

壞人心

AROUND SPINAL



The image features three anime-style characters against a dark background with a large, stylized diamond shape in shades of purple and yellow. On the left, Tsukune Fujinoya is depicted in a vibrant pink suit with a yellow tie and red pants, wearing heart-shaped glasses and pointing. In the center, Kuroyo Kage is shown in a dark, professional-looking suit with a red name tag, looking directly forward with a neutral expression. On the right, Reiwa Kyougi has white hair and is wearing a yellow long-sleeved shirt with a green frog mascot on the chest, blue jeans, and tall pink boots. She is resting her chin on her hand.

Tsukune Fujinoya

Are you looking for a date? (Not with Tsukune. Well, maybe with Tsukune). Then come on down to Fujinoya's Dating Service!

Reiwa Kyougi is raking in those unemployment checks? Her new favorite mascot is Lala the Frog? What is her new plan. Where will she work next. Please hire her?

Kuroyo Kage She blends into the background, and that's just the way she likes it. She uses this blandness to stalk people.



Maaka Umigami

Have you heard about her board game yet? Don't worry, there will be more than a few sentences about it.



Hoshi Watamoto

Surprisingly, being in the Yamagata Police is a more recent job for Hoshi. He spent most of his life as a woodcutter.



Officer Sugimoto

Who can even be bothered to learn his first name? Sugimoto is just another handsome face in the crowd.

PART I
FLOODED
WITH
MEMORIES

IN WHICH KUROYO RELIVES THE PAST,
FINDS HER NEW FAVORITE PLACE, AND
WONDERS ABOUT UNSOLVED MYSTERIES.

WOULD IT BE STRANGE TO TELL YOU
I FIND YOU ATTRACTIVE?

XOXOXO MAY 18TH 1993 2PM XOXOXO

She was a rail-thin woman with a strange combed-back hairstyle and two fake pointy teeth that she'd had attached to her real ones.

"Yaeba's all about looking cuter?" she said, in a questionable dialect.

"Noted." replied detective sergeant Hoshi Watamoto. "I hope you understand that we must complete profiles on all people of interest in your case, including you."

"I totally get it." said the woman. She didn't appear to.

Reiwa Kyougi, currently unemployed. Her previous job was as a secretary to Dr. Uzumaki, a local therapist.

"Don't worry. The YPD will conduct a thorough investigation." Hoshi assured her.

"Y... P... " Reiwa repeated. It was like the letters were holding her at gunpoint.

"Ohh right? The Police Department one? Yamagata Police Department?"

"Yes, that's where you are." I said, trying to be helpful.

"How should I begin." she... stated, with a troubled look in her otherwise vacant eyes.

"Anywhere you want." Hoshi said, kindly. A huge mistake, on his part.

"I was clipping my nails in the shower, when I heard a click, click, click. I was frightened, but then I realized it was just the nail clipper making that sound? After that I went to work? The entire day was uneventful, except for the part that wasn't uneventful, which was the end?"

"What happened at the end?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"A gross corpse showed up? It was the dead body of my employer, Dr. Uzumaki. I was really sad?"

"Were you..." I began.

"Yes, I was."

"I didn't finish the question." I said. "Were you sad because you had close personal relations with Dr. Uzumaki?"

"Yes." sniffled Reiwa. "I personally related to him lots of times. One time he stubbed his toe and yelled in pain, and I stub my toe and yell in pain a lot. So I knew the feeling and could totally relate, you know?"

"I meant a friendship or a romantic relationship." I pressed.

"Oh, no I didn't? I just... when I see a dead body... I get really sad? Because of an increased awareness of my mortality or whatever?"

Reiwa looked certainly looked sad, an astounding magical illusion.

"Dr. Uzumaki, what can you tell us about him?" asked Hoshi.

"I'm not ready to reveal everything. Those are my precious secrets."

"With respect, Reiwa, you were the one who contacted us about investigating his death. Letting us know everything you know would be a big help." said Hoshi, with a gentle smile that hid his impatience.

"I know that?" Reiwa had a pained expression.

She obviously was protecting something... herself, or someone else.

"One last thing, then." Hoshi said. "It's been seven months since he died, you claim. Could you please tell us why you didn't inform the police of this matter before?"

I find that every bad situation always teeters on the edge of getting worse. And this one did, with Reiwa's next words.

"Because there was this... agency that came in to investigate his death? They paid me a bunch of money to be quiet about it, but I can't, not anymore. I still don't know why he died or how, or if something or somebody dangerous is gonna kill me that killed him too. I think about it... all the time?"

Hoshi licked his lips, a troubled expression growing — procerus contracting, orbicularis oculi tensing and twitching, depressor anguli oris... depressing.

"What agency?" he asked.

Damn it.

"The YPDA, they were called? They seemed very professional."

Reiwa's face was interesting enough, but it was her waist that mostly interested me. As spindly as a spider's. How would it be when viewed from behind? I couldn't wait for her to leave to find that out.

"It's 'them' again." Hoshi muttered, glancing at me. We had taken "them" on in the past a few times. "They" were slippery, though, impossible to connect concrete evidence to.

But "they" were not "them" to me. "They" were "I".

Because "I" was with "them".

My name is Kuroyo Kage, I'm a Senior Police Officer in the Yamagata Police Department.

And I also moonlight as a detective in the Yamagata Private Detective Agency.

XOXOXO BPM XOXOXO

"You guys cleaned up, right?" I asked.

A private, untraceable call.

"Not entirely." Takuma, a detective with a very defined jawline, replied. "We have not yet... entirely... completed the deal with the broker. The product remains with us."

"You haven't cleaned that yet? You know we're coming for it."

"Only because you're an incompetent idiot. You're supposed to keep things like this from happening in the first place." he said, defensively. "Besides, it's not our fault we have more product than usual. It's like it's the year of serial killers or something."

"If I may chime in," said Ume, the tech junkie with many more lines on her face than a twenty-eight year old ought to have, "I agree with Takuma. You should've spiced up Reiwa's silence fee with extra cash. Or a footrub. Or just a massage in general. That reminds me, we need to convert part of this office into a massage parlor, by this point Yuzuki's performed so many massages in here that it's practically one already."

"Sounds like easy money to me, a worthwhile investment." said Takuma.

"Do you guys ever use your supple lips to form words about the topic at hand?" I asked.

"Thank you for complimenting my lips, I get them suction-pressed every day for maximum appeal, but they always deflate within twenty minutes of said suction-pressing." said Ume.

"I can't help but compliment your lips, and you know that." I said.

"It amuses me to think that if someone is listening in on this conversation, they just had to bear with an irritating, pointless tangent about Ume's thin, lopsided lips." said Takuma.

"Yes, when are we going to get off of this tangent?" I asked. "That's what I was trying to do when I mentioned your lips in the first place."

"My lips are perfectly fine, thanks for asking." said Takuma. "How are your lips doing on this fine spring morning?"

I wasn't getting through to them.

"What is the state of Uzumaki's office? How did you leave it?"

"We didn't really do any clean-up there. Our fingerprints and DNA are on a few suspicious areas, no doubt. However, seven months is a long time, someone else may have destroyed all that evidence for us. I don't know."

"Well what do you want me to do about it, handsome?" I asked.

Crap. I shut my eyes and tried to focus.

"You know I didn't mean that 'handsome' part, right?"

"Why not? It's the plain truth." Takuma said.

"Plain is right." said Ume.

"Anyway —" Takuma continued, "How about Dr. Uzumaki's house? Is there any possible trace of your investigation?"

"None." I confirmed, letting pride slip into my voice. "I leave nothing behind."

"It'd be a good idea to double check."

"I can't now. Reiwa filed the report, there'll be eyes on that house."

"What's this? You're saying you'd get caught? I find that hard to believe."

"The reason I'm never caught is that nobody knows to look for me." I said. "It'll be riskier, but I can cover up any signs that I was there during the police investigation."

"If you say so."

"I'll just 'accidentally' forget to put on the plastic booties and incidentally damage any evidence there. Police do it all the time, even experienced ones."

"If you say so."

"My recommendation is to move the product out of the YPDA and wipe all traces of it immediately. Hoshi's probably planning on using this investigation as an excuse to drag us down... and he may already be watching you."

"...If you say so."

That last "If you say so" sounded more defeated than the others. Perhaps that meant Takuma was finally listening to me. But it could also mean that he was tired of listening to me. I couldn't be bothered to clarify. Words begin to bore me after a while. Too many talking. Too much talking. These things tend to tire me out.

XOXOXO NOV 27th, 1992, 10PM XOXOXO

I tried to stay calm as I surveyed Dr. Uzumaki's house. It was dead in the middle of the night, and so was he.

The house was fairly small, but it was nice enough to make me wonder how he could afford it. He must've made a sizable amount as a therapist, though the detectives had only uncovered evidence of two clients: Noa Karada and Amane Kirishima.

I was here to find anything I could that would help those beautiful detectives, but I was on alert for evidence that his death had been a suicide, or of other clients.

A deck of cards were on a low table. Some cards were arranged on the table in the classic position of Solitaire. It didn't really tell me anything — people who play Solitaire are perfectly healthy. It's not an indicator that they have no friends or anything. I should know.

Along a wall were shelves of books, mostly on Eastern philosophy and therapeutic techniques. There was one book that stood out to me: "Tempering Your Client", by Kaito Saito. That was probably a fake name.

I pulled it off the shelf and thumbed it through; the contents, from what I could tell, were fairly unethical practices involving negative reinforcement. If I'd written it, I'd also want the name on it to be "Kaito Saito".

Generally there are two easy ways to enforce behavior: carrots or sticks. Bribes or punishment. It's an outdated, inadequate model. This book spoke of borderline nonsensical sticks like using self-harm to cure depression, and attachment therapy. I could see how it would appeal to a therapist who cared more about edgy theories or "scientifically exciting" experiments over the wellbeing of their fellow humans.

Maybe Uzumaki had tried one of those techniques on himself, resulting in his own death. I couldn't find a technique involving poisoning oneself in the book, however, so I abandoned that idea.

An experienced therapist wouldn't own a book like that, would they? How long had Dr. Uzumaki been a therapist?

I cautiously opened kitchen drawer after kitchen drawer. Nothing seemed peculiar until I reached the bottom one. It was stuffed to the brim with pachinko tokens. Overflowing, in fact. I hadn't heard of any pachinko parlors in Yamagata. Maybe he took trips to Tokyo to play.

In any case, why wouldn't he have them exchanged for real money at a tuck shop? Was he afraid to? Was it some kind of "cash reserve" just in case money got tight? Were these the only tokens in the house?

I was attracted to that last thought, so I resumed my search hoping to find more. My efforts were quickly rewarded — there were tokens everywhere. Some were even stuffed in pillows.

Still, this discovery didn't seem very significant. It didn't point to someone who would commit suicide, for one thing. But wait... That was it, wasn't it? If you planned to commit suicide, why wouldn't you cash in your pachinko tokens? But... that wasn't solid. There could be any number of reasons for not cashing them in before committing suicide, as long as the motive wasn't money. Ume had trained me to try to look for other motive possibilities. She really hated money-based motives, the scamp.

XOXOXO (:(30PM XOXOXO

"In short, my investigation amounted to nothing."

"No it didn't — did you seize those tokens, Kuroyo?" said Ume.

"Now, now, it's unethical to spend money that you seized from unlawful entry." I said, reproachfully.

...

"Just kidding..."

"Funny times." came Takuma's voice. He'd been listening in, apparently. "I'm wondering, Kuroyo, if it's possible for you to do something else for us. Right away. I know you thrive at night time."

"Was there something you missed at Uzumaki's office, that you think could point to a suicide?"

"What... What?" he said. "Sorry, my brain's always a bit fried at the apex of the Bell curve of our mystery crams. No, we're ruling out suicide, actually. Too many things don't line up. It's too coincidental. Both Noa's parents and her therapist die on the same day? Right now our main suspect is Noa herself. But perhaps that's needlessly over-thinking it... maybe he really did kill himself just so he wouldn't get caught... that was one of the first things that crossed my mind..."

"Never go with the first thing that crosses your mind." I said.

"But sometimes do." added Ume.

"Stop confusing me." said Takuma.

"Just tell me what I need to do for you sparkling, radiant people." I said.

"I think I have a way to prove that Noa could've faked the scare at the window. But you'll need to confirm it."

"I... have another idea, Takuma." came a voice I hadn't heard in a very long time. "If Client 287 was really involved in a fire, why wasn't there any sign of it at the scene? No smoke residue, nothing burned."

"Good point, for once." said Takuma. "But I noticed that immediately. So? Just because the fire was fake doesn't mean that Noa faked the fire."

"Yes... but there can be no doubt that she would've found out that the fire was fake when she went to the hospital, right...? Someone would've told her that there wasn't any smoke in her lungs."

"Oh!!" Ume exclaimed.

"No, hold on." Takuma cut in. "If I know this case as well as I think I do... We won't be able to get her on that. Noa and her parents were standing near the back of the house, and Noa claimed in her report that the fire started at the front. Therefore, it wouldn't be strange for her to have no smoke in her lungs, even if that was reported to her."

"Oh." Ume said dejectedly.

"You've hit on something, Yuzuki." I said. "If you're going to hit on something, you might as well hit on me, know what I'm saying?"

The silence over my poorly placed pick up line was so deafening that I resolved to dedicate the next few weeks to learning sign language.

Yuzuki still won't talk to me.

"Was there a point to that?" Takuma asked.

"Y-yes." I said. "Even though Noa can explain why she didn't have smoke in her lungs, she can't explain why she didn't know about the absence of fire damage. Unless somehow nobody informed her of that, despite her being the house's owner."

"Hmm. So you're saying this would have happened at the hospital?" Takuma asked.

"If what Noa said is true, that she went straight from her house, to the hospital, to your offices, then it's the only place she could've have been informed, if she was, in fact, informed."

"This is just a hunch of yours, Kuroyo." Takuma said. "Maybe nobody thought to inform her. We're running out of time before the police figure out we're investigating this case. Every second counts. Every. Second. Every. Single. Second. I just wasted a bunch of them while I was talking about seconds. And look, now I'm wasting even more. When will this end? Right now: My point is, should you investigate her house and prove whether she pulled off the scare, or should you investigate the hospital and maybe blow her story about the fire into smithereens? Either way, I still have no idea how she could've killed her parents from this office. Maybe she didn't. Maybe she only scared them, and Uzumaki killed them. Or maybe they were both in on it, and she killed Uzumaki once he'd killed her parents. That makes sense, right?"

"Hold on, I'm making a decision." I said.

Was there really no way to definitively prove whether Noa and Uzumaki were working together...? If they weren't, then we were back to square one: finding a motive for Uzumaki. Any trace of secret plans to kill her parents would likely not exist, as they could easily discuss them during therapy sessions.

Takuma was right. We were running out of time, or, more precisely, I was. I work very long hours, and I can only spare a few to help the YPDA.

Maybe the clue lay in the timing of Noa's parent's deaths? If they were working together, Noa may have needed a way of notifying Uzumaki when to strike. Except... Maybe the plan was simply for Noa to hang out with the detectives as much as she could, and when her parents had been interviewed and were alone, for Uzumaki to kill them.

This was tough...

If this theory was true, then that must've meant the "scare" existed to create an excuse for Noa to contact the agency. But why was the YPDA being used to create an alibi for Noa? ...Ah. That was clever — obviously, the people detectives trust most is themselves, so creating an alibi in front of a detective is the least suspicious route!

No holes so far — the theory was holding some water, but was still too hypothetical. And something else was bothering me... why would a therapist so willingly go down such a dangerous route with one of their clients? Were they in a relationship or something? Was this the "evil lovers destiny" of my soap opera-induced nightmares?

"Kuroyo, you've been silent for a very long time now." complained Takuma.

"No worries, sparkleface, I know where I'm going." I said. "My priority is blackmail, and we can't blackmail Uzumaki now that he's dead. So I'll get dirt on Noa for you."

"And how will you do that?"

"I'm going to investigate the hospital. What are you guys going to do?"

"If you're going to the hospital, then..."

There was a long pause.

"I guess we'll go break into Noa's house."

"Oh, okay."

XOXOXO MAY 18TH 1993 6PM XOXOXO

Uzumaki's office: the scene of the months-old crime.

"Summer lips, those summer lips... Do dee do dee do do do..." I sang to myself.

"What's that from?" asked Hoshi.

"It's my own song. I wrote it."

He grunted.

Police shouldn't grunt. It perpetuates bad stereotypes.

"I don't know what you're talking about! There wasn't a murder here!" protested a voice.

Tsukune Fujinoya. He was dressed in pink and red, a wonderful combination (it makes one think of romance). He was the owner of Fujinoya's Dating Service. The service had taken residence in Uzumaki's office three months ago.

"Uh, erm, perhaps you'd like to look at our Love Menu?" he asked, with hope in his eyes.

"I would, actually." I said. "There may be some... clues."

Hoshi smiled at me in a patronizing way. He didn't know what love was.

He looked Tsukune kindly in the eye: "Let us investigate. Please."

"Do you have a warrant?" he asked, handing me the Love Menu.

"Well, no..." admitted Hoshi. I tuned out their ensuing conversation. I was absorbed in the Menu.

There was a section for local females and a section for local males, all of them looking for hook-ups. Finally, some juicy info.

Was I interested in this guy Rito? Bland look, spiky protagonist hair... he looked extremely lukewarm, like someone who was so nice and such a pushover that you wouldn't be able to tell if they actually liked you. I noticed that Tsukune had put himself into his own Love Menu. That was a bit desperate... he looked like the kind of person who would string along people he was only kind of into, while actually harboring feelings for someone else. Fortunately, there was nobody else I recognized. That would have been awkward.

But on the female side, I noticed Reiwa had a profile. "Doesn't like rabbits anymore"? That's not a good trait to advertise yourself with. I would advertise myself as "Calm, cool, collected, shaves mustache."

"Kuroyo?"

"Hm?"

Hoshi motioned towards the screen doors. Tsukune was letting us through. Inside, everything had been draped in feathery boas from a hundred yen shop, and there were heart shaped pillows scattered everywhere. The indoor pond had a neon sign that said "love pond". Wow. How tacky. Drool meter: zero.

"How much clean-up did you do when you bought this place?" asked Hoshi.

"None!" Tsukune assured him. "A clean-up crew is expensive... I just had the place painted..."

"There may be something left then... Kuroyo — pattern four."

I nodded. Police use different search patterns to discover evidence, like zig zagging or sweeping. Pattern four was a spiral pattern: you worked your way to the center of the room.

It didn't take long until I found something. A faint stain on the mat. It was photographed and cataloged. Something the YPDA had forgotten to erase. What would Takuma's dating profile say? Probably "I make trouble for others". What would Ume's dating profile say? Probably "You're paying for everything".

To my shock, when we opened the doors to Uzumaki's private office, it was almost exactly the same.

"I haven't gotten around to that..." mumbled Tsukune.

Probably because he didn't want to stop using Uzumaki's computer.

I glanced around a bit, but I didn't need to look long. There wasn't any trace of the detectives here for me to clean up.

"Excuse me." I said.

"Where are you going?" Hoshi asked. It was his job to know these things.

"Just the bathroom." I said.

He looked slightly embarrassed.

XOXOXO

My hand was hugging my mouth in disgust.

Those stupid detectives — expecting others to clean up their messes. Doing sloppy work time after time.

Here was their latest example — obvious traces of one of their patented bathroom autopsies. They'd been using impromptu autopsy rooms for a while. I'd told them to rent a space to do it properly. Did they listen? No. Fortunately, Tsukune was as intelligent as a body pillow. I wasn't sure how he missed all the bloodstains, but good thing he did.

There wasn't enough time to clean everything up.

I could try to flood the bathroom, but that would just call more attention to it, and there was a chance it wouldn't wash away the evidence.

Besides, my top priority was gaining the full trust of the police, and if I tried to destroy the evidence, I would be the most suspicious, having just announced that I was going to the bathroom.

Great. What a pickle.

What now, detectives? What now.

XOXOXO

"Hoshi? There's something in the bathroom you may want to see."

He looked up from one of Uzumaki's files.

This is where one of the YPDA detectives would've made a tasteless joke. But not Hoshi. He was someone who took people seriously and really listened to them. Pretty useless. You can't get a date that way.

"What've you got?"

"Bloodstains. Possibly fingerprints."

He followed me, wordlessly.

This was a gamble.

I hoped nobody left any fingerprints, but if anyone had, it would've been Yuzuki. Yuzuki could be careless.

I hadn't thought of a reason why Uzumaki's blood would've gotten all over the bathroom, but maybe I didn't need to. I just had to play dumb and let Hoshi do all

the thinking. After all, nobody would ever guess that someone held an autopsy in a bathroom, would they?

"That's a lot of blood. Almost enough to indicate a stabbing." he said.

"Was someone stabbed, then?" I asked.

"Let's not jump to conclusions."
Just the thing Takuma WOULDN'T say!

I worked with Hoshi to scrape the dried bloodstains off the molding, into a plastic evidence bag.

"Once we get this blood analyzed, it could turn this case on its head." Hoshi remarked.

"How so?" I asked.

"My current theory is that Uzumaki was killed by one of his patients."

"Seems reasonable..."

"But if the blood isn't Uzumaki's, I won't know what to think."

"Do you have any prime suspects?"

"Other than Reiwa? None have come up yet."

"Why suspect Reiwa? Just because she's involved?"

"Suspect everyone. Trust no one." he said, rotely.

If only he knew how ironic he sounded, saying this to me of all people.

"I don't fully buy Reiwa's excuse for not contacting us earlier. It's very convenient for her, most of the evidence is probably gone by now. And there's something else, too..."

He pushed a file over to me. One of Uzumaki's patient files.

It was Reiwa. Reiwa had once been a patient of Dr. Uzumaki's.

We were safe. The YPDA was safe.

XOXOXO NOV 3RD, 1992, 2AM XOXOXO

Ugh. It was freezing.

I had to hand deliver my Black Report. It was a thin document this time.

There hadn't been much to go on. As Takuma told me, Noa didn't have any friends or even acquaintances.

Ume opened the door with a smirk. She enjoyed watching me shiver.

"Do you know what they call dirt that makes you rich? Pay dirt."

"Ha ha ha!" I forced a laugh for Ume. I hope she appreciated it.

Inside, the detectives had made a mess, as usual.
Takuma speed-read my report. He was on his fifth cup of tea.

"Interesting... Good to know..." he muttered.

"So the nurse told you that Noa had been informed that there was no fire to put out?" Ume asked.

"Yeah. Noriko and Hiroki weren't informed, because they didn't own the house."

Takuma flicked the Report viciously.

"Hah!" he cried. "No matter how you look at it, Noa's been lying to us. Too bad the hospital doesn't have security cameras..."

"Not very blackmail-y." said Yuzuki, who was sprawled across the desks with a sake bottle in her hand.

"It's you guys' fault." I said. "You could've pressed harder on her ridiculous story."

"Actually, it's Yuzuki's fault." said Ume. "She told me to try not to upset Noa."

"For future reference, Kuroyo, things are usually Yuzuki's fault." explained Takuma.

Yuzuki set down the bottle, and pulled herself off of the desks.

"Oh!! I s-see I'm even more popular today than all the other days..." she pouted.
"Popular to ridicule."

"Don't worry, Yuzuki, you'll never be popular." Takuma reassured her.

"I'm not popular, and that suits me just fine." I said.

"Imagine that, a popular stalker." said Ume. "If that happens, you're fired, by the way."

"Okay, I'll try not to amass a following." I said.

"Good work, Kuroyo." said Takuma, as quietly as he could.

That was my cue to leave.

I'd done all I could.

XOXOXO 9 DAYS LATER XOXOXO

It was only slightly cold, and I was looking for interesting people.
It's something I do whether I've been tasked with it or not.
I like to look in on people's lives and their habits, see who their friends are, listen to what they talk about. It's not creepy.

I realized I was standing next to a nail salon.
Something clicked.
Noa had worked at this salon, hadn't she?

Well, the case was over. No need to poke around in it.
No need to poke around too long.
I could poke a little.

Poke poke poke.

XOXOXO

"Noa? Yes, I know Noa."
Said a woman at the salon.

"How long did she work here?" I asked.

"Work here? She didn't work here." she replied. "Sometimes she would get her nails done."

Another one of Noa's lies uncovered. I shouldn't have been surprised.

The woman lowered her voice.

"Mostly she would stand outside the window, looking in, for hours and hours, twisting and pressing and wringing her hands..."

PART II
FLOODED
WITH
EMOTIONS

IN WHICH KURDYO CHOOSES HER SIDE,
HAS INTENSE CONVERSATIONS, AND
DOESN'T GET A TOY.

YOU HAVE THE MOST BEAUTIFUL EYES.

XOXOXO MAY 19TH 1993 11AM XOXOXO

"God Jesus Robot!!" cursed Takuma.

One fingerprint.
Yuzuki's.

"Did you get rid of the product like I told you to?" I asked, calmly.

I was visiting in person for once.

"It's on my list of priorities." he muttered.

"So, no."

"We can't get rid of it. There's quality eyeballs, hands, and hair." he said.
"Maybe four or five million yen worth. Maybe we can find a buyer before —"

"You're going to get rid of it right now." I insisted. "Hoshi's smart enough to piece this all together."

"That's just a fear of yours. You're paranoid." he said. "Stop talking to me about this."

"I..." Yuzuki said. "I agree with Kuroyo. We should get rid of it."
Takuma looked at Yuzuki with contorted, barely contained rage. A few seconds past. It felt like a century.

But, at last, his muscles relaxed.

"You're the boss..." he said.

Ume nodded.

"I'll call 'The Guy'." she said, reaching for the nearest phone.
The Guy could make anything disappear.

"This is stupid." Takuma continued. "Yuzuki has no police record. It's an unidentifiable print."

"How long will that be true...?" I pondered.

Takuma froze.
"What's that?"

The sound of a car pulling up to the office.

A police car.

This was it.

My rational fears, coming true.

XOXOXO

Hoshi dripped into the office. He was soaked.
There'd been a flood warning earlier, and rain was coming down like the flu on a child who licks their unwashed hands.
With him was another officer: Sugimoto. An 8 out of 10.

"Beat me to it, Kage?" he asked.

"Yeah. Sorry I didn't inform you." I said. "I was excited —"

"It's alright, it's alright." he reassured me. "We all make mistakes sometimes. I just hope there's something left to ask them. I know you're very thorough."
I'd forgotten how nice Hoshi was. Probably because I'd been talking to Takuma.

"They aren't admitting to anything. Not even their involvement in this case."

"Is that so... well. Let's see if a few more officers intimidates them more, eh?"
he brushed past me into the bullpen.

The detectives all pretended to be relaxed as he entered.

"What's... kicking, officer?" asked Takuma, being cool.

"I'm very well." said Hoshi, who was too old to know how to respond. "Is this your organization?"

"It's mine." said Yuzuki, playing with her hair. "Officer Kage's been questioning us for a little while."

"Yes, I'd like to start over if you don't mind." said Hoshi.

"Suretainly." portmanteaued Yuzuki.

"The person who reported this crime to us, who will remain anonymous, claimed that your agency conducted an investigation into Uzumaki's death."

"We already debunked that lie." said Ume. "We don't investigate murders. We don't have the resources for that. We're a dinky, homespun, homegrown, homemade, local, farm-to-table, free range, artisan private detective agency that only cares about assisting our community."

"Might I also add," said Takuma, "how flattered I personally am that you assumed our little agency could do such important and difficult work." Hoshi looked at them with the look everyone ends up looking at the YPDA with once they realize the true nature of the organization: disappointment.

"I never said it was a murder."

Wow. What an Encyclopedia Brown mistake.

"But I did." I said. "Sorry. It slipped out while I was questioning them."

"Ah." said Hoshi, looking disappointed in a different way. "You still have much to learn, Kage..."
I bowed my head in shame.

"Do you keep records of monetary transactions?" Hoshi asked.

"Of course!" said Ume, eagerly. "I created a special program with a spreadsheet and everything."

"I would like to spread your sheets, Ume." I said, compulsively.
Everyone ignored me, as usual.

"...Can I see it?" asked Hoshi.

"Yeah, just..." Ume stopped.
Takuma was glaring at her.

"...Come back... tomorrow. I'm fixing it. It's broken."

"Really? Oh well. Nothing I can do about that, I suppose." said Hoshi.

"Are we done now, officer?" asked Yuzuki.

"Yes, yes I think so. I think so." he said. "This didn't go the way I'd hoped. Anyway, may I use your bathroom?"

"There isn't a bathroom here." said Yuzuki.

"Then we will leave. Officer Sugimoto!"
They both turned for the door.

"Kage, finish up here, will you?" he asked.
I nodded.
They stepped out, quietly shutting the door behind them.

"Heh. What a chump." said Takuma.

"Don't gloat yet." said Ume. "That politeness is an act. It always is. Tear down people's walls, and they're never nice. That guy was suspicious of us the entire time."

"Very not nice of him." commented Yuzuki.

"You have more to worry about than just suspicion." I said. "When he told me to 'finish up', that was his cue for me to distract you guys while he secretly searches the rest of your office."

"Crud. What now?" asked Ume. "Try to catch him at it?"

"No." I said. "If you do that, it'll make me look even worse. It was bad enough that I was already here when he arrived. And that I had to lie about screwing up just to cover for your inconsistencies."

"What choice do we have?" asked Takuma, through gritted teeth. "He's going to find the product."

"Maybe he won't." said Yuzuki. "It's such a special hiding space!"

"Yeah, it's special all right." said Ume.

"She has a point." I said. "He won't find it. Unless he tries to copy something."

"Shh!"

Takuma gave everyone the evil eye. He was right. We were being too loud.

And as we quieted down,

I could hear it.

Hoshi rifling through the couches in the reception room on the other side of the wall.

"Nothing... nothing..." I could faintly hear him say.

It didn't seem like he'd heard us.

But maybe he didn't want me to catch on that he'd caught on.

Was 'Nothing... nothing...' a natural thing for him to say to himself? Or was it a foolish way of covering up that he'd heard?

Stupid — he didn't need to have heard to know. It must've been obvious as soon as he saw me with the detectives. I'd never gone to take a report without informing somebody. Or my face could've given it away. I have a very readable face.

In fact, this could be the culmination of a year's worth of gathering information on my relationship with the YPDA, and this case just happened to be the best time to catch me.

It was, after all, a pretty hideous example of how the detectives got by.

The slight sound of a squeak. Ume's office door.

Takuma's pupils were like little flies, darting around like mad and puking everywhere they landed.

Ume was hugging herself and biting her lip. Probably the first time she'd hugged anybody.

Yuzuki was clasping her hands so tightly I could almost see an impression of one hand through the other.

Wasn't it odd for us to stay silent? Didn't Hoshi expect me to be talking to the detectives? I tried to clear my throat to say something, but it was suddenly dry.

The front door shut closed.

Takuma exhaled.

"Well, that was —"

"Sugimoto, idiot." Ume whispered, harshly.

I didn't blame Takuma for wanting to believe this torture was over.

A low hum whirred into being. Or was it a whirr that hummed into being?

"My computer." whispered Ume.

I'd almost forgotten it was there.

"This is very, very bad." whispered Yuzuki.

"Shut. Up." Takuma whispered back.

But she was right. Ume's computer contained almost nothing but incriminating information.

I relaxed a little. We'd already lost. If Hoshi spent any time looking through that computer...

Wait! Hoshi hadn't gotten used to computers. He still used a typewriter at work... there was a small chance that he wouldn't figure out how to open any of Ume's programs.

But there was still the copier.

It had been my idea. At the time I thought it was really clever.

Now it seemed riddled with potential disaster.

The only good part of this situation was all the romantic tension. There's nothing more romantic than truly sharing a moment, even if that moment is a police officer rifling through your belongings.

Footsteps. He was... pacing? No... they were purposeful. He was heading towards something. The bookshelf?

A door creak. Back into the reception room. This had to mean he'd found nothing, right?

The footsteps were getting louder. He wasn't hiding.

The door to the bullpen swung open. Hoshi looked at all of us. Most of all, he looked at me. My readable face was full of fear. It was obvious to anyone.

We were done. It was over.

"Kage, what's taking so long?" he asked. I followed him out. Shaking.

That was close. The closest it had been in years.

"Once we get back to the station, we'll try approaching this from another angle." he said. He pulled open the door.

"Uh-huh, makes sense." I said. "If Reiwa was lying from the beginning about the YPDA's involvement, then she's going to need to answer some more questions. Definitely."

"So will you." he said, halfway to the car.

"What?"

He put a hand on my shoulder. Firmly.

"How long have you been working with those detectives?"

XDXDXD

My mind was moving faster than the police car, and my thoughts were like a siren, blaring incessantly.

I'd refused to say anything. What else could I do?

He had no proof.

He would interrogate me back at the station. Even if I said nothing, he would never trust me again.

Sugimoto wasn't with us. He'd been let out to stand watch in a nearby koban.

It was just me and him. Driving in the rain. Driving in the dark.

He muttered a curse. The road ahead was blocked. Flooded.

He turned onto a side road.

"I don't get it, Kage." he said. "I didn't think you would be the type of person to fall in with... unsavory people like that."

I stayed silent. The largest advantage a police officer has during an interrogation is a gap in knowledge. If I didn't say anything, I'd be fine.

The flooding was even worse down the road he'd chosen. With an irate grunt, he moved the car forward into a deep puddle. Water sprayed everywhere, and I felt us glide a little, but we made it.

"Is this my love boat to hell?" I muttered.

Hoshi was probably just trying to get me alone at last. That's all this was. He would never want to lock me away. A pointless romantic gesture. I was simply not interested.

"Everywhere's flooded..." Hoshi said, steering frantically.

I stared out the window.

A familiar cat pillow floated by.

Ah, yes. We were near Noa's house.

It had been a year ago that I'd read her patient file. Trauma. Constant verbal abuse. In vivo exposure therapy... also known as 'flooding'. I couldn't help but smirk at the coincidence.

Her rice cooker floated past us. One of her more transparent tricks. Where was she now?

I had hoped at the time that she would seek out a new therapist. But I knew it wasn't likely, when her old one had betrayed her.

I half-expected to see her dead body float by next. Pardon my morbid thought. My mood wasn't great at the time.

Ugh, when was Hoshi going to confess already? He was taking forever!

He pulled over. The roads ahead were drowning in water too deep to drive through.

He sat in silence with me for a long time, watching the rain. I could feel his disappointment. What did he have to be disappointed about? What did he know? Maybe I would get to find out. We were, after all, in an environmental prison.

"You really should've been quieter while you were talking to those detectives," he said. "It was almost like you wanted me to hear."

"You know I'm loud when I talk." I replied.

"Still..."

"I didn't mean for you to hear."

"I'm trying to give you an out, Kage." he explained, politely.

"Oh."

"You must have your reasons for working with those detectives. And you're going to tell me those reasons, please." I hate it when people try to make their demands polite. A demand is a burden. It's like painting a flower on Sisyphus's rock: why bother?

"I have often thought about why I work for those detectives." I said. "In the end I've come to realize that it's because they validate me."

"In what ways?"

"They help me with my hobby. They help me with my life. People-watching. That's what I like to do. But not just any people. They have to be interesting. I don't want a boring show. The YPDA attracts nothing but interesting people, and the detectives pay me to watch them, give me info on them. They're heavily involved in the local community. They know mostly everyone. That's why they need me. Nobody knows who I am. I blend in."

"Yes... you're very good at that." said Hoshi. "Does police work not scratch that itch, of wanting to watch interesting people?"

"It does, to an extent."

I was getting more comfortable. This was dangerous. I almost felt like telling him everything.

"Let's just say they give me access to more information. Information that the YPD is a bit more tentative about gathering."

"The way I see it, Kage, you're in a corner. The YPDA will be brought to justice. There's only one way out. Up. Are you willing to fly up, into the sun, and do what is right?"

"What?"

"Here's what I know: something's rotten. And I heard you mention the copier. Why? Are they printing money?"

"No... It's worse. Much, much, much, much... much worse."

"Please." he said. "Work with me."
I hadn't expected that.

"I'll put you on a team. An Anti-YPDA task force. You'll be my double agent. What do you say?"

A confession that would make any girl blush.
Oh my.

Hoshi was being very nice to me.

But I couldn't betray the detectives... could I?
What did I owe them, really? And hadn't they gotten me into this mess to begin with? And they still hadn't paid me for two months of work.
And yet... there was that thing.

"They have something on me." I admitted. "Every member of the YPDA knows a secret about the other members. It's always something pretty bad. Pretty illegal. This chain of blackmail binds us together. It helps remind us of where we draw our moral lines, and enables us to cross new ones. The YPDA deals as much in blackmail than it does in mysteries. To you, it probably looks like some lame little operation with three people who barely know what they're doing, who lack a professional attitude, and have very shady, immoral practices.

But to take on the YPDA is to take on much more than those three detectives. You're also taking on the underground dealers they are in business with, and the clients who will do anything to protect their own secrets. I'm the one who finds those secrets, so I should know — the YPDA tries to find the secrets that would be as damaging as possible to the clients if exposed. And I have blackmail on people who aren't even clients. Enemies of the YPDA. If you were their enemy, I have no doubt that I would be asked to dig up dirt on you."

Hoshi laughed. "I've made mistakes, but I don't carry regret with me. That's the perspective of someone older, with more experience. These clients must all be young, attractive twenty-somethings who don't know any better."

"Yes, they're all extremely attractive."

"But back to the topic at hand — the answer is simple. Tell me your secret. They will have nothing on you."

"Telling them my secret was important. It was part of my initiation ritual. They gave it a lot of power."

"I won't push you." he said.

"I... have delusions about people. That they're in love with me." I said. "Most of the time I have it fairly under control. I know these are just passing thoughts. They aren't real. The stare that lasted more than a few seconds meant nothing. Just because I helped someone pick up the things they dropped doesn't mean we've fallen in love."

But those thoughts always cross my mind, and some times they're stronger than others. And when I think that someone's in love with me, the idea that they have a girlfriend doesn't match my internal narrative at all. So, there was this one guy... who was engaged... but I thought, just because he'd helped me check out books at the library and made small talk with me... basically that was, in my mind, a marriage proposal."

"I see."

"So I did the logical, justified thing. I faked that I was pregnant with his child. Of course he didn't buy it, because we'd never even been together. He told me off, and I got angry... so I sent him many, many letters describing me threatening his baby, who didn't even exist, trying to guilt him into being with me. Reading them now deeply disturbs me, and when I'm watching someone shower, I'll sometimes think to myself, 'Am I going too far?'"

"Yes, you are." said Hoshi, like it was obvious or something.

"The YPDA has all of those letters." I explained. "I gave them those letters... that's the kind of career-ending blackmail they deal in."

"Hmm." he said. "This just means we'll have to be extra careful. As long as the YPDA doesn't know we're working together, you'll be safe. We may even be able to procure those letters before they're able to leverage them against you." He reached over and pulled a sheet of paper from the glove compartment.

"This is a list of every case the YPDA has not solved, as far as I know. A good place to start, don't you think? Those clients are probably sore with them, and wouldn't mind giving accounts of their incompetent ways."

"No, that won't work." I said. "Those clients are the ones the YPDA has me stalk the most, dig up the dirtiest dirt I can on them, sometimes they'll even have me frame them for various other unsolved crimes. That's how the YPDA deals with

disgruntled clients. You want a client who had no qualms about paying the detectives extra fees, who was thoroughly satisfied with their investigation, and is someone who the YPDA has little or no blackmail on.”

"Is there someone like that?"

"...No..."

XOXOXO MAY 20TH 1993 11AM XOXOXO

Boxes were being moved by people like me. Forgettable faces. Forgettable outfits.

These boxes were going into vans with the license plates deliberately covered in thick mud.

They had an excuse. It had been raining all day yesterday.

I knew they'd cave in and move the product. But I also knew there was one piece of evidence Ume would never move, modify, or destroy.

XOXOXO

Hoshi lead me into his office. Neat and orderly, but dense. He'd put his typewriter under his desk. Hadn't used it in a year since we'd gotten the computers.

"Kuroyo, these are the other members of the Anti-YPDA task force. You know Officer Sugimoto. This is Officer Maaka Umigami. She's from a police department in Kaminoyama, but I heard good things and was able to borrow her for this project."

"I have been borrowed." she said. "Let me ask you, Kuroyo, have you ever heard of Jun?"

"As in, meek and submissive?"

"Yes, that's what it means, and it's also the name of a game I invented. Because I invented it, I know the rules better than anyone. That's a bit similar to this case, isn't it? The police, and maybe even you, don't fully know the depths to which the YPDA has crawled.

In my game, two players move their tokens between spaces arranged in a spiral, drawing and playing cards that determine their actions. But unlike other games, the point is not to get to the center. You are actually trying to stay away from the center. The game ends when one of you has only three cards left in your hand. The player who dealt the most damage loses. The player who is closest to the center loses. The only way to win is to not lose. And the best way to not lose is to draw as few cards as you can, and try not to draw cards that move your opponent to the center. There, you see how I have explained my game to you, and now you understand it better? So, let's hear it. Everything you know about the YPDA."

They were all looking at me. Waiting for my response. For once, I was the one being watched.

"Well — the YPDA is, at its core, pretty simple." I said. "One chief investigator. One tech wizard. One coroner/manager. One detective/blackmailer. Their goal is not, as they claim, to solve mysteries, to give massages, to help the community, or to provide religious services.

All of those things feed into their real goal: to make as much money as possible. As with any organization, when money is placed above all else, things like morals, transparency, and honesty fly out the window."

"That's a bit preachy." complained Sugimoto. "My family owns a successful candy store and they aren't so bad."

"Don't think family business. Think 'corporation'." I replied.

"How can no more than four detectives be running a 'corporation'?" Sugimoto scoffed.

"How much money are they making?" asked Hoshi. It was the right question.

"Millions of yen. Possibly tens of millions. In addition to their ridiculously high paychecks, they get tax breaks by registering the agency as a religious organization, and they keep expenses down a lot by having the already tiny team perform more than just one job."

"Millions of yen? I'd like to get in on that!" said Sugimoto.

"And I'd like to get in on you, but sometimes you don't get what you want." I said.

"Those comments are inappropriate for the workplace." said Maaka.

"Forgive Kuroyo, please." said Hoshi. "She is unable to control that."

"I can see why the detectives hired her." said Maaka. "They're all dysfunctional, and Kuroyo's no exception. I don't see how we can trust her — after all, she was arguably the most important member of their group, getting them blackmail. She can soliloquy all she wants about how bad the YPDA is, it won't prove her true feelings on them. She still hasn't revealed anything very damaging. Being in on the Anti-YPDA task force is exactly what she wanted. It's an obvious trap, laid by the detectives."

"Oh really?" I said. "Nothing damaging? What about this: 58 percent of the YPDA's earnings come from deals made on the black market. They personally perform autopsies in order to not only solve crimes, but to harvest organs. The work they claim they do for the community is nothing but a sick joke. They hold kidneys, livers, and hearts hostage when nearby hospitals need them the most, then overcharge for them. They almost single-handedly control the market for these organs in this area."

"A-are you kidding me? There's no way that's true." said Maaka. "It's cartoonishly depraved. It's essentially grave robbing."

"They see it as an easy way to make lots of money doing something they need to do anyway. Making use of all the parts of the animal."

"Do they have any respect for the dead?" she asked.

"Not really." I said. "Takuma goes out of his way to disrespect them. He barely respects the living. They're kind of rude to everyone."

Hoshi, who had mostly kept quiet, finally spoke up.

"I think the key is to prove the detectives were involved in Karada's case. It could result in dragging them into court, where we could trap them much more easily."

"They've been in court before." I said.

"Not like this. Did they sell Uzumaki's... organs?"

"They had not. It was an off season, I guess. And people like to buy them fresh. But that hardly matters, because the detectives lie and claim its fresh for a lot longer than the parts actually are."

"This is making me sick." said Sugimoto.

"Pull it together." said Maaka.

"Plus, they had a surplus. Uzumaki wasn't the only victim in the Karada case."

"Oh?" Hoshi said, with interest.

"The detectives concluded the real culprit was Noa, and put forward a hypothetical scenario where she also killed her parents, who had died the day before. Noa basically confessed."

"Why'd she do it?"

"Because she was an angry little angst-muffin? Who cares?" I said. "Killers can never properly justify their actions."

"If she didn't have a good motive, then maybe she didn't do it." said Maaka.

"Hm. You sound like Ume." I said. "She also puts too high a value on motive. The evidence was there. Noa constantly talked about how little she liked her parents — whether there was a good reason for that or not, I don't know." I'd decided not to get into it.

This task force didn't need to know the full truth of Noa's situation. After examining Noa's case, I didn't feel bad for her at all. But I wish I had followed her around longer. Maybe something could've been done.

"This has been a meaningful discussion." said Hoshi. "We'll have to have you fill us in on the details another time, Kuroyo. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I never really noticed you before I knew you were secretly working for morally depraved detectives."

"Thanks?"

"I would like to now get to what I think is the best path forward... a raid of the YPDA offices. We will go in while one or two of them are in the building. It is very important that they don't suspect Kuroyo is aligned with us."

"Excuse me? A raid? This early?" said Maaka. "If we find nothing, we lose the advantage, and the element of surprise."

"I know. It's drastic." said Hoshi. "But we're a bit pressed for time. And with Kuroyo, we will be able to confirm that the evidence is still in the office before the raid, resulting in a 100% chance of success."

"But what if the detectives realize, or even have already realized, that Kuroyo is working with us? Have you perhaps thought of that possibility?"

"Do you want me to tell them I'm working for you, for a triple fake-out?" I asked. "Or I could tell them I'm working for you, then reveal that you told me to tell them I'm working for you. That would be even more honest and trustworthy."

"I don't think so. The key to this sort of thing is simplicity." he said. "Speaking of which, what's the most likely place for them to keep evidence of transactions? Where should we head for while rushing the building?" asked Sugimoto.

"It isn't a physical place. It's a virtual place. Ume is very proud of her laptop. She stores all of the blackmail data on it, as well as records of organ sales. That's what we need to seize."

"You'll have to make sure that the laptop is there when we rush the building." said Hoshi. "If we don't find anything, our search will have been unlawful."

"It's unlawful anyway." said Maaka. "Everything we've heard from Kuroyo is conjecture — there's no proof anything she's said is true."

"Well, I trust her. She seems really attractive and smart." I said.

Nobody laughed. Maybe because it was supposed to be a serious moment. My time with the detectives had ruined serious moments for me.

My time with the detectives had ruined a lot of things for me.

XOXOXO 9PM XOXOXO

"And now, a startling report from the Yamagata, Yamagata prefecture. As the area is battered by a vicious, relentless downpour, and water levels continue to rise, an act of heroism shines through to inspire us all.

Ukiho Nureki was returning from a visit to her friend's house when she saw, ahead of her, a fallen electrical pole lying in the quickly rising water, which caused to her to take an alternate route. Unfortunately, this route was even more flooded, and she found herself stranded on top of a wall, hoping that the water wouldn't rise that far.

Luckily, she never found out, because one Takuma Karashi heroically leapt from wall to wall and welcomed her into his house, providing shelter for her until the flood passed. It's a real-life prince-saves-princess story. How does it feel to be a hero?"

"There are only two things I care about in this world." said Takuma. "Helping others to the best of my ability, and various delicious puffed rice snacks. And after helping Ukiho out, I consumed one of those snacks. So right now, I am full of caring and compassion, as well as puffed rice. That is how I feel. And at my detective agency, that's all we do. Eat puffed rice. And also, help others. That's where my heroic mentality comes from — working at the YPDA, where we always put the client's needs first, and have even worked for free because it meant bringing someone to justice."

"And now we go to the princess herself, Ukiho Nureki, for comment."

"I am very grateful to have been saved. I was not sure how to deal with the situation, and I was panicking. I am nothing but grateful for Takuma's brave actions."

XDXDXD

Hoshi was slumped over his desk.

"Is the raid still on for tomorrow?" I asked.

"Yes." he replied.

"Even though Takuma just associated his out-of-character heroic actions with the YPDA?"

"That just makes it all the more urgent. The longer we wait, the better their reputation will be. It's better to strike now."

"You're sure?" asked Maaka. "This looks to me like a game we can't win. I'm not for a raid to begin with. We should take our time mounting our case."

"The detectives are sloppy." he said. "We'll easily dig up dirt on them. Especially with Kuroyo's help."

"I don't know, I'm uncomfortable with this too." said Sugimoto.

"Well... I hear your concern." said Hoshi. "Perhaps we should split the difference. We'll wait a week before raiding the place. See how the story is received by the community at large."

"Thanks, boss." said Sugimoto.

"I hope this works." said Maaka.

"It will." I said. "You have me, after all. And I'm very trustworthy." I flashed my most trustworthy smile.

"...we'll see." said Maaka.

XOXOXO MAY 21ST 1993 3PM XOXOXO

"Look at this." said Takuma, holding up a plastic toy. "It's me."
The toy, did, in fact, look like him.

"It's me!" said Yuzuki holding up another toy, of herself.

"We're merchandizing ourselves, Kuroyo. Maybe some day you will also have a toy. A secret toy, that you have to send a special code to get." said Ume.

"Do you have t-shirts and skateboards and yo-yos as well?" I asked.

"That's all part of our four-year commercialization strategy." said Takuma.

"Now that I'm a superhero."

He'd gone from hero to superhero in less than a day.

"To be honest, this is making me depressed." I said. "How can you do this, and also do... That."

"That?" asked Ume. "You mean the that that brings in more money than any other that that we do?"

"Yes."

"Don't tell me you suddenly have a problem with it." said Takuma. "You had plenty of chances to raise an objection."

"Would you rather be paid less?" asked Ume.

"This isn't about money." I said.

"Oh good! So you'll work for free?" said Yuzuki.

"What would you say if, hypothetically, someone thought that it was... morally and ethically questionable?" I said.

"Let me show you something." said Ume. She disappeared into her office, and returned with her laptop. She opened up several documents.

"These are the people we have harvested organs from." she said.

"They all consented to be organ donors after death. We always check. Always."

It was too easy to tell she was lying. There was no way they'd checked during the Karada case, for instance. They went straight into the autopsies. And the police knew that.

"The Karada case was different." she said, as though she'd read my mind. "We were unprepared to find murder victims. When we were hired, we were lead to believe we were investigating an arsonist. Takuma decided to take responsibility and was the one who suggested we proceed as usual, without checking.

Luckily for us, in a follow-up, Yuzuki confirmed that all three victims in that case had consented to donate their organs upon death. So, you see, we have done nothing morally repugnant or illegal at all."

"What exactly isn't illegal about the black market?" I asked.

"Who said anything about the black market?" asked Ume, innocently. "I wouldn't even know how to sell something on the black market."

"You're wrong, Ume." said Takuma. "All you need to do is pick up a phone and say, 'Black market, please.' — it's very easy!"

"What about the hospitals? How you starve the market by buying organs, then selling your own at a higher cost?"

"That's delusional." said Ume. "We don't do that, have never done that, and you wouldn't be able to prove it."

"Any further questions, Kuroyo? We're dangerously close to letting you go." said Takuma.

"I can replace you at any time!" said Yuzuki, snapping her fingers.

"This isn't about what I think." I said. "The Anti-YPDA task force is fully formed, and they were going to raid this office today. Hoshi is highly suspicious of all of you. I want to make sure you have an adequate defense."

"Well, how was that?" asked Ume.

"It wasn't good enough." I said. "You can't spin 'resells victims' body parts'. Or blackmail. You know what you have to do, Ume."

Ume's smirk fell from her face.

"Go on." said Takuma.

"It's not necessary." said Ume.

"You knew this was coming." said Takuma.

"Blackmail isn't so bad." she said. "What's really bad is having something to be blackmailed over — if they didn't want to be blackmailed, they shouldn't do anything blackmailable."

"Yes, we all agree." said Takuma. "But the police do not see it our way."

Ume sighed and opened her laptop.

"This took me weeks to input." she steamed. "Hours and hours and hours of work. More work than any of you have done for this agency."

"That's hilarious." said Takuma. "What about all my sleepless nights?"

"They're hardly sleepless."

"My natural breathing sounds like snoring at nighttime — I told you that, but you never listen."

"Losing this data will mean having no leverage. What if we get in a tight spot? We should at least print it out. Store it on paper somewhere."

"How soon until people stop seeing you as heroes?" I asked. "Knowing you, probably tomorrow, at the latest."

"We can bluff, Ume. We don't even need to have the blackmail, because they all know we dug it up before, and could do so again." Takuma said.

"Fine, fine." Ume conceded. She picked up her toy doppelgänger.

"But Little Ume hates you all."

And so, the data was deleted.

XOXOXO MAY 27TH 1993 12PM XOXOXO

It was peaceful, the day of the raid. Until it wasn't.
I crouched, gun drawn, beside the front door of the YPDA. Sugimoto stared intensely at me. Probably entranced by my beautiful eyes.

Takuma's big rescue hadn't done much for the YPDA. Their merch had not sold well at all. It was too bad, because I got a percentage of the royalties. Maybe I'd make something at the evidence auction.

"Go!" ordered Hoshi, over the com.

Sugimoto tried the door. It opened.

We hurried inside. The waiting room was empty. "Clear."

Sugimoto checked the reception room. "Clear."

Office. "Clear."

Bullpen.

"Police, you're under arrest!" I got to say.

Takuma, Ume, and Yuzuki were then pressed against the wall, with their hands held high.

Maaka did the body searches for Ume and Yuzuki. Sugimoto did the body search for Takuma.

Hoshi entered the bullpen.

"Hello again, you three." he said. He was being a bit smug. He'd earned it.

"My shining star!" exclaimed Yuzuki.

I headed into the office to check the copier. Empty. Maaka looked pleased to see the laptop.

"Is that the new model?" she asked.

"It's a year or so old." I said.

She began snooping around in it. Good thing Ume wasn't there. She didn't like people touching her computer.

XOXOXO

"I don't understand." said Takuma. "You're accusing us of... donating organs? Are you going to accuse us of rescuing people from floods next? If that's a crime, then lock me up!"

"Careful Takuma, he probably will." said Ume.

"What you are doing is essentially robbing from corpses." said Hoshi. "It's not just immoral, it's viscerally disgusting."

"I wouldn't do that! I don't like corpses." said Yuzuki.

"I thought you were the coroner?" said Hoshi, confused.

"I'm forced to be. We don't have a lot of employees, or money." said Yuzuki.

"So you admit you're desperate for money?"

"We have plenty of money." said Ume. "Plenty."

"How much?" asked Maaka.

"More than I'd tell you." said Ume.

"Might I remind you again that you have the legal right to an attorney." said Sugimoto.

"It's fine." said Takuma. "We have nothing to hide. Except our exclusive 'unpainted' toy set. It's a collector's item."

"They're selling like hot cakes!" lied Yuzuki.

"Then you wouldn't mind a more thorough investigation of your establishment?" asked Hoshi. "We would visit your homes. Talk to your friends and family."

"Yeah. We know what an investigation is." said Ume.

"Really? Not from what I've heard." said Maaka.

"Are you Maaka Umigami, inventor of Jun?" asked Ume.

"Yes, I am."

"Ah, I love that game. I always slaughter my opponent!" said Takuma.

"How... is... That even possible?" asked Maaka. "The game is literally designed so that nobody can dominate anyone else..."

"I make my own rules. Live on the edge. That's how." said Takuma.

"You shouldn't play games that way." said Maaka. "I put a lot of effort on those rules."

"Don't let them get to you." said Hoshi. "They're a bit insensitive, as you can tell."

"No, let us get to you!" said Yuzuki. "We have something to offer!"

"Yes, if you drop this investigation, we will give you an exclusive Bikini Yuzuki figurine." said Ume.

"Nobody wants that." said Hoshi.

"Well..." I said.

"Okay, then what about cash?" asked Ume, sounding desperate. "How much does it take to buy off Officer Sugimoto?"

"Six million." said Sugimoto, without even blinking.

"What?" asked Maaka.

"Fine. Six million. It's a deal." said Takuma.

"Wait a minute." said Hoshi.

"What about you, Maaka? Six million yen would fund a lot of board game things or whatever." said Ume.

"I-I..." said Maaka.

"They aren't going to take your money." said Hoshi.

"Fine. I'll take your money." said Maaka. "Hoshi's the one in charge of this investigation anyway. It's his responsibility."

"I will never be bought." said Hoshi.

"We weren't going to offer." said Ume. "Though, you're welcome to beg for it. We recently came into a sizable fortune, so you'd better take our donation offers while we can still afford them."

"I'm getting my hair done all day tomorrow...!" said Yuzuki.

"This is ridiculous." said Hoshi. "I still have Kuroyo."

"No, you don't." I said. "You never did. Don't you get it? I'm not an officer. I'm a detective, first and foremost."

Hoshi looked remarkably disappointed. He wasn't that into me anymore. Oh well. Too bad for him.

"What are you going to do now, Hoshi?" asked Ume. "Try to convince people that your hasty raid was made on good intel? You won't find anything. In fact, I invite you to try. We deleted that data a week ago. There's nothing left. And unless you're sneakily recording our conversation right now, you have zero evidence of anything. Just suspicion. And like Takuma always says — “

"'If you don't have evidence, just make it up?'" said Takuma.

"Not the quote I was looking for. More like 'Always record everything'."

"That's MY catchphrase." I said.

"What can I say?" said Hoshi. "You've proven yourselves to be just as awful as I thought. I'm profoundly disappointed, on both a personal and professional level, with all of you."

"You shouldn't be." said Takuma. "The way I see it, bad people get to do bad things all the time, and they get rewarded for it. We're good people who do good things, and get nothing for it. We only make money through the bad things we do. It's sad, but it's true."

"I don't think that makes you good people." said Hoshi.

"We just generously donated twelve million yen to your police department." said Ume.

"Stop calling it donating. It's a bribe, and it's illegal."

"Last I checked, we were a tax-exempt religious organization." said Takuma. "All our expenditures and income are donations!"

"That doesn't sound right." said Maaka. "But thanks for the cash."

"No problem." said Ume. "Have you ever wanted to be a detective?"

"Why do you think I wanted to be a police officer?" said Maaka.

"Hmm. I think we just found Yuzuki's replacement." said Takuma.

"Hey!" said you-know-who.

"Thanks for visiting, officers." said Ume. "Would you like some tea before you go?"

"No." said Hoshi, eyeing us.
He left, guided by Maaka and Sugimoto. They were going to watch him closely.
For the moment, his hands were tied.

I didn't follow him.

I was going to be a full-time detective.

At least for a while.

XOXOXO JUNE 5TH 1993 3AM XOXOXO

It was hot outside Noboru's room, as usual.
I'd brought along my usual snacks and my usual library book.
I usually waited five hours before leaving.
He usually slept in a fetal position.
The night usually was quiet.

Usually.

Everything was usual, wasn't it? But I was doing a highly unusual activity.
Anything is normal if it is normal to you. But normal can be strange, like an ear in a box.

If I was sent an ear in a box every day, that would be strange, but it would soon become normal because it could be expected to happen, and if the boxes stopped arriving, that would be strange, even though it was just as strange for them to arrive at all.

It's not normal to mine murder victims for organs, or to blackmail clients, or to pay a small fine for keeping a rare library book so that you can resell it later. Maybe those things would never be normal outside the YPDA's echo chamber. But it doesn't matter, because they never leave it.

Noboru's gentle snores were clearly audible with my handheld amplifier.

They helped me to relax.

But not to sleep.