The Hinterland Doctrine: Plausible Deniability
by Halfpromise

Summary

Part 3 of 3
It's a strange feeling to be alone in someone else's house. If I didn't have a conscience, I suppose this must be what it feels like to be a hitman waiting for his victim to come home. Knowing that there are no guards around makes me feel very vulnerable, and that makes me realise how much I hate being dependant on their brand of comfort. I'm not officially AWOL and I'm sure that someone is watching the house. A car with tinted windows is parked outside and I keep checking on it from one of the upstairs windows which has a view of the road. It might be paparazzi or it might be a crazy who wants to kill me, but I don't want to phone security incase I appear paranoid. I don't trust anyone on my security team, even before one of them disclosed my location to a journalist. I don't make their jobs easy for them, so I doubt their loyalty, but I have their respect. They're not paid a high enough hourly wage to be loyal and I don't hide my resentment of their presence when they are around. I suppose that I should try to be nicer to them and pat them on the head every so often for being good guard dogs. Kiyomi sent them all bottles of wine at New Year but I didn't notice any improvement in their attitudes. They're very ungrateful, really.

L took B with him so he could attempt to be a decent host and friend, but more likely, it was to get him away from me. Last night, B expected us sit through a documentary called *Psychiatry: An Industry of Death*. I sighed next to L for ten minutes in my gulf of depression, because a little bit of patience always pays off when you make sure that people notice that you're being patient. L's pleased with how I'm dealing with B because he knows that he's 'difficult'. I said that it was nice that he has his very good friend over. I'm happy for him, yes. B can stay as long as he likes, yes. L suggested that we should have an early night instead of watching the documentary with B. There are quite a few rooms and closed doors between the lounge and L's bedroom, and I didn't want B to labour under the illusion that we were sleeping. I screamed my fucking head off.

I walk from one room to another with intent, hoping to find locked drawers and secrets. B had locked his bedroom door, which is to be expected from such a distrusting little shit. I found a spare set of keys in L's desk though, so it didn't do him much good to underestimate me. If I was B, I would have taken better precautions. I was excellent at chemistry and physics at school and dabbled in pyrotechnic devices.

In any case, I don't know why he bothered to lock his room. There's nothing of any interest in there, apart from a journal which is coded using a very weak symmetric-key algorithm, and there was nothing in that which I didn't already know or wish I didn't know. Most of it was about psychiatric disorders and shopping lists. I did find what amounts to a small pharmaceutical dispensary in a very studious looking leather bag. Mikami and Jeevas would have thought that they'd found the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

And I found some things of Stephen's, of course. Some of the clothes in L's room are of very bad quality and are too substantial to be his, so they must be Stephen's. I'm surprised that he has quite so many clothes, since they're all essentially duplicates of the same boring t-shirts, jeans and badly-tailored spy suits in the same cut and colours. His intention must be to blend in but he wouldn't have a clue how to dress anyway, the stupid twink. His Rive Gauche suit would look excellent on me if I had it altered. It's cataclysmic that he owns it. If I was a lesser man, I cry. I'd rather see it burn on a barbecue than let it be worn by someone like him. I thought about packing all his shit up as a gesture of good will and to get him the fuck this house once and for all, but I decided against it. He's also made some kind of scrapbook which I thought belonged to a manic middle-aged woman at first. It's full of receipts (what the fuck?), ticket stubs and annotated photographs of what I presume must be his revolting family, and some of the moron himself with L in various settings, but always with the same inane, forced smile which comes from awareness of the camera. I perfected the ability to make
even the most staged of photographs look candid years ago, but looking back, I don't think that I ever had a problem with it. After I've been through the nauseous scrapbook and the loose papers and photos inside, I toss the whole lot into a suitcase. If I didn't think that I could find anything better to do, I'd probably painstakingly cut L out of the photographs just to pass the time.

The house is artificially lit, even though it's the middle of the day, and it gives me a headache. All the blinds must be closed wherever I am unless I'm officially supposed to be there. I can't seem to settle in this house, and this is a premonition of sorts for after I've left politics, I guess. L in Tokyo with no repercussions. Everything will be better for him. He will have the kudos of snagging a PM and making me leave my job and family for him, while I'll be jobless, useless, friendless, scorned by everyone, a joke for the international media and stuck in this house. I don't like being idle, but there's an atmosphere of agitation here which I'm positive is because of B. He's like an old woman who's long gone but leaves her strong stench of lavender behind. Eventually, I go back into L's room and find B's penknife in a drawer - the one L used to slash Jeevas' tyres. My thumb rubs over the length and delicate curves of the wooden handle which has been smoothed down to an almost sea-worn sheen from decades of palms glossing over the surface. The crudely carved and childishly coloured in letter B in the wood looks more ridiculous than I remember. Then I have a bath. I've already had a shower but I really have searched this whole house for things of interest, so I sit in a bath of water and salt crystals, smoke a cigarette, and flick the blade of B's knife up and down until I almost hypnotise myself. Not a thought goes through my head, and when I come back again, my fingertips are wrinkled and ugly.

When L and B return just after five, I must look like I haven't moved all day. By now, I feel like I own this house - I own it and I hate it – so to have a psychiatrist and a lawyer invade this space and my silence with their cackling shit is very irritating to me. Neither of them say anything and I don't welcome them back, I only watch them like a ghost as they carry in Comme des Garçons and bookshop bags. Don't tell me that B is sinking into retail therapy. I imagine him trying on the 'Poor King' collection and coming out of the changing room to show L various pyjama and frock coat ensembles, like a peacock who's trying too hard to be quirky and individualistic. He's supposed to be a fucking professional.

If L wants a king above all men then he's found one already. I'm the people's emperor with golden eyes; why would he look at B when I'm around? Oh. He looks nearly adequate in that coat. As I watch B trying the coat on for no reason other than to show off - like I'd be jealous of it, like I'd wear that - L asks me how my day was. I don't know what he could think that I've been doing, locked in his house. At first, I think that I should defend myself, although he hasn't accused me of anything. Sometimes I forget that other people can't hear the thoughts in my head too, since they're so loud. They have to shriek and push and shove against all the other ones to be heard.

'Yes, I'm fine. I've had a well-deserved break,' I tell him. 'No, I'm not going to see Kiyomi today.' She needs to learn that I turn hot and cold like a fucked up tap and she should treat me with respect if she knows what's good for her. I have one of L's divorce lawyers pre-booked and she's lucky that I'm staying around long enough to support her through her pregnancy. I trusted her. Bitch. 'Oh, nothing. I've been reading about conflict in geo-strategic flash points across the Eurasian land mass, the purpose of which is to stop unification and subsequently enable global hegemony of the superpowers. Yes, it's very interesting.'

Behind me, L reads his post, talks to B, eats a cream cake and rolls a piece of my damp hair between his fingers, probably just to demonstrate that he's mastered the art of multitasking. I start reading the papers he's brought back with him, starting with the most cerebral. I'm on page four and I'm not big headed at all, but I look like the fucking ace of spades in the photo. Then there's a very fleshed out, dramatic, completely false article about Kiyomi and me across pages seven and eight. Thankfully, the bill isn't mentioned, so that's a good sign that my cabinet have thought it over and seen my
incomparable good sense. 'A woman's been murdered in Tokyo? All over the news, is it? She was wealthy? Oh dear.' Funny how her murder is media bait, but the prostitute who was murdered last week only got a five-inch column towards the back pages, isn't it? She was lucky to get that much; she only did get that much because it was a slow news day. The world's always been like this, it's just that no one cares. No one likes a poor person who throws their honest sins in your face, but it's a tragedy if it happens to a dishonest but rich person.

L decides that we must be fed properly instead of scavenging for whatever we can find in the kitchen like hyenas, and he mourns the fact that we have over a hundred years between us, and yet none of us have any inclination to cook, even when faced with starvation. Someone always feeds me. I can't remember the last time I went hungry, because people are falling over themselves to cook for me.

"You're not going to be happy with cake for dinner, are you, Light?" L asks me. No, I would not be happy. "You're so high maintenance. That's it then, I'm setting up a standing order with that restaurant in town."

"You mean, the village," I correct him. Misa's got a mention in the women's section. She's still alive? This paper is really starting to slide since it included a gossip column at the weekends.

"It's classed as a town."

"It's a prehistoric village populated by chickens and huts," I say. It might be a slight exaggeration.

"Listen here, Mr Swanky Pants. You -"

"Mr Swanky Pants?"

"Yes. You will eat what you're given and be grateful. No one turns down cake unless there's something wrong with them," he tells me authoritatively, putting a pile of envelopes next to me as he stalks off.

"And there's definitely something wrong with him," B mutters. L stops to point at him like a prison warden. I never know who he'll side with when B and I sling insults at each other, but that was uncalled for and L must agree. Because of my two outstanding performances yesterday, three if you count my bill speech, L must think that I deserve to be defended.

"No cake for you," he says.

"That's ok, I want pizza."

"No pizza for you either. I will have your cake, Light can have your pizza and he will be fucking grateful."

"Why can't I have pizza?"

"Because no one takes the piss out of Light apart from me," he states, then disappears into his useless kitchen which might as well be a garage for how little it's used. B glares at me, which is his new favourite thing to do, and I smile at him over the top of my paper, which is my new favourite thing to do.

"It's called... now, I know this word in English... partisanship. Preferential treatment, whatever you want to call it," I explain. He laughs or gargles to himself and opens the book he's reading. Living with a Psycho.

"You know what you are?" he asks. "I've finally been able to think of a succinct way to describe
"you."

"I can hardly wait to hear it."

"You're just milk that's gone sour. You might look ok, but you leave a bad taste in the mouth."

"I know a lot of people, including L, who would disagree with you."

"What people might tell you and what people think are different things. When people say that you
taste like strawberries or cherries or a raspberry macaroon on a summer's day, you shouldn't believe
them, you know. People taste like base metals, egg whites, vinegar, lemons, shit, and sodium
chloride. L must eat a lot of mints for a reason, and I presume that you are the reason."

I continue to smile, and when he looks up to see what effect he has or hasn't had on me, I flip him off
with my middle finger. I expect this to be the end, but he takes a knife from his pocket, wipes the
blade on his shirt sleeve and looks like he's going to throw it at me.

"I don't think that L would be very happy if anything happened to me," I say. It's all bluff. All lies,
all threats and no fucking action.

"He'll get over it," he replies.

"I don't think he would. I think it might kill him."

"You have a very high opinion of yourself. I had noticed."

"B, it's not like you haven't had the opportunity to get in there. You've had nearly thirty years to have
a pop and there's no need to take your jealousy out on me. I know him, he would have slept with
anything. A sombrero, for instance. He was very free and easy and accepting of all up and comers.
I'm not saying that I haven't had my moments, but I was like you for while; everyone was so fucking
disgusting. But I got over that. Him though, I'm surprised that he's not riddled with disease. We're
lucky that we live in a medically advanced time. A hundred years ago, his nose would probably have
dropped off and he'd be dosing himself with mercury."

"He's always careful."

"I can assure you that that's not true." I set my paper to one side so I can lean towards him. "Both of
us were very careless and trusting with our health. Can I tell you something? Since we're friends and
like telling each other stories which the other person might not want to hear? I found out that he'd
been fucking around with at least two other MPs while he was supposedly exclusive to me. I don't
think that safety was very high on his priorities. Your L. I was a bit… annoyed."

"He obviously didn't think that much of you," he says, but he's shaken, I can tell. L's recklessness in
the otherwise carefully considered route to success which is inherent in politics, law and every other
institution can't be that much of a shock to B, but being hit with evidence that L did and probably still
would screw anything apart from him, is.

"No," I laugh and shake my head. I love this. "You see, I knew that he was a bastard. I knew it and I
didn't mind. I've known a lot of bastards in my life, but he won me over as King of the Bastards,
until I met you. I've wanted to talk to you all day. Can I tell you something else?"

"If you have to," he says, flinching back to his book all the same. His eyes are shining like his knife
and it strikes me that he's peculiarly attractive in a desperate, beatnik sort of way. He doesn't want to
hear anything else about his precious L, but he believes every word I say. I'm going to overload him
with information until his hard drive burns up.
"When we started seeing each other again, he fucked me in an alleyway without my consent. I could have fought him off, yeah, I have excellent upper body strength. That's not to say that my lower body strength is weak – I do crunches and could crack someone with my thighs like a walnut - but I wasn't totally against the idea in principal. I just didn't like the alleyway and someone could have seen us. I'd only just managed to get him to speak to me again, never mind put his dick anywhere near me, with or without spit, so I suppose that there was emotional coercion in play. I could argue that it was under duress, anyway. Now, what is the word for that? Begins with 'R'. It did make me think." I pause to tap my cigarette into L's empty cupcake case while I muse over it all. I feel relieved to have voiced my violation to someone who will feel more pain from it than I do. B really is in the right profession. "But, he spoke to me while he was doing it. He made me look at people walking on the street and told me that they were mine. I said that I didn't want them. I don't, not really. And he said: 'Don't lose your empathy, Light. It's all you have.' What do you think he was trying to teach me there? Because it's all about teaching. He's always trying to teach me something or prove something and make me admit that he's right."

"You're lying."

"Because he thinks that he's my tutor, you know. I'm his Hephaestion," I tell him proudly, waving towards L's statue with my cigarette, "just like that marble fucker over there, and he's going to teach me things. What do you think he's teaching me?"

"I don't believe you."

"Don't then. It don't care. I've been with him for nearly five years and do you know what he's taught me? In the cruelest way, he's taught me that I can't do anything. I thought that I could. He helped me get here just so I'd learn that all I have is him. There is no goodness, there is no hope, there's no point in trying. There is only me and him. I'm not good; I'm something that's only fit to be used in an alleyway surrounded by refuse and rats, and I always thought that I was better than that. Isn't everyone better than that? I thought that he was better than that, but he taught me that any of us could be Astbury. Being civilised has been hammered into us, but underneath, we're all Astbury. I couldn't have asked for a better tutor. But do you know the cruelest thing? Once, he sold himself to me - that's how he made me feel. It was in return for something. It was a business deal and didn't he make sure that I knew it. I could tell you everything he said to me; that I'm mad, that he created me, that I'm nothing, and he threw Stephen and everyone else in my face. He dislocated my shoulder trying to get my clothes off once. Everything was all to teach me this one thing: I have nothing but him and we're all that matters. If that's right, then he should have nothing but me, but you're here, and you're not needed anymore."

"I'm not leaving him with you," he tells me with a broken voice, like his balls haven't dropped yet. Poor man's deluded.

"Ha! You have such a rosy little view of who he is, don't you? It's all Easter bunnies and sad eyes and inner torment with you. Nobody knows him like I do and he knows me better than I know myself. He's been waiting for me his whole life, like I have for him, and right now, I think I'd do anything to make sure that you're not in the way of that. I get the feeling that you're not going to take your marching orders well. Not like Stephen, Stephen was a dream. You can threaten me with pots and carving knives, but I'll threaten you with a contract on your head. I can do that. I can phone someone now, you'll be dead by midnight and they'll never find a body. Do you know how they'd get rid of you? They double up coffins at funeral homes. They'll put you in foundations where they're laying new roads, they'll grind you up and feed you to pigs, or maybe they'll just send you off to sea to be eaten by crabs. I'd rather avoid your unexplained disappearance because it might upset L, but you have to get in line, B. I could make him choose between us. Is that what you'd like to see? Would that prove it to you?"
"He wouldn't choose you," he says firmly. I can understand why he'd say that, but he's still a fucking idiot.

"He would. What's more, if you fork your tongue at me again, you little bitch, or try to harm me in any way, he'll never speak to you again. I made him get rid of Stephen and I'll make him get rid of you. I'm not very nice when I'm upset. So, which is it? Are you going to take the hint and go, or are you going to force my hand?"

"You're all talk. It's all that you politicians can do."

"Fine," I breathe out, leaning back into the chair. I couldn't care either way. I don't know anyone who would kill him – I wouldn't associate with someone like that – but the threat is believable and would frighten off most people. In a way though, I'm glad that he's stubborn. It'll be more fun this way. "You have until the end of the day to see reason, or tomorrow, you'll be catching a flight out of here, just like Stephen. And if you mention this little conversation to L now, you'll just be out a lot sooner. See who he'll believe, or who he'd rather believe. Who he'd ignore the truth for. You know that I'm telling you the truth about him, and I'm sure that he's done worse things that neither of us know about, but you don't care. It wouldn't worry me, but you don't want to believe that he's like that because he's your L, your crying waif. But he's not, he's my bastard, so don't fight me. You will always lose."

The finality of my statement, delivered in a way I wish I could employ in the House but can't because of established political etiquette, makes him anxious enough that he makes a display of standing up. "I think it's knife time Prime Min –"

"I knew that I should have bought a tea tray," L says through a mouthful of God knows what as he comes back into the room. What the fuck is he eating now? Once his metabolism eventually calms down, he'll be fat as a lord and I'll have to leave him. B immediately puts the knife back into his sheath of a pocket, and I look at L like the innocent that I am. I'm thrilled by this idea of tea trays. Tea trays are very useful, important things and I'm sure that they prevent injuries and fatalities involving tea. It's a great oversight of L's if he doesn't have one and he should remedy the situation straight away, because he needs a tea tray for some reason. I'm desperately worried about his safety and could not be more interested in his plight. He sets three cups on the table, awkwardly unhooking his fingers from one of them and spilling tea all over the place. "Fuck. I'm burning my fingers off here, I'll have to get one. Are they a bit old person, or would I make it look sophisticated and European? Tea trays look so decadent. A bit queenie, maybe, but I think that Sherlock Holmes had one, so if it's good enough for him then I should have one, shouldn't I?" he asks us. Looking between myself and B, he must sense that we were at the point of killing each other or fucking in front of his fireplace. "Is everything ok here?"

"We were just talking," I say happily. He doesn't believe me and look at B's nervous and stricken face, while B looks at me like I should confess or do something stupid. Oh, I have you, you emotional wreck of a robot.

"Are you alright, B?" L asks him.

"Honestly, L!" I laugh and blow some cooling air over my tea. "You make it sound like talking to me is dangerous."

"Have you ordered pizza?" B inquires, trying to regain his composure. He manages it, I think. It would be convincing. The only thing which gives it away is how his face has become vaguely pug-like. L buys it anyway, because it's easier, and he sighs as he sits down next to me.

"A nice delivery boy is on his moped with your pizza as we speak."
"Empty calories," I say. It's the rule of L's house but it doesn't mean that I have to like it.

"You like pizza," L tells me. Once a month, maybe. I'm so grateful that he's here to tell me what I like and don't like.

"I didn't say that I didn't, but it's still empty calories."

This fact is accepted and we both look at B like we're expecting him to entertain us with a dance routine, since he's still standing up. After a second, he eagerly grasps onto a reason to leave.

"Oh, I brought that photo of you and the Judge!" he says, already heading towards his room. "I forgot because of all this soap opera stuff that's been going on."

I didn't find a photo of L and his father in B's room. I must have overlooked it, unless he put it under the floorboards, but it doesn't matter. Now that he's gone, I drink my tea, feeling very satisfied with my puerile victory. I will hold onto this all day, stacking it on top and reinforcing my other victories, and later on, I will act my age and consolidate our fraternal triangle so that I can break it.

"Is everything really ok?" L asks me, languidly lifting his cup to his mouth. His hands are beautiful. I must not get distracted though, because he's trying to hide his worry and suspicion behind a don't give a fuck attitude used by the British royal family during the war when they were pretending that bombs weren't being dropped around them. I feel sorry for him, like I should confess and we can plot together, but he wouldn't, because B's his blood brother or some shit, and delicate relations between amoral creatures must be well timed and executed. He's too sober to be forewarned and forearmed anyway.

"Yeah. Well, y'know, he's very protective of you for reasons we're not supposed to acknowledge or talk about."

"I wish you'd drop that."

"I bet he has the walls of his house covered with photos of you."

"I said that I wish you'd drop it, Light," he snaps at me. This might be more difficult than I thought. Luckily, the drinks cabinet now looks like a well-stocked bar.

"Ok... Where did you take him?"

"An astronomy exhibition. I know, try not to be too sad about it. I bought you a present, actually."

Oh, he thought of me when he was walking around an astronomy exhibition. That's nice, I suppose. He reaches into a plastic bag at the side of the sofa and unboxes a mug with a badly-transferred picture of the moon on it. He hands it to me and I'm shocked by how shit it is. What the fuck?

"It's a mug," I say.

"With a moon on it."

"Yes, I did see that. That's very funny, L."

"I knew you'd love it," he grins at me and relaxes back with the self-satisfaction that you'd expect from a victorious war commander. "You're still plain old Light to me, but everyone needs a personalised mug. You have one now. You've practically moved in."

"Yes," I say, setting the mug on the table, unconvinced by the significance of it. If he'd given me a
walk-in wardrobe with all my clothes inside, then I'd understand. "How is Stephen?"

"Hmmm?"

"I know you saw him today, L. I'm not stupid. You didn't see him yesterday because you were with me, so you would have seen him today. Plus a suitcase is missing from the bedroom and there are some gaps in the wardrobe. It's considerably less denim in there."

"Damn you. You're so pleasant to look at that sometimes I forget that you're quite intelligent. I didn't see him, I left a bag of his things for him at Naomi's."

"Naomi?"

"He's staying there. On a sofa. Oh, Light. I feel so fucking bad," he says regretfully. God, give me strength.

"You spoke to him then."

"No."

"You must have, or you wouldn't have known that he was staying at Naomi's."

"Mikami told me," he explains quickly, staring straight ahead. He's losing his talent for coughing up undetectable lies.

"That's a lie."

"No it isn't!" he bristles at being found out. My lie detector is going mental after being recalibrated. "What's with the questions? Mikami told me before lunch yesterday, when we were waiting for you. I didn't mention it because somehow I knew that you'd act the way that you're acting now. I mean, perish the thought that I should actually care that he's homeless because of me. I just dropped some things off for him so that at least he has clothes and a toothbrush. I was thirty seconds, if that. Ask B, he was in the car."

I try to ease the truth out of him by rubbing his leg with my hand, but it's unusually sexless and doesn't affect either of us. Maybe I'm losing my talent? We continue to look at B's book and the shining pool of spilt tea on the table.

"And what was the message?" I ask calmly.

"What message?"

"You would have given her a message to pass on if you really didn't speak to him, wouldn't you?"

"My message was: 'Hi Naomi. Please could you give this bag to Stephen? No, don't call him. I'll speak to him next week about arranging to have the rest of his things picked up.'"

"That's a lie too."

"Fuck, Light, it is not a lie!" he lies exasperatedly. It's feels less tense now, and a little less comparable to a hangman preparing his best friend for execution by avoiding eye contact, commenting on the weather and asking him what he's doing on Friday night. I'm not willing to show any emotion at the moment, because B would like it and because it would include shouting and slapping L across the face repeatedly with a newspaper. L breathes deeply a few time to prepare himself for the telling of an epic tale of endurance and sacrifice. "I just wanted to get the meeting out
the way, which went well, thanks for asking. I had to take B into Tokyo so at least he can say that he's went somewhere when he was in Japan, and come home. That's it. Now I wish that I hadn't been in such a rush."

"Oh, to see me, you mean?" I ask before sipping my tea. My heartstrings remain untouched, even though L's really trying to put the damage on by sulkily picking at the skin around his nails to convey hurt that his devotion is unappreciated.

"Yes, to see you. I don't suppose that I'll see you much next week. Me staying at the Kantei is just asking for trouble and I can't leave B here alone anyway."

"We'll work something out. And how was the meeting?"

"Interesting. Murders, murders everywhere."

"You're not defending murderers anymore. I won't be linked to it via you. You have to maintain an upstanding reputation as an employee of my government, so stop being a fucking prick. We spoke about this."

"Yes, we did speak about it, and you'll be pleased to know that I'm reining back on being a prick. I'm acting as the prosecution for the state on this case in accordance to your wishes, oh mighty one."

"You are?" I ask in surprise. This is new. I feel like I should check his temperature. "But you never have before."

"You're speaking to one of the chief legal advisers to the government," he says with no sense of pride. "You forget that, just like you forget that I did two extra years of intensive training at the Bar, unlike some people who do a law degree and waste it by becoming a fucking statesman instead. I just didn't have the time to participate much in regards to the public prosecution service, what with my obligations to the firm and PR. I'm not interested in fraud and the majority of homicides are really insulting to someone of my standing."

"But you're interested now?"

"Serial killers interest me," he tells me huskily but matter-of-factly, like there's a sexual attraction to serial killers which everyone must share. All my muscles seize for a second.

"Oh."

"They don't come around too often, and I desperately want to speak to this one. He sounds completely amazing."

"How is he amazing?" I ask. My face must be a knotted mass of confusion and bitter disgust, but he's sunk into some kind of respectful affection reserved for cases he particularly likes. He must see them as other people see a lauded TV series.

"Maybe not amazing, just... better than the usual. His planning and execution, excuse the pun, was almost brilliant, only he wasn't as good at hiding the bodies. As far as we know, he's been killing for ten years, but I have no doubt that he's killed more. If I could speak to him, I'm sure that I could appeal to his ego and he'd sing like a bird."

"What did he do?"

"He posed as a retired doctor to perform free treatment, maybe abortions, off the record and out of the goodness of his heart. That's what I think, based on statement from a woman who was befriended
by him and told this load of shit and that he could help her. She didn't take him up on it, very wisely. I think that he probably knocked the women out, strangled them while he raped them, and buried them in his garden. The best part was that one of the bodies was found a few years ago in a outhouse, and he blamed her husband, who was a lodger there. I mean, fuck, the police didn't even search the house and garden properly. He had a femur propping up one of the fences, for Christ's sake, but they missed that. So, because they fucked up, he killed at least four more women, and an innocent man was executed. Makes you wonder whose fault it is, really. I'd like to prosecute some of the investigators as accomplices, but there's a problem with the law. You should fix that, Light."

"I hate incompetent people," I say, and he looks at me sadly, like we're sharing an unusual disappointment in the human race. We must hate them more than other people do. It's been my experience that people who say that they hate incompetence are usually incompetent themselves.

"I do too," he replies, and he looks so young that it's laughable. He reminds me of myself for the first eighteen years of my life, looking into the mirror with my fishbowl eyes. When I was called down to dinner by my mother, my reflection would sympathise with me. Sometimes dad would be there, but normally his chair was empty. When he was there, he'd look like a martyr and his despair was so intense that I felt like it singed me. I never asked him what he was thinking. Maybe part of me knew the reason, or maybe I didn't want him to smile and lie to me.

Before I realise it, I'm pressing my mouth against L's, and it might be the first time I've done so without intending to initiate something distracting or to kill off any reluctance he might have in doing what I want him to do. I imagine that it's more in friendship and understanding, but I don't really know for sure. It might just be boredom. I hope that he doesn't think that I share his perverted admiration for murders or that I like the mug he bought me. In any case, footsteps interrupt me and I fall back against the sofa in frustration that there's yet another person around. There's a conveyer belt of people whose only purpose is to get in my way.

L's pinches his lip lightly while he looks at me, and B holds a photo out to him with an accompanying whine to get his attention. My veins are full of justified malice.

"That's a good thing you're doing. Prosecuting him," I tell L, trying and succeeding to make B sound even more screechy in comparison to my soothing, seductive voice. I should narrate audiobooks, really. Poor L is defenceless against it and his expression is similar to Kiyomi's when I married her. She wasn't surprised that I was waiting at the altar until she got her act together, but I was. Why did she have to take so fucking long to get it over with? If she wanted to create tension, then it was completely lost on me because I was just bored. Her dress did compliment my suit perfectly though. Oh, my virago.

"L. The photo," B says, the nagging shit. I despise him. I want to rip him and leave my bloody handprints all over his arse.

"How did you become a legal adviser in the first place?" I ask.

"I stood for election to the board, I won," L replies. "You're not the only one with landslide victories under his belt."

"So you just turned up in Japan and became a government legal adviser?"

"I didn't just turn up. I built a reputation. I came here with one already, but I made it more impressive quite quickly."

B's impatience is now showing itself in a similar way to a child during a long car journey. People with children must feel this way when they're about to have sex and their cockblock kid walks in,
having pissed himself. "L?"

"Just a second, B," L says, realising that I think there's more to it. "Ok, Light. It's very difficult to get on the board, yes, so it might have helped that the Attorney General is a friend of mine. Well, I say 'friend', but Mihael fucked her on top of a piano. Thankfully, the piano suffered no lasting damage."

"Oh God. On a piano?"

"Just like in Pretty Woman," he says, nodding his head.

"I haven't seen that, so I don't what you're talking about. But Mihael started working for you a year after I met you and you were already a legal adviser then."

"No, he started working as my PA a year after I met you. Really, Light, I would have told you this before, but you never asked about me or what I did or for my PA's backstory. This interest in me that you have is a fairly new development in our relationship. Mihael was just some guttersnipe I helped out of a nasty situation in return for a steady, boring, overpaid job at the firm. He's very useful. Of course, when I found out that he'd been abused in such a way, on a piano and by someone of status, I felt a moral responsibility to report it. I also felt the need to let her know my intentions first. She wasn't aware that Mihael was my employee and pleaded with me to make all of it go away, so we came to an arrangement. State prosecution is one thing I haven't done because I never cared about it, but it looks good on my wikipedia page and you said that you'd like me to prosecute rather than defend, so..."

"You set her up?" I didn't doubt it for a second.

"I wouldn't put it so strongly. You're very dramatic and everything's black and white with you."

"That's stupid coming from a lawyer."

"I'm a barrister."

"Whatever. There's wrong" I say leaning towards the left, "and then there's right," I add, leaning to the right. "You set her up, or you didn't set her up."

"You're so difficult. You really test my patience with insignificant details. She met Mihael at court while he was waiting for me to finish a case, and she was so bowled over by his charisma and tight trousers that she neglected to find out anything about him apart from to try to test his stamina."

"But... they don't have pianos in court."

"No. Your law degree wasn't wasted on you, was it? No pianos, and more's the pity. I think a chorus of 'Imagine' every now and again would improve proceedings. If you really want to know the gory details, then I'll tell you. These statements may or may not be correct, but say that Mihael told me about her interest and I arranged a little party for various law officers courtesy of Lawliet & Company. And say that I encouraged Mihael, in the nicest way possible, to have a good time and make full use of the bar. Mission accomplished."

"You never told me that," B says, and his obvious horror wipes L's smile off his face. "That's not what you said. You said that you applied and were chosen. You're too good to resort to blackmail to get any position."

"It wasn't exactly blackmail. I would have got it without speeding it up but it's a very long-winded process," L tells him. I can't wait to hear this non-excuse. "There are a lot of interviews and studies and committees and I think I'm too good to wait that long when there are faster ways to go about it.
"I think it's low. It's something that a shit lawyer would do," B grumbles. He's not happy with his mythical tower of L exposing his own rotten footings, but I think it's funny that he's very reserved. If he was more emphatic, then he'd risk upsetting L, but passive aggression can be overlooked.

"I'm a barrister," L corrects again. "And I'm definitely not shit. I just don't like wasting time."

"I'm disgusted with you."

"I'm not," I say softly, making L turn towards me again. The corner of his lip rises as he's condoned by me. It's a nice moment, but of course B ruins it by throwing the damn photograph into L's lap and then throwing himself into a chair opposite us. He looks like his spine has turned gelatinous from anger.

L turns the photograph over and my heart lurches. It's the photograph of L and his father that I took from his desk and is now in a locked drawer in my office at the Kantei. I forgot all about it.

"Yes," L breathes out as he looks at the photo. "That's what he looked like."

I have to react in a normal way, I can't just stare at this photograph in silence. I don't want to be overenthusiastic and raise suspicion, because there's a thin band of safety in between saying nothing and saying too much.

"How old were you there?" I ask, smiling. Maybe I seem too interested? If I do, L doesn't seem to notice.

"Seventeen. I was leaving for university. If you look very closely, you can see B's tears on the camera lens."

"I thought you went there together."

"I went a year early," he explains, never taking his eyes off the photograph. He'll be depressed all day, moping around the house and being sad about some dead cock. I can depend on L for one thing: when he's depressed, he dresses like a slob. He is not putting that shitty cardigan on again, I will not allow it. "So, there he is. I thought I'd feel better, but I feel worse."

"You have to let it go. You should burn it."

"No!" B exclaims.

"I can't burn it," L says, but doesn't sound as horrified by the idea as B does.

"Some people should be erased from your life," I tell him. "Deleted."

"But you can't erase them from your memory."

"Yes you can. Burn it."

"If I did that, Light, he'd still be there. No, I should frame it. Don't you think?" he asks me. I don't want that photograph around, no. The only reason I didn't slice L's father off the copy I have is because I fully intended to give it back. Well, I was going to plant it somewhere in L's pit of an office, but then he left and the photograph was pushed to the back of a drawer to gather dust after my wedding.

With subtle disapproval, I shrug my shoulders and laze further back into the sofa. "Up to you."

"Thanks for the photo, B," L mutters, placing it face down on his lap.
"He's got some other photos," I say. B glares at me again, and he really is very good at it. He's a pro. L is still reeling from seeing his horse-faced father again and struggles to sound interested.

"Oh?"

"Yes, in his wallet. You look very stupid in them."

"I can't believe that I ever looked stupid."

"Give them to him then," I tell B, smiling as I trace the outline of my bottom lip with my finger. "It's why you brought them, isn't it? So you could reminisce over old times?"

B grudgingly reaches for his wallet. I hope that as soon as he opens it, hundred of photographs of L will fall out onto the floor and L might actually realise that his best friend has an unhealthy obsession with him and probably wanks over these photos several times a day. He bet that he does; he spends a long time in the bathroom. Sadly, my dream scenario doesn't happen. He pulls out one photo and hands it to L, who looks it over like a louche bastard.

"Oh. I look stupid," he says.

"What were you thinking of, wearing that coat?" I ask good-naturedly. "It looks like a poncho."

"It's pastel blue and it wasn't a poncho. You have to bear in mind the fashions of the time. I'm just sad that I can't blame anyone for it. I bought it myself."

"You don't look stupid," B slimes. Pfff...

"Where's the other one, B?"

I half-expect him to claw at my eyes but he just gives up his treasures with as little fanfare as possible. I can't believe, however, that L doesn't think that it's strange that his friend has multiple photos of him on his person at all times. He must think that these photos are gifts that B's brought for him, because he doesn't show any sign of giving them back.

"Will this fun ever end?" L sighs as he takes the other photo. "Oh my God. When was this taken?"

"Charlie's party," B says.

"Charlie? Oh, the fruit fly, yeah. No wonder I look drunk."

"Do you like any women?"

"The mute woman who does my dry cleaning is lovely to speak to," he answers with not a shred of shame. "So, there I am and I look stupid. Thanks."

"I could get them blown up for you," B offers. He's going to get them copied incase L does keep them. I laugh and he looks at me with such loathing while L picks up the photo of himself and his father again, missing the whole war of wills going on around him.

"You'd actually blow them up for me?" he asks. "With explosives? Can I watch?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, thanks. No need. Here you are, Light," L says, handing me all three photographs. "Put them somewhere, will you?"
He stands and goes to the kitchen, looking like he's dragging his legs rather than walking, and with his back now curved into the depressive slouch he takes on when he's tired or troubled or both. I used to think that he looked slovenly when he did that, but it reminds me of bending him into uncomfortable forms during sex now, so I don't mind it so much. It's just where my mind goes. B also watches him leave, and when he's out of sight, turns back to me. He must get terrible stress headaches from going from the wide-eyed, slack-jawed gaze of wonder he wears whenever he looks at L, to the furrowed brow, thin-lipped frown he wears whenever he looks at me. Sometimes he goes between these two expressions dozens of times a minute and it's hilarious. Some botox would probably help.

A smile now feels natural on my face after years of it being like an alien contortion I performed on request, and I smile at B now as he watches me slip L's photos into my wallet.

B comes back from his walk after dinner at precisely the right time. Well, a few minutes later would have been better, but this will do. L's talking to me, so he doesn't hear the deadened sound of B's bare feet. He's telling me about an execution which he saw carried out in Florida years ago, thanks to a friend of his father's who admitted him as a witness. He's also a dove tail joint between my legs, niched there while I sit on the table. His face presses into my neck while he whispers to me smoothly and darkly like tar in the lungs.

I take short, shocked gasps of air at strange moments, trying to exert some control over the tight discomfort inside my trousers as he speaks, but I jolt and shiver against him from certain words and the way he says them. And now B's a part of a moment we're spinning - he's sharing it, it's ours – we've all been drinking to varying levels of excess and I see the night unfolding perfectly. I've challenged myself to make it happen precisely as I imagined it over the last few days, and in more detail over the last few hours after I'd set my heart on it.

L's talking about cycles of voltage and the duration of alternating current to destroy internal organs and make the heart beat like it's been hit by a fuckload of cocaine. Eight seconds of 2,450 volts, a one-second pause, then twenty-two seconds of 480 volts, a twenty-second pause, and then repeat. Three times. What an extravagant way to kill someone. He says that you have to see death to truly understand it. Man is only ingenious at finding new ways to inflict pain and death. His father said he should see it, because if you throw shit at your wall of a son then maybe something will stick. When the witness box door was opened after the execution, L was sure that he could smell almonds. And that, my friends, is when I was told what an electrocuted criminal smells like.

"Maybe it's not justice unless they die," L whispers to me, and I lean closer to him and his voice, because it's like the sea to me. It's like the sea on a dark night when you can't see it, but it's there and it colours my life. "Should murderers get sentenced to death or a cell and a bed and a TV and healthcare and fucking fabric softener?"

"Death."

"Maybe life is prison is worse."

"They shouldn't be allowed to see blue skies. It's an insult to the victim if their murderer lives. It's an insult to everyone if they're allowed to live. They're poison."

"No mercy?"

"No. Never."

He kisses me and I don't know if he thinks that I'm heartless or full of heart. Behind him, I see B at
the threshold of the room and I wonder how long he's been there. How long has he been watching L push the hair from my face to sloppily mouth at my cheekbone in between pouring words into my ear? Did he hear the words? I feel like the volume of my life has been adjusted for clarity and intensity, and it makes me close my eyes for a moment. I have to watch B watching us and hope to God that he doesn't make a sound and ruin this for me. He could either make it or break it, frankly.

L tells me that he loves me, but B couldn't possibly hear it from where he is. That must be rectified.

"What was that?" I ask L, who laughs and slides against me in response. I smile at B, who's still standing there with his rictus expression while he's being gutted from the inside, and congratulate myself for always making the best of a bad situation.

"I love you," L tells me, but he's still far too quiet.

"Louder."

"I love you, fuck's sake!"

And B must have heard that. I laugh softly against L's hair so wisps of it fly within my breath and stick to my lips. I am content. B's brain must be boiling in its juice from the electric currents that he's generating and inflicting upon himself. This is my third night under the same roof as him, and his veneer of the best and purest friendship is peeling, exposing the desperate longing and envy underneath. The poor, sad bastard. I don't think that he'd even know what to do with L. The more he sees of him with me, the more he must realise how he's allocated him a personality which doesn't match. The disappointment makes him irritable but resigned, like he's permanently hungover. Even if I felt any sympathy and the man wasn't a twisted hulk of a dead tree, I'm in the last position to offer solace. I don't see why I should.

"So you could smell almonds when he died. Tell me more," I say.

"He was dead. There is no more. Nothing."

"Mu," I groan against the side of his skull and the combed hair at his temple. There isn't a word which describes the emptiness of it so well. We're all going to die and we're all going to the same place. "You should do me here."

"No. B –"

"B will enjoy it. Are you embarrassed?"

"Some things should be private, Light."

"Since when? There's nothing to be embarrassed about, is there? I'm sure B knows all about the dangers of repression. What are your thoughts on sexual repression, B? Psychologically speaking."

As soon as I address B, L looks behind himself to see the plastic-looking humanoid and steps away from me guiltily, wiping his mouth on his knuckles. I don't think I've ever felt so righteous as I do when B's looking down on me like I'm a life sentence of horror.

"I'm not a follower of a certain well-known hypothesis," he says condescendingly.

"Ha! Hypothesis. And what would that be in psychiatric terminology?"

"I could tell you, but I'd have to charge you my standard fee."
"You're welcome to stick around if that'll do as payment," I say, pulling L back towards me by the waist. B's face remains unchanged. Under every mask, there lies another, exactly the same. L pushes my arms away and takes up his vodka again, leaving us to continue our spat.

"You could just read Foucault," B replies. He picks up his empty glass before he continues, because he's not done with me and I haven't even started with him. "That is, if you can read. I think that you decided a long time ago that there's no point in reading when you can be a libertine. That was your decision and your poor education shouldn't be visited on me."

"Are you saying that I'm an illiterate slut?" I ask, casually standing up. This is so funny, oh my God. I could curl up on the floor and laugh until my spleen falls out, I swear.

"You must have some uses."

I walk towards him, and I don't know if he thinks that I'm going to hit him. He straightens his back like he's expecting some kind of assault, but I only put my hand around the glass he's holding, letting my fingers sit lightly over his. "Mmmm..." I sound out with a half smile. "Let me make you another drink."

His hand is cold from the night air and he doesn't move, he just looks at my hand and then back at me. I let my eyes drift and linger over his face until he panics and pushes the glass into my hand before he steps away from me. He's one of those. I'll have to treat him like a frightened horse. Like all repressed people though, it should be worth it. Once you get them going, they go like the fucking clappers.

"I'll make one myself," he says frostily.

"Don't be stupid, it's one of many things I'm good at."

"Like me," L moans on his way to the kitchen. His glass is empty. "Except I'm only good for mixing drinks and suing people."

"He's good at a few more things than that," I tell B, since I'm an authority on the subject.

"I know."

"Do you?" I ask. When I move towards him, he freezes up again. God almighty. "I don't think we're talking about the same things."

"Go away," he says sharply.

"Why?"

"You smell."

"Of Tobacco Vanille and Noir de Noir, I know. You're still a little boy inside, aren't you. Why don't we be friends?"

"I like the way we are. I don't want your drink."

"I'm sure that L will have it, so it won't go to waste. Let me give you a present."

"What?"

"I could make him. If I ask him, he'll do it," I say confidently, lighting a cigarette to cement it. "We'll all have a bit more to drink and give you a present."
"What are you talking about?"

I laugh and check that L's still out of the room before I lean closer to B's ear like it's a secret I'm going to tell him. And it is, more or less. Or a Pandora's Box. I'm trying to keep hope inside. "Turn around, turn around. But he was already asleep."

"What's going on?" L asks, and we both look at him standing there with his selfish vodka.

"We're just having a chat," I explain. "We've agreed to be friends, haven't we, B."

"Oh. That's nice."

"L, could you get B a drink and put some ice in mine, please? I forgot," I say. L takes the glasses and doesn't show much sign of being suspicious, but he probably doesn't care much by this point. I turn back to B and smile to encourage him. "See, it's nice. That's the official verdict, we have the blessing of he who matters. And now that we're friends, what do friends do? He's in a very good mood. Do you want to know what I did to him to achieve this amazing and rare feat? Maybe I could show you. Maybe I could put you in a good mood too."

"No, thank you."

"Be quiet now," I whisper, breathing in near a throbbing point in his throat. "Is that... Carbone by Balmain? I remember the review for that. 'Resin notes in this spicy aroma evoke the hallowed silence of old world churches. Black fig, musk, bourbon pepper and vetiver add sensuality and masculinity.' Am I right? It's just like being in a church, isn't it? Can't beat a black fig."

L comes back, sloshing the two drinks around when he trips over something. I'm trying to convince B that I'm serious by letting my eyes warm him a little. He really is the most hopeless thing if there isn't equal antipathy between us.

"What are you doing?" L asks. He and B have the same habit of standing still when shocked and I always find it funny, like L's face is funny when I smile at him and rest my head on B's shoulder.

"Play with us."

"What?"

"You're not asexual," I laugh softly into B's ear.

"Light, leave him alone."

"Some friend you are," I tell L, then go back to B so no one but him can hear me. "Do you want me to ask him? You don't know what I can do. I could have him fuck you stupid - would you like that? That's a rhetorical question. But are you brave enough? On your deathbed, would you rather be thinking 'what if I had?' or 'what if I hadn't'?"

L says my name again angrily as he approaches us, forces drinks into our hands, and I notice for the first time that he seems very anxious about this whole exchange.

"You're neglecting him, L. I'd like to watch you two sort out all this shit. Give me a present. I gave you one."

"What present? What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just that tonight is all stops and starts and interruptions and vorreyism. I don't know
about you, but I'm pretty turned on right now."

I suppose that I am suggesting incest as far as he sees it, but I really can't believe that in thirty years, when they were in close proximity and in times of drought, that he never once thought of it. He storms off back to the kitchen instead of shouting at me, so I know that all is not lost.

"He just needs to think it over," I tell B comfortingly. "Now, which way would you like to go. I'm thinking that you'd be a very aggressive top, which would be interesting, because I can be too and so can L. It's caused problems in the past. But L... sometimes he gets a bit lazy. I'll give you a tip: he has a prostate fixation. You have to attack at the right angle. The angle is all important."

"You rabid fuck," he snarls at me. My God! How dare I speak about L in relation to something so vulgar and human? It's unacceptable!

"That's quite an accurate description, yes," I laugh. "But I'm sure you'll find that out for yourself. And I've got a lovely set of pipes, but I guess you know that already."

"People who scream like you do usually feel like they have something to make up for."

"Not in my case."

"If you don't get away from me I'll -"

"I've seen you looking at me," I say aggressively just to shut him up. "You and your phallic knives. Give me ten minutes."

He doesn't respond, so I'm done with him for now. It's time to move on to the big bad. I pick up the drink L left behind and find him propped up against the worktop in the kitchen. When I walk in, he looks distinctly unimpressed with me but it's not an absolute no, he's just not very happy about it.

"You forgot your drink."

"What the fuck are you trying to do?" he asks. Oooh, he's angry in a 'where are my handcuffs?' way. I'm a bit drunk already, so I have to stop myself from making a funny noise.

"Ha. Nothing. He just gets to me, that's all."

"Please don't," he says, his voice softening as I rub his arms. "He means a lot to me and I don't think you understand."

"You said please!"

"Just leave him alone."

"Please?"

"Please."

"But he desperately wants to be included!" I tell him cheerfully. Why's he so serious about this? His eyes have taken on a steely tone underneath the vodka glaze, but he's going to lose this one and he knows it, no matter what he says.

"Look, I'm only going to say this once so you better fucking listen. You do whatever you want to me and whoever else, but you leave him out of this."

"He's waited his whole life for you to notice him."
"Shut up."

"Are you honestly telling me that it never occurred to you? From what he said, you've been searching for 'Oh! If only someone would love me!' when it's been there all along. You knew."

"Fuck off, Light."

He turns away from me, so I just lean against his back instead like his conscience. He's dead in the water. "But you were scared that if you did that, he'd see what you were really like. It's funny, because that's exactly the same reason why he hasn't done anything."

"I know, ok. Just leave it."

"Ha! I knew it. So, you did know. That makes what you've done even worse."

"What do you mean?"

"You owe him. You owe me. Don't forget your drink."

If he hadn't fooled himself all these years, this probably wouldn't be happening now. I never knew that he was such a coward. I offer him the vodka and this time he takes it, but not before he's given me the saddest baby animal look, like he's being pressed into doing a terrible thing by a despot and it goes against all his morals. What bollocks. I kiss his neck before I leave, and B hasn't moved an inch from how I left him. He looks almost disappointed when I smile at him. I wonder why I bother sometimes. Everyone's so awkward and I don't know why they have to make such a big deal of of it. God! I'm not forcing them to do anything. I'm sorting their shit out for them because they can't, that's all.

And not too long later, maybe half an hour or so, B's sitting on one sofa a fair way away, looking like he's waiting for a dentist, and L and I are sitting on the other sofa. L's adorably drunk by now - if you could say that about a fully grown man - and I'm nicely buzzing. As the one with responsibility for this, I have to make sure that I'm not too far gone. Plus, I want to remember this tomorrow. The TV is off and there's no sound unless L and I catch sight of each other and start giggling like we're children. Everyone is waiting for something to happen and I'm not sure if they're the same things. If B gets his way, his ideal scenario would probably be me collapsing on the floor and he and L running off to Las Vegas and a civil ceremony performed by Elvis. I snort into my book at the thought and L thinks it's because of him, because he's a car crash of funny, and he starts laughing.

Then B stands up abruptly. We watch him in a shocked silence, expecting a reprimand or some joint analysis session, but he picks up our empty glasses and offers to make us another drink. My thanks when he returns sounds hollow and suspicious, and the sting in the tail turns out to be that while my drink is vodka, L's is water. The bastard's just put a lot of of lemon in mine, which completely ruins it and masks the subtlety of a decent vodka which doesn't burn your throat out.

L sniggers drunkenly to himself again and there's no way to describe it. Pleasantly drunk. All limp and boneless so that his humour rocks him and nudges me and the book which I'm trying to read while I wait. It's very irritating that the words move up and down on the page.

I don't say anything, which is the best way I've found of getting his undivided attention. Just like a charm, he moves like a snake to the floor to crouch at my feet, dipping his head so he prises into the space between my chest and the book I'm holding in front of me. As his head appears in front of my book, I want to laugh, but I suppress it in order to watch him with the superiority of the unattached and unmoved.
"Mind if I interrupt?" he asks, clipping his fingertips on the corner of my book to pull it from my hands. He squints his eyes and moves the book in the air until he can focus on the words, then reads aloud with the gravitas of a Shakespearian actor, and quite well for someone who should be falling asleep on the nearest available surface. "And so, in one point of view, the art of war is a natural art of acquisition, for the art of acquisition includes hunting, an art which we ought to practice against wild beasts, and against men who, though intended by nature to be governed, will not submit; for war of such a kind is naturally just…" His voice drifts off and he rolls his eyes at me as he puts the book aside. "Yeah. Whatever, sweetheart."

I smile slightly at his damning conclusion of Aristotle's finest, and it's one of L's own books which I picked up only because it said 'Politics' on the cover. Very few books in his house are loved and treasured, they just take up space, regardless of everything he says about the importance of culture and considering other people's views. He never raves about any book without critiquing it in some way and disagreeing with something fundamental. He has problems with almost everything he comes across in life, and in that way, we're the same. Our minds are our own and can't be influenced.

He stretches up to kiss me slowly and I let him without moving or encouraging it in any way, apart from moving my mouth at his instigation. This must annoy him, because he becomes more dominant, or eager to please, I can't tell which. And at the right moment, I push down on the top of his head, forcing his mouth away. He looks at me with his still strangely clear eyes, and allows himself to be pushed to my lap. His spindly fingers obediently tackle a belt buckle, buttons and zips, and I watch it fondly. Then I look at B, who's watching as I'd hoped, but gives no indication of his thoughts. I admire that about him and drink the vodka he fucked up.

L laughs before he kisses the elastic-crimped skin under my waist band, and I think of Kiyomi telling me to go back to my whore. Well, I did. Kiyomi often leaves traces of herself on me when she does this. The first time, I found myself thinking of something celestial while I looked out the window of my office, though I can't remember what it was now. I thought how useful she was for helping to put me into the frame of mind for thoughts like that, but they vanished when she'd finished and there was nothing left but greasy red smears of lipstick on my cock, like blood. She'd smiled at me as a nighthawk in the nest that she was, covering her smudged mouth with a delicate hand.

"I told you that he was in a good mood," I say to B, and L forces a slight exaltation out of me. "So, do you want to know what I did to him? For him, I should say. I didn't get much out of it."

B looks back down at his book like this is all completely normal. You'd think that L and I are playing chess together and we're all adults who are patiently waiting to die.

"L?" I ask, stroking his hair back, but he's very preoccupied and I have to prod him again. "L, would you like to make me happy?"

"Nnnn..." he replies, rising back up and draping himself all over me as he kisses my chin. Just like Misa when she was sober. God.

"I want you to fuck B." It's a whisper only L would hear. He opens his eyes and laughs again after a moment, but his mind is cloudy and pliable. I'm not worried. "I'd find it very entertaining," I explain.

"No."

"It's not like I can bring any old person in, is it? Think of who I am. B's safe."

"He's my friend."

"So it's even safer. Kiss him then, to start with. Just a little kiss, that's all. You should help out your
"You kiss him all the time."

"Not like that." He shakes his head violently like a wet dog. His hair stands up in sharp looking spikes until I rake them back down again.

"I'm not saying how you kiss him, am I? I dare you. See if he'll kiss you then. Leave it up to him."

"What are you talking about?" B calls out from the other side of the room. L flinches from how loud and unexpected his voice is, but I ignore B and lean down to L's white face and the red blotches on his neck. Blotches and bruises.

"You know, if I was B, I'd find this very offensive," I tell him. "Go on. I know you've done it before. He told me."

"What?" he asks. His eyes are full of vodka and confusion.

"You don't even remember, do you. How sad. It's almost tragic," I sigh, mournfully stroking his hair flat against his head. "We have to make this right. After what I did for you yesterday, I think that I'm owed something in return. Or maybe this says a lot about us. You demand and I supply but not the other way around. Seems a bit unequal, doesn't it? It's something which I'll have to think about before we go any further and I leave politics and send Kiyomi the divorce papers."

"Are you talking about me?" B calls out again. I laugh at him and L does too as he stands up unsteadily. While trying to give the impression that he's articulate in mind and limb, he somehow makes his way over to B. I feel proud, like I'm sending my fledgling out into the world. In my mind, they're brothers, like L and I are brothers.

"Sorry, B," L says. "The gentleman wants to see me kiss someone. You don't mind, do you?"

"The gentleman?"

"I owe him a favour. I'm not bad at it, honestly. Just a peck."

"Because he asked you to?"

"You can have me on your couch later..." L nearly doubles over when he realises what he said. His teeth look very straight and white in a row on his pale face and I... I have to blink quickly to try to clear my mind. I feel like I've been hit by a bus all of a sudden. When I open my eyes again, L's sitting next to B and tries to be composed, only to start laughing again. "Ha! Light, I need a chapstick."

"Are you laughing at me?" B asks. L's face falls into the look of a stunned child who's been told off for something he didn't know was wrong. I worry that he's been brutally sobered up by B's question, because I think that we're running out of vodka.

"No," he says breathily.

"I'm not doing anything for him."

"Do it for me then?"

After a moment of watching them gaze at each other, I start to get bored of this idea altogether.
They're completely useless and complicated and I think about just going to bed because my head's in it right now; it's cloudy and everything is getting more and more indistinct. But then B shifts closer to L until he's literally on the edge of his seat, and like a cat's angry tail my crossed leg bounces on my knee while I wonder about at what point I should step in. B cups L's drunken little face in his hand and looks so sorry to see him reduced to begging for simple kisses to please me. I think so, anyway. I'm hated and L is loved, but B is desperate enough to accept whatever's offered, even if I am the one handing it out. The affection there is disgusting, and even L looks awkward when faced with it. His eyes grow large as they look into B's. I know those eyes; it's like looking into the depths of a dark lake. Get the fuck on with it.

And eventually B does, but it's soft and pointless and I feel like I'm watching an old film under strict censorship. B's eyes are closed and I'm sure that this is like a baptism for him, but L's eyes are open and frightened.

"You can do better than that, L," I say, making my boredom clear. He forces his eyes shut at my criticism and he doesn't look any more comfortable, but he makes more of an effort, at least. He opens his mouth now and looks a little less like a piece of wood by a fire which should be burning, and I see just a faintest shock of light shining on B's red tongue, flicking and searching inside L's mouth. Of course B would respond with a grateful fervency - it was what I expected and hoped for. I have to inspect this from a closer position, like a child sitting inches away from a cartoon on TV. Something about this makes me feel godlike, playing with my lego sets. When they disappoint you, you can bring a flood or break the wicked sinners with brimstone and fire. Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we can have intercourse with them. But God intervenes at the right moment and saves those he loves, or ruins all the fun, however you want to see it. It's a stupid religion, all religion is stupid. What's mine is mine, and what's yours is yours. L isn't yours. I will descend and see.

By the time I reach the carnivorous scene and sit on the table in front of them to watch all this in technicolor glory, it's getting a little more interesting, but only because L in his drunkenness can ignore the bad with his closed eyes like everyone else does. Everyone has their eyes closed. I think of the detestable abomination of strange flesh, sex with strangers, sex with angels. B forcing L backwards is so perverse that it's funny and I think he's forgotten that I'm here. Maybe he'll be thankful to me for all time because I gave him this loan, innocent and sad as it is. L's there because I asked it of him, but B's probably living in a little fantasy which has been well nurtured and honed for decades. His hand, smoothing L's hair down like a rumpled bedsheet, makes me ache. Come back into my arms.

L must sense me there in my silence, and his eyes open to look at me with a rusty-coloured tinge of desire, like the sheen on dried black ink. I don't see B now and his gawping, heinous mouth. I lean towards them until L turns his face away from B, and if B doesn't catch the significance of this then I don't know if he ever can understand it. I want to crush him in every possible way. I want his heart to shatter and for him to pine to death in his office. Time will extend painfully for him, but everyone else will rush by around him at the speed of sound. My mouth catches L's, which is moist from B, it's dirty. But he grabs at my hair and pulls me down on top of him on the sofa. I wish I could see B. I wish I could see his face and see him move away to make room for me, to see him see me make L come alive and writhing and clutching and greedy for cleansing fornication. I wish I could see B's face when I place L's leg around my waist so it's resting on my hip, and me on all fours like an animal. Like Zeus turning into a menagerie of animals for a purpose, yes. Rain and coins and bulls and dreams.

L says that he can't breathe; the poor man needs life support. He makes labouring gasps on my shoulder until I push him away from me by the throat so that his head rests against this worn old sofa; lived in, fucked on by him and whoever owned it before him. Some man in a top hat and a woman in
a bustle dress, refurbished, two women in wartime utilitarian suits, drugs in flares and suede, fringed shirts, left to rot, refurbished, L and whatever hole he could find. This sofa. Everything he owns must have a story because they're so old. B's behind me, and I imagine him watching with hatred and ancient love at how I pin L down and how L takes it. Yes, he always did because there are so few boundaries. This is no romance which involves Interflora. I lean back and my lips barely scrape B's mouth before he pulls away from me, making me bite my lip and carve the print of my teeth into them in frustration. There's no air here, I'm too high, I feel high. I'm an aide again, I'm back in Transport, I'm nobody, there's no oxygen. I feel licentious. He hates me. We should fuck.

"The offer's still there, by the way. He'll do anything I want," I say to him with a raised eyebrow. "Won't you?" I ask L then, like a caring master. L looks three sheets to the wind and purely running on instinctive carnality now. And that's the wonder of just the right amount of alcohol in someone with little restraint to start with. He reaches up to kiss me with the same tenderness with which I'd used to push him down. "You like B don't you? Do you want to make me happy, L?"

"Stop it. He needs to go to bed," B tells us. Dead fucking loser. Nothing but compacted atoms.

"What an excellent idea. You're not really there, are you? Neither am I," I say to L, whose face is snug against the curve of my throat. His hand runs up my chest, over the buttoned placket, finding no obstacle, with me between his legs and B behind me. I look across the room in front of me because I need some space. The thinness of the air and the heat in it and my swimming head makes me feel claustrophobic. "I think his frailty is so obvious that it makes people want to hurt him. Like a constant reminder of mortality. It annoys you to be reminded. You know, like how people prey on the weak? He looks that way, but it's not true. He's just one big lie."

"People don't want to hurt him; you do," B says. I imagine him so close to my ear. I want to feel his hands around my neck.

"Maybe. But he's hard to hurt. Hard to break. L? L, tell B about the night your father died. Tell him what you did to me," I ask with my hand running over his back as a comfort. He sighs a despondent, groaning 'no' into my shoulder, but B needs to learn about him. He needs to know what he is. "Remember Astbury?"

"Stop it," B growls, But it doesn't affect me. I want this out.

"What did you do to me?" I ask L again.

"I... I didn't mean it," he answers and it sounds like crying. Yes, he should cry. I feel nothing but a need for B to know the truth.

"You did, L. Remember? I was only being kind to you. And then you left me."

"I didn't want to."

"Then you came back and made me kiss your feet and you were comparing me to everyone you'd ever slept with and said that I was nothing without you, didn't you? While we were fucking, L! You made me do and say everything you wanted, you sadistic fuck!" He turns his face away and B puts his hand on my arm like he's going to drag me away to an execution chamber. I sound so angry and I don't know why. "And what about The Blue Note? The Blue Note. The alleyway."

"No."

"We had a fight about it."

"We didn't fight."
"I didn't want to see you again. I didn't want to do it there, did I?"

"No."

"But you did it anyway," I smile at the small admittance of truth from someone who's allergic to it. It's like a ring on my finger; mizpah, a promise of love eternal and all the things I should have felt on my wedding day if I was at all inclined towards romanticism. B's presence and his analytical brain is soiled by affection and longing which is so oppressive that he must realise, he must see, and I turn my face back to him with the smugness of someone who knows better. "That's your L."

His eyes flash up to mine and I see some understanding there which wasn't there before, but he feels no sympathy for me. If only he was drunk too and had the freedom I felt, but no, the patient has died. I close my eyes and smile from the satisfaction of being the wronged and from having the truth told. It's as close to justice as you can without blood being spilt. It's almost holy, what I feel.

"I'm sorry."

The weak words open my eyes and look down from where they came from, like it was unexpected rock thrown at me. L's lying back against the sofa with his heavy-lidded, waterlogged eyes which find no escape or relief. He can't cry because he doesn't feel it enough. I speak without thinking. The thoughts find words without me realising.

"Why have you hurt me so much?"

"I wanted you to admit it," he says quietly.

"Admit what?"

"That you loved me. I wanted to be sure."

"But I do love you."

"I wanted to know that you'd forgive anything I might have done, but I don't think you're capable of it. Forgiveness is proof of love."

All the air is pulled out of my like I'm in a vacuum then and it takes me a moment to process exactly why. He's prone and his eyes close slowly because he knows that he's said too much and he's been too honest; for what are we without our lies? I pull his dead weight towards me to hold him, because, for some reason, that's the most revealing thing he's ever said to me, like he's baring his heart to me after I was feeding him to B for my own entertainment. I got him drunk and he knew what I was doing and he didn't resist it, but it made him sad to be tied to someone by woven threads of emotion which built up over time to become chains. That's what I was scared of, but he shouldn't feel that way. I feel like such a despicable bastard now, like I'm rotting and exposed in a dark cell somewhere, surviving on sin. We should never have met, we shouldn't be here, I shouldn't have done this. And suddenly all the regret which maybe I should have felt long before now - years ago - infuses me with sadness. Why am I destroying the only thing I care about? When I met him, he was good. Under all of it, I knew he was good. And I know now why I wear these suits, why I don't love my wife, why I haven't given a single thought towards naming my child. I know why I put myself in a storm of hatred where I could only destroy or be destroyed, and it's all meaningless. What he says in those words means more than every 'I love you' he could say over a lifetime. In this moment, I see that disapproving of him makes me feel superior to the one person who ever meant anything to me. Not because I'm related to them and have to feel something for them, or because they love me, or because I'm required to by law - just because. And I feel like when I was lying on my bed with a broken face and I just wanted him to call me, to call round and to look at me, because I forget sometimes that
there was a time he wanted nothing to do with me. I'd known him less than an hour before I looked at him across a dining table, and in my head I asked him to tell me that I'm not alone. For months, when he was away from me, I was alone, and I forget sometimes. I'm only alone when he's not with me. Him and his stupid face and thin bones and his brain and broken ideals and sweet wrappers everywhere and his shit music and his wet towels on my floor. He's always stealing my cigarettes and he doesn't give a fuck when I shout at him, but he does. And when he kisses me sometimes, the inside of his mouth feels furry from sugary drinks and wine and coffee and tea and I think: 'Brush your fucking teeth before you touch me, you bastard!' but I kiss him anyway, and I forget sometimes. I forget what it was like when I didn't have any of those things. I was perfect and alone.

"I would forgive you. You should have known that," I whisper through thick saliva. "We'll be different now."

And he says nothing, only puts his hand on my back so I know that he heard me. In this moment, I believe that we'll be different, even though I don't know if it's actually possible. Behind me I hear B tutting to himself and I hate him for mocking me and mocking us. He drinks his fucking bacardi. L sits up and kisses me. He's woken up and he's someone else. He pushes me back so my head rests against B's leg, and B looks down at me. The view I have of him is through the bottom of his tumbler, as though I'm underwater looking at the clone of the man who's pushing me down. I reach up to touch his face, but he grips it at just a hair's breadth away. It's not allowed. I'm an exhibit he's not very interested in, tilting his head to one side to look at me like L does sometimes. The weight on my chest is L pulling my shirt up to my neck. There's nothing but dizziness and laughter in a coffin as I look past B's face to the ceiling, and everything's vibrating and out of focus. I think that whatever happens to me, ever, I'll live through it. My plane could crash because I trade altitude for speed, but I'll be the only survivor standing in the wreckage, surrounded by flames and fuselage and bodies.

"Clever. Look what you've done to him," B says. When he speaks, I think that it's to L, but his mouth doesn't sync with the words as I hear them.

"It was the truth."

B's hand pulls at my tie, first into tight noose, the end of which he holds up and laughs at before he unties it roughly. He looks towards L, and I see a razor cut under his jaw. It's just a line of dried blood but it seems like a zoomed in, low quality, pixellated image. My chest is being covered in long, dragging kisses, and the feeling is like a cold wind which makes me smile against my shoulder. When I open my eyes, a dark, gracile thing, ten feet tall, is moving towards me across the room. Passing through chairs and tables to reach me, just to reach me.

There's something unnatural in the room. I should tell someone, but I can't move. Suddenly it's right beside me and I'm disoriented by how it's like I'm going up in an elevator while the shadow is going down, but then there's just its face with skin so bloodless that it looks almost grey and decomposing, just shrunken tissue over deformed bones. It's wide smile just grins at me. It's an old friend to me. I hear someone laughing over B and L's short questions and answers to each other, then I realise that it's me who's laughing.

"Oh dear. Looks like more than one of us have had a little too much to drink. Poor Prime Minister."

"Mmmm..."

The demon's eyes are a corona of molten lava with a red core. His teeth look like sharp diamonds, and I don't think that he can do anything but smile at me, like I can do nothing but smile back. I'm a rag doll being stripped by hands that know me, and new hands which are inquisitive. In his face, I see the future, but he's not really there. Maybe the future isn't there either. A hand slides into my
trouser pocket, pressing the silk lining against my hip and I rise towards it. I'm still looking at the
demonic face looking at me with unblinking eyes, but my back mechanically curves upwards
anyway until the hand is withdrawn.

"Oh, look at this. He planned the whole thing. Well, I guess that this useful. Where did you find him
again?"

"I saw him at a funeral."

"How romantic. He's a very sick man."

"He's a beautiful man."

"No, not beautiful... I can't help you. Either of you."

I think it's B's hand which pushes my hair back from my face and draws soft, cool little swirls across
my forehead like I'm nothing but a piece of paper. His voice is a solemn, grotesque contrast to L's
warming slurs, muffled against my stomach. L leaves hot kisses like footsteps, but they go cold
instantly. I shiver and the demon laughs at me until I laugh at myself. He's the thing in the mirror.

I'm still laughing in amazement. No one should see what I see, no one has seen what I see. I should
be screaming. Part of me doesn't believe what's in front of me and it's the same part that finds the
affection being lavished on me by two oblivious people to be funny. Bony black elbows and arms
like branches propping up a joke of a face in front of me, and I can't pull my eyes away from it. It's
skin is the texture of thick oil paint.

"Light, what do you want to do?"

"You and B," I tell the demon dreamily. A hand grips my face and forces me to look towards L.

"Light?"

"I saw something," I tell him. "Someone." My fear was delayed and it sweeps over me now and over
L in turn.

"What did you see?" B asks me, but L talks over him, tracing my jaw with his thumb.

"Whatever it was, it wasn't real."

"Yes, keep telling him that, if you want him in an asylum," B says smugly. "He's transcended the
realm of ordinary logic. What did you see?"

"A demon."

"Is he still here?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Next to me."

B's face looks down on me and I try to keep my eyes open but he makes me feel tired. "Is he often
like this, L? You keep an eye on that demon, Prime Minister," he tells me.

"B, don't -" L says.
"He is there, isn't he?" I ask B. "He is real."

"You see him, so he's real to you. If only you can see him, you must be chosen."

I close my eyes and just listen to the words being said all around me until they become one voice arguing with itself.

"B, stop it."

"The more he hallucinates, the closer he is to the end. No drugs in the world could save him, they'll just make him numb to life; someone in a walking coma. But that might be an improvement in Mr Yagami's case. The more you encourage him to ignore the problem, the worse it's going to get. We should confront it. What does the demon signify? Why that particular form? Ask the demon what it wants, Prime Minister."

"Leave him alone."

"It's not him that I want anyway, but since he's here... I'll just get my camera."

"No you fucking well won't."

"No, no more cameras," I whisper. Before I know it, I'm upright, I don't know how. I'm level with B and my eyes float down to his chest and the perfectly ironed shirt over it. I start unbuttoning it with my numb and shaking fingers until he grasps them tightly in his hand to stop me. "I only want to see," I tell him coyly, and he lets me go. There's no mark where he said there would be. He said that it was ruined, but he lied. I kiss the thin layer of skin over the bone. "It's not so bad."

"What's he talking about?" L asks behind me, and I turn slowly to look at him over my shoulder.

"B told me about needle in his chest."

"Why did you tell him about that?"

"There's not even a scar," I mumble against the murderous place, pushing the shirt further open.

"Not there, no," B says. "The scars are in other places."

"Please don't talk about it," L tells us. It's painful for him to remember it. More painful for him than it is for B, I think, because B seems almost proud of it, and I identify with that feeling.

I rise up again, unbalanced, and when I kiss B's mouth, he lets me. It becomes a kind of torrent which I didn't expect from him. I'm surprised and feel awakened by it somehow. If I didn't have L - the original - then B would be the next best thing. He moves away from me, so I kiss his cheek instead. His stubble feels rough against my tongue, like a cat's tongue with little barbs. I feel his voice reverberate through his jaw as he speaks to L and looks behind me to see him compromised and having some kind of internal battle with himself.

"What's the matter, baby boy?" B asks him.

"Nothing."

"That's the problem with these things," I say, and turn around to face him instead and to unbutton his shirt casually in the hope that he won't even notice. "There's always someone feeling like they're left out in the cold."

"I don't want to do this, Light."
None of that. The damage is practically done now, he can't go back. I run the narrow point of my tongue over the edges of my teeth before I make a sad, sympathetic sound and kiss him, breaking him up like a melting glacier hit by global warming. While I kiss him, I feel a sharp pain behind me and the roughness of B's cool, unconcerned fingers. I bite down on L's lip so that he feels it too and winces like me, but he only helps steady me by my shoulders as I struggle to make out who's responsible for what crime. After a moment or two, I don't really care anymore. I mould myself into L's form as I'm induced and disentangled.

"I wish I'd worn gloves," I hear B mutter, then the familiar flip and click of a cap over the sound of my own heavy breathing. "Well, if I'm not wanted, you carry on then. He's kitted out and ready to go, L."

"No man left behind," I smile, curling back towards him. There's nothing worse than a threesome which is just two people fucking and one person wanking off. L moans, and not in the way I want him to moan. It's full of advance grief and regret. Sayu used to sound like that when I tried to explain algebra to her, and like the algebra, this is not fucking difficult.

"I don't know..."

"L, please."

"I know why," B says. I look between him and L and it's like I'm not there. If they decide between them that this isn't going to happen then it'll ruin the schedule I have planned. It'll still happen one way or another, I'll just have to resort to deviousness, and why put off until tomorrow what you can do today? This is really annoying. "I thought, I always thought, how disgusting I must be to you."

"There's nothing wrong with you," L tells him, reaching out to touch his face. "There never was."

"I've loved you forever."

Oh, fuck! Can we just get on with it already? I am primed and they're wasting time with all this shit. The more angry and jittery I become, they calmer they become, but there's a cutting off point to my agitation, like I hit a ceiling and can't feel much more. L smiles at B sadly, and I'm about to say something, but then I see the demon again, lank and tall behind L, and I think: 'Don't go near him, don't go near him!' but no one moves. No one can see him but me and I feel faint with the knowledge that I couldn't do anything anyway. Suddenly, L's faces clears with resolution and he stands, wobbling on the stalks of his legs.

"Let's do this thing right then. As right as it can be," he says as he walks away. There's a graceful dignity about him in his drunken sadness, and as I watch him leave, I'm overcome with dizziness and fall against B. He holds me up, and I look up at him and laugh.

"I hate rubbers with him," I say.

"I don't want to be infected by you, do I?" he smiles as he strokes my face lightly with his knuckles. He's always a little bit menacing, because I know he hates me. He'd get more enjoyment out of seeing me choke on my own vomit. His eyes are so bright they're like spotlights. They're like camera flashes in my face. "Where's the demon now. What's he doing?" he asks.

"Don't laugh at me, you crazy fucker... He's watching."

"Maybe he can see these. It might shock him. Do you know what these are?"

He holds a small box in front of me and I try to read and understand the dancing English characters.
"Zolpidem..." I sound out slowly.

"Ambien. Intermezzo, Stilnox, Sublinox, a sedative hypnotic which sometimes has quite exciting side effects, and you've just had a tiny dose. You shouldn't have let me make you a drink. They dissolve in alcohol like a dream, but they mix with alcohol like a nightmare. You went into my room. What did you expect?"

"Haaa! You... ahhh... you didn't have to go to so much trouble."

"I've always thought that you'd be much more pleasant when sedated. One of the possible side effects is amnesia, which I hope you'll experience. You'll wake up and you'll know that something must have happened, because you'll be like a battlefield after the night before in the morning. I really would not like to be in your shoes. Your dirty mind will start racing but you'll be too proud to ask exactly what happened. L will never mention it, if he remembers, and neither will I. But I will remember. That's what I'm hoping for."

"How clinical," I sigh, still laughing, though I don't know why it's funny exactly. My head sways against his chest in my tiredness, but underneath that there's rage and I want to overcome this, now that I know what it is. Maybe the demon was warning me. The demon is the bringer of revenge.

I just see L return and the demon's blue lips before I shut my eyes. My body wants to sleep but my mind, though fogged, is plotting.

"Oi, you," B shouts at me, followed up by a hard slap across my face. "Wake up."

"Don't hit him," L says. "What's wrong with him?"

"Not a thing. He's just relaxing, aren't you, dearest? L, I don't think we've done this before."

B's overpowering sense of control is hideous to me. My eyes snap open and I lunge for him so quickly that my head feels like it's spinning in revolt against me moving at all. I grasp B's hair tightly and pull his head back.

"You're going to suck my cock," I tell him. He laughs in reply as I force him to lean back until he's flat against the sofa with me straddling him. "Ok, L. You're first."
A brightness makes my eyes clunk forward in their sockets, like one of those dolls Sayu had which did nothing apart from open and close its eyes and piss itself. Alive. Dead. Alive. Dead. The light is blinding me through my eyelids and I'm brutally made aware of life as though it's through a painful clash of cymbals. My limbs feel heavy, the threadbare patches of whatever shit this sofa is covered in scrapes uncomfortably against my skin as I shift against it in annoyance. Then a shadow must have pity on me and shields me from the light. I open my eyes as a reaction to whatever kindness it is, but it's not kindness - it's B - and the sight of him and the addition of visuals to my already overwhelmed consciousness makes my head bang. Then I remember, smile, and frown into his face. His hair is combed back like L on a workday morning. Bubbles of air trapped in the liquid of my eyes and what I think might be the start of a migraine, drift over him like a light snow. What I think is my inevitable shut down mode actually turns out to be the fine lines of his grey pinstripe trousers, nearly on a level with me as he crouches beside me, and his otherwise perfectly good white shirt has some kind of purple and red watercolour gore on the side, like he's been knifed. His face is as blank as a newborn's as he looks at me. I don't know what he thinks and I honestly don't care. I appear to still be alive.

I try to sit up but L's heavy arm is draped across my chest and is effectively pinning me between him, the blanket, and the sofa. It's that dead weight you wouldn't think was possible from the fine boned, and that it must be the weight of willpower which holds you down. I try to shirk him off me by rolling my shoulders, but it doesn't work immediately, and even that small effort exhausts me. If B was to decide that this was the time to kill me, I think that I might let him do it. I imagine L waking up, sticky and crimson in my blood, he shakes me, and my head rolls off the stump of my neck and onto the floor. And then the screaming.

"Don't wake him up," B croaks at me.

"Close the fucking blind," I croak back. We're a frog chorus. God, that hurt.

"What did you call me?"

If I was going to call him anything... there are so many possibilities. But what does he mean? It's a slow lurch towards the realisation that I spoke to him in Japanese and he doesn't understand a word I'm saying.

"Blind," I say slowly.

"I'm not blind."

"Yes you are, but close the blind."

"In case your guards and paparazzi are peering through the windows at you? And how are you this morning, Prime Minister?"

My head is going to explode and my body is going to break up like a meteorite hitting the earth.

"I feel fine."

"Looks like you had an eventful night. The state of this sofa," he tuts, clicking his tongue. "I thought that I'd left all this behind at university. What exactly happened here?"

"I can't remember."
"You lost it? Stick a pin in the arm of the chair. St Anthony, St Anthony, give back what does not belong to thee."

"What are you talking about, you crazy fucker?"

"I just found you like this. Is it all a blur to you? I found so many empty bottles I thought that I was at a recycling centre. What a shame that you don't remember." He bobs on the balls of his feet in excitement and if I could release my numb arms from under L's weight, I'd push B right over. But I remember. I can't believe I fucked him. I must have been on some mission of mercy. Ambien and vodka do funny things to a person.

"So you found us and put a blanket over us?" I ask. "How sweet of you, Daddy."

"Anything for my boy. You must have stolen it from him, but that's what you do, isn't it? It's not for you. You could freeze for all I care, like in a Scott of the Antarctic porno. What's the last thing you remember?"

My dick was down your throat like a corkscrew into a bottle of wine because you needed an endoscopy. No... "The last thing I remember was L laughing. Like he could see right past you, through the ceiling and into the sky."

"Do you two often laugh at things that aren't funny?"

"You're funny."

"You should go to bed, Prime Minister. You'll get a crick in that lovely neck of yours," he says, his eyes glancing over my throat while he drinks his coffee. It sounds flirtatious but he looks like he'd rather break my neck than admire it. "I'll look after L."

"I'm sure you would," I laugh lightly. It makes the veins in my temples throb.

"He's very delicate in the mornings."

"I know."

"Not at his best, but it's the only time you can really talk to him because he doesn't talk back."

"I bet you live for it."

"No."

"Does he quote Dante to you?"

"No."

"No, Funny that. It's seems to me like he doesn't really care for you at all. But your imagination is admirable," I smile. L doesn't quote Dante to me either, but B doesn't have to know that. I'm simply highlighting that his mutant romantic feelings towards L are insubstantial and unfounded. Pointless, actually. Put simply, he's mad and deluded. Sometimes I have days like this when I wake up and feel awful, but the part of mind which critiques things and sorts shit out is as sharp as a needle. I should go into work and decimate the opposition's agenda with the mood I'm in.

As though L's physical demonstration of how correct I am is up for interpretation, B purses his flabby mouth into a full pout as he recognises and discards my subtle advice.

"Look, just... fuck off," he says.
"You know I'm right. No need to be so defensive. L mightn't have liked you, but I think that with a bit of training, you could pass."

L arms tighten around my chest suddenly as his whole body flexes itself in preparation for living, then he goes limp again, making me feel like I've had a minor heart attack. I find that my blood is up enough to power me to move out of this lethargic spooning so I can face him instead of B. His lips are sightly open, and I think that if I was in a more energetical frame of mind I'd wake him up in an unusual and pornographic way. I could easily slide into a life of lost hours and debauchery in this house. And somewhere, my child turns within Kiyomi's cavernous stomach.

But back to L. His eyes flutter open with dark eyelashes accentuating the bruised, tired circles under his eyes, and you'd think he was angelic, really, you would. I do, sometimes. He smiles at me, his dry lips cracking and stretching over his teeth and his eyes close from the effort. I think that if we woke up this way every day, we'd never have a bad word to say to one another.

"Hi," I say, and he shifts upwards while holding the side of his head. I know how he feels. The curve of the armrest fits in the nape of his neck like a prop for a body in a morgue. He opens his bleary eyes, sees me again, with the addition of B, and I suppose it must be like a fucked up hospital scene after you wake up from unexpected coma. He looks visibly uncomfortable both physically and mentally, and while my reaction is to smile at that, B's is to reach over me and stroke L's hair out of his eyes, as he often does, but this time it makes L recoil and look at him suspiciously. When I turn my face towards the sofa to smile as wide as I can manage for a moment, I must catch L's attention, and he looks at me adoringly. He's predictable in that he'll always act in the opposite way to how any normal person would.

"Are you happy yet?" he asks me. It's touching that those are his first words of the day, because they're usually choice four letter ones. I feel mischievous and I'm pretty sure that I must look it. I'm an oversexed Peter Pan and I'll never age. He stretches forward to kiss me with laughing lips, and I'm reminded that I'm a challenge he took on years ago which he'll ruin old friendships for so he can achieve his goal in this very long football match.

"Nearly," I reply.

"I made you coffee, L," B interrupts gently. I knew he'd act this way. His awkwardness hides beneath servitude. "Or would you prefer tea?"

"No, coffee's great, thanks," L coughs, sitting up take a heavy mug which is held over my face. If he spills it, I'll kill him. Boiling water doesn't scar, but it would fucking hurt and I'd look like shit for a long time. He doesn't spill it though, and once it's it's safely cupped within his hands, I sit up next to him. L and I like a old married couple in bed, and with B kneeling next to us, handing out kicks of caffeine like a devoted nurse. It's bizarre. I can't say that I expected this.

"I'll have a coffee," I mutter, wrapping the edge of the blanket available to me across my chest and under my arms to shield me from B's cold breath. His eyes turn immediately cold at the request.

"You'll have to make it yourself," he tells me. I put on a show of quiet surprise at his rudeness and turn to L for sympathy, but he hands me his coffee to defuse the situation and starts to doze on my chest instead. "Can I get you another coffee, L?" B begs pathetically, irritated beyond belief and comparable to a moth with a damaged wing, vainly trying to fly.

"No, thanks."

"Ok. I got you some clothes."
"You didn't have to... Oh yeah, thanks" L replies quietly. He's realised that he's naked, so he takes the neat pile of clothes after checking under the blanket. No clothes for me. There's some very obvious favouritism here, and I'm not the beneficiary. This hasn't happened to me before and it's an experience I could have done without. After scouring the floor, expecting to find my clothes in an inelegant heap somewhere, I decide that B's done something sinister with them.

"Where are my clothes?"

"They're in the sink," he says with a pharmaceutical smile.

"What? No," I gasp. My suit. 100% rare breed wool from the Shetland Islands. Woven by nuns, cut by nuns, sewn by nuns. It's so holy it practically has wings and a halo. "They're dry clean only, you bastard!"

"Oh. That explains the strange colour of the water. I rinsed them through with boiling water and now they're soaking in cold water. Is that ok? I put ice in it. It's like a suit mojito in the kitchen, you should see it."

"You cunt."

"Light, I'm sure that he just overlooked the washing guidelines," L sighs, putting his trousers on under the sheets. "You have other suits."

"Other suits? Other? Suits?"

B pulls my cigarette holder and lighter out of his pocket and holds them out to me. At least he didn't put them in the sink. "Here," he says. "Give yourself cancer."

"What time is it?" L asks.

"Just after ten."

"It was one of a kind. Only virgins can make suits like that," I moan while lighting a cigarette. "Do you know how hard it is to find a virgin these days? Let alone a virgin who has dedicated herself to God and weaving. There are no 'other suits' like that... And I looked fuck amazing in it."

L stares at me with a blank expression. He stares at me for quite a long time and I almost feel stupid after ten seconds. "Cry me a river."

Fine. No sympathy. No support. My suit's been destroyed and he doesn't give a shit. Fine.

"I'm going to bed," I say. L hands me the corner of the blanket, like I'm supposed to wear it as a toga. I don't need a blanket toga. I stand up in front of B, blow smoke down into his shocked face like he's a whore who's too useless to have a pimp. Fuck you and your ugly shirt.

Then I walk off leaving behind silence me, but when I turn the corner, I stand against the wall so I can overhear them. What do I leave in my wake? Absolutely nothing by the sounds of it, but after a few moments, L apologises for me.

"Sorry."

"Do you want me to wake you in an hour or so?" B asks him.

"Do you mind if you don't? I'm tired and, you know me, I always follow the naked man... if he happens to be Light, not just any man. I don't do that any more."
God. That's a U-turn. I wonder what I did and when that happened. Maybe he thinks that I'm a more considerate lover or some *Cosmopolitan* shite. Or maybe it's because he's just watched my arse walk out the room. It's probably a lie.

"It's alright, L."

"This is... I knew it would be like this."

"Change isn't a bad thing. Maybe it's what we needed," B tells him in his kindly psychologist voice. He's hoping, I know it, that L will suddenly realise that B's the love of his life after being a Lucky Pierre.

"I'll see you later," L says. I think he must stand, judging by the sound of the creaking and complaining sofa. "Take my car somewhere if you want. No point you staying here all day."

"Are we ok?"

"Why shouldn't we be?"

"Just -"

"We'll forget about it."

Typical L, that. He's used that one on me several times like it's a clause, and it never fucking works. What I learn from this exchange is that: 1. L regrets it all, and 2. B doesn't and isn't going to go anywhere voluntarily. It's ok, I was prepared for that. I hear L's footsteps then, so I rush to the bedroom silently (a skill I've perfected because it's surprisingly useful in all kinds of situations), barely stub my cigarette out in a bowl, jump under the covers, and pretend to be dead. There are many types of insect which have survived since the dawn of life because of their ability to pretend that they're dead. I take lessons from all things.

L must come in, and while I have my back to him and stare at my cigarette trailing thin wisps of smoke into the air like an extinguished candle on a birthday cake, I hear the sweep of fabric on skin, the bed covers lift, the bed dips, and that's that. I sneak a glance over my shoulder to find that he has his back to me too, and that panics me for a moment, but then I remember that I don't give a fuck about things like that and I never did. I also remember reading in a magazine that if you and your partner sleep facing away from each other, it means that you have a very stable and loving relationship. It might also mean that you hate each other but you're forced to share a bed. I still don't give a fuck, and I go to sleep.

I dream of Penber. We're in his old house, but his desk is missing and there's blood pouring from the walls and soaking my feet. He tells me something he said once when he was alive: that politics is nothing but sex and power. The sex and the sleaze is to make up for how aimless everyone is, and that we should pity them. They do it because the illicit is exciting and it makes people feel powerful, which is the thing that MPs love most, beyond money. People are available to the powerful who wouldn't be available otherwise. He says to me that I should use this. I think I have used this, but I deflect. I confide in him that I only love one person, and it's the wrong person. He doesn't understand, like no one understands what it means to me. It's not a warm comfort like it is for other people. It's not a sharing of resources. It's me decanting everything I am into a crystal vase set very precariously on a mantelpiece, and me telling him: 'Don't break it. It'll fuck me up.' It's me not being able to be what I could have been. Penber just nods, so I give up. The last thing I say to him is that I'll ask L.
There's still something missing. Every day, I wake up feeling slightly different to how I did the day before. I draft up ideas and they seem pointless in one respect, but it feels right. It will also ensure me a third term, and a fourth, and a fifth, and for as long as I live, because no one can do what I can do. I'll be here forever, I'm sure; a perpetual dictator with L as my consul. I've been writing down Penber's thoughts and ideals lately. When we talked, they seemed like they were mine too. I just couldn't vocalise them before because they were mine and they were secret and no one could understand. The night he died, he told me to aim for that truth and rightness and to never forget why. But I did.

Somewhere far away, a ringing irritates my ears and I must have unconsciously placed a pillow over my head to drown it out. Just as I start to fade into darkness again, someone leans over me, crushing my bones to the mattress, and then lifts the pillow from my face.

"Light, your phone."

Why can't L just take the initiative like he normally would and throw the phone across the room? Instead, he hands me the vibrating and screaming object and lies on his side to watch me suffer. The call goes to voicemail then, of course, but I saw that it was security, so I send them a text message to tell them that I'm staying here, don't call again, I'll call them.


"You're very important," he tells me lasciviously. Oh, God. Are we going again? He sticks bony elbows into my chest as he half-lies on top of me. I know this isn't his fault, but his observance annoys me when he make it so obvious and he uses me like a desk.

"If I had a gun, I'd put it in your mouth," I whisper. It makes him smile. It makes me smile. He shifts his elbows so I don't feel like I'm being harpooned anymore, and flicks his tongue against my nipple. Instead of being fully engaged, I think of how I should have had a shower by now.

"The way I'm feeling, I'd let you," he says.

"Hah. Mmmm… you'll have to tell me your name sometime."

"Why would I do that?" he asks incredulously. "You'd leave me if you knew."

"Is it that bad? You have to tell me now."

"Maybe it's Light? Light Lawliet. Pleased to meet you. I didn't want to tell you because it's awkward and confusing."

"You're right, forget it."

"Why do you want to know anyway?"

"Usually people tell other people their names at some point. Especially after years of fucking and stuff. It's not even on your work records."

"You sneaky bastard," he says, then bites his lip. "No, it isn't. There's a good reason for that."

"Does Stephen know your name?"

"No. He probably thinks that my parents couldn't be bothered and just picked a letter."

"B will know though, won't he?"
"Light."

"Hmmm?"

"Shut up."

"But God speaks through me," I laugh, while he turns his attention to my chest again and I look at
the ceiling. Ceilings are always bad because the blandness of them always make me think and say
things which I wouldn't think or say or care about otherwise. "Did you mean what you said last
night?"

"Did you?" he asks, looking up at me again.

"You remember?"

"Yes. What I said? I guess so."

"I thought, from what B said, that you only said it to knock me sideways."

"B doesn't know a fucking thing."

"Oh, so you do love me, really, truly, cross your heart and hope to die? That's nice. You should
elaborate though, because my interpretation is that you've treated me like shit on purpose to see if I'll
forgive you. That's pretty fucked up. L, you're fucked up."

"I know," he says. He speaks slowly in a suitably reflective tone and draws a circle on my chest as a
distraction. "But I thought that maybe if I broke this naïve idealism of yours - all this determination
and conviction I love in you - if I ripped that from you and made you like me, but better. If you loved
me and I was sure of it. If it came from your mouth and I believed what you said; then that would be
it for me. You'd be over for me because you'd be another solved case. I just can't do it though, can I?
You have said it, and I believed you. But I just loved you more."

God, he's talky. I wonder when the cheese police are going to burst in and caution us, but he makes
me happy. He's never hidden the fact that he was trying to ruin me and bleed me dry to prove me
uninteresting, but he's admitting that he failed, and that's yet another win for me on the scoreboard.
It's not an end though; there's always a warning there that this is what he expects of me in the same
way I expect him to always be a set apart from everyone else. The worst thing he could ever do to
me would be to bore me and slip into a contented life of someone who doesn't feel like they have to
try anymore. If he failed me, I'd probably kill him out of disappointment and to trap him in amber in a
way I'd want to remember him.

So, while we're being open and honest, my mind glides back to Penber and what I should have
asked L years ago when I first realised that he was a secret keeper of The Lady. But I was too
consumed with envy and didn't want to let him think that his position was anything to be proud of. I
can ask him now though, because I think he'll answer me truthfully, and The Lady's dead, Penber's
dead, and dead people don't need secrets. It's been nearly five years since Penber died. Naomi got
over it in her constantly looking back, moving on way. But I haven't.

"Tell me about Penber," I say. His eyes darken. I practically hear a door slamming in my face.

"Penber?"

"You know what happened. Tell me why."

"I know that he died."
"And you got a job out of it."

"That's not very nice."

"No, it's not. And then you accused me of benefitting from Higuchi's death, which in retrospect is rather hypocritical."

"I didn't say that it was a bad thing if you did. Anyway, that was different. The Lady liked my work and I got a job from that, not because Penber died."

"The Lady hired you to work on the inquiry into his death, didn't she?"

"You know she did."

"And the inquiry was shit."

"That's not really my fault. It was an inquiry launched by the government, so it was never going to be very good. I just advised and read over the evidence and findings so that when it was made public it was boring enough not to cast any shadow."

"You mean you took the truth out of it."

"No, I was involved in it. I didn't compile the information and I didn't edit it, I just suggested the rewording of certain lines."

"Which lines did you change?" I ask, and he rolls his eyes in despair. Every time I speak, it's to a background noise of sighs.

"Fuck, I don't remember! It was years ago and it's Sunday and I've just woken up. He died well before my time here, Light."

"You were working for The Lady before he died. Don't tell me that you don't know anything."

"I advised on incidental things, nothing major until the Penber inquiry. I don't know any more than you do."

"Damn you, L, if you're lying to me."

"I'm not."

"Tell me then."

"I know nothing. He died and I'm sorry because he must have meant something to you, but don't blame me just because I'm here."

"You were close to The Lady."

"No I wasn't!"

"He was assassinated, wasn't he."

"It was an interrupted robbery. Light, you didn't listen to the opposition, did you? They'll say anything to make themselves look better."

"No, I feel it. I know it. The truth didn't come out. I should have access to all classified information The Lady left, but there's no mention of Penber or anything. She looks like a fucking saint."
"I still have the information about the oil conspiracy," he says, rolling off me to pick his shirt off the floor and pull its bagged-up sleeves the right way out. He dodges things so messily now, like he's not even trying, and his reluctance only deepens my resolve.

"Give it to me."

"No. It was no then, and it's no now."

"L, what the fuck are you? You're supposed to be on my side!"

"I am," he tells me, turning back to face me. He'll warn me off. He'll make shit up. "You have to let that go. Don't drag it up. This is your party, she was your predecessor and it implicates people in your government. Blowing that open might lead to dissolution."

"I don't care. I just want the truth."

"It's old news."

"It has a legacy."

"And if you expose it, what do you think yours will be? There is no such thing as a clean slate. You have to accept that."

"No."

"There are other people to factor in and you'll be killed by them to protect the government. They won't even have to discuss it."

"I'm not scared of anyone."

"Neither was The Lady. Do you think she chose to die, Light?"

"She committed suicide, so yeah. You're saying that she didn't?"

"I'm not saying anything."

"You're trying to confuse me and scare me off, but I need to know the truth. Penber and the oil conspiracy are linked, I know it," I say, more to myself than him.

"Do you want me to look into it?"

"No."

"You can't, I can."

"No."

"But why do you think they're linked? Honestly, Penber's death doesn't sound like an assassination to me. Why would he be assassinated?"

"Tell me."

"I can't tell you what I don't know."

"Then tell me what you do know."

"I know as much and no more than you. It was years ago, there was an inquiry and a verdict and it's
in the public domain. Why are you interested in that now? You could have asked me any time in the last four years."

"I was worried about asking you," I answer reluctantly.

"Why?"

"Because of what you'd say or wouldn't say. I don't want to think that you're hiding something from me because you think I won't take it well."

"You don't take things well."

"I know that you don't want the drama."

"I don't want you to be upset," he tells me. Fuck's sake. You'd think that I wear a pinafore and squeal over baby animals.

"But I need to know the truth."

"That's stupid. You were involved in the report anyway."

"I want to know what really happened."

"Oh. Well, you would find that out from the report."

He turns back to fixing his inside-out shirt and I pretty much sit on his shoulder to continue this. I sense that he's going to do what I'd do and put miles between us, so I'm more than prepared to stop him doing that.

"Or what the suspicions were that weren't included in the report," I say. I soften and lower my tone and rest my chin on his shoulder for a different tact. "Please, just tell me. Do they think that I was involved?"

"No! Why would they think that? All I heard, and this is years ago, is Takada and The Lady mentioned Penber and said that he had to go, but that's all I heard. They shut up when they knew I was there."

"So?"

"It wasn't unusual to hear them say things like that, especially about Penber because he was a revolutionary, very liberal, so I just thought that they were going to find some way to make him resign. But, when he died, I suspected that...as sometimes happens, someone finds out something they shouldn't, and they can't be trusted. If Penber found out about The Lady and the oil, the plans to sell arms abroad and that she was ploughing state money into it, then they had a choice between the risk of him exposing the government and him tragically dying. Maybe they chose the latter. He was a naturalised citizen, so no great loss as far as they would be concerned. I think they underestimated public feeling."

"They did have him killed, didn't they. It wasn't a robbery gone wrong. And you helped cover it up."

"No. But I knew about the oil conspiracy."

That admission makes me sit back, and the loss of me makes him turn his face to look at me through the corner of his eye. I can't believe it.

"You seemed so surprised when I told you about it! And you knew? You knew that I was looking
for a way to get rid of The Lady and you didn't tell me?"

"I was surprised that you found out. Fucking Jeevas. I thought that was buried."

"That's why you didn't help me."

"If one man had already been killed for trying to expose it, why do you think they wouldn't do the same thing to you?"

"You weren't protecting me, not then. You weren't interested in protecting me because you didn't care about me."

"If I didn't care about you then I would have helped you. At least, I wouldn't have stopped you. There are some things you're better off not knowing, Light."

"And you'll decide what that is?"

"No. I'm not losing you for something that doesn't matter, years after the fucking event. I wasn't going to let it happen then and I won't let it happen now."

"But this does matter!"

"Why?"

"I don't need protection if that means ignorance of the truth, L. And you're not helping me."

"What use are you if you're dead?" he asks. I don't know. No use, I suppose. But that doesn't make him right. My quietness makes him get back in the bed and face me, like he thinks he's got the upper hand but he's going to be kind about it. "You need to be more like me, Light. I'd tell you everything if I could be sure of how you'd react."

"About Penber?"

"I've told you everything I know about Penber. Jesus, leave it!"

"I was there. I was there when he died."

"You.. You were there?"

"I'd given him a lift home. I heard a bang and I thought it was an engine backfiring but -"

"There weren't any witnesses."

"Not officially," I smile bitterly. "I saw a man run down the street and Penber's door was open, and then I found him in the doorway. Slumped in the doorway. I called the police and they told me to go."

"You called the police? The report says that it was an anonymous call."

"My dad was the chief of the NPA for years, they knew me. They said I should go."

"Because of your career?"

"He was already dead. It probably didn't make much difference. I told them what I knew."

I don't know why I'm bothering to tell him this. No one knows apart from me and a couple of men in
the force. Not even my dad knows, because he'd definitely tell me if he did. I'm conflicted about it, because my sense at the time was that it was wrong, but I was grateful to be allowed to leave and not be linked to it. I could just be shocked like everyone was. I almost forgot that I was the anonymous caller who was mentioned in the papers, and started to believe that it was only my imagination and guilt which made me think that I knew what the crime scene photos looked like. My distance from it became fact, and the lies became truth because I started to believe them. But now I've told L and he's looking at me like I'm a much loved cat who's being put to sleep, and I've made it all a reality. I see Penber lying there. I see blood. I see the golden glow from his porch light making a spectacle of it in the darkness. L touches my hand and then wraps it in his, but it's not a comfort. It couldn't be a comfort to me, ever.

"I'm sorry, Light," he says.

"I should have stayed, shouldn't I."

"No. No point."

"But it would have been the right thing to do."

"There wasn't anything you could have done. It might have damaged your career chances if you'd stayed. You'd just be 'that man who saw Penber get shot' person."

"They shot him in the head," I say unthinkingly and so quickly that it sounds like a bullet passing out of my mouth. I'm still and calm and letting myself sink into the knowledge that I've ignored, and L shifts from what I think is anger. He's resolute that he's going to pedantically correct me on something he knows nothing about.

"He shot him in the head, Light. Some cunt did it for no reason, not 'they.' And the police found the man that did it, didn't they."

"Yeah, it was him. They asked me to identify him from a photo, but it was dark when I saw him and he was running away, y'know. Sometimes I think I was wrong."

"Didn't ballistics prove it?"

"That's what they said. But he no reason to -"

"Sometimes there aren't any reasons. People just kill people. It's a classic case of wrong place, wrong time and I'm going to make you a coffee and you're going to forget about this."

He stands up, pulls on his shirt and buttons it up so he's just long bare legs like some French actor in a film set in a artist's studio in the sixties. I look down at my crossed legs and the tan which is fading.

"I think it was the government," I mutter. "The government hired him. He was just someone to blame."

"No, Light. Wait a minute," he says, and leaves me in this shaded room. I can't even open the blind and see the sky and the swans, if they're there. I'm completely closed off from the outside, and I don't think this is fair. My freedom is compromised and the inside of this house is the only place I can be, but even then there's the threat of discovery because of the public's need to know. No, I don't think it's fair.

After a while, L comes back carrying two mugs in one hand and a thin pile of papers trapped in a brown card file in the other. He skims through it and then points out the few relevant words which support whatever he's going to say. It's the official report from the inquiry, which I know well
enough. "See, his bloods were stratospheric. He was some mad man with a gun. Look at his past history, Light. This isn't a person a professional outfit would hire as an assassin."

"Which is exactly why they would hire him," I tell him, looking up at him drinking his coffee. "And then he killed himself straight after? We're supposed to believe that?"

"He might have fallen in the canal. He was pissed and there were traces of all kind of things in his blood."

"No, the government hired him to kill Penber and then they killed him."

"There are easier ways to kill people. They wouldn't hire some homeless junkie."

"L, you know something. Tell me."

My desperation shows through my voice and he looks shocked by it. It's the same expression he had when I was begging him to come back to me, take me back, whatever, in that fucking miserable shed of a place a couple of miles away from here. I had no pride then and I have no pride now. Here a heart beats and he's surprised by it when it makes itself known.

"I don't know anything, I promise you. I thought it was an inside job too, but it just doesn't add up," he says. I believe him. No, no, I don't. I never did and I never can. I can't trust anyone. "It looks like B's gone out. Drink your coffee," he tells me.


"When you're hungover, you need to drink a lot. And eat pasta, I think. That might be wrong but if you don't drink your coffee then you'll get dehydrated and die. That might not happen, but you'll feel better if you drink it."

I laugh and it makes my cheeks ache while he sits opposite me on the bed in a shirt I bought him. I liked it, but it wasn't for me, it was for him. It wasn't too long ago but it made me think what a fucking awful problem I have. It was nice that he took it graciously and didn't make a fuss. It made it easier for me. I have a lot of money just sitting around as numbers on a screen and a piece of paper and apparently it belongs to me. Sometimes I just want to get rid of it on any overpriced shit I see.

"What's all this about Penber anyway?" he asks.

"He's on my mind."

"Were you..."

"Ha. No. No, but he was my friend."

"Why?"

"Why? I don't know. He was a good person"

"What was he like?"

"You can't describe someone properly in a few words, unless they're a twat and not worth describing. People are either good or bad."

"How would you describe me?" he asks. This is entertainment. He prepares himself with coffee.

"You, I can't describe at all."
"Because I'm neither good or bad?"

"No, because the more you feel about someone, the harder it is to encapsulate why. Go on then, describe me, if it's so easy."

"NNNNNN, ARRRRR and NNNNN again just about covers it."

I smile again, in spite of the hurt it causes me. I really don't want to smile or laugh. I want to sit here and think and let my face go slack and unmoving like all the muscles have wasted away. "They're not even words," I say.

"Those are my feelings over the time I've known you and I think that my summarising skills deserve some recognition."

"They're pirate noises."

"Pardon me for not being loquacious enough for you," he grins. "Did I mention that B's gone out?"

"Yeah, you did."

"Seems a shame to waste the opportunity."

"L, that's kind of insatiable. Do you mind if we don't?" Penber's name is written in L's handwriting on the tab of the file and I really don't want to move or be moved right now.

"Leave me to it and if you feel like joining in at any point then join right in."

"Alright."

"Thanks ever so," he says, after taking the mug from my hands, he puts it on the beside table next to me alongside his. I lie back against the pillows and he lies over me and sort of chews on my collar bone. That's what it feels like anyway. I hold a handful of his hair lightly in my hand and bend forwards head to smell it like it's a bunch of shitting roses. I have a problem. I have a real problem. For all B's said about me being trouble for L, he never said that L was trouble for me. I hear Penber's file bend and crunch between us and turn my face up to the ceiling again while L presses padding kisses on my shoulder which probably leave little bubbles of saliva. He's right; this is a good opportunity. I peer up at the ceiling and the one mar on its whiteness. As I stare at it, it appears to get bigger and become a gaping big hole, but it's not, I'm just looking at it too intently.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Oh, shut up, Light," he mumbles, but I push him off easily and stand on the bed to look more closely at what I've only just noticed now, honest to God. "Where are you going? I was in the middle of doing something with you then and you were committed. I think I could prosecute you for breach of contract. Oh. That's an unusual view of you I don't think I've seen before."

"This is a fucking joke," I say to the ceiling. My fingers feel along the edges of the issue.

"What is it?"

"There's a hole in the ceiling."

"What?"

"There's a hole in your ceiling," I repeat, looking down at him. Then I step out of the way so he can see it for himself.
"There isn't a hole in the ceil... Oh. Those fuckers have bugged my house?"

"No, it's just a hole. I knew it. Well, I didn't know it, but I heard noises the other night and you told me to ignore them but I knew he'd do something like this. Of course he'd either kill us or start drilling holes in your ceiling," I state, stepping off the bed. L continues to look up at the thumbnail-sized hole but shakes his head quickly when it dawns on him what this means.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, you're not blaming B for this."

"The studio's above, isn't it. And the stairs are right by his room, aren't they."

"That doesn't mean that he -"

"Done and done. I knew it. I heard something and you said noooooooo, but I knew he was up to something. That's the last time I let you shut me up."

"Light, leave it."

"Leave it? He's been up there. You know it's him, you do know that. Has he done things like this before?"

"No, it... Maybe it's rats."

"Rats in the studio? Rats gnawing a perfect circle right above your bed? Do you think he drilled it? Do you own a drill? Stephen looks like someone who'd own a drill and keep it down his trousers all the time, just in case," I huff, then watch L launch a mini investigation, nudging the bed out of the way a little and running his hands underneath it. He finds a fine dusting of something which looks like cocaine on the bed and rubs the dust between his fingers, then he searches through a drawer, obviously looking for something in particular to explain everything. It would look quite professional if he was wearing trousers. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"L, what are you looking for? It better be one of Stephen's guns."

"My penknife," he grumbles, shutting a drawer and opening another one. I smile at his perseverance to prove me wrong.

"Not there?"

"It must be in one of my jackets."

"You won't find it. If you find it, it'll be because he has it."

"B wouldn't do that to me."

"Then who did? Ask him."

"No. There has to be an explanation."

"Ask him for an explanation."

"He's not here. I can't ask him if he's been drilling holes in my ceiling, Light. That's not the way you talk to guests. You'll never win another election with that attitude."

"Ask him."
"He'd never speak to me again."

"That might not be a bad thing. Unless you like the idea of him watching you."

"I know B, and he wouldn't do that. If he did it, and I mean if, then it's to... unsettle us."

"Well, he's done that!"

"He wouldn't actually watch us."

"Yeeaaaaah."

"He wouldn't," he says, then puts on a pair of black boxers, which is fine, although I think some support is important, but then he puts on a pair of indigo jeans. Oh no.

"You should leave the door open," I tell him. "Get him a glass of wine and invite him in. We should sell tickets and raise money for our pension fund."

"Light."

"Seriously, I'm just... If you're fine with it or you want to think that it's not what it is, then you're going to do that, aren't you."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Erm, ask him to leave? There's an idea."

"No," he says firmly. "I'm not doing it. I don't want him to leave. I've already driven one person out because of you."

"Oh, so it's my fault? Again. I force you to do things, don't I. And this is all my fault."

"I didn't say it was your fault."

"I know he's your only friend, but he's your only friend who drills holes in your ceilings to watch you have sex with me."

"He doesn't."

"What's that then?" I ask, pointing up at the peephole "Decoration? Both of you are so blinkered about each other."

"So you know him better? I've known him for nearly thirty years."

"Yes, and he's been obsessed with you for nearly thirty years, but apparently you didn't know that. I mean, first he pulls my hair out and."

"Wait, what?"

"He pulled my hair out and put it in his pocketbook. Don't ask me. Then he comes into my office and nearly psychobabbles you to death, and now he's drilling holes in your ceiling, but you think this is perfectly normal. It's what best friends do." I tap another cigarette on the back of my hand when I realise where we've gone wrong, or where I've gone right. My lighter scratches out a flame. "We shouldn't have had sex with him. He's gone mental. I thought it'd calm him down, y'know?"

"I'm going to have a drink," he says after considering what I've told him for a moment. If he can't
argue then he tries to avoid the issue entirely through whatever means necessary. Usually he'd leave wherever he is, but B must have taken his car, so he's stuck here. I follow him out of the room and call after him.

"What about the fucking hole in your ceiling? You've got a mad person in your house and you can't ignore it, L."

"You don't like him and that's ok, but -"

"He was saying all kinds of shit to me. He put ambien in my vodka last night and he writes poetry about you. Ok, maybe he doesn't, but he was saying some fucked up things about you."

He stops and turns round, massaging between his eyebrows fervently. "Rewind again. He put what in your vodka?"

"Ambien. It's a sedative."

"But you weren't sedated."

"Not enough, it just made me a bit spaced. I've had them before."

"When?"

"Jeevas."

"I thought I heard you rattling when you walked into the Higuchi inquiry. Light, how did you live before I met you?"

"It was social. That's not the point anyway. B drugged me. Me! He told me he did it. You went out and he said that he'd prefer me sedated. That's why I was seeing fucking... demons and shit."

"No. No."

"Yes, yes. And on Friday he set that whole coffee run up for you so he could speak to me. And he had a knife. I was naked, in bed, with him and a knife."

"No, Light. That's mad."

"HE IS MAD!" I shout. It's like talking to a very stupid wall. I'd get better responses from a wall. "But you said that he didn't say anything to you."

"Yes, because I didn't want to worry you. There's being a overprotective friend, and I don't give a shit if he hates me because the feeling's mutual, but this has gone past overprotective now."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, pffft. Well, for starters, he wanted me to record us having sex just to hear what you say, or what we talk about, I don't know. Actually, no. That was on Thursday night when he locked me in the kitchen with him and beat himself up. God, L, why can't you see how insane he is?"

"You're making that up. The sex part."

"No, I'm not. Then he was telling me about David and you and thin walls, black sheets, you're beautiful, like an Dior model in retirement. You're gamin, whatever that is, and he has photos of you in his wallet. You in a duffle coat. A fucking duffle coat. I draw the line at that duffle coat. Those
photos he gave you, they were in his wallet because he keeps them in his wallet all the time and he showed them to me. Then he asked me if I speak French, and when I said no, he spoke to me in French. Now, I don't know much French but it was all about you, I'm positive. This whole thing is not good, L. By the way, are you Danish?"

"No. My great-great-grandfather was," he says, his forehead tensing from confusion, and it's the most confusion and worry that he's demonstrated so far.

"I thought you said that your family was from Norway."

"No, my great-great-grandmother was Norwegian. How do you know about my great-great-grandfather? The Lawliet's don't talk about him. He ran a circus and we're very embarrassed of him. He's a missing link in several generations of law and ruins everything, so my father rubbed him out of the family bible."

"I know about him because of B! Fuck's sake, L! Ok, here's something – he said when you shared a place at university, that you got into his bed, kissed him, said that he wasn't something or other, and then you went to sleep."

"He told you that?"

"Yes, he told me that. And he threatened me, but obviously that's not as important as your family history."

"How did he threaten you?"

"Said that he'd cut my head off and put it in one of your pots."

"You must have taken that out of context. I've often wanted to do that to you myself."

"Thanks! I feel so safe here."

"I wouldn't actually do it."

"No, but he would! How much do you tell him about us? Because you really shouldn't say anything. It's none of his business, L; it's our business. He said to me that he's going to take you back to Paris with him and he's going to make you forget about me. I hope you like being sedated, but hey, at least you'll have croissants."

For the first time ever, he actually looks his age, only kind of grey in the face. He sits down heavily on the nearest chair and lets his head and arms hang down limply. It's about time.

"He just loves me," he sighs.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, you fucking moron! What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing," he says. I don't think I heard that. He stands up and disappears into the kitchen, and it takes me a minute to gear myself into action again.

"What?" I ask him from the doorway. He glances up at me and carries on pouring some cheap wine.

"He'll be leaving in a few days."

"You're seriously going to let this go?"

"Yes. And you're not going to say anything. You're just going to be nice to him and then he'll go and
it'll be ok. Don't make a big deal out of this."

"It is a big deal!"

"No, it's not. You're going to shut your face and I'm going to have drink and call a plasterer. God, Stephen would have been handy right now."

"I can fix the ceiling." I tell him. I'm confident that I'll find that I'm the best plasterer in the world, but he bursts out laughing at me and has to steady himself on the worktop. "There's nothing to it," I say defensively. "I just need to... look it up on the internet."

"Thanks, Mr Fix It, but I'd rather get someone in who knows what they're doing," he replies. I'm not letting this go so easily and I'm raging inside by how he's avoiding confrontation which is very much needed, so I'm going to take matters into my own hands, and then I'm going to show him that I can plaster like a professional and with my bare hands! I was born and I plastered my mother up behind me. Sayu was a Caesarian. "Where are you going," he asks. I don't stop, so he has no choice but the follow me through the house while I explain.

"He gave you that knife, right? It's not where it should be, so I'm going to find it."

"I probably just put it down somewhere. Light. Light, no," he says when I try B's door and pretend to be surprised to find it locked.

"It's locked."

"He's very private. There's nothing wrong with him locking his door."

"It suggests to me that he has something to hide."

"Maybe he thought you'd do something like this. I think you need cake."

No, I don't need cake. I kick at the side of the door handle of B's room and bust the door in. Then I feel very masculine. Kiyomi would be impressed with me, but L just stands there staring at the massive dent in the wood and the splintered doorframe as I start looking through drawers. B's single bed is neatly made up and looks so childlike that I almost feel a shard of guilt, but it passes.

"You broke my door!" L shouts at me. "I thought this was solid wood. What is it, chipboard? Light, get out."

"It'll be here," I say, intently turning the contents of drawers over. Pressed for time, I run my hand under B's pillow and hello, L's penknife. I hold it up for him to see. "Look. Do you believe me now? There's dust on it. Shall we bother sending it off to forensics and have it compared to the dust from your ceiling or are you going to accept this is proof? Will you talk to him now?"

"And say what?"

"I don't know. Why is he carving holes over your bed?"

"I can't accuse him of that."

"Fuck, L. It's obvious he's done it. You've accused me of worse without any sign of being emotionally conflicted. God, I don't understand you sometimes."

"He'll be upset."

"Oh, but I wouldn't have been upset when you accused me of murder."
"I didn't accuse you, I just asked you if you'd done it. That's a perfectly reasonable query."

I breathe out. This is hopeless. "If you don't bring him up on this, I'm going back to the Kantei until he leaves."

"Now, Light -"

"No. No 'Light'. Why? Are you frightened of what he'll do to you?"

"Of course not."

"He's your best friend and he's making holes in your ceiling to spy on you when you're asleep, or to spy on us. And he drugs me and treats us both like shit, but you don't want to say anything in case it upsets him?" I say, swatting away his calming hand. "You let him fuck you. Do you really think it'll end there?"

This shocks him, and it shocks me how he can so easily blank things out which he doesn't want to remember. He's already put it out of his mind, so to be reminded of it makes him touch his forehead self-consciously, and his reply is absolutely atrocious.

"We're adults. I told him that we'll forget about it," he says. "How are we going to explain this door? Put the knife back."

"No. And he's not going to forget about it, L. He's going to frame the page from his diary."

"He knows that it didn't mean anything."

"To you, no. To me, no. To him, it means everything. Thirty years of waiting for you to get pissed and sleep with him, and you think he's going to forget it and be happy with a game of jenga in the evenings? No." I throw the knife onto B's bed and leave the room to go back to our bedroom. Even when B's not here I feel that we're in some state of enforced isolation. I put the TV on and nothing's happened in the world. A few minutes later, L walks in to continue making excuses. I should pack my bag, if I knew where it was. Maybe that would make him do something.

"He knows I did it because you wanted me to," he sulks.

"That doesn't matter. You slept with him and that's what he's going to remember. You've never done anything for me that you didn't want to do."

"Um..."

"Not like that. You did it because it was a dare, really, wasn't it, L? I say: 'I bet you can't do this,' and you prove that you can, and the other way around. But you don't know what it means to him. You don't know what it's like to wait and try and try, and then one day what you want actually happens."

"But you'd understand it, of course. Empathetic Light, king of the world."

"Anyone would understand it apart from you."

"Right. Right," he nods sourly. "At least I don't exploit people."

"Ha!"

"You did this to ruin our friendship, didn't you?"

"No, L. I did it because it was Saturday night and it was either group sex or the Dancing on
"Ice omnibus. Of course I didn't do it to ruin your friendship. I don't give a shit about it. So... are you going to talk to him?"

"I don't know. Are you going to put some clothes on?" he asks. Oh, yeah. I forgot about that. Once the central heating comes on, it's easy to forget.

"B vindictively destroyed my suit, remember?"

"Try to pick up the shattered pieces and move on with your life," he tells me flatly. "Borrow my clothes."

"I'd rather die. And there's another thing. He ruthlessly murders my clothes and hides the ones I have left. My bag is missing. Add that to the list of reasons why you should run the risk of upsetting him."

"Light, your suits have a room of their own. There are people, ten to a bed sometimes in one room with a shower curtain instead of a door, and you're upset about one suit."

"It was a beautiful suit. Hand-cut, hand-finished - "

"By nuns, I know."

"Listen, I fucked a tailor once and he was a terrible fuck but an excellent tailor. He gave me that suit. I really earned it and I've cared for it like it was a child ever since. It's irreplaceable. Anyway, that's not the point. B hates me. Who are you going to support?"

"He doesn't hate you."

"He does."

"That's not what it looked like last night."

"That was the hate fuck of hate fucks," I explain. "But think what you want to think, L. I'll be staying at the Kantei until he goes. I really can't put myself at risk like this."

"He wouldn't hurt you."

"You reckon? So the constant threat of drugs, knives and decapitation is all a big joke, is it?"

"Light, don't imply that he's psychotic."

"I'm not implying that he's psychotic - I'm telling you that he's psychotic, you intransigent little shit."

I go into the bathroom and shut the door. God knows where L goes. After a shower, I have no choice but to drag a pullover and trousers and boxers (B's destroyed my underwear?) out of L's closets and drawers to get changed into, because I do need clothes. I hastily put them on and L's trousers dig in around my waist. How small is he? He'd give Kiyomi a run for her money, back when she had a waist. It's not fair.

Then I look for my overnight bag, eventually finding it in the oven on a low setting. I pull my poor suit out of sink so the water drips from it noisily and L can't ignore me. He's sitting at the kitchen counter and looks up from his book so we can exchange an acknowledgement of just how much of a cunt B really is. Well, I do. I'm not sure when B got back, but he's in the lounge again, in front a bookshelf. My instinct is to hit him on the back of the head with my salvaged bag and suit, but I decide to feel him up instead, because that will probably scar him psychologically.

"How did you get that scar, here?" I ask, rubbing my hand up his thigh. He goes completely still, not
realising that I'd crept up behind him. "Not going to tell me? Ok," I smile, and leave him cuddling a copy of *The Rule of Law*. "So, did you enjoy last night? I did. Consider it a goodbye present from me."

"I'm not leaving," he says.

"Yes, you are. L really regrets it, you know. Can't you tell? Maybe you were just a big let down to him. He has high standards. Maybe you let everyone down."

I'm going through my slightly shrivelled, warmed up bag on the sofa to check that everything present and un-shredded, and I don't notice B until he's knocked me onto the sofa and is pummelling my chest with his fists, the big girl. This is embarrassing.

"Stop it!" I shout, trying to grab his hands. "You're nearly forty!"

He does stop, but only because L's come in. B and I stare at him, with me holding B's wrists, and we watch him breathe in and out several times as he looks between us.

"B, will you come with me?" he says. "We have to buy some food and I need someone to push the trolley."

"Yes," B answers instantly. We still haven't moved.

About an hour later, B storms back in. I breathe a sigh of relief from the sofa which still shows signs of us. It's stained and looks like a group of animals scratched their claws and drew lines in the fabric during a mass rape. I'm sitting on it all the same. B strides up to me and I prepare for violence.

"I know you did this," he hisses at me. I think he's going to cry. I hope he cries.

"Let me guess. He believed me, didn't he? Wonders will never cease." I smile up at him. "I told you."

L follows slowly and the sound of the door closing and his keys being dropped in to the bowl concludes in B walking off towards his room. I wipe the smile off my face just in time for when L comes in looking exhausted. He wipes his mouth with his palm and I try to look sympathetic. I do feel sorry for him, but it was bound to happen.

"I'm going back to bed," he says. "Are you coming?"

Hell, yes.

Disappointingly, L goes to bed to sleep. We both lie on the covers. Me propped up like I'm sunbathing, him on his side and digging his nose into my already uncomfortable trousers like a pig looking for truffles. I'm decidedly unstressed and just biding my time, though I'm unsure of what will happen because this is the unknown. B is the closest thing that could pose any real threat to my position and I dread that he'll apologise for something he didn't even do just to keep L on side.

Bored out of my mind within ten minutes, I have no choice but to read the Sunday papers and then the supplements. I read them with the disgust of an alien looking down at a sewage farm. I've just finished reading an article about how spontaneous combustion has been linked to an overactive thyroid, so I'm almost grateful when B knocks and opens the door without admittance. I look up at him from my downcast face and there's a standoff for a minute while we wait for the other to to shoot first.
"Is he asleep?" he asks at last.

"What do you want?"

"I'm leaving."

"Bye," I smile briefly, then go back to reading about how eating placenta is good for you, or so says some insane woman in the *Times* supplement who dowses in her spare time.

"I just want to say goodbye to him." I put my paper down.

"Are you saying that you want me to wake him up?"

"He always used to have trouble sleeping," he says, shuffling guiltily.

"No doubt that you had some tablets to help him with that."

"You told him about the ambien, I know. You deserved it."

"You sound like L. I was just begging for it wasn't I? It's ok, you helped my cause." I nudge L in the chest, but he just pushes his face into the pillow instead. "L. L, B's leaving."

Once that sinks in, he turns to look up at me questioningly, so I shrug my shoulders and go back to my paper. He sits up to see B standing on the threshold, slightly bug-eyed.

"No, B. You don't have to go," he sighs as he stands up and makes his way unsteadily towards B.

"My taxi will be here in a minute."

"This is stupid. Cancel it."

"Tell him to go and I will cancel it," B says. Me?

"No one needs to go."

"You don't believe me. I didn't do it, L."

"Who did then?" I ask, shuffling the paper as I read. "Maybe it was a rat."

"L?" B prompts him, but L just looks at the floor. I'm fine, I win. Just as I was thinking that that aggressive, burly civil servant in *Work and Pensions* would suit B down to the ground. He'd have L out of his hair in no time and the civil servant wouldn't be fussy; he worked in a women's prison until recently. I really like today. If you average it out, it's worked entirely in my favour.

"Cancel the taxi," L tells him. What? No! "I'll drive you to the airport." Oh. Ok. The taxi would be more economically viable though; L's car drinks petrol like a Boeing 747.

B scowls before smiling slightly in forgiveness, lopsided and sad. He pushes a few strands of hair behind L's ear again. I might feel a bit sick. I might think that L and I should get a mirror on the ceiling. You can't drill through those easily.

"Being you isn't such a good thing, is it?" B says to him. A car horn echoes outside. Thank fuck.

"B, wait. This isn't right," L calls after him, following him to the front door, and I follow him. When B opens the door, I see the back of a red saloon, so I stand in the shadows to keep myself from being seen by some idiot who might recognise me from the TV. B picks up his suitcase and smiles at L so
sadly that I almost feel guilty. Then I remember that he's at least halfway through life and he can look after himself. If I got the better of him then that's not really my fault. It's a life lesson. And he's a bastard. He holds L's face in his hands, running the side of his thumb down his cheek like he's tracing it out so he can remember it better.

"Bye, Baby boy." Give me a break.

I step behind L to put a dampener on these lingering gazes between him and L. The tension in L's back is making me a little nervous that they might decide to make up and kick me out, hard as that may be to believe. I'm fragile sometimes, like when I haven't eaten all day, and I haven't today. I look over L's shoulder to smirk at B and hurry him on, which works, because he shuts the door after seeing me. Once he shuts the door, L goes to watch him from the window after parting the blinds.

"I need to be on my own for while," he says after the car drives away. His bedroom door closes again and I feel like I'm living in the college halls of some very mentally unstable students. After making myself some tea and eating a pre-packaged salad, to be honest, it's a bit shit knowing that he's sulking a few rooms away, so I brush my teeth and go in there to see him sulk. I prise apart a slat on the blind to see daylight, then I lie down on the bed behind him and - oh dear - we're spooning again.

"I said I needed to be on my own for a while," he grumbles at me, half-muffled against the pillows. I kiss the back of his neck and the soft, fine hairs which escaped the barber's razor.

"It's boring out there when you're in here."

"Maybe you're right. About this being a succession of challenges. We'll run out of them one day, and what will we have then?"

"I don't know, but we'll probably still have really great sex."

"Eughhh," he groans.

"Yeah. Just like that."

He laughs and turns his head towards me, so I know that I definitely won. I press my face into his shoulder and breathe out.

"Fuck off, Light."

I'm the first Prime Minister for many years who hasn't sought media coaching. I am an orator and I arrived complete and able. It's very important, on the theme of physical appearance, that 'irrelevant' details such as an offset tie or a crease in a suit is the sort of attention to detail that a proud Prime Minister must be aware of and avoid.

When making a speech, I have always stood at a distance from my audience, because although it could be argued that placing yourself in the centre of a crowd in the old soapbox manner builds rapport and makes yourself seem like 'one of the people', I think distance demands respect. It's fine as long as you dominate the space and demonstrate authority. Power and assertion are key to a good speech. The emphasis of words and the actual delivery is more important than the speech itself. Most politicians reveal anxiety about particular issues through stuttering, licking lips, jaw drops, monotony and fiddling with papers throughout. You should never clasp your hands together, because it could look like a pleading, prayer-like gesture, which suggests helplessness and desperation for help and cooperation. Gesticulations must be confident. You must not show aggression; you must not lash your hands out or display your full set of teeth at any point unless you're smiling at the conclusion, if
that's appropriate. You must not swallow, or turn the palms of your hands upwards. You must never look tired. You must pause so the audience can absorb important points. You must have a fixed gaze to emphasise sincerity. I avoid the 'Clinton Thumb' gesture since it's overused by politicians and looks ridiculous. Instead, optimism is conveyed through dominant, proud gestures and the insertion of carefully timed wit. In summary, you must make it seem natural, not forced. I am a method actor. I represent the government and the country, so I must be stable, decisive and assertive to rally not only the party faithful, but the country at a time of crisis, and it's a permanent time of crisis in one way or another. Most politicians deliver speeches in an over-practiced way and cold as corpse but with less charisma. It comes across as 'I'm a politician, please don't hate me' speech. My opposition's most humorous nervous tick during speeches is that he speaks with what looks like a dislocated jaw which is out of sync with the the words he delivers. He's so easy, it's boring, and I'm offended that he's the best they can come up with. The Reds lend themselves towards my private ideology on a lot of issues, but I went with the Blues because it pays (after-dinner speeches and such) and I think blue compliments my skin tone better. The problem with most politicians is that they've spent too much time in the hothouse of the government quarter and too little in the real world. The sense of drawing upon life experience should be a prerequisite of any aspiring politician.

Finally, once the speech is over, you must walk away with strength and a stride. It's very easy, if you walk away normally, to look as if you're following a funeral cortège. Sometimes, I used to (apparently spontaneously) ask Kiyomi to join me at the podium so we could wave and smile together for a good photo opportunity. She's very popular with the public because of her loyalty, attractiveness, intelligence and excellent taste in clothes. Our genetics are very complimentary.

I decide to make a speech about my proposed bill to the public before I put it forward for voting. I'm assured that public reaction and support will influence the voting results of the House. You don't oppose something which is popular with the electorate, and my whips can draw on media coverage to convince the indecisive.

On the face of things, I have a lot on my plate and a lot of juggling with a sick, pregnant wife who would easily take up all my time if I let her, friends and family who would guilt-trip me into keeping constant contact if I didn't ignore them; an ongoing affair with my Head of PR (I admit that's unwise) - the firing squad on the landscape of my life - who would also take up all my time and headspace if I let him; a very important career with a schedule which would take up all of my time if I wasn't so efficient, staff at the Kantei and in the House who try to infiltrate and box in my life, and journalists who document and interpret every move they see me make. Anyone else would struggle, but I find it quite easy without the help of a whiteboard, by prioritising. My job is the most important thing and the other things link in to support it. They must patiently filter in like traffic into one lane if and when I allow them to, because my first concerns are implementing my skills of resolving conflict, encouraging compromise and galvanising those around me, ensuring that we have an incorruptible judiciary, court system and police force; improving the constitution, setting a low tax policy to encourage economic growth, focusing on government spending; deregulation, concentrating on lowering inflation instead of unemployment (that always trips leaders up), coordinating a strategy to ease global warming; bringing an end to world poverty, fighting terrorism and fighting for equality and human rights, and providing excellent healthcare and education in a classless system in which people will thrive. I can do that from my office. Twelve hours a day, on average. Five days a week. Plus holidays.

Weeks pass like this. My secondary consideration is L and he's my primary diversion. Things haven't really changed since the day I met him in that respect. He's always been a potential supermassive black hole for me, but when I feel myself getting drawn in, I back off to hover within his gravity while he collapses into himself. I think by always staying within a certain distance, we will conserve each other. I realised early on that he wouldn't, couldn't be enveloped by me, and acceptance of facts is the most important aspect of a successful life.
B isn't mentioned again. He doesn't call L and L doesn't call him. Despite that sudden and complete isolation from anyone apart from me, it doesn't seem to affect L very much. He also accepts facts, and he chose this course he's on. Occasionally he's aggressive and accusatory, as if I'm the cause of all his problems, but he chooses to close himself off because he finds other people boring in comparison, and that's hardly my fault. I sense it from him more than hear it, because it's never said outright that he blames me, he just speaks in an orgy of random thoughts which mean something to him but nothing to me. I could sympathise, but I won't allow myself to.

Over the weeks, Stephen picks up the majority of his things, but not the entirety. L doesn't think there's much wrong with this, but I take it as a lingering hope that with this slight connection Stephen thinks he can enter the stage again if his patience lasts out. I don't think so. A few days after B left, Naomi held a dinner party, and neither L or I knew Stephen was going to be there. I thought Naomi had more sense than to be so crass. L guessed correctly that the purpose of the party was primarily to feed me and to get Stephen and himself back together. Towards the end, he and Stephen had some kind of confrontation about civil rights, although I don't know how, because they both had the same thoughts on it, and L left. Stephen turned to Naomi and said: 'I'm mad about him.' and followed him to his car to wave him off or some shit. I twirled a chopstick between my fingers, and when Stephen came back, I wanted to stab the metal tip of it into his hand. I'm sorry, it was an accident.

There's a swirl of dark liquid in the sink. I scrub my hands together, running my fingers inside each webbed tissue, scratch along each nail, and then I'm clean. I look clean, but a luminol test would expose every slick smear and spatter and make me look like I've killed an alien with glowing cyan light for blood. When I wipe my hands dry I know that the towel will be stained with the same glow which is hidden from the naked eye, the sink will be covered in it, and yet everything looks immaculate, including me. Looks can be deceiving.

After rolling down my sleeves from the elbows, I slide my wedding ring on again and leave my reflection. The bare lightbulb dies instantly from the tug of a cord, and I look up, still fastening my cufflinks, to see L's bare legs on the bed. They look violated, crooked and hooking over each other, but then he has no reason to make them appear to be anything else. No sudden return to the decorum of the untouched for him. He's always caked in his depraved filth, and that's the only honest thing about him.

I've downgraded my car. No, I bought another to use only when I escape my security and disappear for hours like an errant child. It's a complicated business because no one knows that I own it apart from me. It's kept in a garage on the outskirts of my country estate. I replace it with my Lexus, and the only people who knows that I drive it is myself, L, and the old guard at the gates who mans it singlehandedly when I'm not officially here, and he doesn't care. I'm not even sure he knows who I am and that this retreat is now bequeathed to me for the duration of my Premiership, because he still refers to The Lady in the present tense on the occasions I have spoken to him. He must think that I'm a friend of hers, and his thick-rimmed glasses don't hide his creamy cataracts. If I was discovered then I'd have to answer a lot of questions. I worry about crashing it or being pulled over, because officially I'm not the owner: it's not registered to me and I'm not on the insurance policy because some dead man is, so I drive it like the dead elderly man whose persona I've assumed for the purpose of owning this car. Driving in my Lexus was a problem for a time, because one of my newer guards seemed determined to follow me and made life more difficult than it had to be, so I fired him. I kept those who come when I call instead of intruding. They think I'm a free spirit. Not a twat, as L says.

Something which is L's idea and not mine is that instead of risking security getting suspicious of what is practically my change in residence, I return to the Kantei. I sleep there and eat there more often than not, and the sympathy for me from my staff flows over and drowns me. I act exactly as I did when Kiyomi was there, only she's not there. I'm conscious of being watched and L is paranoid.
He says that I'm becoming arrogant and sloppy. I'm not, so I think L just wants a change of scenery or to make the illegitimacy of things more interesting for him, and he does that by putting both of us in roles in which we meet in strange places for something sordid. L says that it's only a matter of time before we're discovered and have to come up with a magnificent lie on the spot. I think he wants us to be discovered. My distrust of him boils. I do it because I'm bored. I do it because, as it probably is for him, it's like constructing an unnecessarily difficult formula to solve a problem. I do it for the challenge, because I can with relatively little difficulty, and because it consolidates my supremacy over everyone else. I could have an easy life, and that option is still there, but my heart needs to beat from the electric shock of the possibility that I could fail. I am deceitful and there's no end to what I will say to hide what I do.

I think L chose well, because if this was going to happen and I agreed to it, it would be in the small retreat of a blind man. I love the idea, and while I was driving I imagined the whole world being struck by blindness apart from L and me. I thought it through and assessed problems, and I think the treasury could cover the cost of the changes which would have to be implemented, and it would solve every problem I can think of. Because we alone would be the seers and people would be as blind as they always have been, only more so. It was a nice but useless diversion, but it's good to think about this kind of scenario in case it does happen one day.

Despite agreeing to this, when I arrive, my nerves still cut through me with a jittering nervousness and a will to return to known dangers. I park my car so it's hidden between L's car and the cliff face, and my hands stay gripping the gear stick and steering wheel as though ready to propel me away from here. I watch L step out of his car where he'd been waiting, he doesn't even look at me, and walks calmly into the small building with a loose gait. The sea roars and frays white at the edges when I follow him, rolling the boats in the harbour, and I worry that its salt will scorch my car. I hate the fucking sea. I hate the steadiness of the eternal waves, the despairing cries of seagulls. So, I follow him inside where he's talking to the old blind man at reception. He's alone, L says. He just needs a rest because he's driven six-hundred miles in two days. He's a food critic writing for a foreign travel guide. The lies expand and expand and soon the man is best friends with him and lets L find his room without being escorted. L hands me the key and I walk ahead to let him continue to blather his way into trust. He's despicable, but I can't help but admire him like I always have. He's the only person worthy of my resentment and respect, and that gets messy. I love the air he breathes. Sometimes I wonder whether it's a a disorder I've developed; some syndrome with a long Germanic name, maybe. Because I should want him rotting in a cell for fraud.

Wherever I am and have been, I'm always in the wrong place for the right reasons.

Under his jacket, his shoulders are broad and I wish he wouldn't hunch them so often. It's embarrassing apart from anything else. It makes me cringe to see him physically lie to whoever he thinks would respond better to someone who looks deferential and happy in a mood of permanent anxiety. People don't see him like I do. He won't allow himself to be seen as anything like his normal self.

He lets me kiss his neck and struggle with the buttons on his shirt which are too small to be anything but a nuisance to me, like they're some kind of weak chastity belt to inspire violent destruction. While I do that, he scans a paper with indifference, past the photographs of massacred people of regimes in less fortunate countries. I feel like a fairly desperate man and that we should exchange places.

And later, once I'm out of that bathroom, I draw my belt through the loops on my waistband again. The unforgiving leather belt makes an example of the damage I've suffered and makes me very aware of it. I curse the thumbprint bruises on my hipbones and thighs. Some I feel but don't see, but those visible are coloured like autumn leaves; the welts and scratches on my back, the red bite mark on my chest from pearl teeth. But I'm a tribute, I think. The violence makes a god live. L has his head
tilted towards the ceiling and draws a long finger from his chin to his chest in one fluid motion. When I see him now, fucked and lounging, extending and diluting whatever glow there is left, I hate him for it.

I realise that the room's so terrible that I want to stay here longer than I should. I was going for the 'bang bye' approach to affairs to make L feel cheap, but it doesn't work out that way. I postpone seeing Kiyomi so we can savour this experience and share an equally terrible bento box and pot of tea from room service before we go in our different directions. We're dressed and we're smoking, though only because there's a sign telling us not to smoke. He's sitting in a kind of nursing chair, and I admire the contrast of the horrible, decades-old, chintzy, flouncy fabric of the chair and the thoughtlessly tasteful fabric of the trousers hanging from his legs. I sit opposite him on the bed and it's almost like a job interview in the 50s, I'd imagine, only we're in a bedroom. Clouds of smoke colour every word we say to each other, and he says: "I knew someone like you once. You remind me of him."

"There's no one else like me. That's what you said. All that bollocks," I say scornfully. As soon as L closed the door behind him, I found our situation incredibly funny and have struggled to keep a straight face since. I've laughed inappropriately during dull moments and grunting, shoving maltreatment. I think of the blind man downstairs who's probably warning his son about some big gastro cheese who's coming over to inspect his menu tonight and recommend him in a European good food guide. He's sleeping in his room right now and he's had one of his bento boxes. I don't exist. The blind man is sitting underneath the political story of the decade - him and his marmalade cat - and it would pay for his retirement and the mortgage on this fucking place. He represents every person on the street.

"I was romantically nostalgic about you at the time, Light. Strangely, that's ongoing," he replies coolly. No shits are given. He reminds me so much of my old headmaster: superior in everything, louche, unavailable and available at the same time. "But it's true, there isn't anyone like you. There are, but only for brief flashes of time. Then it gets burned out of them and they become just like everyone else. They don't last long, usually. So you're unique. A good man in a bad place," he says, tapping the pillar of ash from his cigarette.

"So who was it?"

"Hmmm?"

"Who do I remind you of?"

"Me."

After a cabinet meeting, I feel dulled by the contentedness of everyone. Work has become something I can forget about as soon as the clock tells me that I can, so I take a long lunch and L comes with me for what I tell my security detail is for further discussion of the meeting. What I recall most over the last few weeks are quiet moments like this, not our conversations or our disagreements or his moody moments which simultaneously tell me to ignore him and take notice of him at the same time. I suspect that he's feeling the loss of B's ears and how they soaked up his edited admissions and sins. And now that B's in my head again, I can't think of anything else but how his mouth was made only to take my cock. I don't mention it to L because I'm thoughtful like that. B isn't to be mentioned. The wound is still raw. Losing someone who always sees the best in him, haunts him. He's no longer absolved and made clean by B, there's no Stephen to make him think that he could be 'better', whatever that is. Instead, he's encouraged by me.

My foot stays steady on the accelerator which propels us down the motorway. I'm followed by my
security and their guns and vigilance, and I think of being killed in some Ides of March reenactment while L talks to me about how female MPs are only window dressing. I imagine myself bleeding to death on the House steps, and the last thing I see is the white flash of a camera bulb in my face as my body moulds itself to the hard stone. I don't mention that to L either. I press myself against him in the car outside some shit service station, and I can smell the grease and burnt coffee in plastic cups through the car vents. This is a reoccurring part of our days recently: I pick him up from where he waits like a prostitute who's not too fussy and doesn't haggle, we talk in some kind of courtship as I drive, then I pull over and we don't talk anymore. It's an unacknowledged fetish, maybe. I'm drawing myself away from the House and the Kantei to see if we still work outside of that, even in the most boring places on earth. A plane passes over us from the nearby airport and the windows rattle while L's mouth is twisting around my penis, because that doesn't draw attention like a shaking car would, and this is how things are. My hand slides down the back of his trousers because he thinks he's doing the right thing, and I think of opening the sunroof so the people in the plane could see, if they have binoculars. 'Sorry that you're now leaving Japan. Please come back soon.' People walk past and admire my car, not knowing who's inside, and I stroke my worker's hair. I like to think that this isn't the goal every time I see him, but I suppose that it is. In a deeper sense, it's a renewal of vows or something. I still like you.

Then I drive somewhere because I want to see something beautiful. L's saliva and traces of myself dry tight beneath relocked trousers, and I end up at the hospital without much thought. Before we leave the warm car, I wipe the corner of L's mouth with my thumb and a fondness I should feel for my family.

Kiyomi is encouraged by a nurse to show me the ornamental garden and she obeys, not really seeming to care either way. She's fussed over by two nurses who put scarves and gloves and socks and shoes and a coat on her like she's a doll, but as soon as they leave she takes most of them off again, leaving herself with only the coat and shoes. It's not even cold outside.

I've seen Kiyomi since she told me that I was useless, common and only good for procreation, and we reached an unspoken truce and forget about the whole episode. That was weeks ago, and when I've visited since, I haven't stayed for long and we haven't discussed anything apart from her state of wellness. It makes it easier, because stagnation with Kiyomi leaves more energy and opportunity for clashes with L and more professional ones with the opposition. She's clearly confused and embarrassed to be seen by L, and draws her coat tightly across her chest. He doesn't hide looking over her, comparing her to the last time he saw her. At one point, I know he respected her, but no one could deny that she looks fucking awful now.

We follow the square path in the garden which has been cleared of people in wheelchairs and nurses dragging on cigarettes. Kiyomi's deathly quiet and I'm just serving my time, so it's left to L to start any conversation.

"Kiyomi, I'm sorry about your... obstetrical problem."

He never has been very good at small talk. He thinks pregnancy is only a problem stupid people get themselves into after a cold snap and a electrical blackout. My breath leaves my body like wind through a tiny window.

"Thank you," Kiyomi returns politely. "I'm sorry about you and Stephen."

Even I don't know whether that's a sly dig or not. L's face stays blank for a moment longer than it should, then quickly shifts into a social smile of gratitude and all is well with the world. We walk, the three of us, around the garden with security trailing behind us like birds in the wake of a plough. There's frogspawn in a small pond and flashes of white and orange from koi carp underneath,
picking off the unborn. Kiyomi stops abruptly. Her hard stomach billows under the coat she can't fasten.

"Light, could I speak to you for a moment?"

I turn my face towards L, who dutifully gets distracted by the perfectly raked gravel on my left, and tramples over it. As he goes, my eyes follow his back while Kiyomi and I resume our walking with no purpose. God, you wouldn't think he'd been near a service station in his life, let alone to suck off someone in a parked car. His suit is quite special. I don't know the brand and I'd say was too tight but that's a design feature and... no, it's fine. Stone grey, 100% wool, peaked lapels with a white shirt and a oyster coloured silk tie. It's a bit wedding-like and completely inappropriate for work, but my views relax on that sort of thing sometimes. He's been trying lately.

"I'm sorry about saying that you're a policeman's son," she says. L's presence must make her think it's time to apologise for old news and actual facts. It's like an official apology to another country for conflict decades ago, which I occasionally subject myself to due to public pressure and to benefit international relations without money being exchanged.

"It must be very stressful in here," I reply. I don't think it could be, really. I might go mad in a place like this, but not Kiyomi or anyone else. L's sitting in a small pagoda made for two.

"Yes. But I don't it like when we fight," she says mournfully. Her hand runs between my shoulder blades, creating friction against the fabric. I wonder if she's trying to find a wind-up key back there. We're approaching a wall and turn sharply at a 90 degree angle.

"You seem better."

"I feel better. I've been thinking of how we rushed into this though. It's too late now, I know, but... I was thinking of how it could be affecting you."

I'm not the one carrying a parasite inside me. Maybe I am, but she's like a tree feeding mistletoe and one day it's going to burst out of her. I had to be induced, but this child probably won't. It'll accept the life we gave it and be eager to start.

"I'm ok, Kiyomi. I was tired but I'm ok now."

"Good. Because we should talk more," she says. L and I should talk more. I get nothing from talking to anyone else.

"Well, we will then."

"How did the cabinet meeting go? About your bill, I mean," she asks awkwardly, maybe because it took her a few weeks to ask me.

"Fine."

"Good. What's the bill about?"

"Reform."

"Oh," she mutters with a dipping head which conveys understanding, but I know she's already lost interest. It's always reform. As I thought, she changes the subject. "Lawliet seems well."

She's edging towards asking me why I brought him. I want him to be my Press Secretary, but there's no point. I want him to run in local elections and win a seat. I want to show my support and say
aggressively in interviews and in the House that his sexuality has no bearing on his competence. I want to promote him and promote him and then I'll leave my life for him.

"We've just had a lunch meeting and he wanted to see you."

"That's nice of him. Where did you go for lunch?"

"Some place L goes to. Not in the city."

"Jiro said that you've been staying at L's sometimes," she says. My head nearly spins off my shoulders.

"Who said?"

"Jiro. He's in security."

"Oh, yes. I'm terrible with names."

"You should stay at the Kantei. It's safer. I'm not saying that you shouldn't see your friends but -"

"I'm there because it's closer."

"To me?" she asks. I can't tell her that no, actually I moved her to a hospital nearer to L's so I'd have a excuse to stay there. She takes my silence as she would take a confirmation of what she wants to hear and leans her head against my arm. I hope she's not wearing foundation because I really don't need that shit on this jacket. "I've never felt so ugly, Light," she tells me. Oh, for God's sake.

"You're not ugly."

"I just hate it."

"I know."

"It moves and I can't sleep."

And I have nothing to say about that. A pulse of horror runs through me, like when someone tells you about their constipation trouble. The end of this approaches though, since we're nearing the little wooden building L's in and there's no way I'm doing another loop of this like I'm part of an emotional go-kart. Kiyomi has nothing to think about apart from herself. I look at L rubbing a leaf between his fingers and trying not to watch us.

"Sorry, Kiyomi, we have to get back," I say as I slow to a stop outside the pagoda. L extends a leg and slinks up beside me, obviously relishing the deceit of the situation and his part of the other man.

"Will you come and see me again later?" Kiyomi asks me, gripping both my hands for effect. I turn my head to look behind at security slowly, then back at Kiyomi's fervent hands. One day, Kiyomi, those men, everyone, will look back on this moment and the significance of it will be revealed. Could they blame me though? Look at her.

"Yeah, if I can, I'll call around later." I throw a smile in and she smiles back with a suddenly bright face and colour in her cheeks, like all the blood just rushed to her head. I feel an intense need to privatise some industries and ruin communities in poor places in the North which no one cares about.

"Lawliet," she says, turning to L. For a moment she stops, apart from moving her arms like a wooden puppet, and then decides to hug him for some reason. I almost laugh at L's retracting and frozen reaction, and I would if I knew what the hell this was about. It must be hormonal. "I want to
"Thank you," she explains. I'm still lost. I don't know what's wrong with her. This situation is out of my control. She's held a gun up to both our heads.

"Why?" L asks her. He looks at me like I should intervene and protect him.

"For letting Light stay with you," she laughs, and finally lets go of him. "It makes me feel so much better knowing that he's not far away."

"He's very quiet," he shrugs off. "I hardly know he's there."

"Oh, I know he's quiet. All the same, thank you."

I should feel awful, I know that. My upbringing tells me that I should, but I don't. I wonder then why I did this in the first place. I didn't think about it. It's like I was programmed to come here and get it out the way with L for company to limit the time. I feel no sexual pangs from this scene. Maybe I hoped she might ask me why he's here. That she'd put it all together and figure it out and be like other wives of politicians who don't care. I imagined that, depending on how easily I broke her in, I could wrangle a 'it's ok, I understand,' from her, but in my heart I know she wouldn't be that way. A woman she could cope with, because she could wipe her out, but a man, and a man like L, is a different animal entirely. That changes something fundamental and all she could do is scream and wreak revenge. She can't pull his hair in a parking lot and scare him off.

So now that L and I are traumatised by something unexpected, I look at my watch but don't register the time.

"We'd better be going."

"Yes, we're running late," L agrees hurriedly. Her disappointment is accompanied by the sad, inevitable smile of an old relative who is lucky to see a member of her family once a year.

"I'll see you later," she says, reaching up towards me, and I lean down to kiss her obediently with L observing. Then I feel a pang of satisfaction.

And we get out of there. We walk back to the car, L slightly ahead of me and with security guards between us and behind me, like he's leading a pack of protection for a special cargo. He's not important enough for them to include him in their safe circle, and he wouldn't let them anyway. I exchange some words with my head of security, and two of them are going to follow my car back to the Kantei, but it's reluctant on both sides. I don't want them, but they're necessary. They'll protect my life with their own if needs be, but because they're paid to. Maybe there's a warlike state of mind they have. It's for their country, but not for me personally. I know that they dislike me personally because I don't give them warning of what I'm going to do most of the time. I don't value them and this is something I really can't rectify because my sourness regarding them is too overwhelming to hide.

There's already a guard standing by my car to make sure that it too is safe. I unbutton my jacket as I get in, sliding in against the leather, and someone shuts the door for me. L's already inside and we don't speak. I don't start the car immediately because I should say something funny and dismissive. Something about what a bad idea this was, but I don't. He fastens his seatbelt with a click and I do the same. My hands rest on the steering wheel and I turn my head towards him but keeping it down so all I see are his legs and dials and leather-covered gearsticks and handbrakes. I realise that I'm not ashamed, despite these residual teachings rising. Then I start the engine. The car feels heavy.

And I don't see L again that day, or the next day. I stay at the Kantei and sleep in my empty bed like
the dead. L’s sleeplessness is catching just from his presence, I think. When I wake up, there are two
messages from two in the morning. One telling me that the swans are gone, the other is from half an
hour after the first and tells me to ignore the previous message because he didn’t realise the time. He
would have been sitting there alone and awake. He waited for a reply which didn’t come, and then
sent an embarrassed follow-up in an attempt to downplay the fact that he sent me a message in the
first place, but ended up making it all the more embarrassing.

Then it's that old robotic feeling of going about the daily preparations for living. I don't speak until
nine, and then it's only to the woman who sets out my breakfast and polished cutlery so I can eat
alone, read the papers and check my diary.

I run into Shadow Transport in a restaurant after lunch. Among other things, she tells me that the
electorate vote for personality, first and foremost, not the party, which I know. She flatters me
unceasingly while touching her throat, and I suspect that she’s a plant from the opposition. Like I'd
commit suicide for a fuck in a broom cupboard with her. In a meeting with Finance, he admires my
notes, highlights and eye for detail. He might say that, but all those highlights and notes point out his
errors, so I'd be surprised if his enthusiasm isn't covering his bitter resentment. While he talks, I feel
my eyes rolling backwards inside my skull to look inside. I close my eyelids because if I didn't, he'd
see nothing but two great pearls from the Lady's necklace in their place. What would be perfect is if I
could be head of every department, because I am already, more or less, but unofficially. Nothing
goes through without my approval, and wading through someone else's crap is a pain in the fucking
arse. I'm admired for my commitment and determination and single-mindedness, but no one can do
this job but me, I'm certain. This isn't a democracy, it just appears to be one.

In the middle of the night on the 26th, I'm in L's bed when the hospital calls me to tell me that
Kiyomi has gone into labour. I go back to sleep. It's far too early for that kind of shit. I'd have to call
security to pick me up or get L to drive me just so I can watch a horror film from a vantage point at
three in the morning.
There's a patch of blue over Tokyo in the distance, breaking up the grey sky. I think it's significant. I've brought blue skies for everyone in that city and beyond, but at a great personal cost. None of it's for me, never for me, as I knew it would be. There's always a price. This could be hell and maybe it is, because I know that I'd make the best out of hell and fit right in. I exchange my freedom for a better world for others, and while I look back on indulgent moments in my life fondly, I don't regret that there are so few of them, because it's right. I feel so little most of the time I wonder whether I force everything out because it makes living easier. God help me if I turn into L and content myself with what's easier.

Then it starts to rain - one of those light drizzles which weighs leaves down over time and makes everything look plastic - and this convinces me to have a shower and go through my routine with a clear mind. The house is drowning in the unearthly quiet of the early morning, apart from when L moves in the bed occasionally. He sighs in his sleep as I put on my socks, but I try not to look at him for too long. Somewhere, I imagine tiny, bloody hands scrabbling their way out of Kiyomi. I hope that by the time I get there that it'll be over and everything will be clean and pale-skinned, like a courier just delivered the baby we ordered. When I switch my phone back on, there's five missed calls from my mother-in-law, six from my mother, one from Sayu and then some angry text messages, again from Sayu. I skip the familial voicemails and find a message from one of my secretaries to tell me that Finance has died in a car crash overnight. Ok. There'll be a funeral later in the week at the earliest and I have a suit for that. There needed to be a reshuffle anyway and it's not like it's a surprise; every time I saw him he told me about his heart complaint.

I open the front door to catch a glimpse of my security guard open and step out of the passenger side of the car in the driveway. They're silently efficient now, after months of reworking and reprogramming them. It might have been easier to pull them all in for a meeting at the start, but it's better to find level ground through practice. They don't speak to me, ever. I wonder if they gossip about my unusual patterns of life and laugh amongst themselves about how I'm L's bitch. People who inspire envy usually receive that kind of childish slaughter when they're not present. I have to be more careful. I must make them friends of mine. I must buy them dinner and talk to them about sports and cars. I must remember their names.

To start with, I smile at the guard and he seems taken aback by my sudden friendliness. His eyes dart away from me as I open the door wider to step outside. This might not be as easy as I thought.

"Bye then."

L disappears into the kitchen. Always fucking naked. I consider just leaving, but close the door and follow him instead.

"Kiyomi's in labour," I tell him from the doorway. He looks up at me for an elongated second, like I've told him that there's been a horrendous catastrophe which has left thousands dead. Then he goes back to the coffee filter.

"Already?" he asks, but I don't reply. I don't know if he thinks Kiyomi's gestation period was supposed to be like an elephant's. "Do you want me to drive you there?"

"No. Security are outside."

He peeks through the blinds and smiles to himself sourly. "Oh, so they are. Well, congratu -"
"Finance has gone and killed himself. Could you write a press statement when you get to work as a matter of urgency?"

"How did he die?" he asks after another second's pause before he spoons coffee into the machine. I'm glad that he accepted this sideswipe in conversation. I think of Finance dead in a car somewhere. Probably in the morgue now waiting for an autopsy by some bored pathologist who's drinking coffee on the sterile metal bed of a table before he sharpens his knives and saws. I used to think of L dying in a car crash. I wanted something violent to rip him from the world, and it was beautiful in my head.

"Car crash."

"Well, that saves me one problem. I heard yesterday that he was going to defect."

"Finance?"

"Hmmm. I was going to speak to him today and talk him out of it. It was over your bill," he says, looking up in his calmness to barely focus on me after what sounds like an accusation. Finance is dead because he didn't agree with me. He's dead because he'd rather betray me, and Fate wouldn't let that happen.

"I thought he supported it," I murmur. I did, truly. He was one of those who mentioned it the most, though always in an interested, approving way. That should have been a warning sign to me, and L obviously thinks that. He smiles again to himself as the machine percolates water through coffee and growls into some frenzy of duty.

"Don't trust people. I'll see you later, maybe. Do you think you'll be free for lunch? There's a new pâtisserie chef in... you know where the Giger Bar was years ago? Near there. He's got rave reviews and he's actually done an apprenticeship with one of those Roux people, so he might be good. I like Tokyo a lot less since all the best chefs died or left the country."

No, he never did find a replacement.

"I don't know yet. I'll call you," I say, already on my way out. As I open the front door and see my security guard still standing there, waiting, L's voices carries loudly behind me to see me out.

"Send my love to Kiyomi. Tell her that I've been looking after you."

This wasn't going to ever be a charming first meeting with my son, because I feel like a disharmonious chord fighting against the orchestra even before I get to the hospital. I'm dazed but annoyed, aggrieved, wondering how I got to this point in life with no injury and no real reason to see the inside of a hospital in a non-work capacity until now. My priorities are set and all this must come before work because apparently things like this come before my country, that much I know. Other people don't have important work to do like I do though, and they don't have the dedication to their job, like I do. They'll use any excuse they can for a day off, and that's just one of the ways in which I differ from other people.

Now that I'm here, I'm escorted up the steps of the hospital and past the journalists outside. They've been camping out there for weeks, I think, because they've been waiting for this moment. All these frustrated art photographers and novelists who can't shit a story or a good photo out, so they embellish real stories where art and talent is not necessary instead. The trick I use so I don't laugh at them is to look at the steps and avoid all eye contact. Although I told myself that I should smile and look like a thrilled father when this moment arrived, I just can't bring myself to do it. I can't stand the thought of seeing photographs of myself looking like a idiot on the front pages, so instead I try to
look proud and set apart. If you think a certain way, chances are that you'll look that way, and I am set apart. People shout questions at me. They ask me how Kiyomi is, do I have a boy or girl? What's their name? Who am I wearing? I don't answer any of these questions. My guards form a moving wall around me, pushing microphones away so I can pass through unimpeded.

Once in the hospital lobby, I pause for a moment, and people stop in their tracks to stare at me. Patients sit in their chairs with their injuries waiting for treatment, nurses and doctors clutch clipboards to their chests, and I look up to the glass dome above me, just to take myself out of here and get my thoughts together. I must prepare myself for how I must act, but I can't help but think that this is the worst thing that has ever happened to me, and I did it to myself.

Then I'm in an elevator, and what has been happening to me lately happens again: I find myself in a place with no recollection of getting there. Nothing major, just a few steps and a few seconds. There are missing slices of my life, like I dematerialise and rematerialise somewhere else, but I don't put much thought into it. I think that my brain must switch off temporarily due to boredom. So, I'm in an elevator because apparently there's a need for speed, but I can think of nothing but sex. Locked in a cage in a place of sickness with three men. It's presumed that I'm so eager to see my wife and child that I can't take the stairs. The stairs are a security hazard, I'm told.

I walk towards Kiyomi's room and see her sister and mother in the distance. Still everyone looks at me, judging me, or just shocked at this happy twist of fate which has allowed them to breathe the same air as someone as important and well known as me. I walk past my in-laws without a glance in their direction, which must shock them into silence. Then I'm alone in Kiyomi's room while my guards wait outside. I see the expanse of white laminated tiles first, the faint smell of bleach burns my nostrils, and Kiyomi is sitting up in a white bed looking only slightly deflated, which disappoints me. In all other ways though, she looks like how she was when I first saw her. Painted and powdered and sweet-smelling and inviting you in for consideration. She looks up at me and smiles. A little way away from her, I see the cot by the window. A brutal, communist looking thing, like a pig trough on a stand, padded out with cheap, easy to wash white blankets.

"Well done," I tell Kiyomi. Her smile almost completely obliterates her face until she picks up her nail file again to concentrate on that. I almost laugh at her.

Instead, I approach the cot slowly until the pink, balding head covered in wispy hairs comes into view, and the screwed up, dissatisfied face. He looks like he's been in a bath for so long that he's disfigured and swollen. The crown of his head looks soft and I see a pulse beating strongly under the skin, but I see him and I feel nothing. After almost expecting instant cup-of-soup love, it didn't happen. My life is unchanged. Or, if anything, I've lost something. I've forfeited something which as yet unfathomable for this boy, and I feel the expectation already from him, from Kiyomi, from everyone, but I feel no connection to this bundle of splayed limps. I feel pity for it when I should love it and be amazed by the tiny hands which I created. He might as well belong to someone else.

"How did it go?" I ask him, then look to Kiyomi a little too late.

"I had all the drugs," she smiles dimly.

"Good."

"What do you think?"

"He looks ok," I say. It's all as I imagined it would be: disinterest on everyone's part. I leave the cot to sit next to Kiyomi on a very unstable-looking folding chair. I tug my trousers up from the knee to avoid unnecessary wear.
"Sachiko said that he has your eyes," Kiyomi tells me amiably. I don't know if he does; I haven't seen them and I don't really care, but Kiyomi's relief to be physically her own again is almost something I can touch. "Isn't that such a cliché, standard thing to say? I don't see it, myself. All babies look the same - like little old men. Where were you? I told everyone not to bother you until the morning but they said you should be here. I thought they'd never leave, and even now they've only gone home to get changed."

"I was asleep."

"I said that you would be. No point you being here. I told them I didn't want anyone, but no one listens to me."

"Do you feel better?"

"Much better, thank you," she says. Her nail file scrapes against her ridges, and I wonder what her stitches must look like under these blankets and nightdresses. A mocking smile of a stitched line, I conclude. "They said that I can go home in a day or so. Are the press outside?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what to wear when I leave."

"White and blue."

"You think?"

"A dress. Maybe broderie anglaise or a floral pattern"

"Light, I'm not dressing like a mother."

"A mother they'd like to fuck," I grin slightly at her for a second, then look back at the cot.

"Would you?" she asks. The light catches on the gloss on her lips and on her teeth, the room seems oddly foggy and bright, and she looks out of focus. She complained to me a few weeks ago that people were treating her like a child, speaking to her like a child, and that I was the only one who treated her normally. 'When you said that I was an incubator, you were only saying what people are thinking but don't realise that they are. I'm still a person. I'm the same as I always was under all this,' she said. I brush her comment aside.

"You need to confuse them with opposites. A mix of innocence and prettiness so they're conflicted by that and that they want to fuck you, but you're unfuckable, if you get my drift."

"Because I'm with you."

"Mmm," I hum quickly and turn my cufflink until it's straight with the edges of my shirt cuff. "It's more complicated than that, but it's partly true."

It's quiet then. She lays her hands flat on the covers over her legs and I look again towards the cot, expecting some wailing which doesn't come. Being pulled out by doctors must be a tiring experience.

"Light, are you happy?" Kiyomi asks me.

"With you? Yes," I reply, and she smiles again in her prideful way, taking it as a confirmation of our compatibility instead of what I actually mean. "You've done well. We should name him."
"I think he looks like a Rei."

"No, Kiyomi."

"You decide then, with Rei as a middle name," she says, picking up a bottle of clear nail polish from a table beside her (perfect choice). Rei of fucking Light. It's going to happen. No, it's not.

"No -"

"Yes, but make it quick," she interrupts dismissively, striking long strokes along her nails like she's lighting matches. "The nurses are all looking at me like I'm a terrible mother because I haven't decided yet. It's not that important, is it? Haven't I done enough?"

I have to come up with something quickly or I'll be stuck with Rei.

"Akira," I say as a snap decision.

"Akira?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"That's far too common. Kira, maybe..."

"As in shiny? Glittery, sparkly, what? Fuck's sake, Kiyomi."

"No, as in 'light'. We'll use the character for light, not moon, like you, because that's silly. Kira. I like it." Yes, but you're an idiot. The idea of sort of naming my child after me horrifies and appeals to me. It suggests a lack of imagination but bags of dubious good humour, and I'm not sure how I feel about that. She's pulled out her phone and is searching for something on there. By this point though, I've lost all interest.

"He'll get bullied at school. As long as you're ok with him being bullied."

"Ha! It means 'dark' in another language. Oh, shut up, Light. You weren't bullied, so why should Kira? It's settled. God, I can't wait to get out of here. You know, the doctor said that I've lost weight. I think once this stomach problem has gone down, I should have dropped a dress size from what I was before I was pregnant. I mean he was nearly 8lbs."

"Oh. Is that normal?"

"I don't think so, but it's good, isn't it? I have to have some clothes taken in, but I'm really happy."

"I meant, is his weight normal?"

"Yes! Stop worrying! He's downright thuggish, if you ask me. Imagine giving birth to that. It wasn't fun, let me tell you." Well, technically, she didn't give birth to him because they cut her open. None of woman born. "Hello, Light? Earth to Light," she waves her hand at me. I must have drifted off, but then, I don't want to be here. I want to be at L's kitchen counter while he tells me how much rentboys charge for different things. "Anyway, Naomi and my sister are so jealous, you should see them"

"Because you've dropped a dress size?"

"That and because I'm a mother. It's not the same for men. I've accomplished everything which was expected of me, so now I can do what I want. We can have a life, Light."
She looks so earnest and desperate. My brain swims in its liquid-filled membrane. "I thought we had one."

"I mean holidays. And I could do more work with the charity, diversify, business, do a master's degree, like I wanted, anything. Or, I was thinking of running for Finance's constituency. You've heard about him, right?"

I snap back. My horror must be clear, because her face becomes guarded and resolute.

"Politics? Kiyomi, you can't go into politics." Sometimes you have to take a firm hand when people get carried away. This is such a terrible idea that I don't know whether she's joking. I'm not gullible, I just miss the joke sometimes.

"Why not?" she asks.

"You have to be a mother."

"I can be a mother and have a career! Lots of women do it, and very well, actually, because we're more capable. It's male oppression which says that we can't, and it's all lies. I thought you'd be proud of me."

"You ca-"

I'm cut off by the screaming issuing from Sayu's mouth as she runs in the room, followed by Touta and my mother. I don't think they notice Kiyomi or me, they all rush to the cot to gaze at the new addition to the Yagami line, like they won't have enough opportunity to see him over years. There's very little to look at there; just 8lbs of a sleeping baby. If they put him in a room of babies, I wouldn't be able to pick him out of the crowd. My father comes in last, sees that the area around the cot is blocked to him, so peers over the top from his height, sees what he sees, then stands behind me. All this I see out of the corner of my eye, because I'm still staring at the changing, lying expressions on Kiyomi's face.

"HELLOOOOOOO! OH MY GOD HE'S SO CUTE! Touta, look!" Sayu screeches. I half want her to wake the baby up so I can see his eyes and whether there's any truth in my mother's reports. Touta nods his head in agreement with Sayu's statement of cuteness.

"Yeah, look at his little fingers!"

"Doesn't he look like Light?"

My father's hand sits heavy on my shoulder and I turn to him like he's a stranger. It's the first time anyone's dared to touch me this morning.

"Congratulations, you two," he says. His voice is deep from pride and a sleepless night. He used to sound like that when he came home from work late and my mother would wake me up so I could tell him what my grades were, which was annoying, repetitious, and quite insulting after a while.

"Thanks, Soichiro. How does it feel to be a grandfather?" Kiyomi asks him, beaming and maybe flirting, I don't know now. I stand up and my father's hand falls away from my shoulder.

"We'll talk later," I tell Kiyomi. Of course, this attracts everyone's attention.

"You're leaving?" she asks.

"I have to get to work."
"Light, you can't work today!" Sayu says accusingly. Unfortunately, I've never listened to her.

"My Head of Finance died overnight."

"I heard about an accident," my mother says. "He died? Light, I'm so sorry."

"Thanks, it's a real tragedy. I need to get into work to pass my sympathy on to his family."

"Was he married?"

"I presume so."

"That's nice of you and all, but so what?" Sayu asks me.

"So, I have to go in and officiate."

"Officiate?" she repeats after me. This is a new word to her, I can tell. Kiyomi pats me on the arm so I don't have to explain my job to my sister.

"Alright, darling. Call around later, if you can."

"Kiyomi!" Sayu shouts, hushing herself on the last syllable.

"The world doesn't stop for babies, Sayu. Light has to carry on working to make the world a better place for me and Kira."

That's the best excuse I've ever heard. I wish I'd thought of that. Can't stop, I have to make the world a better place for the children. I'll be late home tonight; I'm staying at L's so I can make the world a better place for the children. No, that doesn't really work.

"You're calling him Kira?" my mother asks. Oh yeah, and then there's that.

"Glittery?" Touta says. His eyes are wild with confusion and he looks back at the baby as if it might all suddenly make sense then. Kiyomi sighs and I sigh for a different reason. My watch says that I'm fifteen minutes late for work.

"No, as in 'light', "Kiyomi explains. "After his father."

"Oh! That's really sweet," Sayu tells us. "Isn't that sweet, Touta."

"Kira kira. Shiny shiny? Yeah."

"No. Light," Kiyomi says aggressively. What have I done wrong?

"What?"

"NO! Kira is... oh, forget it," she despairs, pulling a magazine from a pile beside her. We're on the cover. What a surprise. A break in the clouds blinds me with unadulterated white hot light for a second, then disappears again, leaving me with a view of the world which is bleached and faded.

"Well, I think that's a lovely name, Light," my mother says, smiling insidiously from the gathering around my son. My son. He's not mine though, he belongs to everyone and that's why I enabled his existence. People can watch him grow up from a distance as the son of Japan and try to replicate this perfect family using whatever they have to hand. Obviously they won't be as successful as me, but they can try. This is what they should aim for. I don't mean to congratulate myself for a job well done, but it's amazing what I can do when I put my mind to it. When we learned that Kiyomi was
pregnant, I asked for the exact date of conception so I could try to remember that particular occasion. Kiyomi must have come into my room, and left pregnant, more or less. That's interesting to me. But their estimate wasn't and still isn't exact. Once I'd made my mind up, I let Kiyomi deal with the particulars, and I would appear for duty when the app on her phone said that I should. I quite liked how clinical it was. It felt like I was being called out to inseminate a prize-winning cow, and I suppose that's how it was, really. She was full of folic acid and I kept imagining that I could taste something metallic on her. By taking 0.4 mg of folic acid a day, the risk of spina bifida in the foetus is significantly reduced. It also reduces the risk of having a baby born with a cleft lip and palate, congenital heart disease, and the risk of premature labour. She also took iodine supplements because she's not terribly fond of fish. Iodine is essential for brain development of the foetus, which was a great concern to me. Her diet was overhauled by a nutritionist, cutting out a lot of food that she did like, such as liver, shark, soft cheese and licorice. She also cut out eggs altogether, just to be safe.

What irritated me about that is that she made such a big deal of it and that my chef would make meals for both of us according to her diet. But now the result of those months is here, though no doubt the insane restrictions will continue. I'm overwhelmed by the feelings I apparently should feel, but don't. I suspect now that all fathers lie when they talk about the wonder of fatherhood, or else it's something which changes you gradually into a gibbering wreck of blind pride and devotion. That won't happen to me.

"Kiyomi chose it. The name," I say, determined that everyone knows that this naming game is nothing to do with me. I'm ignored because Sayu is the loudest and most in need of attention. She falls all over herself at the contents of the cot.

"Aghhh, is he waking up? Helloooo Kira! He's waking up! No he's not. He's gone back to sleep again."

"Sayu, stop it," Dad tells her gruffly. "I agree, it's nice name."

"That's definitely settled then," Kiyomi says with finality, looking to me with a business-like expression. "Press release?"

"Not just for that, no."

I pick up my briefcase, button my jacket again and kiss her cheek quickly. I want to leave before my in-laws come in. They're probably outside gossiping to each other about how Kiyomi married below her status. New money. The don't think of me as a self-made man like everyone else does; I'm 'new money' and I heard old Mrs Takada actually refer to me as such in a whisper when introducing me to one of her friends. I was 'Kiyomi's boy' and 'new money' who 'is in politics'. I was only in Foreign at the time, but still.

Maybe my in-laws are something I can talk about to my guards to win their empathy. As long as I speak about it in a way which avoids any hint of criticism and discord. Even before I've left the room, my own family are talking about me.

"I thought he'd be a bit more excited."

"Your brother was never very demonstrative, Sayu."

My relief at leaving is instantaneous. I find that I can smile and answer press questions on the way back to my car, but I wish that I'd worn another suit. I should have gone back to the Kantei first to change into something more appropriate and less fitted to give a sense of casual excitement. Even my sister questioned my level of excitement, and it's because of my choice of suit.
A woman tries to get close enough to me to give me an Akita Inu dog figurine. At first, I don't really know why and pass her off as a nut in a good humoured way as I take her offering, then I remember that it's common to give these things to new parents as a good luck and health charm. She tells me that she bought it months ago for the birth of my baby, and wished me joy and all that shit. The statuette is glass and not wholly offensive to the eyes, since the dog is sitting down so you can't see his arsehole, but I dislike dogs unless they're used in real art and in an ironic way. I'm also given flowers from various women and children. A man pats me on the back as I walk past, and I want to ask them all why they're not in work and why their children aren't at school.

The glass dog sits next to me on the back seat, and after five minutes of thinking about it in the car, I decide that a baby won't change my life. That phone call in the middle of the night wasn't life altering and I am still myself after seeing him. I'm not sinking into quicksand and nothing has changed. By the time I get to the office, he's become a generic baby and I can't think of anything unique about him. Maybe there'll never be anything unique about him, and my pride is slightly hurt at the thought. I'd like to think that I'd pass on something, but it'd be easier if I didn't. All I can hope for is that he's studious and quiet.

I miss lunch somehow. I rushed straight into my office and stayed there. My secretary gave a pile of congratulatory messages, cards, and yet more good luck charms, some of which smell awful, and I think that the less I'm seen today, the sooner this monumental occasional will dim in people's minds and I can avoid saying the same thing to people who stop me. My stomach groans and I looked up from my desk and to the clock on the wall to see that lunch is practically over. I didn't phone me to arrange a meeting, but then I did say that I'd call him. I didn't want to waste my time watching him gaze at dessert trollies anyway. I've completed a lot of work from further down on my priority list - some things which I've been leaving until such a time - and I've read Mikami's latest report. I've accomplished a lot.

The coffee my secretary brings me is bitter, burnt, unpleasantly smoky and horrible. It's also fairtrade, sustainable and from an independent business, so I advise all of my subordinates to go there. They also supply the Club, and I always have my coffee from there now. I must support local business. I must lower business rates for independents at some point, but it's not high on my list. If I give somewhere, I have to take from somewhere else. This is what people don't understand. They all think that the particular axe they're grinding is the most pressing concern and should be the priority of the government, but I don't have a bottomless well of money in the treasury. I'd rather conserve and save. I prefer countrywide austerity to spending beyond our means and borrowing. When The Lady took over from the last government, they said: 'Good luck, there's no money left.' They were a lesson in how the country shouldn't be run, but The Lady favoured taking from public services and raising taxes which hit the lower classes, which is sure to result in civil unrest. I prefer to raise taxes for the rich and large companies. I have no desire to be their friend and it seems like common sense to me. I've been warned that this policy could drive the rich out of the country, but that doesn't bother me either. Each to his means. A strong economy will keep the country stable and I will force people who can afford to contribute, to do so. I might have to review this. I should encourage philanthropic acts, not penalise them for being successful, but rich people never want to part with their money. I hate the bastards. Unfortunately, they're usually better educated and more bearable. I look upon the lower classes as idiot children who never stood a chance, and I want to make sure that doesn't continue. I'm a harsh father.

So after a ten minute lunch, I take a shortcut through PR to meet Watari, catching sight of my reflection in the mirrored corridor. My suit is tighter across the shoulders. Imperceptible to others, no doubt, but I see it and my concern that swimming would have this effect has proven to be well-founded. I must speak with my personal trainer. He's taken so many steroids that there's nothing but testosterone and androstenedione in his skull, and he doesn't understand why I don't want to gain
muscle mass because he's a fucking idiot with massive tits. I'm very fortunate; I have excellent genes and I'm thankful to my parents for putting so much thought into their partners before they bred. Why would I ruin what I already have to have a head which is too small for my body? Yes, he's a fucking idiot. I bet that he votes for some racist minor party and pulls trucks in his spare time.

I drift through PR at quite a pace because my life circles around meetings, like I'm in a video game and each meeting is a level I must pass. My reward is sleep. Wherever I walk, there is a sudden silence and if I stand still for any length of time people start approaching me, so I try never to do that. There is always a feeling of stillness and the eternal to me, I'd like to think, but ultimately, I'm always moving somewhere. I rush through into the safety of the stairwell and am just turning the curve in the staircase when the door opens again. I automatically prepare to rush so I can avoid whoever it is, but slow to a stop when I hear someone who's not unwanted.

"Always running somewhere, aren't you?" a familiar voice calls up to me from the bottom step. I look over the plastic banister which I normally don't touch because they're so unhygienic.

"Hi," I say awkwardly, looking down on L with half a flight of stairs separating us. He also looks awkward, but smiles up at me with his asymmetric grin. He looks more perfect in his imperfection to me after the day I've had so far. He's a sort of rolling tide you can't trust or rely on. The only reason I haven't drowned yet is because I've read him correctly and because he likes me enough not to sweep the air from me completely.

"I saw you walk through the department. I mean, I heard all the office girls squeal, so I knew that it must be you."

"I have a meeting with Watari. I was just cutting through, otherwise I would have called in."

"It's ok, you don't have to explain yourself to me," he says, looking at his feet, which he shuffles almost shyly. I don't know what changed in the hours since I last saw him, but something must have happened to make him so unsure of me and of himself. "I only followed you because I thought: 'He'll take the stairs. He's here for the stairs.' And you were. I have to get my kicks from somewhere. Mine is but a small life."

"It gets pretty sedentary in this place."

"Yeah? Can't say that I noticed. Sorry to hold you up. You go."

I feel my body lurch forwards to obey him, because I do have places to go.

"I can see you at four if you get rid of Mihael," I tell him, taking a few slow steps down instead, while he takes a few steps up. I lean over the banister and feel him take hold of my wrist. I try to draw away again, but he pulls back my jacket to see the cufflink on my shirt. They're not his. His head tilts to one side, offset with a bitter smile, like he was expecting it. "I wear different ones sometimes," I say defensively.

"These go better with your suit." He strokes down my jacket cuff again. "It was nice of you to ever wear my plastic offering. I'll get you some platinum ones, like these. They are platinum, aren't they? Very swish."

"I don't need platinum anything. I like the ones you gave me as they are."

"Still, I think you'd prefer platinum."

"I... er."
"You have to go."

"Yeah."

"Are you a father?" he asks. I nod. "Congratulations," he says quietly. No one communicates disappointment quite like he does, so much that you feel guilty for nothing. "Really, Light. I'm very happy for you."

"Thanks."

"You look nice. Not that I notice those things either, but you look the same as the first time I saw you, and I remember that you looked very appealing then in a snaky sort of way. You must have done."

"It's a different suit."

"Oh, yeah. I know that," he laughs awkwardly again. What's wrong with him?

"Why are you acting like this?"

"I can be pleasant sometimes. Ok, go, you little shit. Why can't you take a compliment like everyone else instead of making out like I have a problem, Jesus Christ..." his voice trails off as he walks back into his department and the door cushions itself to a close. I smile.

And later – it's nearly three – I'm walking away from a quick talk with Mikami. He's given me a card from Naomi and himself (they signed their names individually to show that they're individually happy for me) and invited me for dinner one night at a French restaurant in Roppongi. I gave him some work to do. I smile at people as I walk and don't stop or even slow down until L walks up beside me, slightly out of breath.

"Hello again," he says. "Y'know, here's a thing. When I see you walking, I hear music."

"What music?"

"I don't know, but it's got a hell of a drum beat. I like your suit, did I tell you that already? You look very... Summery."

"It's air force blue. Vivienne Westwood."

"Well, thank you, Vivienne!" he laughs, raising an eyebrow. We sneak a glance at each other and I smile at my feet for a second.

"Calm down."

"I'm calm, Prime Minister, just a little nervous. I need to talk to you about something."

"I haven't got time unless someone else has died," I whisper after checking behind me.

"But I've been a terrible person," he tells me, and I laugh at the idea that that's something new and which could be remedied. "I shouted at your Press Secretary," he continues. "Swore at him like a naval officer. I would suggest that I should be reprimanded like any other employee."

"Maybe later," I say, approaching my office. My secretary is enjoying her role as Head of the secretarial department of my office, but the truth is that I only gave her the promotion because she's the oldest and she's the only one who doesn't chew gum on the job. She stands up, which she always
does like she's in the army, but follows it up with a message.

"Prime Minister, your father called. He'd like to speak to you this afternoon."

"Ok," I answer, opening the door to my office.

"Prime Minister, what you don't want is to be accused of being overly close with a subordinate," L states. I hold the door handle and stare at him, wanting to put a hand on my hip for whatever trick he's going to try to pull. "You know how dangerous favouritism is and all you've done to avoid it. I couldn't live with myself knowing that you treat me differently because you value me above all others."

"I really haven't got the time right now, L. I told you that I'll see you at four."

"This is the most depressing moment of my life." He turns to my secretary who's still standing like a fool. "You, what do you think about this?"

"Me? I... I don't -"

"L, get in here," I say, opening the door wider for him to follow me inside. He closes the door behind me and self-satisfaction pours from him like sweat. "You just humiliated me in front of my secretary.

"Yes, but it was with love," he smiles at me, drawing up to me like a stalking, ravenous animal. "I don't think you'll ever learn."

"Teach me."

"Even if I had all the time in the world, I couldn't. As it is, I have a lot of work to do and then I have to get back to the hospital."

"I didn't hear from you. It hurt me here," he says laughingly and dramatically places a hand over his heart. "Did you have a working lunch?"

"Yes."

"We have working lunches and you're not usually worried about them overrunning."

"Our working lunches are a little different."

"I'll say. I hope so, anyway. So, what's baby Yagami like?" he asks. I turn around to look at whatever memos, cards and gifts have been sent to me while I was out of the office and occupy myself with slitting letters open.

"He's... a baby."

"It's worrying me that you're not talking about him."

"I don't have anything to say. He's a baby, L."

"You should be proud. Shouldn't you be proud? I thought you might be. I thought you'd change."

"Why?"

"I don't know."
"I'm no different from how I was last night."

"They all say that," he says as a fact. Who says that?

"And maybe they mean it. I do. There weren't any complications and it couldn't have gone more smoothly. Oh, but they'll be released from hospital soon."

"Ah."

"I'm sure we'll find some way to get around things."

"Hmmm. Have you named him yet?"

"Yeah. Kira. Don't," I tell him, putting up a hand before he starts, because his amusement is instant and brimming. I write the character on the back of an envelope and hand it to him. "Written like this."

"Very egocentric."

"No it isn't. They're not the same characters or anything, L. Kiyomi chose it. Akira's so common and -"

"It's a nice name," he nods to himself before handing the envelope back to me. "Kira Yagami sounds good, I'll send out another press release later on. I don't suppose you know the weight, do you? An editor asked me for the time of birth, name and weight,"

"I don't know exactly. A little under 8lbs. I don't know the time, I'm sorry."

"Right. Thanks. Well, don't let me keep you. You go back to being a little professional velociraptor. And don't worry about four o'clock. If you can't make it, you can't make it."

"What do you mean?"

"I came here for sex or something like it. No. Actually, I just wanted to talk to you, but I can see that you have things on your mind."

"L." I grab his arm and pull him back.

"Will I see you later? At my place, I mean."

"Do you remember when you'd turn up at my office and -""

"Yes. But will you be coming over later?"

"Of course. You can drive. I need to see Kiyomi, but I'll be back here for seven."

He smiles again, but his smiles aren't something you can trust as a sign that everything's ok. If anything, I often take them as a sign of the opposite. I feel things collapsing around me. I'm someone with baggage now, and I don't care about my baggage and complete life because it's nothing. It's a reminder of what I should be and what I'm not. It's a hole of perpetual sadness to me now and a weight around my neck. If Kira and Kiyomi died it would be a solution and I'd probably bleed the public sympathy for all it's worth. I'd be glad.

"You don't look so different," he says, pushing my hair from my eyes.

"I'm not."
"You change. All of sudden sometimes. I was just checking."

"I don't know why you'd think I'd change; it's not a shock to me. I've been expecting it for a while now."

"Light, I know you and I know you'll change. Maybe not today or for years, perhaps, but you won't be able to stop it."

I laugh, turning my head to the side, but my laughter sounds empty and poisonous. I slip my wedding ring on and off my finger. "I'm not going to change. I'm not about happy about this. I went there to see him and you know what I thought? My first thought was this is the worst thing I've ever done. Who'd bring an innocent into this? I saw him and I... I think it's evil, what I've done. Because there's no reason for it."

"It's not ev-"

"Anyway, do you want to go for drink somewhere at four? The club? We should talk about Finance and... I'm not really sure what to do."

"About what?"

"We should look at houses. I hate your house and you hate your house. Get some property brochures, ok? But no shit, and nowhere too far from Tokyo."

"Ok," he says after a moment. I'm fucking this up so badly. School boy fucking errors - no smooth transition from one topic to another. Now his eyes are drifting over my collar and I feel so self-conscious that my skin is crawling. "Where were you when I was seventeen?" he asks.

"I was ten and I was probably at school."

"Ugh."

"Do you think that if you'd found me earlier then you could have spared me years of tragedy? Because you wouldn't. You would have been arrested."

"I wouldn't have known when you were ten, would I? I wouldn't even have known to make a mental note to check back on you when you were over the age of consent and capable of even slightly intelligent conversation. You would have been some little boy and that's all. No, I just wish that I'd met you earlier. Before this place did things to you and things aren't... the way they are."

"I think we met at the right time."

"It might have been different though."

"In what way?" I ask, and he doesn't seem to know how to answer me. The force of pushing thoughts to the back of my head or squeezing them to death gives me a headache. The waiting stretches out until neither of us can bear it any longer and he walks over to my tea maker, which I only use when I'm in the most dire need and my secretaries have gone home.

"I'll make you some tea," he says. Well I wasn't thinking that he was going to throw it out of the window. "Empires are built on it. Meetings be damned, we're having a cup of tea."

"Do you think I'm weird? For not... I'm glad everything's ok, but -"

"No. Underneath all your artificiality, you're the most real person I've ever met. I think if people were
honest, they'd agree with you. I don't think being a parent can be all it's said to be."

He says that so matter-of-factly that I feel immediately better about my own lack of emotion. It's not that they're not there, it's that they're not the right ones, or they centre around the wrong things and people, sometimes. I scratch behind my ear and sit on the edge of my desk to watch him watch the water in the clear pot bubble and boil and a click, pour it, and slowly stir two cups.

"Did you interview your serial killer?" I ask.

"The other day? Yes. Let's not talk about it if you'll make it unpleasant."

"I'm not going to make it unpleasant. What was he like? Did you see death in his eyes?" I laugh.

"He was dead behind the eyes. Have you ever met a serial killer?"

"No."

"You must have, you just don't know it," he says, handing me a cup and stands opposite me again. "Probability would say that we might have passed them on the street and not known, talked to them and not known. You know why they're so fascinating to me, Light?"

"They're living the dream?"

"Sort of." He holds a square of his chocolate bar out towards me, and after I shake my head, he dunks it into his tea and speaks with his mouth full. "It's because, to be a serial killer, they have to be pretty good at what they do. It's like a career to them and there's no real emotion in it. It's the realisation of all their philosophies with no civilised restraint, because they are the most important thing in their world and rules don't apply to them. People are objects to be used and discarded. It shows a degree of intelligence, cunning and understanding of human nature to make themselves appear socially acceptable. People have an idea of what a serial killer is like - Ed Gein or Albert Fish, that sort of face - but they come in all forms. People defend them, not because they don't believe that they could be a murderer, but because they can't believe that they didn't realise and that they liked them, had a beer with them, invited them over to their house. No one likes to be fooled. Do you fancy a change in career, Light?"

"You think that I'd make a good serial killer?"

"Yes, you'd be the best, I think. Maybe uncatchable."

"I can't quite take that as a compliment... So, what was he like?"

"Who?"

"The serial killer."

"Oh, he was very nice in a psychotic sort of way, but there's no need for him to pretend now, so he's just gone woohoo."

"I see."

"You mean, you don't mind that I'm still indulging my hobbies?"

"Why should I mind?"

"Oh," he nods for a second. "And how was Bethlehem? Did you like the myrrh that one of the kings brought you?"
"L, it's alright. I don't mind."

"You don't? Am I still drunk?"

"You're always going to want to fraternise with abhorrent people. As long as it's for your own perverted satisfaction and not to defend them in court, it's fine by me."

"This must be bliss. Are you sure I'm not drunk?"

"I don't know, how much did you drink last night?"

"Only a glass of red with you."

"This morning?"

"I never drink in the morning, Light. Not on a work day."

"I'd say you weren't drunk then."

"If life was always like this I wouldn't have to drink. So, are you going to discipline me or not?"

"Not."

"Are you forcing me to bring out the big guns?" he asks provocatively. His cup chinks against the button on his sleeve cuff.

"That's not necessary; I know it well."

"That's a terrible joke, Light. Really offensive. Your sense of humour is so immature, when you do have one. But further to your comment, you've only experienced my gun during friendly fire."

I laugh and it's so unexpected that it's more of a bursting flood of laughter. What's nearly as unexpected is that L kisses me suddenly, and it's all unprepared and shocked mouths as far as I can tell. That and chocolate, so he must quickly regret it.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Don't apologise. I like it when you do that. I just need a bit more warning sometimes.""

"No." He swipes his thumb at the corner of my mouth. "I got chocolate on your face."

I breathe out another laugh and push his hand away, then I jump up as a reflex to seeing my fucking dad standing in the doorway. Fucking fuck!

"Dad!"

"The door was open. Your secretary told me that you were expecting me," he says. Oh God, what did he see? Why can't anyone fucking knock? Why do I bother having a door if everyone feels like they can just walk on in? That 'my door is always open' line is just a line, no one actually means it. There's no room for subtlety in life when it's full of cretins who believe open door policies. No, I need to calm down. He didn't see anything. I can make this into nothing.

"But... ok."

"Your mother wanted me to drop these off for Kira."
He holds up a paper bag, so I walk over to him to take it. I suppose that I should, but I really should do what I want. This is nothing. This is nothing. Not yet.

"Babygros?" I ask, looking inside. "God, we're up to our necks in these things already. Could you tell her thanks but we're ok for them now?"

"Yagami-san, it's nice to see you again," L says, bowing in my father's direction as I walk back past him. "I'm -"

"I remember you, Lawliet-san."

"Once seen, never forgotten," I say to ease the tension. Dad just doesn't like L and that doesn't matter. At most, he must have only seen me pushing L's hand away. Me sitting on a desk and having a cup of tea with my work colleague and friend to celebrate the birth of my son. Yes. I want to crack his head open and see what he saw. Without knowing, all I can do is act like nothing happened. I want to tell him when my mother's in the room, because her almost drug induced coma of a personality will smooth everything out. Nothing matters. I should work hard and do what makes me happy, she'd say. I shouldn't think of my mother like that because she's my mother. It's not a flaw in her exactly. It's made life easier for me than it could have been. The point is that I could construct things so they'd understand and not care about what I do with my life, just be thankful that I'm here. I need L; he's necessary. I've been waiting for him my whole life.

"I'm Light's PR," L explains to him.

"He's a good friend," I add, like this needs annotation notes. "L, I'll call around your office later and we'll discuss things in more detail."

"Discuss what in more detail?"

"Disciplinary action," I explain, making L smile and bow his head to both of us before leaving quickly. Then I'm left with my father and a void and a bag of babygros. "Are you ok, Dad?"

I sit on the desk again like that's something I do now, so at least that won't be questioned. I'm listening and I'm open to questions as long as they're the right questions which are delivered in a respectful way. Kiyomi said that she thinks my dad's attractive for an older man. I have no idea about that. Maybe he's the sort of man that women fantasise about fucking on an empty train without a word being said between them, I don't know. I don't understand women and I don't want to to that pointless degree, but Kiyomi likes Nancy Friday and I read the blurb to one of her books once. It left me even more confused. When women start talking about sexual liberation, my eyes glaze over. Anyway, I don't know what my father is. He's just thick and solid like a tree with fucked eyes and salt and pepper hair.

"I didn't know he was your PR. I thought he was a lawyer," he says. He's blocking me in until he computes fully, and that will never happen. I realise then that I've never been told off by him or my mother about anything, but that it looks like I'm going to be told off now, at this age.

"He's a barrister. The best in the country. He has his own firm, but he works for me as well. We're very lucky to have him. He worked for The Lady, you know that. You know him from a case a few years ago, don't you?"

"He wanted some confidential reports and evidence."

"I heard."

"A bullet cap from forensics."
"Well, I'm sure he had his reasons for asking. I'm sorry, Dad. I'm a bit busy this afternoon but -"

"He doesn't have a good reputation in the force, Light."

"The force doesn't have a good reputation," I smile antagonistically, and see the anger rush to his face. I'm the one who should feel angry. People barge into my rooms all ready to judge me. There's a reason I keep doors closed. Nobody has access but they try to bulldoze in anyway. "He's a state counsel. Is there anything else? I have to be somewhere in... oh, now."

"What did I see then, Light?"

I hear nothing but white noise after he speaks, but then my reliable feeling of blankness with an undercurrent of pure rage saves me again.

"I don't know. What did you see, Dad?" I ask.

And that's it. I can tell that whatever he saw, he won't press the issue. He reaches into his pocket and draws two tickets from his wallet.

"Um... I wondered if you wanted to come with me to a motor rally on Saturday."

"A motor rally? Ha, well, no, thanks. I think it's a waste of natural resources and glamorises dangerous driving, so I can't be seen to support that. And the security issues would be more trouble than they're worth, anyway. We could do golf sometime. Some neutral. You should stay at my place in the country. Someone should use it."

"I think you should spend more time with your family. At a time like this you need family around you."

"At a time like this? Yeah, it'd be nice, but I really don't have the time. I'll check my diary and maybe we can work something out."

"We need to have a talk about responsibility and what it is to be a father, Light. I remember when you were born and I -"

"Well done for remembering, Dad, but you know who I am. I think I know about responsibility."

"Now's the time to start pulling away from your friends to concentrate on family. Having Kira in your life will be a big shock to you. Your priorities change."

"Don't be so patronising."

"I'm not pat-"

"Excuse me," I say so I can check a text message which has just dinged timely into life on my phone. The Finance Department want to know where I am. I have to give them a pep talk and assign someone to take over duties until someone else is assigned. "I really have to go," I explain to my dad's stoic face, pushing myself way from the desk. He better get out of my way.

"You need to know what to expect," he tells me, unmoving.

"Look, you don't have to tell me. Kiyomi's had a baby. There is a baby. Your take on parenting was not to be there much. It didn't affect me, Dad. It instilled a work ethic in me and I'm grateful. It didn't have the same effect on Sayu, but that's Sayu. So, there's a baby but it's not going to radically change my life. Now, I really have to go."
I walk around him so I can reach the door. I find it odd that he hasn't thought to ask me about my office. He probably thinks it came with the job. Sometimes I forget about it, myself. Sometimes I think the whole world is one big box like this.

"Light... my son."

Honest to God, I think he needs to say that to remind himself that I am his son sometimes. It lost all effect on me decades ago.

"Is this because of L?" I ask him. Maybe we should have this out and then later we can decide that I was just tired and not thinking properly.

"What? No."

"Because he's my friend and you don't like that. Would you choose different friends for me?"

"I'd reconsider having him as your PR because, from what I know of him, he's not trustworthy."

"You met him once and I'm sorry that you got a bad impression of him, but I do trust him. Please, please, don't come in here unannounced and tell me who my friends should be and how I should act and that I should go to motor rallies."

"I only want to give you some advice -"

"Did I ask for your advice, Dad? I'm sorry, I have to go."

And I don't see L at four. He sends me a text message to cancel while I'm sorting out the fucking catastrophe which turns out to be Finance, but he doesn't give a reason. The whole Finance department are basically dancing a tap dance routine, so it's no wonder their Head died, and I'm not overly concerned about L cancelling at the time.

Once it's over though and I do become concerned, having thought about how he gave no explanation, I call L's office. He's not there and Mihael cautiously dodges the subject with a pretence of ignorance. L picks me up at seven and we don't talk about it. We don't talk about the hospital, we don't talk about my father. On Thursday, Kiyomi and Kira are released from hospital.

After Questions, Watari asks if he can speak to me. He's the sort of man who fumbles his way to the point, like a driver without any form of navigation and road signs, and this takes time I don't have. But, to save procrastinating in favour of an allotted space of time for a meeting which I also don't have time for, I stand in the Kantei office lobby and listen to him ramble on. I hope that there is a point to this, though I don't expect that it's as important as he thinks. It's about Finance and the Shadow's Deputy, who died yesterday. I despised him. He was a good speaker, when given the opportunity, but his views were xenophobic and his policy ideas unrealistic. Because he was a good speaker though, there was a worry that he would take over as leader of the opposition. These two deaths are nothing to write home about, but it has an unfortunate consequence which I'm hearing all about from Watari at this very moment. I'm currently trying to convince him that the 'curse' isn't back because there is no such thing, only natural causes, murders and accidents. We both shut up when L sidles up. Fuck, he's wearing Dior. I try not to look at him beyond a welcoming shallow bow.

"How are you, Watari?" L asks. "You're looking well. I hope you don't mind if I steal the Prime Minister from you."

"We can talk later. Five, maybe?" I suggest to Watari. I don't think I can take any more in one sitting.
"No, no, it's alright. It wasn't anything important," he says, bowing to both of us. I watch him go and wonder if he'll ever retire.

"What was that all about?" L asks me.

"Stupid old fool thinks that the curse is back."

"Well, I have to say, it did cross my mind."

"L, I thought you were more sensible than that."

"I said that it crossed my mind. It crossed and passed. Two in less than a week though. Not good."

"It's a pain in the arse. Two deaths means two funerals."

"I like funerals," he leans in to tell me in confidence.

"I do too. Anyway, try to damp down all this curse shit, will you? Before the press start that up again."

"I'm on it, don't worry."

"Shall we?" I ask, opening a door to the empty reception waiting room. We step inside and I shut the door behind me. "Look, now Kiyomi's out of hospital, we need to think of alternatives."

"For what, pray?"

"Be serious. I won't be able to stay at yours for a while at least, so I was thinking of hotels," I say, waving an ever so bored hand. "Meetings."

"How cheap. Legal meetings, maybe."

"Yes, just make it official. Wednesday's a good day for me. In the afternoon."

"Does this mean that I won't see you apart from on Wednesdays?"

"No, but we can't afford anything too risky. It's more difficult now Kiyomi's back, but it's only for a couple of months."

"I wish the curse went after politician's wives as well."

"You want her dead?"

"Don't you?"

"Yes," I say without thinking. It's a dream of mine, but it wouldn't solve everything. L would have to piss off and come back with a different face, a vagina, a dress, and a name like Mitsuko. However, he finds my answer amusing.

"You shouldn't, Light. She's your wife and the mother of your child."

"I know, I... I don't want her to die. Stop fucking confusing me," I say, slapping his arm grumpily when he laughs.

"It's ok. I don't want her dead either, it'd just be easier for us, that's all. But then you'd have sole ownership of Kira and I don't want a baby in my house."
"L, he's not a car."

"Did I say ownership? I meant custody. Sorry."

"I have a meeting now. So, I'll leave the hotel thing with you. Book a conference suite with an adjoining bedroom because you need to stay in Tokyo overnight. Make sure that you tell them that."

"Well I wasn't going to book the honeymoon suite."

"Maybe I should arrange this, if you're going to be stupid about it."

"No, no, leave it with me."

"Official, L. Put it on expenses."

"I can do official. I've done official before. I've booked conference suites in hotels before. I used to have legal meetings with The Lady all the time."

"Ok," I say, only slightly appeased.

"Ok," he smiles. Job done, I leave him and the room and to go back into the now deserted lobby. I'm just beginning to climb the stairs when he shouts after me: "So I'm not to mention that we'll be fucking there then?" causing me to spin around and nearly lose my balance. I grab hold of the railing to stop me falling while he laughs at me from the doorway. He practically doubles over from laughing and I really, really want to go back into that reception, lock the door, fuck him, kill him, and bury him under the begonias. "I'm sorry," he says, "it's just your face. Don't worry about it, really. I promise that I'll order coffee and not champagne and strawberries."

I've taken to phoning his office now during work hours instead of his phone. Something stationary and somewhere he should be, no excuses. It's the only way to keep proper tabs on him, because my mind still drifts back to the day when he wasn't in his office and I never asked him about it. It angers me that he feels that his work hours are loose enough that he can do anything he fucking pleases. Ultimately, I'm responsible for him, and I think the state deserve their money's worth. The truth is, I have every reason in the world to be suspicious of him, and he's not where he should be. When I phone his office at five, Mihael says that he's at the House for a meeting. I have to go back to the Kantei anyway, I've decided, so I cancel Watari and phone House reception. What do you know? He hasn't checked in. I can't take my eyes off him for a fucking minute. I drive through the tiers of the Kantei car park, see L's car, park a little distance away between two sedans, and wait. I'm determined to stay there for as long as it takes. He uses this car park whenever he's in town because of the free parking, even if he's not on official business, because he's a greedy, shitfaced little fuck.

I wait for an hour and try to do some work while I wait, but I have to keep checking the door to this floor so I don't miss his reappearance, so it's a wasted hour. When he does turn up, he's with Stephen. I feel sick with anger, but the saving grace of this is the incomparable high of being right. They walk past my car, I wind down my window slightly so their sound will carry to my ears, and L laughs in that not really amused way he does, because he turns his face away from Stephen as he laughs. Stephen clasps his hand on L's shoulder and L physically leans to one side from the weight of it. I don't need to hear their conversation but I can't ignore the opportunity.

"I switched to decaff so it's not really a problem anymore," L tells him. Stephen's in a permanent state of hilarity, like he's on nitrous oxide. He's wearing... God know's what. Thrift store chic? Some black sweater and black trousers like he thinks he's Johnny fucking Cash. I can't see his shoes over the car bonnet, but I'm sure they're shit. He's had a haircut and is obviously trying desperately to look
"You have a noble head," he says. Fuck's sake, why doesn't somebody kill him for the sake of humanity? Maybe I should. I don't know why I haven't.

"Well, thank you!" L replies. You fucking bastard.

"So, how are you really?"

"I'm fine, I wasn't lying. And you? Were you lying?"

"No, I'm still good... I like your hair." L had a haircut last week. He also went to the dentist's to have a filling and was in such a foul mood that I kept out of his way all day, but Stephen doesn't compliment him on his fillings, does he? No. He doesn't have to put up with that. Never trust people who don't put any effort into their hair but still tumble out of bed looking like they're in a shampoo advert. It's not natural or fair.

"Thanks. I was born with it."

"Ha!"

"No, really. I was born with a full head of hair and it never fell out like with other babies."

"That's special," Stephen simpers.

"I wouldn't say that," L says.

Flattery with L is tried and tested, and if you pitch it right, chances are you'll wake up the next morning in his bed. I know Stephen's game. Why not punt for L again? He's rich and has a lot of equity security, Stephen's homeless and living with a friend of mine. God, I hate the marrow of his bones.

"I was wondering if you wanted to go for a drink sometime?"

"I don't think that's a good idea, Stephen."

"Are you seeing someone?"

"Sort of."

"Oh."

"Doomed, of course."

"Of course."

"It always is," L laughs, again swimming in fake as he leans on his car. I can just about see them through the interior of the car next to me, and all I see is someone who can be bought for the right price and someone else who has empty pockets. I look at them like I'm a sniper. Stephen shuffles on the spot and looks at the floor. It's all very sweet and disgusting.

"I've been waiting for you," he says.

"You shouldn't."

"Well, whoever he is, I hope he's worth it."
"He is. I'm not."

"I never understood why you don't like yourself."

"Are you kidding me? I love myself."

"Yeah," Stephen says, nudging L's shoulder. "Well, I guess it's about time I picked up the last of my things."

"No rush. Whenever, as I said. Between seven and ten, Monday to Saturday, but not Fridays. Or Saturdays, actually. Or Tuesdays. Let me know. Hey, let me give you a lift," he offers, opening his car door. Oh that is fucking it! No one ever gives lifts to exes. It gives them completely the wrong idea.

"Will you come in for a coffee? Naomi has decaff."

"I can't. I-"

"No, then. No lift if you won't have a coffee," Stephen smirks.

"Ok, I'll have a coffee. Just get in the car and stop being so bloody annoying."

"You really like me, don't you."

"No."

"Yeah, you do."

"No, I don't."

"How can you not like me. I'm a likeable guy."

"You're like a lemur. I like lemurs when I see them in a zoo for five minutes, but I don't want one in my house."

"Oh," Stephen sighs, holding the passenger side door open.

"No, that's not true. You're not a lemur," L sighs. Honestly, I could shoot them. I could drive into them and keep crushing them and say that it was an accident, then go back home, sleep peacefully for eight hours and answer any questions in the morning.

"So, you do like me still?" Stephen asks.

"You're ok when you're not asking me if I like you or not."

"You like me."

"Get in the car and shut the fuck up."

I've heard enough anyway. Same old boring conversations with the same wreathes of creamy flattery which L accepts willingly. Once Stephen gets in and shuts the door, I start my car and I drive past L, who watches my car go.

And nothing is said of it. I expect a message but I don't get one. No explanation.

Punishment is for ordinary people. I'm above that. When I realise what I'm thinking of doing,
that if anyone else did it I'd think it was abhorrent, but this is my conclusion: I'm above that. Why should I be constrained by the same laws as other people? I'm God, he told me because he knew. It was that obvious that not even he could ignore it. B told me once that I love to be hated and I hate to be loved and I love to be feared, just like L. And L's love and hate is necessary to me. I am an unyielding, sadistic, mercurial cunt who would cut your throat to drink your blood. I am the emotionless pestilence and the saviour - the one true justice. I am the ram's head knocking down your door. I desire attention and only attention to feed on and to be consumed by. I despise authority because I am the authority. I am effortlessly right and superior. I don't feel the things you feel, I don't see things the way you see them. There are no pastel colours and no rainbows. All flowers are dying, all people are already dead. I am not human.

More silence on both sides over the weekend. I've seen Kira's eyes and they're his eyes, not mine. Someone could have swapped him since the last time I saw him and I wouldn't know the difference. He cries; I found that out on the first night. I've since had my bedroom and home office soundproofed.

I haven't even started work yet, but I'm in the building and on my way to my office. People are dribbling in, still half-asleep, but they perk up when they see me like I am the sun, their reason for living, the giver of life. I feel sick all of the time. I've forgotten what it feels like not to have this heavy weight in the very core of me.

It was a standard, easy start to the day, like breaking in a pair of shoes you've already worn a few times, but I hear Kiyomi's clipping heels on the wooden floors before I hear her voice, but she doesn't know that. I continue walking. Distance isn't something she likes unless it's on her terms, and distance and isolation was imposed on her during her confinement, so she's taken to following me around a lot since she got back. I don't care anymore. I'm looking forward to and dreading my meeting with L this afternoon, and that takes up a lot of my thoughts. A friend of Touta's - a civil servant from the same department who's been recently reallocated and has a very prominent Adam's apple - holds the door open for me.

"Light, wait!"

"Mrs Yagami!" the man says, "Let me get that for you. We don't see you much in the offices. You're like a breath of fresh air." Oh shit, he shouldn't have said that.

"You mean because I'm female? Or because I'm an attractive female?" she asks. Every time I see her now, my eyes are immediately drawn to her stomach steadily deflating over the days. She still looks presentable though, in a strange way.

"Uh... Well, -" he stutters.

"You didn't open the door for that woman a minute ago, but you did for me. Don't you think that's a bit inconsistent?"

"I didn't see her."

"Yes, you did. Is it because of who I'm married to?"

"I really didn't mean anything by it."

"What do you think, Light?"

"Don't bring me into this. I think you can fight your own battles," I say, and leave. Because I leave, she leaves, but only after telling the poor bastard that she can open doors for herself, thank you very
much. Women never complain when I hold the open for them, but I'm good looking, and he's not - that's the difference. When I hold the door open for someone: the elderly, the infirm, the pregnant, people carrying heavy loads, or just women because we're still brought up to think that it's polite and that they're at a disadvantage because they're women, even the burly feminist dykes, it puts a smile on their faces, probably all day. Because they recognise that I'm lowering myself. I noticed this when I was about fifteen.

"Light, what do you think of these?"

"What?" I say, but it sounds like more of a lazy snap. She points at her feet and the stilettos with steel heels that she's wearing. I see them and think of knives = B = L. Everything leads to the same place. "Yeah, they're fine." I carry on walking and she tries to keep up. Part of me wants to slow down for her, the other part of me wants to run just to make her run. "Was that a lesson in equality or do you just not like him?"

"A bit of both. I wanted to check that we're still ok for tonight."

"Oh, that. What are you going to wear?" I ask. I stop at the door to my department because I don't want her to come in with me. It'll be difficult to get her out of my office once she's there. She crowds me, smiles and watches her hands spread over my chest, disturbing the straight drop of my tie. "Um... Kiyomi?"

"Yes?"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm admiring my husband."

"Someone needs a lesson in equality and respect," I say. The elevator doors open and we both look towards the people starting to herd out before she turns back to me laughing.

"Red," she says. "I was going to wear red."

"That's a bad colour."

"It suits me. In a non-political context, it's my favourite colour."

"I didn't know that."

"Now you do. Did you hear Kira screaming in the night?"

"No."

"Like a demon."

"Was he ok?"

"Babies scream, Light. Usually over nothing," she tells me. Babies scream over nothing, and I don't think that ever changes, even when the babies become adults.

"I know," I say, grabbing her hands to stop her from this entitled molestation.

"You only see him when he's asleep," she says teasingly. "I'm getting very fond of him, but then he starts screaming and I'm so thankful that we hired a nanny."

"I'm thankful that my room is pretty much soundproof."
"I'm sleeping in your room from now on then."

"That kind of defeats the object of having separate rooms. Anyway, I'm told that they grow out of that in about thirty-odd years."

She laughs again and strokes her hand along the length of my tie. I notice L outside the elevator, but I don't know whether he's there for that or if he was on his way to see me. Within my closed mouth, I run my tongue along my teeth and it settles against a squeaky clean, flossed, minty molar. Kiyomi sees me staring at something and turns around to find out what it is. "Oh, there's Lawliet!" she says, waves at him, and turns back to back to whisper conspiratorially. "Here's a mission for you. You make sure he comes to this concert tonight and I'll invite Stephen."

"I don't think -"

"Never mind, I'll do it. Lawliet!" she calls out, but he's already leaving, rounds the corner and is out of sight. Kiyomi has probably never experienced people willfully ignoring her, and she's stuck to the spot, completely mystified. "Oh, that's strange."

"It's nine o'clock, Kiyomi. He probably has work to do."

"He's a funny man. He was at Naomi's the other day and he didn't even say goodbye when he left."

"Why was he at Naomi's?" I ask. Coffee. No. Sex, then coffee. Sickly smiles, sweet decaff, and a reward from a whore. A fucking whore.

She turns back to me, raises one shoulder and tilts her head to a rest upon it for a second while she looks at me like I'm an idiot. I want to tell her that I'm not, but I am. I'm being fucked over by a disgrace of a man. I wonder, if I tell her calmly enough, maybe she'll accept it as a fact of life and pat me on the back and tell me how we all make mistakes. All great men make mistakes. Instead, every word she says is like a slap, like a paramedic trying to keep someone conscious.

"Stephen, Light, come on. They were having a 'coffee', apparently, but Stephen couldn't stop smiling." Oh God. I look at the floor, partly so my hair hides my eyes from her. She reads and misreads me, but tries to speak comfortingly to me all the same to bring me round to her way of thinking. "Hey, I hate matchmaking as much as you do, but I like Stephen and I want him to stay. If Lawliet will make him stay, then those two need some professional help. Lawliet's your friend, I know, but he made a mistake. Help me out a little bit? Just this one thing."

"Kiyomi, Stephen's... I think Stephen's still in the CIA working under cover -"

"So?"

"Only he's really bad at it... Hold on, what do you mean, 'so'? That doesn't shock you?"

"No, not really. You suspect everyone and you've never liked him, but he's my friend and I'd know if he was still with the CIA."

"People don't tend to advertise that they work for a secret service, Kiyomi. He shouldn't get too close to us. He's already got far too close to us."

"Stephen's not spying on us, don't be silly. Are you still worried about that Wedy woman? Listen, he's really good with Kira, and if he has a reason to stay then he can't be with the CIA, can he? Give him an aide job or something."

He's good with Kira? I know Kiyomi will hand Kira to anyone like he's a gift to the future just for a
chance to talk to someone without being distracted and burdened with him. She is Kiyomi first, a
wife second and barely a mother, but I don't want Stephen anywhere near anything of mine. He's
invading and permeating everything slowly, touched everything that belongs to me, and it's only a
matter of time before he gets to me.

"I don't have aide jobs for your friends. Besides, he'd be terribly under-qualified."

"Security, then."

"No. I have to go. I'm late."

"Lunch?"

"I have a meeting."

Yes, I have a meeting with L at the hotel. I wonder which of us will snap first. Maybe he'll stand by
a window and confess to me that he spoke to Stephen, they had coffee, and then he left. He loves
me. I'll believe him and gratefully forget all these bloodstained thoughts in my mind. How can I be
hurt by what he decides to give himself up to? It never used to bother me. 'Stephen couldn't stop
smiling'. I want to...

Kiyomi sighs and makes quite the costume drama out of it. "I'll just have to go shopping instead."

"Great. Yeah," I say, opening the door.

"So red's ok then?"

"What?"

"Red. Tonight."

"Whatever you want. It's not important."

_____________________________________________________

"Mmm... you're so -" 

"If you say that I'm 'so tight' or some shit, I'll smack you in the fucking face."

Looking down into his violent eyes, I'm torn between hitting him or laughing, so I roll off him and
laugh to myself. As soon as I'm on my back and he's clear of me, he sits up and stands in his clammy
tackiness. I don't see him walk into the bathroom, I only hear the light switch and the dull running of
shower water. I don't know if he came. I don't if he came because I wasn't paying attention. It looks
like he did, it seemed like he did, but I should have made sure.

My laugh settles into disturbed but steady breathing. I know then that I'm going to kill him. If not
today, then one day. I've planned it out in my mind so many times that it should just be like revisiting
a dream with a script. I'm going to kill him and that won't be difficult. I'll sit next to his cooling body
and relish the silence that only death can bring, then I'll book this suite for a few more days and move
his body to the locked bathroom, come here for an hour at a time, and slowly dismember him to
scatter chunks of him throughout Tokyo from my briefcase. I could bring an overnight bag one time
for larger pieces. In rubbish bins, wrapped in plastic. Dump joints in the lake and bury pieces in the
woods around his house for animals to gnaw on. Put his head and hands under my floorboards. I'll
forget about him until I ever need to move, and then he'll come with me. Him and what I've done.
No one will ever know. No one would ever think I'm responsible because I don't have a killer's face
and I have no motive. I don't know what happened to my Head of PR, but I know that he was asking

He comes back into the room eventually, though it doesn't seem like much time has passed, and the whiteness of his legs makes them look stupidly long. There's little shadow, just flanks, like a narrow, elongated rectangle from the side. My face presses into the pillow as he smiles at me in the mirror, then he holds his finger out towards his reflection like a gun. "Bang," he says, and holds his hand like that, pointing at himself, like he didn't mean to do it. My eyes widen, I can feel my face open for my shock, but then I smile slightly and he climbs back into bed and sits beside me, slightly damp still, ignoring his dripping hair while he checks his phone.

"I called by your office on Friday afternoon and Mihael said you'd gone out," I say, watching him closely.

"For lunch, yeah," he answers calmly. Well, he fell right into that one. Let's see how much deeper he can get himself buried.

"He said you had a doctor's appointment."

"Not a doctor. I had to see a osteopath."

"You've hurt your back?"

"I must have."

"You didn't mention it."

"I didn't have a chance to. It's not important."

"Where does it hurt?"

"Here," he says, pressing the base of his spine from what I can tell. Considering what he's just done, that osteopath must be a miracle worker, or else L's on some fucking amazing painkillers.

"What did he do?"

"Manipulated it a bit. Did osteopath things."

"Maybe you should see a doctor and have it checked out properly."

"I don't need to, it's much better now," he tells me. His finger drags along the screen and he checks the traffic report.

Then I'm in the bathroom, not sure of how I got here. My mind is still lost in a haze of methodical murder with good sense trying to break through and tell me that it's not really possible, I'm overreacting, I should trust him, I should leave him, no, it's ok, kill him. What excuse would I give for why the bathroom must be kept closed? This would be so easy if there wasn't a fucking body. As I clean him from myself in the shower, I realise that I can't do it. I don't want to, but I should get a gun and kill him and then put the gun in my own mouth if I ever do. I was so ashamed that I had to put an end to both of us, that's what they'll think. My son will have this hanging over him, always. What I did, trying to understand it when he's too young to comprehend a reason why his father chose not to watch him grow up and help him with his homework. But all there is is that: he gets a job, he might get married, he might have my grandchildren and I'll die in retirement, then the same thing will happen to him. That's all there is. Maybe he'll understand one day. End things before they turn to shit.
Back in the bedroom, leaving my wet footprints in the bathroom mat, I think my thoughts are so powerful that they colour the air, but L still lies there, waiting. I never thought at that inquiry that it would lead to this. I don't want to die. I don't want him to die.

My intention is to start putting my clothes on in front of the mirror. My hair is still damp and drips transparent holes onto my shirt as I carry it, but I'm too desperate to get out of here. L watches me from the bed and his face is so white that he looks dead already. He's holding my phone, offers it to me, and I take it without saying a word. On the screen is a photo of Kiyomi and Kira which Kiyomi took last night. It should be obvious that she took it herself and not me, and she set it as my phone wallpaper as a joke. Well, I took it as a joke. I wipe my phone of everything every day, but I haven't yet. On the one day I should have.

"Kiyomi -"

"Are you leaving? You only just got here," he interrupts me angrily, pointing at the folded trousers over my arm. If only he wouldn't say a thing. If only he'd let me be respectable and leave, then he could leave, and we can both keep breathing a little longer. Anything would be better than this. I don't want to see him again. I want to leave, send him his dismissal, keep away from him, block his calls, never hear or see him again, laugh off his accusations in the press, maybe have another baby to prove it false. He'll get bored and leave; leave the country, leave my life. The end. I'll be a proud father at a wedding thirty years from now. I'll have children who share my blood sitting on my knee. They wouldn't be living if it wasn't for me making this decision and for taking the path in life I knew I should take, despite L. Despite L. To spite him. I'll die surrounded by people who love me and he'll die alone. He'll die first and maybe I'll hear of it and I'll hardly remember him enough to feel anything. This vision of the future makes me bored and cold inside. I need an alibi. I never thought L would get in the way of my life. No, my life is in the way of him.

"I got here forty minutes ago," I say, putting on my shirt quickly. My dressing routine has gone to shit.

"Where have you got to be?"

"Ahhh, it's a charity thing. People with mental health problems putting on an opera to raise money."

"God. Being Prime Minister must be terrible."

"It's a traditional opera too. You could come, if you want. Kiyomi wants you to come." I stop then. He watches me, waiting, questioning me in his mind, coming to conclusions, spotting a weakness, not understanding but determined to understand me to the death. "L?"

"Yes?"

My eyes feel full of water that's just reabsorbed when I go back to my cufflinks. Fucking L cufflinks. Cheap shit cufflinks and I wear them now without even thinking. I try to imagine a time when there's no need to call him because he won't be there to answer, and it hurts me so much that I can hardly breathe.

I look at him in the mirror. "Stephen's going to be there. Kiyomi wants you to..."

"What does she want me to do?"

"She wants you to come with us. You could talk to Stephen, it wouldn't be so bad."

"Ha. No, I don't think so."
"Maybe he'll feel up your leg."

"My leg's been felt, thanks. And I don't think Stephen will join you."

"Oh?"

"I'd be very surprised if he did, put it that way. No, I'm tired. Mentally ill people singing at me and then wanting my money is not the answer. Send my apologies to Kiyomi."

"Ok."

"So, will I see you tomorrow?"

"Lunch tomorrow?" I ask, literally throwing on my trousers. I find a charity pin in the pocket which I should wear but it's fucking ugly. "Yeah."

"No, I meant - "

"Fuck," I hiss suddenly. A drop of blood builds on my thumb and I shake my hand to distract myself from the echoes of the unexpected needle-like pain. "Stabbed myself in the fucking thumb with this pin. Fuck these charity pins. Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Nothing. How's Kiyomi?"

"She seems ok," I say, shrugging my shoulders. "Why?"

"Just asking. Would you rather that I didn't mention your wife? Shall we pretend that you're not married with a baby and that this isn't what it is? Am I kidding myself, Light?"

My eyes narrow in the glass and my hands drop to my sides. It's so dark in here that I'm lit only by a streak of daylight from the parting in the curtains, but aside from that, there's the softness and tiredness of a late night after a fine day. The sort of day with exhausting sun and clouds and a kissing breeze which leaves you with the feeling like nothing bad has ever happened and never could happen – that they're just stories. And you're content with yourself and complete and you go to sleep feeling that way. That you're happy and want nothing more than you already have. I could be happy now, I think, but he won't let me. There's a break in the wires somewhere. Electricity is tripping and jumping instead of joining us because we're not earthed like we should be.

"This isn't about Kiyomi. Do you want me to stay here until you're bored and you decide to leave? I have to leave. Not because I want to, but because I have to."

"Yeah, yeah, my heart bleeds for you." He waves his hand and lies back into his grave to descend into some reverie while crows caw outside above the faint buzz of traffic. "I just didn't picture myself at this age, meeting someone for sex in a hotel room."

"I didn't hear you complain before, but then, you were too busy having sex in a hotel room."

"FUCK you," he says, using the words like a battering ram against my head.

"Let's not do this. I don't have the time for it."

"I know that you don't have the fucking time."

"Do you want me to cancel?"

"And disappoint all those people?" he asks, his face vibrant with rage. "Yes."
"You're really not giving me a reason to. Don't think you can bully me into doing what you want anymore. Those days are well and truly over."

"I didn't think that I ever had that power."

"Give me a break. News Bulletin! You've been a manipulative bastard to me since day one."

"Yet you still keep coming back for more, don't you, Light," he sneers at me, but it settles back into sadness quickly. Good. I'm glad that he's sad. "Do you need to talk about anything?"

"No."

"Ask me. I saw your car. You know that I didn't go to the osteopath."

"No, you were with Stephen. You could have spun that lie, L. You could have made it believable; only I saw you."

"Yes, and you see things. So, are you back to stalking me?" he asks. "I'd only like to know so I could try and make things more interesting for you next time."

"Ha. You'd like to think that I'm stalking you."

"Really? Do you have someone more important to stalk? Like that billboard of yourself?"

"Piss off."

"Or something nicer, maybe. Perhaps a Venus flytrap."

"If I wanted to stalk someone more important and nicer than you I could hop down to Death Row and find someone there."

"Ooooh. Can we stop for a minute? I want to cry," he says, then rubs his forehead roughly like it's irritating him. I have no choice but to wear these cufflinks. As soon as I get back to the office, I'm changing them. I'll put them in an ashtray. "He's thinking of going back to the States."

"So he can rejoin the CIA? I'm so pleased for him."

"He never left the CIA," he tells me. Well, that must have been embarrassing for him. I look at him in the mirror, then I laugh, so he continues. "But it's not what you're thinking. He blames himself, even though it's not his fault, but I couldn't tell him that."

"Sounds like you had a nice chat. How does it feel to be used?"

"You want me to say that I feel like an idiot? I don't. I knew something wasn't right and I moved him in because of that. A liar knows another liar. I suppose that it is quite funny though."

"Yes, it is." I look back at myself in the mirror, framed like a portrait, and create a neat knot with my tie. "Did you fuck him?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

"Yes, I would, actually."

"Well that's tough because that's something I'm going to keep to myself. Or not grant you with an answer, whichever you'd rather think."
"You didn't then," I smile into the mirror. "Not for want of trying though, I bet."

"Yeah, Light, I'd love to. It's all I think about."

"But you try to make do with me until he's free? I understand."

"You help pass the time," he agrees bitterly.

"Oh, well I wouldn't want to hold you up. I wouldn't want to get in your way either. You should go wherever you want, L."

"You are such a bastard today," he says, amazed at my reaction, because he probably thinks that he deserves an award for service to the state.

"And every day. Did you like your bill, L? And this is the thanks I get. You know, I... I really wonder what I'm doing all this for. I look at you and I don't know what I was thinking."

"Snap out of it. I'm trying my best for you."

"Sure you are. I'm tired of lies. Everywhere I look there's lies."

"Then we'll have no more of them," he says. Anyone else would believe the solicitude and ardency in his face and voice, but I don't. I can't. I rub my hair again with a towel.

"Fucking liars everywhere."

"Light."

"And you're the worst of them, L. You're the worst," I say loudly, but my face returns to the same barren state by the time I turn back to the mirror. I use my fingers like a comb to polish my hair into a smooth helmet with a side parting, like L's, I realise. I look like a completely different person. "Just fuck him, will you? Maybe then he'll leave me alone. Do your best."

"Hey, I'm sorry, but what's this all about? Nothing happened, ok? I didn't mention that I saw him because -"

"Stop," I shut him down quickly, turning to glare at him until he's silent. He's hurt and tender, but only because I won't listen to his shit, so I look back at my reflection and calm myself with a wipe of a finger across my forehead.

"I'm not lying to you, Light."

"Do you mind if I don't believe you?"

"No. I don't mind," he breathes out sadly after a moment, then pours himself a glass of water which he holds and contemplates in his lap. "We need to talk about -"

"About you and your fantasies?"

"Let me fucking finish! About the Wedy investigation."

"What about it?" I ask, turning to look at him again. He smiles, an astringent laceration from my attention.

"Oh, will you cancel now?"
"It depends. He said something to you?"

"I said that I didn't trust him. I always felt that he was hiding things from me. Distrust makes for a
terrible situation and it ruined our relationship, that's what we decided. Absolutely nothing to do with
you, was it? Surprise, surprise, he felt the same about me, so we confessed our deepest, darkest
secrets," he says dreamily, leaning on the upturned palm of his hand. "Well, I made some up."

"What did he say?"

"Cancel."

"I can't."

"Then this will have to wait, like me."

"Am I a suspect or not?" I ask, but he does nothing but smile at me until my hands become stone-like
and stiff and built for killing, so much so that I try to hide them. "Tell me."

"How did you kill her?"

"I... I didn't. They still think that I did?"

"You can tell me," he whispers lasciviously. "I'd love you all the more for it."

"I didn't kill her. L, are you are playing with me? Do they really think that I killed her?"

"I don't know," he replies lazily, letting his head droop to one side. "I hear bits and pieces, but to be
honest, Stephen was rather preoccupied."

"L!" I shout at him, on top of him now, but he was prepared for it and holds my forearms away from
him like I'm shackled. My mouth trembles with expelling air and anger as I search his eyes for
something - for anything - but there's nothing there; just black holes in the centre of wide, round
whites and the darkest grey ring of smouldering carbon. I hate him so much that he'll draw out each
torture for me. That he gets some prurient satisfaction from it.

"You're not a suspect," he says. I hold my breath until the relief comes, but it's transitory. He could
be lying to me again. My head falls onto his chest anyway and I breathe in warm air from here,
willing myself to accept it as truth. He kisses the top of my head and I think that no one could be that
cruel to give lies and take truth from someone like this. No one could treat someone they're supposed
to love like a yo-yo. Then he speaks into my hair. I try to pull myself away from what he says, but he
holds me there, forcing me to listen, and it's like he knows every thought in my head.

"You're not a suspect," he says. I hold my breath until the relief comes, but it's transitory. He could
be lying to me again. My head falls onto his chest anyway and I breathe in warm air from here,
willing myself to accept it as truth. He kisses the top of my head and I think that no one could be that
cruel to give lies and take truth from someone like this. No one could treat someone they're supposed
to love like a yo-yo. Then he speaks into my hair. I try to pull myself away from what he says, but he
holds me there, forcing me to listen, and it's like he knows every thought in my head.

"You know, if you killed me then you'd have to get rid of my body. There'd be evidence from you
all over me like a road map to your door. You'd have to cut me up in the bath all by yourself. It's the
only way you'd even have a chance of -"

"Stop it, you crazy fuck," I shout, managing to push myself away from him, and his eyes widen with
pleasure and shock.

"I thought you liked that kind of thing," he says, biting his lip as he presses his face against the
pillow, which he holds almost like a lover. "I can smell you here." You bastard, you bastard.

I turn back to the mirror and rush at stuffing my shirt into my trousers and putting on my belt. I don't
want anything but to get out of here, even if I look a mess when I do. I just need to get out of this
room. But suddenly he's standing behind me and I see only a portion of his face in our reflection.
"You've killed in your mind," he tells me. "You're a murderer in all ways but one. You might as well do it for real."

"No."

"You're so close, Light. You should let yourself go."

"Shut up."

"Maybe I am sleeping with him. In Naomi's house, but she hasn't told you because it's still none of your business as far as everyone else is concerned. Why would you care what I was doing? We're just friends, aren't we. But, between us, you don't get anything for nothing, so maybe I slept with him for you, or maybe I did because I wanted to. I don't know anymore. Maybe I didn't at all. What do you think?"

"I think that you did. Because you wanted to."

"Then you'd be wrong," he says, then sits on the edge of the bed, nonchalantly drinking water while he watches me. "He asked me to move to New York with him."

"So, are you going?"

"You know that I'm not going."

"You're very good at getting on planes with no notice, L."

"And you're very good at getting your wife knocked up, but I..." He stops himself, which is just as well. I relax back to easy dressing and put on my shoes.

"Anything else?" I ask.

"No, just that the investigation is closed. Deep vein thrombosis aggravated heart attack was found to be the cause of death."

"So all that for nothing."

"You have a real talent in how ungrateful you are, or how you don't ever feel relief when you should. They still think that it was someone in the government but they can't prove it, and word from above has said that any further investigation isn't worth potentially damaging relations with you. G8 and everything."

"Couldn't they have worked that out sooner?"

"They believe that a senator was assassinated by your government, Light."

"Well, I didn't. No one in my government did. But they think that and they'll just let it go anyway?"

"For the greater good, yes."

"For financial reasons. They think I've committed murder but they'll let it go because it might affect trade? You know, Stephen could have just asked me instead of spying on me for months via you."

"Actually, it was Mikami they suspected, but on your orders. Apparently I was just a coincidence. When the Bureau found out, they asked Stephen to work on the case from my house, to bring him closer to the suspects. And I knew it. I knew it. I gave you to him because you deserve every punishment that can be handed out."
"Thanks."

"And so he is more interesting than you thought. Do you see why I liked him now? And then there's America. America's on the table for me. He thinks a new start would be good for both of us. He's probably right."

"Maybe you should go."

"Maybe I should."

"For the opportunity."

"Hmmm. But I've invested so much time into you, and now you're falling. That wouldn't be the actions of a loving creator, would it? To abandon you. But I don't know, New York might be a nice change. Maybe we should both move on like we were before you -"

"Shut up, L. I'm telling you!"

"I'm thinking about it, and in the meantime he's fucking my brains out until I don't need to think any more. Unique way of convincing someone, isn't it?" he says, then sprints to the door to stop me leaving. I'd leave without my briefcase and jacket now; I don't give a shit, I need to leave. "No, no, no, I booked you for two hours and I will get my two hours. Cancel."

"No."

"I'll call Stephen then. Shame to let this room go to waste. I could go again. Same thing, different face, eh?" His expression changes immediately to one I've seen countless times. His head hits the back of the door softly as he purrs and hums with closed eyes. "Mmmm... Stephen."

"You fucking -"

"And then I'll call Kiyomi. I might call her now, actually. Let her know what her husband's been up to for... oh, five years nearly."

And he's not joking. He walks to the bed, picks up his phone, scans, and dials.

"Give me that!" I demand, reaching towards the phone, but he steps out of my way easily with it pressed to his ear.

"It's ringing. Oooh, the tension."

"L, put the phone down."

"Cancel."

"No."

"Oh well," he says, shrugging his shoulders.

"You can't do this every time you don't get what you want!"

"Can't I?" he asks. "Oh, hello. I'm Mr Lawliet, I'd like to speak to Mrs Yagami, if she's available. Yeah, thanks, I'll hold," he says to whoever's on the line. My mouth has fallen open. "I'm on hold," he tells me cheerfully, putting his hand over the phone. "You know what wicked whispers I heard the other day? There was me trying to get information out of Stephen for you, for you! And I fucking hate it, Light, because of all people, he shouldn't be treated like that, but I was doing it anyway. And
Kiyomi came around to talk to Naomi about how you're getting on so much better since Kira was born. How she thought that you were having an affair but you're not anymore."

"I never said that I was or I wasn't!"

"But you've done something to make her think that you aren't when you should be doing the exact fucking opposite! I saw you today -" he spits at me, his face curling into a the very picture of anger and betrayal. But it's not true! I haven't done anything to encourage Kiyomi.

"I haven't -"

Again, with alarming speed, his entire demeanour changes to that of a pleasant man I've never met and speaks into the phone. "Yes, sorry, I'm still here. No, I don't mind waiting."

While he's distracted, I lunge for the phone and grab it, end the call, and throw it to the other side of the room. Instead of retrieving the phone, L rushes at me, taking me by the waist and running me backwards into a wall. I push him away and punch him as hard as I can, but it barely seems to register on him, so I punch him again, waiting and hoping for some reaction, but he simply rubs his jawbone and laughs at me.

"Light, you're so predictable. You need some new moves. Stephen's got some, you should ask him." My madness is overwhelming then. I just want some admission, a sorry, the truth, but I get nothing but scorn, lies and threats. I push him until he hits the edge of the bed and falls onto it and twists with me on top of him like a rabid thing. I've split his lip, and that shocks me to a certain stillness which he follows up on. I think that we could probably fuck again now and it'd all be forgotten, maybe. Written off as a bit of necessary intensity. I'll tell him that I love him and then I'll be late, but tonight I'll still be walking down a carpet which matches Kiyomi's dress. "I think this is hurting you more than it is me," he tells me. His chest moves up and down with a stressed regularity and tempo. I want it to stop.

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"Go to fucking America!"

"I might just do that. Be careful what you wish for. You wouldn't have a clue what to do if I left. You'd be a stranger to yourself again."

"I was fine!"

"Yeah, ok, you were fine, whatever you say. Just some asexual twat who thought of nothing but clothes and money and making a name for himself, because you're selfish, Light. You try to excuse it with all these great ideals, but it's all for yourself. You want people to see what you are, but you know what? If they saw the real picture, they wouldn't like what they saw. Sex was just a currency for you depending on the exchange rate and greater men than you have died without anyone remembering their names. You would have been just like them if it wasn't for me."

"Shut up, L! You don't know what you're talking about."

"Are you going to do something or what?" Yes, gouge your eyes out for how they're looking at me. I see something dark manifest through the wall out of the corner of my eye, but I'm used to it now. I see things. Maybe everyone does but they don't talk about it, they just accept it, like I should. And when I see that darkness, it's always a sign to tell me that I'm making the right decision. I see that now. "No?" L asks me. "You're such a disappointment sometimes. All the fucking time."
A second passes, and now my hands are around his throat. I scramble on top of him and sit on his thighs, pinching my knees tight either side of his hips to hold him still. My hands squeeze around his throat until I can feel through the thin skin down to the fragile cartilage, and I see how simple this is, how it's always been this simple. All these opportunities I've had, and I've held myself back for sentiments which might not even be there and for laws that don't apply to me. This man is the definition of emptiness. I convinced myself that I love him, but at most I just admired him, and like every hero he was bound to fail in my eyes. My torque-like hands tighten and his neck strains and swells, and I close my eyes. He grapples with me desperately, but in his panic he can't get a grip or do anything apart from hit and slap and hold on. His legs try to kick but can't, a balled up fist hits my head, glances off, and I hardly feel it. I hear him rasp out my name twice, creaking with agony and the nearness of death - it leaks from him unwillingly as I force it from him - and I knew that he'd die perfectly. My hands are the strongest of hands and I wish someone had chopped them off when I was born. And in this moment there is nothing beautiful in the world.

I push him down into the mattress but he still struggles, so I pull the corner of the pillow from under his head and he gasps at the sudden rush of air until it's cut off from him again. I put all my weight on the pillow and his face beneath all that whiteness. He's not even a person anymore. I have made a decision and I control fate.

I was only distracted for a second. I just took my eyes off the road for a second.
"It's a shame. He would have loved this."

"All these sycophants campaigning for his job. People like me, who have better things to do but have to be here. And people like you, who came to his funeral when you'd never even met him, but you have to help represent your department because Health can't be bothered to stop knobbing his secretary for one fucking minute. Oh, and there's a buffet and a free bar. Yes, he would have loved this."

"Sorry. I only meant -"

"How's Kiyomi, Yagami?" Mikami asks me. Mikami is one of the pallbearers because someone pulled out at the last minute, protesting a bad back, and Mikami's dressed like a pallbearer and vaguely knew Finance on a friendly level. We stand under the marquee, but far over the the side by a slit in the tent so that we can watch the drizzling rain over the perfectly mown lawn. My security took over this entire funeral, so the occasion is now considered safe. Everyone has been groped at least once, apart from me.

"Doing pelvic floor exercises," I answer moodily.

"What's that when it's at home?"

"I don't want to know, so I haven't asked. Is my jacket creased at the back?"

"No, it looks great. What's that, linen?"

"Silk and linen. Sixty/forty."

"Nice. Pelvic floor... What could that be? Must be code for something. Pelvis on the floor? Maybe it's putting a pillow underneath their arse when they're lying down, y'know. I've heard of that. Works a charm, seriously. Have you tried it?"

"It's the oldest trick in the book, Mikami."

"Is it? Maybe it's that then. Maybe it's been rebranded. I'll text Naomi, she'll know. It must be something to do with sex. I heard that some women go mad, proper nympho after they have a baby because of the abstaining and hormones and stuff. Did you abstain? Are you missing out right now?"

I find this conversation hard to stomach. I feel myself look at him like I've just discovered a confusing new species of deep sea creature which defies the laws of nature.

"She's just had a caesarian."

"No sex then? Nothing at all?"

"You guys are so funny," Touta giggles to himself. "Hey, is that the caterer coming back? I was
worried. I thought they'd gone."

"Nothing like a funeral to make you appreciate what you've got, eh?" Mikami smirks. "I always feel kind of renewed after a funeral. I never want to go to them because they're such a waste of time, but I'm always glad that I did afterwards."

"Free lunch."

"Not exactly for that reason, no."

"The only people who like funerals are old people," Touta says. "Have you noticed?"

"Ha, yeah. I think it becomes a competition at the end. 'Who'll live the longest? You decide.' That sort of thing. Did you see that old woman in the back row? The one with the pugs, and she cried all the way through? I asked, and she's some crazy from the village. Didn't even know him; just goes to every funeral to cry."

"I don't get people sometimes."

"You'll be like her one day, Touta. Crying in the back row with your pugs."

"Lay off, Teru. I don't know what there is to like about funerals. They depress me. What do you think, Light?"

"Death is an aphrodisiac," I say, looking at the rolling expanse of grass which is so intensely green after the terrible weather lately that it almost hurts my eyes. It's only after I've spoken and it's met by silence that I realise that perhaps it wasn't the right thing to say.

"Come again?"

"It makes you want to have sex. No? Ok. What's with the Pavarotti?" I ask. A seamless change in topic. We're being treated to a dose of opera over the sound system which is blaring all over the grounds. This is a very exclusive funeral location and I can't understand why our ears are being assaulted.

"Sato liked opera, apparently," Mikami tells me. "His cousin was going to sing, but she shattered a couple of glasses so they decided against it. I know what you mean about the sex thing though. Sex and death. It makes you evaluate your life and, I don't know, funerals make me want to book a holiday or do something stupid, like propose, but they do make you think. I don't know where I'd be without you lot. If I hadn't gone into politics, I'd probably still be some boring, second-rate lawyer harping on about justice. Politics saved my life, it really did. You ok? You look tired."

"I'm bored." I do not look tired. I slept better than Sato did in his coffin, probably.

"Thinking about Nakamura, I bet."

Nakamura was in the Cabinet Office and died yesterday afternoon. She died in the House, but since no one is allowed to die in the House, she officially died at hospital. She was completely useless, being in favour of devolution, which is crackpot, but she was one of the recognisable female faces of the cabinet because she'd been here so fucking long, so she was good to keep around. Since I became Prime Minister, I've increased the representation of women in my government. One of the major criticisms of The Lady was that she did nothing for her gender. I have taken the tax off sanitary towels and tampons because Kiyomi was moaning about it and Kiyomi represents women's interests, I suppose. Not that she can't afford the pay the tax, but I realise that it's a small concession for women on lower incomes. It says that I'm not penalising women for being women, and it's
amazing what loyalty that inspired. The Lady inadvertently did a lot for women in getting the position that she did because it gave them hope of equality, but she preferred the company of men, had no time for feminism, constantly referred to women as homemakers, and did nothing to further other women's careers in the House.

Oh, I know what you're thinking. What about L? Dead, I'm afraid. I left him on the bed in the hotel and sent him a message five minutes after to act as a sort of alibi, which chastised him for interrupting an official meeting (in rooms provided by the state) for a shag with some man he pulled in off the street. L put me in a very difficult position and we would have to talk about it at a later date. Security picked me up and I reiterated what had happened and: 'L is very unprofessional and will get himself killed one of these days.' I haven't been contacted by the NPA yet and I suppose that I shouldn't be surprised - the chief is a friend of mine.

But the problem now is Nakamura dying. Yet another blow to my cabinet, because now her seat is empty and her death exacerbates the danger of her extracurricular activities being leaked to the press. I only heard about it a few days ago, and then she upped and died. Innocent until proven guilty, but still dead either way.

"Yagami?" Mikami prods me.

"Oh. Yes. Rotten luck."

"I heard about that! You were on the radio, Teru!" Touta says cheerfully. I heard him on a news report too. At first I thought that it was a bit early for him to be launched back into the spotlight, but on second thoughts, it's probably worked out for the best.

"Was I? Oh yeah, I was interviewed."

"I keep thinking about when I was asked about that article she wrote. 'Prime Minister, what do you think of your honourable colleague's paper promoting radical new policy: This Happy Land Free of Strife?' This Happy Land Full of Shite, more like. A complete waste of paper."

"Ha! God, yeah, that was shit. You handled it like a pro. What did you say again?" he asks. I am a pro. I couldn't be more pro. What the fuck does he mean by that?

"That the policies she was advocating would lead to a sustained state of systematic decline, and at best she was suggesting that the government's role was to oversee an orderly management of that decline. She missed out on the keyword of government, and basically, she wanted us to distrust wealth and capitalism, tend crops and sheep, and live in the fucking Shire like those hobbity people instead. Of course, I couldn't say it in those terms; it wouldn't look good to point out the deficiencies of my own MPs. I said something about how our anti-volacity mechanisms will maintain stability after the property boom, so there's no need for defeatism. We have a wealth of usable political history to refer to in creating policies - what works, what doesn't - but still people think that they've thought of something new which will revolutionise the world. They should leave that to people who are more able, because nine times out of ten it's a load of shit."

"Thought the same myself."

The woman from the Attorney General's Office who's fancied me for years is wandering around with no clear destination in mind and says: "Prime Minister," to me softly as she passes by, like she's trying to imitate Marilyn Monroe after a fuckload of crystal meth. She always looks hurt when she sees me now, and I'm sure that she thought that I harboured some secret longing for her, and that in my despair about the House rules against romantic inter-work relationships, married Kiyomi instead. As it is, I can't even remember her name. I bow my head and thank God that she didn't stop.
"So she just died?" Touta asks once she's out of earshot. Mikami nods slowly. Some would say wisely, but I'm not one of those people.

"Dead before she hit the ground, the paramedic said."

"She was one of the only women The Lady allowed into the big leagues, wasn't she?"

"Yeah," I sigh. "The only one she promoted. And her seat was so safe that I never had to worry about it. It's a real pain."

"I wish I'd seen it."

"Touta, that's a very morbid and disrespectful thing to say. Rephrase."

"Um... I always miss these things?"

"Better, but you shouldn't express so much joy that someone's died. It's just not very polite. Try to keep it to yourself."

"What are you wearing for the funeral, Yagami?" Mikami asks me, giving me the once over again and taking a step away from me.

"I haven't thought about it much yet. She was from Himeji, so I thought I'd wear Kenzo."

"Why?"

"He's from Himeji. He's related to Kiyomi, actually. He's a Takada."

"Really?"

"Hmmm. Distantly related. He sold the business, but I have a suit from his final collection somewhere. It's not 'out there' or anything, I just haven't had an opportunity to wear it."

"Out there is good. News just in: the husband's setting a bright dress code."

"Shit. Really?"

"Only 'happy colours because she loved them so much'. What a fucking knob."

"I did mistake her for a parrot in a yurt once. No, that's ok. I have a turquoise mohair blend Kenzo two piece."

"Turquoise? Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"It was marketed as turquoise but the pantone colour is something more like... I don't know, a vivid navy." Accent stitching in grey throughout, notched lapel collar with buttonhole, two-button closure at front, slightly padded shoulders, welt pocket and flap pockets at front, vent at back seam, four-button sleeve cuffs, welt pockets at interior, fully lined, tonal stitching, slim-fit trousers, four-pocket styling, tapered at unhemmed ankle cuffs (a pig of a thing to get your feet through, actually, but worth it), partially lined, zip fly, 73% wool, 27% mohair. The lining is viscose and acetate though. You win some, you lose some. "Kiyomi said that I should wear blue, isn't that funny? Because blue -"

"Isn't a funeral colour."

"No, not at all. I have it in green too but I think that's too much. I don't want to go mad. And they
were both made in France so I don't think that's appropriate, considering."

"Why? Will you look like the Moulin Rouge?"

"Mikami, don't try to be funny, it doesn't suit you. I just think that for a funeral I should wear
Japanese, unless I can think of a reason to make it sound like there's some meaning in me wearing
something French-made."

"She used to holiday in France."

"Oh! Perfect," I say, but my happiness is short-lived because Mihael's rolling up. "Fuck. Hell's angel
is here."

"And he's bringing... what's his name. From Culture."

"Oshiro. He only wants Finance," I laugh, and Touta and Mikami share in it. "You should read the
application he sent me. It had a fucking cover letter."

"Oh my God."

"I know. Two pages. I was thinking: 'Hello, 1995!' because you should see the typeface and the
layout – fuck! Home office job, y'know? Windows Stone Age or something and a Packard Bell
printer. It was really funny until I realised that he expected me to read it," I say increasingly under my
breath as Mihael and Oshiro draw closer. "Oh, hi, Mihael! How are you doing? And why are you
here?"

"PR," he answers, the monosyllabic pretty boy twat. Looks like he's lost his visual kei bandmates
and now he's just lost.

"Of course," I smile, then accept Oshiro's desperate yet still repulsively arrogant bow. "Oshiro,
thanks for coming."

"Prime Minister. I thought you'd be too busy with Mrs Yagami and your new baby to be here. What
have you called him again? Shiny?"

"Kira, with the character for light. It was my wife's choice."

"Women, eh?" he nudges me. "I can't stand babies. Get a nanny, send him to boarding school as
soon as you can and good luck, that's all the advice I can give you. I'd say that it gets easier but it
doesn't, they just cost more."

You know what I can't fucking stand? People who think they're amazing and that their opinions and
advice are wanted, but they can't even manage to form a good skincare regime. Almond oil is an
excellent cleanser. It's a great all-rounder, actually, so there's no excuse. I noticed a difference after
two weeks, but then, I use organic. People make mistakes with exfoliants and alkaline products
which completely unbalance the natural Ph of the skin and act as a breeding ground for bacteria.
There's cleansing dead cells away and there's ripping your face off with apricot hulls, and who thinks
that that's a good idea? Oshiro obviously does. Broken capillaries, the works. I'm not holy in my
skincare routine, because, frankly, life's too short and I was naturally endowed with skin which
doesn't need much upkeep beyond the most basic. I only do what I do now for the anti-ageing
benefits so that one day I'll thank myself. It's too easy to get complacent. The list is to cleanse twice a
day, do not smoke, get a source of vitamin D from natural sunlight in moderation, SPF, sugar is evil,
don't eat shit, take supplements, avoid dairy, avoid alcohol, and use quality skincare which doesn't
foam (you get what you pay for) – then you'll be fine. I do most of those things but I won't let it rule
my life. This man has no idea and doesn't do one thing right, I can tell that just from looking at him.
His wife doesn't care enough about him, obviously, but judging by her, she smothers herself in 'warm beige' masonry paint every morning, so what can you expect? Kiyomi has made snide comments about her brutal eyeliner before, but I like to try to think the best of people until they prove themselves to be idiots. I don't normally have to wait too long.

"Ha, yeah," I say. "He's only a week old but I'll keep your advice in mind. Nice suit. Those budget brands are really pulling out all the stops lately, aren't they." Hole in one!

"I'll leave the fashion parade to you young ones. This one's a classic. Seen me right through from my first House funeral in '87." He pulls open the jacket to demonstrate that it was crap in 1987 and still is today.

"It's in fine condition. You might like to get that lining looked at though. I could pass on my tailor's number on to you, if you want. I'm sure that he could do... something with it."

"That'd be great," he says. A muscle twangs in his jaw like a shamisen and I've never felt as perfect as I do now. I want to kette moments like this and dip into them like books. "Thank you, Prime Minister."

"Not a problem. It's just nice to see that Sato's funeral is so well attended."

"Oh yeah, I mean, he was a terrible minister, but a good laugh. He said to me once that the only people who say 'no comment' are murderers and politicians. Isn't that hilarious? Completely deadpan, y'know? One of those quirky buggers. Hahahaha!"

"Hahahahahahahahaha!" He's an absolute dickhead shitting royal cunt.

"Anyway, I just wanted to say hello before I leave. Don't suppose that you've had time to read my application for old Sato's post, have you?"

"I'm afraid not, but you will be considered."

"Brilliant. I'm a people person, you wouldn't regret it. I work best on my own and as part of a team. I'm just really the best man for the job, ask anyone, but I think my record speaks for itself. You have my number. Got to go now. I'd stay, but I have lunch booked at The Blue Note. Nice to see you though, Prime Minister."

"And you. Thanks, Oshiro."

"What a dick," Mikami whispers to me, leaning in towards my ear just as Oshiro waddles away and the stick-on smile is ripped off my face.

"Doesn't have a cat in hell's chance. I'd rather promote a cat than him."

"I'm worried about this dress code for Nakamura's funeral now," Touta says, stroking the back of his neck. "I never know what to wear to these things anyway and I only own black suits."

"No one will take any notice of you, Touta. You wear your black suit."

"I'm wearing black," Mihael informs us all. What a surprise.

"You're invited?" Touta exclaims. "But you're just a PA!"

"Fuck you, Matsuda. I'm representing PR."

"I better send a memo to make sure that nobody clashes," I decide. At least I should warn people not
to treat this bizarre dress code as an excuse for fancy dress and play right into the press' hands. "But she clashed with herself all the time. Maybe everyone should clash as a loving tribute?"

"Polka dots," Mikami says. "She wore a lot of dot things."

"Who was she again?" Touta asks.

"Cabinet Office," I reply.

"She should never have worn red," Mikami continues, though we're not listening to him.

"She was one of those eccentric types," I tell Touta.

"Just made her look like a beef tomato," Mikami concludes. "Oh hell, look who it is."

It's L. Yes, I might have exaggerated. I haven't heard from him since yesterday, so I almost convinced myself that he was dead - he might as well have been. Anyone else would have done the decent thing and died, but L absolutely refused. And I might have changed my mind about that kind of emotional outburst, because although effective, killing someone isn't the best way of resolving conflict. I left immediately, leaving him pushing the pillow off his face, gasping for air on the bed like a dying fish and tentatively touching his neck. That was the last I saw of him while I took steps back like a murderer, staring at what I'd nearly done. He still looks a mess twenty-four hours later, I can see his split lip from here. Back to the loose, hardly-worth-mentioning suits of yore just to piss me off, and he slouches over to us, smiling at the floor like the shit that he is. I try to remind myself of why I liked him enough to waste four years on him, liked him enough to want to kill him and that I actually felt betrayed and hurt by him, but it's difficult. When he looks like he's been pulled out of bed by a crane and dressed by a two year old, it really is hard to remember. Temporary loss of sanity, I think. Utter desperation for a confidant on my wavelength and perhaps some ill-placed gratitude. And he's a really good fuck - that might count for something. I am but human.

"Yo," Mihael says to L as he joins our party, holding his hand up to be smacked, I presume. Mihael still thinks that we're in the early '90s, clearly. If someone did that to me, I'd probably punch them in the face, but sadly we can't always act as we would wish to. I've never understood this father/son showmance thing they have, but I'm 99.9% sure that if I wasn't around, L would be all over Mihael like a rash.

"Good afternoon, Mihael," L replies, ignoring his waiting hand to pat him on the shoulder instead like he's dealing with a mentally-ill patient who must be softly appeased. "Gentlemen," he nods to everyone. "Prime Minister, may I possibly cadge a fag?"

After a second of silence, Touta laughs sharply, cutting himself off by slapping his hand over his mouth. Everyone sighs.

"A cigarette, I should say," L continues. "For the benefit of some of our more immature colleagues."

"You're not allowed to smoke inside," Touta tells him almost smugly. I am silently horrified by how raspy L's voice sounds. I did that; I must have. After noticing my thumbprint on his throat, I pull out my cigarette case in a daze.

"Technically, I'm outside," he says, all good humour and fingers, touching my hand more than the lighter which I'm offering him out of politeness. I end up throwing it at his chest and roll my eyes back inside the marquee. "Lovely having a bit of 'Nessun Dorma', isn't it. Shame that the CD keeps skipping. 'Ma il mio mistero è chiuso in me; il nome mio nessun saprà! No! No! No! No! No! No!' for about five minutes," he laughs, shaking his head with each 'no' and wrapping one arm
around his chest to support his cigarette hand. In L's universe, this inane babble is the equivalent of starstruck blushing, tripping over a bucket and walking into a door. Is he actually awkward? Is he nervous because of me? Good. "Hasn't anyone noticed?" he continues. "Oh no, we're stuck on 'Die! Die! Die!' now. No such luck with that Monty Python song they played before."

"God, what happened to you?" Mikami asks, pointing at the thumbprint clearly seen above L's collar. A split lip is acceptable if it's an isolated injury and could be caused by anything from your everyday accident to dry lips, but the whiteness of his shirt acts like a frame and a white wall to emphasise the bruising on his neck so that he looks like one of those beaten and mugged old people you see in the papers. Of course he'd show it off. I'm only surprised that he didn't wear a mandarin collar so he could display the whole thing. He immediately smiles and attempts to pull up his collar, but he's loving this - humiliating me privately by showing off his war wounds. Part of me is proud of it, because he has to live with that and give various lies to everyone who asks him about it, and everyone should know what a bastard he is. In retrospect, I could easily have knocked him out and strangled him in peace if I pressed on his carotid artery, but I forgot about that trick at the time. I'm so disappointed in myself. I made a complete hash of it.

"Oh, nothing," he says. "You should have seen the other guy, as they say. I've never seen someone leave a room so fast."

"Fucking hell," Mihael gasps, pulling down L's collar to reveal the ring of deep red and purplish bruising around his throat. Suddenly I regret nothing again as I glance over his throat passively; only that I didn't finish the job. L swats Mihael's hand away and pulls up the collar again.

"It looks impressive, doesn't it?" he says, turning to Touta and his horrified, open-mouthed face, "I play rough," he offers in explanation to shock him further, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "Have you ever seen something and knew that it was bad for you and that it would probably kill you, but you had to tap it anyway because that's half the reason you like it in the first place? That's me. I'm sorry, Prime Minister. I'm every nasty homosexual stereotype going. People are burning effigies of me all along the Bible Belt. Do you really want someone like me working for your government?"

No, I don't. I shouldn't. I'm trying to eradicate corruption in the House and I idolise the most corrupt person in the building. What the fuck is wrong with me? I'm kneecapping myself.

"You should get a shirt with a taller collar," I say. "I've got one in my office that you can borrow."

"How kind of you to offer, but I was getting fond of the myriad of colours. I saw a scarf just like it once."

"Missoni?"

"Possibly," L replies before dragging on his cigarette as some woman wails over the sound system. "Oh, Maria Callas. Christ, pass me the razor blades. So, abuse is ok as long as it's hidden from sight? Typical politician."

"Who was it this time?" Mikami asks, losing interest quickly.

"Some temperamental nut," he says. I've now completely detached myself from any involvement in L's weird and no doubt well-deserved assault. "I thought about reporting him, but I'd quite like to see him again."

"Why?"

L puffs on his cigarette like it's a remedy for the affliction, appears to ponder the question and
decides on the most insubstantial of answers. "Nothing means more to me," he explains. Like that's supposed to make me forgive everything and fall into the nearest bed.

"I don't understand," Touta confesses. He must be permanently confused, like someone in the most severe and foggy stages of senility. "After he did that to you?"

"You'll get yourself killed one of these days," I say to L lazily. I could hardly care if he did. It's a strange position to be in, knowing that if someone called me to say that he'd been killed in a sexually motivated crime, I wouldn't be surprised at all. Not a bit.

"So you said in your text message yesterday. Oh, but I do hope so," he tells me, looking for all the world like the bruises are only proof of a good time being had. "I won't be happy unless I die in suspicious circumstances and an inquiry into my death is held and splashed all over the papers. I'm just sad that my father won't be around to see it."

"Yes, I'm sure that he would have loved it. Well, you're on the right track, if that's what you're after."

"You should go to the police, Lawliet," Mikami says. Under normal circumstances, I'd agree, but this is L and he deserved it. L takes another laugh-ridden intake on his cigarette, looks at the floor briefly, and my hands ball into fists, so I stuff them into my trouser pockets. I expect that this action makes it look like I don't condone his behaviour but I'm concerned about him, when in fact I'm itching to press on his carotid artery.

"Yes," he smiles, looking at me. His eyes are pornographic and dying for round two as the smoke dances around him, but I am unaffected. "But, as I said, I'd quite like to see him again. He's a bit like really good crack. Sometimes you wonder why you like it, but you can't face a day without it. He's a good-looking motherfucker and not without his virtues. I don't know, I can't explain it," he says, giving up with a shake of the head. "So, I hear that that mad woman in the Cabinet Office has died. What was it this time? Stroke?"

"Yeah," Touta nods excitedly. "In the House, just outside the Chamber. Mikami saw it."

"Really? Was it gruesome?"

"Nah," Mikami says with a laugh. "Actually, a bit. She cracked her head on the base of that statue of The Lady as she went down."

"How fitting."

"Shit," Touta gasps. No, that aspect of her death is not common knowledge, nor will it ever be.

"Yeah. Couldn't stand her," Mikami confesses, and L turns to him like the louche bastard he is.

"Oh, you heard the rumours?"

"What rumours?" Touta asks.


"Kiddy fiddler, I heard," Mikami says. God, everyone knows. "Weird for a woman, isn't it? What would she get out of it?"

"Not so confidential then. Yes, she had some ring going. Her husband runs a children's home outside Himeji and she took photos and spread them around, enabled visitors for a fee, you know how these things work. Obviously, this is in confidence, though I couldn't help it if you felt the need to tell a
journalist anonymously. Perhaps bear in mind though that the ring is made up of a lot of MPs from your party, and, with a local election there looming, we want to retain that seat and the PM's majority, don't we. That's my latest PR nightmare. We're having a whale of a time, aren't we, Mihael?"

"Yeah, it's great," Mihael says, looking like he's just been told that he has three weeks to live. Touta is probably the only civil servant who's fairly well informed on matters of state that don't concern him, but even after years of working for the government, he's always shocked at new revelations.

"God, you think you know someone."

"You never met her Touta," I remind him. She looked like the clown from that Stephen King novel. If they find children buried under that place, I wouldn't be surprised about that either. Unfortunately, this whole thing could lead to dissolution. I've thought of leaving it as a parting gift when I resign, citing my lack of faith in the government as a reason for me leaving. This reminds me that despite writing L off as dead to me, I'm still planning to resign and that hasn't wavered. When something like this is revealed, I despair of the whole institution. The best thing that could happen now is that someone destroys the House, the Kantei, and starts again from scratch, but it won't be me. All of my career, I've longed for a coup - a vote of no confidence - so that I can show my true colours, but history tells us that nothing really changes.

"Maybe that's why she wore all those bright colours: to attract them. Like an ice cream van," Touta muses to himself. I notice L staring at me, letting his cigarette waste down to a ashy Tower of Pisa between his fingers. I feel like I've been watched and seen, that my inner thoughts and my despondency is open for everyone but only L really sees, if he sees anything at all apart from a look on my face which he finds attractive or interesting, whatever. I'm a cattle market because of my damn face and his damn eyes.

"And what are your thoughts, Prime Minister?" he asks me. I wish he wouldn't speak to me. I wish he wouldn't look at me. I wish he'd fuck off.

"No loss."

"That's my boy," he smiles back at me, his voice suddenly soft with affection. You wouldn't think that I'd tried very hard to kill him yesterday. My mind flashes back to the last time he called me that, which wasn't exactly pleasant, and he's such a shit for disarming me in public. "The curse is back and rotten people are dropping like nine pins. Useful for you though, isn't it? Didn't you say that you wanted her out?"

"Yes, I did, but at the right time and without all this ring stuff being made common knowledge. Mikami, come to my office at nine on Monday."

"Sure."

And I leave the group with no fanfare and am nearly home and free until L calls after me so that I have no choice but to answer him or keep walking and therefore draw attention to myself. "What?" I ask. He says nothing. Now they're all looking at me. "What do you want, L?"

"A moment of your fucking time, por favor."

I have no verbal reply to that. I have nothing apart from a dream of my fist hitting his face until his eyes are swollen shut. A fist in his ribs so he can't breathe without being reminded of me. I want to break every bone in his body and delight in the cracking and splintering and until it becomes just ambient noise. But I walk away and hear his shoes crunch on the gravel behind me as I leave the
marquee, roughly aiming for the tiny building where the coffin is kept, and where, after the coffin is buried, we'll all stand around and make speeches in between stuffing ourselves with bite-sized hors d'oeuvres.

"Don't talk to me," I say, not sure if he's still behind me as I walk across the lawn. I could be saying it to the whole world, the sentiment still applies. I keep my eyes down, but still see people turn to watch me move past them, and I wonder what they think in their little minds. When they see me, what do they think? I don't want to know. I present an image I've honed over a lifetime and they'll see what I present to them. It doesn't matter.

"I don't chase after anyone," L tells me loudly, contradicting his own statement by running up beside me. "Stop trying to make me look like an imbecile."

"You don't need any help with that. And before you start, I have to tell you that there's no point."

"Thanks, but I'll ignore you, if you don't mind. I think, all things considered, that I have more reason to be angry with you than you do with me."

"That's my boy?"

"Well, you are, aren't you? Don't worry, you're still safe because my lips are sealed. How's life in the closet treating you these days?" he asks. I walk more quickly, forcing him to rush to keep up with me. "Ok, I'll share some responsibility. I'm sorry, just... fucking stop, will you?" says, grabbing hold of my arm. I feel my eyes burning as I look at him and how he thinks he can manhandle me, but he soaks it up. "In here," he directs me, opening the door to the building like a warden during a bombing. "Get in here now, or do you want me to drag you in? I'll make a scene, and you wouldn't want a scene, would you?"

Only because, no, I never want a scene, my suit's getting damp, the rain plays havoc with my hair, and because there's nowhere else for me to go, I walk inside. He follows me, closes the door, and I realise that we're in the same room as the coffin. Open coffin. Bad decision. He wasn't much to look at when he was alive.

"What is it?"

"Don't you think that we should talk?" he asks.

"No."

"Well, bear with me. I don't think that we had a chance to speak of it yesterday because of the attempted murder, but a little bird told me that you're planning a merger of the security services."

"Who told you that?"

"Naomi via Mikami. You should be careful who you speak to."

Fucking Mikami and Naomi. Stephen will know then. In a way, I hope that he does, the little shit.

"Mikami's helping me look into it," I say.

"I wouldn't trust him to look into my letterbox, but each to their own. So, it's true then? Do you think that's wise?"

"I wouldn't propose it if I didn't. It's my belief that corruption is endemic, so I'm cleaning the stables."
"If this gets out, you'll be dead within a fortnight."

"I'm going to prosecute senior figures in the intelligence establishment for corruption. I'd be disappointed if they didn't try to kill me before my changes become irreversible."

"It's not funny. Are you trying to kill yourself? Don't fuck with Intelligence, Light. You leave them alone and they'll leave you alone."

"That's not the kind of superficial authority I want to have. Yes, I'm going to blow the whole thing open: our intelligence, foreign intelligence, our government, foreign governments. They won't like my policies, no, because I want integration, a truly united and honest nation, a stronger economy, a country which will not answer to anyone else."

"It sounds like you want to join NATO or something. You just want to join the club."

"There's a small problem of the North Atlantic standing in the way, but yes, I think that they should make me an exception. I want stronger international relations and respect. I have a lot to offer the alliance, my country has. You know why NATO was set up? To keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down, it's that fucking antiquated. But we're not even taken seriously. I want a say on security measures, defence and deployment which might affect my country's trade. I want a say on intervention, when and if it's necessary."

"You're the Prime Minister of Japan, you're an ally already."

"Ally means nothing. They'll turn on allies. I'm a world leader and I should be seen as such by those bastards. I'm not a lap dog who'll bow down to sheer numbers and fucking Western shit."

"Welcome to the world, Light."

"No, it's not fair."

"Again, welcome to the world. Enjoy your stay."

"Shut up. They won't pick on their own, nor will they nose around in our business. But first we have to be respected. Make them come to me. I have something to offer them and they should fucking see that, so a major reform is one stone, many birds to kill."

"Is this about Stephen?"

"Yes, L. The future of my country is all about Stephen."

"No, because the CIA were over here. That's what's set you off."

"It highlighted an issue which I was aware of anyway. I am not trusted when I should be."

"Light, this is all too much, too soon. You won't do it in time. These things take years and, you know, you could hammer your head against a closed door for years and no one will answer."

"Thanks for your vote in confidence. Well, it's not like I have a choice, do I? I'm fast tracking. Thank you, L. Do you think that anyone else will or could do it? No. Those in the best position are those who are so embedded that even if we're not heard, we're at least a step ahead. Why should my impact be limited to Japan? It's ridiculous. There are a lot of things I want to change. The longer I'm here, the more I find. I want to leave an impression. When my name is mentioned, I want it to be alongside reform and greatness."
"It's not just you though, Light. Don't test your cabinet and run stridently, expecting them to follow. Expecting to be protected by a shield of MPs and security who you know are not truly loyal to you is madness. You're not invincible. Waging war against your own secret services simply because you're an knobhead aggressor and determined to take all this on as a personal attack is madness and it will kill you."

"Bullshit."

"Aaaaand you don't listen."

"Who should I listen to, L? My advisors, my cabinet, the people, or you? I don't need to listen to anyone. The people put me here to make decisions on their behalf, and that is what I have done and it's what I'll continue to do."

"Consensus isn't even a word for you, is it. You're a one man band."

"Consensus doesn't lead to decision making. Someone has to make clear decisions. Offer them up with yes and no answers and steer things so the right decision is made."

"Decisions which are unwise and unpopular."

"Which are best for the country - for the people. They need a strong leader."

"Well, they've certainly got that. You don't even like people. I don't understand you. But I suppose that's it then. I never could beat any sense into you, could I. You've always done exactly what you wanted."

"I didn't expect to be harangued about my policies and ministerial style. I thought you'd want to talk about..."

"Oh, this?" he asks, pulling down his collar and clicking his tongue. "There didn't seem like much point. You made your position clear as glass when you strangled me. Oh, and tried to smother me for good measure. Speaks volumes, that. I take my life in my hands every time I talk to you."

"You slept with Stephen, L. The fucking enemy. I thought that maybe you would show some loyalty. Who knows why I thought that."

"For your information, I didn't sleep with Stephen. The only thing I had from him was some bloody awful coffee, and if you weren't such a cunt then I wouldn't have said that I didsleep with him, but it was what you wanted to hear."

"I don't care if you did or you didn't."

"Liar. It's been eating you up inside."

"There's very little sustenance to be had. You were phoning Kiyomi and you have no reason or right to blackmail me."

"Yes I do. Never forget who you're playing with here, Light. Call me fire. I'm sure that you think that you can string me along in exchange for the occasional fuck in a hotel, and that might have worked for you with some people, but not me. I don't even think that you care about that. You just want to keep me on side."

"It's not like that at all," I say, my face downturned. I'm misunderstood again. No understanding, no attempt to see things from my perspective, just a judging, cowardly bastard. Said bastard leans right
in towards my face and crosses his arms.

"I don't see this last bill coming any time soon. You haven't even passed the last one, and I don't hear your whips drumming up business, so it probably won't. Then you'll say that it doesn't count, you still have two goes, and in five years time you'll still be promising me the world and delivering nothing. Now you're talking about reforming this and that and I'd rather cut all of it out so, y'know, I can do other things. Meanwhile, you're playing happy families with your wife. You can't knob her, surely? Not right after a baby – it must be all ground beef down there. Are you using the back door? Because that's disgusting."

"Oh my God, how can you say it's disgusting? You're fucking gay and your back door's always open with a free pass for subscribers."

"But... it's Kiyomi."

"So? Anyway, what Kiyomi says to Naomi isn't reality, and we're too old for this jealousy shit."

"Nevertheless, I better see some progress soon," he tells me, but stops when I laugh in amazement, because I'm sure that he'd continue and lay down the law to me otherwise. Fucking unbelievable. "Fine, laugh at me. I just wanted to make sure that you know that Stephen and me... no."

"Maybe I can act as some consolation to you then? Is that what you're thinking?" I ask, feeling my mouth sneer and curl.

"You're not a consolation prize to me. I don't want anyone else, but, well, we're a mess."

"Nothing new there."

"I know that, dipshit. I just want to sort it out because it shouldn't be like this. Don't you see the shift in things though? Overnight. It wasn't brilliant, but for a few weeks, we were ok. Now Kiyomi's out of hospital, you're over there, you won't talk about anything to me, and we're right back where we were. I shouldn't feel like I come second or wherever you can fit me in with your schedule. I knew it'd be like this. I'm not surprised, just disappointed."

"I thought that you'd know. It's difficult. I can't split myself in two, L. I have to be there. It's not where I would choose to be. I'd be with you, obviously," I say, shrugging my shoulders, more because of my disappointment in myself.

"No, not 'obviously'."

"L, we're not going to do this 'I love you' shit again, are we?"

"No, but there's a breakdown in communication and it's all your fault, I have to tell you. I, yes, I could not be more supportive of you - fucking wonder, I am – but you should make sure that I know where I stand with you because... I don't know!" He throws his hands in the air and lets them drop to his sides in defeat. "I've never known. I should know without being told, shouldn't I? I don't, Light. I don't. To me, it just feels like you got what you wanted, you ruined my life, so now I'm being pushed out again so you can be all pally with Kiyomi and Light Yagami mk.2. Especially when I heard about this secret service reform, which is fucking mad. Why didn't you talk to me about it or at least ask my opinion?"

"Because that's my business, not yours. Me - politician. You - arsehole. And you should know where you stand, yes, but it's not my fault if you don't know. I could tell you twenty times a day and you'd find some other reason not to believe me. I'm not your dad, L."
"You think this is about my father?" he asks, apparently shocked.

"I think that you never knew where you were with him and now that he's gone you're passing it onto me."

"That's some godawful Freudian shite you've got going there. My father might have been a lot of things, but he never tried to kill me. That's a seriously mixed message. What am I supposed to think? Because I'm lost, really. After you left, I thought: 'Why am I letting him do this to me.' If you were anyone else, I'd kill you -"

"You pushed me, L. If you were anyone else and my thumbs were working properly at the time, I would have killed you. Look, I... I think that if we talk at the moment, we should talk on the phone or keep it to work. What about Nakamura?"

"Fuck Nakamura, she's dead. You know, I don't expect this to make any difference to you, but I had a dream the other night. I was on a plane, the engines failed and the plane was falling. I knew that I was going to die and there was nothing I could do about it. Some man was telling me to stand over the wings of the plane because that's the strongest part, but I was saying: 'No, that's also where the fuel tank is, you idiot. I have to get to the tail and push some people out of the way!' Everyone around me was phoning people and crying and saying how much they loved them. I phoned you. You didn't answer."

"That's a really shit story. I don't even believe that you had that dream, and even if you did, that's a fucking awful thing to say."

"Yeah," he sighs, like I've burst his balloon. "I thought you'd think that."

"What is that supposed to mean anyway?"

"I was dying, I phoned you and you didn't answer. I don't know, we might need a dream interpreter for this one. Maybe not. When I needed you, you didn't answer. I was thinking of you looking at your phone knowing that it was me and sending me to voicemail because you were in a meeting talking to some twat from Transport."

"In your dream, L."

"Dream you is a dick. Real life you is a dick. That's what I'm trying to say."

"That's completely unfair. When have I not answered your calls? This isn't about your dreams and whatever you're trying to say. Am I supposed to apologise because in your dream I didn't answer the phone, or am I supposed to accept this as an excuse for why you spoke to fucking Stephen?"

"You told me to speak to him."

"Speak, yes, in a crowded place. YOU!" I shout, jabbing my finger in his chest. "You were laughing with him."

"No, I -"

"Hawhawhawww, Stephen you're so funny!" I laugh as a fairly good impression of L, I must say. "But you'll come running back, 'Oh, Light, he's so boring but he cooks, what am I to do? Blah blah.' I don't know how you can bear to look at him. His eyes are all... blue."

"I'm not even slightly interested in fucking him. Or you right now for that matter, because you try to kill me after I do. You're such a baby, spitting your dummy out and knocking your cot over and
throwing up on my shoulder because - oh my God - I actually spoke to another person. For you, I might add. So, what's your reaction? You stalk me and try to kill me. Back to old favourites. I can't be trusted because no one can be trusted. You against the world and you're fucking furious about it, but it's what you know, it's what you're comfortable with. You like thinking that everyone's lying to you and you're underestimated and undervalued, but not by me, Light. I know what you are and I love you like no one else does, to the point where I start to think that I don't mind if I'm the one who's undervalued by you. I'm bloody used to it, everyone does that to me, I've made it useful, but you undervaluing me and not believing me is... I don't like it. I can't stand it. Just listen to me. I'll always be on your side, no matter what you do. Isn't that obvious? You should trust me, whatever I say. You should value me, like you did, but that was only when I wasn't speaking to you, because you don't know what you have until it's not there anymore. Do you think that I'd put up with all your shit if there wasn't something really wrong with me? Because there is something really wrong with me - I love you, you stupid fuck."

Oh.

"I didn't stalk you," I mumble. "I was driving and pulled over to make a few calls."

"Right where my car was parked. I thought you had a meeting with Watari, but evidently nothing gets in the way of your stalking. You don't need to drive anymore. Why do you insist on driving? It's a security hazard. Big fucking security hazard!" he says, waving his hands. "'Hello, I'm the person who's taxing you to death. Shoot me.' That's what you're saying when you're driving around the way you do. You're asking to get killed."

"If you'd told me what you were doing instead of just pissing off for clandestine meetings and coffee and fuck knows what you were doing, none of this would have happened. And I'm going insane because I don't get a minute to myself. This is hard. Fuckwits at work want my time, journalists want my time, Kiyomi wants my time, my parents want my time, you want my time, and my security guards want to follow me around all the time. Somewhere in there I have to be a prime minister and - ah - wonderful - I'm a father now, so there's another drain on my resources and time."

"You give him your time?"

"No, but he costs a shitload in nappies and formula and do you know how much live-in nannies cost? Fucking extortionate. How hard can it be to look after a baby? She drawing a surgeon's wage off me. And even she follows me, by the way. Either she fancies me or she wants my autograph, I can't tell which. Even when I go to have a fucking piss, people follow me."

"Oh boo hoo."

"You don't know what it's like, L."

"Excuse me, I've only been spending a great deal of my time dodging your security and paparazzi to get the little bit of time with you that I do get. But you asked for this, Light. You wanted it, I helped you. And now that you've got it, you're still not happy. Out of the way."

He pushes me away to grabs the chair which was next to me and wedges the back of it under the door handle. I watch him, completely mystified as to why he'd barricade us both in with a dead man.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"We're having an argument," he says. "Do really think I'm going to let someone interrupt when we're not finished?"
"They're going to want to take him soon, you know. To bury him."

"Well, they can wait. He can. At least if you kill me here it saves time for the funeral. You could just chuck me in with him."

He walks over to the coffin and gazes down into it - at Finance's plastic, bloated, orange, rosy-cheeked face. Soleil Tan de Chanel, I think. Kiyomi uses it sometimes. A little goes a long way and whoever's made Sato up must be colourblind or he's been left out in the sun, because I don't remember him having a tan like that when he was alive. I join L out of morbid curiosity and we both look at the terrible job the mortician has made of what was once Finance and wonder why they bothered. Why did any of us bother? L starts unwrapping a sweet in our silence, pops it in his mouth and chucks the wrapper between Finance's legs.

"Don't put wrappers in the coffin, L."

"That fucking dick? This is a waste of a good coffin. Nakamura next week though, God. I'm clearing up her legacy of shit and finding out some pretty awful things and paying people off and it makes me sick. Everyone should know what that woman was involved in, but no, we'll all turn up for her funeral, saying what a good person she was. And you're going to make a speech to that effect, because you're completely spineless."

"She's dead; that's enough for me. I don't need another scandal and inquiry right now. You're just overreacting again."

"I don't think so. I don't trust you and I'm really angry with you," he tells me, practically pinning me to the side of the coffin, which is on an already rickety-looking table underneath a tablecloth - the sort I've seen people use to paste wallpaper. Suddenly L loses all his ferocity and looks at his shoes, and I feel like I'm on some really fucked up and realistic haunted house roller coaster ride. "And I love you," he says sulkily. "You need to know that bit, because it explains the rest."

"Ditto," I reply. "Ok then."

"Is that it?" he asks.

"Um hm."

"I thought that you'd want to finish what you started. Just carry on, I really don't care anymore. You'd be doing me a favour."

"I didn't kill you for a reason. What could it be? Think."

"Because you were doing such a shit job of it? You left your umbrella with 'Light Yagami' on the handle and everything. I despair of you sometimes."

"That wasn't the reason."

"Lucky me. Well, you show your love in strange ways, but I knew that," he tells me, but I'm still looking at Finance until L nudges me. "Hey. I'm sorry that I'm a dickhead."

"You are a dickhead, but you're my dickhead," I say, and I can't help but smile when he laughs, then I grasp him into something which seems more platonic than anything else. I'm not a hugging person. L's not a hugging person. It's very awkward until he kisses my shoulder and it feels less like I'm seeing off someone I vaguely know at an airport.

"Don't leave me, Light. I'd give up everything for you. I would. That's why I don't understand you...
you should be the same as me. I can't think straight."

"If this was as easy as walking out the door then I'd do it." I twist to kiss the side of his neck where it looks angry and hurt, and I can't believe that I was so fucking stupid. I think of Finance watching this from where he is now, wherever that is, seeing me in some crystal ball and when he turns around to tell someone, he's alone in a small room which doesn't have any doors or windows. That's what hell is to me. "I'm sorry."

"It doesn't hurt," he says, pulling away to hitch up his collar again, but I lean over to inspect it more closely. It's even worse under the collar. "Oooh, unless you do that," he cringes, pulling out of my reach and pawing at his eye. "God, I'm so tired. It's annoying."

"Go home."

"No, that's not it. You don't know, do you? You still have no idea."

"Give me an hour. As soon as they bury this guy and I give my speech, I'll drive you. I'm free after this."

"No, Stephen's there," he says, fading away, regretful that he told me. I look back at Finance and the wreaths of white flowers on the table behind him. "To get the rest of his things." He rubs his eye again after explaining and slouches only slightly, but loses several inches of height in doing so.

"Yeah."

"I wish that you'd believe me. I wish I could believe you... Well, better let them bury this fucker, I guess," he sighs, and somehow I feel like nothing has been said, no peace has been made, nothing's changed; anger has just turned to this resigned sadness instead.

"Wait a minute," I say, grabbing his arm before he moves away.

"I'm losing you, aren't I," he whispers. No, no, we're losing each other but I don't know what to say. I just don't want us to leave this place with him thinking that I don't care and with me thinking that he's hiding things from me in some conspiracy with Stephen which involves a lot of sex and nice words and bad coffee. I hate the idea, but if I had to make a choice between who would be saved and who would die, I'd choose L's life over everyone else's. I wouldn't even have to think about it, whoever was put against him. I'd be grateful for being able to make such an easy decision for an exchange.

"No... look, come over here."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

"You love me more than anyone else."

"Yes, I do. I don't even like anyone else."

All these promises uttered on whispering breaths make them as ephemeral as they feel to me right now. I can imagine resigning, telling Kiyomi, telling my family, going to court, L hiding the papers and the TV remote from me to create some isolation booth and endless holiday for me to live in which is free from real criticism, but it's almost nightmarish and something I keep thinking that I could avoid. I think it may be even worse than I imagine when it actually happens. That's the worst thing about it. But L, who's been trying to read me - a closed book – in silence for nearly a minute,
eventually drops the loose hold he has on my hand to palm his forehead instead.

"Fuck, I can't believe you."

"You can believe me." I say, suddenly desperate to be believed by someone for the truth and not for some presentation that I want them to believe.

"No, you don't love anyone. You just like me a bit."

"More than a bit. Listen. Three months, max, and then... well, I'll be unemployed. Is Stephen leaving the country?"

"I told him that he should go."

"Good. Don't give him any reason to stay."

"I wasn't going to... I wish you trusted me."

"Give me a reason to trust you and maybe I would."

"You mean that I haven't?" he asks, and I see the anger in his eyes surge and change him, almost like he's been possessed, but it passes as quickly as it came. "No, I suppose that I haven't. But you know, every time your mouth moves I think that you're lying to me."

"Do some self-introspection, L. Think how I feel. I know that it's difficult now, but we've been through it before. I think once we take all these incidentals out of the equation then we'll be fine."

"Incidentals? Yes, we'll either be ecstatically happy or we'll get bored with each other. I know you worry about that. I worry about that. I think sometimes: 'God, I wish he'd relax and wear a t-shirt or something,' but then I think: 'No, I don't want him to do that because that's not him.' What if you do that and you become one of those boring people who make boats out of matchsticks?"

"A prisoner with a life sentence?"

"No."

"Stephen?"

"Light," he says, letting his head drop to one side as he rolls his eyes at me. "And I worry that you'll finish your career, break up your life and family and humiliate yourself in the press for nothing long term. Basically, I'm worried about you and I don't know why. I should worry about me."

"Well, I don't worry about any of that. I don't. If there's nothing for us to fight about and all the obstacles are gone, do you think we'll get bored? Do you really think that?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I'm not a steady relationship man, and I've never... I've never... well, kind of depended on anyone else. I mean, I usually hand the reins over to the other person and the only thing that changes is that I'll always have a plus one, you know? But you don't know how it's going to go and neither do I. I've been dumped in the Antarctic without a map here."

"Don't overcomplicate things before they've started. Anyway, we've been fucking around for a long time. I think we'll be ok."

"But it's never been steady," he says. "Steady as the fucking Titanic going down."

"I care more about you than I do about myself and I don't want to think that'll change," I admit, then
push my hair off my forehead like I've just done twelve hours of hard labour in the blistering heat. "Ok, I worry about it, but somehow I think it'll be ok. I will make it ok. I'm not going to find anyone else like you, am I? You stay with me, or I'll fucking murder you. I won't be able to go back after this."

"You don't know how happy that makes me," he smiles. "Not the vision of my possible murder, since we did a rehearsal of that and it wasn't fun, but I believe you. I think it'll be ok. I'll just have to stop you from being bored, won't I. That should be easy enough. I'll hide your clothes so you'll have an Easter egg hunt every day."

"I won't need clothes then. Hide all my suits, I probably won't have any cause to leave the house for months."

"You'll find something else to do, Light. You're too special not to."

"There's always the backbenches again, until a local election and I lose my seat. Ever so slightly humiliating, but... I don't know."

"I don't think you'll lose it."

"Well, if I don't, I could be a foreign ambassador, maybe. They normally look after ex-PMs, even the ones who leave under a cloud."

"Yes! That's it. Optimism. Looking for alternatives. And there's always law. I've always thought that you'd be a great lawyer. I'd hire you like that," he tells me with a snap of his fingers for effect. "And it's not all nepotism, honestly. I'll phone Stephen and ask him to clear out by three. Can you swing it so you can stay at mine for the night?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Good boy," he says, but his eyes lower to the floor until he's the epitome of sadness again.

"What's wrong now?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking that I look at things there and think how empty it is without you. I miss you when you're not there, because you're always here," he says, tapping his head. Oh God, this is getting a bit much for me. I think we're on the line of this becoming a scene in a film which Misa would star in. "When you're not there, it just makes me think of you more."

"You're not going to cry, are you?" I ask.

"I don't cry," he scowls. "I didn't cry when my father died or when the Berlin Wall fell, so I don't think that I'll cry over you now."

"Ok. As long as you don't. And I'm sorry for -"

"Not a word about it. I forgive you for trying to strangle me, but only because you looked like a centrefold while you were doing it."

"In Angry Men in Suits magazine?"

"Oh, you don't know the magazines I buy," he says, smiling as he leans in so our lips nearly touch as he speaks. I think about it, but no. I smile about it though and kiss him quickly. It's a nice idea.

"And I think it's time for me to go."
"You're leaving again?" he asks as I walk away. "Can we talk about the 'you always leaving' thing?"

"They're going to want to bury him soon." He needs a reminder, but he doesn't give up so easy. Nor does he see reason when reason doesn't compliment his agenda.

"Let's give him a send off then."

"And some men will be coming in here to get his body to bury him. Call Stephen and get him out of there because I'll be over there this afternoon and if he's there, there will be another funeral. And don't get needy. It's very unattractive," I tell him, pulling the chair from the door and opening it. The coast is still clear, thank God. I had visions of L and me hiding under that table.

"Are you really going to leave me like this?"

"L, you're always like this," I say tiredly, and close the door.

At four, I head over to L's using an unusual mode of transport. I'm prepared to peer through his window to find Stephen naked apart from a novelty apron, but thankfully that's not the case. I can't see L either though, so I call his phone, only to see him come out of his office inside the house. I'm in plain view standing outside the glass doors at the back of his house, but he wanders around, vacantly looking at his phone ring for a fairly long time before he answers it.

"Is he gone?"

"Yeah. Hello."

"I'm outside."

"What?" he asks and turns around to see me standing outside like a psycho in a horror film. "Oh. Hello."

"Could you... um," I say into the phone and point at the locked door. It takes him a moment, but he duly walks over and lets me inside.

"Sorry," he says, switching his phone off. "How did you explain this?"

"I just left. Borrowed Touta's car."

"You didn't have to, Light," he tells me, and watches me walk to his bedroom to check for signs of Stephen, or possibly Stephen himself. I don't find him there, but the bed isn't made.

"I know," I say, turning back to him with a smile. "I don't have to do anything. How are you feeling?"

"Like shit."

"Right. Early dinner?"

"Ok. I was going to order something in anyway."

"Yeah, do that."

"You're staying?"

"Kiyomi's spending the night at her mother's."
"Any particular reason?"

"She's ill. Her mother. She's dying, I hope. Her hips are fucked anyway. She'll be all titanium by the time she's finished."

"Many happy returns of the day."

"Thanks," I say. I wonder if I can keep my thoughts to myself, but then I find myself fighting against logic. L rarely makes his bed presentable in the morning or ever, unless someone does it for him. Me, probably Stephen did, or his housekeeper who sweeps up on Tuesdays. It doesn't mean that he's fucked anyone - it just means that he's a lazy, messy bastard. I decide to settle on this until I have more reason for suspicion, but then I go into L's bedroom and open the wardrobe to find a lot of Stephen's clothes still inside. I stare at them in amazement.

"He's coming back for those. His car was too full to take them today and he's short on storage space. They're things he doesn't wear anymore." L tells me. He sounds more weary than guilty and I want to believe him, though I have no cause to. Why doesn't Stephen hire a moving firm with storage like ordinary people? Does he have to do everything himself? He's probably whittling a house with lots of storage space at this very moment.

"He's still at Naomi's?"

"He hasn't decided whether he's going back to the US or not, but I've told him that he should. His grandmother isn't well. Can we not talk about him? What do you want to order?"


"Don't make me choose, Light. You never like what I order."

"Is he taking his boat?" I ask.

"I don't know."

"You'd think that he'd want it. You gave it to him, didn't you?"

"Light -"

"I really fucking hate Stephen, L," I say, closing the wardrobe doors and force a smile when I turn back to him. "I'd like... yakitori, I think. Chicken."

"The swans are back. Can I interest you in one of those?" He smiles. I smile. "I'll order... something. Yakitori, I guess."

He leaves me in the bedroom, and after a few minutes, I follow the sound of his voice as he orders until I find him in the kitchen putting his phone on the counter.

"Thanks for coming over. This has been the worst day. The worst week, really," he says quietly and it slips easily into silence. I'm about to reply when my phone rings. I check it quickly and out of the corner of my eye I see him watching me while holding two plates in his hands, then I switch the phone off, putting it next to L's on the counter.

"Have you got any wine?" I ask.

"Who was that?"

"Security," I answer, then scan his empty wine rack before starting a grand-scale search. "L, you
"I don't have any wine."

"Do they know where you are?"

"No. I'll call them in a while."

"It gets to you, doesn't it. Everyone needing to know where you are."

"It's not for much longer," I say, triumphantly holding up a bottle of champagne from the fridge. I'd say that he smiles but it's little more than one corner of his mouth lifting minutely. I find glasses, and though I don't normally drink on an empty stomach and yakitori won't mix well with it at all, champagne is a universal exception. Just as I pull the cork from the bottle with a resounding and celebratory pop, I notice some brochures on the counter and stare at them like I've never seen one before in my life. It obviously makes L anxious and need to explain himself.

"I was... I know we weren't talking, but I was looking at houses. I like houses."

"Ok."

"You did say to look at houses, so I did. This estate agent is a client of mine and dropped these off today. I got his daughter off a manslaughter char... sorry. He'd give us a good deal, so if you see anything you like the look of."

Jesus fuck, we're buying a house.

"L, why have you got a sales brochure for a castle?" is all I can say, pushing it aside to get to more sensible options and pour champagne with such little sense of luxury and occasion that I doubt that champagne has ever been so mistreated.

"Oh, I just requested that one because I was nosey. To see what the inside of a homely castle looks like, y'know."

"Hmmm... you like this one?" I ask. He's put a cross next to it, so that means one of two things.

"I thought you'd like it."

I do, actually, and I take hold of his hand without taking my eyes from the page. When he continues after a second, he sounds considerably less depressed, having taken on the persona of a soft-spoken salesman. "It's not too far out from the city and the security is good because it belongs to a filmstar or something. It has everything. We'd never have to leave the house."

"What about your old house?"

"I'd have to give my tenants notice. And the security there is shit, Light. You will need some safeguarding. All ex-PM's do."

"Fine," I say, push the brochure to one side to put my champagne in its place and draw out a cigarette which I tap on the counter for no real reason. "I'll buy it."

"No, I'll buy it."

"I thought we were splitting it?"

"We are. Transfer some money over to the firm. Actually, this would be a good opportunity to hide some of your assets, then we can limit what Kiyomi can claim. You'll have to give me the name of your accountant."
"Ok."

"Don't you want to see it first?"

"The house? No. It looks fine. It has a swimming pool." I sound like I'm not really interested but I'm more shocked at this whole thing.

"Yes, Light, you've finally made it. You'll have a swimming pool," he laughs, but reverts back to sounding thoughtful and shocked himself. "I've never bought a house with someone else before."

"Neither have I," I say, and after a moment I feel some delayed panic which is tainted with regret and makes my voice whispery. "L, I nearly killed you."

"It was provoked," he says and chinks my champagne glass with his own. "Crime passionnel."

"No. I lost my head. Don't make excuses for it."

He doesn't answer and I don't expect him to, but he takes a seat next to me, puts his hand on my back and bends down to look at my face, because I'm so busy staring at my unlit cigarette. "I think we can safely say that I had something to do with you losing your head. When I get upset, I tend to take everyone down, like I think you do, but I don't want to do that to you. You're a good man, Light. Don't think about it anymore."

"The thought of you with someone else makes me really -"

"Yeah, I know. I'm the same. It's a territorial thing and it's the ego. I was cruel, I'm sorry. I took all I could find at the time, which was your insecurity, and I used it against you."

"Maybe."

"Well, just so you know, you're irreplaceable to me. And I should know better than to get upset about Kiyomi, but Kira, he..."

"He's a baby, L."

"Yes, he's your baby. You have the pre-packed family and roses in the garden, and then there's me. I told you it was ego related."

"They don't mean anything to me compared to you," I tell him, turning to look at him.

"Thank you. I was thinking, I don't suppose that I could convince you to emigrate, could I?"

"Emigrate? I need to stay near Tokyo."

"Yeah, I knew that you'd say that."

"Why emigrate?"

"It's easier. But you never do easy, do you. I'm sick of this country, Light. You're the only good thing in it and I want to take you with me."

"I can't. I belong here." It's my instinctive reaction. Leaving the country never entered my mind. It'd be like running away, but it would be easier and I realise that. My voice breaks a little, so I must recognise that it'd be easier to run away and start again somewhere else.

"Ok," L tells me, and rubs my back. He must think that I'm going to cry because of how I must look,
but he's just thrown this at me with no time to think.

"I can't ignore my responsibilities."

"I know. You shouldn't."

"L, if I could, I'd go anywhere you wanted to go. It must be nice to feel like you're not tied to anything."

He smiles blandly and stands up clear up the brochures from the counter. "I wouldn't know," he says.

A week later, L hasn't complained about our situation once, and as such he has become a sanctuary to me again. I presume that I must be a terrible husband on the surface, because I spend more and more time away because I have a book to write, for all intents and purposes. Everyone who needs to know is now aware that officially L's letting me use the boathouse (I bought him) so that I can write undisturbed. That's what we're telling people, but Kiyomi doesn't seem to mind anyway. We go to the opera, something which normally fills me with dread, but I am actually looking forward to this one because I'll be having a productive intermission. It's only the second time that Kiyomi's been out for an official engagement since her 'convalescence', as she keeps telling me. It's a bit of a greatest hits thing, fresh from La Scala in Milan, and I can't understand a word of it but the singers are terribly emotional and robust. Mikami pretends to know about opera since his mother apparently was very keen on it, but at one point I hear him tell Naomi that a particular aria is by someone named Tosca and that it's not one of his best. Kiyomi looked at me, chuckled discreetly into her hand, and I checked my watch. There was me thinking that I was clueless where opera is concerned. After twenty minutes, I sigh loudly and excuse myself, saying that I'm going to see a couple of guys from PR, which isn't a complete lie. There's a tense moment when Mikami, who's incredibly bored, is going to join me, but I put him off by saying that I'm going to be discussing a statement to go alongside Kira's first official photographs which are going to be released next week.

Security follow me along the narrow, curving corridors, and the brightness is such that when I enter the pitch black of box 102, I'm hit by a sense of vertigo which L takes full advantage of immediately. He booked this box to keep empty for the chance of a small indiscretion which I was fully intent of having if I had to go to the opera at all. The men on the stage sing so loudly that it's not even worth trying to speak, but L has drawn a heavy velvet curtain like a shield to hide us from the auditorium, and we stand behind it so we're close enough that L can whisper scrapes of a translation of the warbling to me in between lazy but still chaotically messy kisses. His synopsises of the operas are incredibly funny in their brevity and scathing tone, but with a touch of nostalgia. His favourite is The Pearl Fishers because he thinks that it has a homoerotic subplot, which I'm positive is a figment of his imagination. I can't hear a lot of what he says - just the odd disjointed word during quiet sections of the bawling on the stage - and I tell him so as my flat hand feels it's way down his trousers to make him shut up. I don't really give a shit about it until afterwards. Just once, when he's slowly blotting my jawline with kisses while I look through the threadbare curtains behind me to see only lights and movement through the weave, I wonder whether the earnest outpouring from the duo is just a recipe for mille-feulle, though L assures me that it's about us. Since it was written in the 1800s, I really doubt it, but he says so twice right into my ear so it couples with the sound from the orchestra in my mind.

I'm there for about fifteen minutes and I think of the wasted seats, the expense of booking a box at the opera just so we could do fairly innocent things to each other behind a curtain while two men sing in French, and with my wife and Naomi and Mikami sitting in the box next to us. The intermission comes and L joins my party in the so-called royal box, saying that the rest of PR didn't
turn up, so he was sitting in a box by himself and was about to leave until I invited him to join us. This is accepted and he's welcomed into the fold. Half-way through the second act, he passes me a note from where he's sitting behind me, which I read somewhat covertly behind an opera programme from the light of my phone.

'You should try to fill these gaps within your education, Light. Your knowledge of music is severely lacking, as is your concentration, your soul, and possibly your sense of hearing.'

'What unknown fire is destroying me? Your hand pushes mine away. Love takes our hearts by storm and turns us into enemies. No, let nothing part us. No, nothing. Let nothing part us. Let us swear to remain friends. Oh yes, let us swear to remain friends. And, faithful to my promise, I wish to cherish you like a brother. Yes, let us share the same fate, let us be united until death.

'Cheery, isn't it? Most men would have a pint at the pub and call it quits, but operatic people are so fond of drama.'

I'm nearly sick, but in the end I decide that it must be love or something like it. No, it definitely is; I know it now, I know its name. L doesn't cherish either of his brothers, but I'm pretty sure that he hasn't fucked either of them and that he holds me in higher esteem anyway. I fold the piece of paper, put it in my inside breast pocket and smile over my shoulder. And just like that, I'm back to being a fawning idiot, hanging on his every word over dinner in the private dining room behind the box, quietly hating myself. The alternative would be to hang on Kiyomi's every word while she regales us on the wonders of childbirth and taps her nails against her wine glass though, and I'd rather hang myself than become emotionally involved in that tale of woe. L asks if she was in any pain and is visibly saddened to hear that she wasn't, only minor discomfort.
"One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. 'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping."

~ Virginia Woolf

My fingers drag across my lips.

I've always thought how strange it is - once I realised that other people must be similar in some respects - how we're all crammed together, but we're alone with our thoughts. Trapped with them. Over 13 million people in Tokyo alone and more than 7 billion stuffed onto the planet, breeding at a rate of 134 million a year while deaths are only 56 million a year, but we're all trapped alone with our thoughts, though we're surrounded by other people. I like the irony of that. It's very cruel. It almost makes me believe in God, because only a god's interference could be that sadistic. Everyone wants to express those thoughts in some way, physically or vocally, and to the greatest number of people possible, which explains the popularity of social media, I guess. It makes them feel important and heard. Why? Perhaps to find a soulmate – someone who'll listen and share their thoughts – someone who'll care and say: 'Yes, you're right! I don't know why I never saw things that way.' It's difficult to say all you have to say about what you love and hate and why. And even if you do, by some miracle, find an audience, I can't imagine that anyone would listen for more than one minute before trying to jump in to agree or disagree or change the subject to something which they want to talk about. What they're really hoping for isn't to hear someone else, but to be given an opportunity to be heard themselves. Everything we do say is merely sound bites. Even my speeches are edited and snipped into digestible chunks for public consumption. But while everyone thinks that their views are the most important ones, mine actually are. What I say affects a nation, but not much has really changed since I was just one of the people. I'm protected like a rare and valuable commodity, but sometimes I wonder why when I'm fighting against human nature, which is to speak and not to listen.

Before this age of everyone shouting in 140 characters, attaching themselves to hashtags and preaching on blogs like everyone's an independent newspaper begging to be heard about fascinating subjects such as what they had for breakfast and what their cat did, people found some other way to ease this intense need to express and share. But it's not sharing; there's no one to share in it because we've all lost the ability to listen, and maybe we never had that ability in the first place. I spent a lot of time listening, watching, disregarding, conceding, bending, changing my outward appearance and personality and availability to suit, and it got me here. Everyone wants to talk about themselves, everyone. If everyone wants to do that, who is there to listen, really? No one. So we're all trapped with our thoughts on trains, graffiti on the windows and each line and marking and scratch and word is a scream to be recognised. 'I am alive, I am a person!' but we're going nowhere, just wishing someone cared as much as we do about something banal. Nobody cares.

What were you saying? Oh, yeah. Well, the expectation of me is to allow myself to be... I don't know, possessed by every person in this country, to hear and understand and see every problem that affects them, and to fix it. I'm the messiah and the liberator, aren't I? What am I supposed to say? 'So, what are your thoughts? Do they compliment mine? Let me help you because you're the most important thing in my world. Let's be friends. Let's not.' What I am means more than who I am.
must synergise with my policies, allegiance and what the people expect of me. Who I am is represented by my tie. Details about my private life and my likes and dislikes are kept to a minimum, because those things make me human and equal and easy to mock. Maybe they'd be shocked by how little I like and how much I dislike. Yes, they'd be shocked. They'd be horrified. I want to say to them: 'Let's not pretend that I'm like you, because how could you respect me if I was?' The voice in my head shouts the loudest and the clearest. I can't believe that anyone else has this same burden of thought.

"Yeah, it's just you. You and the rest of the fucking world," he tells me, managing to hold his mug of tea steady and balanced while he pulls his legs into a crossed-legged, lazily meditative position on the bed. The denim of his jeans buckles behind his knees, a crescent of skin slices between the thick waistband and his long-sleeved, white t-shirt, and I forget what I was talking about. It couldn't have been very important. He blows at the steam rising from the surface of his tea while I admire how he makes something so simple seem so graceful and calming. "What do you think is spinning around in my brain most of the time? Nothing?" he asks me.

"Sex and money."

"Ha!" he splutters through a badly-timed sip of tea. "Not as often as you'd think. I don't know, I suppose that you're just too cerebral for this world, Light."

"I know that other people think to some degree, I just find it perverse that we're all locked inside, trying to find a platform to speak. There's too much thinking and speaking at the same time and not enough action."

"Sorry, all I heard then was: 'Everyone talks too much when they should be listening to me.' Just because you're PM doesn't mean that your thoughts are any more important than anyone else's. Me, I find thinking for the sake of thinking to be depressing when you overindulge, and you enjoy the misery of it too much."

"Hold on, have I got this right? Are you telling me to stop thinking?"

"Maybe don't think quite as much as you do, that's all I'm saying. Don't tear everything apart into sterile little pieces. And I listen to you. Sometimes I wish that I didn't, like now, but I do. Shall we investigate why people don't listen to you then? Obviously speaking as an unbiased PR man and a man of the world, not my very biased opinion as your up the arse man."

"Yeah, hit me with it."

"Ok. Your speeches are very long and cliché. You lock onto clichés to get your message across in a stirring, warlord way, as you see it. You should be more honest. You might think that it's boring and it won't work for you, but it'd be refreshing. Just say: 'I'm doing what I think is best for this country. These are the facts, these are the options, these are the financial and moral constraints, this is why I'm doing what I'm doing. It'll never be perfect but I will try to make it as near perfect as it could possibly be.' Plain facts, simplify. Don't try to confuse people out of listening by using a labyrinth of political terminology. You talk about being isolated, but you isolate yourself."

"I want to be isolated. I just want to say fuck off to the lot of them."

"And that would be the best resignation speech of any minister in any government in any country, ever. 'Stick your fucking job!'"

"Hmmm... Honesty and laying everything out on a table? I'm sure that must have been done, and it must have ended badly, because it didn't catch on. I like the idea of it, but I can't be seen to patronise
people. They should know the terminology anyway – it's important."

"How can you patronise people with the truth?"

"I don't know, they just don't want it. They'd think that I was weak and begging for public opinion."

"I think they'd appreciate it. If you made politics seem like a responsibility which everyone can contribute to, not just a load of men in suits, then voting rates would rise, young people would be interested, there wouldn't be the despair that they can't do anything because the government will do what they want to do, regardless of public opinion. We're nothing without power. The power of force. Forcing people to involuntarily behave in a certain way through the threat of loss of liberty or money. Those threats rule everyone's lives and the power of it can allow governments to do something good or something incredibly harmful. Without the government, even law is just a suggestion. Courts can say one thing, but the country doesn't have to comply unless the government forces them to. You should let the people feel like they have power, even if they ultimately don't."

"No. No, you know what they'd do?" I ask, drawing my legs up onto the bed too and turning to face him, suddenly animated by the hopelessness of the prospect of becoming someone pitching an idea to a board of idiots. "You know what they'd do? They'd... they'd vote for the opposition, that's what they'd do. Because they love lies."

"I completely disagree. Lying is necessary for protection, but no one loves being lied to. They expect to be lied to by you and I think that's sad, that's all. I'm not saying that you should talk to people like they're five-year-olds, but these are people problems and you should bring it down a level. Sometimes I'm not sure if you're a politician or a lecturer of nuclear physics."

"Sssss..."
smiles look fake, your manner is too reserved and the passion is gone. You rip the opposition apart and that's very entertaining, but you do it in such a bitter and mean way now. There's no wit in it, you just verbally crush people. Your... well, your press is less enthusiastic and more: 'Oh, here he comes again in another suit. If he stopped buying suits, the entire economy would collapse.'"

"This is great advice. I don't know what I did without it. So, you're saying that if I don't wear a tie, have some plastic surgery every six months, crack some jokes and be friendly with the opposition, then I'll be likeable?"

"I think that you should listen to people. Do what you say that people don't do, what you're moaning about. The opposition can have good ideas and questions sometimes, and if you don't listen to them then you're cutting your own nose off to spite your face, and you look incredibly obstinate. Use them, listen to people, give them credit if you think that they have a point instead of automatically going on the defensive. Now, make me another cup of tea, there's a dear," he tells me, taking his t-shirt off.

"Make it yourself."

"But, Light, I thought that we were in lurrrrve," he says in his Misa voice.

"I don't know what gave you that idea."

"People make cups of tea for those they love."

"Is that how Starbucks stay in business? The love of humanity?"

He looks at me from where he is, with no movement, not a word, just a hazy regard for me and a knowledge that I'm going to do what I end up doing. I sigh and pull myself out of bed and go into the kitchen, hearing his fingers start to type as I leave.

While I wait for the kettle to boil, I phone Kiyomi, because I should have called her last night. If I don't draw attention to it by apologising then she won't. She answers the phone and I hear drilling noises and hammering before I hear her, because the place is a worksite when I'm not there.

"Hi, Light."

"Hi."

"How's it going there? Are you making us a fortune?"

"I think I've made progress. I write better at night."

"I didn't take you for a night owl. Well, Kira's been screaming all night long, so I slept in your room and, going by Kira, I didn't sleep like a baby, I slept like a log."

"Is he ok?"

"Kira? Yes, he's fine. He's just a screamer. The doctor came over to weigh him yesterday afternoon and he's got a clean bill of health. Hold on, I can't hear you with all this noise. Wait a second." I wait, and the kettle begins it's slowly rattle into boiling until she returns. "So, when will you be back? Shall I send the driver over to pick you up?"

"I want to write another chapter while I've got the chance. I'll call them when I'm ready."

"Oh, alright. Naomi and Teru are coming over later, it'd be nice if you could... Ha! It feels funny to
ask you if you could be there."

"What time?"

"Around seven."

"I'll be there for seven."

"They'll think it's strange if you're not there, maybe, but I don't mean to pressure you. I know how important your work is for this book... thing. How's Lawliet?"

"I haven't seen him."

"You should take a break, see how he is and then get some sleep. And ask him if he wants to join us for dinner. I'll invite Stephen, but don't tell Lawliet."

"I think he's busy later and I just want a quiet night. Naomi and Mikami is more than enough."

"I could cancel if you want. We could have a quiet night -"

"No, it's fine." The kettle boils and that's the end of the time I have for Kiyomi. "Well, I'll see you later then."

"Don't work too hard. Work hard, but not too hard. It's Sunday, after all. See you later."

Yes.

I carry the two mugs back into the bedroom and pass L his tea. He's balancing his laptop on his thighs, and the sight of him working when I should be working, and with us being so domestic all of a sudden, fills me with a kind of peace.

"Earthquake in India. Looks pretty bad," he says without looking up from the screen as I climb in next to him. I see a picture of rubble from my angle. How sad. A very typical, human response, whether I really think that or not. Maybe we're trained to empathise with disasters when really we're thankful that we're not a part of it. Maybe empathy isn't empathy, it's selfishness and should be redefined. I should have a response, so I say the second thing which comes into my head: the response of my position.

"Oh. They'll be wanting money then."

"It would be nice of you to offer your sympathy and support. I'll send a statement to the Indian Embassy and the press now and explain how you would send money, but the relief fund is empty because you've had to buy two new suits. Do you want to write it, or shall I?"

"You do it," I mumble, but he's already scrolling and clicking and typing. I wonder at myself for not showing more interest in what he's typing. He could be writing any old thing for all I know. I switch the muted TV off and lean on one arm, pick up a book, but let it droop in my hand because my eyes become fixed on the slightly open window behind L. He must have opened it while I was gone because it's uncomfortably humid today, but it makes me imagine that there's someone listening outside. The breeze makes the rods of the blind knock and shudder, the light dances geometric shapes through it, a bird sings outside, and I look at L instead.

There is something of winter about him, which is a strange thing to say at this time of year, but he doesn't suit this brightness and heat at all. Everything's dead on the surface but green with renewed life under the snow, if you look hard enough. He sits propped against pillows and his elbow brushes
my arm as he types. I become so aware of it that it almost feels like burning, but I don't move away. It'll be like a watch I put on; you're hyper aware of how alien it is at first, but you adjust to it over time. That's L summed up for me, I think. I watch the flicker of his curving lashes, which are absurdly long like a deer's. He's not beautiful, not in a classical sense, but in an interesting way that I haven't grown tired of yet. My eyes wander over his fluid back, the buckled shoulders, the notches of vertebrae and slender ribs under the perfect, water-like skin. His focused gaze shift across the screen again and again like a pendulum, drifting further down, checking what he's writing as he goes, and his tapered and unconsciously bitten fingernails press on the keys like a piano. I think of how some of what he says makes sense to me. I think of how he's a better man than he thinks he is. I think of how his eyes remind me of opals when they reflect the screen like this. I think of how he smells of pineapple and bergamot and lemon and nutmeg and jasmine and musk and cedar. I think of how lucky I feel.

So I don't make it back for seven. I don't make it back at all. I have research to do, that's what I tell Kiyomi in a text message, because I don't want to hear anyone else's voice today. Writing about myself is more difficult and time-consuming than I'd thought. I'm very sorry, pass on my apologies. Some other time. I'll stay here until I'm done and I'll call in to see her tomorrow at lunch. She doesn't question me, but her reply gives off the feeling that she's disappointed and maybe more than a little suspicious. I don't find that I can care about her. This day has been practically perfect in how uneventful it has been: the ease of it passing, the lack of thoughts in my head and the general contentedness. Just the blandness of it all is peace to me. L and I have the permanent half-smiles of idiots and glory in the gentle brushing touches as we pass each other, just for the sake of it, like we're reminding ourselves that we're really there. I want to think that every day could be like this. I'll live my life in days like today, but I know that somewhere, repressed, is the knowledge that tomorrow will be different. Tomorrow, I will do things. Tomorrow, I will be robotic in my efficiency, and that might be what makes me happy now; the knowledge that it's not going to last.

The sun sets and L leaves for a late rush for supplies, which turns out to include a bunch of flowers. I'm slightly worried, but he explains that it's for his secretary at the firm. He normally gets her to do these sort of things, but obviously she can't buy her own flowers, so she gets a sad looking bunch from a service station. I laugh at this - what I see as a weakness and a concession to good manners which he normally ignores and scoffs at, but I think that he did it because of genuine feeling. This tenderness towards an employee and someone he pretends to dislike and put up with is funny and he's embarrassed. He says that these flowers are too shit to give to anyone, since they're garish with dyed colouring which has been greedily sucked up into an assault of fake beauty, but they'll be another reminder for him tomorrow morning to buy her some good ones from a florist and have them sent over to her. Before he left, he locked all the windows and bolted the back door. I heard the key turn in the front door and knew that I had been locked inside by him. He's more fearful than I am, because my life has been untouched. I've seen things happen to others and people have died around me, but the idea that I could find myself in a position where I could be harmed is ridiculous to me.

He left Stephen's illegal revolver on the table for me and didn't say anything about it because it explained itself. I tried to read a book but my eyes kept rising to look at the gun in front of me. It was so distracting that I could see the dull gleam on the barrel even when I was trying to focus on the book, so I put a cushion on top of it.

And when he's back from leaving the flowers propped in the kitchen sink, he picks the cushion up, revealing the gun, and smiles like I've been found out. I sag into the sofa as he picks up the black bolt of a thing and spins the chamber and every chamber of my heart, and points it at me. My mouth curves with mischief as he leans down to press the barrel under my chin and tilt it up towards him, firmly enough so that I feel a light suction of the gun on my damp skin. Then he kisses me, my eyes close and I lazily bite at his lip while the gun presses into the hollow of my jaw. Then the pressure leaves – him and the gun have left me feeling emptier than I was before. His laugh is quiet but moves
him like a cough would. The book is left open beside me before I follow him into the bedroom, like a stalking animal following weakened prey, turning the lights off as I leave rooms until the whole house is in darkness. I stand just a few steps inside of the bedroom so that my eyes adjust to the captivating ghost of him; the paleness, a silhouette inverted. Then I realise that this is an ambush. I'm not the predator. He is.

The t-shirt is slipped over his head and his belt coils into a sleeping cobra of leather on the floor. It's sort of enchanting to me and I walk closer slowly until he starts unbuckling my shirt. I think of how I could graze the edge of my thumbnail in a certain place, and all the muscles in him would draw tight and he'd jolt towards me like I'm a bare wire of electricity. I could do that, but I don't. I stand there watching his practiced undressing of me like I'm a mannequin in a shop window. A thought stabs me of how many other men he's done this to, and I'm jealous of every one of them. It's so effortless and not a fumbling tangle of irritation like I was used to with most men, so I can't ignore the others, his and mine, because they're omnipresent. Other men - all of them - had a desperate eagerness, like I might realise what a mistake I was making at any moment, so they'd better be quick. That was so much better and too good for them. That I was lowering myself to their level because I must be an idiot. Their egos were not so diminished to think that I was doing it in exchange for a realisation of my expectations, because for me, this whole thing was never anything but a trade or a conciliation. No, it for easier for them to think that I was stupid, or easy, or drunk, or that they were just lucky. If there was another way, I would have avoided it. I always hated being clawed at, pulled at, mauled and drooled over. My eyes would roll back at their clumsy hands, but they didn't care. I always knew that once the door closed, I wouldn't be getting out without something being taken from me. I could have always scapped with them, but they were usually burly and older and I knew that I would always come off worse if I decided to have a change of heart. I never did. When I make up my mind, I stick to it.

L's fingers dance over my hips like leaves across the pavement, and goosebumps rise on my skin. We press against each other until we're joined by a keystone of a hard kiss which takes the weight of us both. His hand loosens my shirt roughly and glides along my back, and suddenly I need to fuck him, because I can only take so much tenderness and affection before I have to ruin it. My hands are well ahead of me, already yanking at his loose jeans - this denim monstrosity which I wanted to disappear as soon as I saw him wearing them this morning. I wonder if he wore them to annoy me. The rubbing and pressing is pointless without gnawing kisses. When I push him onto the bed, I hear his breath hitch as my hand feels where the rigid ribcage concaves suddenly into his unprotected stomach. I whisper kisses against it, telling him how much I love him, all of him, especially the imperfectness of him. I feel almost seasick by the feeling, and I lived all my life without it.

I pull at the bedside table drawer and he laughs at my hot impatience, the sudden hasty clunk and the rattling as my hand searches, but I kiss it away from him. When he laughs at me, it reminds me of the mirthless mocking he subjected me to months ago. He probably doesn't even remember it now, but it cored me like an apple. I just couldn't understand his cruelty, and that it comes so easily to him. That's on my mind as my fingers slot and sink into him, easing the coolness into a place of resistance so I can contrive a path for myself. My penis breezes against my palm as I force myself into him, and he holds my shoulders to keep himself steady. As if I could see it in in the darkness, because I want to see, I lean back to watch the tautness of me rock into him. Each hindered thrust squeezes the air from my lungs because he's gripping me so tightly, and it's a sustained and increasing high. It's pain and joy and everything I thought that he could be to me, and I tried to get away, I did. They make drugs that can do this, and you don't need someone else to be there with a living, breathing, steady rhythm. I think of how everything evolves with him and nothing's the same. Like now he's quiet and doesn't speak, just breathes in interrupting panting bursts. With Kiyomi, it's like I've put on a DVD of a film I've seen before and was never terribly interested in the first time around. It felt that way very quickly.
Biting my lip feels almost comparable to how my cock is enclosed in him; a sort of voluptuous, airless velvet wrapped around me, and when he comes, it's when I hit muscle. His spine arches as his fingers dig into my back, and then I'm rudderless and lost with no control. I yearn for it to return to me, but I think that perhaps this surging will never end. I'm radiant and deep in him, and only feel a far off stroking of my neck as he pulls a moan from me by doing absolutely nothing apart from lying there. In moments like this, I think of what a talent he is. How he could dismantle and destroy worlds with everything he has at his disposal and that no one else sees it but me. He must be special, he must be, because I don't admire anyone but him. There's no one who's comparable. Then I'm loose and fall against him, but still pulsing and breathing like I'm keeping time by a stopwatch. I don't look at him because I don't want to. I sink into the blackness of closed eyes and the rise and fall of his chest slows me down, but I'm thankful. Today I thought, maybe, maybe I could live like this and be grateful for it. Transfer all my life and longing into this and never regret it. His hands plunge slowly through my hair and I kiss his still stretched and sinewy chest as I roll onto my side.

"I found myself again with you," I whisper after a while, wanting to pull a sheet over my head as soon as I say it. The air is unbearably warm and heavy and only the mildest breeze brings any relief. He turns towards me, highlighted and shadowed and glistening.

"That happens. I tend to find myself with you all the time."

"That's not what I mean."

No, I never knew what I really wanted. There was everything and nothing in life before.

I don't know what time it is when I wake up, but it's almost as if someone has prodded me awake. It's still dark and I look at the shadows against the wall which seem to grow closer and larger the more I stare at them. But I focus on them, and as if I'm making it happen, the shadows seamlessly join and become solid right in front of me. It assumes a form which I can barely make out, but dips to sit on its haunches – at least that's what it seems to do. Panic rises inside me as I start to make out the pale, almost sky blue jutting chin, the massacre of a mouth with a graveyard of teeth beneath a mummified stub of a nose and the wide, gawking eyes. I can't move.

"It's happening," it says to me. I watch, hypnotised as his mouth forms the words and a gravelly, corrugated steel voice pushes them out.

"Wh... what are you?"

"Don't you remember me?"

"No, I... I've seen you, but -"

And it laughs at me, his mouth stretching until it's pulling like tight cotton. My hand reaches behind me, finds L's shoulder and squeezes it repeatedly, but he doesn't wake up and scream. He doesn't wake up at all. I think that he must be dead for a second until he turns over, which only makes the monster laugh all the more, arching back and holding himself for a full belly laugh.

"L!" I shout.

"Shhhh..." the monster hushes me, leaning back down to me suddenly, and in my shock, I push myself back against L. "This is just between us. Don't wake him. The truth will be the end of both of you if you're not careful."

"What do you mean? No, you're not real."
"You think that you're dreaming? Maybe you are. Who's to say?"

"You can't be real." I will myself to wake up. I pinch myself hard at my waist but hiss from the pain of it, and the demon is still there, I haven't woken up. Then I learn that I can't get out, I'm stuck here, and you can feel pain in dreams. I wonder when the dream began. "Are you here to kill me?" I ask. He looks like Death, he's certainly not here to give me candy floss.

"Huh huh... Is that what you think? I don't understand you humans, but you're interesting to me. And what I know is that there are far worse fates than death for you. That's what happens."

"L, wake up!" I shout again, flinging my arm behind me, not caring where it hits him as long as it hits him and he wakes up, but the monster grips my jaw with spindly fingers which are freezing cold like ice, and he speaks right into my face. Even his breath, what might be breath, is cold and radiates from him.

"Convince yourself that I don't exist again, do it. It makes me laugh. You're dreaming, this isn't happening, it doesn't make sense, it doesn't fit with your laws of science. Do it, but everything depends on what you do now. I'm tied here, but I didn't choose you. Put that on your tab, Light Yagami."

I can't break away from him and my eyes stretch painfully in their wideness, like I couldn't possibly take in the whole horrifying picture of what I'm seeing. I know this face. Over the years it's come closer and closer to me, slowly encircling me. And now I'm going to die here, killed by a vacancy of soul.

Somehow, I tear my fixed stare away from the glowing bright yellow tapestry around the blood red centre of his eyes, and see something like a peeling of the skin near a silver heart earring which catches the light. Instinctively, I reach for it, hoping to do damage to this thing, and rip it with all the force I can muster. It tears like thick paper, leaving ragged edges across his cheek, and underneath I see skin with colour, unlike the surface layer. Skin like mine but pulled by tight, thick stitches and patched to bruised, decomposing flesh, like violet satin. The thing doesn't flinch, there's no blood; it's like he's wearing a thin mask. I look back into the now furious but laughing eyes and feel a punch which seems to hit every part of me - a split-second crunch, a coldness and a sudden stillness within. The force of it rocks me back, but I don't take my eyes from his. When I finally do look down, his arm disappears into my chest, and around it, an aurora borealis of waving colour and light circles like a whirlpool. He pulls his arm from me, pulling me forward towards him until he's free in one quick movement, and I fall back again, how I was. I feel the cavernous hole in my chest without having to look at it. I'm not breathing, and I'm not sure if it's because of shock or because I physically can't anymore. The last thing I see is a thin black clad hand, like a vicious tree branch, holding my own shining heart out to me.

Despite waking, intact and breathing and with my heart still thumping excitedly inside me, I can't believe that it's real. Before reason points me towards reality, I sit there in bed with the light of morning just breaking through the blinds and L still asleep beside me, exactly how he was in my dream. My hand presses into my chest to find it solid and apparently undamaged, and I think for a moment that he must have stolen my heart and replaced it. Something else is beating inside me. I stare at the white sheet over my legs and see nothing but the quilt of rotten and living skin in my mind's eye. I visualise a shard of black hair and the demonic face of an African mask of the dead.

L's alarm clock beeps suddenly and I glare at it over his shoulder until he reaches over to silence it. He rolls on his back and smiles broadly towards me, all white teeth in a reawakened face while he rubs his eyes, but in his fogginess, he hardly looks at me. He mustn't see my horror which I'm sure must still remain imprinted on me, and he mustn't think that my silence is strange. He just flings
himself heavily onto my thigh and holds me like a pillow, pressing his forehead against my hip.

I touch his hair. I feel him. I'm not dead.

After L drops me off in front of the the Kantei and disappears to park and go to work himself, I collect memos and letters from my secretary, skimming over them while she rattles off more messages and reminds me of my schedule today. I nod but say nothing, and for the first time ever, she asks me if I'm feeling alright. Looking at her for a few seconds because of the bizarre and unusual question, I catch sight of myself in my office's closed, dark door like a scrying mirror of obsidian. I look as shit as I can ever remember looking. It shocks me to see myself looking like this; haunted somehow. The look of a dying man or a man who's seen something he should never have seen. I hate that my dream has left a scar of itself on my face as well as my mind, and when I'm in my office, I wash and scrub my face unforgivingly to try and bring some life back into it. I order my secretary to bring me a plate of salad just so I can put the slices of cucumber on my eyes, but that doesn't work, so I order espresso and soak cotton pads in the coffee to shrink the blood vessels and reduce swelling. This I have learned. I find myself feeling so depressed by the lack of improvement that I consider taking the day off work to sleep it off, but by one o'clock, I look normal again. The memories fade.

At six o'clock and after a one minute conversation with L, I leave the office with my head still ringing from a gaggle of secretaries starting the weekend early by the water cooler. Until they noticed me standing behind them waiting to get near the stairwell door which they were blocking, they were practically screaming like witches. They shut up and dispersed quickly enough, but I know their faces and every one of their names, and that's all I need to know. I'll see how I feel about it tomorrow.

I go from one hoard of women to another, as what sounds like collared doves soothing each other batters me as soon as I walk through my front door. Even the maid looks embarrassed, but she usually does anyway. In between the cooing, the familiar snivelling of Sayu breaks through in punctuated, spiking sobs. When we were both still living at home we came to some unspoken agreement. I could either be a tutor or an overprotective big brother who beat up boys for her if she was stupid enough to sleep with them, after which they would of course fuck off and delete her number from their phones. One role was easier than the other, so I became her tutor and my mother handled her emotional fuck ups. Meanwhile, I tutored myself, more or less, achieved excellent grades despite being considerably more intelligent than my teachers, and I had no emotional fuck ups. I think my mother and father should have stopped at one child. I liked Sayu when I was younger - loved her, maybe - but when I started to appreciate intelligence and poise and she showed no interest in either or those qualities or in common sense, I lost interest in her. She wasn't academic and I got her through school. That was the end of my obligation.

"So that's it. No more men for me," I hear Sayu say as I take off my shoes and hand them to the maid.

"God, Sayu, how horrible. Please don't say that." Is that Naomi? What's she doing here?

"Women can have very happy lives without men," Kiyomi says assuredly, although from what I gather, she's hardly ever had a period in her life in which she's experienced not having a man running after her in some way. "You can go where you want, do what you want."

"Have a bed all to yourself."

"Yes! I love Light and I'd miss him terribly, especially his bad moods in the mor... all the time, but I do like that we have our own rooms."
"Teru steals the sheets."

"Oh, I hate that!"

"Does Light?" Sayu asks.

"No, he lets me have them."

"Awww."

"And then he leaves."

"Oh."

"It's perfect."

"Well, I'm glad for you, Kiyomi, but I'm going to have a great life without men. I can take up self improvement, like Light always told me to. Embroidery and quilt making and flower arranging, and I'll read that book that I was supposed to read at school but Light wrote the essay for me so I didn't have to read it. And maybe I'll take up pottery and buy a few cats and..."

At this point, Sayu descends into wailing and choked out weeping, which brings out much hushing from Kiyomi and Naomi. I'm surprised that Kira doesn't join in. I couldn't really blame him if he did.

As I walk past the sitting room, which is more like a ballroom with chairs, Kiyomi must hear my footsteps. I'm not planning on staying long.

"Light, is that you?"

"I'm just picking up some things."

"Come in here. Your sister's upset."

Although I see that as a perfectly good reason not to go in there, I drag myself into the room and the acrid smell of the freshly painted walls burns the back of my throat. Kiyomi is in a white skirt suit (it's too bland to know the designer at sight. There's no obvious signature design traits, but I think that it's Anrealage, which would be the best political choice) and blends in with the furnishings and the walls. A rhapsody in white with a red slash of a mouth. I want her to be painted like that in our official portrait. No, I don't, there won't be one. Sayu's hair is scraped back and she looks like she's fourteen and has had a bad time on the pommel horse in P.E. Naomi is all long hair and a Mary Katrantzou dress which looks like a short and over the top Ming vase. I think she's had highlights and treatments. You can always rely on Naomi.

"What's wrong, Sayu?" I ask, and she immediately tears up and launches herself towards me. I feel like I'm a man on the train tracks who's unable to move as my doom comes right at me at an incredibly slow speed. I stand there exhausted with my arms hanging at my sides while Sayu cries all over my jacket.

"Oh, poor girl," Kiyomi clucks, somewhat falsely. "Sayu's had an argument with Touta," she tells me, then pours herself and Naomi another cup of tea. Despite making the right noises, they appear to be decidedly unconcerned about Sayu's trouble.

"Why?"

"He's mean," Sayu says, brokenly muffled into my shoulder. I push her back out of affection for my
"No he isn't. You are."

"What?"

"You treat him like shit."

"Light, you're not helping," Kiyomi calls over.

"Where's Kira?" I ask her.

"He's at my mother's." Oh, no fucking way.

"You left my son with your mother? Kiyomi, she couldn't even look after that orchid we gave her for New Year, and you expect our son to still be alive when you can be bothered to pick him up?"

"He's fine. I'm picking him up at four."

"It's half past fucking six, woman! I hope to God that he's survived this long. Sayu, you should go home and apologise to Touta."

"What? I should apologise to him?!"

"Akane's with them anyway, there's no need to shout at me. Especially since I've been comforting your sister when she's very upset," Kiyomi interjects. I thought that was finished. "Are you going out again?"

"Yes, I'm just having a shower first."

"Light's writing a book," Kiyomi explains to her audience smugly.

"Oh! That's wonderful, Light," Naomi says, clasping her hands together in all her excitement. I nod and start to leave.

"Maybe you'll be in it, along with all his other bits on the side," Kiyomi tells her. I spin back around but she's the picture of calm still. "Sugar, Sayu?"

"Kiyomi!" Naomi shrieks.

"Naomi is Light's bit on the side?! He has bits on the side?" Sayu asks, looking at me like the truth will make itself known and I'll give myself away by dropping a packet of 'extended pleasure' condoms and a diamond tennis bracelet which is inscribed 'To Naomi, with love'. They all seem to wait for me to reply, apart from Kiyomi, who's still pouring tea. Naomi looks at me, begging me to deny it. As it is, I can't speak, so she takes it upon herself.

"No!"

"She was," Kiyomi says. "She probably still is."

"Shut up, Kiyomi. You're paranoid," I tell her, finally finding my voice just as I leave the room. A few seconds later, I hear the hard click of Kiyomi’s heels as she follows me and the clopping of Naomi and Sayu behind her.

"No I won't shut up. So you're off again? Who are you seeing this time?"
"No one. Don't be stupid," I answer, taking my jacket off. I walk into my wardrobe and scan the rails quickly, picking out a leather Calvin Klein suit. It speaks to me. Well, the jacket does. I bought the full suit for the sake of completeness, but I never intend to wear the trousers. It was a spur of the moment purchase a few years ago because I wanted it, irrespective of how inappropriate it would be. I was feeling reckless and had just had a healthy bonus from my investment into Higuchi. It's inappropriate now because it screams: 'I'm going out to have sex, thank you! I'm a bad, bad man!' but that's probably why I subconsciously pick it out. Kiyomi hovers in the doorway while I select trousers, a shirt and tie, and stays standing there as I walk past her to lay the outfit on the bed until it looks like the invisible man has been squashed by an invisible anvil.

"Light, are you having an affair?" Sayu asks in exactly the same tone she used when she asked me anything from about twelve onwards when she developed a fascination with my sex life or lack of. She was constantly incredulous. 'Are you eating those? You'll get fat and no one will won't to go out with you.' 'You have a girlfriend? Have you had sex yet?' 'You got an A? How did you do that? The girls will think that you're a nerd.' 'Dad bought you that watch? How much did it cost? The girls will love that.' My youth was very disturbed and fraught with screaming teenage girls in my ear. Needless to say, I moved out as soon as it was financially viable.

"Get out of my room, Sayu."

"Kiyomi. Light and I are not having an affair," Naomi says definitively.

"Oh, come on. You both told me that you were and you're still all over him."

"No I'm not!"

"Fuck!" I shout, suddenly rigid with having my peace disturbed and Kiyomi making arguments now. That's L's job. "Have a mother's meeting somewhere else, will you? I'm having a shower now."

"We've all seen you naked, Light. Carry on."

"I haven't seen him naked since we were..." Sayu ponders. "I don't think that I ever did."

"There's always a first time, Sayu. Believe me, you haven't missed much."

"You," I point at Kiyomi. "Go and get my son."

"Our son. My son, actually. You didn't really contribute."

"I contributed half his genes and his gender and his actual existence, you're talking complete shit. Who are you, the Virgin fucking Mary?"

"Light!" Sayu gasps. Oh God, help me.

"And I wanted a girl," Kiyomi continues unabashed. "You knew it, and you couldn't even give me that much."

"What? Oh, forget it."

"And I carried him for months!" she shouts, following me into the bathroom.

"A greenhouse could have done a better job."

Her pause makes me watch her while I'm unbuttoning my shirt. She reluctantly seems to look me over and inhale. "Well, why are you worried about our child when you probably have a few spares
"I want to talk to you." I hiss under my breath.

"I know..." she says sympathetically. I'd almost forgotten in this short time what her voice sounded like normally; deep and melancholy. I always liked the light and cheerful 'telephone voice' she puts on in public and for outsiders which makes her sound as if she'd never had an imperfect moment in her life, because I knew how false it was, and I like it, because she doesn't use it with me and she never did. Naomi and Sayu stare at us in shock, I think. It's hard to say. They have such pretty but vague faces and often look as gormless as they do now. You have to rely on more obvious emotions from them, such as crying or laughing. "Are you still leaving?" Kiyomi asks me, picking up my discarded shirt from the floor.

"I have to. I've made arrangements now. Look, will you two get out?" I shout again at Naomi and Sayu, but they don't move.

"What arrangements? I thought you were supposed to be writing a book."

"I am, but I've told L that I'll be there."

"Tell him that you've changed your mind. He won't care. He doesn't even use that place, Stephen said."

"Stephen said," I repeat after her in a chirpy imitation. "Kiyomi, when I make arrangements I stick to them."

"I want to talk to you."

"We're talking now in front of the whole fucking building. You're holding me up. Are you getting
anything out of this? I'm not."

"Well, I'm sorry. I'll pack your condoms."

"I've heard enough. This is horrible!" Sayu says, starting to tear up again. "You two are always rubbing it in. You know that I'm practically a nun now!"

"Sayu, if you go home – and please go home – you can say sorry to Touta and stop being stupid so you can go right back to how you were this morning instead of crying all over me and my floor."

"I'm not apologising. Why are you always supporting the underdog? You're a politician!"

"He's supporting him because he's a man, Sayu," Kiyomi tells her. "Men stick together."

"You're such a sexist fucking bitch, Kiyomi," I snap at her.

"Tell you what then, you come back to me when you're underpaid and disrespected and everything is unequal and unfair because of your gender. Oh wait, you can't, because you're a man! How nice for you!"

"I can't be arsed with your shit now. Can you all just get out? I only want to have a shower."

"And see your girlfriend. What does she look like?"

"Tall. Dark hair. Thin," I tell her after moment, taking care to say each word clearly, forcing the admittance out. My blood burns with adrenalin because I've just killed myself. The room is silent then, and Kiyomi's eyes widen like she never did really believe it at all.

"You sizeist..." she gasps, but doesn't finish because she's too busy beating my chest with her fists until I grab her wrists and spin her around into some kind of restraining hold. She stabs her heel into my foot, which causes me such unexpected pain that I immediately let her go to rub at the spot just above my big toe.

"Light! Oh my God, Dad's going to be pissed!" Sayu tells me as Kiyomi thumps me hard on my shoulders while I'm bent over, attending to my foot. That actually brought tears to my eyes, the bitch.

"Fuck off, Sayu!" I shout, looking up at her. I feel that my face is hot and probably red like Kiyomi's and that really annoys me. I see Sayu's lip tremble before she explodes.

"I think you're horrible, Light! Horrible!" she screams hysterically. She mercifully leaves the room before she drips on my carpet. This was The Lady's suite and I had the carpet restored instead of replaced. I kept the whole place more or less the same, just updated. When I first moved in, I imagined her climbing onto her poor husband like a succubus to drain the life and semen from him once a year. Kiyomi ended up being similar.

My foot is throbbing but the searing pain has subsided enough that I can grab my jacket from the bed and storm out in a slightly hobbling and uncomfortable way past Naomi and of the room.

"What about your shower?" Kiyomi shouts after me from the stairs when I reach the door and snatch my shoes from the maid. I catch a glimpse of Kiyomi's legs and the hem of her white skirt from the corner of my eye, but I slam the door after me without answering.

Forty minutes later, despite the traffic, I draw up at L's house and open his door with my own key which he gave me in a fit of romance. I look barely presentable. My trousers don't match my shirt
and jacket, being charcoal grey, so I feel like a badly-made bed. My car makes a sound like a horse breathing behind me, which makes me jump and quickly close the front door.

I think of this place as peace and terror combined now. After dropping my keys on the console table, I listen to the house, trying to gauge what's here apart from L, if anything. His car is parked outside, so he must be here somewhere. No, nothing else is here. I see things. I have dreams which I can't wake up from. After taking my shoes and socks off to inspect the angry wound on my foot, it looks worse than it did at first. Now it almost looks like a bullet has been fired at me through kevlar. All the way here, I was in a state of unreleased anger and embarrassment and regret, but now that I'm here, I close my eyes, straighten and let my head drop back while I push my hair off my face. My breathing calms, my heart rate drops, and then I feel a cold circular rim press against my cheek.

"Shit fuck!"

An arm holds me in place to stop me flailing and hitting out, and a mouth kisses my ear, but all I can do is stare straight ahead of me with that same feeling of hopelessness and inevitability that I did last night when the demon stole my heart from me. When death was right there and I couldn't escape it.

"This is a burglary," he whispers to me, and I breathe out in relief, turning my face to my left to see a brandished gun for my benefit.

"That's strange, because it looks a lot like a gun."

"With five bullets in it. I was messing around and accidentally shot a lamp."

He lazily lifts the gun towards a small table which carries nothing now apart from a disembodied lampshade. I sigh and step away from him to stick a cigarette into my mouth, but hear a tiny noise from the bedroom and my head snaps towards it in panic, like a worried meerkat. I must look ridiculous and a bag of nerves. Then the wheel of my lighter burns my finger, and when I do manage to light my cigarette, I light the filter end. Could anything else go wrong?

"It's the central heating switching on, calm down," he tells me while polishing the gun on his sleeve. With one eye closed, he raises it, clasping it with both hands, and aims it at me. I step out of his aim, but the gun follows me with the help of a steady arm, thanks to a man in a suit.

"I'm not in the mood, L."

"I was going to burgle you but you've ruined the moment, as usual," he says sulkily, eventually dropping the gun to hang at his thigh when I fall onto the sofa and breathe out before I speak.

"Shouldn't you give that thing back to Bucky O'Hare?"

"He hasn't asked for it," he shrugs innocently. "Oh dear, this is bad. What could I do to help? Hmmm... I know!"

Nothing could surprise me now. For a second, I think that he's just going to shoot me, because that would solve my problems better than anything else could, but he walks over to me and crouches between my knees, spreading my legs open. Part of my brain is thinking: 'Yes, great idea!' but the part of my brain which is not attached to my dick makes me put a blocking arm in front of me, much to his amazement.

"I'm running out of ideas now," he says.

"You've only had one."
"It usually works. Is this leather?" he asks, thumping my lapel like a stress stone. "You're wearing leather? Light, your personality is leaking and it's made your jacket become leather. Hey, what happened to your foot?"

"Kiyomi."

"She did that? What a bitch! Are you sure? It looks like stigmata. Have you been crucified lately?"

"She accused me of having an affair... with just about everyone, I think," I sigh, letting my head fall down to be caught and propped up by my hands just above my knees

"Oh."

"I don't know if she really thinks that."

"Probably. Although, from what I've heard, unless you're giving them attention all the hours of the day, that's a standard thing that women say. What happened?"

"She just..." I wave a hand in the air to represent the bomb explosion which happened this afternoon. "I know what I could try to make her quiet, but I don't think it'll work on her."

"Well, this is perfect," he says. What the fuck?

"In what way?"

"Let's think." He climbs onto the sofa and lies back like he's ready for his therapy session. As he speaks, he gains momentum from the growing love of his idea, and picks at the skin around his fingernails while he stares at the door like he's seen the fucking future and it's beautiful. "You were going to ask her for a divorce. Men who ask for divorces always get the same reaction: 'He's having an affair. He's a bastard. He's got a younger model because men are sex-obsessed arseholes. His wife is so lovely,' even if that's not true. The woman always gets the sympathy unless they leave their husband for someone else, because then they're a slutty bitch. Who'd leave you? I think that we should push her towards doing just that."

"She's not having an affair, L. She wouldn't have an affair, so let's not push her anywhere."

"Maybe towards the edge of a cliff then? I'm joking, I'm joking, but hold your horses there, sport. This could be perfect because you have a new baby and you're in a very stressful position. If Kiyomi has an affair, that would be perfect. What you need to do is encourage her privately by being absent a lot of the time, immersed in your work and me, but act like a slightly friendly acquaintance to her with absolutely no sex drive. A bit like how you are already, but more so. Invite some lotharios over for dinner, like Culture, and then leave them for half-an-hour. Stir and repeat, stir and repeat, microwave, bing! But, when it's made public, be shocked. Take the day off work and make sure the press know about it. Go on TV and say how shocked you are. Sad face. Devastation. You thought you were happy, but you're trying to be understanding of her and hopefully you can work it out for Kira's sake. You just feel so betrayed at the moment. You've been there before with that Amane person fucking Jeevas of all people."

"Yes, and I'm not going there again. You can only do it once, after that it looks like there's a reason people keep having affairs."

"Not necessarily. Having a baby and being the Prime Minister's wife must be very stressful for her, that's what you'll say, but you'll be understandably very upset. Play that card into the ground."

"But -"
"Shut up. You're depressed. Suicidal even. You're going to be very depressed and exhausted and I'll get my doctor to give you a nice form which says that you are, with a suggestion that you take time off work."

"No. Absolutely fucking not."

"Yes. So you hold a very emotional press conference and state your intention to leave, and then you move in with me. I'm your friend and this house is very isolated and sanctuary-like. Move along, nothing to see here. But, you're bonkers and I'm an attractive lawyer with a mean streak and his own firm, a good brain, gay, gay, gay, AND anything could happen. I've turned men like other people turn corners. Your cabinet will be in uproar because who's going to replace you in the mean time at such short notice? Watari? Yes, because he's your deputy, but he'll be awful, and that's exactly why he's perfect for the job. It won't take long before you'll have to promise at the insistence of your cabinet that you'll come back once you're recovered. However, in that time, you'll have unexpectedly fallen in love with me, because I'm a bad man and took advantage of your vulnerability and – the horror – people can be attracted to the same sex or both sexes and it doesn't define them. The cabinet will have sympathy for you. You must be very confused, and they won't accept it immediately, but with Watari standing in for you and the opposition gaining popularity, they'll realise what a great leader you are. The only one. Having me down your trousers is irrelevant. They might not like that you're fucking a man but you're really good at your job, so they'll just have to deal with it. Your party will see that without you, they'll be kicked out. I'll leave PR so that I'm out of the picture, and with me not in everyone's faces, they can ignore the imagery they have of us at night. They'll make themselves believe that we're just friends or forget about me altogether. We all love a sense of the absurd. This will actually change everything and it'll work out pretty well for us too. Give it a few months, maybe a year. Then come back. Are you listening?"

No, not really. I switched off when I starting imagining the tagline for my next election campaign being: 'Men at work. Having him down my trousers is irrelevant. I'm fucking a man, but I'm really good at my job, so you'll just have to deal with it. Vote for the Absurd Party!' But L's staring at me, eager for my imput, so I cross my arms.

"Light, did you hear what I said?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"It's a terrible idea."

"I really don't mind taking the blame."

"It's not that. It won't work. They won't keep the job open for me. The opposition will fight that and call for another election, and people will think that I'm impressionable, sexually deviant and mentally unstable."

"But a good man and a good Prime Minister. I'll arrange some kind of crisis which Watari will struggle to deal with. I can do that without even being in PR. I'll make life hell for him. He might even die from the stress. You'll be called to help resolve the problem, and you will, even though you're not well and, y'know, having sex with me. You'll sort everything out practically overnight. Think of how that kind of dedication will look."

"No, it's terrible. I need a drink," I say, taking my time in sitting up and preparing to walk. It feels likes someone's driven a nail through my foot, which is what Kiyomi effectively did.
"Have mine," he tells me, crawling and shuffling onto me, clamping me with his rucked fabric covered thighs and handing me his vodka with a giving and lopsided smile. His voice has a warm purr running through it, and one hand strokes dreamy, slippery, rushing noises from my leather jacket. Surely he doesn't think that I'm that stupid. The thing is, nowadays I'm not sure that I'm not that stupid. "You just need to think about it. I'm shooting ideas at you and you can take or leave what you want, but with good steering and a few tweaks, this could be perfect. We all like having our cake and being able to eat it. That's not an innuendo, by the way. Unless you want it to be."

"This isn't a fucking cake though, L. This is my life and my job."

I'm exhausted by what feels like a battle of wills in who wants their own way the most. Honestly, I'd prefer a straight forward punch-up which ends with a fuck on the floor, but we both twine each other around our fingers through more devious means. It's just that I'm so tired that I feel that there's a danger of me letting him win. His eyes almost close as he smiles and his hand runs through my hair and down my neck, tracing along a rib, poising over backwaters, swirling and spreading his fingers to the curve of my back. Hairs stand on end. All this time, I watch him like an idiot, knowing exactly what he's doing because I've done it myself. I've done this to him. Now, I want to ruin him. Commit arson and vandalism on this man who makes himself look so fragile and fine and sleek and intended for only the most gentle of lovers. I want to tear his skin with my teeth and claws.

He hunches forward to glide his lips across mine as he gives me what I'd hardly believe was an order from the way it's whispered so beautifully: the death sentence to Kiyomi's life as she knows it unless I stop him.

"The only thing is how to get rid of Kiyomi in the right way, and then there's just public opinion about your... well, this, which you can change with very little effort on your part. The trick is to have a slow drip and control it. It's not a lifestyle choice, it's who you are. You've done the job well so far, why would you stop now? Think of how progressive this is. And most of this is press related. Just be very reserved. Don't start wearing pink and going on marches and kissing men in public who aren't me, and then they'll realise that you haven't changed one iota. Aren't you lucky to have me."

"L..."

"I'd feel very guilty for taking such a great politician away from the people," he says, suddenly rocking back until my breathing stops at the tormenting glance of him over my rising cock. "What would be the absolutely perfect scenario for you is if you could go back and everyone would overlook your bad choice in partner. Bad, bad..."

"I thought you wanted me to stay here and give up politics."

"You don't want to leave it, Light. You love it."

"Do I?"

"Imagine what it'd be like for you to see all the wrong things going unchecked and not being able to do anything about it, but knowing that you could."

"I'm not going to be humiliated."

"If we play this right then you won't be."

"I will. My marriage is falling apart and we've only been married a year," I say sadly, which is all too obvious. I failed at something I didn't really care about in the first place, but Kiyomi was there when L wasn't. She distracted me. She was always there for me when I needed her and not there when I
didn't want her to be. She gave me an alternative to believe was something important to me, even if it wasn't. On paper it was. I'm grateful to her for that. I'm sorry that she didn't own all the things she thought were hers and that she knows that now. In my mind, I see her legs, a white skirt and blood tipped white heels, and that image makes me push L off me and scratch under my ear roughly. "After I resign, it'll look like she left me because of you."

"So you're alright with it as long as you do the leaving? I'm the problem?" he asks me. Yes, you're the problem.

"She thinks that I'm sleeping with some woman. She blamed Naomi."

"Well, you did sleep with Naomi."

"Years ago, God! I slept with a lot of people years ago. Now I think that she blames my secretary, judging by the way she speaks to her. That's just what I need – an adultery charge with a hundred co-respondents."

"It's not going to come to that. There'll be no charges of adultery. It could be your standard breakdown in a relationship. Irreconcilable differences, it happens all the time. You rushed, really. You didn't give yourself an opportunity to test drive. You have options. File the divorce papers before her, or make her believe that you're innocent and she'll back off, but personally, I think it would be better for everyone if you let her get on with it. Everyone loves a rogue in politics and an affair with a woman could be forgiven. But you're having an affair with a man and they'll think that there's something wrong with you, so we have to handle this perfectly."

"Have a sex change," I laugh. I don't know how.

"Hah. I love you a lot but I'm not cutting my dick off for you, I like it too much. It's brought me a lot of happiness over the years and I like to piss standing up. Light, you and Kiyomi need to separate and you have to have a complete mental breakdown."

I turn to him. He's serious.

"Errr..."

"For all the world, look like you were happy with Kiyomi, but when you come back and people know about me, show them that it has no bearing on you and comment on how that bigotry reflects on society. What we need to do soon is let some stories slip out about how Kiyomi isn't the most maternal woman. Maybe a piece on how she's always pushing Kira onto relatives alongside a photo of her shopping, with an insinuation that she's having an affair with one of your security guards. You have to start collecting Kira when you leave work. You need sympathy and Kiyomi needs bad press. She will have the press and public hatred which is only reserved for women who do wrong. We need that sort of -"

"L, it won't work. I won't be able to go back to politics after this."

"Not with me in tow, you mean."

"I'm sorry, but that's how it is."

"You can change things."

"I can't change how people think."

"People need to be told what to think, that's what you've always said. You're a very popular man
now, why would that change if we handle this correctly? I'll get the press behind you and we'll get your cabinet behind you. Obviously I'm behind you all the fucking way so no surprise there. Haven't you listened to anything I've said? Because it's twenty-four carat gold, Light.

"My goal isn't equality. There are more important things."

"Oh, you've got this all wrong."

"L, If I did what you said, it wouldn't be for equality, it'd be because I want you and I want my job."

"That's ok."

"No, it's not. There are people living in poverty and getting killed out there. I can't care about a one man battle for equality."

"Do it for us then."

"I am. That's why I'm leaving. You don't understand." I rub my forehead and L shifts closer to me in agitation.

"Make me understand."

"You care about equality in how it affects you, not because you care about anyone else. That isn't a good reason."

"I'm sorry that I'm not selfless but I never have been. I care about me and I care about you and I stop caring after that."

"I know. And I'm going the same way, so I have to leave."

"You care about other things."

"I hate things which are wrong, but all I love is you and that's where I should go, shouldn't I. Shouldn't I?"

"Is this to guilt trip me into backing off so you can carry on with this once every so often thing? Because I can't, Light."

"No! It's not to make you do anything. It's what I'm doing because it's the right thing to do. I can't help it if the result is that I have no option but to leave, but I have to be realistic. No one else should suffer to make it easier for me, especially when it won't make any difference anyway. It is what it is. You know politics, L. It's a bit backward with things like this."

He searches my eyes for a moment, desperately trying to disbelieve what I'm saying but not being able to. He slams the flat of his hand against the seat of the sofa as he stands up and begins to slowly pace in front of me. Well, that was attractive.

"This is so fucking shit," he says angrily.

"You're telling me," I laugh, or try to anyway. It comes to nothing. I feel as battered as I did before and L's still pacing and biting his thumbnail.

"You're trying to do the right thing and you're going to lose your job over it."

"Yeah, well. Maybe if I'd done the right thing earlier, it wouldn't be like this now."
"The one time you're honest and do the right thing."

"Mmm... Hold on. What?!"

"Sorry."

"I've been honest and done the right thing before! Lots of times!"

"I said that I was sorry."

I make a low sort of grumbling noise as I settle back from my momentary outrage, but he's still pacing. "When this is over, it won't be so bad," I sigh with my fake optimism. "I've got my degree, I could do law."

"An ex-Prime Minister as a lawyer, yeah. We might as well set up a theme park and charge a hundred yen for people to have their photographs taken with you."

"You were the one who suggested it!"

"Because I would have said anything to make you follow through on leaving. But you won't be happy. No law firm will hire you for anything other than for publicity, apart from mine, and what the fuck would that look like? Tell me that you would be happy working for me, having me tell you what to do and how to do it."

"You're kind of doing that now..." I tell him, but I know what he means. He'll be the authority to me. "No," I sigh in resignation.

"No, you wouldn't."

"I know that it will always follow me around but..."

"Light, you won't be happy. Everything you do is going to be a step down for you."

"Who knows what could happen. So, that's where I am, and it's no one's fault but mine."

"No, you did what you did to fit in with what was expected of you."

"I didn't have to do it."

"You were made to feel like you had to. And I could have made it easier," he says, finally finding a destination for his wanderings, and that destination is the vodka bottle and a fresh tumbler. He chucks ice into the glass, only because it's another humid night, and the vodka spills over the cubes as he focuses on haste.

"How?"

"By not being such a twat? I know what people think of me, but I never cared. I thought that it was funny how they all think that I'm some mad man who's going to fuck them if they turn their backs on me or dropped something. I played right into their hands, didn't I. If I was quiet and respectable and fucking celibate, maybe it wouldn't have been a problem at all. I don't know."

"Don't drink any more. Come here," I tell him. I'm so tired that I want only to talk about anything else or nothing at all. Just to fold myself around him like paper around a stone and be fucked in the silence on the darkest of nights when all the stars are clearly seen. Us rocking supine and gently like a ship on an dead calm sea and falling asleep, twisted around each other so nothing would dare to disturb that. I'd wake in the morning and love him more than I did the last time I saw him, for not
saying or doing anything apart from what comes naturally to him.

He puts down his glass and sits next to me again, sad, like a tortured French artist painting beautiful things from his mind while living in a dark, underwater slum of a place. I laugh a little to myself while he mopes in ridiculousness.

"Will you not blame yourself, please," I say.

"I don't blame myself."

"Liar." I hold his knee as I lean back into the sofa. "So, I'm staying here tonight. You'll have to feed me again."

"Does Kiyomi know where you are?"

"I told her that I was writing, but she thinks that's just a ruse and that I'm using you as a cover, that's the impression I got. Then I left and security were tailing me, so I lost them on the motorway."

"They probably know where you are."

"Doesn't matter if they do. There's a good thing - I won't have security around anymore after I leave."

"You will need security."

"When homophobes attack?"

"Is that a film?"

"I know that there are some crazy people about. I wonder if I'll look back and think that it was worth it. Politics, I mean. It doesn't really feel like it right now."

"It was worth it."

"Tell me that I'm doing the right thing"

"No, you're not."

"I asked you to tell me that I was."

"Like you need me to? You never did before. Honesty is the best policy, and I don't think that you are doing the right thing. Morally, you're doing the right thing, but you have a way to stay in power and you won't fight for it."

"I'm not going to lie down and let them kick me. I'm going act normally, leave Kiyomi, resign, and leave the door open. Like you said, I'm the best person for the job and they might ask me back when they realise that."

"You don't really think that, do you," he asks me. I take a long time to reply.

"No."

I'm walking with Mikami down the corridors in the maze of the backwaters of the House when we see L skulk out of the ladies bathroom followed by a bleached to fuck, fake-tanned woman in her forties. I thought that one thing I could trust him with is that he wouldn't go around fucking women
in bathrooms. Mikami laughs to himself and makes his excuses, because obviously nothing L did would surprise him now. He leaves me in the hallway watching and listening to L have a conlab with some disgrace of a woman. I feel like I must be having another dream again.

"I got nothing from that," he tells her. Her shoulders fall.

"I know. I could tell."

"I'm sorry. I'd say that it's not you, it's me, but it's definitely you. I'm in perfect working order as of three hours ago. It's not your fault that I find you supremely unattractive. If I was that way inclined, I would definitely hire you though. I'm sure that you're very skilled."

"I could put on a suit," she offers. Worlds have collided. I'm having some kind of psychotic moment.

"No. Even then, I don't think that my imagination would stretch that far. You're a dear though. Any other news?"

"Police came sniffing around last week. Disrupted business."

"Let's see if I can fix that so you aren't troubled again. Oh, Prime Minister!" he smiles as I approach them.

"Prime Minister, is it?" the woman asks, flustered and awkward. She actually curtseys to me, the thick plank.

"No need for that," L tells her. "We're on his side. Now, what were you saying about Hoshido? It's ok, you can say in front of the right honourable gentleman."

"Likes to be whipped," she answers.

"How apt for a chief whip."

"By blondes in World War II uniforms. Cost me a bomb in wigs and costumes, he has."

"Which uniform? Which regiment, I mean. Just out of interest."

"He didn't care, he wasn't specific. He was lucky that I put up with him at all."

"That's why I suggested you to him though, Sharon. Because you're so accommodating and your establishment makes dreams come true. Back to the uniforms though."

"Why? Do you like uniforms?" she asks, suddenly excited. She'll wear army uniforms for weeks in the hope of seeing him, I bet, and L makes no secret of revelling in her obvious adoration of him. I have no idea what's going on here.

"Naughty," he says, tapping her arm. "Japanese though, I take it?"

"They all look to same to me, L. Green with caps."

"Oh. Well, we do not approve of it anyway. Ok, thanks. Keep me posted."

She bows to me this time and kisses L on the cheek before she leaves. It's a quietly tragic scene because she attempts to catch his mouth but he turns his face to the side and pats her on the back. Then he watches her go and I watch him. The smug twat. "What?" he asks me when he notices how I'm looking at him.
"This is the worst fucking time to plan a change of orientation."

"She's my pet fruit fly. What? Can't I have hobbies? She's desperately in love with me, desperately... with me or my money. Alas, it is not to be and now she's got a terrible cocaine habit, isn't it the saddest thing? She's literally on her knees, it's hilarious. And before you say anything, it's not cheating," he says, straightening his jacket. I open my mouth and shake my head but no words come out. "Do you need burping?" he asks.

"I think I'll be ok, thanks," I say, and we start to walk along the corridor. "So, she's the official House whore then, I'm guessing."

"Madam. One of an approved list. Everyone's for sale, the question is: how much? Fond of your chief whip, are you?"

"Can't stand him."

"Well, if you ever want to wipe him off the face of the earth."

"I don't. I've used up my quota for sackings and deaths in the cabinet. I don't think that I can afford any more."

"Yes, it's been a regular Night of the Long Knives for the last month, hasn't it."

"The opposition seem to be feeling the brunt of it now, which is fine, and he is loyal if nothing else. I could spare him, but it wouldn't benefit me if he went, not with my majority. Have you seen the poll?"

"I did. Very well done."

"What I need is a new Exchequer. Someone pliable, not a consensus man. Someone who'll follow me and not the sheep."

"I take it that you've still heard nothing about the budget then?"

"Not a whisper. The Treasury don't have a clue either."

"There hardly seems any point, considering your imminent retirement from political life."

"You mean my imminent retirement from life."

"Light, you've dropped your dummy," he says, and sticks an imaginary dummy in my mouth. "There. I can understand that you'd like to leave on a high. I'd suggest Mikami if he wins back his seat in the locals, and the polls suggest that he will. Of course, the press will be bad. In effect, you'd be giving a big pot of cash to a druggie."

"An ex-druggie."

"Once a druggie always a druggie. He'll never be able to get all the tar and feathers off. But, if you're looking for blind loyalty and someone who doesn't have a clue what they're doing and would happily take your budget on as his own, he's your man."

"I do think a reshuffle invigorates things a little. To get the cabinet as I would want it will take time. Large reshuffles could be seen as instability, especially with all the deaths lately. The body count has definitely spiked."

"There's a lot of pressure on you. You have to have a capable and likeable cabinet, and it's hard
"I need the NPA to return evidence on Penber," I tell him as he reads, following it up with the necessary: "It's for Naomi."

"You want all the reports too?"

"Yes. It's for Naomi."

"You said that and I'm glad because I didn't hear you the first time. Why? What's the point, I mean. Penber's dead and Naomi's moved on twice since then. She's like the Orient Express. A quick service and then she's off again."

"I think she'd like his things back."

"Mikami says that they're getting married," he says with complete disinterest as he turns a page.
"Yes."

"Why not? She must really like jewellery. She could open a shop selling all those engagement rings. The woman's jewellery box must be a regular gold mine."

"Does that sound ok then?" I ask.

"I hope she's not thinking of wearing white again because, well, I'm not a traditionalist, but she'd be really pushing the bounds of believability."

"L, can you stop? I can't deal with it myself. You have to do it."

"I thought that you had links with the NPA."

"And I want to keep them for the time being. Also, I don't want my dad hearing about this. He's still very friendly with some of them and always seems to know what's going on. They still call him the Chief, for God's sake. When you go in, officially, you're acting as Naomi's lawyer."

"I might need power of attorney for that," he mumbles, and almost looks disappointed when I hand it over to him. "Naomi signed this?"

"Officially, yes."

"And unofficially, no?"

"Maybe. It'll work for what you need it for anyway. You're her lawyer. Go do your thing."

"I'm her unofficial barrister."

"Whatever. You're her representative."

"Barristers don't do this kind of gopher work. Not me, anyway."

"You will. I want you to handle it for me."

"Talk to the NPA?" he asks.

"No, to the Elvis fanclub. Of course, the NPA. But you don't have to talk to anyone because this has to be kept quiet. I want everything on that list, but the desk and its contents are the most important. Don't accept it if they say it's destroyed and don't let them tell you to come back later. When you get everything, hire a moving firm immediately and have it taken to your place. I'll reimburse you, of course."

"Oh, thanks. I wasn't sure that my bank account could cover the cost of hiring a van."

"And I want all reports and statements. Everything. Actually, make sure that they leave you alone in there so you can have a root around. Tell them that you work for me and if they don't give you everything you want, the government will launch an inquest into police procedu-"

"You don't have to tell me what to do, Light. I have done this before, and I've got a brain."

"I want it, L."

"Then you will have it."

"Even if it means upsetting them, do it. Use the government card if you have to. Just don't be easy on
them."

"I still don't understand why all this is necessary."

"Naomi says that she needs closure."

"The way her art gallery is going, she might get some kind of closure."

"L. This is my last opportunity to do anything for her. I won't have any leverage once I resign."

"I'm sorry that I'm not sorry, but don't expect me to believe that you're doing this for her. Ok, Light. It's been... how many years? You have to be prepared that some things might have been destroyed and you not wanting to accept that is not going to make them come back."

"I want the desk and everything in it. That's the priority. The police took it from the flat after Penber was shot and there were classified files in there."

"About what?"

"I don't know. I just know that he was working on something, and we shouldn't have governmental files hanging around for police officers to read while they're eating Doritos."

"They're out of date though. Knowing police officers, the Doritos probably are too. I think that if anyone had read anything important then it would have been leaked already. I bet that they were shredded as soon as they realised that they weren't porn."

"L, I want those files."

"And I said that if I can get them then you'll have them. I know someone in the archives who'll give me access and I can bypass all the boring stuff at the main desk."

"Good."

"I'd wonder at your urgency but you waited nearly five years to chase this up."

"I only found out a few months ago. I tried to look into it... Well, Mikami did. But -"

"No need to explain. Mikami, enough said, I completely understand. Light your entire cabinet and staff is made up of useless idiots."

"I know. He tries though. I wanted to keep it quiet and I can't trust anyone else, and you've been -"

"Busy, yes. I still am. Pile it on me, I'll muddle through," he says, folding the papers and sliding them inside his pocket. "What a lovely wedding present this crap will be for Naomi. Here's your dead fiancé's old desk. Something old."

"Is that my suit?" I ask. It's my suit. He's wearing my Z Zegna wool and silk micro check suit. I didn't believe it when I first saw him, but he's definitely wearing my Z Zegna suit and with a grey tie it looks fucking atrocious, not to mention the fit. It's a red tie suit if ever there was one, but I can't wear red so I'm lucky that it works with the right shade of blue. I've gone right off it. He makes it look like a cheap suit from a market stall that's been hacked together by someone who doesn't know what the fuck they're doing. "Did that woman just give you a blow in my suit?"

"Mmm," he sounds out proudly. "She tried. What do you expect if you leave things at my house? I thought it might look nice on me, but it doesn't look the same on me as it does on you."
"It's not tailored for you, that's why."

"No... you have things in places I don't," he says sulkily, and I make a snarling noise which annoys him "Other things, Light."

"Like an arse?"

"I have an arse, you snivelling little shit, and you know very well that I have arse. What a stupid thing to say. Stupid man. Stupid, stupid man. Buy me a drink at the Club."

"How about, no?"

"I despise you, you perfect specimen. How long have I got you for?"

"I'll have to get back around nine," I say as we leave the cupboard. No one's around, which I'm oddly disappointed by.

"Three hours. Lovely. Ok, I'll buy you a drink in your horrible suit. It's not as fun since you forced people to pay for their own drinks instead of putting it on expenses. This is Yagami's Japan."

"Any word from Stephen?"

"Actually, yes. Very interesting."

"Really?"

"No, not really. He's decided to stay but he's going to pick up the rest of his things tomorrow. He and Naomi are thinking of starting a business together."

Fucking fuck deciding to say the stupid waste of space why can't he fuck off he's not fucking wanted here I'll have to have him deported for being a fucking fuck.

"Doing what?" I ask nicely.

"I don't think that they've thought that far ahead yet. But he was saying how wonderful In Search of Lost Time is again, and asking me why I haven't read it. I must read it, so he says. I read a chapter of it once, but I can't take a book seriously when it was written by an asthmatic who stayed in bed all day and had cork-lined walls. So, I told him something about Proust which he might not have known. I'm sure that he didn't. Apparently, our friend Proust had a sexual obsession with slaughtering. He was having sex with a butcher once and asked him: "How do you kill a calf? How much does it bleed?" He also showed photos of his mother to men in male brothels and asked them: 'What do you think of this tart?' Snippets like that stay in my head and you think they're useless bits of information until the occasion presents itself. Stephen was very upset."

"Did he cry?"

"He put the phone down on me."

"And probably cried."

"Now, now. It's true, he's unusually attached to Proust."

"Well, at least I can be sure that you're not having an affair with her, unless you've lost your mind," Kiyomi says, holding the curtain aside to watch my invited MP arrive. "What is she wearing? Are you sure that you want to do this this?"
"I can get a stylist to fix that."

"She'll have to go on a diet. It's even more important for women, Light. We've always been judged on our appearances."

Kiyomi and I are only just on speaking terms and even that is full of barbs and unsubstantiated allegations. I spent last night here, and I'll spend tonight here. What more does she want? It's like being married to someone with a peculiar form of Tourettes. I hear the front door open and so must Kiyomi, who drifts back to her throne-like chair next to mine and adjusts her dress. We sit in silence until Yamada is heralded in by my cunt of a butler. I don't even know why I need a butler, but he came with the Kantei. It seemed rude to question how necessary he was.

Kiyomi wasn't wrong. The woman is wearing an African print scarf with an obnoxious chain and sun print on it in gold. What the fuck is that, Versace? An ode to slavery? Get the fuck out, bitch.

"Yamada-san," Kiyomi greets her as we all stand and bow at each other. "Please, call me Kiyomi."

"Thank you. My name is Tochiko. And thank you for inviting me to your home."

I walk towards her and her outfit gets worse the closer I get. I show her to her chair and note her shaking, clammy hands. However, she puts on a good front. I'll just have a doctor prescribe her some tranquillisers.

"How nice to see you," I say. "Your scarf's Versace isn't it? It really suits you and I love the political message. It's exactly what we stand for. Please take a seat."

"Thank you," she says, quickly bringing out a massive file. I'm not reading that. "I brought some -"

"Oh, let's not start like this. It's far too formal," I smile before stopping the stupid arse butler. "You. Did I tell you that you could leave?"

"Sorry, Prime Minister." He has a slipped disc in his back and bowing causes him intense pain, so he tells me. I make sure that he's put in situations where he bows constantly in apology.

"Would you like tea or coffee, Tochiko-san?" I ask.

"Coffee, please."

I nod to the bastard and he bows again before leaving with his order. "You should have tea for your nerves," I tell her. "You seem very anxious."

"I'm in the Prime Minister's home. Anxiety comes with the territory."

"But I'd hate to think that I inspire that kind of feeling in you, Tochiko-san."

She blushed. Even in this low light I can see the change in colour and the sense of guilty danger she feels. Kiyomi must see it too and laughs. "I think everyone is rather frightened of you, Light."

"Surely not. Are you frightened of me?" I ask Yamada.

"Oh no, Prime Minister."

"Good. My hobby isn't scaring ladies in my spare time, but you'd have to ask my wife if I'm very successful or not."

"And how are you, Kiyomi-san?" she asks, taking the hint to pay homage to Kiyomi.
"Very well, thank you," Kiyomi answers with an elegant dip of her head.

"Your home is beautiful."

"Thank you. All my own design. Light doesn't have the time or the interest."

"Now Kiyomi, you're bullying me and I can't have that. I must stamp my authority upon you," I say as the coffee arrives and is handed to Yamada with many bows on both sides. "Tochiko-san, you were saying about this... thing you've written?"

"I've drawn up a proposal looking into the sustainability of a nature reserve on what is now a rubbish dump in my constituency. Many rare species are in danger of extinction and I..."

"Excellent. I'll read over it later," I say, taking the file from her and briefly looking over the first page. Then I put it on a table where it will stay until enough time has passed and I can give it back to her, unread. "How are you liking Environment?"

"It's a great passion of mine. Conservation, finding a balance between humans and nature."

"With a healthy respect for nature, yes. But this area is a prime site for housing. Just outside Tokyo, it would considerably lessen the overcrowding problem we have here. Perhaps the nature reserve could be incorporated into it."

"But -"

"We have a problem of overpopulation to deal with within Tokyo if we want to retain some quality of life. We must think of the less fortunate. It's easy to forget that some people are living in windowless shoeboxes at this moment because of overpopulation. Nature will have to share those problems, don't you think so? Adapt and make do with what we can spare. Tochiko-san, I can tell that you're passionate about environmental concerns, but I hope that won't conflict with any aspirations you have where your career is concerned? The reason I called you here is because I want to offer you the post of Foreign Secretary."

"Oh!"

"Unexpected?"

"Well. I. Yes."

"There is a lot of responsibility. I held that post myself and I feel that I should warn you of the pressure you will encounter. However, I am very supportive of the Foreign Office. I will rely on you heavily and I feel that you are the right person for the role."

I firmly believe that the analytical facilities of women are hampered by emotion and the ridiculous hysteria which is inherent in them, so they are not suited to certain pursuits. However, my cabinet is full of useless women in useless roles. I need a woman near me on the front benches, and she's probably the most capable. She's also from a working class background, which shows diversity in my party. I want to distance my government from the stereotype of privileged landed gentry representing the common man. She's without a university education, which is unfortunate, but I have placed an overeducated toff as her deputy, which hopefully should even it out. The Lady counted women out of the running for leadership in my lifetime, at least, so she's not a threat to me.

"I..."

"Thank you," I tell her. "Those are the words you're looking for. Thank you. I will do my best."
"Yes. I will. It's a great honour."

"Congratulations, Tochiko-san," Kiyomi smiles condescendingly from my left.

"Thank you."

"I won't brief you now, the Foreign Office will do that. I just want to inform you of my decision. Congratulations. I trust that you'll accept the position?" I ask. I wonder what other positions she'd accept, in a more physical sense.

"Yes," she bows. "Thank you for this opportunity."

"My advice is that you study foreign policy over the last thirty years - the failures and the successes as born out over time. Your predecessor, rest his soul, was scheduled to visit Germany in two weeks. Of course, you will have to take his place."

"Germany?"

"Mmmm... for a week. I don't suppose that you know any German, do you?"

"No."

"I'm giving you four days leave after tomorrow. Learn German."

"I don't think that I can learn German in four -"

"You have two weeks to perfect it, and you'll only need some basic conversation and political terms, that's all. You will also have a translator to fall back on, but it'll show that you've made an effort. It's amazing what we can do when we put our minds to something. Germany is very important. I like to think of it as the financial capital of Europe, so it's definitely worth making that extra effort. I'll have my secretary send some intensive learning programmes to you."

"My father had an excellent tutor," Kiyomi tells her. "I could pass on his details, if you'd like."

"Ah. Thank you," Yamada splutters. "But I'll have to speak with my husband to arrange things with the children."

"One thing I have no time for is when we let our private lives stand in the way of our duty," I tell her firmly. This is a fucking call to arms and a get a grip moment. I don't think that she appreciates what I'm offering her, completely against my better judgement. "The country comes first, and your husband, if he's as supportive as he should be, will understand that. When my son was born, Kiyomi told me that I had to work to improve the world for his future. You must do the same. Do we understand each other?"

"I couldn't agree more, Prime Minister."

"Please, call me Yagami-san. There will be a cabinet meeting tomorrow morning to finalise and officiate your promotion, then I'll hand you over to the Foreign Office. If you could be there by eight, you should have time to see the stylist before the meeting."

"A... a stylist?"

"And a hairdresser. You must join Kiyomi and I for dinner one evening. Kiyomi has a great knowledge of foreign affairs. Were she not a mother, I have no doubt that she would have made an excellent minister for any department, but especially Foreign. She doesn't let emotion cloud her
decisions."

"Thank you, darling," Kiyomi smiles towards me for a brief and fake second.

"You're welcome, Kiyomi," I reply. "And bring your husband with you, Tochiko-san. We would love to meet him."

"He would love to meet you."

"What does he do?" Kiyomi asks.

"He's a bank manager."

"Which bank?"

"Shimizu."

"Oh," Kiyomi gasps and looks at me. Yamada looks confused and worried. Shimizu was one of the recipients of a government bail out a few years ago which was hugely unpopular. This is not good.

"That might be a problem," I decide, "but not insurmountable. He wouldn't mind a transfer to another bank, would he? One which isn't so prone to making horrendous mistakes which necessitates state investment to prevent falls in the stock market and instability in the Japanese banking system."

"Er..."

"And your children, how old are they?"

"Seven and ten."

"Where do they go to school?"

"Hagiwara."

"A private school? Well, since our recent improvements to the state system, I would appreciate it if you could move your children to a public school, at least until they're upper secondary age, then it would be perfectly acceptable if you chose to send them to a private school."

"But..."

"I'm sure that they'll love the change. As foreign secretary, you will benefit from the house provided for you by the state, but still retain your constituency house, obviously. Don't sublet it though, can't have that. That's been happening too often lately and then the idiots still put a claim in to expenses anyway. The constituency home must remain your home. Have you finished your coffee already?"

"Not qui-"

"Don't let us hold you up," I say, and Kiyomi and I stand, forcing Yamada to put her untouched coffee back down on the table. "I'm sorry that we've intruded on your time. We can discuss the finer details tomorrow. Oh, and don't mention this to anyone until it's official. You will have to give a press statement, live. It's scheduled for two o'clock, which gives you plenty of time. And I'll have a stylist find you in the morning to sort out... that. But leave it to him, you should prepare for your speech in that time, but listen to him and take notes because he's an excellent stylist. Now, the speech. Again, source other acceptance speeches for reference and mention a few of the policies we have planned for the near future. Use the House library. I've arranged for your new deputy to advise you after the cabinet meeting, and then PR. They'll look over your speech. I have every faith in you."
"Oh!"

"Is that lisp you have because of cheap dental work?"

"What? Um... no."

"Good. PR will start sorting that out tomorrow with some coaching. Congratulations again, it's well deserved. Ibuka will see you out."

"Thank you, Prime Minister. Kiyomi-san."

"Goodbye, Tochiko-san."

She opens her mouth like a fish gasping for words instead of air before being herded out of the room. I might have made a terrible mistake in hiring her, but I don't have much to play with here.

"Well, she's an idiot," Kiyomi says at last.

"Yes. PR have got their work cut out with her tomorrow."

"Kira would like to say goodnight," Akane tells us, poking her head around the door. She holds Kira in her arms and brings him over to us, even though he looks asleep already and won't remember any of this in the future.

"Goodnight, Kira. Goodnight!" Kiyomi says to him, waving his hand up and down in the air. unsurprisingly, he starts screaming and Kiyomi and I sit back in our chairs in repulsion. "Ooooh, someone's in good voice this evening. Bye! Thank you, Akane, that'll be all."

As soon as Akane and Kira have gone, we revert back to our silent, slightly injured presence in each other's company until I pick out a cigarette and start looking over my diary for tomorrow, which starts Kiyomi off. "I thought that we could go to the country for the weekend, Light. I bought a tweed suit and I have nowhere to wear it. They say the weather will be awful, so I thought that would work out perfectly. Oh, I wish that you wouldn't smoke. It'll ruin your teeth. Not to mention your skin. And the furnishings."

"I'll have to smoke a lot more to have an effect on any of those things."

"There's a line between confidence and arrogance, and you're heading towards arrogance. Give it here," she tells me. She smokes it. She coughs. She hands it back to me. "Urgh. What time will you be finished tonight?"

"I don't know."

"Can I help?"

"No. I need to read these. It's no help to me if you read them instead."

"So, the country on Saturday?"

"I don't think that I can. But you go, by all means."

"Are you still working on your book?"

"I was planning to this weekend."

"Oh. Well, I'll take Kira. Maybe you can join us on Sunday?"
"We'll see."

"Aren't you a bit premature writing a biography at this stage of your career?"

"It's a chronicle."

"A chronicle, then."

"No. It's a standing achievement of what I've accomplished. If I time it right, in three years or so, it should be out in paperback before the next election."

"Oh, good thinking. You're so clever," she says. I look at her, appreciating that she hasn't mentioned my inconstancy for at least ten minutes. In my mind though, I was never constant to her, so her argument was null and void in that respect.

"I don't like that dress," I tell her. She smiles and stands in front of me, so I go back to reading over my diary.

"Should I take it off?"

"And burn it. No, just don't wear it again."

"Light," she whispers.

"No."

"You don't know what I was going to say."

"You've just had a baby. Control yourself."

"We can do other things," she says.

"Sit. Down," I tell her. This results in a moment of silence during which I'm not certain if I'm going to end up being hit or whether she'll do what I say with some grace.

"Your mind is filthy. I like it. I was actually going to say: this trip to China, I'll be going with you, won't I?"

"I think it'd be best if you stay here with Kira."

"We could take him with us."

"I don't need a baby around. No, it'll only be for a few days. I'll take Mikami or L."

"Light..." she starts up again, but her phone rings. She appears to be content to ignore it since she's staring at me so eagerly.

"That's your phone, isn't it? I ask. She sighs and picks it up from the table, walking around with it, talking into it in hushed tones. Then she stops walking and stops talking. She stands there and it's so odd to me that I can't take my eyes off her. When she ends the phonecall, I look back at my diary before she turns towards me.

"Whatever it is, it can wait until tomorrow," I say, but she doesn't answer. After a while, I look up at her, now standing in the same spot but with a hand covering her mouth. What light there is in the room makes her eyes seem so large and liquid and so entirely unlike her that it puts me on edge.

"What's wrong with you?"
"Stephen... Stephen's dead."
Mikami told Kiyomi that L's at the hospital, but that he's ok. I don't know what 'ok' means and I need specifics, but when I phone Mikami back, he doesn't have any. All he knows is that Stephen's dead and L's at the Tōkyōmusashino Hospital. My calls to L's phone go unanswered, and in every second that passes, my vision of L in a hospital bed grows more concrete and detailed and stained with fact, like it has happened and I've seen it with my own eyes. People shaking their heads over his flatline on the monitor and removing their plastic gloves after they pull a bloody sheet over his face. Maybe Stephen went mad and shot him and then himself. He's killed my L. I've thought about L dying in the past so many times and I thought there was something glorious about it, but there's no beautiful ending and freedom from violence ripping him away from me.

And I don't care if he's dead, I'll drag Stephen's body from the hospital and drive over him in my car over and over again until there's nothing left of him. Then... I don't know. I don't know what I'll do then, and it's the uncertainty of the situation and the horror of possibly being completely alone which is why I order my driver to bring my car around immediately. I've always considered myself alone and I was happy that way - I'd do all I could to stay that way. But when L left, I realised that practically from the second he walked into my office for the first time, I haven't been alone, not really. Even when he was abroad, he was still reachable, albeit over a torturous distance. The option of finding him was always there for me, though I thought it was worse than if he was dead at the time. I wished him dead. But if he is dead now, then I can never find him, whether he wants me to or not. And I don't want to know what that's like, to be in that place. I don't want to have something that means more to me than everything else in the world combined and lose it.

When I say that I'm going to the hospital see if L's alright, Kiyomi insists on coming with me, and for some reason she wants Kira to come with us. To comfort her, she says, although I don't see what comfort he could be unless she uses him like a living teddy bear. I don't have the time or patience to argue though, beyond a 'no' which is ignored, and a minute later, we're both in the car with Kira strapped into a baby seat between us. I just want to get to the hospital, I don't care. She gives up on trying to talk to me and gets over Stephen's death quickly enough. That's Kiyomi. Ten minutes before, tears were streaming in black rivers down her face, but now her face is clean and she's reapplying mascara in a pocket mirror. I watch her, stunned by her ability to adjust to things so quickly, when I notice Kira staring at me. I'm probably a unclear blur of a face to him and he must wonder who the hell I am. I can't stand him looking at me, so I turn towards window instead.

There's no record of L's admittance to the hospital. Then I jump the queue again and ask the shocked receptionist where Stephen is, and he is listed, so I aim for the ward he was in. Kiyomi and my guard rush to catch up with me at the elevator, with Kiyomi trying to stop Kira's head from bobbing with her hand as she runs, and my guard shouting after me to stop because he's clearly torn between who to prioritise. He prevents other people who've been waiting from getting into the elevator with us, and the clunking thing is so fucking slow, stopping at floors, that I want to bounce myself off the walls of it.

We're directed to the waiting room when Kiyomi finds a nurse who has seen both Stephen and L, and I almost don't go there. I want to check each room and bed until I find L, but something about these places make you do what people tell you to do. When I open the door, L's facing the window with his hands in his pockets. I've convinced myself so completely that I'll find him in surgery or in a morgue that it takes me a second to believe that he's standing in front of me.

"Why didn't you answer your phone?" I ask angrily, and he turns, pale-faced, looking at me like I'm in a dream he's having. "You scared the shit out of me, you bastard."
Kiyomi arrives and pushes past me, leaning Kira's head against her shoulder so she can put her free hand on L's arm.

"Oh, Lawliet, I'm so sorry. What happened? You look awful, just awful," she tells him. I shouldn't have let her come. L glances between us in confusion which has just been amped up a notch by my wife's hopeless attempt to comfort him. She's confused by his confusion and looks to me as well.

"Light, what should we do?"

"We should stop telling him that he looks awful for a start."

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that, I just can't believe it. What happened?"

"Stephen died," he says simply. Yes, that's nice, but why are you here and why can't you answer your phone?

"But how?" she asks. "He can't die, he's the healthiest man in the world!"

"Obviously not. He just died, Kiyomi. It's my fault. Mine and your husband's."

What?

"What do you mean? You're upset. Do you want a coffee? I'll get you a coffee. Look after him," she says, handing Kira to me. I don't want him, I have no use for him. The veins throb under the thin skin on the top of his head and I don't like it, so I pass him to my guard who straps him into the baby carrier and leaves him on a chair. I step towards L, but Kiyomi comes back in as the guard is about to follow her. Why can't they all just fuck off?

"Sorry, have you got any money, Light?"


"Do vending machines take cards? Is there an ATM?"

"I don't know. Ask at reception."

"Christ, here," L sighs, and hands her a fistful of change from his wallet.

"Oh. Thanks, Lawliet. I'm sorry. I'll be right back," she says, darting out again and taking the guard with her. We should have two guards here. I'm unattended and could be killed by any passing terrorist.

"Take your time," L says after she leaves, then turns back to the window and mutters to himself: "Thanks, Roraito! Fucking bitch. There's someone who never had to manage on student loans. You're another one."

"And you're another one," I remind him. As I approach him, I see how loose his jacket is around his tense shoulders, and I realise that he's not really ok, he's just able to stand. What the fuck happened to him? "What do you need?"

"Nothing. Evil men need nothing. Apart from change for vending machines, apparently."

"What are you talking about? You're not evil."

"No?"

"No. Sit down," I tell him, and pull him towards the chairs. I need to get him out of here.
"Well, I suppose that you'd know," he says as he sits down.

"I'm not evil either. Are you ok?"

"Why are you asking about me? I'm not dead, Stephen is. Don't you want to know how he died? Don't you care?"

"No. Uh... I mean, yes."

"You answered right the first time," he smiles acerbically. "You don't give a shit."

"He was your friend, L, not mine."

"Yes, we were just friends that shared a house for months. Is that what you want to think?"

"You moved him in with you to keep an eye on him, you said."

"No, that wasn't the reason and I didn't say that. You just don't care about anyone, do you."

I don't know why L's validating whatever they had, because he usually plays it down or denies it completely now, and I hate Stephen even more than I did before, which was quite a lot. I don't care that he's dead. I'm actually thrilled about it, and I shrug, not really knowing what to say to L. Whatever I say, it'll sound hollow because he knows me.

"I'm sorry for him that he died."

"Oh, that's good of you. Fuck's sake."

"I guess that it's sad, but, y'know, these things happen."

"Whoa, stop. No. No. But you... People are dying all around you and you don't bat an eyelid. MPs from your cabinet who you work with every day die and all you do is moan that you've got another funeral to go to."

"It's costing a fortune in suits. Besides, they're bastards, so no, I don't care."

"Yes, but Stephen was not a bastard," he informs me. I tilt my head towards my shoulder and roll my eyes a little, because I'm not convinced that that's true, but it makes L go batshit. "He wasn't! You should just go. You're the last person I want to see right now, apart from, I don't know, your wife? But oooh, you brought her with you in a double whammy! Bra-fucking-vo, Light."

"She just got in the car, I couldn't stop her!" I say defensively, but he scoffs at me and rubs the side of his face with his hand. God, he looks so tired. "What did happen?"

"They say that his heart just stopped. No warning, nothing. It stopped and they couldn't start it again."

"That's the only explanation they've given you? That's not an explanation, that's a fact of death. I'll find a doctor and get some more information," I tell him, but he takes hold of my arm to stop me from standing.

"Light. I just want some proof of life from you. A good man has died and we're left. I know what I am, but sometimes I don't know if you're good or not, you could be both. You didn't have anything to do with this, did you? You didn't want him dead? Even if you did, tell me that you feel as guilty as I do."
"I don't understand."

"You did this. This is your fault and you should feel guilty."

"What are you saying? How could I make him have a heart attack?"

"Because you always seem to get your way. They don't know what the cause was. Is it just me or does this remind you of Wedy?"

"Not this again."

"Yes, this again."

"You think that I had him killed? Oh my God," I exhale as I stand up and walk a few steps away. It feels like he's taken all the oxygen from the room and replaced it with a crushing, dreamlike, stoned atmosphere. "That shit only happens in spy novels, L. What reason would I have to kill him?"

"He meant something to me. You knew that and you ran right over him to get to me like he wasn't even there."

"I never did anything to him."

"We were happy before you muscled your way back in. Why couldn't you have just left us alone!?" he shouts, and my immediate reaction is to walk towards the door. "That's right. Run away."

"I'm not running away. Look, you're upset, I get that. That's fine, but don't blame me for every bad thing that happens. It's raining; it's Light's fault. There's a bombing in the Middle East; it's Light's fault. Stephen died of natural causes; it's Light's fault. Listen to yourself."

"Funny. You seem to know more than the doctors. They haven't said that it was from natural causes."

"A heart attack is a natural cause," I remind him, but he doesn't answer, he just puts his head in his hands. "I don't know, L. Maybe it was the curse. Let's sacrifice a fucking goat or a chicken or something to appease the gods."

"Has anyone else noticed that the curse has done nothing but benefit you and just you? Did you get bored of boning your way to the top? Killing people is so much quicker and easier and more effective, isn't it."

"God, L!"

"I'm just saying that every person who was in your way or has annoyed you is dead. Every one."

"You don't seriously think that the curse is real?" I ask, and in the silence which follows, the idea runs through my mind. I know what he's thinking. "You think that I'm the curse."

"No, I... I don't know. I don't know anymore."

"L, look at me. You're a logical man. I can't magic heart attacks in people - no one can - and even if I could, believe me, I can think of better people to kill than Stephen," I say. No reaction. Because his face is still half-covered by his hands, I kneel in front of him to look up into his face and take a softer approach. "You must have liked him a bit, so I wouldn't do that to you. I wouldn't kill anyone."

"Yes, you would."
"Ok. Tell me how I did it. How did I kill him?"

"I just know that it's your fault."

"This is ridiculous," I laugh as I stand up again. He's determined to blame me and there's nothing I can do about it now apart from wait for him to realise what a prick he's being.

"I've been thinking about it since I heard," he says, sitting back calmly in his chair. "They told me, and the first thing that I thought of was you. Your face. And I realised that you're to blame. It's ok though, I understand. To be with you means that people die. Oh, the drama."

"No it doesn't!"

"I can't be happy with you. We can't be happy. It's just not supposed to happen, is it?"

We're both swamped by the despondency of what he's saying. I'm going to tell him that we're leaving. He just needs to go to sleep and think about this rationally in the morning, and I'll make him see it rationally if it kills him. Maybe he needs a hug or something? I have no idea what to do in this situation, mostly because I don't understand why he's like this, and there's something radioactive about him right now. To me, Stephen dying is no different from Jeevas dying, and I liked Jeevas a lot more in comparison. Yeah, L might have fucked him a few times but who hasn't he fucked? I've slept with people and they've died but I don't cry about it and blame L. It's just a 'Really? What a shock!' moment, and then I go mad and eat a rice biscuit.

I'm going to risk it and hug him, but before I can, Kiyomi returns carrying a cup of coffee and a stuffed toy for L. What the fuck is she thinking of? She's getting worse every day. Oh. Thankfully, the stuffed toy must be for Kira, because she's put it on the chair next to him. Trust Kiyomi to find a shopping opportunity in a fucking hospital of all places.

"I'm sorry but it's that bad kind of coffee," she says, handing L the cup. "Now, tell me what happened. Hey, are you ok?"

"Kiyomi, I'm staying at L's tonight," I say quickly. Yes, right now, we're going. Goodbye.

"No you are not," L laughs as his phone starts ringing, and he pulls it out of his pocket like he doesn't know what it is. "Hello?... Yeah, I know... No, there's no more news yet. When I hear something, I'll let you know. Who told you?... Oh."

"Light?"

"My, gossip spreads fast, doesn't it? So it was you who phoned the Prime Minister and his wife then? They're here now... Yes, they're very kind... No, there's no point in waking her. Tell her in the morning and tell her, tell her that they don't think that he suffered... Yes, probably. I hope so... That's nice of you to offer, but I've got my car here, I'll be fine. Thanks though... He was thirty-four... I know..."

"Light, are you listening to me?" Kiyomi asks me. I don't know how long she's been trying to get my attention, but short of hitting me in the face with Kira and dancing an Irish jig on my stomach, she hasn't got much hope.

"Sorry. What did you say?"

"I said that you staying with Lawliet is a good idea."

"Hold on a minute, Mikami," L says. "I said, no. You are not staying with me."
"Just for tonight and we'll see how you are tomorrow," I tell him.

"Yes, listen to Light," Kiyomi says. "You can't be alone; you need your friends. He's very good at times like this and he makes a lovely cup of tea."

"If I'm left alone with your husband, one of us will die," he tells her before he sips his coffee, shocking her like a trailer tagline for a horror film. "Urgh, you weren't wrong about this coffee."

"Oh God. I'll... I'll get a doctor," she gasps, and runs outside again. It has no effect on L or myself.

"Sorry, Mikami, what were you saying?" he says into the phone after another swig of coffee. It's fascinating how revived he is by some godawful coffee. "Oh, that was nothing. People are fussing... The Prime Minister, yes. Ever thoughtful. What a catch he was for Kiyomi. Right, I have to go now. I'll see you at work... What? Well, you could drop off some crystal meth for me... No, I'm not serious... No, I'm not suicidal. I told you, I'm fine. I just... I need to get out of this fucking country... I can't do that. Taking time off isn't something I do... Christ, I hadn't thought of that... No, I've got their number. Thanks."

He ends the call and stares at the phone. The coffee hit has apparently left as fast as it came. "Shit."

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Mikami just reminded me that Stephen has a family."

"I'll call them."

"Yes, I'm sure they'd love to be told that their son is dead by an stranger with a thick Japanese accent. They'll get a lot out of that. And you're hardly sympathetic at the best of times. Remember on your last campaign when you worked on the phones for a suicide hotline for an hour and that man hung himself when he spoke to you?"

"He did it the next day, it wasn't my fault. I... maybe you're right," I sigh.

"Yes, I'm right. I'm always right."

"Think about it tomorrow. Or give me their number and I'll get someone at the embassy to let them know."

"No. Maybe the CIA will phone them, but I should call to make sure that they know. That's the right thing to do, isn't it? I should do the right thing."

He looks around the room and notices the baby carrier. Kira hasn't made a sound this entire time. I wonder if Kiyomi swapped him for a realistic doll because it'd be less trouble.

"God, what's that? Kiyomi's handbag?" L asks, standing up to investigate. I see Kira's eyes attempt to focus on L as he approaches, and neither of them look very impressed with what they see.

"That's Kira," I say.

"Fuck, he's ugly, Light. He looks like a turnip." I'm so glad that Kiyomi isn't here to hear him say that. He closes in on Kira and peers at him. "You look nothing like your father," he says to him. "Look at him, Kira. He's beautiful and you're nothing. No use to anyone until you start paying your taxes. I feel so sorry for you."

"He can't understand you."
"No, he can't, but I wish that he could," he says. "I'm going to murder your father, Kira. And if you could understand, you'd thank me. He'll be dead before you have any memories of him."

"Are you?" I ask, and he looks at me instead of Kira.

"What? Am I going to kill you? I should, but I can't. You'd like me to, wouldn't you."

"If anyone was to kill me, I'd want it to be you. I'd want your face to be the last thing I see." I mean it too, I think. Maybe not, but I bet that Stephen never said anything like that to him, and that is as romantic as I fucking get. Anyway, it seems to have the desired effect on him because his face has gone a much healthier colour.

"I thought the same about you once, but then you did try to kill me and I didn't want to die. Maybe it's because you think that I'm the only person who's worthy enough to kill you, but if it came down to it, you wouldn't want to die either. You'd kick and scream like the little bitch that you are," he says. Oh. I'll have to try harder. Kira starts crying and I mourn the loss of the cabbage patch kid I've had for the last hour. Both L and I take a step away from him and the noise, but L talks to him, and bizarrely, he shuts up. "Oh, Did you hear that, Kira? Shame you can't understand that, because that sums up exactly what's wrong with your father and why you're going to turn into a complete fuck up, just like him. God, but you are ugly. Are you sure that he's your father?"

"Stop talking to him now," I sigh. I'm tired of his crap. I have no idea why I'm so happy that he's not dead like Stephen.

"Why, is it upsetting you?"

"No."

"It should. There's something very wrong with you, Light. You should love him. You should be willing to throw yourself in front of a volley of bullets for him and an out of control race horse and a train and some pillaging Vikings, but you wouldn't. You'd use him as a shield instead. Life is so cruel to such little things, and it only gets worse. Doesn't it depress you?"

"No."

"I can almost see you building walls around yourself, you shit. I thought that you felt guilty for bringing him into this. Was it just lack of sleep that made you say that?" he asks, but I don't have time to answer, even if I could be bothered to. A doctor comes in with Kiyomi - a sort of efficient but fundamentally inept doctor with interpersonal handicaps. He looks like B, in that he looks like the sort of doctor who has a syringe full of weedkiller in his coat pocket.

"Right, are we ok here?" he says without looking at any of us. He looks very bored until he sees me and realises who he's in the room with. "Oh!"

"Yeah, we're ok," I tell him. "Sorry for bothering you. We're taking him home."

"Prime Minister! It's so nice to meet you. I saw you once when you were visiting your wife in the clinic but I never thought that I'd actually speak to you. I wonder if you have a moment? I have some reservations about your changes to the health service."

L immediately walks out of the room and I won't be far behind. I incline my head towards Kira's carrier so the guard remembers to take him back to the Kantei, because I can't trust Kiyomi to remember.

"Write a letter to my office and I'll be sure to read it and reply. And contact the Health department."
Tell them that you spoke to me," I tell the idiot with a doctorate, who unwisely perseveres.

"It won't take a moment."

"I'm sorry, but a friend of ours has just died," I hear Kiyomi tell him as I follow L. He was no friend of mine.

"I'll get you a drink," I say, and drop L's car keys heavily into the bowl. We didn't speak in the car and I was surprised that he gave up his keys to me, considering that he said that he didn't want me around at all, but I suppose that he couldn't be arsed to drive himself. I asked him one thing in the car and he didn't answer. He mustn't have heard me and I hate repeating myself, so I left it at that and L played one miserable dirge after another on the stereo, like he had a prepared CD for the death of a CIA agent who made a reasonable lasagne and fucked him a few times. He doesn't seem to have heard me now and just walks straight towards his bedroom, and for some reason I follow him. I want some acknowledgement that I'm trying to help and he knows it and he's thankful for my time and effort. I'm trying, and maybe he'll realise that blaming me is out of fucking order. I want a thank you. I want him to say something. Every moment of silence from him worries me, like he's putting his plans in order for a cataclysmic backlash. "L, do you want a drink?" I ask him, but he stands with his back to me, not moving.

"Jesus Christ," he breathes out, his arms hanging at his sides. I walk beside him and see that he's staring at a shirt on the bed. It must have been left there by Stephen, I guessing. I remember that L mentioned that he was coming over at some point, unless L's taken to wearing it. I push out accusations from my mind, like, why had Stephen left his shirt on the bed like that.

"He was here? Did he die here? L, were you with him?"

"No. We had an argument, I told you in a text message, and I... well, I threw him out," he says with difficulty. He swallows to force back emotion or something, and I do not fucking understand him!

"I didn't get the message, I changed my phone number. Why was he here? When was he here?"

"He was here to get his things, Light, what do you think? I told you, remember? He must have got here around eight and he didn't call first, so I was angry. Why? Do you think that it was my fault?"

"No. No, it would have happened anyway."

"We had a fight and he died."

"L, it wasn't your fault. Get that out of your head."

"I don't know where he died. My number was his emergency contact. We had a fight and the next thing I knew, I got a call from the hospital saying that he'd collapsed. I don't know, do you think that he was dead then, when they called me? They never tell you over the phone, do they? They always make it sound like less than it is. I wonder if..."

He stops talking and just gazes at the shirt. I walk forward and grab it from the bed angrily, like a rag in my hand, and put it in a drawer out of sight, but I can tell that L can still see it in his mind and he probably always will. When I turn, he's still staring at the spot where it was and he starts to choke, like some water has slipped into his lungs. My stomach twists with panic - it must be panic – and he breathes in suddenly like he really is drowning.

"Don't do that," I say, rushing towards him, and he holds me like he might fall apart if he doesn't. My shoulder feels damp through my shirt as he cries silently into it for minutes on end, and I really, really
don't understand why this has hit him so hard. Death always makes him act strangely, even if he hated the person, but I don't understand this at all. I'm surprised that I don't try to stop him or remove myself away from this situation and that I'm content and almost grateful for being allowed to do this. Eventually his back stops lurching up and down under my hand as he calms down.

"I know that it doesn't make sense to blame you," he says. His voice is thick and his fingers dig into my shoulders. I'm so sorry, but I just want my old L to come back, because he wouldn't cry. I never thought... I thought that he'd be back to normal in the morning, but I can't see that happening now.

"It's ok, I'm used to it. It comes with the job."

"But I shouldn't blame you. You're not the PM to me."

"I know. You're just upset, L. It's shock."

"How could you have done it anyway?" he whispers, pulling away to screw the heel of his hand to his eye. "You wouldn't take a risk like that for me."

Oh, no, he's wrong. He doesn't realise what risks I've taken for him. Even now, he doesn't know how much he means to me, and it makes me clasp my hand to the back of his head when he pushes his hair from his face. Funny how emotions like this make people so self-conscious and ashamed. I can understand this and I'm sorry that he's ashamed, but I'm glad that I'm here.

"I would take a risk for you."

"Don't."

"No. I have taken risks for you, and I will keep on taking risks for you until I die," I say. He squeezes his eyes together, as if trying to block out my words or some thought which he can't kill. Someone else took a risk for him - L let him - and he died for it. "He couldn't have meant anything to you." Please tell me that he didn't mean anything. Tell me that you're tired and shocked, but he didn't mean anything.

"He did. He was starting to."

No, that's not the right answer, I don't like that answer. It can't be true, and I pull away from him to see his eyes. "No. You're lying."

"He's dead but he's in my mind more than he was when he was alive. All the things he said to me. You never knew him, you never saw him, really. I brought him into this and he died because of me."

"No."

"Now you're lying," he smiles, then grasps me and holds me so tightly that I can't take anything but shallow breaths while I feel his own chest expand and heave against me, but I don't care. I kiss his shoulder through his shirt and hate Stephen. I hate him, hate him, hate, hate... fuck!

And I kiss L to reclaim him, to get Stephen out of his mind, to celebrate his death - I don't know, maybe all of those things. I kiss him because he's slender, sexless, childlike and weak to me now, and I feel like I don't know him. I've never seen a man cry, let alone L. Crying is only meant for women and children. I can't imagine doing anything but this to him now, and even this much seems like a transgression and a prelude to something which people get arrested for. But he kisses me back suddenly with a vehemency. His teeth knock against mine, his lips are crushing and slippy from my innocent affection as he forces his tongue into my mouth, skirting my teeth, and he digs his fingers into my back like he's trying to skewer down to the bones of me. My back stiffens from the thrill of
my underestimation of him. It's a primitive need in him, and now I think that he might see it as a road to forgetfulness for a time. Thoughts are pushed out of the way for a blood-filled, vital, growling instinct. It's a terrible thing, but we'll play this out until the end. He'll be astride me just when I think that control is mine, and he'll exhaust me because he wants to mar me, because it's all lies.

We're both awake. The alarm went off ten minutes ago, and since then, I've been staring at the ceiling and L's been staring at me. I wonder how long I can stand his gaze, but it turns out that I can out of obstinacy and reluctance to let him see that it's bothering me. His eyes are judging arrows. I don't know what to say to him to break the silence, and think that it'd be better if I didn't say anything, so the silence drags on until I check to see if L is still staring at me. He is.

"If you could change one thing you've done in your life, what would it be?" he asks me. It's such a childish question that I smile at him, but he doesn't smile back. He's asking me so he can compare my answer with his own and judge our individual worth upon his findings. Are we decent people? Probably not. I have no regrets.

One of his elbows is crooked under his head so that his hand hangs above him like a parasol. He's all sharp angles and long limbs and an imperfectly perfect equation of the mind, and I love him more than anything in the world.

"Nothing," I answer.

"Not one thing?"

"I can't think of anything. I think everything happens for a reason, and things have worked out ok. Maybe that I could have made more impact on crime rates and... ha."

"What?"

"I wanted a suit a few years ago but I didn't get around to buying it."

"Couldn't you have just gone in and bought one?"

"Off the rack? Have you learned nothing?" I laugh at him, and he's still staring up at me, completely undecipherable to me now. He doesn't have any comment, no sarcasm, no ridicule, so I blink and look back at the ceiling. "It might work for you some of the time, but I like to have things tailored. I might still get one, one day. But in a way, I think it's one thing I want to keep as an aspiration. What about you?"

"Oh, there are a few things," he whispers. "Absent mother, distant father. Maybe I could have made more effort with them. B. You."

"Me?"

"Hmmm... And Stephen isn't the first person in my life to die when he shouldn't have, although he might have been the first who genuinely cared for me more than he cared about himself. He was the selfless sort. That both feet first sort of person you hear about, but in reality everyone is too scared and self-centred. 'He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again.' All that bollocks."

"I'm sorry, L."

"No you're not. I bet you're laughing inside. I liked that about you. It mesmerised me because I'd never met anyone who gave less of a shit about people and yet cared so much about how you appear
to them. I have some regrets, but above all of them, if I could change just one moment in my life, I wish that I'd never laid eyes on you."

I always guess his mood by the tone of his voice, and going by his soft, tender delivery now, I was not expecting him to say something like that to me. I glare at him for a moment to see that he really means it before sitting up to think without his eyes looking back into mine. I see him turn onto his back and his legs stretch out beside me under the sheets. As if he'd never said anything hurtful at all, he carries on talking in a misty, longing way, like he's drunk on sadness.

"I'm glad that I don't believe in life after death, because I'd hate to think that Stephen is sitting on a cloud somewhere thinking: 'I know, I'll check on L! He must be really cut up about me.' And he finds me in bed with you when he's not even cold and buried. What would he think?"

The elastic of my boxers snaps snugly around my waist, and no, I couldn't care less about what Stephen might think. I don't know, I didn't care when he was breathing and I care even less now. He's dead and he doesn't think anything anymore, so this is pointless.

"At least he knows now, I suppose," L mutters behind me. "He always wanted to know the truth and now he must know. But I am cut up about it, Light. I really am. And I hate you for what you did to him."

"I -"

"Yes, you did," he smiles when he interrupts me. "It's my fault. I should have realised that you'd never be so unselfish. And I'm ok with that now. I've learned my lesson." When he closes his eyes as he presses the side of his face into his pillow, I feel like I've disappeared. "I'm sorry. You'd probably understand, though I never deserved your understanding or anything else you gave me, and you must know that now - how you wasted yourself on me. I never should have let you be anywhere near me."

"What?" I ask, and he opens his eyes slowly.

"Not you. I mean Stephen. I think he's still here."

I'm not going to stay here while he makes that bastard into more than he was. "This is lunacy. I'll get you some coffee," I say.

The silence seems more pronounced now. I couldn't hear it before. I sense every breath he makes, every little electrical spark in him. Maybe it's this room with grey walls, like a box for batteries. Something as faint as the sound of fabric of my trousers gliding over my leg sounds like a waterfall of noise.

"Could you pass me my address book over there?" he asks as I buckle my belt. I look up to see him pointing towards a cupboard with some crap on, including a leather business filofax. Who uses those things nowadays?

"This?" I hold the book up and place it into his waiting hand when he doesn't answer. He flips through the pages of names and numbers and it seems familiar to me. I've seen him do this over so many breakfasts and lunches because he can't stop for one fucking minute. He settles on a page and picks up his phone from the bedside table. I'm quite content to just watch him while he focuses on something so mundane and ignores me. I don't even mind being ignored.

"Now get out," he says, and he looks up at me when I don't move. "I need to phone his parents and I can't do that while you're here. Stay out of my office. I know that you root around there sometimes,
and I don't know what you're looking for but it can fucking stop right now."

"I don't root around your -"

"Just get out."

The next thing I notice is that I'm staring at dried splashes and my distorted reflection on a chrome kettle as it boils in the cold kitchen. I should have put on a shirt, really. Something. This thing really does take a long time when it's being watched, but then it does boil and switches itself off, and I go through the motions of tea-making without thinking. I pause outside L's office for a moment before impulsively sliding the door open. I want to open drawers and read his notes and his work diary and assert myself, but I don't. I just close the door again, I think, or time skips, because then I'm standing outside L's closed bedroom door holding the two cups and listening for the low rumble of his voice and indiscernible words to stop. I don't know how long it takes because time means nothing to me right now. My eyes are fixed on the grain of the wood in front of me and I feel more uncertain and locked out than I have in my life. The steam once rose from the cups, but now it doesn't. The heat on my fingers doesn't burn anymore, not by the time I go back inside, again impulsively, and through a pure flash of anger which sprung up from disjointed, chaotic non-thoughts.

"You're still here? Isn't your wife wondering where you are?" he asks, taking the cup I'm holding. He seems full of repressed agitated movement and he's standing and dressed now, wearing a shirt and jeans I've never seen him wear before. "This is cold," he says at the cup, and it's like a knife to the stomach to me, for some reason. He puts my failure on the bedside table as he walks to the now open wardrobe and just gazes inside it, though there's little to see.

"What did they say?" I ask.

My question knocks him into pulling out two suitcases, opening one and throwing them onto the crumpled bed. "They hadn't been told," he says flatly, placing some trousers into the open suitcase. "Well, if you're staying, you should help me deal with this."

"L."

"Can't you clean up your own mess? Do I have to do everything for you? Even this?" he hisses at me, all raging anger and still moving to and from the wardrobe, dumping clothes on and around the suitcases. Yes, I'm in the same room as a madman.

"I don't think that you should do this now," I say.

"Don't you? Well, I can't register the death because it's been passed onto the coroner, so what do you suggest that I do today?"

"Why can't you register the death?"

"Because they can't explain how he died, you fucking idiot! He shouldn't have died, so they're going to slice him up to find out why. God, it's amazing that you can still be so clueless at the age you are."

"They told you that he'd have to have an autopsy?"

"It's how things work, Light. So I have to wait for them to find a cause of death before I can do anything, apart from tell the US consul. I had to tell his parents that; that their son is dead and there's no reason for it, and that he's going to be chopped up and weighed up in pieces until they find out why. And you know, I don't think that they'll find a reason, do you? They didn't with Wedy, did they. Or most of those other people whose funerals you've been to. Of course, you wouldn't know about autopsies, because your life has been a bed of roses since the day you were born. I really
worry about how you'll cope when something bad does actually happen to you. My guess is that you'll crack up completely and that'll be the end of you. But then, you don't care about anyone, so death is just an excuse for another fucking suit."

"That's not fair, L."

"What the fuck is fair? There is no fairness," he says, and goes back to transferring clothes and shoes from the wardrobe to the bed until it starts to look like a garage sale.

"But why do you have to do all this? Why do you have to do everything?"

"Because I can. Because otherwise his family would have to come over here to do all this. They still might have to, but I will try to avoid it because I don't think that's very fair, do you? Since you're talking about fairness."

"Can't the CIA deal with it?"

"No. I don't want them to deal with anything, they can fuck off. I'll deal with it. It's what I do."

"You arrange autopsies and funerals?"

"Shut your fucking mouth!" he shouts, and every word is through deep, quick and shuddering breaths. "I am so sick of you. It makes me sick just looking at you. You know nothing and you don't want to help, even if you could. You can't understand why I might feel really shit about this, because Stephen shouldn't have died, Light!"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't! ... Don't say that, please," he says, forcing himself to calm down abruptly. "I don't want to have to hit you. He shouldn't have died, you're not sorry, you shouldn't have turned up last night and you shouldn't be here now, and I hate you for it."

"I didn't want you to be alone."

"I wouldn't have been. I would have had B, but you fucked that up too."

"L, please. Please just sit down for a minute and have something to eat."

"Oh, and drink my cold tea?"

"I'll make you another one." Yes, I can do that.

"No, I think that you should help me do this," he says, striding towards me and grabbing my arm so roughly that my tea sloshes on his hand and floor. He seems to blame me for that too, judging by the annoyed sound he makes. Then he drags me to the wardrobe, practically pushing me inside. "There. Look at that. Look at his things, Light."

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be looking at. All I can see are L's suits on on one side of the gap he's made on the rail, but he pulls out a suit on its hanger.

"This is the suit he wore to his sister's wedding and his interview with the CIA. He couldn't get rid of it. He said that it was lucky." The cup is taken out of my hand and he places the suit over my arm. I clench my fist from the cheap feel of it which reeks of Stephen. "And this is the tie he wore when I first met him. Is it synthetic?"

"What do you expect me to do with these?" I ask.
"I want you to fold them and put them in that suitcase," he tells me angrily, but I don't move, so he carries on: "This is his hockey shirt. He never fucking wore it. He didn't even like hockey. Who likes hockey, really? Oh, a pair of jeans! How very common place. What was he thinking? You wouldn't be seen dead in these, would you. No, not you."

"Is this helping you at all, because I get it, ok? I don't need a story for everything."

"I think that you do. You see, this was a person, Light, and these are his things. They're all that's left of a life. He wasn't just some walking piece of meat that annoyed you, he was a good person and he had stories, just like you. He had a life, just like you, and he was important."

"I know."

"Do you? I don't think that you see others as being people. You see them as obstacles. Just things that can be shifted around or disposed of altogether unless they do exactly what you want, which is to keep out of your fucking way. I could have had him and no complications, no politics, no hiding, no wives and children, but I'm stuck with you. And I have to send these things back to his family in a box, like he's in a box. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes. He's dead, but I'm not sorry that he's dead. I'm sorry for you that he's dead, because you're like this, but I didn't like him, no, and just because he's dead now will not make me like him. What kind of hypocrite would that make me?"

"You are a hypocrite. You're a spineless, self-absorbed hypocrite."

I can only stare at him, trying to understand this hatred towards me. He can't even look at me. He was a little like this when his father died, and I should have known that he'd take it out on me. It's because I'm here, I know, and I shouldn't take it personally, but I am. When his father died though, L just got drunk and volatile. He's not drunk now. I don't know why he's so upset over a man he discarded because he chose me instead. But I've had enough. I want to drop these clothes on the floor, but I don't know what he'd do if I did that, so I put them on the bed.

"Please accept my condolences," I say, putting my shirt on quickly.

"You can take your snide condolences and stuff them down your throat. You didn't know him. You didn't want to. You hated him as soon as you saw him and you wouldn't have thought twice about him if he wasn't with me. Because of that, you did this. Because he was in your way."

"I'm going." I tell him, and pick up my own jacket from the floor where L must have thrown it to make way for all this shit on the bed and the chair. "Cry wank over this on your own."

"You're a killer," he mumbles, looking at a horrible plaid shirt. Maybe he didn't want me to hear it, but I did.

"You don't know what you're saying. I'll check on you later."

"I can hardly wait."

"L?" I ask, stopped by an afterthought. "L, should I be worried?"

"Do you think that I'm going to kill myself? So I could be yet another person who died because of you?"

"Nobody... I don't know. I wouldn't put it past you. Just to spite me, you would."
"If my will to do what's right was stronger than the fuck I don't give, I would. All these deaths, they were because of you. You did all of this. You won't admit to it and I can't prove it, but it doesn't change the fact that the blame lies with you."

"Stop this."

"After today, I never want to see your face again."

"For fuck's sake, L!"

"Why did you kill him? Don't you feel sorry? Don't you feel anything at all? Because he died because of you. You're the curse."

"He's dead, L. Get the fuck over it. You didn't love him then, so don't start with all this shit now. He meant nothing to you."

"You have no idea what I thought of him."

"What? You suddenly love him? It takes this much to make you realise that you loved him? Shit, you're hard work. If that's what someone has to do to get something from you then God help us. I've seen this before with people. They manage to live perfectly well and happily without talking or seeing someone, but as soon as that someone dies then it's the end of the world."

"The last thing I said to him was 'Fuck off,'" he says, like it's poignant. Well, that's hilarious.

"So? He did. He fucked off permanently."

Because I was looking out of the window as I said it, I almost think that I've been hit in the face by some shrapnel from a bomb blast until I realise that L has punched me. I stagger backwards, but within seconds, I rush towards him, pushing him back. His legs hit the bedside table so that the lamp and junk on there sway and fall onto the floor. My arm is raised to hit him but I stop because his eyes are so wide and judgemental. And he's laughing.

"Oh, do it. Please do it. It's what you're really good at - being cruel. It's your talent, Light. Leave your fucking mark and do it well. Let everyone know that you've been here, as if this isn't enough. Leave me with nothing."

I went into work the same day, just late. I make a concerned, sympathetic but breezy query every day to find out if he had turned up for work, and he always had, so I contented myself with that and wondered why I cared in the first place. But every day, I still cared. Kiyomi is snivelling next to me when I see him at Stephen's memorial. I don't think she that notices me leave her side. I don't think that anyone does.

I smell damp stone and even damper wood from the walls and floors. This place should be torn down but it's so very sacred that we must risk death and ignore its problems. I see him walking in his funeral best, too well put together to be unaffected. He is one of the grieving here, I realise, and an immature feeling of wonderment, anger and sadness mix in me as I follow him. He sees me, I know. He looks over his shoulder when I call him, but he rounds a corner and I lose sight of him. There's no sign of recognition and none of the hatred I last saw on his face before I left. He just looks like someone had shouted to a friend whose name they share.

When I turn the corner, almost immediately I'm thrown against the wall by my lapels and hear their starched interfacing quietly crunch within his white-knuckled hands. The wall is cool through my suit and I feel hazily angry for him treating me this way when I have nothing but good feeling and a
small amount of empathy for him. He doesn't handle death well when it's on his doorstep. I can forgive a little unreasonable shit, but it's been nearly two weeks since that night at the hospital, Stephen's been shipped off back to Virginia in the cargo area of a jet liner, and we're at his memorial service. I want L to know that I came here only for him. On the face of it, I came for Kiyomi, but he should know that I came for him. I'm a buttress of fucking support and he's such an ungrateful bastard.

His lips spasm into a dangerous snarl. "Why are you here?"

"Because I'm so grief stricken, L. I'm desolate and life has no meaning anymore. Get the fuck..." I push his hands away from me and try to straighten the damage. "I wouldn't choose to be here," I admit, and he walks away like I'm not worth his time. "L, you're going to feel really stupid soon, and when you do, call me."

Miraculously, that stops him, and he looks down at the floor with his back to me. "I do feel stupid. That's your fault too."

"Look, I'm sorry that you're as upset as you are, but Stephen dying is nothing to do with us. It didn't happen because of us. He could have been anywhere in the world and it would have happened. These things fucking happen."

"To thirty-four-year-old's? He had a full medical a few months ago and he was in perfect health. He had a calcium something or other and his heart was fine, but he has a heart attack anyway?"

"The doctor obviously missed something."

"Ha! Just fuck off, Light."

And I do, like B did, like Stephen did. All of us did what L wanted us to do, at a loss at what to do instead. Am I supposed to hang around at a respectful distance and accept his abuse when he catches sight of me? Maybe I am supposed to, considering that he's decided to be a widower, but I won't put myself through that. He wouldn't appreciate it, anyway. I encourage Touta to ask him to the party my parents are holding in two weeks to celebrate (or show off) the fact that Sayu is pregnant. It only took two years and shitloads of IVF which I paid for before we all gave it up as a lost cause. But L refused because he's too busy, apparently. I take that as a slight against me.

So more days pass, and for a time I wonder whether it's all for the best. We'll just drift away from each other like this, right when we're on the cusp of fucking up my life for the sake of a pipe dream. I begin to think that I can accept the U-turn and be thankful for this merciful parting. I even slept with Kiyomi as a statement of intent at altering my life. Bland. I don't know what comfort is, but I thought that I'd give it a shot. I don't even know if I require it, but without L, I find life easy. It was a irreparable fissure. Truth be told, I've done more of use lately than I have over the last few months, and that's because L isn't there. It's very easy to do, because my role is well established and simple in being Prime Minister, husband, father, son, brother, friend. There's not a cloud in sight and I want to watch everyone die around me and litter the ground. I'll leave them there to rot and step over their bodies. They're already dead.

"The most integral thing is to be detail orientated with a view of its relevance to the bigger picture. Really, being a visionary is what will bring success."

"That's excellent advice, Prime Minister. I feel quite honoured."

"You're welcome, Sasaki. You should go away and think about it for a while." Lumbering, stupid,
"tax avoiding twat."

"I will. I will. And, Prime Minster, how are you feeling?"

"Uh... very well, thank you. And you?"

"Good. That's really wonderful, I'm very pleased to hear it. It's just..." he says, leaning towards me suddenly to speak to me in hushed tones. "I heard about your... y'know. And I just wanted to tell you that it's ok. I understand that all you need is support, and we're here to support you."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know."

"No, I really don't."

"Your... depression," he whispers. My what?

"Sasaki, I'm not depressed."

"I know, I know. What is depression really? It's just a chemical imbalance. You have a very high-stress job, and with a new baby too... oooh. I don't think that any of us could cope with it as well as you. You're a inspiration. I mean, your hair's great and everything."

"Yes, but I don't have a chemical imbalance. Who told you that?" I ask. I know the answer. Stress, new baby - he's just accepted and used L's script more or less word for word and I'm going to kick shit all over the building right now. "It doesn't matter."

"You're telling people that I'm depressed!?! I ask, barging into his office. L and Mihael both look up at me, and I swear that an almost imperceptible grin forms on L's face.

"Of course not." Fucking liar!

"You're spreading rumours about me? Sasaki has just told me that I have a chemical imbalance but they're all there for me. Explain that."

"Mihael, could you get the Prime Minister a coffee, please? And put some arsenic in it," he says, and looks back down at his desk like nothing unusual has happened at all. Mihael stands and is on his way out the door. I feel his eyes weighing me up and writing me off as a headcase who accuses his beloved boss of bizarre things in the afternoon.

"I don't want coffee, just get the fuck out," I tell Mihael as he leaves, and he scowls at me in reply. He's wearing fucking black nail polish at work! Does he think that he's Marilyn Manson moonlighting in the government quarter? I'll have him suspended if I can be bothered to remember later.

"How dare you speak to my staff like that, you cunt," L says as Mihael closes the door.

"I told you that I was not going out that way, L. I'm not doing it."

"You didn't say that."

"I said it was a terrible idea and that I wasn't for it. Or are you doing this because you knew that?"

"You haven't spoken to me for nearly two weeks."
"Errr, yeah! Because when I did at the memorial you told me to fuck off."

"Oh, right. So how long were you going to fuck off for? A couple of months? Couple of years? Or maybe an indefinite time?"

"You could have spoken to me but you made no effort to. You deliberately avoid me, you ignore me and you call me the fucking Prime Minister. What am I supposed to do here?"

"Turning up at the Stephen's memorial with your wife was such a low thing to do."

"I went there for you!"

"You went there to gloat and you know it."

"I didn't, actually, but never mind. So, I was supposed to leave you alone for an undisclosed amount of time and put up with you calling me a murderer when I check up on you?"

"You are a murderer."

"You know what, L? Forget it. Just stop these rumours right now. I told you what I'm going to do."

"I can't let you resign," he mutters into his computer screen, so I walk over and turn his computer off at the wall. The look of outrage on his face is hysterical. "Oh my God, you did not just do that."

"I thought that you were supporting me."

"I am. I'm supporting you, not your job. The stress of your job and the baby, it's all become too much for you. Complete nervous collapse. 'Fuck, why didn't I think of it before?' I thought. So I'm giving you a push."

"Off the top of a very tall building, yes. I'm not having a nervous breakdown and I'm not going to pretend that I am."

"Come on, you're practically there already."

"This is not up for discussion, this is the answer: No. And you're going to backpeddle this all the way to Argentina and back."

"No, I refuse. Anyway, it's done. By tomorrow, everyone in the building will be sending you get well cards. Here."

He holds out a letter for me to read, but won't let me take it, so I have to read it like it's on a noticeboard instead. Turns out that it's a letter from some psychiatrist who says that I'm suffering from severe situational anxiety and depression, and at his insistence, I'm unable to work while I'm under medical care. What the fuck is this? I try to take the letter, because it causes me great anxiety in itself, but L folds it and puts it back in his pocket.

"I've never even met him," I say.

"It wasn't necessary for you to meet him."

"Give me that."

"No."

"L, give me that fucking letter!"
He refuses again, so I end up trying to grapple it from him.

"You... shit!" he exclam3s in the vocal equivalent of a basset hound's bark as he unbalances and I pin him on the floor while the wheels of the overturned chair spin near his head. I suspect that this is going to have to get really nasty, but he obviously realises that I've bested him, because he's not putting up much of a fight. His big eyes just stare at me, finding this funny or a turn on, and he pulls the letter from his pocket.

"Ok, you can have it. It's only a copy, anyway," he grumbles smugly, and offers it to me. After snatching it from his fingers and walking to the window, leaving him lying on the floor, I have to read it again and try to figure out all the malpractice laws this contravenes. This could have murdered me. I have to keep looking at the letter to believe that a qualified psychiatrist has actually been convinced by L to write a note like this for the Prime Minister, let alone a man he's never met.

"God!" I breathe out. "Has anyone seen this? What were you going to do with it?"

"No one's seen it yet. I was going to send it to HR, the CO and the press. I was going to send it to whoever would read it," he says. Out of the corner of my eye I can see him prop himself up, but I can't bear to look at him.

"I could have you sacked for this," I tell him, and he laughs behind me. "No, I mean it. Get rid of this. You have to about-face the hell out of what you've told people, because I don't want to hear this mentioned again by anyone. Understand?"

"Come home with me now."

"No. You're having a fucking laugh!"

"I don't want to talk, I just want you there. I'll meet you anywhere."

"Well, I don't want to be near you. Clean this shit up or it's over. I'll give you one day."

"Light, I'm -" but I shut the door behind me before I let him finish.
think that you weren't going to come back tonight."

"I have to be here, don't I."

"Light," she sighs, shaking her head. "Light, I'm sorry. I thought that we were ok, what happened? What have I done wrong?"

God, you have sex one time in months and apparently you're the happiest couple in the world. I shouldn't be surprised that she's so stupid with things like this. She's just a woman, after all.

"Nothing."

"We haven't really talked since before Kira was born."

"We've talked."

"No, we haven't. Are you having an affair or were you just saying that?"

"You decided that I was and I don't like to argue," I say, shrugging my shoulders and looking anywhere apart from at her.

"I didn't decide anything. Well, if you are... if you have been, I forgive you," she tells me. Oh, how condescending of her. Somehow, this reminds me of the time when she handed me her empty water bottle to put in the bin which was right next to her. I rub my nose, but she was obviously expecting a different reaction. Her dressing gown is wasted on me and she knows it. "Is it serious? You wouldn't let it come between us, would you?"

"Who do you think that I'm having an affair with, Kiyomi?"

"I don't know... I miss you, Light. I'm all alone here. I have no one to talk to."

I nod my head and close my eyes. I can't avoid her without an argument, and she's wearing slippers with sharp heels. "Ok. I get it. You better come in then, before you catch pneumonia in that thing," I say, opening my door.

"What do you get?"

"Kiyomi, do you want a fuck or not? I have to be at the office by seven."

To emphasise how restrictive my schedule is and how I'd much rather be asleep, I switch on the light in my room and see that my dry cleaned suits have been returned to me. There they are, lying on my bed. My heart swells. And when I turn back to Kiyomi, she looks stunned, perhaps by my phrasing. Perhaps because she imagined this sort of thing to not be spoken of directly, but heralded by chocolates and flowers and me climbing through her bedroom window on a stormy night dressed as a samurai from the Revolution.

"I..." she starts, but pauses self-consciously as a maid walks past, bowing to us apologetically. "I wasn't asking for that. I'm not that desperate. If I was, I'd rather ask anyone else than you. I was voted -"

"Number one on the Mothers I'd Like to Fuck list in Yay! magazine. Yeah, I know. Congratulations, quite an achievement."

"What I'm saying is that I could have my pick of any man."

"I suggest that you should go and pick them then. Goodnight."
"Do you? Do you really want me to do that? Because I will."

"You're the one who makes the decisions. I'm just here."

"Don't make it sound like that. Forget about it," she says, and starts to walk away. That was easier than I had imagined.

"Ok."

"No, wait," she says quietly. I watch her turn around with her eyes staring at my feet. "Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, I want to. With you."

Oh, how the mighty fall. God, I'm positive that that must have killed her. It's quite attractive, really, but she never used to be this way. I also see, through her, what an idiot I've been over L, because I must have acted a lot like this. It's sad, it's wretched, but it's also very clever of her, because even though she doesn't know about L being a bastard who lies and punches and ignores and leaves when he says that he won't and denies me of himself, she must know that I won't treat her like that. I'm a better person now from my stupid suffering with no apparent purpose, and she, of all people, is the one who might benefit from it.

"Do you feel humiliated?" I ask.

"Yes."

"It's not nice, is it. To beg. To feel like you're completely in someone else's hands. That you're nothing."

"No, it's not nice. Why are you making me do it if you know how cruel it is?"

*It's what you're really good at - being cruel. It's your talent, Light.*

"I'm not cruel."

"Why do you treat me like this? What have I done wrong?"

"You've done nothing wrong. You never have."

"The scar's practically healed now, didn't you see? And the doctor said that it would be ok. Are you disgusted by me? I'm still the same, you know. I just did what you wanted me to do."

"I know."

"Then why?! I never would have had Kira if I'd known that you'd be like this!"

"It's not because of Kira. We can't talk in the hallway," I say, and push the door open wider. "Are you coming in?"

"Don't do it because you feel sorry for me. Don't do that to me."

"I wouldn't."

"But you do feel sorry for me. You're only doing this to keep me quiet and make me think that everything's ok when it's not."
"No."

"I thought that you loved me once. I felt bad about it, because I didn't. I didn't love you. I just wanted to be the Prime Minister's wife and I knew that you would be Prime Minister one day."

"Yes, I knew that," I sigh. I'm not surprised. I knew it and I didn't mind, but now, when I feel as used and mistreated as I do, I could have done without hearing it. Why can't I just not care about this shit?

"But I do now," she says.

"You do what?"

"I love you."

No. I don't want to believe it but I know it's true. She sounds like L when he told me that he loved me in my office after he fucked me and fucked me up outside The Blue Note, when he was ashamed of it and he'd rather that he didn't. I don't understand how much feeling people can put into those words, like how they put so much importance into it. And I feel empty, not angry, like when I first realised that L loved me years ago when he was hassling me to have a health check. I don't know what I did to make people love me. I presumed that it was my looks, but maybe not. Her eyes dart up to mine for only a second, embarrassed. I've never seen her be so awkward around me or anyone else. I've destroyed you, my queen. I know what that's like.

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

"You're sorry?"

"I didn't know."

"You... you thought that I didn't care? I do, Light. I do."

She's got it all wrong, but I'm not about to correct her. She thinks that I've been looking for whores because I thought that she didn't love me, when I knew that she didn't and that was perfect as far as I was concerned. But now she does love me and I still don't give a shit, I'm just sorry for her and for the complication. She takes hold of my hand, and for the first time in our history I don't mind her touching me, because it's so strange to find some small solace from an unexpected source when I thought all of that hinged on L. She hangs from my neck when she kisses me because she's so small, and I'd forgotten how easy to crush she'd be, or it never entered my mind to notice her before now in any real way. She was an ornament on a shelf just for show, but now I see her. I turn her over in my hands and admire the fine details: my incestuous twin in all but depth of feeling.

I go inside the room to turn on a lamp and pick up the ironed flat versions of me in their plastic coats from the bed. She follows me inside as far as the doorway, and I watch her over my shoulder, wondering what she's waiting for. My whole life, I've been blackmailed by obligation and what was expected of me, and this is no different. She switches the light off and shuts the door. She never knows or sees the hatred in me for every living thing, especially now. I'm an actor.

In the morning, I sit up suddenly on the edge of the bed, and Kiyomi strokes my back with her featherlight fingers. The sun rises early, and I like the quietness of this time of day. I like the beginning and the end of a day, nothing else. It's the only time I find any beauty in the hours.

A blade of sunlight cuts through a gap in the curtain and across the floor, and I think of how long the light from that nuclear plasma took to reach me. I'm not really looking because there's nothing there
to see, until some movement catches my attention. A shaded sphere rolls towards me through the light, and the apple finally rests, red and polished, between my feet.

I will not see L today.

It's Sayu and Touta's party tonight, held at my parents' house because there's more space, and I'm waiting outside the bathroom for the long pisser inside to finish. I used this bathroom for eighteen years and always ended up waiting for Sayu then - God knows what she was doing in there – and now I'm waiting for someone else. Sometimes I feel like my life is spent waiting.

When I finally am allowed inside my own bathroom, I check the basin to see if they washed their hands, and then take a piss myself. It's moments like this when, like it's replacing the waste that's leaving me, my head fills with completely useless thoughts running through a list in my mind of all the incidental things I must do aside from work. It's then when I see, quite calmly, how pointless my life is. There are too many restrictions and I don't have the power to change anything I want to change. I'm a melancholy person, L says, if I allow myself to think too much. My life is weighed down by essential routine. Piss, shit, shower, get dressed, eat, brush my teeth, floss, mouthwash, go to work, drink 2 litres of water a day, piss it away, eat, brush my teeth, work, exercise, shower, eat, keep up to date with worldwide current affairs, have an opinion, say goodnight to my wife and son, brush my teeth, go to sleep. Right now, I'm washing my hands. The noise from the tap must mask the sound of the door opening, because someone starts kissing the side of my neck and I never heard them come in. The water is still gushing as I watch L in the mirror. He says: "I'm sorry," into my neck and then watches me in the mirror in turn, leaning his face on my shoulder. We make a gorgeous pairing, I think. We watch each other for too long, really.

"How did you get in?" I ask. "I locked the door." I'm knocked into stillness and the anger is instantly killed by shock on the battlefield. He's such a clever man. No one else can shock me just by coming into a room.

"That credit card trick does actually work, you know. Slide and push. It's a five second job. Scary, isn't it."

"It could have been anyone in here."

"Then I would have had some explaining to do, wouldn't I," he smiles. "No, I saw you go in. I was sitting on your parents' bed, actually. I was thinking, I wonder if this is the same bed he was conceived on? It was strange. So I was sitting there with the door wide open. I'm surprised that you didn't notice."

"Well, you can go right out again."

"Now, Light. I broke into a locked room for you and I don't do that for everyone. Only you and locked-in toddlers in distress, and that's never happened. I'm not positive that I would do it if it did happen. I even waited until you'd stopped pissing. Show some appreciation for my effort and respect for you."  

"No."

"I said that I was sorry. How long are you going to be like this?" he mumbles sulkily, pressing his finger along the lifeline of my damp hand. I could ask him the same question. He's been a complete shit since Stephen died. No, before then. He either loves me or hates me and there isn't an in between.
"You will never dictate what I do with my life again and you will not sabotage me," I tell him. But, God, I don't sound like I mean it. I sound so easily won over, it disgusts me.

He leans against the wall, eyes lowered as his fingers drift down my arm and grip my hand again. I don't believe a second of it.

"I think... that we should fuck," he says, raising his eyes unashamedly for the shock factor.

"Now?"

"Problem?" he asks, eyebrows lifting. I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed as I open the medicine cupboard over the sink, so I'm not as ashamed as I'd like to think I am. There's nothing inside but cough medicine and a first aid kit.

"Shit."

"We can do other things," he suggests. Kiyomi said that. Kiyomi says that all the time.

"No."

He sighs at my despondency when faced with a cupboard which is mercifully free from lubricants, considering that it's my parent's cupboard.

"Here, you idiot," he says, reached over my shoulder and handing me some pot of something which I hope isn't Vicks Vaporub. "What do you expect to find in there when Soichiro Yagami is your father? Dildos, butt plugs and lube that smells of strawberries? That'd put you right off. Improvise. It's always penetration with you, isn't it. What would Mummy and Daddy say?"

"But I haven't got any -"

"Well, I'm clean, you're clean, let's just do it."

He walks out of the bathroom, leaving the door open like he owns the place, and I follow him after checking the hallway. By then, he's opened Sayu's old bedroom door and scans the pink and fluffy horror of a room.

"Oh, Light, I love your old bedroom. Those Hideki Ryuuga posters are very decorative."

"It's Sayu's room and you know it."

"No, really?" he laughs. "I thought that he was dead. He's gay as a picnic basket, you know. One of my lawyers had him," he tells me before closing the door. "There's always your parents' room. I know where that one is and there's no Hideki in there. I presume that you didn't have a bedroom and that you just hung upside down from the beams in the attic."

I've had enough of his cocksure fucking smugness and drag him inside my old room, kissing him before the door is even shut. My hands pull at his jacket, and it's less of a kiss than a connection. I don't know what it is, but he's there and that's all that matters to me right now. I'm quieted by his presence somehow, and just want him to stay there and I'll do whatever I have to do to make him stay. But he never stays long. Something happens and someone dies and he disappears for days or weeks or months because of his ludicrous reaction, which is to run away and hide within himself or blame someone, and that someone is usually me.

Suddenly I'm pushed against the door, face first. My cheek is pressed against it like I'm being mugged while he kisses and bites my neck with the familiar blood thirst, and I unnervingly feel
myself become who I was before. I don't care, it doesn't mean anything, it's just something for him and he can take it because I couldn't give a shit. I get what I want and he gets what he wants and somewhere, across some distance, we'll both be happy. I could think about the people downstairs, and maybe they'll start singing 'Happy Birthday' to Sayu and I'll laugh and have to cover my mouth to keep the noise down. The door shakes a little as I'm shoved unceremoniously against it, pummelling the wind out of me in stunted breaths. But with my ear against the door, I'm in the best position to hear anyone outside, and I do hear someone. I hear Sayu laugh with another woman, and a few seconds later, soft footsteps. The door handle turns, but I lock it just in time.

"Light? Are you in there?" she asks through the wood. It's just like old times, although I was always at my desk. I was never doing anything which could be considered wrong by others, apart from maybe my thoughts, but no one could or ever would know what has been in my head. "Light?" her voice rings through the gaps around the doorframe, sliding through the lock and the fibres of the door itself. All the confusion in it, the sadness and longing for a brother who wasn't really there. I tense from L's hands and fingers and it reminds me of other people and other times when I'd hate this. When men and women grabbed at me with fat hands like I was available at a slashed price because of limited stock. My forehead and hair drags against the warmed wood while I close my eyes and sweat while my sister stands outside. Our heads must be nearly level, like twins separated by a wooden wall in a womb of a house. I've been stripped by now. I feel like a badly treated prisoner of war and it makes me laugh, how funny it is. Me in my childhood bedroom about to get fucked against the door while my little sister stands outside, bleating my name. I breathe out a laugh as I struggle vainly, which Sayu must hear because she starts calling me again, but I'm pulled away and marched backwards, and I don't hear Sayu again.

I'd lie on this bed for what must have amounted to weeks as a kid, waiting for something. Now I'm motionless between L's thighs and looking up at his black eyes, his face coloured a pale blue from the dim streetlight outside, because that's all the impression it can make on the indigo dye of twilight. I sling my legs either side of him while his arms hook around my hips and thighs as I stiffen and swell in his mouth. He looks like he's made of glazed porcelain to me, or silk on a human frame, and I reach the tips of my fingers towards him to touch his face. I find him interesting and strange, focusing on enjoying me, or trying to make me enjoy this. And my touch when he doesn't want tenderness must remind him that I'm not a doll, because he looks at me, surprised somehow. He bows his head and sits back on his haunches slowly, misty and defeated in this dark room. I should apologise for not paying attention to him and for not acting correctly, but all I can think of is how he looks now; the crown of his head, the angles of his downcast face and the shard of hair sticking to his temple. I sit up to kiss it, pressing it there and holding onto him like I was thankful for this attempt at carnality. I'm not, but it's what people do, isn't it? I never understood this and I don't think that I ever will now. It means very little to me, but if it takes this to have him there, I'm not repulsed enough by it to care.

Inflamed by this, maybe by anger towards me, he turns me onto my front suddenly and makes me kneel while pushing my head into the bed. My anticipation and lack of power sends shudders through me. I am so fucked up. He strikes me at an angle, and it hurts in an intense, pressured way while he pushes at me in repeated hammerings and slidings of increasing ferocity towards my spine like he's at some kind of weird gym. This is his version of going to the gym, I think, because he's so calm and lazy in his movements normally. I feel the sweat form, run and drip from my jaw like tears, sinking onto the pillow while I accept it, before a divine stab of pain tears through me and makes me rigid. I don't scream - I wouldn't ever, not from pain, but I try to pull myself away, clambering and dragging myself using sheets and the headboard as an anchor. It's useless to try. His hand holds me down and my throat stretches, raised on the angle of rumpled pillows. A mix of fear and possession holds me as he holds me, and it seems to go on forever. I can't escape it, I can only try to track his progress until it's over and wait for the vibration from him, throbbing and lunging. And then it is
over, and all I can hear his laboured breathing and my own filling the silence of the room.

He withdraws from me, gets off the bed, and by the time I turn around to lie sprawled on my back
instead in a daze of the burnout, he’s standing up with his back to me, fastening his trousers. I know
that he feels like being in here is another door of my mind and history being opened to him to
plunder as he takes in my room and use what he finds to fill in the blanks of the collage he has of me.
Just chunks he's collected over years, but what I've allowed him has been cleanly sliced with knives
into a jigsaw. This room is a window to me before money and a career and suits. Me in school
uniforms, waiting, building and sleeping in a library of no content. I stare at his back with heavy
eyes. Each breath still is a ravaging, burning release, and as I watch him, I love everything about him
so much that it overwhelms me. It burns me more than sex burns my lungs.

"I still love you."

He looks back at me over his shoulder and a small smile tightens the skin of his jaw sleekly, like he
only feels that it's polite to acknowledge me.

"Yeah... So, this is your room. Did you bring boys up here?” he asks easily, looking at my bare walls
and bookshelves. His voice is low and totalitarian and doesn't even sound like him. I pause to
recover but I can't hide my shuddering, uneven breathing.

"No."

"Girls?"

"No."

"Well, it's taken you thirty-two years, but you did it,” he says, turning to face me. He looks no
different, only a thin slick of shine on his cheekbones from his exertion while I'm naked, coated in
sweat as greasy and slippery as melted butter. "How do you feel, Light?"

"Ha!” I wheeze out, and the shadows on his face convulse with distaste as he looks at me.

"Didn't you have any posters? Did you take them down?"

"I never had have any. I had a map of the world."

"There's no personality here. No pictures, nothing. It's like a hospital room for a terminally-ill law
student with no friends."

"I guess that's what it was."

"No politics in here. When did that fuck you up the arse?” he asks, obviously not expecting an
answer, because he walks around the room leisurely like it's a museum exhibit. "Is this hoover
supposed to be here?"

"Yeah, it was mine."

"Self-contained and a tidy little boy. And they kept it that way it was after you left. That's interesting.
My father made my room into a guest bedroom after I left. He never had any guests."

"It's a room. I studied and slept here."

"That's not all it is, is it. Not to your parents. This is all they have left of you now. That's why they've
kept it like a shrine to you. I used to fuck in mine. My father had to purge it of every trace of me,” he
"I couldn't do that in my parents' house."

"Light, news for you: you just did."

"Light? Are you up there?" Sayu's voice carries up the stairs.

"I'll be down in a minute," I shout back. "God, it's like I never left." I'm tired by the pestering and being forced to reply. L is stalking around my room, picking up objects which all have a function, because there was never anything in here which didn't have a purpose. I watch him hover over things, picking up what interests him, like a bird of prey picking off small mammals from the ground, then the door handle rocks and we both look at it.

"Light?" Sayu calls, almost begging through the door.

"I'll be there in a minute, I said!"

"Is Kiyomi with you?" she whines. I look at L, who smirks thinly before closing the lid of an empty box in his hands. "Light?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. Sorry," she says weakly, and I hear her pad away.

"What if she finds Kiyomi?" L asks as he pulls a book off the shelf over my desk.

"Then I suppose that I was with someone else, wasn't I," I answer, and stand, picking my clothes up from a messy pile on the floor near the door.

"Can I borrow this?" He's reading one of my old law books. It wasn't required reading but it was recommended. It's like the years roll away and I remember all this useless shit like it's still as important and relevant to my life as it was. I remember where I bought it, I remember reading it in fits and starts, but I don't remember what I read at all.

"You can have it. Why? I thought you knew all about the law."

"I haven't read this one. Lies and the Law," he laughs.

"It could have been written for you. Are you done then?" I ask. I button up my shirt in the mirror and half-watch him open the drawers of my desk behind me. One of them won't open. Naturally, this is the best possible thing he could hope to find. "You should go now."

"What's in here?"

"Nothing," I say. As I wrap and fold my tie around my neck, I see him fumble around my desk and straighten a paperclip before he attacks the lock with it. "You never believe me. The key's on the desk."

"And spoil my fun? I haven't done this since Lawliet the Elder died. I found porn in his desk, like, Victorian porn, it was funny. I don't understand the fuss about women."

"That's because you're so very gay."

He ignores me as he concentrates on breaking into my desk. He wins. "Oh!" he exclaims in surprise as it clicks open. "Oh." There is nothing inside.
"Told you."

"Nothing stuck to the top?" he asks, running his hand inside and under the drawer. "No secret compartments?"

"No, nothing. Did you think I'd leave things in there for my parents to find?"

"Tell me your secrets, Yagami-kun," he says darkly, cross-legged at my desk.

"I don't have any left."

"Don't say that. Well, look at you. No one would suspect. I'll follow you downstairs in a minute."

"Ok," I say, uninterested. "I mean it, by the way. No more fucking around with my life. Have you backtracked?"

"Mmm. I got you confused with someone else. They seemed disappointed, but you shouldn't hear of it anymore. Consider it dead."

"Good... Are we ok now?"

"No, I don't think so," he says, looking into the space where my computer used to be. "But it'll do for the time being. I'll call you tomorrow."

And I leave him there. I go downstairs and glide unnoticed right into the room full of people until Sayu stands beside me. We exchange bored smiles.

"And what were you up to, big brother? You've made up with Kiyomi then?"

"We're fine, Sayu," Kiyomi's voice says, and wraps her arms around my waist from behind me. Sayu blushes, I catch it, and smile to myself. Sometimes I'm impressed by how I fool everyone, but they're just so painfully easy to fool that I can't really take much credit for ingenuity.

Matsuda and L join us at the same time, only L was caught by Naomi and Mikami for second beforehand. He's treated with kid gloves by Naomi, who obviously thinks that he's a very brave soldier for taking time out of his mourning.

"Hey, Lawliet! I didn't see you arrive," Touta says happily.

"And that's why you'd be a shit policeman, Matsuda. Congratulations, by the way. Another baby. More lives ruined."

"Funny thing is, we spent all that money on IVF and then as soon as we stopped -"

"Yes, that's enough information, thanks. Light paid for it, didn't he?"

"Well... yeah. How did you know?"

"I don't know, you must have mentioned it. How charitable of him."

"Light and I didn't have to try for very long," Kiyomi says smugly.

"Are you comparing potency, Kiyomi?" L asks, vaguely amused. Kiyomi's vaguely amused. I'm vaguely amused.

"It wasn't my fault," Touta says defensively. "It was Sayu's."
"Hey!" she shouts.

"It was no one's fault," I say, putting an end to this nonsense. Kiyomi's not content to let it go though and whispers in my ear that maybe they've been sticking it in the wrong place all this time. I laugh.

"What?" Sayu asks.

"Nothing. Kiyomi's being stupid."

"I'm being stupid, Sayu," Kiyomi agrees, and we fall into silence as my father starts speaking to the room, flanked by my mother, who looks sickeningly self-conscious, but it's ok because Dad speaks for both of them.

"Thank you for coming to mark this day with us. For this news to come so soon after the birth of our first grandchild has made the last year one of the happiest of our lives. Seeing your children be so successful in life and love is all you ever hope for as a parent. I'm very glad that my son, Light, and his wife, Kiyomi, have been able to join us this evening," he smiles at me when he notices me, and I lift my hand to everyone who took the opportunity to turn around and stare at me. Yes, I'm here. Now piss off. "Our family has been blessed. I'd just like to say how proud Sachiko and I are of both of our children. This is just the ultimate joy for us: to see them both happy."

I suppose that that's his speech then, because everyone starts clapping. But wait! I got perfect grades and became Prime Minister. Sayu has only managed to get married and get up the duff. This equal praise thing regardless of what we've achieved in our lives is very unfair. I'm practically supporting this whole fucking family and I'm running the country. I'm drowning in dependants. I am displeased that this isn't publicly acknowledged so I can downplay it.

"To life and love," my mother says, and everyone raises their glasses and repeats it after her. God's sake.

"Life and love. Like those two things go side by side, hand in hand. The way it seems to me, you can either live or you can love," L, my resident truth teller, mutters as he raises his glass. I glare at him until he lowers it again.

"He talks a lot, your father." Kiyomi tells me.

"A heart attack would be less painful," I say and drink my wine until she nudges me with her elbow and glances pointedly at L. Oh, no. No one must speak of heart attacks in a humorous way while L's around. We just shouldn't mention heart attacks and certain dead CIA agents, because obviously L is so distressed by his loss that he fucked me raw twenty minutes ago. "Sorry," I grumble.

"Lawliet, are you with anyone?" Touta asks, compounding the awkwardness. "'Cos there's this man who's just started in my department and I think he's gay."

"What makes you think that?"

"He... His hair mostly."

"Right."

"I thought that you'd like to meet him."

"Sure, yeah, sounds great. It's not like I'm picky or anything. Very kind of you to think of me. Could you pass me that?" L asks him cheerfully, pointing at some magazines on the table next to Touta.
"This?" Touta says confusedly holding up a magazine.

"No, that one. The thicker one," L replies, takes it from Touta and swats him over the head with it. I nearly choke on my wine. "Thank you. I'm going. I have to learn about lies and law."

"Enjoy that," I laugh.


"I came, I saw, I conquered. Goodnight. And congratulations again, Matsuda. You're a nice man, you're just a bit stupid. Congratulations, Sayu. I still don't really have an opinion on you, but I like your brother, so congratulations. Kiyomi," he says, and kisses her cheek quickly before moving on to me. I hold out my hand to shake his, but that's not happening. "Light," he whispers, kisses my cheek, smiles and leaves. The fucker.

"Did he just kiss you?" Touta asks, still rubbing his head.

"Yes, he did."

"Gays," Kiyomi tuts to herself. "Light's very handsome, it happens all the time."

"With all the gays?"

"People try to kiss him a lot. Strangers, voters, MPs... It's good that I'm not the jealous type. There's no such thing as respect for personal space when you're a personality."

"I'm the Prime Minister, Kiyomi," I remind her.

"But you're still a personality. You belong to everyone."

"God, Dad can really talk, can't he?" Sayu sighs. He's still giving some kind of director's cut version of his speech, but only the people closest to him are polite enough to listen.

"Sayu. Bio oil. Buy it," Kiyomi tells her firmly. Well, that was random.

"What?"

"Just buy it. It's my gift of wisdom to you. Congratulations, darling. Our children can grow up together. Light and I have a present for you and Touta."

She looks at me and I pull out the slightly crumpled envelope from my pocket to hand to Sayu. I forgot all about it, what with the sex and all.

"OH MY GOD, LIGHT! KIYOMI!" she screams. It's money. It's Sayu's favourite thing in the world. People turn around to see what the hell has happened, but I'm pretty sure that they've been keeping one eye on me anyway. Even my relatives look at me now like I'm a god who's descended from Mount Olympus.

"My advice is to put it into a high-interest account and leave it there," Kiyomi tells her, and Sayu's eyes dart between her and me, astounded by the number of noughts on the cheque, I guess. I don't know, I just signed a blank cheque and left the amount to Kiyomi. She was obviously feeling generous. It's amazing what the occasional fuck can do to her temperament.

"Light, you didn't need to do this," Sayu gasps. Well, I know that. She hands the cheque to Touta, who also gasps and stares at me. Oh, Touta.
"It's nothing, really," I say to their shocked faces, and then walk away. My glass is empty.

"Light?" Sayu calls after me before I get very far. She hesitates before she hugs me, and I can smell her sickly sweet, pink and cheap perfume rising from her. Her gratitude is pitiful, but somewhere far away I feel some fondness for her, even if it's just a bond of blood and years spent in the same house. She's a good person, she just doesn't try very hard. I put my hand on her head before I hold her away from me at arms length. I'm glad that L wasn't here to see this.

"You're my sister, Sayu. It's nothing."

L calls me the next day, like he said, and I answer the phone as horrifically quickly as if he'd simply been in a country with bad reception for weeks. Sad. As if I can't think of anything better to do than talk to him. The line crackles, I imagine him striding through departments.

"Is this a good time?" he asks.

"As good as any."

"I'll keep it quick. Can you come over to mine later?"

"Today?"

"Tonight. Whenever."

"I could. I'll shift a few things around."

"Will you?" he asks. He sounds moody and I'm reluctant to see him if he's in that frame of mind. I'm the closest thing to him now - I'm the only thing he has now – and, excellent victory as that it, it also means that I'm dealt his full mountain of shit when he's irritable. Stephen hasn't been spoken of yet, and I'm sure that it'll come. It has to, because L needs to apologise to me properly for calling me a murderer. If he thinks that but he still wants me around and wants to fuck me, what does that make him? It makes him worse than me, or what he thinks I am. "Light? Will you?"

"I guess so."

"Good. Ok, I'll see you then."

"Are you just going to shout at me again?" I blurt out before he ends the call, because I sense some arguing in the pipeline. "Because I'd rather not bother if you are. You could do that now, if that's what you're planning, and save me the petrol."

He's so silent that I hear his footsteps clipping on tiles in an echoey space, and a thought of his position in the Kantei occurs to me. I walk to the window and, sure enough, he was in the lobby, because I see him leave the building in the direction of the car park. It's twenty-past two, where's he going?

"No, I'm not going to shout at you. It's about business," he says.

"Penber? You've found something?"

"God, I hope that no one's bugged your phone. Use your head, Light," he grumbles, and ends the call. The phone beeps in my hand as I watch him from my window until he disappears from view. I carry him with me always like a languid ghost who won't leave me. Hopelessly flawed to perfection, just for me. And he always delivers.
A couple of hours later, at the House, Watari wanted to speak to me urgently. He stood on the sidelines while Mikami and I were talking, our voices bouncing off the marble tiles and making him seem all the more of a lonely, exiled figure, and we kept talking because we knew that he was waiting. For some reason, we want him to suffer for being old and useless and frightened by how out of his depth he is. I want him to know that he's not of my chosen few, who I make a point of being casual with in public so that others notice the difference and aspire to impress me enough so that they too are rewarded with my friendship. Or maybe I am just cruel, after all. I do feel some shaking thrill from putting him through it. With Watari and everyone else, my eyes glaze over, my voice lowers, my back is straight as a ruler. Personally, I want him to know that I don't value him at all and he's of no use to me; he just fills a role in the cabinet office.

Whatever his problem is, apparently it's far too sensitive to be discussed anywhere else, or so he insinuates. I think that he's losing his mind. Maybe he wants to retire? So, after Mikami leaves to go back to the Kantei, looking suspicious of Watari, I offer a lift to the old man so that we can discuss matters in the car, and then I'll go to L's. It'll work out perfectly.

I look out the window for the most part while Watari talks, because he's taking his time getting to the point. I've gathered that it's to do with the 'curse', and I've had enough of that, but people are talking, apparently, and they're frightened. I think of Stephen in his coffin. He mustn't have seen it coming, or he probably would have built his coffin himself. It's a simple joy to imagine someone punished and dead. Of course, I couldn't tell L that I think that. It's a tragic loss. Poor Stephen, asleep forever in a box underground somewhere in Virginia. Wiped off the face of the earth; it's beautiful. I tell my driver to drive faster.

We round a corner just where the land opens up briefly to an open space on one side, the sky illuminating and catching each shard of grass on the run up to the Kantei. It all looks very expensive, and so do I, because my reflection in the window stares back at me.

"Watari, you don't really believe in the curse, do you?"

"It is real."

"Oh, Watari," I sigh.

"But it's not supernatural. It can't be."

"I never thought that it was supernatural. Are you feeling ok? You think that someone is murdering people in my government indiscriminately?"

"No, not indiscriminately. They're targeting the cabinet office."

"It may seem that way to you, but L thinks that it killed his... friend."

"Who? You mean, his partner?"

"He wasn't his partner."

"Oh. He told me that he was."

"When?"

"I met him at your Christmas party and he said that he was Lawliet's partner. It's very sad. He was a very nice young man."
"He was a very nice young corpse."

"Pardon?"

"I was agreeing with you, Watari. Fact is, the curse which isn't a curse because I don't believe in curses, isn't just targeting politicians now. Anyone who dies within a 100 miles radius of the House or has stood behind a politician in a queue for the carwash sometime in the last five years dies because of the curse, that's basically what the press are saying. It's getting out of control and we have to put a stop to it."

"To the curse?"

"To the rumours. To the press. There is no curse," I say dismissively. I should get it tattooed on my chest.

"Hmm. So Lawliet believes in the curse then? He thinks it killed his partner?"

"He wasn't his partner, he was an acquaintance."

"Even so, Lawliet thinks that he died because of the curse?"

"Yes, but he was upset and he drinks too much."

"For what reason would he think that though?" he asks. Well, he believes that I did it out of hatred and jealousy.

"The man was a CIA agent looking into the death of Senator Wedy."

"And he was Lawliet's partner as well?"

"NO!" I say too loudly, but I quickly recover. "No. He infiltrated."

"I had no idea."

"The CIA suspected that Mikami assassinated her, it's really stupid, can you believe it? Well, there you are. I was thinking, actually, that we could possibly spin this to a good cause. If we're going down the supernatural route, why not tie the opposition to it so that they become the curse? The whole party is made up of cursed murderers - can't you just imagine how the press will love that one? A secret cult summoning demons, blood on the walls, pentagrams, that sort of thing. Anyway, is that all you want to speak to me about? I have another appointment when I get to the Kantei."

"Prime Minister, do you think that they're behind it."

"I don't believe in it at all, but for the purpose of dismantling the opposition, it might be useful. We could blame... I don't know, Nate River."

"Nate River?"

"He's a threat. Tsukino hasn't got long left before he's kicked out for making no impression, and I want him to stay where he is. Believe me, River is the generator behind that party now. And, after all, most of the deaths have been in my cabinet. Who benefits there? The opposition, no question of that, and River's next up for leader, according to my spies. Of course, I couldn't be seen to agree with blaming them. It couldn't come from me. I would say that it's an attack against democracy and just idle gossip, but the damage will have been done. What we need is a whistleblower. We could make one of those up. I'll get L onto it."
"But isn't Lawliet on sympathetic leave? I haven't seen him for a while."

"Oh no, he's fine, he's just been very busy, but this is right up his street. I'll get him onto it first thing tomorrow. So, don't worry, Watari. In a few days, this will all be the opposition's fault."

Watari rubs the back of his veiny, age-spotted hand for so long that I think that he's fallen asleep. He might have done, but he lifts his head suddenly and seems determined to say something important. There's always a first time.

"Mikami was asking me questions last week," he says.

"Oh? I hear that he does that."

"About Penber."

"Well, he is engaged to a woman who was Penber's fiancée, so he's probably intimidated and curious. He has a very sensitive nature."

"Prime Minister, I don't think that there's any way to stop the curse now if your investigation into Penber's death goes any further."

"What are you talking about, Watari? I'm not investigating Penber's death! The police handled that years ago and the man who shot him is dead. That's over with, don't be ridiculous. Warm, isn't it?" I say loudly, then switch the air conditioning on, the vents of which are just behind the front seats where my guard and driver are sitting. This isn't my most official car, it's more like my personal, small and very basic bus, so there isn't a screen between us and those two are probably listening to everything that Watari and I are saying. The noise from the vents is so loud that I doubt that they'd be able to hear us now. I lean towards Watari, who must be so surprised by the anger and sudden seriousness of my face that he backs as far away from me as he can. "Who did it?" I ask him. "Who killed Penber?"

"The... the cabinet."

"And The Lady?"

"Yes."

"You hired that man to shoot Raye and then you had him murdered to cover your tracks."

"Not exactly. Penber was dangerous and he left us with no choice."

"He knew about the supply of arms to the militant groups in exchange for oil, didn't he. He found proof."

"Yes."

"Did you have a vote? Did you vote to kill him, you bastard?"

"P-Prime Minister -"

"Don't 'Prime Minister' me. You're an idiot. You shouldn't have told me, because I'll find that proof and then I'll have every one of you executed, even if I have to do it myself."

"We're all guilty, it's true. I didn't want Penber to be killed but -"

"But you went with the majority? You're going to tell me everything."
"Yes," he says calmly. "I want to. I have to stop the curse."

"Shut up about the curse. There is no curse. There's you and the cabinet office and you killed Raye."

"Other people have died. People are still dying."

"I don't care about other people. It started and ends with Raye. You had him killed right in front of me."

"You saw?"

"I saw. I was there," I nod, and I see it again in my mind. I hear the shot and see him lying on the ground. "I was there."

"The man with the gun was not the one who killed Raye Penber."

"What? What do you mean?"

I'm filled with so much hatred for him - him and his old, craggy, apologetic face like the side of a sandy, barren cliff – and I want to smash his head through the window for it. Everyone who's an accomplice to evil out of avarice or fear against a moral code which they should have is embodied in Watari right now. His eyes are shining like they're made of coated plastic, and he's mute with stupidity. Even over the deafening sound of the cold air blasting from the vents in front of me, I hear one of my guards shout and I see a glimpse of a red car through the windscreen, swerving and steering across the road markings between lanes. Our car swerves in trying to avoid it and I'm flung against the door. The seatbelt jams against my shoulder and jolts painfully over my collar bone as the tyres scream, but all I can do is watch the oncoming car, now almost completely obliterating the windscreen and coming at us like a suicide or like there's no driver inside. My car's milometer reads 50mph and that number is going to kill me.
And Here's a List of Who I Slew

"Well, I'm glad that it wasn't a racially motivated crime."

"No matter what the reason was, it was still murder," I tell her. I don't know what she's talking about.

"Yes, but at least it wasn't racially motivated. It's so much harder to stomach," she says, lifting a fork to her mouth.

A string quartet is playing some repetitive tune as a soundtrack to fill the silences. I don't notice immediately, but the whole room and everyone in it is in black and white. I look at my hand on the tablecloth and it too is like it's from an old film, because grainy crackles flicker over everything I see. The only thing with any colour is a man sitting at the bar who draws my attention immediately because of how he stands out against everything and everyone else. Even from here I recognise the suit.

"Dior."

Kiyomi turns to me with her mouth full and pursed shut from ground-in manners. "Hmmm?"

"Nothing," I say, and she shrugs her shoulders as she continues eating, staring into the distance as she chews in boredom. We're sitting close enough to the bar that the sound carries over to me, and I watch L struggle to be noticed, holding out money in front of him as bartender after bartender walk past him.

"Hi. Could you... Excuse me, I'd like a... Why are they ignoring me? I am here, aren't I? They should pay attention to me and get me a fucking drink when I want one."

"They're busy," Mihael mutters next to him. "Anyway, back to my story. So I said: 'I don't care who you are, I'm going to kick your teeth in.' And he pulled a gun on me, the big pansy."

"Please stop it. I don't like this story. It's too violent for this time of day and I don't think it's going to have a satisfying conclusion because he obviously didn't shoot you."

"I just laughed and said that I don't mind being shot. I've been shot at before and it'd be worth it once I kick his teeth down the back of his throat."

"Mihael, your voice hurts me."

"So I twisted his arm around his back and popped his shoulder. He screamed like a baby. Then I -"'

'RIGHT! That's enough. I'm emotionally a bit fraught right now, so stop with the dick comparison story or you'll make me angry, because I normally bypass being upset and go straight to angry," L tells him, pinching the bridge of his nose. As another bartender approaches him, he frantically waves his money at him, but he just walks right past too. "Hey. Hey!" L shouts after him. "I want a drink! You! Hello?"

After a moment of consternation at being ignored, he picks up a blue glass ashtray and smashes it onto the surface of the bar. The sound of the chunks of broken glass cuts through the quartet's dirge for a moment, but doesn't stop them.

"You just broke an ashtray," Mihael points out while chewing on some peanuts and lazily lolling on the bar. "Why did you break an ashtray?"
"I want to be served," L replies.

"And they're going to serve you now that you've broken an ashtray?"

"That's the plan. I want a quiet drink on my lunch break," he says, reaching a new peak of agitation as he speaks. "I want the lunches that other people have, in parks by a stream and someone making me cocktails and taking the seeds out of grapes for me while some strapping young men in very few clothes float along in gondolas nearby. It's not much to ask for. I think it's my right and I've worked fucking hard for the privilege. Instead, I'm here with you and no one will get me a drink even when I'm waving money in their faces. Where are we anyway? This place is shit."

"You wanted to perv on the Prime Minister."

"I didn't. How dare you slander me like that. I'll sue you. I'll fire you and then I'll sue you."

The typical L and Mihael interactions are as boring as they always are, and I can't help but think that there's something more important I have to do, but at the moment this is where I am and I'll stay here. I'm sure it couldn't have been that important.

As it turns out, L's unusual plan of breaking things to get attention seems to have paid off, because he now has the full attention of the manager (he has a suit and a badge, so he must be the manager), who approaches him hesitantly. "Excuse me, are you alright?"

"Oh, hello. Yes, I'd like something with Tia Maria in it."

"You broke an ashtray, sir. You'll have to pay for it."

"Why? It was an accident."

"You broke it on purpose, sir. I saw you," he's told. Oh, the poor bastard should just give up now. L's going to end up sending him to an institution.

"Are you accusing me of wilful and malicious destruction of private property?" L asks him.

"Err…"

"Because I don't think that that covers disposable and gratis products you obtain as promotional items for the convenience of your customers. No, I don't think it's covered by any section of the law. Unless you're suggesting that I destroyed it with the intent of using it to cause actual bodily harm, that is, which you could define as an act of terrorism."

"I never said that."

"Excuse me," I say to Kiyomi, who doesn't seem to notice or care anyway, and leave the table to watch the brewing disaster at the bar from a better position. As I near them, L's in full flow.

"But that's how it's defined by the law and you're saying that I want to cause injury to the public using this ashtray that happened to break while I was sitting here minding my own business and trying to order a drink but being ignored by you and your rude and useless staff."

"I'm not suggesting that you wanted to hurt anyone. I'm sorry that you had to wait but we're very busy at the moment."

"I told him that," Mihael chirps in.

"But you're still accusing me of a crime," L continues, ignoring Mihael.
"No, but you broke an ashtray," the manager says.

"I'll tell you how this will go. If the value of the property so destroyed or damaged is not alleged to exceed some non-applicable figure I can't remember anyway, the punishment is a fine of three times the value of the damage to such property, or by imprisonment for not more than two and a half months; provided, however, that where a fine is levied pursuant to the value of the property destroyed, the court shall, after conviction, conduct an evidentiary hearing to ascertain the value of the property so destroyed. I don't appreciate being accused of such a thing. As a defendant, I have the legal right to gather reliable witnesses in my defence," he says, and finally sees that I'm standing behind him, which he somehow turns into something to help his argument. "Oh! Look, the Prime Minister. And there!" he points towards Mihael, who looks up from his bowl of peanuts with puffed out cheeks. "A prominent member of the Japanese government's press relations, if you can believe that. May I rely on your testimony should this matter go to court, gentlemen?" he asks us. "There's no need for that," the manager starts blustering as he bows to me. Oh, stop it.

"So you're not going to try to press charges? Personally, I'd warn you against it. Courts don't like having their time wasted and neither do I."

"I just think that you should pay for the damage. Sorry."

"You should be sorry. I'm not responsible for any damage. Also, you have to prove that this ex-ashtray was actually your property and that you have been financially injured by it's departure into ashtray heaven. Can you prove that?"

"But -"

"How much do you want? Will this cover it?" I ask, taking out my wallet and a few notes, but L pulls them out of my hand like I'm a cash dispenser and puts them into his pocket.

"Light, you are not giving this bastard any money, but we'll use that to buy another round at another bar at another time, so thank you. Well, whoever-you-are, call the police with your evidence: a broken ashtray. I don't think that they like having their time wasted either, but maybe they like having their lunch breaks interrupted and they're probably at a loss for things to do anyway, so go on. Before you do though, I need to tell you something: have you heard of the firm Lawliet & Co.?"

"I don't really know about law firms," the man says.

"Oh, of course, you work in a bar, what am I thinking? Lawliet & Co. advertise in all the papers. There are three billboards in Tokyo and there are commercials during the Friday 9:30pm slot on SakuraTV in the middle of that terrible, wholly inaccurate law drama which I admit to watching occasionally because it makes me simultaneously want to kill the cast and crew, myself, laugh, and throw my stereo at the screen. Those kinds of emotions are hard to come by. It just makes me feel alive, you know?"

"Uh. Yeah."

"So you've seen the ads?"

"No."

"No? Ok, full page spread towards the sport section on Sundays? The advert with the woman tripping over a shih tzu because of an irresponsible dog owner letting it wander around, shitting everywhere?"
"Oh! Yeah! I know that one, it's funny!"

"Yes, isn't it? You should see the commercial though, because that's really funny. The woman actually trips over the dog and lands in the shit."

"No!"

"Yes!" L laughs. In fact, they both laugh for about ten seconds. It's quite disarming until L's laugh trails off to intense seriousness. "Haaaa... I'm the Lawliet in Lawliet & Co."

"Oh."

"Mmmmm..." L smiles at him. The manager bows several times in succession like he's a wind-up toy, and that, I suppose, is the end of that.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Lawliet-san," he says.

"That's no problem at all. If you could get this broken glass cleared up, that would be nice, because at the moment it's causing a public hazard and I could sue you. And keep your eyes out for our new advert. The next one is going to be about a suspected murder and my law firm proves to the jury that the dog did it." he says. The man bows again and leaves, completely emasculated. I don't think I've seen something as glorious as L is right now, the arrogant, cavernous cunt. He turns to me and I bite my lip from the lack of having his wrapped around my cock. "Was that attractive at all?" he asks. Are you fucking kidding me?

"You've done better," I say coolly, and his eyes flash with annoyance before he turns back to the bar.

"Why am I asking you? You only find your own reflection attractive. Mihael?"

"Comme ci, comme ça," he replies, letting his hand float from side to side in mid-air.

"Don't speak French to me, boy, I'll fuck you up. Ah, failure has such a bitter taste. Well, I didn't have much to work with," he sighs. Then, catching sight of the manager again, now holding a dustpan and brush, he shouts at him. "Hey!"

"Y... Yes, sir?"

"We'll have a bottle of wine too. House red, whatever that is."

"Of course, sir."

"And I don't expect to see a bill."

"No, sir," the cretin agrees, scuttling off. L is smiling at me and looking even more pleased with himself. Oh, fuck me.

"Better?" he asks. He acts the way I wish I could act. And I did once, before the responsibility and boredom set in. Now, with the ordinary citizen, I'm as well behaved as a guide dog for the blind.

"I can't approve of your behaviour in public," I mumble. Some underling sweeps away the broken glass from the bar while desperately trying to be inconspicuous. We ignore him without much trouble.

"Honestly, Light, I don't believe that that wasn't attractive. I'm amazed that you haven't forced me into the toilets already. I was the one saying it and even I'm impressed. Mihael, piss off for a minute or ten," he says, never taking his eyes off me. Mihael sighs, untangles his legs from the rests of the..."
barstool and leaves with his bowl of peanuts so I can take his place while L holds court.

"Well, hello," L greets me belatedly. There's something brazen and lascivious in the way we're looking at each other, but I couldn't care less at the moment. I'm filled with the sense that I've been reunited with a part of me that's been lost for so long that I forgot that it was missing. I want to fuck him into the ground and break all his bones, have a breather and an energy drink, and then do it all over again, put it that way. You don't want to know what's in my head right now. "Small world."

"You knew I'd be here."

"I didn't, actually. It was an informed guess."

"You look really..." I say breathlessly. He looks ok, I'll give him that, but I'm actually imagining him spread-eagled on a rack and me standing there ready to crank the lever like a captain on the deck of a tall ship.

"I know. Depression must suit me," he says dreamily, but sounding tired by my infatuation. His drink arrives, followed by a bottle of wine as a chaser, and he stares into the mirror opposite us.

"Are you on the pull?" I ask, making him snort into his drink. "You've pulled."

"That's the best offer I've had all day from a married man. So, out with the wife for lunch then? How cosy."

"What are you doing this afternoon?"

"I'm very busy."

"Are you?"

"I could be persuaded otherwise," he leers, then he turns in his seat suddenly as if to tell me something very important. I'm expecting a proposition, or for him to tell me how good looking I am and that he loves me because my looks contradict the horror inside, but he doesn't. "Light, have you ever thought that every orifice looks like an exit wound from a high-velocity bullet?"

Ok.

"Can't say that I have," I laugh, and he looks very disappointed when he turns back to the bar.

"Oh well," he sighs before he drinks from his glass. I can smell the alcohol and coffee, but I am practically sitting on him by now. I notice a smear of red on the glass and then see the origin: a small cut on his finger. Fuck, I love it when he bleeds. It's proof that he's real and that he's human, because sometimes I wonder if he's just something I made up. No one could be as perfect as he is.

"You cut your finger," I say, taking the glass from his hand. He looks at the small red slice on his fingertip with barely any interest, but I see only cut rubies and droplets. The colour is so intense in the greyness around me, it's beautiful.

"So I did. Can't think how that happened," he smirks at me, and I grasp his hand to guide his gory finger into my mouth until my tongue is alive with the sweet iron taste of it. He opens his mouth as his knuckle bumps over my teeth, and then I realise that maybe this isn't something I can easily explain to anyone who might see me sucking my PR's finger, so I let him go reluctantly.

"Silly boy," he whispers. "You shouldn't have done that."
I'm in so much trouble now. Why did I do that? He slides off his barstool and moves towards me like some kind of slinking carnivore. He always wears the same expression just before he kisses me or punches me in the face. It's strange not ever knowing which I'm going to be treated to and not really having a preference, but I'm becoming so used to it and us that anything else feels as sterile as a bucket of bleach. It's still an expression of feeling, isn't it? He's the only person who isn't impressed by what I am, but I'm rewarded or punished for the things I do and say, and sometimes I act a certain way just to get a reaction, like his attention makes me real.

I close my eyes to ready myself for whatever comes, and he kisses me until I'm half-pressed against the edge of the bar. The taste of his coppery blood dilutes and is drawn back its source, and I don't care who sees. I hope that they do notice and evaluate their own existence, because no one is truly alive except us when we're together. My hands smooth across his shoulders until I find the centre back seam, overlocked, pressed flat and trapped against the lining. I want to take this fucking jacket off and inspect this dreamlike thing.

"Light? Light, what are you doing? We're leaving now."

What does it look like I'm doing, you stupid bitch? Sometimes you act so brainless it makes me feel almost guilty for taking advantage of you, and if I could send you back to your pathetic family, I would, and you could take Kira with you. In fact, I might do that, I'm going to do that. I'll make a fool out of you. People will laugh at you and your lipstick and your legs because I'll leave you for a man with no lipstick and better legs and what does that say about you? You turned me gay, that's what it says. That's gotta sting. I only married you because you were convenient, don't start saying you love me now, am I supposed to have a reaction to that which doesn't involve hanging myself? You're so easy to fool, I just laughed at you the whole time and sometimes I dream of roasting you on a massive barbecue. I only sleep with you because I feel sorry for you and to get you off my fucking back. You're like every woman I've ever known only I think you're different but you're just as greedy and self-obsessed as the rest of them, you're just like my mother, you live through me and you can stick your feminism up your arse, I mean, fuck, you come out with some shit. I'm more intelligent than you, I'm more intelligent than anyone, don't even try. There's nothing attractive about you, you're worthless. I care more about my weekly hair conditioning masque than I do about you, and one day I'll tell you but not now because I'm busy, look at this, get out of my face.

I open my eyes to glare at her while my mouth moves against L's, and I'm being watched not only by her, but my parents, Sayu, Toutes, Mikami, Naomi, Raye, B, Stephen - practically everyone I've known on an informal basis, whether I wanted to know them or not. They don't look shocked or at all surprised, just eager to leave, but I'll leave when I'm ready. My leg hooks around L's thigh as I balance on the stool and my hand plunges into his chest; his ribcage opens for me and closes around my arm after I get a good hold of his heart. It's everything I ever wanted. God, it's beating like a trapped bird, I think I'll give it a squeeze. Yes, we're leaving now.

When I close my eyes again, I feel myself being jettisoned like the world has just disappeared and I'm left floating in space. At some point, I must lose L because I can't feel him anymore, and at that moment I open my eyes again to find that I've been transferred from the bar to sitting on a cheap, blue, fold-out chair on an airport runway in front of airline staff and the faceless press in a military line. Everything's in colour now, everything's too bright, but I adjust to it, because there isn't another option apart from curling up and keeping my eyes shut until the night comes. Directly in front of me a speaker I'm not listening to is thanking me for 'taking time out of my busy schedule and coming all the way to share this great moment with her and her staff, but this is a great moment for Tokyo,' etc. It's the opening of a new airport and one seems to open every week, so it's not that great a moment, but I think that I must look very majestic with a state of the art plane and pride of the fleet behind me as a backdrop. Between you and me, this airport is a disaster waiting to happen because the ridiculously short runway looks like it'll make planes into speeding bullets aiming straight towards a
sheer drop, a main road and a petrol station, but that sort of thing isn't my concern. I'll just have a speech prepared for when the inevitable disaster occurs.

It's very hot and heavy (the air, that is), and while the woman rambles on, I lean my head back to face the midday sun because I have the strangest feeling that I've just been fucked, though I can't remember it. My mind revolves around sex these days, so this must be what it feels like to be a normal person. I close my eyes for a moment as a blast of air and sound from a plane passing over helps me blank the woman's voice out. I must look very happy to be here and very happy with life. I'm not, of course, but L's sitting next to me like my number one concubine in his suit, and things could be worse. He's my PR and this is very important, PR-wise. I look at him and he looks at me and the woman tells us about how this airport is unique in its devotion to avoiding something to do with climate change and how the newly developed, safe as houses economic engines will spare precious natural resources and lower airfares as a result. It's impossible for this plane to crash, apparently. It's the 'Titanic', and we all now how that turned out. It doesn't matter though because it's the prices of the tickets which people will be interested in. Anything else is just incidental.

I think of L smiling at me like this a couple of hours or days or weeks ago in exactly the same way as he is now - like a dangerously friendly SS officer who might fuck me and shoot me in the head - and I practically fluttered in the moments of heart failure as I imagined myself through his eyes, bronze and bare and prize-winning as his fingers drew a line over the ridges of my spine. People clap in appreciation as a plane speeds along a parallel runway. I see it glide behind L and the force from the engines makes loose, untamed tendrils of his hair fall messily against his forehead and cheeks and make his eyes seem even more piercing, like two telescopes which are trained on another galaxy. "I love you. I hate you," I tell him, and his smile widens, parting his lips. I want nothing more than to suffocate him with my tongue.

But there's a catastrophic crashing sound. It must be that plane. Instinctively, I close my eyes and cover my head until it's quiet and feels safe enough to view the carnage.

L's no longer beside me, I'm not on a runway or in a bar - I'm sitting naked on the edge of the bed in L's bedroom with a dead girl splayed out next to me. I'm not even surprised anymore; that kind of reaction left me a long time ago. Her arm hangs over the bed and blood drips down it and from the tip of her finger onto a pool of coagulated gore on the carpet. I can hear my voice as though I'm shouting back to myself from far away, telling me to wake up, but I don't know what I'm talking about. My legs and forearms are sticky with drying blood and I have to figure out what to do. I don't have much time to consider it though, because L walks in, so I pull the sheet over the dead body because I'm not sure how to explain it yet. She was there when I got here.

"Are you ready?" he asks. He's paying no attention to me anyway. He looks like he's on a searching mission, rooting through a stack of ongoing law files of a spectrum of corporate monotone. I just happened to be in the room.

"Where are we going?"

"You're resigning today, aren't you? Come on, put some clothes on."

"L, I..."

He pulls back the sheet from the girl's face, but not enough so that I can see her, and he looks entirely unaffected.

"Well, that's one way of getting rid of your wife," he says after taking in a bored breath of air, then he drapes the sheet back over her again like she's simply an old sofa under a dust cover. The white cotton ripples over her like sand. "We'll deal with that when we get back. Have a shower, quickly."
You've got blood all over you."

He pulls me up to stand and my vision is shaking as he leans towards me, calm and heavy lidded. If I didn't have this face and these arms and these legs and this body, he wouldn't like me so much, because what else is there to like when I'm just an empty box? Sometimes I feel like there's a space vacuum in the intense darkness where my heart should be. The sound of bending metal cuts through the silence like a groaning from some dying beast, and blood drips from my jaw as L dips and curls slowly to lick the side of my face.

"I didn't mean to kill her," I confess. He nods sympathetically but I can tell that he's in a hurry and he'll do and say the most appeasing thing in order to make me hurry too.

"I know. She was in your way and she should have known better. Don't worry about it."

"She loved me."

"Everyone loves you, Light. You can thank your face for that."

"Do you?"

"Do I what? Come on, shower and suit up," he says cheerfully, but stops for a moment of contemplation while looking at the curving form under the sheet. "Maybe we could hide her in the fold-out couch?"

Have I killed the one person I could have trusted for someone like him?

"L, taking advantage of a person's feelings is the most despicable thing someone can do."

"Worse than murder, even?" he asks, raising his eyebrows. "WELL -"

"Why am I doing this when I have all I wanted? Why are you making me do this? How have you done it?"

"You think that I'm taking advantage of your feelings and making you do this against your will?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe, Light, maybe. Small problem with your theory though: you'd have to have feelings for me to take advantage of." He smiles smugly and pulls a suit and shirt out of the wardrobe for me, laying it over what was Kiyomi's face, avoiding the blood which is seeping and spreading through the sheets.

His eyes are so matte now. I remember them once when they were alive, when things happened but they didn't affect us because we were more interested in each other. He might be breathing, but he died when I met him because I'm a terminal illness. Over the years, he's been dying slowly and I watched it happen. I watched it and I enjoyed it because it felt like a victory like no other. My life could have been so much easier. Why did I choose this?

Kira starts crying in the other room and I turn my face in the direction of it. It's a wailing cry with frayed and broken edges, like shattering glass. I stand automatically like it's a fire drill and I know what I have to do without even thinking about it. I have to hold him until he's lulled back to sleep by the slow thud of my heart and the nostalgic scent of his mother's blood, but L puts his hand on my arm.

"We haven't got time for that. Get yourself ready. We're leaving," he says, then heads out of the
room, passing Watari, who's standing over Raye, dead by the door, just like the very last time I ever saw him. They both turn to stare at me, and from the corner of my eye I see Kiyomi turn her face towards me under the sheet. I hear the cracking of her neck and I want to scream, but before I do, the demon materialises in the doorway by the door.

"You did this," I say to it with difficulty, because it feels like something is tight across my chest, preventing me from even breathing. The light doesn't touch him and he looks completely flat like a projection, and he smiles at me, although I'm not sure if he's capable of any other expression. In him I see the ravenous joy of one human being killing another mindlessly.

Kira starts crying again and the pitch changes with hysteria until my ears start ringing. I think that my ears are like hanging drops from a glass chandelier and might shatter from how the cries become a crashing, crunching echo which intensifies until I can't stand it any longer and close my eyes to it.

Everything feels heavy and aching with reality when I open my eyes again, and I'm inside a car. We must have crashed, though I don't remember the crash itself and I don't know how much time has passed. It feels like hours since I was in that bar with L, and I wonder if I ever was. One side of my head feels numb, and after touching it, my hand, in vibrating double vision, is covered with blood. Each time I blink, I close my eyes for longer than I intend to. All I see is the corner of my window and the blue sky. My driver is slumped to one side in front of me and the windscreen is cracked in increasing circles around a hole like a puncture wound. What I'm seeing makes no sense to me – that I'm here, that this happened. This shouldn't happen to me.

I hear a groan beside me and turn awkwardly to find Watari, drooping in his seat. The inside of the car feels crumpled and compacted somehow, and blood burns the back of my throat. Watari's dying. Everyone around me is dead or dying and maybe I am too.

"Watari?"

"Cursed... we're cursed," he says. "It was worse waiting for it... but now that it's here..."

"Watari, tell me who killed Raye." The question comes automatically. It's the most important thing. Watari doesn't answer and I can just about slap his leg with the back of my hand from where I am, flung to the opposite side of the car. "You better not die before I'm done with you, Watari. Wake up!"

He laughs, but the laughing makes him choke and gurgle and he can barely talk. It's more of a whisper when he does speak. "You saw the man who shot Penber, but he wasn't the murderer. I know... I knew..."

"What the fuck does that mean? Tell me what you mean!"

The stupid bastard doesn't answer me, he's silent, so I strain further to see him. There's blood dripping from his open mouth onto his lapel in a long, saliva tainted string, but he's looking at me, with his head lolling on his shoulder. I start to say his name again, but he's not breathing. He's not breathing.

I thought that it'd be gratifying to see someone die in front of me, actually die right beside me. I miscalculated. I should have given Watari more of my time, but he told me enough. How was I to know that he knew anything about Penber when he never even knew where his house keys were.

While sitting in the car next to a dead man, a breeze moves through my hair, lifting and separating it like vines out of my eyes, and I've never known a peace quite what there is in this wreck of a car.
Just me as the last man with only the sound of birds outside and air whistling by me. But suddenly there's a thunderous boom and a flash of brightness from the window behind Watari. I think of cameras - that people are taking photographs of me dying - but it spits and crackles and the light rises into a large torch of fire, making a silhouette of Watari. I start to panic, clenching my teeth and struggling to arch myself from how forced I've been in my seat, like the G-forces are still pressing on me like another echo, like the noises of crunching metal I can still hear.

"D... Dammit."

I unclip the seatbelt as the fumes of the fire reach me – a mix of petrol and burning rubber. The sunlight is dimmed by some artificial eclipse and the inside of the car is now dense and choking grey. Adrenalin rushes through me and I go from a dead weight to a maniac, because I don't want to die here and I won't die here. I convince myself of that, but I can see the fire spreading and the headlines in my mind's eye. And me with stretched, desperate fingers reaching out for my future, even in death. Me, charred in a black body bag the same colour as my skin. When my body is identified, I'm just tanned black leather, scorched. Parts of me are ashes. White teeth trapped and grinning with pulled back, thin lips and with just patches of bruised rosy flesh remaining to show that I was once human. Like a patchwork quilt. Like...

The door lock pops.

A glint of wet pavement shows through the slit created between the door and the frame, and I push with my shoulder, shrugging off the seatbelt which is still clinging to me like it doesn't want to let me go. With one hard shove against the door, I fall onto the ground. The damp, sharp tarmac-coated surface catches and cuts through my jacket and pulls it from me as I drag myself out of the car. But it's not the road - it's glass. It cuts into my hands and splinters slice and dig under my nails, but I don't feel it, I just know.

Dragging my legs behind me - the useless, asleep, shaking things - I think that I must look like a soldier trying to stay out of the sights of a sniper. When I'm clear from the car, I smell burning rubber and see the now thick black smoke rising over the roof. Watari's dead. His staring eyes gaze at me from inside the car, and I force myself to stand. Then I see that the red car that hit mine is on fire and that the inside of it is now completely engulfed. The car looks familiar to me, but I can't see the driver, only the dark outline of a person in the driver's seat against the flames. Again, I compare this to a warzone - it's my war. Symbolically, I think this scene I see represents my internal life and struggle, and I think it's funny how I feel so leisurely that I can indulge in thoughts like that now when I'm the only one left, surrounded by crushed and folded metal. I need to stand at a safe distance to watch this, and with every minute that passes I'll feel more alive. I might phone the emergency services, or I might just watch.

The front of my car is shredded with a gaping wound letting it's engine innards trail all over the ground around it. I'm stunned with the brutal beauty of what I see and the feeling that I survived for a very important reason. I cannot die. If I died, the universe would collapse in upon itself. Then there's movement from the passenger seat and I lunge at the door without thinking. What a stupid fucking thing to do.

"Get out!" I shout at my guard, who's dazedly looking at my driver next to him. "What are you doing? Get out!"

He starts unbuckling his seatbelt as I leave him, and the flames feel too close as I run around the car to drag the driver out. The side took an impact too, I can see that, because Watari's door is catastrophically dented like a meteor hit it. No wonder he died.

I have to pull hard on the driver's door because the metal of the wing has folded like paper around it
and wedged it shut. When I open it, the blood inside looks almost cartoonishly red, but people always bleed like a pig from the head, it doesn't necessarily mean much, he's just being dramatic. But I do think that he's dead until I yank him free from the buckled wreckage - until he screams. His legs were trapped by the footwell and look as mangled as the car does, and flail uselessly from side to side as I drag him clear. My guard hobbles over and helps me, for what use he is. I'm doing all the work here and I don't think that's fucking fair. People are so useless.

"Phone an ambulance," I tell my guard. Orders are something he can understand because he was born to follow them. I sound strangely calm, considering, but I've never understood why people shout when there's no need. I should handle this as calmly as I can and then sue the fuck out of whoever that bastard was who owned that red car. Well, his insurance company. I don't think I'll get much out of him now. If he hit me on purpose then his death is justice, if it was an accident then he should still pay me compensation.

My guard's phone light up as he dials and it's bright against the dark grey air. He collapses to a seated position on the ground next to the driver with the phone pressed to his ear while I stare at him and then my car catching fire. I could have been still in there. They'll probably say: 'If you were sitting just five millimetres to the left then you would have been out for the count and probably dead, Mr Yagami,' and I should be renewed with a new thirst for life. Kiyomi will probably start some charity for supporting women whose husbands were nearly killed in car crashes.

Watari must be catching fire now. His blood must be bubbling and boiling. Good.

A few feet away from me, at the side of the road, there's a discarded apple core speckled with ashes and dirt.

 Nearly every firefighter, paramedic and police officer seems to have descended upon me, and I really don't think that all these police cars are necessary. It's food for thought, because this is such a waste of public services. As well as them, Kiyomi arrives, and the clacking sound of her heels sets her apart from all the practically-minded people here with a job to do. I watch her scan the cars and grab the arm of a firefighter to question him. Her eyes follow where his arm points and she runs towards me. She's not made for a place like this. It's as bizarre as seeing a woman in a wedding dress run across a battlefield.

It annoys me that she wraps herself around me in some kind of wrestling hold as she cries into my chest, and I feel very detached from her and this whole thing, because it's just a very realistic theme park ride now. Kiyomi holds me tighter and tighter and squeezes out every ache and pain which until now has been dormant, and my general discomfort makes me hold her away from me. Her face is shining with tears. Some people look so much better when they cry. Women especially. Some look ugly whether they're crying or not but Kiyomi looks just as I would want her to in a perfect world. She is getting beyond it now though. If she doesn't stop soon she'll have puffy eyes for days.

"Kiyomi. Kiyomi. Pull yourself together," I tell her, gently shaking her by the shoulder to make her pay attention. She wipes her eyes and sniffs onto the cuff of her sleeve.

"I'm sorry. Are you -"

"I'm fine."

"Akane saw the smoke and I knew, I just knew..."

"You're clairvoyant now? You could have given me a heads up, Kiyomi. Look at my car."
"Stop it," she says, sounding almost pained that I'm not taking her seriously. My poor Cassandra the seer foresaw the burning of Troy and no one believed her because she is a woman. "I knew it was a bomb, I knew it would happen."

"No, a car hit us. That one. I could have been killed by a fucking Honda Accord saloon of all things." How do I know what car it was? I hardly saw it before the crash, but now I recognise it?

"It wasn't a bomb?"

"No, there wasn't a bomb. Where's Kira?"

"He's with Akane."

"You shouldn't have come here, Kiyomi. Go back to the Kantei," I tell her. She smiles and I know that she won't leave until I do, and I want to find out whose estate I'm suing.

"Oh, Light, your hands," she says quietly and starts crying again at the sight of them. She puts her arms around my neck and I examine my raw and bloodied palms over her shoulder, and the small glass shards shining and standing proud of the skin. Some paramedic looked at them but seemed more concerned with shining a light in my eyes and asking me where it hurt. Nowhere. Everywhere. I feel nothing, only cold, and for a moment I think that maybe I died in that crash and that I'm nothing but some spectre who can't accept that he's dead. "You have to leave politics," Kiyomi blubs into my shoulder.

"God, not another one who wants me to leave," I sigh. She tucks her face into my chest while I look over the dispersing smoke hovering over the wreckage now that the fire has been put out.

I hear someone say my name and turn my head to see L standing a few feet away from my side. I smile tiredly as soon as I see him, and I know then that I just want to get in his car now and go back to his house, tweeze this shit out of my hands, have a bath, and go to sleep in his bed. He'll read and I won't be angry that he's reading instead of paying attention to me, like I was the first time he did that, because no one ever had done that to me before. No one had ever chosen a book or the TV over doing something to me instead. He's home to me now and it literally takes a car crashing into me to make me realise that. I'm tired even though I never saw battle. I wonder if the things I think matter do actually matter, and decide that they only matter if I choose for them to have meaning.

He looks like he doesn't really know what's going on, though I'm sure he's already worked it out and that's why he's here in the first place.

"You were in that car? Light, what were you doing in that car?" Obviously he hasn't worked it out and I give him too much credit. His voice is quiet from shock and he looks worse then when Stephen died, or when his father died, or when he ran out of mints that time at 3am and we got into an argument about how I didn't have food without nutritional or social value in my apartment.

"Watari's dead," I say. There's little reaction to that. He doesn't really care, like I don't really care, but Kiyomi pulls away from me and apparently cares. She has known him since she was a little girl, I suppose. That warrants a moment of reflection.

"He's dead?" she asks. No, Kiyomi, I was making it up.

"L, find out who was in the other car. It drove right into us. It was red but it's..." I pause, looking at the blackened pile of smoking metal it is now. "Well, it's not anymore."

Instead of leaping into action, he walks over to me instead and pushes back the hair from my forehead. My eyes squint from an electric, searing pain which spreads right over the left side of my

Kiyomi panics over the blood and for some reason looks to L to offer her reassurance while he inspects wherever the cut is on my head. I love his voice. He makes me think of places where no man goes. Granite rock formations covered and shaded with painfully green, delicate leaves which would crush underfoot, and rivers cutting a path right through it all to reach the sea. I close my eyes and almost see this place I imagined from his voice, forcing out the meaning of what he says for a second, because what he makes me feel seems so much more real than car crashes and bleeding heads. I raise my fingers to my forehead though and pull them back to see fresh blood on the already rusty stains on my hand. Kiyomi gasps and covers her mouth. Oh. I knew that I'd bumped it, but I didn't know it was that hard. The roots of my hairline are soaked in blood.

"Oh shit," I sigh, and wipe the blood on my trousers because they're fucked anyway.

L shouts for a paramedic, which I don't think can be that necessary. I didn't even realise my head was cut and it'll only be a graze or something minor, but the same woman I saw before rushes over to me, armed with her trusty torch which she's desperate to shine into my face again. My hair covers a multiple of sins and she's useless. Half my brain could be falling out and she wouldn't have noticed.

"His head's bleeding. Do something," L tells her.

"Stay still now, Prime Minister," she says, switching on her torch like it's a flick knife.

"How many fucking times? I'm ok!" I protest, but she completely ignores me and looks at my forehead, pressing the dead centre of the source of pain unforgivingly and making it worse. I hiss and Kiyomi goes into meltdown.

"Oh God, don't let him die!"

"Kiyomi, will you shut up?"

"I think you're ok," the paramedic informs me. "Didn't I tell you to go to the ambulance to be checked over? You're still standing here. You need a few sutures and tests, so do what I told you and go to the ambulance." I don't know why she thinks she has the right to chastise me like a matron and tell me to do anything. She's just a glorified paediatric nurse on tour.

"No."

She rolls her eyes at me and looks to Kiyomi. "Make sure he gets to the hospital," she tells her, and thankfully leaves. Kiyomi whines at me, but I can feel the metal core of her being strained by my obstinacy.

"Light, please."

"No, it's a waste of time. I'm -" I start, but L stands in front of me and cuts me off.

"Light, go to the fucking hospital or I will drag you there by your bollocks," he says. He's not messing around, he'd probably do that. Maybe I should get checked out by a professional. I'm sure there must be someone at the hospital who knows what they're doing.

"Find out what's going on. Find out what happened," I tell him.

"Yes, yes, just get in the ambulance."
"I don't want to go in an ambulance."

"What? Do you want an ice cream van to take you?"

"I'd just rather go in the car."

"Tough. I'd describe your car as being off the road at present."

"It's a write off."

"Exactly."

"I have other cars."

"Yes, but you're going in the ambulance."

"I'll take the Lexus."

"You're not showing up at the hospital in the Batmobile, Light, come on, this isn't *The Fast and the Furious*. Anyway, the road's blocked and I'm not calling a limo service or a horse drawn carriage for you. Go," he says. I back down.

"Call me with any news... Oh, and get me a new phone."

"Why? Where's your phone?"

"It was in my jacket. My jacket was in the car," I sulk, and we all look at the smouldering mess which was once my car. "I want a HTC One in black with a... No, they're Taiwanese, aren't they. Errr... I'll have a Sharp Aquos FullTouch 933SH... No, the camera on that is ugly. I'll have a -"

"Will you get in the fucking ambulance?" he shouts. Kiyomi jumps from the order and starts leading me away quickly, but I look at L until it's not feasible to anymore. He watches me, and probably continues to watch me until I'm shoved into the back of an ambulance. He'll get me a shit phone, I know it.

I've been set up in what must be a kind of presidential suite at the hospital. My father calls Kiyomi while I'm getting stitches (not sutures – fucking stitches!) and Kiyomi gives me the phone. He asks me if I knew that there'd been an accident near the Kantei, and I say that I did know because I was in it. I'm fed up of telling people that I'm ok.

So, within the hour, I've seen a lot of doctors and nurses, the head of the hospital, my guards are swarming the building like flies, Mikami and Naomi, my parents, Sayu and Touta – the whole goddam world. L must have released a press statement, because my involvement in the accident comes on the TV as breaking news over an hour after it actually happened. The doctors shoo my family out of the room to 'let me rest', which is the nicest thing anyone's done for me for a while, but I insist that as soon as my PR arrives, he's to be brought to me. He arrives about hour after that, when I'm at my most despondent because I've just realised that as much as this looks like a hotel suite, there isn't a mini-bar.

"Should you be walking around?" he asks, pausing at the door for a moment before dropping a bag on my empty bed which is far too hospital-like for me. It has those rail things at the side to stop you falling out, for fuck's sake. I go over to see what he's bought me, and he's bought me a HTC One. What did I tell him? They're Taiwa-fucking-nese! And it's white. Hopeless man, except that he probably did it on purpose. "I'm pretty sure that you shouldn't be out of bed," he says.
"You got me the wrong phone."

"Shame. Get into bed."

"Why? Are you going to sex me up? I have to walk around, it prevents blood clots."

"The doctors think that you're at risk from blood clots?" Panic stations. His eyebrows speak of there being a fire on the bridge, everyone abandon ship.

"No, I read an article about it," I answer, unboxing the phone anyway because I don't have a choice but to use it now. The one thing I asked him to do and he buys me a phone which supports foreign industry. "Watari is dead, isn't he?"

"He's dead," he nods. "Shizo and Nakamura -"

"Who?"

"You driver and guard. Nakamura's got a leg fracture but other than that he's ok. Shizo's in surgery but the prognosis is good."

"Who was in the other car?"

"Get into bed now or I won't tell you and I'll never sex you up again," he says. I sit down heavily on the bed, which is as much as I'm going to do for now, and breathe out a long breath as L stands in front of me with his hands in his pockets. I just look down at his legs and shoes in front of me, a stark contrast to me in my hospital gown. My legs look good though. He's wearing Salvatore Ferragamo three-eyelet Oxfords in polished calfskin with a seam toe cap. Ferragamo run very narrow but they always fit L and that's fucking annoying because even I have to wear a wider fit. I have perfect arches and a chiropodist and several other people have complimented me on my feet. They're not fat feet and hate the insinuation that they are by a dead Italian and his fucked up sizing system. I don't know though, if you want a real Ferragamo then best save your money and steer away from this glued together shit and stick to the Lavorazione Originale or Tremezza lines. Of course, L doesn't care, he just buys whatever fits him. I don't think that he owns a pair of shoes that aren't black.

"What did the doctors say?" he asks.

"Waiting for the results but I'm -"

"Yeah, you're fine, you said. What happened?"

"I don't know. Fucker in the red car coming in the opposite direction just crashed right into us."

"Did you lose consciousness?"

"I don't think so," I lie, because I'm sure that I did. I must have. I had three very realistic dreams and L was in all of them, but there's no point mentioning it because if he tells the doctors then I'll probably have neurologists doing scans of my brain for days.

"That's good," he says quietly. "Where were you going anyway?"

"We were going to the Kantei. I gave Watari a lift because he wanted to speak to me."

"Why couldn't you have talked in the House?"

"He wouldn't say. He just said that it was important."
"What did he want to speak to you about?"

"The curse. He said that he knew who killed Penber."

"Light, will you just..." he says with a raised voice, only to break off suddenly and take a few steps around the room. "You have to leave this Penber thing alone. We don't need this right now and you know who killed him. Will you let it go?!"

"No, the cabinet office ordered it. It was just like you said."

"I didn't say that."

"Please, you all but said it. They all gave it the go ahead." God, I wish they were all dead. If they were dead it would be justice and I could be happy. They're disgusting murderers and they should die.

"The Lady had the final say, that's obvious. Of course she would have had final say," L says.

"The whole cabinet office did it. I don't know whether to report them to the police or have them killed and skip the waiting and the cost of a trial."

"Light, if you have them killed then you'll be just like them."

"What they did was wrong and they should pay."

"Yes, but not by your hand. You're not a murderer."

I think on that for a moment and wonder if it'd make any difference to me if I did have them killed. I think I'd be content, or as near to it as I could be. But maybe I'd start and never stop. I'd find people everywhere who are only fit to die and I'd hand out death until I became death. If my reasons are just then would that still make me a murderer? I rub my head unthinkingly and my stuck back together skin stings. The local anaesthetic must be wearing off.

"I have no proof now that Watari's dead. Even if I testify, all it would be is hearsay," I sigh.

"Don't kill them. If you do, you won't come back from it."

"There's no need to be so histrionic. First thing tomorrow, I want you to start drafting a plan of action to change public perception towards the opposition being the source of the curse. Nate River."

"No."

"Yes. When people see or hear of the opposition I want them to be irrevocably linked with the curse. Watari's dead and I could have been killed, it makes perfect sense to blame them."

"You don't know if it's true though."

"It doesn't have to be true. I'm using what I have. I can deal with the cabinet office myself and I'll let the curse take care of the opposition for me. Doesn't that make perfect political sense to you?"

"If you were staying, it would, but you keep saying that you're resigning, so it's more like you're doing it out of spite."

"If I'm to come back in a couple of years, I need to get rid of Nate River."

"Nate River's not going to be a threat to you."
I hum disbelievingly, and then I hear my dad's voice outside. There's no reason for him to be here still. "Oh God, is my dad still outside?"

"I saw him when I came in. The whole Yagami clan is out there."

"I can't deal with them at the moment."

"Visiting hours are over, they won't be allowed in now."

"You got in."

"Yeah, but that's me, I'm special. Are you sure that you're ok?"

"I'm just tired," I smile weakly, but hear my assigned doctor's voice who patched me up. His voice joins my father's in conversation. "Fuck, hide," I tell L, but he's already running to the bathroom and locking himself in.

"Good evening, Prime Minister," the doctor says as he comes in. He doesn't look at me; he's flipping through sheets of paper on a clipboard.

"Yes, it's a great evening, I've had a fantastic time. Can I go?"

"No, you'll still have to stay in overnight for observation."

"Thanks for the invite but -"

"It's not an invite."

"Well, I still can't stay."

"Oh! Your tests came back clear for smoke inhalation. How do you feel?"

"Fine. Perfect. I could run a marathon."

"No coughing or chest pain, shortness of breath, wheezing, vision problems, dizziness, nausea?"

"No."

"Good. Well, we'd like to do a few more tests in the morning, just to make sure."

"How many times do you have to make sure? If I wasn't feeling ok, I'd tell you, but I feel fine. I just need some ibuprofen and I'm good to go."

"Prime Minister, you suffered a not inconsiderable knock to the head and were exposed to some pretty noxious fumes. There are risks involved in that, like delayed shock, or a bleed on the brain, fluid on the lungs, infection, respiratory failure, brain haemorrhage, pulmonary embolism..."

"You're making some of those up."

"No. The human body is an extraordinary thing but a lot of things can go wrong. If I said that you were good to go, I wouldn't be doing my job very well now, would I?"

"I'm not nauseous. The symptom of a bleed on the brain is nausea, right?"

"Not always. Leave this to me. You do your job and we'll do ours, and we say that you need to stay in overnight."
I sigh loudly and cross my arms. "Alright."

"Thank you. Your family is outside. I could let you see them for five minutes, but then you have to rest."

"Tell them that I'm asleep."

He clips his pen back into the pocket of his white coat and checks his watch. "Ok. Have a nice rest now. A nurse will check on you later on to see if you're asleep. If you're not, God help you."

He leaves and I hear him mumble outside to someone. Idiot. L cracks open the bathroom door and inch until I can just see his finger curve around the edge of the door and a big eye scanning the room. He looks like something from a horror film.

"It's alright, he's gone," I tell him.

"I'm going to leave you to sleep," he says, walking back over to me.

"I don't need to sleep. It's too early."

"You heard the man, and you told me yourself that you were tired. You're going to sleep." He starts buttoning his coat and I don't want him to leave yet. If it wasn't for someone ploughing into my car, I wouldn't be here – I'd be at L's and L would be telling me what he's found out. Whatever that is.

"L, thanks. You got me the wrong phone, but thanks. Were you worried?" I ask. He ties the belt of his coat around his waist and doesn't look at me, so I smile.

"A bit, y'know," he mumbles quietly.

"What have you told the press?"

"The bare minimum. Don't worry, it's been dealt with."

"Have you told them that Watari's dead? They haven't mentioned it on the news yet."

"No. We'll leave that for tomorrow. He was a old man, Light, they're not bothered. Find a new deputy in a few days when you're better. Did you get sutures?"

Oh my God, don't talk to me about sutures.


He smiles and sits down next to me, taking my new phone off me to set it up, because I haven't got past the unboxing stage yet.

"Don't do that to me again," he tells the phone, but I think it was meant for me.

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"I know. I'm sorry. I just don't know what I'd... Get out of this as soon as you can, please. Resign if you have to, I don't care now and I won't stop you. I want us both out of here."

"This didn't happen because of the job, L. It wasn't the curse. Some bastard just drove into my car."

"It was Culture," he says, entering my phone's new number into his own. That's how I knew the car! I knew Culture had no clue about spatial distance but I didn't know he was such a shit driver.
"Culture?"

"Mmmm. Culture was driving the car."

"And he's dead?"

"Yes. Do you see now that it's all because of the job? If you can't see that then you really did hit your head hard. This is enough. Leave. Never go back. Neither of us will ever go back. Promise me that it's the end now."

"Ok."

"I mean it, Light. No more procrastination."

"I heard you," I say grumpily, and he hands me packet of Marlboro menthols and a plastic lighter from his pocket. Well, that's a really kind thought I wouldn't have expected from him. He must have realised that my case and gold lighter were also in my jacket and are probably a puddle of molten metal now.

"And I don't want to see you in work tomorrow," he tells me. I light a cigarette before I argue. The smoke reminds me of a foggy sky over two crashed cars.

"L, that's stupid -"

"Shut your face and do what I tell you," he snaps, also slapping the phone down onto his leg in quite a scary way that makes me imagine what he could do my ribcage if we were wearing bearskins and living in a cave.

"I like it when you're bossy."

"I like it when you listen," he smiles and pulls me towards him. I watch my phone fall off his leg onto the bed and then I wonder how we fit together so well, like two parts of a whole, designed and built to work together. His head fits against the side of my neck and our chests flare flush against each other as we breathe. He really was born for me. He might not be what I would have designed for myself, because he's weird looking and strangely beautiful, but I wouldn't have anything else now. I just wish that he loved me as much. The scale is slightly unbalanced, he still reserves the right to leave when I couldn't now even if I wanted to, because whatever identity I have now, though private, is because of him. Even though no one knows how I watched him walk around a bookstore once like he was a painting come to life and the most captivating thing I'd ever seen. He doesn't even know that I watched him and thought that about him. It was a long time ago. I just shouted at him for taking such a long time. Even though when I was lying in a crashed car, I dreamt of him. I still don't really understand it, but I think of the apple at the side of the road after the accident and what it means to me know. If my heart is an apple, he's the worm inside it. Maybe that's what it means. Two people who couldn't feel anything for anyone fall into traps set for each other and it's a source of eternal anger at the loss of true freedom. I like it when he's quiet like this and we're speaking to each other without speaking and I can think of these things. It reminds me that I'm doing the right thing.

"God, I'm such a fucking idiot for you," he says. His voice cloys against my neck from the upset. I know that feeling.

"I wanted to see you tonight," I reply sadly and uselessly. Then I'm reminded of why I was going to see him tonight. "Hey, you were going to tell me something about Penber, weren't you?"

"Light, for fuck's sake, that doesn't matter now," he huffs and pulls away from me. "Stop with this Penber thing. I mean, look at you. You're fixated on it even when you're in the hospital with a
broken head."

"I don't have a broken head."

"Yes you do. I don't know what's wrong with you, you're just obsessed with things that don't matter. I don't even know if medication would fix it now, I think it's just who you are and I'm stuck with it. Christ, you're just -"

"Did you find something?" I interrupt him, and he rubs his nose in annoyance. Get to the point.

"I found his desk and there are some papers in it. It's at my house."

"Bring me the papers now."

"No. When you're better, you can look through the desk yourself. I don't want to."

"You haven't look at what's inside? That's not like you."

"It doesn't interest me. I saw that there were papers, but let's get this clear for you: I don't agree with what you're doing. Penber might have died because of whatever's in that desk, and you should leave this alone. I got the desk because you asked me to, so you can find out what you need to know because it's so fucking important to you, but don't do anything with what you find, if you find anything. Just prove it to yourself and be content, because you don't need to prove it to anyone else. It won't make things right, it won't bring Penber back. All you'll do is cause huge distrust in the government and upset Naomi, and I don't think you want to do that."

"Naomi deserves to know. She wants to know, she just can't find out herself."

"I think she deserves to get on with the rest of her life now and so do you. Value your life, because there are lines that even you shouldn't cross."

"I do value my life," I say. I do, it's all I have, but I'll sacrifice it for the right thing, I think.

"Am I not enough for you?" he asks, sitting back stiffly. Oh, fucking hell.

"L."

"Because it's like you keep finding reasons not to leave, and all this with Penber. I'm pretty jealous of a dead man at the moment, Light, and it's not very pleasant because I can't even ease myself with thoughts of him dying because oooh, he's already dead."

"You didn't want me to leave a while ago!"

"Yes, because I thought you'd be unhappy if you did. With a choice between you being unhappy or dead though I'll go with the unhappy."

"Right, but I've always wanted to know what happened with Penber and this is my last chance to put it right. Look, don't try to guilt me into doing what you want. You're everything to me and you know it."

"That's what B said, but not enough for you to forget about Raye Penber."

"Things don't work that way. I can't forget about everything else that's important just because of you. That'd make me an idiot."

"Ok," he breathes out. "Let's say that I agree with you, but if I mean as much as you say then you'll
leave this alone for me because I'm asking you to."

"I don't know, L."

"Light, I don't want to have to take this out of your hands, but I will."

"How can you..." He'll destroy the desk. I picture him setting it on fire outside his garage and watching it burn until only the bones of truth lie in cinders and ashes. He'll do that and I'll never forgive him. I'll lose the two things which are most important to me at the same time. "No, no, don't do anything. I just need to know."

"If I can't trust you not to do whatever madcap thing you want whenever I'm out of the room then you leave me with no choice. Knowledge alone can be justice. You don't have to take revenge and make sure everyone knows about it," he says. My eyes widen because he knows. He knows there's something in that desk which could blow everything apart and I want it.

"You have looked inside the desk, haven't you? You know what's inside."

"I'll call round in the morning," he tells me as he stands up. He's had enough and I don't want to push him into doing anything to that desk. I'll leave it, and tomorrow I'll make him trust me so much that he can sleep, and then I'll find out everything I need to know.

"L. -"

"And I'll get you another phone. Use this one for now and tell me what you want when you wake up. Do you want me to get you breakfast from somewhere and bring it in? Are you on a health kick still? Don't have fish for breakfast again, it's so boring."

"You choose something then. I'll go to sleep now," I say huskily just before I untie the hospital gown fastening across my shoulders so that it falls off my arms and down to my waist. Trying to win him over in such an obvious way brings out every ache in my body, but I have to do it. I have to make him want to believe me. I'm available for anything, even now, and he can do whatever he wants as long as I get what I need at the end. It's over the top and he won't be fooled by it, but he likes it anyway. He looks me up and down, appreciating the blooming bruises on my chest and wishing that he caused them himself. "You running all these chores for me will look strange."

"I don't care what it looks like. Who else is going to do it for you? Who else is going to put up with your sense of entitlement? No one except me."

"And why do you put up with me, L?"

"You know why."

I smile as I lean towards him like his answer is what keeps me alive. "Remind me," I say. He doesn't answer immediately. I think he knows that he's being had, but he still doesn't care.

"Because I love you, you little shit."

There we are. I rest back on the pillows again and drag on my cigarette like we've just had sex. To be honest, I'm astounded that he hasn't jumped me already.

"I love you too... you lanky bastard."

"Well, isn't this nice," he almost smiles. "But don't forget what I said. I won't hesitate to burn that desk if I don't 100% believe that you're going to be sensible. And I'll do that because I love you,
otherwise I'd just hand it to you right now."

"Don't burn it yet," I say, tapping my cigarette onto the floor like I couldn't care what he did to the desk. "It could be interesting. We'll go through it together."

"Yes, but you might do something stupid with what you find. That's what worries me."

"I won't do anything stupid. I'll do whatever you say. You're the greatest man in the known universe, why would I go against what you say?"

"Oh, I wish I could believe you," he says bitterly. His eyes are heavy as he looks at me. "The flattery is overwrought, by the way. I've had too much excitement in my life. I just want it to be quiet forever now, and I want you to be there. I know it sounds boring but that's my sales pitch."

"It doesn't sound boring at all."

He doesn't come to see me in the morning, but everyone else does. When I realise that L's not going to turn up, I ask to be discharged after my tests come back with the same results as last night. Sleeping at the hospital was fitful, so I have a shower and go straight to bed when Kiyomi and I return to the Kantei. We're in an identical car to the one I was in yesterday and I'm in the same seat. Everything's so similar and yet different when we pass the same spot where I crashed and I stare at the dark patches on the road, the sand soaking up various substances, the tiny glistening shards of glass like stars on the tarmac.

I have a dream that I walked into the cabinet office for a meeting and shot all the remaining leading members of The Lady's cabinet office one by one with a revolver. When I stopped to reload more bullets, the idiots just sat there dumbstruck, waiting for me to continue. It's very realistic and very gratifying because it feels like something I have to do to see justice exacted. The time it takes to become a serial killer is less than thirty seconds.

Kiyomi lets me waste an entire day and wakes me at six o'clock. She's ghostly white and breaks news to me gently but torturously slowly. All the founding members of my cabinet office passed onto me from The Lady's clique - the guilty - have all died of heart attacks. Somehow, I'm not surprised. Explain that.

After I'm dressed, I sit in the living room drinking tea and watching the news while Kiyomi bobs Kira on her knee to jolt the impending cries out of him before he starts. There's no word from PR, but the media have the news and are running some kind of panicked campaign blaming everyone in sight without actually stating anything implicitly, particularly pointing towards an internal or foreign conspiracy (they can't decide which) to destroy the country's government. It's run alongside reminders about the accident which killed Watari and injured me, and L must have released a statement about the deaths, purportedly from my sickbed, which sounds so like something I'd write that I'm confused as to whether I did or not. At least I'm being seen as a victim now who narrowly escaped with his life. No one knows what's going on so everyone's a white canvas just waiting for me to tell them what to think. I can use this.

There are bruises all over me and my bones groan, but I think it's worth it.

After phoning the PR department as soon as I heard the news, Mihael told me that L also sent out a standard press release which urged people to be calm and promising further information as soon it's available. That was as much as he could do until he was able to speak with me, he'd said, so he went
home at his normal time, leaving Mihael and the department to reiterate his statement to everyone who calls. At seven o'clock, I leave to go to L's house. I'm perfectly calm until he opens the door and I'm suddenly pissed off as soon as I see his face. It might be because of his choice of clothes, actually. A white long-sleeved t-shirt and jeans. He looks like a fucking misfit.

"You didn't come to see me at the hospital," I say when he opens the door and greets me with silence and a blank expression. I'm angry and unsure and why does it always have to be this fucking way with him?

"I tried but there were too many people there. I didn't have a chance of getting anywhere near you. You've heard then?"

"Yeah. What a terrible tragedy to befall us."

"Terrible," he agrees.

"Mihael said that you needed to speak to me about it."

"It could have waited until tomorrow. Are you sure that you should be... you know, walking around?"

"I'm not going to bed for no reason. Are you going to give me a reason to go to bed?"

"I'm glad you're so happy that your cabinet office has been decimated."

"Yeah, about that - we need to talk about it tonight because I'll hold a press conference tomorrow morning. I was just wondering if there was anything wrong, because I haven't heard from you. I brought something from a restaurant," I say, lifting up the bag as proof. "Are you going to let me in?"

"Oh. Yes. Sorry," he says, stepping to one side to let me pass. "You got a takeaway from a restaurant?"

"I had someone pick it up for me on the way here. It's supposed to be cold, which is just as well, really."

"I... I got you another phone," he tells me, and reaches under the coat rack to pull out yet another bag from the phone shop. He must be their favourite customer. I can't believe that he actually got me another phone, the stupid bastard.

"Thanks. Put it down," I say, walking up to meet him. He looks very puppy-like as I rub his back and he practically folds himself into my chest.

"How are you?" he asks.

"Good as new. Ok, the plan is that we eat this, fuck around, talk about the shitstorm for ten minutes and that's it."

"Is that in descending level of importance?"

"Yeah."

"Light, you do know what happened, don't you. How they died? Did Mihael tell you?"

"He didn't tell me anything that wasn't on the news. Seems like divine judgement, doesn't it? If I was mad, them dying could make me believe in this curse thing."
"At the same time."

"What?"

"They died within minutes of each other, all of heart attacks, and they were all in different parts of Tokyo at the time."

"Really?"

"Apparently so. It hasn't been released to the press yet, so we just stayed vague. Better it sounded like an accident than what it actually is. Just saying, because if you're giving a conference then you shouldn't try to play it down. You can't play something like that down. It'll have to come out tomorrow. The police will launch an investigation."

"How could they have died within minutes of each other? All of them dying the same way at the same time."

"It's like Stephen," he says. From his profile I can see how worn out he is. Dull and tired from being assaulted by PR nightmares. "Someone made an example of them."

"Someone?"

"Or something."

"L."

"I'm not saying anything."

"You still think it's me, don't you."

"No."

"L, when I got back to the Kantei I had a dream that I shot -"

"Don't," he says, closing his eyes. God, he knows. He does know, he just doesn't want to hear it from me because that makes it real, but he knows. My anger over his stubborn grasp of ignorance makes me rattle out what happened so he can't ignore it anymore. Part of me wants to tell him the truth and for him to be disgusted and turn on me, part of me wants him to tell me that it doesn't matter.

"I shot them, and when I woke up, they were actually dead."

"It's a coincidence."

"It's not a coincidence."

"Maybe you're psychic then, Light," he mumbles. He opens the brown restaurant bag and tips the plastic containers so that the food loses all shape and becomes a sludgy mass which rolls and slides around inside. "I don't know what wine you're supposed to drink with this."

"L, will you listen to me?"

"No, I won't."

"You just don't want to believe it!"
"That's right, I don't."

"But that's no use to me, that's not helping me! Who do I talk to if I can't talk to you?"

"No one," he says harshly. He looks at me harshly, speaks to me harshly. If he doesn't want to admit it then it must really be true. "You don't think these things. You will not let yourself think these things."

"What if I am the curse and I can't control it?"

"No, you stop that. Listen, you are not to blame. I'm sorry if I made you think that I blamed you. I'm just really sorry. About how I've been. It's one of those times when I fuck up and when I actually think about it, I realise how much of a shit I am. And it's stupid, really. Blaming you for things is very counterproductive, as good as venting feels at the time, because then you go and I miss you and you get involved in fatal car accidents. Fuck, what is this shit, Light?" he asks as he pops open one of the containers.

"I don't know."

"Should we eat it when we don't even know what it is?"

"The 'Where to Eat' guide says that the chef at that restaurant is the best in the country and he's got a degree in physics. He made teriyaki venison with a cryogenically frozen rosehip compote and it won an award. I'm sure it's ok."

"I'll take your word for it, but I think we'll need a lot of wine," he says. I follow him into the kitchen where he's picked out plates.

"The accident was only fatal for Watari," I point out, going back to our previous conversation.

"You could easily have died. Easily."

"I didn't though. I got out with barely a scratch, but I wanted Watari to die. Right before it happened, I was willing him to die. One of the last things I said to him was that I was going to have him executed. Coincidence? I ask. My hands start shaking and L turns his face to watch them shake for a minute, but he doesn't say anything. I nearly killed him with my bare hands and I've wanted him to die. Maybe he's realising what a mess he's in. "I said that, and it was almost like Culture aimed right for him. Like I'd told Culture to do it. Everyone else survived, I survived. Don't you think that the curse, if there is a curse, would wipe us all out since we were there? Why didn't I die?"

"Because it was an accident," he says firmly. "Why would you kill Watari?"

"I'm sure that you can think of a reason. The same reason that I wanted the other bastards in the cabinet office to die. Because they killed Raye."

"I don't think that you had anything to do with it. You wouldn't place yourself in that situation. And, like you said, it's impossible. No one can kill people like this."

"Maybe I can. Maybe I did it as a double bluff so that I could be blameless in your eyes and everyone else's eyes. I placed myself at the scene of the accident so that I couldn't be responsible."

"No. No, I don't believe that."

"So you don't think that I killed Stephen and everyone else then? Am I absolved?"
"I shouldn't have blamed you. I shouldn't have said the things I said, and you shouldn't have taken any notice of me."

"When in doubt you go back to treating me like some errant servant of yours that you can't part with because I make the place look so decorative and I'm an easy fuck," I spit out at him. I'm not shaking from shock now, I know that. I'm shaking from anger and hatred.

"You know that I don't think that," he says, putting plates onto the worktop. "I mean, you're decorative and you're an easy fuck, but that's not why I treat you like shit."

"No? But it's how you treat me. I'm a murderer, I'm a coward, I abuse you and forced you to leave Stephen and come back to me. Then I killed him, like I killed everyone else, because I hated him. You don't know the thoughts I've had, L. You don't know the things I see. And because it doesn't suit you to believe that I really am a murderer, you just ignore all the proof."

"There is no proof," he says, plopping the food onto the plates so it spreads in a disgusting mess like raw offal. "This conversation is over, Light."

"I hate everyone and I want them to die. The world can't be saved by political bills, it can only be destroyed. Then it will be a utopia. A world without man."

"Light, don't. Please." The words are muffled because he covers his face with his hands. I'm breaking him. I'm finally breaking him.

"That's what I've always felt – that there is no salvation. But I met you. I met you, and I wanted to crawl inside you and live in your veins. Did you know that? Aren't you scared, L? That's not love, is it."

"It is to me," he says. Now his hand shakes as he drinks from his glass and tries to pull himself together. How can he think that? "Who the fuck can say what love is."

"How can you just accept what I've done and cover it up and serve pretty statements to the press? That makes you as bad as me. It makes you worse than me."

"It's my job. Things are simpler when you don't let emotion get in the way of what you have to do."

"So you're not doing this for me then? You should report me, L. I'm sure you'll find someone else to sleep with. Hell, you found one a few months ago without any trouble, and you said you were happy with him. You're not happy with me, look at us. There's B. You could always have B. B loves you. He's mad too, like me. There are plenty of men like me."

'Shut up!' he shouts, but it only takes a few seconds for him to calm down again to his icy way of speaking. "There's no one like you. We have to stop now. I feel really shit, I can't take this from you, and this food is going to start growing legs if you don't eat it soon."

"What's wrong with you?"

"I just don't feel all that great," he says, pushing his hair back from his face. "It's been a long day."

"I'm making you ill."

"No. I just can't hear all this from you anymore."

"I am. I'm making you ill. I make you do things you wouldn't do, I've made you the way you are. I got rid of B, I got rid of Stephen -"
"No, Light."

"And you have the fucking gall to say sorry to me with mobile phones? What the fuck is wrong with you, L?"

"I am sorry. Words don't seem like enough."

"Why? Because I needed you on side and you flipped out on me?"

"I was... I was upset."

"Yeah, about Stephen, not about me," I tell him as he walks past me carrying the two plates. I follow him and watch him set the plates on the table.

"That's ridiculous," he says. "Eat your cold whatever it is."

"You cried about Stephen. Literally cried on my shoulder. I nearly threw up."

"I didn't cry."

"Are you kidding me?" I laugh.

"Look, are you going to have some grace and let me cry over whoever and whatever the fuck I want to?"

"No. Why did you start spreading rumours that I was depressed when I asked you not to?"

"Oh, that. I wanted it over and I wanted your attention, to be honest with you."

"That's not the way to go about either of those things."

"I know, and I am sorry. About the other night as well. I was too rough with you."

"I'm not complaining about that."

"I know. You should do though. I would. I keep trying to find your breaking point but I can't."

"Why? Why do you want to find my breaking point?"

"I don't know. And it's not you who makes me do it, not intentionally. Anyway, I've decided that you don't have a breaking point and I'm giving up the search. Light, I'm sorry for everything, ok? Can we just start again?"

"You're sorry a lot," I say, and we sit next to each other at the table. I'm surprised that despite an argument which ranges from murder and how I think that he's in love with Stephen because he's dead and can be whatever L wants to make him, that none of that held up dinner.

"Lately, yes."

"Have you been drinking?"

"One."

"Keep it to one. I don't want an alcoholic around." He doesn't reply, just squeezes his eyes closed, but I start eating and he starts pushing the food around on his plate. It becomes my sole focus while I shovel food into my mouth without tasting it or noticing anything about it. All I can think of is his
downcast face as he moodily swirls the sticky rice mess around in a never-ending circle. Eventually, I snap. "L, if you don't eat that, I'll stuff it down your fucking throat. Don't become one of those awkward people you have to look after like a baby."

"It's just that I've eaten already," he says apologetically.

"Oh. You should have said."

"I saw Stephen's sister today."

"She came here? I thought he was, y'know, sent back to them."

He breathes out a short laugh and places his chopsticks on the edges of the plate. "I think she wanted answers and to go through his things to decide on what to take back."

"Did she get answers?"

"The US autopsy results were the same as the Japanese one."

"Heart attack?"

"Yes. His grandfather died in his forties, the same way, so Stephen's dad thinks that it might have been inherited."

"Well, at least that's something."

"I shouldn't have blamed you, Light. I don't blame you. I was just shocked by it and I made his last few months pretty miserable, but I didn't know that he was - "

"It's ok."

"No, it's not, and I'm sorry. Not that it changes anything."

I really am forgiven for all sins, it's amazing. I chew like a cow and a thought comes into my head - the most important thing now, beyond every death and every betrayal. Where's the desk? Where's the desk?

"Don't worry about it," I smile. "We're ok. So, what have you been doing?"

"Working."

"Apart from that."

"Sleeping."

Alright, he's depressed. In my experience, there's only one cure for that. I put my chopsticks down and for all the world I'm the most cheerful man on the planet. "Hey, let's have that fuck, eh?"

"You've just been released from hospital."

"Yep. And now I want a fuck."

"Now?"

"No, next year. Are you done?" I ask as I stand. He looks up at me with his wide eyes, completely thrown.
"Why? Do you have to go soon?"

"I can stay overnight."

"What did Kiyomi say?"

"Who cares? Are you saying thanks but no thanks?"

"No, I just want to know what you said to Kiyomi to explain why you're here."

"I told her that I wanted to get laid, L. What do you think?"

"Don't be sarcastic," he sighs, turning back down to his plate.

"Ok. I said that I needed to discuss what's happened with you and come up with some strategies. She
understands. And she believes in all this 'men retreat into their caves' shit, so she was fine about it.
Are you saying no to me?"

"I'm not saying anything."

"You just want to stare at your plate instead?"

'Well, you got me this... Alright. Let's go."

"No. It's ok. I don't want to force you or anything."

"Don't be offended, but it does feel a little forced."

"Oh, I'm sorry. We can't have things being forced on each other, can we," I say. I sit down again and
L just watches me as I start eating again.

"What do you mean by that?" he asks eventually.

"However you choose to interpret it is fine by me. Sorry. I thought it was what you wanted."

"Do you think that's all you are to me?"

"Yes."

He continues to stare at me while I stuff food into my mouth aggressively, because I refuse to be
affected by this. After what seems like an eternity of being stared at, he stands up and goes into the
kitchen, but I continue to eat my dinner like nothing has happened and nothing is wrong. The
multitude of problems we have, which all boil down to our distrust of each other, despite assurances -
all of that is always present. In the end, I can never trust him and he can never trust me. He hurt me
in such a base way and knifed everything which I relied on as a support. My ego is in tatters because
of him, and I rely on his affection like it's a ballast in stormy weather. Whatever he says now or in the
future can't take away the things he said to me in the months after we met again, because he meant
them. I force food into my mouth and hardly give myself time to chew. I do that until my stomach
lurches from it and my throat refuses to allow any more to pass by it and it lodges in my chest. Then I
push the plate away and place my forehead on the edge of the table, and I stay like that. The coolness
of the polished surface eases the tension from my head.

After I don't know how long, fingers reach around and massage the back of my neck in firm circular
motions under my collar.

"Are you ok?" L asks me, and I breathe in as I lift my head from the table.
"Yes," I say. He sits next to me and watches me pull back my plate to resume eating, even though I don't want it. I must have my 2,500 calories a day. "You're going to watch me eat?"

"Do you mind?" he asks, and I shake my head. I'm so sensitive to being watched, but I've been watched for as long as I can remember, and L has stared at me like the neighbourhood watch since day one, so I'm used to it. If people stopped watching me now I'd probably get stupidly depressed and anxious and question my purpose in life.

While I'm eating, he lifts my arm closest to him out of the way so he can nuzzle his head in the crook between my shoulder and neck. It's only then that I feel like I don't need to eat this shit. "Light, You're more to me than that," he tells me. Oh, sex. Yeah, I know that. Sometimes I wonder whether there's anything more to us than the occasional angry fuck, but if it was that simple then it'd be so easy to walk away. I wouldn't get upset with him because I wouldn't care enough, we wouldn't miss each other – we'd just find replacements or live with what we have.

"I see."

"No, you are. If it was just that."

"You would have left years ago," I say. Oh, wait. He did that. "No, I think you like me besides that now. I didn't mean anything by it, really. It's just car crashes, fires, death, near death, hospitals, you. Have you spoken to B?"

"No."

"Not even after Stephen died? You should call him, L."

"Why?"

"You'd normally speak to him if something like this happened."

"There's no point," he says. My hand finds itself on his head and I don't know why I feel like he needs comforting or why he's letting me, for that matter.

"He won't be angry now."

"Can we not talk about him?"

"I didn't realise that he meant so much to you."

"B?"

"Stephen."

"Oh. No, neither did I."

"Do you feel responsible?"

"I just feel like it shouldn't have happened. I don't know. I shouldn't have argued with him."

"What did you fight about?"

"Just things. The same old things. I don't want to talk that either, if you don't mind."

"Ok... Tomorrow you'll start with the poison pen letters, won't you?"
"Against Nate River?" he asks. He tries to pull away from me but I keep him in place and he doesn't fight it. I think the beat of my heart might drum the sound of battle into him and he'll stop being so fucking obstinate.

"Yeah. I don't care how you do it, just set the ball rolling."

"I don't know, Light. Haven't I got enough to deal with?"

"If we don't take advantage of this situation then all those deaths will have been in vain. All those loyal Blues who would have loved to have see a perpetual leadership. What a legacy that would be for them."

"What? But you're resigning."

"When I come back I want the coast clear for an easy win."

"River's socially inept and looks like a Mr Whippy. You don't need to worry about him," he says.

"Come on, L. It's one thing and you'll probably enjoy it. Anyway, shall we watch a film."

"No."

"You like films."

"Not not. I don't identify with anyone anymore, and that's the whole point of films: that you learn about yourself through them. I have nothing left to learn."

I'm not worried about L exactly. He's on a downer, but I am too and there's nothing new there. Where I can switch myself out of it if I feel like it, he's always been one to embed himself for the sake of it and not to deny himself anything, even sadness, then strike out, ruminate and despair quietly and I can't get a word of sense out of him. I'd almost prefer it if he was out of control and irrational instead. I don't ask him about the desk though. I'll look for it when he's asleep, because it's probably in the garage next to Stephen's boat. I keep picturing it waiting there in my mind. I itch to get to it, like it's a lamp which holds a genii, but I sit with L instead, and we're suddenly middle-aged; reading, not reading and talking about boring shit. Despite that, it's not boring, although it should be. I think it's strange to seek this and prefer it to anything else I could do. But I never was a socialite. I'm a natural at it, but it was always exhausting and I ended up wanting to murder everyone in the room.

Because I feel filthy even after the shower I had once I got back to the Kantei, I think whatever it is needs to be soaked and scrubbed and forced off my skin before I feel clean again, so I run a bath. While I wait, standing over the bath to watch the water gush into the whiteness, I have a cigarette, and a flake of ash falls into the perfect water. It's only after a day or so after losing things that you realise exactly what you've lost, and along with my jacket and phone, I did lose my gold cigarette case and lighter. They haven't been returned to me, anyway. I lost my briefcase and everything in there. They're all important things and I can't help but think that I'll mourn their loss a lot more than I've mourned the loss of any living person. Who knows if there's something wrong with that or not.

The steam clouds the mirrors and the tiles and dampens my hair as the curl of the bath edge fits along the back of my neck. My arms hang over the sides, and I think that I must look like a painting I saw once of a French leader from the revolution who was stabbed to death by some mad royalist woman when he was in the bath, and I consciously try to replicate what I remember of it. L, the font of all knowledge and a good 15% of my own, had a postcard of it stuck to his fridge for a while a few years ago, which is where I first saw it. It had a some words in French written on the back of it and
was signed from B, even though I didn't know who B was then and never thought to ask.

"I killed one man to save a hundred thousand," L says from the doorway.

"Hmmm?"

"Charlotte Corday's reason for murdering Marat," he explains. That's it. That's who I'm thinking of. Synergy flashes between us and it's fucking weird to share the same thoughts.

"I was just thinking of that. B sent you a postcard of a painting of him once, didn't he?" I ask him. I gaze up at the ceiling at how the steam glides around the light. It can't go higher, it can't escape, it can only settle and change form.

"Ha, yeah, he did. He was a bit of a morbid fucker."

"Was?"

"Well, I don't think I'll see him again now."

"Why not?"

"He doesn't forgive," he says. I think on that for a minute, dead in the bath apart from my mind whirring and thinking and possibly regretting. But if L doesn't see B again, it's either because he was too weak to oppose me, secretly wanted to get rid of B also, or didn't care. He has to take responsibility; he's a grown man. It's not my fault.

"What did he write on the back of the postcard? It was in French, wasn't it?"

"Oh!" he laughs with the remembrance. "He wrote: 'My great unhappiness gives me a right to your kindness.'"

"That's sounds like B."

"It was something to do with the painting," he tells me. "Do you want a glass of wine in there? Make a night of it."

"No, thanks."

"Alright."

"Do you think of him?"

"Sometimes," he says before he leaves, and his answer drifts behind him like a sea mist after he's gone from sight. I think of B more than I should. I wonder if he's killed anyone yet. I think that I have.

As I lie in the water with the steam condensing under my chin, the stillness of the house makes me close my eyes and accept the almost floating feeling. Very gradually though, I hear a slow, faint, grumbling sound. Pipes, I think, because L has underfloor heating in here, but I can't ignore it somehow, and turn my face towards the open door. The tension builds in my shoulders as the noise grows louder, and then I see a red ball roll along the floor of the corridor outside, stop, and turn ninety degrees to continue its path directly into the bathroom, across the tiled floor, towards me. I watch it until it hits the side of the bath and stops just beneath were my hand hangs. Not again, no. I only hear the sound of the water when my eyes are closed, but the more I try to overlook what happened, it has happened, and I'm so angry that it will never leave me alone. It's haunting me until I
don't know what's real and what's a dream anymore. My fingers glance over the skin of the apple, then I grab it in my hand.

"Fuck off!" I shout as I throw it at the wall. It hits a large mirror and smashes it. Glass slides in large and small curving shards out of the frame and slowly drop onto the floor, and I hear L running through the house. L or something else. I wouldn't be surprised now, whatever it was.

"What happened?" L pants as he stops himself by gripping the doorframe. He looks at me with the first bit of life I've seen in him all night. His eyes shine like pieces of that broken mirror when he's frightened. "Are you ok?"

"Yeah. Sorry," I say calmly, sinking slowly back into the bath and looking at the broken pieces which still hang inside the frame.

"That was my father's mirror."

"God, is it?"

"Yes. I never liked it," he smiles, like I've done him a favour.

He leaves then, and comes back with a dustpan and brush like man at the bar. I don't know if that happened or if I dreamt it now. "Coming in here and breaking my heirlooms. Whatever next?" he tuts and sweeps the glass against the wall. I watch him defensively when he finds the apple and picks it up, and I try to decipher what he's thinking. What conclusions is he coming to when he looks at me in confusion? But whatever he thought must be pushed aside as he sets the apple on top of the pile of glass. What will it take for him to confront these things? I pull myself out of the bath and stand there dripping like a waterfall over a cliff face before walking out of the room, grabbing a towel as I go.

"I don't like apples," I say, leaving L crouching on the floor by broken glass and my footprints on the floor.

He follows me into the bedroom, I can sense him there behind me – the force of his presence was always hard to ignore. When he walked into a room, it was always hard to ignore him. Not because he was so incredibly aesthetically pleasing to look at that it was impossible to do otherwise, because that's why people look at me, I know, or because he burst in dancing and screaming for attention, but because something about him was commanding and assured and calm and volatile all at once. Am I going mad or have I always been mad? Am I going mad because of him or despite him? I can hardly remember a time when he wasn't there. I was always just waiting for him from the day I was born.

"I need to speak with you," I say, taking him by the arm before he tries to avoid the overbearing wrongness in the air. He doesn't resist me dragging him into the most constrictive place I can think of. There's a walk-in cupboard in his room which is meant for shoes, but he's abandoned it and it's now just empty shelves. Maybe he's frightened that I'll go ballistic if he does resist or question me. Honestly, I'm not sure if I wouldn't.

"Do we have to talk in here?" he asks as I shut the door. The light bulb has long since died but the odd LED light on the shelves make for an eerily lit space around us.

"Shhh."  
"Why do we have to whisper?"

"He might not find me in here, I don't know. He can probably find me anywhere. He follows me around."
"Who?"

"Did you notice anything else that was strange about the deaths?"

"I'm getting used to them now," he says dismissively. I stare at him and he looks downwards so that his eyelashes brush his cheeks. "There were more than usual."

"Eight. All at the same time, and all were The Lady's key figures."

"Yes, I noticed that."

"It's almost like someone has discovered something and has taken vengeance against them, isn't it? It's the plot for a ronin film."

"I haven't really thought about it."

"Liar."

"We've spoken about this, Light. It was nothing to do with you. That was the conclusion, and I'm not exactly sorry to see them go anyway."

"I killed them," I tell him desperately. It has to be acknowledged by him. I could work this out alone but I can only see one resolution.

"No you didn't."

"L, you know it was me. Watari told me that the cabinet office during the Lady's tenure ordered Raye's death. I'm not joking, L, I'm not being dramatic," I say as he tries to leave. "When he told me that, I wanted him to die. I promised him that I would kill him, and what happened?"

"Light, stop it. You've told me this."

"He died. And today, eight people died of heart attacks within seconds of each other."

"Please stop it," he tries to hold me but I hold his arms straight to stop him. I want to be heard.

"L, stop ignoring the truth. You know it was me, you've known all along. Explain it. Explain in rational terms how that happened - how all those people died."

"I..."

"I think I must do it when I'm asleep. I see things. I have done for years. I have dreams and he comes to me."

"Who does?"

"Death comes to me."

"No."

"You know that I see things!"

"It's nothing. You're just stressed and tired -"

"No! No, I'm not stressed and tired, I see him like I see you! He's real and he kills for me!" I say, trying to keep my voice down. L shakes his head and I'm so angry that I push him against the wall
for being so dismissive of me. "I'm a murderer, L. You're right. I'm the curse. I hated Jeevas and I killed him. I hated Stephen and I killed him. I killed Watari and all those people for what they did to Raye because they didn't deserve to live."

"No, no, it's not you. You have to calm down."

"L, it's one thing lying to other people but when you lie to yourself it's unforgivable. If you forgive a murderer, it's unforgivable."

"You're not a murderer," he says.

"Not one you've ever seen before," I whisper viciously, and he recoils from me. I'd tell him not to be frightened of me but if I was in his position I'd probably be exactly the same. How could someone as logical as him think that I'm anything other than a raving lunatic? I'm not though, I know it now. L saw the apple, so it wasn't in my mind. I broke his mirror with it. Every time I've seen those things they've been real. The demon is real.

And the demon appears through the closed door now. His face first, and the rest of him follows. He's lit from below and looks like a horrific corpse who has been encased in lead-like ice for hundreds of years, and even though I know his face well, it never stops being terrifying to me, and my mouth falls open as I look at him.

"Light, what are you looking at?" L asks me. I can hear the fear and sadness in his voice. His perfect creation is not so very perfect.

"He's here."

"Who!?"

I reach for the door handle behind the demon and pull open the door suddenly, hoping to hit him with it so we can escape, but it simply passes through him like I pass through his arm as I charge through. Sure that he'll follow me, I run back towards the bathroom, pulling L behind me, but he stops dead in the corridor and the demon passes by him, floating towards me and laughing. I back up but he shows no interest in L, only me, so I run into the bathroom. I pace around the room as if an escape hatch will suddenly open up to me, but there is no escape. L shouts my name through the door, the door handle turns manically and fills the room with a thudding noise.

I fall to my knees in the middle of the bathroom, grasping my head, and I've never felt so helpless, now that I'm completely at the mercy of a monster that no one else can see. As I look down, spots of blood appear on the white tiles and a shadow is cast over me. I look up and see the demon, coal black against the blinding whiteness. His smile widens and gapes and L's shouts fade into the darkness. I remember nothing.
This Charming Man

I'd want someone like me to die.

Like a weight has been lifted from me in some way, I'm floating and weightless in my thoughts before I'm grounded by the heaviness of my own body. My eyes rotate in their sockets towards the sound of wood knocking against glass, and the sense of light flooding where I am. I think though that I'd like to go back to the way I was, because I think that if someone had stabbed me while I was asleep, I wouldn't have felt a thing.

L looks like a drawn character with blurred edges against the light of the window, but my vision clears when he draws the blind again. Everything becomes clear then. I could stay here, where I'm no one of any great value to anyone else. I could laze in the climax of my life, and maybe it'll be sustained, maybe not, but I've abandoned ambition for this feeling and for another person, and I never thought that I'd fall for something so stupid and intangible. It seems like such a waste, but I put that pressure on myself. It'll take a while to stamp it down.

"I... It was warm, so I thought I'd open a window," he explains in a stilted way. It's as funny as his shaded, concerned expression when it comes into focus, because through a good intention for my welfare he ended up hurting me by waking me up. I press my face into the pillow, still smiling. The return to darkness and the coolness of the underside of the pillow against the palm of my hand is a relief.

"How are you feeling?" his voice asks me. I hurt all over with a dull, unrelenting ache, so I stretch, and my discomfort reaches a warm sharpness that gives me some kind of flagging erection. A few years ago I realised that that didn't mean that I was fucked up. I've never lost my taste for the obscene and physical reactions to something some people say are strange and immoral, but it was because I didn't understand it that made me intrigued. It's a dash of pepper on a bland bowl of rice. We should aim for a perfect complimenting cohabitation of body and soul, for one is nothing without the other. But everything is too intense. My skin can pick out the weave of the sheets, the springs in the mattress. My ears can hear the birds from miles away and the wind gliding over water and through the reeds.

"Feels like I missed a good night," I groan into the pillow.

"Yeah, it was great," he says flatly. "What do you remember?"

"Not a thing."

"Nothing?"

"Don't take it personally. I'm sure you were on sterling form, because I feel like shit."

"I didn't do anything."

"L, that's funny."

"No, really, I didn't."

"Oh. Did I drink a case of brandy then?"

"No... I was going to call a doctor but -"
"Why would you do that?" I ask, turning my face towards him. He's so painfully alabaster white, even in this dim room, that it makes me eyes hurt. Like he's been bleached by sun and water.

"Well, you... you must have blacked out," he tells me awkwardly. Oh my fucking God, give me a break. The very idea of it makes me cough unsuccessfully, laugh equally unsuccessfully, but it definitely makes my head ache successfully.

"Next you'll be telling me it was because I'd laced my corset too tight."

"You had a nosebleed."

"A nosebleed? Are you saying that I had a nosebleed and fainted?"

"I'm not sure," he says. "You'd locked yourself in the bathroom."

"Don't kid around, L."

"I'm not. It's what happened." Is he serious? It's a stupid, pointless bluff if he is, but well played. You wouldn't know it was a lie if you went from his poker face, because he looks like a very dedicated care giver. The pressure and expectation of me staring at him must make him elaborate, but I'm not sure if I want to hear it. "You were saying some strange things and then you ran into the bathroom, locked yourself in, and I found you on the floor when I finally did get the door open. I don't know, you got yourself into a state. You really don't remember any of it?"

I don't. I remember spots of blood on white tiles. I remember short clips, like the whole story is a film and parts of it have been burned away and lost forever. Forcing myself to try to recall it makes my head bang with rebellion when I find nothing but closing doors. I must have mixed my drinks with nail polish remover, despite what he said, but I've had enough of this conversation now. It's embarrassing if it's true, and L won't have a lockable door left in this place. Oh, no, he probably used that card trick of his. Hold on, why am I even entertaining his fucking ludicrous tale of events?

"What time is it?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter."

"You're dressed."

"Yeah. I was going to work, but you didn't wake up, so I called in."

"What was your excuse?"

"I'm distracted," he explains, and I press my face into the pillow to smile again.

"That's not an excuse that flies in HR, L. You'll get yourself in trouble and I'll have to bring you in for a disciplinary."

"I phoned Mihael, he'll sort it out. There's nothing I can't do from here anyway, though apparently he's having a meltdown. I'd rather not be there to witness that."

Everything feels so heavy, like several military rucksacks full of rocks have been strapped to my back. What the fuck is wrong with me? A few years ago I could have felt like this and gone into work without letting it touch me in a way that anyone would guess that I'd done anything more than have a glass of warm milk and eight hours sleep. But I was in a car accident, I remember it now. That should count for something. I look up dazedly at the ceiling while rubbing my head and will myself to see smoke blowing across it, dark and like a living thing. That's my main memory of the
accident: smoke and tarmac and broken glass. I can't focus my eyes on his alarm clock, even though it's that aggressively clear type. My eyes burn and sting, and I imagine them bloodshot and in danger of exploding, so I close them, taking it as a sign that I shouldn't try to see anything.

"I need to give a press conference, don't I? I said I'd do that, didn't I," I say, levering myself to something that could be described as sitting.

"No. You're recuperating. There's nothing for you to worry about. No one expects you to be giving press conferences right now," he assures me. Yes, because you've handled everything, I'm sure. Everything in effortless, short phone calls, and I'm not sure whether to be thankful or angry. I feel the bed sink, the cover pulled down from over my shoulders, and I shrink back against the cool air hitting my skin there, exposed from my cocoon. "I didn't see these yesterday," he says sadly.

His hand has settled, featherlight on my shoulder, and I turn to watch it shift over my skin until the bruise beneath shows itself. Well, I was in a car accident, I'm not sure why he's surprised. I would have been flung around like a doll if it wasn't for my seatbelt, which has left a stripe of yellowing, patchy bruising at an angle across my collarbone and chest. It doesn't hurt so much as it's fucking annoying. I don't say anything. After seeing this glimpse of the imperfect state of myself, I look towards the blinded window in a daze. Seconds pass and I feel L's growing agitation at my silence and coma-like state. My detachment, even from myself, is a gift I'm blessed with and one which I encouraged. I'm blessed in too many ways to count, and I don't think I did anything to earn them. I'm some weird fusion of lucky genes, circumstance and soul, with no blights on my horizon.

"Should I call a doctor, Light?" I look at him, trying to understand what he means and trying to figure out what makes his face so different now from how it is normally. "I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do."

"You're asking me for advice? That's a first," I laugh after a moment. I'm giving up on today - it's too tiring. I fall back onto the bed, rest my head on my arm, and feel the bed sheet with a casual flight of my hand to check for signs that he's lying. No soaking patches, no dried, flaking, rough smears. I'm almost disappointed in him. "No, I don't need a doctor."

"So you think it was just stress then?"

"Yeah, maybe I was stressed. The past few years have been quite stressful, in a way."

"Quite stressful?" he repeats, raising one shocked eyebrow. I don't know why he's so upright and why he doesn't move. Despite my general feeling of unwellness, I have strong urge to be fucked, and I roll onto my back like an offering who finds some mad satisfaction in these things. It might be because of the aches and pains that I do, because it'll add a brittle shine to things. It might be because without it I'll have nothing else to think about apart from the missing hours, or it might be because he looks like how I imagine he looks when he meets clients in cells; from that superior angle, observing the handcuffed, cast down thugs of life. Who's been a naughty boy then?

"Well, you know, I'm still alive. So I was acting weird then?"

"Yeah. You were saying some pretty strange things."

"Like what?"

"What do you remember?"

"Nothing. I know that we talked, but... there are a lot of gaps. I'm alright now."

"Are you sure?"
"Yeah," I breathe out. For an apparently intelligent man, he needs things spelling out to him more often than you'd think, so I stretch again as if to demonstrate how alright I am. It'd take nothing short of a nuclear blast in my chest cavity to lay me low. It annoys me, how he looks at me, like I'm a cause for worry when I'm the last person in the world anyone should be concerned for. I'm an anchored ship in a sea of upturned hulls like spinal columns rolling on the waves, all souls lost.

"You've been asleep for a long time," he says, taking a bored gulp of coffee. "I'll make you something."

"Unnnngghh, I think I've gone past the point of eating anything," I reply, grabbing his hand to stop him from leaving. I hold it loosely, but ready to grip it like a vice and yank his arm from its socket if he tried to go.

"Do you want my coffee?" he asks.

"I'd have to move."

"Not much," he smiles at me. I'm not sure if I can take much more of his beside manner; quietly spoken and bending over to help me with slow movements like I could expire or go insane if he acts normally. This is not my L. My L would be laughing at me. My L would have gone to work and left me here to wake up alone. My L would have set the ringer on my phone to the loudest setting and left it right by my head and called it once he got to his office to inflict the most pain.

His hand nearly guides me while I prop myself up on my elbow, and he holds the cup for me to drink from. My head pounds again, my brain throbbing almost audibly against my skull because I'm so fucking annoyed about this. I feel like I spent hours shouting and crying and drinking and fucking with about seven different thugs you see driving around on state benefits (because no one in their right mind would employ them) who have motorbikes and Nazi helmets, and I still can't quite believe that that didn't happen. I shuffle through the filing cabinet of my mind trying to remember something of the lost in between moments, but I draw a blank, which is irritating. Nearly as irritating as how he holds his cup in front of my mouth, so I ignore his intention of actually pouring it down my throat and take the stale tasting coffee from him. It's unhealthily laced with sugar and so strong that it's like an injection that sets my pulse racing, but only for a second, because I'm abnormally tired again almost right away. I kiss his lips softly without opening my eyes and without knowing why, feeling the tender pads of flesh against mine, and lie down again while he exhales deeply, apparently pleasantly taken by surprise. He rubs my shoulder and his fingers glance over the bruise on my collar bone before he kisses it. It hurts, and I'm reminded again that I would very much like a fuck and to go back to sleep, so and I put my arms around his thigh and rest my head on it like he's a shitting dakimakura. Even so, I'm starting to appreciate moments like this, despite it being disgustingly embarrassing for the most part. It's better than hurried sex and more meaningful than words, so of course he'll ruin it. I'm just waiting for the time to come.

"I sent Kiyomi a text message from your phone and pretended that I was you," he says, sliding his finger across the screen of my phone to show me a frighteningly typical me message and the typical Kiyomi reply, which is slightly moody, slightly worried, slightly in love with me, and slightly makes me want to bend over a toilet and purge myself. He seems proud that he elicited such a response from her, and that it's proof that he's brilliant at impersonating other people. What does he want, a medal for interfering? Just shut up and make the most of me now, because I won't be like this again. I try to take the phone from him, considering it's supposed to be my phone and I haven't even seen it properly yet beyond what he's allowed me to see, but he moves it out of my reach, and I really don't care enough to persevere.

"You didn't have to do that."
"She's told the guards to leave you alone, which was nice of her. I think she'd prefer me as a husband; I calmed her down. Before I replied, she'd called your phone six times. I've put my phones on silent because she started phoning me."

"I don't know why."

"She's wondering where you are."

"No she's not," I laugh, but it makes him look tense and furious for a moment.

"If you think that she doesn't give a shit about where you go or what you do then you're an idiot," he tells me. Yeah, like you'd know. I don't reply, and my passivity throws him into a reverie of some no doubt profound thought. "Everything's falling apart in a really strange way. I'd rather it was quick and unexpected, wouldn't you? Don't you feel it? It's like sensing tremors before the earthquake, but you don't really pay attention to it because no one else seems to notice it and-"

"L?"

"What?"

"Shut up."

"That's rude. You interrupted me."

"Yeah. Don't start that shit again, because I'll have no choice but to throw you through the window. Ok, I'll have a coffee now."

"Is that your way of asking for a coffee?"

I can't see what was wrong with what I said or how I said it, so I shrug my shoulders unwisely. Every bone of me hurts. "You ask for coffee like that."

"In places where they're paid to get me coffee. I don't have to be polite or beg, because I pay them. You don't pay me or beg me."

"I do pay you. I suppose that makes you my whore, so you can make me a coffee."

"The state pays me, so I'm the state's whore. And a cheap one, apparently, because I'm definitely underpaid. But how could you put a price on what I have to offer."

"You earn more than I do."

"Ah, now, no. On the face of it, yes, but you get a lot of under the counter deals that I don't get. You forget, Light, I've seen your books."

"Foreign was a good earner for me," I sigh. It was. I got a lot of presents.

"Some of us actually have to work for a living to earn anything like what you earn, and all you have to do is stand there and look pretty at after-dinner functions."

"It's not quite as simple as that, L. So, what? Do you want a raise?"

"It's hardly worth it now, but the thought would have been nice. We all know what happens when I'm not around. The whole place falls apart."

"You arrogant bastard, it did not fall apart."
"You deluded bastard, it did. Watching it from a distance, it was like seeing the rapid decline of an ancient civilisation in Guatemala. It was quite heartwarming to think that it was all because I wasn't there to tell people what to think. I was on a high, especially seeing you trying to pretend that everything was fine. But you looked very stressed and lovesick around the eyes. Yes," he says looking at me from the corner of his eye before he sips his coffee. "Lovesick."

"Whatever. I can't give you a raise when I'm fucking you on the quiet, can I. What the hell would that look like when all this comes out?"

"Like I was very good at my job and a very good fuck," he explains. Yes, but I don't want everyone to know that. I can't be bothered arguing, which is just as well, because my phone lights up and starts vibrating and L holds it up in front of him. "Oh. It's your dad. He's been calling you too."

"It can't be."

"I swapped your SIM card while you were asleep and now your phone says 'Dad' a lot. The vibration feels angry."

"It's vibrating, how can it feel angry? Let voicemail get it. Shit, is that the time? Midday?"

"Yeah, I told you. Light, he's not giving up and it's not going to voicemail."

"Oh well."

"Should I talk to him?"

"Yeah. Yeah, you talk to him and we'll see how long it takes for him to get his friends from the station down here."

"Why doesn't he like me?" he asks the ether. "Oh. Is it because I bum people?"

"No. I don't think so. I don't know. I'm not sure if he knows that gay people exist outside of prisons. Maybe he's fine with it as long as it's not right in his face. It might just be you. Maybe he's heard about you Fucking your way through Tokyo."

"I didn't! I'm very discerning."

"L, come on."

"Look, if I wanted something that money couldn't buy and a fuck meant that I got it then, yes, I did that once or twice -"

"Once or twice?"

"Do not judge me," he says, pointing his finger at me. "My father was a judge and he could judge me, but you can't judge me because you're just a politician. Besides, you've done exactly the same thing for nearly ten years."

"I'm not judging. I think it's a very reasonable way to go about business."

"I think so too. There's something very civilised about it. Cold and civilised. Had to be on my best behaviour most of the time though. It was quite boring."

"Yeah, same. Well, them's the breaks. Why isn't my voicemail kicking in?"

"I still don't understand why he doesn't like me. I'm likeable."
"Because you tried to bribe him into giving you forensic evidence which you would have destroyed to clear your murdering client. It wasn't a great first impression."

"I never said that I was going to destroy it. God, these upstanding, law-abiding citizens are so annoying. I see how it is though. Everything's so horrendously easy to understand. Kiyomi's... female. Well dressed and reclining. He probably sees me and imagines me bumming him from behind. Are you worried about him finding out about us? Because he'll just imagine me bumming you from behind instead. I think my father imagined me being taken up the arse but he didn't seem to mind. It was nice, most of the time, but your dad must be one of those 'not my son!' fathers. All this seme/uke shit. I don't know about fucking women, obviously, but I've seen films and someone always gets fucked from behind and I really don't see how it's much different, whoever sticks what where in who."

"It's not."

"What is it like?" he asks inquisitively and vaguely disgusted, judging by how his top lip curls upwards a little. "With girls."

"Squidy," I explain. "Anyway, he is going to find out about us. And, no, I don't give a shit. He'll probably be fine about it in a few years."

"Do you think he'll be angry because of Kiyomi and Kira and your job or because it's me."

"All of the above," I smile. "And I still don't give a shit. Are you scared of my dad because he's an ex-cop?"

"No. I'm a barrister; I trump cops. I'm scared of him because he's very bulky," he says, and we both laugh a little at his honesty. "He gave up," he sighs when the phone stops vibrating. It starts again almost straight away though. "Oh no, he's back again."

"Just turn the phone off."

"It's like the whole world's against us just having a cup of coffee," he moans. I'd agree with him, but I don't have a cup of coffee. "I mean, look how innocent we are, look at this. We're doomed."

"Yes, L, it's the end of the world as we know it."

"I don't know what to do, Light."

"I have a suggestion."

"What?"

"Switch the phone off, get into bed and fuck me."

"I don't think your dad would like that," he says after a moment, and shyly looks back at the phone. "No, it's not a good idea because you're weak and bashed up and damn, I would love to say yes, but I think you should sleep and not be interfered with."

"I'm asking you to interfere with me."

"Yes, but you're not the best person to make that judgement call right now."

"Do you feel sorry for me or something? God, that makes me sick."

"What?"
"I'm really offended," I say, crossing my arms. "What a horrible fucking thing to say."

"I'm sorry that I'm actually putting you before my sexual urges. If you saw yourself..." he tails off and starts eating a cookie while he thinks about it. "Well, you'd probably be fucking yourself already, but I'm a considerate, better person. I want you to remember my self-sacrifice here. I'm like Jesus dying for your sins. How can you act insulted?"

"L, I'm giving you an invite with a RSVP and you're saying that I look so shit that you'd rather sit there and drink that instant coffee of yours and fucking hell, about that - could you do me a favour and get some proper coffee in this place? It's going to be a massive problem between us if you think that shit is fit for my consumption. I'm worth more than that."

"Of course, of course, I'll get some of that coffee which is chewed and shat out by rodents, and I'll buy a shiny machine just for you, Light, because that's what you're worth," he says. "And I didn't say that I'd rather sit here. I'd rather be on you, but I'm not going to because you're not well. As soon as you are well though, I will be on you, with or without an RSVP. You can think whatever you want, but you can't see how ill you look."

"Well you look fucking awful."

"Probably, because I stayed up all night watching you. I held a cold flannel to your forehead and you got blood on my jeans, but have I blamed you? No."

"I didn't ask you to. You're hardly Florence Nightingale. Am I supposed to be grateful?"

"Yes. Now stop doing that."

"What?"

"You know what. You're doing that thing."

"What? This?" I ask, stretching my neck and closing my eyes for a second, and I sigh for good measure. He stands up looking absolutely furious with me and quite frightening, if it wasn't for the cookie he's holding.

"Will you stop it, you cunt!?" he shouts. I look down at his crotch and smile to myself.

"I can see that I'm making you very uncomfortable."

"Not at all," he says resolutely. Liar. My shoulders feel like they dislocate when I put my hands under my head.

"So, if I really did faint clean away last night, if I believe that, am I also supposed to believe that you carried me to bed? What a prince."

"Yes, I did. Well, it was more dragging really. I pulled a muscle."

"Mmmmm. Ride me, cowboy," I growl, stretching out again. I just want to see his reaction mostly.

"Light, stop it. I'm not going to talk to you when you're like this," he says, handing me his now lukewarm coffee. "Drink that and go back to sleep. Have a caffeine nap."

"I don't want it. I want you."

"Well, you're a Fabergé egg right now and I am not opening the cabinet... But I really want to open the cabinet," he practically sobs.
"Open the cabinet already."

"No. I might chip the enamel."

"L, this analogy is terrible."

"Stick with me. I'm not going to open the cabinet, even if I have authorisation to, because I having a habit of smashing things when I open cabinets. And sometimes the people who give authorisation don't know what the hell they're asking for, because they've woken up with a boner. Will you drink that now, please?" he asks, and I pretend to drink the coffee. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry that I look bad."

"Don't be sorry. It's not your fault and it doesn't matter. Nothing's your fault. And, for your peace of mind, I really do think that you look excellent in an ill way. See? In with anger, out with love."

"How can I look excellent in an ill way? That doesn't make sense. You're saying that I look like shit, you're just trying to be nice about it."

"I'm not. You do look excellent. I don't know, you just do. You always do, but right now you make me think of people in custody who've had a beating. After a couple of days in a cell they have that same look, and to someone like me, that's very attractive."

"You're just saying that."

"You know me well enough to know that I avoid complimenting you at the best of times. Your ego doesn't need any encouragement and you never take it graciously, so what's the point?" he grumbles to himself. I bite my lip slightly to stop myself from smiling, and that just makes me evaluate his shaded profile a little too appreciatively instead. Shit, why doesn't he just shut up and stop being so fucking idiotic? I'm not having this, so I lean further back against the bed and dreamily relate a little story.

"I thought before, that you were looking at me like how you must look at people in cells when they're handcuffed and their legs are tied and they're lying on the floor next to a blocked toilet and it stinks, and you look down on them and you say -"

"Stop."

"Hmmm... no. You say -"

"Light, stop being a tart. You're causing me a lot of pain right now. These trousers are skinny fit anyway and now they're very skinny."

"You don't get skinny fit suits outside of a Chinese market, L, don't be stupid. They're slim fit."

"They're tight fitting."

"Turn around," I demand.

"No."

"I'm not going to do anything to you when it'll take me about ten minutes to stand up. Just turn around," I ask again, and he turns reluctantly and too quickly for me to get a proper look. "And again. Slower this time." He does, and I've evaluated the living fuck out of his trousers. I don't know when he bought them or what moment of good taste possessed him, but I'd really like to see the
jacket. I like Tom Ford a lot. He's the Hardy Amies for our generation. 'A man should look as if he has bought his clothes with intelligence, put them on with care and then forgotten all about them.' "They're not too tight. Tom Ford, isn't it?"

"God, I wish that you'd be wrong just once."

"You're not supposed to wear a belt with them."

"Please excuse my fashion faux pas. Should I have gone for braces, oh holy gospel of good dressing?"

"You could have done, but you'd look like a twat. A belt disrupts the visual flow and line on a suit with that fit. They'll sag with a belt. Look at the side adjusters."

"What?"

"The slide buckles on each side, but you don't know what they are so I'll sort it out for you. You could look amazing in that suit. You need a shirt with darts at the back to make it more fitted and less like a woman's blouse, because you don't need all that extra fabric there. The spread collar would work well if you had the right tie. Put the jacket on and pass me mine," I say, and I think he must be thankful that I'm not stretching and groaning anymore, so he complies. I fish out my cigarettes and light one while he puts on his jacket. Oh my God. "It's a close fit. Do up the buttons... Yeah, you see how it pulls at the top button? It's because it's too tight."

"That's bad."

"No, it's good, it's skin tight, it's what you want. You've had it fitted, haven't you?"

"I might have," he says grumpily.

"The tailor knew what he was doing. Very dark charcoal, almost black but not quite, mohair content adds depth and a slightly midnight blue sheen, so you should wear a tie that colour. Straight shoulders, three button front, narrow rolled lapel at the top button, jetted pockets, 5 button cuffs – you should leave the last button open, by the way – single vent with an overlap, flat front trousers with side adjusters and hemmed without a break." Swallow. "It's a nice suit."

He stares at me for a while, his eyes glazing over. I wish he'd have more interest in his clothing, and now that he does at last seem to be getting some appreciation for tailoring, he has that fucking annoying shame that some men have about 'vanity.' My tailor works exclusively for me now. It took me years, but eventually I found the perfect tailor – a lifelong bachelor doing alterations for old ladies from his shack of a home in Arakawa. I'd heard about him through Mikami and didn't expect much, but our eyes and minds on the subject of suiting were so in tune that I felt like... you know when you hear or see someone talking on TV and you wish that they were your friend? No, me neither, but I felt like I'd found my soul mate in tailoring. I set him up in a nice studio with a furnished flat just outside Tokyo, because sometimes the smell from nearby restaurants used to ruin his fabric.

"I need a drink after that," L says. He moves towards the door and I feel like I'm going to be abandoned in a hospital room again.

"Don't go yet. I feel like I haven't seen you for days. Pass me my jacket again."

"Please don't tell me about your jacket, I don't think that I could take any more."

"Sit down, I won't touch you," I assure him after he gives me my jacket from the edge of the bed. When he sits down, I hold open my cigarette case, which isn't as nice as my old one, unfortunately,
but it's only a temporary solution. "Turkish on the right, Virginian on the left."

"I've done enough damage to Virginians. I'll have a Turkish."

"Good choice."

I had decided, at a young and compassionate age, to devote myself to the one source of optimism that I could find in life – the fable of the inherent goodness of the human race. However, it proved hard to find. As a reaction to my disappointment, I developed an ability to keep a certain distance from life and prided myself on simply observing it coldly and participating only in a superficial capacity. I found no satisfaction in any personal attachments, sexual or otherwise, but I aspired to a status where all would see me, with the understanding that when they did notice me, they couldn't help but agree with me and see the error of their ways, or else they were damned. The damned would be easy to root out from the majority, I thought. But I found no testimony to that basic yearning for a peaceful, just world which I was told was in the heart of every living thing. The good were poisoned, or so it seemed. Everyone seemed inwardly sick and there was no goodness or beauty anywhere. I could barely excuse even the stupidity and conformity of the weak. But I saw our heroes of this modern age - the law makers and those that we should aspire to be. Only there could I change things, so I became one of them.

But instead of heroes, or at least like-minded people, there I found a well of the most vile, bacteria-sodden individuals on earth. I had found the rotten core of everything which was wrong in my world. I could have ejected myself from life then, once I saw the truth, overwhelmed by the distance I'd have to travel against so many, but what a waste that would have been. I was made for great things, and I could use these idiots if I have to, I thought. Soon, they didn't count as people to me; they were soulless things on two legs, and because of that, I felt nothing as I trampled over them so easily that they didn't even realise that they were the ones being used. In their eyes, I appeared to be just like them and just another ride in the fairground; pretty, innocent and stupid with shining youth. I advanced.

It would have been easy to lose myself in the slurry along the way, but I contented myself by seeing beauty in details, in skill, in talent, in craft; because to me, there was man at his best, and it was one of the only things which spoke of there being truth behind the myth of integrity. I was starting to think of myself as alone and a hopeless dreamer, but in such apparently frivolous things which are drowning in marketability, I found some sustenance. I was never interested in music or film because I think people make too much noise as it is. I like subtle things grown from lonely, dedicated, quiet lives, not oil on canvasses depicting fat-arsed bitches, landscapes and famous stallions, bright and garish with either no message or a weak one; but delicate stitches, mathematics spiralling around the human form, woven fabrics which take months to create, and all for the most simple and honest purpose. Something where a centimetre mistake or a slip of the hand or a flaw in the materials or execution, ruins the whole thing. Something was is fit and cut and painstakingly crafted for one person and makes them a work of art. It doesn't wear you, it becomes you. It's the ultimate aesthetic virtue. When you find it, it says: 'This is the best I can achieve. I could do no better for an emperor or a god, and I made it for you in return for a fistful of paper and for the love of it. This is the best. You are the best.' It seems stupid, but sometimes it was all I could cling to in a world full of evil and hatred which began to pour from me, despite myself. Feeling that sewn together cloth, seeing my new skin and and myself streamlined in the mirror like a cold-blooded shark, renewed my belief in that childish hope for a better world. God knows that there's little else which attested for anyone else's beauty of mind. And when I wore a bespoke suit, it became armour to me. People treated me with respect, they noticed me, I got offers. 'Do this and I'll give you something you want.' I did it. I felt dirty at first, but that was all. I didn't see what the fuss was about and why they'd want so little from me, but after I'd showered and put on that suit again, I was beautiful once more; my cause was
beautiful, my martyrdom was beautiful, and I was made clean again. You could say that my wardrobe has been my greatest, truest friend. In it, is my pride in myself. I don't consider it a flaw to value myself so highly. If anyone thinks it arrogant, they haven't seen the filth I've seen which are classed as human beings.

As I developed a passage of life which zig-zagged towards my goal, overseen by an unknowing public and the lowest forms of human life, it was destroyed by something beyond intellectualism and aesthetics, and was possibly the making of me, possibly the ruin of me, possibly both. Something as burning as what I've heard of passion, but almost virginal and pure in sentiment. In truth, it was all those things. It was like a draught into a starved and dying fire. A man made of flesh and bone just like me, but full of stoic pessimism and laughter in the face what life offered him, instead of the hatred I felt. In some ways it was a greater revenge than mine. He took trinkets which were useful to him, like I have. He used people, like I have. The only thing he sought from life was a distraction, a challenge, an egocentric high, and the pursuit of pleasure. Brainsick spilling into insomnia, my companion in suffering. I'm not sure when we saw a cure in each other - maybe at completely different times – but when I wake in the morning, I think of him. When I fall asleep, I want him there. In me, he saw a storm coming. In him, I saw my heart breaking from it's hard shell and my dreams disintegrating and reforming into something new and beautiful in its selfishness. And now everything else is secondary and inferior, my dreams were the ravings of an idiot child. The change makes me calm in a peaceful way rather than the numbingly dead way I'm so used to.

So we have a quiet day. We talk about things we wouldn't usually have the time or patience to talk about and laugh at stupid things; things we've said and done which seemed so logical and reasonable at the time. And I realise that I've had enough. Not of him, but of the time between being with him. We talk about our childhoods and teenage years and neither of us have much to say about it that doesn't involve detachment, discontent and escapism. We eat instant garlic ramen and stink of it, and as we digest it and each other, the sun sets, and we grow slower and quieter like clocks when the batteries are running down, not quite keeping time, but keeping our own time which is different from everyone else's. He gives me a book and I only look at the pictures like an imbecile, because I'm not fit for words, and he reads a something else and laughs to himself intermittently. When I ask him what's funny he says that the book is unintentionally funny, so I climb onto his lap out of jealousy. He looks at me like I've seen people look at their children when they do something amusing and adorable; a moment they'll store to look back on. "Pay attention to me," I tell him, and he replies that it's hard not to when I'm sitting on him. His mouth curves, his eyes become almond shaped and soft with feeling, and my dick twitches up towards him with a flush of blood. I never took any notice of things like that. We're always warned not to listen our dicks, but I think that we don't give them enough credit, because sometimes they point us in the right direction like a compass when our minds are too clouded with logic and 'good' sense. The blood that fills it comes from the heart, after all. My mind told me to use him and my dick told me to leave him; now it's the other way around. He says that I'm still that Fabergé egg in a glass cabinet and never thought of me as something breakable. I'm not. Am I ok? I won't be unless I get my way.

He fucked me there with my legs slung around him, and the sweat dripped from my jaw like tears as I held onto him and the carnality. I got my way. I'm intrigued by how I used to avoid this or see it as a chore, but now I seek it, and once I get an idea, I'm not happy until I get it. Maybe my guards know what I'm doing or maybe they don't, but I'm starting to care about very little these days. Later, while L's asleep, I try to get into the garage through the side door, but it's locked and I can't find the key. Then I start not to care about that too much either.

He has a three-quarter view and a front view from my reflection in the full-length mirror, so he can see me well enough. I watch him, with his head leaning on one hand, one leg crossed over the other in my chair in my office, and he looks like a bored king since I oversaw his dressing routine. Now
there's nothing slapdash about him and he's completely perfect for everyone to see. I made him like me. I've put on almost exactly the same suit as the one he's wearing; I bought it yesterday during my lunch break. Don't look too much into it, it's because it's a good suit. Tom Ford, nearly the same colour, same cut, but it flares over me differently. Two days off is all I needed to recover sufficiently enough from a major car accident. Everyone else involved is either on leave, in hospital, or dead. People found it hard to believe that I was back at work so quickly. I'm sure that those other lazy bastards would have spun it out for a couple of weeks.

"Thoughts on this," I ask.

"Thoughts on what?"

"Me."

"Oh."

"In this suit. How do I look?"

"Ggg... nuhh," is the answer. Normally that reaction is the one I'm looking for, but not today. I smile down at my lapels as I straighten them, then I walk over to lean down towards him, my mouth hovering and sweeping over the corner of his mouth and cheek. I bet it's still smooth as satin. I feel fucking filthy.

"How am I supposed to take that? It wasn't even a noise, it was more of a bowel movement."

"Ha! Shut up. It's very tiring being me. You look very nice and you know it. I don't know why you're asking me."

"What kind of nice? 'Nice, professional, I'd like to listen to what he's got to say' or 'I'd like to rip that suit off his back'?"

"More of the latter."

"Shit," I say moodily, and draw back to reassess the situation.

"What's wrong with that? How was that the wrong answer?"

"I think I look too good."

"How can you look too good?"

"I can't go looking like a suiting catalogue when I'm talking about nuclear power. People won't pay any attention to what I'm saying if I don't dress correctly, and I've just been in an accident; I can't look too good. So, not grey. Black's too harsh. Blue. Blue?"

"Blue's nice."

"Does it say 'married, dependable, trustworthy, hi, kids! Today let's talk about nuclear energy because that's fun. And you know what else is fun? Once the station's built all of you will glow in the dark. Think of the money your parents will save on lighting!'?"

"No, it says blue. The only thing you are out of that list is married."

"You!" I say in surprise to a forgotten suit in the wardrobe. I swap jackets and am now respectable from the waist up.
"No, I don't like that suit," he groans behind me as I change into the new trousers.

"Exactly. It's loosely tailored. It's perfect. I knew there was a reason I bought it. I hate this suit but I want people to listen to me."

"Catch 22. If you wear that, you won't be on the front page, that's for sure. Not for the right reasons, anyway."

"I'll sacrifice the tabloids for intellectual journalism. Ok. Done. I'd still do me. The tie saves it. You should savour this moment, L. For once, you look better than me."

"Yes, I do. I'm not important, though. I don't need to be noticed."

"I think you should be," I smirk over my shoulder at him. I'm very proud of my dressed-up doll. It makes my heart expand and squeezes my lungs.

"No, the day I'm noticed is the day I retire from life," he says. "PR aren't in the press and neither are barristers. If they are then it's because they're shady or shit."

Looking back into the mirror and glancing myself, I tilt it backwards so I can't see myself anymore. "I can't look at myself in this suit," I grumble.

"Thankfully, I can," he tells me. We smile at each other and a cloud passes over the sun outside, plunging the room into a sudden but transitory gloom. Maybe a good knock on the head has made me so warm towards him now. I find it hard to control, even in company. I lean towards him unconsciously when I'm next to him and fail to correct it even when I do notice that I'm doing it. I laugh at his shocking remarks and nod along with his obscene statements and defend them when they're questioned. Being untainted is hard to remember now. I want to open windows and doors and say what's on my mind all the time, even it's so beautiful that it's ugly. People must think that I've undergone a personality transplant or that I'm on some uppers from the hospital, but I know that his fingers have left possessive bruises on my hips and that my dick shivers with remembrance every time he laughs, thinking of his teeth playfully biting the inside of my thigh. I smile when he does, like a fucking idiot, just like I am now.

The door opens suddenly and Kiyomi walks straight in like she has a right to, and looks at me like she's willing me to be kind to her. I resent the way she thinks that she can be here. Her job's complete, I don't need her anymore. When my smile falls, hers falls with it, and I resent that too.

"Hi," she almost whispers. "Oh, hi, Lawliet. You look well," she says, looking him over once she realises that he's here. I wonder if she's waiting for me to say or do something. I do. I go into the bathroom to check my hair. Unfortunately, she follows me. I simply can't restrain my only feeling towards her now, which is that I see her as a persistent problem, and I feel it emanating from me without saying a word. I see the future with her as I sever legal ties and I can so easily imagine how she'll try to destroy me in her catty ways. "Light, are you wearing that?"

"Yes."

"Ok. Well I'm ready. What do you think?" she asks, and I see her turning around in a circle from the corner of my eye, distracting me while I comb and smooth down my hair. I need a haircut, I think.

"Ready for what?"

"I'm coming with you."

"No you're not."
"But I've read up on nuclear sustainability," she says. I allow myself a short laugh before I walk past her to grab my phone from the desk. Her attention makes me so tired, like she's a life and soul-sucking leech. The world is full of takers like her. L is watching from where he sits and I roll my eyes to show him how I feel about this. It's more of an apology, but he doesn't smile like I expect him to. He remains blank and unreadable.

"I'm glad that you're broadening your mind, but L's coming with me," I say to her as I put some notes in my pocket to read over in the car.

"It's a PR thing," he tells her. He doesn't have to fucking explain anything to her!

"Can't I come too though?" she asks. Yeah. I'll drop you off at the rubbish dump. I obviously have to reinforce this point. She's not necessary, but that fact just will not get through her thick skull. For a second I see a flash of a dream when a single drop of blood dripped from her finger which pointed at the floor.

"It's not necessary, Kiyomi. Where's Kira?"

"Sachiko's coming to pick him up," she replies.

"Oh, ok."

"So that I can come with you. Akane's sick."

"Did she drink too much last night? I don't want someone like that around my son. She's so irresponsible."

"I drink and I'm irresponsible," L remarks.

"I don't want you around my son even when you're not drunk," I tell him jokingly. I don't care really, but Kira and L in the same place for any amount of time would surely end in disaster. He hits his hand over his heart, stricken, and we smile at each other again. I forget about Kiyomi until she speaks and walks past me towards the door.

"I'll be in the car," she says.

"No, Kiyomi. I said that you don't have to go."

"I want to."

"She wants to, Light," L prods me. Kiyomi's holding the door of my office open, and in doing so is opening this conversation up for my secretaries to absorb and spread the gossip throughout the department and possibly further, depending on my response and manner now. He's challenging me to make a step forward towards the dissolution of my marriage. Am I all talk? No. If it has to be this way, maybe it's kinder. I'll enjoy making her hate me.

"Kiyomi, can you do PR?" I ask her.

"I could have a go," she replies. There's a moment of silence before L laughs and covers his mouth. I smile, bearing my teeth because I just can't stop myself. I look away from her and scratch the bridge of my nose as if trying to recover. "I could!" she shrieks after looking disbelievingly between L and me. "I worked in media. L never has."

"Lawliet," I correct her, and she purses her glossy nude lips. What the fuck is the point of that sticky shit?
"Ok. Lawliet never has."

"We wrote this speech together."

"It's very important," L breathes out, leaning back in my chair and crossing his arms. "It's for the children... and the multi-billion yen investment into a part-nationalised energy source which could yield massive profits."

"So we need to make a good impression," I nod. "All the press will be there."

"Can't I just come to support you?" she asks. I thought that she might have closed the door by now, but her shock at being dismissed and branded useless has obviously made her forget that people are always watching and listening to us. Her eyes are wide and moving over my face in panic and desperation to be taken seriously as something of use to me. "That'll look good to the press, won't it?"

"It'll make him look like he can't move without you being there to hold his hand," L grumbles.

"And we don't people to think something so stupid," I agree.

"You really don't want me there?"

"No."

She stares at me, dumbfounded, until I just can't look at her anymore. I turn back to my desk and L, who spins around slowly in my chair to watch me lean over him to log out of my computer. I'm full of burning hatred for Kiyomi all of a sudden, because she made me do this. I don't want to be cruel to women, but there's always a first time. It must be an inbuilt system which tells me always to be polite, always treat them differently to men, always be forgiving of their stupidity and mood swings and empty obsessions, because they're the lifegivers and deserving of some respect. But she always gets in the way now. If I don't give myself something pointless to do on the computer then I feel like I'll slap her face until she's unrecognisable. Well, part of me wants to.

"Stupid bitch," I say quietly. Not quietly enough that she wouldn't hear it, because my intention is for her to hear it, just quietly enough that it might have passed undetected by the spies outside. Even if it they did hear it, I don't care anymore. Nothing matters. Marriages break down and husbands and wives call each other bastards and bitches before the end and they make sure that everyone hears it, even the children they share. They viciously attack everything in revenge for the lost affection, which in my case, I never had for her.

The silence that follows is that unbearable kind which drags on without end and silent words hang in the air until someone decides to throw something. L stands and turns towards Kiyomi, I presume, and says her name, but the slam of the door and the rattle of the glass in its frame and the echoing shudder throughout the entire wall of my office tells me that she's left. And that was the end of my marriage; a spat which children in a playground would be ashamed of, but it gets the ball rolling.

"We didn't write any speech together," L says to me after a moment, by which time everything except my bloodrush has returned to how it was before she arrived.

"She doesn't have to know that," I reply. Logged out and shut down and ready to go. "Speaking of, you didn't ask me about my speech."

"Should I?"

"You usually do."
"I'm not a Svengali. I trust you to do at least half as good a job as I would do if I was in your place," he informs me. I unbutton my jacket for no good reason when he pauses and I don't have anything to say. "What was that just now, Light?"

"What?" I ask breezily as I check my watch. Seeing that we're running on schedule, I push him towards the door. "Get gone," I say, marching him forwards. I don't look at my secretaries once we're outside of the safety of my office, I just keep on walking until we reach the elevator. While we wait, Mikami eases over to slow us up. I'll have to get rid of L for a minute.

"Yagami. Feeling better?" Mikami asks, but is quickly distracted by L and his suit. "Lawliet, wow, what a great suit! Look at the shine on it. Is it mohair?"

"Isn't mohair sort of fluffy?"

"It's a mohair tonik," I say, and L looks at me questioningly.

"Like a gin and tonic?"

"No. They have toniks with a K and tonics with a C, but tonics with a C are inferior. Yours is with a K. It's wool with kid mohair so you get this two tone -"

"It's ok, Light, that's enough."

"You look good, Lawliet," Mikami says. "If I was that way inclined, you'd be a complete 'would bang'."

"Oooh. Well, thank you, Teru. What do you think of that, Light?" he asks me with a beaming smile. You shit. I tell you that you look nice and you're suspicious of me, but Mikami tells you that you look nice and you're a giggling girl.

"L, get my coat," I say grumpily. "The Iceberg one."

"Sorry?"

"It's by Iceberg. It's slate blue, the same colour as this suit and it's in my closet," I explain, but he still looks lost as he walks back to my office. As soon as he's out of earshot, I turn back to Mikami. "I can't talk now. I have an important visit to make."

"That's ok. I just wanted to say that I can't make it to the meeting later. Naomi's got an exhibition opening."

"Oh. Ok."

"And there hasn't been much progress since the last time, to be honest with you."

"That doesn't surprise me. But I've made progress."

"Really?"

"Mmm... we'll reschedule for Monday. That should give you time to chase things up."

"Yeah, fine with me," he says, pushing his hair into a carefree, voluminous side parting. "So, Lawliet's your bitch now, eh?"

"Excuse me?"
"'L, get my coat,' and not a peep out of him. What have you done to him?"

"Nothing."

"Ha," he laughs into his fist. What the fuck is he on about?

"What?"

He leans towards me to whisper in my ear, smelling of glancing, rubbed off wisps espresso and Naomi's patchouli perfume. "He wants to knob you, mate," he tells me. Oh, sex, sex, sex, of course. Sex and money and status. I wonder if there'll ever be another valid reason for someone doing something for me voluntarily.

"You think so?" I ask him innocently and apparently slightly alarmed by the idea.

"Er... yeeaaah."

"Oh, that's awkward. L!" I call towards him as he returns through my department with the wrong coat slung over his arm. Mikami leans back in towards me, suddenly stiff with confusion.

"What are you doing?" he asks me.

"Yeah, I've got it, give me a minute," L says tiredly, handing my coat to me. "Is this slate? You say slate but there are a few blue-ish coats in there."

"It'll do. L, Mikami thinks you want to knob me. Is that true?"

"You mean, right now?"

"No, just in general. Anytime."

Between Mikami's expression and L's expression, I'm really struggling not to laugh. It's nice to indulge myself in small jokes like this, because sometimes I know I take life far too seriously and that's a heart attack waiting to happen. L's brain goes over possible answers, eventually deciding on something which isn't a complete lie just as the elevator door opens. "I wouldn't say no if you were going spare," he tells me, like he couldn't care less, and I smile triumphantly as I walk into the elevator. "Why? Are you going spare."

"I don't know. I'd have to consult my diary."

"I feel left out. No one wants to knob me anymore," Mikami whines. I press the hold button to keep the doors open just for this. I don't know why. Politeness, I suppose. My phone pings with an incoming text and I forget about politeness to check it while I wait for Mikami to piss off or the doors to close, whichever happens first. "Naomi excluded, obviously. But when I was 25, I was rolling in offers. Wasn't I, Yagami."

"Yes, Mikami." Not really.

"Couldn't move for offers."

"I bet," L says, and the doors close in front of Mikami's face. The message is from Kiyomi and says: 'You're the stupid bitch.' Cheap. The only thing that deserves is to be deleted, so I do, put my phone back in my pocket and look L over.

"Mr Lawliet, we appear to be in an elevator."
"Well observed," he tells the ceiling. "You were rather cruel to Kiyomi."

"Have I told you how fantastic you look today?"

"Yes. This will be the third time you've told me. It's not me you like though, it's my tonik suit with a K. I know your game. Clothes maketh the man."

"Not in this case," I smile, and kiss him instinctively so that my lips roll slowly against his until he holds my jaw with his hand. It makes me think of one massaging hand palming two dicks together, which in my opinion is underrated in a world obsessed with the metaphor of penetration, and this feeling is only heightened when his thumb presses into the tender underside of my chin, forcing it up towards him and restricting my movement. I feel so dominated and peacefully willing in this handover of control, irritated and driven half mad when he pulls away for teasing broken seconds and breathy, laughing groans, so that I lose patience and grab his tie tightly, tell him that he's a little shit, and bring him closer and make myself inescapable. The elevator hits the ground floor a few seconds later. We part without ceremony as the electronic woman tells us that it's the ground floor, like we didn't know, and his eyes speer mine so that I almost forget my purpose in life beyond being in his spotlight. We leave as soon as the doors open.

My car's outside. The same model and colour and almost indistinguishable from the one I crashed in. I get in when my guard holds the door for me, but L only opens his door and stands outside holding it open. His legs are turned towards the Kantei like he's taking a moment to appreciate the architecture.

"L, are you getting in?" I ask impatiently, and he slides in next to me with his usual 'I didn't ask to be born' face and says nothing. My curiosity gets the better of me and I look up at the Kantei as the car turns in a circle. A woman is standing at one of the windows above the lobby, and though I can't see her properly through the tinted windows, since she's already in shadow, I can guess who she is. If that's all she can think of doing with her time then that's her problem.

The following day, L brings me to the Kantei again because he had to call into the firm before work, and I realise that I haven't slept at the here for four nights in a row, and in a way, I have practically moved out without explanation. The staff will have noticed, and Kiyomi will be hearing all of the whispered gossip and theories. Serves her right. I unhappily decide, however, to sleep here tonight. I will avoid Kiyomi but make sure that the staff see me, because I'd like to avoid wind of this getting into the papers just yet if I can help it. Plus, I should at least make it look like I have an interest in seeing my son, though all he does is stare at me and occasionally laugh like a mad bird I saw in the zoo once. Sometimes I visit him just to see if anything has changed for the better. One time when I had some morbid interest in my progeny and decided to look at him, he'd clearly just shat himself and the room stank so badly that I didn't even bother crossing the threshold.

I find L in his office with Mihael, and I'm relieved that his recent downcast mood was a fleeting thing, because he's been sickeningly cheerful over the last two days, like I've been. Summer has finally arrived for Yagami and Lawliet and everyone else can just fuck off home. Thank you very much, goodbye.

"Light of my life! It's been at least two hours since I saw you last," L says after I shut the door, then turns to Mihael to make sure that he caught whatever joke he's trying to make. It's a bit too gay of a greeting though, so I'm trying to decide whether to write it off as a thing that L does and that we all must accept it, or to threaten him with a disciplinary again, which might or might not take place in a cupboard. "Ha! Mihael. Light of my life."

"Yeah, really funny. I'd laugh but I've lost all feeling in my face."
"What?" I ask, stuck to the spot.

"Light doesn't understand the poetry and resonance of language. All he understands is fumbles in small spaces and a frightening amount about suits. He is though, my Lolita, only I won't marry his mother to get to him. Thankfully, I didn't need go that far."

This is way too gay. This is extremely gay and he's including me as an accessory in all this gayness.

"Lawliet, what are you talking about?"

"Mihael knows about us," he says as he types, "so you can stop with the 'I don't know what you're talking about' shit. I have to say, it's quite a weight off my mind. Sometimes I think that I'm imagining it."

"Lawliet."

"What the fuck with the 'Lawliet'? Light, Mihael knows, so you can give up now. Mihael, tell Light that you know."

"I know," Mihael says as he types. No. Why should Mihael know? I didn't give him permission to know. If anyone was going to find out I'd rather it was someone high up, not some blond scrap that L adopted from a ghetto somewhere. I struggle to find words that are recognisable words.

"I... no."

"I know that you know, but Mihael does too now, so that's nice, isn't it?" L tells me cheerfully.

"Why did you tell him?"

"I didn't; he figured it out all by himself. I merely verified it and gave him a timeline. I told him about the house and all that."

"It's an amazing fucking house. Good find. It has a swimming pool and everything, and it's much bigger than what it looks like in the photos," Mihael monotones out without looking up from his computer screen. Wait, he's seen our house? Even I haven't seen our house yet apart from in pictures.

"Mmm, yes it is," L drawls in the same tone. He glances up at me and nods towards the chair opposite him, which I sit in before I fall down. "So, there you go. God, you look nice."

Yes, I do, I know that. I've accepted Mihael knowing surprisingly quickly, though in my mind I'm thinking of ways of cutting his tongue out and sawing his fingers off one by one with piano wires. L bends down to look at my legs under the desk, and I don't think that's a very professional attitude to have with me, regardless of what he's told Mihael. "L, stop looking at my legs," I tell him, and he taps fingers on his glass of what I hope is water. "And, Mihael, I shouldn't have to tell you this, but -"

"Don't worry, I won't say anything," he mutters, and L nods again.

"Mihael observes and doesn't give a fuck. He'll also keep his mouth shut."

"I have since 2010, anyway. It was kind of hard to ignore," Mihael says.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, I definitely knew since that guy went to the press with that story last year, you know."
"Err... What's he talking about?"

L shakes his head as if he doesn't have a clue either, but throws an angry glance Mihael's way. "I don't know. I think he has a drug problem."

"You didn't tell him?" Mihael says, and actually looks up from what he's doing. He clearly doesn't know L well enough to know that you can't rely on him to tell you anything. He just waits until you find out, like now, when some idiot like Mihael blabs. My head falls in my hand and I close my eyes in anticipation of finding out something which sounds bad, and I've been walking around, oblivious to it. Noting annoys me more than being ignorant. "Wow, I thought you'd play that one, L. Did you forget?"

"It wasn't important."

"Will someone tell me what the fuck you're talking about?" I demand so loudly that both of them recoil back against their chairs. This was only supposed to be a flying visit to help me stay sane, but it's turning out to be having the opposite effect.

"Old flame of yours went to the press and L blocked it," Mihael tells me hesitantly. I don't think he knows whether to be more scared of L or me. L hisses like he's just got a paper cut instead of having a can of worms opened for him, and my eyes dart towards him. You cunt, I'll kill you.

"And when was this?" I ask him, but Mihael answers for him.

"Ooooh, it was during his campaign for King of the Mountains, wasn't it?"

"Thank you, Mihael, you've said quite enough, and Light's not in the Tour de France," L says. He leans on his desk and faces me in a manner you'd expect from a doctor who's trying to prepare you for some bad news. "It was after you'd announced your candidacy."

"Who was he?"

"Can you guess?" he asks. I sit back to smoke and think. Why does he have to make everything a game? "I didn't know him but apparently he was quite the young pretender a few years ago when you were an underling, but then he was sacked." Ok. That doesn't really narrow it down much.

"Shido?"

"No."

"Hayashi?"

"No."

"Muza?"

"No."

"Fukada?"

"No."

"The Olympic football team?" Mihael opines. Oh, just be quiet, you.

"Shut up, Mihael," I say. "Kobayashi?"
"No," L replies. "You slept with Kobayashi? Please tell me that you were drunk. Oh God. All I can think of is you with him now and those things don't normally bother me, isn't that weird? You poor thing, you must have really wanted a promotion."

"Yes, I really did and I went into a zen state. Miwa?"

"No, not him either."

"I can't think who it could be. Erm... what's his name. Daiju?"

"Jesus fuck, do you just want to write out a list?" he asks, throwing himself back in his chair.

"Give me a clue."

"He had frosted hair. I don't know what you were thinking there either."

"Oh, Kisugi. I hated him, I hope he's dead. 'No, Yagami, I won't say anything. Politics is a lonely business for men like me. I've got more to lose than you after all.' Yeah, right. Bastard," I say. "How did you block that?"

"Used up a few favours with the press, paid him off and wrapped it all up in law and justice until it strangled him to death."

"What did he say?"

"The usual. I'm sure that it would be shocking to the average Times reader, but alas, not for me. Didn't sound like you were firing on all cylinders from his reports, and to be honest, I'm not surprised, having met him."

"L paid him off himself because the budget wouldn't cover it, and I figured it out then," Mihael elaborates. "I knew before. Well, I kind of thought that you were and Matt said that you were, but when L paid him off, I had proof."

"Yes, Mihael, you're quite the detective," L scowls. I don't understand why he'd do that. He could have just told me and I would have dealt with it. It was probably something to do with his control issues.

"Why? I mean... why did you do that?"

"I don't know, I must have gone mad. Come on, Light. Why do you think I did it?"

I feel blood rushing to my face and my ears going red as he looks at me, so I look down towards my lap. I hate owing people favours. I hate that he did something like that and didn't let me know, even when he apparently hated me, so I could have paid him back and destroyed Kisugi while I was at it. Kisugi. He was always a money-grabbing, ugly troll and it makes my mouth feel furry just thinking about him. He tasted like a raw steak. He looked like one too.

"Should I leave you two alone?" Mihael asks.

"No. Light just gets very confused when someone does something nice for him for no personal benefit."

"In a way, I guess that you did bene -" Mihael says, but stops short when L glares at him, so he lets that go and talks to me instead. "But you've been at it for years, I know all about it. You two should get married if it was legal here, except, shit, you're already married to someone else."
"And if you want to keep your comfortable little job and keep out of prison and out of the eyes of immigration, then you'll continue to keep your mouth shut," L tells him, and Mihael drags pinched fingers across his mouth like he's pulling a zip. Yeah, you better be quiet.

"So, when are you running off together then?" the idiot asks.

"Shut up, Mihael."

"You two are the most horrific pairing I've ever seen. Like Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes when they were everywhere with all that Scientology shit and jumping on things. Y'know, like a double-headed monster."

"Ignore, ignore," L tells me, but it's ok; I always ignore Mihael. "Tired?"

"I've been working since six."

"Are we at war?"

"No."

"Then why would you be working since six? No matter, I'll make you one of my special coffees."

"God, don't do that to him! I thought that you liked him," Mihael nearly screams when L stands up. I nearly had the same reaction.

"Thanks, L, but I'm coffeed out, really," I say.

"No, no, I have a mug for you," he replies, holding up another of those fucking awful mugs with a moon on it. He must have bought them wholesale.

"With a moon on again?" I ask, half to myself. He scowls at me, so I throw a loving smile his way. "That's very... kind of you. Is it clean?"

"Yeah. Looks clean," he says, but when he tips it over, something falls out of it. I'm concerned, but resolve to be gracious and to pour the coffee he makes me into a plant pot. It takes him exactly twenty seconds to make me one of his 'special' coffees, and I'm wondering how it's any different from his normal coffee until he puts a slosh of vodka into it. He places it in front of me and I try to look grateful while he sits back down and leans across his desk towards me. "So you're staying at the Kantei tonight? Is that what you came to tell me?"

"Yeeeah. Sorry. I don't want people to start talking. I have to keep an eye on things here."

"It's a shame. I'll miss this relationship that we're not having. I think I could have a more physical relationship with someone in the Russian Gulags who I could meet through one of those Christian dating sites, if they have internet access there."

"I don't think that they would," Mihael mumbles.

"Shut up, Mihael," L tells him for probably the twentieth time today, then turns back to me. "But can you come over later for a couple of hours after work? I'll cook and everything. Well, I'll put something in the microwave."

"No, I can't. I have a meeting at seven. Someone's getting promoted!" I say with jazz hands because of my non-existent excitement over something which happens so regularly now that pretending to be excited about it is very exhausting.
"Woo!"

"But I have half-an-hour or so now."

"I can't, I'm working. See how annoying it is when someone says that to you?"

"You're flagrantly disobeying orders."

"Somebody, stop me! I have to finish this article. You'll like this. This is Mikami's submission for a weekend supplement," he says, turning his monitor towards me. 'My Part in My Own Downfall by Teru Mikami.' Fuck, this sounds like a brilliant read, but I'm not sure if it should be printed. I'm going to read it to make sure if I have to veto this shit.

"L, I don't want it in a weekend supplement. You might as well put it under people's windscreen wipers if your aim is that people don't read it."

"Ahhhh, but this is how I'm masterful at my job and how you're coasting, quite frankly. The weekend supplement has the highest readership of middle-aged women in Japan, and middle-aged women just happen to be the majority of Mikami's voters when he had a seat, and they still would be in his catchment area, I think, if he goes for somewhere around the same district. They're his best chance, anyway. They love a handsome, reformed rogue. In theory, after this and a few public appearances, he could run again if you get rid of the woman who holds that constituency now and call another local."

"I don't care about him getting a seat. He's better off as an aide for now. He can't do much harm there."

"You're such a great friend, Light."

"I'm busy enough running the country than to waste time agonising over Mikami's fuck up career."

"Let's not talk about how bad you are at running the country. There. Read that," he says. I am reading it, give me a minute! L's lack of sympathy makes it read like a comic memoir. It's very good.

"You're still using this structure?" I ask.

"Introduction, exploration, expansion, conclusion, yes. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. You're just very old fashioned. Bleugh, bleugh, bleugh, 'I will always be grateful to the Prime Minister for his understanding, support and faith in me. He was the only person who stood by me and gave me hope that I could defeat my demons,' ha! 'and return to life in office one day. Before then, I felt like my life was over. I considered suicide because of the shame I'd brought on those around me; my wife left me and I was bankrupt, but the Prime Minister stood by me. It's my personal belief that Japan has never had a better leader who's so sensitive to the plights of the public. He listens. He's dedicated. I admire him above all other men, and it is through his support and inspiration that I now feel that I'm ready to try and make a difference and speak out about my personal failures. I want to be honest and hopefully help warn others against making the mistakes that I have made, and the reason I'm alive at all is in no small part due to Prime Minister Yagami's strength as a person and kindness as a friend.' Oooh, I like that."

"Now, that shocks me."

"Hold on, it goes back to talking about his personal failures again. What about me?"

"You come back into it in the eighth paragraph and you stick around for a while," he says.
"Oh, good."

"Why miss an opportunity to boost your public image? Which, since we're on the subject, is the journalistic equivalent of a flaccid dick right now. Uppity wives and snotty-nosed babies aside, you're not in the paper very often apart from when it's about how stylish you are."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"It's not bad, but wouldn't you like to be known for your personality and decency and ability to do a good job? Wasn't that what you were moaning about the other week?"

"All that's obvious though."

"People need to be reminded. Often. I'll write you an article for the Times. Otherwise you'll have to go on the TV again, and you wouldn't like that. Very low-brow."

"I can write my own articles, L."

"I thought that you were too busy being stylish? I'm sorry, I mean, running the country," he smirks. I ignore it.

"An article won't take long. What should I talk about?"

"Salmon fishing in the Yemen? Like anyone cares about that shit. I don't know, you have to make yourself more personable. I think that you should be seen in a t-shirt, or roll your sleeves up."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"And, once in a while, don't wear a tie when you visit a museum or something like that."

"I caaa… I can't do that!"

"What could that infer? You in a formal setting, informally dressed?"

"That I've forgotten my tie."

"No, it would infer that places like museums, which still have this feeling that they're only for intellectuals in suits and ties, are actually for everyone. You should take Kiyomi and Kira with you. Museums are places for everyone, regardless of age, gender, class, career, and whether they have a master's degree or not. You should be seen to promote the importance of education and that it's a fun time to share with your family."

"Do you believe that?" I ask.

"Of course not. Museums are for stuffy men in suits and ties and boring school trips for those of a certain class, but for the purpose of your public image, you should try to break that. You need to be more relaxed. People might think that you have something up your arse that isn't me."

"Oh, please!" Mello moans.

"Sorry for mentioning body parts, Mihael. Get your rosary out and pray for my soul," L tells him before turning back to me. "Look, go halfway and wear a short-sleeved shirt."

"Ughhh."

"You look nice in short-sleeved anything."
"I do?"

"Yeah. Don't go for a sleeveless one though, as much as I would enjoy that." He might have a point. I work very hard on my upper arm tone and strength and it's a shame that the only people who see them are L, Kiyomi on a very rare occasion, my tailor, and my trainer at the gym, because now I have my own private sessions. In the sauna, you can really appreciate the definition of my biceps.

"I know that my wardrobe is a major concern, but I think you should leave that for me," I say.

"I have left it for you for years, and now you're becoming a mannequin in shop window with an 'ask me about the minimum wage!' sticker on your chest."

"I'm going for lunch," Mihael states, standing up.

"Have you finished typing that up?" L asks him.

"Yes, master."

"Good boy. Off you go," We watch in silence until Mihael disappears and closes the door, then I ask L what I've wanted to ask him almost as soon as I walked in.

"Why did you tell him, L?"

"He really did work it out years ago, don't blame me! I believe that I did mention it to you years ago but you were in denial about your ability to deceive. You came up in conversation a few days ago, he asked me if we were knobbing, and before I knew it, I'd told him my entire back history. I get the feeling that he didn't want to know a lot of it, but you can relax. He's extremely trustworthy and he's actually quite happy for us."

"Oh, well that's alright then. As long as Mihael approves."

"Stop being shitty," he breathes out, then stands, walks around the desk and kneels at my side. Oh. But he doesn't say or do anything, and that makes me nervous.

"Are you going to do something, or are you just going to stay there like your knees have locked?"

"My knees have locked," he says. "What exactly would you like me to do? Bear in mind that my skills are wide-ranging and, all told, I'm very talented."

"Have you got a nail buffer?" I ask.

"A... what?"

"A nail buffer. My ridges are fucked. Have you got a manicure set?"

"I've got some clippers at home..."

"L, you need a manicure set at work and at home. It's very important. You can't just clip them and go, you need to file them."

"And buff them? Like a car?"

"Yes."

"I don't have a... buff."
"A buffer."

"Right. I'm sorry but I don't have one. What's wrong with your nails anyway?" he asks, taking my hand to examine and then drops it gruffly. "They look fine. You're just being a twat."

"Yes, I am... L, you're alright about tonight, aren't you?"

"Yeah. It's ok, Light, I understand. I'll try to sleep through the night without you. There's a documentary about deforestation on later. That'll have to do," he says as he stands up. Some people are talking outside, their voices becoming a sort of grumbling 'men at work' sound, and L peaks through the blind to investigate while I stare mournfully at my poor nails. "What is he doing here?"

"Who?"

"Nate River's outside."

"Where?" I rush over to look through the blind and yes, the man in the white suit is talking to L's secretary. "Well, fuck me."

"Why do you think he's here?" L asks. Damned if I know.

"I don't even know how he got past security."

"Well, this is still a government building, but you don't see many Reds daring to call in for a visit. Maybe he just wanted to look around."

"And speak to you."

"I'm one of the only people he knows. Plus, he likes Mihael. Mihael doesn't like him. It gets awkward."

"He might be ready to defect."

"I doubt it. He's been doing quite well for himself over there, hasn't he. He's probably up in arms because of my lovely leak to the press the other day."

"Hmmm?"

"River and the curse in the wicked whispers column, just like you wanted. Haven't you read the tabloids? It's spread like wild fire, especially since it turns out that his mother died in a car crash a few months ago. The journos won't say who wrote the articles in case they're suddenly stricken down by him. They're calling him 'Prince Albino and the River of Blood.' Even the broadsheets had a piece about it yesterday. Anyway, hopefully it's not me he wants to see. My secretary won't let him in. She's very worried about me being another Harvey Milk. I can't see him now, anyway, so he must have gone."

"I haven't had time to read the papers," I confess. No. I just didn't want to. I press my face against L's neck, since he's standing next to me. He smells nice. Just clean mostly, but something about it reminds me of smoke and childhood. He puts his hand on my head as I breathe in and try to pin this scent down. It's driving me mad because it's so familiar.

"My poor Light. Sometimes I think a week in bed would do you the world of good."

"You smell of blown out candles," I whisper. That's it!

"Oh. That wasn't what I was hoping for when I bought this aftershave." He turns towards me,
slightly smiling. "Let me take you out for lunch. I'll get you a frappé and it'll fix you right up."

"I don't want a frappé."

"Don't be stupid, everyone wants a frappé. Come on."

We leave his office and everyone stands up to bow to me like I've just put on a captivating, once in a lifetime portrayal of Hamlet. I keep my eyes down until I'm worried that I'll walk into a wall, and as we turn the corner, I see River talking to some girl by the water cooler, who leaves him as quickly as she can. He's still here? What the fuck does he want? I push past L and aim for River. L tries to stop me, probably because my mood is like that of an already aggressive man who has caught someone trespassing, but River's already seen us and is waiting for us to arrive like a smug bastard, even though he has nothing to be smug about.

"River, what are you doing here?"

"Prime Minister. Oh, and Lawliet too. I'm glad I crashed into you," he says. He looks like he stopped ageing at fourteen, having the sort of babyface you want to punch your fist right through.

"Ha. Weak, badly delivered, topical jokes are my favourite – how did you know? I think you must be a little confused. This is the Kantei and you're on the losing team. You're not allowed in here unless you're the winner. I'll have security see you out."

"I'd heard about a lot the changes you'd made and I wanted to see them for myself. It looks just like the passport office. Something told me that I might find you here. Is that black box in your department your office?"

"It was designed by a local artist."

"Really? I can see how it's very symbolic of your leadership. I was wondering how you were, Prime Minister. After your accident, it was very quiet on the Western Front. And when you didn't appear for the emergency House meeting, I was very concerned. Possibly the first time in political history that neither the Prime Minister or his deputy, may he rest in peace, have been present for a meeting of such importance."

"He was recovering from the car accident," L tells him angrily. I knew that the opposition would complain about it. The only way I might have taken time off without comment is if I'd died, and even then they'd probably question my dedication.

"Yes, I'm sure. I noticed that you were absent also, Lawliet."

"I'm not a politician. My presence wasn't required."

"No, but you were absent from work. I called into your office the other day and Mihael was as charming as ever, but he couldn't cover for you taking time off. Two days, I heard. Just like the Prime Minister. Were you recovering from a car accident as well?"

"I appreciate you caring so much. And me, just a lowly PR."

"You know that I esteem you very highly, though perhaps not as highly as the PM does."

"Is there a point to this?" I ask. I swear to God, I'm going to tear him a new hole if he doesn't fuck off soon.

"Are you blood brothers?"
"What?"

His little fat fingers reach forward and pull down L's collar, exposing a very elegant little nick. "Nasty." It isn't nasty. I feel like showing him what really is nasty, but then he grabs my hand and turns it over quickly before I can comprehend that he's actually touching me, to see it for himself. A not so elegant slice on my palm. "Nastier," he says, and I pull my wrist away from his disconcertingly hot hand. Oh. I found B's knife the other day and we were filled with nostalgia, but got bored of it. Well, we were a little too enthusiastic and had to break off to find a box of plasters, which spoiled the mood a little. L's quite heavy-handed.

"And your face is even nastier still right now, Nate," L tells him. "I cut myself shaving. Unless the Prime Minister has been shaving his palms, I'd say that we both just cut ourselves."

"That would be a plausible excuse, however... Oh, this is difficult," River says, grimacing dramatically. "No. No, it isn't. I'll struggle on. I'm afraid that things might get unpleasant over the next few days."

"What do you mean?"

"Based on a gut instinct - gut instinct and observation which other people don't seem to have noticed even though it's quite obvious to me - I did something which might be thought of as illegal, but somehow the ends will be worth the means, I think. I was surprised that you didn't realise, Lawliet, because, in my experience, nothing gets past you. You did seem quite preoccupied by physical pursuits, but maybe you've grown lax in your old age. I have some video footage, with audio, very high quality, of you and our great Prime Minister in what I can only presume must have been earthquake, because you'd fallen on top of each other in an elevator. Or maybe Yagami was simply trying to give you CPR? We know how he loves saving people in danger. It might be the best example of his love for humanity. Sadly though, I don't think that people will see it that way."

No. There aren't any security cameras in the elevators.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say.

"Think back. It wasn't very long ago. I like to be honest, if I can be, and I'd like to give you the opportunity to step down, Prime Minister."

"Ha! Why would I do that?"

"You wouldn't want this getting out, would you? I think, bearing in mind this situation, that you and Lawliet should resign within the week. No rush. Otherwise, this little love story might be on the news at six. Say, on Thursday."

"That's less than two days."

"Yes, but I'm impatient. And I'd hate for you to resign at the weekend and interrupt my days off. You taught me that, Lawliet. I noticed that you always release bad news mid-week so that it doesn't break up the normal running of things."

If I've got this clear, River found some way of getting footage of L and myself. It might be a lie, because I don't see how he could have done that unless he bribed someone within the Kantei, which is entirely possible. I have to weigh up how dangerous this is to me, and I'm tempted to think that he's making it up, but he doesn't seem the kind of person to make empty threats. As I realise that he's probably telling the truth, L must come to the same conclusion at the same time.

"Who's a clever boy," he tells him coolly.
"Me," River smiles.

"But you're punching above your weight."

"I don't think so."

"Yes, you are. I was going to change, Nate. Light and I, we were going to change. Why couldn't you have waited?"

"You were going to resign anyway?" he asks him quietly, hushed with shock. He looks at me for verification, but I can only look at the floor. I wouldn't have handled this in the same way as L, but I can't contradict him now he's done it. "That's... romantic, I suppose," he says to me. "Let me guess though, you'd leave, maybe write a very saccharine and saintly biography, do some charity work for some important but neglected cause, and come back in a year or two? That's still a problem for me. So, as much as I might sympathise with this mess of a situation you've got yourselves into, my position remains the same. You're still in check, Prime Minister."

He's a good deal shorter than I am, and there's something pathetic about his pomposity, considering what he looks like. I don't feel that it's worth appealing to his better nature, like L obviously does, so I just say what's in my head. It can't make things any worse.

"Fuck you and your white midget suit,' I tell him. There's no response, although he does try to stand at his full height after I say it. "You don't stand a chance in hell of being PM. What are you going to do? Seduce them with your toy plane collection?"

He smiles in a very childlike and menacing way, but decides that he can't reply, or we'd just go around in circles. I'm sure that I could insult him for a good few months without a break. Instead, he looks back at L.

"I'm disappointed in you, Lawliet."

"Why's that, Nate?"

"I respected you. I admired you. I thought, from the early days, that the PM's popularity was 30% good looks and vocabulary and 70% good PR. Down to you. But it turns out that you're just a loser."

"Say that again," L tells him, suddenly straight as a ramrod, because before now he was acting quite casually and even slightly beaten down.

"What kind of strategist with your credentials and track record would be stupid enough to get involved with a married man? Not just any married man, because that's by the by, but the Prime Minister? I'd imagine, if I did enough digging, that I could find out when and where this started. And if your idea of a good time is slicing each other up then that really would shock the populace, wouldn't it? Do you think that would damage your reputation in law, Lawliet? Because the PM's already done for."

"Listen, River. I'm sure we can sort this out if we discuss it properly like... adults," I say. I sense L looking at me. They're both looking at me like I'm mad, so I turn my face towards L. "Yes, I realise that I'm saying that to someone wearing a kigurumi."

"If you don't mind, Prime Minister, I'd rather speak to the man at the wheel, and that's not you, I suspect," River smirks. What?

"What did you say?"
"You wear the dress in this relationship. You're just a puppet in a suit."

What the fuck? How could anyone think that? I'm too shocked to say anything, but my face must look so horror-stricken that L puts what might be a comforting hand on my arm.

"Nate," he says calmly. "You've done a very stupid thing."

"I don't see a flaw in my plan or execution. In fact, I think it's just what you would have done."

"I would have done a few things differently."

"Like what?"

"Well, I wouldn't have told the Prime Minister and myself, for a start. You wanted to show off though, and I can understand that. But you've brought me right back to square one again. If you have a brain, you'll give me that recording and get the fuck out of Dodge."

"That's not part of my plan. If anything happened to me, I've left instructions that this footage will find its way to the press, and I don't think that you could stop that then. It's compelling viewing."

"River, I'm warning you, give me the tape," I tell him, taking a step towards him, but he just back away smiling.

"Goodbye, Prime Minister. Goodbye, Lawliet," he says as he walks away and out of the office. L and I both stand there staring at the door as it closes. It takes a while for either of us to speak.

"I don't have to tell you what has to be done here, do I," L says.

"Not so quickly; that'll be what he's expecting. I need time to think."

"Light, sometimes there are attacks that don't allow for time. This is one of them."

"I'm not making a rash decision which will end up being a mistake," I say, and paint a relaxed smile on my face by the time I turn to face him. His expression is dark and pre-battle. Ordinarily, I'd approve of that, but his mood has been so downcast lately that I don't want him to be concerned about this. I can deal with it. I've dealt with worse, and River's just some little boy with big ideas.

"Don't worry about it, L."

"I am worried," he tells me. No, no, don't worry about anything. I lean towards him to whisper in his ear.

"That I'll kill him?" I ask, then stand back and smile.

"You don't even know who to contact."

"Who said that it'll come to extreme measures? Maybe I'll just let him use it," I laugh. But he still looks sick with worry. Worse, actually, since I'm putting on a face of it just being yet another small problem and not our possible defeat and ruination. "Hey, don't look like that," I say, and put my hand on his face to swipe my thumb across his cheekbone comfortably. "Really, don't worry. I've got this one."

He grabs my hand from his face almost immediately to throw it back down to my side, turning to check if anyone from his department saw. You know that I don't care anymore. We should do what we want. "Do you want people to know or something?" he asks me.

"They will soon, either way. But I'm damned if I'll let River benefit from it. Don't think about it."
We'll just carry on as we were and avoid elevators. Did you know there was a camera in there?"

"Of course I didn't. I didn't even think someone would do that. Maybe I am losing my touch."

"It can't be that bad anyway. It was very innocent. Just two friends in an elevator."

"We were kissing in the elevator."

'Yeah. Innocently. Raincheck on that frappé, ok? I have to work on this now. Pick me up at four at the workman's door, and we'll have a look around this house we've bought without seeing it."

"Light, don't underestimate this. If he's got that tape, that could destroy us."

"I'm not," I say, backing away towards the elevator. No, not the elevator. I'll take the stairs. "I'll phone this guy I know."

"Who?"

"Ex-secret service guy who does some work for me sometimes. It'll be over in a few days, L, I promise. I needed to deal with River anyway; this is just a good excuse. Leave it to me, I'll get it done."

I don't know any ex-secret service guy who I can call on like a plumber with any odd jobs. I'll have to deal with this myself.

"No," I shout when someone knocks on my bedroom door. I forgot to lock it, but then, I just got here. Closed doors aren't for locking yourself inside, they're for keeping people out - everyone knows that. Barbed wire does the same job, but it doesn't look as nice, otherwise I'd cover all my doors in it. I have barbed wire wrapped around my skull like a crown instead.

After standing there for a moment in silence, I decide that whoever it was has left, so I go back to removing my cufflinks. All's well, until the door opens unceremoniously.

"I said no," I repeat again, because maybe they didn't hear me or they're just really stupid, but Kiyomi marches in. She's obviously still smarting from her dressing down yesterday, judging by her attitude and her privileged airs and graces. I once found it slightly appealing, but not anymore. Now it's just a translucent veil for whatever shame and hurt she's feeling, and I can't be bothered with that at any time, but especially not now.

"You decided to come home?" she asks. "I only found out because I heard the girls talking in the kitchen."

"Can't they find something else to talk about?"

"You've been away for three days, Light."

"So?"

"So, this is your home. Someone from Foreign asked me how you were after the accident, and I said: 'Oh, he's much better. Thanks for asking,' but I haven't seen you, and I don't know how you are. You're my husband and I don't know how you are or where you've been for the last four nights. Were you ever going to return my calls, or were you going to carry on ignoring me?"

I don't answer. I don't need to, so I just take my tie off. I still like to believe that if you ignore someone for long enough, they'll disappear. And I wish that Kiyomi in her perfect off-the-shoulder
little black Gucci dress would disappear. She doesn't show any signs of leaving though. She starts brushing out the creases from my jacket on the bed with long strokes until I pull it away from her. Don't touch that. Don't touch my things.

"I have something to tell you," she says. "If you want to know, that is. I'm running for Culture's constituency."

"You're what?"

"I have the deposit for candidacy and I grew up in that district. We still have a house there; my father left it to me in his will. It was our holiday home. Don't worry, I know your feelings about it, but I want to do it. It's not like people are lining up to represent your party or any party, since it's like a death sentence now if you're voted in. But why should I care about that if you don't?"

"You're not running for office, Kiyomi."

"Yes I am. I signed the papers yesterday."

I stare at her, feeling the heat from my eyes on her, but she doesn't back down, she doesn't even look away. You spoiled brat. If I starve you of affection, this is your answer? I suppose that any attention is better than none. I could block this. Retract the papers on her behalf and shut her out. But when I think of how many people might know of this, if I do that, I'll look like an overbearing husband and she knows it. I don't have a choice. Not another problem. Every time I think of how to deal with River, my mind comes back to the same answer - I have to kill him. I can't counter blackmail him, because his leverage is greater than mine. Threats are what he expects, that's why he made sure that I knew that he's set up a way for that footage to be leaked anyway. I have to force him to erase all the footage and all copies, find out who else might know about it, and kill him myself. I can't rely on anyone else.

"Fucking hell," I sigh. I want to slam my fist into something, but I can't let her see that this bothers me that much, so I drag my fingers across my skull instead, digging into my scalp.

"I knew you'd be happy," she says confidently. "Everyone was saying how proud you'd be of me. We know different though, don't we."

"You have to retract it."

"I'm not going to. I'm going to campaign and I'm going to win."

"Ha! You're not going to win. You're going to make a fool out of yourself. You're just giving away a seat of mine to the opposition."

"Why do you think that? Why are so mean to me?!" Her voice breaks suddenly when she loses her composure. Yes, some tears are just what we need. "What have I done you? Because I don't deserve this. The way you treat me."

"Oh God."

"You humiliated me in front of Lawliet. Even he felt sorry for me. How could you talk to me like that when I was only trying to help you? You promised me everything. 'In your eyes lies all the happiness for this new world,' but it was just lies, wasn't it? You used me!" she shouts, but quickly calms down again. "But it doesn't matter. I'm going to win that seat and I'm going to sit in the House, just like you. And I'll show you and everyone else what I can do."

It's all a show, of course. When I walk closer to her, her pride fails her and she just looks like some
"You know why you'll fail?" I ask. "Even if you win, you know why you'll win? Because of me. Because you will always be your father's daughter, my wife, and the mother of my child. No matter what you do, that's all you are and all you ever will be."

Her eyes widen and shake in their sockets, and it makes me smile, because her reaction couldn't be more perfect. It's what she's most frightened of. It's the reason why she's doing this in the first place; fighting to escape the truth of her situation. She's known because of the men she's allied herself with, not on her own merit. What she's known for on her own merit is how she looks and how she dresses, which is meaningless in comparison. That helps only to back up what you achieve, and she's achieved nothing but marrying me. After a few seconds, her whole body starts shaking and it only makes me smile more, and then she slaps me across the face. The sound rings out when she makes contact and makes the silence consuming in the aftermath. I realise then that both of us want to be that person smiling while the other is shaking with anger, and neither of us want to show that we give a shit about anyone else, and that we're both failing. I turn back to her.

"It's not misogyny, it's the truth. It might not be what you want to hear but it's still the truth, and there's nothing, nothing you can do to change it now. I won't support you. You do this, you do it on your own. I'll watch you lose and I won't do a damn thing to help you. It won't reflect badly on me, but people might feel sorry for me because I have a disobedient wife who doesn't know her limits. It's a sad reason to run for office though. I wonder, are you doing this because you're bored, or because you want my attention?"

"You're so full of yourself! Like I'd want your attention."

"Oh, so has this always been your dream? Is that why you married me?"

"Yes."

"Yes. Because for all of your talk, you knew that you couldn't do a thing without a man there to make you somebody and give you a name. A man, so you could stand in his shadow and use your connections. And Daddy died, so I was your best bet."

"I don't need you!" she cries, falling backwards a few steps, but I close the gap again. "I don't need anyone!"

"You know what I did after your father died, Kiyomi? He was an idiot. I made that speech you liked so much and then I went home and fucked someone. Then we watched the news reports. You know, that split screen of me talking and those pictures of old Takada. We laughed, and then I fucked them again."

"Stop it!"

"And I really enjoyed it. When I met you at that party, I thought: 'She'll do,' because of who your father was. Your father dying was the start for me. That's what you have to do in politics; you lie, you say nice words, you blow cock and let them come in your face for a pint and a knee up, and people die when they get in the way. But you have to take advantage of that. It's hell. We're in hell. Do you know how many people I've had to fuck to get where I am?"

"Shut up!"

"A lot. Men, women... I would have fucked your old man and his dog if I could have got a promotion out of it. They're stepping stones, it's what you have to do. But I turned off. In my head, I
can just switch right off and go somewhere else. I had to, and I want you to think about that when you think of all the times I've been with you, because you were just another stepping stone to get to where I wanted to be."

"No. I don't believe it! Why are you saying this?"

"'I don't believe it! Why are you saying this?!' Oh no! Think about it, you idiot. Do you still think, even now, that the walls of the House are solid mahogany and solid gold, just like our principles? They're not. It's just cheap veneer and fucking gold leaf over rubble and chipboard, and so are our principles. And if you win this local, you know what people will think? They'll think that it's just because I skewed the vote as a reward because you had my son and you've got a whim for something to fill up your days. Which is what it is, isn't it."

That did it. She runs to the door but I slam it shut as she opens it and stand behind her, caging her in and forcing her to listen. "You know that. Now run away, little girl. Good luck in politics, Kiyomi. Don't have any opinions of your own and don't wear any underwear. You'll go far."

I open the door and she runs out. I shouldn't have said any of that.
People go on and on about how to kill a person. You know, the hows and whys and wheres and what with, because we're fascinated by it. We say that we can't comprehend it but the truth is that a lot of people (the people who I associate with anyway) are drawn towards it. We long for it. In life we all come across people we think would be better off dead, and often for the most nondescript reasons. I read once that there's a little switch in our brains which kicks in and stops us from going berserk whenever someone bumps into us and spills their coffee down our shirts or spells our names incorrectly or barges in front of us in queues or says that we're shit in bed. Psychopaths don't have this switch, so they become irrational and uncivilised and they take every little misdemeanour out upon selected prey. I've heard people say: 'I don't understand how they can do that to another person,' but I can. They don't see people as people, you see, and I can completely understand that. Replace the layman's term 'switch' for 'self control' and that's the thing - the thing which separates us and allows them to kill and the rest of us to look on in awe and horror and read about all the gruesome details and imagine what it'd be like to be there or to kill or be killed. We conjure up the scene in our minds.

So, we're obsessed with murder, not because it's unthinkable, but we're obsessed with that idea of freedom; of feeling someone's warm blood spatter on our faces and to soak our hands in it and for it to drench our clothes and and for someone we hate to just stop breathing, stop being, because we decided that they should. If we're honest, which no one ever is, it's a massive turn on. People get bogged down in technicalities and 'what if I fail?', but I think the most important thing is to be psychologically prepared, because killing is easy. You can kill someone with a ballpoint pen or a plastic bag. Everything in life is easy if you're mentally equipped, because if you're not and haven't already completed the task beforehand from start to finish and considered every twist and outcome in your mind then you're never going to do anything well, but this is especially true when your task is to take someone's life. The person who's going to die isn't likely to be accommodating unless your will overpowers theirs. Sounds simple, but most people would struggle against someone who starts kicking and screaming blue murder. Humans are, by nature, nervous creatures and self-doubters. If there's a speck of doubt in your mind, you'll fail. If not right then and there by making a horrendous mistake like leaving them alive or leaving your DNA all over the place, then later you'll give yourself away somehow, because people are stupid. I think it's about training. Some people are just more entitled to live than others and are therefore more successful in life. From the time we go to school we are encouraged to not just do our best, but to be the best. We stretch and explore our capabilities and position ourselves in the food chain appropriately. I never hit the ceiling, and that's why I'm where I am today. I'm positive that I could be or do anything I set my mind to. If I chose to be an artist, I'd be the best fucking artist who ever lived. If I chose to be something useless like a bus conductor, I'd be the best bus conductor in the world. Personal status continues throughout life - into work, into relationships. You discard people, sack them, dump them, fuck them over, and it's very, very similar to killing them, if you think about it. It's just more polite.

Let's not forget the Everyman though, because without them, who'd make our coffee and make sure that the trains run on time? They're the ones that people like me broke at school. They're from a background which wouldn't let them move forward and were too weak and probably very sensible, (knowing their limitations, thanks to people like me) in deciding not to try. They're happy making my coffee and they meet someone else who makes coffee and they have children who will make my coffee in twenty years time. We can't all be special. Being more intelligent is one thing, but being intelligent and physically superior is another, because, oh my God, what a lethal combination. Not
many people want to stand too close to you because you make them look ten times worse and you could humiliate them with a snide look and a short sentence, compounding their sense of inferiority. People like me are dangerous if we advertise it, but it wouldn't be a problem if everyone knew their place. The problem is that some of those nobodies think that they're just a little bit more important than they actually are. They do try to stand next to you, they try to have their photograph taken with you, they try to get your phone number and if you don't play along then they get can nasty. If they're really stupid, they just want to beat you from the start because you are what they want to be. You can try to reason with them but it'll end up in a bollocking, a sacking, a dumping, or depending on the circumstances, you just have to kill them. Everything must be thought out, all situations accounted for. But people kill for stupid reasons, like they do most things for stupid reasons. Spontaneity is only good for clearance sales. A just reason, good planning and knowledge of your subject, yourself, and everyone else around you - all those factors - is what will allow you to succeed. Know the system to beat the system. If I were to murder someone, that's how I'd do it. The how doesn't matter. I wouldn't do if I didn't think that I would get away with it. Or, rather, I wouldn't do it if I didn't have a very good reason to. I think that I'd be very good at it.

By this point you might be wondering why this fine young man, the pride of Japan with the world at his feet, is going to throw everything away for a man who can't dress himself properly and gels his hair only to give himself a few more days between washes and as a lie so he can be thought of as sophisticated rather than a slob. Well, truth is that I've grown used to him. L is strangely endearing when you're subjected to continued exposure over a prolonged period of time, and I consider the fine points of his abdominal muscles and odious character regularly now as a result. He's become beautiful and a never ending maze of corridors with hidden rooms to me. When I see him or think of him I often get a pain in my stomach, and I can't decide whether it's sexual desire or if he just makes me sick, so I suppose that I must love him. I've been poisoned, that's the only way I can describe it. I'm in a permanent state of disappointment with myself, yet I carry on. Nothing else is as fulfilling as was promised, but I'm still optimistic. This is a new chapter for me, and I hope to wear cropped chinos during this blue period in exile. Classic capri length; mid-calf, like they wear in... well, Capri, because I have excellent ankles and shinbones. I need something casual, slightly depressed and uninterested but inherently regal and stylish, like I'm on holiday in Monte Carlo. Capri pants are loungewear for professional men who were something once but lost it all (or threw it all away in my case). Winning bores me. It came too easily and the highs were very similar to taking low-quality smack, in that they were ecstatic but brief. Sometimes I walk through the Kantei now, past departments, passing people, seeing their eyes pop in happy surprise and their mouths move like gasping goldfish, but I don't hear them because I have headphones in and an app on my phone playing white noise. They don't notice the wires. I smile at whatever they say, watch their expressions and alter my non-verbal responses accordingly. What they're saying isn't important and what they think isn't either.

On my way to my car, I pass Kiyomi talking to that treacherous underling bitch in PR who's now heading her campaign and who'll I'll get L to sack for a lurid reason I'll leave up to him to invent if he can't find a real story. Kiyomi looks at me with contempt, and I smile ahead of me as I breeze past her. In my way, I'm fond of Kiyomi and I didn't want it to end this way, but she caught me at a bad time and she's very stupid. I haven't told L yet because I haven't had the chance, it's none of his business and he probably wouldn't care anyway. As far as I'm concerned, it didn't happen, and when Kiyomi mentions it in court, I have a reaction prepared: 'What are you talking about, Kiyomi? How could you say such a thing after all we've been through? Yes, this is why I'm divorcing her, Your Honour. It's nothing at all to do with the lanky guy on the back row, no.' That sort of thing. Divorces are supposed to be cutthroat. If she repeats anything I said, my defence will be that she's a bitter liar and, as revenge for me initialising divorce proceedings, is trying to prevent me from seeing my son and destroy my reputation and legacy. That's what scorned women do and it's what lawyers are paid to counteract. I'll leave it for them to say it, because I must appear to be saddened by the whole
situation. It looks better and will gain me the sympathy of the judge and the press. I'll leak something about how Kiyomi's violent and an unfit mother and that I've been through hell this past year. I don't care if I see Kira again really, but I'll be damned if I don't gain sole or at least shared custody rather than letting that sex-obsessed, avaricious, privileged whore get what she wants. But that's for another day.

Maybe I can find some way of picking out and bribing the judge? I'll see what L can do. Speaking of, I haven't heard from L since the last time I saw him, but that's not unusual. When we share a house, I'm sure that we'll spend most of the time in separate rooms, and that's fine. That would be the best scenario for me. At the moment it's far too intense with all this rushing backwards and forwards and dodging guards and wives and bumping into each other or turning over in bed 'Hey, what are you doing there?' and then with the fucking. I'm hoping the novelty of his presence and my completely bizarre reactions to it will subside and I'll be my normal self again, maybe focusing on setting up a charitable foundation to do with employment of the stupid – maybe an apprenticeship scheme which would be very advantageous to my public image. My petrol bills are astronomical from all this running around, but sometimes I just have to see him, and it's the same as feeling that you need a drink when you're thirsty. I wouldn't say that it was romantically driven.

With all the excitement after Kiyomi ran crying from my room and all this River business, I couldn't sleep until three, so I hacked into L's Amazon account (same password for as long as I've known it, which has been years) and had some things sent to the new house, express delivery, which I'll pick up later if I have time. It's easy shopping with someone else's credit card. I had an idea to keep buying things until it was declined so I could work out his credit limit, because I was that bored, but I figured that he wouldn't be very happy if I did that. Using my own credit card, I ordered a display cabinet from a bespoke carpentry business, and I specified, some would say unnecessarily, that it was a housewarming gift for a Mr Lawliet. It's actually for me and it's going to house my erotic netsuke collection which has been in storage for over a year. I'm going to set it up by the front door and when guests call round and look at the disgusting poses sealed in wood and ivory with garnet clits and masterfully carved dicks, speechless, I'll sigh and explain that they belong to L and devote myself to making camomile tea, destroying their respect for him and bringing it closer to what it should be. 'Hentai,' they'll think. 'Hentai,' they'll say to their friends, 'pass it on.' Soon everyone will see him and think 'hentai', and see me and think: 'You poor man, corrupted by that hentai who made his money defending murderers.' He's so professionally cold to strangers sometimes that you'd think he was completely asexual, and it annoys me. His fabrications are the stuff of legend.

I swipe my finger across my phone as the car speeds along, because I'm still waiting to see what River's response is to my message. I sent some hired help to his apartment last night (absolutely no security in his complex apparently. He's so idiotic it's funny) to pass on my regards in a threatening manner. The hired help didn't know why they had to threaten him, only that I'd hired them and paid in cash upfront. He's an ex-security guard and hence ex-NPA who sadly lost his position with me because he was too fucking efficient, but he never knew that. He blamed another person on my security team for getting him fired and subsequently broke that man's kneecaps. When that happened, I thought: 'There's a useful kind of person to have on standby,' so I talked my now temporarily disabled security guard into not pressing charges, citing the man's fictional wife and small child who depend on him, but he didn't give a shit about them, so I paid him off for his trouble instead. Then I gave my ex-thug some money to set up a security business of his own, with the understanding that if I ever needed his help, I could call on him and that he'd ask no questions and say nothing to no one. He's not ex-secret service but they're hard to come by because when they turn rogue they usually end up mysteriously disappearing. He's a big man though. I wouldn't like him and his leather duster calling on me in the middle of the night, so I can only imagine how River felt, being a fucking white rabbit and very challenged height-wise. I don't identify with anyone or any persuasion, sexual or otherwise, because the older I get the more I feel like I'm a unique casting from a unique mould, but
maybe River would wank himself to death after being threatened by a megalith of a man. Who knows?

And now, practically within the blink of a proverbial eye, I'm in the House. I've signed in, put my phone on silent, checked in my coat and meet Mikami and Foreign on the first floor, which is a ring of checkerboard tiles around a ring of closed doors, and all around a hole to the lobby below and the dome above. The morning light adds a milky cast to the vast void of a space, bouncing off tiles. It's not a good place to be if you're scared of heights, but fortunately, I'm not. Mikami and Foreign are laughing, breaking off only to welcome me into the fold and bow compulsively. Foreign then tells me that we simply must meet up for dinner one night with our partners. "Yes, we really must," I say. They must bring their children because I'd love to meet them. "Yes," she says, and our eyes are crescents squeezed shut with good feeling and friendliness until she leaves. Fuck, I can't stand that woman.

Mikami follows me into one of the open lounge rooms and we exchange more meaningless banter – this time about Naomi's disastrous gallery exhibition opening the other night. An artist put on a live performance, so he says. I don't know what you'd call it, but the gist is that he was out of his head drunk and regaled everyone with tales of his years as a goat farmer in the Pyrenees and his rather illegal-sounding relationships with said goats, because he was a great admirer of Robert Lenkiewicz and something to do with his star sign.

Obedient and, as it turns out, surprisingly loyal and reliable as Mikami is, I can hardly bear his brain-numbing small talk any longer, so it's good timing when L turns up. I see him outside through the open door. He looks sulky and almost luminous with sleeplessness, staring at the floor as his walks. In other words, he looks the same as he usually does, but his coat, which he hasn't checked in because he's obviously not planning on staying long, is a cracking Canali city coat he picked up from Harvey Nichols in London in between burying his father. I love the colder weather purely for the need to wear coats. It turns out that I have an absolute passion for coats, which developed only over the last few years since the winters have been very cold, but the right coat with the right fit makes me feel like Napoleon in Russia, only taller and better looking and without the failure. Stupid Europeans will never learn. My coat today is a WooYoungMi leather trimmed wool blend (I like to support South Korea because they're sane, easy to deal with and because their president gives me coats when I visit), and I'm almost sorry that I'm not still wearing it now because I look brilliant in it, but I don't like to blow my own trumpet.

When L sees me, he smiles, and somehow the change in his expression hits me hard in the centre of my chest because it was me that caused the change. I feel sick again and want to pin him up against the wall. I fill my head up with such shit but he's like a rifle that shoots right through it all and me, so that I almost forget what I'm doing here and what my name is for a second. His look of relief, like a sailor who'd just caught sight of land for the first time in years, is momentary and easy to miss, but it lingers in a faded form, though he resumes staring at the floor as he joins us. I find my feelings are hard to verbalise, which is just as well because I keep them to myself, but they're a surprising and depressing weak spot in my character. I console myself in knowing that they're only occasional and that my psyche is so complex that I shouldn't question the unquestionable.

We say our hellos to each other and Mikami says that it's very cold today. Yes, ok, Mikami, you can fuck off now. L and I turn away from him after I ask him to get us some coffee, and when he goes, L leans against the wall and looks exhausted, but smiles at me again. He has that same soft-eyed look that I feel on myself sometimes. The one which makes me want to poke my eyes out.

"Your face completely changed when you saw me," I say, half-rapturous, half-mocking. He only picks up on the mocking and it makes him grumpy as fuck.
"Did it? Yeah. I'll have to do something about that," he replies, looking down at his watch like he'd rather be somewhere else and that I've practically dragged him here, even though I didn't say that it was necessary for him to be present.

"You didn't have to come. It's a pretty standard meeting." Yeah, people are putting their names forward for vacant positions in my cabinet. It's not important because I've already made up my mind about who's going where, but for the sake of openness it's only fair to let everyone think that they're in with a chance. L didn't have to be here. He just wanted to see me in my WooYoungMi coat.

"I didn't have much else to do and that bistro over the road opens at eight, so I waited there. I was just checking."

"On what?" I say coyly. On me, of course. The bastard's obsessed with me.

"River, Light. Have you seen him?" he asks. Oh. He didn't come here to see me in my WooYoungMi coat.

"No. If you want to keep your eyes on the press today, that'd be good. Do whatever you have to do if anything happens. Block the fuck out of it, sacrifice a few people in exchange. It'd be so much easier if we knew someone reliable to tap his phone and search his place."

"Well, this is what happens when there's no one you can trust, isn't it. What did you do in the end then? Did you find your ex-secret service man?"

"Mmmm. I think it'll be alright."

"I hate it when you say that because it always means that you don't have a clue what's going to happen."

"No, no, I sent someone round to his place last night with some friendly suggestions. I told you it was nothing to worry about."

"Yeah, and I told you that it was," he says, turning his face away to start chewing at his nails, almost like he's eating corn on the cob.

"Don't bite your nails, it's disgusting," I tell him as he gnaws at himself. I can understand his worry but there's really no need to chew his own fingers off yet. He looks behind me, still nibbling, and I look away from him towards the book-lined womb of walls, still sickened.

"Light."

"Shut up, it is disgusting. If you're going to do that, do it outside."

My arm feels like it's being dragged down and I think that perhaps I've had a stroke, but it's because his hand is gripping my coat so tightly that his knuckles have blanched white. Looking towards where he's staring, River, coming in through one of the adjoining offices - a shocking sight in the same awful white suit he was wearing yesterday - is walking towards us. He looks as vacant as always, with his sleepwalking, slouching gait, and I smile at him as darkly as I can without looking too much like a villain with a plan from an American comic. But he doesn't just look tired, he looks like he is actually half-asleep. As he draws closer to us, I realise that he doesn't look like himself at all, because he has the same glazed eyes that Watari had just before he died. Like he's already dead, just waiting for his body to catch up. Now that he's standing in front of me, seeing me but not seeing me, it seems, my smile's gone and I think that he's going to kill me. If he got through security with a gun or a knife... no, he couldn't have. But killing is easy. I realise that I don't know enough about River to gauge what he's capable of
"River?" I say quietly. The sort of pointless remark people say before they're killed because they know what's coming and can't do anything to stop it. The thought that it can't happen to me repeats and sears through my mind, deafening me to any more logical thinking and renders me defenceless. Inside, that logical, warlike part of my mind is screaming preservation at me, willing me to kill him before he kills me. I'm so certain it's going to happen that I can almost smell it. The fear.

He stares blankly at me for what seems like forever, though it can only have been a few moments, and then his hand slowly reaches into his jacket pocket. My eyes follow his hand, and an innate feeling which is stronger than fear and louder than logic clears my mind and takes over. I won't let him touch me. I won't let anyone touch me. Why is L still holding my arm? It's his fault. He's making me think that there's something to be scared of, so I shake his arm from me.

What River pulls out of his pocket isn't a knife or a gun or so much as a remote control for a bomb. That was the fear talking. What he's holding in his hand is nothing but a memory stick, which he holds out to me. I look at it and then at him again questioningly, and some far away anxiety washes over his face, almost begging me to take it. When I do, he suddenly looks so calm and peaceful, almost smiles and turns to walk away from me, leaving his briefcase behind on the floor by my feet. As he walks out of the room, I look at L, who's still watching River, and I turn back to watch River too, who's now walking across to the balcony. Without hesitation he does the most bizarre thing which almost makes me laugh. He climbs over the railing, his shadow casting darkness on the floor, and it's so strange to see anyone do that that it takes me a moment to process anything else, and by then he's let himself fall like a dead weight, blurred as gravity pulls him down until he's gone. I can't see him anymore, he's gone and my confusion is gone. I can only think of how elegant he looks in that stalled second; almost mystical in how the air makes him look like he's underwater. I dream of falling just like that. Falling forever and alone and never hitting the ground.

The building goes silent as he falls, as everyone must see him plummet, and it seems to take an age until a heavy thud echoes around the dome above us as the sound tries to rise and escape, just like how the final flight of souls has been described. Then women start screaming, feet start running, and people rush to the balcony to look over the railing to the floor of the lobby below. I leave L behind me as I walk there too, drawn to it and needing to see it though I know what I'll see. Putting my two hands on the metal bar and looking over from the place where he fell, his body is broken below me, flattened and twisted against the black and white tiles. His pale eyes are open and gazing up at me, looking more alive than they did when he was standing and breathing right in front of me a few moments ago. The blood seeps slowly, creeping away from him like it's also trying to escape and pool around his head. It's the brightest, most intense red I've ever seen and there's so much of it. I've never seen anything so beautiful in my life.

People crowd around him down there, all useless, all pointless, blocking my view. Some simply stand there staring at him with their hands covering their mouths like they might get infected by suicide, some crouching next to him, one with his phone pressed to his ear and trying to avoid the blood from getting on his shoes.

The picture is now ruined by unnecessary people and flowery details, so I exhale as I lean back from the railing and turn away. It's only then that I notice L still in the lounge where he was. L likes hearing about gruesome details, but he doesn't much like seeing them in the flesh. It's one of his foibles. I walk back to him and River's briefcase, but he can't seem to pull his wide eyes away from the spot where he last saw River as he fell. Covering my hand with a handkerchief from my breast pocket, I pick up River's briefcase, put it on a table, pop the locks and root through it. I pull out his laptop, flip through his appointment diary, notebook and papers, and decide to only take the notebook because his diary for the last few weeks doesn't so much as mention me or anything else of interest. I'd take it all but that would look suspicious. There are no scribbled notes in there, nothing; just a list of meeting times. Poor sod didn't even have a life outside this place.
I call out to L a few times with hushed but growing insistence until he looks at me, dazed. Sighing as I physically take his briefcase from him, I put River's laptop, notebook and memory stick inside, close it and close his hand around the handle again. The interference makes him stare at me as if he can't compute. Please don't make me have to slap you back to reality in public.

"Go. See what's on these before the police get here."

He doesn't say a word but finally blinks, and the loose-jawed shock disappears. He grips the handle of the briefcase firmly and leaves, heading through the interlinked rooms towards the stairs while I dump River's case by the door for someone to find. Then I walk back to the railing, but you can hardly see River now because of some tryhards who are vainly trying to summon up the few CPR techniques they've seen on TV. I'm not interested in that because River's not going anywhere soon and he's definitely not coming back from the dead, but you don't see something like this every day. I wait until I see L pass unseen like a ghost behind everyone who can't tear their eyes away from the taboo of a dead body, the vacant security checking area, the whole show, and out of the building. It's only then that I can relax. I'm really glad that I cut down on public spending by contracting a cheap and apparently useless security firm in the House to top up security from the NPA, who cost the fucking earth. They're also notoriously bad, which is proven now that one man jumped from a balcony and that has their full attention. Anyone could wander in to blow the place up while they're busy ogling some dead man on the floor, but it also allowed L to leave unnoticed. Thank fuck for that, but on the other hand, I might have to reconsider my decision.

It looks like I'm the only person left on this floor apart from one Red who's vomiting by a door, because everyone else seems to have gathered around River. But Mikami runs up to me, gasping for breath, thrilled by the experience and strangely carrying two coffees.

"Shit, did you see that!" he asks me, passing me a coffee. I have a sip of it. It's awful. "Was that River? Did he fall or did he jump?"

Everyone must have seen that he wasn't pushed, and a muscle is desperate to twang my lip upwards. I feel bound to them all for second, because we've all seen the same ultimate declaration of unhappiness. How can they not question their point of living after this? I almost expect everyone to start killing themselves, but they'll all be eating rice at seven as usual. Mikami doesn't wait for my reply. He runs towards the stairs to see the mess from close quarters, although the crowd around the body is now at least ten deep. I take one last look as security get their act together and seal the building with their hulking tombstone bodies, knowing that L is probably in the car park by now, and make my way to my personal office here to wait for the police to arrive. I know the procedure well enough.

What a dramatic exit.

Thankfully, I'm not kept long at the House. The Chief turns up – the man who now sits in my dad's old NPA chair - because I can't talk to just any old cop, and we have a cup of tea because I say that I'm a bit shaken. He feels very sympathetic towards me and offers me a swig from his hip flask, but I decline. He can only imagine how I must feel, he says, and I worry that he's going to tell me about his grandfather's experiences as a lieutenant during the war and how hard it is to lose men under your command, but he doesn't. Because I saw as much but no more than anyone else and because I'm the Prime Minister, of course I'm not questioned in a traditional sense. It's more me asking him questions than the other way around, but I say that I'll give a statement if they need it, though there are plenty of witnesses. My statement means more than anyone else's though. I don't mention L and had phoned Mikami to tell him not to mention him either. Although he didn't ask why L shouldn't be mentioned, I told him in confidence that L was very distressed because it's still so soon after
Stephen's death, so I sent him home because he didn't see anything anyway.

It appears that no one noticed River before he jumped, apart from security when he checked in, and one security guard described his appearance and mood as being 'strange.' The Chief tells me that, between us, they're already writing it off as a suicide. I'm not surprised, but it's a relief to hear it. Goes without saying that they have the CCTV footage, but because I disapprove of a dystopian hell which makes everyone feel as if they're not trusted, I say, there are no cameras in the offices and other rooms. No swivelling electronic eyes for memories on articulated stalks. It's true, thankfully. The Lady tried to have cameras placed in all offices and rest areas but support was predictably low and it was very unpopular with everyone, being seen as an invasion of privacy rather than a security measure. This means that my meeting with River in the lounge wasn't captured and that the only footage available will only show him coming in and going out, so to speak. The Chief asks me if I saw him when he came into the room I was in, and I say that I'm sorry but I didn't. I was reading the paper before a meeting.

Probably when the call first came in, he'd decided that River had lost the plot. We talk about what's happened lately and I'm very upset, obviously, and so soon after my car accident and loss of my deputy and various other cretins. I would have been proud to have River in my party, and even though we were on opposing sides, I respected him as a politician. He had great integrity. Yes. There needs to be more support available for people in crisis, I say, and he nods. It's the same in the force, he says. I nod.

So after our nice little chat, I'm free to go and head for the Kantei and L's office. News has spread and I hear televisions and radios in departments when people should be fucking working. The blinds of L's office are closed, which isn't unusual in itself, but when I go inside, the window blinds are closed too, and it's like being plunged into a room in another timezone where it's the middle of the night. L's sitting on a couch, dimly lit by the laptop on the coffee table in front of him, and only looks up at me briefly. I go through his desk drawer and pour myself a glass of vodka before walking behind his chair to see what he's watching. River's emails. Oooh.

The vodka is cooling, although I'm perfectly calm now. I'll feel better once we offload this laptop, of course. I just need to be sure that there's nothing on there which could be found and brought back by some geeks, not that it'll come to that. I'll make sure that it's wiped, break the thing and dump it in the bins outside River's apartment, something like that. The police or someone might wonder where it is otherwise.

"So?" I ask L.

He doesn't say anything, just starts playing a file, stands, and walks to the window to peep between the blinds like a film noir detective, causing a thin horizontal line of light to cut through the room. I take his place in front of the screen and the video of L and me in the elevator starts right away. The empty elevator, the doors opening, us walking inside and Mikami standing outside talking to us. It's strange seeing it. I'm used to seeing myself on TV but not this covert shit. It's not as high quality as River made out, so that's my first thought. My second, looking at myself on the screen, is how amazed I am that I'm so expressive in this film, even though it's only been on for a couple of seconds. To me, it looks like as soon as the elevator door closed, my shoulders and posture and face relaxed, despite me glaring at my phone. I always imagine myself as a still portrait of professionalism, and that's what I looked like in this video until the door closed, because I changed from that to some ordinary, weary-looking man in an instant. I'm going to blame the suit.

The film continues and I watch us standing there; me looking at my phone, stuffing it into my pocket and turning my face towards L, who stares into space. "Mr Lawliet, we appear to be in an elevator," I say. "Well observed," he replies. "You were rather cruel to Kiyomi." Suddenly, I've forgotten the
importance of this and am just watching it as a spectator, and I smile at L on the screen like the me on
the screen smiles at L. ”Have I told you how -"

But the screen goes black. I check the player to see that it there's nearly two hours of playback left.
My forehead creases in suspicion. After ten seconds of the blank screen, I decide that River must just
have been shit at editing. I'm about to skip the film forwards to check through it quickly when L
orders me to wait. What for? I hope that it's not a compilation of me sacking him on several
occasions. Then there's some movement on the screen in very poor light. I see that it was black
because someone was standing in front of the camera, setting it up. A second later, River pulls away,
revealing what looks like his office behind him, and sits down to stare directly into the camera - back
at me. I'm expecting him to start talking because perhaps he had a message for me, but he doesn't
move, he doesn't even blink.

"What the fuck?" I ask after watching two minutes of River looking at me.

"That's it for the rest of the recording," L tells me from the window.

"For the whole thing? He must move or do something."

"No, he doesn't."

"How long for?"

"Just over two hours. He doesn't move and the film just cuts out. I scanned through it."

I lean back against the couch and watch River watching me. It must have been filmed at night. Did
he really spend hours of his life making a film of himself like this? And there's no point to it.

"Are you positive that he doesn't say anything?"

"Yes. If you don't believe me, you'll have to watch it yourself," he says. I don't know if I will. I have
some work to do later and I could have this playing in the background, I guess, just to make sure.

"I didn't take him for a madman, did you?" I ask laughingly, skipping half an hour ahead, though
you wouldn't know it because River hasn't moved an inch. L doesn't reply at first, just breathes out
and walks to his desk to throw himself onto his chair. His posture is appalling. His knuckles are
practically dragging on the floor, the way he's sitting.

"Turn it off, Light."

"You think that it's the curse? Do you think that the curse could make him do that? Well, well, River.
You didn't need to go to so much trouble," I tell the man on the screen before turning the laptop off
and looking towards L. There's no trace of any video files on the hard drive, so the man must have
cleaned up after himself. Though I can't be sure that there aren't any other copies floating around,
there's very little I can do about it unless someone else tries to blackmail me, so I put the memory
stick in my pocket. "He needed to die. He made it impossible for him to do anything else, but I didn't
expect this. It doesn't matter. It just saves us from having to get a hitman in."

"Mmmm."

"So it's all alright after all. No more Nate River," I say, standing and walking behind L to kiss his
neck, but he doesn't seem to notice. He's acting very pensive, despite this being the best outcome we
could have wished for.

"Why would he stare at the camera like that?" he asks me. "He could have recorded anything over it
if that was what he was going to do."

"It must be the kind of joke which suicidal people think is funny."

"He wasn't suicidal."

"He jumped, L, you saw him. Call me stupid, but I think those are the actions of a suicidal person."
I put my chin on his shoulder from behind him and rub my hands over his chest, because this could actually be a really good moment for us if he'd stop being a sullen dick. There's still no reaction. I'm considering tactics. "Why? Do you think that we scared him into madness?"

"He was an ok kid," he says. Yeah, whatever. I kiss the corner of his mouth but he moves away to lean over his desk instead. God, if it's not one thing, it's another. I leave him to it and sit in the chair in front of his desk to dust down my trousers. After lighting a cigarette, I look back at him, pressing his hands flat and breathing down towards the surface of his desk in a minute's silence, like he's considering smashing his head into it. He looks crushed and I'm sure that I look fucking marvellous, just like I did after I won the last election. I cross my legs over at the ankle, tap my cigarette into a glazed pot with a plastic orchid inside (a present from L's secretary, the simpering shrew) and think what a privilege it is to see him think. I might ask if he'd have his hands cast in bronze for my birthday.

Most of the time, I don't actually inhale my cigarettes, I just like the trails of smoke rising.

The rain drums against the glass of the window.

"Have a stoli, L, if you're all that upset," I say, and then inhale.

"I'm not upset."

"Could have fooled me. You don't need to worry, the police have it down as a suicide, they're just going through the motions. Actually, I better check that the press don't say that he died in the House. That never looks good. Are you on it, L, or should I call Mihael in? Where is he anyway?"

"He's got flu."

"Yeeaaah. Well, someone's got to see to the press."

"I spoke to the Press Secretary. There's nothing I can do."

"Excuse me, I don't think I heard that."

"The press know already. Someone talked."

"Shit, stupid bastards, the lot of them. Did I imagine that conference I held about confidentiality about House matters?"

"It was probably someone on the opposition."

"What are they saying on the news?"

"I don't know, Light. I don't know why you're so fucking concerned either. River wasn't your MP and this doesn't reflect on you."

"Yes, you're right. Ok. Tomorrow I'm going to talk to fuckface of the opposition, HR and the Treasury to work out some initiative to provide mental health support for all government staff. We'll have an in-house quack or something. You know what's going to happen now though. They're all
going to call in sick saying that they're traumatised or depressed."

"Probably."

"Maybe you will."

"Probably... Wait, what?"

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Damn straight, it's nothing. L, he died, it's over now. Is there anything on the computer or in his
emails?"

"No."

"Can't trust that. We'll have to overwrite the hard drive and smash it and dump it somewhere, and I'll
have his government account purged. I wish I could look through his emails and see what those
idiots are up to, but it could be traced, couldn't it. Leave it with me. But there was nothing else? What
about the notebook?"

"Nothing. Just notes from meetings."

"Oooh, opposition meetings? Good. I'll have a look and burn it."

"I don't understand you. You've just seen a man die in front of you and you're happy about it."

"Oh, lighten up. You're annoying me."

"Because I feel sick and I don't know how you can act this way."

"You feel sick? Is that a figure of speech?"

"No," he says, sitting back to massage his fingers into his forehead. "It's not because you, before you
start. Although you're not helping."

"How sick?"

"Just..."

"Tell me."

"Just feels like I'm a twisted knot inside."

"I told you not to drink carbonated mixers so late at night. Sounds to me like you just need a good
fart."

"Shut up, Light."

"Ok... Why? Why do you feel sick?"

"Because there's death everywhere, hello? I've just had to watch a film of a man who's just died and
it wasn't exactly It's a Wonderful Life."

"And?"
"And it wasn't like him. He wouldn't do that. No one in their right mind would do that. Isn't that enough?"

"No. He wasn't in his right mind, clearly. I've just seen the same things as you and I'm alright."

"Well, you're cold as an ice cap in December, that's why."

"It's not just about River, L."

"No... Every time this happens, especially after your crash, I think that next time it'll be us."

"That's ridiculous."

"No it isn't. Why shouldn't it happen to us? And I don't want to be the one who's left behind."

"Urgh," I breathe out from a curling lip.

"I can't help feeling that way."

"Try. You don't still believe in this curse thing, do you? L, come on, you led me to believe that you had a brain. Next you'll be looking for fairies in the forest in a fucking mushroom circle or something," I tell him, but he just carries on looking crestfallen, so I try to sympathise. I can understand that the prospect of outliving me must be hard to stomach."We're alright. I'm not going anywhere and neither are you. We'll stick together like we always have and we'll be fine. The crash was nothing, the River problem's solved - back to the plan."

"FUCK, Light, you're completely mad." Whinge, whinge, whinge. Personally, I think that if there is a curse - because I'm more agnostic now as far as that goes - then the curse must be the fist of god. God smiles on me and always has.

"I didn't die, did I? That means that even if there was a curse, it's been watching our backs."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't believe in it, obviously," I say, scratching the side of my neck carelessly with one fingernail.

"What do you think it was then?"

"It means that I'm just humouring you."

"Oh, thank you very much."

"You saw it too. The guy jumped and it wasn't to catch the ice cream truck. He really wanted to die. My message must have made him realise what he'd done and he did the honourable thing. It's not any curse, it's just what humans can do to themselves. He must have had other problems."

"You mean my leak to the press?" he asks, looking like he's not sure whether he'd prefer me to consolidate or dismiss his feelings of responsibility.

"No."

"Nate wouldn't allow himself to have other problems and he wouldn't commit suicide."

"But he did, L. You just didn't know him as well as you thought you did. The man I sent over must have been very persuasive," I say, deciding to dismiss it. River died because he wanted to die and that's the end of it. I'm not going to waste my time trying to figure out why. "Alright, I've got to go."
Do me a favour and see a doctor now. The police are coming to take a statement and I don't want you around when they do. Take the rest of the day off."

"There's no need for doctors. I'll be alright in a minute."

"You've been feeling sick a lot lately and I want you to get checked out."

"Light?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm ok," he tells me, looking up at me for to show me his sincerity. If I was blind and deaf then I'd probably believe it. He stands to pick up his jacket and coat. "I might head off though and check how things are at the firm. I'll see you tomorrow."

"If I could come with you, I would, you know," I say quietly as he walks past me. I sound harsh though and quite put out by it, almost as if what I'm really saying is: 'Look at the mess you've made of me. I wish that I was dead,' but he stops and smiles slightly at me anyway. I suppose that it is an accomplishment which he should be proud of.

"The police spoke to you then, I take it?"

"Yeah, very quickly," I reply cheerfully, relieved for the change in topic. "The Chief came for a chat with me himself and we're having a round of golf next week. He was very sorry for the inconvenience of closing the House until they've cleared River away. God, did you see the state of the place? But everyone's stories match up, I checked, and the CCTV will prove it as a suicide. The handover thing didn't actually happen. Nobody noticed him until he took the plunge. Ha. Sorry."

"Oh my God, the CCTV!"

"You know where the cameras are in the House, L, give me a break. There'll be nothing to see apart from him coming in and going out, don't worry about it. I might watch River's last testament in full later. I've got a busy day ahead."

"So the police think it's a suicide."

"When someone jumps off a balcony with dozens of witnesses it's hard to find any other explanation. The Chief's very words to me included 'open and shut' and 'poor kid must have been bullied at school.' Don't worry about it, it's a good thing," I say, standing and walking over to the laptop and notebook on the table, but he follows me and I suddenly feel a sense that like he's going to take them from me. "Leave these with me, I'll get rid of them."

"It's easier for me to do it. You can burn the stick and the notebook. I'll deal the hard drive on this and dump it in the House somewhere tomorrow."

"No, no, they've searched the House, that's no good. We'll have to find somewhere else. It might look like he's deleted anything to do with us but this needs to be dealt with. It's pretty straight forward to wipe it, but you need to overwrite it."

"I know. Do you know who you're talking to?"

"It's just that you're nearly forty and I don't know what you know about these things because you more or less type with two fingers."

"Fuck off. I'm not old and I type perfectly well with all my fingers."
"Fine. Do that, then smash the whole thing and leave it by his apartment block so that if anyone finds it it'll look like he broke it and needed to get a new one. I don't think they'll bother looking at the hard drive, but just in case. It's really just that it's accounted for so they won't get suspicious. What if he had another computer or hard drive though?"

"He didn't. That laptop was his pride and joy."

"How do you know that?"

"He told me."

"He told you?"

"We used to talk sometimes. I didn't particularly want to but -"

"What else do you know? Did he have any family? I know that his mother died and he lived alone."

"There's no one that he was close to, as far as I know. I don't think he had a girlfriend or anything," he says, and I bark out a laugh and actually grip my stomach to stop the feeling that it might fall out. "What's so funny?" he asks.

"You mean he dressed like that and he was straight?"

"I don't know, Light. We never talked about it, I'm just presuming."

"And your gaydar is shit, I know. He had a really high-pitched voice as well, I don't buy it. So, we can't be absolutely positive that there aren't copies of this film floating around but we're a sure as we can be. About the hard drive though. Are you sure that you can do that?"

"Can I do that," he repeats sarcastically as he walks away, putting the laptop into his briefcase. God, he looks so thin and stick-like sometimes, but I don't buy that either, it's just an illusion.

"And clean it so there are no prints," I add.

"Light, I know this shit. Stop it, it's insulting. We're not in CSI Miami," he grumps, and I give up. When he's like this it tends to make me act in the opposite way most of the time, to counteract it. I don't know, it just lightens my mood. We can't both be angry with what life hands out.

"Ok, smart arse, I'll leave it to you."

"Why are you in such a good mood?"

"Why are you in such a bad one? There was a problem that's gone away and I'm happy about it. If you don't cheer up soon, I'm going to send you to Dignitas. I'll call you later."

"But was I at the House or not? If the police get in touch with me, what should I say?"

"You weren't there unless the police pick up on it, and if they do, say that you felt sick and had to leave. If you see a doctor now, that'll tie everything up. Just dodge the subject if someone else asks," I say, and he walks to the door. I feel like we have as many bases covered as we need to. More than we need to worry about really, because I don't think the police are going to waste much time with this case.

"Oh, I released a press statement, by the way. There's not much that needs to come from our side though so it was just the standard 'what a tragedy' thing," he tells me from the door.
"Thanks."

"No need for thanks. It's my job, isn't it," he says as he leaves. The door closes. I'm about to leave his office too when my phone rings. It's the man I hired to speak to River. Before I can say anything, he tells me that he didn't get to speak to River at all because there was no answer. I'd told him not to break in or do anything reckless because the presumption was that River had no life and would be there at two in the morning. He'd waited outside the apartment block all night but there was no sign of him, and now the police have just turned up, so he left. Probably some domestic is going on, he says. Does he want me to try again later? Does he know where he could find him?

The next day, River is all over the papers as well as the lobby floor, but the day after that it was like he'd never lived at all. Forgotten almost instantly because of some scandal involving the Emperor's son and an extra-marital affair which has resulted in a mad woman rubbing her hands with happiness as she goes from press office to press office with a story about how he knocked her up and encouraged her to have an abortion before disappearing when she refused. She was never going to have an abortion; she smelled money. I send a note of sympathy and support to the Emperor, which I know will be gratefully received, and urge the media to have some respect and leave the family in peace. I see the Emperor every week about state affairs, but I learned early on that he only wants to hear good news from me and share a pot of tea in a sun room, and once I think that he asked me to share some actual pot with him. I couldn't do that. I don't condone drug use, even with the Emperor. He once said to me that my father must be very proud of me, only he said it in a very depressed tone, and of course I sensed some familial problems there and read up about it in the gossip rags.

I know what you're thinking, but I have no idea what happened with River, I swear. Mysterious as it is, it doesn't mean that I can't be pleased about what happened, because he was a rat and whatever happened was ultimately to my benefit. Unfortunately, my sparkling mood is shot on the night after River's death. I go to L's and he's not there. His car's not there, he's not there. It's to be embarrassing to let security see me walk straight back out again, because officially my reason for going to L's at all is to work, preferably when he's not there, so I flick through the channels on his TV to a quick rhythm I've developed. I eat his salad and I drink his white wine which is supposed to go with fish, but he doesn't have any fish. I think to myself: 'This is fine. He's his own person and he can do whatever he wants. He doesn't have to tell me.' But he is not his own person, he can't do whatever he wants and he does have to tell me. I'm very pissed off. He replies to my brusque text message by telling me to shut up, he's on his way back now, and that he blames me for not telling him that I was coming over. God, I was only letting him know that I was here and he's not and I know that he's not. There's no reason to overreact.

I try to wait patiently but end up looking for anything pornographic and am disappointed there. I don't know where he hides it. Maybe he's one of those people who buys 'art' books and passes them off as culture while manically beating off to them into an empty crisp packet. Giving up on that idea, I find myself sitting on the bed in B's old room, which I don't think L has set foot in since he left. The dust rises from the carpet beneath my feet and I sneeze once, rub my nose like a baby animal, cough in a manly way to make myself feel better, and go back to the living room. After a few minutes of staring at the grain on a beam in the ceiling, a thought smacks me in the face, as they tend to do when you've forgotten about them completely, and I march to the kitchen again, filled with a new sense of purpose. Annoyingly, the side door to the garage is locked, so I find L's spare set of master keys and am quickly working through them when I hear the front door close, so I stuff the keys back into the drawer, switch on the kettle and run to the fridge to very casually look over the sparse contents.

"Where are you?" he shouts with a tone of having absolutely no interest whatsoever about where I am. He finds me before I have to answer and I smile at him innocently before turning back to this Narnia of a fridge. "What are you doing?" he asks.
"I'm making tea. Do you want tea?" I look at him only long enough to see the his eyes dart between me, the knife drawer, the jar in which he sometimes hides wads of cash for laundering, the garage door, a corkscrew, miscellaneous objects.

A 'hmmmm' reverberates from him after he's walked behind me, and with no answer I turn my face around to get some sense of what's he's going to do. His eyes are more hooded now with a lazy disbelief that he probably won't pursue, though he kisses me on the forehead sinisterly before he puts his jacket on the back of a chair. "Take your shirt off," he orders, taking two cups from a cupboard. Oh, respect and domestic bliss.

"What?"

"I'm not having a younger man around who's always wearing a shirt. You're not living up to my expectations."

"It's cold."

"That's what happens when you stand in front of an open fridge for longer than you have to," he says. Suddenly his arm reaches in front of me and I tense up, preparing myself for a punch in the stomach, because that wouldn't surprise me, but he just grabs a milk carton and shuts the fridge door. I watch him pour hot water into a teapot like it's the most fascinating thing I've seen all day, but there's not much competition, to be honest. He rushes the brewing of the tea, taking to stirring it aggressively. "You know, one day you're going to be snooping around and you'll find something you don't like."

"Like what?"

"My cellar full of boys," he says in all seriousness. Feeling more relaxed now, I lean forwards against his back to watch him pour the tea and add milk until it's that particular shade of golden brown that makes me think that he uses a pantone colour chart to make the perfect cup of tea, which nine times out of ten actually tastes like shit.

"So, did you deal with the laptop?"

"Of course. Mihael had a friend of his leave it by the recycling," he says, tapping the spoon twice against the rim of a cup.

Only now do I see a lost opportunity slipping away from me. If I hadn't been so eager to get rid of it, I could have put all kinds of confidential state information on that laptop for any anonymous person (L) to find and sell to the papers, causing a security breach and a reputation nightmare for the opposition. I should have thought of that.

"Excellent. Well, that's that then. Did you see the doctor?"

"I did, sir."

"You did?"

"He was providing a character testimony for a client of mine yesterday, so I did see him. My client is a very sick puppy."

"That doesn't count, L. I mean, did you see him about how you're being sick all the time."

"I'm not being sick at all, Light, I feel sick sometimes. And it was a waste of time asking his opinion. I'm overworked, apparently."
"Hahahaha... overworked."

"I am! He said! 'Mr Lawliet, your work to life ratio is disproportionate,'" he says in a boring voice and passes me my tea.

"Your work is your life."

"I know! That's what I told him."

"And then there's me."

"I know! I didn't tell him that though. Basically, he wants me to take a holiday and cut down on my hours. Like that's going to happen."

"You can clear it with the firm, right?"

"If I was going to take his advice seriously, which I'm not, it'd be PR I'd cut down on."

"L, what about me?"

"You're resigning, aren't you?" he asks me like he doesn't believe it, sipping his tea while watching my reaction closely

"Oh. Yeah."

"And so I'll be resigning. It'll work out. I'll work forty-six hours a week and most of it from home instead of ninety plus hours and most of it from a horrible office in the Kantei," he says. I follow him into the bedroom then, apparently just for him to go into the bathroom and shut the door in my face. The shower starts running and I sit on a chair by the door while the cup warms my hands.

"But he didn't do any tests?"

"No, it was pure instinct. Doctors, eh? Aren't they great?" I barely hear him say.

"A very reliable means of diagnoses. It could be physical though. Your colon might be exploding."

"I'm sorry?"

"Or your prostate. You kind of abuse it."

"Believe me, it could do with more abuse," he mumbles.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean that my prostate is fine, Light. I'm fine. It must have been seeing a man throw himself twenty feet off a ledge to splatter his brains onto a marble floor in front of me. Hard to believe that it might make me feel a bit queasy, I know."

"It was only River though. The House is still closed, by the way. They have to pressure wash the tiles but it looks like they might have to replace some of them, or regrout them, I don't know."

"Thank you for that unnecessary detail."

"If you need time off, L, you should take it."

"I don't."
"I'm just saying that you could," I say. After a few seconds of silence, the sound of the shower stops, and shortly after that he opens the door to stand in the doorway. Naked and wet as he is, I still get the feeling that he might beat me up if he thinks it necessary.

"Are you worried about me?" he asks.

"No," I reply. Thankfully he seems satisfied with that and walks back inside the bathroom, leaving the door open this time, so I inspect my nails. "But you could if you wanted to."

"I don't want to."

"Ok."

"There's nothing wrong with me. Don't start acting like there's something wrong with me."

"I'm not," I tell him. Again, he appears, only this time he walks out and stops in front of me to very precisely inform me of his state of health. I try to listen but I'm more interested in how the dampness from the shower is shining on his collarbones. Fuck, life is so complicated.

"I'm not ill, I'm not stressed, I'm not weak. There is nothing wrong with my prostate," he says.

"I said ok."

"You think it's the curse, don't you? You think the curse is killing me slowly like it did with Jeevas."

"What? No!"

"That's what Naomi thinks."

"What are you talking about?" Naomi thinks that L's dying like Jeevas, what?

"She said to Stephen and me that Jeevas was punished for something but she didn't know what." Oh for fuck's sake, Naomi. Do you have to romanticise everything?

"Jeevas died because he did too many drugs and fucked too many people and thought that a condom was a type of house."

"It's what she said. You think that too and that the same thing is happening to me."

"Fuck Naomi, she doesn't know anything. L, I don't believe in the curse, you know that. Why Naomi said that to you, I have no idea. And why she had to say it to Stephen, who probably told the CIA... What must they think now? That we're the land of superstitious bibbidy bobbidy boo?"

"So you really don't believe in it now? You don't blame yourself?" he asks.

"Why should I blame myself?"

"Forget it. Forget I said anything."

He walks away, leaving me very confused, and puts on the stereo, ramping the bass up until the floor vibrates with yet another melancholy dirge which is trying to be something else but not really managing it. I look to my left, across the lake, but still noting his movement from the corner of my eye while he drags clothes on, which is never a good sign. Good clothes should slink on like a snake and clasp to you, so he must be doing that clothes for the sake of it thing.

The tempo of songs influences our heart rates, I heard, and whatever he's put on is interfering with
mine. It plods like my mind plods, trying to work out what he means in suggesting that at some time I believed in the curse and blamed myself. Maybe he blames me still? Maybe I was drunk the other night and told him that it was me in hope that I could get a fuck out of it. He's so oddly evasive lately. More than usual, and in a new and particular way of making me feel like an idiot who must be protected from things which could possibly upset me, while still making me very aware of those things because he not-so-secretly thinks that I'm responsible in the first place. Now he's not ill and is very emphatic about it, but he did see his doctor regardless, so it concerned him that much to do that. But I'm not supposed to care about that. I'm not frightened of anything – not death, not illness, not loss, not anything – but I'm frightened by how much I care about him, as though if he wasn't there I would lose myself as well. I don't understand it and I don't think that I ever will, but from being an insulated, self-sufficient man for whom life glossed over without leaving the slightest mark, to this, I don't think that I could be anything else now. Whether I like it or not, it's this or nothing.

*With every mistake, we must surely be learning*, the song says. L laughs to himself.

Later, I wake up at some stupid time like an internal alarm clock woke me for a reason. L's asleep and it takes me a while to untangle his legs from mine and shift away without waking him, because his face is pressed against my back. I'm used to it now, but it makes waking up needing a piss a kind of time trial of that operation game where you try to remove organs from a cardboard patient without setting off the buzzer. I manage it however, and have a piss. I feel very awake now and wander around until I find myself in the kitchen again, and put the kettle on to watch it and hear the boiling sound grow louder, but turn it off suddenly because it's getting too loud. Instead, I open the drawer directly underneath and take out the set of keys.

Once I find the right key and get into the garage, the smell of old burning rises to greet me. The force of me opening the door disturbs some ashes in a metal paint bucket on the floor between Stephen's fucking boat and a desk - Penber's desk. I'm not hopeful and I can't even bring myself to be surprised or angry about it, but I lower the lid to see that there are still some papers inside, so I pull a chair over and read through what has survived the holocaust. The first page has big chunks of text highlighted and 'speak to Light' written in the margin.

I don't know how long I've been reading through Raye's notes (which start off neat on most pages but descends into almost indecipherable scribbles like he was possessed) when a shadow blocks the light from the kitchen. I look towards it to see L standing there. He looks sad but not reproachful like I would have expected. I also expect him to shout at me, but he doesn't do that either. Shuffling the papers back to uniformity slowly like I've been caught stealing, I don't take my eyes off him and try to think of an explanation I can give him. I'm entitled to this. I just wanted to know – it's my right and my name is literally all over it, but he just walks away, back inside. I decide to take what he didn't burn and not mention it again, at least not for the time being. After putting the pile of papers and spiral binders into my briefcase, I go back to bed. He's on his side, facing the window, and I want to apologise, but I don't. I just press my face against his back and tangle my legs with his.

On my way to another meeting with HR (they have a problem in that there are too few humans in the party these days), I saw L and Kiyomi talking like traitors outside his department. Kiyomi appeared to be doing most of the talking but I was and still am furious with both of them for sharing the same air without me being present. Kiyomi had almost backed herself into a wall and L looked wooden and awkward. The only thing I heard was Kiyomi saying that she knows "he's not like that," and that L's "known him a long time." L told her that: 'Sorry, Kiyomi, but I don't know how I can help. In all other ways he never puts a foot wrong, but you have to understand that, emotionally, he's still in pre-school. Sometimes he says and does things he doesn't mean, just like everyone else."
So, he's a complete bastard, like I needed reminding. I expect this from Kiyomi, but not from him. I'm so cold all of a sudden. It's like he's dead to me because this is a betrayal I didn't foresee, and he's made me feel stupid and realise how stupid I've been. I hate that I trusted him that much, against common sense, just because I wanted to so badly. I don't know why I did and why I'm so disappointed in him. Combining with the anger over this are other reasons over the past day of how he's injured me, so in all, I feel justified. He just hurts me.

I broke up the mother's meeting by being noticed by them. Kiyomi left as soon as she saw me, which was as predictable as the turning tide and I don't care anyway, but L started making excuses for why they were talking, which were desperate, guilty, earnest and pathetic all at the same time, so I interrupted his nonsense.

"What were you talking about?"

"She was waiting for me, I couldn't ignore her. We weren't..." he lies and lies and lies. Interrupting him again, I called my guard from over my shoulder imperially, always knowing that there's usually at least one within hearing distance unless I tell them to do otherwise (you get used to it and it's kind of handy), and ordered him to take Mr Lawliet home because he was unwell and shouldn't be at work. Mr Lawliet looked like shit at that moment, having been caught out, so it was a believable excuse, but the real reason is that he can't be trusted even to keep his distance from Kiyomi and must be punished in the most distinct way possible – to have him removed. L didn't argue against it but his demeanour immediately went from apologetic to hostile, moodily mentioning his own car and how he could drive himself if I insisted on sending him home. As I walked past him, I told him that he's not fit to drive, brushing him and his comments aside. He didn't even argue against that and simply stood there motionless before, I'm told, eventually leaving as instructed. The next morning, he had to hire a taxi to bring him into work. I want him to know that I can freeze him out from life and independence as easily as putting a stamp on a letter, if I choose to. If I chose to, I could have his estate impounded, his name destroyed, I could have his tongue ripped out and his hands cut off and, if I really, really wanted to, I could have him killed and sent to B in a box. Equally, if he deserved it, I could make him a senior member of the government whether he's elected or not, make him landed and effectively give him jurisdiction over several departments. God, I just can't accept the idea that I'm leaving all this and voluntarily walking towards destruction. Resign. The word doesn't connect to any vision of reality.

I'm not stupid. I noticed a long time ago that people who become an obstacle to me tend to die, like this life is a video game and I have godlike powers. Divine providence, maybe. I am favoured. Apart from that though, I have unequalled power here that I rarely tap into because I simply don't have to, but that power is why The Lady stayed in office so long, and even I might have to resort to it one day. Fear and control rule the people until you slip up and someone better comes along. That's who I am: fear and control. I only slipped up by becoming too damn fond of him, but all that can change. Sometimes when he's not there I can talk myself out of this whole situation and see things in a very realistic light. If I put L on a scale against what I have and unbiasedly weigh them up, then he is sincerely outweighed. I'm not overreacting here, because he should know better. This comes just weeks after he encouraged me to spend tens of billions on social projects and grants in marginal Blue seats which will be showing results just in time for the next election, even though in theory it's uncertain whether I'll be back to benefit from it. This was of course picked up on in Questions by the opposition, namely, River. I was expecting it, but it was nonetheless humiliating to hear the jeers and laughter until I shut them the fuck up, though my defence hardly stands up to scrutiny. I'm not sure what there is to defend, but whatever it is, it's L's fault. My Kingmaker, my arse. He acts like he's the Prime Minister and I'm his deputy. What the hell have I been doing letting him run rings around me, the turd, and now talking to Kiyomi when he knows, he must know, that the one person he shouldn't have chats with is my wife, especially when it's about me, which it must have been in its entirety. I think he forgets his place sometimes. When I go to sleep that night I imagine that I hear a scuttling of
tiny clawed feet under my bed. There isn't anything there.

So it's not surprising that I don't hear from either L or Kiyomi that day, or for three days in total. What's amazing to me is how peaceful I become, on balance, when left to myself. B whispered confession to me as if he was ashamed of it but that it explained everything about himself: 'but I just don't like people," keeps coming to mind. All these fucking people.

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer type thing: There's a John Lennon witticism about Brian Epstein's biography, 'A Cellarful of Noise' somewhere in here because, heh, funny.
"Describe it to me... make it poetry," I rush out on panting breaths. A breeze from the window cuts through the blind, cooling the beads of sweat on my chest and back, so I pull him closer to me because he's warm. No kisses really seem to make proper contact, they're just half-open gaping mouths we press against each other, wherever's closest.

"No, Light."

My hand slides slowly down the curve of his spine to the crack of his arse. Do it, you fucking bastard. Bury my heart in it.

"You have before... You've done it for me before," I remind him, then make a soft gasping sound and practically invert towards him. His hand moves smoothly across my wing of a shoulder blade and strokes up to the nape of my neck. He holds it while he flicks his tongue and kisses over an artery.

"Did you see it?... How he fell... The blood."

Despite the mood between L and myself being best described as Arctic, in that we're avoiding each other and that my greatest fetish at the moment is imagining punching him in every major muscle group until he dies from internal haemorrhaging, I still find myself taking further steps towards dismantling my life. I've spoken to the lawyer L recommended to me and actually told another living soul that I'm planning to divorce my wife in the very near future. I've jotted down a timeline but filled it up with unnecessary jobs which I have to complete before I resign from politics. I don't know if I'm punishing L or myself. Maybe deep inside I feel that my resignation and our binding to each other will be a concrete block tied to our feet. Maybe it'll be just what we both deserve for what we've done.

But this break is as short-lived as my contentedness after River's death. Any shred of happiness I've ever felt has always been either caused or destroyed by L, and now he's ruining even the briefest moments of peace that I manage to claw back from life. Mikami comes to my office in the afternoon and tells me that I have to speak to L. I'd rather not, I tell him, but ask him why. L has gone mad, it seems. He launched a tirade against my Foreign Secretary, who, in light of River's tragic demise, is trying to drum up support for her idea of a support group with monthly meetings in every department, bringing people from different professional levels together to speak in the third person about their feelings and personal problems in a 'secure, confidential environment with no judgement'. Her plan is to make it a nationwide scheme in every place of business in the country, bringing thoughtfulness and kindness to the workplace... fuck knows. She hasn't even run this by me and this is the first I've heard of it. She's already been bleating on about setting up a crèche in every department so children can accompany their parents to work, and now this. Two strikes and she's out, I'm not waiting for a third. Why in hell would I want to hear about my secretary's athlete's foot problems and her philandering husband? I don't, and I'm certainly not going to confide in everyone about how I don't feel anything for my son - don't even think of him as a human being, never mind as mine - how I'm resigning from politics and divorcing my wife for my Head of PR, and that shares in a casino I invested in as a joint enterprise with L have gone through the fucking floor, just so they can all nod sympathetically and clap their hands, astounded by my honesty, and to congratulate me for these small fuck ups. I'm not sure where the benefit there is in it, and it sounds like L said more or less the same thing, only he ripped her throat out at the same time. She is indeed crap and so is her idea which has nothing to do with her job, but apparently now she's on a mission to have him sacked for bullying and 'verbal assault'. It's generally attracting attention to him - his power within the party which goes beyond his station, and his closeness to me - so it makes it hard for me to ignore the issue
now that it's become a source of gossip, like a river that might burst its banks if I don't do something.

Gone are the subtleties of slaughtering the egos of those around him and making them unendingly loyal in the process, not that he was ever very good at that. He just branded her incompetent in no uncertain terms by pointing out her failures in front of two departments. Mikami repeated some key points of L's attack, which were: 'This is why women should be banned from politics. Your heads are so full of shit, josei manga and fucking yaoi, nail polish, and dreams of fifteen-inch cocks which you wouldn't know what to do with even if you found one that was willing, that you can't make any rational decisions. Personal problems are just that, personal, and we're here to work, not to have some love-in and talk about our illicit affairs on the clock. You just want any excuse to be paid for sitting on your arse doing what you do best, which is talking bollocks and eating biscuits.' He also only referred to her as 'you fucking woman' because he couldn't remember her name. I wouldn't mind so much, in fact in private I agree with him wholeheartedly as I'm sure any sane person would, but I'm already angry at him and I can do without this. He's such an attention seeker.

So, I arrange a meeting and text L, telling him to come to my office at eight, with the insinuation being that if he doesn't come to the fucking meeting then he'll be sacked in a non-sexual way. Mikami and Touta come along because they were witnesses to his tornado, and if they don't then I'm worried that the meeting will become violent and then sexual. He's late, which I expected. The time rolls on and Touta starts making excuses for him, such as: 'He's grieving,' and: "Maybe he's been in an accident," but we all know he's just a hateful bastard who's late on purpose. He knows the punctuality is very important to me. I get anxious otherwise, and it's more of a physical reaction; my heart beats in an unpleasantly rapid way and I feel like I want to rip my skin off my bones. I'm not mental or anything. I just like things to run on time and L is a cunt.

When he eventually does turn up, he tries to appear aloof and carefree but gives off dangerous pheromones by the bucketload that he's more than willing to throttle us all to death. His hair is all over the place, drooping into a sweep over one eye, and his clothes are... he's a fucking mess, basically. His tie is missing, his top buttons are undone, he looks like he's been caught in a light shower, and when he glides in, smirking at us with mischief and superiority before he takes his coat off, it appears that he's also lost his jacket. My rationality which I've been nurturing with dedication over the time I've been waiting for him is thrown out the window, because in the barren pit of my soul I think: 'You've just fucked someone, haven't you.' It's what he wants me to think, I decide, to unnerve me, and I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing that it worked, albeit momentarily. When I see him like this it makes me feel sad for both of us.

He sits in one of my armchairs which I bought because they're uncomfortable and put people on edge. Ones used only for meetings like this one and for sackings. I really want a cigarette but I won't have one in case he thinks that I'm at all affected by his display. I am not weak.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he says. "I'm sorry that I'm late for this little get together, but I was rather busy."

"Doing what?" I ask. Aiber in the opposition again, maybe?

"Wanking in the bathroom, if you must know. I trust that you understand how that affects my priorities and timekeeping."

Ok, you bastard, let's go. You'll leave here wishing that you'd come in grovelling instead.

"Let me make his clear to everyone before we start - this is an informal meeting." I say. My tone is appropriately steely and it irritates him, because he starts fucking around with the buttons on his shirt cuffs.
"This is an intervention," he states.

"Touta, get him a drink."

"What of?" Touta asks me for some reason as he stands up, so I incline my head towards L to remind him for whom the drink is for.

"Anything," L tells him, and Touta wanders off to my drinks tray obediently and grateful to be out of the vicinity for a minute. "So, what seems to be the problem?"

It's that kind of sarcastic remark that's often not taken as such. People think that he's being genuine and really doesn't know what's going on, and Mikami, whether he realises that or not, sits forwards sympathetically. I'm trying to say as little as possible.

"We're worried about you, my friend."

"I'm not your friend," L replies. "Was this your idea?" he asks me.

"It was brought to my attention that there was concern about you. I'm only here to oversee," I say, and watch his lip quiver into a dangerous smile.

"Like an umpire? It's no fun unless you join in, Light." He then coughs a laugh into his hand, folds one leg over the other and leans back with his arms on the armrests like he's just sitting down to watch fucking Star Wars. God, I could kill him. "I see. And what are you concerned about, gentlemen?"

"You with Foreign this afternoon," Mikami says.

"What happened which could concern you?"

"You could have beaten her up and been nicer about it."

"She thoroughly deserved it and I really wasn't as bad as you're making out. Anyway, even if I had beaten her up instead, I still don't see how it could concern you."

"You were out of order."

"What right do you have to tell me what's in order? Have you forgotten that I'm the most qualified person in this room? No, within the whole fucking government," L says loudly. Both he and Mikami are quickly getting angry with each other to the point where you expect fists to start flying, so I intervene. Mikami's a black belt and L doesn't even have that many normal belts. I can see how someone could find it attractive to see L and Mikami kicking the shit out of each other, but people can pull such awful expressions during fights and it puts me right off.

"L," I sigh, but he turns on me and can't pretend to be indifferent about this any more.

"You can shut your face," he tells me, his eyes burning with hatred. I'm so shocked by it that my mouth closes in response and I look at the floor. I feel so stupidly guilty for some reason that I want to apologise and tell Mikami and Touta to leave because I've done the wrong thing and this should be a private conversation. It's goes against everything, because I know that I haven't done anything wrong, but to him this is a betrayal; how I've brought in outsiders.

"God, Lawliet, you need to calm down. Yagami's been defending you," Mikami says.

"Oh, I'm sure he has. So, what do you suggest I should do to curb my ability to call a spade a spade?
Because she is a fucking spade."

"You've been bouncing off the walls since Steve died."

"Stephen," L snaps quickly. "His name was Stephen. You should know that, you stayed in the same house as him. He was living with your girlfriend."

"Yeah, well, he told me to call him Steve."

"I really can't see that. He was just being nice to you," he says calmly, crossing his arms and looking to his right. "And how dare you mention him." I think: 'what?' just as Mikami says it, but he doesn't press the issue.

"Fact is, I can understand that you're gutted about it, but you have some mental issues that -"

"Mental issues!?" he repeats in shock and at the point of suddenly boiling over. Touta has returned with L's drink at precisely the wrong moment and leaps to Mikami's defence in his rather ham fisted, good-natured way of trying to calm a volcano into not erupting by pouring a glass of water onto it.

"What Teru means is that you're -"

"I don't need you – a pissing civil servant - to tell me anything. I've shat away more intelligence than you've managed to collect in your entire lifetime, so I suggest that you shut the fuck up too."

"I'm sorry..." Touta replies, though I wouldn't be surprised if he started crying as he puts L's drink on the table and takes his seat again. I don't think that anyone has ever spoken to him like that, not even Sayu when she's in her worst mood. It's practically impossible to shout at him, even though I've wanted to a few times.

"L, if you're angry, be angry with yourself or with me, not Mikami and Touta," I say.

"Oh, I am angry with you, don't worry."

"Man, you need to calm down. We're not attacking you here," Mikami assures him, even though I'm not so sure anymore, but it only serves to make him laugh to himself.

"Ha! That you all think that you have a right to judge me is hilarious, really. Who the fuck are you? You're just some failed lawyer, Matsuda's another idiot and that one over there is an evil fucking twink."

"Listen, we're worried about you."

"That's your problem, Mikami. Maybe you should get a life?"

"Maybe you need to take some time off?" he counters, which makes L laugh again.

"So I'm incapable of work because I criticised some no mark woman? You were all thinking the same thing as me. She is a fucking idiot. But so are you. Who would have thought?"

"We're suggesting that you take some time off so she doesn't make an official report about this."

"Really? How kind of you," he smiles coldly, then looks at me with that same hurt look of betrayal and expectation that suggests that this can only get worse. "And you. What do you have to say about this, Prime Minister? You in your overseer capacity."

"I think that you need some time off," I say reluctantly, choosing to look at his glass on the table
instead of him. "A week or so."

"You're suspending me?"

"No."

"Under your authority," he nods bitterly. "Why don't you just sack me and be done with it?"

"It's in your best interests to accept a week's leave, otherwise this will have to be reported, you'll face an official warning and it'll go on your record. L, be sensible."

He stares at me for a moment and I think that maybe he's taking in what I'm saying, but then he stands suddenly, draining his glass in one go.

"I'm going. I don't know why, because I've been disappointed by you in so many ways, but I expected more from you. Why would I think that? I'll have time to think about it over the next week, I suppose. That is, if you deem me fit to drive a car. Under all this," he says, waving one hand towards me dismissively, "you're just as much of a coward as the rest of them. You weren't even there, and yet you take their word over mine. In fact, you don't even listen to my side. You don't want to know."

"Your behaviour is erratic."

"Erratic? Oh, yes! Because of my mental issues, you mean? That and Steve, whoever he was. Yes, I can understand why you'd think that everything I do now is erratic. It must be."

"She's going to complain if you don't take leave," Mikami points out, but I think L's too far gone to care. He's angry again and part of me which has disconnected is stunned with how arrogant, petulant and unashamed he is as he shouts at Mikami again.

"You, you fucking drugged up twat, follow him around because you have no opinions of your own. I have no time for sheep. And you," he tells Touta. "You're all sheep."

"Hey, wait a minute," Touta exclaims. "You can't speak to us like -"

"Baaaaaaa!"

"I'm not a sheep!"

"Touta, Mikami, leave us alone for a moment, please. Wait outside," I say. The moment that L starts impersonating farm animals is the moment that people have to go, because it's the end of times. They do leave, thankfully. As soon as the door closes, I fall back against my chair and breathe out. Even that seems to annoy L so much that he has to look away from me. "You're being really mature, L."

"They're disgusting. Like scabs."

"They could have said nothing to me and you'd have a nightmare on your hands. Would you have preferred that?"

"Yes."

"I've bought her off," I tell him, stretching my spine a little. "I was going to demote her this week, but I can't now. Not after your performance. I offered her some compensation and a week's paid leave if she didn't lodge a complaint against you, so you've actually rewarded her for being an idiot."

"Lovely. And this won't even be on my record? You made this whole non-problem go away, have
"You might not care about it now, but -"

"I own my own firm, of course I don't care about it. She needs firing so she can excel herself in whatever her true talent is. Selling flowers or something."

"Tell me what happened."

"Oh! So now you want to hear my side of the story?"

"No, I've heard about that. I mean with you."

"I'm fine, she's just useless."

"I know that, but you can't speak to someone in public like that, L."

"Can't I? You know when I said that it's not you that makes me sick? Forget about that, because you're making me sick right now. You're becoming like all the rest of them. The only difference is that you're hopelessly in love with yourself," he snaps at me, and I laugh at how unreasonable and ungrateful he is. I feel him watching me as I smile towards the ceiling. "Why did I think that you were different? You've humiliated me."

"I saved you," I almost shout back. "You're going to take leave which is owed to you and no one will speak of it again. It never happened."

"I don't need you to protect or clean up for me, because I did nothing wrong. With no respect, because you don't deserve any, you weren't there. Everyone will know why I'm on leave. You think this is better than suspension? This is worse than suspension. This is you ripping my balls off just because you can, when you should have told your little friends to fuck right off. But you've never supported me, not really, not in anything. I don't know why I'm surprised at you. Your idea of support is just being in the same room as me, like I should be thankful for that much."

"I couldn't support you. You know better than to slaughter someone in full view of several departments."

"At least with suspension I'd keep my dignity. I wear my crown of thorns with pride," he laughs dramatically.

"L, you fucked up and this was how I kept you from official action."

"Yeah, Light, you saved me. My hero."

"This isn't about the woman, is it."

"Yes, it's about that fucking woman and you being spineless again. This was nothing to do with you. Why did you have to stick your nose into it and save the day, you twat? I had no choice but to speak to Kiyomi and you humiliated me then and you've just done it again."

"You shouldn't have spoken to Kiyomi," I say before drinking my diluted whiskey until there's nothing but ice chinking against the sides of the glass. L and I can't even bring ourselves to look at each other now, so the vitriol just flies between us, filling the atmosphere.

"I said that I didn't have a choice. Believe it or not, I don't want to speak to your wife, but she was waiting for me. How about you stop having arguments with her? I don't know what the hell you said
to her, but it must have been bad if she came to me for advice.

"What did she say?"

"She didn't say anything exactly, she's just really upset because of something you did. I know that feeling well. But we're both trapped by you. Neither of us have anyone to talk to, not about you. I never thought that I'd feel sorry for Kiyomi but I fucking well do. Hypocritical, isn't it? Ironic how the one person she asks for advice is the last person who should give it. You're a shit to her because... I don't know why, because she annoys you? Because of me? It's not her fault that she's there, Light, because you were the one who put her there. I hoped that she'd ask me about you one day. I thought I'd find it funny but I just felt really sad for her, because she loves you. Even after the what you've done to her, she loves you. Don't you feel sorry that you treat her badly? It's cruel, Light. You're torturing her. If you're going to end it then end it, but do it soon. Do the right thing for one time in your life, because seeing her back there made me ashamed of myself and ashamed of you."

"Kiyomi is my problem, L."

"Yes, your problem, not mine. You treat us both like we're commodities that must be kept separate and punish us when we don't do exactly as you order us to. But we're people, Light. We're our own people and you shouldn't tell us what to do and how to live our lives."

"Ah, yes, poor Kiyomi," I laugh. "All the sad songs for Kiyomi. Did she tell you what she's trying to do?"

"About her running for office? Yes. I told her that it was a good idea."

"You what?"

"It is a good idea. She's intelligent and a damn sight better than most of the fuckwits around here. But wait, you want her to be the little wife, don't you. She didn't say anything against you but I got the feeling, and because I know you, that you weren't too happy about it."

"She can do what she wants."

"She wants you to support her."

"She wants a lot of things from me that I don't want to give."

"Oh, like what? Shock me. Does she actually want you to act like her husband and Kira's father instead of an occasional lodger for appearances only?"

"Forget about Kiyomi."

"No, you're running away from your responsibilities. You can divorce her, maybe that's for the best, but Kira's still there. Do you really want to be a shithead, absent father like mine was? Parents are supposed to care about their children, but if I believe what you say, then you don't. You better sort that shit out now unless you want Kira to turn out like I did."

"There's nothing wrong with you."

"Oh my God, there's a lot wrong with me," he laughs, leaning his forearms on his knees. "I'm cold. I don't feel anything and when I do it hurts me. But maybe that's just who we are, Light. Maybe it's nothing to do with my father and all that Greek tragedy shit, because you're the same as me and you had the father of the century."
"I never said that."

"But he was there for you and you know that he cares about you. Do you know what I would have
given to hear my father say anything to me which showed that he cared? Say that it's none of my
business, but I still think that you should be a father to that kid, now that he's here. I think it'd be
good for you. You know, there's work - I know all about you and your work - but if you keep
putting it ahead of everything else then you're going to end up alone, just like me."

"I'm with you."

"Really? If that's your decision then you should do it, Light. Do it already. Make your choice, stop
procrastinating and stop putting people through hell with all your promises, because I've been here
nearly five years and there's no payoff. You're always going to find reasons to stay, but I will leave
you, Light, don't think that I won't. And I'll despise you for it. Don't do the same thing to Kiyomi and
don't fuck up any chance of having a decent relationship with your son before he can even speak
because of how you deal with this."

"What are you saying that I should do? Divorce her and leave tomorrow? These things take time. I'm
leaving, ok? Can we just drop this, please?"

"I'm just saying that you should do something. If you divorce her and resign, that's up to you, it's not
my decision, but in five years or ten years you're going to blame me because you didn't do the right
thing now. I can just see you heading hell for leather straight at a wall, you know? And I'm just really
tired. Like I really can't take any more. I don't want to be dragged into your problems with Kiyomi
and I really don't want to think about your son, but I do because you don't. You should, because one
day it's going to bite you on the arse if you don't grow up. He's going to hate you for how you
treated his mother and that the only effort you made with him was to get Kiyomi pregnant in the first
place. And I don't think you want that. You mightn't care now because he's just a baby, but one day
you're really going to regret this. But whatever you decide, just do it. You're going to hurt someone,
but you have to do what's best for you and what will make you happy. I'll tell you now though, it's
won't be your job. I wish you'd realise that."

"I know."

"If you know, then why won't you fucking do something about it?" he shouts. "Do something,
Light. Stop thinking that you can keep us all in aspic so you can have it all, because it doesn't work
like that. And be a proper father to your son, for God's sake. Stop making me care about that," he
sighs, and then we sit in quietness for a minute, simmering from aggravation because I don't know
how to respond. I don't understand this. I don't understand. "Can I ask you something?" he says,
waiting for me to look at him before he asks. "Forget about whether it's what I want to hear, just tell
me the truth. Do you think that you could be happy with Kiyomi?"

"No."

"You're lying."

"I'm not lying."

"When will you look at what you have and make a choice? The right choice."

"It sounds like you're telling me to sort things out with her. I do not fucking understand, L! I don't
understand you or any of this!"

"I don't want you to stay with her, but I want to know that you're sure of what you're doing before
you do it. You know what I thought when Kiyomi was talking to me? I thought, wow, he's really upset her, how did he do that? The Ice Queen's melting, wow! Then I thought, but why has he upset her? He's done a great job of it, and you wouldn't bother if you didn't think anything of her. I don't think that you're naturally that mean that you'd get some perverted pleasure out of treating her the same way that you treat me. I know why you treat me like shit; I get to you. Basically, we're both really pissed off with each other because we care. So, you know why I think you don't want her to get into politics? I think it's because you don't want her to get involved with something you think is an evil, stinking mess, because you care about her."

"No, not at all. I told you, she can do what she wants. I'll tell her that. I would have told her then but she caught me at a bad time."

"Right," he says sourly.

"While we're on the subject of who we care about, Mikami's right. You haven't been the same since Stephen died."

"Oh God."

"You, now. It's about a lot of things and I'm sorting them out, but I can't stop feeling like this is about Stephen."

"It's not Stephen. I'm sorry about him. I'm not saying that I'm not upset about him, but you know that I'm really upset about your accident. I never thought that you could die, it just never entered my head, you're so... permanent. It shook me up more than it did you, even though you were in it, but I can't talk to you about it because you just write it off as being nothing, like you did the other day. I just can't talk to you about those things, so I have to get through it on my own. It's just difficult sometimes."

"You can talk to me. I told you that it wasn't my fault."

"You put yourself in a position where it happened, it was definitely your fault."

"Being driven in a car?"

"You have shit guards and shit drivers. Their job is to keep you safe, but you end up saving them from burning cars like you're in a fucking manga!"

"So you're angry because I didn't let them die?"

"I'm just angry. But no, Light, I'm not so very, very, exceedingly erratic because of that. Nothing so simple. You don't take the curse seriously, you're blasé about it and everything else that matters, but you think that I'm erratic. Mental fucking issues..."

"You are erratic and I think that you do need a break. Sue me."

"You know, I might just do that."

"It wasn't the curse, L."

"Tell Stephen that. Tell River that."

"You're worrying me," I tell him automatically. His eyes widen but he brushes it off with a dismissive sigh and looks very uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, but I think that there's something to worry about."
"There isn't. I'm just trying to be honest with you, but I'm worrying everyone, apparently, which is why I'll be in my pyjamas on what should be a work day tomorrow. I could go to the firm, but then they'd wonder why I was there and I'd be humiliated just that little bit more. Humiliated in front of as many people as possible. Invite your guards in. Let's all have a nice cup of tea and discuss my mental issues and how erratic I am. Maybe I should visit Nepal?"

"L, get a fucking grip."

"It's so easy to blame other people for things, isn't it," he says. It's more of an accusation, actually.

"I don't know, you're the expert on that. Judging by you, it must be quite easy, yes."

"You blame everyone on this entire planet for everything you don't think is right. In your head, you think you're right, you know right, you're the scale of justice. You don't see the world for what it is and that no one and nothing could live up to your expectations. If your life is slightly unbalanced, it's not your fault. It's the secretary's fault, it's a murderer's fault, it's the TV's fault, it's the media's fault, it's Western values, it's capitalism, it's religion, it's popular culture; it's the fault of people on state benefits - it's the unemployed's fault and their 'social culture of despondency', it's another country's fault, it's your MPs' fault, it's the opposition's fault, it's my fault, it's Kiyomi's fault, it was Stephen's fault, it was River's fault, but it's never, ever your fault."

"Don't talk shit."

"It's not shit, Light. Well, it is, but that's you. That's your glorious regime. You blamed Stephen and River, and because you ruin everything within a hundred feet of you, now they're dead. You might not think it's your fault, but there's always a time when you're alone with nothing but your thoughts and the truth. Don't tell me that you don't feel it, I know that you do."

"I haven't thought about them once and I'm tired of hearing their names mentioned. I'm sorry that they didn't die earlier," I say, totally switching off emotionally so there's nothing left but anger. He just stares at me in disbelief until I regret saying it, but I have to stick with it now. It might be unpalatable but it's the truth and I stick by it.

"Fuck," he sighs eventually, walking a few steps away from me while grasping his hair tight to his scalp.

"That's how I feel and I'm not sorry for it. They were in the way."

"So you wanted them dead?"

"I wanted them gone, so I'm ok with that, but don't you fucking blame me. I didn't push River, I didn't make Culture hit my car and I didn't cause Stephen's heart attack. If I could, wouldn't you think that I would have done it earlier? Like when I first saw him?"

"But he wasn't important enough for you to kill him then. He wasn't anything special."

"I'm starting to think that he was."

"Do you think I'm dying of a broken heart?" he asks me. "I think that I'm dying because my heart isn't broken. I'd forgive you anything because you make me not care about anything else. Everything that I thought I cared about is nothing, and I really wish that I didn't know it, because I was happier when I didn't know you. Empty, but happier. Maybe it was the same with you too. Maybe you miss not caring and not feeling like I do. God knows that you wouldn't let yourself feel anything for years, but you're ok, look at you in your suit, just like the day I first saw you, but better. A more expensive suit, a more expensive hair cut and I still can't believe how much you spend on that moisturiser of
yours. Just better. And you know what really hurts me? I was proud of you because I thought that it was my doing, but I didn't do this - you did. I just hitched a ride to see the show. That's the truth of it, isn't it? All these years you've let me believe that it was me and my good judgement and my hard work and my decisions that created you, but I didn't. Somehow I made you a better person by being a worse person than you, because all this was always a competition, wasn't it? Now you won't do without me because you're scared that you'll go back to what you were before. Alone. And that's the only reason why I'm still around."

"L. -"

"But you're there, Light, you don't need me anymore. You have everything and I'm the same as I ever was. All you did was leach anything from me that ever had the possibility of being good, because I see, I feel, I'm not frightened of it. I don't think that you're frightened of it anymore either, so you'll be fine. I think you'll get your act together one day, with or without my help," he says before picking up his coat, at which point he stares at the wall and his tone becomes cold. "So, you and your wife and kid can get to fuck. Nothing good has ever come from this for me, just shit."

No, I don't believe that. He doesn't want me to do leave him, not really. I can't imagine him choosing to be without me, though it sounds like he's already given me up as a lost cause. My head literally throbs from the confusion of what he's saying and the wildly switching temperament. He speaks to me like he feel sorry for me because he thinks that I'm stupid, and then he curses me and names me as his destroyer. If that's true, who's the stupid one here?

"I don't understand what you're saying," I say, closing my eyes for a second. When I open them, he's smiling at me fondly.

"I can't explain everything to you. You'll have to work it out yourself. I have to... I have to go home now. Thank you for forcing me to take some leave. It will be paid leave, won't it?"

"Yes, it'll be paid."

"Because I'm owed paid leave, whether it's enforced or voluntary," he informs me.

"I said that you'll be paid."

"Good." He puts on his coat and stops dead, looking at the floor. I try to read him like it might all make sense to me, but it doesn't. "I don't fucking care if I'm paid, Light."

"But you just said... I want you to speak to B," I say after a moment, walking over to meet him. "I think you need to speak to someone who isn't me."

"No, I."

"Can you hold on just a few more weeks? Just hold on for me, then we'll go wherever you want to go. We'll even visit Nepal if you want to. That's a joke, but I know a really great hotel with tigers in the garden. Fucking tigers, think of that! You could pet a tiger – they're drugged, apparently, so they won't kill you – and there's –"

"What about Kira?"

"What about Kira?"

"Don't do that, don't do that," he says quietly, palming his forehead. Part of me thinks that he cares more about my son's wellbeing than I do. I care about Kira's education and little else, maybe because I hope that one day I'll be able to have a conversation with him and possibly like him, and because I
know that he's catered for in every other respect which I can be thought responsible for. It doesn't look good to have a distant relationship with your offspring. He'll want for nothing, as far as I'm concerned. He'll live a charmed life and I almost resent him for it. He won't have the problems that I have, and he's one of those problems.

"I can't help it, L," I tell him.

"Try," he replies, and smiles, so I smile. Just like that, the tension is broken. I'm not the Prime Minister and he's not some bastard from PR. He's just my L again, so I rub his arm in gratefulness for this return to equality. "I'm sorry about that fucking woman."

"It's alright, I just wish that I'd seen it. But, speaking as your employer, consider your hand slapped. Don't do it again," I whisper jokingly, so he laughs.

"Erratic as I am, I love you more than anything else. I want you to believe that. It's important."

"But you lie."

"Not about that," he says, embarrassed. I smile and shake my head like it's a joke, but I'm touched by it. I truly believe what he says for probably the first time ever. It's a peaceful contentedness he's given me within a few words. I could be happy now, I think, if I didn't care about the other things still.

God, I just wish that he'd somehow be able to make me forget about everything else and make it stay that way. "Unofficially, I know that something's not right with me, I just wish that you didn't act like there was. It makes it harder for me to ignore. Officially, there's absolutely nothing wrong with me."

My hands move from his arms to his waist, and my wrist knocks something which rattles delicately in his pocket. I know that sound, so I reach into his pocket to pull the bottle out - one of those old brown pharmacy jobs with tiny print on the side. He tries to take it from me, but I move away, trying to read the label.

"What are these?" I ask.

"Nothing."

"L, what are they?"

"Just some antibiotics I picked up."

"What do you need antibiotics for?"

"Because I have an infection."

"These aren't antibiotics. L, are these antidepressants? Did your doctor prescribe you these?"

"Don't be stupid," he says, grabbing the bottle from my hand, which I'm holding out like proof, to stuff back into his pocket. "What would I need those for?"

"I don't know, because you're depressed?"

"No, no. I saw the doctor, like you told me to, and like I told you, he thinks that it's anxiety because of overwork, so he gave me these to try. It's a waste of time but, y'know. It doesn't pay to talk to doctors."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it's a load of shit, Light. I'm not even going to take them, I just thought that it'd be rude to
"say no."

"Are you on them because of me?"

"What? No, because my doctor's a fool. Seriously, I'm ok. Stop being nosey with my coat pockets, because one day you'll find a chopped off dick in there and that'll teach you not to mess around with other people's things."

"But what reason exactly did he give you when he prescribed you these?"

"God, Light, leave it alone, will you? He's stupid. There's nothing wrong with me physically, so they hand these out like complimentary mints because they just don't know. Personally, I think that I just had a blast of that flu Mihael's got. He loves sharing." I'm kind of rooted to the spot and when he notices that I am, he cups my jaw in his hand and leans towards me. "Don't look so worried, it really pisses me off," he says before he kisses me softly. "I don't know when I'll see you next then, because I'm on holiday now and all, but I'll see you soon, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Don't hate me. I don't know what I'm doing."

"L, I want you to speak to B."

"Ah, yeah. No. B can't help me."

"Alright. But I'm going to call someone and you'll see them. We need a second opinion from an actual doctor."

"He is an actual doctor. I know what you're thinking, and no, I won't see them. Stop bossing me around," he laughs, gripping the back of my neck in a slightly fatherlike way.

"Aren't you worried? Aren't you scared?" I ask him.

"No."

"This isn't you."

"I don't know. I think this is me seeing myself for the first time, and I'm not as great as I thought I was. Why, are you scared?"

"Yes, I'm scared. I've always been scared, but never as much as I am now," I answer. Sentiment always makes me quiet. Usually silent. I spend most of my time ignoring it, but I am scared, and so much so that my eyes feel like I've got soap in them for a second. I can't get my head around L being on medication for anything, although some would say that he should have been on something from the day he was born. He kisses my cheek and then rubs his thumb over it.

"Don't be scared for me."

"Please see someone. I want you to see my doctor."

"I've seen a doctor. I'm not depressed, Light."

"I'll get him to call round and see you tomorrow," I say, walking off with my phone in hand. The cold professionalism of it really seems to annoy him. "Don't go out and don't bullshit him. I'll check that he saw you. Don't make me take extreme measures to make sure that you do see him."
"Stop this. It's a waste of time. So, after your doctor agrees with you and I'm forced to take these or some other low dose of anti-depressant to start with, told to rest but make sure to walk every day, get a hobby, appreciate the small things in life, maybe have a holiday to read a brochure on cognitive behavioural therapy because I deserve it while I wait for the serotonin to kick in, what then? Will you be happy?"

"I'll be happy that you've seen someone, whatever they say."

"Fine. Fine, I'll talk to your doctor. If he's as good as you make out then he'll agree that I don't need these. But I don't want to talk to those two anymore," he says, walking towards me while pointing towards the door, behind which, I presume, Touta and Mikami are still waiting outside. "Tell them that I'm very sorry but I'm a twat and I'm on medication for it now, so it's ok."

"It's not funny, L."

"It is a little bit. Maybe you should have these tablets instead?" he laughs, and when I don't laugh and don't reply and just gaze at his shirt with my brain in a tailspin, he knocks my chin up with his knuckle and kisses me quickly. Every joint of me feels loose, like I'm coming apart. Then he leaves. Mikami and Touta spring to attention as soon as the door opens and he strides past them like they're not there.

"What's happened?" Touta shouts after him. "Lawliet? What's happened?"

"Let him go, he's alright," I say. "We've discussed it. He's taking leave."

Because I neither shut the door on them or invite them inside, they don't seem very sure what they should do at first, but when I sit down, Mikami joins me and Touta follows. I suppose that we're just going to have a quiet drink now then.

"I owe him, you know?" Mikami tells me after a minute. "He's helped me out when he didn't have to and he wasn't asked, but we try to help him and he's a shit about it. Naomi's tried with him as well, but he won't talk about it. Won't even talk about Stephen."

"I said that it's alright, Mikami, There's no need to speak about him behind his back now. No one is to mention this again. If anyone does, I'll have you sacked, both of you, regardless of who talked, understand? We can't afford to lose him; he's the best PR this party has ever had. Just don't talk about it. He's on official leave."

"Light, you're not angry with us for telling you, are you?" Touta asks.

"No. You did the right thing."

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After having to force L into taking leave, which really was the last resort after the bitch in Foreign refused to forgo lodging an official complaint unless I did, even after offering compensation, I feel like I've betrayed him, humiliated him, ripped his balls off, disappointed him, whatever he said. He has a talent for looking so hurt (a particular look and attitude which I think he's developed to work only on me), that I feel responsible for every problem he's ever had. I know that's idiotic, because in this case I only tried to resolve the situation as best I could, since he made it so difficult. But realising that he really is in a fucking state and I don't know how or why that happened, especially without me really noticing, is all I can think of. After phoning him the next day and it going unanswered, only to try again at eleven and getting a short, grumbling, non-sensical reply, I try to think over something which is so painful for me that I stay in my office going over and over it while I read through spiral binders full of long words, looking back and trying to see the point when this became more than just
a bit awkward for him and seeing how I'm directly responsible for it going this far. My doctor phones me at four to tell me that he'd just seen L (I'm amazed that L did actually let him in), and that he has 'no problem' with the medication he's been put on, only the dosage, and that L threw him out when he told him that. It's all he has to say. I resolve to do all I can to put this right, and quickly. Someone should be with him but I can't get away until the following day, and L doesn't answer the phone or my messages. I suppose that if I really tried and broke a lot of engagements that I could get over there, but things just drag on and on. He might need some time alone anyway.

So, the following day, I cancel some meetings in the afternoon and drive to his house. I presume for a while that I've escaped without being noticed, but I see a black car in my rear view mirror half an hour into my journey and I realise that I haven't. My guards keep their distance but I think it's that moment which makes me mind up for me.

I let myself into L's house, standing by the door once it's closed. He comes out of his office with a glass of vodka in his hand, dishevelled, narrow and silent. It's so horrible to see him like this that part of me wants to leave because of it and wait until he sorts himself out and comes back to the Kantei in a dry cleaned suit. That part of me wants nothing to do with this. My face burns with how lost and useless I feel; that all this ran away from me so quickly that I didn't notice. He just gazes at me, looking very aware of the drink in his hand and the effect it's had on me but doing nothing about it, like he's decided to present his problems openly for me, or that it helps him to see me worried.

"You shouldn't be drinking," I murmur sadly. It's pointless too, like saying that the town's been overrun long after an invasion. He doesn't reply, only looks at me, puts the drink on the sideboard and walks towards his bedroom, and I follow him, still holding my keys. In the bedroom, he watches me stand there uselessly, and I wish for someone to talk to about this. I wish that I could talk to him about this like he was an outsider to it, because he's the only person I can talk to. He's more of a ghost to me now, not speaking, just spiriting around silently, and I see how much I rely on his good humour now that it's gone, and how he pushes problems aside to ease the atmosphere for us both, but he obviously doesn't feel the need to now.

"You were right about everything," I whisper, hoping for a 'I told you so' or a snigger or anything, but he says and does nothing, so maybe he didn't hear me. After a minute, he walks over to me languidly, pulling me towards him by the neck to hold me. His arms are loose at first, but then they tighten, pulling himself flush to me like he's trying to fuse with me somehow. Yes, and never let me go. I dig my chin into his shoulder. He smells of damp earth now, not stale and dirty and fermented like I'd expected. In a way, I wish that he did, because then I could busy myself with shaming him into having a shower and physically moving him towards at least appearing to be his normal self, but there's nothing that I can latch onto. A little too late, I return the hold and kiss the sloping curve between his neck and shoulder. I'm suddenly filled with some base longing and try to kiss his mouth, but he moves his face away. "L, please, it's me," but he still does nothing, only holds me a little closer, and I grow illogically angry with him for this refusal. Since when are you like this? You're not like this.

I push him backwards towards the bed, made even more angry by how he allows me to direct him onto it without actually submitting. Once on the bed, he looks out of the window to his right while I unbutton his shirt, which is barely buttoned anyway. I think it's the same shirt he was wearing the other day. It feels the same. I hear the sound of swans flying across the lake and see L's eyes move like he's watching them.

Pressing furious kisses onto his cheek and wherever they fall without really knowing why, I think that maybe they'll seep right through and wake him up. He still doesn't move though or say anything, just lies there like a physical clone of someone I knew, but they're heartless. I move his face towards me to kiss his mouth, because I won't accept this. This is the most telling change in him that I've
I lie down on top of him, forcing my hands underneath him to hold him, tucking my face under his chin while my breathing is broken and stammering. I just keep reliving seeing my hand slap his face and... why don't I ever do the right thing? Why am I asking for help when I should be the one giving it? Why can't I? When I breathe in, the air catches on saliva and upset. I've never felt so completely over before and I never want to again, but it just never ends, like my eyes are stinging over my whole life so far. I don't understand. I want this stop.

"I needed you here yesterday."

With my phone against my ear, I walk over the exact spot where River's head cracked against the tiles of the House lobby. I keep walking quickly so that my guards have trouble keeping up even though they're a good few paces behind. The phone rings and rings and I think that no one will ever answer. When it is answered, I hear all kinds of shuffling on the other end of the line before he shouts: "Il est quatre heures du matin, putain!" in a crackling voice. Oh, yeah. I never thought about time zones.

"Is it? I'm sorry. It's Light Yaga –" I stop because he's put the phone down on me, so I redial and breathe through annoyance as the phone rings until he picks up again. I am cool, calm and collected. "B –"

"He's dead, isn't he."

"L? No! No, he's fine! I wanted to –" But I'm talking to a dead line again, so I redial. "Stop putting the fucking phone down on me!" I hiss quietly down the phone when he picks up.

"Listen, fucktard, I'll block your number and report you to the police for harassment. You have form. You stalked him for months, the poor, stupid sod, and now he can't get rid of you and –"

"All I wanted to tell you is that you have to phone him," I say, smiling at an idiot who's waving at me shyly as I step into the elevator. I've completely forgotten his name. The doors of the elevator close before my guards can join me, so they'll have to take the stairs. This is difficult enough, thank you very much.

"You interrupted me," B says.

"Yes."

"That's a very stupid thing to do."

"I'm starting to think that it's stupid to phone you at all but it doesn't matter. Just phone him."

"Well, thank you for your advice because I need advice on my friendships from you, considering that you're the one responsible for ending it in the first place."

"Do you know that Stephen died?"
"Wuh... what?"

"He had a heart attack a couple of months ago."

"Nobody told me."

"I'm telling you."

"I don't believe you. He was young, he couldn't –"

"He did. It ran in the family, apparently."

"Why didn't L tell me?"

"He thinks that you don't want to speak to him. Prove him wrong. Thanks."

"He hasn't called me."

"You put the phone down on him. That doesn't seem at all like you, does it? I can hardly believe it."

"That was months ago."

"So he's supposed to think that you're playing hard to get?"

"I don't want to talk to you. If he gives up so easily then he can't be that bothered. Tell him... tell him that I'm sorry about Stephen. He arse was magnificent."

"Hmmm..." I mumble, walking to my office. A hoard of men are sitting around a conference table, one of them passing a plate of biscuits around. They stand up immediately when I walk in, but I shoot past them into my adjoining office.

"Nicer than yours. He was just a nice guy. All round, he was just better than you. No. Is this a sick joke, Prime Minister? Because you're very sick and this fits with your personality. Yes, it's definitely something that you would do."

"I wouldn't lie about something like that. Don't tell him that I called you, just phone him and let him tell you himself. I don't want him to know that I called you."

"Because he'd be angry with you if he knew that you were interfering –"

"No, because he's given up on you and he's not... he's not well at the moment. I think it'd help him if you called him of your own accord, not because I asked you to."

"I wouldn't do anything you asked me to do. What do you mean, he's ill?"

"I'm not going into it, B. I just think it'd help him if he spoke to you. I know I'm not easy to talk to sometimes –"

"You're not easy to speak to at any time."

"No, B, he can talk to me about things, but not about Stephen. I don't need to tell you but it's hard for me to sympathise about it. I don't know if that's it or if it's you or something else. Maybe it's a midlife crisis, I don't know. I don't understand him."

"He's depressed?"
"He's just not right. He's sleeping a lot and he's not going to work."

"What? He's not working? Even for the firm?"

"No."

"He's depressed. But he's with you still, so that doesn't surprise me. Has he seen anyone?"

"I don't know. I mean, I saw him this morning, does that count? He's not isolated."

"No, you idiot. A doctor. Has he seen a doctor?"

"Well, yeah. He's on tablets."

"What tablets?"

"I don't know off the top of my head, B."

"It's very important that you find out you ineffectual dolt I need to know you have to find out and tell me the name and the dosage and the small print and the name of the doctor or I'll –"

"Ok. But will you phone him?"

"This was hard for you, wasn't it? That you're asking me for help."

"I'm not, but he misses you."

"He misses me? He said that?"

"No. He's not dying of love for you, B. I just know that he misses you as a friend. Friend. Just phone him and stop being a stubborn bastard."

"This brings back memories. Look, if he missed me so much then maybe he shouldn't have thrown me out of his house. He didn't say anything, he just let you screw me over. He chose you and your tricks over me, like you said he would. You ruined a thirty year friendship and made him manically depressed. You win."

"Whatever. Anyway, you still got a fuck out of him so you shouldn't be moaning. You wouldn't have got that much if it wasn't for me."

"YOU CUNTHOLE OF EVIL DWARVES!"

"Even he said that it's not my fault."

"He's a liar, you pus-filled scrotum. He was fine before he met you, that's all I know. Sort of fine. He knew that it was you who drilled the hole in the ceiling, I could see it in his face. Don't think that you fooled him."

"It doesn't matter what he thinks, just phone him."

"No."

"None of this is my fault. I wouldn't choose to phone you."

"But you did. Have you developed some semblance of a soul, Prime Minister? Or do you still burst into flames when you set foot on holy ground? You should carry a fire extinguisher around with
"If you just knew when to piss off then it wouldn't have happened. You had a nice send off, so what's your problem?"

"Fuck off and die. I read on the news that your beard has had a baby beard. Congratulations, you little -"

"Just call him."

"I'll do what I want. Email me his medication details, don't phone me. Your voice is whiny and gives me a headache."

"Yeah, yeah."

"L hates children, by the way!"

I choose that moment to cut him off. Then I walk into the meeting.

I phone L afterwards to... see if he's still alive, to be honest. He doesn't answer. I end up doing something spontaneous, which I advise everyone against doing, but not giving it much thought leads me towards the inevitable. I know where I have to be and what I have to do to get there doesn't seem very important.

So without thinking about it much, as much as you think of packing to leave a hotel to catch a flight back home, I go back to the Kantei and take out overnight bags: a tan bi-fold suit carrier and a Ralph Lauren leather duffle bag. 'The last word in luxurious luggage.' It looks great with a navy suit, but unfortunately I'm not co-ordinating today. The process of packing is actually quite relaxing and the careful motions of it to avoid creasing and making sure that I have everything to see me through at least a few days takes my mind of what I'm actually doing it for. However, news has spread that I'm in the Kantei, because the whole place lives in a permanent state of preparation for my presence, and one of the maids knocks apprehensively at the open door to ask me whether I'll be eating here tonight. "No," I tell her without looking at her. No, I won't be eating here again.

As an afterthought, I lock my walk-in wardrobe and take the key, so unless there's a fire, what I leave will be safe. The amount of empty space in my duffle bag after essentials is quite sad in comparison to my bulging suit carrier, so I start filling it with random objects which I neither need or care about as I survey the bathroom, drawers and shelves. For some reason, I become panicked while doing it because I'm filling it for the sake of filling it.

"Are you away again? What is it this time?" Kiyomi's voice asks me from the door. I stop, staring into the open bag in front of me. I didn't plan at all for this. I didn't want to, I thought that she'd be out. She waits patiently, though I expect her to start tapping her foot in irritation for how long it takes me to answer. I zip up the case.

"Kiyomi, I'm sorry for what I said to you the other night."

"Oh," she says, sounding shocked, like I've done the opposite to what she expected.

"I think you'll be great in politics. I think that you'll win the seat."

"Really?"

"Yeah."
"But you said –"

"Forget what I said."

"So you'll support me?"

"You don't need my support."

"But it's nice to be endorsed by the Prime Minister," she says softly. I feel like I've been instantly forgiven for something I shouldn't be forgiven for, because she's stupid. She's not actually stupid, but she's so eager for a reconciliation and for us to forget all about what happened that she's happily forgive me, no questions asked. Love makes us do stupid things, and right now we're both doing stupid things because of it.

"Well, that's not..."

"What? And why are you packing a bag? Why haven't you taken off your shoes?" she asks, becoming concerned about it rather than the icy passivity she's known for.

"I hurt someone who's very important to me."

"Oh, Light, don't feel like that. It's ok, I knew that you didn't mean –"

"And I think that I've hurt you too," I interrupt her, turning to face her. I see that she was in the process of walking towards me, but now she's just standing there. Her eyes blink slowly, trying to understand what I'm saying. I suppose that it doesn't make much sense to her. "Or I will do. But this is for the best"

"What do you mean? When you said that you've hurt someone..."

"I'm leaving, Kiyomi."

"You're... you're leaving me?"

"I'm sorry," I say, pick up my bags and walk past her and head for Kira's room, not knowing if she's following me, because I feel like this is the end of that chance L was talking about me being a father. I open the door and he's alone in his cot. His hands are grasping at his feet which are sticking up in the air, and a mobile turns above him. The whole room smells of talc. I know myself, and I know that I might feel some small inadequacy somewhere for this, because I know how I'm supposed to feel, but I know that I'll leave here and pay for his support every month like he's a bank charge and nothing more. He'll never mean more to me than what he does now, which is very little. I don't know why I wanted to see him. I guess that it was just to assure myself that I did that much before I left his life completely. I might see him sometimes, I don't know how things will turn out, but he might as well be fatherless. Something inside me tells me that I'm failing for thinking this way. Fathers have protested for their rights and lost them through no fault of their own, just a gender bias, but I walk away from mine with hardly a thought.

He sees me and his gummed mouth opens in a kind of manic, expectant smile you'd expect from a homeless, toothless old man on the streets with a cardboard blanket.

"You can't leave us, Light," Kiyomi says from behind me. I don't know when she caught up with me or why she thought that I'd come here of all places. "Why? You're leaving me for someone else, aren't you."

"Yes," I tell Kira. His eyes open wide in surprise, like he understands me. Bizarre, speechless thing.
His eyes were almost black when he was born but they've suddenly turned the same colour as mine. I don't know when that happened. Maybe I just didn't notice.

"Who? Light, who?" Kiyomi asks me.

"It doesn't matter."

"It does! You should tell me. You have to tell me! You can't leave us for some woman you've just met."

"I've known them a long time."

"You've been having an affair for... for how long? You couldn't have!"

"Before you."

"...That bitch! I'll kill her!" she shouts. Kira squeals in happiness afterwards. I don't understand why. He's completely mystifying to me, so I turn away from him.

"What are you talking about?" I ask Kiyomi. She looks frightened and trapped, looking to either side like she's checking for exits.

"It's that Amane slut, isn't it?" she says, and sort of pats her mouth and then presses her shaking hand to her chest in fervency. I don't understand her, I can only try to. "You can't! She's not right for you. I'm right for you and she's an idiot. You said that she drove you mad! Speaking the the third person, taking drugs and getting bleach on your towels. She's -"

"It's not Misa, Kiyomi."

"Then who? Naomi?! Stop. Please, stop so we can talk," she sniffs and tries to calm down to a point of making herself at least slightly understandable. "I'm sorry that I haven't been a good wife, I'm sorry. I'll try harder now, I'm trying, I just didn't know what you wanted. I thought that I knew but if you tell me then I'll do my best, I promise. We've done all this the wrong way round. We rushed into it but I want to make this work. Don't leave, just talk to me and let me try," she begs, looks at the floor and starts crying. I draw in a breath which I can't seem to release right away. I've never seen her like this, and I realise that if I had planned this out properly then I would have done this when I could be sure that she wouldn't know that I'd left for at least a few hours after I'd gone. She takes hold of my jacket cuff and silently implores me to listen to her, her tears making white-ish streams somehow through her perfect makeup, like she's crying milk. But I walk past her, out of the room "If you go then you'll never see Kira again," she says coldly, following me.

"Do you think that's in his best interests?"

"When he has a father like you? Yes."

"Ok," I reply quietly after a moment. As I approach the front door, some staff dash into a waiting room and close the door. Damn Kiyomi for making a public display out of this.

"Wait, Light, I didn't mean that," she says as grabs the back of my jacket desperately like she could actually stop me. My guard is waiting outside where I left him and turns around as I open the door.

"The car's ready, Prime Minister," he tells me.

"No, the car is not ready!" Kiyomi shrieks hysterically and pulls a few times at my jacket, having a tantrum. My guard looks as shocked as I am and quickly jogs towards the open door of the car
waiting for me while I look back towards Kiyomi. I don't think that this will be the last time I'll see her, but it's the last time I'll see her like this. The next time I see her, it'll probably be in a courtroom. This might be the last time that we actually speak directly to each other. "Don't do this to us," she says.

"We'll let the courts decide about Kira, shall we? Don't make this worse than it has to be."

"I'll tell the press! You'll lose your job!"

"Tell them. I can't stop you."

"What?! You can't do this, please!"

"Hire a lawyer, Kiyomi. Mine will be in touch on Monday to discuss things."

"No."

"Yes. You don't need to move out yet - you can stay here - but any worries you have, talk to him about it and we'll sort it out, he's fair. He's transferring some money into your account for me today, but don't go mad with it because you're angry with me, it won't look good for you in court. I think that it's best that we don't speak now... I'm sorry. I never should have married you."

I can almost feel my guard and driver's desperation to ask me what's going on, but that's not part of their job, so they don't. When I finally get to L's, I slip my coat, jacket and shoes off with absolutely no intention of putting them on again until Monday, and drop my keys into the bowl. I check his office first, even though I know where he'll be, I was just hoping that he'd be working instead. He's exactly where I'd left him this morning, curled up on bed, but it looks like he's been reading a book, and I'm impossibly thankful for that because after observing him for hours, it seemed to me that he'd lost all interest in anything almost overnight. I put my bags on the floor and move the book to sit next to him, wondering whether I should wake him or just go to sleep myself, because I feel completely exhausted all of a sudden. His arm moves under his head and I see a bowl of strawberries next to him, as red as River's blood, so I take one, pull the stalk out and hold it in my hand. L opens his eyes, blinks at me and smiles in lazy recognition.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi. You're back early, it feels like you just left. I know you said that you wouldn't be long but... God. When did you get here?"

"Just now," I reply. I put the strawberry between my teeth and struggle to speak around it. "I've got something stuck in my teeth. Could you give me a hand?" I ask. It's stupid but it's all I can think of doing to make him laugh, which he does, broadly and almost startlingly because of how tired he looks. I think that it's always annoyed us both when we make each other laugh just after we've just woken up, because we're not prepared for it, but he always seemed to appreciate it more than I did.

With some effort, he props himself up on one elbow to bite the strawberry in my mouth, slicing it in half in the middle so that his dry lips just brush across mine, and leans back against the pillows. Then I sit there like an idiot with what's left sitting on my tongue while I watch him chew and swallow, and when he looks back at me I take it out of my mouth and put it onto the bedside table. "You didn't answer my calls."

"You called?"

"A couple of times."
"Oh, I've got it on silent," he says, reaching for his phone beside him. "Silly. What a stupid fucking button, look at that."

"Tired?"

"I was going to go into the firm but I need petrol, I think. I'll take the day off work today. Again."

"You did."

"What?"

"It's half-six, L."

"Oh, that's ok. I knew that I was tired. Shouldn't you be at work though? Did you actually leave at all? What are you doing here?"

"Did you sleep?"

"I must have done. Half-six in the morning, right?"

"Well..."

"In the afternoon?" he shouts, looking at his phone again and pulls the blankets from himself. "Christ!"

"Don't get up. We'll stay here."

"No, I don't do this. It's the tablets, I'm throwing them away. This is your fault. You and your fucking second opinions and 'take the tablets' and fucking shit!"

"No. You have to give them time to kick in, L."

"They're making me tired."

"Maybe. That's on the list of possible side-effects but it should pass within a week or so."

"How do you know that?"

"I looked them up."

"Oh. God, you are nosy and interfering," he sighs and looks down at the bags by my feet. "What are those?"

"My bags," I answer, and he looks extremely confused and opens my duffle bag, the height of luxury.

"They can't be yours. There are books in here."

"They're not mine. They're for you."

"The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism?"

"That might be mine."

"Thank God for that. For a moment there I thought that you expected me to read it."

"L."
"I'm not going to read it, Light," he says, reading the blurb on the back.

"I left Kiyomi. I told her and I left."

"You left her?" he asks, again, confused.

"It was time. Have you got a room going spare? I'm almost homeless."

"Wait, wait, wait a second. Have you actually left her?"

"Yes," I reply. Once the idea sinks in, he falls against the pillows again and exhales.

"Light, you should have told me that you were going to do that."

"You were right. I keep putting things off, so I made a choice. Will you have me?"

"Please."

"Sorry. Please will you have me?"

"No."

"No?!"

"I mean, no, I was saying please. Please let me have you."

"Oh," I smile. "Yeah, ok. Thanks."

"And forever?" he says towards the window. "Wow, this is hard to process"

"I haven't smoked for two days."

"Have you given up?"

"Fuck no, I just haven't smoked for two days. Let's sort that out right now."

I pull my case out of my pocket and light a cigarette as L pulls himself up to sit cross-legged on the bed. I could give up at any time. My doctor doesn't even consider me to be a smoker.

"I'm sorry. I'm not really helping you am I," he says.

"Don't worry about me. I never need help,"

"Never," he grins back at me.

"I'll make us some coffee," I offer, breathing my words all over the room, and I start to move but L clasps my hand.

"I haven't said thank you."

"Coffee's not really a great effort, L."

"No. For what you've done."

"Well, I said that I would. It just took me a while."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you'd actually do it."
"What's new? You're always underestimating me."

"No one's ever chosen me over anything before. Nothing like this. No one's even left their cocker spaniel for me, let alone their wife and kid."

"But it's not just for you, it's for me. I did this for me."

"You selfish brute. Even you aren't immune to my charms," he smiles briefly. "Poor Kiyomi. So, what happened? What did she say? Does she even know? It doesn't count unless she knows, Light."

"She took it pretty well, considering. What I expected, really. Confusion, anger, threats, denial, pleading – the norm – only it was all the space of less than five minutes."

"What did she threaten you with?"

"I'm thinking murder or castration is the most likely threat, but she said... Kira and the press."

"Fuck," he sighs, taking my cigarette from me to smoke it himself, so I light another one. "What happened to you trying to avoid that?"

"It's ok. Weren't you expecting that? I was. She won't do it, at least not yet. She doesn't want to be publicly humiliated just yet. She'll get my family onto me first."

"Maybe you should announce that you've separated before she starts talking? Or someone else does, when they realise. Security or someone on your staff."

"No. I thought of that, but there's no point, is there. It's going to be the same either way, I just need to keep in touch with the right people so they don't think that I've run off or been kidnapped or something. I'll go into work on Monday and get this finished."

"You need to initiate proceedings, if you're going to do this. Don't leave her there thinking that you're coming back, it's not fair."

"I have, and I told her. I spoke to that lawyer of yours, it's started already. He's phoning her on Monday to give her some time to find a lawyer, I'll file the papers. And I'm resigning on Thursday, so..."

"It's like a death sentence for you, isn't it."

"No."

"It is. And I've done it to you. Light, I never wanted to destroy you like this. I wanted you to make a choice but not the wrong one."

"I made the right choice. I don't think of it that way at all, I... It's going to be hard and it'll take some adjusting but it'll be ok. This week will be bad, and maybe after that for a while, but when the court case is over, that'll be it, won't it?"

"No, you'll have to live with this for the rest of your life," he says. God, the voice of fucking doom.

"L, it's a choice I've made. It wasn't even a choice."

"You did it because I made you," he mumbles, then almost shouts at me: "It wasn't me, it was these fucking tablets!"

"It wasn't you or the tablets. We're running out of sugar and I need some more cigarettes," I say,
checking my case. "Maybe a bottle of vodka."

"Or whiskey. It's more comforting."

"You're not having any. Will you come with me to get some later? I'll have to stay in the car."

"Of course I will."

"Or we could get everything delivered. They do deliveries, don't they?"

"Yeah. Welcome to the real world, eh? It must be a big come down."

"What's the name of your doctor, by the way? Is he the same doctor you had write that depression slip out for me?"

"No, why?"

"I just want to know."

"To make sure that I have spoken to him and that I haven't bought these off the black market?"

"No. I should know though, shouldn't I? It's an 'us' thing."

"It's not an 'us' thing. It's a 'me' thing."

"I want to know how I can help you," I whisper awkwardly, and I hear him breathe out through his nose softly like a deflated laugh.

"You do. Just by being here, you do. And I think you've done enough for me for now. Actually... Prime Minister, I'm really sorry, but I'd like to hand in my resignation."

"Ok," I smile.

"Thanks," he smiles back. "That was easy."

"Oh! Well, you'll have to write a letter and hand it into HR on Monday. I'll drop it off for you."

"I'll have to work notice, won't I?"

"Not when you're sick, no. We'll let you off."

"I'm not sick."

"No, you sleep in until half-six every day, don't you. How about you read this old book of yours for a while so I can steal your identity to order food on the internet?"

"Ha. Yes, that sounds nice."

"I'm going to order a lot of porn on your credit card, ok?" I say, walking to the door. He picks up his books again and cracks open the spine.

"Alright."

"You're the best, thanks."

I do order food on the internet to last us over the weekend. We must look like yobbos from the order because it's just ready made meals (which I'm thinking I can dress up a bit), whiskey, cigarettes,
sugar and coffee. There's a pile of newspapers on the dining table which I throw onto the step outside the house, and generally tidy up. Put clothes in the wash, unpack my bags while L reads his book, open blinds and windows at the back of the house, and I feel kind of ok. Relieved, really. I had two lives and now I have one. I feel like I'm on a countdown to a holiday, and though I might feel ok now, inside I'm still worried that I'll get bored of this pretty quickly. There's a reply from B to my text message about L's medication but I can't fucking understand it. It's something to do with rose quartz and how he needs to speak to him, so I send back a standard 'ok.'

When the order arrives, it's a bit embarrassing telling them to leave it outside the door. I can see through the gap in blind from a side window how my guard is questioning the poor delivery guy and going through the box of food, checking it for bombs or petitions. The eggs are apparently extremely suspicious. When I get the box, I throw two meals in the microwave and hope for the best. By this time, L's emerged wearing new clothes, thank god, and looks very surprised to see me cutting spring onions. I don't think that he could look more surprised if I was dressed like a drag queen. I'm very surprised by what I'm doing too, but there you go.

"Hey... Bad news, I can't find any decent gay porn," I tell him. The microwave beeps. What do I do now?

"I don't know whether to be happy or sad about that," he replies and starts scouting the place, looking under tables. "Hey, what have you done with my newspapers?"

"The order's been delivered."

"Of porn?"

"No, food and things. I couldn't be bothered driving there so I ordered online and it's just arrived. I put on a weird voice and told the man to leave the box outside because I had a virulent case of whopping cough."

"You should have called me."

"I didn't realise until he was there that I couldn't open the door and say: 'Hello, I'm your Prime Minister and I'm living with my gay lover now. Look at our lovely azaleas. Thank you for the groceries.'"

"Light, you're trying too hard."

"Hmm?"

"To make me laugh."

"I don't need to make you laugh. I'm making dinner, that'll make you laugh. You should see this shit."

"I'm sorry that I'm so --"

"Yes, well I've learned to cope with you. I don't think that this food could get any worse from another belt in the microwave later, so if you need to sleep some more, you can do. You look really tired," I say like it's his fault and it's an annoying habit of his. Realising that, I smile and push the hair back from his face.

"No, I'm ok," he says.

"Oh, and B called."
"B?"

"B," I confirm, elongated the sound. "You should call him."

"He didn't call me, did he, Light."

"He did."

"No. You called him and told him to call me, or you're making this up so I'll call him. Either way, it's a lie."

"Whatever. You should call him back."

"You told him about my tablets. Light, don't lie to me. I'm not angry."

"Only to see what he thought. It was a professional phone call."

"He'll be laughing all the way to his office knowing that I'm on medication. He always said that I should be, but it was a joke. To be honest, I still think that it's a joke."

"He was worried about you."

"Mmmm... Well, thanks for trying."

"Call him, L. One of you has to back down and I think it'll have to be you because he's crazy."

"No, we're finished. It's not going to be the same, is it?"

"He's your best friend."

"I think you're my best friend now. You're my only friend now, and that's ok by me," he says, following me to the table while I carry two plates of whatever the fuck this is. "People drift apart, have threesomes, things end. God, what's that?"

"Beef tempura. Don't ask me, I don't know how. I thought tempura was fried."

"Well, it looks..." he drifts off and then pats me on the arse, "... yeah."

We both sit down and I'm really trying not to be offended. If it was up to him, we'd be eating strawberries and mints until we both die from a low-protein intake. He picks up his chopsticks, lifts up a piece of something or other and lets it slip back down onto the plate. I'm about to comment on this, because it's very rude, but he speaks again as he looks at the table.

"Light, I'm not going to say this again until the next time you leave your wife for me, because you'll get bored of it, but you're the best person I've ever met and I'm proud of you. Of what you've done, despite what I might have said in the past, because I'm a liar and I was lying before. And I love you."

Oh. I'm more stunned by how he says it than what he actually says and I don't know what to say, so I stuff something that I hope is only a slimy, battered carrot into my mouth instead, and it's revolting. Once I've finished chewing, I talk down to my plate.

"It's really hard to cut spring onions all slanty like."

"It looks like a forty-five degree angle."

"It is."
"Well done."
A little intermission thing. Many thanks to thebarstool for choosing L's name for me.

One thing I've realised is that politics is a lot like sex – all you need is a willingness to jump up and down on people to get what you want. It's not a new parallel to me, but I'm disillusioned at the moment, you might say. I'm a reluctant master manipulator. I don't want to exploit people, but sometimes I have to. I often think in my most despairing moments which I rarely allow to fly, that I'm carving a road through the House at the expense of lives and careers, but I can reconcile myself with that. What upsets me is that despite my best efforts, it's still mostly talking and not much action - not the instant explosion of change I wish for. For something long-lasting I know that it must move at a deathly slow pace for it to be accepted. I know this from history, otherwise things shock, their effects are viewed negatively and nothing becomes practice unless you give out a tax rebate or pay their heating bills. Political change only disturbs life briefly like the shot of a gun most of the time; it doesn't stay. It's only a flattened landscape from a bomb, and that's reclaimed within a few months by the devil we know. Luckily, despite my eagerness, I am also patient.

Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes. It's not necessary for most people in the House, but in politics it also helps to be able to distinguish between truth and lies, good and bad. It's not so important for sex, granted. People didn't care whether I was honest or not. Nothing matters there apart from the noises I make, the appearance I have, how I take and how I give, the sureness of my hands and mouth and all the rest of that shit. Honesty only goes so far as being a virtue. No matter what people say about how important it is that someone can make them laugh, be someone they can identify with, someone stable and good and kind – they all have totally different expectations in bed. I realised that, but I always left them breathing at the end it, which I saw as an unfortunate necessity because they should have paid with their lives. Depending on my hatred for whoever I was with, and sensing that I might as well as have been dead for all some people cared, I kept my participation down to a minimum. I just couldn't lie well enough to give them everything; or maybe I didn't know that there was anything more to give. I tended to give more to people I hated, but still only enough to get by. It was like being the only sober person at a party though. The one with his wits who steals everyone's wallets.

In politics, as it is for life, you have to become inhuman just to stay alive and to view the fragility of humanity through a sheet of glass. Life is nothing but being slowly poisoned. You live without knowing why. You make up golden reasons and base metal aims to excuse your own continued existence until work and what you think might be love and other distractions slowly kill you. I've always wanted to rebel against that, and I've thought a few times that I'd like to do something truly shocking; something so out of character that it would shake everyone who heard of it to the core and leave them completely confused. I want them to question themselves and find an answer which makes no sense but speaks to their soul and haunts them. I don't do it though. I keep living by the rules that society has prescribed. The truth is that I, like everyone else, continue to live by these rules because there is no alternative which has a future. I, unlike the majority, am bored by it – bored by the cruelty of it, bored by how little I can do about it – and I have been for as long as I can remember. I live on sparks of hope and dreams which will become fainter and fainter and further away. So I tread on the fallen instead of helping them to their feet. I trip them up to clear my path because, you know, I'm not stupid. If the construction of this world was made for people like me to thrive, why would I cloud my clear amber tea with sour milk for no reason?
These sound like the thoughts of a suicidal man, I'm aware of that, but they're not, don't worry. It's cold, hard rationality. It's the only thing I have. Some people think that we'll get what we truly deserve once we die. Fuck, I hope not. What's the point of that? If there is anything after death then it's shrouded from us, and with no proof of its existence I can only fear it and deny that it's there in my bravado. I'm frightened, just like everyone else. Over the last few years, I've seen that I'm not so different. Besides, my life is quite bearable even in its current form and I won't be beaten by it, so I won't launch myself into the unknown to benefit a TV biopic with a nice soundtrack.

I keep thinking of the one time in my academic life when I was made to feel stupid, and I don't know why it's in my head. The teacher made a point of my error in front of the whole class and he encouraged people to laugh at me. It was because, when faced with a simple mathematical question, I'd taken the most complicated route to the right answer. The answer was correct, but my ingenuity in finding it was so strangely and needlessly complex that it was apparently worse than getting the wrong answer. I thought that the humiliation was because the teacher was intimidated by me, even at my young age. A flaw in me was so unusual that it was worthy of being publicly displayed. I never understood why it was so terrible then. I was just angry, because when we bowed and clapped our hands at shrines, I wasn't worshiping the kami – I was worshipping myself. The idea that anyone else could criticise me was so new to me, and I couldn't understand. Now I see that I avoided the answer for as long as I possibly could by distracting myself. I tried to find an answer which was less obvious because I found the simplicity of it so neolithic and insulting. It couldn't be so simple, it couldn't be so plain. I don't think that I ever learned my lesson that day. Only I can make life interesting for myself while finding the right answer, or what's the point of finding the answer at all?

I think of death constantly, like now when its presence is heavy in the room like silence in an ancient forest. It soaks through the bark of me and stains and I can't ignore it. Perhaps it's because L's seeing dead people, as you do. There are only so many things that I can excuse with his tiredness. Because Nate River's still big news, I think what it must be like for people when they're told that someone close to them has died, if they actually care. I'd say that it's not every day that police find a pool of blood with a person in it, but it does seem to happen every day, and the living are left with the consequences.

Preoccupation with death is another distraction to a weakness I have and am aware of. I am as perfect as the man lying next to me who's drawing loose circles onto my chest with his fingertips. Like burning planets, the fire of our scorn for all human life has exhausted itself, leaving us floating in space with the question of 'what now?' I was once superhuman and marked for something great in life. All my rewards were owed to me, but in this light I see what fuelled me, and it was my own self-importance. I flattered myself to stupidity and life rolled over me like water, with me doing little to encourage it and feeling nothing but discontent instead of counting my blessings. Whatever causes held my interest had superficial importance to me but I forced myself to believe them to be more important than anything else. It was my responsibility to put those things before myself because no one else does. It changed at the moment when I noticed another person. Without him I'm sure that my sincere sadness and sense of injustice over Raye would have been forgotten as easily as it is to forget what the dead leaves of autumn look like when you're in the height of summer. Love is the ultimate delusion, distractor and balm of forgetfulness. I was right to be frightened of it.

So, when I should have been charging through with policies and speeches which I would have sworn my life on being selfless, I was very much in love instead, and as selfish as I ever could have been. I was determined to win and to possess, to prove to myself that my charm and intelligence made me irresistible to the one person who had most cause to think otherwise. But the raptures of pursuit and success fade. Or it did in my case. All love is related to varying degrees of self-love. Now, on one level, I feel cheated of what was promised to me. My sainthood is tarnished, yet I feel responsible for his sadness and gratitude for the pain of love he's given me so far. Love is a strange thing, being completely unreasonable and illogical. It's why I thought myself above it, and for a long
time I was. But now I couldn't be happy if he isn't, even if it meant that we had to part. Isn't that stupid? I've skimmed over life without feeling anything real until now. Whatever true thoughts I've had I've kept deep within myself, but my identity feels unstable because his sense of self is sometimes so much stronger than mine. I've lost days in a fog of forgetfulness, like I've drunk so much that I've forced memories out for a reason I don't understand.

So now, with indulgent realisation and self-persecution in the air, I feel trapped and numb. He's dejected and barely sane, and we haven't spoken for hours. I've no idea what's going to happen but I feel no anticipation. The sun rises molten, cutting through gaps in the blinds and creating sharp copper contrasts in the room; the shadows become more dense and dark with every minute as I twirl a shred of his tousled hair around my finger. I don't know how much time passes, but eventually he edges closer to me, reaching underneath my leg until I can feel the bones of his hand pressing and persuading me, crawling between my legs. I love the rushing sound of mischievous fingers against bed sheets. I watch him like he's a film I'm untouched by - like I only observe life, not participate. His eyelashes and morning stubble catch the sun and appear tawny for broken milliseconds as he moves within the light and shade. His skin glows in a rusty blushed whiteness. I could watch him my whole life. No one has ever been viewed with as much love and warmth and wonder, no one. Only the timid, fearful of being denied and rejected would-be lovers see the objects of their affection as I see him. When someone becomes the human, divine equivalent of doves wings flying against a dead, silent sky as the one thing of true beauty in life - that's how I see him. A voice is screaming inside me while I smile at him. I'm an idiot.

"And what do you think you're doing, Larsen?"

At first, I dreamt of Kiyomi, but like a dream within a dream, I woke up and turned over, only opening my eyes when my arm hit a firm mattress when it should fall on a person. I tensed from his absence and only eased a little when I saw him standing by the window, staring out into the darkness. It should have scared the shit out of me but my reactions are usually reliably staid when nature would suggest that they shouldn't be. I wanted to ask him to close the blinds again because I expect bastards to be outside waiting for the opportunity to look in this house in the middle of the night. Some people might call it paranoia, but those people don't live my life. So I opened my mouth to speak but I couldn't. It was as though soil filled my mouth.

He said that he thought that he'd heard something, and my thoughts ran to the press being outside. I strained my eyes, which were still fighting to close again, and looked through the window. There was no one outside.

"But there's nothing there," I told him. "Come back to bed."

But he didn't move. He kept staring out towards the moon-lit edges of the lake where the wind blows the water against the reeds in a tidal replica. Everything about this house is fake. Something here turns our heads inside out, but it's our only sanctuary now and I can't imagine leaving. I can only liken it to someone who's been in prison most of his life. If the doors were opened and he was able to escape, he would be the only person who wouldn't because what's outside is more frightening.

"There's a dream I keep having," he said. "It's why I try not to sleep. I wake up and I look out the window like this, just like this, and there are people outside all standing there, looking at me. All the people who've died."

Ok. Despite this being a mad load of bollocks, he sounded so convincing that I couldn't help but look out of the window again to double check that it was a mad load of bollocks. It was.

"There's no one outside. No dead people, no noises."
“Stephen’s there.”

“Stephen’s dead, L.”

“Yes, you’re right. I know that you’re right. But I think that he’s angry with me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m with you,” he answered after a moment, and looked towards me to see what effect he’d had. I know that he thinks that I killed Stephen as surely as if I’d put a gun to his head – you don’t have to be B to understand his psychology and guilt. Because I would have loved to have emptied a barrel of bullets into Stephen, I can’t be angry and can’t say anything. It might as well be true and I feel no regret about it. L’s face was so shadowed that it was almost like I was talking to a skull and I wish that I didn’t think of things like that. “I have to get out of this house, Light.”

I think I said something about how we’ll go, which he took for meaning that we’d leave right then and there.

“No, not now,” I said, pulling myself out of bed to walk to him and close the blind. “It’s two in the morning, stupid. What are you thinking? Security would think I’m insane if we move out in the middle of the night.” In truth, I didn’t know where we could go. The house we bought is still empty. I don’t mean to sound brusque but that’s my natural state and I have to make a concerted effort to sound any other way. It usually doesn’t bother him at all – I suppose he’s used to it – but on this occasion his eyes grew so large and round and childlike that I felt sad that I hadn’t made the effort. Whether it was the dreaminess and unreality of it that caught me off guard, I don’t know.

He asked me whether I thought that he was insane and I said that I thought he was tired. We were both tired. It’s a weak excuse and to me it was a weak lie. Yes, I thought that he was insane but I wasn’t going to say that, I’m not that insensitive and what good would it do to tell him the truth? Besides, he smiled at me like I was a child who had accidentally said something touching, and put his hand around the back of my neck to draw me close to him. He was like a open wound and I’d never seen him like that. I think it was love then. Sometimes I wonder, only because there are moments I still despise him for things he says and does which seem tailor-made to hurt me. He has such a debilitating effect – he practically burns the spinal cord out of me like a lightening strike – but at that time, I loved him more then than I ever had. I kissed his eyelids for it, I kissed his mouth for it. For one of the few times in my life, I felt that everything was true and not a simulation.

“Do you want to know my name?” he asked me.

“Yes. What’s your name?” I replied, but part of me didn’t want to know. I wonder to myself then and now why he told me. I only asked what it was once, and even then it was only because I was so envious that B knew and I didn’t. I never really wanted to know though, because it never mattered to me. He was Lawliet when I hated him and L when I loved him. I sounded as nervous about having another name for him as he did, like knowing it would change how I feel about him.

After he told me, I immediately wanted to repeat it. It was a new name to me, so it was unique to him with no prior associations in my mind. The strange combination of sounds were beautiful in the way he said it, like the secret it was, and I wouldn’t know if it suited him until I’d said it myself. I dipped my head downwards to laugh but he completely misread me.

“I know, it’s bad,” he said. "It was my father's name. I'm his namesake, not a person in my own right. I was made for a cause and it was to be just like him, but I was a disappointment, I think. It's hard having a name with 'arse' in the middle of it when you're gay as a box of frogs, harder than you'd think. It is funny though. The irony didn't escape me."
"I like it, Larsen. I don't think it's funny. I think it's funny that you told me," I assured him, but I could tell that he didn't believe me. I traced over his Adam's apple with my tongue and kissed it until he laughed and I smiled. I wanted to say his name over and over again against his skin to make up for all the years I didn't know it, didn't care, didn't use it. It was a name as airy as the breath that carried it, made to be whispered. I couldn't imagine ever saying it in anger. "And you're not a disappointment."

"You would say that."

His smile gradually fell and he asked me why he was sad when he should be happy. He should have been fucking happy, but this is L. I told him again that he was tired because it was my excuse for everything. I've seen documentaries about how to talk to nutters, and really you should just go along with what they say or tell them that they're tired, from what I gathered. Agree, calm them down, back out of the room, and lock the door.

"I do nothing but sleep and look at you," he said.

"That must be tiring."

He laughed again and I thought how he doesn't smile enough. When he really smiles, only the way I've seen him smile with me, he smiles with his whole face – his eyes, everything. It's so rare and transitory though, and it was then, because he asked me again if I thought that he was going mad. I took a little too long to answer, and by the time I told him that I didn't he'd closed the blind and was lying on his back on the bed. I joined him and we were just lying next to each other, both staring upwards. Well, he was. Out of the corner of my eye I could see his chest rising and falling as evenly as the second hand of a clock.

"So... what are you planning to do tomorrow?" I asked eventually, and he grimaced. Practically cringed.

"Light, that's the same as asking me about the weather."

"Just trying to start a conversation."

"Don't try to appease me through smalltalk just because you think I'm mad."

"I'm not! I don't!"

"So you don't think I'm mad?" he asked, turning his head to face me. When actually confronted with it, I almost panicked. He can look quite wolf-like at the best of times.

"No!" I said, then lay in the awkward pause that followed while he stared at the side of my face. "Well, you are seeing dead people on the patio."

"Because there are dead people on the patio."

"If you actually thought that then how could you just go to bed and –"

"I'm hoping that you're going to do me a favour soon," he said casually, turning his eyes back up at the ceiling. "When you're ready, no rush, take your time. Not even dead people outside my house can come between me and sexual encounters. How mad do you think I am?"

"What do you want me to do?" I asked stupidly, and he looked at me as you would look at someone who said something like that.
"Light... use your imagination. It's ok, my expectations are low. You have a think and I'll read
something while I'm waiting," he said, and I watched him pick up a book from the nightstand.
"Remember that time at your apartment when we were just laughing for hours because you said that
it was like we were wrestling? I don't even know why I thought it was so funny."

"It was like wrestling," I said, scratching my head against the pressure. "Do you want to wrestle?"

"Not really."

"Oh... What are you reading?"

"Work Makes You Free," he replied in his boredom.

"I agree with that. That's a good slogan, I should use it, is it copyrighted? That would be good on
posters, wouldn't it? Because unemployment is still fucking awful and I've created industries and
jobs, so there's no excuse for it still being as high as it is, it's just that people are lazy. Short of killing
them, maybe they need to be inspired by slogans and moral incentives. I know that I'm leaving, but
maybe I could push it through Work and Pensions. Work makes you free... hold on, wasn't that?"

"Over the gates of Auschwitz," he said, turning his face towards me. "Over the gates of a few
concentration camps, actually. Light, I really worry about you."

"I'm not the one reading the book!" I scowled, crossing my arms over my chest. "I still agree with it,
in theory."

"Lovely."

"I don't appreciate you calling me a Nazi."

"I didn't."

"You're inferring that I am."

"I'm not inferring anything."

"You are."

He sighed heavily. "It's ok, Light, I'm tickity boo now. You can go to sleep. Please."

"It'll be my pleasure. Brilliant. Thanks for waking me up, you mad bastard."

"You're welcome."

So I turned over but still felt him beside me. The sound of page being turned cut through a longing,
dull sound carried on the air outside and only brought attention to it, then I felt him sit up and knew
that he was looking towards the sound, but I stayed on my side, facing the other way.

"Can you hear bells?" I asked.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I hear them too."

I'm trying to recount things in order, but everything overlaps, like I can't identify dreams from reality.
It was a traumatic time for me, I think. It must have dawned on me what a life changing thing I'd
done, and I hate doing things without preparing and planning and feeling completely secure. I could have done – I had the opportunity – but I didn't want to. I couldn't think of anything more depressing. I was forced into it.

As I said, I don't know if this is in order or whether it happened or not, so I'll treat it all as though it did. My interpretation of reality can be, at times, somewhat bizarre, but on the whole I think it's accurate. I can fool myself into a state of contentedness for a short time, but reality always blasts holes through it in the end. The day I left Kiyomi and Kira and the Kantei – discarding all the K's for one L – I got bored very quickly of his... misery, depression, indulgence, whatever you want to call it. Despite my great sacrifice, his appreciation faded and he was ordering me around and occasionally asking me very stupid questions from his sulking, owlish position on the sofa. Instead of the relief I did feel, now that we're reduced to sitting in front of the TV while he writes out his resignation letter or reads the papers or whatever the fuck he does, all I'm left with is that he makes me feel like I've rushed towards the wrong decision in an attempt to solve something which can't be solved. But I refuse to have made the wrong decision. I will make it the fucking right decision. Maybe any kind of commitment in a relationship always leads to sitting in front of a TV in a bland atmosphere. I don't feel like I'm in any kind of peril and that annoys me, but I suppose that I'm just comparing him with Kiyomi because I've often sat with her in easy comfort, so it just seems to me that I've swapped one companion for another.

I think L started to suspect that my temper was frayed and he stopped asking me anything. He didn't phone B, but by that time, I was past caring. I would have been happy with silence but apparently he wasn't, because at ten o'clock he put on a suit and left to 'check on things at the firm', which is the most blatant lie he didn't even try to make any real effort with. Even before then though, there was a moment when I thought that I'd made a terrible mistake. I signed up for the man in the suit, the straight back and the extraordinary ego, not a ball of thoughtful anxiety, shit posture and sloppy dressing, which is what I got. I didn't want peace – if I'd wanted that then I would have stayed with Kiyomi – but I want, I don't know, some of the panicked adoration mixed with loathing which I found with him. I'm surprised by my own impatience now that he's not living up to my expectations, so I've spent a great deal of time biting my tongue. Because of my appearance of contented passivity, I got asked for cups of tea and given declarations of gratitude which I suspect were rather begrudging and bewildered. People tell you that they love you, but once you're used to it and you expect it, it lingers as long as the smell of his smoky-smelling tea once it cools, which isn't very long. I'm not vain in the least (it's a very unattractive quality), but I thought that the source of his moods lately were more because of my absences than through seeing people jumping off balconies. Now I'm starting to wonder why I bothered leaving Kiyomi, because the only difference I've made to him is that he's pulled himself out of bed. Maybe I should be happy that he's motivated enough to put on a suit and go to the firm, but I don't actually believe that he has gone there. It's ok, I've sent one of my guards to tail him. The guard didn't ask why and I don't really care what any of them think. I'm in that quiet fury stage. Some people shout or throw things when they're angry, but that's pointless and I'm beyond that. I have the fuckwit tailed while I sit on the sofa to stew in my own anger until he comes back. I feel it spread through me like a cancer.

While I wait, I review the list of people I've purged from the government for being ineffective and having no alternate vision to the status quo which I inherited. Inherited is a key word in politics. It's very important and I use it a lot. The same with 'broken'. 'This country is broken.' 'The social structure is broken.' It sounds good, doesn't it? Then I think how the by-elections have simply replaced idiots with more idiots with different faces. Someone representing my party usually wins, though I see that more of a reflection of me as leader than anything else. Or maybe people want to see how long politicians will stay alive for. I don't know. And now Kiyomi is going to win a seat from my hard work, joining the rest of them by jumping on my back for me to carry them. Leaches.

L reappears at fourteen minutes past one, which is think is very important. His car draws up and I
know that it's him because I know the sound of the engine, and who else would it be? I don't look at the door when it opens, I just hear the keys fall carelessly against a glazed surface and laces straining against the cracking leather of his shoes as he takes them off and flings them against the floor, so I check my watch and note the time.

"Well, look at you," I say when I do look up from my magazine. He looks... well, he looks very good actually. He has the flattest stomach I've ever seen on a man. It's quite feminine, actually, quite appealing. Good for rubbing your cock against when you're strapped for time. Maybe he wants to be congratulated for looking the way he does? He's not all that. I mean, he's not like me or anything, and I saw a model in GQ who's much better looking than he is, but similar and younger. This relationship is so one-sided. I get very few compliments from him these days, and when I do they're all shallow and perverted.

"Yes, look at me," he replies smugly. "You're still here then."

He's in one of those moods when he wants to bolster himself up like a pompous twat who knows that his stomach is something that you'd write a postcard to your parents about. He's done it before, loads of times. He acts like an alley cat that's fucked every cat in the fucking street and he knows that I know it but that I'm so stupid that I'll give him a saucer of milk anyway.

"Where have you been?"

"The firm. Where do you think I've been?"

"I don't know, L. I can only imagine where lying bastards go at night."

I look back down at the book reviews. Everything's shit and I've read this page twice already. He pinches the paper out of my hands to look at what I'm reading and, God, I just want to hit him. He laughs and hands it back to me before he takes off his jacket.

"You're reading about a love story?"

"No. It's a review about 'The Philosophy of Running.'"

"Running?" he asks, then laughs again like someone with emphysema. After he pulls his belt off like a whip, I stroke my eyebrow with my forefinger. "Don't you want to know where I've been?"

"No, but I'm positive that you want to tell me."

"I was with a client," he smirks with self-satisfaction. "I suppose that I could call him that. I haven't seen him for a while."

"Oh?"

"He murdered a man in cold blood but never mind that, I got him off that charge. He wanted to show me the crime scene again; he's still living there. He has a blue carpet."

"How tasteful. And what were you really doing?"

"A picture can speak louder than words, but unfortunately, I forgot to take a picture. What are you going to say? 'I could catch a disease from you!'? That's what you usually say. The grand 'you' is all you care about." I don't reply, I just cross one leg over the other and turn away from him. It's not too late. I could go back to Kiyomi now if I could only bring myself to move. "I did, Light," he persists. "I did. What are you going to do?"
"You should eat something. You're always trying to pick fights when your blood sugar's low."

"Oh, do I really? I've eaten, thanks. So, you're not going to do anything? You just don't care. I see."

"I don't believe you."

"Because I confessed?" he asks. "Blue carpet, blue walls, blue sheets. It was like being drowned by a man in a pond in Las Vegas, which is kind of what he did to the man he killed. Well, he strangled him, stabbed him, but then he put him in the bath to wash off the evidence. I don't mind telling you this - he can't be retried. There were a few other similar murders in the area at the time, six years back, do you remember? I know that you love reading about those things, you keep a track of them. You're one of those people who wank over cases like that because you can't do it yourself. They called him the Tokyo Strangler? Someone used to break into apartments and kill people in quite a savvy way, forensically. He made my job very easy for me, because there wasn't any actual evidence to link him to the murders that you couldn't explain by way of it being where he lived. He had no motive, and I was his alibi. You can't beat that. And then the Tokyo Strangler struck again while he was being held for questioning, oh no! I always had such a fondness for him, it made me do strange things. It was a weird case, I had to testify and everything. He wanted to show me that he's kept his apartment the way it was. The dusted fingerprints on the door, the hole in the carpet by the bed where the police cut it for testing, all very... hnnng. It made me realise - I'm not the monogamous type, you always knew that. I tried it out but... this isn't for me. I mean, you've got so much baggage and you're such a downer! You never do anything sexy, you're always shaking your head at me and telling me how disgusting I am, I can't be a defender because it's 'reprehensible', and you're not in your twenties anymore, so you haven't really got any plus points left. He's twenty-four. You should see his arse, it is something to behold. And, you know? I think he might actually be a twelve incher. I couldn't see, he covered my eyes with something, but it certainly felt like it. What do people say? That when you find your true path in life, you should go for it? I think that I've found my path."

I don't say anything because I can't. His words are so busy filling my head and hitting me from all angles that I actually can't throw anything back at him. Is he admitting to murder in there as well? The Tokyo Strangler was executed two years ago, I remember it.

Annoyed by my silence, he tosses his jacket onto my lap, which I push off before following him into the bathroom. I follow him because I've known for years that I'll always follow him until I can't anymore. One day he'll make it impossible for me to follow him anywhere, and then I don't know what I'll do. I feel so heavy with sleep that I'm nearly pulled out of this dream, but I stick with it.

"Get out," he orders me coldly, looking at me through the mirror above the sink. But I don't go. I walk over to him and breathe in his scent around his neck, the plain of his chest with the beating heart beneath it – just like B would – and then look right into his eyes.

"You haven't been with anyone," I tell him. No, he's a liar and he hates me for catching him out. He walks past me back into the living room and I follow him again like I'm tied to him. But there's nothing else for me. When he leaves the room, there's nothing left for me. He used to follow me once. He stalked me and I just rolled over and died.

"I was," he says grumpily.

"I know that you weren't. You drove around, you went to the firm, you were there for forty minutes, and you drove straight back here."

"Ha! You know that because you got your lackeys to stalk me? You were stalking me again?! You can't even do that yourself anymore, you get other people to do it."
"Yes, I had them follow you. I have them watch you and I watch you because I don't trust you!" I shout. No, I don't shout it. I don't say it at all. "Why do you lie? Why do you lie about something like that?"

"I didn't -"

"You lied. You lie the wrong fucking way around. You should lie when you have slept with someone, not when you haven't, you stupid bastard!"

"I'm not lying! It's not my fault that you never bel --"

"Just shut up. What's wrong with you?" I ask. Somewhere, I feel his leg against mine even though he's standing five feet away from me, and I understand. My hand feels like it's running under a pillow and grabbing the handle of a knife. Odd. "When you say things like that when they're not true, do you know what it makes me think? Is this you having cold feet? Is this your answer, L?"

"Yes, my feet are freezing and I'll tell you why. You're making a mistake. This is... it's too much for me. I didn't want you to leave Kiyomi. Ok, maybe I did, but I changed my mind. I don't need someone like you in my house, cooking my food and making me tea and drying my fucking hair. I want to go back to the way I was."

This is my nightmare.

"No you don't," I say.

"When I tell you, when I try to tell you in the clearest way possible, you won't accept it. What am I supposed to do? You know why I was ill? It was because of you. It's not working out and maybe you should rethink things before you do something you can't go back on."

"What a load of shit!" I shout. "Why are you like this, really? You wouldn't leave the house for days and now you're living it up at the firm and trying to make me leave when you decide to come back at whatever the fucking time it is?"

"Look, ok, that's it. I want you out of my house."

"No! How about that?"

"I don't want to see you again and I want you out of my house now. I'll help you pack," he tells me. He doesn't seem very happy when I sit down. "Get up. You're leaving," he says, but I cross my arms, so he pulls me by the front of my shirt and in the scuffle that follows, he falls almost on top of me.

"Get off me!" I shout.

"Then get out!"

"L, I'm not leaving and you are not fucking this up for us."

"There's nothing to fuck up! We are fucked up!"

I shout in his face while he shouts into mine. We're just gnashing teeth by now and nothing will ever be rectified. There's no reason. We're just animals. I wonder why I keep doing this to myself when I'm at my most vulnerable. I can't blame anyone. I dream of this or of killing him. Sometimes he kills me. I wonder how it will end this time? When I dream of it I'm always surprised when I wake up. Maybe I won't this time.
Between the spitting curses, the doorbell rings. L doesn't have a doorbell. Nevertheless, we both look towards the door and accept that there is a doorbell now. I push L away from me and open the door to find a man outside who turns around to face me. It's Mikami and he's smiling like his mouth has been stretched by a shoe horn. The security light above his head makes his skin appear like tanned leather, only mushroom-coloured and gaunt like a made up corpse. I've seen a lot of those.

"Yagami, I thought that I'd bring you this. I'm sorry that it's late," he says, holding out a folder towards me which is tied up with a black and white ribbon like a funeral envelope. I'm so shocked by it that he walks straight past me, inside. L's gone, I don't know where, and I close the front door automatically. "You should hear what Kiyomi's saying about you. She's telling anyone who'll listen that you're fucking Lawliet. What a disaster, eh?" he says, picking my notes for a speech and scrunching them up in his hand.

"Kiyomi's saying that?"

"It's all over the House. They held a secret, not-so-secret meeting tonight to discuss it. It was hilarious; we were actually passing a sake bottle along the benches because it's the fucking end, isn't it. We might as well all kill ourselves. Listen, I don't suppose that you'd make me your deputy, would you? I'd be the front-runner for leader once you're gone."

"What? But I'm leader. I'm the Prime Minister. You're not even an MP."

"Ah, you can sort that out, can't you? For a friend? It's only a formality after all, and I know what I'm doing. I'm a born politician, it's all I know. And Naomi's hot for politicians, isn't she. Hey... erm, can I talk to you, man to man? I think that you're holding something back from me about Penber. You won't be able to launch this inquiry now, so why don't you tell me what you know and I'll do it? Because you're a friend. You're a goner now anyway, fucking a bloke, killing people left, right and centre, God! I can't imagine you in prison but I think the prison-issue uniforms would suit you. You could make them work, you're really good at accessorising. I always admired that about you."

"Mikami –" I start, but he suddenly clutches his chest. I step back at first, thinking that it's his idea of a joke or that maybe he has heartburn and he's really dramatic about it, but his hand start scrabbling at his shirt like he's boiling and I just know what's happening. Even if we were in a hospital surrounded by doctors on standby, he's going to die. His face contorts before his knees buckle and I take a step towards him. Then his eyes rolls back, his arms go limp and he falls face down on the floor. What the fuck just happened? I stare at him lying there until I hear L laughing. I look up to find him standing in the doorway of the kitchen with a cigarette in his hand.

"You got another one?" he asks me, sounding impressed.

"I didn't do anything!" I tell him desperately, but he makes a drumming sound and sort of swaggers into the room like he's at a party and he's slightly pissed.

"And another one gone, and another one gone, another one bites the dust. Hey! I'm gonna get you, too! Another one bites the dust," he tuts as he walks.

"What? This isn't funny! I didn't do this, L! I didn't touch him!"

"If you say so," he says, looking down at Mikami like he's a broken paving stone. "But there are plenty of ways that you can hurt a man and bring him to the ground. You can beat him, you can cheat him, you can treat him bad and leave him when he's down."

"He just... died, L."
"Yes, he does look dead. Pop him in the chest freezer and butter me a teacake, would you?" he says, and steps over Mikami to sit on the sofa.

"L, there's a dead man in your living room! Mikami's dead!"

"What do you expect me to do about it?"

"I don't know, we should call an ambulance, maybe. I'll go and then you can call an ambulance."

"No, you're not disappearing off and leaving me here with a dead body! I don't do dead bodies, they freak me out," he says casually, rubbing his nose with the thumb of his cigarette hand. "Paramedics always cause a massive fuss and they have this tendency to get the police involved. You might as well write off your entire day then, because those guys are idiots just after cups of tea. I'd really rather leave it until tomorrow. I'm free tomorrow. I'll stock up on shortbread and deal with it then."

"Well we can't leave him here. We can't put him in the freezer either."

"Put a blanket over him then. I'll get a pillow. He'll be fine until tomorrow, we'll just pretend that he's sleeping."

"Wha?!"

"We're children in the woods, Light, we're completely lost. I mean, our heads are just..." he says, making a whooshing noise as he waves his hands either side of his head. "We'll just say that we thought that he'd wake up, so we tucked him in for the night."

"You're joking."

"A tiny bit," he pinches two fingers together and grins widely. "You're not leaving me to deal with this though. It's your fault. I've had it up to here with tidying up your mess."

"L, we -"

"Yes, yes, but I am really tired and want to go to bed. I'm very sorry that Mikami just died in my living room, because he was very attractive and this is my living room and he's right in the middle of it. It's a pain in the arse, but it's bad timing and there's nothing we can do about it now. Are you coming to bed?"

"But -"

"Light. Bed," he says firmly, like an order.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I was just saying good morning."

I blink, and when I open my eyes, I'm not in the living room. I'm horizontal in bed, and the dim daylight is fighting through the blinds.

"What?" I ask, like he could explain all this to me.

"I said that I was just saying good morning," he repeats, shakes his head like he can't make any sense of me or hope to get any from me any time soon, then lays his head on my chest. Through the weight of it, I control my breathing so that he doesn't remark on it.

I put it down to my intelligence that my dreams are so vivid, although I fully expect to find Mikami
tucked up on the living room floor. He's not. I even check the chest freezer while making coffee but he's not there either, so I suppose that it didn't happen. I'll forget all about it by midday, anyway, so I go back to bed for a few hours while the sun rises.

"And what do you think you're doing, Larsen?"
This is so longwinded, I'm really sorry.

"To the psyche, winning can feel like losing. And success like failure and, perhaps even more perversely, failure like success. Even as you experience disappointment, you may breathe a welcome sigh of relief."

- The Paradoxical Rationale for Self-Sabotage, Leon F. Seltzer

This is the age of the celebrity politician. Based on the unwritten laws of our party, you must present an image, bring in the figures, dress well but not too expensively lest you be considered frivolous and vain. Marry your wealthy childhood sweetheart who preferably has a degree in Art History, and attempt to procreate in a vanilla way, in a vanilla room, during vanilla personal holidays. Be aware of your car’s fuel consumption and carbon emissions and feel suicidal about it. Don't claim furniture or entertainment equipment on your expenses and don't sublet. Be serious; restrict your sense of humour to bland wit during Prime Minister's Questions to match your bland personality. Having no opinion is safe, so stick with it. Always be clean shaven. Don't be ridiculous. Vices bring out your weaknesses and make you look like an idiot, so encourage them in others but deny yourself. Don't have an affair. If you do have an affair, for god's sake, keep it quiet. Definitely don't have affairs with outsiders, keep it within the House. Everyone just wants to use you. Unofficially, banging men is ok and even preferable if you're married with children and can therefore deny it, because women can be bitter, emotional and read too much into things, whereas men tend to be more reasonable. You can get away with it if you've been to boarding school, have no strong political aspirations and, again, if you keep it quiet. For men, because most politicians are men, it must be kept to accepting drunken hand jobs in the showers after a sporting activity and dealt with a beefy heterosexual overtone, like a pat on the back, and only to relieve an unhealthy, potentially fatal build up of testosterone. You must not enjoy it. Any more than that is risky but not impossible if handled with confidence. For example, if the dependability of your partner is in question, choose wisely – someone who has more to lose than you do. If they don't fit into this category, get your secretary or aide to do it instead, using money as an incentive for discretion. If in doubt, deny everything and transfer blame. Put as much importance into researching your colleagues as you do into having a house surveyed. If you're climbing the ladder, make yourself open to offers but make it clear what you expect in return before goods change hands. It's prudent to prepare a business plan in these scenarios. Advancement is a combination of efficiency and deviancy. Don't appear to be too intelligent or ambitious – it scares people. Do not make mistakes.

See everything as an opportunity. Be optimistic. Express a belief in a higher power but don't go overboard. Don't admit to a liking for music which isn't classical or a book which isn't unheard of and philosophical. War is a nasty business we must avoid at all costs unless financial profit is to be made from it. If a country’s government seems shifty, bomb the fuck out of their electorate, with or without UN approval. Disclose as little as possible to the public and use incomprehensible words to avoid admitting to failings. Remember: the party is you and you are the party. Sidestep questions you don't want to answer by talking over the interviewer and passionately saying: 'Let me finish!' In the unlikely event that they do let you speak, refer to the incomprehensible interview technique. No one
will think that you're making phrases up; they'll just think that you're more intelligent than they are.
The media are evil conspiracy theorists, so be friends with them through bribery you can later refute.
Don't leave breadcrumb trails. Be careful who your friends are. They must all be someone who could
be an impressive reference on a passport application. Don't get emotionally attached. Be prepared to
dump friends and family if they do something illegal, but stand by them until the proof is
overwhelming in order to uphold the 'innocent until proven guilty' theory and so you don't appear
disloyal and emotionless. Be a family man. Loose lips sink ships. Don't be teetotal because it makes
you boring and antisocial to your colleagues and suggests that you have a problem. Justice is the
most important thing in the known universe. You can't trust anyone apart your dog, and even they
shit on your carpet. To appear radical and interesting but still promotable, your 'hardline' politics must
be only slightly either side of the middle ground and based on popular public opinion. Try to mention
'economic recovery' at least once a day. Advocate state schooling but send your own children to
private schools for a better education. Illnesses are things other people have, but we sympathise.
Someone else carries your umbrella; that's their job based on the class structure of capitalism. Be
punctual. Be seen as reliable and as having 'a special relationship' with your constituents. Don't have
any problems apart from state problems.

If you accept all of these rules, you're well on your way to success. If you don't, you're fucked.

I don't like fitting in with people's demands, but I do it for the right price or for free publicity –
preferably both – so I do stupid things like this: visiting centres and theatres. I've learned to fit in with
society and expectations like it's an exam, and I'm the top of the class because I couldn't be anything
else. I study the media and their demographics to appeal to every variable, manipulating them like
clay figures and poisoning their minds through safe conformity and the mystery of occasional semi-
shocking but logical opinions which lean towards the far right. Like hunting prey, success is found
through research, observation, and making yourself to appear to be a safe haven. You can count on
me, I'd never hurt you. Through this, I can inspire love, adoration and loyalty through admittedly
devious means. I don't like doing it, mostly because I don't like interaction and contact and taking
advantage of good and stupid natures, but I have to. My bitterness coursed through me until it
became all I am, impregnating my aspirations with discontent. That's my disease.

When placed repeatedly in situations I dislike, like this, I think about what I do like. I never used to,
since it's a waste of time, but it occupies me when there's nothing else to do. After a couple of hours,
you run out of things of importance to plan out without a notebook, desk lamp and possibly a
calculator. I find myself to be a rather fascinating subject to muse over, and there's nothing wrong
with that in moderation, like all bad things. I never liked socialising, but there's some prurient
enjoyment through making people uncomfortable and eclipsing those around me. The small victory
of breaking hearts and egos of those who deserve it used to help me go to sleep with a smile on my
face at the end of a long day. Now those victories are found mostly through intellectually destroying
someone at work. I'd say that in general though, I've always preferred the complete opposite of what
I've been forced to do. I like isolation; of working alone in a neat, tidy, locked office. I like being
special, I don't like being paraded by others. I like controlling those around me to fit in with my
dream ideal of efficient silence. I like propping my head on L's shoulder to let him carry the weight
of my mind for a while. I like that I miss him when we're separated for a few hours by miles and
obligations. I feel the separation keenly, and it brings a private, closeting feeling and anticipation
throughout the day, pounding and driving my heart even while I'm talking about something
mundane, all kept to myself. I like walking through a door knowing that he's on the other side of it,
and aiming to get through the day for that moment – something purely selfish. I've grown to like
feeling the absence and the cause of it twist inside me like a whirl inside of a tree, and something
self-destructive wants me to display it as something I'm proud of. Here is my imperfection, let it
weaken and scar me. I want everyone to be left in no doubt of the nature of our closeness and to be
so jealous it makes them vomit blood.
Walking slowly down a path from which I cannot stray, Kiyomi's fingernails dig into my arm through my jacket, like tearing animal claws. I hoped that I could avoid her from now on, but my diary won't allow for it. We don't and won't speak for the entire night and we'll sleep in different houses because this is work. Despite our outward image of unity, divorce is a heavy war of a word between us – one fighting for it, one fighting against it. At the end of the thick blood-like streak of a carpet on the floor is a glass door, opened wide like Heaven lies beyond, but we stop in front of it for one last photo opportunity. Through that door lie horrendous cruelties against my ears and sanity; people singing for money, dancing for money, playing instruments for money, speaking for money in what they call a show. I hate that I know exactly what's going to happen from now until I close L's front door behind me and lock myself in later, because time with him is the only uncertainty. Maybe the boredom of these things is what I hate most, but I'm still here because it's expected of me. It was arranged for me after talks between PR and the owners of this theatre months ago. They settled on a contribution to the party which won't be declared – L decided on the price – and I'm whored out. It was written in my diary for me, and my job is to turn up and smile in a well-pressed suit next to my well-pressed wife and look like I'm enjoying it. For money. For votes. This isn't what I wanted, this isn't what I was aiming for, but all of us are prostitutes in our own way. Who's to say that one transaction is more immoral than another if no one's unwillingly hurt?

I close my eyes against the gunfire white lights and dip my head to focus on blocking out the clicking buttons and orders to pose until it's so far away it's like I'm underwater. Then I lift my head, put my arm around Kiyomi's waist when a photographer tells me to, open my eyes for the cameras, and smile.

Years ago, I went back to L's house one night because he said that he had something to show me. I didn't want to go because I'd seen enough of him that day (two hours) to what I thought was well past saturation point, and because I thought the 'something' was probably going to be his cock. I'd seen enough of that too in the year I'd known him for then and didn't want him to think that it was an exciting prospect for me, so I pretended to sleep in the car while he drove and occasionally threw sweet wrappers at my face while acting like he hadn't.

When we walked into the dark house, the biting air followed us and cut against my legs before dissipating, and L only turned on the odd table lamp like he didn't want to disturb the darkness too much. I poured myself a drink and one for him out of robotic politeness, suddenly made aware of the bargain we'd made because of the silence and air of unwanted pre-sex from my side. I liked him a little by this point, I liked talking with him and I didn't inwardly sigh when I saw him like I did other people, which I suppose made the situation more difficult for me, but I would still grunt dissent throughout the pushing and shoving and complaining bedsprings. On this occasion, I was still trying to settle on an idea for getting out of it. You could only use an excuse with L once and you couldn't fool him with headaches and tiredness, so over the last few months I'd tried being blunt, which always offended him. That was when our restrained arguments became a knuckled pummelling of soft skin and taut muscles to bruise for the next day, and then we'd end up having sex anyway, but by that point I'd enjoy it and was usually the one to initiate it. I was shocked by myself the first time, it was a revelation to me, but, I don't know, I think I've always had a problem with things not being on my terms. I always needed something to fight against or I'm as good as dead. L started describing it as my necessary 'firing up', like I was an obstinate car on a frosty morning.

I'd prepared for the blunt approach and my stomach muscles tensed protectively in anticipation when he led me into his living room. His house was different to his living room now, not being such an open-plan layout. It was more cluttered too – he must have sold a lot of things before he moved house, almost completely changing his style with the transition – and I'd spent many an occupied hour rooting through his piles of books and notes when he wasn't there. He had more pictures around; cracked oil portraits of long dead, nameless, stuffed Europeans of no relation to him.
clustered on one bare wall leading up the stairs. Their eyes followed you around enviously, so I'd avoid looking at them when I walked past.

As soon as I entered the living room and looked up, I stopped in shock, glass in hand, while he walked ahead and leaned casually on a statue in the middle of the room. He explained to me that it was a plaster casting for review, and my own face stared back at me with pale grey, pupil-less, dead eyes. The suit was only roughly sculpted, I presume to emphasise the detail of the face, but it was me at my most mythical, surreal and horrifying. L kept talking with more rapidity and forced humour, probably due to my reaction, and stood away from the statue, occasionally grabbing its chin playfully like he always has with me, as if he almost expected it to rotate its face towards him and scowl pugnaciously, like I would. He draped himself over it's solid, unmoving shoulders while he watched me, and not once did I think the situation strange, though in retrospect it did have the sense of unwittingly going into the house of a stalker and being presented with the memorabilia of his obsession before he kills you and puts your head in the fridge.

So there was my reflection, only tangible and more deathlike than lifelike in its pore-less, colourless state, and I was shocked more by how beautiful it was. I didn't care about L's motives, I felt no horror or gratitude or flattery, I was just quite in love with myself or, rather, this version of myself, and as a result, it weighted my tongue to silence. What was strange was that I'd never felt so ugly; so disgustingly human, soiled by a heart and thoughts compared to the vision of myself at my purest and most empty. It was only afterwards that I saw it as proof of L's Pygmalion complex. I couldn't blame him for his obsession because I'd made myself an indispensable person of interest by then, but I didn't once think that this statue was evidence of his love for me. It was before all that shit.

Eventually L collapsed in an armchair and drank vodka with the accomplishment of having shocked me. I was so taken by what I was seeing that I struggled to absorb what he was saying, but at one point he told me that I didn't like the statue and smiled like it was what he expected. He went on about how it was created using lasers and 3D computer blueprints based on photographs, had no creative flourishes, pointing out that even through the suit you could tell that my statue self 'dressed to the left', though I have to admit, I couldn't tell. It just looked like a typical 'let's gloss over that' burial mound on a male mannequin to me. The statue was taken as thanks from a client who was a well known sculptor and crackhead whom L defended on an 'intent to supply' charge, somehow managing to avoid prosecution and adding an arty, bohemian rep for him in the process. He now had a two year waiting list through Mr Lawliet's natural gift of the gab. L couldn't think of a subject for the commission, but neither could he bring himself to decline the offer, and finally decided upon me as some kind of joke and because I was his new favourite toy at the time. I told him that he couldn't keep it. If someone saw a life-sized statue of me in his house, what they hell would that say? But he said that he had no intention of keeping it. It scared him, apparently, and his intention was to keep the final bronze casting in storage until I was Prime Minister, and then donate it to the House to stand with all those who'd gone before me as a mark of his respect, a word he used with a laugh. Then he drank from his glass compulsively in long draughts until there was nothing but ice left.

"It's not that I'm obsessed with you or anything," he said moodily, because I still had said very little. It was a desperate defence, but I didn't care, I just kept staring at the statue from about fifteen feet away. The contrasts of the face were heightened in the low light of the room, and I realised that I'd never known my angles to be so sharp and coldly vicious in their perfection. L made a show of shuffling self-consciously and sprawling out in his chair to mask it, annoyed now by my silence, which must have highlighted his oddness to himself.

I walked towards the statue until I was right in front of it, probably appearing to view it like Narcissus seeing his own reflection in the water. L said again that I didn't like it, but I did and I didn't. It was strange seeing myself as others must see me, though I'd thought that I had great self-awareness to the point of being able to see myself from other points of view in my mind's eye. Then I
leaned forward, closed my eyes and kissed its mouth. The smoothness of the plaster being such that it
felt only slightly gritty and rough against my lips as I kissed it with piety, finally putting my arms
around it as if to comfort the solid, grounded thing, holding it close around its neck until we balanced
out each other's temperature. I don't know why I did it, and I wondered what it must have looked like
to L, who I then sensed beside me, and when I loosened my hold of my plaster self to face him, he
kissed me. I loved the warm softness of his mouth compared to mine, how I could feel his heart beat
while my chest was stone right through, how his hands weren't fixed to his sides, but gliding across
my back. It was the first time I held the back of his head to enforce a prison of tenderness.

Later, when L was asleep in an embryonic pose on the floor next to me, his breaths having become
slow and long, I sat up to look at the statue who'd viewed the whole thing. To me, it was the part of
me that sees everything without feeling or really participating. Stone, locked in, screaming under a
mask of cold peace. I stared at it for a long time and memorised it as I began to memorise L in the
years after that, like my almost religious love for this statue was to be transferred to him instead.

I looked at L all curled up like a dying leaf, and stood to retrieve a heavy poker from the fireplace. I
walked back over and stood over him, watching him breathe, thinking how strange he looked with
closed eyes, how like a statue he looked himself, and how I could easily smash his head like an egg.
The hand holding the poker twitched like it'd been shocked, and I stepped over L and the heaps of
discarded clothes, and once again stood in front of the statue of myself. I wondered how long I could
look at it before I got bored of it, but without even thinking much, because all this had been
instinctive, I lifted and swung the metal with all my force, striking the head of myself and creating
multiple cracks from the eye to the neck. I hit it again, now full of a rage of destruction as evicted
Hephasteon urged me on from the corner. By now I knew that L would be awake and watching me
because of the sound of my impacts, shocking sounds from me and the crumbling stone, but he said
nothing. I kept striking the statue until its head fell to the floor, chipped and cracked but still in one
piece, revealing a metal rod through the torso. I hit its shoulder and chest and arms and hands until
chunks of plaster flew and scattered across the floor around it. With every strike I felt warmer and
more alive as I murdered this ironic representation of my hidden nature and lies, which is what it had
become to me. I couldn't destroy it completely, but I focused my attention to the decapitated head on
the floor, smashing it into pieces until sweat cooled and ran down my back.

At some point I was content and let the poker hang limply from my now sore and strained hand
before letting it clatter and roll to a rest on the floor. And breathing deeply, I stood there surrounded
by small boulders and chips, admiring my handiwork, and pulling dusty air into my lungs until my
chest ached. I always saw myself as an unnatural thing walking unceasingly towards the edge of a
cliff, and no matter what diversions I took on my path, the result would always be the same. I knew
that.

L cancelled the commission.

"And I said to my eternal life partner, it's the kind of place you could get lost in for hours and hours!"
a mad woman tells us. I wish that she'd get lost there for hours and hours. Her powdered flabby neck
shakes and bulges and hangs, sagging like the ballsack of an old man deformed by cancer. That's
really all I can say about her.

"Oh, that sounds lovely. Doesn't it, Light?" Kiyomi asks me, struggling to sound interested.

"Very." Like a fireball at an airport.

For the sake of this pre-arranged party at the Kantei – a kind of artist's social viewing of depictions
from the history of the Japanese government (what we're proud of, anyway) – I'm here. Pictures line
the walls in selected rooms of my house for that 'homely' feel for those invited, I'm Kiyomi’s husband
and we're pleasant to each other for one night only. The one thing she's said to me so far is to remind me of a joint photo call tomorrow morning, which I know nothing about but didn't want to admit it. The lies scratch and tear under my skin with every second that passes.

The idiot woman who's telling us about my own country's fucking landmarks with the romanticism of a drippy tourist leaves lipstick blots on her glass like wide, red fingerprints at a murder scene. She addresses me because I've spoken, having waited for the opportunity.

"I can't tell you both how excited I am to be here, thank you so much for inviting us! I can't believe it's happening!" What a dreamy world of surprised excitement she lives in. I smile and whisper to Kiyomi as the woman gets her glass refilled by a passing skivvy, asking who the cretin is.

"She's just won an award, Naomi introduced us," Kiyomi groans back sourly without looking at me. Apparently her preference would be that we didn't speak at all about anything other than me 'stopping all this silliness' and servicing her. "She's an artist."

"You don't say," I reply. The woman hums curiously through her closed, liquid-filled mouth as she returns to us, as if everything I say would be directed to her now. "I was just saying to my wife how glad we are to have you here," I explain, not sounding very glad about it.

"I can't get over how perfect your English is, Prime Minister. You and Kiyomi, you're so cultured! I hate going to another country when no one there can speak English, don't you? You'd think they'd make the effort, wouldn't you. Communication is so important, but I can forgive ignorance when the country is so full of culture. I've filled two sketchbooks already and I've only been here three days! I really wasn't expecting it," she tells me, littering the air with exclamation marks and shit, bouncing them off my head. I'd decided that I hate her as soon as I saw the 'arty' glass beads in her hair, but I really do now. The idea of standing too close to her in a crush of people and being knocked out by the projectile beads spinning out like a ride at the fairground when she turns her head is nearly as upsetting to me as being subjected to her company. All I want is to hear of her funeral and feel a great burden lifted from the world.

It's at this point that my mother silently steps between Kiyomi and me, carrying Kira, whose arms wave in their shortness towards me, making me to step out of his reach. I haven't seen him since my drama-filled exit the other day, and I'm surprised that he shows some sign of recognition, although he'd probably do the same thing to anyone and anything within grabbing distance. He ignores Kiyomi's proffered finger and puts her necklace into his mouth instead, which causes her a moment of brief horror, not least because I bought that necklace and it cost as much as some houses. My mother looks between us like nothing makes her happier than the sight of us in one place, and offers Kira to me after his suicide attempt, but I don't know what she expects me to do with him. I'm not having a baby dumped on me like it's pass the fucking parcel, so I drink my wine instead.

"OH. MY. GOD, what a beautiful child! Is this your son, Prime Minister?" the piss artist shrieks. "I have to do a portrait of him, I simply must! Look at his wonderment at the world around him! How inspiring! Oh, we could learn so much from you, little fairy being." Leaning towards him with her arms outstretched and oddly crab-like in trying to commandeer Kira makes him disturbed to the verge of tears from his defencelessness and nonexistent vocabulary. I rushingly swallow.

"Don't touch him," I blurt out, so that everyone looks at me, electric shocked into blank stillness by my sudden protectiveness. Well, she's displaced Jeevas and Stephen as my pinnacle of hatred, towards which all my bile will be directed until someone else supplants her, and on it goes. I don't want her touching anything of mine, that'd just be insult to injury. I resent her even drinking the cloudy urine apple juice which the state has paid for. "He's tired," I explain to her with a smile. Yes, and he's very expensive. "Where have you come from, if you don't mind me asking?"
"Oh, gosh, I've come all the way from New Zealand! That's where I'm living now. I'm a drifter, a gypsy, a child of the world – it's the Romany blood. I've lived all over the place, but I'm living in New Zealand now by your earthly standards."

"I'm sorry."

"That I'm from New Zealand?"

"No. That you've come here. Excuse me," I say, then whisper an order to my mother, telling her that Kira has to go to bed, remove my tie from his hands before he tries to eat it, and veer off towards where I've just caught a glimpse of L moving around the outskirts of the room. I notice with some annoyance that as soon as I saw him I felt that slightly miserable, second-stopping, almost audible thud of the heart, which still leaves me feeling utterly confused and ill. So I stalk him, watching how he dodges any intensive conversation or interrogation by simply turning around with smiling awareness of his own arrogant mystique, exchanging a few ambiguous words with people before passing by. His holiday/suspension has been the talk of the evening between politicians. I'd wondered how he'd handle it, and he's handling it by pleasant avoidance. My technique is just to ignore people and appear deaf to them, so I find it interesting that he does anything differently. I insisted on him being invited like I insisted to him that he'd be present, and I don't have to explain why to anyone. The only way I think that I can stand obligations like this now is with the knowledge that he'll appear at some point. Perhaps I want him to suffer with me, but mostly I just want a lift back to his place as soon as this is over because, my God, I want to get out of here.

Kiyomi laughs awkwardly as I walk away, telling the 'child of the world' not to take what I say personally, it's just my sense of humour. Yeah.

"Mr Lawliet, good to see you. How are you enjoying the exhibition?" I ask, interrupting another passing conversation he's having with Transport and taking his hand to shake it and turn him around at the same time.

"Huh?" Dear God, could he be more perfect? What a heavy curse it must be to be so miraculously loquacious. His intelligence practically drips from his bewildered open mouth.

"Excellent, good to hear it. Let me show you my office. I don't think you've seen it, have you?" I say, walking him away. Someone calls me from across the room, so I hurry it up, almost glued to his side.

"Err..."

"Yeah, of course, it's right over here! What's that? You like my suit? Thanks! You don't think it's too tight? There's no room for error here, you know. No, really, it's like cling film. Super 200's, 7.5 ounces and only twenty-five thousand yen a metre."

"What are you talking about? Have you had a seizure?"

"I look magnetic, you say? Fascinating? Really? Well, I think my work is done then, don't you?" I ask loudly, pushing my hand into his pocket to feel for his cock through the lining. He sharply gasps on cue and walks with difficulty where I direct him, like a donkey following a carrot. "Here's my office, you go right in. Have you got a drink? Oh, yes, so you have. I'd love for you to see my etchings... I mean, my library. Ha! No, it's not all progressive policies and economics, don't worry. What do you mean? I never have to use the bully pulpit! I'm not a bully; I just talk sense."

Releasing him to let out a sigh of bitter disappointment, I push him inside with a hushed 'Get the fuck, fucking, fuck,' and shut the door. The noise from the room full of people is immediately
dampened and my stretched, pressed on smile drops to something more naturally melancholic and pissed off as I fall back against the wall.

"I don't know what the hell you're doing but I like it," L tells me.

"I am going insane here," I say agitatedly, and my hand shakes as I drink a desperate gulp of wine as if to demonstrate my near nervous breakdown from this hideous deviation from my routine. "Every idiot in Tokyo has turned up."

"Yes, I did notice that your parents are here."

After I look up at him with the bored hatred of having allowed that kick when I'm down, he makes a sympathetic noise and draws towards me to rubs my arms soothingly. It's surprising how much better it makes me feel, like how feeling the soft pressure of his mouth on mine makes me feel almost cured of the build up of resentment. The anticipation of it surprises me more or, rather, the way my eyes automatically start to close and sink into this feeling again surprises me, almost like it's my reward for getting through the day so far. It's not even an astounding kiss; it's sympathetic too, like he has nothing but sympathy for me, and blasphemously kind.

I think of the first time we ever had a major fallout, though I can't even remember what it was about now. It was after we were familiar enough to be honest in our dislike for each other and the things we do, anyway, and there was apparently a lot to dislike. It was also the first time I ever saw a threat of some emotional danger, which until then I couldn't ever imagine. He stormed out my apartment, telling me to delete his number from my phone. Fine, I thought to myself. I knew all his numbers by heart and couldn't delete them as easily, but fine. I sat in my armchair picking at a barely there crack in the leather until I'd gouged a small hole which was roughly the shape of Australia, while stupidly reliving the argument in torment. I decided then that it would be the first and last time I would ever feel that way. My course of action was that in the unlikely event of irritation, discontinue use immediately. I just never did. That's what people say when they first see a scrying vision of their future warping through bad habits and addictions: no, it'll never happen to me. By then, I'd unknowingly grown used to the shelter. So I was pretty much fucked then and forever within a few months and I point blank refused to believe it. I'm still really fucking annoyed about it.

"Mikami was shouting you," he says, breaking away from me. "He'll be in here in a minute."

"He's just been telling me how important the love of a good woman is." Kiyomi's spoken to Naomi, I thought, when he said it. Such a comment has to have a relevant source.

"Oh? I can't help you with that. How about the love of a bad man?"

"Would you sleep with Mikami?" I ask after smiling, having no idea where that question came from, but I've always wondered and always knew the answer.

"I'm not dead and I'm not stupid either. Of course I would. Have you seen him? And don't say that you wouldn't, because that'll break a lot of dreams I've happily passed the time with over the last few years. I'm still not entirely sure that you haven't. Maybe he and Naomi compare notes."

"I've never thought of him that way," I say sulkily.

"Who do you think of that way apart from me and crying women? Honestly, Light, a box of tissues is quite sufficient. You don't have to shag the sad from people."

I laugh before he kisses me again, and it's all very lazy and summery and revolting until I hear a knock on the door at the same time the door handle turns, as L predicted. My eyes snap open and we
pull away from each other with learned ease as the door opens. By the time Mikami walks inside, scanning the room, we're looking innocently at the books on my shelves. He sounds shocked to find me behind the door and peers around it.

"Yagami, didn't you hear me shout you? Oh. Hello, Lawliet," he says, his voice lowering suspiciously once he catches sight of L.

"Mikami," L replies, glancing at him for a second. All this I see through the furthest corner of my eye. Mikami closes the door and joins our little line of observation, like we're expecting books to just jump off the shelves at us.

"I miss the get togethers we used to have when we were younger. Or maybe I miss being younger. Everything seems so flat and quiet now."

"I'm sorry that this party is so disappointing to you, Mikami."

"It's not your fault."

"Absolutely lifeless," L opines, reaching forward to stroke the spines of first editions. They're a good investment but I don't know what they're about. I had to fill up shelves. Any things I do read tend to have unattractive covers, so I hide them in organisers on the lower shelves.

"Yagami, that suit is amazing. Where did you get it?" It's his version of an uninterested 'how are you?'

"My tailor made it."

"It's not the suit that's amazing. Light is," L informs us while still looking at the books. Well, well. I'm certainly not going to argue with that little statement. "When I first saw him I thought that he was too stunning to be real. So perfect, it was almost a flaw. He makes me think of when someone told me that some myths and legends must be true when they're too beautiful not to be. All myths are built on truth, aren't they? Warnings and lessons to be learned."

"They all end badly."

"Only if you want to see them that way." He licks his lip quickly. "What did you think of me?" he asks, looking back to me finally. I don't get misty-eyed when he says things like this; I'm not that stupid. It's all smoke and mirrors and verbal bunches of fake roses most of the time, but sometimes he looks at me like his reluctant feelings have made him a victim of mine, and it's that which makes me misty-eyed and stupid. He reminds me somehow, in this messy, hardly subtle admission of the most shallow admiration, of how he was when I woke up this morning. When the first thing I noticed was the inertia of his hand draped lazily on my thigh under the sheet to reassure himself, even in sleep, that I was there. I woke him up with kisses and to fuck him blind before he knew what was going on. I almost felt sorry for him. What did I think of him?

"I can hardly remember."

"Riiiiight," Mikami sounds out after a moment, eager for all this go over his head. "Well, Yagami, Kiyomi's looking for you." I've been five minutes. Five. Fucking. Minutes. Maybe everyone's worried about Schrödinger's cat paradox not being just a load of bollocks to prove a point. For all I know – and honestly, I've secretly suspected this to be true for some time – if I'm out of sight, I'm reality and eternal, but everyone else is simultaneously alive and dead unless they're observed by me. I imagine them being in this duality state, but slowly fading into negatives unless I intervene and recharge them like a battery. That's why everyone's always pestering me. They need me so they can
exist in one form or the other.

Unsurprisingly, I don't have anything to say about Kiyomi's dilemma; I'm still looking at the back of L's head long after his attention is back on the books.

"Shouldn't you go and see what she wants? I'll still be here when you get back," L says, smiling at me over his shoulder.

"I won't be long."

"It's fine, really. I'll just wait here for you."

So L picks holes in my theory of my own importance, because I can't imagine his existence becoming entangled with me to that extent. Whether he's an anomaly or not, I know with all surety that he's alive in that room when I leave him, and that he'll be there when I get back if he chooses to be there. It's absolutely nothing to do with me.

Numb with sleep the next morning, I'm driven to the Kantei. Chairs are being set up in the ornamental garden, which only means a photo op or press conference, neither of which I have planned. My confusion isn't enough to make me actively find out what the fuck is going on, but I have suspicions. Sadly, I'm not allowed to be ignorant for long, because almost as soon as I get into my office, Kiyomi's PA calls to politely ask me to join my wife for the announcement of her intent to run for office. I'm clearly just expected to turn up because, on the face of things, there isn't a reason to think that I wouldn't support Kiyomi and this crackpot idea of hers, so I don't know why they're pretending to be polite about it. It's obvious that Kiyomi's not blasting her freshly estranged status around to everyone yet, and I won't let her live it down that she's using my name for her campaign. If she had any confidence in her abilities then she'd use her maiden name, but no.

I'm a busy man with a lot of paper shuffling to do and people to talk at, that's what I tell the PA, only not quite like that, and they should have given me more notice. I'm stubbornly going to refuse to help even if it makes me look bad. I'd just like someone to challenge me without fear so I can unleash hell upon them, but they never do. The PA fumbles over her words, giving away only that they'd sent multiple memos to my office about it. I rifle through memos judged 'not pressing' by my secretary and notice one from Kiyomi's PA and from the PR department I've ignored since L left. I still tell her that I can't make it, but by watching the press gather from my window it's clear from their body language that they're making assumptions about my absence. I'm an unsupportive chauvinist, that's what they're thinking. I can just see the snide insinuations and gossip in tomorrow's papers, so I make some last minute cancellations and turn up anyway, a little late. Dignity and righteousness is imbued within me as if I've been soaked in a marinade in the plastic bag of a womb, and everyone stares at me like I'm glowing, forgetting their jobs, forgetting to take pictures. It reminds me of when I turned up for my civil wedding. Everyone seemed slightly shocked, apart from Kiyomi.

"Darling, I thought that you'd be too busy for my little press call. You're too sweet to me, really. Come and stand by me for the nice people," Kiyomi babies me, gripping my arm to forcefully dragging me over to the little cross of blue tape on the ground where we're supposed to stand while she tells the assembled press: "I feel terrible that he's taken time out of his schedule to support me like this. He always makes the time up, though. The country's still in safe hands, don't worry!"

The media portray Kiyomi as quite the comedienne, so this goes down well with her admiring press, but it makes me yawn loudly against my fist. She scowls at me and adjusts my perfectly straight tie with rough, tightening tugs on my neck so she can stand in front of me, her face and words hidden from everyone else. She's wearing too much highlighter. The flashback will make her look like she has greasy cheekbones. I know that eyes always centre in on me first in a photo just as in life, no
matter where I stand. No one will be looking at her, anyway.

"You look a disgrace and you did last night. You are a disgrace, I've never been so embarrassed. If you had to come here, why couldn't you have made an effort? Useless man," she hisses, standing next to me. "Smile."

"Your arse looks huge in that disgusting dress," I say through my teeth after the first bar of camera shutter clicks end, which is how we time our jabbing remarks to each other, when we have to slightly change our poses depending on what the press tell us to do. "Like a continent for lepers. Which charity shop did you buy it from?"

"It's YSL, you idiot, and it's the smallest size, so there's your argument out the window. It was incredibly expensive but they just charged it to the Deity card before I could stop them. I feel just awful about it."

"Smile, Prime Minister!" someone shouts at me from the press pack. I'd started to frown, apparently. The interest rate on any purchases over 50,000 yen on that card are at 59.9% APR. Bitch. I only got that card because when you have one it means that you've made it and have money to burn. I don't literally want to burn it.

"Why won't you answer my calls?" Kiyomi asks, sounding rather savage through her shy grin.

"I told you that we have to speak through lawyers now."

"Oh, you're not still going on about that are you?"

"And I'm told that you're yet to hire one."

"I have no intention of hiring one. We need to talk, not lawyers."

"If only that were the case," I whisper, looking quickly at her hand for more ammunition. "Why are you suddenly wearing your wedding ring? I thought you said that it was ugly."

"It is ugly. It's vile, but it's my wedding ring. I see that you're still wearing yours. Are your fingers so fat now that you can't take it off or is there another reason?"

We must both beam at the cameras for a second.

"I'll take it off when I'm fucking ready," I smile broadly. "Unless you want to announce our separation now, in which case, I'll be more than happy to take it off and melt it down for pin tacks."

"What does your girlfriend think of that? Or maybe you don't wear it when you're with her? That's very suave of you, you womanising toad. But … considering that you've been staying with Lawliet and, unless he's hiding sluts in the walls of his house, maybe you haven't seen her over the weekend?" she says. God, I wish she was dead. "Security said you've been at Lawliet's all weekend and that no one visited you there. Did you have a fight with your mistress?"

"No. We're ferociously compatible."

"Anyone would think that it was Lawliet that you're having an affair with."

Shit. This should be on my terms, not through her tripping over the right answer. I decide to bombard her with overblown romantic honesty which she won't believe.

"Maybe I am. God knows he's better to talk to than you. And he's got a smaller waist."
"That couldn't be!" she gasps.

"34" inside leg, his hair's nicer than yours —" 

"You don't like dark hair."

"I do."

"Then why did you say that I should get highlights?"

"Because you were going to anyway and I didn't give a shit. Good dark hair is like raven's wings," I sigh in an excessively dreamy way.

"Oh shut up, Basho. Raven's wings, pfff."

"Basho only wrote about frogs and rice fields and onomatopoeia. He couldn't do L justice."

"You sound like Stephen when he was drunk with all this 'in praise of Lawliet' rubbish. I'm sick of him, especially since he's siding with you. He's British and past his sell by date. The best you'd get is a cup of milky tea and a double decker bus splashing rain in your face."

"Ha. Actually, that's not too far from the truth, but he has a wonderful Scandinavian family tree. So yes, I'm divorcing you for L. When I'm with him, I can almost feel the air of the fjords on my face, see the Northern Lights, everything. You've turned me. Now give me my fucking divorce."

"You can whistle for it. Anyway, I wouldn't put anything past you, but Naomi says that he's depressed over Stephen and I can understand why. Stephen was lovely and worth ten of you. You're a pervert and a user. The only reason that some woman is with you now is because she likes your money, which is half mine, by the way. I hope you know that, because there isn't any other reason she'd like you. God, it's so hard to be a feminist sometimes when women are just constantly letting the side down, they're hateful. Still, I'll come over later and Lawliet can disappear for a few hours. I went to Agent Provocateur on Saturday, so we'll come to a resolution," she says, and links her arm with mine on the order of a photographer.

"There isn't going to be a sexy peace treaty, Kiyomi, I've left you. The only resolution is that we get a divorce. If you come over, I won't open the door. I'll laugh at you from an upstairs window."

"I'll send Teru to talk to you then. I have the charity book group meeting at eight, anyway. Dear Teru. He's such a caring man. He's worth ten of you, too."

"Caring? Yes. His eyes are glued to your tits, so I suppose we know what he cares about."

"Most people do stare at my tits. And don't use such vulgar expressions. You're like a fifteen-year-old boy. I told your parents, just so you know. Last night, after you'd left, they asked where you'd gone. They apologised to me like they'd sold me faulty goods on a warranty when I told them that you'd abandoned me and your son for some anonymous whore and to live in a bachelor pad. I think that they're very upset with you, Light. They couldn't believe that you'd do such a thing. They think that you're having a mental breakdown. I wouldn't be surprised if your daddy called round to spank your bottom, you naughty boy."

Excellent.

"Do I care that you've told my parents? I don't think I do. Anyone else you've told?" I ask after a moment. My face hurts from smiling.
"Well, of course the staff must know. Naomi, Teru. Sayu knows, so I suppose that Touta knows too by now. I would think that you should try to make this little misunderstanding go away as soon as possible before anyone else finds out. Like the press. Smile wider, you fool."

"It's not a little misunderstanding, Kiyomi."

"I won't let you ruin this. I do not marry failures."

"I'm not a failure."

"If you're going to resign and throw everything away then that makes you a failure. You said yourself that I haven't done anything wrong. But I won't let you resign. I'll kill you first," she says, and I laugh. For some reason, like they always do when I look up or do something unexpected, the camera clicks become more intense until I regain my composure.

The photo call is over. Kiyomi's PA stands in front of the photographers to direct them about the running order of events from now on; Kiyomi will be making her statement, but while everyone's attention is on the PA, Kiyomi makes a statement to me.

"I mean it, Light. You don't understand. If you do this, I'll murder you. I'll execute you. A dead husband is so much more socially acceptable than a public disgrace. I think of it as self-defence. I could get a lot of good press if you died in an accident. Say, if you accidentally shot yourself seven times in the face. In a few years, I could be Prime Minister and everyone will completely forget about you. I'll overwrite you, so you better think about what you're doing."

It's hard not to look at her, and when I do, something ridiculous becomes a very real possibility. Her profile is confident, callous, mask-like and dimly smiling. The last photo is taken.

I don't know why, but I think of how she'd tell me to do things and instruct me while I was doing them to her, like I was a eunuch to her Empress fucking Cixi. I'd do what she asked out of longing for tranquility and out of curiosity, from the newness of taking orders in that situation. Even L never did that; not with the same air of entitlement. I can't get her face out of my head.

After making my excuses to the press pack, saying that I can't stay for Kiyomi's speech because my schedule doesn't allow for it, unfortunately, I watch it all from my office window during a phone conference. After Kiyomi has spoken, silently for me because of the soundproofing, everyone hangs around in the brightness of the autumn sun. It's so depressingly perfect, I feel like I'm watching my own public engagements from my campaigns, because they must have looked just like this. I stay in my office. Everything leads me back to this shadowed room.

Somehow it's impossible for me to concentrate on work today, but I continue out of sheer obstinacy and then make a point of packing more of my clothes at the Kantei, stopping outside the living room to make sure that Kiyomi saw my suitcase. My phone has been on silent, and soon my voicemail is full of calls from my parents, which I erase without listening to them. L's car isn't in the drive once I get back to his place, but I have other worries, and the only thing I can think of doing is to fill the kettle. As I do, my eyes fix on a small black spot of mildew on the silicone around the tiling and watch, horrified, as it grows larger and fatter like a pulsating blister in front of my eyes. It grows so quickly that soon it won't be something that I can deal with myself - I'll need a fucking army tank. I step away as the alien fungus sprouts glossy, repulsive jointed legs and antennae as the kettle roars to a boil, and I bite on my thumb while I stare. Then I taste blood.

"Hi."
I pull my thumb from between my teeth as I turn around to L, and feel the pain instantly, looking down quickly to see the blood glob from the bite marks. "Hi," I reply strangely, knowing that huge monster is behind me, and smile as I stuff my hand into my pocket.

"Should I even bother to ask what you're doing?"

"I was just going to make … something."

"Prime minister's don't do things like that. Are you ok?"

"Yeah, why shouldn't I be?"

"What's wrong with your hand?"

"I cut myself."

"With your teeth?"

"What are you trying to say, L?"

"What? I don't know why you're calling me that, that's not my name. You're spending too much time with him, you have to come home. Stop being a silly boy."

"Hey? What the fuck are you talking about? I've called you that for years because that's who you are, and this is my home now. L, you fucking idiot, where are you going?" I shout angrily as I follow him into the living room, but he disappears in front of my eyes. I stand there in the empty room he faded into, because it's even more shocking to me that the thing in the kitchen.

A few minutes later, the door clicks and opens, and L walks inside again. He looks at me tiredly, sighs like he's sick of seeing me, and dumps his things by the door before walking into the kitchen.

"Don't go in there," I say quietly, but wander in cautiously soon after he left, half expecting to find that he has been bitten in half by massive jaws.

"I wouldn't talk to me if I were you. I'm really angry," he says with his back to me.

"Why? Where have you been?" Whether he's angry because I ignored his warning, he turns his head to the side and squeezes his eyes shut like he's in pain.

"Shut up. He's not," he whispers. Pardon fucking me?

"He's not what? I haven't done anything wrong, I just got here."

"I know, I'm sorry," he tells me, throwing a spoon on the counter and taking a deep breath as he turns around to me. "I was at the firm." He smiles weakly, like being at the firm explains everything.

"That's good."

"Is it?" he asks, becoming confrontational instantly. "Why? Are you surprised that I'm fit for work?"

No, no fights. Especially ones over nothing. I need to lie down. I don't feel well.

I turn to leave, but he rushes to me, apologising and blocking my path to stop me. He grins in thanks when I do stop, rubbing my sleeve cuff between his thumb and forefinger like he's checking the quality.
"And what else did you do today apart from …"

"Apart from what?" I ask.

"Nothing. Just … what did you do today?

"What did I do? Well, I awoke at approximately 6am and proceeded in a north westerly direction to the bathroom, whereupon I evacuated my bowels and entered the shower, the water being set to 'warm'. I perceived no cause for concern. Expletives were exchanged with a Mr Lawliet, a 38-year-old uncircumcised male of mixed race, the reason being that he's a fuckhead of diminished responsibility who had attempted to antagonise and harass me because I was unclothed. At 6:15am, having –"

"Light."

"… having been offended by the disrespect shown to me during my verbal altercation with Mr Lawliet, I made sexual advances towards him because I'm seriously f*cked up in the head, but they were well received. Lubrication and prophylactics were employed in accordance to government approved standards, penetration occurred, and I perceived no cause for concern. However, I was somehow still left disappointed, so I ate a lemon and poppyseeds muffin. At 6:50am, I had another shower and grew distressed of mild intensity, having noted the time, and got dressed in a manner of restrained haste. Upon doing so, more expletives were exchanged, due to what I considered to be his devious methods to restrict my intended movements. After expressing my suspicions, he denied the accusations in a cheerful manner, which suggested to me that I was correct. I stated my belief that he was lying and observed the subject taking avoiding action by fleeing on foot from the location into the bathroom, shouting profanities and his intent to murder me and commit suicide. I have known Mr Lawliet to be an unsavoury character prone to unpleasant behaviour, which contributed to my inability to locate a f*ck to give. I believed that he then had a shower using my shower gel without asking my permission, because I've suspected that for some f*cking time, you thieving bastard! Thereafter, I left the property to my place of employment, and beyond being threatened by my estranged wife, I perceived no cause for concern or comment. I returned to the house I share with Mr Lawliet, entering the premises at 6:23pm. I was in the process of making a cup of tea and having a hallucinatory episode when Mr Lawliet arrived, who has been an utter cunt to me ever since, as he has been for the entirety of the time I've known him, so I perceived no cause for f*cking concern, nothing out of the ordinary there, which brings us up to the present. This is my sworn statement which accounts for my movements this day, so help me gods of every religion because I like to cover all bases."

My annoyance builds to full blown anger towards the end, probably because L just stared steadily at me throughout. Now, he does little else but blink for a long moment. "Your sexual advances were not well received."

"Oh, they really were," I assure him, and he nods in amusement.

"Speaking of, I like it when you're angry. I might have to make some advances myself and try not to leave you disappointed."

"Make it good," I say, feeling a pang of an ache run down my centre. Hold on a second, I'm Prime Minister. I was the highest scoring graduate at every level of my education, I'm bilingual, I've won awards for intellect, speaking, dress, hair and everything, really. I've been described by many as being 'perfect' since I was a child. I'm just f*cking gifted, you've seen my photo. When I set my sights on something, I get it. I've walked through life with the self-confidence of a hero, sure of his success in the world. I'm better than this baseness which is still relatively new and uncomfortable to me, and I'm not so easily won over. "No. No, this is where you say sorry."
"I was saying sorry," he says with a glinting eye. Oh, alright then. I stupidly forgive everything and stroke the fat vein on the back of his hand which rose from trying to contain his anger. He'll shovel smoke until the end of time and I'll let him with only the thinnest slither of regret.

He gasps kisses at my mouth and curls into me, forcing his hand down my trousers until it's just like Sunday. Just like Sunday when I hadn't done anything apart from him. There was nothing but the complicated puzzle of him and myself when I'm with him, which made everything else fade into a pale grey. Even my own fury at myself was easily drowned out until it was just a sulking whimper in the back of my mind while I chase the first hit again and again. You're the Prime Minister. Remember who you are.

He stumbles me backwards until I bump against the kitchen table, which scratches a little way across the floor complainingly. An uncertain rolling noise makes me turn towards the wobbling bottle next to me, and I push myself free to save it.

"Whoa, Lambda, no!"

"Excuse me?" he asks.

"The olive oil."

"You've named it?"

"No, I haven't. It's Lambda olive oil. It's from Crete, very limited, I had it imported. Will you be more careful? You nearly knocked it over."

When I look back at him, my heart sinks with guilt about how easily distracted I am by imminent kitchen disasters. He's digging the heel of his hand into his closed eye while his other hand props him up on my knee. I slide my hand through his hair in apology, but he walks off, leaving me perched on the edge of the table.

After a few minutes spent in remorseful organisation and tidying, compulsively checking the black spot where a monster was born, I scrub it with some bleach and drift into the bedroom. L's drawn the blinds so that we're immersed into that false night we always seem to be plunged into when he's around, and I walk in just in time to see him throw his tie on the floor, open a few buttons at his neck and cuffs, and fall face down onto the bed, which knocks against the wall with an arrogant thud.

"Ooof. I'm so tired, oh my God. Could you deal with this trouser issue for me? I think I died about ten minutes ago," he mumbles into the pillow, making me smile despite the undertone of worry I have. I want to tell him that I think we're going mad in this house. I think it's the house. It's the lake. It's the ever-present security guards that we ignore like spirits. They must know by now, they must do. It's the confinement of a space station and all this fucking quiet nature outside. Sometimes I see hands come out of the walls trying to grab me, their fingernails torn, hanging off and bloody, and some of the hands hold cameras. And then there's that thing in the kitchen. But I don't say anything, because I'm aware that the reason we're in this situation at all is because of me, and I'm the only one who can do anything about it.

Placing my drink on the table, I reach under L to unbutton and unzip his trousers and pull at the legs with no assistance from him. It's like undressing a dead body, and he's not wearing any underwear, so there's another thing. Then I drag his socks from his flexing feet, because otherwise everything's very middle-aged and unattractive.

"So, did you have a good day at the firm?" I ask him like an attentive butler.
"I took over a case on the last minute and won a lot of money," he replies. All I can think of is that he was commando in court again, which is repulsive, but wow. I know that he does that sometimes. It makes him feel better, apparently.

"Congratulations. Last minute, very reckless. This is becoming a habit for you though, isn't it."

"Mmm … I'm very good at making money. I hardly have to do a thing," he says, sleepily lifting himself from the bed a little so I can pull his shirt over his head, and continues grievously: "And I'm not even at my best. I think about you all the time, about you and what's going to happen, and it makes work more difficult because I just don't care enough about anything else anymore. Not even about the interesting things and the shady deals." I know how much he loves those. The darkness and this scenario which is something I associate with going to sleep makes me fall into the sound of his voice and the tiredness of the room. With him comes a kind of paralysis.

Once I've cleared his shirt from his limp arms, I lean down to press my lips against his shoulder blade. "How was your day at work, really?" he asks, twisting slightly to see me.

"Yeah," I reply.

"Oh, how vague," he laughs and rolls over slowly to kiss me. And with lazy friendliness, he puts his hand on the back of my head and we automatically shift ourselves into more cooperative positions. His hands pull up my shirt, yanking the white cotton with upward tugs, but the vacuum of energy in this room makes it all seem like too much effort. The more he kisses me though, the more an instinctive passion grows in me, and I get angry with myself for being so lethargic. I'm just angry with myself for so many contradicting reasons. Angry that I’m making this a cause for sacrifice and oblivion, and angry that I'm not even trying to make it worthwhile. I'm not really tired and I love his voice, I love the way he moves, I want to be a part of it. When I rake my fingers through his thick dark hair, I think, out of nowhere, that it could be Raye's. Raye had hair like this late at night when he'd drunk too much and was sad and tired. I used to watch him swing from optimism to desolation, breaking up the gel in his hair with despondent clawing fingers over the course of the evening as he talked. And I'd watch him. I'd encourage him through my silence, neither approving or disapproving, greedy to see him disassemble and reveal himself to me.

"I handed in my resignation today," L says. "Everyone was so shocked, they almost died."

"You're not my PR anymore then?"

"I'm just a lowly lawman now."

"On behalf of the government, I'm sorry to lose you," I say, pulling back from him to deal with my shirt. He hums in response, pushing his hand into the unbuttoned gaping wound to expose my chest with slight interest.

"Kiyomi announced her run for office today, didn't she? I saw you both on TV in reception, so that might be why I wasn't too happy earlier; it had a strange effect on me. So you did help her then. Decided not to be such a spoiled little shit?"

"Well, I had to do something," I grumble. "I thought that if I helped then she'd give me my divorce without any hassle."

"Hm. Did she drag Kira out?"

"No."

"I couldn't blame her if she did, but it'd be rather despicable, using a child for publicity."
"It's what I'd do."

"Yes, but she's just some fucking woman."

"You're such a misogynist," I laugh, running my hands over his sides with adoring familiarity. He moves in a snakelike way when I do.

"I'm not a misogynist. I hate everyone."

"Great. I really scored with you, didn't I."

"Is that sarcasm, Mr Yagami?" he smiles, sliding up towards me. I look at the blinded window while he nuzzles my neck, and my own smile falls like a guillotine. "I should hate her most of all but I just can't."

"She said that she was going to kill me," I tell him, but he doesn't seem to hear me and just makes a sort of groaning noise as he collapses into me. "I think she was serious."

"Kiyomi? No, she wouldn't kill you. I'm 99% sure that she's in love with you. That's why she's such a pain in the arse, like me."

"Ha, maybe. It was a turn on, actually, which is new, coming from her. Execute me, she said, can you imagine? It'd be like one of those black and white films. She said that anyone would think that I was having an affair with you," I say, assuring him that she was joking. Then I kiss him. He curves his face upwards to think and look past me, so I kiss the rough, bristling line of his jaw instead in a tired attempt to regain his attention. "It was so funny though, L, you should have been there."

"Maybe we should hire more security," he mutters thoughtfully.

"She might burst in any minute with a little revolver in her purse," I laugh, closing my eyes when I lean against him.

"Why did you speak to her? You're divorcing. Press things, yeah, but why talk?"

"L, look at me, sitting here."

"Yeah, you look like a Sunday roast."

"L..."

"I know, I know, I'll be there in a minute. So? Why did you speak to her?"

"I was only trying to be amenable and I get death threats for it. That's not very nice, is it?" I say, watching my hand stroking and knocking against his ribs as he breathes.

"People just like threatening you, Light. Because you're arrogant and unlikeable."

"Oh?"

"Yes," he smiles momentarily. "Are you sure that she wasn't serious?"

"She'd like to think that she could kill me but she couldn't. I think it'd be very difficult to kill me."

"But you're the worst person for security to ... secure."

"I'll be good. Anyway, it's one thing being divorced, but it's another being charged for killing your
husband. We should celebrate later, go somewhere. We won't be able to after the news gets out. We'll be locked up in a house for weeks and weeks, mmmm. Oh, we should move out, shouldn't we. I'll hire a firm. I want to move. I want everything to be new apart from you."

"We should talk to her. Both of us."

"I don't think that she'd understand."

"She might, if we explain."

"Let's just forget about it for a few days, can we?" I ask, grimacing from the bored, dull pain of it. I'm certain that I only have only one more thing to do and then my problems will disappear like ships out to sea. Everything will become a memory so insignificant that I'll have to be reminded of it by other people. "Be nice to me."

"I can be nice."

His breath is rather stale and astringent when he laughs at my unconvinced expression, and sweeps his hands over my back to draw himself closer to me in a lazy, ruggedly friendly motion. My neck is kissed briefly, as if his goal is simply to look over my shoulder, untroubled, and that's his definition of niceness. I try to distract him again from whatever he's looking at by mouthing sighs at his neck, and he pulls back to smile at me with the small shine of tears in the outer corners of his eyes. Yes, I want retribution for the hurt you've caused me. I think that, but a smile flutters for half seconds on my face, enchanted by the trusting closeness of him, despite his disaffection, and the unconscious ease he has with me as though he was alone.

Reasoning that I'll still get the work done and that it doesn't matter from where or how I was dressed when I did it, I work from the dining room table. But with L here, knowing that he's somewhere else in the house makes it hard to concentrate on what I'm doing, so I move my laptop to his bed and work next to him while he's asleep. Making decisions about apparently really fucking important things, I get the work done, and that's what matters.

He wakes up somewhat rejuvenated and doesn't comment on how I've set up an office in his bed while he was asleep, but I know that he finds it funny. He brings me a cup of tea, sits back in his cleared space and tells me the news is in his old disinterested but amused way, like I don't know the news already. He tells me about the settlement on his court case and talks about retiring in a non-committal way, I think trying to gauge my reaction to the idea of it. Sounds great, but only now when we're fairly content with each other. How long could we run away from life and live in this bubble before we go completely mad? Maybe the house is nothing to do with it. The greater part of me doesn't give a shit, but I don't comment on it at all, either way.

I have a bath in the Western way by not having a shower first (in this and many other respects, the Japanese culture is far superior) and doze in my own filth for an hour until my fingertips and toes pucker as the water cools. At some point, I hear voices – L's and another man's whose is too unclear to identify – so I drag myself out of the bath and try to listen in while I find some clothes that won't be ruined by my dripping hair. I still can't hear them very well because the stereo is blaring some grotty shit out to mask them, so I peer around the corner and see that Mikami's descended upon us. I'm very angry with him because I was expecting him this morning with his final report, but he didn't turn up then, he turns up unannounced here at ten o'clock at night. I'm even more upset now to see that he's is wearing an excellent suit and looks as good as he can do, while I'm wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants and look as shit as I could do. There's no excuse for slacking, but I refuse to make an effort for him.
The atmosphere in the room is icy and interesting, so I decide to hold back from making my entrance just to observe how people interact when I'm not there, just observing. They're still awkward and silent from their last meeting. Mikami paces slowly in an impatiently waiting and wandering way, gazing at the walls and bookshelves while L reads his paper. He asks L what the music is, L doesn't know, Mikami weighs him up a few times looking displeased with what he finds, sits down and shifts uncomfortably like he's fearful that he might be infected by L's lethargy, and starts questioning him about me. As soon as I saw him I knew why he was here – Kiyomi. His face takes on a determined, self-sacrificing look when he's on a mission, but L deflects all his questions, making it increasingly hard for him to be subtle. In the end, Mikami says outright that Kiyomi called and told him and Naomi about how I'd left, but I knew that she had already, of course. She was in floods of tears just for the sense of drama, and he's come to make me realise what a mistake I'm making. I'm wondering about that myself at the moment, but he has no right to advise me. L brushes him off and doesn't appear to give a shit about me making mistakes and fucking up my own life, probably because he's the cause of it. I feel like I've had a premonition of this meeting and want to rush Mikami out of the house for a reason I can't explain.

"Have you spoken to him though? I'm not saying that you shouldn't let him stay here, but have you asked him if he knows what he's doing?" Mikami asks. L turns a page.

"It's his decision, no one else's. He's got this mad idea about free will and independence."

"When this gets out, it'll be bad. When the press get hold of this, a divorce could finish him off. There'll be a coup."

"There won't be a coup."

"He can't leave his wife and child for no reason. If he's having an affair, fine, he can carry on if he wants to because Kiyomi won't say anything, but leaving her now is suicide and he's not that stupid. What is going on?"

"Maybe he wants to be with someone else," he says sadly, flapping the newspaper once to flatten it. From Mikami's reaction, I don't think he hears him over the sound of the paper.

"Ok," he sighs, "everything's pretty shit in the House. There are locals all over the place and the cabinet is in chaos because he's not showing much leadership. He's hardly there now. All he cares about is …"

"What?" L asks, looking up at him. "What does he care about?" God, I don't even know anymore. How does Mikami know?

"Nothing," he admits. I realise then that he probably means the work I've given him, because that's all we ever talk about when I do see him, and I'm thankful that he didn't mention it to L. "Politics and getting his end in with some hooker, apparently. Do you know who she is? I could scare her off, pay her off. I've been given the go ahead to pay her off," he says before draining his glass of vodka like it's medicine.

"I don't think he's having an affair with a hooker," L replies after a heavy pause. Ha.

"But if this got out on top of everything else then it'd be politically damaging, right? You were PR, you know how it is. Look what happened with me!"

"You were taking drugs, Mikami."

"It's all the same - divorces and drugs. PMs don't get divorced. He should be going for baby number
two around about now, not shagging some no name and Romeo and Julieting all over the place. I never thought that I'd say this, but we are running really low on MPs, and he acts like these deaths are just something that happens."

"It does happen. People die."

"Not like this. One or two you can get away with in a year, but not dozens of the fuckers. You can't tell me that this is normal, Lawliet. He needs to launch an investigation into this. The way River died was –"

"River committed suicide. It's nothing to do with anyone where he did it and it's not the straw that broke the camel's back."

"He should say more for appearances sake then, at least. He's saying nothing."

"Maybe he's sick of appearances. Look, I can't tell him what to do. If he gave a statement for everyone who's died lately, he'd be on that podium for about three hours. And in regards to his personal life, what he does now is up to him. I can only be his friend and support him, whatever he does. I think that you should do the same."

"That's very valiant of you, but he's throwing everything away and you're letting him. You're not being a friend."

L bristles at the comment because he's my very, very best friend, of course he is. Mikami is making some modicum of sense to me on one level, but it doesn't suit me, so I take offence to it and step into the room. My appearance is well timed to the music, which is stuck on some classical radio station because we're very cultured, I've been told. Mikami looks well and truly caught in a web of deadly sins, which I'm sure that between us, L and I pretty much have covered. Mostly though, I think he's shocked at how I'm allowing him to see me in this state.

"Mikami, do you have anything to say to me? I ask. "Because it sounds like you have something to say and that you're saying it to the wrong person."

"I brought you my report," he says, standing up to pull a folder from his bag. It's like a goddamn schoolboy's satchel, what the hell is he thinking? My lip curls in disgust before I can restrain it, so he looks at his bag in dismay.

"Right," I smile angrily as I pick up my cigarettes from the table. The mere sight of him makes me want to drown my lungs with smoke. "You're late, and you're intruding. I was expecting it this morning - I thought that's what we agreed. You can't imagine how disappointed I was."

"Referencing's a bitch," he replies, suddenly growing balls. "I apologise. May I talk to you in private?"

I must appear to consider his request while I drag on my cigarette, stringing out the moment before nodding toward the kitchen and turning up the stereo as I go. Mikami shuts the door behind him and I flick through his report. The left margin of the pages is 2cm instead of the standard 2.54cm, and I am displeased.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Mikami? I'm not used to hearing myself being spoken of so disrespectfully, so I'm hoping that you have a really good excuse."

"As your friend, I'm showing concern for you."

"That's nice, but a really bad excuse."
"Do you think it's a good idea to stay here?"

"Kiyomi's been onto you then?" I laugh as I turn a page.

"I'm not here because of that. This stuff between you and Kiyomi is your own business. I mean that staying here with him is not a good idea, considering. Hey, are you alright? You don't look too well and -"

"Considering what? Where am I supposed to stay?"

"He's queer in more ways than one," he says. I tap my cigarette ash into the sink and open the knife drawer casually as I read. "If you're not careful, people will talk. Do you even remember what I told you about him?"

Oh, that. Unfortunately, Mikami, in his thoroughness, interviewed the The Lady's old PA on her death bed just before she croaked – she died that night, rest her soul – and called to tell me that she listed those who were often present at The Lady's office for 'secret' meetings, and that L was mentioned. She remembered him because he wasn't a member of the cabinet but presumed that he was an advisor. He was. It was obviously no surprise to me, but Mikami thought it very important, probably because L is one of the few who were close to The Lady and still with us. I quickly dismissed that line of enquiry, but apparently once wasn't enough.

"And I told you that it's not relevant," I tell him. I'm shocked when he laughs. Maybe I misheard it, so I continue speed reading over the results of nearly a year of Mikami's work. I've read most of it before in various forms, but now I'm looking specifically for one name and typos. Looking at the fairly thin, clipped folder of papers, it makes me wonder why I gave him a bonus.

"Don't you think that he should at least be questioned?" he asks. Oh, shut the fuck up. Whose investigation is this?

"No. He doesn't know anything. He was The Lady's employee and completely independent at that point. If he testified, it'd just be hearsay and we couldn't use it. No use muddying the water with useless statements."

"So you have asked him about it?"

"Ages ago."

"What did he say?"

"It's not relevant."

"Look, I know he's your friend. He's my friend too but -"

"What exactly are you suggesting?" I ask him, looking up to stop him before he does something sickening, like putting his hand on my arm.

"That if it looks like a duck and it quacks like a duck then it might well be a duck. Even though he's a friend, it doesn't mean that he should be protected."

"He's not being protected and he's not a fucking duck."

"He must know a lot more than he's letting on."

"You think that I'm lying?"
"No, I think that he's lying. He's the only person left who could have known about Raye, if The Lady had meetings about him, and everything suggests that she did."

"Based on what Jeevas told you while plastered. Looking through this, you seem to have very little proof of anything, Mikami. It's pretty much 'um … ahh … I don't know, but, like, it's really weird, isn't it? I've seen more compelling evidence on conspiracy theory websites run by school kids."

"I did my best with what I have because you're blocking me."

"I'm not blocking you, don't be ridiculous. I ordered you to do this in the first place."

"Let me speak to Lawliet then. I mean, I questioned my own girlfriend over this."

"You told Naomi? I told you not to tell Naomi."

"She's my girlfriend, and Penber was her fiancé. You expect me to lie to her?"

"Yes … No. What did she say?"

"She's upset. She's gone to stay with her parents. Anyway, it's not just because of what Matt said. There must be evidence somewhere and Lawliet could shed some light on it, because otherwise all we have are allegations and not much else, I know that. It feels like finding a link to Lawliet is the best thing we could have hoped for, because he's alive and he can testify. Whatever he knows is better than nothing."

"There's no cause to bring him into this. We need a clear case, which we have without his testimony."

"Well, he's in there," he sulks, pointing to the folder I've now tossed on the counter like it's something I don't really want to buy.

"It's ok. I'll edit it out."

"What about the PA's statement?"

"She's dead now. It doesn't matter."

"But why edit it?"

"All she did was mention his name. He was in and out of that office but he wasn't privy to any discussions. He heard Watari and The Lady mention Penber's name once, and he knew nothing of the oil deal until I told him about it," I say. Yeah, ok, that's not true exactly, but anything I know from L about the oil deal can be attributed to another source. Someone's who's dead. Jeevas. Jeevas knew too much. Jeevas was one of the first people to know about The Lady's suicide. I heard of it via a text from Mikami – how I got a special mention in her suicide note – and then they wanted to celebrate or commiserate with me depending on how we decided to feel about it. But there was someone else I wanted to see and I'd been waiting all day. Once I'd heard that she'd died, I waited until precisely the right moment to find him before he left his office, but I would have driven all over Tokyo to find him. I felt that day, once I'd been told that The Lady was dead, long live the King, that it was the start of my life, when it was really the beginning of the end.

Mikami really irritates me by smiling, disbelieving whatever I say. He owes me a lot. I gave him a job when no one else would touch him and I let him have my cast off as his girlfriend. Even now, I'm sure that if I gave her the nod, she'd drop everything for me. I had more right to her than he did. One word from me to Naomi and she would've shut the door in his face. I let him have her.
"Can I at least speak to him?" he asks.

"No. He's … not well."

"He looks alright to me. Did I hear right that he's resigned? He didn't answer me when I asked him."

"Yes, he resigned."

"That's a bit coincidental, isn't it?"

"Mikami, you're making me very fucking angry with your suspicion."

"And you're making me very fucking angry, because I found this link and you're ignoring it. I've been working on this for nearly a year and I know that there's something here but I can't prove it. There are just dead ends, literally. When you're looking at all this, you see how everyone who could be involved or could know something is fucking dead. All we need is for Lawliet to give a statement."

"And I say that he's not to be involved. I'm not dragging him in front of a board of inquiry just so that he can be a scapegoat. You know how these things work. If he's the only person left to blame then they'll blame him because they can't charge The Lady or anyone else. At the very least, it would ruin his career just by association, so if you want to cause him unnecessary stress by questioning him about something he knows nothing about then you can fuck off."

"I just want justice," he says quietly after a moment of shocked silence. "I don't see what's wrong with that."

"We'll get it. But there's no need to drag L and the cleaner and the sandwich delivery guy and anyone else in for questioning, just because they were in The Lady's office once or twice."

"I wouldn't say that he was just anyone."

"Maybe we should all be questioned then? Because we were all in her government."

"We're not dodgy."

"And he is? We're dodgy as fuck, Mikami. This isn't a witch hunt, but if you pull L in, it will be. There's no one to be charged over this, because everyone involved has one thing in common and it's that they're all dead. Justice has executed the guilty already, I just want it to be known about."

"The curse is justice?"

"Yes. So the important work is done," I say, lulling myself into a very calm state in which I see the end and death and nothing more. Verbalising things I think but not say normally is calming, it makes it real. And Mikami will lap it up, unlike L.

"What are we doing this for then? Why are we risking stability for this?"

"Because death isn't enough. I've been cheated, and all that's left for me is to attach shame to names. People should be shown what happens to those who do wrong. All those who were guilty have been punished, but people should know why. I'll find out why and lay it out for everyone to see and then there'll be change for better or worse. There will be change. No one's above justice."

"Well, it's up to you, but it seems to me like this is a personal vendetta with a possibly destructive outcome for the party." Maybe.
"L thinks I'm risking my life for this," I confide in him. Sometimes I think L's right. I see how I'm steering myself on a course to destruction without really knowing why, but it's so peaceful accepting and seeing the inevitable and violent end that it's hard to content myself with less. "I better do this quick then. I'll read over this, and on Thursday I'll hold a conference announcing a need for an independent inquiry and hand this out to the press as the conclusion of an internal investigation. So the information will be out there. It'll be too late for someone to kill me then, unless in retribution, which would only make the case stronger."

"Fuck, don't say things like that."

"Why? I'm resigning after this. I'll give it a few days run in the papers so that everyone hears about it and then I'm resigning. I'd really like to see this through, but as long as everything's in this report and it's been released."

"Hold on, you're resigning? Why?"

"It'll be a big news week, won't it?" I say disinterestedly, picking up the report again to internally criticise the choice of font. "Divorces, inquiries into government corruption, allegations of misuse of power by security services and NPA, assassinations, resignations, and possibly the death of a Prime Minister. Just like every week. The political correspondents should be getting a lot of overtime. Maybe I'll find God, like ex-politicians in disgrace tend to do. Do you think that would be met with some scepticism?"

"Yagami, you can't resign."

"I promised someone that I would."

"Eh? What?"

"My lifestyle would make it impossible for me to remain Prime Minister."

"Your lifestyle? Wait. You … an affair doesn't mean that you have to resign, I was joking before with Lawliet. I don't know how much you heard but, Yagami, think about this."

"Did Kiyomi tell you who I'm having an affair with?"

"No."

"No. Because she doesn't know. The only one who knows is L. L and two other people. Don't you think that's sad? Why do I have to live this way?"

"It doesn't matter who you're with, you don't have to -"

"Oh, I think it does."

"Why?"

"Don't be such a fucking idiot, Mikami, you know why. I hope that I haven't said too much, but I think that you should be aware of my timeline here. I have one week and then you're on your own, so it's all the more important that you keep quiet. Don't discuss this with anyone until after it's all over. And even then I'd keep my head down if I were you. Particularly if I die."

"But I -"

"Breathe a word of this to anyone and I'll make you quiet permanently. Do you understand?" I say.
Never having threatened Mikami before, it comes as a shock to him. He's one of the less stupid people I know though, so it'll have the desired effect, I hope.

"I just want to help you," he tells me softly.

"But I can't trust anyone enough to let them help me," I reply. He can't help me, anyway. No one can. Besides, I don't need pity and I don't need people I can trust. I've lived this long without them. I trusted him enough to give him the duty of doing this research because I couldn't, and I only trusted him because it would help him campaign for office again and because of the link to Naomi. No one does anything for nothing, and Mikami knows as well as I do that Naomi, despite what she says, is still living with Penber's death and the mystery of it like it happened yesterday, and without justice, she won't be able to move on really. Mikami will always be living in the shadow of a man who became a standing stone in death. She tries but she can't. She was stonewalled by the government and the NPA. Even the press thought that she was just some grief-stricken gallery manager and didn't take her seriously, so in the end, she just gave up because she had no power. I just hope that Mikami hasn't become so emotionally involved with it that he remembers that he still has to tow the line, and that I tell him where the line is. "I'll go over the report tonight so you can go to print."

I walk past him, taking the folder with me, and go back into the living room, where L is still where I left him. He was staring ahead of him when I opened the door, with the paper flat on his knees. He must have turned down the music, but I don't think that he could have heard our conversation, anyway. At most, he just suspects some disapproval from Mikami and something which could affect him at some point down the road, but nothing specific. I smile at him as I walk out and stand there, waiting for Mikami to follow me.

"Goodbye, Mikami. I'll see you tomorrow," I tell him coldly. He looks like he's pulled himself back together. Enough to leave me with something before he goes.

"If you resign, who's going to take your place?" he asks me. "Take it from someone who knows. Don't fuck up what you have when you don't even know why you're doing it."

I stare at the wall behind where he was standing until he closes the front door after him, and the room seems to bend inwards like we're in a thin metal box under pressure. L watches him leave and slowly turns to look at me instead, as if it was some great parting message which has changed everything for me. Yes, it truly opened my eyes. My t-shirt is soaking around the back of my neck from my damp hair. I should do something about it.

"Don't listen to what he said," I tell him on my way back to the bathroom. "He doesn't know what he's talking about."

L's sitting on the step of the open window facing the dark lake wearing a black square cloth of Mr. Justice Lawliet's on his head for no good reason. He's been like that for some time. Mikami left about two hours ago and we haven't spoken since then. I've been reading over the report, making notes in the margins, scratching lines out which allude or relate directly to L. After reading all of it, it's pretty damning from Mikami's tone and it would insist on L at least testifying, but I can erase all this. I have to remind myself that Mikami doesn't know, doesn't understand, couldn't understand. I'm bent on editing this to death to get the result I want. I thought that as long as I knew the truth of what happened, that's all that mattered, but now I don't even want to know that much.

"Do you think that we're like salmon?"

I look up at the question and smile with a furrowed brow from the randomness of it. He's still sitting on the step with the black cap over his head, so I shake my head and go back to my work while I
"Do I like salmon? It depends how it's prepared. I don't like salmon mousse. I mean, what's the point of that? I've never understood it. It's like baby food and they make it look like a mousse fish but it never looks like a fish, it looks like a splat of baby food for people who haven't got teeth."

"No. I meant, do you think that we're like salmon," he says, pulling the cloth from his head, but he doesn't turn to face me. "People. That we go back where we came from to die. And I always wondered, do they die because they went all that way or were they going to die anyway?"

"That's bullshit, L. Stop being so depressing."

"It was only a question."

"Well, I suppose that I haven't got very far to travel when I'm going to die, and you'll have to get a plane, unless you want to swim back, in which case you'll probably die in Tokyo Bay."

"Why do you think they do that?"

"Salmon? I don't know, L. I haven't spoken to any recently. I think they go there to spawn and then they die."

"Really?"

"For fuck's sake, L, what does it matter? They're fucking salmon. Who cares what they do and why."

"My father used to catch them in a stream. They'd be swimming upstream, jumping up waterfalls like they were ladders, I thought it was amazing. He used to catch them with nets and kill them. Bashed their heads in on rocks. We never used to eat them; he just liked killing things. But he said that they were going back home to die anyway, so someone might as well get some sport out of them. Sport," he finishes, growing increasingly quiet and nostalgic. It makes me angry.

"Does this story have a point?"

"No, I suppose not. I was just trying to talk to you. It made me sad, thinking about it. Thinking that my father was such a cruel bastard and that I came from him. I used to think it was sad then, but as I grew older, it stopped being sad, it was just life. I'm my father's son, and I think I stopped seeing their lives as being important. Maybe we all do about all things."

"You choose to be sad," I say dismissively.

"No one chooses to be sad, Light."

"You do. You choose to be sad and I haven't got any sympathy for you because you're not trying to help yourself. You're just falling into it. I'm trying my best."

"Did I say that how I feel right now has anything to do with you?"

"Stephen then. Or your dad or B or someone else you've decided to feel sad about. Now it's fucking salmon."

"I found the notes for your resignation speech," he says. I barely heard him over the rising winds outside. When I don't have a remark to make about the significance of him finding my notes, he stands up abruptly. "I'm going for a walk."
"But it's after midnight," I say quietly, but I start putting my papers and pens next to me in a sudden panic. "Ok then. I'll go with you," I tell him, "We'll need a torch though. God, this is fucking stupid, L. Walking around in the dark, we're going to die out there."

"No, you stay here. I'm going to go away to be sad somewhere else. Don't worry, it'll be ok. Either I'll come back as I was or I won't come back at all because your security guards shot me. I want you to think about what Mikami said. I want you to think about going back to Kiyomi and about releasing that report as it is, whatever it says. I've been listening to you scribbling over it, putting lines through things, and it kills me, it does, because I can only imagine what's in there."

"There's nothing. Mikami's got terrible spelling, that's all. It's not a report, anyway. It's –"

"Yeah, whatever. I'll deny that this conversation ever happened, but don't forget it. Light," he says, breaking off to watch his flexing hand gripping his other arm. "If I'm important to you, you should do this. See what I see in you. I truly could not live with myself watching you rot in a house because of me. How could I let you give up on what matters most to you after you've fought all these years to get where you are? And I know how important this is to you, this report, but you're going to blame dangerous people for it who aren't responsible, anyway."

"They killed Raye."

"No. They just do what they're told, but they won't let you take them down like this. If what we have means anything, I hope that it makes you see the truth and that what you have is special. Use it in the right way."

"Don't leave me again," I say quickly, looking down at the report I want to rip up. My instincts are warning me of something and it's telling me never to let him out of my sight, even if I have to say desperate things and humiliate myself to make him stay.

"I just want you to think. I'm not taking a suitcase."

"You didn't take one the last time you left."

"I couldn't leave you now. Wait a minute, I'll prove it to you," he says, walks into another room and comes back with his passport flapping loosely in his hand, like it's irritated by it. He holds it out for me, and my suspicion makes me take it.

"Why are you giving me this?"

"So you know that I can't leave even if I wanted to. I want you to leave me."

"Why?" I ask, feeling my eyes stretch wide at the corners by what he's saying, and most of all by how calm he is. Like all this was always going to happen. "Why do want me to leave? Here, take it back," I say, trying to push his passport back into his hand.

"I taught you something, didn't I. I've never been so proud of anything I did," he smiles at me kindly. "Light, listen to me. This won't last. Us, here, like this. I know that it won't and you know it. You can't build a castle on sand alone. And when it ends, it won't be because we stopped feeling anything for each other, it'll be because of the opposite. I want you to use it and make it mean more than just something we have. Please, I'm telling you to face up to the truth."

"L, this doesn't make any sense. What do you mean?"

"You always make things difficult, why do you do that? Why are so obstinate? You know what I mean."
"I'll resign and things will be ok," I say, shaking my head.

"We both want to believe that, don't we. And when I come back, I will believe it, that's what I'll say, but it's not going to happen. Do you know why I'm sad? I've done so many bad things in my life. The only good thing about it is you, I've ruined everything else. I want you to remember how much I believe in you and take it with you wherever you go for the rest of your life. I want you to be all you can be, and that won't happen if you resign for me. It's not what I want for you."

"It's what I want!"

"I think about a lot of things, and it all makes sense to me now. I see truth everywhere, and I can't run from it anymore. I thought I could. One day you'll see it too and understand," he tells me. My breaths are nothing but stunted hauls of air. "Your guards are still outside, aren't they?"

"What?" I say. "I don't know. I guess so."

"Good. I'll be back soon. Don't follow me."

He leaves before I can say anything, since I'm silenced by the shock of what he's just said and the disgusting knowledge that he's right, and out of nowhere. I thought that we'd silently agreed to ignore what's underneath.

I could go after him, but instead I phone one of my guards and tell him to watch him. L's just passed him, he says, he saw the torchlight. I insist that he watch him, giving no explanation as to why, except that it's very important. What tangled lives they must think we live in this house.

Not even an hour later, L comes back dripping with rain and with the arse of his coat sodden with broken blades of grass crushed to it, like he's been sitting on the ground all this time while I've been trying to block out what he said. He peels off his coat and glances up at me, because I stood as soon as he stepped inside. He talks to me like nothing happened, and when I try to speak to him about what he'd said, he gives me the cold-shoulder and goes to bed. I won't let him fuck this up for us, but I hide his passport under the sofa, anyway.

It's Thursday. I launched the second inquiry into Penber's death and kept it brief. The press weren't expecting it, but very few people were, just as they weren't expecting the photocopies of the report which were handed out after I'd spoken. I'm used to people applauding after I've given a speech, however short, and I think I deserve one for this more than anything else I've done, but the silence doesn't surprise me.

Afterwards, in the foyer of my department, I see L talking to Mikami for a moment, or rather, Mikami talks to him and hands him a copy of the report, but I'm within a circle of MPs and civil servants who've suddenly decided to tell me how overdue the reinvestigation is. They'd always suspected something, apparently. Shame it took me putting my head on the block for them to realise that.

A hand glances over my back a few minutes later and I know who it is. I turn and smile at L as he passes by me, who just absorbs it and lets himself into my office. Not long after that, I excuse myself to follow him. It's what I do, isn't it? After closing the door, I find him standing by my desk looking at a glass paperweight and turning it over in his hand. The light from the window casts him in a slim silhouette and it's something I want to remember, so I take a photo of him on my phone. When he finally looks up and notices me there, it takes him longer than I'd expect to return my smile.

"Mr Lawliet."
"Mr Yagami. What are you doing?" he asks.

"Taking a photo."

"You and your photos," he laughs quietly. He places the paperweight back on the desk next to a copy of the report and spins it slowly as though he's mesmerised by it. "You did well today. You spoke well."

I grunt thanks back to him, because I don't think that I should be praised so patronisingly for something obvious. I feel the anticipation of a changing wind when he picks up my letter opener and turn it so that it catches the light and shines a beam across his eyes for a second before he puts it down again.

"Have you ever felt frightened of being hunted and caged, Light?"

"Yes."

"By the press or people in your life?"

"Both."

"Have I ever made you feel like that? What does it feel like? It's just that I'm not sure if it's that I'm frightened of."

"Why would you be frightened?"

"No reason. So, now that we can talk about it, are you going to give me the uncensored version of why you've reopened the Penber case?"

"What I said was true. There needs to be an inquiry to uncover the truth."

"The truth. What if you find something that you don't like?"

"That's why I'm doing it. I have evidence that suggests a government assassination and that the first inquiry was a cover up."

"You contributed to the first report."

"Officially, I didn't contribute at all. I wrote something on Mikami's behalf and it was more a character reference than anything. I knew then that the government line wasn't the truth. It'd be negligent of me not to make it public now that I have some proof to back it up, if only enough to prove that the first inquiry was a sham. What do you think of the report? Have you had a chance to read any of it yet?"

"Not much. It's good, I know it's good and that it's the truth. Mikami's concerned that it could destroy the government, so it must be quite impressive."

"If that's what it takes, I'm fine with that. This place needs to be cleansed."

"So this is what you've had Mikami work on for months?" he asks, scanning through the report. "I told you not to bring him back. It seems that he does have uses. Well done. I misjudged you."

"What's wrong?"

"What do you think? You're acting like there's nothing in here that affects me," he says loudly, dropping the report on my desk again like it's rubbish. I don't understand why. I thought that he'd be
upset about this report because he'd told me to leave it, but then he'd told me to do it, and there's nothing in there that affects him, I made sure of it. "That's a cruel joke, Light, even for you. I'm not saying that I don't deserve it and, fuck, I mean, I know that I asked you to do it, but don't insult me like this."

"I don't understand. The inquiry is nothing to do with you."

"Well, I'm a suspect now, and considering that everyone else involved is dead, that doesn't make things look very good for me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm named in the report, so I'm a suspect. As good as."

"What? No, I edited it out!" I say, rushing towards him to read through the report and prove it to him. But the statement from The Lady's PA is in here. It's the unedited version – Mikami's version - and L will be like some ghost of a villain in the background with everything pointing at him. This isn't the version I okayed. "Mikami," I whisper, though I can't believe it. This is a mistake.

"Oh. Did he screw you over, Light? Did he let you down? Really?" L says to me with relief in his voice. "I thought that you did it."

"No! I edited it ... how did this happen? We have to recall them."

"It's too late for that," he smiles. "Mikami told me that I was named, just before. He apologised. What do you think of that gentlemanly conduct? Considering that I'm the main suspect for involvement in Penber's death and more now, he's really taking his life in his hands in admitting his part in this report. Were you really trying to save me? You knew about this and you still tried to get rid of it?"

"It only mentions you. It's ok, it's ok. You'll have to testify now but we have time to figure that out," I say through rapid breaths. "You didn't know anything. You were advising her on ... fuck."

"They'll want to know what I was involved in with The Lady and I have nothing to back up any story apart from the truth," he says calmly. "Or do you want me to lie?"

L, no, you didn't do it.

"You'll say what you have to say. It'll be ok."

"I've just admitted to you that I've lied to you all this time but you haven't batted an eyelid."

"I knew that you were lying but it didn't matter to me."

"Will you save me the trouble of reading all of this and tell me what you know?" he asks, but I don't answer. I wish that he wouldn't look so fucking impressed by me. "Ok. I suppose that I'm done for then. I might go home and have a cup of tea before I'm called in for questioning. I'll have to read this and figure out if there's anything they can charge me with."

"What you burned of Raye's, was it because it mentioned you? Because you were advising The Lady on the oil deal?" I ask once he's walked past me on his way to the door. I'm so anxious about what he'll say, my heart won't stop ricocheting against the walls of my chest.

"That's in the report?" he asks, facing the door.
"No. It's what I think. I haven't told anyone. Did you destroy evidence? Did Raye have proof against you?"

"He had a list of names linked to her and I was on it. A few things," he says, turning back towards me. "What do you know, Light?"

"I don't know for certain but I suspect … I think that the plan was to drip-feed the money into the Treasury."

"That's right," he smiles. "The money was going to be attributed as profit to failing nationalised industries she brought in in her second term. They weren't as profitable as she'd hoped they'd be. They were her idea, she ignored the experts and the cabinet and brought them in anyway, and she'd staked her premiership on them being a success. As you know, they weren't. Because she died, you got the official figures and you could see that they were white elephants to sell off to private investors to cut yourself loose from a failure. She wouldn't do that."

"So it was all to mask any shortfalls and make the country seem like it was booming, then call an election. Clever. Was that your idea?" I ask, and he bows his head like it's a compliment.

"She realised that nationalisation in some cases was a huge mistake. The country was supporting them, not the other way around. If she'd admitted that, she would have lost the election, so she fudged the numbers and made it seem that they were turning a profit, and she kept doing that, but she'd need to come up with the money one day. In a fuel poor country there aren't many options. Nuclear power was becoming unpopular, and to invest in new fuel sources she'd have to shut down the reactors but keep the country running at the same time. Finding the money to buy in fuel for the interim and for investment into sustainable production was impossible, and admitting that her ideas weren't working and closing them down would have seen her and the party out for decades, probably. A client of mine was an oil magnate with interesting hobbies; links with militant groups in the Middle East. I saw that there was an opportunity to get both fuel and money. I suggested it as a joke. I didn't actually think she'd go for it because it was too risky, but she was desperate. I didn't care if it went wrong, I thought it was funny until it was my job to make sure that it didn't go wrong. Then Penber found out."

"How did he find out?"

"I don't know for sure, but no one in this place can keep their mouths shut. He never trusted The Lady, and why should he have trusted her? Maybe he overheard Watari or Jeevas, or maybe he was spying on her, I don't know. He was a danger, whatever he knew. I found out that he was nosing around shipment records at the docks and trying to find out information about me, so that was enough, I told The Lady."

"And she had him killed," I say, slightly swaying from the bitterness of it, so I steady myself on my desk. No, it's all because of his involvement in it. It was his idea. He's responsible for all of this and I knew it.

"You understand though, don't you, Light? I am innocent," he tells me. I look up at him and see that there's no regret there for what he's done, only tempered hope. And I hate him then for a second, because he's trying to exploit how I feel about him, but I still can't blame him for it.

"Innocent," I repeat through a breath, looking down at how my hand is shaking.

"I had to tell her or everyone could've fallen like dominos, me included. I had no idea of how much he knew. I didn't know until I saw his desk."
"You had the desk? You didn't find it at the NPA?"

"The NPA never had it. Secret Services had it confiscated as government property. Everything in his house was looked over before the police got a look in, but The Lady didn't trust them to destroy it, so it ended up with me. Of course, she shouldn't have trusted me either. I kept it as insurance. I didn't know you then. If I had, I wouldn't have … I would have made sure that you didn't see it happen."

"Like that would make it any better?" I laugh. "So you did cover it up. The Lady had him killed and you helped cover it up. You're the reason all of this happened in the first place."

"Yes," he admits. I close my eyes. This is a bad dream I'm going to wake up from. "And you've always known."

"I knew that there was more to it than what you were saying. But then I didn't want to know. I still don't want to know. I was scared of what you'd say. Either you'd lie or tell the truth, and I wasn't ready for either."

"That's stupid. You could have hung me out to dry. If you'd asked me straight up like you did now, I wouldn't have lied."

"I did ask you and you did lie."

"I lied then because if I'd told you the truth, you would have had to die for it. I couldn't trust you. I can't trust you now but I can't lie to you. There's no point, anyway."

"Are you going to kill me now?"

"No, I can't. I won't. But are you going to kill me, Light? You should, it's justice, isn't it. Don't put through me through an inquiry and put me in prison. I don't think it'd suit me."

I'm suddenly spurred on by the mention of inquiries and prosecution and how death is preferable. "Does anyone else know that you were involved?"

"Not now. They're all dead."

"Why are they dead?"

"I don't know," he answers dreamily, tipping his head to one side to consider it. "Light, what if it was worse than what you think?"

"What do you mean? I know that you didn't kill Penber. I saw who shot Penber and it wasn't you. It was the man they fished out of the canal."

"What if he was my hand?"

"What? You hired him?"

"I didn't hire him."

"But you arranged the hit?" He doesn't answer because he doesn't have to, so I grab the side of my head like I could force all this away. No, I know where L was that night. He had a cast iron alibi. I checked. I checked his diary and verified it with three independent witnesses, knowing that he might find out, but I was suspicious and I had to do it. He's still standing in the same spot like he's just waiting for me to do something, and he doesn't even move when I walk towards him, full of purpose.
I could kill him, I could hurt him, I could call security to take him away for questioning immediately, not wait for the police to find out. That's what he must think I'm going to do, and he accepts that. But I just take hold of his hands. "We need to be careful. We should think this out now, before the NPA hear about it. We'll think of something. You were advising on legal matters, we'll make something up, it's easy. It wasn't your fault. You didn't kill him, you were just doing what you were told."

He lets out a little laugh towards our hands that make me loosen my grip. How can he think this is funny?

"I've been worried about this for such a long time. Not because of what would happen, but because I knew you'd hate me. Isn't it funny? In the end, we were just really scared of each other. It was nice pretending, wasn't it. You hate me, don't you. I can't stand you hating me."

"I don't hate you. I hate what you've done but I understand why you did it."

"I am what I've done. That's all I am."

"No," I say, shaking my head and gripping his hands with a pulsing tightness. "We'll keep you out of it. You weren't working for government officially then and the only person who mentioned you is dead. We'll go over everything tonight and make sure that if you're questioned, you'll look clueless. We'll divert it onto someone else – Watari or someone – because you weren't involved."

"People know that I was working for The Lady. People at my firm know that I was, it was no big secret. Other people might know that I'm involved, they might have been told, and they might say something once they know I'm incarcerated. They might think that they're safe to talk."

"Who does? I'll deal with them."

"How?"

"Any way I have to."

"I won't go to prison."

"You won't, but there has to be justice. Raye deserves that. Everyone deserves to know what happened, but not everything, and I can't retract this now, it's out there. We could … we could say that you were scared. Tell them what you told me a few months ago. Tell them that you heard her and Watari talking about Penber but you didn't know what significance it had until after he died, and by then it was too late. You were scared of them."

"I'll lose everything if I do that. I'd lose the firm, everything."

"We'll talk about it later and figure it out. I won't let anything happen to you."

"A truly independent inquiry will want someone to blame and prosecute, and I'm the only one left that they can prosecute. They'd be right to. Thank you for trying to help me, I love you for it," he says, and one tear slides from his eye when he looks down and grips my hands. "But justice would be that I'm prosecuted."

"That's not going to happen."

"It should. Even if we pick and choose what to say, I still withheld evidence. And you can't pick and choose what justice is."

"Yes I can. What were you supposed to do? If you hadn't helped cover it then she might have had
you killed too. We'll say that. I'll testify that you told me this and I said nothing either. Everyone was scared of The Lady, especially when the deaths started. But you have to tell me everything and I have to hear it. What I can use, I'll … I'll testify that Watari told me about it just before he died."

"Then you'll be blamed."

"No."

"You will. How would people react if their Prime Minister kept information like this to himself?"

"That I launched this inquiry to tell them everything I know."

"The police will have expected you to tell them weeks ago then, after Watari died."

"Amnesia. I hit my head."

"Oh, Light …"

"I'll make a statement to them tomorrow. We'll talk about what I'll say."

"Why should I be protected? Why would you do that for me?"

"You know why," I say brokenly, looking at the floor again. The truth is that I don't know what to do. I've started wheels moving and I don't know what I can do to stop it and save him completely. No matter what I think of, everyone would realise why and nothing would ever be the same again for either of us, whatever happens.

"I killed Penber, Light," he says to me.

"Penber was nothing to you and you didn't have a choice."

"I had a choice."

"Shut. Up," I say firmly, and stand straight again to walk away from him and breathe out all this useless emotion. "Go home. I'll be back later and we'll figure everything out."

"But you should ask me what you want to know now, while you've got the chance."

"Why?"

"Because I'm feeling unusually honest right now and I don't expect it to last," he says, and I'm suddenly so cold, so professional. A truth seeker.

"Tell me about the man The Lady hired to kill Penber and what happened to him."

"It wasn't The Lady. It was a Cabinet decision in the end. Everyone was responsible."

"And they hired someone to kill him? Were you a go-between?"

"He was a witness for the prosecution against a client of mine who just got out of prison in exchange for his testimony. He shot Penber and then he drowned in the canal, but why did he drown himself?"

"Are you going to tell me that you drowned him? I know that can't be true; you can't swim, for a start. Did you hire someone to kill him too? Is it just a vicious circle of bumping people off?" I laugh bitterly.
"Light, do you remember when you used to see things? You said that you saw the devil."

"Hey?"

"You did, you used to see things. You'd tell me when you saw him and it was at all these strange times. You were so frightened of him."

"I don't..."

"You don't remember now. It stopped after your accident. Remember, when you came to see me the day after? What do you remember of it? Not much? You thought that you were the curse and that the devil you saw was killing people for you because you wanted them dead. That's what you told me, that's what you thought. Then you saw him again and ran into the bathroom. I told you that I found you in there unconscious."

"I don't see things, L," I say with a dismissive laugh. The very idea! I don't see things. Not things that I admit to, anyway.

"It's amazing that you can forget that and just that. I still find it really interesting, it's like you've been wiped clean of only one thing. I didn't do it earlier because I wasn't sure how much you'd forget. I was selfish. Whether you'd forget about me, I just couldn't be sure, I couldn't trust what I was told. I didn't even know it was a possibility until after Stephen died and I still didn't know for sure, but I had to do something. You were driving yourself mad right in front of me."

"No, this doesn't –"

"You told B that you saw the devil, he knows that you did. He thought that it was some psychological shit but it stopped that night and you haven't seen him since, have you? You haven't seen the devil?"

"No. I … I don't remember seeing any devils ever, L."

"It was my fault," he says matter-of-factly. "It's happened twice to me. I don't know when you did it, but it was just like with Stephen. I must have been careless, I don't know. Stephen found it when he was clearing his things. He went insane, I'd never seen him like that. I think he worked it out when he saw the names, or he was told. Maybe he didn't know what it was, but I couldn't trust him not to say anything. Not to run to the CIA or fucking Interpol. I should have left him alone though, who'd believe a story like that? Even you don't believe it. But with you, I don't know when you touched it, but you were always snooping around my office when I wasn't there, weren't you. You probably only touched it for a second, that's what I was told. You were looking for my diary and didn't even notice it. But once you'd touched it, you'd see him. So all that time, Light, you weren't seeing things. The devil wasn't following you. He was following me."

"What? Touched what? L, don't take this the wrong way, but have you had your medication today?"

"Ha! No."

"No, I thought not."

"I have to tell you something. Come here," he says, pulling me into his hold so that his breath rasps against the skin on my neck before he speaks. "I know that you didn't kill Stephen," he says quietly. "I killed Stephen."

The enormity of this punches a hole through my chest. He is mad. I preferred it when he blamed me for Stephen having a heart attack in the middle of the afternoon. When I try to pull away from him,
he won't let me. I feel my whole body go rigid from the shock of what he's saying, and I shouldn't take any notice of what he's saying but I'm so used to listening to him and in some way believing him when he admits to something. Because why would he say this otherwise?

"But he had a heart attack."

"Hmmm … Stephen Gevanni, Raye Penber, Hitoki Mizushima, Kyou Wakahisa, Rei Takada, Matthew Jeevas, Nate River … they add up, don't they. That's not even half of them. I killed The Lady's Cabinet members to save myself. Sora Kurosawa, Daisuke Watari —"

"What? But you didn't kill any of those people."

"With Watari, I didn't think that you'd be in the car. I was still testing it because the wording is so important. Sometimes it fucks up if you don't word it correctly, but the person still dies. They always die once their names are in the book, but apparently no one else can be killed as a result of it, though they can be injured. I didn't know that. That was a real shock to me. It's funny, because in a way I was doing it all for you and I could have killed you in the process."

"L —"

"You won't understand this, Light, but I write names down and they die. I decide what they're going to do before they die, when they die, how they die – heart attack, suicide, disease, accident, anything within reason – everything. I completely control their fate from the minute I write their names down. That's how I did it."

"Wait a minute."

"I know, I haven't taken my tablets and I'm making this up in some psychotic episode, but let me tell you this because I don't think I'll see you again, you won't want to see me after this, and I have to tell you. I decide who should die for different reasons. Sometimes they just have to die, like Penber and Watari and Nate and Stephen, because they didn't leave me any choice, and sometimes people just run their course. Sometimes they just really fucking annoy me. Do you really think you'd be where you are as quickly as you managed it if someone wasn't helping you? You said yourself that gods smile on you and you were right. They do."

"I didn't ask you to kill anyone."

You never said that it was a bad thing when people died though, did you? I wanted you to do well. You wanted to be Prime Minister and I was going to get you there, and I did. I was going to kill Kiyomi soon, that's what I thought. I told myself that River would be the last unless there was an emergency, but Kiyomi's turning into a fucking emergency, isn't she? She's going to ruin you. I hadn't decided how though. Something quick and tragic, I thought. The public sympathy would be good for you."

"Kiyomi? I don't understand what you're saying."

"I don't want you to. People keep getting in the way. I don't know how much Stephen understood, but he'd found the book, he'd seen the names, he saw … What was I supposed to do? He thought that it was something I was doing on your orders, so I killed him for you and I blamed you, I'm sorry."

"Shhh … What the fuck has that doctor given you?"

"You don't believe me."
"It's impossible for anyone to do the things you say you've done. You kill people by writing their names in a book, L?"

"I know how it sounds."

"Like you're mad."

"Yes."

"Yes."

"But I'm not."

"A lot of mad people say that. I'll get my driver to bring the car round and take you home."

"No, I'd rather drive."

"Ok," I sigh, needing to create some distance between us and this because I can't think. He's so quiet that I can almost forget that he's there, my thoughts are so wild and loud.

"Can I …?" he asks, and must see from my face that he can do whatever he wants. My arms open for him as he reaches me, and I press my mouth against the top of his head and stare unseeingly around the room for minutes as I hold him. I just can't see a way out of this yet, not if he's as mad as this, but I'll sacrifice everything to keep him. "And you'll be back later?"

"Yeah," I breathe out.

"If you can, that'd be nice," he says, standing straight now, but still holding me. "Light? You know what I'd like?"

"I can't get you a cake now, L," I laugh awkwardly, feeling worse when he doesn't laugh as well. "Go on. Stun me with it."

"If someone asked me who the most important person is in my life, I'd like to say that it's you, I don't want to hide it. You're fucking hard work but you're worth every second of it. I'm just sorry that it took me such a long time to find you. Can you accept the truth from a liar? Because you mean everything to me … Ok, I know, I'm tired and emotional and I have to take my medication. I'm going."

So, he's mad, but it'll only be temporary. I try to push the thought out of my mind that it could be a ruse and that he's still manipulating me by pretending to be vulnerable, because I just can't believe that. If I did, I couldn't see myself caring about anything else again, ever. I'd see everything in life as a cruel lie and I'd want to destroy it all.

I speak to the chief of the NPA and try to downplay everything. Luckily, he hasn't read the report yet, he's only heard of it on the news, and even the press are slow to pick up on L's potential significance to the inquiry. He's fucked off that it makes it look like the NPA's initial investigation wasn't good enough for me, but I assure him that that's not the case. It is the case, but whatever. I refuse to see or speak to Mikami or anyone else, I put him out in the cold to stew, and run over plans in my mind. L could sue the government for defamation, maybe? We could go through a farce of a trial in which I'm apologetic, he's livid, and we both blame Mikami. Who's left to contradict whatever L says? No one. If we do this right, we could both walk away from this with clean hands. L might have known about the assassination, but I can forgive that. Perhaps he did put the Cabinet in touch with some low life with a death wish; I can forgive that too, barely. I worry that if he did do what he
said he did, that I'd forgive that as well, eventually, and for no other reason than because he's my L. If it was anyone else, they could swing for it as far I'm concerned. What does that say about me? But his level of involvement must be an exaggeration through madness and guilt. No one can kill with a book.

I'm anxious as I drive after my great escape from the Kantei, worried about L and how I'll find him, or whether I'll find him there at all. Thinking about what he said, it just seems more and more insane and unbelievable, and by the time I get to his house, I'm just irrationally pissed off with him for being mad. Suddenly, I don't know when, but Raye stopped mattering to me. His death and this inquiry I've worked towards secretly for years is now just a problem, like it's someone else's fault. It's Mikami's fault. Penber isn't an innocent martyr anymore, he's become a problem who's trying to hurt what's most important to me. I curse the day I met him.

After practically storming into L's house, my restrained anger making me violently heavy handed and defiant against what I might or might not find here, I calm down when L walks into the living room with clear trepidation. Granting myself only a cursory glance of him, I pull off my gloves, irritated by how the leather has stuck to the palms of my hands like the sweat is glue. I'm irritated that I'm sweating like it's the middle of fucking July. I'm just irritated.

"Are you ok?" L asks me nervously. Not particularly, no. Free of my gloves now, I force myself to look at him properly. He's cut his hair. It's shorter and bits stick up in spikes like he's just hacked at it like some emo kid. God, it looks so generic and unpalatable.

"You went to the fucking hairdresser's?"

"No, I did it myself," he says quietly, trying vainly to smooth his hair down. "I wanted to change."

Somehow his hair butchery has become the most pressing issue to me, and I stalk towards him, probably appearing murderous. His eyes look up at me, large and frightened, distracting me and making me feel ashamed at my harsh, unchecked manner. I smile regretfully, pressing the ends of one mangled, electric shocked tuft between my fingers.

"What the hell have you done to yourself? I liked it the way it was. Did you have to take things out on your hair?"

"I didn't think you'd come back."

"Why wouldn't I?" I ask softly, and he smiles embarrassedly at the floor, which only brings my cold reminders and intent back again. I walk away and stuff my keys into my pocket, not really having a destination in mind. "It would have been better if you'd started getting rid of any evidence you have. Do you have any? You need to pack."

"You're sending me away?"

"No, but we need more time. You need to disappear for a while and I'll hold them off until we get our stories straight. I'm sending you to do some research on the guy who shot Penber, for the inquiry. Make sure you're seen, ask some questions about him, but otherwise stay in your hotel room until I call you."

"It'll look very suspicious if I disappear, on your orders. It'll look bad on your part."

"Let me worry about how things look for me. You need a reason to get out of town and you need an alibi, so go there and stay there. I'll phone you, but you need to tell me everything, L. Not this killing people through writing their names down shit – the truth. You need to explain this to me."
"I tried to."

"Yeah, well, you didn't do a very good job of it, because woooo, I still don't understand. You can't kill people by writing it down, you just can't. Do you mean that you gave messages to hitmen?"

"No. I did just what I said. I write names down and they die," he says with childlike plainness. Oh God.

"L ... We'll talk later. Pack now, not much, you'll be back tomorrow, and after I've gone, take your car and go. When you get there, park it out of sight. Ask around and focus on his past history. He was done for assault on an ex-girlfriend, so find her and get what you can out of her. Your focus is that he was a bad bastard and the Cabinet hired him to kill Penber, that's it. Try and find something we can spin into him having shown suicidal tendencies in the past, anything."

"He didn't. I made him kill Penber and I made him kill himself."

"Will you!" I shout before stopping myself, and it's the first time I've ever seen him flinch at the sound of my voice. "You have to stop talking like that. He was a man the Cabinet hired to kill Penber, and after he did, he freaked out and killed himself. That's what happened."

"What's the point of this? For the police's benefit, your showing your confidence in me? Because it'll still look like I'm running away."

"We only need a day. Less than that, we just more time and we need more dirt on this guy, so we'll do both. I need you to get out of here."

"Light, you can't cover this up."

"And you can't tell them and a board of inquiry what you told me, because you'll be in an institution so fast your head will spin off. I want you to testify that you know that The Lady had Penber killed and that it was a political assassination. I want you to tell them that."

"Then I'll be prosecuted."

"No. No, I told you that I won't let that happen. There's a way you can tell them the truth without dropping yourself in it. We'll work it out."

"And where are you going?"

"Back to the Kantei."

"Back to Kiyomi."

"I can't stay here, can I. I have to backtrack and you have to go."

"Are your security outside?"

"No, but they'll be following me, so I have to get back. Come on and pack a bag, will you? I've got directions; it's on the coast. Never heard of it, but it'll probably take you two hours to get there," I say, walking to the bedroom with him following close behind. His arm stretches out and picks up a small oval Hepworth sculpture I bought him, so I start turning towards him to ask him why. It happens so fast that everything judders and spins, but I see his arm raised, holding the sculpture above me. Then nothing.

The demon laughed and creakingly buckled over to hold his stomach and howl as a man dropped to
the floor. Another man unblinkingly looked at the fallen body, and slowly lowered his hand to set the
statue back on the table beside him. Seconds passed, the demon's laughter settled into a heaving
excitement, though the man formerly known as L and who soon would have a new name, heard only
a rising pitch of throbbing tinnitus in his ears. Sadness and regret shook hands. Vertebrae compressed
and slid against each other as he slouched and crouched like a sprinter before a race to check for a
longed for strong pulse.

"He's not dead."

"I didn't hit him to kill him," L replied. Now assured, lean leg muscles pulled him up reluctantly,
already taut and urging him to run. Just run. He looked away from the body and towards a wall
mirror, in which he found himself unchanged, and left the scene like the murderer he was.

In the living room, he resumed his actions with the calm efficiency of the well planned. He struck a
match and lit a fire in the grate, and when he did, his hands were bloodlessly steady, though he
thought that he could still feel the echoing memory of the statue in his hand. The statue that was
bought for him by someone, and he'd used it like a bowling ball to club that same someone over the
head like a demented cave man. Because he had to. That someone was going to help him – less out
of love for him, more through his own stubborn selfishness – pushing truth and resentment down
until it burned them from the inside out. Whatever undercurrent of love they had would become
ercrid, and one or both of them would drown in it. L knew the justice system like an adoring cynic
and knew himself in the same way. Justice would try to catch him in a net, and he knew that he
couldn't trust himself not to kill anyone in his way if he felt cornered. And he felt cornered. He'd felt
it, known it was coming for some time. He wondered whether he'd slipped up on purpose to bring it
forward.

"You'll have to kill him now," the demon said, mistily passing through the wall. "Soon. He's not
going to let you get away with this, is he. I don't know, maybe he will. He's funny like that."

Hardly a novice at ignoring the demon, the man let the words pass over him, and the demon, used to
being ignored, scratched his head over this apparently spontaneous event and poked his head through
the wall to check on the man in the bedroom, who was only a little untidily spread out on his back.
He saw the numbers and characters hover above, half-hoping that they wouldn't be there. He'd like
to see what L would do if something didn't go to plan as it always did, and he'd like to see whatever
forested feelings could be raked up by what humans describe as a tragedy.

L never spoke to him much, only to ask questions which the demon would either not know the
answers to or defiantly answer in riddles. But the demon had watched him for years with others of
his own kind, especially the man on the floor in the bedroom, because it had become a hobby of his
to watch them, and saw with perplexed wonder the labyrinthine emotions and bizarre physicality
they were capable of. He couldn't see a reason for any of it, didn't understand it, thought it was
disgusting, but interesting. He laughed many times at things L said and did to others – never to him –
and liked him through those second-hand, observed interactions. His feeling of injustice plateaued
after a while about why he was consistently ignored by someone so ungrateful but talented, and
wondered sometimes whether L could see and hear him at all. He did, in fact, doubt his own
existence sometimes, when he was ignored for days on end, and he daydreamed in star fall showers
of physics and philosophy. But he still talked, if only to himself, in the hope that one day the man
might treat him as something other than an annoyance. He didn't love him, but he was his favourite
actor and he lived through the life L led. Over the years, L's life became his own, like an old film
he'd become so immersed in that he was practically printed on the celluloid. He felt a superior thrill
when L raged at him only a few times, because despite being told not to, he still let himself be seen
by someone who shouldn't see him. And a young man who was practically mad to start with,
unravelled. It was then that the demon saw how much more fun it was to play with the minds of
people instead of their lifespans. He felt that he understood L a little better then, though it made him feel as dirty and confused as it did to watch him maul others and act out mini murders. It was far more interesting than life, if you could call it that, in other realms. Here, there was music and lights and explosive relationships and uncertainty and madness. And there were apples. L, for all his faults, always bought apples for him and left them where they could be easily found.

"What are you doing? Are you cold?" he asked the man lighting the fire, who didn't surprise him by answering. "He'll drop you, you know. You can't trust him. The only option you have left is to kill him. Suicide. You're good at those. You've made too many mistakes now. You were so good at this before you got involved with him again, and now you've told him everything."

"He didn't believe me," L said to himself, as if the demon's words sprung from his own inner voice.

"Prove it to him then. Let him touch the book so he can see me again, show him how it works. I still wouldn't trust him but, I don't know, he likes you, I guess. And if you still can't trust him, you can always kill him."

"I am not going to kill him."

"Then what do you want to do, buddy?"

He wanted to chain smoke and drink a bottle of vodka and snort white powder up his nose and have sex with six boys. One boy. He wanted Light to wake up and roll his shoulders the way he does in the morning, like he's sorry to find himself still alive because he's more tired than he was when he went to sleep. He wanted him to say that nothing else matters, that he really does understand and he forgives him, that he still wanted everything to be new apart from him, get on a plane and join the Mile High Club in a first class lav with him. He wanted only to see himself through Light's eyes and kill anyone else who ever saw his face. But none of that was going to happen.

Once content that the fire had taken hold, he stood up and took a large picture off the wall. He lay it down on the sofa to prise the backing from the frame, and peeled off the brown envelope which had been taped underneath. From the envelope, he took out a wad of notes in two currencies, a passport and with it his new identity, and a black notebook.

The demon looked on intrigued as L hung the picture back on the wall and placed a small box on the mantlepiece. Standing close to the mirror until his legs were hot from the fire, L delicately pulled open his eyelids to make way for the blue irised contact lenses, and put the box into his pocket. He checked his hair, fluffing it up so that it was almost unrecognisable as being his, put on some thin framed glasses, and compared the final result to the doctored black market passport photo. He looked like his brother, he thought, and perhaps a little like B when he was hungover, but importantly, he now didn't look like himself. He looked anonymous, someone nobody would pay any attention to or remember.

"Nice! Contacts and glasses," the demon said. "Oh! We're going somewhere? Where are we going?"

"Nowhere," the man replied, then loosely held the notebook and all the death warrants inside it dangerously close to the fire. He looked at the demon while wearing a small smile.

"Don't do that," the demon told him. He wasn't ready to stop watching the film yet.

"Really? Let me guess what you're going to say. Do the deal and ride this out? See what happens and use this as a back up? Kill whoever stands in my way?"

"Yeah."
L thought about it, or appeared to, but with an elegant, almost sadistic flick of the wrist, he tossed the book into the fire. Only looking at it long enough to see the flames begin to lick and curl the page corners and turn them to ash, he then put on a hiker jacket which didn't belong to him; it belonged to an American he fucked and killed once. Now that his transformation was complete, he walked back into the bedroom, hardly looking at the man on the floor, and picked up a rucksack from the wardrobe. He'd already packed, though he didn't have much to take.

"I went to a lot of trouble to get that," the demon reproached him. The book was gone, now ashes which cracked and blew up the chimney, carried on a through draught.

"You said that you'd found it."

"I went to a lot of trouble picking it up,"

"You will go, won't you. You come with the book and I've just got rid of it, so you should go too."

"I could get you another one."

"I don't want another. Will you go now?"

"Not yet. I want to see what you're going to do."

"Yeah, you just watch, don't you. Well, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm leaving. I'm not being thrown into a meat wagon and I don't need your book anymore. I will win at all costs, and this is the cost. So that's the end of the story. Are you happy now?"

"What about him?"

L looked at 'him' on the floor, noticing a gloss of red in his hair which made him breathe in sharply, but no more than that. Instead, he turned to a bedside table and put his wallet and phone in plain view, so that what was to happen couldn't be doubted by anyone except the most stubborn. Light was stubborn. He wouldn't believe anything unless there was proof, like a body.

"What about him? He'll be ok."

"But where are you going to go?"

"That doesn't really matter," he told him, determined that those would be the last words he'd say to the demon. He'd never liked his presence, but he was so used to it now, like how you get used to knowing security cameras are filming you on a high street. And he hated how blithe the demon was about the notebook, and how he laughed because L used it sparingly and coldly. The notebook, to L, was a last resort or a fast track. Sometimes he planned deaths months in advance without writing anything over that time, but sometimes they were more spontaneous acts of preservation, and it was those deaths which he regretted. He'd used it less and less, but the demon hung around like a rotten smell so he was never truly free. He hoped to be now.

L knelt down to touch the blood on Light's head. He was still breathing, but L worried, anyway. There was no point asking the demon if he could foresee Light's future in any way that might have changed from what he'd done, so he only sighed. Until now he'd been functional with cyborg-like competence, but when he bent down to press his mouth lightly on the hollow of Light's cheek, he let out a tiny whine that only he could hear. "I haven't hurt you badly, have I?" he asked in whispered English. "I'm sorry, I've got to go."

He stood and didn't look back. It was never good to look back, but he'd always wonder whether he would have been liked without what he brought with his book, even if Light didn't know about it.
Light had just reaped the benefits of having a silent assassin with initiative. So, the final thing L had to do had been done. Now he was free from the past, but it didn't feel like it. Putting his suit jacket over one arm, and used the Prime Minister's phone to send a text message to his security, telling them to come to the house quickly and call a paramedic; he was hurt. Then he dropped the phone on the floor as he walked away, and put one foot outside of the sliding doors.

'I'll be alright in ten minutes,' he thought. 'I'll be even better in an hour.' He planned to get a bus to the airport as just another tourist, forgotten like all the others. Lost, unobserved, never to be seen or heard from again. The man known as Lawliet was going to die in that lake.

"L, you don't want to do that," the demon said.

The wind blew from behind the man as he turned back around, seeing the notebook and ready pen in the demon's hand. The film reel crackled and spun, flapping on the projector.
A/N Extra long update (in which nothing exciting happens!) to make up for the time it took me to get around to it. Beware of time skips back and forth.
Disclaimer: I think I've set a precedent with all the legal/illegal/bank/government/business/taxes stuff in this. What is realism?

No matter what time of year it is, it's always a good time to buy a new kitchen. Treat your family to a tailor-made kitchen suite, designed for you by the experts. Book your appointment today and start the New Year with a new heart to your home. Whether it's sharp and contemporary you're after, or elegant and classic, we'll design the most technologically advanced kitchen to suit every taste and be as unique as you are. It will change your life. Aaaand if you book a consultation today, you'll receive 15% off! With free delivery, you simply cannot lose! Subject to minimum spend in a single transaction charges refer to the value of goods being delivered excludes installation services appliance transactions servicing repair delivery or installation of goods or in concessions. Offer ends on 7th of January –

"What do you think of this one?"

"Yeah."

"Which colour?"

"I don't know. Purple," I say, looking behind me to see if my guards are still there.

"Now you're just being sarcastic. Would you rather do this another time? You seem distracted."

"No, I'm not. I just can't get excited about kitchens, I'm sorry. This one's fine."

"Why can't you even show an interest? This is important."

"How is this important? You're seriously telling me that choosing a kitchen is important when I've been in meetings all day about lowering the national debt? Look, Kiyomi, can you just choose, please? I'm getting a headache in here."

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that I'm depressed, and you'd be right, because I'm in Kitchens Pour Vous. I'm so used to the benefits of delegation that I'm sorry that I didn't ask a PA to choose my kitchen for me. It gets worse though. Because this viewing had to be pre-booked so that the store could be closed off to the general public, it makes us sitting ducks for the sales staff. One of those sales staff cuts in just as Kiyomi's ramping up her berating me for not caring about our upcoming personal kitchen, which, despite the name, still won't be used by either of us.

"Hi, welcome to the Kitchen Pour Vous elite sales department!" a strange woman says brightly, popping up from nowhere to shock us into irregular heartbeats. "May I help you at all? Oh! Good evening, Prime Minister and Mrs Prime Minister! Please let me assist you. I see that you're looking at our state of the art, custom-made 'Andromeda' modular kitchen unit."

"We'll buy it," I say after taking some slow breaths. "Where do I pay?"
"Brilliant! Mr Prime Minister certainly knows what he wants. Please join me in my consultation room and we'll go through your new dream kitchen inch by inch until you're fully..."

"We don't want to go through it inch by inch. Just send someone round to measure it up and do whatever it is you do."

"That's not standard protoc..."

"But it's what we want," I tell her. This blows a few fuses and she gapes for a few seconds, trying to run through training scenarios for difficult customers.

"But we can make your kitchen project easy and help you find everything you've ever wanted even if you didn't know it with our interactive kitchen planner! Edgy and modern to timeless and traditional, we can design the very best quality kitchen for you, and each one handcrafted in our workshops by qualified carpenters who each have over two months experience! You can even take advantage of our patented banana slicer to take home today just for enquiring. We have a selection of two hundred different worktop styles for you to choose from – from burr walnut veneer to a cosmos quartz – each with its own luxurious, unique finish and..."

"I don't care. We'll take this actual kitchen here. Just chuck it in a van and we'll call it quits."

"Darling, I think it's too small for our kitchen," Kiyomi tells me, rubbing my arm while smiling at the saleswoman.

"How about if I give you a free pen? It's a nice pen. Look!" she says, pressing the button repeatedly to show us that it's a bog-standard ballpoint pen. Kiyomi starts backing away from her.

"Thanks. We'll have a think about it."

"No problem!" the insane woman says, off her head on kitchens and possibly some class A drugs. "Here's my card and please take a catalogue. We're open from 9am to 8pm, Monday to Saturday. Please call me as soon as you're ready to get your dream off the ground! I can even do house calls, if that's more convenient for you?"

"Oh God," I breathe out, but my guards must hear me because they start laughing, which isn't what they were hired for. I'm the first one to go, leaving Kiyomi behind to be polite and take the woman's card and an armful of catalogues. We should just buy online. Who needs the stress of having to see things in person anymore?

"Goodbye, Prime Minister! Goodbye, Mrs Prime Minister! I look forward to hearing from you!"

"Fare thee fucking well, what a fucking twatting shitting fuck," I say quietly when Kiyomi rushes up beside me again. "What was that? Was that a real person or a hologram?"

"I don't think you're ready to go shopping for kitchens yet, are you."

"Where's the tool aisle?" I ask her. She looks concerned that because I'm a man I'm going to build a cabinet or knock down a wall, which I'm well within my rights to do and I'm sure that I'd make an amazing cabinet, but that's not what I want. Lucky for me that I prepped myself with a double whiskey before we left. Or a few. I'm not sure – someone just kept filling my glass at the Club because it's Friday.

I spy some drone stacking paint buckets on shelves like his life depends on it. I'm desperate to be unpleasant, yet I still feel a dull pang of sorrow for his situation. He makes a brave show of it, laughing with another drone who walks past him, but he must feel like crying. I want to commiserate..."
with him and say how I'd raise the minimum wage but it would merely be redistribution which would restrict opportunities, fuel inflation, discourage investment, and promote labour substitution. Capitalism's a bitch. Instead, I'm going to exempt more low-income citizens from taxes so that those just over the living wage can subsidise them, and encourage employers to reward staff like him with performance-related bonuses. Or something. I don't know, maybe I should ask him? I'm not on a low wage and I never have been, and my economists aren't either and in fact are paid by the tax payers. People on low wages aren't really their greatest concern. How am I supposed to understand what it's like living on a yearly wage which is less than that fucking kitchen I was going to buy just because I wanted to get it over with? However, my woozy empathy isn't enough to stop my contempt from showing. I can see it happening and am powerless to stop it.

"You! Where do you keep your sharp things?"

"Hi, Prime Minister Yagami and Mrs Prime Minister Yagami! What sort of sharp thing are you looking for? We have a selection of the best quality sharp implements you could wish for under this one roof!" he says perkily. He's been brainwashed too. Why do they have to act like this? I think that now I understand why some people go berserk and kill everyone in the supermarket.

"I don't care about the quality. I just want something sharp."

"Like a… ?"

"A big knife."

"You'd have to be a little more specific for me to help you to the best of my ability by answering just a few quick questions! Firstly, what purpose is this big knife for?"

"To kill myself with. Do you have a suicide aisle?"

"Erm… are you ok, Prime Minister?"

"Just tell me where your knives are."

"Aisle four. But why don't I get you some water instead?" he says. I'm disappointed. Kiyomi does her usual damage limitation act and one of my guards presumably pulls out a confidentiality contract, which they carry around with them now. It hasn't exactly encouraged better behaviour on my part, but this shit just isn't funny anymore. I keep searching for confrontation in unlikely places, for some reason. I miss when I used to write people off as soon as look at them and didn't think of them at all apart from as objects taking up space.

"He's joking. He's so funny, isn't he? Excuse us," Kiyomi laughs, and follows me, because I've wandered off again. I'd feel so much better if I could remember where the way out is. Now that I've realised that I can't figure out where it is, I can't think of anything else. "What are you doing?" she hisses, pulling me into a pretend bedroom which is made up like a big doll's house. She shuts the door between us and the guards but we're completely open to the rest of the empty showroom on the other side of the wall like we're on a film set, and it feels strangely appropriate.

"What do you mean? Oh. I don't know. I'm bored, I think," I whisper to myself. "I had the right idea."

"Don't say that. Don't say it, don't think it, even if you're joking. It's not something to joke about."

"It was just something to say. The world's really rotten if I can't even joke about suicide in this... wherever we are."
"Not after what happened to Lawliet, no. It's insensitive."

"Insensitive?" I ask, turning on her. Oh yes, L killed himself a month ago, officially, unofficially, what does it matter? What right has she to tell me what to say and when to say it? L deserves no sensitivity from me. What she means is that he should be forgotten completely because of the shame of it and we shouldn't mention anything which will remind her of him.

"I've never seen anyone so completely confused before as you are."

"Probably, because I don't know what you mean by insensitive."

"So you do believe that he's dead now and you think that it's funny? You're not still pretending that he's alive somewhere?"

"I wasn't... Yeah. Dead. Yeah. Whatever. I don't want to talk about it, Kiyomi. It's nothing to do with kitchens and, to be honest, I just want to get out of here."

"But when you talk about suicide, it scares me. He didn't mean to do it, and even if he did, it's not something you joke about," she says, and it stalls the annoyance out of me for a second. I thought that. That he didn't mean to do it. I don't know if it makes it any easier to think that he wasn't in his right mind, if he did it at all. I mean, I still feel... No.

"I told you that it was a joke. It was really obvious that it was. I'm not going to commit suicide because you've made me go with you to some world of kitchens at eight at night, although no one would blame me."

"I wanted to get you out of the Kantei. It's not healthy to stay in the house all the time."

"Our house is attached to where I work and it's not like it's easy for me to pop out for the morning paper. It's a full-scale operation when I go anywhere. Anyway, I go out."

"And where do you go, Light?"

"The House."

"Exactly. That's it and it doesn't really count. I just wish that you'd talk about it. When are you going to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?"

"Lawliet."

"There's nothing to say. He's just some dead lawyer and that's a cause for celebration for most people. Did the lights flicker then or was it just me?"

"Just you," she sighs, letting her forearms go limp as she sits down on the bed. I see a brief glimpse of how unreasonable I'm being, but everything still feels like a dream somehow and the lights did definitely flicker then. But I think that she's unreasonable for bringing this up now. She's always prodding at me towards a nervous breakdown but she'll be sorely disappointed. "So now you're pretending that he was just some lawyer? He wasn't anything more than that?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say, turning away to pop a caffeine tablet.

"I've made my position clear. I'm not going to leave you no matter what the truth is, but I want you to talk to me and trust me. You don't have to do this alone," she says. She's set this up. She made me
come here so that she could interrogate me in a fake fucking bedroom. People are listening. The guards are probably recording this through the fake wall. My eyes shift from side to side like an executive's ball clicker. I remain silent as I make a quick motion for another door of the fake room near me because I'd have to get past Kiyomi to reach the other one, but it turns out that it's a fake door. I could just walk out and around but the chilling humiliation of walking away from Kiyomi would seem like an admission. "Why are you trying to run away from me, Light?"

"I'm not. Sorry," I say hurriedly and quietly so that it doesn't hurt. "It's just that we've been here for hours."

"Fifteen minutes. We've been here for fifteen minutes."

"God, really? It's like limbo in here. Did you see an exit? I've been looking because I can't see where we came in, but I just can't find a door or a fire exit. That's illegal – what sort of place is this? I think we're trapped, Kiyomi, don't panic. I said, don't panic! I've gotten out of worse fixes than this."

"I'm not panicking. Are you sure that you just had the one drink?" she asks, walking over to me and pulling the strap of her handbag over her shoulder. I don't know why she has a bag because there's nothing in it apart from lipstick which is the same colour as her actual lips and I don't understand that either. "Maybe we should go."

Yes, we should definitely try to find a way out of here. I open the fake door to find my fake guards on the other side, my heart now beating with some kind of purpose I'm nearly grateful for. What a perilous place we're in. Why didn't I notice earlier?

"Masuo, you're on reconnaissance. Nakamura, you stay with us. You've got a gimpy leg but you've got a gun and we might need it. Hold on, cancel that. I've got a compass app on my phone. I think that we were facing north when we came in. Don't worry, it's ok, I'm in control."

"The exit's this way," Kiyomi says, guiding me a little way, but then veering off sharply to the furnishings department. "Oh, I do like those curtains. Don't you?"

"Absolutely, I think they're hideous. I'll buy them for you," I say instinctively. She looks pityingly at me again and pulls me a little further away from Masuo and Nakamura again, which I'm not sure is a good idea now, considering how dangerous this place is. She just doesn't understand the gravity of the situation we're in. It's not her fault. She's had a very sheltered life.

"You don't need to do that, but thank you. This was a bad idea, wasn't it. I just wanted to get you out of the Kantei but you're not ok."

"Of course I am!"

"Let's go home," she says, after squinting at me for a moment like a paramedic.

"But you wanted a new kitchen and they sell dream kitchens here which are handmade by people who've been promoted from the checkouts."

"No, I think that we should get home."

"Don't look at me like I'm being weird, I'm not being weird. Just show me where the exit is and I'll be fine. I just need to know that there's a way out because…” I stop to whisper in her ear so that the guards won't become hysterical, "Kiyomi, I'm not sure that there is an exit. It's like we're on one of those Somalian pirate ships. Don't worry though, maybe if we buy that kitchen then they'll let us go."

She smiles bravely at me, despite her concern, because I think that she understands now that we're
being held hostage.

"Fuck the kitchen. Come on."

After linking her arm through mine, she courageously walks me towards what I now see is a massive door with a sign above it saying: 'Goodbye! Thank you for your custom!' Oh, thank God. But now I feel stupid and Kiyomi said 'fuck.' I overreacted, yes, but I'm not sure if you've noticed that I've developed a slight nervousness of enclosed spaces. And open spaces. And crowds. One of my ministers was attacked with a loaf of bread a few weeks ago on a visit and the press caught the whole thing. I sent him a hamper because it was so horrific, and it could have been me. If someone does that to him, what will they do to me? I pull myself out of it most of the time, but it's difficult to do in Kitchens Pour Vous when there are people talking over public address systems about kitchens and you can't switch them off. You cannot switch them off. I'm so close to standing in the middle of the store screaming while people walk around me with their paint buckets, taking absolutely no notice of me.

"You swore," I say quietly.

"Yes, I did."

"This will work, won't it?"

"You're asking me? Wow, thanks, L! Actually, don't ask me. You'll have to try it out."

"Couldn't you just tell me? It doesn't matter to you, does it?"

"I don't know why it matters to you."

"If you would've just stayed out of the way like I told you to then I wouldn't have to do anything, you oversized goblin straight out of Moomin-fucking-valley! God, I hate you."

"Wow! Thanks, L!"

"It's not a compliment."

The sound of voices makes my eyes flicker from the sleepy anxiety creeping back and knowing that I have to open my eyes. After focusing in on the darkness painfully, trying to pick out details and seeking him out, I see his face, but I don't scream or thrash out. I just realise quite calmly that I can't wake up and I'm stuck here with him forever. There has to be a way out of this.

"Hi," the demon waves at me.

"Light, look at me," L says. "Not him. Look at me."

"You can see him?" I whisper. Now I know that I'm really dreaming. The demon's laugh echoes through the room, scoring a hole through the air like nails on a blackboard. I cringe, but L points my face towards his, not allowing me to looking anywhere else. I feel like there's a sniper aiming right at me but I'm being forced to look away from it, and how can that ever end well?

"I need you to do something for me. I'm going to give you a book. I'm giving it to you. But you have to give it back to me and say that you don't want it anymore. At least, you have to put it in my hands. Whatever you see and whatever I do – because I might act like I don't want it – you have to do it. Say that you don't want it and give it back to me. That's all you need to do."
"Why?"

"Because I'm trying to help you so that you won't see him anymore."

"With a book and pass the parcel?"

"Yeah, if you like. And then he'll leave you alone. Will you do it? It's important."

"How could that help? That's crazy, L. Have you actually seen the big death metal drummer in the room with us?"

"It doesn't matter, Light, I'll explain later. Will you please do this for me? If it doesn't work then we'll try something else. He won't hurt you."

"Why d'you think that?" the demon wheezes or giggles. My mouth falls open, but L just shakes his head despondently.

"And don't listen to him," he tells me. "Just take the book, but give it back to me right away. Remember to say that you don't want it anymore."

"You could always see him," I say, quiet with the realisation. "You know what he is."

He lowers his face and I want to hit him. Years he's lied to me, telling that I'm seeing things when he knew that it was real all the time. The book is pushed into my hands, but as I look down at it, I see blood on his hands and clothes and just know that it's my blood. He sits back on his haunches and looks almost envious of me, but I don't recognise the book and I try to turn it over, glimpsing only a little white writing on the cover before L turns it back the way it was and holds it there.

"Light, don't keep it. Don't listen to anything he says," he urges me.

"I'm sorry but I think that we should call someone. A... priest or something."

"No, that's not going to help."

"And your Moleskine notebook is?"

"I don't know. Just shut up and do it," he tells me, lets the book go and sits back, not giving me a chance to argue. "I don't want the death note anymore. I don't want to be its owner."

"What are you talking about? You have to explain this to me. Tell me what he is and what he wants," I say, but then the demon screeches or laughs so loudly and unexpectedly that it seems to fill the room and my head, and I have to close my eyes from the sound.

Nothing happens. I look up from how I'm crouching over the book like I'm protecting it instead of myself, but the demon is still there. Everything's the same until I look at L, whose face is free of something which has always been there as long as I've known him but couldn't describe or see before now.

"Hey, you don't have to do what he says, you know," the demon croaks at me, extending a hand to point at the book. "That belongs to you now."

There's a sound of tinkling, chinking metal from the beads on his belt as he moves, and I look at L, who doesn't look to be fully conscious, never mind aware of the fucking monster in the room.

"L?"
"Yeah?" he sighs tiredly. He looks anxious again when he sees me, and rubs his thumb across my top lip. "Light, you look really bad. Is this blood? What have you done to your face? I'll get some water."

"L, can't you see him?"

"See who? There's no one there," he says, staring at how I'm gripping his hand to stop him from leaving.

"You can see him, L, you saw him. You were talking to him!" I shout, but he just seems confused and worried, and I realise that it's about me because he can't see what I can see now. I hold the book towards him, desperate to get rid of it. If I do what he said then maybe he'll see the demon again and I won't be alone. It's something to do with this book, it has to be. "Take your book. I'm not playing anymore."

"I don't think it's mine," he says, just looking at it. "Let me get something to clean you up. I didn't do that to you, did I? It's just a nosebleed, isn't it?"

"Why don't you find out, Light? Open the book and find out what it is," the devil goads me. I'm so angry all of a sudden that L's lied to me and a monster is talking to me about notebooks that I shout at him to be quiet. He laughs while L's eyes just grow wider.

"What have I said?" L asks me.

"L, take your book. I don't want it anymore."

I place his hands around it and let go, wanting to create as much distance from it as possible. The demon makes a mournful sound which stretches until it stops abruptly, as if it's been cut off. At the same time, a feeling passes away from me until it's so distant that I start to forget what it is. I've never felt such a loss of control before, but I can feel memories fading and things changing in me and there's nothing I can do but try to keep hold of them. A noise sounding like the scraping of ice from windscreens gets louder and louder in my head until I can't stand it. It's only when L buckles over that I don't care about the sense that I'm being eroded, and even that in itself is fading. He starts whining at first, but then it becomes a scream. I reach for him uselessly, as it could make any difference, but I don't think that he even knows that I'm there. I feel like I'm angry at him for something he's done but I can't remember what it is, so it mutates into the cold thinking that he has to be quiet, he has to, because he's hurting my head. He makes everything worse and nothing makes any sense. I think about when he's told me that I take on characteristics and find a baseline for normalcy through observation, and I worry that perhaps, if L stays like this, I'll go the same way as him. He curves into a ball; clawing at his head and screaming against his legs, dampening the sound. All I can do is watch and fight against the urge to just lie down until it's over or smother him.

But he stops, now only left with harsh breaths, and he pushes me away. After a moment, he looks up – older, beaten, and sick. What the fuck is going on?

"What do you see?" he asks me raggedly.

"What do you mean, what do I see?"

"Look around you. Do you see anyone in the room with us?"

"No." Oh my God, he has gone mad. I try to remember what we've done tonight, and it calms me to think that we've both taken a mindbender for some reason, even though I know that we wouldn't and we haven't. When that doesn't stick, I convince myself that I'm dreaming, but I know that it's not that
either. L said once that when I have a 'Hunter S. Thompson half hour' as he calls them on the rare occasion that I confide in him that I'm experiencing some weird shit, he says that I should listen to Mahler so at least it'll have a dramatic soundtrack. He's one to talk.

"What do you remember? Light, have you ever seen anything strange, like a ghost or a demon?"

"Are you on acid?"

"No," he pants agitatedly, his fingers actually jumping against his leg like he's typing. He's on LSD. God save us all. "I'm just asking you a question, it's just a question, we're having a conversation and I'm interested in your life and what you think like I should be because I love you, I'm completely fascinated by you and I must know, have you ever seen something you can't explain?"

"Er, no. I don't believe in anything like that. Why did you scream?" I ask, but he doesn't answer. His breathing eases, he calms, and it's almost like his bones crack back into place to make him the L I know again, but then I feel dizzy and aching and I don't care about him. I remember the car accident I was in the day before and how tired I've felt since then. How Kiyomi stroked the hair back from my forehead to inspect the stitched back together split in my skin before I pulled myself out of her reach. When L touches me, I let him. I don't mind when he does. I want him to. "God, I feel really bad. You bastard, you dosed me," I say. L's manic episode has become just that, because I can forget about it incredibly quickly when there's something more important to worry about. I dip my head to try to still and clear it, and I see how L's holding a black notepad in his hand, and how tightly he holds it. "What's that?"

"This?" he asks, seeming alarmed as he pulls away from me and stands up from the bed, still holding the book. I've caught him doing something he shouldn't be doing. "Oh, I just write notes in here sometimes. Trivia. What to do when people hit their heads and stuff. I'll put it away now."

"I hit my head?"

"I don't know. I just found you passed out in the bathroom. You don't remember anything?"

"No."

"Never mind. You must be ok now… because you're awake and everything. You lie down. We'll get you cleaned up."

Yeah, he's mad. Anyone else would call an ambulance or have a first aid manual or even google it, but not L. I'm reluctant to pursue it any further though, no matter how weird and funny it is. I'm happier to write it off as 'just L', and sleep, so I lower myself onto my back. My head pulses with pain but passes just as quickly once I'm still, leaving only tiredness.

"You're so strange," I laugh to myself as L walks slowly towards the door. He stops for a second, gripping the doorframe, so I close my eyes before he takes offence to being described as what he clearly is.

"Yeah," I hear him say faintly when he leaves. No kidding.

"He disappeared? Just like that? That's… I mean, I heard some things about him, but that's so unprofessional to just vanish from the village like Zatoichi."

"Well, officially, he committed suicide, so I didn't really expect him to tell HR his intentions. Anyway, he'd resigned, so it didn't matter. My arm's going dead, can you get off me?"
"Sorry. Officially though. What happened to him unofficially?"

Sometimes I get myself into situations where someone thinks that I'm contributing to a conversation when I'm not, and this is one of those times. In a way, I want to talk about it, but not to her. It'd be a pointless exercise in self-emasculation if I talked to anyone, which I don't really see the need for. When I'm giving a press conference sometimes, with flags and emblems drooping behind me on sticks, I see myself reflected all perfect and pristine in people's eyes, and I want to laugh at myself. I want to admit to the black-eyed cameras and the millions of gawping faces inside them what I've done and that I should be punished, but don't you dare try to judge me because I will crawl through your windows and kill every last one of you. You are no one and I am everything. You cannot comprehend what I've sacrificed so that you have the lives you have. I don't mean that L was a sacrifice; I mean the chunks of myself which I've cut up over the years and fed to the pigs. When you buy anything, it's a gift from me. It's money I haven't taken from you in taxes. I dream about telling them that, and then I'd probably go back to talking about inflation. Part of me likes the threat of being questioned by someone who's suspicious of me, and when it happens, unless I find it necessary to make an effort to neutralise the question, I usually either ignore them until they change the subject out of awkwardness or I bluntly tell them to shut their face. I wish that there was an easier way. It's like when I'm not sure how to end a speech and I wish that I could just fade out like some songs do.

I keep my eyes closed but know that she's rolling onto her side to face me because she makes such a racket doing it. Her interest in what could launch her into the stratosphere of Z-list celebrities for fifteen minutes if she was stupid enough to plot an exposé is made very obvious because she doesn't know how not to be. She always looks at me as though I'm a regular oil field and she's expecting to strike a fountain of black gold soon, like there's nothing at all wrong with trying to milk me for information like she's Mata fucking Hari. Sadly for her, she's not Mata Hari, but despite her intrusive questioning, she's clever enough to be loyal to me. That's only because she's stroked her ego into thinking that she's an indispensable lynchpin of my PR team, so I do this occasionally to keep her feeling that way. Her one talent is acting as a stand in for written statements and answers to press questions so I don't have to unless they're important, in which case I'm semi-involved. She's quite proficient, having studied my writing style and keeping an indexed filing cabinet full of my stances on issues to refer to. She's vain and models herself on Kiyomi, as most women here do now. As my wife, they must think her a good role model. They wear cheaper versions of her clothes and have similar haircuts, but they still wear The Lady-esque 'statement' (meaning: huge) jewellery, only sort of budget imitation Chanel plastic versions. Mai reminds me how much I value Kiyomi, and in a strange way is preventing me from straying in an active way, in the unlikely event that I'd want to. I was worried that I might do that because that's what people do in films when they're dumped or, you know, someone dies, but the thought never really occurred to me. Everyone's just as boring as they always were and nothing has changed.

I'm sure that Kiyomi would understand about Mai, because it's for work and not really my fault. Women read romance into everything and it's their ruination. They throw themselves at you when all you did was smile in their direction but not at them once or twice. Honestly, sometimes I feel like I should wear a sack when I walk through departments to save these women from themselves and save myself from trying to figure out how to deal with the unwanted attention. I need to put people down in a politically correct way so that they'll have more respect and loyalty to me, work harder, and berate themselves for bothering me. It's a nightmare, I can't tell you. I'm just constantly fending off women, I don't know what's wrong with them. It must have always been that way but I've only recently realised that I've become the political equivalent of that man in the Diet Coke advert. Kiyomi says that it's funny because I represent men and this is retribution for millennia of sexual objectification of women, and on and on that broken record goes.

"Lighty, are you awake?"
"Unfortunately."

"Well? Is he dead?"

"Probably."

"Meaning?"

"They say that he's dead."

"But do you believe it?"

"They found a body. There was a funeral for the body. I guess that means that he's dead."

"You don't sound very sad about it. I was told that he was your friend. Is that why his bonuses were so high?" she asks, cooly twirling a length of her hair around her finger. When women try to be seductive and glamorous, I've noticed that it consists of looking like a particularly vacant duck.

"No, it was because I used to just pay him, and now I have to pay five people to to oversee a department which he was in charge of singlehandedly."

"Yes, I've heard how wonderful he was. He makes me feel ill, really. 'This never would have happened when Lawliet was around!'" she adds in a gruff voice, which I'm hoping is just an impersonation of any one of my MPs, male or female.

"Who said that?" I say. Since she's looking away from me, I take the opportunity to wipe my mouth of her war paint and saliva onto my hand and smear it onto her hitched up skirt. I think she takes it as an affectionate nudge, because she turns back to smile at me in a duckish way.

"The Environment Secretary, just after I slapped him for putting his hand on my leg, like you just did; no one important. Does it make you angry? That he did that to me?"

"Not really."

"But that's because you respect me enough to know that I can look after myself, isn't it. You're fighting against jealousy and unbridled testosterone."

"No."

"Oh. You say that, but if you were there, I know that you wouldn't have been able to stop yourself from punching him. Anyway, was it an inside job, the Lawliet thing?"

"What?" I ask, opening one eye to look at her. She shakes the silk spaghetti strap of her camisole from her shoulder and smiles stupidly, like that's going to make me reveal details of a Bay of Pigs invasion.

"Come on. He was a scapegoat, right? It's ok, I've seen it all before with people who knew too much, so it's not going to shock me. Someone's head always has to roll, and your Penber report was quite suggestive. He took on too much responsibility and did all that shady work for The Lady. It just makes sense."

"As far as I'm concerned, he wasn't involved. Those rumours were quashed in the inquiry."

"By you, yes, but he was dead by then and the damage had already been done in your report. If he'd lived, he'd probably be in jail and he'd have so many secrets. He'd write one of those prison diaries. If he was in jail, what would he have to lose? The last thing you'd need is a possible loose cannon, so
a wet disposal would be the only option."

"He wasn't assassinated, Mai."

"Maybe, but secrecy breeds conspiracy. Are you going to tell me that it wasn't your report now?"

"No. It was my report."

"Did he seem depressed, like you said? Someone who's going to do something like that is going to seem depressed. No way out. Trapped. Politicians out for blood. The NPA breathing down his neck. It's so John Le Carré!"

"You can never be quiet, that's the problem with you. When people feel insecure, they overcompensate by talking too much, have you noticed that? It's what you do. Can we quit the pillow talk and get on with the questions from The Times? I have a meeting with Education in twenty minutes."

"Keehl said that Lawliet had a phobia of drowning, so why did he drown himself? It's like me deciding to kill myself by falling on a bed of hypodermics. I'm scared of needles, you know."

That's so fascinating that I sit up to zip up my trousers and find my tie. She never lets go of things, which is why I'll have to find a way to get rid of her and destroy her reputation so that no one will listen to her, even her own mother. It's like she's trying to find tips on how to avoid what she thinks happened to L from happening to her.

"Lighty, Lighty, come back," she whines, pulling me back down by my shoulder while she quickly rustles some papers to try to placate me by actually doing her job. "I'm sorry. It's the journalist in me talking. I know that you're too nice to do something like that. The cabinet probably went over your head."

"Excuse me?"

"We'll go back to the interview, question twelve. Prime Minister, tell me about you. People want to know all about you."

"Is that how the question is worded? From The Times?"

"They want to know what you do when you're not working."

"No comment."

"Lighty lou… Obviously, we can't tell them the truth. We have to keep this clean, but people want to know what interests you have which aren't political; what your hobbies are, what books you read, what your favourite film is. We might be able to work out a deal with a publisher so that you'll get a cut of the sales spike if you pick an obscure title. I'll look into it. But who's the real Light Yagami who writes the manifestos and sticks to his promises. People don't understand it, Lighty. Politicians don't do things like that. Light Yagami. Just who is he?" she asks the ceiling. It is one of the great mysteries of the world, I know. I'm beloved by men, women, children, and household pets alike, yet none of them know a thing about me.

"Why does it matter?"

"It's the number one question. Every man wants to be Light Yagami and every one wants to know what makes him tick."
"Really. Still?"

"Of course they still want to know. You're the most powerful man in the country. You have to give me something here. This is supposed to be a personality-led article. Just make it serious enough for the over-fifties and cool-hip-hop-nic-nac-paddwhack enough for the under-thirties to keep the demographics interested, ok? Oh, and I think that we should say that you had a few lower class jobs before you went into politics, like a postboy or something? Say how difficult it was for you to make ends meet then to make the working classes think that you're one of them, you know?" she says.

Right. Being one of the people and at one time impoverished is all the rage now. I haven't quite given up on my intention to leave soon and let her write this article by filling in the gaps with some bland shit and occasional surprising but inoffensive oddities, but a fucking postboy? I think that someone might realise that I went into politics straight from university and never worked before then because I didn't have to and actually had, by most standards, a privileged life. I sigh as I start tying a Balthus knot in my tie. I'm the only person I know who can do this without a mirror. Does that count as a hobby?

"I don't know who Light Yagami is, but I wish that I was him sometimes."

"Silly," she says, slapping my back light like Kiyomi does. I need to command some respect here without creating bitterness. "Just say something revealing. Who is Light Yagami?"

"Light Yagami is who you see in the papers and on the TV. Do I really have to try to convince people that I have a personality? They see me first and then my suit, in that order, as it should be. They don't care about anything else. My personality's not important even when I'm campaigning," I reply. Due to my complete blank about how to answer such a stupid question without reverting to a personal statement format, I'm filled with anger about that blankness, and direct that anger silently towards Mai. All I can think of saying sounds uninterested and uninteresting, and, most worryingly, it sounds depressingly honest. I wake up, I put my suit on and I'm Light Yagami, but he's a figment of imagination who goes by my name. I don't have a personality because it's safer not to have one. I don't have any pastimes because they're boring. My work actually is my life. Everything I do isn't appreciated as it should be, and sometimes I might as well be a wooden and silent figurehead of a ship for all my MPs expect of me. I wanted to change things but there's always something in my way, like I'm fighting through a tangled forest of weeds and thorns, and I don't know why I do that much anymore. Out of habit, I suppose. "Tell them that I'm a bastard, Mai. I'm a bastard and I hate everyone."

"You like me though, right?" she laughs, putting her interview questions on my chest as she leans on me. She's way too close to my face.

"Not at all."

"Lighty."

"Not at all. You call me 'Lighty' and that's very, very annoying. I don't like you, but you're in love with my job and I can use that. You'll write what you think people want to hear me say; that I play guitar or something like that."

"Do you play guitar?" she asks, writing something down on the paper. On my chest.

"Do I fuck. Next."

"Question thirteen… Oh, it's about the flooding and dredging concerns."

"All flooding questions will have to go to the Environment minister until next Friday when I sack
him and officially oversee that issue."

"Are you?! That's brilliant news!"

"Yes, confidentially, until next Friday, it's brilliant news. Until then, say that I have every faith in him to resolve the problem. I recognise how important it is and I'm keeping a very close eye on it. That'll scare the fucker," I say. I don't know why she's laughing, but then she kisses my shoulder quickly and leans on her hand to gaze down at me some more, which is quite worrying. "What?"

"Don't you think that you're taking a risk, being so honest with me?"

"It doesn't matter what I say to you."

"Doesn't it? Maybe I'll just write exactly what you've said. The truth is more interesting."

"No, your job is to lie; that's what press relations do. There's no point in being creative, anyway. I have four witnesses on standby at any one time who'll swear in court that I was with them if I tell them that I was, and one of them is my wife - your favourite person."

"She's amazing."

"And you aren't. We never met here today, you never asked me any questions, and I've hardly spoken to you since you've been working for the Press Office. Don't contradict that."

"Don't be mean, Lighty. It gives me heartburn."

"I'm just saying don't even think about it. I can make your life untenable if you do anything other than what you're paid to do, and you know it. Plus, you like sleeping with married men, especially important ones. That's a problem of yours, isn't it. Sleeping with the Prime Minister makes you feel irresistible and important, but don't forget your place if you want to keep some semblance of a life. I'm not doing this because I want to and I'm not doing it because I'm bored. I'm doing this because I can't be bothered to answer stupid questions - I want you to. And maybe I'm a little bored."

"So, is that what happened to Lawliet? He wouldn't do what you told him to and you made life untenable for him?"

"I didn't help, put it that way. People who let me down tend to regret it," I say, surprising myself with how cold I sound. It doesn't bother her though, because she climbs on top of me so that her 'Kiyomi cut' hair sweeps into my face for a second and nearly blinds me. Bitch.

"I love you," she says, and I roll my eyes, mostly because she's pecking kisses all over my face. God, not again. She makes my skin want to crawl off my bones. She starts these things but then expects me to do all the work when I didn't want it in the first place.

"No you don't. You're confusing it with admiration of my status."

"I love you, I love you."

"Shut the fuck up."

I look for those with weaknesses and something I can use. Everyone has at least one, and in this case, Hishida's is drink and attractive men. I have drink and I'm an attractive man, so it's a perfect combination for him, really. To put him at ease, I've taken him on a tour of the House and Kantei and alluded to how he could have influence here. My government could use someone of his expertise to
advise them, I tell him. I generally blessed him with my attention and grand rooms with high ceilings until his confidence was properly inflated. I plied him with mixed drinks and now dinner in one of the best conference rooms near my office, which has an excellent view, and had classically minuscule portions served to keep his blood alcohol level high. He was introduced to Kiyomi and she joined us for dinner, as did Mikami, to add his legal understanding which backed up mine, but neither he or Kiyomi were necessary. I really only invited them to give Hishida more nice things to look at, and Kiyomi must have an honorary master's degree in hostessing by now. All the ugly people were hidden away today for his guided tour so that it would become a fairy land of possibilities for him with no duffers.

As discussions turned to the bank, Hishida became increasingly coy, but I could sense how close I was to securing a deal. I want a state owned bank based on my own statutes which offers better rates but which would still bring in a lot of profit to be reinvested for the country's welfare. I want his bank, but I don’t want to pay for it. I want to seize it entire – all assets, staff, property and all. If you even it out, it'd probably work out to be around the sum he and his father before him owe this country in taxes. I arranged for myself to be introduced to him when I noticed that his shares had been falling steadily, only for a sharp and sudden lift, which I investigated and found that the cause was due to private and highly illegal investment from dubious sources, if I chose to believe rumours. Now, I could either blow the whistle on this, destroy the bank, and rid several thousand people of their jobs and cause yet more people to lose their savings, giving me no option but to bail the bank out, or I could make it into a positive. I took over a declining country which I've contrived to improve and stabilise. It's not good enough though. It's never good enough. My party are renowned for being ineffective, and there was a period when I felt that I was losing control of my cabinet when they started running around like headless chickens as a reaction to some of my more revolutionary 'socialist' ideas. Getting involved with the banking system might be one of them, but they lack the mental agility and instinct required for seeing that we can't just rest on our laurels. You only have one chance in politics and it has to be a continuous storm of improvements. That's the way it is. A year ago, there was a bitter piss poor attempt at a coup by my Head of Agriculture after I'd fired him. A leadership vote was held after an aggressive campaign on his part. My support wasn't assured because of the aforementioned temporary terror at my reforms. I really missed L's PR and whip strategies but I sat back and waited, thinking that to appear worried, chasing votes, wouldn't do me any favours. My quiet desperation for a majority was such that I had a terminally ill MP brought to the House in an ambulance for the vote though. He agreed, obviously, as one of my staunchest supporters. He called me The Boy King and predicted my rise to power years ago, which might have had something to do with the blow jobs I'd given him in his Rolls Royce when I was a Junior Minister. All in all, his sacrifice was much appreciated. I won by one vote, he died a few days later, and I sent a wreath of orchids to his funeral service. It wasn't the majority I was looking for, but it got the job done. Ex-Agriculture retired from politics in disgrace and all that supported him really, really regret doing so. Apparently, it was just to 'frighten' me out of my 'sense of regality', whatever that meant, but it only made me more determined. It had no effect on me other than now I'm more suspicious of my MPs, thinking that they're all looking at my crown and plotting how they can take it.

So, I've been dancing around Hishida for months leading up to this. I think that he's aware that I want his bank or at least shares in it, but he probably thinks that it's as a personal investment, like I'm one of his Yakuza friends. I have two contracts; one which would annihilate him and some would say it's insane of me for thinking it a possibility, and one which is more reasonable but not as beneficial to me. As time goes on, my confidence in the destroying contract increases. I ask him to sign with me today so that we can start our business relationship without actually discussing the terms, so he seems very muddled about what I'm proposing.

"My bank's not for sale and I don't need a bailout," he laughs, slurring madly.
"I wasn't suggesting one."

"Sorry, I thought that was what you were leading to. Anyway, I couldn't possibly make any decisions about shares without legal looking over it and discussing it with the board. Could you pass the wine?"

"Of course. Mikami, pour Hishida-san another glass of wine," I say, propping my chin on my hands as I watch him gulp the wine down. He needs another. "I apologise. I thought that I was talking to the owner of the bank and that you make the decisions."

"I do."

"But you can't without talking to dozens of people first? That's false advertising. I had my legal team go over this and it's very fair. We'll take care of everything. It is very fair, isn't it, Mikami."

"Very." Mikami agrees. He doesn't know what's in the contract. Hishida looks blearily at him and then back at me like he's found himself in a sweet shop. Doing him the great honour of pouring him another glass of wine myself, I glance up at his ecstatic face.

"So, you can trust me. I'm the Prime Minister. I'm hardly going to do something untoward. Let me be frank about this. Because we're friends, aren't we?"

"Most definitely."

"I'm in sales at the moment. I'm currently nominating individuals for life peerages in exchange for donations or contributions. Should it clear through the appointments commission, which it will, some people will have a lot to gain with very little investment. Influence you just can't buy, but you can today only. If you come back tomorrow, the offer won't be on the table, because I have people lining up for consideration. I need a decision from you today."

"How interesting."

"I think so. So, say someone contributed through cash donations to the party or, as in your case, a deal with your bank, we could come to an arrangement as to your induction into what would be a part reinstatement of the House of Peers, in effect. I'd nominate you personally, so you'd be a shoe in," I say. He's not really listening to me though. His drink swirls in his glass, he drinks it, and then swills it around his mouth like mouthwash as he eyes me intently. If I was younger and my position not as it is, I might have been tempted to back the hell away from this, but no one would have listened to me anyway because I had no power. Power can be so destructive if it's in the wrong hands.

"Prime Minister, I hope that I don't offend your wife by saying this, but I'd love to see you without your suit. Do you ever take it off? I don't think I've seen a photo of you in anything other than a three piece suit, even in pap shots."

"I don't do waistcoats, you must be mistaken. I find them rather… restrictive."

"Oooh, tell me more. I'd pay good money to see you without a suit," he says. I feel his hand under the table rub my knee and I sit back to look at it to remind myself of just one of the reasons why I fucking despise him. Kiyomi sees it too but pretends that she hasn't, and I smile. It's actually exactly where I wanted him to take this, because it's so much easier to dupe someone with a distracted agenda. I admire his arrogance in thinking that he could make a bed notch of a Prime Minister, but overall, I'm disgusted. The more he drinks, the more forthright he becomes in his lechery when I encourage him with carefully chosen words, and I've had to put up with this shit for months. When
someone compliments me, it doesn't surprise me, but on the other hand, I lose any small potential respect I might reserve for them until that point.

"I'll take my jacket off if you sign this. That's a start, isn't it?" I suggest, pushing only the signature portion of the contract towards him on the table until he falls back into his chair, ruddy-faced and thrilled. He laughs, arrogantly pleased with himself.

"It was only hypothetical. It'd take a lot more than that."

I continue to smile as he laughs and glances down into his glass like it's a magic eight ball. Offering him more to drink at this point would look insultingly suspicious, and besides, I want his signature to be legible. I'll just have to hope that his dick is more awake than his brain.

"Ah, yes. I've heard about what 'more' is with you. My wife read an article out to me about you the other day. What are the claims? Sexual harassment of your staff? The press are just terrible, aren't they? Trial by media must be so stressful."

"Innocent until proven guilty," he replies, wagging his finger.

"That's what Kiyomi and I were saying, weren't we, Kiyomi," I say, but she petulantly tosses her napkin onto her dish instead of answering. "Are you going to court about it?"

"No. Just some Ainu driver with an imagination, so I paid him off. It was overblown," he says stiffly. "I'm really not that demanding."

"I'm disappointed to hear that."

"Well, I have to think of my reputation," he nods smugly.

"Hmm. I know something of that, myself. I think that we should talk in my office, don't you?"

When I stand, everyone looks at me in surprise. I'm not sure why. Slow and subdued, Hishida stands and follows me, walking behind me towards my office. I give a pointed look at my secretary as I open the door to let Hishida go ahead, and her eyes follow me – the rest of her face obscured by her computer monitor. She's seen me take several people into my office over the last year or so, all infamous for one reason or another, and all dulled with drink and hope. All go in confident and smiling and leave pale and shaking, knowing that there'll be all kinds of legal notices dropping through their letter boxes that week and their lives as they know them are over. This one's easier because his greed is for me more than for money. I don't expect this to take long.

After closing the door, I turn away from Hishida and take my jacket off, hearing him loudly sigh when I do. He must be right about those lurid stories about him being overblown if that's all it takes. I walk past him to sit on desk, and after some contemplation, he pulls a chair up and sits in front of me, and he's only surprising in how lazy he is. I lean back, recoiling but hopefully not too obviously when he runs his hands up my legs and sticks his face in my groin. Yes, he does. But I have the contract in my hand, turned to the important page where the dotted line is, and use it to block myself from his face so that he looks up at me in confusion.

"I've left my glasses somewhere," he says, bored and squinting at the print. I know that he did. He left them on my living room coffee table and I have them in my jacket pocket. "What are the terms?"

"Very favourable. I'm going cheap and everything must go, Lord Hishida."

"Oh, I like that. Lord Hishida. So I sign this and you get, what? 10%? How much are you willing to invest?"
"Something like that."

"I can't do more than 10%. So shares were 54,700 yen at opening –"

"They're 56,300 now."

"That's honest, Prime Minister. With a 10% share, you could be on the board of directors. I would see a lot more of you then, Light. May I call you Light?"

"No. And, yes, I am honest. It's all there," I say, tapping the contract where he should sign if he knows what's good for him.

"You're not planning a hostile takeover, are you?" he laughs. I lean back a little to touch the line of my belt.

"Ha. No, not hostile. I wouldn't know where to start. Besides, maths isn't my strong point, so what would I do with a bank? It all goes over my head, I'm afraid." My maths teacher said that I was the most gifted student he'd ever had the privilege of teaching, and I thought, well, yeah, obviously. I scored 99%, and I'm sure that the only reason I didn't get 100% was because a fuckwit marked it. I didn't challenge it, but now I wish that I had. The unfairness annoys me sometimes. "God, my trousers feel tight after all that food. I'll have to go to the gym or something."

"Or something. So, are you as honest with your wife as you are with me?" he asks, causing some friction on my thighs as he rubs them. I try very hard not to wrinkle my nose and punch him, choosing to smile carnally but comfortingly instead when I hold my pen in front of his face. I'm perpetually amazed by my acting abilities, and he's so starstruck that he quickly signs the contract. My smile spreads and heats my blood as he scrawls his life away unthinkingly, because it's as easy as that. When he drops the pen on the floor as a follow through from the final oblique and sweeping flick, I pull the paper away and look at it above his head. He immediately buries his face down again so that I'm treated to a stunning, shining view of the bald patch where his combover has become dislodged. His hands pull at the front of my shirt, which is all so very familiar somehow, and that's partly why I put an end to it and stand up suddenly. His chair rolls backwards on its castors when I knee the seat of it between his legs before I walk towards the window. He's still bent over with his legs stretched out in front of him, and it takes him a few seconds to realise what's happened and let out an aggrieved vowel sound.

"I must say, this is more than acceptable. On behalf of my country, I thank you for your good sense," I tell him, reading over the key phrases of the contract. It looks far more beautiful in the glare of full daylight. I wonder how I can get so much enjoyment out of destroying someone, but they always deserve it. Cosmic ordering or karma just doesn't do the job well enough and I have to step in, that's all. Here's me thinking that I've made everything perfectly clear for him, but he still doesn't get it and just hums and rolls his chair towards me, so I step closer to the door and let him see the full repulsion I have for him. "I'm not interested in your faggoty ways, you perverted son of a bitch."

"What?"

I turn back to him only because I can't stop myself from glorying just a little bit, and use the contract to fan some cool air onto my face. The only way that this could be better is if he was L, because I wish I'd said that to him when he first walked into my office instead of wasting years of my life flattering him for no reason.

"You should really read things before you sign anything. Try to remember your glasses next time. I'll have this faxed over to your legal department."
"What have you made me sign?" he asks.

"You've just handed over your bank to the state. Well, I've seized it, really. Since your family avoided paying substantial taxes over the last few years and 30% of the shares were sold to the mafia in exchange for stabilisation loans because you were disinclined to pay for things yourself – which you've just admitted to by signing this, by the way – I'm just preventing the collapse of the fifth largest bank in the country. Did you think that you could carry on siphoning money and declaring losses until the state would have to bail you out? Because I'm not bailing out any banks, and I'm not reimbursing the mafia for your fuck ups. They've lost everything, I'm sorry to say. I don't suppose that you read my manifesto. No matter. It didn't get much press, but one of my proposals I subsequently passed as the caretaker of this country allow me certain governing powers if the economy is jeopardised in this kind of situation. As a bank, you signed a code of practice, didn't you? Didn't you read that either? Anyway, the new laws also allow the Treasury to reclaim avoided taxes retrospectively, so based on that, I'd say that you're fucked. It would be a financial catastrophe if I didn't intervene before you went into receivership, so I'm going to nationalise it to reclaim some of what you owe me, and you owe me a lot of taxes. Don't worry though, voluntarily conveying the bank will look relatively good for you. The courts might go easy."

"Wait, you can't do that!" I says, stumbling as he stands. "That's all I have left. There are people after me – I owe them money. They'll kill me if –"

"Why should I care what happens to you? If the people are the shareholders, you could try to reimburse them with anything you have left, if that's the problem. Although I don't think that you'll have anything left."

"But all my money is tied up with the bank. We had refits."

"Oh dear. I don't entirely believe you, but I can understand your anxiety. I'm not sure how well the Yakuza will take to the idea of losing their equity because you're effectively bankrupt."

"You can't just take my bank! It's been in my family for generations."

"And you've just given it to me. If what you say is true, perhaps you should make your way straight to the police to report your fears. Or better still, I'll have them come to you. You should be careful what you say about me though; don't start telling tales, because the chief is a friend of mine and I raised the basic wage for those in law enforcement. They won't have a bad word said about me and they can get nasty, so I hear… Get yourself together, man. Your flies are undone."

"The Yakuza will kill me. They'll kill you," he says, still drunk and now depressingly so. He whimpers as he falls to his feet.

"Not if I kill them first. I know who's involved and they'll know I too when they're busted. You never know, things might happen to them while they're in custody, say by suicide or as a result of a prison fight or attempted break out. It's a double hit for me. For anyone left, then I think that if they come after anyone, it'd be you. It's been a secret service operation for a few months, I'm just taking the opportunity to clean the streets like any self-respecting Prime Minister should do. Look at it this way, if you're going down, why you should you bring innocent people down with you? That should be balm for your soul. Oh, and you're responsible for any costs as a result of this transfer of ownership, which I suppose that you can pay for with that hefty bonus you gave yourself this year. Everything's covered in this. If you're let out on bail, I'm sure that my legal team will go over it with you. Thanks again."

"Please help me."
"No, I don't think so. Goodbye, Hishida."

"Wait!"

When I look back, he's standing in a sweaty combat position and holding my letter opener. I thought that I'd got rid of that thing; it's far too dangerous.

"God, don't be stupid," I sigh wearily on my way out of the room.

I pass the contract to my secretary and she rushes off to Legal to have it dealt with without being told to. Another secretary lets out a little shriek and Hishida bawls out my name like a primal scream, but I don't turn around. Five of my security guards run past me into my office, and I hear the thuds of what I can only presume are chairs or Hishida being thrown around. Everything's so methodical and clockwork now.

It's hilarious hearing him being dragged out of my department to wait in custody for the NPA to collect him; he has such a temper. He rambles on about how he's not a faggot, he's a human being, and how I won't get away with 'this' because it's not legal, etc. All counts that I differ on, but it doesn't matter. I can do anything I want now. Once back at the table, with Mikami and Kiyomi as stunned as when I left them, I fall contentedly back into my chair. Their stares and silence don't annoy me much because presumably they're just in awe of me, so I'll eat a breadstick until the last course arrives.

"Did I miss anything?"

I'll skip some parts, but I might come back to them later, if I feel like it. Now, I didn't buy into the funeral at all and thought that the whole thing was based on a hastily made conclusion, but because Kiyomi insisted that we go, I went for a change of scenery. L's mother was there, which should have been a laugh, but instead I had to listen to her tell me about her 'dead' son, based on the version of him she knew when he was growing up. She was distraught with all the 'parents shouldn't have to bury their own children' shit. I don't know who else she thinks should have to bury them. Only because she was so upset, I couldn't tell her that he'd faked his own death because he was a coward and the most unpleasant person you could possibly meet. While we were probably burying a perfectly decent man, it wasn't her son, because her son was most likely fucking thirty cabin boys on a ship off the Canary Islands at that very moment. I also couldn't contradict her description of a peerless man by telling her how he hit me over the head, amongst other things, and arranged the death of one of my friends. Basically, she described someone completely unrecognisable to the person I knew, and if she hadn't told me who she was talking about then I wouldn't have had the vaguest idea. I did find the whole drama strangely cathartic though. Anyway, she told me that the executor was at L's house, so I thought that I'd go down there to beat some information out of them, because L wouldn't let anyone take his money. If he was dead, he'd probably be buried with it and wouldn't need an executor. So, I drove myself over there after getting changed, ashamed that I hardly had to look at the road because I knew the journey so well. I needed no condemnation from anyone, because I could heap it onto myself better than anyone else could. I tried putting myself in his position as someone given promises by a person who'd choose his job over them any day, or that's what it must have seemed like to him, but I couldn't understand what his problem was. I think that I treated him ok. Sort of. I did everything I could have done. It was stupid attacking myself, but I didn't think that I was at fault, really. It's not easy being sensitive.

For some strange reason, I blamed the lake. I wanted to drain it and fill it in with concrete like my anger when I first caught sight of it. Sludgy, grey, and hardening in my veins. Then all these images came into my head because my imagination had decided to go on a kind of self-destruct mission and I was too uninterested to stop it. Still, I found myself idly wondering if it was dark when they found
him. Apparently, he'd put stones in his pockets to weigh himself down. But I didn't believe that he'd done that, so I pushed it out of my head. I needed someone to blame for 'mental anguish' and the trouble he'd caused me, and I blamed just about everyone else but him, ranging from Kiyomi to Mikami to L's mother to the doctors. No one that I could sue, so anger just built up in me and found a home with other like-minded feelings. You wouldn't have known how lost I was if you looked at me. Somehow I found it easier to blame myself rather than him. I found it easier to blame a lake than it was for me to blame him. But no, despite this, I didn't believe that he was dead. It was just what the official line of thinking was and it gets to you after a while. If I didn't go along with it then people would get suspicious, and I find that I'm very proficient at convincing even myself if I'm not careful, so I'd flip between both theories. My feelings towards him also changed with a frighteningly illogical violence from minute to minute, though most of the time I wouldn't think of him at all.

The door was open, so I let myself in. The house was so fucking quiet and it smelled of him – hitting me with warmth and tannin and some strange sweetness which I'd nearly forgotten – but I just became more devoid of feeling than I had been. I breathed in, saw the bowl for keys on the console table by the door and thought: 'I'll take that.' A pair of his shoes were on the floor where he'd left them, but don't worry, I didn't want those because I thought that he might need them when he got back. And why would I want a pair of someone's old shoes, for fuck's sake? One was on its side, messily cast off, broken in to near destruction at the heel from how he'd peel them off his feet with his toes. They made me want to smile. And on a rack nearby, my house slippers were where I'd left them – straight, together, and neat. I hated them. You'd think that I would have come to my senses but I hated that I didn't love him any less.

There was a noise within the house and I thought for second that it was him. I stood there waiting and hoping while my head was telling me not to be such an idiot. I think that I called for him, I can't remember. Everything hurt, for some reason, and all I wanted to do was cry or die, one or the other. But I never cry, and I certainly won't die.

"You're looking very casual today, Prime Minister. And I so hoped that I wouldn't see you again," a deep voice said. I looked towards where it came from and a man with dark hair, not quite as tall, not quite as thin was standing in the doorway of L's office. It wasn't him; it was his executor. I wasn't surprised to see who that was, but I was surprised that he wasn't at the funeral if he was in the country. He looked like he'd been crying, probably in fits and starts, but then he usually looks like that. I also recognised his clothes, which fit too snugly in all the wrong places.

"B."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing, really. I heard that you were here. You're wearing his clothes?"

"It helps me. It also saves me from going to the dry cleaners. Did you go to the funeral? It was just a mock funeral for all you fuckers who say that you were his friends to make yourselves feel better. He wasn't in the box. That was dealt with last week. I hope that you all had a lovely time and did a lot of professional circulating. I hate funerals. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I was just thinking that if I squint my eyes a lot, you look a bit like him."

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," he gasped.

"Well, there's a lot of imagination involved and my eyes have to be practically closed," I clarified, glancing around the room awkwardly, wincing at all the half-packed boxes and the emptiness in progress. "Do you mind if I have a look around? I won't take anything."
"I suppose so. I found some of your things, I think. Yours or Stephen's. They're in black bin bags by the road. Everything here's L's, so don't touch or I'll slap your face."

"You're packing up his things?"

"He wanted the house sold. He wanted everything here sold, but I don't know what to do with the other houses because he wasn't specific. I'm getting legal advice about it."

"So you're going to sell everything."

"It was in the will and very dramatic. Along the lines of 'and salt the earth, let nothing remain,' except that I'm putting some things up for auction next week. You can take this as a viewing opportunity, if you want," he said, and slouched into L's office, leaving me with full rein of the rest of the house. I scratched the side of my face quickly to kickstart myself into moving, walked a few steps, determined to get it done and get out of there, but stopped to lean on the back of one of the dining chairs and close my eyes to steady myself. It was so strange to me how ill I felt from being there and seeing B, and realising that L probably wasn't going to come out of the attic to tell us both to fuck off.

After a moment, I steeled myself to go somewhere. I looked into the kitchen and the door to the garage was open, so I glanced inside. It was strange seeing it flooded with light, and now I could see that Raye's desk was still there, Stephen's boat was still there, covered up, and beside that, crates of apples were piled up. I didn't think much of it and moved on. I felt like I was sliding down a slope and hitting the sides constantly.

The reason I went there that particular day is so misty to me, like a siren called me. I felt compelled to be there rather than for any other reason I'd used to excuse it. My memories flicked back to the last day I'd been there, and I hated myself for how quickly I'd jumped out of bed, how I didn't say anything to L until he asked me if I wanted coffee after my shower, and how I'd been so quick to leave. I didn't even ask him if he'd wanted to come with me to the House to hear me announce the inquiry. I could have done. Maybe if I'd acted differently at any point that day, things would be different. He probably would have thought to have asked for a preview copy of my report, and then everything would have been cancelled. He'd still be here now.

"Are you going to stare at that bed all day? You're a mess, aren't you. You should speak to someone," B said from behind me.

"Ha," I breathed out, dipping my head. "But there is no one."

"If you taking anything will mean that you leave sooner, then you can," he said in a dull tone, and walked off again, but I followed him. Even then, he resented me.

"What are all those apples for in the garage? I didn't think that he liked them that much."

"No idea, don't ask me. Are you taking time off work?"

"Just a half day."

"You should take some time off."

"And do what?" I asked, looking up at him and his blank face. Only the redness around his eyes gave him away in the slightest, and he had a certain numbness which I recognised. I don't know if he felt the same slight bond I felt with him. "Thanks, but I can't."

He shrugged his shoulders lazily, because he didn't really care. "It's up to you." Suddenly, I wanted
someone to talk to about it. About L. Everyone avoided the topic like he was a taboo. I didn't want to talk to them or people who didn't know him, and that's still the case. It suited me fine most of the time, but at that moment, I wanted to talk about him.

"He said that he killed all those people. You know, the 'curse'? He said that it was him."

"The more I hear, the more I think that he wasn't well at the end," he replied. He gave away no emotion, sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by boxes. There was a pause while he ripped a length of brown tape with his teeth. "He wasn't taking his medication, was he. You don't know, but I've been expecting this for a long time."

"You believe that he's dead?"

"I know that he's dead," he said with an odd cheerfulness. "You don't? Don't be idiotic, Prime Minister. I just wonder what pushed him over the edge. Why do you think he did it?"

"Why he left? He… I found out that he covered up the death of a politician, years ago. I don't know. I've stopped looking into it but there's going to be an inquiry. So he's not with you?"

"Do you see him anywhere?"

"I mean, is he with you in France? Or somewhere else? You can tell me, B. I won't do anything. I just want to know."

"You want to know where he is?"

"Yes."

"Try Tama cemetery. But it was an inquiry that did him in? That's so disappointing, L, I'm ashamed of you. He was always such a drama queen. So, you dumped him in the shit and he did this to avoid all that boring legal stuff. Figures."

"I didn't dump him in the shit, but he must have left because of the report. He didn't say much beforehand, just crazy things. I didn't know that he was involved in Raye's death until after the report had been given out. I mean, I thought that he was, but I…"

"Didn't want to believe it?" he asked, calmly strapping down another box of L's life. Of my life. "But it's your fault."

"No! I told him at the time that nothing was going to happen to him."

"You just told me that he covered up an assassination. Is that what it was? That doesn't surprise me. Still, I don't think that he'd have much chance of nothing happening to him. You drove him to it."

"It wasn't my fault."

"But it was your report. You fed him to the press; that's how he'd see it. It doesn't sound to me, from what I've heard, like he had many options left."

"No, B, that wasn't how it was at all. I was… undermined."

"How does a Prime Minister allow himself to be undermined, I wonder."

"It doesn't matter. We were going to sort it out that day. I was going to resign, I'd left Kiyomi, I had a divorce lawyer. We had plans," I said, gushing words and regrets onto B, and all out of context, never the whole story. My eyes stung and I was saying too much, so I turned back to him with a
complete change in topic. "So, how long are you staying for?"

"Another week, maybe. Until this is sorted."

"What about the firm?"

"He left everything to me. I'm just going to be a very silent partner. Practically dead as long as they send me cheques regularly."

"He left everything to you?"

"Why? Do you think that he'd leave you something? He didn't. Otherwise I'd be obligated to notify you."

"I didn't expect... But we bought a house. We paid half each for it."

"You vulture! Trying to steal a dead man's house!?"

"I'm not. You can keep it. I just wanted you to know that I tried. I was serious."

"There's nothing to suggest that you part-own anything apart from your word, which means zippo to me," he said, making a zero of his thumb and forefinger. "Nul points, Prime Minister Turdface. All his estate was in his name and you're not mentioned anywhere. Are you really going to contest it?"

"I don't give a shit about the fucking house! I don't understand how it's come to this. He's not dead, B."

"I do love a good old fashioned delusion. That's a coping strategy of the temporarily insane in moments of stress or bereavement, but you're insane all the time. I can only presume that you didn't intend to kill him, whatever happened, so that's why you can't accept the truth when it smacks you in the face. You could have had an episode and drowned him yourself, but you don't realise that yet, so you're falling back on the old Gilligan's Island Syndrome. I'm still not sure. Look, I have things to do. Do you want to take anything? Oh, do you have his phone, by the way? The police couldn't find it and it wasn't found with the body." No, because the body wasn't his, I thought. And yeah, I had his phone.

"I'll wipe it and send it to you, if you want. I have to wipe it."

"Ah, you wanted his phone to get rid of any links to yourself. Your dirty little messages? I should have known."

"Why are you being like this with me?" I asked, though I don't know why I expected anything else.

"Because you're here. Everything that happened is your fault. You're the reason he's gone and you come here like you own the place. You're not sorry; you just want to make sure that nothing comes back to you."

"That's not true. So he's really not with you? You don't know where he is? The body they found – it wasn't him, you know."

"You saw the body?" he asked suddenly, looking up at me for the first time to confront with a crazed expression, so I gulped. It was like being in a house with Norman Bates.

"No, but it couldn't have been him. There's nothing to prove that he's dead, B."

"Except that I identified his body," he said, and went back to packing a box. I was stunned into
silence because, from what I knew, everything was based on an identification from one of my security guards at the scene who'd only seen L twice, and L's jacket, which was found in the reeds a few days beforehand.

"I... I didn't know."

"It was definitely him. Did you think that they'd release his body to me if they weren't sure? Like, 'ummm, well, it's a man's body and we're looking for a missing man, it could be him, it might as well be, I'm cold and want a cup of tea, I can't be bothered anymore, let's just say it's him'? It doesn't work like that, dearest. They needed a formal identification, and I was here for that. And his dental records were sent for independent comparison, if that makes you feel any better, because I had a bit of trouble believing it myself at first."

"I never heard about any of this," I said, and he made a sort of high-pitched giggle and went to the kitchen, leaving me standing there feeling like the house was falling down on me. It does seem mad now, looking back, but I was convinced that there had been a mistake. I'd hoped that he'd admit to me that L wasn't dead, or at least that he had doubts. I never really believed it. I thought that L's brothers just wanted the case closed as soon as possible to see what they'd get from his will (which was nothing. I know because L had told me), and B had everything to gain from going along with L's plans, perjury aside. B was the sole beneficiary. Throw in an added bonus for him that L was actually alive and, I would presume, dependant on him, of course B would play along. That wasn't what I was getting from him though, and my lack of interest or knowledge about the body was starting to make me look incredibly stupid and negligent. I just never took it seriously. I was convinced that L would be found alive somewhere. Finding his escape route was what I focused on, not jackets and bodies.

So I stood there while my theories were being silently dismantled. When B reappeared carrying some dishes, he took up exactly where we left off.

"Why should you know? All it took was for me to identify him, and that was it, done. Do you want to see his death certificate? Death by drowning."

"But why would you not think that I'd want to know?"

"Did you think that you had any rights? If you'd really wanted to know, you could have identified the body yourself. You knew him, and you're the Prime Minister. It must count for something."

"I couldn't. I tried to go but I was... ill."

"Oh? Were you feeling a bit poorly? What a shame. Well, I didn't tell you because I don't trust you. Cold reasoning or blind refusal to accept facts helps a person get through a time like this, but I guess you know all about that. L was always saying that you were trying to change things, but yours is the most corrupt government I've ever heard of. L's just another person in a long line of people you've killed off. Am I right in thinking that you were the last person to see him alive? It makes me wonder what you did to him."

"What? I –"

"He was terrified of the water and you knew it. I struggle to sympathise with you. Now you're here with all this 'mew mew mew' when you're the reason L's dead in the first place. I think that you should go and leave this alone. Leave him alone. Content yourself with the knowledge that he won't be confusing you again. Set your ship straight to port, Prime Minister."

"I didn't do anything! I came here to help him and he hit me – he knocked me out. When I woke up,
"He was gone."

"He hit you? A likely story. And what about his hair?"

"He cut it. Before I arrived. He said that he wanted to change."

"I wouldn't do that. I think that you're responsible for that as well, but I don't know why you'd do it. Sometimes it's futile trying to understand the hopelessly unhinged. I've got a photo here somewhere of him on the viewing table. Do you want to see? It might help," he said happily, pulling out his phone. Fuck.

"You sick bastard. You have a photo of him after he died?"

"Ah, so you've accepted that he's dead? That's progress."

"No, he's not dead."

"Oh. That's not progress. Have a look at the photo. Relax, it's just of his hand." He smiled at the small screen, tilting it and lining his hand alongside it as if to mimic the pose, and I looked away from him. A breath shuddered from me and I took a few stumbling steps backwards until my back hit the door. "They looked just perfect, not dead at all, but they were cold; perfect for making pastry. Do you want to see? Don't worry about me, I can handle you if you go manic. You don't want to see? But you don't believe me. I thought that this might prove it to you and make you feel better. I'm not into that softly softly approach."

"Make me feel better!?"

"Confronting issues is key to emotional recovery. Or you could just get drunk forever and ever until your liver gives out."

"You want him to be dead."

"Why would I want that? He was my best friend. I'm just not blind to the truth like you. You want hard, irrefutable facts and you want to see them with your own eyes and do your own little tests until you're satisfied poking and God knows what, but I'm afraid I can't help you there. I have this photo though, or is that all a little too unsavoury for you? I'd hate for you to feel poorly again. You must have such a delicate stomach. You know what I think? You should forget about him, me, everything. Go back to your little macrobiotic family and your job and draw a line under all this. Just go away. I wouldn't have you soil his memory for me for anything. Not by you – you're disgusting. But, speaking as a psychologist, I'd advise you to get some help. You seem to be plagued by numerous psychiatric disorders and now guilt I'd say that you're just clinging on aren't you just clinging on by your teeth but one day you'll go bang because who's going to care about you now I don't mean Light Yagami the Prime Minister son husband father I mean you the real you who's going to put up with that? You can never truly be yourself again. Not that that's a bad thing, because the real you is like toxic waste. But I wouldn't trust you with a gun at the moment, no I would not. Still, if you want to skip the grieving process and do everyone a favour, then you know where the lake is. Tried and tested method."

His words seeped into me like poison, breaking down all the hollow optimism I'd wrapped around myself since that day. I wasn't much more than a buckled, depth charged wreck at the door, breathing haphazardly like I'd been deprived of air and I didn't care if he saw it. I hardly noticed him walking towards me and leaning into my face, examining me like some roadkill he was responsible for.
"Light?" he said, and in the softer tone I'd only heard him use with L sometimes. It was also the first time I could remember him using my actual name and not 'Prime Minister' or a rich variety of insulting nicknames. I looked into his face scathingly, hoping that he felt burned by my hatred for him, but it seemed to have no impact at all. He said perhaps the most shattering thing he could have said. Everything he'd said before were just words, but with the kindness in his eyes and voice, it felt like the end. "I understand now. I'm sorry for your loss."

And I left. I practically ran from the building like it was on fire and once I was back in my car my hands shook on the steering wheel. I found one of L's old sweet wrappers in my car ashtray when I pulled over, so I threw it out of the window and then regretted it. It was littering. Then the possibility hit me for the first time that I wouldn't see him again apart from from grainy photographs or in the background, unfocused, in press footage. I had little to show of his existence or his effect on my life, so it was like he'd disappeared completely, and I was so frustrated that a fucking sweet wrapper suddenly held all these memories and emotions – it was pathetic. I'd thrown it away with no ceremony, only shaking hate.

But B was right. I started my car again and went back to the Kantei like nothing had happened. I went to my office and since then I've worked like a machine that doesn't stop until it breaks down and thrown on the scrap heap, like everyone who has sat at that desk before me.

I have a book in my hands and it's beautiful. Deathly black against the whiteness that surrounds it. Never has there been a book like this. Like a religious text, it kills; not through inspiration, but by a name clearly written within its pages. It didn't corrupt me into doing this, but it gave me power to do what I always dreamed of; to do what one else can. I wonder where it could take me. In it, I see justice – not just changing the world from within like this, on this tiny island, but as a god. His name is written alongside all the others who died for my world, and it's an honour for them. I close the book and walk back to him. I have so little time of him left to me.

Between these rooms I feel that perhaps I've been too impulsive, like he always told me to be, and I stand and wait for words which don't come. He grips the table and I rush to him before he hits the floor, because the greatest compliment that I can give him is to let him die in my arms. His life was his, his death is mine, and so he's mine forever. That's winning. And somewhere, when a shaft of sunlight casts its eye across the overlooked lakebed, his shorn hair moving sleepily in the water is the only thing that's alive there.

He turns his head towards me slowly, his hair longer again and moving like ink in water, and I realise that I'm underwater too, held down by weights. I struggle against it, but then acceptance and a kind of peace comes. I resign.

His lungs are so full of water that there are no air bubbles when he speaks. He looks at me like he still loves me. Like he doesn't blame me and I'm where I should be.

"Kiss me before you go?"

Then I wake up like I've been hit in the chest. My body has completely seized from shock, though I've had this dream before and should be used to it by now. Why can't I dream of owning a ranch of pink ponies like other people do? My heart is crushed like a paper bag, tiredly crunching and wheezing as it inflates and deflates. It's not doing that at all, of course. I've just had a health check for insurance purposes and I'm in excellent order. No, it's all psychological.

I think I'm more shocked by how hazy his image seems to me now, like I can't even remember the details subconsciously. Inside, I think I'm screaming, but I make no sound and it doesn't wake
Kiyomi. I can't even remember why I should be screaming.

Mikami was sacked, but between Naomi and Kiyomi's pestering and then with Sayu and Touta wading in, I reduced that to a six month suspension as long as he said what I wanted him to say at the inquiry. He knows that I hate him and he's lost my trust, but he's still around, grovelling and buying me coffees which I don't accept. He sends me memos sometimes asking me to meet him in the Club for a drink after work. I tell him that I'll be there, but I never am. I still have trouble talking to him because of his treachery but he's still useful for appearance sake and it's easier than battling against Kiyomi, who doesn't want her social circle disrupted because of some 'oversight'. No one mentions L apart from Mihael sometimes, and even he's learned not to. I offered him a position in PR, since L left him unemployed and he knows far too much to be let go. Mai is the only one who doesn't know enough to let her curiosity be hampered by respect or good sense. Kiyomi only occasionally refers to L as 'him' or 'he' bitterly, and only when questioning me on my mood or when I fail in some marital way. She knows now. I don't know when she realised, but she asked me not long after word came through that L had been found. Because I never denied anything, like an ugly political secret, she just accepted it as a fact. She won out in the end of the battle of the sexes, so I don't suppose that it bothers her much. We've been getting along much better since.

But about what happened that day. It was three years ago, so my memory might fail me and I either look back and see things as worse than they actually were or with a blurry glow around the edges.

After I came to again and L wasn't there, I staggered around from room to room with a banging and bleeding head knowing that I wouldn't see him again. I don't know how I knew that, but when I found his phone and wallet and then his passport where I'd hidden it beneath the sofa it was practically proof to me. How could someone as useless as L get by without those things? The glass door in the bedroom was open, the breeze licked at the tapping blinds, and that was the only noise in the house. It was the most peaceful moment I'd experienced for a long time. In fact, I can't remember ever feeling that way before. I knew what the scene looked like, or what it had been made to look like. Whatever had happened, I knew that it wasn't just going to be a case of waiting until he came back, because something told me that I'd be waiting a very long time. I took his phone because there was potentially damaging information on there, then I packed my bags and went back to the Kantei once my security had arrived with a fucking doctor. L must have sent the message they said that they'd received from me as some last gesture so that I'd live to fully experience the humiliation, but I was very calm about the whole thing. It's offensive to me that he thought that he could possibly kill me with a small Barbara Hepworth sculpture. I said a big "fuck you" to L and the empty house before I left.

I wasn't that concerned for the first few days until it was mentioned in the press, and I read it like it was just another story. The tone was disinterested, and the feeling of it was that its purpose was only to fill up dead space. It wasn't until weeks later that Kiyomi had a call to say that police divers had found a body in the lake. I'd had my security team and some private investigators I'd hired help the NPA – checking with taxi firms and airports and making sure that they did things properly – but in the end, it still came back to that lake, and all I was left with was a big bill to pay which I could hardly put on expenses. Before the body was found, I felt quite detached from whatever people suggested reality was and made up my own version of events. Afterwards, things were neither positive or negative, it was just how it was and I felt very little about it at the time, because I'd half-expected him to leave, just not like that.

It wasn't until a day or so after he went missing that I'd thought about what he'd said. I started writing down every word – analysing it, finding messages in the words he chose and how he said them and hating myself for not seeing the fucking obvious. I think about him saying that he killed Stephen and River and Watari and Jeevas and The Lady and everyone else who died from the 'curse' since it first
started, about how he almost killed me, and that he was responsible for Raye's death. I can't make sense of it though, because how could you write down the particulars of how someone would die and make it happen just through that? That's my stumbling block. That's how I know that he was mad at the end. I think that he felt some guilt over Stephen's death and because I was throwing everything away for him, so he reconciled that with himself by imagining that he'd killed people for me, to equal the devotion. There are some things I'll never understand, and even if he was here to ask I probably wouldn't get any closer. The easiest, most realistic view is that he was an insane depressive who killed himself for illogical, fantastical reasons during an unmedicated psychotic breakdown, but I know that wasn't him. What he said was the truth and somehow it makes sense. I can, in some way, believe that he was the curse. No one else could do it as well or for as long as he could. Apart from me, maybe.

My reaction to the news was plain and very stupid denial, and then I was sick in the toilet – because of some bad lobster, I might add. I was going to drive to the lake to identify the body myself because there had clearly been some massive fuck up there confusing L with any old body they'd found. Honestly, L said that in the summer, if you went for a morning walk out there with 'Peer Gynt' on your iPod and joy in your heart at the wonder of nature, you'd be tripping over dead bodies everywhere within five minutes. Ramblers use them as path markers, like they do on Everest. There were massive clean ups twice a year during 'peak season,' which annoyed L, because he'd be eating his breakfast and they'd be fishing someone out of the lake. It made his waffles hard to swallow. I didn't think that L would do something so boring somewhere so conventional and I was on my way to prove it, because Kiyomi was getting on my nerves with her 'why would he do something like that? How many more people are going to die?'

So, picture the scene. I was on my way to the door wearing one of my less good suits. That doesn't matter, but I think that it expresses something about my state of mind and health. But I didn't make it as far as the door. I was overwhelmed by a sudden sickness, ran to the bathroom and threw up my guts into the toilet until my throat burned and I nearly passed out. It was like how people describe botulism, only worse. Those bastards don't know how I suffered. Anyway, Kiyomi found me dying on the bathroom floor, and I remember it in the same daze I experienced then. L wasn't in my mind at the time because all I could think of was trying to find some way to stop feeling as terrible as I did. My mind was empty like the rest of me was, so I just lay on my side and hoped that it would pass. Some unprecedented disaster had happened and I was powerless to do anything.

I remember seeing Kiyomi's feet in the doorway and her voice asking me what was wrong in a confused little girl voice. She must have stood there in silence watching me trying to breathe, because I couldn't reply, but then she shouted at Akane or someone to go away when she was asked if a doctor should be called. She locked us in the bathroom, knelt on the floor and placed my head on her lap. I thought that she'd poisoned my lobster even though I had come back to her, for all intents and purposes. Her sense of injustice is very well developed and her ambition might have made her think that having a dead husband would help her career after all. I don't know what I was thinking, but I don't trust anyone. I couldn't even raise enough strength to call for a doctor myself, so we both just waited.

Eventually, she kissed the side of my face and said: "It was him, wasn't it." I couldn't reply to that either, and the next thing I remember is waking up in that same recovery position, but with Kiyomi's jacket folded beneath my head. I was practically back to normal by then, so I stood and found her sitting near me against the wall. She was watching me from there with bloodshot eyes, so I told her very calmly that I was sorry, I didn't know what happened but I felt better. We both knew that it was a lie. By then I was convinced that she had kept me in there in the hope that I would die and that she was disappointed that I hadn't, but I offered my hand out to her and her hateful look of the betrayed. She took my hand, stood and put her arms around me, which I wasn't expecting, and said: "Why didn't you tell me?" I haven't eaten seafood since.
And that was the last we ever said about it, really, because I refused to talk about it. I wish that I'd had the presence of mind to try to salvage the situation and blame the lobster, but it was too late. I'd done too much and ploughed too many resources into a search operation which I'd become obsessed with to deny anything, because she'd know that I probably wouldn't do that much for her or Kira, let alone for a PR who was due to be questioned by the NPA. I'd hidden everything so successfully from everyone else that I don't know if her understanding and attempts at quiet empathy made things easier to live with or more difficult. So, if I'd done anything to be forgiven for, she forgave me and possibly liked me more as a person. Women like imagined chips in the armour in their partners. Of course, they'd rather that they were the source of vulnerability, but she doesn't seem to mind either way.

Then there was the funeral and B, which is when I took a downturn. Before that blip, I was doing well. It was only a short blip, but in that time I thought of nothing else but L. I continued looking into his disappearance myself for months, trying to find some proof that he'd just left the country, and ignored what B had said about his identification and the dental records. I had B under observation in France, but that came up with nothing. I just could not accept it. Not that long ago, I called B to ask him for something of L’s. He was in my mind again for some reason and I must have sounded like a junkie craving a hit, but B said that I knew that I didn't really need anything. I got angry with him and said a lot of things I shouldn't, but he has a gift of having so little presence either on the phone or in person when he chooses to that it was like I was just talking to myself. I hated everyone and everything that day. Then I realised that he was trying to help me. He made me see that I was acting like a madman trying to reassemble their icon through whatever they can find, although it wasn't that. Sometimes something would happen and I'd think 'Oh, I'll ask L,’ but he wasn't there to ask. If I'd called him, his phone I kept charged would ring in my desk. I'd forget through work and when I was reminded it put me in a terrible mood until I forgot again. I mean, I knew he was gone, but it wasn't real, if you know what I mean. He still seems like I dream I had or a nightmare that never really happened. I know that I was and still am the biggest bastard that ever lived, but I think that I'm becoming more worthy of things I never appreciated until now, and I wish he was here to know that. I just wish that he was here. There's a strange wisdom and calmness from accepting that I have no way of controlling or altering what happened, but it doesn't get easier, it never passes and leaves me as I was. Through him and through knowing him, I've learned to see that some things I thought mattered, turned out not to matter at all, but work still keeps me occupied, regardless. I remember what he asked me to do – to be a good leader and do the right thing, to make the belief he had in me to be well placed – so I'm trying to do that. I accepted his death with hate which morphed into romantic nostalgia for a time and then straight back to hate again, but I'm totally passive about it now and rarely think of him at all. It's been three years since I last saw him and I'm completely fine about it.

What really helped was Kiyomi's crisis two years ago when her mother was dying. Very slowly. Kiyomi practically lived at the hospice because her other sister unsurprisingly found that she had to move abroad, and she was constantly crying when I did see her. I didn't really have the time for overseeing her constituency duties and the whole thing was irritating, so I decided that something had to be done. Two months had gone by and the old woman was still clinging on. She treated Kiyomi like a servant and caused a lot of trouble with the nursing staff for an unnecessarily prolonged time, so I had a quiet word with one of the doctors there and we arranged a peaceful resolution to hasten her making her peace with God. As I'd anticipated, after her mother died in the night, Kiyomi's mood dramatically improved in the days following and we could all go back to working out what normal was. There was an equality in our idiocy for allowing people to use us, and that made us close allies. I'm not sure if it's what marriage is supposed to be all about, but it's better than I expected.

L said that he'd see me later, and I think about that a lot. I did, anyway. I try not to think about things
I can't reason out, but sometimes, and for the most stupid, insignificant reasons, I miss him so much that it pulls the air from me. I miss him like you'd miss air or water. An almost physical pain of loss but constant and thumping like blood in my head which wouldn't cease until I thought that, yeah, I'd see him later. But I don't believe it, really. I can't, and it sucks big, hairy, massive balls. I couldn't understand why I'd need to believe that I'd see him again just to comfort myself. I'd rather have felt nothing. So, as I say, I don't think about it now. Everything worked out for the best, I suppose.

Kiyomi marches in laughing, wearing a Reiss suit and with a dazed look on her face. I should ask her what's wrong but I'm in the middle of reading an article on global warming.

"You'll never guess what she's just said about you," she says, breathless and visibly shaking.

"Hmmm?"

"She's saying that you're having an affair." Mai, you're so stupid, you're going to have to die.

"What!?"

"Akane. That's what she's just said. That she's having an affair with you." Eh? Oh. Yeah. But fuck, that was ages ago and the lights were off because I definitely wouldn't have done it if they were on. It was a minor mishap and only the once - literally, bang, done - ten minutes, tops, because I was back in my chair in time for 'The Week in Review' on the politics channel straight after. Since when did that become an affair? She took advantage of my good nature. Kiyomi was out with Kira somewhere and I was very angry at the time. It wasn't my fault.

"Poor girl," I sigh.

"I just asked her about the state of Kira's room and how she bought him a burger on the way back from school. A burger, Light. It's all around his mouth, you should see it. She poisoned my baby."

"My God, what was she thinking?"

"I don't know, so I asked her and she came out with this story that she's having an affair with you, like that's a reason she gave our son a burger. Can you believe it? Did you know that she has photos of you plastered all over the inside of her wardrobe door?"

"Really? News to me," I laugh, and carry on reading the paper.

"As if you'd look at her twice. She needs a brace and you can't stand her. She'll have to go. This is just the last straw."

I agree and call my security to bring a confidentiality contract while Kiyomi rants about how our until recently highly prized nanny should be marooned on an unpopulated island. There's no other option, I say, and nod my head throughout. Then, unwisely, because she is the definition of unwise, Akane steps into the room arrogantly and looks to me for back up. She's looking in the wrong place. Kiyomi walks to Akane and whispers sweet horribles to her, which Akane replies to, probably equally horribly. It's kind of entertaining in a non-violent cat fight way. I wish I could hear what they're saying, I really do, but my papers make too loud a rustling sound and I don't want to seem interested. It ends in slightly raised voice, anyway, because Kiyomi tells her to pack her bags and then Shizo arrives to chuck her and her fake Louis Vuitton's in a van. Again, I do nothing, even when Akane calls my name questioningly, like she expects me to contradict my wife in any situation. Imagine if Kiyomi knew about Mai, I think, and bite my lip. I just about got away with L but that's because he's dead and was a man, so somehow Kiyomi doesn't see it the same way. It was all backslapping and Saving Private Ryan brotherly love. I'm not sure when I suddenly turned into a
roving husband and started feeling guilty years after the fact. It's really ridiculous. It's not even like I have any interest in it; it's either for work or something to pass the time and everyone does it, so I don't see why I should be held accountable.

The room is rather atmospherically brittle and murderous now. I wish that L was here to witness this. I could have replaced him ten times over, but I have to be restrained – Prime Minister and all. You can't cross a prize winner with any old thing with a big mouth. Speaking of, Akane eventually storms out, slamming the door like an aggrieved teenager, and Kiyomi follows her, possibly to scratch at her eyes, who knows? Who cares? My manicure is holding up very well, I must say.

Kiyomi's voice is calm and assured against Akane's shrill protestations about how I love her, I never loved Kiyomi, Kiyomi is a terrible mother, I deserve better, and all the rest of it. Unfortunately I inadvertently planted most of that in her head by giving her one in Kira's bedroom, off the cuff, two years ago. It didn't make any impression on me and, honestly, I'd forgotten all about it. She was just there and she has this shy virgin, prudish way about her that needed to be knocked the fuck down, but I hardly touched her and I've kept well out of her way since. I can't even remember her surname and couldn't tell you anything about her, even though she's lived in my house for nearly four years. The master always shags the nanny, everyone knows that. And so my sexual renaissance continues. No one would listen to her. I've seen how far I can push people and the press, and it's surprisingly far. My frozen reputation precedes me and how on earth would I find the time anyway? Her buck teeth would make her story sound preposterous. Even Kiyomi doesn't believe it.

"I'm… Just the nerve of the girl!" Kiyomi says once she's back, and I blow some bewildered air out of my mouth as I turn a page. A few minutes later, after listening to Kiyomi blather on, Kira comes in (I know that it's him because it takes him so long to turn the door handle. His hands are permanently covered in sticky stuff, but it's ok, I have anti-bacterial wet wipes), slightly tearful with his school satchel which has nothing in it. As an attempt at diversion during my infamous 'blip,' I tried spending more time around my son. I was trying to force some paternal feeling from myself but ended up just looking at him like he was an alien until he was slightly coherent. On closer inspection, his simplicity and intense happiness at being alive was mystifying to me at first, but I adjusted. I've taken him on as a fatherly project, but he's naturally messy, lazy, obstinate, and doesn't appreciate my efforts, so it's hard work. I won't say that everything changed for me. I'm not a natural father, but I stopped seeing him as a mistake. I guess that I'm fond of him now, but there's not much to say about it, really. He looks like an iPod Nano version of me, only very short and covered in grass stains. There's no Kiyomi in there at all, I think, apart from his habit of carrying empty bags, but that's probably because her features are quite weak and my genes bullied hers, appearance-wise. His personality is a complete mystery to everyone. I question him on his treatment of his 100% wool trousers but he just smiles like I'm making a joke. What do I do now? Is this grounds for corporal punishment? I need a manual for this.

"Where's Akane going?" he asks. Kiyomi seems surprised to see him and kneels down to tell him the news while picking pieces of who knows what off his t-shirt. I hoped that I'd never see a son of mine wearing clothes like that, but then I hoped that I'd never see a son of mine at all.

"I'm afraid that she's leaving us, Kira," "Kiyomi tells him.

"She's deading? She's crying but she doesn't look deaded."

"No, but she's –"

"Yes, Kira, she's well and truly deaded," I say, flapping another broadsheet open to hide my despair. I try so hard not to correct him on all his mistakes because a child psychologist told me that it could cause untold psychological damage and that it's a ready-mix for a despot with an Oedipus complex.
Besides, Kira never looks so sad as when I point out his mistakes. It makes me feel like such a worthless piece of shit.

"But I like Akane," he says, clambering up onto the sofa next to me.

"The god of deading doesn't really care about whether you liked her or not, sadly. Don't worry though, we'll find you another one. Pull your trousers up at the knee or you'll wear them out. You've ruined those already but it's good to get into the habit. Now, tell me what you learned at school today."

"I sang a song and I made a picture and I had some milk. I like milk."

"Is that all? They didn't teach you anything? Right, that is it! We're getting you a private tutor. Fuck this public education system shit!"

"Fuckshit!" he shouts happily. Ooops. Kiyomi's not going to like that, and on cue she comes running over like the cakes are burning.

"Light! For God's sake, he's only in playschool! Kira, you must never say words like that. They're Daddy words. Be a good boy."

"Your mother's right, Kira, you must never say words like that," I say distractedly, because I think that I can hear the phone in the living room. "Is that the internal line? Could you get that, Kiyomi? I have to read the papers. If anyone wants me, I'm in a meeting."

She huffs a little but she goes, so Kira jumps off the sofa to run around the room like a maniac and climb onto my office chair, so I take the opportunity to carry on reading for a few minutes.

"Who are they? Are they politics?" he asks.

I glance up to see what the hell he's talking about, and he struggles to turn around a framed photo to show me it from a distance. He must have found it in one of my desk drawers and I'm shocked to see it, especially in his hands. I haven't looked at it for years and I forgot that it was there.

"Did I say that you could touch that, Kira? Did I say that you could touch my things? Your hands are dirty, you'll..." I feel like shit. I know that he's a manipulative little bastard but he looks so upset by the tone in my voice, and I realise that what I'm saying is through gritted teeth. He holds the frame to his chest with one hand while he wipes the other on his trousers and I feel really shit. Get a grip, Yagami, he's a child, he's your child. "He was someone I knew once – the man with the black hair. The other man is his father. Put it back where you found it, please."

"I don't know them," he says, like he knows absolutely everyone in the world. I watch him while I'm pretending to read the paper and see him pouting and turning the photo back around so that he can look at it more closely. I clear my throat. Put it back in the drawer.

"You met him when you were a baby."

"I don't remember. What's his name?"

"Larsen."

"That's a funny name."

"You can call him L, if you want. That's what I used to call him," I say timidly. Why am I talking so quietly like he's a secret I'm ashamed of? Oh, yes. Because I am ashamed of him.
"ERUUUUU! He looks happy. Can I meet him?"

"No. He's not here anymore."

"He's not? Like Grandma? Is he deaded?"

"Yes."

"How did he deaded?"

"Because he was sad."

"Can you deaded from being sad?"

"Sometimes."

"I'm never sad!" he tells me proudly. I don't have anything to say about that. "Why do you have deaded people in your table? Why's Eru in your table?"

"I don't know."

"Does it make you sad?"

"I'll always be a little sad."

"Why?" he asks. I have to think about it for a moment, about how to be succinct and understandable as possible to a child who can't even tie his own shoelaces and who I don't want to talk to about this, ever. I don't want to questioned about it again.

"Because I miss him," I say, and he screws his face up at the picture

"Why?"

"I just do."

He still can't understand but stays quiet about it. After a while of looking at the photo in confusion, he starts rummaging around in his pocket for something. I think that maybe it's for crayons so he'll draw on the glass and I know that I'll let him do it and get some absurd satisfaction from the defacement. Maybe I'll join in and go mad scribbling out L's face with a furious black crayon, blotting out the only real thing of him that's left until he is truly gone. But Kira pulls out a toy plane. I'm disappointed. I'm used to it. "Do you think that Eru would like my plane?"

"Yes. I think that he'd love your plane," I say after a few moments of silent conflicting feelings. I have no idea what he's talking about, but it's strangely touching in its childishness. Kira sets the picture frame flat on the floor, takes a little toy plane out of his pocket and places it on top of the photo. He looks at it, almost like he's expecting L to say thank you, then runs over to sit next to me. "Did your mother give you that plane?" I ask.

"Yep."

"Because you were a good boy?"

"That's what she said, yep."

"Were you a good boy?"
"Nope!"

"No, I didn't think so. What's 'good' anyway?"

"Being quiet and not making a fuss."

"I wasn't actually asking you, Kira."

"Who were you asking?"

"It's rhetorical... Never mind." I give him a pen and the blank side of a memo in the hope that he'll be quiet for a while so I can finish this paper. "Draw me a picture," I tell him.

"I'll draw you my friend," he says, sticking his tongue out with concentration.

"Who's your friend?" I ask. Going from what he's drawing, apparently his friend is a giraffe.

"Kim."

"Oh."

"She's six. She's old... Is Eru your friend?"

"Yes."

"Even if he's deaded?"

"Yes. He'll always be my friend."

And that's the end of that. I put the paper down on my lap and sit there looking at the plane on the photo on the floor some way away and wonder what I should do with it now that I'm reminded of it. I can't see the actual photo because of the light shining off the glass. Maybe I should get rid of it.

While rubbing the centre of my forehead slowly, I exhale and close my eyes. When I open them again, I turn to look at what Kira's drawing with no interest, and then I catch sight of Kiyomi in the doorway. We look at each other for moment, and I'm the first to look away.

"Kira, make a start on tidying your room. I need to speak to your father," she says. Kira and I look at each other in mild panic for completely different reasons, and then he wails and humphs as he's practically pushed out of the room by Kiyomi. She shuts the door, and when she turns to face me, I can see how anxious she is. She's probably gone quite pale under all that foundation. Oh God.

"You're... you're not pregnant, are you?" I ask.

"No." Thank fuck for that. She smiles nervously, like it was a really unbelievable idea, anyway. It must still be really bad news though, because she sits down next to me.

"What then? Oh. My father's dead."

"No!"

"My mother's dead?"

"No. Light –"

"Saru's dead? Who's dead?"
"No one. That's kind of the point. Um... That was Security."

"Is someone in Security resigning? That's not all that terrible, Kiyomi. Either someone's resigning or they've found a bomb under my car."

"I don't know whether it's terrible or not. They've just had a call from the Chief of the NPA that... they've found Lawliet."

Well that's just stupid, but my heart thumps, just the once, like it hasn't for three years and it's a bit rusty. I knew it. No, they mean that they found him in the lake years ago. That's old news. Their admin department is shit, isn't it?
So, two men walked into a bar. No, they really did. In an airport lounge. They came in on a flight from Europe, had a couple of drinks at the bar, and then one handed himself in at the security point saying that his passport was fake. It's a press set-up because news is slow at the moment, but you have to hand it to them, they've been really inventive this time. I'll laugh it off for all intents and purposes but impersonation of the deceased is a serious crime and our 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' agreement is over. How fucking stupid of them to cross me when I know what I know.

What I've heard is that this whoever-he-is told airport security that his name was L. Lawliet, barrister and former high-ranking employee of the government. He left out the part about him being an all round soul eater and devourer of babies, though. But that wasn't all. He demanded that the NPA be informed that he'd entered the country, and refused to answer any questions until he saw the Chief of the NPA (my 'friend' and occasional golf partner, even though I dislike both him and golf but happen to be good at playing both). When he did see the Chief, he told him that he'd left the country under false documents a few years ago as he'd had a nervous breakdown, which his friend, someone who declared himself to be a psychologist, verified. It just gets better, they even know about B. By this point in the story I was getting a little nervous because the press must have dug and dug for this and must have a reason. Anyway, the man said that the Prime Minister should be notified personally, due to the sensitivity of the situation. Sensitivity. It must have sounded like the ravings of a mad man but he was apparently quite convincing. So, after remembering the case of the dead ex-government PR I'd hassled him with way back when, the Chief probably spent some time biting his nails while stretching his abilities in trying to validate the man's story. A complete waste of time.

Some no doubt chaotic hours passed in the police station before the Chief called me and spoke to Kiyomi. Kiyomi freaked out while I remained practically dead with passivity, then I called the Chief back privately and freaked out afterwards in a silent, unnoticeable way. The man looked familiar, the Chief said. He'd met Lawliet a few times, he said. Yes, for quiet backhanders in exchange for evidence and information, I thought. All I could think of was what the press could have on me to make them try this suicidal move, but soon I calmed myself into ambivalence. The idea of L's return from the grave isn't something I've considered for a long time because I'm not insane. Over a gin and tonic I don't like, though, I laughed over the idea. There was no way anyone could have hidden from me for that long and L definitely wouldn't be deserving of such credit. I had a private investigator looking into it until fairly recently – going through B's household waste – and over those years all he found out was that B has an extreme love of biscotti and jam. I hope he develops infected cavities soon which will spread to the brain. Oh, and his earnings from L's shares in the firm combined with the profits from selling the estate have made him extremely wealthy, though you wouldn't know it –
he hardly ever makes a withdrawal from that account. I know that because I've kept tabs on his accounts. It might be illegal for most people to do that, but not for me. The thought that L could be alive would be both exhilarating and catastrophic even if you disregard the possible zombie scenario, but it's not true, obviously, no matter how convincing the press' cuntish actor might be. They'd known L, and whichever paper was behind this must have known him well enough to know that he'd been an arsehole.

The man has been held at the station ever since, waiting until the NPA gained clearance from me for formal identification and in-depth questioning. I think that it was hoped that I'd send my security around to pick him up and shoot him in the back of a car, whoever he was, but I only sent Mihael to check that it was just some insane man and not L, although the two could have been one and the same. Meanwhile, I took Kiyomi and Kira out for dinner like a 'normal family', having alerted the press first that I was touring, and tried to assure Kiyomi that it was all a terrible mistake while Kira shouted 'ERUUU!' and 'IMPOTENT' constantly, for some reason. Mihael is as useless as ever and didn't see fit to let me know or answer his phone. So, I decided to take that as a no, it's not L, which is just as well because I'd be so fucking angry if it was. I suppose that I must be upset in some way. It's like getting a letter addressed to a dead person, dredging it up again, stabbing me, and I don't need to be reminded any more than I am, anyway. The hurt it caused me made me consider our history, and it boiled down to this: it was complicated and I should write it off like an old car. I began seeing myself when I met him as an innocent child who was caught by a passing childcatcher who abused me mentally and physically for years in return for a few toffees. I mean, he was that sort of bastard who said things like 'Oh, come on, you enjoyed it,' and stuff like that. I might have, but that's not the point. Thinking about it that way, I find his loss easier. I know that I wasn't entirely pleasant and that I was partly responsible for making our relationship a cross between a wrestling match and a G8 meeting, but the majority of the blame lies with him. Because of his conduct.

That night, when I was brushing my teeth, I stood there in a thoughtless dream digging the bristles in until my gums bled. That's the first sign of gum disease, I thought. No, it was because I'd been brushing too hard, I hadn't been paying attention. I looked at myself in the mirror while the hint of blood filled my mouth, just gawping at myself and seeing what everyone else saw and something extra, just for me. I bent down to spit out the blood-streaked froth, and suddenly I felt the room had changed somehow. There was something wickedly dark in the room with me. I peered up through my hair back at the mirror, but my reflection wasn't mimicking me anymore. It was standing, looking down at me, and it smiled so widely that it was like a gash across its face. It's skin stretched and tore to make way for how funny it thought I was.

I left it in the bathroom, knowing that it was still standing there waiting for me to come back in the morning. Just a blacker silhouette that looked like me in the dark. Kiyomi talked to me until I fell asleep and I didn't take in a word she said but I must have replied. The veils between worlds are thin and I live in both of them.

Strangely, I slept very well that night.

"I will not shake his hand and make up. I'd rather cut his hand off."

"Yagami!"

"Excuse me? Are we friends? Are we friends that go way back or am I your leader?"

"I'm sorry, Your Honour."

"No, not 'Your Honour.' Prime Minister is fine. Can't you remember my rank?"
"Oh! Of course, sorry. I mean... Prime Minister!"

"Nice recovery, I hardly noticed. What are you shocked about?"

"That you won't let Iseki back into the Cabinet. You've said abominable things about him to the press and now you want to cut his hand off."

"That was a manner of speech. I don't know what I've said about him that's so bad which isn't also the truth. Ministers like him have lied and lied about policies which favour profit over people, and those same ministers were responsible for the selling off of national assets at half their value to fund a tax cut for the wealthy before an election. Funny coincidence, that."

"You weren't there, old boy. It was before your time, you were still in shorts. No need to kick up a stink about it now. We were in an awful situation when we took over; the cupboard was bare. Anyway, I thought that you were in favour of privatisation."

"**Key** privatisation, not selling off everything like it's an estate auction. Selling off loss-makers to boost productivity, yes, but not assets which were built by the skilled workforces of this country – our greatest resource – who are now badly paid or have been made redundant and treated with contempt. If those ministers were local councillors, they'd be in prison, but because they're ministers and now on the boards of the companies they privatised, they're heralded as businessmen. I will not and could not accept him back. He's someone who's guilty of attempted murder but got off on a technicality, and the life he sought to take was that of the country's industry."

"That's... slightly harsh. He's a thoroughly good chap and it worked out in the end. He was very highly esteemed by The Lady, remember."

"And he's the same as The Lady. My predecessor also committed crimes against this country through her pride and greed and, let's face it, she would have benefitted from a course of electroconvulsive therapy by being plugged into the mains. I'm ashamed of being in the same party with people who are responsible for our current state of tax cuts for the rich, benefit cuts for the poor, and creating a society in which everything is priced but not valued. She didn't do it alone; you're all responsible. So, no, I'm not supporting the team, as you put it. I kicked him out years ago and I see no reason to bring him back now, unless he's undergone a morality transplant."

"With respect, Prime Minister, those able to take the vacant position are hard to come by."

"Mikami will do."

"Mikami?"

"Since he won the by-election, I think that we can consider him absolved in the eyes of the public, and he has experience. His crimes were against himself, not the country."

"But he's weak-willed and unreliable!" Hitsamatsu shouts. He's old and he's very angry about it, he's old money, and has a very loud voice but terrible diction. He also has a tiny dick, if I remember rightly. L told me in the early days. L used to hang around the urinals sometimes when he was depressed just to observe, until people caught on and started using the cubicles to avoid him. He also described him as someone whose will is strong but whose body isn't present, but I never knew the context of what he meant by that. Hitsamatsu's always been bitter since I 'got too big for my boots,' which is hilarious because, compared to him, my boots are massive and so is my dick. He's a cunt, obviously.

"Well, whatever he is, he's perfect for the role because I can be sure that he'll do what he's told now
without question. He knows that I know what's best for this country, you do not. You should follow his example." Yes, through my benevolence, he's learned what the others can't admit to themselves – that I am a lion surrounded by the undedicated who stand in my shadow and feed off what I provide for them. In fact, I plan to knock poor, stupid Nakasato out of my Deputy's chair and put Mikami into it, eventually. This is mostly because of Mikami's weak attributes, which Hitsamatsu so elegantly defined despite the gherkin quietly nesting in his grey, skid-marked Y-fronts.

"Mistakes have been made, it's true," Nakasato says with a solemn shake of his head. Everyone's so old and stupid and I waste most of my days around them. "But there's no good to be had in freezing out ministers who are best for roles in the Cabinet in order to favour your friends."

"Believe me, Mikami is not a friend," I say sulkily. I think that I'm expected to expand on that statement, but I'm hardly going to say that I hold Mikami personally responsible for ending my almost-relationship with a completely abhorrent bastard. Apparently, I'm still angry about that. But no, it's because of his betrayal in contradicting my orders, but he has learned his lesson, I'm sure. He said to me, after I very lazily supported his campaign in the by-election by not giving a shit either way, that his only purpose was to serve me, which led me to consider his potential usefulness to me again. If my cautious trust proves unfounded then I'll... well, I won't be very nice about it.

Nakasato and Hitsamatsu stare at me and I realise that I must look like I'm daydreaming. I do that sometimes. I just zone out and dream of machetes.

After a quick glance at my watch, it's now the time to expect Mihael to turn up any minute – or so a memo I received from the Kantei this morning suggested. As if on cue, my secretary calls me, but it's only to inform me that Kantaro, my Home Secretary, has arrived, so I tell her to let him in.

"I'm very sorry, Prime Minister," he says tiredly, met with an icy atmosphere he doesn't seem to recognise. My jaw seizes and sets for a second. His tie is askew.

"Were the trains late?" I ask.

"No, minor crisis at home. I apologise," he replies. I look up just as he begins to sit down and take Hitsamatsu's notes to see what he's missed. My attention freezes him into a mid-bend position.

"Get the fuck out. You arrive on time or not at all," I tell him. There's that unique kind of silence of the shocked for a few seconds, but he doesn't attempt to dig himself out of the hole he's in – he simply leaves, bowing, and closes the door behind him. "Now, where were we?" I say, putting a strike through Kantaro's name in my diary. Dead. Dead to me. Dead. If only it was so easy, L, you insane fuck with your fucking notebook.

Suddenly, Hitsamatsu stands to speak at the same volume he uses in the House. Surely he's not going to defend Kantaro?

"I'm sorry, but this is shameful. Mikami is shameful, your treatment of the Cabinet is –"

"What? Isn't it my Cabinet?" I saw, scrunching a few old notes into a ball in my hand. "I can do what I like with it. Should we just throw schedules away and take an organic approach of wandering into meetings whenever we feel like it? I'm not holding a drop-in clinic here."

"I'm not saying that you're not wrong to reprimand Kantaro..." he stutters. "I'll move on. But your comments about The Lady are downright appalling. She's not here to defend herself and she shouldn't be defiled in that way." Well, I'm not fucking her dead mouth, am I?

"Because she was the mother to all of us? Because it's not an issue of public interest?"
"No, it's not."

"That's easy for us to say, but we're not the people suffering because of her mistakes. If I was out there instead of in here, I'd like to know who to blame for the state of the country. If it wasn't for me telling the public who's responsible and admitting and rectifying past mistakes, no one would be held accountable, apart from me as leader. I really hate how this party in particular doesn't seem to find that necessary, but I'm sure that you'd rather I was blamed on your behalf."

"I haven't done anything to be held accountable for, Prime Minister," Nakasato tells me while putting his hand over his heart. Yes, have a heart attack and die.

"Nor me," Hitsamatsu agrees nervously. You can definitely die as well, you shit.

"No. You just haven't done anything at all, have you. Useless ministers do just as much harm as incompetent ones, in my opinion, and I certainly have my fair share of both in my party. In your department, Hitsamatsu, let's review: every homeless person I see on the street is there because we have failed them. Every pensioner struggling to cope are victims of the state, and it's something you could try to correct, but you don't, so that leaves it all up to me. I want to reverse the effect The Lady had on this country by killing the source of the demonic philosophy still held by too many members of this government. I'm apologise if you find my wording offensive but I don't have the time or inclination to sprinkle sugar everywhere."

"It's dangerous and unwise to change the whole moral stance of the party and denounce The Lady like she was a war criminal," Hitsamatsu says. "You're even attacking members of your own Cabinet, and ministers who deserve forgiveness. This fixation you have on benefits sounds terribly socialist, old boy. It works well enough." Well, he would say that. I won't be happy until my name is followed by 'ite' and 'ism' to refer to my politics as a golden era.

"I wouldn't put it as strongly as my honourable colleague, but people might wonder if you're joining the Reds, Prime Minister, and it will surely lead to defeat come election time," Nakasato adds more calmly than his fuckhead in arms.

"Defeat isn't a word I understand. The opposition are, unfortunately, disorganised and split and with the weakest leader for generations. You'd think that he doesn't actually want to be leader, he's just in it for the cake in the Club after debates. Morality isn't insane, although The Lady made us think that it was. Why? Are you telling me that I'm wrong?"

"I think that you're becoming too radical for the party and that you're leaving us behind."

"I agree," Hitsamatsu nods.

"Well, that's progress, gentlemen. Everyone thinks it's mad at first but they'll jump on the bandwagon some time or another, and I don't really care when or if they do. Instead of calling me too radical, you should look at why and how you're being left behind, because maybe, just maybe, the fault will lies with you. The public obviously approve of my radicalism, as you call it, though I call it common sense. Have you seen the latest independent popularity report? Overwhelming support for me, personally. Not you. None of you. There is a sincere lack of confidence in all MPs except, apparently, me. *The Times* said... where is it? Oh, yes: 'Yagami is a strong force and a servant of the people and as such has gathered the backing of the country, commandeering those disillusioned with the embarrassing ineptitude of the opposition and representing the unheard. It does seem that we live in a one-party state with no real contender to Yagami's romantic hold over the electorate.' Romantic. When did you last hear that said about a politician? It does go on," I say, pushing the paper aside. "It's very derogatory about the attempted coup and the lack of support from my own MPs, but, you know, water under the bridge. I don't hold it against you. Especially you, Hisamatsu. Didn't you
second Ishinomori's bid against me? No grudges. Anyway, I will not allow Iseki back into any position of power, and there's an end to it. Now, we have a busy month. Friday will be the tax proposal, and then I want to focus on reforming benefits."

"But I'm working on the budget at the moment."

"Yes, but I'd like some hand in it, if you wouldn't mind? I'm not suggesting that you're incapable, but I want this to be a budget to end all budgets. I'm fairly happy with the progress on all the other areas. We have a state bank, a free health care system, education is much better than it was, no thanks to you, Hitsamatsu, but thank you for being so gracious in diverting your talents towards the Exchequer instead. We all know good you are with money."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing at all, I'm sure," I say with a smile. I was notified by one of my moles of an allegation of Hitsamatsu's misuse of permitted expenses, specifically claiming for a second home he was renting out, plus energy bills. But when I sought to retrieve the documents in question to hand them to PR to leak, I was told that they'd been shredded 'by mistake'. I've now planted the mole in the submissions office to scan all expense claims and put them in a secure folder for me on the network. I have plans. "So, now we're going to deal with benefits. I was sorry to hear that one of your ideas included cuts to the disability allowance by 20%."

"It was only an idea," he says, sweating instantly. "I was looking at all options to make up the losses of the health system, since you brought that in."

"Is that a criticism?"

"No, but I'm still not certain where you're going to get the money for it. Even the press are wondering where this bottomless pit of money is coming from."

"It's in this policy," I say, tapping the wad of paper I slaved over for hours... well, three hours. I wrote it shorthand and had my secretary type it up and put pie charts and photos of smiling children in it. "But what's so wrong with disability that you want to penalise people for being disabled? Maybe we should just send them away to be euthanised."

"I don't want to penalise them, but there's evidence of over one hundred billion yen in overpayments. How did you find out, anyway?"

"I have ways, Hitsamatsu-san. I only sleep for four hours a night, did you know that? It drives my wife mad. Well, we must investigate overpayments by regular but fair reassessments, but surely we don't want to impoverish all recipients of a system which is outdated by at least twenty-five years. We need to tackle homelessness, not contribute to it. They make the streets look so untidy. Really, we should be –"

"Prime Minister?"

"Do not interrupt me. We should be looking at raising the allowance, not cutting it. But, good news, that's my only real 'Worry of the Week'. You two can submit a department summary, as usual, and tell Kantaro that I want to see him at the Kantei at two."

"Excuse me, but Prime Min –" Nakasato starts up again, but my secretary is on the line again, so I put her on speaker.

"Yes?"
"Keehl-san from PR is here, Prime Minister."

"Send him in," I say, and Mihael saunters in wearing his usual attempt at bondage professionalism and a shiteating grin. A shiver glides down my spine but I ignore him and start gathering my papers into a neat pile, then stop when something dawns on me. "Oh, I wanted to discuss the proposal, didn't I. You know what? Read it. That's what we're doing."

"Prime Minister, I've just looked over the first couple of pages and I have an issue with point two," Nakasato whimpers. No one speedreads my policies. "There's a roaming population in my constituency with a lot of students. I don't see how we could enforce this tax you're proposing if their residence changes several times a year."

"We tax their home address. Who's responsible depends on age. When they sign up for university, money will be allocated to their local council for the period spent there. It really is very simple. It's everyone's responsibility over the age of twenty one to ensure that they notify their local council of their residence and keep up payments to the state. If they fail to, they will face criminal charges for evasion unless they or their parents or guardians pay the taxes and the ensuing fines and admin charges, plus a handling fee."

"A handling fee?"

"Yes, it's a genius idea I came up with the other day when I had a customs bill which was bordering on theft. The Post Office does it. No one really know what it's for and we don't need to tell them, like the Post Office. We'll just consider it a bonus for doing fuck all."

"But what about people with no fixed address or people having friends stay with them?"

"Everyone in the house must be declared and paid for by the home owner every month. It's up to them to be reimbursed by the person in question or take it into account when they're budgeting. I'm not holding everyone's hands through this. There'll be an advertising campaign and we'll push the online literature to cut on costs. There's no excuse for stupidity over something so easy to understand. Even my son would be able to understand it if I set it to music and danced a bit."

"But don't you think that this is unfair? Charging people for the number of individuals in their house when poorer areas, according to your tax bands, will be charged a higher rate per person than what they're paying at the moment. I don't even think that it can be enforced. And children are paying the same tax as an adult when they don't use the services."

"Well, it's better than bedroom tax, isn't it. If they can't afford children then people shouldn't have them. It's not for the state to provide support to people who can't be bothered to buy contraception."

"But –"

"As a parent myself, I sympathise with the majority of the population who work hard and live within their means, but all citizens should pay towards public services, regardless of age. This tax is also a further contribution towards their healthcare provision, education, and pension. There are tiers of rates depending on the criteria of the child and household income, which you'd know if you'd read the whole thing before you question it. The answers are all there, so don't question me unless you have a legitimate concern. Now, if we were at school, the bell would have rung and that's the end of the lesson. Run off to the cafeteria now. Thank you for your time." I stand up.

"But, Prime Minister -"

"Good. Bye," I say, and wait, staring burning bullet holes through both of them before they get their
act together and leave, then I start packing my briefcase while Mihael blocks some of the light from the window. "You took your time."

"Yeah, sorry," he smirks, then rocks his head from side to side as he lists the highlights from his morning. "I was there for a while and the battery on my phone was dead. I fell asleep as soon as I got back, so I called your secretary but you weren't in the office. I went to the Kantei for about nine but you weren't there, your were here, so I left a message and –"

"Whatever. So? Is it good or bad news?"

"What would be good news?"

"That it's not him."

"Bad luck," he says snidely.

Well. Is lying? Why would he? Maybe the press got to him. Or maybe he's telling the truth. L had booted God off his throne as far as Mihael was concerned, he wouldn't lie. He's not lying.

The worst thing about this is that it's not so much a surprise, but that I don't know how to feel about it. Four or more opposing feelings are pulling at my brain in different directions like a team of horses, so I lean over my desk like I'm struck by nausea. It's like, in my mind, my image of L is quickly having all the skin and muscles reattached. I don't believe it, and yet I do and it's not a shock to me somehow. I think that I've been waiting for it all this time. How could I think he'd give up? I was never ready for him before and I'm not ready for him now, I don't think I ever could be. What this is, in L's terms, is an equivalent of, 'your move' after a series of cheating endeavours over a long match. I don't care anymore, I can't escape, I have nothing left. Checkmate.

No.

"It's not really bad news though, is it," Mihael continues after a few seconds. He sits heavily in one of the chairs and puts his feet on my desk. His cheap, fake leather pointed toes fall in front of me and I want to vomit all over them. Does he think he can act like this because he has L's protection? It makes me want to kill him to show him how wrong he is, but I settle for pushing his feet off my desk. "Sorry, mein führer," he laughs. "Are you ok? Are you going to say something?"

"Fuck."

"Something else?"

I just breathe out like I'm being breathalysed, closing my eyes to massage at the centre of the pain in my forehead before standing straight, good as new. "Did you speak to him?"

"I was just there to see if it was him, wasn't I. They weren't going to let me speak to him. He was being interviewed; I just saw him through one of those one way window things. His friend's there too. You know, the mad one?"

"Great."

"He looked well."

"B? I don't give a fuck how he looked."

"No, the mad one looked like shit. L looked well. You know, for a dead guy. All that sugar must act as a preservative, like he's a jar of chutney."
"You can go now, Mihael."

"Nah, it's ok. Hey, look. Nakawotzit didn't have his coffee," he says cheerily, and sits down to drink it. God, how disgusting to have someone's leftovers. To distract myself from him, I call my secretary and cancel all my appointments after four o'clock without really knowing why. I'm going to end up doing something questionable if I give myself free time, but I clear my schedule, anyway.

"Are you heading down there?" Mihael asks me, but I don't answer. "Whoa, man, I thought you'd be happy."

"Why would I be happy?" I say, daring him to make any reference at all to L being anything more than an acquaintance of mine. Should I be happy? I don't feel anything. I'm flatlining. My mind's in such a spasm that I can't reason out what to think or do about this. I want to go to bed. If I go to bed, I'll wake up with the answer. I might wake up tomorrow and everything will be fine. I'll go to work, sit down at my desk, open a drawer, pull out a gun and blow my fucking brains out. Or not.

Mihael shrugs his shoulders and picks up a biscuit Nakasato must have dropped on the floor. I think for a moment that he's just being tidy and courteous, but, no, he nibbles at it. This just gets worse.

"Can I talk to him then? The Chief said that you just need to authorise it."

"No."

"If he can make bail, he can stay with me."

"He's not going to be making bail. He's a flight risk."

"You're going to help him though? You're not going to let him stay there. They might send him to the immigration centre and I've been there – it's not a nice place. It's worse than prison. The guards'll probably fuck him up to kingdom come or make a snuff film out of him or something."

"I can't interfere with official procedures and border control," I say as I breathe in, which makes me sound like a drowning alien.

"Official procedures? But this is L, you have to do something!"

"I don't have to do anything."

With a Gucci slim-fit shirt and a Lanvin waffle-weave silk tie, I'm wearing a brick-red, navy and charcoal-grey ghost striped, slim-fit, wool, single-breasted jacket with notch lapels, a double vent, chest pocket, flapped front pockets and buttoned cuff details by Alexander McQueen. Sadly not actually by him, because he's dead. The trousers have a slim straight leg, side pockets and an unfinished hem. Both are lined with charcoal-grey satin. I'm wearing this suit because it looks rust brown from any distance, but close-up, it gives off a rainbow-coloured moiré effect usually seen on television because of the non-linear interaction of the optical lines of the suit creating an interline twitter, so I don't wear it often. It is, however, useful, as I suspect that it has a subconscious effect on people which makes them feel inadequate, dazed and acid-trippy. This is what I have observed. I have an original McQueen suit made before he hung himself with his favourite belt in a wardrobe – killed by fashion – but it doesn't fit with the modern sartorial style I'm working towards this year. I didn't have time to change my shoes and I don't particularly like them so I won't attribute a brand, but they take eight weeks to make. Anything which has a waiting list must be worth it, in my view.

I try not to consider my actions much, because there really isn't much point. I decide to identify him alive like I should have done after he died, but don't arrive at the station until after eight because I
have to phone ahead, have dinner with Kiyomi and not appear suspicious. Over those hours though, I've prepped myself. When I arrive at the station, I'm led through various corridors by the Chief, who meets me at the door, telling me what a difficult situation this is for me. I refuse to walk into an interview room as that makes it look like I came here especially, and those rooms are very dingy from what I've seen on TV, so I tell them that they can bring L into the Chief's office, where I'll be waiting and in control, looking like I've lived there all my life. It's my dad's old office, private, and fairly unchanged. I think I look more majestic in a room with wood paneling.

Minutes pass before L is brought in and pushed down into a chair across from me. It all happens too quickly for me to process, but my mouth falls open, so I realise that I must be surprised on some level, after all. It's very surreal, and during periods of stress I have problems distinguishing reality from how my mind translates life for me. Maybe I'm stressed. I'm too busy to be dealing with some fuckup lawyer who can't decide whether he's alive or dead.

He limply allows one of his cuffed hands to be attached to some of the brasswork of the desk while he stares at me and I watch the men dealing with him, feeling some residual resentment somehow. Then I give them the nod to leave. I can't bring myself to look at him directly yet, and, as I said, this feels very dreamlike. They've brought a ghost into the room, so I only perceive some kind of familiar height and shape. The silence doesn't seem quite as loud and painful as it normally does, and I remember that I always felt that way when I was with him, which annoys me. Some time after the door is closed, his hand reaches across the table for mine, but I pull away. He retracts his stretching fingers slowly.

"Well, this is awkward," he says to the table. I haven't heard his voice for so long. I've heard him on recordings I found but it wasn't the same. It's only then that I look at him and see him as I knew him, but cast down, holding onto the last scrap of self-reliance and ego he has left, which is apparently quite a lot. He's half-smiling at my glossy reflection in the desk surface and does look very awkward, which is to be expected given that he's chained to the desk.

"Why have you come back and why aren't you dead?" I ask, and he laughs quietly, glancing at me like he's just a naughty little boy being told off for some minor offence. He looks around the room, I presume to check for any sign that people could be listening in, because that's what I'd do. I'm struck by how he's dressed entirely in black, which he never used to do. Black sweater, black trousers, which only accentuate his black hair and the dark bruises of tiredness under his eyes and in the hollows of his cheeks. He's either become a mime artist or a cat burglar. "You can talk. I wouldn't be speaking with you at all if anyone could overhear."

"Do you still smoke?" he asks after scratching his scalp.

"What? No."

"You're such a liar, Light. You must have had one before you came in, I can smell it on you from here. You still smoke menthols, right? Old Chiefy smokes. I don't think he'd mind." He points to a decomposing full ashtray of a bent and crushed forest of cigarette butts on the desk and pinches his fingers suggestively, so after a sigh, I throw my cigarettes at him. He uses what must be the Chief's lighter and tosses it back onto the desk. I think that I'm sort of hypnotised somehow, just watching how he breathes out a cloud of smoke and looks at me for an incredibly long time, all soft-faced when he should be fucking dead, what the fuck is going on? He catches me for surprise then when he leans across the desk towards me suddenly. "I didn't think that I'd see you. I didn't think that you'd come here."

"I didn't want to."

"Yeah, I bet," he says, then seems distracted by how he's shackled to a desk leg but thrilled by it,
lifting his cuffed hand as high as he can so I can fully appreciate it. "Look! Here's justice. Pre-justice. We-don't really-know-what-to-do-with-you pre-justice. Me! Me, being accused of all these crimes, isn't it stupid? It's my identity to do what I want with, but there's all this fuss about fraud when all I did was take a little holiday. I think, for people like us, we should be able to have some leeway. You're looking a bit ill, are you ok?"

"I'm fine. Not that it should be of any concern to you."

"Maybe, but it is," he smiles with disappointment at himself, then drags on his cigarette. "Mmm... minty fresh. But, yeah, there's a side of me which I've accepted as being wholly illogical and human. Do you know what I thought about on the plane? I reckoned that you'd be like this, and it reminded me of a story I read at college. Have you heard of Timagoras and Meles?"

"No, and I don't want to know about them."

"You really should. Everything is a repeat, right? Everything's been felt and done before, so we should learn from history. Agreed? Are you sitting comfortably?"

"I don't want to hear your stories, I want to know –"

"Good. I mean, you have the comfy chair, I don't. Ok, there was this man called Timagoras, and he was an immigrant, no less – like me. Really good looking and charming like me, too. Spectacular. All he was trying to do was to start a new life in a new country and work hard and all that shit, but he fell in love with a beautiful, proud little knob called Meles. On sight, you know? Fate smacked him in the face. But Meles was having none of it and refused the love and friendship of this weirdo from who knows where. Very xenophobic was old Meles. Possibly a self-hating homosexual, too. Possibly bisexual, possibly asexual, but it doesn't matter what rocked his boat, what's important is that he was definitely a dicksplash."

"Stop it. I don't want to hear your shitty stories."

"Yes, you do. It's been a long time and I have plenty of them, you'll never be bored. Anyway, Meles got so fed up of him that one day he told Timagoras to prove his love by throwing himself from a cliff onto the rocks below – just taking the piss, really. But Timagoras was so far gone that he wanted nothing more than to satisfy him, so he did it, smashing himself to pieces. Game over, yes? Meles can swan off, happy as a pig in shit. But a suicide can kill two, as Arthur Miller would say. Meles saw Timagoras dead and he was filled with the disease of love in return and repented. In that moment, he realised that he was in love with Timagoras and felt the pain of being apart as strongly as the relief he'd felt when they were together. What I found particularly interesting about Meles is that you're given some kind of insight into his strange little mind, and I ended up feeling sympathy for him, because before that I was thinking what a dick he was. I mean, they were both dicks, but hey. Oh, my cig's gone out, would you pass me the lighter again? You didn't need to throw it, but thanks. So, through no fault of his own, he's loved and is infected by that love, but he doesn't understand the condition and can't give a reason for it. In Timagoras he saw himself as in a mirror, and now he'd lost that and all his pride, so he threw himself off the cliff too, to be with him again. What I'm saying is, I'm throwing myself off a figurative cliff for your benefit, see!" He says, rattling his chains again. "What you should do now is stop being a brat and just be fucking happy, because if you don't, we'll both suffer. And, contrary to what you're probably thinking, you won't feel any better for it if you try to pretend this isn't happening."

I stare at him for a few moments completely expressionless while his smile grows wider, like that was his killer defence.

"You're fluent in bollocks, I forgot."
"Ha! Oh, Light, it's worth it just to see you. Throw me in the workhouse and I'll write some poetry. I feel like Oscar Wilde suffering for his dishonesty and the love of a perfect man. I identify a lot with him. Our golden objects of affection were also complete shits."

"Yeah, you're just like him. It's uncanny."

"Mmm..." he hums, leaning towards me again. "Look at us. I was born purely for you and you were born purely for me, remember? I realised how right you were, you were just really fucking arrogant with it, but I even like that. So, how are you? This is like a date, isn't it. And I come pre-tied up for your convenience."

"How am I? Seriously?"

"I'm only being courteous. I have to say, it's damn good to see you. It's made my entire... well, the last three years, actually," he says, then lets his head fall despondently towards the desk. "You're such a stunner, my God, what was I thinking?"

"I don't know, what were you thinking? Or how about, why did you come back? You must have known you'd be put in custody. I could have you executed."

"On what charge?"

"Well there are quite a few potentials. It's like a pick and mix."

"My advice would be that the only one you could have a chance of proving would be offence against the state. It's dramatic and rare. I assaulted the Prime Minister and fucked him on many occasions, which I suppose might be unacceptable and even offensive to people who don't know you, and I'll happily admit my guilt and all the gruesome details in a court of law. It should be televised. Firing squad if you can manage it. That'd be lovely."

He breathes out longingly like it really is a lovely idea. It is tempting but I'd rather avoid him having an opportunity to talk in court or anywhere else about his offences to the state and my person.

"I... don't think that's a good idea," I say, "but I could definitely have you locked up for life because I'm merciful."

"I don't want my freedom," he sighs quietly, still with his head on the desk.

"What? Why?"

"There's no reason for living with a broken heart," he says. My eyes widen because what the fuck? He seems to notice my reaction, which is startled to put it mildly, and sits up to lean across the desk towards me earnestly. "This is a tricky situation and I've only got myself to blame. It's just a simple fact of life and can happen to anyone. You win, you lose - it's a chance you have to take with love. Oh yeah, I fell in love, but now you say it's over and I'm falling apart. Life is tough on your own."

"Shame. Yeah, right, obviously it's over. I thought you were dead. Are you alright mentally? Scrap that, you never were. Are you saying that you want me to have you executed? Because... L."

"I'll look back on myself and say I did it for love. Yes, I did it for love," he nods. And suddenly it dawns on me that he hasn't been living in a monastery reading *The Prophet* for three years. I lean back in my chair.

"You're using song lyrics, aren't you," I exhale tiredly.
"'It's a Hard Life' by Queen, 1984," he grins. I look at him in silence for about ten seconds, over which time I feel increasingly cold towards him and he looks increasingly anxious.

"Ok, bye," I say, and start to stand up until he grabs my hand.

"Look, I fucked up, ok? I'm sorry. I came back to sort it all out. What more could be expected of me? You'll have to stay because I can't follow you. I'm chained to the desk. Y'know, it's awkward."

"Oh God," I sigh, falling back into the chair.

"Don't panic over my situation, it's only a precaution. It just chafes a bit. I'm sure they'd uncuff me if you asked them to."

"No, you. Your attitude – what the fuck is that about? Do you not realise what you've done?"

"You have a right to be a bit miffed, Light. I was prepared for it, but despite that, your heart's beating like a little drum, isn't it? No use ignoring it. Stop fucking about and come here."

"For your information, if someone plugged me into a heart monitor my heart would not register at all. Look, fag, this isn't an informal hello or whatever you think it is, it's –"

"Fag? You're calling me a fag? I suppose that's factually true but am I supposed to take it as an insult? Oh, I get it. No homo, Light, no homo. Now come here and sit on my face."

"Shut. Up. I ask questions, you answer them, and if you tell me a lie or sing a fucking song then I will know it and you will regret it."

"God, I love it when you're like this," he breathes out in a kind of tired ecstasy. He has to breathe his way through it, actually, like he's having a baby. He bites his lip and looks at me sleepily. I'm not sure how I've managed to gratify him but apparently I have. "Like I said, I was thinking about it on the plane and I knew that you'd probably be annoyed with me, but if you think rationally, I can't do more than say sorry to you and face the consequences of my naughtiness. I'm really looking forward to it, Light. I'm sure that you'll find ingenious ways of making me pay. In the end, though, the only reasonable thing you can do is to forgive me."

"What? Are you mad?"

"It has been said, but I'm just very happy to see you. You have no idea what it's been like for me."

"No, I'd have no idea."

"Oh, sorry, you probably do. Pretty shit, isn't it? Being apart? I was a shade of what I was and all I thought about was you. I didn't have anything to do to take my mind off it, it was terrible. I even grew a beard in my sorrow."

"Ugh," I shiver.

"I know. B didn't like it either. I didn't like it because I thought that it'd be more impressive. It was more wispy than the full blown afro I wanted on my face, but I couldn't be arsed shaving. I wrote you some poetry. Well, I didn't, but I could make some up now, if you'd like. It's not so great being dead, in case you're interested."

"But it was a fucking lie! We buried you."

"You went to my funeral?" he asks. "Did you cry?"
"No!"

"B said that you nearly did when he saw you. He said that it was... um... repressed something or other as result of you being raised to associate stoicism with masculinity, and that repression can manifest in biochemical problems which leads to high blood pressure. You always got yourself so worked up about things, I was worried."

"I was glad that you were dead," I say scornfully, which he laughs at. "So? Why aren't you dead? Why are you avoiding the question?"

"I'm not, I'm not! I'm getting to it. I just walked away, I did no more than that. People presume a lot and I wasn't really in a position to argue."

"You weren't in a position to... God!"

"God's out of his office at the moment, as usual. Sorry for hitting you over the head, by the way. It's just, well, you were there and you shouldn't have been."

I actually can't believe something like him exists, and can only shake my head wearily. You'd think that the balance of the world would insist on such an abomination being neutralised.

"What about the body they found in the lake? Your decoy. The person B identified as being you."

"Absolutely no idea but he was a godsend," he exhales, leaning back. He opens one of the drawers on the front of the Chief's desk and finds a bag of pretzels which he opens and eats as he talks. "All I did was leave my jacket nearby, but then B called me to say: 'Hey, they've found a body in the lake and they think it's you. I have to identify it now, what do I say?' At the time, I thought that I'd like the challenge of starting again completely - changing myself, like Madonna, you know? No going back. Sadly, it was more difficult than a new haircut, producer and leotard."

"You're lying."

"No, really, it was."

"You know that I'm talking about the body."

"What are you trying to say? That I put the body there? I was off my rocker, Light. I couldn't have made a cheese sandwich, let alone pick up a body from somewhere and come up with a plan like that. Or do you think that I drowned him? Little old me with my lack of muscles?"

"Yes, I think that you drowned someone in the lake and ran," I say, and he covers his mouth while he yawns for such a drawn out time that I think that I should just leave.

"Sorry. B gave me some uppers when we got off the plane but they've well worn off now," he says with a sniff. He's not taking any notice of me and that's just unacceptable. Under the desk, my hands become rigid like metal fists.

"Larsen. The body." Saying his name is unnatural for me to say and appears as though it's unnatural and intimate for him to hear it, but I thought that it might have this effect on him. He looks like he's been knocked for six and reminded of someone he'd rather forget. He repeats his name so quietly that it's like it hurts him somehow.

"Larsen?"

"That's your name, isn't it? Or did you lie about that as well?"
"I forgot that I told you."

"You forgot? What, the whole... it doesn't matter."

"No, I remember everything else. I remember these things, I just don't remember telling you his name."

"His name?" I ask, feeling my forehead furrow with confusion. "What the fuck do you mean? It's you. It's your name."

"Yeah, that's what I meant," he says, brushing it off. "I remember now. I had a nightmare and you were nice to me."

"Not particularly. I said that it didn't matter, anyway. So, is that what happened? A quick murder, haircut, grievous bodily harm, and then up, up and away?" I ask angrily. Of course he'd forget. He only remembers what he chooses to remember.

"Not like that. I ran, yeah. Well, walked at an ordinary pace and someone dropped me off at the airport. I knocked you out and I left, but then they found that body and decided that it was me. I didn't see any point in coming back at the time, complicating matters. But, as you can see, I was ok."

"Great. Well, that's just brilliant but why have you come back now?"

"I knew you'd be happy," he smiles stupidly.

"I'm not! What's your excuse? Don't tell me – you had amnesia and found yourself washed up on a beach in Hawaii and you've been wearing a fucking hula skirt since then, but now you remember that you're a twat who lived in Japan?"

"Calm down, Light, Jesus! Actually, you're not too far wrong. I have statements from two psychologists attesting to my state of mind being a bit so-so until three days ago, when I decided to face the music and dance. Booked a flight almost straight away. I was going to call you, but I thought that you might be a little pissed off, and there's nothing worse than someone shouting at you over the phone; it's so depressing. Plus, premium rates abroad. You're shocked, aren't you. You're in the freeze stage of the stress cycle. I've been living with B, some of his psycho shit has rubbed off on me," he explains. "Not like that, though. No funny business, scout's honour."

"I don't care." Scout's fucking honour, yeah, right. "I'm not in any cycle, I'm just... So two psychologists have signed you off? But one of those psychologists will be B and the other will be someone you bribed."

"He's a friend of B's and a highly-respected psychologist – what a disgusting thing to say," he says while dragging on his cigarette stump. "It should have a bearing on my sentence, if it goes that far. Personally, I think I'll just settle it out of court and pay a fine for being too cool for school. I'm going to represent myself, obviously. It'll be alright," he yawns again.

"You know what? I don't think that that's going to happen. Your fake fucking psychologist assessments aren't going to help you."

"Now, come on. I didn't come back to make trouble for you. Don't be stressed."

"Don't tell me not to be stressed. Don't tell me I'm in a stage of any cycle, don't tell me to have a good day, and don't tell me how to feel."

"I didn't. But you shouldn't be stressed. This little problem will be over in no time."
"How? Why have you come back? Why aren't you dead? Why!?"

He looks at me like I'm a boring film for a few seconds, then stubs out his cigarette and sighs.

"I listened in when you phoned B. He left the room, so I knew it was something important and picked up the other phone."

"That's not an answer."

"I couldn't leave you thinking that I was dead after hearing you like that. I was surprised that you did, in a way. I didn't think that I'd fool you that well. I was even more surprised that you cared."

"I didn't."

"Oh, yeah," he smirks at me, like this is all some private joke. "B said that you didn't believe it until he mentioned the dental records and... some photos? Not bad, is he? That was ad lib, mostly. I didn't tell him to go that far. But after hearing you I kept thinking about it, and in the end I thought, 'L, baby, you've got to go back and clear this up.' I just thought that by now you'd be ok and thanking your lucky stars."

"But you didn't do it. You can't even be truthful about being dead!"

"I'm sure that you do wish that I was dead now, don't you. B said years ago that I should send you a letter or something to let you know. He said that you were all Queen Victoria after the death of Albert, but I didn't believe him until I heard you on the phone. And you can be very vindictive. I just wanted you to know and, to be honest with you, I'm really sick of being dead. I've hardly been outside for three years, like a fucking hermit. But if I owned up, it had to be on my terms. I didn't want you to do that whole extradition thing, it's so boring but I wouldn't put it past you. So, here I am doing this very stupid thing. It's almost entertaining, though. I'm considering it work experience, to see what it's like being the accused. Please stop looking at me like that."

"The Chief said that they haven't charged you. I can't believe that. What sort of evidence do they need?"

"Yes, they're pretty useless. I wish that they'd get on with it. I've been sitting here for eighteen hours, but I expected them to run it by you before they do anything," he says, then his eyes flicker over me like he's considering some possibly dangerous action, and leans towards me again, speaking breathily. "Make it go away, Light? I can't talk to you here... and they won't let me change my socks, which I think is a breach of civil liberties. God, you're beautiful. Did I ever tell you? Not just the shell, everything. I must have, Christ, I just can't remember. You don't come across as well in photos or on TV, but holy hell. Fucking illegal is what you are," he laughs, looking down at his cuffed hand and then rubs his face self-consciously. "You've made me go all shy. You'll have to tell me how you've been. I've tried to keep up with things, and it seems like you suddenly turned into a good Prime Minister along the way. I heard about the attempted coup. They're such a bunch of bastard bananas, but you handled it so well, I –"

"Did you tell the police that you've murdered people?"

"No, of course not. I haven't killed anyone," he says, wide-eyed with fake innocence. He's good. No behavioural pause, no verbal/non-verbal disconnect, he keeps eye contact, there's no anxiety indicators, he doesn't comfort himself through touching his face or licking his lips, and no fidgeting. But then – there you are – he starts to pick at his nails. "I was just barking mad, I must have been. B says that it was survivor's guilt. Even with Penber, you know? I didn't have a clue about him until after, when I remembered that conversation I overheard between The Lady and Watari and put it
together, but then I blamed myself because I didn't do anything about it. I could have stopped it, but I
didn't know him and there wasn't any reason for me to get involved. I just felt... bad about it, after the
fact. Because of you. I wasn't quite right at the end. I blame my dad – he completely fucked me up –
but I’m ok now. Honest to God truth.”

"Yeah. So your excuse is that you were mad."

"Completely. Do you want the truth or what I told the police?" he asks, and I sigh loudly. "Truth is,
it was getting a little too hot under the collar. I got a flight out of here, turned up on B's doorstep, he
went, identified that body and that was it. It was so easy. It was so boring. And I missed you. God
knows why, but I thought that'd die off and that an early retirement would suit me. Turns out that it
didn't but I still thought that it was best for you if I exited stage left. You always looked well on TV
and I swear that I actually saw you smile once when you were on that log flume with Kira and
Kiyomi. That grand opening thing you did for Take Your Child to Work Day? I felt that it was too
out of character for you to appear genuine. The set-up was bizarre, I'm shocked that you agreed to it.
I'm not sure that that's the kind of knobhead politician publicity stunt you need, really, but in general,
I think your PR department is officially shit. You were going through that Cabinet backlash thing,
though, weren't you. You had to improve your popularity with the public. I know why you did even
if it was rather embarrassing. Ha. Hey, this'll make you laugh. I saw a bloke outside B’s flat every
day – he used to sell 
La Monde
on the street – and I sort of built this whole fantasy around him,
really elaborate, you know? I was going to ask him up after a few months and thought that we'd have
this amazing affair in French because it'd turn out that he'd be a gigolo and I'd be some rich, lonely,
desperate cunt. I'd read too much Tennessee Williams, don't judge me. But then I realised that the
only reason I noticed him was because he had the same colour hair as you, so that put a dampener on
it. He wasn't as amazing looking as I thought he was. He just wasn't very interesting at all. I mean, he
sold papers, how interesting could he be? Funny, eh?"

"Hilarious."

"Yeah, maybe not. Light? Ok. I've come back because I realised that you did believe that I was dead
and I didn't like that you did. I didn't want to hurt you, I've only ever wanted the best for you. Well,
maybe not always. The first year or so, I didn't give a shit as long as I got a fuck, but, y'know, later.
You were happy sometimes with me, I think, and I wanted you to be happy all the time. And I didn't
like being dead, I didn't like not having a job. I didn't like not seeing you and being completely cut
off from you, because you became somewhere between 80 to 90% of my life, depending on
inflation. And, honestly, I didn't like that either. I understood you then, when you said that love is
like a prison. I didn't get what you meant before. I didn't know what your problem was, I just thought
that you were being melodramatic, but sometimes melodrama has a place in life. I understand now. I
didn't like hearing you upset and that I couldn't say anything. I didn't like that I still cared if you were
upset and I felt really terrible, I... I knew that I had to tell the truth whether you believed me or not or
whether you'd hate me for it or not. It couldn't be a letter in the post, you'd go mental, so it had to be
some big fucking declaration. That's what this is, because I knew that you wouldn't take me seriously
otherwise. Maybe you won't, anyway. I'm a liar, I'm selfish, I'm cruel, I'm rude, I don't take notice of
rules or social etiquette and I don't like suits anywhere near as much as you do – why would you
believe me? So, here I am, giving myself up and having my accounts frozen, and I'll be handed over
to Immigration when they finally get their act together and charge me. Jesus, Light, you don't know
how much I want to tell them what they should charge me with. They've all got their little Beat
Officer's Companion guides out back there, completely clueless, but what's the worst they can do?
They can only charge me for fraud and ruin my quite astounding dead reputation. I was called the
'innovative star of the century who was sadly missed' in The Law Monthly. Do you know how hard
it is to get a mention, never mind a double spread and a compliment in that fucking journal? Shame
that you have to die to get it. But no, fuck all that because you have to know that I'm not dead. You
just cannot let me die in a deckchair as an old man like Michael Corleone, but then look how it
worked out for him when he was MIA, they blew up his fucking wife. I'm not blaming you. I feel this way, it's me, and I can't do anything about it. So what, they'll just lock me up for ten years max? It wouldn't be much different to what life's been like for me for the last three and I might actually get some sex in there. Is that alright? Is that enough? I'm not dead and I'm sorry that I did what I did."

I forgot how much he talked. Once, Touta said that L was quiet. No one understood why I laughed.

"A letter would have done," I say.

"Now you tell me."

"I can't get any sense out of you about anything else, but at least tell me the truth about the body."

"Why are you so mad about the dead guy? I'm spilling my guts to you and you're worried about some dead guy in a lake, three years ago?"

"Because I thought that dead guy was you. Everyone did. He was cremated and buried under your name – who's going to know who he was now? Don't you feel bad about that?"

"Yeah, there's probably some West Highland Terrier pining away at a window somewhere waiting for him to come back," he grumbles, crossing his arms and looking away from me. "Officially, I didn't know about the body until B told me three days ago. I don't know. He must have topped himself, since it was suicide season. What do you want me to say?"

"How did you fit murder into your busy schedule that day?"

He doesn't answer, which I think speaks volumes. He does everything wrong for a second, pushing his palm into his eye sockets and almost imperceptibly nodding while he says a quiet 'no' to himself. Then he suddenly leans across the desk to grab my hand. I try to pull away from him but it's like a clamp of ice is holding me, so the only movement I can make is to ball my hand into a fist while he grips it.

"Light, if you get me out of here, I'll tell you everything."

"Tell me now."

"Not here."

"I'm not helping you. You don't deserve my help. You want to sell your lies to me in exchange for me getting you out of this place, but this place is exactly where you should be. A decent person wouldn't hold the truth for ransom, so what you'd tell me won't be the truth, and I don't find value in anything you say. I'm going to let the full weight of justice crush you, and if there's anything I can do to make it worse for you then I will do it," I tell him. His grip on me loosens, so I sit back in my chair so he can't reach me without dragging the desk with him and possibly breaking his arm. I drop the hand he held onto my thigh and flex the feeling of him from it. Eventually, he sits back down again, physically smaller somehow to how he was before. I have that effect on people.

"You're right, I shouldn't have asked you, I'm sorry," he says.

"You lied to me about everything."

"No."

"And I fell for it, but not again. I'll tell the Chief to go ahead and charge you so you can get on with your case, but don't count on the state accepting settlements. You'll get no help from me."
It's the proper moment to leave, I think, so I stand, which seems to wake him up from his daze in a panic when I move closer to the door.

"Light, wait. When I listened in on that call you had with B, I've never heard you say things like that, ever - the way you talked about me. I was so undeserving of it. So... I just wanted to tell you that it wasn't your fault. I ran away thinking that I was doing it for you instead of myself when it was just selfish. I used you as an excuse to go. I thought that the truth would change how you felt about me, so I decided that I'd rather be the one doing the leaving. I don't know how I would have dealt with it if you'd left me, like I couldn't bear it to think that you might have put yourself on the line to protect me and regret it. Because you would have regretted it. It was all my fault; you tried as hard as you could, I know. And whatever you think is right, I deserve it. I understand," he says, growing increasingly soft in tone. "Please talk to me."

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Your eyes still say forever to me," he whispers. I turn to look back at him over my shoulder before I leave, and can only see a slice of his profile, since he's looking down at the desk, but he's smiling to himself. That shit might work on women but not on me. As I go, policemen go in like they're on a mission to tackle a rat infestation and pull L out between them, but I only hear it, I don't look. Once I get back in the car after talking the the Chief, I inspect my eyes in mirrored casing of my cigarette case and they don't look any different than usual. Stupid fuck.

I left L in the care of the NPA and had B arrested for suspected perjury, but had him released a few days later and sent back to France. They're both fuckwits and by rights I should be able to have them shot. As it is, I haven't decided what to do with L, so I left him in a limbo of government detainment and tried to forget about him completely, which was going quite well until Kiyomi and the Chief of NPA started to remind me, daily. I wanted him to be left to rot in there, but apparently I can't do that. Human rights, or some crap like that. I think that perhaps humanity was at its height hundreds, maybe thousands of years ago when there were sacred kings who could do whatever the fuck they wanted. No one went on about human rights to them, did they. And as if that unfairness wasn't bad enough, then Kiyomi stuck her rhinoplasty into things. She waited until I was out of Tokyo before she lied to the Chief, saying that I'd given permission for L to be allowed to apply for bail and that we'd both be his surety. I'd tweaked the rules on bail hearings in his case in the name of state security, you see, in that I made it clear to the Chief that I didn't want him to be given even the possibility of bail. She'd gone down to the local court to meet privately with the judge on my behalf, apparently, because of it being a 'sensitive political matter'. She'd signed the papers, using the excuse that I was away on a work trip, so then she alone became his surety. She didn't tell me. I found out when I hadn't heard from the Chief for a few days and called him to find out why. That was the reason why, and I had to sound like I knew all about it but I'd forgotten. And so the trust I had in my wife disintegrated. Despite her blaming L for everything ranging from the persecution of ethnic minorities throughout history to the weather, she didn't see her role in her own downfall, nor did it stop her from staying in contact with him. I imagined that they compared notes and how she'd probably set him up in a house somewhere, fully furnished with a stocked fridge, and that made me sick. But she never mentioned it to me, I never mentioned it to her. I tried to keep my distance from her after that betrayal. I go to my room early and lock the door. Sometimes I hear her frightened knocking and quiet pleading until I put on my headphones, but I don't let things get to me because I have better things to do. I don't know why I ever even slightly trusted anyone, and I think it's only because I became too tired to shoulder the burden alone. I'm suffering, you should suffer, too. Feel the most insignificant gram of what I have to carry with me and crawl on the ground from the heaviness of it.

I don't go out outside much, if I can avoid it. I live between the Kantei and the House, am ferried to
and from locations and shielded by a sea of guards whenever I'm in the open air. This is because I have reason to believe that some people want me dead. Actually, there's no real reason to think that, but I anticipate it or expect it, I don't know. When no attempts on my life were made, I gave the would-be assassins too much credit, thinking up ways that I would kill someone like me. All my house staff are scrutinised without their knowledge and anyone found to be involved in anything slightly suspect or who have friends who are suspect are released from their contracts. My water supply is off the grid and tested, and my food is likewise tested. I don't consume anything outside of the Kantei which hasn't been made or overseen by my personal chef, and then tested, like an Emperor's food testers. I'd wear a bulletproof vest but they're too bulky, so I just make sure that I'm not put in situations where someone could get near me. Anyone entering my department is searched and screened through metal detectors. I think that I went a little too far, but it passed the time trying to think of all eventualities and possibilities. People don't need a reason to kill you, because they want immortality in infamy. I couldn't possibly list all the leaders and bright political hopes who've been assassinated, sometimes by their own bodyguards or people we're supposed to trust, but just off the top of my head, because I've done case studies - Stambolov, Merbah, Doumer, Barmina, Petkov, Uwilingiyimanana, Villarroel, Bishop, Martinez, Carranza, Gill, Najibullah, Nokrashi, Doe, Ratsimandrava, Balewa, Stamboliyski, Bhutto, JFK, RFK, Luther King, McGee, Hariri, Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, Indira Gandhi, Cerro, Kostas, Deligiannis, Tisza, Moro, Narutoqicz, Pais, Flores, Chalbaud, Sargsyan, Rahman, Ceausescu, Dindic, Blanco, Palme, Erim, Perceval, Stolypin... The Lady. Of course, Asanuma is constantly in my head. I see the film of the wakizashi running through him in my mind like he was nothing but a slab of butter. Hirobumi haunts me with his fucking big beard. Even after people retire from politics, sometimes they've still been on someone's hitlist. They stare out at me from books and say: 'You're next.'

It's eleven at night. I'm still working and will continue to do so until two. I heard Kira cry about an hour ago, and then he knocked low down on my door and tried to turn the handle, all the time trying to snivel out his story about a monster in his room. I stared at the wall while he cried and called for me, and wondered: why me? Of all the people in this house he'd run to, why me? I instinctively reached for my headphones. When your problems are greater than mine, I'll listen to you, Kira. He's already told me how he nearly choked on some pickled sakura blossoms and how a man offered him some sweets with 'poison' tags hanging off them when I left him in my office alone for a minute. He said: 'You could get in trouble, couldn't you, Daddy. You're not supposed to leave me alone.' I humoured him and said that, yes, I could go to prison. He said: 'I'd miss you if you went to prison, Daddy.' He looked very sinister when he said it, so I've kept away from him since then.

I was skipping tracks to find some white noise which was appropriately noisy enough, when I heard Kiyomi outside talking to Kira, telling him that I was asleep and that he shouldn't wake me. My finger hovered over the play button like it was a detonator for a bomb, and then their voices became more distant as Kiyomi must have led him away. The revenge of my dissatisfaction extends even to my child.

My internal line rings, which isn't shockingly unusual. I expect that some national tragedy has occurred and I'll be forced to go to The House or write a statement which'll be repeated on TV until the morning, when I release another statement of regret. But I'm told that a personal call has been made for me from a 'friend' called Asahi, which was L's nickname for me in text messages to conceal the truth if he ever had his phone stolen. He called me it after the beer, I think, because I hate it. So, I know who it is and I'm put in a position where I'm obliged to answer or look like an uncaring, antisocial cunt to my staff. I hope it's a fucking tragedy.

"What?" I say. There's nothing but the sound of breathing and of splashing water, which I listen to for about ten seconds before losing patience. "What do you want, L?" I ask, and he breathes out a rush of air down the phone so that I can almost feel it.
"This line's clean, isn't it? I thought that I heard a clicking sound."

"It's clean. What do you want?"

"I was just wondering how long you're going to ignore me."

"I don't want anything to do with you. I thought that I made that clear."

"That's sad. I've been thinking... I need to talk to you. Will you meet me somewhere? Tomorrow or whenever?"

"No."

"No. I thought not. If I'd put a bet on that I would've made a lot of money. Why did you do that the other day? With the press?"

"I don't know what you mean," I say gruffly.

Yeah. I didn't mention it because it wasn't worth mentioning, but about a week after L was released on bail, Kiyomi and I were being driven to a restaurant for dinner, but were snarled up in traffic. While sitting there, dying of boredom and staring out the window as pedestrians on fucking crutches passed us by, Kiyomi noticed a crowd of people outside the bank near The Living Room – a restaurant I'd been intending to visit one day but they weren't very accommodating to the suggestion of my personal chef sitting in while they prepared my meals. We started to move by slowly, and I realised that they were a crowd of photographers. A man was attempting to walk through, but they moved with him, cocooning him in a blob of camera flashes and heckles, like mutant frogspawn. 'Is that Lawliet?' Kiyomi asked me, leaning over me to see. It was, obviously. There are 13 million people in this city, but it would have to be him. Fate shat on me once again.

L came to prominence through his 'lost years' because people like a story like that. A policeman blabbed, which was no great surprise, and Mai only suppressed any allusions to me or my government which could be damaging. The media labelled him guilty of fraud and conspiracy, and luckily for me that meant that I was proven innocent of having him offed, as was previously suspected.

I smiled at the providence of life punishing him for being free when he has no right to be, and then he was weighed down to a stop while our car kept moving past them at 1mph. The last I saw of him, he was shielding his eyes and turning towards the wall. I looked at the back of the driver's seat feeling incredibly angry, for some reason, and decided that I'd had enough of this marching parade through a street of Tokyo, so I got out of the car, heading towards The Living Room. I thought that I'd risk it. A side effect of this was panic from my guards, driver, my chef in the car behind, and Kiyomi. Of course, upon my sudden appearance, the photographers noticed me and targeted me instead. I was full of joviality as I spoke to them on my way across the street – I've made it my business to know each of them by name – and only glared at L for a second before he darted off to the taxi rank. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but since then I've considered my actions and reasons for interfering. It's not what you think, but it might be the reason I wouldn't open my door to Kira. I cannot stand seeing suffering around me and I wouldn't wish my life on anyone, even someone I despise. I don't usually intervene, but I observe and condemn for eternity. Kira sees monsters; I am that monster, and I am followed by others who would rip your guts out and string them up like decorations if someone paid them to. I am not content. I hate being constantly followed and noticed and catcalled by paps and made into a fucking industry. One thing I always envied of L and nobodies like him is their ability to go anywhere in relative anonymity. A possible flaw in my character is that I would sacrifice myself so that they can keep their peace. But L doesn't deserve peace.
When he turned towards the wall, trying to protect and hide himself, it was the saddest thing I've ever seen.

"I'm frightened, Light," he says, though I can barely hear him and he talks so slowly. I think he's drunk. There's that sound of water again. Where is he? At a fucking swimming pool? Drunk at a swimming pool in the middle of the night?

"Have you been drinking?"

"No, I'm just sad and tired."

"Go to sleep then."

"I can't sleep," he laughs bitterly, and I exhale, overwhelmed by sad tiredness.

"What are you frightened of?"

"Everything. Of the press, that people will know who I am. That you won't talk to me again. I thought – stupid, I know – I thought that all I needed to do, as a duty of care for you, was to come clean and everything would be alright, but it's not going to be alright."

"A duty of care?"

"You know what I mean."

"Not really," I say, then sniff. "You know the press. Stay inside and another story will come up. PR's working on getting a court injunction."

"It's not that. In some ways, I don't think that I deserve a court injunction."

"You don't, but the press would focus on the political links you had, that's why we're getting one. It's not for you."

"I know." He's so quiet that I give up on my aggression with another sigh.

"Most of those guys were indies, I know them. They were tipped off, but there won't be any stories in the broadsheets and if they don't find buyers for photos then they'll give up following you. PR'll see to it. Give it a few days and it'll die off."

"I have trouble understanding people sometimes," he says, like he grew bored half-way through what I was saying and found something else to think about. "I can put myself in their position but, emotionally, I don't always understand. I pretend to, but I just don't get it. What use are degrees if emotions are a mystery to me? I understand my own sometimes, but not other people's. Do you think I intentionally fuck things up for myself?"

"I'd say that it was a strong possibility."

"It's because I don't understand. I didn't understand why you'd be so upset with me when I was no use to you anymore, but then I thought, maybe you did feel the same way as I do. You're very difficult to understand, Light, you have to realise that. I always thought of you like you were in a little box and I'd get to you one day, and you'd be worth the time and trouble. Remember the day I met you? Remember what I said?"

"Yeah, you were talking about boxes and scratching surfaces and crap like that."

"Ha. Yes. And you agreed, didn't you. It wasn't all innuendo, as it happens. I just didn't know why it
was important for me to know you. But... uh... when I was away, no, probably for a long time before that, I felt that that red string of fate story has something going for it."

"Pfff... I don't think so." God, he's been reading a lot of stories while he's been undead. It's like talking to a drunk English Literature graduate.

"You love all those romantic stories, don't deny it. You romanticise absolutely everything: politics, you, me, suits, love, death, sex, everything. You're the worst for it, and I always thought that it was kind of sweet because you don't realise you're doing it and it's all a bit fucked up in your head. No, I think this red thread is there for life. Most of the time it was tangled up or stretched out or kids were using it as a fucking skipping rope across continents, but it was there, linking us by our fingers."

Then I'll chop my fucking finger off.

"Are you still there?" he asks.

"Yes."

"What do you think?"

"I think that you need to move on emotionally like you did physically and stop talking to me about red string and just... don't call me."

"You know I'm right. You said it yourself, years before I realised, remember? I was fucking angry with you but I knew you were right. I know it's annoying, Light, I'm sorry. I'm not what you'd choose for yourself. You chose Kiyomi."

"But I did... I did choose Kiyomi, yes."

"Will you let me explain what happened? I did everything wrong when I saw you."

"I don't want to hear it. You don't need to explain to me. Don't call me again and don't speak to my wife."

"Wait, wait. I think that you do need to hear what I have to say. I'm not going to jump on you, Light, I just want to talk. I'm sorry that I came on a bit strong at the station. Was I too enthusiastic?"

"You were very inappropriate and disrespectful, but there's no change there."

"Haaa... Sorry. Where are you now? Are you busy? Do a man a favour and tell me what you're wearing."

"I'm in the dance studio in a gold lamé jumpsuit. It shouldn't matter to you where I am or what I'm wearing."

"Oh, Light. What games we play. I keep thinking about the House a lot. When we were in the House, when The Lady died and you saw him. Had you seen him before then? I can't understand why you didn't scream. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"No."

"No, you don't remember. You saw him though, I know you did. That was when I realised."

"What are you talking about?"

"You were looking at the ceiling of the chamber and you saw him. We were both looking at the
same thing and he was watching us."

"The ceiling?"

"Him. It doesn't matter. Oh, Kiyomi's invited me to something at the Kantei. I don't expect that she would have told you. She feels sorry for me. I know, I've no idea either."

"Kiyomi often feels sorry for strange people with mental disorders but she was probably only being polite and didn't expect you to accept. It'd be polite of you to refuse the invitation."

"It's too late; she insisted. It's not like I could tell her that I was busy. I don't want to go, but you'll have to insist that I'm uninvited."

"I can't do that. If she wants you to be there for whatever reason then it's up to her."

"Mmm."

"What?"

"Nothing. It's just that she said that you're not talking at the moment." What the fuck has she told him? Why has she told him anything?

"It's none of your business, but we had a disagreement about Kira's schooling, that's all."

"Oh, parental conflict, of course. Did you tell her about us or am I reading too much into her kindness?"

"You're reading too much into it."

"I thought that it'd be strange. Do you know what she said?"

"She told me everything you discussed," I say confidently. She didn't.

"I'll just repeat it then for the sake of clarity. I asked her why she was helping me, and she said that she's seen you destroy too many people. She didn't want you to do the same to me."

"She didn't mean that, obviously. We wanted to see how you'd respond when given the opportunity to criticise me. How stupid are you if you can't recognise when someone's leading the witness? You should know about that. I told her that it wouldn't work, but apparently I gave you too much credit to think that you wouldn't leap at the chance to slag me off. " Fucking hell, Kiyomi, why can't you shut your fucking face, you shrew!? It's ok though. I think I saved the situation."

"But I didn't respond," he says calmly after a second. Fuck. Well, it was 50/50 whether he'd have or not.

"I know, I was just checking."

"On me or Kiyomi?"

"I have no reason to doubt Kiyomi." That bitch. I couldn't trust her to put her shoes on without killing me in the process. The fucking she wolf, what is she doing? I'll have to stop avoiding her now. I'll probably have to fuck her to get her back on side, I'll have to get a vasectomy because I can't trust her there either, I don't think she's taking the pill anymore, she's just waiting, that's what they do, that's why she's done this, and she'll pierce every condom in Tokyo with a hair pin. But how will I find a surgeon I can trust? You have to watch the nurses and all the admin people and the anaesthetist – I'd need one of them even with a local because I don't want anything going wrong, I've
looked into it. God, an injection in my fucking balls, shit, shit, shit!

"Light, I know that she knows. She asked me when it started. She told me things," he says. I don't know what to say, I'm still thinking about needles in my balls, so I say nothing. It works with political crises, why wouldn't it work with anything else? He waits for me to reply and sighs when I don't. "Ok, let's take it slowly. Tell me how you've been. I want to know."

"You could just read the papers and find that out."

"I won't find the truth in the papers. I want to hear it from you." He waits for my answer, but I don't reply then either. "I really fucked up this time, didn't I. You know, the best thing that you can do is make me the only loser in this, because I regret what I did more every day. I'm glad that you're happy now, if you're happy. You've done some great things, and you've come a long way. Don't ever be ashamed of caring about me once, however misplaced it was. If you ever want to talk, I'll keep this number."

"I do have some questions," I absentmindedly mumble after a long silence. Needles in my balls. "But I can't believe anything you say."

"I'm staying in 102 Dai apartments, Tsurugashima." God, that's terrible.

"Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?"

"No. It's just where I am. If you want to call round."

"I'd rather be dead than be seen there. You really are a loser now, aren't you," I say, and slam the phone down. Then I scrape my teeth on my thumbnail for five minutes until I'm as calm as a rock again, causing untold damage for my manicurist. Needles in my balls. I wonder if I could do it myself? I think I'd prefer that, like soldiers after battle piling their guts into a pot to sew back in once they've finished killing. It can't be that hard. I could buy some things online, maybe sterilise my nail scissors, and I have a sewing kit and some antiseptic. There might be an instruction video on youtube.

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer (applies for both this chapter and the next) over everything but especially:

1. Light's political blah is a weird mix of Tony Benn and Margaret Thatcher speeches and thinking. You couldn't get two more opposing people apart from that they both 100% believed in what they stood for.

2. This is supposed to be incredibly, cripplingly ridiculous because this Light is the most offensive and least self-aware version of Light ever, but he's been hella fun to write for. I'm like 'what do I find really offensive?' and then make him or someone else say it, it's been great.
I Am The Victim And The Murderer

Well, I decided against the vasectomy in the end. The women of the world have nothing to fear, I am intact. Not that I doubt my competency as a surgeon, but I decided that I'd hoard condoms I'm sure of and hide them under a floorboard instead. As it happens, I didn't need them, because Kiyomi has been decidedly cool with me since I extended an olive branch. I started having meals with her again and telling her that she was prettier without makeup, which is always a complete lie but they like that stuff. Keeping Kiyomi alienated makes her untrustworthy and I must keep people close.

I thought about L in his dive for a few days during empty minutes, usually when Kiyomi was talking to me over meals, and it made me feel more satisfied with how karma has played out, if it can't kill him. After seeing him in the police station, absurdly buoyant and unrepentant, to hearing him quiet and miserable on the phone, I couldn't get those two sides of him out of my head. There was a time when I would have torn the world apart to have him back, even if it was just to speak to him across the great divide through a ouija board or some doped up crazy hippie, but now that he is back, I feel nothing but hatred for him. I'm angry because I was used. I allowed myself to be used and to make all the mistakes I'd spent most of my life trying to avoid. There must have been some self-confidence issues which I've since overcome, but when I hear him now, I feel like all those protective layers are being stripped away and that I could make the same mistakes all over again. Instead of feeling comfort and renewal through being alone, I just feel dulled. It makes no sense but I'm very stressed.

At some point though, there was some vitality I found now that my old cynical views reemerged with a vengeance. His return coincided with a tint of colour coming back into my life, and I saw things with my familiar, simple acceptance that I'm alone, everyone is a cunt, and I'm isolated by my superiority. Word got around quickly that he was alive and on the cusp of the justice system, with only Mihael as his public defender, who's no use to anyone whatsoever. I had some tracker in my brain which seemed to seek out particular words or phrases said within my hearing, like 'Yagami' or 'bomb' or 'Lawliet' or 'homosexual' or 'up the arse with a broom handle', but only his name was mentioned and just by a few civil servants. And with something between awe at his audacity, admiration at his success at doing the impossible, and shock at his return, I saw his reputation taken down like scaffolding and was completely ecstatic about it.

In more important news: I've found out that I've lost weight recently. In panic at the thought of being scrawny, I now eat a shitload of crisps as a failsafe preventative measure, reasoning that I would prefer an early death from saturated fats than having all my clothes re-tailored.

Of course, if there's one thing to really make me do something, it's when I'm told or advised or expected to do a particular thing, and in this case, I had everyone telling me how I should denounce L publicly. I did the opposite to the consensus and sought him out in his hovel to cause him such humiliation and guilt that hopefully he'll slit his throat. That's my objective. I've been so excited about it, I can't tell you.

So, the door clicks and opens. Plastic bags rustle into sight first, then a white trainer, a denim-clad leg, a mushroomy-coloured t-shirt draping unfavourably over a body which is far too thin for it; hair like a gorse bush, a face as white as a fucked on sheet, the eyes of a microbiologist with insomnia; a set of collar bones and cheekbones you could cut your wrists on, and, as a strange antithesis to the well passé heroin chic look, a black Givenchy suit jacket. Oh. The way he's dressed is so rebellious and carefree that he makes it work for him. It's the French Revolution of dressing, it's so brave. Don't take that the wrong way; I don't find him attractive in the least. I'm just trying to be a good, reliable and unbiased narrator, and that involves descriptions, however much it pains me. It amazes me that I must have found him acceptable once, but I realise now, after my thirty-odd years of life, that even
my sexuality is pious and as such is dead most of the time. It relies more on a complicated primordial soup of attributes, which individually are rarely developed enough to make anyone worthy of my attention, and practically impossible to find in any combination within a single person. In fact, I only saw such a thing which came close to it once in my entire life, and for that, I didn't mind lowering myself to his level, so to speak. At the time. Not now.

God, that's a really nice jacket. Anyway, I thought that sex was so intrinsic for him that he might fuck off if I didn't compromise, but he did all the same, so there you go. That's how much it means. It was alright, sometimes. There were moments of sky touching, but I never appreciated it for the sake of it, like everyone else seems to. I found it a travesty to be shunted around like I was a toilet that needed unblocking or sat on like I'm a rocking horse. It's so degrading, God. I lose some sense of self-worth through it, but I buy something expensive and feel better. All that shit is completely unnecessary, putrid and repulsive, but I recognise that I'm just too advanced for society. I'm not one of those frigid people who don't like that term so they came up with this new 'asexual' fad and wear purple, because they're weird and/or ugly and I don't like purple. I just don't feel sexual attraction or have much interest in sexual activity, it's completely different. But, if anyone should pass on his genetics, it should be me. I owe it to the country, really. Sex with L was pointless in that regard, obviously. It was just a compromise and he must have always known it. It's only ever been a compromise.

But, yeah, he was ok in that department. Hold on, why am I thinking about that? Ignore all of it. He's come back to his apartment and that's all you need to know. I'm not gay, in case I haven't made that clear already. I'm married and have a child.

After struggling with the key which has stuck in the lock, he yanks off his shoes and walks straight into the chest of a huge turd of a man from my security team. It's only then that he realises that his home had been invaded. He sees me facing him from a little way down the tiny hallway, cross-legged but Lincoln-esque on a chair which my other guard had brought for me.

"Are you aware that you're living in a shithole?" I say disinterestedly. He looks between me and my two enormous brutes, looking like a bullied school mate whose just found his nemesis and two flunkies in his house who are ready to beat him up for a DVD player, which I suppose is what's happening.

"Does anyone want a cup of tea?" he asks, cornered by the two men. One of them parrots: "A cup of tea?" to the other one and they find it hysterical in a giggly way, which defeats the whole image I was going for in having two threatening professionals who say nothing but could rip you apart with their bare hands if I gave them the go ahead.

"You two can fuck off and wait outside now," I tell them, dusting off my trouser leg from the crap floating around this place, since L let in a draught and stirred up uncountable horrors against hygiene. One brute looks at the other and they immediately realise their mistake and walk past L, shutting the door behind them to leave us in this astringent silence and yet more motes. He just stares at me, so I break that up by standing and fastening my jacket. Then he speaks.

"You broke into my flat?"

"You weren't in," I reply casually. "What am I supposed to do - wait outside? I thought that it'd be bad, but this is certainly something. Quite eyeopening for someone like me. I'm glad that I never worked in Housing. I mean, where do you start? The place is only fit for being pulled down. So, this is where all the dropouts of life live? You must feel like you've found your place in the world."

He absorbs that with some bitterness and walks off with what I can only describe as a black cloud suddenly descending over his head. I'm reminded of many things I'd noticed when I first met him but
disregarded due of lack of interest, such as how he has a way of drifting around like he's used to being followed or haunted and doesn't give a shit about it. I trace his steps into some kind of makeshift kitchen a caravan would be ashamed of, and lean against the doorframe to wipe my jacket sleeve, which shows up any dandruff-like dust this place is covered with. God, it's like falling into an ashtray.

"What do you want to ask me?" he mumbles, apparently ignoring me to focus on boiling the kettle and pouring powder from a sachet into a mug.

"Nothing."

"Oh, how interesting, I can hardly wait to hear all you've got to say. You look all... sexed," he scowls at me, looking me up and down for a disparaging second. "I suppose that it's too much to hope that you're here for that."

"You supposed right. Why, are you desperate?" I reply, huskily pretending to be concerned about it.

"Getting there."

"What a shame. I wouldn't know what that's like, but I sympathise. I'm here on business. Don't worry, it won't take long."

"You've broken into my place to orate at me? I was just thinking on my way back from the supermarket, what I feel like is a bloody good pompous speech from a pompous bastard. My prayers have been answered."

"I've been in meetings all day at the House. I'm on my way back to the Kantei and thought this would be as good a time as any," I say, watching how he's quite stiff in his movements from what I recognise as being pent up anger and, very likely, sexual frustration, because he reeks of both. I can't comprehend either, really. There's a lot I never understood about him, and in him are my contradicting feelings about the entire human race. I've spent my life unwillingly sympathising, trying to empathise, but seldom truly understanding. He's the only test I've ever failed.

I find it uncommonly fascinating how: 1. He's so fucking impolite to me. 2. He acts like the last three years didn't happen, and 3. How I think the way he stirs things in an almost sultry way is something akin to Zen Buddhism. But, you know, he has a nostalgic charm for me, maybe. He's entangled with my rise to power and glory, it's only to be expected. It's almost sad how's he's dressed like some nobody, but I guess that he is a nobody now. I wish that I could drug him so he wouldn't remember that I was here. He'd wake up covered in semen and bruises with only vague memories which he'd put down to his filthy imagination in dreams and a collision with a sideboard. At odd times I have an urge to touch him or hold him or smile at him or something stupid, but it's really only because I'm still slightly shocked that he's alive. Though I never truly believed it, part of me convinced myself that he was dead because it was less difficult to excuse his absence. Now I'm torn between a want to forgive and a want to make him suffer. A thought pops into my head that I could really fuck him up and live out the rest of my life with a spring in my step, but the idea that I somehow need or want to do it is sickening, so I push it aside.

"Mmmm... lovely. Instant miso. Everything about your new life is full of style and class," I smile, and he turns to me slowly with a slightly intimidating blank expression while holding a dripping spoon like it's a weapon.

"What do you want, Light?"

"Just catching up. We might as well be friendly, what with our red... ha... sorry, our red string of fate
"Don't laugh at me."

"It's very hard not to when you're so pathetic."

"When you laugh at me, you're laughing at yourself," he replies, his eyes glazing over with a flimsy attempt at hatred. He is pathetic and he knows it. He looks at the ground while steam rises from his cup and quickly clouds the room behind him like cigarette smoke as I peer down on him from this great height of mine. Great in many senses. He looks more anxious than I feel, because I feel very good about how perfunctory my work is here. I have something to say and that's it. I try to get past him but he won't move, so I'm wedged between him and the doorframe and some greasy kitchen cabinets. He keeps his head down, only hesitantly glancing up at me from time to time. I can't get past him without physically pushing him aside, but I don't feel threatened. I'd rather that he was still cufféd to a table, but I'm the threat, and he reminds me of an animal who's so fearful that they're stunned by it.

"You seem nervous, Lawliet-san," I say. He shifts awkwardly like he's trying to shake it off. "Do you mind if I don't take off my shoes? It's just that this place is so –"

"My estate has been impounded and I'm living on the generosity of friends. It's pretty humiliating, yes. I don't need you to remind me how I'm not in the Ritz. Keep your fucking shoes," he tells me grumpily, walking away. He's a lesson in how to be an excellent host. I don't think I've been in a place anything like this in my life. "It doesn't matter where I live anyway, does it?"

"Not to me," I say, following him into a cupboard. No, God, is this an actual room? I stand in the doorway to take it in while he switches on the, like, fucking hell, it must be just a 14" TV. I didn't think that they made them that small anymore. I thought that it was a cardboard box with an iPad stuck on the front of it. "Well, considering that B's been claiming your shares from the firm for the last few years on your behalf, I'm surprised that you haven't got some money hidden away somewhere to pay for a better place."

"Sadly, this isn't The Shawshank Redemption," he says, sitting on the tatami to eat his soup while he gawps at the news running along the bottom of the screen. "That money was put into an account which I declared when I was arrested, so no. Please, take a seat. You have a choice of one chair. Oh, what do you think of that, you're on TV. I can't stand this guy, why did anyone ever vote for him to be Prime Minister? He just goes on and on and on, beige, beige, beige like Coldplay. Do you mind if I mute your speech?"

"Go right ahead. And, thanks, I'll stand," I say through gritted teeth. Twat. His attention is now only on the soup and I'm ignored and left to watch him lift the bowl to his mouth and slurp, it's horrendous. His mouth will taste of the sea, I think, and sigh.

I wait for him to say something, but he doesn't, and it's like I'm not even there. I despise being ignored. My fingers naturally stray towards the pen in my pocket, since I tend to spin a pen between my fingers when I'm annoyed or bored or stressed or all of the above. It's better than biting my nails. But I don't reach for it like a comfort blanket, I toss it to the floor a little way in front of L's feet. He looks at it and then at me, and swallows, so I smile with feigned shock at my ungainliness.

"Look at that. I dropped my pen."

"You practically threw it across the room," he says, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Butter fingers."
"When you choose to be."

I grant him with an amused tilt of my head before walking over to retrieve the pen which has just unexpectedly flown from my hand. In front of him, I bend down slowly to pick up the pen so that my arse is nearly in his face. Take that, fucker. I hear him cough, and from the corner of my eye watch him look at my heels instead with a bizarre intensity. His fingertips reach towards the hem of my trouser leg like I'm a holy relic he's not supposed to lay a hand on, which is pretty damn accurate. I stand straight.

"Touch me and I'll string you up," I tell him, clicking my pen before returning to my geniality and safe position near the wall. "So, you're penniless? Well, declaring everything was a stupid thing to do, wasn't it."

"It was my legal obligation. What's the point of doing this if I don't do it correctly? I'm trying to do the right thing," he says, unceasingly irritable in his tone with me in between taking up his slurping again. All this talk about his devotion to the law makes me want to laugh. I would have thought that he'd go into anaphylactic shock from doing what's right. What a martyr.

"Oh, the right thing. But didn't you say that right and wrong were constructs to dominate society or something stupid like that?"

"To bridle them, yes."

"But despite that, now you're trying to do the right thing? There's a first time for everything, isn't there. I hear that B's been released. Pissed off back to France then?"

"Yes, since you deported him. Thanks for having him detained for no reason, by the way. It was very thoughtful of you."

"He purposefully misidentified a corpse. I'm just surprised that the NPA didn't follow it through. Did he enjoy his time in custody?"

"Actually, he had a brilliant time, apparently," he says, setting his bowl down. "Light, I'm glad you're here. I don't care what your reasons are. I want to see you and explain what happened and why." No, you shut the fuck up, you fucking prick.

"No need. You were insane, weren't you? That's normally why people disappear, and from what I remember, you were bordering on incomprehensible. Besides, I've heard some of your excuses, entirely involuntarily. Kiyomi told us that you left to improve yourself?"

"Us?"

"Mikami was asking about you. Personally, I couldn't have given a fuck about your excuses."

"Improving myself," he repeats, looking down into his lap. "Partly, I suppose. I just wanted to get out of a situation which was hard to control, and then I had to do the right thing and prove to you that I --"

"Well, there's certainly plenty of room for improving yourself. So, have you finished doing that? I would have expected that it would take more time." He looks up, but loses all spine and glares at his feet instead, so I look at them too. A box anklet thing is strapped to his leg. Oh. A GPS monitor. "They've tagged you?"

"It was part of my bail conditions. That, and I have to report to the Home Office."
Something inside me screams at me how wrong this is and how it doesn't have to be this way. I should be tagged, he should be in court, he should be in prison, but it feels wrong, anyway. I'm not going to feel sorry for him about his change in circumstance, but, after a heavy second, I take a step towards him and hand him an envelope.

"I brought you this to give to your defence team," I explain, but he doesn't seem to comprehend and just stares at the still unopened letter, so I continue, because somehow I feel like I should. It's not a fucking Kinder Surprise. "I was told that if I supplied you with a statement like this then the case would be dropped. I'll have copies sent to the NPA and the state prosecution and you'll just have to pay a fine you can settle out of court, like you said."

"Why? Why have you done this?"

"The press wouldn't be beneficial to the party if you were sent down. It's bad enough as it is. That scuffle with the photographers the other day? Think of that as a tiny taster. The media will turn on you, injunction or not. They turn on everyone and I have it on good authority that you have no loyalty there."

"And who told you that?"

"A contact of mine."

"Oh. And why should it affect the party?"

"Because it affects me and I am the party."

"I forgot that it's all about you. I'm sorry for any inconvenience. Can I get you a drink?" he says, standing up forlornly. When he does, I take a step back.

"No, my car's outside."

"Please just stay until I read this," he says, and leaves the room with the letter. He always went off like that to read something important, but not my speeches, tellingly. While he's gone, I look over this place and can't imagine him living here, but I find some warm joy in knowing that he is. I'd probably die if I had to live here. Just die from bad décor and layers of dead skin cells, oh my God, I'm going to be sick. No, false alarm. This room is like something you see on documentaries about people being abducted and forced to be sex slaves for men with mother fixations. I just cannot get over this place. He must have picked it out especially to impress me by how awful it is. When he does come back, he gives me a drink, anyway, in a cheap plastic glass, and holds my letter like it's not worth the paper it's written on. "Light, this is…"

"Will it do?"

"I would think so. Thank you," he says quietly. I can't stand him with all his 'look at me! I'm not dead but I'm living in poverty after being charged for various crimes because you hate me. Please love me and feel sorry for me! Oh, and if you could possibly see it in your heart to give me a good fuck while you're here, that'd be just peachy, thanks!' And I actually thought that my life was better for having known him. Isn't it weird how your mind conspires against you to make you think and feel all this shit? But my head is clear now that there's all this bad blood between us.

"Yes, you see, this is why I wanted to give it to you personally, because I didn't want you to get the wrong idea. It's to solve a problem for myself, nothing more."

"I didn't think anything. I'm just surprised."
"Politically, it's the most prudent thing to do, no matter how much I believe that you deserve to be everyone's favourite prison bitch. But we all know how rare justice is now, don't we. Ha, can you imagine how they'd treat you? You with all your 'would anyone like a cup of tea, darlings?' It'd be so fucking funny, wouldn't it. I'd pay to see it."

"Yes. Very funny," he replies sadly. Well, that ruined that one.

"But, anyway, my request is that you take this and leave so I don't have to worry about you absconding, since my wife is your guarantor."

"I have no intention of absconding."

"You haven't got the best track record. Obviously I won't offer support in any foreign cases against you, if there are any. I can't get involved in international lawsuits. The fact that you'll be pretty much let off here might help your case elsewhere, but I really don't care. So, yeah, take it and run. I have to go. I suggest that you don't take advantage of your dual citizenship by visiting Japan again."

"The most prudent thing you could do is to let the case go ahead," I hear him say as I walk past him. And, unfortunately, it does make me stop.

"You want me to let you be sentenced? I suppose that I can arrange that, if that's what you really want."

"Of course I don't. I'm just confused about why you're doing this. You're unconstitutionally intervening in a judicial matter, leaning on the NPA and the chief prosecutors to have the case dropped. It's just unnecessary."

"It's a state issue and I'm effectively the Head of State. I want you gone and I don't want any press, that's it. Thanks for the drink." I've left it untouched on the table and I hope that he notices.

"Wait, I thought that we were going to talk?"

"No. Talk to B," I say. By this point, I'm pretty eager to get out of here because it smells and he's around, but he follows me to the door and puts his hand on it to stop me from leaving. I'm blocked in again. Dick, dick, dick, don't touch me, you boil on the arse of humanity.

"I want to explain. Give me a chance to apologise." Oh, please.

"I don't want to hear it. Look, no harm, no foul, but I don't owe you anything, let alone my time. I need to go, I told you, my car's outside."

"You're angry with me and you have every right to be, but do you know why you're angry?"

"Well, you were involved in a political cover up, cost the state a lot of money and resources in searching for you, and you're going to get away with it. Oh, and GBH, murder, insanity, the list goes on. You couldn't possibly apologise for all you've done, so don't bother trying. There's nothing to be gained from you going to prison apart from justice being upheld, but justice never really applied to you, did it. You can't be reformed. I just want you out of the country so you're someone else's problem. Justice can be sacrificed if it means that you get out of this country."

He cringes as I list his many crimes and makes a quite 'oh' sound once I've finished. He has no shame though, it only touches him for a second.

"I know that what I say won't mean much to you, but I really thought that the right thing to do then was to leave."
"I don't understand how faking your own death could possibly be the right thing to do, but it doesn't matter now."

"You were going to ruin your career and -"
silly, constantly misconstruing innocent incidents of daily life. I've dropped a lot of pens and soap, but I've never seen anything throw itself across the room like that. I've been in this game a long time and you're a fucking lap dancer with a no-touch policy and you can fuck off. But here's something for you to think about when you go, because this applies to your politics as well as your clusterfuck of a life, and at least with your career you did take notice of me sometimes. What exactly are you trying to do, Light? Where are you heading? Because, as I see it, you put dreams ahead of reality, but they're unachievable, and that's why you'll never finish a single thing. You did the groundwork and you did it with my help. With my help. No, shut up. All you've done since I left is pass a few reforms, which are very admirable, I'll give you that, but based on my insider knowledge of you, your reasons for the reforms are more because you want to piss off your Cabinet."

"No. They're for the good of the people."

"Bollocks they are. If it benefits the people it's coincidental. You recognise good things but when you're not actually affected, your interest sort of wanes, doesn't it? Unlike appointing yourself with a sinecure role in which you do absolutely nothing but get paid quite a lot of money, am I wrong? Because that was one of the first things you did as Prime Minister, if I remember rightly. Look after yourself first, Light, I never expected anything less. But those wages aren't actually made public. If the press knew then that would make your refusal of part of your ministerial entitlement look slightly less selfless and more corrupt self-serving bastard tyrant despot. So your noble quest of making life better for the less fortunate is definitely not so high on your list as you'd like to pretend. You're only doing it now because you hate the government and want to do what is apparently impossible just to annoy them. And proposing a cut in their wages isn't going to make you terribly popular there either. You still haven't learned anything. You're on a big self-destruct course because you just cause disruption, never finish anything yourself. Someone has to finish it for you. You could finish this, but you'd rather send me away instead. You can't just sit down with me like an adult and talk things over, you have to drag things out and make it more difficult than it has to be because you want payback."

I don't know which blatant falsehood to reply to first. I'm astounded. And, wow, his eyes are huge. I remember now that they'd do that at strange times, like he was on drugs or dying – his pupils would just dilate. They're so dark too, I forgot. Like if I lean in really close and peer at them there might be galaxies there. No, there's nothing there but a void and I'm furious.

"Do you want a court case?"

"No, not one I couldn't win because you'd see to it that I wouldn't. But you've made me indebted to you and I don't want to be."

"See, to me, all I've done is create a situation supported by PR where you can leave easily and quickly. I expect you to go. I wasn't aware that there was anything to finish. And everyone earns more than me. Touta's on a ridiculous wage."

"But that was your doing."

"I only encouraged his promotion because my fucking sister was on my back but I don't set the wages and he's useless. I'm responsible for the entire country, I should be paid more. It's not like I want the money and I'd probably refuse it, but I have a critical value to this country which isn't recognised. You earned more than me and you were just PR. And I gave you bonuses. You shouldn't be saying that I'm hypocritical."

"I didn't say that you're hypocritical, you did. I believe that I thanked you for my bonuses even though there were benefits there for you, too. So, again, self-serving. I also never denied how much I like money but you keep saying how unimportant it is, which I have to tell you, looks pretty fucking
stupid coming from someone with a 100,000 yen haircut and a silk suit. I'm just pointing out your failings, Light, don't take it the wrong way."

"I hate you."

"Same," he replies, his expression is probably a mirror of mine, looking like he's stepped in dog shit. "Is it just me or is it getting very sexual in here? Do you want to drop that pen again and we'll see what happens?"

"You're disgusting."

"Then don't come here and flounce about in your self-importance, because I'll only take so much of it. I could be in France now. France. With money. I've offered apologies and explanations. I'll tell you anything you want to know, but you won't accept it or that you might actually need to hear it. So be a cunt instead, I see that you haven't changed. It's easier. Whatever's easiest."

"I don't need anything from you, least of all your lies. I know what you did. If I seem upset now, it's because you came back, because I liked you so much better when you were dead. I haven't suffered since you left, everyone was happy, and the country's in much better shape. You were a distraction I could do without. Life's a regular wonderland to me, so do us all a favour and piss off again, yeah? And stay gone."

"Light," he breathes, and touches my hand as I turn away, letting it go when I flinch and glare at him, but it doesn't stop him talking. "More than anyone I've ever met, you shouldn't be alone. Find someone if you're not happy with Kiyomi. I don't really see how you could make that work now, you've done too much damage. But find someone you're happy with, you'll be much better for it. I'm sorry that it's not me."

I don't know why I stayed long enough to hear that, but as soon as he's finishes, I smile and let myself out. My guards jump up from where they're leaning on the bannister, chatting away like they're on holiday, and follow me to the lift. L's still standing by the door, I think. A few seconds into the downward plunge in the lift, it hits me. He's given up, finally. That was him giving up. Language fails. It means nothing and yet there's no alternative. Ungrateful bastard. All of them are. I don't feel like I've won even though I've defeated him, and I don't know why it feels more like a cold wind to me, like I felt after I woke up on his bedroom floor and realised that he'd gone.

I have the blinds drawn in my office and look over the papers again in dim light. The door opens without ceremony and a scruffy man walks in, unknown to me and overweight just around his gut. I stop what I'm doing and stare at him, evaluating him.

My hand reaches under my desk to rest on my alarm button. It takes on average fifteen seconds for security to arrive, since they're posted outside my department. Unfortunately, convention makes it difficult for me to press it based just on suspicion. Whoever this bruiser is has to do something first, and that will probably take less than fifteen seconds. He sniffs and closes the door and bows when he addresses me. Almost like he's just trying to identify his target.

He reaches into his pocket and I watch like he's in slow motion. In that time, I press the button and plan my exit strategy, my legs locking ready for the sprint. Cover your head, stay low to the floor and run for cover.

He pulls a tissue from his pocket and blows his nose into it.

"Excuse me. You wanted to see me?" he says. What? Oh.
"You're from IT?" I ask, and he nods. My shaking, regretful finger retracts from the button. "I want to know why I can't get access to the network."

"Which part are you trying get onto?" he says. He's just a massive blocked sinus. God, no, don't come over here and breathe on me!

"None of your business but I can't get onto it at all."

There's a thunderous sound of pounding feet outside the door and three of my security burst in with their guns raised at the IT man, who meekly puts his hands up. I tell them that I knocked the button by mistake and they leave. Thirteen seconds. That's an improvement, I suppose.

"Don't mind them," I say, bringing up the big screen of no on my computer for him to see. "It says that my ID's blocked, so one of you guys has fucked up. I tried to use another computer and my back up ID but it's the same." He leans over me to do what I've already done and navigates to the log in screen. The trouble with these 'geniuses' is that they think that you're completely stupid. "I tried that. And that. I know that this is an outing for you but do you have to waste time?"

"Urr... It's probably to do with the change of passes."

"I didn't order any resetting and security haven't reported anything. What have you lot been doing, fucking around with the system? This is unacceptable. How am I supposed to do my work if I can't get on the network? Sort it out and tell me what happened and why."

"Just following orders, sir," he says. "It was implemented this morning, it was all official."

"Who ordered it?"

"I'm not sure. Orders from above."

"I am the above. No one else has clearance to order changes like that. So, unless I had a brainstorm this morning, I definitely didn't lock myself out of the network. I didn't have a brainstorm, therefore it's your fault. Take responsibility."

He shrugs and asks me to log in again. Why can't he take my word for it? Does he think that I'd make this up just for the joy of his company? I roll my eyes and tell him to turn around. Like I'd enter my password with him watching. This is useless, anyway. They're fucking idiots, these nerdy people with their anime t-shirts with purple robots on.

"We just got a request authorised by orders of the Cabinet, sir," he tells me, and starts checking his online dating profile to see how unpopular he is, probably, and then types in something or other into my computer. "It should work now," he says. I just stare at him blankly until he understands how insulted I feel, and then log in again while his back is turned. Thank God, I'm back online. That was horrible. Everything's as it was, but then I notice that some folders are shaded and locked.

"No, no this is wrong," I sigh. "Your fuck ups just escalate. I need to see these folders."

"Well, these are your settings."

"So I have to change them? I shouldn't be having to deal with this... what's your name?"

"Yamaguchi."

"Yamaguchi, right. Just set it up, will you? I have complete access. I shouldn't be on a researcher's settings."
"I can't, sir. Those are the new settings requested as part of the changes."

"Since when? I need access to these folders."

"Since the order came through. It's for security reasons, they said."

"But only I and the Treasury have access to them. No one has a right to take them from me," I say, my blood boils and condenses in my veins to a black tar, and then I understand. The Cabinet. "It's ok, Yamaguchi. Bring me the authorisation you received. There's been a mistake."

I check the security cameras on my computer for ten minutes until I find one of the twats going into one of the morning rooms with a cup of fucking coffee. They're like fleas. If you find one, there'll be at least ten others nearby. Shitheads stay together. I make my way there like a tornado and burst in to find them gathered around a coffee table and a plate of their beloved biscuits. If they had any self-awareness then they'd pass on them.

"You seem to be holding a lot of Cabinet meetings without inviting me," I say pleasantly, when in reality I want to shoot all of them.

"You were informed, Prime Minister," Nakasato replies, completely without shame. Some of them look shocked and guilty as fuck, but they gain strength and support through the clique. I'll know who the ring leaders are by who talks. Nakasato, you shit.

"But I wasn't informed. What's going on with the network passes? Surely I'm not the only one who's affected? Is that why you're holding this very informal meeting? Or maybe you're just slacking and I'm the only one who's noticed that there's been a massive problem in IT? Because, interesting, I've heard that they received authorisation from the Cabinet to restrict documents stored on the network. Specifically, expenses documents. Looks official, doesn't it," I say, holding up the 'authorisation'. "It's crazy. I can just hope that it's an April Fool's Day joke, but those things are never, ever funny."

"It was an issue which became a matter we felt needed to be addressed. We held a vote and this was the result."

"You held a vote and didn't inform me? Votes mean nothing without me."

"You didn't arrive, Prime Minister, so we went ahead without you. It was decided that no one should have access to certain files and that information must be applied for on an individual basis using a written application to the Treasury via the Cabinet," Yamada says. And I gave her Foreign. They all smile as they stab the knives in.

"I have to apply to my own Cabinet for access to information which until now has been open to me?"

"We don't think that one person should have that kind of power," Hitsamatsu tells me smugly. YOU!

"'We' don't? This is illegal."

"That's not true, Prime Minister. You were notified and you didn't turn up."

"I was not informed."

"As far as legalities are concerned, you were. It's a majority vote."

"What about Mikami?"
"He didn't appear either."

"That's very strange, isn't it? His first vote as a member of the Cabinet and he finds something more important to do? How about I call him now and we'll have another vote, since the initial one is void."

"There's no point."

"I would get enough votes easily and have the deciding vote."

"None of us will be dissuaded, Prime Minister. I'm afraid you've lost if you don't agree with us that democracy is crucial."

"Democracy? Right, I understand," I nod, laughing. "So, your democracy is that I'm relegated and that my chances of appealing this stupidity are low."

"You can't appeal. It's the final decision with no room or need for appeals," Yamada says.

"And I'm sorry to say that unfortunately your applications to the Treasury for any expenses information will be denied for the foreseeable future," Hitsamatsu adds.

"This is the most blatant coup attempt. I've never heard of anything like it. And that you'll think that I'll stand for it is even funnier."

"It's not a coup, Prime Minister. You're very popular and will remain leader. It's been decided. We value your contribution to the Party's successive terms in office and we have no wish to go against the decision of the public."

"Oh, thank you! Even though you're trying to make it untenable for me to stay?"

"No, we are reasserting ourselves," Hitasamatsu tells me. "We each have a department we're responsible for and you should have limited control, so it will be a Cabinet decision how information is disclosed and when. This is an issue of trust we have been concerned about for some time. Your role has simply been revised."

"Revised? Like you can do that."

"Yes, we can."

"Good luck, because I don't know how you could or what would happen to the Party if I'm sidelined. I don't know what you mean by this or what you think that you're trying to achieve."

"It means that we're taking back the Party," he says finally. They must all telepathically decide that they should stand, and they file out of the room. Yamada throws an empty cup into a bin beside me as she goes. None of them bow to me, and I just stand there wanting to rip their heads off. But I can't. After all I've done, after all the mercy I've shown to them, it's still the same. They still see me as someone who's there to be used, legs parted. Fuckers.

I spend the rest of the day reading about my rights as leader again, and also learn that my mole in the Expenses Office has been reallocated to Agriculture as an aide. I know that I can reverse everything they've done, but it would mean dismissing the entire Cabinet and making this embarrassing treachery public. The Opposition would use this opportunity, and my Party might have a vote of no confidence to replace me. What they're doing is giving me restricting my options. I can accept this, or I can be ousted or resign. I can't even bring myself to start fighting them. If I wait and plan, I'll find another way. Something better. Where's the 'curse' when you need it?
I'm not in the best mood when I return to the Kantei. Kiyomi has her 'social drinks evening' tonight, and all the Cabinet are invited, and L as a bonus stab in the back. I don't think that I'll be able to stand there and watch them drink my wine in my house after what they've done, but I can't even uninvite them because of how that would look. They'd all laugh at me, knowing that they've got to me.

I'm completely cold but my forehead is sticky with sweat under my hair. My instinct is to go to bed, it always is now. Lie in bed and stare at the ceiling.

So, walking in the direction of my room – the one sanctuary I have in this entire house – I barely notice the person walking in the opposite direction, since I'm looking at the floor. They say nothing and neither do I, but then I recognise his legs. This is hell. It couldn't actually be much worse to find someone I would have once confided in, knowing that he'd think of something to do even if I'd already thought of it and discarded it because the results would be too uncertain. He always had a faith that any idea of his, however madcap, would be successful. And to be fair, he was normally right. But I like to be certain. I also like to take all credit for what I do.

"Oh, fuck, what are you doing here?" I ask him.

"I'm going for a piss."

He's always going for a piss, I bet he's diabetic, I hope so.

"So you came all the way to my house to have a piss? This isn't a public toilet! Who let you in?"

"I'm here because Kiyomi wanted to speak to me. She asked me over for this drinks thing, I did tell you," he says, aggressively defensive. He's actually wearing a suit for this, but his hair flops into his eyes in rebellion. I want to identify the moment everything started rolling into a massive ball of shit as the day he first came into my office. I want to blame him for everything.

"I forgot. Well, you're not staying. Put your coat on and get out."

"Kiyomi wants me to stay."

I laugh because I can't help myself. Of course Kiyomi would latch onto L because she knows how it would fucking irritate me.

"Great. Yeah, that makes sense."

"She doesn't have to ask your permission," he says, walking off.

"You're very pally with her," I say loudly, and he turns around to walk back to me. For a glorious second I think that he's going to hit me and then I could throw him around the corridor, but he doesn't. His face is beautifully calm and bored and how I wish that I looked, but I feel so uncomfortable in my own skin that I'm sure that I don't look brilliant and shining.

"Yes, Light, it's exactly what you're thinking; we're having an affair," he says. I wasn't thinking that. Mostly because I don't think he's that desperate yet that he'd take something he considers inferior because they don't have a penis. "I don't know why she asks to meet me. I don't. Ask her to say that I can leave and I will."

"No. If Kiyomi really wants you here for some charitable reason of hers then I won't go against her. She wants to improve your reputation by making out that you have her support and mine. But you don't. It's to get rid of you. No pain, no gain."
"I don't think that's the only reason. She called me over to talk to me, which I don't need.. All she does is ask me about you, anyway, which I definitely do not need."

"God, I bet you love that! And what does she say to you? What do you say?"

"What do you think I say? It's very difficult, Light, it's the definition of awkward. She doesn't say anything outright but she's suggestive. I try to say as little as possible. I have to be here because she asked me and I do it because she's helped me."

"What has she asked you?"

"I don't want to come between your marriage. You're so spiteful that you'd ruin it and vilify her as well as me."

"My marriage is already ruined, thanks to you. We just have a contract of employment now. Why does she want you here?"

"I think she wants to see how you act around me. I think she wants to make life fucking difficult for you because you make her so unhappy."

"She said that?"

"She doesn't have to."

I feel my mouth curl with hate as I look at him, so I walk away. Well, thank you, Dr Phil. This is brilliant. I'm overruled everywhere in every compartment of my life. You know what's so great about him? Fuck all.

"What's wrong?" he asks, grabbing my arm.

"Get off me," I say, trying to push him away and push myself back in the process. He leans forward and puts his hand behind my head before it scrapes the wall. My head is cushioned against his hand but I feel the bumps of hitting the moulded plasterwork. If he's damaged it, I'll sue.

It's a two second scuffle but I succeed in pushing him away, because he's actually touching me and is way, way too close. He holds his wrist and his hand somehow looks like he's just punched someone. He grimaces at it and makes a sharp intake of breath as he picks a slither of paint from his scuffed knuckle, notices me staring at him, and hides his hand behind his back. How low can you get?

"You weren't looking where you were going," he says. He disgusts me, fabricating injuries for me to apologise for.

"Freak," I say as I walk away. I'm definitely going to bed now. I'm going to run on the treadmill for forty minutes and then I'm going to bed. When I turn up late at this party, I will be so sparkling that people will have to wear sunglasses.

"You're welcome," he whispers. No. No, not 'you're welcome!' I spin around and I'm on the edge of violence, I can feel it. He needs to shut the fuck up and be ashamed and let me go on the fucking treadmill.

"Look, just because my wife asked you here, that doesn't mean that I want you here."

"I know that."

"So don't talk to me. Don't come anywhere near me."
"I should just let you walk into things then?" he asks.

"Yes. I mean... I wasn't going to. I know it's there because it's my fucking house, but if I want to walk into it, I will fucking well walk into it."

"You're always hitting your head."

"I'm not! How do you know anyway? Oh, yeah, because you were always responsible?"

"Really good to see that you still hold grudges like a pro, Light."

"Are you going? Go outside and play in the road."

"Immediately, sir," he says, and starts walking away. My eyes are fixed on the graze on his hand as he passes. I can't believe he did that. He's so pleased with himself and so suave as he walks – I mean, he practically floats. I can't stand arrogance. Everyone's arrogant, but especially him. Humility should be a staple of people's personalities. Take me, for example. I'm the most intelligent person in this fucking hemisphere. I'm being humble there, too, you see? Because what's the other half of the world got? More people and some fucking penguins. I wouldn't mind if L had some basis of an argument but the fact is that I'm more intelligent, better looking, reasonable and... I'm just better, ok? I'm so filled with the heat of injustice that I run towards him to clop him over the back of his head with my open hand. It seems to take him by surprise. I wish I had some postmodern sculptures to hit him with instead.

"See how you fucking like it," I tell him, practically spitting fire in his face.

Once I'm in my room, I expect to calm down, but he's still in my house and probably telling Kiyomi all about how I throw myself at walls and assault him. I run the majority of that off on the treadmill until I'm holding myself up on the handrails and I can't breathe, then I'm left with the more important issue of the Cabinet, which I think was the goal. I find it boring though. I can't really bring myself to care about it now that there's only some bricks and tastefully horrible expensive wallpaper between his face and my dick. Sorry, I mean, his face and my fist. I want to hit him properly. Since I unfortunately know him and Kiyomi so well, I can almost script out their conversation. I'd get back on the treadmill but I'm worried about collapsing and scraping my face on the conveyor belt, so I pour some vodka into my neon-coloured energy drink. I saw some arseholes do that at school to pass it around to other arseholes before exams.

I have a shower and search for the photo of Penber and lie on the bed looking at it instead of the ceiling. How many days did he have left? Should I punish L for all the days he stole from him? If I was L, would I have done the same thing? I wonder if I'm capable of forgiveness, and if I am, is it a weakness or a strength? There's no solace in anything I have, but I know that I'd found it in him once, and I thought that those small moments of time were worth any pain and disgrace. Maybe I'd forgive him just because I miss him, but that can't be right. I don't even know if it's Penber I need to forgive him for. Penber's just a dead impression from another time on photographic paper. L was so much more to me, but I don't know him now. That man who drowned in the lake might as well have been him, because the L I knew died that day like I died that day. And we were a whisper away from perfection.

So I think of murderers and how they can hide under a mask of a beautiful, calm face. If I could crush what I know from my mind and start again, I try to imagine how it would be, and it's then that I realise how I could beat the Cabinet with the cards I have. I'd be the storm I'd promised and rip the roots of trees from the ground but survive it. When the idea comes to me, I think of L being beside me. He'd clasp my hand tight like he was forcing strength into me to do it. I wish that I could make him feel what he did to me. I want everyone to feel how hurt and angry I am and how painful being
alive is for me. Because it is. He hurts me, and if that's his purpose and my curse then he really is gifted.

Studies are inconclusive overall on the effectiveness of ginkgo biloba, but along with other things like fucking incense, I was given some by a Buddhist priest for improving concentration and sharpening thought processes, so I've popped a few. I was very offended that he thought I might need it.

"You don't want to do that."

Ryuk had an immovable face like he'd had too many botched facelifts and too much botox. He watched L drop a rucksack at his feet in surprise and wanted to smile, but he wasn't sure if his face got the message. He had no idea how to use the face he had. Expressions he gave away were involuntary and he was unaware of them. Any humanity had been leached from him long ago, and all that was left of his time on this earth was now rotting somewhere in a ditch. Scorched bones dragged to the four corners of the earth by animals? He didn't know; he hadn't checked.

Sometimes he'd remember things, but only from the point of view of a camera taking landscape shots; he couldn't remember his own face. Everything seemed familiar somehow, but people and places were all the same here. He remembered dying, or at least that's what he thought it was. He'd been punched in the chest and it tore a hole through him. Small pieces of metal had lodged in him and expanded, ripping his insides apart, the ground came up to meet him and his own blood split and spread. Bleeding out took time, and whoever killed him couldn't wait for that. There was noise, like people screaming. He heard the hollow knocks of plastic before something was poured over him, then he was on fire. The world was on fire. The step his head rested on blackened and charred in ripples, licked by flames. His suit turned leathery and melted into his skin. Someone tried to hurt him even more – he couldn't understand or expect the idea of someone trying to help him – and then everything stopped, just for a second. Lights crackled in small lightning strikes across the darkness, and then he was in a world of swirling dust and bored monsters, just like him.

All he remembered was that just before he opened his eyes again and he was as he is now, his last thoughts were like an incantation wishing for power and for the death of everyone. He wanted others to feel what it was like to burn and die because he'd wasted himself on them. He wanted to be a winged god of vengeance and kill them all. The first people he killed were those who killed him. He sought them out and killed and killed until it became boring and his mind worked at less than half the speed it did when he started. And now all he had were half-remembered but intense flashes of a life and the reason which drove him then. He'd fought to keep them when he felt them slipping away like a retreating tide. Being around L reminded him of those things somehow. He spoke a lot about how he 'felt'. He felt hot, he felt cold, he felt pain, he felt love, he felt ill, he felt good, he felt bad, he felt clean, he felt dirty, he felt. Ryuk couldn't really remember what it was to feel, though he knew that revenge for feelings were once his motivation before he forgot what those things were. He didn't think about why he'd made sure that L was the one who found the Death Note, but it wasn't an accident. Ryuk chose him, but he didn't know why.

L was taking a long time to say anything. Maybe he was just waiting for the end. There was no such thing as time in Ryuk's world because it was too confusing. He'd wasted ten human years playing with skulls and bones for what only seemed a few minutes to him there, but on earth, time moved concurrently and forever on a loop in layers. He could move between them as he pleased, causing disruption. Ghosts unseen lived their lives at different times, none of them knowing that they're already dead.

The breeze sang through L's shorn hair, though he didn't know if it was that which made him shiver
or the idea that he had little more than forty seconds left to live. Unless he did something.

"Blackmail? That's rather cheap for a god, isn't it?"

Ryuk's spidery, char-tipped finger pointed at the body of the man lying on the floor.

"Kill him and end this."

"No."

"Then you will die here."

"Fine," L said. "Whenever you're ready."

He didn't seem concerned or frightened, as Ryuk had come to expect from people who know that death is coming for them. Almost like they can hear the pale rider and his horse in the distance coming for them and that it's the fear which kills them. L simply turned lazily to the open glass door and closed it like it was the final chapter of his life, and stared out across the water outside.

"What were you planning to do? Just leave?" Ryuk asked him.

"That was the idea. Oh. Toshio's here."

Ryuk floated across the room to stand just behind L's back to see what L could see. A man whose name and numbers he recognised even at this distance was walking in a straight line through marshy, uneven ground towards the lake.

"That human you did things to?"

"Years ago, yes. He's an arse. A nympho arse. I think I might be saving lives here. Do you think he looks like me?"

"You all look the same to me. But why are you killing him now? Ohhh. I get it."

"Do you?"

"No."

They watched Toshio take his jacket off as he walked, like he was going for a shower in his own home. He picked things up from the ground and filled his trouser pockets while the water caught hold of his discarded jacket and pulled it in to float across the surface. Then he stepped into the water and kept walking, further and further and deeper. When he was up to his waist but still walking, L turned away from the window and checked his watch.

"God, I wonder how long this'll take," he sighed. "Oh! My will. I better put it somewhere where they can find it easily. Won't be a sec."

"Ahhh! Now I get it. He's you!" Ryuk exclaimed, but L had long left him. He'd put an envelope into a drawer which he left half open and walked around Light's body to put an old record on. When he was a child, he stood on the stairs and watched his mother and father dance to it before Deneuve pulled him away and smacked him on the back of the head. It was the only time he ever saw both of them happy at the same time. It was the end of whatever they'd had, and it was one of the only things L had stolen from that house when he moved out, probably for a moment like this – the end of whatever he'd had.

"Light hates this stuff. I think he hates all music, actually. Good job that he's unconscious, really.
Ordinarily, I wouldn't trust someone who didn't like any music, but he must have his reasons for not liking noise. Isn't it fascinating when you see it like that? All he wants is silence," L said quietly to himself, then sneaked a glance at Ryuk while his mind whirred. He couldn't kill him, otherwise he would have done a long time ago, but Ryuk could kill him. 'If you get boring, I'll kill you," Ryuk had told him during one of the more peaceful weeks in his life without Light. Unfortunately, Ryuk didn't find court cases as interesting as L did, and it was doubtful that he'd find a murder-free life in exile interesting either. But if there was one thing L was good at, it was manipulation. When a gun is pointed at you, it's not a time to sit there and wait if there's anything you can do to stop it.

The crackling record and mournful voice danced around them while Ryuk watched Toshio's head bob above the water and his arms spread like he was flying.

"Is he swimming to the middle of the lake?" L asked.

"Yeah."

"He should sink," he said, checking his watch again. "I might as well stay to be certain, though I'm not sure what to do if he doesn't; it'd balls the whole plan up. But if you're thinking of murdering me, anyway, I don't suppose it matters."

"I don't murder. I end lives."

"How is that different? That's like saying that a sanctioned bombing is different from a suicide bomber. They both murder people, like I have. Don't act like what you do is righteous," L replied, irritated.

"What do you mean, righteous? It's not righteous. It's not anything, but if I don't do it then I'll die, you know that."

"Maybe you should starve then," L said, and Ryuk hacked out a laugh. Light's hand twitched and the tiny movement caught L's eye. He walked towards Light and stood over him, rubbing his own hand anxiously over his heart. Even when unconscious, Light was apparently rebelling against the music. "God, he's been out a long time. His lifespan's still the same, isn't it?"

"Yeah, yeah," Ryuk replied. He hadn't looked at Light for a while because he was so intrigued by the man swimming to his death, but he knew when he was going to die, and it wasn't now. "How long will it take until he sinks?"

"Ten minutes or so. He'll probably be gone in three. I don't know, you tell me. But when he's gone, I've got maybe ten days to two weeks until he resurfaces."

"How do you know that?" Ryuk asked. He saw bubbles now on the surface of the lake, but no Toshio. Dim red lights of hazy numbers below the water sank deeper until even he couldn't see them, but they lit the water in a flickering maroon glow until it disappeared completely.

"Well, he's just put stones in his pocket for the suggestion, not to weigh him down for good. That's not what I want; I want him to be found. It's stagnant fresh water, so I'm estimating based on that and the time of year. They only resurface when the putrefactive gases decrease the gravity and give them sufficient buoyancy to rise and float." Ryuk turned to look at him. "Everyone knows that, it's not particularly clever of me," he explained, and then looked at the lake. "Look at that, he's not even struggling. He makes it look easy. He always was a twat."

L turned away from the lake and walked to the bed, choosing to look at another victim of his on the floor instead. He sat down and took a chocolate bar out of his pocket, kicking the wrapper under the
bed, and tried, not for the first time, to understand Light. Like all those who come suddenly to power, Light was dangerous and unpredictable to most. Malevolent to enemies, kind towards few, and indifferent to the majority. He had a keen sense of injustice, but not of justice itself. His view of justice was brutal and hysterical and Gestapo-like. The true picture of his mind was a single bright green shoot of life growing from the decimated landscape of a bombed city. L had purposefully distracted him from his self-declared mission for his own enjoyment. He didn't regret it. And he thought that he'd saved more lives than he'd taken by doing so, too, for certain.

"I'm not going to let you go, you know. I'm not going back there."

"Oh, you mean up there," L said, pointing his finger towards the sky. "You just don't want to go back to Kansas, Toto?"

"I can get you another Death Note."

"But I said that I don't want one."

"Then I'll have to kill you."

"Well, it is going to be pretty boring from now on, Ryuk. Maybe you should." He wiped off the grimy feeling from his fingers onto his trousers and stood. "Don't you think that it's strange that I can still see you?"

"Eh? Come to think of it..."

"Maybe we're meant to be together? That's why I can still see you, because we're linked. Practically the same. Maybe if I die, you die."

"I've never heard of that before," Ryuk grumbled, but he was unsure sometimes. His laziness clouded his ability to remember all the rules and he wasn't even positive that he'd read the whole guidebook. He'd certainly never heard of that happening, but L sowed doubt in his mind. Like humans, he was scared of death. Shinigami who die are doomed to an existence without bodies. Every last thing is taken from them except their perceptiveness, and it's that which drives them mad. They float but don't stay in a single place long enough to see anything happen. The King said that each speck of dust has a consciousness which is separate and yet together. The more dispersed they become, the more the spirit is pummelled by different fleeting blurred images which overlap over each other in a kind of purgatory. You can't sleep. You can only see the second-long, flickering pictures of life which taunt you. Nothing ever stops. You forget who you are. Even your little half-dreams are lost. What Ryuk dreamed of now wasn't a death like that, but of true nothingness, and he thought that he'd found a way to do it. If he died on earth before his time, then he, as he is now, should vanish. But he couldn't do it, someone else had to. He could only set the pieces through small interferences and suggestion.

"But you've admitted that there are a lot of things you don't know," L said, standing in front of him, flicking his finger once against one of the silver charms on Ryuk's belt. "You like me, don't you. I think you slipped up along the way. Don't worry, it happens."

"No... errr..."

"Rule number one: don't get attached. That must be true whichever world you're from. Haven't I always looked after you? I did everything you wanted, but you'd kill me now?"

"I just gave you a choice."

"No, you chose me," he said, then reached up to stroke Ryuk's face, trying to find the join behind his
ear. Ryuk froze. "Take that thing off."

"Hey?"

"Your mask."

"I... I can't do that. It's not a mask!"

"Let me see, Ryuk. I want to see what you look like before I die. Last request, I promise," he smiled. It startled Ryuk more than the question, because he looked like how he did when he smiled at the man on the floor. L's fingertips slipped underneath what looked like a scar under Ryuk's jaw and pulled at the skin like it was just a piece of silicone, drawing the action out tentatively. He was determined to look pleased with whatever he found. It could be just bloody muscles and bleached bones, but he'd look at Ryuk like he was a divine creature. But when he saw metal staples in Ryuk's neck, pulling and joining taut peach skin and dried out, torn, purple-coloured flesh, he realised that this might not be as easy as he'd thought. Ryuk moved his face away shyly, but it also had the unwanted effect of pulling his dead face off entirely into L's hands. His black hair fell forward into his eyes from how it'd been pulled back like a hairband by the monstrous mask, and no matter how much of a good liar he was, L couldn't stop himself from gasping. He wanted to scream.

"Is this a joke?" he asked, breathing erratically, and Ryuk scrabbled to hide his face as he tried to cover it again. "Wait, I'm sorry," L said quietly, and swallowed and he put his hand on Ryuk's to stop him. It had to be a joke. He glanced at Light, untouched and breathing steadily, and it comforted him. "You have a nice face under there," he said with his fake kindliness to Ryuk. "I don't know why you prefer looking like a whacked out Michael Myers in drag with that thing."

"Heh..." Ryuk coughed nervously.

"Why would you hide it?"

"It's ugly. Past. I can't see myself. We're born with a covering for our shame."

"What are you ashamed of? So you're... but that's impossible."

Ryuk's hair was dark, he had dark lips like he was cold and frostbitten, and he had black eyes that didn't understand anything, they were dead. Any brightness of colour had been removed and every spark of life and intelligence, but those were the only differences to be seen. Personality-wise though, they couldn't be more different, which only contributed to L's breakdown-level confusion. He knew that he couldn't risk questioning him too much. He had to try to make sense of it silently and alone.

"I don't remember... before," Ryuk replied hesitantly. He started to tremble and didn't understand it or why he felt so uncomfortable to be uncovered in his ugliest form. Or why he'd let L do it.

"You're anything but ugly. Ryuk, you're blushing," L told him before getting a grip of himself. "I don't mind having you around, if you really want to stay. Maybe we are supposed to be together, forever," he pondered aloud and breathed out a laugh as he lied, tilting his head to one side.

There was no change in Ryuk's face, but Ryuk didn't know that. He didn't understand the foreign but familiar sense that... he felt strange. He couldn't remember much of it, but what he vaguely recognised as a burning sensation under his skin reminded him of dying, if that's what it had been. He saw L do this to humans and he always laughed at them, but he couldn't laugh at himself. Everything reminded him of things nearly forgotten now. Even his own voice sounded scratched by flames and smoke.

Distracted, he didn't notice L pull out a piece of paper from his pocket, folded into a small square.
"To be safe, I'd lay off with this killing me idea of yours. I wouldn't like to be responsible for you dying, too. So, we're together in some way. That might be why I can still see you. It might be that, although, technically, maybe I still own the Death Note."

"You can't do that!" Ryuk said, now seeing the unfolded page of the Death Note, although he wasn't sure if what he was saying was true. "You burned the book."

"But apparently the pages still work, or I wouldn't be able to see you, would I?"

"I should end your life now. Those are the rules."

"Oh, those rules, I hate rules. Rules are there for idiots who don't like winning. What will you do then, after I'm dead? Go back to that nice place you were telling me about? I don't see how that could be less boring than staying here with me. Tell you what, when we get out of the country, you get me another book, if it's really necessary."

"It is."

"Shame. It's quite stressful carrying it around. I'll just have to swallow my pride then, but you can't blame me for trying, can you? We better go. Light's... Security will be here soon and I need a head start."

"You're just going to leave him?"

"It's just us now."
Because We Separate

'It is with the greatest dedication and commitment that I accept the honour of the role of Prime Minister, as decided by the Japanese people. For placing your trust in me, I can assure you that I will not fail in bringing the prosperity and social change I have promised. My values are what drive me, and those values and beliefs I stand for are simple: we defend the weak, we reward the hardworking, we expect and accept nothing less than a kind society. Those who commit harm, commit it against the state as well as individuals, and will be severely punished. I will bring you what I dream of for this country: that regardless of age, gender, orientation, and status, you will live without fear. There is no reason on earth which warrants brutality against another living soul.'

I stand alone outside his grimy green door. My knuckles, tendons, ligaments, and veins stand proud out from the skin of my tight fist. This is the spontaneous outcome after years of dreaming. The elevator behind me shunts shut as the latch on his door is lifted. Before the door opens one inch, I crash against it with my shoulder, knocking him back and springing the door wide. I'm inside, I'm on him, beating my furious bones into his stomach and sides like I'm trying to punch my way inside him, and never once looking at his face. I'll tear off his ribcage, I'll stew his organs around, I'll make a swimming pool of his blood and soak my clothes in it. If all these thudding, mechanical parts are all that keeps him alive then I'll do it to win and find peace and return to who I was before. Please don't stay for me, I never asked for you. I never wanted you in the first place. Kiss me before you go.

With the door open behind me, Misa's voice pours in from a radio on one of the higher floors, spiralling around the staircase. Hi, Misa. Still can't write your own songs? You never could do anything yourself, but I can only end things – cursed to destroy in the name of creating – and I don't know which is worse.

'There is freedom within, there is freedom without.' He won't break, he only bruises like rotting fruit. I stand to kick him and stomp on him and see him curl inwards, all automatically, and I shake with fury and impatience for seeing him dead. But he still won't die, so I sit astride him like I did in different times. If anyone walked past behind me and saw my heaving back and his writhing legs, I'd imagine that it'd be difficult to determine whether I'm fucking him or killing him, but it doesn't matter what anyone sees or what they think now. Let's see you come back from this, come back from this, let's see you fix this, let's see us love each other now, how many times do we have to do this? How many times have I dreamt of this? And all because I can't admit that you won.

His hand tries to grab the knife, so I just slice into it like the blade is an extension of my rage. I wonder if I'll regret this, but I'll think about it later. I might relive it. And I can't hear him shout, I can't hear anything apart from what I want to hear, and I want to hear this shit song with its delusional hope and 'Get to know the feeling of liberation and release.'

His breathing is almost rapturous and I bitingly kiss him as I take a firmer hold on the knife handle and ignore the hollow bubbling, gurgling sound and how he stiffens beneath me as I slice at his throat. Even I wonder whether there's a difference here between fucking and killing. I loved his throat once. I loved the words that came from it and I still do. Always too late I realise these things for what they are. Why am I a mystery to myself over something so simple? It's made to be simple but effective and crippling and now I'm killing it. But I can't kill it, I can only kill him - the feeling will still be there after he's gone. I know that, but I can't stop sliding the knife back and forth across his skin. The knife saws away at all the words he's ever said to me – it sounds like resisting bones – because every one of them has hurt me in some way.
Blood and sweat hang heavy on me, soaking my shirt. I pull him towards me and don't look at what I've done but at how his eyes stare up at the ceiling, and my own throat chokes on hot emotion when I kiss him. I love you, but you can't hurt me now, I hurt myself more than you ever could but I can live with it, it's different, I have to. His body lies on the floor. His head is in my hands. I want to hold it to my ear and see if I can hear his last thoughts echoing.

"So I stared at his crotch until he covered it up with hands. You know, like footballers do?"

"During free kicks?"

"Yes, that's it. And he asked me why I was staring at him. This is a civil servant we're talking about. And I said that since he stared at my chest all the time I was talking to him, I thought that I'd return the favour."

"Kiyomi, you're terrible."

"He just really annoyed me and I don't see why he should get away with it. God, is that a Misa Amane song?"

L hates the sea, but I think that I like it. I find it difficult to be absorbed by anything for long, but once, with L, I sat in a car and watched a rain cloud drift over the grey sea and spill tears as L spoke to me. What he said wasn't interesting and my replies were few and far between, but I think that I was happy then. At least, I didn't feel so empty. When he laughed, I smiled just because he was laughing, and it highlighted to me how I was dry as sand before him and without him. So, yes, I think that I love the sea.

"HEY! Didn't I tell you to turn that crap off?" Kiyomi shouts, then turns back to Naomi, Mikami and myself. I drink the rest of my vodka and the coolness eases the furnace in my head, bringing me back to myself. "Honestly, I can't stand that Misa Amane. You'd think that when you hire a professional DJ they'd have a little more tact. I should have hired the string quartet but I wanted something a little more..." she ponders, shifting her shoulders up and down while she searches for the word, "...youthful."

"I wonder how Misa is now," Mikami says.

"We can only hope that she's dead," Kiyomi informs us with an elegantly waving hand. "I had so much trouble with her. She was just obsessed with Light, you wouldn't believe it. I had death threats, incessant phone calls in the middle of the night, dog shit through my mother's letter box, everything. Light didn't want the police getting involved, so we sent a few of the security guys round to speak to her. But then we ran into her at some gala somewhere just after we were married, did I tell you about that? She threw herself at Light's feet, it was so embarrassing."

"You don't need to convince me how much of a bitch Misa Amane is," Naomi says.

"Oh, yes, I forgot that she slept with Matt. No accounting for taste. No offence. Light had to get the place fumigated, he said. I think they did something to his carpets. Anyway, what do you think, Light?"

"Hmm? Well, the last I heard she was –"

"No, not that Amane woman, about what I was saying. Where have you been? Daydreaming again? It's bad enough that you turn up late for your own party."

"It's not my party; it's yours. I haven't been anywhere."
"You weren't listening to me again. But you've just proven the point I was making. You're useful sometimes," she says, looking away from me dismissively. Was she giving a fucking seminar or what?

"I was listening. I agree with you, Kiyomi," I tell her, taking another drink from a waiter's tray as he passes by. It's rude to refuse. Whatever Kiyomi says, I just agree most of the time. Even if I make a stand against her about something, she usually beats me down until I can't be bothered fighting anymore. If you went by my tone you'd think that I was hurt to the marrow.

"That men have no respect for women?" Mikami asks incredulously. Oh.

"Yes, see, we're living in a male-orchestrated culture making boys believe that they're entitled to have power over women, leading to controlling, abusive relationships because of a lack of respect. You see us as another species and maybe like us sexually but not personally," Kiyomi smiles so startlingly that I look at her in fear.

"... Yeah," I say quietly.

"You've brainwashed him," Mikami humphs to himself and turns his cufflinks around. "I don't hate women."

"You do. You just won't admit to yourself that you do," Kiyomi says.

"Do you hate women, Teru?" Naomi asks, innocent-eyed, shiny-haired and so pretty that it almost hurts. Mikami shouts a desperate "No!" and she smiles, relieved. For such an emotional creature, she's strangely passive in regards to other people's views, so if Mikami had said that he hated women, she'd probably just ignore it because she 'loves him'. Or at least, she says that she does. She must have ignored Jeevas and his continent of shit every minute of every day she knew him. I'm still shocked and disappointed in her for that, and actually took personal offence to it. In hindsight, the reason I didn't pursue her – because Jeevas wouldn't have stood a chance if I had. Everyone knows that she was in love with me and probably still is – was because I had a fear of becoming too fond of her. Anyway, she made herself soiled goods. Looking at her now, I consider trying to find out how she really feels about me and how much of a liar she is, but I prefer distant adoration from her. Maybe I like her too much to fuck her up on account of my boredom and dissatisfaction. So, now she's with Mikami and revoltingly happy, and I will stay in my loveless marriage and try to replace the irreplaceable with work and convictions I struggle to stay interested in. Sounds about right.

"He does, Naomi," Kiyomi says in her great knowledge. "You've emasculated him, you see." God, going by Kiyomi, because I've had to listen to this for a few years, there really are a lot of dickless men walking around and a lot of women with dicks and balls hanging from their belts from the men they've conquered.

"I'm fairly sure that I haven't," Naomi laughs off cautiously.

"She definitely hasn't," Mikami tells us while drinking the orange juice Naomi told him to drink, and I zone off again into my own thoughts.

I don't know where L's gone. Maybe he did leave after all and missed my grand entrance. It took me a long time to pick out a suit, and I dabbled with the idea of dressing casually by wearing a black roll neck and jeans as a fuck you to this whole sham of a party, but thought that I might look like a porn star from the 70s. So I conform, but I do it better than anyone and become the one that others imitate. Over by the grand piano which looks impressive but which no one plays, stand a parliament of ravens from my Cabinet. They smirk at me and whisper to each other and raise their glasses while smirking. I wish that I had a machine gun. They'll wish that I did, too.
"Unfortunately, you have emasculated him," Kiyomi says smugly. God, she's been reading feminist literature again, hasn't she. "We have. We've taken away men's established roles as the strong providers we're dependent on and made them redundant apart from procreation, don't you know? Of course they feel intimidated and emasculated. That's why Light didn't want me to go into politics."

"Light, you didn't?" Naomi asks me.

"No, that wasn't the reasn —"

"He didn't, he was textbook about it," Kiyomi answers for me. "Anyway, I've been reading about raising boys and it says that the pain of separation and not feeling loved or given a strong sense of self at a young age can cause another type of behaviour: that of the man who cannot get emotionally close and runs scared. They're all terrified of commitment. They learn to split off the intimate emotions and eventually shut them down rather than risk being hurt again. The male pattern of putting all emotional energy into work and success is favourable to revealing that they might be dependant or vulnerable to another person they cannot bring themselves to forgive or trust. I just don't want Kira to turn out that way. I think this will be the greatest gift that I could give him. I don't want to be Sachiko, fussing over him like she does with Light and his father."

"What?" I ask. I don't like how she's using me and warping my life to illustrate her insane arguments, but she ignores me and continues.

"Because to Light, her life was about looking after the men in her life and essentially being a servant. What sort of impression would that give him about respect for women? So, women are scared of men because they want intimacy and are constantly hurt, and men are scared of being hurt. They're like babies, really. All of you are babies. But everyone's afraid of each other. We are not liberated. We're equal only in how messed up we all are. Let me just say this though: men cause and fight wars, not women. And here endeth the lesson."

I can think of a few women who've started and been involved in wars. It depends on whether they had power or not.

"Are you going to stand up for us, Yagami? For the brotherhood?" Mikami asks.

"No," I sigh.

"He knows I'm right, that's why," Kiyomi says. "You can't argue with the truth."

"You've wrecked him, Kiyomi. Look at the poor bastard. He's a broken man," Mikami says, gesturing towards me and looking like his world has collapsed because I haven't lived up to his expectations. I feel my spine collapse from defeat and not caring. I'm tired and Kiyomi's had a few too many wines. You have to evaluate situations and see that resistance is futile against my wife, as is trying to defend some made up boys club.

"Are you alright?" Naomi asks me, dipping down to see my downcast face, because I'm angry at whoever dropped crispy things on the carpet. I open my mouth to reply to her but Kiyomi cranks up again.

"Teru, I take exception to how you're saying that I've —"

"God, Lawliet's still here," Mikami says. Where? Oh. There. I hope that maybe he'll come over to see me at my best and actually pay attention to me so I could point and laugh at him and make a loud speech about the importance of mercy and forgiveness even though I don't feel any, but he doesn't. I slouch back again and take another glass of sake from a waiter as L passes through the room and into
the garden. Everyone stares at him like he's a rare animal in a zoo, and then gossip as soon as he's out of sight. 'You can't trust those gays. They're not wired right.' If I did have a machine gun, I'd be hard pressed in deciding whether to shoot myself or everyone else. Or L. There'll be no forgiveness from me. I want to have my revenge upon him until we die and I will feel absolutely nothing. I'll drown it from myself until he's a shell of the man he was.

As a means to pass the time, I think of the times we've been at parties and shit like that in the past and how they were always as bad as this – I mean, the best social event I've ever been to was Jeevas' funeral, and that wasn't a social event per se – but they weren't quite so bad because I usually had L's attention. He'd watch and inspect everything I did and said so that I felt beautiful and godlike. I think back fondly to that masked ball crappity shitty thing we went to when we recognised each other despite our masks, and actually, I've been worried about that recently. You see, I'm not 100% sure that it was him. I mentioned it once to him in a wink wink way and he said that he didn't go to that party. I didn't pay much attention to it at the time, but maybe he didn't go after all. I got a blow job out of it from someone and then they just disappeared, which I thought was typical L behaviour, but maybe not. God, I wonder who he was.

"I better check that he's ok," Kiyomi says patronisingly. It's a skill of hers. "He doesn't seem to be mingling."

"He never did," I say in a low tone. I didn't mean to say that, I was just thinking it. Kiyomi turns to me and I try to ignore her while I knock back the sake and look for another one.

"Well, you know him much better than me," she says spitefully. I'm sure that it's not lost on Mikami and Naomi that L's a bone of contention between us, but I'm not sure if Kiyomi's previous pity for me was worse than her sniping now.

"Why is he here?" Mikami asks.

"I invited him," Kiyomi replies.

"And you're ok with that, Yagami?"

"Yeah, absolutely, yeah," I say, pouring myself another drink from the selection on the table for those who can't wait for waiters to do a circuit of the room. I knock it back like medicine.

"Do you think that it's a good idea though?" he asks. No, it's not, but Kiyomi answers for me again.

"Oh, that little misunderstanding will be sorted out soon, I'm positive."

"Kiyomi, he faked his own death," Mikami points out. "It's fraud. And I'd like to remind everyone of the report."

"It's a misunderstanding, Teru. Naomi agrees with me. We should be kind to him in his hour of need. Besides, Light's fine with him being here, aren't you, Light."

"Yeah, absolutely, yeah, fine, misunderstanding, terrible mistake," I say, and pour myself another drink.

"You're letting loose, Yagami," Mikami says, smiling. You envious dick, am I just some entertainment for you now?

"It's a Sunday tomorrow," I shrug off. After I've had that sake and nearly choked on a deviant ice cube, I compulsively start to pour myself another drink, but Kiyomi takes the glass and walks off with it and Mikami to continue their argument about feminism or L, it doesn't matter. I'm just glad.
that they're gone. Without a glass, I take the bottle from the drinks table, turn towards the wall and swig from the bottle instead.

"You're not ok, are you," Naomi says from behind me. I forgot that she was there. "You should talk to him. You know that Kiyomi only asked him here because she hoped that you'd talk."

"Oh. Well, we all know that I don't understand women, Naomi," I say with a disgruntled cheerfulness. "You're far superior and have wisdom I can't fathom because I don't have a vagina."

She laughs, covering her mouth like she really shouldn't laugh at all. "No, really. I don't understand," I tell her, then turn around quickly to take another swig before I come back to her. "She knows that I don't want to talk to him, so either she knows something I don't or she's a vindictive bitch, I can't decide which."

"She's a bit heavy into the feminism, isn't she," Naomi nods.

"Slightly."

"It's not vindictive. For what it's worth, I do agree with her on one thing. You should talk to him and smooth things out. You're big boys now. Avoiding him is ridiculous."

"You of everyone shouldn't say that, Naomi," I say, turning around again for another swig.

"Why? Oh, you mean the report. But in the inquiry you said he had nothing to do with Raye."

"Yeah," I sigh. I shouldn't have, because she takes a few seconds and somehow translates it into what happens to be reality.

"You covered up for him."

"No."

"It was The Lady, I always knew that it was. Even if Lawliet was involved, it was The Lady who killed Raye."

"How can you be so forgiving, Naomi? It was Raye. So if someone had killed him but it was on The Lady's orders, you'd forgive them? I'm not saying that that's what happened, but –"

"You think that I'm really stupid, don't you," she says. I look at her but either I have double vision or she has a twin. "I wasn't always like this, Light."

She gestures towards her black leather dress for some reason. She's wearing Rick Owens, Kiyomi's wearing Etro and I can't remember what I'm wearing. What's her point? That she's had to become a brainless clothes horse like the rest of us just to keep up? When I first met her she was more like how Kiyomi was before she went mad with inequality, except when it came to Penber, but she's battle weary now and so am I.

"I know."

"You think that I gave up though. Gave up, gave in and didn't honour Raye. You think that I was weak but I'm not. I lived through it – I'm not weak. I lost him and I did things I regret but I never forgot about him. What would you expect me to do? I tried but no one would listen to me but you, and you told me to leave it to you, that'd you'd help me. You said that you'd get justice for Raye and you did."

"But I didn't."
"What would be justice to you?"

"That I'd done it before The Lady died. She should have suffered," I mumble, turning away again for a quick swig of failure. "Someone stopped me."

"Well, I think that someone sounds like they were a good friend to you, considering what happened to Raye. You can't right an injustice that way. Raye's dead and we all know why he's dead. It doesn't matter to me who shot him or who arranged it, it matters to me that everyone knows that The Lady was the person who really killed Raye and why he died. Raye wasn't perfect, Light. I know that better than anyone. Raye was a good man but... he was very self-centred. He'd get eaten up by things."

"So it was his fault?"

"He didn't deserve what happened but he ignored the risks and did it anyway, not thinking how it could affect anyone else. More double-standards, because he was always warning people off from doing things he thought were risky. Did he tell you about what he was doing?"

"He was going to. He wrote my name in his notes."

"No, he wasn't. He knew what he was doing and that it was dangerous, and that's why he didn't tell anyone. When I met him, I was successful and was on a better wage than he was and he didn't like it. He put up with it, but once we were engaged, he made it clear to me what he expected of me, and I gave it up for him because one of us had to. I was offered a gallery director's job abroad, you know. It was all I'd worked for but I turned it down because Raye asked me to. It wasn't self-sacrifice, it was just that he meant more to me than any job and I didn't want the dream job but be without him. I used to say to myself that I'd never let anyone get in the way of what I wanted to do, but when he wanted to run for office, I supported him – I didn't even think about it. It meant that I couldn't move away for my career, and I wanted to go to other countries, but I couldn't. It mattered to him to live here and... politics mattered to him, and he mattered to me. Life isn't all set out on A to B paths. But when I asked him not to do something, he just ignored me, and look what happened."

"You knew? You said that you didn't know what he was doing."

"I didn't, but I knew that he was up to something. He was very quiet. Sad. Like you, actually."

"I'm not quiet, I just don't like parties."

"Nothing to do with Lawliet then?"

"L is the last of my problems, Naomi."

"Then maybe you should sort things out with him and then you'd have someone to talk to about your problems?"

"Don't be stupid. It's political stuff, I can't talk to anyone about it. I don't want to, anyway. I'm the only one who can deal with it."

"God, you are like Raye with all that 'I have to do it myself' talk," she laughs, but becomes very sullen when I must look even more depressed and take another swig from the bottle. "Can I just tell you one thing? For all his faults, I wouldn't have changed him. Acceptance of people's faults are important, especially when those faults are part of why you love them. You have to accept them and love them entirely, mistakes and all. But it extends beyond that. It didn't happen right away, but I forgive the people who killed Raye, like it took me a long time to forgive him for dying. Because he walked right into that, Light. He made himself a martyr and he left me here. I married Matt because I
was lonely and I wanted to forget, but you can't move on unless you look at everything square in the face and accept and forgive. I could have easily been angry and bitter forever but how would that honour Raye's memory? He's dead, I'm alive, and I'll love him for the rest of my life but I have to live with what happened and move forward, taking him with me."

"Where is the justice there, Naomi?"

"He has justice now. He got what he wanted even if he had to die for it, but I didn't get justice. I was the one who was left. I love Teru. He's treats me with more respect than Raye did. He encourages me to do things I want to do and he loves me. There's no artifice, no lies, no secrets. He's made mistakes but so have I, and we'll continue to make mistakes because none of us are perfect. That's why it annoys me when Kiyomi says that men are evil or that they don't understand or they have no respect for women, because most of the time, in my experience, that's not true. Raye acted the way he did with me because he loved me, not because I was a woman who had to be looked after. I mean, yeah, he wanted to be the breadwinner; he was old-fashioned like that, but sometimes men are idiots like women are idiots. We're all the same, really. I don't see how getting angry about things and seeing men as enemies helps. When you love someone, it's stronger than everything else. I wanted to live and see if there was any happiness left for me. I had to want that for myself and I know Raye would have wanted that for me. You have to make a choice, though. Make a choice, make mistakes, make sacrifices for what makes you happy – otherwise there's nothing left, there's no reason for living if you can't be happy, and that'd be like giving up, wouldn't it? He would want you to be happy, too."

"What does this have to do with me?" I ask, looking up at her. The bottle is slipping from my hand.

"You're not happy," she says. What does she know?

"Has Kiyomi said something to you?"

"No. Stephen did. Before he died, obviously. I haven't spoken to him since that happened," she says jokingly, moving the engagement ring on and off her finger, then experiences some delayed horror. "Wait, Kiyomi knows?"

"Knows what?"

"If she knows, that would explain a lot. Stephen... kind of suggested that you and Lawliet were... sort of..."

"Stephen was a cunt," I exhale. That was my overall impression of him, though maybe I shouldn't say it. "You shouldn't have listened to anything he said. He hated me and he was extremely irrational about L. I thought for a while there that he was going to walk in and shoot him one day. Very unhinged. A mass murderer waiting to happen. Anyway, he was a cunt."

"Because he was with Lawliet?"

"No, because he was a cunt. What's anything got to do with L, anyway?"

"I don't know, Light. Why don't you figure it out."

"You're making this much sense to me," I say, squeezing my thumb and forefinger together. "What did Stephen say to you?"

"Enough. I just watched you, Light. Not in a scary way, but I care about you. I thought Stephen was just mad, because, you know, you and me. I'd have no reason to believe him, but he said that you'd sleep with anything, which didn't make me feel terribly good, to be honest. Looking back, though, it
just made sense. I didn't know how to talk to you about it because how do you bring that up apart from calling you and saying: 'Hey, I hear that you're gay now?' So I chickened out. It's not like it's any of my business, but I love you and I love Kiyomi. Lawliet doesn't seem all that great to me but all I know is that you weren't the same after… well, after he left. Anyone could see it. I know that you tried your best and maybe no one else noticed or maybe I just recognise loss better than most. Don't lie to me, Light, and don't be angry," she says, putting her hand on my arm. This is awful. "Don't be embarrassed. You shouldn't be embarrassed of loving anybody. I don't think any less of you, and if anyone does then they're not worth thinking about. Don't be that dickhead stereotype of a man Kiyomi was talking about who runs scared. And you'll work things out if you're brave enough. What I gave up for Raye, I've never, ever regretted it." Really? You sound pretty bitter about it from where I'm sitting.

"I don't know why you'd think —"

"Course you don't, I talk rubbish most of the time; that's why no one listens to me. But if Kiyomi knows, why do you think she really invited him? She's not vindictive, she's not trying to make you suffer – she's not like that. You're really lucky. She's giving you the opportunity to go, if you choose to. She loves you that much. She loves you and she's probably worried about Kira, but you won't mess it up, will you? Whatever you decide, don't mess it up. I don't know how you'd get over what he did. I mean, even to me that's stretching the limits of forgiveness."

"You are talking shit. He was a colleague," I say stubbornly. My skin is practically cringing its way out of the room as she stares at me blankly.

"God. Kiyomi's right. You really are all babies," she sighs, and turns to walk away and leave me swaying with my half empty bottle of sake.

"Naomi," I whisper. I don't know why. She turns back to me and leans towards me in a rather threatening manner.

"Say it. Say what you're most worried about and what's stopping you, and if you say your job or what people will say, then I'm sorry but I'll have to slap you around the face. Don't make me do my big speech again, it's really tiring."

"I… I don't think we're good for each other," I say. I don't know why I'm saying anything at all. But she smiles and kisses my cheek and I think that I'm going to throw up but I swallow it down into the pit of alcohol. If I had to say something, why say that instead of listing all the other reasons? I don't know him anymore, but what I do know is that he's a liar, he's mean – in fact, he's horrible. He's abusive, he's controlling, he'll do anything to get his way and fuck anyone else who happens to be standing there. He makes me stand in crowded rooms and dream of killing him. He makes me really unhappy, he made me really happy. He's just like me, really.

"Then make it good," she says.

Well, that was unpleasant. Fifteen minutes go by and I probably have that glazed look of the drunk and depressed. People walk past me and apparently know better than to talk to me, so I guess that I must look defeated and not someone they recognise or want to speak to. Nothing compares to being made to feel like an outsider in your own house. It's like going back to when I was an aide and no one wanted to talk to me, so I stood around boiling with rage and trying to get the right person's attention so I could start the climb. I realised a few minutes ago that I'm not drunk, just unsteady, so I went into my office with a bowl of macadamias and ate them just for the sake of it. The most expensive nuts in the world for the most expensive nut in Japan. I thought to myself: I'll leave it to Fate. Fate has usually been kind to me, so I'll go outside and if L happens to still be there then I'll just
let Fate take the wheel because I'm sick of driving. With options, it just makes life more complicated, because I don't know why I care about any of this.

I walk through the French doors and the air is still and humid and sticky and revolting with the addition of the low hum of music, voices, and occasional shrieks of laughter from the house. I'm very intent on finding him, because even Fate needs help sometimes, and then I make out his leg and the rest of him, propped up against the wall, so I walk over to him. He sighs when he notices me and it makes me stop walking.

"You should plug yourself in to charge. You look like you're on energy-saving mode, Prime Minister," he says, turning away from me so that I'm back to looking at his Hopper-like silhouette. "Don't. I've done my time, I'm just waiting for a car to arrive. This is another of your great parties. Thanks for letting me enjoy it, I can barely contain my happiness. Goodnight."

"I just wanted to tell you – you were dead at the time – but I have a favourite song now."

"Oh?" he says, and suddenly his expression changes to something softer and amused but shocked. "What is it?"

"I'm not telling you. It doesn't matter, but I thought that you should know. I am human and I do have a soul."

"You better keep quiet about that. People don't want their Prime Ministers to be human. When did this miraculous event occur?"

"Well, when I say that it's my favourite song, I just don't hate it as much as I hate others. That still counts though, doesn't it?"

"I guess so," he smiles, dragging his finger across his lips like he's trying to mask it. "Do you have a favourite film though? That's the question."

"I don't like films."

"Book?"

"No."

"Well, I'll tell you something I don't usually admit. Most of the time I read them and I think 'What the fuck is this?' and don't finish them. I'm not as cultured as I make myself out to be. It's all part of the mystique," he says, briefly waving his hand near his head. I fucking knew it. All his lies are crumbling around him along with one of the main things he used to make me feel inadequate with. I have read a lot of books, especially when I was younger, but then I realised that they were all shit. You'll find no truth in fiction, non-fiction is biased, all nonsensical and lacking. We'd save a lot of trees if everyone realised that. I'm heading more towards USB manifestos and only still have them published because I like to see my words in print, but even those don't do me justice. "Your book should be out soon, shouldn't it?"

"It's out already. It'll be in paperback in November."

"I missed it? What did you call it, since Mein Kampf was taken?" he says, and I look down to smile. The fucking knob. It's dark enough that he probably can't see me well and just presumes that I'm enraged by him, so when I start walking towards him, he tries to backtrack. "I'm sorry. I was trying to be funny but that's quite insulting and I know we're not on good enough terms to be insulting in a jokey way. Especially since your sense of humour's a bit off, anyway. And we're just not on good terms at all, really. But don't get aggressive, Light. Rise above it, just –"
He only stops talking when I stop in front of him and hold out my hand, because I won't bow and I'm not drunk enough to do any more than that. That being said, I am quite drunk. When I blink, it's very slow, and when I walk, I'm not sure that it's in a straight line. Anyway, I make this gesture, and he stares at my hand like I'm offering him a katana to kill himself with. If I was and he took me up on the offer, I'd probably let him go so far and then put my hand on his head and say: 'No, simple man. For I am not a vengeful god,' or something inspiring like that.

He takes my hand but holds it like he's trying to warm it, even after I make the effort of indulging his fucking stupid Western greetings of swapping germs. He just looks at me so that I feel very awkward and bleary and very aware of him touching me. Disengage. Reverse thrusters. I step back.

"I came to tell you something... but I've forgotten what it was," I say as confidently as I can.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Oh, yes, that was it," I laugh to myself. I stand in an alcove but hit the back of my legs unexpectedly on something, so I fall back onto a bench there, but I recover well. It looked intentional, I think.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

"I seem to have drunk a little too much."

"Yes, I can see that. Are you drunk because I'm here?"

"No, of course not! God! I didn't want the sake to go to waste because it's a really good sake. I don't want any of those fuckers in there drinking it. It's quality – thirty years old at least..." I drift off on a tide of sadness. "I think so. I don't know."

"I'm sorry."

"It wasn't just because of you; I've had a bad day. So, are you open for questions still?" I ask, and he just shrugs his shoulders resignedly. We both seem incredibly tired. "You didn't have to come here. You've never felt obligated to anyone before, so why start with Kiyomi? Did you come because I'd be here? It's alright, I won't be angry, whatever you say."

"It might have had something to do with it," he replies, looking down at his heel as it scuffs the ground.

"You really, really fucked up this time, L."

"You don't need to tell me, I well aware of it."

"I just can't forgive you, I..."

"I'm going soon," he says after a moment of waiting for me to finish a sentence I can't finish. I won't look at him because I'm so embarrassing, but I think he finds my choking, rushing words as surprising as I do. "I'm just waiting, but I don't think I'm very high on the taxi's priorities. Unless you mean leaving leaving, in which case, I've got a ticket booked for Tuesday."

"You're leaving on Tuesday? As in –"

"Going back to London. On a plane. Schoooo..." he explains, making his hand flat to move up on a gentle incline in what I think is an imitation of a plane. I laugh at it like Kira would instead of crying, which I worryingly feel very close to. Good job that I stopped drinking when I did.

"London's the flagship and there's a small possibility that I could actually work there again."

"I wasn't saying that it's a bad idea."

"I know you weren't. I was just explaining."

"You don't need to explain. It's not like you have any reason to stay. I mean, it'd be difficult for you to go back to the Tokyo branch and be held with any respect there."

"Well, I was willing to drop it three years ago and I'm not worried about leaving it now. What do you think? Am I doing the right thing?"

"Yeah, it's sensible," I answer enthusiastically, but it's increasingly difficult to keep it up, especially when he looks so uninterested. "It's up to you... It doesn't matter. I wish you'd stay and I wish you'd go. Everything will fall apart either way," I say, pushing back my hair through all the shittiness of my life.

"I don't think so, Light."

"How do you fucking know? You don't know! You just go back to your fucking terrible apartment and eat instant miso with that fucking thing on your ankle, you don't know!" I say loudly. I'm not hysterical, but I continue to surprise myself.

"I'm sorry. But, actually, they took the tracker off," he replies. I'm really tired of hearing him say sorry, and yet he can't say it enough. I'd just rather he was saying it while I was stabbing him. I'm so bored, L, I'm so bored.

"No, I'm sorry. I've had too much to drink and I wasn't feeling all that great before then. And I could always talk to you, or feel like I could even if I didn't say anything. I just forgot for a second," I say, then draw myself up as I inhale to try to gather some pride, which I'm sure I had once. "What was it really like when you were gone?" I ask.

"I didn't like it much."

"Yeah, that's what you said. Did you ever think what it would be like for me?"

"I thought you'd be alright."

"You said that, too. Shows how much you know," I say. I look up at him and the side of his face and his hair which are dimly lit by the lights from inside, shining off the black strands and making a peachy glow on his skin and think... fuck. "Your hair grew back. Were you always this tall?"

"Since I was about sixteen, yeah. You're just sitting down."

"Ha! So I am," I smile. His hand is only a little way away from me, on a level with my eyes. I search for the graze on his knuckles but I can't see it in this light, so I take his hand to rub my thumb over his knuckles like I have no control whatsoever. I find the dried out frayed skin and the warmth of it. Three fucking years. "I'm... happy you're not dead."

"I wish you'd say that when you're sober," he laughs after looking at the sad nostalgia of our hands touching. I am so sad, it can't be real. Everything does feel very much over and hopeless, thank God. But I'll never forgive him for this.
"I thought that you'd read between the lines," I mutter, focusing on the light swipe of my thumb over the back of his hand, then I swallow and drop his hand. "I'll get one of my men to give you a lift," I say quickly, breaking this up by standing and being forceful, but somehow end up leaning against him instead. He buries his face into my neck and, strangely, I don't mind. I feel wrapped in love again after such a long time and I don't know what to do with it. It's a different chemistry of chemicals, I think, when they're coming from both sides. It's not like when Kiyomi or Mai or anyone else does this. I wish I could forget, I wish I could.

"You smell nice. What's that?" he asks, his words clouding against my skin.

"Japan Noir," I sigh. "Do you like it?"

"Yes, you always smell nice."

"Do you like me?" I ask for no reason in particular, but I never really did know for sure. I couldn't figure out why, besides the obvious. I couldn't figure out why I liked him so much either, so maybe his answer will explain that as well. I'm waiting, but he pulls away from me. From what I can see of him, he looks angry and agitated, putting his hand on his head and looking like he's going to start pacing. He doesn't know. God, I'll never understand. "What?"

"I can't believe that you'd ask me that."

"I wasn't being obtuse."

"Why are you asking me? That's just fucking upsetting."

"Is it? I didn't know. Look, um. I know that... I mean, I gather that the normal response when you think someone's gone and they come back is to, like, cry and throw yourself at them. I'm sorry that I didn't do that," I say, and he lifts his eyes to me while he rubs the back of his neck.

"If you'd done that, it wouldn't have been you. It'd be a standard film reaction so they can wrap things up. It's not really so easy. I'd rather you'd be you."

"I'm angry."

"You should be."

"But whatever's changed now, I am glad that you're alive. I don't mean to be a shit, L. It's just easier for me."

"I know, I'm the same. I don't know what to say to you."

"I'm sorry that I stuck my arse in your face."

"Please don't apologise for that," he laughs.

"You don't talk much anymore, do you. Not as much. You did at the station but not now."

"I haven't had much to talk about."

"I had no one to talk to."

"You do, you just don't realise it."

"They're not you though. Who you were to me. But you're a stranger who looks like someone I knew once. I've just had a really bizarre conversation with Naomi and I'm spaced and pissed and my
legs are weird. But I've still got legs."

"You certainly have," he smiles at my legs. Yes, they are still there. "Light, I'm sorry that I can never act appropriately for you or anyone else. I'm just sorry."

"I don't know what to do with you. Don't listen to what I said. I'm glad that you're not dead and I... I hope that you're ok. I can't forgive you, but when you go, I hope that you're ok."

"Thanks. You, too. It's good that you're happy."

"You think that I'm happy?" I ask accusingly. I'm not even sure what happy is but it definitely isn't me at this moment. I'm an impeachment short of a suicide, but the concept that I'm not singing songs in the shower every morning is clearly a shock to him.

"Well, until I complicated things for you again. I thought that with Kiyomi and Kira..."

"Oh, yeah. Yeah, it's great," I nod in a mentally disturbed way.

"Do you want to talk about it? Do you just want to talk? I'd like to hear you talk."

"I can't say what's... No, I don't. It's not as bad as all that. You were right; I've never been happy. I can't even imagine what it'd be like. But, yeah, everything's fine. Family – tick. Job – tick. Retirement fund – tick. It's fine. I got where I wanted to be and it's not a shock to me, but with all I have, it'd be offensive if I wasn't thrilled with life, wouldn't it."

"It is offensive, but I've been poor and alone and living in an apartment with damp on the walls and with no hot water."

"Yeah, how do you manage that?"

"It's amazing what you can live without," he says quietly. "But it doesn't sound fine for you, anyway."

"No, I'm ok. I've been ok. I kept thinking about how you did it, because I never really did believe it. It'd be such a fucking waste, L. I thought that I'd worked it out, but it didn't matter because I couldn't find you. I was tied. I had all this power and influence but I couldn't do anything because of it, I couldn't catch up or I'd be caught myself."

My voice is gritty with exhaustion and a burning throat, and I'm surprised by that and rather slow, because I don't notice him pull me towards him again. He says: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," into my ear, and I just start babbling from having too much sake in me and not enough of anything else.

"And everyone said that you were dead, even B, and I couldn't decide what was worse; you still being alive but knowing that you planned it and wanted to leave, or you being dead. You just can't do things like that to people, L, it hurts. You have to stop running away."

"Is that why you wouldn't leave Kiyomi and Kira? Because you'd hurt them?"

"I did leave them, don't you remember? No, I didn't think of how it would affect them. I'm very good at having morals I don't live by," I say, now embarrassingly holding onto him like someone poured a can of 'Politician Black' paint down his chest. I close my eyes and my eyelashes brush against his cheek.

"I really did think that I was doing the right thing," he tells me. The right thing would have been to stay with me, you stupid, stupid... "How did it make you feel?" he asks after a painful wait.
"No, you'll just get off on it. I'm not giving you that."

"I won't. Believe me, I won't. I just need to hear what I did."

"I can't."

"Light, you can tell me anything, I always understand you even when I say that I don't. Did you learn something from this? I did."

"I just missed you… for a while."

"Oh. Even with all those people who love you. You have everything."

"I don't want it, L," I say despondently, like he's a fatherly figure comforting me during a teenage period of uncertainty. It's true though, and he always had more time for me than anyone else did. Not that I ever admitted to having any problems or needed comfort, and people's attention was taken for granted or unwanted by me. I didn't have problems then, because they came with L, but I definitely wouldn't have confided in my parents. They probably would have said: 'Just concentrate on your studies, son,' and I'd think that was a brilliant idea. I doubt that it'd help now though. I lean back just to look at him and show him that I'm not upset or something ridiculous. "Wait, I've remembered what I wanted to say to you. I had it planned out," I say, and clear my throat. Some gas rises up my gullet and fills my mouth with the taste of cherries from that amaretto sour I had before. It's astounding that I haven't been sick but my gut is like iron and won't let me down. "Lawliet, I don't want you here. I want you to leave the country as soon as possible."

"I'm leaving on Tuesday," he says, looking confused.

"You are?"

"We spoke about it a few minutes ago. I'm going to London."

"God, that's sad. Do you have to?"

"You asked me to."

"Oh, yeah, I did."

"Maybe you should go to bed."

"But I have to speak to you and hear truth in what you tell me. I know when you're lying, L. A liar knows another liar. I can't say how I'll feel about what you tell me, but have to hear it," I say, then sigh and let my face rest against his, because suddenly it doesn't matter – such are the joys of drinking too much. "Maybe it can wait until tomorrow. You know, because I'm drunk, we have to forget all about this. All about it. You can't remember it because it's rude to," I tell him, pulling back enough to point at his face. I'm not actually all that drunk now, but I can't risk him thinking that I'm sobering up. If I didn't know him better I'd think that maybe there'd be a chance he wouldn't take advantage of an inebriated person, but I know him, or a version of him, and he totally would take advantage.

"I'll try," he says, leaning towards me slowly with his eyes already closed. I almost want to laugh at him, humiliate him, and scream bloody murder until security arrive, but that'd be a hollow victory, so I dodge his mouth and press my cheek against his instead.

"L, I think that I might die soon," I whisper, and his shoulders become hard from the horror of the idea. Yes, I should go with it.
"Why would you think that?"

"The Cabinet laid down the law to me. I've been looking into expenses, and they found out. This is what happened to Raye, isn't it? They found out but he didn't back down, so they killed him. And the same thing's going to happen to me because I won't back down either. They can't trust me, they know that I hate them and I'm after their heads. They gave me a warning today."

"They threatened you?"

"Not in so many words. It's ok though. I'll get them first."

"Light, back down. It isn't important."

"Yes, it is. For them to do this, they must be hiding some really bad shit. I'll find it, and it's not my plan that they get me first, but it happened to Raye. I'm better than Raye, but if it happened, I want you to finish them for me. I haven't got anyone else to ask."

"What exactly have you done?"

"Stuff. I've been collecting information for years, not just about them, about everyone. I think someone's been in my office. They wouldn't have got past my password, I made a maze of my computer, but they must know there's something there. Security aren't mine, they're the government's, so they probably let them in. It's ok, I deleted what I had there this afternoon, but my hard copy and some files are here. Can I give them to you? Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"If you've killed people..."

"No, Light," he says firmly.

"I think that you have and you've done it so well that I can't figure out how. That book you were talking about – is it real? Because I can't see you forcing pills down The Lady's throat and I can't see you making Culture drive his car into mine. Were you trying to kill him or Watari or me?"

"I couldn't kill you. I wouldn't. You weren't supposed to be there."

"So it is real?" I ask, my eyes widening as I clasp him so tightly that he can't move away. I accept the possibility of something so unbelievable so easily now because I want to believe that it's real. If I had that, I wouldn't need politics. I wouldn't need any of this or anyone, I'd only need that book and myself. "And you killed all those ministers on the same day? Heart attacks, like Stephen? You said that you can choose how they die. Is that true?"

"Sorry, am I interrupting something?" someone shouts. No, it's not meant for us, shut up, strange man! But L does think that it's directed at us, and leaps away to disappear off towards whoever shouted. Fuck's sake.

"Sort of. You wouldn't give me a minute, would you, Mikami?" I hear L say. MIKAMI! I will kill him. I think that I scuffed my elbow but I'm damned if I'm getting it patched.

"God, you're a crafty bastard. Does he know who you are? Someone should warn him what he's getting into. Hey, boy toy, you can come out now," he shouts to me, I'm guessing. "I have to tell you something about this guy." Too late.

"I'll warn him later," L says.
"Whatever. Just don't bring it inside. You're at the Kantei, and after what you did you could at least have some sense of propr...propopo... prop –"

"Propriety?"

"Yeah. Prop... yeah," Mikami grumbles drunkenly. He must have found a stray bottle of vodka somewhere while Naomi was with me. I must get that book from L.

"Drunk too much?" L asks him.

"I think so. I'm not supposed to and I'm a real lightweight now, but... Hey, no! Listen, I don't know why you're here, but I'm watching you. Yagami doesn't want you here. Nobody really wants you here and I know what you are. Remember that."

"I'm sure that he doesn't need you as his watchdog."

"My job is to do what he says. That's all that matters."

"Then no one's ever going to respect you. Not him, no one. You'll always be the sidekick taking handouts until you grow some balls of your own," L tells him. God, if they have a punch-up, what should I do? Watch and enjoy, probably.

"Listen here, you prick, you –" Mikami shouts, but that's the moment when I unwisely step forward and reveal myself. I am Batman.

"Just go, Mikami," I say, rubbing my head. He looks very confused. I check my flies but they're fine and I'm fine, just marginally dishevelled. I could conquer worlds.

"He was telling me to leave," L tells Mikami. L is also looking confused, though I don't know why because he knew that I was here. Mikami huffs a bit and staggers inside as I told him to, and L wanders back over to me. "He really has it in for me," he says. The moment has passed. I will reconvene.

"Because he has a brain," I say.

"You mean that you don't?"


"I'll go."

"L, can I see you tomorrow?"

"Of course you can."

"What time?"

"Anytime, I'll be there all day, but I won't hold my breath. Promise me that you'll –"

"I don't need your help. I don't know why I asked you. Forget about it."

"But –"

"It's nothing for you to worry about. I better get back inside. We'll talk tomorrow," I say and start walking away, but stop with some sad realisation. "I'm not going to turn up tomorrow, am I."

"Because he has a brain," I say. 
"I don't think so," he smiles at me when I turn around. "I better go, too."

"One of us always needs to be somewhere else," I say regretfully. No, I will see you again. I'll see you and I'll see if the world really does hold any beauty after all. I could be justice unblinded, unbound with a book. "Goodbye, Larsen."

He looks to one side, and when he looks at me again, his eyes look weird – sort of glossy while he swallows.

"Hey, can I give you my number?" he asks awkwardly. "If you ever want to call. I don't know why you would and I'm not really expecting you to, but I'd like to know how you're doing from time to time. And if you ever need any advice about anything at all, you could call me. We were friends once. Ok, maybe not, but we could be. Send a text message, maybe? If you remember to. I'm worried about what you're going to do."

But I just smile and shake my head. Not yet. I know love when I see it. I'm proud of you for getting this far, because now you really are of use to me. I'll give you everything you ever wanted if only you won't lie to me and be a fallen tree in my way like everyone else.

I leave him out there, call my driver to give L a lift, and go to the bathroom. The door's open and Culture's being sick in the toilet. The toilet flushes, he rolls out, rubbing his stubble, rinses his hands without proper attention to it, tells me what a great party this is, and leaves. I clean the sink with bleach, fill it with water and dunk my head into it for ten seconds. Could there really be a book that kills? And for it to come to me through L. I stand straight again just as Mikami comes in. God.

"You alright? The sake's strong, eh?" he says as I self-consciously scrape my hair back from my face. I now look like one of those waiters, just way beyond their league. "Sorry for interrupting before."

"I was only telling him to leave," I tell him.

"Oh good. For a minute there, I thought that was up to his old tricks."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, that he was with some guy."

"He was with some guy," I mumble, suddenly brought down to earth again with a crash. What was I thinking? Killer books? Fucking hell.

"Who? Not one of our crowd?"

"Just some fucking loser," I say, then I leave the bathroom. The music I didn't notice a few minutes ago assaults me on the way to the makeshift bar.

"Hey, do you want my jacket?" Mikami says, running up beside me. I've taken my jacket off because the elbows look suspicious. My shirt is wet and partly see-through but it doesn't matter now because this whole thing is a disaster. Besides, I think that with my hair the way it is, I look casually sophisticated in a 'just fucked by a Bond girl in a swimming pool half-an-hour ago' way.

"No, it's a terylene mix, isn't it?" I ask, but I know that it is.

"Is it that obvious?" he sighs. "But about Lawliet – it's disgusting him being here, he has no shame. And to top it all, he manages to cop off. I said to him before, I don't know why he's here. You shouldn't be associated with him at all."
"Kiyomi invited him."

"That doesn't mean that he has to come. He's just trying to get back in with you, you know. So you'll help him. What a bad fucking bastard."

"He's very manipulative," I agree, reaching for water but as a last second, scandalous decision, go for vodka.

"Fuck, yes, I can't get over it. Or that he's been let off. I mean, how did he manage that? You should have had him kicked out. The man should still be under house arrest, at least. There's something really wrong with the justice system if it lets people like him off."

"Maybe you should go back to practicing law, Mikami."

"Oh, God, no. Law's a mug's game," he laughs, leaning against what he thinks is a wall until someone on the other side opens the door so he falls through it. His eyes widening with shock as he falls is almost funny, but my spirits are as damp as my hair.

I walk away from him, taking my vodka, and go into the main reception room where there's some unholy racket of poppy shit going on. All my dickhead guests are standing in a circle looking at something, so obviously my first thought is that one of them has died and someone's giving them CPR on the floor with an exciting soundtrack. But no, nothing so nice. Kiyomi, Naomi and Kira (who's wearing one of Kiyomi's shoes and is using the other as a kind of threatening weapon, aiming the heel at anyone he sees) are dancing insanely to the poppy shit. I can only stand there looking at them, stunned and horrified as Kiyomi and Naomi spin each other around.

Mikami and L turn up beside me at the same time, Mikami rubbing his head and looking like he thinks that he's hallucinating, and L's as disturbed as I am by the waving arms and legs. My parents must have come round to drop Kira off because it's nearly eleven and they're usually in bed by ten, they're almost religious about it. They're standing in their coats by the shocked waiters, looking apologetically at me. I'm really sure that it can't be their fault that Kiyomi and Naomi are both pissed, I'm just sorry that any of us have to witness this. Culture dances like a dad riding a bucking bronco and throws a dozen thousand yen notes at Kiyomi, who picks them up, shoves them down his shirt and pushes him back into the crowd, then goes right back to dancing with a champagne bottle in her hand. Kira catches sight of me and L, shouts: "Eru, you're not deaded or in the drawer!" and hugs his legs. Kira, I'm sorry, this might come as a shock, but I'm going to have you adopted.

When Kiyomi sees us, she comes over, slings her arms around my neck, nearly garrotting me, and sings: "Oh NO! Don't you touch my BOYFRIEND! He's not your BOYFRIEND – he's MINE!" loudly at L, and tries to pull me off with her into the centre of this distressing scene, but I am an untrained horse who won't be put through this.

"Turn that shit off!" I shout, and there's a loud scratch of the record across the room. Fucking Western DJs. Kiyomi seems to have tired herself out and drapes herself around my neck, nearly garrotting me, and sings: "Oh NO! Don't you touch my BOYFRIEND! He's not your BOYFRIEND – he's MINE!" loudly at L, and tries to pull me off with her into the centre of this distressing scene, but I am an untrained horse who won't be put through this.

"Play 'I Touch Myself' again!" she screeches. No! What the fuck has been going on here?

"No, no more music!" I say loudly, and thankfully the enormous geek with his record collection and stupid shirt listens to me. I turn to the room while Kiyomi howls in disappointment and Naomi waltzes past me with a reluctant Mikami, humming her own waltz tune until Kiyomi starts singing 'Circle of Life' and Kira sings in some fucked up version of the Zulu language while still wrapped around L's legs. I never should have bought him that DVD, but I thought that it had a very powerful message about, you know, life's a painful struggle, don't trust anyone, the stampede will run you
down, you end up with warthogs as friends, Elton John will sing at some point, and then you die. 
God, this is a nightmare. I'm going to wake up in a minute. I will wake up in a minute.

"TIL WE FIND OUR… Ok. key change. It's alright, I can do this, I was in the choir. PLACE! ON THE PATH UNWINDING!" Kiyomi sings, smacking her hand on her thigh with every word. Shit. 
I'm not waking up.

"Kiyomi! Kira! Shut the fuck up!" I shout.

"Shutfuckup!" Kira says, jumping up and down like he's humping L's leg until Naomi leads him away. A few people clap Kiyomi's performance, I think. You can fuck off.

"Right. Does anyone want coffee?" I ask the room, but no one does. They start to filter away, grumbling, including my parents and so called friends, and my wife glares at me every so often from the the corner of the room while sipping water and moaning about me to anyone who'll listen, I think. I sense L near me, Kira-less now and smiling one of his sad specials. I want to tell him that he can't leave me here to this. I'll die here of musical interludes if he leaves. But he does. This is your moment to go, Yagami. No one would blame you. Your wife is an insane drunken feminist and an unfit mother, your son sings in Zulu, and your career is fucked. L has a really, surprisingly tight arsehole and possibly a notebook with supernatural powers. He also has a horrible personality, but does that matter? No, it does not. Staring at the remaining people filing out, I feel a pulling of my hand. I look down to see Kira reaching up to hold it like we're waiting to cross the road together. 
This is fuckshit, Kira. I'm sorry that I brought you into this. I'm sorry that I only have room in my heart for that deaded fuckwit from my drawer whose legs you just humped. I'm really sorry that I bought you The Lion King on DVD.

"Don't be sad, Daddy. He's not deaded anymore," he tells me.

"Endo, can I see you in my office for a moment?" I say, peering around my door and switching the clear glass of my office to darkened walls.

"Prime Minister! Thank you!" he says excitedly, grinning at two aides and running to follow me into my office. He's fifty-five if he's a day. "How are you today? I like your suit."

"I wanted to talk to you about your interview with that political editor with the wig at the Party conference," I say, sitting down at my desk.

"Oh! Yes. It was so nice to be heard, Prime Minister."

"Was it?"

"To represent the party and put forward what we stand for to the wider public was quite an honour. My mother recorded my interview," he grins.

"Hmm. I'm glad that you're happy about it, because I'm afraid that I'm going to have to let you go."

"What? Did I say something wrong?"

"Well, the part when you opened your mouth was the real clincher, really. But before that you were doing just fine, Endo, just fine."

"I don't understand."

"Do you want to take a seat? I can spare you forty seconds," I say bored almost stupid by his
company. He jogs over to take a seat in my chair of doom. "Ok. The fact is, that we're all equal here, right? We're all here to improve the overall lives of the people of this country, aren't we?"

"Right," he nods.

"Wrong. You're a minister at junior level. I'm the Prime Minister. I'm younger than you, but I'm your senior. I can understand how that could confuse you, but do you see the difference there between your position and my position with the addition of 'prime'? There's a pecking order here and everyone knows their place. I can't have backbenchers running around croaking about what the party stands for and having opinions. How do you know what the party stands for? I haven't talked to you about it, have I?"

"But the manifesto, Prime Minister."

"Yes, the manifesto. Which we haven't fucking released, you twat!"

"Oh."

"That's the manifesto, yes. I wrote it, and indeed it is the manifesto, but it's not for people like you to talk about it. The trick is with being a politician at your level is to be vague. Practically foggy with vagueness. Imagine a ship going into a wall of thick sea mist and smoke and getting lost in there, like a ghost ship. That's you. You and your shower have to present a united front where you all agree with my manifesto so it becomes your manifesto, but you don't quite understand it. It's like the Bible. I'm the one who's clear about it if it's in the best national interests for me to be clear. Do you understand now?"

"Not really."

"No. Ok. It doesn't apply to the likes of you, but when politicians speak about important matters in the House or on camera, not piddly constituency problems, but real problems, PR looks over it for them first, don't they?"

"Yes," he nods again.

"No. PR are a courier service for me. I look over it. Your job is to look a certain way and speak a certain way, but you're not supposed to actually say anything unless it has been approved by me via the Press Office first. I really don't see what's so hard to understand there."

"I'm very sorry if I overstepped the mark."

"There's no 'if' about it. Oh, don't cry, for fuck's sake," I say, throwing a box of tissues at him which I keep here especially for this sort of scenario. This office gets through about two boxes a month. "Get a hold of yourself, man. Look, you got a makeover out of it, didn't you. The image counselling did a really good job on you, and your wife came back to you and everything. I mean, your teeth look very realistic now." But he just cries more loudly into his knees. "I'll tell you what I'll do. Instead of an honourable resignation, we'll just give you a honourable reduction of burden instead. How about that?"

"You're demoting me?" he asks, looking up at me and sniffing.

"Yes, but honourably."

"Thank you, Prime Minister. I'm terribly sorry for the inconvenience."

"That's perfectly alright, Endo. On your way out, tell my secretary that I'll be leaving in five minutes,
Right. Now, true to my word, I'll go to L's, but today: Monday, one day late. Yesterday, I spent the whole day researching L's whereabouts and relationships with all the people who've died in connection to the House, and I came up with some interesting if not concrete findings. By his own admission, L had an argument with Stephen shortly before Stephen dropped dead of a heart attack. Stephen died approximately a half-hour's drive away from L's house, in a park on the outskirts of Tokyo. I remember Kiyomi mentioning to me that he used to go for walks there with L, or Stephen would jog wearing a sweatband like a twat and L would walk and they'd feed fucking ducks, I don't know. I blocked that out at the time because, ugh, but it's a strange coincidence. If L has the ability to dictate when and where deaths happen, then he could have made Stephen drive there to get him far enough away from his house so that he wouldn't be present, and he chose that park because it's on the route into Tokyo. He might have just picked the place out in a moment of panic as somewhere suitable, or there might be some symbolism there. L's favourite murders involve symbolism. The autopsy report – part of a stack I requested from the coroner's office this morning and which just arrived – says that there were no signs of congenital heart disease, the normal case for sudden deaths in the young, and after further tests, the cause of death remained unexplained. This was true also of Senator Wedy and thirty other deaths of members of the government over the past eight years. Other cases were thought suicides, accidents, or, in Raye's case, murder. I could locate L's whereabouts at the time of all the deaths, which I found suspect. L is notorious for not telling anyone where he is and often goes AWOL. The only time you know for sure where he is is when you're with him. He also would have witnesses, usually being at work, at meetings, or with me. Most deaths occurred between ten in the morning and three in the afternoon, with only five happening after three but before eight at night. On those five occasions, he was always working at the House and his timesheet verified this. He was always several miles away from the scene of death apart from with River.

I'm just biding my time in office, waiting for the right time to come along when I'll blow them open. I'll possibly die with them, but that's immaterial when you think of the greater good and the satisfaction I'll feel knowing of the longevity of the impact I'll have. I did think though, last night, that having a co-conspirator would be useful. I could do it myself, of course, but I'm all for delegation.

I drive myself to his apartment block and congratulate myself on my bravery when walking past some boys in synthetic tracksuits. I mean, where the fuck are they running to? They haven't exercised in their lives apart from mugging old ladies and running away from the police. I can't stand lazy dressing so that it becomes a fashion fad of the hopeless, but at least you can spot the people on unemployment benefits. They heckle at me as I walk past in my pristine Hugo Boss black trench coat. Hugo Boss may have been a Nazi, but you've got to hand it to him, he could really design a good uniform of authority. I mean, the SS uniform designs were stunning, and this is the closest I can get to it without actually wearing a vintage Nazi uniform. That wouldn't get me very good press. But I do like to think of myself as a better looking, thinner, Japanese Ralph Fiennes in Schindler's List. Only I don't shoot people. Not before breakfast. That wouldn't get me very good press either.

Waiting outside L's door, I think back to my dream and worry that it might actually happen. Say if I was possessed and just snapped and killed him. I have to knock three times before he decides to open the door, by which time I'm appropriately furious.

"God, I didn't think that you'd actually turn up," L says when he sees me. He looks like a fucking mess, but it doesn't matter. He's wearing grey marl tracksuit pants, which is actually a bonus for me because they're easier to get access to. I step inside and push him against the wall, knocking the door shut with my foot. My eyes glide appreciatively over his face from this close. It's not fair that he's so hideously beautiful when he should be wilting and sagging and draining of colour at his age. He looks very frightened.
"Hello," I say quickly, breathing hot air heated by my heart all over him, and kiss him so ravenously that I think maybe I'll make an impression of him in these crappy thin walls. In his excuse for a living room, some loud news programme tells us that politics is one of the most complex areas of human thought, and psychologists and neuroscientists are researching mind mapping as a way of linking political attitudes to brain structure. Our subconscious drives which respond to urgent physical dangers, direct our political minds more than we'd like to think. Fancy that.

My phone rings.

I stand away unapologetically from him to answer the phone. Our mouths make that awful plunging noise that makes me want to be sick, but I take the call.

"What do you –" L starts, still pressed to the wall, but I hold my finger up in front of his face and talk pleasantly to my potential financial backer to the party.

"Absolutely. Thursday would be fine. I'll have a word with my secretary about this. It won't happen again, I do apologise..." I say, looking back towards L viciously while the man speaks to me about my cancellation of a meeting we had booked, which I've blamed on my secretary. I couldn't tell him that I had to go and fuck a fraudster, could I. "No, not just double booked – triple booked! I don't know how she can think that I could be in three places at the same time..." I walk back to L and open my mouth as I push my hand down his pants. No underwear. That's not a surprise. L lets out the most glorious gasp of air, like I do on cold nights just to see my breath. "Oh, you're too kind, but even I can't teleport... That's great, yeah. See you on Thursday," I finish, not even really thinking of what I'm saying. L's eyes close and his head knocks back against the wall and I tongue at his Adam's apple and the shaved goose flesh of his throat as I put my phone back in my pocket with one hand and knead at L again with the other. No one can say that I can't multitask.

I breathe his name out, digging my nails in as I squeeze my hand around him, and I bite my lip just from the look on his face. The lines between consent and assault are so vague here. My other hand is pushing his t-shirt up to his chin so I can tilt my head to look at his flat tits. Can you imagine anything worse than being raped and beaten by five strangers in your own house? It happened last night to a girl after the clubs closed. People heard her scream, someone filmed it happening from where it began on the street, but no one stopped them or called the police. Now the film that was taken is being played on the news. The person who filmed it but did nothing is profiting from it. The men who treated a woman like a piece of meat are probably in a bar bragging about it and no one will say anything against them. 'She was gagged, she couldn't say no. And if she couldn't say no, was it rape?' they'll ask the crowded room. Their mothers will protect them and make them cups of tea. 'She brought it on herself, being out so late at night and dressed like a slut.' This is why I hate the world.

I lean down to clench his nipple between my teeth and my lips brush against a small, pale pink areola. Men have a female template until the second trimester of development. There is no reason for these things and evolution is at fault, so I release him and blow on it, because it'd be rude to bite it off and rid him of it to improve on evolutionary failings. He becomes rigid like a corpse with rigor mortis.

"Where's the book?" I ask, mouthing at his jaw. He says nothing, only pulls at my coat over my shoulder in such a defeated way. "L, I need the book. Just between us, just between –"

"No," he says, almost stupid with weakness. No? My hand stretches before gripping him tighter so that he gasps again from pain or something else or both. They're very similar.

"Do you want me to die, L? They want to kill me."
"No..."

"You do. You want them to kill me. You want to see me dead," I whisper, only allowing him the softest, briefest glance of my lips as he searches for them with his mouth blindly. You fucking idiot. Why do we close our eyes like this? Just to feel everything more desperately? "Give me the book, let me see it."

He doesn't answer me, but like a stubborn dog he'll refuse but still try to take his reward, anyway. And as quickly as that, I stand straight and feel my eyes become narrow and cruel as I watch him come back to his senses now that my hand has left him.

"You're just here for that," he says quietly, cloudy-eyed and desolate, staring at my chest.

"Yes," I tell him bluntly, and he closes his eyes so tightly it furrows his brow. Yes, pain and gratification are so closely linked it could be hard to tell what he feels. "Tell me where it is. I'll give you anything if you give it to me. Just let me see it."

"It doesn't exist. I made it up," he answers. No, that's not an answer. It exists, I believe it. It has to be real. I walk past him into where the radio is shouting, and push it off the table so it crashes on the floor. Sparks fly from it but I hardly notice that, only the quiet that follows. I'm looking through the drawers of the only cupboard in the room, pulling each one out and dumping the contents on the floor. I search through the pile of papers and empty ibuprofen boxes with my foot, pick up a little booklet and think that I've found it, but a newspaper cutting of me from my state visit to Russia falls onto the floor. It's such an old photo and article that it's yellowing with age, but I only pause to look at it for a second. This book isn't anything at all. I'll know it when I find it.

L's at the doorway, watching me kick up a rug, take books from a small bookshelf and open each one to see if anything else he's hiding falls out of them.

"It's not there, Light. I made it up," he says again, but I'm in the kitchen now, looking through cupboards and drawers and finding nothing, just pushing and dropping knives, forks, cans, and dishes onto the floor. And yet, considering how I'm trashing the place, the rooms don't really look any worse for it. I can't find anything resembling whatever it is I'm looking for. In my head, I'm imagining a... I don't know, but I think it'd have gilt edges. "Could we just sit down and talk?" he asks me. Absolutely fucking not.

"Where's the bedroom?" I ask him.

"Through there, on the left," he replies sulkily, slowly indicating his head towards the hallway. Ok. There aren't that many places to hide anything here. If I was him, I'd probably bury it somewhere.

I walk off immediately and the lack of possible hiding places in the bedroom is very disappointing and obvious. He has a futon which looks like he's only just left it. A book with a cracked spine lies open on the floor next to it. I can't just keep turning this place upside down, because he's not some idiot. He has to give it to me willingly. Reconvene again. I think about this for a second and decide on a merger of plan A and plan C. I take off my coat and jacket, and I'm damn close to rolling up my sleeves, too, because this is going to be really slumming it, then sit on a chair so I can unlace my shoes.

"Kira's taking violin lessons," I tell L when I know that he's in the room. "I arranged it because playing a musical instrument improves brain functionality by 15 to 30% and lowers the risk of arthritis in later life, but he's fucking awful at it. I'm mortified" I confide in him, drawing each shoe on the floor together so that they're neat. "So, you heard back about the case? No problems?"
"No."

"Excellent. Well?"

"Um..." he sounds out. "Wouldn't you rather be in another room? Have you searched here? Do you believe me now?"

"This is fine. It's filthy but it's fine," I say, walking towards him. "What do you think of that coat? Do you think that it makes me look like Amon Goeth?"

"Not really."

"Better looking, obviously. An SS officer. Do you think it makes me look like an SS officer? One of the higher ranking ones."

"No. But it's a nice coat."

"It's not nice," I say, twitching and smiling from the insult. "It's the cold efficiency of death."

"If you say so," he says, covering his mouth for a moment. Are you fucking laughing at me? I'm dressed like a corporate killing machine and there are knives all over the kitchen floor and you're laughing at me? "It looks like a coat to me."

"It's by Hugo Boss," I tell him, leaning towards his face. "You don't understand anything."

I linger there to hover over his mouth, watching his lips puckering slightly in a nervous spasm. Then I walk away to lift the sheets off his bed and shake some small cleanliness into them for me. I won't lie on wrinkled sheets and if they end up filthy with fluids, it'll be because of me. "Ok. Please tell me that you have something important to say and not the shit I've already heard, because I spent most of the morning lying to people to get out of appointments for this."

"You've been busy wrecking the apartment, I didn't want to interrupt. You said that you didn't want to hear it, anyway."

"I don't. You're a murderer or as good as, and you're insane. You have a strange guilt complex and I don't have time for it. So, we'll just do this."

"What?"

"Fucking hell. Look, you haven't left me alone since you came back and I presume that it's because you want this. After this, you'll tell me about that book of yours, won't you?"

"You do believe me?"

"I'm agnostic about it, but if there's any truth in it, I don't think you'll tell me unless there's give and take."

"I don't understand," he says, looking like he really doesn't.

"God. Ok, tell me afterwards but let's get on with it."

"You mean?"

"How long has it been for you? Have you forgotten how? Don't worry, it'll all come back to you. I'll even do all the hard work, if you want. I'm completely at your disposal. I've taken my coat off, so you can give me orders."
"No, it's just –"

"Great, because I'm not guiding you through it." I walk back over to him. Maybe it's my absolutely perfect trousers – a once in a lifetime deal – but he looks quite intimidated by me. Nevertheless, I start taking off his t-shirt. When his face reappears from the shirt being pulled over his head, I freeze, then laugh because he looks exactly the same as when I did this years ago. It's the same face I could stare at for hours and never get tired of, and it worried me because it's not all that amazing in a classical sense. I thought I was mentally ill to like it as much as I did. I think I probably was. "This reminds me of another time, only you were a lot more cruel to me than I am to you. 'This is shit, Light. I feel nothing,'" I say, my bitterness radiating from me so it burns and he dips his head in shame. Yes, you cock. "L, are we doing this or should I just go?"

"No, don't go," he whispers and tries to hug me, or something.

"Stop that. We're not doing that shit," I say, avoiding him. I reach over to the chair to pull a thick envelope out of my coat pocket and pull out a piece of paper. "This is a list of the people I want dead. You have to prove it to me. We'll start with ten."

"No," he says aggressively.

"Listen, you owe me."

His big eyes look at me, somehow disappointed in me, I recognise the look. He walks past me to sit on the futon, folding his legs into some kind of yoga pose.

"You really hate me. Why would I expect anything else though?" he mumbles. I don't answer, but eventually I walk to the window and check my phone while he starts up again. "You don't need to sell yourself to me. I'm glad that apparently the sun has been shining on the whole of East Asia since I left, even if you're still not happy, but if you have any questions to ask, this is the time, because this is the last time you'll see me."

"I only care about whether you're telling the truth. Oh, actually, one thing: that body they found in the lake, was it this man?" I ask, pulling out a small passport photo from the envelope for L to squint at.

"I don't know," he answers. Liar.

"Maybe you'll recognise him from these holiday snapshots instead," I say, and pull a few other photos from the envelope, mildly creased and crumpled from being worn as an unseen part of my uniform. Now I'm bereft of photos, I throw them on the bed in front of him, and he looks at them, apparently unmoved and clinical. They're photographs from L's post-mortem, but not of L. L's not dead, but the man in the photographs is. "Toshio Kuronuma. They're of the same person, wouldn't you agree? He's not in bad condition, is he? I think he's still recognisable, but that's a matter of conjecture, because B mistook him for you. I can see that there are some similarities. Do you like fucking people who look like you, L? You know this man, don't you?" I ask. He continues to look at the photos and opens his mouth but doesn't reply. "You told me about a Toshio who was a journalist you met. A megalomaniac nymphomaniac, wasn't he? But then most journalists are, and there are lots of Toshios in Tokyo – that didn't help me narrow it down. You came to me fresh from him. You might have thought that I never listened to you, but I did. You said to B that he became a children's entertainer, I remember. I thought that I might hire him for Kira's birthday, from your glowing recommendation, so I took the liberty of finding him. But I was disappointed to hear that he's no longer in the business. It's strange, because he's a missing man. He was reported missing two days after you left."
"What a coincidence. You have been busy. Is work a bit slow? I can't say that I'm sorry to hear that he's missing, but he always did say that he wanted to start a sex retreat in Switzerland. He had a thing about chalets," he says simply, moving his hand across the bed to clear it of photographs so he can lie flat. He raises his hand in a grasping motion, asking for cigarettes, but I ignore him.

"Well, he's not doing that. He's dead."

"Is he? How do you know? Don't go by that passport photo, it looks nothing like him. I don't know this dead guy."

"It's the same fucking man, L! Cut that shit out! He's not in Switzerland, he's dead and his ashes were under a grave marker with your name on it," I shout at him so that he hitches his legs up to hug them. When I'm finished, we stay in the silence until I speak again. "Was it a suicide?" I ask coldly.

"Yes."

"And he just happened to do it outside your house?"

"No, that was where I wanted him to die."

"You wanted... You did kill him. So you drowned him?"

"I had him drown."

"What does that even mean? This... book. Is it some psychological story you've made up because you can't admit that you've killed people? Did you have someone else do it?"

"No. He drowned himself. I saw him do it."

"And you didn't try to stop him?"

"I couldn't have stopped him, I'd written his name – he was going to die. If anyone had stopped him, he would have just died of a heart attack."

"Right, ok, you'd written his name, yeah, that makes sense, yeah. Happens all the time when I write names in my address book, it's a real pain. At least you could try to make it believable if you're going to lie."

"What I told you was the truth; everything, I won't deny it," he says, standing up again. "I killed Penber, I killed Stephen, blah, blah, blah. And the demon is real."

"You're still falling back on all that? You're unbelievable."

"I could prove it to you."

"Whatever," I laugh. Yes, prove it to me.

"You wouldn't laugh at me if you knew how quickly I could kill you. You'd be dead before you left the building."

"Oh? And how would you do that? Go ahead. I'll sit down and make it easy."

"You really don't know what you're asking for. Don't ask me to do it, Light. Please believe me, I'm telling you the truth. You must believe me or you wouldn't have done all this," he says, kicking his foot at the photographs. He's so unrepentant and disparaging, it's gorgeous, I hate him.
"I don't know, it sounds like the plot from one of those Harry Pothead films. I really want to know how you'd kill me like a librarian would, though. You're a twat with malnutrition and anaemia. I could floor you and you know it. So, go on. Show me how you're going to kill me, Spartacus Maximus Cuntus," I say, sitting down and crossing my arms.

"No."

"It's just another lie. It's always been bravado and self-congratulatory crap with you, and now I know you for what you are. That's why you left. You left the first time because you're a coward and you left the second time for the same reason."

"I'm a coward? Me?! I'm not the one hiding behind my wife's skirts, Light. I didn't marry someone just to have their skirts to hide behind."

"Well why don't you just kill me then, you bastard. Kill me like Raye and The Lady and your ex-boyfriends. Someone else will if you don't, and I prefer your way of execution to the government's, in general. I want an open coffin. Raye didn't have one. He had a bullet hole in his head the size of a coin, but apparently you did that."

He stands there gormless for a minute, then walks to what I think is supposed to be a beside table and open a drawer. He might have a gun. Part of me doesn't really care if he does, but he turns around with a piece of paper and a book. Is that it? It can't be, it looks so fucking innocuous.

"You're going to kill me with a piece of paper? Fuck, I'm terrified. Anything but paper. Death by a thousand paper cuts?" I say, then collapse back, laughing. Once I calm down I look at a huge, putrid damp stain on the ceiling and try to figure out whether that notebook in his hands could be a book of death. Hello Kitty is scarier. "Urgh, this place really is a shithole. I feel like I should have put on a gas mask and a forensic investigator's suit before I came in. Oh, I'm sorry. You were about to kill me with a piece of paper. Is this the book you were talking about? The one you killed all those people with? Wow. I am truly in the presence of greatness."

I stand to reach for the book, but he takes a few steps back and holds it out of my reach. Something about his face makes me think of carnivores jealously warning others off. I'm shocked by his expression, and my hand hangs in the air. Then he turns around, looking into the air like he's looking at someone, and puts the paper back inside the book and the book back in the drawer.

"What? Aren't you going to do it?" I ask. "God, I'm disappointed. You're obviously still completely insane. Well, I'm going to risk it and run for my life. Hopefully that book won't kill me before I get home and brush my teeth."

"So you really didn't care?" he says with his back to me. "That'll serve me right for rushing into things."

"What are you talking about now?"

"You don't care that I'm alive."

"Yeah, I care that you're alive because it's fucking irritating. How dare you come back? You left to save your own skin and came back to make things ten times worse for yourself and force me to intervene, but you're not content with that."

He laughs, still looking away from me, into the air beside him. I look at the wall to try to see what he's looking at, but there's nothing there.

"Why did you do this? It just hurts both of us," he says to air.
"What?" I ask. For some reason I feel like there's something evil in the room, but he turns to me casually like nothing was said and he wasn't talking to thin air.

"Light, I broke your heart – that's what you felt. That's what it feels like."

"You're so up your own fucking arse," I say, feeling my eyes thinning again. "You didn't break my heart. You just played me and hit me on the head."

"You know, I don't think you care that I hit you. That wasn't the way I really hurt you. You didn't fix it so that I'd be let off just to get me out of your hair. I don't think that you feel the same way now, but I love you, Light, I always did. That report... they'd have nothing on me. I wasn't scared of it or an inquiry. I've dealt with worse and no one ever catches me, but the link to it would have ruined you and you'd have no chance of being in the backbenches, let alone being Prime Minister. I wasn't worth it."

"No, but you were worth it to me," I say instinctively through anger, regretting it as soon as the words leave my mouth. I know what he's doing. He's trying to divert my attention away from the book, so that's another reason to believe that it's real. And I am diverted. The book isn't just important to me for its own sake, but because I'd have a reason to justify to myself the humiliation of leaving everything and everyone for L. I want L but without the sacrifice. Throughout my life, I've only really been alive during the times I was with him, for the broken minutes and hours and days. I want that back. I want this back. I want him without lies and I want that book, and if that book is real then there are no more lies between us.

"Light--" he says softly, but I attempt to save myself.

"Then. Maybe you were worth it to me then. Ok, what hurt, if anything really hurt, was that I realised what an idiot I was. I thought that I knew someone and I was starting to trust them, but I didn't know them at all. You're right, I didn't interfere in your case just to avoid the press. I'm doing it for a man who was my friend once, and you look a bit like him. But the man who killed Penber for The Lady and lied to me every day and faked his own death is who you are. Just goes to show that you never can trust anyone. It's an important lesson, especially for someone in power. I don't rely on anyone now, and everything's great. Despite all you said, it turns out that I didn't need your help. I got to where I am because of who I am and what I've done, not because of you."

"I know. You would have done it without the fast track and it would have been beautiful. More refined than what I could bring. There's something very heavy handed with how I live, because it's learned, not natural. I don't savour patience," he says. "The only thing I want is for you to forgive me, then I can be happy that you're happy, and I can get on with my life, because it's been a bit in stasis since I left."

"Why? That's not my fault."

"It's not. I just can't get you out of my head," he says calmly. I get the feeling that he knows how this will end and that I'm at a disadvantage.

"I don't want to be in your head," I shout. "Get me out of your head!" Keep me in your head, let me live there.

"I can't do that, I've tried. Why do you think that I came back? Do you think this is easy for me? Being accused of fraud, the partners are trying to sue me and kick me out of my own fucking firm, I can't work, I can't do anything, and, yes, I've been living in a shithole. I have tried, Light, I really have tried, but I need you to know what happened and for you to forgive me, with or without the Death Note."
"The Death Note?" I repeat after him. Is that's what it's called? I thought that it'd be called something more majestic.

"I'm not giving it to you. It's mine."

"Give it to me," I say.

"No, Light," he replies solemnly and cold as stone. My veins boil from being refused, and though we stare at each other in the deafening silence for a few seconds, I run suddenly towards where he put the book. I open the drawer and see it, my vision shaking with madness and joy, but L grabs my wrists and forces me back so he can stand in front of me, blocking me from the book.

"Don't touch me," I say with increasing panic, trying to wrestle free from him. I hear the drawer close again as I push at L and it's the loudest, most mournful sound I've ever heard. "Do not touch me!"

I push him hard to get him away from me and he hits the wall with a hollow thud, but I just focus on the book, opening the drawer so I can see it again, and smile and laugh breathily. It's Pandora's Box. All that was left in it was hope.

For some reason, I want to share this moment with L, so I look towards him. See my moment of discovery before anything is touched. It's like shining a light into a tomb and seeing the gold shine, waiting for you to take possession of it. It might be the most glorious of moments.

But I feel my smile fall when I see L press his hand to his forehead and let himself fall to his knees. My breathing at some point has become very erratic and my hand judders and shakes like I'm freezing.

"Get up," I tell him, watching him. When he doesn't move, I pull him up to stand, and his eyes catch mine and... it's a horrendous thing, this love I have for him and how I hurt him and this war I've made for nothing. "I told you not to touch me."

"Did you touch the book?" he asks, looking at me painfully through one eye while the other is covered by his hand.

"I'm –"

"Light, did you touch the book?" he asks again. A thin stream of bright red blood runs down the side of his nose from a cut I can't see. How? I look at the wall and realise that he must have hit his head on the corner of a shelf there. This is like that other time I hurt him. I always dream of it being a release and righteous and it turns me on, but when it actually happens or anything close to it, like this – when I cause bruises and cuts on his skin and make him bleed – I'm horrified by myself and the evil within me. It's the same kind of violation I hear on the news and read in the paper that others do and I want them dead for it, yet I do it myself, I'm capable of it. I can hurt with words because the injuries are unseen, but in people's minds I hack and slash through them. I know that from experience but never realised it, and never applied it to others. I've done it to L, I've done it to anyone unwise enough to be near me, because I hate them for not seeing this emptiness in me, I hate myself. I am no god among men.

I shake my head and hold him tightly. My eyes are closed but I feel the warmth of him and the sun on my face from the window. I don't notice these things because they're so small that there can't be any worth in them. My tutor said to me when I graduated – someone I respected, one of the few – 'You have the potential to be a great man, Yagami, but your reasons can only be just if they're centred in love. A man can be great without owning anything except love, because then, everything
in the world is his.'

"It's ok," L says close to my ear.

"No, it's not ok. You shouldn't let anyone treat you like that, L. Not me, not anyone."

"It's not half as bad as what I did to you that day."

"But I don't want to do what you did to me," I say brokenly. I realise then that since he came back, the thing standing in my way of not caring about the where and why and how and what he did, was that what he did that day completely destroyed everything I'd become and left me hollow again and aware of my loss, and I wanted vengeance for having loved him. I felt tricked by him and I shouldn't have been put through any of it, not by him, and yet he's the only person who could do it. He knows it. I love him, and even if it had been one-sided, I would have loved him the same, and it takes this to make me see it. I can't take responsibility for how I feel, I just blame him instead of thanking him.

He kisses my cheek and I squeeze my eyes closed, but when I open them again, the peaceful sadness I felt is steeled with that old sense of having been wilfully dishonoured, like a wire tripped and reset everything back to default.

"Are you finished?" I ask him, and feel him exhale like it's a dying breath before he steps away from me. The cut is in his eyebrow, dark and angry, and I caused it.

"Yeah, I'm finished," he says quietly. Oh, and will you let me go just like that? You know that neither of us will ever be happy apart. Even if the source of all wickedness is in each other, there's also all the contentment we could ever hope to find in this shitty world.

"L, why did you really go?"

"Because you wouldn't have forgiven me," he sighs, closing the drawer again. I don't mind. It's there, still, so I sit down on the chair while he stands in front of me.

"I would. I told you that I would forgive you anything and I meant it."

"I'm a murderer. You can't forgive that."

"What were your reasons?" I ask, and he looks up at me. "It depends on the reasons."

"Money. My career, because I hated them, because they were threats, because of what they'd done or what they could do. Because I knew that I could." No, they're not good reasons. For me, maybe, but no one else. They're shit reasons for anyone else. I'll have to ignore them.

"What about The Lady?"

"Her?" he breathes and thinks. "I killed her for you. I killed a lot of people for you, and so I could keep you."

"You made her write that note recommending me… But you didn't kill Kiyomi."

"I couldn't do that. I'll be honest though, I thought about it."

"How many people have you killed?"

"Forty one," he answers quickly. I swallow and excuse, and he laughs for a second when he realises something. "One for every year of my life."
"You could kill anyone you wanted to and you've only killed forty one? That's your average train wreck, and much fairer, not as senseless," I say. Lying.

"I'm not proud of it, Light. Every death I caused was a failure of mine and my impatience."

"If I had the power you have, I don't think that I'd ever stop," I say truthfully, reaching for a cigarette. "You said that I'd forgotten some things. You made me forget?"

"Yes."

"That's like a rape, L. You stole something from that was mine just because you could take it."

"You were going mad because of what you saw. Do you really believe me?"

"There's a book of death and a demon you picked up at a filofax shop somewhere. It's easy to believe. The things they sell nowadays," I say jokingly. Of course it fucking isn't easy to believe, but it's true. I want to believe it, for L, and for myself. To know that there's a kind of justice like that within my grasp would make me truly satisfied. "You will have to prove it to me, otherwise …"

"I will, if you promise that you'll never ask me to use it or give it to you."

"But I need you to."

"Don't you think that you've done well enough without it? You don't need it. It's for cheats."

"It makes things more simple, what's the point in taking the long route? You'll have to use it to prove it to me."

"I won't have to do that," he says assuredly.

"Of course you will. We'll pick someone who deserves to die. Some criminal who hasn't been caught – like The Nagano Ripper. I'll write it if you don't want to. I'd be happy to."

"No, you're definitely never using it. I don't think that you would stop, and that'd ruin you. And there are consequences."

"Like what? Do you have an ugly portrait somewhere like Dorian Gray?"

"No," he laughs.

"What then?"

"It doesn't matter. Anyway, it doesn't work with nicknames and unknowns. I need a name and a face."

Ok. This is really weird that I'm even entertaining this.

"There are twenty-two members of my Cabinet. Ten I know are against me, but I'll be happy if you just kill three. The rest are weak without those three. I'll end them in other ways."

"How?"

"I'll tell you later," I smile at him. "Will you do it for me?"

"Three?" he asks, thumbing his lip. "Just three?"
"I want them to die violently. I'll leave it up to you, but, personally, I like the idea of them being hit by a train, maybe one of them could jump off a building, and the other could die in a car crash. Nothing too unusual. You can tell them what to do beforehand, too? Like you did with River?"

"Yes."

"You'll do this for me?"

"I'll do while you watch," he says. I've never felt such awe and appreciation for anyone before. Not for what he'll do, but that he'd do it for me. My shoulders fall and my head drops as I force something from myself, because I want him to know.

"L, I'm not here just for that. I wanted to see you."

"In this glamorous location?" he laughs, but I can't look at him.

"I don't care where you are or what you wear or how successful you are. If you were the laughing stock of the world, you wouldn't be that to me. If that book turns out not to be what you say it is, I wouldn't care. I've been so lonely without you," I say, I think almost too quietly to be heard. I blink and rub at my cheekbone and nose in my awkwardness, finally raising my heavy eyes to see him. He looks me up and down, just hammering in my self-consciousness with his shocked muteness, so I raise my hand to my mouth to draw on my cigarette for a second to breathe smoke out in a stuttering breath. "So... am I a good reason to kill for?" I ask.

"I don't know, you have to decide if anything excuses what I've done. But to me, you're the best reason I can think of," he says simply. "All this is shit, you know? Politics and everything. The way we treat each other. I had a lot of reasons for leaving, but mostly, I just didn't want to hurt you anymore. And I was scared. Light, I left you because I loved you and I couldn't stand it."

'I still love you,' his lips say silently, and it hurts me, it...

I close my eyes and my head hangs again, because I feel like I've been knifed. That someone like him chooses to love me. After a few moments of quiet, I open my eyes again and he's closer to me than he was. My arm's still crooked, holding up my cigarette. The smoke withers and dies.

"Fuck you," I whisper, looking at him with all my hate and love and despair and tiredness, and he walks towards me to kneel between my legs. His hands stroke my face and pull the skin tight against my bones and wipe my hair from my eyes, and I feel him, even through my half-closed eyes. I feel him looking at me like he's found something special, and I realise that that's enough for me. I'd never looked for it or wanted it; it always had to be forced upon me. I needed it from the world even if I didn't want it, but when it comes from him, it means a hundred thousand times as much.

Fuck you.

When I wake, not that I've actually been asleep, because I've been thinking, I listen to his breathing and feel him tight against my chest like he's trying to get inside. But I can't look at him, I just sit up slowly and pull my arm out from underneath him, feeling my palm and fingers slide against his shoulder. I think that I told him to ask me to leave – the government, Kiyomi, Kira, everything – and if B's favourite excuse, oxytocin, didn't have time to wear off first, I probably would have done it. But he didn't ask me to leave anything for him. He asked me to leave him before he woke up, because it'd be easier that way, and it made me so ashamed because I knew how that was probably what I was going to do even if he hadn't mentioned it. I've seen a demon, I remember missing moments of the past seven or eight years. I've read rules in white against black of how to kill
someone, and I believe it.

Nakamura jumped from his apartment block last night. L and I sat on the floor in front of his tiny TV waiting for the news reports to come in that an unknown man was reported to have jumped out of the 45th floor of the Tokyo Twin Towers in Shiodome. L acted like it was routine confirmation, but I sat there stunned until he gave me a cup of tea, naked. It was a good time. He looked like one of those twinky guys you see in cages in gay bars, only without the leather thong with the spikes coming out of it. Anyway, I listened to the reports on a loop while more and more confirmation came in – it's a very expensive apartment block, so it's shocking that someone would actually die there – realising that I'd murdered that man and there was going to be no reprisal, no blame or condemnation. I can't wait until they find his suicide note pinned to his front door. Hitsamatsu will die when the 09:30 train passes through Meguro station, and Yamada will die in the early hours of Wednesday when she jumps off the Rainbow Bridge. One a day, just to space them out, otherwise it's a massacre. I laughed like a maniac when the film crews showed a stretcher being carried into an ambulance, but none of the paramedics were rushing themselves. DOA. Then L and I had sex again, completely at my instigation. It was funny – I was so happy with all these deaths on my conscience, and with such an unassuming murderer practically strapped to my back. It almost wasn't murder, just wishes granted. I never wanted it to end.

I lay there for an hour thinking of stealing the book and leaving him.

He shifts but doesn't wake up, and I think how life's played a cruel joke on him. He never got the things he wanted from me and he thought that he deserved them, but he doesn't now. He expects me to leave him while he's asleep and that this was my thank you for killing for me, and I'm going to do that. He'll leave today and I'll live without him as I did. But I'd like to take him somewhere. I'd like to sit in a car with him again and watch the rain fall over the sea.

I've had enough.

I put my clothes on in the bathroom and my forehead furrows but my mind is so clear, it's quite amazing to me. Clear water when all I've known is cloudy ice. The sun shines warm on my back and even that makes me think of him. As I leave the apartment, pausing to see him lie on his side, looking at me like it's a goodbye – cheating, really – I just smile slightly back at him before I go. It's too nice a day for my killer coat, so I put it over my arm. Sand from blood rain is drying in grainy, dusty patches on the dark paint of my car. It must have rained overnight, but not in my world. The rain is always out to sea when I'm with him.

My face looks tiredly grieving when I get back to the Kantei. People greet me and I don't answer. I feel strangely sad that Kira's still asleep. He finds his life so interesting and everyone else's so boring that he bubbles over with excitement at telling you about it, and for some reason I would have liked to have heard it today.

In the living room and in an armchair, I'm blinded by the gauzy morning light coming through the window, but not being able to, y'know, move out of its way or anything. I'm not depressed. I'm just tired and shocked.

I hear Kiyomi before I see her, and she responds with a happy noise of surprise when she's told by someone that I'm here. Her energy as she bounds into the room like a fucking lamb wearing a yoga outfit completely exhausts me. I feel so old and heartsore at knowing that it's not going to last very long.

"Hello! I thought that you'd be in work by now. It's after seven," she says brightly. "Have you seen the news? Nakamura's dead. The press got it before PR. That's why I thought that you'd be at work already, but Mai called because she couldn't get in touch with you. What a thing, hey? He jumped
out of his bedroom window last night. I only just saw him at the party! It's just strange, you know? /that one minute they're there, next minute they're gone thing. Anyway, we'll have to send some flowers to his wife. Do you think that orchids would be too sad or too happy? What do you think?"

"I don't know. Do whatever you think is best."

"Did you sleep at all? You don't look well. It's ok, it's only Nakamura. He was bound to retire soon, anyway," she says, looking worriedly at me for a moment, then dashing off with importance. "You should change your clothes."

"I don't think that I'll go into work today." I reply, leaning my head against the back of the chair to look at the ceiling and the little squares of light reflecting from glass vases by the window. God help me.

"You're ill?"

"No, I feel ok. I just... forgot, I guess."

"I know that you have a lot of work but you really need to let it go sometimes. I don't like thinking of you working all night in The House, it's not healthy. Do you want something to eat? I'll get you something," she clucks, putting her hand on my forehead. "You don't feel like you've got a fever or anything. I know! Do you want to see something?" she asks, but I don't care. "Light, you're not looking. I can't keep it up forever; I'll fall over."

I look to her reluctantly and she's holding one leg up towards the ceiling in some kind of strange torturous pilates position. I'm sure that L could do that, and he's never done pilates.

"Why are you standing like that?" I ask her. She sighs and crouches on the floor, straightening my tie and looking mischievously shy.

"How about we have a shower and we can... you know."

"I'll have a coffee, I think."

"Am I being too subtle for you again?"

"What?"

"What do I have to do for you to get it, Light? Do the splits naked?" she asks. What is she talking about? Why is everything so exhausting? I wonder if you can smoke so much that you die in one day.

"Why would you do... oh." I get it now, but only because she's molesting my lapels again. She always does that.

"Kira't be up for a few hours, there's a skeleton staff, I'm here, you're here, and I'm mad high on vitamins and pilates. I love pilates, I could do it for hours. I could really help you, Light."

"Right."

"You should do pilates, too. We could do it together!" she says, her eyes popping from the idea.

"Do you mind if I... don't?"

"I don't mean right now. I had other plans for now."
"Kiyomi."

"Light," she purrs. I don't know what to do. Help.

"Stop, stop," I say, taking hold of her hands. She breathes out and stands up so that she's looking down at me with her hands on her hips. Fuck.

"I'm getting really sick of your... I'm sorry. You're tired. You go to bed and I'll wake you up in a couple of hours? I'm sorry. It's just... 5am double pilates."

"I need to talk to you," I say, standing up so that I'm looking down on her now. Standing up takes a lot of effort. I don't think I've planned this properly. Not this exactly, but what follows. Hitsamatsu has an hour and a half left to live. I hope that he doesn't run into traffic on the way to the train station.

"That's bad. I hate hearing that," Kiyomi says, stepping back and shaking her head. How do I do this?

"Sit down."

"No, that's even worse. You want to talk to me and you want me to sit down and you don't want to have sex with me, this is bad!"

I have to take hold of her because the shaking of her head is turning into more of an epileptic fit. She half-heartedly struggles against me, and I just think: Why? You know, Kiyomi. You know.

"I wasn't at the House last night. I was with L," I say, stony-faced when confronted with all this nonsense. But it isn't nonsense to her. When my words sink in, she stops shaking her head and stops struggling, like I've just jabbed her with a dose of Valium.

"At his flat?" she asks, looking up at me. "It's an awful place. God, you must really like him," she says, and walks away from me to stand in front of the fireplace instead.

"I just went to talk to him," I say. I'm a fucking liar with the best of them.

"All night?"

"We had a lot to say."

"Oh. Funny that you can talk to him so much when I can't get a word out of you most of the time. So, what? You're leaving us again? How am I supposed to tell Kira? You know, Light, this is one of the times when I would have preferred you to tell me over the phone. That's be easier to take, it'd only be after you put the phone down that it'd be difficult."

"I have to do something and I have to make it work this time," I say. My hands hang uselessly at my sides.

"I'm sorry?" she asks, spinning around to me confrontationally. God, no.

"I can't help it, Kiyomi. I can't help it." I wipe my face with my hands, and the relief of closing my eyes just makes me feel more tired than I was. "But he's leaving today."

"Do you know where he's going?"

"London."

"Can I convince you to give us another shot? No, I guess we did that. I know you don't love me. Do
you love him? Do you love anyone or are you just playing with us?" she asks. I don't know. Can I love him and still be playing with him? I don't answer her, anyway. "You love him. God, you're in for a lot of stress," she says, then walks over to me. "Light, you're an idiot if you let him go. Wait there a minute."

She leaves the room and I don't understand. I was expecting hysterics and having to hold onto her arms for long time until security arrived with a doctor. It's a shame that we can't put wives in asylums anymore just for being annoying. It's really tiring standing up, so I sit down again to wait, and when she does come back, she pushes an envelope towards my chest. I take it and glance at the papers inside.

"I kept this. I signed it the day he came back, I didn't know why," she says with a sad smile. "It's been lovely. I know that we've had our fair share of problems, but I've only regretted it once of twice. I just wanted it to be ok," she taps at her head. "Not too bright."

"Kiyomi -"

"It's not just for you; it's for me as well. It's for all of us. Kira, too. Ha! It's weird, because I've been thinking about something a lot over the last few weeks and now I understand why. I've been reading stories to Kira, because I think he's sick of you reading Karl Marx to him now. You know what I always hated as a little girl? Fairy stories making girls think that they need a prince to save them. It annoyed me, but I kind of wanted it, anyway, so I married you, and it wasn't for the right reason. Same as you marrying me, really. I think that we were alright for a while though, weren't we? Who says that a happy ending has to follow a certain plot? Life's not really like that, is it. Light?" she says, and I look back at her. Her face is reddening and a tear has blazed a path down her cheek, but she still tries to look happy. "You're thinking that you'll have to resign. Well, do you know what I think? I think that you should forget about the job. If I had to choose between you and politics, I'd choose you."

"I wasn't thinking about that," I say, looking back down at the papers, ashamed of how little I've done and yet how much harm I've caused. I killed a man last night. I saw a demon, I saw a book kill someone, I fucked L five times. I've cheated on my wife repeatedly in every way since I've known her. I'm killing another man in just over an hour and I'm killing a woman tomorrow. I'm probably going to be responsible for closing one of the metro lines for a few hours until they've cleaned up the mess. I've never thought at all about how this would affect anyone else but myself. I thought Nakamura was a widower – he must have remarried. I don't know how to tell Kira that I love that deaded man from my drawer and I'm going to live with him instead of my family. I'm going bring down myself and then the government, and I still haven't had coffee yet.

"You're not thinking of us, are you?" Kiyomi asks me. "We'll be ok. You can see Kira whenever you want, we'll always be there. And... it's taken me a long time, but I think this princess can save herself. But you'll still be my friend, won't you? Not just for Kira's sake."

I think that maybe she's the best friend I could ever have, but my silence makes her laugh and rub my arms.

"You've already signed it," she says. "I suppose that you made you mind up three years ago and you haven't really been back here since. It'll still be valid, won't it? I mean, do these things go out of date?" she asks, sniffing as she takes the paper off me to read the small print, but gives up. "We'll talk about this in a few days and work out how we're going to do this. Take some time off and go somewhere. I'll think of something to tell people, and PR can release statements, no one will know. Be happy," she says, and takes my hands. "Were you scared about this?"

"I didn't want you to think that I'd just used you."
"You didn't. I knew what I was doing. Of course, this amicability goes out the window if you don't live up to the name 'Dad,' understand?" she tells me, and I nod like a child going to boarding school. She kisses me, I put my arms around her out of gratitude and because that's what you're supposed to do, isn't it? Then she pulls away from me to just hold my hands again. I wish things were different, in a way. "You better get going or you'll miss him. I'll take Kira with me to... I need a few days to myself. Don't think that I'm really happy about this, because I'm not. I just know what's right. Find him. Forget about what anyone else thinks and make this worth it."

"Thank you. Kiyomi, I... I did love you."

"Just not enough."

It's after eleven by the time I leave the Kantei. I packed some things and sat with Kiyomi, listening to her tell Kira. He didn't take it very well. At one point I ask him why he was so upset, but was slapped down by Kiyomi angrily while she hugged him. I don't really understand. So all that took longer than I'd expected. Not that I'd really planned doing it at all. I phoned my office to leave some messages and pick some up, and hinted that I was unwell and might not be back for a few days. I received a lot of sympathy and good wishes. It will be a few days before I go back, but I know that I'll be making another phone call to PR later today and possibly make a press statement tomorrow or the day after, when Yamada's dead. The radio in my car tells me that a man was hit by a train at Meguro station this morning. Delays are expected to last several hours.

It was only when I was driving, doped with other people's emotions and my continued shock at being a murderer and how easily I've broken up my family, that I realise that I don't know where L will live.

Back at L's shitty apartment block, the eternal kids are hassling a taxi driver, and some of them are spraying misspelt words on the side of a skip. I park up recklessly in view of the kids instead of a private car park. In the skip is a futon mattress which one of the kids is stabbing at with a carving knife.

I check my watch. My first thought is that Hitsamatsu has been dead for nearly two hours. My second thought is that I don't know when L is supposed to be leaving today. He could have left already. I rush inside, taking the stairs because the elevator is out of order. As I reach L's floor, a man passes by me, carrying a few familiar hideous pieces of furniture, and I look at him like he's an alien because... L's door is open. A man walks out with another man in a suit, moaning about how short notice this is and whether he's entitled to sue. The least the tenant could have done was to leave the furniture he brought instead of having them destroyed. When they're gone, I walk inside slowly, noticing the boxes by the door, and check all three rooms. The wardrobe is open and empty. It's such a small apartment that it doesn't take me much time to accept that he's gone. He just makes a decision and leaves, that's what he does.

In the hallway, I stand there and the paper slips from my hand as my despair catches up with me. I sink to the floor and sit against the wall, and remember that I don't have his number because I refused it. I have no way of getting in touch with him and he probably wanted to leave as soon as possible to get away from me because I disappoint him as much as he's disappointed me. I could phone the airport, I could stop the plane, but I can't move. I'm not even sure if it's a good idea to do anything.

I sit there for I don't know how long. The occasional removal man steps over my legs carrying junk, and I think: you might as well put me in that fucking skip with the rest of L's shit for boys to stab at. My head throbs and droops down and I must look like I've been shot and left for dead, but no one notices me, and I laugh to myself until it sounds like I've gone mad.
Sensing someone in the doorway, I force myself to look up in case I'm in someone's way. L looks down at me, cast in shadow, but doesn't say anything. Neither do I. I can't read him, I don't know what he's thinking. I just exhale and feel how exhausted I am, and how relieved I am to see him. I thought you'd left me again, just when I made a clearing for you to take everything I have and make it yours. I'd take your name if you wanted me to. If I could. I'd become your property until the wrecking balls came, and be proud of it.

After a little while, I grasp my hair close to my scalp until it hurts and my eyes scrunch up from pain. For me in another time, this would be a mistake. It wouldn't have happened. What the fuck went wrong?

L bends to pick up my dropped application for divorce, sees what it is and looks at me like he expects me to explain it. But I don't have to, do I? I can't give any more of myself than I already have done. When I don't say anything, he walks to me and sits against the opposite wall. I'm not sure how much time passes with us sitting like that, but eventually he crawls towards me and kisses me like it's a thank you. We don't need words, you and I.

I touch the back of his head as another removal man steps over us.
Every time I move it's to scientifically study the reactions it pulls from him, noting them down in my head so that I'll become an expert in how to control him. No, it's not that. I fear this. I always did because I don't understand it. He gets something base from this that I'm responsible for somehow, but I get something else. Stupid poets with their love of words talk about finding some paradise in this, but I think it's a load of balls. I get a kind of victory, and it's only through this that I get it, really. Times like this were my undoing and making. I watch him like he's a supernatural creature in a jar, lit by a distant radiance from another room and his own rising colour, seeing how he unconsciously reveals so much to me. Smooth-faced, closed eyes, gasping-mouthed, damp hair, and beautiful, glowing, but not as beautiful as what's inside his mind, caged by this shell of his, made for me. That's what I get from it. The open, vulnerable wounds from years together and apart, being as beaten by me as I have been by him, but I think now that he's suffered more than I have. I can dissipilate and reform, I just didn't want to forget him and wouldn't allow myself to, but he has suffered. Everything about him is desperate and disgusting with a self-devouring love for me, I see it.

I don't love; I seek possession. My love is selfish and consuming and unreasonable but pure and devoted. I'm the priority but he's more important to me than anyone or anything else apart from myself. You don't think that I know who I am, but I do. I can't face it, though I know it's there. I deny its presence so I can be god instead and give myself righteous reasons to live, but he understands the black emptiness in my heart and loves me with it included, perhaps because of it. Everyone else is an idiot; an uninteresting object because they can't see what I truly am, and I've felt like the last of a rare, supreme species mixing within a herd of mules my whole life until he forced his way in. All this invasion now is just a physical representation of what he's really done to me. No one else can understand me – I've only been playing with them – and if everyone disappeared tomorrow except for L and myself, I know that I wouldn't give a shit. I hardly notice them, anyway. My love is a never changing season where the colours are always bright and the ground breathes with the decay of the people I have destroyed only to feed myself. But even now, transfixed as I am, I can't push out the thought that he's a god and it should be my burden and my glory. He can't do what I could do. Maybe I'll have to kill him to get it, but if he's as clever and equal as I hope he is, then he won't let me.

My heels slip against the base of his spine, and for a stupid moment I feel like watching him is the greatest honour I could ever have. It's so distracting that I forget about myself and about how maybe I should be looking as torn apart as he is. That's why people do this, right? For loose moments on the brink of sanity when every part of you shivers and you think that maybe this time you won't come back from it. He's inside me but I'm the one inside his head. I won a long time ago but haven't claimed my prize because I haven't found it all yet. The scattered jewels in his mind are a infinite source.

"You look like you're on drugs," I whisper, curving my neck so I can look at him. His fingers scratch into my back in some clenching reflex, making me smile and close my eyes for a second to feel it better. I let out a warm breath which hits his face only inches away to come back at me cool. His head sags against my chest, and when his eyes open and blink slowly, he smiles so slightly at me, as if looking upon some unimaginable wonder. My lost half, sink beneath my skin. Be part of me and make me god.
"You're the one, aren't you," he says quietly. "You're god."

But I'm doubting whether he said it at all. It has the insubstantial feeling of something imagined or misheard; created by me to fill in the blanks I need and believe.

"Yes."

"Especially for you. I wanna let you know what I was going through. All the time we were apart, I thought of you. You were in my heart. My love never changed. I still feel the same."

"Could you be more camp?" I ask.

He looks towards me like he expects me to start miming along with the duet like he is. When I just stare at him, he sways as he drives, bites his lip, shifts his shoulders in a slightly attractive way, and nods like I am singing and he's agreeing with everything I'm not singing but he's pretending that I am. He closes his eyes, and I'm very concerned because, well, he is driving a car. My car. And I'm in it.

I'm so struck by the horror of all this that I can't do anything apart from consider where I went wrong with my life choices, and it goes on for quite a while. Only love or mental affliction can excuse my massive fuck up, and I'm thinking that they're the same thing, but I'm terrified that this kind of crap is going to ruin our relationship. All this love business is very similar, I'd think, to optimistically skipping through a minefield after ignoring the word 'danger!' on the signpost. Sustained proximity and his overindulgence in sugary food is going to kill off any utopian romantic feelings I have for him, I know it.

His window is wound down but I never really thought about it until I notice a car is driving alongside us on L's side. The couple in the car obviously think that they recognise me and point and wave like the idiots they are. I partly cover the side of my face and tell L to do something. He sees them and returns their smiles and waves while continuing to mime along to the song. They've wound down their windows and can obviously hear the shit coming out of my car, since they start to sway and mime along with L. But L's wave turns into a middle finger which he holds there as I press the button to wind up the window. Now that we're in the minutely dimmed box of tinted windows again, I feel safer.

I think of an article I read yesterday, which said: 'What you are feeling is a state of bliss, passion, energy, and health resulting from a huge love. Don't be scared. Your life is so beautiful that you can't wait to bound out of bed to start a new day and thank the Universe that you're alive. With this love, quantum physics, biochemistry, psychology, and a copy of Dr Biggun's new book 'The Love God' (only 3,000 yen to subscribers), the 50 trillion cells which make up your body can motivate you to heal the world and create a heaven on earth for you and the partner you've chosen to share your life with.' I read the article, and then I threw up. Bearing this in mind, I look at L again. Dear God, his shoulders.

Somewhere around the first chorus I hit rock bottom of the depth of my disappointment in myself, so I light a cigarette. After blowing the smoke into the reflection of my distinctly unimpressed face in the car window, I worryingly look at L while he mimes dramatically to the girl's vocals. I never thought that there'd be a moment in my life when I'd be driven in a car by a psychopath, but it's happened. And now he is actually singing.

"I've waited long enough to find you. I wanna put the all hurt behind you. Oh, and I wanna put my dick inside you, oh and now we're back togeth –"
"They're not the lyrics, L," I say when turning the stereo off.

"This is the radio edit. Don't you like the CD I made for you?" he says, stabbing at a button to wind the window down a little on my side while I ignore him. We're at junction 26 and in less than twenty minutes I'll be in the Kantei just to show my face for the first time since I became a gay renegade. I've only taken two days off work but I feel different and self-conscious, as if I'll walk in and everyone will be whispering about me and my gay slacking. I'm nervous about being seen with L in case we give off 'vibes' or he gropes my arse, despite before now being dead set on being so out there that I even considered wearing a pink tie I was forced to wear for Sayu's wedding (terrible colour theme I had to obey). But now it's here, I think that I preferred it when it wasn't as unofficially official as it seems now. L's going back to the firm unrepentant and I'm almost certain that he'll tell every person he sees that he's a commoner who's so enchanting that he's become my fucking consort or something to distract them from the fact that everyone thought that he was dead for three years. I'm supposed to be meeting him there with Kiyomi after lunch to sign some papers about the divorce which he's drawn up to 'speed things up'. Kiyomi doesn't know that he'll be there and I don't think that he should be there, I was just going to tell him that in a text message once he was several miles away from me. That should be fun. I'm not really looking forward to any of it.

There are some clicking noises beside me and I know what that means, so I sigh before he turns the volume back up. What is this synthy shit? He's not getting to me. I'm in an open field of barley and there's no sound... No I'm not. I'm in a car and L's driving and there's some crap I'm being subjected to.

"We're leaving together, but still it's farewell. And maybe we'll come back to earth, who can tell? I guess there is no one to blame. We're leaving ground..."

"Leaving ground," L harmonises horrendously well. Ugh. "Will things ever be the same again? It's the final countdo –"

I turn the stereo off again to listen to the calm, steady rumbling of the car engine and speed.

One thing has been going around and around my head since last night and on and off for months and possibly years before then, but now it's more pertinent. Soon my divorce will be common knowledge and questions will be asked. I'm living with L and both our names are on the deeds of the house for a sentimental reason I regret being a part of now, but it seemed like a good idea at the time and it made L happy. I don't know, my mind was shot and it makes me feel... sort of weird... making him happy. My security guards know about us for certain because L left the bedroom window open and two guards I didn't know about were standing outside. God knows what they heard. I try not to think about it but they look at me differently now. Rumours will most definitely spread and assumptions will be made that I'm not willing to deny now. I couldn't, anyway. L would kill me if I did.

The most criticism will come from the House and they will try to force me out – I can't even rely on my own party if it came down to a vote. The papers latch onto scandals, and apparently homosexual affairs are indicative of some fundamental inadequacy which necessitates the MP in question to resign immediately and apply for a fake office of profit to leave politics completely. What only makes this worse is that most MPs take the opportunity of 'experimenting' with young aides or lower ranking MPs at some point, of either sex. At least, that's the excuse I heard when I was taken back to a fair number of governmental apartments belonging to married, influential politicians with very straight and pious reputations. I was just an experiment. So all this goes on, but unofficially. Unofficial is probably the most important and respected word for people within politics, because if you don't understand all it implies then you're out on your arse with nothing. These House standards and how wrong they are have boiled in me until they've become a tumour of dissatisfaction. It never mattered to me much before but now it's probably going to be very relevant and decisive to me and
my career. I'm really fucking angry about it.

It's very strange but not unusual to politics that murder, solicitation to murder, and fraud are more acceptable than a sexual scandal. Many an MP has gone on to have a very prestigious career after serving time for despicable crimes. A previous leader of the third major party arranged a hit on his secret gay lover and got a standing ovation for his rare appearance at a party meeting a few months ago, I heard. I realised immediately why he was so easily forgiven; it was because, in the House's eyes, he'd tried to rectify the crime of having a gay lover in the first place by killing him. The gay lover was the real crime to them, and being found out was the other one. Never has a person of my standing admitted to a relationship such as mine as a normal person might. Even non-Cabinet members have resigned when they couldn't deny it. On Saturday I must have absorbed so much of L's cum that it went to my brain and I actually considered resigning today instead like I was going to three years ago. It'd be much easier, I thought to myself, and L was pushing me towards leaving. Then I realised what it would be like in reality. My life would be so completely changed and I'd be so powerless and pointless that I'd be brain dead by November. I became determined to fight it but now that I'm going into it and it has to be so carefully handled, I'm not doubting myself exactly, but it's not helping that L's playing Now That's Gay 87 on the stereo. It's not helping that I'm with L, more to the point. He's hard to defend. If only he was a war hero instead.

I said to myself that I have nothing to be ashamed of, and I'm not. I'm very liberal and very much in favour of me having equal opportunities, but I am anxious about it. The plans I've made with L feel too naive to be workable, and I can't play it as cleanly as he suggests that I should. To play dirty would be like admitting that I've done something terrible, he says. Though I'm not ashamed of L or myself, the truth of being a politician at my level makes me feel like I should apologetic and conforming to sweeping all this under the carpet. L doesn't understand this as a civilian with few standards to maintain, but my truth is very different. It's a load of shit but many still think that unless you're a straight man, you're not thought to be a man at all; you're just weird. Homosexuality was listed in a psychiatric manual of mental disorders until fairly recently. I've created a persona that will obliterated unless I convince people to make an exception. The hardest things to change are people's beliefs, so I'll have to employ some very destructive methods to retain my position and the respect I currently have. I'll have to do it alone using all the tricks I've learned, and no one is safe from me. I'll use L to do it. I'll lie and cheat and kill to do it. I'll put the country in chaos to stay where I am and keep what I have.

"Not nervous, are you?" he asks, and I turn to answer him with another glare. He sees it and looks back at the road. "Go in there with your head held high. Not many people have been able to say that they've snagged a Lawliet."

"I highly doubt that," I say. Those who could have said it are dead.

"No, just temporary custody. I'm the gold trading card everyone wants but never gets."

"Does that mean that I can trade you in for a jacuzzi then?"

"Why would you want a jacuzzi when you could just fart in the bath and get the same effect," he says in all seriousness. Oh my God, what have I done? "Do you want me to go in with you for moral support?"

"No, I don't."

"I wouldn't mind. I'll call in and see Mihael and scare everyone in PR. It'd make my day, probably. I'm in no rush to get to the firm. I could work from home."

"You have to go in at some point. Get it over with."
"I don't have to do anything, I own the fucking place. I'm only going there to shout at Sato for how he worded your divorce petition. Unreconcilable differences, pff. I'm going to make sure that everyone knows it's adultery," he smiles to himself. No you shitting well won't.

"As the one seeking the divorce, I can't plead adultery and you know that. Nobody is going to mention adultery. I don't want to see you there, by the way. You will keep your distance and shut your face and WILL YOU TURN THAT FUCKING MUSIC OFF?" I shout, switching the radio off again myself and pulling the button off, too. Every time I've spoken he's put the CD back on.

"No one's going to believe that you've been living separate lives in the same house for two years. No one ever believes that. I don't believe that," he says. Oh, who cares what you think, Sherlock.

"It's the quickest route."

"Adultery is quicker."

"We're both men and therefore it's not adultery in the eyes of the law, as you know," I reply smugly. I kept the divorce module from university on a temporary hard drive in my head, so I had to remind myself of its boring stupidity. Little did I know then how relevant it would become in my picket-fenced life. "Unless you want Kiyomi to contest the divorce for no reason at all by saying that I had an assortment of affairs with women. Which I won't let you do, just so you know."

"No, we're not mentioning those," he pouts, slouching back in his seat. "Not after I paid that woman off. I don't know what were you thinking. Do you have a thing about PR? Because you're obviously not fussy about what they're like as long as they're in PR. I'm going to go in there and investigate her."

"You're not. She was convenient and it bought her loyalty and there was nothing else to it," I say simply, but he's still very moody about it. He pushes hard into a lower gear and the engine revs to the sound of a plane taking off while he overtakes a few cars, including security. Ooooh.

"Hmmm… Yes, I could believe that," he says. "Was the nanny convenient as well?"

"You're a very bitter man, Mr Lawliet," I tell him with a thin-eyed glance. I'm oddly proud of my heterosexual affairs now that they seem like a distant memory. I will soothe myself with them and possibly allude to them if I have to defend myself against criticism I expect soon.

"No, just critical of the sudden decline where your sexual partners are concerned."

"I think that you should get over it."

"It doesn't concern me enough to be something to get over," he says. "Anyway, I want to be recognised as a co-respondent in the divorce. It's very important to me."

"Tough shit. I might as well hang myself for all the good that would do me."

"I see your point but I don't like it. It's another problem with the system. I'll use my influence with you to create an amendment which recognises hardcore bara, man on man, hairy, sweaty fisting and anal sex."

"Is that all you care about? All the problems with law and you're worried about that? And we're not bara … God!"

"Yaoi then."
"We're not fucking yaoi either, dickhead."

"But you are a bit of a bishōnen, Light," he tells me shyly. I cross my arms and slump in my seat.

"Fuck off, I'm seinen. But I'm not arguing with you, it's just proving to be very difficult. Anyway, I'm not thinking of any amendments right now. I don't have that much time, L," I tell him, and his eyes snap towards me for some reason.

"What do you mean?" he asks, but then answers his question himself and relaxes back again. "Oh, you mean before you resign." Yeah. L thinks that I'm resigning soon.

"What did you think I meant?"

I'm waiting for a reply but I can see that his eyes have glazed over again as he looks at the road. And then he puts his hand on my knee instead of the gearstick.

"Ooops, sorry," he grins. "By the way, when you come to the firm with Kiyomi, I need her to sign an NDA, so will you break her into the idea? You want to ask me what an NDA is, don't you, you cute little stupid uke."

"I am not cute or little or stupid and I'm not a fucking UKE!" I say loudly, feeling the muscles in my forehead become stone-like, in fact, all my muscles twitch in a way that's typically sexual. I'm very confused by it and have to take a few breaths to calm back down to my normal self. Do you know how many fatalities a year are a result of arguments and punch-ups in cars? I don't either. "And I know what an NDA is."

"What is it then, oh mighty seme of mine, oh so mighty?" he says, pouting his lips like a fish.

"A non-disclosure agreement," I tell him, very pleased with myself. He looks disappointed. "I'm the Prime Minister, L; I hand them out like pamphlets. Kiyomi doesn't need to sign one. Asking her to will just piss her off."

"That's why I'm asking you to break it to her gently before you get to the firm. Do that charming thing you do and she'll sign anything. Today an NDA might not be necessary, but what if in the future there's a dress she wants but she's already spent all her alimony for the month on the shit women buy – like lipstick and tampons and massive courgettes – and some journalist turns up with a big fat cheque."

"I trust Kiyomi."

"When did you turn stupid?" he asks, turning to me. We're very quickly heading towards a line of stopped traffic.

"Brake! Brake!" I shout, reaching over to grab the wheel, for what use that is."

"Calm down, what's wrong with you?" he says, braking just in time and batting my hands off the wheel. This is so stressful. "You weren't like this before. I was only gone for a minute and now you're stupid and paranoid."

"Three years," I say, blinking slowly. Those were the days. "You were gone for three years."

"Two years and eight months but who's counting? Well, I don't trust Kiyomi and an NDA would make me feel a lot better. I need my reputation protecting even if you're not worried about yours. If people knew that I'd been wasting my time with you for as long as I have, like when you were a nobody, they'd think I'd gone soft. What is the fucking hold up here?" he shouts suddenly and
honking the horn at the standard rush hour traffic.

"She's not signing one and that's final."

"Trusting –"

"Nope!"

"People –"

"La la la!"

"Will get you killed, Light."

"And being an interfering bastard will get you killed, L."
He has one weakness that I can find, apart from his stupidity, and it's his wife/daughter – Important Fact subheading 1a. A virtual prisoner in his extensive estate, she's only brought out for the social functions which necessitate having a wife on hand to stand there, look pretty and keep quiet, but I've heard that she fills her days with praying, embroidery and painting still lives of flowers. He's reportedly captivated by her gentle ways, youth and innocence. Before Tsukino started modelling his wife on mine, Kiyomi spoke to her at one function about the random, ridiculous things women talk about, and she told me that Shiori (Tsukino's wife, not Mikami's ex-wife, but her name is a useful coincidence which I'll label 1b) has a tattoo of a butterfly which she got when she was sixteen in a one-off moment of rebellion. Tsukino hates it, but she was frightened of having it removed. Kiyomi went on a rant about oppression, probably. I can't remember, but it's very lucky that I remember the tattoo because it's Important Fact subheading 1c. My imagination makes her such a tragic figure to me that it nearly sets me off course, but she must remain silent. Casualties happen in this game and can't be avoided in war, and it's usually the innocent who cop the worst of it. At no point will I say that what I'm doing is right, but they're the methods I must use to do what's right. I'm only empathetic when it suits me. I see how things are, how people are, what the rules are, and which ones I can break without consequence when I view the potentials of cause and effect dispassionately. I'm not a good person but I can do good things. It's not my fault that some people will be in the way or, through association to my target, get caught in the crossfire.

Important Fact Number 3 is Tsukino's deputy, Kiyohisa Sakurada. He's a much younger, attractive, unmarried man (Important Fact subheading 3a) who accompanied Tsukino on his blood-raged hunting trips until a few months ago because of his weak stomach for the sight of blood and death. He's considered by many to be Tsukino's best friend and a surrogate son (Important Fact subheading 3b). Tsukino often makes fun of him for not 'being a man' in not relishing the kills as he does. Sakurada is, from what I know, a 'very nice man' who could stand a better chance of leading the party than Tsukino, since he's much more media friendly, likeable, charismatic, and he's a vegetarian, which is very popular right now. It's for these reasons that I cannot let him live.

Somewhere within all this facts and characters, I see a plan emerge for me. It would be more simple with the death note, but since I don't have access to that, I must use other ways. Under a proxy and on L's old laptop, I spread my shit everywhere until I've coated the walls. I have conversations with myself through various anonymous messages to political forums I know most aides subscribe to. A high reply count along with the porn gif I posted when I started the thread will attract attention. Rumours like these must come from low places to be taken seriously when they reach the top.

'MEN ONLY WIMIN OUT I MEAN IT YOU BETTER GET OUT OR I'LL HAVE YER YEAAAAAH WOTCH IT! Hey I know we're not supposed to talk about it but has anyone here been with the BUTTERFLY?'

'everyones had the butterfly'

'Who's the Butterfly?'

'You mean you don't know the butterfly? Where have you been!'

'she's the pols favourite but she does civs too and she's free she just likes a bang. even yagami's been there. it's just what I've heard though.'

'Who wouldn't do Yagami?'

'GOD YEAGH AND IM STRAIT YOU GET ME? •:*:* (*√/*)•:*:*'

'Are you sure you're straight?'
I heard that she caught him at the last social while Kiyomi was away and she must have raped him because he's a very honourable man and wouldn't sin.

'Yo Kiyomi id do errr yeeaaaahhh'

dont be fsilly men cant get rapped duh its a impossibillity

'If Yagami's had her then I'll have to have a go. The man's got class.'

'You shud iv never had a ride like that in my life.'

'I went with her x2 and she sucked me dry. Definitely call the butterfly but she has a waiting list due to high demand. She even does BUKKAKE!'  

'I fink shell do anything.'

'Wow!!111!

'Yeah, she does department groups but over 10 in a group and you have to bring a bottle and book 1 month ahead because it's a day event.'

'the pols are hogging her i hate fucken mps.'

'AIDES FOREVA!'

'Hello, I'm sorry if I'm posting in the wrong place but I have a petition calling for action about one of the condom machines in the downstairs House bathroom which has not been replenished for nearly two weeks. This is very irresponsible because as gentlemen we must reduce the risk of spreading diseases and avoid increasing the population during a recession. We cannot rely on women because they're infamously devious in creating entrapment situations. The House should support us in our endeavour to fight the whores of Babylon.'

'you've never been laid have you.'

'OMFG NO ONES GONNA FUCK YOUR 1 INCH JUNK ANYWAYS REPLENISHED WTF GET THEM SOMEWHERE ELSE AND WEAR THEM AS A HAT BECAUSE THAT'S THE ONLY THING THEYLL FIT ON YOU'

'I will have you know that I am endowed with the curse of a weapon which is monstrous and makes women cry just from looking at it. I'm often stopped by security because of the suspicious outline which is reminiscent of having a machete down my trousers, which I'd also like to complain about.'

'Tsukino's bitch moves like a piston engine, it's true. She's only 22.'

'coooool buut tsukino is like 60 innhe? Lucki shit '

'tsukino kant get it up.'

'You know she's his daughter? Pervert.'

'Does Yagami know about that?'

'i do not think he nose'
'You're right about Tskuino. I heard that he beats her up and killed her mother.'

'*your*

'Yes, please watch your speling gentlemen, for we are aids. Whitherwherefore, it's extrordinary how Tsukino has managed to completley evade capture by the police. He must be an evil genious.'

'No. He's just a dirty old geezer. I'll have to call her this weekend while her pops is away. Nice of him to be so generous in boosting the morale of the men of the House.'

I hear the chinking of ice in the two glasses L's carrying, and before he sits next to me I quickly switch browser windows to a carpenter's website about bespoke fitted wardrobes, which he knows I'm in dire need of. This new house is good in all respects apart from the lack of furniture. 'Angular, well proportioned and modern, while still evocative of traditional Japanese architecture. Wide timber trusses span the walls and roof, leaving large spaces for glass,' is how an architect's design magazine described the house when it was built. It won an award and now I'm living in it, but finding the perfect wardrobe is the sole purpose of my life at the moment, as far as L's concerned. I show him a wardrobe, he's not interested, I close my laptop and we look out towards the dark waters of the ocean at night that we can hear but can't see.

"Did you see Kira today?" L asks.

"Erm… No, not today. I sent my secretary out to get some books for him. He should have got them this afternoon."

"You have to see him though. If you don't then Kiyomi might start being a problem. Take him to a park or bring him here while I'm out. I'm staying late at the office tomorrow. As long as he's gone by nine, I don't care."

"There's no need for that, I'm too busy. I'll speak to him tomorrow."

"Why don't you phone him now? That would be something."

"No. It's too late. He'll be asleep."

Though I have changed, I still remain the same in valuing quality, skill, intelligence, knowledge, good design, principles, functionality, confidence, efficiency, balance, justice, purpose, boldness, innovation, and the ability to adapt to situations, personalities, and the perils of Arab straps. A man in love. It's a strange thing. I might have been slightly overcome. My actions were neither wise or thought out, but you have to consider what my cards were. I had a miserable, limited life on one hand, and the chance to exchange it for a challenging, perfect man with the gift of death. Imagine me as the true leader whose word really is law and who doesn't have to waste time with bills and reforms. Only an idiot would have to consider losing out on that opportunity. It was Fate and what was always intended for me. I knew that I was born for greatness and I thought it lay in politics, but now I see that it was only a sideline to occupy myself and train me until today. However, what I have built until now can only add to my arsenal and shouldn't be cast aside so hastily. I might not have taken such a sudden turn in ditching Kiyomi as I have, and so undeniably, though I don't think that I could have handled it better. I didn't allow her second-hand, bargain basement love and hurt to distract me; I only used it to manipulate her into letting me have what I want. I don't like doing it, but I have to. She and Kira may still be the key which seals my political fate – men have fallen from political grace for less – but L forces me to do spontaneous things I spend a lifetime regretting because he has a habit of, you know, leaving. I don't like it when he does that. He is not one to be lost to me. Nothing matters as much to me apart from the beliefs that make me who I am, and
Anyway, the mundane interests I lost myself in vanished since I now know such things exist in this world as demons and books of death. You have to admit, that's impressive, isn't it? Now I know what I always thought: the only way of creating a utopia is through the justice of taking poisonous lives which deserve to be taken. It's a cleansing and it's not a nice job but someone's got to do it, as they say. Everything looks nice, but there are rats behind the skirting board. I am not a remote and non-interfering creator. Keep your life, but if your existence offends me and the world then you should die for justice's sake. My only mercy will be shown in how and when you die. I do consider it my gift and that it was meant for me, only brought to me through an exceptional courier. My faith in life has been restored and I can hardly bring myself to care about anything else, because I truly have everything now. I wonder why I ever cared about the perceptions of others, and am only irritated by how they're still necessary so that I can have this same boundless world before me. Why must they keep getting in my fucking way, are they blind?

Just to keep you up to date, after L put my divorce papers in his pocket and we left his dingy apartment, we broke into the house we bought which had stood empty all that time. I nearly said screw it to the whole thing when I realised that there wasn't a bed or any furniture, but L threw some blankets on the floor and somehow I coped by imagining that it must be what camping feels like, or a prison term in Rwanda. We discussed my ideas and he mind mapped it for some reason, then wrote out a plan of action almost down to the minute. Like I need something on paper, honestly. Two days later, we had new locks put on the doors so we weren't illegal tenants in our own house, I started buying some emergency furniture online, hiding when they were delivered, and L didn't give a shit about anything. I was worried that over the years he might have become a mystery to me that was considerably degraded, unemployed and uninteresting, but unfortunately that didn't happen. Instead, I watched him over the course of a few days remake himself and shamelessly bully his way back into life and his firm. People were ruthlessly sacked, clients were unscrupulously stolen from rival firms, promises were made, and all on the phone, on the fly, while he was sitting on the floor of our living room and wearing a t-shirt but no trousers. I was in awe of his horseshit and of how he didn't seem to think there was anything to be in awe of.

But despite my epiphany that with the death note the world has opened like a rose for me, us, whatever, L won't allow me any shared moments of glory, which I personally would find quite satisfying instead of keeping it to myself. It's very difficult to be God when you're told to wash dishes. To celebrate his funds being released by the state and perhaps not so strangely being overwhelmed with requests from new clients at the firm following his brief moment in the spotlight, he's been throwing money everywhere. It has no value to him, he expects it as proof of his excellence and it will only multiply, he says as a matter of fact. I can't disagree with him, I think it's probably true. Everyone loves a conman, and someone who can fake his own death successfully says a lot about how competent he is as a lawyer, apparently. He's bought a DeLorean. It's an incredibly rare gold-plated (only four in existence, and for good reason) version of a car from some film and it can go back in time, he says. It's very 80s, has overheated twice since he got it, it looks horrible in the garage, and I don't think it could travel 50 metres down the road, never mind through time, the clapped out piece of shit. A clapped out piece of shit which cost him nearly three hundred thousand dollars plus the cost of having it shipped over from the States. It's a gold-plated penis, that's what it is; I know what cars mean in the secret language of men. I've never been so excited about a gold exhaust pipe before, but it looks like something a drug dealer would drive – there's no class there at all. It is gold though. When he's not home, sometimes I sit in it. I don't know if it will be an anchor for him or whether he'd drop that as quickly as he's dropped things in the past. Oh, to be so uncertain and in the hands of an unreliable bastard. He's so amazing, you should see his… but it doesn't really matter.
To top everything off, I did, in a way, kill some people over the last few days, so the last week has been very eventful. Being a murderer caused some conflict in me for a few hours, but it's alright, I'm fine now. After three days, with Nakamura dead – in fact, with three people dead – I decided to make a new world. One with fish in the sea and animals that creepeth on the earth and people in mine image with whom I could commune. Well, no, but I reshuffled the Cabinet and appointed Mikami as Secretary of State for Justice as well as making him my deputy. This is integral to my plan. I felt more confident about my situation then, and obscene in my desire to flaunt my hideousness and pet lawyer around.

About a week after I left Kiyomi, we made a joint statement about our decision to divorce, but 'our dedication to our child and maintaining our friendship remains'. Mass shock. I was a free man again and women everywhere had their bikini lines waxed. There's always optimism with idiots when they idolise someone they'll never meet but who happens to be on the market, so my popularity took a leap. Then mass despair. I blame security telling someone in the opposition and it made its way to Tsukino and their PR, but wicked whispers in the papers hinted if not outright stated that I was involved with a man. Before then there was gossip that I was having an affair with an actress I was in the same room with at an official reception. I didn't comment. No 'I did not have sexual relations with that bastard, Mr Lawliet,' nothing. It was reported that I was 'reborn bachelor', which L said was Victorian for 'a fucking big pansy'. I've no idea what happened to my popularity then. I didn't check because it makes me want to kill everyone and I don't like feeling like that; it's such a drag and I've been in a good mood lately. But it did give me some sense of excited determination from being so disapproved of, particularly by people in the House and the media. Allegiances flip on the turn of a coin if they smell money, and suddenly papers, which were supportive of me since I popped out of the House womb as a bouncing baby MP, started printing derogatory articles. It's fine, I expected this.

Tsukino then made a snide reference during questions to 'a third party' in my divorce, but it wasn't worded as a question so I neither admitted or denied it. I just reminded him of his own divorce and how there was undeniably a third party involved there, so I found it strange that he'd bring up a fellow politician's personal life when he's aware more than most that it has no relevance to their work and is very intrusive besides. He shut the fuck up, people cheered, it was good. However, less than a week later, there was a no confidence motion levied against me by Tsukino on the House order paper for rather vague reasons, as I'd also expected. They can't exactly say 'You're bringing shame on this country by shacking up with a gay dead!alive fraudster barrister who might be hot as fuck, but no, shame on you – you're out of the club!' No, that would be very bigoted, and God knows that politics isn't both hypocritical and bigoted. They say that they have no confidence in me, not because of any political wrongdoings but because of their prejudices. There's a overall sense that I'm suddenly dishonest and untrustworthy, which I wouldn't be offended by normally because I am dishonest and untrustworthy, but on this occasion I'm the opposite, so that's annoying. They're going to force me into being a very dirty player, and it'll be their fault when ruin falls on their heads.

My skin is constantly in an orgasmic, dangerous thrill of how everything could crash and burn no matter what I do. I like it that way. I have faith in my abilities. For the past week, my chief whip and a dozen loyalists have tried to mobilise and recruit allegiance for me (because I've done nothing to save myself), brokering deals for no reason. The unofficial government whore house was very busy with gifted fucks and the Club busy with free drinks in exchange for votes in my favour. It's all illegal bribery, of course, but no one takes any notice of that.

The day of the vote has come. I'm a perfectly calm sea in knowing exactly what will happen, and I will probably feel validated when it does. Only one thing worries me, and that regards L. I might have suggested to him that I'd do something I don't think I'll be able to deliver, you see. But I'll deal with that as and when.
During the debate – I was excellent, by the way – Tsukino shouted at me from his pulpit, mocking me, saying that I've proven to be 'delicate and incapable of leading the country' and through being 'sexually embarrassed' I'm 'bringing the government into disrepute'. The translation would be: 'You're fucking a man and we don't like it,' but he also sees a prime opportunity to get me out of the way and he'd be a complete idiot if he didn't try. However, it's not going to do him much good. Sometimes I feel like warning people when they're on my hit list, but in reality there's no use. People choose their paths, and if they happen to block mine then that's not usually a good thing for them, but I can only do what I have to do.

I know this place, I know how these cunts work, and what I have done is despicable to them. It's too honest for them. There's no such thing as love between men, only perversion and something which, as a long held House rule, should be kept hidden. My honesty stains the floors of this building and the feet of all who work here like River coated the shoes of everyone in the lobby that day when they stepped in his blood as he died. There's no excuse for leaving your wife and son when you're who I am, so I must be punished and self destruct. I am accused by a man who's been stalking stags with flashlights and now with guns so he can wear the antlers on his head.

I go to my office at the House to wait for the results of the vote. I find L waiting there with his feet on my desk, his legs stretching out to forever in a grey pinstripe silk suit of my choosing. Near his feet is a gold razor blade and kilo of cocaine wrapped in plastic, open at one corner. How did he get that in here?

I say nothing, having recently headed a new government campaign against drug use and calling for harsher sentencing, but that's for the good of the idiots, not for me. How can I hate my dealer and his gifts? I'm not sure at what point I accepted this as something akin to ibuprofen, and I'm inwardly insulted that he thinks I might need this kind of courage, but now rails, drip, rush, eloquence, bravery are all on the table. I lock the door and scrape a fat line from the white block after L lazily rolls a 10,000 yen note and hands it to me. I snort the powder off my desk, which is so highly polished that it's as smooth and reflective as a mirror. The euphoric kick of real life magic in my head is immense, crossing the membranes to blood to brain. It's too good at what it does to be legal, and only the worthy can do this and use it without abusing it. Only the worthy. Only those too good to be legal.

Combined with my own natural highs with strange cause and the ever-present disappointment at living, I didn't think that I could feel much better, but apparently I can. I prop myself up and gaze out of the window to the blue and now swirling with colours sky like oil on water. Seeking and greedy and sustaining the high, I do another line and suppress a laugh at how dilated my eyes have become in the mirror. You look like that when you're in love, I read in a magazine article. L looks like that whenever I'm with him.

I feel no different, really. Myself, only concentrated and stimulated. When L smiles his teeth look like mother of pearl. My voice is hoarse and husky in between my intermittent sniffing. I have a terrible cold all of a sudden but it's ok. It's really ok.

Sitting down and with my forehead hard with concentration, I chisel some more coke off the block, take a cigarette out of my case, wet it with my tongue, and roll it into the snow before haphazardly burning it to the filter paper with my lighter. It browns and bubbles while L tells me that he loves me, I'm the only thing worthy of his time, he wanted to give me a hit before I resign. I know, L, I know, you're the best, good as gold. I love seeing you dance without moving. You dance for me and no one knows, no one sees, they just think there's something wrong with me. I feel sadness which is something like powerlessness, but worse. He's putting his trust and any good nature and hope he has left in me, and I've longed for it but can't supply the demand. I hate that about myself, so I snort up the dregs of dust from the table before I light my tainted cigarette.
The coke's direct from a client who just heard that L's alive again, so he dropped this block off at L's office at the firm in big jiffy bag. I don't know why, but it makes me laugh. I don't care. I can't stand the sound of my own voice because I've spoken so much today. I'll be called back to the chamber soon for the results and then there will be more speaking required. My gums are numb, my throat feels like it's scratching with cactus spines. L says something like: 'All this will be over soon,' and I nod my head. I smoke my crystallised cigarette and watch L smile at me as he licks the note I snorted with and kneel in front of me to spread my legs apart.

As one on trial with a foregone conclusion, I'm just a sacrifice to the tradition and protocol that remains. I refuse to sit with my party, taking my official seat in facing them, the opposition, and the independent parties I haven't bothered to bribe. Members are packed in tightly, shoulder to shoulder, jostling for a good view of this historic final act. Mikami pauses in front of me to give me a rough count of those in the No lobby who had recorded their votes by giving me a thumbs up sign. No, it's wrong, it has to be. Rough calculations always are. His gesture must have been seen by someone on the opposition's bench, and a piece of paper is shuffled along the front row to Tsukino, who hisses with anger as he throws it on the floor.

An opposition whip runs in with the official result and can hardly contain himself, wanting to make an announcement like they're sports results, but the Speaker stares him down; he wants that honour himself. A hush passes over the chamber as Tsukino stands.

"Lord Speaker, I object to a person being present during this session," Tsukino whines like a bitch. There are many people in the public gallery – aides and civil servants and politicians' wives here for this day. I stand, slightly stooping, and cover my nose while I sniff quietly. L's here and it's been noticed. He's with me even though hits leave the neurons. Synapses crackle with fading electricity but he's there everlasting.

"Lord Speaker, I think that my honourable colleague is referring to a man in the public gallery who is here at my invitation," I say, bored. The Speaker doesn't look up from his notes.

"Does he have a bomb? Is there any need for him to be ejected?" he asks.

"No, My Lord Speaker." I force myself to laugh. Everyone laughs. No, he doesn't have a bomb. He is a bomb.

"I see no reason for any person to be removed from the public gallery," the Speaker announces. I bow my head in thanks and smile antagonistically at Tsukino, who scowls at me and sits down. "The motion brought before us by the Leader of the Opposition is that this House has no confidence in the government. Do you have anything to say before the results are announced, Prime Minister?"

Yes. You'll have to force me out and try to take what's mine to scatter among yourselves. I want to see the hands which hold the knives. None of you will escape from the hatred I have for you.

"No, Lord Speaker."

The Speaker insists on taking the results from the mad opposition whip and in a dull tone, reads the results.

"Ayes to the right, 317. Nos to the left, 316."

Oh. That's more than I had expected. My speech must have won a lot over, but I still lost by one vote. One one person on my side or one more person abstaining and I would have won, but I won in other ways. I needed to lose to excuse what I'm going to do, but I have to remind myself of that.
Immediately after the results are read, the chamber erupts in noise, people stand to shout and add to a mixed low howl of discontent and joy. So strange for a country like this that there should be such chaos in its very core. Some backbencher's start to sing Kimigayo off key to support me: 'May your reign continue for a thousand, eight thousand generations, until the pebbles grow into boulders lush with moss.' Yes.

I lower my head to smile, then raise it to the ceiling and the black demon who hovers there. His wings cast the air as a breeze on my face, and I stand there, jubilant before a room of shouting people whose evil is only a fire in me. I only feel real when I feel something.

The Speaker tries to calm the House but they won't listen. I look to Kiyomi on the backbenches, her face white with shock and sorrow for me, but I'm still smiling. No one can understand why – I must have gone mad. The wolves and their cries for blood lessen. I will not sit down, I will not apologise or back down, I am not frightened of you. I look at the public gallery and L. Our eyes lock and I see his hand reach for the phone in his pocket before he leaves the gallery and the chamber, and then I feel free to betray him. No, you're not betraying him. Yes. I am. He won't see it any other way.

"Prime Minister, the vote is decided that the House has no confidence in your government. Is it your intention to oblige the government to resign or will you seek a dissolution?" the Speaker asks me. Some idiot in my party shouts: 'Recount!' but he's ignored.

Dissolution.

"I take my case to the country," I say. My voice echoes around the room, and the mindless grumbles from the room rise again. The demon has gone, haunting L, not me.

"The Prime Minister has stated his intent to call for a general election within twenty-five days from this date. Prime Minister, you must now be granted official dissolution from the Emperor," the Speaker says.

"Yes, My Lord Speaker," I reply, and bow.

In the modern age, dissolution as a result of a no confidence vote being lost is favoured, but in my situation, a resignation would be expected. I have surprised everyone by how the death throes of my administration didn't resist this defeat, and yet I still refuse to die. My gallows humour is shocking. The Speaker, who knows that I'm the best thing in the entire world, looks on me with sadness that I've been brought to this, and how my stubbornness will not let me release my grip on what I have earned. I could spare myself further humiliation, but I will not.

He turns back to the chamber.

"So pleases the House. Session is ended."

And everyone begins to leave this match as rain stopped play, apart from the disheartened who want to show me how they stood for me and the ones who want to glory in my defeat. Some are only for status quo, though some clearly have supported me not for their will to be in power, but as a stand against unfairness, maybe. I don't know, I'm still slightly high, I love the world. I'm a warlord looking upon grassy, peaceful plains of land which I will churn into mud and stain with the blood of men so that I can own it. Unfortunately, I had little interest in knowing who supported me or not, but I can identify them now through their expressions. It's unfortunate, because some of those people I'm now standing in front of will be brought down for their crimes, anyway, despite this redemption. I cannot retract it and nor should I.

"It was nice working with you all. Who knows if we will again," I tell them. "I'm afraid that there'll
be local elections everywhere now leading up to the general election. I might need to ask for an extension."

"What do you mean, Yagami?" Culture asks me, but I walk up the stairs and smile to myself in reply, feeling eyes and confusion burning into me from all angles, and only more so when Kiyomi joins me. She doesn't speak - she knows better – but she leaves me with a glancing touch on my arm at the spot in the main lobby where River bled and died.

L is waiting for me outside the floor of my office, not knowing for the best how to act around me, by the looks of him. I don't know how he can be as he is, or if he always was this way. I don't know when he found the Death Note or if he was given it, because he refuses to talk about it, but if I had his knowledge and could change the world or empty it of people, I wouldn't be the same. He's even more interesting because of it. What I can tell is that he doesn't know what I've done yet. If he did, he would have hit me or left by now.

He bows his head when I reach him. So, it's done. My messenger, my Mercury. I feel no regret. A stiff cock has no conscience, does it.

The demon's nowhere to be seen. He vanishes on L's command and doesn't often disobey now. I don't suppose that any of this means a thing to him. He only appears at strange moments, like at my shoulder when I'm fucking L in our dark rooms. Knowing that he's there makes me come a thousand times at once.

"I think that I might wear black for this. What do you think?" I ask L, and he lowers his head shyly, perhaps because of the people who are staring. You better get used to having people looking at you. Since when have you cared about people? You caused this and you'll share it with me.

"It doesn't matter to me. I like you in any colour," he says as we smile at each other.

"Black isn't a colour."

"No, it absorbs colour."

He follows me towards my office, and when I open the door there are a mass of PAs huddled around a news stream on a computer. I stop so that L is walking beside me and not behind me, and I pass through the tombstone bodies who then run in to tell their MPs what the breaking news is. Secretaries and civil servants run around, stopping as if under a spell when they catch sight of me. Only Touta does anything but stare. Even L is blind to everything but me.

"Light!" Touta shouts at me, running towards us and only just managing to stop before he hits me. He bends over to catch his breath and waves his hand tiredly at L once he notices him. "Oh, hi, Lawliet. Great that you're not dead, congratulations. Light, why won't you answer your phone? I'll been trying to catch you for weeks, have I done something wrong? You lost the vote?"

"Yes, Touta, I know. I was there. The country is effectively without a government. Don't you feel free?" I say on my way into my office, taking my tie off as I go and leaving Touta standing there, shocked and still trying to breathe. I need to get changed and I need to get rid of L or Touta, and I'd rather that it was Touta. L can't find out what happened from some chattering aides and civil servants – I have to tell him myself, but I don't want to. I'm quite nervous of what his reaction will be, so it needs to be handled very delicately.

"I think you have a problem with authority, which is strange considering that you are the authority," L says to me. My change of suit is waiting in its plastic coat on the back of the door, and L's cocaine
is in its plastic coat in a very suspicious looking holdall in my safe. I take my jacket and shirt off without closing the door, tossing them over the back of a chair. How scandalous of me. "Look what you've done, you've made Matsuda upset. It's like booting a bushbaby," L points out.

"But, Light, they're saying that you've – oh, sorry." Touta stutters, running in. He looks at me, looks down, and covers his eyes. I'm only shirtless and taking off my shoes, which is apparently fine at swimming pools but not anywhere else. I can understand though. When I'm without a full suit, I feel naked, and when I'm naked, I'm extremely so. I've worked very hard on these V-lines because it's amazing how much appreciation I get for them, but it's like a big arrow pointing to sex. No wonder Touta's feeling intimidated, though he probably thinks my impeccable definition is the result of operation scars. Sometimes I wish that I could go shirtless and wear low-rise trousers for work and say that I split coffee down myself so people can see the eighth wonder of the new fucking world. But Touta needs to go now. We can talk about me until he fucks off.

Touta, will you get me a coffee?" I ask, but he doesn't budge.

"They're saying that you've released a statement already and it's –"

"That's out already?" I interrupt him, taking the new shirt which L is holding out for me. "What has it been, five minutes? Yes, my statement. This entire institution is corrupt. I knew that they'd do this, so I thought that I'd take the opportunity to list all corrupt MPs and civil servants and their crimes." I can say that. L knows that much. If I steer the conversation and get Touta to get me a fucking coffee then I leave while he's gone and take L with me to my car. L will wait there until I get back and won't speak to anyone because he hates everyone. Yes, and then I can break it to him later. I'll do something inventive and… oh, fuck, what am I going to do?

"But it's like revenge," Touta says.

"Is there a reason why you won't get me a coffee?"

"Christ's sake, I'll get you a coffee," L sighs, but I grab his arm as he walks past me and I must be pale with horror, by the way he looks at me.

"No, L! Don't. I want you here with me," I tell him, and try to look simpering. He looks suspicious of me but at least he stays.

"Light?" Touta murmurs. Fuck!

"It is revenge, Touta. It's the country's revenge. The House just had a vote of no confidence in me because of L. L, you've toppled the Prime Minister," I laugh nervously, but promptly drop my trousers with pride.

"I topped one, anyway," L replies, handing me the rest of my suit.

"What do you mean? The rumours aren't true!" Touta tells us. Oh dear.

"What rumours?" I ask, and step into my new suit trousers. "You mean that L toppled me? No, that's not true."

"Oh, thank God."

"He's just been fucking me up the arse for years," I say, stand straight, zip up my pants and cup my hand around a flame as I light a cigarette and smile at L crookedly.

"Don't joke, it's not funny!" Touta shouts in despair.
"Do you even read the papers?" L asks him. "It must be so nice to have no idea what's going on in the world. I've often wondered what it's like for stupid people. It's true, Matsuda. The rumours are true. Light's with a man, and I am that man," he says, places his hand on his heart and bows. I almost want to slow clap him out of the room. "I've not been named yet, but I'm sure that'll come," he adds bitterly, and starts nibbling on his thumbnail.

"I don't know why you both make fun of me!" Touta says, his voice breaking with upset. I suppose that I'll have to clarify things for him. It's no matter to me now.

"I'm not joking, Touta. It's true. Kiyomi and I are divorcing, you know that, and I'm living with L. Don't tell Sayu or my parents about L though. Actually, you could. That'd save me doing it."

"Haaa!" he says, pointing at me and looking suddenly manic. "I know what you're doing. Well, no luck, boys. I'm onto you! You can't fool me!"

"No, really, it's true."

"Bu… What's going on? I don't know what to believe, I'm so confused," he says, but since I can't ask him to get me coffee for the umpteenth time, I walk over to my mirror and deal with my tie and cufflinks to calm my nerves. Mistakes happen when you're flustered – even with me it could happen. I think today calls for more black. L walks over to Matsuda, who almost springs back from him. I watch them behind me in the mirror.

"Matsuda. What happens is that… you know when sometimes you get so excited about Thundercats that you piss yourself a little bit? That might not always be piss. And sometimes that happens when a boy loves a girl or, like in this case, a boy loves a boy. I don't know what the fuck happens when girls love girls but it can't be much. Anyway, sometimes when two people love each other very, very, very much, a boy sticks their –"

"L, shut up, he has a child, he knows," I interrupt, shrugging on my jacket.

"But that was artificial insemination, wasn't it?" L asks me, and Touta is unsurprisingly indignant.

"No! I told you!" he screeches.

"I'm sorry, I must have forgotten," L says. "Last I heard, you didn't know what you were doing, so the doctors shoved a turkey baster up your wife. Anyway, what you were doing? That was probably what Light and I do, and that, Matsuda, is why you had a job getting your wife pregnant."

Touta just opens his mouth, and I decide to take pity on him.

"Don't worry, Touta. You'll be ok," I tell him, walking to him. "Campaign for office. The guy who holds the seat in your constituency is a goner for sure."

"Oh God! But -"

"Now, I'm sorry to be a pain but I really love your coffees so could you get me a fu... a coffee, please?"

"But why have you done this?"

"Because it's right," I say. Why should I have to explain that? Then I look at L. "I think that I'm ready now."

"Do you need your notes?" he asks me.
"No, I'll be ok. I won't be long. Why don't you wait in my car?" I suggest.

"Ok. What's the code for the radio?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. Reports will be terrible until someone's actually read the whole statement. Besides, I want us to watch it together on the news later," I say, touching his arm to press my sincerity upon him, and he grumbles and sort of reply and kisses my cheek before he begins to leave. Touta is awestruck, but not to the point of silence, unfortunately.

"Hey, Lawliet, why don't you watch the TV reports with us?"

"Oh, no, Touta. You civil servants always watch that fascist channel," I say quickly.

"I don't mind fascist. All news channels are fascist," L states. No, no, no. "Who knows how long you'll be with the Emperor," he says to me.

"It won't take long though, Lawliet," Touta says.

"It probably will. The Emperor likes Light, so he'll probably try to convince him to reconsider."

"Hey? What's the alternative?"

"L, really," I say. "I'd rather that you waited in the car until I got back."

"I know you would, Light. I just wonder why."

"I'm frightened that you'll… be shot."

"I am willing to take that risk," he replies. "Well, Matsuda. The Emperor won't want Light to resign and might keep him there for hours. I'm not waiting in the car for that long."

"But he's not resigning," Touta says with a scratch of his head. Shit.

"Yes, he is," L tells him laughingly. "The assumption by the press would be that he'd call for a general election if he lost the vote, so they might have reported that in preliminary reports, but he hasn't. He's resigned. He's had enough of all this. You explain to him, Light. He's your brother-in-law," he says, looking towards the window in boredom. I don't say anything immediately, and that hesitancy is enough to make L look at me and weigh me up. I see reality dawn on him. Over the course of a few seconds his eyes appear to get even darker than they usually are, and I know that I'm in some really deep shit. "You didn't resign. This isn't what we agreed. Why am I not surprised?" he says at last. I shift uncomfortably and incline my face towards Touta.

"Touta, would you leave us for a minute."

"No, I'll go," L says, and I leap into action.

"L, I couldn't do it. Mikami has no experience and we'd lose the next election."

"We? They'd lose the next election. You wouldn't have been part of it."

"The party would have lost."

"And since when did you give a fuck about the party? You don't."

"Can we not do this here?"
"Oh, yes, because the Emperor will be waiting for you. I'll wait in the car and play 'The Show Must Go On' because it's feels strangely fitting, but of course, you wouldn't know what I'm talking about," he says. He picks up his holdall full of cocaine and walks out, not bothering to close the door. My arms become so slack and heavy that I think gravity might pull them out of their sockets. Touta gingerly touches my shoulder like it's potentially boiling hot.

"Light, are you ok?"

After that, I'm appropriately despondent looking and sounding when I go to the Emperor. It only takes fifteen minutes, and on my way back, I notice the people lining the streets and staring at my car as I get closer to the House; a mix of professional photographers and normal people with professional looking cameras and mobile phones, and it makes me realise what I've done. I've created two crises today. Everything usually feels very distant because being in the House is by nature, distant. You have an idea, you take the budget into account, it morphs the idea, it mutates, you become vicious, you write it down, read it to the House, it gets passed and it starts to have an effect on people out there. It's one of the idiosyncrasies about being a politician that you will lose touch with reality, but wanting to escape reality is why many people become politicians in the first place. Politics brings power and fame and admiration, and isn't that what everyone wants? You'll be hard pushed to find someone who isn't a sociopath in this place after the situational disorder infects them. Not with me though. I was always as I am.

I file the necessary papers which officially dissolve the government. The road has been blocked by police and people gather in hoards on opposite streets. Once it's done, I walk into the private car park which is there solely for unpopular or important people to leave in shame, usually unnecessarily speeding away with screeching wheels, only to drive around and past the front of the House, anyway. L's begrudgingly waiting for me in my car with the engine running. I get in the passenger side, notice Ryuk in the back seat, and we leave without saying a word, followed by the trail of security cars. We're held up by the police outside the steps leading up to the House while they clear the tiny plastic road blocks out the way. L's fingers agitatedly tap on the steering wheel while we wait, and I look at of the window at the House, thinking how perhaps it's only going to be something from the past to me now. If only I can return to see how empty I will have made that place once they start falling.

"I'm sorry," I say to L. "When it came down to it, I just couldn't do it. You understand, don't you?"

"Yeah. I understand," he replies with a tired anger. I knew that he couldn't –

"There."

The word and voice interrupts my train of thought and my secret smile, and I look at L instead of who spoke, because it was the shinigami. I begrudge it being there most of the time, but accept it as though he's an annoying fly and I don't have anything to kill it with. L's face changes like something profound has been said, he looks towards the House as if something has happened there, but it's deserted, he looks at the crowds of people, he looks at the policemen, what the fuck? I can't look away from him as he turns his face around to look at Ryuk to share some silent communication. I wonder if they can talk without words, and amongst my feelings of confusion I feel some envy. I'm not sure whether it's because I envy L or Ryuk.

"What?" I ask L, so that he looks at me instead with his large eyes. He looks shellshocked, so I turn in my seat to the demon. "What? 'There' what?"

But he just grins at me the same as he usually does. It's why I don't bother talking to him most of the time. All I get is the same horrible, shadowed face staring back at me.
The cordon is removed, L shifts the gear and we leave without an explanation to why 'there' is so important and what 'there' is. The silence continues as the dense urban concrete and lights and people soon make way for an open river of a motorway towards the rural land of farmers and the affluent effluence of bankers, executives and politicians, where I live now. There.

After L pressed send on his phone and email with an attachment winged its way to every major news team in the country and the NPA, everything crashed down on the House. I've prepared the list that was sent over years with proof through photographs, links to video evidence, photocopies, bank statements, witness statements, official government records – anything I could get – but in my email I said that it was a more recent personal investigation of mine. I also gave them my first and only admittance that the rumours no one really believed about L and I were true. It was the dream of every journalist and I gave it to them free of charge. With the political grenade, I released the following statement:

I feel that I have no option, since the results of the House vote were released this afternoon, but to make public what I have discovered, which is what I believe to be the real reason behind the motion against me today. Attached is a list detailing the cover ups, rapes, harassment, fraud, money laundering, theft, racism, extortion, expenses abuse, drug abuse, drug dealing, bribery, affairs, links to suspicious deaths, and miscellaneous wrong doings by people within the government.

I would have released this before now, but it took time to gather evidence to support the claims I've been made aware of. I can only hypothesise that someone suspected me of researching, as my access to certain government records was denied to me by a Cabinet decision, proof of which I have included. After the suicides of three members of my Cabinet recently, I admit that I felt that my own life was in danger, and the safety and wellbeing of those dear to me. It was of the utmost importance then to release this as soon as possible and call for an official police and independent investigation of the corruption I now believe to be endemic within the system. The country deserves better, and I cannot lead a government which I know is not honest and serving the country as it should.

My feelings are, though only hypothetical because they are strong accusations indeed, that, based on Yamada's suicide note, she, Hitsamatsu and Nakamura were involved in a plot in trying to discredit me and remove me from the government through a vote of no confidence. It was presumed that I would resign. They were at some point then blackmailed so that they felt no option but to take their lives.

Finally, although of minor consequence when discussing the whole, in reference to the vote against me today and the reasons for it, I have this to say: all I have done was to be honest about my personal life from the start. I will not bow to the pressure of having to speak about it or apologise for it, because I don't believe that there is anything to apologise for. I have never been unfaithful to my wife. To be unfaithful would be reprehensible, and I endeavour to always be truthful in every aspect of my life or I could not live with myself. Our divorce was a joint decision after the stress of our careers and life in the public eye caused a fracture we felt we could not overcome, despite our continued affection for each other. My partner is someone I have known for many years but our current relationship only developed after my wife and I had decided to part. I would not disrespect Kiyomi or anyone else by doing otherwise. I would like to repeat my tribute to Kiyomi's unparalleled worth as a mother and friend, and that the strongest bond between us is our equal love for our son, who we both value most in the world and will always be our highest priority.

The introspection into the lives of politicians is so intrusive at this time that I urge the media to give my family the respect of distance. There is nothing to condemn about my relationship, and yet I believe that my honourable colleagues have used it as an excuse to oust me. My personal life does not affect my ability as Prime Minister, and so I suggest that bigotry of the system be added to the
attached list. In the election which follows, I will not campaign. I trust my record as a servant of the people to speak for me. Let the country be the judge, for I know that its people are civilised and would not see loving another person as a crime.

Light Yagami MP, Prime Minister of Japan

When the news came out, the backlash was stupendous and eventually a kind of state of political emergency was declared because of the internal unrest at the extent of the corruption within the government. The email was bad enough, but the fact that I was the source of the information and that I’d make it public was even more catastrophic. Tsukino desperately tried to deny that he was involved in the ‘plot’ I had mentioned, which is something the press decided upon because he would benefit most from my ejection from politics and it was he who levied the no confidence vote against me. Well, I did say that it was hypothetical. Apart from that, I left him alone. I didn't release what I know about him. I have something more interesting planned for him.

MPs were resigning in droves, forced out by my words and work and the disgust of the masses. There always has to be a sacrifice, and if they can't blame and force their aides to resign, it calls for their own resignation. Local elections were hastily called everywhere, other countries spoke of their sadness at the situation (as if it doesn't happen in their country) while going out of their way in supporting me as a great leader who was wrongly forced into speaking out and making the corruption public for the good of the country. To me, it looked like I was a fallen warrior and saviour of the people, but the country was more interested in the chaos, isolated riots using political corruption as an excuse, curfews, uncertainty, threats of military intervention to back up the police, accusations of police brutality, and my personal life, so my political importance got lost by the wayside. That was not part of the plan. I hired security who I pay for personally because I don't trust the official security, so now I have double the men following me around and posted outside my house, scowling at each other. I've been advised to return to the Kantei for better security and to give the public a sense that they still have a Prime Minister. When I refused, I was advised not to go into Tokyo unless I have a strong desire to be mobbed by the press, and I know that they're posted on the other side of the electric gates like dogs waiting for a bitch on heat to rear its head so they can gang bang it. L has to drive through it twice a day but he doesn't mention it. All my appointments and visits have been postponed, so all I can do is release the odd statement through the Press Office. I saw my chances slipping, so my thoughts went back to the death note. The only way I could come back supreme is by making this worse. I'll kill all who oppose me until they realise that it's God's will that I should be in power, and my desperation at how things have become slightly out of hand and that I'm so powerless, turn my thoughts back to the death note. L might be more receptive to using it now, and if I can convince him, then all this will end more quickly and decisively than it will otherwise. Plotting in such a conventional way is so tiresome when you know it's possible to kill someone miles away in forty seconds without any repercussions.

I have to get around L for that to work though. I don't know where he's hidden the book – I've looked everywhere. The demon is just a shadow out of the corner of my eye sometimes and when I call him it's like I'm mad, shouting at the air, so I have to win L over. He just needs a little push, and am I not the best reason he can think of to kill for?

My quarantine isn't as bad as I'd expected. I'm bored, but it's not unpleasant. It's like being a teenager again, waiting for life to start. I make work for myself, writing notes of ideas and strategies which become endless the more time I pledge to them. I like being alone most of the day and only seeing one person who I've chosen to see after years of not having neither him or privacy. But the nagging doubt in me bites throughout, telling me that acting like I'm going to remain Prime Minister is pointless. I've lost already unless I get rid of Tsukino. He clings on and his is the clearest voice in the din which criticises me. He's still a threat. He's the working man's choice by tradition, so they might
return to him, and people show their disapproval for voting for the next best alternative or not voting at all. If I make his party a worse alternative, then there's only dozens of tiny, unpopular and mostly unknown fractured minor groups left to beat. I will not lose to Tsukino. I won't lose to anyone. I won't form a coalition. If I leave, then it'll be because I've chosen to abandon them to their hopelessness, like all gods do until the end times.

Over a few days, because a sudden downturn would look suspicious, I gradually make myself depressed, basing it on L and Mikami's self-indulgent periods of twaddle. I stop eating. I shave once a day instead of twice. I start wearing L's insanely baggy and grotty white t-shirt which says 'Frankie Says Relax' in big letters on the front. I don't know who Frankie is but he says 'relax' and I now look like a person you'd expect to find in a squat. So I wear that and pour vodka and whiskey over it and empty the rest down the sink every day, but I appear to drink gallons by leaving the bottles around the house for L to find when he comes back from work.

When I was first given the disreputable accolade of MP, I was given a House pass, a laptop (even though I already had two), a Blackberry (even though I already had one), a tiny shared office, a twenty-minute induction with the Independent Standards Authority on the expenses system no one really takes seriously (like the age of consent), a guidebook on how to order stationery and what to do in a chemical attack, and a make-up kit. I never had cause to use any of those things apart from the pass and the larger single office which I had to fuck an omnipotent whip for, but now I'd remembered my bag of tricks, I also realised that I needed more theatricals for L. I went into the garage and dug out the basic make-up kit, and in a palette of very neon orange colours never naturally seen on a human being of any race, I found an ashy-toned cream contour which I thought would be suitable for the purpose when mixed with Touche Éclat. Every morning for the past week, while he's asleep, I sit in the DeLorean and flip down the vanity mirror, smear the instant unhealthiness under my eyes and have darkened it every day until I look like… well, like L, actually. It's oil based and stays on all day when lightly powdered, I've found, being very highly pigmented and of excellent quality. Today I've put some under my cheekbones to accentuate them and balance the gauntness of my face, and some on my jawline to accentuate that even more for no real reason. So, I look sick as a dog, but attractively so, and he finds me, more often than not, apparently unconscious in bed, stinking of alcohol. When I'm awake I'm very clingy to him but resistant to anything sexual, and if denied for long enough then I think he'll kill everyone. But one thing I have learned is that you can't withhold sex for too long with men, unlike with women, who just get depressed and sit on a washing machine during its spin cycle. Men piss off and fuck someone else, so I do occasionally give in but further capitalise on it. When I do 'give in,' I'm as missionary as fuck, whimper a little bit, and on one occasion pretended to cry afterwards. He doesn't like it. I have nothing to say for myself and I've become a very sad thing, but I can stand any suffering for what I want. And I am suffering. I've been wearing this t-shirt for days now and it smells awful, but L still goes to work and leaves me here. I know that I'm getting to him though.

I'm quite happy eating yoghurt-coated cranberries after a meal of random things on toast so as to be unnoticed overall. I have my reasons for appearing to starve to death slowly in a pit of sorrow. L's been gone for six hours, during which I've read the papers, watched the news, done some very basic cardio, and showered, only to re-grease my hair and re-apply my dark shadows so I don't actually appear to have showered but smell sweet as a nut. Amazing. And now I'm lounging around, tossing cranberries into the air and trying to catch them in my mouth even though I just brushed my teeth not long ago. I feel so wild with abandon that I danced around the house to my cardio mix before my shower. I am genuinely so happy because I now see perfection around the corner which I can only will to become mine. Politics and L and the power of dictating death – it won't get much better than that, and the anticipation is excruciatingly beautiful. I'm leaving my clothes on the floor and it's causing me a lot of pain because they desperately need washing, but I can't because it would ruin the
impression I'm trying to give of someone who can't pull himself together.

I hear the front door open and close, so I rush to turn the TV off, hide the cranberries under the bed, scruff my hair a little bit, then flop face down on top of the sheets to play dead. He can't be away from me for too long, probably because of his fear that I'm suicidal. I made a big mopey drama about the idea of him going to the firm for a few hours to hammer in his guilt, and I've done that every day. You left me, you fiend; it's pure luck that I'm still alive. I was just too bored and apathetic to kill myself while you were gone.

A few minutes later I hear L in the hallway and then sense him in the room. He hisses out a quiet "bullshit" loudly and I feel so full of mischief that I nearly laugh, but I don't. The room is like a crypt. I'm very proud.

He must throw his coat onto the bed with yet another sigh, and probably stands there for a while admiring my discarded fucked form, just how he left it. I am very patient, but when I hear him hiss again, I sneak a peak at him and see him drop a cigarette butt from the ashtray. I've just smoked it. It must be still hot. Shit. Schoolboy error, Yagami. Sometimes I forget who I'm dealing with.

A cloud passes and hides the sun, dimming the room into a near eclipse of darkness. L looks into the air, his eyes spinning, mystified under a slightly furrowed brow.

"Oh, it's gone dark all of a sudden. Like when Jesus died," he says, then turns to look at me, but I quickly close my eyes. "Get up. I know you're awake," he tells me commandingly. Corrrr.

"Is someone there? Please don't kill me. I don't have much to live for but I want to see the person I love before I... Ah... it's you," I reply, tiredly stretching and rubbing my eye as I turn over. "You gave me a shock, L. I thought that someone had broken in. I must have slept all day again... but it doesn't matter. How was work? I missed you."

Nada. Just a death stare is returned. I have to try harder.

"Did you hear anything?" I ask, sitting up like it hurts me. "I can't face watching the news. Everything is so fucked up, I wish I was dead. Tsukino's going to win the election and then it's over. It's already over. I try to remind myself that I still have you, but I just can't live like this. I have no purpose. Wow, where are my clothes? I hope that no one's been in here and sexually assaulted me while I was asleep. It does happen, you know."

"Have you been out of bed at all?" he asks. My hands drop limply off either side of the bed, so I'm spread-eagled now. I don't know how he can cope with this – me, naked on a bed, depressed, weak, helpless – it must be driving him mad.

"I can't remember, I'm so tired. All the days bleed into one," I moan. "Why are you so far away? Ha, remember the closet at Naomi's wedding? You said that to me. Then you went down on me," I say, biting my lip and letting my hand drift down towards my manically depressed but only dozing, award-winning cock. "But you are far away – I can hardly see you. Please come here? Hold me," I beg, reaching my arms towards him. Give me water, give me love, give me life! Fuck, I'm so good at this.

"No, thanks," he says, checking his hair in the mirror. "I don't see the point in sex that isn't brutal and borderline GBH. Keep your cuddles and tip of the nose kisses for Matsuda."

"But, L –"

"But nothing. Do I need to get a shotgun out to you? I don't want a lifetime of vet's bills," he says,
looking down at me entirely unconvinced. How can that be?

"Hmm? What do you mean, baby?"

"Baby? You've never called me 'baby' in your fucking life, I'll smack you up if you do that again, you fuck, just stop it. Get out of bed and put your ball gown on. I need to call round to drop a cheque off to the judge about your divorce and then there's that thing with your parents." Oh shit, no. I roll my head to one side in the throes of death.

"I forgot about that. I can't. If I leave the house, someone will kill me. I'm so scared every time you go out. I think that someone's going to blow you up for blowing me. If you died, I'd die; there'd be nothing left for me, nothing! And I can't face my parents, they'll be so ashamed of me. What if I really am nothing without politics? L, I need to ask you something. You're the only one I can trust."

"I'll just make a coffee first."

"No, it's important, please. I've been thinking… Tsukino will win this election, and when that happens, I don't want to live anymore. I can't live with the disgrace. You have to promise me that if I don't come back from this that you'll… kill me."

"Softly?"

"Yeah."

"With his song?"

"Whose song? No, don't kill me with music. Kill me –"

"With your boots on?"

"No, just my favourite Gucci lace-ups. Will you do it, L? Will you kill me when I lose the election? It would mean so much to me."

He's so distressed by the idea that he sticks his bottom lip out while he thinks of how to stop this. Yes, you'll have to kill Tsukino for me, L, or I'll die. Look at me and imagine me dying – how horrible would that be? He shrugs his shoulders, since the weight is so heavy on him, and says…

"Ok."

"What?" I ask, sitting up in my outrage.

"Whatever, Light. By the way, can Satchel cook?"

"Satchel?"

"Your mother. Is she a good cook or should I get a kebab on the way there?"

"Sachiko. Her name's Sachiko."

"That's what I said, wasn't it?

Bastard. I throw myself back on the pillows and take long breaths between words, staring out towards the window. I've successfully avoided my parents for thirty-odd years and I'm not going to stop now.

"Oh God, help me. You're right, I have to say goodbye to my parents first. I owe them that. And
Kira," I nod to myself sorrowfully. "I can't be seen like this though. I must look terrible but I can't
 care, I haven't washed for days," I say, nearly sobbing, but I stop abruptly when he climbs across the
 bed looking furious. He takes a sniff under my arm, and looks at me triumphantly.

"Is that a fact?" he asks, staring at me for a few seconds, then stands up to take his tie and cufflinks
 off. "Get up, bitch. Kiyomi and Kira and your sister and Matsuda and every fucking person in the
 world is going to be there and it'll be awkward as hell but we're going to sit through it."

"You can't talk to me like that! Can't you see that I'm sick?"

"You're such an atrocious liar, it's insulting to me. There's nothing wrong with you but I've put up
 with it because, I don't know, maybe you thought that you should be ill in this situation and the fact
 that you weren't wouldn't stop you from pretending. Or maybe you're a cunt. I think it's the latter.
 What is this shit under your eyes? Is it make up? I've been meaning to ask you," he says, leaning
down to wipe his thumb just above my cheekbone, but I turn away for a moment to stop him.

"No! I hurt all over, please don't! I feel really bad, L. I can't argue with you, I don't want to. You're
 so beautiful in a lawful and manly-but-not-meathead-more-androgynous-and-it's-really-hot way but
 please be gentle with me," I plead with him adoringly, holding onto his lapels to pull myself up. I
 reach up to stroke his cheek but he grabs my hand and plants his own smack in the middle of my
 face to push me down onto the bed again.

"I'll make your head fucking hurt," he says, sitting back on the bed. "Have you eaten?"

"No, I couldn't eat anything if I tried. I don't want to worry you though."

"I'm not worried. How many days has this been going on for again? Five? Surely you should be
 wasting away by now. I haven't so much seen you have a glass of water. You're a feat of nature
 living on vodka, as you'd like me to think. There were seven bottles yesterday and that would kill
 someone a few times over."

"Seven? I'm so sorry. My doctor did say that he'd never seen such a high-functioning liver before
 though."

"Why, did he take it out to have a look at it? And where are you getting the vodka from? You don't
 look like a home brew kind of man. I stopped buying anything days ago."

"I order it in. I'm sorry. I'm so ashamed," I cry into my hands.

"It's fine, Light. If you want to waste your money, it's fine. It must be clearing the drains out, at least,
 but I've hidden the coke kilo at work. Do you know how much that's worth on the street? I'm not
 letting you chuck that down the toilet. I was going to send Mihael out to a club to flog a few grams,
test the water, but that'd be the last I'd see of it."

"Oh, L, I really need a hit! I need a hit, L, a hit, a hit, please!" I shout pathetically, dragging myself
 over to him on my stomach to claw at his trousers.

"Oh do piss off. You're not a junkie, you just need a kick in the balls. This is rather entertaining for
 me, watching you. Better than prime time. It's why I come home early. Despite your sad condition,
you're looking pristine. In fact, you look better than you have done for as long as I've known you. I
 doubt that's all due to my awe-inspiring fellatio skills, which, according to you, you don't appreciate
 since you're so ashamed and depressed and drunk. I must say though, you make a really good show
 of enjoying it despite apparently being unconscious most of the time. You've eaten something, you
 must have," he says, leaning towards me and holding my face steady. My eyes become
uncomfortably large as I gulp and swallow.

"You're not going to smell my mouth, are you?"

"It smells minty fresh. Have you been eating toothpaste? Because I will have to call a doctor if you're trying to kill yourself with toothpaste."

"No! Don't call a doctor! God, no. L, I... I have a problem."

"I wasn't going to call a doctor. You're a perfectly healthy, no, stunning example of a man in his prime, you've just brushed your teeth. By the way, I've never known anyone as attractive as you in my life."

"Really?" I ask, pinching my bottom lip while I'm facing away from him. "You think so? But I must look so ill."

"No, once you've washed that crap off your face, you'll be fine. Are you experimenting with being a tranny? Because I think that you should leave it alone. I've seen men with beards who are more convincing in make up. Unless you're thinking of auditioning for The Walking Dead."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yep, well, stop being a stupid shit and get up. Your parents are expecting us in an hour. I don't mind being a bit late but let's aim to be on time," he says, getting off the bed.

"It'll take me at least that long to..." I start arguing, but fall back down on the bed to remind myself that I'm depressed. "I'll do it for you. If you want me to. I'd do anything for you. I've given up everything I had for you."

"Oh, thank you. How touching. Is this all because you don't want to face your parents?"

"No. I feel awful, I just want to sleep," I say, muffled against the pillow. It's so depressing, but when I look at L he's just thumbing his lip and staring into space.

"You do know that I'm not buying this, don't you. Why all this effort? Could it be that you'd rather they thought that their son is dead instead of a disgraced Prime Minister who dumped his wife and son so he could be regularly sodomised by a lawyer? That's understandable, I suppose."

"Why are you like this with me? I love you! Have you hidden my vodka? I need a drink before you force me to go outside. By force! But I'll do it because I love you, it's ok. I just wish that you'd love me as much. Then maybe... maybe then I could be happy."

"And how could I and the world make you happy, Light? It's all any of us wants and we owe it to you, really," he says, looking very serious. Crossed arms, the works. It took him this long to figure it out but I've got him!

"I don't know," I say, hugging the pillow to my face. "I just love being with you, but... maybe you could help me."

"You want me to kill someone."

"Don't say it like that! I haven't even thought of it. But now that you mention it, can you think of someone -"

"Nope, I can't. I told you. We had a talk and you said that you'd be happy with three. I killed three
people for you because I didn't give a fuck about them, but now you want to kill more, and where would that end, I wonder? It wouldn't. It's what I expected but I am still quite offended by this unique way you've devised for trying to make me do it. I don't even think this routine would work on Kiyomi.” Fuck.

"Have you heard what Tsukino's been saying about me? He's denying everything and he's trying to ruin my reputation!"

"Well, good luck to him. No one's managed it yet. God knows that I've tried."

What the fuck is wrong with him? Ok, big guns. I sit up and try to look earnest.

"L, I didn't want to admit this, but my dream now is to win the election to change the law so that… so that I can marry you." I look down briefly in shyness and in fear of rejection. You're good, Yagami, but I hope this doesn't come back to bite me. I'd have to be paralytically drunk to marry anyone again, let alone him.

He stares at me, captivated by love for a beautiful boy, yes, don't you know it. Who doesn't want to marry me? I bet even Tsukino would if I asked him. I carry on.

"I want to make it legal and recognised, L. We have to get rid of Tsukino and I have to win the election, but then we can really be together and have rings and celebrate our love with our family and friends," I say, but he looks horrified when I say that. Too much. "Or something more private, just for the two of us. And I want to get you a cake with a big mountain of profiteroles on it like a tower."

"With the Eye of Sauron on the top of it?" he asks, making a small circle in the air with his finger. What the fuck eye of what?

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you want," I say happily.

"Oh! Well, now that you say that…"

"Yes! Yes!"

"Fuck off," he tells me with one dismissive blink. I feel my lips purse up like a very annoyed clam.

"I want to marry you!" I shout, standing up to point at him. "I love you, but you're a cruel man, Larsen. How could you use me like this? I gave up –"

"Everything for me, yes, I know. Light, the day I marry you, I will wake up screaming in a cold sweat and book myself into the nearest psychiatric unit."

Right. I'm so angry that I almost forget about how depressed and lethargic I am and shout some 'fuck' variations at him when I run to bathroom and lock the door. Anyone else falls for this crap, why can't he? I stand there, almost crouching over, nauseous with rage. My hands ball into fists and I kick the side of the bath and, shit, that hurt! I have to cover my mouth with my hand and hop around on one foot for a minute until the pain eases off. Oh, fuck, fuck!

"Are you going to slit your wrists?" L calls to me from outside the door. "Do you want to speak to B about that for handy hints and tips? I'm sure he'd be more than happy to oblige. Actually, I know he would. I have experience dealing with people trying to commit suicide for absolutely no reason. Should I come back in, say, ten minutes? If you only want to do it as a cry for help then there's a very good chance that you'd survive."
"You'd like me to, wouldn't you!" I shout back. Fucking bastard cunt.

"Survive? Yes, I'd like that, but I'd settle for you getting dressed. This is all pre-booked, Light, we can't get out of it."

Arghhh! The massive… arrgh! My only alternative is to scream and pull at my hair, so I gingerly walk on my possibly broken foot and swing the door open to storm past him on the way to the fucking wardrobe.

"Ok, I'll do whatever you want. What choice do I have, anyway? You treat me like shit like you always did and exploit me because I love you and that's fucking unforgivable. I thought that it'd be different now but –"

"Come here," he says, taking hold of both my arms and swinging me unsteadily back so he can clamp his messy, stupid mouth on my bottom lip. He just misses entirely, the fucking… umf. My hands are acting independently because I think my brain fell out, and after a half-hearted smack on his shoulder, one hand tangles itself in his hair and the other pushes it's way down the crack of his arse, but I really am very angry. Very angry. He walks me back so we both fall on the bed and I think, well, this is one way of getting out of seeing my family and getting him to kill some people for me. I'll blow him and rim him at the same time, tantric style. It's called 'The Screaming Lotus' or something, it'll kill him. I'm not sure how I can do both at the same time but I'll alternate. I will damn well give it a shot. I've been reading a book recently on kindle about finding mindfulness and inner peace through rough sex and primal screaming, and I've learned a thing or two about a thing or two. By the time I've finished with him it'll be next Thursday and he'll be begging me to spare his life.

But then he grabs my balls and tugs them hard. Not this again, what the fuck, is he trying to castrate me? As he looks down on me, looking the way he does and twisting my balls to one side, it's so glorious and painful that I gasp for air and make a strange noise which I've only heard coming out of a guinea pig before now.

"You love my cock and my killer book," he tells me. He's not wrong there. I smile and push myself upwards to snap my teeth together near his mouth, but he just tugs on my balls again so I collapse back. He leans down to drag his mouth over mine in a slowly torturous, uncommitted way while he speaks. I am in that prison camp in Rwanda. "But I'm not killing Tsukino or anyone else for you. You got yourself into this mess and you'll get yourself out of it and you'll do it properly – no cheating. Have some fucking patience. Now get ready, bat boy."

No, I think that he should carry on tugging my balls like a bell-ringer.

"I can get ready in less than ten minutes at a push," I say quickly. One corner of his mouth twitches and his eyes look so kind, I want to –

"Can you now," he whispers.

"I think it's possible. I can do anything."

"Oh no. See, I just want to see if you can now."

"I won't disappoint," I tell him confidently, unzip his trousers and try to look pleasantly surprised.

"One thing I've noticed about you, Light, is that you're either a nymphomaniac with ADHD or an old man who finds crossword puzzles physically exhausting."

Yes, yes, shut up.
"Let bat boy go to bat," I say, slipping his jacket off his shoulders.

"No, you're too depressed, remember? Intercrural. When you cross your legs at the knee, it's amazing."

"Maybe for you."

"Armpit," he says before trying to convince me when I wrinkle my nose at the idea. "Ah, go on, I've always wanted to try it."

"69."

"Boring, kind of ridiculous. Besides, with your security patrolling, someone needs to keep a look out for them in case they climb on the roof."

"Shower sex?"

"With you? Ermmm..." he hums, tilting his head to one side. "I don't know. It always makes me laugh. The last time I did it properly was when I was twenty. I slipped on some soap and cracked a tooth."

"Well, I guess there's nothing for it then."

"Wait, no. I have a book and there's a quickie section. You just pick a picture you like – I can do them all. You know what's sad is that we're so strapped for time," he says, then starts to stand up. "What an idiot. I used to think that the faster you were, the better you were, until I heard some girls talking at school. It's just so boring dragging it out though."


"Your mouth and it's a deal. I want to see you kiss your mother with that mouth in, oooh, about forty-five minutes?" he says, checking his watch. "I don't like this haggling because I usually get bored, give up, and afterwards regret not being more forceful and getting the better end of the deal, so to speak. I definitely won't get anything this time apart from him shooting his load and making me gag, but I'm good at masking that. In the early days, one time I was sick from, you know, and the MP in question (who was apparently death-noted a few years ago for saying that L was 'overrated') was as old as my father and very pleased with himself, but it's a very unnatural thing; people forget that. L's the same; nothing matters to him and he'd be the last to give me a round of applause, but ordinary people would be amazed by me now, and I owe it all to the chief whip's office and my own good sense. All this practice paid off and now you could do an invasive, investigative procedure and stick a fucking iPhone either end and I'd think that I was on holiday."

"Deal," I groan. I don't care. While he clambers up to take his trousers off, I lie back with my hands behind my head on the pillow and wonder what suit I should wear. I think I should go with the leather Calvin Klein. The whole suit. Teal shirt, black leather, black tie, completely inappropriate and demonic, yes. My head's so full of the image of myself in that suit that when L reappears on all fours to kiss the corner of my mouth – because that's as polite as he usually gets before he shoves his pelvis in my face – I sit up, he hugs me, and I bite his shoulder.

"Whoa, Suárez, what the fuck?" he asks. I don't know, so I just smile and sling my arms around his neck before I kiss him. Can't we just cancel everything so I can show him what I know about erotic asphyxiation? I'm better at it now, honestly. I've been reading up on a lot of things because I've had fuck all else to do.

But somehow we're not going straight to it because L's procrastinating with lovey-dovey stuff, so I
skim through my mental notes. Keep up eye contact. It assures your lover that they have your full attention and that you're probably not going to strangle them to death. Be aware of their non-verbal cues and ignore their verbal ones. Be aware of their responses to things you do to them and keep doing it. It's really so simple, I don't know why I stole that gay magazine from the House periodical section in the smoking room. Yes, so keep doing it and add more pressure until they scream and you draw blood. Don't go in for this namby pamby soft kissy shit, just go straight in there and pump the hell out of the fucker. If they blackout, congratulate yourself on a job well done, lie back, watch Gardener's World or something similar which is so relaxing and boring that it might kill you, and have a sugar-free mint to take the nasty taste away.

L's fingers are featherlight on my hips and distractedly trace along my V-line (you know how I'm very proud them). Hours I spent at the gym on those, hours. I hack up some viscous spit from the back of my throat. The noise is disgusting but this whole thing is, and don't worry, boys, I'm going in. But then he starts talking.

"Did you go to all that trouble for me? All this shit you've been up to for the past week?" he asks, and I just look up at him and bare my teeth and my mischievousness. "Hey, did I ever tell you about a case I worked on once?"

"You've told me about a lot of cases," I say aggressively after being forced to swallow my saliva, but catch myself and sit straight again to smile at him, but sweetly this time. "What case?"

"You'll like this one. I was defending a woman who couldn't pay me. It was a bit of a charity thing so I could win a lawyer morality award back in London."

"Good press," I say, leaning forward to bite at his ear lobe and pull it. I'm a fucking mad dog, mad dog, mad dog!

"Yeah," he breathes out. "No, bite me there. Ow. Thanks. Well, this woman was a maid for a rich Rockefeller type. He died suddenly one day and she sent a text message to get an ambulance."

"A text message?"

"Yes, wait for it," he says, and I sweep my lips across his cheek to his mouth, but he just carries on talking. "So, he was dead, and the police arrested the woman because the man was in a state of undress, as they say. Meaning that he had his dick out."

"Oh God."

"And it was in her mouth. She had lockjaw and some surgeons had to come and surgically remove this thing from her mouth."

I don't know why I didn't expect that punchline but I press my forehead against his while I laugh. All I can see is a shadowed glint of his teeth as he smiles and, raising my head, I think that my face might crack from how stretched wide it feels.

"So what happened?" I ask.

"She was accused of second-degree murder."

"And you won?"

"Well, I don't lose, do I. Except that time we don't talk about."

"Ohhhhh… " I sigh in a wilting rapture, holding his hips to steady me while I drip kisses down his
chest. He raises himself to kneel in front of me, and wow. His dick has become another friend to me
that sometimes I wish I could talk to. 'Hello, traveller, you're ever so worldly. Are you clean? How
have you been? Where have you been? Tell me your tales of all the things you've seen and done. I'm
a bit frightened of you, you know.' But I'm not mad, so I don't. I just open my mouth. Suck it and
see.

I take in the head of his cock and swirl over it lightly with my tongue, which is something I learned
from L, actually. I never bothered with that shit before he turned up like a living Karma Sutra. The
man can tie knots in cherry stalks, come on. Then I pull back, blow a cooling breath on it, laugh at
his shiver, and use his groan to cover me hacking up some more spit. I take a moment to think about
this logically and work out angles of approach and timelines, but then think: fuck it. After taking a
breath, I slowly slide my big cave of a mouth made for talking and bullshit to the base of him,
moving my tongue until he's lavishly slathered by my degeneration. My throat contracts, my tongue
forced forwards and against him, and by some happy coincidence he apparently likes that. I didn't
really notice his hands on my back, gripping me and pulling me closer to him. This is a very
complicated business. The squicking noises blocks out nearly every other sound, but I'm pretty sure
he's still breathing in a raspy, moany sort of way. Who knows?

His hips buck unexpectedly so that my teeth scrape against him and he yelps. He is alive then. If my
mouth wasn't full of cock, I'd say to him that he has to watch what he's doing because this could get
really nasty, but it's ok, I recover. After a while of gorging semi-boredom, during which time I've
picked the shoes out to go with my suit in my head, my air's running out, so I call half-time, pull back
and stretch my neck upwards so he can lean down to kiss me. This is all very demanding, not like the
old days when I might as well have been a glory hole in the wall that people could fuck. You have to
fill every second with something or other now and I'm afraid that it's not innate to me.

As I dip down again, because he has impatiently put my hand on his hot, neglected state, I notice that
the demon is standing at the side of the bed. We hold each other's stares: me a crouching animal as L
takes hold of some of my hair. I suck my finger and reach behind to slickly stroke L's arsehole. I
want to get inside him in and turn him inside out in every way with Ryuk watching me do it. L's
thighs tense up and I think of how all his straining muscles are for me while I look at the demon's
imperceptibly dull, horrific face. There's a unique kind of satisfaction I get from dimensions crashing
together with the physical and spiritual.

"I bet you'd like to do this, wouldn't you," I ask the observer before cosseting the tip of L's dick with
my tongue. I like how the dead freakish thing that shouldn't exist causes a degree of confusion in my
mind, because he shouldn't be here, but if he is, what else is possible? He, it, shows no surprise at my
question, only lifts one limp hand slightly in a dismissive wave.

"Done it," he replies.

"Really!?!" I say in my happy surprise, glancing up at L. You naughty boy, you'll have to be severely
punished for this. "L, I'm not narrow-minded, but don't you think you've crossed a line in getting
blowjobs from gods of death?

"Will you two stop talking to each other?" L says after a muddled second, having trouble getting the
words out in his breathless way.

"Why?" Ryuk and I both say simultaneously.

"Because it's fucking weird!"

"Why?" I ask again, and he starts moving away, taking his erection with him. My God, what are you
doing? I reach towards it like I'm trying to save some jewellery from disappearing down the
"Hey, hey, hey, hey!"

"I'm going to... have a shower," he says anxiously.

"Great idea, take me with you!"

"No! I was trying to be polite but I'm not very good at it. I'm trying to get away from you. Get yourself dressed."

"But, L, we're... Don't you go in there. I said, don't you go in there!" I practically scream. My voice is quite hysterical sounding because I am quite hysterical, but he just hurries into the bathroom and locks the door, and he can't do that, that isn't fair! My hand's still outstretched and talon-like and closes into a fist slowly. What just happened? I breathe out as my blood continues to go everywhere except my brain and, God, you're fucking optimistic, blood. What do you think's going to happen when we're dealing with that bastard?

Failure. Not really my fault, but I feel like I've failed. I wish this was as instinctive to me as House matters are. So, I flop back on the bed smelling the remnants of the musk of him, left behind on me and in the air, and hear the shower start up. L squeals for a second from the bathroom, and I think that he'll need more than a cold shower to sort out his problem. I flex my finger which is still damp with saliva and lost opportunity, then I look down at myself in sadness. Fuck. Oh, well. I'll deal with it myself, so I spit in my hand.

I stare up at the ceiling but get annoyed because my hand isn't L's. It tries and is almost feverish about proving to me that I'm all I need for anything, but it's fighting a losing battle, really. To help it along, I think of myself in my leather suit and teal shirt walking around Tokyo as an all powerful god that people step out of the way for, but it's not the same. I always knew this was fucking stupid.

"He's very touchy, isn't he," the demon says, looking at the bathroom door. Ugh, I thought that he'd gone.

"Yeah," I exhale, propping myself up on my elbows to consider the angry red reality of my frustration, then I look at the demon. "Hey, um... could you help me out?"

He looks down at me, his face as empty as it always is.

"No," he says, and disappears through the wall.

Now I really do feel depressed.
"These children are in crisis. They're starving in a war-torn land, but you can help them. For just fifty yen a month, we'll send them a bucket, and some cake. Text CAKE to 0800 CAKE and — " ... still unavailable for comment. Later on the show: The leader of the opposition, Akuhei Tsukino, will be here. We'll be asking him about his campaign, where he thinks recent events have left the government, and we look into the reasons behind the Prime Minister's shock divorce announcement and the motion of no confidence which brought us to this turning point in Japanese political history.

With the general election being held in two weeks, our political correspondent profiles the mysterious man who's rumoured to be in the centre of the storm: lawyer and former political svengali who until recently was believed to be dead, L. Lawliet. Our panel will also be discussing what Light Yagami's chances are of winning the election with his no campaign policy, and whether his conversion to homosexuality will spell a return of the pink fashion trend this winter. In other news, our fashion and relationships editor will be examining what Kiyomi Yagami has been wearing this week, asking people on the street what they think the divorce of Japan's favourite couple says about society, and why do we actually care?

"But now, cult leader, Dalai Hammer, joins me in the studio to tell us about his new bestseller, Anal Buccaneers, a sequel to his critically acclaimed, Hoyay: Gay Orgies Until Civilisation Dies Out. Good evening, Hammer-san. Could you explain to us why Prime Minister Yagami is gay? What went wrong?"

"Hello, and thank you for having me on your programme. Where's the camera? Ah, there. Yes, I believe that the Prime Minister is suffering from what we state unapproved psychologists call Gay Stockholm Syndrome, named after a very nice city where everyone brainwashes each other into being gay, and I'm sorry to say that our dear Prime Minister Yagami has been brainwashed."

"Oh no!"

"Oh yes. It's a legacy of avian bird flu and World War Two, because this would never have happened if the Axis forces had been victorious. It may seem strange to many of the viewers who aren't trained in Gay Psychology, but the Prime Minister actually has limited responsibility for his current situation. We should, in fact, pity him. His parents could be to blame for this, but it's not too late for him. I've sent an open invitation to the Prime Minister's office for him and his lawyer friend to come to my clinic for treatment. Heterosexuality guaranteed for three years or your money back! I'm a living testament to the power of my clinic and the forty-step program, because — you might not believe this — but I, too, was once a sodomite."

"That is very surprising, Hammer-san! So you'd like to help the Prime Minister?"

"Ooooh, would I! I think he's gorgeous, just gorgeous, don't you? Like woo woo call the fire brigade, I smell burning, hose that hot man down! Drop and roll, drop and roll!"

L comes back in from the kitchen, although it doesn't really register with me until he's blocking my view of the TV, staring at it with a cup of tea in his hand. He passes another cup of tea back to me without looking at me. My eyes blink slowly as I take the mug from him to replace the untouched and cold tea I've been holding for the past half-hour.

"... and we usually start treatment by expressing the gayness through completely breaking them mentally. They need to be drained but it's a very delicate psychological operation. It's beautiful to see their progress. But, yes, I will definitely look after the Prime Minister, don't worry."
"The fuck you will," L tells the TV.

"... that's very interesting. Thank you, Hammer-san. Let's just take a moment to introduce our second guest this evening. I'm also pleased to say that Akuhei Tsukino, the leader of the opposition, has also joined us for this discussion. Tsukino-san. I understand that you know L. Lawliet?"

"Yes, I know him and he's a big homo. I have to say that I agree with Hammer-san — these people are animals! Rehabilitation is an option, but you have to understand, we have to protect our people and way of life. The point is that we have to clamp down on the degenerates in society, but in a moderate way of exporting them all to some of the smaller Northern Islands. I've been listening to some of my constituents, and the truth is that if you ask anyone, they don't mind the homos, but they don't want them living next door. Because of the insane and practically open door immigration laws set by Yagami and his government, this country is broken, yes, broken! Anyone has been able to walk in to steal our jobs, our women, and now our men. This is why Light Yagami —" "... is the smallest breed of horse in Japan with such strange mating rituals."

Now that's going too far. Lifting my head from looking at the steaming, insipid mirror of tea in my hand, I see L holding the remote. He flops down next to me with a sigh while some horses neigh and awkwardly try to mount each other on the wildlife programme he's changed the channel to.

"Look," he says, lazily pointing at the screen. "Tiny horses fucking. Smile, Light. Tiny horses are fucking."

The day I smile at tiny horses who are or aren't managing to fuck is the day I'll kill myself, and today is not that day. It's close, but not quite. I'm going to wrap myself in a blanket instead. I put my tea on the table and stand up, just staying there like a statue for a second until my legs start taking me somewhere.

"Where are you going?" L asks me. I'm not really sure, myself.

"To sleep."

"Do you want me to come with you? After seeing those tiny horses going at it hammer and tongs, I'm inspired. Let's do it for the degenerates."

"No," I say, treading through some cooling split tea on the floor when I drag my feet.

"I was only joking… You're not acting this time, are you. Are you upset because your parents hate me? It's a common theme with me."

"They don't hate you. They hate what I've done."

"Yes, they think that you've made a mistake," he says, but I'm out of the room and he's talking to himself. "I've never seen you like this."

If he likes this, then he'd loved to have seen me after he died. No, actually. This is worse.

I bump into the bed rather than find it, and kneel on the edge to crawl towards the pillow. My eyes are gritty with hours and days of staring at a box with the masochistic intention of forcing myself to see every single news report about me. It's the time of year when it never seems to get truly dark outside, just the darkest of blue twilights, but I start to see pinpricks of white stars above me through the glass ceiling as my eyes adjust. And then there's the sense of something sinister in the room that's not me. I don't know, it could be me, it could be Ryuk, it could be L, it could be nothing. All that makes my heart beat the last few days is the thought of people disappearing because it's my will, and every second I just add more people to the list. I'm probably the sinister thing in the room.
"Are you giving up?" L's voice asks me.

"No. I'm thinking."

"Then think quick, because time's running out for you and you're losing. I only sleep with Prime Ministers now, Light. Not losers."

For a second I think that I must be imagining this, but why would I think that way? When did my role become who I am and all I'm worth? My legs and arms draw up like I'm reacting to being kicked in the stomach, because that's what it feels like, and I cover my head with my hands defensively, but I'm so angry at being beaten. The answer will come to me, I thought, but the only sure way I can think of is to kill and it frightens me that I have a yearning to. I'd be disappointed with anything else, because there is no victory more final and conclusive than killing those who oppose you. Wipe them from the earth.

He only sleeps with Prime Ministers.

The bed sinks on one side, making me feel like I'm on uneven ground, and I shrink away from it.

"I don't mean it. I don't mean it," he says quietly, kissing my shoulder. "I just don't want you to be like this."

"You wanted me to resign."

"Yes, but... you want to win. I understand that, so I don't want you to give up."

"The prelim polls are bad, L. And the press is —"

"Don't listen to prelims. Press turns on a dime. You'll win when it counts."

"No... I want to kill them. I want to —"

"You know, that coat of yours makes you look like an SS officer," he interrupts me. What?

"Don't."

"A really high-ranking one. Sexy as fuck. Even Dalai Hammer thinks so. Honestly though, you have a touch of the SS officer about you even without the coat."

"Don't try to make me feel stupid."

"But you'd make a really terrible SS officer. You couldn't shoot someone in the head because someone told you to. You'd just start crying and then you'd shoot the person who told you to do it. You're a leader, not a follower. And those guys were just mad narcissists with ridiculous hair who... actually, that sounds too much like you, let's forget that. But you don't have to kill anyone to be someone, you don't need to do that. You'll get power because you're the right person to have it. Because your reason for wanting it in the first place was because you wanted to make the world better, don't forget that. You literally brought down the House, Light. It doesn't happen every day. They don't know what's going on, but they'll realise that they need you when it goes to the polls. If you want my advice, I think you should do some low level campaigning."

"I'm not campaigning, I said so in the statement. It's humiliating."

"I did say 'low level'. So low level that it doesn't look like campaigning. Fulfil arranged engagements in your calendar instead of cancelling everything and putting yourself on deep freeze. Yeah, ok,
you're divorcing your wife and you're living with a man and you've admitted it, and that's a first for
Prime Minister, I grant you, but it's not the highway to failure. You need to be seen being the Prime
Minister to remind people why they voted for you. Smile, go to schools, go to hospitals, visit towns
in the back of beyond and speak to small business owners, give interviews, did I mention that you
should smile? Go somewhere with Kira and be seen with him. You have to use what you've got, so
use him. Be proactive, and that will win you the election if you want it."

"You don't want me to win."

"I don't, but I'm trying to be unselfish these days. I don't think you know who you are without
politics, so I can't take it away from you, can I."

"You have to help me kill Tsukino," I say, stuttering like I'm cold in the dark.

"No. If you win, you should win the right way. I'll support you but I'm not helping you. You can do
all you need to do without the Death Note," he tells me, and my eyes open wide, hidden beneath my
hands as he leaves the room. It's the shock of realisation. It's horror and an acceptance of weight on
my shoulders. It's a trembling of joy of being who I am and having the gifts I have. When Kiyomi
and I were told that she was pregnant, I started shaking. The doctor said: "Don't worry, Prime
Minister. We haven't lost a father yet." I wasn't frightened. I wasn't happy. I shook because of the
reminder that I can achieve anything I put my mind to.

Yes. I can, can't I. I can do anything.

The next day, I woke up with an almost final plan in my head, and through that, a pumping heart and
a restored will. I went to the House for the first time since the vote of no confidence, walking up the
stone steps and finding excuses to wander through the corridors and rooms and be seen. Soon I'd
accumulated a following of MPs like I was the Pied Piper, and they trailed me into the smoking room
where Tsukino walked past me, followed by rats of his own. I was wearing my earphones by this
point, listening to NASA-Voyager sound wave converted recordings of electromagnetic vibrations
emitted by planets because it was recommended for better concentration in a professional executives
magazine. My favourite is Mars, maybe the Sun. Anyway, Tsukino said something to me, but I
didn't hear it because of the planets, which was probably just as well because he was laughing. It was
obviously derogatory. Jupiter howled in my head when I engaged the twat in a staring contest until
he lost and walked away saying something else I didn't hear. I made my mind up then that my plan
would come to pass, and I set my heart on it. It's going to hurt and he deserves it.

After he stands up, he pats the back of his leg with his hand and inspects it, then wipes it on his hip
so it looks enamelled before inspecting himself in the mirror opposite the bed. Nothing is more
elegantly depraved than a thin line of my cum running down L's thigh, and that is a fact. I want to
rub it into him and force his skin to absorb it. I want his veins to be full of it. I want ramen from
Ebisu for breakfast and kaiseki ryori for dinner.

There's a safety device I have installed — a certain level of disconnect between body and mind, but I
suppose that they're both taken by different things about the same thing. It still amazes me that I can
function in such a way without throwing up, but I'm getting used to it. I don't know and don't really
care. It was half-five in the morning and I was woken up with a slap on my dick and a "Wakey
wakay, rise and shine, champion!" and various oral pursuits. He must have remembered that I'm
going to the coastal hotel being used for a televised pre-election debate, and will therefore not be
around for the weekend. Also, we spent most of last night bickering about B before I willed myself
into a coma, so he might feel some regret about that. I do hope so. L always likes to see people off
with a bang in one way or another. He probably thinks it's affectionate and even polite, but it's a
habit I've noticed and hope doesn't extend to members of his staff leaving the firm.

He's very annoyed that I'm the one doing the leaving for once, and that pleases me. When I struggle to keep my eyes open to watch him lean back into a slightly curving shape while he blows smoke above him and preen himself in the mirror, I start to suspect his motives for this early wake up call. If he suggests that I go back to sleep because he'll wake me in half-an-hour then I'll know for certain that he doesn't intend to do any such thing but intends to make me miss my train and possibly the whole debate. I'm pretty fucked up but not fucked up enough to trust him.

I feel like I'm breathing out smokey, caustic air because my chest is so tight, and L adds to it by smoking one of my cigarettes. It's generally a bad idea to launch into energetic activities immediately after waking up. Early morning exertion is the cause of many heart attacks and deaths — I think I've mentioned this before — but you try telling L that. What is also obvious to me is that I can't breathe and he's hardly broken a sweat. He should be a broken, crumpled mess, and I worry over my duty of care these days because, after the event, I'm considerate to a fault.

"Did you…" I wheeze, and that's all I manage. He slowly turns to me, and looking at him on my side with my half-closed eyes makes his smile look like the thinnest, sickle-like crescent moon. But it's only a smug second before he turns back to looking at himself in the mirror and smoothing down his hairline, using his other hand to make some kind of lazy masturbation gesture.

"Oh, don't worry. I always make sure that I do."

Fucker. Entirely against my own will, I look him up and down. I'm devastated that I actually admire him like a love-sick fucking idiot who has to retake years at school until they're twenty-five and smokes blunts with people half his age. I realise that I'm biting my thumbnail when I notice the unintended and savage cherry-coloured scrapes on his back and start reliving everything again with a mix of pride and horror, so I rip my hand away from my mouth and direct my scowl and worry elsewhere. He stubs the cigarette out carelessly in one of my etched crystal bowls and saunters into the bathroom. Well, he's very assured of himself, isn't he. I don't receive half the recognition I deserve in this area, I'm telling you.

As soon as the bathroom door closes, I grab his wallet from the bedside table. For the purpose of comparison and understanding, I've developed a fascination for seeing the photos people have in their wallets. Most have photos of ugly children or partners that they think are 'adorable' or 'funny'. I have my official House photo ID and emergency contact information in the plastic sleeve of my wallet, because it's mine and that's what you're supposed to have in there, isn't it? Maybe people need to be reminded of what a mess they've made of their lives by seeing photos of whoever they've mistakenly married and any resulting offspring they've had and feel like they need to be reminded of it every time they pay for something. L has stuffed receipts and business cards in the plastic space meant for photos in his wallet. There's cash literally spewing out of this thing, how the fuck does he even close it and who uses cash these days, anyway? Old man.

No embarrassing photo of me in there though, thankfully. I'm relieved but also strangely pissed off, so I root through all the pockets, unfold a piece of paper, and find a satirical cartoon sketch of me from The Japan Times. He knows that I hate those. The artist always gives me a huge nose and it doesn't look like me at all. I only found out who it was supposed to be when Kiyomi broke it to me gently a few years ago. In another pocket there's a carefully folded note I left him a few weeks ago saying: 'Buy milk. Back at 7.' I don't know why he's kept that. He bought the milk and I was back at 7, so that's worrying more than affirming. I dump his wallet and attempt to regain some of my dignity, which I think also went up his arse. "What the fuck happened, Yagami?" I ask my showered reflection in the ground floor bathroom. My reflection doesn't know. After my shower, it's like this morning never happened. I'm absolved and reborn and I find some consolation in that thanks to
Tom Ford's Neroli Portofino shower gel.

By the time L comes out of the bathroom — twenty minutes after he went in — I've been back in the bedroom for about five minutes and am dressed and ready to go. He waves his hand in front of his face while puffing his cheeks out, and I take the opportunity of getting my pre-packed weekend bag out from under the bed.

"I'd give it a good ten minutes in there before you go in. I opened the window but… where'd you go?" he asks, but then he find me on my knees with my arm under the bed. "Oh, there you are. Whatcha doin'? Prayin'? God, I didn't think I had it in me. My stomach must be upset. I must be upset," he muses, rubbing his stomach. "Am I upset? Do I look upset to you?"

"Can you not?"

"Yes, you sensitive, prudish child who's never had a shit in his life. I just wanted to apologise if your dick's a bit… Oh. You're dressed."

"I might as well get an early start, since I'm awake," I say accusingly, standing up.

"Why do you have to take the train, anyway? It'll take ages, won't it? It's that battered old Murder on the Orient Express train that takes a scenic route, isn't it?"

"It has a Presidential suite."

"Yes, but you know how people always get murdered on trains; it's very risky. If you take a car, you'll get there in a hour."

"No, the train's better. It's been specially commissioned for the debate and it'd look good if I'm seen to use public transport, won't it. The press will be at the station."

"That sounds like good reasoning from a PR perspective," he grumbles, climbing back under the covers like a sloth with alopecia. Yes, it is very good reasoning and something he'd buy.

"But, you know… trains, so I might take a car back. See you on Tuesday. And if he isn't here when I get back, that'll be great," I add on my way out.

"Mmm," he hums disinterestedly before a very interested: "Oh, hey!"

I don't know what he wants. He's looking at me like he wants something and that I should know what it is without him telling me. If I don't get it right then he'll hold it against me for days, possibly weeks, and it might come up again in an argument in a few years time, so it's quite a stressful situation for me. After running possible causes over in my mind, excluding 'special days' I'm supposed to remember and commemorate in some way, I think that maybe it's Memorial Day somewhere and I should say something about that, though neither of us gives a shit. But no, I get it. Obviously he wants me to kiss him goodbye even though I'm only away for two days and I'm not going on a life or death hunting mission to get enough food to see us through the winter.

So, I take my bags and suits with me and lean over the bed to kiss him, and it reminds me of being forced to kiss my grandmother in hospital before she died. She had a full beard though, not just stubble. There's something very clinical about it, despite my best efforts. It's probably because I try to be tender, which is something I've accepted can't be forced and isn't my natural disposition, anyway, but he's not fussy. I step back to see how well I did, and he's smiling down at the bedcovers, so I privately give myself a round of applause. I'm a bit disappointed in him for becoming such a stupid, needy bitch, but I suppose that these upcoming days without me must seem like a black hole of darkness to him. Light by name, Light by nature. God, I do actually feel sorry for him now. And he's
so brave, laughing to himself.

"Thanks, Romeo… but I was only going to ask you to make me a cup of tea before you go," he says.

"Oh."

"It's just that you're standing and I'm not and don't intend to for another hour."

"I knew that," I say, shrugging my shoulders quickly like a twitch. "I was going to, I just wanted to kiss you. Because I can. It's my right."

"Your right? As Prime Minister?"

"No, as me," I say, and now I feel very confused because I am Prime Minister. Prime Minister is me. We are one and the same. I really don't need a crisis of self at the moment.

"It was very nice of you. A bit dry, but the thought was there."

"It was spontaneous, I wasn't thinking about my hydration levels. Do I need to explain that? No, I fucking don't. I'll get you your tea and you can stink there like a fucking pig," I tell him, tornado-ing my way to the kitchen to angrily wait for the kettle to boil. He shouts something back to me but I tell him that I can't hear him. I can, but I can't. The kettle is taking so long to boil and I'm so full of adrenalin that I go back to the bedroom to shout at him while I wait. Why am I even waiting? Why am I doing this? I should be gone already, I'm ready to go! No, Yagami, this is serious now. What is wrong with you?

"Could you bring me yesterday's Daily Fap?" he asks like an invalid in bed, typing earnestly on his phone and with his stupid files and laptop already spread out all over my side of the bed. "Not the Financial Times — I like to read that at work. People don't bother me if they see me reading it. It's very intimidating for them, I think."

"Of course. Anything else? I'll park your car in the living room so you won't have to walk all the way to the garage, if you want?"

"No, that's not necessary, thank you. I don't like your tone with me. You swear all the time, and after all I've done and given to you, I think I deserve more respect and less of your fucking lip and bad manners."

"What have you ever given me apart from herpes?"

"My time and love and both are exclusive and very expensive and you get them for nothing. Nothing!" he yelps at the end, though his body language is so relaxed he could pass for a corpse. "I get nothing from you. You even whinge like a fucking woman about making me a cup of tea, like you expect me to make it. And you've never had herpes; I would have noticed or you would have made sure that I knew through your incessant whining. I can't get a word in between your vomiting of complaints."

"Wha —"

"Shut the fuck up and get me my tea and paper. Please," he adds, side-eyeing me guiltily. Yes, because 'please' makes everything acceptable. Strong men never say 'please' because they don't have to. The same goes for 'sorry,' so L is weak, haha! That's why I take pity on him and bring him his paper, but then he says: "And maybe a pen would be good so I can underline things."
I'm almost stunned into silence, but until my mouth catches up, my hand is furious and reaches for my Montblanc pen (a sophisticated 18 carat champagne-toned gold nib and barrel featuring a classic but somehow very contemporary and relevant three-dimensional geometric pattern which is complimented by a deep black precious resin to unite classic design with the unique quality the brand is known for. A personalised member of the famous and coveted Meisterstück Solitaire Doué family with a few significant improvements, it's engraved with my name in English — I thought that was very brave of me — and finished with a mother-of-pearl Montblanc emblem. Last of all, because I'm a special customer, a single white diamond dots the last of the i's in my name. Because no one knows better, people must think that it's gold plated, but it isn't; it's solid gold with sterling silver accents on the nib and a platinum pen clip. It's the pride of my life and no one fucking notices it, never mind get on their knees to pay homage like they should. I like pens).

"A pen? Yes, here, have my fucking pen so you can colour in the nipples of the naked woman on page 3 and give her an eyepatch and black out her teeth, because that's the only reason you buy that shitty paper." I spit at him, aiming to throw my pen at him like a dart but thinking better of it because this pen is a piece of art, so I place it gently on the bed with all the love I have for it. He picks it up with his labourer's hands and puts it behind his ear like he's going to measure up the kitchen for some cabinets. Urgh. "L, this isn't working. I can't live with you, but I know that I can live without you, so I think that we should call it a day," I say. No I don't. I throw my cigarettes at him instead. "And have my cigarettes, too. They keep disappearing, you prick. Why don't you buy your own?"

"Because I don't smoke," he says, lighting a cigarette.

"Are you allergic to the truth?"

"Are you suggesting that I'm lying?"

"Yes. Obviously you're lying. What's that in your hand?" I say, pointing forcefully. I don't think this is good for my heart. He blows out smoke and looks at the cigarette smouldering between his fingers like it's a complete surprise to him, and starts scrolling and squinting at his laptop screen.

"What, this?" he sniffs. "It's a factual discrepancy." I cannot fucking believe this.

"L, it's a cigarette and you've just said that you don't smoke. You're lying. Admit that it's a lie. It'll be good for you."

"No. It's not my fault that you can't identify a factual discrepancy when you see one. I definitively state that this is the clearest case of a factual discrepancy I've ever encountered because I do not smoke and never have in my life. So say we all."

"You know, I might as well ask a farmer to pump slurry in here, because that'd be the same as living with you but more pleasant," I tell him, but he just grins and carries on looking at the screen. "Ok, so you don't smoke. It's a factual discrepancy. You just like stealing my cigarettes."

"I think you'd miss me more than the cigarettes," he says with the swarthy smirk of a successful bomb disposal expert who's saved a thousand donkeys in Afghanistan. It shocks me for a second, but only because it dawns on me that he might be right.

"Don't... don't change the subject."

"I didn't, actually, but I made it emotional and difficult for you. Come here for a second," he says, now kneeling on the bed and holding what looks like a noose in his hands. I'm naturally cautious. "I'm not going to do anything. Just come here," he laughs.
'Don't talk to strange men,' my mother told me at a playground full of strange men, women and children when I was six. I replied: 'It's very unlikely that I would, but telling me that is an unrealistic contradiction to the value you place on my politeness, which in turn I suspect is a conniving attempt to overrule my natural ability and capacity to accurately discriminate, perceive intentions and danger. And your gender bias is also endangering, because it's more than possible that I'd be targeted by a woman.' This was just after my parents had been told what my IQ was, so she didn't argue, and I stopped talking to her as if she was someone who understood me. My position on the subject has not changed because it's so simple. No one should be trusted whether they're a stranger or not. There's actually more reason to fear family, friends and acquaintances than strangers if you go by statistics of the relationship between victimiser and the victims of abductions, violent crime and abuse, so I try to keep that in mind, since L is a case in point.

I remain cautious when I walk to the side of the bed and he shuffles on his knees towards me. It's especially suspicious when he sticks his tongue out of the corner of his mouth in concentration and takes off my tie to string a rag around my neck instead, forcing my face up towards the ceiling when he pops up my collar.

"You lied again. This is you doing something," I say.

"I want to see you wear my tie on TV. It'd give me unknown happiness to see a Prime Minister wear my tie at a debate. I am a man of simple pleasures."

"What's wrong with the tie I was wearing?"

"It's not mine."

"I can't wear this. There are L's on it." There are. It has a monogram pattern all over it, and it's synthetic. I can only presume that it was a Christmas present from an aunt who doesn't like him much.

"They're tiny; no one will notice except a few twats I had a bet with."

"A bet? It better not be that I'll wear your tie on TV."

"Light you won't believe how much better you look in this tie. It's like being before Michaelangelo's Statue of David. Honestly, you look so majestic and powerful, Jesus Christ, I'm going to come again."

"That's another factual discrepancy. You haven't even got a hard on."

"It's too religious an experience for that. I'm blasting inside," he says earnestly. My face creases like a disgusted origami crane. "You have to wear this. May you reign for the next ten thousand years and let me win my bet. How do you tie these on other people? Fuck, is it supposed to be so difficult?"

"They make clip on ties for idiots now, you know," I tell him, stepping back to fix it myself.

"You should buy some for yourself then, Light," he replies, falling back on the bed. "Ok, I'm ready for my tea now, Slave."

Well, that's just rude, so I go to make his tea. Just as I'm about to stir in his third dose of sugar while grumbling to myself about that age old tale of what a bastard he is, I pause and look at the mist and dew hanging in the air outside, not yet burned off by the sun, and wonder what I should think about it. Maybe I should think: 'What a nice day!' and talk about it to someone for the sake of friendliness, but it's not a nice day, it's just misty. I hate people who are talkative and cheerful in the mornings. Or
at any time, really. I just don't like people and boring social conventions.

"Here's your tea with a bag of sugar in it." I say, marching back in and accidentally on purpose spilling some of the tea on his lap. Instead of jumping up, he just pushes the sheet away and holds his hands in the air like he's surrendering to an army. "Whooops! Did I spill some of this boiling beverage on your defective cock that ejaculates inside now? I do apologise. Let's hope it doesn't blister or anything like that. I better get a move on and inspire a party and motivate a country, but keep me updated, because this is what really matters to me," I say, reaching down to grab a fairly ruthless handful of L so he cowers and struggles to maintain eye contact.

Unfortunately, though I meant to undermine his assurance in himself so he'd feel like shit until I get back, the closeness births a kind of moment that undermines all my words and actions instead. My face becomes softly slack as I look at my reflection in the dark and crystalline convex mirrors of his eyes. And I gaze into the abyss, find myself in it, and it gazes back while his face looks increasingly proud and pleased with life, though I try to ignore it. He slicks the silky, veiny underside of his tongue over my bottom lip and I close my eyes and open my mouth for it, drawing cool air over the contact. 'Without light, we see nothing. Light can be reflected, deflected, refracted or absorbed.' That's what comes into my head, and then my brain kicks in and I propel myself away from him, towards the door. Maybe my mother was right, because he was a stranger once. Or was he? I knew his name before I met him, so was he ever a stranger to me, really? I'm very confused.

"I love living with you, Light," he says behind me. Since I've had a problem ignoring him since… well, always, I look back at him, smiling as he flattens out the page 3 model on his lap and apparently talking to the far wall in a daze until he notices that I'm still here. Do you ever have days you wish you could restart and try to do it right? I get those a lot now. "Call me whenever? And often? And don't use your telephone voice with me."

"I don't have a telephone voice."

He grins and tilts his head to one side while he looks at me, lazily smoking one my cigarettes. My breathing's picking up and I'm not sure why but I feel unpleasantly emotional, so I purse my lips together so I can't give him the satisfaction of getting any more out of me, and leave.

Once I'm safely seen onto the train hired to take members of the government to the debate on the coast (we couldn't possibly have this debate in the House because of some unknown reason. I think it's because someone years ago thought that having a debate in a holiday resort full of old people will make us less aggressive), I declare myself so emancipated that my intention is to order my own lunch in the train restaurant. Most people are still in their cabins, so I'm free to roam the carriages in secrecy until I find her. She's alone, squeezing herself as close as she can to the window like she's being squashed by several dozen large-framed, invisible people. I lean against the wall to the left of her cabin and like a master spy I take a covert photo of her on my phone. I need to inspect her closely in advance to plan my attack, and though I find no positive comments to make on her appearance, I'm sure I'll come up with some bullshit later on. I was married to Kiyomi, so I can do that. I zoom in on the photo to see what book she's reading and google it to read a synopsis for a minute. Then I walk past her cabin again, stop as if I've just caught sight of her, and knock on the glass before opening the door.

She looks up from her book and takes off headphones that are shaped like cat heads. She looks disturbed in a few ways. I evaluate her as being a bookish, scared little girl who's emotionally damaged and seeks refuge in books because the lives lived in them are more exciting than her own. Her eyes are so full of fear and longing for life that I feel a twinge of stupid advance guilt. She is literally a sitting duck, but I can't take responsibility for her actions, and no one is truly innocent. It's
up to her. If she knew my intentions she'd probably go along with this in exchange for a short-lived life experience. My evaluation today combined with what I know of her through prior research suggests to me that she'd easily throw herself into an exciting love affair if it's forbidden, restrained, and if the 'hero' is strong, polite, honourable and powerful, but also thoughtful and sensitive and broken in some way. I can do that, so I put on my friendliest, most benign of smiles.

"Hello. Are you in here on your own?"

"Uh… yes. I am," she says with a voice which is the definition of weedy. Her face is too small for the thick-rimmed glasses she lowers onto her nose to look at me, so they promptly fall into her lap, and that makes her blush bright red. God, this is terrible. I feel like I'm going to drown a kitten.

Damn Tsukino for making me do this.

"I thought that your husband would be with you."

"No, he's working. He's taking a car there later."

"Good. I'd have trouble debating without my main opposition. So, it sounds like you're in my situation. I'm Light Yagami, by the way."

"I know who you are," she says with a shy laugh aimed at her legs. Shiori?" "I'm Shiori, aren't you?"

"Yes… um…"

"Do you mind if I sit with you?" I ask, but I'm already inside and closing the door behind me. She seems quite alarmed and virginal when I take a seat opposite her with all my smiles and good nature cascading from me. I'm waiting for a tunnel to plunge us into darkness so she'll start fearing and hoping that my hand will start sliding up her thigh and between her legs, which won't happen because I'd rather not, but the important thing is that she catches herself thinking it and dreaming of it. I have to get into her brain like a worm and stay there.

She pushes her Kiyomi-style hair behind one ear and pulls her baggy, hand-knitted cardigan up over her shoulder. "Aren't you in the Presidential suite?" she asks me. Where do you think I stay, luggage? Yes, I'm in the Presidential suite, and it's an entire carriage. Gold leaf everywhere, mahogany wood panelling, air conditioning, an office, living room, and a four poster bed. And yet I'm here.

"It gets very lonely in there. I just don't feel very comfortable being somewhere so grand. Not that I don't appreciate it," I reply, letting my smile fall as I gaze out the window at the speeding fields outside. The sunlight must just glow on my face and make my eyes look bright amber. I wish I could see it through her varifocal eyes.

"You're travelling alone?" she asks.

"Yes. Unless you count security. I'm trying to avoid them. They smoke."

"Oh, how disgusting," she laughs nervously, wrinkling her nose and pulling up the shoulder of her obstinate cardigan again.

"I know, it makes me sick," I smile, then appear to suddenly catch sight of the book she's loosely
holding open. "Oh, you're reading that? That's one of my favourite books."

"Really?!" she says, but is quickly ashamed of her own excitement. "It's my favourite, too." I just needed a way in.

"Who would have thought it? My copy's a comfort to me. I read it a lot, especially lately. It's important to value life and love, that's the message I got from it. You met my wife, didn't you? I mean my... well, I suppose that she'll be my ex-wife soon. I'm sorry, you don't want to hear this," I add, and look at the carpet in a deeply hurt way. God, what an awful carpet.

"It's alright. Are you ok?" she tells me.

"I just don't find it easy to talk to many people. We haven't spoken before, have we? I sensed, when I first saw you, that you were a kind person, but lonely. I felt some kind of kinship with you, I suppose. You seem sad. Sorry, I don't mean to offend you. Sometimes I say things without thinking."

She smiles a toothy grin which she covers with her hand. "I like your honesty. Why do you think I'm sad?"

"There's just something about you," I say, apparently mesmerised. "And no one who loves that book as much as I do could be a happy person."

"I feel like it was written about me," she tells me, holding the book like it's of religious importance and in every hotel drawer in Japan. "That sounds very big-headed, but —"

"I know what you mean. I have no idea, but what I read online just now made me think that it's one of those sentimental bestsellers with teenage girls, young women, and middle-aged women who are very dissatisfied with their overweight husbands who snore.

"I thought that you'd be happy now," she says. "Now that you're with your new partner."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand. Wait, do you mean Lawliet?" I say, stricken by the mere mention of him. "He's not my partner."

"But I thought... after your statement."

"I didn't write that statement. He wrote that. Let's just say that all's not what it seems. I haven't lied but I haven't denied that statement or told anyone the truth apart from to you. I'm not proud of misleading people, but it's better that I'm the only one who's hurt instead of..."

"Instead of what?"

"Nothing," I sigh. "Oh, excuse me, you've got —"

"What? I'm so sorry!" she gasps when I reach my hand towards her face.

"It's just an eyelash, don't worry. There. Make a wish and blow."

"I thought it might be chocolate on my face," she smiles, and closes her eyes to blow the eyelash which isn't actually there off my fingertip. She's as blind as a blindfolded bat in a box. "Thank you."

"It was my pleasure. You're so cute," I say with a conflicted laugh after noticing her hideous phone charms and cat print bag and general pastel pukey shit. She's the sort of person who'd see cute as being the most perfect compliment. God, this must be so fucking easy or else it must come naturally
to me, and that is a frightening power to have, it's a good job it's mine alone. I think it's a big portion of both because I'm amazed that she's lived this long without being bankrupted by a thousand scam emails from Nigeria. I feel terrible for doing something so despicable and seeing the way her expression changes as she falls for me terrifyingly quickly. It normally happens within ten minutes when I'm intent, but I might have a new personal best here. It is despicable but I have no choice.

I lean back against my seat to look at her in a regal but reassuring way. You have to be so self-aware for this, no laziness allowed. I have to be every romantic hero in every book she's read. I have to be everything she ever wanted but didn't know could exist.

"You know what this reminds me of? Brief Encounter. Have you seen it?" I ask her. I haven't seen it but I know that it's an old film about people having some kind of affair in a train station, and I only know that because Kiyomi's sister gave me the DVD for one of my birthdays and I was offended by her cheapness. It was a very inappropriate present but I think that she wanted to sleep with me and it was a sort of code message which I fiercely ignored.

"I love that film!" Shiori says, and it's as if she's suddenly come alive after a lifetime of being dead in her hand-knitted cardigan.

"I thought that you might."

The train driver must be taking the fucking scenic route like L said, because here I am two hours later and I'm still in the cabin. Ideally, I would have started this earlier, but I had to wait for the opportunity to talk to her alone and unseen by anyone who matters. The other day, while I was looking for an opportunity to create, I checked the boarding list for the train via security and saw that she'd be travelling there alone while Tsukino would be taken there by car after work, as I would have done under normal circumstances. Important people don't take trains. For debates and conferences on the coast, an ancient train is reserved for accompanying families and low-rank MPs without cars, so I am really slumming it. Tsukino has begun parading his wife around to emphasise the current disparity between the genders of our partners, but my partner is probably still in bed trying to solve a cold case (it's his new hobby), and Tsukino's wife is currently wondering what I'd whisper to her in bed.

It didn't take long to win her trust and admiration, nor did it take me long to turn her against her husband, although she didn't need much turning. I spun a tragic yarn about how L and Tsukino are working together; blackmailing me by threatening my family for their different agendas, both of which focus on my ruin. They'd threatened the lives of my wife and son. It'd only take a phone call and Kiyomi and Kira would be dead. I'd wake up with their heads next to me along with a dead horse or something, they'd told me, and obviously I couldn't risk going to the police or fighting them in any way. I'm too honourable and surprisingly weak and baby animal-like. They had proof that my beloved, darling sister had had an affair and that her child was not her husband's, and they said that they'd go to the press. To protect her honour and the lives of those most dear to me, I had no choice but to go along with their smear campaign against me so that Tsukino would win an election and that I could never return to politics because of the shame. They've ruined my life between them, I am merely a pawn to them. Because of their demands and threats, I couldn't tell my wife — I couldn't tell anyone the truth — but it's all a lie and I'm alone in my misery. I had planned to say something less bombastic, but soon got the sense that she had a love and gullibility for the theatrical, so I embellished. I am now a self-sacrificing victim of a son of Satan, money-hungry, disreputable, homosexual deviant of a lawyer whose advances I have resisted, and her one dimensional villain of a husband. It's not a complete lie. Tsukino wouldn't have a problem doing something like that if he had the brain for it, and I think my description of L is very accurate.
I held her hands and begged her not to speak of what I'd said in confidence. The only good point I can think about her husband is that he loves her, I told her. Of course, this was the only prompt she needed to nervously tell me everything about Tsukino's many sins I already knew of but which I appeared horrified by. She must save herself, I said. If she would put her trust in me, I would make it my goal to help her find all the happiness she deserves, while making it very clear that I'm not gay at all. I'm rich, eligible, lonely, tall, tortured, and handsome. Hook, line, sinker. I'm now telling her how I've deflected L's advances, and I get nothing but sympathy from her, which is nice.

"I… have to beat him off sometimes," I say, because I do resort to that quite often depending on your interpretation.

"You have to hit him?"

"I'm not proud of it, Shiori, but it's in self-defence. I could show you bruises," I tell her, eager to show the beautiful bruise I have on my ribs which I earned from some rather rough sex in the shallow end of the swimming pool. God, I wish I'd filmed it. Well, it started off with me trying to teach L to swim, but it degraded, and then, boom. Tiles are very unforgiving and L thought that I was trying to drown him, hahahaha! Anyway, I'm very impressed by this bruise, and she'll love a teaser shot of my torso. Her face when she sees it is a big O of empathetic pain, and then it looks like she really is looking forward to seeing the whole picture, so I tuck my shirt back in again. It's just a trailer. You have to pay to see the film.

"He's such a monster!" she tells me.

"Yes, he is," I agree proudly before catching myself and reverting back to character. "You won't tell anyone about this, will you, Shiori? This is so strange to me. It's like I trust you with my greatest secret though I barely know you. You have my life in your hands."

"I won't tell anyone, Light. I promise. I just can't understand how Kiyomi doesn't know about this."

"Ah, it's complicated. She probably wouldn't care, anyway."

"What do you mean?" she asks, leaning towards me. This is a clincher and very important to be handled correctly, so I close my eyes and push my hair to one side as I despairingly whisper to her like every word is a knife.

"Kiyomi has been having an affair with one of my aides. You know Teru Mikami? He's not the first. In truth, I think she was unfaithful throughout our marriage."

"She's mad!"

"It must have been my fault that she did it. I hadn't…" Urgh, I can't say 'fuck,' I'm supposed to be a stupid romantic, "made love with anyone before I married her. I had a purity ring and everything, so maybe I was a little naive and, you know, not very… good. I'm sorry if this is too personal."

"No, Light! I think it's beautiful that you waited."

"Well, I wanted it to be special. It's the way I was raised."

"It's so admirable. I've never met a man who has such a strong moral code. You're not alone, Light — I feel the same way as you. I think people should keep themselves pure even after marriage, because it's a holy state. People seem to enjoy it but they forget that intercourse is for the begetting of children."

"Exactly, that's what I think. We shouldn't enjoy it," I say with a sniff. Tsukino doesn't service his
mare, this is fantastic. "But I worry now. People like us are unfortunately very uncommon. There's a lot of pressure from people who don't value ethics and God. So, I think my inexperience and innocence was a disappointment to Kiyomi. She'd ask me to do the most horrible things."

"Oh no!… Like… what exactly?" she asks. Ha.

"I couldn't say to a lady. It was bad enough confessing to the priest because I was so ashamed, but I'm told that I was very good at it."

"Oh…" she sighs.

"But I wasn't enough for her, anyway. I still loved her though, despite everything." I say sadly. "And she drinks. I worry about Kira, but I can't apply for custody at the moment because of where I am. It's no place for children. But he needs a real mother."

"Yes," she agrees. Someone like me, she thinks. I can almost see the thoughts flashing up in her mind like neon signs.

"As soon as Tsukino and Lawliet get what they want and I'm out, I'm going to get custody of Kira and go somewhere where no one knows me, and then maybe we can start again. I don't care what happens to me as long as my family is safe and happy."

She takes hold of my hand and I stop myself sneering at how dirty her nails are so I can seem affected by whatever holding my hand is supposed to signify. The train slows and I see a welcome sign pass the window as we get into the station. Shit, I've got to hurry this up. I haven't even finished planning my speech for the debate yet.

"Oh no, we're here already? I'd like to see you again. But I can't, can I," I say.

She makes some strange 'umming' sound and looks genuinely puzzled as she looks at my hand and then the sign outside saying 'GET OFF THE FUCKING TRAIN!' It doesn't say that but, God, come on, woman!

"Does Tsukino ever let you leave the house alone?" I ask, sounding more and more desperate. There is a certain urgency now that she's kept me so long. I'm so angry. This is my life here. Hours of my life frittered away when with normal people you could just say 'Hey, fancy a fuck?' and they'd say yes if I was the one asking. Then they'll do whatever you ask them to do, which makes things much less wasteful in terms of time, but dealing with her is like circling a roundabout for no reason when everyone knows you'll have to turn off at some point.

"Um… On Wednesdays I go for coffee with a friend," she says. Great. L works late nights on Wednesdays.

"Where? What time?"

"It changes. She picks me up and she decides where we go."

"Ok. On Wednesday morning, call her and tell her you're sick. I'll pick you up at eleven on your street. Eleven a.m. In the morning. Eleven hundred hours. Before midday. Do you want to write it down?"

"What if he finds out?"

"Tsukino? He won't. Just act like you normally do on a Wednesday when you're meeting your friend. Because you are meeting a friend, I'm just a different friend." Don't fuck this up, you stupid
"Where will we go?"

"Where do you want to go? I'll take you anywhere you want to go. You decide," I say, because I think being asked to decide anything is quite unknown to her and is thoughtful and such.

"A garden centre?" she suggests. I look away and thumb my lip and say nothing, so she tries again.
"A restaurant?"

I pout. "Hmmm... we need somewhere private where we won't be noticed. Somewhere outside of Tokyo."

"What about the forests?"

"It's an idea, but forests are very open, both in terms of climate and public footpaths. It's a brilliant idea, you're doing better than me, but what we need is a room where we can't be disturbed," I say. Short of saying the actual word and draw some biological drawings in the steam on the window, I'm not sure what else I can do here. "Somewhere small and quiet, and ideally with a coffee machine and an ensuite bathroom. I wish I could think of something!"

"Oh!" she says, but I'm in a thinking pose being very intense and attractive. "A... a... a hotel?" she squeaks. Bingo.

"A hotel?" I ask.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean —"

"No, you're brilliant. I know a small hotel on the coast where we won't be recognised and we can... talk. Good idea," I say, now rushing to get myself seen by someone somewhere else. It took over two hours, but I got there. After I give her a number to a phone I have only for this purpose, I stand, bow, and look at her for nine seconds. Eight seconds isn't loving, and ten seconds is 'I'm going to kill you,' but nine seconds in conjunction with a soft expression is perfect. "Call me if you can," I tell her with longing and hope in my eyes, then I catch sight of my reflection in the window. I swear that I'm even more good looking than I was when I got on the train. Success makes me glow. "Ah, I look terrible and the press are outside. Your husband's going to wipe the floor with me in this debate, isn't he."

"He's very nervous about it, I think. Not that he tells me anything, but he's hired someone to buy clothes for him, and they were studying all these photographs of you. They had them spread out on the table, trying to figure out where you got your suits from. And... I don't think you could look terrible," she smiles timorously. She's just a heavy fringe, plump hamster cheeks like dough, and badly applied, wonky eyeliner.

I turn and smile at her and her compliment on what is plainly evident. This old thing? It's not important. I dress it well and I use it to get what I want. It's just a vehicle.

"I trust you, Shiori. I feel like I've found something that's been missing until now, and your eyes..." God, she's cross-eyed, "your eyes say forever to me."

"I feel the same way, Light."

Aaand, then I left. L's throwaway lines come in handy sometimes. She is, luckily, an idiot of previously unknown proportions, but I do feel sorry for her and think about her on and off throughout the day. I think that I search for mini tragedies in other people's lives, as if the scale of
their misfortune may comfort me somehow. The only way I can give her peace is to take her out of this shitty world altogether. There's probably another way but I wouldn't benefit from it and neither would the country, so she'll become a sacrifice for us all, and that's an honour, isn't it? I had an anonymous rose sent to her room at the hotel and I did the same the next day, and then she called me. One good thing which comes from having to listen to her is that it makes me appreciate people not talking. And I miss L.

After the debate was over, which worked out very well for me, I did get a car home because I wasn't putting myself through more hours on the train with Shiori making goo-goo eyes. I told her on the phone that I was being called away to deal with something important but I was devastated. Night and day, all I think about is seeing her again, I said. "Really?" she whimpered while hiding from Tsukino in the hotel bathroom. "I think of nothing else," I told her. This shit is really exhausting.

But I'm home now and I have a copy of that stupid book she was reading so I can do some research for Wednesday. All I actually want is to lie on my back in the conservatory and listen to the low roar of the sea while L strokes my hair and tells me how amazing I am and how empty his life was without me, but when I get to the front door, I hear voices inside. So, he's here. My shoulders fall and I lose all the confidence gained over the last few days. He was due on Saturday but L never mentioned him on the phone because it's a sensitive subject with me. I'm not happy. My blood pressure peaks and I feel incredibly excited and angry at the same time. I could just burst in but I decide to make a more unexpected entrance by going in through the garage. The door from there to kitchen is locked, so I glance over my shoulder to check that my clingy security guard hasn't followed me inside, then pull out a flick knife from my pocket and listen in through the door.

"… now I'm ball deep in cases. Being the consort of a PM is a great money-spinner."

"I didn't think he'd forgive you. I wouldn't."

"Yes, you would. With Light though, it took a while but I think the red string of fate clinched it. That, and me talking about going back to Blighty and singing 'Jerusalem'."

"You didn't."

"I didn't sing 'Jerusalem' but I would have if I thought it'd work."

"No, the red string of fate line. It's so naff, L."

"I told you, it's a winner. You have much to learn but I think it's too late for you now. Light fought the law and the law won. Actually, I was thinking of writing a book about how to get what you want and keep it, and aim it towards spinsters and divorcees. There's so much money there to be made; that business is booming. Obviously, I couldn't publish it under my own name, but —"

"I thought you were going to write something about the law."

"The law? Oh, shit, that was only something I told The Judge. What am I supposed to write, a fucking text book? Please. Like I'd give away my secrets to tell people how to be as good as me. No, it's either write that book about murder cases I've solved on Sundays from my extremely comfy, sex-stained bed, or books for fuck ups. Jack the Ripper and life coaching are big money, and points mean prizes. Especially because, well, not that he makes that much, anyway, but I want Light to retire soon."

"I don't think he will."

"Well, excuse my French but you know fuck all. Give me time."
It goes on, but Ryuk distracts me by floating through the wall and staring sadly at a case of apples we have stored in the garage like it's harvest time and we own an orchard. He can't open it, he can only pass through things, but I'm not helping him. I don't know why L wants me to retire but I'm used to this flipping back and forth business with him and never took any notice of it. I make a shitload of money, by the way. I'm on the Japan's rich list but I try to keep it quiet.

Instead, I get back to the job in hand. I don't normally carry knives around, but today calls for one. It takes a lot of cunning and expertise to open a cylinder lock with only a penknife and a biro refill, but I'm very cunning and a natural expert at many things, if you haven't noticed. Eventually, it clicks twice and I spring the door wide open. The voices stop abruptly and two sets of eyes look at me and then at the blade I have hanging from my hand. Tense moments pass for them. Have I finally snapped? I'm not even sure.

"The door was locked," I explain with a delayed smile, then walk to the glass cabinet, pocketing the knife again. "Hello, B. I see that your plane didn't crash."

Not that I look at him much if I can avoid it, but B's wearing a Tom Ford suit I viewed but decided against for being too extrovert and fucking awful. Even Tom Ford makes mistakes. It has a greenish tinge and a magenta lining that makes B look like that Joker person, so I smile to myself that he's a fuck up simply through existing. In contrast, L looks top-notch, but I can't really pin down why. He stares at me the way he looks at his DeLorean or large cheques, so I turn around and I hear B hiss "Don't be such an idiot," to him while I make myself a Vesper martini.

"Aren't you happy to see me, soon-to-be-ex-Prime Minister?" B asks me.

"Yes, B. I'm ecstatic," I say.

"L's happy to see me."

"Are you, baby boy? I'm so happy that you're happy," I tell L, turning around to lean against the counter to gaze at him and act like a complete slut. It's only then that I notice that a furious looking B is holding L's forearm down on the sofa to stop him from running towards me, probably. Attention whore doesn't even cover it.

"Don't do that," L murmurs to me and looking like he's about to cry, but I just stare with more force until he obviously gives up and lets his head fall forward limply. My eyes could probably burn through buildings. "Uh. My Achilles heel."

"You can't call him baby boy," B tells me. Au contraire, you croissant fucking fuck.

"I think I can. I think I have the right to call him whatever the fuck I want. I don't know why, but right now and probably until you're on a plane going back to the freakshow in Montmartre, I want to call him baby boy, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it because you're in my house now, you little shit."

That did it. B stands up and I do actually laugh at his trousers. Then I flick my knife up again.

"Hey, now, Light, I thought you said that everything was forgiven and forgotten," L says through fake laughter.

"I don't forget and I definitely don't forgive," I reply.

"Give me back my knife," B says to me.

"Certainly. I'd be happy to, but you'll have to come here for it. Where do you want it? Chest,
"I'm going to put the kettle on and make us all a nice cup of tea," L says happily, jumping up like nobody's about to have a throw down, no. I can't stand these Europeans. I can't stand anyone. Everyone's mad and bad and the result of interbreeding.

"I thought the Japanese were supposed to be famous for their courtesy," B grumbles to himself, and I turn back to the carve some lemon peel for my martini but end up stabbing it instead. I hate the fucker. I hate him and this fucking lemon! But, hello. I feel someone's mouth on the back of my neck and I'm pretty sure it's not B's mouth because no one's bitten my spine out yet.

"How was the debate?" L asks my neck.

"You haven't seen it? It's been broadcast."

"I saw it. You looked so shiny," he says, putting me into a kind of affectionate strangle hold.

"No I didn't, I'd been powdered. What about what I said?"

"I have to admit, you're so shiny even when powdered that I didn't listen to anything you said, sorry. Ain't love grand? So, no one bullied you?"

"Ha! No, but I know they're talking."

"It's hard to stop people talking when we're so interesting."

"Actually, it's not that hard. What about you? What did you do after you'd stopped crying?"

"Same as usual," he says, then whispers to me so his teeth just barely scrape against my throat as he speaks. I feel a little faint all of a sudden. I should eat something. "I kept looking at the clock and thinking: 'Only nine hours until I see Light. Only eight hours until I see Light. Christ, it's dark in here. Only four hours until cake."

"You ruined it."

"How do you know cake isn't a euphemism? Ok, no, I ate it. It was very nice. And now I've seen you, too, which is also very nice."

"Hmmm… Make the most of just seeing."

"Come again?" he asks, still whispering, but I want B to hear so I speak in my now perfect English. It can't be faulted.

"You're not coming in any way, shape or form, sir. I told you, you won't see me much until he's gone or in a hotel."

"Now, Light —"

"Unless you want to join us, B," I say in B's direction.

"No! For many reasons, no. You two are sex obsessed. You have problems that are overwhelming," he tells us, tapping his thumb and ring finger together nervously. "Besides, I have a girlfriend now."

"You what?" L asks, abandoning me while I laugh hysterically. It's ok, I still have a martini. "You have a girlfriend?"
"Yes, look," he says, and proudly pulls out a folded editorial photo. This is fucking priceless!

"B, that's a picture from a magazine," L points out.

"Of my girlfriend."

"Oh… Well, she looks —"

"Like L. She looks like L," I interrupt, shielding myself behind L. There's a resemblance. Well, she's thin and has dark hair.

"No, she doesn't!" B says, turning the photo around to check it. "You're a stupid… stupid."

"Isn't that the model that pushed Cara Delevinge off the runway during the Marc Jacobs Spring Show?"

"Cara got in the way."

"And isn't she dating a guitarist from some shitty band?"

"No. She did, but now she's dating me."

"And you don't have a real photo of her?"

"This is a real photo."

"It's not. She was in L'Uomo Vogue last year. I remember it because I wondered what the fuck she was doing in a men's style magazine. And that you've got there looks like a page from French Vogue, you fucking loser."

"So what? I like it. I think she looks —"

"Like L in it."

"She doesn't look like L!"

"You're not dating her, she's just some model you saw in a magazine and you're a lunatic. You'll probably stalk her and go to her house and set her on fire," I say, being held back by L. Isn't it strange that, when you really hate someone, you get past the point of wanting to avoid them and want to get right in their face and kill them instead?

"Light, that's rude," L tells me like he's a congenial grandpa. "If B says that he's dating a model who pushed Cara whateverhernameis off the plank, then he is. Let's just leave it now, shall we?" he adds through his teeth before turning around to B. "She looks very nice, B. If you like that sort of thing. And models don't talk or understand much, do they? Looks like you're found yourself the perfect woman."

"I have, L. I'm dating a model. A supermodel. A woman. She has female parts," B tries to convince him, gesturing towards his chest and crotch.

"Lovely. They must be handy. Right, tea?" L asks him calmly, walking me towards the kitchen and whispering to me: "It's ok, I think I have some anti-psychotics somewhere. We'll crush them up and put them in his tea."

"You don't believe me, do you," B shouts, and I reply before L has a chance to.
"Of course he doesn't believe you. You're making it up. Why don't you go back to France and their massive onions, jailbait?"

I am a little bitter towards B, I admit, but there's no reason for him to launch himself at me, so I pull out my knife again and nearly stab L when he throws himself between us. That would have been ridiculously unfortunate. But it all calms down and L falls off his already unstable hold on the wagon when we crack open a bottle of 88% proof Balkan vodka.

"Oooh! Hahahahahahahaaaaa…” I laugh nervously when I turn around and bump into L. He wasn't there a minute ago, where did he come from and how did I get here? I've spilt vodka down his shirt and now he's all wet. I'm so shocked that I cover my mouth. Look at that, his shirt is transparent now and clinging to his chest. What a shame.

"Sorry," he says. He's not sorry at all and neither am I. I've only had two shots, I swear.

"No, I'm sorry. It was my fault. I wasn't looking where I was going."

"Well, really you don't need to since I'm always looking at you," he tells me shyly. I am extremely taken with how secretive his smile is. "I could steer you."

"I like it when you steer me," I smile back at him. Wow, I wonder what sex on a dishwasher on the fast cycle is like.

"I like steering you," he says, also looking at the dishwasher. I bite my lip.

"Hey, have you done something with your hair?" I ask.

"I… combed it?"

"It looks really nice. Really."

"You look really nice," he says, self-consciously smoothing down his hair.

"I do, don't I, heeehehehe!" I giggle along with him. "Oh, well, thanks, but when I said your hair looks really nice, I meant you as a whole."

"How do you know what my hole looks like? You haven't seen me for nearly three days, I thought you might have forgotten."

"Hahahahahahahaha —" we both laugh, but we're cut off by the Fun Police and smack our hands over our mouths again.

"What the fuck is wrong with you two? I don't know what you're saying but if you carry on I'll throw up over every single suit in this house you better stop it stop it right now!" B shrieks like a banshee. B and I are two countries who have been forced into a truce through a treaty L drew up on a piece of computer paper and tacked to the wall. It's lasted less than an hour.

Because a large part of the treaty involved a demand by B for 'no funny business', which seemed easy enough when first proposed, the truce hangs on it. I'm taking it as a challenge, but it's less important to me now. I've discovered that L has a great talent for making very complicated cocktails because he's dexterous and has a Byzantine mind. He made me something I think might be illegal because it involved two glasses, lighting sambuca and rum for a few seconds, drinking it, and inhaling fumes through a straw. I forgot my own name for a while but I'm alright again now.
We all agreed to keep our distance by each of us being the point of an invisible elongated triangle so that we're separated and yet linked. B's sitting on the floor in front of a crap red plastic record player that looks like a child's toy and with black scored and scratched discs strewn around him. I'm leaning against the wall, and L's sitting on the sofa so we can have silent but smirking conversations throughout B's very vocal outbursts about my until now unheard record collection. It appears that I bought a load of ancient shit if you actually want to listen to the albums, but I bought them to fill a lower level of oddly-shaped shelves on a bookcase, so it doesn't matter. B is like a child and we treat him as such. If you want peace then you either have to send them away or give them something noisy to entertain themselves with. I'm a father, so I know about this stuff.

The record crackles through a song which L moves his shoulders to like a lazy stripper, but I don't know, it could be the sambuca fumes doing that. Everything's very 60s and wavy, and when did colours get so fucking bright? His eyes are piercing with mischief as he outlines his slightly open mouth with his thumb as though he's ready to suck or bite it. It's all exploitation and manipulation with a goal to make me fail the challenge first or at the same time that he does. I think he thinks that I like it, and I'm not saying if I do or I don't, but it makes me smile when he crosses the room towards me, anyway. His still damp shirt is open enough to show off his collar bones, and I admit that I like that, too, but I couldn't tell you why. It probably has a deep psychological meaning to do with death and wanting to see him skeletonised, but I can't be bothered about that right now.

My hand independently decides to massage tension from my shoulder because I'm panting for air even before L reaches me. When he does, he moves listlessly to the music and sings words against my cheek while I just stand there like an immovable tree being made to sway, although I do put my branches on his arse and under his shirt. He makes everything he does seem spiritless and too much trouble for him but, damn, he's really good at it, I think I'm going to die. Our open mouths touch and glance off each other but don't connect fully, and then he wedges his thigh between my legs. This is very painful for me. I'm going to invite L to invade my country soon and fuck me and the treaty.

He sinks to his knees and he looks up at me, steadying himself by holding onto my hips. What a nice twist on things; he's the perfect height for me now. I'd fantasise about cutting his legs off at the knee if he wouldn't look like Toulouse-Lautrec if I did. He sings along with the record, moving his hands up and down my thighs and biting his lip, staring at the my crotch like I saw him look at a cake shop window once. Then, like he's suffering and repenting, he lets his head droop and roll against the front of my trousers while he mouths at it in between singing words. I hold my head in my hand because fucking hell.

"That's nice, baby boy. You have the best singing voice. You should have been a singer in a band or something," B says sweetly like a fucking dick, but he doesn't look away from the record player, thank God. "Don't you think, L?"

"Yeah, definitely, I missed my vocation. What do you think, Light?" L asks me breathily, standing up again like I'm a sexy snake charmer and he's my sexy snake. That's too accurate a comparison at the moment, so I do fuck the treaty and fail beautifully. I kiss him, I think I am actually eating his face, and he pins me to the wall. And that's it, we're dead.

The record scratches and zips off to a silent spot on the carpet, and L leaps away from me when something slices at our legs. What the very fuck? Even I couldn't mobilise a missile strike that fast.

"B, don't throw records! Jesus, that hurt..." L says, rubbing his knee, and then he seems to realise something and looks up at me, smiling. Yes, that hurt. His mouth tasted of sweet despair, otherwise known as sambuca, rum and sugar, and he's transferred it to me. I double over to catch up on my breathing and hold onto his waist.
"The treaty," B says commandingly with a stern, concrete face. It would be commanding if he wasn't sitting like a curmudgeonly pixie. He puts another record on, plopping the needle down in the middle of a song which is very noisy and has a nasty sentiment which I think is aimed at me. I'm still sulking at B's head when I notice L smile in a drunkenly apologetic way at me. I equally drunkenly return it.

"You know what you're missing here, Prime Minister? Some old hatecore," B tells me. "Baby boy, look at this."

"L. Car," I say. It's one of the better ideas I've had lately, but I'm on a roll at the moment in that area. L nods emphatically. I don't want to drive anywhere except to the nearest lay-by, and I think I can do it if I drive really slowly.

I dash off to the bedroom to bring necessary equipment and to be prepared, and also to phone Shiori quickly from the bathroom. God, she talks crap. I had to cut her off because I don't want to draw attention to myself so L gets suspicious, but when I get back into the living room, I don't think he's noticed that I was gone.

"B. Light and I said that you could stay as long as you behave yourself and don't cramp our style," he tells him, jangling car keys in his hand. "You're not behaving yourself and you're cramping our style. I think that you should think about that while Light and I get supplies. Well, I'll get the supplies and Light will stay in the car. Is there anything you need?"

"I want a lighter, kitchen foil, a five inch mirror, some straws, a small candle, and a bottle of lemonade," B rattles off quickly with a totally blank face. Ok.

When I rolled down the ramp of the garage at about 1mph, my state car came out of nowhere along with several bins and recycling boxes and drove right into me. Obviously I can't do a fucking thing without security turning up to stare soulfully at me, so L and I climbed over each other to swap seats behind the dark windows so officially it was L who was driving. He calmed down my guards and driver before driving off at maybe 3mph and stalling, which we agreed was also security's fault. I was asleep by the time we got to the end of the drive, but L must have valiantly continued our journey and pulled up in front of the gates, because that's where I woke up about five hours later. I woke L and we went to the late night convenience shop because we reasoned that bacon would cure our headaches.

So, after we got back, because it all took some time, B wasn't anywhere to be seen. Maybe he's finally hung himself, I thought, but no. When L knocked on B's door, he was told to leave the bizarre collection of paraphernalia we could remember from his shopping list outside his bedroom. The only time we saw or heard him was when he came through to get a teaspoon and stare at us in silence for nearly thirty seconds, and then he locked himself in his room again, slamming the door. I try to pretend that he's not here, but I lock our bedroom door and set the panic alarm on my bedside table, anyway.

Since I'm meeting Shiori tomorrow, I need to read this awful book and make mental notes. It's difficult hiding it from L, but I sit against the headboard with the book hidden behind my propped knees while he watches a crime documentary and shouts 'IDIOT FUCK!', 'I KNEW IT!', 'YOU DESERVE IT!', and reverent whispers of 'justice,' every so often. I actually don't mind because this book is making my brain numb and I still don't feel too great.

When there's nothing else for him to do or shout at, he turns the main light off, but it's ok, I have a tiny lamp perched over my book like a flamingo. He crawls into bed and if I didn't know it was him it'd be quite scary to suddenly feel a spindly hand creeping between my legs.

"Excuse fingers," he says.
"No, L. Watch some porn or something," I tell him.

"I wasn't doing anything!" he says, flumping heavily on his side. "Anyway, I hate modern porn. Everyone looks so amateur and bored and all I think is 'nice sheets.'"

"What are you talking about now?"

"The sheets. I don't know where they make these things but they're always on some grubby sofa or their grandmother's bedspread. There's no storyline, nothing. I'm not asking for a Hitchcock classic with added cock but it's painful to watch, you feel like sending Amnesty International in to help them. Have you seen any lately?"

"No, it's disgusting. Everyone's ugly and it's just disgusting. But, actually, yes, I did on Thursday. I don't choose to, but when I'm bored I hack into Security's network and they're always watching porn. I better report them, actually."

"If it involves a woman then I will admit, it's better."

"I'm sorry, are you feeling ok or have you turned?"

"I mean that the acting standard is better. Women are great at lying. It's hard to lie about how good things are when everyone involved has a flaccid dick and one of them's being forced in like a fucking Beef Wellington. They keep looking at the camera like they're begging someone to call the police, but it's always good for an ego boost."

"Hmmm… God, this book," I breathe out, then regret it.

"What are you reading?" he asks, lolling all over me to see, so I turn away from him.

"Nothing. Fuck off."

"Liiiiight, are you reading a rooooomance novel?"

"Obviously not, why would I read shit like that? Go to sleep," I say. If I thought that would be the end of it then I'd be stupid and disappointed, because after a few seconds of musing my profile and the surprising depths of what I'm willing to read, he kisses my cheek quickly and puts his chin on my shoulder. "I'm not!" I tell him. "Ok, I might be, but I was told to read it by PR to understand the young electorate."

"You mean that you did once?"

"Shut up. I have learnt something. I've learnt that I don't want to understand them. I want to hoard them into a building and have it demolished."

"That bad, eh?"

"The book? The only the good thing is that everyone's dying in it, so I'm hoping the two main fuckwits die before they have sex in Anne Frank's attic again."

"Are people allowed to do that? Can you hire it out?"

"Well, they didn't have sex there but they did just after. I think they did, anyway. To be honest, I'm not sure, but how disrespectful can you get?"

"Ummm…"
"I just hope that they die. I mean, he's already lost his leg, someone else has lost an eye, and Sycamore's thyroid and now her lungs are fucked, how long is this going to take?"

"Sycamore?"

"Sycamore's the girl in it. She's with the boy with one leg: Octavius."

"Right."

"Hold on, he's… ahhhh… it's ok, he's had another scan and he's gonna croak. I'll skip ahead a bit."

"Poor Octavius. All these young people today with their various maladies."

"He's having a pre-funeral, what the fuck is a pre-funeral? Just DIE already!" I shout at the book. "Stop milking it!"

"You're such a soft-hearted little thing. Put it away before you have an aneurism."

"No, I need to finish it and underline quotes to memorise by tomorrow. Just let me finish this part."

"Ok," he says, moving onto his back to look up through the skylight and the rain streaming down it. He's quiet for a while, but it doesn't last too long. "Ha… when I was with David, he asked me to go with him to Belsen concentration camp — some of his family died there, I think. They must have, it's not like it's a resort in Barbados, so there must have been some reason. I asked him to go down on me in the gas chamber and he wouldn't speak to me for three days. It was an awkward flight back, not least because we were seated in economy."

"Oh my God, that is disgusting."

"I was living on student loans at the time, Light. I couldn't afford one of those tiny cans of tonic water, never mind a first class seat. Oh, are you shocked about Belsen as well? I was, um… a troubled youth. And I think I was drunk. Don't say that you would have said no."

"I would have, actually. Because of the tourists. No, it's this book, I'm going to vomit," I admit, and L moves a safe distance away from me. My body is actually reacting to this book in a physical way. I can't deal with it, so I skip ahead again, and suddenly it's like the gates of heaven have opened. "Ha! He's dead. Mr Lawliet, pour me a glass of champagne and make it snappy," I say, tossing the book and lamp on the floor. L just passes me the bottle after taking a swig of it himself, and I consider how unhygienic it is and how it's not a good idea at all, really, but I can handle it. So, after I've had a celebratory drink, we prop the bottle on the pillows between us like a baby. "I take it all back, it's a really good book. You just have to go through a lot of lows to get the highs. So… didn't The Judge give you money to get you through university?"

"No. He never gave me anything," he says quietly, shifting and slouching against the pillows. "He had no time for me until I graduated, because then I was worth something. I was useful then," he nods to himself. The mood has changed instantaneously. God, why did I ask?

"You were always worth something, L."

"No, no, you don't understand, it wasn't like that. I had to earn it. He was harder on me than the others because I was his favourite. I was, I know I was. But when he found out that I… with boys, he, um… I ruined his plans. My brothers and sister are idiots but he wanted one of us to marry into the aristocracy. He loved the aristocracy, did I tell you? He loved them," he smiles like it's a really endearing quality in someone when it's another sign of twatdom to me. "He had plans for me to marry the Queen's… I don't know, the granddaughter of the Queen's third cousin twice removed or
something? But I made myself not so much of a catch. He said that I could either be the biggest
disappointment of his life or I could be his greatest pride, so I had to prove myself and I had to do it
alone. It was fair."

"No, it wasn't fair," I say quietly because this makes me so fucking angry, but L, depending on his
mood, can be very defensive of his father. It's completely irrational but I realised early on that he
finds nothing harder to talk about than his father, but that there's nothing he wants to talk more about,
he just can't. If I wasn't worried that he'd cry or something stupid like that then I might press it more,
because I'm positive that I could be a brilliant therapist. "Did you have to get a job through
university?" I ask, horrified by the idea of L working in a coffee shop or somewhere terrible.

"Pfff… no. I would have been pushed to afford a box to hide in in storage if David hadn't helped me
out," he says, then starts coughing. I say nothing but move slightly to one side in case he
contaminates me. He coughs again.

"Stop that. Why are you doing that?" I ask.

"Ugh, I had a meeting in a steam room. It's supposed to clear your lungs, isn't it? It's had the opposite
effect on me," he says, hammering his fist into the centre of his chest. I don't see how that's going to
help unless he's trying to give himself heart massage.

"You were in a steam room?"

"With a big hairy man," he winks.

"What?"

"He's a new and very lucrative client on my books. He feels more comfortable doing business in
steam rooms, so…" he trails off, staring ahead of him and scraping his fingers through his hair to
push away any shards from his eyes. The soft and relaxed way he's speaking is still unnerving to me
in its intimacy and it only gets worse. "Hey. You know, it was kind of quiet around here while you
were gone."

"Yeah," I say after a moment. My eyes do a world tour of the room in the silence as I get
increasingly uncomfortable, so I sit up. "I need to brush my teeth."

"You did already. It's not like champagne's going to hurt them. Just go to sleep," he tells me. He's
wrong, but whatever. I lie back down again but still feel tense for some reason. "What's on the cards
for tomorrow?"

"Nothing important. Why?"

"I'm just asking. I'm interested."

"Are we doing that now?"

"Being interested in what each other does? We could try it out," he shrugs, then pushes the tip of my
nose like it's a buzzer on a quiz show.

"I wish you were still in PR."

"You miss me? Massive surprise, Light, massive. I am shocked. Look how shocked I am."

"You were good at your job, that's all. I manage without you."
"What about when you said that I was integral to a stable government? Ha, no, I know. It annoys me but I know you manage fine on your own even when hampered by the idiots squatting in my old office."

"Oh God, don't make me say it," I say, muffled because I'm pressing my face into my pillow. I sniff while he pulls the champagne bottle away and takes a last swig before putting it on his bedside table. I'm worried that he's preparing the land for something.

"What? Say what? Are you going to say something nice? Because I don't think my heart can take it, and a vortex might open because you brought on the apocalypse. Don't do it, Light. I want to live!"

"That you are integral. To me. Not that I'd die or anything if you weren't here because, I don't mean to bring it up again, but you can't be that integral because you were dead and I still kept my hair appointment the next day, but... y'know. I nearly didn't, so that's something."

This whole experience makes me feel like I've wandered into a funeral service for someone I didn't know but now it's too late to leave. One thing I was hoping for was that we'd cut this out since we're living together now, but I'm still occasionally caught in a thick, tar-like feeling I'd rather not feel. It hurts when I hear the way he talks about his father, because The Judge is like a poisonous plant you try to kill but it won't die. I'm sorry The Judge is dead because I'd like to punch him in the face and blame a sudden spasm. L came back more nostalgic and more fucked up by him, if you ask me. He mentions him more often since The Return 2, makes excuses for him, lies to himself and changes stories he's previously told me to make his father like a god of fairness, reason and love. I might be a little jealous that he's obviously so present in his mind when I should be there instead, but it's so tiring and infuriating and I can't do anything about it to make him write his father off as the bastard he was. Underneath L's bravado there's a pit of insecurity and delusion to deal with it when he shouldn't have been made to feel that way, he shouldn't feel that way now, and I definitely shouldn't be upset about it. This love business is being shackled to someone with a cattle prod. It's cracking my chest and leaving my heart open and swollen with him when I'd rather pretend it wasn't true, but I can't avoid it, I'm confronted by it every day. It just distracts and confuses me and slows me down until I'm stripped and armourless by that scrappy shit. Not that I'm bitter about it. Maybe I just feel it more today because of advance guilt about Shiori, because I'd really like to tell him my plan. If he wasn't so temperamental and jealous, I think he'd be very impressed. But it's not guilt. I never feel guilty over what has to be done; it's the most ridiculous emotion with a lot of stiff competition. Maybe I feel this way and there's no reason at all. I don't like doing things without having logic behind it, but all the possibilities seem very illogical to me. It must be a kind of insanity to let someone do what he does to me without even trying.

"Are you listening to Radio Light?" he asks me, and I smile and lower my face for a second when he kisses the top of my head. When he was gone, I was so thirsty for the sound of his voice I can't describe it, so I push the memory out of my head. Looking up through the skylight, I try to pick out constellations to take me out of this. L would say that I'm stupid, that it doesn't need to be this way, and he'd be right, but I don't think he's been disassembled and put back together with everything in the new places like I have been. Everything still works, the clock still tells the right time, but something's not right and it's hard to get used to. A lot has happened and I'm forced to do what I'm going to do because of him. I still haven't forgiven him and I don't believe I ever will. Really, there's a salad of emotions in me which I'm not equipped for. I'm not mixing my drinks again, and I'm not drinking sambuca again, if only because it's foul.

And then I see my future like a sick joke in the stars, and the strangeness of it knocks the air from me. Virgo, Corvus, Hydra. The hydra will kill the virgin, but the raven will kill the hydra in time.

L moves into my eye line again, looking down on me and crushing out everything else so he's the
only thing I can see. He mouths the words 'I love you' to me. He doesn't say them. He doesn't make a sound and I'm grateful for that. I don't know. Somehow it means more for it to be said but unsaid.

I reply in the same way, and he smiles with a brightness of a child. There's something still untouched and unbroken about him. He lies next to me, becoming a tangle of suffocating rose thorns around me while he shares my pillow. And in my mind I'm taken back to a morning when I felt something I didn't understand; a piercing in my heart that bled through and stained every cell of me and every thought in my head after that. And in my mind, I change that time as if I had the knowledge I have now. And in that time, I tell him I love him and I mean it, like I do now. I'm not ashamed of it and I'm not scared of it. I'm just scared of how it hurts me and makes me conflicted and screw up my priorities, but I say it and he smiles like he's doing now, and it makes it worth it. I think I must become a less bright reflection of him, because loving him is the bravest thing I've ever done.

But it changes nothing, because I am a serpent with many heads. Tomorrow, I'll take Tsukino's wife to the hotel I went to with L and I'll tell the blind man that my name is Sakurada. I'll make Virgo believe that I love her. I'll promise her the world. I'll take what I need from her and I'll fuck her to get it, and when I'm ready, I'll tell Tsukino and he'll do the rest for me. Everyone in my way will die and my eyes will remain dry. I don't need a death note.

I wake up and I'm surprised to see that I've only been asleep for an hour, and even more surprised that L's gone. I should be used to that, and it's sad that my first thought is more sinister than him just having a piss or something innocent and reasonable. Horrible ideas run through my mind about where he is, which is exactly the reason why I don't want B here. I wait a few minutes until I give in and go to find him. There's a sense of foreboding as I walk down the stairs, but some relief when I see a thin line of light coming through under L's closed office door. As I approach it I can hear him talking to someone in there. I can't help overhearing him when I've got my ear pressed to the door, can I.

"… I'm not supposed to remember," says a slow and croaky voice which can only be Ryuk's. It's followed by the kind of sigh which can only come from L.

"But how am I supposed to stop it if I don't know what I'm stopping? Do you get sick? Think! I want to help you."

"You want to help him, not me."

"Well, that is actually the same thing, isn't it. But... if I stop it, you'll die, won't you?"

"Not die. I just won't exist anymore because it wouldn't have happened. It'll erase me."

"But he'll live? There'll be another way to give you what you want without killing him. How do you know it'd work, anyway?"

"The only way you can stop this is to kill him."

"Yep, well, I'm not doing that."

"But I'm asking you to, L. You'd do it if he asked you."

"No, I wouldn't. This is why I don't believe you, because he would never want to be erased."

"Why do you separate us?"

"Because you're not him. And I can't do what you want."
"Then you're a failure and I will kill you," Ryuk tells him. The more I hear, the faster and louder my heartbeat echoes in my ear against the door until I can hardly hear their voices beneath it. I press my head a little further down the door in the hope that I'll hear more, but they're still muffled and nonsensical. All I know is that Ryuk just threatened to kill L because I don't know the fuck why.

"If you think that you died at the House, then... if he resigns — if he leaves — that should be enough." L says. What the hell is this? "I'll make him resign."

"He's not going to do what you say."

"There are other ways. I'm the most rotten player, you know that."

"It might not be enough."

"The alternative isn't good enough for me, sorry. Don't you care what happens? You just want him dead."

"I've lived already. I don't care about him."

"How can you not care?"

"Because it's nothing. Why should he matter to me? Nothing matters to me."

"Ok, but it matters to me. That's all fine, but why do you think me killing him would change anything? Maybe this is just what happens regardless of when or how he dies. I think we should concentrate on avoiding him dying altogether and work out why this happens to you."

"But he's going to die, it can't be avoided."

"He's not going to die yet. You said that you can't see when it happens."

"No, I can't, but the course has to be changed. I trusted you to do this for me. If you kill him, he won't hate, he'll just die."

"How do you know that?"

"Because you're all I remember. You must have been important. He won't expect it from you, but you have to make it a quick death so he doesn't have any time to think or suffer."

"This makes no sense. If you're so obsessed by this idea, you could have had a stranger do it. They would if you asked them."

"It doesn't work. I've done this a few times now and nothing has worked."

"What do you mean, a few times?"

"Only limited things can be changed. One time, I found you before you knew who he was and I offered you the death note if you'd write his name in it. You did it but nothing changed, so I killed you and tried again."

"You killed me?"

"For failing. And I'll kill you this time if you fail me."

"So this is like Groundhog Day for you? You just keep restarting it and killing us over and over again? Did he die? When you did this before, did he die?"
"Yes. But I was still here, so it wasn't enough."

"That's what I mean though. If when or how he dies or who kills him doesn't make any difference, maybe it just can't be changed that way or at all... No, wait a minute, I'm not saying that I won't help you, but I don't think it's a case of how he dies. I think it's about him changing it. There is something that needs to change and it's not about his death. He has to do it himself."

"Suicide? We tried that. It didn't work either."

"No, I said that it's not to do with death. You're just skipping the whole alphabet and going straight to Z. There's the idea of fate, but you replaying our lives and it changing every time proves that it's not about fate, because people can influence and change what happens to them. It's about choice."

"He is different this time."

"In what way?"

"This never happened before, with you. Not like this. It never went this far."

"Ha. Did he always dump me before? That'd be right."

"Or the other way around. It always ended. I don't know why it hasn't this time, it's interesting."

"Interesting? I'm so glad you find this entertaining, Ryuk, but at the moment I'm trying to figure out what the fuck to do, so thanks for your help."

"You have to kill him. That's it."

"But I've just explained to you that it hasn't worked before and it won't work now, so it's pointless. We need to think of something else."

"No. If anyone was to kill me, I'd want it to be you. I'd want yours to be the last face I see, and so would he."

My head slides down the door because the slithers of understanding and disbelieving combines to burning my mind from the inside. Ryuk's using my words. I'm not Ryuk, I'm not. I'm not going to die, they're lying. None of this is possible.

"Light?" L asks softly. I look at the door because L's speaking to me, but he's not. He's talking to Ryuk as if he's talking to me.

"Not now. That's why I want you to do this, L."

"Does he love me? Did you love me or am I just an idiot?"

"All humans are idiots," Ryuk tells him. "Don't make me exist like this anymore. I'm not living — I'm dead. This is what happens."

Sour bile rises up my throat. This isn't happening. The silence draws out forever behind the door, and along with the confusion and horror, the fact that L doesn't say anything feels like he's been convinced that he has to kill me and I have a lot to fear now. If he had to kill someone to save himself, then I know what he'd do. It doesn't matter if it's me he has to kill. Sense will win out over anything else, like it would for me. He's killed others for lesser reasons, and he'll kill me like he killed Stephen to save himself, because I wouldn't expect any more from him.

"He's outside," Ryuk says.
So I run. I hear the door open behind me, but I'm running like I did years and years ago in the most normal of suburban houses. My mind can't cope with what I've heard, so I go back to that time instead, which was like this in some ways, but time and life gave me some kind of understanding since. My first instinct is flight when I can't fight or don't know how to. That's normal, isn't it? It was the middle of the night and I'd had a nightmare. I got out of my first proper bed — one that didn't have rails like a prison to keep me inside — and my hand was too small to open the door so I had to use two hands. Sayu was sleeping in a crib that used to be mine and didn't wake up. I walked along the huge corridors to find parents, because they should have been there for me when I was frightened, they had to assure me that I was safe and loved and that was the most important thing. They fed me and gave me what I wanted; they were extensions of me that did what I wanted them to do. I went to their bedroom and I... I heard something. I know what it was now, but then I thought they were hurting each other. My mother was dampening her quiet dying shrieks and screams with her own hand, and my father was on top of her like a wolf tearing something apart, like in a story — like in my nightmares, what bad people do. I didn't tell them to do that. It wasn't funny, so I ran back to my room and I hated my father for hurting my mother and I hated my mother for letting him hurt her because it hurt me. I forgot about that until now, I forced it out, but I never trusted them again. People do horrible things to each other without my permission and ignore what I think when they should listen to me. They should pay attention to me.

And this, tonight, is my glass ceiling shattering above me again and it fills my head with questions and anger. Me as a small child and me as a man running away from what I don't understand.

The next thing I'm physically aware of is my back hunching over and my hands shaking as I struggle to open the doors to the balcony in my frustration. I wonder why I'm doing this. I don't think I chose to run, I would have stood my ground if it was my choice, I'm sure of it. I wouldn't have run, and I think for a moment that maybe my name's been written in the Death Note. L's done it already. It makes people do things they wouldn't choose to do, so I question what I'm doing. Why do I want to go out there? It's dark and there's nothing but a platform and a sheer drop, but still my hands desperately try to open the doors. I feel trapped inside my body and something else has pushed me aside to control me so I'm just looking on. I'm telling myself to stop it but I need to open this door and go onto the balcony, I just can't understand why because there are so many thoughts in my head. The lock clicks and I push the door open and I'm frightened of what will happen now that there's no glass in the way to stop me, but I just stand there. A cool breeze comes into the room and washes over me like water, so I breathe and look at the blackness and the tiny lights of buoys and cargo ships far out to sea and I don't panic anymore. I don't think I even blink. The cold air dries out my eyes.

There are footsteps behind me, and I turn my face towards them. L's practically blended into the darkness of the room like I must be. Only the skin that's visible can be seen, like he's lit from the inside.

"What was that?" I ask him.

"What was what?" he says, and tilt my head to one side because he must be kidding if he thinks he can just brush this off. His expression changes so that he looks as frightened as I feel under a mask of bland calm, and I smile like death.

"Is that how we're playing it now? He's lying. He's just bored. He wants you to kill me because he's bored, can't you see that?" I say, but he doesn't reply, though I give him enough opportunity. "Why did you call him Light?" I ask him. He seems to tense up at the question and looks away, which only makes me more anxious than I was. It's the not knowing. Uncertainty and the lack of control terrifies me, and the thought that the answer and the end might be his betrayal of me feels like shredding claws now only inches from my heart. I really shouldn't care about that. That's the least of my problems now. "Answer me."
"It's ok. I know you're right," he says. "I'm just humouring him."

"How can we get rid of him? He wants me or you or both of us to die, so we have to kill him."

"We can't."

"Why not? That's what he wants, isn't it? He's not me, L. He's not me."

"I know that, Light. He's just joking. He's playing with me. He knows that I'd like him to disappear and he likes causing trouble."

"Why did you call him Light?" I ask again. His ability to lie is either on the wane or I just know him too well now. My anger at him is contained and it calms me. It strengthens me that he lies to me. I can't believe a word he says.

"It's nothing," he says with a small and completely unconvincing smile.

"Do you believe him? He's saying that he's me, isn't he? How would that fucking work? And you believe him?"

"No."

"You said that you wanted me to resign, like you said to B that you wanted me to leave politics. You said it to me. I never thought you were serious. How exactly were you going to do it? Because you're the most rotten player, aren't you? That's what you said."

"It's um... it's only because I worry about you there."

"At the House? Why? Because he said that I die there? Or he dies there? What is he saying? That he's me, what, reincarnated? L, you know that's stupid."

"Yes, I know. Let's go back to bed. I'm tired and this headache's not shifting."

"He's playing games with us. Why are you even listening to him?"

"I can't ignore him all the time; he can kill me if he feels like it. I haven't... He gets bored if I don't use the notebook. That's all this is about."

"Then kill someone so he's not bored," I tell him, seeing his eyes widen as if what I've said is truly shocking and not something he's considered. "What? Can't I state the obvious?"

"It's not as simple as just killing someone. He wants it to be interesting."

"Then have someone fall out of a fucking ferris wheel and get trampled on by a hoard of wildebeest, I don't care. What about Tsukino? He deserves it and you could make it interesting. If you're having trouble then I could come up with some inventive ideas. Why haven't you told me about this?"

"You've been busy," he says. He must realise how ridiculous that sounds, so he makes it more ridiculous. "And you heard him. I don't know how much you heard, but you must have noticed that everything he says is a headfuck and a load of shit, but I have to talk to him. I didn't want to worry you over something I can handle on my own. It's not your problem."

"I think it is. We have to figure out how to kill him. He said that he can't kill me. Why can't he kill me?"

"I don't know what he meant by that," he laughs off awkwardly. "Nothing he says makes sense,
Light, he just says things."

"Can't you ever tell me the truth just once? Do you believe him? Do you believe what he says? He knows what's going to happen, doesn't he. Does he know when people are going to die?"

"He's never said that to me."

"You're lying."

"No. It's hard to tell if any of what he says is true. You don't need to worry about it, Light. I've been dealing with him for years, it's my problem. It's weird shit you never asked for."

"Neither did you, but it's here now," I say. He's crawling out of his skin because he finds this so difficult, which only worries me more. "You called him Light."

"Oh" laughs awkwardly. "I think that's just something I started doing when I was away. Y'know, wooo!" he says in a cheerful, dismissive way, waving his hand around his head like a brainstorm. I don't react at all. I just absorb this and judge him and hate him. "It doesn't mean anything. Look, we play games, him and me. You're right, it's just a game because he's bored."

"How do you even fuck that?" I ask. His mouth falls open.

"I have no idea. I haven't fucked him, so how would I know?"

"He said that you did something. He looked at you and said: 'Done it.'"

"Well, he didn't mean with me. I don't know what he meant. It's not like his teeth are conducive to blowjobs, I really doubt that's something he does. It'd be a horror film, and obviously you can tell that I haven't put myself in such a perilous situation, I'd have bite marks and probably be cockless, I —"

"Maybe he meant that he'd 'done it' when he was alive," I say bluntly to cut off his nervous rattling. His reaction proves to me that I'm hitting on what he believes might be the right answers. I believe him so far as that I don't think he understands everything. He thinks there's truth in what Ryuk says but doesn't know how far it extends, and I don't want to believe any of it. That monster isn't my future. I want to dismiss it as a scientific impossibility, but Ryuk does exist, which disproves logic in itself. And despite all this, my mind is caught in the idea of betrayal. How could L keep this from me and how long has he known? All this time I've been thinking only of destroying Tsukino and winning elections, and now it's all stupid in comparison. I can figure this out myself. Unless L offers anything to me, I'll deal with this myself. Until then, I'll act stupid, but I will make sense of this. "I don't like it, L. We have to kill him."

"We can't talk about it now," he whispers, walking towards me. "He might hear."

"No, he's gone. He's not in the house."

"How do you know? Just because you can't see him doesn't mean he's not watching."

"Because I know when he's here," I say, and that realisation obviously shocks L as well as myself. I'd never thought about it before. I just presumed that anyone would sense his presence even if they couldn't see him, but L's reaction tells me that's not true. "He's a big fuck off monster, L. Can't you sense when he's around?"

"We'll talk about this another time. It's not important, really. I can handle him. You don't need to worry."
"He avoids me now. He never used to. Why would he say those things?"

"He likes messing with people's heads, that's all," he says. My face feels so stone-like and heavy and set while he lies to me. Not complete lies, but worse. He's just not telling me anything. "I'm really tired now, Light. We should try to get a couple of hours sleep before work," he tells me. I hate him.

It's clear that he's trying to gauge what I'm thinking, or maybe waiting for me to accuse him and drag facts from him, but all I do is stare and do what he says and go to bed without argument. He seems surprised that I have and closes the balcony door before getting into bed himself, facing away from me, and we say nothing more to each other. I don't think either of us sleep.
I forgot to update ao3, I'm sorry.

I can't see where you coming from
But I know just what you running from:
And what matters ain't the "who's baddest" but
The ones who stop you falling from your ladder, baby

A few hours after we'd agreed to not discuss anything anymore because L didn't want to, I sat on the edge of the bed with my back to him, staring ahead of me, beating down anger and trying to replace it with excuses. I felt his hand on my back, rubbing a circle into my skin with his thumb, and I said: "Tell me," but no sound came out of my mouth. Though I expect him to know what I think and I know that he does, he just pretends not to when it suits him, like now. This gesture from him is the only one that suggests some guilt or understanding, but no acceptance of any part of it. Maybe the biggest shock of this isn't that I've uncovered something illogical, but that I'm actually surprised L's involved. Part of me doesn't even want to know what L and Ryuk were talking about, because unusual as it is, I don't want to confront it all. My instinct is to back away and forget about it, to go along with him, because the change that could come from this is so immense that for a moment I can't imagine a way to function if I don't convince myself that it didn't happen. But I'm not an idiot.

All he said was: "Can't you sleep, Tink?" and pulled me down against his chest, dragging my legs onto the bed to position me in the way he wanted me. I knew then that he was never going to tell me. Maybe it was a dream. Maybe I made it up. I'd like to believe that.

His thumb strokes my arm in repetitive and slow glides; his heart beats against my ear. His breathing matches it in tempo, and there was something so comforting and embryonic about it. This is where I was before I clawed my way out of my mother. It's where I should be. I pressed my ear hard against his chest to try to hear the blood flood and be forced out of chambers, but I don't know if what I heard was his heart or mine. He makes me tired. He makes me want to trust him. He makes me not care, and when I realised that was what he was doing, I got up without a word and went to one of the spare bedrooms. And, what do you know? I fell asleep almost straight away in a cold bed that was crisp and hard with newness. I didn't put much thought into guest rooms because I never intended for them to be used, but this room was now full of my unconscious thoughts being put into a justified, centre aligned order for review in the morning.

At some point while I'm asleep, my head makes some sense of this. Not good sense, but the only sense to be made. I'm at a disadvantage, obviously, but there's no table I can't overturn. In terms of priorities, I need to talk to Ryuk myself, and until then, there's no reason why I shouldn't carry on as normal. I have to carry on as normal, and normal for me until now has been to win elections. I need to do all these things myself because I can't rely on anyone. Especially not L. He told Ryuk that he wouldn't kill me and I have to believe that what he said was the truth. I have no reason not to believe him, because he's had so much time to kill me but he hasn't done it. I can't give him a reason to change his mind now, but that doesn't mean that I have to accept his shit lying down.
Being ignorant has kept me safe this long, and though that has changed, I can lie as well as he can. Until I find out what it means or force L to tell me, all the anger I have and all the hurt I feel will be directed towards Tsukino. After that, there will only be L and me, and only one winner. I'll take any show of love from him and more because there's nowhere else I want to be. There is nowhere, and he has the death note. I thought I had power, but for the first time it's really hit me that he could kill me in forty seconds if he wanted to, and I wouldn't even have to be in the same room as him. All I have is my heart and mind and hands, and I'll use those to beat him if I have to. They're all I need, really.

If I'm going to die then I'll damn well take him with me, and that will be the end of the monsters who only tell lies.

In the morning, he comes into the kitchen with that pissed off aura he's known for. He doesn't mention my unexplained disappearance, and I presume that he won't until his pride has been totally pushed aside. He can't sleep on his own when he knows he's alone, so the shadows under his eyes tell more than their usual story today. It's my easy trump card because I know it's a weakness of his. I suspected it for a long time, but then a few months after we met he was drunk and told me: "I have trouble sleeping alone." I got him drunk and prised it out of him like with Penber, just by being a listening ear for him and giving him a few disabling questions like 'Why do you have those dark shadows under your eyes? Are you an insomniac or something?' Yes, he is, he said, but he didn't tell me if there was a reason for it. With hindsight, I have my suspicions what the reasons are. It's not a dodgy thyroid, as he'd have you believe.

We take aspirin and go through the routines as normal, but in an unacknowledged tense atmosphere, like two roommates who are more curtly polite than friendly. L only really says anything when B comes into the kitchen. He's then his sauntering self — his voice isn't as deep, his whole demeanour changes — and I watch him, feeling different, as if I've been cured of something and the clarity I had most of my life has been restored to me.

B compliments L on his suit without mentioning mine, demonstrating his distaste for me and his bad taste in general. Also his complete tunnel vision and desperation where L is concerned. He latches onto every movement L makes and every nuance and inflection until his eyes are shining with the joy of being a recipient of his smiles and conversation. B depresses me. Not just because he's an irritating freak, but that he's a living, human-shaped result of the sum of L's cruelty over his lifetime. And to think that I might well have looked at him in the same way once.

L alludes to a case he has been working on to (something he hasn't mentioned to me), and his vagueness only makes me think that he must be working on the wrong side again. I feel like a ghost who eats miso soup followed by toast with apricot jam only because it's placed in front of me, but I'm content to observe and take in the information I find in this hour. I don't announce my intention to leave but L must recognise the signs of my pressing schedule down to the minute, and appears behind me to hand me my coat. The meaningful subtleties of staring eyes makes the silence so heavy before I take the coat from him. He knows what he's done, that he knows that I'm putting on a polite show for him because I haven't completely given up on him yet, that I know a secret which he had no intention of telling me about. But on top of that I sense his disappointment in himself for letting me overhear him. I think then, that if it comes down to it, I could actually be done with him. It's an instantaneous thought I try to hold onto before I start thinking of sentimental reasons to let him live. Whatever might have passed is only as good as the present. All of it is nullified in the event of an unforgivable betrayal, and we're not really talking about something that could end with an amicable separation and splitting of assets now, are we? However much I might love him, if it's based on lies, is it worth anything at all? I finally value trust and see what a rare commodity it is. Extinct, I think. My worth is beyond numbers and must be preserved.
As soon as I get to the Kantei, I phone Shiori. It's a courtesy call, really, but I sound semi-dead, and she picks up on it. Unfortunately, it's not something I can rectify easily by being excited and apparently lovestruck. She's not very persistent with anything, so when I say that I'm ok, only tired, she actually believes me and is thankful to go back to talking about herself instead. Listening to her babble about her sad little life, I have an irrational urge to tell her about my problems, because I know she'll be mute with incomprehension, and she won't live long enough to make an issue of it. But I don't say anything. I just sign some papers for my secretary and accountant while she whinges. I'm still meeting her at eleven and that's all I care about.

I don't want to hear it, but L's voice comes into my head; something I laughed off at the time and forgot about, but Shiori's weak, frightened voice telling me things I don't want to hear makes me think of it. I'd rather think of L than Shiori, because I don't need her to make a pitiful person of herself to me. As long as everyone remains cardboard cut-outs, everything is much easier for me. I can't feel pity. That's how idiots make mistakes.

"Some people don't get the opportunities that you or I did, Light. Or they don't know what to do with them, so they run away from them. It doesn't mean that they're worthless, really, it's just that they're frightened, and everyone's frightened of different things. I can't think of something more worthy of fear than life," he said.

"Are you frightened of life," I asked him.

"Of course. The older I get, the more frightened I become. There's more to be frightened of."

"Like me?"

"Yes, like you. The first time I saw you, you made me want to run from you as much as I wanted to meet you. Because I knew what you were."

Did he mean it? Yes, I think he did. And Shiori's frightened of life and of me because she wants both but is frightened of change and the inevitable pain life brings. I'm not doing a good thing here. I'm aware of it. I say the right words to her and make her heart flutter and make her mind race with the possibility of happiness with the perfect man; the dreams people hear of, aim for, never get. I work her, and it's cruel, I know, because my intentions will be the death of her. I do everything I despise most in other people for my own conservation, and that's how I justify it. I think I was at my most perfect when I was about sixteen, because I was pure in every way and I had no faults or pretences to keep up. I wouldn't have done this. I had no power but I was as brilliant as a person could be in attitude, formation and intellect. I was given money simply because I was alive and perfect, beloved by my family, an inspiration to others, recognised by the NPA who bought my attention on some peculiar cases after my father recommended me. Yes, I was only sixteen but I was a certified genius with an ability to get into the minds of murderers and criminals which surprised even myself. My years between that and graduating university only further proved to me that I was abnormally special. I wanted the most power that anyone could have in the country, because if anyone should have that power, it should be me. I was made for the earthly role which was closest to being a god, and I wanted it reflected in a 10% wage increase every year regardless of the economic state of the country. I don't like money but I've never been without it. If it's society's measure of worth then I think I deserve it. I like what you can do with money and what it can buy, and an idle dream of mine is to draw it all out one day and look at it in neat piles of millions for hours; something tangible but somehow more depressing and meaningless than printed figures on bank statements and faultless credit. I could buy something I don't want or need. I could give it to a worthwhile cause or throw it off the top of the House or bury it or burn it. The possibilities are endless but I know that all I'd do is stare at it forever as the only mark of appreciation I've received for what I am, and wonder why the
world revolves around paper.

My career goals were low for a while with a vague idea that I was going to become a criminal profiler, but to be elite within law enforcement is not truly elite, and I wanted more than that. I was at my most perfect at that age because it was before I had to lie in the most unforgivable of ways and learn how to corrupt and connive. I had to acquire girlfriends in order to fully blend in with those around me and be considered successful in all respects at seventeen, because that was my cut off point. I couldn't avoid it any longer, but I remained aloof, putting in only the bare minimum of effort and keeping them at a distance so my life wasn't unnecessarily disrupted. My general disinterest in them (which I didn't do much to hide), was considered part of my charm, when if people were honest, my charm was that I was nicer to look at than most people. It made the girls question themselves and whether they were worthy of being my girlfriend. If they did something different or looked differently or were more intelligent, maybe I'd be more interested in them. I had no particular feelings about it, but watching them waste away and submerging themselves in self-criticism and emotion had more of an affirming, positive feeling than shame and pity. I had my list of goals which were predominantly education and career driven with additional guidelines, such as: 'Age 21 - get own apartment with Mount Edo view, Age 24 - move to better apartment and move girlfriend in, Age 30 - get married. Age 35 - Have a child.' I did all those things and always bettered my rough guides. But, yes, then I fucked up. It was society that did this to me, and that's what I have to change using the same evil it taught me.

I'd like to keep her as a short-term and part-time occupation during work hours — because I do consider this work and I should be paid for it — and preferably during lunch breaks or on my way back home. At ten, I take the SIM card out of my phone, tell my secretary that I have a meeting out of town and should be back sometime this afternoon. I don't need security trailing me for this, but they're used to me occasionally disappearing in my Lotus, and who knows where I go? It's not like it's out of character for me to vanish into the mist. I'm known for it, in fact. It only adds to my reputation as a great master of inspired, revolutionary thought who requires solitude.

Well before eleven, I'm parked a fair distance from Tsukino's house, and the bitch is going to be fucking late, isn't she. Everyone knows that when I say certain time that they should be there at least fifteen minutes beforehand. I'm sure that she will turn up at some point, because she'd probably kneecap anyone who tries to stop her, but I'm not used to being the one kept waiting, especially for some stupid woman. The only sign of my impatience is the way my hands tighten on the steering wheel and my leather driving gloves creak and stretch. But with ten minutes left until she's officially late, I see a small, frail and wispy form walking on one side of the pavement, looking as likely to be tossed around by the breeze as the autumn leaves in piles at the side of the road. She's wearing a white silk blouse and a modestly long skirt with shoes with an equally modest heel, and appears so transitory, almost translucent with how ephemeral she is. She looks like a ghost already.

I check my mirrors to make sure that there's no one who might be watching, but because it's an expensive neighbourhood where unsavoury people are moved on quickly for loitering and threatening residents with their hoodies, it's safe. When Shiori is walking alongside some tall and well-pruned hedges, I start the car and stop alongside her like someone looking for sex and murder. She looks terrified and she has every reason to be. I decide to give her a chance; if at any time she says that she doesn't want to do this, I'll cancel this whole thing and drop her off home safely and find some other way to get what I want which doesn't include her. But she doesn't once show any sign of doubt, and from that moment, I'm guiltless.

It took longer than I'd expected and there was a lot of boring chat and nineteenth century subtle edging towards her, which I won't go into, but I got her. Yes, through pure will power alone, I get the job done. It was hard enough trying to prise her hands off the front of her old maid's blouse and
skirt. Is this sort of matronly dressing supposed to be ironic? It was like fucking one of those cheap sex dolls, I imagine, and I think I really would have struggled to do anything if she hadn't screamed so much that I had to cover her mouth with my hand. Sometimes with L… but I can't with her, I just have to imagine him because it's so boring otherwise. I think of his neck stretching under my hands and his open mouth, half-panic, heightened, tightened, reigning, power; excited at the possibility of trust is a rising high to the peak of his anger when I slow to appreciate what I'm doing. 'Don't you fucking stop now, you cunt!' he bellowed at me. But she does none of that. She does nothing but lie there

Her very vocal and unspecific reaction was illuminating in regards to her past experiences or lack of, and of Tsukino's suspected impotence. Not that she didn't have reason to scream, because this is me we're talking about, but as far as I was concerned, I wasn't really putting my back into it at that point. My goal was to fuck her stupid in a very real way, but since she was stupid to begin with, it didn't take too long. She started crying and apologising to God, so I told her that it was ok, I knew she was trying her best. Fortunately, she's such a dozy mare that she fell asleep after I said some crap to her about how I'd save her and we'd make this right. Obviously I meant that through doing this she'd contribute to my ultimate political victory by bringing down her husband and my opposition, but it was vague enough that she assumed that I meant that we'd pray for forgiveness and marry as soon as possible. Anyway, I rolled eyes and patted her arm soothingly until she started snoring, and then I was able to get what I wanted from her, which was a photo of her in bed. I tore open condom packets and scattered them around her, moved the blanket back, picked an appropriately awful camera angle, took the photo, job done, and I tidied up again. Of course, I couldn't just jump and run because I have to keep her under my thumb until the end, so waiting for her to wake up was very annoying. She was tormented by her infidelity, so I quoted some lines from that damn book of hers as well as some key quotes from The Art of War and Machiavelli's realpolitik view that "the end justifies the means", because we can only do the right thing when the right thing makes logical sense. It all came in very handy in calming her down until she was deathly still and quiet on the bed, which only made me think how like a premonition this will turn out to be. The next time she screams it'll be for a different reason and I won't be there to hear it. I asked her to shower with an emphasis on 'thoroughly' before we left.

On the way back, she asked me if I felt guilty because of Kiyomi, and I had to stop myself from laughing. I had a shower as soon as I got back to the Kantei and I couldn't stand the sight or sound of any woman because they all sound just as whiny and fragile as Shiori. Kiyomi called into my office but I was having a shower and was glad I missed her. I'll phone her tomorrow to see what she wants. So, I've lowered myself yet again for a great purpose. I'll give them two full days to live because I'm feeling generous.

I got home late, had another shower and then went into my office, bypassing L and B sitting like evil twins on the sofa, but a few minutes later, L came in to offer some smalltalk. When I didn't respond in the way he was hoping for, he told me that he was going to bed. At nine o'clock, yeah. He's tired. At least, that's what he says. Funny how one moment you place such joy on seeing someone that work seems like it's a chore you have to complete in order to be rewarded, and the next, you find chores to do in order to avoid what once was your reward. I'm aware that our apparent normalcy is just a facade, because we're anything but normal. The house feels so cold and empty, but I enjoy watching him try to sit through my impossibly polite silence and one word answers until he gives up altogether. I like to see him hurt without a show of blood. I think it must hurt more than anything else; to be emotionally and physically abandoned. A bullet of his betrayal is ripping through him slowly until he can't stand it anymore and says that he's tired when he's not, just so he can get away from me and what he's done to me. I know him better than anyone. He revels and fights against angry words and accusations, but he can't do anything against being confronted with my dignified
pain at knowing what he is.

After he goes to bed early, and B quickly follows because there's no reason to be awake anymore, as he sees it, I wait for Ryuk, tossing an apple into the air to mark the seconds passing. But he never comes. So, I go back to the spare room I definitely shouldn't be in when L’s in the master bedroom. The keyword is 'master'. I haven't done anything wrong; he has. What the fuck am I doing sleeping in this shitty fucking room? But I do sleep.

It seems part of the dream I've having. I feel pressure on my face and mouth like having my face forced into a pillow, and my arms and legs twitch tiredly against it because it feels so real. Instead of feeling my hands being held behind me like they are in my dream, I feel a hand on my face; a thumb pressed under my eye and finger settling along my jaw. I grip the collar of what feels like a t-shirt, and this doesn't sync with my dream either. In my dream he's wearing a suit and it's a film noir kiss. It's like watching a film with the wrong audio track, it's just not right. I follow the lead of the weight against my mouth until I realise that it's not a dream. I only have to see a flash dark hair and ringed eyes before I turn my face away.

"Off the books?" L says, and I look back at him, outraged but the suggestion and by how his hair hangs limply over my face. "Have an hour off from hating me. It must be getting on your nerves."

"No. You're getting on my nerves."

"Don't sleep in here. This isn't where you should be."

"You know what you'll have to do to make me even think about it."

"What do you want me to do?" he says, like he doesn't know.

"Tell me everything. And it has to be the truth, it really has to be."

"I need more time," he replies awkwardly, and my hand twists the bed sheet as I look at the clock on the wall. "I was just… I can't sleep."

"So you have to wake me up? You're so fucking selfish, get out."

"Don't play the pathetic kitten with me. You're not a kid and you're not a fucking idiot. Unless you're going to tell me something significant, you can get out and let me sleep."

"I just need an hour. I have a verdict tomorrow," he tells me. Like I give a shit.

"Do you want me to make a fucking fool of myself and you in front of the press because I'm so tired that I don't know what I'm doing or saying?" he says loudly, rushing the words shakily. "Because that's fine by me. If the verdict doesn't go my way they'll probably have to hustle me out in a
"You must have slept sometime."

"Nope," he says, leaning his elbows on my chest so he can unwrap a boiled sweet. I can hear it knock against his teeth as he rolls it around inside his mouth. "We shouldn't be like this. You should know that I... I haven't lied to you. I wouldn't lie to you."

"No, you just haven't told me anything. Get a fucking dakimakura, L."

"If he hears me talking to you about it, I'm dead," he whispers.

"Ryuk? He's not here. He's never here."

"He's with me all the time. You wouldn't know."

"Well, he's not here now."

"I'm not taking the risk. I'm not sure yet."

"About what?"

"I can't talk to you about it," he says slowly. I turn over, which is hard to do with him on top of me.

"Then B's down the hall," I say sulkily after a pause. "Sleep with him, he won't mind."

"I don't want B," he replies quietly, and presses his mouth against my shoulder while he thinks. "Just... time out, ok? I want one hour and that's all. I've done it for you. When you wanted me around, I stayed."

"Yeah, but you beat me up first and then you left and stole my car."

"But the point is, you asked me to stay with you when you needed me and I did. Can we forget about this for one hour?"

"You'll need more than an hour; you look like shit. I'll stay with you until you're asleep. That's the best I can do."

"Ok," he says sadly, and moves off me so I can pull the sheets back for him. When I tense up and shift myself a little farther away from him, he just moves with me, aligning himself along my side. I lie there like a corpse — like Shiori was with me — while he does to me what I did to her in a different way. A bit of psychological fuckery is a speciality of ours, but I'm almost immune to it at the moment. His arms chain around my waist and he hooks his sweatpant leg over mine, just like another restraint. And I lie there on my back with his head on my chest and think that no one else knows he can be like this — like a parasite; like mistletoe on a tree leaching from it for his own ends. I can't believe that he has ever been like this with anyone else, because he wouldn't allow himself to be so weak and reliant. I'm unique in that respect.

"What went wrong, Light?" he asks me.

After an uneventful morning, I spend the remainder of my lunch break with Mikami and Touta in the
Kantei lounge in front of a giant television which is set on the news channel all day, every day. That's not unusual in itself, but what is unusual is that I hear L's name mentioned. Has he been arrested? Is he dead? Has he scribbled someone's name into that fucking book of his and been caught? Why is he on the news? I turn the sound up so I can hear it over the cackling MPs, civil servants and aides in the room, and I stand up when L appears on the screen outside what looks like the Supreme Court. Fuck.

"Life on the streets does this to you," some fifteen-year-old in a suit standing next to L tells a reporter. There should be a rule about people wearing suits when they have greasy hair and acne. "We're all under pressure out there. I was under pressure. I didn't want it to end up like this. It was an accident and thank fuu…" he stops when L nudges him in the ribs, "it's good that the judge saw it that way."

"But the verdict is very unexpected," the reporter says. "Your defence must have put forward a very convincing case."

"My defence… yeah, I guess. Oh, L? Yeah, he's the man, y'know? My grandpappy came through for me and got me a really great guy. I'm not gay though."

"Your grandfather is very wealthy, isn't he? Your defence used the affluenza strategy, isn't that right?"

"Uh…" the boy says, looking lost in a world where nothing makes sense. L steps in front of him to fill in the dead air.

"Affluenza is close to being recognised by international psychiatric associations," he tells the reporter in a very smiley way. "My client is a victim of a consumerist upbringing, leaving him selfish and emotionally immature and unable to function as part of society. I called a psychologist to the stand to testify and make it clear to the judge that my client's overly permissive upbringing prevented him from fully understanding the consequences of his actions."

"Four people were killed as a result of your client's rampage and one is left with serious brain injuries which leave him unable to move or speak. Do you think today's verdict is justice for those people, Lawliet-san?" the reporter asks him. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"My client has undertaken substantial therapy since the incident and he pled guilty to manslaughter. No one can say that he intentionally drove his car into those people with an intention to kill, so manslaughter is what it was. His family has also voluntarily recompensed the families affected for their losses. My client has to live with what he's done for the rest of his life, and that is a life sentence. He's on probation and I think the judge is right to give that one more chance."

"Do you think that if your family had not had the money to afford your defence counsel and treatment that you'd be standing here as a free man today?" the boy is asked by the reporter.

"Uh…"

"Who can say?" L smiles. "But when I heard my client's story, I wanted to help him. It's not a case of money changing hands. But my client has a useless but supportive family who are also undergoing treatment for incompetency. A supportive family is what my client needs to help him through rehabilitation and to beat his addictions."

"I'm going to rehab?" the boy asks him.

"Yes, that's part of your court order," L tells him, then smiles at the reporter and camera again.
"But I got off!" the boy shouts.

"No, I explained to you that you're on probation for ten years and ordered to get therapy and rehabilitation treatment, which the state is not paying for, by the way," L tells the camera directly. "His family are paying for it."

"Oh fuck. But I'm still out, right?" the boy says.

"You're on probation."

"What's that?"

"This is proof of my client's inability to retain information because of the effects of affluenza and drug addiction, I'm glad you're all here to witness it," L says, ignoring the client and actually pushing him offscreen to talk to the reporter. "Drugs and life on the streets. People on streets, under pressure, is what led to the incident and why I congratulate the judge on his decision. Because 20 years in prison or a death sentence would solve nothing. It wouldn't bring those people back and it wouldn't change what happened. The best legacy we can give those people is to reform this man into an upstanding member of society. We should at least give him a chance."

"Do you think this is an example of how the justice system treats rich and poor differently, Lawliet-san?" he's asked.

"This isn't about wealth, but it's about how wealth distracts us from what really matters. My client's parents spoiled him. By most standards, he was privileged, but it brings its own problems. The repercussions were such that he tried to fill the void with money and slipped into drug and alcohol abuse to ease the pain. Like my client said, this is about pressure pushing down on me, pressing down on you, and no man asks for that. Pressure that brings a building down, splits a family in two, puts people on streets. That's what we're talking about here. That's what this case is about. My client tried to help the injured and contributed to saving the life of one of the passengers who was trapped in the car. He's full of remorse, aren't you," he asks his idiot client off camera.

"Uh…" the idiot sounds out, but L just carries on.

"He’s a victim of a consumerist attitude where children are given money instead of love. He was unequipped to deal with life, and after the incident he's confronted with the terror of knowing what this world is about. It's watching some good friends screaming: 'Let me out!' And how does he cope? He prays that tomorrow he'll get higher, higher, high. Drugs," he says, shrugging his shoulders. He looks quite intense even though he's talking absolute shit again.

"Instead of trying to find his place in the world, he's chipping around, kicking his brains around the floor, because these are the days it never rains but it pours, what else can he do? The only thing my client is guilty of, and I think he'll agree with me, is that he turned away from it all like a blind man. Sat on a fence, but it doesn't work. He keeps coming up with love but it's so slashed and torn - why? Incidents like this are up 20% in this prefecture alone because insanity laughs and under pressure we're breaking. Affluenza is a epidemic," he says, shaking his head, and pauses to gather himself, apparently. This is turning into a motivational speech and it looks likes he's really feeling it. Cunt.

"What I think we should take from this case is to ask ourselves: can't we give ourselves one more chance? Why can't we give love that one more chance? Why can't we give love, give love, give love? 'Cause love's such an old-fashioned word and love dares you to care for the people on the edge of the night? Love dares you to change our way of caring about ourselves. This is our last dance. This isn't a one-off story to read in the paper and forget about; this is about all of us. We
need to reevaluate what's really important in our lives in a Capitalist country. This is ourselves… under pressure. Thank you."

And then he slinks off humming 'do do do do do do do' to Mihael, who appears to be crying. The camera follows him so does his worthless client, and there's the sound of applause from the fucking journalists. L pops a chocolate mint into his fat mouth and I want to die. I want to kill him and die.

"God, that was inspiring," an idiot from the Treasury says behind me. I turn to glare at him and the fucker has tears in his eyes, staring at the TV screen. "No wonder he's the best lawyer in Japan."

"He's a barrister," I grumble.

"It seemed familiar, what he said," Mikami says, rubbing his chin.

"Classic speeches always do though," Touta tells him, then turns to a group of civil servants in the room. "Hey, guys? That's my co-brother-in-law! Kind of."

"It is amazing when you think that he came up with that on the spot," the Treasury twat says. "We have to change the way we treat each other and ourselves. Money doesn't matter! We're the cause of our own stress, fuck, he's deep; he's like Confucius! That poor boy there was given so much money when all he needed was a hug. I'm going to go home and tell my wife that I love her and that I want to give it another go. Why can't we give love one more chance? The man's right! Prime Minister, I understand why you're gay now — that man of yours is brilliant. May I have your permission to leave early? I'd like to surprise my wife."

"If you leave this building you can look for another job tomorrow. Get back to work. Your lunch ended five minutes ago," I tell him, but I'm trying to listen to the TV because the reporters are walking alongside L and asking him questions as he goes.

"You say 'Capitalist country'. Is that an attack on the Prime Minister's politics, Lawliet-san?"

"Obviously I'm not going to criticise him on live TV, am I. Vote Yagami or whatever."

"Are you a communist, Lawliet-san?" another reporter shouts.

"Hell no, I love money too much."

"How's the Prime Minister, Lawliet-san?"

"I said thank you. That means the end," he says.

"Do you have a statement about the Prime Minster, Lawliet-san?"

"I think we're very lucky to have such a good-looking statesman who is also fairly capable. And he has lovely handwriting."

"Do you think he'll be happy that you've won the case? His views on justice are thought to be quite strict, aren't they?"

"He is of the disciplinarian school of justice, yes," he smiles.

"Are you going to celebrate with the Prime Minister, Lawliet-san? What do you think he'll wear?"

L stops as if this is a very important question and his smile and compulsive blinking fills me with dread.
"Hope… hopefully…" he struggles, as though he's trying to contain himself. Oh my God. Hopefully nothing? I stand up to shout at the TV.

"Don't say it, you bastard, don't say it!"

"What's wrong, Light?" Touta asks.

"Hopefully my car should be here soon," L says finally, and I sit down again. "Please excuse us. I'd like to take this boy back to his family," he smiles one last time at the camera. I paid for that left incisor he has there. It was wonky. I paid for that fucking smile and sent him to the dentist's on his birthday five years ago.

The news reporter steps in front of the camera, while in the background one of the security men I've hired to look after L leads the fuckwit to a car which is driven by a driver I hired to drive the same fuckwit.

"Get in the fucking car," I just about hear L say as he pushes his client towards the open car door, but the boy cracks his head on the doorframe. "Ooooh, mind your head, sweetpea," L adds, smiling at the reporters and waving before getting in the car himself. After the car drives away, we're left with the reporter vomiting crap about how wonderful Lawliet-san is before handing back to the studio, who are also apparently overwhelmed by the poignancy of L's ridiculous speech. Apparently his full name now is 'Lawliet-san, partner of the Prime Minister.' God.

And a few seconds later, my phone rings. I don't even have to check who it is.

"Speak," I say when I answer it.

"Prime Minister, may I take you out for dinner?" L asks me.

"You've been on the news."

"Live?"

"Well, unfortunately you're not dead and neither is your fucking client."

"I know we're in the middle of a disagreement at the moment but I'm waving a white flag for one hour. I appreciate what you did for me last night because you really made it clear that you did it only for the sake of justice in the courts of law."

"I didn't know that I was contributing to this freakshow, did I. Which judge heard the case?"

"The Chief Justice," he says smugly, knowing that I chose that prick for the job. I'm constantly let down by all and sundry, I have no idea why I'm ever disappointed.

"What do you want now?" I ask through gritted teeth.

"I just won a case, Light. I need to fuck someone as part of my post-win ritual, you know that, and I'd rather it was you. I'll buy you some enchiladas first though. There's a new Mexican restaurant that opened on —"

"Your speech was shit."

"How dare you. I'm offended, not only on my part but for Queen and David Bowie."

"I knew it, it was a fucking song, wasn't it!"
"Well I can't take this case seriously. This little turd should be on Death Row."

"Hey!" his client screeches on the line, and L must hold the phone away while he shouts at him, because he sounds muffled.

"Yes, you should, and you will be, because you'll break your probation within two weeks and then you'll be dragged up again and you'll swing from the gallows. And you know what's great about this country is that they don't tell you when you're going to die, they just come in one morning and hang you if they've got nothing better to do."

"What's probation?"

"It's nothing to worry about. It means that you should stay at home until your grandfather's cheque to me clears, and then you know what you should do? You should fucking rage it up in a club crawl and do whatever you want to celebrate. Drugs, preferably. Take your car. And when you do, give me a call so I know that you're having a good time," he tells him, then comes back to me. "Now, Light. How do you feel about enchiladas?"

"No," I say.

"Ok. How about you come over to my office and we'll fuck in a stationery closet."

I put the phone down.

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At the end of the day, there was a fire drill at the House which I might have arranged. While everyone was outside (because obviously I don't have to take part if I don't want to, and I don't want to), I take Tsukino's personal phone from his office, being careful to avoid cameras. Tsukino couldn't be bothered with the five minutes and flights of stairs it would take him to go back to the Red's office for his jacket and case, so he goes home during the fire drill. This even surprised me — since I'd prepared for him to report his phone missing — but it wasn't necessary.

After work, I spend the night with Kiyomi and Kira, which is depressingly nostalgic and boring, but pleasant enough. Kiyomi has the chef make me what she decided was my favourite meal, and I slipped straight back into being the distant husband and father I was. L is not mentioned because all of us wish that he was in a ditch somewhere.

Eventually, I do go home and L's already gone to bed to stare at the walls again on his own, B tells me before disappearing with his phone. I then spend forty minutes in the garage, sitting on an apple crate. Another night, another no show for Ryuk. In a way though, I'm glad, because it just makes me more focused on Tsukino. I feel red with intent and the perfect murder. And that night, it's me standing in the doorway looking at L trying to sleep. He turns over and sees me but looks terrified for a second until he realises that I'm not one of his ghosts. Not yet, anyway.

"Have you got a light?… Light," he says, sitting up in the bed and switching the lamp on as moodlighting. Excruciating. I'm just about to tell him that I don't have any cigarettes on me, and that even if I did I wouldn't give any to him, but then see him pull a box of cheap cigarettes out of the bedside table drawer. One white stick is quickly poised between his fingers, and this is news enough for me that I walk towards him, finding my lighter in my pocket alongside B's penknife. My hand hovers over the knife for a few moments as I near him, but then I pull out the lighter. He looks at me hopefully, I think more for my attention more than for my lighter.

"You bought your own?" I say, pulling out my lighter and holding the flame under the tip he extends
"My secretary gave them to me. I took it up because it'd be rude not to," he says gravelly after puffing his cigarette into life. "I forgot the lighter though."

"And did you ask your secretary to buy them for you?"

"Possibly," he says reluctantly but as amused by it as I am.

"Are you still working from home on Fridays?" I ask like an acquaintance. His face opens with yet more hopefulness that's so fragile to being knocked down. The temptation to knock it down is so great, I'm very impressed that I don't smack his hope across the room.

"Well, that's the idea but it doesn't always work out that way," he says. "Why?"

"I was just wondering if you had any plans for tomorrow afternoon."

"Are you asking me out on a date?"

"Hahahahaa… No. You're going to ask me," I tell him, and he smiles. "I was just thinking we'd stay here though. I don't want to go anywhere."

"Skip the date, just get into bed."

"And ruin this lovely tension we have? Unfortunately, I have a busy morning tomorrow."

"Prime Minister's Questions?" he asks, like I should be impressed by his knowledge of my etched in stone schedule.

"Yes, so I have to sleep, sorry. It's late and you're very tiring."

"Am I?" he grins, and I smile back, pinching my lip between my thumb and forefinger.

"Yes, always. In every way," I reply, taking a deep breath. "I was thinking of taking the afternoon off, but not if you're working. It was just an idea I had," I say, and he looks down at his lap, holding his cigarette like a warning to passing aircraft.

"Where did you go tonight?" he asks.

"I went to see Kira."

"Oh."

"He's my responsibility, so I have to make time for him, don't I? But it made me realise that what you said last night was true. You're also my responsibility. I have to make time for you, too. And… us. I know it's been difficult lately."

"Light, if I could tell you —"

"How long has it been, L? Since I slept in this bed," I interrupt, kicking the bed lightly. Something shunts to the front in his befuddled mind, and then he stares off into space, his eyes fixed on some far off wall.

"Do you want it in days, hours, minutes or seconds?"

"Seconds."
"Rough estimation but one hundred and seventy-two thousand eight hundred," he says quickly. The cigarette between his fingers drops ash on the sheets because his hand is shaking minutely. Excellent. I'm a drug now.

"That's a long time," I say softly, clicking my neck to one side so it cracks. Sleeping in that spare room has been murder without my orthopaedic pillows, but I want to leave them for L so he can cry on them.

"Mmm," he agrees.

"I'm going to go to work for roughly eighteen thousand seconds in the morning, and then I'll take the afternoon off."

"You can do that? I thought you'd be busy with the election," he asks suspiciously, so I lift my hand like I'm lazily wanting to volunteer for something, never taking my eyes off him.

"Prime Minister," I explain. "It's all under control. I'll meet you here?"

"Why?" L asks. "I mean, yes, but —"

"Do you think I have some sinister agenda with you?" I laugh. "Never change, L," I say as I walk out the door.

The morning begins so mundanely that it's hard for me to believe that by the end of it everything will have changed. I get to the House early, before most but the most diligent civil servants, and visit the House bathroom. Just for a moment, and I'm horrified by what I find there, but officially I haven't seen anything unusual. The first thing I do once I know that Tsukino has arrived is, using his phone, send a message to Sakurada, employing Tsukino's trademark capslock and terrible spelling. 'CUM TO MY MANSHUN RIGHT THE FUK NAOW ITS URGEN FERGET QUESIONS WHO CARES WHAT YAGAGAYMI HAS TO SAY ABOUT ANYTHON.

Tsukino doesn't appear during Questions, at least, not for very long. Sakurada isn't there either, which is the first indication I get that everything is working out perfectly. By eleven, it's over, since the Opposition is severely low on numbers and there are few people to ask me any questions. Kiyomi stands to ask me about something to do with the Welfare bill, and we share some banter when I ask her if I should call her My Honourable Colleague Yagami-san or if she's reverting back to her maiden name. 'Yagami,' she says with a sweet smile I return. Old Takada would be turning in his grave. God, I hope L's watching this on the twenty-four politics channel.

Afterwards, I sit in my chair and wait, drinking coffee in slow and measured draughts to ease the growing, almost sexual anticipation I feel. When my secretary calls me to let me know that Tsukino wants to see me, I think I reach a peak of satisfaction which would normally require me to lie back in my chair for at least ten minutes to recover, but I can't do that. Tsukino is let into my office, and when I see his piggish, evil face, the hatred I have reserved for him for years as well as the worst of the hatred I feel towards all that I consider wrong and unjust fills me to the brim.

"Tsukino," I say, standing to bow slightly. He doesn't return it. "You weren't at Questions."

"Yagami," he replies, ignoring me to take a slow stroll around my office. "So, this is the PM's office. I've heard a lot about it. I'll look forward to working here."

I'd have the whole fucking Kantei knocked down before I'd let him sit in my office as Prime Minister.
"Careful, you'll jinx yourself. No Sakurada with you?" I ask.

"Why would he be?"

"I asked him to join us once I got word that you wanted to see me. But never mind, he must be busy. Can I take your jacket?" I offer, waiting like a butler. He's quite thrilled by the idea of me being subservient, but resentfully pleased, so he shrugs his jacket off his shoulders into my waiting hands as I stand behind him. I take it to hang it on my coat stand, making some comments about how warm it is today while I slip his phone back into his pocket from the plastic ziplock bag I've stored it in after cleaning it. You can't be too careful.

When I turn towards him, he has his back to me and is standing next to my chair. I make an observation on both this fact of rudeness, and his suit. "Nice suit," I tell him, calmly striding back to my chair and directing him to the one on the other side of the desk. "Looks like one I wore to my last party conference. You were lucky to get one. I heard that they had a waiting list after I wore it."

"I don't think it looks like anything you'd wear," he says, sitting down. Please. "Did you see me on the politics show the other night? I've been on that, Newsnite, the 10 o'clock news, DawnTV, Breakfast at Seven..."

"What a busy schedule you have."

"Yes. And a lot of campaign visits. Interviews everywhere. People can't get enough of me. What about you? Oh yeah, nothing. And how is... Lawliet, is it?" he asks, leaning towards me with his liver lips spasming with hatred and joy. His mother voted for me instead of him in the last election and I've never stopped laughing since. "I bet you love having him fuck you up the arse like an altar boy. I always knew there was something wrong with you. All you Blues are the same. All fags."

"Have you slept with L, Tsukino?" I say, casually moving some papers on my desk to one side.

"What do you take me for? I'm not one of you. Of course I haven't."

"Then don't knock it," I smile widely. "So, yes, I do like it, but I'm sure your perverse interest in my private life isn't why you wanted to see me."

"I'm perverse?" he laughs to himself, leaning back to sulk and take a envelope from his pocket to fling onto my desk. "I want to know who's behind this"

I've seen it before but I take the folded paper from the envelope. It's a thank you note and quite X-rated. Unsigned. I try to look puzzled.

"I don't quite understand why you're showing me this," I say. "Do you have a secret life? I sympathise if that's true."

"Shut up, Yagami. It's addressed to my wife, look," he points. I look at the envelope, and yes, it is indeed addressed to Shiori Tsukino, and even has a little butterfly drawn above her name. Sweet.

"Do you normally open your wife's post? This seems quite... private."

"She doesn't ever get post - that's why I opened it. It's one of your boys, it has to be. Don't pretend that you didn't know about it."

"I'm very sorry, Tsukino, but anyone could have sent this. Have you asked your wife about it?"

"No! She'd cry if she knew about this."
"Oh no, not crying. Hmmm. Well, I don't know why you're blaming someone in my party."

"It's your Chief Whip, what's his name."

"But he's seventy-two," I say, looking back at the note. "I don't think he knows what a... 'cunnilingus carousel' is, but who am I to say. Anyway, if you'd like to follow this up, I think the best way is perhaps to hold a House meeting."

"No."

"Too embarrassing for you?"

"There's graffiti in the House toilets. Haven't you seen it?"

"What kind of graffiti? In this House? That's blasphemous! But I don't really have need to go in there, do I. I have a world class suite through that door," I tell him, pointing behind me. "Not that you'll ever see it. What does this graffiti say?"

"It... it's obscene. I want whoever's responsible to be sacked."

"Well, you'd have to tell me exactly what it said. You might just find the grammar obscene, and I can't sack someone for that. But they should be severely reprimanded for defacing government property. You should notify House cleaners immediately, but I really think that we should hold at least department meetings about this or release a memo and..." I drift off, suddenly noticing something about the note that I'm very troubled by.

"What?" Tsukino asks me.

"The handwriting looks familiar. Does it look familiar to you?"

"No."

Of course he needs everything pointed out to him, so it's useful that I still have a note from Sakurada which I used as a basis for writing the note I sent to Shiori. I'd sent him a bottle of champagne and a handwritten note to thank him for not commenting about my divorce and L nonsense. That was my excuse, anyway. I really did it to get a handwritten message back from him, and I have it right here. I go through my impressive pile of invitations and memos until I find it and push it sadly towards Tsukino.

"No, this must be wrong. Give me that note back," he demands, his colour changing rapidly to heart attack red. While he compares the two notes, I sit back in confidence.

"It's not surprising, really, when you consider everything," I say.

"What do you mean?" he asks, looking up at me. I think his heart broke ten seconds ago.

"The way the letter to your wife is worded, it's like they're very familiar. You could call it a lurid sort of love letter. It's not like your wife to make an affair out of things but... well, he is quite attractive, isn't he."

"Excuse me?"

"I mean that your wife is quite fussy when it comes to repeat performances. I knew she liked him but... wait. You mean you don't know?"

"Know what? Dammit, Yagami!" he shouts. I am all horror.
"I didn't think that he'd stoop this low. To run a smear campaign against you."

"What smear campaign? There's no smear campaign," he says. Hmmm. I think for a moment and then raise my finger to set pause on this conversation while I buzz my secretary.

"Could you ask Mikami to come in here for a moment?" I say, then turn my attention back to Tsukino. "The problem here, Tsukino, is your wife. It seems to be more serious than I'd thought."

"My wife? What about my wife?"

"Well, you know. She'll do anything for a fuck."

"What!?"

"You do know, don't you. You don't know? Oh God!"

"What are you saying about my wife?" he says, standing and looking like he's going to kill me.

"If you move from that chair, I'll call security and they have guns. Sit!" I tell him, and he seems to have difficulty in obeying me, like his muscles won't allow him to bend and conform to the relaxed nature of a chair. When he does sit down again though, I continue. "I can't believe that you don't know. She said that you gave her your blessing. She told everyone that. She said that you can't get it up, so you told her to find it elsewhere because of her age and insatiable libido. I have to say, you're missing out, Tsukino. Have you tried viagra?"

"Tell me what the hell you're talking about!" he shouts. Well, more of a roar, really.

"Can I just say first that when I slept with her, it was two years ago," I say, and obviously he stands up again like an angry jack-in-the-box.

"You slept with Shiori!?"

"Just the once. At the Summer social, but I'm not sure if it counts, really."

"Come here, you little rat!" he says, grabbing for my tie over the desk, but I avoid him by leaning back. "How dare you say something like that about my wife!"

"But it's true, Tsukino. Don't shoot the messenger. Remember my security," I tell him, and thankfully a short knocking sound on my door is followed immediately by Mikami appearing, looking neatly pressed, as he does every morning. "Oh, Mikami, thank you. We were just talking about Shiori," I say.

"Hey?" he asks, confused by Tsukino being here more than the question, I think. "Pfff... well, I have nothing good to say about her," he sighs grumpily, making Tsukino and all his rage turn towards him instead. "What's he doing here?" Mikami asks me.

"Irrelevant," I smile. "Am I being harsh in saying that Shiori was the House bike, so to speak?"

"Shiori?" Mikami laughs. "Oh, yeah. Not even limited to the one party. She's even worse since I —"

"How many people do you think have slept with Shiori?"

"It'd probably be easier to say who hasn't."

"Thank you, Mikami, that's all," I say, glancing down at my desk to let him know that he has to get the fuck out right now and say nothing. The best thing about Mikami is that he does just that. After
the door closes, I consider the decidedly crumpled man in front of me, wondering whether to be outraged and rile him up that way, or sympathetic and ease him into it. When he falls back into his chair, I have my answer.

"I'm sorry, Tsukino. I'm shocked that you didn't know," I say, then lean across the desk, clasping my hands as though I'm praying. "And I deeply, deeply regret it, but I'd heard things."

"But you're a fag," he mumbles, staring at my desk with wide, horrified eyes.

"Actually, I'm more… I think the term is 'fluid'? I'm trying men out now, but before then I... well, let's just say that Kiyomi was busy with her charities during the Summer break. I was at a loss, curiosity got the better of me, and Shiori always made time for me. You know, with my schedule."

"You said it was just the once!" he gasps, looking up at me. "How many times have you —"

"Ah, you caught me out. It… might have been… a few times? I'm a natural bachelor, you know how it is. Or maybe you don't. But, yes, I knew that she was your wife and I have disrespected you, but I am sorry. We can be gentlemen about this, can't we? I had no idea that you didn't know and that she was doing this behind your back. Actually, I did hear some things, now that I think back on it. It all makes sense."

"It's not possible," he says quietly, immersed back into his catatonic state. I'll have to drag him out of that.

"Everyone's had her. There's a sweepstake at The Club about who can do two days in a row. You can get special leave to take extended lunch breaks, but limited to once a month or the House would be practically empty," I tell him, which does seem to help bring some anger back to him. "If I'd known that she was lying to everyone about having your blessing, I would have told you. I can't think of anything worse than being betrayed in such a way, and by someone you trust."

"And Sakurada's spreading this around?"

"I believe so. It must be, his handwriting proves it. And there's always this…” I say, pretending to mess around on my computer for a while, but when I have the aides forum thread about The Butterfly up and ready, enlarging the font because I'm not sure how good Tsukino's eyesight is, since the rumour is that he refuses to wear glasses despite needing them. I turn the screen towards him.

"What is this?" he asks. Fuck's sake, just read it.

"Well, this internet link has been sent to me by a concerned MP. They were concerned that some of my MPs and aides are involved in this discussion about your wife, because that's what this is. Unfortunately though, nothing said here is slanderous, so I'm not sure what I can do. I support free speech, so as much as I'd like to help you, I can't force this to be taken down."

"Shiori…” he whispers, his eyes are transfixed and watery like two pickles fresh from the jar when he sees my photo of his wife in the hotel room. Quite disgraceful.

"That's her, isn't it?" I ask. Standing up to look at the screen also. "It's timestamped on Wednesday. Is this your house?"

"No."

"Oh. I thought it looked like your house but it must be a grotty hotel. Ah. The person who posted this also started the thread. If only we could find out who it is. They say that the photo was taken at the Seaview Hotel in… God, I'm not even sure how to pronounce that. Japanese is a funny language,
isn't it? I'll call them and see who had booked in on Wednesday."

"They won't tell you. That'd be breaking privacy laws or something, wouldn't it?"

"I think they probably will tell me, Tsukino, I run the country," I inform him because he's obviously unaware of the doors that open.

"What he did to my Shiori," he whines at the screen and reaches out to touch the image. I feel like clicking on it to make it full size so he can appreciate my handiwork better.

"Yes, she looks like she's been quite intensely fucked, doesn't she," I say instead, leaning it to peer at Shiori's surprisingly bulbous backside. "What a mess, look at that. This doesn't shock me though, obviously. I've seen her in worse states."

"What?" he shouts, grabbing hold of my lapel and pulling me towards him. "You bastard, I'll —"

"Don't touch me," I say, and somehow the way I say it is more threatening that his caveman way of dealing with things, and I unwrap his fingers from my suit with a faintly disgusted look on my face. My imagination goes into overdrive in creating a mental picture of Tsukino's grease soaking into the weave of the suit. Urgh. "I'm the only one on your side. Calm down. I'll get you a Perrier while I phone the hotel. That'll make you feel better," I tell him cheerfully. I practically skip over to crack open an ice cold bottle of water, set it in front of his with a tumbler while pressing my phone to my ear, asking my secretary to connect me to the hotel. The old man answers and now I know what L meant when he mentioned my telephone voice.

"Oh, hello, this is Prime Minister Yagami… Yes… Thank you… I have your vote? Thank you very much, your support is much appreciated. I'll have my secretary send you a badge. I will do my best…" I say, sneaking a glance at Tsukino, but he's in fairy land. "Well, yes, unfortunately he is a lawyer but don't hold that against me… Yes, he's foreign, but he's half Japanese and has a very nice accent and has absolutely no influence on my work for Japan. He comes very much second, my country comes first, as it should be… No, I don't need to book a room at the moment, thank you, but I will keep you in mind if I'm ever in the area. I need some information about someone who used your services on Wednesday the fourteenth. Could you help me, please? I'm trying to track them down… Yes, it's a state security concern and your information is very valuable. The government requires your full assistance… Oh, yes, thank you, I'll wait." While the old man toddles off, I put the line on speakerphone for Tsukino's benefit and tell him: "The owner is blind, so he's getting his daughter to read out who booked in."

Absolutely no reaction or thanks for all this trouble I'm going to for him. He's not the best company.

"Prime Minister?" the old man's scratchy voice echoes around the room.

"Yes, I'm still here," I tell the machine.

"We didn't have that many guests that day, but my daughter just read out their names to remind me. A gentleman called Kai stayed for a week. He was on holiday from Hawaii and I was quite suspicious of him, Prime Minister. Mr and Mrs Sakurada from Tokyo booked in but left the same day. They were newlyweds on their way back to Tokyo. A family called Shimohira from Misawa stayed for four nights and—"

"Did you say Sakurada?" I ask, seeing Tsukino lift his head.

"Normal spelling. They were a very nice couple, I remember them. They're not in any trouble, are they?"
"No. But they told you that they were man and wife?"

"Yes. I remember that they stayed for a few hours, I think they checked out at three. I don't run a love hotel, Prime Minister."

"It doesn't matter if you do, that's perfectly legal. Thank you for your assistance, you've cleared up a few questions. Your discretion in this matter would be appreciated," I say before ending the call.

"He wouldn't do that to me," Tsukino murmurs. No, but I would. I'm transfixed by the horror on his face, all caused by me and suggestion.

"What this proves it that Shiori wants you out of the way altogether now. In fact, I did hear that she'd closed shop for the last, ohhh, six months? It must have been because of Sakurada. And he did mention that he was seeing someone and that's why he pulled out of those hunting trips you two used to take," I inform in, moving behind him to speak into his ear so I'm just a cruel voice of reason to him now. "He's been knocking up your wife, Tsukino. Everyone's laughing at you. You'd be open to a divorce though, wouldn't you? It's the only thing you can do now to save your reputation, although with these posts online, it's only a matter of time until the press finds out, and that'll be your chances in the election done for. Because I played it by the book — separating from Kiyomi before I moved in with L — it was all above board, and I think people are coming to terms with it now. But Sakurada's not going to accept any less than having you thrown out as leader for losing so he can take your place. He wants you gone, and so does she, from what this looks like. When you think about it, Sakurada has a lot to gain from this, doesn't he? Leadership and your wife. Not surprising that he started that thread when you think about it like that. I wondered why you hadn't broken this up before now. Seeing you stand next to him in the House, I couldn't understand how you could be on such good terms when he's fucking your wife stupid, but then, I thought that you had to look all of us in the eye knowing that we've all seen your wife's tramp stamp."

"Tramp stamp?" he asks, turning his head towards my voice.

"Butterfly. She has a butterfly tattoo. That thing there," I say, pointing to the photo on the screen and the childish tattoo at the base of her spine. "That's what she's known as. That's her code name – 'doing the butterfly'."

"No."

"She told me that you hate her tattoo and that's why she kept it. But you didn't know. You poor man."

"I'm going to kill her!" he says suddenly. Yes.

"No, wait. There's no need to resort to that, is there? You'll just have to back down on this one and give her her divorce. I'll call Sakurada's office and find out what's holding him up, shall I? We can sort this out here and now. I'll be an intermediary."

"Yes, I want to see him, I want to kill him!" he hisses. Hold up, Tsukino, I haven't finished yet.

"If they love each other then there's really not much you can do about it. You'll have to let her go," I tell him, flipping through my contact book for Sakurada's office number at the Red's headquarters and pretending to call it.

"But I love her. I can't believe that she'd do this to me. And Sakurada," the big idiot says. It's like all his bones have turned into gelatine, it's amazing. It's a great burden to have this kind of power.

"Yes, he's like a son to you, I bet. I hear this is always a danger when you have an unsatisfied
"younger wife," I nod. My call connects, for all intents and purposes. "Yes, hello. Light Yagami speaking. I'm just wondering where Sakurada is. I called before to ask him to meet with me and Tsukino in my office to... I see," I say into the droning line, put the phone down and look at Tsukino. He has all my sympathy.

"Where is he?" he asks, standing stiffly.

"Now, don't make assumptions."

"He's with her, isn't he?!"

"I understand that you're upset, but this is exactly what they want. Are you on heart medication?"

"Why?"

"He mentioned it to me, that's all. Something about the way he said it... it made me suspicious. Sakurada wants to be leader of your party, that's obvious from what he's been saying to people. And he wants your wife as well. You can't let him do that. You have to handle this like a man."

"Like a man," he repeats after me, his eyes drifting off to stare broken and empty. Yes, like a hunter. Like a killer.

"Yes. I don't know what I'd do if I was in your place," I say softly, walking behind him again like a bad dream. From my view, his ears are an even deeper red than his face, his hand trembles on his thigh, sweat soaks the ends of his thin hair on the nape of his neck. He just needs a push. "Betrayed by the two people closest to you in the world. If Kiyomi had done that to me... and made a fool out of me... I'd probably do what any man would. But knowing that Sakurada is fucking your wife right now, I don't know how you can be so calm. Who knows what they're doing. I don't know, I just keep thinking about the last time I saw her. I got a blow from her in your living room the day we were at that war memorial ceremony. I was late, remember? You remarked on it. She was why I was late. She used one of your socks to wipe her mouth afterwards. I think she got off on it, because she really hates you, you know. She called me God because I made her come. You've never managed to do that, apparently. She can't even feel you when you're inside her, she said. She just has to look at your ugly face and wish you were someone else. How do you feel about a gay man doing a better job of fucking your wife than you can? She said that you're a dirty old man and she hates the sight of you. She wanted a real man, she said, and now I suppose she's found one she wants to keep. She's a whore, Tsukino, and she wants to kill you. They both want you dead and out of the way, and they'll destroy you if you don't stop them. Honestly, I can't tell you what to do, because if it was me I'd probably back away quietly because I'm not man enough. Not like you. But if I could — if I were you — I think I'd do to them what they did to you and stab them in their fucking hearts."

I pull back from his ear to stand straight and see him shake all over. His hands are clenched into fists now, though I feel like I did when Jeevas' ashes and L's mouth were all over me. I step back with my eyes closed before he stands and storms out, and then I move onto stage two. It's not enough that I have alibis here, but there aren't any links to me that I can't explain if I'm ever asked. In fact, I plan to come forward with them and call the Chief as soon as the news breaks. It's all my fault. I knew that he was upset. I should have done something, but I had no idea he'd do something like this.

In his tornado of pre-murder, Tsukino has left the door open, so I follow his path as far as my secretary's desk, looking around worriedly until my secretary, an abnormally nosey bitch, asks me if anything's wrong.

"Did Tsukino say anything to you?" I ask her.
"No. He just left. He seemed angry, are you alright?"

"Yeah. We agreed to meet to talk about the debate and fact check, things like that, you know, but he just started talking about his wife instead. I think he thinks that she's having an affair."

"Ooops," she smiles, biting her fingernail guiltily.

"Hmm. But I couldn't really get much sense out of him. He was saying something about Sakurada and just… left with no explanation."

"Sakurada's his deputy, isn't he? Maybe he's gone to talk to him. It might calm him down if he has problems."

"Do you think he's ok?"

"Oh, I'm sure he will be."

"I don't know. Have you heard anything about him having mental health problems?"

"No. He's not very nice but I haven't heard anything like that. Oh, Prime Minister, the bi-election result came through. We won the seat."

"Good, another safe seat for the election. Note it on the board, will you?"

"I have already, Prime Minister."

"Thank you. What would I do without you," I say, and she blushes like a schoolgirl. God. "All that with Tsukino's tired me out. If there aren't any more messages, I think I might go home for the rest of the day. We have a friend staying."

"Oh, how lovely! You should. Your diary's free now," she says. She's very pleased and slightly surprised that I'm talking to her like an equal about such things.

"Yes. Could you call Tsukino's office in a while to make sure he got back alright? I feel like someone should check on him, but that might be too intrusive, considering that we're in opposition."

"I'm sure he's fine, Prime Minister. You shouldn't worry so much about people, especially him. Maybe he's gone home, too," she suggests, and I agree with her incomparable common sense.

"You're right. Well, thank you. Oh, could you call Mikami for me? Tell him I want to speak to him before I leave."

"Yes, Prime Minister."

"And, um…" I add, stalling with my hand on the door as if I've just remembered an inconsequential something or other. "Tsukino said something about graffiti in one of House bathrooms, but he was raving at the time so it could be nothing. Could you get housekeeping to look into it for me? If there's anything, just get them to clean it. And could you call my… could you call Kiyomi and ask her if she and Kira can come with me on a visit on Monday? It's in the diary, I'm opening a new science block at a school I've been thinking might be suitable for Kira, so I thought we could view it at the same time."

"But I thought that he was happy in the school he's in."

"Yes, but I'm not happy with it. The school I'm considering has the best rankings. Kira's happy anywhere, it's for me to decide what's best for him."
"He is a very happy little boy," she says, then shuffles some papers on her desk. "Don't worry, Prime Minister. I'll look after everything here for you," she tells me. What does she think she is, my office wife? But I smile and nod appreciatively before I close the door, then pack my suitcase and bask in my chair until Mikami arrives and wait for the distant sound of sirens. I feel cold inside. I imagine Shiori, bloodsoaked, crawling on the floor towards me and clinging onto my legs, never letting go of them.

L’s car is not outside, but that's just another disappointment to add to the ever-growing list now. Considering that B’s supposedly on holiday, I don't think he's actually left the house since he got here. I walk in the front door and almost walk straight back out again when I see him sitting on the sofa looking at me. Instead, I just dump my briefcase and keys at the door. He's not going to ruin my day.

"L’s not here?" I ask him, taking off my jacket.

"No."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"No? Oh dear, what's happened? After you left this morning, he was in quite a unique mood."

"Unique. You mean he was happy?"

"I hate it when you two fall out," he says, and I look at him only long enough to see how he's leaning forwards with a fake sympathy and concern with his arms crossed, hanging over his knees.

"I bet you do," I scowl on my way to the bedroom, but I know he's following me, and when I'm in the bathroom I see him hovering in the doorway out of the corner of my eye while I text L. "Get the fuck out, B."

"I'm just watching."

"I don't want you watching."

"You weren't so shy before," he says smugly.

"I'm not shy."

"Slightly shy," he amends, grinning like a skull. "Why does he call you 'Tink'?" he asks, smiling like a skull when I look at him sharply. "I heard him. 'Can't you sleep, Tink?' Unless there's another fucking fairy in your room, he must have been speaking to you. Are you having trouble sleeping, Prime Minister?"

"Get out," I say again, turning away from him to look at the latest incident reports on my phone until he makes a rising noise like an alarm.

"Ohhhh, that's revealing. You didn't complain when he called you that, you didn't say anything that I could hear and that says to me that you don't mind him calling you that but only in private because you're embarrassed that I heard so it must have some significance to you, do you know what I'd give to have him say anything to me the way he said that to you and now he's given you a godawful pet name I feel ill," he rattles, finishing by pressing the back of his hand to his forehead dramatically.

"Then be ill somewhere else."
"It's alright, I'm ok now," he pouts, tilting his head. "Can I pick your clothes out?"

"No!"

"Can I run you a bath?"

"No, you can't."

"You're looking pretty swish," he tells me, pressing his tongue against one of his sharp teeth. I notice now that he's holding a glass of something. One o'clock is definitely starting early.

"Get out of my house right now!"

"And miss you getting all squeaky clean? No. L invited me to stay here and half this house is his so I'll just stay in his half of the house and not yours. That sounds fair, doesn't it? You're trespassing on his half of the house, but don't worry, I won't tell. Have a drink, Prime Minister," he says, holding the glass out towards me.

"What have you put in it?"

"Nothing! I wouldn't do anything to L's things, would I? It is only vodka, but if you're scared of me…"

It's so obvious that this is a double bluff but at the moment it's more important to me that he knows that I don't find him a threat in any way. I could take double of whatever he gives me, so while it's stupid and impulsive, but I take the glass and drink it in one.

My hair is still wet from my shower and drips onto my knees while my head buzzes. We're still waiting for L, I think, and the room has taken on a hopelessly resigned atmosphere that makes me tired. I've had an exciting day so far and deserve a break, I suppose, so I walk to lean against the bookcase to create at least some distance between myself and B, who's sitting like a king on a chair facing me.

"So, El Presidente. How are you feeling? Not nauseous anymore?"

"No," I say, squinting at him.

"Good. That's good," he says, stroking his temple with his middle finger. My phone pings, so I reach in my pocket. No messages. When I look up, B's smiling at his phone.

"L says he's on his way back. He told me and not you, isn't that strange, Tink?" he asks me, but I roll my eyes and drink my vodka. "I sense some underlying anger coming from you. Whenever I mention L, you just snap crackle pop all of a sudden but in silence — shhhh. I can recognise it because I'm trained. Your silence shouts so loud at me, Prime Minister. But why would you be angry? You're happy, aren't you? And he loves you. We should all be dancing, shouldn't we? Let's play a happy song and dance, oh happy day! But you're sleeping in one of the spare rooms. What happened?"

"He's an arsehole," I grumble.

"Well at least you share that personality type," he says. Everything he says brings out the same tired glare from me.

"Do we have to talk?"
"It's just that you've come back and I presume it's either to see L or me."

"Neither. I came back for a break and to eat something."

"I don't think food will help you. It doesn't mix well with… vodka. Let me tell you a story you might like: once upon a time, on a school visit to Barcelona, L and I were sharing a room in the hotel. L and me," he says dreamily, closing his eyes. Give me a break, really? "It was beautiful. I'd been looking forward to it for months. I thought that we could hire one of those scooter things and scoot around like Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn, only they were in Rome and we weren't in Rome. But I thought, you know, Barcelona. L hated everyone else in our class, I was the only one he'd talk to, and he was the one who put our names down to share a double bed, not me. Imagine what I thought when I saw the sign-up slip on the notice board for all to see, Prime Minister. Someone had drawn a heart between our names and it was quite a conversation piece for a while. I was shocked and appalled and went straight to the boy's toilets and used up a lot of toilet paper, let me tell you. You could fill a pint glass with me when I'm… yes. I'm not talking about piss, obviously."

"Just say that you jizzed all over the fucking place."

"I can't, I'm British. It's surprising, really."

"It's not surprising. I remember you and your stream of wank," I say, letting my head fall back against a shelf in my boredom. "You wouldn't be out of place in Wadakura Fountain Park. And you ruined the sofa."

"It's only a pressure build up," he elaborates for absolutely no reason, so I wrinkle my nose. "Thoughts. All thoughts. I was getting there though, I was getting braver; I'd bought a black shirt from Burton's."

"I can see where this is going. This is pointless. It's like going to see a film about the Titanic and being expected to be surprised when it sinks."

"No, it was beautiful. We did hire a scooter and L drove it on the wrong side of the road, but I thought, if we die, I couldn't think of a better way to go; hanging onto his back like a baby monkey. It was perfect… but then I woke up in the night and L was fucking our art tutor in the bed next to me. In the same shitting bed as me! Don't laugh at me you piece of shit don't laugh I'll make sticky ribs out of you!" he shouts, his hands either side of his head, and shaking, eyes bulging. I try to calm myself by crossing my arms but I have trouble speaking through my urge to keel over.

"Ooops. That must have been a… shock."

"It was a bit," he says in a breaking and hushed voice. He presses his finger to his temple and looks like he just experienced a terrorist attack, and my stomach hurts from suppressed, heaving laughter. What a stupid twat he is. "He noticed, L did, and he mouthed 'sorry' to me and smiled like all he'd done was steal a few of some of my crisps without asking me. I turned over and put my hands over my ears but I couldn't block it out. Was he saying sorry for waking me up or because I wasn't the art tutor or because he wasn't doing it somewhere else or because he'd turned the lamp on or because he just had to prove a fucking point about a Mr Apparently Straight Pompous Tutor he hated but who had a suspicious obsession with Henry Scott Tuke paintings?"

"Ha," I laugh at the carpet over B's wide-eyed manic breathing. "Yeah, that sounds like L. Who was topping?"

"I'm just saying that if you think you're special or that he has any respect for you then you're wrong. He doesn't have any respect for anyone."
"I am special but he hasn't contributed to it. And he does respect me. Sometimes he uses lube instead of spit," I say, buffing my nails on my trouser leg.

"Is your whole relationship based on sex? Because that's not terribly healthy, Prime Minister. I wouldn't say that you have a healthy relationship, anyway, but your preoccupation with sex says to me that you're trying to make up for something that's missing."

"Maybe…" I sigh thoughtfully.

"I knew it!"

"Or maybe we just like fucking," I say, throwing a shiteating smile against his comical frown, then I lean forward to whisper. "And I fuck L a lot, B. A lot." Actually, not all that much since that first weekend, and now I've found out that L is probably trying to kill me, so the bloom is definitely off the fucking rose.

"Even though you're sleeping in separate rooms now?" he asks, and I scowl and look to the window and try to ignore him. "Something tells me that he's not very happy about it. In fact, I suspect that you feel that you've been wronged in some way. By him, and your revenge is to withhold emotional and physical support. You know he's a nymphomaniac and unable to sleep on his own. That is absolute cruelty, Prime Minister."

"I don't think he's a nymphomaniac. I've known worse. Did he sleep with you in France?" I ask quietly.

"Well, actually… no, he didn't. I thought he might, but no. I cannot tell a lie. You'd. Fucked. Him. Up," he says accusingly, stabbing his finger into his cheek with every word.

"He fucked me up," I mumble.

"Then let's call it a draw, eh? Now, with you and L, what would you say the ratio was of meaningful, loving conversation and actions to symbolically killing each other?"

"Well, I don't have a pie graph handy and I am talking to some fuck up who doesn't have sex in or out of a relationship, so it's kind of hard to explain. I heard that this sex business is very popular now. I don't know, I'm not one for fads, but I met L at a Scrabble addiction clinic, and we were partnered up to support each other when we went cold turkey. Life without Scrabble was just too hard, B, so we thought we'd try sex instead to keep our minds off it. 'Symbolically killing each other', fuck! I can't believe that people pay you for this shit," I say, peering at my nails again. "What I like about sex is that it's about control. Self-control and controlling others. There's no love about it."

"No love about it," he repeats slowly. "That's interesting. Sexual impulses are associated with the drive for life, but in both your cases, it's the self-destructive instincts directed outwards as an expression of aggression and violence and a longing for chaos. All either of you want is to re-establish a state before it was disturbed by the emergence of life. Your impulsive cathexis of sexual energy is an effort to come to terms with and accept the fact of death, which you both desire and dread. Your saving grace was love, but now you're in denial even about that. You can't even allow him that power over you. This is a sad, sad story, Prime Minister, I'm so sad. I have a theory. Would you like to hear it? Don't answer. Self-destructive behaviour also reinforces, quixotically, that the person is indeed alive. The ability to feel pain proves life, numbness is associated with death. Both of you require each other to demonstrate your desire for life. You do all these things, both of you, and yet you're still alive. Amazing, isn't it? Self-sabotage is a stress relieving mechanism conducted to give a semblance of order to a chaotic life. Do you identify with that?"
"Nope," I laugh, letting my head fall back against the bookcase. Ow.

"But you smoke, which is the leading preventable cause of death."

"My doctor doesn't consider me a smoker."

"Oh, I could have so much fun with you," he says breathily, his eyes narrowing as he looks at me. "L said that you were frigid. In the early days, he said that you were 'aloof', which is L-speak for you're as frigid as —"

"You? No, I didn't like it much, that's fair to say. It never mattered to him though. It still doesn't. Sometimes he says: 'Stop looking bored. I don't want to see that look on your face again,' I say in a deep, angry voice and laugh. "But it's not that I'm bored, it's more that I have a lot to think about. I mean, I run the country; I have to multi-task or I wouldn't get any sleep at all. I don't know why he doesn't realise that. I've planned out drafts for a lot of speeches thanks to L just… lying there, but it doesn't stop me from being bored sometimes and it doesn't stop him from ignoring it. He's the one with a problem, not me. I just think of it as another job to do so he'll talk with me like…so he'll let me go to sleep. I don't care. I don't mind. Is this you trying to analyse me, B? I'm touched, really."

"Is this the face of someone who gives a shit about you?" he asks, pulls up his eyelid with his finger. "Sometimes I'm misleading."

"It's a hideous face. Maybe that's the reason L wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire unless there was a chance you'd singe his furniture," I say, belatedly laughing at my own reply. He draws out the silence that follows just to stare at me, and I swear that I can actually feel blood rushing into my brain, distorting sound into a low whine, and my vision becomes out of focus except for B's face, like everything else is underwater. I blink but it doesn't seem to do much except make me angry and frustrated. "Ugh. You should have done a better job at killing yourself. You only did that to get his attention and did it work? No. Because no one has ever cared about in your life. You live and no one notices and you will die and no one will notice for weeks. Even then they won't notice you, they'll just notice the smell and wish that it'd go away. And that's exactly how L and I feel about you right now. You're just a bad smell we wish would go away. I don't care where you go or what you do, but when he gets back I want you to sit there and listen to me fuck your baby boy through the fucking wall."

I might regret saying that. After a few seconds of being completely still, he grabs a butcher's knife which he must have hidden under a cushion and runs at me. My mind goes blank for a second so all I can think is 'shit!' but I instinctively pull out his penknife from my pocket and flip the blade up before he gets to me. It might have been better to have made a run for it before he's on me, but there's a lesson here in that I'm more offensive than defensive, and that contributes to my success in life. Not that I have much time to congratulate myself, because he pushes me against the bookcase and then… nothing. Just a lot of staring into each other's eyes while the bookcase wobbles behind me and some books fall off it and onto the floor.

His eyes glance downward at where I have the penknife pointed at his stomach, and I realise that he has his knife at my throat. He looks back into my eyes and smiles jaggedly. I'm not sure when it became quite warm in here.

"L will be back soon," I say calmly.

"I have a girlfriend," he tells me. He looks quite conflicted, but that might be because he's talking shit.

"Hah. You know no one believes that."
The rage comes back to his face almost instantly, and my eyes blink slowly and heavily, feeling his warm breath on my face when he leans so slightly onto the knife I'm holding. Then I close my eyes altogether.

"What does he see in you?" he asks me quietly, and moves the knife at my throat while he takes a deep breath, like he's smelling me. The sharp edge of the metal warms against the skin under my ear, and just through breathing I can feel how dangerously sharp it is. His breath becomes even hotter on my lips and I draw it in into myself in a measured laboriousness to savour the closeness of 'the other.' "One day, I'll kill you for what you've done to us," he tells me.

His laugh is as quiet as the wheezing of a shaken coke bottle, and I imagine his face cracking in trying to contain his insidiousness. I change the angle of the penknife against his stomach so it's like an erection, because his mouth is so soft against my cheek and I think of Tsukino, it's…

"Give it," I breathe out.

But before he says or does anything, my eyes snap open when I hear some noise at the front door. From looking at B's flaming, glasslike eyes, it's clear that he heard it, too. To the sound of keys forcing a lock open, B takes his knife away from my neck and slices a lock of my hair with it before he walks away. What the fuck, again? Before the door opens, I more or less throw myself at the bottle of vodka on the table and start pouring myself another glass of it, stuffing the penknife into my pocket.

"My favourite boys haven't killed each other, have they?" L says, peeping around the door. Well, we nearly did something.

B says a thrilled 'hi!' though he's pretending to be reading a book on the sofa. Smooth. I turn my face away to look around me in confusion and drink my vodka in one go, but my throat makes a fucking mess of it and I end up coughing and spraying it through my fingers. It's alright. I straighten and recover and pretend that nothing happened, but everyone's looking at me blankly while I try to drink from an empty glass.

L dumps his briefcase next to B, and Mihael trails in after him looking very lethargic and uncomfortable. I can't figure Mihael out or describe him because he's so uninteresting, but I concentrate on him to take my mind off my hard on. He's leathery and something you'd find on the kerbside? Cheap? Surplus? Your guess is as good as mine.

"I saw your car outside, Light. I didn't think you'd wait around after your text. I'm surprised," L says softly. There's something begging and apologetic about his manner which I just stare right through until it makes him uncomfortable enough to entertain the two interlopers with his dashing, fabulous arseholeishness. "Mihael's just come for some files I need couriered over. Actually, I need to be couriered over, too," he announces, then turns to look at each of us with a dozy look on his face. I'm very impressed by his black coat but I can't make it out very well no matter how many times I blink. There's just an overall tone of dark deeds and carefree professionalism which I am reluctantly very attracted to. "All my favourite boys together…" he sighs.

"I thought you weren't working there today," B asks.

"Yes, that was the plan but I heard that a case was going badly. Not one of mine, obviously, but my firm is acting for the prosecution. I have eyes and ears everywhere and I have to appeal a legal error because the judge is an idiot. Well, really I'm meeting the judge to stop him from making a legal error and being an idiot."

"He bullied him into adjourning the verdict until tomorrow just by coming in and staring at him. I
don't know how he's never been ejected from court. He just swept in like..." Mihael tells us with an accompanying jump forward and a wrestling stance. "It was the coolest thing. Like an unexpected star cameo in a bad TV drama."

"They can't eject me; I am justice," L says, drinking a glass of water and looking at me. "What's wrong, Light? You look spooked. Did we shock you?"

"No," I say mockingly. My neck itches with an echo of B's knife, and when I rub at it, it stings. There's a very thin smear of blood on my fingers. What a fucking shit, he cut me. I bleed such a lot these days I upped my iron intake as a precaution.

"What's that?" L asks, and though I take a step back before he reaches me, he's determined to investigate and touch what I hope looks like a paper cut. His eyes thin as he looks at it and I make dismissive, joking excuses, then he looks at the back of B's head, just seen over the top of the couch. "Do you know anything about this, B?" he says in the particularly low tone he uses when he's really, really pissed off. Shit, fuck, shit.

"L, I said it's nothing," I say. "I used your razor, I'm sorry. I'm sorry because I cut myself on it; you should get better razors. So, you're bullying my judges again?"

"They're not yours."

"Yes they are. Who makes the rules?"

"What's wrong with your eyes?" he asks, but I just scoff and blink and don't offer an answer because I don't have one. His expression gets darker by the second.

"Hi, Mihael," I say, ignoring L. "Working for L in your spare time? Except you're being paid at this very moment to work for me."

"I was told that I wasn't needed," he tells me in his whiney way before sucking on the straw of his fucking slush puppie. I thought that L would have stepped in to defend Mihael's moonlighting by now, but he's fixed on B.

"B?" he asks him.

"Hmmm?"

"I'm in a really bad mood, don't try it. Why is Light's neck cut and why are his eyes like satellite dishes?"

"He's cut his throat? Excellent," he says, turning to look at me for a second, looking disappointed but unsurprised to see that I'm not bleeding out on the carpet, then looks back at his book. "Oh, yeah, the Prime Minister cut himself shaving that bum fluff on his face. I was going to call the National Guard but..."

"You're not cracking on to him, are you, Ben?" L says, walking over to him. Yes, that's B's name, and he insists on 'Benjamin' from what I gather. Any shortened forms result in restraining orders and assault charges settled out of court, unless you're L, of course. I found out through the French surveillance files and I laughed at it for a while, but L has never used his name or mentioned it. It must be bad. It could lead to murder, who knows? Like any interruption would work on L at the moment, Mihael jumps in asking something inane as B stands up and he and L square up to each other in a very unequal way. L looks barbaric. B is fucking terrified. I am extremely entertained.

Because a nuclear explosion couldn't distract him, L ignores Mihael, who gives up and leans against
the wall to anxiously suck on his drink like a baby on a tit. L's now right in B's face, clearly not prepared to believe a thing he says but very prepared to bury him under the floorboards. He stares at him, scrutinising him intensely, and I feel some long delayed sense of justice enacted. I'm reminded why B is just the inferior 'other.' I don't think I'm very well, you know. I can't be if I was considering B when L's around, but it was because L wasn't around. It's his fault — he should have been around, but it's alright now. My breathing is fucked up like I've won a stage of the Vuelta, but that's alright, too.

"I don't know what's wrong with him. He's been drinking since he got back, it's nothing to do with me, he's a big boy now. I didn't do anything to him. I'm not interested in him. I wouldn't… no cracking," B says shakily, but L's so still and quiet and… damn. I have to pour myself another drink to calm myself down.

"You better not or God help you. And even God on his best day would regret fucking with me," L tells him.

Oh. I wonder if I should take my pants off now and just throw myself spreadeagled on the nearest sturdy surface and stick a sign on my arse saying 'L Lawliet, reserved parking'. But then I remember that he's been plotting to kill me with a god of death for an unspecified amount of time.

This might be a turning point in a thirty-year friendship which I'm very happy to have instigated. The silent conversation continues for a few more difficult seconds until L suddenly breaks off staring and walks towards me again. Yes, this is what I came back here for.

"This isn't something we can work through by talking, is it," he says to me. I do nothing but bite my lip. What's the point in lying?

"Off the books?" I suggest quietly with a smile, but there's no obvious reaction from him; he only looks like a wax mannequin with a face, revealing nothing. He walks past me and expects me to follow, which I do after I finish my vodka and smile at B and Mihael like it was all part of my plan. Who's to say that it wasn't? I'm prepared for this — psychologically and physically. I won't go into details but I spent a long time in the bathroom this morning and I'm fully prepared for anything from here on in.

We left the room with a shocked quiet after a bomb blast and climbed the stairs as brazen as you like, and now that we're in the bedroom, I leave the door open on purpose. The room is so bright and L's so dark in it like the blackest of shadows. He stalks around almost pulsating with fury and frustrated ownership, as if I'm a dog who was making progress during training but then mounted his grandmother and pissed on his slippers when he was out. Well, I did need an alibi, not for the police, but for him, and who better than for him to be my alibi? If anyone figures this out, it'll be him, but I won't slip up. The unknown factor is whether Tsukino has followed through or if he's sitting with Shiori and Sakurada having a nice chat and a cup of tea. Doubt crosses my mind for a shocking, thrilling second, but I don't kill it with probabilities and logical reasoning and mathematics; I just let it pass through because it only adds to everything. I read people correctly. I know what to say and do - I have studied. There will be bodies and they will be found soon. The question is, how many?

So I dutifully sit on the bed and start unbuttoning my shirt.

"I cut myself shaving," I say, maintaining my smile when he turns to look at me. He's a silhouette against the window, where the sea looks solid behind him and blends into the sky, and to see him like that makes me drag my glorified ribbon of a tie from my collar. Ties are one of the trappings of being at the top tier of society and success. They're our armour and bridles that keep us repressed and presentable, but not at this moment in time. At this moment in time, I'm just me.
"You know I don't like people touching my things. I don't like my things allowing themselves to be touched," he tells me, flexing his hand as he walks towards me until he's standing between my legs. I don't look at his face because it'd put him in a position of power, so I unbble his belt and pull it free like a bullwhip instead. All I sense is his shadow over me and an anger which is so oppressive it's almost scented. "What do you want? Do you want me to get rid of B?" he asks. Hmmm…

"It's an idea," I say, pushing his coat and jacket off his shoulders in one action so they fall off his arms and onto the floor. It makes me exhale to see the drape as it falls — beautiful, like a slow-motion shot of a glorious and self-sacrificing act in a wuxia film. And I only notice then that it matches his hair colour perfectly, which is looking more 'stylishly dishevelled' than usual, anyway. Whoa. Fuck me with your fully-lined cashmere Chesterfield with set-in sleeves, wool undercollar and buffalo horn buttons. It's so elegantly understated, where the hell did he get it from? I pick the collar up to try to make out the moving, blurry letters on the label. Oh. Burberry London. They do free shipping now. Well, he kept this one quiet.

"He's only been here a week, Light. You haven't been here most the time but you're doing this? Whatever problem you have with me, keep it to me. Why do you have to bring B into it?" he asks.

"B's a non-issue," I say, smiling as I pull up his shirt, and he just stands there and lets me. All any of us want is control, but we're so willing to give it up when someone takes it from us.

Suddenly he plants his fingers under my jaw to pull my face up to look at him, and I see some change in him as if he's finally figured something out. He's seen something in my eyes and I gave it to him.

"What is it? If you have something to say then say it," he tells me, closing his eyes for a second when I softly drag my fingertips up and down the back of his neck like a whisper.

"I can't talk to you when he's here. I'm glad you came back, because I thought we were supposed to have lunch today, minus B. I hate being let down, L. I was here, why weren't you?"

"Something came up. You mightn't have been listening, but a case was going b—"

"And was it really that important? Think about it before you answer."

"What have you done?" he asks again. He's prepared for the worst and looks tired of it.

"What have you done? Or what haven't you done?" I ask, tilting my head to one side as I look up at him. Neither us have any intention of answering, but he turns his face away because his sin is worse.

"To hell with you, I haven't got time for this. I have to work. Just don't… with B. You should go back to work, yourself. I heard that you had an election coming up and the journos are waiting to follow you around like a pack of Hunter S. Thompsons."

"You haven't asked me anything about it."

"Ah, so this is because you're not getting enough attention, diddledumpling? I'm not happy about it, that's why. You were supposed to resign but you didn't, so I cut my feelings and brainpower off on that issue."

"Why? I asked you to come back to PR because then we'd see each other more than we do already. No one would think it was strange now. You're my First Lady, First Man, whatever. Although neither term is particularly accurate. Current Man would be better."

"Have you slept with someone else?"
"I would describe myself as experienced, yes."

"No, today. You've done something I won't like and is that what it is? With B?" he says, swallowing. Yes, the thought is quite appalling. I've seen so much havoc which jealousy births in normally stoic characters today, but on L it's really very beautiful. He's so colourless normally that only the most violent of emotions can make it believable that blood actually flows inside him.

"Why do you want to question me about that when you know better than most that it means nothing. How many people have you slept with since you've known me?"

"It doesn't count."

"Explain and annotate."

"Because I… I always ended up thinking of you," he says quietly, looking down at my legs, but then he suddenly seems to get very angry about it. It takes all my self-control not to laugh in his face. "I can't get off now unless I think of you. Happy?"

"Oh dear, L," I say. "I think we have the same problem. I have to imagine that it's you because I can't stand anyone else. I think I actually hate everyone else. Everyone."

"So you have then? You had B?"

"Fuck, L, I do have standards. But I have slept with someone else recently, yes. And I did think of you while I was doing it."

I clench my teeth together in anticipation of his reaction, but he doesn't do anything at all, and I am very surprised and even disappointed. There's nothing — not a glimmer of anger that might explode, nothing. I'll have to put a bit more effort in if I want to upset him now, obviously. But then he slaps me across the face when I've just about given up on it. It's not an unpleasant feeling — I've never been adverse to it — but my main thought after my head has been sharply smacked to the left, is that as much as I was anticipating what he'd do, he was doing the same with me. He knew that I expected to be hit, but he waited until I didn't think it would come. It's clever, and I turn back to him with closed smile to show him how impressed I am by him.

His eyes widen, and the light from the window and his closeness show every flare of grey radiating in the coal iris of his eyes. I feel myself moving mentally from my comfortable anger and disgust to something softer, and though I try to stop myself, it's too late. It's like quicksand, and I've never been able to tread that ground without sinking sometimes. It's not what he's said or even the display of hurt that did it, but seeing something new about eyes I thought I knew better than my own that makes me momentarily stupid and speechless; like his face looks open with the same kind of stupid right now. I look down because I'm ashamed of it. This man is going to kill me one way or another, but all I cared about for a second was his fucking eyes.

Like a blast of wind that'd knock you over, he kisses me. It's fierce and from both sides, because there's nothing quite like realising that you've fucked someone up as much as they've fucked you up. And perhaps only in this way are we equal. I put my arms around his neck and grip onto his hair and I am so, so ill, I'm an idiot. Our mouths stay open and gasping, moving clumsily and desperately like we just can't be satisfied. But then a flash comes into my mind of him standing in nearly the same spot as he is now, in the dark, lying to me, so I push him away. I'm so calm that I'm practically dead, but his breathing has picked up from dubstep to speedcore.

"Light, you have to move out of that fucking bedroom and get back in here or I swear I will kill someone," he says.
"Starting with me?" I mumble.

"Hey? What did you say?"

"Nothing. Don't worry, L, you'll get your fuck. Right, well I'm really pleased that when we're unfaithful to each other we're not really being unfaithful because of some lame excuse I'm happy to go along with. But to go back to what's important, if you come back to PR, we could work together, live together. I could keep my eye on you, because you're not the most trustworthy person either, Mr Lawliet. We could rule the country. Wouldn't you like that, L? The only reason I can think of for resigning would be if I was at risk somehow, but it's not like I have anything to worry about. I mean, you'd tell me, wouldn't you? I'm used to people close to me plotting my assassination."

"What?" Yes, you scrawny cock.

"You know, my political assassination? You were the best PR I ever had," I say, clicking my tongue when I see his stomach muscles tense. I try to concentrate on loosening his tie and unbuttoning his shirt from the top. "You'd be able to tell from public mood and media coverage if you thought there was a reason for me to resign without a fight. Your opinion means a lot to me. If you thought that I should quit then I'd have to consider it."

"That'd be quite unusual for you."

"Well, things have changed, haven't they? You're my partner now. I love you, apparently."

"Apparently."

"Newsflash," I say with a half-smile.

"Then, yes. I think that you should resign."

"You'll have to give me a reason, L. Preferably a sit down meeting with a forty-thousand word document explaining why I should give up my career on your say so. And maybe with coffee in a French press and biscuits on a plate, because I'd need to be really fucking seduced into listening to you with titanium-coated espresso cups and saucers as props. You'd need those, bank statements, champagne truffles, a butt plug with a furry tail, financial projections, a slideshow, maybe your father's judge outfit, and —"

"I'm just saying that you being in politics complicates things unnecessarily," he says tiredly.

"Politics is complicated by nature. It's why we both like it, if you've forgotten. But, not that you've shown any interest, things seem to be improving. I won another bi-election seat this morning, and what do you think the chances are that I'd lose it during the general election next week? Everything's looking much better than it did a few days ago. Beautiful photos of me on the front pages today, you must have seen them. Really nice. After seeing them, I'm not surprised why your entire existence rotates around fucking me stupid. And the articles weren't bad either because you weren't mentioned. I think they've decided to forget about you and think of me as a life-long bachelor. My face wins votes. And, as you've said yourself, what would I do without politics?"

"Every problem we have is because of politics; that's why you should resign. I was thinking… maybe we could talk about it later."

"Oh, I don't know, L. We're so busy," I say, slack-jawed and breathing heavily all of a sudden when I part his shirt open. He's nothing conventionally impressive but he's not conventional in any way. He looks like one of those fucking idealised ball-jointed dolls, and I hate anyone who's ever touched him even in passing, dead or not. "We should do everything now while we're both here."
"I thought that maybe I could liquidate the firm and… that we could start one together as partners. Equal partners. 50/50."

"Wonderful. So I resign and we start this new firm. And what would we call it?"

"I don't know," he says in irritation, shaking his guilty head to one side and freeing more strands from his hair gel's weak hold on it. It's very distracting to me, and without really thinking, I kneel and reach forward to brush it back and kiss where it touches his forehead. I feel very… I am quite conflicted. But you know that I love that he's a liar. I love that he thinks he himself is a good enough reason to lie, and that I love that I'm always left waiting and guessing for him just as much as I hate it. He looks into my eyes and can't understand the signs he's picking up in a mind complicating science and logic with more ethereal things. Am I listening to him or not? Am I angry or not? Do I love him or not? Is he losing? "The name is the least important thing, Light. Call it whatever you want," he tells me. How kind of you.

"What about Law, Lies & Company?" I suggest, sitting back again.

"Ok, you don't like it," he says, turning his face away again. You'd think there were diamonds scattered on the floor by the way he keeps staring at it. "Fine then. Do whatever you want. You always do. I only meant that you're on safemode support from me. You're doing this on your own because that's obviously what you want. You're lucky that I'm still here."

"Oh, would you leave again?"

"The fact that I haven't says a lot, doesn't it? We can talk about it later."

"But we don't see each other."

"Well, you're sleeping in another room, so…" he shrugs moodily. Yes, and I have no time for you. I could go forever without having another person touch me again and you know it.

"B shouldn't be here," I say.

"I'm starting to agree with you. Just leave him alone. He's housetrained but neither of you play well with others. I have to go to work and you should do the same."

"No you don't."

"Yes, I do."

"No. You don't." I tell him, holding onto his wrist like a handcuff and so tightly that I can feel the imperfections of his bones.

He breathes in like he's going to reply but the words get stuck in his throat, so he grumbles to himself instead to try to disguise how he's giving in. I call him L-sama and laugh quietly to myself while he unzips his trousers and I take off mine. What we have here is a ritualistic means of redemption and reassertion of rights of a condemned property, and I wouldn't have it any other way. It comes with a satisfying regularity whenever pride is hurt.

B is partially right, but what he doesn't understand because he's a fuck up is that you can get boring 'healthiness' with anyone. Really, pick a person, any person, alter yourself to accommodate them and be who they want you to be and be patient enough to put up with their shit. It's not difficult, but it's boring. Most people like boring, from what I gather, but it's a rare thing to be your worst and best with someone and for them to cope with it. So, you hide yourself, box yourself up and put it in storage to live a lie in the name of healthiness. It's always going to be just kisses on cheeks, love you,
see you later, what's for dinner? Darling, you look beautiful, sign a card on certain dates because these things are made easy by consumerism and social conventions to take any undue thought out of it. Lights off, not now I'm tired, I don't want to argue with you, presents you don't want or like, have a baby to shackle yourself to yet another piece of concrete to hold you down until you die, goodnight, goodbye… but this chase never ends. We're just snakes eating our own tails. Literally. When we suck each other's cock, we're really just sucking our own.

I look at the open door and try to hear the movement in the house downstairs, but only hear the sounds of our breathing, the shuffling of sheets, and the strokes of my hand on L's back before I dig my nails in. Fresh blood is so red it almost burns your eyes like the scent of it burns the back of your throat, and I imagine it sprayed on the walls of the Tsukino house, seeping under floorboards and pooling under the innocent and the guilty. They didn't have children, but in my mind I see blood spattered and dripping and staining the faces of manic-looking stuffed toys in a toy box. It must represent the children they might have had who I've saved from existing and polluting, maybe. It's pointless trying to explain how I justify what I do and think; what matters is that I can justify it.

My intention is to make a lot of noise and to picture Tsukino slaughtering himself and others at this same time not many miles away in my minds eye. I want to picture B and now Mihael — two people who think of L as an idol without parallel — sit downstairs in an awkward silence and listen and wait for me to send him back to them just a little less perfect than they imagine him to be. Tendons stretch in L's neck as he strains to look back towards the door, and I mouth at the fat, hard ridges under the soft skin, trying to grip them with my teeth. I'm still holding his belt, so I put it around his neck while he's distracted, slipping the leather through the buckle and pulling until it's tight. I use it to pull his head down to me and kiss his smiling mouth. Our noises and shitty minds are a symphony of obscenity before anything's really happened, and I hope they hear outside. I'm certainly not quiet. I always liked an audience and I don't know what to do without one now.

I say that I cut myself again just to make L more silent and more fervent. He's no different to the demons I've seen all my life, but he must be. I don't understand love. I don't understand how it turns from one thing to another and yet remain and grow. It's like a child I can't control, so I deny it nothing and let it become the most powerful, domineering thing in my life while I keep an eternal smile on my face because of how beautiful it is and how happy it makes me.

He pulls against the makeshift dog collar to look at me, smiling like evil and straddling me like an animal, so I let go of the belt and let him sink away from me while I turn onto my stomach. His invasive tongue slides like the fat tentacle of something disgusting between my legs so my head hangs over the edge of the bed. I feel like I'm just a gasping open mouth and that's all I am, but not long after that, I'm dragged by my legs towards where he's standing. I twist around and claw at him like a maniac, pulling and tearing at his shirt until the final collar button gives way, then I take hold of the belt again and use it to raise myself up. I bite at his lip and cheekbone and carve half moons into his back before I drag him down. When I pull back his shirt over his shoulders I see the blotting red stains on the white cotton. It's like an introduction before seeing the angry rising lines and bloody crescents I've drawn on his skin.

I slip two pillows under the small of my back to raise myself up, supporting myself by my elbows on the bed, but he tries to turn me over again. I take hold of both of his arms to stop him.

"No. I want to watch you like you watch me."

His eyes flicker over my face coldly, still lost, and under one dark circle is one of my scratch marks, only this one's deep; it's bleeding and purple under the skin, but I feel nothing but pride. And I'm usually so careful not to leave my marks which he can't hide or explain without blaming it on a werewolf, but not today. I raise my legs and drag my toes up over his chest before his expression
changes totally. He pulls the belt from his neck and grabs each of my calves and pushes and fights against them. And he's so focused on my kicking legs and hushing me that he must forget about the rest of me, so I manage to get one punch in at the side of face to knock him sideways. I've always wanted to but never did to the best of my ability for some reason. It's better than any wimpish play and I sigh unashamedly at what I did. I was always too slow with affection for his stupid face to do better than glancing blows, and after feeling emasculated by him for so long, I feel vindicated and reformed by one really good fucking punch. After that, I'm quite happy for now, but he's not.

I wait there until he stands straight again. My chest heaves and my knuckles start to burn like they've been set alight until he lets me see past his veil of hair over his eyes, like it's a mantle of black threads and tassels. He looks up at me, his face hard with injury and hurt, and it's like his eyes carry every scrap of hatred for every injustice and ugliness he's ever witnessed and suffered in his life. I can almost see all those times replaying in his eyes so he's blinded by them. There's nothing but fury and vengeance there and I can seeing it coming for me like a pack of hunting dogs.

"You worthless fuck!" he shouts at me after he's touched his face and sees the red traces on his fingers of what I've inflicted. He uses a tone I don't think I've ever heard from him before. There's some sense of betrayal and humiliation in it over underlying pain, which I've heard before, but his upset that I'd hit him, in his mind, undeservedly, is what tips it into something new. I deserved to be hit, but he doesn't believe that he should be, and one thing he thought he could rely on is that we're apparently equal. He's wrong, obviously, because to me it's clear that we've only ever been trying to better each other. His idea of fairness is not mine.

His eyes thin to the shape of almonds as he looks at me and the disregard I have for his vulnerability. I'm… not scared, but it makes me cold, like every bone of me is hollow and dry. Fine transparent hairs on my skin which serve no real purpose stand on end like blood feathers. It makes me writhe my shoulder blades against the bed sheets like a trapped and flightless bird who's closer to God than any other. Cast out by God to become the ruler of my own kingdom.

"Not all that worthless, eh?" I tell him, though I can barely hear my own words I want to tell him. I feel closer to God because of him because he's so unworthy, but instead I wrap myself in the feeling of warmth within me and the coldness of him, and where they meet, a storm forms. It's a kind of ecstasy I feel, and I close my eyes and smile as if I might see something divine behind my eyelids if I close myself to the solipsism of him. There's nothing but darkness — which is perhaps all there really is — but one day I'll close my eyes like this and open them as a real god who's neither living or dead. That's the story, anyway. That's what I'm supposed to believe.

While my eyes are still closed, he kisses me like he'll crush my skull. He's like whipping, eroding waves you're not prepared for, and he punctures through whatever dreams I have. Why be a leader of men when I could be god? Why be a god and alone when I could be here? My arms hook around his neck and his hands sear possessing handprints into my skin like his heat burns me inside just by being with me. As unimaginable it is to think of the world without me in it, so too is the thought of anything having greater value than what he is to me. I feel years in this. I feel every day of the years since we met in this, and I live and breathe it every second now. And in my life, how many years have I spent with one hand pressed against someone's chest to keep them away from me?

As if he heard my thoughts, he pulls away again just as suddenly, and I try to look at him with the crystal eyes of the dispassionate observer I want to be. He reaches for my legs again and stretches them back towards me, pulling one up to hang over his shoulder and extending the other one towards the ceiling as a crutch for himself. This is too much like a gymnastics warm-up for me and I don't appreciate being forced flat on my back like a whore when I'm in the process of becoming a fucking live-ass god here — why does he have to ruin everything? I pull back my bent leg to plant my foot
on his collar bone, and I'll push and stand over him and stomp on his vaulted skeleton ceilings as a
god would tear down corrupt churches. But before I have any time to push against him and turn this
around in my favour, he punches my shin bone and then strikes my kneecap hard with the side of his
hand like a knife. I cry out in a way I would never allow myself to do as my leg immediately
stretches out straight as a reflex, slipping off his chest to hang, twitching over his shoulder. As the
feeling starts coming back in throbs, he holds onto my knee to lean forward, lowering his face. The
head of his cock almost strokes my balls while his fingers press the skin behind them, so I close my
eyes and shut the fuck up.

"Look what you made me do," he says in lightly spoken breaths which breeze coolly through my
hair. "Will you scream for me? Hmmm? They're listening, Light, you better scream."

"Bastard!" I shout into his face, my eyes snapping open. But he smiles, pulling away from me again
so that he just has a blurred moon of a face. The hand he has on my knee falls and curves around my
thigh and onto my cock. His fingers pull my foreskin back delicately, which is the thing that really
worries me, and I struggle to see what he's doing. I don't like it when he becomes gentle and
forensic, and I was right to be worried, because he pushes himself into me with no fanfare, slapping
my arse like I'm a horse. Not that I want warnings and preludes and cautious concern, but he's
fucking brutal about it. I instinctively clench against it and my back arches, lifting off the bed, which
only makes what discomfort there is become painful but somehow better, like a thousand starbursts
worth of agony. But it doesn't last long. I'm angry that it's always so temporary, and the noises I
make become louder like I'm being murdered, like his are the low, working grunts of a murderer. I'm
like two people making different sounds and feeling different things. I just shout every juddering,
snarling, interrupted word and accusation I can manage in between the embarrassingly weak groans
he draws from me.

He tells me to relax and not to come, so I bare my teeth at him. I'm like a fighting thing that doesn't
want to die, I don't want to come. I don't need to be told what to do, I'll do whatever the fuck I want.
I resent this but I don't. I hate it but I don't. I stop fighting and close my eyes. My neck stretches back
while I take the feeling and sound of slapping of skin against skin, and I feel almost privileged
somehow. Only my bones are stopping him from tearing me in two, and my arm reaches for him to
try to keep myself steady against his thrusting and aggressive shoving, because it's too fast and too
much, he's killing me. I hope he never stops.

Though I don't really care anymore, I feel his impatience and how he slows and shifts, stretching his
back so he's taller and moving like he's searching for something within me. When he finds it, I
shudder, then go limp like a ragdoll. My clammy fingers dig into his arm, and there's no way to
describe how I feel except helpless.

"Looks like I hit jackpot," he breathes out, biting his lip when he eases off to focus on massaging that
one place, and I can't keep my eyes open. I don't understand why he's not just seeing to himself like
he usually does. He's obviously trying to impress me or make me a gibbering wreck. I don't know
and I honestly don't give a shit about it at the moment. Neither of us has power over the other for
very long. L might have think he has it now, but in another way, I've won. I made him become this
beautiful, ruthless thing.

My hand makes a cover over his as it glides, but he pulls his away to put it firmly over my mouth. It
feels like he's putting all his weight onto it and into me, and it's unforgiving again. My eyes hurt from
how stretched and panicked they are as I look at him, but then, I feel like that all over. Only the bed
complains when I can't. My lips try to move against his hand and muffled noises sound against his
palm which aren't audible to anyone but me. Any sounds are cut down to pathetic, squeaking thuds
and L's low groaning sighs and the occasional breathy 'fuck.' I'm not getting enough air because he
won't give me a chance. He forces air from me to rush over his hand which covers my mouth.
"Watch me then," he says.

When he breathes, it's still rapid, and his chest pushes against my arm selfishly. I feel feverish with hate and annoyance at the fading heat in my gut but also strangely calm. His fingers rake over my scalp and through my hair while he stares at the wall, and I roll onto my side to lie against him. My mouth opens against his damp throat and I slip my arm around his back to draw him closer to me. I've never felt as much as I do now.

Am I supposed to feel guilty for what I've done? Because it's all my fault, not his? He does things and I just have to shut my face like I did about Raye, but that doesn't mean that I forgive him. I might say that I do but I see the bullet hole in Raye's head every time he's mentioned. I want to tell L about all the things I've done and that he's the worst and best, because who knows how many people have died and are going to die because of me. No, not for me. All this is for something great, isn't it? I'm just a servant, a saviour, a chosen one, a victim, a martyr, a saint trying to touch godhood in a blasphemous act. I want to tell him that when I heard sirens on my way out of the city I knew that it couldn't be for Tsukino that soon, but all I wanted was to see what I'd done before it's cleared away and hosed down and buried. I want to tell him that I understand now. The deaths we give are justice because of who we are. I want to tell him that I know. If I had a good reason for dying then maybe I wouldn't find it so hard to accept. What a waste it'll be, and maybe if I die, everything I've created will die, too. This whole world will crumble away with me, including him. All this is an illusion I've created, so what does it matter if it ends? And for a moment the only thought in my head is what he is to me and what I am to him, and that I'm so aware of both, conflicted as it is.

"Would you really kill me?" I ask him. His silence says everything. "Is that what you're going to do?"

"I can't talk about it," he whispers.

"You know I wouldn't let you and I don't want to —"

He cuts me off by shushing me, rolling over to face me and nuzzle the side of my face. He kisses my cheek, but it's his hand over my mouth again that keeps me quiet.

"It'd be like killing myself. I wouldn't do it, Light," he says so quietly into my ear, and I squirm against it because he's lying and trying to cover up what he's saying with kisses. "No, stop, I'm telling you the truth. I can't discuss what you heard the other night yet. Just go along with it until I can."

He draws back so I can see his eyes, but you can't tell anything from those.

"I don't believe you."

I look towards a shaft of light cutting through the air and onto the wall, but feel him staring at me and the tempests he restrains only just under the surface, always. He slides away from me so all I'm left with is what remains of a tingling pins and needles feeling, and I roll onto my side and squeeze my legs together to hold onto the violation, curling in towards it. Because he's leaving. I hear him get dressed again and my eyes only move when his footsteps leave the room — when I hear him speak far away, cold and muffled downstairs, and I wish that he hadn't gone.

"Have you got the files?" he asks someone. Surely they can't still be there?

"Yeah," Mihael replies. I hear a succession of voices then, but only L's seems to have any assurance and purpose, though rushed and slightly breathless, like he's in shock. He sounded like that after
Stephen died.

"Let's go then."

"Baby boy? I was thinking that —" 

"B, if you decide to stay at a hotel, I'd understand. With the election soon, things are getting very hectic and we have to be careful about who's seen here. I'm sure you've noticed the journalists outside. It'll only get worse and stress you out. They might research your history, pester your family and… ha… your girlfriend. I recommend staying at The Royale. Tell them to invoice the firm, they know me."

"L, don't —"

"Do you remember what happened last time?"

"But that was his fault. L, your face."

"Don't worry about my fucking face."

"Did he do that to you?" Mihael asks. "That is your blood, right?"

"Yeah, it's mine," L laughs sourly. He sounds surprisingly offended by the idea that it could be anyone else's blood.

"What have you done to him?" B asks him. That's a theme of the day, isn't it.

"I haven't killed him, if that's what you think. I just want everyone to go away," he says, and it sounds muffled, like he has his hands over his mouth. At first I feel a kind of deep-rooted pain like an old ache you'd forgotten about until it comes back to surprise you, but then I bark a laugh into the air above me and the pain goes away as quickly as it came. Death Note them, L. Then they'll go away and stay away. No witnesses.

"We should cancel," Mihael says dryly — almost completely without feeling.

"No, we're not cancelling."

"L, you look like you've been mauled by a fucking crazy. You can't go."

"You severely underestimate me, Mihael. We'll call by the office on the way and I'll change my shirt, wash my face, and I'll think of something in the car. A cat did it."

"What kind of cat, a panther!?"

"Where is he?" B asks, interrupting L's spiralling plans and lies.

"Don't worry about him either. Look, you're my best friend and you've done a lot for me."

"I know."

"But I will dump you like a sack of shit and never look back if you cross me."

I breathe out the breath I've been holding. All this is because of me. I think of all the lives I've touched and changed in just this one day and wonder if there's anything I can't do. No, there isn't.

"Call me once you're settled in, ok?" L continues, the antithesis to the coldness he's had with B so
far. "Just for a few days. I'll try to sort an order out against the press and... Light and I need time
alone to talk over some things. It's difficult to do that while you're here, B, I hope you understand. I
mean you come here and start putting ground rules down and this is our house. What right do you
have to tell us how to act and what we can and can't do? You did not help this situation. If you mess
with him, you mess with me. And, no offence, but you don't want to mess with either of us."

"I was doing it for you, L. You're not who I know you are when you're with him."

"Is that right? Or maybe you don't know who the fuck I am," L says, and it's followed by a distinct
quietude I'd think would spell the end if I didn't think B's perseverance to hold onto L was so intense.
"We'll make plans for tomorrow, maybe. And don't bother him. He's busy. Just get your stuff
together and call a taxi. Here."

"I don't need your money," B says. Oh, L.

It must be L who laughs, and I think I hear the sound of paper being crushed. Who would have
thought he'd turn on him like that? Me. I would have put money on it. Still, it's a shame, in a way.

The front door closes. I pull myself up to sit on the edge of the bed, reaching to fish my cigarettes
from where my trousers are in a heap on the floor. I close my eyes, and in that time I see myself
sitting on the bed and the glass above me imploding. All the glass in the house shatters and hurtles
towards me in an explosion of shards, but I open my eyes before they hit me; when I sense someone
behind me. It could be a guard or a person or a monster or a wife or a son or a mad lawyer or a mad
psychologist or no one at all. It could be in my mind. My eyes are fixed on the skirting board on the
wall ahead of me even though there's a window there with a view worth millions of any currency,
but I can't look at it.

Other eyes stare into my back and make me curl forward like it's a weight on me, but I lift my head
to some movement outside. Two birds swirl around each other over the sea — far away enough for
them to be not much more than blackening commas in the pastel blue air, but I see them and follow
their dancing path across the sky. It distracts me a moment, but then I realise that they aren't like two
lovers' souls dancing. They're fighting each other.

"Just once, I'd like to know what it's like to cry. I mean, really cry and scream like Kira does. It's
supposed to make you feel better, isn't it? But I don't see how. It's just saltwater coming from your
eyes, and I don't think I'd have enough tears. There are so many things I hate. There's so much worth
crying about but it'd be such a waste of time. Why should I cry about it, anyway? How's it going to
change anything? How's it going to help me? Did I really fuck up so badly?" I ask no one.

I lean further forward, and the hand that comforts me by pushing my hair from my forehead and
holding it back against its natural fall is no one else's kindness but my own. My words are so slow,
but then I speak again as if I can't stop myself.

"I don't think I should be punished for it. It can't be wrong if no one stops me, can it? I don't think
there can be such a thing as justice, because it's never found me. I thought I was justice, but there's
no justice, only vengeance. I've done nothing but try and I've done well, haven't I? But shouldn't I
feel remorse and regret for things I've had to do? Because I don't feel anything. I'm not even
surprised, you know? I don't even feel relieved, it's just how it should be. The world should be left to
rot but I can't let that happen, because if I don't try to stop it then who will? I could change things —
I have changed things; I've made life better for people who have no power. If I know that I can do
that, then isn't it a sin to walk away? I just want to sometimes. But I'm not a bad person; I just do
what I have to do. L does the same thing for his own reasons. We're so alike; it's why I love him so
much, I think. Because I do, I know no one believes that. And he... But none of this matters, really.
I'm going to die and become an ugly kind of god, and you know what I do? I'll come back here to
find L. That's what I do. Why do you think that is? It's mad, I thought it was mad, but then it made sense to me. I get power like that and become a god, but I still go to find L. I always come back to find L, and that's why I know it's true. I would find him. Everything else doesn't mean anything at all. They're just ideas I've given meaning to so that I have meaning."

"Are you crying, Prime Minister?"

"Oh, it's B. B? Sometimes I look in a mirror and I see myself but the room behind me is different to how it really is. The furnishings are different, the whole room's different. Sometimes the room is the same but my reflection isn't mine. It scares me because I don't know what it means. I don't want to die. I don't want to be just some black and white picture in a book. I want to be god on earth."

My only truth is concluded by ash falling from my cigarette onto my swelling knee. I nearly forgot about that. The ash continues to burn, glowing orange for a second before I brush it away.

"My doctor says that I should stop smoking now," I admit, but there's definitely no point now.

"I don't understand what you're saying. Speak in English," he says. Oh yeah. I forget that everyone's fucking stupid. "Are you ok?" he asks me.

Ha.

It escapes me in the same way L shunts the air out of me, like a reverse resuscitation. The laughter starts like a fucked up engine, starting and stopping, but soon it becomes louder and continuous, filling the house as an expanding foam would. It takes me some time to realise that I'm the one who's laughing. It doesn't sound like me.

I don't know how much time passes, but I'm so exhausted from laughing that I'm just letting out little gasps every so often. All I feel is L in my head and my veins and the crashing horrors attacking me from all sides that I can't silence. And then I hear the front door close. It has a particular and very final sound, and a while later, I drag myself around the house but I can't find B. I go into his room and see that his clothes and cases are gone and the thoughts in my head are shouting so much that I crush my hand to the side of my head, holding myself up against the door when I become unsteady. Honesty never helps me, look what it does to me.

Routine is a saviour. I shower, dress, make myself look untouched again, and sit on the couch to wait. About half an hour later, my office calls me. 'I'm on my way,' I tell my secretary, and end the call. The thrill takes some time to reach me, because I won — the election is mine now. I've destroyed Tsukino and L — but when it does, I let my head fall against the back of the sofa and smile up at the ceiling.

Done.
A/N. Hello! Well this isn't 'the end.' It's a flashback chaptery sceney thing because, yes, over a year on and I am still finishing up the ending. XD Sorry. I just thought that it'd be a good idea to post this now to show that the fic isn't dead. I'd be very surprised if anyone reads this because it's been an absolute age and I'm very pissed off about how slow I am, but it's more important to me to post an ending I'm happy with, so I'm taking my time with it.

This part would fit between chapters 1 and 2, and it's here at this point towards the end of the fic because I think it's kind of important, though it could be mistaken for plain ol' filth and that's completely understandable. So, Light's just been made Minister of Transport and characters are alive in it who have since sadly passed away to my character graveyard that's getting a bit crowded and set to be overflowing. The Lady is still around and so is someone I've missed a lot since he died.

Boring disclaimers: 'The Box' is taken from slang the police use for both MI5 and MI6 (Box 5 and Box 6), although I used it to describe the Ministry of Defence in this extremely fictional universe. The plot L talks about is based on the alleged Business Plot conspiracy in the US in 1933 because it was mad as. I just made it more mad and tried to shoehorn it to fit better with Japan's defensive military status.

Also, I'd like to thank Karina, Tae and Bleu for reading over some stuff I wrote, and to the lovely people who've been so nice about this fic on tumblr and elsewhere. There have been times over the last year when I did feel like leaving this where it was, but I really appreciate the support and motivation to finish it and not be a wimpy crapsack. And thanks to the anon for reminding me to update ao3.

Schadenfreude

The poet is a faker
Who's so good at his acting
He even fakes the pain
Of pain he feels in fact

- Fernando Pessoa

Making the mistake of scanning the restaurant while waiting for my card payment to clear, my eyes shoot between faces like a rapid gunfire of focusing for 0.5 of a horrible second on each open mouth, greasy hand, t-shirt encrusted with food stains; puffed-out-cheeked chewing, slimy lips, grunting,
sweaty squealing; melting flabby faces like dripping wax and ugly like pigs at a trough. This could easily wipe me of any hope if I let it, but I quickly find the profound sense of detachment I rely on to keep me alive. When I do, the isolation and numbness from my disgust is almost reviving.

I used to think that there might be something wrong with me for thinking the way I do, and that perhaps it was I and not the world around me that was the source of my unhappiness and dissatisfaction. The social expectation for blinding optimism and lightheartedness was something that I could imitate very well from a young age, but an early attempt to alter my perceptions at a grassroots level was the one thing I've ever truly failed at. Then I reasoned that though it might be considered abnormal of me to think these things, the reasons behind it aren't wrong at all. Maybe these people are normal if you base normality on sheer numbers, but to me they've only ever been a plague of benign idiocy, in which case, being abnormal isn't a negative. Looking at them now makes me wonder how we can be classed as being the same species. Lobsters' claws and legs scrabble to prise open clams on the gravel base of a tank nearby while people use their chopsticks to prise open clams on plates. I watch them — lobsters and people — thinking that they both have same negligible value.

With this in mind, my credit card and receipt are returned to me to slide black into my wallet so I can leave. My walk through the restaurant towards the exit makes a bored model on the catwalk out of me, because people look at me, their faces ballooning in awe and shame as if my presence turns the food in their mouths into a gritty gruel of inferiority. I feel their eyes, I hear them swallow, I know the thoughts they're thinking: 'You're not one of us. You're something else.' Yes, I certainly am.

Once I've collected my coat, I navigate my way through a congealing crowd of tourists around the moat of fish in the centre of the room until I find Lawliet, who only stands out because he's relatively smartly dressed in contrast to the couples and children in neon t-shirts and shorts. Everyone else is crouching and gurning at the lobsters and fish while he's treating it like an art gallery, watching Siamese fighting fish which are bedded into the walls like flowing, living pictures in individual tanks. He read some of the menu trivia to me over dinner while we waited, telling me that the fish in the walls are all males bred specifically for fighting. They're more beautiful than females, but despite their iridescent, metallic colours and elegance, they're so surprisingly fierce that they must be kept separate and alone. He said that they'll even fight with their own reflections, and he seemed to find it amusing in some way, but didn't elaborate, thankfully.

I stand behind him while I shrug my coat over my shoulders, silently fuming that he seems so interested in the fish that he doesn't notice that I'm here. But then he mumbles something in English to himself or the fish or to me and I'm not sure which. After tearing my eyes away from my reflection to look at his pale ghost in the glass instead, I pretend that I didn't hear him and check my phone for missed messages. None. Bastards.

"I asked if you're leaving now," he says without turning around.

"I'll get a taxi," I sigh, pocketing my phone. It's just been a waste of fucking time.

"I'll give you a ride."

Now, I'm not entirely sure what he means by that, but it sounds sexually threatening to me. I gaze towards the doorway while I consider options and excuses, but on noticing that I'm turning my cufflink around like a screw without realising it, I look toward his reflection again surreptitiously. His reflection is staring right back, and it gets worse when he turns to smile at me over his shoulder. I suddenly want to tell him that my grandmother has just died and that I have to go. That'd work, but I think he knows that all my grandparents are already dead, so I grumble something about needing air, button my jacket and walk out the door.
I get my air, and it's terrible pure sea air mixed with car fumes and it's whipping through the square and the lights draping the line of trees. Once the door and the rowdiness of the restaurant closes behind me, I pop my collar up towards my chin and stand behind a pillar to shelter from the wind for a minute. One day I'll have my own driver and it'll be in his contract that he's not to talk to me except in life or death situations. I'll have one of those greyed-out window screens that The Lady has in her official car, and even for some of the more important cabinet posts, because that's what you get when you're important. Transport isn't important. The Lady hardly knows that I'm alive. I just need someone to retire or —

"How much for a blow, sailor?"

The voice makes me shiver more than the wind does. I don't even bother turning around to see him because why would I want to do that? I just immediately start walking towards the carpark in the hope that he won't follow, but of course he does. His flapping Converse slap on the pavement behind me, getting closer.

"Yagami, it's me!" he shouts.

"I know it's you, Jeevas. Why do you think I'm trying to get away from you?" I say under my breath. Aside from running, I'm not sure what else I can do, so eventually he catches up with me and turns me around by my shoulder so I'm confronted by his ridiculous face in high definition, as well as his snow leopard faux fur coat. He pushes his sunglasses down the bridge his nose so he can peer at me with his beady cannabis-pupiled eyes, and my heart sinks at being in such close proximity to so much awfulness. "What are you wearing?" I ask him despondently, but he strokes his lapel and smiles like an arrogant lech.

"Yagami, Yagami. Looking pretty fly," he slurs, taking a step back to look me up and down like a scanner taking its time. "On a date?"

"No, I've just been to a meeting. No dates for me since you slept with my girlfriend on my premium Kingsize Airweave mattress topper."

"Ha, but that was a while ago now. Why the celibate bitterness?"

"Who says that I'm celibate?" I ask, offended by the suggestion even though I wish it were true. "I'm just not leaping into another relationship straight away."

"Fuck, have you been talking to Naomi? That sounds like something she'd say. That and 'before you learn to love yourself then you can't love anyone else,'" he says in a clipped, screechy impersonation, pouting like a duck and bobbing like he has some some out of control bouncing breasts. "Something like that. But I wouldn't think that you'd have a problem with loving yourself. Say it ain't so."

"Ha. Jeevas. I know this might be hard for you to understand, but unlike you, I'm a member of the cabinet and I'm fully committed to my role. I don't have time for any distractions," I tell him, taking care to remind him of my status upgrade, but he ignores that and starts making cranking motions with his hand like he's trying to start an ancient car.

"There's no need to pretend with me, Robocop, we've all had slow times. Even me, can you believe it? You just need to relax and flash some cash around," he replies with a pat on my arm before drawing unpleasantly close to my face conspiratorially, but then this whole experience is unpleasant. "But back to the point, how much a blow? I'll have to check your teeth first though, because I've had a few nasty scrapes in the past. Cash on approval? Let's see your molars," he says, sticking his sea slug of a tongue towards my mouth."
"Will you just…!" I say and push him away from me, holding my hands up like I've been unexpectedly sprayed with shit. A side-effect of Jeevas exposure is getting to relive the taste of the last meal you ate as it rises up your gullet, and that combined with seeing Lawliet walking towards us makes this very stressful for me. I rotate Jeevas while trying to wave Lawliet away, but I know that I'm doomed. I'm fucking doomed.

"Bwaaa, I love fucking around with you, mate, it makes my fucking day," he gurgles. "But seriously, I'm sure there'll be someone out there for you. Oh, here's someone! Lawliet. What a surprise," he says, clapping his hands towards Lawliet like he's the main act. Lawliet, to his credit, stops dead some way away, makes a repulsed sound, and turns on his heels. Jeevas shouts after him, but he's gone and so has whatever ride he was going to give me. "God, that was fucking rude, wasn't it?" Jeevas asks me in astonishment. "What a coincidence that you're here and he's here and we're in this superfuckingmassive city, though! What do you think the chances are? It's almost like it was meant to be or, y'know, that you'd just been on a date with him in that shitty restaurant over there or something," he grins.

"It is just a coinciden—"

"Calm down, bro, I don't need the details and I don't want it putting me off my dinner. Romantic setting, isn't it," he says, looking around him. "Fuck me, look at the size of the moon over there!"

"That's not the moon; it's a bar sign." I sigh and point in the opposite direction. "The moon's in the sky over there."

"No way!" he gasps in surprise when he pushes his sunglasses onto his head for a second and make sure.

"And you're obviously not great with astronomy, but I feel like I should tell you that the sun has set and is somewhere over the Atlantic, so you can take your sunglasses off now."

"Nah, I never ditch my sunnies. Fuckin' Magic Eye shit, eh?" he says, pointing at the sign and putting his sunglasses back into place. "Anyway, I'm glad I caught you because now we can have a brotalk."

"Let's not."

"Nah, nah, look. I'm worried about you as a friend."

"But I'm not your friend."

"Bleh bleh bleh, listen, will you!? All this Lawliet stuff," he says, waving his hand limply to where Lawliet was. "I mean you being in each other's pockets and who knows where else. Now, don't get like that," he says, grabbing my arm when I start to walk away. "I'm just saying that you're flying very close to the wind. He's a bad guy. Like really bad, bad news and you're in his bad part of town, so I feel like I owe you a favour after—"

"After you fucked my girlfriend on my bed in my apartment?" I ask.

"Shhhh," he wheezes, closing his eyes when he puts his hand on my arm. "Let it go. But yeah. Don't get too close to him. Didn't Mamma Yagami tell you not to take sweets from strange men? I saw you take a gummy bear from him the other day."

"I didn't eat it, obviously. I was only being polite because he offered," I say. "There's nothing in sweets but E numbers and sugar and I want no part in it, thank you very much."
"Not the point. He's a strange man. I've heard things about him and he's not someone you want to get mixed up with."

"What kind of things have you heard?"

"Well... it doesn't matter what. It's PRIVAC stuff. That's 'privileged access,' FYI."

"What kind of privileged access could you have?" I laugh. "Fucking The Lady's office girl doesn't count, FYI."

"I told you," he says, pointing his finger in my face, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman. Coco. She just gave me head. Why can't you accept some friendly advice when I'm going out of my way to help you here? I'm just saying."

"But you haven't actually said anything."

"It's highly sensitive, I can't tell you! Fact is that you're dumping the crew for a dodgy pansy and it isn't on, y'know? You've got to stay with the pack. Aren't we good enough for you anymore?"

"You were never good enough for me, Jeevas."

"Well, that tells me, you rude fuck!" he more or less belches when I leave, but unfortunately he's hard to get rid of and I can hear him following me again. "Here's me extending a fucking tree branch to you and—"

"You mean an olive branch."

"I don't care, whatever tree you want," he shouts, "but I try to help you and you throw it back in my face. What a fuckin' cheek! One day you'll look back and think: 'I wish I'd listened to the Jeevster, he was right all along, always watching my back,' but it'll be too fucking late then because I'll be in fucking Barbados! Just watch yourself though. Don't upset him and don't get too friendly because you won't be able to go back. He wants to give you more than a gummy bear and people might talk."

"They better not or they'll regret it."

"Oh yeah?" he asks, so I stop and turn around. His reactions are so poor that he walks straight into me, but my thigh muscles are without compare so I don't budge an inch. I grab his horrible lapels so I can get right up in his face. I know how to be intimidating. I saw a fight scene from Battles without Honour and Humanity by accident.

"Yeah," I snarl, waiting for the nervous expression to spread across his whole face before I push him back. Because of his lack of coordination and balance, he falls on his arse. I am not liable. "I'll tell Naomi that you weren't asking about her," I tell him.

"You've seen Naomi?" he asks in a very squeaky way.

"I said I didn't need any distractions. That doesn't make me celibate. Goodbye, Jeevas."

"Fuck you, Yagami, fuck you! I know that you banged her whenever I turned my back, so don't play all high and mighty with me, you bastard! I don't know why I bothered trying to warn you about Oscar fucking Wilde over there. He can have you and I'm sure he already has. Ok, tell her that I've got a Russian girlfriend. Fucking Russian!" he screams, but I'm busy walking along the line of closed shops by this time, so he's just some mad circus act howling at a bar sign.

As if on cue, I see a girl who might be a likely candidate for his latest victim, and by the looks of her...
she charges by the minute. She totters towards me wearing not very much, but has very high heels, incredibly long blonde extensions, a mouth like an inflatable dingy, legs up to here and tits out to there. Though a low IQ might have something to do with her vacant expression, she stares at me as I pass, stupefied by my bone structure and poise, so I bow my head out of ingrained social etiquette. A few seconds later I hear some concerned Russian mewing, followed by Jeevas saying: "It's ok, babe, I got rid of him. HE. TWATTO. Yeah? Do svidaniyeahyeah, yeah?"

After walking some way down the street, I can feel that Jeevas has gone like a diffusing foul air, but the night seems to be a trial in how it continues to get worse. After a brief highlight of seeing a fine pair of leather gloves in a shop window, I notice Lawliet walk out from behind a pillar like he was once part of it. It might have been quite dramatic and brooding if he hadn't hit his head on a hanging basket on his way over to me. Glancing at him to see that he hasn't improved since I last saw him, I start to throw what seems like thousands of receipts from the restaurant into the litter bin nearby just so I can close my shitting wallet. I can't really claim it as an expense because I don't want anyone to know that I spent any time in that place.

"What were you looking at?" Lawliet smalltalks, so I point towards the gloves. He nods. "They look comfortable."

Comfortable? I'd reply but natter for the sake of it is pointless and fucks up my concentration. I take a surprised intake of breath when a receipt slices into my thumb and causes a pain that's sharper than it has any right to be. As I peer at the thin line of red across my thumb, I inwardly blame all this on Jeevas.

"What's wrong?" Lawliet asks.

"Paper cut."

"Let me see," he demands, taking my hand to inspect it before I can work out what he's doing and why. He hisses and tuts, looks up at me sympathetically and says: "You know, if I could take the pain for you, I would. You do know that, don't you?"

"Shut up," I say, yanking my hand back and walking towards the end of the street with him laughing behind me, his hands buried in his black, classic-fit Burberry trench coat pockets. I was wrong in my original assumption in that he was fashionable, because it turned out that he either bulk-buys at Burberry or has no sense of adventure to try out other labels. At my side, my thumb burns like I'd knifed myself. Why does it hurt so much?

"So?" he asks.

"So?"

"Speak."

"Hm?"

"There's something you've wanted to ask me or tell me all night and I wish you'd get on with it," he says. That's wishful thinking on his part that happens to be accurate, but if he knew what I really wanted to ask him then he wouldn't invite it. I've always want to ask him something in particular for months, but the potential consequences and the fact that I'm not intellectually impaired means that it's never happened. There's something else that's been on my mind, but bravery and stupidity often share the same bed. I'm naturally cautious and prefer sleeping alone.

"What makes you think that I want to ask you anything?"
"Gut instinct. There's no one around now, so go for it," he tells me, dramatically clenching his fists. "I just can't wait, Light, I can't stand the anticipation."

"It's not worth talking to you; you've had too much to drink."

"What did I drink? Not enough, let me tell you."

"I know exactly what you drank because I paid for it and the bill was more than enough. Wine doesn't agree with you."

"No, it agrees incredibly well with me. So speak," he tells me again, sighing when I laugh dismissively. "Fine."

And over a short time, the atmosphere has grown very heavy now that we're walking down the eerily empty street in complete silence. It might be a good time to let things go, but my mind whirs noisily until I decide to try to find a more subtle way to get my questions answered, since he probably won't remember any of this tomorrow. He did ask for it.

"Jeevas said that there were some death threats to The Lady and it's thought that someone in the House might be involved," I say casually. Jeevas said no such thing.

"Ahhhh, there it is!" he gasps, looking up at the sky and biting his lip. "Hmm… that's confidential, I'm afraid."

"Oh come on," I say exasperatedly.

"It's dealt with and done."

"Does that mean that the Intelligence Service dealt with it?"

"You could interpret it that way," he replies. "Or maybe penguins did. You could interpret it that way as well. It doesn't mean that I can talk about it."

"The Chief Whip's on unplanned leave, I heard."

"Is he?" he says, like he doesn't know. I think that he knows all about it and I am so close to getting to it.

"And I haven't seen his aide around much the last few days. Kunomasu. I haven't seen him since I told you that I heard a man ridiculing The Lady while singing a Chinese Communist Party propaganda song in the Club toilets, actually," I say, making sure that I have a good view of his profile. Although my own breathing quickens, he shows no response at all, so I reveal the horrible truth: "And that was a lie."

He actually stops walking for a second with a look of fear on his face which isn't something I see often or ever, though I would very much like to.

"What?" he asks, staring into the distance. Drink certainly leaves him more open to being read. This might be bravery and stupidity getting in the same bed for me, but it's hard not to take some pride in having shaken him like a martini. I step in front of him so his eyes can focus on mine, but with some blurry difficulty, I imagine.

"Do you doubt yourself?" I whisper lowly, tightening the belt of his coat with a ruthless tug. "Are you scared that you've made a mistake? Because that's what you're really worried about, isn't it. There'd be nothing worse than for you to make a mistake. What have you done? Where is he?"
"You lied to me?"

"Not exactly. I just didn't give you the full story and he didn't sing anything. I was in a cubicle, just hanging around, because you have no idea how much business is done in the Club toilets."

"You mean sex?" he asks, easily distracted by one of his favourite topics. He's been pestering me for weeks to give him a scandal, but I don't think that's in my best interests at the moment.

"Come on, Lawliet. No one has sex in the Club toilets anymore since those health and safety regulations were brought in. They use the seminar rooms for that now. I know Kunomasu's voice, and unless he was talking to himself, he called someone in there for a chat. When read between the lines, what I actually overheard him say sounded more specific to an assassination plot. We should keep walking."

"No," he says, gripping my hand. "You heard that and you knew who it was but you didn't tell me? You lied to me and made me run around in circles trying to found out who he was?"

"Are you impressed?" I smile, but frowning soon after because his expression could stop a clock. "I didn't lie; I retained information. I gave you a tip-off that you should be grateful for. You expected me to tell you what I heard and who said it? And be dragged in front of The Lady? You think that it wouldn't spread that I'd ratted him out?"

"Ha!" he laughs towards the space behind him as if sharing a joke with a tall, invisible friend. "Ok. I had to investigate every man in the Club that night before I found a connection, and you could have told me who he was and what you heard? Remind me again why I'm even breathing the same air as you."

"I've been wondering that myself. You're no better than me."

"I beg to differ."

"Differ all you like, you're deluded. Like I give a shit about helping you. I did enough. You say that you were looking for someone in the House, yeah? That's a lot of people if you count MPs, aides, civil servants, researchers, assistants, security, general staff, and that old guy who lives in the basement cleaning cupboard. It must be about two thousand people at least. I narrowed things down for you to someone who was in the Club that night. I gave you a lead that would point you to the right place if you were clever enough, and it seems that you are. It was a test more than anything."

"You were testing me?" he asks, standing open mouthed for a second before scoffing and storming past me, all hunched shoulders and muttering hushed curses. I'm still in the right, but maybe I overestimated my standing with him. I have the sense that unless I do something soon, he might cut me off and I'll never get this chance again. He might make it difficult for me to progress and may even try to get me demoted, so I run to catch up with him.

"Look at it from my position," I say calmingly when I reach him. "You'd want me to testify in person to The Lady that I heard it firsthand, but what good would that do me? A rat is a rat, and if I told you or anyone too much then that's what I would always be. No respect, no chances, no trust, and stuck on the backbenches forever. I might as well get a job in that fucking restaurant."

"We had an agreement," he says. "You had the ability to tell me what you heard but you didn't."

"I helped you find him without putting myself at risk, because I'm sorry but I'm not risking my career for anyone. You're not the most trustworthy person in the world, Lawliet-san. I only gave you that tip-off because I don't want The Lady dying yet."
"Yet?" he asks. He always tries to twist my words, I'm sick of it.

"Dying, retiring, whatever," I say, shrugging my shoulders. "It's not the best time."

"That's true, and you don't know what could have happened if I hadn't fixed this."

"Yeah, but you did and I helped."

"No, that's the thing, Light. You didn't help. This wasn't just an assassination plot, because those things are fucking everywhere and everyone's bored by them. This was a plot headed by a lunatic who wanted to overthrow the government through creating an offensive military force with foreign backing."

"Hahahaa, you're joking."

"You'd think so, but no. It's all good laughing at shit like this, but once someone makes a religion out of a rejected Star Trek script about an evil warlord massacring millions of aliens in volcanoes then you can't dismiss anything. This guy had the money, the artillery, and he found a load of unstable wannabe squaddies through the International Paintball Association."

"Ha!" I let out, bending double from the force of it.

"It's not funny. Those guys are maniacs. From my estimation, they were days away from taking out The Lady."

"Paintball enthusiasts?"

"A lot of them. With real guns," he says. His angry eyes are locked onto mine, and I am taking this seriously but some part of me still thinks it's funny, so I laugh and try to cover it with a cough. "It's not funny," Lawliet tells me again.

"Sorry, I've got a… in my throat. Well… shit," I say.

"Yes," he agrees grumpily. "If I only had you to rely on then there might not have been a government ladder for you to climb. I knew there was someone involved who had links to The House and that when I found them I could crack the whole thing open, so thanks for making it easy for me, Light. It's alright, I saved the country without your help. Again."

"I helped!"

"No, you didn't."

"Well, I didn't know, did I! You should tell me things. And maybe you could take some responsibility for not making me feel like you'd shaft me like you do everyone else."

"Light, how long have we known each other now?"

"I don't know," I reply, confused by what difference that makes. "A few months?" Too long, to be honest.

"Long enough for you to know how this works between us. I'm not here to make you feel special. I presumed, wrongly as it happens, that if you heard talk of an assassination plot then you'd think that was worth disclosing without any vagueness, you fucking idiot," he says, striding away and leaving me as still as an Antony Gormley statue.

"Fucking idiot yourself," I grumble as I think over this. There is still something to salvage, so I catch
up with him again. I'm sure that my eyes are full of stars from the epiphany I've just had. "Hey, wait a minute, I foiled a coup!" I point out to him, because I don't think he's realised this yet. "The Lady should know that my vigilance saved her life!"

"Oh now you want her to know? And I think you'll find that my vigilance saved her life."

"Through information that I gave you."

"For what use that was," he tells me. Pfff.

"So, it was the Chief Whip's aide," I say in wonder. "Not prominent enough to be suspected but able to pick up a lot of information and he'd know The Lady's schedule. Perfect cover. Was the Chief Whip involved? He's pretty mad. He wears lime green suits and pink shirts."

"No, he's not involved."

"What happened to the people who were involved?"

"I don't know. The Box is dealing with most of them."

"Box?"

"The Ministry of Defence," he sighs, like I should know his strange, unnecessary slang words.

"What about the head guy? I don't know how he thought that he could away with it."

"That will remain a little mystery in his strange mind, but I don't think he's able to think much anymore from where he is."

"And where's that?"

"Thursday's *Times*, page 57 obituaries, column 3."

"You killed him?" I say, disbelieving but somehow not surprised.

"A bit louder, Light! I'm not sure if enough people heard you," he says angrily. "I didn't kill him. Do I look like a hard knock to you? I'm the brain that finds things out and from there on in it's someone else's business. This way," he adds, guiding me through the carpark.

"What exactly is your job here? You're not the party's PR."

"Excuse me, you know I am. I have an office, it says on the door," he replies, casting his implacable eyes over me. "And I'm The Lady's legal advisor as a sideline, yes."

"They might be your official job titles but do you know what I think? That you're the House Intelligence Service," I say. I'm aware that I crossed a line some time ago and that I continue to step beyond it, but there's no response to that comment at all apart from a small smile that's almost permanently on his lips, anyway. I start wondering whether he has a gun and that's why he has his hands in his pockets all the time. "I told Jeevas and Mikami and my parents and some office guys that I went for a meeting with you, by the way," I rush out as insurance.

"Good for you. I'm sure that they were shocked that someone has agreed to spend time with you out of hours."

"Just so you know that people know where I am and who I'm with."
"Yes, I picked up on that."

"So don't try anything."

"Would I ever?" he asks, which is a stupid question I won't dignify with an answer.

"Am I right? You're with the Secret Service?"

"I investigate leads and pass information on in an advisory role, which we should all do, Light, since we pledged allegiance. You failed to do that," he says. It has that edge to it that's as annoying as it is privileged, but I'm used to it by now.

"Yeah, yeah, but what's happened to Kunomasu?"

"Shhh… If you really want to know, his secretary will find him dead in his office tomorrow morning," he tells me, leaning close to me to whisper. I try to restrain my shock from showing, but can't stop myself from inhaling from how unexpected the news is and from how casually he told me. The top button of his collar is open, and before he draws away, I catch a musky scent rising from his throat, which leaves as he does with the faintest touches of sweetness I can't place. It's as disarming as he is, and when I realise that he's waiting to see my reaction, I pull my gloves onto my hands like this is something I hear every day.

"Very convenient," I struggle to say through swallowing. "Won't it look obvious that someone killed him?"

"No, which proves that I'm not with the Secret Service, doesn't it, because I'd probably make it obvious to give the NPA something to do," he says. "We're not talking about poison-tipped umbrellas or improbable suicide by superficially slit wrists in a wooded area, Light. It'll be death by misadventure, and that'll look very obvious. How many hits have you heard of where a dead guy is found surrounded by porn, naked apart from a pair of women's stockings, an electrical cord around his neck and an orange in his mouth? There are only so many bullets to the head that you can get away with," he says, almost like it's a joke, except it's not. Bullets to the head.

There's a delay before my mind can begin to process what he's said, and when it does, my legs just plant like roots to the tarmac and stay there. I see him walk ahead of me a few steps while all the air leaves my body. Though this goes some way to prove my suspicions that he had something to do with Raye's death, I'm more shocked that I immediately start to think of excuses for why he couldn't be involved. He wouldn't tell me like that. He knows that I was Raye's friend, or that I pretended to be, at least. He's been unusually sympathetic about it when he's come up in conversation. This is what I'd hoped for: to expose this, but I can't do anything about it now. I'd have to be Prime Minister before I'd have that kind of power, and I'm increasingly aware that he could help get me there.

"Here's my car," he says, but turns to find me nowhere near him. "What?" he asks me, standing a few feet ahead as a matte silhouette. Lights from overhead bounce off the cars around us, but I can't see his face. The breeze lifts his hair into what look like spikes, and his shadow extends his limbs, making him appear to be about seven foot tall and so misshapen that he becomes demonic in my mind. It calls my name but I can't answer.

Even when it starts walking towards me, I still can't move, but as it walks, the shadow decreases, like it's sucked back into someone I recognise. Some lights catch on his face, and though his skin appears bleached and dead, he's not as monstrous as I imagined him to be. In the cold air, the breaths I exhale forms a mist he disperses as he walks through it to stand in front of me.

"Are you alright?" he asks. "Too much information? You did ask for it."
"Yeah… I did," I say. "I was just wondering why that level of humiliation could be necessary"

"Precisely because it's not Intelligence's style. You think he deserved better?"

"Isn't dying enough?"

"Ahhhh," he breathes out as if captivated. "No. We all need examples so we behave ourselves, so we're told. That goes for you, too. You really need to tell me things I need to know, otherwise what's the point of this?"

"Of this?" I ask, motioning my hand between us. "For you? Maybe the fucking? For me, I'm not sure, but I certainly know a lot about a dead man in his office who's going to be found by his secretary in the morning."

"Ooohhh, you're not an idiot, are you?" he whispers, bending so that he's looking up into my face and there's no escaping him. "You know nothing and you're going to say nothing to anyone apart from me. Behave yourself and I'll talk to you, but there are limits on what I will say and you will fucking accept that."

"Why? Why am I supposed to tell you everything but not the other way around?"

"Because I don't trust you, sweetheart," he smiles with some tinge of bitterness, "and I've got more to lose. I want to see how you handle this. Yes, there's a dead man in his office and he's there for a reason. Are you telling me that he should've just been given a smack on the wrist?"

"No, but he should've gone through the legal system like anyone el—"

"Why bother with that? All the expense, we all know it'd end the same way, and no one needs to know about this. It'd just upset people and make them worried for no reason. In the trade, this is only a bit of wetwork, so let's keep it on a need to know basis. If you want to be Prime Minister one day then you'll have to change your views on some things. You're a bright kid. Maybe too bright, but your ambition might save you if you're willing to learn. Just take my advice and keep your mouth shut and aim for the stars, Light. I'll help you get there as long as you ignore the shit I have to clear from the gutter. It's what I'm good at."

"And if I don't, will it be me strung up in suspenders with an orange in my mouth?" I ask. My anger towards him means that I literally can't stop myself from talking back.

"Ah no. For you, I think a corset and an overdose just in time for The Lady's anti-sleaze campaign. If I have any say in it, it'll be classy, don't worry. Do not fuck with me. Just fuck me. Ok?" he says with a smug smile, like it's the simplest thing in the world and I'm just some stupid gigolo.

"I wouldn't touch you if you fucking paid me."

"Oh really? Well, I'm sure that's true, but to be honest with you, I wouldn't pay you for your inverted commas services in any currency. We'll both have to make the best of the lots we've drawn, eh?"

"Lawliet, what are you doing this fo—"

"Won't you call me L?"

"No. You don't need the money. What are you doing this for?" I ask, and he genuinely looks so confused by the question that's there's almost an innocence to him.

"I really don't know... but it keeps me busy," he answers. "Why do any of us do anything? If you
"I'd like to think that there can be more to it than that," I say, not totally believing it myself. It's a hope. Maybe he's right, but I'll create a reason for all this if there isn't one to start with.

The change in his face moves from surprise to amusement to being slightly misty-eyed. He touches my face with the knuckle of a bent finger which helps form a tight fist out of his hand, because since I've known him, I've felt that there's only been a milligram of self-restraint between him kissing me or punching me in the face.

"I can't be angry with you. You're just a simple-minded pretty boy," he tells me, stroking my cheek.

"Fuck you."

"What?! What have I done now?"

"I think that you're offensive and disrespectful," I say.

"I am offensive and disrespectful," he replies, stepping close to me like I did with Jeevas, but smiling like a wanton whore. He leans in way too close to my mouth, so I shove him away and glance around to see if anyone's around. He might not care but I fucking do.

"Do you think anyone's watching? Do you think anyone cares?" he asks.

"Probably."

"Why?"

"Because it's not normal," I tell him, and it leads to a stunned pause which I'm personally quite proud of.

"Wow. I always pick winners, don't I," he laughs to himself. "Ok, sunshine, here's the deal and as long as you stick to the dogma then we'll be ok. Try not to be so sneaky with me in the future. If you know something, you tell me. It's in your best interests to keep The Lady where she is for now, and keep me on your side or you don't stand a chance in this place. Yes?" he asks, holding his hand out to me. Deal with the Devil analogies aside, I think it's fair, but roll my eyes as I shake his hand all the same. He then clicks his key fob, and the car which beeps and flashes at his command is, of course, very expensive, impressive and pretentious. "You're an interesting one, though, for a politician," he says cheerfully. "You must take some consolation in knowing that you're the best of a bad bunch."

"Are you saying that I'm bad?" I ask.

"No. I'm saying that you're the best," he replies, leaning on his open car door. I pop a cigarette between my lip to hide a thin smile I have from how socially incompetent and hammy he can be. "Why do you think I'd have anything to do with you otherwise? Fucks are ten a penny. So, what do you think of my car?"

I nod my head to one side as I look over it. "Misa had a Ferrari. She couldn't drive."

"Ah yes, because you run on petrol and diesel when occasion calls for it, I forgot. I go for petrol, myself. And I can drive. Tell me if my euphemisms are too much for you."

"I've coped so far," I mumble, lighting my cigarette with what is probably a sexy flourish.

"I'm glad, because I'm going to have you in this car," he says.
"No. I'm going to have you in this car," I smile.

"Mmm… I wonder if I'll let you," he muses, tilting his head and watching me while I slowly blow out smoke. I draw the seconds out, because I'd been considering just walking away until he made a challenge out of this. "Let's go then."

Lawliet's new car is a Ferrari 458 Spider convertible which he designed online during a lunch break a year ago and which finally arrived last week. I can almost smell the mid-life crisis from the distraught engine which rages into the traffic like it expects cars to just get out of its way, but I don't comment. I'm given a demonstration of the its aluminium retractable hardtop that can be lowered or raised in 14 seconds. The contrast stitching on the leather interior, the Ferrari horse stitched into the headrests, and the dash that looks like an airliner cockpit are all pointed out to me as if I didn't notice. He talks about his 0 to 60 in 3.4 seconds, horsepowered, direct-injection V8 engined, torquey, 'Rosso Scuderia' paint-jobbed metal box like it's a reflection of his libido, but who gives a shit, it's not my car and I'm not interested in his Ferrari or his damn dick.

When he asks me if I'm impressed, I rest my chin on my hand and kiss the side of my finger lingeringly like I'm full of wonder and hormones. In reality, I'm just trying to mask the acid reflux I'm suffering from after a particularly acidic lemon sorbet. My car, my income, my manhood, and my very worth as a human being is being outsized, so I entertain myself by imagining the police finding him dead with a steering column up his arse.

"It's just a shame that you can't afford one yourself, isn't it, Light. I might sell it off next year, though, so if you're interested, I could give you a good deal and a loan, possibly. At your rate, you might be able to pay it off in about ten years."

"Hmm. Anyway, did you see The Lady today?" I say quickly and smiling painfully.

"I went with her on a visit to some scabby district just for something to do. God, it was so depressing, Light," he groans, planting his forehead against the steering wheel while he's driving for one terrifying second. "You should try it sometime so you know what it's like for people living in poverty. Life is just one big hopeless struggle for money to heat their homes and feed their children. Makes you realise how privileged you are. Honestly, it really cheered me up."

'How nice that other people's misfortune has that effect on you," I grumble.

"There's a word for that, you know? Schadenfreude. And like you don't feel the same. You represent a party which made it possible for poor people to stay poor and be even poorer, but let's not split hairs. Ahhh, here we are at the gay bridge in all its garishness," he says. We're approaching the Rainbow Bridge, but he refuses to call it that even when he gives directions to strangers. "I don't know about you but I'm not much into rainbows, so I don't feel that my sexuality is represented at all by this particular shade of gayness."

Yes, a skull and crossbones flag would be much more appropriate for him. I breathe small quickly disappearing ovals of mist onto the window next to me as I look out onto the river of what looks like tar beneath us. We passed a billboard for Lawliet's firm at the side of the road, and after looking at Lawliet of Lawliet & Co., he either didn't notice the sign or thinks that seeing his name on a billboard is his God-given right. The silence becomes strained. I'm beginning to feel like a passenger in a very expensive taxi driven by the worst driver in Tokyo who is also some kind of James Bond villain, so I try to break whatever ice there might be.

"I'd never heard of you or your firm," I say quietly.
"I'll sack my publicist in the morning," he replies. "Oh, wait, I am my publicist and I'm great at it, so your ignorance must be your own fault."

"I just think it's weird that I'd never heard of you when everyone else seemed to know you and there are billboards for you all over the place. I should be honoured, I suppose. What with you and your castle in Kyoto."

"It's not a castle; it's just a very large house. Anyway, you don't feel honoured, do you."

"No, not really."

"So the honour is all mine?"

"If you'd like to think about it that way then yes," I answer, preferring to speak to my reflection in the window instead. "Do you know that people call you The Rottweiler?"

"Do they?" he laughs.

"Well, Jeevas does."

"Jeevas says a lot of things," he replies gravely, because it's true. Jeevas says far too much and ideally he should be buried alive in a coffin and sucking air through a straw, but I sense that Lawliet's reply was loaded with some kind of House information that I should know about for future ammo.

"Like what?" I ask.

"Hmmm… I wasn't going to tell you because I suspect that it may be true, but he said that a couple of years ago you—"

"That's not true," I interrupt him quickly and trying to sound unconcerned, but my jaw tenses and aches. I half expect my heart to jump out of my chest and smack a bloody mess against the windscreen, so I start scrabbling for my phone in my pocket like someone's calling me. I still have no messages but I pretend that I have. Fuck.

"You haven't heard what I was going to say yet," he points out, but I don't have to hear it, I know what it'll be. Because I don't elaborate and he doesn't press the issue, his judging silence seems to go on forever. If it was anyone else then I don't think I would react so defensively. I'd just hear it out, deny everything and they'd believe me, but he wouldn't be satisfied with that. I know that he keeps turning to look at me like I've lost any mystery I'd ever had, so I take a breath and prepare to confront him.

"I didn't—"

"Anyway, he really shouldn't have opened his mouth," he interjects happily, "because I had a terrible reaction to it and leaked that story about him crashing his car for the third time this year. Five times over the limit as well. It was amazing that he could drive at all, let alone almost knock down a woman carrying an unset mandarin and sake trifle. Did I tell you that?" he asks with a smile glinting like a magic trick. There's no air left in me. Is it possible to be grateful and annoyed at the same time? My instinct is to think that he did that because he lives for mischief making, though from his expression, I think he wants me to believe that he did it for me. When I end up having no reaction at all apart from to stare at him blankly, he looks back to the road, looking pissed off as fuck. "I can see that you're concerned, but don't worry. The trifle was uninjured," he says.

"Good," I say, although it's almost inaudible.
"I can't ignore my duty to look after trifles and my investments," he explains.

To add to my feelings of confusion, I'm now murderously livid by how he makes me feel as though, through being with me, he's slumming it with the lower classes in every respect. "Shut up. Pull over," I say after a moment's consideration.

"What?"

"Pull over. You can park at the docks near the Barque Shibaura Building," I tell him, almost professionally abrupt now, giving him simple one word directions throughout like a hijacker. He stays unusually quiet and obedient, probably hopeful, and it sickens me because I know that he thinks that his investment is due to release some royalties. There's a sort of lay-by that's just off the main road and usually empty, and when he parks and the engine is turned off, I turn in my seat towards him. My mouth opens in anticipation for questions I have no idea how to form into sentences, so I think twice about it and reach for my phone instead. "Who did you leak it to," I ask, opening the browser on my phone.

"Just google his name. It'll be everywhere by now," he replies.

My pulse races when the top search results appear as a swathe of summaries for how terrible a person Jeevas is. I click on The Times' article because they're Lawliet's closest cronies in the press world and it's common sense that he gave them the exclusive. Reading through the article gives me an unimaginably dirty feeling of joy which I've come to associate with Jeevas and his pushy drugs, and I laugh, wanting to hear the words spoken aloud to revel in it.

"A reliable anonymous government informant alleges that this is the third time that Jeevas-san has crashed his car while under the influence this year. The Government has yet to comment, but a spokesman for the NPA told us in a statement that they can verify that no charges were been made against him, nor was he interviewed by police or cautioned on any of those occasions. The case was settled civilly and all damages were paid for.' By the state, I suppose," I say. "He has no money."

"Yes. This anonymous government informant alleges that that is the case," Lawliet tells me, enjoying this too much for someone who keeps saying that he neither likes or dislikes Jeevas. "The Lady obviously didn't have much time for it like she didn't have much time for threats against her life, but it was decided to put him on suspension pending a review until this 'dies down'. She wasn't happy. I wouldn't like to be him tomorrow morning. And I suppose he'll have a hangover as well, since he usually does."

"It's brilliant!" I laugh, scrolling further down the article for the standard candid walk of shame photographs. He looks like Tokyo's very own downtrodden Al Capone in his awful fur coat and with his usual fat, bent-looking, spiked cigarette hanging from his mouth. I look up at L to share it, only to be held there by his heavy-lidded eyes. He suddenly makes me very self-conscious, so I sit back in my seat like I'm on the bus, lowering the window and wanting to be outside this car. The glass had begun to mist up again.

"Yeah. I thought you'd like it," Lawliet sighs next to me.

"I wish he was dead. If he was dead, I'd be happy," I say dreamily, looking at the dark view far out over the water and the city lights reflected. I shouldn't say things like that, should I. Oops.

"Is that a request?" he asks. Don't say that. "It's just that it's quite extreme to wish for one of your supposed friends to die."

"He's not my friend and he deserves it. It's what the death penalty's for. He damages people's lives
and the death penalty is there to remove him and uphold the value and quality of life," I rattle off as a practiced and reasonable defence in accordance to the government's party line. Unfortunately, I can hear that that's exactly how it sounds. It's amazing how I've prized this ability of mine to sound entirely passionless and political when really it just makes me sound weak and feeble.

"That's a beautiful oxymoron which would only make sense to morons or you," he breathes out, leaning back in his seat. "The two might not be exclusive, except I think that in your soul you believe it, and I know that you're not a moron. As it is, I don't care about the death penalty or what people think, and I certainly don't care about Jeevas, but the death penalty solves nothing. I've lived in countries where there's capital punishment and there's crime, I've lived in countries without capital punishment and there's crime. I've never been short of work either as prosecution or defence, put it that way. I profit from it and I'm happy that it's not a dying occupation, but until it is, we haven't cured human nature. I know that must upset you deeply."

"It just makes sense that if problems are taken out then there'll be fewer problems," I say slowly to calm myself.

"And who do you think you are to pass judgement on people who haven't actually harmed you?" he asks, now more interested in scraping whatever gunk he has from under his fingernails.

"He has."

"Because he slept with a girlfriend you were desperate to get rid of or because you chose to take his drugs when you knew he's the most untrustworthy, jealous piece of shit?"

"You don't understand the pressure there is to —"

"Oh, please."

"He's no better than a murderer."

"How?" he asks, suddenly looking at me with a violence I don't understand considering we're talking about people neither of us care about.

"He offends me like they offend me,"

"Why?"

"Why?" I repeat after him. "Who are they take life?"

"But with the death penalty aren't you just doing the same thing? You're saying that you support killing people to justify how wrong you think it is to kill people. Don't you understand how insane that is?" he says. I gave up a long time ago in hoping that anyone would think along the same lines as me without it being proven to them. I suspect that Lawliet has a killer kink and some of the rich ones pay his many mortgages, so of course he doesn't want them all killed off. But I can't say that.

"This is a cultural difference," I say diplomatically.

"Not really. What you want to say is that it's a moral difference but you won't, and I don't know why, because if you think I'll be disgusted by an opinion I don't necessarily disagree with then you're wrong."

"I knew that you were just trying to aggravate me."

"No, I told you, I don't give a shit about who lives and who dies. I'm just pointing out the problems
with your argument. You shouldn't be scared to voice your opinions with me, Light. I like it about you because it's so unusual to find someone who has opinions. But why you have to romanticise and simplify it all is what annoys me about you. You could just say that you support the death penalty and it's nothing to do with preserving the value of life or some shit, it's because you think they're bad bastards and bitches and you don't care about the whys. You don't value human life — their very existence offends you, like you said. The only way to restore balance is to get rid of as many people who offend you as possible, and you're the man to do it because you hold the scales. Have I hit the nail on the head there or can't you admit to it because it sounds more ugly than it does in your head?"

Yes. No. Without really thinking about it, I start to disagree with everything he's said in the same politely bland way, littered with 'no disrespect to you, but', like I'm preparing for a speech on a platform. I can hear my own voice doing a better job at dismantling myself than he did, when I really just want to say: 'Yes, you're right. That's exactly what I believe.'

His constant gaze on my mouth as I speak is distracting enough that my words become laboured and slow with an unintended softness until they eventually stop altogether, though I'm only aware of that when he smiles as if he's just won a game I didn't know we were playing. I look away, annoyed and embarrassed, making a remark about there being no point me talking to him because he's obviously drunk and makes no sense. He laughs, so I glare at him until he goes back to that knowing smile he reserves just for me alone, it seems.

I look down at his hand when he plants it flat on the centre console between us, and see how he's leaning towards me now. When he speaks again, his voice is smoother than it was. No aggression, just a melodious sort of longing close to me that makes me close my eyes the more I hear of it. There's no him, there's only me and his voice talking for me.

"How about this: there's no one like you. You see evil all around you — it's overwhelming — and the system doesn't make any difference. It fails, we fail, they're winning and it's hurts so much that it makes you hate like they do. People who never harmed anyone in their lives are ruined and cut down by worthless delinquents, and they multiply, the bastards. You know better than anyone that hate is a disease and it spreads. Soon they'll be no one else left. Long drawn out cases draining resources, extending the pain of victims and their families, and justice isn't justice, is it. There must be a better way to stop them, remove them, and no one understands how important it is, do they? It's just getting worse, everything's rotting around us, we're rotting, and no one does a fucking thing about it. They can't. But you can," he says seductively, and with more assurance than I have on a good day. It feels like the only thing I've ever wanted to hear. His nose is against my cheek and his breath against me is like a warm veil, so I move the angle of my face until I sense that my mouth is near his, but then he suddenly sits back in his chair.

I open my eyes and am left staring at him, wondering where the man who was talking to me only a few seconds ago went. "Or maybe you don't hate anyone in particular. You care as much about people as I do, which isn't very much," he says. "But you're disappointed by them: humanity, the evil that men do. To you, your neighbour playing music and fucking his screaming actress of a girlfriend at 3 in the morning would deserve to die as much as some psycho who kills 5 people. It's just the way you are. It's human, but it's not socially acceptable to feel that way, so we don't talk about it. It is socially acceptable to hate criminals though, so you pour all your disapproval and hatred onto just some people, but it's a pretty vicious diversion and just as illogical, if you think about it. Have you ever considered that perhaps you just hate people, Light?" he asks me with a self-congratulatory smile. God, I hate him.

"That's stupid," I grumble. "Why do you think I have this career when I could have done anything? You've said that yourself — I could do anything. I chose to represent people's interests and well-being. I couldn't do that if I hated them."
"I don't know. You put on a pretty good act, maybe you could. You cast a cold eye over everyone. Speaking of, I wouldn't say Jeevas deserves to die for being a junkie and the House dealer. You let your dislike of him colour your feelings."

"No. He's an example of the people who get away with murder because of the influence they have, when poor people and minorities get the heaviest sentences for lesser crimes because of who they're not. Everyone should be considered equally and mitigating factors should be taken into account if applicable."

"Why couldn't you have talked about this in the restaurant so I could have smacked you down in public?" he asks me, turning towards me slowly. "Look, the law's not perfect because it's human justice. It's a game of cards and I don't know what you're expecting from something so inherently fallible. And I don't give a fuck about any sob stories. Neither do you."

"You just care about the money. I don't know how you can live with yourself," I say, sitting back and crossing my arms. "All you care about is what they can pay you."

"Correct! You know why? Because the law can be manipulated and I like that I can decide the outcome. I could have the worst cards possible in terms of a client and I can rewrite their story, but they have to fucking pay for it. They're not getting an orange jumpsuit for long either way, because what you say is true about how money matters, but they don't want to be there at all — it terrifies them and they'll pay anyone anything to make it go away. But do you know how many people I've saved from prison only for them to kill themselves within 12 months? You don't keep track of my cases, you just disapprove from on high and don't hold out for the results. I don't disagree with you or your opinions, I just don't try to excuse it with pretty reasoning. I love a challenge, I love the game. I'm vindictive, I hate the people I defend but I know their kind and know their Achilles' heel because I come from the same stock. I take everything from them to win them their freedom, but it's not that that matters to them: it's what money and influence can buy, and they give both those things to me and never get it back to live as they did before. That's what hurts them. At this level, what really hurts them is me bleeding them dry. That's how I live with myself."

His tirade makes some sense and I find new things to dislike about him, but I'm more interested in how completely assured he is, and I shouldn't be interested in him, should I? I feel like I'm one of the people who don't listen to me speak, they just look at me and imagine me in bed. Too many unfamiliar emotions assault me from different angles until I can't bear it any longer, so I open the car door and stand like a concrete pillar for the air to wash over. Cars flow and drone like a stream of lights and electrics somewhere behind me. The water in front of me is black and unassailable, but the skyline as a glowing monument to capitalism across the water is like a beacon to me. I'm going to rule this place one day. I'm going to own it. All of it. Authority is what people need but I do not. I should be the authority and answer to no one. And everyone will know my name.

I hear him speak behind me hesitantly, but I'm so enamoured with the distraction I've invented that it's hard to pull away from it to pay attention or answer him.

"Light?" I hear him say more forcefully. "Do you want to go n—"

"Do you feel like we've done this before," I interrupt him, looking at him when he doesn't answer immediately. He's leaning so he can see me through the open door like some nocturnal creature.

"What do you mean? Everything's a repeat with different characters and different scenery," he says.

"But you were drawn to me. Why? Did you feel like you knew me?"

"Truth?" he asks, smiling with something wicked. "You had a nice mouth and I wanted to see my
dick in it. That was it."

And suddenly like a broken dream, I feel the air chill the surface of me, trying to reach me, but I'm boiling inside. I climb back into the car to kneel on my seat, breathing out a laugh as I angle myself towards him.

"Now, you do surprise me," I say, bending down so my mouth lingers and breathes hot air over his, and fascinated by how he stretches closer to me. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go for it. I'm in a consensual mood," he replies, but I don't right away. I think the most vile, deviant thoughts I can't admit to while searching for something more acceptable but still shocking, and he grins from how it all must show in my eyes. I don't care how much people admire me as long as they do, and I know it takes many forms, but his hazy admiration warms me and makes me uneasy at once.

"One day, I want to see you masturbate in front of me, about ten feet away from me, and I'll just watch you. Would you do that?" I whisper, stroking my finger over the sharp, jutting cartilage in the centre of his throat. It's feels hard like bone, it doesn't give, and I sigh when I think about how it's a cage for his voice. I drag the tip of my tongue along the line so lightly that he might not even feel it. Everything about him has a purpose and a certain elegance in its form that I haven't noticed before. "And no touching."

"No touching," he whispers back. When he moves, his lips graze mine but I don't respond, and it's gratifying to sense how his tension and impatience only ever seems to grow with my indifference. The worst thing I could ever do is to react in any other way, because if I did, then any interest he has in me would just fade away and die in an instant. He's just a chaser who preys on dreams until he gets what he wants. But my expectations of what he'll do turn out to be completely wrong, because it's seems as if he turned off a button inside himself. He sits back in his seat, looking towards the footwell.

"Can I tell you something? I don't expect a reply to it, but will you listen?" he asks me eventually. Fuck, is he serious? It seems so, and because I'm insulted and the last thing I want to do is to be his captive audience, I throw myself back in my seat, close the door and light a cigarette. When I blow smoke out as a cloud which gets torn apart by the breeze coming through my window, my disgruntled attitude with a hint of the rebel is probably so incredibly attractive that that's why he can't so much as look at me and why he takes to so fucking long to speak. But then my cigarette is plucked from my hand and he drags on it like he thought I'd lit it for him.

"Hey—"

"Are you holding the talking stick?" he asks, still not looking at me but holding the cigarette up. "No, I am. I wanted to say… although I don't see much point, but since you do like to misinterpret just about everything, I suppose it's important that we're clear on a few things. I see you a couple of times a week. Like this, I mean. In between, I see you for maybe a few minutes in passing, and I'm sad to admit that it's the highlight of my week until I see you again. I just want to be honest about that so you know that I'm aware of it but it doesn't mean that I'll let you exploit me like you have with others."

"I don't do that," I say after a shocked pause.

"Oh, you know that you do," he laughs to himself. "You're very good at it. It's a well-honed skill I recognise because I'm good at it myself, which is another reason why you shouldn't try to fuck around with me."

"I'm not."

"What do you think of me, Light?" he says coldly, staring ahead now towards the water. Well, shit.

"I think… I think… I think that you're very clever."

"That's true. Remember that. But what I meant was what do you think about me in terms of us?"

"Oh!" I exclaim, looking outside my window in discomfort. "Well, yes that's a good question… Wow, look at that cruise ship over there."

"Light," he groans.

"It's a business deal with hormonal relief benefits for both of us and don't you forget it or turn this into something more than it is because if you do then it won't even be that much," I rush out so quickly that I struggle to disguise how out of breath I am.

He doesn't appear to have any reply to that, so I continue to look at the unexciting cruise ship in silence until I finally look towards him, seeing him look at me with something dark and hate-filled in his eyes while his mouth looks almost tragically sad. This is what I wanted to happen, wasn't it? To make him an idiot for me? But somehow I think this could only end in bitterness on his part or a lot more acting on mine.

"Hopefully you'll never know what this is like, because a decent person wouldn't wish this on their worst enemy. But I'm not a decent person, so I hope that one day you feel just like this and worse, and that the unfortunate recipient of your affection tells you to choke on it."

My immediate reaction is to laugh, since it's one of the funnier things he's said lately, but his eyes that are only piercing for how dark and inscrutable they are, leave me blinking, mouth gaping like I'm in an airless place. I cast my eyes down to avoid the strength of it, though I'm still aware of it. It feels like a trespass into some kind of intimacy which makes me so uncomfortable that I react like a scolded, stupid child.

He's the one who laughs instead, and I realise that the roof lowers, probably of its own accord just to prove that it can do it in 14 seconds.

"What are you doing?" I ask him.

"I need headroom," he says gruffly, suddenly determined and serious.

"Why?" I ask, but he doesn't reply. I watch him stretch himself out like a rigid board, or as much as he can do in the space. He starts taking his belt off and I resign myself to the inevitable, though the hypocrisy of dinner now seems like a waste of time. To compose myself while he pushes his legs free of his trousers, I reach for what's left of some very sophisticated bottled water which was imported from Kilimanjaro, wishing that it was something stronger because I have a feeling that what he has planned might hurt. His trousers end up on the foot pedals. I swill the water around my mouth, looking with disdain at the exposed skin of his thighs when he leans across and starts getting annoyed with the apparently complicated nature of the hook and bar closure on my trousers.

I slowly become more anxious as I try to predict the future with a pornographic tarot spread of possibilities in my mind. And while I'm thinking about how that and how i could possibly deflect the attention, he straddles my lap, facing me, and takes off my tie. Like what is probably standard for professionals the world over, he doesn't offer any explanation while I don't offer any resistance. He's too fast and I'm too slow. He moves on to unbuttoning my shirt with his insouciant attitude like I'm a helpless, hopeless child or invalid. I wonder for a moment why I feel so little — just a vague
indignation and concern which is passing easily like the glowing spears of traffic on the bridge.

"We're outside," I say uselessly, but he's either intent on ignoring me or he's too busy interfering with my clothes and spitting into his hand. Chlamydia, genital warts, gonorrhoea, hepatitis B, herpes, HIV, NSU, pubic lice, scabies, syphilis, and many more! are things I can possibly look forward to. I reach into my now lower than it should be trouser pocket and pull out a foil packet which is so discreet that it could be mistaken for a wetwipe if it wasn't for its circular bulge. Tearing the packet lazily, because that's apparently my responsibility like it is for women, my eyes move between the traffic on the bridge and the road to the left that's not far enough away. Maybe the ships on the water can see us. Captains on decks with telescopes, grinding their teeth and wanking off on deck with their crew watching us. Maybe a jogger will take a diversion down this lay-by. Maybe the police park here for doughnuts. Maybe the Yakuza will try to steal the car. Maybe the car will be towed for a minor parking violation while we're still in it.

He places his thin hand on my bare chest just over my heart, smiling at it as if he's drawing an invisible force through it, and oblivious to my bemused glances between his face and his hand. Whatever's between us is a natural kind of camaraderie I would be happy enough to go along with, but he always pushes it into something more intense, either through getting my blood up with highlighting opposing views or this clammy closeness. He leans towards me, and I tilt my head back to expose my throat to him so he can gnaw at it like a vampire in a shitty 70s film. I imagine his breath condensing on my neck like mine did on the cold window before, leaving a misty sheen on me.

Letting my eyes close as if to feel sensations better, I suddenly feel drowsy from the vertigo of his mouth on my neck, nipping skin between his teeth and then kissing it as if to apologise. I press my face into the curve of his shoulder, which he must take as an advance or some kind of provocation, because his arms reaches around my back until they become like a rope around my neck. I don't know what he does but I suspect he's following some formulated timeline of events which begins with saliva. All I'm aware of is that I feel his mouth sliding and pressing until it reaches mine. It shudders and squirms over me while he pulls at my shirt like some disgusting, biting demon who takes and takes but never gives and is never satisfied.

"Why are you so much work? You're not worth it," he whispers brokenly against my mouth. I must take exception to it in some way, because I kiss him back viciously. His fingers tear thin paths over my scalp until I feel like every hair on my body is standing straight, and I smell the musky smell of him again. Dense with leather and agarwood, but softened with vanilla, rose and jasmine, and they're the sweet touches I'm left with until I breathe it in afresh again like I could never get tired of it. So I'm an idiot breathing in his scent while his hand works at me with a fervent, slippery persistence, carrying me along like a motionless puppet. But there's something delicate and gentle about what he does, and it's something I think I'd only ruin. In him there's an ardency I don't return and don't want to, and I feel almost a kind of guilt and that I don't think I'm capable of it, even as an actor. I wish all these people would disappear when they touch me. I endure it only through being so engulfed in idle thoughts that my heart hardens within the liquid amber of my dissociation. I wish that the penetration would let me suck all the life from them and leave dry, frostbitten husks to crumble into dust and become the air I will also breathe in and consume. I was made to be admired from behind wrought iron railings and that's how it's always been. If he falls then it's all his own fault.

His lips become slightly parted, so I bite his lip and suck it to soothe it in tandem with his rhythm of kneading me. I lean towards it like I'm greedy, turning my face aside to tear open the greasy foiled packet, but he pushes my shoulders back against the seat. All I can do is look at his face like I'm looking at something not quite human as he moves.

"You want to wear this hat?" he asks mooidly, taking the condom to hold it up at its most pathetic
and sad-looking so he can inspect it with what looks like disgust. "It's my birthday today."

"Is it?" I reply, inhaling from surprise when he glides the condom onto my cock.

"No," he sighs with boredom but admiring his handiwork. Then he looks directly at me. "But make it a good day for me."

"But you always... You mean—"

"What's the matter? Can't you do it?" he says mockingly, and that along with his disparaging eyes make my blood fizz like magnesium in water. It's been a source of humiliation to me for months that he's always dodged this since one time he described as 'a disappointment', after which he avoided me for three days. I couldn't put as much passion into him as I do with work and achieving what's owed to me, so I still don't know what he was expecting, but since then I've been dreaming of having another shot at it. And here he is daring me, when sometimes I find myself thinking about him and I realise that in all honesty I've always just wanted to fuck him to death and it's as simple as that.

My own swiftness and action startles me, but I don't care about how roughly I push him sideways across the driver's seat or how quickly I get onto onto my hands and knees over him, as if my composure has evaporated through some narcotic. I almost don't notice the way he turns, using his elbows against the car seat to push himself closer to the door, looking at me like this wasn't wholly unexpected. I knock his arm out from under him to turn him onto his stomach, because I don't think I can bear to look at him anymore, and pull him back towards me as I kneel. He raises his hips over the centre console, shivering with lonely sighs when I force my way in like a slow stab of a knife. There's a need I have to possess and better him — to have him and have revenge — and it's not typically sexual at all. It feels more like I want to take something back that he stole from me, but even in this reversal in control, I still feel as ruined and dominated as usual, only now I'm angry about it.

The lights from the bridge and the traffic casts a dim, supernatural glowing flush of blue and rose gold across his skin, making the sparse freckles on his shoulders and back look like faded ink spatters. That's all I notice, really. The leather seats squeak from every impulsive push and shove and how he grips the seat to steady himself. I suppose it almost looks like he's praying, bowing with his head down, and I'm a mechanical god of sin savouring any spitting vicious insults he has for me until my violence makes him stop.

I'm about to smack his head against the car door for one cutting remark when lights from a new source pass over me, and I immediately fall onto Lawliet's back when I realise that it's a car rolling into the lay-by. I bury my face against his back, listening to the car engine not far away but too scared to look myself in case I'm seen. A car door opens and closes, so I burrow myself further against L like I could disappear, but he turns over, pushes me onto my side and lifts himself so he can see over the top of the dash. My whole life is over because of him and for once I have no idea how I could get out of this.

"He's taking photos," Lawliet whispers.

"What?" I ask, surprisingly high-pitched with horror.

"Of the view."

"Get down!" I say quietly, pulling at his arm. I hear the glovebox open and close before he sinks back down beside me with a flushed and secretiveness I haven't seen on him before.

"They don't know we're here," he smiles. This situation combined with his calm and how husky his voice is makes my panic subside into a thrilled, almost elated anxiety from the risk. I suddenly feel
consumed by the idea that I could be caught and that this worthless moment could be the end of me like it has been for so many others, but I want to do it anyway, and maybe because of it.

Lying low across the seats, my only hope is that the bastards don't investigate this hugely expensive car with its hood down, apparently abandoned by the docks in the middle of the night. Seems unlikely, but that's half the fun of it. I'm more than happy to stay like this, but then what I hope is Lawliet's hand pushes down between us and grips my dick like he's misjudged where I keep my cigarettes. At some point it feels cooling and wet, and I realise that of course he'd have lube close to hand wherever he goes. He slides his hand without acknowledging it in any way, and I make no argument about it because I think I'm in the latter stages of shock, so you wouldn't think that either of us were aware of what was happening at all. We just lie there avoiding each other's eyes while he handfucks my cock like I'm not even attached to it. He becomes impatient and rough, reminding me of someone trying to put an elastic band around a stubborn rolled wall map. Whatever he does and however he does it, it makes me almost convulse towards him occasionally, and that shocks me more than anything else. I feel lightheaded as though I'm so drunk that I'm on the verge of passing out. If I didn't have so much self-control then I'd probably be shouting out a flurry of porn film script favourites, so it's a good thing that I can play dead better than anyone I've heard of who's not dead.

"You're a pervert," I mouth to him silently.

"You think so?" he says with the kind of confidence bred into someone like him that makes me want to slap it off his face.

"Wait until they leave and then we'll go to your pla… " I start to suggest, but shiver when he starts gorging kisses against my neck, which almost disguises how he guides one of my hands between his legs. He makes it act in a replication of his own motions until I continue doing it of my own accord without his prodding to please him. I look above me and see no stars; only the darkness which is my only ally in this, and I think, when I can think, that this strange exploration of each other's bodies is nearly innocent. Not much different from two teenage boys in the showers with rampant hormones and curiosity but no girlfriends, who do something like this and never speak of it again. I doubt that'll happen in our case.

"I just want to feel something and I don't really care what," I hear him say like a sad hush against my hair, and it makes me close my eyes.

"Oh, fuck it," I say, kissing him so impulsively that even while I'm doing it I'm trying to figure out why. Sometimes I feel like I'll do anything just for a moment's peace from myself, and I think that's why I'm going along with him and sympathise with what he said. I want to feel everything or nothing but I'm usually left with something frustrating in between.

His mouth is open and hot against my jaw when some woman says: 'It's beautiful, isn't it? It looks so different at night,' but I'm too preoccupied to care. A man starts talking about how 'it' took six years to build, the lights are solar powered, it spans 1,903ft, and other non-interesting facts straight out of a tourist book, when all the time I'm doing a practical sex education exam in the quiet cocoon of an open-topped Ferrari just feet away from them. We're different at night. We took decades to build, we span about 6ft and our lights are also solar powered. They should take photos of us and write about us in travel guides.

It couldn't really have been too long before Lawliet tells me that they've gone, and because I didn't hear the car leave, I sit up just enough to look through the windscreen. I'm almost sad to find that it's true and that it was like they were never there and neither were we. They never knew, or maybe they did and that's why they left. Maybe the idiot man ran out of suspension bridge facts to bore the woman with, or maybe they've moved onto the Akashi Kaikyō Bridge for a bridge tour? That's
when I realise that something about the secrecy and taboo nature of this being carried out in plain sight has a surprising effect on me that I'm not very proud of, like any time that Lawliet has kneeled before me like I'm a king and he's scum. I like having at least one person who knows this about me and encourages it. An element of me longs to rebel against what's moral, say one thing but do another, to have L spit in my face and use that spit as a lubricant to fuck him with.

"Finish me off," I tell him, lying on my side again and panting by now. But he just smiles so the corners of his mouth lift cruelly with satisfaction to see me so humiliated.

"No," he says, which strikes me with a rage in me that I can hardly believe. I'm tired of reigning it or directing it in long-term plans which leaves it constantly growing inside me with no relief. And people like him are always stopping me from achieving what I want.

I sit up and try to turn him over roughly, but look down on him when I feel his legs wrapping around my back like a black widow spider. He says that he wants to see my face, and I think, yes, and I want to see your eyes close. I want to be the one who makes your eyes close and stay closed. He leans up to kiss me but I move my face out of his reach, and it's only then that I feel any independence of thought and any form of control.

He looks at me questioningly because of my rejection before falling back again, resigned but tilting his head to one side like he did at the inquiry. It confuses him — my unwillingness to be touched during something in which touching is the whole point to some, apparently. But then he hangs a deflated balloon of a condom on the steering wheel and looking very pleased of himself like he's Houdini reincarnated, having done a remix of the tablecloth trick. I can see that he's going to laugh in my face, so I cut him dead by thrusting with no care into him. This night is full of surprises, because instead of reacting to the assault of pain that's clear and open on his face, his neck arches back euphorically. His legs crush my sides and I kiss the side of his throat and the stretched, damp, firm skin and cartilage that I admired before when it was dry and cold.

In these early stages, my mind wanders, mostly thinking: what the fuck am I doing? But also I realise that since my trousers are around my knees, I don't have to struggle with the slippery leather interior as I would have expected. That explains why my trousers aren't currently steaming in the footwells. I did wonder, because he usually insists on them being elsewhere as soon as possible, and I don't blame him, because my legs are one of my best assets along with the rest of me. In addition to this, I notice that both the passenger seat and console are set just a little lower than the driver's seat. Then a realisation dawns on me that makes me slow almost to a stop, because this car has probably been designed for fucking. I'm sure that he specified the entire installation for this very purpose, and I'm giving him what he wanted just like the people at Ferrari did. He predicts and plans every second of his life to his advantage without anyone noticing, and my anger and disgruntled admiration for him just makes me go at him faster like he orders me to. His time is expensive, he says.

His hair has become those tousled, silken, crow-like feathers that look so slick and impenetrable, but it's all a lie if you touch him. Looking at him is like looking at an image in a flat mirror, and I expected the cold boundary to extend to touching him, somehow. At first, it almost surprised me that he was warm and soft despite the sharp edges and lines under the skin, and I was surprised that I could feel it.

A shining platinum line runs from his eye like a metallic tattoo which makes my heart shatter and reform in my chest, because I caused that, I think. Despite our positions, he makes me feel like I'm looking at god when he's anything but, and thoughts flash diluted in my mind that this should be reversed. I should have the control, not him. He should be seeing me the way I'm seeing him. His eyes open only a slither, but they're like a luminous cobalt blue under the blackest eyelashes in this light. Everything is just amplified — it's just more — like how his lips are wet and parted and more
obscene than I've ever realised. He makes my own eyelids flicker closed, fighting to stay open just so I can look at him more while he's so silent, now squeezing his eyes shut. All I can focus on is how his arms are bent at the elbow, his hands raised towards his face defeatedly, hooked and limp, like how spiders legs contract when they die. What I started in anger and hate is manipulated into something else by him, and I didn't even try to fight him. I gave myself to him.

His hand suddenly reaches up and pulls a hard left on the steering wheel, and I feel a change in him, I see it happen. I realise that I've done what I'd started to think was impossible. His eyes close, his forehead furrows and his lips snarl before he claps me to him. The straight outline of his nose presses against my ear and weakened, incoherent shouts move through my hair. He's sticky and damp on my chest and stomach and it's a fucking revelation. I shouldn't be distracted by that or be surprised, but I touched the untouchable and the tightness of him is so sublimely unbearable I try to control myself to make it last longer. It must be a prolonged torture for him, and that's what I want to give him. This isn't for me. I have no stupid goal like coming — four seconds of release, clarity, then tiredness. I only want him to make those resilient noises and see his mouth open in a silent scream like it is now, and his eyes screwed up like tree knots as they are now.

My head slips to his shoulder when I stutter and gasp because I can't catch my breath. And he stays like that, we stay like that, until it feels like all the blood that's pooled, groaning low in me is suddenly driven in a shooting feeling to him. I've heard about blinding lights and all sorts of shit, but for me it's just a few seconds of touching something I've chased like an animal without knowing why, and an aggrieved sigh that it's over.

His chest heaves and I realise that my forehead is pressed against it, so I look at him, still lowered over him, my hands slipping on the padded leather either side of him. Him. Smelling of me at my most degraded and glorious, I reach towards his face to push some of his hair that's almost plastered to his skin with sweat, because it looks like a jagged crack running down his forehead.

He leans up and his mouth tries to find mine, quick and heavy with breathlessness and some kind of horrible, grateful desperation, but I take it and even return it. He holds my head and forces me back so he can sit up on me. His fingers are like warm suckers against my skin. My back aches, I ache, but there's something resplendent about this messy novelty. They could be anyone's lips. I've never liked it. I always thought it was unpleasant and unhygienic, but maybe I've just been unlucky. They're all the same when they're mouthing at your face, really, but knowing they're his makes a difference somehow. The soft urgency and the closeness feels more intimate than anything before and I don't understand it.

Time and the fading of what happened makes me push myself away from him as if my very skeleton demands that I do. My instincts act as a warning sounding over a tannoy system in my head, they're so loud. Men like him just want sex — that's all they want. I only want power, I think. No, to make the world a better place, of course, I made a mistake. The glaze of sweat cools on my skin as my unaffectedness attempts to reinstate itself again, and I don't look at him for a long time. I only fix my clothes and pour Kilimanjaro water over my shirt to try to wash his milky mess away, using his tossed aside jacket to dab at the stains. When I pull up my underwear and trousers with shame and revulsion, I swallow it like I always do. The only thing that's different is how my shoulders feel tight and awkward when they move and how my eyes become repeatedly drawn to his sleepy expression of disappointment when that's the last thing he should feel. I want to shout: 'You got what you wanted, didn't you?' But I don't.

His gaze is fixed on the steering wheel until he throws the sticky trophy of a condom in the ashtray and tries to recover his trousers from the footwell. They're pulled back on like his socks and shoes, but an image of his bare legs is like a permanent fixture in my mind now and I sigh at myself. I worry a little whether there's some deep meaning or change that we can't return from. That maybe I'll inherit
another Misa and wonder whether it'd be worth it, regardless of his influence and what I could get out of any idolatry. But I console myself with the thought that he's a pervert who's only in it for himself, so he's not stupid enough to do that. All that'll remain from this is a memory for him of a good fuck in a Ferrari by the Rainbow Bridge, hopefully. And I hope that his gratitude will make him work harder to get me closer to The Lady. It'd be nice if maybe some good could come from this experience.

The traffic moves in the same inexhaustible lines of lights on the road in the distance, but for a while there it was like they weren't there at all.

"Well, you certainly outdid yourself," he says with the smallest of smiles, surprising me with the sound of his voice. I grunt in reply and button up my shirt, but he doesn't take the hint. "Can I tell you something else? It's more of a continuation of what I was telling you. The punchline."

Oh God, no. I start rearranging my hair in the flip-down mirror so it practically covers my eyes, but he's obviously waiting for me to answer with a 'Yes! Tell me a good joke. I love jokes, it's just what I need. My back is killing me, your semen is all over my Valentino shirt, and I need a knock knock joke to make it all pale into insignificance to the suicidal thoughts your joke will inspire in me.' But the laboriousness of the silence becomes more oppressive and who knows when it will end. He can drag it out for hours.

"I don't like punchlines," I say.

"Who does?"

"Don't make me pretend to laugh at something that's not funny. I do enough of that at work."

"You don't have to do anything, it's not that kind of punchline. But you might think this is funny. You probably will and I suppose it is funny in a twisted way. It was just that I do look forward to seeing you and it's depressing. Unusual and depressing."

"Yes, that is funny," I say derisively, quickly lighting a cigarette. "Sounds like you need some more interesting cases at the firm. Are the murder cases too mundane for you at the moment?"

He breathes out a laugh and smiles downwards, leaning his elbows against the steering wheel so he can pick and tear into his nails.

"You could say that," he says quietly. "Maybe that is it. Maybe I need something more challenging. Maybe that's it."

"Don't bite your nails. It's disgusting."

"Yeah, I don't know where I've been," he smiles at me for a second. There's a sense of shame coming from him in his small talk and compulsive smiling that makes me terrified at where this is going. Beneath my hair I'm wide-eyed with horror but probably look half-asleep to him. He's gearing up to tell me that The Lady doesn't like me, isn't he. I could change it. Whatever it is she doesn't like, I could change.

"So what were you going to say?" I ask.

"Oh, nothing. Just that it was very depressing for me to realise that, when there's no hope of anything ever being reciprocated. Do you understand what I'm saying now?"

He doesn't look at me directly. It's more of a weary, stony-faced side-glance while he waits for me to reply. What am I supposed to say? 'Oh yes, I know exactly what you mean!'? No, I fucking don't.
He'll get over this tomorrow. I grab my phone from the dashboard to find that I still have no messages, but he doesn't know that, so I pretend to reply to some messages. He gets all sombre and moody like this sometimes and it's very annoying and tests my patience, but I think it's a post-coital hormonal imbalance that passes over. It'd be wrong to discriminate against someone because of their mental illness, although privately I think he's a nutcase and should be sectioned.

I stare straight ahead as if I'm driving somewhere, and when I open the door it makes a sound like puff of an inhaler.

"I might walk back from here," I tell him.

He laughs to himself, and strangely seems happier and more relaxed. Both of us were tightly coiled and now it's just me as I grab my jacket from the hanger in the back.

"I don't mind dropping you off," he says amusedly. "I have to drive past, anyway. You live in Roppongi Hills, right?"

"Why do you think that? I told you I lived in Midtown."

"Yeah, like I'd believe that. Let's say that it was a lucky guess and nothing at all to do with illegal research of the electoral register. Roppongi Hills is nice. Kind of sterile, but—"

"Thanks for the offer but I didn't make it to the gym today, so…"

"And you need more exercise?" he asks, thumbing his lip like it's all a big joke, oh, it's hilarious. "Give," he says, pinching his fingers together towards my cigarette. I just hand it to him through the open window with no argument and it's immediately secured in his mouth. "Ok. Well. Thanks for dinner and the hearty fuck," he says, looking at me for my reaction. "Would it kill you to laugh? You think I'm funny, admit it."

"You're definitely funny."

"Funny ha ha or funny weird?"

"Weird."

"Weird's cool these days, don't you know? That's something to be proud of, isn't it?" he says, and I shrug while I look towards the ground, but I see him lean down to see me smile. "Nice. You should smile more, like that. No more of your fake pleasantries with me, ok? Because you know that I never buy it," he tells me. I look up at him to reply, but he starts the engine and the car roof rudely rises and clicks into place within 14 seconds. "Enjoy your walk."

"I'll see you next week sometime," I say quickly, like I feel some pressure to.

"No doubt. Oh, wait, you forgot your tie," he says, throwing my tie out the window so it curls in a puddle at my feet. That was the nicest tie I owned. "You have to be careful with evidence, you know. See you later, Light-kun."

I want to tell him not to call me that, but instead I grab my tie from the ground and walk away into the stingingly cool bay air in a daze, putting my coat on and feeling very much like the hustler I swore I wasn't. Even worse, I feel like an idiot hustler who pays for his trick's meal. I rub at my mouth, but he's still there and I have no real idea of where I'm going on foot. It's hard to truly get lost in any city. It's easy to get mugged. I might get a taxi in a minute, anyway.

The breeze has made my still damp shirt and the backs of my knees shivering cold, like my skin can't
allow me to forget. His car drives past me and I feel sick because I realise that I was waiting for him. His profile is reflected in the side mirror for a millisecond as a sort of faintly angled white blur; ironically transient, as I predict our deal will be. Like others, whatever shit he says in the moment of a chemical rush has no value in itself unless I keep his interest. Unlike others, he wants to know me inside out, and when there's nothing more there for him to find, he'll go. But I only need to keep him around long enough, that's all. That shouldn't be for long, but he has and, I think, always will make me feel anxious and even doubtful that I can retain him. I hate that. It'll take me a while to convince myself again that I can and I will keep him for as long as I need to, and I hate that, too. I hate how fake and conniving it is. There's so little that's real about me and I don't need to be reminded of it.

Maybe I feel empty because for a moment I felt the opposite.
The Handler

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

EDIT: 13th June 2016

This chapter was posted a couple of weeks before what happened in Orlando, but I've been in two minds whether to take this chapter down temporarily because of some events mentioned in here. It was an upsetting chapter before, including the flippancy of the narration, but even more so in this rawness. The thing is, though, that it was always inappropriate and insensitive and there's a reason for that which is more relevant to me after a certain political wannabe has shown his usual disrespect and twisting of a hate-fuelled attack to fit with his own hateful bias in his campaign. So, I'm leaving this chapter online, but will throw out a warning and urge readers to use their own judgement.

A/N: This follows the chapter before last, chronologically.

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The Handler

"My supreme idea is to get on. To this idea I shall sacrifice everything... I am prepared to thrust even love itself under the wheels of my juggernaut if it obstructs the way."

~ From a letter from David Lloyd George to his future wife.

As I was driven towards Tokyo, the sunlight faded and died into the darkness, but the ghostly, luciferous blue mist rising above neon lights and billboards created a halo around the city. That's not important but I'm trying to set an atmospheric scene for the sake of the overblown kind of narration that's so fashionable these days. It was starting to get dark at 5pm, basically. Fucking October.

It was only a few hours ago that I'd been looking forward to a quiet night at home with my dear friends to maybe share a bottle of wine and sit on a bag of frozen peas while I caught up on newsworthy events, but then An Important Event! occurred. Since part of my role includes hijacking stories for political kudos whenever possible, I'm being driven to the House so quickly that I might register on meteorological charts as a small dark cloud formation. Sitting in that car, I feel as if everything is finally coming together for me, and about fucking time, I say. So, anticipating a busy night following my busy day, I prepare for anything by misting my face with Shu Uemura's finest when an advertising poster reminded me that I'd bought some. God knows that I needed to. I underestimate how even passably rough sex plays havoc with my skin hydration levels.

My driver — an absolute idiot at the best of times, which is why he's just a driver — puts the radio on without asking my permission. Well, my security guard next to him asked and I said ok, but it's not even the news; it's some sentimental torch song station. I can only stare at the back of their heads until they deform like there are creatures moving under their skin, so I stab my finger at the button on the console for the privacy partition.

Although there's now a barrier between myself and the two cretins, the music seems to be even more cocooned inside with me, which makes it almost impossible to focus on anything useful. In a break between songs, an inappropriately happy broadcaster on the radio talks about a house fire and reports of the discovery of 'two bodies devoid of life'. My mouth becomes dry and rusted. It could be unrelated, it could also be what I'm waiting for, but why only two when I planned for three? Maybe they just haven't found the third yet. Apart from that question, I reacted to the breaking news
announcement in a way that I wouldn't have predicted. Suddenly it's true; they are really dead and not stock characters that I've written out of a fictional story. I composed their deaths, cold and determined in my objective, and found a unique satisfaction in apparently being naturally gifted at constructing the ending of lives. I cannot trust a single living person, and even dead ones are suspicious. I'm proud and horrified at myself and what I can do, and realise, maybe for the first time in any seriousness, that I can and will kill anyone to save myself. But I'd be stupid not to, wouldn't I?

Another love song is played. It's very distracting, but I try to turn my mind back towards something that's actually relevant to me. Only L will suspect me of any involvement in what happened today, so I suppose that I'll have to start thinking about how to deal with him now, but… I long for you so much it's maddening. Be with me always, so that we can't be separated… God, it's hard to think with this fucking music going on. My optimal thinking process requires an atmosphere of relative tranquility, fake or not, so thinking might have to wait until I get home. It'd be nice if L would shut the fuck up so we can pretend everything's fine until I'm ready. Like that would ever happen. He's so bitter, envious and self-obsessed that it's impossible for him to be supportive and selflessly happy for me when I deserve it more than anyone. The only thing in his favour is that he could recognise my potential, and I can imagine that feeling superior to someone like me would be a huge turn on to a despicable little fuck like him. It's a shame, really. We might have been happy if it didn't have to end like this… but I'm the most important thing, so never mind.

When my car stops at a traffic light, I notice a woman who's walking on the pavement close to my window. When her long white skirt billows and floats around her legs in the breeze, I imagine her hazy, cloud-like form folding in towards itself, darkening and disappearing like petals being incinerated. No, I saw it happen, but I couldn't have. I dip my head towards my lap to pinch the bridge of my nose until I'm convinced that I neither imagined or saw her. I made this isolation tank for myself but now the air is so close that loosening the knot of my tie will not fucking help. It never helps, it'll just make me look like a trainee bank manager ordering a kebab on a Friday night, so I fix it and make it tighter than it was before. A baby cries so loud that it sounds like it's from inside the car. It sounds like shattering glass. I think it's Kira, but, no; he's too old now and he's at the Kantei, not in this car or in the middle of the city. Even so, I look out the window again instead of at the papers on my lap, and catch a glimpse of a woman in white on the pavement, holding a baby. Both of them look like they can see me through the darkened glass, and a pain splits through my head, forcing me to close my eyes. A hard thud hits against my window, but there's no one there when I look up. It's just a torment to stop me from resting even for a moment. I don't know what's wrong with me, there's something wrong with me. B dosed me, he must have.

The car is moving again towards the next traffic light because they never end. Starting and stopping, held up, diversions, red lights for what seems like a lifetime and for no particular reason. Signs say 'men at work' with no men to be seen and no work either. Excuses. The air smells of Kiyomi. It smells of Shiori. It smells putrid like menstrual blood while I'm stuck in this glass case within a metal coffin. I can't breathe in here but the windows won't open because it's a security hazard. I want to either look everywhere around me in panic or hide in the footwell and cover my head, so I call the talking clock for a distraction instead. At the tone, the time will be… until the placid voice and beeps become increasingly faint and I can't hear them anymore. I'm not worried about that, though, because I don't feel like I'm alone here anymore. Someone is sitting next to me.

My eyes are drawn towards the seat to my left and lock onto charcoal trousers clinging to familiar legs, a suit and body which are drenched with water, and a downcast face that's peaceful and shadowed. I lower the phone when I see that not only has he appeared out of nowhere, but that he looks like he's only restrained by the barest hold of gravity. His clothes and hair move symmetrically and silvered as if underwater, like I'd dreamt him to be in the indigo lake that I thought had killed him. I reach my hand towards his face, but before I can touch him, he raises his head slowly and opens his eyes to smile at me. Everything about him is gentle but there's a bitter pain to it, because I'd
love for him to look at me like that again, even though it's only another lie. I've never been able to believe in anything he says or does because his soul is as dark as his eyes, but my soul is just as dark now.

His hand holding my hand is a jigsaw of discoloured skin stretched over his bones with leather stitches like fat, dark maggots binding the pieces together, and I hold it against my mouth so I can kiss his fingers. His face is icy cold and drained of all colour, his fingernails are a blackened purple, stained by dead blood underneath. His veins could be full of formaldehyde, but this mirage still makes my heart slow to a sleeping beat. Whether it's the idea of him or my ideal of him or of what he once was to me or one second which cored me, I am and I think always will be in love with him. All these things I've done mean nothing when he consumes the worth of anything else, and I realise that he still will even after he's dead. If only he had died that day. I loved him more for every minute of his absence when he wasn't there to ruin it.

Something suddenly pounds against my side of the car and I jerk away from it, towards L, turning to see two palms slammed flat against the window nearest to me. Shiori's drained face screams like a high-pitched howling wind, leaving no breath but a fine mist of blood on the glass. Her dark, open mouth stretches so wide that it looks like her jaw has dislocated, and her eyes are a misted and glassy pale blue with no pupil. She claws at my window, streaking blood down the glass. I look towards the driver and guard in the front seats, amazed that they haven't noticed what's happening, and during that time, she has disappeared along with any trace of her or L. I know that she wasn't ever there at all and neither was he. None of this happened, but who's to say that it didn't if I experienced it?

So. I take my place in my seat again, only looking straight ahead until I can leave the car. I don't turn back towards where L was, because I know that someone else has taken his place in the car beside me; drenched with blood instead of water, and looking at me like she hates me. It was me who took her life.

The drive to the House from there on passed from that ridiculous turmoil to something like excitement when the gates swung open. After my car drew up outside, a legion of aides swarmed around me when I walked through the pale lobby, and the news was broken to me in full. Several people were guardians of different pieces of information which were whispered into my ears for me to assemble like a puzzle. Made breathless by unnecessary details which built a powerful image in my head — like a film shot through a blood-spattered filter — I must have appeared so sickened by it that I was offered a glass of water by an aide. I've grown sensitive to bad news even if it's good news, it seems. My stomach turned, my heart raced, I asked for a white wine spritzer instead.

To summarise, it's thought that Tsukino brutally murdered two people in his home this afternoon while I was engaged in some brutal intercourse of my own. Cadavers shook from bullets like the intense full-body shaking orgasms that I've almost grown accustomed to, and souls soared simultaneously. Someone walked in on him in the middle of his massacre, the police were called, and Tsukino tried to set himself and the house on fire in the meantime. It was assumed that the victims were his wife, because that would be understandable for any man who has one, and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Sakurada, since no one could contact him and his car is apparently parked outside Tsukino's house. Truly, I couldn't have asked for more. Along with it being an excellent opportunity for me to reassert my electability while also ridding me of my main opposition, the press will be praising the 'if it bleeds, it leads' commandment. It's very sad, and I'm devastated, obviously. My thoughts and prayers are with the family and friends of those killed, and not forgetting the responding emergency services. It must be quite a mess in there.

Within the House, the rumour mill started turning quickly, and soon there was talk of a scandalous thread on an aides' forum which may have precipitated this unfortunate tragedy. All this was purely
speculative though, and while I may listen to it intently, I passionately disapprove of gossip, no matter how lurid, revolting and accurate it is. I was as disgusted as anyone could pretend to be, so I quickly changed my suit for one I bought in advance for the occasion. It's by an up-and-coming designer who made me a sombre but hopeful suit full of subtleties and which only needed minor alterations. Quite inspiring, actually; me in this suit, and not least because of the exceptionally fashion-forward narrow peak lapels. The day I forget to give myself a second look when I walk past a mirror or reflective surface will be the day I'm certified blind.

Anyway, while I was waiting for the Chief of the NPA to arrive for a chat, I was conscious of the growing crowd of press at the bottom steps of the House. No information had officially been released at that point, so it's safe to assume that the police blabbed for a few Danish pastries and a bubble tea, as I'd expected. People carriers obstructing the road is always a good indication of how big a story will turn out to be and how much coverage I'll get. I thought to myself that I could do with a few politicians on hand to act as solidarity staging for the imminent photo opportunity. The problem was that, apart from myself, the sole minister in the building was the Head of Gender Equality: a ministry so boring and pointless that no one really knows or cares about it. I suppose that I should have chosen a female minister for that department, since they account for most of the whining about gender issues. The thing is, the few there are have to go into more prominent positions for the sake of diversity or representation or something; I can't remember now, it's just a thing I'm trying out. Something will have to be done about the ratio of penises to vaginas in this place soon, but it can wait until the run-up to the next election. In any case, Gender Equality was no use to me, whatever genitals they had. I needed Cabinet Ministers. I needed an ambassador of sorts from the Reds to stand next to me, maybe wipe a tear and applaud my speech to show the electorate how I've unified all parties in the face of adversity. I needed props, so I sent a few aides to trawl the local bars and restaurants to round the bastards up.

Once the Chief had arrived, he confirmed that Tsukino's victims were thought to be his wife and his deputy. This shocked me so much that I had to sit down even though I was already sitting. He patted my back in a gorilla-like way and got me a glass of water to sip through the trauma. It calmed a bubbling feeling in my chest which could have been horror, laughter or indigestion, so I recovered quickly enough.

After telling the Chief about Tsukino's strange behaviour that day, I asked if there was any way to find out who posted the defamatory poison on the internet. I'm glad that I mentioned it, because he didn't know about the forum posts when it was critical that he did. A long phone call later, he told me that the experts were currently working on it, but it appeared that whoever started the thread used a maze of proxies and firewalls to such effect that it's only been seen coming from top hackers. Damn straight. Needless to say that I have no idea what a proxy or firewall is and neither did the Chief, unsurprisingly, so we laboriously googled it and were still none the wiser. I used a Linux live CD on a dead man's laptop to run a bare bones browser through a proxychain and Amnesic Incognito Live System routed through Tor to make those forum posts, but I humbly admit to him that I'm a luddite when it comes to computers.

Since he seemed eager to go to bed, I invited him to help himself to my second-best whiskey while he shot questions at me to round things up. He asked me whether Sakurada was known to have any knowledge of 'computery' things. I told the truth, in that I believe Sakurada had a programmy company before entering politics like a throbbing cock with a smile. It is a possibility that he had something to do with that thread, but I really couldn't say. I casually pointed out the age gap between Tsukino and his wife, how the relationship was arguably incestuous, how his first wife pressed charges against him for assault and battery, how he had several rifles and hunting paraphernalia that I know of, and how I once saw a wild boar in the boot of his car with its head cut right off, I couldn't believe it. There were rumours in the House about Tsukino's controlling, violent nature leading to some instability in his marriage, and I might have drawn attention to Sakurada's
playboy reputation. The Chief frowned throughout and closed his notebook like he'd just solved the case. As a good citizen, I'm glad to be of service if I can help an investigation in any way.

I am all amazement, thinking of Tsukino being raving mad in a burns unit with his wife's blood trailing behind him, and now at how the police suspect that Sakurada was involved. It's hard to comprehend, but I cope. Despite what Tsukino's done, I hope he pulls through. I can't think of a greater suffering for him than having to live and realise that the only bad thing that Shiori and Sakurada ever did in their lives was to meet him. Sometimes you meet someone and know they're either going to change your life or end it. How happy we might all have been if we'd never met those who'll be the death of us.

After the Chief left to find a drive-thru somewhere, I remembered that I have a new pair of shoes from Italy which I had delivered yesterday. On lifting the lid, a Pandora's box of polished leather and brogueing is revealed, encased lovingly in a tissue-lined nest. It's so enrapturing that I almost didn't notice my door open to let Mikami inside without etiquette. He looks chicly windblown, as usual. A theme of his life seems to be that the weather is determined to unleash its worst on him.

"Ah, Mikami," I say, gasping as my foot slides into my shoe like it's lubed. "I thought that you were out of town tonight. Thank you for coming."

"You make it sound like a party," he says, throwing his coat on my leather Chesterfield before throwing himself on it as well. I'm trying to decide at what point I should stamp my authority down, when there's a gentle knock on the open door, followed Kiyomi's face appearing around it looking like she thought that she might catch me out in doing something perverted.

"Kiyomi," I say, stunning her by remembering who she is and also by standing up for a lady because that shit has been drilled into me. She loves it and tries to hide how pathetically happy she is.

"Light," she replies huskily. "Oh, hello, Mikami," she adds upon noticing him, and her whole demeanour changes to something more solemnly businesslike. "Light, I just wanted to let you know that I'm here."

"I appreciate it," I tell her. Well, this is awkward. She must have broken off in the middle of a hairdressing appointment, because her hair looks wet and slick against her head like… well, like L, actually.

"Ok. Then. Good luck," she says sadly, starting to close the door. I impetuously call her back without having a good enough reason to except for the seed of an idea I haven't fully planned out yet, but why do tomorrow what you can do today? She peers back around looking hopeful but holding the door in front of her like a shield. Her eyes are dead focused on mine and I struggle to find a reason to offer her.

"Is this a new look?" I ask her, gesturing towards her and then to my hair, smiling reassuringly. "It's nice." It's weird as fuck in reality, but it wouldn't help me to ignore such a dramatic change which is obviously intended for me to notice and admire. She blushes as much as a woman her age is capable of before the menopause kicks in, and opens the door a little wider so I can see her black trouser suit teamed with a deeply cut white shirt. It's the 'Le Smoking' trouser suit by Yves Saint Laurent, I think, and original if I know Kiyomi, because she's never been one for knock-offs. I blink a few times and my mouth gapes open a little, while Mikami breathes out an "you can't be serious!" when he must catch sight of her. Yes, she's definitely trying to say something.

"I just threw it on when I was called in," she lies self-consciously, since her makeup alone probably took at least 2 hours. I have a feeling that I caught her trying out a cosplay. "Anything else?"
"Oh, yes, I wanted to ask you something," I say, trying to think of what that might be. I see Mikami's head turn towards me cynically out of the corner of my eye but I ignore him. "It might be better left to another time to discuss it. It seems inappropriate to mention it now, after what happened tonight."

"Yes, it's awful from what I've heard," she says. Her eye contact is so intense that I might need some eye packs after this to reduce swelling if I'm going to keep up with her. "Are the rumours true?" she asks, not sounding or looking vaguely interested.

"If the rumours involve murder then, yes," I tell her. "It's terrible."

"Oh, I am sorry, how tragic."

"Yes, at times like this it's difficult to reconcile the unfairness of how quickly life can be snatched away by one evil act. We can only let their deaths not be in vain by strengthening our awareness of domestic violence, promoting anger management therapy and tightening gun laws to prevent a tragedy like this from happening again on our shores."

"Oh, that's good, you should use that in your speech," she nods. I nod. "I'm heartbroken and my thoughts go out to the families, but what were you going to say?" she presses. Fuck, I don't know.

"Just that I might need to postpone the school visit with you and Kira on Monday," I decide. Yes, good one.

"Oh," she sighs. "He'll be disappointed but I'm sure he'll understand."

She begins to close the door again, but with the attitude of a kicked puppy. I need to think of something better.

"I'll call him to tell him myself," I add, which draws her back. "Once he hears about the details of this tragedy and the importance of my campaign then he'll understand."

"He won't understand that, Light, he's only a child," she tells me. "You can't talk to him about election campaigns and mass murder. I have enough trouble getting him to sleep as it is."

"I see what you mean," I say. "Then I'll just -"

"Leave it to me, I'll talk to him."

"Thank you," I bow gratefully, but again she starts closing the door behind her, so I suddenly land on something she'll like. "Kiyomi? I want to give you Gender Equality."

"About time," she smiles snidely. Oh, give me a break, woman.

"I mean that, and this is premature, but in the event that I win the election and you keep your seat, there'll be a reshuffle. I was hoping that you'd consider being the Head of the Gender Equality Department."

"There's a Gender Equality Department?" she asks.

"Apparently," I answer. "I thought that you'd be the best choice to make some impact in that role and let people know that, you know, that it exists."

"But what about when you told me that you couldn't give me a department because you'd be accused of nepotism?"

"Hahahaha, yes, well, let them accuse me. I know that you'll prove to them that your appointment is
based solely on your capability... even though I might be slightly biased," I smile with an attractive
degree of shyness. She always responded to that if it was well-timed, and I'm always well-timed.
"So, we should discuss it, if you'd like?"

"Yes, I'd like that, thank you," she says, coming a little further into the room, smiling towards the
floor. L has never been this easy. "Oh, Light," she laughs affectionately, "your shoelaces are
undone."

"Oh. Yeah," I agree with a soft laugh to match her tone. Yeah, I'm cutely quirky and can't even tie
my own laces without a strong woman behind me, whatever you want.

"New shoes?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Very smart," she says, which somehow makes me want to throw them away. She appears to fight
with something but must decide to just give up, because she comes out with the closest you can get
to a come on between a couple going through a divorce. "You know that you're welcome to come
over any time. Stay over, anytime. Kira would love to see you, and it might do you good to have a
break. We'd both love to see you."

"Thank you. That would be nice," I reply with a small bow. Good of her, considering that the Kantei
is my official residence and she's living there rent-free. "And thank you for your support."

"You're still my husband and I'm still the First Lady. It's my job to support you, and I've always
taken both of those roles very seriously," she says like she's rattling off her personal statement as a
reason for me to hire her. I smile again, and though I feel like I'm getting lockjaw from all this
smiling, it's not all pretence. Sometimes it's a relief not having to work so hard to put plans in action.

"God, will you two just go out for dinner or something?" Mikami groans loudly. Both Kiyomi and I
turn to look at him lying on my couch and spouting at the ceiling. "Have a date, have a fuck and kick
out the lawyer, but in your own time, yeah? Some of us are here against our will because some
fucker just killed some people, not to listen to you two play verbal footsie under the table."

I'm shocked, not least because he referred to L, but because he's so disrespectful when he would
ordinarily kept his mouth shut or excused himself. The door clicks shut, so that's Kiyomi gone. I
glare at the cause.

"This must be so inconvenient for you, Mikami," I snap at him.

"You're telling me," he replies, tucking his hands under his neck and stretching out. "Naomi and I
were going away for the weekend but my new PA is too shitting competent. No matter how many
phone calls I ignored, she just wouldn't give up and dragged me in on your orders, apparently."

"It's unfortunate that it ruined your plans but part of our work here is responding to unforeseen events
like this. I thought that you'd know that by now," I say, which is very restrained. If I called him in
here for any reason, like to make me a fucking coffee and hum the top 50 singles chart from 1973 in
the middle of the night, then he should do it. "I didn't specifically ask for you, but I need as big a
turnout here as possible."

"I told her that you didn't need me," he says bitterly, but I won't respond to the embarrassing cry for
attention and he moves on. "Anyway, you got your wish: it's a thoroughfare outside. I haven't seen
so many MPs in one place since the vote about whether we should accept the 10% pay-rise."

"You sound very disillusioned with politics today."
"Not just today" he sighs. "No, they were good times; when we used to be able to vote on our own wages."

"It's more appropriate that it's decided by an independent body," I remind him robotically, because that's my official view and should be his also.

"It was just one of the many quirks about politics when we voted on it, Yagami. Only a dodgy bastard who'd hooked up with some rich fuck and was getting money under the table would ever say: 'Oh no, I couldn't possibly accept a pay rise. Let it be distributed among the needy,'" he says with a dramatic sweep of a limp hand, holding it in mid-air and grinning when he appears to remember something. "Oh, wait. You say something like that, don't you."

I feel my face set into some kind of death mask before I look directly at him and reveal it. I don't know where this has come from, but he's been distant with me since I left Kiyomi and long before. He seems to be expecting and wanting me to throw home truths back at him, but if I started then I probably wouldn't run out of things to say until next week, so I smile like a bird just shat on me but I didn't notice.

"Would you like a drink?" I ask.

"I wouldn't say no," he replies.

"You never do," I mutter. "Help yourself." And he does. Meanwhile, my disappointment in these shoes escalates when I try to flex my foot inside what feels like a concrete block. "God, these shoes were supposed to be broken in."

"Don't you just hate that when you thought you were getting something special but it turns out to not to be what you thought it was. Life's such a struggle," Mikami says in his decidedly bitchy tone. I preferred him when he was pliable, snorting coke all day. "Well, this is unexpected, isn't it? Who'd think that Tsukino would go all Battle Royale right before an election he had a chance of winning? If it was any other time I wouldn't be all that surprised, but this doesn't seem like the best campaign strategy I've ever heard of."

"It is quite extreme," I admit disinterestedly, trying to avoid the subject altogether. "Who else is outside? Any Cabinet Ministers."

"I don't know, I saw a few."

"Yes, but which departments?"

"Why does it matter?"

"We have to have a meeting," I explain, though I shouldn't need to. "And I might need a few ministers present for the statement," I add quietly when he goes back to pouring himself a whiskey.

"You're giving a public statement tonight? Surely we're not all going to speak."

"No, but it'll be expected that a few of you are there when I speak on behalf of you."

"Oh yeah, the old publicity machine is still in full force, I forgot. Best make the most of the situation. The fire's spread to a church nearby, by the way. You might want to add some message of condolence to Christians who'll need to find somewhere else to pray," he says. That's not a bad idea, actually. He suddenly clutches the Chief's unfinished glass of whiskey from the table like a bear catching salmon. "Oh, someone didn't finish their whiskey. Spoken to the Chief already, have you? Well, waste not, want not," he says, knocking it back. That's disgusting but I'm more concerned by
his sarcastic attitude and disregard of my status.

"Do you have a problem, Mikami? I apologise that you've been pulled away from your dirty weekend."

"Not at all," he smiles on his way to the couch again. "I have no problem with being window dressing for a speech by the captain of the team."

Now, why would someone make it so obvious that they don't respect me if they're not stupid? Mikami, for all his faults, is not stupid. I would have said that he was the most faithful and useful among my ministers, especially after my forgiveness and finding him a safe seat to win and a job when no one else would, but now I wouldn't trust him to hoover my floor. He doesn't ask my permission if he can smoke in my office, but he offers me one which I decline in favour of leaning down to lace my shoes. As I calmly loop the leather cords, I think of the obvious conclusion that I should have: those I cannot trust can only be liquidated, so it looks like I'll have to do a lot of liquidating.

"Multiples of three look best in lineups," I tell him. "I was hoping for six Cabinet Ministers for the backdrop, and I was only going to ask you if there was no one more suitable. What with your reputation being, should we say, shaky?" I say with a final pull on the knot of a shoelace.

When I look up at him, he watches me light one of my own cigarettes but has no expression on his face. Only an almost undetectable flaring of his nostrils give his true feelings away.

"I understand," he says slowly, though I doubt that he does. After another moment of silent contemplation of each other, I walk to my dresser to choose final touches. "So, what did you talk to Tsukino about when he was in your office this afternoon?" he asks.

"I hardly know. He was a babbling mess; you saw him," I reply, looking over the selection of cufflinks I keep here like a drawer in a jewellers. "All I made out was something about his wife and how he thought Sakurada was plotting against him, and he made me call some cheap hotel in who knows where for him. Then he left. I thought something didn't seem quite right with him but with Tsukino it's hard to tell because he's never seems right," I say, tapping my fingertips against my head. "I talked with my secretary about whether I should put a call through to his office to see how he was. You can ask her if you want."

"Why would I need to do that? Your word is good enough for me, surely? Anyway, she told me before I left that you were very concerned about him. It got me thinking. Is it true that his wife was called Shiori?"

I release a shallow breath and fasten my cufflinks, looking in the mirror and holding my hands near to my face to see how my rose gold cufflinks compare to my skin tone. It compliments the youthful flush of colour in my cheeks which I slapped myself to achieve earlier on, but I don't wish it to be exaggerated. And while trying to make a decision, I catch a glimpse of a hulking dark shape in the mirror's reflection. For that split second, it looked as if something was walking in the room, blurred and juddering like footage from an old VHS tape. I turn quickly to look behind me, but Mikami is still sitting on the couch at the other side of the room and there's no one else here with us. Somehow these occurrences don't cause me any panic and never have to any great extent. It's become normality for me, and is only unsettling for the threat that it would try to interact with me while another person was present. Any panic is momentary, though, because of how fucked off I am with Mikami.

"I don't know his wife," I say.

"You know everyone. You make it your business to," he replies, making me turn to look at him.
That might be true but who the hell is he to tell me who I know and don't know and what my business is? What a fucking nerve.

"That's simply not true, Mikami," I enunciate, clearly enough just in case he has trouble understanding me. "If I met her, I forgot her. Her name could be Ricardo for all I know."

"She was a mousey little thing. We all laughed about how they probably had twin beds. You wouldn't forget her. Like I wouldn't forget that she had the same name as my ex-wife."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, maybe that is her name, but I don't see what difference that would make."

"Let me help you with the issue here. Why did you call me in and ask me about Shiori?"

"Oh, that. Ok, yes, I can understand why you'd want to know that," I say, turning around. "It's not my place to tell you this and I don't want it going any further than between us and the NPA, but Tsukino was upset and confided in me that he suspected his wife of infidelity. I called you in to give him an example and show him that in comparison to Shiori, he had nothing to worry about. Look at you; you're fine. People play away games occasionally, we all know that, and that's all I was trying to point out to him. If his wife is a Shiori then it has no importance at all, and if you think that I was trying to make him think that you were talking about his wife then that's ridiculous. He knew that I was talking about your ex-wife."

"With the greatest respect, Yagami, that's bullshit," he tells me. And that's the end of him. I return his stare defiantly, and it could well have continued for a long time if the door didn't open when it does.

Touta's face peaks around the edge of the door, and both Mikami and I groan loudly. Touta must be used to this and may take it for a sigh of relief, because he walks in smiling.

"Matsuda, don't you know that you should knock before walking into the Prime Minister's office?" Mikami says without looking at him. The irony is that that's exactly what Mikami did.

"Oh," Touta says, walks back outside, knocks on the door timidly and looks at me. "Is it true, Light?"

"It depends on what you're referring to," I reply, straightening my already straight tie in the mirror.

"They're saying that Tsukino chopped his wife up into tiny pieces and made a spit roast out of her. And Sakurada, too."

"No, Matsuda, they're not saying that," Mikami sighs a world of sighs. "They're only saying that to you because you'll believe anything."

"What? Why do people keep doing this to me? I'm not stupid! I was accepted into the NPA, and they don't accept idiots."

"That's a matter of opinion," Mikami mumbles as he drinks so that the words create a hollow echo in his glass.

"Sayu says that it's because of my horoscope. I'm too trusting and people take advantage of me," Touta says while looking at me for a reaction shot. I tilt my head to one side and smile in empathy. Being cursed with a bad horoscope sign must indeed be a terrible cross to bear. "Why would they
say that Tsukino killed his wife and Sakurada, though?” he says. "That's not funny."

"Oh, no, that part was true," Mikami explains. "The particulars were a lie."

"I don't understand," Touta says, and he really doesn't, so I tilt my head a little more. If this carries on I'll look like I have a broken neck and might pull a muscle, so I give him a mint from the compliments bowl on my desk to take his mind off Mikami's exasperated swearing instead.

"Fuck's sake. He killed his wife, he just didn't chop her up and roast her," Mikami tells him.

"But Sakurada's ok?" Touta asks.

"No, he's dead, too," is the answer, but Touta looks so unashamedly shocked that I freestyle a comforting manoeuvre I only employ on rare occasions. I put my hand on his shoulder.

"As I just said to Mikami, we don't know the details yet, so we shouldn't speculate," I tell him slowly and clearly.

"You know the details, Yagami. You've spoken to the Chief," Mikami caws from his too relaxed, resplendent pose on my couch.

"Yes, and you didn't, so you don't know anything. I'll discuss what was said in the Cabinet meeting but not before," I reply. "Touta will hear about it on the news after I speak to the press. We'll all go to bed with the basic facts, gentlemen."

"But has he or hasn't he killed them?" Touta asks, big eyed and bizarrely similar to a baby lemur in a cheap suit. "You can tell us, Light. We're your friends, and friends don't keep secrets. Did he chop them up? God, I thought it sounded weird when they said that he'd made a spit roast out his wife. I mean, you can't chop someone up and make a spit roast out of them. The whole idea of a spit roast is that the body is in one piece. What they described would make her more suited to being pan fried, isn't that true, Light? I knew something smelt fishy."

"Nah, the fishy smell was probably Shiori on the barbeque," Mikami laughs uncontrollably, so I walk away to let them get on with it.

"Shiori?" Touta asks. "Oh my God, how can you think it's funny that Tsukino married your wife and barbequed her?"

"No!" Mikami yelps, flinging his arm against the back of my couch to prop himself up, though he's barely keeping his shit together at this point. "Different Shiori. And he didn't barbeque the other Shiori. And neither of them are my wife."

"But you just said that she was Tsukino's wife, Teru!"

"Yeah that's Tsukino's Shiori! The name's not fucking copyright, you know. She's not my Shiori and neither is my Shiori because I divorced her."

"But…” Touta says, pouting in unending confusion. I haven't got the fucking time for this.

"Sorry to break this up, but nothing's official until I say so. Until then, the only thing that's known for certain is that Tsukino's house is on fire, so let's leave it at that. Touta, if you're still confused tomorrow, I'll get the whiteboard out and draw some diagrams for you, just ask."

"Hmm," Mikami sulks, moulding himself against the couch and staring in front of him with fierce concentration. He's worked it out and he's not going to keep it to himself. He's a problem. Whenever
I get rid of one, another always shows up.

"If anyone's dead, it must have been an accident," Touta says, looking to me for confirmation.

"I'm not sure how shooting two people with a rifle, strangling one and beating their heads in could be accidental, but, as we've been told, it's not official yet," Mikami grumbles and broods in the corner. "I have a friend in the NPA," he explains with a grin. His suit is a fucking mess and he's tormented by demons. He needs to be put out of his misery. It's the most merciful thing. If he was in his right mind, he wouldn't want to live like this.

"I'm upset about it, too, Teru," Touta commiserates, "but like Light said, we don't know what's happened yet and we can't believe anything PR says because they're liars. You heard what they told me. I don't believe Tsukino would do something like that. I don't believe anyone could do something like that," he adds, getting quieter and quieter the more he speaks. It's clear that the concept he tries so hard to deny is definitely a possibility. It does happen. It happens too often, and not even his innate and irrepressible positivity can deny that. There's something arresting about his tone when coupled with his expression and body language that I just can't place. His sadness is almost like an invisible mist, but it's his honesty which makes it so magnetic, so I watch him, inspecting him and isolating the elements to see how he makes this work. "Has anyone been able to contact Sakurada?" he glances up at me for a moment, but allows his head to droop again as he vainly clutches at unfeasible excuses. "Maybe he's out of range at the moment. There's bad reception where he lives. I hope he's ok."

"Why are you sad, Touta?" I ask him, and though it seems like a reasonable question to me, he seems surprised by it.

"He's nice," he replies. "He's always been nice when I've seen him. You know; different. And he remembered my name the last time I met him. People don't remember Civil Servants' names these days."

"Did he send you a bottle of wine because you went to his birthday thing?" Mikami calls over, pouring himself another dose of my whiskey. His voice was apparently so unexpected that Touta's head turns towards the sound like he's heard a gunshot in a thicket. "He sent me one too. And not some cheap shit either. That was another weird thing, because why would a Red invite Blues to anything? And why would he invite you? But this isn't something to be sad about if it's true. With him and Tsukino gone, we've won the election, and for the foreseeable future as well." Hold on, 'we'? I've won it and I fucking worked for it. All Mikami's probably done today is sleep through it.

"God, Teru, there's nothing good about this! It's a tragedy," Touta exclaims, bringing my attention back to him and his responses. His emotions are so close to the surface, even this soft anger, that it feels like a rare lesson in subtlety which has been otherwise lost to the ages.

"Yes, Mikami," I say, checking my watch. "And I would have won the election, anyway. Whatever Tsukino's done makes no difference to anything apart from for the Reds. Because, yes, they're done."

"True," he replies. "Tsukino hasn't just taken out a couple of people, he's killed his entire party. Still seems strange to me that he'd do something like this, especially now. Maybe we should ask Lawliet. He might know. We could do with his experience and advice to gain some insight into this and how we should respond. You know, to use it to our advantage for the election. But you seem to have that covered, Yagami," with a sly smile and a quick gulp from his glass. Our eyes lock across the room again, and I'm conscious of my chest filling with air to repress any instincts which aren't advisable in this situation. He's saying that I'm not who he thought I was. He's known it for a long time. He thinks that L has done this on my command, but suspects that what he sees as a weakness of mine is his
way into power. He thinks that he's worthy enough now, and I suppose that he thinks that it's only right that he should give me due warning in the hope that I'll just accept defeat and step aside for him. Danger might be dimly flashing in his mind that's marinated in whiskey, but unfortunately he can't stop his judgement of me from being clear. He's just like L and B and everyone else who's stupid enough to think that they know me.

"Maybe it would be a good idea to ask Lawliet," Touta says, shattering the tension in his obliviousness. Every time L's name is mentioned I want to kick someone. He's a non-person in this place and no one should mention his name ever again. "Not that we should use this to our advantage though. That's sick."

"This whole thing is sick," Mikami laughs. "I wonder what made the old boy snap. What were you saying Tsukino was babbling about when you saw him this afternoon, Yagami?"

"You saw Tsukino?" Touta asks me, so along with Mikami's bastard face looking at me, I also have Touta's eternally shocked eyes on me.

"Touta, get a list of the Cabinet Ministers who've signed in at the lobby and bring it to me," I say quickly, and though I sense him leave and that he might even had said something, it's as if it's from inside a box and in a language I don't understand. I stare at Mikami, imagining him being pulled by one leg to hang in the air by an unseen force for me to slit his throat. Today has proven that unbelieving failures are disposable. Everyone is disposable. With my life hangs the future of a new world.

Once Touta leaves, I look to Mikami, who seems to cower beneath the weight of it.

"I meant that Lawliet should be consulted because of his experience and links with PR, clearly," he attempts to backtrack unsuccessfully.

"Of course. Clear as crystal," I say with a completely set face.

"So…. how is he?" he asks. Oh, please.

"The last time I saw him, he was very much alive, thanks for asking. How's Naomi?" I ask in return, smiling when the question makes him flinch. So it's a sore topic. "I haven't seen her since the party at the Kantei."

"She's been busy," he says cautiously.

"With work?"

"No, she's taken some time off."

"Is she sick?"

"Nothing serious," he says, starting to edge towards the door. "I better round up the Cabinet for you while-"

"I thought that she might be avoiding me."

"No, nothing like that."

"So it's nothing to do with L then?" I say bluntly. His eyes widen, but I think less from this being news to him, because it's not. It's because I've said it out loud.
"You know how women stick together. She might be trying to support Kiyomi but there's no favouritism, really. It's for Kiyomi's benefit if she's keeping some distance, but she hasn't mentioned anything."

"Mikami," I sigh, "This sudden politeness from you is a nice change, but after all you've said tonight, don't you think that it's rather fake? You've suggested that I was involved in whatever Tsukino did this afternoon and you've more that made me aware of what you think of L. You believe that he had something to do with the deaths here in the government, and I told you then and I'll tell you again that it's impossible."

"I don't know how he did it," he says towards the floor before looking at me directly with a fierceness I wouldn't think he was capable of. "But he did it. I had enough evidence against him to warrant an investigation and you know it."

"Ha, do I now?" I laugh. "Look, it's ok to dislike him and disapprove of my personal choices, but fixating on this crazy idea you have and putting ideas in Naomi's head about Penber is unforgivable. To go against my orders with that report was unforgivable, but I forgave you. I've forgiven you time and time again out of loyalty and all you do is throw it back in my face. Do you think for one minute that anyone else would have made you Minister for Justice and Deputy Leader? With your reputation? And, let's face it, you weren't ever the most outstanding minister. I put my name on the line to support you, but now you're accusing me of all kinds of shit, Mikami. How am I supposed to take that? Naomi, you, me, we've been friends a long time."

"Oh yeah, we've been friends a long time," he smiles off to one side like it's hugely amusing.

"I thought that you knew me well enough to know that I couldn't have anything to do with what happened today, and that I wouldn't associate with a murderer, which is what you're accusing L of being. He left because of you and your insane fucking theories!" I shout suddenly, pointing my finger at him and everything, which takes me by surprise as much as it does him. "But I forgave you," I add, collecting myself. "You have Naomi to thank for that. You should thank Naomi and Kiyomi for making me go against common sense."

"Oh, you mean two women who are in love with you?" he asks, and his eyes hold a peculiar blend of sadness and suicidal bravery at how shocked I must appear. "I know that Naomi loves you," he clarifies. Well, yes, but that's old news and nothing particularly noteworthy.

"As a friend, maybe," I say carefully.

"No, more than a friend. I should now; I'm engaged to her. But, yeah, you're right. I should thank her for fucking you for your forgiveness, because that's what she did," he says like it's a fact, and so convincingly that for a moment I wonder whether it did happen. Then he starts pacing and rambling, which is always a reassuring thing to have going on in your office. "I understand why. You were both close to Penber. You've got that charm thing and you're well-kept. Girls like that. Ha, and men, too, it seems."

"What are you talking about?" I ask quietly. This curve ball came out of left field and smacked me in the back of the head. What has Naomi got to do with anything? I haven't even thought of her for months. I can't be dealing with people's trust problems; I've got enough of my own. Kiyomi and now Mikami have accused me of having an affair with Naomi when I've never had the time or inclination. Apart from, well, post-Penber comfort, but that doesn't count. I was just being friendly.

"Shame that Lawliet's around," he carries on. Can't argue with that. "Kiyomi and Naomi must be devastated. Well, I know that Naomi is. She'd drop me in a second if you told her to. She puts on a good act and she might even think that she loves me, but with a gallery of you and Penber on the"
wall like some kind of fucking shrine she worships at, I never stood a chance, did I. I mean, she married Jeevas, so she must be desperate. But what's the common factor between me and Jeevas?" he asks, stopping only to catch me checking my watch. "Think about it! Go on!" he says loudly.

"Don't shout at me. Who the fuck do you think you are?" I ask him.

"Just answer me!"

"I don't know. Rehab?" I suggest.

"No. You. She hates Kiyomi, but between me and her, we were a connection to you, weren't we. To keep her in this little... sphere!" he says, waving his arms when he decides on the word 'sphere' and reaching the strangest mania I've ever seen. I haven't seen him much lately, but this sounds like it's been cooking for a while.

"Mikami-"

"It's ok, I know there's nothing going on between you now. You're busy with Lawliet, after all. But since you're so concerned about her, she gave up her job and just paints fucking awful paintings now. Never sells any, never leaves the house. They're just piling up, all these Francis Bacon knock-off canvases of men in suits with no faces. It started when Lawliet came back. Go figure."

"I think that you're reading too much into this," I say calmly.

"No, I don't think I am. Don't tell me to thank her because she put in a good word and who knows what else so you'd forgive me. Anyway, retrospect is a funny thing, and I know more than most. Now I have some idea of how far you might be willing to go to secure this office and that plaque on your door. You and Lawliet," he says spitefully. I have to admit that I didn't anticipate this. A hundred other things, but not this.

"Well, if that's how you feel then we'll have to talk about your position here as my Deputy," I tell him a few moments later.

"Yes," he nods, but I feel his attitude is regretful, and it's that's slither of regret and ambition that I'll latch onto. With his flapping mouth, he's done himself in, but it'll be on my terms. I can't have my deputy resigning in the aftermath of Tsukino and before an election, and his bitterness may make him talk to the press and anyone who'll listen, especially if he blames me for his relationship problems.

"Mikami… Teru," I sigh, drawing closer to him and trying to assume a comforting and understanding expression rather than the angry one that's trying to force through. "There's never been anything between Naomi and me; not like how you're thinking, I swear to you. Naomi loves you. If there's any truth in these rumours about Tsukino, surely that should be a lesson to you not to let insecurity create jealousy and distrust."

"Yeah," he says, but not in a way that makes me think that he's buying it.

"Is it too late for you to go on that break?"

"Naomi said that she won't go. I said that I was going, anyway."

"Did you have a fight? Did you say to her what you just said to me?"

"Not exactly."

"Good. Maybe it's best to have a break apart so you can think clearly. Think about this. Work it out,
see sense, and meet me here on Monday at nine. I can go through every suspicion you have about myself and L, because you know you're wrong, you know it."

"Mmm... but you would say that."

"Because it's the truth," I tell him, then draw away after a moment just to give it a chance to linger in the air. Maybe he'll believe it, maybe not. It doesn't matter much now when it's all going to end the same way. "You're not needed for the press call. You can go, but one last thing: don't make another mistake. You've got a good thing here. Don't ruin this for yourself; not with Naomi, not with your career, not with me. As far as your career goes, the Deputy has a head start in succession as Leader. You don't know how long I'll be around. Someone will have to take my place, and I hope that it'll be you. You won't get another opportunity like this one that I gave to you against everyone's advice; even L's. Don't throw it away."

Whether that statement made any difference remains to be seen, because he just leaves when I walk back towards my mirror. No thank you for taking up so much of my time with offensive accusations, no bow; he just walks out. Fuck him. All the way to Nairobi and back.

As he opens the door, the noise from the department is so loud that it's like a white heat that floods the room for a split second, only to be muffled as soon as the door is closed again. I stare at that door until I feel as if I might see through it, and in that time, I storyboard my ad lib, unfocused plan for what will happen in great detail until I feel so secure in it that it's as though it's already been done. I have created fate today. People have woken up this morning, only to die when I say so. I've created it all, and I've chosen ones to follow. It's strange that I feel less about what is to come than I might have expected, but it's a resolution and necessary. I must see what I have to do as being as simple and redecorating my surroundings and throwing away things which I no longer have a use for, so I adjust quickly once I know that it's for a logical, good cause.

My watch is set to beep at quarter hours, so with fifteen minutes left, I approach my full length mirror. It's been said in periodicals of some note that wherever I go, the air is charged with sex. I try to laugh this off because I prefer to be taken seriously as an sex icon, but occasionally I get a shock from it myself. I'd definitely do me, but in a respectful way, and that's saying something because I'm very hard to impress. However, the occasion doesn't call for radiance at this time. I have to throw some camouflage over this glow.

I concentrate on different areas of my face, trying to make the muscles mimic Touta's expression from before. I have a brief flash of admiration for him for performing this so easily, because it turns out to be more complicated than you'd think. When broken down, if one element isn't pitched perfectly, the overall appearance can look overwrought, unnatural or more suggestive of someone suffering from sciatica. I've found that the key is always in the eyes, so all of my attention goes into making them look as shiny as possible. This is best done by not blinking for as long as necessary and being careful to stop before it looks over the top, like when choosing the moment to use windscreen wipers on a car. The eyebrows are ever so minutely raised in the inner corners, but less pronounced than when 'disgusted' or 'quizzical,' because that's not what I'm aiming for here, obviously.

After building up the individual expressive components which make up this look, with all things combined, it makes my top lids look slightly puffy, as if gorged with emotion. I've identified that apart from my brow, my whole face must be slack, but I spend time trying to find the appropriate level of how upset I should appear to be, because I must avoid looking suspiciously emotional. This takes the most time, but when I'm pleased enough with the outcome, I cough, glance down, look back at myself and say quietly in perfect imitation: "There's bad reception where he lives. I hope he's ok."
Though I'd suffered a setback in the form of Mikami, I felt optimistic and in an excellent frame of mind for the emergency Cabinet meeting which followed. As you'd expect, a cover-up of sorts was actioned immediately. Disregarding standard protocol, I'd invited members of the Shadow Cabinet to sit in and contribute their pale with shock faces, and at the end of it, it was decided that though everyone knows that it's pointless, the election will go ahead. The consensus was that we might as well see it through, considering how much money has been spent on campaigning and sending out postal votes already. The man I expected to succeed Tsukino has unofficially stepped into his shoes. He's even more repulsive to look at than his predecessor, and has a strange twitch in one of his eyes which makes him appear to be a psychopath at breaking point. The Reds must know that their best chance of ever defeating me went up in smoke with the Tsukino house, and added to that, I'm suddenly the only one who can save us again. It's exactly what I needed to lift myself back up from L's squalid perversion and corruption of my reputation. I feel the forgiveness for my personal crime flow in waves, so along with Tsukino, I doubt that L will be spoken of here again either. In politics, problems which can't be easily and inexpensively solved are best ignored, so for all intents and purposes, L will just be a stain which people will step over and avoid, pretending he isn't there.

After the meeting, I watch them all walk out with the absolute knowledge that I’ve as good as won this farce of an election. Granted, I made an error of judgement in allowing my political sanctity to be compromised by a lawyer with a moral deficit, but I stopped short of killing my wife and that must count for something. However, in these days when a politician can be ousted on his regrettable taste in shirts, I am still disgraced, no matter how much I deny it. Officials such as me hang from the thread of public opinion. We're expected to resign for the sake of honour like a modern Bushido, and smaller parties deadlock the government until they do. I'm expected to resign and have been for some time because of L, and though tainted, I'm an exception in that my popularity has remained fairly high despite L's best efforts to fuck it up. I can recover whatever I may have temporarily lost. Years ago, I read a political think tank report which suggested that an adverse event would be beneficial in creating a dominant force, leading to world peace under that country's domination. It was critiqued as being a rallying cry for a neoconservative, New World Order, hegemonic, Orwellian nightmare, and rightly so. It would be a horrendous misuse of power by anyone else, but I found it quite influential all the same. It makes sense to me to exploit Tsukinogate in every way possible, including burying some of my recent bad news and lessening the impact of any to come. My job is to be the only person anyone could ever consider voting for until the end of fucking time. To do that, I need to dictate what should be thought in a caring and suggestive manner so that everyone accepts it as common sense and thinks that they came to that conclusion themselves.

Most Japanese Prime Ministers lasted a year in this political theatre of constant reshuffles and resigning leaders, plunging the country into a crisis of some sort to avoid foreign pressure for Japan to take on unwanted policies. That is, until The Lady, who wouldn't let her iron grip loosen on the balls of this country. Of course, she was dramatically booted through sinister means in the end also, and that was useful, but I don't intend to let L or anyone else do the same to me. I'll fight for this through orchestration and win, because if I ever leave this sorry state then it'll be because I choose to. Maybe my leaving would be what it'd take for them to truly realise that I'm the best thing that ever happened. It's like what L said to me once: that I'd realise how much he meant to me when he was gone. I know now that he was right, but no one likes a smartarse.

It's pitch-dark and starless by the time I give a statement to the press outside the House. I pause during my speech when my heart pounds against my chest, because I see the even darker silhouette of the Shinigami sitting on the top of a streetlamp, backlit by the moon. He swings his dangling legs happily, like a charcoal sketch of a rickety, grotesque overgrown child on a tall chair.

Then I realise. Ryuk said: 'There,' and I'm standing exactly where he'd pointed. My muscles feel like
tightly strung cables while I try to see the faces in the crowd. I look for someone who could be an assassin, but I can't make anything out because of the blinding lights in my face as cameras take a thousand photographs over the few seconds. The vulnerability is something I've never experienced before — not quite like this. I regret how my guards might be too far away to throw themselves in front of me, and how kevlar vests are too conspicuous for me to wear under my style of suiting. I regret a multitude of stupid things, including how any of them could be my last thoughts. The most desperate sadness would be to die regretting anything, and for a moment I regret everything.

I anticipate death, being not at all ready to make my peace with anything because I'm so fucking angry that I practically deny the concept of it being an ending, but nothing happens. Ryuk spreads his wings of thin, charred skin stretched over a framework, and flies away, hulking and graceless. As though I was hypnotised only by seeing him, I immediately collect myself and continue from where I left off like there was no pause. At my side is Tsukino's successor, who nods along with every saddened and heartfelt word I have to say as though he's a puppet moved by the strings of my will.

When I'm finished, I'm guided through the crowd in a zig-zagging scenic route towards my car. Journalists shout questions and stick microphones in my face while I'm hurried on by some heavily-set guards. There's something dreamlike and slowed down about when I'm the most special, the most adored, though I can't be seen to enjoy it. I'm reminded of how I can imprison people without them realising they're held. I'll pass through the sacred corridors as the monarch of righteousness and stability, chosen by the people and sanctified to do what's right. I am the star which people use to navigate their course through life and moral dilemmas, and soon, they won't be able to contemplate a world without me.

Solemn and pained with a duteous burden which is too much for one man, but beautiful with it, I lower my head so my hair hangs over my face, hiding my smile in a shadow I cast myself. I've spent my life hiding in plain view. What makes a good man is no formula of insipid, civilised attributes, but one who lives and fights with the darkness within him, only a hair's breadth away from being the most savage of murderers. Through reining it, he sacrifices himself for others. That's who I am, and no one will ever know it because it would destroy the illusion that I walk among them. There is no right or wrong for me. I am the definition of what is right, so how could I ever be wrong when it's impossible for me to make a mistake? I don't feel guilt. There's nothing I can be guilty of. Evil as a definition can only be applied to people; not gods. All gods have to do evil things if they're judged by those same simple standards. I'm no different.

The scent of stale blood is like incense in the air which coats my skin and lungs. I can taste it, I can smell it, I can almost feel it drying and cracking between the webs of my fingers. I feel like I've just woken, having slept for too long. Sounds are deadened as if heard through a wall. I'm dampened by tiredness but sensations linger like a kiss of acid, and burn.

Once my car pulls up outside my house, it looks as if only one lamp has been left on to make it look occupied to deter burglars, but I'm confronted with L and the bitter scent of tobacco as soon as I walk through the door. There's no sign of the love that I saw on his face in the car earlier, but then, he was underwater in my car while being driven through Tokyo, and I think that he might have been a zombie or something. I'm starting to think that it didn't happen. It shouldn't disappoint me, but I've been holding onto that image in my mind like a comfort blanket only for it to be torn to shreds by reality. He's sitting on the couch in front of the TV in the lounge with one arm bent at the elbow to lift a cigarette into the air. His other hand is in a bowl of multicoloured sugar-shelled chocolates next to him, and when his eyes meet mine, a trail of smoke escapes from his lips for a few seconds in the grieving light. And even though it's a cold feeling to know that I'll find no peace in the one place where I could possibly find it, my heart moves in its dormancy like a pupae in a chrysalis when I see him. For the most worthless, most undeserving, most treacherous of people.
Any sense I might regain through distance is always lost, pulling me back like a bungee cord so the confused, scalding feelings can take up from where they left off. There's nothing impressive about him, and that's what makes me wearily angry, because I think he's so impressive. He has the shape and aura of someone who has seen and done too much, knows too much, has no wish to know or see anymore. He seeks an end with disinterest and lazy hedonism, but confident that he'll survive because he is who he is. He takes a handful of sweets and lets them fall through his fingers back into the bowl, and we watch the ruined but captivating editorial images of each other until I open my mouth to say something I haven't decided upon yet. He doesn't even give me the respect of time, because he suddenly stubs out his cigarette, stands, walks past me and into the kitchen.

He leaves the TV on, so I can see that he's been watching the news. I see myself talk on the House steps more than an hour in the past, feeling as if I've aged considerably since then, though I probably appear to look the same. My face has that certain expressionless symmetry which people admire, and I sound convincing — as if I really am sorry and deeply upset. Amazing.

Then the screen cuts to a photograph of Tsukino and Shiori. She was with me all the way to the House, along with all my other nightmares, so any feelings I had about her have been exhausted. She had to die and it was nothing to do with me, so I feel absolutely nothing now and turn the TV off as I follow L into the equally dimly lit kitchen.

The language of dressing is an art of cold reading which is lost on most, but like with anyone, L's appearance is a good indicator of his mood at any given time. Right now he's wearing a thin black sweater and ankle-grazing black chinos, and it hasn't escaped my notice that it's like the casually chic shit he'd wear when Stephen was around. This speaks volumes to me. A flash of pale skin above his black, sock-less, suede moccasins makes him look like an exclamation mark. I remind myself that I'm supposed to love him and should act that way, but for the life of me, I can't remember why. I watch him suspiciously, silently hating him as he pockets his phone. He hasn't been off that thing since he found that police scanner app. Between that and the news on the TV, he probably knows more than the press know about Tsukinogate. The great L must make sure that he's informed.

I stand behind him, noticing how his shoulders tense up from my closeness, like Ryuk's wings did before he took flight. Murderers are so tetchy these days. Taking in the picture: his taut back in front of me, the wisps of hair grazing the back of his neck, the sound of him rooting through bottles on the counter, the knife block to his left, and the table behind me. I could have him anytime I want. I could have him on that table right now. Part of me wants to keep making a fucking mess.

"Sorry I'm late," I say, staring with a kind of mild adoration at the dark watercolour of a bruise just above the collar of his sweater. It's erotically placed, like the bare nape of a geisha's neck paint. It's the kind of interesting mark I'd expect to see in autopsy photos, and yet he's still alive, so I kiss it and whisper against it. "Ooooh, did I really do that?"

He doesn't reply but shirks his shoulder away and glances back at me when my hand leaves him. There aren't many marks on his face; just some closed burgundy scrapes and a bruise near his eye, but he's none the worse for wear than usual, really. He always looks like a week-long coma would do him good and I think some people believe that he smokes heroin on his lunch breaks, anyway. The shadows around his eyes make any additional bruises look like a lightweight surrealist pattern of my vengeance. Fuck me if I was ever going to make this easy for him.

"You had to go back into work?" he says quietly, but I can hear the rigidity of his jaw is through it. He dumps a handful of ice between two glasses. I could have him on that table.

"Yeah. God, what a day," I sigh dramatically.

"But you seem very happy all the same."
"Mmmm… I have no reason to complain, thank you," I say against the bruised, goose-pimpled skin which is like a wedding band around his neck; just mouthing it, wetting it with my tongue and breathing against it until we both shiver while I think of how close to the surface the sour blood is. I push my hand down the front of his fucking monstrosity of sweater to hold him around his chest and press my cheek against his. "You're very good at a lot of things, Mr Lawliet. But sometimes I wonder why we're not just fucking all the time."

"Somehow I don't think either of us would live very long if we did that," he replies, looking straight ahead but rebelling against the tight band of a grip I have on him.

"What a beautiful way to die, though," I say with a sigh, releasing him to lean against the counter and watch him. "But you're absolutely right, of course. I'm still married, and out of the 2% of sudden deaths attributed to coitus, unfaithful men are 75% more likely to die during sex. With you, I think that chance is more of a very risky gamble, even at my young age. For the country's sake, I should try to stick around for a while longer if I can manage it, don't you think? So, you should keep away from me," I tell him, jabbing my finger into his chest not so playfully. He just glares at me for a second and then acts as if I'm not here, so after an overly long pause, I give up and look through the papers on the table. "Have you got the Times? I left mine at the office and didn't get a chance to read it."

His briefcase is unlocked on the counter in front of him, so I'm opening it, perfectly innocently, before he slams his hand down on the lid.

"No, I haven't got it," he says with a small smug smile, locking the case and sliding it away from me. If the Death Note is in there and he thinks that I won't be able to crack his combination then he's more stupid than I thought. I make a mental post-it of this behaviour and sigh as I lean against the counter again. He holds an empty glass in front of his face and turns it, polishing the rim with a swipe of a cloth. I doubt that there's a reason for him to suddenly be a perfectionist other than to have something to focus his attention on that's not me. I feel like a living machete tonight. Every movement I make feels sharp, precise and defensive, including how I glare at him.

"It wasn't delivered?" I ask.

"Yes, but I took it to the office and I left it there when I finished reading it. You'll have to read it online."

"Read it online?" I ask, shaking my head like I cannot even conceive of such an idiotic thing. "Look, L, I'm trying really hard but I'm struggling to see a point to your existence."

"Yeah," he sighs despairingly. "So do I sometimes."

"Don't sulk, you twat. It doesn't matter. I'm guessing that it was just about that Prime Minister doing a stupid thing, anyway."

"Yes, you were in it quite a bit, but then you're always doing stupid things," he says, huffing air onto another glass to polish.

"Not me, shut up."

"You mean that guy and the pig when he was at University? It's how the rich boys get their kicks, y'know. No one really questions it and they usually end up being politicians. But yes, bad press for him, poor soul."

"I've had worse," I grumble, swaying from how mightily pissed off I am. "If he wanted really bad
press then he should have fucked you instead of a pig's head."

Oddly enough, L doesn't appear to find that very funny or flattering. He lowers the glass he's holding so that the base chinks on the marble worktop, and from the sound you can hear the quality of both the crystal and the worktop, because it isn't some cheap formica shit. There's a moment of trepidation when he lifts his face upwards like he's preparing for something, but it becomes evident that he's actually just looking up at the hand-blown glass accent light fixture with the bronze finish above his head. I have to say that they did turn out very well and were exactly the architectural and masculine look that I was going for in this particular space. I knew it would work because it had the high ceilings for something dramatic in a restrained and expensive way, so I took inspiration from the central pillars of the 'floating' torii gate at the Itsukushima shrine at high tide. Through working closely with the designer, as in we had a phone conversation, of course it's a stunning installation, but I still think that L's very rude in being so easily distracted. I reach for my cigarettes, light one, and watch his jaw set solidly. Truth be told, the added tightness and contouring at his jawline does wonders for his profile, but he doesn't give me much opportunity to admire that or take pride in my rapier wit which so often goes unnoticed.

"Are you looking for a fight?" he asks me, which makes me laugh and cough on the smoke I've just inhaled before I can reply.

"Me? With you? Always," I smile, I'd like to think seductively, but he groans and turns his back to me to pour wine for himself. What's strange to me is that I don't often feel more alive than when he's critical of me. It can be an immense and almost spiritual anger. On the flip-side, it always makes me want to leave the room when there's no force behind it, like now. That in turn makes me wonder why I'm in politics, since that's all I hear all day.

"I tried to call you," he says mournfully. "I don't know why. I knew that you wouldn't answer."

"I've been in meetings since this afternoon and had enough people talking at me without adding you to the mix," I reply quickly, tilting my head to look at the curved jetted back pockets of his chinos. Unusual. "Did you see the judge about the case?"

"Yes."

"Everything's going to go your way then?"

"What do you think?" he throws back, finally facing me. Of course. I should just presume that it always will. "But my work isn't important in comparison to yours: running the country."

"I'll take your word for it. So, why don't you tell me about your day?"

"Oh let's not do that 'how was your day?' shit. No B or Ryuk?"

"No."

"You mean I actually have you all to myself?" I sigh at my nails. "I saw Ryuk today."

"You did?"
"Yeah," I reply, holding his gaze for a few seconds to identify any emotion in him. "I don't see him much these days, which is strange since both he and B are virtually stuck to you. Did you leave any food for me?" I'm so close to punching him that I look around the kitchen, hoping I don't find anything so I can have something to shout at him about instead of what I would actually like to do. After a cursory glance inside the fridge, I now have reason to shout at him. "You didn't leave anything for me, you selfish ba – "

As I'm walking, my foot is lifted by some obstacle against my shin and I tip forwards. My hands flail out to catch hold of something to stop myself from falling, but a hand pressed against my chest pushes me back against the edge of the counter, knocking the air out of me. When I look up, L's right there. He's the obstacle that stares into my eyes coldly while offering a glass of vodka to me. My shoulders sink and hunch so I assume the pose of a guarding wolf on two legs while he looks down on me, straight-backed and coolly autocratic. His face is so unfathomable and his voice so dull and measured now that I can't read him.

"Careful," he tells me with the smallest of smirks. "I'll look after you, Light. I can understand how you must have been too busy to eat after all the meetings and press you've had today, because you're so important. I bought you dinner from The Blue Note and kept it heated in the oven. That's how much I love you. You like The Blue Note, don't you?"

"Yes…" I reply questioningly, and he smiles for a shocking millisecond.

"So do I. I had a good fuck outside there once," he says so casually that it feels like an unexpected bite. My eyes flutter down to the glass he's still holding between our chests, hating to be reminded of some deep-seated feeling of degradation I shouldn't feel. He almost completely destroys the blossoming, fragile pride I've been rebuilding. "I got you the lamb. It's your favourite still, isn't it? Oh no, sorry, you don't have such things as favourites, do you. I don't expect you to like it but I'm sure you'll eat it all the same. You deserve a drink, Sir."

The glass is pushed towards me so the ice chimes against the sides. I want to smash it into his face and he knows it, so this feels like a test to see whether I will or not.

"Thanks," I say, taking the glass.

"There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. Keeping food warm is nothing. You'd do the same for me, wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"Because that's the kind of relationship we have. I do things for you, you do things for me, and we ask about each other's day. Because we love each other. We've reached that nirvana of maturity and our missing halves at the end of the red threads. This is supposed to be what it's all about, Light. And then we die." There's something equally charming as it is sinister in how he says this, and his stare is the kind that forces you to nod whether you agree with him or not. It's only when I do nod that he moves back to his bottle collection with my untrusting eyes on him. "With that in mind, please tell me about your day."

"You mean, this afternoon? When you came back? Yeah, that was —"

"No, not that. I imagine that you've had quite an eventful time."

"Hm?" I sound out in my childlike ignorance, and he responds by turning on the TV behind me. I reach a high pitch of sickness which ironically burns itself out when I see the footage, because I haven't been able to see much of it until now. The flames from the house appear to have spread so
that the trees have caught fire, and the spindly arms of branches reach up to a dark, uncaring sky. No one cares. The fire service seem to have decided to let everything burn apart from one area of the house because they're fucking useless. The news captions along the bottom of the screen read: 'Two confirmed dead on scene of major fire at the home of Leader of the Luck Egalitarianism Union Party, Akuhei Tsukino.' Yes, but why isn't my speech being televised?

"Oh my God, what's happened!? Tsukino's house is on fire?" I gasp through what I have to admit must be a very convincing display of shock, but once L rolls his eyes, I can't keep my face straight anymore, grab the remote from him and turn the TV off. "Ha, ok. You've proven that you're up to date with current affairs. Yeah, you could say that it's been eventful. It's been a fucking nightm — "

"How did you do it?" he interrupts me.

"Do what?"

"How did you kill three people?"

"Hey?"

"And why did you kill three? You asked me to kill Tsukino and I said no, but now he's out of the picture."

"He's not dead, as far as I know."

"He's not?"

"No. Haven't you seen my speech? Fuck, what are they doing? PR are useless now, L, completely shit. If you'd seen my speech then you'd know that... well, he's actually in hospital, but he's in custody under suspicion of murder. Nothing to do with me. I was with you when he did it, but obviously you'd think it was my fault because you blame everything on me. And what I couldn't say in my speech is that, from what the NPA told me, it sounds like he went home and found his wife with Sakurada. I don't know, they must have been at it or else he put two and two together and came up with seven, but, anyway, he killed them both and set the house on fire with himself inside it. Really," I almost laugh. The extravagance of it all only adds to me recapturing my shaken couldn't-care-less humour, so I try out the vodka. "You have to hand it to him though. He was a terrible politician and he never failed there, and now he's a murderer and he went all out with that as well. Police had to taser him before he could shoot himself. They shouldn't have bothered, if you ask me. The murdering bastard isn't worth saving. They should have just shot to kill, like they should when dealing with a rabid dog. I might need to look into gun control again, though. You think you've got things covered but then some nut turns up and — "

"Stop there for a minute," L says, staring into space and tapping his middle finger against his palm anxiously, so I set pause and let my eyes look around the room while I wait. "Brandy," he says urgently, and he spins around to clink bottles together until he finds what he's looking for in the collection which we officially keep in preparation for guests and parties we never have. A big slug of it is poured out into a glass, he downs it, shakes the grimace out of himself, then pours himself another one.

"Why bother with glasses when you could set up an intravenous line?" I grumble.

"You're saying that he killed Sakurada? Sakurada, his deputy?" he asks.

"Well it'd surprise me if he killed another man with the same name and description, but stranger things have happened. You remember Sakurada. His campaign for office involved cherry blossoms
being thrown from a bus, remember? Crass. You said that he had nice legs… which he didn't, by the way. I think he was bow-legged, myself. When you were there he was Shadow… I don't know what now, I can't remember. Probably Transport or something insignificant."

"You were Transport once," he reminds me, and I blink a few times. What? How does that correlate?

"A long time ago. And not in the Shadow either."

"You should have stayed there," he says under his breath, but I hear him well enough. My back straightens, even more like a rod than it already was. What the fuck does he mean by that? "Ok, that answers one question I had. The press haven't said that it was Sakurada. They're just saying two victims — one male, one female. It's assumed that the female is Tsukino's wife."

"Goes without saying that Sakurada has to be formally identified and his family have to be told before that's released, but everyone must have worked it out by now. He hasn't been seen or given a statement, and he'd be acting leader now if he wasn't dead. The Reds have appointed an acting leader and it's not him, so…"

"But Sakurada wasn't having an affair with Tsukino's wife. He'd have to get near her for a start."

"I wish someone tried telling Tsukino that before he created yet another sex scandal, because everyone knows that we haven't had enough of those," I say, leaning to one side to roll my eyes. There was already the start of a low warmth in me even before he looked at me like he is now — like he totally despises me — so I reach down to massage my knee. "You really hurt my knee. I've got a massive bruise there now."

"How sad," he replies moodily. If I listened to him, if he would actually discuss anything with me, I might find out that I may not live long enough to be without this bruise, not that I actually believe in his overheard doom scenario. Knowing that he could easily kill me and that I'm always only forty seconds away from death creates a raging bloodlust in me, and my eyes shower his face with appreciation because we're so close I can't take it all in. It's always been a great part of my attraction for him, I think; knowing how easy it would be for him to end me in various ways, and the challenge I've had in avoiding it. Just him entire calls to me like a limited edition suit from YSL that has a hybristophilia effect. Eyes, mouth, eyes, mouth.

"I'll have to show you what you did," I tell him, but it's clear it'll take more than that. He leans back and crosses his arms, not at all interested in my bruise or my eyes or my mouth or that table and he's not accepting my offer of a distraction.

"I'm not a sex scandal," he tells me, which I find so funny I want to laugh, but I inspect my nails again instead because they're looking spectacular, despite what they've been up to over the last few days. No one would ever suspect what these hands have done.

"Unfortunately, you are, L. You know that. You've been rolling in your infamy like a pig in shit and dragging me into it, but I couldn't say that I'm a real politician until I'd been involved in a sex scandal at some point, so I suppose I've done everything now. And one good thing Tsukino's done is to deflect attention away from us. All we've done is partake in some homosexual acts, which I know is unforgivable. Y'know, with us being two consenting adults and all."

"It does seem abnormally beneficial to you that your arch nemesis decided that at this pivotal point in his career he wants to become a murderer. And as you say, murder trumps affairs with me and my gay infamy. You're still mad if you think they're just going to forget about the whole unfaithful dirtbag and shitty father part of your character though, Light. Also you're wrong if you think the
whole gay issue doesn't matter in this business. You're not what they signed up for. And what's worse is that it's so fucking obvious that you and Kiyomi didn't just wake up one day and decide that your marriage was as dead as Tutankhamun and that you wanted to live with your ex-PR in some celibate bromantic bliss, as you'd have them believe. Oh, the stories I could tell."

"Well, actually, it was kind of like that," I say.

"Shut up."

"We didn't have an affair. You and me. At least, not until after I'd separated from my wife and your fuckboy tragically died too young, too young! Anyway, my cock's business is no one else's concern and I'm an excellent father, for your information. My son idolises me."

"Yes, he does," he says, and I feel like it's a reprimand that I don't know how to react to.

"Yes… So, whatever we're accused of are rumours and lies. It's not like we've killed anyone."

He heaves out a laugh like a sly fart under a blanket, but officially we haven't killed anyone and that's what matters. He's referring to an idea I've been toying with that I state publicly that I'm simply a gentleman bachelor living with his gentleman friend as two professionals to share bills, petrol costs and to reduce our impact on the housing crisis. It's not my fault that people have dirty minds and presume the worst. I love him like a brother, officially. That's all. Nobody asked me to specify the precise meaning of my statement in regards to him. Well, maybe they did, but I was too busy to answer. The breakdown of my marriage was unavoidable due to Kiyomi's incompatibility with anyone, so I left for the sake of my child's emotional health and to dedicate myself to my country. Maybe I'll find love again. God, what a horrible thought.

"It sounds very unfair then, if you're the injured party here and completely innocent," he says. "I wonder if I can forgive myself for dragging you into my homosexual acts against your will while I roll about like a pig in shit."

"Don't be sensitive, L. It's only the public's perception of you. I wouldn't say that you roll about in it exactly. You paddle in it, maybe."

"Would you like a brandy, Light?"

"I haven't had this vodka yet."

"No, I mean would you like this brandy bottle up your arse, you flapping cunt?" he asks, holding the bottle at an intimidating angle.

"I'll decline on this occasion, thank you," I reply after nervously swallowing, then open the oven door to groan at the inedible remains of some carcass. "Anyway, horrific as it is, it's not all bad news. The Reds have effectively collapsed. I'm not going to lose now. It's all very damaging publicity for them, isn't it? Makes what I've done with you look like a one-off average grade due to illness. Suddenly people want me to talk about something other than you again. I almost forgot what it was like to be Prime Minister."

"Yes, I thought that would be another positive side effect for you. I'm sorry. Being with me sounds like a debilitating disease someone should set up a charity for," he says sardonically, because he's the most sarcastic shit I've ever met in my entire life.

"It means a lot to me to hear you say that. It must infuriate you that though you've tried so hard, you've failed to dismantle me completely. You're usually so good at destroying lives, Lawliet-san. What went wrong?" I ask. He looks to his left and hugs his arms closer to his chest as if there's a
sudden cold draught, but there is no draught. I have a mild coughing fit and 'you bastard' might be said in the middle of it while I practically throw the burning hot plate on the table and sit down. The food is actually alright under a cremated-looking surface, but I couldn't tell you what it is, it's a mystery. He says it's lamb but I'm not convinced. "Anyway, that's all I know, L. Sorry if it's not enough for you, but I can't admit to things I have no involvement in. So, where is B? Is he dead or just hiding under the bed again? This lamb looks familiar. Are you sure it's not B's calf muscle?"

"B's staying at a hotel for a while to think about what he's done," he says. Clearly this isn't news to me, since I heard their conversation about B being sent packing to The Royale, but L doesn't know that. He has an inflated view of his sexual prowess leaving people unconscious, so doesn't see me overhearing anything as being a possibility. I'm not about to make him think otherwise.

A string of fried seaweed hangs over my open mouth.

"You sent him away? Because of me? Do you feel threatened, L-sama?" I smile.

"Don't call me that. What exactly have you done today?"

"Today? Well, you fucked me something rotten and then Tsukino killed some people and set his house on fire, so I had to reassure the masses that this isn't how the government thinks conflict should be resolved. The usual. Oh, and my party won the Yamanashi Prefecture District 3 seat in that bi-election. Not sure if you saw that on the news since no one's interested at the moment, but I can take that as a safe seat for the election."

"What I meant is what did you have to do with Tsukino going batshit?" he asks. I love hate seeing his anger repressed like a pot of boiling water with the lid left on. On one hand it's foreplay, on the other it's like a gossamer-veiled painting you like well enough unless you've seen the full overwhelming colours and beauty of it.

"I didn't do anything. I told you. I just went to work and —"

"And?"

"Worked? If I didn't oversee this personally then the campaign committee would have me expecting to win the election through a tap dance routine. So I worked and then I came home to see you, which was an excellent decision of mine," I grin lasciviously, but it gets little reaction. "The rest has just been Tsukino, Tsukino, Tsukino, NPA, meetings, PR running around, press. Actually, it's been quite a nice day. Apart from the horrific murders, obviously. Have we got any Pinot Noir to go with this shit or have you drunk it all?"

A bottle is grumpily slammed in front of me, and while I move it to one side, L switches the TV on again, standing next to the images of the flaming house scorching red and yellow against the night sky.

"Turn it off, L. I'm done with Tsukino and his killing spree," I sigh, sneaking glances at the screen while I eat, occasionally pointing my chopsticks at the screen. "God, talk about overkill of these aerial shots of his house. Why aren't they showing my speech? I better phone PR and see what the fucking problem is. This never would have happened when you were running PR. I hope you've been thinking about that, by the way. That was a serious offer. You were exonerated of any link to… uh…to Penber. I'd love to see you stalking around the Kantei again," I smile at him, but it falls as I look back at the screen.

"I wouldn't worry about that at the moment," he says. "I'd worry about explaining to me how you did this."
"Hey? Oh, not that again," I groan. "You know, it sounds to me that it's like you want me to have had something to do with this. I'm sorry if that's the case, but this is a straight-forward domestic homicide, and there could be another one in this house if you don't stop harassing me. Shut up and let me eat this shit, please."

"Yeah, eat shit," he spits at me, which me look at the plate of food suspiciously. "Did you take a page of the Death Note?" he asks, now leaning across the table and into my face like he's a part-timer with the Spanish Inquisition. The information is a nice bonus.

"You mean the paper does work even when it's ripped out of the book? You said that it didn't. But then, you lie."

"Don't play dumb with me or I will fist fuck you out the fucking door," he hisses. "I was wondering what you were doing on Stephen's laptop, because what's wrong with yours all of a sudden? How many have you got now? Three? So when I came home, it was just lying around and so was I, and it was a good clean up job, apart from that you really shouldn't SAVE A BOOKMARK FOR A FORUM YOU'VE BEEN SPAMMING WITH SHIT!"

What? I wouldn't have done that. Did I actually do that? Oh, fuck, Firefox. I was only checking!

"What are you talking about now?" I ask.

"You did this. You've been spreading lies about Tsukino's wife and Sakurada and you used a piece of the Death Note to make him kill them, didn't you."

"I…" I start, then push my plate away while laughing. What is this? A come to Jesus talk from Satan? "Ok, how could I have done that, L? Tsukino's not dead, so, you know, I couldn't have made him do this without him dying, could I? Or did I misinterpret the rules?"

"Maybe it wasn't him who did it," he says, "There are two dead people. They could have killed themselves."

"Except that there's a witness who saw Tsukino do it. Explain that, Detective Oxford Comma. Another flaw in your case is that you wouldn't even let me touch the notebook and I don't know where you've hidden it. I've had no opportunity to use it even if I wanted to. And I saw that forum, yes, but I don't know why you'd think that I'd post those messages. It's an aide forum and it's been a long time since I've been an aide. I didn't even know it existed before now. Someone told me about that thread, so I just had a look to think about whether I should tell Tsukino or not."

"And you did tell him?"

"No, because I'm not suicidal. I was going to tell PR to leak it, like any sane person would in my position. I was just keeping an eye on the gossip, but thank you for thinking the best of me, as always. I don't think my heart can take all these feelings of trust and respect. Wait there a minute," I tell him, leaving to get my briefcase from the hall. Back in the kitchen, I pull out a folder of papers and dump them on the table in front of him. "But if we're talking about suspiciously beneficial deaths, why don't we talk about these? I have a book's worth of them in this little scrapbook which is… oooh, all about you!"

"You made a scrapbook about me?" he asks, sitting down and worriedly looking at the folder.

"About you? Not exactly. In fact, your name isn't mentioned once in any of these articles, although you are the link between them. Do you want me to go on?"

"I don't care what you do, Light. But you've clearly gone to a lot of trouble here, so go ahead."
"Ok, here we have ex-clients you defended in various court cases once you came to Japan. There are also politicians, lawyers, editors, journalists, a selection of criminals, and some no-name one-time colleagues and acquaintances of yours, all of whom inexplicably died, and in some cases quite inventively."

"So far all you've got are a pile of people I might have met as a matter of course through work."

"Yes, except that when you look into it, as I have, it seems that you might want all these people dead for some reason. For your benefit or mine. Mostly yours. And there are a damn sight more than forty-one people here," I say. We look at each other across the table until he breaks away to light a cigarette in the silence. He offers it to me, which I take as an admission that I'm on the right track here and he's impressed that I found a connection to murders no one knew existed. "You said that you'd killed forty-one people before the cabinet deaths, so it must just be a coincidence and not another factual discrepancy of yours. It makes interesting reading though. One of my personal favourites is this one about a man who'd had a fantastic day doing what business executives do, which apparently involved two prostitutes and a water bed. The man must have got his viagra prescription, because he'd made arrangements with another lady that night at his house. When she arrived, he'd somehow managed to kill himself with carbon monoxide poisoning in his brand new white Ferrari, which had just been delivered that day. Expensive coffin, eh? Strange actions for a man who'd hired the dream team of legal representation to get him exonerated in a murder case."

"Who's to say the reasons behind why people do the things they do?" he says tiredly. "I assume that you're accusing me of causing his death? You'll have to remind me of what reason I'd have to want him dead, apart from that he chose white for his Ferrari, though I'm not saying that's not a good enough reason."

"I'm not accusing you. I know that you killed him. And I don't disapprove of it."

"That's nice to know but —"

"I looked through your past cases and saw that you represented this guy, defended him, won the case, he paid you a lot of money, and why would he bother if he wanted to kill himself less than a week after being exonerated? I get it, L. It's justice. True justice, unlike what there is on earth. You make a joke of the legal system to show how flawed it is because you can, but you give the guilty true justice. I think it's almost admirable."

"That's an unusual way to describe it," he says, sweeping some crumbs from the table so he can lean on his elbows on it like a bored schoolboy.

"How would you describe it?" I ask.

"Murder. It is what it is. Not pretty enough a word for you? It's not pretty, Light, but unlike you, I've never needed to excuse it as anything greater. 'Justice,'" he laughs sharply down at the table like he can't control himself, then lifts his head again and combs his fingers through his hair. Still smiling.

"Don't laugh at me, you bastard," I say.

"Sorry, but justice is such interesting terminology coming from you. I suppose that justice is what you make of it, isn't it? I made it mine," he tells me, looking straight into my eyes like it's the truest thing he's ever said. I feel the cold ruthlessness in it which makes me blink quick fire for a second until I stand tall to look down on him, seeing him for what he is. "I find it easy enough to live with what I've done," he says. "I don't know what it says about me that I have been able to live with it, but I can. Whether you can live with the truth of what you've done is another matter."
"What do you mean?" I ask innocently, and he bangs his fist on the table.

"God, Light, just admit that you're behind what happened today! We're the same. I know why you did it."

"Don't compare yourself to me. We're nothing alike," I tell him. Chopsticks roll on the plate from when he smacked the table, and the sound is like the dull echo of a singing bowl. It's probably that sound which prompts me to lean towards him and touch his face as tenderly as I do, and it's why the words I whisper to him sound so loving, like a hushed confession. "You said that I didn't need the Death Note to get what I want. You've executed people. You executed Raye, but I still saved you. You know, sometimes I look at you and see the hole the bullet left when it went into his head. You're the last person to accuse me of anything. What does it say about me that I know these things about you and I lived in this house and I still let you fuck me? I allowed you to. Are you as pure as snow, L? The only kind of snow you know about is the kind you snort up your nose, and everyone is someone you have or haven't fucked or killed. Make something out of this if you think you have a right to preach and condemn me. Otherwise, I'd advise you to leave it the fuck alone."

I press my thumb against the centre of his forehead to push his head back. Exactly like how Raye was shot, yes, right there in his head. Just as quick as it would have been for him, whipping him back from the force of it. When I pull away, I see how L's eyes are closed because I've shown him as the shameful god of deceit that he is. Even with his glistening lies, he's worthless unless I find some worth in him. For the first time, I can't find any worth except for the book of death that he's an owner of.

"You're a murderer now, Light. You can't attribute these to me, like with the three from the Cabinet because I wrote their names. I know how you excuse yourself of blame," he says as I walk away from him. The words loop in my head, and I stop for a moment to stare at the view in front of me. I don't know whether the walls are shaking or if my vision is. My hands suddenly feel like they're on fire, clenching with hatred I want him to feel and suffer for. I could only give him that if these hands were around his neck. "Why do this to Sakurada and the girl? Why kill the girl?"

That's a good question. There wasn't any other way. I simply had to do it because I could not fail. The possibility of failure cannot exist.

"I didn't kill them; Tsukino did. Jealousy makes people do desperate things," I reply. Not to him, not over my shoulder, but straight to the wall in front of me like I'm giving an emotionless explanation to an invisible audience.

"Do you think that the more you say it, the more you'll believe it?" he says.

He knows, and in no small way, I want him to. I want him to have worked it all out and be impressed, and for once in his goddamn life acknowledge that I'm better than he is. It doesn't take anything special to write a name in a book. What I've done takes brains.

So I tell him something that I hadn't planned on admitting to, but my longing to hurt him in any way possible is too strong for me to deny. He talks about the dead as if they were innocent victims when they were practically implicit in their own downfall; one for neediness and stupidity, the other for ambition. Both were a means to an end.

"I slept with her, you know. Tsukino's wife."

His silence draws on, and I wonder whether it is really just confirmation of what he already suspected or if this actually is a surprise to him. He's arrogant enough to be surprised. He's a great believer in 'why go for hamburgers when there's steak at home?' monogamy, since he considers...
himself the best steak money can't buy. Either way, if it stabs at his heart even a tiny amount, it's worth it to me. Somehow it's worse to hear it come from the mouth of the person in question, as I know from experience.

"I didn't doubt it," he replies eventually, and sadly, I think. Good.

"It was a while ago. It's not what you think."

"Oh, that's such a relief, Light," he says with a sarcastic edge. "And there was me thinking that you used her to make her look like a whore. I feel terrible for thinking that you were capable of creating that forum thread and leaving every comment to reinforce the lie and make Tsukino go completely insane and do, I don't know, something like what he's done."

"She slept with anyone. She was a whore, and Tsukino killed her for it. It was his choice."

"No. You fabricated this whole thing. It has you all over it. The only way you know how to deal with people is to play on insecurities and manipulate them in whatever way you can to get what you want, and you wanted Tsukino out of the race so you could win this election. Why leave it up to chance when you can make it a certainty?"

"I told you that I had nothing to do with this, but you're determined not to believe me."

"I know you too well to believe you," he says, which makes me smile. "I do believe one thing now, though. There was no Death Note involved. You don't need it. This is just you and your conniving, sordid methods. You're pure evil."

He says it quietly, and for some reason it has more effect because it sounds so sure and convincing, but I can't believe that, I can't accept it. He twists things and won't take into account the reasons. It's pure, yes.

"I think that you should get out of my house."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: You know not to trust me now because I think that for at least the last 10 chapters I've said that the next update will be the last. This chapter obviously isn't the last either. I hope you won't be pissed off with me, but since starting to write this after a break, there are a few things I want to add in because I won't get the opportunity again. I appreciate your patience and hope that you'll think it was worth it in the end, when that does finally happen. I'm not estimating anymore because I'm laughably bad at it, but I'm hoping that it'll be soon because I live in hope of getting my life back/start another story. I'd like to see if this can beat the word count of The Bible, though. Socialising is overrated, anyway, so idk. I had problems actually writing it for the past year-ish, because once I knew how it ended, I felt like it was done in a weird way. Thank you to everyone who's left kudos or reviews, because it really encouraged me to get my teeth back into this thing. xxx

I have a playlist for this and most chapters on http://8tracks.com/halfpromise if you're into that sort of thing.
Disclaimers: I believe that "The possibility of failure cannot exist," is a Queen Victoria quote that I heard via a Margaret Thatcher quote. The hamburger vs steak quote is by Paul Newman. The lyrics in the opening scene are translated lyrics (by Bleu) from Finale by L'Arc~En~Ciel because I wrote the scene around it, as I'm prone to do. I know nothing about how to be invisible on the internet but Light would, so I relied on the internet to tell me. The info might be outdated or incorrect.
Kind of a Pretty Boy (Part One)

Chapter Notes

Originally intended, despite the length, to be one chapter because it all takes place over one night. There aren't too many *scenes* as such and it mostly merges into each other until the second half. It's split on Ao3 as an alternative way to read it to the one-chapter version on FFN. :D

Kind of a Pretty Boy

In quiet moments like these, rare as they are, I like to consider the concept of self care. The definition is to initiate actions to benefit and maintain the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of an individual. I do this naturally and don't understand how anyone could find it difficult, but unfortunately for me—especially since I've gained premiership—I have to be considerate of others, and as such my self care has to be secondary to that of others. My own well-being struggles to squeeze between the tiny gaps within the heaving mass of people that scurry around this country like ants. Today, I have enacted self care selflessly yet again by destroying my competition while barely lifting a finger. There's more to self care than putting a candle on the edge of the bath.

The silence of this house is only interrupted by the distant roar of the sea, close and groaning with a hunger to take lives. Y'know. The usual. It's just always fucking there. The intensity of it starts to thunder in my head with a panic that I might actually be alone in this house, because I asked him to leave but I didn't mean it, and I didn't hear him go.

"L?" I shout out, leaving the living room for the heart of a foyer to which all other tumorous rooms are connected. I hate this house. It seems to grow bigger by the day like E. coli in a petri dish. "L?"

"What?" he sharply shouts back from the room I just left. Just when it seems that Lord Bastard must have acquired the gift of invisibility now, I find him lounging on the sofa and with a face as pale as milk like he was there the whole time.

"I told you to go," I remind him, the disobedient little shit that he is.

"I'm reluctant to leave in the middle of the night since my name is on the deeds of the house as well as yours. I'm not some delinquent tenant to be turfed out by you on a whim just because I cut a little too close to the bone didn't I, Light?" he replies, pretending to read a book throughout.

"Oh, you're still accusing me of being a murderer? Really?" I sigh like a director of a play who has to put up with actors who can't remember their lines. "Ahh, and I'm 'pure evil' as well, I almost forgot. Well, sorry to disappoint, but if had wanted to kill Tsukino then I'm sure that I would have done a better job, because he's still alive and kicking after killing two people, so I'm told. Look it up. Accusations of evil murdering aside, I'm offended that you think I'd be so inept at it, L."

"Obviously I'm not in a position to criticise a spot of democide every now and again.'
"No. Because you killed The Lady," I say, and he likes that. He dips his head to cough and smile to himself, and I realise that maybe he's trying to remind me what he's capable of. He can topple Kings and Queens.

"I didn't see you complaining," he points out, snapping his book shut. Well, at least I have his full attention now. "It's becoming de rigueur in international politics, but it's particularly lethal to live in Japan right now, it seems."

"Since you moved here, yeah."

"But I've never been as devious as you've been today."

"You knew! You just didn't know how I did it. You're amazing," I tell him, shocking both of us by how impressed I am by him. No one else would suspect that I could possibly choreograph such a thing. It'd be something that even mad conspiracy theorists would disregard as being too far fetched, but L knows that I'd be able to do that and more.

"Amazing, yes, amazing," he laughs, and it's quite sinister, really. "Great, I'm so pleased. We're doing so many amazing things today, you bastard!"

"I'm not blaming you, but you've got to take some responsibility here. You could have made this so simple. She didn't have to die."

It's a fair comment but, nevertheless, he stands and walks towards me to prod me in the chest a few times.

"What the fuck are you talking about, you fucking mentalist?! I didn't kill them but it's my fault they're dead? It's my fault you slept with that fucking woman? I've seen more virile looking things squashed in a mousetrap. How the fuck did you do that, eh? How did you pull that one out of the hat? How long was that going on?" He jabs me in the chest with every question until a thought seems to dawn on him, and I don't need to say a word. It takes him a while but he usually works things out. I revel in the delay quite often, though sometimes it's frustrating. "Not long," he answers himself calmly. No, not long at all. I did most of it while on official travel and lunch breaks. I'm efficient. "You took the train so you could find her. You're a piece of work."

"You're just angry that I slept with her," I laugh. "Take comfort in the fact that I didn't actually sleep. But she did. I must have tired her out, poor thing. Or are you angry at yourself because you had no idea what I was doing? Have I hurt your pride, L? Because I can do things without your help when you leave me with no other option? I'm sorry, but I think it's good for you to remember who makes the rules here. You think you do because you have that fucking book. You think you're so clever. You use that thing for the most stupid reasons, you make mistakes, and you won't let me use it for real, justified reasons. The only person who should have the Death Note is me and you know it, you fucking know it!"

"I know no such thing," he says as the audible equivalent of a full stop. "Giving you the Death Note would be like inviting an apocalypse, and I'm not quite suicidal enough for that yet. Besides, the rest of the human race is doing such a good job at fucking up the entire planet, I'd hate to cramp their style."

He walks with intent, no doubt towards where the vodka is because he's heard its call. I'm so furious that he's turned his back to me that I start shaking from this red heat inside of me.

"It doesn't matter, though. I don't need the Death Note," I tell him. "That's why I want you to know how I did it, but all you care about is who I fucked to do it. What sort of person are you?"
Aaaand he stops in his tracks to turn back to me. Good.

"Well, as I said, I can't criticise some sporadic murdering, no matter how unnecessary it was, but I care that you slept with a woman, and it was premeditated."

"Oh! So if she was a he then you wouldn't mind so much?" I ask. "I should have fucked B after all then, shouldn't I?" I tell him coldly just to see him react in the way I anticipated. His face sets like concrete in trying to contain the anger that's pooling in his fists, judging by the way he's forcing them into his pockets. He might as well hit me. I wish he would.

"No," he finally replies. "I think that if I'm being monogamous, then you should have the courtesy to at least attempt to do the same."

"Haaa! That's the funniest thing you've ever said, L. Like you could ever be monogamous. The word is not in your dictionary."

"It's certainly not in yours. I don't know what happened to you while I was… away, but you've turned into someone I hardly recognise," he tells me without a flicker of emotion on his face, apart from the disappointment I've been seeing there consistently since I met him.

My eyes become swollen with water and pressure from looking at him for so long, I have to allow it to reabsorb before things starts looking dramatic. Thankfully, he looks literally anywhere else apart from at me, so he doesn't notice my momentary struggle and misconstrue it.

I can hear that mournful piano song that was playing in a restaurant a few weeks ago, and I'm sure that there must be a radio left on here somewhere until I realise that it is really just in my head after all. I thought that it was sad when I first heard it, I don't know why it needs to come back now. If I'm different, then he doesn't see that he has anything to do with that. I've felt myself become almost transparent as the layers of what made me have fallen away since I woke up on the floor of his house and he wasn't there. But we don't talk about that. He can't recognise it, let alone understand it, and if he can't understand me then what hope do I have? Like he'd come back and I'd be exactly the same as I was when we were happy for all of two days. I feel this way now because of those two days and brief moments when nothing mattered more to me than him. I gave up everything for those two days.

"You haven't got a clue have you?" I ask him, stunned by how oblivious he is.

"There's nothing to have a clue about," he says. "You did this so you'd win the election, it's so predictable. That woman though, Light, seriously?"

"Do you think I'd want to fuck that? I needed proof and… I felt sorry for her," I admit while looking around me cautiously. I hope she's not listening.

"Sorry for her?" he asks. "You fucked her then killed her like a black widow spider because you were sorry for her? At least put some effort into your excuses, Light."

"She'd only been with Tsukino. Can you imagine that horror? And that was all she'd known but she thought that there must be more than that: she read it in books, she heard it in songs, she saw it in films. Fuck, L, of course I felt sorry for her. She'd had no life apart from what that bastard inflicted on her."

"So it was a charitable act, what you did?" he asks sarcastically. "Because you're such a considerate, gentle lover that it was totally worth dying for?" Well, I don't think that deserves an answer, and I struggle to do so much as shrug. Why wouldn't it be worth it?
"I don't know why you're bothered anyway," I say, to which he lets his head fall back in annoyance as he walks to the window. We're such a nice couple. I have no regrets about throwing my whole damn life down the toilet and becoming a meme for this. Since he has his back to me again, I quickly alternate hands in giving him the finger.

"How did she die?" he asks the window, all solemn and tortured sounding. "How did he kill her and Sakurada?" Horribly, Darling, horribly.

"Well, I wasn't there, how could I know? Aren't you impressed though? I mean, it is kind of impressive, you've got to admit. It takes more skill than writing in a book. Even Kira could do that," I tell him, walking up behind him to whisper now, because these things should not be spoken. "Don't pretend that you care about anyone, bearing in mind that you're directly responsible for a lot of deaths. I might be indirectly responsible for what happened today, but it's not really the same thing. I was with you when Tsukino was killing his wife. Think about that. I did it to win. I need to win, L."

"So you made me your alibi?" he complains to our glassy reflections against the darkness outside, but faces me to hear my answer.

"Yes, but don't misinterpret me. I could have just done an impromptu public appearance if I wanted a rock-solid alibi. Security are my alibis, and hacks and photographers follow me wherever I go. I wanted to be with you."

"Oh, I am grateful to have shared such a poignant moment with you. If only I'd known, I would have fucked you harder," he gasps, clasping his hands to his heart before letting them drop back to his sides. I remember a time when I would have paid money to have him look at me like this. "And what about B? You brought that issue up. I walked in on something, didn't I."

"Hm?" I sound out, having decided upon pleading ignorance to the whole B issue. "Ha, no. I forgot he'd be here to be honest. We got into an argument about guess who and he held a knife to my throat. Normal for a psychologist, apparently."

"Oh, and I bet you did nothing to provoke him. You must have loved that."

"Wouldn't you? You know how weird he is. Anyway, he did cut me, didn't he. But that's old news. He's a fucking psychopath and a cocktease."

"I hate it when you're like this. You go mad and give the big come on to everything that breathes just to see their reaction."

"Yeah, and you know what I've concluded after years of research? Not groundbreaking or surprising but it turns out that everyone just wants to fuck me, L," I reply, scratching at the irritation on my throat. "Since you're asking about B: look at this," I add, turning to bare my practically slit throat to him. "He did that with his fucking knife which I thought you'd confiscated. I had to put some concealer on the cut for the press conference, but it stings like hell and there wasn't one that matched properly."

"I wouldn't expect there to be one," he replies. "You're far too unique."

"Heh. Thanks. The nearest the House make-up artist could find is called 'Bronzed God.' Well, it's 'Bronzed Goddess' actually. I hate all this gender specific terminology shit. Anyw—"

"You have to stop causing trouble wherever you go," he interrupts, but I ignore him.

"She has to mix it with 'Golden Sands' to get something that even slightly matches. You look like a 'Silvered Porcelain Rose' shade to me. But you tan well, don't you," I remind myself, suddenly so
distracted by the vivid picture in my mind of him dusky from the sun that it makes my voice soft and breathy. "Murder. You look amazing with a tan. I don't think I told you… yeah. But I only saw your tan close up when it was fading." My face becomes tight and pinched with old but ever-present hurt and anger. "Did you and Stephen fuck on a beach? Is that how you got that tan? Because you didn't have any tan lines. And you don't even like the sun, I don't really understand… that. I didn't know you liked that sort of thing, you should have said something. I could fuck you on a beach," I inform him confidently. The whole sand complication bothers me actually, but I'm sure it'd be an excellent exfoliation treatment for both of us. "You'd never forget it. You forgot him quick enough, so I guess he really wasn't all that memorable to be worth keeping. If it was me, I'd never let you forget it. We'd probably never fight again if I could just…"

I trail off, surprising myself by my sudden fragility from imagined past pain, something suspected, of trying to grasp at anything I can think of that'll make him want to keep me, not kill me.

"What?" he asks, shaking his head and blinking compulsively as if this came out of left field. I suppose it did, but it's relevant to me now. It's always relevant.

"You and Stephen. He was just something you used to waste time with, wasn't he? That's all any of these people are, but I'm different, aren't I? He tried his best but you haven't seen me try my best."

I sound so aggressive on this statement that I think it might sound more like a threat, and judging by his reaction of pushing back his hair and forcing out a laugh, he clearly doesn't know how to interpret it either.

"What do you want me to say?" he asks. "You're shit and he was great because we fucked on every beach in the South of England?"

"There's nothing in England outside of London and you couldn't get a tan there," I say dismissively. "You had a continental tan. You'd get nothing in England but nits and herpes, you're lying to me again."

"I'm not, actually. We didn't do anything on any beach, but I don't know why you're—"

"You didn't fuck," I say forcefully, pointing my finger at his face. "A fuck means nothing. It wasn't nothing. You had sex with him."

He tilts his head and his eyes narrow like he's trying to work me out, and he takes so long about it that I can't keep up the eye contact. I look down at the mirror-like varnished floorboards beneath my feet and want to throw up all over them.

"Do you need something, Light?" he asks me softly. Maybe he means to sound concerned but he just sounds patronising, as always. He reaches to touch my arm tentatively, but I step away from him. "Do you need one of your pills?"

"No," I laugh mockingly. What a ridiculous thing to say, oh my God! "They're for migraines. Do I have a headache, L? Are you Kiyomi now?"

"What about a joint? It'll calm you down."

"There isn't anything in this world that could calm me down," I tell him slowly, proud at how he backs up against the console table and holds onto the edge of it. It takes a lot to make him show any emotion at all, but now he's so deer-like that I can glimpse the violated and violating beautiful boy I've only seen in photographs. Life was cruel to deny me of him then firsthand. I could have carved the imperfections from him when he was as impressionable and eager to please as women. We
should have been born at the same time, joined and sharing organs, screaming when surgeons tried to cut us apart.

"We'll have a joint together?" he suggests weakly.

"You're a stupid bastard," I laugh to myself while I fumble in my pockets for a cigarette. We shouldn't have any drugs in this building. We shouldn't even have that hoard of alcohol in the kitchen. We should just have one bottle of wine on show and a stocked and locked cellar of bottles with dust on them and little tags that don't say anything. I don't want to be accused of being extravagant, boozing it up and snorting fruit bowls of cocaine with this pittance of a salary I—

"Takes one to know one, as they say," he says. What are you talking about, you idiot?

I let my lighter burn my cigarette for too long until I remember that I called him a stupid bastard, didn't I? Oh yeah. Stephen. One of the many fatalities of sleeping with L. Anyway, now that my cigarette is well and truly lit, I pocket my lighter and blow out a smoke cloud as vast and town-consuming as those vaping fuckers with their sub-ohms.

"I don't know what's made you think about this all of a sudden," he says after passively being enveloped in the atmospheric fog. Heh. "Guilt, maybe? But since you're asking: yes, I slept with Stephen. Many times actually, he was very good. Great stamina. I've slept with a lot of men and graded them in my head, and Stephen was near the top, if you'll excuse the pun. Sex means nothing more to me than what it is, and I judge people on it. Actually, I had a journal for grading, but I couldn't be bothered updating it after a while." My jaw tenses, and to cover the tell with a bluff, like this is a glorified game of poker, I disinterestedly smoke my cigarette. He doesn't buy it. "Is this causing you a lot of pain?" he asks me. "Because obviously you're having problems quite late in the day with how I've slept with a lot of men before, during, and after you, even though you're hardly a vestal virgin yourself. Why are you bringing all this up now?"

I swallow and look around me like I might find an answer just floating in the air, but I don't know. What about David though? What about the art tutor in Barcelona and Aiber and Toshio and Ukita and… 'he went through tutors' was what B said. Someone gave him the Hephaestion statue because he was their Hephaestion once, he said. What did L find in them that he can't find in me? Most of them I know are dead now. They're probably all dead now because they fucked the wrong man, and the same thing will happen to me. He wouldn't give B what he wanted because then he'd have to die. The man's a graveyard. Astbury.

"Just that the next break we get, we should go somewhere to get you a tan," I say blithely. "It'll be nice. I'll be nice. It'd be… Actually, I meant to ask you. Have you seen anyone else here today?"

"Oh God, don't tell me that one of the men I keep locked up in my secret dungeon has escaped again?" he says dramatically, and I feel instantly ashamed of mentioning this.

"I'm serious. And not a man. A woman in a white dress."

"What use would I have in keeping a woman here? I'm happy just hiring a cleaner like everyone else. I like the fact that she leaves, although she doesn't take that incense smell with her. Why do you ask?"

"I think she followed me home."

"Our cleaner? Who? Kiyomi or one of your crazy fangirls? Well, let's face it, they're basically the same thing. Oh fucking hell, was it Misa? I'd love to meet her and all her batshittery before the police arrive!"
"Forget it, it doesn't matter," I say despondently.

"No, who do you mean? You think that someone's in the house? There's no one else here apart from our friendly neighbourhood god of death, you know that. What do you mean?"

"I saw her. She was in the car with me before."

"Who?" he asks, like he actually believes me or is at least giving me airtime.

"Shiori," I tell him quietly, more of a whisper than anything else. Please don't just interrupt me and knock me down like TV interviewers. I'm tired of fighting to be heard.

I watch the expression in his eyes morph from concern to the sort of look he has when I talk about the likelihood of me lowering business rates. I should have known he wouldn't even try to listen to me.

"But she's dead, isn't she?" he says.

"Yes, she is. I know how this sounds, but I saw her, L. And I think she's upstairs."

"Okay… that's mad, you know that, right?" There it is.

"I'm not mad! What about you seeing dead people outside the windows all the fucking time!"

"I was on like a cocktail of uppers and downers then, for fuck's sake. And I don't think I needed them. I just needed a holiday, to be honest, because I'm all tickety-boo now. And I knew that they weren't really there. You believe that she was there?"

"I saw her! I was sitting next to her all the way back here in the car and… now I think she's in the house. Why don't you ever fucking listen to me!?"

"Actually, I think that I will go," he says suddenly, and slides out of his penned in position between the console and me. Something about the ease of him stating his intent, as if I have no say in it, infuriates me so much, like my heart has been stabbed with a shot of adrenaline. I can't stay still but neither can I move, and the room has started shaking. I'm suddenly laughing so hysterically I don't sound like myself.

"Of course you'll go, of course you will, of course!"

"Light look at me," he says firmly, grabbing my shoulders and being so close that I can't avoid looking at him. "I'm not leaving, not like that. I just think that we need some time apart, alone, to think or, y'know, sleep. Maybe both? I know, it's a crazy idea but I think that it might help so we could talk rationally later. Get some sleep, please? I'd rather suck The Don's tiny dick than to see you like this, I just can't, and I don't think I'm helping you by being here. If I go up there—" he says, pointing to the stairs. God, no.

"You can't go up there!" I nearly shout, but he just holds his hand in front of me, pressing down on air repeatedly as if he's appealing for calm from an angry mob with pitchforks.

"If I go up there, she won't be there," he tells me. That's how much he knows. "There's no one there, and I just can't see you like this. It worries me and… you just need to calm down. Really, no one could love anyone as much as I love you."

Yeah, right. If this was a movie, this would be the moment when I'd look at the camera and break the fourth wall. As it is, I just look at him blankly, skeptical and becoming deathly calm in record time,
as requested.

"I'm touched," I reply, as flat as speech synthesiser.

"So I can tell," he replies dejectedly, stepping away from me, looking for all the world as if he's hurt. "Ok then, despite that, or maybe because of it, one of us has to leave or we might start tearing each other's hair out. Let's leave that shit for the drag queens, yeah? If it came to that then we'd never be the same."

"Yeah," I laugh like canned laughter that laughs at every line.

"Don't laugh at me."

"I'm not laughing at you. I just remembered something that Kiyomi said. She said that if I was leaving her, I'd better make it worth it. Didn't happen, did it. You lie and you leave and you come back and you hide things from me. I know about what you and Ryuk are planning. That was really the death knell for what I thought of you. It's funny. It took years for me to love you and an overheard one minute long conversation for it to stop completely dead."

"I'm not… I'm not planning anything with him. You don't know what you heard."

"Oh, I think I've got the picture now, don't worry. I heard enough."

"No, you don't understand."

"Then make me understand. Please, L, I just want to know. He's not here, you can tell me."

"I can't," he enunciates slowly, which opens out the canned laughter again.

"So you keep saying!"

"I'm horrified that you'd even consider that I'd hurt you. I'm upset that you're so upset." I'm offended he thinks that he could upset me. "I don't care what you did or—"

"You're not worth the sweat from a fat man's asscrack. I won't give you my tears," I say, and so adamant about it that the aftershocks appear to destabilise everything he was so sure of.

"Are you saying that you never loved me after all?"

"No, I loved you. I loved you until I stopped," I tell him looking directly into his eyes until I hear a shattering sound in my head. He has little to no visible reaction, which angers me even more than I was already. "Anyway, it's not all that bad. If things do happen to go your way with whatever you're plotting, you might be known for something other than being my whore, because that's all you are now, L. You know how the press works, you understand how immovable public opinion is. And you thought that you were a respected barrister and businessman? You're not; you're a disgusting whore, and that's all you'll ever be."

"A disgusting whore," he repeats. Yes, just like your mother.

"You had the right idea before—get out," I tell him, abruptly stepping away from him. "Security will drop you off somewhere, because you're drunk and I can do without the press if you crash," I shout behind me, and leave the room.

Not long after, the front door slams and a car starts up to roar off so that the house feels truly empty. I'm on edge and even slightly regretful, despite my determination not to be. I've never been alone
here at night and I don't want to be, precisely because I won't be alone for long, I'm sure.

So, with the win I've bet my happiness on not reaching the peak I'd expected or the longevity I'd hoped for, the issue I've been suppressing for days rises to the surface with nothing to contain it. I see that he must have left without a bag or even his coat, so he probably left the notebook in this house somewhere. I sit on my Bauhaus chair in the living room and wait for Ryuk, because he'll come now if I wait long enough. Over time, the sound of the sea rolling, never-ending, almost takes me with it, but I refuse. Speaking to Ryuk should be about finding out the truth, but in my heart I think it's just as much about finding some way to forgive L for...

I close my eyes for a moment to escape a blinding headache, and I mean that literally. It's not just any headache. It blinds me with white shafts of light spreading across my vision like a massive light leak on a camera lens. The pain and pyrotechnics in my head are cymbals crashing together so that everything shudders from the power of it, and if I could claw at this bowl of a skull to rake out all the shit, I would. But as abruptly as the pain started, it ends, leaving only a shocked, haunting stillness.

When I open my eyes again, I'm not in my house; I'm in one of those intimidatingly grey offices where the blandness tries to instill calm banality by brute force. This is a room in which only bad news is given, and it could be a waiting room in any establishment anywhere. All I know is that someone knows why I'm here even if I don't, and it's the most terrifying feeling, waiting, staring at a steel vault door in front of me. I keep throwing logs on the fire of my anxiety to keep it burning as the locks of the door clunk and shunt before it opens painfully slowly. From behind the door, a faceless man, all features smoothed out completely, comes into the room and tells me: "I'm sorry."

"What do you mean?" I ask him, looking over his mint coloured scrubs. I know what he means but I can't believe it. "Where is he?" but I'm already walking past him.

The vault door leads to a dark, sterile room in which the metal surfaces reflect what little cold, flickering light there is. Laid on a stretcher in the middle of the room, dimly lit by a deep sea light, is a large black bag emblazoned with 'property of the city morgue' in white characters. The door closes behind me as I walk towards the shape—which looks more like a modern day Egyptian mummy wrapped in plastic—just to stare at the zip running down the centre of it. I unzip it. There's another bag inside, another zip. I unzip that, and there's a body inside. I know them, but they're not L and I'm looking for L.

"Sometimes you have to do more than scratch," the faceless man tells me.

A pale grey hand with black nails passes me a knife, and without hesitation I slice a perfect Y-incision into the cadaver as if I've been doing it all of my life. The flesh of it is like a mix of soap and congealed jelly, like a body that's been floating in water for months until it was dredged out, and it tears apart when I claw at it impatiently with my bare hands. I rip out ribs which are covered in dark, sticky mucus. Maggots ooze from organs and all the decomposing muck I fling aside, until I find another body within the cavity. It's someone I've known since I was born and I have half of his chromosomes, but I tear into that corpse like an animal who destroys for no understandable reason. Inside him, there's my mother, and I cut through her without a second thought, although I know that I should feel something. I don't. I feel nothing but the determination to get to what I'm looking for and have no time for anything else. Time after time like a fucked up game, I tear through people—Raye, Kiyomi, Jeevas, B, Tsukino, Mikami, and others—only faltering for a moment when one of the bodies I have to cut through is my own.

I just become more desperate, determined and rabid until eventually I get to the centre of these Russian Dolls, none of which get smaller, as you'd expect.

And I find him. His skin is not like the others; it's warm and firm like I remember it. I pull him from
the messy womb of a sack, and we collapse to the floor surrounded by the gore of countless people. I cradle him in my arms because I've saved him; I've birthed him, he's mine because I created him. All he is to me is what I've made him to be, and now he's here as he should be. The choice was mine to make him important to me. He was and could have remained nothing more than another life passing by my own, but I chose for him to stay and to give him the importance he doesn't deserve.

Rocking him gently like a treasured child, I notice Ryuk standing in the shadows. His arms hang stiffly at his sides, though his hands twitch intermittently like little shocks of electricity surge through them. Then I realise that it's not Ryuk; he just has the overall impression of him. I'm looking at myself in his clothes: staring, teeth bared, lips spread thin and wide across my face. The only reaction I'm capable of is to curve inwards protectively when I see him, feeling my brow furrow as I bite my teeth together and hiss.

The dark vision of myself is hunched over and shuddering with laughter, and I watch it. A soft echo of a thudding heart beats for the first time as L's chest is clutched against mine, but I don't know if it's coming from him or me. It gives the impression that it's beating for both of us.

It's impossible to tear my eyes away, not even to blink, but the stinging, gritty feeling forces me to close my eyes for a fraction of a second. I'm ashamed at my weakness, because I'm sure it'll be the death of me now, but when I open my eyes again, I'm lying on the dining room floor, breathing in the same rapid breaths that I was taking in that room. I'm not there now and the air doesn't taste like death and antiseptic. I'm in our house, but in my mind I went somewhere else. And L's gone again.

Steading myself on any furniture I pass on the way to waking up my computer, my head is so full of confusion, fleeting thoughts, and waking momentary nightmares, I forget what I came into my office for. I open the files of this morning's footage from the security cameras I had installed, watching the grainy picture of L in the shower like I'm a disinterested pervert with a beaten up VHS porno. He gets dressed, and at one point seems to look at the camera like he's staring directly at me, so then I know that Ryuk must have tipped him off about the cameras. My eyes follow him on the screen, moving from room to room to the stairs. I can hear his footsteps above, so loud in my head, until he becomes a real life picture walking down the stairs towards me. He avoids looking in my direction though, heading straight towards the door to a storage room instead, like a fast-moving ghost reenacting past crimes.

Once he's out of sight, I look at the livestream, but L's not in the house after all. I'm not going to question or overthink what I just saw because there's no point unless I want to roll myself up in a blanket and panic for a few hours, so best just accept it. I put a call in for L to be followed instead, which is easy enough since I had a tracker put in all his cars.

I'm told that L's in Tokyo and went straight to a casino for two hours. It couldn't have been two hours. He left with a man I don't recognise from the description, and they lost L in the middle of Shinjuku because the guard is a fucking idiot, but spotted his car parked on a residential street a while later. After some enquiries, I find out that he's parked near 4256 Nakacho Meguro-Ku, which is the address of Reiji Namikawa, a lawyer from the Yotsuba Law Office—one of L's rival firms—and he's a despicable junkie who I've met once and hope never to do so again. I do a search on him, but find more of interest from Facebook than official records. He's married, his wife's an air hostess and they're both awful. Through reading all this and seeing the fake happiness of Namikawa's holiday photos, my distrust becomes a solid mass of dread in my gut. It's a familiar feeling but one which always troubles me. I hate anyone who L shows any interest in and, since Stephen, it intensified to the point where it's become a phobia that my stability hinges upon. I don't know why. I just know that I hate being reminded of any created, stupid fuck dependence on anyone but myself, and I couldn't have found anyone more unreliable than L.
At that moment, my phone rings with a video call. With some reluctance, I answer it, but disable the video from my side. L seems to be struggling to prop his phone up against something to get a decent angle of the room behind him.

"What are you doing? What do you want?" I ask, and his cropped face smiles.

"Sorry, but I'll have to mute you. Consider this a live video of an adult nature," he whispers. "I was going to give you something to see, but never mind. I'll try to make it as visual as possible for you, so make sure you have the volume turned up. Maybe wear headphones for the best experience." He winks at the camera before obviously placing the phone flat on some surface, because now all I can see is a ceiling.

"Do you want ice in that?" some strained voice I recognise as Namikawa's says. "I mean ice for the vodka, but I have the crystal kind as well, if you want any." I remember him sounding nervous, but most people do when they're talking to me, and he's a tweaker, so it's hard for me to work out a baseline. He sounds particularly nervous with L, however.

"No, this pleases the court. You may be seated," L says, and Namikawa laughs, either because he's got a crush on L, wants a job, or is easily amused. "I hope that you won't find this rude, but I've always wondered why you keep your hair so long."

"Oh. I keep meaning to cut it," Namikawa answers, sounding shy and… just stupid. Why L thinks that I'd need to listen to this is beyond me, except that I suspect that this is just foreplay.

"It doesn't look terribly professional, but I suppose that professionals can get away with a lot these days. If you want to have feminine hair but call it samurai, then all power to you."

"It's not girl's hair! My wife likes it."

"Oh, she swings that way, does she?"

"What? No, she just likes my hair long. Every time I ask her about it she says that she likes it, so that's why I haven't had it cut. Like, your hair is really nice. I'd like mine cut like that."

"Thank you, but my hair is copyrighted. Reiji, have you considered that your wife might be lying to you?"

"No. Why would you think that?"

"Just that it might explain why you're having problems with her. You'd look better with shorter hair. I'll cut it for you, if you'd like?"

"Ha, do you cut the Prime Minister's hair?" Namikawa laughs. Like I'd let L of all people loose on my hair.

"I wouldn't change anything about him. Not even a hair on his head," L says softly, probably so that I might not hear him, but I do. And it makes no fucking difference. "Anyway, I was just thinking how cruel it is of her to leave you all alone like this."

"Yeah, but it's her job and, anyway, I can't do this shit here when she's around. Right, do you want an A-bomb or something else? You can roll your own if you want… Hey! What are you doing?!" Namikawa and I say at the same time for apparently different reasons. I start to dial my guard who's currently outside that house, but my fingers lock up. L's right and I hate him for it. He knew that I'd have him followed and he did this because he knew the effect it would have and that I can't stop him.
"Sit back and think of my assistant at the firm or whatever that woman's name is that you keep crying about," L tells him, "but I'll put a hefty bet on you not thinking of her when I'm done. Think of this as a kind of intensive therapy that you're in dire need of."

"Get off! I'm not gay, man!"

"That's what they all say," L replies. "I'll up the stakes. My car and a blow. You don't get an offer like that every day. Especially not from me."

"Seriously?"

"Serious as genocide. However, you have to win the bet to get the car."

"What's the game?"

"To make a gay snuff film with me," L tells him excitedly. Oh my God, what are you doing?

"Haaaa, I'm joking, I'm joking," he laughs, just as I'm about to call my guards after all, and I'm still not sure that I won't, actually. I find Namikawa's home phone number in the meantime. "The bet is that you take a blow, but no more, for my car. When I stop, everything stops, and if you leak even the tiniest drop of groin gravy on me, then no Mercedes for you. Shouldn't be difficult for a strapping specimen of heterosexuality like yourself, should it! Now, I know you're thinking that you can dodge this at a critical point if you happen to… I don't know, forget your straightness or whatever, but a rule is that you cannot withdraw from the blow at any point, because in this game, I'm the banker and you're the wanker, ok? However, I have to warn you that in five minutes you won't be thinking of any car, and you'll want more than some head. Heads I win, tails you lose. Oh, and you better smoke that; you're wasting it."

"Fuck… we're talking about the black car you were driving, yeah?"

"Mmm. Top of the range Mercedes-AMG GT coupé with under a thousand miles on the clock. I paid, I don't know, 19 million yen for it? I can't remember, but it's a beautiful thing."

"I do like that car."

"Of course you do. That's only to be expected for someone who drives a Honda Jazz."

"Yeah… but it's reliable," he sulks.

"Good gracious, how boring. Reiji, I'm starting to think that you need my car more than I do. It's also reliable but moves like shit off a shovel and generally makes you feel glad to be alive. Your car just makes me feel sad."

"Me too."

"Then why don't you have a punt for my car?" L says seductively. I can just picture him leaning in and saying that. Will you give me permission to take your mind off your heartbreak?

"As long as you know that I wouldn't enjoy the oral, obviously," Namikawa says unconvincingly. "But if you insist on it."

"Yes, the addressing of the court is compulsory. Ok, fun times! Let's put these here then."

I hear what sounds like the jangling of keys while I try to skim ahead to work out what he's going to do, because it's not going to be this simple and L isn't going to lose his car or anything else. He'd die first.
"Why are you doing this?" Namikawa asks L for me.

"My dear Reiji, that hardly matters. Get yourself comfortable and keep your eyes on those keys. This won't hurt a bit."

"Hold on. This doesn't count as gay, does it?"

"No, this is definitely not gay, don't worry. Now, take off your trousers."

At that point, I give in and call Namikawa's landline. His slurring, droning voice answers it mid-laugh after I hear L tell him to.

"Hi, hello, hi, yeah?" he babbles.

"Reiji Namikawa?" I say.

"I'm sorry, he's not available at the moment. Can I take a message? Ha!"

"Are you Namikawa?"

"Hey?"

"Are you Reiji Namikawa, born August 3rd, 1979 in Tokyo, son of Taro and Namiyo Namikawa, and married to Rikako?"

"I'm happy with my electricity supplier, thanks. Is that what you're selling?" he asks. God, what a absolute cretin.

"Reiji Namikawa who studied law at Harvard University to become a lawyer for the Yotsuba Law Office in 2011? Your credit score is 419, you're mortgaged to the hilt and spent time in rehab in the States for six weeks for drug violations and DUI but haven't declared that to your employers? You voted for the New Renaissance Party in the last election because you're a fucking knobhead? Your blood type is A? Are you Reiji Namikawa?"

"How do you know all that?"

"I want to speak to L."

"Wow. Sure thing, hang on."

"Is that Liam Neeson calling to threaten me again or is it Stalag wanting me to return to base?" L asks him. He sounds disturbingly pelvis-level. "If it's Liam, tell him that I have no idea where his daughter is."

"I don't know who he is but he knows my credit score and he wants to speak to you."

"Sounds like Stalag."

"Larsen, get on the FUCKING phone!" I scream.

"He's going ballistic here and wants to speak to someone called Larsen now. Wait, is that your name?" Namikawa cackles in his schizophrenic way before stopping abruptly.

"Hey," L grunts.

"Yeah?" Namikawa answers.
"My trousers aren't around my ankles, so I see no reason for your mouth to be open."

"Ok."

"But does he sound angry? I'd love to hear that. Put him on speaker," L says, so I bellow down the phone:

"L, get back here right now or I'll have the guards drag you out and beat both of you to mush, I swear you'll be picking gravel out of your balls with tweezers for years to come. Remember the torture scene in Casino Royale? You should. You made me watch it. That. But worse. DID YOU HEAR THAT NAMIKAWA? BECAUSE THAT GOES FOR YOU TOO! I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE, YOU FU——"

"On second thoughts, let's turn the volume down a bit," L says after my tirade. What the hell am I supposed to do now.

I hear shuffling on the line and press my ear close to the phone. My hand crunches itself into a shaking fist around the phone until it aches. The idea of having my heavies crashing into this fuckwit's house on my say so to break up whatever's going on seems like a brilliant idea, but I know how catastrophically embarrassing that would be for me and L does too. It's amazing what he'll do just to piss me off so much that I'll have a nervous breakdown.

Then I hear the sound of a zip being opened, because it's obvious that it wouldn't be closing.

"Ok! Point proven, L. You can stop now," I shout into the phone. I'm pretty sure that L has the phone because he sounds closer to it than Namikawa, so I try to be more calm, but in reality I must sound frantic.

"Hold on, did you hear that?" I hear L say. "Point proven?" he asks directly into the phone. "What point is there to prove? I'm only doing what you told me to do because I'm so disgusting. And I'm just a whore, after all. I can't help myself." I close my eyes. It wasn't like that, I didn't say that.

"Stop playing," I say. "It's not a game. I need to talk to you."

"We did talk and look at how well that went. Do you take it back? Say it out loud."

"Yes, I... just come back."

"Why is it so urgent? I'm busy right now."

"Stop it."

"Are you asking me not to do this?"

"Yes."

"Yes' what? Yes could mean: yes, you had a shower this morning; yes, you'd like chocolate sprinkles on your cappuccino——-Yes` is very unspecific, and I'd like more than that, Honeybun."

"Please come back here," I say. It sounds like begging and makes me sick to hear myself. I realise how I'm clutching the phone to my ear like it's a lifeline and I'm some desperate fuck when I'm so much better than that. He's trying to hold me hostage by the heartstrings just to get back at me. Why should I lie on the ground for him to kick me when he made me doubt him in the first place? And now he's doing this. "L... it's not having any effect on me. No fucking effect, you're wasting your time and you're making a fool of yourself. I. Do Not. Care! Get back here, you dramatic bitch!"
"Oh," he sighs after a few moments that seem sewn together for how drawn out they are. "Well, since you asked so nicely… no. I don't think so. And, by the way, Stephen and me on the beach? You were right."

"Fuck him then!" I shout, unable to temper myself. I can't think or see straight because of the craving to kill them both. "Why do you have to be such a bastard? You can tell that idiot that he's dead, he's fucking dead! You're dead, you stupid fuck, I'll—"

"Excuse me, I might not be able to answer because, as you keep telling me, it's rude to talk with your mouth full. But feel free to comment at any time. I always appreciate feedback," he interrupts cheerfully and apparently waits for a reply I don't have. "Do you have nothing to say, Light? Well, I'll see what I can do about that."

The line goes dead, and when I phone back, it goes straight to a sickeningly chirpy message from Namikawa's wife telling me that they're unable to take my call at the moment. I'm running out of options here now that L's gone all Harvey Weinstein.

"Who was that?" Namikawa asks, so my head snaps back towards the ceiling shot of the video call on my phone. "Was that the Prime Minister? He sounded really angry Lawliet."

"Yes, it's a lovely sound isn't it? Like bird song in the Alps on a Spring morning. Anyway, it's his bedtime now," L's voice replies. Bastard. "So, is this still a goer, Reiji?"

"I'm just thinking that there has to be a catch here somewhere. All that for a blowjob? And not even me having to give one to you."

"I'm philanthropic, what can I say?" L replies flatly in a blatant lie. I don't know why he's doing any of this and I don't know why I care.

"But, really, just for that?"

"You say that like it's any old shop-bought blowjob we're talking about. I don't think you know what you're in for here, but I get the feeling you'd be happy with anything. So, yeah just a blow. Unless you accept my complimentary options."

"No way, man. I'm—"

"Not gay, I know, we've established that, you're very convincing. But I thought you said at Espace that you were curious."

"I was, y'know… I just meant that you're attractive… for a man."

"Really! See, in my language that usually means 'fuck me gently.'"

"Nooo… haaaa… Well, maybe, but I'm not gay. If I did this, it doesn't mean that I'm gay. I just want the car."

"Of course! That will never be in doubt. If we were facing each other, that'd be a different story, but as long as we avoid doing that then we're as macho as Rock Hudson. Just think of driving away in my car. And I'll write your debts off too, so you can forget about what you owe me for a start. I might be able to offer you a position at my firm if you're a good sport."

"Why? I mean, that'd be great, but you said that you'd never hire me when I asked you."

"Oh, I was just playing hard to get there, Reiji."
"I don't understand why when you must know I'll win. Why would you give me all these things?"

"Gratitude, hopefully. I'm not unattractive, am I?"

"No."

"Disgusting?"

"No."

"Someone said that I was. Let me level with you. I like sex. I don't think I should be made to feel like I'm a bad person because of it. I'm a bad person for other reasons."

"You're not a bad pers—"

"I am, but I'm a good fuck and that's all that matters. Have we got a deal?"

"Ummm… alright then, why not?"

"Why not indeed."

"Speak in English for me? You sound boss when you speak in English, it might help," Namikawa requests. That's how much he knows. L sounds stupid when he speaks in English, it's such an ugly language. Is this actually happening?

"Well, I won't really be able to do that while I'm sucking you off, but here you go: All you have to do is close your eyes, you brainless little man. I'm really very good at this."

"Nice."

And now I'm silenced, forced to listen to random noises of fabric sliding against fabric followed by disgustingly slippery, moist sounds and pleasantly surprised groans. L has no gag reflex and he can tie knots into cherry stalks. It's an earth-shattering talent worth writing a five star review about and he knows it. I'm very familiar with all this, so I anticipate the sounds before I hear them, putting images to everything happening right now in some shitty house in Tokyo. Even if they could hear me, I don't think I could speak, and suddenly it's so unbearable that I rush to the downstairs bathroom, locking myself inside just to avoid listening to the noises. Pacing around for minutes that seem like hours makes me want to die. I have an election in a few days. It surprises me how something as trivial as L doing what L usually does can make everything else so insignificant.

Eventually I summon up enough anger to act in the place of courage and force myself back into the room, grateful that my footsteps mask any sounds that the phone echoes around the room.

"Ughhh… and to think I could have had Makepeace" I hear L say. "I need to rinse my mouth out, pass me that drink."

"Just finish it!"

"The drink? I plan to. Oh, you mean you?! No! That'd break all the rules. If you're not going to abide by the rules then I'll just toodle off and leave you to it."

"But the car… Ow…"

"The car is off the table because you accepted—sooner than anticipated and in a manner that could be mistaken for pleading—this once in a lifetime opportunity. You're not obliged to redeem your coupon, but it's valid for one night only."
"I wouldn't have this fucking boner if you hadn't stopped before I—"

"Yes, I did stop," L confirms, sounding disgustingly pleased with himself, and all I can think of are the various ways I could kill him for this. "I don't want you coming in my mouth. What would I get out of that apart from indigestion? People pay a lot of money for this mouth of mine. Why would I do you a favour like that and let you drive off with my car?"

"Whoa!" Namikawa says. L must have taken his trousers off or something. I'm going to be sick.

"I know," L agrees proudly. "It's not going anywhere near you. Don't touch it."

"Why not?"

"Do you want a list? Well, firstly, it doesn't want to. My arse isn't fussy, but this little fella is used to the finer things in life. Also, you're probably cooking a shit and you might need some stretching out that I can't be bothered to do. And frankly, I doubt that you'd be worth the trouble. This is unpleasant enough as it is, we don't need to add to it. So, none of that seems very appealing to me but I don't mind you fucking me up the arse. I'm sure I can handle your… disappointment."

"Hey, that's not fair, it's cold in here, this isn't a true reflection of—"

"I'm sad to say that I think this is as good as it's going to get. I love your excuses, though. It explains a lot about how you consistently lose cases."

"Ohhh… ok, what do I do?"

"Well, I won't make this too intimidating for you. Let's go back to school. You like cars, don't you?"

"Yeah… Oh God," Namikawa gasps like a weak bitch, whereas L sounds completely unaffected. "How did you learn how to do that?"

"Do what?"

"That… with your hand."

"Home Economics class," L says. "Who knew that learning to make bread could be such a valuable skill?" Oh shit. I sigh from the realisation that L's going to do that husky audiobook voice thing he does sometimes and is generally pulling out all the tricks in his vast repertoire for this, so Namikawa never stood a chance. And somehow I've separated myself from the whole thing. I don't know these people. "Ok. What we're going to do here is make an internal combustion engine. Sounds good, eh?" L tells him.

"Yeah…"

"Yeah. I'm going to give you some advice in a way that you might understand and which you'll thank me for in the future. And so will your wife, I'd imagine. *This* is your piston, unimpressive as it is, and your hips are your crankshaft. I am the cylinder. The crankshaft makes one revolution while the piston moves into the cylinder and back. Since the piston is connected to the crankshaft, the motion of the piston is dictated by the angle and rotation of the crankshaft, so these hips of yours are very important. Use them. Zero degrees occurs when the piston is inserted to the hilt inside the cylinder. I will accept no less. In one revolution, the piston is up to the hilt when the crank angle is 180 degrees. Don't try any fancy tricks, leave them to me. You have one job. You've got a beat in your head and you need to mix it up sometimes. It's not a funeral march but it's not a Beastie Boys remix either, ok?"
"So... like 'In the Air Tonight' by Phil Collins?"

"O... Ok, but maybe skip the drum rolls. Back to the nitty gritty: the distance travelled by the piston from zero degrees to 180 degrees is called the stroke of the piston. The inside diameter of the cylinder—my arsehole—is called the bore, but believe me, it's not boring."

"Heh."

"It's not funny either. DON'T KISS ME!" L shouts suddenly, making me press my hands against my head and push like I could break through my skull. "That's very, very gay, control yourself. Focus on the job. Are you listening to me?"

"Not really... God, you're good. In all my livelong days, Lawliet."

"I know. Do you want a firm merger?"

"Please... so that's why the Prime Minister left his wife for you," Namikawa says dreamily. Was that really the reason I left her?

"You are not to mention him. I'm trying to teach you something."

"Just saying, you look a bit like a girl when the lights are low."

"What a horrible thing to say. I'll forgive you this once. Right, so, this is important and if you fuck this up I'll throw you out the window. The piston needs lubrication to increase efficiency by reducing power wastage in overcoming friction, or the engine is good for nothing and we won't get any speed up at all. Also, it could fucking hurt, and if it does, remember that there's a window right behind you and I'm a kicker. With me so far? Good. Here you go. Rubber up and apply this liberally to your piston after every stroke for the first three to five strokes or until I tell you otherwise. Slow start until the cylinder is fully lubricated. Don't just fuck me like I'm your wife. I deserve better."

"I don't know, this is sounding too complicated now and you've kind of put me off."

"Really?" L asks, and it's instantly followed by some kind of defeated squeak from Namikawa. I don't want to know what happened then. "It's worth the prep. You won't regret it. Based on reviews I've had from men such as yourself, the general summary is that you should imagine the best sex you've ever had in your life intensified by a considerable percentage. I'm talented. All anyone wants is a tighter orifice. It's oxygen, but you have to work for it. Every man dreams of this, but women just don't want to do it, do they? That's what I hear. I've heard all the justifications, excuses, whatever you want to call them. So, are we doing this or not?"

Apparently they're doing it, and it's at that point that I rush to the phone on the desk to hurl it against the wall. I just pant against my hand until my breathing slows and I can open my eyes again. When the phone hit the wall and bounced on the floor, it was louder than I would have expected, and it's left a blackish dent on the white paint. The floor glistens with tiny shards of the phone that look like stars. It's tangible proof of what just happened, and I say to myself: "Yes. Something just ended, didn't it, Light. He broke it."

Suddenly sickness rots the bones of me. Through the building nausea, I sprint to the kitchen with my mouth covered, and double over the sink to throw up. The used coffee cups L left in the sink catch whatever I spew into them like it's an offering.

As the physical sickness passes, I feel like I'm in the Kantei bathroom all over again. He's dead and there's nothing apart from helplessness; the desolate, puncturing thoughts and images and words race through my mind when there should be the freedom I once had. I expect feelings to wither and die
and crunch into dust under my feet like leaves, but they don't. What is love and what is possession and do I feel either? It's every hurt he's given me in one fatal stab: the jealousy, the betrayal, the shaming, how he knew I couldn't do anything because he knows how limited I am by my position and pride. He's thrown it in my face, knows me, knew that I'd feel this way when I didn't think I'd ever feel like this again. I could interfere even now, like ordering my guard to do something, but it's all irrational and too late. Then I realise that it's not the act that hurts me; it's the motivation of sheer vindictiveness behind it.

Who knows why people tell you to splash your face with water at times like this when it makes no difference to how you're feeling. It takes me about twenty minutes of sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of water in front of me before I go back to my office where my murdered phone lies on the floor. The screen is black and cracked now and I'm reminded that I'm one of those people who takes out their anger on inanimate objects and furniture in lieu of a person. I'm so exhausted and hollow now, that weirdly the first solid thought I have is how L won his bet and still has his car. It'd be nice if he'd lose at something one day.

The house is silent apart from my still too rapid breathing which I try in vain to hush against the back of my hand, but I hear sounds from my dead phone somehow: hitched, metallic noises like Ryuk's laugh. On my computer screen there's still a live stream from the cameras in this house, showing empty rooms with no life in them, but I expect something to happen. I pick up the broken phone again like it's an ancient torture device used to glimpse the world and the lives of others through an onyx scrying mirror; not a part of it, having all the power a man could have, and yet none at all.

Something on my computer screen catches my eye. A wisp of white floats off the corner of one camera's shot, like someone's just crossed the bedroom floor. I'm too scared to go to the room to check, because either I find someone or something there that wants to kill me, or I find nothing, which would mean that I'm seeing things. I lean in closer to the camera feeds on the screen. Watching. Waiting. Willing something to happen...

The phone rings. A jolt runs through me and I blink rapidly at the shrill sound. For some reason I assume that it's the broken phone that's ringing, but it's the landline, of course. It rings again and keeps ringing, getting more frustrated by the second. My shirt feels damp and clings to me coldly, and I still can't fucking breathe properly, so I stare at the phone from across the room like I expect it to dance for me. It goes to the answering machine.

_We're unable to take your call right now. Please leave a message after the tone._

"Why did you turn your phone off, Light?... That's not like you," L breathes into the phone. I cover my eyes and lean over my desk when I hear some piggish noises in the background, but L's voice is soft and breathy and sounds very close. I can't stand it. "Ahhhh... are you there? I know you're there... I wish that it wasn't like this. I wish I could kiss you the way I want to. I wish you'd let me."

"We agreed, no kissing," Namikawa rushes the words out like it's an immense effort and inconvenience. He sounds far away and partly muffled, so again an image comes into my mind which is so real that it might as well be happening right in front of me. In a way, it is. And I've done nothing to stop it.

"I'm not talking to you," L replies angrily. There are shudders in his voice but I can't tell if the cause is from being fucked or from something else, but it makes him sound very young and cold. Only because of that, I step towards the phone to hear each breath drawn in and expelled like he's in the room with me. With me instead of some used, faceless germ of a man. My madness is confirmed the moment I feel sorry for him for doing this to get to me. Any pain only goes skin deep now, and I'm covered in scars already.
"Light?" his voice whispers out, sounding suddenly panicked, like he's seen an asteroid screaming towards us and it's the last word he'll get a chance to say before he dies. I blink repetitively at the phone as his breath hurries out of the machine, so close now that the sound is distorted and rumbling. "I love…" he says. I wait expectantly, but he never completes it. He's quiet for a while apart from his breathing, but it builds into a frustrated growl until he spits a "fuck you" right into the phone. The line goes dead.

The drone stretches on until the machine, as if it was shocked by the message, realises it's recording a dead line and cuts it off. A green light flashes to tell me there's a message, and for some masochistic reason I want to hear it again, but I don't. Instead, I stare at that blinking green dot and picture him right now, somewhere else, with someone else, doing something he regrets as he's doing it, and I know how that feels. There's always a moment when any reason you had for doing it just doesn't seem so important after all and you regret everything.

Maybe I shouldn't care. Maybe when he comes back, I'll pretend that this never happened. I could do that, and so could he. I was tired. I'm still tired and this was all my fault. I didn't mean what I said even though I did. I should have kept it to myself, because I'd rather have whatever he spat at me than nothing at all. Maybe I'll tell him what he couldn't say to me just now. But spiny words begin to build and form in my throat, and I know that I won't say any of those things.

"You're dead."
I wake up lying face down on the floor, only feeling the rough texture of the tatami mat against the side of my face. But I quickly numb to it and nearly everything else. An echoing boom of drums shakes the ground beneath me, interspersed with laughter which sounds both close and far away at the same time, like waves rushing towards you and retreating hesitantly, over and over again. And all the way through, a high pitched note strings out in my ears. I struggle to open my eyes because I feel so tired, and what little I can see spins like I'm on a fairground ride from hell. The tiredness is so overwhelming that I think that maybe I'm dying, and that panics me enough into trying to lift myself up from the floor, but I collapse back down again immediately.

Again I hear laughter, but I don't know who's laughing, like I don't know where I am or what's wrong with me. All I know is that no one is helping me when I think that I'm drowning, and I can't even help myself. That's what frightens me most, because I'm helpless if I can't rely on myself. That's all I know, so how could this carcass of mine let me down like this now? Then I hear myself laughing. The idea of failure always terrifies me until I can just laugh in the face of it. The sheer dizziness and exhaustion of trying to stay awake and breathing makes me feel as if I'm floating out of my body to touch the sky, and if I am dying then I'm starting to not care anymore. I've wanted to have wings for as long as I can remember.

"I thought you said that he'd be out by now," a voice says. It sounds double tracked and autotuned somehow, I can't explain it, but I recognise the voice. I just can't remember whose it is.

"I slipped him roofie in his drink, and with everything else he's had he'll be out cold in a minute probably. I don't like it if someone's completely gone. It looks a bit... rapey, y'know?"

"It is rapey, Jeevas."

"Alright, Mr Abuse Committee, alright! Fuck, it's not like we're doing anything to him," the second voice replies—Jesus or something—but he sounds slowed down and under water. Nothing seems real now, but his voice also has a vague ring of familiarity. The more I try to remember where I am or what I'm doing here, my head burns like a fucked up, burning engine. Different coloured lights in a dark room? Every time I try to open my eyes it's like they're clamped shut by something stronger than I am. It wants me to crash dramatically and for a long time, so I stop fighting it. But I want to
I'm being moved, rolled over, rough pulling and shoving at my shoes and clothes before I'm pushed back over onto my stomach again. Being tossed about in a strong wave by many hands. Oh! What was the name of that goddess with too many arms? That one. Durga or something. It means 'inaccessible'. The room is still spinning and I try to bat my hand at Durga, but it hits nothing apart from when it limply falls back to the floor again. Stop it, Durga.

"Oooh, what's on the meat rack, gentlemen?" asks a new voice which drips with so much money it's like viscous tar, and I really need to stop laughing. All these voices above me. I thought that a deity would sound more... godlike.

"Someone who's just dying to meet you, Higuchi. Get yourself a drink. He'll be ready in a minute." Too many gods now.

"I thought you were getting a girl."

"He's better than a girl."

"Hmmm... but he's a bit old, isn't he?"

"Early twenties, fuck, what do you want? No girls, no kids, they're the rules in Chez Jeevas. They're too talky, anyway. If you don't like it then you'll have to go somewhere else."

"He looks like a politician."

"He's a bag carrier boy."

"He's a researcher, actually."

"Shut up, Miki."

"Whatever he is, I thought you'd be bringing in someone who's not from the House."

"What is your problem, mate? This one's special. He's kind of a pretty boy, isn't he? His name is-"

"It doesn't matter who he is, Jeevas." Janus? And my eyes open enough to see shoes walking away from my face.

"Twisted bastard," Janus whispers. "I bet he's one of those fuckers who just likes strangling eleven-year-olds on boats. God. Maybe Yagami'll need another dose and more vodka to be wasted enough."

"I'm stopping this," the first voice says firmly, and I feel myself being roughly lifted into a kneeling position like a dead weight. There's no blood in my head. "I'll take him back to his flat and let him sleep it off." Yeah, sounds good, whatever.

"Will you calm down?!" the second voice hisses, and I'm dropped to the floor again. "You are not fucking this up for me. This'll be good for both of us. If Higuchi has a good time then we're in as partners, yeah? Yagami might get something out of it as well, you never know. Just remember that. He won't remember a thing, so consider it done already. I don't need to tell you that a lot hinges on this now, do I, Mikami?" Haaa... Mikami. Three - Above. Three gods above and me on the ground. But I don't think that he spells Mikami with those characters. Not sure why I think that.

"I don't like this," Three Above says.
"Oh, boohoo, go then! Pretty boy wants to stay here, DON'T YOU?" the second voice shouts in my face. Too loud. "But if you go, you might as well clear out your desk and any plans you had to run for office. Man up and remember the Brotherhood."

"I didn't bring him here for this and you're making me an accessory."

"Miki. Have another drink and some base and calm the fuck down. This prissy bitch needs to earn his keep, and he won't remember a fucking thing. He's the best I could find. Why the fuck would he think he'd be invited here otherwise. He's just some no name."

"If Penber finds out about this then—"

"Penber's not going to find out shit, Miki, you worry too much. I'm not going to tell him—are you? Thought not. Like he could do anything anyway."

It's sounds like someone left the TV on and it's a shitty programme. I just keep laughing but I don't know why and it doesn't matter to me because nothing does now. It coincides with a small kick in my ribs which is a trigger for nausea from the pit of my stomach that spreads all over me like fire. I try to speak but everything comes out as a slurring mess that leads to more laughter from behind me. I laugh, too, I think. My eyelids feel like they've been stapled shut again.

Any consciousness after that seems to only be for a few seconds at a time and due to more pulling, hands around my waist; rough, worker's hands with clammy skin, fingers like palette knives lifting and turning me over like a fucking pancake. The floating feeling is too physical this time, and the hands never leave me. They grip my hips so firmly that I panic again, turning to reach out in front of me to claw at the floor, desperately trying to drag myself away. The sharp stabs under my fingernails from scratching at the tatami never stop until my arms are held behind my back. The last thing I remember is a blurry, faceless shadow prising my mouth open.

Mikami was there.

I wake up with a start, just relieved to be awake again. I must have fallen asleep at my desk, so I rub my face because I woke up, cheek-side down on my keyboard. What a fucking idiot, probably with a rubix cube pattern of punctuation embossed on my face.

My head still aches, even more so when I look up at the computer screen that's way too close to my face, and see Shiori in the bedroom on the livefeed. I lazily watch her wander around like she's trapped and searching for something or someone, still in her white dress that's soaked in blood. I'm probably not in the best position to criticise what's obviously the costume of choice for ghosts, but she could try harder or at least figure out how door handles work. Anyway, she's why I can't go to bed. I forgot.

Since the entire first floor is blocked to me, I go to the downstairs bathroom for a piss. I sway while I stand there and really need to concentrate so that I don't just spray piss all over the wall. Not thinking of anything and grateful for the mindless peace of doing something so perfunctory but incredibly difficult right now. For a second I forget everything.

I walk off to wash my hands and probably drown myself while I'm there, but when I round the corner, there's a man standing at the basin with his back to me. I nearly apologise for walking in on someone until I remember that this my fucking house and they're trespassing. They're wearing a black and white striped, long-sleeved t-shirt which stretches tight across his back as he bends over the basin snorting cocaine off the tiles. What the very fuck?
When he stands straight, I see his red hair for the first time and my blood becomes frozen sludge in my veins. He turns towards me in what seems like slow motion, snapping a gold stash tin shut. I recognise it. I recognise him.

"Oh hey, Yagami! Whoa, who died?" he says to me, artificially euphoric to see me. "You look like you need to loosen up. It's no crime to have a good time y'know, bro. Here. Just a little bump from a friend to help you through the night." He opens his stash tin again and offers it to me. I look between the tin and his face, stupefied. "I've got some molly in my coat too, wherever it is. You know you love molly."

I watch his smirk slowly spread from ear to ear like a gaping slash. When I take a few steps back, his face starts to smoulder before just bursting into flames; it burns like someone's holding a blowtorch at his face. The skin bubbles and pops and crackles and blackens, and when he speaks again, the words sound like the slow rumble of an underground train coming to a stop.

"Come on, Yagami. Don't be such a boring fuck."

He shouts after me as I run away, but I'm hyperventilating so much that I can't hear him now. My heart feels like it's going to blast out of my chest by the time I reach the door to the sun room. I open it like it's a gateway to a sanctuary, but as soon as I do I'm confronted with Jeevas again, inches away from my face.

"I'm feeling a bit crispy, mate. Have you got any hand cream?" he says, turning his hands over to show me charred, split palms dusted with that fine grey powder I last saw on L's body and on my hands. Vomit rises up my throat when I see it, and I run again before he finishes speaking.

Once I get to the corridor, I start to slow down—bouncing off bookshelves and knocking pictures off the wall because I can't seem to walk in a straight line. When I hear Jeevas shouting, I start to run again, but I run past a woman standing on a chair. I see her at out of the corner of my eye at first, but just that much is enough to make me stumble back against the wall. Sensible blue heels, a blue skirt suit, a pearl necklace. She's tying a noose to a rafter. She slowly turns to look at me, and as she does, her head lolls to one side like her neck is boneless.

I slowly step backwards from her as I did when she was alive. Never disrespect The Lady by turning your back on her was something that was drummed into me before I was even an MP. She commanded the respect that I always aspired to have and will never have now, unless…

As if she heard my thoughts, she opens her mouth impossibly wide to scream: long and piercing like a siren. The sound follows me as I run down the dim corridor to get to the kitchen, past the silhouettes of dozens of people pressing their hands against the wall of glass to get to me. Some have cameras that flash in my face, blinding me.

But I am the camera.

The people are outside a window above a sheer cliff face drop that's at least 60 feet above the sea. As impossible as all this is, the fear won't let me think logically that maybe this is just another nightmare I can't wake up from. I'm experiencing this. This is no dream.

As soon as I cross the threshold of the kitchen, breathless and holding onto the doorway for support, I'm faced with the room not being as I left it. All of the cupboard doors and drawers are open. Smashed plates litter the entire floor. A tall man in an apron is standing behind the island worktop. He's holding up a gun in one hand and a butcher's knife in the other, and smiling at me so maniacally that his blue eyes look glazed over by frost.
"Hi, Prime Minister! Let me show you my boat!" he says, but I run away again. He calls after me just like Jeevas did, and for some reason I look behind me to see that he's moved to the doorway. He's a silhouette against the bright white of the kitchen, but he's still holding up his knife and gun like an orb and sceptre. "I was hot rodding it…" he says, "but I'm not sure where it is."

When I get back to my office, I lock the doors and pull the blinds when I'm sure that no one else is in there. This is a holy place, and I light four incense sticks and clap three times to confirm it. The only sound after that is of my own breathing that's now ragged and desperate, so I fall into my armchair in the corner of the room to put my head in my hands and wrench at my hair. The only thing to fear is fear itself, which sounds reasonable unless you have a shitload of ghosts in your house.

When I lift my head, it's because I sense that I'm not alone even now. Raye stands in a dark corner opposite me, arms crossed. Judging me.

"Did you know? I didn't want anyone to know," I say quietly, but he doesn't reply. He's just like a statue without any emotion. How he looks at me makes me feel guilty for what I've thought of doing about Naomi. Both Raye and Naomi are so linked in my mind I can't separate them. "I don't have any choice, Raye. She could ruin me with what she knows," I tell him like I'm begging for understanding and an approval that I know will never come. "She betrayed you, anyway. She'll do the same to me. I can't even say that it's because she's a woman, because men are just as bad. Remember when you said that trusting anyone in the House is the same as giving them a loaded gun? I agreed with you then and I agree with you now. I've lived by it, but it's true whether they're in the House or not. You can't trust anyone, and you can't argue with me about that. I mean, look at you. You're dead!" I laugh, but he doesn't. His stare is so piercing with a hatred I never saw from him in life, and a thin line of blood slowly runs down from his forehead. "Don't look at me like that. Raye, I said STOP LOOKING AT ME!"

I impulsively reach towards the table next to me to grab my Holmegaard ashtray and throw it at him as I shout, but it speeds straight through his head to shatter against the wall. For some reason, that calms me. He can't touch me. None of them can hurt me now.

"So you are dead," I mutter to myself, rubbing my lips with my shaking finger. "I remember, I saw you. I was going to destroy them and I will, I just… got distracted. You know that, probably. I gave him a loaded gun. Even after I knew that he… I tried, Raye, but I can't trust anyone. You know, if I sleep, I just see you with that hole in your head and I think, how could they do that to you? Just end you like that, not just killing you, but shooting what made you special was an insult. It was symbolic, wasn't it, how you died? I don't know if that was L's idea or The Lady's, but I want to think it was a Cabinet decision because… I didn't want to believe that he was involved, Raye. At first, I thought: 'Ok, I'll use him and bring him down with the rest of them,' because I didn't care about him. But then I did and I'm sorry," I whisper like I'm confessing to a priest, but he says nothing.

Wiping my nose on the back of my hand, I wait and wish that he'd say something, good or bad, but he might as well be a cardboard cutout. It's as though our roles have reversed, because he used to confess to me and I'd listen, absorb information and offer nothing in return. Now our places have changed.

"They want to kill me now," I mutter. "Everyone does. And he does. L. He says that he doesn't but who'd believe that? You'd have to be pretty stupid, wouldn't you? I've been pretty stupid. A funny thing I noticed was that I wanted whatever feelings I had to be shared by him. That's all I wanted and I wanted it so badly. I'd never felt it before and I feel sick from it because it never goes away, even now when… I think about him all the time, I have done for years. Do you know what I mean or is it really just me? No one talks about it; they're just smiley, happy, smug bastards. But he's no different
from the rest of them. So you see, I'm just defending myself. They don't deserve to live anymore, do they? None of them."

As soon as I say that, what I thought was Raye appears to glitch like an old videotape so that his image is overlaid with that of Ryuk. It flickers between the two repeatedly and so quickly that I'm convinced they're just gearing up to judder towards me suddenly. That is until the lights in the room fail. All that's left is my own hitched, choked breathing in a room of complete darkness.

That universal childhood fear of the dark returns to me for new blood to feed on, but knowing that Ryuk is here just makes me determined to find him. The lights are on in other rooms, because I can see them as a glowing sliver under the door. I approach the door to unlock it, only pausing for a moment to evaluate whether this is really what I want to do. It's what I need to do. I can't have come this far to lose now, so I open the door and step outside.

Cold air hits me and makes me blink from the shock of it. When I close the door behind me and stand in the living room, waiting, I turn the light off to test it. It switches itself back on immediately, but the light flickers now. No, it's not just that. It's as though the lights are revolving—spinning in mid-air. Different parts of the room are illuminated then cast into shadow on rotation, and the flickering looks as if wings of a thousand birds are circling around the light as it spins.

Other lights in the house go dark but some remain on in what appears to be a line through the house. This could all be interpreted as an electrical fault, but I take it as a phenomenon that I shouldn't ignore. So I follow this luminescent breadcrumb trail, and the lights flash and die as I pass them. Only a light in the hall remains, so I walk towards it, and when I reach it, that light blows. I cower beneath it as the glass of the light bulb shatters over my head, so then I'm left in complete darkness again apart from a thin line of light from under the door of a spare room. It's a small room I planned to have knocked through at some point, but for now it's used for storage, and is so innocuous that I'd almost forgotten that it's there. It's unlocked, whereas L's office is always locked, and logic suggests that rooms are locked only when there's something inside that's worth hiding. L's office was a mask. It'd make sense for someone like L to do that. So, this is where he's kept the death note all this time.

When I open the door, the light stays on so I can see the intimidating number of box towers and tall furniture stacked up like a cityscape. Much of the furniture are covered with dust sheets, and I really don't know where to start looking.

It hits me, when looking at this redundant or rejected stuff which sentimentality prevents us from throwing away, that all of these things have stories unknown to anyone else. I root through boxes, getting increasingly frustrated by the sheer mass of what I have to look through, and knowing that I need to think like L in order to find it. Freud's theory is that hoarding is a result of punishment during toilet training, and that a hoarder, like L, is simply trying to replace what they feel they lost during childhood. From what I've read, I think Freud cut and pasted that reasoning to explain every psychological problem going. Modern thinking is that compulsive hoarders are comforted by their possessions, because of their fear of being left with nothing at all. Either way, it's messy as fuck.

Now in a rage at my ongoing failure when faced with all this shit which is mostly L's, I rip down dust sheets from what turns out to be my erotic netsuke cabinet, and from Hephaestion who's still languishing, which leaves the tallest thing in the room to unveil. When I pull the sheet off it, a pair of yellow eyes in a dead face stare back at me like a hideous noh mask. I stagger back and trip over a box so that I end up on the ground from the unexpected horror of it. I'd think that I'd be more accustomed to Ryuk by now, but not when he just pops up like a demonic jack-in-the-box.

He points at my feet, and I presume that he doesn't mean my slippers, so I push some boxes out of the way and pull back the rug that covers the floor. Under that are some parquetry floorboards that
don't look disturbed at first glance, but when I use my penknife as a pry bar, it's clear that this isn't the first time that they've been removed. After I take out the first piece, the others quickly follow like breaking up a jigsaw, until I find... a red apple. My disappointment is indescribable. I toss it towards Ryuk, who grabs it greedily and laughs like hyena before he holds it over his open and waiting mouth. I watch him, transfixed by how foreboding it is to see him relish the moment before he drops the apple into the cavernous crater, chews it, and spits out the spine of a stalk. That's exactly what he does with lives.

I have to look away for my own sanity, back at the hole I've made in the floor. My slowness of mind from tiredness is so frustrating, because it takes me a moment to realise that the apple was only sitting on top of what was really hidden. Under where the apple was, there's a black book, face down, just lying there, blending in with the dark camouflage between the floor joists. It's almost insulting to see how little effort L put into hiding it.

As I'm holding the book in both hands as a bequeathed holy relic, Ryuk walks towards the wall on my right like it's not there. A thin, electric blue field glows around him as he passes through the wall, leaving me with the book and no answers. I should be shocked, because every time I see him it's like being thrown into a strange scientific anomaly, but I've accepted a lot of bizarre things in the last few years. My head throbs painfully with every strained heartbeat.

I resist writing a name at first. Part of me wants my first to be a glorious moment in ending someone who deserves this kind of justice. I could look back on it with pride. People would thank me if they knew, because I did what they could not. But I sit cross-legged on the floor with a blank double-page spread of the notebook in my lap, pen-clicking and pen-spinning obsessively while I consider writing a particular name with only a purely selfish motive behind it. I reason with myself that I should test the Death Note. It's a scientific investigation of a curiosity and no more. Every scientific test needs a lab rat, and like a lab rat, no one will mourn his passing in aid of the greater good.

The first name I write in the Death Note is Reiji Namikawa.

I spend the night slumped at my desk like a broken puppet, looking up at the camera feeds on my computer. The house is pinked with sunrise daylight, when I do actually notice it, and my mind has reset itself into a calmer state. I make a trail of my clothes to the pool and swim slow lengths until I feel more alive and can begin to formulate my script for what happens next. I like planning. It brings some comfort of order into the chaos of life.

When I go to our bedroom without even thinking of the danger I'd imagined to be in there—in fact, I don't actually remember it until I'm in the shower, when it doesn't seem to matter at all—I develop a theory. Maybe Shiori just wanted me to have the Death Note like Ryuk did. She must've just wanted the best for me. Everyone wants the best for me; I'm told that in letters to my office from supporters about 200 times a day. Actually, I don't get quite so many letters now, but that's L's fault. I'm sure that they still want the best for me, though. I want the best for me too.

So used to the silence of the house now, I nearly jump out of my skin when a guard calls to tell me that L spent most of the night at the firm and that it looks like he's on his way back. Marvelous. It's not where he was, but whatever. They must be glossing over the truth for my sake. They want the best for me as well, not humiliation. L is not the best for me.

So, what should I do now? I pack a bag, order a new phone, and put my broken one in the microwave for five minutes just to see what happens.

Since the lights came back on they haven't malfunctioned since, though they're not necessary now
that it's 8am. I should just think of it as an electrical peculiarity to be expected in the countryside, I suppose.

Sourcing the original Model B3 chairs made such a good investment. None of this reproduction shit. These chairs aren't comfortable, but, frankly, comfort isn't what makes them a design classic. What makes them a design classic is precisely why I'm sitting in one now. This chair gives you a feeling of sophisticated anticipation in waiting, whereas lesser chairs promote indulgent laziness. I can't be allowed to forget who I am.

Eventually a car pulls up outside, of course. I stand only to take off my jacket and remove my cufflinks before I roll up the cuffs of my shirt and take my seat again. In my mind, I've been rehearsing what will happen for hours, so this all feels as natural as breathing now. I'm extremely good at planning.

Perhaps because I haven't slept in so long, all minute sounds pierce my eardrums like the sharpest of arrows. The door is opened after a brief jangle of keys, and a tall man in a dark suit walks in slowly like reverse footage of how he left. After seeing me about 20 feet away from him and being disappointed in my lack of enthusiasm, he takes off his coat and drops it on the nearest chair when he walks towards the stairs.

"And how is Aiber?" I ask him, causing him to stop and stretch his neck out from side to side tiredly before he answers.

"You know that he moved abroad years ago. I haven't had reason to speak to him since and didn't feel like getting a flight to Cape Town for a flying fuck. Sorry, I mean, visit."

"Then who was it this time?"

"The new paralegal I hired who looks like Idris Elba, if you must know. His name is Makepeace, which is hilarious, all things considered," he says easily, but tiredly decides to change his story.

"Actually, I didn't see anyone apart from a security guard. And before you say anything, I do have some standards, and he'd have to be one hell of a security guard to warrant any lowering of my standards. As it is, I'm supporting Japan's Silver Human Resources and hired an 83-year-old great-granddad for the night shift two nights a week. You didn't know that, did you. That I'm supporting a government subsidised program because you would not shut up about the ageing population and dwindling workforces, with bonus statistics because you like statistics. I did listen. Anyway, I went to the firm, and with only an ancient man within fucking distance and not really wanting what would probably end up in being a fatal sexual assault charge being slapped on me after such a long day, I tried to sleep, which didn't happen. I'm guessing that you didn't sleep either? No?" he asks, and when I don't answer him, he sighs. "Did you have your guards tail me? What an excellent way to waste money… Ok! Well, you're not expected at the Kantei today. I told them that you were working from home, so you might as well go to bed, or at least make yourself useful and make pancakes or something."

"How could you do that to me?" I ask him, having discarded whatever he said as soon as he said it.

"What? I'm sorry, but you'll have to remind me of what I did, Light."

"Don't treat me like an idiot. You know exactly what you did."

"I really don't. I told you what I did and I don't see how that could be hurtful to you. Since you had your guards follow me then you'd know this already."

"Namikawa."
"Nami… ha, sorry. What about Namikawa? That's a bit random, I wasn't expecting that."

"Are you seriously going to lie about it? You know that I don't believe what you say about what you did last night, don't you?" I say calmly, proceeding to take off my tie and open the top two buttons of my shirt. "I know what you did."

He looks confused as he watches me take off my tie, before shrugging and smiling to himself. "Ok, Light. Whatever you think I did, I must have done it."

He starts to walk away after totally ad libbing the fuck out of the script I'd set out for him. I don't remember standing, but suddenly I'm running towards his back and driving him into the wall. I turn him around to punch the side of his face. It sends him a couple of feet away from me to stumble and fall to the floor. Even though I wanted this and part of me always expects it, my body fizzes from hot blood rushing inside me like I've never felt alive before. I breathe deeply and watch him rub his jaw where I hit him. I naturally put my guard up and tuck my chin down in readiness for the inevitable. When he looks up at me, a spatter of blood at the corner of his lip, he knows that I regret nothing. Something about his eyes instantly shows how furious he is, and he runs at me like it's some kind of ugly rugby scrum.

There's nothing refined and gentlemanly about how we fight. It's shocked, messy and unrestrained brutality in trying to hurt each other as best we can without weapons, and for a second I realise that we really are just animals fighting over some infringement of territory. I'm not concerned with any potential damage to either of us; I just want to hurt him. I want to inflict the most base, purest pain on him like that's my only purpose in life. From experience, I know what hurts the most—I wore unforgiving Carmina black Oxfords with steel toe caps especially for this—and after landing punches while simultaneously being punched by him, I pull myself together and aim for his neck in particular. There are so many nerves and arteries in one place in a stupidly flawed anatomical design which make an ideal target, like a bunch of them lying there waiting to be hacked at, and that makes me consider something irrelevant. I don't think that people realise that the origins of bowing are so animalistic, like a dog rolling on its back in deferential submission. You're making yourself vulnerable, exposing the back of your head, not out of politeness, but to demonstrate that you are no threat and that you're resigned to defeat as the weakest. I haven't bowed like that for years for this reason. Because it'd be a lie.

I hit him soundly just behind his ear. He falls again and tries to put some distance between us to allow him to recover, but I won't let him. The punches fall like a bombing raid then and any pause is only because of some hit I couldn't block or dodge. I'm temporarily stunned by dizziness, gasping from exploding pain by hits to my solar plexus, unprotected kidneys, or stomach, though each time it's almost immediately eradicated by a force of adrenaline.

Driven on by pure rage—lashing out at him instinctively, and joyous when I feel my knuckles hit his jaw and see his head spin to the left. When he turns back towards me, I hit him on the other side and wish that I was wearing a knuckle duster. I'm surprised only by how he tries to roundhouse me like a punchdrunk idiot, when every fucker knows that never works unless the other person is asleep. I can block his attempts so easily once he starts obviously getting tired, breathing heavily, knocking over the dining chairs we've never used, and bouncing off the walls, but always running back towards me, trying to knock me down. He grabs at my clothes to throw me off balance. I block any headshots with my elbows, guarding my face and pivoting around him while he tries to blitz me with head punches and kicks like we're still in school. It occurs to me that he probably hasn't found it necessary to do a self-defense class like I have, because you just never know when some angry feminist with unmanicured nails and a balaclava is going to come at you these days.

Since he's been slowing down for a while now but stubbornly not giving up, it's predictable that he
finally backs off, bent double and holding his hand up to me as a white flag I have no intention of accepting. I give him an oblique kick just above his knee to show him how it should be done, forcing his knee back against its natural bend, stretching muscles and tendons so that he buckles and falls against the wall. It's nice when a plan comes together. Not that I ever doubted it would.

"Ok… ok," he breathes out, pulling his knee towards him so that he ends up sitting against the wall. I feel a sudden urge to check my face for any damage, but just because he appears to have conceded doesn't mean that he can be trusted. In the unlikely event that this went badly for me, I reasoned that any cuts and bruises and broken teeth and bones would be easy to explain. Politicians are punched every day, and usually by each other over security bills in the House. There was an article two years ago which described me as a passionate ronin who'll fight only for peace or to protect my honour. I'm protecting my honour and much else besides.

I only feel overwhelmed by sadness and a hopelessness which is somehow encapsulated by looking down at L, bloody and bruised on the ground, and knowing that I caused it yet don't regret it, even if I don't rejoice in it. I step away from him and half-fall onto the couch to massage the pain in the side of my head where L got one heavy punch in early on. I catch the movement of my reflection in the polished blue labradorite that covers the wall behind L, broken in the flashes of iridescent blues, golds and peacock greens captured in the shining black mirror of granite. Why did I put so much effort into this house if I was only to live within it for such a short time? I thought I'd live a long life here, though I never really believed it. I wanted it to be beautiful, so that everywhere I'd look, I'd be surrounded by a gorgeous frame for a life that I'd chosen for myself. In retrospect, L never really cared about that either. He never cared because he knew it wouldn't last for long. We were both just pretending throughout the last few months. Maybe long before then. Now I understand why most of his things were just left in boxes next to sculptures under dust sheets, just like I was kept in his bed under sheets as one of the most precious things he owned. This house was just another temporary piece in his collection, like I was, and he'll sell us both off soon. There were warning signs everywhere and I just refused to see them.

L's breathing calms, and I take that as a cue to stand, closing my eyes to stave off the delayed unsteadiness of being in a storm at sea, rocked by walls of waves as high as the sky. I put my jacket and coat over my arm, pick up my overnight bag, and turn my back to L.

"Going back to the wife?" L asks me quietly, but somehow the sound bounces and echoes around this lonely, empty house. "She is still your wife, I suppose, and she'll take you back. Just a mistake. Back to the comforting arms of the Madonna, eh?" he adds bitterly, but it's a tone I'm so accustomed to that I don't really take in what's being said.

A shadow passes through the edge of my vision, causing me to turn towards it until all I see is L—thin and crumpled on the floor like wreckage in this house which seems so ridiculous to me now. He nods slowly to himself as if he's answering questions he always knew the answers to, which draws my attention to his rising bruises and broken skin. All the blood on his face. I did that.

I turn to walk to the door, making a point of dropping my house key to make a hollow, mournful sound of finality on the console table. There's blood on my hands like a beautiful varnish, and I turn them over to see them shine. But L's voice follows me throughout it all, breezing over me as I stand there in my stillness.

"I wanted to hurt you like you hurt me. But love is a cruelty we inflict upon ourselves, isn't it. This is as much my fault as it is yours," he admits, and still in the same desperately melancholy tone that sounds like the death of something. "I've known men who've never loved anyone, and they live long lives. I wanted to be like them so that I could accomplish something and never be hurt, like you, I think. But I love and I think it will kill me. You don't need to worry now, Light. The only one who'll
I recognise that he's trying to shock me into some kind of mad panic for his life with the lightning strike that he loved me, but instead I turn to stare at him blankly. I feel so strongly that I've experienced this many times before, it creates nothing but a familiar tiredness and emptiness in me. The firestorm of emotions burnt me out a long time ago, maybe. Or perhaps we really have been here before and nothing's changed. It's crushing to realise that, for a time, I believed that we could make it different. It's all his fault that we didn't.

L draws his knees towards his chest in a weak defence as I approach to kneel in front of him. My thumb brushes against his cheek slowly, like I'm drawing a tender outline of his features, sensing any tension in him fade through my gentleness, and feeling him put his forgiving hand on the back of my head. Then I lean towards him and kiss where my thumb has passed over.

"L, do you know?" I whisper, so close and soft as my lips glance over his ear that it makes me close my eyes and almost forget myself for a moment, "Gods of Death who only eat apples... have red hands."

When I pull away, I see his eyes wide and staring at mine with horror from the understanding of a cryptic message. Yes, Love, I own the Death Note now. I know everything. Every lie of yours has been sliced open to shed truth like blood.

My crimson-streaked hand slips to his shoulder while my other hand locks onto his hair, but he doesn't seem to notice. He focuses on what's behind me for a moment, his mouth opening with voiceless words before he looks back at me and my smile.

"Light, don't—" he rushes out, terrified. It'd be so gratifying if he was anyone else.

But, no, what I don't want or need is to hear any orders, so it's a good time to smash the back of his head against my labradorite wall behind him. The first hit only causes him to let out a low grunt and to grab at my hands. The second hit makes his hands fall to his sides. And the third was unnecessary, probably.

After I let go of him, he slides down to one side. There's blood on the wall, tainting the winter colours and pearlescent lustre of the Northern Lights trapped in mineral. That's what the ancients thought explained the colours of labradorite—the spirits of the dead forever entombed in stone—that's why I bought it, because I loved it, but now it's spattered with blood. There's blood everywhere. I look down at my split knuckles, angry from where the bones have collided with his face, and I instinctively reach to touch my nose and find that it's bleeding. My only clear thought is how I can withdraw from the attempted suicide of having known him?

"He's not dead," a gravelly, vaguely disappointed voice says behind me, though initially I think that it's my voice. As if it's a prompt, I look back at L.

"You're mine now, yes?" I say, talking to God but looking at L. "You're not to talk to him again, do you understand?"

"I don't have to do what you say, but there's no need for me to talk to him now. I go where the Death Note goes," God replies.

"I'd call an ambulance but it'd be in the papers. He never called an ambulance for me, so why should I bother? You were there then, too, weren't you."

"He'll live. Like you did," God tells me disinterestedly. "Are you worried about him?"
I turn my face to my right, towards where the voice is coming from at my shoulder, and pause before I speak. But only to breathe.

"Did you see Shiori here? In the bedroom last night? She followed me home."

"No. He was right about that. You're mad. It should be interesting."

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