

A White Rabbit

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Part I Separate Winters

~Ladybug~

The snow silently fell on Johann Müller. He stood between the hotel entrance and the subway station, watching the snow collect on the streetlamps, taxis, and his gloves. He hated the cold. He hated the snow.

“If it wasn’t for work,” he sighed, checking his watch.

Fifteen minutes late.

“Verdammet,” he muttered, clearly irritated.

The target emerged at last with a heavy coat and expensive shoes, covering up his sins with money.

Johann raised the gun. Breathed. Pulled the trigger.

Click.

He stared at the weapon.

The gun only clicked pathetically.

“Of course.”

Johann closed his eyes.

“This is why I should have become an accountant.”

By the time he cleared the malfunction, the man slipped into the car and drove off.

Johann lowered the gun and watched snow settle into the imprint where the car had been.

At the corner shop, a faded ladybug poster peeled at the edges. Tentoumushi— a symbol of luck. A selfish predator, humans decided to call lucky.

By his coworkers, he was called “Marienkäfer” (ladybug) to “increase luck”, as they put it, though it seemed to do the complete opposite.

Once, a train delay cost him a contract. Once, a target died choking on a steak before Johann could fire.

Johann did not believe in fate.

Fate seemed to believe in him.

Three hours later, he learned the man had died in a brake failure accident. Reduced pay. Again.

“Scheiße”.

He walked following the coastline. He walked until there was no sidewalk, and the road seemed to stretch on forever. Along the way, a stray cat darted across his path, and Johann, who was twenty years into a profession that required stillness, jumped.

“Entschuldigung,” he said automatically.

The cat blinked and looked at him with the particular disdain only cats possess.

Johann looked at his hand. The 7-11 baguette he bought, because it was cheap and soft, reminded him of home.

He set it down.

The cat did not approach.

He walked away.

When he reached his hotel, he entered his room, numbered 168.

Outside, snow continued falling with obedience. Johann calmly watched from the window, wondering who had completed his work.

~Zero~

I like winter.

Winter removes everything. It covers the ground with white. It is the season of reset. It all turns to zero: a shift from one season to another. The world turns quiet, edges soften, mistakes disappear under white.

I stirred sugar into my mother's tea.

"So, how was school?" she asked gently. "You had Aya sensei's class today, right? You always seem thoughtful after her class."

"Yes," Rei said, a smile forming quickly as he looked down at his bag.

"She said something interesting," I said. "That morality isn't about being right. It's about responsibility."

My mother smiled, satisfied, as if she had personally shaped that thought.

"Yes, Rei, I understand you. When I was a teenager, my art teacher was also like that...."

I slowly let the noise around me blur and melt into nothingness. I nodded and uh-huhed time to time to show my mom I was attentive. I watched the steam rising from her cup and considered something else Takamine sensei had said. "If something is clearly harmful, waiting can be worse than doing." "Peace is not the absence of violence, it is the management of it." "Law and morality are not the same thing."

I refocused on my mom and said, "Mom, even though your art teacher really sounds like an amazing guy, I should start working on my homework."

She nodded approvingly, proudly, and kindly.

I walk up to my room. I lock the door. Glancing at my bag, I take out my notebook. Not homework. The other one. I copied down the phrases I remembered. I wrote small annotations in the margins, possibilities, applications, and corrections.

If I am going to be a responsible adult, I should begin early.

Outside, the snow silently fell. Not demanding anything but doing what was supposed to be done. The snow continued to fall indifferently, precisely.

~Beauty~

She stood before the class and smiled at them as though she wanted to be there.

"Good and evil," she said, writing the words on the board, "aren't opposites. They're decisions."

A student once asked her how to decipher between the two. She had replied, "There's the difference between believing in justice and believing you are justice." They had written it down carefully. She did not believe a word she said. Words are powerful only if you wholeheartedly analyse them, which she doubted any of her students ever did.

When she was younger, she thought good and evil were like black and white tiles. Step on the wrong one and you fall. But the older she got, the more they felt like snow, which covers everything evenly. It makes even the dirtiest ground look clean. However, when it finally melts, the ground is exposed, unchanged. Snow has the power to mask the ground's defects, but not to correct them.

She scanned the room. Most of them were half listening. One was asleep, two were dozing off, and one was watching her calmly, focusing on everything. No one had admiration on their faces.

She doesn't actually believe humans are good or bad. She believes they are adaptable. "Protected by the terms adolescence and ignorance, the kids were allowed to do anything they pleased," she thought. They would care, then in a fraction of a second, not care, based on the moment, on the consequences.

She sighed as she dismissed the class with a polite bow. Everyone rushed to the hallways to chat with their friends, except for the few kids in the classroom, either sleeping or looking out the window, admiring the white scenery.

~Far~

Sakuma Ryo had failed at so many things that he sometimes wondered if failure itself was his true calling.

He stood outside the convenience store at midnight, holding a canned coffee he hadn't paid for yet, staring at the job listing taped to the window.

"Night shift. Experience preferred."

He had experience being awake at night. That must count for something.

He once ran a coffee stand called Tentoumushi. Ladybug. Symbol of grace and good luck. It lasted three weeks before an electrical mishap turned the place into what the insurance company called *negligence*. He preferred to call it *experimental combustion*.

After that, he started an Instagram account named *Reinventing myself at 34*. Three followers. Two were bots. The third asked if he was okay. He wasn't, but he appreciated the concern.

Recently, he'd tried religion. They asked him to meditate in silence for six hours. Ryo lasted twelve minutes before asking if enlightenment came with snacks. They told him he lacked spiritual seriousness. He thought that was unfair. He was extremely serious about snacks.

Inside the convenience store, a television displayed breaking news. It was about another suspicious accident. A local businessman dead. The cause was brake failure.

"I guess even successful people fail eventually," Ryo murmured at the end.

Outside, the snow began to fall. Softly and unnecessarily. Ryo watched it gather on the sidewalk.

“If life were a story,” he quietly told himself, “I’d probably be the old man who trips in the background.”

He paid for his coffee and walked home, unaware that somewhere in the city, someone never tripped over their feet at all.

~God~

Kanzaki Seishu did not need to raise his voice when he spoke. He had no need. The room would be silent before he began.

Thirty-seven followers sat cross-legged on polished wood floors, backs straight, eyes fixed forward. Snow pressed against the tall windows of the converted warehouse, softening the city’s bright lights.

“Humanity,” Kanzaki said slowly and gently, “is asleep.”

The silence deepened. He breathed and continued.

“Not because it is ignorant, but because it is undisciplined”.

He walked slowly between them, hands clasped behind his back, faintly smiling at each one he passed by.

“Compassion without clarity becomes weakness.”

A few followers nodded.

“To save forests, weak trees must fall.”

He never said who held the axe. He never needed to.

Kanzaki believed himself to be beyond ego. That was what made him so certain he had none. He had once been ordinary. A lecturer. A thinker no one listened to. Now, when he entered the room, a heavy silence, gravity-like, formed around him and his followers.

He called it awakening. Others called it charisma. He stopped pacing and faced the group.

“Most of you are not ready to guide others,” he said calmly, “but you can prepare yourselves. Eliminate ignorance within. And when necessary...” He paused. He smiled gently, making his eyes and mouth thinner than before. “Assist the world in doing the same.”

After the session, the followers flowed out while Kanzaki remained alone in the tall-ceilinged building. He adjusted the sleeves of his newly tailored coat and glanced at his phone. A message waited from an intermediary.

A problem may need removing.

Kanzaki closed his eyes briefly.

Correction was not violence. It was maintenance.

Outside, the snow covered the streets. Kanzaki watched it fall and thought, with quiet satisfaction, that nature understood hierarchy better than humans ever would.

Some things must be buried for the landscape to appear pure. And purity, he believed, was worth almost anything.

Part II Cracks in Ice

~Ladybug~

The new contract arrived like all the others. Nothing special but a name, a photograph, and an address in an envelope under his hotel door.

Johann studied his face. Mid-fifties. Soft jaw. Eyes that avoided the camera. A mid-level coordinator for something called the Clear Path Society. The file said he was unstable and talkative, making him a liability.

Johann didn't care about the descriptions and the labels on these files. A target was a target.

He spent two days watching the apartment building from a rented van. He studied the third-floor, corner unit. The lights turned off at 11:42. The man bought groceries alone. He smoked on the balcony at midnight, staring at nothing.

The third evening, Johann parked down the street. Snow fell steadily, burying the sidewalks. He checked his rifle. It was clean, loaded, and most importantly, functional. He checked it suspiciously. Twice. Three times.

At 11:30, he stepped out of the van.

His phone buzzed.

Gas leak. Explosion contained. One fatality.

Third floor. Corner unit.

Johann stopped walking. He lowered his rifle slowly, letting it hang at his side. His hair was covered in white as he stood there, the warmth of his body cleared a circle around his feet.

He had not pulled the trigger.

Again.

He walked toward the building anyway. Not to see, but just to *see*. Emergency vehicles crowded the streets. Neighbors gathered around in clusters. The air fogged. Hushed voices filled the air. A woman cried. Someone held her elbow.

Johann circled the side entrance. Close to the door were footprints of boots and equipment marks. But near the corner of the building, there was a patch of clean ground, as if someone had stood there long enough to melt the snow, then walked away without leaving a trace.

Johann exhaled slowly.

“Das ist kein Zufall.”

This was no coincidence.

He returned to the van and sat in the dark. The heater hummed while the outside commotion still remained.

Three contracts in one month. Three accidents before he could act.

Choking, brake failure, and now, a gas leak.

Someone else was working in the same territory. Someone efficient. Someone stealthy. Someone who didn't leave evidence, didn't leave bodies with bullet wounds, didn't leave anything but empty spaces.

Johann had spent twenty years believing killing was neutral. Economics. Supply and Demand. Someone pays, someone dies, nothing personal, but something that was indispensable.

He started the engine and pensively drove away.

Back in his hotel room, he spread the photographs across the desk. Three faces. Three reports. Three empty spaces.

This was not fate. This was something else. This was human machinations masquerading as fate.

~Beauty~

The envelope had no return address. Takamine Aya found it in her faculty mail box between a department memo and a conference flyer. Her name was written in confident strokes.

Inside was a single sheet of paper, folded carefully.

Peace is not the absence of violence, but its management.

Her own words. From a lecture two weeks ago.

Below it, in smaller handwriting;

Thank you for helping me understand responsibility.

No name.

She sat at her desk longer than usual. Students often repeated her phrases. They wrote them down. Nodded at the right moments. But this felt more intentional.

She replayed the class in her mind. Someone sitting near the window. Not smiling, but watching, observing the class.

She folded the letter and put it in the drawer. During the next class, she chose her words more carefully.

“Morality isn't about being right,” she said, gentler than usual, “It's about what you're willing to live with afterward.”

A few students wrote it down. One just stared at her indifferently.

After the bell rang, she slowly erased the words on the board.

When she was younger, she had worked for people who understood the weight of words. Coordinated meetings. Made phone calls. Never killed, but made killing easier for others. She left that world after something went wrong.

Now she stood in an empty classroom, watching snow collect on the windowsill, wondering if words could be inherited. If you say something often enough, does it belong to you anymore? Or does it float out into the vast world, looking for someone to claim it?

She walked out, leaving the empty classroom silent.

~Zero~

There was another accident in the news.

A gas leak this time. The television said it was tragic. I suppose it was, for some people.

Systems are designed to prevent such things: inspection, regulations, and protocols. But systems are imperfect. They rely on people caring, and people rarely care about things that don't directly affect them.

That is why individuals must sometimes compensate.

Takamine sensei said something interesting last week. She said law and morality aren't identical. She didn't elaborate, but I understood. Law is what you can prove. Morality is what you know. They are not the same thing.

I wrote it down in my notebook.

I have seventeen names now. Some are crossed out. Not in anger or any other emotion, but in completion. Like checking items off a list. The man who hit his daughter. The teacher who traded *favors* for grades with pleasure. The businessman who sold faulty heaters to old people who couldn't afford to complain.

I didn't choose them because I hate them. I don't hate anyone. Hate isn't efficient, especially because it leaves traces. I chose them because they needed to stop.

The new name works for something called the Clear Path Society. He used to be loyal. But now, he's only a liability.

I walked past his building this evening. The snow had stopped. Everything was very still. I stood near the corner for a while.

It's unpleasant to look at something broken and do nothing about it. That's irresponsible. Some people confuse hesitation with virtue. They think waiting is wisdom. They are wrong.

Back in my room, I reviewed my notebook. Some names are crossed out while others remain to be crossed out.

When snow falls, it covers everything equally. It doesn't ask if the ground deserves it. It just falls. That's the only fair way.

~Far~

Ryo hadn't meant to record anything important.

He was walking home from the convenience store at midnight, holding a can of coffee, when he saw the emergency vehicles. Flashing lights painted the snow red and blue.

He pulled out his phone and filmed for a few seconds. Not because he was a journalist but because he had a habit of recording things he might want to look at later. He didn't watch most of them.

“Another accident,” he murmured. “Sapporo’s really going downhill nowadays.”

He kept walking.

Later that night, lying in bed, he scrolled through his phone. He looked at old photos, screenshots, and came across the video from earlier today.

He pressed play.

The footage was grainy. It was mostly snow and flashing lights. He looked past the crowd, the yellow tape, the police, and the stretcher. In the corner of the frame, barely visible, a figure calmly walked away from the building just before the emergency vehicles started to flood the area. The figure faded into the dark.

Ryo paused the video.

“Huh.”

He squinted. “It’s probably just a neighbor. Probably nothing,” he told himself.

He considered uploading it with a dramatic caption. Maybe something like “EXCLUSIVE: Footage From Scene of Tragedy.” But then again, the quality was terrible. No one would care. His Instagram account has three followers. Two bots, one person.

He deleted three old photos instead. His storage was almost full.

The video remained unwatched and unshared.

The snow pressed against the window while Ryo turned off the light and stared into the ceiling, into the night.

~God~

The message was brief.

Resolved.

Kanzaki Seishu read it twice, then set his phone down. He had not specified how the problem should be handled. He rarely needed to. His followers understood the implications.

Gas leak, the news reported. Unfortunate. Tragedy.

He stood by the tall windows of the warehouse and absentmindedly watched the snow-covered sill.

Young people were easily malleable. If guided early, they could learn to see the world clearly. To understand that purity required sacrifice. That some things must be buried so others could grow.

He smiled faintly.

Somewhere in the city, someone had acted truly and rightfully. A follower, probably, or a follower of a follower. It didn't matter who it was. The work was done. The organization was cleaner and purer for it.

He turned back to the windows to the never-ending fall of snow, the continuous hue of people and neon mixing together, contrasting the buildings' sharp edges. By morning, the city would look clean again. The city would be right again.

When he spoke of removing ignorance, he meant it purely. As a gardener means it when he prunes a dying branch. It's not about pleasure or cruelty. It's about balance.

Outside, a crow landed on the windowsill. It shook off the snow on its back and stared at him. Kanzaki stared back with his thin eyes and thin mouth. The crow flew away.

Somewhere in the city, he was certain there was someone waiting for his words. Someone is waiting for guidance. Someone who already felt what he felt. Someone who just needed some assistance and permission.

The snow fell and fell.

~Ladybug~

Johann spread the files across the table for the fourth time.

November 3rd: contract accepted. Target dies on November 7th. Choking incident.

November 17th: contract accepted. Target dies on November 19th. Brake failure.

November 20th: contract accepted. Target dies on November 23rd. Gas leak.

In every case, the death occurred before he could act. In every case, the cause was natural enough to avoid investigation. Someone else had done his job in every case. It felt insulting.

He leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. The hotel room was small, and had a bed, a desk, and a bathroom with a shower that never got quite hot enough. One window faced the neighboring building, so close he could see the family in the apartment across from him. He saw a mother, a father,

and a child who did homework at the kitchen table every night. He had watched them for weeks without them noticing.

He had stayed in hundreds of rooms like this. They all blurred together after a while. The same furniture, the same smells, the same thin walls, distant traffic, and white weather.

But this. This situation was different. This was new to Johann.

He thought about the clean patch of snow near the building. The sudden absence of footprints. The way someone had stood there, watching, waiting, then walked away without leaving a trace.

It was not professional. Professionals leave traces behind. They have methods, tells, and patterns. They use certain weapons, certain approaches, or certain times of the day. They are predictable in their own way.

This was something else.

This was someone who killed without any big statement, without hesitation, and without leaving anything behind except the absence of what used to be there.

This was someone who believed in what they were doing.

Johann had met believers before. They were the most dangerous kind. Not because they were skilled; often they weren't. Rather, because they couldn't be stopped by money, couldn't be redirected by threats, couldn't be reasoned with at all. They lived, moved through life with a certainty that almost made them invisible. Certain people don't look over their shoulders or leave traces.

He closed the files and stacked them neatly.

Outside, a white rabbit hopped through the city without notice. Johann closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Part III The Silver Lining

~Beauty~

The auditorium filled slowly, students drifted in like snowflakes, aimlessly, separately, eventually settling. Takamine Aya sat in the back row, arms crossed, watching them find their seats. The ethics symposium had been her idea. She had suggested it to the principal months ago, back when she still believed that bringing different voices to the school might mean something.

Kanzaki Seishu stood at the podium, adjusting the microphone in front of him. He wore a dark gray suit. His hair was neat. His smile showed exactly when it should, stayed exactly as long as it should, and disappeared exactly when it should.

Aya had known people like him before.

They always smiled like him. Always stood like that. Always spoke about purification and clarity and the necessary things, while someone else did the work that made those words real.

She had been that someone else, once. Coordinating and arranging phone calls to make people answer with action. Never pulling the trigger, but handing someone else the gun.

That life ended years ago. She had stepped out of it after she saw a picture of a woman and child and realized the man she was helping to remove had a face that looked like someone's father. His name was Shinomiya Kaito.

She had backed out at the last moment. Someone else finished the job.

Kanzaki began speaking.

"Humanity is asleep," he said. His voice carried without effort, filling the auditorium with his confident voice. "Most people move through life without understanding why they suffer. Without understanding who causes their suffering."

Students listened. Some nodded, calmly watched the clock waiting for it to hit 3:30, while others checked their phones under their desks.

Aya watched Kanzaki's hands. They rested on the podium, not moving. He did not gesture or fidget, but his words and stature alone commanded the attention required for earnest listening. He spoke like he practiced being watched and heard.

"To save the forest," Kanzaki continued, "weak trees must fall. This is not cruelty. It is compassion. True compassion requires precision, requires seeing what others refuse to see."

Aya's chest tightened.

She remembered the photograph. A woman holding a child. The woman was smiling. The child was too young to understand he was being photographed. The man, Shinomiya Kaito, was not in the frame. He was the one taking the picture.

She had stared at that photograph for a long time. Then she had made a call and said she couldn't continue. She hung up and waited for someone else to do what she wouldn't.

Someone did.

Kanzaki smiled at the audience. "Ignorance is the only real enemy. Remove ignorance, and you remove suffering. Remove those who spread ignorance, and you protect the innocent."

Aya looked away. Her eyes found the window.

Then, she saw him.

Shinomiya Rei. Sitting near the middle of the auditorium. Not moving, not looking at his phone, not doing the slightest things other students did to prove they were alive, but watching Kanzaki with the same stillness he always brought to the classroom.

Shinomiya.

The same name.

Aya told herself it meant nothing. Common name. Hundreds of families. Thousands of people.

But she couldn't look away from the boy's face. The way he watched. The way he listened. The way he never blinked, never shifted, never showed what he was thinking.

Reminiscent of his father.

The thought came without any forewarning. She tried to push it away, but couldn't.

Kanzaki kept speaking. Something about responsibility, about duty, and about the burden of seeing the truth while others choose to stay in blindness.

Aya heard none of it.

She was watching Rei and Kanzaki. Deep inside her, a door that was locked years ago began to creak open.

~Far~

Sakuma Ryo was only at the symposium for coffee.

He had seen the poster three days ago, taped on the convenience store window beside the job listings. *Ethics Symposium. Open to the public. Refreshments provided.* Refreshments provided meant free food. Free food meant he could stretch his money another day.

So here he was. Standing outside the high school auditorium twenty minutes early, watching students file past him obediently. A few looked at him funny. He was thirty four. He wore a coat with a stain on the sleeve. He looked exactly like what he was: someone who had nowhere better to be.

The peaceful snow had started falling again.

Ryo lit a cigarette he barely could afford and watched the parking lot.

That's when he saw the kid.

Sixteen, or maybe seventeen. Dark hair, with a school uniform that he outgrew, walking near the edge of the parking lot, away from the crowd. The boy moved slowly as though rushing was not part of his nature. Then he stopped.

Near the fence, half hidden from the snow, Ryo noticed something white was moving. A small rabbit was shivering. One of its legs looked wrong. Twisted, maybe, or caught on something.

The kid knelt down. He didn't hesitate, didn't look around to see if anyone was watching. He simply reached out and slowly, but gently, picked up the rabbit.

Ryo watched with interest because city rabbits don't last long. There are too many cars, cats, and other causes for alarm.

The kid held the rabbit up to his chest. The animal stopped struggling all of a sudden, as though it knew it was safe now. The kid was wearing a smile. But to Ryo, it seemed emotionless. There was no concern, nor satisfaction, in the boy's eyes. He just stood there, collecting snow on his uniform and his hair.

Then he turned and walked towards the auditorium.

Ryo's phone was already in his hand. He filmed without thinking, just a few seconds of the kid walking, the rabbit against his uniform, snow falling around them both. The kid glanced up at the camera. He didn't react. He didn't smile or frown or even wave Ryo away. He just walked past Ryo, gently put the rabbit down, then disappeared through the auditorium doors.

Ryo lowered his phone.

"Weird," he muttered.

He forgot about it by the time he found the coffee.

The symposium was exactly what he expected it to be. Boring. A man at the front talking about forests and trees and things Ryo didn't really care about. He sat in the back and drank three cups of coffee while trying to look like he belonged there.

Halfway through the speech, he scanned the room.

The lady who introduced the speaker sat in the back row, looking pale. Some foreign-looking guy sat near the exit, scanning everyone like security. And the rabbit kid sat perfectly still in the middle, watching the speaker with a sharp attention that seemed to cut through the auditorium.

When the lecture ended, Ryo headed for the exit. The foreign guy was already gone. The lady in charge was now standing in the back, alone. The kid was nowhere to be seen.

Ryo walked toward the station with his hands in his pockets, thinking about nothing. He never watched the video again. But something about the way the kid had held the rabbit stayed with Ryo. Though the act seemed gentle and caring, something seemed off.

The thought faded and was forgotten. Ryo was feeling satisfied with the free food and drink. A great way to end the day.

~God~

The microphone hummed once, then settled into complete silence. Kanzaki Seishu stood at the podium and let the room wait. An auditorium full of students and strangers was all watching him. They were all waiting for him to speak. He had learned long ago that silence before words made the words more impactful.

He scanned the faces. They were all young, soft, and malleable. They did not know yet what they believed. They did not yet understand that belief was a choice, not a discovery.

He noticed Aya, near the back, sitting alone. He could see that she still knew how not to draw attention to herself.

To his left, near the exit, Johann sat with his arms crossed.

In the middle of the crowd, a boy with dark hair sat perfectly motionless, the same boy from earlier, who had looked at him without curiosity or boredom.

Kanzaki began.

“Humanity is asleep,” he said. His voice carried easily, filling the space without any effort. “Most people move through life without understanding who causes their suffering.”

A few students shifted. Good. Discomfort means attention.

“To save the forest, weak trees must fall. This is not cruelty. It is compassion. True compassion requires precision. Requires seeing what others refuse to see.”

In the back, Aya looked down. Johann did not move. The boy watched without blinking.

Kanzaki paused, letting the words sink in.

He thought about the speech he had prepared. The usual metaphors and the usual gentle guidance toward enlightenment. But something about this room, these watchers, made him want to go deeper. To reveal something true.

“Ignorance is the only real enemy,” he continued. “Remove ignorance, and you remove suffering. Remove those who spread ignorance, and you protect the innocent.”

He stepped away from the podium, walking slowly along the front of the stage. His voice softened along with his expression.

“Years ago, I knew a man who understood this. A man who removed corruption for a living. He was skilled, precise, practical, and pure. He believed in what he did: Believed that some people needed to disappear so others could breathe.”

Aya looked up.

“But belief without discipline is dangerous. This man made a choice. He fell in love. He started a family. He decided to walk away from his work, as if that kind of work was something you could leave behind.”

Kanzaki stopped walking and faced the audience.

“He learned otherwise. The organization that trained him could not allow a weapon to exist outside its control. He was removed. Not because anyone hated him. But because a garden must be a controlled environment. Weeds come in many shapes and sizes.”

Silence.

Kanzaki let it stretch, watching their faces. Aya had gone pale. Showing her weakness. It was good she had left when she did. Johann shifted ever so slightly, just enough to show he was paying attention. The boy in the middle remained completely still.

“He understood, at the end, that his death was not punishment. It was maintenance. It was the natural order controlling itself.”

Kanzaki turned to the podium and tilted his head gently.

“We all have choices. We all face their consequences. The question is whether you will walk through life asleep, or open your eyes and see what needs to be done.”

The applause came. Polite at first, then stronger. Kanzaki nodded in acceptance.

Kanzaki did not see the boy in the middle, who did not clap, or Aya watching him, but Johann noticed them both. Kanzaki was busy thinking about the next engagement to shape young minds.

But as he stepped away from the podium, something tugged at him. The stillness of the boy. Kanzaki shook the thought away and walked into the lobby, where people were already lining up to thank him.

~Zero~

The man spoke about forests.

I listened carefully. Not because I respect him. Respect requires admiration, and I feel nothing like that toward Kanzaki. His voice is too loud. His smile is too practical. He wants to be seen, known, and remembered. That is weakness. Correction should be quiet.

But he said things worth noting.

Humanity is asleep. True. Most people move through life reacting, but never choosing. They wake up, go to school or work, eat, sleep, and repeat this boring cycle. They never ask who suffers so they can live comfortably.

Remove ignorance, and you remove suffering. Also true, but incomplete. Ignorance is not the problem. People are the problem. What they do. What they allow. What they refuse to see.

Remove those who spread ignorance, and you protect the innocent.

Yes.

I wrote none of this down. I did not need to. My notebook is for names, not philosophy. Philosophy, I carry here.

I touched my chest lightly. Beneath my uniform, the notebook waited. Seventeen names. Some crossed out.

Then Kanzaki said something I did not expect.

He spoke about a man. A man who removed corruption for a living. Skilled and precise. A man who believed in what he did. Believed that some people needed to disappear so others could breathe.

My father.

Kanzaki described his death as maintenance. As natural order.

I considered this.

My father was skilled. I remember fragments. How his hands were always steady, how his voice was always calm, and how he would move through rooms without sound. He taught me how to watch, how to wait, and how to recognize people who needed to stop.

He said, *Some people are weeds. Remove them, and flowers will soon bloom.*

I did not understand then. I do now.

He was killed before he could teach me more. Someone from Kanzaki's organization, probably. The timing fits. The method also fits. I have never confirmed it because confirmation isn't really necessary. The present will not change. He is gone. I remain.

I do not feel anger about this.

I must feel wronged to feel anger. But it was not unfair. It was a consequence. He made choices. He fell in love, he started a family, he tried to walk away from something that couldn't allow walking away. He knew this. He accepted it. And so do I.

I am simply continuing.

Not for revenge.

I kill because of what they are.

Weeds.

During the lecture, I watched Kanzaki and calculated how easy it would be. He stands still. He smiles at everyone. He does not expect danger from a seventeen-year-old boy in a school uniform.

But that would be personal. Even wrong. He is not my target. Not yet. Maybe not ever. I remove weeds, not gardeners. Kanzaki is a gardener, no matter how poisoned his garden may be.

After the lecture, I walked outside. The cold snow was falling on my face.

Near the fence, the rabbit I let go was there. I knelt, picked it up, and held it for a moment. Then I set it down in the snow. It did not move. It just lay there, breathing and moving, almost as though it was waiting. I watched it for a while, then walked back to the auditorium.

In my room tonight, I will open my notebook. I will review names. Some are crossed out. Others wait.

My father's name is not in the notebook. He does not need to be crossed out. He is already gone.

But his work remains.

~Ladybug~

Johann did not applaud when the speech ended.

He sat next to the exit, arms crossed, watching the crowd with the same attention he had brought to every contract for twenty-five years. Scanning, cataloging, and noting who looked nervous, who looked bored, and who looked like they might be worth following.

The speaker, though irrelevant, was Kanzaki. A man with too many words. Johann had heard enough men like him to know they were always hiding something, usually themselves.

What interested Johann was the audience.

The ethics teacher who hosted this sat in the back. She was pale, and her eyes were fixed on someone in the middle rows. Johann followed her gaze.

A boy.

He had dark brown hair and wore a school uniform, and sat perfectly still while everyone around him shifted and stretched and checked their phones. He did not clap, nor did he move. He watched the stage as though he were patiently and politely waiting for the show to end.

Then, during the final question, he stood.

Without drawing attention, he slipped out the side door while Kanzaki was answering some student's question about compassion.

Johann stood too.

Outside, snow fell delicately. The boy was already thirty meters ahead, walking toward the fence at the edge of the parking lot. He moved without hurry, without looking back, without doing any of the small things people do when they know they are being watched.

Johann stayed in the shadow of the building and watched.

The boy stopped near the fence. Knelt down. When he stood, something white was in his hands.

A rabbit.

It was small, and it looked young. One leg was hanging wrong. The boy held it against his chest, cupping it gently. His face showed nothing.

He stood there for a long moment with the rabbit that was shuddering against his uniform.

Then he set it down.

The rabbit did not move. It lay in the snow, patiently breathing. The boy watched it for a while, then he turned and walked back toward the auditorium, passing within five meters of where Johann stood.

Their eyes did not meet.

Johann let him pass.

When the boy was gone, Johann looked at the rabbit. It was still there, breathing and waiting.

He did not approach it. That was not his business.

But something clicked.

The timing. The stillness. The way the boy moved was not unlike a teenager, but there was something more. Something like Johann: professional.

He thought about the clean patch of ground near the corner of the building. The footprints that were gone. The absence of evidence.

He thought about the three contracts that ended in an *accident*.

He thought about the boy holding the rabbit. The care in his hands, but not on his face.

This is him.

Johann did not need proof. He needed a pattern. And the pattern was clear.

A teenage boy, a killer, was working in the same territory as him. Completing the same jobs. Believing in something Johann never believed in.

Johann stood in the cold for a long time.

Then, he laughed quietly. Not because it was funny, but because it was absurd. Because after twenty years, he had finally met someone who killed for reasons he could not understand.

He lit a cigarette he did not want and watched the auditorium doors.

The boy did not come out again.

Johann finally finished his cigarette and walked away.

He said nothing.

He did nothing.

Some things were not his to touch.

Part IV Down the Hole

i.

I did not go through.

I sat in the snow and watched the light and listened to the voices and did not move. My leg hurt. My heart beat fast. The cold pressed down against my fur.

Behind me, the world I knew continued. The snow, the trees, the river that never fully froze. The cat that sometimes chased me but never caught me. The places where food appeared, disappeared, and appeared again.

In front of me, the door stayed open.

I do not know what was inside. I never will.

But sometimes, when the snow falls, and the world goes quiet, I think about it. About the warmth, about the voices, about the boy with the still face and the slow heart and the hands that held me like I mattered.

He showed me a door.

I did not walk through.

But I saw it open.

And that is the thing about doors. Once you see one open, you cannot unsee it. You carry it with you. You wonder, in the long winters, what waited on the other side.

ii.

The boy is gone now.

I mean, gone from this place. He walked into the snow and did not come back.

But sometimes, late at night, when the city is quiet, and the snow falls soft and endless, I think of him. Standing at the edge of the light. Looking at me the way he looked at me then.

Like I was a door.

Like I was something he could open.

I do not know what he found on the other side.

I only know I am still here.

Still waiting.

Still cold.

Still watching the doors.

iii.

The snow falls.

The door waits.

The boy is gone.

The rabbit stays.

This is the story.

This is the hole.

This is the falling.

This is the whole.