

空ろの箱と 零のマリア

御影瑛路

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 電撃文庫

Utsuru no Hako to Zero no Maria

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It's not like I forgot. I probably remember where this place is, and I even have dreams in this scenery, like now.

However, I can't remember this scene outside my dreams.

It's not like I forgot. No, I just don't have the means to pull out these memories. There are no opportunities in reality to remember. If I tried, I could surely remember, but I don't grant myself any room to turn around.

After all, the person in front of me does not appear in my everyday life.

"Do you have a wish?"

The face of the man (woman?) that had asked such a question in a calm voice changed its shape fluently to various other faces. My deep psyche, who was creating this dream, couldn't grasp his face. I certainly saw his face, or so I think, but while he seems to resemble just about anyone, he also seems to look completely different from anyone.

I guess I gave him a mediocre, unharmed answer then. So I can't remember anymore how I answered. Anyhow, when he heard my answer, he presented some kind of container to me.

"This is a 'box' that grants any wish."

It looked like a box now that he mentioned it.

I narrowed my eyes and looked at the box. My eyes aren't bad. Nonetheless, I couldn't see the box clearly. There was nothing in it. This fact felt very strange to me. It was like when you hold a sealed cookie box that makes a sound when you shake it, but is empty when you open it.

Then I think I asked him something trifling like 'Why do you want to give me this?'.

"Because you're truly amusing! I can't distinguish you humans by your slight differences. I can't recognize this person as this person. Although I'm so interested in your kind. What irony, don't you think?"

I didn't get what he tried to say, but nodded halfheartedly.

"But I can distinguish you. You might wonder how this could be something special, but it's more than enough to draw my interest!"

I looked at the bottom of the box. Although there was nothing in there, I got attacked by an unpleasant sensation that drew my whole body towards the bottom of it. I immediately stopped looking.

"Any wish can be granted when you use this 'box'. I don't mind any wish. I won't stop you even if your wish ruins all of mankind. I'm merely interested to see what you, or your kind, do wish for."

When I said something to him, he smiled.

"Hehe... No, no. It's not some kind of special power. Humans have the ability to grant wishes just by having clear images to begin with. I'm only able to give this power a little push."

I accepted the box.

Of course I won't remember this scene when I wake up.

But I'll be able to remember clearly how I thought about him. And this impression doesn't change within this dream either.

Somehow, isn't this person——

——disgusting?



1st time

"I am Aya Otonashi. Pleased to meet you."

The transfer student said with a faint smile.

23rd time

"I'm Aya Otonashi. ...Regards."

The transfer student said disinterestedly without putting any emotion into her voice.

1050th time

"I'm Aya Otonashi."

The transfer student uttered boredly and didn't even look at us.

13118th time

I saw the transfer student called Aya Otonashi, whose name I didn't know yet, standing at the platform.

"I'm Aya Otonashi."

The transfer student murmured only this to her classmates - in a low voice as if she didn't even care whether we could understand her. Nevertheless, her voice was very clear.

--Yeah. I already knew her name. Of course I had heard it for the first time now, though.

Everyone held their breath. Not because of her blunt, simple self-introduction which wouldn't even count as greeting. Probably it was simply because she was such a stunning beauty who stood out just by being in the same room.

Everyone waited for her next words.

She opened her mouth.

"Kazuki Hoshino."

"...Huh?"

She called out my name for some reason. The questioning glances of the class concentrated on me. Don't look at me like this, I'm clueless myself.

"I'm here to break you."

She suddenly proclaimed this.

"This is the 13,118th 'School Transfer'. Even I can't help but get irritated after such an amount. So for a change, I'll proclaim war."

She didn't care a bit about the dumbfounded classmates and gazed just at me.

"Kazuki Hoshino. I'll make you surrender. Better present me your most precious thing soon. Resistance is futile. Why, you ask? That's simple. Because I am--"

Aya Otonashi formed a smile and proceeded her sentence.

"--always by your side, no matter how much time passes."

10876th time

It's «March 2». It surely is «March 2» today.

I wonder why I'm affirming that in my head?

...I'm sure it's because the sky's still cloudy, even though it's already March. That's probably it. It is the weather's fault that I'm a bit melancholic, considering that recently, clouds have been hiding the blue sky all the time.

Geez, I wonder when the weather will finally clear up.

I was in the classroom before the lessons start. I was thinking these unfunny things while looking out of the window.

I guess I have such thoughts because I'm feeling unwell. No, my condition isn't bad. It's like always. Just, somehow... I'm uncomfortable. I can't express it very well, but it feels like I'm suddenly the only one without a shadow. It's rather the 'something feels wrong'-kind of 'uncomfortable'.

...odd, I can't make out the reason. There was nothing unusual yesterday, I ate breakfast this morning, I listened to the new album of my favorite artist on the train, and I had a safe 5 in the fortune-telling show I watched by chance.

Well, no use wracking my brain about it; instead, I'll eat an Umaibō. Today's is pork flavor. I take a bite. I really could eat as much as I wanted; I don't get fed up with the taste.

"Again with the Umaibō-? You really can't get enough of them, huh? If you continue eating Umaibō every day, your blood will turn an Umaibō color, you know?"

"...err, and what color is that?"

"I wouldn't know!"

The girl that is carelessly joking with me is my classmate Kokone Kirino. Her brown hair, which is about somewhere between long and semi-long, is bound in a ponytail in the center of a high position on her head. Kokone changes her hair style all the time, but it seems as if she likes the current one. Or at least I have the feeling I only saw this style recently.

This Kokone then arbitrarily occupies the seat beside me and starts doing her make-up while looking in her blue hand mirror and using a tool that I, as man, do not know very well. I wish she'd concentrate on everything like that with such effort, not just on make-up.

"Come to think of it, you have quite a lot blue things, haven't you?"

"Ah yeah, I like blue...ah, right, Kazu-kun! Isn't there something different with me today? Isn't there?"

Kokone says suddenly and looks at me with sparkling eyes.

"Mh...?"

I wonder? There's no way I'd know if you asked me suddenly like this.

"I'll give you a hint! There has been a change at my charm point!"

"Eh?"

I look at her breasts reflexively.

"Whoah, hey! Why my breasts?!"

Well, because you boast everywhere all the time that you finally crossed into D-cup, so I was sure...

"Of course these two eyes of mine are my charm! And anyhow, breasts don't get bigger at once! Or is this your desire?! You obscure perv! You tit maniac!"

"...sorry."

There's no way I'd know such a self-proclaimed charm point, but for now I'll apologize.

"...so?"

Kokone looked straight into my eyes with a glance of expectation. I admit her eyes are big. I get a bit bashful when I realize it.

"...I think your face looks the same as always?"

I tell her that without really looking that much at her face.

"Eh? What? My face looks cute as always, you said?"

"No, I didn't."

"Say it!"

I'm being compelled.

"To tell the truth, I'm using mascara today. Say, how is it? How is it?"

I don't see a change. I don't see any change from yesterday.

".....well, there's no way I could judge such a thing."

I told her in all honesty and failed.

"Such a thing'...you say?!"

I got hit.

"Ouch..."

"Tz! What a boring rascal you are!"

She says in a forced voice, but... aah, she might really be a bit angry. Kokone makes a gesture of spitting at me and goes to the other classmates to show around her mascara-face.

"Haa..."

Now I'm tired. Kokone may be funny, but I can't cope with her temper.

"Done with the lover's quarrel?"

The first thing that enters my view, when I turn around, are the three piercings in the right ear. There's only one person in this school who's styled like this.

"...Daiya. That wasn't particularly a lover's quarrel. Where did you look to come to such a conclusion?"

My friend Daiya Oomine, however, just sneers at my objection. Yeah, he's arrogant as always. Well, but I guess it would be weird if someone like him, who puts on such accessories and doesn't just ignore the school rules but rather provokes them, abased himself.

"But did you really not notice the mascara? Even I could recognize the difference. And I'm absolutely, completely not a bit interested in her."

"...for real?"

They're neighbours and they seem to have been childhood friends since kindergarten. That he's not interested in her is a lie without a doubt. Even so, not noticing something Daiya noticed might be a small problem. After all, he's a person that isn't interested in others and doesn't seem to even look at people.

"...but you know."

I have the feeling she already applied that mascara yesterday.

"I see, I got it, Kazu. So you revealed your inner thoughts to her by telling this bitch 'I am not interested in you'. I agree with you. I'll take the same attitude. But I'll do it more bluntly."

"You malicious chairman! I can hear you clearly!"

Daiya ignores this sharp-eared girl and continues our talk.

"Kazu, to get our topic away from this irrelevant girl: did you know that a transfer student is coming today?"

"A transfer student?"

I'll affirm this again, but it's «March 2» today. Why would someone transfer to here at such a halfway point?

"A transfer student?! No kidding?!"

Kokone, as expected, had heard our talk and raised her voice to ask that.

"Kiri. I am not talking to you. Don't come butting in from there. Ah, but don't come closer either! It's not good for my mental health when that desperately made-up face of yours enters my sight."

"W-What-?! You're one to talk, Daiya! You should soon start thinking of a way to fix your mendacious personality. Maybe it would help to have you hanging upside-down for 24 hours, so that finally some blood gets up to your head and you become able to say something upright?"

These two really both have a nasty tongue... in order to stop them abusing each other, I raised my voice a bit higher and return to the topic.

"A transfer student, right? I think I've heard of it."

Upon these words Daiya shuts his mouth as planned and glares at me.

"...who told you?"

And then he asked this with a serious face.

"Eh? Why do you want to know?"

"Don't answer a question with a question."

"Err... who was it again? Wasn't it you?"

"That's impossible. I heard it just before when I went to the staff room for some business. There shouldn't have been an opportunity to tell you."

"Really?"

"This kind of rumour spreads out immediately. But even this babbler, Kiri, appears to haven't known of it."

It looked to be true, considering her reaction just now. And not just her; no one in the first year's 6-class seemed to have known of it.

"That's why I conclude that the information was hidden until the day of the transfer, which is today. But then, why do you know of it?"

"...err?"

I wonder?

"Well, whatever. But isn't it weird, Kazu? Why do you think someone comes transferring in at such a point? I believe there are some circumstances. For example, how about the daughter of a board chairman who's quite a problem child and, thus, was expelled from the other schools? In that case it would make sense that the information was hidden."

"Daiya, it's not good to get a prejudice about the transfer student by these guesses. I mean she's already in a position where she's distrusted. And everyone is listening to you secretly."

The students, who were really listening secretly to our words, smiled bitterly.

"Ah? Why should I care?"

Uwaa...

The moment I let out a sigh to Daiya's high-handed attitude, the chime rang. My classmates scurried back to their seats.

Kokone, who seat is on the window side, opens the window and leaned out. Apparently she wanted to see the transfer student as soon as possible.

"Oh!"

Seemingly having found a person who looks like a transfer student, Kokone raises her voice. After she let out this 'Oh', she sat down on her seat with a frozen expression, although she had been so cheerful when she had been looking through the window before.

I wonder what's wrong?

Kokone smiles and murmurs 'this is amazing!'. Probably not just me, but everyone wanted to ask what's up, but our homeroom teacher enters the room right then. The silhouette of a girl could be seen beyond the cloudy glass of the door. This has to be the transfer student. Looking around in the classroom, the teacher guessed that everyone was wondering about the person behind the door, and immediately called her.

The silhouette behind the cloudy glass moved.

And then I saw——her.

In an instant——

As if I was pushed off a cliff, the scenery changed at once.

First, I heard a sound. A rasping sound as if the scenery was being erased by getting turned up inside out. Forcedly, violently one scenery after another came thrusting in. Over and over similar sceneries appear. My consciousness is about to be blown away, but then gets pulled back and is forcibly crammed into a little metallic box. Deja vu. Deja vu.

"I am Aya Otonashi." I heard it.

"I'm Aya Otonashi." I heard it.

"I'm Aya Otonashi." Enough, I heard it already!

I reject the giant amount of information that's trying to thrust itself into me. I mean, there's no way this could all fit in. My brain would overload. It can't process it all.

"Ah..."

What,

What incomprehensible things——am I...?

I realized that I'm having incomprehensible thoughts and thus closed my thinking——and return.

Eh? What did I just think?

Having forgotten this, I face again to the front and look at her. I look at the transfer student called Aya Otonashi, whose name I don't know yet.

"I'm Aya Otonashi."

The transfer student murmured only this. In a low voice as if she didn't even care whether we could understand her.

Aya Otonashi gets down from the platform.

Because of her extremely simple self-introduction, the classroom starts to get noisy.

She didn't care a bit about the bewildered classmates and comes walking.

Towards me.

Looking directly into my face.

She sits down naturally at the empty seat beside mine, almost like this seat was prepared for her from the start.

Otonashi-san scowled at me suspiciously when I watched her silently without being able to do anything.

...I guess I should say something.

".....err, pleased to meet you."

Her frown, however, did not change a bit.

"That's all?"

"Eh...?"

"I've asked you, if that was all."

Is there something else? Even if you say so, I can't think of anything. After all this is our first meeting.

But the atmosphere forces me to say something.

".....err, your uniform. Is that uniform from your former school?"

Otonashi-san does not react in any way to my frantic words and just gazes at me.

"...eh, well?"

Seeing my confusion, Otonashi-san let out a sigh for some reason and smiled. A smile as if she was amazed at a shallow-witted child.

"I'll tell you something good, Hoshino."

...eh? But I didn't tell her my name yet?

But this wonder was a mere trifle. Otonashi-san said something to me that made me completely stand still for five seconds.

"Kasumi Mogi is wearing light blue panties today."



Kasumi Mogi's basic style during gymnastics is not a gym uniform but her usual uniform.

Today, she is again watching the boys play soccer and wearing her uniform with an expression invariant like an ornament.

The white legs that extend from within Mogi-san's skirt are so thin, it looks like they could break any moment.

And I was, for some reason, sleeping with my head on this lap of hers.

Ah, yeah. I don't have a clue what's going on, either. While there certainly is a sensation of bliss, I'm not able to enjoy it since I'm desperately stopping my nose bleed by holding a tissue against my nose. It wouldn't end well if I didn't.

I can, by the way, remember how it came to this. When I had lost my ability to concentrate because of Otonashi-san, I got hit by the soccer ball straight in my face and got a nose bleed. Then Mogi-san was worrying over me and, for some reason, let me sleep with my head on her lap.

Mogi-san's legs aren't soft at all, and to be honest, even hurt a bit.

I wonder why she does care for me like this? I look up to Mogi-san but can't tell anything from her expressionless face.

But I'm happy.

Very, very happy.

Otonashi-san's 'panties' utterance.

Of course I was surprised. Not only to this lack of context and this unpredictability. What I mean is, Otonashi-san said 'I'll tell you something good'. So she declared «Kasumi Mogi's» information to be «something good» for me.

My love for Mogi-san has, however, not been busted on to Daiya and Kokone. So there is no way that Otonashi-san, who I met today for the first time, would notice. And even so she said that remark.

".....say, Mogi-san."

"What is?"

Mogi-san answered in a low voice. It's a voice like a little bird, which fit her overall short and delicate appearance.

"Today, say, did Otonashi-san approach you?"

"...the transfer student Otonashi-san? ...no."

"You aren't really acquainted either, right?"

Nogi-san confirms by nodding.

"Did she do something suspicious to you?"

She thinks for a moment and then shakes her head. Her lightly waved hair sways.

"Why do you ask something like this...?"

She inclines her head and asks.

"Ah, no... if there's nothing that's fine."

When I shifted my glance to the sports ground, Otonashi-san stood alone in the center of the schoolyard in a daunting pose, showing neither interest to the ball nor to the girls swarming after the ball. When the ball came casually rolling to the front of her, she kicked it slightly back. ...err, wasn't that person on the rival team?

"Mmhh"

It might be overthinking it to think that she noticed my feelings.

Otonashi-san has quite an impact just by her appearance and attitude. I just read too much into it because I was suddenly told something like this by such a person. A logic everyone can understand.

And yet——why can't I believe it?

Otonashi-san looked at me.

And stayed like this without averting her gaze.

Staring straight in my eyes. She boldly raised the corner of her mouth. Although the lesson had not yet ended, she came walking towards me.

Before I knew it, I stood up. Abandoning the privilege of sleeping on Mogi-san's lap, which was supposed to be the utmost happiness for me. My entire body shuddered. No metaphor; I was really shuddering.

Mogi-san seemed to have noticed Otonashi-san as well, and tensed up in anxiety and stood up like me.

Still with a daring smile, she pointed at me... no, at Mogi-san.

Just then.

A sudden gust blew. It was completely sudden gust. A gust one couldn't possibly foresee.

This sudden gust lifted Mogi-san's skirt.

"~~~~!!"

Mogi-san immediately pushed her skirt down. But just the front of it. I was standing behind her. Right after the gust ended, Mogi-san turned around and looked at me. She was indeed expressionless as always, but her cheeks seemed lightly red to me.

She moved her mouth to "Have you seen them?". No, she might have spoken, but at least I couldn't hear her low voice. I shake my head frantically. I guess, due to my frantic action, it's obvious that I've seen them. But Mogi-san didn't reply with anything and cast her eyes down.

Otonashi-san came instantly to me.

I got a glimpse of her expression.

"Aah——"

Then I grasped the reason why I was trembling like this. I read the meaning that comprised her expression. A sentiment that was not once aimed at me in my life up to now.

——Hostility.

Why? Why is it aimed at someone like me?

Otonashi-san raised the corner of her mouth and scowled at me. While I was just shaking and couldn't move, she put her hand on my shoulder and placed her lips near my ear.

"They were light blue, weren't they?"

Otonashi-san had known it all. My affection towards Mogi-san, that a sudden gust would expose her panties to me, she had known it all.

This statement isn't some kind of joke. This was a——threat to insinuate that she understands me, that she has grasped my way of thinking, that she is ruling me.

"Hoshino, with this you should have remembered, right?"

Otonashi-san observed me while I was petrified. We stayed like this for a few moments, but then she seemed amazed at me, because I didn't reply with anything, and averted her eyes downwards and sighed.

"That it's useless, although I went so far... I see, you're even one level duller today."

She murmured her complaints.

"If you've forgotten, remember now. My name's «Maria»."

...«Maria»? No, err... you're «Aya Otonashi», aren't you?

"...I-Is this your pen name or something?"

"Shut up."

She scowled at me without even trying to hide her irritation.

"Well then. You aren't a challenging rival like this, but I'll act on my own convenience then."

Otonashi-san said that and turned her back to me.

"Ah, wait..."

I accidentally stopped her. She turned around, seeming stressed out. I unintentionally winced at her frown.

I'm not sure. But judging from Otonashi-san's attitude, maybe——

"Could it be that we met in the past?"

Hearing these words, Otonashi-san raised the corner of her mouth.

"Yeah, we were lovers in our previous life. Oh my beloved Hathaway, how miserable your current state! You weren't such a fool back then when you came praising me, the princess of the enemy country."

".....err, eh?"

I was at a loss for words. Otonashi-san seemed satisfied seeing me like that and showed, for the first time today, a smile that actually looked like one.

"I'm joking."



The next day.

I saw Aya Otonashi's corpse.

8946th time

Upon hearing my words Mogi-san's pondered for a while with sorrowful eyes. Then she uttered, looking really uncomfortable, the following words.

"Please wait until tomorrow."

2601st time

"I'm Aya Otonashi."

The transfer student murmured only these words.



"Oh my god! That's intense!"

My friend Haruaki Usui, who's sitting on the seat beside mine, said so in quite a loud voice, although it's still during class, and slapped me vigorously on the back.

Haruaki? You know, it hurts and the glances of my classmates are also quite embarrassing...

Towards the back of the room in the direction Haruaki was looking was the transfer student, Aya Otonashi.

"Our eyes met! That's intense!"

"Well, when you specially turn around to look at her, then it's only natural that your eyes meet."

"Hoshii, you lack manly spirit."

What the...? Manly spirit?

"Anyway, she's just too pretty! She would count as work of art on the world market like this... and then be acknowledged as national treasure. Oh, it's too late for me, my heart has already been stolen... I'll go confess to her."

Fast!!

The chime rang. After we stood up and thanked the teacher, Haruaki went straightforward to Otonashi-san without bothering to sit down.

"Aya Otonashi-san! I fell for you at first sight. I love you!"

Uwaa, he's seriously doing it...

I couldn't hear Otonashi-san's reply but Haruaki's face revealed it right away to me. Ah, no... it wasn't even necessary to look at his face.

Haruaki returned to the front of my seat.

"Absurd... *I* got dumped?"

How could you think you'd succeed... It's scary because you look serious.

"Isn't that natural? Confessing to her all of a sudden will only bother her!"

"Mh, I see your point. Well then, I shall confess again. But this time not all of a sudden! These feelings of mine are bound to get through to her one day!"

On one hand I think this positive thinking is enviable, but on the other hand I'd rather pass on it.

"What pleasant thing are you guys doing there? For me it's pretty good entertainment, but the girls are casting you two disdainful glances."

Daiya joined us and said that.

"Eeh?! Isn't only Haruaki supposed to be disdained?!"

"Nope, you are, too. The girls regard you as birds of a feather."

"Oho, the same bird like me? What a honor! Don't you think, Hoshii?"

A-Anything but this...

"Leaving that aside, Daiyan. Even you can't help wanting to make a move on her, am I right?"

Haruaki poked Daiya with his elbow . The reason that he doesn't fear doing that to Daiya is probably because they're childhood friends, or just because of his consequences-ignoring personality.

Daiya let out a sigh and answered right away.

"Not at all."

"That's impossible! Then who can make your heart beat faster, Daiyan!"

"It doesn't matter whether my heart gets moved or not by Otonashi's beauty. Even if I admit she's beautiful, I wouldn't want to make a move on her."

"Huuh...?"

"Haruaki, you haven't understood anything at all, have you? Well, of course this feeling can't be understood by such a monkey like you who lives by following his instincts and thus would take any girl as long she's got a pretty face."

"What! To begin with, what has instinct to do with attaching importance to the appearance?!"

"Since the appearance of a child is directly related to it becoming prosperous, it's instincual to be attracted to someone with good looks."

"Ooh", "Ooh" Haruaki and I let out breaths of admiration in the same moment. Daiya made a amazed face as if he was shocked that we didn't even know such a thing.

"Ah, I got it, Daiyan! So you're saying that her beauty is so beyond reach that even you can't make a move on her! Inevitable defeat! It's that, right? Like foxes make themself think that 'this grape is sour' when a grape's out of their reach. It's called rationalization. How uncool! That's uncool Daiyan!"

"How much of my talk did you listen to? The heck? ...well, the first half of your statement wasn't necessarily wrong. But for the other half I'll kill you."

"Oho, so you really can't make a move on her."

At last, Daiya punched Haruaki, when he had a triumphant expression. Uwaa, what he endured until now went right into his punches, it looks like...

"It's not 'I can't make a move on her'. It's 'she isn't coming to make a move on me'."

"What's with this conceited wrong guess? Say Hoshii, this guy is getting carried away just because of his good looks, right?"

Haruaki stated without showing any sign of reform.

"It's not like she doesn't make a move because I'm out of reach! Well, although that's also possible, but in her case this doesn't apply."

"Uwaa, he's boldly speaking strange things."

"She's not regarding me as out of reach, and doesn't even do such a classification. In the first place, she's not interested in us. She's not even looking down on us. Like we recognize bugs just as bugs, she recognizes people just as people. That's all. She doesn't care about slight differences like my pretty face or Haruaki's ugly face. Just about like we omit the recognition of the gender of cockroaches. How do you want to make a move on such a girl?"

Even Haruaki seemed overwhelmed by this merciless statement against Otonashi-san and kept silent.

"...Daiya."

Therefore I opened my mouth.

"Looks like you're surprisingly interested in Otonashi-san."

Daiya was lost for words. Ah, that's an extremely rare reaction. But am I not right? Leaving aside whether or not his opinion is correct, he must have observed her to a certain degree to be able to do such an analysis.

"...tze, I have no interest!"

"Oh, you blushed!"

"...hey Kazu. You're going to step into my land mine if you keep going like this. Shall I treat you with a huge spring onion that exceeds your imagination until you suffer from PTSD to an extent that you get nettle rash just by seeing an onion?"

I gathered that Daiya was quite angry, so I tried get away by laughing awkwardly.

Anyhow, Daiya seems to know that he can't get along with Otonashi-san.

"Even you guys with the dumb intuition of an insect will soon take notice of her abnormality."

It sounded just a bit like a poor excuse.

But it wasn't one.

You know, it was exactly as he said.



Right after homeroom ended, Otonashi-san suddenly raised her hand. The class teacher Hokubo-sensei noticed her, but not only did she not care for his consent, she didn't even wait for his answer and stood up and started speaking.

"I'll have everyone of the first year's 6-class do something now."

Otonashi-san didn't care about us being dumbfounded and continued.

"It will take five minutes. Sparing this much time should be no problem, right?"

Nobody replied, but she headed to the platform nevertheless. She drove Hokubo-sensei out of the classroom like it was completely natural, and took his place at the platform. Although this should be an abnormal scene, it felt to me like something very usual. As far as I can see from the reaction of the others, they seem to think so as well.

The classroom was without any commotion; there was just complete silence.

Standing at the platform, Otonashi-san opened her mouth with her gaze pointing straight ahead.

"I will now have you write «a certain thing»."

Otonashi-san once stepped down from the platform and handed something over to the students in the front row. The students that accepted this something from her took one sheet and passed it over to the seat behind them; just like they usually do with handouts that need to be distributed to the whole class.

It arrived at my seat. It was a casual, plain recycled paper with about 10cm long sides.

"When you're done writing, hand it to me please."

"What is this «certain thing»?"

When Kokone asked like this as a representative of the class, Otonashi-san explained herself plainly.

"My name."

With this, the silent classroom finally started to get noisy. Fair enough. I mean, I don't get it. Her name? Everyone knows this. She introduced herself this morning as "Aya Otonashi".

"How stupid!"

Someone exclaimed. There is only one person that could possibly say such a thing to Otonashi-san.

Daiya Oomine.

My classmates held their breath all at once. This is because everyone in this class knows that one mustn't turn Daiya to an enemy.

"Your name is Aya Otonashi. Why do you want us to write that down? Are you so emphatic about having us remember your name?"

Otonashi-san stayed composed even against that kind of talk.

"I would just write «Aya Otonashi». But I told it just now to you orally. There's no need for me to write it anymore, is there?"

"Ah, I don't mind."

Apparently he didn't expect such a simple affirmation and became lost for words.

He clicked his tongue, tore the paper with a purposely loud sound, and left the classroom.

"What's wrong? Won't you write already?"

No one could get started writing. Fair enough. They might not show it on the outside, but they were surprised and were now overwhelmed. She talked down to Daiya. We, the classmates of Daiya, had come to know very well just how impressive that was.

No one was able to do anything for a while. But with the sound of someone's pencil writing, like to follow suit, the same sound started to resound from various places.

Probably no one knew Otonashi-san's intention. But it doesn't matter. In the end, there's only one thing to write, after all.

There's only the name «Aya Otonashi».

The first one to bring his paper to Otonashi-san was Haruaki. Seeing him standing up, several classmates followed after him. Otonashi's mien didn't notably change when she accepted the paper from Haruaki.

It was probably... the wrong answer.

"Haruaki."

I called out to Haruaki when he came towards me after exchanging a word or two with Mogi-san.

"What's wrong, Hoshii?"

"What did you write?"

"Mh? Well, there's only «Aya Otonashi» you can write. I just almost forgot to write the last letter."

Haruaki said so and seemed a bit desolate for some reason.

"...well yeah, I guess there's only that to write."

"Don't waver too much and write it down!"

"But do you really think she did this to make us write this name?"

In that case, I can't think of much meaning in doing so.

Haruaki answered immediately with,

"Of course not."

to my doubt.

"Eh? But... you wrote «Aya Otonashi», didn't you?"

"Yeah. ...listen, Dayan is so intelligent it's not even funny, right? Well, but his contrasting personality is so bad it's not even funny."

Because he suddenly changed the topic, I inclined my head.

"And he said 'I would only write «Aya Otonashi»'. So he couldn't think of anything else to write. Of course it's the same for me. That's why, you know, there's only this that we, who can't think of anything else, can write."

"If you can't think of anything... you can't write."

"Exactly. In other words, this all wasn't directed at us."

I have the feeling that Haruaki's words hit the bull's eye. He's surely right.

In other words, Otonashi-san is ignoring most of her classmates and is doing this directed at the one who can think of this something.

I understood the reason why Haruaki seemed so desolate just now. I mean, he fell for her at the first sight. He might have acted jokingly, but I don't know of anyone else he confessed to. So he was more or less serious.

But she doesn't play his companion. His existence is being ignored. ...just like Daiya said.

"...Haruaki, you're surprisingly bright."

"The 'surprisingly' is unnecessary!"

When I hid the bashfulness of having said something rude with a smile, Haruaki reacted with a bitter smile.

"See you. If I don't go now, I'll get killed by Senpai. No, I'm not exaggerating!"

"Ah, yeah. Go for it."

The so-so strong baseball club seems to be pretty demanding.

I faced my empty paper. I was about to write «Aya Otonashi», but could not do it in the end.

I gazed at Otonashi-san. There is not the slightest change in her expression while she looks through the papers handed to her. I guess there's «Aya Otonashi» written on every one.

--someone who can't think of anything can't write anything.

"-----"

Then what am I supposed to do?

After all, I could think of something. For some reason, the absurd name «Maria» came to mind.

No, I'm aware of it. Something's wrong with my thinking. «Maria» of all things. I have no idea where this name comes from. If I handed it to her with this name, she'd just roar at me with something like «You've gotta be kidding me!».

But if this is, by any chance, the answer she's wishing for...?

After some severe wavering, I started writing on the 10cm recycled paper.

«Maria»

I stood up and headed to Otonashi-san. There wasn't a queue anymore. Seems like I was the last one. I nervously handed my paper to her. Otonashi-san accepted it wordlessly.

Then she looked at the letters written there.

Otonashi-san's expression changed, oh gosh, massively.

"...eh?"

Otonashi-san, who didn't show any stirring of unease against the teacher or Daiya, had her eyes wide open?

"Fufufu..."

Now she burst into laughter.

"Hoshino."

"Oh, you remembered my name."

I regretted it in an instant. See, when she stopped laughing, she scowled at me like she would at the enemy of her ancestors.

"...You wretch... Are you kidding me?"

She seemed to frantically suppress her anger since she spoke in a low, chesty voice. I expected the 'are you kidding me', but I didn't expect this tone in her voice.

She seized me by the collar with all her heart.

"Wa! I-I'm sorry! I-It's not like I was kidding you..."

"So you're telling me, you could write such an answer without kidding?"

"...err, well. You... might be right. I might have been kidding."

This may have been the finishing blow.

She carried me like this away to the backside of the school building.



"Hoshino. Are you making fun of me?"

Otonashi-san pressed me against the wall of the school building and glared at me.

"I'm not that good in working out plans. I'm aware of that. It's an insane plan that's about the same like saying «Culprit, turn yourself in!». No, you can't even call it a plan. And yet... Why are you taking the bait!? And this is already the second time I'm doing this! The first time you completely ignored it!"

She removed her hand from my collar, but her eyes were more than enough to prevent me from moving.

Otonashi-san was looking at me while chewing on her lips and let out a sigh.

"...no, I lost my head because I seized a foothold without feeling the slightest achievement. But the situation is without a doubt improving, so I should rather be happy."

"...right, I guess. You should be happy! Hahaha"

Otonashi-san again scowled at my forced smile. Seems I'd better keep quiet.

"...I don't get it. Actually, I was thinking you lost to my persistence... but what's with this thoughtless, comfortable face of yours! "

Rather than being thoughtless, I have no clue what you're talking about.

"You kept ignoring me for 2600 times. However many times this endless recurrence should continue, I won't surrender. However, I do tire. It should be the same for you, yet how can you maintain this composure!"

What should I do... I have no idea what she's talking about.

Apparently she finally noticed my bewilderment at her words and looked at me suspiciously.

".....are you perhaps not self-aware?"

"Self-aware? Of what?"

"...very well. No matter whether you're acting or not, an explanation shouldn't cause any remarkable harm. Hm, right. To put it simple-- I've already 'transferred' 2601 times."

To fall into blank amazement was all I could do.

"If you're just acting then you're quite a big deal. But certainly, if you really «didn't know», you'd make such a dull face. Whatever. I'll explain to you what I grasped. Mh, right--today's March 2, right?"

I nodded.

"It would be comfortable to say that I repeated this March 2 for 2601 times, but this isn't true. For this reason I use the expression 'School Transfer', although I can't really call it appropriate."

"Haa..."

"I've been sent back to March 2 06:27AM 2601 times."

"....."

"'Sent back' is the correct expression from my own perspective, but generally it's not. So I'm using the expression 'School Transfer' here, since it's near to reality--"

Otonashi-san saw that my jaw had dropped and scratched her head.

"Aah, geez! Just how dumb are you! If there's some inconvenience for you after 06:27, you're declaring it conveniently as «it didn't happen», haven't you!"

She shouted at me, boiling inside. No, no... there's no one that would understand such a sudden thing right away?

"...I don't understand very well, but so you're repeating the same time over and over?"

It was the instant I said so.

"Ah--"

What? What's this?

I pushed down my chest on this giant strange sensation that attacked me. An unease, the word 'unease' isn't sufficient. It was an eerie sensation, like, say your town was replaced by another without anyone noticing except of you.

It's not like my memories were brought back. I haven't recalled anything.

But for some reason I can feel that this «happened».

Otonashi-san is telling the truth.

Nothing but the blank truth.

"Did you finally understand?"

"...w-wait a sec."

She experienced March 2 for 2601 times. That alone would be more than enough to confuse me, but basically Otonashi-san is stating this:

"...I am doing this?"

"Yeah."

Otonashi-san answered on the spot.

"W-why would I do such a thing?"

"There's no way I'd know your motive."

"I'm not doing this!"

"You're just doing it without any self-awareness, am I wrong?"

Why me? When I was about to say so, I noticed. There's only one factor that made her have an eye on me.

That is--because I wrote «Maria» on the paper.

"Similar to you just now, who wasn't self-aware, other people, that were just dragged into here, have no means to remember the past that was declared as «it didn't happen». In other words, apart from me, only the culprit is able to write down the «Maria» I've mentioned in an iteration before."

But I recalled this name. I admit it's unthinkable that a name like «Maria» would suddenly appear without reason.

"I don't know if it's effective, but I'm always trying to act in a way it remains in the memories of the others. I waited for the culprit, who also had the memories of the past worlds that were declared as «it didn't happen», to make a failure. But well, I didn't really have any expectations."

"...since when did you doubt me? I mean, you specially told me this name «Maria» in some world before, haven't you?"

"I don't specially doubt a person like you who doesn't seem harmless."

"So...?"

"Hmpf, of course I went through all one by one and told them this name, since my time is basically unlimited."

Her time is unlimited.

The time Otonashi-san spent. An amount that big, it can't be called a metaphor.

I see. Her time is basically unlimited, so that's why she arrived at this reckless plan of making the class write her name. With the slight hope that someone would write «Maria». ...No, maybe she didn't even have any hope. All her breakthrough solutions exhausted long ago in those 2601 'School Transfers', so it was probably a mere way of killing time until a new plan appears to her. Even such a plan is better to conduct than not in order to calm down mentally. After all her time could possibly go on forever.

That's why Otonashi-san got angry when I fell for this trick. It's probably like when you couldn't beat an enemy in a RPG and thus trained and leveled up desperately, but in truth you could easily beat the enemy just by using a certain item. The goal may have been achieved, but you want to have back the effort until now.

"...no, I relaxed my attention strangely, but it's not yet the situation for negligence. After all it's not settled yet."

"Is that so?"

"Of course. Or does it look settled to you? Does this consecutive nightmare, 'The Rejecting Classroom', look to you like it has ended?"

"The Rejecting Classroom"? I guess that stands for this repeating situation.

At any rate, there's just one point that bugs me.

"You know, I can understand that you treat me as culprit because I've written «Maria»? But listen, to begin with, why are you not involved in this 'Rejecting Classroom'?"

"It's not like I'm not involved. I'm firmly involved in 'The Rejecting Classroom'. I guess I'd get captured in 'The Rejecting Classroom' if I gave up and abandoned remembering. I would continue to live meaninglessly in this endless recurrence. That's about as easy as to spill a cup of water that's put on my head. We would forever be continuing to experience this one day you're rejecting."

"That would happen just by you forgetting?"

"Think about it. Is there any other guy who could possibly notice this recurrence? Even you, the one that set it up, weren't self-aware of the recurrence!"

...she might be right. And really, she already did repeat for 2601 times.

"It certainly would be simple for me to abandon my remembrance. But this will absolutely never happen."

"...never?"

"Yeah, never. It's not possible that I give up. No matter if I have to repeat 2000 times, 20,000 times or a squillion times, I will overcome this recurrence and achieve my goal."

2000 times. I tried to think again about this number. We often come across this '2000' as unit in our daily lives. But if we had to really pile up one after the other... for example, a year has 365 days, five years have 1825 days... this would not yet be enough.

This amount of time, Otonashi-san came to exceed.

"Hoshino. Are you also unaware of the reason, why you produced this 'Rejecting Classroom'?"

"Eh? ...yeah."

"Fufu, I see. Assuming you're playing dumb just to dodge this question, then there's certainly meaning in this. In that case your acting is a big deal."

"I-I'm not acting!"

"Well I'll ask you then--"

Otonashi-san smiled faintly.

"Hoshino, you have--met *him*, *haven't you?*"

--who?

This natural question didn't pop up. I couldn't comprehend the reason and thus was perplexed. Who have I met? I don't know. I can't remember.

Even so, I understood.

I have met "*".

When? Where? Of course I don't know such a thing. This isn't in my memory. But even so, I can feel that we have met.

I try to remember. But the information was blocked before my eyes like a shutter being shut in an extreme speed. Attention! You may not enter. Unauthorized people may not enter.

"Fufu, so you met him."

She chuckled.

Otonashi-san was now convinced. And I myself was convinced as well.

I, Kazuki Hoshino, am the originator who caused this situation.

"He should have handed it over to you. The 'box' that grants you a single 'wish'."

She suddenly used the word "box". Based on the context, this "box" seems to be the tool that produced this "Rejecting Classroom".

"Ah, I didn't tell you my goal yet."

Otonashi-san told me without stopping to chuckle.

"My goal is--to obtain the 'box'."

Then her laugh disappeared. Otonashi, who is convinced that I own the "box", scowled at me with cold eyes and commanded.

"Now hand the 'box' over."

I surely have the "box", I suppose.

But is it really alright to hand over this "box", that grants a "wish", to her?

I mean, Otonashi-san endured 2601 repetitions just for the sake of obtaining this "box". So she has a "wish" that is worth this great effort. She wants to grant her own "wish"; even if this means to make light of my own "wish", to steal my "wish". It's like this.

This is--an almost abnormal tenacity.

Right, this is abnormal. Aya Otonashi is abnormal.

"...I don't know how to."

That's not a lie. But it was also my way to offer resistance.

"I see. So you'll hand it over to me, as soon you remember?"

"Well..."

"Forgetting how to take it out is a common case. But you have just forgotten it; you still know how. Like you know how to ride a bicycle, you can't teach it to others, but you know it as a feeling. You're just bewildered because you can't convert it into words."

"...is there no way to end the 'Rejecting Classroom' without taking out the 'box'?"

Otonashi-san darted me a cold glance.

"So you don't plan to hand it over to me. Is this what you want to say?"

"I-It's not like this..."

Seeing my obvious panic, Otonashi-san let out a small sigh.

"Let's see. I guess the 'Rejecting Classroom' would also end if we crushed the 'box' along with its 'owner'."

"Crush it along with its 'owner'...?"

"Owner" probably implies the culprit holding the "box" - in other words me. Crush it along with me? In short--

Otonashi-san killed her feelings and said severely.

"The 'Rejecting Classroom' will end if you die."



Is this reason enough to prepare a «*****»?

Do you want to tell me that this is my future? In that case better do this quickly to me, that would feel better.

March 3 morning. Rain, a crossroads with a bad view.

I had thrown away my umbrella and was looking there at the «*****». Other things didn't really enter my sight. Also the truck that crashed into the wall or Otonashi-san, who was standing there still, weren't recognized by my eyes. Red blood flowed without a pause to an amount that could not be washed away by the rain.

A cor*** which missed half of its head and had the bra** jumped out. ***pse. Corpse. Corpse. CORpse. CorpseCorpseCORPSE. corPSE. CorpsecorpseCORPSE. Corpse. Corpse. Corpse!

Haruaki's «Corpse».

"---ah"

I vomited when I recognized the thing before my eyes.

I looked at Aya Otonashi. She was expressionlessly staring at me.

".....Haruaki"

But don't worry, Haruaki!

You know--this will repeat anyway.

This will be declared as «it didn't happen» anyway. Conveniently.

.....oh? Could it be...

Is this the reason why I'm wishing for this "Rejecting Classroom"...? Because I'm rejecting these situations?

2602nd time

"I'm Aya Otonashi."

"--ah"

In this instant, a red picture flashed through my mind. A picture that was buried in the depths of my memories, although I've just seen it before.

And as if my brain was pulled by a thread connected to it, the recollections of the 2601st 'School Transfer' were drawn out of it.

I'm astonished of myself that I could suppress screaming out.

"Mh? What's wrong Hoshii? You look painful, are you alright?"

Haruaki, who was sitting beside me, worried about me.

Haruaki, who was supposed to have been overrun by a truck, smiled at me.

An inevitable unease. Nausea. The information gathered and covered me completely, as if I was its prey and was eaten up by it. My feelings couldn't keep up with the speed of the information and thus got strained.

The memories of last time got connected with the ones of this time.

So lively and clearly.

"But really, Aya-chan is too cute. I'll confess."

--because of Haruaki's corpse.

And now he fell again for Aya Otonashi at first sight, although she made him suffer like this.

I looked at Otonashi-san. In this moment our eyes met. She was glaring at me. With a daring grin she was glaring at me.

...was this corpse an attack to corner me and get my 'box'?

In that case this is just too effective. To threaten me by showing me a corpse with the meaning of "I'll kill you". And by using the corpse of a friend of mine, she also corners me with feelings of guilt. Otonashi-san is doing this all arbitrary. Even I can understand in theory that it's not my fault. But when I see a corpse, this theory gets blown away and my heart gets easily broken.

If I knew how, I would surely present her the 'box' right away. But fortunately I don't know the means.

...fortunately? Really? I mean, if this is an effective attack, Otonashi-san will most certainly continue.

Until my heart breaks.

Otonashi-san descended the platform and approached me.

She came right beside me.

Keeping her glance straight forward instead of looking at me, she murmured.

"Looks like you remember."



If it continues like this I'm going to break.

I'm aware that it's not going to solve anything, but I played dumb and ran away from Otonashi-san.

I have to somehow think of a counter-plan while I'm avoiding her.

That's why--

"Are these all details now, Kazu?"

I consulted the most intelligent person I know, Daiya Oomine.

Daiya was leaning against the wall in the corridor and was obviously in a bad temper. I think it's because explaining the details used up the break between the first and second lesson.

"So? What do you want from me by telling me this novel idea?"

I told him straightforwardly everything, including the things I learned from Otonashi-san, without omitting a part. Still, the matter is the matter. Since I didn't expect a realist like Daiya to believe my situation, I made it to the story of a novel.

"I was wondering what the «Hero» of this story is supposed to do."

"If we think about it generally, he's probably supposed to oppose the «Transfer Student»."

Of course I am the «Hero» and Otonashi-san is the «Transfer Student».

Since I adopted it just like this, Daiya noticed that the «Transfer Student» is «Aya Otonashi». But he just expressed a wry smile with the words "So she was the model", and was apparently confident that it's only fiction.

"But... I don't think the «Hero» can rival the «Transfer Student»."

"I guess that's true at the present point."

The opponent is this Aya Otonashi. A person that goes as far as to 'transfer' 2602 times and even produces corpses in order to obtain the 'box'. I don't think that there's a chance for me to win.

"But it's possible for the «Hero» to obtain power at a later point that matches the «Transfer Student»'s."

Daiya said carelessly.

"Eh--?"

Of course I consulted Daiya to find a way. But I did so with the expectation of finding a needle in a haystack. Honestly, I didn't expect he could think of a breakthrough solution for me.

"What's with this reaction? Well then, tell me, why can't the «Hero» rival the «Transfer Student»?"

"Eh? Well--"

"Aah, no, better don't answer. You idiot would give me a dull answer anyway and make me irritated."

...I'm allowed to get angry here, right?

"The difference between the «Hero» and the «Transfer Student». It's the difference of information. The «Transfer Student» can use this difference to move the «Hero» like a puppet. It's simple. She merely has to only tell the favorable information to the «Hero»."

That's... right. Otonashi-san can do anything with me as soon as I forgot the situation again.

"On the other hand if he fills up the difference of their information, which is the main reason he can't rival her, it would work out somehow. So he just needs to get rid of this handicap."

"...but this is impossible!"

Daiya smirks at my murmur.

"Say, you told me that the «Hero» can take over the memories of last time?"

"Yeah."

"If he takes over himself, who took over the memories of last time, he's able to take over the memories of the time before last. Right?"

".....well, I guess so."

"So if he takes over the memories of the time before last, he can also take over the memories of two times before last. If he takes over the memories of two times before last, he can also take over the memories of three times before last."

"...so---? I mean the «Transfer Student» is also able to build up information during this while. The difference can't be filled up. Otonashi-sa-- the «Transfer Student» has already the memories of more than 2601 repetitions, you know? What's there going to change for the «Hero» if he obtains the memories of 2, three times---"

"Repeat for 100,000 times."

"...eh?"

"There's no way to fill up the difference of the already ended 2601 times. Then just make those 2601 irrelevant. The difference of information between 102,601 times and 100,000 times is merely 2% if we use simple math. You can't call this difference anymore. If the «Hero» repeats this much, he obtains the means to oppose the «Transfer Student». Then he has to use the gained information and the opponent's labor to exhaust the «Transfer Student», to weaken her, to frustrate her and to make her forget the memories of those iterations."

"I'm---"

I'm supposed to do such a thing?

".....but he doesn't know how to take over the memories to begin with."

Right. I was able to take over the memories this time, but this was just by chance.

"You said that the shock of seeing a corpse made the «Hero» take over the memories, right?"

"That's what I suppose... at least."

I can't think of another reason and my feelings are telling me that it's like this.

I was able to take over the memories by chance, because I saw Haruaki's corpse.

"Then it's simple."

Daiya said again carelessly.

"The «Hero» just needs to produce corpses himself."

"---what the!"

I reflexively became speechless.

"S-Such an act---"

"Well, listen. I guess it's certainly unreasonable to kill someone. Because the «Hero» would just cause aversion in the reader with this lack of ethics. My point is that the «Hero» has to prepare something of the same impact as to see a corpse."

"...that could certainly... work"

"In other words the «Hero» just needs to have a stronger tenacity for the 'box' than the «Transfer Student»."

The chime rang. Daiya considered our talk as finished and turned around.

"I'll return to the classroom. You should quickly come too, Kazu!"

"Yeah..."

But I didn't feel like returning to the classroom right away and stood still. Daiya walked away without paying me any attention.

I sighted.

"...there sure might be a way to retain my memories. But---"

---hanging on for 100,000 times? This may be possible in theory but it's not in reality. There's no way a feeling human could bear up against this. That's like being told 'I've developed a car with the top speed of 10,000kmph, so please drive it for me'. Even if the car could drive with this speed, my body wouldn't be able to withstand the burden and would break. My mind, no, the human mind isn't made to bear up against 100,000 repetitions.

Otonashi-san is a special case if she's really able to bear up against it. Please don't put me together with this monster.

But is this the only way to oppose Otonashi-san? Am I even supposed to oppose her? Wouldn't it be better for both of us if I just raised the white flag?

I once again let out a sigh since I couldn't even decide on such a thing.

When I raised my face in order to return to the classroom for now.

"---ah"

I reflexively raised my voice.

".....Haruaki."

Did he hear us? But in this case his face, that appeared from within the shadow of the post, would be too serious. After all we were only talking about a 'fictional story'. Theoretically.

"Frankly, I get jealous when you get in a good mood without me; being your friend. Thus I think it's completely fine for me to hide and eavesdrop on you. Let's forgive me."

He started to freely plead himself not guilty. Despite of his tone being quipping, his expression stayed serious as before.

"Well then, Hoshii---"

Haruaki scratched his head and asked.

"---wanna try killing me?"

My breath stopped.

I had no idea what made him say these absolutely uncommon words.

Haruaki watched my bewilderment for a while. I wasn't even able to wink. He suddenly formed his mouth to a complacent smile and, apparently he couldn't bear it any longer, burst into laughter.

"Ah, don't tell me!--That's cruel, Haruaki! Don't tease me!"

"Ahaha! No, no, I never would have guessed that your reaction would be that serious...!! Terrific! Hoshii, you're just too funny! Naturally I'm just joking, just joking!"

Well, that's logical. There's no one who would believe that such a recurrence happens in reality.

"Right... naturally it's just a joke."

"Of course. Naturally it's a joke. --something like letting me get killed."

I felt something odd in the last sentence.

"--Haruaki?"

"--And? How can I assist you?"

Assist? What's Haruaki talking about?

Haruaki was again serious and earnest when he said so.

"Well, but since my memories will be lost in the next world, I guess it's limited what I can do."

Aah, I see--

Haruaki believes in the "Rejecting Classroom".

He believes in my story everyone would just think it's made-up.

".....Haruaki."

"What's wrong, Hoshii?"

"Err... this is just a fictional scenario I made up, you know?"

Haruaki laughed and said like as a matter of fact.

"That's a lie, isn't it?"

"Wha--"

I couldn't even bring out the words to ask how he figured this out.

I mean, I myself couldn't believe such a nonsensical story even if I was begged to.

"Wahaha! Are you impressed by this deep friendship of mine, that makes me even swallow such a story unhesitatingly?"

"Yeah."

When I nodded, Haruaki seemed to be taken aback for some reason.

"N-No... don't answer so plainly! I'll blush." He bashfully scratched his nose.

"I'll mention this just in case, but Daiya does also think that this isn't a fictional story, but happening to you."

"Eh? ...no, I don't think so. I mean, we're talking about the realist, Daiya?"

Well, but now that he mentions it, he might have acted a bit unusual. After all he specially changed the place for this talk and offered up his break. If he really thought of it as a novel, he would have casted me away with something like "Boring. Don't write it."

"Okay, probably he didn't believe your story as is. But he earnestly believes that you're currently in this situation. I sensed it!"

Come to think of it, Daiya's advice was a bit off the point, considering it was about a novel. He clearly chose the answers I wanted.

"There's a contradiction to begin with, Hoshii. Aya-chan who's the motif of the «Transfer Student» arrived today, you know? You called Daiya in the break after the first lesson. When would you have had the time to think this all up?"

"Ah--"

That sure is true.

"I think that you're telling the truth and not some delusion."

"...why?"

"It's a bit too well made for being a delusion of yours, isn't it? There's no way you'd have such an imagination, Hoshii."

"How rude..."

"Well, but even if you were a bit more brilliant and could think this up in a short time; I'd still believe you."

"...why?"

"Because we're friends, aren't we?"

Uwa, what is this person saying.

I mean if he speaks to me like this... I can't suppress to blush and don't know what to answer.



Haruaki wrinkled his brow and stuffed a potato into his mouth.

"I see. So Aya-chan... no, Aya Otonashi might have killed me..."

We went to McDonald's as suggestion of Haruaki. Two students in uniform who left early, and this because of feigned illness, at McDonald's in the broad daylight. I couldn't help to sense the glances from the surrounding people and felt like running away.

"I wonder if Otonashi-san wouldn't care about being at McDonald's during this time and in uniform."

"Well, I guess in Aya Otonashi's case, she wouldn't."

Haruaki listened to the story that he might have been killed by the Otonashi-san he fell for at first sight and spit out her name in hostility.

"That means in other words that she adapts to this more than 2000 loops."

Otonashi-san become accustomed to everything being declared as «it didn't happen». She surely doesn't get upset about each thing anymore within the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

Otonashi-san adapted to an abnormal situation. Can you really say that her personality's still normal?

This Otonashi-san is trying to kill me?

"Was this supposed to be an escape?"

My heart stopped.

The sudden voice of the person I thought of right now. I couldn't turn around to the voice behind me. I was unable to move as if I was cemented.

How did she find us? I didn't even tell Daiya.

Otonashi-san walked around me and stood in my front. I was still unable to raise my face.

"I'll tell you something good, Hoshino."

She said with a grin on her face.

"I'm spending this March 2 for the 2602th time. I spent just this time together with classmates that didn't change a bit since they don't keep any memories and aren't aware of this recurrence."

She put her hand quietly on the table. This was enough to make my body stiffen up.

"People do change. Their values do, too. Thus it's not easy at all to predict their actions. However, you guys are inside a deadlock without any change. It's too easy to grasp your actions. Even more since it's the same March 2. I even grasped your conversation pattern. Hoshino, I can easily predict the range of actions a passive high school student like you would take."

I experienced the «information difference» Daiya mentioned, firsthand. I vaguely thought this was just meant for information about the 'Rejecting Classroom' or the 'box'. But it's not like this. The most critical information is the information about «Kazuki Hoshino» - myself. And the information I need to obtain is about «Aya Otonashi». Daiya meant it like this from the

start. That's why he said that the difference between our information would disappear through more recurrences.

"Got it? You can't flee from me, Hoshino. I have a grip on you. I could easily crush you. But if I do so, I'll also crush this important article you're holding. That's the only reason I don't do so. Got it? Better don't anger me."

Otonashi-san took a hold of my hand.

"Be quiet and follow me. And then quietly obey me."

Her grip on my hand wasn't strong. I could probably shake her off if I tried to. But... can I do that? ...no way. I'm already taken over by Aya Otonashi. I'm miserable? I'm aware of that. But I just can't... defy her. I don't know how.

And despite this - despite I don't even know the means to defy her - my hand was set free from Otonashi-san's grip.

"What are you doing?"

Otonashi-san said. I wasn't able to shake her off. So her hostile words weren't pointed at me.

"What I'm doing? ...ha!"

They were pointed at Haruaki, who pulled our hands apart.

"I don't hand Hoshino over to you! Can't you get even such a simple thing? You're an idiot?"

Haruaki made this childish provocation, but his face had become stiff. It was a complete bluff. He doesn't look down on people like this, to begin with.

However, Otonashi-san did naturally not react to this provocation.

"That's not what I'm asking. Usui, it appears that you're the one of us that can't use his head. Your actions are futile. They're meaningless. It seems you decided to save Hoshino, but this is merely a fragile dream of this moment and will disappear. You will have forgotten this determination next time anyway and come confessing to me instead of considering me as an enemy."

Haruaki faltered completely upon these words. He knows that it's going to be like this. If it resets again, Haruaki will forget our conversations this time. However hostile to her he may

be now, he's going to fall again for her at first sight, and he's going to again confess to her. Haruaki's within a hopeless deadlock.

And even though he was confronted with the truth like this, Haruaki clenched his fist.

"No, it's still you who can't use her head, Otonashi! I might really return to the «not knowing anything me» each time! I guess I won't be able to keep my memories and I'm not as bright as Daiya. But you know? I have quite some faith in myself."

"I don't understand. What are you trying to say?"

"Say, Otonashi. It's certain that I'm in a standstill and won't change, right?"

"Yeah, that's why you can't do anything."

"Ha! It's just the other way, Otonashi! If I'm not going to change, I can vouch for myself in a later world. After all they will be the exact same person as I'm now. I can imagine this without problem! Those selves are going to believe Hoshii each time when he explains them his situation, and they will help him each time. Which world ever, I won't abandon my friend Hoshii. Listen, remember this, Otonashi--"

He pointed at Otonashi-san.

"--if you make Kazuki Hoshino an enemy, you also make the immortal me an enemy!"

To be honest, his posture was anything but firm. He seemed forced, he was bluffing and his hands were even trembling. He was obviously anxious. Especially since he's usually clowning for everyone. Cool words don't suit him it's not even funny.

But his words warmed up my heart more than enough.

I mean, Haruaki is saying so without 1% doubt. There's no pomposity as well. Haruaki is saying so as if it's a matter of fact.

"____"

Of course Otonashi-san wasn't flustered a bit of his unsteady posture. But she also didn't object right away. She closed her mouth for a few seconds displeased.

"...you're sounding as if I was the bad one. Despite it's Kazuki Hoshino who dragged you into this 'Rejecting Classroom'."

Otonashi-san's words were precise and sharp. Haruaki took damage one by one, but even so--

"But I won't choose my ally wrong just because of this!"

Haruaki didn't change his opinion. He decidedly didn't avert his gaze from Otonashi-san although he was frightened.

I started worrying. I mean, the opponent is this Aya Otonashi! She isn't the one who's bothered when Haruaki made her an enemy forever. It's Haruaki. He's going to be the object of hostility of the girl he's attracted to each time; without knowing the reason. Haruaki is going to suffer each time from now on.

Whereas she surely won't feel any pressure from him snapping at her.

However,

"I lost my interest."

Otonashi-san was the one who first averted her gaze and turned away.

"All your actions will become meaningless anyway when next time arrives."

She spat out these words and left.

If it wasn't for her who said it, it might have sounded a bit like poor excuses. But it didn't sound a bit like this. In the first place, how should Otonashi-san lose to him when she doesn't care about him anyway?

Hence, she simply said what she thought. She merely came to the conclusion that it would be more convenient to do something about me in a better situation.

Otonashi-san doesn't feel anything for us. Of course she doesn't fear us, but she isn't angry at us and doesn't scorn us either.

So I wonder--why?

No, I know. It's just my imagination. A wrong guess. An extreme misunderstanding. But even so, really honestly, just for a instant--

She looked just a bit--sad.

"Say... Hoshii"

Haruaki said with his gaze still directed to the way in which Otonashi-san passed through the automatic door.

"Do you think I'm going to get killed?"

No way... was what I almost answered reflexively, but then I noticed that it could be like this and kept quiet.



As expected it was raining at the March 3 of the 2602th time. I went to school a bit earlier than last time and avoided the spot of the accident, although it was a detour. In order to ward off Otonashi's attack... or rather than that, simply to not see this scene a second time.

When I arrived at the classroom, Daiya was already there. He approached me when he noticed me.

"What's wrong Daiya?"

For some reason Daiya didn't answer right away. He looked deep in my eyes. He's good in hiding his feelings as ever, but something was obviously different from always.

".....about the novel we talked about yesterday."

Daiya spoke consciously indifferent. It's about the «novel». In other words it's about «my current situation».

"There's something that bothered me. Why doesn't the «Transfer Student» lose her memories, even though the «Hero» does?"

I couldn't answer him. Because I didn't get the reason why he began to talk about this.

"Even the «Hero» - the creator of this «Rejecting Classroom»" - loses his memories. Even when we assume that the «Transfer Student» possesses some special power, wouldn't it be too convenient to automatically keep the memories of the recurrences? So I think it would be better to make the «Hero» and «Transfer Student» be able to keep their memories employing the same method."

"...you might be right."

I agreed without thinking too much about the meaning. Maybe I wasn't able to grasp his words fully because he was just talking about a «novel».

"The «Hero» was able to keep his memories, because he saw a corpse, right?"

"...I think so."

"The corpse was result of a truck crash, right? There's no way the «Transfer Student» who spent the same day for 2601 times, wouldn't know of this truck. If the «Transfer Student» had her hands in the accident, then it was without a doubt intentional. That's why you expressed that the «friend of the Hero» «got killed»."

I nodded.

"But something bothered me there."

"Why? Are my thoughts odd?"

"No, not at all. It's certainly an effective attack against the «Hero». That is, if it can be taken for granted that he will take over the memories. There's no meaning in a successful attack, when the «Hero» forgets it right away."

"I don't get what you're trying to say..."

"The goal of the «Transfer Student» is to steal the 'box' from the «Hero», right?"

"Yeah."

"Try to think from the perspective of the «Transfer Student». The «Transfer Student» finally found the person she searched for - the «Hero». Although the «Transfer Student» could have kept quiet, she explained the situation openly to the «Hero». A clueless opponent and an opponent that was attacked and thus is on guard - from which one is it easier to steal the 'box'? Of course it's the clueless opponent. So why do you think did the «Transfer Student» explain the situation to him?"

"Err... because the «Transfer Student» thought the «Hero» would forget?"

"Right. She concluded that it wouldn't matter. That she told him was probably just because of something like dissipation; you may also call it negligence."

"But the accident could only occur intentionally, right? So it could only be an attack against me..."

"I guess it was intentional. But try to think like this: it was unforeseen for the «Transfer Student» that the «Hero» saw the corpse."

In other words, it was an accident with another target than to attack me?

I thought about his words once again.

"Ah--"

I hastily looked around in the classroom. The «Transfer Student» - Aya Otonashi wasn't there. She's surely still at this place.

"No way... that's not normal anymore!"

"Of course. There's no way a person that adapted to 2602 recurrences would keep being in his right mind."

Aya Otonashi killed someone.

She did so not to attack me, but to retain her own memories.

I remembered. I didn't even want to, but I remembered. That this accident didn't only happen during the 2601th time. That she may have done so already in each of the 2600 other times.

So will she continue to kill someone in order to 'transfer'?

Will I be forced to watch this silently?

Will Haruaki be again killed this time?

"---Haruaki!"

"Mh? What's wrong Hoshii?"

Haruaki entered the classroom just now and stood beside the door.

What does this mean? Haruaki isn't the target? ...right, there's no need for him to be the corpse, is there?

"The story about your novel is at an end now, Kazu. I'll tell you now the main problem."

Daiya continued without caring about Haruaki.

"It seems there was an accident a short time ago."

Daiya took a deep breath and spoke.

"Aya Otonashi was run over by a truck."

Err, what--?

Aah, I see.

She doesn't care whether she herself's the target.

4609th time

"Haruaki was run over by a truck."

5232nd time

"Kasumi Mogi was run over by a truck."

27753rd time

We played soccer during gymnastics.

I was sleeping on the lap of Mogi-san because I had got a nose bleed.

I suddenly started to wonder about her feelings for letting me sleep on her lap. Could it be that she's trying, even if just for a bit, to attract me?

I have not the slightest idea; she was expressionless as ever when I peeked at her in a casual manner.

"...Mogi-san"

"What is?"

"What are you thinking right now?"

"Eh?"

Mogi-san tilted her head. But her answer didn't seem to come. The only reaction she showed to my question was her bewildered face.

This made me get a little pondering. If it's so hard to recognize the partner's feelings, can love really progress?

Why did I fall in love with such a difficult girl?

In the first place - when on earth did I fell in love with her?

I tried to remember.

".....Huh?"

"...What's wrong?"

Mogi-san asked when I suddenly let out a sound.

"N-No... nothing!"

Probably my face doesn't say 'nothing'. Mogi-san is aware of that. But since she doesn't have the skills to question me about this matter, she kept silent without doing anything.

I stood up without prior warning to Mogi-san.

"Ah, um... it seems my nose bleed has stopped."

"...mh."

Our conversation had ended with these plain words.

Why do I abandon such an favorable situation voluntarily? Though this bliss might not come a second time.

But--it was impossible.

You see, whatever I tried--I couldn't remember.

I can't remember. I can't remember. I can't remember! --I can't remember when I fell in love with her!

Why did I fall in love? What was the trigger? Or was I simply attracted to her before I knew, even without any special occasion?

Though I should know as much; Though there's no way I'd forget - I cannot remember, no matter what I try.

It wasn't love on first sight. And except of the fact that we're classmates, we have almost no contact point.

And yet, why so out of the blue? Or are you telling me, that it was a completely sudden awakening of love--

"--no way..."

For real? But it's the only thing I can think of. This was a completely sudden awakening of love.

"What's wrong? Are you alright? ...Should we go to the school infirmary?"

Mogi-san suggested this with her calm voice. I was indeed very happy that she worried for me. Simply happy. This feeling was not fake.

"...I'm alright. I was just pondering about something."

I asked myself several times if this isn't some mistake. But the more I reconsidered it, the more it seemed true to me.

I wasn't attracted to Mogi-san.

Until when? Right--

--I wasn't attracted to her until yesterday.

"--Ah, I see."

I looked at the transfer student who was only standing straight at the sports ground - Aya Otonashi.

When was the occasion that made me get attracted to Mogi-san? --ah, that's easy. It wasn't yesterday. But today I was already in love. So when was it?

That's only possible--between today and yesterday.

Only during the interval of the more than 20,000 repetitions that occurred due to the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

Ah, I remembered. Only a fragment, but I probably remembered more than the other times. But still it was just a fragment, so most of the memories stayed lost.

I've lost the most important recollection to me - how I fell in love with Mogi-san. And surely I won't regain this. I can't share anything with Mogi-san. An unrequited love I can't do anything about, no matter how much time passes; only my feelings will get stronger.

No, this might not be all. This love could possibly disappear as soon as the 'Rejecting Classroom' ends. I mean, this love shouldn't even have existed without the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

This is strange. Such a thing is strange. There's no lie to this love.

But this love is a fake that could not exist originally?

A sudden gust blew before the lesson ended. It lifted up Mogi-san's skirt. I wonder why? But I had a feeling that I already knew these light blue panties.

No, I do know them.

The fact that Mogi-san's wearing light blue panties today.

And also the fact that Aya Otonashi sacrificed Kasumi Mogi the most of all in order to retain her memories.

Hence I decided.

To defend this 'Rejecting Classroom'.



This time's Aya Otonashi doesn't come approaching me.

No, I think it was the same for the time before. I can only remember slightly, but it was like this for a while now.

During the lunch break, Aya Otonashi was alone chewing her bread really wearily.

I then approached her.

Just by approaching her, my body stiffened up and my heartbeat accelerated. Otonashi-san's rejection against others had risen to a giant extent, so it alone was enough to apply pressure.

"...Otonashi-san."

I readied myself and called out to her. However, Otonashi-san didn't turn around. But there's no way she didn't hear me from this distance. So I continued without caring.

"I have something to discuss."

"I haven't."

She turned me down point-blank.

"Otonashi-san."

No reaction. She just continued chewing her bread lustlessly.

She seems to plan to ignore me whatever I say. ...in that case I only have to make her unable to ignore me.

It came to mind immediately when I thought about it.

"...Maria."

The chewing movements of her mouth stopped.

"I have something to discuss."

But even so she didn't even look at me. She kept wordless.

The classroom was deathly silent. Our classmates were only looking at us while holding their breath.

And finally Otonashi-san seemed to have lost her patience and sighed.

"I never thought you'd say this name. Seems like you remembered quite a lot this time."

"Yeah, so--"

"Even so, there's nothing to discuss with you."

She began again to chew her bread lustlessly.

"Why!"

The glances of my classmates focused on me when I said so reflexively in a loud voice.

"Why?! Am I not the one you have to do something about?! So why don't you even try to listen to me!?"

"Why, you ask?"

Otonashi-san sneered.

"You honestly don't know? Ha! Right. You're always dumb, acting like this. You don't think by yourself. Why should I keep company with such a person?"

"...well, I don't know what I have done sometime."

"Sometime? Foolish. What's different to the current you? You're just the same, aren't you?"

"Why can you assert this? Maybe I'm going to offer you my help. In that case--"

"Virtually doesn't matter."

Otonashi-san spat out these words without even letting me finish.

I was about to object reflexively. But this objection was erased by Otonashi-san's following words.

"Because you didn't make this proposal just two or three times already."

"Eh--?"

My idiot grimace might have been funny. Otonashi-san curled her mouth up slightly, put her half-eaten bread back and spoke.

"Very well. This time is full of useless things anyway. This isn't just the second or third time I'm explaining this as well, but let's tell you anyway."

Otonashi-san stood up and started walking away.

I didn't have another choice but to follow her quietly.



She led me as always to the backside of the school building. Otonashi-san leaned as ever on the wall.

"I'll say this right now at the beginning. I won't talk together with you. Just listen to my words like an idiot."

"...I can decide that on my own."

I said so to be a bit rebellious, but Otonashi-san just darted me a cold glance.

"Hoshino, do you know which time's now? No, you don't know. Now's the 27,753th time."

It was a much too outrageous number.

"...did you specifically count each time?"

"Yeah, since there's no way to affirm this as soon as I stop counting even just one time. If I forget to do so, I'll lose the sight of my standpoint. That's why I'm counting."

Certainly, it calms slightly if one knows how much steps one did to an unknown arrival point.

"I have repeated just this much. I've already done almost all possible ways to approach you. I'm in a situation where I can't even think of something I haven't already tried on you."

"That's why you think there's no meaning in talking to me?"

"Yeah."

"You're not even trying to persuade me to hand over the 'box' to you?"

"I've stopped that already long ago."

"Why? Somewhere within these recurrences, there should have been a supportive me."

"Yeah, of course. There were times you treated me with hostility, and there were also times when you cooperated. But you know? It doesn't matter. You don't hand out the 'box' either way."

I don't even hand out the 'box' when I'm cooperating? ...but well, that's logical. If Otonashi-san obtained the 'box', then this «now» inside the 'Rejecting Classroom' wouldn't exist.

"Just confirming: it's for sure that I have the 'box', right?"

"I, too, was doubting this constantly. But the conclusion is always the same. Kazuki Hoshino is, without a doubt, the 'owner'."

"Why do you think so?"

"There aren't as much suspects as you may think. The explanation would take too long so I'll abbreviate. It's impossible for the few suspects to deceive me for 27,753 times. Hence, you're the only possible 'owner'. Furthermore, having nothing to do with this, there's a unarguable circumstantial evidence, isn't there?"

As she says. I've met the distributor of the 'box'--"*.

"Even so you're not taking out the 'box' at all. No, you can't. I've marked you as 'owner' more than 20,000 times ago."

"So you gave up?"

This Otonashi-san who spares no effort in order to obtain the 'box'?

"I have not given up. The means do not exist. Let's assume you're searching for a 100 Yen coin that should be in your wallet, but you can't find it however much you turn the wallet inside out. To search every corner of the wallet is easy. Even so, it's not there. In that case

you have to assume that those 100 Yen aren't there anymore. In these 27,753 recurrences I've come to the conclusion that «I cannot retrieve the 'box' from Kazuki Hoshino»."

Otonashi-san scowled at me for a moment and turned away.

"Well then, the side show has ended. Still something you want to say?"

"...there is! That's why I wanted to talk to you in the first place."

I have to say it.

I have decided. I have decided to defend the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

Otonashi-san, who came to kill Mogi-san countless times, I make her--

"I make Otonashi-san, no, Aya Otonashi--"

"--an enemy?"

"--huh?!"

What I was about to say with the determination of making a leap into the dark, Otonashi-san guessed in advance. And she was still uninterested and not even looking at me.

When she saw that I was shocked from the bottom of my heart and lost my words, Otonashi-san let out a sigh. She turned to me reluctantly.

"Hoshino, have you still not understood? How much time do you think have I spent together with this dumb you? This is just another pattern that I've already repeated so much that I'm tired of it. There's no way I wouldn't see through it, is there?"

"W-What--"

I've come to get this strong determination countless times already?

Why did this become meaningless all these times?

"Incidentally I'll tell this as well. Even if you get the determination of making me an enemy and then try to take over your memories each time; in the end you revoke this hostility against me. Dead sure."

"T-There's no--"

After all this would mean that I allowed her killing Mogi-san; that I chose to erase my feelings for her.

"You can't believe me? Then shall I tell you the reason I've heard countless times from you?"

I bit on my lips.

Otonashi-san considered the conversation as ended and turned away.

"This conviction of yours can hold on more than 20,000 times without any problems. I'll admit just this conviction."

I raised my face spontaneously.

She that she «admits» me just now, right? This Otonashi-san has?

"Wait a moment."

There's one thing I have to ask no matter what.

Otonashi-san turned only her head to me.

"You stopped trying to retrieve the 'box' from me, right?"

"Yeah. Haven't I said so?"

"Then--what are you planning to do from now on?"

There was no change in Otonashi-san's expression. But she gazed straight at me without averting her eyes.

I was the one who averted his glance unintentionally upon this extremely straightforward gaze.

"Ah--"

In this instant--Otonashi-san walked away without saying anything.

Without having answered my question.



Otonashi-san didn't return to the classroom after this - maybe she went home.

Fifth lesson. I couldn't understand the formula in the math lesson right away, although I probably heard it for a gazillion times already, and watched Mogi-san all the time instead.

Will I really abandon Mogi-san? Will I really break off these feelings for her on my own accord?

No. This isn't possible. It doesn't matter what the me of the past thought.

The current me won't give up on Mogi-san. That's all that matters.

The fifth lesson ended.

I headed immediately to Mogi-san. She noticed me and looked back at me with big eyes. My body stiffened up just by this like a stone. My heart loses its usual rhythm.

Just by looking at her. This means that what I'm going to tell her now is just this special to me.

An action I would certainly not take in the usual everyday life.

But I can't help it. I can't think of another way to retain my memories.

I can't think of another way than to confess to Mogi-san.

"...Mogi-san"

I guess I'm doing a pretty strange face right now. Mogi-san looked at me wondering and inclined her head.

"Err, there's something I'd like to--"

«Please wait until tomorrow.»

"---ah"

A picture passed through my mind. A voice started replaying arbitrary. This was as clear as if glass was thrust into my eyes, eardrums and brain and hurt.

My chest was pulsating aggressively as if it was beaten by a hammer.

N-No--

I don't want to remember. Even though I don't want to remember. Even though I wanted to consider it as having not happened countless times, it doesn't disappear. Even though I can forget any other important recollection, only this one I can not forget.

Yeah, that's right--

A long time ago--I already confessed to Mogi-san.

"...what's wrong?"

".....sorry, it's nothing."

I took distance from Mogi-san. She raised her eyebrow suspiciously but didn't question me any further.

I returned to my seat and let my upper body fall prostrate on the desk.

".....I see."

Now that I think of it, it's obvious. After all I've come to repeat this day for over 20,000 times.

I confess to Mogi-san. But I forget. So I confess again. And forget again. In order to resist the 'Rejecting Classroom', I've made this confession, I don't even want to do, over and over and over and over again, and forgot it like this.

And I got each time the answer I don't want to hear the most.

It's always the same one. It's decidedly always the same answer. Well, there's no way it would change. Mogi-san can't retain her memories and thus her answer can't change either.

This answer--

"Please wait until tomorrow."

Truly cruel. Mind you--this tomorrow will never come.

Getting a matchless determination, plucking up the courage I'd originally wouldn't be able to take, stretching the nerves to the limit - and even so, these honest words of mine disappear entirely as if they didn't happen. And then, like now, I have to come in contact with her, who has lost those memories of my confession countless times.

...I see. They don't become not happened.

There's nothing from the start.

There's nothing in this world from the start. There's no value in anything in a world that becomes not happened. There's equally no value in beautiful things, nor in ugly things, nor in precious things, nor in shabby things, nor in beloved things, nor in hated things.

That's why there's nothing. Only emptiness.

This elusive emptiness is called 'Rejecting Classroom'.

I felt nauseous. I'm breathing at such a place. I wanted to vomit it all out. But if I did so, I couldn't live on in here. I can't live without breathing. But if I continue to breath emptiness, then my body will get empty as well. I'll get as hollow as a sponge.

Or--was it too late for me long ago and I'm already empty?

"What's wrong Kazu-kun? Are you feeling unwell?"

When I heard a familiar voice, I raised my face slowly while lying on the desk. Kokone was standing in front of me with a frown.

"That reminds me, you had a nose bleed during gymnastics, right? It might be due to the influence of that, you know? If you don't feel well, should we go to the infirmary?"

"There's no need to worry about him, Kiri. I bet the origin is rather the lap he slept on than his nose bleed."

Daiya, who stood near to me without me noticing, said so.

"Lap...? ...ah! I see! So that's it! Whaat, just a lovesickness..."

Then she grinned and slapped me on the shoulders encouragingly.

"Yo-u! You you! Isn't this a bit saucy, considering it's you? Please do not do something mature like looove."

"Swayed by such a plain seduction - ludicrous."

"N-No! I've always loved--"

I stopped my words midway. This was a verbal slip in various senses. For one I admit my feelings for Mogi-san doing so, and first of all--

"Ha? You didn't have any special feelings for Mogi until yesterday, did you?"

--it's not the truth.

In actual fact I fell in love with her today. At least from Daiya and the other's viewpoint, this was a sudden awakening of my feelings. Aah, I see... so that's why no one knew of my affection to her, even though it's clearly visible from my attitude.

"Hey hey, more than this Daiya. It looks like this guy just admitted his unrequited love to Kasumi. Uhihi."

Kokone grinned and poked her elbow at Daiya.

"Yeah. In the best case this might entertain me for a longer time."

"Uhehe... the love of others is fun after all! Mh, Mh. Don't worry. Onee-chan is supporting you! I'll give you advice and even help you! If you get dumped, I'll console you! But if you should succeed, I'll kill you, since I get irritated."

"No worries. If the two of them should start going out, I'll steal her from him."

"Uwaa, that sounds funny! The misfortune of others and muddled love triangles! Superb!"

...ignoring that I'm not in excellent form. Those two are really cruel.

Well, but I fortunately XX's not here. If he was here, then he would ride on the opportunity and lead the conversation to a way that would end in a--

"--huh?"

"Mhh? What's the matter, Kazu-kun?"

"No, just... I was wondering where he is. Is he taking today off?"

"Who are you talking about?"

Daiya asked making a suspicious face. This is odd. I thought Daiya would know who I'm talking about when I use this speaking style.

"You don't know? Naturally it's-----"

-----err, who?

Huh? Wait a sec! I was, I myself was about to say a certain person's name. So why can I not only not remember the name, but not even the face?

"...Kazu-kun? What's wrong? Who were you talking about?"

I felt sick as if I swallowed something half-liquid like a slime, what made me want scratch off my gullet. But I was lucky just feeling this disgust. You see, if I gulped down completely and excreted it, then XX would disappear.

"H-Hey... Kazu-kun!"

No problem. I can remember it. I can remember thanks to the disgust.

"---Haruaki"

The name of my dear friend. The colleague that pledged to be my ally forever.

...only slightly, but I hoped. I hoped that only I forgot Haruaki for some reason. But I really am an idiot. This hope--

"Oi, Kazu. Who is this 'Haruaki'?"

--could never be fulfilled.

I gritted my teeth upon this vexing sensation. Daiya and Kokone frowned at my strange behavior.

Those two forgot. Although they know him for far longer, being his childhood friends.

The fact that «Haruaki» does not exist here, was thrust with no mercy at me, and--

"I'll go home."

--was a fatal wound for me.

I stood up, took just my bag, turned my back to them and walked away to leave the classroom.

I can't endure being here any longer.

Why isn't Haruaki here?

I know why. I know it. Haruaki was 'rejected'.

By whom? That's decided. He was decidedly 'rejected' by the «Hero» who caused this 'Rejecting Classroom'.

I misunderstood. I thought the 'Rejecting Classroom' was to continue the everyday life forever. How foolish. There's no way it would be like this. The everyday life is called everyday life because it flows continuously. If you stop the flow of a river, then mud will gather and paint it black. It's the same like this. Sediment has gathered here.

Aah, I see. I guess I noticed this fact many times already. However much I repeated, I noticed this fact. And then I stopped being hostile to Aya Otonashi.

Aya Otonashi will destroy the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

How could I stop this?

The chime rang. I suppose most of my classmates have already gathered.

I turned around before leaving the classroom.

An empty seat. Another empty seat. Another empty seat. And there's another one. Aah... I knew it already, but no one is doubting those unusual many empty seats.



I probably knew it. But I didn't think about it because I didn't want to admit it.

Aya Otonashi came to the conclusion that it's impossible to retrieve the 'box' from me.

In the first place it's easy to end the 'Rejecting Classroom' as soon as you know the culprit. It was to retrieve the 'box' that she repeated those 20,000 times.

So--what can I do?

That's obvious.

My limbs flew around when I was run over by the truck. It seemed extremely comical to me to see my familiar right leg lying far away from me. Somehow I could laugh.

"So it ends here..."

I was «killed». I let me get killed.

"27,753 meaningless recurrences. So this time ended in completely wasted effort? I have to... I have to admit that even I am tired now."

To be exact I'm not yet dead. But lying in my own pool of blood, I understood. I will die. There's no rescue for me. So I was indeed killed by her.

"Ugh...! I spent just this outrageous amount of time and what I got is this. I never before hated my own inability more than now...!"

She murmured so in bitter regret.

"...let's move on. I couldn't find the 'box' here. I just have to seek the next 'box'."

Aya Otonashi's eyes weren't perceiving me anymore. No, surely those eyes have never perceived me.

Aya Otonashi was from the start to the end just looking at the 'box' inside me.

Will this also be declared as «it didn't happen»? No, it won't. If the 'box' called 'The Rejecting Classroom' is inside my body, then it gets smashed with my dead. And like my flesh was smashed by the truck, this 'box' is already smashed as well.

It won't repeat anymore.

Aah, what irony. If this was the only way to end the 'Rejecting Classroom', then death was the only thing that was decided from the start. Well, naturally it's empty. This world was surely--the world after my death.

But with this, our fight has come to an end.

It was a one-sided fight with no surprises, but it comes to an end here.

Yeah--that's what you're convinced of. Right, Otonashi-san?

You're pitiful. I feel so from the bottom of my heart, Otonashi-san!

I guess it's because you disregarded me all the time. If not, you wouldn't have made such a misunderstanding.

That's why this meaningless time continued.

Listen, Otonashi-san. It should have been simple if you thought about it. There is no way that an usual person like me could be the «Hero».

I wanted to tell her, but this wasn't possible anymore. I couldn't even move my mouth.

My consciousness fades away. I'm going to die now.

And then---nothing will end.

I was inside a scene I couldn't remember outside of my dreams.

I had accepted the 'box' from him.

"Please be at ease! Usually there are risks to such things, but there's none to this. And you won't lose anything precious, nor will your soul be drained out. You know, it's not the special characteristic of the tool that adds such negative components, but the nature of the human using it. If you use it correctly, your wish will come true as is."

If you use it correctly--

But is this condition really simple to meet? I don't know. I don't know, but even if there was a risk of this extent, this would still be an extraordinary condition. Just like a certain win at the lottery. There sure is the possibility to destroy one's life with the big cash. But you don't consider that as risk usually, right?

So please tell me if there's a person who wouldn't accept this 'box'.

"---What's the meaning of this?"

Because here's a person who passes it back.

"Are you restraining yourself? Can you not believe my words? Or--do you fear me?"

Each applies, of course.

But that's not my reason. I simply don't need such a thing.

You see, my wish is that this everyday life continues. I have this already without using this 'box'.

Like a man that owns a trillion Yen doesn't strive for a million Yen. Of course I'm aware of its value. In that case I can't accept such a thing from a mysterious human.

Right. I surely rejected the 'box'.

Thus--

Even if I wished for this recurrence so that my everyday life can continue, there's no way I'd be the culprit.

27753rd time

**rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp*---*

What is this sound, I wonder? It's an extremely low sound, I almost overhear if I don't perk up my ears. But a sound I mustn't overhear, that is coming from inside me.

**rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp*---*

There's a tiny, tiny rasp applied to me. Where? --well, the sound comes from within me, so it's shaving off my inside of course.

**rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp*
rasp---*

Even though the sound's very low, it sounds to me extremely loud, so I reflexively blocked my ears. But doing so just lets me hear it better. Aah, naturally. Of course I can hear the sound from within me even better, when I block my ears. So I am not even able to block my ears. I can never ever escape from the sound of myself getting abraded.

And it hurts. As expected, being abraded hurts. I bet it feels like this when the heart turns into a balloonfish. A continuous prickling pain. Are these feelings of guilt? And I was sure this was the first feeling I've lost. More stubborn than I thought.

**rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp* *rasp*
rasp---*

I'm getting abraded.

My heart.

I myself.

Aah, my innards are going to lose their shape and will crumble to small pieces like wood shavings if it goes on like this. Mhmm, no. It's already---too late. I'm already just small pieces.

In these 20,000 recurrences, I stopped being myself. I'm self-aware of this fact. I couldn't endure this boredom and lost my heart. I can't even communicate properly with others anymore.

This world is rejecting me.

Well, of course. This isn't my place to be from the start. I've thrust myself into it forcedly. The classroom of everyone is always rejecting me.

I know how I could attain ease.

But I won't do such a thing.

That is because--my wish hasn't been granted yet.

...huh? But I already crumbled to small pieces. So why can I retain only this wish like this? Is this even possible? My wish was abraded together with my heart. As proof--

--I can't remember this wish.

"--ahaha"

I laughed unintentionally. Right, I can't remember. Ahaha, I can't remember. What was my wish again? Come on, let me remember! Ahaha stop kidding me, so why did I endure these recurrences which aren't anything but torture? I can only laugh. Though I can only laugh, aah, I forgot how to laugh already long ago, and raise my laughter expressionlessly.

So--I could as well just end it.

An extremely simple conclusion. I wonder why I couldn't think of such a thing?

I just have to kill him. Right, I just have to kill him. I just have to kill Kazuki Hoshino. After all he's the origin of this agony. If I can attain ease by doing so, then I just have to kill him quickly.

But somewhere I know.

This «tenacity» of mine that was once called my «wish» won't grant me an end.



27754th time

My body became rapidly cold and then empty, but although this means I myself should have become empty, I opened my eyes as always. Not being able to endure this coldness, that should have passed already, I embraced myself on the bed and trembled.

I was killed.

On March 2 of some loop.

Right, even if I get killed, this 'Rejecting Classroom' will continue without change. But it did feel like I'm getting empty, so this coldness didn't subdue.

I couldn't stand being too long here and thus went early to school without eating breakfast properly.

Outside was the familiar cloudy sky. Tomorrow is going to rain. Come to think of it, when was the last time I saw the sun?

Nobody was in the classroom. Well, I guess that's natural, since I'm one hour early.

A question suddenly occurred to me. Why do I go to the classroom so uprightly? I noticed the recurrence of the 'Rejecting Classroom' many times already. Even now. So couldn't I just not go to school to resist this recurrence?

No... I go! Yeah, I go. If I'm healthy, I go to school. To me, this is my everyday life . A definitive matter I don't even dream of changing. An action I don't change at any cost; in order to maintain my everyday life. My one and only belief.

Ah, I see. That might be the reason I'm still here. I have not the slightest idea about this logic, but that's what I feel.

Even if I end up alone in this classroom.

"----"

I moved to the center of the classroom. I climbed on the desk of someone with my shoes. I'm sorry XX-san. When I tried to recall whose desk I was standing on, I couldn't remember the name nor the face. Sorry, I'm really sorry.

I looked around. I knew from the start that nothing would change just by standing on top of a desk, but there was no one in the dim classroom.

There is no one in the classroom.

There is no one in the classroom.

".....mh, I'm kinda cold."

I embraced myself.

The door opened with a sound. This person spotted right away me standing on the desk of someone and frowned.

"...what are you doing there, Kazu?"

Daiya sent me uncomfortably a glance.

I noticed that just with this my face relaxed.

".....aah, really, I'm relieved."

I murmured so and climbed down from the desk. Daiya was watching me in the meantime, unchanged with a frown.

"You know, seeing you really calms me down, Daiya."

".....that's fortunate."

"After all, you sure are the real Daiya."

"...hey Kazu. Right now I'm feeling dread of a human for the first time in ages."

"But you know, even if you're the real Daiya, this world is still a fake everyday life. I can't share anything with you. The next Daiya won't know the current me. It's like I'm the only one outside of the TV. I just one-sidedly come to know you. So can I really claim that you're here?"

That's why there is no one here.

--no one?

"Ah---"

No, that's not correct.

There was just one other.

There was just one other person that can share memories with me. There was a person that can't get away as long I don't omit retaining my memories.

Aah, I see. There were only the two of us in this 'Rejecting Classroom' all the time. Not being able to break out and not even trying to, we were beside each other all the time within this small, small space of the size of the classroom. But I didn't have the leisure to notice, because the other person looked at me as hostile.

I sit down at my seat.

She sits down at the seat beside me.

...I can't believe it. Just by imagining her sitting there, I calmed down a bit. Even though she was the one that killed me.



Is it because of this?

Because? What is, because? I don't understand the meaning of this. I can't grasp my own feelings. But my body warmth dropped even more. Rapidly. No, worse. My body was already cold from the core, but reached now the zero point, froze, ached because of this and then stiffened completely.

"I am Aya Otonashi. Pleased to meet you."

The «Transfer Student» acted almost like a real transfer student and smiled lightly, seeming a bit abashed.

".....what on earth?"

I couldn't understand the meaning of this.

No, to be honest, I understood.

«--...I'm firmly involved in 'The Rejecting Classroom'. I guess I'd get captured in 'The Rejecting Classroom' if I gave up and abandoned remembering. I would continue to live meaninglessly in this endless recurrence. That's about as easy as to spill a cup of water that's put on my head.»

A voice I heard once, replayed.

I looked at her standing at the platform. I verified her features, came to the conclusion that it had to be her, but couldn't believe it.

She is--Aya Otonashi?

That's impossible. After all there's no way she'd give up.

Yeah, even if she recognizes that the person she chased for more than 20,000 'School Transfers' wasn't the culprit and everything she had done until now became meaningless; there's no way she'd give up. There's no way! There's no way she would ever give up!

I mean, this--wouldn't suit her.

The number of our classmates had gone down to the half because they were 'rejected'. Regardless, everyone was throwing questions at her. She answered those short and simple, but properly. She didn't reject them coldly as she did before.

Almost like a real transfer student.

This scene should not be possible. Hence, this happening is fake. Lies. Everyone is just a lie. Everything is a lie. Then--is Aya Otonashi a lie, too?

--I won't,

--I won't,

"I won't permit this!"

Even if everyone permits, I won't.

I won't let Aya Otonashi become a fake.

"...what is the matter, Hoshino?"

Kokubo-sensei asked so for some reason. Why? Aah, because I stood up all of a sudden?

I sneaked a peek at Mogi-san. The glances of my classmates focused on me, and so was the glance of Mogi-san. But as expected, I was unable to guess what she's thinking behind her expressionless face.

She surely wouldn't give me an answer if I asked what she thinks of what I'm doing right now. We spent a long time together in this classroom. Despite of this, our relation has come to a still stand.

Tomorrow needs to arrive in order for our relation to exceed classmates.

Right, Mogi-san's not here.

There is no one here.

That's why... it's enough already.

I abandoned all my classmates who will forget my strange behavior anyway.

I looked only at Otonashi-san. I walked towards the platform she was standing at.

The action I'm going to take now is as unnatural for me as the confession to Mogi-san.

I stood in front of Otonashi-san.

Otonashi-san didn't show any signs of unrest and took a long evaluative look at me. I got extremely irritated by this expression of her which looked like she's seeing me for the first time.

"Hey, what's wrong Hoshino?"

Kokubo-sensei's voice was calm, but I could recognize unrest in it. My classmates were also asking similar things.

I ignored all of them and kneeled in front of Otonashi-san. I lowered my head and held out my hand to her.

"What are you doing?"

Otonashi-san said. In a polite tone she would never use for me.

"I've come to meet you."

In that case I'll do so, too!

"...what are you saying?"

"I've come to meet you, Maria-sama. I am Hathaway, the one that pledged to protect only you, even if this means to betray everyone and making everyone an enemy."

The noise of the surrounding people disappeared in an amusing way. Yeah, that's right. In order to take Otonashi-san back, I had to at least make her realize that these people do not exist. That makes this condition very easy to understand.

I waited for Aya Otonashi to take my hand without raising my face. I waited like this for her to lay her hand on mine to start the dance.

But it didn't work out.

Otonashi-san didn't take my hand.

Together with a dull sound, I collapsed to the side.

"...you're gross."

I didn't know what kind of attack this was, since I had my head lowered. Lying on the ground I looked up at her and finally understood what had been done to me. She gave me a knee kick from the right.

Aah, yeah. Understandable. I wonder why I had such a naïve delusion, that she'd hold out her hand.

"---fu"

With no doubt, if she's really «Aya Otonashi», then there's no way she'd be as kind to me as to hold out her hand.

"Fu, fufufu..."

Apparently not being able to hold it back anymore, Otonashi-san laughed. Amused from the heart. Probably to an extent I did not see once before in these 20,000 times.

I was still lying on the ground and my head hurt, but my cheeks relaxed in relief.

"You've made me wait for quite a while, haven't you, my beloved Hathaway? I'm amazed how you dared making a frail lady like me, who can barely lift more than a spoon, wait. I never thought you'd leave me alone for 27,753 times on the battlefield!"

Otonashi-san leaned over to me and held her hand out.

She grabbed my hand and pulled me forcefully up.

Yeah, that's it.

That's how Aya Otonashi is supposed to be.

"...but thanks to this you've become tough."

Otonashi opened her eyes wide taken by surprise. Then she raised the corner of her mouth again.

"You've become skillful with words, Hathaway."

Otonashi-san pulled me like this by the wrist out of the classroom.

Ignoring homeroom. Ignoring the teacher. Ignoring the students. Ignoring everything. Ignoring everything I abandoned, we left the classroom.



After I was dragged out of the classroom, I was told to sit on the rear seat of a large motorcycle and had to wear a helmet. I was quite frightened of this speed I experienced for the first time, and asked her in a quivering voice "Otonashi-san, do you have a driver license?", while feeling her surprisingly slender waist (well, it was as slender as it looked, but somehow I unconsciously demand reliability from her). She answered bluntly with "There's no way I'd have one".

"I had too much spare time between the 'School Transfers', so I acquired this skill. I use my time resourcefully, don't you think?"

...well, her driving skill doesn't seem half bad.

When I asked her then, if she acquired some other skills, she answered with "Of course". Car driving was within what I expected, but apart from that she also learned martial arts, sports, languages, various musical instruments, and so on. Generally speaking, she tried out about everything she was able to under the conditions of the recurrences of this 'Rejecting Classroom'. But Otonashi-san, who apparently would be able to get almost full points in the National Center Test for University Admissions, proclaimed that "Well, I knew most of that stuff already before the 'School Transfers'".

Her basic specs might be high from the start, but this also gave me a feeling of just how much time she spent in those 27,754 times. I can't calculate it exactly, but converted to days this would result in about 76 years. About the lifespan of a human. An incredible time span, now I think about it again.

"Say, Otonashi-san. You're of the same age as me, right?"

Probably because of those thoughts, I became curious of her actual age.

"...no, I'm not."

"Eh? Then how old?"

"That doesn't matter, does it?"

Otonashi-san answered, lightly ill-humored. Is this perhaps something, she doesn't want to be asked? Well, I heard it's impolite to ask girls for their age... in other words she's of an age where this applies?

Thinking about it, there's no way that there'd be a such mature student in the same school year. She only chose to be a classmate because this position was handy for slipping into the 'Rejecting Classroom'. Perhaps she's already at an age, where it counts as Cosplay to wear a uniform?

"Hoshino, if you're having rude thoughts, I'll throw you off."

Without even looking at me because she's driving. She's sharp!

"By the way, you learned how to drive a motorcycle during the 'School Transfers', right? In that case, this bike isn't yours, right? Who's is it? Your father's?"

I'm not versed in motorcycles, but this one doesn't look like it was built for girls.

"Beats me."

"...eh?"

"Don't you think it's careless to leave a bike alone in front of the house with the keys left in the lock?"

Well, I think so, too, but, what? So that means...

"Also the chain lock was poorly-built and could be easily cut up with some tools. It's always the same every time I 'transfer'. Well, naturally."

Let's not ask in-depth. I don't know anything. Yeah, I have no clue.

"But say. If you lose your memories, then this driving skill, the other skills and the knowledge you acquired will be lost as well, right?"

That would be a real shame.

"....."

Otonashi-san didn't answer me.

"Otonashi-san?"

Still no answer. Could it be--

"Do you also think it'd be a shame?"

Could it be that she didn't absorb this much knowledge and skills just to kill time? Even someone like Otonashi-san finds it regrettable to lose those finally acquired abilities. Thus she doesn't want to lose her memories. That's what I think.

In order to produce this «regrettable» feeling, she went on acquiring skills.

Which reminds me--

Although a bit late, I started wondering.

--why did Otonashi-san act like she had lost all her memories?

In the end she led me to the, not top class but, most expensive-looking hotel in the vicinity, which was obviously not affordable for a common high school student. Otonashi-san checked in accustomedly, turned down the hotel man that wanted to lead us, and started advanced determinedly.

When we arrived at the room, Otonashi-san sat down immediately on the sofa.

I sat down on the bed, while suppressing the uneasiness of being in a high class hotel. ...actually it would be quite a stunning situation to be alone with a girl in a hotel. But with Otonashi-san being the other party, I didn't feel strange tension surprisingly, since being with her seemed just too unreal.

"Still, you sure are rich Otonashi-san. Well, you look indeed so."

"Whether I'm wealthy or not had nothing to do with it. The money will return anyway when I am 'transferred' again."

"...true, now that you mention it. So that means, I'd be able to buy up all Umaibōs in the convenience store. Awesome!"

"That doesn't matter now. We didn't come here to discuss such trifling matters, did we?"

"R-Right. What do you want to discuss specifically?"

"What actions we'll take from now on. After all my pointer was lost completely with you not being the culprit."

"I'm so sorry."

"Cut out the sarcasm."

I didn't put in any.

"But then, well, wouldn't it be best to just find the real culprit? Don't get me wrong; I know it's not simple, but wouldn't it work out better now you've lost this preoccupation against me?"

"...Hoshino. I have experienced 27,754 'School Transfers'. Are you aware of that?"

"...what do you mean?"

"I've told you a bit of this last time, haven't I? However much I mistook you for the culprit, it's not like I didn't doubt the other people. I also tried to come in contact with the other suspects with a mindset of not knowing the culprit yet. ...of course I was probably negligent to a certain extent, since I mistook you for the culprit."

"But you didn't find any other possible culprit except me?"

"Yes. Realize that this is the 27,754th time. This means the 'owner' of the 'box' is a person who didn't give himself away for such a time span."

"Err, couldn't it be that he noticed you because you acted too boldly?"

"Even if he was cautious of me, it would be impossible. We're talking about the amount of time of 27,754 times, you know? Or do you say that the 'owner' has the fortitude and wit to continue hiding his true colors for just so long? Well, but it's also true that I could not find him. Jeez... the 'owner' can only be someone who enters this classroom, and yet, why can't I find him?"

"...wait a sec. What do you mean by saying the owner could only be someone who enters this classroom? So the 'owner' has to be one of our classmates?"

Which reminds me that Otonashi-san mentioned that there aren't many suspects last time.

"No. The teachers and the students of the other classes, that come to our 1-6 classroom each time, are suspects, too. The range of this 'Rejecting Classroom' is, as the name implies, only the classroom of class 1-6. Only the people that entered the classroom 1-6 during March 2 and March 3 are involved in this phenomenon."

.....? But I left the classroom and saw various other people actually.

"Your face tells me that you don't understand. Hoshino. In the first place, do you believe it's really possible to turn back in time?"

"Eh...?"

What does she mean? If I deny here, then the basic concept of all this won't hold true, will it?

"...but isn't the 'box' what makes this possible?"

"I guess so. It sure would be possible with the 'box'. But I'm asking for your opinion. Can you fully believe in the power of this thing to turn back the time? Do you think such a phenomenon is even possible?"

I had no clue what Otonashi-san was trying to say.

"I think--"

Thus I just answered her question honestly without pondering about her intention.

"--happened things cannot be changed by any means."

Even I thought already countless times «If only I could turn back the time». But assuming there was a time machine, I surely would still not be able to believe in time traveling. I probably wouldn't even believe it when I actually traveled back to the past until I gain a thorough proof that this is the past, or no, maybe I wouldn't even then.

I don't know whether this was the correct answer, but Otonashi-san nodded with a "Mhm".

"Your sentiment is probably normal. And the creator of this 'Rejecting Classroom' was having the same sentiment."

"...what do you mean?"

"The 'box' makes the inserted thought come true completely. Through and through flawlessly. In other words--even the doubts about traveling back in time will come true together. You understand what this means, right?"

"Err...."

Wanting to turn back the time, but not believing in it. This resignation will probably crook the shape of the wish. I understand that.

"But weren't you actually sent back to the past?"

"Hoshino. Did I only once refer to this phenomenon as «being sent back to the past»?"

There was no way I would know since I had lost most of my memories of her.

"Let's say it straightly. If this 'Rejecting Classroom' was born out of the wish of wanting to turn back the time, it's poorly made. No, rather it's defective."

"So why did you experience over 20,000 recurrences, Otonashi-san?"

"Isn't just this the proof that it's defective? If the time was turned back perfectly, then there's no way my memories would kindly be excluded from this phenomenon. And in the first place, if these recurrences were so perfect, then how could I slip in as «Transfer Student»?"

She gave me a side-glance.

"Considering it's you, I bet you thought something simple like if it's me everything is possible and stopped thinking there."

I couldn't object because she was spot-on.

"To say it simply, all I did was getting into the 'box'. For example, it wasn't on my own will that I was made a «transfer student». It's a position given to me by the role-division of the culprit. The stage of the 'Rejecting Classroom' is the classroom 1-6, so I guess it was the most natural way to explain the sudden slipping in of me; since I'm of the same generation as you. The feelings of balance of the culprit preserved the consistency."

".....?"

I had no clue what Otonashi-san was saying. Why is it necessary to keep some consistency?

"Why do you only lack comprehension so much... anyway, to explain it simply--let's assume the 'Rejecting Classroom' is a movie the culprit is directing. The filming has ended so only the editing is left to be done. But due to the circumstances of the company, there's a new actor that has to appear in the movie. There's no cast left anymore. But it's unreasonable to not give him a role and instead just showing this additional actor standing still on the screen. That wouldn't be a movie anymore. So instead he decides to modify the script to the lowest degree in order to give him a role. That's what I mean by 'preserving the consistency'."

"In other words he couldn't do anything against you slipping in and had to somehow integrate you. So he was forced to make you a sudden «transfer student» and preserved the school life of March 2 like this?"

"Yes. And just that should make you feel that something's wrong with this 'Rejecting Classroom'. It's too bothersome to explain each and everything so I'll go straight to the conclusion. This is not «reality». Nor is it a recurrence. It's merely a separated small «space». It's just a clumsy 'wish' that holds true as long the culprit himself continues to mistake this as a loop of time."

"Err... so that's why the recurrences were imperfect?"

"Exactly. The culprit just doesn't believe it's possible to turn back the time, but doesn't allow the time to proceed. He's just rejecting it. The 'owner' is satisfied as long he can deceive himself."

"This imperfectness is the reason why we can retain our memories?"

"I guess so. The reasons why we can retain our memories may differ, but it's without a doubt a gap in the 'Rejecting Classroom'."

But there was something I couldn't understand no matter what.

"But in the end, who are you? Otonashi-san."

Otonashi-san frowned openly. Maybe it was a question she wanted to avoid.

"Ah, no... you don't have to tell me if you don't want to..."

However, she opened her mouth, still frowning.

"There's no pleasant title to me like you you may be expecting. I'm just a student. ... is what I'd like to say, but this applies only for until one year ago... My standpoint, huh? I have never named it, but right, there's probably only one way to express it. I am--"

Otonashi-san spitted her next words out seeming very displeased.

"--a 'box' itself."

"A 'box' itself? What do you mean?"

When I asked back like a parrot because I didn't understand, Otonashi-san frowned even more.

"There will be hindrances if I explain the details to you. Thus I can't tell you."

I was a bit discontented. And this was apparently reflected in my expression, so Otonashi-san continued after looking at me.

"But I'll tell you just this. I have once obtained and used a 'box'."

"Eh--!!"

"And this wish of mine is still being granted."

Otonashi-san is holding a 'box'?

"You're curious about my reason of seeking the 'box' anyway, aren't you? Very well, I shall teach you. My 'wish' sure was granted. But at the same time I've lost everything."

"...everything?"

"My family, friends, classmates, relatives, teachers, neighbors - I lost all people intimate to me due to my 'wish'. All people related to me aren't, here anymore."

I became speechless.

"This isn't... some kind of metaphor, but literal?"

"Yes. I can't leave it all lost. This is the reason why I'm acting."

She has lost everything. She has nothing to lose anymore. This might be why Otonashi-san can be so recklessness and fearless in a sense.

At any rate, to wish for such a situation, heck what kind of 'wish' did she insert into the 'box'?

"Isn't it possible to destroy this 'box'? Wouldn't this wish get ineffective by destroying it?"

"Hoshino."

Otonashi-san said with a strong admonishing tone upon my natural doubt.

"The 'box' is granting my wish. Do you get it? Don't make me say more than this."

Right. There's no way Otonashi-san didn't think of this natural doubt herself. In other words, it's like this:

The 'box' did certainly take everything away from her. But even so--Otonashi-san doesn't want to make this 'wish' ineffective.

When I kept silence, Otonashi-san took again the lead and started talking.

"My 'wish' and the 'wish' of the 'owner' of the 'Rejecting Classroom' can't exist together. The 'box' is made like this. Hence they repelled each other when I slipped in and the interference against me was reduced. But only «reduced». Put another way I can't avoid the effect of the

'Rejecting Classroom', too. Even I don't know how much I'm affected. If I gave in, I'd also be captured within the 'Rejecting Classroom'... what I already told you long ago, huh?"

In that case what does the 'owner' think of Otonashi-san? At least he's not likely to perceive her as pleasant.

"You should now finally have understood the situation to a degree, so I'll return our topic. I guess it's not possible anymore to retrieve the 'Rejecting Classroom' and use it. This 'box' is already used up by the 'owner', so it's alright to just end the 'Rejecting Classroom'."

"How can we end the 'Rejecting Classroom'?"

"By tearing out the 'box' from the 'owner'. Alternatively by destroying it together with the 'owner'. That's about it. Another possibility would be... to find him, the distributor of the 'box', since he might be able to do something. But he shouldn't be inside the 'box', so this doesn't seem like an option."

The distributor of the 'box'?

I was about to ask her about him--but stopped.

I don't know about this "*" I should have met already, and I don't want to know about him either.

".....so nothing will start as long we don't find the culprit, right?"

"Oh? Nothing will start, you say, huh? So you just complained implicitly to me that our conversation up to now was completely meaningless, nonconstructive and a waste of time, right? You've got some nerve."

"N-No! That was just a confirmation..."

"Hmph, so there a prospects that you can solve this problem, even I couldn't solve, with your knowledge and wit? I'm sure you didn't say so without idea in your mind, right?"

"Ugh..."

I winced. There's no way I'd have such an idea.

"If I knew how, then there'd be no way I wouldn't find him. But, right... unlike the other ones, the 'owner's death won't be forgiven inside the 'Rejecting Classroom'. For example, I died

countless times inside this 'Rejecting Classroom' but I'm here now and I haven't lost my 'box'."

"But the 'owner' is different?"

"Yeah, exactly. The 'owner' and the 'box' are connected. The instant the 'owner' dies, the 'Rejecting Classroom' will be destroyed. This should be certain since I could affirm this in another similar case. The 'box' would break in the moment the 'owner' dies, and at the same time the characteristics of the 'Rejecting Classroom' would be annihilated and the concept of death would be restored."

"So he'd stay dead like this...?"

"Exactly."

"So I can say I'm not the culprit. Also, naturally, you're not the culprit as well."

"Well, yeah."

So Mogi-san can't be the culprit as well. I mean, Mogi-san met with this accident already.

"Say, some of our classmates have disappeared, right? Has this nothing to do with death?"

"...I can't tell for sure, but there shouldn't be any relation. I still don't know the purpose in this, but probably it's another characteristic of the 'Rejecting Classroom'."

--wait!

I suddenly noticed. A simple way to determine the culprit.

At the same time, the blood vanished from my head. What am I thinking? This is just too despicable. But, but--

If it was for Aya Otonashi, she could do it.

I mustn't say it. But why didn't Otonashi-san notice this method? There's no way she wouldn't notice. But she didn't execute it. This means? What does this mean---?

"Hoshino."

My body jumped up when my name was called.

"What are you thinking? You surely didn't think of a way to find the 'owner'--"

My body jumped up again.

"--you thought of one, Hoshino?"

"Ah, no--"

"Clouding is futile. How much time do you think have I spent together with you. I have been chasing you longer than anyone in this world. Unwilling, though."

I'm aware of this. Everyone would notice that I'm trying to cloud.

"----"

But there's no way I could tell her so easily.

"Hoshino. Even you should be aware that I'm not a very patient person."

She isn't one who would fall for a random lie. Even if I tried to evade her question, I'd surely blurt out the method in the end.

But still--

"Hoshino!!"

Otonashi-san seized me by the collar. Ah, painful. She's serious. ...well, of course. After all she endured more than 20,000 recurrences just to obtain the 'box'.

"Tell me!! Tell me this method!!"

I will surely regret it if I tell her. But can I really keep quiet in this situation?

"...you just need to kill all our classmates."

Thus I told her.

It's simple. If you can exclude every person, that died at least once, from the suspects, then you do indeed only have to do so. You just need to kill them. Ah, this is kind of simple and devilish.

But people who die here will revive.

There's nothing to worry about. I could by no means do such a division, but I'm sure Otonashi-san is thinking like this.

After all she did produce corpses in order to retain her memories.

But did this really not come into her mind? Why didn't it come to her mind that she could not only use this to retain her memories, but also to trace the culprit? And assuming she did think of this, why didn't she execute this effective method when she just needed to repeat it for only about 40 times?

She didn't answer.

She didn't show any reaction.

I slowly looked at her face.

Otonashi-san was still seizing me by the collar and stared at me without winking.

"This is--"

Otonashi-san removed her hand quietly from my collar.

"This is--not a method."

"...eh?"

"That would be something like tests on a living person. Of course it's the best way to use humans if you want to know how much humans get influenced. But this act shouldn't even be considered as a method from the start."

Otonashi-san spitted out these words in a low voice without averting her gaze from me.

"You want to know why? This is decided. Because such an act is inhuman. The moment someone does such a thing, he isn't a human anymore. ...yeah, I certainly am a 'box' itself. Is it because of this? Is it because of this you--"

Unmistakable anger was dwelling in Otonashi-san's eyes.

"--you aren't considering me as a human!?"

Aah, certainly, if she did perceive my words like this, then this anger is understandable. I realize that I was thoughtless.

But I can't comprehend.

"But you killed people to retain your memories, haven't you?"

".....what are you saying?"

Otonashi-san didn't seem to be able to endure my words and shot me a sharp glance.

"...a-as I said, you produced happenings that remain in your impression in order to retain your memories, didn't you?"

"Stop insulting me already--!! Didn't I explain it to you just now?! I can only resist because I am a 'box'!"

Aah, right. That she retained her memories by producing corpses was just Daiya's unfounded prediction.

But even so I can't comprehend.

"What's with that face? If you have something to say, then spit it out already!!"

Otonashi-san seized me again by the collar.

At this straight scowl of her, I scowled back.

Yeah... I hadn't prepared myself. I didn't really consider the meaning of me scowling back at her, which was a very uncommon act for me.

She has a grip on me. I am aware of that, and just because of this I did so right now.

But I made a statement who made this break down.

"Then why did you kill me?!!"

And then the words between us were lost.



Our relation that broke down with these words couldn't be returned in the end.

Otonashi-san erased all words or expressions towards me. Completely. With such an Otonashi-san standing before me, I could naturally not do anything and, in the end, had no choice but to leave the hotel.

I loitered around the hotel but this was nothing but reluctance. I just wasted my time aimlessly. I gave the bike of someone we came riding on a side-glance and walked away. I went to the convenience store. I bought tea in a PET bottle. I drunk it bit by bit. It became empty. I noticed that I could almost not remember what I drunk.

This might be the end.

Unlike Otonashi-san, I don't know if I can retain these memories. If she doesn't consider me necessary, I will forget everything and before I know I'll get spit out of the 'Rejecting Classroom'. Then I'll vanish from here like a certain someone.

There was no sound on the path. And there were no street lights nor were there colors.

It was almost as if the one who made all this didn't get around to do all details.

I put the empty bottle on my mouth. I felt like being swallowed if I didn't act like drinking. ...by what? I don't know.

At once, the music of my favorite artist resounded on the silent road. What? ...aah, I see. That's my phone. ...my phone? So someone called me? Right. Right! I can't remember having told her. I can't remember having told Otonashi-san my phone number, but in some world I might have!

I took out my mobile phone from the pocket of my uniform.

The name «Kokone Kirino» was displayed on the LCD screen.

I looked up to the sky. As if such a convenient development would occur! I knew it. But it can't be helped having some expectations, right?

I put my breath in order and accepted the call.

«Ah, hello... Kazu-kun.»

I didn't feel the usual aspiration from her voice, though this might be just me. Or is Kokone always like this on the phone? We might be intimate, but I almost didn't phone with her before.

«Ah, err--»

I have a hunch that I already know this development.

Ah, no, I surely know it. I just can't recall right now.

«Please come for a moment to the place I'll teach you now.»

What was it again? How did this development continue again?

«There's something I have to tell you, Kazu-kun.»

3087th time

I surely love Umaibōs, but in fact I don't like those with Teriyaki Burger flavor that much.

I was at the forlorn park in front of her house. In front of the water fountain we were facing each other while I was chewing on the Umaibō I got from her.

"...how is it?"

".....mh, err, it's not a flavor I don't like, but well..."

"...I'm not really asking about... the Umaibō."

I know that much, but you see, I also don't know how I should react.

"...so, will you go out with me?"

I didn't have enough experience with such things to not get flustered.

But the classmate before me was about the same flustered as me. At least have I never seen her like this before.

Maybe it's because of the new Mascara she told me about this morning, but her already big eyes looked even bigger to me. And those eyes looked straight at me. ...how should I be able to not avert my eyes then?

I didn't know what to say, but I knew that I had to say something, so I opened my mouth.

"So... you love me?"

The face before my eyes blushed crimson.

"...may...be"

"Maybe?"

I unintentionally asked back.

".....W-Why do you ask such a thing back, I wonder? You should know my answer to this, right? ...O-Or do you want me to say it?"

"Ah...!"

I finally noticed just how much I lacked delicateness and hanged my head in shame.

"I'm... sorry."

I reflexively apologized. She looked at me with upturned eyes and murmured.

".....I love you."

Then she pulled herself up and said straight into my face.

"...I love you."

I was spontaneously stunned by her cute face and averted my eyes. My heart swayed just by this affection pointed towards me.

I think she looks cute.

Her personality is bright, too and there are always others beside her.

I also know that many already confessed to her and were turned down.

I think it'd be surely fun to go out with her.

But--

"Sorry."

But I answered her like this. So clearly I was almost surprised myself.

I know it's a waste what I'm doing. But I just can't imagine us going out. It would feel so unreal.

The expectation vanished from her eyes. And tears appeared instead. I couldn't look directly at her although I knew that this was my responsibility.

I couldn't say anything. Because I was sure I'd say 'sorry' if I started to speak.

".....you hesitated quite a bit, mh?"

I nodded to her murmur.

"...say, you like Umaibōs, right?"

Words without context. I nodded also to them.

"But you don't like Teriyaki Burger flavor that much, right?"

"...yeah."

"Which flavor do you like the best?"

"Err... Corn Potage, I suppose?"

I had no clue why she was asking this, but answered awkwardly.

"I see. I see, I see..."

She nodded repeatedly.

"Ahaha... I made a mistake."

These meaningless remarks of her. I wonder why, but for some reason those words struck me. It was like watching a poorly edited video.

"I wonder if there might have been a conclusion in which you accepted my confession if I would have changed my approach?"

She said so with her eyes turned downward.

I don't know. After all I hesitated like this. ...no, that's not true. I know it.

I would turn her down for certain.

I mean, if it's the same me, then I would of course continue to give her the same answer unless the conditions change.

As long it's today, I cannot imagine myself going out with her. Therefore, as long it's today, I can by no means accept her confession.

"Your face tells me that you don't know."

I couldn't say anything upon her words.

But she took this for a 'yes' and finally smiled sweetly.

"Aah, yeah. So I just need to continue confessing until I succeed, right?"

That might not be bad. I want to take at least this much responsibility for rejecting her feelings.

But still--it has to be after today, you know?

27754th time

I was tuckered out after the ruin of Otonashi-san and my relation and the following sudden call from Kokone. ...which is only an excuse, though.

I forgot entirely.

That an accident would for certain happen at the crossways.

I myself am safe. I remembered due to a conditioned reflex when I neared myself this crossways since the shock of me dying once was too big. Self-protection is no problem.

But this was by no means satisfactory for me. Because, if this accidents occurs no matter what, then another one will get run over.

I had forgotten it. And because I had done so, I can't save this person. Although I knew that someone would get run over, I didn't stop it. That I had forgotten it doesn't even count as excuse.

I'm horrible. It's just the same as if I killed this person.

Kasumi Mogi was there.

The girl I love was there.

The truck was driving towards her at breakneck speed as always.

I'm unable to save her from my current position. However reckless I'd jump out, I'm not able to save her from this distance.

She's going to get stained in blood. The girl I love is going to get stained in blood. The girl I love is going to, due to my fault, get stained in blood. Like when I overlooked her over and over, like when it was my responsibility over and over, the girl I love is going to get stained in blood over and over.

"U-UAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

I ran towards the truck. In order to save Mogi-san? No. Certainly not. I just couldn't endure my feelings of guilt and thus wanted to act like I did something. It was merely self-satisfaction.

Horrible. Just how horrible am I?

Then I saw it.

"Eh...?"

The girl, that was past all hope, was thrust away.

It wasn't me.

I was at a distant position from where I could never reach her.

Consequently, there was only one person who could have done it.

Only the girl that continued fighting even when I abandoned my memories and acted like I didn't know her.

Even though she wouldn't make it in time. Even though she wouldn't make it in time to save herself.

But yet, she--

--Aya Otonashi jumped out.

Ah, right. I remembered.

I already witnessed the exactly same scene countless times.

For her, it will all repeat anyway. Even the fact that she saved someone will disappear. What remains is only the memory of the pain until her death. And the fear of encountering death. And the despair of knowing that she will have to repeat the same thing again.

But yet, even so, Aya Otonashi jumped in the front of the truck. In order to save another one from getting run over.

Over and over. Many thousand times.

Right.

Why did I only forget such a thing?

The loud sound of a crash resounded, but the truck did not stop its course and smashed the wall down with a roaring sound. I approached Otonashi-san while still getting overwhelmed by this sound. Beside her, Mogi-san was lying stiffened in the same posture like when she was thrust away. Apparently she suffered a shock.

I looked at Otonashi-san.

Her left leg was bent in an abnormal direction.

She was full of cold sweat, but spoke with resolution almost as if she wasn't hurt at all.

"Last time, I killed you."

Although speaking should be painful for her, she said so clearly.

"I thought everything would end by killing the 'owner'. I was reluctant. But at the time I believed that this was the only way to get out of this 'Rejecting Classroom'. I accepted becoming a being below human. It's hard to believe, but I thought at the time that it might be good like this. Reason is, I thought that the 'me', that became a being below human, would also get reset and disappear after I got out of the 'Rejecting Classroom'."

I finally understood why Otonashi-san acted like she forgot everything this time.

She couldn't forgive herself.

For approving my death when I met with the accident.

To an extent she was about to abandon getting out of the 'Rejecting Classroom' and obtaining the 'box' she was so tenacious for.

«Then why did you kill me?!!»

To an extent she wasn't able to object against those words.

Just how cruel were these words of mine to her?

And they weren't even true at all.

Last time, I jumped out to save Mogi-san and died due to the accident. I considered this as Otonashi-san's fault, just like I always considered Mogi-san's death as Otonashi-san's fault.

Because of this prejudice I blurted out something like «You killed me». I should have noticed this misunderstanding in the moment she denied murder. IN truth she was just unable to save me.

For some reason this accident occurs always. Someone gets run over for certain. It's just that it was me this time by chance.

"Mph, I can only laugh about my own stupidity. There's no way the blame would disappear just by me forgetting it. And really, the 'Rejecting Classroom' did not end and I have to cope with myself that has become a being below human now. I can't think of any situation where the word 'retribution' would apply better."

After she said this, Otonashi-san vomited out blood.

"Otonashi-san, you don't have to speak if it hurts..."

"Will there be another chance to talk? I've already become accustomed to this pain. This is nothing. This momentary pain is much better than feeling pain chronically due to a disease."

One doesn't call this 'accustomed'!

"I didn't lose my memories, nor did I get out of the 'Rejecting Classroom'. Fufu... I think I knew it. That I wouldn't get released from the 'Rejecting Classroom'."

"..why?"

"It's simple. I'm self-aware. My tenacity won't release me that easily."

Otonashi-san stood up tottering. Even though she could stay lying down, but I guess she couldn't stand me looking down to her.

Her left leg didn't function at all. Otonashi-san coughed violently and bloody. But she then stood upright using the block-wall as support and looked at me.

Probably because Otonashi-san moved, the expressionlessly petrified Mogi-san moved as well on a sudden. She then looked timidly at me.

"Are you alright, Mogi-san?"

".....hy!!"

She suddenly screamed up.

"W-What have you been talking about... just now...? Mhm, not just now, since yesterday... what are you two?"

...what? Who are you looking at with those eyes? Who are you looking at with those scared eyes?

...I know. I am the one her glance is pointing at.

Somehow I was unable to leave her alone and reached out unconsciously for her cheeks.

"D-Don't touch me!"

Aah...you're right. What am I doing? What am I reaching out for her mistakenly, although I'm the one that scares her? Or did I perhaps think it would calm her down? Did I perhaps think I'd be able to make her calm down? ...there's no way I'd be able to.

"...what... are you...?"

I clenched my fist. I can't explain her anything. Thus I have no choice but to endure her glance.

I'd love to explain the entire situation right now to her. Maybe she would even comprehend my situation.

But--I mustn't do so.

After all I have to fight. I have to fight against this 'Rejecting Classroom'.

And for this sake I have to refuse the fake everyday life of the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

I came to this determination when I took Otonashi-san's hand back then. I will refuse. Also that Mogi-san smiled upon my words someday, also that she blushed in front of me, also that she let me sleep on her lap -- I refuse all of this.

Mogi-san gave it up to understand me when I kept silent, and stood up still scared.

She stepped backwards with tottering legs while looking at us like to pray that we won't come chasing after her. And then she escaped.

I gazed after her.

And made sure I wouldn't avert this gaze of mine.

For this is supposed to be my desired conclusion.

"----I grasped your determination."

Otonashi-san said so still leaned at the wall after having watched us from beginning to end.

"So I shall come to a determination, too. I shall give up trying to obtain the 'box' for the sake of my goal."

"...eh?"

This troubles me. This absolutely troubles me. I need Otonashi-san power. I opened my mouth thoughtlessly to stop her.

When I did so.

"--Therefore I shall lend you a hand."

"...eh?"

I didn't expect that.

Lend me a hand? Aya Otonashi-san will lend me a hand?

"What are you gawking like a gibbering idiot? I just said that I'll lend you a hand. Could you not hear me?"

But this is as impossible as the sun going up in the west and going down in the east.

"I lost my way. Just like you criticized, I became a being below human by killing you. No, even worse. I am a coward that abandoned his own goal and tried to run away because I didn't want to admit it. To say it plainly, I gave in to the 'Rejecting Classroom' once. And I continued to run away while telling myself that there's nothing more to do for someone like me who's merely a defeated 'box'."

Although she was abasing herself, the glint in her eyes was still sharp. I was a bit relieved.

"But there's nothing to waver. I certainly did something to be ashamed of. But there's no reason to dwarf just because of this. Nothing will start just by regretting. Therefore I won't run away anymore. So--"

She shut her mouth once, hesitating to finish her sentence.

But since I was almost scowling at her, she restated.

"So please---forgive me."

Aah, I see. That's what she meant.

This weird speech was supposed to be an apology to me.

This entreaty is completely meaningless.

"I can't forgive you."

Otonashi-san looked surprised for an instant upon my clear words, but then returned to her serious face right after.

"I see... to forgive being killed is certainly not possible. I understand."

"It's not like this."

Otonashi-san frowned as if my words were incomprehensible for her.

"What I mean is...I have no clue what to forgive to begin with."

Right. It's not like I don't forgive her. I just can't forgive her. Because there is no such blame.

"...Hoshino, what are you saying? I..."

"You killed me?"

"...right."

"What are you saying?"

I smiled spontaneously.

"I am here!"

Right. This is a distinct fact.

"I am here, Otonashi-san."

However much responsibility she may feel, it is by no means anything that cannot be undone.

I don't understand why she's feeling such a strong responsibility, anyway. She is not the creator of this 'Rejecting Classroom' after all. Otonashi-san was just involved in the 'Rejecting Classroom'--

--no, that's not correct.

Otonashi-san isn't just a victim. She is a ruler who grasped our personalities and read through all our behavior patterns. She knows how the ripples in the water would expand by throwing the stone at a certain place. She is a ruler of at least the same degree as the creator of the 'Rejecting Classroom' himself.

Precisely because she had this power, she feels responsibility for the things that happen. She thinks that things would have worked out when she only acted correctly.

Therefore she considers it as her own guilt when she couldn't and didn't prevent someone's death.

But Otonashi-san said it herself. That death in the 'Rejecting Classroom' is just show.

"I don't think anything about this matter. But if you insist even so, then how about using a certain appropriate word?"

Otonashi-san didn't move for a while and kept frowning. When I thought she'd finally move again, she looked downward.

"Fufu..."

Her shoulders were trembling. Eh? What? What does that mean? I got nervous and sneaked a peek of her.

"hehe...haha...Hahahahaha!!"

--she's laughing! Furthermore it's an explosive laughter!!

"H-Hey! Why do you laugh there? Excuse me but I don't get it!!"

Otonashi-san continued her explosive laughter for a while without my protests reaching her.

Geez... what's this about? I was actually confident that I had said something 'cool', but it seems my words were just a laughing matter in the end...

Otonashi-san finally stopped laughing, returned to her usual gallant expression and spoke to me with pursed lips.

"I have transferred 27754 times."

"...I know that well."

"I was convinced that I had grasped your behavior pattern completely within those. But I could not at all predict your statement just now. Can you imagine just how amusing this is for someone who grew accustomed to boredom?"

She said, seeming very pleased. I could still not grasp her real intention and inclined my head.

"Hoshino. You're truly amusing. You're a human I've never seen before. At first glance you look like an ordinary person with no belief, but actually there's no one who is more vigorously attached to the everyday life than you. Exactly for this reason you're able to clearly distinguish this fake everyday life from the real one. Even better than me."

Better than Otonashi-san?

"That's not true. I can't distinguish this clearly at all. After all, my heart hurts when the accident happens, even though I know it's going to be undone..."

"Of course. This has nothing to do with distinction. For example when watching a movie or reading a novel, you feel discomfort just like in reality when the characters have bad times there, don't you? It's the same here."

Is it really like this? I don't know well.

"---Hoshino."

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

It was so sudden, I didn't get what she was apologizing for. Before I knew it, the pleased expression had disappeared from her face.

"Really, I'm ashamed of my own incapability. I'm sorry."

"I-It's alright..."

I only feel uncomfortable when I get apologized earnestly like this by a person that stands obviously above me. I faltered as if I was criticized by her. I have to admit I'm pathetic.

"This was just a mere courtesy, but this OK with you, isn't it? I only have to continue unchangedly to understand you, to grasp you and to direct you. This is what you desire from me, right?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"Apologizing, huh? Surely a necessity, but it seems to me that I haven't done it for years."

...I'm sure it's indeed like this.

"Well then, It's time."

"Time?"

"For the end of the 27,754th 'School Transfer'. And the beginning of the 27,755th 'School Transfer'."

"Aah, I see."

I accepted this queer fact surprisingly calmly.

People had already gathered because of the big accident, which is natural, when I looked around. There were also lots wearing very familiar uniforms. Kokone was there as well and watched us. We had been talking together while ignoring all of them. Well, I guess I can understand why Mogi-san was scared. A blood-stained Otonashi-san and me having a chat is most certainly strange.

I offered my hand to Otonashi-san.

She took this hand, which another person had previously refused, without hesitation.

My heart was crushed by an overwhelming power like being squashed by a vise. The sky started to close like a coin purse. Despite being closed, the world turned white. White. White. The ground became instable and tasted sugary for some reason - not on the tongue, but on the skin. This sensation didn't feel bad, and yet it felt disgusting. Finally I understood that this was the end of the 27,754th time.

We are inside soft, sweet and pure white despair.

0th time

I didn't notice until I was sixteen that 'Love changes the world' isn't just a metaphor.

Haven't you already thought several times that life is too long with all those repetitions of

habits? I'm sure the number of times I thought quite seriously about dying, couldn't be expressed using both of my hands and not even by using my feet as well.

I was horribly bored.

But I did not put this to words and behaved cheerful as always. After all, it won't do any good if I show this attitude open to all. Therefore I endeavored to be on good terms with everyone. Which isn't all that difficult. If you don't think deeply about strong and weak points and likes and dislikes, you can get along with everyone.

Quite a number of people gathered around me and they all said the same to me.

"You're always so cheerful. You sure have no worries, right?"

Ah, yes. Thank you so much everyone for being deceived so honestly. Thank you so much for not recognizing my dark side until now. Thanks to this I've come to want to throw it all away.

I probably know the point in time this boredom began.

Each and every one is just too self-centered.

When I exchanged mail addresses with some boy and replied to his messages regularly, he got excited on his own and confessed to me. When I tried to not leave out a boy that wasn't well received by the girls, he mistook this for affection and confessed to me. When I was invited by someone to the theater and accepted since it was hard to turn down, he confessed to me. When I walked several times together with someone, because we had the same way home, he confessed to me.

They all made faces as if I betrayed them, got hurt selfishly and resented me. I was also resented by the girls who loved those boys. Selfishly. Self-centeredly. It hurt me each time, I became full of scars, and when I didn't even recognize the new scars when being hurt, I finally noticed.

I would only need to associate with each and every one halfheartedly in my spare time. I would only need to sense the mood and continue having shallow talks. I would not show them what's inside me. I would only need to close like a shell in order to protect my soft inside.

And then I became bored.

No one noticed even when I showed them only my surface.

They all said the same to me.

"You're always so cheerful. You sure have no worries, right?"

What a great success.

You should all just disappear.

It was at an ordinary day after school. I was smiling as always while talking comically with the strangers around me that pretended to be friends. Then, all of a sudden - without any special impetus.

Nevertheless, it struck me. This concept suddenly obtained a shape and made me think of a certain word.

«Solitude»

Aah, I'm in complete -- solitude.

Solitude. I see, so I was in solitude. Despite being surrounded by everyone, I was in solitude. I felt strangely pleasant. This word fitted just too well.

But this word promptly sharpened its fangs and attacked me. It was the first time I learned that pain comes together with such utter solitude. My chest hurt, I couldn't breathe. And even when I was finally able to take a breath, it felt like needles were inside the air. Pain ran through my lungs. My sight turned black for a moment and I thought that my life could just as well end now. But my sight returned right away and life doesn't end as easily as this. Therefore, I don't know what to do. I don't know. Help me. Everyone, help me.

"What's wrong?"

Someone took notice of my change and addressed me.

"You look very happy smiling like this."

Eh?

I'm smiling--?

I touched my cheeks because I didn't understand his words.

Certainly, my cheeks were raised.

"Really, you're always so cheerful. You sure have no worries, right?"

I laughed out. "Yeah, I'm happy!" I said laughing. I laughed without even knowing why.

In this moment, the color of the surrounding people gradually turned transparent. One by one turned transparent. Each turned transparent and disappeared, so I couldn't see them anymore. Some voices addressed me, but I couldn't hear them. But for some reason I still replied properly. I don't get it.

Before I knew it, the classroom was empty. Only I was left.

But I'm sure I was the one who made it like this.

I rejected them.

"I have an appointment, so I'll go now."

Although I couldn't see anyone, I said so with a smile and took my bag. My relationship with the others could have probably been established even if I didn't address anyone in specific. I should have spoken to the wall from the start if it's like this.

And yet, why?

"...excuse me, are you alright?"

Although there should have no one been here, I could hear those words clearly for some reason. I had just left the school gate when I was brought back in an instant and the invisibles changed back as well.

A boy of our class was standing there out of breath when I turned around. As it seems, he ran after me.

His name was certainly Kazuki Hoshino. We weren't intimate, nor did he have some special characteristics - I knew no more than his name.

"What do you mean?"

While I asked so, I noticed that a strange expectation enveloped me.

After all, he wouldn't ask whether I'm «alright», if he hasn't noticed my abnormality. That means he might have been able to sense my change, what wasn't even possible to the people that are near to me.

"Err... how should I put it? You looked very «distant»... or no, I'm not sure, but it seemed like you weren't inside the everyday life..."

He said with difficulty. He doesn't get to the point at all.

"Err... don't mind if it was just me. Sorry for saying strange things."

He seemed to feel awkward and was about to leave.

"...wait a moment."

I held him back. He inclined his head slightly and looked at me.

"E-err..."

I may have held him back, but what should I say now?

But hey--he was able to describe me as «distant», although I was smiling while being in this lonesome classroom.

"...do I look always cheerful?"

If he answers this like the others, then he's just the same.

Ah, I'm having giant expectations. I'm having giant expectations that he will deny it and understand me.

"Yeah. Well, ...you do look so."

He said hesitantly.

Upon hearing these words, I became disenchanted with him, lost my interest and hated him. I was surprised by this pendulum-like sudden turn of my feelings, but my expectations were probably respectively high.

But then, he, whom I hated, added those words.

"You're really trying hard, aren't you?"

My feelings shook once again like a pendulum and my hatred was inverted. My face couldn't come along with this change - only my heart was strangely warm.

Trying hard. Trying hard to look cheerful.

That's correct. Much more correct than denying it.

And so I -- fell in love.

I'm properly aware of it. It's just a convenient assumption. Just because he said «You're trying hard, aren't you?» doesn't mean he understands all of me. I'm aware of it. But even so - this assumption of mine doesn't leave my mind anymore.

First, I thought this feeling was just temporary. But it soon grew to a point where it couldn't be undone. My feelings for him were being piled up like snow that doesn't melt away and covered my heart entirely. Despite being aware that he might become my everything if it goes on like this, it didn't feel bad for some reason.

After all Kazuki Hoshino rescued me from the lonesome classroom and dispelled my boredom.

If he vanished from my heart, I'm sure I'd return to there.

I'd return to this lonesome classroom where I'm all alone.

My world changed so simply. That I had been bored seemed like a lie. It was as if my feelings were plugged into a powerful amp. I get happy just by greeting him. At the same time, I get sad that I was only able to greet him. I get happy by talking with him. I get sad that I could only talk a bit with him. My heart that was obviously out of order, felt complicated and good.

Yeah! I'll get on good terms with you without fail!

First, I'd like to start calling each other by our first names.

-----.....

"Do you have a wish?"

He seems to exist everywhere, but does not exist anywhere. He seems to resemble everyone, but he doesn't resemble anyone. Someone of whom I didn't know whether he was male or female spoke to me.

Wish?

Of course I have one.

"This is a 'box' that grants any wish."

I accepted it with my blood-stained hands.

I immediately understood that this was the real thing. Therefore, I was resolute to not let go of this 'box'.

It's the same for everyone, isn't it? I don't believe there's anyone who would pass it back.

I wished.

While knowing it's impossible, I wished.

"--I don't want to, regret."

27755th time

"Come on, isn't there something different about me today? Isn't there?"

Kokone asked this with her usual face. I was already asked this question once. What was the answer again?

"...you've applied Mascara."

"Ooh! Thumbs up, Kazu-kun!"

Seems it was correct.

"...so, how is it?"

"Yeah, you look cute."

I spoke without hesitation. That was again the correct answer. I didn't say it too seriously, but Kokone was satisfied with hearing the word 'cute' and nodded with a smile.

"Mhm, mhm. I see, you have great prospects. Hey you! You lad there with this failed personality; you ought to learn from him!"

She folded her arms contentedly and turned her head to Daiya.

"I'd rather bite that tongue off than to say this."

"Ah, this would be for the entire world's sake, so please go ahead."

"No, I'm talking about your tongue."

"Hahaa, so you desire an intense deep kiss with me? Please don't get carried away too much by your fascination for me~"

With no hunch of the situation I'm currently in, the both of them started their insult-duel without leaving any space to insert a Tsukkomi.

Shortly after, Daiya brought up the matter of the transfer student.

Please come soon, Otonashi-san.



"I'm Aya Otonashi. I have no interest in anyone but Kazuki Hoshino and the 'owner'."

The classroom became noisy at the same moment.

Err, Otonashi-san? You're free to put some distance between yourself and your classmates at the first day since you're a transfer student, after all. But listen. I am in this class for almost a year, so it doesn't work like this for me, you know?

"What does she mean by 'owner'? Who's the possession? Does she mean 'the person that's possessed by Hoshino'?"

"Isn't that simply «girlfriend», then?"

"Which means that Kazuki-kun has a «girlfriend» and the transfer student Otonashi-san is searching for her? Why?"

"I guess there was something between him and Otonashi-san. Maybe they're going out... so he's two-timing?!"

"Exactly! That's it without fail! That way it seems more fun, so let's go with that!"

"So while having complex feelings of love and hate for Hoshino, she chased after him and transferred to our school. I'm sure."

"Which mean Hoshino has...seduced such a beauty?! Damn it!!"

Our classmates carried this subject on as they pleased and ignored us, though we were the concerned. Heck, from where do those thoughts come?

"So Hoshino...actually only toyed with me..."

"What?! You were the other one?!"

"No... I was probably just an extra... the third, no, there were more."

"Wha...this bastard!"

Kokone pretended to be crying while Daiya took the opportunity and raised his voice in a way he usually doesn't. Geez, those two really cooperate only at such times.

"...How bothersome."

Otonashi-san murmured.

"Because of you they got conversely interested in me, instead of being put on distance."

Err... is this really my fault?



Right after the first lesson, Otonashi-san and I rushed out of the classroom. Of course I was cheered on by my classmates, and I did even feel the thirst for blood in the glances of some boys, but there was no time to care about such things.

We arrived at our usual spot - the back of the school building.

We won't participate in the lessons anymore.

"I see. That's what it means to work with you. I can't help to get dragged into your relation network. Jeez... how unpractical."

No, I for one think that the problem lies in your way of speaking.

"But it's the first time in those 27,755th times that I experienced demerit by rejecting them. This is truly amusing."

"No, I don't know if you should find this amusing..."

"Don't say so. Even I get excited more or less when I experience something new. And you know, just by having you cooperate with me, the situation changed like this. We ought to welcome this."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe there is something new I didn't see previously."

Looking at it like this, it's surely worth it to cooperate, but well...

But this might be surprisingly possible. Otonashi-san doesn't know how our class 1-6 was before today, after all. She can't compare today with before. For example she doesn't know that my love for Mogi-san started between today and yesterday - in other words during the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

"But what should we do now concretely?"

"...about this, Kazuki. I brooded about this and came to think that you might still be the key for the 'Rejecting Classroom'."

"Eh? So you're still suspecting me?"

"That's not it. Let me ask you: why can you retain your memories?"

"Eh... who knows?"

"It's a mystery, isn't it? You certainly have points that are different from others. Even so, don't you think it's strange that only you are able to retain your memories?"

"Well... of course."

"Therefore I thought that this might also be an aim of the 'owner'."

"E..rr...?"

"You're dull as ever. In other words, it might also be an aim of the 'owner' that you retain your memories."

It's an aim of the 'Rejecting Classroom' that I retain my memories?

"That's not possible. It's not like I retain my memories for sure, you know? If it wasn't for you, I probably would've kept losing my memories like the others."

"This is surely the neck at my hypothesis. However, it's also possible that the retaining of your memories wasn't established just like the redoing of the past by the 'Rejecting Classroom'. That would make sense for this contradictory system, since the past can't be redone anymore if you retain your memories."

This sure might be possible. But it doesn't make sense to me for some reason.

"In the first place, what meaning is there in letting me retain my memories?"

"I wouldn't know."

...she answered bluntly.

"But I know what feeling moves people the most."

"What?"

Otonashi-san looked deeply in my eyes and spoke.

"Love."

"...'love'...?"

She said with a scary face, so I didn't get the meaning right away. Aah, love?

"Otonashi-san, you say some quite cute things."

Otonashi-san looked with cold eyes at me.

"What is? Such a deep-rooted love is just the same as hatred, isn't it?"

"The same as hatred?" I was taken aback. "...t-that's just wrong!"

"It's the same. ...No, it's certainly wrong. It's a worse feeling than hatred since people themselves aren't aware of its dirtiness. Horribly repulsive."

Repulsive, huh...

"This doesn't matter now. Kazuki, is there nothing that comes to mind?"

"You mean someone who is in love with me, right? There's no way, there--"

I began speaking but then suddenly recalled.

There is one.

If what I heard when I was called by the phone wasn't a joke--then there is one.

"You seem to have an idea."

"....."

"What?"

"...err, well. It's not for certain that this person is the culprit if there's someone in love with me, right?"

"Of course. There's no way we could conclude that someone's the culprit just by this. This is, however, no reason to not investigate this matter."

"No...well...there's no way this person would be the culprit."

"Why can you say for sure that this person is not the 'owner'?"

I know. I just don't want this person to be the culprit.

"We have unlimited chances as long this 'Rejecting Classroom' continues. We will take every possibility to come nearer to the 'owner'."

"...but you weren't successful with this method until now, were you?"

"You lunge quite a bit, huh? It's as you say. However, the fact that the retaining of your memories is an aim is a new point of view that I didn't have until now. I have never investigated from this point. We might be able to obtain new information I wasn't able to obtain before."

"But--"

"Exactly because you trust this person, we have to clear our doubts, no?"

Right. Just as she says.

Somewhere in my heart I'm doubting this person, and therefore, I don't want to investigate.

".....I got it. Okay, I'll help."

"You shouldn't just help, but rather take the lead, though."

She's right. I myself am the one that wants to get out of the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

...Anyway, since earlier, something has been extremely bothering me. What is this strange feeling?

"Well then, let's go."

"W-Wait a sec!"

"Why are you wavering! I'm rather near to the end of my patience, you know!"

What is it that bothers m--ah, I see.

When I recognized the origin of this strange feeling, my ears became hot.

"Mh? What's wrong, Kazuki? Your face's all red."

"Ah, no, just this--"

Why did she change her way of calling me from «Hoshino» to «Kazuki»?

"This? What are you talking about? ...Hey, why is your face reddening?"

"...S-Sorry. It's nothing."

When did she start calling me by the first name, I wonder? Not even my parents address me like this.

My face probably became even redder.

"...? Strange guy. Anyhow, let's go."

«Otonashi-san» turned her back to me and started walking.

"Y-Yeah..."

Should I also use another way of calling than «Otonashi-san»? If I used the same way as she, it would become «Aya»?

...No, no, no!! I can't I can't that's really impossible!!

At least «Aya-san»... no, that's still quite hard. But I also think «Otonashi-san» is too reserved. It should be a name that's a easy to say and a bit more casual.

"Ah..."

One came to mind. It seems to be quite hard to say, but having said it several times already, it's quite easy.

".....Maria."

When I murmured so in a low voice, «Otonashi-san» stopped and turned around. Her eyes were wide open.

"Uwa! S-Sorry!!"

I apologized reflexively upon seeing her unexpected sharp reaction.

"...Why are you apologizing? It just surprised me a bit."

"...So you're not angry?"

"Why should I be angry? Call me as you please."

"I, I see..."

Otonashi-sa... no, Maria loosened her mouth.

"But still, of all things you chose Maria... fufu"

"Ah, well... if you don't like it"

"I don't mind. I just affirmed it again."

"Err... what did you affirm?"

For some reason, Maria smiled gently.

"That you, Kazuki, are an amusing guy."



I was in a hurry.

I had returned to the classroom and was searching through the belongings of the girl that has affection towards me.

Of course I'm not doing it because I want to, and I even have a vehement feeling of immorality.

They currently have gymnastics. Therefore, it might be better to look for a hint in her belongings than to speak to her directly - was Maria's judgment.

Because I thought the same but wasn't able to speak it out, I obeyed her while having this feeling of immorality.

By the way, there's only meaning if I do it. Maria has already searched through the belongings of everyone several times. But the outcome had not been that good, looking at the current situation - which I can understand. Maria knows us only since today, so she wouldn't notice anything that has changed from before this day.

"Huu..."

She had cleanly made markings of various colors in her text books. Her notes were cleanly written in small round letters. And also here, she had used lots of colors. At the left edge is a drawing of a cat. On the next page was again a cat at the same spot. The same for the next page... then I noticed. This was meant to be a flip book. When tried flipping through it, the cat flew away in a rocket that it had built with a tin can. When I smirked unconsciously, Maria scowled at me.

Basically there were a lot of things that seem very girlish. The colors were generally pink or white. Her iPod was filled with J-POP. Her wallet wasn't there, so she's probably carrying it around with her.

"Oh!"

I found a neatly decorated mobile phone. This is a treasure chest of personal information.

I had some expectations for a clue, but the mobile phone was locked so I couldn't look into it. ...But in a sense, I'm relieved that I didn't have to.

I tried opening the make-up pouch beside the pink hand mirror. This is probably the foundation, this is the color lipstick, this is the eyeliner to draw eyebrows, these are the scissors to trim the eyebrows, and finally something that seems to be quite new... some Mascara, I guess.

"___"

Oh?

Something's strange.

"Did you find anything, Kazuki?"

".....I don't know, yet..."

I rummage the contents of the make-up pouch. There's nothing special in there, I think.

"Maria, does something catch your eye in this make-up pouch?"

"No? I've searched through it already previously, but I didn't find anything special--"

She began speaking but then stiffened her face.

"--wait, that can't be. She shouldn't have this. Or else there's no way I didn't notice during these 27,755 times. But... in fact there is--"

"Eh? Did you find anything?"

"...Kazuki. Wasn't there something else you felt looking at this?"

"...eh? ...mhh, well, I thought that using make-up doesn't seem like her."

"Good grief!"

Maria contorted her face in displeasure.

I went on searching through the bag for further clues. Inside, I discovered a familiar touch. I took it out.

"Ah---"

It got pulled out.

Upon seeing this familiar package, my memories got pulled out.

«I wonder if there might have been a conclusion in which you accepted my confession if I had changed my approach?»

«Aah, yeah. So I just need to continue confessing until I succeed, right?»

No way.

No way.

No way.

I won't believe such nonsense.

This is just a coincidence, but although it's just a coincidence, the memories that are pulled out of my mind are too offbeat for being only made up by me---

"--Say, what is your favorite dish, Maria?"

"...What's that, all of a sudden?" Maria looked at me and frowned. "...Hey, what's wrong Kazuki? You don't look well!"

"...You know, mine is Umaibō."

I revealed the object I had taken out of the bag just now.

An Umaibō.

"I especially like Pork Cottage flavor. But I haven't told anyone since no one cares. I often eat in the classroom, but concerning the types, I'm unfaithful and eat different flavors each time. No one should know that I like Pork Cottage flavor the most!"

«But you don't like Teriyaki Burger flavor that much, right?»

«Which flavor do you like the best?»

I prayed it was just a mistake of mine and looked again at the snack.

It stayed the same, however often I looked at it.

It was not Teriyaki Burger flavor. It was an Umaibō with Pork Cottage flavor.

The drawn out memories told me.

Even if it was just coincidence that she had an Umaibō with pork cottage flavor in her bag - the clips of my drawn out memories told me undeniably.

She is -- the 'owner'.

"Kazuki."

Maria grabbed my shoulders powerfully. Her nails ate into my shoulders and brought me back to reality.

"She is for sure the 'owner'. We finally arrived at our goal... well, not quite."

When Maria spat these words out bitterly, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"There's no way someone who makes such mistakes could deceive me for 27,755 'School Transfers'."

"But Maria, you did indeed not know who the 'owner' is, did you?"

"That's not true. I probably hit on her several times already. But I couldn't keep the memories that she's the 'owner'."

"Eh? Why not?"

"I can't say for sure, but I guess this is again some rule of the 'Rejecting Classroom'. It would be logical. The 'Rejecting Classroom' is established as long the 'owner' himself believes that he's inside a loop. If someone knew she's the 'owner', then this prerequisite would crumble down. Therefore, even if someone discovers that she's the 'owner', the memory about it gets forgotten."

"...But we know who's the 'owner' this time."

"Yeah. But this is by no means a situation where we can rejoice."

Maria spoke as if she was spitting her words out.

"If we don't do something about it this time, we're going to lose this clue again."

I see. If we lose here, we will forget what we found this time and will once again begin our search for the culprit.

Maria was biting her lips, annoyed. For someone like Maria, who's used to being able to redo things, this might be a vexing situation since we must not lose.

"...But Maria, isn't life by nature a contest decided by a single round? However trifling the matter, it's not possible to return to the last save point by pushing some reset button."

I myself liked my phrase, but Maria looked at me with cold eyes.

"What are you trying to achieve by such a misdirected encouragement?"

Now she even sighed.

"S-Sorry... I just thought you seem mortified."

Upon hearing my apology, Maria relaxed a tiny bit.

"Yeah, I sure am mortified. But not because our situation is unfavorable."

"...but rather?"

"Don't you get it? Although I found out several times that she's the 'owner', the 'Rejecting Classroom' has not ended yet. Don't you get the meaning of this?"

I tilted my head.

I don't know if it was against me, the culprit or herself, but Maria then spat those words out in irritation:

"I have lost against the 'owner' several times."



"Kokone."

"Ah, the man of love - Kazuki Hoshino in person!"

Kokone teased me in her usual joking way of speaking.

It's lunch break at the moment. In the end, Maria and I didn't participate in classes at morning and got severely teased. Because Maria kept completely quiet, it stopped very fast, but the curious glances of our classmates were still focused on us. Well, I knew it'd be like this from the start, though.

"Listen, Kokone. To tell the truth--"

I stopped myself. Because Kokone had changed her relaxed face to a serious one and had caught me by the sleeves.

After she peeked at Maria, Kokone led me out of the classroom.

"Kazu-kun, I want you to answer without evading the question."

Kokone let go of my sleeve right beside the door and continued.

"What is your relationship with Otonashi-san?"

"...Why do you ask such a thing?"

Despite knowing the answer, I asked this. Kokone just dropped her gaze to my question and couldn't answer.

"I can't describe my relationship with Maria so simply."

Kokone's gaze kept dropped without reply.

"But I love someone else other than Otonashi-san."

Kokone opened her eyes wide upon hearing my words and looked at me.

"This means--"

But Kokone didn't say more and moved her eyes. I didn't overlook this.

She peered into the classroom and searched someone.

Her eyes stopped moving.

And they were pointed at -- Kasumi Mogi.

As of March 01 I have yet to love Mogi-san. And this time - the 27,755th - I did not come in contact with her in any way.

"Kokone, to tell the truth, there's something I'd like you to do. That is--"

"Yeah. You don't have to say it. I think I've understood with our conversation up to now."

Kokone said with a smile.

"Cooking room after school - is this okay with you? I'll tell you everything there!"

Why the cooking room? - I thought so for a moment, but right, Kokone is in the home economics club.

"Probably, there'll be no one else there today."

When I nodded, she looked again at me. I couldn't read what she was thinking behind her face.

"Kazuki."

Maria, who had watched us from beyond the door, called me. Probably it's the sign for me to retire.

I told Kokone 'Later' and was about to turn around.

"Ah, wait a sec!"

Kokone stopped me. I looked at her without turning away.

"Say, can I ask? Ah, but of course you don't have to answer if you don't want to..."

"What is it?"

"Who is the person you love, Kazu-kun?"

I answered on the spot.

"Mogi-san!"

Right upon hearing me, Kokone looked down and hid her face. But I didn't overlook her expression before she could hide it.

Kokone was smiling.



Then, after school.

When we heard a scream resounding from the cooking room, we entered the room and immediately realized that everything went amiss.

We missed this exceptional opportunity.

In the cooking room were, as expected, Kokone Kirino and Kasumi Mogi. No, strictly speaking--something that was once Kokone Kirino and Kasumi Mogi was there.

She tilted her head; maybe it came too sudden for her.

"I noticed long ago that you're a hindrance, you know? But I didn't want to be cruel. After all, we were really «friends»."

But, we aren't friends anymore.

I guess she considers me still as «friend». Until yesterday, we were so intimate we would listen to the other's love problems. But now that I've changed, I cannot think so anymore. Therefore, we aren't «friends» or something anymore.

This is not just a problem on my side. She can by no means doubt me, although I've changed. Even when I don't talk to her like I did in the past, she can't notice.

--«My change cannot be disturbed».

This is the rule of this world.

Let's assume that I change, but the others don't in the normal world. For example, in her case, she thinks of me as friend. If I changed, she would perceive this as an abnormality on me. This would already disturb my free change. It would probably resemble the reaction to someone who dyed his hair blond during summer vacation all of a sudden. My possibilities would get limited when being put in such an environment where I can't change.

In that case, my one and only wish, «spending today with no regrets», couldn't be granted.

That's why there is this convenient rule.

Right. This world is entirely made to be convenient for me.

And yet--

And yet, why? I can't think of what's ahead of this.

I have the feeling that I mustn't think about it.

Therefore I omitted thinking and brought up another subject.

"Don't you think that 'love' resembles spilling Soya sauce on a white dress?"

She didn't seem to understand my simile and tilted her head.

"Let's say you spilled Soya sauce on your white dress, okay? Even when you wipe it up, stains remain. They stay forever. Thus, you'll forever think 'Aah, I've spilled Soya sauce...' when you see them. There is no way to forget since they remain there forever."

I opened a drawer of the cupboard.

"It makes me sick, you know."

I grasped the kitchen knife in the drawer tightly.

"The fact that it were those stains that broke me, does."

I took out the kitchen knife.

I have used this kitchen knife for the same purpose several times already. This kitchen knife here is the sharpest one.

She turned pale upon seeing me grasping a kitchen knife. She asked me 'What do you plan on doing with that?', although I bet she can predict it to a certain degree - believing that I would never do what she's «predicting».

"What I'm going to do with this? Ufufu..."

But you know? I'm sorry. It's probably--

"I'll reject you!"

--as you expect.

*I *****ed ***** with a *****.*

I try to not comprehend this black, painful feeling that's about to arise. This resistance is futile anyway, and if I don't comprehend it, then there's no meaning. But even so, I try to resist. Because I don't want to sense this feeling. Because I've acted as if I don't comprehend this feeling all the time up to now.

She had collapsed and was spitting out blood.

She looks really painful; how pitiful.

*Probably, I failed. I should have ****ed her as painless as possible.*

"You know, failing can be kinda scary. Boys develop an absurd power when they're desperate. Even a thin boy is much stronger than I am. Being hit with this power is very painful. But their eyes when hitting me are much more scary. They look at me as if I am trash. Why I failed at the time? ...right, right. Because I used a cool-looking but cheap knife. It's pretty hard to kill people with such a thing, you know? And it's unpleasant at that. Stabbing or cutting people is. It's gross! I can't help vomiting. I also cried, asking myself why I have to do such unpleasant things. But you know? In the end, the outcome will never change as long as the same person takes the same actions - and thus my desired future will never come either. So I have no choice but to erase this person, right? It can't be helped, can it? That's cruel, isn't it? I wonder why I have to do such things?"

She was looking at me with powerless eyes.

"But you know? Actually, I might not need to stab you like this. 'Rejecting' is in the end just a matter of my mindset. But you know? I didn't find any other way. I couldn't 'reject' anyone with another method than to kill him with my one hands. It's not that easy to 'reject' someone from the bottom of your heart. I'm putting a burden on my heart. And by creating these feelings of guilt, I have no other choice but to flee from this person. Doing so, I'm able to think that I don't want to meet this person anymore and can 'reject' him. Then, neither I nor others can remember this person anymore, whatever may happen."

She hanged her head, seemingly not being able to lift her head anymore.

"I know it! It's my fault, right? It's all my fault, right? But say, what should I do then? ...Sorry. You have no idea, do you? Aah, why am I talking so much? I know why. I'm so anxious, so anxious, so anxious, I can't be quiet. I'd like to think that you might forgive me when I tell you my reason. But I know. There's no way you'd forgive me, right? I'm sorry. Really, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for being so selfish. But you know? I'm the one that suffers the most. I'm properly blaming myself. I know that I'm doing something bad. So to be honest, I couldn't care less about what you think of me."

I wonder to whom I am talking?

But I had a gut feeling that this didn't matter. I've always talked not directed at anyone, anyway. I didn't even consider this collapsed person as «friend».

I am alone anyway.

"N-No--"

And yet, I didn't want to admit it.

I said so, despite being aware of the fact that I'm alone, remaining at this place which isn't my place to be.

Please come!

Come fast!

"Kazu-kun!"

I wonder since when? Since when did I call him like this? Although we started to call us like this, although I got his approval to call him like this, he doesn't remember it.

At this moment, the door opened.

He stood there.

The one I longed for, Kazuki Hoshino, stood there.

Kazuki-kun lost his words upon seeing this terrible spectacle. Beside him stood the disturbing young woman, Aya Otonashi, who's living like a parasite in her 'box'.

"...so you finally came, Kazu-kun."

I was amazed by my own words.

Just how stupid am I?

Just how many times did Kazuki-kun belie my expectations? Didn't I give him up several times within those uncountable number of betrayals?

It's not even coincidence that he appeared here. I decided to invite him to here, only in order to show him this.

And even so, just by him appearing with this timing, I started expecting the miracle that happened once. I started expecting that he would take me back to the original world.

Although--there's no way it would be like this.

Kazuki-kun had his eyes wide open.

"Kazuki. I can guess your feelings. But you should have known."

What is this unnecessary girl saying.

"That the 'owner' is--Kasumi Mogi."

*Kazuki-kun looked with wide, opened eyes at the collapsed *****.*

What was her name? Ah, well. I forgot. I even forgot when I forgot.

"...w-why--"

You want to know the reason I did such a thing?

I couldn't hide my irritation at such a slow Kazuki.

Putting a grudge into my eyes, I spat out my thoughts at him.

"...die!"

It's not enough.

"...die... die..."

It's still not enough.

[illegible]

And still, I--

"---don't want to die!!"

27755th time

Come to think of it, Mogi-san doesn't use makeup. It didn't strike me for quite a while, being a man who has naturally no habits of using makeup, unlike Maria.

But she has a makeup pouch.

Why?

Maria presumes as follows.

--it became tiresome.

I can't remember anymore, but I suppose Mogi-san did originally care a lot about her appearance. But during the 'Rejecting Classroom' she lost the reason to care about it and thus stopped it. The pouch is untouched in the bag since March 01 - since before the 'Rejecting Classroom' started.

Mogi-san became tired of applying makeup and of taking it out of the bag.

Only someone who retained his memories for over 20,000 loops would end in such a situation.

The only one who would be able to--is the 'owner'.

Therefore, the girl I love; the girl that loves me - Kasumi Mogi is--the 'owner'.

«There's something I have to tell you, Kazu-kun.»

During the last time - the 27,754th time - Kokone called me like this over the phone and told me as follows.

«Kasumi loves you!»

Kokone knew of Mogi-san's love towards me. I'm sure that Mogi-san consulted her about this matter since they were good friends until yesterday.

We wanted to lure Mogi-san.

But if we did so, she would naturally be cautious. Maria lost already numerous times. If possible, we didn't want to give Mogi-san the chance to prepare herself.

Therefore, we decided on using Kokone as middleman. We concluded that she would lure Mogi-san out for us if she mistook that I have the will to confess.

As result of this, we--killed Kokone.

I recalled Mogi-san's words.

«...so, will you go out with me?»

How often did she confess to me? For how long has she been in love with me? If it was mutual love, then why--

«Please wait until tomorrow.»

Why did she say this?

Mogi-san was standing expressionless, seeming not to be aware of the spurt of blood on her.

--like always.

Was she always so expressionless? No, she wasn't. There is a brightly smiling Mogi-san in one part of my memories. But this Mogi-san doesn't seem real to me even a bit. The Mogi-san I picture is expressionless and reticent.

But what if this bright Mogi-san that doesn't seem real to me was the original one?

Where did the girl called Kasumi Mogi go?

"She got taken in."

As if to answer my question, Maria spat out those words.

"She got entirely taken in, into this endless recurrence."

She declared while gazing at Mogi-san with scolding eyes.

I already thought this once ago. That there's no way that the human psyche could endure such a giant number of recurrences.

And Mogi-san did repeat for 27,755 times.

This Mogi-san that has repeated so many times is now stained in blood.

"...it's your fault, Kazu-kun!"

She said so gazing at me.

"It's because you cornered me!"

"...Mogi-san, what have I done?"

"Mogi-san"

Mogi-san repeated this after me and raised the left corner of her mouth.

"I sure said it, didn't I? I did say it, didn't I? I said it for many hundred times, didn't I?"

"W-What do you...?"

"I did say 'Call me «Kasumi»', didn't I?!"

...I don't know. I don't know...of this...

"I said it hundreds of times and you accepted hundreds of times, didn't you? And yet, why? Why do you forget right after this happening?"

"It can't be...helped..."

"Can't be helped?! What can't be helped, I wonder?!"

Mogi-san shouted hysterically. But her face was still almost expressionless.

Surely, she lost the meaning of changing her expression during those thousands of recurrences and forgot how to do it. She cannot laugh, cry or get angry well anymore.

"Kazuki, don't listen to her."

Mogi-san scowled finally at Maria.

"Don't call Kazu-kun so over-familiarly!"

"I'm free to call him however I like."

"You're not! ...why does Kazu-kun remember you, but not me...?"

"Kasumi, weren't you the one that made it like this? Because it's easier to do things over again like this."

"Shut up! I didn't want that!"

Come to think of it, in the previous 27,754th time, Mogi-san became frightened upon seeing that I remembered Maria.

At the time I was sure she was terrified by my strange behavior. But now that I know she's the 'owner', the point of view changes. Her accrued discontent burst out because I remembered Maria and not her, and so she became emotional.

"Kazu-kun..."

I'm not used to being addressed like this by her either.

Perhaps she has once asked me whether she may call me «Kazu-kun», just like she asked me to call her «Kasumi».

I may have forgotten it, but Mogi-san remembered it all.

"Kazu-kun, you said that you love me."

"...Yeah. I believe that I said so."

"I consented readily! I told you that I love you, too!"

"....."

Her words «Please wait until tomorrow» is all what I remember. Only this. I don't remember anything else.

"You don't remember, huh?"

I couldn't answer anything.

"Can you imagine how happy I was? I tried my best all the time in those recurrences in order to make you look at me. I tampered with my hair, I tried applying Mascara, I took attitudes to appeal you, I learned your hobbies, I observed your way of speaking... and you know what happened then? A miracle occurred! Your attitude changed clearly. I understood that you had interest in me. You accepted my confession which you had been turning down previously. You even confessed to me. When you did so, I always thought that I got finally rewarded. I

thought that a joyful «next» is awaiting me. I thought that this recurrence might stop. But you know? ...Kazu-kun, you--"

Mogi-san looked at me with no expression.

"--forgot each time."

I couldn't bear her gaze and looked downwards.

"Even when you forgot it, I had high hopes that you would remember next time. Each time you accepted my confession, each time you confessed to me, you raised my expectations over and over. But in the end you did not remember. I soon gave my hopes up that you'd remember. But you know, if you get confessed, you can't help getting expectations! After all, a miracle might happen. And that's why I was hurt each time."

I couldn't imagine me going out with her. But Mogi-san made real what I wasn't able to imagine. She made me love her. Perhaps this is the reason why my memories are vaguely retained.

But even making me look at her like this was in the end meaningless.

There's nothing ahead, after all.

After she made me look at her, it's the end.

What awaited her was an complete one-way love.

It is an absolute unrequited love with no reward, no matter whether she was able to get my affection.

"Therefore, I didn't want you to confess to me anymore. Nevertheless you always come. You say that you love me. Although I get so happy, it's even more painful... thus I can't help but to say those words."

Mogi-san spoke those words that I have surely already heard many times.

"Please wait until tomorrow'."

My chest tightened.

Those words hurt herself more than anyone else - even more than me.

But I wonder why she doesn't end the 'Rejecting Classroom', then? Her unrequited love won't be rewarded. Even if this is not her only aim, she does suffer like this.

"Kazu-kun... did you get it? It's your fault that I'm suffering. It's all, all, aaall your fault."

"You're blurting out ridiculous things."

Maria interrupted her with an ill-humored face.

"What an extremity of irresponsibility. You're just forcing the responsibility of your own 'Rejecting Classroom' upon Kazuki because you can't endure the pain anymore."

"...no! It's Kazu-kun's fault that I'm suffering!"

"Feel free to think so. But Kazuki doesn't think so. It's not even possible to remember you. Kazuki has retained his memories now for his own goal. Not for your rotten heart."

"Why... why do you know such a thing!?"

"Why, you ask?"

Maria stretched out upon hearing her question and sneered at her.

"The answer is simple."

She answered nonchalantly.

"Because I have watched Kazuki Hoshino more than anyone else in this world."

"Wha--"

Upon hearing these caustic words, Mogi-san lost her words.

She tried to object, but her mouth just opened and close without any words being produced.

I closed my mouth because of different reason than Mogi-san. I mean, it's embarrassing being told such a thing! After all.

"H-However, I've watched him for the same amount--"

"Your time is worth nothing."

Maria denied her with a irrational argument.

"Don't you understand just how worthless your time is by looking at this outcome? Look at yourself in the mirror. Look at your own hands. Look at your feet."

On Mogi-san's face was solidified blood that was about to turn black.

In Mogi-san's hand was a kitchen knife.

At Mogi-san's feet was Kokone's corpse.

"Please object to your heart's content. Insist that you watched Kazuki as long as I did. If you can believe that there's any meaning in those words of yours."

Mogi-san seemed to be stricken and turned her gaze downwards.

I had no words to point at her.

".....ufu, fufufu. You have watched Kazu-kun more than anyone in this world? I guess so. It might be as you say. Ufufufu, but it doesn't matter! It does not matter."

She was chuckling with her head still hanged down.

"Hmpf, I pity you. So you broke at last."

"At last...? Ufufu... what are you saying?"

She pointed her kitchen knife at Maria, still looking downwards.

"Did you think I was still in my right senses?"

She raised her face.

"I'll tell you something good, Otonashi-san! The people killed by me disappear from this world!"

Her face was expressionless as ever.

"Therefore, it doesn't matter! It doesn't matter how long someone has watched Kazu-kun who will disappear anyway!!"

Mogi-san gripped her kitchen knife and charged Maria. I shouted without thinking Maria's name. But Maria just gazed bored at Mogi-san and did not seem to be in unrest in any way.

She just plainly grabbed the arm in which Mogi-san was holding the knife and held her still like this.

"Ugh..."

It was a one-sided difference in power. To a degree that I was embarrassed of having called Maria's name.

"So sorry. You know, I have learned a full array of martial arts. Seeing through your straightforward movements is as easy as to twist the hands of a baby."

The kitchen knife fell out of Mogi-san's hand with a sound.

Having lost her weapon, Mogi-san gazed dumbfounded at the kitchen knife on the ground.

"...the same as to twist the hands of a baby...?"

Mogi-san whispered painfully with her glance still remained on the knife.

".....ufufu"

Even so, even though still painful, Mogi-san smiled.

"What's so funny?"

"«What's so funny?» she asks! Ufu...ahaha, hahahahahahahaa!"

She laughed with her mouth wide open. Her blood-stained face, however, was far from being a smiling face. Despite her laughter, the corner of her mouth was not raised. Rather than narrowing her eyes, she opened them widely.

Maria frowned distastefully upon this loud laughter.

"Of course it's funny!! After all, you ranged grabbing my arm with twisting a baby's hand! You of all people did! You, Aya Otonashi did! What a masterpiece! If not a masterpiece, what should this be?!"

"I cannot in the least understand what you find so pleasant."

"Really? Then tell me, are you actually able to twist the hand of a baby?"

I still didn't understand Mogi-san's reason of laughing.

But Maria lost her words.

"You captured me. Yeah, nice for you. Congratulations. So? What was your goal again?"

"....."

"I know it. After all, I've heard it numerous times. It's the end of this repeating world, right? It's to obtain this 'box', right? What do you need to do for this? You just have to kill me to end it?"

"...I suppose so."

"I'm aware that you mastered martial arts! You yourself told me! What are you... what are you doing, acting like you outwitted me? Isn't this a masterpiece? Did you perhaps think I didn't know that? How embarrassing! It's embarrassing, isn't it? You know... I've returned to the past as often as you. And I know very well about you! You disarmed me. You're holding my arm. So--?"

Mogi-san returned to a serious look and spoke her next words in a low voice.

"What do you do to me next?"

"....."

Maria did not reply.

"Oh you gentle, gentle Otonashi-san. You, who can't kill me. You, who can't torture me. You, who can't even break a bone in me. Are you, who is so elegant and dislikes violence, able to twist the hand of an oh so weak baby? No. You can't. Of course you can't."

I see. So this was the main cause that made Maria lose.

When violence is the only solution, Maria can't do anything. Mogi-san is aware of this fact.

"Think about it once. Don't you think that I have had the chance to kill and 'reject' you all this time? Do you know why I did not do so, although you were clearly a hindrance? For one, it's convenient that you rescue me from the accident! But that's not all. I noticed it the first time when you found out that I have the 'box' and failed at driving me into a corner."

Maria clenched her teeth.

"You--don't even count as opponent."

Sometime ago, Daiya told me. That the «Hero» is inferior to the «Transfer Student» because of the difference of information.

But this thesis was wrong.

The Kasumi Mogi«Hero» has more information than the Aya Otonashi«Transfer Student».

"I've got enough of this pattern."

Mogi-san said so purposely in a bored tone.

"...but now it's different. Kazuki is here."

"I guess so. So, should we try out a new development of things?"

Mogi-san kicked the grip of the kitchen knife. This knife spun loops in the blood and slid to my feet.

"Pick it up, Kazu-kun."

Pick up? The kitchen knife?

I looked again downwards at the kitchen knife.

It was now even more covered in blood and shone deep red.

"Say, Kazu-kun. Do you love me? If so--"

I raised my face and watched her lips move.

"--I'll kill you, so hand the knife over to me."

----what?

I don't understand. I know the meaning of her words. But I don't understand what she just told me.

"Did you not hear me? I told you to hand the knife over to me in order to get killed by me."

She repeated herself. So I didn't mishear her.

"Mogi, what are you doing, saying such mad things! Don't you love Kazuki?! And yet, why do you request such a thing?!"

"You're right. I love him! But exactly because of this I want him to die. Didn't I say it? It's Kazu-kun's fault that I'm suffering. Therefore, I want him to get out of my sight. Isn't this a logical conclusion?"

Mogi-san said so as if it was completely natural.

"To begin with, why do you think I pretended being lured out, although I knew that Kazu-kun would come? I have a proper goal! I've made a decision. --the decision to kill Kazu-kun."

Mogi-san spat out her words with a peek at me.

"I can 'reject' Kazu-kun by killing him. He will disappear from me. If this happens, I'm sure I won't feel pain anymore. I will be able to stay here forever."

"Mogi, why are you talking nonsense--ugh! Ah--"

Maria groaned suddenly and kneeled down. She was seizing her left side.

"...? Maria?"

Something was stabbed into her left side.

...eh? Stabbed?

"Ah--Ma-Maria!"

Maria ascertained the thing that was stabbed into her left side. Clenching her teeth, she pulled out this foreign body. She moaned again silently in pain. Scowling at Mogi-san, she threw away the object she pulled out.

I looked at the object that rolled on the floor with a sound. It was a folding knife.

"You were negligent. You may have mastered martial arts, but that doesn't make you immune against surprise attacks. This cheap knife, which lets boys resist after having stabbed them, should be enough for you with such a slender body, right? I'm sorry, but you can't change your constitution in this world no matter how much you may train!"

Maria tried to stand up, but as it seemed, the place of her wound was bad, so she wasn't able to. Blood was flowing steadily from the left side she was seizing.

"I had various experiences as well, you know. So I thought it might be better to have this. I'm always carrying this knife under cover."

Mogi-san walked until she stood before me. She crouched down and picked up the tumbled kitchen knife.

"Ah--"

Although she was completely unguarded to me, I was only able to let out such a voice. I couldn't move as if I was petrified. I couldn't do anything but to stand still like a driven-in nail.

My body was left behind. My mind had stopped with the belief that this can't be happening and did not accept the scene that's taking place in front of me.

"Didn't I say it, Aya Otonashi? People who are going to disappear do not matter."

Mogi-san mounted Maria and raised the kitchen knife.

The raise kitchen knife was, swung down with no hesitation. Over and over. Over and over. Until Maria's breath stopped for certain.

During this, Maria did not even raise an unsightly moan.

"If you stayed being a mere eyesore like flies that swarm around feces, I would have spared you. But oh no, you had to make a move on my Kazu-kun!"

Spitting this out, Mogi-san stood up.

Maria didn't move anymore.

Mogi-san viewed the kitchen knife she had thrust into Maria several times and then threw it away at the ground before me.

I looked reflexively at this knife. At this knife that had soaked up the blood of Kokone and Maria.

"Well then, you're next Kazu-kun."

I crouched down and touched the kitchen knife reluctantly. I removed my hand instinctively again when I felt the slimy touch of blood. I swallowed my saliva and reached out once again. My hand quivered. I couldn't grab it properly. I closed my eyes and grabbed it somehow. I opened them again. The fact that I'm holding the weapon that killed Kokone and Maria made my hand quiver even more. I almost let go of it. I grabbed it with both my hands to suppress the quivering.

Aah, I can't.

To do something with this knife is not possible for me.

"What are you doing, Kazu-kun? Come on... hand the kitchen knife over to me!"

No, it's not only me. No one could do anything with this knife.

Therefore--

"...Who made you do something like this, Mogi-san?"

Mogi-san, too, shouldn't have been able to it. There's no way she was able to.

Unless she's manipulated by someone.

She stared in puzzlement at me.

"...what are you talking about? Do you want to suggest that someone ordered me? Are you alright, Kazu-kun? There's no way it would be like this, is there?"

"But I fell in love with you."

".....and what do you want to achieve by saying so?"

"Even when having experienced more than 20,000 recurrences, even when being driven into a corner - Mogi-san would never do such a thing. The girl I fell in love with would never do such a thing!"

Mogi-san was struck for a moment by my words, but then scowled at me and replied.

"...I see. So by appealing to my emotions, you want to make me spare you, huh? I'm disappointed. I never thought you were so unfair. So you don't want to die for my sake, huh?"

There's no way I would. For one, I don't want to die, and I don't believe that she would be saved by this.

".....Kazu-kun, do you think one mustn't kill under any circumstances?"

"...Yeah."

"Ufufu. How upright. Yeah, that's very right. So perfectly right, isn't it?"

Saying so, Mogi-san peered into my eyes.

"--so, for a lifetime... no, so enjoy your stay here for all eternity."

She spat these words out coldly.

Probably because she knew that this is the least I'm wishing for.

"After all--if I hand over this 'box', I'll die."

In other words, she will die if the 'Rejecting Classroom' ends? Maria did not mention this with a single word.

"Do you understand? Getting out of this 'box' means killing me. Do you think I'm lying? Do you think I'm just saying random things to protect the 'box'? I'm not! It's easy if you think about it! I mean, why do you think I have had the wish to return to the past?"

The times one wishes to return to the past? For example at times when something happened in reality that cannot be undone...?

"Say, didn't you think it's strange? That I was always run over by this truck. Well, there were times when Aya Otonashi sacrificed herself for me, though... ah, by the way, there were also times when you sacrificed yourself. But basically it was always me, right?"

"Ah--"

Don't tell me--

Finally I took notice of this possibility.

Why does Mogi-san not end the 'Rejecting Classroom'?

This traffic accident is an inevitable phenomenon within the 'Rejecting Classroom'. Someone, especially Mogi-san, meets with an accident. I don't know why, but this is for certain.

«I think--happened things cannot be changed by any means.»

I have once said those words. Maria answered as follows. 'Your sentiment is probably normal. And the creator of this 'Rejecting Classroom' was probably having the same sentiment.'

So, assuming I had the opportunity to destroy the 'box'. Would doing so at the same time mean--

"Are you prepared to let me die because of an accident?"

--to kill the girl I love?

- Clonk*--this sound resounded. I wondered what sound this was, but it was the sound of my kitchen knife falling to the ground.

"How miserable. You're not even able to hand the knife over to me..."

Mogi-san walked to my side. She picked up the kitchen knife I had dropped.

She will probably kill me now.

Having piled up sins on sins, she cannot justify herself by another way than to continue piling up sins. If she doesn't do so, her conscience will crumble down. She has no way back anymore. This girl that has lost the ways to control herself will run wild and kill me.

I'm sure that--«Kasumi Mogi»stopped being «Kasumi Mogi» when she killed the first person.

On her expressionless face was the blood of two people.

Bending her knees, she adjusted herself to be on the same height as me who could not stand up.

Still holding the kitchen knife, she enfolded me in her arms. Her arms intersected behind my neck, where she applied the blade on my carotid artery.

Mogi-san brought her face near and opened her mouth.

"If you can, please stay like this with your eyes closed."

I closed my eyes as she told me to.

Something soft touched my lips.

I realized instantly what this touch was.

At last, this certain feeling welled up. This welled up feeling that didn't well up when I saw Kokone's corpse, nor when Maria was stabbed.

Anger.

I can't--forgive this.

"It's not the first time I kissed you, you know? Sorry that it's always so forced."

I can't forgive this. After all I didn't remember. And I'm sure I won't remember this time, either.

"Bye, Kazu-kun. I loved you!"

Is she satisfied by creating memories she cannot share with anyone? Maybe Mogi-san is satisfied with this. I mean, she got used to being alone to such an extent.

A sharp pain run though the back of my neck.

Betraying Mogi-san, who wanted me to keep my eyes closed, I opened my eyes.

Mogi-san became flustered but couldn't avert her eyes since it was so sudden. Aah, finally our eyes met properly.

I grabbed her hand.

I saw in the corner of my view how the red liquid that had flowed from my neck to her hands dripped down from there.

"...what are you doing?"

"I... cannot forgive."

"You can't forgive me? Fufu... I don't care! I'm aware of that! But it doesn't matter! It's farewell anyway."

"That's not it."

"It's not you whom I cannot forgive. It's this 'Rejecting Classroom' which is far away from the everyday life!"

I put strength into the hand I was gripping of her wrist. Her delicate hand was pinned down by me. My sight turned black for a moment. The bleeding at my neck might be fatal.

"Let, go of me--!"

"I won't!"

I still don't know what to do. I'm sure I can't kill her. But I clearly realized that this 'Rejecting Classroom' is inexcusable. Therefore, I must absolutely not disappear at this point.

"Let me kill you! Please, let me kill you!"

She shouted. Although these were supposed to be words of rejection, it sounded to me like she was shouting that she's in pain. Almost like a lamentation.

...ah, I see. I finally noticed.

She is crying.

On the surface, she was expressionless as always. She didn't shed tears. I looked straight at her. She averted her eyes immediately. Her legs were trembling all the time, being so thin they seemed to have problems sustaining her. She, who has lost her facial expression, cannot notice her own feelings. She can't even notice that she's crying. Her tears do not flow anymore. Because they dried up long ago, certainly.

Sorry that I didn't notice sooner.

"I won't let you kill me. I won't let you reject me."

"Don't make fun of me! Don't torment me more than this!"

I'm sorry, but I can't listen to this entreaty.

Therefore--

"Under no circumstances will I let you be here alone!"

I shouted.

It might be my imagination, but I had the feeling that the strength left her for a second.

Even so.

"Ah--"

My sight turned completely black. An impact on my cheekbones brought my sight back temporarily. The scenery had changed from before the blackout. The blood-stained slippers of Mogi-san were before my eyes. My hands didn't grab her wrist anymore and were lying powerlessly on the ground.

It's not like she did something to me. I just collapsed on my own.

I thought that I finally found a way to persuade her and now I can't even move. I even have problems moving my mouth.

"I am an idiot."

I hear her voice.

"Just by this, just by such a message, I--"

I didn't know with what face she was saying this since I couldn't raise my face.

[illegible]

Like to instruct herself, she repeated the same words.

Her slippers moved. Someone's blood splashed on my face. I saw the light of the kitchen knife slightly. --ah, she's planning to use this.

"But now it's farewell, Kazu-kun."

She crouched down and stroked my back gently.

"---I must kill."

And then she swung down the blade.

"--I must kill me."

Into her own body.

27755th time

"--I must kill me"

I instructed myself desperately. This is the only way. The only way to prevent me from being possessed again by the fake «me».

I will abandon everything.

This is the only way to atone for my sins that I can think of.

I thrust the kitchen knife into the middle of my body.

I fell on Kazu-kun's body who was lying collapsed. Kazu-kun's face was now very close to mine. He had finally noticed the fake me and was looking at me with big eyes.

Please don't make such a face. To calm him down I tried to smile--but then I noticed that I cannot smile anymore. After all I haven't smiled nor have I cried for ages.

My body's temperature was dropping more and more.

I hope that my dirty inside will also flow out completely.

«Under no circumstances will I let you be here alone!»

Thank you. But it's impossible. It was impossible right from the start, so long ago.

Or am I wrong? I mean--

--I died already long ago.

0th time

Aah, I'm going to die.

I was blown away by the truck and thought so while my time was prolonged to an unbelievable extent. I wouldn't survive such an impact. I'm going to die. My life will end here.

N-No, I don't want to--

It were the silly words of someone who had never thought seriously about what's death in specific, despite having had the thoughts of dying several times.

To die. To end. There's nothing ahead. I realized just how dreadful this fact is, now that I was about to die.

If it was going to be like this anyway, then I wanted it to happen before my world had changed by love!

Though I do know love now,

Though I have a goal,

Though I have not yet done anything with this other party--

--this is just cruel.

"Mhm, a situation that draws my interest."

This man (woman?) appeared out of the blue. I have no clue how he appeared. To begin with, why can this person speak to me so normally? I could also not perceive clearly where he was standing. I was twisted all over so I didn't even know in which direction I was looking to. And even so, this person did not avert his eyes from me. This is an impossible situation. Ah, no, that's not right. I am at another, unknown place. This person is standing in front of me. I don't know where I am. This place did not leave any impression, but was a special place.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not talking about the situation of you meeting with an accident. Such a situation is ordinary and happens everywhere in the world. What draws my interest is, that this accident happened close to the boy I have interest in."

What is this person saying?

I have heard that you see a playback of your life when you die, but I haven't heard anything of being blown to this place and talking to this person.

Is this person the grim reaper or something?

This person who doesn't look like anyone but who would also look like anyone.

But there was something that's for sure. This person is fantastic. His appearance, his voice and his fragrance fascinated me.

"I want to see how this boy reacts to 'boxes' used near to him. Ah, but of course I'm also interested in how you use your 'box'. After all I'm interested in all of mankind. Well, but naturally you are just «while I'm at it»."

Saying these incomprehensible things, this person smiled.

"Do you have a wish?"

A wish?

Of course I have one.

"This is a 'box' that grants any wish."

I accepted it.

I immediately understood that this was the real thing. Therefore, I was resolute to not let go of this 'box'.

Please, if this end cannot be changed, then please just let me redo a bit. Even just yesterday is enough. There is something I have left to do. If I have just yesterday, I can communicate my feelings. If I'm able to do just this, I'm sure that I won't have regrets. No matter what's the conclusion, I won't have regrets. Please, turn back the time just for a little. I'm aware that this is not possible. But even so, I wish for this.

When I wished so, the lid of the 'box' opened like the mouth of a carnivore, it merged with the space and vanished.

Yeah, right. It should be alright like this.

"Huhu--"

The charmingly smiling person commented my wish with a single sentence.

"--so you restrained yourself."

And then he disappeared.

I was thrown out of this special place that doesn't leave any impression.

I landed in a chamber enveloped in darkness, in which a rotten smell struck my nose as if countless corpses had been left alone here. It was a disgusting room, to which compared a

prison would seem like paradise. Aah, if I stay here for just an hour I'll collapse. But this place started to get painted out white, almost like with white paint. I lost sight of the boundaries of the room because all became white. A fragrance that seemed to be made of sweets erased the rotten smell. Each time I winked, blackboard, desks, chairs and other necessary objects increased. All objects were there, so the only thing left was to call the necessary characters. To insert the people that entered our classroom yesterday. If that's done, I can redo things. I can redo yesterday.

But however cleanly painted over, this place is still this chamber, where even a prison seems better.

My world after death, packed with white, white, white despair.

So, yeah. If I seem to be unable to achieve my goal--

--I'll have to destroy this box myself, before this pretty decoration comes unstuck and before I can see this shameful sight.

5000th time

"Why not just kill him?"

Haruaki-kun suggested jokingly this offbeat, nonsensical idea when I consulted him.

6000th time

"Why not just kill him?"

Haruaki-kun suggested for the nth time jokingly this breakthrough solution when I consulted him.

7000th time

"Why not just kill him?"

Haruaki-kun suggested jokingly this logical solution.

8000th time

"Why not just kill him?"

Haruaki-kun suggested jokingly his theory like to affirm himself.

9000th time

"Why not just kill him?"

Haruaki-kun suggested jokingly this fact to the cornered me.

9999th time

I have already heard the means to kill him from himself.

"How to make oneself absolutely not wanting to meet a certain person?"

Haruaki has already suggested the same method numerous times. I've heard it so much I'm sick of it. I arrived at the conclusion, that feelings of guilt towards somebody are the best way to make oneself not wanting to meet anymore. Like always.

And like always, he told me the means to create feelings of guilt towards someone.

"Why not just kill him?"

Haruaki-kun suggested jokingly this only method to the cornered me.

"Ultimately, you know. Well, if you kill him, it's not even a problem of meeting or not meeting anymore, though, hehe!"

Why there's the need to 'reject' Haruaki-kun? That is because I think that it will affect Kazu-kun and me the most when he disappears.

Living in this world resembles playing a Tetris you cannot end. At first you give your best to make a new high score. That's fun, too. But midway it becomes indifferent. After all it doesn't

matter whether you make a new high score or not, it's just a game that is going to be reset. And then you have to start all over again. Nothing changes even when you have a Game Over. You try your best to feel some fun nonetheless, but with this feeling the blocks reach the top in no time. It gets boring. It gets uninteresting. It gets tough. It gets painful. You lose the spirit to just turn the block. It's indifferent. And despite being indifferent, the blocks don't stop falling down. And however often they reach the top, you cannot stop the game. If you stop, you'll die. And I don't want that. After all I have a goal to achieve. I have to spend today with no regrets. So I have to change this system somehow.

Haruaki is an important part of this system.

Therefore, I have to 'reject' him.

".....can you tell me once more the method to create feelings of guilt?"

"...Kasumi, what's wrong? Well, I don't mind, though..."

Haruaki said like always.

"Why not just kill him?"

With this, it's right the 1,000th reply.

Right! That's the only way. Yeah. So it can't be helped. You understand, right? After all you told me for 1,000 times, so you understand, right? Or rather, you want me to do so, right?

--you want to get killed by me, right?

10000th time

"Please stop! Please, just don't kill me!"

I didn't lend him an ear.

I will kill Haruaki Usui.

After all, he suggested so himself!

*I ****ed Haruaki Usui.*

And then I vanished. The person that was once Kasumi Mogi vanished. I suppose I won't be able to find the 'me' anymore, that was crushed in agony, ground to dust and blown away somewhere. Nevertheless, my body will keep resurrecting forever. It will resurrect, no matter if it's empty inside.

I felt something entering my empty body.

Something that was born in this filthy 'box'. Something unbelievably grotesque that smelled as nasty as if a bunch of dead bugs were stuck together with feces. I refused it. I continuously refused it. But I knew already. Even when I refuse it countless times, this something will gradually enter me through my gaps. It sniffed out my weak parts like a hyena and started to paint me pitch black by eating those. I became pitch black and lost the awareness of who I am. I became a fake me that was still no one other than me.

But still, I cannot end it yet.

After all, I wished for a today without regrets.

--today without regrets?

"Hahaha."

Am I stupid? There's no way there'd be something like this. This is my world after death. There's no way my regrets in the real world would disappear by doing something in this world after death. Even if Kazuki confessed to me in this world, there would be no meaning to this. How could I become satisfied in a separated today with no connections to anywhere whatsoever? ...look, nothing comes to mind.

My longed-for outcome.

In order to pursue this, I tried my best all the time up to now in this utter standstill.

But I didn't even know what this outcome I'm longing for is.

I groped for it all this time without even knowing what it is.

And then I came to the conclusion that there is no such outcome.

"I don't want to die!"

Aah--what, finally I figured it out.

So that was my 'wish'.

So that's why 'wish' cannot be rewarded for an eternity.

I distorted the 'box' so much because I didn't know this. This distorted 'wish' of mine grew to an «attachment» and won't disappear anymore. It's in the 'box', thus it won't disappear.

This «attachment» is continuing to remain and is what moves this fake me.

So I'm sure that, even when I disappear, this 'box' never will.

27755th time

"Under no circumstances will I let you be here alone!"

With only those words of Kazu-kun, I returned to the lost Kasumi Mogi just for a moment.

"I am an idiot."

Though I decided already. Though I decided from the beginning that will destroy the 'box' before I have to see this shameful sight.

But such a dedication gets weaker and weaker in such endless recurrences and disappears in the end.

Once, when I killed someone who's name I don't know anymore, I was supposed to have become unable to return.

But even so--

"Just by this, just by such a message, I--"

--could regain myself.

My love has saved me at the very last moment.

But I know that I'm going to get captured again in no time.

I'm going to get captured by this 'box'.

Therefore, while I'm still «Kasumi Mogi»--I must kill me.

"Goodbye, Kazu-kun."

And now, this 'box' that was so convenient but couldn't bring me happiness is going to end.

I can pass away lying on my beloved one. Maybe this is, at last, some kind of happiness. Therefore it's enough for me like this. It's enough for me.

I closed my eyes.

I will certainly not open them for a--

"Who allowed you to die?"

I got startled and opened my eyes.

This unidentifiable person that handed the 'box' out to me stood there. Kazu-kun doesn't seem to have noticed him, so I guess he's only visible for me.

When our eyes met, this person smiled calmly.

"I still want to observe this boy. It troubles me when you end this opportunity of unlimited observation on your own accord."

What? ...What is he saying?

"But well, I suppose it's not so thrilling with similar situations all the time. Let's see... it's against my principles, but may I take care of the 'box'? I'll tamper with it a little. You were planning to destroy it anyway, so you don't mind, do you?"

Without waiting for my answer, he placed his hand on my chest. The moment he did so.

"Ugh, aaaah! AAaaAAahhh!!!"

An intense pain that exceeded my imagination. A pain that made even me scream out, although I've gotten used to the collision with trucks and didn't even raise my voice when I stabbed myself in the chest. The kind of the pain was different. It was a sensation as if my soul was cut up into a thousand pieces. A pain that attacks right at the nerves without any means to soften.

He took out the 'box' of the size of the palm of a hand and smiled.

"Aah, I think you're already aware of that fact, but this 'box' cannot move anymore without you. So I'll have you get into the 'box'."

When he said so, he started to fold me up.

He folded me and folded me, and then he stuffed me into the 'box'.

Kazu-kun. Please, Kazu-kun.

I know I'm thinking selfishly. I know it's impertinent, after I did such things to you. But, but--I can't--I can't anymore--

Kazu-kun, help me--

27756th time

I have to end the 'Rejecting Classroom' and regain everyday life.

What would be the worst scenario that may hinder me from attaining this goal?

To come upon a big obstacle? For example, one where I have to traverse a thin thread from one building to another. Or one where I have to repeat the same day for a million times.

I don't think that's it. I mean, I know how to clear the obstacle in that case. No matter how hard it seems, I might be able to acquire the skills to overcome it within this unlimited time.

Surely, the worst crisis is when I don't even know what the obstacle is.

If I don't know what to do, I have no other choice than to be at loss. But no matter how much I'm at loss, time does not go on inside the 'Rejecting Classroom'. Time won't possibly solve the problem for me.

And I've now--come upon this worst scenario.

"What's wrong, Hoshii? Somehow, you're acting very suspiciously today?"

The break after the first lesson. Haruaki addressed me with with a light laugh.

The lesson had just ended, so no one had left the classroom yet. Mogi-san was sitting at her seat, too. Right--all my 38 classmates were inside the classroom.

I tried thinking about why the 'rejected' people are here, but for some reason I could remember almost nothing from last time. I have a hunch that we found something out, but I can't remember anything.

But that's okay. That's still okay.

If we could find out something important, then we'll find that out again soon. It's a riddle for me why all my classmates have come back, but that doesn't affect the things I have to do.

That's not the problem.

"Anyway, today's really boring~. Nothing new today at all!"

There's nothing new.

A dull pain ran through my chest due to Kokone's remark.

I don't want to believe this. I don't want to admit my current situation.

"Daiya."

As if to seek for help, I addressed Daiya, who was sitting beside me. He turned only his head and looked at me.

"Did you hear anything of a transfer student coming today?"

I said so with the frail hope that he would nod. My question was--

"Haa? What are you talking about?"

--denied with a frown, as expected.

Right--Aya Otonashi does not 'transfer' anymore.

Thus, I don't know what to do anymore.

Find the 'owner'. And then what? Take out the 'box'? Destroy the 'box'? How do I do that?

I planned to settle things together with Maria. But this was just me being conceited. I was completely dependent on her, so I don't know what to do now that she's not here.



"But listen, isn't it the same whether we're in the everyday life or inside this 'Rejecting Classroom'?"

When I consulted him, Haruaki replied like this.

I didn't know what to do, so I consulted him during break. And this was the answer I got from him at the back of the school building when he finished hearing my story during lunch break.

I know Haruaki's personality. It's not like he's saying this because he can't believe my absurd story.

"The same, you say..."

"Ah, no. It's not like I don't believe you. Just well, let's assume that we're really inside this 'Rejecting Classroom'. Then how does that differ from the everyday life you wish for?"

"What differs? They're completely--"

"Equal, aren't they? I and the others that seem to have disappeared and come back. And Aya Otonashi wasn't originally a member of this class anyway. It just returned to how it was at the beginning. Or am I wrong?"

It just returned to how it was?

...it might be so.

After all, even I might not have ever met her if it wasn't for the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

No one knows about Maria. This is reasonable. The existence of Aya Otonashi doesn't belong into the classroom 1-6 to begin with.

Maybe it was all a dream? Maybe Aya Otonashi was just a illusion of mine?

...I don't know. But it's still «March 02» today.

"If we're in the 'Rejecting Classroom', then this «March 02» is not going to end, you know? So can you still call it equal to the everyday life?"

I thought Haruaki would agree with me. But...

"I claimed so with this in consideration, though?"

Haruaki did rather incline his head and said so.

I got unintentionally speechless when I heard him speaking as if it was a matter of course. Upon seeing me like this, Haruaki scratched his head uneasily and continued.

"I think I got what you want to say. But look, don't you get this uncomfortable feeling because you know it's a cycle? Take for example the everyday life you considered as natural before. Assuming those days had been repeating for a long time, you didn't notice, right? And indeed, I don't feel anything like this at the moment. I consider this moments to be the usual everyday life. Even if, for argument's sake, this was inside this 'Rejecting Classroom'."

That's--surely correct.

Because I'm aware of it I get this feeling of discomfort and disgust. If didn't know it, I wouldn't think anything.

If I didn't know about the 'Rejecting Classroom', I wouldn't even have this conflict now. Even if the day's repeating, I can fully enjoy the everyday life provided to me. I can spend the time with the sad fate of a certain someone being averted. This is happiness, and convenient.

To destroy this is not more than mere self-satisfaction.

"You got it, right Hoshii? What do you have to do?"

"Yeah. I got what I have to do!"

"Right? Well then--"

Haruaki's words stopped suddenly. I turned around in wonder, and saw Mogi-san standing there.

"What's the matter?"

I asked.

"I'd like to borrow Kazuki, okay?"

Upon hearing Mogi-san's words, Haruaki and I exchanged glances.

"Err, Hoshii. Well, is this enough for now? If there's still something you want to tell me, I'll listen."

"Yeah, thanks Haruaki."

Haruaki left with the words, "You're welcome".

I wonder what she wants from me. Did she search specially for me?

I stared at her face. What a pretty face. When I thought so, I couldn't endure looking at her anymore and averted my eyes.

"___"

Despite being the one that called out for me, Mogi-san frowned.

"...I'll ask you something now. It may sound strange, but please answer without wondering."

"Ah, okay..."

I nodded, but Mogi-san seemed to still have troubles saying it, and was still frowning. After a while, she came to a decision and looked straight into my eyes.

"Am I Kasumi Mogi?"

--huh?

Her question was so unexpected that I couldn't even get surprised and just stood still with a serious face.

Mogi-san averted her eyes, seeming uncomfortable.

".....err, Mogi-san? Did you perhaps have a loss of memory?"

"...I can understand you. But please answer to my question."

"Of course you're Kasumi Mogi..."

What are those words I'd never say in the everyday life?

"I see..."

For some reason, Mogi-san murmured so and looked a little desolate.

"Well then. It may be quite unbelievable, but please be prepared and listen. I am--"

Then, Mogi-san - Kasumi Mogi, the girl I love - spoke out completely contradicting words.

"--Aya Otonashi."

"----eh? Aya Otonashi...? Mogi-san is Maria? What's the meaning of this?"

When I was overcome with surprise, Mogi-san continued.

"Yeah, I am Aya Otonashi. Perplexed by this absurd situation in which everyone without exception calls me «Kasumi Mogi» despite my different looks and way of speaking, I had lost confidence in myself, but I am certainly «Aya Otonashi»."

You may claim so, but the person standing in front of me is «Kasumi Mogi». But I also have the feeling that these expressions and way of speaking fit exactly to the «Aya Otonashi» in my memories...

"Err... right! There's this split personality thing that appears all the time in Manga, isn't there? So are you perhaps in such another personality now...?"

That's quite absurd as well, but it's still within common knowledge.

"I had this kind of thought, too. But if it was like this, you should rather doubt my different behavior and I shouldn't know the name «Aya Otonashi». Or am I wrong?"

Right, I did never speak out the name «Aya Otonashi» in front of her.

"In the first place, why did you suddenly turn into Mogi-san?"

"...don't phrase it so ambiguously. I merely changed into the position of «Kasumi Mogi». It's not like I transformed to Mogi. Well... anyhow, to explain this situation. Right, you understand that there's no «Kasumi Mogi» in this 27,756th time if I'm «Aya Otonashi», right?"

I nodded.

"«Kasumi Mogi» disappeared. Her position got empty. Do you still remember when I told you that it's not on my own accord that I become a transfer student? Perhaps I was placed into that empty position this time, instead of becoming a transfer student."

That's just... forcible.

"There's no way I, no the entire class, would mistake you for Mogi-san!"

"Exactly, this was a big question for me. But when I ran into this question, a certain other one was solved. The 'owner' of the 'Rejecting Classroom' felt all 27,755 loops. So her personality should have changed, too. Nevertheless, no one noticed this change in her."

I have to admit, she may be right.

"It's natural to presume that there's a rule to the 'Rejecting Classroom' according to which others cannot notice the change at the 'owner'. Furthermore, this change cannot be disturbed by the owner's relationships. Kasumi Mogi was the 'owner' but disappeared due to some reason. And now I changed into her. So this rule applies and no one notices any change, although the appearance and personality of me, «Aya Otonashi», are completely different."

I understood Mogi-san's explanation for now.

If she was really Maria, then it would be a reason to rejoice. I suppose. I mean, I, on my own, have no clue what to do. But if it's for Maria, she'll surely be able to guide me.

However--

"I don't believe this."

--I didn't accept this.

Mogi-san seemed surprised by my distinct resistance and opened her eyes wide.

"...I know it's unbelievable, but I don't think that's a reason to oppose like this."

I chewed on my lips.

"Ah, I see. So you don't want to accept this fact. If you accept, you'll also admit that Mogi's the 'owner'. And you don't want to admit that if possible. Which is fair enough. After all you love M--"

"Stop it!!"

I shouted accidentally.

You're exactly right! I do absolutely not want to accept this. And I'm not talking about the claim that she's the 'owner'. What I can't accept is--

".....I love Mogi-san."

I wrung out my voice and said so.

"I know that."

Mogi-san raised her eyebrows as if she wanted to signify me that I don't have to tell her this now.

"Therefore--you can't possibly be Maria...!!"

I clenched my fist. Seeing my trembling fist, she has surely finally noticed what I'm trying to say. She opened her eyes wide and closed her mouth.

I love Mogi-san.

This feeling has not changed, even now.

This feeling has not changed--even now that Mogi-san is just like «Aya Otonashi».

If what Mogi-san's saying is all the truth, then I'd be a hopeless fool. Not noticing when my beloved person changed. Not noticing when my beloved person was replaced by Maria. This isn't a problem with her, I just can't deal with my own feelings.

Love is blind, they say. But this is a whole new level.

Fake.

This love that I have had for such an unbelievably long time would turn out to be fake.

Therefore I cannot accept it. I cannot accept that she's «Aya Otonashi». The moment I accept it, this love is going to end.

"I love Mogi-san!"

Thus, I spat those words out like a proclamation of war.

She cast down her eyes wordlessly.

This was the worst confession ever. A confession during which I didn't even think about the other party, which was merely to deny this situation.

I clenched my fists strongly. But even so, I didn't have another choice.

"If you insist on being Maria, then prove it to me!"

She stayed for a while with her eyes cast down.

But then she seemed to have come to a decision, opened her eyes and spoke.

"Kazuki. Even if you gave in to the 'Rejecting Classroom' like this, it wouldn't change my mission. So I thought about letting you be. However, after thinking about it again, I don't want that. I don't want you to go down on your knees because of something like this."

She gripped my right hand. My glance wandered to her. She was staring straight into my eyes.

"So you shall realize now that I'm no one but «Aya Otonashi»."

She placed my hand on her chest.

"W-What are you--?"

"I am a 'box'."

She said like to scorn herself.

"Therefore, I am not the same as the human «Kasumi Mogi»."

"Isn't your wish merely still being granted? If so, then Mogi-san's just the same! Even if you showed me your 'box', that wouldn't prove that you're «Aya Otonashi»!"

She shook her head.

"There tend to be those fairies in fairy tales that grant only a single wish, right? When you heard of such a story, have you never thought of this: «Why not just wish for unlimited wishes?»?"

I nodded. By doing so, one would have endless wishes. I had this thought already.

"It's a bit embarrassing, but my wish's similar to this."

She said so in self derision.

"My wish was--«I want to grant the wishes of others». I became a being that grants wishes."

"That's--"

Just like the 'box'.

But I think this is an upright 'wish'. So just why does she have such a self-derisive smile?

"But I couldn't fully believe that it's possible. The 'box' couldn't fully grant my 'wish'. Every single person that used me, the 'box', disappeared. Because the 'box' had surmised my feeling of «there's no way 'wishes' would be granted so conveniently in reality»."

I was speechless. When on earth will this 'box' be satisfied with toying with our lives?

"Kazuki, I'll let you touch my 'box'. When you do so, I won't let you ask such a stupid question like who I am anymore."

She unfolded my hand and pushed it against her breast.

I feel her heartbeat.

At this moment--

"Ah--"

I sunk to the ground of the sea. Although I was supposed to be at the ground of the sea, it was bright as if the sun had been sunken here as well. It's beautiful. I was fascinated by the water. It was, however, cold. I couldn't breathe.

Everyone seems happy. Everyone seems happy. Everyone seems happy. At the ground of the sea. They frolic around with deep-sea fishes. They suffocate, swell, freeze, get crushed by the water pressure and smile. Nothing has any meaning here. Nothing's important here. Puppet shows all over. Playing houses. Picture story shows. Comedies. A tragedy in which everyone is happy.

Within this scene, someone was crying.

Only a single one was crying, surrounded by the others who were laughing 'HAHAHAHAHA' happily.

I tilted my head. This is my imagination. Just my imagination. I haven't seen anything.

But I realized just one thing. I realized the feelings of someone, I won't likely be able to bring away anymore.

Utter loneliness.

I crawled out of the ground of the sea and was again at my original place.

She released my hand.

I took my hand slowly away from her breast, and then I was exhausted and fell on my knees.

At the same time when I did so, I also noticed that my cheeks were wet with tears.

I can't deny it anymore. After being showed such a thing, I can't deny it anymore.

"This is my 'box' - the 'Flawed Bliss'."

She is--«Aya Otonashi».

Mogi-san holds a box, too? Doesn't matter. It's not something to deny Maria. I don't need any reason. I understood just by touching it. I understood that she's Maria.

I'm sure she didn't want to show this to others. Nonetheless, she showed it to me.

So that I wouldn't lose to the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

"Maria, I'm sorry..."

Maria shook her head with a smile.

"---"

She hates her own feelings.

I realized. I realized that she's «Aya Otonashi». And yet, my feelings towards her haven't changed. Her smile looked terribly cute to me. The remains of my love confuse me without disappearing.

I felt so vexed being attached to this love, my tears didn't stop.

"Kazuki."

Maria called my name.

"Eh?"

And then she took an unbelievable action.

She embraced me.

Despite knowing what she was doing, I couldn't understand what she's doing.

Her way of embracing me wasn't like her - she seemed strangely falteringly.

"You were the only one that remembered my name."

Maria spoke in riddles.

"If it wasn't for you, I'd be alone. I have to admit that I was supported by you. It was so even when I considered you to be the 'owner'. So--"

I finally recognized what she's doing.

"--let me support you, at least now."

She embraced me closely. Contrastive to her tone, she did so only weakly and in a way that seemed more like enveloping me.

"At least now, during the time you feel love towards me, I might as well be gentle to you."

I don't know.

I don't know if this current feeling of mine is towards «Kasumi Mogi», «Aya Otonashi», or both of them.

The only thing I know is, that I'm very happy that she does so.

"Ah."

Perhaps--

Perhaps, Maria didn't only let me touch her 'box' for my sake. Maria didn't want me to call her «Kasumi Mogi». Thus she wanted to make me admit her existence.

I considered this possibility for a moment, but then I thought that's over-thinking it and laughed unintentionally.



"Hoshii, what did you talk about with Kasumi when I had left?"

After school - Haruaki poked my chest with a big grin.

"Did she perhaps confess to you or something!?"

"Ah...no..."

She confessed to me that she's «Aya Otonashi», so in a wide sense he's correct, though.

"You just beat around the bush! How suspicious! Was it perhaps Bull's eye?! Damn it I'm jealous! Kasumi has gotten pretty, after all."

Ah, I see.

Watching how Haruaki talked happily, I understood what I have to do.

It's reassuring that I have reunited with Maria, but because «Kasumi Mogi», the 'owner', disappeared to somewhere, I had been lost on what to do.

«If you make Kazuki Hoshino an enemy, you also make the immortal me an enemy!»

I recalled the words Haruaki had once said to Maria. Since it was so long ago, I'm not too sure if it matches word by word, though.

Right. I must absolutely have him help me out.

"Haruaki. Will you listen to the continuation of our previous talk?"

Just for an instant he looked blankly when I asked him out of the blue, but then he nodded with a smile.

"I said that I got what I have to do, right? I'll tell you now what I was going to tell you then."

I looked into Haruaki's eyes and proclaimed a war.

"I will--fight against the 'Rejecting Classroom'."

Hearing my distinct declaration, he opened his eyes wide.

"Err, listen... haven't I explained it to you clearly? Even if we're in this 'Rejecting Classroom' - there are no barriers as long you don't know about it."

"Yeah. But I can't! I can't permit possibly being in a everyday life where I can't make a step forward because everything's repeating!"

"Why?"

"Because--I do know about it, right now."

I might be able to spend my time with no problems if I just forgot about being in the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

However, I do know about it. I know that I'm merely in a fake everyday life.

Therefore, I cannot ignore this fact.

Maybe doing so is just for my self-satisfaction. But even so I think that I'm right and I can't act different.

"...well, up to you. But so is there a reason for you to get so obstinate?"

Haruaki asked purely out of wonder.

A reason...? The reason why I insist on the real everyday life? I thought about it. And really, my attachment to the everyday life might not be ordinary.

"As it seems, this reason has also to do with life and death..."

Haruaki whispered.

Ah, right. That's it. The reason was this simple.

"That is--the reason of life."

Haruaki opened his eyes wide, as he seemed to have not expected this answer.

"The reason of life? What's that? What do you mean?"

"I can't spell it out, but... for example, when you get 100 points in a test you haven't learned anything, you don't get happy, do you? When you learned with utmost effort while aiming for a good mark and then get 100 points, you get happy. Or am I wrong?"

"Surely, I get it that something has more value to you when you obtained it after a lot of hardships, rather than having done nothing for it."

"I think that to pursue this something is the reason of life. I don't think that's exaggerated. I mean, everyone will die someday. So the result of life is death! For me, pursuing only the result is dreadful."

"Everyone will die someday. ...Indeed."

"If this here is the 'Rejecting Classroom', within everything will be made unhappened, then I can by no means accept this. To protect the reason of life, the everyday life has to go on. Therefore, I deny the 'box' that denies the everyday life."

Haruaki listened very interested to my unresisted opinion.

...maybe there wasn't even the need for me to tell him all that. Haruaki would probably help me without conditions.

"Haruaki, will you help me?"

As if it was natural, he gave me the thumbs up.



With Haruaki's opinion, I also had Kokone and Daiya listen to my story after Maria and him. The five of us had gathered around the bed in the high-class hotel I went to previously with Maria.

I explained the situation to Kokone and Daiya.

I expected Maria to complain that it would be wasteful to spend the time with explaining, but basically she didn't interrupt me and just complemented me from time to time. Maybe she'd like to hear some new opinions on the matter.

"Err... 'Kasumi is actually not Kasumi but Aya Otonashi-san, while the real Kasumi is the 'owner' who created the 'Rejecting Classroom' and we don't know her whereabouts... what's the solution?' - so that's what you're asking, Kazu-kun, huh? ...I don't get it! There's no way I would!"

Kokone dumped down on the bed like this.

"Aah, this bed feels good."

"I didn't ask for your impressions about the bed, you know?"

"I know!"

She replied with an angry voice to my Tsukkomi. I think, however, that Kokone's mulling over it seriously, though having this attitude.

"I'd like to ask something..."

Daiya interjected us.

"If this here is the 'Rejecting Classroom', this accident that is supposed to be inevitable will occur again, right?"

"I guess so, yeah."

Maria answered to his question.

What... Daiya is asking seriously?

"What's up with that stupid look, Kazu? Are you a carp that flaps its mouth open and closed, or something?"

"Ah, no--I was just surprised that you believed the 'Rejecting Classroom' so readily."

"As if I'd believe such a thing!"

Daiya spat out those words.

"--err, huh...?"

"Not to mention if it was just you who has a nut loose, but now even Mogi is saying such weird things composedly. Even if there were some other circumstances behind this, it's too tiresome to think about it. So I decided on accepting this 'Rejecting Classroom' for now, and stopped my thinking."

He's hella indirect, but in short he's helping us, I suppose?

"And then, Daiyan? The accident might occur again. And then?"

Haruaki urged the continuation of our subject.

"Aah. If the accident is going to occur as ever, then who will be the victim? Mogi isn't here anymore, is she?"

"Probably... I will. It's natural to think that I took over this role as well, since her position was forced upon me."

"Was it always Kasumi that was run over?"

Haruaki asked.

"No, there were also cases that others were run over when they tried to rescue her. Me, Kazuki, Mogi and even you when you tried to save me while I was trying to save Mogi. And not only once, but several hundred times."

"Whoa! No kidding? Wait, isn't several hundred times kinda impossible? ...ah, no, not necessarily, huh. After all it's plausible that the same person would take the same action in the same situation."

"On top of that, in the majority of cases you had confessed to me, before."

Maria said with an amazed expression.

"A man that sacrifices himself to save the woman he loves... oh shit! Ain't I cool?!"

"To be frank; mind your own business."

"H-How cruel."

"Just try picturing our positions reversed. Imagine how much it takes to endure seeing someone, who loves you, sacrificing himself for you... your actions made my haughtiness of aiming for the 'box' stand out magnificently and blamed me. It was the utmost effective way of breaking my heart."

"Weell..."

Haruaki grimaced.

But I guess he won't be able to reconsider since his actions themselves weren't wrong.

"While we're at it, how many times did I confess to you, Aya-chan?"

"Exactly 3,000 times."

"W-Wow, I'm passionate... "

"So you were dumped 3,000 times! That's a unprecedented getting-dumped record, isn't it! This hopelessness excites me quite a bit, Haru!"

"Just shut up, Kiri!"

Those two are quite funny.

"Mogi... ah no, I'll call you Otonashi for now. Otonashi, why did Mogi head to the scene of the accident each time, despite knowing that the accident would occur?"

Maria raised a brow to Daiya's question and answered.

"It's defined in the rules of the 'Rejecting Classroom', isn't it? Oomine, I think that you've already seen through it, but I've tried to stop the accident numerous times."

"Well, of course you wouldn't sacrifice yourself right from the start. It's natural to think that you arrived there at last. I for one would never choose being run over myself, though."

"Hey, why are you talking about the accident? Nothing will settle when we don't find Kasumi, right?"

Kokone tilted her head and interjected them. Daiya looked away displeased.

"This humanoid noise player sure is noisy."

"Ahaha. If only you were run over 20,000 times by a truck, no? ☆"

"Just asking, Kiri, how will you find Mogi?"

"Well... beats me. And anyhow, do you know?!"

"No clue."

"Oho... I'm amazed how you're able to play the innocent while calling me a noise player. Why don't you scrap the last name 'Oomine' and call yourself 'Mr. Innocent', instead? Daiya Innocent. Whoa, fits perfectly!"

"I'm not the only one who doesn't know. The others don't know, too. Right?"

Haruaki and I exchanged glances. Well, he's right. If we knew, we'd propose that right away.

"Therefore, we have to search for another solution. Consequentially, I had an eye on the truck accident, which is obviously a special event in this recurrence. A completely ordinary thought. Ms. Humanoid bullshit player, could I obtain your agreement?"

"Ugh..."

Having been explained away, Kokone gritted her teeth vexedly.

"Anyway, by preventing the accident, we might make some progress. If we might make progress, it's worth trying. That's what you want to say, right, Daiyan?"

Daiya nodded to Haruaki's summary.

"Exactly. But there's no meaning if we cannot prevent the accident."

"No--" Maria denied his words. "It might be worth trying. I was limited when I was alone, but with this number of people it might work out somehow."

"Does the number of people really matter? Zero stays zero, no matter by how much you multiply it. It's the same for this impossibility, isn't it?"

Daiya objected.

"I get your point. But I believe there's a possibility. After all, the conditions have changed. I am not Mogi, but «Aya Otonashi». The chances might not be zero anymore. So raising the chances by increasing the number of people is at least not wrong, don't you think?"

Daiya crossed his arms and pondered for a while, at last he nodded, "You have a point".

"Alright! It's decided; we'll try it for now! We'll prevent the accident somehow! Any objections?"

No one objected against Haruaki's summary.

Yeah. That should, probably, work out.



Early morning. One hour before the accidents occurred until now.

We were standing with umbrellas at the scene of the accident - the crossroads.

Haruaki and me had the role to save Maria in the end. It's dangerous if the accident really occurs, but both of us took this position on our own accord.

Maria had the mission to find and enter the truck. Maria had expressed the opinion that when sitting on the driver's seat of the truck, it would be the least possible to get run over by it.

I was nervous. Defeat is not allowed. I couldn't slip a bit yesterday. Out of anxiety, and also for affirmation, I had talked with her over phone for hours.

I looked at the face of Haruaki who was standing beside me.

Unlike me, he didn't seem nervous. His expression was the same as always. It was Haruaki's usual face that I had always seen in the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

This time we might be able to destroy the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

--No matter whether the accident occurs or not.

"Haruaki, while we wait I'd like to talk a bit. OK?"

"Why so formally? Of course that's OK!"

Hearing the rain drops resounding on the umbrella, I looked up at the sky thoughtlessly.

"It's about Mogi-san."

"Kasumi? Err, do you mean the original and not Otonashi-san?"

I nodded.

"I didn't tell you about this, right? About her killing me."

"...what is this violent story?"

Haruaki raised an eyebrow.

It's not like I hid this story from him. I simply couldn't remember until I realized that Mogi-san's the 'owner'.

And as if my shackles were removed when I recalled the 'owners' existence, I remembered all the memories of last time.

"Me, Maria, Kokone and probably even you were killed by Mogi-san."

"...we were killed? By Kasumi? Why so? With what aim?"

"To 'reject' others. Originally, everything is going to get unhappened in the 'Rejecting Classroom'. Even if you kill someone, it's going to get undone. But as it seems, Mogi-san is able to 'reject' only the ones that she kills on her own. I think she does so, because she then doesn't want to meet the person in question anymore from the bottom of her heart."

Haruaki nodded with a serious expression. I had explained 'rejecting' to him previously. That by doing so, one can't recall this person anymore.

"This Kasumi has, huh... quite unbelievable. But... well, even Kasumi gets like this after having experienced almost 30,000 recurrences, I guess. Fair enough."

"Do you really think so?"

I asked him.

"Mh? Look, it may be hard to imagine, but after being in such a standstill, anyone would get strange in the head, no?"

"I think so, too. But even when going insane, would you really kill? That thought doesn't appear normally!"

"You think so? Isn't that just from your perspective?"

Might be. But I cannot believe it. I mean, exactly because she felt guilt, murder became an effective way to 'reject' for her. I can't believe that such a person alone could think of this worst of crimes.

"...you confessed to Maria for 3,000 times and were run over several hundred times instead of her, right?"

"Seems so. Being the current me, I have no idea, though."

"But say, your words did, concerning the result, torment her, right?"

"Ah--... unintentionally, though."

Haruaki said with a bitter smile.

"To explain why it tormented her so much: this is because with such a giant amount, any message develops an accordingly high power, no matter how absurd the words. For example: no matter how much you think of yourself that you're beautiful, if someone told you for a thousand times that you're unattractive, you'd lose your self-confidence even if the other party was just joking."

"Well, I guess so."

"Thus, Maria couldn't help getting conscious of you after being confessed for 3,000 times. And we're talking about this Maria! I'm sure she did feel something when you opposed her."

«If you make Kazuki Hoshino an enemy, you also make the immortal me an enemy!»

I recalled those words again.

"...oh? Did I perhaps set the flag for her route?"

I laughed lightly and turned aside his joke.

"So what if there had been someone who suggested murder to Mogi-san for a thousand times? Wouldn't Mogi-san get cornered to think that this was the only way, since she did not only lack someone to rely on, but was also on the verge of going insane?"

Haruaki nodded.

"...I admit this would be intense. And it's actually possible. After all, the speaker is inside a standstill. This person's actions and beliefs don't change. It wouldn't be strange to say the same thing over and over. When having said something once, then there is the possibility to say the same for several thousand times."

"As you say. But that's no problem. After all that'd be like an accident, no? But you know--"

Finally, I moved my glance away from the threatening sky.

"--what if someone chose his words and actions purposely to corner her?"

And then I--stared at Haruaki.

Haruaki didn't show any signs of unrest even when I stared at him.

"Mh? But isn't that impossible?"

Haruaki's expression was just like always.

"It's not. For example, Maria or me would have been able if we wanted to. Isn't it like this? In other words, if there was someone who kept pretending having lost his memories in front of Mogi-san, it would be possible."

Haruaki listened silently to my words without objection.

"Retaining one's memory is undeniably a superior condition - is what I had thought. After all, you'd usually think that the more information the better, right? But that's not true. To continue to retain one's memory means also to be continuously attacked by those without memory or by those who pretend to have no memories. The ones without memory are in a safe zone. From there they can attack us who are standing on the foremost line."

I experienced such an attack, too, when my beloved girl replied with «Please wait until tomorrow» to my confession. She wasn't in the safe zone, though.

"What if there was someone who attacked Mogi-san deliberately from this safe place? Someone who was aware of her suffering, who took care that she wouldn't find a way to escape and who prepared the answer 'murder' for her. If so--"

"If so, this guy controlled Kasumi and deliberately assisted the murders."

Haruaki said so casually.

He didn't deny me.

"The target of such an attack isn't limited to Mogi-san."

"...but?"

"I mean, not only Mogi-san is standing on the foremost line. Maria and me were also there. It depended upon this person's aims, but he might have also tried to manipulate Maria and me. No... we might already be manipulated considerably."

«---wanna try killing me?»

I recalled those words, someone had once said to me.

And really, I didn't hear those words only once. He said them to me countless times. Those words stuck to my head like a curse.

That's not all. I was shown corpses.

Maria was confessed, had a certain someone sacrifice himself for her, and was opposed.

I could pull out all this information from my memory which doesn't even remember everything. Probably there were also small traps that I didn't notice.

To continue to attack from a safe place with no risks. Even if it doesn't go as expected, it's possible to redo this attack unlimited times.

"If we assume that I made my moves while being controlled by this person to a certain degree--"

I swallowed my saliva.

"--then this situation now is as he planned."

Haruaki kept silent. His face was hidden by his umbrella, so I couldn't see his expression.

The silence continued. The sound of the rain seemed strangely loud to me. I heard a small voice. First, I wondered what it is, but when I perked up my ears, I realized that it was a suppressed laughter.

Haruaki moved his umbrella and showed his face to me.

He was laughing and scowled at me with the corners of his mouth raised.

"Err, listen Hoshii. What is this joke, or rather grand hypothesis? First, that's definitely impossible. It's not that easy to control others so simply, is it? Sure enough, it's a funny story. But to be honest, I don't know whether it's okay for me to laugh or not because you make such a serious face... wait, I laughed already anyway because it's so funny."

"Yeah, I guess it's hard to understand when I'm so indirect."

"...indirect? Anyhow, I don't get at all what this guy would want to do. I think there'd be an easier method, no matter what his aim is."

Haruaki was still talking such stuff in a bright voice.

"Yeah. I don't know his motive either. Therefore, I thought about asking you."

"...asking me?"

When I said it, I won't be able to withdraw anymore.

"Haruaki--"

But I've lost the intention to withdraw long ago.

"--why did you corner us into this situation?"

He didn't answer.

His face was once again hidden by his umbrella.

He doesn't say anything. Probably, he doesn't have the intention to say anything.

"I've already forgotten what the occasion was, but a while after I entered school I made friends with you, and thanks to this, I also made friends with Kokone and Daiya. Perhaps my school life would have been a bit more boring if it wasn't for you. It's all thanks to you."

So I have to speak instead.

"It has not yet been a year since we made friends, but--"

"So you say that it wouldn't be strange for me to do something like this?"

I shook my head. Haruaki couldn't see it probably, though.

"There are lots of things I don't know about you. But there is something I know for sure. At least this I can say without fail."

I declared.

"Haruaki Usui would never be able to do something like to corner us."

I could finally see his expression.

Haruaki looked with wide opened eyes at me.

"So--"

I said it finally.

"So--who are you?"

«You just beat around the bush! How suspicious! Was it perhaps Bull's eye?! Damn it I'm jealous! Kasumi has gotten pretty, after all.»

Haruaki had said those trifling words.

But I noticed something there.

There is a rule to the 'Rejecting Classroom'. The surrounding people don't notice Mogi-san's change. They don't notice even when «Aya Otonashi» replaces her. So how? just how?

--how could he say that, Kasumi has gotten pretty?

That's not the only suspicious thing.

Haruaki had been 'rejected'.

I, too, had forgotten about him, but I managed to remember.

'I remembered because he's a dear friend'. That's how I interpreted it. But why could I remember him when I couldn't remember a single other person that had been 'rejected'?

It's just my hypothesis, but I think I didn't forget him completely, because someone different had slipped into Haruaki.

Both of those don't count as proof. Rather, they're full of gaps.

But that doesn't matter anymore.

For I have remembered.

For I have remembered something that I shouldn't be able to remember.

"Do you have a wish?"

"This is a 'box' that grants any wish."

Those were the words of someone who could be anyone, but couldn't be any anyone either.

"Tell me your intention!"

I then spoke out his name.

I spoke out the name of the distributor of the 'box', I had forgotten all the time.

His name is--

--'0"

The moment I said this name--

"Fufu--"

--Haruaki vanished from Haruaki's face.

It's not like the shape of his head changed. Haruaki isn't in the smile that's on his face. It's a fake that has only covered himself in Haruaki's skin.

The one that had continued to chase us became finally frank.

--'0'.

"Geez. Actually no one should be able to speak out this name except of the current 'owner' of the 'box'. That's strange."

"You were thoughtless with your words."

"Thoughtless?"

'0' giggled, seeming honestly amused.

"I wasn't thoughtless at all. After all I have nothing to be careful of originally. You are the strange one for being able to become aware of me under those conditions!"

"You think so?"

"So tell me: when you see someone acting a bit unusually, do you think right away 'This is someone else. Someone took him over.'?"

I have to admit that he's right. No matter how suspiciously someone moves, it's not reasonable to consider him to be another person.

"And even so, you found me. This means that you knew of my existence, which is able to cause such a situation. Though you shouldn't be able to remember my existence."

"If I shouldn't be able to, why did I?"

"Who knows? It's really mysterious. Maybe Aya Otonashi's existence influenced you? My existence isn't something you can notice just by being taught by someone, though."

'0' was talking pleasantly. But at the current point I don't care about such things.

"...Aah, you want to know my intention? Okay! There's nothing to hide. I--only wanted to observe you from up close."

Upon hearing him, I started to feel it.

Aah--again.

The same strange, uncomfortable sensation like I have felt at the first time. I felt it once again.

What was it? What was this feeling again?

"...I don't get it! How does this explain cornering Mogi-san?"

"The intention why I cornered the 'owner'? As I said, because I wanted to observe you. But well, let's explain it a little easier."

'O' started to talk amusedly.

"I wanted to see how you would react to the 'box' of someone else. When Kasumi Mogi's wish of redoing her mistaken past was granted, I couldn't help but rejoice for an instant. After all, I became able to observe you being involved in a 'box' for a long time. ...but I noticed right away that this was a misunderstanding. Because, naturally, I want to observe you in various situations if possible. But I can't do this within this 'box' that you people call 'Rejecting Classroom'. Everyone takes the same action all the time, so naturally you do, too. No matter how much Kasumi Mogi and Aya Otonashi establish their own memory, if the important person - you - doesn't retain his memories, then it's not interesting at all."

I embraced myself because of this uncomfortable sensation.

"Therefore I decided on interfering you. I turned into Haruaki Usui, since it's a position from where I can easily influence all three of you. I allowed myself to prepare a desirable environment for me by using Haruaki Usui, Aya Otonashi and Kasumi Mogi, and by implementing the retaining of your memory. Thanks to this I was able to observe you quite nicely!"

"So, could it be that you manipulated Mogi-san so she would kill me...?"

"Yeah, I wanted to see how you'd react to getting killed by the girl you love."

...for such a thing, Mogi-san was tormented non-stop.

"Of course it was also for this reason that I induced this love to you."

"Wha--"

My feelings of love were induced--?

"Oh? I was sure you noticed. Ah, I see. So you didn't want to notice. Fufu... Precisely because I can watch such moments, it's worth being close to you. To tell the truth, I could observe you even when I'm not in the 'box'. But then I would have overlooked such a moment, I suppose. Watching from outside the 'box' is bothersome and almost like to peer in from far away in the space through the lens of a super high efficient telescope. It's possible to see, but the focusing is bothersome. That's about the feeling of it. So, while being a byproduct, it was really fortunate that I could watch you from close up in position of Haruaki Usui!"

I finally realized the true form of this uncomfortable feeling.

Right. It was--dread.

It's not like I didn't feel dread until now. I just couldn't recognize it, because this dread differed just too widely from its usual form.

"Well then, Kazuki Hoshino-kun. What do you plan to do?"

I couldn't produce any words.

Because I had realized this dread, I couldn't open my mouth.

"Did you think that everything would settle when you exposed my existence inside Haruaki Usui? Like, for example, you would just have to hand me over to the Police if I was human and a murderer? You could call that an end point, though. But that can't be it, right? Your goal is to take back the everyday life, isn't it? Nothing settles talking with me!"

He is dangerous. More dangerous than anything else I've come upon until now.

"This is also the reason why I didn't hide the fact that I turned into Haruaki Usui more than necessary. Surely, I stole the 'box' from the 'owner' and am holding it now. I could show it to you right here. But there's no need to do so. Neither is there the need to hand the 'box' over to you, just because you remembered me. You haven't got the power to force me to."

He is interested in me. But only as test object. No more, no less. And naturally I have no idea how to deal with someone who treats me like this.

Therefore--

--yeah, surely not."

--of course it's not me who could speak so disrespectfully.

"Kazuki alone doesn't have this power."

However, 'O' looked at me, searching for the origin of this voice.

But he was correct. The voice came from behind me.

The Klaxon of a truck resounded. With the loud sound of an engine, a big truck got closer to us. 'O' looked in this direction and frowned slightly. The truck that was rushing to us was awfully familiar to me.

And sitting in the driver's seat was, Maria.

"I missed you, 'O'!"

This voice resounded from the mobile phone in my bag that was connected all the time.

The truck was approaching us. We stood our ground. The sound of an emergency stop resounded. Due to the rain, it didn't go as planned. The truck drew near more and more. Even so, 'O' didn't step back. Neither did I after seeing him not doing so. I instinctively closed my eyes.

The sound of the emergency stop faded away.

I opened my eyes. The truck was stopped literally before my very eyes.

"What meaning is there to this bluff?"

'O' smiled faintly and asked so towards the driver's seat.

"Just a little welcome. How fortunate that you weren't run over instead of Kasumi, no?"

I could hear this voice from both ahead of me and my bag. Maria alighted the truck, finally removed the Bluetooth headset and with this our telephone call was interrupted.

'O' was staring at Maria, who stood in front of us without umbrella.

"So you heard our entire conversation. In other words, you weren't interested in this strategy from the start. I would have loved to see Kazuki getting discouraged by the outcome of this strategy, though."

"I considered this strategy seriously the time you proposed it. But as it seems, Kazuki knew of your true form and let me in the dark."

That wasn't really on purpose, though. I just didn't know with what timing to tell her that I found out.

But I made Haruaki cooperate and chose the timing to talk effectually to him.

"But in the end that was the right choice. Because if I was by his side, you might have continued to play dumb."

"You purposely went away, stealing the truck in order to appeal being far away? Well, thanks for the efforts. But why do I have to play dumb when you're here? You might be a 'box', but that doesn't mean that you're able of doing anything."

"What, you didn't know? So my efforts were pointless. Well then, let's ask. You know of my 'Flawed Bliss', right?"

"Yeah, I know of it. And I know also that you can't do anything against me with it."

Maria laughed at '0'.

"Fufu, you really won't ever comprehend us humans. Do you understand when I phrase it like this? 'I have done the preparations to get rid of you'."

'0' reacted with a wry smile to her words.

"You can only cram others into your own 'box', can you not? So how would you be able to do to me what you said?"

"It seems that you still don't know the reason I was fixated on Kazuki."

She suddenly called my name. '0' looked at me. Although these eyes should have been kind, they were scary. They seemed like the eyes of someone who looks at pork and thinks about how to prepare it.

".....I see."

'0' smiled.

"So you got it at last. Kazuki has a gift for using 'boxes'. He might be able to master even my 'Flawed Bliss'. And he would surely wish like this. He would wish for the everyday life to continue. For the everyday life to continue without beings like you or the 'boxes' that destroy it."

Maria scowled at '0' and declared this.

'0' wasn't overwhelmed by those words, nor was he surprised, nor was he amazed. He just cast down his eyes sorrowfully.

"I see. So you haven't changed at all."

'0' replied like this.

He called her, who exceeded 27,755 loops, like this.

"If you did so, you would also disappear, being a vulgarized 'box'."

Maria didn't quail at his words.

"I'm aware of that."

"I figured."

'0', however, still looked sorrowful. He didn't seem to even worry about the possibility of himself getting erased.

"You still can't live for your own sake, huh? You can only move for the sake of someone else. I pity you from the bottom of my heart for such a miserable way of life!"

"Your pity can't even be used as bait for fish."

"At first I was interested in this uncommon characteristic, but it's worth nothing. A human that doesn't have any desires is just the same as a machine. I could just as well use a vacuum cleaner as an object of observation. To me you're the most boring existence there is!"

Maria gritted her teeth vexedly upon hearing '0's words. Fair enough. She gets pitied by the enemy, instead of being perceived as an opponent.

"Okay! I don't want to get erased after all. Let's make a deal. I'll hand over the 'box'. In return I want you to leave me at large. What do you think?"

"...hmpf, quite selfish conditions when you're about to get erased."

"You should be thankful that I respond to your very doubtful threat. It's not sure that Kazuki Hoshino would really use your 'box'. And I don't want to even imagine how low the chances

are that I'd disappear if he used the box. I'm doing an unnecessary conciliation here to express my respect to Kazuki-kun for finding me, you know?"

"Conciliation? What you'll hand over to us is an old birdcage in which you caged Kazuki. You can prepare new birdcages as much as you want, can't you? Losing interest in it, you were about to change it to a new one anyway, weren't you?"

"I'll leave that up to you."

"Hmpf... Kazuki, are you okay with that?"

Maria asked for my affirmation. I nodded. If we can do something about the 'Rejecting Classroom', I'm okay with it.

"Kazuki Hoshino-kun. May I give you advice?"

'O' asked me such a thing.

"You are someone who doesn't wish for change. But most of the 'owner's wish for change when they obtain their 'box'. They want something. They want to become something. They want to get rid of something. They try to realize desires of this kind. Consequently, you're opposing them."

I frowned because I didn't understand the intention behind his words.

"Kazuki Hoshino-kun. Do you consider yourself being abnormal?"

He asked me this.

"...I am ordinary."

Upon hearing my answer, he smiled.

"I see. But I'm afraid you're abnormal! But you know, if you don't like that, be at ease. The time you're able to be abnormal isn't so long. People like you get, in the end, either repelled or lose their abnormality, adapting to society. Be at ease! You're without doubt one of the latter."

He said without erasing his smile.

"Therefore--you have really had bad luck."

He spoke, seeming really glad.

"What I mean is, you have learned that such an irregularity does exist. You will think every time you meet with a regretful event: «If only I had a 'box'...» No matter how much you may shake your head in order to forget about it, unfortunately the 'box' does exist. The 'box' that grants any wish exists. You will never be able to forget about its existence. And then, when you lived with the knowledge of the 'box', you're definitely going to need the 'box'!"

He was still smiling.

Aah, I see--

I handed back the 'box'. But it was futile to do so. I was already cursed by '0's curse.

"At the point when you need the 'box', you might have already lost your abnormality. If so, you won't be able to master the 'box' anymore. That will raise my interest just a little. Therefore I'm going to continue interfering a bit with you and your surroundings from now on, so that you will get interested in the 'box'."

What should I have done to prevent getting cursed?

--Probably, I couldn't do anything against it.

I--no, we have already lost at the moment we met with '0'.

"Of course even if you lost your abnormality, I'll provide you with a 'box' when you need it. That's still enough for me. As long you let me listen to your sound."

"...sound?"

"Yes, I like any tone color you humans produce, but there is a sound I like eminently. If possible I'd like you to let me listen to this sound. ...Mh? What sound this is, you ask? My interest is completely ordinary, so I think you know already. It is--"

"--the sound of creaking hearts."

Leaving these words, '0' who had had Haruaki Usui's appearance disappeared.

A small box fell to the place '0' had been standing. When I reached out for it, it started to expand itself automatically.

Right after this, the entire scenery started to get folded up. I could see the walls of this world. The white wallpapers started to crumble to dust. The sweetness that had stuck to my skin disappeared and dull, pure discomfort attacked me. My semicircular canals went crazy and started to turn around. The sound of destruction. The sound of destruction. The sound of destruction. We're within despair. Within despair we can't deny.

The fake background had been erased and we were inside a dark chamber. A small, small chamber in which I would surely get ill when being there for even just half a day.

This is probably--the inside of the 'box'.

Within this prison-like room, she was sitting embracing her legs and placing her forehead on her knees.

This is the girl I have loved.

".....Mogi... san."

Upon hearing my words, she raised her face slowly.

"Ah--"

Light flared up in her eyes that seemed almost dead before.

"I can't believe it! There's no way it would work out so conveniently!"

Tears flowed over her cheeks.

Something seemed strange to me, but then I noticed what it was.

"--you really came to help me."

I see.

So she can shed tears again.

"Mogi-san, I'm sorry. But I plan to destroy the 'Rejecting Classroom'."

"...yeah."

Mogi-san nodded while shedding tears.

"I plan to let you die in the accident."

".....yeah."

She wiped off her tears.

"You may destroy the 'box'. You may also end my life. But please wait only for a moment. There's something I want to tell you."

Saying so, Mogi-san started to look for something in her bag. She took something out and hid it behind her back.

Maria frowned to Mogi-san's behavior.

"Mogi... don't tell me, you still..."

Mogi-san ignored Maria and drew near to me with her hands hidden behind her.

"...wait, Mogi! At this late hour you still want to--"

"That's not it, Maria."

I admonished Maria. I couldn't see what Mogi-san was hiding. But I knew already what it was.

Maria reacted with a dubious expression to my words and went around Mogi-san. She saw what Mogi-san was holding and smiled wryly in amazement.

"Kazu-kun, do you think there are feelings that don't change?"

Mogi-san asked me this.

I had an answer right away. But it wasn't a pleasant answer for her.

Therefore I had quite some troubles saying it.

I guess my answer would be different if I didn't experience the 'Rejecting Classroom'. But I have experienced it. I have experienced this world that is close to eternity. Therefore I can't help thinking so. Feelings that don't change--

"--there aren't, I think."

Mogi-san listened to my answer patiently.

Then she smiled.

"Yeah, I think so, too."

I peered without thinking into her eyes. And as she seemed to have even predicted this reaction, she kept smiling and continued.

"My feelings towards you didn't stay the same at all. You stopped seeming dear to me. I started disliking you, I hated you, I considered you to be a hindrance. I was even about to kill you once. But you know? This means that I was dependent on you all the time. Because I was always hoping that you would rescue me from here. Always, always... I couldn't ignore you. I know that it's the worst and most selfish feeling there is. But you know? I couldn't help it, even when I knew that I was being selfish. I know the name of this feeling. Even if you don't believe in unchanging feelings, please believe just this. During all the time in the 'Rejecting Classroom'--"

Mogi-san embraced me very reservedly.

She gave me the object she had been hiding.

Her lips trembled right beside my ear.

"--I was in love with you, Kazu-kun."

Her lips approached my lips. When they were about to touch, she stopped. After a while, she retracted her lips peacefully without having touched mine.

At first I wanted to ask why she stopped, but then I reconsidered.

Because I had seen what she handed over to me.

"Ah--"

There was the reason why she couldn't do anything.

I understood and chewed on my lips.

It was something different than I had expected.

It was an Umaibou.

That was still as expected. But it wasn't my favorite flavor 'Corn Pottage'. It was Teriyaki Burger flavor. The type I don't like that much. Furthermore--

--it was the type that Mogi-san was supposed to give me originally.

Why did Mogi-san embrace me so reservedly? Why didn't she kiss me?

This wasn't the confession of the Kasumi Mogi that has already confessed to me countless times, that has kissed me and has experienced the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

It was the first confession of the Kasumi Mogi before the 'Rejecting Classroom', who could only manage to call me 'Hoshino-kun'.

'I want to redo March 02.'

The deepest regret of the March 02 she wanted to redo.

She made this regret just now.

So--I have to answer her like I did at the real March 02...?

I looked at Mogi-san.

Mogi-san was smiling gently. She was waiting with a gentle smile, though knowing my answer already.

"I--"

I can't.

I don't want to say such a thing.

I mean, I loved Mogi-san. Even if these feelings were controlled by '0', the feelings themselves weren't fake.

Why do I have no other choice than to speak words that will hurt her?

Aah, that's obvious.

I 'rejected' this 'box'. I denied Mogi-san's wish. I'm going to let her die in the accident. I don't have the right to say kind words to her.

I opened my mouth.

Still, it was quite hard to say it. I flapped my mouth open and closed numerous times, I hesitated numerous times, but then I got startled by a salty liquid flowing into my mouth.

But I couldn't think of other words to say to her.

"Please wait until tomorrow."

Mogi-san cast down her eyes sorrowfully.

There was no way that she wasn't hurt by my words. And yet, she changed her expression again instantly. She told me,

"Thank you."

--with a smile.

With a smile coming from the bottom of her heart.

Aah--

Due to this smile, I finally remembered.

A conversation from some time ago.

The conversation that made me fall in love to her.

The conversation that was the trigger of this love, that is going to disappear very soon.

A dear recollection.

«Hoshino-kun. Can you please call me Kasumi...?»

«Eh? W-Why so all of the sudden?»

«It may seem sudden to you, but I've been wanting to be addressed like this by you a long time, you know?»

«Is... that so?»

«So... you're okay with it, right?»

«O-Okay...»

«F-Further, err, well--may I call you Kazu-kun?»

«Err... yeah, I don't mind.»

«O-Okay, so try calling me.»

«.....Kasumi.»

«...please say it once more.»

«Kasumi.»

«...thank you.»

«Wha...! W-Why are you crying...?!»

«Mh? Am I crying?»

«Yeah...»

«Then... that's because I'm so happy, Kazu-kun.»

And then Kasumi laughed, still with tears in her eyes.

I have never seen a smile like this before.

It was a smile that was full of real happiness.

It was the first time I was able to bring so much happiness to someone. This sensation was very new to me, so I got extremely happy.

To bring happiness to someone, is happiness.

I was happy to have discovered such a side of me and she, who taught me this feeling, became a special existence to me.

Maybe I'm simple.

But this smile managed to change me, with no doubt.

But I'm going to erase this recollection.

I'm going to erase this newly known feeling.

I think that's just too much. I think you really didn't have to prepare such a thing for me at the very last moment. I think it's just too cruel to make me destroy such a thing with my own hands.

But even so, I have already chosen.

I've already chosen a long time ago.

I mean, even this maddening thought will get erased by the 'Rejecting Classroom' right away, will it not?

"Maria, can you grant me a request?"

So I just want her give me a little push while I'm hesitating.

"Try saying it."

"You should know what I'm going to do now."

"Yeah, because I've watched you more than anyone else in the world."

"What am I going to do now? I just wish you to say this."

Maria nodded with a serious expression. Maria knows without doubt the reason why I'm asking for this.

"You're going to trample it down!"

But Maria didn't use any gentle words.

"You're going to trample down the clumsy 'wish' of someone else for the sake of your own 'wish'! Only this 'wish' you will not abandon under any circumstances, Kazuki."

Yeah. I believe that I am right.

"Therefore Kazuki, you will--destroy the 'box'."

I nodded to Maria's words.

I used my entire left arm to wipe off my tears.

"It's as you say."

I stood in front of the wall.

The gray wall surrounding us was thin as if it was made of paper. This 'box' has no power anymore. It's merely enclosing my recollections and hinders them from disappearing for just a short while.

I wanted to turn around and check up Kasumi's expression.

But I had the feeling that I mustn't.

I held aloft my right hand.

In order to destroy the 'box', Kasumi's 'wish' and my recollections, I held aloft my right hand.

"Thank you. So it really was you in the end, Kazu-kun, who rescued me."

Please stop!

You don't have any reason thank me. I am only trampling down. I'm only trampling down Kasumi's mistaken 'wish'.

Sorry.

Please forgive me for not being able to save you.

Therefore I ignored her voice.

But, thank you.

Because she laughed at the end, I could finally believe in myself.

"UAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

I screamed from the top of my lungs and beat the wall as powerfully as I could.

The wall got smashed up easily like glass, with a loud sound.

Within one of the scattering pieces I could see Kasumi and myself. We were smiling happily at each other.

This piece fell down, broke, and crumbled to dust.

White light started to shine in from outside the wall. The more the wall crumbled down, the more was the darkness of this room corroded by the light. Everything got painted over and disappeared except of us.

It was bright; I couldn't see anything.

But, however cruel, Kasumi was there. The original Kasumi was clearly there.

Kasumi was lying tumbled on the street. Stained in blood. It looked so painful that I wanted to avert my eyes.

But Kasumi was smiling. She was smiling with all her might for me.

Her mouth opened.

"Goodbye."

And then we were enfolded in pure white and disappeared.

The white light entered my body. The light searched violently for my gaps and encroached me. It painted my innards, my blood, my heart and my brain in white. The white light invaded even my memory and painted it in white. My fake, but valuable recollections. This new feeling I had learned. The words we had just exchanged.

Everything gets erased by white.

Everything gets erased by white.

Everything gets erased by white--

1st time

"I am Aya Otonashi. Pleased to meet you."

The transfer student said with a faint smile.

Seeing her good looks, the girls started to get noisy while the boys were too overwhelmed to bring out any words.

Of course I was no exception. I've never seen such a charming appearance before. While wanting to avert my eyes, they were fixated on her. Our eyes met. I was easily absorbed by her eyes. The transfer student somehow seemed to be used to this look of mine and smiled at me.

I almost got dizzy.

Falling in love with her is probably impossible. Our ranks are just too different. I have the feeling that we don't live in the same world. This may sound a bit mean, but I think anyone would agree seeing her.

"At first I'd like to express a declination."

Aya Otonashi said with her perfect smile.

"Please, --don't make friends with Aya Otonashi - me."

She managed with only this to silence the entire noisy class. Almost like using magic.

"Please don't take offense at this. If I could, I'd love to make friends with everyone. This is, however, not possible. That is because--"

"--the existence of Aya Otonashi has to be an illusion."

I still didn't get it, but for some reason I swallowed my saliva.

"And in the first place, we don't match. We're just phantoms from the viewpoint of the other. After all, I am the 'transfer student'. I am not acquainted with anyone, no one knows me and I'll constantly return to this situation. I will have to endure returning to this condition of no relations for a long time. I suppose you can call my existence a phantom. But even being a phantom, I still have a self. I also have the feelings that this is sad. But I have no other choice but to accept it. When I stop being able to accept being an illusion, when I can't endure it anymore, I will get taken into this fake recurrence."

I still didn't get it at all. The only thing I understood is, that she's deadly serious and doesn't let anyone make fun of her.

"In order to become an illusion, I abandoned my real name inside this 'box'. If I used my real name, I'd be held back by myself. I did so because I felt such a hindrance would appear. And when I get taken in by this fake recurrence, probably all of you will be erased."

She continued in a strong tone.

"Therefore, I--have to continue being a phantom, being Aya Otonashi."

I see. Well, I still don't get it really, but as it seems, she's not yet «Aya Otonashi».

She's going to become «Aya Otonashi».

I guess she doesn't really want to. It's not what she's wishing for.

But she has no other choice but to become «Aya Otonashi».

"But I am not strong."

She said so bitterly.

"I suppose there will be times I want to complain. But starting now, I will stop being «Aya Otonashi» as soon as I complain. Therefore, in order that I won't complain in the future, I will do so now. I--"

It was by chance.

Yeah, I guess it was just by chance, but without doubt--

--she was looking at me when she said as follows.

"I--want someone to be by my side."

And then I smiled.

"Well then, please let me introduce myself once again."

She spoke like to instruct herself.

"I am «Aya Otonashi». I hope we can be on good terms during the long time that's about to come."

Aya Otonashi bowed very deeply.

All of us were still silent, not knowing how to react.

Therefore, I applauded.

The sound of my hands clapping together was the only sound inside the classroom.

Finally someone joined the applause. After him, someone else started to applaud. The sound of the applause got steadily louder.

When all members finally applauded, she raised her face again.

She was not smiling anymore.

She was clenching her fists strongly and looked straight ahead in an imposing manner.



It was magnificent weather with a deep blue sky.

The first thing I did after waking up was to confirm today's date on my mobile phone. «April 7». Today's «April 7». I also checked in the newspaper and on the TV to confirm that it's really «April 7». Well, of course I know that there's no meaning in such an affirmation. But since the day I was involved in the 'Rejecting Classroom', I can't help but to do so. Or else I become very anxious.

The events of the 'Rejecting Classroom' remained in form of knowledge. But I can only recall those memories with the perception of looking at pictures that were snapped at a place I've never been. The 'box', Maria, '0' - I know what they are. But the corresponding emotions are not there anymore. No anger, no sadness - nothing. So even if I was in love with someone, I would have probably forgotten it by now. Maybe I'm going to gradually forget those memories because they are so faint.

Including Maria.

I mean, we weren't supposed to meet anyway, so I'm sure we won't meet a second time.

Anyhow, today's «April 7», the opening ceremony.

I became a second year student.

My classroom changed from the 4th floor to the 3rd floor. It's not like the scenery really changed for the better from the classroom changing its floor and moving a bit westwards. Nevertheless, the air felt completely different when I entered the classroom of the second year's 3rd class. I got so excited that I even seized my chest.

I noticed that a seating chart was placed on the teacher's desk. I sat down according to the chart. My new classmates replied lively when I greeted them lightly with a 「Let's get along well」. Yeah, I feel good vibes.

Another one entered the classroom.

He discovered me and raised his hand.

"Heyho, Hoshii! So we're in the same class again!"

Although they were minor words, the glances of all the other 15 class members focused on us. Yeah, Haruaki speaks as loud as ever.

"...Haruaki."

"Mh, what's the matter?"

I looked with suspicious eyes at him.

"The original?"

"...why do I look like a fake? Did you perhaps think of me as twin? Were you perhaps influenced by some super famous manga so that you now think that all the high-school baseball pitchers are twins?!"

"...no."

For some reason I start to doubt Haruaki's personality itself...

"Ah right, Hoshii! Come to think of it--"

"Morning, Haru and Kazu-kun!"

A new voice interrupted Haruaki.

Kokone was standing by the door of the classroom. And beside her was Daiya.

Ah, did those two go to school together affectionately today as well? If I'd mention that, Daiya would make me suffer mental harassment all day long, so I didn't say it, though.

"My heart beat faster for a second, being greeted by a girl, but whaat, so it's just you Kiri? What a waste of my excitement."

"Hey Haru... What's with that reaction? Who do you think you are?"

"Er, well, I'd just like you to stop being so obsessed about me that you would chase after me just to be in the same class."

"Haa... so you try to hide your embarrassment of being fascinated by me with such phrasing? You weally are a child, Haru-chan, awen't you? Ah, right. Can you finally stop filling your mobile phone with my Moe voice?"

"Who would do such a thing!?"

"«My Mastee~»... come on! Now's the chance to add some new data to the Haru Moe-Moe voice collection! Shall I give you one more chance? If you like, I can add a «Welcome home~» this time?!"

What's with this conversation... Please stop it, it's embarrassing.

"Haa... hey Kazu, do you have firecracker by chance? I would love to ignite one and jam it into Kiri's mouth right now."

"And then what about Daiya? You're jealous that I provide my Moe Moe voice only to Haru? Don't worry! If you genuflect and kiss my feet, I'll say «Onii-chan» to you, bearer of a little sister fetish. I'm so kind!"

"How about adding the phrase «Sorry for being born»?"

...nothing has changed at all with the class change.

But this is what I have wished for.

I feel a bit lonely without Maria and Mogi-san, but I fought against the 'Rejecting Classroom' to regain this.

"...why are you grinning alone? That's repulsive, Kazu!"

Daiya pointed me out.

"Ah, really. Kazu-kun's grinning. How horny he is. I bet he's imagining the girl sitting beside him, stumbling around clumsily--"

"I'm not."

I denied it immediately. Kokone puckered her lips.

"But who's sitting there anyway? Do you know? Is it a cute girl?"

Haruaki asked so, while sitting shamelessly on said seat. I knew since I also checked the name of the people sitting in the neighboring seats when I looked up my own.

"Yeah. It's a cute girl!"

"For real?! Who is it?!"

She has a seat. I'm glad about that. The fact that she has a seat means that the possibility of her sitting there also exists.

Her seat won't be beside mine anymore by the time she returns, but I don't mind.

I called the name of the girl sitting beside me, with a smile.

"It's Mogi-san!"



I almost thought the rain would continue for an eternity on that day.

I headed to the hospital right after I heard of Mogi-san's accident from Daiya. Being absent from school. I used a taxi since the hospital she was transported to was not within the city. An unbelievable behavior, considering that I value a peaceful life over anything.

But I had to do so. I had to know the outcome, for I have fought against the 'Rejecting Classroom'.

I reached the hospital as the first one, even before her family. Then I waited together with her family, while being mistaken for her lover, for her operation to end.

The operation succeeded... as it seemed. But Mogi-san didn't regain consciousness on that day in the end.

It was two days later that I could meet her, since I wasn't allowed to enter the ICU. She had gotten moved to the general ward.

Mogi-san was on her bed looking very pitiful. The sound of the electro-cardiogram and the artificial respiration made my eardrums vibrate. Both her feet and arms were fixated, her face covered with bruises and her arm was hanging down, having turned violet due to the intravenous drip.

Seeing the wounded body of an acquaintance at an hospital alone almost made me shed tears reflexively. But I am not the who wants to cry. I mustn't cry in front of her. I suppressed my tears and looked at her face, peering just a little.

Mogi-san looked a bit surprised when she saw me. I'm not too sure, though, since she didn't move her facial muscles.

Her family had told me that she may have regained consciousness, but still hasn't spoken a word because of shock.

But Mogi-san opened her mouth, trying with all her might to tell me something. I told her not to over-strain herself, but she didn't listen to me and tried to speak something.

Mogi-san directed her first words at me, making her oxygen mask white with her breath.

"--I'm so glad. I survived."

I couldn't understand her well, but it sounded to me like this.

Mogi-san burst into tears after having said just this. When I looked around being at loss where to look at, I discovered her dirty bag beside the bed. I saw a silver wrapping in the opened bag. Knowing what it was, I took it in my hands unconsciously. A Teriyaki Burger flavored Umaibou. It was crumbled and not in its original form anymore. When I kept touching it thoughtlessly, I suddenly couldn't endure it any longer and broke out in tears.

I didn't know why it happened with this timing. I remember that she gave it to me in that world, but I can't recall the reason why she did so.

But my tears really didn't stop.

I went to her hospital room in the general ward several times since then. Mogi-san tried to talk to me as bright as possible.

"While I was unconscious, I had a long dream."

Mogi-san told me this once. Apparently she was thinking it was all a dream.

A thought suddenly struck me. Mogi-san couldn't escape from the fate of getting run over by a truck in this world. And her fate of surviving didn't change either. This might be the reason why the 'Rejecting Classroom' hadn't gotten destroyed, regardless how often she met with the accident.

But though she was able to survive, apparently she won't be able to move her lower body anymore. At the time of the accident, she suffered a blow on her back which injured her spinal cord. Chances of recovery are not just hopeless, it is actually impossible.

I couldn't help but to stay silent since I didn't know what words to direct at her. Mogi-san had said as follows, seeming to take me into consideration.

"I always thought that I'd think 'I had better died' if it came to this. You understand those thoughts, don't you, Hoshino-kun? After all I won't be able to walk with my own legs anymore. Even when I'd like to go buy me a little dessert at the convenience store next door, I won't be able to do so carefreely. I can only go if I depend on someone else or if I take out my wheelchair. All kinds of hardships just to buy a dessert! Isn't that cruel? But it's kind of strange. I don't think of dying at all. I wonder why? I think so, really from the bottom of my heart."

--that I'm glad being alive.

Mogi-san had said so without a bit sham or bluff.

"So I'm alright. I won't quit school either. No matter how much time it takes, I will recover. Maybe it won't be the same school like you guys anymore, but I won't give up."

She had smiled and had shown me her biceps weakly.

It's embarrassing to admit, but at the time I burst into tears in front of her. I was glad. Glad that her most important wish was granted.

--can I do something for you?

I want to help her as much as possible. I thought so in all honesty. Therefore I had asked her.

Mogi-san started off with, "I'm very happy that you ask for this" and continued bashfully,

"I want you to reserve me place to return to. I want you to build a place for me to be again."

--Again? Did I build a place for you to be before?

".....within this long dream I had!"

When Mogi-san had averted her eyes after responding like this.



At the entrance ceremony.

I recalled something when I saw Haruaki sighing to the ceremonial address of the principal at the gymnasium.

"Come to think of it, Haruaki. Weren't you about to tell me something this morning?"

"Mh? ...aah, right! Right! I've heard some rumors that there's a super cute girl within the new students!"

Haruaki battered my shoulders and gave me a wink.

"Well, then I don't care. As senior I won't have any occasion to talk to her anyway."

"Are you an idiot?! Just being able to watch a cute girl is already happiness!"

I don't want to believe that this is the common perception.

"But when did you hear this rumor? We're going to see the new first year's today for the first time after all?"

"Will wonders never cease! It's Daiyan information!"

"Daiya's?"

I can't believe this readily. I've never seen Daiya talk about a girl.

"You don't believe me, do you? But there is a proper reason that Daiyan knows! You know that Daiyan has only mistaken two problems in the entire entrance examination, right?"

"Yeah. He boasts about it frequently. That he established the record of our school."

"This record was beaten in just one year!"

Haruaki said so, happy with all his heart. He really can't be helped. ...But I can understand him.

"Err? What does this have to do with Daiya knowing about this cute girl?"

"You're really really dull, Hoshii. What I'm saying is, that this cute girl has beaten his record by getting perfect score in all subjects. Therefore, Daiyan was informed by the teachers, being the previous record holder. The teacher told him at the time that she was so beautiful that even he, as an adult, got nervous."

That's exaggerating. Getting nervous... though having lived much longer?

The ceremonial address of the principal had ended during our talk.

The chairman turned on his microphone.

"Thank you very much, principal. ...let's proceed to the greeting of the freshmen representative--"

"Look, she's coming out! The rumored beauty!"

I see. She's the representative who does the greeting since she's also the top student.

It started to interest even me, so I looked around in order to find her.

"The representative of the freshmen--Maria Otonashi."

Maria--Otonashi?

A name that seemed extremely familiar to me. ...no, no. That can't be. Maria was called Aya Otonashi, after all.

"Yes."

But this voice was without doubt her voice. It was Maria's voice.

Aah, I see. I noticed at last.

«If you've forgotten, remember now. My name's «Maria».»

Hah. So she was just telling the truth then.

...oh? So I was calling Maria all the time by her first name...? UWAA! UWAAAAAA!

"...why are you getting all red, Hoshii?"

She mounted the platform with more elegance than anyone else. She already had a great presence, having lived longer than anyone here.

The students got noisy just by her looking at them.

A face I know very well. This face of hers that was beside me for a long time.

She was wearing a brand new uniform.

Yeah, I think that's against the rules. I'd never of thought she'd be younger than me.

Maria let her glance wander about, standing at the platform. This glance met with me. And this wandering glance stopped there for some reason.

Then she smiled.

My body got easily and completely paralyzed by this.

Maria began her speech without releasing me from her gaze. Even the noisy students got silent upon hearing her imposing voice.

"Isn't she somehow constantly looking to here? Oh shit, maybe she fell for me?"

Haruaki cracked jokes, but I was so absorbed by Maria's gaze I couldn't even respond.

I was only looking at Maria.

Maria was only looking at me.

"--I conclude the greeting of the freshmen. This was the representative of the freshmen, Maria Otonashi."

Maria alighted the platform.

And right after she did so, the students became noisy again. No, not only the students. Even the teachers were in confusion.

But I was, without a doubt, the most confused.

Maria didn't return to her original place, but was heading to me.

The students automatically made room in the direction of her movement, impressed by her authority. Maria took advantage of this and headed to me straight ahead.

The path from her leading to me.

Aah, geez. Has she still not got rid of this habit from that world. It might be okay to have no reservation inside that world, but it doesn't work like this here, does it?

I already realized that my everyday life is going to get destroyed.

"Haha--"

But I laughed, nevertheless.

It's a real bother.

It's a real bother, but no... it just doesn't feel like one.

At last, the students in front of me went aside. Haruaki went away from me, too. We were surrounded by empty room almost like the eye of the cyclone.

In the midst of the gaping wide space, Maria was standing in front of me.

I had already thought that we wouldn't meet anymore.

But thinking about it, there's no way she wouldn't come to my side.

After all, it's her goal to obtain a 'box'. She has no other choice but to approach me, who is targeted by '0'.

Maria smiled.

She opened her mouth easily.

"I'm always by your side no matter how much time passes--is how I proclaimed war to you once, but this still continues, as it seems."

After having said so, she introduced herself once again.

"I am «Maria Otonashi». Pleased to meet you."

The freshman bowed very deeply like she did long ago in the past.

Therefore, I applauded like I did long ago in the past.

For a while, my clapping was all that resounded at the gymnasium.

Haruaki started to applaud without knowing the situation. Get hooked on by him, another one started applauding. Without knowing what's happening, the applause grew louder.

Within a magnificent applause, she raised her face.

She was not smiling anymore.

She was clenching her fists strongly and looked straight ahead at me in an imposing manner.

Author's Notes

Hello, I am Eiji Mikage.

It has been right three years since my previous work. If there have been readers anticipating my new book, I beg for pardon. And also, thanks for not forgetting me.

There was a period in which I came to a halt, but it's not like I gave up writing. The reason that I didn't publish a book in three years is simply because of my own lack of power.

I wrote this book with the intent of a high entertainment value. My stance concerning my intention of writing novels has changed as well.

But I couldn't help but to get anxious with all this change. Won't my quality disappear? Won't my faithful readers feel betrayed by me? Won't it be buried under the numerous other great books?

This was the anxiety - and fear - I was fighting against at every moment of writing «Utsuro no Hako to Zero no Maria».

But this anxiety and fear had disappeared before I knew.

Because I noticed that this book is nothing but my own book.

I believe that it has become a book, I'm able to say «Try reading it» to the readers that liked my previous works, to the readers that didn't, and also to the readers that didn't know me at all up to now.

How was it? Was it amusing, now that you tried reading it?

If the answer is «YES», then there's no greater delight for me.

By the way, this is my 4th book and also my first one with illustrations.

To be honest, I was worrying that the interpretation of the reader would change due to illustrations at first, but when I received a mail with a rough sketch, I changed my mind.

It was the sensation of my own characters stopping to be owned by only me.

It was the sensation of having my characters escape from my control.

This time, I didn't know the looks of my characters until I was almost finished with writing, so the influence was only small, but I'm going to slip this "independence of my characters" in my future works.

I'm eager to know what the outcome will be.

Furthermore, I received support from lots of people while writing this book. To say it clearly, the weight of my gratitude is just different this time. Because I finally could strongly feel for the first time that I was able to complete a book like this.

Therefore, my thanks is going to become respectively long. I beg pardon.

All the people in the editor team of ASCII Media Arts. The proofreader. The designer. Thanks all of you.

415-san who had drawn the illustrations for me. I was anxious about illustrations at first, but as soon as I saw 415-san's illustrations, this anxiety got wiped away. My days have since changed to having various delusions while looking at his illustrations with a grin all day long.

My friends that have helped me develop myself, all my colleagues at my part time job.

My family that has watched over me when I had quite problems to get book out.

Yuu Fujiwara-san. I'm really thankful that you encouraged me when I was about to rot because my manuscripts were getting rejected non-stop.

And of course Kawamoto-san who's in charge of me. If it wasn't for you, this book would have never existed. I'm amazed that you didn't abandon me, looking at how I was in the past - no joke. You helped me grow in various aspects, not only regarding books. I'm really thankful. Best regards also in the future.

And then of course I'd like to thank all you readers that took this book into your hands.

Novels exist because there are readers who read them. All of you are part of this novel... which would be a bit rude to say, but anyway, you are indispensable components.

I hope I could convey my gratitude to everyone at least a bit interestingly.

I hope that we will associate for a long time from now on if possible.

Ah, and then, somehow sorry for writing such a boring afterword!

- Eiji Mikage

Translated by: EusthEnoptEron (a.k.a Casha)

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