

都市シリーズ

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市

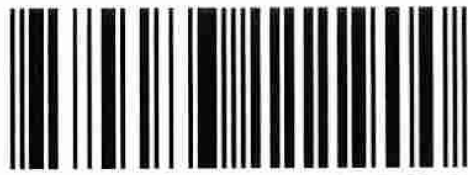
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著●川上 稔



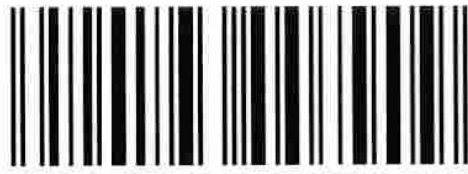
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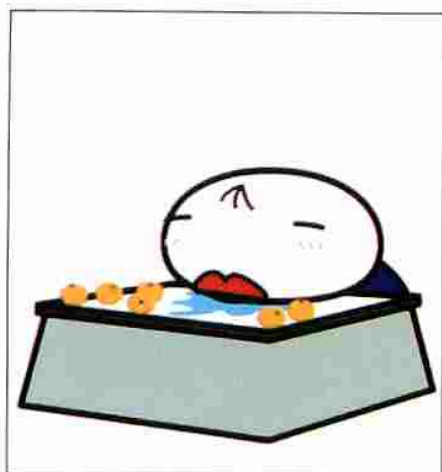
とし
都市シリーズ
そうがくとしおおさか
蠢楽都市OSAKA〈下〉

最強神器を生み出すため、ついに大阪圏は言詞加速器IXOLDEイゾルデを起動させた。しかし、神器の完成に時を併せ、東京圏・名護屋圏連合がIXOLDEを襲撃。大阪を守る総長連合は壊滅的な打撃を受け、さらに最強神器“炎神”が東京圏総長・中村久秀の手に渡ってしまう。

東西のパワーバランスが崩れ、大阪圏は東京圏に屈するのか？ 東京の強大化を阻止しようとする大阪圏・古都圏連合、大阪へと覇権の手を伸ばそうとする東京圏・名護屋圏連合。後年、和解動乱と呼ばれることになる最強神器を巡る両者の闘いは、大阪城を舞台にクライマックスを迎える！

第3回電撃ゲーム三大賞受賞・川上稔が贈る都市シリーズ第4弾、待望の下巻！





かわかみ みのる

川上 稔

1975年1月3日生まれの東京出身。企画、シナリオ、総監督を務めた「蠡楽都市 OSAKA」のゲームが完成し、ホッと一息。気分も新たに都市シリーズ第5作の執筆を開始。(してるはず…編集部註)

【電撃文庫作品】

都市シリーズ

パンツァーポリス 1935

エアリアルシティ

風水街都 香港〈上〉〈下〉

蠡楽都市 OSAKA 〈上〉〈下〉

イラスト:さとやす(TENKY)

山形県生まれの栃木育ち。テンキー所属。「蠡楽都市 OSAKA」ではゲーム版のキャラデザインも担当。近頃は怪しい自画像を作成してみたが、他人に彩色を任せたら朝鮮人参みたいになったので作り直しというか再起を図って苦悩中。いつも通り人生について深く… (以下略)。

都市シリーズ

ソウ
奏
馬

ガク
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OSAKA

〈下〉

著●川上 稔

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・ごあいさつ

このたびは都市シリーズ「蠢楽都市-OSAKA・下」をお買いあげいただきまして誠に有り難う御座います。READされる前に本口絵の解説をお読みいただきますと、より一層楽しく時間を過ごせます。正しい使用法でご愛用下さい。なお、この口絵部分は再発行いたしませんというか物理的に無理なので大切に保管して下さい。

Presented by
Minoru Kawakami

The 4th city

From 1996・CITY
To 1998・CITY

Its Formatted by NOVEL-words

カバー・口絵デザイン：TENKY
カバー・口絵イラスト：さとやす (TENKY)
カバー・口絵CG：佐藤真理子・松下佳靖 (TENKY)



Character 1

CHARACTER

森 楽 都 市

OSAKA

陽阪・勝意 (HIZAKA・SHO-I)
字名：騒音の領主 (Loudist)
肩書：なし
戦種：近接格闘師 (Critical Forcer)
神器：荒神
舞闘：南大門無手派

陽阪勝意

HIZAKA・SHO-I



荒神発動

スーパーゲージをためて (P+P+P)

神器無効化

荒神発動でガード中・ \rightarrow +P

荒神一撃

荒神発動中・ \downarrow ・ \leftarrow ・ \leftarrow ・ \rightarrow +P

荒神封撃

荒神発動中・ \rightarrow ・ \leftarrow ・ \leftarrow ・ \downarrow ・ \rightarrow +P

森 楽 都 市

OSAKA

コマンドはキャラが右向きの場合です。

Hizaka Shoui

Urban Name: Loudist

Title: None

Combat Style: Critical Forcer

Rhythm: Storm High

Dance Combat: Nandaimon Unarmed Style

Activate Storm High

Fill the Super Gauge (P+P+P)

Rhythm Negation

While Guarding with Storm High Activated • → + P

Storm High Strike

With Storm High Activated • ↓ • ↙ • ← • → + P

Storm High Sealed Comet Strike

With Storm High Activated • → • ← • ↙ • ↓ • ↘ • → + P

Commands are based on a right-facing character.

Character 2

結城・夕樹 (YU-KI・YU-KI)
 字名：殺括者 (Killing Holder)
 肩書：古都圏総長・古都圏守護役
 戦種：遠隔神術師 (Energy Gunner)
 神器：水神・凍神
 舞闘：南大門神術派

結城夕樹

YU-KI・YU-KI

落凍虎

(P+P+P)タメ

昇水虎

(K+K+K)タメ

威 圧

➡タメ・⬅+P

朱雀・凍煉獄弾

⬇タメ・⬇・⬆+PK

コマンドはキャラが右向きの場合です。

Yuuki Yuuki

Urban Name: Killing Holder

Title: Koto Chancellor – Koto Guardian

Combat Style: Energy Gunner

Rhythm: Aqua High – Cold High

Dance Combat: Nandaimon Holy Spell Style

Falling Frozen Tiger

Hold (P+P+P)

Rising Water Tiger

Hold (K+K+K)

Intimidate

Hold → • ← + P

Suzaku – Freezing Purgatory Blast

Hold ↙ • ↓ • ↑ + PK

Commands are based on a right-facing character.

Character 3

CHARACTER

音楽都市

OSAKA

中村・久秀 (NAKAMURA・HISAHIDE)
字名：奏音の領主 (Harmonist)
肩書：東京圏総長
戦種：近接格闘師 (Critical Forcer)
神器：なし
舞闘：伊庭式

中村久秀

NAKAMURA・HISAHIDE



フレイム・オン

スーパーゲージをためて (K+K+K)

フラッシュオーバー

炎神発動でガード中・ \rightarrow +K

バックドラフト

炎神発動中・ \downarrow ・ \leftarrow ・ \rightarrow +K

ソリッドファイア

炎神発動中・ \rightarrow ・ \leftarrow ・ \downarrow ・ \uparrow ・ \rightarrow +K

音楽都市

OSAKA

コマンドはキャラが右向きの場合です。

Nakamura Hisahide

Urban Name: Harmonist

Title: Tokyo Chancellor

Combat Style: Critical Forcer

Rhythm: None

Dance Combat: Iba Style

Flame On

Fill the Super Gauge (K+K+K)

Flash Over

While Guarding with the Flame High Active ▪ → + K

Backdraft

With the Flame High Active ▪ ↓ ▪ ↙ ▪ ← ▪ → + K

Solid Fire

With the Flame High Active ▪ → ▪ ← ▪ ↙ ▪ ↓ ▪ ↘ ▪ → + K

Commands are based on a right-facing character.

Character 4

CHARACTER

高田・清儀 (TAKADA・SEIGI)
 字名：速読歴 (Fast Reader)
 肩書：なし
 戦種：狗神使い (Beast Master)
 神器：なし
 舞闘：なし



高田清儀

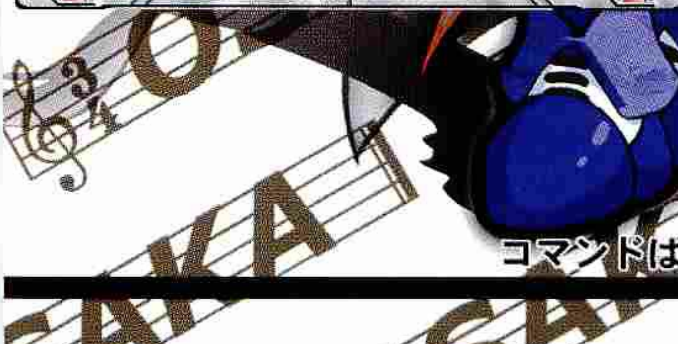
TAKADA・SEIGI

意志なる決定
 投げ間合いで ←・→ + P

親和
 ←タメ・→ + K

太郎丸・咆哮
 ↓・↘・← + K

太郎丸・我が地を据えず
 親和H | T中・レバー一回転 + K



コマンドはキャラが右向きの場合です。

Takada Seigi

Urban Name: Fast Reader

Title: None

Combat Style: Beast Master

Rhythm: None

Dance Combat: None

Will Decision

While at Throwing Distance ◦ ← ◦ → + P

Friendship

Hold ◦ ← ◦ → + K

Taromaru – Roar

↓ ◦ ↙ ◦ ← + K

Taromaru – Never Setting Foot on My Land

While Hitting with Friendship ◦ Rotate Lever 11 Times + K

Commands are based on a right-facing character.

Character 5

CHARACTER

音楽都市

OSAKA

池丸 孝弘 (IKEMARU・TAKAHIRO)
字名：闘うビジネスマン (本人談)
肩書：東京圏第一特務隊長
戦種：言霊師 (Word Master)
神器：なし
舞闘：帝式真呼流

池丸 孝弘

IKEMARU・TAKAHIRO



海に舞え

←タメ・◆+P

風に跳べ

↓タメ・◆+P

わきまえろ

←タメ・➡+PK

聖十字に踊れ

←タメ・↑+P (HIT中・➡+Pで連続)

音楽都市

OSAKA

コマンドはキャラが右向きの場合です。

Ikemaru Takahiro

Urban Name: Fighting Businessman (Self-Styled)

Title: Tokyo 1st Special Duty Officer

Combat Style: Word Master

Rhythm: None

Dance Combat: Emperor's True Calling Style

Dance in the Sea

Hold ← ▪ ↘ + P

Leap in the Wind

Hold ↓ ▪ ↗ + P

Know Your Place

Hold ← ▪ → + PK

Dance with the Holy Cross

Hold ← ▪ → + P (While Hitting ▪ Tap → + P)

Commands are based on a right-facing character.

Character 6

葵・聖 (AOI・HIJIRI)
字名：いいオンナ (本人談)
肩書：東京圏副長・神陰流葵系葵派総帥
戦種：全方位武術師 (Strike Master)
神器：なし
舞闘：神陰流葵系葵派



葵 聖

AOI・HIJIRI

雁金連鎖打ち

小P・中P・大P・➡+大P

転・攻撃転化

ガード中・K・K

四十人斬り

小P・中K・大P・➡+大K・➡+大P



無刀取り・月笑

ガード中・PK連打

コマンドはキャラが右向きの場合です。

Aoi Hijiri

Urban Name: Excellent Woman (Self-Styled) Title: Tokyo Vice Chancellor –
Leader of the Shinkage Style's Aoi-Style Aoi School Combat Style: Strike Master
Rhythm: None

Dance Combat: Shinkage Style's Aoi-Style Aoi School

Wild Goose Chain Strike Weak P • Mid P • Strong P • →+ Strong P

Change – Attack Transformation While Guarding • K • K

Forty Man Slice

Weak P • Mid K • Strong P • →+ Strong K • →+ Strong P

Bladeless Grab – Laughing Moon While Guarding • Tap PK

Commands are based on a right-facing character.

Battle Screen

ポイント! 対戦画面



- ・とりあえずライバルを倒せ。
- ・とりあえず金は積むな。
- ・困ったらドリルくねえって

・とりあえずここの画像は全
冗談なので信じないで。



One Point! Battle Screen

–For now, defeat your rival.

–For now, don't stack up your coins.

–If you're in trouble, make a drill spin.

–For now, this screenshot is entirely a joke, so don't actually believe it.

Prologue: Hidden Special Moves (Command List) – (12/19/1996)

Who has succeeded in the great attempt, To be a friend's friend,

Whoever has won a lovely woman, Add his to the jubilation!

Indeed, who calls at least one soul Theirs upon this world!

And whoever never managed, shall steal himself Weeping away from this union.

(From Schiller's "Ode to Joy")

Part 1

6:58 PM

A pure white light filled the large room.

Those inside the room wore white. They all wore pristine lab coats.

All of the computers and desks filling the room were just as white.

It was a sterile space.

But the large window in the wall opposite the entrance was dark. It gave a view of the subterranean darkness beyond.

Through there, the Ixolde Babel Gun could be seen extending further underground.

Ixolde's control room functioned within that clear divide between white and black.

The only sounds were quiet footsteps and typing at keyboards.

Time passed calmly.

Suddenly, a long, pleasant beep sounded.

The large digital clock on the wall by the entrance had struck seven.

On that signal, everyone stopped moving.

Those carrying documents, those typing, and everyone else looked to the clock.

Then one man in a lab coat started to move.

He wore an armband indicating he was the room's manager.

It said, "Osaka Science and Chemistry Research Alliance Head".

He wordlessly walked down the room's center aisle and toward everyone's

gazes.

His feet took him below the clock gathering so much attention and he stopped at a terminal there.

As soon as he arrived, the clock's display changed to 7:01.

"..."

He maintained his silence as he looked up at the clock.

He bent over to peer at the screen instead of sitting at the terminal's chair.

The screen displayed a small blue window on a white background.

The window was a password prompt.

He stared at the question there and opened his mouth.

"To settle the east-west split begun by the Kinki Riot, Osaka will create the ultimate Rhythm and use its power to subjugate Japan. ...That's what you call peace by deterrence."

No one said anything in response, but he was not done speaking.

"Including our upperclassmen, we've all worked hard for the past ten years."

And...

"We will now record the ultimate Rhythm: Yamata, aka the Flame High."

The prompt asked a question.

"1st Lock: What is your wish?"

">Peace"

"2nd Lock: Who is your wish?"

">A King"

"3rd Lock: What is your need?"

">A Rhythm"

"4th Lock: Really?"

">No, not really."

“5th Lock: Really?”

“>Yes, not really.”

“6th Lock: ...Then what is your need?”

“>Original Words”

“Complete...!”

The conversation with the machine ended there.

The screen briefly displayed a graph.

The white bar instantly filled up to 100% and then closed.

The Flame High had been recorded.

That announced the end of a decade’s worth of research.

But no one moved.

That meant there was no noise.

However, the armband-wearing Alliance Head looked away from the screen and straightened up.

Without turning around, he spoke on behalf of everyone behind him.

“...That was kind of anti-climactic.”

He laughed a little.

“Now, let’s get the data in the underground pocket, send it to the storage room, and seal it in the MD.”

As he spoke, a single clapping sound rang through the room.

...?

He turned around in confusion.

Then another clap came from somewhere.

Before he could ask anything, more and more clapping filled the air.

The overlapping sounds were applause.

Chairs could be heard scraping on the floor as the previously unmoving

people stood up.

As the applause sounded, papers spilled to the floor with a sound much like a crashing wave.

The girl carrying the documents had dropped them in her attempt to applaud.

That sound elicited laughter from the others.

Rather than hurrying to transfer the recorded data to the storage room, the Alliance Head looked at them all and nodded.

A moment later, a shrill beep came from the terminal below the clock.

Part 2

7:02 PM

“!?”

They all stopped applauding.

Their gazes pierced through the Alliance Head as they looked to the terminal.

He looked back as if thrown around by those gazes.

He found a new black space in front of him.

The terminal's screen had blacked out.

“...?”

He grabbed the edge of the screen and peered at it.

A white cursor appeared at the upper left of the black screen and the same question as before appeared again.

“Is this an error?”

Focusing on action over words, he reached for the keyboard.

The keys he pressed were immediately written out by the cursor.

“So it's responding... Everyone, back to your posts!”

With that, he pulled out the chair and sat down.

He pulled the keyboard close and resumed his conversation with the machine.

“6th Lock: ...Then what is your need?”

The repeated password prompt was asking for the final answer.

He answered by trying to quit.

“>exit”

But...

“6th Lock: ...Then what is your need?”

He only got the same question again.

He thought for a bit and tried again.

“>Original Words”

And...

“6th Lock: ...Then what is your need?”

“6th Lock: ...Then what is your need?”

“6th Lock: ...Then what is your need?”

The question would not stop appearing.

“...!?”

It was no longer responding to the keyboard.

Something was wrong, so he shouted on reflex.

“This is an emergency! Status report!”

At that moment, fire burst from the terminal’s screen.

“!”

It was not an explosion. It was a directional flame, much like from a flamethrower.

For just an instant, the terminal spewed a bonfire-like flame as if it had become a burning altar.

The machine burned.

The Alliance Head rolled from the chair to escape the heat and intensity of this abnormality.

But his eyes remained glued to the terminal as it burned to ash. He viewed the machine that Ashed into nothingness without leaving a single scorch mark on the wall or floor.

He watched that audible fire and shouted a name.

“The Flame High!?”

At the same time, an alarm sounded from the speaker on the ceiling. The room’s white lights vanished at the same time.

Deep red warning lights switched on in place of those fluorescent ones.

Tension rapidly filled the control room and someone’s voice raced through the room.

“Someone has hacked into Ixolde’s control computer!”

“Into the completely isolated control system!?”

“It’s a direct connection from within! The target firewall’s spoofing supplement was broken through two minutes ago!”

“You moron! Even if they’re inside, could they really break through the defenses!?”

Something answered that shouted question.

The Ixolde Babel Gun gave a roar outside the large window.

It was a great roar.

“Wha-...!?”

The sound acted as a physical blow as it mixed with the alarm and shook their bodies and the room.

Then that machine, which looked like it was made from linked-together containers, began a rapid transformation.

While shaking and producing a mechanical cry, it erased its seams and strengthened its connections.

The mass of metal wriggled like a giant snake.

“A Live transformation!? Is it a Tuner?”

“No! There’s no interference at its Octave! This is...a Word Master!”

“You mean there’s a Word Master capable of transforming Ixolde at will?”

“There’s no other way to explain this! They didn’t hack into Ixolde! They tamed its *kotodama!*”

The Babel Gun raised a metallic cry as needle-like objects jutted out from it.

Those needles split and spread out thinly to become leaves.

The metal leaves grew out from the seams between containers like heat sinks.

Several of them stuck out long and sharp on either side and straight line veins were visible on them.

Ixolde was rearranging its Live to become a flower.

But that was not all.

That vast underground space was covered by a ceiling. The Babel Gun's base was attached to that, but it was torn away by a great force pulling downward.

The giant metal stalk rose like a cobra head and the head instantly became a flower bud.

The growth and transformation produced great noise.

Several cracks ran through that bud and an intense noise rang out.

It was blooming.

What had been a machine was blooming as a flower with the alarm, the metallic noises, and the sounds of impact acting as its cries of birth.

It was red.

Even in the red lights of the alarm, it was noticeably deep red as it spread out.

The red flower blossomed in the darkness.

Scarlet ivy wrapped around its stalk, its leaves, and its flower.

That ivy was fire.

The flames raced up from below and wrapped tightly around the surface of the flower petals.

The flower burned.

Just like the terminal, the giant red flower of metal was instantly wrapped in scarlet flames.

It crumbled.

With a roar much like that of a waterfall, the metal blossom crumbled in the darkness.

The roar of impacts created by the bright flames assaulted everyone watching.

“———!!”

Then tension and screams filled their surroundings.

The crumbling flower was falling toward the control room.

Before they could even gasp, the burning red flower petals filled the entire window.

The Alliance Head tried to say something to them all, but...

“Take cover!”

With a roaring voice behind them, the wind raced in.

Part 3

7:04 PM

A shimmering of heat raced through the center of the room.

The shimmering was heading for the large window and the flower beyond.

Someone's Words rang out.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The shimmering responded by producing Kusanagi.

A spatial cutting power that could slice through anything raced in a straight line and broke the large window.

With the repeated sounds of shattering glass and dull impacts, the power collided with the flower.

A few screams filled the air and everything was drowned out by the wind and heat.

But the flower and its petals were sliced through, the flames were blown away, and they all fell into the darkness.

Every student in Osaka knew who could pull off something like this: Nanba Souichirou, the Ogre Buster who wielded Kusanagi.

He stood in the control room's entrance and did not lower his raised sword.

"We have an attacker! And once the space underneath here burns, the entire area will collapse!"

A few of them nodded at Souichirou's words, a few moved, and one spoke.

"Something activated the mid-level freight elevator and it's headed to this floor!"

The enemy was ascending from underground.

This enemy had tamed Ixolde and controlled the Flame High to burn the giant flower.

As if to confirm that fact, all of the computer screens blacked out below the red lights.

Everyone saw white text on the black screens before their eyes.

“6th Lock: ...Then what is your need?”

The machine asked the question none of them could answer.

The battle was beginning.

Chapter 1: Team Battle (Team Battle Rules)

Part 1

7:04 PM

The attack occurred suddenly.

The schoolyard was large enough for two baseball fields and the defensive formation of the Student Council's guard unit was knocked to the ground by an instantaneous lightning strike.

The Chancellor's Officers field work unit rushed out of the guard station and immediately joined the battle.

Luckily, the alarm from the sewer had reached the Osaka Chancellor's Officers guard station.

Before the attack began, the VIPs in Ixolde's hall for the celebration of Ixolde's activation were moved to the spare party site prepared outside.

But that was the only piece of luck.

By the time Saki Seiji, 1st Special Duty Officer of the Osaka Chancellor's Officers, ran out of Ixolde and onto the surface, he saw only a few members of the field work unit still moving and...

"Yamashita Taeko! This was you!?"

A girl with a false left arm turned back toward him in the center of the schoolyard.

She shook her ponytail and calmly smiled his way.

“Oh? Ya’ve come out?”

As she walked toward Saki, several collapsed members of the field work unit were visible at her feet.

Saki lowered his sunglasses to look directly at Taeko.

“...Did you betray us!?”

“Betray ya? Nagoya always chooses whichever side’s winnin’.”

“...!”

–Saki – Spear/Gym/Draw Tech – Multi-Take – Left and Right Spear Throw – Hit!

He threw two spears.

But...

“Like that’ll work, moron!”

–Taeko – Boxing/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Intercept – Hit!

With two light metallic sounds, the Dragon Emperor grabbed and crushed the flying spears.

She swept the metal fragments aside and looked to Saki.

By then, he had already stuck his headphone in his ear.

–Saki – Pressure High/Gym/Draw Tech – Multi-Take – Singularity Shot – Hit!

–Saki – Pressure High/Gym/Draw Tech – Multi-Take – Singularity Shot – Hit!

–Saki – Pressure High/Gym/Draw Tech – Multi-Take – Singularity Shot – Hit!

–Saki – Pressure High/Gym/Draw Tech – Multi-Take – Singularity Shot – Hit!

Saki made four throwing actions.

The four spears stabbed into the ground surrounding Taeko.

Each one was wrapped in ether, making it look like a glowing serpent.

He kept his eyes on that ether light and recited his Words.

Heaven, please answer the longing found in the sky of my final moments

Simply let the white snow fall on the heavy darkness as you raise your cry

“Cry into the darkness!”

–Saki – Pressure High/Intimidation Tech – Multi-Take – Crush Explosion – Hit!

The spears exploded with a black light.

It was a mass of gravity with an Octave exceeding 600,000. The solidified gravity roared on all four sides of Taeko, instantly absorbed the fragments of the spears, and rapidly expanded.

Gusts of wind blew in toward the masses of gravity and the light grew distorted as the space around the explosive quartet glowed.

Taeko was swallowed up by the black explosions surrounding her on four sides.

The four gravity explosions each attempted to obliterate the person in between them.

But...

“Dragon Emperor, take this up to Sixth Activation!”

A voice sounded louder than the overwhelmingly massive gravity and a single sound exploded this time.

It was a dragon’s roar.

It started as a “gi” or a “ga” and rose into a deep cry.

The dragon’s powerful roar easily shook the surrounding Lives.

The four masses of gravity were blown away.

The breaking of the gravity sounded a lot like the shattering of glass.

In no time, the light and wind carried the four solid sounds across the schoolyard.

The light and air that the masses of gravity had been absorbing were freed all

at once.

“A dragon’s voice can surpass mass!?” shouted Saki.

Unscathed, Taeko stood up after using the Dragon Emperor as a shield.

“Yeah, and it works as an attack too. It’s been a while since I’ve brought it up to the Sixth, though.”

“I can see why you’re known as the Drachen Königin. Although I thought you’d have to take it up to the Ninth.”

“Ya want to see the Dragon Emperor’s Final Activation? There’d be nothin’ but ashes left around here.”

Taeko did not smile as she said that.

When she did smile, Saki began to move on reflex.

But...

–Saki – Sense Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Killer Intent – Hit!

He looked up when he noticed a powerful and heavy presence in the sky above.

It all happened in an instant.

Light fell from the heavens.

The clear night sky was split apart and a single beam of light dropped toward where they stood.

“...!?”

Saki, Taeko, and the other people around them all looked up.

Their faces were all illuminated by the light from heaven.

The sound of the splitting atmosphere sounded like paper tearing.

Just as someone raised their voice in what sounded like a scream, the light was stopped above their heads.

It had been stopped by a staff shaped like a tuning fork that was thrown into the air.

The device's long striking end and bottom end were made from triangular parts and it was known as Housei. It was the giant staff of the Koto Guardian.

It rotated in midair and fell with the light from heaven contained within itself.

As the light extending from heaven grew thinner and ultimately vanished, the light within the staff wriggled fiercely along the surface like a snake.

It was ether light.

Housei rotated toward the ground now that it was full of power from one of Suzaku Ver. 40's ether rounds.

Someone standing at the main gate to Osaka Prefectural #2 caught the large staff that fell from the sky.

"Koto Chancellor...Yuuki Yuuki!"

Taeko raised her voice when she saw the red individual standing there.

Yuuki wore a red blazer modeled after the Suzaku and she held Housei at her waist without saying a word.

–Saki – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit!

Yuuki already had a headphone in her ear.

"So the Killing Holder is here!"

Before Taeko could finish her shout, Yuuki suddenly fired a scythe of ultra-high pressure water from Housei.

The blade made from a thin film of water instantly grew to about five meters and it easily sliced across the schoolyard and toward Taeko who was surrounded by other people.

A few screams rose in harmony and the battle resumed.

The city's siren only now went off.

Part 2

7:06 PM

The city's siren could be heard in the distance through the Osaka Hilton's window.

Shoui looked around the room as he listened to it.

He was inside a bedroom with three other people.

Takada sat on the bed in front of him, Aoi stood by the wall, and Ikemaru stood in front of the door.

A few minutes had passed since Iba had left the room to begin a diversion in the city and the others had gathered in this one room.

Shoui stood by the window and listened to the siren.

"I can't believe this."

When the Dog God spoke for him, Ikemaru glanced his way and then close his eyes again.

He was definitely keeping an eye on Shoui to make sure he did not leave the room.

Because she knew that, Aoi looked no one in the eye and smiled a little.

"Well, we just have to stay put a while longer. Everything will be settled before long."

"Are you sure?" asked Shoui through the Dog God. "An ether round dropped from the sky earlier..."

"Don't worry. It's fine. Prefectural #2 is being attacked from underground and above ground simultaneously. Nakamura is underground and...he can tame Ixolde with the charm Takahiro made. That should more or less end it."

“Can he really steal the strongest Rhythm like that?”

“Takahiro’s *kotodama* will transform Ixolde itself and bring it to our side. You saw those bikes flying like birds, didn’t you? ...This is more than that. It will be a complete transformation.”

“It’s a lot like Tuning. Right, Takahiro?”

Ikemaru looked unsure how to answer Takada’s question.

But after a while, he corrected his expression and silently nodded.

Aoi gave an exasperated sigh at his behavior.

“More importantly...Hizaka-kun, was it? There’s a more personal matter I would like to ask you about.”

“What is it?”

“I know this is sudden, but do you know of any cherry trees that bloom in winter?”

“That bloom in winter?”

“I can’t tell you why, but I’m searching for those. Supposedly whoever sees those cherry trees will invite in bad luck as a jinx. For example...causing the Kinki Riot or leading to my birth.”

“Why are you looking for them? If the jinx is true, won’t it only bring bad luck?”

It was Ikemaru and not Aoi who answered Shoui’s question.

“She has her reasons.”

“I see.” Shoui crossed his arms and wrinkled his brow. “I think Saki-san said something about that, but it didn’t sound like he knew much about it.”

“Do you have any idea where I might find information on it?”

“Old Lady Senga might know something, but...sorry. I don’t know anything.”

He gave a quick bow and looked back again.

He found a view from twenty stories up.

And a shadow suddenly appeared in front of his eyes.

It was a window washing robot. Its boxy one meter body had a cleaning brush installed and it moved down past Shoui's eyes as it cleaned the window.

Shoui relaxed and sighed as it slowly passed by.

With the increased transparency of the fresh cleaning, he could see the area in front of Osaka Station below. People were moving around like normal despite the sound of the siren.

"I can't believe this," said his Dog God once more.

"What can't you believe?" asked Takada behind him.

He answered without looking back.

"You can already tell thanks to the Dog God, can't you?"

"There are some things I can't accept unless you actually say them."

Yuuki's face appeared in Shoui's mind. He pictured her as she was now: known as the Killing Holder and acting accordingly.

But he also knew who she had been in the past.

"I really can't believe this. What does it all mean?"

"You can't believe she has two sides to her? The past and the present. The seen and the unseen. And can you not believe that the Killing Holder can be the Killing Holder now that she has lost her doubt?"

"I'm not worrying about anything as cool as that."

When he turned around while scratching his head, he found Takada standing right there.

...!?

Surprise showed on his face as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Before he could resist, she placed her lips on his with her eyes closed.

"Ah," said Aoi, but Shoui's vision was blocked by Takada's face.

Ikemaru sighed on the far end of the room and the girl finally moved away.

Shoui was unsure what to say as Takada took several steps back and sat on the bed with her eyes still closed. The bedsprings creaked quietly and softly and

the sound gently overlapped with the background noise of the siren for a few seconds.

Then she opened her eyes and looked up at Shoui.

She lowered her eyebrows and gave a small smile.

“You’re a liar.”

“ ... ”

“Are you scared? Scared you might reject that girl?”

Shoui could not answer.

But Takada said more.

Taromaru recited some words with her voice.

A white flower blooms in the darkness

An empty party begins in the fire

A memory of death floats in nothingness

A king resents him

A queen smiles at him

A sage resigns himself

Fall into indecisiveness while looking to another’s path

Choose your own path and hesitate

The true path lies in the past

The prophecy had changed somewhat from those he had heard before.

Taromaru explained why.

“Possibility is on the move around you, Shoui-san.”

“Possibility?”

“Unlike with Hisahide-san, I doubt my prophecy will become your Words,

Shoui-san. I believe you lost your Words somewhere.”

Shoui repeated that under his breath.

Without actually speaking, the Dog God on his shoulder moved its mouth to match the muttering in his heart.

Takada raised her lowered eyebrows and smiled a little as she watched the boy and the animal.

“But please do not forget my prophecy. Without your own feelings, it would likely have become your Words.”

Aoi and Ikemaru looked Shoui’s way when they heard that.

Aoi pulled the parts to her hexagonal rod from behind her waist and instantly connected them.

Shoui frowned at her action.

“Why pull out your weapon?”

“To keep you from leaving here. Based on what Seigi just said, it sounds like your destiny is closely related to what we’re doing here. And...”

“In that case, we cannot allow you to do anything that would lead the king to resent you.”

Ikemaru pulled out a few coins and squeezed them in his hand.

“At 7:10, Nakamura will defeat Osaka’s Chancellor and board a bullet train for Nagoya at New Osaka Station. We will begin a diversion at the same time. We must hurry and synchronize our timing to make sure that we do not get in his way and that inspection points are set up around the city.”

Aoi nodded in agreement.

“If anyone is going to do anything unnecessary, we might have to silence them.”

When Shoui heard her mischievous tone of voice, he scratched his head and turned toward the city once more. And he surreptitiously placed a hand on his forehead.

The scar below the bandanna ached.

“I can’t believe this.”

He spoke those words by proxy yet again and looked down at the city.

–Shoui – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit.

Then he noticed something odd about the city.

The flow of people on the road in front of the Osaka Hilton had been disturbed.

The people would normally walk by the hotel, but most of the people visible below were slowly making their way inside the hotel.

And all of them had one thing in common.

They were all boys Shoui’s age wearing casual clothing.

“It can’t be...”

Ikemaru replied to the Dog God’s words behind Shoui.

“So they’re here. ...The special forces of Osaka’s Chancellor’s Officers are here to suppress us.”

Shoui looked back over his shoulder at the other three.

Takada looked up at him somewhat worriedly.

Aoi’s eyebrows gave her a belligerent look that was the polar opposite of Takada’s expression.

Ikemaru kept his eyes closed and toyed with the coins in his hand.

Shoui asked them all a question.

“Do you think Tokyo’s Chancellor will face Koto’s Chancellor?”

“Osaka’s Chancellor comes first. After that, it depends how long he has until the bullet train leaves. It’s possible he’ll have to head for New Osaka Station without tying up all the loose ends.” Aoi took a breath. “But if she pursues him, I think he’ll kill her.”

A serious look filled her face.

She lightly placed her hexagonal rod against the floor.

“The only things Nakamura lacks are the decisive attack power of a Rhythm and the experience of having killed someone. So if he has the Flame High and the Koto Guardian pursues him...”

“The odds are good he will eliminate this country’s only Killing Holder.”

“...”

Shoui said nothing, crossed his arms, and leaned toward the window.

He glanced outside and saw Takada reflected on the image of the city’s night. She looked worriedly up at him from the bed and the clock on the room’s wall was visible above her head.

The white clock on the warm colored wall said it was 7:09.

In another minute, the special forces of the Osaka Chancellor’s Officers would make their move below and the diversion Ikemaru had mentioned would begin.

Shoui had only a minute left to make the one decision he was allowed.

And when he looked out the window again, he heard a roar and saw light fall to earth from the western sky.

It was one of Suzaku Ver. 40’s ether rounds.

A single charge from one of those contained enough energy to destroy Private Showa’s schoolyard and this was a second charge.

As he watched that light, Shoui repeated what Takada had said.

“A liar, huh?”

As soon as he did, he gave a large nod.

“Time to go!!”

With that shout, he forcefully turned toward Ikemaru and the others.

–Shoui – Savate Tech – Take – Run – Hit.

He reached full speed on the very first step.

And as he ran forward, Aoi swung her hexagonal rod like a baseball bat.

“I like that sort of thing...but it’s not enough!”

However...

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Carry – Hit!

–Shoui – Savate/Gym/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Shield Dodge – Hit!

Shoui snatched up Takada as she sat on the bed.

“Kyah!”

Her Dog God cried out for her and a look of shock appeared on Aoi’s face.

“Y-you idiot!”

With that, Aoi frantically diverted her swing upwards so as not to hit Takada.

Shoui ducked below Aoi’s attack and the hexagonal rod grazed his hair.

The door outside was right in front of him now.

“Takahiro!”

Ikemaru Takahiro moved in response to Aoi’s cry.

He stood next to the door, so he removed his right glove and squeezed the coins in his hand.

By that time, Shoui had already raised a leg to kick down the door as he ran.

But Ikemaru calmly moved in front of Shoui and threw the coins forward.

“Become shooting stars.”

As soon as he said that, flares burst from behind the coins and they rocketed toward Shoui.

The coins ignored Takada’s presence as they become meteors meant to strike their opponent.

The speed and force they were given by brief words was equal to that of a clump of ore burning up in the atmosphere.

Shoui charged straight toward the group of flaming bullets.

“!”

An explosion followed.

Part 3

7:10 PM

Shoui was blown away with Takada still in his arms.

He had kicked one of Ikemaru's shooting stars with the bottom of the foot raised to kick down the door.

He used that to jump backwards.

The shooting stars were even more powerful than he had expected. The others moved out ahead of him, broke through the bedroom window, and flew outside.

Several spider web cracks ran through the window.

“Seigi!?”

Aoi raised her voice in concern just as Shoui crashed back-first into the cracked window.

The window bent outwards with a sound like spilling sand.

But that did not last long.

The window was not strong enough to stop him.

It broke.

The shattering of the glass sounded like water thrown to the floor.

Shoui and Takada were thrown outside along with the spray of solid water.

This was the twentieth floor, so they were approximately eighty meters up and the winds between the buildings were strong.

Shoui realized he was in the air.

“I'm gonna fall!?”

He could see the night above him.

The city was below his downturned back.

“I can’t believe this!”

He gave a shout and Takada’s slender arms held onto him.

How weak those tensed arms felt brought him back to his senses.

He made up his mind with no more surprise or hesitation.

As proof, he powerfully swung his legs as he floated in midair.

–Shoui – Savate/Gym Tech – Multi-Take – Attitude Control – Hit!

He kicked off the window frame with his toe tips and used that to change his position in midair.

He turned his face downwards so he was facing the ground and perpendicular to the building wall.

He started to fall.

Even so, he kicked at the building wall.

He kicked himself downward.

He chose to fall.

He turned his back on the night sky and kicked powerfully off the wall.

He had to escape from here.

He kicked off the wall again and again to forcibly run down the wall.

“———!”

After only the third step, he had run down two stories.

He was moving quickly.

He was roused from the overflowing tension by the chilly sensation from one of Takada’s fingers as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

It was the ring she wore.

He did not know the meaning of that ring.

But something else mattered more.

“What can I use as footing...? That!?”

A cleaning robot was slowly descending the windows.

He landed straight on top of its boxy white body.

–Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Land – Hit!!

With an intense noise, parts of the cleaning machine burst off and the roof broke.

The wire it dangled from loudly snapped.

But Shoui had jumped again before the machine could completely break.

His eyes were searching for a means of survival.

–Shoui – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit!

He found it.

It was a window frame.

–Shoui – Gym/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Jump Control – Hit!

He kicked sideways off of the slight protrusion of the window frame.

“...!”

He nearly lost control.

–Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Attitude Control – Hit!

But he maintained control.

He ran.

He continued to race.

He seemed to fly downwards.

The way he ran side to side from window to window was a lot like a skier in a speed race.

But the speed of his fall was gradually converted into horizontal movement speed.

He was moving quickly.

After the current window frame, he looked to the next target object he needed to stay alive.

A flag stuck out toward the road at the fifth floor.

He used that as a stepping stone to further reduce the momentum of his fall.

“Here we go!”

He spoke to Takada who he held to his side.

She responded by gathering strength in the arms around his neck.

He made the jump.

Part 4

Same Time

Everyone in Osaka Prefectural #2's schoolyard came to a halt when around a dozen students in lab coats ran out from Ixolde's emergency passageway at one corner of the schoolyard.

These were the students who had been controlling Ixolde.

If they had fled, then Ixolde was done for.

Everyone in the schoolyard came to a stop and looked at the lab coat group.

A moment later, destruction arrived at the center of the schoolyard.

“!”

The first sound was an intensely solid one similar to splitting stone.

As if in response, Ixolde's equipment delivery hatch in the center of the schoolyard erupted up toward the heavens.

The deafening noise was a simple yet gigantic physical blow.

With the same force as the noise, the two panels of the fifty meter hatch flew through the night sky like sheets of plastic thrown into the wind for fun.

After reaching about three hundred meters up, the two steel panels began to fall.

The fifty meter panels fell from a height of three hundred meters.

It was like a giant's guillotine.

No one could react to the massive cutting.

Two sounds of breaking minerals followed.

The first was one of the steel panels slicing Prefectural #2's western school building in two and stabbing into the ground.

The second was the other steel panel crushing the tall concrete wall surrounding the schoolyard.

No one said a word.

But not even one of them was looking where the steel panels had fallen.

They were all focused on the large hole opened in the schoolyard.

Fire burned in the depths of that hole and a warm light flickered like a wave as it left the hole.

It was a gentle dance of light.

And that night-illuminating dance revealed two silhouettes facing each other on the edge of the hole.

One wore a student combat coat and held a sword downwards.

The other was unarmed.

A deep sound of destruction continued playing in the background as the unarmed one laughed.

“Nice. I love things like this.”

The one with the sword, Nanba Souichirou, asked a question that rang through the darkness.

“What is it you want?”

“To defeat you.”

“Do you like fighting?”

“No, that’s not it. I like to win. I like to stand at the top.”

Nakamura sounded cheerful as he pulled something from his pocket.

It was a headphone.

He placed it in his ear.

“So Saki’s information was correct,” said Souichirou. “You’re going to use the Flame High.”

“Yeah, that’s right. My sister did too. The thing about Harmonists is we can’t

use normal Rhythms or Wind Rhythms. We just can't seem to get the hang of it.
...But that inexperience with sound can come in handy."

"It allows you to grow accustomed to the Flame High's ridiculous speed and Octave?"

"Correct! Without any unnecessary knowledge, we can accept even the most powerful weapons!"

He began a cheerful recitation.

A red flower blooms in the darkness

An empty party begins in strength

Human memories dance within nothingness

A soldier saves the king

A woman becomes the queen

A sage reminisces

Run down another's path without looking

Choose your own path and sprint

The true path lies in the future

It took a beat before his full power could activate.

But it did so in short order.

Fire.

Flames.

A conflagration.

The red blaze resembled all of those things yet was none of them.

The flickering flames resided at the ends of his arms.

This was the Flame High's fire.

The fire gave a scorching roar.

It cried out as it bent its body atop his hands like living creatures.

He held it up in front of his eyes.

“Thanks for making my sister’s Rhythm. I had no other memento of her.”

He took a fighting pose.

He gently held his burning fists at his waist and pulled one leg back a little.

It was an upright stance focused on kicks.

He carved a speedy Tempo into the knee of his forward leg.

“Now, it’s time I showed you what I can do with the Flame High.”

He spoke the words that would begin this decisive battle.

“Welcome to the White Noise!”

Part 5

7:11 PM

A single movement acted as a starting point for all the motion to follow.

But it did not come from either of them.

It came from the crater to their side. Down in that burning abyss, Ixolde took an important action.

It created a giant explosion.

“...!”

Scorching sounds rang long and heavy with the force of a surging waterfall.

A red flare surrounding a yellow core rose from the crater and toward the night sky.

A rumbling much like a tremor or shockwave ran through the earth and air.

It sounded like cracks were running through space itself.

But that was not all.

Actual cracks were running through the earth.

The double helix Babel Gun rooted three hundred meters belowground was attempting to die. And everyone moving above it was caught in the middle.

The earth roared once more. The end of a machine that had taken a decade to build was signaled by a great shockwave and rumbling.

The schoolyard instantly collapsed.

The ground became a giant rock jigsaw puzzle as it sank down into the subterranean flames to join Ixolde.

The screams of those in the schoolyard joined the tones of destruction.

Voices, destruction, and heat.

Those three sounds complexly intertwined as two boys moved.

The first to move was Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide.

He ran smoothly forward in his red mountain hoodie.

He charged toward his opponent on the tilting and crumbling ground.

Meanwhile, Osaka Chancellor Nanba Souichirou lightly swung his sword.

–Souichirou – Kusanagi/Sword Tech – Multi-Take – Impact Sword – Hit!

His sword had been made into a divine item and it easily amplified the Kusanagi Rhythm he used.

“Ah.”

That monotone Live became a blade and raced through the air.

Hisahide was a mere three meters away as he charged forward.

Dodging the slicing shockwave would be impossible at that range.

But Hisahide did not even try to dodge.



He made a kick.

He turned his back a little for a high-speed roundhouse kick that launched fire.

The flames raced through the sky along the path of his toes and collided with Kusanagi's shockwave.

After a beat, a large flower of flame blossomed in the air.

Kusanagi's shockwave was burning.

The monotone "ah" had lost to the Flame High's high-speed Tempo and ignited.

The shockwave that had split sound and crushed an ogre became a flower in the dark night.

"Now it's my turn to attack."

With those words, Hisahide took the initiative.

He was less than three meters away now.

At that distance, a Critical Forcer could arrive in range just by shifting their center of gravity.

Hisahide first stuck his left leg forward and turned it into a rightward kick with a snap of his knee.

Souichirou was right-handed, so a kick from his left side was hard to avoid.

The kick was surrounded by flames that would burn through anything.

But Souichirou did not dodge his enemy's attack.

–Souichirou – Sword/Box Tech – Multi-Take – Switch to Left Hand – Hit!

*–Souichirou – Kusanagi/Sword/Dodge Tech – Multi-Take – Kusanagi
Interception – Hit!*

Without taking a step back, Souichirou held the sword in his left hand rather than both hands.

He did not hesitate to swing it to the left and send a shockwave toward the

Flame High's kick.

“Ahhhhhh!”

The sword wind released with his voice collided with the Flame High and instantly burned.

The slicing wind was eliminated.

And similarly, the flames guided by Hisahide's kick were canceled out and vanished.

The Flame High's fire was gone.

That created a brief opening.

“!”

Hisahide quickly tried to pull back his raised leg.

But Souichirou did not overlook this opportunity.

–Souichirou – Sword/Box Tech – Multi-Take – Switch to Both Hands – Hit!

–Souichirou – Kusanagi/Sword/Savate/Dodge Tech – Multi-Take – Kusanagi Diagonal Slash – Hit!

He took a deep step forward and swung a powerful blow from the hip.

The silver arc became a slicing wave.

Hisahide was surrounded by a shimmering as if from heat.

The air immediately exploded along the path of that shimmering.

Solid sounds overlapped, but this did not end it.

Hisahide stood outside the path of slicing air.

This was the power of a Harmonist.

He could place himself outside of the flow of Lives created by Rhythms or Techs.

“Damn! That was a...”

He never managed to say “close one”.

Souichirou was already taking his next action.

“Another one!?”

After swinging his sword diagonally upwards, Souichirou stood tall.

And he took another step forward.

–Souichirou – Kusanagi/Sword/Gym/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Thrust – Hit!

The Kusanagi-wielding Strike Forcer used every Tech available to him to make a high speed thrust.

The sword became a silver line wrapped in shimmering.

Its target was Hisahide’s throat.

That was where one uttered their Words.

Or that should have been the target.

Suddenly, a great tremor ran through the ground.

“!”

The earth shook.

The section of ground Hisahide and Souichirou stood on tilted to the right thanks to the underground explosion.

The speed of the thrust was somewhat dulled.

But the attack did not stop.

Everything apart in surprise and the thrust veered off course.

The sword reached Hisahide’s right hand.

It easily pierced straight through that right palm which was wrapped in some flames.

The Flame High in Hisahide’s hand and the Kusanagi in Souichirou’s sword fully counteracted each other.

The flames seemed to envelope the blade before bursting and vanishing.

Kusanagi’s power was annihilated.

Momentum simply carried the blade through Hisahide’s hand and shallowly

into his right chest.

But that was all.

Souichirou's attack was over.

The two exchanged a glance while connected by three points: the swords, the palm, and the chest.

Flames burned around them on the tilting ground and the crumbling earth provided background noise as Hisahide spoke.

"It's too bad. If that had been a slash, you would've sliced me in two. I didn't expect you to go for thrusts and attacks from below. You were just unlucky there."

With that said, the Flame High boy clenched his pierced right hand to grab the blade.

"Burn."

As soon as he spoke that one word, flames burst from Hisahide's hand.

The sword piercing his hand instantly set on fire and exploded.

The Lives creating the sword had lost to the Flame High's Lives.

The Tempo of the flames burned through all other Lives.

That intense burning attack was not satisfied with just the metal of the sword.

–Souichirou – Mind/Dodge Tech – Multi-Auto-Take – Emergency Dodge – Miss!

Souichirou removed both hands from the burning sword's hilt.

But he was too slow.

The flames had already reached his right arm.

"...!"

Souichirou's right false arm immediately burst into flames like it was kindling straw.

–Souichirou – Savate/Steel Tech – Multi-Take – Cut Away – Hit!

The electronic word circuits reacted faster than his reflexes and released the right arm at the shoulder.

After the bolt locks were blown away and the arm came free, it turned to a blowing flame and Ashed before it reached the ground.

As soon as the right arm burned away, the ground they stood on sunk down.

As it did, flames burst from the cracks in the ground as scarlet jets of gas.

The secondary destruction had begun belowground.

“The center of Osaka is going to collapse from the backdraft,” said Hisahide as he licked up the blood coming from his right palm. “Let’s settle this before the Flame High ends.”

Souichirou had lost his right arm and his sword had been burned, so he had no more weapons.

Meanwhile, Hisahide walked forward.

He walked toward Souichirou.

“Aren’t you going to run away?”

“Attack is the only word in the Modified Purple Electricity Style’s vocabulary.”

“That’s the opposite of Aoi’s Shinkage Style.”

Hisahide lightly swung his hand as he spoke.

Flames trailed behind his hand.

And then...

–Souichirou – Sight Tech – Take – Spot – Hit!

“Tokyo Chancellor, this battle will be a long one.”

When he heard Souichirou’s voice, Hisahide stopped moving.

The one-eyed warrior who had lost his right arm continued to speak.

“Now that the Flame High has awoken, both the resentful voices of those devoured by the ogre two years ago and a great power are at work to keep this battle from ending too easily.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“I am not the only one that protests Osaka!”

With those words, Souichirou jumped.

–Souichirou – Gym/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Great Leap – Hit.

He used the power of his false legs to jump too high for Hisahide to reach.

When he looked down, he saw the crumbling schoolyard of Prefectural #2 and a sea of flames.

None of his fellow students were there any longer.

Saki had likely ordered them to evacuate.

Only three people remained at the scene of destruction: Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide, Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko, and...

“Killing Holder!”

As soon as Souichirou shouted that Urban Name, Koto Chancellor Yuuki Yuuki looked up into the night sky from one end of the schoolyard.

Part 6

7:13 PM

For the first time in thirteen years, Suzaku Ver. 40's Word Particle Cannon was fired toward Osaka. Its light was visible as far away as Divine Punishment City – Yokohama.

That was the coup de grâce against Ixolde and the signal that the next stage of the battle was beginning.

Chapter 2: The Battle Changes (Stage Selection Guide)

Part 1

7:17 PM

The night sky and the scattered winter stars were visible straight ahead.

Only that great expanse could be seen and the ground was nowhere to be found.

This was a view only available to someone lying parallel to the night sky.

Shoui was the one enjoying that view.

He felt déjà vu as his thoughts drifted in an almost sleepy sort of way.

“I’ve seen an expanse of stars like this before.”

For some reason, the thought was vocalized even though he did not open his mouth.

Before he could wonder why, he realized where the déjà vu came from.

It was from two years before.

After he had been defeated by Nagoya Vice Chancellor Yamashita Gihei’s sword strike, the night sky had filled his vision when he had come to.

But back then, he had seen snow rather than stars.

That scene was indelibly burned into his memory.

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Release Memory – Hit.

The memory was replayed as a video.

It was a video of the past.

It was snowing and he was indeed collapsed and staring up toward heaven.

...I have to fight.

If I don't, I can't protect Yuuki, he thought even though he had trouble moving.

That was likely paralysis from the Lightning High Rhythm's additional attack.

But he could not accomplish anything if he did not move.

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Strengthen Mind – Hit.

“I have to fight!”

He muttered those words as he got up.

When he lowered his vision from the heavens to human height, he saw Yuuki.

The girl he had needed to fight and protect had her back to him.

Almost as if she were protecting him.

He could sense no strength in her.

“Yuuki...?”

He did not even need to use a Sight Tech to notice a certain fact.

A male right arm lay on the ground in front of her after being severed at the shoulder.

“Yuuki...!”

When he shouted, Yuuki looked back.

She had lost her glasses and the right half of her face was dyed red with blood.

A sword had stabbed her in the right eye.

The blood had yet to stop.

But her left eye looked to Shoui.

As he stood up, his gaze audibly clashed with hers.

She was tall, so her gaze was situated higher than his.

As if to accept their age difference, she narrowed her one eye in a slight smile.

Then she opened her mouth and spoke one simple word.

“Sorry.”

That was all.

She closed her eye and collapsed backwards.

He ran over and supported her.

As he did, great pain ran through his forehead.

As soon as that phantom pain struck his head like a hammer, the replayed memory was cut off by his own scream from two years ago and an external voice from the present.

“Yuuki!?” / “Shoui-san!”

He awoke in an instant.

His eyes came into focus on the starry sky before them.

A girl looked down at him with that winter sky in the background.

It was Takada Seigi, the girl with the Urban Name of Fast Reader.

“Please pull yourself together! You need to wake up!”

Shoui obediently sat up while placing a hand on his forehead.



He could see Osaka's cityscape, but the neon and streetlights were flying backwards with surprising speed.

–Shoui – Mind/Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Confirm Situation – Hit.

As he felt a vibration reaching him through his butt, he realized he was sitting in the back of a dump truck.

The scene around him was moving because he was being carried down the road.

The city continued to move around him and he could hear the city's siren.

Takada kneeled next to him with the Dog God.

His mind was still muddy, so he asked for some confirmation.

“We survived jumping down from that building?”

“You don't remember? You kicked off a pole, kicked off a traffic light, and then rolled on top of here.”

Once she mentioned it, he did remember planning to do that.

“I see.” He nodded. “How long was I out?”

“Quite a while. While you were, some weird lightning struck over there. It was a completely straight line.”

She pointed to some clouds in the southern sky.

That was the only point in the night sky with any clouds and they were too small and oddly shaped to be natural.

They were rainclouds created by loud noise, ionization, or extreme atmospheric convection.

“A Word Particle Cannon, huh?”

He clenched his teeth, but stopped almost immediately and slowly stood up instead.

“They said Tokyo's Chancellor and his group are escaping to Nagoya, didn't they?”

The Fourth Alarm's siren continued to sound even after Suzaku Ver. 40's

Word Particle Cannon had fired.

The battle was not over yet.

“Takada-san, this dump truck will probably stop at that light up ahead, so you need to climb off and get to safety. I’ll keep going to New Osaka Station.”

“Eh? Why New Osaka-...?”

“The rest of Takada’s question was cut off by Shoui’s answer.

“Because Yuuki will be pursuing Tokyo’s Chancellor.”

“Why do you seek her?”

Shoui could not answer that question.

He had far too many reasons to pursue her.

He felt like he could sum it all up, found he could not, and ultimately said nothing.

The Dog God was unable to articulate his self-questioning, so Takada asked another question.

“Do you not know?”

He was unable to answer that and neither could the Dog God on his shoulder.

Takada and her Dog God smiled bitterly.

“Then I’m going to New Osaka Station with you. I’m supposed to go to Nagoya too.”

She pulled a ticket from within her stole.

Shoui noticed that it was a ticket for a designated seat on a bullet train.

He sighed.

“We can’t have a teenage boy and girl going on a trip without their parents’ permission.”

“What are you talking about? Despite how Hisahide-san acts, he won’t do anything to me. Unlike you, Shoui-san.”

“Y-y-y-y-y-y-you’re a pretty rude girl, you know that!?”

“Why are you getting so flustered? Honestly...”

She went on to smile mischievously and held the ring on her right hand to her mouth.

“But that’s not the only reason I’m going with you.”

“Eh?”

“I also want to see you, Shoui-san.”

He thought on that for a bit and scratched his head.

“You ‘also’ want to see me, hm? I can’t believe this.”

“Hisahide-san is the main reason I am going there. ...It’s the same for you, isn’t it?”

Unable to answer that, Shoui asked a question of his own.

“Why do you want to see me?”

“As I said before, there is possibility in indecisive people.”

“Possibility...”

“They have a great number of options. ...I ended my indecision and closed off those other paths, but it is possible I could have escaped the fear I had of my own power. It is possible could have become a Tuner or Buster instead of a Fast Reader.” She spoke with the city of Osaka moving by in the background. “I gave up on indecision.”

“But you can’t just never make a decision.”

“Yes, that’s true. The time will come when a decision must be made.” Takada looked up at Shoui. “But the stronger one’s indecision, the stronger their resolve when that time comes. And the greater one’s resolve, the more they will wander in indecision.”

“In that case...”

“Your prophecy fits into Hisahide-san’s Words, so your indecision and the decision it leads to will certainly bring great possibility to us...no, to the people around you and me.”

She took a breath.

“And that possibility can bring everyone happiness...or bring them unhappiness.”

“I’m shocked.” Shoui smiled bitterly. “That’s why you’re staying with me? In order to point my possibility in as good a direction as possible?”

“Yes. And as I said, you have what I gave up on.”

“This is the first time anyone has been this deluded about what I’m capable of.”

“Liar. Someone else has cared for you since long before this.”

“I hope you don’t mean Old Lady Senga. I’ve already decided anything over 28 is too old.”

Shoui felt a slight shaking below him as he gave that serious comment.

The dump truck was coming to a stop.

The city of Osaka slowed down around them and Takada asked him a question as he looked out toward New Osaka Station.

“Please tell me one thing. When did you start thinking about her?”

“When was it for you?”

He returned the question as if bargaining with her.

She looked a bit hesitant, but after two breaths, her usual expression returned.

“At the summer festival two years ago. He said he needed my power and everything else about me. ...Now, what about you?”

When she returned the question to him again, he sighed.

“Do I have to tell you?”

“I told you.”

“Girls are willing to do whatever it takes to get what they want, aren’t they?”

“There is no point in letting shame hold you back on vacation... Now, will you answer me?”

“It’s the continuation of the image you saw from my thoughts before. During the Kinki Riot, my house collapsed and I was...”

His thoughts must have been reaching her because a cloud fell over Takada’s expression.

At the same time, the dump truck stopped.

The lurch caught Takada by surprise.

“Ah.”

The Dog God cried out for her and she started to topple over.

–Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Pick Up – Hit.

He supported her and picked her up.

“I’m going to get off here. It would be dangerous to cause a scene on here.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Eh?”

“I thought it was a happier story. I’m sorry.”

As she apologized, he smiled a little and responded.

“You sound just like Yuuki from two years ago.”

“...Two years ago?”

“When we first met wasn’t like that. After Yuuki worked with Old Lady Senga to pull me out into the light, she rejoiced that I was alive.”

“Do you not want to apologize to her?”

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Control Emotions – Hit.

“I promised...to protect her.”

With that, he turned his back on Takada.

He could see the city of Osaka.

He jumped down in that direction and spoke too quietly for Takada to hear.

“I promised to fight...and protect her.”

His voice jumped down to the road and his body followed.

Part 2

7:25 PM

The hustle and bustle of Osaka's night grew duller and duller the farther one got from the city center.

Northern Osaka's border between noise and silence was the Yodo River, Osaka's greatest river.

It was about a kilometer wide and it was spanned by a few bridges.

One of those was the New Yodo River Bridge which contained a wide road and had one primary geographic feature.

The bridge was the shortest route between Osaka's city center and New Osaka Station.

There were no cars on the bridge.

That was due to the Fourth Alarm.

The ear-splitting siren rang from Osaka's center.

The sound seemed even louder as it was carried by the river's winds.

Two people ran across the New Yodo River Bridge as if pursued by that wind and noise.

One was a youth in a T-shirt and jeans.

The other was a girl with a large false left arm.

The youth asked a question as he ran.

"Are you okay? That Word Particle Cannon didn't hurt you, did it?"

"It might've if it had hit me directly, but the Dragon Emperor's roar is enough to handle anythin' else."

The false arm girl, Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko, lightly tapped the

Dragon Emperor's armor.

As if answering the vibration of the tap, steam burst from the gaps between armor panels.

"I can't believe I had to take it up to the Seventh Activation, though."

"Is bringing it to too high an activation a problem?"

"It eats up a ton of power. It's a bit of a problem when I can only fire cannon blasts," she explained as she ran. "And if I take it up to the final Ninth Activation, I'll lose the Dragon Emperor's arm itself."

"Rumor has it that would wake up the lightning dragon contained inside the thing."

"Don't ya get too interested. When the Third Dragon Emperor was taken to its Final Activation durin' World War Two, the wearer and everythin' within a kilometer was turned to scorched earth."

"Wasn't that because someone other than the original wearer tried to use it by force?"

"The Dragon Emperor is a false arm with a dragon's will, so it'll try to kill any master it doesn't take a likin' to."

"That's pretty scary. So it's a false arm that's on the verge of being Death Techno, huh?"

"I guess. But it does seem that I've got some kinda connection with it. It's probably watchin' me while it sleeps inside this armor."

Taeko smiled bitterly.

"I just hope it accepts me as its master when I go for the Final Activation."

"Instead, how about you pray you never come across a danger warranting that?"

After that comment, Hisahide sneezed.

"Damn, it's cold."

They were in the middle of the bridge, where the wind on the river's surface was strongest.

Taeko glanced over at him as he bent forward and held his arms around his sides for warmth.

“Maybe if ya hadn’t burned yer hoodie...”

“I had to. I needed some kindling to spread the Flame High to the Word Particle Cannon’s light.”

He sighed.

“And after Takada chose it for me and everything...”

“Oh, ya mean that girl who was hangin’ out with Shoui?”

“Don’t put it like that.”

“Why not?”

He looked up at Taeko.

“Because she’s my prophet.”

“Well, she sees it that way too. What’s got ya so mad?”

“...”

“Jealous?”

“Of course not.” Hisahide briefly fell silent. “I’m Tokyo’s Chancellor, I’m the strongest, I’m definitely the star of this incident, and I’m going to be king. I have no reason to feel jealous of or indebted to that Hizaka guy.”

“Then what does that girl see in Shoui?”

“I can never tell what girls are thinking.”

“Ya can’t tell, huh? ...Well, it sounds like ya trust her, so that’s fine.”

Taeko gave a pleasantly bitter smile.

“So all the resentment is directed at Shoui,” she said.

–Taeko – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Killer Intent – Hit!

But then she gave a sudden shout.

“Jump!”

For just an instant, they heard a roar from overhead.

A moment later, both of them saw several giant icicles fall from above.

“The Koto Chancellor!?”

The thirty meter transparent masses dropped down after they had leaped out of the way.

Several deafening noises and powerful impacts followed.

One, two, and then three ice spears with sharp points stabbed into the New Yodo River Bridge.

The destruction continued without stopping.

–Taeko – Dodge/Gym/Savate Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Running Dodge – Hit!

“That’s a helluva lot of power!”

“This is no time to be praising her! She’s figured out my weakness as a Harmonist!”

“Yer weakness?”

“An attack with greater speed than my paradox. In other words, a surprise attack.”

The giant icicles formed within the ether light that suddenly appeared overhead, so they were impossible to predict.

Seven of them stabbed into the ground ahead of Taeko and Hisahide.

They were well over ten meters in diameter, so they blocked the way as a wall.

The two stopped and briefly saw ether light twinkling overhead.

More were coming.

And come they did.

Eight icicles appeared overhead and giant hunks of rock came into view directly below.

The Lives of the ether that formed the space around them was altered to change everything into ice weapons.

This was the technique of the Cold High Rhythm user. It was the technique of Koto's Chancellor.

But Taeko fearlessly took action.

She had already activated the Dragon Emperor, so she recited her Words as the dragon gave a cry.

She shouted the song that summoned lightning.

Nobody takes the middle road

Nothing lives or dies

It all either falls into ruin or survives

Everyone, everyone, everyone

The Dragon Emperor released bluish-white electricity from her shoulder, fist, and claws.

Taeko took action in a big way.

–Taeko – Gym Tech – Take – Step Forward – Hit.

–Taeko – Savate Tech – Take – Leap – Hit.

–Taeko – Lightning High/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Ether Strike – Hit!

She jumped and made a simultaneous smash uppercut with the Dragon Emperor to destroy one icicle.

But the overwhelming difference in mass pulled the icicle down and tried to slam Taeko to the ground.

Her jump was forced to a stop and her feet reached the bridge.

But she managed to fully support the icicle with her one fist.

“I can't let myself die here!”

With that cry, she finished swinging the Dragon Emperor.

She was supported by the Dragon Emperor, her Techs, her Rhythm, her own physical strength, and the anti-shock inner suit she wore.

The Dragon Emperor gave a roar.

Then the icicle flew back up into the air, lightning surrounded it, and it broke. It shattered.

With the sound of a broken waterfall, a transparent spray scattered through the sky.

Taeko sighed as she looked up at it.

“That was a close one... This is no laughin’ matter!”

As soon as she said that, the ninth icicle arrived without warning.

It dropped in no time.

Taeko had already lost her chance to dodge and she was not prepared to attack.

She could not move, but...

“Get down!”

Hisahide leaped over.

He had his MD’s headphone in his ear.

He spun in midair and swung up a foot that produced fire.

The fire immediately grew into a flame that illuminated the ice while drawing a trail behind his foot.

The clash of ice and heat was over before it began.

The icicle burned.

It became a giant torch thirty meters tall and ten meters wide, it lost its qualities as ice, and it was blown away by the pure flame.

The mass of heat and flame fell over onto the New Yodo River Bridge and rolled loudly.

The other icicles that had stabbed into the bridge were caught in the flames and ignited.

The Flame High’s fire was spreading.

And these icicles had been created by altering the ether's Lives, so they burned especially well.

Several giant pillars of fire were created.

The ice burned.

The seven giant icicles piercing the bridge became fiery towers.

Their light called in a scorching wind.

As the flames grew stronger, so did the wind.

The bridge itself ignited and was enveloped by hellfire.

Taeko and Hisahide maintained fighting poses as they looked across the burning field that had been a bridge.

And...

–Taeko – Hear Tech – Auto-Take – Hear – Hit.

“...!? The bridge is burnin’ down!”

The flames reacted to her shout.

With a blast of scorching wind, the flames rose up like a wall and the bridge was crushed.

The collapse began at the locations weakened by the icicles piercing it.

The center of the bridge crumbled over a length of three hundred meters.

The road, the sidewalk, the railings, and the bridge girders all burned and sank into the flowing river.

“Man, the Flame High kicks ass!”

Hisahide acted like this had nothing to do with him even as the sounds of destruction surrounded him.

Taeko asked a question next to him.

“If Tokyo's Chancellor had this much power, how'd she die during the Kinki Riot?”

“Well, according to Iba, she was killed by his master, Yuuki Senga.”

“Eh?”

“A corporation was involved in the Kinki Riot and they wanted to end it via single combat between a representative of Tokyo and a representative of Osaka. ...The corporation’s troops surrounded the two of them, so they had no choice but to go through with it.”

The din of destruction drowned out Hisahide’s voice.

But he did not stop speaking.

“Then Yuuki Senga arrived and the two of them died. That’s all Iba is willing to tell me. I don’t know what Yuuki Senga did, but her arrival must have triggered the end. In other words, their death.”

He added that he did not hold a grudge against anyone over that.

His words vanished within the roaring of the flames.

The only sounds were that roaring and the splashing of water.

Pieces of the bridge were turning to fire in midair and vanishing into the Yodo River.

The scene of destruction continued.

And as it did...

–Taeko – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Killer Intent – Hit.

“Hey, ya’ve noticed this, haven’t ya?”

“Yeah, I have. You mean this killer intent, right?”

Taeko and Hisahide let the intense noise wash over them as they stared straight ahead.

Three hundred meters away, the other end of the break in the bridge looked like a distant cliff.

A girl stood there.

She wore a red blazer modeled after the Suzaku and held a staff that resembled a giant tuning fork.

She was Koto Chancellor Yuuki Yuuki.

Across the crumbling bridge and through the gaps in the red forest of burning pillars, they could see a blazer colored an even brighter red.

“So the Killing Holder really is here!”

There was excitement in Hisahide’s voice, but he turned around.

“Ya aren’t gonna fight here?”

“I’d be at a disadvantage in a wide open space like this. She’d just attack from above like before.”

There was a smile on his face.

A smile also appeared on Taeko’s lips and she nodded.

“Yeah, I suppose so...”

“And our real goal is getting to Nagoya. Takada will be on her way to the station too.”

With that, he started running.

Taeko followed while keeping her focus on Yuuki.

Just as the two started running toward New Osaka Station, the destruction reached its climax.

One of the bridge girders burned away and sank into the river.

Flames scattered like snow and spread across the river’s surface as the air shimmered.

The destruction of immense heat signaled its end.

Part 3

7:29 PM

Aoi and Ikemaru stood on the twentieth floor hallway of the Osaka Hilton.

They stood before their room and they were repelling the enemies who had entered the hotel.

The battle had a light start when Ikemaru turned the floor into an ocean while the Osaka Chancellor's Officers members approached.

As soon as the carpet-patterned ocean appeared everywhere except where Ikemaru and Aoi stood, Aoi used her Shinkage Style to copy Taeko's lightning attack and used that on the ocean.

That instantly defeated all of those who had sunk into or were sinking into the ocean.

It was a nice combination.

The two of them stood on the isolated island of floor located in front of their room.

Beyond the end of the hall, they could hear quite a few people talking and moving around. It was most likely a second wave from the Osaka Chancellor's Officers.

Aoi spoke as she looked that way.

"It's ironic. Some of our enemy probably use the Modified Purple Electricity Style."

"Please do not let your guard down. The next group will soon-..."

"Don't be so strict. ...I'm trying to gather my thoughts."

Aoi closed her eyes before saying more.

“Takahiro...did you know this?”

“Know what?”

“The Dance Combat style born from the Kage Style split between an Osaka and an Edo Style that fought for supremacy.”

“...”

“But the eastern style fell into decline after the war. Then...was it twenty years ago? The elder of the Aoi family unscientifically claimed the reason behind the decline was in our blood and snatched a girl away from the main western family.”

And...

“Now, the sole survivor of the eastern style...is kicking their asses like this. It’s kind of ironic, really.”

When she said that, Aoi felt someone gently embrace her from behind and heard a whisper in her ear.

“...Aoi-san.”

“Hm? What?”

“You did not come here to fight.”

Hearing that, she opened her eyes and smiled a little.

“Yes,” she began. “That’s right. Once this battle is over, let’s go look for those cherry blossoms. If we can find those, then a Shinkage Style created to fight may not be so worthless after all.”

“Can you make that decision in the place your parents first met?”

“Yes. And if we do find that place...I have a request, Takahiro.”

“What is it?”

“Hold me tight...and don’t let go.”

She giggled and gently elbowed confused Ikemaru in the chest.

“The battle isn’t over yet, but don’t push yourself too hard. I don’t want you collapsing like you did when you created Seigi’s Dog God.”

“I believe I have grown since then.”

“It’s only been five years, right? Your height’s the only thing that’s grown.”

“Aren’t you judging me rather harshly?”

“But you have the exact same look on your face as back then.”

“The same look on my face?”

“Whatever you might say, you always get this hint of a smile when you know you can use your power to its fullest.”

She sighed and added, “That’s the opposite of me.” She then looked to Takahiro’s hands as he hugged her.

When he noticed her gaze, he spoke.

“Do not worry. I cannot speak to the Lives while holding you in my arms.”

“And you don’t need to worry about me. ...Why do you think I was training in the Shinkage Style?”

“Wasn’t it because your mother asked you to?”

“Do you really think a girl of five would train under that man for nothing more than that?”

Aoi smiled bitterly.

Then the cellphone in Ikemaru’s pocket rang.

“Excuse me.”

With that, he let go of her.

Aoi leaned back against the door as he pulled out the phone and held it to his ear.

“It’s from Nakamura. It’s about my cousin.”

“In other words, it’s for me, huh?”

She gave a troubled look as she took the phone.

“It’s Aoi.”

“Hey. Just won. On my way to New Osaka. Any word on Takada?”

“Could you maybe speak in complete sentences?”

“I’m in a hurry. I was having some fun and got hit by a Word Particle Cannon, so I burned my hoodie and now I’m freezing.”

“Burned it? So I take it you stole the Flame High?”

“I put a lot of work into it.”

“That was all thanks to Takahiro’s charm, wasn’t it? You didn’t lose the other one, did you?”

“No. I’m about to use the charm to steal a bullet train with Nagoya’s Chancellor. ...So where’s Takada?”

“Seigi, well... Y’know that boy we picked up earlier? She left with him.”

“I see... Oh, crap! She’s catching up, so I’ve gotta run.”

“She?”

“Koto’s Chancellor! I haven’t re-listened to the Flame High yet, so this is bad timing. ...Later!”

Just before he hung up, Aoi heard Nagoya’s Chancellor shouting.

The shout apparently accompanied some kind of attack. Probably aimed at their pursuer.

“I see.” Aoi nodded and returned the phone to Ikemaru. “Sounds like everything’s more or less going as planned. Iba must be doing well outside.”

As soon as she said that, a change came over the ocean.

Starting from the far end of the hallway, the slightly wavy carpet turned white.

It was ice.

The ocean was being frozen.

“It would seem they called in a holy spell user. ...They are cleverer than I gave them credit for.”

“What should I do?” asked Aoi. “Fire Kusanagi?”

Ikemaru suddenly embraced her again.

“...Eh?”

Before she could ask anything, he opened their room’s door with one hand, placed her inside, and closed the door.

He shut only her inside the room.

She blankly stood there for a few seconds, but then she realized what had happened and turned back toward the door.

“H-hey! Takahiro! What do you think you’re doing!?”

She received an answer from beyond the door.

“I shall crush Osaka’s Chancellor’s Officers here. But there is a danger of you being caught in the middle...so please stay in the room.”

“What are you planning to do?”

“To use my power. I shall use my *kotodama* power to its fullest.”

His answer was punctuated by gunfire.

Aoi heard the almost pleasant bursting sounds through the door.

“T-Takahiro!”

“Is something the matter?”

“You idiot! Why are you getting yourself shot!?”

“Calm down. I have not been hit ye-...”

He paused for a second.

“I have been grazed once. My apologies.”

“How can you be so calm!? Open this door. I’ll support you!”

“Become a wall.”

The door became a wall.

“Stop that! Takahiro!”

“Please. I am trying to focus.”

“Focus...? What are you trying to do!?”

“One of the hotel’s main supports runs through the side wall here and I can only speak to it from the hallway.”

Before he could finish speaking, Aoi kicked at the wall that had been a door.

“What are you planning to do with the entire building’s *kotodama*!? If you just want to defeat them, there are better battlefields!”

“But those would not function as a diversion... And those would not allow me to understand them.”

“...Eh?”

“Don’t you find them to be baffling? Why can they not do what we do? And why can we not do what they do?”

Aoi could hear a slight smile in Takahiro’s question, so she asked a question of her own.

“They? Do you mean Seigi and that boy?”

“ ‘Everyone but us’ may be the better answer. I have never before seen anyone who can act while filled with such great indecision.”

“Well, Seigi would say we’re the ones who’ve cut off our own indecision. ... And open up already. I can hear all that gunfire!”

“You said you were jealous of Takada, didn’t you?”

She stopped moving when she heard his question.

And he said more.

“I had already met you when I created the Dog God from Takada. That is why I could not allow her indecision to contin-...”

“Takahiro!!”

“...Yes?”

“She was the one who decided to close off her path to being a Tuner or Buster! That wasn’t because you gave her the Dog God. Don’t be so conceited.”

His silence was filled by gunfire.

Aoi ignored the sounds of bullets as she spoke.

“The fact that you aren’t honest, that you’re strict on Hisahide, and that you’re blunt with Seigi are two sides of the same coin, aren’t they? Just like with the Shinkage Style’s raison d’etre, the one side is strong because the other side is also strong.”

“ ... ”

“Well? Am I wrong?”

“Making assumptions about others’ thoughts is a bad habit of the O blood type.”

“The blood type horoscope doesn’t matter, so just open this already.”

“Unfortunately, that would not fulfill the prophecy.”

“The prophecy?”

“The prophecy of the king’s birth. The red flower should bloom toward the sky, not underground.”

A moment later, a giant glowing blade stabbed through the door before Aoi’s eyes.

It was an anti-demon round.

That special sort of bullet had been developed in Europe.

The blade was created by solidifying the ether’s Lives as light and it rolled across the room.

She could see Ikemaru’s face in the narrow gap created in the door.

He had lost his glasses and his face and clothes were both stained with blood.

That was the result of the gunfire.

Aoi honestly gasped.

“ ... ”

But after a moment’s hesitation, she finally smiled toward him.

“I see... So Seigi wasn’t the only one you were jealous of.”

“ ... ”

“You’re really cool, Takahiro.”

“I was waiting for you to say that.” He smiled a little. “Whether or not you find the cherry blossoms, whether or not he becomes the king, and whether or not the east and west reunite are all an issue of possibility.”

“And so we too need to step inside that ring of possibility?”

“At the very least, that boy increased his possibility by jumping out that window. That should have left him with zero possibility, but he transformed it into an uncertain future.”

“Then do you know why he jumped out that window?”

“Yes.”

“In that case,” she said. “You’ve found someone to pursue, just like that boy and Hisahide have.”

“My apologies. This does not mean I have any complaints about the current state of affairs.”

“It’s fine, if it’ll help everyone out.”

“Everyone?”

“You’re a businessman, aren’t you? Then you need to make everyone happy.”

When he heard that, Takahiro’s smile grew bitter.

At the same time...

“Please leave this building. I will now turn it into a flower.”

Hijiri obediently began to run.

She turned her back on Takahiro and did not hesitate to run for the window.

As she did, leaf veins appeared on the walls and floor.

Just before she jumped out the window, she looked back.

“Takahiro! I’ll see you again below those cherry trees! Don’t give up and continue searching!”

A bitter smile came to her lips as she spoke.

“Honestly. You deny it, but you really are a competitive boy!!”

Her voice was soon a part of the night sky.

Part 4

7:36 PM

Rectangular New Osaka Station was longer to the east and west.

When Yuuki stepped inside the eastern entrance of its bullet train platform, the first thing she did was raise Housei and use a spell.

On the way, she had called Senga on her cellphone and had the station evacuated.

She poured all power into the spell.

–Yuuki – Cold High/Shot Tech – Take – Icicle Drop – Hit.

She aimed Housei above the front car rather than the third car in front of her.

Three icicles around ten meters tall appeared below the atrium platform's roof and gravity pulled them down into the bullet train's front car.

After the great roar of destruction, the bullet train could no longer move.

She then held Housei at an angle to aim it toward the bullet train itself.

She swept it across the entire car for a broad-range spell that could sweep through the enemy as well as the car.

She did not bother searching out the enemy's exact location and challenging them to a duel.

If her enemy was cornered, she just had to crush their hideout and them inside it.

That was the Killing Holder's decision.

She frowned a little while wielding Housei.

Before she hit the firing switch, some words escaped her lips.

“Even after this is over, I doubt he will have changed...”

The words faded and vanished.

In their place, she emitted a tense or solid presence.

All expression left her face.

The area was filled with a strict atmosphere that did not allow the slightest tremor or movement.

And just as she was going to use her power through Housei, the train produced a metallic sound and shook violently.

“!?”

This was not a slight tremor. It was the sudden lurch of a train about to move forward.

Yuuki did not move in the slightest as she held Housei at the ready, but she did stop firing.

She narrowed her eyes and looked ahead with her natural left eye.

The next movement began with a sound.

It was the metallic sound of the train cars' connectors bumping together.

Another vibration ran through the platform.

Then something changed.

The front car suddenly started forward as if it had been kicked.

“What!?”

Yuuki's shock was ignored as the three icicles piercing the train's roof were broken.

With the sound of shattering glass, one fell on the platform, one on the opposite track, and the last one straight forward where it crushed the front of the car where the driver's compartment was.

But...

“It's moving!?”

The front car continued its attempt to move forward.

Something was not right. It was definitely not the train's internal engine providing this driving force.

The bottom of the icicles was still connecting the front car to the track, but the car moved as if writhing and the icicles broke there as well.

The bullet train trembled as it moved forward.

It very, very slowly picked up speed as it left for Nagoya.

The open doors closed far more slowly than normal.

Yuuki started to run.

The train was still moving slowly, so she ran faster than it and jumped to the front door of the second car.

And as she did...

–Yuuki – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit!!

It was just an instant, but she saw someone arriving through the platform's central entrance.

It was a boy with a bandanna over his forehead and a girl in a white stole.

But Yuuki did not bother to watch them as she landed on the narrow deck over the connector.

The door closed behind her, cutting off all noise from the outside world.

She looked out the window and found they had already left the station. She saw a residential district over the elevated track's wall.

The bullet train would travel above that residential district for a few minutes after leaving New Osaka Station.

The lights of the houses moved by faster and faster as the train accelerated above the sea of lights that meant people lived there.

Yuuki remained silent as she watched them move by. Without saying a word, she looked away from the window and faced forward.

A passageway led to the front car.

She aimed Housei down it and set the output adjustment switch on the grip

to the lowest setting.

She used one hand to remove the Cold High Rhythm disk from the MD in her pocket.

She pulled the Aqua High Rhythm disk from her pocket and stuck it inside the MD instead.

She switched it on.

She held Housei below her right arm and thus between her blouse and the collar of her unique blazer.

Then she moved forward.

The door between cars stood in her way like a wall.

–Yuuki – Aqua High/Shot Tech – Take – Water Spell Shot – Hit.

With a bubbling sound, the door's lock was blown away by high pressure water.

The door opened when the train shook slightly.

She took a step forward to enter the connection between the second and front car and fired at the lock of the next door in her way.

She continued onto the rear deck of the front car.

As she walked, she glanced to the window installed in the wall.

The view outside was moving backwards quite quickly, but they had yet to leave the residential district.

“ ... ”

With no change of expression, she fired Housei into the door leading to the front car's passenger area.

After a solid sound, this door too slowly opened.

She could see the smaller passenger area up ahead.

She saw two people standing in front of the wall that divided the driver's compartment from the passenger area.

One was Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide.

The other was Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko.

Once she confirmed who they were, Yuuki looked to the wall behind them.

There was a single red charm in the center of the wall.

The wall had transformed around it and vein-like lines bulged out.

The deeply-rooted veins were all pulsating equally.

–Yuuki – Unknown Spell/Sight Tech – Multi-Take – Determine Spell – Hit!

“So you used the charm to recite speed.”

Hisahide nodded in confirmation.

“That means this thing ain’t stopping until it reaches Nagoya.”

With that, he took a step toward her.

And...

–Yuuki – Aqua High/Shot Tech – Take – Water Spell Shot – Hit.

As she held Housei under her arm, light filled its Live Accelerator and it fired water.

Chapter 3: An Ending (Game Over Conditions)

Part 1

7:40 PM

Yuuki fired water from the end of Housei.

The straight-line shot was like a stake containing incredible pressure.

A transparent drill several millimeters thick flew forward.

She fired between the two enemies.

A red charm was attached to the wall there.

That charm was moving the train.

The supersonic pressurized water was right on target in order pierce through the crimson paper.

But...

“How naïve.”

With those words, red flames consumed the water from the front.

This was the Flame High.

The all-piercing, colorless stake burned like oil in the flame blazing in Hisahide’s hand.

The Ether Lives forming the water burned and turned to ash.

And the flames did not stop there.

The Flame High Rhythm user ran straight toward Yuuki.

Yuuki reacted by firing again.

–Yuuki – Gym Tech – Take – Prepare For Rapid Fire – Hit.

–Yuuki – Aqua High/Shot Tech – Multi-Take – Water Spell Rapid Fire – Hit.

Just as all of the spells activated and the water flew, Hisahide vanished from her vision.

This was his power as a Harmonist.

As long as he could react to something, he could move with even greater speed than it.

It was a White Noise technique that only Hisahide could use due to his ignorance of Techs.

The many lines of water passed through the spot he had just been in.

He was outside of that.

She could not even take a breath before his attack was on its way.

But she took action without panicking.

She held up a hand and swung it.

“Water!”

With that word, the air around her feet whipped up into a wind.

–Yuuki – Water High/Mind Tech – Take – Water Spell Barrier – Hit!

The Ether Lives forming the air came into contact with her Rhythm and became something else.

Water spears thrust up from the ground.

The colorless blades drew a circle around Yuuki as they thrust up toward heaven.

And...

“Gh!”

With a short groan, someone was thrown atop the seat to her right.

It was Hisahide.

He knocked over two seats with broken backs and fell between more of the seats.

He was not moving.

Without even glancing that way, Yuuki looked to Taeko on the far end of the car.

“So you’re next.”

Taeko took a defensive pose with the Dragon Emperor and looked to Yuuki.

She glared at Yuuki.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised when yer the Killin’ Holder...”

“What will you do? This is your last chance to surrender.”

“Did my brother surrender to ya?”

Yuuki fell silent as the girl asked her question from beyond the Dragon Emperor.

The silence lasted a few moments, but then she slowly answered.

“He was dead before he had the chance.”

Taeko reacted with immediate movement.

However, that movement came to a sudden end thanks to a certain noise.

The Dragon Emperor gave a cry.

Part 2

7:42 PM

It was a cry of lamentation.

The Dragon Emperor released a long and loud cry from its shoulder armor as if wringing out its lungs.

It was an almost tearful and plaintive howl.

Surprise colored Taeko's face when she heard it.

"Dragon Emperor...!?"

Before she could ask anything of it, the Dragon Emperor's engine noise began to lower.

The pulse-like engine noise of that false arm's Eighth Activation slowly vanished.

It grew quieter and quieter.

Taeko looked to Yuuki for a moment and then gave a panicked shout.

"D-Dragon Emperor! What're ya doin'!? Hurry up and activate!!"

–Taeko – Steel Tech – Take – Activate Dragon Emperor – Hit!

Her Tech succeeded, but the dragon ignored its master and cried.

The long, lonely cry reverberated through the train car.

"Dragon Emperor! She killed my brother!"

Taeko's voice did not reach it.

It ignored her, lost all strength, and let its giant fist fall to the floor.

Taeko fell to her knees at the Dragon Emperor's unexpected deactivation.

The dragon's will vanished, so the Dragon's Emperor became nothing more

than a hunk of metal to reject her attempt to fight.

That meant it had not accepted her as its master.

“Dragon Emperor!”

–Taeko – Steel Tech – Take – Reactivate Dragon Emperor – Hit!

Even though the Tech succeeded, the metal disobeyed and gave no response.

“Why...?”

“Bringing the Dragon Emperor to such a high activation was a mistake. Once the dragon’s will awoke, the prosthetic disobeyed you.”

“...But why?”

“What do you mean why?”

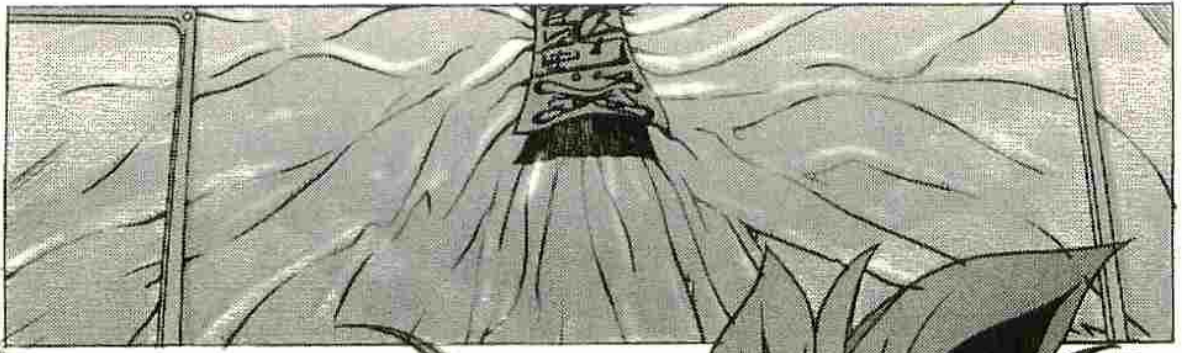
“Why would the dragon’s will refuse to fight ya!? The dragon’s will can see people’s wills and supply them with heaven’s will, so why won’t it attack ya!?”

Yuuki ignored Taeko’s question.

She did not respond and simply held Housei at the ready as she spoke.

“Will you surrender?”

“Why would we surrender!?”



With a shout full of rejection, someone charged in from Yuuki's right.

It was Hisahide.

In a single bound, he rose nearly to the ceiling and landed in the center of the aisle.

He stood at the midpoint between Yuuki and Taeko.

He stood tall, but he was covered in blood.

The blood was coming from his right collarbone, his right chest, and his left side.

He held his side as he spoke.

“So you get us used to attacks from straight ahead and finish it off with something from directly below? You play pretty dirty.”

Yuuki attacked without warning.

–Yuuki – Aqua High/Sight/Shot Tech – Take – Create Water Barrier – Hit.

Her vision filled with a giant wall of water formed from the whirling wind.

The water created a high-pressure current in the wall.

It smashed the seats and pressed on the air as it raced forward like a bulldozer.

It was an instant away from a direct hit, but then the wall came to a sudden stop.

“...!?”

A few meters in front of Yuuki, Hisahide threw a kick beyond that transparent wall.

He dropped his heel down.

As usual, flames surrounded that foot.

The one difference was the amount of fire.

This was an explosion.

Unlike before, the flames reached an Octave of more than 1,000,000.

“Don’t you underestimate me!!”

The flying water wall was burned to ashes by the Flame High.

As he swung his foot down with the force of an axe, the explosive flames flew out toward Yuki.

Yuuki reacted by staring at her opponent’s fire using her natural left eye.

The power of incineration descended with a diameter of about two meters.

–Yuuki – Aqua High/Sight/Shot Tech – Take – Create Water Barrier – Hit.

The water she created was kicked into oblivion while it was still small.

As she tried to move back, her back reached the door leading to the connection between cars.

“...!?”

She had destroyed the door’s lock, so she could easily open it if she reached for it.

But she did not have time for that.

“...Kh!”

With a hint of panic, she knew the attack would reach her.

But in that instant, the door behind her burst open and someone behind her grabbed her in their arms.

Part 3

7:44 PM

It all happened in an instant.

As soon as the door with the broken lock was opened, Shoui noticed Yuuki's back in front of him.

–Shoui – Sight/Tactical Tech – Multi-Auto-Take – Confirm Situation – Hit!

–Shoui – Gym/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Grab – Hit.

*–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Dodge Tech – Multi-Counter-Take – Great Dodge
– Hit!*

–Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Prepare for Landing – Hit!

He quickly fell back with Yuuki in his arms.

He moved back to the front car's rear deck, the second car's front deck, and back halfway through the passenger space after opening the door to the second car.

Yuuki looked back in his arms.

–Yuuki – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Identify Individual – Hit.

–Yuuki – Mind Tech – Take – Intimidate – Hit!

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Auto-Counter-Take – Ignore – Hit.

–Yuuki – Gym/Dodge Tech – Take – Release – Hit!

–Shoui – Gym/Boxing Tech – Multi-Counter-Take – Grab – Miss.

Yuuki forced his arms off of her and stood up.

At the same time, the door to the front deck was knocked down with embers flying everywhere.

Shoui stood with his back to the embers to protect Yuuki.

And he looked directly at Yuuki.

The Dog God on his shoulder expressed his thoughts for him.

“Please hurry away from here. Not even you can win this, Yuuki.”

“Hizaka Shoui...”

“Y-yes?”

When she called his name and he answered, the look on her face changed slightly.

An expression briefly entered her natural left eye.

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Hit – Decode Expression – Hit.

–Yuuki – Mind Tech – Counter-Hit – Psychological Resistance – Hit!

Her thoughts immediately vanished from her face.

Instead, she spoke.

“Hizaka...Shoui.”

“What is it you want? We need to hurry.”

Before he could say the enemy was approaching, she seemed to spit some words out onto the floor.

“Why are you here?”

“I promised on that night three years ago I’d protect you, didn’t I?”

“I do not remember making any such promise with you.”

“...Eh?”

He frowned and she gave a simple reaction.

She ignored him.

Instead of at him, the Killing Holder was now looking to the front car where their enemy was.

The Dog God frantically spoke up as the power of her cold eyes pierced Shoui's heart.

“Wh-what does that mean!?”

He had nothing further to say and she did not answer his question.

She rejected him.

The answer could be found in her behavior.

And a voice spoke from behind him as if to mock his thoughts.

“What's this? I thought you were supposed to help me become king.”

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Auto-Hit – Detect Killer Intent – Hit.

Shoui turned around in surprise and saw Hisahide stepping in from the front deck.

His clothes were dyed with blood and he stood proudly tall as he looked back Shoui's way.

The horribly heated look in his sharp eyes contrasted Yuuki's cold gaze.

Shoui's Dog God hid behind his back in apparent fear of the boy's gaze.

Hisahide laughed a little at the small animal's reaction.

“Outta the way, kid. Takada might like you, but get in the way and I'll turn you to ashes.”

His warning was filled with a number of emotions, including jealousy and intimidation.

But Shoui was not the one to respond.

Nor was Yuuki.

A girl's voice responded.

“That's going a little too far, Hisahide-san.”

It was Takada's voice.

Part 4

7:48 PM

A small figure with a stole over her shoulders stood from the seat to Shoui's right.

It was Takada Seigi.

She moved to the aisle and stood between Shoui and Nakamura.

She looked to the darkness out the window rather than either of the boys.

"This is a crossroads. With the current possibilities, you can become king if you survive here."

"Takada."

Hisahide's somewhat irritated voice responded to Takada's gentle one.

"Are you trying to stop this showdown?"

"What if I am?"

"The thing about guys is, we want to be the strongest. Can you really stop that?"

A short silence followed.

Hisahide remained motionless, Takada did the same, and Shoui followed suit as he watched them.

–Shoui – Hear Tech – Auto-Take – Listen – Hit.

Shoui heard a quiet whirring noise from behind him.

It was Yuuki's MD stopping.

Beyond Takada, Hisahide's MD had also stopped playing its Rhythm.

The Rhythms they used to fight had stopped.

That brought a certain thought to Shoui's mind.

...Is the battle over?

But then he realized something.

The Dog God had not voiced that thought.

...?

Puzzled, he looked back over his shoulder.

The Dog God was still hiding from Hisahide as if dangling from his shoulder.

The small light brown animal was suspiciously looking behind him.

That was of course where Yuuki stood.

The Dog God was frozen in place watching her.

...What does that mean?

The thought remained trapped inside Shoui and did not come out.

Instead, he heard Takada's voice from her Dog God.

"Shoui-san."

He quickly looked forward when she spoke his name.

She looked up at him with her dark eyes.

She reached for Taromaru on her shoulder and held his small body in her hand.

As she rubbed the Dog God's throat, she opened her mouth.

"Please. Convince the Koto Chancellor to leave and then leave with her."

She smiled a little, but when Shoui gulped, it had more to do with hearing her voice directly for the first time.

He thought about her voice, what her words meant, and what it meant to do as she said.

He recalled a portion of the prophecy she had recited.

A king resents him

A queen smiles at him

A sage resigns himself

...Is that referring to now?

As soon as he asked himself that, Hisahide opened his mouth again.

“Wait, Takada. ...Do we really have to rely on him?”

“That is the best way of hurting the fewest people.”

Takada turned her back on Shoui to face Hisahide.

Hisahide glanced over her shoulder to Shoui and sighed in exhaustion.

“I see you didn’t use your physical voice for me...”

With a dull expression, Hisahide sent his direct killer intent Shoui’s way.

“To be honest, I don’t like how you’ve taken a liking to someone weaker than me.”

“Are you still saying that kind of thing? Nobody likes a jealous boy.”

“That may be, but I want you by my side.”

Those words rang in Shoui’s ears.

He reflexively looked into Hisahide’s eyes.

Rather than clashing, their gazes seemed to melt together.

...He’s the same.

Shoui did not even need to think about what about Hisahide was the same.

He suddenly found his body relaxing.

He lost the will to fight and felt oddly fulfilled.

So he fearlessly accepted Hisahide’s gaze and prepared to turn his back.

“...Yuuki.”

Just as he said that...

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Killer Intent – Hit!

A gale-like presence slammed into him from beyond Takada and Hisahide.

Part 5

7:57 PM

“!?”

Before Shoui could ask what was going on, the owner of the presence gave a powerful roar.

“Yuuki Yuuki!! Answer me! Why does the Dragon Emperor see ya as good!?”

It was Taeko.

The Dragon Emperor produced a shallow sound of activation.

“Boss!?”

Shoui was conflicted.

Beyond Takada and Hisahide, he could see Taeko with the Dragon Emperor at the ready.

This was dangerous.

He knew that.

An atmosphere so intense it brought pain shot across the train car and ruled their surroundings.

But Shoui was conflicted.

Should he stop Taeko?

Should he wait for Takada and Hisahide to do something since they stood between him and Taeko?

Should he protect Yuuki?

This should not have been a hard decision to make, but the doubt in his heart filled him with indecision.

He doubted whether he really needed to protect a girl who knew she was the Killing Holder.

Just as Yuuki had forgotten his three-year-old promise, Shoui only knew Yuuki from before she had killed.

And so he hesitated.

He came to a stop and someone else took action instead: Hisahide.

He shoved Takada to the ground in front of him and slapped his MD's switch in.

Shoui remained motionless as the Flame High user began to move.

He began a slow turn to face Taeko.

"You moron! I thought you weren't gonna fight!"

–Shoui – Mind/Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

A look of both surprise and confusion came to Hisahide's face.

Hisahide's eyes turned to Yuuki behind Shoui.

...What did Yuuki do!?

Shoui's silent question was answered in an unexpected way.

–Shoui – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Miss.

An intense weight slammed down on top of his right shoulder.

"!?"

–Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Control Stance – Miss.

The blow knocked him to his knees and he saw something like a giant metal rod on top of his shoulder.

It was Housei. Yuuki was aiming the weapon with Shoui's shoulder acting as a prop.

But that was not all.

–Shoui – Hear Tech – Auto-Take – Listen – Hit!

The intro of some horribly clear music reached his ears.

It was the Cold High Rhythm.

Yuuki was preparing to fire a blast of ice rather than water at Taeko.

It was one of the Cold High Rhythm's frozen shots that had once killed Nagoya Vice Chancellor Yamashita Gihei.

“Yuuki!?”

As if in response to the Dog God's yell, flames enveloped Hisahide's leg as Takada lay on the floor next to him.

A series of motions began with those flames.

Housei prepared to fire its ether light.

Hisahide swung up the leg covered in the Flame High while keeping an eye on Taeko's movements behind him.

Shoui remained motionless as it all approached the conclusion.

Or it should have.

However, someone rebuked Shoui.

It was Takada.

“You can't let this happen! Stop them, Shoui-san!”

She did more than just shout.

She stood up.

And with that simple action, it all fell apart.

The Harmonist could not react to the sudden movement.

And in accordance with the rules, Hisahide's sideways sweeping foot pierced through Takada's unexpectedly raised torso.

“...!”

All Shoui saw was the fact that Hisahide had kicked Takada.

As planned, the boy's kick cut through Yuuki's icy blast as it swept through Takada's torso, rotated in a compact arc behind him, and kicked away Taeko's lightning blast.

The powers of ice and lightning were turned to ashes. The same fate awaited Takada.

As she doubled over and collapsed, her body was covered in fire.

The first to burn away was her clothing.

Next came her hands and Taromaru on her shoulder.

“Takada-san...!”

Shoui stepped forward to support her as she collapsed.

But...

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Restraint – Miss!

His actions were stopped by an odd impulse inside his heart.

Part 6

7:58 PM

It was the fire.

The flames filling Takada stopped him from moving.

Someone was burning. He had to save her.

But his feet would not move forward.

He realized his face and body were stiff with tension.

An emotion that controlled his body more than his mind had frozen him and it refused to go away.

His legs, his body, and his arms did something other than move forward.

They trembled.

His body was ruled by a bone-rattling exhaustion and chill and a sharp pain stabbed into his forehead.

The sword wound he had received two years before filled his head with a powerful phantom pain.

This chilly emotion brought back his memories of the past and sent a tremor through his body.

That emotion was known as fear.

But...

...How strange.

The fear permeating his body now was not of the unknown. It was a pure fear that did not even include any curiosity.

...I've never seen the Flame High's fire before, so why!?

That rational part of his mind was shattered by a cry of instinct.

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Restraint – Miss!

“Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

He heard a scream escape his own mouth.

It was an unpleasant voice. It was a loud, ear-splitting voice that seemed to squeeze all the air from his lungs.

He tried to stop it but could not.

He wailed.

A voice answered his cry.

“Takada!”

It was Hisahide.

As Shoui motionlessly screamed, Hisahide called Takada’s name and supported her body.

When he held her upper body from behind, her waist and below fell to the floor.

The Flame High strike had bisected her torso.

Both her clothing and her entire body were enveloped in flames and burning.

Shoui saw her detached lower body turn to ashes on the floor.

Her stole gradually turned to ashes and scattered into the air, starting from the bottom. On her shoulder, Taromaru grew entirely white and vanished into a wisp of ash.

The Dog God on Shoui’s shoulder gave a small cry.

It was a long, drawn-out, and metallic animal cry.

Taeko ran over from behind Hisahide.

“A-are ya all right!?”

But Hisahide ignored her and tried to turn Takada to face him in his arms.

It was too late.

The simple voice grew louder and louder.

As it did, shimmering heat and a white light surrounded him.

“———!”

The voice stopped.

Nakamura Hisahide looked to Shoui.

Nakamura was not crying.

He was not smiling and there was no anger in his eyes. He looked to Shoui with an expressionless face.

It was the look of a Killing Holder.

He then continued forward.

He took one step.

Shoui was still on the ground and he took a step back while facing the other boy.

His back ran into Yuuki's legs.

She did not retreat. Ether light filled Housei as it rested on Shoui's shoulder.

At the same time, Nakamura continued wordlessly forward.

Every action was controlled by the name Killing Holder.

Before Nakamura could launch his fiery kick, Yuuki's spell activated.

A giant icicle appeared above his head.

“!”

The icicle stabbed straight through the train in between Shoui and Yuuki's position and Taeko and Hisahide's position.

The metal screamed as the train was torn in two.

Part 7

8:01 PM

Below the night sky, an icicle broke through the roof of an Osaka bullet train and stabbed into the track below.

It was a giant stake.

Of the bullet train's twelve cars, the stake pierced the second one, which accomplished two things.

First, it brought all the cars behind that to a stop.

Second, the second car was split from the front.

The front car possessed a will driving it forward.

The sound of ripping metal only lasted an instant.

The back of the front two cars was torn and they jerked forward as they took off again.

A moment later, the ice stake was overwhelmed by the momentum of the other cars and shattered.

Of course, it did not end there.

Amid a tremendous metallic din, the rearmost ten cars lost control.

The heavy flow of metal was dammed up by the ice stake, so they danced about as the stopping motion mixed with the forward motion.

The first to dance was the sixth car in the center.

In just a split second, the car bent and hopped upwards.

The seventh car onward followed the movements.

Instead of racing forward in a straight line, the row of cars gained an upward movement.

The sixth car took the lead in falling from the elevated railway.

The seventh and eighth cars were pushed by those behind them and followed the sixth.

The fifth had its back end lifted up and was dragged after them.

From there, it was a chain reaction.

They hopped, were pulled on, or spiraled.

Before long, all of the rear ten cars had tumbled from the elevated railway.

The kinetic energy of their 200+ kph velocity caused all of the cars to slip from the elevated railway and tore at or destroyed the power poles, railway, gravel, and walls like a woodworking plane.

A complex cacophony of destruction continued without end.

The noise rang far into the distance as the bullet train fell onto the Osaka Plain.

The rural land could not stop the cars.

The power of speed caused the long metal cars to hop along the dirt.

The links between cars were destroyed and each of the ten cars rolled as a separate metal tube.

From beginning to end, it only lasted five seconds.

The scene of destruction with no audience ended quickly.

Part 8

8:08 PM

After it was all over, it took several minutes before Shoui regained clarity of mind.

“ ... ”

The color of the scene returned to his eyes.

He saw the winter night sky.

He had seen that vast sky a few times already today.

If that night sky lay before his eyes, he had to be on his back.

The ground below him was made of dirt.

With the thin frost of the winter earth, the ground was cold.

It was not an appropriate place to sleep.

He tried to get up, but his body would not move.

–Shoui – Medical Tech – Take – Determine Wounds – Hit.

He had hit his back hard on something when the train car had overturned.

He felt numb and his head felt heavy.

He gathered air in his gut and held his breath.

–Shoui – Mind/Gym Tech – Take – Focus – Hit.

He shot to his feet.

When he lifted his hips, a dull pain ran through the core of his body.

–Shoui – Mind/Medical Tech – Take – Ignore Pain – Hit.

–Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Control Stance – Hit.

He almost collapsed, so he put his left leg back to support himself.

He felt a blow to the back of his head.

“Ow!”

He quickly turned around to see what unexpected obstacle he had struck.

He saw the train car that had been split by the icicle and rolled upside down.

He could see inside through the slice.

Several of the seats had come undone and fallen from the floor which was now on top, so it looked like a bizarre work of art.

The walls had grown distorted and all of the glass was gone from the windows.

It had clearly hit something hard.

“...”

Shoui silently rested his elbow on the ceiling which was now the floor.

When he did, the Dog God climbed down his arm and onto the ceiling.

The small foxlike spirit beast had apparently not followed Takada into death.

...Is that because it followed me of its own free will?

It had been born of her Live, but it was now just an animal.

Her will was nowhere to be found.

He sighed at that thought.

...I can't believe this.

He tried to speak the words, but only a scratchy breath escaped.

His throat was still refusing to produce words.

He had once more faced the opponent who had injured his throat, but it had resolved nothing. It had only deepened his feeling of defeat.

He smiled bitterly.

The Dog God glanced up at him and ran further inside the train car.

He watched its back and swaying tail and then looked up to the floor that was now the ceiling.

There was nothing there expect for the occasional seat.

The part of the car containing Takada's ashes had continued on to Nagoya.

Shoui had nothing.

Once he became aware of that, a thought came to him.

...So my indecision expanded our possibilities in a negative direction.

When he should have protected Yuuki and stopped them, he had given into his doubts and done nothing.

So...

...You might be able to say I killed Takada-san.

"..."

He looked back behind him.

He saw the night sky and the ground there.

A few long line-like objects had fallen onto the dark expanse of Osaka Plain.

They were the other cars.

Shoui looked around.

–Shoui – Sight Tech – Take – Search – Hit.

The Sight Tech told him the person he was searching for was not there.

...There is nobody, hm?

Yuuki was nowhere to be found.

He was certain she was not dead.

He knew very well she was not the type to make a suicide attack.

She had likely been the one to remove him from the car and place him on the ground.

But she was gone.

He did not know if she had gone after the enemy or to inform someone of the crash.

The one thing he knew for sure was her absence by his side.

That girl had said she did not need him, had forgotten the promise from three years before, and had controlled the battle.

She had been the first to react when Taeko had charged in.

...The Killing Holder, hm?

As he thought that, he heard a quiet sound by his right side.

...?

He looked down and saw the Dog God looking up at him from the edge of the ceiling.

Something glittered at the Dog God's feet.

It was a gold ring.

It was the one Takada had worn.

...Is this...?

As he picked it up, the Dog God stared at him and suddenly hopped to the ground.

"!?"

He reached out on reflex, but it ran a few meters away.

It then stopped and looked up at Shoui.

Shoui remained silent.

But the Dog God gave a small metallic cry.

It was saying goodbye.

The Dog God turned its back and ran off into the dry grass.

Its tail swished above the waves of grass a few times before vanishing.

The rustling as the small animal parted the grass quickly moved off into the distance.

Instead of pursuing, Shoui squeezed Takada's ring in his left hand.

“ ... ”

He said nothing, said nothing, got up from the train wreckage, and began to walk.

His body ached, but he walked regardless.

The field was deserted.

The sky was vast, dark, and empty except for the stars.

Shoui was alone.

Chapter 4: Rest (After Playing for an Extended Period of Time) – (12/20/1996)

Part 1

11:57 AM

The sun was at its peak in the sky.

There were no clouds.

There was no wind either.

Unusual for winter, warm sunlight shined down.

But that sunlight did not provide heat to all parts of Osaka evenly.

Most of the narrow land known as Osaka was occupied by cold buildings.

There was little land in the city that could be warmed by the sunlight.

The Tennoji Park in the Tennoji Ward was one of those few places.

The large park contained large flower beds, many trees, and brick pavement. Occasional bird calls and beast cries could be heard from the Tennoji Zoo inside the park.

It was the carefree time of midday on a weekday.

The flow of time seemed slower than usual.

Few people walked through the park and none of them were in a hurry.

Some of those were casually-dressed boys and girls.

The schools were on winter break. Freed from the bonds of time, they were

able to walk slowly.

The occasional bird calls from the zoo were the only sound supporting that pace.

They all slowly but surely made their way to their destinations.

But there was one person who had come to a stop inside the large park.

She sat on the edge of a large round flower bed in the center of the park.

She was Aoi Hijiri.

She had a shirt wrapped around the waist of her jeans and she wore a white blouson. The outfit combined with her short hair gave her an androgynous look.

She sat on the brick flower bed and ate a somewhat late lunch while facing the sun.

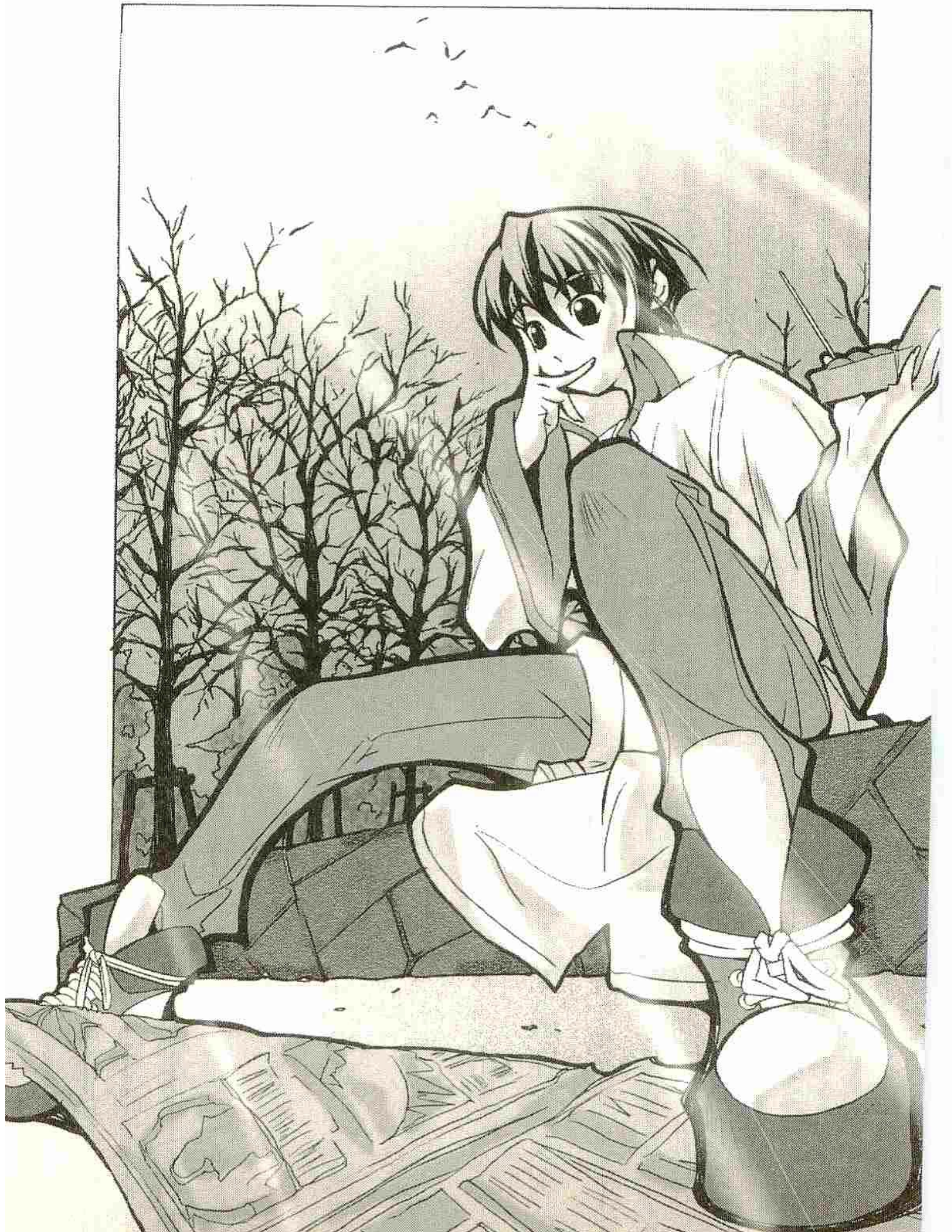
She was eating some takoyaki she had bought at a stand at the park entrance.

She slowly but precisely took the nine takoyaki from their paper box and tossed them into her mouth while her gaze was fixated on the ground at her feet.

A newspaper sold on the roadside was opened there.

It was a sports newspaper that sold itself on the entertaining gossip articles.

“The rumors were right. This newspaper really did change its name from the Tokyo version...”



Hijiri moved her foot to skillfully turn the page with the toe of her sneaker.

She kicked past the TV section as she read it in reverse.

She was looking for an article on the previous night.

Hijiri had no idea what had happened since she had escaped the Osaka Hilton and spent the night in a business hotel.

If things had gone as planned, the newspaper would probably mention that Nakamura had escaped to Nagoya.

“...”

She skipped the entertainment section and the horse racing information, but she stopped on the financial section.

While eating two takoyaki, she read the fashion information, glanced at the actions of an Osaka corporate group, and turned the page again.

Then her expression stiffened somewhat.

Not a single article mentioned the previous night's incident.

Not a word about the Osaka Hilton turning into a flower, about Osaka Prefectural #2 collapsing, or about Nakamura.

Her hand stopped with the toothpick stabbed inside a takoyaki and she kicked at the newspaper again.

She reached page three.

She passed by it after only glancing across the page.

There was nothing there.

She looked at page two across from it.

She glanced across it and prepared to turn to the final page.

“...Oh?”

But her foot stopped.

On the edge of page two was a notice about the temporary suspension of a bullet train.

The bullet train route from Osaka to Nagoya would be stopped from the first train early in the morning to the third train in the afternoon.

The only reason given was a train car malfunction.

There were no related articles, but...

“Come to think of it, there was a weird story earlier...”

She used her toes to flip back a few pages at once.

In the financial section, one piece of information about a corporation had caught her attention.

“The Houzenji Group’s special forces had a live-fire exercise late at night, hm?”

The Houzenji Group was a corporate group that had been under the protection of Nanba Souichirou’s Modified Purple Electricity Style.

An article mentioned that the group’s corporate combat special forces had held a live-fire exercise in Osaka Plain the night before.

No matter the age, corporations would always secretly fight over their patents and technology. These exercises were daily events and normal people and students like Hijiri would likely end up dragged into those conflicts if not for the academy rules.

“But why did a simple exercise make the news?”

Hijiri looked down at the article that expressed some questions about this exercise.

Most of the exercise had occurred on national land without receiving permission from the appropriate government departments, so the article simply gossiped about a possible true meaning behind the actions.

The author ultimately concluded that they did not know the truth but that it might have been a way of disguising a search for Hideyoshi’s buried treasure or making contact with aliens.

Hijiri, however, sighed.

She stuffed all four remaining takoyaki into her mouth.

And she swallowed them.

Five seconds passed.

After another sigh, she picked up the newspaper and looked at page one, which she had been unable to see while it was lying on the ground.

The headline article was about a professional baseball winter camp.

There was no record of their rampage from the night before.

But Hijiri was no longer frowning.

She quickly flipped through the newspaper while moving her lips.

“One, two, three,” she counted as she flipped through.

When she reached the end, her count had stopped at 32.

She closed the newspaper and looked up into the sky.

“Including the five text ones and the seven 1/8 size ones, that’s how many ads the Houzenji Group has in here...”

To have their ads printed, they had to be paying the newspaper.

Newspapers of course made money by publishing articles to bring in readers, but they more directly made money through advertisements.

Most of this newspaper’s direct income was paid by the Houzenji Group.

“They bought up the page, did they? If the other newspapers are the same, it must have cost quite a lot.”

“Does that frighten you?”

A man’s voice suddenly reached her.

Hijiri turned around to see a man dressed like a monk standing in front of the flower bed on her left.

He was Iba Masaaki.

He too was holding a rolled-up newspaper in his hand.

“I overlooked the fact that the Osaka Chancellor’s patron is from the Houzenji family. I never thought the wealthiest merchant in Sakai would be so fixated on

a child who merely slayed an ogre.”

“Looks like they’ve made a really big move here. Is that newspaper the same?”

Iba frowned slightly and nodded.

“It mentions the collapse of Ixolde and the damage from the destroyed hotel, but it blames those on a localized Clockquake, ridiculously enough. The victims will apparently receive disaster relief from the anti-Godquake fund set up after last year’s Godquake – that battle between gods – in Kobe.”

“That was fast...”

“That’s what happens with the Houzenji family, Osaka’s wealthiest merchant group. They intend to conceal Osaka’s defeat.”

“There’s no helping that. The Kusanagi Rhythm works on the emperor, so the Kinki-Kansai corporate group that includes Kyoto probably also wants to hide that it lost.”

“Yes, they cannot afford a loss. ...Most likely, this was the doing of Houzenji’s Iwai Sanzou.”

“Do you know him?”

“Yes, although I doubt he remembers *me*.”

Hijiri did not comment on the emphasis Iba put on the word “me”.

She asked about something else instead.

“Do you know where that idiot Nakamura is, Iba?”

“He did not arrive in Nagoya.”

“...What?”

Hijiri rolled up her newspaper.

“What do you mean? Don’t tell me the Koto Chancellor-...”

“The Koto Chancellor was out on patrol in the city today, but Nakamura did not lose to her.”

“Then...”

“The bullet train they were riding derailed in Osaka Plain and the remaining front car stopped at Kyoto Station instead of continuing on to Nagoya. But...”

He took a breath.

“Nothing remained inside the cars besides a handful of ashes.”

Hijiri remained seated and silent.

She slowly set the newspaper down on the edge of the flower bed and rested her chin on her hand with a serious look on her face.

A few seconds passed.

Then she looked over at Iba.

He looked her in the eye and spoke with no apparent expression.

“Takada is dead.”

“Are you certain? Those ashes could have belonged to the Osaka boy or Nagoya’s Chancell-...”

“Nakamura is not in Nagoya.”

Iba’s short and powerful statement seemed to be all the reason he needed.

Hijiri looked away from him and down at her own feet.

Iba’s voice reached her from above.

“What do you think Nakamura will do?”

“...Wouldn’t you know that better than me?”

“Why?”

“What did you do when someone important to you died?”

Iba fell silent and Hijiri did not look in his direction.

She kept her head lowered as she quietly asked herself a question.

She kept a carefree tone throughout.

“Now, what will I do?”

She smiled bitterly.

“So this is what it’s like, Seigi, Takahiro.”

“What what is like?”

“Being alone.”

With that, Hijiri stood up.

And she faced Iba.

“I don’t like the possibility of Seigi having died, but Nakamura is a problem.”

“What will you do?”

“For now, do what I was doing before: search for the winter cherry blossoms.”

“Those cherry blossoms are the beginning of misfortune. Will you still search for them?”

“What greater misfortune could I find? I never thought the destruction of an entire hotel would be played off as no big deal.”

“The Osaka Hilton, Prefectural #2, and the New Yodo River Bridge are already being repaired. ...By repair companies belonging to the Houzenji Group.”

“So a red flower did not bloom in the darkness.”

Hijiri’s bitter smile deepened and a manly smile appeared on her lips.

“Iba, if you have any hints about the cherry blossoms, please tell me. If they bring misfortune, then I intend to start with them as I find a number of things.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

Iba fell silent for a few seconds.

Then he crossed his arms and gave Hijiri an upturned glance.

But that too only lasted a moment.

He then practically spat out his next words.

“Those cherry blossoms are born from battle.”

“Battle?”

“Yes, that’s right.” He nodded. “Nakamura Midori and Kuki Udai had

interacted in the past, but then they became enemies. When they fought in a certain location, cherry blossoms were seen at the end of the battle.”

“ ... ”

“Your parents must have been the same.”

“My parents never told me much about that kind of thing.”

“But those cherry blossoms are born from battle. ...Your father, mother, or both of them must have seen them at the end of a battle.”

Hijiri suppressed a bitter smile at that.

A possibility came to mind.

Her father had abducted her mother from Osaka and returned to Tokyo with her.

It would not be surprising if a battle had occurred then.

What effect had those cherry blossoms had on the two of them?

“ ... ”

Iba would not tell Hijiri that.

And Hijiri chose not to ask.

But she did ask something else.

“What do you intend to do now?”

“Bear all responsibility by fulfilling the prophecy.”

“For who?”

“For those who have died.”

With that brief answer, he looked Hijiri straight in the eyes.

There was no intimidation or questioning in his eyes. It was a powerless gaze.

And he spoke with no hesitation in his voice.

“Aoi, promise me one thing about what is to come.”

“?”

“No matter what might happen, please stay on Nakamura’s side.”

“Eh?” Hijiri lowered her head. “S-sure, that’s fine. But why?”

Iba turned around without answering.

He began to walk away.

Just as Hijiri prepared to call out to him, his voice stopped her.

He uttered some Words.

Companions vanish

Even he vanishes

She too vanishes

A hand that can hold onto no one remains

A hand that fosters destruction remains

That hand pleads for no one to leave

They were Iba’s own Words.

Hijiri simply listened to the low rhythm of the quiet Words.

The back of the monk’s outfit slowly, slowly vanished into the few people walking through the park.

“Iba...”

She could not ask where he was going.

The wind blew through.

It was a quick gust of the north wind that instantly swept away the midday warmth.

“!”

Hijiri covered her face against the dry dust carried by the wind.

She faced forward while surrounded by quiet cries of surprise about the wind.

Iba was already gone.

She could no longer see his back, as if he had been swept away by that wind.

Part 2

2:00 PM

The repairs to Osaka Prefectural #2 would take about two weeks.

Even with workers sent out from the prefectural health department, a repair company from the Houzenji Group, and the Kansai General Student Onmyouji Unit, restoring a three kilometer square of collapsed earth was no small task.

The work was officially said to be the measurement and repairs for a localized Clockquake experiment, but everyone in Osaka knew the truth.

The people avoided that truth because it would not benefit them in any way.

As long as they received large Godquake insurance payouts, rumors would spread, but no one would demand a public announcement of the truth. And even if some smaller voices demanded it, they would fade in time.

Various parts of Osaka were repaired within that almost dependent mood of utilitarianism.

It was lucky that winter break had begun for the schools.

With no classes, it did not matter if the school did not function.

The supplementary and extra lessons for the second term were held at Osaka Prefectural #1 and most of the dorm students temporarily moved to the dorms of other schools or the residences of local wealthy families.

And the wealthy family that took in the greatest number of Prefectural #2 dorm students was the Nanba family.

A large green space was located behind the Naniwa Ward Office.

That was the Nanba family residence.

Two buildings were hidden in the woods surrounded by 200 meter walls.

One was a single-story wooden house and the other was a five-story reinforced concrete dojo for the Modified Purple Electricity Style.

The dojo cut through the wall to border the road and sporadic sounds of bamboo swords could be heard from within.

The first afternoon general lesson was underway.

The retired, housewives with too much time on their hands, college students without a class that afternoon, and workers sent by their company as a form of training were all sparring.

Outside the dojo, the colliding bamboo swords blended together with the rustling of the leaves in the wind.

It was a horribly pure and relaxed sound.

And that sound was audible to the single person in the open-air training ground behind the dojo building.

It was Shoui.

He had removed his coat as he moved his body in the open-air training ground.

He was repeating the simple action known as a push-up.

But his technique was different from normal.

It came down to how he positioned his hands.

The palms were normally pressed against the ground, but he pressed his clenched fists against the ground.

This technique was known as knuckle push-ups.

It required grip strength, wrist strength, and the balance to extend one's arms perfectly straight.

A normal person would be unable to do 30 of them, but Shoui's breaths carried a count that had passed 300.

His voice was not yet leaving his throat, but the sound of his breaths provided the count.

As his body moved up and down, his breaths passed 400 and quickly reached 500. Then he maintained the same position but brought his right hand behind his back.

He used just his left arm to continue the knuckle push-ups.

His pace did not drop.

The muscles on his back and shoulders slowly moved without end below his inner suit.

By the time he passed 300, white steam rose into the winter air from his shoulders.

He was beginning to sweat.

That meant his body had only now begun to activate.

He reached 500.

Without taking a break, he placed his right fist on the ground and placed his left hand behind his back.

He began knuckle push-ups with just his right arm.

His pace still did not drop.

In fact, his slow movements were beginning to grow faster.

He passed 200.

As his movements evolved, the steam rose from his back as well as his shoulders.

His body was activating. The back and shoulder muscles pushed up at the inner suit and moved like a separate creature.

Shou's body stored a power that looked ready to begin moving and explode out at any moment.

It was a great strength.

The monotonous exercise restrained that power.

He passed 300.

The strength and speed building up inside him had already grown to nearly

twice their original size.

But Shoui gradually stored that power inside himself.

–Shoui – Hear Tech – Auto-Take – Listen – Hit.

His ears listened to the sporadic sounds of bamboo swords coming from within the dojo building.

The rustling of the trees blended together with them.

He let the sounds wash over his body as he continued his exercise in silence.

He passed 400.

More and more strength built up inside him.

It was a nostalgic feeling.

At Nandaimon, he had done this exercise in front of the detached room he had used.

Yuuki had often stood by his side and counted his knuckle push-ups and sit-ups.

...Two years ago, 200 was plenty.

He reached 500.

He stopped moving and stopped breathing too.

He brought his left hand forward and placed both fists on the ground.

He spread his fingers.

He dug his fingers into the ground like an animal's claws to raise the palms from the ground.

In that position, he used his toes to kick lightly at the ground.

His legs lifted into the air.

He did not stop there. He bent his arms to control his balance with his legs pointed toward heaven.

He performed a handstand.

His fingers supported his entire body.

But that alone was insufficient.

Once 30 seconds passed, he bent both middle fingers.

His body was supported by a total of eight fingers now.

After another 30 seconds, he bent both index fingers.

After 30 seconds, he bent the ring fingers.

He was down to a total of four fingers.

But his body remained motionless in its handstand.

His grip strength and overall balance supported everything. This was a trick one could not pull off with the unnecessary muscles gained through bodybuilding.

He slowly removed his pinkies.

He supported his body with only the thumbs sticking out from his clenched fists.

30 seconds passed.

“ ... ”

Shoui deeply bent his arms for just a moment, extended them again, and used that force to jump in the direction his back was facing.

He made a perfect half-flip and landed on his feet.

He then faced the wooden training post on the east side of the open-air training ground.

Some faint exhaustion colored his face as he stared at it.

He had only just taken a short break after finishing some questioning from Saki which had lasted until the afternoon.

The slight scars from his injuries the night before had not had a chance to heal and his skin was worn out.

But he stood up.

He said nothing.

He did not move.

He was simply alone.

He continued to stare at the training posts with no apparent expression on his face.

His hair blew in the afternoon wind.

The branches and leaves shook and rustled in the woods.

Several bamboo swords audibly collided.

Shoui moved his hand as if drawn by that sound.

He opened his right fist and raised it for just a moment.

The object in his fist flew straight up.

It was a small gold light.

It was a ring.

The Dog God had given it to him the night before.

It was the one Takada had worn.

The light rose to Shoui's eye level and then dropped back down.

And the wind blew.

The tree branches shook and the sounds of bamboo swords seemed to combine into a single spray.

On that signal, Shoui's hand caught the falling gold light and closed into a fist.

From there, he carried it straight forward. His gauntleted fist struck the training post.

It was a quick movement.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Straight Fist – Hit.

The sound of the strike rang out.

It was a loud sound.

A water bird flew from the large lake located between the open-air training ground and the house.

Needless to say, Shoui paid it no heed.

And he did not stop moving there.

He pulled his arm back and threw a somewhat exaggerated punch.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Straight Fist – Hit.

It was a highly telegraphed strike that he would never use in an actual battle. Due to his lack of warming up, it was a somewhat stiff motion.

But it worked just fine against a training post.

It was a strike that allowed him to feel his own strength.

He threw a right.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Straight Fist – Hit.

He threw a left.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Straight Fist – Hit.

The sounds of strikes never ended.

The wind blew.

The woods rustled.

The bamboo swords crashed together.

And pushed on by those sounds, the audible blows continued and accelerated.

He did not cry out as he threw his punches. He could not speak with the bandages around his throat.

He did not have a Dog God.

He did not even have a Rhythm.

The Dis-Worder boy silently punched the unspeaking training post.

He moved quickly.

The continuous sounds rang loud through his steel gauntlets.

It was fast, but it had not been enough.

“...!”

–Shoui – Savate/Gym/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Combination – Hit.

He added in some footwork for a barrage of blows.

He used his entire body to strike the training post from the left and right.

He stepped in close, spun on his heel, shifted his center of gravity, rotated his hips, put his shoulders into the blows, and timed the extension of his arms.

By combining all of those things, he kept up the blows as a series of motions.

The actions could be called the ultimate in anaerobic exercise.

But this was not enough either.

Shoui thought as he moved.

He thought about how to overcome his opponents.

His opponents were Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide and Koto Chancellor Yuuki Yuuki.

Both of them were Killing Holders.

He tried and failed to imagine himself surpassing them.

Something was missing. Something very, very important.

Until the night before, he had had it in some form.

...The desire to grow stronger so I can fight and protect her.

That desire was missing.

That driving force of his will had disappeared after Yuuki had rejected it the night before.

She had rejected him by telling him he did not need to fight.

“...”

–Shoui – Savate/Gym/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Combination – Hit.

The sounds of the blows and the impacts returning through his arms briefly blew away his indecision.

He kept up the barrage.

He threw the punches to determine his direction.

With each audible hit, thought filled his mind, his indecision vanished, and only pure imagination remained.

But even in that faint remnant of imagination, Shoui could not defeat his opponents.

He had felt undeniable fear on that bullet train.

He had feared the Flame High's fire.

Flames could be seen as a manifestation of death and destruction.

But he had overreacted to the fire burning Takada.

If he had not feared the Flame High's fire, he might have been able to save her.

Shoui had no Words and was familiar with all sorts of Techs and Over Rhythms, so he could of course use healing Rhythms.

But his instinctual fear had overpowered the desire to use one to save her.

...Why is that?

He did not know.

–Shoui – Savate/Gym/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Combination – Hit.

...What did Yamashita Gihei think when he faced Yuuki and me back then?

In his sorrow over Nagoya's future and his desire to escape the bonds of his family, that boy had fought Yuuki and been killed.

When he had faced Yuuki, had he not feared the power of death and destruction?

Had his mind only contained images of himself defeating Yuuki?

"...Kh."

A breath escaped.

Shoui had been continuing the barrage without breathing so far.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Straight Fist – Hit.

He released a single punch from a short distance and breathed lightly enough to maintain the tension in his body.

He drew the oxygen into his gut and moved.

He made no preparation whatsoever, but he simply punched to further his thoughts.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Straight Fist – Hit.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Straight Fist – Hit.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Straight Fist – Hit.

Thoughts floated up in his mind:

The promise on that night three years ago.

A certain incident two years ago.

His ultimately wasted training over the two years since.

His defeat by and fear of Nakamura.

The truth of his training according to Iba.

Takada's death.

Yuuki's rejection.

All of those grew into one large doubt which was answered by his fists.

–Shoui – Savate/Gym/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Combination – Hit.

His question grew clear.

...How can I protect her?

If he could not fight and win, he could not protect her.

But he could not imagine himself defeating them.

And yet if he could not defeat those Killing Holders, he could not protect her.

Yuuki Yuuki had killed Yamashita Gihei who had opposed her and Nakamura Hisahide had killed Takada Seigi who should have become his queen.

Shoui recalled Nakamura's cry when Takada had burned away and vanished.

It had been a powerful cry.

It was a cry only made by someone who had experienced someone's death.

Shoui could not do that.

He was missing something.

–Shoui – Savate/Gym/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Combination – Hit.

He had to regain what he had lost.

–Shoui – Savate/Gym/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Combination – Hit.

He suddenly realized something.

...I'm still thinking about this even after she rejected me...

If he had given up on it all after the rejection, he would not be out here agonizing over it all while punching the training post.

But he was moving now with no relation to his promise or his past.

He remembered Takada's words.

“The more indecisive someone is, the stronger their ultimate answer will be. And the people who make powerful decisions are quite indecisive.”

In that case...

...Am I still trapped in indecision?

The rejection, his fear, and the death of a girl had not led him to a decision.

And his body desired to move.

At the very least, the will of his body had not come to a stop.

“ ... ”

He smiled bitterly.

He stopped his punching.

He stopped his feet.

He took a breath.

He looked up.

He saw the sky.

It was a vast winter sky.

The sun grew pale as it started to sink and the wind whipped through the sky.

The wind was blowing.

The woods were rustling.

He could hear the bamboo swords.

And then he heard something like a dog howling in the distance.

–Shoui – Hear Tech – Take – Listen – Hit.

It was not a dog.

It was some other animal.

It had come from the house.

...What is that?

The animal did not howl again, leaving him with no answer.

“ ... ”

He felt there was more to that, but even greater indecision stopped him from pursuing it.

He nodded.

He remained silent, but his body resumed moving.

He stretched his hand behind him to strike the training post and took a deep breath.

Then he truly began moving once more.

And he tried to figure out a way to catch up to those two.

Part 3

4:12 PM

By the time the afternoon north wind began to wash across the Koto region's fields, Koto Chancellor Yuuki Yuuki had just finished climbing the stairs to the Nandaimon Shrine.

She looked around with Housei in her right hand and a small paper bag in her left.

“...”

In the setting sun, the leaves of the shrine's pine trees rustled coolly in the wind and some of the weak brown leaves fell to the ground.

With the green breath of life gone, the dried leaves were only trash.

Cleaning the shrine of such filth was Senga's job.

But Senga was nowhere to be seen at the moment.

Instead, someone else stood in the shrine.

It was an elderly man in a suit.

He slowly walked toward Yuuki from the house behind the sanctuary.

He approached with the sound of gravel underfoot.

–Yuuki – Person Tech – Take – Identify Person – Hit.

“Houzenji Head Butler Iwai Sanzou...”

The man stopped when Yuuki spoke that name.

They were ten meters apart.

They faced each other with too much room between them to attack in a single beat.

–Yuuki – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

Her Tech succeeded, but she still could not read his expression.

Iwai's gentle smile was so tense that not even Yuuki's Tech could read through it.

With his many years of experience, he did not even need to focus to guard against that sort of search.

It was an expressionless-looking smile and it moved only slightly as he spoke.

“Oh, if it isn't the Koto Guardian. It has been far too long. Three years, is it?”

“Not since the ceremony giving me the title of guardian. ...Why are you here today?”

“To discuss old times.”

His casual answer put a derisive smile on Yuuki's face.

“Are you sure you didn't come with some treats as you gave a report on last night's incident?”

“Well, I did bring some treats. But...”

Iwai Sanzou made a show of tilting his head.

“What is this incident you speak of?”

“...I see. So that's how it's going to be.”

“Is something the matter?”

“You're the head butler now, but it seems you have just as much influence as 13 years ago.” Yuuki aimed Housei toward Iwai. “You aren't planning to use your corporate power to intervene and take control of everything like you did during the Kinki Riot, are you?”

“You seem quite mistaken. I am no more than a loyal servant of the Houzenji family.”

“Did it slip your mind that you used to be the commander of the Houzenji Group's special forces?”

“...”

“You and my grandmother are probably the only adults who were involved in the Kinki Riot to the end and know everything that happened.”

“Are you all that different, Koto Guardian? You too know the secret of the Rhythms and Techs.” He took a breath. “I heard from Senga-sama why you are a Killing Holder. ...And if you know why Rhythms and Techs exist in this world, then I suppose that works.”

“You talk too much.”

Just as Yuuki said that, Senga’s voice cut in.

“Stop it, Yuuki.”

Senga stood in front of the house’s sliding door in her usual white shirt.

She grabbed the broom leaning against the wall and walked toward the other two.

The gravel crunched under her feet as she did so.

“That man and his corporation are no fools. They will not do the same thing they did during the Kinki Riot.”

“...Really?”

“Besides, Yuuki, think about it. It is because Houzenji covered up last night’s incident that you can remain the only Killing Holder.”

If word of Takada’s death got out, Nakamura would also be given that name.

It was a side effect of the press restrictions that that had not happened.

“For the time being, their corporate group is not your enemy. Please make no mistake here.”

Iwai slowly walked forward, as if encouraged by Senga’s worried-sounding words.

He made a wide circle around Yuuki to keep his distance while also lining up next to her.

Senga stopped in the same position he had been in.

“You should leave, Iwai. You have a lot of preparations to make, don’t you?”

“Yes, I must prepare to protect Osaka.”

The elderly man bent his straight back in a bow.

“I will be going then,” he said as he turned his back.

And he began to walk.

Yuuki stared at his back.

–Yuuki – Mind Tech – Take – Emit Killer Intent – Hit.

Pure tension came from Yuuki’s biological left eye.

The wind blew and the pine leaves rustled or fell.

But Iwai Sanzou did not look back.

His pace did not falter as he descended the stairs and disappeared from view.

Her killer intent had to have reached him, but he had ignored it.

“ ... ”

Yuuki frowned and looked away before looking to Senga who was smiling bitterly a short distance away.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s no use, Yuuki. Honestly... He and I are very different from the people we were in the old stories I tell.”

“Isn’t he the one who cornered Kuki Udai and Nakamura Midori when you tried to protect them? Have you forgotten your grudge over that interference?”

“What good is causing more deaths?” muttered Senga as she approached Yuuki. “You know why I set aside the spear, don’t you? He is the same.”

Yuuki said nothing.

She held her tongue and hid her expression, so Senga sighed.

“You really are serious when it comes to yourself.”

Then Senga’s eyebrows moved.

Her eyes turned toward Yuuki’s left side.

Yuuki held a small paper bag there.

“What is that?” asked Senga. “Ingredients for dinner?”

“No.”

“Stationery.”

“No.”

“Medicine?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“Something I will need once I leave my past.”

“Eh?”

Yuuki responded to that confused syllable.

“It’s something I will need to ensure I don’t give up.”

She held the paper bag in her arms, and...

–Yuuki – Hear Tech – Auto-Take – Listen – Hit.

She heard a quiet, barely-audible sound behind her.

She turned around in surprise at the small presence she had failed to notice until now.

–Yuuki – Sight Tech – Take – Spot – Hit.

Something strange grew up from the tall grass that separated the hill’s slope from the shrine grounds.

It looked like a light brown calligraphy brush with a white tip.

It was an animal tail.

“...?”

When Yuuki took a step back and readied Housei, it half-frantically ran out from the grass.

The 15 cm creature looked something like a fox and something like a mouse.

It stood on its hind legs and shook its long tail as it looked up at Yuuki.

“Oh...” Senga opened her narrow eyes. “How unusual. That’s a Dog God.”

“A Dog God?”

“They are a relatively docile type of spiritual beast. ...I wonder why it’s here.”

“Maybe it was drawn here by something in the sanctuary.”

“No, I wouldn’t think so. Dog Gods are known for holding an interest in people.”

“Hm.”

Yuuki nodded and took a step forward to approach the Dog God.

The Dog God jumped back the exact distance of her step forward.

With a rustling from the grass, she saw just its tail sticking up again.

Yuuki looked to Senga.

Senga looked to Yuuki.

They both looked back to the tail in the grass once more.

The tail did not flee.

“...?”

Yuuki took a step back.

Again, the Dog God ran forward to fill exactly the distance of her step.

The small animal looked up at Yuuki from a distance of approximately five meters.

Yuuki looked at the Dog God.

The human and animal motionlessly waited for the other to do something.

Senga smiled bitterly as she watched.

“Reminds me a lot of Shoui and you right now.”

“Hizaka Shoui...”

Emotion briefly filled her eyes as she muttered that name.

She looked at the Dog God with slight surprise in her eyes.

“Come to think of it, Hizaka Shouji had an animal like this with him yesterday...”

“Oh? Perhaps it came to visit you.”

“I seriously doubt it.”

Yuuki looked away from the Dog God, but she sounded more intrigued by the idea than the words themselves let on.

She began walking toward the house.

Senga quickly called out to her.

“Yuuki, what about the animal?”

“You said they’re docile, right? Then it doesn’t matter.”

She listened to the quiet footsteps following her.

It stepped much more lightly on the gravel than a human.

These were the footsteps of a Dog God that may have been accompanying Hizaka Shouji.

“...”

Yuuki embraced the paper bag as she walked.

The wind blew and her hair fluttered.

That wind gave a chill to the growing colors of evening.

Part 4

6:23 PM

The sun had set and night had been around for some time.

There was no moon in the sky and the stars alone were beginning to twinkle.

There was one sort of place far more suited to seeing that starlight than the city.

Those were large, unlit places.

The fields of Takatsuki on the northern end of Osaka Plain were perfect for stargazing.

That vast unlit land had a slight slope and the starry sky was reflected in the distant Yodo River.

The only thing to obstruct the view of the sky was the long elevated railway that passed by overhead.

That railway was used by bullet trains.

It was the same railway from which a bullet train had derailed the night before.

Two people were currently below that railway.

One was a boy and the other a girl.

The boy was somewhat short. The girl was tall and had a giant prosthetic in the place of a left arm.

They were Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide and Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko.

Taeko leaned against one of the railway's supports while Nakamura crouched down on one knee.

They were surrounded by darkness.

They could see the city lights far in the distance at the bottom of the vast slope.

Other than the somewhat bright sky there, they only had the starlight for illumination.

Taeko suddenly spoke.

“If ya can’t find it, maybe a Buster destroyed it along with the train.”

She received no response.

Only a gentle wind blew through.

None of the train cars remained from the night before.

The Houzenji Group’s special forces had likely Busted them that night. Only shards of glass and small metal components were scattered around.

Taeko sniffed quietly.

“So ya can only find glass and screws lyin’ around, huh?”

“Shut up.”

Nakamura finally spoke.

It was a deep and exhausted voice.

It was also full of menace.

But Taeko was not afraid.

“If ya can’t find that girl’s ring, are ya actually gonna beat up everyone from Osaka like ya said ya would?”

His answer came after a short pause.

“What other choice do I have?”

“?”

“She was the one that knew how I could become king...but there’s nothing left of her now. Not even a memento.”

“Ya can’t make yer triumphant return to Nagoya without the girl who was

supposed to be yer queen?”

Nakamura did not answer.

He said nothing as he crouched in the darkness.

Taeko sighed.

“I can’t believe this.” She smiled bitterly. “Yer prophecy belonged to both of ya, didn’t it?”

She stood up from the bridge support and stood next to Nakamura.

“Ya wanted to us her prophecy to become king so ya could make her queen, didn’t ya?”

“...I wanted to show her the truth about herself.”

“And what was that?”

“That she could be more than just a Fast Reader.”

She answered him after a short pause and with some sadness in her voice.

“So ya would’ve become her possibility?”

It was too dark to tell whether or not he nodded.

But he did stand up.

And he turned to look toward Osaka.

“It’s time I became king,” he said.

“Is there any reason for that?” asked Taeko. “It’d be a lot easier to return to Nagoya.”

“When the result is a foregone conclusion, a battle’s possibilities are meaningless.”

“So ya want to choose the more difficult one?”

He did not answer and silently started walking.

Taeko followed him.

After a few steps, Nakamura asked her something.

“Why are you following me?”

“I’m not followin’ ya. But if yer goin’ to Osaka, then that’s where the action’s gonna be. And...” She took a breath. “There’s somethin’ I wanna try in the center of that action.”

She smiled bitterly.

And at that moment, Nakamura came to a sudden stop in front of her.

“...?”

Taeko also stopped.

–Taeko – Sight Tech – Take – Night Vision – Hit.

She saw why Nakamura had stopped.

A man stood about ten meters in front of them.

The silhouette in the pale starlight was that of a short man in a monk’s outfit.

It was Iba.

He stood alone on the ground and looked to the other two.

“Where do you think you are going?”

Nakamura answered him in an awfully calm voice.

“To Osaka. To become king.”

But that proposal was instantly rejected.

“Go to Nagoya. We must avoid unnecessary conflict.”

“...”

Nakamura answered Iba with silence.

After a while, Iba spoke once more.

“What is this? Do you intend to defy the prophecy? That is the prophecy that will make you king.”

“If I had my queen, you mean.”

“What?”

Nakamura decisively answered Iba’s question.

“The prophecy was wrong and my queen is dead. ...I refuse to rely on it any longer.”

“...Do you intend to become king using only your own power?”

“I have my sister’s Flame High. ...You wanted me to use that power to become king, didn’t you?”

“I said nothing about killing for no-...”

Iba stopped midsentence and shook his head.

He lowered his hips and slowly raised his arms.

He was prepared to attack.

“Have you lost your way?”

“There is only one way forward: becoming king.”

“Then why are you fighting to achieve that?”

“To show them my possibility. To show them I can become king without relying on the prophecy.”

“Show them? Show who?”

Nakamura did not answer.

He placed one foot forward and the other back as he prepared to fight.

Taeko quickly stood behind Nakamura.

“Wh-what are ya doin’ all of a sudden?”

“Get lost. Unless you want to die.”

“Once I defeat this boy, you are next.”

Taeko was conflicted.

What was she supposed to do?

Nakamura gave her the answer.

“Go and do whatever it is you want to do!”

She nodded at that.

And then she lowered her hips and raised the Dragon Emperor.

Nakamura frowned.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m doin’ what it is I wanna do.”

Taeko said that with a slight smile and then shouted to Iba.

“My brother was more or less killed for the convenience of the adults too!!”

“Fear not. I will not kill him.”

With that, Iba took action.

Nakamura followed suit after a click of the tongue.

As did Taeko.

Part 5

6:52 PM

The two-against-one battle ended after two deafening sounds.

Chapter 5: The Replay Begins (Free Trade-In for the Sequel) – (12/21/1996)

Part 1

11:05 AM

It was less than ten days until New Year's Eve.

It was winter.

The morning was nearing its end, but the cloudy day was terribly cold.

Shoui continued to move below the clouds.

He stood in front of the training post he had attacked so thoroughly the day before.

He sighed deeply in front of that single piece of wood sticking up from the ground.

The sigh carried a Tempo similar to relief and it refused to blend into the winter air even as it floated whitely in it.

He gently held out his left fist as if to sweep his sigh away.

He hit the training post.

He could see the marks from the previous day's attacks.

He had thrown those punches to confirm in which direction he was headed.

And after making those marks, a thought had occurred to him.

...What is it I lack?

It was not strength.

He had that.

Similarly, it was not willpower.

He had that too.

In that case...

...Is it Words?

–Shoui – Savate/Gym/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Combination – Hit.

The sudden series of blows somewhat expressed the Dis-Worder boy's thoughts.

A constant rhythm of harsh and intense sounds accompanied it.

Shoui recalled the prophecy Takada had sung for him.

The prophecy had changed form as time had passed.

A changing prophecy and a boy without Words.

When he combined those two ideas, he suddenly realized something.

...Maybe it isn't that I don't have Words. Maybe they're just in constant flux so I can't grasp them.

He tested that theory.

He turned a bit to the side and used a Rhythm toward empty air instead of the training post.

–Shoui – Cold High/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Freeze Strike – Hit.

He threw a punch that carried frost even whiter than the winter air.

People normally had to listen to a Rhythm to use that technique, but Shoui could use it if he found it necessary.

...What does that mean?

He remembered what Saki Seiji had said about the Osaka Chancellor during the Kinki Riot.

...He used Rhythms without using a Rhythm.

That had likely been similar to Shouï's Rhythm mechanism.

But if he was to oppose the Flame High...

...What kind of power should I seek?

He did not know.

So he tried out what he did know.

He first considered using the Flame High, but abandoned the idea.

That was due to the memory of that unknown fear lingering in his mind.

He tried something else.

–Shouï – Kusanagi/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Sever Strike – Miss.

He could not produce Kusanagi.

“...?”

He did not know why.

The Words needed to produce Kusanagi was a single tone. There was no detailed Message and it had no MD.

But Shouï could not produce it.

The method he used for Over Rhythms did not work for Wind Rhythms and Heavy Rhythms.

...If my Words were in constant flux, I should be able to use those.

He lacked something.

If he was missing something, he would not be able to use those Rhythms.

And if he was missing something, he could not protect her.

...It isn't Words.

It was something stronger than Words that could control his power.

Something that surpassed his Words that were in constant flux.

Something to make full use of his power as a Harmonist and those ultra-fast Rhythms.

Something to release Kusanagi with a single voiced tone.

“...”

Shoui sighed.

At the same time, he heard an animal cry.

It came from the house.

“...?”

It was the same voice as the previous day.

It sounded a lot like a distant dog howling. It contained a melancholy tone and carried into the distance.

Next, the sounds of bamboo swords came to a sudden stop in the dojo building to his left.

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Killer Intent – Hit!

“!”

A sharp will oozed out of the dojo’s first floor.

It was a powerful killer intent. Instead of a mere threat, it was pure intent to kill.

Shoui frowned and faced that direction.

He was also curious about the animal cry from the house, but he was more interested in the oddity closer to him.

He walked toward the source of the killer intent.

Most of the dojo’s first floor was a wood-floored practice area and it had small windows to let sunlight in. He peeked inside through one of the window’s facing the open-air training ground.

–Shoui – Sight Tech – Take – Confirm Situation – Hit.

He saw the large Kendo dojo.

Wooden swords and real swords hung on the walls and Shoui had a view of two Kendo courts positioned longwise to him.

The locker rooms were on the right while the entrance, reception area, and stairs to the second floor were straight ahead.

There were around a dozen people in the dojo at the moment.

–Shoui – Sight Tech – Take – Confirm People – Hit.

They were all students wearing Kendo outfits.

They all held wooden swords instead of bamboo swords and were facing the main entrance.

Their gazes were sharply focused on the entrance.

Shoui also looked in that direction.

He saw a surprising person in the wide entranceway.

It was Tokyo 1st Special Duty Officer Ikemaru Takahiro.

He wore a three-piece suit with a white scarf over his shoulders.

He was entirely relaxed without a hint of timidity.

That was the polar opposite of the dojo students who were brimming with killer intent.

...What's going on here?

Before he could even finish that thought, he heard Takahiro's voice.

"Send out Osaka's Chancellor. I visited his home, but they said he was not there."

It was an arrogant demand and one of the dojo students answered him.

"Souichirou-san isn't here! Come back later."

"I am well aware of that." Takahiro's expression did not change in the slightest. "I have already confirmed that Osaka's Chancellor has not left his home since he was carried there after the battle at Prefectural #2."

"Then why are you here?"

Takahiro answered without a moment's hesitation.

"It would be impolite to suddenly destroy his home in search of what I am

after.”

He took a breath.

“You have two options.”

He removed the black leather glove hiding his right hand.

He raised his index and middle fingers to indicate the number two.

“One, ask the Nanba family to let me meet Osaka’s Chancellor.”

He lowered his middle finger and left the index finger up.

“Two, your brutal defeat at my hands will show the Nanba family just how dangerous it is to ignore me.”

“...!”

The killer intent grew.

But Takahiro did not mind.

“I have no interest in crushing the Nanba family just because they are too stingy to let me meet their next leader, so this kind of threat would be the best way to show how serious I am.”

As soon as he said that, all of the dojo students moved at once.

Around a dozen sets of killer intent and footsteps focused in on Takahiro.

The raised wooden swords looked a lot like a bamboo thicket.

But Shoui saw Takahiro slowly sigh behind the thicket of wooden swords.

Tokyo’s 1st Special Duty Officer extended his right hand to the side with some slight inertia in the action.

The wooden wall next to the reception desk was there.

As soon as his white and fairly slender hand touched it, he spoke to the wall while ignoring the killer intent directed his way.

“Lay down.”

That settled it all.

Part 2

2:13 PM

The temperature below the clouds remained relatively unchanged even in the early afternoon.

The gray sky in the background made the scene look all the more wintery. Especially in an area with a good view.

Nandaimon Shrine on its hill in the southern Koto region had an excellent view of that dimly-lit sky.

If one looked up from the center of the gravel shrine grounds, the surrounding woods were out of view and only the sun filled their vision.

Koto Chancellor and Koto Guardian Yuuki Yuuki was viewing the sky just like that.

She wore her Nandaimon shrine maiden outfit and held a broom.

Phoenix, her false right eye, viewed a certain point in the sky.

Suzaku Ver. 40 was there.

It was the world's only combat satellite and it was situated at a gravitational and centrifugal Lagrange point, so it moved in an oval above the Koto and Osaka regions. The time it took to complete a circuit changed depending on the phase of the moon and the season, so it was not always in the same place.

"It will enter the Osaka region in two hours."

After that muttered comment, she looked back down.

She saw the woods surrounding the shrine in all directions.

The withered trees looked horribly cold below the cloudy sky.

She swept their fallen leaves into a pile.

–Yuuki – Spear/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Sweep – Hit.

There was a trick to sweeping up just the leaves while leaving the gravel in place.

She quietly, slowly, and accurately swept up the leaves.

And...

–Yuuki – Hear Tech – Auto-Take – Hear – Hit.

She heard the gravel moving behind her.

“...?”

She looked back and saw a small animal standing in the spot she had been in a moment before.

It was a Dog God.

It was five meters away.

That animal had kept that distance behind her since the day before.

When she walked, so did it.

When she stopped, so did it.

When she sat down, it lay down.

When she had gone to sleep that night, it had curled up in its tail while just barely keeping a distance of five meters in the corner of her austere room.

When she had woken up, it had already been up and wagging its tail.

It did not do anything. It simply stayed with her and watched her.

That was all.

“...”

Yuuki looked around.

–Yuuki – Sight Tech – Take – Confirm Situation – Hit.

There was no one here except for herself and the Dog God.

Once she confirmed that, she faced the Dog God.

Five seconds.

After that, she suddenly took a forceful step forward on the gravel.

The Dog God took a frantic step back.

She took two steps forward.

It ran back two steps.

It watched her the entire time to accurately keep its distance.

Yuuki stopped.

The Dog God stopped.

She looked up into the sky a little.

It was a cloudy sky.

The Dog God did so as well.

In that instant, she stepped forward with a loud step on the gravel.

Shocked, the Dog God hopped up for just a moment and then ran back.

But Yuuki had not taken a step.



She had placed her foot forward and stopped.

It was a feint.

The Dog God looked confused as it ran back while looking back toward her.

A moment later, it ran head-first into one of the shrine's lanterns.

With a quiet sound, its light brown body rolled a few times with its long tail wrapping around it.

It got up and quickly shook its head in a sitting position.

Yuuki narrowed her eyes and laughed quietly as she watched.

Her laughter was followed by an unexpected voice behind her.

“You can have fun with that thing if you want, but have you finished sweeping yet, Yuuki?”

It was Senga's voice.

Yuuki stopped laughing and looked back.

Senga stood surprisingly close behind her.

She looked up at Yuuki with a bitter smile.

“That part of you hasn't changed, Yuuki.”

“...”

Yuuki said nothing. She simply faced Senga with all emotion erased from her face.

Senga maintained her bitter smile as she spoke to Yuuki.

“I know you were scheduled to patrol the shrine border this afternoon, but could you head over to Osaka instead?”

“Why?”

“I've received word that the Nanba family's Modified Purple Electricity Style dojo was half-destroyed, but none of the details made it here. Could you go check that out?”

“Why not ask that...Iwai Sanzou from yesterday?”

Senga tilted her head at that question.

“I did, but he only said it was a training accident. ...But something like that would never destroy the Kusanagi-user’s dojo, would it?”

“What, so is the Nanba family hiding something?”

“I called the Osaka Guardian, but they apparently don’t know anything either.”

“So I have to actually pay them a visit, do I?”

Yuuki nodded and handed the broom to Senga.

“Here, grandmother. You take care of the rest.”

“Yes, yes. I always do get stuck with the cleaning for some reason or another.”

Senga slapped Yuuki’s butt, and...

–Yuuki – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Presence – Hit!

–Senga – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Presence – Hit!

Grandmother and granddaughter simultaneously raised their right hands.

They faced the stairs up to the shrine.

Someone lay at the top of the stairs.

He wore a monk’s outfit.

“Did he collapse...?” speculated Yuuki.

But Senga ran over before she could finish.

“Iba!” she shouted.

She called his name, but the monk-dressed man did not get up.

Yuuki jogged after Senga.

“Grandmother, should I call an ambulance?”

“Wait! There must be more to this! We can’t make it public.”

Senga stopped her and Yuuki obeyed.

They reached Iba’s side in the span of a breath.

This was Yuuki's first time seeing the man.

Senga would sometimes call his name in her sleep.

During the Kinki Riot, he had stood between Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Midori and Osaka Chancellor Kuki Udai.

And he was closely involved to everything going on this time.

He was now collapsed in front of her.

Senga crouched down next to Yuuki and asked the most crucial question.

“What happened!?”

Iba lay face down, so she lifted him up. That was when she received an answer of sorts.

His mouth and below were so bloody it looked like he had eaten raw meat.

He had bleeding in his lungs.

The blood was fresh and had yet to dry. The impact of collapsing and the relaxation of passing out had likely induced the coughing.

Senga flipped her former student onto his back in her arms.

“...”

The wind blew through.

It was a chilly north wind.

When its chill washed across his face, Iba's eyes opened ever so slightly.

His empty eyes focused and looked up at Senga.

His bloody lips moved.

“I can no longer see the future and the Kinki Riot begins anew...”

“The Kinki Riot?” asked Yuuki.

But when Iba nodded, he kept his eyes on Senga.

His lips moved.

He raised the corners of his mouth to force a smile, but...

“I never thought he would be even greater than Midori...”

His expression changed to one on the verge of tears.

Then he began coughing up blood.

The blood splattered on Senga’s clothing and face and on Yuuki’s shrine maiden outfit.

But the two of them were unfazed.

Without panicking or rushing, Senga lay Iba’s head back down now that his eyes had closed once more.

The cold wind washed away the stench of blood.

And Senga spoke in a voice so cold it cut off that wind.

“I will heal him. Yuuki, you hurry to the Nanba family.”

“Will you be okay on your own?”

“I took care of him a lot in the past.”

Senga did not look back toward Yuuki, so Yuuki said nothing more and walked toward the house.

The Dog God ran after her.

The wind very, very quietly and coldly brushed across the person and animal.

Part 3

3:35 PM

The Nanba family home was extremely large.

Four footsteps could be heard in a winding hallway in the single-story house.

An old woman servant holding a lantern took the lead.

Osaka 1st Special Duty Officer Saki Seiji followed her.

Tokyo 1st Special Duty Officer Ikemaru Takahiro followed him.

The old woman walked silently and the two boys' footsteps reflected off the low ceiling and narrow walls of the hallway.

The first to speak was Takahiro.

"How far are you taking me?"

"You're our enemy, but you showed up to meet Souichirou without an appointment. Pipe down and follow her."

The hallway turned to the right.

The old woman carried the light on ahead as her feet almost slid along the floor.

Saki glanced up at her and then looked back at Takahiro.

"What the hell are you even doing here?"

"I want information. Information on cherry trees that blossom in winter and on this family's connection to the Aoi family."

"I can't tell you anything about the Shinkage style, but was what I told you before about the cherry blossoms not enough?"

"What am I supposed to do with the vague information that cherry blossoms bloom during battle? And more importantly," continued Takahiro. "Where is

Osaka's Chancellor?"

"You are here for information, aren't you? Follow her."

The two of them followed the leading light.

Saki asked Takahiro a question while watching the light sway like a firefly's light.

"Are Nakamura Hisahide's actions what will determine whether or not you'll be our enemy?"

"No, I serve someone else," explained Takahiro. "And unless that person once more makes an enemy of Osaka, I will remain a mere tourist."

Saki's bitter smile deepened at that expressionless comment.

"A mere tourist? You destroyed Inuyama Station in Nagoya as well as a hotel and the Modified Purple Electricity Style dojo here in Osaka."

"Then are you going to arrest me?"

"I would if I had anyone who could restrain you."

Takahiro smiled bitterly at Saki's way of thinking. The two of them slowed their pace as they caught up with the old woman.

"How very accommodating of you."

"That's just how desperate we are."

The hallway continued upwards.

They saw a narrow stairway before them.

Takahiro frowned.

"I thought this was a single-story house."

The old woman in the lead answered him.

"It is an old house."

"It's an old samurai mansion," added Saki, almost cutting off the old woman.

He glanced back at Takahiro and continued in a whisper.

"Sorry, but..."

“What?”

“If you have any questions about this house, ask me rather than her.”

“Why?”

“The Nanba family has a long history you aren’t familiar with.”

“Are you saying the Kusanagi family that protects the emperor wishes to keep its distance from others?”

“If you can accept that line of thinking, then let’s go with that.”

Saki walked on ahead as he spoke.

The steps were short and steep.

It was 17 steps.

At the top, they found a hallway with sand walls.

They walked down it and soon came to a turn.

The long vertical slits in the wall were entrances to hidden rooms.

Takahiro commented on them.

“Is Osaka’s Chancellor up ahead?”

“Do you doubt it?”

He touched the wall as he walked.

“Terribly heavy emotion has built up in here. It is a powerful emotion, much like fear.”

“Well, of course,” answered Saki without looking back. “Some of the possessions and bodies of those killed in the disaster two years ago are stored here.”

“Why here? Possessions of the dead should be-...”

“Some people wish to continue fighting even after death. When it’s against that ogre, anyway.”

“Even after death...?”

He soon received his answer.

It came from the old woman.

“The young master’s prosthetics were created from them.”

“You mean...?”

Takahiro started to ask more, but Saki tapped his chest.

It was a sign not to ask.

Takahiro fell silent and Saki sighed.

“That’s just how it is.”

“Can you really allow that?”

“They wanted it themselves. ...And that’s why Souichirou has to seek battle.”

“But...”

Takahiro’s voice deepened in doubt, but Saki tapped his chest again.

“We’re almost there. This will clear up all your confusion.”

The old woman followed the hallway to a dead end.

The gap between the wall and the column suggested the dead end was another door to a hidden room.

“I see.”

Takahiro watched the old woman walk up to the dead end wall.

That was when something strange happened.

She was absorbed by the wall and vanished.

“...?”

The two boys approached the wall in question.

Takahiro stepped past Saki and gently touched the wall.

It was a normal solid sand wall.

“You get it, don’t you?” asked Saki.

The old woman’s lantern was fallen at Takahiro’s feet and he asked a question as it illuminated him from below.

“Was she a ghost so dense that not even a Word Master like me noticed?”

“That old lady always served Souichirou, but she was attacked by the ogre when she was out picking edible plants in the mountains. She’s lived here ever since.”

“Is that why you insisted I not ask her anything?”

“Someone mysteriously vanished for three days after speaking with her. They probably got dragged away by her,” explained Saki. “The problem is that she didn’t seem to be trying to hurt anyone.”

Takahiro looked at the lantern at his feet.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do they rely on this place?”

“I don’t know. ...All I can say is that Souichirou will never betray them.”

Another sound immediately followed that.

“!”

It was a cry.

It was a bestial roar.

A lament containing a large portion of sorrow burst out through the wall.

Saki did not hesitate to push open the wall.

There was a dim darkness inside.

Saki picked up the lantern to illuminate the stairs leading down.

The roar rang heavy and loud as it echoed down the hallway beyond that.

“Let’s go.”

Takahiro nodded.

Saki began descending the stairs.

The animal cry weakened and vanished.

The stairway had exactly 49 steps.

Subtracting that from the previous stairs told Takahiro they were now underneath the Nanba house.

The air gradually had grown chillier as they made the descent and their breath was white by the time they stood on the hallway's wooden floor.

They were underground.

They were surrounded by darkness and Saki's lantern was the only light source.

The candlelight from the lantern did not actively light the area, so its faint light only brought their surroundings vaguely into view.

The walls were made from rows of iron bars.

"Cells..."

Saki nodded to confirm Takahiro's short statement.

His shadow also nodded, and...

"Come."

He resumed walking.

There were several cells. They lined the hallway on either side and were each about 10 square meters.

They were empty save for a futon in the corner.

"..."

The two boys continued walking.

They passed by four pairs of cells, all vacant.

But as Saki and Takahiro walked past the cells, they heard quiet voices from the darkness within.

They were too faint to make out, but many people were speaking together.

Saki commented on them.

"The residents here are reacting to you. You are a new face, after all."

"The sad part is I can't tell if they are welcoming me or not."

“I know what you mean,” said Saki as he came to a stop.

He had arrived at the end of the hallway.

A set of metal double doors was there.

Several new charms were attached to the door.

“Based on those emblems, those must be locking charms. What is beyond this door?”

“A secret path that comes out through an old well.”

“...? Did you recently seal off that path?”

“Yes. Because we didn’t know what would happen.”

With that. Saki held the lantern out to his right.

The cell to his right contained a great mass of darkness.

It was a person.

He wore tatters of clothes and had lost both arms and his right leg.

His body was held in place by several thick chains attached to the stone wall.

He seemed to be sitting with his back to the wall.

His long unkempt hair fell down over his face, hiding his identity.

Saki stared at him and Takahiro asked a question.

“Who is that?”

As soon the words left his mouth, the sitting boy opened his mouth.

Despite the lantern as the only light source, his ferocious teeth and horribly red mouth could be seen.

He released his voice with a harsh breath.

“Ah!!”

That single tone ran strong and loud.

The cell’s metal bars shook.

The chains bent and a metallic noise spread through the links to color the

single voice.

That was not all.

The sound set power in motion.

It was a great power.

The strongest power in the darkness was the light of a flame.

Flames burst out from his right shoulder.

But this was not the fire of a lantern or torch.

Nor was it the flames of a campfire.

It was a burning cascade.

The voice rang out.

The flames burst out.

The flames whirled around and rose up to fill the cell.

As the voice gradually lost its color and grew more plaintive, the flames rapidly burned forward.

A great flaming serpent raced toward the metal bars.

The Word Master beyond the bars held out his hand.

But...

“Stop!”

Saki shouted over the roar of the flames and held back Takahiro’s hand.

A moment later, the voice ended and the flames collided with the metal bars.

The fire burst and brightly lit the subterranean darkness.

A barely audible noise came from within the cell.

Then the fire vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

The voice had also vanished.

The lantern was once more the only light in the darkness.

The pale light illuminated the cell and that revealed the fire-emitting demon

who sat by the wall.

A horribly emaciated face could be seen beyond the unkempt hair.

Takahiro spoke a name when he saw the unconscious face with its closed eyes.

“...Osaka Chancellor Nanba Souichirou.”

“That’s right,” confirmed Saki. “The Flame High is known as Yamata for a reason. It did a pretty good job of swallowing up Souichirou’s Kusanagi. He can’t control his own Words anymore, so restraining the Flame High is the most he can manage.”

“Is he enduring the spread of the flames?”

“He removed his false arms, but it wasn’t fast enough.” Saki sighed. “We quickly got the finest quality divine steel from Hong Kong and remade this cell. ...We closed off that door to make sure his fire couldn’t get out if something goes wrong.”

“I see.” Takahiro looked to Saki. “Are you saying I need to use my *kotodama* power to heal Osaka’s Chancellor if I want information from him?”

“Your average Tuner can’t heal him and we’d rather word of this didn’t get out. This was the perfect time to run across a Word Master who can destroy an entire building.”

Saki smiled bitterly and pulled a key from his pocket.

It was the key to the cell.

He stuck it in the lock and said one last thing.

“So take care of this, will you?”

Part 4

4:11 PM

After stepping out of Osaka Station, Yuuki did not head for the Nanba house.

There was something she had to do first.

She started walking west from Osaka Station and crossed the track to the north.

She was a very conspicuous presence in her Nandaimon Academy uniform and with the giant staff Housei in her right hand.

She could feel the people's eyes on her, but she did not look back and continued walking.

She heard some quiet voices behind her. The women and children were making excited comments about the Dog God that continued to follow her.

But she realized that those were not the only voices.

There were a few voices with a duller and heavier tone.

"If this is how it's going to be, I might not be able to get to the Nanba house today."

After that quiet comment, she made a call at a nearby phone booth.

She called the Osaka Prefectural Office.

As soon as they picked up, she rattled off a few keywords to prove her identity.

She pressed her thumb against the phone's camera.

The phone's small display immediately reacted.

"Match confirmed."

She swiftly explained what she needed and hung up.

As soon as she left the phone booth, the city's Fourth Alarm began sounding.

She nodded in satisfaction.

"They react quickly."

It did not take long for the current of people to change in response to the alarm.

The Fourth Alarm was used to evacuate people from regions where damage was likely to occur.

A citywide broadcast loudly announced where that was.

As Yuuki walked about a block, the flow of cars and people gradually changed direction.

The people passing her by were expressing their doubts about the alarm and what was about to happen.

It was an undeniable commotion.

The people were guided slowly but surely away from the location of disaster.

The academy rules had established separate legal enforcement measures for students and normal citizens, but everyone would be hurt in a disaster. Adults and children both intended to evacuate.

They could watch on after arriving somewhere safe.

The people passing by were arriving from in front of Yuuki.

The alarm continued to sound.

Yuuki fought the current of people.

She was on her way to the location of upcoming damage.

She had called the Osaka Prefectural Office and predicted that damage.

That location would soon be a battlefield.

She could see it now: the Umeda Sky Building.

It was a 170 meter observation tower.

A bridge-shaped floating garden was supported by two identical tower

buildings.

She walked toward that building.

There was a hotel out front and the Umeda Sky Building itself had several tenants inside.

People were slowly flowing out of them.

It was like a wave.

Yuuki bumped into the wave of people as she walked.

–Yuuki – Mind Tech – Take – Detect Presence – Hit.

She sensed a powerful presence behind her.

It was not the Dog God.

It was further back than the Dog God five meters behind her and it was more powerful.

She did not look back to see who it was.

She simply walked.

The tall tower was already right in front of her.

The wave of people was gradually thinning and the commotion was dying down.

The Fourth Alarm sounded all the louder.

The citywide broadcast urged people to evacuate, but it was meaningless to Yuuki.

There were no longer any people in front of her.

The two tall towers stood in her way like a giant glass wall.

Instead of passing between the towers, she walked east to circle around the Sky Building.

Passing between them would have meant walking through a nature park.

She chose the spot with a clearer view.

The presence behind her gradually grew.

The owner of the presence was waiting for her to arrive at the battlefield.

Yuuki knew what would trigger the battle: looking at her opponent.

But she did not look back yet.

She climbed some stairs and walked across the plaza in front of the Sky Building.

She passed by the Sky Building's east tower.

She was headed for the entrance to the west tower.

She continued walking.

Then she stopped in front of the glass doors of the large entranceway.

Two presences stopped behind her.

One was the Dog God.

And the other...

"A grudge from the past," said Yuuki.

Her quiet breath contained a hint of exhaustion.

At the same time, she prepared Housei in her right hand and turned around.

And she called a name.

"Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko!"

Her enemy was already on the move.

By the time she fully turned around, Yuuki saw a giant metal fist.

–Taeko – Steel/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Dragon Emperor Strike – Hit!

–Yuuki – Spear/Gym/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Block – Hit.

The Dragon Emperor's fist collided with Housei's frame, producing a heavy metal crash.

Yuuki had blocked the attack, but the fist and shield had different masses.

Yuuki was thrown backwards.

The impact and inertia slammed her inside the Sky Building.

She did indeed see Taeko with the Dragon Emperor raised.

“It’s time to settle this!” shouted Taeko.

At the same time the Dragon Emperor gave a draconic roar.

The roar mixed with the Fourth Alarm, creating a horribly low and long noise.

The battle had begun.

Chapter 6: One Conclusion (New System Introduction)

Part 1

4:33 PM

The Umeda Sky Building normally used a see-through elevator to ascend the first 33 floors to the floating garden 170 meters off the ground.

After climbing to the observation deck on the 40th floor positioned between the two towers, one only had to exit onto the floating garden on the rooftop.

But the Sky Building was currently running on emergency power and the elevators were not running.

The only option was the emergency staircase facing the building's windows.

Those stairs were the key to the battle.

Yuuki was an Energy Gunner.

Taeko was a Steel Master.

Both their Combat Styles focused on long-range attacks.

And at the moment, the stairway acted as a narrow, straight pathway, so they had to prepare themselves for their enemy's sniper shots.

If they moved out ahead of their enemy, they would be fired on from below.

If they fell behind their enemy, they would be fired on from above.

Standard combat theory said higher was better.

And right now, Taeko was below.

There were two reasons for this.

One of those being...

“How can that girl keep firin’ such powerful attacks so fast!?”

Her complaint was answered by two water spears flying down from the stairway landing and skewering her body.

They were narrow blasts of water, but they accurately pierced her right shoulder and right chest.

After a breath, blood spirted from the holes in her inner suit.

–Taeko – Mind Tech – Take – Control Pain – Hit.

The sight of blood did not frighten her.

She simply searched for her enemy.

–Taeko – Sight Tech – Take – Find Enemy – Hit.

Her enemy was no longer on the next landing up. She had already continued upwards.

Taeko took a breath and started running.

Her right arm was not moving properly.

–Taeko – Medical Tech – Take – Check Injury – Hit.

Her right shoulder was broken.

“So I’ve only got my Dragon Emperor left arm to work with.”

She muttered to herself as she ran and she looked over at the Dragon Emperor.

The Dragon Emperor was not roaring.

Its activation had stopped at the Third.

On the bullet train before, it had stopped working when she tried to use it against Yuuki.

It seemed to not reach the higher activation levels where the dragon’s will

awoke.

That was the second reason that Yuuki had the higher position.

“Why are ya refusin’ to fight her? She killed my brother and she’s ignorin’ Shoui.”

The metal fist did not explain its actions.

Taeko ran up the stairs.

She had run like this once before: on her way to where her brother had died.

She had shaken free of the Koto Chancellor’s Officers when they tried to stop her, but there had been nothing there to see.

Nothing had remained.

Only a white chalk oval drawn on the road next to the Sarusawa Pond.

That was where her brother’s right arm had fallen.

There had been no bloodstains. According to the boy in charge of the scene, her brother had likely been flash frozen by the Koto Chancellor.

After that, Taeko had trained and entered the Mountain to support her family.

And now she was running up the stairs.

Her brother’s killer was up above.

She reached a landing.

She ran up the next flight.

The next thing she knew, the floor number label said 33.

An emergency exit opened onto a passageway into the building.

She ran through it and reached a large space.

There was a long escalator straight ahead.

Unlike the previous escalators, this one had a roof.

It continued past the windows.

It led to the observation deck suspended between the two towers.

A red figure was running up it.

“!”

Taeko’s body moved on reflex.

–Taeko – Savate Tech – Take – Dash – Hit.

She ran.

Blood dripped down her right arm and onto the floor.

Even so, her body moved forward.

The soles of her shoes split the floor tiles below her feet.

She produced a series of solid sounds.

For just a moment, Yuuki looked back toward that noise while climbing the escalator.

She ran.

“Ya ain’t gettin’ away!”

Taeko ran up the escalator.

She was fast.

Her speed allowed her to start catching up.

She could see the sky through the glass overhead.

The floating garden on the roof was near.

She released her Words.

She used her poorly-moving right arm to stick just the right side of her headphones in her ear.

She surrounded herself in the light of her own Lightning High instead of the Dragon Emperor’s.

She did not rely on the dragon.

Someone stood in front of her with the setting sun washing over her.

It was Koto Chancellor Yuuki Yuuki.

“!”

Taeko no longer said anything.

She ran up the escalator.

Ice flew her way.

–Taeko – Savate/Gym/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Dash Dodge – Hit!

She ducked down as she continued forward.

The string holding her ponytail in place was torn by the ice spear and her black hair spread into the air.

But she did not stop.

They were a mere three meters apart.

Yuuki held Housei and light filled its ether firing section.

She was going to fire.

But Taeko moved before that happened.

–Taeko – Boxing Tech – Take – Grab – Hit.

–Taeko – Boxing/Gym Tech – Multi-Take – Brute Force – Hit!

Taeko used the Dragon Emperor's fist to punch the escalator stairs with all her might.

Even with the power out, the stairs would move if enough pressure was applied.

The aluminum stairs lost to the Dragon Emperor's strength and broke.

The escalator only shook slightly.

But that was enough.

The vibration propagated through the stairs and Housei's tip hopped up slightly in Yuuki's hands.

“...!?”

It produced ice, but that ice shot past above Taeko's head.

Yuuki had an opening, so Taeko aimed for it.

–Taeko – Steel/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Strike – Hit!

The Dragon Emperor's fist powerfully punched Housei from below.

The intense sound was that of a great weight and metal colliding.

The confrontation between the Suzaku and the dragon was easily won by the dragon.

The tuning fork shaped staff was knocked from Yuuki's hands and flew toward the heavens.

It broke through the escalator's ceiling and spun as it continued upwards.

Housei stabbed into the base of the floating garden that they could see from below.

“!”

Now Yuuki had no weapon.

Wind blew icy air into the escalator.

Taeko looked up at Yuuki in that chill.

Yuuki looked back down at Taeko.

Yuuki jumped back.

Taeko pursued.

“I said ya ain't gettin' away!”

–Taeko – Steel/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Strike – Hit!

She launched the imperial fist toward Yuuki.

Or she tried to.

The Dragon Emperor suddenly stopped.

“Wha-...!?”

Again with this.

The dragon was refusing to fight the Suzaku user.

The dragon's will was interfering at the low level of the Third Activation.

Taeko's body tilted to the left thanks to the Dragon Emperor's weight.

The raised metal fist was pulled down by gravity and slammed against the escalator railing.

Yuuki escaped upwards.

Taeko clenched her teeth.

Her right arm was injured, so she could not fight properly without the Dragon Emperor.

If Yuuki had time to prepare, she could use spells even without her staff.

Taeko looked at the Dragon Emperor that was no more than a weight now.

"Ya...piece of shit!!"

She roared at it and reached her right hand toward her left shoulder.

The bloody right hand manually released the Dragon Emperor's removal bolts.

There were three.

The Dragon Emperor was removed somewhat and her left shoulder felt lighter.

A moment later, she reattached the Dragon Emperor as if tackling it with her shoulder.

–Taeko – Steel Tech – Take – False Arm "Dragon Emperor" Initial Activation – Hit.

When restarting the Dragon Emperor while it was attached, the dragon's will would interfere and slow the process down.

It was faster to unplug it and plug it back in to restart from the very beginning.

The floating emblems carved on the inside activated and the weight vanished.

Taeko stood up and ran forward while dragging along the sleeping Dragon Emperor.

She ran toward the rooftop where her enemy waited.

Part 2

4:47 PM

After reaching the rooftop, Taeko first looked around the battlefield.

The floating garden had a large circular hole in the middle and the narrow walkway drew a circle around it. It was only wide enough for three adults to walk abreast. That was enough room for walking, but not much for fighting.

The landings provided more space, so they would be the key to this battle.

“ ... ”

Taeko silently stepped out onto the rooftop.

The first thing to greet her was the wind.

The winter north wind blew in strong and cold to cool her heated body.

But Taeko defied the wind's will as her long hair whipped behind her.

–Taeko – Sight Tech – Take – Find Enemy – Hit!

The enemy was extremely close by.

She saw Yuuki standing not even five meters ahead.

Taeko spoke to the silhouette she saw in the setting sun.

“It's been too long.”

She smiled bitterly and Yuuki's voiced asked a quiet question.

“What is the Tokyo Chancellor doing?”

“Oh, he gave me a single day to take care of my own plans.”

Yuuki did not respond, but Taeko could not help but say more.

“He really plans on crushin' Kansai. What are ya gonna do about that?”

Yuuki did not respond.

Nor did she move.

“Hmph,” snorted Taeko as she raised the Dragon Emperor which was wrapped in the Lightning High’s light.

The Dragon Emperor’s First Activation could only pull off simple actions.

The dragon’s will could not interfere now.

So she ran forward.

“Yuukiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

She shouted her enemy’s name.

That name had long been on her mind.

She had once tried but failed to forget it.

For her, coming to Osaka with the Tokyo Chancellor had been a ceremony announcing Kansai as the enemy.

But that had only been an excuse to fight Yuuki.

Her enemy was right in front of her.

She would reach her in the next moment.

–Taeko – Lightning High/Steel/ Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Lightning High Strike – Hit!

Her fist slammed into Yuuki’s body.

There was no impact.

There was no sound.

There was only...

“...Eh!?”

Taeko voiced her confusion as Yuuki’s body crumbled away.

It was a liquid.

It splashed down like water.

What had taken Yuuki’s shape and color regained the transparency and strength of water as it crumbled.

It was not Yuuki.

As proof, neither of the eyes in the sinking face were prosthetic.

“A dummy!?”

Tuners would sometimes rearrange the Lives of the wind or dirt to create a copy of themselves to act as a decoy.

As if to prove that, Yuuki’s voice arrived clearly from behind Taeko.

“That is the Suzaku Reflection passed down by Nandaimon.”

Without turning around, Taeko jumped left on reflex.

She jumped toward the large space of the landing instead of the walkway.

Rather than icy pressure, a pure chill pursued her and dropped down from above.

This attack was different from before.

–Taeko – Savate/Gym/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Great Dodge – Hit!

She leaped.

She leaped for the sole purpose of escaping.

She leaped with her back to her enemy and without a single thought of her brother or Shoui in her mind.

That was the right thing to do.

She saw something out of the corner of her eye.

A five meter spherical mass of air had frozen white and it crashed down onto the rooftop.

The attack had no weight or anything else, but when it burst, it created great destruction.

The temperature difference whipped up the wind.

Even the winter air was further cooled by the barrier of air, so a mist of frost formed.

The barrier ate into the floor and railings.

With a sound like breaking glass, the floor and railings shattered.

This world of frigid temperatures left even metal so brittle it would break from the slightest impact.

Everything was turned to sand.

Yuuki had once used this technique to destroy the schoolyard of Private Showa.

And it had also been the one to kill Taeko's brother.

“———!”

After dodging the attack, Taeko saw the broken floor and railings falling along with the building.

Taeko cried out.

She made her presence known with a cry of both fear and anger as the sound of freezing faded away.

And a thought flashed through her mind.

No, that will told her.

Her will uttered Words when she saw Yuuki's technique.

Something isn't right.

She did not know what was not right or how it was not right, but definite doubt rose within her when she saw Yuuki's technique.

Something did not match her memories or predictions.

But that doubt did not arrive in time.

“!”

Her shout erased her hesitation.

She searched for the enemy.

—Taeko — Sight Tech — Take — Find Enemy — Hit!

A figure in a red blazer was circling to her right, between her and the landing's wall.

That was a good decision.

Taeko could not use her injured right arm very much, so she would have trouble with the enemy on that side.

But she did not care.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!”

–Taeko – Boxing Tech – Take – Strike – Hit!

With no Rhythm or anything else, she slammed her right fist toward Yuuki.

She hit.

She felt her fist sink into her opponent’s gut.

Yuuki doubled over.

At the same time, Taeko lost all sensation from her right arm past the shoulder.

The broken shoulder had completely shattered.

“!”

She clenched her teeth and spun around.

–Taeko – Steel/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Grab – Hit!

–Taeko – Steel/Gym/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Throw – Hit!

She grabbed her opponent’s collar with the Dragon Emperor and threw her with an overhand swing.

“Gahh!”

She slammed the girl head-first into the tile floor as cold air continued to rise from it.

Yuuki’s glasses slid across the floor and the sound of impact was accompanied by a quieter metallic sound.

Yuuki bounced and landed face down.

She was right next to the hole she herself had created earlier.

If she fell, she would not escape unharmed.

Taeko would not let her escape.

She stepped forward.

She crouched down just as Yuuki tried to lift herself up with her arms.

Taeko swung the Dragon Emperor's first upwards.

–Taeko – Steel/Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Great Strike – Hit!

Just before that attack hit, Yuuki rolled on her side to turn toward Taeko while still on the floor.

She launched a spell.

It was water.

It had the form and meaning of a wall.

It was a powerful and unavoidable impact.

The transparent wall of ultra-pressurized water slammed into Taeko at almost the same time as the Dragon Emperor broke through the water wall and hit Yuuki.

They collided.

Both their bodies were blown away.

Taeko was knocked back a few meters and thrown toward the walkway.

She hit the wall of the circular walkway.

–Taeko – Gym Tech – Take – Control Balance – Miss.

She continued rolling backwards.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow...”

She muttered to herself and stood up.

The water soaking her body returned to ether and vanished.

She searched for her enemy while feeling cold due to the body heat it had taken from her.

–Taeko – Sight Tech – Take – Find Enemy – Hit!

Her Tech worked, but she could not see Yuuki.

She only saw the large hole torn in the landing floor.

It was five meters across and had been formed by the flash freezing.

There was nothing and nobody there.

It was obvious what had happened.

Yuuki had fallen.

“ ... ”

Taeko sighed as her long hair fluttered in the wind.

“Is it...over?”

Just as she said that...

–Taeko – Hear Tech – Take – Hear – Hit.

She heard the sound of bending metal.

“ ...? ”

–Taeko – Sight Tech – Take – Find Enemy – Hit!

Taeko saw a hand holding onto the edge of the hole.

In the blink of an eye, the right arm pulled Yuuki's upper body through the hole.

Taeko realized her face was colored by surprise.

“Ya survived!?”

Yuuki did not answer.

She silently pulled the rest of herself back up onto the floating garden.

But that was not all.

She held a giant object in her left arm.

It was Housei.

It was the giant staff that Taeko had punched away from her earlier.

“...It can't be!?”

Taeko realized the flash freezing spell had been both a means of attack and a means of retrieving Housei.

Housei had stabbed into the ceiling from the perspective of the escalator below, so from the roof, she had only needed to peel back the floor.

“...”

Yuuki silently raised Housei.

Ether light already filled Housei’s ether firing section.

It was a powerful light.

That light would end this.

“Kh...!”

Taeko clicked her tongue and prepared to defend.

Her left shoulder was suddenly pulled down.

“Dragon Emperor!?”

The Dragon Emperor would not move.

It was only at the First Activation, but it stopped moving on its own. The dragon’s will fully controlled the false arm now.

“Dragon Emperor...!”

Taeko shouted at it and Yuuki launched her spell toward her.

It was the flash freezing.

The white bullet was nearly ten meters across and it filled the space overhead as it dropped down like a fist.

There was no dodging it.

The Dragon Emperor was heavy and would not move.

The air audibly exploded with the icy temperature.

Hearing that, Taeko knew she would be turned to sand.

“...!”

In that instant, a question reached her mind.

Something was odd.

And she realized what it was: the result.

Her brother had died, leaving behind only his arm.

Not a single drop of blood had remained at the scene.

But she would be scattered as sand.

Why was there a difference?

In fact, how much power did this flash freezing spell have against a human?

The schoolyard and school building had been shattered at Private Showa, but no one had died.

Something was odd.

This was the doubt she had subconsciously noticed when she saw the previous destruction.

Before she could wonder what it meant, a certain fact occurred to her: The Dragon Emperor refused to fight Yuuki.

The results were different and the dragon that could read people's wills had made a baffling decision.

Those two facts led to a single truth.

Taeko was surprisingly willing to accept it.

"...Ya moron."

The icy blast collided with her and she shut her eyes.

In that instant, the Dragon Emperor instantly activated itself.

Part 3

4:51 PM

After an instant of light, the floating garden of Umeda's famous Sky Tower fell from its central location.

The structure was positioned between the two 170 meter buildings and it brought down both towers with it. First the west tower and then the east tower collapsed.

Shards of glass were thrown as far as a kilometer away, the pieces of the Sky Tower did slight damage to the surrounding homes and buildings, and the evacuation by the Fourth Alarm was proven justified.

The Fourth Alarm stopped only five minutes after the collapse had ended.

Part 4

9:02 PM

Healing people was difficult.

Timewise, it took about six hours before Souichirou could speak.

It was already night aboveground.

But in the underground space with the lantern put out, it was impossible to judge the passage of those six hours.

After an amount of time that felt both short and long, Souichirou uttered his first words in the pitch dark.

“...I feel like I experienced the Kinki Riot.”

“What does that mean?” asked Saki’s voice.

“I am referring to the usage of the Flame High,” said Souichirou’s voice.

“Would they have been unable to cause that riot if they had not held such an aggressive will?”

“Don’t talk about the Flame High too much,” said Takahiro’s voice. “The fire will move in response to the words.”

Souichirou sighed.

“Tokyo 1st Special Duty Officer Ikemaru Takahiro was it? You have my thanks. ...You have been dragging my Lives up to the surface this entire time, haven’t you?”

“You need not thank me.”

“This guy can be blunt,” said Saki. “So don’t take it personally.”

“I am aware. I saw it in a feeling that was not quite a dream while he healed me.”

“Don’t talk too much. ...But anyway. How is Souichirou? Can he move?”

“Probably,” confirmed Takahiro’s voice. “The prosthetics in this house are sure to protect him. But...”

“But?”

“There is a risk of the Flame High starting to move again. ...To prevent that, he needs to retrieve Kusanagi as soon as possible.”

“How does he do that?”

“By using Kusanagi.”

Souichirou answered that with an exhausted and bitter laugh.

“So I retrieve Kusanagi after it was swallowed up by the Flame High, do I?”

“Souichirou, do you think you can use Kusanagi?”

“To be honest, I’m scared. ...I have my own will at the moment, but what about the elation needed to use a Rhythm?”

“...”

“When I try to use a Rhythm, my thoughts might choose the Flame High over Kusanagi.”

Takahiro asked him a serious question when he heard that.

“Is the Flame High really that powerful?”

“It is pure aggression,” answered Souichirou. “The Kusanagi Rhythm creates a physical manifestation of ‘cutting’, but the Flame High is simply the burning and destruction of your opponent. ...In other words, it is victory.”

“You were caught by that kind of Live?” asked Saki.

“The clincher was being saved by someone else.”

“You were saved by the wills of those in this cell and by your own sense of self. My healing has somewhat saved you, but if you do not replay Kusanagi soon, the Flame High will return.”

“I know that.” Souichirou sighed quietly. “But how am I supposed to reclaim my Words?”

“You fight,” declared Takahiro. “In the end, that is all there is in your Lives.”

Saki sighed when he heard it.

“Yeah, I guess it would be that.”

With the sound of a match striking, a small light briefly flashed and then light returned to the lantern.

Light surrounded the three boys and illuminated their faces.

Souichirou’s face looked somewhat calm, but Takahiro’s was deeply colored by exhaustion.

“Hey, are you okay, man?”

“Do not worry. I have done this before.”

“Before?”

“Long ago, I created a Dog God and erased someone’s possibilities.”

Takahiro’s resolute expression remained and both Souichirou and Saki fell silent in the darkness.

It took some time before Takahiro said anything more.

“Whether we are talking about me or that girl, everyone is killing someone.”

“...Eh?”

Takahiro ignored Saki’s question and fixed his suit’s collar as he stood up.

Souichirou looked up as he did so.

“Didn’t you want to ask me something?”

“I read your Lives while healing you.”

“I see. ...Then you know the location of the winter cherry blossoms that Aoi Hijiri’s parents saw when they met.”

“Yes, they are at Osaka Castle.”

With that, Takahiro stroked the scarf around his neck.

And...

“Osaka Chancellor, I do have one question for you.”

“What is it?”

“That girl’s mother was abducted and taken to Tokyo. ...Was that misfortune?”

“You’ve heard, haven’t you? The winter cherry blossoms they saw bring misfortune.”

“Not quite.”

“What?”

“Misfortune is not brought. It happens.”

“ ...”

“I ask you again: what do you think?”

“Unfortunately, I have to take the side of the people in this house. ...Why not ask Aoi Hijiri?”

“I see.” Takahiro nodded and smiled bitterly. “I can probably ask her that after I settle this indecision.”

He turned his back on the other two in the flickering light.

Even after six hours of work, there was not a single wrinkle on the back of his suit.

“Are you leaving?” asked Saki.

“No, I am going.”

No one asked where.

“If you climb the stairs, the old woman will be waiting for you,” said Saki. “Just silently follow her.”

“This is a wonderful house.”

Takahiro said that in a less-than-complimentary tone and gave a quick bow.

He said nothing more as he left the cell.

The two boys who supported Osaka watched him go.

The sound of chains filled their silence.

Souichirou was moving.

This was the sound of the boy who had slayed an ogre and sought battle.

It rang out ever so slowly.

Part 5

11:31 PM

Below a large hill surrounded by paddy fields was the entrance to the path up to the Nandaimon Shrine.

There was a large torii there.

A red light flashed in front of that torii.

It was an ambulance's light.

The ambulance suddenly drove off.

The red light slowly left the Nandaimon Shrine.

The area was surrounded by paddies that were dry for the winter.

The moonlight was the only illumination.

Its bluish-white light shined on two people.

One was short and the other tall.

They were Yuuki Senga and Iwai Sanzou.

They were both watching the siren light of the departing ambulance.

Then they spoke without moving.

“You insist on home treatment? Do you not like our group's hospitals?”

“I'm not letting your quacks see my granddaughter naked.”

“Then why did you take in the Nagoya Chancellor as well? You even placed them both in the same room.”

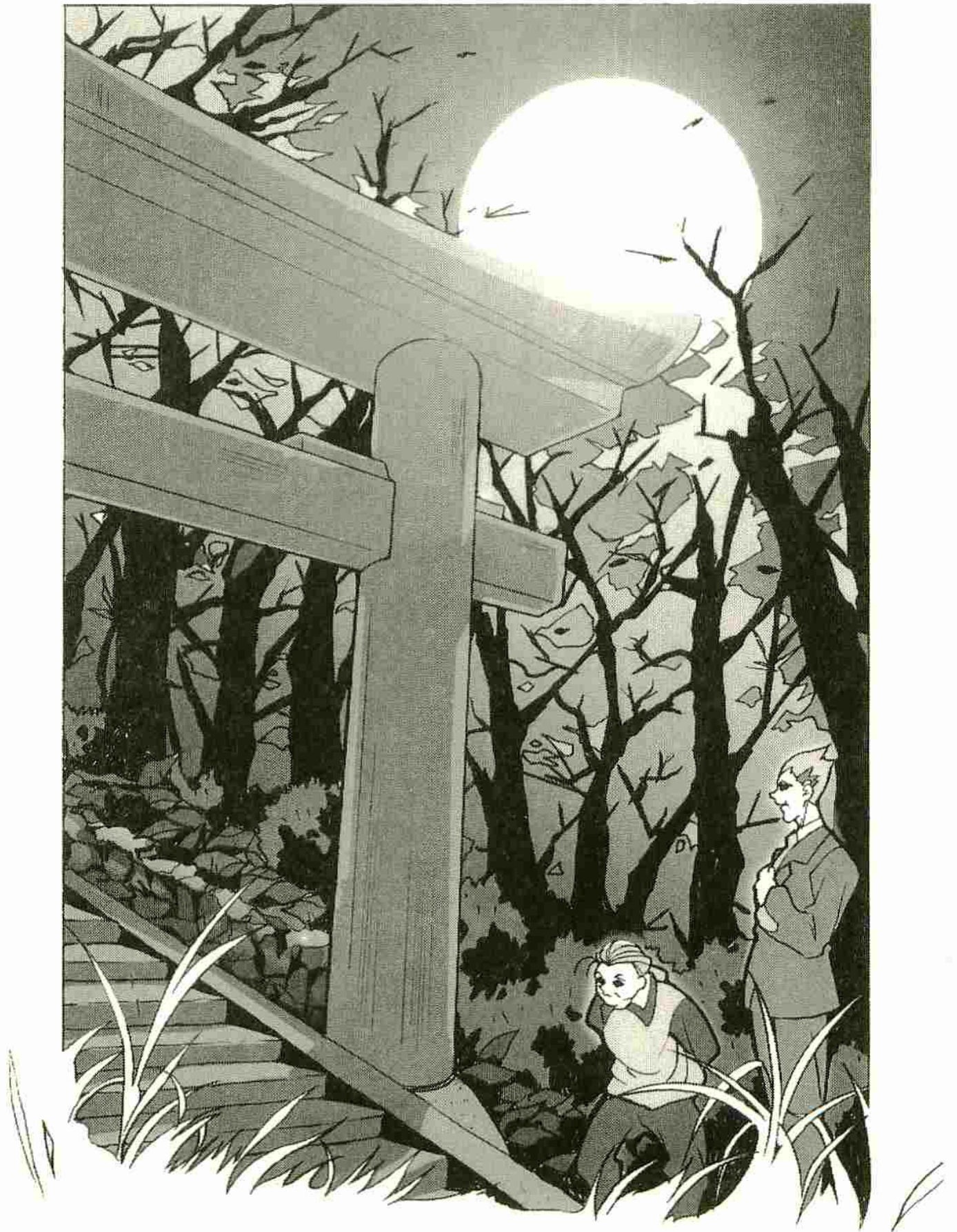
“It's called woman's intuition. I can tell there's no grudge between them anymore.”

“Your intuition is a frightening thing. It was amazingly accurate 13 years ago.”

Iwai Sanzou scratched his head and breathed a white sigh.

“Back then, I had no idea those two were in the kind of relationship you say they were.”

“All the blame lies with the winter cherry blossoms.”



“Yes, that is where it all went wrong. Including the trust between you and your student.”

“That was the only way to get past your group and inform them of our arrival.”

“I was certainly surprised when the spear flew over our heads and fell into the waterfall basin. No one should have been able to arrive within 500 meters of the place.”

Senga sighed.

“If it had been 50 more, I wouldn’t have been able to make the throw.”

“Well, that may have been a form of salvation for those two.”

“Really?”

“When they saw the spear flying their way, they smiled.”

Iwai Sanzou scratched his head even more.

He seemed to be having trouble saying this.

“They probably thought everything would come to an end if it skewered and killed-...”

“Don’t be stupid.”

Senga looked up at Iwai.

She had an aggressive look in her eyes.

“When I did it, Iba asked if I had turned on them too. That had to have been what all three of them thought.”

“Is that what you think?”

“For a corporate dog, you have too many delusions about combat.”

“I fight because I love that sort of thing.”

“You moron,” said Senga while jabbing his waist with her elbow.

The man pretended to be knocked back by the jab.

“You are so cruel.”

“Not as much as you. ...What are you thinking?”

“About what?”

“You called someone in the hospital when I was taking those two away, didn’t you? What are you planning?”

“Hm.”

Iwai Sanzou nodded and crossed his arms in the moonlight.

After some thought, he raised his head.

“We will be holding a festival.”

“A festival?”

“Osaka, Nagoya, and Koto’s Chancellor’s Officers will rent out Osaka Castle and hold a festival.”

“Wait, don’t make plans for my granddaughter.”

“It will be in three days’ time, on Christmas Eve.”

Senga was left speechless as he held out his right hand with two fingers sticking out.

Seeing that, the elderly man smiled.

“And how about we invite Tokyo’s Chancellor’s Officers as special guests?”

“You know...”

“This wasn’t easy. This festival required keeping a band from renting out the place. With that and the newspapers before, we have spent far too much money this year.” He smiled bitterly. “Although those expenses are an investment for the future.”

“But do you really think Tokyo’s Chancellor’s Officers will show up?”

“Can I just say that my intuition tells me they will?”

Senga thought for a moment.

“Your intuition is a frightening thing. It was amazingly accurate 13 years ago.”

“Then that’s settled. Anyone able to use the Flame High can never live

without battle.”

“But how will you stop the Flame High?”

“By ensuring Master Souichirou recovers,” nonchalantly answered Iwai. He crossed his arms again. “He is currently trapped by the Flame High’s power and cannot use Kusanagi. But if a certain individual can heal him enough to live a normal life, it should be possible.”

“And how will you do it?”

“By reminding him of his Words through battle.”

“Who will he be fighting?”

“Someone in a very similar situation.”

“A similar situation...?”

Senga spoke the words and realized who the man meant.

Iwai responded to her look of surprise with a true smile.

“His opponent might die, but that is fine. It will be an excellent experience for Master Souichirou.”

Senga tried to say something about that, but Iwai held out a hand to stop her.

“What I am more interested in is why the Nagoya Chancellor and Koto Chancellor were both nearly unharmed. I apologize for changing the topic, but could you answer me that?”

“A miracle probably happened.”

“I see.” Iwai nodded with his smile intact. “In that case, it might be worth investing in the Nagoya Chancellor.”

“Iwai.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Do you think your plan will bring this all to an end?”

“It will also give you what you want. Although I think I know why you sent him to the Mountain for two years.” A breath. “He is not a failure, is he?”

Senga did not answer him, but her silence was an answer in and of itself.

After a deep nod, Iwai turned his back on Senga.

“I will bring out Master Souichirou. The duel will take place on the beach of Osaka Bay in the Minato Ward. As for the time...how about early tomorrow morning?”

“How selfish of you.”

“Oh, I’m not letting anyone else have something so fun.”

“You do like to show off, don’t you?”

Iwai began walking away as Senga spoke.

He slowly walked toward Osaka along the moonlit road.

Senga called out to him from behind.

“Did you call a car?”

“I feel like walking alone in the moonlight...is what I would love to say, but someone will be here to pick me up in less than five minutes. I am a VIP after all.”

“Yes, someone like you is considered ‘very important’. And that’s why you need to hurry up and die already.”

“And you need to try to live long enough to become a Youkai or something. ... Goodbye.”

He lightly waved back at her.

It was only about six hours until the early morning.

Senga had a lot to do.

Chapter 7: Resuming Action (Continue) – (12/22/1996)

Part 1

4:58 AM

It was still too early for sunrise.

Shoui stood alone in a dark blue world that was beginning the change from night to morning.

He stood in the Nanba family's open-air training ground.

He had spent the past few days doing nothing more than sleep in the house and visit this training ground.

He felt restless when he was not moving his body.

He only visited this place to punch the training post until that feeling left him.

He had chosen this early morning hour because the destruction of the nearby dojo and the Fourth Alarm the day before had distracted him and kept him from moving much.

Tuners had reconstructed the foundation of the destroyed dojo the day before and the wood construction would likely begin this morning.

Once that started, he would be too distracted to train.

So he was here now.

The winter morning was cold.

He wore a jacket to keep himself warm and he began his warmup exercises in full combat equipment.

After a total of 1500 knuckle pushups and 800 squats, he could finally release a long white breath into the darkness.

“ ... ”

He tried to blow that white breath as far as he could and then smiled bitterly.

...How about I get started?

He pulled a golden ring from his pocket and held it in his left fist.

He raised his fists and made a few slow straight punches into the air.

After confirming his ideal form like that, he began for real.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Straight Fist – Hit!

The solid sound of fist against wood rang clearly through the darkness.

Immediately afterwards, the woods around the house shook and the branches rustled like a wave.

–Shoui – Hear Tech – Take – Listen – Hit.

There were birds.

The sound spooked the birds living in the trees and they took flight.

The birds could not see well in the darkness, but they chirped to confirm each other's positions.

“ ... ”

Shoui started up again.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Straight Fist – Hit!

A solid sound rang out.

It was a nice sound and his body moved just as he wanted it to.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Straight Fist – Hit!

This was working.

His fists were picking up momentum.

–Shoui – Gym/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Straight Fist – Hit!

The straight punch was the same, but he twisted his hips and spun his body to increase the speed, destructive power, and reach.

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Straight Fist – Hit!

He also took a step to strengthen those things further.

But stepping too far increased the odds of receiving a counterattack from his opponent. When stepping in for an attack, he moved in a straight line instead of the curve he used for dodging.

So...

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Combination – Hit!

He normally used a combination attack that linked all of the actions together.

–Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Control Stance – Hit.

He would occasionally move too close, so he adjusted his body's position with quick movements of his feet.

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Combination – Hit!

He made his combination attack.

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Straight Fist – Hit!

The critical blow was used as a finisher after the combination.

If his opponent did not leave him with an opening, he would control his stance and judge what distance and timing to use.

The key to that decision between offense and defense was how to shift from the combination to the single attack.

It did not matter how many moves he had if he could not defeat his opponent.

Unlike a competition match, there was no such thing as winning by decision in actual battle.

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Combination – Hit!

Shoui specialized in a combination of straight blows similar to close-range

short uppercuts.

And on occasion...

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Elbow Strike – Hit!

He would move right up to his opponent and use his elbow.

He was fast and there was no hesitation in his actions.

All of the moving he had done over the past few days had built up, so he could draw out his body's full power.

And his movements grew even more varied.

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Tackle – Hit!

He used a technique that resembled a shoulder tackle.

He generally made blows with his upper body.

And he made use of every kind of technique that used his upper body.

There were sounds of blows and impacts. There were sounds of punches and strikes. They created a quick rhythm and would not stop.

Even the rest notes when he adjusted his stance were only pauses that assisted his acceleration.

He moved.

He moved quickly.

But he realized his movements were lacking something.

“!”

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Straight Fist – Hit!

An especially loud noise was accompanied by what sounded like tearing cloth.

The training post had broken.

“ ... ”

The top 3 cm of the post had succumbed to the impact and broken off.

Small wood fibers were visible along the break.

The fallen portion continued to roll along the training ground.

This was not a normal break.

If it was just the accumulation of blows, it would have broken at the center or where it met the ground.

The post had been cut by a sharp strike much like a blade.

Shoui was surprised at this unexpected power, but he also sighed.

...Come to think of it, something similar happened at the Nandaimon training ground.

That training ground was located in front of the detached room he had once called home and he had once punched off the top of a training post there.

He smiled a little.

And bitterness slowly filled it.

...So I'm finally feeling like I did back then.

At the time, Yuuki had watched from the side as he learned the techniques of the Nandaimon Unarmed Style.

"..."

He clenched his fist.

He held Takada's ring inside it.

He did not say or think anything about that ring.

He simply placed his fist on the break in the post.

He seemed to be showing his fist what it had done.

A few seconds passed.

–Shoui – Hear Tech – Take – Listen – Hit.

He looked behind him.

–Shoui – Sight Tech – Take – Locate Enemy – Hit.

As the darkness gradually thinned, he saw a man standing in the center of the training ground.

The man was dressed like a monk.

He was Iba Masaaki.

He briefly looked Shoui in the eye and then spoke.

“I have come for you on Yuuki Senga’s instructions.”

“...?”

“You will now spar with Nanba Souichirou on a Minato Ward beach.”

Shoui had a single reaction to that.

...Huh?

Speechless, he tilted his head.

And Iba nodded.

“I do not like it either, but I came to summon you as repayment for healing my wounds.

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

For some reason, he could now read Iba’s previously inscrutable expression.

As he crossed his arms, his expression lacked its previous harshness and also lacked the displeasure he claimed to feel.

And upon seeing that...

...Why me?

Shoui asked his question through his own expression.

He did not immediately receive an answer.

Iba nodded, scratched his head, and nodded again.

“Most likely, Nanba Souichirou lost his Words after Kusanagi was consumed by the Flame High. If he is to retrieve them through combat, he must view himself in the mirror and objectively observe what his Words are.”

“ ... ”

“But playing the opponent in this battle will be dangerous.”

“?”

“Nanba Souichirou uses a real sword while you fight unarmed. And if he retrieves Kusanagi, you will be faced with death as you lack the Shinkage Style or anything else.”

Shoui listened to those words.

...It sounds like things have really made progress.

He almost felt like he was entirely uninvolved in it all.

Everyone else had been in motion while he simply punched the training post.

So...

...This might be my last chance to get involved.

It was true he was powerless against Kusanagi. When he had tried to block Kusanagi when Aoi Hijiri had launched it, tension and fear had filled his body. He had not forgotten that.

And that Kusanagi had been a copy created by the Shinkage Style of Dance Combat, so it had not come from Aoi Hijiri's own Words. The original would likely be even more powerful.

“What will you do? It goes against my principles to bring an unwilling person with me. It seems Yuuki Senga has already left with someone from Houzenji.”

Shoui was no longer listening.

He simply clenched his fist and faced the training post.

He moved.

He pictured a cutting motion and thrust out his fist.

–Shoui – Kusanagi/Boxing Tech – Take – Kusanagi Strike – Miss.

Sure enough, he could not produce Kusanagi.

There was some trick to using it that was different from an Over Rhythm.

Only Nanba Souichirou could use that Rhythm with such short Words and no MD.

It was a special Rhythm.

...If I fight that, will I gain what it is I'm missing?

Instead of just watching it, he could experience the process with which someone who had lost their Words regained Kusanagi.

“ ... ”

Shoui looked down at his fist.

He held Takada's ring there.

So he gave a deep nod.

He turned back toward Iba and began walking.

“Are you going?”

Instead of answering Iba's question, he walked past the man.

He was currently a Dis-Worder who could speak no words.

His pace was slow, but he walked toward the exit from the house.

Part 2

5:02 AM

Yuuki awoke in her own bed.

The room's lights were on.

She was facing the wall and lying on her side in an unnatural pose.

She quickly realized why.

Below the blanket, her right ankle was wrapped in bandages.

If she was lying on her back, the weight of the blanket on her toes would hurt her ankle.

It was likely a light sprain.

She could feel bandages and charms placed on her joints.

–Yuuki – Medical Tech – Take – Check Injuries – Hit.

Her right ankle, ribs, and right knee must have been broken.

That would normally be some serious injuries, but she seemed to have received Tune healing while she was passed out.

“I suppose those injuries are surprisingly light for a building collapse at that height.”

She sighed.

She looked to the wall and then narrowed her eyes.

She had dropped her glasses during the battle and had not seen them since.

She silently started to close her eyes, but then she raised her head a little.

She looked to the edge of the bed.

Some paperback and hard cover novels were sitting where she had left them

in a pile.

But there was something other than a book on the very top.

It was a paper bag.

It contained what she had bought the day before.

She reached from the blanket and grabbed it.

After placing both hands on it, she slowly pulled it below the blanket and held it to her chest.

“ ... ”

She curled up around the paper bag while sinking back into the blanket.

She closed her eyes and sighed.

Strength filled the hands holding the bag, producing a crinkling sound.

She opened her mouth while listening to that.



And she prepared to speak the precious words she could only say while alone.

Except...

“What’s that paper bag? Somethin’ important?”

The blanket sprang up in response to that sudden voice.

She got up.

She had never suspected there was anyone else in the room, so her face was filled with panic.

It was a rare response for her.

–Yuuki – Sight Tech – Take – Locate Enemy – Hit!

The enemy who was not really an enemy was right in front of her.

It was Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko.

She was sitting down while wearing a yukata over a Nandaimon shrine maiden outfit.

She had the Dragon Emperor on her left arm, so the shrine maiden outfit’s sleeve was loosened to allow the metal fist out.

A guest futon was laid out below her and that fist.

“...?”

Yuuki used her eyes to ask what was going on, so Taeko answered while combing her undone hair with her hand.

“Yer grandma apparently put us in the same room.”

“She did...?”

“She asked to get a look at me, said I wasn’t an enemy, and then told me to get along with ya.”

Taeko sat cross-legged, rested her cheek in her hand, and breathed a masculine sigh.

“I can’t stand it.”

“?”

“Ya understand, don’t ya? There’s so much about this I can’t stand.”

Yuuki remained silent, so Taeko tilted her head.

“Yer not good with people, are ya?”

“ ... ”

Taeko took Yuuki’s silence as a yes and gave an agreeable smile.

“There’s so much I don’t understand, though. ...Do ya know why I managed to escape yer technique?”

Yuuki shook her head.

“Just when I thought I had hit you with my barrier, the building was blown away.”

“That might’ve been the Dragon Emperor.”

“The Dragon Emperor?”

“I solved a question of mine, so it might’ve helped me out.”

Taeko looked to her prosthetic arm.

She sounded more like she was talking to herself than asking a question.

“Why did the Dragon Emperor avoid fightin’ with ya? I think I get it now. ...But that guess leads to a pretty serious conclusion.” She took a breath. “But I can’t think of any other reason the Dragon Emperor would stop in front of ya. ... That’d only happen if yer on the side of justice and my actions are evil.”

Taeko held the Dragon Emperor’s fist in front of her eyes.

She clenched the steel fist, producing the sound of creaking metal.

“Do ya understand?”

She did not receive an answer, but she did not care.

Her bitter smile deepened and she lowered the fist to her side.

She looked to Yuuki from the floor.

“Hey.”

“ ... ”

“I can tell ya wouldn’t answer me if I asked about the truth.”

“ ... ”

“So I’ll ask in a different way.”

Taeko closed her eyes.

“How did ya kill my brother?”

It was a quiet question.

But unlike the previous questions, Yuuki answered this one immediately.

“With Suzaku’s flash freezing.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Taeko asked another question without opening her eyes.

“Then why weren’t there any pieces of him left?”

That question did not receive an answer.

But Taeko asked more.

“And at Private Showa, yer flash freezin’ technique didn’t kill anyone. ...The reason why is simple: unlike mere objects, people will subconsciously negate the Rhythm attack with their own Rhythm.”

An exhausted sigh left Taeko’s mouth.

It was a heavy sigh.

And that breath seemed to draw out more words.

“Ya might lie, but the Dragon Emperor won’t.”

“What lie are you talking about?”

“The one about how ya became the Killing Holder!” shouted Taeko.

She raised her head and opened her eyelids to look at Yuuki.

Her expression was entirely serious.

“I’ve made my decision.”

“About what?”

“Koto Chancellor, ya are the only one I’ll follow.”

Yuuki frowned at that.

Taeko smiled bitterly.

And she said more with that tearful smile.

“A moron who can never catch a break like ya needs someone by her side.”

“ ... ”

“Shoui would really be the best choice, though...”

“I do not need Hizaka Shoui.”

“Probably not.”

Taeko narrowed her eyes and looked to the corner of the room.

“And I guess ya do have that thing...”

She was referencing the small creature with light brown fur sitting in the corner.

It was a Dog God.

“It’s been there this whole time. Is it Shoui’s?”

“I don’t know.”

The Dog God was about 3 meters from Yuuki.

“...It’s closer.”

“Eh?”

“Nothing.”

Taeko tilted her head and nodded at that.

And she glanced over at the Dog God.

“I kinda hope it is Shoui’s.”

She sighed.

And before that breath could fall to the futon, Yuuki began to move.

She pulled her blanket in close and curled up to hide the paper bag in her arms.

“Why are you so fixated on him?”

It was the Dragon Emperor that first responded to her question.

It raised its low rumbling voice.

The armor panels opened somewhat as it rose to the combat mode known as the 3rd Activation.

Taeko looked to the false arm that had started up on its own.

“When earnin’ the position of Chancellor at the Mountain, ya end it with some battles, right?”

“I was given the position on a recommendation based on my testing, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Is that so?” asked Taeko with a bitter smile. “Well, whatever.” The bitterness left her smile. “I fought Shoui during the semi-finals and I punched him out once.”

Some tenseness came to her face.

“And I know that he fought my brother to protect ya. ...We had trained at the same trainin’ ground, so when I learned that, I felt some hesitation and resentment. And when I hit him...”

She sighed.

“That moron completely snapped.”

“...And?”

“Would ya call it combat instincts? Well, when he passed out...he started movin’ at frightenin’ speed. He circled behind me in the blink of an eye...”

Yuuki said nothing.

Taeko placed her hand on the Dragon Emperor.

“The Rhythm he used was the Break High. My left arm was torn off and sent airborne in no time at all. But...”

“...”

“Right afterwards, he seemed to come back to his senses. Would ya call it a look of regret? He had that dumb look on his face and didn’t move at all...”

She said nothing more.

The answer was already known.

Taeko had been the one to become a Chancellor.

That meant she had defeated Shoui.

Someone who could not defeat their opponent when they needed to could not become a Chancellor.

That unwritten rule was absolute.

So she said something else instead.

“It’s thanks to his instincts that he doesn’t die when he should’ve been killed.”

“Is that so?”

“There are two sides to everythin’. Someone who’s strong with one power is strong with the opposite power.”

With that, she stood up.

Her head reached the fluorescent light illuminating the room.

And she looked down at Yuuki from that height.

“I have a number of things to check on. Your grandma said to go to the coast of Osaka Bay before sunrise.”

With that, she pulled a piece of paper from her pocket.

The location was written there.

And Taeko spoke to supplement it.

“The match held here will save Japan from a second Kinki Riot.”

The Dog God seemed to answer her by quietly barking in the corner of the room.

Part 3

5:29 AM

There were two times when purple filled the sky.

In evening it was known as twilight and in morning it was known as daybreak.

A few people were gathered on the Minato Ward beach on the coast of Osaka Bay.

Thanks to modern development, Osaka had few beaches left.

A few men in black coats seemed to surround that beach.

They were corporate combat personnel from the Houzenji Group. The Izumo Company LMGs they wore suggested their Combat Style was Strike Gunner. They probably normally worked as guards.

They all wore combat helmets and spoke quietly using the communicators embedded in them.

They surrounded four people on the beach.

Two of them were at the top of the beach slope descending from the embankment to the ocean.

They were Yuuki Senga and Iwai Sanzou.

They sat directly on the sand and looked to the water's edge.

They looked to the edge of the dark ocean that was not yet lit by the sunlight.

Two other people were there.

They were Osaka 1st Special Duty Officer Saki Seiji and Osaka Chancellor Nanba Souichirou.

Saki remained seated and spoke to Souichirou who swung a large sword around.

Based on the expression visible through his sunglasses, he was chatting with the other boy to calm the pre battle tension.

Some words escaped Iwai Sanzou as he watched the two.

“They are a good pair.”

“Are you going to hire them?”

“Of course not. They need to make even more of a name for the Modified Purple Electricity Style.”

“That’s unusually impartial for you.”

“In the coming age, an outward-facing charisma will be as necessary as our sort of strength.”

“Is that what Kusanagi is for?”

Iwai nodded.

“Any corporate group connected to the emperor will gather below that Rhythm. And if the Houzenji Group has absolute control of Kusanagi, I hope to begin a full business partnership with Izumo and their Wind High.”

“I see. Sounds like you have big plans.”

“I could say the same about you, couldn’t I?” Iwai looked to Senga. “It is your doing that Tokyo’s Student Council has remained silent about this entire affair, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know anything about that.”

“Oh, I heard that the Emergency Teachers and the Mountain were working together to use this incident to reunite the east and west schools.”

Senga said nothing, so Iwai continued.

“The adults failed to combine the east and west, so you are trying to use the children’s war as a trigger. Only you would come up with an idea like that.”

“But I intend to give all the credit to the adults. By keeping this riot entirely secret, it will all be credited to groundwork laid by the politicians and corporations.”

“Why would you manipulate the information like that?”

“In exchange for the credit for such a historic accomplishment, the crimes of all those involved will be wiped clean,” declared Senga.

Her eyes were fixated on Souichirou as he swung his sword on the beach below.

“At this point, all of this is in violation of the academy rules. This riot should be banished into the darkness.”

“And to do that, something must be done about the Flame High.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s what you corporations think.” She smiled bitterly. “If the Flame High wins, the east and west will still be unified, but if Tokyo wins...it will greatly shift the east-west power balance even if all this is kept secret.”

“Indeed. Souichirou-sama must emerge victorious.”

“Don’t be stupid. It’s Osaka that’ll win, right? If Osaka wins, Tokyo will have to support the unification to preserve their pride and we’ll have peace as long as Osaka doesn’t invade Tokyo for retribution.”

“To be honest, there is no guarantee Osaka can win if they do invade.”

“If we have peace, then we’re better off without a king.”

At that moment, the morning sun rose from behind the eastern mountains.

Light raced across the ground and everyone’s shadows grew more pronounced.

Souichirou’s sword dully reflected the sunlight.

Iwai looked to that light.

“That sword...is it true it is a Device pulled from the treasures at Nandaimon?”

“We had it made by Hong Kong’s top Buster. He visited Nandaimon 5 years ago to study Death Techno.”

“I see. That would explain why it is shaped differently from the Japanese-made holy items. I must thank you for that. ...This will allow Souichirou-sama to draw out his full strength.”

“His full strength?”

“Do you know why he always makes a diagonal swing starting from the bottom?”

Senga thought about that for a moment.

And she reached a certain conclusion.

“It’s to make sure he doesn’t go too far and hit the ground while swinging downwards, isn’t it?”

“Normal swords and holy items cannot bear that much force, so the hilt or blade will break. ...But that Device will turn even the ground to dust when it strikes.”

“That isn’t good news for Shoui as his opponent.”

Iwai said nothing to that.

And Senga finally turned his way.

“What’s the silence for?”

“Oh, I’m just surprised you actually offered him up for this. ...He was a prized student worth letting live with you, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah, but this battle is sure to be necessary for him too.”

“...Necessary?”

“He might be able to work through something he failed to resolve over the past 2 years. Think of it like swapping out all your cards to turn your boar into a blue ribbon.”

“Unfortunately, I am not one for gambling.”

As soon as Iwai said that, they heard a slight sound from the direction of the city.

At the same time, a voice came from the communicator in Iwai’s pocket.

“Iba and Hizaka have arrived. They have both passed the ID scan. Should we double check up to Level 55?”

“No, that will not be necessary. Let them through.”

“Understood.”

Iwai and Senga exchanged a glance.

The morning sun was rising.

It was the perfect time for a sparring match.

Part 4

5:43 AM

The morning sun gently shined on the city of Osaka.

It first fell on the tall corporate buildings and the vast historical locations.

Due to the size of its grounds and its own height, Osaka Castle was the very first place touched by the morning sun.

Its white walls reflected the sunlight and the waves of its green roof tiles glowed brightly.

The contrast of its structure was visible from a great distance.

The Otemon Gate was the largest entrance to the grounds and it provided a direct view of the castle's impressive form.

But few were there to see it on this early winter morning.

The only person there had been there since the night before.

He was there all alone.

That person was Nakamura Hisahide.

He sat leaning against the traffic light in front of the Otemon Gate.

He had apparently been there for a long time, at least since the night before.

The headphones in his ears were playing the Flame High's music.

He was silent and motionless with his face buried in his mountain hoodie's collar.

His eyes were weakly narrowed as he stared at Osaka Castle in the morning sun.

“ ... ”

He did not move.

But...

“Hey, you idiot. What do you think you’re doing?”

A sudden kick from the side hit him on the side of the head.

“!?”

With a dull sound, he toppled over and then sprang back up.

He stood and turned toward the person who had kicked him.

And he saw...

“Why are you wallowing in melancholy?”

It was Aoi Hijiri.

As a change from the norm, she did not have a shirt tied around her waist and she breathed a white breath.

“You didn’t go to Nagoya?”

“...Takada is dead.”

That was Nakamura’s sudden response to her question.

When she heard it, Hijiri looked up toward heaven a little.

After some thought, she put her hands on her hips and sighed.

A large white breath left her mouth.

And two simple words accompanied it.

“I see.”

A grim look entered Nakamura’s eyebrows when he heard that, but Hijiri continued before he could say anything.

“Make no mistake. It isn’t that I don’t have any thoughts about that. We knew her longer than you did.”

“...”

“And? What did she say to you before she died?”

“Nothing.”

Nakamura said very little.

Even so, Hijiri nodded.

“Understood. Then she must have thought the possibility she mentioned would lead to you becoming king.”

“And if you’re wrong about that?”

“There’s no way to check what the dead were thinking.”

Hijiri sat on a nearby guardrail.

She released a white breath into the sky.

“Look, look. It’s like a flamethrower.”

Nakamura ignored her and leaned against a utility pole while still standing.

He crossed his arms.

“Where is Takahiro?”

“I don’t know.”

“...?”

“We got separated.” She took a breath. “We had our reasons.”

“Did you break up?”

“It isn’t that.” She smiled bitterly and glanced toward Nakamura. “I said we had our reasons, didn’t I?”

“Then get lost.”

“Why?”

“You two have no more obligation to follow me.”

“That’s too bad. I promised Iba.”

“...?”

“I promised I would stay by your side no matter what happened.”

He immediately responded to that.

“I defeated Old Man Iba.”

He was clearly cutting her off, but Hijiri did not stop smiling bitterly and was not shaken.

“That old man said ‘no matter what’.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“...You’re a dumb girl.”

“I’m not a girl for anyone but Takahiro.”

She stood up and did some light stretches.

She stretched her legs which had a noticeably nice shape even in jeans.

“At any rate, you shouldn’t stay here. Osaka’s Chancellor’s Officers are going to start moving again this morning.”

“And you?”

“I’m going to take a morning run around the castle.”

“No, not that. Are they not going to find you?”

“I’m making sure they don’t.”

Nakamura sighed at that simple answer.

And then Hijiri asked him a question.

“I’ve found a place to stay, so do you want me to take you there?”

“No, thanks.”

He waved his hand in casual rejection.

“Hm.” Hijiri nodded. “I’m staying here until I find the cherry blossoms and I’ll be running every morning, so if you’re planning to do something, come tell me. You look oddly dangerous right now.”

With that, she took a step.

Nakamura said nothing, so she lightly raised a hand.

“Bye.”

And she started to run.

At that exact moment, she heard someone singing.

“...?”

She stopped and exchanged a glance with Nakamura.

A choir was singing in the distance.

“...That’s Beethoven’s 9th.” Hijiri nodded in understanding. “Well, it is the end of the year. Come to think of it, they have an outdoor concert around here on Christmas Eve. ...Did you know that?”

“Why would I know that?”

Hijiri pointed at the utility pole he had been leaning against.

The concrete pole had a few advertisements attached.

The very top one was for the outdoor concert to be held in the plaza in front of Osaka Castle’s Otemon Gate.

They could hear the tenor part from the fourth movement of Beethoven’s 9th.

Hijiri looked curiously toward the parking lot beyond the Otemon Gate where the voices were coming from.

“Beethoven’s 9th, huh? ...Are they singing it in German? I only know the Japanese version.”

“You sure know a lot.”

“Takahiro taught me last year.”

Nakamura sighed at that.

But as he quietly stood there, Hijiri tilted her head and placed a hand on his chest.

“Listen. Don’t keep it to yourself. If something happens, call me.”

With that last comment, she lightly struck his chest.

Then she turned around.

This time, she did run off.

Nakamura did not stop her.

He simply looked up into the sky.

The sky grew to a bluish-white as the morning sun filled it.

It was a still morning filled with singing voices.

Chapter 8: The True Past (Hidden Special Move Information)

Part 1

6:00 AM

Shoui and Souichirou's match began as they faced each other.

They were on a flat beach. The sun was just beginning to show its bright circle over the mountains.

The two of them stood and faced each other without exchanging a greeting.

And with a hint of exhaustion on his face, Souichirou spoke a single word to Shoui.

"...Sorry."

He said nothing more.

He did not need to.

He knew who his opponent was and he knew their background.

He also knew their skill.

And he knew what he should do and what was necessary.

The two of them stood there with no need for words.

Shoui pulled a golden ring from his pocket and clenched it in his left fist.

And he looked to his feet.

Their shadows stretched long across the beach and toward the ocean.

The ocean was to Shoui's left and to Souichirou's right.

They heard the splashing of the waves as those waves washed across the heads of their shadows.

And after several waves crashed, the shadows silently took their combat stances.

Two two-dimensional afterimages slowly moved on the sand.

One shadow raised a sword.

The other raised its guard to protect its face.

The former was Souichirou's shadow and the latter was Shoui's.

Both their stances were unique.

Souichirou held his drawn sword down and below his side like an iai pose.

Shoui leaned forward much like the peek-a-boo style of boxing.

Neither stance allowed them to escape.

They were both on the verge of moving.

But that did not happen and neither of them took action.

Time passed as they held their poses.

They looked each other in the eye as the waves continued to crash.

It looked like it had all ended after they took their stances.

The crashing of the waves grew louder.

But they still did not move.

They could not move.

There was a reason for this: their stances and tactics fit together too well.

Souichirou held his sword in a *go no sen* stance that was meant to counterattack once the opponent approached.

Shoui held his fists in a *sen no sen* stance that was meant to charge up to his opponent to attack.

Go no sen meant to take action after seeing your opponent move and to get

your attack in before theirs.

Sen no sen meant to move before your opponent could and to get your attack in first.

Both stances did not take a second attack into consideration.

Whoever hit fastest would win.

They could not move carelessly.

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

–Souichirou – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

They searched each other's expressions, but that changed nothing.

They were too focused to hide their expressions.

And Shoui moved slowly enough to not show an opening.

He changed his stance.

Slowly and silently, he pulled his left fist back and turned his body at an angle while making sure he did not leave an opening for attack.

–Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Change Stance – Hit.

Souichirou similarly altered his stance.

–Souichirou – Gym Tech – Take – Change Stance – Hit.

“ ... ”

The sun moved one spot higher into the sky before they finished.

Shoui was turned to the side.

He held his left fist by his waist and his right hand a bit out in front.

This stance allowed him to make a powerful step forward and swing his entire body to throw his left fist.

It was the same stance he had used to destroy the dorm door with Nakamura on the other side.

Since he could throw his fist while stepping forward, he could attack in a single action instead of needing the two beats of movement with the *sen no*

sen.

He had used the heel of his palm on the dorm door, but now he clenched his fist for the slight bit of extra reach.

The speed of a single finger's length could decide this battle.

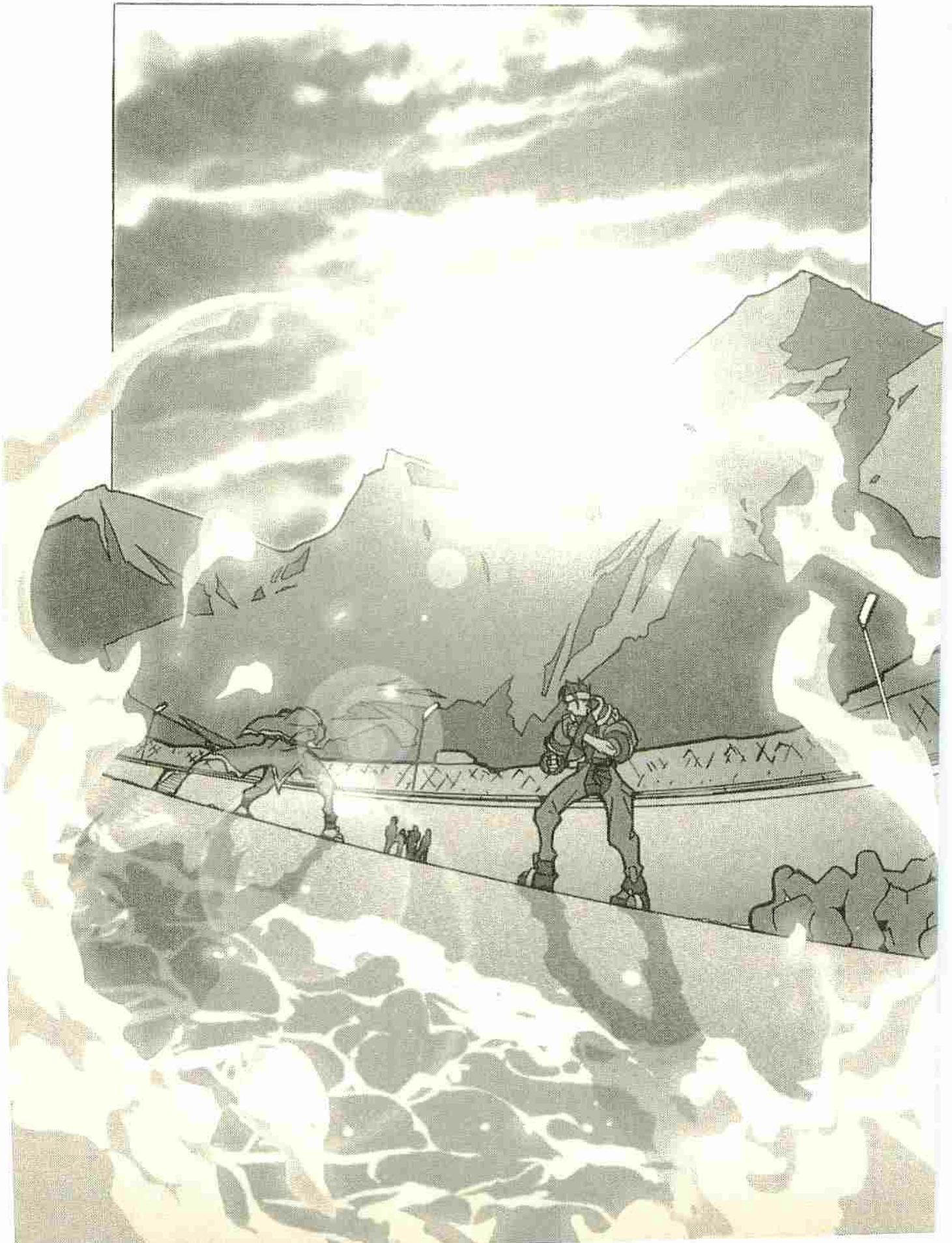
He lightly clenched the fist and gathered strength in the shoulder and elbow.

His fist would fly with great speed once he moved.

Meanwhile, Souichirou had a similar idea.

He prepared a thrusting stance just like when he had faced Nakamura.

He normally held his sword low to cut with the front of the blade, but now he held it at a mid-level height to stab with the tip. That was the fastest strike possible with a sword.



And the small point of the sword tip was hard to see and thus hard to dodge.

It was still a *go no sen* technique, but the great difference in reach and speed would make up for acting second.

However, there was another small factor that could decide this match.

–Shoui – Break High/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Break High Charge – Hit.

That was the Rhythms.

Shoui could use a Rhythm, but Souichirou could not.

The white light of breaking burst from Shoui's fist, but the blade of Souichirou's Device remained silent.

That difference in meaning was crucial.

A single touch from Shoui's fist could carve the meaning of an impact into his opponent's body, but Souichirou's Device could only do damage once its blade tip stabbed into his opponent's flesh.

Kusanagi could scatter everything if even the sword's pressure hit someone.

Souichirou had always relied on that power, so this was a first for him.

He had a handicap both practically and mentally.

If that led to hesitation, the superior reach of his sword would mean nothing.

“ ... ”

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

–Souichirou – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

Their expressions were the same as before.

They did not move.

They sped up, gathered strength, and made every preparation for victory, but they did not move.

Time passed and the waves washed across the shoulders of their shadows.

A sudden female voice reached them from the distance.

“Shoui!?”

It was Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko.

While turned to the side, Shoui reacted to that voice by lowering his gaze somewhat.

Souichirou immediately responded to that movement.

–Souichirou – Boxing/Savate/Gym/Sword Tech – Multi-Take – Full Speed Strike – Hit!

He did not move.

It was a pure thrust.

A straight line reflected the morning sun as it made a swift and accurate movement.

Shoui reacted by dodging.

He had to move up to his opponent.

Would he circle to the left or the right?

There were only two options.

And his vision answered that question.

–Shoui – Sight/Gym/Savate/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Dodge – He had seen his and Souichirou's shadows on the beach.

Souichirou's shadow silently showed his blade as well.

The three-dimensional thrust became a two-dimensional action when viewed through the shadow.

His options of dodging left or right were replaced with two other options: above or below.

– Hit!!

He chose below.

His shadow ducked below the straight line shadow racing across the beach.

He was fast.

His feet tossed sand into the air.

His fist flew.

He made a counterattack against Souichirou's step forward.

He was moving even further ahead of Souichirou's *go no sen* attack.

He ignored the blade racing by overhead and took aim while ducked low.

His target was Souichirou's solar plexus.

Even if that Osaka Chancellor had replaced so much of his body with prosthetics, a heavy blow to the center of his body would do some damage.

This would be the end for a normal Strike Forcer.

And it should have been so here.

But Souichirou was not normal.

–Shoui – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit.

The movement Shoui saw was proof enough of that.

“!?”

It was an instantaneous movement.

Souichirou's left hand let go of the hilt, formed a fist, and punched the back of the blade from above.

The straight forward line of the thrust had its vector shifted downward.

The Device was essentially swinging down from above.

–Souichirou – Boxing/Sword Tech – Multi-Take – Extra Attack – Hit!

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Jumping Dodge – Hit!!

The attacker was far from normal, but the dodger was just as abnormal.

Shoui leaped toward the water.

His hands and feet landed on the wet sand and he formed a proper stance once more.

By that time, Souichirou was already moving.

He let go of and abandoned the Device as it swung down in his right hand.

He could not move swiftly with the heavy Device in hand.

He turned toward Shoui and charged toward him while reaching his left hand for the short sword at his waist.

That automatically meant he held it low.

It was a lot like his usual attack.

–Souichirou – Boxing/Savate/Gym/Sword Tech – Multi-Take – Upwards Diagonal Strike – Hit!

Shoui tried to dodge.

But...

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Jumping Dodge – Miss!!

“...!?”

Nothing about the timing kept him from dodging.

He failed for another reason.

A wave had washed up at his feet.

His feet sank into the sand.

In no time at all, Souichirou swung his short sword in sweeping motion.

It audibly sliced through the air.

And before that sound ended, a vertical cut raced up Shoui's chest.

The anti-shock reflective material of his inner suit provided no protection against a slicing power like this.

He was cut.

He did not bleed yet. So soon after being cut, the muscles had contracted and the blood vessels were squeezed shut.

But the blood would come a breath later.

And it did.

The bone had not been cut, so it was only a light spray of blood.

But it was not over yet.

Before the wave could recede, Souichirou raised his blade for another attack.

He moved fast.

His actions and resolve showed no mercy.

The next attack would definitely slice Shoui through from head to crotch.

And...

“Ah.”

Souichirou weakly released his voice.

And that voice grew stronger as the silver arc began down its path.

“Ah...!”

His voice became his Words.

In his case, that was only a single sound.

“!”

Great pressure filled the short sword.

It was Kusanagi.

A powerful shimmering surrounded the attack as it moved to take down Shoui.

Kusanagi was swung to defeat the one who had dodged its attack and tried to make an attack of his own.

A direct hit would mean death.

And for Shoui, this was the repeat of a nightmare.

Part 2

6:07 AM

When Shoui saw the power approaching before his eyes, a phantom pain ran through his forehead.

He felt déjà vu.

...What is this!?

His battle with Yamashita Gihei had ended like this as well.

He had been knocked unconscious and woken up to find Yuuki had killed the enemy.

And now this was happening, so...

...I have to win.

If he did not, he could not protect her.

He had thought the same thing when he had been hit by Yamashita Gihei's attack.

...I have to win or I can't protect her!

His will desired battle.

It desired victory.

It desired the defeat of his enemy.

It was an extremely powerful desire.

"...!"

And then something changed.

As Shoui tried to raise his fist to guard, ether light wrapped around it.

But this was not the light of the Break High.

This light had a highly sticky power that seemed to consume the Break High's power.

It was a desire to attack. It instantly surrounded his fist and took form.

It was fire.

The blaze of the Flame High.

“!?”

Before he could express surprise, an incredible pain raced through his forehead.

The phantom pain felt like having a nail driven into his brain and it instantly erased his fear of the Flame High.

He snapped.

His body suddenly moved on its own.

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Boxing/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Counterattack Dodge – Hit!

His fiery fist instantly burned the descending short sword.

At the same time, his body leaped across the beach while staying low to the ground.

He did not stop.

With the flames still residing in his fist, he left sand in the air behind him while circling behind Souichirou.

He was a heated gust of wind.

His body moved. It moved to attack and purely to defeat his opponent.

But he asked a question.

...What is going on!?

The question was directed at himself.

His body split the early morning wind as it moved, but this was more the power of the Rhythm than his own will.

And...

...Why can I use this Rhythm so well!?

Part 3

6:08 AM

“So this is the truth of the matter!?” shouted Iba Masaaki as he watched Shoui.

He stood up to better see Shoui and Souichirou moving on the beach below.

Senga also watched Shoui as she sat with Iwai next to him.

Taeko and Saki watched the two down below while standing next to the others.

The five of them saw a clash between Kusanagi and the Flame High.

Souichirou picked up his dropped Device and moved around while Shoui swung his Flame High fist.

They were fast.

The audience had difficulty keeping up.

Souichirou mostly stuck to thrusting attacks.

And Shoui’s movements were far from normal.

Taeko commented on what she saw.

“It’s the same as when he snapped against me in the Mountain...”

“It was the same in middle school when he was hit by Ichiyama Yuusei in a karate match.”

“Shouldn’t we be stopping him, granny?” asked Saki.

“Can you stop him?” asked Senga with a quiet look in her eyes. “Yamashita Taeko, you only lost your left arm to the Break High, but that was because you were lucky.”

Taeko nodded in response.

“I know that,” she said. “The dragon told me.”

“I see. Then I suppose I can tell you now. The person who killed your brother was...”

Taeko cut in and answered for Senga.

“Hizaka Shoui...!”

She shouted the name.

She had the bitter expression of someone with sand in their mouth. She had understood it intellectually, but it was still painful to hear it from someone else.

Everyone remained silent.

The only noise was from the battle on the beach below.

The Flame High’s fire flew and Kusanagi stabbed through and cut it apart.

When she heard that roar, Taeko asked a question.

“But...how? How can Shoui use the Flame High?”

Only Senga could answer that.

“A Rhythm’s power can be used without the music as long as you can reproduce the Message that transforms the ether’s Lives. But that was only understood after I had spread the Heavy Rhythms to everyone.”

“So that’s why the Kinki Riot happened...”

“It would have been too late by the time everyone was trapped by a power like the Flame High, right?” asked Iwai Senzou.

“But.” Senga sighed. “Sometimes an idiot like that shows up. An idiot who refuses to follow the same path as everyone else.”

She saw Shoui emit more flames using the Flame High.

“When faced with death, his desire to protect transformed into a desire to win and he killed Yamashita Gihei.”

“Then...?”

“He does not remember it. The shock of his own action and the cut from Yamashita Gihei left him with no memory of it.” She took a breath. “Yamashita

Taeko, Shoui stopped moving after destroying your left arm because...he subconsciously remembered killing your brother in the same way. He tore off his arm with the Break High and then attacked with the Flame High. ...And when nothing but ashes remained, the wind swept it all away.”

“Then your granddaughter...?” asked Iba.

“Why does the Koto Chancellor claim to be the Killing Holder!?” shouted Taeko.

“Because she wanted to! You got a problem with that!?”

Three of them fell silent after that and the fourth spoke.

It was Iba.

“So there never was a Killing Holder...!?”

“All there was was a foolish granddaughter. ...A truly foolish one.” Senga smiled bitterly. “For two years, Shoui trained and came to loathe the concept of death that was subconsciously carved into him. I really thought he never would use the Flame High again...”

“And the Koto Chancellor...”

“She played the part of the Killing Holder. She really did want Shoui to return, but she said nothing.”

The two combatants continued to move on the beach below.

Shoui attacked and Souichirou received.

It tended in that direction.

Saki took a step forward as he watched them fight.

But he stopped, kicked the sand, and clicked his tongue.

“H-hey, granny! Can’t you do something!?”

“There is something.”

“What is it?”

“It’s all up to Shoui, though. If he is truly thinking about Yuuki, he will find a good way to resolve this.”

“The Koto Chancellor!?” asked Saki. “Where is she!?”

“She hurt her leg, so it’ll take time for her to climb up onto this beach!” Taeko pointed behind her. “I thought I would lend her my shoulder to help, but she insisted she was fine on her own...”

“Wait a moment.” Senga crossed her arms and looked to Shoui. “Iba! You know the Rhythm that Kuki Udai once used, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. But...”

“Kuki was a Dis-Worder just like Shoui. ...Iba, can you tell me why your student Nakamura became a Harmonist and was able to use the Flame High?”

Iba did not hesitate to answer.

“Someone who has no experience with Rhythms and Techs can best use a high-speed Rhythm like the Flame High.”

“Yes, Nakamura Midori was the same.”

When Senga said that, Iwai Sanzou frowned.

He scratched his head.

“Then...he is the same?”

Senga did not nod.

“I don’t know if Shoui is. But the opposite of a Harmonist is someone who can use all Rhythms and is skilled in Techs. They can use the Rhythm that opposes the Flame High without actually using a Rhythm.”

She took a breath.”

“They are the Loudist that lives in the realm of Black Noise.”

Part 4

6:09 AM

Shoui moved.

He continued moving.

His mind had grown shallow and his heart had faded.

His mind was blocked out by the drop in oxygen due to the exercise and by his powerful attack instinct.

He only just barely maintained his thoughts thanks to his fear of death.

He did not want to kill or be killed.

But the pain intermittently stabbing into his forehead tried to cut off his mind.

Each time, a memory replayed in the back of his mind.

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Release Memory – Hit.

He had forgotten this memory.

It had entirely vanished from his mind.

But it was forcibly replayed.

His memory of Yamashita Gihei appeared before his eyes.

It all happened in an instant.

It was two years ago on a winter night.

After taking the hit to his forehead, he had hopped back up in the north wind.

His body had moved on its own.

Despite the blood flowing from his forehead, he had kicked off the asphalt and charged toward his opponent.

Yamashita had raised his sword to counterattack.

He had swung it.

Shoui had dodged to the side.

Yamashita had tried to turn around.

Shoui had fled further.

He had circled behind Yamashita.

Yamashita had continued turning to pursue Shoui.

But Shoui had delivered a powerful punch to his right arm with a Break High fist.

Yamashita's right arm had torn off and flown through the air and the impact had spun Yamashita in the opposite direction.

His back had been fully exposed to Shoui.

The blood had yet to flow from Yamashita's right shoulder.

In the instant before that could happen, fire had wrapped around Shoui's fist.

Victory.

With that power sealed in his attack, he had thrown his fist into the center of Yamashita's spine.

The enemy had turned to ashes in an instant and Shoui had passed right through him.

He had staggered forward.

His outstretched fist's momentum had remained.

His body and his mind had been at odds.

Upon defeating his enemy, the Flame High's power had vanished and a great emptiness had remained in his heart.

The pain had quickly rushed into his forehead.

His legs had tangled up, he had tripped, and his shoulder had slammed into the solid ground.

Only pain and exhaustion had filled him and he had passed out.

As his vision grew dark, Yuuki had gotten up off the ground and looked to him.

He had heard her voice.

“Shoui-kun...”

It had been a feeble voice.

But it sounded nostalgic to him now.

...I can't believe it.

His faint thoughts smiled bitterly.

...She hasn't called me that since I arrived in Osaka.

His mind looked to reality.

“!”

His senses were freed from that memory.

He was on an Osaka Bay beach.

The situation had not changed.

He was still fighting.

As before, his body was moving to achieve victory.

Souichirou released a powerful attack with the morning sun in the background.

Shoui's body moved further and dodged it.

It was an excellent movement.

But Shoui's mind felt uneasy about the flow of the battle.

Souichirou's movements were a lot like those of Yamashita Gihei.

A vertical slash arrived.

After dodging that, he had circled behind Yamashita Gihei and torn off his arm with a Break High strike.

Souichirou swung his sword in the same way.

Shouji had a chance at victory.

If he followed the same route, he could win.

He could circle to the right, tear off Souichirou's right arm with the Break High when he tried to turn around, and use that impact to stop him from moving.

Then he could finish it with a Flame High strike.

He could win.

But that would mean Souichirou's death.

...I can't.

That was what he thought, but his body moved.

So that he could win.

Part 6

In an Instant

–Souichirou – Kusanagi/Sword Tech – Multi-Take – Right Diagonal Strike – Hit.

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Jumping Dodge – Hit.

–Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Prepare – Hit.

–Souichirou – Gym Tech – Take – Turn Around – Hit.

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Jumping Dodge – Hit.

–Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Prepare – Hit.

–Shoui – Break High/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Break High Charge – Hit.

–Shoui – Break High/Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Break High Strike – Hit!

–Souichirou – Steel Tech – Take – Remove Right Arm – Hit!!

Part 7

6:10 AM

When Souichirou's right arm was punched by the Break High, it flew into the clear air.

But Shoui had not torn it off.

Souichirou had removed it himself.

None of the impact reached his body.

“!”

Shoui saw him turn around.

He swung his Device with his left arm alone.

He held it high for an overhead swing.

This was also identical to Shoui's memory. It was identical to the attack Yamashita Gihei had used to knock Shoui out.

The phantom pain returned to his forehead.

At the same time, he felt a lethargic weight fill his body.

...It's the same.

It was the same sort of exhaustion as when he had killed Yamashita Gihei.

He knew why he was feeling it.

Because he knew he could not defeat his opponent.

To one who sought victory, defeat meant death.

The Flame High vanished from his hand.

But his enemy did not stop.

–Souichirou – Kusanagi/Sword Tech – Multi-Take – Kusanagi Slash – Hit!!

A thought came to Shoui.

...I want to win.

But it was different from before.

He would not kill.

He would not be killed.

...Then what do I want to do?

He suddenly remembered the ring held in his left fist.

What had its owner left with him?

He remembered.

The answer reached him through his vision.

–Shoui – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit.

He saw the answer.

Part 8

Same Time

The embankment divided the beach from the city.

A lone girl stood atop it.

She wore a red blazer and her long black hair fluttered in the breeze.

It was Yuuki Yuuki who claimed to be the Killing Holder.

She simply looked to Shouji with no emotion visible in her face.

Part 9

Same Time

Shoui saw her.

That was enough for him to understand it all.

His mind fully awoke.

His body rebooted.

He gathered strength in both fists.

He remembered what he needed to do.

He had made a promise with her three years before.

...I promised to protect her from herself.

She must have seen that as promising him the same thing.

And so she had taken on the Killing Holder title.

“!”

His eyes looked to Yuuki rather than the much closer slash.

He would protect her just as he had promised.

So he would not use the Flame High.

He would not win to protect her.

...Would you say I'll be protecting her to protect her?

He realized there was something more powerful than Words inside him.

It was a great power.

He recalled when he had first met Yuuki.

When she had rescued him from below the collapsed house, she had first told

him her name.

...*Yuuki*.

It had been crudely pronounced and that had been everything.

He only thought for a split second.

His movements were also instantaneous.

As the slash moved toward him, he spread his legs on the beach, raised his right arm, and opened his mouth.

And he gave a yell.

“———!”

He tried to force her name from his throat.

But he failed at that.

A different voice escaped him.

It was a lot like the very first voice anyone made in their life.

It was like a baby's cry.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Immediately, Souichirou's sword swung down with Kusanagi's power wrapped around it.

But...

“!?”

Shouji raised his right hand with no Rhythm around it and without using a single Tech.

And the instant his hand touched the slash, Kusanagi vanished.

It changed.

The Device became nothing more than a blade.

But its momentum was not lost.

The blade split Shouji's right palm.

The silver line sliced off his thumb and its base.

But that diverted it away from his head.

As soon as the blade dug into his flesh, Shoui had swung his arm outwards.

The slight shift to the sword's path led it into his right shoulder, down into his collar bone, and even lower.

Souichirou's attack fell straight down and split Shoui's shoulder and right chest.

With a great noise, the sword pressure whipped up the sand and Shoui's right arm flew through the air.

Needless to say, this did not stop Shoui.

He swung up his left fist.

He squeezed the golden ring hidden inside.

He turned it toward Souichirou who had just swung the sword down.

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Straight Fist – Hit!

–Souichirou – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge – Miss!!

Shoui's fist dug into Souichirou's side.

The sound of impact was followed by three light sounds much like a branch breaking underfoot.

At the same time, Souichirou's body floated up a little.

His head drooped down and he fell to his knees.

Meanwhile, Shoui took a step back and sighed.

An approaching wave washed at his feet while he looked to his right shoulder.

There was no arm attached.

He could see his shoulder's skin and the bone jutted out past the flesh.

“ ... ”

He sighed again.

It was a breath of relief.

With that relaxing breath, the flesh swelled out, hiding the protruding bone.

And allowing the blood to gush out.

“!”

He was hit by the recoil of the blood spurting out with the force of his pulse.

He felt great exhaustion and the shock of blood loss.

He realized his vision was tilting and the ocean was gradually growing vertical.

...Oh, I'm falling over.

Once he realized that, the sand filled the left side of his vision.

He felt exhausted and the right half of his body was soaked with something warm.

Even as he succumbed to the desire for sleep, he tried to hold his right shoulder with his left hand but then stopped.

His left fist held Takada's ring.

He could not get it dirty.

“I can't believe this.”

Shoui spoke for the first time in several days and shut his eyes.

His mind quickly fell into the darkness.

Chapter 9: Prologue to the Final Battle (New Stage Introduction) – (12/24/1996)

Part 1

4:40 PM

The setting winter sun was a deep red.

It was not the warm color of autumn twilight or the piercing color of a summer afternoon.

It was only a moment of color changing into the darkness of the heavy sunset.

That red washed over the city of Osaka every day.

The red and the shadows created a powerful contrast on the white walls of Osaka Castle in the center of the city and the waves of roof tiles dully reflected the light.

It was a strong color.

The Kyobashi bridge to the northwest gave a diagonal view of Osaka Castle where one could look up at the colors of that light and shadow.

Someone was viewing Osaka Castle from atop the Kyobashi bridge.

There were two of them: Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide and Vice Chancellor Aoi Hijiri.

Nakamura stood in the center of the bridge with his MD's headphones still in his ears.

Hijiri stood next to him with her arms crossed and looking in the same

direction as him.

A few people were walking by or leaving behind them, but those two ignored the flow of people and kept their eyes on the castle.

They did not move.

Instead, one of them spoke.

It was Hijiri.

“So the battle’s coming up soon, is it?”

She pulled a flyer from her pocket that she had torn from a wall somewhere.

The flyer said that Kansai’s Chancellor’s Officers were holding a Christmas party at Osaka Castle that day.

All current and former members of the Chancellor’s Officers were invited.

But even as late as it was, Osaka Castle was not prepared for a party and no preparations were underway.

Hijiri looked to the castle.

“The party is probably camouflage to give us a battlefield. They want to keep the damage contained, unlike during the Kinki Riot.” She sighed, tore up the flyer, and dropped it into the moat. “What do you think? We could always ignore their invitation and make them look like fools.”

She asked her question, but Nakamura did not answer.

He kept his eyes on the castle without looking back and Hijiri turned in his direction for just a moment.

He was staring straight ahead.

There was strength in his gaze.

He was focused.

And that powerful focus was quite serious.

He used his gaze to direct that internal strength straight ahead.

But his facial expression was horribly lacking in heat.

Even with the setting sun shining on the side of his face, he stared forward with a cooled expression.

He would seem expressionless if not for his eyes.

It was the look of a Killing Holder.

“ ... ”

Hijiri looked away from him.

She breathed a bitter laugh mixed with a sigh of relief as if she had resigned herself to something.

“Are you gonna go for it before they gather there? ...Or are you gonna wait?”

Nakamura did not answer, but she did not mind.

She glanced toward the city.

“There are more and more from the Chancellor’s Officers and Houzenji Group hanging around. I bet the tourists will be driven out of the castle before long.”

Nakamura still did not acknowledge her words.

Hijiri smiled bitterly at him.

She uncrossed her arms and placed her hands on the bridge’s railing.

Since she did not look Nakamura’s way, she seemed to be speaking to herself.

“If you say something, will what’s hidden inside come spilling out?” she asked.

There was no response.

Nakamura said nothing.

But he did move.

Still looking to Osaka Castle, he turned to face the castle’s entrance.

“ ... ”

He began walking.

One beat later, Hijiri followed through the blowing north wind.

She remained behind him instead of lining up beside him.

They walked toward the castle grounds.

Toward the site of the scheduled party.

In the setting sun, the uninvited guests entered the battlefield before anyone else.

Hijiri said one thing on the bridge dividing the city from the battlefield.

“...I wonder if Takahiro will show up.”

Part 2

6:30 PM

The chill of the night was beginning to descend from the sky.

Shoui was lying down, but he had already woken up.

–Shoui – Sight Tech – Take – Confirm Situation – Hit.

His upward-facing vision saw the ceiling of Nandaimon's detached room.

This had been his room 2 years before.

The room was bright.

The ceiling's fluorescent light was on.

“...”

His eyes could see the scene around him, but his head was far from clear.

It felt like waking from a long sleep.

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Awaken Mind – Hit.

After a single powerful heartbeat, the blood slowly rose through his neck and to his head.

He trembled.

He felt the cold.

He sat up.

–Shoui – Sight Tech – Take – Confirm Situation – Hit.

He found himself in a nostalgic place.

He removed the blanket covering him and revealed his body.

The chilly air hit his skin and he realized he was not wearing his inner suit.

He crossed his arms to keep out the cold, but his skin still felt the cold quite sensitively.

The cold brought back his body's senses.

Similarly, all of his memories returned.

And he realized why he was here.

In his battle with Souichirou...

...My right arm.

He had lost a part of his body.

However, he was currently crossing his arms.

That meant he had the right arm that Souichirou had chopped off.

He looked to that arm.

From the shoulder to the fingertips, it was entirely contained in bandages.

He had his arm.

It was wrapped in bandages, but when he tried to open the hand, he had no trouble moving it. He had feeling in the fingers as well.

...Was I healed?

Just as he wondered that...

“Shoui! Shoui! Have you woken up!?”

He heard a voice from outside and the large window was shoved open.

He saw the darkness of the night.

He felt the chill of the night.

That chilly expanse opened up before his eyes.

And Senga stood in the center of it.

Their eyes immediately met.

Shoui was unsure what to say.

“Umm, long time no see?”

“What are you talking about, moron? We saw each other just two days ago.”

“I’m pretty sure we only passed by each other on the beach...”

After saying that, Shoui was relieved to find he actually could speak.

And then he realized what she had actually said.

“...Two days ago? I was out for that long?”

“You weren’t just out. I’ll explain everything, so come on out of there.”

“Oh, right, right, right.”

He nodded, got out of the bed, and tried to stand up.

“?”

He felt something at his feet.

There was a small paper bag by the pillow.

“What is this...?” he muttered while picking it up.

There was something light and soft inside.

...Who left this?

No one answered his question.

He heard something else instead.

“Hurry it up, Shoui! Get a move on!”

Senga yelled at him from outside.

He sighed, lightly folded the bag, and stuck it in the hidden pocket of his pants.

And he walked.

He was a little unsteady on his feet, but he regained his balance after a few steps.

He closed the large window Senga had opened and circled around to the front door.

He put on his shoes which were lying there and opened the door.

“Shoui! Hurry up and put this on.”

He found Senga’s rushed voice as well as an inner suit and coat dumped over his head.

The clothes were obscuring his vision, so he set them on the ground and looked to Senga.

“Old Lady Senga.”

“What is it?”

“Before I put on the inner suit.” He pointed to his right shoulder. “Can I remove the bandages on my right arm?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m skeptical that it was completely healed in only 2 days after being so cleanly lopped off.”

The anti-shock reflective material inner suit both reduced any impacts and strengthened his body’s movements. If he was still injured, any vigorous activity could instantly reopen the wound.

So he asked.

“Was it fully healed?”

“Of course it was. That’s why you were asleep for so long.” Senga smiled bitterly. “On the Emperor’s own orders, you were given the best Tune healing Japan has to offer and a group from Detroit was called in for some Live modifications. Two days was enough, so remove the bandages.”

He did as he was told.

–Shoui – Surgical Tech – Take – Remove Bandage – Miss.

“Huhh?”

“What are you even doing...?”

–Senga – Surgical Tech – Take – Remove Bandage – Hit.

Senga slowly removed the bandages and they fell to the hard ground in front of the detached room.

Shoui watched the bandages fall away and scratched his head with his left hand.

“I always had Yuuki do this, so I’m no good at it.”

His voice faded away toward the end.

He had seen his right arm exposed in the air.

–Shoui – Sight Tech – Take – Confirm Situation – Miss.

His right arm was now a red biological prosthetic.

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Accept – Hit.

“Is this...?”

He looked to his right arm with no shock or confusion.

It looked like a human arm, but it was not.

When he held it up toward the moon, he could tell exactly what it was.

It was vermilion.

The arm was made from a glossy vermilion that looked a lot like blood and stood out even in the dark night.

And black stripes of lightning patterns were visible on the developed muscles.

–Shoui – Military Tech – Take – Identify Weapon – Hit.

–Shoui – Commercial Tech – Take – Identify Product – Hit.

He used two different Techs, but he could find no knowledge on this false arm.

He had never seen anything like it.

Senga identified it for him.

“That’s the ogre’s arm.”

He looked back in surprise and she nodded.

“It was made using the Lives of the ogre arm severed by Nanba Souichirou. But the base of the actual biological matter came from your severed arm and...”

She hesitated a moment. “The arm of Yamashita Gihei who you killed.”

“ ... ”

Shoui said nothing about the origin of his new arm.

With a serious expression, he simply raised his right arm, thrust it forward, and clenched the fist.

“It’s a great false arm.”

“It’s an honor, isn’t it?”

“What’s it called?”

“There is no literature about a false arm made from an ogre, so you could even call it the Ogre God if you wanted.”

“I see. Would this make me a Steel Forcer instead of a Critical Forcer?”

“No, I think you could call yourself whichever you wanted. It was made to be no different from a normal arm, so ability-wise, you’re still a Critical Forcer.”

Shoui smiled bitterly at that.

“For being made from an ogre’s arm, it’s a pretty boring prosthetic.”

“Yes, save for one power.”

“Power?”

“It can ignore the Flame High. Thanks to the ogre’s Lives,” explained Senga. “Since you still can’t use your power as a Loudist very well, that should help you out.”

“...Huh?”

“What do you mean ‘huh’?”

“Well, uh...you said ignoring the Flame High should help me out.” He tilted his head. “But why would that help me?”

“You moron. Kantou and Kansai are about to clash at Osaka Castle!”

“Ho ho. Well, isn’t that something?”

“And you’re going too.”

“Eh?”

He froze just as he was staring to put on the inner suit.

“Why am I going?”

Senga sighed and brought an exasperated hand to her forehead.

“Do you not remember the Rhythm you used to defeat Nanba Souichirou?”

“...”

“Do you not remember the power that negated his Kusanagi?”

He did remember.

His right arm had negated Kusanagi’s sword pressure the instant he touched it.

But even after Kusanagi vanished, the blade itself remained and chopped off his right arm.

“What was-...?”

Before he could finish his question, Senga slapped his right arm.

“It was your will. It’s a Rhythm meant to protect instead of fight. It’s the Heavy Rhythm that stands opposite of the Flame High and is easiest to use for a Loudist.”

“And I used it?”

“Yes, only a Loudist familiar with all Rhythms and Techs can understand that soundless Rhythm. That blocking Rhythm negates any other Rhythm it touches.” She sighed. “It was once used by Kuki Udai alongside Nakamura Midori who used the Flame High. ...And because it is soundless, it is a Rhythm that can be used without using a Rhythm.”

Shoui looked to his left hand.

...Can I really use something like that?

He had used it.

He did not know how.

While fighting Souichirou, he had seen Yuuki standing on the beach

embankment.

It had happened the instant he had wanted to protect her instead of escape the Flame High or win.

He remembered a certain will within him.

So he spoke.

“That power is needed, isn’t it?”

“Hurry to Osaka Castle.”

“Are the Flame High...and Yuuki there?”

“Yes, they are. ...But your power is probably still unstable, so use that Ogre God well as you fight. Your enemy has the Harmonist’s power. Don’t let your guard down and screw up like you always do.”

“It’s not that I let my guard down. I screw up all the time because I’m weak.”

He smiled bitterly and put on his inner suit.

He fastened it to the suit on his lower body to cover his entire body in a single suit.

And then he put on the coat.

“Does my Rhythm have a name?”

“The Storm High.”

“The Storm High?”

“And as a Heavy Rhythm, it’s also known as Totsuka.” She took a breath. “It’s the Totsuka-no-Tsurugi from when Susanoo chopped off Yamata-no-Orochi’s heads.”

“I see,” said Shouji with a nod.

The coat had the right sleeve removed to accommodate the false arm.

He lightly swung the ogre’s right arm to double-check how it felt.

“Okay, I’ll be going.”

“You forgot this.”

Senga held out his bandanna.

He smiled a little and took it.

He wrapped it around his forehead.

When his hand touched it, he felt the chill of the split forehead protector.

It had been split by Yamashita Gihei's attack 2 years before.

...It all started here.

With that thought, he bowed toward Senga.

And he started walking.

The walk quickly grew to a jog and then a run.

The gravel crunched below his feet as he raced through the winter darkness.

He ran.

–Shoui – Savate Tech – Take – Sprint – Hit!

He ran down the path leading to the shrine.

The wind was blowing.

It was a powerful north wind.

Part 3

7:01 PM

The moon was out.

That pale yellow and somewhat waning light was directly above the city of Osaka.

The moonlight was endlessly wavering.

The heated air at the surface was producing a shimmering effect.

The year-end city was trying to warm itself even if the sky was cold.

The strongest shimmering was located above Osaka Castle in the center of the city and it produced turbulent air.

Osaka Castle had been the site of countless battles in the past and it had been repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt.

The only lights illuminating it were the reddish-brown streetlights shining on the cherry trees lining the inner moat.

That unfocused light lit up the castle from below, giving it a different look from the day.

It was a frightening look.

Three people were approaching that frightening form from straight ahead.

Osaka Chancellor Nanba Souichirou.

Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko.

Koto Chancellor Yuuki Yuuki.

At the plaza in front of Otemon Gate, they left Saki Seiji and Iwai Sanzou who had come to see them off and then they ran toward main castle tower.

Since starting a minute before, they were sticking together and none of them

were out of breath.

They were surrounded by darkness. There were tall stone walls, trees, and lawns.

Taeko spoke to no one in particular while second in line.

“The wind sure is picking up.”

“That is because the city lights have begun to come on,” replied Souichirou in the lead.

He wore an armored shell built for mobility.

It looked like armor missing most of its parts and it supported and strengthened the wearer’s movements.

Both his prosthetic and the mobile shell produced quiet mechanical sounds as he moved.

“Listen. As I said before, this battle will-...”

“Act as a trigger to bring the east and west together whether we win or lose, right? ...But do the two from Tokyo know that?”

According to those on guard duty, their enemy was only the Tokyo Chancellor and Vice Chancellor. The two of them had been on the way to the main castle tower.

Of course, those two would know nothing of what was occurring at the center of Osaka.

So Souichirou narrowed his eyes a little and did not answer Taeko.

He sped up.

“Whatever the case, I want to win this.”

“Well, we did leave everyone waitin’ in the parkin’ lot. ...I’d love to win and then go listen to the outdoor concert of Beethoven’s 9th.”

A powerful gust of wind seemed to blow Taeko’s carefree voice away.

“Is it gonna rain?” she asked while looking up into the night sky.

Yuuki also looked into the night sky while following behind the other two.

She stared at a certain point in the sky.

And at the same time...

–Yuuki – Savate Tech – Take – Sprint – Hit!

She moved out ahead.

“Ah! Hey! What’re ya in such a hurry for!?”

Yuuki ignored Taeko and kept going.

A small form followed behind her.

“!?”

It was a Dog God.

It hurried its small body to pursue her.

It was about a meter away from her.

But Yuuki did not even glance toward the Dog God.

–Yuuki – Spear/Throw Tech – Multi-Take – Throw – Hit!

She opened Housei in her hand.

She used centrifugal force to spin the giant staff and then threw it into the air.

–Yuuki – Steel/Military Tech – Multi-Take – Suzaku Ver. 40 Link – Hit!

Her right false eye, Phoenix, connected with the heavens.

A moment later, lightning struck Housei as it flew through the sky.

It was a white light.

The sound arrived afterwards.

Housei fell while wrapped in light.

Yuuki ran.

The giant staff fell with enough force to stab into the ground, but she snatched it from midair.

To negate the falling centrifugal force, she powerfully spun Housei in one hand.

The afterimage of the ether light surrounding it drew arcs just like neon lights.

With each arc of light, her vermilion uniform shined in the darkness and her black hair flew.

She appeared to be dancing.

Taeko sighed while following after her.

“Yer too much for me.”

“In what way?”

“In that ya can do anything even if yer not aware of it.”

“Awareness can be harmful in some things,” said Souichirou without even looking their way.

Taeko smiled bitterly.

“That’s true enough...”

Meanwhile, they reached a fork in the road.

Heading north would take them to the inner moat and east would take them to the main castle tower.

Yuuki chose the tower route.

Souichirou and Taeko turned in that direction a moment later, but...

–Taeko – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Presence – Hit!

“There’s an enemy here!”

“But the report said those two were at the tower!”

“It’s another one! There were 3 of them to start with!!”

With that shout, Taeko jumped to the side.

She faced north, toward the inner moat.

She had sensed the enemy’s presence there.

That girl with a giant false arm attached to her left shoulder disappeared behind the stone wall in an instant.

But neither Souichirou nor Yuuki pursued her.

They did not even turn in her direction.

But Souichirou did call out to her.

“Give it your all and do not worry about us!!”

His shout lasted an instant.

The two figures ran toward the central circle in front of the tower.

They entered a garden with a pond.

And...

–Souichirou – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Presence – Hit!

He said nothing.

But he did look to Yuuki and the Dog God as they ran away.

–Souichirou – Gym Tech – Take – Stop – Hit!

His prosthetic legs and the heels of his mobile shell creaked as he slid to a stop on the gravel.

He too had noticed the enemy he needed to fight.

“Koto Chancellor, I leave the last one to you!!”

Yuuki did not respond.

She continued running.

She passed through the central circle and ran up the zigzagging stone steps.

She was not out of breath.

Her pace remained steady.

She simply ran and looked up while sticking in her headphones.

She looked to the roof of Osaka Castle’s main tower.

–Yuuki – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Presence – Hit.

She found the enemy.

And at the same time...

–Yuuki – Gym/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Great Leap – Hit!

She jumped.

She used the railing running down the center of the stairs as a stepping stone and she jumped up to the entranceway's roof.

–Yuuki – Gym/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Great Leap – Hit!

And without a running start, she jumped up to the left and onto the second floor's roof.

She continued from there.

–Yuuki – Gym/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Great Leap – Hit!

–Yuuki – Gym/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Great Leap – Hit!

–Yuuki – Mind Tech – Take – Ignore Pain – Hit.

–Yuuki – Gym/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Great Leap – Hit!

She grimaced at the pain from her ankle.

But she ignored even her own body's pain.

She took a breath and continued up.

Her feet could be heard kicking off the roof tiles.

With each jump, her vision grew higher and the wind stronger.

The city of Osaka gradually spread out below her.

She was high up.

But she continued jumping regardless.

–Yuuki – Gym/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Great Leap – Hit!

She saw the roof of the main tower.

–Yuuki – Gym/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Great Leap – Hit!

She arrived there.

Yuuki stood on the waves of roof tiles and looked ahead.

The night sky was spread out before her.

After climbing so high, the sky was at eye level.

It was the dark sky of a winter night. The moon seemed to ripple in the wind and the shimmering heat.

There were dark clouds low in the sky.

They were likely due to the ether supply from Suzaku Ver. 40. The vibration of the air had produced the clouds.

“ ... ”

She looked down at her feet.

The Dog God was swaying with its front paws caught on the edge of the roof.

It had somehow managed to climb this high.

She looked away without helping it the rest of the way up. She confirmed where it was she stood.

She was on the southwest edge of the roof.

It was a poor place for a battle without railings.

She looked up and walked forward.

She walked up the sloped roof.

And...

–Yuuki – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit.

She saw someone standing on the very top of the roof.

She knew who it was: Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide.

He was staring down at the city.

But he already had headphones in his ears.

What should he do?

What did he want?

His music eloquently answered every question.

He moved his eyes to look across the city of Osaka.

“So you’re here.”

He spoke into the wind.

But instead of speaking again, he took a single action.

He smiled.

It was not an audible laugh.

Nor did his body shake.

He simply glared down at Osaka’s nightscape, put a powerful smile on his lips, and raised both arms.

Flames burst grandly from his hands.

This was the fire of the Flame High.

It roared and lit up the heavens from below, but he did not stop smiling.

His eyes were now looking at Yuuki instead of Osaka.

Killer intent filled those eyes.

And his mouth produced more words.

“Now, it’s time to become king!”

With that, Nakamura won the initiative.

Chapter 10: Reconciliation Riot (Changing to a Round System)

Part 1

7:07 PM

Taeko faced a boy below the cherry trees alongside the inner moat.

He wore a three-piece suit with a white scarf dangling from his shoulders.

He was Ikemaru Takahiro.

He removed the black gloves on his hands.

“I saw a strange advertisement and came to take a peek at a Chancellor’s Officers party, but this commotion is what I find?”

“Yeah... Apparently, the superiority of the east and west is on the line.”

“I am not interested.” He threw the gloves away. “There are a few things I would like to discuss with Aoi-san, so could you let me through?”

“That ain’t happenin’. She’s fightin’ right now.”

Taeko smiled a little.

Takahiro did not bat an eye.

“I am not interested in a fight.”

“But if ya go over there, you’ll help that girl out, won’t ya?”

“Of course. That is my duty.”

“Then it’s my duty to stop ya here.”

“Even when we have nothing against each other?”

“Do ya need somethin’ against someone to fight them? I don’t.” She laughed quietly. “There are those I’ve gotta save, though. There’s a lotta those around me.”

With that, she lightly swung the Dragon Emperor’s fist.

“6th Activation.”

The Dragon Emperor roared.

With that bestial cry, the shoulder armor panels opened to release steam.

And lightning surrounded the metal fist.

A deep thrum reverberated pleasantly across the wide space lined with cherry trees.

“You must have nerves of steel,” responded Takahiro.

“What makes ya say that?”

“That you actually want to fight me.” He lightly brushed up his hair. “My *kotodama* is most effective against objects without a will of their own. I am the greatest enemy of anyone with prosthetics.”

“And that’s why I can’t afford to run away.”

“This isn’t your usual method. Don’t you tend to join the stronger side?”

Taeko raised her fist and smiled a little before answering.

“I feel like doin’ some volunteer work.”

With that, she moved.

“!”

Taeko won the initiative.

She race toward Takahiro who seemed to simply stand there.

–Taeko – Savate Tech – Take – Sprint – Hit.

Her long-legged stride kicked up the dirt as she filled the gap between them in only a few steps.

She approached the enemy.

Takahiro's hand moved just before she arrived.

His white left hand reached out and touched one of the cherry trees.

"Fly."

That one word surpassed all logic.

The tree flew.

This was nothing as simple as being knocked from the ground.

The thick tree with no leaves or flowers flew, roots and all.

The dirt was audibly torn up and the tree whistled through the wind.

It flew horizontally in from the right with even more force than gravitational acceleration.

It did not tilt at all and flew almost comically straight.

She could not avoid it.

Taeko's Dragon Emperor was attached to her left shoulder, so it could not block an attack from the right.

She made a split second decision.

"Daaahhhh!"

–Taeko – Boxing/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Intercept – Hit.

She slammed her right fist into the flying tree near the roots.

A dull sound mixed with the sound of breaking bone.

Her fist was smashed in a single blow.

Of course it was. The difference in mass was overwhelming.

But the impact ran through the tree.

And the hit near the roots caused it to rotate in midair as if pitching forward.

Taeko did not overlook that movement.

She briefly glanced at the tree falling toward her head.

–Taeko – Steel/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Grab – Hit.

–Taeko – Steel/Spear Tech – Multi-Take – Swing – Hit!

She held the Dragon Emperor's palm overhead, grabbed the tree trunk, and then swung it like a club.

She easily swung the 7 meter cherry tree like it was a bat.

But Takahiro had already jumped backwards.

Taeko let go of the swinging tree.

The centrifugal force sent it flying into the inner moat.

The sound of splashing water rang coldly through the winter air.

She began running again.

She ran so fast her footsteps seemed to follow after her.

Her white breaths were scattered by her speed and they vanished into the reddish-brown light of the streetlights.

She ran below the cherry trees which had no leaves or flowers.

Meanwhile, Ikemaru kept his distance from her while pulling a few 10 yen coins from his suit pocket.

He lightly threw them.

“Byakko.”

They instantly transformed.

The white light of the coins' paths flew toward Taeko in several curves.

They were targeting a point on the back of her neck.

It was the same motion as a beast rushing in to bite her.

She responded by thrusting the Dragon Emperor forward.



“Dragon Emperor!”

–Taeko – Shot Tech – Take – Prepare Sniping – Hit!

–Taeko – Steel/Shot/Lightning High Tech – Multi-Take – Snipe – Hit!

The light produced an explosive roar.

The sound produced glowing flares.

The tiger’s white lines struck the dragon’s bluish-white beams.

The explosion formed a wall between Taeko and Takahiro and below the trees.

–Taeko – Sight Tech – Take – Locate Enemy – Hit!

In the span of time known as an instant, Takahiro stepped back slightly.

Taeko did not overlook it.

But the explosion was in the way.

So...

“I won’t die!!”

She chose to charge right through it.

The explosion had yet to fully expand, but she charged into the bright light.

And she sang.

Nobody takes the middle road

Nothing lives or dies

It all either falls into ruin or survives Everyone, everyone, everyone

The azure light surrounding her body was the same as the Dragon Emperor’s Lightning High light.

It could cancel out the explosion.

So she did not hesitate to run through the clash between dragon and tiger.

Light.

Noise.

Heat.

They all burst out and something shot through her right leg.

–Taeko – Mind Tech – Take – Ignore Pain – Hit!

Pain could be ignored, so she ran forward.

As her ponytail danced behind her, the end was scorched by the heat.

She rushed.

A mere 3 steps seemed to last forever.

But she immediately broke out the other side.

“!”

She suddenly left the pure white space and found a more colorful scene.

She saw the cherry trees.

And she saw her enemy.

Ikemaru Takahiro stood before her while preparing to take a step back.

“!?”

She did not let him escape.

What she did was simple.

–Taeko – Steel/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Dragon Emperor Strike – Hit!

Takahiro could not use Techs or a special Dance Combat style, so he had no way of avoiding it.

The metal fist flew in an overhand swing and its entire mass slammed into Takahiro’s chest.

It was a solid hit.

She heard the pleasant sounds of impact and breaking bones.

She fully extended the Dragon Emperor arm to push out with the maximum mass.

She heard even more breaking bones in Takahiro’s chest.

“Gh...”

The sound escaping his mouth might have been an inhalation or an exhalation.

His glasses fell from his face.

The black-framed glasses audibly bounced off of the Dragon Emperor fist’s armor panel.

And just as they fell to the ground, his head hung down.

Taeko took a breath with the Dragon Emperor fist still extended.

As the white breath left her, all strength left Takahiro’s body.

“...”

The tall boy in a suit silently fell to his knees and collapsed forward.

Except his hand was extended as if to embrace the Dragon Emperor.

“Go mad.”

His words rang quietly.

Part 2

7:10 PM

Taeko pulled back in surprise.

But it was too late.

The change was instantaneous and the effects were everlasting.

Her left arm suddenly moved.

“...!?! Dragon Emperor!?”

–Taeko – Steel Tech – Take – Control Dragon Emperor – Miss!

Her voice of doubt did not get through.

The steel fist thrust up toward the heavens and roared.

It was a high, high pitched sound much like a pheasant cry.

It was a beautiful voice.

It was the voice of a dragon seeking heaven.

And it summoned lightning.

The Dragon Emperor faced heaven and emitted a lightning attack.

The sound of exploding electricity shook the air.

It was thunder.

The metal arm waved wildly back and forth like a snake and scorched the surrounding air with its lightening.

“Dragon Emperor!”

The Dragon Emperor was deaf to Taeko’s shout.

It roared. It roared fiercely and showed off its power.

–Dragon Emperor – Steel Tech – Auto-Take – 7th Activation – Hit!

“!?”

It ascended a stage from the 6th Activation.

–Taeko – Steel Tech – Take – Control Dragon Emperor – Miss!

If the Dragon Emperor let loose, it could easily blow away an entire city.

And it was trying to do just that now.

“...Dragon Emperor! Stooooop!”

Taeko yelled within the dancing light and noise.

–Taeko – Steel Tech – Take – Control Dragon Emperor – Miss!

It would not stop.

–Taeko – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit!

Taeko saw something in the center of the destruction.

Ikemaru Takahiro slowly stood up after falling to his knees from the previous hit.

Meanwhile, Taeko had lost control of her weapon.

He smiled a little while holding his side.

A slight trail of blood fell from the corner of his mouth, but he ignored it.

His right hand slowly removed the scarf from his shoulders.

The rustling of the scarf sounded oddly loud within the deafening noise and light.

And he gently wrapped it around his right hand as he raised his voice.

“Hear me, oh dragon!”

Part 3

7:11 PM

A great roar rumbled in from the distance.

But two people were creating noises even louder than that continuous background music.

It was Osaka Chancellor Nanba Souichirou and Tokyo Vice Chancellor Aoi Hijiri.

They used similar yet different techniques as they alternated between attack and defense.

Souichirou primarily attacked with Kusanagi and his defense was based on dodging.

Hijiri also primarily attacked with Kusanagi, but her defense was based on the Shinkage Style.

They exchanged sword strikes again and again in the shimmering moonlight.

Souichirou's Kusanagi sword pressure attack was deflected by Hijiri.

There was a solid sound.

Hijiri's body was blown a bit away, but she took little damage.

The deflected Kusanagi strike smashed the central circle's ground and tore into the wall.

When another Kusanagi strike came his way, Souichirou canceled it out with his own Kusanagi.

"This will never end," he muttered while looking to Hijiri. "I suppose only a direct hit will do."

They were about 15 meters apart.

They faced each other while ready to attack.

The mechanical sounds of Souichirou's mobile shell sounded loudly as he raised the Device given to him by Senga.

Hijiri held her hexagonal rod low.

They were ready to attack.

They both breathed out at the same moment.

But Hijiri's white breath came with words.

"I've waited a long time for this battle."

"I would imagine so, heir to the branch family." Souichirou nodded. "Is this the showdown between separate evolutions of the same Dance Combat style?"

"I'd say it's a way to find an answer."

"An answer to what?"

"Well." Hijiri smiled a little. "To whether or not I should have been born."

"..."

"I'm betting you aren't aware who my mother was to that man. Or who I was." She sighed. "I'm settling everything here in this city. I'll prove my mother and I weren't useless by defeating you and finding the cherry blossoms... That's the ending I'm after!"

"..."

Souichirou said nothing.

But he did adjust the position of his Device.

And the two of them took another deep breath.

Then a second and a third.

Below the shimmering sky, their breathing synchronized.

They were using nearly identical Dance Combat styles and the same Rhythm.

Their breathing continued.

More rumbling arrived from the distance.

The smell of scorched air was mixed into the faint north wind.

Someone was fighting an intense battle somewhere.

But Souichirou and Hijiri remained motionless.

And their breathing continued as if to prove their stillness.

They continued in silence.

The blowing wind was the only movement.

It was a warm wind.

It was not a winter wind.

It was created by the fighting here at Osaka Castle.

And it was the heated wind that Osaka emitted into the chilly night.

It rose toward heaven.

“ ... ”

Souichirou suddenly looked up.

There were dark clouds there.

But these were not the small clouds seen there before.

Clouds dark enough to begin raining at any time covered most of Osaka's sky and ruled over the night.

They were dark and heavy clouds.

And they were about to swallow up the moon rather than the sky.

The shimmering moon was being swallowed by darkness.

The moonlight was slowly and silently lost.

The moon's dark blue light fell into the darkness.

Before they could take another breath, the light was fully defeated by the darkness.

Similarly, the two facing each other below the darkness stopped breathing at the same moment.

They gathered their fighting spirit.

The first to move was Hijiri.

–Hijiri – Kusanagi/Sword Tech – Multi-Take – Kusanagi Strike – Hit!

“Ah,” said a feminine voice.

Pushed forward by that voice, a shimmering flew out as a prelude.

And that wavering heat was pursued by Kusanagi and its destructive noise.

But that was not all.

Hijiri too pursued it.

She ran out after Kusanagi.

Following the shockwave, she let the split air reform around her while she kicked off the gravel ground.

She ran with her hexagonal rod held down low again.

She intended to make an attack on the spot Souichirou dodged to.

But Souichirou did not dodge.

He lowered his hips and moved all at once.

–Souichirou – Kusanagi/Steel/Sword/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Kusanagi Interception – Hit!

“Ah,” said a masculine voice.

A shimmering raced out and collided with the approaching power.

With a solid sound, the air burst.

Instead of dodging the Kusanagi attack to the left or right, he crushed it with an attack of his own.

–Souichirou – Steel/Gym Tech – Multi-Take – Control Position – Hit.

He had built up too much power and started to pitch forward, so he supported himself with his lowered center of gravity.

The two Kusanagi attacks ruptured.

A vacuum exploded and created a scratch on Souichirou’s face.

Cracks ran through the chest of his mobile shell.

But that was all.

His opponent was right in front of him, so he did not hesitate to move.

A direct hit from Kusanagi was his only way to win.

He did not attack from above.

Nor from below.

Not even from the left or right.

He attacked from straight ahead.

It was a jab.

This attack would end the battle.

He jumped straight toward Hijiri as she charged in with her weapon held low.

He stomped his foot forcefully onto the ground.

*–Souichirou – Steel/Kusanagi/Savate/Gym/Sword Tech – Multi-Take –
Kusanagi Jab – Hit!*

He made the jab with the Device containing Kusanagi's power.

“Ah.”

He shouted the single syllable with incredible power.

He aimed for the center of Hijiri's chest, leaving her with nowhere to dodge.

Even if she deflected it by hand, the blade would stab into her chest or shoulder.

But...

“That's not gonna work!” yelled Hijiri.

There was no surprise on her face.

She used her fingers to toss up the hexagonal rod in her right hand.

And she clapped her hands toward the approaching blade.

It happened in an instant.

“...!”

The two palms wielding the power of the Shinkage Style clasped Souichirou’s Device from either side.

She used the Shirahadori.

The technique was known as the Mutodori in the Kage Style.

It was very typical of the Shinkage Style that focused on defense.

While crushed between the two palms, Kusanagi roared and created a vacuum around itself.

Hijiri’s hands and clothing tore and blood flowed out.

But she received no serious wounds.

Souichirou’s blade stopped about 2 cm into her chest, but not even that would be a decisive blow.

“...Mh,” groaned Souichirou as he pulled the Device back and jumped backwards.

Hijiri moved forward to pursue.

Her right hand already held the hexagonal rod she had tossed into the air before.

The boy retreated and the girl moved forward.

She attacked right away.

“Ah,” she said while making an attack from below.

Souichirou raised his Device.

It was too late.

–Souichirou – Steel/Kusanagi/Sword/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Intercept – Miss!

A shimmering raced forward.

Hijiri’s Kusanagi struck Souichirou and his Device.

With a roar, the boy said to be Osaka’s strongest was blown away.

Part 4

7:12 PM

Nakamura moved in the wind of that elevated location.

He had flames in his hands and fire in his kicking feet.

His movements were calm and gentle, but their power could only be described as ferocious.

Those flames consumed even the air as they continued to burn.

He moved.

He could see his opponent.

The Killing Holder in the red blazer stood below the black sky.

He wordlessly ran toward her.

His running feet pounded on the waves of roof tiles. The flames surrounding his hands burned through the surrounding air and produced wind.

He was about 5 meters from Yuuki.

She wordlessly raised her staff.

Light raced from the end of the staff.

Nakamura felt pressure overhead and looked up.

There was a mass of ice there.

The mass was around 5 meters across, so being crushed by it would be fatal.

“!”

But even if he was surprised, he did not panic.

Still standing, he swung up his right leg.

Without leaning over, he brought his knee up and extended his foot

overhead.

His toes flew with the sharpness of a blade and fire resided in them.

His toes stabbed into the falling ice.

A clear sound immediately followed.

And the ice instantly turned to ashes.

This was the power of the Flame High.

But its power was far greater than before.

The fire did not spread; it immediately turned the target to ashes.

The ether forming the ice turned to ashes and scattered in the wind.

Nothing at all remained.

This was powerful.

Nakamura used that power and gently spun his body while lowering his leg.

A spinning backhand blow turned three water spears to ashes as they flew toward him.

“It’s no use.”

He turned toward Yuuki who held her staff.

And with those words, he smiled thinly and moved further forward.

Yuuki moved back.

Nakamura ran.

Yuuki jumped back.

“You aren’t getting away!”

As soon as he shouted that, there were two Yuukis in front of him.

“!?”

He was surprised.

But even so, he launched two kicks.

One to the right and one to the left.

The rapid kicks were wrapped in fire, split the air, and turned the two Yuukis to ashes.

But they both felt the same.

“...Water!?”

They were not people.

As soon as the kicks touched them, they crumbled as easily as mud.

The ashes scattered.

Two Yuuki-shaped clumps of ashes danced in the wind.

And then he turned behind him.

He saw someone who should not have been there: Takada.

The girl stood there with a small smile on her face.

“!”

Nakamura realized it was a fake just like the two Yuukis.

But...

“———!”

His face twisted when he saw her.

His eyebrows rose and he tightly clenched his teeth.

Sweat poured from him in an instant.

His teeth creaked.

His voice escaped his mouth...no, the depths of his throat.

“Don’t you...!”

The yell was accompanied by a kick.

With a scorching sound, Takada instantly produced a spray of water, fell apart, and turned to ashes.

The white ashes flew into Osaka’s night air.

But Nakamura would not allow that.

He kicked again at the ashes in the wind.

He burned even the ashes to fully eliminate them.

“Don’t you screw with me!” he shouted.

He looked up.

Yuuki stood at the very top of the roof.

Nakamura pointed and roared at her.

“Don’t you dare!!”

Yuuki tilted her head a little.

“Why...did you kick that Water Mirror?”

“Because it was a fake! Why else would I!?”

“...”

Yuuki fell silent and looked down for a moment.

A Dog God stood about a meter away.

She looked at the Dog God and spoke quietly.

“You aren’t like Shoui-kun.”

Was she referring to Hizaka Shoui?

Nakamura knew that name.

He knew everything about the relationship between Takada and the boy named Hizaka Shoui.

And so he snapped.

“———!”

He raised a wordless cry.

His flames burned brighter.

And he ran as if pushed on by that heat.

Yuuki responded by moving incredibly calmly. She made an attack.

An icicle suddenly appeared from below in front of Nakamura.

The sharpened tip made it a transparent spear.

But it was no match for his flames.

He used his hips to make a forward kick that shattered the ice and turned it into ashes.

Shattering and scorching sounds joined together.

Nakamura looked up.

Yuuki was there.

She was on the peak of the roof.

He could continue forward.

He could reach her.

If he threw a kick, he could reach Yuuki from this distance.

But...

“A dummy!?”

There was no emotion at all on the Yuuki standing there.

Nakamura immediately moved his body.

He leaped toward the opposite end of the roof where they had been fighting before.

He aimed for the edge of the roof.

His enemy was there.

“I know what you’re thinking!”

An Energy Gunner who primarily used long-range attacks needed distance between herself and her opponent.

So the nearby Yuuki was a decoy and the distant one was the real one.

His feet sounded twice on the roof tiles and he ran in front of Yuuki.

The enemy faced him with the Dog God on her shoulder and a slight look of surprise on her face.

“...!”

He did not hold back.

His kick raced out.

Toes that could break through a sheet of steel slammed into Yuuki's gut.

Her body immediately splashed outward and turned to ashes.

It was water.

Not a person.

Part 5

7:16 PM

Nakamura panicked.

“What!?”

Yuuki and the Dog God on her shoulder both turned to clear water droplets before becoming ashes.

He stopped his foot and turned around.

The Yuuki he had thought was a decoy stood on the peak of the roof.

She had moved.

This was not a counterfeit made from water Lives.

“But the look on her face...!?”

It had been a Killing Holder’s lack of expression.

Before he could figure that out, Yuuki looked up into the sky.

The next Tech she used was one Nakamura knew quite well.

–Yuuki – Steel Tech – Take – Suzaku Ver. 40 Link – Hit!

A moment later, light race toward them both from a point in the sky.

“A Word Particle Cannon!?” he shouted.

But he had the power of a Harmonist.

If he could react, he could ignore any Tech.

He jumped as white light swallowed up his vision.

He jumped toward a corner of the roof.

He leaped to a position that would just barely avoid a direct hit from the Word Particle Cannon.

And as he did, he kept his eyes on Yuuki.

He watched her to make sure he did not fall for a decoy like before.

But he noticed something odd.

There was no ether light wrapped around her giant staff.

“?”

His quickly found his answer.

A giant mass of ice was floating in the white-dyed sky.

At around 50 meters, it was far larger than the previous ones.

It was horribly cubic and had perfectly flat sides.

It floated in the darkness of the night and slowly descended between Nakamura and the light of the Word Particle Cannon.

What did that mean?

He instantly realized what.

“Oh, no!” he shouted.

But it was too late.

The light of the Word Particle Cannon directly collided with the giant mass of ice.

The ice shattered.

The light dispersed and weakened.

Even so, the Word Particle light continued downwards under its own power.

And the ice had bent it like a prism.

The Word Particle Cannon’s light was forcibly redirected.

And it was headed straight toward Nakamura.

He could not dodge it.

His body was still in the air and it was too much of a surprise attack to use his power as a Harmonist.

“———!”

The light scored a spectacular direct hit.

Chapter 11: Conclusion (View of the Win/Loss Score Display)

Part 1

7:17 PM

The heat of the Word Particle Cannon grazed Osaka Castle with its massive wind pressure.

A full third of the castle's main tower was torn away.

Needless to say, the shot of light did not end there.

After shattering the mass of ice, the light collided with the ground.

The glowing spear stabbed into the ruins of Yamazato Maru to the north of the castle.

It was a beam of light and great heat.

The impact was too soft to call an explosion, but it still hit the ground, scattered in every direction, and reflected back toward the sky.

The trees, the lawn, and even the dirt burst and burned instantly.

It left a crater 100 meters across in the ground and an inaudible noise and heat burst into the sky.

The turbulent noise formed an instantaneous tornado and rose toward heaven.

The wind wailed.

The dark clouds shook with a clear hole through them after the Word Particle Cannon fired through them.

The noise of the explosion reverberated through the sky and finally became an audible sound.

The sky heavily roared.

The deep rumbling shook the city of Osaka.

The clouds, air, buildings, trees, streets, and water all shook.

The deep roar was almost frustratingly slow.

Afterwards, only the scars of disaster remained.

No one could survive a hit from an attack like that.

Part 2

Same Time

As the heat rose into the sky, something was visible on the peak of the castle tower.

It was a person.

It was Koto Chancellor Yuuki Yuuki.

She stood perfectly still as the turbulence vanished from the sky and the night quieted down.

The loud sounds of impact in the distance were the proof that someone else continued to fight.

They were the sounds of a fight she could not take part in.

“ ... ”

She pushed her glasses up her nose and stared down below.

The first thing to enter her field of vision was the exposed wood and insulation where the roof tiles had been stripped away.

Then she looked further down below the broken edge of the roof.

“Nothing there.”

Sure enough, there was only darkness on the ground below.

Even in the night, she could see the pitch black hole 100 meters across.

That was the scar of the Word Particle Cannon hit.

It was the same attack that had destroyed the schoolyard of Prefectural #2 where Ixolde was.

Ixolde's underground space had been there to receive it before, but that was not the case here.

The ruins of Yamazato Maru had been a park with trees, but the 1 hectare space had been entirely blown away.

The hole of destruction had devoured the stone steps and height differences that should have been there and it extended as far as the inner moat on the other side.

“...”

Yuuki said nothing and looked up into the sky.

Smoke, rather than clouds, was spreading through Osaka's sky.

That smoke had been created when everything that had made this land had been blown away and annihilated.

That smoke could be called “priceless”.

An airplane's identifier lights pierced through the smoke.

The corporate airplane was likely checking on the status of the battle.

She brushed up her hair as she watched it.

Small pieces of dirt spilled from her hair as she did so.

A gentle wind began to blow and it carried the scent of shimmering heat.

And...

–Yuuki – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit!

Yuuki looked at a certain point in the sky.

–Yuuki – Army Tech – Take – Identify – Hit!

It was not an airplane's identifier lights.

It was a more primitive light.

It was the light of fire and it was descending from the sky.

The Dog God barked quietly at her feet.

But she kept her eyes on the sky.

She confirmed the identity of the fire.

–Yuuki – Sight Tech – Take – Confirm – Hit!

It was clothing.

A mountain hoodie fell as it burned.

She recognized the hoodie.

“It can’t be...”

“Oh, but it can.”

She heard a voice behind her.

It was a boy’s voice. It was Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide’s voice.

“!”

She looked back surprise, but it was too late.

She tried to quickly turn around, but a presence much like a heated wind reached her right hand.

Immediately afterwards, an artillery-like kick jabbed into her side.

The impact rang loud.

“———!”

She could not scream.

She just barely kept herself from falling and grabbed at the roof with her left hand which did not hold Housei.

She performed a side flip.

—Yuuki – Gym Tech – Take – Control Position – Miss.

When her right foot landed back on the tile-less roof, the ankle went limp.

She had twisted the ankle that had been injured in the battle with Taeko.

—Yuuki – Mind Tech – Take – Ignore Pain – Hit.

She could ignore the pain and her body could obey its own functions.

“...”

She slowly stood up by extending her right leg.

A boy stood in front of her: Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide.

He raised his right hand into the sky with a terribly serious look on his face.

The mountain hoodie fell into that hand.

“I escaped trouble like this in Prefectural #2’s schoolyard too.”

He forcefully swung the burning hoodie around.

The fire was extinguished.

Some faint ashes flew into the night air.

Yuuki spoke quietly when she saw those ashes.

“You burned the hoodie...to use it as a shield?”

“I had the fire on the hoodie spread to the Word Particle light.”

He put on the hoodie.

He pulled headphones from the pocket of the red hoodie with one sleeve burned off.

He hummed the Fire High Rhythm as he put the headphones in his ears.

And he smiled bitterly.

He looked to Yuuki.

“That attack seems to have shaken me.”

“You mean it disturbed your Lives?”

“My pulse is too disturbed to use the Flame High.”

He removed the headphones and his smile grew even bitterer.

His lips formed a smile that was barely even a smile.

He immediately rushed in at full speed.

The bottom of his red hoodie instantly spread out in the darkness.

He moved fast.

–Yuuki – Dodge Tech – Take – Dodge – Hit!

It was no use.

It happened before she could dodge.

It happened too soon for her to react.

Nakamura's Rhythm-less kick hit her right arm from the side.

The blow had the weight of a log.

“!”

The impact knocked Housei from her hand and the staff rolled along the roof.

She lost her balance and nearly rolled off of the roof.

—Yuuki — Gym Tech — Take — Control Position — Hit!

But before even that could happen, Nakamura kicked again from the left.

Not even a Dodge Tech would have been fast enough.

Before the damage could even reach her, she was sent flying in the opposite direction.

She stumbled and returned to the peak of the roof.

She somehow managed to stand.

“———!”

She belatedly gasped at the weight of the blows to her body.

But she did not scream.

No, she could not.

“That's a Killing Holder for you.”

She heard Nakamura's voice.

By the time she realized he was right in front of her, it was too late.

He made an attack from the White Noise that prevented her Sight or Hear Techs from sensing his presence.

The Harmonist's attack arrived instantly.

She caught a brief glimpse of a forward kick that could break through a sheet of steel.

“!?”

It was a direct hit.

Her right ankle collapse and she was unable to reduce the damage by dodging or falling back, so she was blown away.

Her body doubled over and flew through the air.

A moment later, her back struck one of the *shachihoko* on the ends of the roof.

“...!”

She gasped.

The breath was knocked out of her.

The vibration that hit her body had numbed her lungs.

She could not produce her Words.

All strength left her legs and her butt fell onto the roof.

Her sides were numb after the two kicks and her arms hung limply down.

She could not move.

Only her eyes moved behind the glasses that had miraculously stayed on her face.

The Dog God was to her right.

The spirit beast was within arm's reach and it only looked silently up at her.

Her eyes met the small animal's and she mouthed something to it.

“...”

But the Dog God did not understand. She narrowed her eyes when it tilted its head a little.

And she looked forward.

Nakamura Hisahide stood there.

He was 3 meters away.

From there, he could make a kick after a single step approach.

He rolled up the surviving sleeve of his hoodie.

“You’re not making this easy.” His breath appeared white in the air. “I think I’ll settle this and things down below all at once.”

He spread his hand and held it forward.

A silver ring glittered on his right hand’s ring finger.

He clenched the hand into a fist.

He tightly clenched it.

His lips moved and formed a statement.

“I am king.”

Yuuki said nothing.

She looked at Nakamura without even nodding.

Her gaze alone held strength.

It was far from a resigned strength.

Nakamura snorted a little when she looked him in the eye.

“It’s no use.”

He breathed in deeply and put in his headphones.

He breathed out.

That white breath was followed by fire bursting from his hands.

The crimson light of the flames danced in the darkness with Osaka’s nightscape in the background.

The fire raced out while crackling in the air.

Nakamura moved.

He took a step forward.

His straight line kick was directed toward Yuuki’s face as she sat on the roof.

A yell of focus escaped his lips.

“Sheahhh!!”

The kick flew.

And at that exact moment, a vermilion pillar rose between the two of them.

“!?”

It was a staff.

It was Yuuki’s staff known as Housei. It stabbed into the roof with a solid sound.

The unexpected intruder threw off Nakamura’s movement.

His kick changed course and hit Housei instead of Yuuki.

With a metallic clang, the giant tuning fork of a staff turned to ashes in an instant.

The kick rotated around and toward Yuuki’s back.

“Kh...!”

But he made a jump without leaving any kind of opening.

He moved away from Yuuki and landed.

He put up his guard and shouted.

“Who is it!?”

Yuuki looked in the direction he had yelled.

A boy stood on the edge of the roof with Osaka’s nightscape behind him.

The boy had a bandanna around his forehead and a red prosthetic in place of his right arm.

Yuuki recognized him.

His presence and the look in his eyes were the same as 3 years ago.

So she called his name. She called the name of the boy she had been waiting for.

She squeezed at her lungs and forced the voice from her throat.

“...Shoui-kun!!”

Part 3

Same Time

The Word Particle Cannon wind and the movements of Takahiro's dragon had entirely synchronized.

His scarf became a dragon in the downpour of lightning.

The light wrapped around the wave of wool and became a beast.

The transformation was instantaneous.

The long bundle of light flew forward.

It spiraled around, took in the air's ether, and rapidly grew.

Without a moment's delay, it opened its maw to reveal rows of fangs and roared.

Instead of a tiger or lion's, this was a dragon's roar.

It reverberated.

The flying dragon's body was surrounded in thorn-like scales of light as it slipped through the air.

The two-horned dragon raced between the pillars of electricity.

It knew exactly where it was going.

It would devour its target.

Its eyes were fixed on a tall girl who was struggling against her raging false arm.

It was Taeko.

She saw the approaching dragon.

It was fast.

The horns and fangs were given physical form by the *kotodama*, so a direct hit would likely crush the Dragon Emperor in its jaws.

She would have to use the Dragon Emperor to strike back, but how could she regain control?

“Ya moron! I’m yer master!!” shouted Taeko.

She used her broken right fist to punch the Dragon Emperor’s armor.

The dragon’s eye was there.

–Taeko – Boxing Tech – Take – Strike – Hit!

The striking sound did not awaken the dragon.

But the pain from her fist did stabilize her mind.

There was one way to control the dragon.

She immediately thought of it.

So she raised her voice.

“Dragon Emperor!”

Takahiro’s dragon was right in front of her.

But Taeko smiled.

“Ya saved me once already, didn’t ya? Back up on that observation deck!”

She used a Tech amid the great din.

–Taeko – Steel Tech – Take – False Arm “Dragon Emperor” Final Activation – Hit!

A powerful tremor ran through her body.

It was a pulse.

It came from her left shoulder.

And...

“Obey yer master!”

With that, the Dragon Emperor regained its own will.

Instead of going mad as a prosthetic arm, it was half-forcibly awoken as a dragon.

The dragon's will overcame the *kotodama*.

The madness ceased, the downpour of lightning ended, and the final activation began.

The armor panels on her shoulder instantly opened and revealed the biological component inside.

It was a yellow dragon's eye that looked like a plate.

As soon as that eye focused itself, the horn at the top of the shoulder lowered and a cannon stuck out.

The Dragon Emperor moved on its own.

The fist opened and the claws stabbed into the ground.

The eye and the cannon looked to the approaching dragon.

Just before the collision, the Dragon Emperor roared.

The great beast's cry was fired from the cannon as a bundle of light.

This was the lightning dragon's cannon blast.

The approaching dragon was instantly obliterated by a direct hit.

The light raced on.

It blew away Takahiro who raised his coat as a shield.

With an intense noise, the ground was torn up and the air was scorched.

A powerful impact raced out and the recoil sent the Dragon Emperor's claws several dozen meters back as they dug through the ground.

Taeko had crouched down and obeyed the dragon's will as she kept it from sliding back.

"Gooooo!"

The dragon did as its master wished.

Its roar continued.

The light grew to about 20 meters wide and easily more than 800 meters long.

The bundle of lightning brought down the inner moat's stone wall, destroyed the Kyobashi bridge on the other side, and burned away the outer moat and even the Neya River across the road.

That light and the noise reverberated across Osaka's night, but then suddenly vanished.

Nothing remained afterwards.

The destruction lasted approximately 12 seconds.

And after that length of time, the Dragon Emperor's wailing ended.

Part 4

Same Time

Inside the powerful turbulent air, Souichirou was slammed against the central circle's wall and saw Aoi Hijiri standing in the distance.

She was almost entirely unharmed.

Meanwhile, his mobile shell had shattered and fallen in pieces to the ground and his coat was in tatters.

His false arms and legs had tears through them and the white internal fluid was spilling out.

“ ... ”

–Souichirou – Steel/Medical Tech – Multi-Take – Diagnose Wounds – Hit.

He could somehow move his body, but his prosthetics were in bad shape.

Whether or not he could move with all his strength was a real question.

“...That really isn't a technique to let hit you.”

With that comment, he pulled his back from the wall.

The remains of the mobile shell still clinging to him finally fell to the ground.

His right knee gave out and white fluid erupted from the back of the knee.

“The lubricant is leaking,” calmly noted Hijiri. “You won't be able to move the leg in another minute.”

Souichirou said nothing and stood in the chilly wind.

With a quiet noise from the back of his head, his eyepatch's thread snapped.

His crushed right eye was exposed to the air.

That eye had been scratched by the ogre's claws.

“...”

He touched the wound with his trembling hand.

There was a stiff scar there.

His lips moved unexpectedly.

“None of them would forgive me, would they?”

He clenched his fist and lightly tapped at his leg.

“Stick with me to the end, everyone.”

He began to walk.

His legs trembled, but his pace was steady.

Step by step, he quietly approached Hijiri.

The internal fluid spilled from the false leg and fell to the ground like bloodstains.

Hijiri responded with a sigh.

“You still haven’t given up? You can’t even dodge right now.”

“Dodging will not be necessary.”

He came to a stop.

He was about ten paces away from her.

That was the perfect distance for Kusanagi.

He lowered his hips, spread his legs diagonally, and stood firmly.

He was prepared for a one-hit win that rejected dodging.

“My Dance Combat style has evolved through attack,” he said.

“...Then you’re prepared to do this?”

“My obligations...allow nothing else.”

Souichirou held his Device low.

And he looked to Hijiri’s face.

He nodded.

“Allow me to show you what the ‘modified’ in Modified Purple Electricity Style means.”

“Enough bravado. You really will die.”

Instead of low, Hijiri held her hexagonal rod in front of her eyes with both hands.

She intended to block the attack with the Shinkage Style.

They were both using their specialty.

They began their preparatory breaths.

One.

Two.

“...”

On three, their breathing synchronized.

Then they stopped breathing simultaneously.

Silence fell.

They could only hear the wind and the distant impacts of another battle.

They were nearly noiseless noises.

They could not even feel the chill of winter with their surroundings so brimming with the sense of battle.

Souichirou started by speaking without disturbing his focus.

“I am Osaka Chancellor Nanba Souichirou. My Dance Combat is the Modified Purple Electricity Style.”

Hijiri responded.

“I am Tokyo Vice Chancellor Aoi Hijiri. My Dance Combat is the Shinkage Style.”

Hearing that, Souichirou nodded.

Hijiri also nodded and squeezed the hexagonal rod in her grip.

“...Now!”

Souichirou shouted back.

“Begin!”

Their movements were like a flash.

An attack raced up from below.

–Souichirou – Kusanagi/Steel/Sword Tech – Multi-Take – Kusanagi Blast – Hit!

Wind was the first thing to race out.

The air wavered.

A shimmering rose between the two of them.

A voice followed.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

It was a simple, monosyllabic Word.

And that Word brought an explosion of air.

It flew in a straight line.

The slicing power tore up the dirt as it shot forward.

The tearing sound was like an ensemble of echoes.

The slicing wind and impact stabbed at the ground and sent it flying.

Sand flew with a roar.

But Hijiri thrust her hexagonal rod forward to block it.

If she succeeded, she would win.

Kusanagi left a large opening right after it was fired.

Even if she took some damage, crushing Kusanagi and gaining the right to attack next would be worth it.

She smiled as the impact flew toward her.



“I’ll settle this!”

But it did not end there.

For some reason, she heard another yell.

“Daaaahhh!”

It was Souichirou’s voice.

He raised his Device and forcibly...

–Souichirou – Steel/Gym/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Strength – Hit!

He adjusted how he held the Device and swung it up overhead.

“!”

His next movement only took an instant.

–Souichirou – Kusanagi/Steel/Sword Tech – Multi-Take – Kusanagi Blast – Hit!

And a second voice burst out.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

It was a simple, monosyllabic Word.

This was not just a double attack.

The second attack caught up with and sliced through the first Kusanagi shockwave.

It was a straight line of spatial destruction.

By further cutting the vacuum, he created a truly empty slash that should have only existed in theory.

He had cut the cutting power of Kusanagi with Kusanagi.

The ground was stirred up as the cutting wave of destruction raced forward.

It no longer produced a sound as it flew toward Hijiri.

“!?”

The one attack hit.

The hexagonal rod broke and the power of the Shinkage Style could not fully

deflect Souichirou's attack.

A technique of intense and pure power struck her.

“————!!”

She flew through the air.

At the same time, heated internal fluid burst from all four of Souichirou's limbs.

The Device flew from his hand and stabbed into the ground.

He fell to his knees and Hijiri collided with the ground at almost the exact same moment.

Neither of them could stand.

Their battle ended there.

Part 5

7:20 PM

The clash between Hizaka Shoui and Nakamura Hisahide began wordlessly.

Shoui blocked Nakamura's fiery kick with a Tech.

–Shoui – Boxing/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Block – Hit!

The Harmonist's power kicked in.

Taking that into consideration, Shoui moved further.

–Shoui – Boxing/Dodge Tech – Counter-Multi-Take – Block – Hit!

He used the Tech a second time.

He normally would have been satisfied with just once, but not here.

This was only possible with abnormal reaction speed and a Tech he was intimately familiar with through intensive training.

His red right arm blocked the flames and the kick behind them.

There was an impact and a noise.

The flames scattered.

But his right arm did not burn.

Nakamura clicked his tongue.

And Shoui moved.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Punch – Hit!

Nakamura dodged with his Harmonist power.

But Shoui did not give up.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Punch – Hit!

Nakamura dodged with his Harmonist power.

But Shoui did not give up.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Punch – Hit!

Nakamura dodged with his Harmonist power.

But Shoui did not give up.

–Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Punch – Hit!

And then he won.

After redoing it several times over the course of a single instant, Shoui's speed caught Nakamura.

His fist hit the boy's shoulder.

The impact of the blow ran through Nakamura.

His body wavered.

But despite that waver, he used the blow to spin his body around.

A kick flew.

–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge – Hit!

–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge – Hit!

–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge – Hit!

Shoui fully dodged it.

He put some distance between them.

He exhaled while sensing Yuuki's presence behind him.

...This is scary.

Nakamura must have sensed that mental state because he snorted in laughter.

“Not bad.”

“Well, I'll do the best I can.”

“But...”

Nakamura gave Shoui an upturned glance.

“You’re pretty exhausted, aren’t you?”

Shoui responded with silence.

Nakamura was exactly right.

Repeatedly using Techs so continuously wore down his strength.

The drain on his stamina was far greater than normal.

He already felt fear in facing the Flame High.

...But.

He nodded while speaking in his heart.

He began to use his left hand to pull the bandanna down over his eyes.

“ ... ”

But he stopped.

He had to keep his eyes on his opponent.

He focused himself.

He poured all of his focus into sensing his opponent’s movements and into the entirety of his body.

He felt his heart pound in his chest.

He could feel his own body. He could tell it had nerves running all the way to the fingertips and toe tips.

His body would move as he wanted.

He had a will of his own.

He had his missing memories.

He had an opponent.

And he had something to protect.

“ ... ”

Shoui silently looked up.

Shoui and Nakamura's gazes seemed to audibly crash together.

Shoui fearlessly maintained his fighting stance.

Nakamura also maintained his fighting stance.

They did not move.

The one to ask a question via words was Nakamura.

"What is it...that you want?"

This was the same question he had asked Souichirou during his attack on Ixolde.

It was a simple question based on curiosity.

And Shoui answered quietly.

"To protect."

The answer was as simple as the question.

Nakamura asked another question without nodding.

"Do you like fighting?"

"..."

No response.

As they faced each other in silence, Nakamura asked again.

"Do you like fighting?"

He received a short response.

"I've never thought about it."

"Why not?"

Shoui did not answer.

He simply moved.

Nakamura's fire roared and flew in response.

Shoui slammed his own fist toward that fire.

He used his left fist instead of the ogre's right arm.

...I can do this!

He sensed the Storm High's presence.

His heart remembered.

He remembered the girl who had given him a prophecy and the girl who waited for him.

He moved simply to protect.

“!”

The fist and the kick collided.

An explosion rumbled out.

Part 6

7:21 PM

Flames exploded.

The Storm High strike had negated the Flame High strike.

A solid sound rang out and the undying flames surged into the air as a flare.

Two powers clashed.

Flames.

And emptiness.

Those contrasting powers collided and maintained equilibrium.

“Seaaaaahhh!”

Even greater flames flew.

In response, the emptiness intercepted them with an unarmed hand.

They clashed.

A solid sound rang out and the flames danced.

With a roar much like a wave, a cascade of flames struck the roof of the main castle tower.

The roof burned in an instant.

It was a great conflagration.

The fire burned down Osaka Castle like flowing water.

“!”

More than a third of the giant structure was turned to ashes and annihilated in an instant.

It was a great power, but it had no effect on Shoui.

The flames flew once more.

The emptiness caught it.

A rumbling shook the air.

It did so again and again.

Each time, fire blossomed in the darkness of the night.

And that was not all.

Something white began to fall from the dark clouds in the sky.

It was snow.

As the continuous rumbling shook them, the dark clouds produced snow.

Countless red flowers blossomed within the falling snow.

Red flowers bloomed in the darkness.

And white flowers bloomed in the darkness.

An empty party began in the fire and in the strength.

Two prophecies coincided.

Emptiness was born from Shouï's heart with no Rhythm and it swept away the memory of death.

Within the rumbling and the falling snow, Shouï and Nakamura's attacks and Words coincided.

Nakamura was slightly faster.

"A woman becomes the queen." / "A queen smiles at him."

"A sage reminisces." / "A sage resigns himself."

"Run without looking to another's path." / "Fall into indecisiveness while looking to another's path."

"Choose your own path and sprint." / "Choose your own path and hesitate."

"The true path lies in the future." / "The true path lies in the past."

More red flowers bloomed in the darkness.

But one thing had changed.

Nakamura's Words had vanished while Shoui's Words continued.

He recited them.

To search for his own Words, he reached for everything he had gained.

He pulled in his own current and raised his voice.

“———!!”



With that roar, the Storm High pierced the nothingness.

Within the chilly and still air, a field of destruction appeared inside all of that grand power.

In that field of destruction and annihilation, nobody took the middle road.

Nothing would live and nothing would die.

It all existed to protect.

“Everyone...!”

And with those Words, Shoui brought his fist to Nakamura.

It was a quick barrage.

A series of offensive and defensive blows shook the night air.

There was no hesitation in their actions and more snow fell as if to guide them.

White flowers scattered as if to answer the desire of the dark sky.

Shoui simply recited his Words as the white snow fell through the heavy darkness.

And his voice caused the fire to scatter and brighten the darkness.

His punches cried out.

His emptiness collided with Nakamura’s flames.

They were both fast.

Blow after blow rang out so quickly it sounded like one continuous noise.

And he sped up his Words to accelerate that further.

I have no companions.

She vanishes.

A hand that can hold onto no one remains A hand that fosters destruction remains That hand pleads for no one to leave He clenched his pleading right hand.

The ogre’s fist collided with Nakamura’s kick.

And as he sensed the impact and the noise simultaneously, Shouï remembered everything up to this point.

He had lost his Words.

He had lost his promise.

But he had made it this far.

...Why is that?

He sought the answer in everything.

In the darkness and the flames.

In the sky and the snow.

In the wind and the noise.

And in himself...

The impact reverberating from his fist to his head cleared his thoughts.

He remembered some important Words.

They were an important person's Words.

!!

As the winter wind cried out frigidly, he definitely heard a crying voice inside himself.

That crying voice spoke words yet said nothing.

And as it did, it simply waited, drew near, and never gave up.

Those were the Words of the most important person in the world.

...Yeah, that's right.

Shouï nodded in his heart.

And with that mental understanding, his body freely moved before he even told it to.

He felt like he was moving with no distinction between thoughts and actions.

He felt himself inside a tension and speed he normally could not feel.

It was supported by a barrage of impacts and noises.

His thoughts linked to everything he had.

His sight.

His hearing.

His touch.

His arms.

His legs.

His body.

His head.

His conscious and subconscious.

They all supported his punches, impacts, and defenses.

And he thought.

He sensed more than ever before and looked to the dance partner in front of him.

That boy was moving in the same way.

His speed sensed everything.

His thoughts felt everything.

And he thought.

...I'm protecting her...aren't I?

He was aware of the girl behind him with something other than his 5 senses.

He could not allow her to stand before him.

So he moved to protect her and thought.

...Can they hear this?

He made a combination blow.

...Are they listening to this?

And he defended.

He thought his Words while moving as he wished.

Who did he want to hear what?

Shoui knew the answer to that.

He moved.

He saw the answer in his movements.

In that high-speed current, he saw what was behind his enemy.

A sea of light and an abyss of darkness.

They were Osaka's nightscape and the night sky.

He made another combination blow, continued to defend, and found himself oddly focused on that scenery.

White flowers scattered and red flowers blossomed to decorate it.

“!”

Shoui moved even more.

Part 7

7:22 PM

The movement began with Nakamura.

He made a sharp forward kick toward Shoui who suddenly nodded and crouched low.

This was the same kick he had hit Shoui with back at the student dorm.

His toes flew in a sharp curve from below.

–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge – Hit!

–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge – Hit!

–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge – Hit!

–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge – Hit!

–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge – Hit!

–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge – Hit!

–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge – Hit!

*–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge –
Hit!*

*–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take – Dodge
– Hit!*

*–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take –
Dodge – Hit!*

*–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-Take
– Dodge – Hit!*

*–Shoui – Dodge Tech – Counter-
Take – Dodge – Hit!*

*–Shoui – Dodge Tech –
Counter-Take – Dodge – Hit!*

*–Shoui – Dodge Tech –
Counter-Take – Dodge –
Hit!*

*–Shoui – Dodge
Tech – Counter-
Take – Dodge – Hit!*

*–Shoui – Dodge
Tech – Counter-
Take – Dodge –
Hit!*

*–Shoui –
Dodge
Tech –
Counter-
Take –
Dodge –
Hit!*

Shoui dodged it.

But Nakamura had expected that.

“You’ve gotta be out of Words now!!”

With that shout, he dropped down his raised heel.

He made a second attack.

After the rapid series of dodges, Shoui could not move without stabilizing himself first.

And the Harmonist's power would hit him before he could do that.

He could not dodge this.

But he moved.

Even as his stance almost collapsed, he thrust his Ogre God arm straight up.

The heel strike fell from the sky.

The kick was like a sword strike.

It was a lot like the attack from Yamashita Gihei 2 years before.

And it was a lot like the attack from Souichirou 2 days before.

Both of them had done grave damage to him.

Shoui felt powerful déjà vu.

But...

–Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Suppress – Hit!!

He felt no phantom pain.

The nightmare did not repeat itself.

“———!”

Without hesitation, he blocked the kick with his raised arm.

He caught the impact.

Even so, the kick tried to beat him down with its heavy momentum and the Flame High's power.

It was powerful.

And Shoui responded to that strength with an action the Harmonist's power could not keep up with.

–Shoui – Steel Tech – Take – Remove Arm – Hit!!

He removed the Ogre God and let it fly.

“!?”

Nakamura’s kick changed course.

His heel grazed Shoui’s forehead and fell to his side.

The bandanna was cut and flew from Shoui’s head and his forehead was exposed to the air.

The scar there felt hot.

But Nakamura’s attack ended there.

Shoui saw an entirely defenseless body in front of him.

He knew he could win.

And he answered with a shout.

He shouted the Word inside himself.

“Yuuuuuuki!”

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Combination – Hit!

A 4-blow combination jabbed into Nakamura’s body like a machinegun.

The boy in the red hoodie was blown away.

But...

“...Kh!”

At only 5 meters away, Nakamura regained his footing and stopped himself.

“Don’t screw with me!!”

Nakamura roared back and started forward.

Shoui was hit by killer intent not much different from a wild animal’s.

But Shoui still moved forward.

As he ran, he reached his left hand into his pocket and pulled something out: a golden ring.

He flicked it forward with his fingers.

The ring flew through the snow-filled darkness at eye level.

Nakamura saw the light of the ring.

“!”

The two boys ran straight ahead with the ring between them.

They ran.

They raced.

With a silver ring on his hand, Nakamura reached out to grab that golden one.

But at that very moment, Shoui’s left hand grabbed the small airborne ring before Nakamura could.

And he clenched the hand into a fist.

From here, he only had to make the best possible movement.

–Shoui – Gym/Savate/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Straight Fist – Hit!

He made a full rotation, stopped while turned to the side, and threw his fist directly into the left side of Nakamura’s chest.

It was a perfect punch.

And that brought them both to a stop.

Chapter 12: The End (Ending Details)

Part 1

7:23 PM

Nakamura remained motionless after taking Shoui's punch.

He stood almost entirely upright and looked to Shoui.

He said nothing.

He looked Shoui in the eye and then lowered his gaze with no readable expression.

Shoui's left fist had hit the left side of his chest.

“ ... ”

Nakamura was wordless.

But there was a sound.

A small but solid sound came from his chest below Shoui's fist.

It was the sound of metal falling away.

It sounded like flowing sand and it quietly fell from his chest and to the castle tower's roof.

The sound came from the pieces of his MD.

The Flame High's MD and its drive had shattered.

When he saw that, Nakamura remained silent and looked over to his hand.

He clenched his right hand, but no fire appeared.

“...”

He was silent.

He clenched his right fist a second time, but still no fire.

The Flame High would not ignite.

After confirming that, he looked Shoui in the eye again.

And he suddenly smiled.

“Was that not...what I really wanted?”

With those words, he took a step back.

Shoui kept his left fist extended and he slowly opened the hand, starting with the little finger.

Nakamura held out his right hand as if he knew what Shoui was doing.

A small light dropped from Shoui’s fist and into Nakamura’s hand.

It was a ring.

Nakamura held it in his hand and shut his eyes.

And he collapsed backwards.

He lost his balance and tilted back as if to fall asleep, so Shoui reached out toward him.

“———!?”

But he saw someone support Nakamura from behind.

So he stopped moving.

He saw Iba standing behind Nakamura.

The man dressed as a monk supported Nakamura’s unconscious form with his shoulder and looked to Shoui.

And...

“You have my thanks.”

With that short comment, Iba turned around.

And then he slowly walked to the edge of the roof and jumped down.

He left.

Shoui breathed a white sigh after watching him go.

He looked down to his feet and picked up the Ogre God that had fallen a short distance away.

–Shoui – Steel Tech – Take – Attach Arm – Hit.

He reattached the ogre's right arm and gently clenched and unclenched the hand.

He said nothing.

After confirming he could move the arm satisfactorily, he finally turned around.

He looked to the peak of the roof.

He saw Yuuki sitting in front of the *shachihoko*.

She quietly looked up at him and also said nothing.

Without warning, the Dog God sitting next to her became two.

One stayed by Yuuki's side.

But the other ran over.

It passed by Shoui's side and ran toward the edge of the roof where Iba had disappeared with Nakamura.

Its footsteps sounded quietly on the roof, but after reaching the edge, it briefly glanced back toward Shoui.

He nodded.

"Go on."

Pushed on by those words, the Dog God faced forward.

And it jumped.

Its long, light brown tail fell into the darkness and vanished.

It was a goodbye with no regrets.

“...”

Shoui sighed and faced forward.

Yuuki was there.

That was all.

But that was enough.

The snow fell in silence.

Part 2

7:30 PM

Below the snow, Ikemaru Takahiro and Aoi Hijiri were reunited at the edge of Osaka Castle's inner moat.

Hijiri sat below a cherry tree to keep out of the snow and she healed Takahiro.

She removed his jacket that was soaked after falling into the moat and she opened the chest of his shirt.

He sometimes grimaced, but he let Hijiri do as she wished.

"How did you know I was here?"

"That much noise was hard to miss."

She attached a healing charm and briskly wrapped bandages around him, but she too was covered in wounds.

"Sorry. I lost the scarf."

"We're both still alive, so I'm not about to complain."

"Did you lose?"

He sounded surprisingly carefree and she silently tightened the bandages around him.

He grimaced.

"Was it a draw then?"

"I suppose. I feel like...nothing changed. Not the Shinkage Style, not the Modified Purple Electricity Style, and not me..." She looked to her quickly moving hands. "But I feel so refreshed after saying everything I wanted to say and hitting him as much as I wanted."

"What happened to the Osaka Chancellor after he had to listen to everything

you wanted to say and was hit as much as you wanted?”

“When I came to, he was rescued by a friend and left. He didn’t even look my way.”

She lightly tapped Takahiro’s chest and he frowned.

“Does that hurt?”

“Not enough for me to cry out in pain.”

“Then you’ll be fine. Let’s get back to the hotel before I heal you for real.” Hijiri sat on a root that was not yet covered in snow. “But I really am tired.”

“Hijiri-san, what about your injuries?”

“It’s only a cracked rib and my wrist. I have a lot of bruises, though.” She smiled a little and looked to Takahiro. “Once we’re back at the hotel, will you heal me?”

“Hijiri-san.”

“What?”

“You keep mentioning a hotel...”

“Oh, we have a room. One we’ll be sharing.”

Hearing that, Takahiro’s expression stiffened somewhat.

And Hijiri spoke to him.

“Don’t worry. I made sure to change my family name to Ikemaru.”

“...”

“Is that a problem?”

“Hijiri-san.”

“What?”

He looked at her puzzled face.

“...You are quite the delinquent.”

“So are you for playing around here at night.”

Then they both sighed.

And Takahiro's sigh led to a voice.

"Sorry."

He apologized.

Hijiri looked up.

"For what? I can think of far too many things you need to apologize for."

"...For Seigi."

"It's too late to say that now that it's over. And I promise you she didn't think badly of you."

She tapped Takahiro's shoulder on the final "you".

Her relieved white breath vanished within the falling snow.

She held one knee in her arms.

"Aren't you cold? You are soaking wet."

"Yes, I am cold."

He buttoned his shirt back up and she got up.

She sat next to him and held one knee in her arms again.

He nodded.

"...I wonder what happened to Nakamura."

"Who knows. But I doubt it was anything bad."

"True..."

He looked up slightly.

And...

"!?"

He gasped and Hijiri responded.

"What?"

She saw his eyes were looking into the sky.

The snow was falling from the heavens.

And several cherry tree branches extended toward heaven.

“Is this...?”

The snow fell with the dark heavens in the background.

It gathered on the branches.

And it scattered.

In the reddish-brown light of the streetlights, the snow looked somewhat reddish as it fell.

And with the white covering all of the cherry trees in this courtyard, the snow’s new color and its shape looked like...

“Cherry blossoms!?” shouted Hijiri.

She looked around.

The snow was falling.

The withered cherry trees looked like they were in full bloom.

“Cherry blossoms in winter...”

It was the snow and the lights.

The way they came together at night created the winter cherry blossoms.

White flower petals scattered through the darkness.

It was a snowstorm of cherry blossoms.

The cold flowers continued to fall, scatter, and dye the surrounding space.

Hijiri stared blankly at the scene before her eyes.

“Dad and mom must have-...”

She tried to stand up, but Takahiro grabbed her hand.

He pulled her back and hugged her.

She panicked when a slight creaking sound came from his ribs.

“Takahiro!? Is your chest okay!?”

“I do not mind.”

With that, he looked up at the heavens.

This was what the two of them had wanted.

It was the same scene the Osaka Chancellor and Tokyo Chancellor had once seen.

They had found what Hijiri's mother had told her to find.

Takahiro held Hijiri even tighter.

"How is this supposed to bring misfortune...?"

Just as Hijiri nodded a little, she heard singing voices from the lights of the city.

Takahiro glanced in that direction.

"Oh." Hijiri nodded. "It's the outdoor concert. They were having one in the Otemon Gate plaza."

They could hear the orchestra even as the snow fell.

It was playing...

"Beethoven's 9th. Perfect for the end of the year."

Hijiri closed her eyes.

Then she opened them again and began singing.

She sang the lyrics of Beethoven's 9th that Takahiro had once taught her.

"Joy.

"Beautiful spark of divinity, daughter from Elysium.

"Your magic brings together what custom has sternly divided.

"All men shall become brothers, wherever your gentle wings hover."

Takahiro responded by throwing his words into the sky.

He sang the end of Beethoven's 9th, which was a line from a certain poet.

"Our father must dwell beyond the stars."

Hijiri nodded at that line.

“Mom, dad...”

She nodded again and again and suddenly lowered her head.

Takahiro held her in his arms and stared up into the sky.

Into the sky of falling snow that became cherry blossoms.

Part 3

7:41 PM

The snow was slowly accumulating without melting.

Shoui and Yuuki slowly descended the stone steps of Osaka Castle.

Neither said anything.

They walked without speaking a word.

The snow on the steps crunched below their feet.

They walked horribly slowly.

They took their time as they walked.

A Dog God followed them while wagging its light brown tail.

The two people and one animal silently descended the stone stairs.

But they finally reached the bottom.

They walked a while longer and found the cherry trees alongside the moat.

Cherry blossoms.

Shoui came to a stop below the trees with snow accumulating on their branches.

Yuuki also stopped.

As did the Dog God.

Shoui spoke without looking anyone in the eye.

“Yuuki, will you remain a Killing Holder as long as I’m by your side?”

Yuuki did not answer.

But her silence was enough of an answer.

So he said more.

“If I leave...will you have no more need to call yourself a Killing Holder and will you go back to being your old self?”

“...Why did you remember the past?”

He was answered with a question that led to everything.

He looked at his right hand.

That arm was made from the flesh of the ogre and Yamashita Gihei.

He clenched the fist.

“Because there is a debt I must repay.”

“ ... ”

“I might end up going far away.”

“Is that so? Then I will quit being a Killing Holder.” Yuuki’s voice held no emotion. “If I’m no longer a Killing Holder, I won’t have to hurt myself any longer.”

“ ... ”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

She said that, but another voice overlapped it: “...No.”

It was her own voice.

But it meant the opposite of what she had said before.

“!?”

Shoui looked over in surprise.

And she looked toward him.

The Dog God stood between the two of them.

It stood on the puffy shoulder of Yuuki’s blouse and it opened its mouth.

“No...”

With its head lowered, it once again spoke with Yuuki’s voice.

When she heard that, surprise and then panic filled her face.

“Wh-what are you saying!?” / “It’s true!”

She took a breath.

“You’d be nothing but trouble if you stayed with me!” / “I’ve been waiting all this time...”

Her will and her words did not match at all.

But Shoui understood which one was right.

So he did not hesitate.

He embraced her.

She struggled in his arms.

“...S-stop that!” / “Hold me.”

And...

“Let go!” / “Don’t let go.”

He did as her will said.

She hit his chest over and over.

But the blows were incredibly weak.

That was when he realized something.

Her head was hitting his shoulder.

...I’m taller than her.

That was different from 2 years before.

So he brought his left hand to her cheek and lifted her face.

Yuuki looked directly into his eyes.

She watched him with tears welling in those eyes.

She opened her mouth a little.

The words escaping her lips and her will coincided.

“Please...” / “Please...”

A breath.

“Will you protect me now...?” / “Will you protect me now...?”

The tears fell from her eyes midsentence.

And they would not stop.

Her vermilion false eye was wet with tears.

He noticed her cheeks had grown a little red.

And a single white line ran down from her right eye to her cheek.

It was the scar from Yamashita Gihei’s slash 2 years ago.

“ ... ”

He said nothing about the scar.

Instead, he pulled a folded paper bag from the hidden pocket in his pants.

“Did you leave this for me, Yuuki?”

She nodded and reached out from within his arms.

Her slender white hand took the bag and opened it.

She pulled out a red bandanna.

After a tearful snuffle, she showed it to Shoui.

He gave a small nod and lowered his head.

She reached out and wrapped the bandanna around his forehead as if to hide the scar there.

She stood on her toes to reach around and tie the back of the bandanna.

He once more embraced her slender body.

Her face was close.

He removed her glasses with his right hand.

She closed her eyes.

And he kissed the white scar on her right eyelid.

He licked away the tears remaining in the corner of the eye.

“It tastes like blood...”

Hearing that, she nodded and lowered her head once more.

She smiled a little and tearfully called the name of the boy she had waited for.

“Shoui-kun...” / “Shoui-kun...”

Her tearful voice rang out quietly.

And the Dog God on her shoulder began reciting Words.

They were her Words.



The winter cries out frigidly Someone cries in loneliness

They speak words yet nothing is said

They speak Words yet nothing is said

They simply wait for the ice to melt

They draw near and never give up

Shoui firmly nodded at those Words and looked up into the snowy night sky.

White flowers blossomed and fell through that dark sky.

He strongly and deeply embraced her below his prophesied flowers.

“I...”

He hesitated over what to say.

But he took a breath.

He gathered strength in his arms and spoke to only her.

He spoke his own Words that were the answer to everything.

“I won’t give up either.”

Final Chapter: The Inheritor of It All (Aftercare) – (4/7/1997)

Part 1

4:49 AM

It was already spring, but the weather was terrible that morning.

It was much too early for the sun to be out.

Only the stars and moon filled the dark sky.

Below that heavy sky, a loud and low rumbling never ceased in one place.

It was the Kegon Falls in Nikko, Tochigi.

The air was heavy on that spring morning, so there was no fog and the falls were fully visible.

It was a large waterfall.

It had a long history.

Its majestic form and noise could be seen from close up on the observation platform built out from the cliff wall.

It was much too early for sightseers, so only locals would be on that observation platform now.

There was one such person below the observation platform's sunlamp.

The girl had her long black hair tied back behind her neck and she wore a black tracksuit.

She held the railing and stared at the waterfall.

There was some silent exhaustion on her face.

“So it’s finally my turn to leave this place.”

She held her hands to her chest where the family name Fujiwara was written.

“I can’t believe this. ...I’ll be standing in Osaka in only 6 hours.”

...So what am I doing here?

She looked to the school tracksuit she wore in place of pajamas.

In about 2 hours, she would have to change into her new uniform.

It was the uniform of Osaka Prefectural #1.

A girl from Kantou was attending an Osaka school.

She would never have imagined this back when she had nearly drowned the year before.

The east and west had been reunited.

From what she had heard, there had been a largescale terrorist attack in Osaka just a few days after she dove into the waterfall basin.

That may have acted as a trigger because by January the politicians got to work and the east and west were reunited in the blink of an eye.

Once they had gotten started, it had been apparently been simple.

The Emergency Teachers and the Mountain had acted quickly, talk shows had discussed it almost every night, and foreign politicians had either celebrated or worked to stop it, but there had been no changing it once it had started.

As a result, the east and west were accepting exchange students as a test case.

She had been hesitant, but her curiosity had gotten the better of her. She had taken the entrance exam for an Osaka school and passed.

She had always had good grades.

But...

“I didn’t think I would have to give a greeting at the entrance ceremony today.”

The greeting itself was simple.

They would tell her what to do once she arrived, so she only had to get up on stage when they said to and read the text they gave her.

To help students coming from afar like her, the ceremony was being held in the afternoon.

There was nothing to worry about.

But even so...

...Something’s still eating at me.

She still had too many questions.

Now that she was actually taking the plunge, she was nervous about this new world.

...How will this turn out?

She found herself quietly speaking her Words.

Time flows like water

She who flows through time

People do not stop

Time does not stop

Simply flow like water

And inherit all of the questions

She realized those Words described her situation perfectly.

None of her questions had been answered.

She did not know what any of it meant, but she was climbing to the next stage.

She sighed.

She simply thought about that boy.

He had not appeared for half a year now, but what did he think about the unification of the east and west?

...It isn't like me to think about all this complicated stuff.

"I should really be thinking about the entrance ceremony today."

She looked into the sky.

Dark clouds spread out there.

According to the TV news, they were experiencing out-of-season snowfall in Kansai.

April snow was not unusual where she lived, but it was apparently newsworthy in the cities.

"...Snow, huh? I need to wear some proper shoes."

And as she said that...

–Fujiwara – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Presence – Hit!

She sensed someone standing to her left and quickly straightened up.

She turned around and found him there.

Part 2

4:55 AM

Straight hair, a red mountain hoodie, and somehow sobered eyes.

It was him.

The boy who had once thrown white flowers in the waterfall basin was next to her.

He was close enough to reach out and touch.

But...

“ ... ”

The atmosphere around him forced her to silence.

She looked to him, but she said nothing.

There was so much she wanted to say.

There was so much she wanted to ask.

But the boy stared at the waterfall basin and not her.

He was silent.

There was no hesitation or hurry on his face.

He simply moved.

First, he held his right hand out in the chilly morning air.

He had a silver ring on his ring finger.

Then he grabbed the glittering ring with his left hand and pulled it from the finger.

The rest was the same action as always.

Instead of throwing it, he tossed the ring into the waterfall basin.

The light of the sunlamp caused the silver ring to shine a little as if saying goodbye.

The ring fell toward the basin.

Its small light quickly vanished from view.

It was hard to tell whether or not it fell into the water.

But the girl knew.

His ring had definitely reached the two sleeping at the bottom of the basin.

“ ... ”

She looked to the boy.

He continued staring at the basin and this time pulled a new ring from his pocket.

It was a golden ring.

He slowly placed it on his right hand's ring finger.

He took his time but finally put it on.

He raised his right hand and stared at the ring's light. A wavering strength filled his eyes. It was a faint and unstable strength that seemed on the verge of tears.

That strength led to him clenching his fist.

How much time had it taken?

The boy kept his eyes on the basin as he took a single slow step backwards.

And then he quickly turned around.

“ ! ”

The girl reflexively reached out toward his back.

The bottom of his mountain hoodie fluttered up and briefly touched her hand.

“ ... ”

That was all.

He walked away without looking back.

As she watched him go, the girl opened her lips and tried to say something again and again.

...What do I do?

She covered her mouth with both hands and lowered her head.

And she heard a voice.

“...I won’t forget you.”

It was the boy’s voice.

She looked up in surprise.

She saw the boy leaving.

She doubted he had said anything.

...Then what was that voice?

No one could answer her question.

But...

–Fujiwara – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit!

A light brown mouse-like animal sat on his shoulder.

Its tail swayed and floated as he walked.

She looked to him and the animal.

“...”

She said nothing and did not move.

She remained motionless as he walked toward the emergency staircase and disappeared behind the wall.

She watched him leave.

But even afterwards, she still did not move.

Countless thoughts spiraled in her mind.

Why had he stopped coming until now?

Who was he?

What were those rings?

What was that animal on his shoulder?

And how was he connected to the two at the bottom of the basin?

She did not know any of the answers.

But she was confident of one thing.

“He’ll never come here again, will he?”

She spoke her thought aloud and realized something.

The fear-like emotion inside her was gone.

“...Eh?”

She searched her heart, but the pressure on her stomach was completely gone.

She was no longer hesitant about entering a new world.

Something had changed.

Something was different after that brief and one-sided reunion and parting.

She did not know what it was.

She did not know anything.

But...

...I’m okay with that?

She nodded at her own question. Again and again, she nodded firmly and deeply.

For some reason, tears spilled from her eyes.

And as they fell...

“!”

She suddenly started running.

She ran toward the emergency staircase as if pursuing the boy who was no

longer here.

When she wiped away the tears, she felt strength in her gaze.

It was a great strength different from cheer or ambition.

She ran.

She turned her back on the familiar waterfall and did not look back.

She raced.

Her footsteps produced a nice tempo.

She dashed.

She jumped over the fence blocking off the metal staircase and ran up two steps at a time.

She heard a car driving on the road above.

He was in that car. It was probably a taxi.

But she ran up the stairs without pursuing it.

Once at the top, she was right on the road.

She saw the taxi's tail lights ascending the mountain road in the distance.

She looked that way and smiled.

That was her one-sided goodbye.

She looked to the sky.

There were clouds there, but it was undoubtedly vast.

That same sky continued to Kansai and beyond.

“ ... ”

Without saying a word, she looked down and hopped onto her bicycle leaning against the guardrail.

She impatiently switched all the cycling gears to the inner setting and began pedaling.

She was gathering her thoughts.

And those thoughts led her body to start moving.

She rode the bicycle down the mountain, so she picked up speed.

She moved fast.

She raced to the bottom of the mountain.

She picked up more and more speed in the clear morning air and had a sudden thought.

...Oh, I know.

“I’ll buy a flower.”

She would buy a flower to take to Osaka.

The old lady who ran the flower shop at the bottom of the mountain woke early, so she would already be up at this time.

She knew what flower to buy.

“...A red one would be nice.”

It was snowing in Osaka.

The snow falling from the dark sky would probably look like the white flower petals that had floated down into the waterfall basin.

So if it was to bloom among those, a red flower would be nice.

...That’s what I’ll do.

“That’s what I’ll do!”

She shouted that thought, cut through the wind on her bicycle, and spoke her Words.

Time flows-

She started with the same tempo as always but stopped.

She was just not into it.

...That isn’t it. That just isn’t it.

She did not hesitate to voice the Words that came to mind.

As her new Words, she spoke the feeling inside herself now.

She sang them.

Time flows like water

She who flows through time

A human heart that does not flow into emptiness.

People do not stop

Time does not stop

A single flower resides in the dancing time

Choose your own path and hesitate

Choose your own path and sprint

Do not give up on any of the questions

Her singing voice flowed through the spring morning air.

She repeated the refrain again and again as she rode her bicycle.

She was on her way to buy a red flower.

She was on her way to Osaka.

Someday.

It did not matter when.

But she felt certain she would answer all of her questions someday.

Afterword

God, is it cold. I forgot to write the afterword, so I'm writing it at the office now.

But it really is cold. It'll be March by the time this book comes out and it'll probably be warm then, but then I'll have to deal with allergies. I'm not looking forward to that.

But this is no time to be complaining.

Still, I'm always running into trouble like this.

First, the machine I was writing the manuscript on died. Then when I tried to rely on the backup I had secretly sent to the office, that machine died too. I really thought I was going to die as well when that happened.

Now, a phone call. (I'm not using the office phone without permission, am I?)
"Hey, Osaka's done."

"Oh, you finished that thing? Then..."

"What?"

"How many is this for the City Series?"

"8."

"Stop making tricky lies like that. I know it's only 4."

"If you know the answer, then don't ask."

"Hmm. So did you sneak in some lewd scenes again?"

"Oddly enough, yes."

"I see. Then is there a blond girl this time too?"

"No."

“Does someone get slapped?”

“No.”

“What about a maid?”

“There haven’t been any of those!”

“Then...then how is this a proper entry in the City Series!?”

“Oh, shut up!!”

Dammit, what does he think this series is?

Don’t any of you grow up to be like that, okay?

Anyway, I wrote everything I wanted to this time. I’m satisfied. As a writer, I am truly blessed to be able to write as much as I want like this.

It’s thanks to all of you. Thank you.

Hmm.

Now to change the subject.

I’ve heard a variety of opinions and there seem to be three different ways to read my novels: 1. For the action.

2. For a theory on victory and defeat and on the journey leading to them.

3. For the relationships.

Which one did this one work as? I threw in everything I wanted to say.

And with that, I’m reading back through Part B while listening to Reimy’s Two of Us. (I can’t think of a better image song for Yuuki...even if it is a pretty minor song.) But...

“Who was the strongest of all?”

I really don’t change, do I?

Now, then. Next up is Paris.

Late December 1998. A morning stuck at the office.

-Kawakami Minoru

はっしゅんがたて

しんがらちがはっしゅんがたて

たしげんがたて。

もう好き勝手にしんがたてがたて。

最っか・ローキはしんがたてがたてがたて

今では日本で一番のしんがたてがたて。

一番は川上氏。

はっしゅん



Okay. Now, then.

This is Satoyasu who helped with this book.

I was able to just do whatever it was I wanted.

At first, Yuuki was really hard to draw, but now I'm the second best in Japan at it.

Kawakami is the best at it.

Thank you.

Noise City Osaka <Chronology>

1944:

Even as they lose World War Two, Germany bombs cities around the world with Wort Bombe. The city concepts collapse even further than before and each of the cities evolves in its own way.

The word collapse creates an invisible field known as the Great Canopy around the earth and also creates similar canopies over each of the cities. This prevents the people from reaching outer space.

While unable to send signals down from the sky, the worldwide network is effectively cut off.

1945:

At the Yalta Conference, most of the weapons used during the war are made illegal.

The dp Series of Aerial Ships.

The Glossolalian Word Plates.

The Three Tune Bust Techniques.

The Attesor Project Automatons.

Those, among others, are banned.

1950:

The Korean War begins.

The resultant security issues lead to an increase in student movements and a lower age of those involved in violence. This becomes a problem for the

Universal Student Councilor Committee (later known as the USCC).

1962:

A position is created to end military activity and to properly guide the students. (According to the International Student Special Senior Faculty Academy Rules.) The Leader of the Numbers system is introduced. It is a ranking system.

1963:

The 1st and 2nd Emergency Teachers Committees are added.

Techs are introduced to the schools.

1965:

Testing for the Leader of the Numbers begins.

Ten training grounds are opened numbered from 0 to 9.

1967:

The 3-man system using the Leader of the Numbers, the Chancellor, and the Vice Chancellor is changed to an 8-man system that includes 2 Vice Chancellor aides, 2 Special Duty Officers, and a PR leader.

1969:

After some security protests, college students are entirely removed from the ranking system.

After 3 years repeating the same year, a student is automatically expelled under the shared academy rules. (Returning to school and transferring schools is not permitted.)

1970:

The Nara region and Kyoto region combine into the Koto region.

1972:

Babel, a broadcast tower that can cover the entire world, begins construction in Osaka.

Once it is complete, the worldwide network can recover with Babel at the center.

1973:

The 3rd and 4th Emergency Teachers Committees are added.

The Leader of the Numbers is allowed to also hold a position on the Student Council.

1974:

The Olympic boom leads to sporting goods companies developing Devices.

Competition begins over selling Devices as cheaply as possible.

1978:

The MD Walkman is developed and goes on sale.

Cheap Rhythms become widely available.

The Universal Student Councilor Committee changes its name to the USCC.

1980:

Osaka and Tokyo work together to hunt down delinquents. More than 2000 are injured.

1982:

Another Olympic boom. Athletic shoes and clothing begin to grow fashionable.

1983:

The Kinki Riot begins.

1984:

A Nuclear Syllable Bomb goes off near Nagoya.

Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Midori and Osaka Chancellor Kuki Udai go missing in the mountains of Ibaraki.

Their ultimate Rhythms (the Storm High and Flame High) go missing.

The Kinki Riot ends.

The Nuclear Syllable Bomb detonated near Nagoya creates the Altered Line between the east and west.

The construction of Babel is temporarily halted.

1985:

The USCC divides Japan's student representatives just like in America and China.

This effectively cuts off all interactions between the students of the east and west.

To deal with this, the Emergency Teachers Committees create the East-West Passage Permit.

1986:

Imperial Capital #1 High School is constructed in Tokyo.

Osaka Prefectural #1 High School is constructed in Osaka.

Azuchi National High School is constructed in Nagoya.

The Emergency Teachers Committees that bind the east and west use those schools for exchange students and gifted students.

The aerial network connecting Kantou and Kansai recovers.

1988:

Recovery of the Altered Line begins.

The Kinki-Kansai Chancellors Committee is created.

1991:

The Chip Walkman goes on sale.

1992:

Osaka Prefectural #2 High School begins extraction of the fastest Rhythm.

1993:

As the Altered Line recovers, the bullet trains resume service.

1996:

A largescale terrorist attack occurs in Osaka.

The Reconciliation Riot.

1997:

Construction of Babel begins in earnest.

Applications for the Net War over Babel are taken. Selection begins.

Students from Kantou are also selected as a sign of friendship.

The summer high school baseball tournament is held at Koshien once more.

1998:

Selection for participants in the Net War over Babel ends.

The Net War over Babel begins.