

THE OUTSIDER

A DROP

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PART I / COORDINATE X / SPECIAL PROLOGUE

English Edition

TOJI

I saw a person thrown into a trash can before I ever saw a person die, and not long after that I ate something shaped like a person.

I was fourteen for both.



It was raining the day Yoko was thrown away.

Water came down off the mountain and turned the old asphalt black. At the end of a road the buses had mostly stopped running, there was a single grey cement building, and in front of it a rusted steel playground, a wall that had collapsed at the halfway point, and a front gate in better condition than the wall.

Next to the gate hung a permit from the city, in a frame.

Child protective facility.

Capacity: twelve.

Live-in supervisor: one.

Medical support available.

Of everything written there, the number twelve came closest to being true.

One human being ran the place, and his name was Carlson.

Carlson brewed coffee in the office every morning before dawn. Ordinary ground beans. He poured the hot water slowly over the paper filter and watched the brown liquid

climb the glass pot. Of all the smells in that building it was the only normal one.

He took no sugar.

He held the cup in his left hand and turned pages with his right. There was always a pistol on his belt — when he loaded us into the truck, when he carried in the grocery crates, when he counted heads outside the bathhouse. The edge of the leather holster had worn down until the grip sat out in the open.

No child ever saw him draw it.

Everyone knew it wasn't decoration.

What Carlson handled was the outside.

He smiled when the district office came. He showed sponsors only the clean rooms. He sent the hospital records for the healthy children only. When a child went missing he wrote *released to relatives*. When a child came back and couldn't speak he wrote *adjustment disorder*; when an arm wouldn't move, *congenital condition*; when a fever wouldn't break for weeks, *frail prior to admission*.

Carlson stamped the papers that made the place an orphanage.

That was his job.

The inside belonged to something else.



We called it The Man.

I never found out who started. It wasn't a name Carlson gave us. It looked too much like a person to call it anything else, and it had gone too far out to call it a person.

The Man didn't come often. There were weeks we didn't see it once. There were months it came down three times.

The children always knew first, on the days it came. Carlson would leave half his coffee. He would check the safety on the pistol. He would lock the dining hall earlier than usual.

And then there would be something black standing at the end of the corridor.

The Man was tall. Not taller than the ceiling — that would have been easier to understand. It stood inside the corridor without fitting the corridor's size, and its head never touched the ceiling, but if you followed it upward with your eyes the neck seemed to keep going.

The black outer layer looked like a suit, but there was no clear collar and there were no buttons. Its arms hung straight down at its sides and its fingertips stopped below the knee.

The face was white.

Smooth, like the inside of an eggshell.

No eyes, no nose, no mouth.

And still you knew it was looking at you.

The Man would pick one child. It would hold out its hand.
Then it would wait.

It never dragged anyone. It never twisted an arm. It stood perfectly still until the child took the hand on their own.

No child ever refused.

The ones who had refused were already gone.

The children who left with The Man either didn't come back or came back different. Akira stopped sleeping — he'd sit up all night facing the wall and collapse at dawn. Mari forgot the names of foods and called rice and water and her own fingers by the same word. Kei made a sound like paper being flipped fast, somewhere inside his mouth, every time he laughed.

At first the children cried. Then they hid. Later they lined up for their trays.

Disappearing wasn't an event. It was like winter arriving in the mountains: it came whether you were afraid of it and it came whether you hated it.

We learned how to act like we'd accepted it.

The ones who couldn't didn't last.



Yoko was one of those.

Calling Yoko a friend would be putting it too high. I didn't give anything to anyone back then. Remembering a name too long only made it inconvenient when the name went away.

Still, she sat next to me sometimes. She gave me her leftover bread, and when I gave it back she brought it again the next day. When she was nervous she wound the end of her right sleeve around her finger. There was a short scar at the outside end of her left eyebrow.

That day The Man took both of us.

Yoko went first.

I was next.

There was an old house hidden in the slope behind the orphanage. You couldn't see it from the gate. You went through the locked door behind the laundry room and down a wet mountain path for a while, and then the trees opened onto a house built out of black brick.

Half the windows were boarded. There was no dust in the entryway or the corridor, and the old timber smelled of wax. There were doors along both walls, and above the handles there were numbers instead of names.

The Man took Yoko's hand and went down to the basement. I followed two steps behind.

The stairs went on longer than the house was deep. There were no floor markings anywhere. Whatever level it was, when The Man opened a door there was a room behind it.

The room Yoko went into had one table, a clear tank, and a metal trash can. On the table sat a new roll of toilet paper.

It looked ordinary.

It was white.

It was thin, and it looked like it would tear if you gripped it.

The Man made Yoko pick up the roll.

Her hands were shaking. She was carrying it over the tank when she lost it.

The roll hit the floor.

Half a turn.

Two turns.

Three.

White paper unspooled and touched the damp cement.

Nothing had spilled, but the floor gave. Starting from where the paper met it, the cement lost its colour. It didn't turn to dust. It didn't melt and run.

The hardness of the floor transferred into the paper.

The texture of grey cement pressed down into the thin sheet. You could make out the small cracks, the grains of sand, even the scuff a shoe sole had left.

Yoko panicked and reached for the roll.

The Man's arm split open.

A single black tendril came out from the inside of its wrist.
The tip went into the cardboard core.

It fit exactly.

The Man turned the tendril.

The paper on the floor wound up fast. At the same time, on the other side, new paper unrolled.

Yoko stepped back.

The white sheet touched her arm.

There was a wet sound.

Yoko didn't get to scream. The surface of her arm collapsed like water and stuck to the paper. Flesh and cloth and bone weren't sorted into separate things. The colour and the shape of a person went down into a thin sheet all at once.

The Man turned the tendril further.

The white paper passed over her chest and her face.

Every sheet that turned made Yoko smaller.

The right sleeve went into the paper.

The scar at her left eyebrow stayed as one fine line.

At the end there was a single toe left.

The paper brushed it once.

The toe was gone too.

The roll came back to roughly the size it had started at. It was only a little heavier. On the surface there was a single wet hair, the crescent of a fingernail, and a black smear that looked like an iris.

The paper wasn't damp anymore. When the tendril tapped the hardened surface it made a sound like thin plastic.

The Man drew the tendril out. It opened the lid of the metal trash can. Then it dropped the roll in.

Thunk.

That was a light sound for a whole person being gone.

I was standing right beside it. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't run either.

The Man's white face turned toward me.

It was a face with nothing on it.

I wanted to know what was behind it.

That thought arrived at the same time as the fear. Why Yoko. Why paper. Whether the Yoko inside the paper was still Yoko. Whether you could open the trash can and take her back out.

That the questions came at all disgusted me more than the fear did.

The Man looked into me for a while.

I thought that was the day I died.

But it didn't take my hand. It tilted its head very slightly, and then it walked out of the room.

At dinner Carlson cleared Yoko's chair, went back to his office, and drank his coffee cold. On the form he wrote *released to relatives*.

After that day I hated The Man.

Being afraid of something and hating it aren't the same.

When you're afraid, you look away.

When you hate it, you keep looking.

Every time The Man appeared I didn't look away. I wanted to know what was behind the face with nothing on it.



Rin came to the orphanage before I did. He was eleven, I was twelve. By the time we were fourteen more than half the children we'd started with had been replaced, and Rin and I counted as old.

Rin had leukaemia. Carlson's paperwork said *congenital condition*, but Rin said he hadn't had anything wrong with him until the third experiment.

One flight of stairs and he had to stop and get his breath back. In winter his fingertips went blue. When he took the pills Carlson handed out his hands shook for half a day.

That didn't make him weak. It only meant he had no strength.

Rin liked things that didn't add up. If a door was locked he tried to open it. If a number was off he went looking for the reason. When Carlson changed the padlock on the storeroom, Rin knew the number of teeth on the key before the day was out.

Once, in the middle of a meal, he said:

"Don't you think the ones who come back are stranger than the ones who disappear?"

I kept eating my soup.

"They're both strange."

"The ones who disappear are an answer."

"An answer to what."

"To *gone*."

"And the ones who come back?"

"Still a question."

He said it like it was nothing and dunked his bread in the soup.

From the outside he was ridiculous. He dragged around slippers three sizes too big. He coughed and then startled himself with the sound. Once, with Carlson standing directly behind him, he mimed picking a padlock with a spoon and got the back of his hand slapped for it.

Rin shook out the hand.

"I almost had it."

There wasn't a gap in that lock wide enough for a spoon.

But if you looked at his eyes you knew.

Rin was pretending to be normal.

In those eyes curiosity filled up before fear did. He believed a mystery had an answer, and his face said getting to the answer was more interesting than staying alive.

He was insane.

Nobody knew it. I knew.

Even being hauled into the lab Rin pretended to be scared. While The Man examined his body, put the tube in his arm, and read out sentences no one could follow, he kept his eyes half closed.

Carlson thought the drugs were working.

The Man recorded a reduced response.

Rin read, with his eyes shut.

There were old books along the lab walls. Covers that looked like human skin. Pages where the letters moved. Paper that pushed up a new sentence when you erased the one you'd read.

Rin memorised whatever page was open without lifting his head. He read sentences upside down. He remembered letters reflected in the glass tubing.

After the experiments he'd let a fragment fall.

"Names aren't for calling. They're for assigning."

"Assigned by who."

"Things that have one."

"You're talking shit again."

"Things that don't have one want one too."

That was the kind of thing. It sounded like a joke and you weren't allowed to throw it away.

Rin always dropped the part that mattered like it was garbage.



Down the mountain path, on the second basement level of the lab building, in the third room, there was a juice machine. The children were the ones who named it.

I'd never seen it. Rin had, several times.

"It's a vending machine."

"A vending machine?"

"Pictures of drinks on it, numbers underneath. Coin in, press a button, it comes out."

"Then it's just a vending machine."

"There's a second set of keys up top."

"Keys?"

"Letters."

Rin sank his bread into the soup.

"Type something, hit enter, it gives you that too."

"Gives you what."

"What you typed."

"Anything?"

"Type grape, grape juice. Type gasoline, gasoline. Type sleep, water that puts you to sleep."

"Has anyone drunk it?"

"I heard it somewhere."

He chewed the soaked bread.

"You bring your own cup. It doesn't give cups."

"Any coin work?"

"Ten cents on one side, a letter nobody knows on the other. Only that one."

"How often can you use it."

"Once a day."

"What if you type something it won't do?"

"Green light goes red. Short hum inside, and that's it.
Nothing comes out."

"Does it give the coin back?"

Rin stopped his spoon.

"No."

"It keeps it?"

"Your one time for the day goes with it."

He looked at his soup for a while.

"That's the strangest part."

"What is."

"It didn't do it. It still took the price."

I finished my soup.

"So what are you planning to get out of it."

He didn't answer for a while.

"An answer."

"What does an answer taste like."

"That's why I have to check."

"And if you drink it and die."

"Then that's the answer."

Rin laughed.

I didn't.

"There's something behind that machine."

"A wall, probably."

"Not what I meant."

His eyes narrowed.

"There's too much it won't give."

"It's broken."

"A broken machine doesn't have standards."

He pressed the end of his bread with a fingernail.

"That one picks what to refuse."

He didn't think the juice machine made things. He thought it judged requests. Something that connected a word to an owner to a price. A window that checked whether the person asking could pay.

I didn't understand all of it.

I believed him anyway.

I didn't do that for anyone else.



The night before the experiment Rin sat on the floor under my bed. Every child was pretending to sleep, and a radio

played faintly from Carlson's office at the far end.

Rin said:

"Watch me tomorrow."

"I'm looking at you now."

"All the way through."

I sat up.

Rin said strange things all the time. He didn't ask for things. He never asked me to share my portion, never asked me to come to the lab with him. Even on the days he came back beaten he never asked for the pills.

That was the first time Rin asked me for anything.

The eyes stayed with me longer than the words.

They weren't frightened eyes. They were the eyes of someone who had already decided how far he was willing to go.

"What's tomorrow."

"My turn came up."

That was enough.

The Man.

Rin took a spoon out of his pocket. The bowl had been cut off. What was left of the handle had been ground down over a long time until the end was notched like a key.

"Back door behind the lab storeroom."

He put it in my hand.

"Two turns, then lift."

"This opens it?"

"It opened yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

Rin didn't answer.

I hid the spoon key inside the vent beside my bed.

Then Rin said:

"When that fucker The Man dies, eat what's left."

"Eat what."

"What's left."

"I'm not eating that."

"I know."

"Are you actually insane?"

"I know that too."

He wound a loose thread from the blanket around his finger and let it go.

"But it has to be you."

"Why."

"Because it's yours."

"Say it straight."

"That's as far as I know."

That night there was no explanation either.



A little before seven the next evening, Carlson went to the dining hall. He ate at the same time every day. The pistol stayed on his belt while he ate, but he never went to check the back of the orphanage himself — he seemed to believe dinner was the one thing even The Man wouldn't touch.

The Man took Rin out past the orphanage grounds.

The juice machine wasn't in the orphanage basement. It was in a separate lab building further down the mountain path, a structure that from outside looked like nothing more than a shed.

I waited until they were out of sight, then pulled the spoon key out of the vent.

From the dining hall came the sound of plates and cutlery.

Carlson was eating his dinner.

I went around the wall and ran for the back of the lab building.

The rear door by the storeroom had a small keyhole.

I put the end of the spoon in. Two turns. Lift.

Inside, the latch slid.

Rin was insane, but he wasn't often wrong.

I opened the door and went in.

The storeroom was stacked with empty chemical crates and rusted trolleys, and the stairs at the back went down. Beside them an old freight lift stood stopped, its floor indicator dead.

I went down killing the sound of my feet.

Basement one.

One more.

Basement two.

Near the third room there was an old maintenance shaft. I got inside the wall and crouched, and through a metal grate I could see into the room through a door that stood slightly open.

That was where I watched Rin from.

I don't know if it was to help him. It was because he had asked me for something for the first time, and because he'd said *all the way through*, and because I kept seeing his eyes from the night before.



The juice machine was older than Rin had made it sound, and in better shape.

It was about the size of a normal drinks machine. The murky black casing had oxidised in patches, and the corners and the door were as thick as a safe's. As old as it was, there wasn't a dent in it anywhere, or a seam that had opened.

Photographs of drinks were fixed along the top. Coffee. Red fruit juice. A soda whose colours had faded.

The pictures were lit shallowly from behind, in white, and on the right there was a QWERTY keyboard. The keys were thick and the letters half worn off.

Above the keys the words *Juicy Machine* curved in a tacky script.

Handwriting that was pretending to be elegant.

That bothered me more than the machine did.

Under the dispensing slot there was room for one cup, and around it there wasn't a single dried spill.

The room was less a laboratory than an old study. Every wall had shelves, and glass tubing and metal instruments were wedged in between the books. A circular pattern was cut into the floor.

The Man wasn't standing beside the juice machine.

It was sitting in an antique chair on the far side of the room.

A wide chair, made of black wood. The back was so high it made even The Man's long body look small. Its legs were crossed and there was a heavy book in one hand.

It looked like it was reading, but there were no eyes in the white face.

Rin stood alone in front of the juice machine. A small glass cup had been set under the slot.

The Man had put it there.

On a shelf beside the machine lay a row of worn coins. Ten cents on one face, and on the other a symbol rubbed almost flat.

Without lifting its face from the book, The Man said:

"Insert it."

Rin picked up a coin and fed it into the slot.

Inside the machine, the coin rolled.

Clink.

A green light came on beside the photographs.

The Man turned a page.

"A SIP OF MY SOUL."

Rin's hands went up over the QWERTY keys.

"Type it exactly."

The MY in that sentence did not mean The Man, who had given the order. It meant Rin, standing at the keyboard.

Rin had to order a mouthful of his own soul with his own hands. Whether the machine would actually give it up was unknown, and if what came down was liquid he would have to catch it in the glass and hand it to The Man.

The Man was reading its book.

No — it was pretending to read, and watching Rin.

There were no eyes, and I knew anyway.

Rin's shoulders shook. His fingertips trembled slightly above the keys.

I tightened my hand on the metal grate. My heart seemed to be going harder than his.

The Man turned a page.

Rin's hands stopped.

The trembling went out of them so suddenly that it was worse.

Rin lifted his head.

It wasn't the stupid face he usually wore.

The Man's hand stopped on the page.

Rin's fingers moved first.

Y.

The thick key caught for an instant and went down. Inside the machine a metal pin shifted.

Clack.

The white face came up off the book.

O.

The second key went down. Somewhere deeper, a gear advanced by one tooth.

The Man closed the book.

It slid off the arm of the chair. Black arms split open behind its back and reached for Rin.

U.

Rin's little finger came down on the enter key.

Clunk.

In the next moment The Man was gone from the chair.

The tip of a black tendril stopped in front of Rin's throat.

A low, heavy vibration started up inside the juice machine.

The body of it didn't move. The sound of some enormous mechanism turning came from inside the thick casing alone. Metal parts engaged one after another, and behind them ran the pressure-sound of something being squeezed out inside a sealed drum.

The tendril was a hair from Rin's skin.

The sound stopped.

Something black gathered at the lip of the slot.

The glass cup was directly beneath it. Any normal liquid would have fallen into it.

The black bead didn't reflect the light. It looked like a shadow that had been crumpled into a sphere and hung there.

The bead bounced once against the inside of the slot.

Again.

Then it came out past the glass, into the air.

The black bead landed beside Rin's right foot.

Drip.



The first thing to go was the colour of the floor.

Black spread across the grey cement. It wasn't being painted on. Where the floor met the black surface it lost its depth; the wall holding up the shelves was erased; the ceiling lights went and the boundary between the door and the floor came undone.

Every fixed structure withdrew out of the background of the real.

But Rin stayed.

The Man stayed.

The juice machine and the glass cup, the fallen book and the wheeled metal instruments — all of it stayed.

The wall of the maintenance shaft I was hiding in went. The metal grate I had my hands on lost the wall it was fixed to and hung there off my fingers.

It wasn't us that had been swallowed.

It was the room around us.

Behind the cement and the wallpaper and the ceiling, a deeper black space came into view.

The room hadn't collapsed. It had been peeled, one layer.

The people and the objects that had been in the third room on basement level two were laid out unchanged, on top of somewhere else.

The black surface that looked like a floor ran a long way out, and there was no ceiling. Past where the shelves had been, structures whose size I couldn't judge stood at crooked angles. They looked close. They were also endlessly far.

There was no wind.

Rin's hair moved to one side.

The juice machine stood in the middle of the black space.

The worn casing.

The tacky script.

The green light was still on.

And behind it, someone was sitting.

As though they had been there from the beginning.

The posture was loose, one arm hooked over the back of the chair. The line between the face and the clothing was hard to find. It clearly wasn't facing me, and I had the feeling it was looking at me and Rin and The Man all at once.

Rin said a name the way you'd let out a breath.

"Curious."

The thing that had been named lifted its head.

"Me?"

The voice was light. Like a person checking a delivery that had come to the wrong address.

The Man stopped the arm it had put out toward Rin.

It was very brief.

It took in the newly opened space and the presence behind the juice machine at once. The white face came round for a moment toward where I was.

I don't know how long it had known I'd followed.

The Man looked at Curious again.

Rin was no longer the first target.

The Man's arm split into four and black blades went into the floor, and the long body shot forward. The shape that had been in front of Rin an instant earlier cleared the juice machine and arrived at Curious's throat.

It was fast.

One of the blades grazed Curious's face.

A thin line opened on the black surface. From the gap ran a single drop of black liquid.

Curious laughed.

"You were right to pick me first."

The air smeared.

I thought a hand had appeared. But I have no memory of seeing a hand. Five long traces caught The Man's arms and legs and neck at the same time.

The Man twisted. Tendrils tore the black floor and blades cut through empty air.

It was one exchange.

That one was all of it.

The traces in the air folded inward.

The Man's long arms went in. Its legs bent up toward its waist. The black outer layer and the white face were crushed

toward the centre of its body.

The sound of bones going didn't come all at once.

Crack.

Crunch.

It continued like several layers of wet paper being crumpled.

A shape that had been bigger than a person became the size of a suitcase, then the size of a head, then finally there was a lump of meat a little larger than a fist.

Curious moved a hand through the air, the way you'd flick something off your fingers.

The lump was thrown down to the floor.

Thunk.

A lighter sound than the one Yoko made going into the trash can.



I let the metal grate fall out of my hand and threw myself down into the black space.

The drop was about the length of an arm and it took strangely long to reach the floor.

My knees hit the black surface.

Rin looked at me.

I looked at the lump on the floor.

The Man.

When that fucker dies, eat what's left.

"Insane fucking—"

I don't know who I was saying it to. Rin. The Man. Myself.

The lump was still moving. Thin black threads tried to come out of the surface and burrowed back into the meat.

I picked it up.

It was heavy. It was the size of a fist and it felt like lifting a whole person.

At first there was no smell.

When I brought it near my mouth the smell arrived.

Wet cloth.

Old blood.

The cement in the room where Yoko went.

Carlson's cold coffee.

I was going to be sick.

"Now."

Rin said.

He was looking at Curious.

Curious was looking at me.

"Is there another way?"

Rin shook his head.

"Don't know."

"You told me to eat it and you don't know?"

"Yeah."

The lump kicked once in my hand.

Rin's face had gone white. He didn't know what came next either. He nodded at me anyway.

Curious was sitting right there. The only thing I had to hold on to in that moment was something Rin had said in advance.

I bit into it.

The surface resisted like rubber. When I set my teeth deeper a thin skin burst.

Instead of blood, cold threads poured out.

They wound around my gums, went under my tongue, fastened to the roof of my mouth and the inside of my cheeks.

I tried to spit.

The lump took hold of the inside of my mouth.

This wasn't chewing.

It was two things trying to get inside each other.

I put my jaw into it.

Once.

Something tough stretched.

Twice.

One thread snapped.

The lump slid down my throat.

The retching came up. A black thread had caught inside my throat and wouldn't go down, and when I put my fingers in to pull it out the thread wound around my fingers and crawled back in.

It was eating me too.

I chewed what was left in my jaw again.

On the third time my teeth met, the tough thing gave.

I swallowed the cold remainder.

Something opened out inside my chest.

My shadow stood up first.

I was still on my knees.

I went to move my right hand and felt fingers move behind my left shoulder. I took a breath in. My lungs filled a beat late.

Something inside my body was copying my movements.

Clumsily, at first.

A moment later, more exactly.



Curious settled back against the chair.

"I've seen two before. Three is new."

Rin said nothing.

"One called."

Curious pointed at him.

"One swung."

It pointed at the black stain left on the floor.

"One ate."

This time it looked at me.

"Fun."

The tone was bright.

That made it worse.

After that Curious didn't say anything at all.

I threw up three times. Black threads came out onto the floor with the spit, squirmed on the black surface for a moment, then changed direction and came up my wrist. When I tried to pull one off it went in under the skin.

Curious was watching.

When I vomited it turned its head that way, and when Rin coughed it looked at Rin, and when the thread came up my wrist it leaned forward slightly.

That was all it did.

The hand that had folded The Man in one exchange was resting on its knee. If it wanted to, it could fold the two of us the same way.

It didn't move.

The show simply wasn't over.

The Man had no eyes and I had known it was looking. This one, I couldn't tell whether it had eyes at all, and I knew it was enjoying itself.

There was no way to count time.

There was no ceiling, so the light never changed, and nothing cast a shadow on the black surface.

My shadow was the exception.

It didn't wait for me to move. It looked at Curious before I raised my head, and it pressed the black floor before I put my hand down.

Rin came one step closer and stopped.

My shadow had lengthened toward his ankle.

"Don't."

I said.

My voice arrived twice. One came out of my mouth and the other followed late, from the back of my neck.

Rin sat down beside me. He left enough distance that we couldn't touch.

He coughed. A little blood came off on his palm. He wiped it on his trousers.

Curious watched that too.

It didn't ask anything. Not why it had been called, not why I'd eaten The Man, not why Rin still hadn't run.

It looked like it was already watching the answers.

Rin kept looking past the juice machine. The structures standing far out in the black space. The shapes moving between them. The place where the sentences from the books actually continued.

He was afraid.

He was enjoying it at the same time.

"Do you know what you called?"

I asked.

He didn't answer for a while.

"No."

"But you knew the name."

"Only the name."

"Isn't that worse?"

Rin wiped the blood at the corner of his mouth.

"That's why I have to check."

He was insane.

All the way to the end.



Curious clapped its hands.

The sound was so loud I flinched.

"First come, first served."

A rectangle of light opened at one side of the black space. It was the door of the third room on basement level two.

Beyond it I could see a grey wall and a fluorescent tube.

"I'll let one of you live."

Curious pointed at the door.

"Whoever's hand goes up first."

It made a face like it was thinking.

"Oh. On the condition that when we meet again, I tear you apart myself."

Rin's hand went up.

Fast.

My shadow moved first.

Before I'd even looked at him, the thing inside me reached that way, and the back of my neck went cold.

Oh.

I still remember what I thought right then.

He wants to live.

Rin opened his mouth.

"Let him out."

Curious narrowed its eyes.

"You put your hand up."

"First one up gets to pick, doesn't he?"

Curious laughed.

"That's not what I meant."

"You didn't say it wasn't."

Rin pointed at me.

"I'll stay."

"Rin."

I got up. My legs moved like they belonged to somebody else.

"What."

"Come with me."

"No."

"Why."

Rin's eyes were shining.

Not because he wasn't afraid.

They were eyes where the wanting to see had arrived ahead of the fear.

Behind the juice machine. The place Curious had been sitting. The structures standing out past the black space. The things that had only ever been written in books.

The answer.

Rin wanted to save me.

That wasn't a lie.

He also wanted to stay here.

That wasn't a lie either.

For Rin the two were the same choice.

"Tell him no."

I said.

"Already picked."

"Take it back."

"I won."

"What are you talking about."

"This time I pick."

I ran at him.

The black floor pushed backward. My feet went forward and the distance didn't shorten. Only my legs moved, like running on a treadmill.

I put out my hand.

Rin put his up too.

The same distance stayed between our fingers.

Behind me the door pulled at me. My body felt like it was flying forward and in fact I was clawing air on the spot.

"Don't."

Rin said.

"Shut up."

"This time you go out."

"Come with me."

"No."

Rin laughed for a second.

It was the face that startled itself with its own coughing. The face that ate bread soaked in soup. The insane kid who said a mystery has an answer.

"From tomorrow, I'll watch you."

The floor folded.

The black structures slid backward, and Rin and Curious and the juice machine shrank into a single black plane.

I kept running. I kept my hand out.

Rin's fingers went further away.

The black went out.



The fluorescent light came on.

I rolled out onto the floor of the third room on basement level two.

There were shelves. There was a wall. There was a ceiling.

But there was no juice machine in the room. No Rin. No The Man.

Only the chair on the far side, knocked over.

In the middle of the circular pattern on the floor there was one black point left. Smaller than a fingernail.

I didn't touch it.

An hour went by and The Man didn't come back, and the experiment that had taken Rin ran past its scheduled time.

A machine sound came from out in the corridor.

The lift was coming down.

The number showing the floor changed.

Basement one.

Basement two.

The doors opened.

Carlson's shoes came down on the corridor floor.

A pistol in one hand, and in the other the coffee cup he'd carried out of the orphanage dining hall.

He drank a mouthful as he came out into the corridor. It had already gone cold and I could smell it from where I was.

"The Man."

No answer.

"Rin."

No answer.

Carlson set the cup down on the floor and took the pistol in both hands.

"Come out."

I moved into the prep room next to the third one.

I didn't take a deep breath. I could feel the black thread moving somewhere down my throat.

Carlson walked the corridor. He stopped in front of the third room, looked at the black point on the floor, and looked at the metal grate that had come out of the maintenance shaft.

Then he brought the barrel round toward me.

"You're in there."

I didn't move.

He came a step closer.

"Come out and I won't shoot your legs."

It wasn't the way you talk to a child. It was the way you talk about getting a broken thing out of a machine.

I moved slowly toward the next room. The sole of my shoe scraped the floor.

The barrel followed the sound.

He knew. That I was hiding, and which way I was going.

Going out the front meant dying.

There wasn't another way.

I lowered myself behind the door frame.

Carlson came on.

Three steps.

Two.

One.

Something inside me dropped, cold.

The sound went further off. The hum of the fluorescent tube, Carlson's breathing, my own heart — all of it thinned out.

The shadow that had been on the wall went.

The position of my own body dropped out of my own senses.

Carlson's barrel passed sideways over the place I was hiding.

His eyes didn't find me.

It lasted exactly one moment.

I came up from behind, got an arm around Carlson's throat, climbed his back and locked my legs at his waist.

He bent forward. My back came up and went into the wall.

The air went out of me.

I didn't let go of the arm.

Carlson pulled at my forearm with his left hand and bent the gun back over his shoulder with his right. The barrel came round toward my side.

I kicked out. My heel caught his wrist.

Bang.

The round went into the ceiling and concrete dust came down over my face.

The pistol skidded across the floor.

Carlson turned and slammed me into the wall. My arms came loose. I dropped.

He took a fistful of my hair. My face came up.

A punch came in. My lip split.

Before the second one I put my fingers out.

My index and middle finger went into Carlson's left eye.

Something hot pushed up under my nails.

Carlson screamed for the first time.

He lost his hold on me.

The pistol was at the other end of the corridor.

Carlson saw it too.

We both moved at once. I crawled, and Carlson threw himself forward with one hand over his eye and caught my ankle.

I went down on my face. My jaw hit the floor.

He got up onto my back. An elbow went into my spine.

"Hold still."

He said.

"One form and you're done too."

I put my hand out.

It didn't reach.

I felt myself move a different arm, from somewhere inside.

My right arm was on the floor.

And the shadow on the floor went half a hand's width past it.

Black fingertips brushed the pistol grip.

The pistol scraped and shifted a little.

That was all it did.

While Carlson turned his head toward the sound, I twisted and bit down on the back of his hand.

It tasted of blood.

He pulled the hand away.

My fingertips reached the grip.

It was cold. Heavier than I expected.

Carlson grabbed for my wrist.

I pulled the trigger.

Bang.

The first round went through his shoulder. Carlson rocked sideways.

He didn't stop. Bleeding from one eye, he put a hand out toward my throat.

Bang.

The second went into his chest.

Carlson went down onto his knees.

I stood up.

The barrel shook.

Carlson looked up at me.

It was the face of a man who still saw a child.

The sound of Yoko going into the trash can came back to me.

Thunk.

The dining hall, where the chairs of the vanished children were taken away one at a time.

Released to relatives.

Adjustment disorder.

Congenital condition.

Carlson's paperwork. Carlson's coffee. The gun he wore on his belt.

Everything from twelve years old to fourteen was inside that trigger.

Bang.

The third round took Carlson's face backward.

He went down on the floor.



When the shots stopped the corridor went too quiet.

I could hear the fluorescent light again. My own breathing came back.

My shadow crawled back under my feet, late.

Carlson didn't move.

He was the first person I killed.

The Man killed Yoko.

Curious took Rin.

Carlson, I killed.

That difference never went away afterwards.

I couldn't put the gun down. My finger was stuck to the trigger.

It was a long time before my hand opened.

The pistol fell to the floor.

I went through Carlson's pockets.

Keys. Wallet. Phone.

The screen was cracked, and the blood on my hands kept it from registering. I wiped them on my sleeve and dialled.

It rang.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

"Police. What's your emergency?"

My mouth wouldn't open.

The Man's thread was still caught in my throat.

The voice asked again.

"Hello?"

I looked up the corridor.

The orphanage building was up the mountain path. The closed doors inside it. The children pretending they hadn't seen anything. The names waiting for their turn.

"There's—"

My voice cracked and I swallowed.

"There are a lot of children locked up here."

The other end asked something. An address. A name. What had happened.

I gave the road name that was written at the orphanage entrance.

"They're doing experiments."

The voice on the other end sped up.

I picked up Carlson's keys.

"Please come and get them."

I didn't say my name.

I didn't hang up. I set the phone down on the corridor floor.

I used Carlson's keys to open the stairwell door of the lab building, came up to ground level, and went out through the back of the storeroom.

The rain had got heavier.



I went back up the mountain path to the orphanage.

Carlson's unfinished dinner was still on the table in the dining hall, and beside his empty place the smell of cold coffee was still there.

Along the corridor the children's doors were shut.

I tried the keys one at a time.

First door.

Second door.

Third door.

As I opened what was left in order, the sound of locks releasing carried down the corridor.

The doors didn't open right away.

Eyes showed in the gaps.

Nobody called out to me.

I didn't tell anyone to come out.

I used Carlson's keys to release the inside lock at the entrance and opened the front gate.

Cold rain and wind came into the building.

I didn't close the door.



I ran the mountain path alone.

Water sprayed up off my shoes. Carlson's blood and the smell of The Man were both still in my mouth.

Inside my body something that wasn't me was running.

My shadow put itself down on the road ahead of my feet.

I stopped at the side of the road because I thought my breathing was going to stop.

In the rain, only my shadow was facing backward.

Toward the orphanage.

I opened my hand and Rin's name tag was in it.

I don't remember when I took it.

At the end of the clear plastic hung a single black drop.

Rain hit my palm.

The drop didn't shake.

It didn't fall either.



That day I ate The Man.

Rin stayed in hell.

Carlson became the first person I killed.

And one drop still hasn't fallen.