



1.

J the E.



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isorder



He awoke to the faint sound of grating bone.

In the dead of the night, when he opened his eyes, he lost his sense of feeling in his arms and legs.

He was mimicking a transparent chrysalis. He became a dwarf, no bigger than the palm of a hand, locked inside the brain. However much he moved his limbs, his sleeping corpse would not budge.

Only his left arm was connected to his trapped mind. The blood beating in those veins was transformed into information. He felt the illusion of a mere part replacing his whole. Being only able to move his left arm meant that the existence of ^{Ishizue Arika} 石杖 所在 was concentrated in his left arm.

"—ah"

His body, is in pain.

He hears the sound of grinding.

He feels the chill of his body being scraped away,

The pleasure of his entirety being chewed.

The realization that he was being eaten.

^{The arm} He ^{his freedom} faded away and he finally regained himself. In the darkness, he heard slurping. He removed the blanket.

On top of the bed was the sight of complete red. The girl, stained in pure red from the nose down, smiled at him with her shattered jaw.

"Onii-chan, it hurts doesn't it?"

The girl was taken a hold of by something *wrong*.

On his left arm which had been gobbled up quickly, there was no pain, there were no bite marks. The girl licked the severed surface with her shattered jaw. As if to fill in the large hole of one who has lost someone.

It was a silent night of grating bone.

The sound of budding, beautiful life.

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Now I remember. It had been the end of summer, back when I finally was released out of that prison they call a hospital and when I had been seriously thinking about whether I should go back to college.

I'd been making my way into the home of a neighbor, someone I've seen around the block a few times, a ^{Kizaki}木崎-san. At seven o'clock, when the sun had set, without pushing the door bell or saying anything, I snuck in through the front door.

Nah, I was going to smash a window to get in, but luckily it wasn't locked. Careless schmuck. Now, see that? That makes me look like some punk thief. Problem was, I couldn't say it was off the mark at all.

Just one month ago, on the night of September 12. I had illegally entered the residence like a burglar because I wanted money.

Apparently, there had been a family suicide at Shikurazaka. The guy who was informed about it had been an officer at a nearby police box. There'd been a phone call from the head of the Kizaki household, the first thing in the morning, or so they say.

"Last night, the three of us, me, my wife, and my daughter, committed suicide by wringing our necks rather pleasantly. It would very much be appreciated by me if you take care of the mess as soon as possible. I certainly don't want to inconvenience the neighbors."

Bad joke. But unfortunately for the officer receiving the call, he didn't have the sense to figure out what part of that he was supposed to laugh at and headed

straight to the Kizaki residence, then *blam*. Never heard from again.

Ditto for the other officer that came by looking for his partner when he didn't come back past noon. The police box at block 2 of Shikurazaka became an empty husk for half the day and news of this strange incident spread before the police department even got word of it. 'Course, it's not the kind of stuff that would make its way on the air waves since it is just local, but really it's just gossip among people living around the area. *Oh dear heavens, that officer hasn't come out from the Kizaki's house yet, oh ho ho ho. Oh, that reminds me, I wonder why the window shutters have been closed since yesterday, oh ho ho ho.* I don't know if these housewives are alert or just have nothing better to do.

Gossip like that crept gradually throughout town, eventually reaching the sharp ears of the lovers of the curious, sometime after 2 pm. Apparently they shared the news with me, and there had been phone calls in the afternoon. Don't remember the stupid details of the conversation, but the time is definitely there on the call history.

As of 6:40 pm, there had been 2 calls before the sun had set from a TSURANUI and KARYOU KAIE. Don't care about the *Tsuranui* one but the *Kaie* call? That's a problem. There's something ominous just by getting a phone call from an oddball that loves cell phones but hates making phone calls.

And so, it's a little before 7:00 pm. After the sun had set, there had been a third phone call. The number of the caller didn't show up on the display. I waited a little before I answered the phone. What was to be said couldn't be any simpler. The man told me his name was Kizaki, gave me his address, and said,

"I'm very sorry. I'm tired so I want you to exorcise me."

Then he hung up after giving me that very sorry-sounding line. What I really wanted to do was forget about it and go back to sleep, but there were three reasons why I couldn't ignore him.

Number 1. The massive amount of memos on my desk. Probably advice from *Kaie*, detailing the events today of the Kizaki family suicide. Number 2. The address of Kizaki-san's that I just heard. Shikurazaka, block 2, 4-7, that's only three houses away from me. Shit. And number 3. I happened to have the luck to still have *Kaie's* arm today. Yep, the stage is prepped. If I pull it off, maybe I'll get reward money from *Mato*-san.

Okay, so I've never heard anything about civilians getting money transferred into their accounts for cooperation in arrests, but maybe she'll be a little nicer to me in the future. All right, I'm going. From a rough calculation, I determine that expectation value exceeded trouble value. Before leaving, I briefly check through the memos, finding an extremely important "*Look him in the eyes and you will die*" notice written with a red pen.

"*Look him in the eyes and you will die.*" Wow. What is this, a ghost story? Trouble value is exceeding expectation value a wee bit. But, having already gotten pumped up into doing the deed, it felt like a hassle to just go back to my room.

And that brings me to the Kizaki residence. The entrance I snuck through had a nice feel to it. A persimmon or apple-like hard but flexible, juicy meat kind of feel.

I move in with my shoes still on. Wooden walls, stained with the stench of everyday living. A narrow, fragile hallway where the floor looked like it would break before you hear it creak. Light flickering on and off without rest. Despite

that, it's as dark as a monochrome image. This was a house covered in black film.

In the living room, the TV's been left on, with the usual Sunday night anime running. Oh, you know, that never-ending story, the one that revolves around the daily life of a certain middle class family. So anyhow, right in front of those guys who sustained their household for decades without changes, were the corpses of those people who couldn't keep theirs up.

A mother and daughter probably. The mother's slumped on the table, the daughter's lying on the floor. Even though both of them were lying stomach flat down, they were clearly staring at the ceiling. They had very sad expressions. Their tearful faces looked like they exhausted a lifetime's worth of emotional reactions. This week's episode in the life of ^{I s o n o}磯野 xxx-san¹ must have been a real tearjerker, eh. Okay, okay, people will make these kinds of faces when confronted with incomprehensible violence.

But still, just what are you supposed to do to turn out corpses like these? Suicide by hanging is well known, but actually rotating the head itself to break the neck? That takes a bit of power. Only thing I can think of is that huge vices were locked on their heads and then twisted. Not that it matters. This isn't the time to be deducting this and that about something unimaginable. It's none of a burglar's business if a locked room murder happened in the place he's burglarizing.

Before long, this week's quality family time ended. Putting behind the trailing closing credits, I bring myself to the stairs. The film covering the house was becoming increasingly filthier, and the instant I reached the 2nd floor, the color changed so much I couldn't believe my eyes.

¹ Sazae-san.

The wooden hallway completely switched to concrete. From black to white. The faintly dirty hallway gave me the impression of a grave religious painting.

"Crap. I'm not sleeping am I?"

Oh, lovely. Dreams and reality just had to get spliced in together. I don't know where the swap was, but at the corner at the end of hallway, there was, some kind of, almost dried-out-tree-like human figure.

"Excuse me, are you a priest?"

The dead tree had a good, penetrating voice. Bastard. Great, just great, I am seeing a dream that has no connection to the Kizaki House.

"Sorry pal, I'm not a priest. Priests don't bring along black dogs, mind you."

"But, I was told you would save us. Don't you purify demons like priests do in movies?"

"It's exorcism, as in to expel, not to purify. Might sound the same, but there's a little difference."

After all, the person's going to be broken along with the demon. He'll be normal again, but social rehabilitation is hopeless.

And look, real demons are rare, period. What you buggers are afflicted with is just a sickness. It's only a slightly special mental disorder, so just please stop calling yourselves that.

"Anyway, I am not a priest. A priest isn't going to be able to heal your sickness either. Just deal with it yourself or go under the care of a b-i-g hospital. From what I'm seeing, this mutt doesn't have any interest in you."

"IT HURTS SO MUCH."

I could see noise. For a second, I saw an abandoned building with puke all over the floor. Like a CD with a ghost hidden between the tracks.

"OKAY. The audio must have jumped a bit so I'll say it again. Go to a damn

hospital."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA! I told you, I told you it's something else! I, I'm not sick, I'm not sick! Until now, I did fine on my own and did exactly what Mama said didn't I!? I studied everyday, got good grades to make Mama happy to make up for Papa being gone, but why do I have to be told that when I've become a little broken!"

The concrete wall is twisting.

I mean, it's melting. The excitement of the figure's emotions is melting the hallway itself. This is dangerous. I could get melted along with it if this keeps going on.

"Whoah. Whoah, whoah, wait. Seriously, you're freaking me out, so just wait...Relax. My bad. I shouldn't have assumed that you, a complete stranger, was sick."

I could say the same thing about treating a complete stranger like he was a priest, but I won't bother pointing that out. Say the wrong thing and I will be killed. Doesn't matter if this is a dream or not, it's really not a nice feeling to be killed.

"But, don't you agree that it makes more sense to call a doctor instead of a priest? Now you're saying that you're not sick, but personally, I think it beats being called demon-possessed."

After all, you do get treated like a human being, and either way, you're still not going to be normal.

"How am I supposed to be okay with that! You don't get it! There's something wrong with me, there's something wrong with me, there is seriously something wrong with me! It's not normal, I know what I want to do and what I don't what to do, but I'm doing both! Mom is saying I'm sick but this kind of sickness doesn't

exist. This is demon possession. It's not my fault I'm not recovering, it's the demon's fault!"

The figure shouts. The concrete is melting, it's melting. I'm freaked, I'm freaked. Why's that? Because my cheek's starting to feel like it's melting.

"Whoah-hoh, shit. Come on, give me a break. I don't want to be digested in a place like this."

"Then take back what you said. Say that I'm possessed by a demon."

He points out my error sharply. Grr, damn nutjob. There's an intense difference of enthusiasm between you and me here that's not making this easy for me.

"Roger. So, let's assume a demon is possessing you. I think that's actually rather embarrassing. Anybody can get sick so that's something that can be empathized with. But getting possessed is, see, there's this image of ostracism with it, yeah?"

The dissolving of the walls is slowing. The figure is pleased.

"No, no. You're a priest but you don't even know that? Listen, in the West, demons possess people that don't believe in God. Demons expose the dirty hidden parts of people and make them sin. It's not a sickness. If it was, there wouldn't be anything else to it besides recovering from it right? But demon possession is different. As long as the demon is gone, person is cleansed of his sins by exposing them all."

Uh, this is not the West. Also, Japan doesn't have the right climate for sin and punishment to spread like epidemic diseases. The ones that are irresponsibly spreading it and indiscriminately infecting others aren't celestial, they are artificial and calculating fakes.

"Oh my, is that so. Wow, you are a devout Christian. Well then, why don't we

put aside the cleaning out the skeletons from the closet part? Okay, so what is it then? If you hadn't even known about God, you wouldn't be possessed by a demon?"

"Yes, that's right. Knowledge and faith are different. If I hadn't known about God, I wouldn't know about demons. That's why, I,"

Ah, ah, ah, ah hah, ok, ok, ok.

"Basically, what you want to say is that God and demons are the same?"

Could also call them a set or partners in crime, but hey, it's not like it was either of those. The figure seems to be getting happier and completely stopped melting the concrete. Immediately after, it reverted back to the original two-floored wooden building and my dear middle-class hallway appeared. Woo-hoo. I could now see the door to the bedroom and as long as I open the door, it's adios to this sucker.

"Don't you see? God is using demons to test us. I'm being tested. I was chosen. If only this demon would leave, I could have a normal body again! I could be normal again, but everyone makes fun of me. This, isn't a sickness. I know it, there's somebody else, not me, that's making me into this. Yes, that's it, I hit Mama, I turned my room into a mess, I'm being made fun of by all my friends because God is trying to save me!"

"Ah. No, that's,"

I hold back what I was going to say. I'm not a fan of saying this and that about another person's values, and I don't think it's going to be amusing if I point it out this time either.

"I somehow understand your lingo. But, why are you talking to me about this?"

"Why are you asking me that? Aren't we the same? *You're also missing a part*

of yourself."

I put my hand on the bedroom door.

"Don't get chummy with me, stranger. I'm one of the eaten, you're an eater. Don't ever say we're the same life form just because we look alike."

Bang. The door opened without any resistance.

White and black. Good, from this point on, it's the Kizaki business.

The bedroom I stepped in was enveloped in faint darkness. The shutters are closed, the only lighting is coming from a mini bulb. Maybe it was from the lack of ventilation, but the room is like a sauna and hard to breathe in. In the bedroom, there are two beds. Sitting at the furthest bed is a man in a business suit. He doesn't notice me. His head is drooped powerlessly, with his back facing me. Going by his build, that's got to be the head of the household. Unlike the two on the first floor, this guy's neck was normal, still has the shape of a normal human being. In short, he is alive. Well, no shit. If he wasn't, he wouldn't be able to make a phone call saying that the three of them happily committed suicide.

I keep the sound of my feet stealthy. Kizaki's back is facing me. He might have noticed me, he might not have. The sight of his slumped back was like an art museum on the brink of collapsing. Distance from bed is about a meter and a half. Closing in by three more steps will give me the distance I need to be able to spring on him, *no matter what syndromes* he has. Or would have, but something got in the way. There was a *thump*, as my feet made contact with something. The hell? Crap, hey, this is kind of big—

"_____"

It, was the body of a person, eyes wide open, and dead. Policeman cadaver. Two of them. Both of them, stomach to the floor, with their necks twisted fully.

"Good evening. I didn't think you would come so quickly to save me."

I raise my head by reflex.

Instantly, I stopped breathing from horror.

——The corner of the room.

There was a large full scale mirror, reflecting the figure of Kizaki. Our eyes met. Not good. We both became aware of each other's presence by the mirror, and,

"Look him in the eyes and you will die."

"——, ah,"

The muscles throughout my body spasm. Hurts. Like my entire body had been stretched out by a roller, but is being stretched out again and again and again. As a bonus, I can't move not even one of my fingertips. This is too powerful. Just becoming aware that our eyes met for just one brief instant turned my command system into muck.

Two dead bodies with their necks twisted by my feet. A middle-aged man with his back facing me, gazing at me. A dark room as steamed up as a sauna. No, I mean it, this is scary. Can't even change the line of sight because I can't move my pupils. And excuse me, even more pressingly, I am having a little difficulty in oh, breathing since I can't send commands to my body.

"You must be that, what was it again? Oh yes, you must be that exorcist that eases the possessed. ...Oh? Aren't you Arika-kun, from the Ishizue family?"

No reaction from me since our eyes are still meeting. I'm helpless until he cuts off eye contact.

"That's right, you are Arika-kun. You were just discharged from the hospital weren't you. The reason you were admitted was, aaah, what was it? I'm sorry, I've been busy so busy with work lately that I haven't been a good neighbor. The

daughter's been pestering me for money so she could buy you a gift for a visit to the hospital, but tell me, did she even see you once?"

Did she? I definitely wouldn't know if she really did visit. Oh. Wait a minute, weren't visitors not allowed at that hospital?

"Oh, damn. I'm, you see, I apparently am afflicted with that thing you people call demon possession. I'm keeping myself in this room to be alone until an exorcist comes. I want to avoid contact with people as much as possible. I don't want to be reported to the police and I certainly don't want any awful rumors to spread. When you become as old as I am, what society thinks of you becomes the second most important concern in life."

Kizaki raises his head gradually. Kizaki's ready to kill. Whoah, whoah, hold on, it's me. Hello, the exorcist is ME. Don't get hasty, if you want to talk, I'm all ears.

"But, that's all because there's a family to support. You saw my wife and daughter below didn't you? It's been one day since then, but I do hope they haven't started decaying yet. It is September but still summer after all. I wanted to keep them in the refrigerator but they're not going to be able to fit. It would have been nice to do something before the neighbors complained, but oh well. It doesn't matter anymore. No actually, it never mattered in the first place, but for some reason the two of them followed my example and died. How absolutely meaningless. Up until the very end, my family had to become a burden."

Kizaki slowly turns. His eyes, that had met mine through the mirror, are slowly facing me.

And at the same time,

"No, I won't do anything to inconvenience you. Before I kill any more people, I will kill myself. I really should have been dead long ago, but for some reason I

am the only one that can't die. Last night, *I did twist my own neck after all.*"

The neck.

My neck, is turning at a speed matching Kizaki's.

"I wanted to die by myself. I've been lying to my wife, you see. The company, I quit it a week ago. I'm tired. I'm so tired. I was so tired that I hadn't realized that I had been tired until now. I'm already over 50 years old. Isn't it about a time that I'm allowed to become free?"

If the neck of Kizaki, back facing me, had been at 0 degrees, it's now at 20. Not good. I think I have a good idea on what the mechanism behind this demon possession was.

"But my wife objected. *Don't quit your damn company because you want to, your body doesn't belong to only you, you have the obligation to take care of us,* that's what she said. It was horrible. I've been married for a long time, but, Arika-kun, the hysteria of a woman chills passion incredibly. Sometimes I think, that's a trait that only women have. Us men have too much pride to act as childish as they do."

40 degrees, 60 degrees. As if to copy Kizaki's neck, mine was also turning. Speaking of which, at 90 degrees, my neck will be almost completely facing the side. Beyond that, ah well, no matter how much I put things in my favor, 120 should be my limit.

"I'll make it clear. I didn't want a family suicide. I just wanted to be alone. Because, oh, I don't know. I quit in the first place because, oh, that's right, I made a major blunder, even at this age. I tried to fill in figures by raising money, but it wasn't enough. My superiors told me to go hang myself, I was up to my neck in debt. It was impossible to repay everything while I was still alive."

90 degrees, 100 degrees.

The bones in my neck creak sharply.

My neck isn't going to turn any further. That's the way the human body is built. But Kizaki's neck movement was actually smooth.

I figure that the stuff inside probably changed to have a sliding configuration. 360 degree rotatable and multidirectional to boot.

"That's why when I planned to die by myself, my wife and daughter said no. No, that's not quite what they said. They said that if I truly wanted to die, I should find a way to die that leaves them money. Oh, how utterly stupid. You people, the reason I want to die is because I'm sick of that. They couldn't understand that even until the end. That's why I committed suicide in front of my wife without saying anything, but then something foul must have taken control of them. *My wife and my daughter both followed my lead and killed themselves by twisting their necks.*"

Excuse me, but I believe that was your doing?

120 degrees. 130 degrees. The neck is turning. Lead on by Kizaki, a demon possessed, the necks of the people around him turn.

That's the medical condition he gained from demon possession. The affected site is the neck and the function born from that is instigation. The cause? Overwork.

Go to hell. Kizaki stopped thinking to keep himself from realizing what his condition is and kept repeating his homicidal suicides. People that make contact with that old man's eyes are forced to copy his movements. Gimme a damn break. That guy's neck might be able to do that because he's got a sliding one, but human necks do not turn.

I'm going to die. A few more seconds, and I,

"But still, I thought about it. If it's my duty to support my family, then it also

should be my family's obligation to die with me. After all, they can't live without me, isn't that right? If that is true, they should die with me. And my wife and daughter did just that. I can't stand it. I didn't think they'd go that far to tie our lives together. Damn it, family love, really is an unconscious hell. "

Kizaki's face turns completely backwards. An exact 180 degrees. Kizaki's neck turns smoothly, while mine turns roughl-, *snap*.



Sniff, sniff.

The black dog is looking for the sliding neck. The room is dark, but that isn't a problem. The black dog is blind and thus never needed light.

The left arm which lost its prosthetic arm, hooks a formed formlessness from the neck which lost its neck.

———Attaboy.

Okay, Hatred (tentative name)-chan, it's time for dinner.

1/junk

The sky is near.

When I woke up, my vision was covered by water.

“Ah——eh...?”

The sky, has turned into an ocean.

Sunlight is a shade of white. Light, while shimmering with the currents of water, pours down on me and the stone room I'm in. Inside the clear blueness, the current violently swooshed as the outline of a fish passed.

Swimming in the ocean above my head, was an enormous fish.

The figure of the fish brushes against the light. Its body length is a little more than two meters. If I had to go by just the silhouette, it's a shark. I don't know what kind of fish it is. If somebody asked me if sharks can live in fresh water, I'd have to pause a bit. First off, I can't tell if that even is a fish.

The shadow distances itself. Probably because it didn't like me looking at it, the fish went higher...deeper into the ocean and disappeared.

Felt like the sky and the ground were reversed. But I'm used to it. No problem. That's a glass ceiling and above it is a huge water tank. Nah, a little different from that. The room I'm in is underneath a huge water tank, would be the correct way of describing it. I'm just in an underground chamber and the ocean above my head really isn't the ocean, but just an old storage tank. This crazy water tank ceilinged chamber is an anachronism that might as well be a room taken straight out of a medieval castle, you see.

I'm at the outskirts of Shikura City. In the home of 迦遼海江^{K a r y o u K a i e}, which lies in

the forest.

“Oh? *Arika*, you’re awake?”

An androgynous voice came from the canopy bed at the center of the room.

From here, I could only make out a shadow and not the face from here, but that’d be the owner of the room. Well actually, I wouldn’t be able to see anything but a shadow no matter where I try to look from. That bed’s been calculatingly positioned in a way to ensure that no one could get a glimpse of the face unless they were standing right next to the bed.

The underground chamber is built like a giant square box. The ceiling is glass and around it are walls of stone layered like brick. There are doors at all four sides of the room, but I’ve never opened any of them other than the entrance at the south side. Inside, virtually none of the everyday essential furnishings are present, the only electrical appliance being a small fridge in the corner. Piles of antiques are scattered with almost no semblance of order throughout the room. Depending on how one were to look at it, it could also be a storehouse for junk.

“Sorry, fell asleep. Needed anything while I’d been sleeping?”

“No, nothing important at all. But, now that you’re awake, do your job. My throat’s dry. Bring me some water.”

I’d just woken up. Maybe as an after effect of a bad dream, I make sure my neck isn’t twisted and raise my body up from the sofa.

This room doesn’t have any running water. The only water is the distilled water that’s been stocked up in the refrigerator. I walk slowly to the corner, over to the mountain-like stack of globes, and the refrigerator partially buried by that, and *pop*, open the door with one hand.

...Well shit. A fridge full of yellow shit.

“There’s nothing but colored stuff here!”

“If there’s no water, that will be fine too. If I have to drink something, then I’ll have grapefruit, okay!”

Sure is healthy for someone bedridden. Might even be more energetic than me sometimes because *Kaie* watches out for that kind of stuff. If being picky about meals really makes a difference with homo sapiens, that must mean people like me don’t have much time left on this earth. Oh, but don’t worry. We omnivores love junk food. Two times the tastiness since it keeps meals cheap and cuts down a needlessly long life span.

While bravely putting up with the treacheries of the lightly carbonated fast food beverage, I pour the light yellow into an oh-so expensive glass. There’s a man with one arm reflecting off the mirror on the wall to the side of the fridge. Not a pleasant sight. The man is missing his left arm. Nothing from the upper arm down. Me, I think it’s actually damn cool since now I look like an evil robot, but that bravado doesn’t make up for the inconvenience of having only one arm. Two years ago, I lost my left arm in a little accident. In fact, it’d been lost so completely and perfectly that it left people baffled about just what one has to do to remove it so cleanly. Luckily, the only thing I lost was that and there hadn’t been any danger to my life. One and a half years of rehabilitation and I got discharged. Pain in the ass for job searching and socializing, but nope, no dissatisfactions with the one-armed me. I am somehow managing to get some small time cash with this dull part time job, so yeah, I’d say I am one of the fortunate. About the only thing that bugged me was that time I discovered I couldn’t tie shoelaces by myself. Now that was a shock.

“Oh, hurry, hurry. Run *Arika*, run!”

I close the fridge and hurry over to my spoiled employer. I'm having trouble walking. I guess I must have fallen asleep with my neck in the wrong position.

"Thanks. It's actually been five hours since I last had something to drink."

The master of the room slightly raised the neck and took the glass.

A black, artificial right arm. Karyou *Kaie* gulps down the yellow fluid without hesitation.

"That was delicious. So, you were moaning. What was that about?"

"What, like the feeling that I'd been movie hopping theaters for the lousy late night showings. ...Oh wait, you wouldn't get that."

"Nope, can't say I can identify with that. I've never been to a theater before. Besides, is there even such a thing as an entertaining late night show?"

Golly, why yes, there are, a whole lot. The fool has the idea that a late night showing is the act of shitting out third-rate movies that can only be shown in the middle of the night. I'll let you know that nowadays, late night showings are better for actually enjoying movies, okay? ...But no point in explaining this to someone who doesn't understand the fundamentals of movies.

"Sorry, bad example. Basically, I'd just had a dream of something nasty that happened a while ago."

"Oh really."

Kaie looks at me with a blank face. This, is my employer, the owner of this underground chamber.

First thing to be noticed at a glance is the artificial arm. A black plaster arm extending slenderly like a mannequin was attached. In other words, just as armless as me. However, *Kaie's* a mischievous critter several notches higher than the likes of me in the outrageous department.

Age is 14 or 15. Silk-like, long, black, hair and a pretty face that would knock

out any man. But watch out boys. This, is a *man*. Mortifying, but yes, a *man*. This is coming from me, the guy that got knocked out by his looks at first sight, so there's no mistake on it.

Name's Karyou Kaie. Pain in the ass, so I just call him *Kaie*. This snotty punk, who'd seriously be like a princess if he just shut up, is a work of art that God commissioned on a whim. At the same time, he's also evidence that God has no taste.

"So, then, what kind of dream might this nasty dream of yours be? Hours of seeing something like that does stir up my curiosity. T'was quite the mystery as to how you could manage to sleep the entire time in such agony."

He asks me in amusement. He's bored all year long so he's voracious for anything interesting.

"...Look, I already told you, it was a nasty dream. I'm still feeling nauseous here and the last thing I need is to remember it. I was about to die in it."

Well actually, I definitely did die back there. My neck was twisted after all.

"Oh, you saw a dream where you were about to die? Ah, so that's why you were screaming things like 'Oh help' or 'Please stop for the love of God!'. Oh poo. There would have been real entertainment if you'd only slept a little longer."

Is that supposed to mean you wanted to hear my death scream.

"You're sick. If you see me moaning, wake me up dammit. What, you enjoy seeing people suffer? Do you get turned on by the panting of men?"

"Mmmm, it depends, but yours, *Arika*, was quite the treat, you know? I don't know what happened to you, but it was a disconnected and interesting jumble of somniloquy. Oh, but that demonstration of your shameless and wonderful true colors was more than appetizing enough."

The punk then thanks me for the meal and smiles happily.

“_____”

...Oh snap. I just had to get charmed by that. I don't want to admit it, but it's attractive. It's the ultimate smile. If you're a man, you can't resist it. The truth is I hate the guy, but I love his smile. One day, this dilemma must be resolved.

“...Sigh, oh yeah, what a riot. Gee, depending on how I think about it, I've been raped for two hours? You sadistic shit and your twisted denial play. You'd better give me compensation if you don't want to get sued.”

Two hour rest so going by the love hotel conversion rate, that's 5000 yen.Wait, is 5000 yen for two hours worth of human dignity expensive or cheap? I guess it's expensive? Not really something you could put a price on.

“I should be the one saying that. *Arika*, your day hours are running on my money. I can use it however I want, and you, you're obligated to meet the expectations of me, the employer. But even then, you won't talk to me, so naturally, I do have the right to pass time analyzing your sleep talk.”

He humphs and turns away his face looking disgruntled.

How to pass time. That was the predicament of the life of Karyou *Kaie*. He can't leave this room. No, he can't even get up from the bed without help.

There's a simple reason for that. All of *Kaie's* limbs are artificial. God is cruel. After all, he not only gave *Kaie* a face that couldn't be any prettier, he gave him a body that couldn't be any more restricting. If I became an evil robot by losing only my left arm, then limbless *Kaie* is the leader of the forces of darkness.

My job is to attach his prosthetics in the morning and take them off in the evening. I'm paying for 80% of my living expenses with this. I mean it's great that it's a job that even a one-armed guy could do, but something about this feels unhealthy and wrong. Taking money from a kid that can't move by himself? That's worse than being a gigolo.

Then again, this leader of the forces of darkness was born in a wealthy family and him paying me was something of a pastime to him, apparently. *Kaie* himself isn't going to have any problems with any of the basic necessities for the rest of his life, plus he's got prosthetics that fit him perfectly. As long as he wears them, he can do most things. On the first day of work, he just leisurely walked to the bathroom with his prosthetic legs. Yep, that's *Kaie*-chan, the rich kid with the awesome prosthetics, but performance and comfort are two different things. Seems that no matter what, prosthetics just don't go well with *Kaie*, so most of the time he's lying on the bed like he is now.

Yeah, prosthetics are at any rate, stifling and painful. *Kaie* only has his left leg and right arm on at the moment, probably because he's not in good shape today. Meaning that——

I probe the corner of the room....found it. The black dog's crouching at the corner of the room. Has the appearance of a monster from a picture book. With no eyes at birth, the black dog will never feel light even once in its life.

But don't underestimate it. When that dog hunts, it hunts borrowing human eyes——

"*Arika*...? Oh wow, are you really all right? Your face is a mess. Why don't you have a drink and relax a bit?"

"No, my face isn't a damn mess. I'm fine. No need to worry. And no, I'm not interested in a water-less and beer-less kiddie fridge."

"Then, how about eating something? You're hungry aren't you?"

"Might just be me, but isn't that logic broken? What good is eating going to do when I feel sick? You're going to be charging me too, am I right?"

“Why, of course. I’d deduct it from your salary.”

“See! That’s bully, ice man, scrooge, overlord-class servant oppression. No thanks, besides, it’s only for the afternoon. I’ll be better once its night, so leave me alone for a while.”

I wave my hand at him to shoo him off.

Whoops. *Kaie* can’t move from the bed so I end up returning to the sofa. The best part of this messed up chamber is how comfortable this sofa is. It’s so comfortable it’s almost unbelievable. I’m confident that I can sleep for three full days straight on this sofa.

“———So I take it that the dream was about the Kizaki job? The exorcism you performed one month ago at night? You didn’t have to hide it.”

Kaie sulks. Your persistence is making me want to sulk.

“....Yeah, but, how the hell did you know?”

“Well you had been shouting out while you were sleeping stuff like, oh, ‘Kizaki, stop!’ and ‘I’ll send your ass straight to the moon!’ For someone that was about to die, *Arika*, you were being rather peculiar, don’t you agree?”

He cackles. That snotty punk. He laughs with a crescent moon grin under the shadow of the canopy. There’s really something seriously rotten with him if he could still sit back and watch my groaning after knowing that much. In the first place, the reason why I got into that mess was largely related to him.

I should have quit. Just because I could make money on it, I wasn’t suited for that work. “I want to live as easily as possible” is Ishizue *Arika*’s policy, his ideal principle, his rebirth slogan.

And I ignored that and dug myself into a grave.

On that night... in that nightmare I don’t want to ever have anything to do with again, I stepped right inside that grave.

The house where there had been a family suicide, a freakish neck-rotating man. The epidemic of demon possession I said I never wanted to see again.



It first became known to the public about 10 years ago, or so they say.

Agonist Disorder, a sudden psychological disorder that's also been described as a receptor crash. It's treated as being one of the modern-day illnesses, such as depression and TKS, but probably the only people who know it by that name are the ones involved.

Anyhow, it refers to those psychologically crippled that are unable to control their own emotions. It's a name with only symptoms and no pathogens, so you might think, y'all don't be inventing some disease when you're just loony. But don't do that. Depression after all is a real mental "illness". Illnesses will infect even a healthy cold-proof body using their bags of tricks. If the stuff in someone's head becomes "off" in comparison with everyone else, it's not because the mind's sick, it's because there is something wrong in the body. Human beings are made up of mystery, wonder, and a solid design schematic. Breakdowns don't occur for no reason.

However, the only people that recognize it as a disease are the experts. The public generally calls those affected by it the "demon possessed." Why? Well, that'd be because they exhibit behavior that'd lead one to conclude they're possessed by demons. Personality transformation and breakdown are only light conditions. Severe cases go from obsessive-compulsive, self-inflicted harm and suicide attempts to discharging of hostility towards surroundings. To get straight to the point, it gives birth to criminals that inflict harm on others based on trivial

emotions.

“But, I mean, that’s not even demon possession, is it? It’s just a flashy, but still normal, disease. Why use some anachronistic word like ‘demon?’”

“Because the words ‘demon possession’ are easier to understand, I guess? Depression just won’t ring a bell for normal people, let alone the ones that actually saw them. But the image of ‘demon possession’ fits easily. People can accept the bizarre utterances that are made if it’s because a demon’s responsible for them. If there’s a demon inside, that’d account for their nearly non-human behavior, too, from their point of view. Still, ego transference to an artificial personality coming from that type of possession state died out a long time ago. I’ll add that the personas that the people in this country wear are generally going to be that of beasts too. Demons are spirits that, well, simply don’t appear in Japan.”

Yeah, demon possession was originally nonsense talk from our pals outside this island. Theirs work on the basis of 1 to 6 billion, with Team God (1) getting the absolute advantage. In turn of the century Japan, demons are a concept that can only live in a religion with just one God.

“Pathetic. If they have to use something, they could have picked Inugami possession². More familiar and more established, that’s my opinion on it.”

“Nah, it might be easy to understand, but it mustn’t feel established. No matter how much faith has died out over here, the Japanese are still Japanese. We’re going to be sensitive to the words ‘beast possession’ in one way or another, but with demon possession, it’s more distant, more game-like. Wouldn’t you think that it’d be both strangely realistic as well as boring if it was only a disease that had already been in this country?”

² Dog spirit possession.

“Ah..... so, what, ‘demon possession’ is more convenient for us?”

“Yes, yes. That’s why I think the demon possession that’s going around now is a modern-day sickness. There is an ending in sight, but since it isn’t coming at all, everybody’s building up a lot of stress. You could fall apart any day, the people around you could break any day – you’d feel secure thinking that way wouldn’t you, that you’re safe because you’re ready for self-ruin? I guess people are numbing themselves with a defensive screen that’s giving them that kind of mistaken thinking. It’s the current fad to become obtuse along with everybody else. The words ‘demon possession’ are just being used by that tide. Just as the name suggests, it’s the perfect sacrifice to lay the blame.”

Self-poisoning, self-generation, self-ruin, huh. Oh, you precocious little punk, if that’s true, then demon possession’s only a phenomenon and not even a sickness. You make it sound like it’ll be replaced by a new fad word after a year. But, the big problem isn’t in the theoretical. It’s that it causes real harm.

Demon possession does exist.

The people that have it really are mentally ill.

And, they are “super humans” like Kizaki that threw away their humanity.

These last few years, the number of abnormal crimes has been increasing. Most of the time, these incidents are passed off as being just another demon possession crime, but among these, only around 100 were processed as crimes by the demon possessed. This doesn’t account for even 10 percent of the total number of abnormal crimes.

“That’s why you mix 10 truths into 100 lies. Do that and both of them become lies.”

Well said. Even if someone has the misfortune of running into an incident like the Kizaki one, since the other 9 are normal “abnormal crimes,” it will be

categorized as a “suspicious but abnormal crime.” The public might be aware of demon possessions, but they’re totally unaware, under the real meaning, of what demon possession is.

A part of the reason why the name demon possession stuck. It isn’t because of the incomprehensible behavior of those afflicted. It is simply because they exerted abilities that humans don’t have. There are things that don’t escape from the realm of delusion, as well as things that are treated on the same level as mental defects. However, there are cases where it crosses that line and becomes “super human.”

Like say, a human that doesn’t die when he rotates his head and, on top of that, hurts other people. But yeah, I suppose it is natural for people to think that’s impossible unless a contract with the devil’s been made.

... Seriously, how damn stupid. In the age where excess civilization supply has ended, what the hell are demons? I don’t buy it. I’ve seen people that can’t be interpreted as being anything else other than people really possessed by demons, and I still can’t buy it. Normal people must not accept these things as real even if they are true. I still can’t acknowledge them and I probably never will for the rest of my life. Even if 100 Kizakis come after me, I will stubbornly laugh them off.

... Still, there is something preventing me from dismissing it as nonsense. There is a reason why I, despite being able to write it off as lies, can’t quash it as false.

The reason——is because the punk in front of me, is not some demon possessed douche, but a real demon.



“Say. What’s the border between real and fake?”

“Hmm? Border?”

“I’m talking about demon possession. The difference between someone that’s really possessed and someone that isn’t, the difference between a normal sickness and an abnormal sickness?”

I recall that incident a month ago at that house three buildings away from mine. The neck cramp I got from sleeping the wrong way aches. Yeah, that was---how’d I finish that anyway?

“Mmmm... you mean whether what’s possessing them is real or not?”

“No, not that. I had enough of the demonology sermon. I don’t care about the truth of the current demon epidemic. I’m asking why people get possessed by demons.”

“Huh? How dull. It should be obvious. Whether real or fake, a demon’s going to possess a particular type of person. Those guys have been fond of the emotionally weak for quite the time.”

“Excuse me? Don’t you have that backwards? Your mind gets sick after you get demon possession. Didn’t you say that demon possession is an illness?”

“Look, if you put real thought to it, you will get it. An epidemic infects people with low immunity, yes? The physically weak or the physically unfit are easily susceptible to external illnesses. If the body works that way, then so does the mind. *Arika*, when it comes down to it, you’re a kind person. I know you can’t tolerate it when the weak are pushed around for being weak, but this is a fact. Demons only possess people that had already been weak.”

He says this with a smug face. What I hate about him is this part. Just quit it with the character beautification.

“What...? You’re saying, demon possession is their own fault? Not even

counting physical build and fitness, people with a fundamental personality weakness are bound to become possessed?”

“Yes, weak people will be hit by demon possession. But that isn’t because they’re emotionally weak, but rather, the ‘environment’ around them has weakened. Even if the heart lies in the inside, it fluctuates according to external factors. Family issues; relationship with the friends, the Other; evaluation of Self in society. If the footing is poisoned, naturally, the person standing on it’ll also be infected. The mind then becomes sickened and that person becomes unable to adapt to normal society. This is an example of the environment not being built by us, but changing us. And taking of advantage of that, the supernatural infests the just-weakened mind.”

“You see, the concept of demons is the affirmation of weakness. They’re using that weakness as a breeding ground, so they’re going to be fostering that weakness with all their might. They’ll completely to destroy the host’s sociality, something they had merely lost sight of. Let’s say that there’s someone who says he can’t continue living without his girlfriend. This is just a preventive measure to deal with their pessimism, but with demon possession, they’ll actually commit suicide. ‘I’m sad so I want to die, but I’m scared of death.’ That’s the balance of a normal person. But these people are different. ‘I’ve had enough of feeling sad, so I have to die.’ There is a total lack of fear of the future. The really scary people are the ones that no longer care about their past and future and can only see ‘the present.’”

“... Can only see the present, huh? If people don’t think about tomorrow, that leaves everything up for grabs. If there’s only a today, then it’s fine to do anything in the present.”

Which would mean dying tomorrow isn’t anything to get all upset about. If

there's anything they're scared of, it's being anything but what they are in the present.

“So while us normal people have hesitations towards dying and anger at living, they're the opposite?”

“Yes, that's right. For people with nothing but the present, it's as if they'd just been born. They'll feel that everything around them is tinged with uncertainty. It's not as if they can't put the brakes on their emotions. People with emotional wounds, people that are liable to be possessed by concepts, are living beings that really can't go on living without a 'rule they judged for themselves.' Emotions won't break them, but they'll destroy themselves just by breaking a delicate rule that holds no meaning to anyone but themselves. It's easy for the supernatural to take hold in a heart on the brink.”

“.....”

The hell. After coming up with that kind of stupid rule, they get possessed by a demon when they break it, then turn into mass-murderers? Give me a break. If you want to die, die by your damn self. Don't take your friends and family with you.

“——Damn stupid. So what it amounts to is the whining of the socially inept? Right, right no bloody way I can figure that out. Like hell am I ever going to understand the feelings of some flake that gets driven into a corner by that kind of garbage.”

Displeased at something, the face reflecting in the mirror twists in hatred. Must have been because of some nasty stench. The black dog comes by me and crouches in content. The dog's getting friendlier with me by the day. Uh oh.

“Haha, of course you wouldn't. That's how normal people think after all. But just hear me out. In this case, you don't blame the weakness of the heart, but you

should think about what made it weak.”

“This is how the stock phrase should be. It won’t be, ”Feel shame in the weakness of your fragile heart!” It’ll be, ”Know the sorrow of the fragility of man!”

Kaie talks as if to pity them. He spreads his hand in exaggeration under the shadow of the canopy ever so courteously. But it’s nothing more than a gesture. He doesn’t possess the natural emotion of being able to feel sorrow.

But, I understood what he was saying in a way. Let’s say. Let’s say, there’s this guy who was hopelessly afraid of tap water and thought he’d die if he drank it. Out of some mistake, he accidentally drinks the tap water and then commits suicide, even though nothing unusual happened to his body.

Saying that’s weak is the vanity of the strong. After all, I don’t have the courage to die just from drinking water. It’s a feeling that the average Joe won’t get, but can’t you say that people that kill themselves for some stupid reason are psychologically strong to the point of madness? But, yeah, still. Nope, the fact is that I can’t even slightly deny that they’re the weaklings of society.



Times passes with even useless banter. Perhaps because sunset is near, the room gradually falls into darkness. This room will become pitch black when the sun sets since there is no electrical illumination. Lovely, the sun and the moon are the only sources of light. How romantic. All the girls’ll squeal in delight. But I’m a guy and not the least bit delighted. I’m starving, too, and it’s just about that time when I begin missing normal illumination.

“Okay, it’s about time for me to go. If I seriously don’t put anything in my stomach, I’ll die.”

My stomach twists and rumbles. Sounds like the gastric juice is dissolving my stomach walls.

“Eh? *Arika*, don’t tell me you haven’t eaten anything since morning?”

“You didn’t see me eating today, did you? And it’s more like I haven’t eaten since last night.”

“Oh wow!? You have to eat. Someone as unhealthy as you shouldn’t be skipping meals. I do have food here by the way..... how about it?”

“No. I am very sorry to say that the food over here doesn’t match my tastes.”

Mainly financially. It’s true what they say about people getting stomach problems from eating food they’re not used to.

“Huh, how rude..... But, now that I take a closer look, you really look pale, don’t you? Could it be that, you’re on a diet? Because, you picked up a beer belly from drinking all that alcohol?”

“None of your business. Look, I simply don’t have money.”

Right, I’m short of money all year long, but lately, things have really gotten bad. This job pays by the month, and damn *Kaie* despises paying in advance or daily. Ahahahahaha, go to hell, rich kid.

“Oh, is that it? If you have no money, just work. I’m fine with you working outside at day as long as you dismount my prosthetics, so why not try?”

“There’s no place that would hire me. One-arm-only, brainless, manual labor? Can you actually imagine that?”

“Yes, I can. There is work that only you can do, *Arika*. Exorcise demon possessions like that time with Kizaki-san. There’d been a bank transfer from Kizaki-san after that hadn’t there?”

“Yeah, but that’d been confiscated by *Mato*-san. Something about not taking money from volunteer work. Still, Kizaki-san’s fortune had already been used up

in repaying his debt and---”

Now I remember. After I exorcised that demon from Kizaki-san, he thanked me, while bemoaning that I should have killed him. And, the affected part of Kizaki-san, who had the most pitiable expression on him in the world, was.....

“————Kaie. Listen, back over there, the dog, it,”

“Yes, yes, about that demon possessed dog killer. My, my, *Arika*’s done his research.”

“Huh? By dog killer you mean, who?”

“Oh? You forgot? All right, this will be the seventh time I explain it to you. Since a month ago, there’s been somebody out there catching and killing dogs and cats. Apparently, that somebody has been removing all the stuff inside, and dumping out the skin on the burnable garbage disposal days. There had been nothing more than rumors in the beginning, but about two weeks ago, somebody saw the culprit and has been ranting about it being demon possession all over the place.”

“————”

I take out the memo pad from my pocket. Checking two weeks ago, the last week of September. Scribbling is the usual “*nothing big.*”

“I don’t know anything about that. But what, dog killing? That’s sort of archaic. There aren’t any stray dogs, even in the back alleys. If there are any, they’d be up in the mountain valleys or out in the country. But hey, did you know this? They say if you kill animals out in the mountains or fields, it’s called *hunting.*”

“No, these aren’t stray dogs, they’re house pets. At first, the dog killer caught

guard dogs, but is now going inside houses and stealing them. Thanks to that, there's been a sharp drop in the pet dog population of Shikura City."

..... Now that he mentions it, that noisy mutt next door was pretty quiet last night.

".....Is that so. So, was he taken under custody?"

"Location is unknown at the moment. The police have also got a search net out, but there hasn't been a full out search yet since the only victims are dogs and cats. But according to witnesses, the dog killer is extremely passive. Seems to be weak and I do think there ought to be a reward from *Mato*-san. *Arika*, will you do it?"

"No. I'm not interested and *Mato*-san will never give me money."

And——even assuming that he is affected by demon possession, it's not as if he's killed anyone yet.

"Well, well. 'Yet,' is it? That's my boy, the ex-patient. Never one to squeeze in predictions."

And he heard me. Friggin' sharp ears.

"Shaddup, be quiet. I don't give a rat's ass about that stupid story. Unfortunately, I don't have any friends that are dogs. As if it's any of my business if a bunch of mutts get killed."

"Wow, you're terrible. You're not going to do anything?"

"Hey, it's not something that us humans should get involved in. Vengeance's gotta be handled by the same species. If you want to catch him, go get Scooby Doo."

"Ugh, you have to be that adverse to it? Oh poo. Now, why are you being more stubborn than usual? With the Kizaki job, you gladly took it up for the money. Hey, *Arika*, could it be that you're hiding something? Like, oh, you being

acquainted with the dog killer?”

It’s a baseless suspicion, but I can’t deny it. As far as I’m concerned, the person I trust the second least in the world is myself, after all.

I check a month worth of memos. After what happened at Kizaki-san’s place, there haven’t been any particularly laughable scribbles.

“Yukio. Eating too much. Go on a diet. Watch out for vinegar.”

And there’s one. The date’s about one week before.

“.....Alas, whatever I wrote is beyond even me.”

Kaie has his finger in his mouth as if he wants me to show it to him, but this secret notebook is off limits to human eyes. Can’t show it to you even if you offer me that mysterious, finger-articulating arm. Nah, I really, really, do want one of those. Enough that I’d sell my soul.

“Well? Do you know the person?”

“I told you, no. Don’t ask stuff about me to me. And no more stupid demon possession talk. If you have to do it, do it like around now when the sun’s out.”

I put away my memo pad. Now then, 30 minutes until sunset. Almost the limit. Let’s finish up today’s job, shall we.



“I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Sent off with the usual stock phrase, I exit the chamber. I shut the door securely, then pass through the narrow stone hallway and walk up the stairs. I

rise up by four meters and open the door at the end, at last returning to the surface.

In the forest. The sun had already fallen and the area was covered in bottomless darkness.

Kaie's underground chamber is in the forest. No, I mean his room is in the chamber beneath the storage tank that is in the forest. The storage tank looked like a castle wall, it being enclosed by walls high enough that I have to look up. At a glance, it's an enormous, 10 square meter cube. It might be a strange object, but it's still an emergency water tank, next to a single tall lamp.

The concrete cube illuminated by the lamp, no matter how I look at it, looked more like a spaceship than a water tank. A sight this bizarre ought to be listed in tourist sightseeing maps, but nobody ever talks about it. It doesn't even seem like the people in the city government know it exists. Maybe the veterans over at the fire department know about it as part of Shikura City trivia, but I doubt that wisdom is going to include knowing there's something underneath the tank. The only ones who know about it are me and *Mato-san*, and well, some victims that have had some troubles due to the possessed.

"..... But really, just what is he?"

I met the owner of the chamber, Karyou *Kaie* two months ago.

Our relationship started when I'd been discharged from the hospital and had been looking for an artificial arm. *Mato-san* gave me an introduction to Karyou *Kaie*, saying that there was a dilettante with rare prosthetics. I hadn't expected much, and *Kaie* agreed to my visit on a mere whim. After that, I didn't get the arm, but he offered me the job of attending to him during the day, and I gave into the smell of money and accepted it.

The day I met him face-to-face, it had been night. I remember the water tank-like chamber of that bright moonlight night.

The first impression was horrible. A left-armless me and a limbless *Kaie*. And thus, the two of us limb-deficient wonders became a team --- not. Our first encounter was anything but that. There was a void of any feelings of kinship. The moment I laid eyes on him, I really felt like vomiting. Don't get involved with him. The creature in front of you is different from anything else you've seen before, or so the boiling of the blood throughout my body was telling me.

He doesn't have any arms or legs, you know? That's painful. Even looking at something painful uses up stamina. This is me, the guy whose new motto in life ever since he was discharged was that "I wanted to live as easily as possible." I didn't want to become friends with someone that would make me tired just by being near me.

"..... But despite that, Arika still came everyday, press period button."
Really, what made me take this job?

A possible reason would be the money, probably. *Kaie's* proposal was appealing. The work was easy and I couldn't complain about the salary. Two hundred thousand yen a month for just attaching and detaching limbs daily is too good to be true. I've been told by my heartless underclassmen that I'm living like a gigolo, but it's true indeed. This neck of mine has got a collar called a salary.



I walked for around 10 minutes and reached the road. Even if it is a forest, it isn't that big. Size is about the same as the grounds of a college. Given one hour, I could circle it.

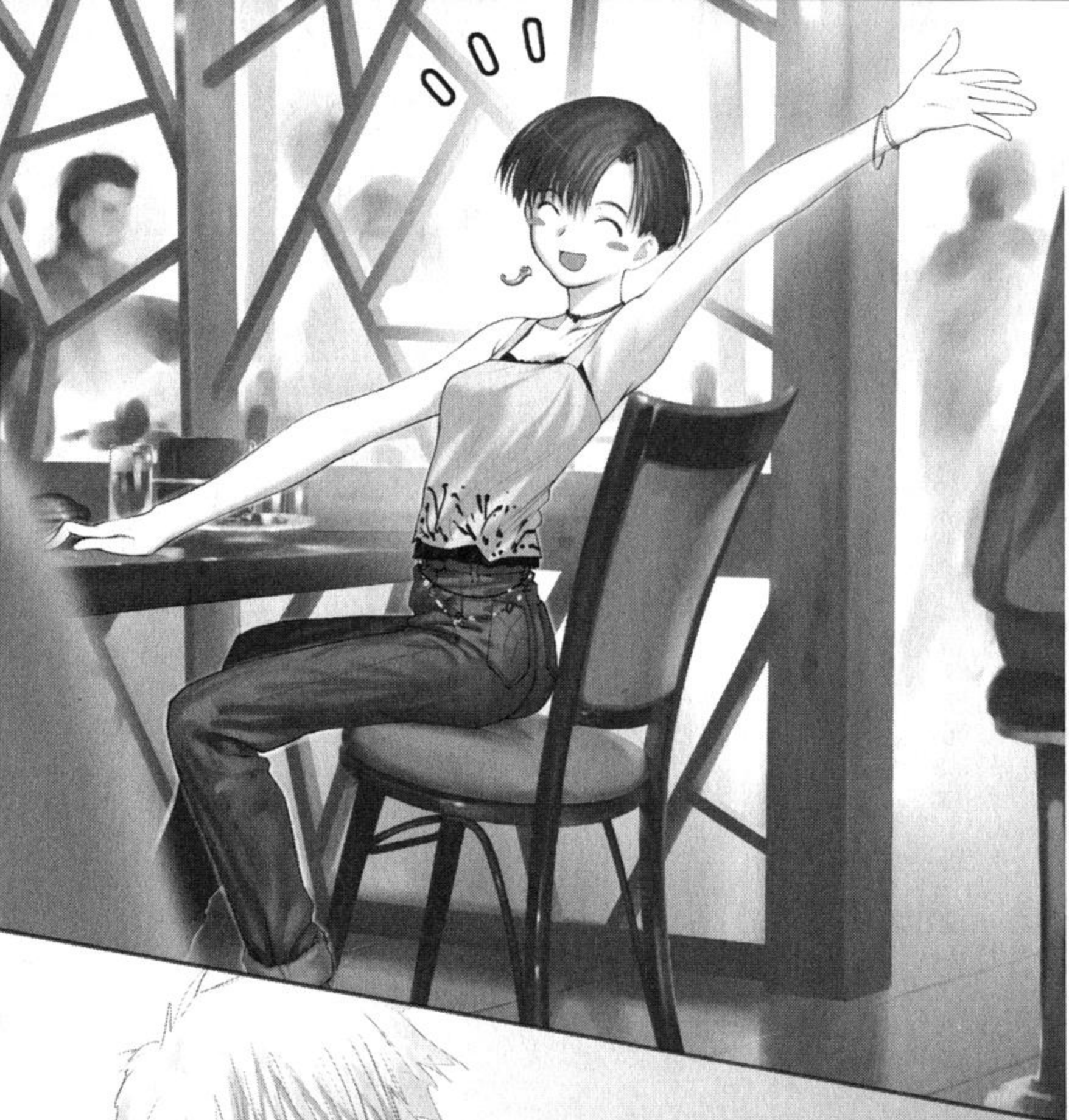
The light of civilization is far even once I'm out of the forest. More than half of town is made up of fields and mountains. No matter how much money gets invested in the station front, it's still a town out in the country, two hours away by commuter express from the urban center. Get five kilometers away from the station and you can be a part of nature, like I am now. Worst environment for modern kids to lock themselves up in their rooms. *Kaie's* room is underground so radio waves and mobile phones won't connect. His only means of communication is a black telephone that lies somewhere in that underground chamber. Oh, speaking of telephones. Check, check.

No mail, no calls. The time is exactly 7pm. Yep. I have perfectly missed the bus. There's a small bus stop on the highway right out from the forest, but the last bus is at 6pm. Five kilometers from here to Shikurazaka, plus two kilometers to get down to the station front, making for one long trip. This is going to hit my empty stomach hard. Work more, city bus.



Since fasting for one full day is actually tough, I went over to the usual pub for grub. And the name of the place, Dining Bar Nebula. Despite serving Italian food, the name is just simply and fundamentally wrong. On the inside, it's as large as a college classroom and is crammed with tables. No other pub can beat its frantic, bustling, and lousy atmosphere. The forty tables are almost all full. Ages go from 16 to over 30 and the pub interior is a clutter of alcohol, cigarettes, and chitchat.

So. In the middle of that chaos, there was this one person that looks at me, the new entry, and instantly raises her ears.



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“——Geh.”

“Ah, Sempai! Yoo-hoo, over here, over here!”

The eyes in the pub converge on me and the idiot.

Enter mysterious creature, who’s buzzing one hand up in the air (without paying heed to the people looking at her), and banging the table with the other. It’s clear she’ll run after me if I try to escape, so I give up and play her game and sit opposite of her.

“Sempai, you’re laaate! Were you at *Kaie*-san’s place agaaain?”

Tsuranui pouts as she puffs up her cheeks. She mentioned the time as if it’s a matter of fact, but we hadn’t even made any damn arrangements to meet.

“One club sandwich. Drink? No. Gimme water, water.”

“And he ignores me without a flinch! Sempai, you’re hurting my feelings when you blatantly ignore me!”

“Okay, okay, don’t cry, don’t cry, because you’ll annoy me. I’m listening. If you were ignorable, I would ignore you and that’s the honest truth.”

I push away *Tsuranui*’s meal, securing my own space from her occupied territory. From the looks of it, she already finished her dinner, and on the table were dishes of completely eaten pasta, salad, and cake. Damn rich as usual, despite being a student.

“*Tsuranui*. I’ll say this in advance, but I’m starving to death. I’ll listen to you once something gets stuffed in my stomach, so please shut up until the food comes.”

I put out my hand to silence *Tsuranui*, who looked like she wanted to say something. If I have to talk to her while I’m hungry, I’m really going to collapse.

“Okaaay. In that case, shall I also order something?”

“Excuuuuse me,” she energetically says to get the attention of the waiters.

貫井^{Mihaya}未早. Appearance: high school student-ish. Gender: female. Commonly known as: *Tsuranui*. An old tie back from high school that I can't get rid of, who's always been like this since way back. To sum her up roughly, she's cheerfully lively and a straightforward fumbler that can't lie. In other words, she's a Maximum Goody Two-Shoes. Seriously, I have trouble dealing with her.



The cheapest dish here is the club sandwich.

In contrast, the most expensive is the undelicious duck liver.

The most profitable items here for the pub are the alcoholic kind, but I'll stick with the food. So.

“Oooh. So ^{Kirisu}霧栖-san has been gone since last week?”

Munchmunch, goes the rich girl, 貫井 Mihaya, age 19, while eating her foie gras. The stereotypical modern kid that lacks self-control, who wants what she wants and eats what she wants to eat. I hope you turn into a pig.

“Yeah, he's out of town. He mentioned something about a daughter of a rich family getting hit by demon possession. He's going all the way down to Nagano to watch over her.”

Though, from what I heard, that demon possession sounded like a farce. Probably her trying to get back at her family or just killing time. It'd drive me nuts having to deal with her, but personally, I'd take the farce.

“Honestly, I also wanted to go, too. But there's this rule about people getting admitted once not being able to go to other prefectures. I get left behind, and Kirisu gets to have fun outside.”

I don't like the idea of getting shot by *Mato*-san either, so I left the good deal to my partner.

"Hey, wait, *Tsuranui*. I don't remember you being a strong drinker?"

Tsuranui drinks down the wine at an unbelievable pace. The decanter looks like it'll soon be empty.

"I'm a strong drinker. Oh, this is no fun, Sempai. Let's stop talking about demon possession! I'll barf if you don't talk about something brighter."

Terrifying. The terrifying part being that she's a monster that'll jump from statement to execution in no more than a few seconds.

If she says she'll throw up, there'll be a hideous sight waiting for me three seconds later.

"Hold it. Do not, throw up, *Tsuranui*. If I'm put on the black list here, the only regular place I'll have left is the nearby family restaurant."

"In that case, please talk about something brighter. Sempai, ever since you left the hospital, you've been talking about nothing but demon possession and have been a real party pooper. Why not talk about, oh, something more appropriate for a man and a woman of around age 20?"

Huh, yes, if I say so myself, I am a party pooper. But, forgive me, *Tsuranui*. The bright topics have been out of stock lately.

"Don't ask for too much. It's not as if the gossip about the loonies is anything new, either. Just what is bothering you?"

"Um..... well, in demon possession, people get taken over by their suppressed emotions, don't they? Then couldn't the same happen to me? I'll get the blues because of your gloomy stories then become demonized."

"When pigs fly."

If she gets demon possession, that'll be the end of the world.

“Ugh. So awful. So immediate. And that’s the one part of you that’s still the same as before, *Arika*-sempai.”

Tsuranui gloomily chows down on her dish. The amount of nutrition she’s taking is five times mine. I hope you turn into a whale.

“...Hey, you sure got some nerve doing that in front of me while I’m settling for a club sandwich. Could this be, oh, signs of obsessive compulsive eating?”

“Huh? Eh, Sempai, you’re hungry?”

“I’m hungry. This is the only thing I’ve gotten to eat today. I don’t even have one cabbage waiting for me at home.”

Ah, she stopped. *Tsuranui* knits her brows and hmms deep in thought.

“I’ll make an educated guess. In other words, you don’t have any money, but you would like to eat a little bit more?”

“Close. I don’t want to eat a little bit more, I want to eat until my stomach’s full.”

“Oh, I see. Mmm, if that’s the case, I’ll think about it depending on your move, Sempai. I’ll pay for your meal, so.....please be my boyfriend!”

“Sorry. I think I’ll just starve to death.”

“Grr, you piss me off! Jeez, why not!? I’m an intelligent and beautiful girl one year younger than you, don’t you know!? It’s a good bargain!”

“Nah, the payment and the work don’t match.”

“And he says that with a straight face.Sigh, dumped again, I am. And as cold as ever, *Arika*-sempai is. But, I’m weak against that part of you. ———Excuuuse me, I’ll take a double float pleaaase!”

Tsuranui buzzes her hand in the air. Soon, a melon float in a bucket-like mug appeared in front of me. Yes, as in the one with two straws, for couples.

“I lost this time, but in honor of the good fight, I’ll pay for your meal. Go on,

go on.”

.....There’s something wrong with this picture. Putting aside *Tsuranui* since she’s already obviously messed up, there’s something wrong with this store for having this on the menu. Actually, just from the name, there was something wrong with this place.

“*Tsuranui*. You know that I’ve got bad chemistry with soft drinks, don’t you? I can’t drink this.”

“Eh? You were?Oh well. In that case, shall we be a bit low-keyish in splitting this jumbo omelet rice?”

“Denied. Just stop with the sharing things between two. It’s not natural to halve one thing into two, you get me? I’ve never been good with that. Splitting and sharing a boiled egg makes me sicker than a bad horror movie.”

“Sigh. But Sempai, we have done this sort of thing before.”

“Whu, seriously?”

Crap. Did I do something in the day again?

“You forgot? Remember my friend ^{Fusou}扶桑? It was that day, the one where the two of us went over to her house, but since she wouldn’t eat the get-well melon we brought for her, we ate it together on the way back. As soon as I realized you had cracked the melon against a utility pole, you so calmly gave me my half without saying a word. Ah, the wonderful days of my youth. The Sempai back then had still been just a little bit more loveable.”

I don’t remember that. It’s completely slipped out of my memory. I close my eyes trying to remember, but what I got was this grainy, gravelly snow.

Being *Tsuranui*’s friend would make her a girl. Get-well present. Visit because she’s sick. Fruit that doesn’t get eaten. I always get the chills with

memories I can't recall.

"Eh, Sempai? You look a little pale?"

"Because I'm not getting enough nutrition. By the way *Tsuranui*, when was that?"

"When? This was around four years ago."

Ah, now that fits. Anything four years ago or earlier wouldn't stick unless it left a big impression. The thought of splitting a melon with her bugs me, but that was back when I was a kid. Back then, it must have been fun to share.

But more importantly, food, food. Since I'm appendagely challenged, my eating pace is slower than other people. *Tsuranui* is drinking her bucket float with a frown. Serves her right. In any case, she'll be quiet until she finishes drinking that.

"Oh, that's right! Look, look, Sempai, I bought a new cell phone!"

Goddamnit.

Unable to endure one minute of silence, she shows her brand-new orange cell phone. This is the fourth one she's switched to this year.

".....Uh huh, I don't care. But what is with this shiny orange? You might want to check to see if there's something wrong with your tastes?"

"Really? I think it stands out, and it's cute, though. Sempai, you don't like it?"

"It's not an easy-to-get-used-to color, isn't it... But, it's the perfect color for you."

"Eh? Sempai, are you praising me?"

"Yeah. You made a practical choice for a change, *Tsuranui*. You'll be able to find it right away when you lose it since it's so flashy."

Her head drops sharply. ...Yeah, well, it does stand out, but I have to admit

it's a charming phone. That kind of junk will turn into precious belonging with one bit of emotional attachment.

"Oh fine, whatever. The goodness of light colors just can't be conveyed to my dark Sempai. Anyway, my phone number has changed, so please register it. There we go, buttons beeped."

"Roger. I'll sort it later. You dumped your old one?"

I ask her while eating. My eyes are affixed on the club, my mind on to the sandwich.

"I still have it, but I cancelled the contract. I, have this dream of making a robot from cell phones, so I'm collecting them. That being the case, if you ever change your cell phone, could you give me your old one? That kind of bittersweetness like, oh, giving away your second button at graduation."

"Yeah, I'll give it to you if I remember."

Me, I don't have any attachment to my cell phone. The actual thing's a used one from four years ago.

"Yay! As a reward, here's a present from *Mihaya*-chan to my boring Sempai. It'll make your dubious sandwich hyper yummy."

Cheered on by that apparently, *Tsuranui* thrusts her orange cell phone out like a spring. From the looks of it, an image from a BBS was being downloaded.

"Are you ready? Okay, here we go!"

Let me see, I say as I look at the tiny liquid crystal display. I'm a sociable guy, truth be told.

The image switches to a movie. There's a familiar looking nighttime road. One second. Dog arfs noisily. Two seconds. Living bloodshot rubber ball-like lump of flesh enters. Three seconds. Head of dog smashed by lump of flesh. Four seconds. Lump of human flesh removes intestines from dog. Five seconds. Movie

freezes. Image is frozen at a sickly scene.

I choked.

“Mmmmm, shocking. Quite the spice, if I say so for my——yowch!?”

“Don’t show me crap like that when I’m eating, you dolt!”

Are you trying to get me to throw up what little nutrition I’m taking in?

“Aww, no way. This doesn’t get the Sempai seal of approval? “

“You have to ask that? You’re too addicted to the web. You’re an amateur and you shouldn’t be poking into anything dangerous. ...So, what gore site did you get that from?”

“I-It’s not gore. You can’t see the important part since it’s covered by the shadow. See, look, Mr. Flesh Lump is too big so you can’t see the dog.”

That’s not the problem. Oh and put away that damn cell phone. I can hear glopping even when the image is frozen.

“Tch. And here I joined a group of jerks thinking it’d help you, Sempai, but not even this worked. Your defenses are too impenetrable for me.”

The orange phone is drawn back reluctantly by *Tsuranui*, an organism shrouded in mystery that dislikes ghost stories but is totally fine with corpses. Yes, perhaps she is a monster?

“But, you’re intrigued, aren’t you? You know this is a picture taken secretly of the new rumored demon possession?”

“Huh? Say what? I don’t get. What do you mean rumored demon possession?”

“The one that’s catching and eating dogs. Sempai, you haven’t heard? That’s strange. It’s a name that’s been appearing in any chat for the past three days. He’s called *Yukio*. You don’t know?”

“No, first time I heard anything. Could you give me some details?”

Tsuranui's explanation was simple. There's been someone out on the streets since one month ago kidnapping and killing dogs. He was witnessed by somebody who then went around saying that the killer was demon possessed. A nickname has already been given, and thus the demon-possessed dog killer was known as *Yukio*.

Take out memo and check. Ah—uh oh. Looks like I met him. I wonder what kind of harassment I'll get from *Mato*-san if she finds out. Brr.

“*Tsuranui*, thanks. This really helped. Next time, I'll appreciate it even more if you talk about this kind of stuff at night like you did today.”

“By this kind, you mean what kind?”

“I'm talking about the kind that involves whether you live or die. And don't meet me in the day. If you don't want me to stand you up, don't phone me, mail me. Anyway, show me that movie one more time.”

“Sure, but you could also download this movie anywhere. You'll have better picture quality if you see it in your own room, Sempai.”

But I still watch. What happens is exactly the same.

“.....Too dark, can't tell much from it. So, someone who just happened to be around the area recorded this while hiding, huh. But wow, it's amazing what advances have been made in cell phones.”

You could say that they're the natural enemies of spontaneous criminal offenders. The materials that could be investigated range from phones to recorded footage, and up to the Internet. The phrase “isolated area” really look like it will go extinct pretty soon.

“No. It seemed that the person who took this movie had been after *Yukio* specifically. Something like, ‘I'll expose the rumored demon possession, so let's all

capture him.”

“.....That’s a unique hobby. No money coming from catching a sick man, though.”

“It’s not that. None of them care about money or justice. They’re just jumping onto the bandwagon because it happens to be the most interesting rumor.”

That’s it? It’s just people ganging up on an easy to understand target?

“Huh. *Tsuranui*, you don’t approve?”

“I hate it. Pleasure without conviction is, kind of, decadent.”

She makes the rare, complicated statement. A believer of justice who despises unprincipled and self-indulged trends. Admirable girl. As a reward, I’ll walk you back home tonight.



“Hey, Sempaaai. So in the end, just what is demon possession? Everybody’s saying that its depression, but do people kill dogs when they get depressed, I wonder? Hm.”

The vapid question echoes in the empty road.

Tsuranui’s apartment lies at the end of the manufacturing district, completely in the opposite direction of where my apartment is. It used to be a women’s dormitory for a bread factory. The rent’s ridiculously cheap.

“Sempai’s a specialist, no? Please gimme your expert medical diagnosis. I, want to know the truth. I asked Dad, but he keeps brushing me off with the line that it’s only a mental disorder.”

She’s either not happy about being ignored by her old man or she doesn’t like irresponsible rumors. *Tsuranui*, who only knows about demon possession from

rumors, is asking me a normal question for a normal person. But, I don't have an answer, either.

"I don't know. Next time, I'll ask someone who might know."

"Oh, *Kaie*-san? Okay, that's okay, but I still want to hear Sempai's opinion. Like, oh, what's the cause for sudden depression."

"Sigh, drunks.Well, yeah. There's stuff like bad atmosphere. Ominous premonitions, feelings like there's something in the dark, etc. That's the material that the demon possession talked about in society is made of."

"Hm, hm, bad atmosphere you say. Like awkward situations or like say murderous intent that's popped up between me and Sempai right now?"

"No. In that case, it's the mood itself that's giving off those vibes. I'm talking about smog, stuff you run into sometimes when you're walking on the street. Like, faint trembles in the air. If you pass by it without noticing it, you'll become irritated or depressed for no reason. Basically, you meaninglessly snap."

".....Huh. So that weird air is what causes demon possession? Um, the sour moments when you and *Kaie*-san fight are different, right?"

"Right. And I'll have you know that every moment between me and him is sour. Also..."

Using the example I gave, the materials for demon possession aren't in that chamber.

The atmosphere there is too beautiful. Because it's disconnected from the outside world, there's no space for pollution to enter. Before, I told him it was beautiful, but *Kaie* denied that while laughing.

"Saying this is beautiful because it's not dirty is dead wrong. This is all there is to my world. It's nothing more than clean, because it doesn't know of filth and ugliness. You don't call that beautiful. It's only emptiness."

.....In other words, humans finally become adults by having both purity and impurity. No matter how beautiful they may be, somebody that only has purity is going to be “alien,” not human.

“Sempai? Your face is looking scary. I didn’t hit a sore spot, did I?”

“No, nothing to do with you. Don’t mind me.”

While pulling the hand of the drunk, I pass by a large scale building.

Still, the more I walk, the more I run into factories. The pack of factories using up the land extravagantly, the privilege of the country, ought to look like a military base up from above.

“———Ah.”

Along the way, I spotted an odd factory. The building had an awfully organic look to it. It was a factory in the process of rotting, in which the tinge of the walls and the rust on the steel fence convey images of death.

“*Tsuranui*. Do you know anything about that factory over there?”

“What? Oh, oh, that’s a poultry plant. It was shut down this spring.”

“A poultry plant in the middle of the manufacturing district? Is that supposed to be a metaphor?”

“No, it really was a poultry plant. The one next to it is a bread factory, and beyond it are fields, so I think it works, environmentally speaking. But it was shut down because of the virus and then became a can factory.”

“A can factory? But isn’t it abandoned, I mean, *really abandoned?*”

“It is abandoned, isn’t it. Anyway, no one’s working there. There had been plans to convert it into a can factory, but the funding went dry eventually, so it was left like that. I heard that the household of the one in charge hung themselves. Now they’re looking for the next lessee.”

“Life’s a bitch. By the way, *Tsuranui*, about that movie. Think you might

know where it was taken? If it was uploaded for fun, there should have been something about where it was taken.”

“Mmmm, that’s true, but... that one was a copy of a copy. I don’t know who took it. Nobody really cares about where that place was. They just treat it as something to laugh at too.”

“Is that so. And you don’t recognize it?”

“Nope. Even though this is Shikura City, it’s still a big place. I don’t go to stores in the alleys that much either. Sempai, have you seen it before?”

Oh, my aching head. If you live around this area, you should as hell be able to notice.



We part ways in front of the apartment. Being a former girl’s dormitory, *Tsuranui’s* apartment was off limits to the male gender. *Tsuranui* is frowning, maybe because the alcohol’s still in her system.

“Are you going to be okay? If you’re feeling sick, go back to your room and throw up.”

“Ugh, I don’t feel sick. It’s been a while since I was sent back home by you Sempai, so I’m so happy I can’t sleep, no, I’m so happy I think I’ll die.”

Didn’t need to worry.

“Yeah, die, die. See you later. Don’t stay up late.”

“O-kay. Let’s eat together tomorrow too!”

I confirm that *Tsuranui* returned to her room, then walk forward. Now then. Before I go back home, I’ll take a little detour.



Mikishiro Water Shikura Plant #2.

That was the name of the abandoned can factory. Though, even though I say abandoned, it hadn't even gotten past the starting line. It was only a wreck that had been abandoned in the preparatory phase. The two building factory is vacant. Kind of like an empty box, and desolate. There isn't a vestige of the time it had been a poultry plant nor any automations for mass producing tin cans.

What's suspicious is the three-story company building. The windows are closed from the inside by veneer boards or something. The stains on the window and the drifting air are utterly rejecting the presence of people. It's as if it was a can packed with something fiendish inside.

The front entrance was locked, but I was able to get inside without difficulty since the back door was broken. Pitch black, tepid atmosphere. I'm used to both, so I proceed inside without a care. Making noise, I walk down the concrete hall. No light is leaking through the seams of the windows because the sky is cloudy. One inch ahead is darkness and I can't even make out the contour of the hallway. But regardless of that and without hesitation, I'm able to walk forward because this building feels familiar to me.

"Tch..... I must have come here during the day."

The further I walk, the filthier the air becomes. There's a terribly rotten stench, probably from water leaking somewhere. This'd be the part where a normal person with a normal imagination would start to become a little scared and hesitate. But, too bad for me, the workings of the stuff inside my head aren't normal.

———A healthy mind resides in a healthy body. It's a stupid phrase, but it's on the mark in a way. At the very least, it's a fact that I can't deny.

Two years ago. When I lost my left arm, I stopped feeling threatened by things. The body and the mind have the same form. Does losing part of the body also cause some emotions to go away? Oddly enough, with the loss of my left arm, a part of my soul had disappeared.

.....Let's say, there's this person that loses his ear in an accident. That guy, who recovered from the accident, but is still earless, then becomes infuriated by the slightest slander. He didn't become pig-headed because of the accident, he lost the emotion of "trust." Could be conceivable. I can't say outright that losing a part of the body doesn't cause the mind to lose anything. But at the very least, Ishizue Arika fits that case.

The bigger the damage to the body, the bigger the damage to the mind. A left arm's worth of damage, resulted in the complete scraping off of my wits, of my ability to "feel threats from external factors." To put it frankly, I've become "fearless." Except, since I'm not missing "fear," stuff that I think is scary is going to be scary. To be accurate, what I lost was an animal instinct, the defensive mechanism against threats.

According to *Kaie*, the advantage of this is that I'll be liked by most animals. This is because my caution's been weakened apparently, but I'm not happy at all if I'm liked by lions, tigers, and bears, oh my. Even if I can't feel threatened, scary stuff is still scary. And, that part in particular makes those animals even more pleased. What the hell.

Beep, beep, beep. The cell phone alarm fades into the darkness.

“Okay. Time’s up. I’m going home.”

A man’s got to know when a man’s got to leave. I stopped by the factory simply because I was curious. People with low caution will act just out of some stupid curiosity. Humans are the type that’ll walk straight into death if it weren’t for signals saying, “Uh oh, stop, this is dangerous.” Since I can’t determine when to pull back without those signals, I have to make definite rules and policies on it. The rule this time was five minutes. I commanded myself to enter and then go back once five minutes passed, no matter what.

As if nothing happened, I exit the building, leaving the factory behind me.

It’s obvious that there will be a new urban legend in Shikura City if I ignore it, but I don’t like the idea of poking into the bush just to get bitten. “So don’t come here,” you might say, but the rules are up because I can’t do that.

“.....Though, it is a ghost-story ridden town after all. So who cares if there’s an extra one or two haunted broiler buildings.”

Uh huh, uh huh. There’s already plenty of disturbing stories here, like, the family massacre in the mansion, the train of human hands running in the subway, the man-eating delusional housing complex. I don’t think I’ll be punished by closing my eyes to one or two potential ghost stories. If there’s anything I’m concerned about, it’s that there’s a ghost spot close to *Tsuranui*? It should be good enough if I warn her first thing in the morning.

I’m going back to my room. I satisfied my sudden curiosity. I don’t want to have anything to do with this demon possession. If I get involved, I’ll have to be responsible and be put face to face with some sin I don’t want to look at.

I have my hands full just taking care of myself. I can’t bear the weight of other people with a sense of justice that’s on par with putting a lid over something

that stinks. I only have one arm. I'm not smart, either. A weakling that can't become strong can only get by, by minding his own business as much as possible.

After all. No one's going to bail me out if I ever get in trouble, right?



What started this in the first place was the fact that there were no artificial arms that matched me. My left arm, which had no external wounds, which had no after effects, which was impossible to analyze, which had even been so far as described to have been “born that way,” rejected all prosthetics.

You heard me right. Not doesn’t work. Rejected.

Not only the ones that were able to grip and hold by broad muscular movements, but even the ones that were only shaped like arms didn’t work. It’s a contradiction, but when an arm is fitted, the left arm *that I had lost*, hurts.

The doctors judged that it was a psychological after effect. Consciously, I was still denying the current me and keeping my eyes away from the reality that I don’t have a left arm. Since putting on an arm means I’ll have to accept that reality, my mind will reject that arm with pain, or some bull like that. Oh I see, my, that is intriguing, but adding a reason doesn’t help. Doesn’t matter whether I defy or reject reality, I’m going to need a prosthetic arm. It doesn’t even have to be functionally good. I can’t relax without both hands.

During my stay, I tested out all the arms in the hospital. Seemingly there had been compatibility issues with the materials, leading to a variety of pain. There were ones that caused sharp pain, vomiting, even ones that made me lose conscious. In any case, there’d been differences with each of them. If that’s how things are going to be, I’ll be patient — and so I persistently searched for one that worked with me, and the last place I reached was Karyou *Kaie’s* underground

chamber. Looking at me, he said oh-so pleasantly,

“Aahh. That arm had been taken by a fake hadn’t it?”

And showed me the *one arm in the world* that matched me.

“Your arm, Ishizue-san, is only missing, but it’s still connected to you. As long as your arm doesn’t disappear, you can’t attach a new one.”

Kaie told me that even if the physical arm is gone, I still have the conceptual one.

“After all, you, don’t have any lingering attachment to your lost left arm, no?”

Those words, that point itself, was the first psychological wound I received since losing my arm. It was true that I didn’t think about getting back my left arm. To me, that left arm had never been there. Which was why—

Even if the physical form is gone, a form that had been *non-existent* from the start won’t change.

“Its sensations are alive. A normal artificial arm, for you, is like wearing clothing on the insides of your body. Of course that would make you so sick as to pass out.”

Yes. Even though the corporeal arm was gone, the sensations, and only them, were still there.

I’m talking about images. This is an extreme way of saying it, but as long as I close my eyes, my brain can perceive my left arm just like it used to, work it, even grab things. ‘Course it’s only a sensory trick. There’ll be times when existences flows into non-existence, but there’s no such thing as non-existence moving existence. The only things non-existent sensations can touch are the similarly non-existent forms. A formless sensation. Because it is non-existent, it cannot touch what exists, but because it is non-existent, it can intermix with the

non-existent. In other words,—

*“But——an imaginary sensation will accept the same imaginary beasts.
How marvelous, Ishizue Arika. That left arm of yours, is the ideal demon—”*

That damn punk, how’d he describe it again....?



The next morning, October 10th. Weather’s cloudy. According to the forecast, it was the same weather as yesterday.

I change and head to the outer forest. The kiddo is actually quite the sleepyhead, so I can get away with showing my face there by around 10 in the morning. The time is before 9 AM, the right time slot for getting there with time to spare, barring any unnecessary trouble.

I put in a call to *Tsuranui* while on the way of getting out of the residential district to head to the outskirts of the city. She doesn’t answer. Still sleeping? *Puhleaze leave a message and love after the beep!* Moron.

“Hello, this is Ishizue. I’m saying this just in case, but ‘bout ‘dat *Yukio*-kun. You have a chronic predisposition for victimization, so don’t get too involved. Also, you sound like a moron so change your damn answerphone.”

Hammering the nail into the coffin of last night’s business, I exited the region’s line of blocks that make up the residential district.

Sea of fields, smooth hills appearing on the horizon, a meaninglessly wide highway with little traffic. The village landscape was as it was in the past, with absolutely no change for twenty years.

“——Geh.”

People incongruent to the scenery detected. Patrol cars: two. Ambulances: one. Bright red Volvo that no person is ever going to lay their hands on, holy moly, that's a 40 Series: one. There's a group of people I don't really want to meet and one person I want to meet but don't want to meet. As a conditioned reflex, I jump aside, off the road into the grass where I watch and watch.

Something must have happened around here. Except, for that to be the case, there's too few people here, and I can't spot any field analyzing silhouettes.

.....Looks like most of the crime scene processing's already been taken care of. They've started to pack their bags too. Now if I hide a little bit longer, maybe they'll go away without notici—, nope, didn't think so.

The lady with her back against the Volvo gives orders to two officers. The two angry mugs that came over here grab me—no questions asked—and drag me over to the front of the Volvo by the arms like I was a little green man being manhandled by the men in black. *Slither, thud*. No respect for human rights.

“Fine work on having him come here voluntarily.”

That's our *Mato*-san. So that was voluntary!

“Yeah, you people can leave. I'll be talking with him.”

The two angry mugged officers saluted to the lady and quickly withdrew. The only ones left were me, the Volvo, and her.

This beauty of an obviously non-policewoman is ^{T o u m a M a t o}戸馬 的. The cold-blooded animal that I'd been under complete supervision of for two years.

“Stop lying down you piece of trash and get the hell up.”

Tomato-san spits out in disgust. This verbal abuse that sent shivers down my back even without being intentionally harmful is still one of the conservative

ones. It could be that she's immune to jokes, so the day I say Tomato-san out loud will be the day I have a bone-chilling torture waiting for me. Thus, that adorable nickname will be tucked in the depths of my heart, so I call her *Mato*-san instead.

"Why, hello. I thought I hid pretty well, but you found me in a jiff. You're sure sharp-eyed in the morning, *Mato*-san."

"Shozai³. You don't get yourself, do you? I can tell apart a one-armed, white-haired punk from even one kilometer away..... Oh for the love of... Don't act suspiciously when there are people around. In your case, one question about your occupation would have landed you in a police cell. If I hadn't done that, no one would have accepted otherwise."

"Oh? You mean you had them haul me here to protect me?"

"Of course. I'm your supervising officer. There is no way I'm going to let myself be called into a police cell because of some idiotic reason. Trash should do as trash does and stay locked up in the damn room. Don't waste my time."

Mato-san is the same as ever. Cool and beautiful. Riding into the crime scene with her own personal red vehicle is particularly stylish. After all, she's a Public Security special agent. You'd have to be a superintendent to voice your opinions to her. As a matter of fact, in Shikura City, she's invincible. Oh, and just to let you know, a superintendent would be the chief of police in Shikura City. *Mato*-san's treated as an assistant inspector within the department where she can boss around policemen just like the way she did a little earlier.

Being like this while still in her twenties, she's already dashing smoothly down Elite Street, but she's extremely unhappy, it seems. *Mato*-san's desire for career advancement is ten times that of a normal person. Convert the normal person into Ishizue Arika numbers, and the calculated result would make her

³ Alternative reading of the characters for Arika. MATO-san calls him this for some reason.

look like a diabolical superwoman a thousand times greater than me. And the true nature of that woman is a sadist that loves tormenting us weaklings.

“——Wipe that insolent expression off your face. It’s disturbing. It feels like I’m being laughed at by an animal at a zoo.”

“Please don’t complain about the way my face is naturally. So what’s the scoop? I’m curious, seeing that this is where I pass by to get to work.”

“My being here means it could be for only one thing, of course. We took into protective custody a patient still in his initial stages. He was being home treated, but he ran out this morning. I received a report from the parents, and this is where I caught him.”

Took into protective custody sounds nice, but the reality is it’s taking the guy by force. Being an officer in a Public Security agency that takes custodianship of people with Agonist Disorder, more commonly known as demon possession, is *Mato-san*’s main profession. The public dubs it the Coffin Department, after demon possession. Modern-day priests who save those inflicted with demon possession. Though, she doesn’t take into account human rights one bit.

“Huh. Busy from the morning, eh, *Mato-san*?”

“Oh, you’ve got that right. This isn’t my damn job, it’s the police’s. That boy only had a normal mental illness, not demon possession.”

She spoke grumpily. Demon possession might be called the new type of depression by the public, but it’s going to be obvious to a person who has seen even one real case of “demon possession,” whether it’s a farce or whether it’s real.

In real demon possession, there’ll be anomalies in a person manifesting severe symptoms that are not only mental, but physical. It’s not a psychological injury. It’s an ailment that appears physically.

The only ones who know this are the people that got involved. The one with

demon possession, the ones attacked by the one with demon possession, and the ones taking the one with demon possession into custody. *Mato*-san is affiliated with the most powerful of the three, the custodians. As far as demon possession goes, she knows way more than me.

“A normal mental illness?Has there been an influx of hoaxes?”

“Yes, there’s been an influx. Thanks to that, I received more unrelated work to plow through. At this rate, it will take me two more years to finish everything. I volunteered for this job to score points since I was under the impression that it was a one year job, but it seems the truth was different from what I heard.”

Mato-san, being the type that likes looking down at the world from a room in a high-rise, doesn’t like working in the field. But, she once confessed when spurred on by alcohol, that because she loves handguns, her dream was to run the director’s office at a shooting range. Scary, seriously.

“In any case, that small fry isn’t important. But more importantly, Shozai, have you heard of the new rumored demon possession?”

“The dog killer? I heard about it last night. Something like catching and eating dogs and cats.”

“_____ “

Ah. She is, kind of observing me with a cold glare in her eyes.

...Yeep. Please, please, don’t find out I’m hiding something.

“Shozai. I’ve said this again and again, but I hate your kind.”

“Well, of course. If you said you liked us, *Mato*-san, you would be the strongest pervert out there.”

“Stop putzing around and listen. What I want to say is that you social underdogs are an eyesore. Do you understand me? The instant you try to pull off a poor excuse of hiding something from me, I’ll have your ass re-administered. You

don't have demon possession, but you have something close. Normally, you shouldn't be able to function in society with your condition. It's easier for you to live inside than outside."

"How rude. I can manage admirably with one arm, thank you. I'm making myself useful to you, aren't I, *Mato-san*?"

"...Hm. If you really aren't hiding or *forgetting* anything, then fine. I am returning to the subject at hand. That dog killer I mentioned is what I'm really after. Like you said, pets are being caught, ripped to pieces, and turned into cuisine right on the spot. By cuisine, I am talking about the type that's eaten while still alive. Here, these are pictures of the crime scene."

She takes out documents from the car and shows them to me without hesitation.

I know I'm only being used, but I'm happy I'm trusted by *Mato-san*. She's hot after all.

.....But, still, these pictures are honestly a bit iffy.

"Er, *Mato-san*. This only looks like barf to me."

"Call it vomit, you idiot..... Yes, I know it's not pleasant to look at, but pass your eyes over everything."

"Ah? Is it just me, or does the floor look like it's been corroded?"

"Yes, it's been corroded. Forensics said it was from powerful stomach acid. Hahahaha, there's nothing these people can't do anymore, right?"

Mmm, well, there was a guy who could rotate his neck 360 degrees. At this point, it's a bit late to be surprised.

".....How~ever, there sure is nothing but vomit. What does this mean?"

"It means exactly what you saw. The demon possessed ate dogs, only to

throw up immediately after.”

“...? Wouldn’t that be because the dogs simply tasted bad?”

“Idiot. Would you keep doing this for one month if the taste was horrible? This person is both eating and vomiting because that’s what this person wants to do. The demon possessed is eating and is fully aware that whatever is eaten will be purged.”

...Eat, vomit. You eat, you still vomit.

I have a feeling I’ve seen a condition like this before.

“...Knowing you, I’m guessing the background check’s been finished by now. The demon possessed’s being called *Yukio* on the Internet, but do you have any definite identification? Oh, and any info on what caused the demon possession?”

“Hm? You already have the name?”

“I heard from *Tsuranui*. So, is there anything?”

“Background check is finished. *Fusou Yukio*. Home is located at Shikura City, Takanodai; has been receiving home treatment since four years ago, but ran away one month ago. No notification from parents. Statement from the mother indicated that she preferred it if her child stayed missing.”

”Huh? Treatment at home being...?”

“I don’t know if it was the cause, but *Fusou Yukio* was anorexic since junior high. Do you need an explanation on anorexia?”

“No thank you. I already know as much as the next person does.”

Anorexia. A modern illness characterized by the inability to take in sustenance due to psychological problems. There’s a tendency for people to think that anorexia is only a sickness where the person “can’t eat,” but a good deal of cases are actually ones where the person “vomits even after eating.”

Initially, because of some psychological reason, the anorexic will purge food.

After a long period of repeating this behavior, the stomach becomes weakened, and because the body becomes habituated to purging, the anorexic will continue to not be able to eat even after the psychological problem is fixed.

Since the anorexic can't take in satisfactory nutrition, he'll become exhausted from simply walking up and down the stairs. What's scary is that the anorexic doesn't realize this. He might look healthy, but his body is going to be constantly feeble. Stamina as well as immunity will both be lowered, and in turn, there will be times when someone might "starve to death" due to a light cold. Anorexia is a potentially life-threatening illness that can't be dealt with alone, and can't be cured without the understanding of the anorexic and his friends and family.

"...Doesn't make sense to me though. *Yukio*-kun's supposed to be fat. *Mato*-san, didn't you see the movie that's been circulated on the net?"

"No, I haven't--- ...Hold on. There's a movie of the dog killer!?"

"There sure is. Pick it up at your local anonymous BBS. You'll be able to see a blob clad only in underpants. Rather greasy and delicious-looking in a sense."

".....I see. It fits. According to forensics, the demon possessed has been eating five times the amount vomited. Approximately 60 kilos consumed per day. Two weeks of that and anyone will turn into a meatball."

60 kilos a day.....! Equivalent of two big dogs, huh? Yep, that'll make you fat. *Mato*-san's also a meat-eater, so she might really be jealous deep down inside.

"However, that feeding frenzy ended seven days ago. Those killings were sensational, you realize. In this one week, there haven't been any reports of dogs being killed. The number of strays has dropped, and the pedigreed domestic ones are inside. Since security's been toughened, it's no longer the case where food can be readily retrieved."

“Yes, well, that’s what happens when you hunt too much. So then, *Yukio*-kun hasn’t been eating for seven days?”

“Yeah. In the worst case, death from an empty stomach could be possible.”

Mato-san’s really worried about him.

I’m a little relieved. Despite what might be said, *Mato*-san’s on the side of justice.

“Phew. So it does matter to you if *Yukio*-kun starves to death?”

“It does. These people are still treated as invalids. If they’re poorly handled, I’ll be the one that takes the blame. Not only that, it’d be a public nuisance if one died while hiding. It’s as nauseating as finding dead roaches behind a wardrobe. If I’m going to kill one, I’d prefer to do it in broad daylight where the mess can be made spot clean.”

Correction. There isn’t a shred of justice in this woman.

“Um, *Mato*-san. I think shooting somebody in broad daylight is going to damage your career.”

“All I have to do is find some other crime. If they kill just one person, they become murderers, not invalids. I can get around it if I’m dealing with a criminal.”

Ah ha ha, you’re scary, *Tomato*-san. ———Who’s the genius that gave her government power and illegal firearms?

“That’s all I have to say on that. Shozai, you’re going to that boy’s place, aren’t you? Ask him for his opinion.”

She shoves the police’s illustrated guide to specially selected body waste and the forensics reports to me. *Mato*-san then goes straight to the Volvo.

“Why don’t you ask yourself? He’ll be delighted to see you.”

He did say there's something rewarding about teasing her. Plus, as far as I'm concerned, it's fun watching *Mato*-san getting harassed by *Kaie*, so I really want her to come with me.

"I have trouble dealing with that boy. He's eerie. The reason why you're able to put up with the atmosphere in that room is because you're fearless. That's the one point about you that I admire. Even when you were in the hospital, you acted the same way to all of the patients."

Engine started. *Mato*-san never pauses.

"Oh, fine. I understand. I'll go all by my lonesome. It's a piece of cake to just ask him, anyhow."

"——Excuse me? Do you really think that I wasted my time here for chitchat? I am telling you to earn half of what you're eating. These people should be kin to you, correct? At the very least, find that dog killing freak's lair before there's a new development."

"Again with the unreasonable demands... The kiddo hasn't eaten anything for one week, yeah?"

"If dogs were the main diet, that would be the case."

"Must be getting irritable."

"If that was me, I'd be starving."

"You mean I'd become the first victim."

"I'm fine with that. If you die, that saves me the trouble of having to crush one of you. The dog killer will become a man killer and a future demon possession candidate will also be disposed of."

She's a monster. A monster tomato has descended on the mortal plane.

"No way. Why do I have to get involved with some demon possessed kid I've never seen before?"

“I’m fine either way. If you won’t do it, I’ll just acquit your little sister of all charges.”

“I’ll definitely take the job.”

Super fast response. Super eager. Super scared shitless. If you let that psychopath out, I’d be a hundred times better off getting offed by the demon possessed kid I’ve never seen before.

“Good. Now, find the dog killer tonight. I know that you actually do have an idea as to where.”

“Geh.”

She saw through me. *Mato*-san clamped her seatbelt on tight, dashingly turned the handle, and zoomed out of the rural landscape at 80kph.



“My, my. So this is the dog killer.”

Kaie sparkles his eyes as he becomes engrossed in reading.

Since I didn’t want to be infected by his enthusiasm, I plopped myself on the sofa and gazed at the ashen ocean. The ocean above was peaceful and luckily for me, that blasted shark wasn’t there.

I hear only the flipping of documents. The only ones in the chamber are me and *Kaie*. His prosthetics are all assembled; all of them are black. If someone that didn’t know any better were here, it’s likely that he would mistake those as just being limbs wrapped in silk.

“Yikes, so this person really is munching on dogs. As a dog lover, I can’t forgive that, no sir. You’re going to die from parasites if you eat dogs!”

He’s extremely pleased. When he cackles like that, even I shiver.

“Incredible, 60 kilograms a day? Wow, wait, wait, *Arika*, did you see this!? One of the investigating officers opened fire! He opened fire you know, opened fire? ‘Due to being in an extreme state of panic upon encountering the suspect, I was unable to make proper judgment’, eh. Amazing, what he saw must have had quite the *inhuman* form.”

“Yeah, read it on the way here. That’s pretty impressive. The fella took five consecutive shots from a .38 caliber S&W. Normally, you’d die from that. Ah, wait. One shot should be more than enough.”

The shooting incident happened one week ago, according to the documents. *Yukio* fled, and hasn’t been seen since. It’s not certain if he was injured or not, but it looks like the reason why he’s been staying quiet since last week was because of the psychological damage of that incident. It’s not a good feeling to be fired at without warning I bet.

“What’s this, what’s this? Note: A piece of metal thought to be a bullet was found at the site.....The bullet was dissolved by a powerful acidic substance, which is thought to be body fluid secreted from the skin of the suspect.....Yikes, this demon possession is like a toad.”

He probably means toad oil. He’s using an old-fashioned metaphor for a kid.

“But this confirms it. The affected site is the stomach, the neo-site is dissolution. The cause isn’t known, but with this much information, that’s good enough. A demon possessed covered with stomach acid throughout the body, eh. If that acid can dissolve pistol bullets, bare hands and blades won’t work either, no. Now, how will she approach this? Nets won’t work too.....Eek, there goes *Mato*-san again. She’s requesting flamethrowers. Ahahaha, she got turned down. Let me see, as a compromise, there are orders to attack the respiratory organs, but neural tranquilizers aren’t very effective on...Ah. I see. Water curing, hm.

There's arrangements for the dispatching of a fire truck too.——This is too precise. *Arika*, is this person really a doctor?"

That's what I want to ask. When I met her at the hospital, she was garbed in a bloody white coat and armed with a chainsaw. Didn't seem like the right time to ask, "Excuse me, are you a doctor?" The first time I met her, she was like someone from an action movie, punching and shooting at my sister with dual pistols.

.....I have to say though that it's ironic how humans are the strongest in the end. However many abnormal crimes the demon possessed may cause, if the cops seriously arm themselves, it's not a mess that can't be suppressed.

".....Mrm, there's also the possibility of *Mato*-san being a superhero. Still, this is pretty cautious for her. Normally, she'd only use her own guns."

"This possession is just that terminal, I suppose. For a 'fake demon' possession, this one's not so shabby. I hate to admit it, but even a real demon can't alter a human this much. Because it's the turn of the century, perhaps. At this rate, fantasy might really lose to reality."

Kaie happily laughs without bothering to hide his black-bladed murderous intent..... Oh, wonderful. Not only *Mato*-san, but now his switch is on. Karyou *Kaie* has a fixation on real and fake, and probably, he's someone that can't tolerate fakes. To this boy whose arms and legs are artificial, fake refers to a sickness in reality, and real are the demons of fantasy.

.....I dwell back on a useless memory. Reality and fantasy. On the night that I first attached his arm, he told me the difference between the two.



Demon possession is a disease.

Its origin is unknown. It is impossible to cure. It could only be thought of as the work of the devil, maddening the mind and altering the body. However, the mechanism behind it, and only the mechanism, had been understood *since the beginning*.

In the human body, there are proteins called receptors. These receptors supposedly absorb ligands released in the synapse gaps to create new information and emotions in the brain.

“I wonder if you’ll understand this. The human body moves by the orders of the brain, but the receptors, you see, are the functions that write the results of those actions into the brain.”

The results of all actions.

If the body is damaged, “I’m hurt,” “I’m scared,” “I hate.”

If the body receives nutritional supplementation, “I like this,” “I’m happy,” “I want more.”

Human beings are organisms that constantly create new emotions. I kind of remember *Kaie* lauding us, saying that it was natural for us to change our nature each day just by waking up.

Receptors are used in processes like cell division up to higher level systems such as vital activity and emotions. In other words, these are the keyholes to the door of development and change. Demon possessed is the general term for those people whose brain receptors have become abnormal.

“People move via feeble electricity and emotions are merely a chemical response. Now wouldn’t you think that this means that the stronger the emotions,

the stronger the electric current? Humans are seemingly digital as well as analog, no, more like, poetic. After all, deep despair and mincing lament does make lightning course through their bodies.”

If a demon is a virus, it grows on human emotions. Extreme emotions, the building up of negative emotions, are the nest that raises demons. A matured virus wrecks havoc onto the system. Fundamentally, ligands bind with receptors to send numerous kinds of information to the brain. But in those with demon possession, powerful chemical reactions force the abnormal secretion of these neurotransmitters, damaging the receptors.

This is similar to the binding of the chemical substances called agonists to receptors. Agonists stimulate the receptors, and at times, fatally, as with neurotoxins. Abnormal secretion of normally harmless neurotransmitters will turn them into agonistic poison, devastating the receptors, and warping the condition of the human body.

What radiate that poison are emotions. To quell what is damaging them, the receptors will newly regulate body functions to solve the problem. They create a function that hadn't existed before, for the sole purpose of resolving the cause which is "I'm in pain".

This is Agonist Disorder. A mental disorder caused by out of control brain cell functions and neurotransmitters.

“Even humans are a product, you know. They’ll exhibit new functions once you add new parts to them. Except---well, see here. Put wings on a lizard and it’ll be a dragon, no? Even if the form of the lizard is the same as before, by having the new part, it will be treated like a different organism.”

A severe case of demon possession alters not only the mind but the body.

There are three factors to demon possession.

The affected site that abnormally secretes the agonists.

The neo-site, the function, borne from that,

And the rampant emotions that had been the cause for the development of the affected area.

In a demon possession where these three factors have appeared, the afflicted is beyond the point of humanity. As in the cases of Kizaki and *Yukio*, these people will no longer be maintaining a human structure. It's as if it's a virus that destroys DNA. When things get that far, it doesn't seem like it has anything to do with demons.

“Yes, that’s right. Immortality, the uberman desire. This is the miracle disease that man has fantasized, a genetic virus that is like a demon trying to approach God. But Arika, you musn’t mistake the order of events. The sickness called demon possession isn’t autonomic. What raises demons are human beings. Demon possession is a secondary tumor that arises only in those with sickened hearts in a sickened environment.

And because of that, it's a disease. Not one that leads to death, but irresponsible, greedy life that leeches off of sickness. It is the cutting edge in epidemics, a symbol of the phenomenon of the corroding individual and the human condition———



“So, what are you going to do, *Arika*? *Mato*-san must have planted some dynamite under you to get you moving, no?”

“Oh, she planted something all right, a jumbo-sized one. She said she’ll let the little sister out if I keep screwing around.”

“Yikes.”

My condolences, prays *Kaie* silently. The silent prayer isn’t funny, so stop it.

“Despite that, you really aren’t enthused at all. Yesterday, your position was that it wasn’t your business, too. You’re the one that took matters into your own hands when it was with Kizaki-san.”

I don’t really understand it myself. It’s just that I had the vague feeling that this case was different from what I encountered up until now.

“Ah, I get it. So, is that it? You’re ultimately just like *Mato*-san. Since no one has been killed yet, you want to look the other way.”

The crescent-shaped mouth grins beneath the shadow of the canopy.

“What? We’re completely different. *Mato*-san’s waiting for a victim to pop up. Me? Unless somebody dies, I—”

Ah. We are the same. I really can’t criticize *Mato*-san, can I?

“No, no, wait, wait. It’s not that simple..... I mean, it’s not as if this guy is evil right? He’s not killing dogs because he hates them. He just wants the stuff inside.”

It’s the motive that’s the problem. Those with demon possession that use hatred, affection, and whatnot as catalysts will misuse their power to commit crimes while in their right mind. On the other hand, those with demon possession that originates from primal emotions will misuse their power for the sole purpose of living. It’s a crime but not one deserving punishment. No, human society won’t

function if punishment is thought about one by one.

“Oh, is that so? In other words, as long as they don’t abuse their powers, they are victims. You’re saying that there’s nothing wrong with just eating to survive. But don’t you think there’s something unusual here, *Arika*? Have you even thought about the reason why this person is eating dogs?”

“Because, he...”

The reason why he’s eating dogs. That’s a no-brainer. *Yukio* can’t get his hands on normal food. I can’t picture him entering a supermarket with that lard of a body, and he probably doesn’t even have the money to purchase them, either.

“Even when the fellow is going out of the way to enter other people’s homes for dognapping? There ought to have been something edible in the refrigerators, no? Why ignore that and eat only dogs?”

“Because...”

The problem isn’t that he can’t get normal food.

He’s no longer interested.

“Yes, that’s how it is. Typical food won’t do anymore. Most of what is available has already been eaten, and the rare cuisine happened to be dogs and cats. *Arika*, do you know any meat stores that handle dog meat?”

“No. I don’t think there’s normally any demand for controversial shit.”

“You see? If the stores don’t have it, the only option is to go out and pick it up yourself. And luckily, dogs and cats are easy to find.”

“Question. Are birds and fish not good enough?”

“It’s not quite that. Rather, there’s no point. The stores have them normally. Fish and bird meat and the like should have been eaten before the demon possession occurred.”

Ah ha. Even I eat them. The fish, I mean.

“Basically, it’s not so much that the only option on the menu is dogs, but he wanted to eat dogs?”

“Yes, yes. Definitely in the experimenting phase. Now then, this is where the problem comes in. What do you think this anorexic, compulsive overeating demon possessed will eat once canines are yesterday’s news?”

He chuckles. He insinuates that this will eventually happen, as if he was a prophet whose predictions of destruction were on the mark.

“_____”

Be it reason or instinct, the fact remains. The behavior of a human possessed by the demonic will lead to monstrous results, in the eyes of society, whether or not there is any ill intent. If the reason why he is eating dogs is only out of “interest,” it’s easy to imagine what will eventually happen. If he wants proteins, this town is overflowing with animals having a bit more bite to them. The population of Shikura City was, what was it, 150,000?

“———He’s not going to eat people, is he?”

“To *Fusou Yukio*, it’s something worth trying out.”

“Meaning that people taste better?”

“Oh?Mmmm, it’s not really a taste issue. Then again, once that happens, that’s the end, I suppose. A murder will get *Mato*-san into the game, and when that person gets serious, the fakes will be filled with bullet holes.”

I raise my heavy body. I wasn’t convinced, but I began to want to check this out while it was still day. It’ll take a little less than one hour by foot to get to the can factory. Just right for killing time.

“I’ll be out for a bit. I will be back by evening.”

“Oh, are you sure? I’ll lend you the right arm if you want.”

“No, don’t need it. She only told me to find out where he’s nesting. She didn’t

ask me to do any demon busting.”

“Well, well. You’ll do things if you’re asked, eh? In that case, why don’t I ask you to do something?”

“Go to sleep, damn punk. I don’t feel a bit of good will inside of you.”



The ocean above switches to an ashen sky.

Freed from the insane chamber, I fill my lungs with the outside air and restart myself.

Looking at the time on the cell phone, I confirmed that it was past 1pm. Which means I talked to *Kaie* for almost two hours. In addition, there’s a message about one missed call on the display. There’s a message from *Tsuranui*. Suppressing an awful premonition, I playback the message.

“Hi Sempai. This is Mihaya. Um, about that movie the other day, I found out where it was. Um, well, when I was going to my part-time job, it suddenly dawned on me, kind of?”

Uh huh. That’s pretty fast for her. Actually, she’s in a subliminal state seven days a week, so of course she’ll figure it out.

“So, so, you see. I skipped class and was waiting around and watching out for him, and then just now I saw Yukio-san. Since you were telling me not to get too involved Sempai, I just gave him food. He looks bulky and scary, but he’s kind of in pain, and oh, I can’t just leave him alone.”

Message ends. Shit. I’m really getting dizzy here. I should had said “don’t get involved at all,” not “don’t get too involved.” This came in one hour ago. Nothing afterwards. I dial *Tsuranui’s* cell phone. No answer. The hopeless tone of dialing

echoes like a refrain.

“_____”

She won't answer no matter how long I do this. I feel like I'm going to crush this phone from gripping on to it too hard. The liquid display cracked. Oh, snap. If I buy a new one, I'll have to give this to *Tsuranui*.

“Ah, she picked it up.”

From dialing-up noise to connection. I'm connected, but there's no response.

——The wordless silence is longer than the dialup.

I can hear pained breathing from the speaker.

Working my normal imaginative ability, I envision what's happening on the other end. Now, just who might be the one currently holding *Tsuranui's* cell phone?

“You're *Yukio*, aren't you?”

The voice that leaked out from me was so cold that even I felt there was something strange about it. No response from him. Just about when I was going give up...

“——SEMPAI, HEEEEELP.”

I heard the sore voice of a woman, and then the phone line was cut.

“Hey.”

I redial. Only the dialup noise reverberates. Whoever's holding *Tsuranui's* phone doesn't intend to pick up. Electric currents coursed throughout my body, and my head became pure white. A semi-conditioned reflex makes me take out my frustration on the wall of the water tank, and I turn back to the underground chamber.



“Oh, did you forget something?”

“Yeah. Let me borrow that arm.”

“You do know that I didn’t ask you to do anything?”

“I had a change of heart. There’s something bad sticking onto my eardrums.”

Kaie’s eyes glitter. It was a regressive and fearless delight, the kind that occurs when finding a long begrudged nemesis.

“How marvelous, *Arika*. People aren’t an absolute, single being like God. Simply waking up will change something hated into something loved. Humans are reborn each second.”

Enough with the praise, give me the arm.

“Here you go. Take good care of it.”

I take the black, plaster-like left arm. Next, I’ll be needing a blade. I want something on the level of a kitchen knife, but there are only fruit knives here. Damn. I’ll settle for borrowing one of these.

“Oh? Why are you bringing a knife? Did you forget that this is somebody that can melt bullets? I doubt blades will work.”

“Self-defense, just in case. All right, I’m going.”

“Okay, see you, *Arika*. It’s been a while since the last stroll. I hope he’ll have fun.”

Beneath the shadow of the canopy, a black creature laughs. Carrying hatred in my right arm, I left the chamber.



Once out on the highway, at the bus stop, I'm greeted by an unfamiliar bus. I'm angry at how well planned this was, but it's a big help so I'll use it. So, from the chartered bus, I call *Mato*-san's cell phone number.

"Hello. This is Ishizue. Yes, I'm calling up about that demon possessed, ah, *Yukio*, right? I'm going to that bastard's hideout, so it'd be terrific if you would send some men there first. It'll take me about 20 minutes to get there, but I want you guys to take the guy in ASAP. What, you can't? You need proof before you can dispatch people? I see. Never mind then."

The only one that'll go by my indefinite information is *Mato*-san. I'm grateful, but surprisingly, she's not that useful. She's an outsider, and there could be factional conflicts within the department.

"What, you'll send a nearby officer over? Ah, that's not a good idea. I guarantee you that your officer is going to be the one dying. Better that I go then. *Mato*-san, where are you now? What, you're eating ice cream at Aqua Line⁴? What the fuck, why the hell are you over there?"

It only gets worse and worse. No matter how much of a speed freak *Mato*-san is, it is going to take her an hour and a half to get from the sea to Shikura City.

"Fine, I'll go first. If something happens to me, rescue me. I will be at the Shikura manufacturing district. Yes, I'm going to send you the address by email, so please, I want you zooming out of there."

I disconnect. The arm, still resting on the floor, waits with longing for its birth.

The bus speeds out of the country landscape 30% over the legal speed limit

——Not what I wanted at all, but now I have a reason why I can't ignore

⁴ A bridge tunnel out in Tokyo Bay. MATO-san is probably at the rest area.

this. Now then, with no mercy and no excuses, shall we embark on our third demon exorcism?



The factory pleasantly greeted my second visit.

Stale air suggesting death. Fading blue pain here and there. An end-of-the-world like, abandoned, derelict building. The one thing different from yesterday is the fact that it's the day, but once inside, nothing's changed.

I enter from the back and move forward into the damp, faint darkness. It's a partial darkness shut in by the veneer boards. I won't need artificial lighting. An apartment without tenants, naked concrete without decoration. In the faint darkness, the dimly visible hall ahead looked like some cave temple.

I'm close to the end of the hall. Lured by the moist stench, I moved forward, and what was there was perfect darkness. No light seeped through because of how tightly the windows are sealed.

Normally, I am supposed to feel fear in this situation, but luckily, I lost the ability to feel threatened along with my left arm. That left arm, as of this moment, is being supplemented by the prosthetic arm.

The arm is only shaped like an arm, and is no different from a mannequin's. Having no movable parts, it's like an arm chopped off from a sculpture. It's perfect only on the outside, an imitation that can't even curve its elbow, let alone the fingers. It doesn't look at all like the animated prosthetic arm that had been attached to *Kaie*. Of course it wouldn't. The blood isn't running into it yet.

I step into the darkness without hesitation. It's dismal, but there's a chance she's still alive. Until I confirm she's still alive, I have to act swiftly, while still in

control of myself.

Ah. An electronic noise rung from my pocket. Must be from *Mato*-san. It'd be reassuring if she really did zoom out of there and arrived here, but nah, not likely.

“Hello, *Mato*-sa—“

I put the cell phone to my ear.

In that instant, something hard was forced against my neck from behind.

◇

Sparkle, sparkle, sparkle. The brain explodes like firecrackers three times. The retinas fry. The consciousness burns out. As the command system is shorted out, the body turns into a simple clump of meat.

——Split-second judgment kept my nearly unconscious consciousness linked. This is a not a good time to black out. Everything might be settled, but there would be no point for me coming here. So I manage to keep my fading consciousness from blowing out like a candle, at a level where I'm practically in la-la land, unable to tell dream from reality.

Crash, thunk.

Sound of collapsing. Electricity streamed into my neck muscles. Enough voltage to clip my consciousness, but thankfully, the amplitude's at one or two. Ten inoperative minutes of simple, nerve-paralyzed despair.

Bang, bang. Bang. Slither.

Grabbed by the ankles, I am dragged. The banging's probably because I'm being pulled up the stairs. No pain is pounding my body because I'm paralyzed. My field of vision is still branded with firecrackers. It won't be returning until the

convergence of the retinas warms up.

Bonk. Slither, slither, slith, splash, splash.

The sound of rubbing against the floor changes softly. My head rolled vertically. I'm being risen. It's a seat. I'm being seated.

Ffffwip, fwip, kreak, fwip.

I am tied by some string-like object. I am getting nothing but bad vibes here. My mind, which could be blown out at any moment, is busy incoherently imaging boneless ham.

Yeah—— it looks I've been chosen for dinner.

◇

My vision returns. The retinas which had lost their focal point slowly begin perceiving the world.

Bang.

“.....ah”

What first crossed my mind was a butcher shop. What came next was a garbage dump scattered with food remains. Then, finally, I understood that I was in the middle of enormous pile of vomit and waste. I am in a room of the conspicuously large building. It probably had been used for storage before. And even after it was abandoned, this seven by seven meter room was used for storage, just as I thought.

Gobble, gob.

Dog corpses hung on the wall. Leftovers of something thrown to the edges of the room were protruding up to the center. The air clung on to my skin like sweet honey, and it felt like I'd be cocooned by it the longer I stay here.

The windows are completely shut— no, there were no windows in the room. If the door had been closed, there would be complete darkness. An airtight space illuminated by blue and white. Procuring electricity from somewhere, countless monitors were flickering on the walls. While humming, they show the scenery of the factory area and the corridor of the first floor.

Gobblegobblegobblegobble.

This is too cinematic. It's a musical trio of bone, guts, and monitors. It's a Braun tube accidentally popping out from the stomach while surgery is being performed. That kind of feeling.

The waste-filled room lightened by the blue-white light of the monitors. In the center of it, an enormous bulk of flesh was wriggling.

Making chomping noises, it was consuming a late lunch. While ripping apart a 50 kilo chunk of meat, it fed.

At a glance, it looked like a swollen tumor with appendages. It couldn't be described in terms of medium build; it was a perfect sphere. Its height was the same as mine, but because of its width, it looked incredibly big. It wore just one strip-like waist cloth. That's understandable. With that kind of body, it's questionable if it'd fit in king size.

“NO, NO, I DON'T WANT TO BECOME FATTER.....!”

connection

disconnection

J the E.

disorder



Gobblegobble.

A closer look reveals that what's hanging on the wall aren't only dogs. There was the dried meat of an animal having legs for bipedal walking and two arms. I can't determine the gender. The meat from the chest was gone and the skin of the face was torn off. What surprised me even more was that the cranium was gone. The cranium's cut cleanly open. What was inside was eaten like pudding. On the floor, there were massive amounts of empty bottles. It's vinegar. That lump of meat apparently put vinegar on it because the pudding didn't have any flavor.

**“.....IE.IWANTTODIE,IWANTTODIE,IWANTTODIE,IWANTTODIEIWAN
TTODIEIWANTTODIEIWANTTODIE.....!”**

While endlessly repeating “I want to die,” it continued to eat, forgetting about me. From the amount left, it should take about two minutes for it to finish eating. I still can't move my body, and, as a bonus, I'm tied down to this chair. I'm bound to the point of sickness that I can't move a muscle. Compared to the meat around me, I'm receiving better treatment. It must be because I'm dessert.

I don't feel any fear. I take that back; this situation does scare even me, despite how numb I am to fear. It's just that my mind is turning white from the thing that's lying by the feet of the flesh blob. Shit. I tried hard to keep myself awake, but it looks like my sanity's going to disappear first.

“Hey.”

I call out. The flesh blob slowly turns.

“HUH—THE, PRIEST.”

The flesh blob suffered just by breathing. Of course it would. The gluttonous rampage warped the workings of the stomach acid, and the food that couldn't be digested pressured the stomach, and those convulsions spread throughout the body. Its breathing stopped, the skin sweated enormously, and its body was assaulted by pain as if it were going to burst.

Whatever, I don't give a shit. First things first, show me a little bit more of that *orange thing by your feet*.

“———Hey. You, ate?”

Fireworks went off by simply speaking. I don't know whether it was from the after effects of the electric current flowing in me, or if it was the emotions sparking inside. My heart circulates blood like a raging horse. I'm high. The left arm which had only been attached to me becomes *linked* to me while I lose rational thought.

“ATE, ATE WHAT.”

“The meat, duh. You're even eating it now.”

The flesh blob resumed eating, as if it remembered something. Completely finishing the 50 kilo meal, it said...

“I DIDN'T EAT IDIDN'TEAT, BECAUSE MY STOMACH ISN'T FULL.....!”

It began flopping towards dessert.

In its hands was a small jig saw. It's pitifully small in comparison to its fat fingers, but it looks like it's good enough for opening up a defenseless person's cranium.

“I'm going to take a guess here. You ate several people with that?”

“YES I ATE. BUT I DIDN'T EAT. IF MY STOMACH WAS FULL I CAN HANDLE IT, BUT IT WON'T BECOME FULL AT ALL. HE SAID I'D BECOME NORMAL IF MY STOMACH WAS FULL. GOD SAID EVERYTHING WOULD

BE FINE IF THE DEMON WENT AWAY.”

Lines I’ve heard somewhere before, and pained breathing.

“I’M SORRY. I DON’T WANT TO EAT ANYMORE, BUT MY STOMACH IS EMPTY AND...”

What I say isn’t reaching it. The flesh blob is only repeating “I’m sorry” again and again. It’s apologizing to me, the eaten, to itself, the eater, and to society, which abhors what it’s doing, while pouring vinegar on me.

“I’M SORRY, I’M SORRY, I’M SORRY.”

Who is benefiting from that apology? It’s not me. By admitting his faults, *Fusou Yukio* is justifying himself. —I’m also a weakling, but.... This guy’s weakness has already dropped off the scale of strong and weak.

Grit. The flesh blob relentlessly holds down my head. The jig saw scrapes the side of my head. *Scrape. Scrape.* I’m paralyzed so I don’t feel pain, but the flesh to the side of my left eye is cut narrowly with each back and forth motion.

“.....!”

The lack of pain makes it scary. If there was a mirror, I might have gone nuts. *Scrape, scrape.* Maybe I just didn’t realize it, but my cranium was being cut into and it’ll only be when I lost my brain that I’ll finally realize that I’ve become brainless.

“IT’S OKAY, IT WON’T HURT. DON’T BE SCARED. I DID THIS A LOT. THE BRAIN DOESN’T FEEL PAIN, SO YOU’LL BE FINE EVEN IF I SCOOP IT WITH MY FINGERS.”

Apparently he’s going by the logic that if he eats from the head, I’ll stop feeling pain. Eaten while alive, huh? I want to pass out and be put out of this misery. But still, I’ll try begging this guy to spare me. I wouldn’t bet on it working, though.

“No, don’t. Please. I don’t want to die.”

I speak mechanically. I regretted it. The instant I said that,

“——*SEMPAI, HEEEEELP*”

The plea that was sticking on my ear drums reverberated in my cranium.

The flesh blob froze, and looking at me cautiously...

“I KNOW. EVERYONE, SAYS THE SAME THING.”

He grins. He happily laughed as if he was a little kid that found a playmate.

“.....What did you say?”

**“EVERYONE, SAYS THAT BEFORE THEY’RE EATEN. IT’S, VERY SAD.
THEY CRY AND BEG ME TO STOP.”**

Scrape, scrape. The saw doesn’t stop. The blood pouring from my head is falling into my left eye. But——I don’t give a damn about that.

**“BUT I CAN’T BECAUSE I’M DIFFERENT. PEOPLE NOT CHOSEN BY
GOD WILL DIE WITHOUT BEING REBORN. I WANTED TO SAVE THEM,
BUT I COULDN’T SAVE THEM, THAT’S WHY IT’S SAD.”**

He says he’s sorry while thinking he’s superior to the people that weren’t saved. He says he’s sorry while affirming his weak self. Then he splashes vinegar on me.

**“I’M SORRY. BUT I’M SICK. IF I DON’T DO THIS I CAN’T STOP
SUFFERING. WHILE YOU STILL DON’T FEEL PAIN——I’LL EAT YOU.”**

The sawing movement accelerates. My mind became indistinct. ——The meals he had until now, I mean people that are psychologically normal, would have been driven insane at this point. However...

“——Shaddup. Don’t you dare enjoy yourself, you freak.”

This was it. The reason I came here wasn’t here anymore. It wasn’t anywhere in this room. There’s no reason for me to understand or pity this flesh blob. There is no longer even an excuse to hold back the hound of the left arm.

“What the hell is this ‘I was chosen by God’ bullshit? Don’t shove the responsibility somewhere else. You weren’t chosen, you’re just moving forward by your own will. You’re so unbearably weak you ran away into demon possession.”

“WHAT.....?”

Some time before, somewhere, I hurled words that were the polar opposite.

You’re sick, so go to a hospital. A priest can’t fix you. Sorry, the one who didn’t know better was me. Like he could actually recover from that. It’s been said again and again. That idiocy can’t be cured.

“WH...YOUR, EYES, THEIR COLOR.”

“Yeah. You see, a bit before this, I met a guy with demon possession just like you. Ah shit. You made me remember him. What the hell is this nonsense about ‘unconscious hell’? That bastard. I’ve had it with this crap about making excuses for your own weaknesses while still using it as a damn shield.

The supernatural possess only the rotten breeding ground. The idea of becoming non-human because of demon possession is nonsense. It’s because they had been weak, that they had holes, that they’d been damaged in the first place, that the demons move in. There’s no one but themselves to hold accountable.

“——Hey, fatso. You didn’t become possessed because you were emotionally weak. You ended up this way only because, from your default specs, the existence of *Fusou Yukio* was weak. This is what you get from not knowing your place in the world. You, somebody that isn’t blessed, that isn’t gifted, went around thinking you were chosen. You wanted to be reborn.”

“WH—WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE.....! YOU CAN’T UNDERSTAND HOW I FEEL! I ONLY WANTED TO STOP SUFFERING, I ONLY WANTED TO START OVER AS A STRONG PERSON BECAUSE I HAD ALWAYS BEEN WEAK.....! WHAT IS WRONG WITH THAT.....!”

“Sorry. People aren’t equal, that’s why we’re equal. You get me? What’s decided is what’s at the top and bottom and not the average. Don’t think that the balance is a scale, weakling. First off—even if a weakling at the bottom of the rung aims high, it’s going to cause trouble to the people around him.”

“I’M NOT WEAK.....! I’M NOT WEAK, I’M STRONG, I’M REALLY STRONG. GOD GAVE ME POWER, I’VE BECOME STRONG.....!”

“That’s not possible. People’s performance has been determined since the moment they were born. There ain’t anybody that moved up from weak to strong. What, what’s that? You say there’s people that managed to get by with blood-oozing effort and determination? That’s because that’s their form of strength. Don’t get the attributes mixed up, pig. You of all people should have learned your lesson, right? That people aren’t able to go back and forth that easily.”

“DO—DON, DO.....!”

Yes, a weakling is going to be a weakling for the rest of his life.

That’s why, for the people who realized they’ll be like this for the rest of their lives, the least they can do is not wish that they want to be saved. That should have been the best pride a weakling could muster. The weak will live, in their own weak way, taking pride in their weakness. Being the same weakling. I couldn’t find any worth in someone that tossed that aside.

“My home is humble, but dear to me, you get. In other words, to feel envy for

others is to scorn yourself. You're non-human scum, even worse than a weakling, that easily sold your own soul to the devil because your price tag was low. Look at the dump around you. This is your last stop. Somebody that's thrown out their humanity once, you know, is not going to find human salvation."

".....UP.....SHUTUPSHUTUPSHUTUPSHUTUP.....! YOU'RE A DOG! YOU'RE NOT A PERSON, YOU'RE NOISY MEAT LIKE A DOG! DON'T LOOK AT ME! DON'T LOOK AT ME AS IF YOU'RE BETTER THAN ME!"

He becomes excited. The saw is flung away.

The man eater grabs my head with its glove-like hand.

**"I'M ONLY LOOKING FOR FOOD, I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING WRONG.....!
I'M ONLY LOOKING FOR FOOD SO THE PAIN WILL GO AWAY. WHY ARE
YOU BEING SO MEAN.....!"**

The veins of his swelling fat arm bulge. *Fusou Yukio*, like he had done with the dogs he has killed up until now, tried to crush my head, then...

"——Because you are the fuck. That ^{killed} ^{one of my own} broke my rule."

Taken by surprise. His chest was crunched by a thing having the same shape as the meat he had killed.



It hits the rotting flesh bulb.

The biting jaw. My left arm, which sprung up against my will, chewed the rope, then ruthlessly rammed the flesh blob. A bullet burst, with a 500 meters to several second velocity, unleashed point-blank. The 200 kilogram lump of flesh was blown away, amusingly, all the way to the wall.

“——, hah.”

Laughter erupts from my entrails. Emotions originate not from the brain but from the heart. After all, my brain's still paralyzed from the electric currents and there's no way for it to work properly. Two minutes, 30 seconds until the brain recovers. My limbs still won't move. But as long as I'm alive, the body is still working. I don't give a shit about the brain. The ligands skewer the receptors in the synapses. At a transmission speed so fast that it's as if it's the one thing in the world surpassing light. Blood rides the capillary highway at 300 kilometers per hour.

“Haha, hahaha, this fucking hurts, ow, ow, ow, ow, this really fucking hurts!”

From the gushing endorphin, cells ignite, nerves writhe, and sensations go berserk. Just as this happened, a guillotine went chop and dropped on my arm. The surface of the left arm which hadn't hurt in the slightest since I lost it was joined together with the “pain” that had been accumulated for two years.

“Haha, hahahahahahahahaha!”

It connects. The severed section fuses, becoming one with the black arm. The bursting blood pours inside the arm like a tsunami. It becomes a rapidly growing bulb. The flow of blood becomes nerves and hold me and the arm together. It's alive. It's alive. It's alive. The mannequin arm is now twitching as if breathing. The lost left arm regains its form and is reborn. Good. Absolutely nothing matters anymore, and yeah, I knew it, the real deal is fucking great! I'm alive, I'm really fucking alive!

“O-KAY. Why don't we finish this up in a jiff, shall we?! Now then, if you have anything to confess, now's the time to be doing it! Spill out all of your grievances and frustrations! Because if you don't, you'll be going to hell, and I'm the one that's going to be bothered if you come knocking!”

I cackle. Crap, this is way too fun. I can't even get up from this chair, but you know, this is really fun?

“A——HA...HA, HA?SO. YOU'RE ALSO, DEMON POSSESSED.”

The flesh blob ponderously rises. Blood is pouring out from the swollen, ripped chest. The bite wound, which was like a diagonal slash made by a katana, was quite remarkable for my bratty left hand.

But. At the same time. The part of my left arm past the elbow was gone.

“BUT, IT'S A WEAK AND SMALL DEMON. IT'S NOT SCARY AT ALL.”

An abnormal smell filled the room. The punching must have excited him, as the flesh blob was sweating all over. That's the stomach acid, huh? He's completely coated with it, so if I'm hit, or I hit him, the one's that going to be melted is me. What's going on with that body?

“BUT, I'M GLAD. MY DEMON IS STRONGER. I'M BETTER THAN YOU.”

He approaches me slowly. I still can't move up from the chair. He is aware of that.

“I'M REALLY HAPPY. BECAUSE—I HAVEN'T EATEN A DEMON POSSESSED YET.”

The flesh blob—*Yukio*, as if remembering something, took out a bottle of vinegar, and was coming to me. He's forgotten about his chest. Wow. That blob really has nothing in his mind except eating!

“YOU SAID SOMETHING BEFORE. THE ONE WHO SHOULD CONFESS ISN'T ME. WE'RE BOTH POSSESSED—I WILL SAVE YOU.”

His gluttoned cheeks melt. Filling stomach acid in the palm of his hands, *Yukio* laughed.

Still, this guy just doesn't learn.

His stomach acid covered arm extends.

His stomach acid melting arm rises.

“EH.....?”

The possessing demon doesn't move when there is sanity and consciousness. For just a few seconds, I force myself to lose the consciousness I worked so hard to maintain. —Now then, Hatred (tentative name)-chan. I kept you waiting. It's time for dinner.



Black out for one instant.

Roaring, the black arm exploded. It scatters on the flesh blob before me as solid matter, rains on it as liquid, and shrouds it as gas.

“E——IE, U, A.....!!!?”

As if on fire, the silhouette of the black dog writhes. It's grotesque howling, incomprehensible to the human ear, shatters the brain instead of the eardrums. All of Ishizue Arika is taken over in an instant by the left arm. It was like the night that he had lost it. The illusion of all the sensations in his bodies dying and he himself being concentrated in the left arm.

“AH.....IT HURTS, IT HURTSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS.....!!!”

He shouts. When I open my eyelids to a voice that was neither screaming nor roaring, I saw the familiar sight of feeding.

This is the same situation as five minutes ago. What's changed is that the eater and the eaten are different.

“AAAAAAA.....!!! WHAT IS THIS, WHAT IS THIS, WHAT IS THIS, WHAT IS THIS.....!!!”

He was being eaten from the feet. No. He was being gulped. The large, one meter black dog pins the flesh blob. The black dog was as thin as seaweed. It sticks itself around the flesh blob, and sounds of grinding come from the parts it's attached to.

“WHY.....!? IT HURTS, IT HURTS, IT HURTS.....! IT'S EATING ME, I'M BEING EATEN.....!”

He's being thinned from the ends of his limbs. The blind dog sniffs the smell of its prey. The flesh blob is completely helpless and sweats tremendously. Under normal circumstances, just its sweat should melt whatever touches it. But——

“WHY! YOU WERE JUST MY FOOD.....!”

How does one kill something that had been formless from the start?

Resistance is useless.

Even if he tries to dissolve it by stomach acid, that thing had already been dissolving. Even if he tries to destroy it by force, that thing had already been crumbling.

In the end, the likes of a demon that can't manifest itself without the form of a man is no better than a somewhat odd-looking human silhouette.

It's because people title these things as “demons” so easily that the definition has been twisted.

It has been said before. That if God is the embodiment of perfection, omnipotence and omniscience, then demons are the phenomenon of absurdity, human knowledge and powerlessness.

“WHY, WHYWHYWHYWHY.....!? THIS IS DIFFERENT, WHY ARE WE TOTALLY DIFFERENT EVEN THOUGH WE'RE BOTH DEMON

POSSESSED.....!"

"Don't lower me to your level. What you have is a disease. And me..."

The demon in the underground chamber speaks.

"An imaginary sensation will accept the same imaginary beasts. How marvelous, Ishizue Arika. That left arm of yours, is the ideal demon—"

"I'm apparently, a real demon controller."

The blind black dog. The imaginary formlessness eating the demon possessed, extending from my left arm. Almost all of *Yukio* has been bitten, but the reality is that the black dog isn't eating flesh. The formless can't kill the formed.

However, the story's different if he's swallowed whole. If the "existent" areas are completely smothered by "nothingness," his position will be the same as "nothing." I am reminded of the cat in quantum theory. *Fusou Yukio*, 90% of whose body has been consumed, is dead without mistake, but as long as 10% still "exists," he should be alive. Or something. In any case, that 10%'s going to be gone in just a matter of time, but...

"NO, HELP, HELP, GOD HELP.....! IT HURTS, WHY DOES THIS HURT SO MUCH, WHY DOES THIS HAVE TO HAPPEN TO ME, ITS NOT MY FAULT, I'M NOT SICK, THIS POSSESSION ISN'T MY FAULT, GOD, I'D BEEN ONLY CHOSEN BY GOD.....!"

Aaah—I've got the nagging feeling that I've heard gibberish like this death scream before in the day.

"My memory's not working right, but, did I meet you before?"

“YES, YES.....! A LONG TIME AGO, A LONG TIME AGO! YOU KEPT COMING TO SEE ME.....!”

Something during the day, huh? Sorry, I’m not going to remember that.

I pool power into my right hand. I’m able to move.

“Uh huh. I’m obliged to provide an answer, I guess.”

The knife is——perfect. I didn’t drop it.

“We can’t do anything about it, but your feelings aren’t going to reach him. Demons and God are hopelessly different. Demons are powerless so they deal with humans, but God doesn’t give a rat’s ass about us. He doesn’t care about faith, and he has no interest in how we indulge ourselves or how we suffer. Of course he wouldn’t; *he’s sufficient all by his lonesome*. That’s what it means to be all-knowing and all-powerful. God won’t save you. Since way back, there’s only been one thing that God’s been saying.”

Yukio, colored in black up to the tip of his nose, looks at me pleadingly.

Gripping the knife, I say my final sentence.

“In other words——‘*You’re pests, so don’t bother me.*’”

“——, a——”

The eyes buried in the meat, look at me in shock.

Before the jaw of the black dog covers the last 10%, I numbly forced down the knife.



Cleaving the meat with one swing, I put away the knife. The room became

quiet. The flesh blob doesn't budge an inch and the blind black dog sniffs around, searching for food. Because it lost its vision, it's looking for its favorite food with its scent sensation. Since there was a chance that it might devour awful-tasting meat, I took out the affected site from the flesh blob using the left arm to give it to the black dog.

"Ow..... Have to be left only with the arm-cutting feeling, eh?I still can't get used to this at all."

At the last moment, I had cut off the left arm. The merged prosthetic arm wouldn't come off me unless I separated it with a bladed object. On the other hand, as long as it's separated, the formlessness will return to its original form.The fact that *Fusou Yukio's* body still exists means that it didn't completely eat him.

As the black dog is absorbed in its supper, I also have something to look for. Using the light of the monitor, I looked around the room, but there was nobody alive other than us.

I pick up the cell phone that had been by the flesh blob's feet. It was a fluorescent orange that stood out even in the thin darkness. It was the one that belonged to her.

"Let's get out of here. You're finished, right?"

It doesn't respond. When I turn my head around, the black dog was gone, and the severed prosthetic arm rolled on the floor. Without reattaching it, I carry it with my right arm.

Three hours until the sun falls. Three hours to go, or only three hours left, huh? It's an honestly dubious waiting time for treasuring and discarding memories.

When I came to, the sun had long fallen. I don't know why, but I'm feeling hopelessly depressed. The time is past 8pm. On top of the table is *Kaie's* black arm. Working through a migraine, I check my memos. I was hoping for a "*nothing big*" scribble, but there hadn't even been a page for today.

"?"

From there, seven pages worth of paper was ripped from the memo pad. I twist my head in wonder, but I don't recall what happened, and more importantly, I'm very hungry. It must be because I haven't eaten anything since the morning. If I assume that the only normal meal I had was yesterday's club sandwich, that means I haven't consumed one full day's worth of nutrition. Not good, not good. Whatever reasons there are, we humans will die if we don't eat.

Wearing the same clothing that I had on since I woke up from my nap, I go to the usual pub. Nebula's crowded to the point of annoyance during dinner time. I shouldn't have come. I turn away to go somewhere else tonight. Except. In the middle of that chaos, was one idiot that was energetically waving her hand.

"Ah, Sempai! Yoo-hoo, over here, over here!"

Oh well. At this point, it's a pain in the ass to change restaurants. I suddenly felt brightened up, so I joined her.

"Sempai, you're laaate! Were you at *Kaie*-san's place agaaain?"

Tsuranui pouts as she puffs up her cheeks. She's saying the same exact thing as last night, but there's absolutely no way that we had a dinner arrangement.

"...? Sempai, why are you staring at my face? Please stop, I'm not wearing makeup today."

“Nah, it just felt like the thing to do. Better question. Why are you alive?”

“What? Why did I die?”

Little bit of silence. We look at each other as if it was it we were a couple having an awkward marriage interview.

“Sorry. I don’t know either. Well, you’re alive, so that’s good enough.”

I order a club sandwich and a cup of water. The strange discord was completely gone and I talk with *Tsuranui* about the usual banter.

“Oh, I forgot! Look, look, Sempai. My new cell phone. This time I went with the concept of vivid tropicality. It’s cute, don’t you think? Like a chameleon.”

Amazing. Didn’t we have the same conversation yesterday?

“Okay, I’ll call you so please register my number—oh? Sempai, did you leave your phone at home?”

“...? No, I should have it with me.”

I put my hand in my pocket. The cell phone I pulled out was orange.

“Oh, that’s my phone! Why are you carrying that, Sempai!?”

“That must be because I picked it up.”

There’s no reason other than that. Since I don’t remember how I picked it up, it was useless trying to guess why.

“Ah. Did you go to the factory after you heard my message? Did you find *Yukio*-san? It’s embarrassing, but I became scared halfway and ran off.”

The migraine again. While I didn’t remember what happened, it felt like dots connected. But I’ll stop digging any further. The pages from the pad were torn out. Three hours ago, I judged that was the right thing to do.

“Huh, Sempai? Your face is looking kind of uncomfortable.”

“I don’t know. People don’t know how they look without mirrors, you know. Anyway, this cell phone.”

I return it, or was about to, but I changed my mind. *Tsuranui* has a new one, and for some reason I lost mine.

“Can I have it? It looks like I lost mine.”

Tsuranui's eyes open wide.

So. From whatever chemical reaction that went off in her brain, her cheeks turn red and she begins tracing a spiral with one hand.

“Oh my, are you that interested in my personal info, Sempai? Eheheh, but, well, since it is you, Sempai, I guess it's okay to show you.”

“Nope, I just reformatted it.”

“Gah, that's fast! Aw, please show some interest!”

She bangs the table. Because of how noisy she is, the eyes of the people around are gathering on us. But, maybe I've been affected by a chemical reaction too, so I'll let her do what she wants tonight.

“Right, so this is mine. I'll pay you later.”

“O-kay. Take good care of it.”

To replace what I lost, I stuff away something that had been lost in my pocket. The unknown weight on my chest lightened by that one cell phone.

———This time, I'll do my best at not losing it.

The junky ones are the ones where the emotional attachment builds up. Plus, now that I'm looking at it closer, this bright color, which somebody can easily find, isn't so bad, either.

3/junk the eater.



That day, was the rare one where I worked at night.

I received a call from *Kaie* about him being busy with some investigation. He oh-so-pleasantly said that I didn't have to come during the day, but to show my face at night. "When the devil did I become your servant," I burned in defiance, but since I am his servant however you look at it, I quietly showed my face.

"And that's the details behind the October 13th demon exorcism of *Fusou Yukio*..... *Arika*, are you listening?"

Does he really have nothing better to do? He had me come here to make me listen to the facts about something I did days ago.

I had heard that the rumored dog killer was taken in, but apparently the one who took him down was me.

Of course, I don't remember this at all. The only stuff I remember about that guy is from the stupid conversation I had with *Tsuranui* and the movie she showed me.

"*Arika*, don't you remember? I can't believe that you don't know anything at all. What happened to your memos and cell phone?"

"Ah, it's completely gone. It seems like I got rid of it without leaving behind a recording medium. So nope, no matter how much you want me to, you can't get

anything off from me.”

“Yipes, you’re the careful one. I can’t ask you, then. Shucks, I really wanted to know how much food and what kind of demon possessed *Fusou Yukio*. Oh, and the reason as to why you didn’t kill anyone this time again.”

Kaie grins, shaking his long hair. —I don’t like those eyes.

It feels as if the blacks of his lightly-pigmented eyes see through a deep layer of me that even I’m not aware of.

“Not a big deal. The fact the other guy isn’t dead is just a matter of the guy not being so tough that I had to kill him. They’re sick people. I’ve got to be gentle.”

“Is that so? So, back over there, you were able to afford to do that. But, *Arika*. That arm is made from my emotions, remember? If you moved that left arm, we have to take it to mean that the matching emotion was put to action. You should have certainly borne ‘hatred’ for *Fusou Yukio*.”

Karyou *Kaie*’s arms and legs. Four black, plaster-like artificial appendages. Despite the fact that I’ve been with him up to this point, I don’t know what they are.

But, he tells me that they’re things that had been formed originally from human emotions. Four limbs made to give Karyou *Kaie* a “human form.”

By losing my left arm, I lost the emotion of feeling “threatened.” An originally complete human body became damaged and an emotion was lost. Then, let’s say hypothetically—hypothetically, that somebody was born in a form without inherent tactile perception. Couldn’t it be possible for that someone to wear a “human form” by paying with those emotions?

For example. Something like, discarding the four emotions making up the foundation of a human being to give each corresponding tactile perception a form—

“It’s really too bad. I was hoping that this would be the time you finally did it, but you ended up saving somebody again. Argh, I am starving you knooow. Perhaps I should go on a rampage, maybeee.”

Tonight, *Kaie’s* wearing both legs and arms. Only me and *Kaie* are inside. Neither the fish swimming in the sky nor the dog lying in the shadows are here.

“.....Hmph. Do whatever the hell you want. And I’ll have you damn know that it wasn’t me saving anybody. I don’t remember what happened, but the reason why I didn’t kill him is for my own sake. I don’t have any other reason to spare him.”

I infer what happened at the past that was no longer my own.

I shouldn’t have felt pity for him. For my own sake, I just didn’t kill him. It’s a zero or one deal. No matter how inhuman he was or how much I didn’t care about him, I didn’t want to damage my “conscience.”

People, if they want to live normally until they die, should keep their sense of guilt to a low. I let the guy go, not because I wanted to spare his life, but because I simply wanted to protect my stability.

“Oooh, I see. You didn’t want to make *Fusou Yukio* atone; you prioritized the life of Ishizue *Arika*, eh? Oh, I really can’t complain anymore after hearing something so adorable.”

Whatever, whatever. This is the number one line that I don’t want to hear from a guy, even worse, a kid younger than me.

“Oh well, then. I suppose I’ll pin my hopes on next time. That said, I’m finished with *Mato-san’s* documents. No point in teasing you any more about this if *Fusou Yukio* is just another demon possessed to you. *Arika*, give this back to *Mato-san*.”

Here you go, he says, as he holds out the envelope.

“To *Mato*-san? Why—”

“Because you’re the one that brought them to me.Oh right. You’ve forgotten that, too. It had been in the day, yep. Then you wouldn’t remember why *Fusou Yukio* ended up that way. An anorexia-caused case... it sure was one deserving of pity.”

“Anorexia.....?”

The dog killer became like that because of anorexia?That’s strange. Wasn’t he unusually fat from the movie *Tsuranui* showed me?

“Oh, I thought you weren’t interested?”

“No, but there’s something bothering me. Let me see that envelope.”

I look over the documents that *Mato*-san supposedly lent out to us.It’s true. It’s presumed that anorexia was the cause. But, if that’s true, doesn’t that contradict the 60 kilogram per day consumption rate? If anorexia’s the cause of the demon possession, he should have become a demon possessed that couldn’t take in food.

“*Kaie*. What is this? How did he turn out like that from anorexia?”

“Why, that’s—— Oh, I get it. *Arika*, you’re getting tripped up over something fundamental. You’re thinking like this, no? *Fusou Yukio*’s diagnosis is wrong. This person is obviously someone possessed by “eating.” Therefore, the cause should be obsessive compulsive overeating. No?”

“Yeah. Abnormal consumption of foods. It can’t be anything other than that.”

“I told you, that’s not it. Obsessive compulsive overeating and anorexia. They’re the exact opposite conditions, but they come from the same psychological factor. You see, *Arika*. They’re both psychological illnesses, prevalent in women, that both originate from the fear of becoming fat.”

Kaie speaks. He says that they’re both sicknesses in which the body can no

longer be controlled by emotions. It's an issue of adding or subtracting, and both anorexia and compulsive overeating are means of weight control that went off course.

Anorexia and bulimia are conditions where fear is learned in eating itself, and the stomach becomes unable to accept food.

Compulsive overeating, however, is what happens when they "couldn't" become thinner, out-of-control stress that gets taken out on food. People who become fatter no matter how hard they try will have this.

Just as anorexics don't see anything wrong with their thin and weakly bodies, the compulsive overeaters, while thinking that they don't want to see their fattened bodies, that they want to die, will continue eating food from that stress.

That's why these illnesses, psychological structures akin to self-destruction, are not contradictory to each other. These are feelings that any human will have. Fear of becoming ugly can't be ignored no matter who it is.

"———Okay, I get it. But, why did they become completely opposite of each other? Even if the source is the same, the methods are completely different. *Fusou Yukio* was anorexic. Why didn't the possessing demon not turn into something that hated eating?"

"Yes, that's the interesting part of this case. *Fusou Yukio* had been anorexic for some time. What do you think, in that case, is the emotion that became the strongest during that long struggle?"

".....Wouldn't it be the fear of becoming fat?"

"Nope, something more simple and fundamental as an organism. You don't know? *Fusou Yukio* hadn't had a satisfactory meal for years, no? If it were you *Arika*, what do you think would bother you?"

“——Starvation. Oh, that’s it. In other words, he...”

“Yes, *Fusou Yukio* was simply starving. The sickness reacted to that emotion and created a ‘gluttonous’ demon possession.”

That’s why he was binge eating. While knowing he’d become fatter the more he ate, *Fusou Yukio*, pushed by starvation, could only continue to gorge food——

“.....Wait. Then, why eat junk like dogs? What’s the connection to starvation? If his stomach’s empty, normal food should have been fine, and don’t tell me that dogs and cats tasted better.”

“Oh, that? I’m saying it’s not about the flavor. The cause was starvation, but *Fusou Yukio’s* objective was different. I told you, yes? That anorexia and compulsive overeating both have the same cause.”

The cause is the same.....? *Kaie* just said it, but the cause for anorexia and compulsive overeating is——

“——Oh.You’ve got to be kidding me. You mean *Yukio’s* been eating dogs and people because——”

“Bingo, *Arika Yukio*, who was afflicted by demon possession because of an empty stomach, could only continue to look for food. An anorexic controlled by hunger. To *Yukio*, who didn’t want to become fat, this was hell. And at the end of that, *Yukio* was taken hold of by a basic delusion that anyone would fall for. That is, if you couldn’t stop, then you find food that you wouldn’t get fat from no matter how much of it you eat.”

It had nothing to do with the taste. More like, no matter how bad it was, to *Yukio*, the ultimate food was the one that couldn’t make him fat. But there’s no such thing as that. At the very least, in the sphere of life that *Fusou Yukio* was in,

it didn't exist.

Because of that, he continued to look for salvation, for food he hadn't eaten yet.

"Are you satisfied? Still, it's not such a rare diet nowadays. Keep your calories down and cool down on the alcohol and late nighters. It can happen to you, too, *Arika*. Nobody wants to be burdened by excess weight. It's important to have a diet that will still allow you to control your body."



Returning the documents to the envelope, I release a large sigh.

Honestly, that wasn't pleasant at all. I don't know who he was, but to go nuts because of that?

"Thanks. Since all my questions are answered, I'm done here."

"What, already? But you just got here, and I don't mind if you hang around longer. Oh, how about staying over for the night? Lately we've only been talking during the day, so why not have the occasional memory-lasting conversation?"

"No way. There's no alcohol here, it's dark, and I already got my money. I'll be partying in a normal restaurant on my payment days."

Plus, I'm not in the mood, and I don't have the stamina to talk to a fully-armed and legged *Kaie*.

"I'm going. If you want to talk about demon possession so much, go grab *Matō*-san. You hawks can get roused up over this together. Oh, and stop getting a powerless little civilian like myself mixed up into this nonsense."

"What are you talking about? You're just like them. Do you really not realize it yet? To the people around you, you are the prime example of a demon

possessed.”

“Goddamn. It’s YOUR left arm isn’t it? I’m only using it. It’s an attachment. I’m not possessed.”

“Nuh uh. What I mean is your condition. You lose everything that happened in the day once it becomes night. You’re unbearable to look at because you’re so pitiful. You’re dying every night, aren’t you?”

“Ah, you meant that. You’re as persistent as everybody else, huh.”

I rise from the sofa and put the envelope between my armpit.

Tonight, the moon is bright. Because the water of the tank has high transparency, the moonlight is reaching me while shimmering in the water.

———Now then. It’s not important, but I got a bad habit I can’t help avoid. I can safely say it’s a bad habit since, while knowing about it myself, I can’t do anything about it.

“Look, why am I pitiful? Depending how you look at it, it isn’t that bad, right? I can completely forget about yesterday’s tab after all.”

Yeah, yeah. Like *Kaie* said. I forget what happens in the day. I completely lose my memory of what happens from the day to the evening, up until night falls.

I can remember in succession what happened at night, but only the events during the day are reset when night comes. Day-to-day memory loss. That’s the current predicament of Ishizue Arika. The after effect of having my left arm eaten by a demon possessed two years ago. According to *Mato*-san, I’m a demon possessed that’s harmless.

The fortunate thing amidst this misfortune is that my personality

development had already been completed long ago. I'm not a kid that can't make judgments of right and wrong, and just losing my day memory at night isn't that big a deal. Basically, I'm getting by, by not making any promises for the following day and leaving all decisions to the night.

That's why I'm keeping my memos to a minimum. Two years worth of memos neverending *nothing bigs*. I don't need to write down all the fine little details. No matter what happens in the day, there's no problem. Since, no matter what happens, there's nothing to leave behind.

"My creed is that I want to live the easy life. Having a body that forgets the stupid stuff suits me fine. It's not your place to be telling me anything."

I turn my back to the light of the moon. It's late. Before the calendar changes, I have to return to the surface quickly.

"I see. That would thin out the melancholy. To have no memory is to have no worries. But, *Arika*? Do you realize that living easily and enjoying life are different?"

Kaie tells me with a voice that would roll a bell. His crystal eyes are tinged in delight and shine like gold.

"You said that your creed is that 'you want to live the easy life,' not 'live the easy life,' yes? What you have isn't a creed, it's a wish. You haven't come to terms with yourself as much as you're pretending to be. With the way you are, you really will be possessed."

"That's stupid. I'm already possessed. Right, oh yeah, that's it. You say this a lot. What's different between a real and fake demon. About that. I found an easier way of telling them apart."

"Oh, and...?"

"The fakes leech off of humans. But the real ones don't. It's been said before,

right? Demons appear in exchange for a *human soul*. In other words, their motto is give and take.”

The presence of grinning in the blue white darkness. That damn punk, he immediately figured out what I wanted to say.

I want his left arm. He wants my left arm. Look at that. Demons, huh? I already made a contract with one a long time ago.

“Later. I’ll come tomorrow.”

“Okay. See you tomorrow, in the day.”

I leave the chamber without turning back.

Once at the surface, the surroundings were completely dark. To make matter worse, the bottom of the ocean was brighter.

Leaving the forest, I walk in the country landscape.

The stars are high, the night is long. People can get by life even with only half a day. And at the moment, I do have one arm and that’s just about right for a broken person.

Heading to town, I pull out an orange cell phone and place a call to the appropriate acquaintance.

“Ah, hello? HARO, *Tsuranui*. You have time?”

Now. Since I’ve got money, why don’t I indulge myself after a days-long absence of food.

/Anorexia bulimia – End



I leave the abandoned building. Probably because breathing the natural air made me relax, I naturally lowered my waist and took a break. Taking out my phone, I replayed my messages one more time.

“Hi Sempai. This is Mihaya. —”

Delete.

“And then just now I saw Yukio-san.”

Delete.

“Um, about that movie the other day, I found out where it was. Um, well, when I was going to my part-time job, it suddenly dawned on me, kind of?”

“But he’s kind of in pain, and, oh, I can’t just leave him alone.”

Delete.

Then, after coming this far, I realized that I didn’t have to go through the call history one by one, and the whole process felt idiotic.

“Take that.”

I smashed the phone against the wall and kicked it again and again. That’s done. Once the sun sets, that’s it. But, it’s not a good idea to leave behind any fuzzy records. If it’s a memory that won’t return, I have to destroy the other memories.

But, with really great momentum, a red car came dashing from the factory door. It’s *Mato*-san’s Volvo. Wow. She actually did zip out of there and get here in no more than an hour.

“Shozai.”

She runs from the car. I’m a little happy since she seems to be somewhat worried. Despite how cruel I might be or how cold the other person is, it feels nice to be concerned for.

“Howdy. You were fast.”

“It looks like I arrived late. You look like a mess, Shozai. And, what is this? This smell. What were you, covered in vinegar?”

That’s the truth actually. But I’m dealing with *Mato*-san, the junk food lover. If I give her a straight answer, she might eat me head first, so I’ll stay quiet.

“——So, the demon possessed is...?”

She probably means if he’s alive, not where he is.

“Lying flat down in the storage room on the third floor. By the way, *Mato*-san, did you eat lunch?”

“Oatmeal and two rib sandwiches. Why?”

“No reason. Just a little sinister question of mine. That’s it for me. Before the police get here, I’ll leave.”

“Yeah, good idea. ——Wait, Shozai. Do you recognize this girl?”

The picture she showed me was a 14, 15 year old girl. The girl, wearing a student uniform all too familiar, was as slim as a dried up tree.

“Hah. Who is this?”

“The demon possessed in this case. Before lunch, I borrowed this from her parents after seeing you.”

“What? That was, a girl?”

“A girl. Fusou Yukio 扶桑 雪緒. She was in the same high school as you. You didn’t know?”

“Nope, not at all.”

“I see. I didn’t think there would be that many coincidences. Good work. Go back home. Depending on the situation, I’ll ask you what happened later.”

Mato-san enters the building after contacting somebody.

Holding the prosthetic arm in one hand, I depart from the factory. But. So that’s it. That was a girl.

If I think about this too deeply, I’ll reach a conclusion I don’t want to consider, so I lock away my memory. Tearing seven pages, I leave no trace of it at all. Except, the words stuck in my eardrums wouldn’t stop ringing.

Three hours until the sun falls. Three more hours, or only three hours remaining, huh?

I remember the conversation we briefly had.

Because I was the same weakling as her, I might have been able to understand her a little better than anyone else.

But there was a pitfall in that. The only ones that can understand weaklings are weaklings. But——because weaklings are weaklings, they don’t have the luxury of being able to save others. Because we were both weak, we couldn’t reach out a hand to each other despite being able to understand the other’s pain.

“——SEMPAI, HEEEEELP.”

Know sorrow, someone had said. But even if I knew it, it didn’t mean anything if it didn’t remain in my heart. On impulse, I thought about writing this with as much detail as time would allow, but I crushed that thought because it was meaningless.

But fine. It’ll be forgotten when it turns night anyway.

/JtheE.end