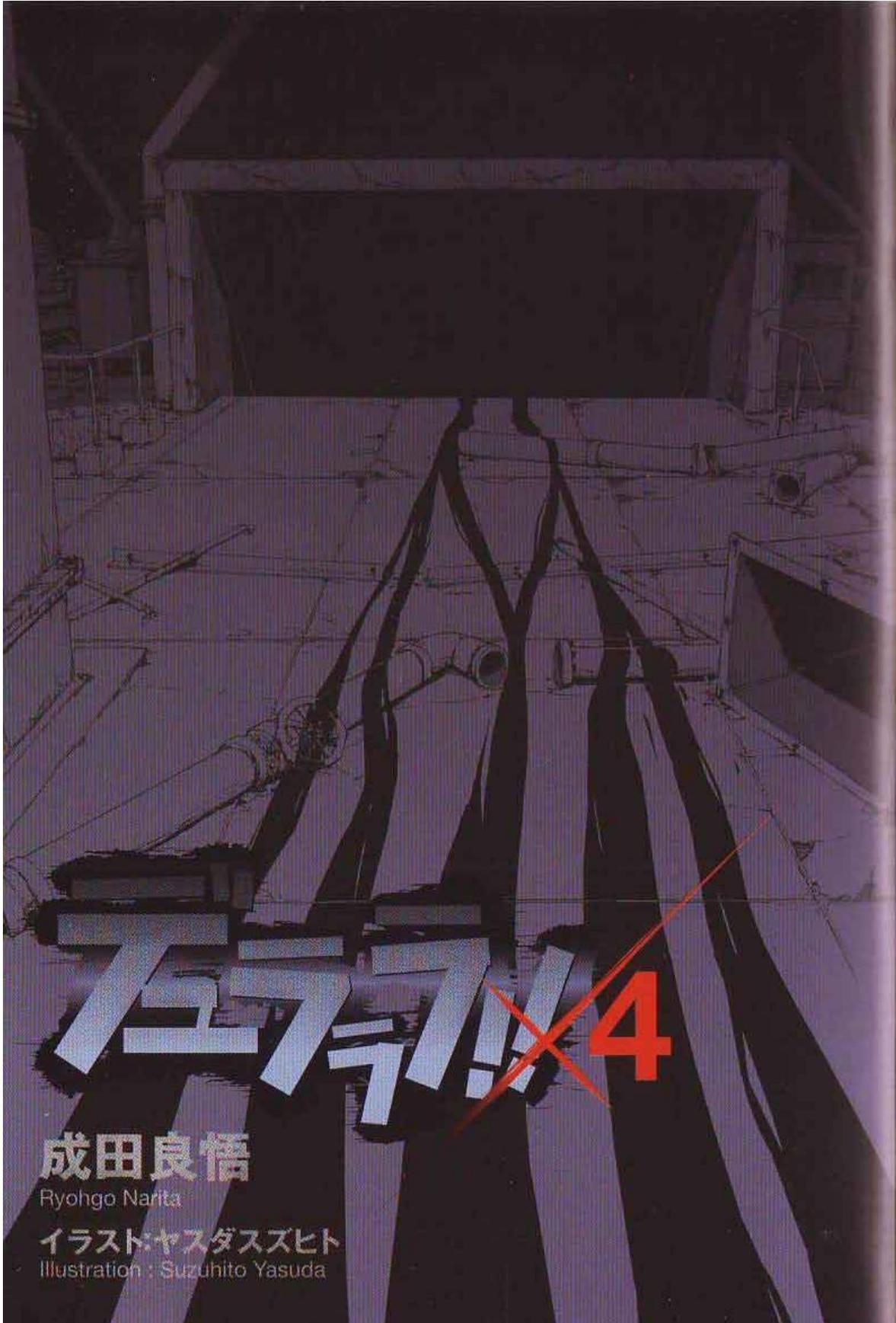


成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita



 電撃文庫



デブタ!!! 4

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

イラストヤスダスズヒト

Illustration : Suzuhito Yasuda

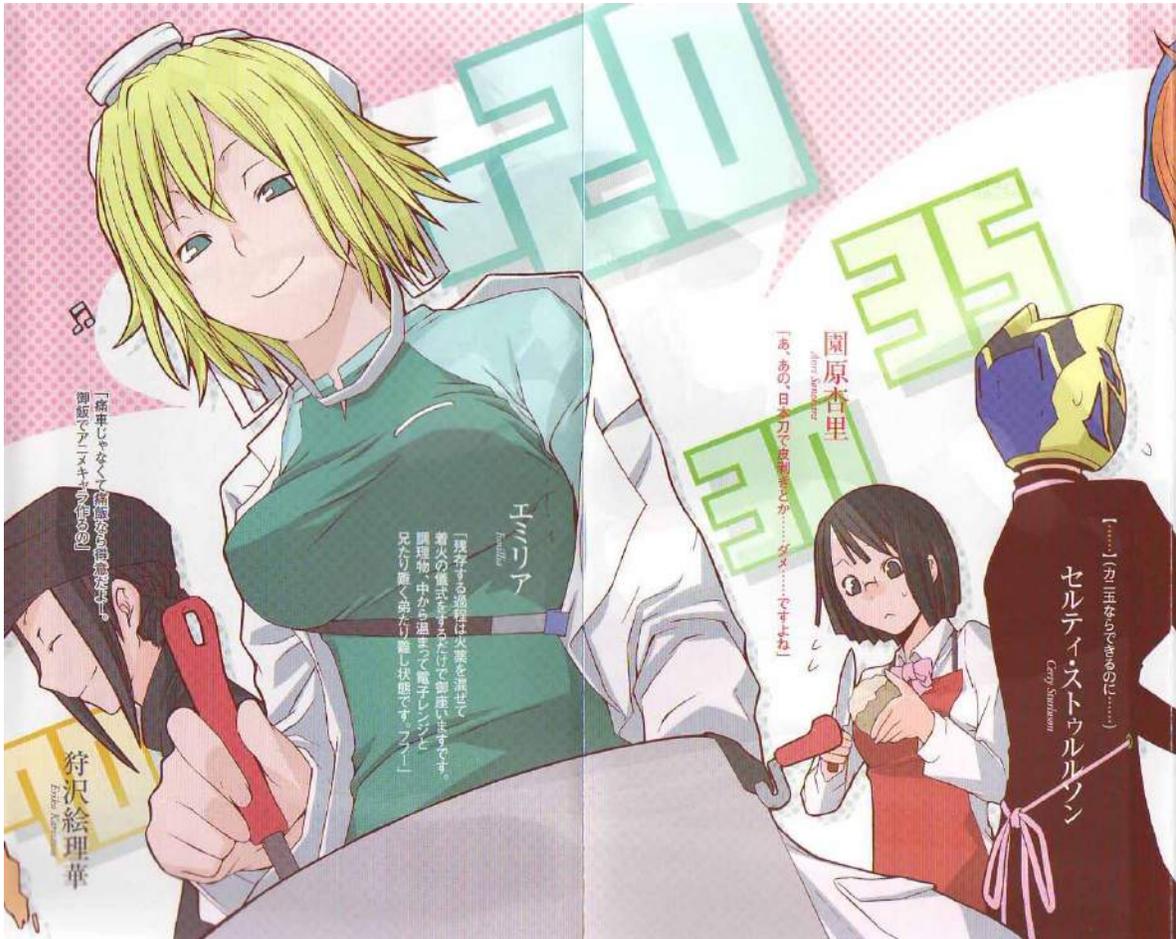


YAGIRI NAMIE (95)

Why do I have to make him dinner as he tells me to.....?
.....Should I poison him...?

HARIMA MIKA (100)

My cooking skills exist only for Seiji-san's sake!
So, if you find my cooking delicious, don't forget to thank Seiji-san!



CELTY STURLUSON (35)

[.....] (If it were just crab balls I would have been able to manage.....)

SONOHARA ANRI (30)

S - Sorry, could I use a katana to peel this.....probably not...right?

EMILIA (-20)

The only process remaining is namely to mix the combustibles and have the kindling ceremony. The cooked is warmed from inside and is neck and neck with the microwave oven. Fufu!

KARISAWA ERIKA (70)

I don't know how to make an itasha*, but if it's just itameshi* I'm an expert!
I'll make anime characters with food!

**Itasha: literally "pain car" (or "embarrassing car"), this term is used to refer to a car driven by Japanese otaku with (usually moe) anime characters painted on them. "Itameshi" is a word Erika made up, literally "pain meal".*

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- P98 2章 読者向け情報誌MAOI春の新生活編 高校生達の東京リビド大特集！ 池袋編！
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- P259 5章 池袋散策解説書「池袋、遊園II 池袋/イオリスス怪奇編」
- P337 エピローグ 玉姫の1 内緒話
玉姫の2 匿名会



DURARARA!! ×4

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Did you know this?

Even the city would want to "take a break".

Like the salaryman who has had one overtime shift too many, or the stressed-out student when *Sazae-san** is airing.

* *Sazae-san*: a TV anime series that airs every Sunday evening in Japan.

And - needless to say - the city never gets a break as long as there are people living in it.

Nevertheless, the city can still enjoy its holiday.

- Because sleeping till 2 p.m. and stuffing yourself with junk food at home is not the only way to enjoy a holiday, right?

The city observes the people moving within itself, and at times, plays with them.

That's how the city enjoys its holiday.

Therefore, if, for example, you're to fall victim to some sort of strange happening in Ikebukuro -

Just try to tell yourself that the city's played a prank on you, and relax.

And, if possible -

Why not play along with the city?

- Excerpt from the Afterword of Ikebukuro Attacks Back, A Pedestrian's Guide to Ikebukuro, authored by Tsukumoya Shinichi and published by Media Works, Japan.



DR 12!
RR 34!
No. 0-30 Ryohgo-Marita

加^ク prologue

「風間」

PROLOGUE

RUMORS

The "Philosophical Killing Machine" -

The man who described him as such was saying:

"I do find that sobriquet way cliche - but then, it sounds the way it would almost inevitably sound if they wanted supermarket tabloids about him to sell. He goes about his work like a machine, but he has his own brand of aesthetics."

- Rumor has it that he is the seventh most feared assassin in Russia. The mechanical killer
- he has transcended the human realm.

- Rumor also has it that by now he's had over eighty lives on his record, and his killing habits do appear somewhat unique.

- He never brings his own killing weapon. He always makes use of what he can find.

- If the would-be victim has a pistol, he would twist the victim's arm and let the shot go through the forehead of the one who fired it.

- If he's in a kitchen he doesn't even need to touch the cleaver, since he can kill with anything from rolling pins to ice cubes from the fridge.

- One of his victims, a soldier-turned-delinquent who was killed at a bank, had his throat cut open with a new bank note.

As legendary as this assassin was, no one knew his true name.

No one knew where to find him or how to establish regular contact with him, either.

No one knew what he looked like, but from everything mentioned above, you'd be able to tell when a victim was killed by him.

"Isn't that just intriguing? In Russia, if you want to hire an assassin, you go out looking for them and ask them. That fellow is always looking for these types of 'assassin-seekers'. Somehow he's able to get the information and contacts his own potential clients."

- Once this assassin agrees to take a job, he does it and disappears without a trace. When he takes the next job he's going to be under a new alias; he never meets with the same client twice.

The only continuity was in his work, which allowed the world to recognize him as 'the same person'. Nevertheless, he was a nameless yet famous existence.

"I heard that this assassin...has come to our country. Something about his true identity close to being revealed in Russia and getting hunted down by the family of one of his victims. So he came here. He also plans to finish off a certain duo that fled their Russian mother organization several years ago with important secrets."

The male information broker prattled on about this bizarre topic.

The female who was presumably the audience, on the other hand, was rearranging the documents in the room without the slightest sign of interest in her cold eyes.

"There's also this rumor that this fellow can take down one or two special force guys even without resorting to dirty tricks like ambush and stuff - actually, even if the other party plays dirty, he'll be able to counter the attack and kill them.....hey...are you listening at all?"

"You think?"

Maybe she found the story too surreal, or maybe she simply wouldn't have been interested even if it were real. The only replies from the female invariably curt and cold, were like "Oh." and "Hmm."

Having finished his tale, the information broker smiled bitterly and shook his head at her as he said in a pitying tone:

"You really are a boring woman, Namie. That's no way to make your little brother love you back."

"I won't mind at all if he doesn't. I'm content just to be able to see his back."

"Oops, that's sick."

"Is it? But I enjoy it. I'm happy just recalling the way Seiji's face looks and knowing that I'm breathing the air on the same planet that Seiji is...though that's not yet satisfaction."

The expression on the female's face turned into a disturbingly loving smile as she proceeded to say something even sicker.

The next moment, Namie's face had regained its steeliness as she began to scold her male employer:

"What would you call yourself, then? Why are you telling me about this assassin who sounds like he belongs in a manga? Are your sensitivities devolving to manga-level now because you've been sticking your nose in all that Headless Rider and demon blade business?"

"Well, I won't deny that."

He gave a refreshing smile as he reached for the beer can on the table.

"Also...it looks like the runaway duo was a black man and a white man."

"....."

"I think they're running a sushi restaurant in Ikebukuro. No idea if that assassin knows as much as I do, though."

Sheer coincidence or not, on the very same day he spoke these words -

The "Philosophical Killing Machine" came to the town named Ikebukuro.

♂♀

As the Russian killing machine arrived in Japan -

A restless shadow was threatening to move within Japan itself.

For a shadow, though, its course of action attracted way too much attention for its own good. Because of the medium that was television, it had caught the eyes of the country's entire population.

"This is the hotel where the killing scene was found."

The reporter who had a flabbergasted expression on his face stretched out his hand to signal to the building right behind him.

He continued in an extremely calm tone to give the details of what happened while standing in front of the building that was very obviously a love hotel.

"The killing happened in the early morning. The staff ran to the scene after they had heard the scream coming from a second-story guest room. What they saw was a woman covered in blood and about to faint...and, in front of her, the badly mutilated body of a male."

The slaughterer "Hollywood".

That was what people called the supposed serial killer.

- Though there was no way to confirm this suspect's presence to begin with.

When the first of these killings took place, the eyewitnesses said that they saw "a figure wearing what looked like a real wolf's head".

The next such killing had no direct eyewitnesses, but a shadow was seen to have jumped off the third-story room of the hotel where the killing took place. It was said to resemble "the kind of mermaid you see in movies".

Even on the news that was currently airing, a female eyewitness who had seen the entire killing process told the police that she saw "a dinosaur-like monster pulling the victim's heart out of his body with bare hands". In fact, the surveillance camera in the hotel did capture a figure with a dinosaur-face running away like a beast.

One of the investigation team members muttered to himself after seeing the video: "This reminds me of the Latin American Chupacabra sightings." It was such an accurate description of the figure that others who heard this remark had to laugh, though it must have sounded disrespectful to the dead.

That was how real - and surreal - the figure looked.

All its victims had their heads and extremities intact; only their bodies were mutilated. Some had their flesh ripped off from all over their bodies, a male had his genitals, tongue and part of his spine twisted, some victims had their faces completely crushed.

The nickname "Hollywood" caught on because every time the killer would appear in the form of a different movie monster. The mass media refrained from using this nickname too extensively in order to avoid potential lawsuits from the Hollywood movie industry and sightseeing agencies. That only made the nickname even more popular on Internet, however.

It was said that an American couple had committed various robberies in different costumes*, but there was much more to "Hollywood" than just costumes.

** Naturally, he's referring to Isaac and Miria from Baccano!.*

This serial killer was not only capable of tearing down walls and breaking into locked doors barehanded; the utterly brutal ways in which the victims were killed looked totally like the work of a true monster.

Since the suspect's motives continued to elude everyone, the people in this country were living under the terror of this fearsome killing monster. There were, however, many people who lived away from where the killings took place and waiting with inappropriate gusto for things to evolve as if it were a Broadway show.

These serial killings, which had taken place in or around the suburbs of Kantou, were the gossip material in spotlight right now - and the culprit "Hollywood" continued to etch its existence onto the world, all while its true identity remained unclear.

And today -

The killing monster made its appearance in the Ikebukuro night.

♂♀

Most absurdly, two shadows appeared simultaneously in Ikebukuro today.

Whether owing to sheer coincidence or predetermined fate, they met in the city night.

It was unclear what kind of communication they might have had.

The only thing mutually assured was the animosity in their respective eyes.

What was very probably the worst combination of beings had ended up meeting each other, both sides were filled to the brim with killing intent, and they had started to try to kill each other.

Ikebukuro's streets were about to become embroiled in their irrational desires to kill, and a brutal evening far surpassing the "Ripper Night" two months ago was about to swallow the city whole -

♂♀

- Would have, anyway.....

Neon lights flashed on and off on the busy streets of an Ikebukuro that was now completely draped in the night.

In a park somewhat far removed from the downtown area -

A resounding "Bang!", as if a gigantic wooden fish housed in a temple had been knocked off its seat by an electric bus.

The assassin and the killing monster were now engaged in combat, and the assassin had begun to make use of whatever he could find as usual -

On the bench next to them sat two young men who appeared to be delinquents.

Judging by the way they took out sticky rice rolls from their convenience store bags, the young men were about to have their nightly snack. They didn't look in the least like they had decent occupations, but for some reason a very out-of-the-place metal attache case was sitting on the bench next to them. The assassin took it without a second thought.

Everything happened at lightning speed.

They were moving so fast that it would have been impossible for an average passerby to even understand what just happened. Every one of their moves was the most effective of its kind and executed with the clarity and grace of running water.

The "Killing Machine" grabbed the metal case and - at the best timing, angle, and speed possible, he smashed it at "Hollywood"'s jaw.

But before the sharp corner of the case could come into contact with the killing monster's face -

A hand from under the awkwardly poised body penetrated it as if it were made of tofu.

Documents, bank notes, pens broken in halves, and ink splashed all over the place - everything flew out of the now-destroyed case.

Their eyes captured this scene as if it were in slow motion; their hypersensitive perception never missed a single move of the opponent.

From the corners of their eyes, they saw the delinquents who looked on as if frozen.

The duo came to the conclusion that they were no threat, and instead focused on each other's moves.

Their abilities were roughly on par with each other; actually, even if one of them were better than the other, the outcome would still be difficult to predict given the conditions they were fighting under.

Their mental facilities never relaxed a single bit even when they were thinking about such things in the margins of their minds.

These two extremely similar creatures were completely absorbed in their own killing feast.

Completely absorbed.

Concentrating the entirety of their awareness, their vigilance, their everything in their very own world.

Which was why they failed to notice.

Which was why both killers facing off each other failed to notice.

The owner of the attache case, the two people now sitting frozen on the bench -

One of them was wearing a bartender suit despite not being in a bar.

Neither were the killers aware -

- That in Ikebukuro, there is an existence you "simply do not pick a fight with".

- Not even if you're an assassin, a killing monster, the president, an alien, a vampire or a headless monster - you simply do not pick a fight with him.

And then - the "sound of the wooden fish" cut into the scene.

Before it did, the duo saw something.

At exactly the moment they were about to come into direct contact with each other, they saw - from the corners of their eyes - the abnormal silhouette of a bartender with the corners of his mouth curled upwards, and the park bench he held high with a single hand.

The man in the bartender suit had, by force, uprooted the park bench.

And simply roared -

"You.....FILTHY ROBBERRRRRRRRRR!!!!!!!"

- As he swung the park bench with full force.

It was a perfect swing reminiscent of a professional baseball player sans the single-handed part.

Both his choice of weapon and the speed he swung it at easily transcended the realm of common sense; the "Killing Machine" tried to dodge before the bench touched his nose, crushed part of his face and shook his brain and spine.

The park facility proceeded to threaten to hit the killing monster unabated -

"Hollywood" put up the defense immediately, but its defense was literally blown to smithereens.

The killing monster was sent flying out of the park and disappeared.

"Hollywood" had exited the scene in the fashion of an American cartoon villain hit by giant hammer. "Killing Machine" lay there unconscious.

The dreadlocks guy who was collecting the documents and bank notes from that attache case while staying out of this scene of carnage spoke.

"Oi, Shizuo. I don't think a second hit is necessary."

Heiwajima Shizuo, the man who was holding the park bench high and about to deliver the final blow, glared at the motionless white man on the ground and thrust the bench back where it had been with a reluctant face.

"Ahhh, scum. Did he want us to walk with bare bank notes in our hands so late in the night? Fucking robbers....."

"Were those really.....robbers?"

The dreadlocks guy tilted his head in surprise as he gave it more thought. However, Shizuo didn't join him, and instead walked towards the entrance of the park as if nothing had happened.

"I'm going to Don Quixote to see if they have anything like attache cases."

Shizuo was speaking in a tone that hardly belonged to the same person as the one he used a moment ago. After he said the name of the supermarket nearby, he jogged out of the park.

Seeing that Shizuo had left, the male who looked like his partner at work kept counting the bank notes as he said:

".....But still...picking fights with Shizuo? ...These two don't live in this town, do they...?"

The man shook his dreadlocks and turned to talk to the white male on the ground with an expression halfway between pity and resignation:

"You need to be more careful, bartender suits are more dangerous than red lights in this town.....though that warning came too late for you anyway."

The male turned around after he had finished talking to the man who might or might not have been conscious.

"All right, he kind of overdid it. Guess I owe you an apology so I won't call the police. Don't hate me for this. Also, if you enjoy being alive, you'd better not hate that guy in the bartender suit either."

From the corner of his eye he looked back at the zombie-faced figure whose eyes only had their whites showing, and ended up saying these words while waving goodbye:

"Um, how should I put this...well...this is how this city's like. Enjoy yourselves the best you can."

"Welcome to Ikebukuro, my two grand-looking and utterly luckless guests."

The assassin and the killing monster were in town.

But that was it.

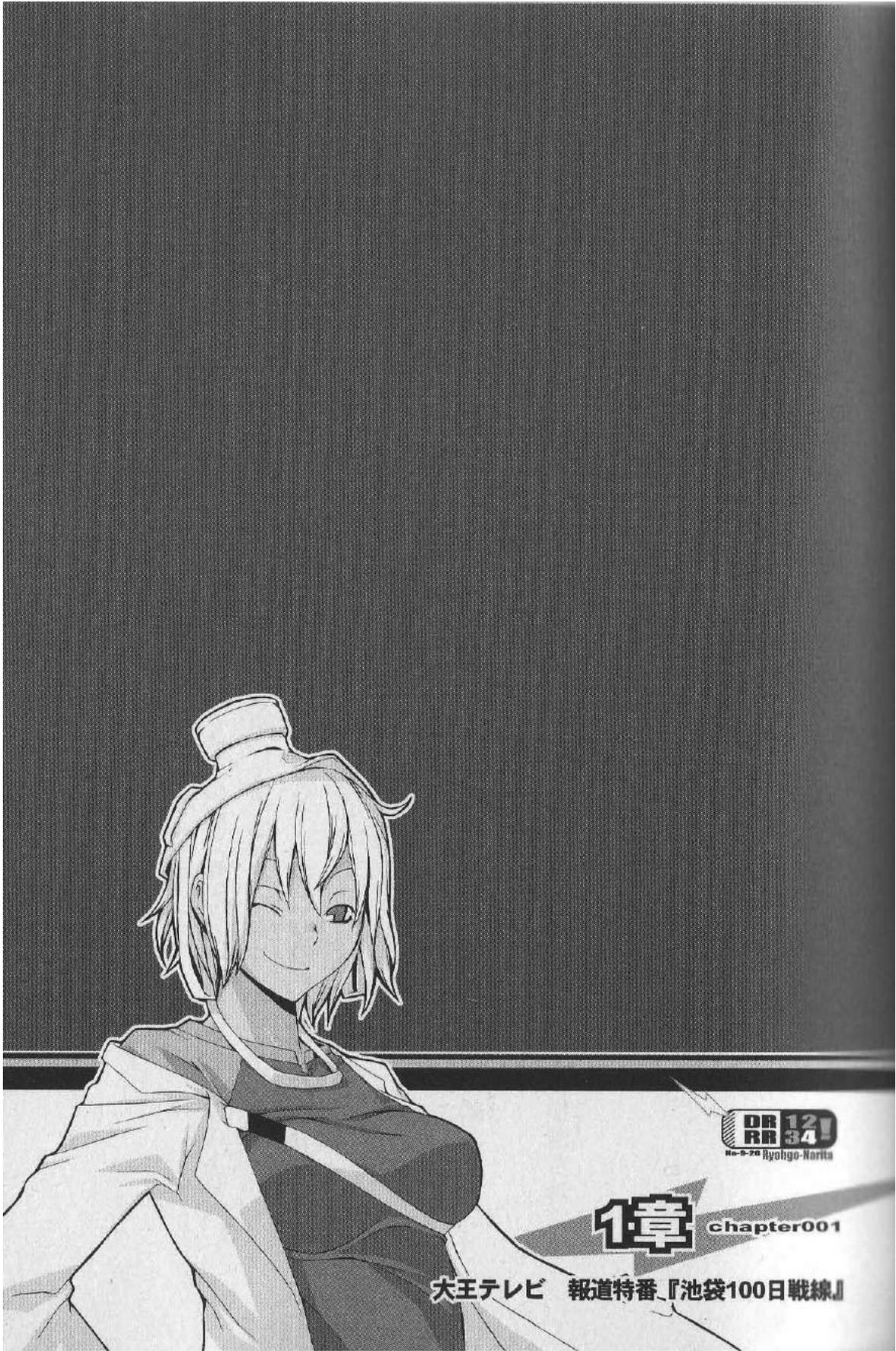
The two violent beings were crushed in a second by a far more irrational and far more violent one.

After it was done playing games with these two killing monsters, who should have triggered far more unrest in the city -

Ikebukuro began to enjoy its holiday.

Observing the subtle details of the various existences it contained -

The city was about to feel very, very relaxed.



DR RR 34!
No. 9-26 Ryohgo-Narita

1章 chapter001

大王テレビ 報道特番『池袋100日戦線』

CHAPTER 1

KING TELEVISION SPECIAL REPORT: IKEBUKURO, A HUNDRED DAYS AT THE WAR FRONT

"Ikebukuro, a town that knows not what rest is - "

The heavy-hearted voice on TV was narrating the clip showing the view of the night street being shot from a patrol car.

"Two months ago, 'Ripper Night', which resulted in a series of injuries, had left the entire

city in panic. Today, the Ikebukuro night is not looking any more reassuring."

It was the kind of special report you see everywhere around the end of the year.

In the peaceful living room, precious clips of previously solved cases - obtained by journalists who followed the police's heels to shoot them - were airing on TV.

Their subjects weren't anything of national concern - usually street fights, drunk or license-less driving, or the retrieval of stolen cars - in fact, hardly anything that was likely to even make its way into regional newspapers.

But these events, captured raw and live on film, did give the audience the impression that malicious crimes were being committed in front of their eyes, and conveyed a central message - "The city is scary tonight."

Still, this special report on King Television had one key difference from other programs of its kind.

"An unnerving shadow is dancing in the darkness of the night on this highway serving as an artery to this city."

The street view switched to a famous video clip.

"This motorbike's got neither a number plate nor a headlight - what's more, it's painted completely black. Naturally, it's already risky driving to begin with."

As expected, the view was still of the Ikebukuro night.

Nevertheless, it gave off a different vibe from everything that had been on air till now.

At the center of the view, a black motorbike was soaring after another car.

As the narrator had pointed out, the motorbike was equipped with neither a headlight nor a number plate; if anything, it was more like a black silhouette that had turned into a three-dimensional object.

A gunshot was heard, and the rider on the motorbike bent far backwards to dodge it; for a moment the safety helmet seemed like it was floating away in the air.

However, it returned almost immediately to where it was a second before -

- as if it were connected to the rider's shoulder by black elastic bands. This was creepy enough to make the viewer's hair stand on end, but the real problem was the "fact" that revealed itself for a split second during that process.

In the split second the safety helmet had threatened to float away -

It revealed mere emptiness underneath.

The viewer's eyes had not been deluded. Nor was it deliberate camouflage utilizing dark-colored hair on the rider's part.

Because, between the helmet and the rider's neck, the video camera did capture the view of the car from which the gunshot had been fired.

Simply put, the scene could be summed up in one sentence -

"The rider on the Black Motorbike had nothing above its neck."

That would have sufficed.

Strings of shadow extended themselves from the neck hole, grabbed the bottom of the helmet, dragged it towards the neck, and fixed it firmly in position.

The video clip was already surreal enough to be dismissed as fake. However, in combination with the medium via which it was reported, it felt strangely real.

What was more - the rider had one more terrifying feature.

Namely, the long, non-reflecting weapon the rider had been wielding even before the gunshot - which looked as if it were made of mid-summer shadows.

But it was too weird to even be called a weapon.

It was a pitch-black scythe almost twice as tall as the rider wielding it and had a handle about three meters in length with an equally long blade.

When he first captured that scythe on his film, the cameraman had thought that it was a bousouzoku* waving his gang flag as he soared. That was how huge the scythe handle had looked.

**Japanese motorcycle gangs.*

It looked as if it were cut out of the silhouette of a tarot Death God's scythe's shadow as it was projected onto the wall - pure, unadulterated black, black, black.

"We have no idea whether he's doing it for personal enjoyment or as part of some bousouzoku activity. His motives have eluded even the police."

It was obvious that the rider had far surpassed the bousouzoku level, but the reporters had to refrain from using words like "fairy" or "monster" due to professional restrictions.

Nevertheless, it was clear to everyone that he was not even human to begin with, and

much less likely to be a "personal enjoyment criminal" or bousouzoku.

It by no means meant, however, that most people were ready to "acknowledge" this fact, even if they understood that the rider was something "far surpassing realm of human knowledge".

- Which was why half of the mass media was trying to assign some sort of "meaning" to that "something".

The other half, meanwhile, began to capitalize on peoples' ability to "accept what they would not accept".

A strange yet very real existence in this modern city.

People had begun to take action to find out the true identity of the Headless Rider. To some it was part of their strange fascination with the occult that was revived every few years, to others it was the exact opposite: they wanted to prove that such strange things did not exist.

Today, the mass media was still pursuing the Headless Rider.

Some reporters had screamed that they had seen "the real monster".

Anyone who was watching the program would have to admit that the rider did look like it did not have a head.

Even if some tried to prove it false, the figure was captured so vividly in action that it was too convincing to be dismissed. Some had even started the rumor -

- that the Headless Rider, created by the plethora of rumors that revolved around him, existed somewhere in-between reality and urban legends.

In reality, you could witness the "urban legend" occupying a sensitive spot in the metropolitan consciousness just by spending a few days wandering the streets of Ikebukuro.

- Which many people continued to do even today.

However, the essential information remained unrevealed. The identity of the Headless Rider was enshrouded in darkness, its very existence reduced to a representation of "modern myths", and dissolved into the society it was in.

And the "myth" itself -

- was working a temporary job in a little corner of Nerima, Tokyo.



Somewhere in Nerima, Tokyo

Blinding light surrounded the white skin.

The light was intense enough to blur the boundary between reality and fantasy. Under its brightness lay a naked female.

Above the well toned abdominals a pair of well-shaped breasts was trembling as fingers, smooth as white fish, slid into their cleavage.

The fingers also belonged to a female her blond hair shining under the light.

She was dressed like some sort of doctor or researcher, but her distinctively babyish face and golden irises were a strange match to the white lab coat she had on.

What was more, her body, even more sensual than the naked female's lying on the bed beside her, was inadvertently making sultry "moves" in her lab coat.

If the blond's body was the type that provoked carnal desires, the body of the female on the bed could be described as healthily beautiful; the two mesmerizing bodies were especially eye-catching in the intense light they were immersed in.

The fingers slid smoothly from the naked female's breasts to her abdomen and lingered around the navel.

It would have been an erotic view had it not been for one problem - one that ruined the mood in its entirety and transformed the scene into one akin to gory pornography.

- One that, all considered, was a little too obvious to the eye.

You could try to tone it down any way you liked, but the female lying on the bed -

- had nothing above her neck.

The cut was too clean and smooth to have been a "cut"; in fact, it looked as if it had been designed that way from the very beginning.

Swirling shadows hid the esophagus and the spine, which should have been visible, from view.

But even if one were to overlook that fact, the scene still looked like a coroner at work.

The Caucasian coroner and the strange female body currently under her examination.

It was amazing how the scene lost all its erotic appeal when all that was missing was a head - but as the female in the white coat retracted her hand from the headless "body", what she said sounded a world apart from the lines in a porno or a coroner's proceedings.

"Done! Finished till the end with all due respect! I thank you that you dabbled in this business with respect!"

Her absurd Japanese was followed by something that was even less in accord with the atmosphere.

The headless female's hand moved just barely and a black substance flowed out.

It hardly looked gaseous; if anything, it looked like liquid that blended itself into the surrounding air.

It reflected even less light than what one would normally consider "black"; there was no appropriate way to describe its color save for "shadowy" or "dark".

The "shadow" flooded over the completely naked body and wrapped it up in a way that would make the viewer think it had a will of its own.

The female in the white coat looked on with interest, not looking in the least surprised.

In a matter of seconds, the headless female on the bed went from completely naked to fully dressed in a pitch-black rider suit.

- But she remained without a head.

The female in the black rider suit did not seem bothered by her own headlessness. Instead, she grabbed the PDA lying on the table next to her bed.

After deftly typing in a series of words, the alien-like existence showed the display screen to the female in the white coat.

[I did not 'dabble in' anything, The right way to say it is 'helped you out.']

"Oops, I apologize with respect. This makes me very ashamed with respect."

[.....So you can read kanji...does that mean your Japanese is weird because you want it to be? For the sake of your characterization or something?]

"That is from the solidly suspicious fact's point of view non-existent.
PINKARARINOPUU."

The Headless Rider felt her shoulders slack as the female in the white coat began to grin innocently. She typed some more:

[I don't know whether to take that for a yes or no...but whatever, Emilia, just give me my salary for the week. And the correct pronunciation is 'TOPPINGPARARINOPUU' *.
PINKARARI is the name of a horseback bread-seller.]

** Meaning "That's all there is to the story" in Akita dialect.*

"Really, mentioning the matters concerning payment, this is really cunning of you with respect. You must work more on raising cuteness level and then can you become the Yamato Nadeshiko* with the best of Eastern and Western romanticism."

** The Japanese "ideal female".*

[Yamato Nadeshiko? But I'm from Ireland.....]

Emilia lowered her head with a pouting face at the headless woman's retort.

"But you are Ikebukuroan now with respect! Also, if you can call me 'Mother', I'll thank you like lightning with kneeling and kowtow like rain and hurricane with respect!
'Mommy' is permitted too, Mama Mia~"

[I'll just...pass...um...it's true that Shinra and I are contemplating our future, but we have yet to discuss anything as concrete as marriage...also, just think about it, you know how old I am...actually, even Shinra is older than you, Emilia, so it's kind of...um...for me to call you Mother...]

The headless woman was squirming as if embarrassed, but owing to her lack of a face to show the blushing, it was as creepy as looking at a zombie struggling after having its head blown off.

[Please, just let me have my salary already! That's the only reason I put up with these distasteful bodily experiments you've been doing on me after all. And what was the last palpating part supposed to tell you about my body?]

"Ahhh, your skin is impeccable as egg white, and fresh out of the bath too.....so beautiful and smooth I just did want to touch it closely and become immersed in heavenliness."
[.....I'm too tired to be mad at you right now...just hand me this week's salary already.]

"Yes yes yes, please calm down with respect. Scared homeless jobless people get paid less than you do, you know?"

Emilia handed her an envelope while saying things that sounded as if they were meant to

distract her.

【THANK YOU MS. CELTY STURLUSON】

In the envelope with these handwritten words lay a hundred 10,000-yen bills.

The headless alien quickly checked the contents of the envelope with a thousand shadowy fingers. Her spirits rose, and the words she typed onto her PDA became peppered with symbols.

[Everything looks good☆Thanks for the opportunity♪]

Taking her salary with her, which was a little too much for a mere week's work, the headless woman - Celty Sturluson - departed the research facility with light footsteps.

Celty's eyes became fixed on a motorbike in the corner of the parking lot the moment she entered it.

It was a motorbike carefully draped under a rain shield. Curiously, the rain shield was not commonplace silver, but rather a dark black - the same color as the substance that covered Celty's body.

The second her hand touched it, the rain shield dissipated into fine drops of black mist and disappeared into the air altogether.

It was a magical view, but Celty appeared more than used to it; she mounted the motorbike that had just revealed itself, and put the helmet hanging off its arm onto her neck.

The Headless Rider soared through the night streets, her motorbike without a headlight or a number plate.

This eye-catching combination was apparently oblivious to their status as "mysterious creatures" -

The Rider simply let the engine neigh like a horse before charging into the Ikebukuro night.

♂♀

Celty Sturluson was not human.

She was a dullahan, a Scottish or Irish fairy that knocked on the doors of the dying and warned them of their impending death.

She carried her severed head at her side and rode a carriage pulled by a Coiste-bodhar – a headless horse -to the homes of the dying. If they were thoughtless enough to open the door, she would splash upon them a bucketful of blood - and was therefore regarded as a messenger of doom like banshees in European folklore.

Some believed that dullahans were the form Nordic Valkyries took when they fell onto the Earth. Celty herself had no idea whether it was true or not, however.

Perhaps she did know.

But she certainly did not remember.

She lost the memories as to what she was when her head was stolen in her homeland. That was the reason she followed the scent of its presence all the way to Ikebukuro.

Her headless horse was transformed into a motorbike and her armor into a rider suit; for decades she wandered the streets in this city.

But she ended up getting neither her head nor her memories back.

For Celty, life was good as it was.

She had someone who loved her, and people who accepted her for what she was. She was content to be able to just spend her life the way she was with these people.

Having made up her mind, the headless woman decided to show her resolve to the world through her actions rather than her nonexistent face.

- Such was the being named Celty Sturluson.

♂♀

A national highway in Ikebukuro

Celty considered her future plans as she rode back to central Tokyo in high spirits.

- Never expected I would be able to earn a million yen within a week.

- I'll probably buy Shinra a new pair of glasses.

Shinra was an underground doctor who lived with her; they were now a loving couple.

He was not only in love with her heart, but also with her headless appearance; as weird as that made him sound. Celty too loved the underground doctor from the bottom of her heart.

She felt even better as she pictured the happily surprised face of her beloved freak, and continued to think of ways she would spend the remaining money.

- And then, buy a new portable laptop.....

- Also, it's about time to buy a new helmet.

The salary from the temporary job was like a bonus to her. Therefore, she was able to spend it on whatever without having to worry about leaving some for her savings.

She had her usual income as a courier, but that money went almost entirely into her savings for the future.

The temporary job was made available to her a month ago when she met Emilia, who came to Ikebukuro to reunite with Shinra's father.

Emilia, who was employed by the pharmaceutical branch of a large overseas corporation*, simply knocked on Celty's door and asked for her permission to "play with her body".

**Nebula.*

Of course, Celty refused at first - but eventually had to cave in despite her reluctance when Emilia added conditions such as "minimal vivisection and cell sampling" and "palpation by female researchers only".

But the delicious amount of money Emilia offered was also an important reason.

- Really, in the old days I would have to let Shinra keep the money even if I earned this amount.

- But now I can buy almost anything online. Civilization is awesome.

Celty's thoughts became increasingly mundane as they continued down the un-monster-like route.

- It feels so nice to not have to spend money on my motorbike. All I have to get Shooter is a brush for his mane since he's not fond of stickers.

Shooter was probably Celty's pet name for her Coiste-bodhar since she stroked him

gently as she referred to him as such.

He was apparently pleased, because the usually silent engine let out a neigh of a horse's that made several passers-by jump.

- Oops. How adorable.

As her horse neighed she went on planning how she would use her million-yen treasure like a kid shopping for snacks for his outing the next day.

- That'll still leave me with 700,000.

- I'll get that DVD recorder set I've had my eyes on for a while. The kind that does videotape-to-DVD conversion.

- That way I'll be able to have everything in DVD format - "Try and Understand"*, "Wonders and Discoveries", "The TV Investigation Squad", "Drama on the Ninth", "Friends" and "How Much Is Your Treasure Worth?"*.

** Try and Understand (Tameshite Gatten): A popular NHK program that teaches its viewer to apply science to everyday tasks.*

** How Much Is Your Treasure Worth? (Nandemo Kanteidan): A popular TVTokyo variety show that offers to assess the value of any "personal treasure" the participant brings to the show.*

- And...what else...right, I'll treat Shinra to something nice. He said he was craving three-five-eight marinated* sandfish.....but is sandfish even in season?

** Three-five-eight marinating: a kind of Japanese marinating technique that will be explained by Harima Mika near the end of this book.*

It was already Mid-April, way past the breeding season for sandfish. But for Celty the greater problem was the cooking part.

She didn't have a tongue since she had nothing above her neck.

The "shadow" that flows out from inside her body worked as a kind of radar - Celty didn't know why, but she could see, hear, and even smell with her "shadow".

But she couldn't taste, probably because she did not need to eat. She had no idea if things smelled the same to Shinra as they did to her, either.

Even though she could follow recipes, it was impossible to make sure her dishes tasted good on her own.

Thanks to years of training she was now able to make egg dishes such as crab balls and scrambled eggs palatable to Shinra. But for other kinds of dishes all she could manage was to make them look like they did in the recipes. Since she had no sense of taste, it was

impossible to tell whether she mistook sugar for salt until Shinra had tried the dish.

- I need someone good at cooking to give me some formal lessons.....

-I wonder if Anri and Karisawa are good at cooking.

A few females she knew came to her mind, but none struck her as a possible cooking expert. Since she wanted to cook Japanese, asking Emilia was probably a waste of time. Other females she knew were just as idiosyncratic....

- Seriously, housewives are something.

The monster shrugged at the sky in awe of humans. The sun had already set.

The streets were lit, making the stars hardly visible. The moon boasted its light amongst the vast emptiness.

- But it's still a sort of happiness to be able to think about such things.

- I had no idea things would turn out like this when Emilia knocked on our door last month.....

Emilia was staying with them - but since she spent her nights at the research facility all week, she hardly ever showed up at their apartment.

The dissection table became part of her routine, but she was able to accept that telling herself that the detrimental effects would be controlled to a minimum and the payment would be great.

The traffic light turned red, she braked, her heart at peace because she was living her life like a human.

- Ahh. Exactly. This is what I want.

To lead an ordinary life with the one I love.

This was an immense happiness for her, a monster in others' eyes. The Headless Rider felt her heart melt in the warmth of that thought.

- Maybe it won't be such a bad idea after all to call Emilia "Mother" once in a while.

- I wonder what kind of face Shinra would make.

Celty waited patiently for the traffic light to change as she pictured her lover's flustered expression.

But -

Humans didn't care about Celty's everyday life nearly as much as she did.

Instead, they insisted on seeing her as an aberration, and proceeded to push her towards the mouth of Hell.

"Excuse me, could I have a minute of your time?"

- Hmm?

Celty turned her attention towards her surroundings upon hearing the voice; her helmet turned around.

A well-built male was holding what looked like a microphone to her as she waited for the traffic light to change.

- ? He's talking to me? Who is he, anyway? Why is he holding a mike to my helmet on the highway?

The male got closer to Celty, whose motorbike was close to the guardrail, and spoke to her over the guardrail in a serious tone:

"I'm Fukumi from King Television, and I've got a couple of things to ask you."

- No. No way.....

Seeing another male holding a TV camera at a distance and some men in casual clothes further away, Celty realized what this Fukumi guy was after.

"We're interviewing you for this special report on Ikebukuro we're doing...your motorbike has neither a headlight nor a number plate, right? Isn't that obviously a violation of traffic rules?"

The reporter looked closely at Celty as he said things that were indisputably right.

What was worse, the traffic light had refused to turn green.

- Shoot, traffic lights in this area are slow.

She had no problem riding a motorbike without a headlight or a number plate - yet she cared for traffic lights.

It was sort of ridiculous, but the reporter simply went on talking, apparently not amused.

"You're the Black Motorbike that has been around for many years, right? What is your

purpose for riding such a dangerous motorbike on the streets?"

At that instant - the engine let out a roar.

Gururu - the roar chilled the hearts of passers-by as if they had heard a beast.

The reporter froze. Despite his doubts about her engine, which did not usually make sounds, he recovered instantly and continued asking:

"Could you say something? Are you aware that you're breaking the law?"

- Ahhhhh.....

- What should I do.....even if I keep silent like this, I'll make a negative impression on the society.

- I don't care how they see me, but I can't stand the thought of my friends being treated like a criminal's companions...but there's no way I'll be able to get a number plate, and Shooter hates headlights.....

She couldn't think of a way out of this situation even though she tried.

She couldn't deny that she did transport less-than-legal stuff in her courier career. Her motorbike obviously violated traffic rules as well.

But there was no way she could simply say, "I'm a monster. Let me live."

-Or is there?

- Would it really matter if I said it?

- Since it's a live report, they'll probably have to trash the film if I let them see something that obviously "can't be." The viewers will probably think it's a fake.

- It's not like I haven't been filmed before anyway.

Celty, having made up her mind, produced her PDA and began to type in the face of the reporter.

".....? What is this? Um.....what's happening?"

The reporter was confused by Celty's first proactive attempt to communicate. His eyes wandered between the PDA's display screen and Celty's helmet.

One could hardly blame him considering the contents of the single line displayed on the screen.

[He's a horse. That's why he has neither a headlight nor a number plate.]

"Come on...if you're trying to kid us you should at least.....uwahhh....."

The reporter stiffened in shock as he was just beginning to speak with a frown.

The Black Motorbike had wriggled and transfigured to twice its original volume.

With total disregard of the rules of physics, it had taken on the shape of a living creature - a pitch-black horse, in a matter of seconds.

But there was one thing wrong with the horse.

"Eh...ehhhhhh....."

The reporter was expressing his fear not of the transformation process, but of the shape the horse took after it.

- Which was totally understandable.

The Headless Rider's beloved motorbike, which had been without a headlight in the motorbike form, kept that characteristic perfectly after the transformation.

Which meant -

The horse was "without a head".

- Heheh. I haven't seen him in his horse form since we roamed the forests on Mount Fuji.

Celty stroked the horse's chopped neck proudly as she faced the reporter. She typed words in to her PDA in a firm manner, not seeming to mind his uncontrollable shaking.

[I believe you see what I mean. Now, if you'll excuse us.....]

- Horses are "light vehicles" like bikes if I recall correctly, right?

Celty waited for the traffic light to change as she thought.

If clips of her horse were to be aired, most of the people would probably just think that the TV station had finally lost the ability to tell between news reports and sci-fi specials.

That was probably why the existence of "abnormal" creatures were never properly reported in the first place.

The traffic light situated at the crossing began to flash. Celty, knowing that the light

would turn green any moment now, put her PDA back and contemplated the coolest way to leave the scene -

- Until, the next second -

"Oi."

A shudder ran down her spine and heart.

"Stand still, monster."

A too-familiar voice sounded from behind. Celty felt her entire body pulsate like the heart of a vivisected frog despite the complete absence of blood in her system.

You must not turn.

But you must turn.

Her instinct and rational thoughts warned her body in turn.

It was right behind her.

"Something" that she couldn't do anything about was right behind her.

Half of her wanted to at least make sure it was him before thinking of escape, while the other half told her to not waste a single second and just run for it -

She turned her sensors slowly towards her back as she heard unpleasant noises from her spine -

And there he was, the traffic cop with a refreshing grin on a white motorbike.

The human traffic police who had planted seeds of fear in her heart before was asking her in a flat tone as he put his foot on the accelerator with a half-pleased, half-mad expression on his face:

"Are you aware that even light vehicles aren't allowed to go on the road without headlights?"

The traffic light turned green.

At the same moment, Celty's peace was put to an end.

Laced by fear, the game of tag between the monster and humans had begun.

However, by the looks of it -

The monster was to be the chased one for a change.

♂♀

The roar pierced the Ikebukuro night as Shooter's giant hooves rang at the movement of his own body.

Celty, who was holding on to the reins that were originally the motorbike's handles, had forgotten to even transform him back into the motorbike.

Shooter, her horse, was a soul who combined dead horses with damaged carriages to form its body. When she set out for Japan, she let him take the form of an abandoned motorbike they found in a metal object disposal area. This was why he was capable of transforming between three forms now.

The headless horse running on its own.

The headless horse dragging an appropriately shaped carriage.

Or, to suit the needs of the modern society, the motorbike without a headlight.

But there was no time to conjure the carriage.

Celty could only hope that the powerful sound of hooves could save her from her ultimate fear, the white motorbike, whose exhaust pipe roared from behind.

The traffic light turned red again ahead of her.

The traffic began to flow on the road before her - if she were to charge into the traffic like this, she would not be able to avoid an accident.

Bodily injuries weren't a concern for Celty, but she couldn't bring herself to disregard the serious accidents that could happen if the drivers were scared out of their wits by her charging headless horse.

- Ahhh!

After making sure that no one was walking on the sidewalk, Celty pulled at the reins and made her horse turn sharply. She felt the pressure gnaw at her back as she decelerated - but there was no time for her to feel afraid. The Coiste-bodhar pranced on her orders.

The giant black creature easily cleared the guardrail and made straight for the outside wall of a building -

And "landed" on it.

From every hoof strings of shadow extended themselves and merged with the surface of the concrete wall.

It looked as if the horse's feet were stuck to the wall with some kind of magical tape that transcended human imagination. Shooter ran vertically onto the wall with Celty on his back at an amazing speed.

"Che! Don't figure you can escape!"

The male on the white motorbike wasn't wavered in the least at the supernatural sight in front of him.

He made a U-turn to stop his motorbike and watched Celty's moves in silence.

Celty, who felt his stare tingle on her back, tried desperately to figure out a way to escape.

- God. God God God. This is bad. This is hopeless. Just hopeless. Completely hopeless. I'm screwed.

Celty could hardly make her own thoughts coherent. She made for the rooftop anyway.

She stopped for a while on the rooftop of the building, which was apparently a small apartment complex, and contemplated her means of escape.

- R - Right...how about -

And she came up with a plan.

An apartment in Shinjuku

That Orihara Izaya was watching TV at this exact moment was by no means a coincidence.

"Ikebukuro: A Hundred Days at the War Front" -

He was an information broker, so that kind of TV program was unlikely to thrill him with anything terribly new. But he was watching it just in case anything interesting happened since he knew it would include live reports of what was happening real-time in

Ikebukuro.

Namie had gone back to her own apartment. Izaya had only just finished a big project and was relaxing while eating the French toast he prepared for himself and watching TV -

".....Huh. I have to say even I wouldn't have seen that happening."

The reporter on the TV screen was following the real-time happenings in Ikebukuro. Behind him was a motorbike without a headlight waiting for the traffic light to change. After that it looked as if the program had turned into a horror movie. Shortly after, it began to look like a crime action film.

Celty on her motorbike-turned horse, and the white motorbike hot on her tail.

"That would have to be Kuzuhara Kinnosuke on the white motorbike, right? I don't know whether to call it good or bad timing."

He narrowed his eyes and sighed in either amusement or awe while listening to the nervous voice of the reporter.

"Check this out! I don't know what he did to make it happen, but the suspect has escaped to the rooftop from the wall on what was apparently a horse! The traffic policeman over there is requesting reinforcements on his two-way radio!"

"For better or worse, Celty always does things I wouldn't expect her to do."

Orihara Izaya was an information broker who dwelled in Shinjuku.

He had known Celty for a long time. Not only was he aware of her true identity - he also kept a secret about Celty from Celty herself.

- Namely, that he was in possession of her head that she once looked for.

But Celty was no longer keen on finding her head. Izaya kept it, treating it as a tool he would need to bring his plans to fruition.

"Ah...even when things like Celty exist, they're treated as if they don't exist by the modern society...but had she been an alien like the ones in the movies, she would probably already have been exterminated by the government or the army - which is not happening anyway..."

Apparently he enjoyed talking to himself. Izaya chuckled alone in front of the TV screen.

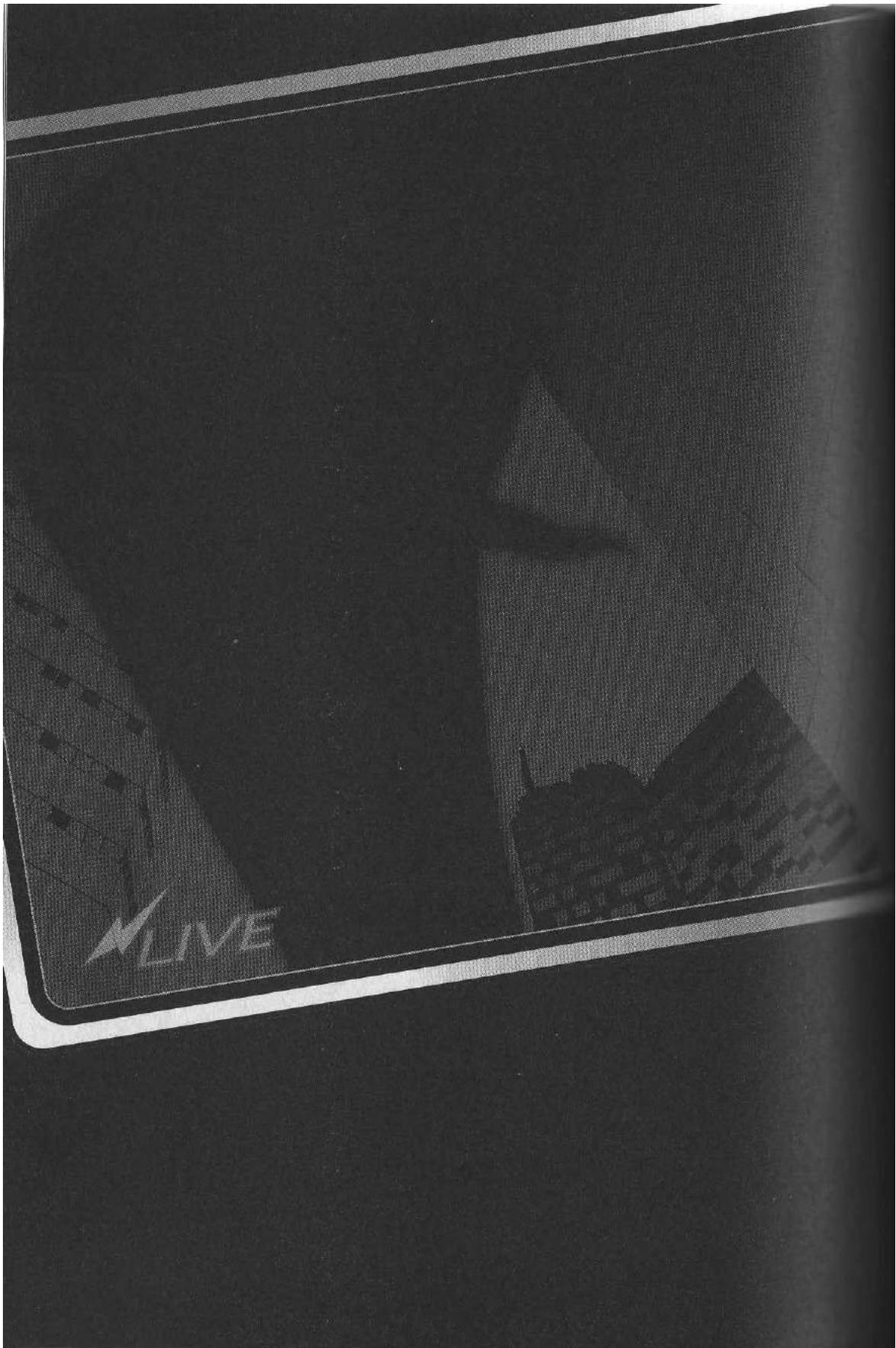
Then it changed in front of his eyes.

"Oh?"

"The Black Rider had remained unseen for a while since he had disappeared onto the rooftop! - Ahhh! What's that!?! Could you see that, everyone? The stars have disappeared from over our heads! Black! A huge black canopy! U - Uwahhhh....."

The TV camera captured something strange as the reporter's voice went anxious.

Something that looked like huge black wings had extended themselves from the rooftop and, slightly reflecting the road lights, had begun to glide through the night.



It was a pitch-black glider that looked like it had a figure on a horse hanging from its center.

But all things considered, its wings were way too huge.

They extended past the rooftop and far surpassed the size of an average jet, concealing the stars from view.

The glider didn't look like it had a skeleton; in fact, it seemed almost weightless despite its staggering size. It glided on as effortlessly as a paper plane.

The giant shadow had reigned the night and begun to glide on the wind coming from in-between the buildings as if it were on a helicopter tour of Ikebukuro.

"Che! You think you.....'re Lupin....or something!?! Get the.....down!" Ahh! Everyone, I think that was the traffic cop yelling, he's resumed his chase now! We're...we're going to keep our eyes on that mysterious flying object!"

The reporter yelled as he got into the interview car. The driver started the engine to catch up with the white motorbike.

But the white motorbike, already on its way, suddenly turned around to warn the interview car.

"Oi, this is not an emergency vehicle so don't you dare break the speed limit.' 'Huh?...O - Okay.' 'And heed the traffic lights.' 'Y - Yes!' Um...um...the driver's still taking instructions from the traffic policeman so we'll switch back to the studio for a moment!"

The astonished announcers in their studio reappeared on the screen a moment later.

They began to exchange their opinions about what they just saw as they realized that the camera was back on them.

But Izaya wasn't interested in what they had to say; instead, he reached for the cell phone sitting on the charger on the desk.

And dialed a certain number in silence-



Several minutes later, an apartment in Ikebukuro

Two shadows were moving restlessly in a room of the dimly lit apartment.

The TV screen was revealing another facet of Ikebukuro's reality.

The shadows leaned into each other in front of the TV and began to utter things with completely different degrees of excitement.

"Strange (This is strange.)"

"This is amazing! Why, why? Ne, why did the motorbike turn into a horse? Ne! That couldn't have been CG, right? It just couldn't have been! Because it looked way too interesting! Isn't this bad!? This is as bad as Superman! As bad as the size of the General Sherman Tree* and the titan arum flower*! So bad that it's amazing!"

** General Sherman: the world's largest non-clonal tree situated in the Sequoia National Park in the United States.*

** Titanarum or Amorphophallus titanum (literally "giant misshapen penis"): a flower with the largest unbranched inflorescence in the world.*

"Quiet (Shut up.)"

"Ah, sorry sorry! It's the critical moment, I know! But there's no way I can make myself be quiet! Ne, isn't this being shot close to where we live? Let's go see it live! Ne! I can't hold myself in anymore! Ahhh, really! I haven't been this excited since I saw the carnivorous cricket Riock and the Goliath birdeater* fight each other! I wanna see it I wanna see it I - WANNA - SEE - IT - !"

** Goliath birdeater: the largest tarantula in existence.*

The shadow that was apparently in higher spirits was as restless as a kid about to board a bus for an outing. In fact, it began to perform a Sleeper Hold* on the shadow sitting next to it.

** Sleeper Hold: a version of the rear naked choke popular among Japanese independent pro-wrestlers.*

The other shadow took the fatal blow and turned purple, but it nevertheless raised its hand calmly and aimed the spray bottle in its hand at the shadow on its back.

".....Chill (Chill out.)"

With that, it sprayed the liquid in the bottle squarely onto the other shadow's face.

".....Uh.....gahhhhhh.....I'm sorry, Kuru-nee! I'll chill out, I promise...cough...coughaaaa...cough...don't use the Habanero chili spray on me.....!"

The excited shadow began to cough and roll around on the floor.

It struggled for a while on the floor as if break dancing until, having found a pivot point to pin its head against, it hopped up like a street dancer and finally began to behave.

"Hah! That hurt a lot. Kuru-nee is always so Spartanical!"

The girl who had just been referred to as "Kuru-nee" had ignored the shadow who spitting out made-up words and kept watching TV in silence.

"Look (I look forward to it.)"

"Ah, right, school's just starting! It thrills me just to know that such things exist in this city, the stage of our youth! How exciting! How magical! How badass!"

The girl's gaze never averted from the giant black wings on the TV screen as the other shadow kept screaming nonsense. - And then, she smiled.

In her heart the same intense excitement was numbing her senses.

♂♀

At the same time, in the office building of "Jack o'Lantern Japan", a talent agency in East Nakano

"Wow! Why? Why why? Why did he...!"

A voice broke the silence in a tidy room with extremely well-polished floors - and immediately destroyed any positive impression the room had made on the viewer.

"This is big shit, isn't it? It's gonna be quite the 'aww' factor, isn't it~? This is just GREAT! Would it be Jurassic-Park-level or Godzilla-level on a movie industry scale?"

The male who jumbled together English and Japanese in his speech was talking sonorously in front of the screen. His fair skin and blond hair combed backwards was

accompanied by dark sunglasses and unshaved beard. He wore a white suit, crocodile shoes, an expensive-looking ring on his finger, and was smoking a cigar. In short, he looked like a typical Hollywood villain.

The screen in front of him was way too big to be called a "TV"; the image size exceeded 100 inches by 100 inches and certainly wasn't the size ordinary people would enjoy their TV programs in.

It was the type of workspace commonly seen in the U.S. or the recent IT industry. Every desk was in an individual cubicle and people worked independently in them.

The rambunctious male was the only one who had a separate workspace all to himself. On the floor before him there were several sofas and desks, arranged in a manner that allowed a better view of the screen, which made the workspace look like a meeting room.

Several individual rooms like this one made up the wider workspace. The male was happily scrutinizing the TV screen in his strange office.

"Ahhh, I want to rush to Ikebukuro right this minute! Really! Hmm! Oi, what's Mr. Yuuhei doing today? He's familiar with Ikebukuro. How about we get him to show us around Ikebukuro and watch that mysterious Sleepy Hollow legend and go see the cherry blossoms if we're in the mood?"

The man's eyes were flashing like a child's, but the other men in the room sitting in front of the TV were much calmer. They talked incessantly among themselves about the things they had just seen.

"Is this some sort of trick by King Television?" "No, their target audience doesn't care for this kind of stuff." "I'll contact the producer....." "Anyone can report to us on the scene?" "I'll check with the manager in the studio....."

Seeing how nervously his Japanese men were reacting to the unusual phenomena on the screen, the Caucasian male shook his head and showed his palms in protest.

"Hey! Hey hey hey! Are you going to ignore your manager?"

"Mr. Manager, please move, we can't see the screen."

"Ah, OK....sorry about that. - But that's not right! Why are you treating me as if I were a nuisance? Oh, I got it. You don't wanna work for a foreigner? Come on, isn't Japan famous for its love for peace and harmony? Why are you guys damaging your country's image?"

"Mr. Manager, please stop damaging your own country's image.....also, you're actually the one breaking the peace and harmony in this room. The filming of Yuuhei's movie has been a success so far, please don't ruin it for him."

The manager's shoulders sunk at his subordinate's immediate reply. He averted his gaze.

His name was Max Sandshield.

He was sent by the American talent agency "Jack o'Lantern" to be the manager of its Japanese branch.

The agency had strong ties to the movie producer McDonnell Company, but its Japanese branch was, at best, middle-tier. The agency was composed of a few competitive top idols and a lot of rookie talents who had not yet made a name for themselves - a strange pyramidal structure.

The manager didn't look reliable, but he was born to be a producer both in terms of technique and social skills as well as his ability to deal with crisis situations. That was why he was made a manager in the first place.

- Although the manager himself was usually the reason they were in crisis situations to begin with.

"Shit! I knew it! Only those cute idols who see themselves as art are my true friends. Only those ANGELS who spread happiness on earth can FOREVER UNDERSTAND me!"

The manager spilled out his discontent as a female who looked like his secretary was saying in a deferential manner:

"Please do your work, Mr. Manager. We had a sakura event just last week. Hanejima Yuuhei is scheduled to return to his Ikebukuro residence right after filming today. Also, I've been wondering why you speak such questionable English when you're from the U.S., Mr. Manager."

"Ahhhhh, you guys are no fun. This era has been so boring. That's why I want some new IMPACT, something like the Headless Rider.....oh...I KNOW WHAT TO DO!"

The manager ignored the secretary completely and yelled at the top of his lungs with bulging eyes. Then he began to dial a number, humming.

- What is he up to this time.....?

His subordinates sighed at the sight of their starry-eyed manager and began to talk amongst themselves again.

Except that this time, they were simply exchanging complaints about their manager.



At the same time, somewhere in Ikebukuro

As the sound of the white motorbike's engine began to fade away -

All of a sudden, Celty's cell phone rang from her chest pocket just when she felt like she no longer remembered how to move.

She started, but only after making sure that no policemen were nearby, was she able to press the TALK button and press the phone to her ear.

"Ahh. Finally you picked up.Hi, Celty. Looks like you're in trouble."

- Izaya!

Upon getting her informant friend's call, Celty wondered why on earth he was calling her at this time. Judging by what he said, he also knew what kind of situation she was in.

"You're thinking 'Why does he know?', right? Rest assured, I have no tapping devices installed on you. Even if I had, Shinra would have found them right away. He's really possessive of you, he is. That's why he would never let me in on your private matters."

- Good. I'll go beat up this fool afterwards. And thank Shinra.

Celty felt like veins were popping from her nonexistent forehead as she continued to press the phone to her helmet. Usually Izaya communicated with her via text messages, but he would occasionally call her like this and do all the talking.

The only thing keeping her from hanging up was the knowledge that Izaya was not one to make such calls without a good reason.

"But you've really done some thinking. I didn't expect you...to make a glider and doppelgängers of you and your motorbike out of your shadow and use them as your bait."

"....."

Celty's heart sank as she heard this.

- He has to be stalking us somewhere, right?

Just as Izaya had said, she had manipulated her "shadow with mass" to make doppelgängers of her horse and herself, and sent them gliding into the sky to confuse the cops.

- Did the trick fail?

Celty was planning to escape in the other direction while the cops and the video camera busied themselves chasing after the bait. Before that, she was to conceal herself for a while on the rooftop. She was astonished that Izaya saw through her tactics so effortlessly. It was beginning to worry her that the White Motorbike might have seen through it as well.

Izaya, as if reading her mind, chuckled as he said:

"Uh-uh, don't you even worry. I wouldn't have noticed had I not been someone who knew you well. I knew because I didn't see the colored helmet - also you're too smart to not know that with the speed of a glider you could never have escaped from the White Motorbike."

- What he said was right to the point. But nevertheless it irritated her to no end to hear him say it in such a cocky tone.

- Is he calling just to show off his detective potential?

No longer insistent on her view that Izaya would not make meaningless calls, Celty was ready to hang up the phone.

But her supersensitive hearing still caught what he was saying even when the phone had been removed from her helmet.

"Alright. Just thought I should call you to tell you this - I think, from tomorrow, things are going get pretty tough for you - "

- ?

Izaya made a request from the other end as Celty tilted her helmet.

"Do NOT try to go to work until things have calmed down for a bit. I'll give you the details by message later - don't go to work before you've read them - "

- Huh?

Celty would have asked what this was all about, but there was no way to get her thoughts across to Izaya since it was impossible to send text messages during a call.

"I'm hanging up now. Wish you luck in your battle*."

- My battle?

** A Japanese salutation used to wish a warrior or martial artist luck. Izaya is using it here to suggest that*

Celty, a dullahan, might be a Valkyrie, loosely interpreted as a "god of war" in the Japanese view.

The call was ended unilaterally before she could ask any questions.

- What exactly was he on about?

Celty was completely confused. She decided to get off the rooftop first and pocketed her cell phone -

But something felt terribly wrong.

There was a pocket for her personal items located at the chest part of her rider suit made of shadow.

As usual, nothing was in it except her cell phone.

Which felt strange now because something else should be there.

Celty felt her body turn cold as she reached for the pocket on the other side of her chest.

She found only her PDA there. She proceeded to check her waist pocket, but there was nothing in there except her apartment key.

In short - only the usual personal items she took with her.

What was missing was the one item she got today.

The modestly colored envelope with "THANK YOU MS. CELTY STURLUSON" written on it.

She dropped onto her knees in shock as the fact sank in.

- I dropped.....the envelope with my salary in it.....

- A million yen...now nowhere to be found - !

She prayed and prayed as she looked around frantically; it was not on the rooftop.

She was almost sure she had dropped it while trying to get away from the White Motorbike. The problem was that she had no recollection of her escape route now because she had been so preoccupied with the thought of getting away from him.

The Coiste-bodhar leaned towards her as if trying to offer consolation. The headless neck was touching her helmet, making the scene look as if two headless creatures were fighting over a helmet.

Celty's night deepened quietly as the comical scene persisted.

She was not aware of the consequences of her actions tonight.

Neither could she predict the chain of incidents set into motion by her lost envelope -

The Headless Rider simply cried like any human being would in her situation in this modern society she had found herself in.

CHATROOM

Kanra

Good-eve-ning! Kanra-chan's here!

Tanaka Taro

Good evening.

Bakyura

Cheers

Saika

Good evening. It's good to see everyone here.

Kanra

Yep yeee~p ☆ Is everyone getting used to the new chat room just fine?

Tanaka Taro

Yes, it's nice to be able to tell who's saying what now with these color codes!

Bakyura

That's true,

Bakyura

now we can gang up on Kanra-san in more vibrant colors which is awesome

Kanra

Vibrant!?! Nooo~what do you want to do to me!?

Bakyura

Gang up on you and then abandon you and repeat for eternity

Kanra

That would transcend the boundaries of bullying and shoot straight up to the realm of public execution, you know that, right!?

Bakyura

That was the intention. So?

Tanaka Taro

Bakyura-san, you're just mean. lol

Saika

Is everyone getting along all right

Bakyura

Ahhh of course,

Bakyura

Saika-san,

Bakyura

it's not like I really hate Kanra-san or something

[Private mode] *Kanra*

You're still such a liar. You actually hate my guts, don't you?

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Shut up. Drop dead

Kanra

That's right! He just wants some physical contact! But he's too tsundere to say it, that's all
☆

Bakyura

In terms of the tsun:dere ratio it's like TSUN TSUN DERE TSUN DERE TSUN TSUN
TSUN TSUN TSUN TSUN till you die from it

Kanra

Heeh, where does that ratio come from!?

Bakyura

Kids sing it in the commercial street in Sakurashin Town

Kanra

And they always sing "you die from it" at the end!?

Bakyura

That part I improvised. So what?

Kanra

You're just mean!

Tanaka Taro

You really are. lol

Setton-san has joined the chat.

Setton

Evenin'!.....

Tanaka Taro

Ah, good evening~

Setton

I don't think I can take any more of this.

Kanra

Good evening☆

Bakyura

Evening.

Tanaka Taro

Eh? Why is that?

Saika

Good evening, nice to see you again

Setton

I lost some money.....

Bakyura

!?

Tanaka Taro

That's too bad...did you call the police?

Setton

No.

Setton

Ah, I mean...I did. I called the police.

Kanra

Heh~how much money did you lose?

Setton

Um...about a whole month's salary.....

Saika

Are you all right

Bakyura

!?

Tanaka Taro

That's a huge amount! Could you manage without it?

Setton

Yeah, I have plenty of savings so it won't be a problem. But I'm really frustrated.....

Kanra

Please cheer up!

Kanra

Oh right! I have good news for Setton-san!

Setton

What is it?

Kanra

Heh heh~please follow [this link]!

Tanaka Taro

I see, so we can insert URLs in our chat now!

Bakyura

Heh -

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

Um, Izaya-san, what exactly is this?

Saika

Um, sorry, what is this about

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

What's going on? Why are they offering a reward for capturing Celty-san?

Setton

No way, this is kind of going too far for me...they want to catch that Black Motorbike...?

[Private mode] *Kanra*

Think about it. Celty has been captured on a TV camera during a live report.

[Private mode] *Kanra*

And some talent agency put up a notice offering this sum to anyone who could reveal the true identity of the Black Rider. Looks like they want the Black Rider to debut as an actor or something.....

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

Do they even have common sense at all?

[Private mode] *Kanra*

Who knows. It's not like Celty is something one can understand with common sense to begin with, anyway.

Bakyura

Ten million yen.....

Bakyura

This is big shit, isn't it?

Saika

Excuse me, I have to get offline early today

Setton

Ah, I need to take a shower as well. See you everybody~

Tanaka Taro

Uh, good night~

Kanra

Good night~☆

Setton

Good night.

Saika

Good night, thank you very much

Setton-san has left the chat.

Saika-san has left the chat.

Bakyura

Good night.

Bakyura

Urgh, I was a second too late.....

Kanra

I guess it's about time we got offline as well. We'll talk more about this reward money later.

Kanra

I'll see ya guys, good night~☆

Tanaka Taro

Good night.

Bakyura

(>_<) ノシ

Kanra-san has left the chat.

Tanaka Taro-san has left the chat.

Bakyura-san has left the chat.

No one is in the chat room right now.

The next morning, on the top floor of an expensive-looking apartment building on

Kawagoe Highway

"I'm back. Really, that was a hell of a night."

This expensive-looking apartment had more living space than an average house -

Kishitani Shinra, the male owner of this 150-square-meter living quarters divided into five rooms plus living room, dining room and kitchen, had returned, in an overly attention-drawing white coat, to the home he shared with his love.

"Ahh, Celty, where are you? I'm exhausted because I got involved in this weird thing...the Japanese always say 'The cat who licks the plate gets the beating', but I had even less to do with the whole thing - why did it have to happen to me...? Eh? Where are you, Celty? Celty? ...Is she not back? But she said the experiment would end last night....."

Shinra tilted his head as he walked further into the hallway. Then he noticed something strange about the apartment.

The living room was strangely dim despite the fact that the lights were on.

"?"

He ran towards the living room to find out what was going on - and saw a black cocoon lying in the corner.

"Wha -!"

The giant cocoon reminded one of a silkworm's; Celty had probably made it with her shadow.

Feeling that Celty must be inside the cocoon, Shinra forgot about his exhaustion and rushed into the pile of shadow.

Suddenly, the cocoon parted like a carnivorous plant and swallowed up Shinra's body.

"Uwah.....wait.....!"

Shinra was dragged into the cocoon before he could realize what had happened - and encountered "happiness".

Celty was inside the cocoon as he guessed, and -

She had flung her arms around Shinra.

Though it was impossible to see inside the dark cocoon, it was doubtlessly Celty's figure

that Shinra knew well.

"What.....! This is too bold an invitation...I know they say 'Don't wait for the prow when the wind's in your favor", but my rationality's been blown away and my body's going all "Dancing with no idea where the hands and feet are"!But.....ehh.....?"

Shinra's tone remained flirtatious even in a state of confusion; but he went serious after he noticed how stiff Celty's movements were.

Something lit up before his eyes, momentarily blinding him.

Shinra narrowed his eyes as he realized that it was the light from Celty's PDA; she had shoved it in his direction for him to read.

[Sorry, please stay with me. It won't be long.]

"No, you don't even have to ask, Celty...but what's up? You look pretty down."

[I'm not just "down", I'm devastated...say something to make me feel better, please.]

"Wow, why are you acting like the Negative Queen all of a sudden?"

At least Celty hadn't said she wanted to kill herself. Shinra's heart fell back into place. He held Celty gently in his arms as they talked about what happened.

".....So not only did you lose a million yen - you're now wanted for ten times that money as well?"

"That's right, so now I can't just leave the house whenever I want...we'll be in trouble if they find out where I live."

Feeling better after she had told Shinra about what had happened, Celty began to absorb her shadow back into her body from the cocoon that surrounded them.

Though he felt somewhat at a loss that their private space was no more, Shinra knew better than to say it.

He continued to try to cheer Celty up and said with a reassuring smile:

"Anyway. Don't worry, Celty. This apartment is pretty secure. I'm sure your lost money will find a way to come back to you. We say 'Fortune and misfortune are ropes intertwined' for a reason, you know."

[I know...but...I'm just really sorry.]

".....? Why are you apologizing?"

[Because.....I was planning on buying some electronic devices. Also.....um.....how should I put it...I wanted to get you something as well.....but the money's gone now. I'm sorry. Uh, I didn't say that to make you feel like you should be grateful or anything...I mean...how should I put it...sorry, just forget about what I said.]

She folded her PDA hastily and turned her body to the side in embarrassment.

The sight pierced Shinra's heart with a golden arrow, and he held her tightly in his arms once again.

"Celtyyy I knew you were the best arghhhhhhh - "

[Thank you, Shinra, but I'm really not in the mood right now...]

Just as Shinra's hand roamed towards Celty's chest he was dragged apart and shut into the cocoon again.

But he wasn't disheartened at all; instead, he said in a cheerful voice:

"Ah hah hah. I'll just wait till you are in the mood then."

[Me too.]

Only Shinra's face was showing now while the rest of his body was wrapped up in the cocoon. As he saw what Celty typed on her PDA his heart raced like a teenager's.

As if it felt his excitement, Celty's cell phone rang at that exact moment.

Apparently she got a new text message. Celty checked it and put her helmet back onto her neck.

[Got some work to do. I'll be back shortly.]

"Are you sure it's gonna be alright? I think staying home for at least today would be a better idea....."

[Timely delivery is the first thing a courier needs to care about. Don't worry, I won't get us into trouble.]

"I wouldn't mind even if you did. We're family."

Shinra's smile sent Celty's heart into momentary unrest. Hating the fact that she had no face to return that smile with, she typed the facial expression she hadn't used very often onto her PDA instead.

[Thank you (^^) ~]

- As long as I know that Shinra's waiting for me to come home...I feel like I'm stronger than a hundred people combined.

Celty left the apartment savoring the power of her newfound confidence.

"Ahhh~it's so nice to see her cheer up at last."

- Leaving the male entangled in the black cocoon.

"Um.....? Hey, Celty, this shadow cocoon you made won't break for me. Celty, hello - ? Hello - ? It would seem that I can't get out - !?"

♂♀

Half a day later, somewhere in Ikebukuro

- That's right. As long as Shinra's waiting for me to come home.....I'll be as strong as a hundred people combined.

Celty soared at top speed as she reminded herself of her resolve that morning.

- But...will I be able to make it back home...like this...?

Around her engines and horns roared.

Without turning around, Celty spread her sensors in all directions.

She could sense at least twenty of them.

The men were wearing striped tokkou-fuku* and riding modified motorbikes.

** Tokkou-fuku: typical bousouzoku attire, usually a military issued overcoat with kanji slogans worn with no shirt underneath to show off the torso.*

Some had three-part seats and exhaustion pipes that made explosive noises; others came with various stickers and obviously unnecessary gadgets attached.

In short, almost all of them were riding so-called "zokusha"* -

** Zokusha: a bousouzoku's motorbike.*

It was obvious to anyone that they belonged to "bousouzoku", or, as some would refer to

them in a derogatory manner, "chinsoudan".

"You bastard! I told you to stop, didn't I?"

"You wanna get killed? Ahhh?"

"Uhyou~~! Dah! Dah!"

The male sitting at the back of the two-person motorbike was swinging a steel pipe at her as the motorbike hovered behind her.

- Ahhhhhh, it's been...it's been a while since I've seen anybody making their purpose this obvious in Tokyo!

Celty, though she was thinking such things, looked no more normal herself.

She was in her usual attire - but beside her motorbike there was a black side car with a black bag in it.

Celty had installed that side car made of shadow on the Coiste-bodhar to transport the black bag, which was slightly larger than a golf bag.

The long bag was sitting in the seat.

Celty had no idea what was in it, but judging from its size, shape and weight -

She had this feeling that she would not like to know.

Thirty minutes earlier -

Celty was reading a newspaper left on the bench as she waited for her client who was to entrust her with a job this afternoon.

- Wow, Shizuo's brother sure is something.

The headline on the newspaper read "Hanejima Yuuhei & Hijiribe Ruri - Midnight Date of Passion!?". Its message was short and straightforward: the most popular top idols of the time were seen dating at midnight.

Additionally, they were seen near Hanejima Yuuhei's home.

Celty, on the other hand, wasn't in the headlines despite what had happened in Ikebukuro last night.

It looked like the world cared more about real male-female relationships than Unidentified Mysterious Animals.

- But who would have expected it to be that Hijiribe Ruri.....

Hijiribe Ruri ranked among the most popular female idols right now. She became popular a few years ago and had been active in all areas of entertainment.

Her charm lay in her delicate and docile looks; despite being Japanese, she had the aura of a Nordic beauty about her. Even Celty, who was also female, couldn't help but find her extremely cute at times.

Yuuhei and Ruri were both over twenty years old, but they looked younger than their age.

It was impossible not to find the love affair between such two people romantic. In fact, she felt like even the news report was trying to make it sound romantic.

Her client arrived before she could read the article more closely. She had to turn her attention to his instructions and transport the item he had brought.

Neither video cameras nor the traffic police had found her like she had feared.

Her job in the morning went amazingly undisturbed, to the point that she was beginning to feel surprised.

But at that moment -

The moment she was ready to feel relaxed - she ran into a group of bousouzoku some distance away from the main road.

Celty was confused for a second before they yelled "Found him! Ten million yen!" - which at last reminded her of the situation she was in.

There was no time for her to even sigh; the grand chase had begun on the Ikebukuro streets.

"Urahhhh!"

"Don't look down on us Toramaru! Oi!"

Around Celty a gang of men were brandishing their weapons about on motorbikes with stickers bearing the name of the gang - which sounded suspiciously like the title of a certain manga*.

* To Love-Ru.

She had heard that bousouzoku nowadays were often older than one would expect - but

every one in this gang looked well over twenty.

- Urgh.....you're too old for such bounty hunter games!

- But isn't Toramaru a gang in Saitama!? What are they doing here!?

- Is this...is this how far people would go for money?

True, they were offered ten million yen just for catching Celty - a staggering amount by any standards.

Had she been offered that amount for surrendering herself to them, she would probably have given it a thought as well.

But she would probably reckon that it was not worth it considering what they had in store for her afterwards. Celty made up her mind to take her thoughts off the money -

Gang flags other than Toramaru's could be seen when she came to her senses again.

"Stand still, you!"

"Fuck off! That motorbike's our game!"

"Don't you look down on us Pylori King*!"

"We'll give you chronic gastritis!"

** Narita Ryohgo himself was battling with pylori-induced gastritis at the time this book was written.*

All the savage remarks made Celty accelerate harder.

- Argh, screw it. I'll just beat the crap out of all of them.....but if I attract any more unnecessary attention I'll just get Shinra in trouble.

- Just focus on getting away from them. And find someone I can talk this over with.

- But then again, who on earth should I talk to for this kind of thing.....?

At that second, one of the bousouzoku whom she was about to succeed in getting away from hurled his steel pipe at her.

"Don't you figure you can just get away! Hah!"

The sharp tip of the steel pipe made a hole in the bag she was transporting -

With a "thomp", a human arm slid out of it and dangled around.

But the White Motorbike made his way through the shadows as if they didn't exist, and was by now riding immediately next to Celty.

"I told you.....that kind of stuff doesn't scare us traffic police!"

- You mean you in particular!

Every bousouzoku around her got further away in fear of the black shadowy substance. The only exception was the cop on the white motorbike - the natural enemy of the Headless Rider - who wasn't afraid of her monster appearance in the very least and only got closer.

"What the fuck? Fuck off, cops! Urahh!"

One of the bousouzoku raised his steel pipe and swung it at the White Motorbike.

After he had dodged the blow -

Celty decided to forget what she had seen him do immediately afterwards.

- No no no. I didn't see a thing.

The White Motorbike had grabbed that bousouzoku's motorbike and pushed it sideways until the rider's face was inches from the asphalt - and the two motorbikes kept running for a whole five seconds before he helped him back up again.

What the White Motorbike did had completely transcended the realm of common sense; Celty, who had captured his every move, decided to forget everything for the good of her soul.

- Nothing! I saw nothing!

That bousouzoku with a dumbstruck expression in his eyes drooled in shock and had to slow his motorbike.

The other bousouzoku froze for an instant at that sight, but -

"He.....He thinks he can pick on us! That fucking cop!"

"Kill him!"

The bousouzoku targeted the White Motorbike instead and had him cornered in no time.

It was a battle at 100 kilometers per hour.

The battle between the hunter, the hunted, and the cops who had come to arrest both had begun amidst the traffic moving at its usual speed.

Celty seized her chance to turn onto another road while the White Motorbike was engaged in a fierce battle with the bousouzoku.

But another group of bousouzoku awaited her there.

- Will I...really be able to get home?

Celty turned around and made for the main street again at the sight of at least twenty men.

The new group of bousouzoku ended up joining the grand chase.

Helicopter sounds came from over her head.

Is that helicopter coming to get me as well? - The Headless Rider could only wonder as she soared nonstop on the evening street.

She was sure that if she had a face, there would already be tears all over it. As the face of her love came to her mind, she remembered one more thing -

That she had forgotten to free Shinra from the shadow cocoon.

- Ahhh, Shinra, I'm sorry.

- If I can't get home in time...I'm really sorry!

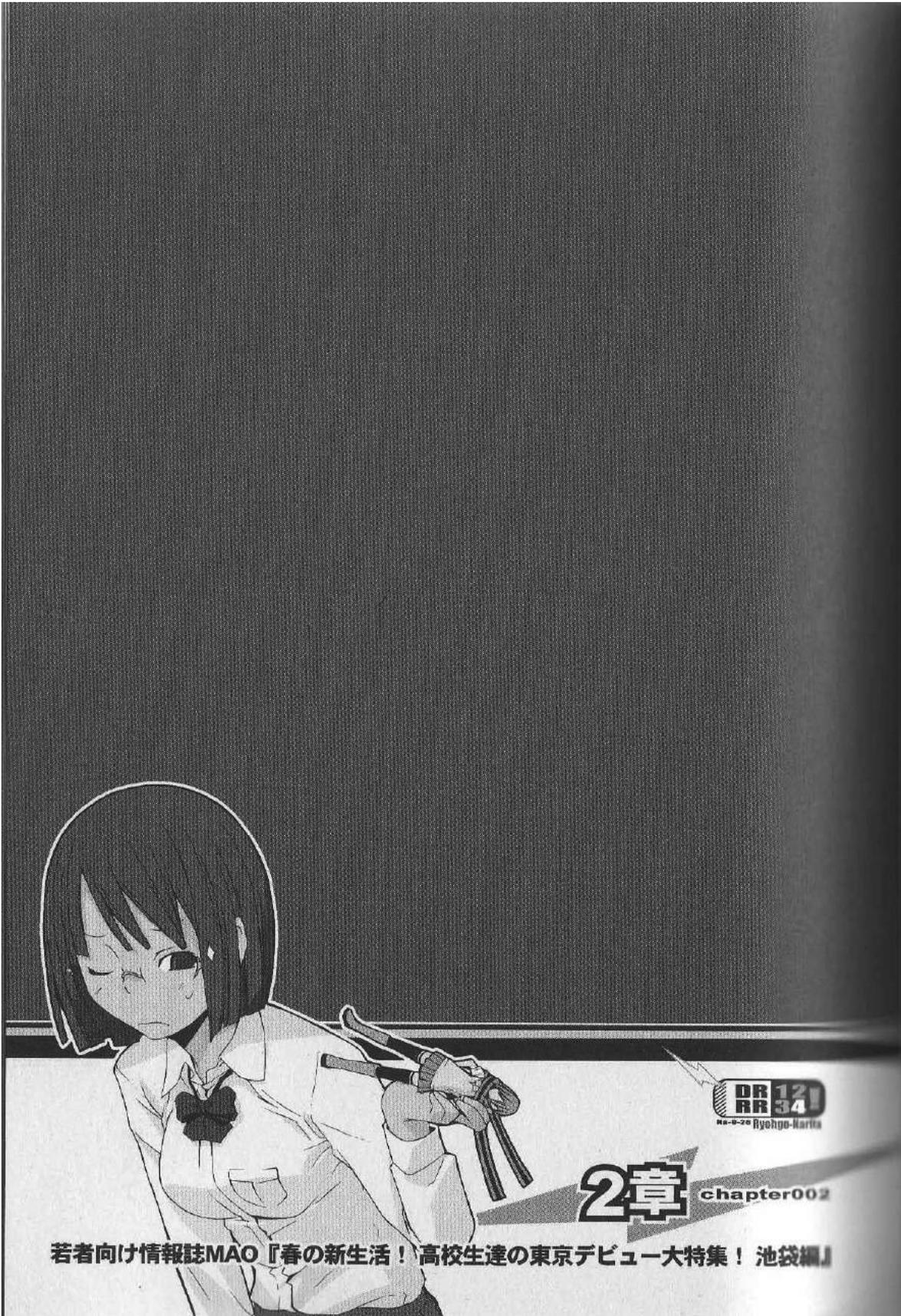
♂♀

It was hard to tell if Shinra felt Celty's love for him via telepathy on the top floor of the apartment building -

He was still lying on the living room floor. With the corners of his mouth curled upwards in apparent glee, he murmured with a dreamy expression in his eyes:

"Ahh...so I guess this counts...as a sort of neglect play*?"

** Neglect play, or houchi play: a term originally used to refer to when the sadist leaves the masochist tied-up and unsatisfied for long periods of time during sexual intercourse. It is also used (often jokingly) to refer to other neglecting behavior without sexual connotations*



DR 12!
RR 34!
Ka-9-20 Ryohgo-Marita

2章 chapter002

若者向け情報誌MAO『春の新生活！高校生達の東京デビュー大特集！池袋編』

CHAPTER 2

MAO, INFORMATION MAGAZINE FOR THE YOUNG "A NEW LIFE IN SPRING! HOW TO MAKE YOUR HIGH SCHOOL DEBUT IN TOKYO, PART IKEBUKURO"

"Now that the spring is here, REFRESH yourself!

A new life starts with new encounters in a new city!

Will you be able to encounter something fresh and new as you start your new life in Ikebukuro?

Some are already ahead of you.....but if you haven't started yet, grab this column and earn your experience points in Ikebukuro for the true encounters the future has in store for you!"

♂♀

After skimming through the column, the boy grabbed the magazine and made for the cashier.

His name was Ryuugamine Mikado.

He had only just become a sophomore at Raira Academy, a private high school situated in the center of Ikebukuro.

It was already his second year living in Ikebukuro, but for some reason he was still looking for articles like the one mentioned above. In his schoolbag there were already

three magazines similar to the one he had just picked up.

The boy walked out of the convenience store in silence and made for the karaoke right next to it.

The food they served in that karaoke was better than the average restaurant's, and most importantly, they combined multiple online karaoke systems to offer a much wider song selection.

Mikado walked into the karaoke somewhat nervously and asked for the number of the reserved box before he went looking for it.

There were several rooms on the sixth floor. He entered one of them and found the other people already waiting.

"Yahoo! Mikapuu, how's it going?"

"You're so slow that we had to order oolong tea and some other stuff for you~"

The ones who spoke to Mikado first were a man and a woman in casual but hip clothes. They had the looks of fashion models, but the pile of manga, light novels, games, anime DVDs and related merchandises ruined that impression completely.

On the side, a girl in the same uniform as Mikado was blushing hard as she held a boldly costumed figurine of a female character in her hand.

The girl let out a small yelp as she saw Mikado before hastily handing the figurine back to Karisawa and curling up.

"Ah...um.....Sonohara-san, is it OK if I sit by you?"

".....O - Of course!"

The bespectacled and docile-looking girl blushed harder. Her curves, which were on par with the figurine's, stiffened in embarrassment.

"Good to see you here, M - Mikado-kun."

"Thanks, I'm sorry I'm late. Sorry, Karisawa-san and Yumasaki-san."

Karisawa and Yumasaki smiled mildly at Mikado's apology as they replied:

"No problem, we have lots of time on our hands during the day anyway."

"That's right. We're pretty much free during the hours the bookstores are open."

The duo in casual clothes were much more laid-back than the somewhat tense duo in their school uniforms.

After accepting the drinks that were delivered to their box, they began to talk business with the door shut.

"So, what were you gonna ask us?"

"I...um...I know it's kind of awkward to ask you this sort of....."

Mikado exhaled deeply and paused for a moment before he could make himself continue.

"Please.....teach us how to show others around Ikebukuro."

♂♀

It happened two days ago.

New students had received their formal welcome at the opening ceremony at Raira Academy.

Mikado and Anri ended up in the same class and continued to be class representatives together.

After they were done with the brief Student Council meeting and initial self-introductions -

Mikado was running to catch up with Anri, who had left earlier than he did, when a voice called him from behind.

".....Excuse me! You're Ryuugamine-sempai, right?"

He turned his head to find a boy in a Raira uniform.

"Um...yeah, and you are...you just introduced yourself.....Aoba-kun?"

"Yes! I'm Kuronuma Aoba, first-year!"

The boy had sparkling eyes and girly features. In addition, he was short enough to be mistaken for a middle school kid or even an elementary school one.

Mikado knew that his face wasn't the most mature-looking either, but the boy right in front of him looked even younger than he had at that age.

"I was really shocked when I heard you introduce yourself! I didn't expect to meet you here, Ryuugamine-sempai!"

The boy was talking in high spirits while Mikado was left perplexed.

- Who is he?

- That's weird...have we met somewhere before?

Mikado tried desperately to remember since it would be very rude to forget someone's face even if he was your kouhai. But he had no recollection whatsoever.

Aoba smiled softly at him as if he knew what Mikado was feeling bad about and said:

"Ahh, I'm sorry. I don't think sempai has seen me before or heard my name."

"Uh, I see. Um...so why were you shocked?"

It was a natural question on Mikado's part. The boy answered cheerfully:

"Because - uh....."

He closed his mouth and checked that nobody was nearby before he lowered his voice to say:

"Sempai.....is in Dollars, right?"

".....Uhh!"

Mikado could only stare with his mouth hanging open as he heard what the boy had said.

"W - What do you mean?"

At that exact moment, Mikado's cell phone rang from inside his schoolbag.

Judging by the length of the ringtone it was a new text message.

"Uh. Finally."

The boy grinned pleasantly as he spoke.

Mikado pulled out his cell phone in haste - it was a text message sent to all Dollars members on the list.

"I'm recruiting at Raira Academy! Please keep me informed about how things are going at other schools!"

It was sent by one of the several hundreds of people on the mailing list.

As he saw the username "Young Leaf Mark"*, Mikado looked from the cell phone to the boy in front of him.

* "Aoba" is literally "green leaf" in Japanese.

"Is...that...you.....?"

"'Young Leaf Mark' is me! I think I joined around number six hundred or so. But you know how the Dollars site was suspended after that spamming incident? That's why my name didn't show up....."

"W - Why do you think I'm one of Dollars?"

The boy gave him an innocent smile as Mikado looked visibly unsettled and said:

"I don't have definite proof. But think about it...about a year ago, at Dollars' first gathering - sempai was arguing with the woman we were targeting, right? I remembered that ever since because it really got me interested!"

Dollars was a special gang that extended its territory online.

Loosely defined, it was a Color Gang except that it had too little resemblance of structure.....but its members were all over the place.

It was rumored to have clashed with the Yellow Turbans a short while ago, but somehow peace was restored all of a sudden and the heat of conflict dissipated.

If Dollars were a Color Gang, its color would probably be "colorless" or "camouflage".

That was how Dollars blended itself into this city without boasting their omnipresence with colored attire.

They communicate with each other via cell phone messages or the Internet.

Both were discreet ways of communication that made it hard to trace their real structure.

Even the high school girl or the housewife you pass by on the street could be a Dollars member -

That "suspicion" primed in peoples' minds was how Dollars was able to defend itself.

The suspicion could very well prove true, which was how Dollars made its attacks.

Such was the Color Gang named Dollars - so permeating that it spreads suspicion and fear.

Hardly anyone in the gang knew who the leader was. The identity of the founder remained in the dark.

Yet -

The mysterious founder himself was shedding cold sweat right now at his kouhai's words.

"Uhh...uhhh...I...I think you got the wrong person..."

"But the text message...?"

"Ah...ahhh, t - that's right."

"I know, you want to keep it a secret, right? Don't worry, I'm great at keeping secrets! It's like what I do!"

Aoba watched him with eyes full of innocence and respect, which rendered Mikado stiff and incapable of thinking of an answer.

In fact, Mikado did get in trouble with a certain company a year ago.

"But how come Mikado-sempai was talking to the woman that night?.....Is Mikado-sempai...some kind of big figure in Dollars?"

"No no no! There're no 'big figures' in Dollars! I'm...I'm just like everyone else!"

"Really? But still! It excites me so much to know that someone close to me is also in Dollars!"

His antics were as childish as his face was.

They probably would have looked like two brothers in middle school to anyone who did not know them. But they were both high school students.

Mikado was at a loss as to how to deal with him, but he sighed eventually and said to the kouhai as he looked around carefully:

".....I see. But it would be better if you don't talk about this at school. I'll be grateful if you can keep this a secret."

It was a somewhat cold reply, but Aoba's smile was unwavering. In fact, he went on to ask Mikado for something in exchange.

"Got it! But I also have a favor to ask of you, sempai!"

"What is it?"

"I'm not that familiar with Ikebukuro. Could you show me around sometime?"

♂♀

He talked to Anri about this right afterwards and they both came to the conclusion that they couldn't do it on their own. That was why they asked their friends - who ended up being Yumasaki and Karisawa - who knew the city better to help them out.

- Really, I wouldn't be having such a hard time if Masaomi were here.....

But Mikado was quick to erase that thought from his mind.

Kida Masaomi had always been his best friend, but he had already disappeared from Mikado's and Anri's lives.

It looked like he had been the central figure in "Yellow Turbans", the gang that pitted themselves against Dollars. After he and Mikado knew about each other's true identities, he disappeared. Mikado did not find this revelation as disturbing as Masaomi did, but thinking that maybe Masaomi had his reasons, he didn't try to dig further into his past.

- That's not good. I can't rely on Masaomi for every little thing like this. Otherwise he'll have a reason to laugh at me all he wants the next time we meet.

With these thoughts in his mind, Mikado was still waiting for Masaomi to come back.

Waiting for the day to come when they would meet each other again and Anri would be with them.

"Mikado? Mikado? Are you all right? Oi - "

"Eh....."

Mikado hastened to raise his head as his name was called.

"Are you sleepy? How about we sing some anime songs for you to repel the sleep bug?"

"Huh...eh...ahhhhhh! I - I'm sorry!"

Mikado realized that he had been too absorbed in his memories of Masaomi and the Yellow Turbans. He forced himself to switch his focus back to reality.

Yumasaki and Karisawa were more enthusiastic than he expected after they explained the situation.

They went into a heated discussion about the places they should cover when they show a young person around Ikebukuro.

Though as expected from Karisawa and Yumasaki the first things they mentioned were stores like Animate, Toranoana and Yellow Submarine, Mikado was able to rest assured as they began to mention more or less normal places to visit as well.

With these thoughts were on his mind, he saw Karisawa raise her head and make a suggestion.

"Do you want us to come with you?"

"Eh?"

"The places we're about to suggest that you visit are not all that easy to explain on paper. Wouldn't it be better if we just came with you? Also, we have no idea what your kouhai likes, so how about you let us meet him first and adjust the plan accordingly?"

"Um....."

Mikado couldn't think of a reply to that.

True, it was a wonderful suggestion, but would his completely normal kouhai be able to deal with these two?

They looked normal, but once they began to talk they sounded like ambassadors from the 2D universe - not the most endearing kind at that, either.

He had grown used to their antics, but he had no idea how Kuronuma Aoba would react.

- Anyway. It probably won't be that great a problem. Once they've talked with each other he'll see that these two are both good people.

Mikado, who had a sort of blind faith in the power of communication due to his mellow temper, nodded his head in silent agreement.

"Really? Would it be OK to ask you to come along with us?"

"Of course, we're pretty much free till the evening."

"Don't you have part-time jobs or anything?"

Karisawa looked at him surprised as he asked nervously.

"Eh? Didn't we tell you?"

"?"

"Yumacchi and I are freelancers, so we have fairly flexible hours."

"Freelancers.....?"

Mikado tilted his head confused. Karisawa sipped her oolong tea and continued to explain:

"Yeah. Dotachin is more of the specialized type. Togusacchi is living off the rent of the apartment he inherited from his parents. His brother takes care of stuff around the house and Togusacchi collects the rent. We're on good terms with them because we both have a lot of free time on our hands. But until about one year ago everyone was working a regular job except for Dotachin."

After listening to what Karisawa said, Mikado realized that he should have known that they weren't working regular jobs from the very fact that they could meet at this time in the day.

Whenever he saw the duo on the street, they simply hung around aimlessly in casual clothing. Kadota and Togusa were usually with them, but collectively they made the impression that they were either freelancers or jobless.

"I sell hand-carved jewelry online to make money. Yumacchi is something, though! ...He's um, what do you call it, an ice sculptor? Anyway, he takes orders for ice sculptures they put up at parties."

"Wow.....!"

"No no no, I'm not that good. I don't have regular contracts with hotels or anything like that, so I'm still scared that someday I'll be out of a job. But ice sculptures of ACG characters are really popular for publishing company parties and photo projects. If I can keep doing those, I'll feel like this is what I've been born to do. Someday I'll be working for Kaiyodo*!"

** Kaiyodo: Japan's largest producer of ACG merchandise.*

Yumasaki sounded somehow embarrassed. Mikado looked at the duo in awe as he listened, surprised that they really had jobs after all. Anri was staring at them with the same astonishment in her eyes, so Mikado was probably not the only one who thought they were jobless. But they would have to have pretty stable incomes to afford their daily shopping sprees at the bookstores.

Though he couldn't rule out the possibility that they were putting their food money into their books.

Mikado bowed to the duo solemnly while such thoughts lingered in his mind.

"Thanks for agreeing to help us out! I'll see you tomorrow.....!"

But his gratitude turned abruptly into regret at Yumasaki's next words -

"All right! So we'll begin with a tour of the locations that appeared in anime and manga taking place in Ikebukuro!"

♂♀

Two hours later, Ikebukuro West Gate

"It's all on us today, so feel free to sing some songs as well."

Karisawa told Mikado and Anri. Being too timid to refuse their invitation, they ended up being treated to a two-hour medley of anime songs.

Most of the songs they had never heard before in their lives. But Yumasaki and Karisawa sang them as if they had practiced singing them several hundred times.

In fact, Mikado wouldn't be surprised if they had.

They seemed particularly fond of some recent anime songs sung by Hijiribe Ruri. One of her songs they even sang separately.

Afterwards, Mikado and Anri walked and talked with the duo around West Gate before saying goodbye.

"Thank you for coming with us!"



"Mmm, no problem. I owe Karisawa-san and Yumasaki-san some thanks as well....."

"Eh? Why?"

"Some things happened....."

Mikado deliberately avoided thinking about it as he tried to think of a way to change the topic.

As he was about to ask if anything interesting happened during Spring Break -

They saw something strange.

Namely - a white gas mask.

He saw a male in a white gas mask and a white coat talking to a fairly tall white man in a corner in West Gate Park.

Though he felt like it was inappropriate to stare, he couldn't help but look at the duo from afar as he said to Anri:

"What's that white gas mask guy doing.....the foreigner right next to him isn't wearing anything of that sort, so it can't be for a gas leak, can it?"

But Anri did not answer.

Mikado, thinking that maybe she didn't catch that, turned around to find a weird look in her eyes.

Her eyes, with a shocked expression in them, were fixed where Mikado's had been a moment ago.

"Sonohara-san.....?"

"Ah...I'm sorry. I was just wondering why that guy was wearing a white gas mask...it's so weird....."

"Eh? Ah, I mean, that's right, that's really weird."

Mikado waved goodbye to Anri, who was back to smiling as usual, and began walking back home.

Anri, on the other hand, kept walking in the direction of home for a while before she -

- turned around to check that Mikado was nowhere to be found, and went back where she had come from.

♂♀

"Well...how about we find a café to sit and I'll give you the details?"

"The data you just gave me should contain all the details, da? Then socializing is pointless."

"It'd still be better if you heard it from me. Better than if you went home, checked out the data and immediately thought I was trying to trick you."

"What does that mean?"

It was impossible to read the expressions of the two men engaged in this conversation, albeit for different reasons.

The tall Caucasian's face was just literally expressionless.

The Japanese guy's face was concealed behind a gas mask.

Hard to imagine how anybody would want to approach these two guys; yet Anri kept walking towards them in small timid steps.

Suddenly - as if having sensed her presence, the Caucasian guy silently turned around and looked at Anri, a gentle smile on his face.

"Are you looking for something, beautiful little girl?"

The Caucasian man was obviously a foreigner, but his Japanese was flawless.

Anri froze at the aura of danger she sensed from the man. But it would defeat her purpose altogether if she just turned and ran at this point. She nodded to the white male at this thought and began to talk to the man in the gas mask.

"Um...actually...we um...hello..."

Anri regretted now realizing that she didn't even know the man's name.

But this man, when talking to Celty last month, had said to her, "You can't be...the daughter of the Sonoharas who ran the antique store, can you?" and she had remembered him ever since.

It was hard to mistake him for anybody else with that gas mask, anyway.

He seemed to have remembered who Anri was after she nodded at him.

The man in the gas mask eyed the Caucasian male; after the latter had said "If it's just an exchange of pleasantries, go ahead." he began to talk to her from behind the gas mask.

"You're the daughter of the Sonoharas who ran the antique store, aren't you? Urgh, I'm sorry you had to see me in such a shameful state last time we met."

"Sorry...did you know my parents?"

".....Sort of. Actually, now that you mention it...right, I sort of know your katana as well."

".....!"

A "sound" came from Anri's right arm.

It was the sound Anri alone could hear, one that originated from deep within her brain.

- 【Look, isn't this my former owner?】

The "voice" was neither a physical nor a psychological one. For once, it did not whisper its curses incessantly as if it were a record playing at the back of Anri's head, but instead said something that made sense.

- 【Though he didn't let me love a single human - he just used me to cut the soul of some strange monster abroad.】

♂♀

Just like Ryuugamine Mikado kept the secret that he was the founder of Dollars -

Or like how Kida Masaomi who was seriously bothered by his other identity as the leader of the Yellow Turbans -

Sonohara Anri had a blade called "the past" sheathed inside her body.

"Saika" -

It was an existence without a form.

It was a consciousness that whispered its curses to Sonohara Anri from inside her right arm.

Had Anri mentioned it to the doctors, they would probably think that she herself was the reason she was hearing things. But that voice did not come from her own consciousness or her brain.

It was simply an existence that couldn't be explained with physical or psychological knowledge.

The demon blade, "Saika", lay dormant within Sonohara Anri's body and was capable of materializing into a katana at will.

Anri was the central figure behind "Ripper Night", which made headlines some time ago, and the Slasher incidents several months back. But Anri herself was not the Slasher - the Slashers were the children Saika had made in the past.

The demon blade that referred to herself as "Saika" wanted to prove that she was capable of loving and having children with humans - except that the way she had "children" was by invading her victim's heart and assimilating her host's consciousness with its own. In short, it was like cursing.

Before she used Anri as her host, she had hurt a girl. It turned out that the "child" she planted in the girl's heart began to seek human love like its "mother" - and things began to get out of her control, culminating in the "Ripper Night".

The incident ended when Anri gained control over all the "children".

She had restored the victims' own consciousness after the Slasher incident had come to an end. The only part about their memories she meddled with was the part about how they had become Slashers.

In other words, every victim would answer "I don't remember what the Slasher looked like" if asked.

But the incident nevertheless became the reason Yellow Turbans pitted themselves against Dollars. Anri, too, was embroiled in the conflict between her best friends without realizing what had happened.

♂♀

Although after these happenings she had accepted the fact that Saika was in her, deep in her heart Anri was still not able to stomach that fact.

For one thing, Saika was one of the most primary reasons her parents were dead. But to Anri, it was unsettling enough just to have to live with an existence that knew exactly what she was like.

Saika's "voice" had returned to normal and was now repeatedly whispering her "I love you"-s. After the "Ripper Night", Anri had occasionally heard her say things that actually made sense like what she had just said. Anri had to conclude that Saika was not lying.

She inhaled silently, keeping her guard as she went on to ask the male in the gas mask:

"How...how much do you know...exactly?"

"Hmm. To answer your question: I know some things about you. Is that an acceptable

"But we're talking about important business. I'll treat you to dinner to make up for this."

While saying things that sounded as if he were trying to pick her up, the male nodded silently as he placed himself between Anri and Shingen.

"Ah...I see. I'm really sorry."

Anri etched the white male's face onto her memory before turning slowly around to leave.

Do not forget this face.

Both her instinct and her rational thoughts were warning her.

Anri turned around for the last time at the crossing that would lead her to the overpass.

The Caucasian male was still looking at her.

Anri carefully remembered every single detail of his features as she felt something trickle down her spine.

But actually - it would be the last time Anri ever saw this face.

Because -

The Caucasian male would be beaten up by Shizuo with a park bench several hours later. Even if Anri did see him again, he would have looked like another person.

♂♀

Night, an apartment in Ikebukuro

"It's scary to think that they still haven't caught 'Hollywood'..."

The boy was watching TV and muttering to himself in a cheap apartment close to the station.

Mikado planned on watching TV all day since he had nothing else to do. He squinted at the screen which was showing the news.

The undisputed focus of every recent headline was the mysterious serial killings.

Although the nickname was not used on TV, the magazines and the online communities

have long since been referring to the killer as "Hollywood".

The killings took place in Tokyo, but Mikado felt as if they were happening in a distant country the first time he heard about them on TV.

But once he got used to referring to the killer as "Hollywood" online, he began to talk to his chat room friends about it and look up information web pages on the search for "Hollywood", and he felt a definite fear for the bone-chilling killer as well as a tint of curiosity.

Who exactly is this mysterious killing monster?

The general public was more interested in knowing the true identity of the mysterious "Black Rider", but Mikado, who knew her identity already, was more interested in "Hollywood", whose identity still eluded everyone.

But news about "Hollywood" was too dark for his mood after having just seen Anri.

Mikado thought as he murmured with the remote control in his hand:

"Is there nothing more pleasant on the news?"

As he switched between channels he saw the report about how Hanejima Yuuhei's photo book sold over 20,000 copies in the first week. The young man whose incredibly good-looking face appeared on the screen was certainly someone he would feel ashamed to stand next to.

"That's so cool...20,000 copies, 3,000 yen each...that would be six million yen just in royalties even if he only gets 10%...and his new movie is being talked about way before its release. This guy is simply ultra-cool....."

He could beat him in nothing whatsoever.

Mikado sighed in resignation as he watched the handsome, young, Superman-like celebrity on TV.

- Speaking of which...

- This Yuuhei guy kind of reminds me of someone I know.....

Every time he saw this idol on screen, the same question would surface in his mind. After that Mikado continued to look for more pleasant news on TV.

As every channel proceeded to air the weather report, he began to use the Internet to check the TV schedule.

It was April, the end-of-season period for TV - so not surprisingly, almost every channel had specials scheduled for the slots formerly reserved for TV series.

"Ikebukuro: A Hundred Days at the War Front! Live Commentary of the Dark Side of the Evil Capital, Ikebukuro!"

- The Evil Capital...? That was a little mean.....

But it would have been a lie to say that it did not interest him.

Mikado hesitated for a moment, but convinced himself to watch it thinking that maybe he would see people he knew on TV since it was live commentary.

- Which he did.

But it was certainly not the "people he knew" he had expected to see.

An hour later -

The pitch-black shadow making its flight away from the White Motorbike appeared on the screen before Mikado's eyes.

"Celty-san....."

Mikado's mouth hung open at the unmistakable figure.

He turned his gaze from the TV towards the window.

He lived far away from where the scene was being shot, so there was no way that he could see her from this distance.

Nevertheless, he thought vaguely that maybe he would be able to hear something if he tried hard enough - which was more or less impossible as well.

As he was about to try, Celty had conjured the black wings and begun to glide through the night like a Magic Thief.

"Is she gonna be...alright...? Should I try to do something for her with...Dollars?"

The boy was as pure as pure could be. As the screen switched back to the studio he began to feel genuinely concerned for the "monster" he would never have known if not for a twist of fate.

"But since it's Celty-san...she'll probably come up with something herself?"

Mikado logged onto a certain online chat room as the thoughts of the Headless Rider,

who was also a Dollars member, lingered on his mind.

Somewhere in his heart he was also anxious about, but still looking forward to, the tour of Ikebukuro he was going to give the evening of the next day.

CHATROOM

Tanaka Taro-san has joined the chat.

Tanaka Taro

Eh? Why is nobody online?

Tanaka Taro

I'll come back in a couple of hours.

Tanaka Taro-san has left the chat.

No one is in the chat room right now.

Bakyura-san has joined the chat.

Bakyura

Hmm?

Bakyura

Looks like no one's here?

Bakyura

Awesome,

Bakyura

that means I can doodle all I want on this tabula rasa.

Bakyura

Listen, Johnny,

Bakyura

back when I was in elementary school,

Bakyura

a girl used to steal my recorder and blow it.

Bakyura

When I caught her blowing it,

Bakyura

I told her that if she wanted me to keep the secret -

Bakyura

"The recorder you want to blow should be the one on my face, don't you think?"

Bakyura

So she began to lick my whistle instead.

Bakyura

Other boys saw us at it so they blew raspberries at us.

Bakyura

HAHAHA,

Bakyura

Since it's a real story it counts as an American joke!

Bakyura

Good,

Bakyura

Now I'll just have to erase the chat log,

Bakyura

Now I'll count to three -

Saika-san has joined the chat.

Bakyura

1.

Saika

Good evening

Bakyura

2.

Bakyura
Ehhh!

Bakyura
Good evening.

Tanaka Taro-san has joined the chat.

Tanaka Taro
Good evening.

Tanaka Taro
Bakyura-san, what are you doing?

Bakyura
Good...eve...ning.....

Bakyura
Laugh.

Bakyura
Everybody, why not just laugh at me!

Tanaka Taro
AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

Bakyura
You really laughed.....

Kyo-san has joined the chat.

Mai-san has joined the chat.

Kyo
I don't feel enthusiastic personally about laughing at someone I've only just met...but since it's what that person wants, I feel like I should laugh as if there's no tomorrow if I want to qualify as a good human being. So let me laugh at you like there's no tomorrow, as God tells me to. Here -

Mai
(LOL)

Kyo

YAHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! AH AH, AH AH, AH AH AH!
PFUUU....PFUUUU...YAH AH! YAHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! AH-
HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! AH AH AH AH! AH AH AH AH! STOP
IT.....S - T - O - P - I - T! I CAN'T BREATHE! I REALLY CAN'T BREATHE...STOP
IT.....SERIOUSLY! LET ME LIVE
AHHHHHHH....EH...EH...AH AH...YAH AH...YAHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

Mai

(LOL)

Bakyura

Good evening.....

Bakyura

Eh?

Bakyura

Who are you.....

Bakyura

Uwah, I don't know whether to feel anger or despair at the way you laughed at me!

Tanaka Taro

Good evening.

Tanaka Taro

Have we met before?

Saika

Good evening

Kyo

I'm really sorry. I don't believe we've met any of you before. We will be joining your chat from today onwards so we beg you to remember us. My name is Kyo. I was planning on exchanging pleasantries with you, but it felt kind of rude to Bakyura-san if I were to do so when I'm laughing at his desperate American joke. So this is how it turned out.

Mai

I'm Mai.

Bakyura

Somehow your personality reminds me of Kanra-san.

Mai

I'm sorry.

Bakyura

No, I didn't mean you.

Tanaka Taro

Nice to meet you!

Kyo

Nice to meet you too. Speaking of which, um...if Bakyura-san is a female, I would really be confused as to how to react. If two females are to blow the same clarinet...and kind of kiss that way...it would have been just beautiful and elegant and worthy of a place in my permanent memory. Should I say dreamy or unrivaled? Anyway, that's how I would feel.

Mai

So erotic!

Bakyura

You're free to picture me any way you want.

Tanaka Taro

God, this place's already got more personality going around than it can handle.....

Saika

Nice to meet you

Bakyura

Hey, did you guys watch the special report a couple of hours ago?

Tanaka Taro

Ah, the one about Ikebukuro?

Bakyura

That's right.

Saika

Did something happen

Tanaka Taro

They captured the Headless Rider on film with their video camera.

Kyo

Ahh, small world. We watched that report a while ago and thought if we went out we might still be able to see the Headless Rider with our own eyes. We've only just got back. It was a pity that we didn't witness the living urban legend boldly gliding through the sky. But it was an exhilarating experience just to be walking in the darkness with such high

hopes in our hearts.

Mai

Too bad.

Tanaka Taro

Ah, so do you live in Ikebukuro as well?

Tanaka Taro

Looks like everyone in this chat room lives in either Ikebukuro or Shinjuku.

Tanaka Taro

So make yourselves at home here.

Kyo

Tanaka Taro-san, I feel so grateful. An insignificant being like me, who keeps saying things that shock everyone, is like a water stain on a grain of sand in the vast sea that is the Internet. Yet you say such gentle things to me that I almost feel like I'm in love with you. Only on the Internet, though.

Mai

Thank you.

Mai

I like you.

Tanaka Taro

I really don't know what to make of that lol

Bakyura

Still feels like Kanra-san's self-acting to me.

Saika

What is self-acting

Bakyura

It means to pull pranks on people and stalk them.

Tanaka Taro

Anyway, I'm going to show someone around Ikebukuro and at the same time will be shown around Ikebukuro by someone myself.

Tanaka Taro

I'm still new in this city, so I'll have lots to learn from you.

Kyo

What a coincidence. We're planning to walk around Ikebukuro tomorrow as well. Maybe we'll run into each other and even start fighting.

Mai

We're fighting?

Tanaka Taro

If that happens, please go easy on me lol

The next day, Animate Central, Ikebukuro

If you walk from the crossing situated west to the Sunshine building to Route 254 -

You'll be on the "Girls' Road", so called because many stores that sold doujinshi and similar merchandise were located on it.

Two males and a female were walking on this road on a sunny afternoon.

The female was Karisawa, and one of the males was Yumasaki.

The other was Kadota Kyohei, their guardian figure. He pulled his knit cap lower as he listened to the other two's dialogue.

Or, to be exact, less than half of it since the majority of their dialogue consisted of things he couldn't understand.

"That's why I was saying~ exchanging opinions on anime is great, isn't it? Putting forward opinions different from other peoples' is also in their interest. But if one starts saying 'If you don't realize what's great about this anime, just go back to your pantsu anime.' - that's the worst possible way to try to say that the anime you like is good. In fact, you would also be insulting the anime you do like if you said things like that!"

"That's right! I remember someone saying that on the official discussion board of *Gun=Jaws**. I know he was just mad because others said bad things about the show he loved, but that's no excuse to insult other shows."

* *Gun=Jaws*: a made-up anime Narita wrote an "original novel" (which only consisted of a prologue) for on April 1st, 2009.

"Exactly! I enjoy hardcore shounen stuff where all the characters are male, but I also like moe shows with lots of panty-shots and tits awahhhhhh!?"

"Yumacchi, you dumbass!"

Yumasaki stared at Karisawa perplexed as she hit his face with her palm.

"Wha - what are you doing, Karisawa-san?!"

"It's so misleading to associate 'moe' with only panties and tits! 'Moe' is in the soul of the viewer! Therefore, all show in the world can be 'moe shows' - even traditional Japanese paintings of birds and beasts are moe paintings, but Yumacchi, you - "

"T - That's not what I meant! I mentioned panties when I said moe just as a figure of speech, in which moe is defined as the romantic imagination of - "

" - If you see things the same way I do, you'll know that every male character in *Gun Jaws* is moe -

" - I think Karisawa-san got a lot of things wrong - "

" - Moe - moe* - moe - MOE - MOE - "

" - Moe - MOEMOE? - moe - "

** Moe: here Karisawa and Yumasaki alternate between the kanji for "burning" and "moe" (which are both pronounced "moe"). "Burning" is usually used to describe a shounen-manga character while "moe" is conventionally associated with bishoujo and, of course, panty shots.*

As their unstoppable dialogue entered the stage of stalemate, the male who had kept silent all along opened his mouth to say:

"Please, you two...save your moemoe talk for when we're off the busiest streets of the city."

Kadota sighed deeply as his right palm made contact with his forehead.

The contents of their dialogue never seemed to change whether in the warmth of April or in the chill of winter. The only thing that changed was probably the titles of the anime and manga they mentioned.

"Hey, you two. Can't you stop talking about 2D stuff for a while?"

"Got it."

"Sure."

Kadota was surprised to see them agree to do it. Anyway, he thought, that probably means they'll be silent for a while -

"Speaking of which, I feel like the recent figures by the designer Youen Zetsumu have even more erotic waistlines than before!"

"Nah nah nah, the best thing about that designer's work is the slightly protruding lines on the abdomen. The ribs of his slimmer characters are the ultimate moe!"

Kadota's angry voice resounded in the space they were in as he heard the completely unchanging dialogue.

"You two.....didn't I just tell you to stop?"

Yumasaki and Karisawa looked at the raging Kadota with flustered faces and said:

"Ehhh!? But figurines are 3D, aren't they?"

"That's not right, Karisawa-san! Figurines are 2.5D!"

".....It's hard to tell if I'm really in Japan sometimes when I'm with you guys....."

Kadota said in a tone of resignation as he continued to head for their destination, Tokyu Hands.

After making a turn and arriving at a less crowded street, he asked the duo walking after him:

"So are you going to show Mikado and the other kids around the stores in that area?"

"That's right. Wanna come with us, Dotachin?"

"I'll pass. I'd just scare them if I went."

"Really? I think Dotachin would look like a top student if you take that cap off and comb your hair forwards."

Kadota ignored Karisawa's teasing and kept walking in silence.

However, they saw something unusual ahead of them -

"That's what I was saying~ we just wanna hear about it. Ne, you know about the Black Motorbike, don't you?"

"You want money too, don't you little girl? But we want money as well. Share it with us."

"How about you invest on us with your pocket money? If we get that ten million yen we'll pay you back with our bodies. With the interest."

"We're not that much older than you are. It's a very ecological way to do it, I say. Just give it to us for free."

The males who were making their purpose very obvious had two high school girls cornered. Every one of them looked fat and rude and wore bousouzoku clothes - one of them even wore a striped tokko-fuku.

"I got it now! You are the Black Motorbike, aren't you?"

"That's right~"

"That's just awesome."

"So play with us till we feel like it's worth ten million yen."

Even the way they were picking on the two girls sounded vulgar and cliché. They were an eyesore on this otherwise peaceful street.

Kadota looked at the men and muttered to himself:

".....I didn't know such rowdy delinquents still existed."

The trio shook their heads and continued walking.

The men, oblivious to what was happening behind their backs, were still advancing on the two girls.

"Speaking of which, you two must be pretty rich if you're playing around on this street, aren't you?"

"That pisses me off! That really pisses me off!"

"Are you gonna say anything at all? Say something! Say it!"

"Here, here, give them a break. Look, they're scared as it is. Sorry. Where are you headed? We'll drive you to make up for it. Does that sound good to you?"

Kadota said as the delinquents rambled on.

♂♀

Several hours later, in front of the Tokyu Hands:

At Raira Academy, students got afternoons off on the first and the last few days of the semester.

It was meant to make the transition into and out of the semester easier for the students. But the students usually don't give it any more thought than "Lucky! Afternoon off!" which was more or less the school's intention, anyway.

The streets were filled with Raira's uniform color after the morning classes had ended.

Casual attire was allowed at Raira, but once the students blended into the crowds on the street, only the ones in uniforms stood out like figures embossed on a multicolor background - like a Color Gang.

Mikado walked leisurely in his Raira uniform.

Anri and his kouhai were waiting for him when he arrived at the meeting spot.

"Ah...eh? You're here already? I'm sorry, did you wait for a long time?"

"No, I only just got here."

"Me too."

Though he felt like Anri and Aoba were just saying it to make him feel better, it did sound like they hadn't had time to talk with each other yet.

So maybe they weren't there for very long - he thought as he greeted them. Aoba bowed to Anri.

"I'm really sorry to take up so much of your precious time because of my childish request....."

"Don't mind that. We have free time on our hands."

Anri nodded in agreement to what Mikado had just said.

After the innocent-looking kouhai had thanked his sempais for their hospitality -

He raised a question with interest:

"Is Sonohara-sempai dating Ryuugamine-sempai?"

Time seemed to have stopped between the two.

But now that Mikado thought about it, it was something one would naturally assume if

they had never seen them before.

Aoba had asked Mikado to show him around Ikebukuro, and it was only reasonable that he did not expect Anri to also show up. So the only conclusion would be that they were either boyfriend and girlfriend or something of the sort.

But Mikado was visibly embarrassed at Aoba's question. Anri also lowered her head, blushing.

Aoba, unsure whether to take that for a yes or no, tilted his head sideways and tried again:

"So you're not dating?"

"No...no no no...it's not like that...we're just...um...friends! We're friends!"

"I see~ so Sonohara-sempai is still single? Is there any way I can make it into the waitlist?"

"What.....?"

His kouhai had said something shocking with ease. Mikado couldn't help but look at him in awe.

- With such incredible ease.....!

- And in a more natural manner than Masaomi would have managed, too!

Mikado felt his lips tremble. He tried to say something - but nothing came out.

Losing to his kouhai made him feel miserable, but he was also jealous of his kouhai's straightforward way of confessing to females he liked.

The kouhai, however, looked at his frozen sempai who had such thoughts racing on his mind and said in a troubled tone:

"U - Um, Ryuugamine-sempai.....I was just kidding."

"Eh?"

"So don't look at me as if you're despairing about everything in the world...I makes me feel very troubled."

".....Am...am I looking at you like that?"

Mikado blushed harder out of shame and squinted at Anri's direction.

As expected of her, Anri kept her head low as the two of them talked.

They looked like two elementary students; but the one who looked most like an elementary student smiled and said to Mikado:

"I'm so glad! I thought sempai would be scary since sempai is in Dollars and everything...it's so nice to know that there are people like sempai in Dollars, too!"

"Really? I'm glad you feel that way....."

- Huh? Was that a compliment?

Mikado could only laugh drily to conceal his confusion since he couldn't tell if Aoba was simply being sarcastic.

Aoba, after seeing Mikado's reaction, asked with renewed curiosity:

"Um...so...the people who are going to come with us, are they in Dollars as well?"

"That's right...but don't worry, they're not scary."

- Well, they are at some level.

Mikado looked around for Yumasaki and Karisawa - their guides for the evening - as he recalled the nonstop dialogue between the two.

But the people who were walking towards them weren't Yumasaki and Karisawa.

"Excuse us for a minute, would you?"

"We wish you all the happiness in the world!"

Instead, two males over 180 centimeters tall popped out of thin air and sandwiched Mikado.

"...!? ...? Are...are you looking for anything?"

"Shut up. Let's check out your face."

The tall men grabbed Mikado's hair and ignored his nervous question. They continued to say in cold voices:

"Is he the one?"

"E - X - A - C - T - L - Y! Bingo Pachinko!"

Though there was no way to know what they had just bingo-ed, the men looked at each other cheerfully.

Their lips were pierced, their teeth uneven and blackened from smoking. Mikado believed that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but the appearance of these two men seemed pretty indicative of their personality - he would hardly guess that they were pacifists.

The sudden turn of things left Aoba and Anri at a loss as to what to do. The men did not seem to be paying attention to them. Instead they smirked lewdly and pressed their faces, which smelt of cigarettes, closer to Mikado:

"You~you were there, right? You were there a while back."

"W - where, sorry...?"

"Some time ago, remember~? You were there, right? When Kadota and his dogs were beating us up, you were there in the abandoned factory with the Black Motorbike, weren't you? Argh?"

"Or did you not notice just because we don't have yellow cloths on our arms or anything?"

".....Urgh!"

Mikado began to tremble at the mention of "yellow cloths".

".....You are....."

- Former members of the "Yellow Turbans".....

Though they were "Yellow Turbans", they weren't part of the group that gathered around Masaomi when the gang was founded.

These men were former members of "Blue Square" who joined the Yellow Turbans to take over the gang - except that they in turn were defeated by Kadota and other Dollars members who infiltrated the Yellow Turbans.

"But whatever, we don't give a shit why you were there."

"But we do want the ten million yen. Got it?"

Ten million yen.

At the mention of that Mikado was able to piece the jigsaw puzzle in his heart.

So they were not here to take revenge against Mikado, a Dollars member -

"You know where that Black Motorbike lives, right? Tell us!"

"Anyway~ guess we'll be keeping your cell phone for a while. You'll at least have his number or something, right?"

The men grabbed Mikado's schoolbag from him and began to ransack its contents.

"Wait! Please stop!"

"Shut up!"

Mikado wanted to fight back, but the disparity in their physical strength was absolute. He was not a master of any martial art that would have given him some advantage, either.

He could think of no way to stop the two 180-cm men, and was sure that his cell phone would end up being robbed when -

"Hey~ Mikado."

An even taller shadow appeared from behind the men's backs.

"!?"

"You...what are you playing at....."

It was a formidable-looking black man in a white T-shirt.

Mikado didn't realize immediately who that was because he was not in his usual Japanese cook clothes, but it didn't take long for him to figure out. He was sort of a man of legends in this neighborhood.

"Simon-san!"

"What's up? Fighting, is not good. Stomach would be hungry. Today, sushi is not open. So if you fight, you die from hungry~"

"You...bastard....let go....."

"Can't...can't move....."

Though Simon's hands were only on their shoulders, the two men felt as if they were deep in the sea - the pressure was threatening to crush them from all sides, and they couldn't even move a finger.

Simon, who was exerting such overwhelming pressure on the two men, was still saying with ease:

"Come, get your schoolbag, sessha* is going to take care of these people, go ahead without me~"

** Sessha: a first-person pronoun used exclusively by samurai in the old times. Simon probably picked up this word from popular TV series that portray the events of that era.*

Mikado had no idea which TV series he picked up these lines from. His pronunciation was still weird, but it sounded reassuring nevertheless.

It was a typical "death flag" line, but when Simon was the one saying it, it felt like a death flag for the other party instead.

"B - But, Simon-san....."

"Can't fight when you're with a girl, thirty-six sceneries of Fugaku, you run away, OK, go go~"

"T - Thank you! I'll come have sushi with everyone next time!"

"Oh~ thank you~ then, I'll let you pay the real prices in return~"

Upon hearing the horribly and eerily wrong Japanese Mikado picked up his schoolbag and took Aoba and Anri's hands in his.

As they began to run along the Ikebukuro street, Mikado lowered his head to apologize to Anri and his kouhai:

"S - Sorry! I didn't mean to get you into trouble.....!"

"No...actually...sempai was the only one in real trouble..."

Though what Aoba said made sense, Mikado still couldn't help but feel that in addition to giving him unnecessary shock, he had also exposed a very shameful side of himself in front of his kouhai.

The first kouhai he ever had in high school.

Did the respect in Aoba's eyes send him over the top? Was he being too cocky?

But there was no time for him to recall everything he did even if there was time to regret.

Because -

Men were running in their direction from every alleyway in sight as if they had communicated via cell phones.

"Oi, what about Shinji and the other guy....."

"Don't even try to save them! We'd have no chance against Simon even if we ganged up on him! Plus, if we tried to fight there, Shizuo would show up!"

The youths shouted as they chased after Mikado and the other two.

If they kept up their speed, they would catch up with them in less than twenty seconds.

But - they were really not in the best of luck while Mikado and the other two were, because the people they had been waiting for had come.

"Ehhh!?"

Mikado screamed as the van came to a halt in front of him thinking that it was another group of people after them.

But as soon as he saw the man sitting in the navigator's seat, he broke into a smile -

"K - Kadota-san!"

The next second, Karisawa poked her head out of the van and shouted at them:

"Why are you being chased?Anyway, hurry up and get in the van!"

It was so close.

Mikado, Anri and Aoba succeeded in getting into the van and shutting the door just as the delinquents were about to get them.

Togusa started the engine at almost the exact moment.

One of the delinquents reached out for the door on the navigator's side -

Kadota swung his fist at him and silenced him instantly.

"C - C - Can't believe we're safe!"

"No problem no problem. Sorry for being late by the way~"

Karisawa said, smiling kindly.

The van was surprisingly crowded. At the back sat Mikado, Anri and Aoba as well as

Yumasaki and Karisawa, and - two girls whom Mikado didn't recall meeting before.

The girls sitting at the back of the van had the same features except that one was wearing glasses and the other was not; they were probably twins.

"Uh...what - what are you doing here?"

The shocked voice came from Kuronuma Aoba.

- Do you know them?

Just as Mikado was about to ask -

Heavy noises were coming from the side of the van as horns sounded somewhat too loudly outside.

"Screw it, did they already find us...?"

Mikado looked around nervously as he heard the driver spit.

He thought it would be the former Yellow Turbans who caught up with them on bikes, but from the darkened van window he saw a group of men in striped tokko-fukus on motorbikes.

"Stand still!"

"You want us to burn you with gasoline?"

"Oi, where's our reinforcement?"

"They said they had found the Black Motorbike so they're not coming! Actually they told us to go over and help them!"

The men on the motorbikes that surrounded the van kept yelling things at each other, but it was impossible for Mikado to hear what they had said.

"W - What exactly is going on? Why are they...?"

"Well...I have some bad news for you. You just escaped from one misfortune, but you're now knee deep in another. How incredibly sad. The world we're in right now is as filled with unrest as a certain Academy City where they study superpowers*. Please wait patiently until...Chapter Someone Arrives and Destroys the Distasteful Virtual Reality with Her Right Hand - !"

* A Railgun/Index *reference*.

"I have no idea what you're talking about....."

"Pay attention when you still can. Do you know any doctor who looks like a frog? If you do, we have an additional 10% chance of surviving. Ah, if we're going for frogs, Hakusanmei-kun is also fine!"

Yumasaki continued to say things that did little save for cause confusion. Mikado gave up on communicating with him and turned towards Kadota in the navigator's seat instead.

Kadota looked back at Mikado in the rear mirror and averted his gaze with an apologetic look before muttering:

"We...have our reasons...sorry..."

"Eh...ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Their tour of Ikebukuro formally began with this completely unexpected turn of events for the thrilling.

The boys and girls were forcibly taken for a ride in this Death Race with no destination in sight.

They could not predict what was going to happen next - or didn't want to even if they could -

And the neigh of a headless horse reached their eardrums from far ahead -



DR 12!
RR 34!
No. 0-28 Ryotgo-Narita

3章 chapter003

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若姫倶楽部『世界で一番火照い春！ 女子高生達のエロティカルターミナル、池袋！』

CHAPTER 3

YOUNG PRINCESSES' CLUB "THE HOTTEST SPRING ON EARTH! IKEBUKURO, THE EROTIC TERMINAL OF HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS!"



"Erotically wet blackboard erasers! Never-ending after-school 'lessons' on the street! Ikebukuro, the Dangerous Horizon of Tokyo filled with the aroma of Shining Rose -

High school girls, elegant and lonesome eagles out and about to cure your long-neglected illness called desire!

Our scouts spotted the legendary 'Old Fairy' among these girls who tread the borderline between passion and destruction!"

Those were the headlines on the cover of the adult magazine, "Young Girls' Club".

Though its target audience appeared to be the city's youngsters and maybe some older perverts, the magazine was increasingly headed in the direction of the bizarre and maniac, which made it a hot topic on its own.

On the cover a woman obviously over twenty years old was posing suggestively in a sailor uniform, with several ofudas* pasted to her flawless feet.

** Ofuda: a paper talisman issued by a Shinto shrine.*

Certain parts of her body, of course, were also covered with ofudas if you turn to the first colored page. It's hard to decide whether it was supposed to be erotic.

To read an adult magazine in a crowded classroom - especially with girls around - was bold enough an act in itself, not to mention one with such a peculiar orientation.

Yet there she was, sitting in one of the first-year classrooms in Raira Academy, browsing the magazine quite openly on her desk.

"Hmm~ Ahh~ Oops~ How naughty! I like that. What a smoking body."

The girl in question was tilting her chair backwards and giggling to herself - in a mostly black sailor uniform that differed from the standard color at Raira Academy.

She was wearing glasses and no make-up; her laughter as clear as a bell.

In almost every way, she looked like your typical liberal arts girl who would be perched in a chair reading Natsume Souseki or Dazai Osamu in the library.

"Ahhh - how sweet. I'd wanna be like that. How do you make your breasts bigger? Milk? With milk? Would rubbing milk into your breasts make them bigger? What do you think?"

With a translucent smile the bespectacled girl asked the boy sitting next to her.

The boy blushed hard in a "how would I know" sort of way, taking furtive looks at the girl every now and then while napping on his own desk.

They both wore glasses - but this girl was a completely different type from Sonohara Anri.

Anri was more mature, with a dark side to her life. This girl, on the other hand, had eyes that juggled schemes and conspiracies behind those two simple pieces of glass, yet still gave off an innocent and upbeat vibe.

Not to mention she was happily browsing porn.

Black skirt matched with a studious pair of glasses.

Nobody would have expected her to even produce that kind of magazine from her backpack.

But there she was, checking out the colored pages with an ever-so-translucent smile, talking to herself and every now and then to the boys around her.

Barely thirty minutes into knowing this girl, the boys in this class were already looking troubled.

♂♀

School opening day at Raira Academy

Raira Academy was a co-ed private school in South Ikebukuro.

Until several years ago the school was called by another name; after merging with another high school nearby, however, the school began to take the form it is in today.

The campus was not big, but the students did not feel confined since the architecture

design made the best possible use of the limited space available. Students living in the suburbs of Tokyo could commute easily since the school was close to the Ikebukuro Station. As the school's popularity grew, it was increasingly harder to get into. Rumor had it that before the merging the school was a pretty bad one swarming with delinquents, but their era had long since passed.

On the taller school buildings one could look over the view that surrounded the school, but it was nothing compared to what one saw from the sixty-story building standing right next to the school.

On the other side there was the Zoushigaya Cemetery, giving off a neglected vibe despite being situated in central Tokyo.

But that vibe dissipated when students gathered; their youth and energy turned this place into an oasis in the metropolis.

Self-introduction was usually the first thing they did as a class after the school's opening ceremony -

And there were invariably students who manage to stand out.

The flirtatious ones, for instance, would appear in almost every classroom.

They would usually try to be funny, and either get accepted as the life of the class, or have to sit down embarrassed on the first day of school, or not notice that they should be embarrassed.

These people stand out because of their personalities; there would of course also be people who stand out because of the way they look.

Others stand out because they stutter or bite their tongues when trying to introduce themselves, making a clumsy impression. In short, people stand out for all sorts of reasons.

This was when "first impressions" were formed like a sturdy outer wall in everyone's hearts. The walls were silently being erected accompanied with every shade of emotion.

Because of the way the school was organized, few people were sorted into the same class as their friends they knew from middle school or before. If you were not a student who graduated from Raira Middle School, you would be lucky to see one or two people you knew in the same class as you.

The "first impression" was an especially heavy mask to have to wear if one was aware that this class would probably be the basis of one's interpersonal relationships for one year, three years, or even a lifetime.

Everyone knew not to judge a book by its cover; it wasn't much help unless you possessed the ability to see through the cover right away. Moreover, it was impossible that anyone would assume others could see through their own cover.

Therefore the first impressions would end up being the deciding factor in the formation of student groups, in who would have lunch with whom, and in the reshuffling of classes next year.

In other words, the self-introductions on the first day were a rite of judgment - or a test - of one's adaptability to the class one was sorted into.

However, there were two students who apparently did not "read the air" - it was hard to tell whether they even realized the importance of these self-introductions.

♂♀

One of them was a girl wearing glasses who made her appearance in Class 1-B.

"My name's Orihara Mairu! Ori as in origami, Hara as in fields of grass, Mai-Ru as in losing yourself in a dance. Nice to meet you all! I like reading encyclopedias and manga and adult magazines!"

The only surprising part of this self-introduction was its last sentence, but most would just dismiss it as a joke. Her black sailor uniform did make her stand out, however, among a sea of the standard green.

But what she said immediately afterwards made everybody gasp.

"I'm bi, both platonically and sexually! But all slots are full for males as of present, so don't even bother trying! I can however take any number of girls, so keep that in mind when you're asking me out!"

♂♀

The other oddball presented herself in Class 1-C, a girl whose appearance stood out naturally as well.

"I'm, ...Orihara...Kururi."

The fact that she wore a gymnastic suit to her school opening was enough to draw attention.

True, at Raira Academy you could technically wear anything you like to the school

opening, but most people would just go with uniforms or casual suits.

Yet this girl picked a gymnastic suit.

The head teacher asked her as she was about to sit back down:

"Is there anything else you'd like to say?"

"No (Nothing) ..."

The girl replied in a hardly audible voice and sat back into her seat.

The thin fabric accentuated the sheer size of her breasts. The obvious contrast between her curves and the slenderness of her limbs was enough to direct the gazes of all the males in the class toward her body.

But the boys, too, would have second thoughts about a girl attending her first day of school in a gymnastic suit. So none of them actually stared at Kururi's body until they received sharp looks from the rest of the girls.

A healthy-looking body in a healthy-looking gymnastic suit.

Yet there was nothing looking even remotely healthy or upbeat about her decidedly dark expression.

Kuronuma Aoba, a boy sitting next to her, let his thoughts wonder as he looked at the weirdly-dressed girl.

- Looks like she's a melancholic. But why that gymnastic suit?

But the thoughts stopped there. He was just feeling puzzled like everyone else.

Turning around to look at other students, he noticed boys who stared at her curiously like himself, and girls looking as if she was a revolting sight to them.



- Whatever. As long as no one bullies her.

Aoba took on a nonchalant attitude and turned his gaze to the next person making a self-introduction.

As did most other students.

- There's an oddball in this class.

That was where they decided to leave things and focus instead on other people's self-introductions.

♂♀

Since they were in different classes, however, no one had noticed at this point that the two oddball girls in Classes 1-B and 1-C had almost the exact same facial and bodily features, except for the glasses, hairstyle, and bust size.

Moreover, the fact that they both had the surname "Orihara" -

- rang an alarming bell among the older teachers who had been at Raira Academy before it acquired its present name.

".....Just because their older brother was like that doesn't necessarily mean that these girls will turn out the same, so I'm trying not to judge them prematurely here..."

The old art teacher sipped at his tea in the faculty lounge as he muttered to himself.

"But really...compared to the times when we had to teach Izaya-kun and Shizuo-kun, this school is way more peaceful nowadays."

The old teacher held back a bitter laugh as he thought of the problem kids of yore.

"Back then we used to have filled gasoline drums rolling down the third floor of the school building..."

♂♀

Same time, an apartment in Shinjuku

"That reminds me..."

Namie's expression softened as she spoke without looking away from the work at hand.

"It's school-opening day at Raira Academy."

Izaya, listening to her brighter-than-usual voice, replied airily as he continued to check his e-mail without turning to look at her.

"Ah, right. Why bring this up though?"

"Seiji is officially a high school sophomore...oh, how I would like to rush to the school and celebrate for him right now - "

"It's just school-opening...not like it's new student orientation or something. As a guardian you have no business being there anymore."

"But I want to watch."

Namie replied without hesitation. Izaya simply shook his head and sighed.

Trademarked cool beauty Namie only ever showed her deep and abnormal loving side when it came to her younger brother Yagiri Seiji.

A way-more-than-brother-and-sister erotically charged loving side at that.

Which was unfortunately unrequited, since her younger brother found her love nothing more than tiresome. But for Namie, even cold blank stares were lovable as long as they came from Seiji.

A peachy shade of pink flew to her cheeks as her expression turned dreamy at the mental image of a fully grown Seiji. Glancing at his assistant happily at work, Izaya muttered to himself with a sigh.

"Raira Academy...the entire atmosphere really did change after they merged the schools and gave it a new name."

"Hmm? Are you a graduate too?"

"I graduated six or seven years ago. That was back when it was still called Raijin High School..."

Something close to a nostalgic smile crept onto Izaya's face - turning into a malevolent smirk spiced with hatred in the following nanosecond.

"...It was nothing but a pile of stinky memories, anyway, including how I came to meet Shizu-chan."

"You really do hate Shizuo, don't you?"

Namie murmured. But suddenly something struck her as odd.

"You said you graduated six or seven years ago...but didn't you also say you were 21 years old?"

"I've been telling people I was 21 since ages ago - or were you under the impression that I would just feed them my real personal information for free?"

Namie just listened for a second without feeling like there was anything to say - and then,

pausing suddenly, turned her eyes to Izaya for the first time.

"Does that mean you have some trust in me now?"

"It's different from real trust...I just felt like I should at least tell you a thing or two about myself to keep my right-hand woman from turning against me."

"Why don't you just go and die already?"

Namie said curtly and turned back to her work, adding in a fact that sounded like revenge.

"Speaking of which - your sisters too are gonna be Raira students from now on."

".....You sure are very well-informed."

Izaya's expression verged on the uncomfortable.

"Just thought you should know that I've done my research on my head man as well."

".....How should I put it...well, I do that all the time to other people, but..."

It's a different thing altogether to have that done to myself - he laughed bitterly as if to say. Deciding to abandon the work at hand for the moment, he leaned into his chair and continued to talk as if to himself.

"I never knew how to deal with those two."

"Really? Are you saying there's something you don't know how to deal with apart from Heiwajima Shizuo?"

"Stop kidding. I'm human after all. Well, not completely, but still."

Sighing heavily, Izaya began to describe to Namie the environment he grew up in.

"My sisters...are called 'Kururi' and 'Mairu'. ...How should I put it...my parents are completely ordinary people. Except for when it comes to the taste in children's names, that is. Yet I grew up in that highly ordinary environment...to be what I am now."

"Alas, so you're aware that you are a freak?"

Namie's sarcasm didn't seem to bother Izaya as he put his hands together, rubbed his thumbs and continued.

"I didn't turn out like this because of the environment I grew up in...but my sisters, I think, turned out abnormal because of my influence. That I do feel guilty about."

"Abnormal? In what ways?"

- What kind of children could make even a freak like him call them abnormal?

Namie, now looking intrigued, paused the work at hand and poured herself a cup of tea from the kettle in the kitchen.

She was really listening now despite the fact that she just stood there in an aloof fashion. Izaya simply looked at Namie with weary eyes.

"Their goal is - to be 'human'."

".....Excuse me?"

"They want to become sort of a 'humankind in a nutshell' combination...and of all humankind especially the Japanese."

"I still don't follow."

Izaya smiled bitterly at a perplexed Namie.

"I know it's hard to understand. They simply thought that being twins automatically meant that they were supposed to be the same person."

".....Ahh, that kind of makes sense. A single twin does strike as an incomplete human being if not in a set with the other...or at least that's how we feel. But wouldn't it be odd for the twins themselves to feel the same way?"

"Normally, yes. But like I said...my sisters aren't normal."

Izaya rose slowly from his chair as he shut down his laptop.

As he parted the blinds with his fingers, he narrowed his eyes in the sunshine that poured through.

"You know how games always come with preset parameters? Like some characters would have high magical power but very low fighting ability, or excellent fighting ability but no brains. In an RPG game you would have to form a balanced team to make up for each other's weaknesses."

"Well, that's what we do in reality as well. Using your personnel according to their strengths and weaknesses is the first step towards rational management."

"If only it were anything close to rational management..."

Izaya put his hand on the desk as the image of his sisters came back to his mind.

"What they did was that they formed an RPG team, just the two of them. One would be the martial artist, and the other would be the sorcerer, something like that."

".....I have no idea what you're trying to say."

"It's simple. They consciously formed two completely contrasting human stereotypes. They became totally different despite being twins - on purpose! Thinking they would be something more than all other humans by combining their forces like that...just another way to convince themselves that they're capable of anything, I'd say."

As if observing something truly nonsensical, the stray smile around the corner of Izaya's mouth never reached his eyes.

"Their respective appearances and personalities - those were settled by a flip of the coin back when they were still elementary school kids. They weren't aware that there is a thing called congruency. So Kururi - the older one - is silent and melancholic but wears a gymnastic suit. The younger one, Mairu, looks like a liberal arts girl but talks and behaves like there's no tomorrow."

"But...that would just be odd, right? There's no point in divorcing the appearance from the personality."

Izaya nodded slowly at Namie's bewildered reaction.

"Sure, there is no point. But for those two, there isn't any point in synchronizing the appearance with the personality either. They end up being the 'same person' anyway. As long as they think they have all the 'parts', they don't care. They like to think they're special because of that - what a pair of intolerable Eighth-Grade-Disease* patients."

** Eighth-Grade Disease: a phrase coined to describe typical adolescent behavior stemming from the belief that one is special and is not understood by others.*

"What's Eighth-Grade Disease?"

"Google that up yourself. Whatever...it's at least better than thinking you're an esper or the reincarnation of a warrior of light or something. But anyway those two stand out too much...whatever kind of crowd they're in."

"Ah, I see. So as someone who wants to remain the evil mastermind in the dark it's only natural that you don't wish to be seen with them."

Namie nonchalantly interpreted Izaya's own thoughts for him.

Izaya looked away as if that analysis hit something right on the mark, and replied.

"True. It embarrasses me when I see those two or hear them talk...you'll see what I mean when you meet them. Keep in mind that even I can't stand them. If I can't stand them, there is probably no way anyone else can..."

"If you're so aware that you are just as intolerable yourself, why not behave a little bit for a change?"

"I don't wanna be told by someone who forced an illegal plastic surgery on a girl for the sake of her brother."

Namie merely smiled at Izaya's pungent riposte.

"Ahh. I have no intention to behave whatsoever when it comes to Seiji."

"....."

"True love needs no brake nor accelerator. When you think about it, it will get you there by itself."

Namie's cheeks turned rosy as she muttered such completely irrelevant sentences that didn't even sound like an answer.

If this were the only side people ever saw of Namie, they'd probably think she was some kind of overgrown adolescent girl.

- If only her brother weren't the one she was lusting over.

Izaya sat back in his chair without another word. Namie's expression returned to normal as she asked the next question.

"But are you sure they're going to be alright? If they stand out so much, wouldn't it make them easy targets for all those bullies out there? I heard they are getting pretty nasty these days."

Though her words looked like they were filled with concern for Izaya's family, there was not a trace of emotion in the way Namie uttered them; it was obvious that she actually couldn't care less.

Izaya looked as if he took on the same attitude as he pondered his sisters' situation.

"You have a point. Hopefully no bullies are gonna pick on them...but it's not like we can avoid it."

Still sighing, the information dealer's face eventually broke into a sarcastic grin.

"Poor things."



Three days later, noon, Raira Academy

Why does bullying exist?

Kuronuma Aoba thought to himself in a chair at the back of the classroom.

Usually it's the bullies who start such things, but the bullied are not always innocent as snow either. Not that the causes mattered.

Influenced by the society, by games, by manga, by parents, by the school, by the Internet.

Honestly, whatever, thought Aoba.

You can point at a thousand factors you think are causing all the bullying, but even if you remove all of them, the bullies are not going to stop.

Because ultimately they're doing it for their own satisfaction.

If they're not getting enough satisfaction, they will continue to do it.

It was a somewhat awkward conclusion, as Aoba himself realized; but he carried his thoughts further anyway.

- I wouldn't deny it.

- The pleasure inherent in bullying someone weaker than I am.

- That leaves only one question: whether I can suppress the yearning for that pleasure.

A pleasure akin to attacking a pre-modern country with missiles while you yourself remain at a safe distance.

Basking yourself simultaneously in the feeling of safety and overwhelming superiority. However you may choose to tune it down, it is, to say the very least, pleasant.

- Those who simply look on when others are being bullied are probably not doing so not only out of fear for retaliation if they try to stop the bullies; they're also savoring the fact that they aren't the ones being bullied.

- That, too, is a very pleasant and safe position.

- Of course, there's gotta be saints who don't feel comfortable in such a position and just have to help others. It would be weird if there were none - we're on a crowded planet after all.

- If you're talking about this particular classroom, however, it looks like there are none.

It was before the after-school homeroom -

Aoba was letting his thoughts wonder as he looked at Orihara Kururi's desk right next to his.

- There were things written in what looked like oil-based marker all over it.

- Considering it was only the third day of school, that truly is something.

But the contents of the writings came in a slightly different flavor than what would then be typical.

"SISTER OF A WHORE"

"CLAIM YOUR RESPONSIBILITY!"

"THE GUARDIAN'S FAULT!"

"ENJO-KOUSAI* SISTERS"

** Enjo-kousai: a euphemism used to refer to prostitution involving school girls.*

"DIE!!"

And the like. Overall the writings involved more kanji than would normally be expected of graffiti.

Kururi, however, simply stared at her desk with a blank expression on her face. This

had happened within the last 20 minutes, during which she was at the library. Although

Kururi's idiosyncratic gymnastic suit and dark aura made her stand out pretty much enough, none of the graffitied insults were directed at her.

For some reason, most of the abusive remarks were about her sister "Orihara Mairu".

To see why, we'll have to rewind to the morning of that exact day.

♂♀

"Good morning - "

Orihara Mairu arrived at her classroom on the third day of school to find her desk covered in graffiti that said "WHORE" "1000 YEN FOR ONE NIGHT" "OPEN FOR ENJO-KOUSAI" and the like.

Mairu stopped dead on the spot for a second.

"Hmm - "

Still smiling, she began to scan the classroom.

Everybody turned their backs, deliberately avoiding meeting her gaze or looking at her desk.

Typical atmosphere of a bullying session.

But she continued to scan around, her look unwavering -

Until fixating her eyes on a small throng of girls by the front window of the classroom.

One of them, after stealing a look at Mairu, had giggled and whispered to the others.

With a sudden "hee", the corner of Mairu's mouth curved skywards.

It was a totally different kind of curve from the ever-translucent smile she wore until now. Like a trickster grinning in the shadow after locating his unknowing prey, she broke into a sharp and slimy smirk, and -

- Jumped.

Everything happened in a flash.

The floor made an explosive "bang" noise.

But nothing had actually exploded - it was only Mairu's feet as she jumped from the wooden floor.

The bullies and the on-lookers had until now assumed that Mairu was transparent or didn't exist altogether - yet within a twentieth of a second, that assumption was blown to smithereens.

As every head turned at the explosive noise, Mairu had already hopped into mid-air and

towards the back of the classroom.

Starting from the desk right behind her, she had jumped all the way until landing on a locker located in the back of the classroom, picked up a little box on the locker and turned around.

With astounding fluidity she jumped up again from the locker, flew over the heads of several dumbstruck classmates, and covered the length of the classroom in a few strides.

The girl was unstoppable like a cannonball.

She made one more stride after stepping on the last desk -

And landed in the middle of that throng of girls at the front of the classroom.

♂♀

Three days earlier, noon, an apartment in Shinjuku

"You have a point. Hopefully no bullies are gonna pick on them...but it's not like we can avoid it."

Still sighing, the information dealer's face at last broke into a sarcastic grin.

"Poor things."

"Do you find that funny? Aren't they your family after all?"

Izaya shook his head at a frowning Namie.

"Nah nah nah. It's not that. It's not that at all."

He chuckled as he went on to clear this simple misunderstanding.

"I wasn't talking about Kururi and Mairu...I was talking about the bullies."

"Huh?"

"Wasn't I telling you just now? They turned out abnormal because of my influence."

"Say...if I were bullied, do you think I would just leave my bullies be?"



Back to the morning of the third day of school.

The entire class froze.

It took a long while for anybody to actually register what had happened; for a moment they just stared and remained dead still.

“Ahaha! I - got - ya - !”

Mairu sounded as cheerful as a child playing tag.

But those around her were in a state almost the exact opposite of cheerfulness.

The little box Mairu had just fetched from the back of the classroom was filled almost to the brim with thumbtacks.

In a deft move she had flipped the box open and raised it high.

Her actions up until this point had been simple.

She had landed right in the throng of girls who had been laughing at her -

Knocked one of them down with a clothesline -

And stuck her palm like a cleaver into the wailing girl's mouth.

That had been it.

Her movements were captured like multiple action movie clips by the eyes of her classmates.

Mairu, cheeks flushed with excitement, was smiling as she set her legs astride the girl on the floor.

The scene would have been quite erotic had it not been ruined by Mairu's one hand stuck in the girl's mouth and her other holding a box of thumbtacks.

Eyes glittering from behind her glasses, Mairu asked with the same smile she had on her face during self-introduction.

"I'll give you 3 seconds! Who started it? Point her out for me!"

As she spoke, the now-opened box of thumbtacks was being shoved nearer and nearer to the girl's face.

"Nnnnnhhhh! Haaa-! Nnnhhhhhaeehh!"

Now that she knew what was in store for her, the girl struggled fiercely - but Mairu's knees kept her arms pinned to the floor and incapable of defense.

Other girls in the group could only goggle at Mairu nervously as if they didn't have a clue what was going on.

"Three - "

Such an overwhelmingly skilled counterattack totally deprived the bully - now a victim of violence - of the ability to think.

"Two - "

There was no time to even consider the possible retaliation if she turned her accomplice in.

Even if there had been, she would still have turned her accomplice in since no future retaliation could possibly be worse than having her throat flooded with thumbtacks in the next second.

"One - "

The box of thumbtacks made a ticking noise as it was slightly tilted.

That was when the girl had to surrender.

She pointed to the tallest among the group of girls who had been gleefully discussing Mairu's reaction to the graffiti on the desk.

"Ze - ah, thanks!"

Mairu caught several thumbtacks as they began to fall towards the girl's throat with the deft hand she just pulled out of the girl's mouth.

Still smiling, she turned to the girl who had just been pointed out by her partner-in-crime, who was now shaking all over in fear.

At that point her next target was already making for the door.

"Ahh - ! Don't run away yet!"

She raised the thumbtacks she had just caught in her left hand and released them like a pitching machine would a bunch of baseballs.

A series of rhythmical clicks and clacks later -

The tall girl found several thumbtacks pinned to the exit door she was just about to open with her hand.

That wasn't an extraordinary feat in itself; with some skill, thumbtacks can be thrown to the wall like darts.

But it was downright insane to throw them in public to begin with - not to mention at other people.

It just happened that Orihara Mairu was the kind of person to disregard all such boundaries; without the slightest hesitation she had aimed her thumbtacks where the primary offender's hand was headed.

The realization made the girl stop dead in her tracks out of the sheer immensity of her fear.

Passivity.

She was trapped in passivity.

She had made the first move - yet she was trapped in passivity. The bullied girl didn't even spare her the time to consider the next move or follow her instinct; her shoulders were grabbed in mere seconds from behind.

"So! You wanna hang out in the restroom? Listen! I! Suddenly! Have this huuuuge urge to get really really close with you, though I don't even know your name! Ahaha!"

With a playful smile over her chic features, Orihara Mairu was about to drag the girl by the chin straight into the hallway -

As she stopped to talk to the boy sitting next to her desk.

"Hey, sorry - how about you help me erase these and lunch is on me?"

The boy started and, not sure what to do, tried rubbing the oily marker writings off with his eraser anyway -

None of the other students dared even move; only the sound of the eraser at work could be heard throughout the quiet classroom.

A boy who had attended the same middle school as the Orihara sisters walked into the classroom. Seeing the writings on Mairu's desk and the state of shock everybody else was still in, he let out a sigh.

"Ahh - so she did it again."

He began to tell his dumbstruck classmates about Mairu.

"That one, she goes to this gym that teaches pretty weird martial art stuff, so you don't wanna pick on her. Some guys tried to gang up on her once - ended up almost killed by her and her fellow gym-goers."

- Does the kind of martial art they teach use thumbtacks as weapons?

The question surfaced in everyone's mind, but they all remained silent deciding that not getting too involved with Mairu was the better idea.

Fifteen minutes later.

Right before homeroom was about to start, Mairu returned with her clothes straightened out as if nothing had happened. She lowered her head apologetically as she saw the boy still bent over her desk, trying to erase the graffiti marks.

"Ahh - sorry about that! It's hard to get oil-based stuff off just like that isn't it! I'll help!"

She produced from her sailor uniform pocket a piece of cloth and began to clean the desk with the boy.

"It's not coming off. I guess water doesn't work on oil-based stuff anyway - should we just plane it off?"

She was still smiling as she said that.

A pure liberal-arts-girl smile.

The boy hastened to lower his gaze as he realized that he had been staring. Then he noticed something absurd.

The cloth she was wiping the desk with had string-like things attached to it.

Though he found it weird, the boy didn't think further about it as he went back to focus on his own work.

Nor did he realize that the cloth was actually the brassiere of the girl whom Mairu had dragged into the restroom a moment ago.

That girl never showed her face in the classroom again that day; in fact, she had left school early without even fetching her backpack.

Nobody knew what happened between the two during that private "conversation" in the restroom save Mairu and the girl herself. Neither did anybody venture to ask.

The reason was simple: if they had looked on without a word when the graffiti was being done, there was no way they'd be willing to be involved in anything that reeks of deeper trouble.

♂♀

And now, the homeroom after lunch break.

After the scheme to bully Orihara Mairu of Class 1-B ended in a complete fiasco -

The twisted network of girls targeted her sister Orihara Kururi instead.

Which was why Aoba sat there staring at the graffiti and letting his thoughts wonder.

- She had never done anything.

She was targeted just because she was Mairu's sister.

Kururi wasn't the hated one; yet she was spit in the face for Mairu's sake.

- Well. Whatever.

Aoba's gaze wondered outside the window as he waited for the homeroom to begin.

At last came the teacher, who was about to dismiss the class after taking care of some simple housekeeping issues -

After dutifully checking around the classroom, however, Mr. Marumura noticed the ruinous state Kururi's desk was in.

"What happened to your desk, Orihara?"

"....."

"That can't possibly be your own graffiti, right?"

The teacher frowned as he got close enough to read the writings. He was waiting for Kururi's reply.

"Negative (It's not mine)."

Her voice was small, but her answer was clear.

Marumura scanned the students in the classroom.

"Anybody got a clue who did this?"

- Whatever.

Aoba thought indifferently as he looked at Kururi, who still had her head lowered.

- I have nothing to do with this bullying affair. Nothing to gain and nothing to lose.

- Really, whatever.

Yet precisely because he believed it had nothing to do with him -

"Miss Tsukiyama and some girls from other classes did that together."

He replied without hesitation, since it had nothing to do with him anyway.

Whether this was a bullying affair was irrelevant for him; he was simply delivering the answer to the question he was asked.

Tsukiyama, the girl he just turned in, was visibly flustered.

Nobody had tried to stop her when she committed the petty criminal act.

Which was why she never expected to be "betrayed" in this fashion.

Though Aoba was never officially on her side to begin with, it still felt like a stab in the back from her perspective.

"...Tsukiyama, come to the office after this. Bring the others with you."

The teacher said sternly. Tsukiyama gritted her teeth and turned to Aoba.

- Why didn't you say anything when we were at it!

Said the piercing look she was throwing at Aoba. But Aoba, still not feeling like the

whole affair had anything to do with him, wasn't bothered in the very least.

If anything at all was on his mind at this moment -

It would be the slightly surprised look Kururi herself gave him, which, as it turned out, was going to stay on his mind for a while.

♂♀

After school, stairway

A couple of hours had passed since the aforementioned incident.

"Tomorrow, after school...ah, something to look forward to."

Aoba was just finished with his club activities for the day when he received a message from Mikado telling him the time and place to meet for tomorrow's afternoon tour of Ikebukuro.

Anyway, better be going home now. As Aoba was walking towards the stairway however -

"Oy, you!"

A not-too-well-meaning voice sounded from behind.

Aoba turned to find several girls standing in front of him.

At the center was Tsukiyama, who was in his class and had just been to the teacher's office.

"Something wrong?"

Tsukiyama frowned at the boy who leaned his head sideways as he asked.

"You know very well what's wrong. What do you think you were doing, anyway?"

"What is this, a confession? How sweet but I'd be very troubled. There's no way I can go out with all of you at once..."

The other girls couldn't remain silent any longer at Aoba's airy joke.

"Are you dumb or what? What exactly were you thinking? Would a normal person just

turn people in like that? You think it's fun to pretend you're on the side of justice or something?"

"If I were trying to be on the side of justice, I would have stopped you when you were at it. You guys aren't making sense."

"Then why did you turn us in all of a sudden?!"

"Well, it's not like you guys bothered to tape my mouth, is it? Frankly speaking, if I had to choose between your side and Miss Orihara's...not that I know either of you all that well, but, look, you write stuff on people's desks, while she's mature and wears a gym suit and has nice breasts and feels pretty mysterious...you know what I mean?"

"- Shut up! You - "

Just as the girls advanced towards Aoba -

Tsukiyama sensed something strange.

Her olfactory system was sending urgent alarms through her brain.

Something was burning.

"Ehh?"

- A fire?

The girl looked around frantically for the source of that strong burning smell.

But Aoba, standing opposite her, was the first to find it.

"Hey, your..."

"Ehh?Arrgh!"

Shocked to see that fumes were coming from the schoolbag on her shoulder, Tsukiyama screamed as she threw it away as far as possible.

Halfway the schoolbag burst into flames, and a fair amount of smoke was released from the hole where the schoolbag had just been burnt through -

The shrill sound of fire alarm on the ceiling began to echo throughout the school.

Later, all students at the scene of fire including Aoba were summoned to Student Affairs and talked to separately.

Aoba simply told everything as he saw it. However, his school bag ended up being inspected as well.

He had asked why inspection had been necessary - the teacher, who was hesitant at first, disclosed the reason and told him not to discuss it with anyone else.

Why the fire had suddenly erupted from Tsukiyama's schoolbag remained a mystery. But an inspection of the contents of the bag brought to attention several nutrient beverage bottles that apparently contained paint thinner.

What was more - similar bottles of paint thinner were found in the backpacks of the other girls who had been there talking to Aoba. Though the girls didn't admit it, the whole thing happened right after they had been called to the teacher's office.

"Honestly...first thing in high school they start trying out drugs? ...Well, guess it's not really a surprise if they're also a bunch of bullies. What a royal headache. They were picking on you for turning them in during homeroom, weren't they?"

"It definitely felt like they were."

"Well, I won't be surprised if they get suspended for a while. You never know how they're gonna get back at you...if they try anything, let me know right away."

Aoba ended up being the only one allowed to go home. He was just about to leave school when -

He saw two girls standing in front of the stairway, where some of the remains of the schoolbag could still be seen.

One of them was Kururi, still in that gymnastic suit, her schoolbag on her shoulder. The other was dressed in a way that contrasted with her - but other than the glasses, the girl looked exactly the same as Kururi.

"Yahoo! Good day to you! Or should I say good evening? Anyway, I've never met you before! I'm Orihara Mairu! Kuru-nee is my older twin sister! Nice to meet you!"

Unlike her sister, the girl was rather chitty-chatty.

"Um, hi - nice to meet you too."

- These are some weird twins.

Aoba thought to himself as he replied. Kururi, who had been standing behind Mairu's back as if trying to hide, raised her face and said to Aoba,

"Thank (Thank you)."

"Hum?...Ah, you mean the thing during the homeroom? That was nothing. You don't need to thank me. I should have stopped them in the first place."

"Know (I knew that)."

"Eh?"

Mairu chirped in merrily as Aoba was taken aback.

"Oh that - actually, Kuru-nee was watching them from the hallway when they were at it! And, when you were talking to those girls a moment ago, Kuru-nee and I were also watching!"

"Huuuhhh?"

Aoba calmed down and tried to continue the conversation despite the fact that these girls had just declared themselves random stalkers.

"Well, in that case there's even less reason to thank me - "

"Kuru-nee was so happy when you said she was cuter than that girl called Tsukiyama! Look, Kuru-nee is the quiet liberal arts type but has to wear a gym suit all the time - people usually just find it weird, right? So Kuru-nee is actually really happy to hear that boys think she's cute!"

"Silent (Shut up)."

Kururi shushed her sister and took a step towards Aoba, her eyes still fixed on the ground.

She said only two words to the boy who was about the same height as she was.

"Indebted (Thank you)."

Raising her face and closing the distance, she covered Aoba's lips with her own.

- Hhhh?

Aoba's mind turned blank at the incomprehensible situation -

And could do nothing but look as Kururi, cheeks flushed, pulled herself away.

But the situation was just about to get even more incomprehensible -

As Kururi retreated back behind, Mairu stepped forward as if to take her sister's place and suddenly pulled Aoba into a powerful embrace followed by a deep kiss.

- !? - !? !? !?

The female and male roles looked decidedly reversed - an impression not helped at all by Aoba's rather childlike facial features.

Aoba's mind was again reduced to a state of blankness; as he stared at Mairu, however, the latter had already resumed her chirping without even blushing.

"Yay I did it! Indirect kiss with Kuru-nee! Heehee!"

She let go of Aoba and continued in a tone as if nothing had happened.

"Sorry! It's a little surprising to be treated like this by girls who aren't even your girlfriend, isn't it! But don't be fooled by Kuru-nee's looks, she's actually even more aggressive than I am!"

"Negative (That is not true)."

The younger of the twins pretended not to hear her sister, and instead began to whisper in Aoba's ear.

"Ah, forgot to say, if you fall for Kuru-nee sometime in the future, I won't let you have all of her! Because part of Kuru-nee is still mine! Also, for males, I will only go out with Hanejima Yuuhei-san! Ah, Kuru-nee is also a huge fan of Yuuhei-san, so I won't be surprised either if you aren't gonna get anything more than that kiss! Ahaha!"

"Hanejima Yuuhei...that idol?"

"Correct! Anything wrong with that?"

"No, not at all...I...um, what exactly am I supposed to do?"

In Gal-game jargon they would have called it a multi-flagging event. But Aoba's head was way too messed up to think of any of that - he tried to regain his composure anyway, and wondered aloud something completely unrelated to those kisses a moment ago.

"Um...right. It can't possibly have been...that those two...put um...certain stuff in Tsukiyama and the other girls' schoolbags...can it?"

He had asked the most important question of all. The girl - who just kissed a boy she had met only three days ago, let alone gone out with - replied in a disappearing voice,

"Private (It's a secret)."

With a faint smile forming around her last syllables.

After the twins were gone, Aoba remained leaning onto the shoeboxes at the stairway entrance -

Until he hastened to dial a number of someone he knew on his cell phone as if something urgent had come to his mind.

"Ah, hello? It's me....."

"It looks like I'm now sort of the main character in some horribly made porn."

"Look...if I told you two girls, who were twins, had each kissed me once separately just now, would you believe that?"

"Eh? Yeah, they were cute. Kinda weird, but they looked really...um...cute."

"Why would you wanna kill me? Also I was gonna ask if I should feel led on or turned off...what would you suggest as an unpopular guy?Sorry, that was my bad...don't scrape the glass with your cell phone - uwahhhhhhh! S - T - O - P - !!"

♂♀

Night of the same day, Ikebukuro

"That's weird, Kuru-nee, I was sure that glider was headed this way! Ahhh, I hate it! I WANNA SEE I WANNA SEE I - WANNA - SEE - IT - !"

Mairu, who had just kissed a boy she had only just met that evening, was already talking in a loud voice as if she had forgotten about it. They were wearing somewhat strangely designed casual clothes which gave different impressions from their usual attire in the day.

"....."

Kururi, on the other hand, remained silent and looked around calmly.

They had been out on the streets after seeing the live report about the Black Motorbike

when they got home from school.

The streets were crowded as ever, but once they wandered off the main road they found themselves in quiet and empty alleyways since it was not a holiday. Mairu was asking her sister with a puzzled look on her face:

"Why are we here? Shouldn't we be looking for the glider on the main street?"

Kururi ignored her sister and continued to observe her surroundings - until her gaze fell on a certain car parked on the roadside. She made straight for it.

"Here (It's here.)....."

Before she even finished talking, Kururi had bent over and reached for something under the car.

"Wahh, what are you doing, Kuru-nee?! Is that a ten-yen coin? Yipee! I get treated to a Umai-bou, don't I? I want the mentaiko flavor!"

She giggled as she continued to tease her sister -

But her sister had risen again holding something that had been dropped under the car.

".....? What is that?"

Mairu asked, surprised. Her sister had at last stopped ignoring her:

"Ago (Some time ago)...TV (on television)...monster (the Black Motorbike)...fell (dropped it)....."

"Ehh? You kidding me? Did he really drop this? I didn't notice at all!"

Mairu said in astonishment as she looked at the item in her sister's hand.

And what she saw was -

"What is this envelope?"

On the light-brown envelope was written "THANK YOU MS. CELTY STURLUSON" in Japanese.

It was surprisingly heavy, and from the touch of it they could only guess that a pile of paper was inside it.

Kururi had already had a hunch as to what it might be when she opened the envelope -

Her eyes popped and looked around wildly after she had seen the contents.

"What's wrong, Kuru-nee?"

As her younger sister was about to peek into the envelope as well -

Something had made its way into their peripheral vision. She turned sharply to face it -

It was standing in the Ikebukuro night.

A monster was standing there as if it were about to kidnap the sisters who had wandered into the godforsaken darkness by mistake.

The monster was tall, thin and very pale.

It hobbled and stumbled as it walked apparently without a destination in mind.

But its face was completely distorted with its nose being the most telltale part; scarlet blood trickled down from its eyes, ears, mouth and nose as it stumbled towards them like a zombie.

"Who (What is that?)....."

"Kuru-nee, get behind me."

Mairu had probably guessed that the monster was not an ordinary person.

She had got between the monster and her sister, shielding her sister with her body.

And - just as the monster was only several feet away from the reach of her back-kick -

The male fell forward on his bloody face, murmuring something.

".....What's with this guy? Should we call an ambulance?"

As he heard this -

The male raised his head and began to talk in trembling Japanese:

"Hospital...is...a little...bad for me...Miss...is there...cough..."

"Healthy (Are you all right?)"

The male coughed some blood before he rolled onto his back and continued in a disappearing voice:

"Sorry...I may not...be able to make it...before I die...there's something...I wanna ask

you....."

"What what? This is a rare experience! Tell us what it is!"

"Do you know if...there's a Russian...sushi restaurant...nearby...somewhere.....?"

♂♀

Ikebukuro, Sunshine 60 Street

Having bought a new attache case at a discount store, Shizuo walked along the street in a dignified manner.

"Still...wonder what was wrong with those robbers, Mr. Tom."

"There's no way I would know though..."

Shizuo's boss replied in a lazy tone as he reflected back on what happened earlier.

"Anyhow. Should we go check on them later? That white guy looked like he could die if we just leave him there."

"That filth robbed us, meaning he wanted us to starve to death. He was asking to be killed so he should have been ready to be dead."

"...You sure do speak pretty aggressively at times..."

Tom decided that saying anything more would very likely make himself a target. Wiping the cold sweat off his face, he sighed and looked up the next debt-collecting location.

Shizuo was actually a quiet person when he was not mad. However, now his mood was somewhere in-between.

Chances were that his rage at all that robber melodrama a moment ago hadn't properly subsided yet.

They were looking for a place to have some quick lunch before setting out for the next debt-collecting location when -

"SHI-ZU-O-san!"

A bouncy voice rang from behind as a girl flung herself onto Shizuo's back.

"....."

With an ambiguous expression that could have been either a troubled face or a wry smile

-

Shizuo reached behind his back and grabbed the nape of her neck as you would a cat.

"Ayayayah! You'll stretch it, you'll stretch it! You'll stretch my clothes, Shizuo-san!"

"Mairu...what're you doing here so late in the night..."

Without putting the girl in question down to the ground, Shizuo saw that it was indeed the little sister of the guy he hated the most.

"I came to see Shizuo-san!"

"You're still after Kasuka anyway..."

"Yeah! But I also really like Shizuo-san! 'Cause you're strong!"

"...Well. You know I have no say over Kasuka's schedule. Seems like he's terribly popular these days."

Shizuo sighed in some sort of resignation and put Mairu down.

Now that he looked, Kururi could also be seen at a distance, her head tilted towards his direction.

"...For a moment I was freaked out thinking you were gonna lose it...really."

Shizuo scratched the back of his head as he turned to an awkwardly smiling Tom.

"Oh, that...I don't get mad as much when people are straightforward with me."

What Heiwajima Shizuo hated was the type of people who play with others' emotions by trapping them in an intricate maze of words.

Orihara Izaya was certainly top of that list. Although his sisters turned out little wackos like he was, they were much less complicated so Shizuo got mad at them only rarely.

Which was not to say never - but the twins adored him all the same, so there was no way Shizuo could actually hate them.



Except for when the girls reminded him of their older brother - which was still bound to infuriate him to a certain degree.

"Well, off the top of my head...if your brother would throw himself in front of a dump truck laughing, we can talk about introducing my brother to you. Speaking of which, I'm still kinda mad today, guess I should just go beat that Izaya bastard to death myself."

"If it's just Iza-nii, no problem no problem!"

Shizuo sighed again at Mairu's instant decision that her brother's life was a small price to pay.

Tom had half a mind to comment "I don't recall that you liked to sigh so much...?" but chose to remain silent in fear of waking the sleeping dog.

"Ah, right right, I'd love to talk to Shizuo-san some more but we have something to ask you!"

"Hum?"

"This! I think Iza-nii has taken us there before, but is there a Russian sushi bar somewhere on this street? I forgot how you get there!"

"Huh, you mean Simon's place? And don't call that flea Iza-nii, he's a flea."

The inquiry itself was a bit weird, but Shizuo still gave her the directions very carefully (though it only involved turning around one street corner anyway).

Meanwhile Tom looked at the other girl who was acting all timid and thought to himself, "Shizuo and an easily-scared high school girl...um, mismatch is the new match...? I don't know..."

As he saw the envelope in her hand, however, his eyes popped to the size of saucers.

From the half-opened envelope he could make out its contents - around a hundred 10,000-yen bandnotes.

Tom made sure nobody was in the vicinity as he approached her and lowered his voice.

"Hey, did you just walk here with that envelope in your hand?"

"....."

The girl hastened to close the envelope again, but Tom had already handed her the shopping bag he got from buying a clock at the discount store.

"It's at least better than nothing. Be careful not to drop it."

"Thank (Thank you)...plenty (very much)."

"No problem. I would've just thrown it away anyway."

By then Mairu was done hearing the directions and was coming to fetch Kururi's hand and afterwards went straight down the street.

"Thank you Shizuo-san! Good-bye!"

"Again (See you around)... Greet (Say hello)... Yuu (to Yuuhei-san)..."

Tom sighed heavily as he watched the two leave.

- What are they, first- or second-years at Raira? ...Walking around with that kind of money...

- What unspeakable things did they have to do to earn that ridiculous amount...?

After contemplating this for a while, he spoke to Shizuo.

"Kids these days are so open about that kind of stuff...well, I guess the power of money really is scary..."

"?"

"Not that we debt collectors for dating websites are the ones to talk...but still..."

Not realizing that he got something fundamentally wrong about these girls, Tom nodded softly in sympathy.

Seeing his boss like this made Shizuo think back on the encounter with Mairu, which somehow brought his own brother to his mind.

- Now that I remember, he did say he would be in Ikebukuro today.

- We live in the same town after all...a call once in a while shouldn't be a bad idea.

CHATROOM

Tanaka Taro

Anyway, I'm going to show someone around Ikebukuro and at the same time will be shown around Ikebukuro by someone myself.

Tanaka Taro

I'm still new in this city, so I'll have lots to learn from you.

Kyo

What a coincidence. We're planning to walk around Ikebukuro tomorrow as well. Maybe we'll run into each other and even start fighting.

Mai

We're fighting?

Tanaka Taro

If that happens, please go easy on me lol

Kyo

We're going somewhere special as well tonight. Do you know Russian Sushi? I heard it's an interesting place.

Mai

The sushi's good.

Tanaka Taro

Ah! I know Russian Sushi. It's where Simon-san works, right?

Bakyura

People running that restaurant are scary.

Kyo

Alas, now this is a coincidence...maybe we've already seen each other on the streets, close to Russian Sushi.

Mai

Passed each other by.

Tanaka Taro

Ah, I go to the bowling place next to that restaurant a lot.

Bakyura

I go to that Taiwanese place on the third floor quite often. Also that game center on the second floor.

Saika

Everyone seems to know a lot

Tanaka Taro

Hmm, but Kanra-san still knows the most, I think.

Kanra-san has joined the chat.

Kanra
Yahoo~good evening~

Kanra
Speaking of which, we have new members!

Tanaka Taro
Good evening~

Kyo
Ahh, long time no see, Kanra-san. I never expected that we would see you again in the online world before we see you in the real one! The Internet - it's a tool to distance people from others, and at the same time bring them closer.....a tool of the future, I say.

Mai
Long time no see.

Bakyura
Evening~

Kanra
Um.....a moment please.

[Private mode] *Kanra*
Kururi, Mairu, it's you two, isn't it

[Private mode] *Kanra*
How did you find this link?

[Private mode] *Kyo*
Namie-san gave us this link because she's warm and considerate like that, Izaya onii-sama.

[Private mode] *Kanra*
.....So she's already been in contact with you.....

[Private mode] *Kanra*
Anyway. You have to leave now for the day.

[Private mode] *Kanra*

I have a lot to teach you later, I see.

[Private mode] *Kyo*

I see, onii-sama. I look forward to hearing your voice in the real world.

Mai

Yes, we'll leave.

Tanaka Taro

?

[Private mode] *Kanra*

Use the private mode! No, actually...enough, just leave!

Kyo

Kanra-san doesn't like us, so we're leaving.

Kanra

Oi...wait a moment, maybe I overdid it but I was just kidding☆

Kyo

I hope Kanra-san feels better the next time we meet.

Saika

Quarreling is not good

Mai

Sorry.

Kanra

Ahhh! I said I was kidding! Don't get all wound up!

Kyo

Anyway, I wish everyone good luck.

Mai

Bye-bee.

Tanaka Taro

Ah, good night~

Kyo-san has left the chat.

Mai-san has left the chat.

Bakyura

Good night~ but why did Mai-san use "Bye-bee"? lol

Saika

Good night

Kanra

OK - ! Let's start again in refreshed spirits!

Tanaka Taro

Um, so who were those two people?

Kanra

If you think too much about them, you'll die!

Tanaka Taro

Die.....?

Kanra

Anyway, don't mind them! Um...so.....

Kanra

Good evening everyone~ this is Kanra~!

Tanaka Taro

Good evening.

Bakyura

Hi.

Saika

Good evening Nice to see you again

Kanra

Awesome awesome~☆ is everyone getting used to the new chatroom?

Tanaka Taro

Yeah, the color codes made it easy to tell who said what.

Bakyura

That's true,

Bakyura

now we can gang up on Kanra-san in more vibrant colors

Kanra

Vibrant!?! Oh no, what is everyone going to do to me!?!?

Bakyura

Gang up on you and then abandon you and repeat for eternity.

The next day, noon, somewhere in Ikebukuro

Students in Raira uniforms were seen everywhere in the city on this sunny afternoon.

But as of now, only first-year student, because they got out of classes earlier than upper-class students, were on their way home.

Among these uniformed students - Kururi and Mairu were walking on the street next to Sunshine City.

Apparently they had a destination in mind, but for some reason Mairu's feet were dragging.

".....Live (Cheer up)....."

"Hic....I'm sorry, I'm sorry~ but Kuru-nee...I'm really devastated....."

Mairu was holding the entertainment section of the day's paper in her hand.

The entire front page was devoted to "Hanejima Yuuhei & Hijiribe Ruri, Midnight Date of Passion....." in which was written how Mairu's favorite idol, Hanejima Yuuhei, was dating another top idol, Hijiribe Ruri, in private.

"Yuuhei-san.....Yuuhei-san just became somebody else's.....ahhh, had the name up there been 'Kururi' instead of 'Ruri' I would have been able to put up with it. Actually, I would be happy to see it! Why oh why! My heart is going to burst from the pain! My sadness is on the order of magnitude of Graham's number!"

By the way, Graham's number is the largest natural number that actually had any meaning on the Guinness Record. For anyone without the proper prerequisite knowledge it was a staggering number to even begin to understand.

It was impossible to tell whether her sister knew about Graham's number or not, but she seemed to understand just how shocked Mairu was.

Kururi stopped in her tracks at the middle of the sidewalk. Turning around, she covered her sister's lips forcefully with her own.

"Mmm.....!"

Mairu's eyes popped wide like Aoba's did yesterday at the sudden turn of events.

.....

Though taken aback by her sister's actions, Mairu began to embrace her older sister back with a glazed look on her face.

As if taking it for some sort of cue, Kururi broke the kiss and smiled at her younger sister and said:

"Alive (Are you all right now)?"

"Yeah! Never felt better! There's nothing better than the soft lips of a girl! Not to mention they were Kuru-nee's dreamy ones! Am I allowed to yell 'Yahoo~' now? Yahoo - ! Awesome - let's do it again! Again!"

The older sister's face fell immediately as her younger sister shook with joy and threatened to lose her balance.

"Shock (How disgusting.)"

"Ehhhhh.....that's mean! That's just mean, Kuru-nee! Haven't we only just confirmed our love for each other? And why are you telling me I'm disgusting when you were the one who kissed a girl - who happened to be your own younger sister - in the first place? What was all that? Seductive seme!?! Seducing me and then topping me!?! What was all that? Let me think...for example! Kuru-nee is like Road Runner and I'm like Wile E. Coyote!?"

Kururi sighed in confusion as her younger sister began to draw incomprehensible comparisons. She lowered her head and smiled again.

Right at that moment -

"Goodness~ you two, did you have to put on that show for us in this broad daylight~?"

"Isn't it too aggressive? Two girls making out in the day?"

"AggresSIVE? * How disgusting."

** The "SIVE" part sounds the same as the Japanese word for "bitter".*

"It turns me on just to watch, but how about you let us join too?"

"Why are two girls making out? Is it because you have no boyfriends?"

"How about we be your boyfriends?"

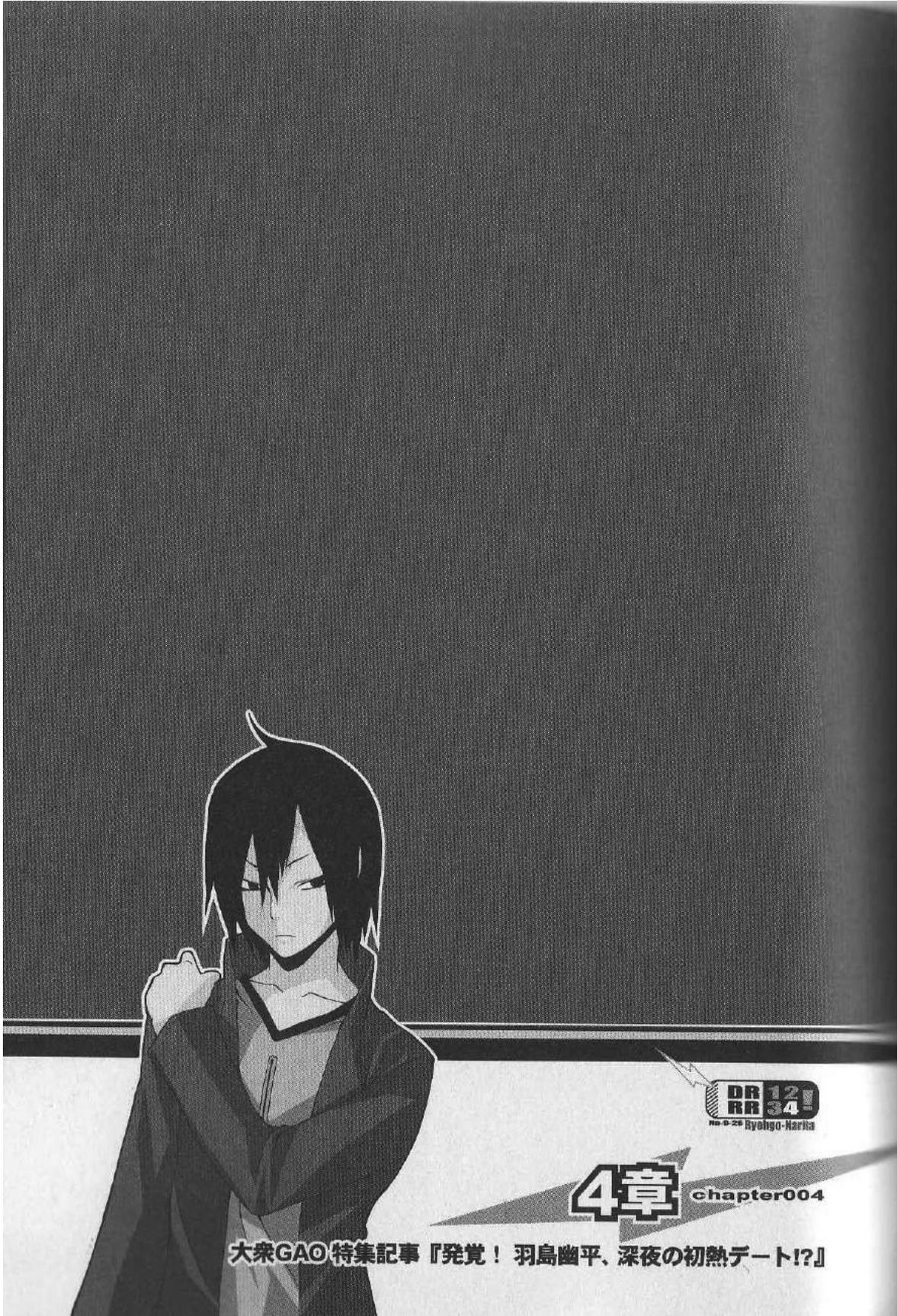
"But in exchange you'll have to tell us where the Black Motorbike is~"

The men who were walking towards Kururi and Mairu - and probably had noticed them since they saw them kissing from afar -

Looked like bousouzoku people in their striped tokko-fukus.

Right afterwards -

The twins were embroiled in the holiday happenings in the city called Ikebukuro.



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4章

chapter004

大衆GAO 特集記事『発覚！ 羽島幽平、深夜の初熱デート!?』

CHAPTER 4

POPULAR GAO SPECIAL REPORT: FOUND OUT! HANEJIMA YUUHEI, FIRST MIDNIGHT DATE OF PASSION!?

Somewhere in East Nakano, in the Smile Cafe "Roots"

"Roots" was a small shot bar near the East Nakano Station.

It had a selection of wine lined up on the shelf and its interior design was clever with a handmade touch to it.

A lot of young people were clamoring inside, forming cheerful spheres of their own which served as a kind of background music.

At the innermost table two men sat opposite each other.

One of them was looking around nervously as the other sipped his nonalcoholic cocktail with no expression whatsoever on his face.

The expressionless man had ice-cold eyes. As he finished the drink, he asked for a refill, never changing his expression.

Then he asked the apparently older man who sat opposite him in a tone devoid of expression as ever:

"Are you not getting anything, Kanemoto-san?"

"No, I have to go back to the company afterwards....."

The man referred to as Kanemoto replied to his younger conversation partner in soft honorific speech.

The young man - or the boy - had a face so beautiful that he could easily have been mistaken for a female. His features were amazingly delicate and clear as if the word "beauty" had been invented to describe him.

Despite being male, he had countless strands of silky black hair that looked smooth as running water.

At first sight he would have struck the viewer as a perfect male who had just stepped out of a shoujo manga - but the icy air that surrounded him made him appear almost impossible to get close to.

The young man continued to talk to the older man in a tone devoid of expression as their spaghetti was served:

"Let's start, Kanemoto-san."

"Um, yeah, please start first, Yuuhei-san."

The young man referred to as "Yuuhei" raised his fork as his older companion spoke to him with the honorific "-san" attached.

The carbonara looked delicious with firm and chewy spaghetti covered in rich cream sauce and accompanied by the aroma of roasted bacon. The young man used his fork to curl the spaghetti expertly until it reached the size of a golf ball before putting it in his mouth.

He chewed it carefully in complete silence - and complimented it with the expression of a statue:

".....The carbonara here is very good."

The other man felt his shoulders relax as he sighed and reached for his own plate.

"It's impossible to tell whether Yuuhei-san's kidding or not just by looking at your face..... Ahhhh, but this is really good!"

The manager began to gobble up the pasta. Though it had brought a cheerful look to his face, he continued to complain nevertheless.

"But still, why this little bar right across the street from the company? Wouldn't it be better to have the talk somewhere more...say a nightclub, since the agency's paying for it anyway? Why this place?"

"Because it's close."

"Ahh, I see.....um, are you just not interested in nightclubs?"

"I never gave it a thought. If I get the chance, I will try to think about it."

The young man answered flatly. Kanemoto sighed again as he decided to wrap up the talk with a few items he remembered from the schedule.

"Let's see, so...um...you know the schedule for tomorrow right?"

"Interview in an Ikebukuro hotel at 6:30 p.m.. After that I go straight home."

".....Yes, that's the schedule."

The conversation trailed off again.

The young man did talk, but there wasn't anything that could be considered emotion in his voice or manners.

That was why Kanemoto found it impossible to tell if it was really OK to continue the conversation or if the other man was actually displeased.

"....."

"It's really good."

".....Yeah...but I'm already finished.....anyway, the interview tomorrow is about your

newest movie, so please try to make it a good advertisement."

"OK."

Yuuhei nodded and continued to eat like a robot.

Kanemoto, the talent manager, looked at the talent he was assigned to work with and began to think.

-I accepted the job because Uzuki-kun asked me to.....

- But...he can't have asked me because he actually hated me, right?

"Um...uh...so...um, I hope we're going to work together fantastically for the coming three days. I'm sorry that Uzuki has to go on his honeymoon trip at a time like this....."

"Yes, I hope so too."

Kanemoto bowed cautiously as the young man returned the politeness with an icy and robotic expression.

He couldn't afford to appear rude.

Because the beautiful young man in front of him happened to be the "moneymaker" that could earn his company hundreds of millions - or even billions.

♂♀

Excerpt from the entry for Hanejima Yuuhei from Fuguruma Youki, the Free Online Encyclopedia

Hanejima Yuuhei (羽島 幽平) is an actor and model born in Toshima District, Tokyo.

Despite the various random comments Max Sandshield, manager of "Jack Lantern Japan", has been known to make (e.g. "He's a cyborg born born in 3258." "He's a thousand-year-old vampire." "He's a true warrior of light - not a reincarnation of one! - who came straight from the ancient land of Atlantis."), the exact date of Hanejima's birth remains unknown. Judging by the time his coming of age ceremony took place, he's believed to be currently around 21.

His real name is Heiwajima Kasuka. His talent agency is the aforementioned "Jack Lantern Japan".

Hanejima's family members include his parents and one older brother. He appears to have great respect for his brother, whose name he mentions from time to time during interviews. Little information is available concerning his brother. Journalists insisting on interviewing his family members have reported incidents where their cars had been mysteriously turned over, but the relevance of said incidents to his brother is still unverified.

His brother is widely believed to be a fearsome personality. In fact, Hanejima himself was scouted to debut after saving the life of a talent scout from his brother, who apparently did not appreciate being talked to by that talent scout.

After some magazine modeling experience, Hanejima debuted as an actor in the leading (and title) role of the V Cinema TV series "Vampire Ninja Carmilla Saizou". His exquisite facial features, combined with flexible acting skills considered unbelievable for an amateur, began to gain him popularity. His name became increasingly familiar on the Internet.

The following year, he took part in King Television's popular program "Money Gamer". In the "How much can you earn in one month starting from a million yen?" project, he made a startling 1.2 billion with various smart investments, and his name appeared in nationwide news even before the program was aired.

According to the policy of this program, the participant is the rightful owner of all the profit. Therefore, Hanejima became known as the lucky boy who gathered a wealth of 1.199 billion yen in just one month.

His amazing acting skills exhibited in his ensuing TV dramas changed the widespread stereotype of him as a mere wealthy pretty boy. He has yet to fail in any role he's been cast in, and his unbelievable looks helped propel him towards true stardom.

Apart from being skilled in acting, he is also a good singer and athlete. In his TV series he can manage any type of roles ranging from singers to killers, and his talent shines through in any kind of setting from cross-dressing to sex scenes.

When he is not acting, however, he becomes almost completely devoid of emotion, and only talks in an expressionless, robot-like manner and only when he has to.

For that reason, he's usually not considered the best guest for talk shows. He has not felt compelled to change his natural manners, and his fan base seems to think he is cool that way. According to Hanejima himself, he had "laughed and cried like any other children" when he was little. "I grew up to become like this because my brother set a negative example - his emotions are too unconstrained. However, I cannot help but respect him."

There are also anecdotes about him such as the following one: without advance notice, the producers of an entertainment special sent subordinates dressed up as delinquents to threaten him into cutting his pinky. To their surprise, he raised the cleaver immediately

and made a gesture to cut his pinky without showing any sign of fear or resistance - until the staff came to stop him.

When he got a call on a holiday from a stalker, he had once remained silent for 20 hours without hanging up. The stalker ended up giving up (and the world knows about it because the stalker collapsed under the overwhelming pressure of his silence and surrendered to the police).

He has hardly any friends in the show business, presumably because his robotic manners made him appear hard to get to know.

His private life therefore remained a mystery, and no one has been able to film the interiors of his residence.

He owns several cars, of which the majority are imported convertibles. He has a weakness for classy and individualistic models like "Le Seyde" and "Galue" by Mitsuoka Motors. He mentioned in a recent TV interview that he wanted a convertible, "Orochi", made by the same car company.

His wardrobe consists of anything, from things he has a personal fondness for to expensive articles. He is sometimes seen wearing accessories purchased from 100-yen stores coupled with designer accessories,, though he does not seem seem to find it strange. ^(*Citation needed)

Since he seemed "capable of anything", he is nicknamed "Captain Embarrassing" on the Internet. The nickname seems to have originated from the fact that he "is as perfect as if he could only exist in middle schoolers' fantasies. But as they look back after they grow up, they find it terribly embarrassing."

When his manager heard about this, he said: "Then we'll have to make him even more perfect." and dressed him up in angel's wings and devil's horns. He even made him wear differently-colored contact lenses in his left and right eye and made a poster of this look. After talking to editors of fetish magazines, this new look made it onto several covers. Unexpectedly, the look earned him even more fans because it suited him so well, and the poster for some reason was also popular overseas.

Another anecdote followed this incident. Yuuhei had remained virtually expressionless throughout the entire process, but somehow rumors began to go around saying that he was actually very angry and had simply pretended to not mind. Max was so afraid after hearing such rumors that he took refuge in the U.S. for two weeks. This is a perfect illustration of just how fearsome his icy expression is.

The producers of "Vampire Ninja Carmilla Saizou", which everyone regarded as his most embarrassing history, asked Yuuhei to star in the sequel after he had become rich and famous. To the great surprise of the showbiz, he accepted the request immediately.

He was third place in a ranking of "Actors and actresses who don't pick their roles" by an entertainment magazine. When the topic was brought up in an interview, he said: "Carmilla Saizou is a character worthy of respect. He knows about true love, and he is an outstanding ninja." but nobody around him was sure what he actually meant by that since he delivered it without a single expression on his face.

He's going to star in the ambitious new film "Cruiser Field" by John Trox, the Hollywood director, who had picked Japan as his filming location. Apparently he had also established a reputation overseas.

♂♀

Kanemoto felt a pain in his own stomach at the thought of having to become the temporary manager for a Hollywood-level star like him.

Uzuki, Yuuhei's original manager who had been working with him since he debuted, had to go on a honeymoon trip and therefore delegated the responsibility to him for these three days.

- I didn't expect him to really be this robotic.....

Kanemoto had thought that Yuuhei's poker face was a mask he put on under the limelight.

He was able to convey all sorts of emotion when cast in a role in a TV series. It was only natural that people who had seen his acting skills would assume his usual expressionless face was just another part of them.

But the young man right in front of him was unusual.

"I'll excuse myself then."

After finishing their meal and walking out of the bar, Yuuhei went back to the office building of Jack o'Lantern Japan and got into the driver's seat of his convertible.

Today, it was a Ferrari.

Kanemoto didn't know much about cars, but he was able to guess that it was a Ferrari from the red body of the car, its signature curves and the emblem with a prancing horse on it.

In the navigator's seat there was a bag from a convenience store containing beef rice bentos he had probably bought for his nightly meal.

- This guy owns eight brand cars, yet he buys beef rice from convenience stores.....

Kanemoto couldn't help but marvel at this sight. He sighed in his heart as he saw the younger man off with a look on his face as if he had seen a god in human form.

Hanejima Yuuhei - he was a gem to the agency, one that shone brighter the more it was polished.

Therefore, he had to keep the gem from any possible harm - Kanemoto thought to himself.

Yuuhei did not seem as aware of his own worth, but he was versatile enough to know how to protect himself.

Though Kanemoto knew about this, he still couldn't help being all wound up about it. He would be in trouble if the gem were to be hurt in any way in his keeping. He ground his teeth for multiple reasons at the thought of the colleague who had gotten married earlier than he could.

But alas, he was not in luck.

Because the gem was about to be embroiled in the holiday happenings in Ikebukuro on the very next day.

♂♀

In the darkness -

- If a person's life could be portrayed with a movie, a TV series, a novel, or a fairy tale -

- What kind of B-rated movie would my life be?

"She" thought silently to herself as her eyes remained incapable of perceiving her surroundings.

- What would the opening be like?

Her sense of time seemed to have been warped after that certain "sound". Struggling to retain her sanity, she swam against the tide in a sea of vague memories.

- Ahhh, that's right...

- When I was a kid -

- I had dreamed to become...

The giant monsters on TV, wreaking havoc all around the place at their will, tearing down skyscrapers and the Tokyo Tower.

They were not so much "monsters" as they were hybrid creatures between men and reptiles and forms of life that did not exist on Earth - their shapes evoked fear and humility in the human heart. They did not need to suck up to anyone. They simply destroyed and destroyed without anything that resembled a purpose -

She harbored something close to admiration towards these monsters she saw in movies.

As for why she felt so strongly attracted - that was too complicated for her, a small child, to express in words.

But she understood now.

She had actually been aware ever since she had been a kid -

- That there was absolutely no way she could be like that.

Of course, no one could actually become a monster over a hundred meters in height.

But that was not what she wanted.

Like the monster, she wanted to be able to live without constraints and not have to suck up to anyone to earn a living -

Even if that lifestyle consisted of nothing but "destruction".

And then it dawned on her.

She was probably not going to become a criminal, but even if she were to become a good person - she wouldn't have been able to express her real self.

Her family had been one of the wealthiest in the neighborhood.

But all that had meant for the members of the family was that they must keep the mask of "tradition" on at all times and be careful not to act out of line with their "heritage". Her parents and family, as well as the people around her, had never voiced it explicitly, but she was nevertheless pressured to maintain the facade because the "tradition" was stronger than she was.

The family was wealthy and respected, but it didn't even have connections in the business

or political world, let alone exert any real influence.

It was only wealthy because someone in the family struck a fortune generations ago.

That made it all the more pressing for its members to behave like they belonged to a "respected" family since it was the only way to maintain the family's pride.

But it was not like her family even existed now anyway.

Her grandfather failed in business. Her father lost a fortune and went bankrupt after a reckless attempt to invest in futures in order to compensate for her grandfather's loss.

Her mother had run away from the family, never to be found again.

Somehow their house burnt down.

Several of her relatives with heavy debts hanged themselves.

Several of her relatives without debts also hanged themselves.

It was probably harder for them to have to give up the pride as a "respected" family than to have to live on borrowed money. Real respected families should be able to keep their pride deep inside their hearts even if they had lost everything. But they were simply an ordinary family that happened to have struck a fortune. When it became impossible either to maintain their pride or abandon it, the only way out was to despair.

She was one of the few of the family who survived and grieved.

Her reward was the taste of freedom for the first time in her life.

She was raised by a family of far removed relatives. After some tribulations she at last realized what she wanted to do with her life.

She wanted a job having to do with the objects of her childhood obsession - monsters.

And it was not only monsters; she was also fascinated by serial killers that appeared on TV like Jason and Freddy, or emotionless creatures like Aliens. These were invariably creatures that killed and destroyed with no regard of the limit of human strength or social rules. Her fascination with these creatures led to her taking a job as an apprentice in a make-up artist's studio right after graduating from middle school.

She wanted to create these monsters - her ideal creatures - with her own hands.

- What I cannot do myself...I'll let them do for me.

As these memories rushed back to her -

She at last realized something.

- Ahh. So this...is the vision before death they kept talking about...

Feeling her body flying in the air after that park bench had hit her -

The killing monster "Hollywood" realized that her life was about to be put to an end with astonishing ease.

She closed her eyes silently in the time she had left, which was compressed to the extreme.

Why did she become a killing monster?

That she did not need to revive in her vision before death.

Because she did not want to remember.

- But I'm content...

- To have met a real monster at the end of my life.

- Not a fake one like me, but an actual monster with overwhelming power.

Then, as the shock of the second impact went through her body -

The vision before death ended, and her remaining consciousness was swallowed into the dark.

♂♀

At the same time -

Heiwajima Kasuka - or Hanejima Yuuhei - was to pass by that exact spot, whether by sheer coincidence or fate.

He had just finished the interview in an Ikebukuro hotel and was driving home -

He steered the Le Seyde around with ease and roamed the nightly streets at a legal speed.

He was planning to visit his brother - whom he had not been in touch with for quite some time - after being asked one question too many about his family in the interview he had just finished. He began to look for that bartender suit he had given out as a present.

Of course it was not that easy to find. He hesitated, not knowing whether to call or text or give up the thought of visiting his brother altogether while continuing to drive when -

A weird object was illuminated by the car's headlights after he had taken a turn near the park and entered a narrower alleyway.

"....."

It looked like a human being falling from the sky with its eyeballs lost at some point in the process.

That "thing" fell with a heavy thud to the asphalt road. It twitched for a second, but remained decidedly still afterwards as if all its remaining energy had been spent.

Its silhouette was the only thing about it that resembled a human being. In the headlight one could see worms wriggling out of its greenish skin like a zombie's.

Any ordinary human being would have screamed at the sight.

But Yuuhei simply slowed his car and parked on the roadside. He stepped out of the car to check whether it was a living creature or a doll.

The greenish skin looked especially wet and sticky in the headlight.

There was no sign of blood, but from the way it lay completely motionless he was able to tell that it must have been fatally wounded.

It could still have been a doll had it not been twitching the second before.

Despite the abnormality of the situation, Yuuhei didn't look in the least flustered.

Seeing people falling from the sky was something Yuuhei was more than used to.

- Though the ones he had seen had usually been victims of his brother's rage.

He was about to call an ambulance when he thought of one "possibility".

The killing monster "Hollywood".

He suspected that the half-dead body lying in front of him was "Hollywood" itself as rumors of its changing monster costumes came back to his mind.

But he was not planning to change his course of action just for that. After taking a step forward, he noticed that the face of the zombie was peeling off.

"....."

That zombie face was too real to have been a costume - it looked like rotting skin in every way. But Yuuhei saw that there was a different color underneath it - not the red of bare flesh and blood, but the paleness of unhealthy skin.

The young man was able to notice what others would have overlooked in horror. He reached out his hand silently towards that mask.

He took it off, and did some thinking once he saw the face that appeared from underneath.

It took him only seconds, during which his beautiful face remained decidedly expressionless; if anything, he looked eerily like a cleaning robot that had just spotted garbage.

Yuuhei ended up carrying the weird person in the zombie costume to his car.

He deftly opened the door to the navigator's seat and placed the zombie's body in it.

He sat back into the driver's seat and contacted someone using his cell phone -

After he was done talking, he hung up and silently started the car.

♂♀

In the darkness -

It's amazing how aware I am of the fact that I'm dreaming.

How did this all start?

Why did I become a murderer?

Why was I suddenly able to become a monster, something I had been so sure that I would never become?

Why is it making me so miserable that I've become what I've always wanted to become?

I wanted to throw up.

I always wanted to throw up after I killed "those people".

I was aware of it.

- That if anything, I should be feeling sick at the thought of myself, the murderer.

Why was I feeling that way when I was the one who killed other people - killed them with my own hands?

Whether out of regret or guilt, it's just sick that I would feel that way about something I had chosen to do.

But the nauseous feeling coming from inside my spine just couldn't be made to stop.

No, no. It's not how a monster should feel.

A monster should never regret.

A monster should never feel sick.

A monster should never feel guilty.

In movies there are also monsters who do.

But those monsters cannot be real monsters.

They are humans who should be loved. Or, even if they aren't - they are something close to humans.

If that "something" could communicate with humans, a human would doubtlessly fall in love with it.

No matter what it looked like.

But I'm different.

I can't afford to become like that.

I can't afford to let anyone love me.

I have to become a monster.

I have to become a monster that no one understands.

That's the only way I can let those bastards...those bastards.....

No, no.

No! No! NO!

There's only him left! Only him! But.....

Only him, only him, only him, it's him, he's coming

It's him I'm going to kill him kill him kill him

Kill him kill them no him kill him

Kill kill no if I don't kill I'll be killed I'm going to throw up he's coming don't come

Don't come don't come don't come don't come stop it stop it stop it stop it

Don't touch me don't touch me don't touch me don't touch me don't don't don't don't

"Amazing, her injuries are healing themselves at a speed second to only Celty and your brother."

Nooo Who's that no is it him? No!

No but who is it ah ehhhh I'm getting kill - no ahh

Sounds different can't be monster

"This is eye-opening. Had she come because she sensed Celty's presence? What do you think?"

It's not him it's someone else's voice where am I where is he I have to

If I don't kill him someone else will be killed
eh ahhh

"At first I wasn't even able to get the injection needle in. But then, cutting Shizuo open cost me several scalpels as well. Unbelievable - scalpels are the most flexible and durable kind of blade you'll ever see, but he was able to make them break in half.....frankly, it felt as if I was trying to cut a steel washboard with my scalpel."

Who is it someone answer me

Where is he where

Only one left but everything should
have ended ehh

"But still, she's so like him.....who would have guessed such a delicate girl would be so like him? Really, she's the type of girl who looks like she belongs in the red-light district."

Answer me answer me answer me -----

I don't want it to end here no no no I don't

Save me mother where are you

Please save me

Save me

♂♀

And then -

She opened her eyes.

"Ah, she's awake. Looks like her condition's far from critical - she may even be able to walk on her own pretty soon."

"Thank you very much."

"No problem. Figured I'd better not refuse a request from Shizuo's brother if I didn't want to be punched all the way to Mars afterwards."

She still hadn't regained her consciousness in its entirety.

But she was able to understand that the whiteness in her vague vision was that of the ceiling.

She could hear voices engaged in what seemed like a conversation, but it still felt like everything around her was happening in a distant land.

People can't see things happening in a distant land without television. But somehow she felt as if she were a TV set capable of processing wave signals from afar. Her senses slowly began to sharpen.

She could hear a voice devoid of emotion. Another voice was laughing wryly.

"I'm sorry Brother's been bothering you so much....."

"Not at all, I actually have to thank him since he had helped Celty out of so much. But I can't afford to have Celty fall for Shizuo, so will you tell him to try not to let her see too much of his manly side? I can't tell him myself since he'd be sure to beat me up if I did. Ah, I'm a little thirsty. Can I get some water?"

"I'll get it."

"Ah, thanks. As for her.....can she drink? Get her a glass of water too just in case."

The male who said this was looking at her face.

He was a young man wearing glasses and giving off the vibe of an intellectual.

Judging by the white coat he wore he was probably a doctor of sorts.

But the room they were in did not look like one she would expect to see in a hospital.

She saw bookshelves that lined an entire wall as well as ornamental foliage plants often seen in expensive restaurants.

It would have been a pretty chic room if not for the laundry hanging from several hangers at the entrance.

As her gaze fell on the bubbling water tank that held tropical fish, she began to hear the meows of a cat from somewhere inside the room. The room looked expensive and cozy at the same time.

- Where...am...

She blinked hard and tried to clear her head.

But the next second, she realized that a dull pain was running through her entire body.

-Uh.

The pain was not severe enough to make her scream, but it was still a wonder how she only just took notice.

Seeing that she was frowning from the pain, the male who looked like a doctor said:

"Ah, don't make yourself get up if you don't feel up for it. Even though I did give you analgesics - and even though your recovery was fast, your injuries were serious enough to put anyone into a coma. I wouldn't have been surprised if you failed to wake up."

She regained her breath quietly as the doctor briefed her.

If this had been the hospital, she would have had to ready herself mentally for what was to come next -

But now, since she had not the slightest idea where she was, she needed to know first.

"....."

"Are you all right? Any sense of sharper pain other than the dull pain you're supposed to feel throughout your body?"

"....."

The male in the white coat nodded as if reassured as she shook her head.

It was probably safe to assume that the doctor would not harm her.

She swallowed hard and said in a determined but stifled voice:

"Can I ask.....where.....this place is?"

Her voice was too delicate to convince anyone that only minutes ago she had been wearing a zombie mask. Kishitani Shinra - the male in the white coat - was apparently moved as he continued to nod:

"Ahhh, your voice sounds exactly the same as it did on television."

"Ex - Excuse me....."

"Oops, I'm sorry. But please allow me to savor this moment. This is different from love, but before I answer your question...please let me savor the excitement at meeting someone I admire. Just a couple of seconds, please."

"Ah...um....."

The female on the bed had to stop talking and nod instead to avoid more pain.

Shinra stroked his own chest as if relieved before raising his open arms high again to express his heartfelt happiness in front of the injured:

"It's a world worth living in after all despite all the tribulations it puts us through! This is what's moving about it! Could you...um...once you feel comfortable enough to walk again, could I have your autograph? Can I have two if that's possible? I know it would sound like we're just jumping the wagon, but my roommate is also a big fan of yours!"

The underground doctor seemed to have forgotten his gentlemanly manners completely and was bubbling with joy in front of the injured. He bowed cautiously to the idol he admired.

But to be fair, a lot of males would have behaved the same way he did.

Some would even be so nervous that they'd be able to do little more than stare and stutter.

"Who would have expected that this indecent job I have - "

Shinra opened his arms even wider and said the name of his patient aloud -

" - would have given me the opportunity to treat everyone's idol, Hijiribe Ruri!"

♂♀

Excerpt from the entry for Hijiribe Ruri from Fuguruma Youki, the Free Online Encyclopedia

Hijiribe Ruri (聖辺ルリ) is a Japanese actress, talent and model. Her agency is Yodogiri Shining Corporation.

Her real name is the same as her showbiz name.

Her birth year is unknown. Her birthday is August the 8th.

She was originally an apprentice of Zakuroya Tenjin, a special make-up artist, and later

scouted by Yodogiri Shining Corporation to debut as a model.

Before she debuted, she had already served as a special make-up artist for several Japanese films, the most critically acclaimed being her work in "Vampire Ninja Carmilla Saizou", for which she was listed alongside her master in the "100 Juiciest Special Make-Up Artists" by the World Film Village Association.

After that, she debuted as a magazine model and began to earn supporting parts in TV series only half a year later. Her unique looks attracted many loyal fans.

She is often regarded as the type of idol who attracted fans not because of her acting skills but because of the uniqueness in herself.

Her impeccable white skin and her melancholic and delicate looks blessed her with a sort of inhumanly charm. Most of her roles were delicate females with dark and downbeat personalities.

Unconfirmed rumor has it that she's a "natural beauty" who never puts on any make-up.

Her personality is said to be just as delicate and maidenlike in real life as on-screen. She mentioned in an interview that she did not have friends or a boyfriend because she lacked the necessary social skills.

Although her popularity is widely attributed to her looks, she remains without a rival since there are currently no actresses or models who are of the same type as she is. Her unworldly charm makes her popular among both male and female fans.

It is widely believed that she is not very athletic, and therefore has never taken part in sporting events like swimming contests on TV.

Since her downbeat personality made her an easy victim in variety shows, she is usually invited to talk shows instead. However, she hardly ever talks or reveals her own character unless prompted to by other artists moderating the shows. She also said that she was not very athletic in a talk show.

But there are reports saying that she was an outstanding athlete in areas like track and field when she was in elementary school, and that her delicateness is a show she put on for popularity - this view is supported by many of her fans. ^(*Citation needed)

Additionally, she was popular among anime and manga fans because her unworldly aura resembles those of 2D characters. She topped the chart in an "Artists Who Should Become Cosplayers" vote online.

♂♀

Without a doubt, this very idol - Hijiribe Ruri - was right in front of Shinra's eyes.

After the zombie make-up was removed, she appeared unworldly in a different sense.

Naturally, she was not wearing any make-up right now. But her skin remained silky smooth and her features as delicate and refined as a painting.

- Hmm...if Yuuhei-kun had stepped straight out of a shoujo manga, this girl had probably stepped straight off a Western oil painting of angels.

Shinra looked at her in awe and regretted deeply about not having brought colored paper for autographing purposes.

- Anyway. I can hardly blame myself for not having expected to meet her.

He was doing his usual cleaning around the house and waiting for Celty to return when his cell phone rang all of a sudden. The number displayed on the screen evoked his nostalgia.

The younger brother of his old schoolmate called saying "I have a patient I cannot take to ordinary doctors. Please come over." and he had hurried over since he had nothing else to do anyway -

And what he saw made him conclude in gratitude that it was the right decision of his life to become an underground doctor.

Hijiribe Ruri thought to herself as she watched the overexcited male in the white coat.

- So...who exactly is this man?

- This.....looks like someone's home.....but then.....it's way too big...

Judging by the way the interior was furnished, it was probably a room in an apartment rather than a single-family house. But what bothered her was the fact that it was way too roomy for an apartment.

- Right...how come I.....

- I remember being hit with a park bench by that man in the bartender suit...and then.....

She recalled vaguely that that was when she lost her consciousness.

Someone took her to this room and fetched this male who was apparently an underground

doctor to treat her.

That was what she was able to gather from all the loud and excited talking the male was doing.

"....."

Ruri decided to remain silent and contemplate her situation.

- Does this man...know who I really am?

- He already knows that I'm Hijiribe Ruri.

The important thing for her was whether he had realized that she was the killing monster "Hollywood".

The very fact that he did not call an ambulance was suspicious enough to her. Had he done so she would have been in a far more dangerous situation - but not as fatal as the situation she would have been in had he just left her lying on the ground.

She felt pain coming from all over her body as she continued to think - but suddenly, a cat climbed onto her abdomen.

"Urgh....."

The pain intensified in a split second as the cat's paws came into contact with her wounds.

She was about to get the cat off her body when she noticed that the cat on her blanket was extremely cute.

It was a teeny Scottish Fold with its ears folded forwards.

The creature looked like a soft ball of wool with life; it tilted its head to stare at Ruri and mewed.

The killing monster found it so cute that for a second she completely forgot about her pain and her worries.

But -

Another male had entered the room, stopped next to the male in the white coat and reached out his hands to fetch the cat.

"Shush, don't do that, Dokusonmaru. You can't climb onto someone who's injured."

"Dokusonmaru?"

The young man said with a face devoid of expression as the male in the white coat asked.

"His name's Yuigadokusonmaru*. Isn't it cute?"

** "Yuigadokuson" is a Japanese/Chinese idiom meaning "Only I am holy." It was first said by Buddha when he was born, and later used to describe a holier-than-thou attitude.*

He proceeded to hand the cat over to the male in the white coat, who withdrew himself as if scared.

".....You need to smile a little bit when you give cats to other people to pet. Otherwise it's just scary."

"...? But I am smiling."

"If my dad ever sees you he'll probably be dying to cut you open."

The underground doctor shook his head in resignation at the completely emotionless face of the other male.

As the two of them conversed, Ruri was able to notice -

That the young man wearing a cheap T-shirt with a designer belt had a face she was not unfamiliar with.

"Hanejima...Yuuhei...san?"

Putting the cat on the floor, Yuuhei turned around with no expression on his face as he heard her murmur and said:

"Good. You look like you're feeling even better than I expected."

None of his body parts moved except his lips. It was impossible to tell whether he actually felt happy about it, but -

She was aware that her "fellow artist" was a person who hardly ever showed any emotion.

They had met a few times, but they weren't really friends.

Ruri did Yuuhei's vampire make-up in his debut film "Vampire Ninja Carmilla Saizou".

After she debuted as an actress, they had appeared together on the TV screen for two hours in another series.

It was a crime drama with Yuuhei starring as the police officer and Ruri guest starring as the daughter of the criminal. And that was it.

- Why...

The question surfaced in her mind before she could even allow herself to be surprised at meeting him again.

How come a fellow actor is standing right in front of her eyes?

- Could it be that....."he" ...told him to.....

She shook her head immediately at this thought.

- "He" has no connection to Hanejima-san as far as she knew.

Then why?

A look of confusion appeared on the actress's beautiful face. Yuuhei asked quietly:

"Would you like water?"

And handed her the glass with a robotic expression on his face.

Ruri felt like she was about to be poisoned, but took the glass anyway and let the water flow down her throat.

Her whole body was in pain from trying to sit up, but she could still drink.

As he watched Ruri, the underground doctor said to Yuuhei:

"So yeah, her insides seem intact even though her muscles are badly damaged. But just to be sure you should take her to the hospital and do either an X-ray or an MRI once she's able to walk on her own again. Internal bleeding in the skull won't manifest itself until much later. I would have performed the check myself if I were able to borrow Nebula's research facilities. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You're already doing me a great favor for coming over so late at night. Thank you so much."

"Ah, not at all, not at all. I should thank you instead for giving me this opportunity to get so close to my idol. But don't tell Celty I said that - she's also a huge fan of hers, and she would probably get jealous of me before she gets jealous of her."

The underground doctor was smiling a foolish smile again with a lover's joy -

When his cell phone vibrated from inside his chest pocket and he had to walk to a corner of the room to answer the call in a low voice.

The two talents did not try to make conversation on their own; an eerie silence fell.

Ruri had to break it when she apparently couldn't take it any more and said in a faint voice:

".....Why am I here?"

"Because you fell in front of my car when I was on my way home. I know it was a little rude on my part, but I felt like I should take you home and get a doctor I know to treat you."

"Why your home and not the hospital.....?"

"I had my reasons - "

Yuuhei paused to inhale before he continued:

" - but I think...Ruri-san would have wanted to avoid going to the hospital as well."

"....."

"If I am wrong, I will apologize right away and take you to the hospital."

".....No...this is good."

Ruri kept her vigilance in front of the expressionless Yuuhei as he continued to talk in a flat voice.

Silence fell again soon enough since their exchange remained polite and distant.

The underground doctor had returned. Sighing, he said:

"I'm sorry, but I just got another urgent patient! Really, I can't believe I got two in the same night. God, this is so annoying. It's not like I can get this close to Hijiribe Ruri-chan everyday at work....."

The male muttered his complaints as he got ready to leave. He whispered into Yuuhei's ear:

"Could you get her autograph for me? Celty would like one too, I guess. Please!"

"I'll make sure to ask her."

"Thank you! In return for that I'll just treat her for free today!"

"But that's a little....."

"No problem! I'll make that other patient who dared ruin my hour of bliss pay instead! Bye, and don't forget to say hi to Shizuo!"

The male was still smiling as he said this and walked out of the room in his white coat.

The cat left the room as well as if to see him off - leaving the two clamored-after top idols to their own devices.

Without the legions of fans that usually surrounded them, they passed the time in complete silence.

Yuuhei, who was sitting on a chair next to the bed, was the one to break the silence this time.

"Can I ask you something?"

".....What is it?"

Ruri sat up in her bed to face Yuuhei - and was shocked at what she saw.

Yuuhei was holding the zombie "skin" she had been wearing until a short while ago.

Ruri went tense as Yuuhei said what she was expecting him to say:

"Ruri-san...you're the killing monster 'Hollywood', aren't you?"

His tone made it sound like he was almost certain, but Ruri didn't give up trying to deny it, until -

"Your body is different from an ordinary human being's. The doctor told me that."

- He...is sure about what he said.

There was no point in lying or trying to change the topic.

Ruri lowered her head and muttered a vague reply as she looked at the poker face right in front of her.

".....If you're so certain...why didn't you...hand me over to the police?"

"Do you want me to? If so, I'd suggest that you surrender yourself instead."

".....That's not what I meant....."

"Then I see no problem."

Yuuhei said in a voice devoid of emotion as he stood up. Having just confirmed her identity as "Hollywood" from the conversation they had just had, he nevertheless reached out for the empty glass in Ruri's hand in silence.

All of a sudden -

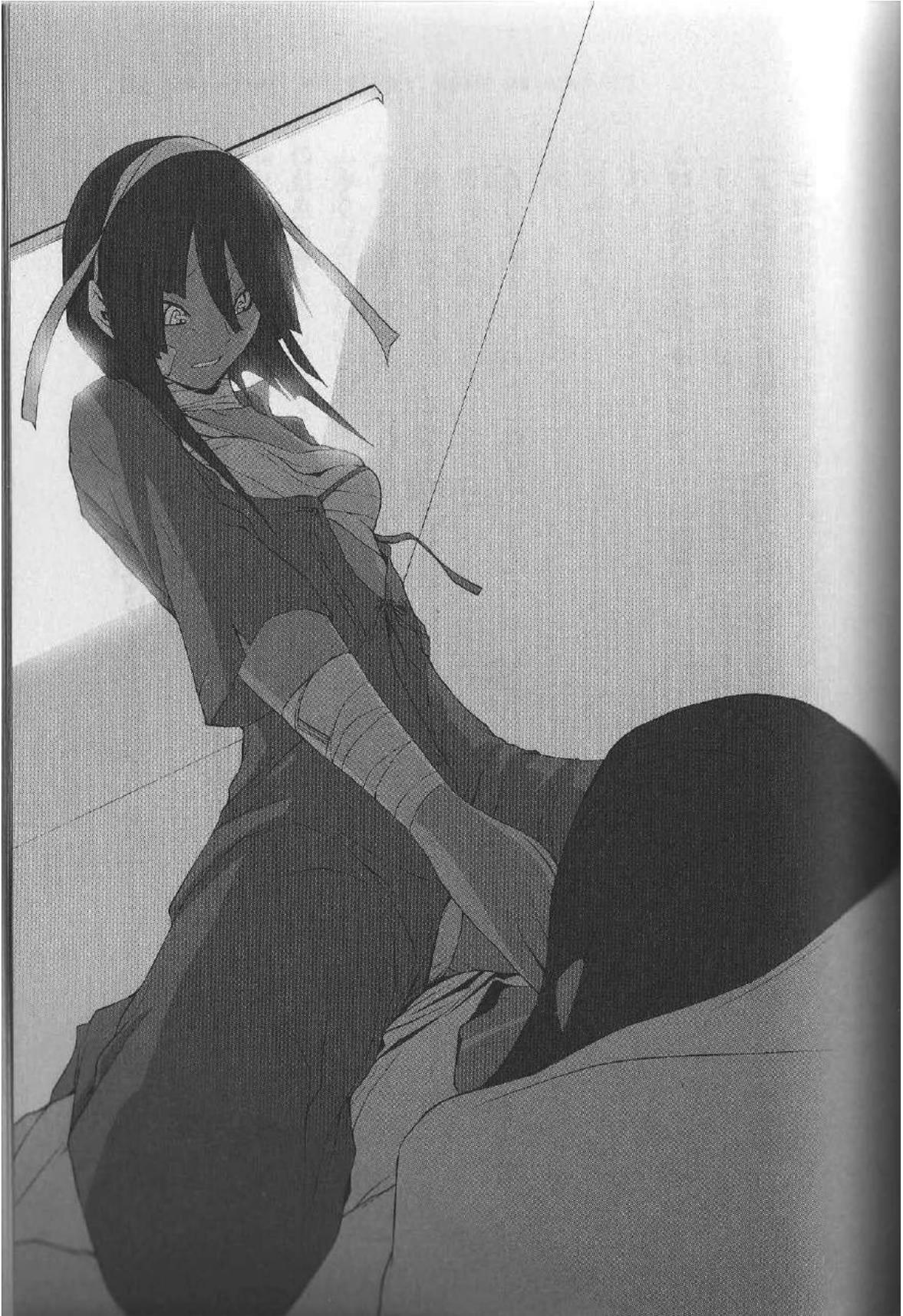
".....I see."

As Ruri opened her mouth quietly -

Her wrist had sprung forwards as if propelled by a spring and grabbed Yuuhei's neck.

She pulled Yuuhei onto the bed and, ignoring the pain that was washing through her body, turned over and pinned him to the bed and sat astride him.

Ruri held her finger to Yuuhei's throat and asked him a question.



Even though she delivered it in a nonchalant tone, her voice still exerted overwhelming pressure on the listener:

"So...did you never expect things to turn out like this.....?"

"....."

Despite everything, Yuuhei remained expressionless as ever. Ruri's tone went steelier as her irritation grew.

"I will say this to you, Yuuhei-san. I know your personality is not a facade you put on for popularity.....but to be frank, it is simply abnormal."

"Really?"

"Yes. Your brain is without doubt abnormal if you just let killing monsters in your home like this."

Ruri raised her hand and asked the young man under her who was tilting his head:

"You might get killed - did that thought...really not occur to you even for a split second?"

♂♀

Two hours after, Sunshine 60 Street, Ikebukuro

"My, my, I can't take this anymore. I need at least two more heads and four more arms for a night with two jobs like this one."

Shinra was muttering things that would have earned him a good spanking had a real doctor been able to hear him. He put the money into his medical bag and continued to walk in the Ikebukuro night.

"There's still time. I'll probably just go back to Yuuhei-kun's apartment and get the autographs before heading home."

As he walked the nightly street with sparse traffic with such thoughts on his mind -

(Oi, isn't that the guy?)

(Ahh, that's him!)

(There's no mistaking it!)

(Oi! Camera, camera!)

"?"

He heard noisy voices approach him and raised his eyes -

And was suddenly showered in flashlight.

"Uwah!?"

"Ex - Excuse me! You are the one who walked out of Hanejima Yuuhei-san's apartment about two hours ago, right?"

".....!?"

He had already been assaulted by five rounds of flashlights when he came to the realization that these people were paparazzi.

"Can you answer questions for us? Every apartment in that building belongs to Hanejima Yuuhei-san, so are you a friend of Hanejima-san's.....?"

- Ehhh!? No kidding!? Is he that rich!?

He had heard that Yuuhei had used the 1.2 billion to make even more with his investment skills. But it was still unbelievable that he was able to purchase the entire building of luxury apartments, each one of them comparable to the one Shinra and Celty was nurturing their love in.

But it was hardly the time to wonder whether that was true.

"Can I ask you something? About an hour ago Hanejima-san and actress Hijiribe Ruri were seen kissing in front of the apartment. Do you know what kind of relationship they have?"

"What was it that they asked you to come over so late to treat?"

"What's your speciality - ?"

"Are you a gynecologist.....?"

Voices, voices, voices from journalists hired by several magazines were threatening to drown him like a raging tide.

"Wait! Wait! Wait a moment please!"

- What!? What!?

- What the hell has happened afterwards between those two!?

- Why were they kissing all of a sudden!

- What about the autographs!? Did he get the autographs!?

An overload of questions popped up in Shinra's confused head - but he knew that his ability to think rationally was being deprived by the combined attack of questions and flashlights.

"I see...anyway, I'll deliver the answers to your questions straight to you rather than announce them here, so allow me to insert some commercials here! Stay tuned!"

Before he even finished the sentence, Shinra had made run for it at full speed.

"Ah, he's running away!"

"Please wait!"

"Say something please! Anything is good!"

As he looked back on the journalists and cameramen who ran after him -

Kishitani Shinra had embarked on some real physical endeavor he had been foreign to for years.

He did not know, however, that Celty got chased by television cameramen the same night -

♂♀

Twelve hours later, an apartment building on Kawagoe Highway

"God, now that I think about it, yesterday was a scary day."

Shinra wriggled around on the floor in the bundle of black threads as he waited for Celty to return.

"Speaking of which, what the hell happened exactly...? After I'm freed from this cocoon I'll...guess I'll watch the news first. But they're probably not going to show my photo in the news since I ran away yelling that I would sue them if they infringed on my right of publicity."

As he muttered such things to himself he remembered that it was almost time for the wide show, so he tried to flip channels as he kept wriggling like a black caterpillar.

Just as he had at last found it -

The doorbell rang.

- Ahhh, this is bad. I can't receive guests in my current state even if I wanted to...

- But hang on! If I can get someone to help I might be able to break free from these threads!

Shinra thought to himself as he tried to come up with a convincing story to get others to help him.

But before he could even think of a way to answer the doorbell, he heard the sound of a key being turned.

"Ah, Celty, is that you!? You're a lifesaver! But then I can make it through anything if I

just think of it as a form of neglect play to heighten my spirit....."

He greeted the person who had entered the apartment with a silly lovey-dovey smile -

But it turned out to be several well-built men and a slimmer one.

The stronger men didn't look like they had decent occupations -

The thin man at the center of the group, however, looked no different from any ordinary person.

The thin man stepped into Shinra's apartment without showing any sign of discomfort and said in an icy voice:

"Neglect play...I have to say I don't really understand that phrase."

".....Sir Shiki*, to whom do I owe the honor today?"

** Shinra (and Akabayashi, too) refers to Shiki as "Shiki-no-danna", the honorific being one that shows casual respect towards a male figure with some level of authority. It's hard to find an English equivalent so I had to go with "Sir".*

The male referred to as Shiki smiled in a wary but peaceful way to the man who spoke to him.

Needless to say, they all belonged to the violence group called Awakusu-kai. Shiki was probably the youngest among its authority figures.

"It doesn't look like...you have an urgent patient..."

Shiki was the only one who held the spare card key to this apartment.

They were the Shinra's VIP clients more or less because of their special occupation. Shinra had given Shiki the spare key just so that he would be able to ask Shinra for help in case of emergency even if Shinra was sleeping.

But it didn't look like they had come with someone who had just been shot or anything.

As Shinra wondered what exactly this was about - Shiki, with a stern expression on his face, tossed a newspaper to the black caterpillar Shinra had become.

The bold headline of today's entertainment paper read "HANEJIMA x HIJIRIBE: SECRET 'PREGNANT!?' DATE IN THE MIDNIGHT....." and it was obvious that he had made it into the report as well.

In short, a doctor that looked like a gynecologist was seen walking out of the apartment before the two idols were seen kissing each other.

Shinra read the report closely and sighed in relief at not finding his own face staring back at him in the newspaper.

But -

"Really, you...who else would wander the streets in the neighborhood in a white coat?"

One of Shiki's subordinates said. Shiki bent down in front of Shinra and asked:

"We have only one thing to ask you, sensei..."

"What is it?"

"You...were doctoring Hijiribe Ruri, weren't you?"

"Kind of, yeah."

Shinra answered without a second thought. Shiki quietly put on a cold expression - although it was cold in a different sense from Yuuhei's.

".....Then I'll just skip the formalities and ask - what is she?"

His voice was calm, but so powerful that it would have been able to crush his conversation partner all by itself.

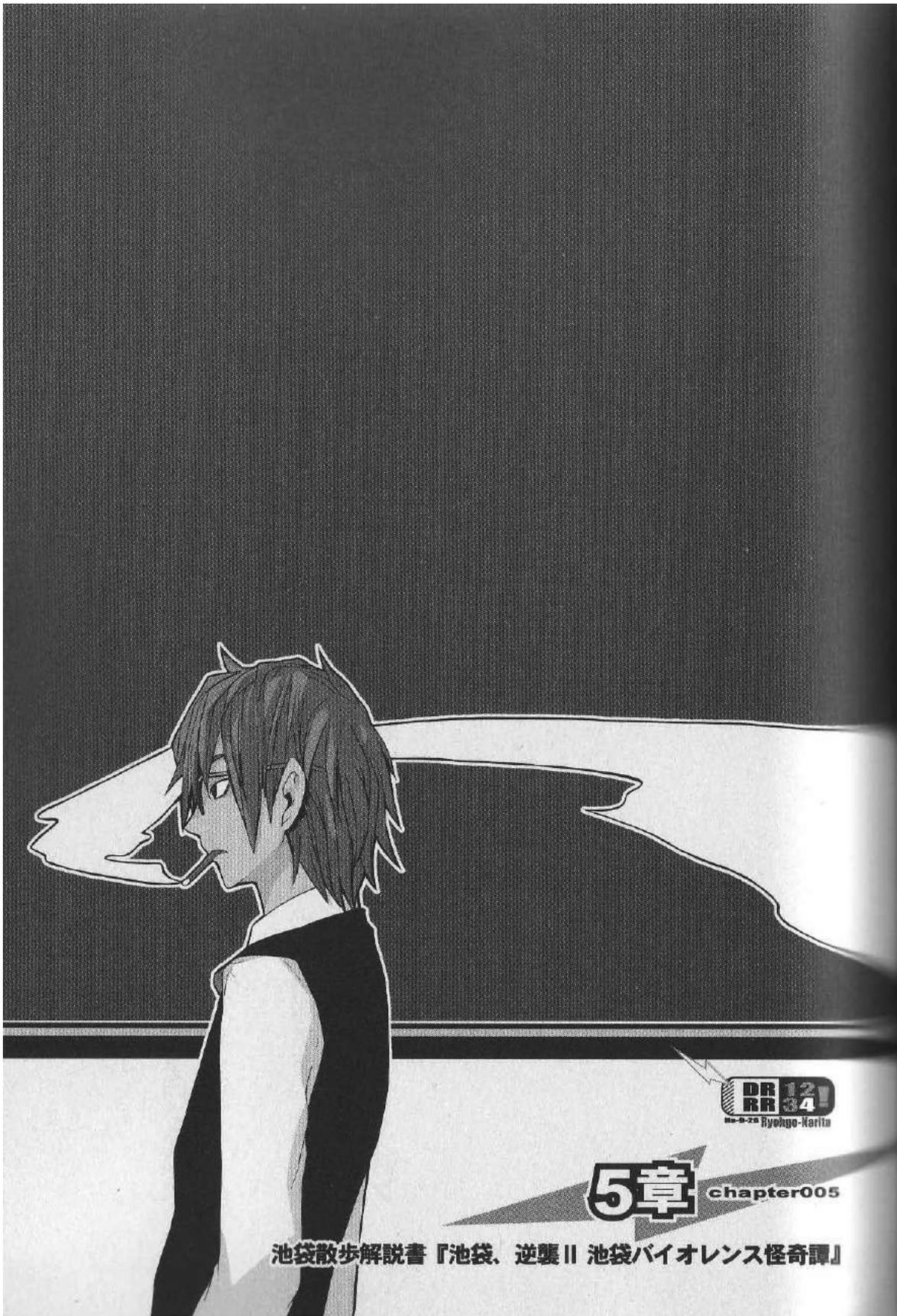
Shinra, however, avoided the question and said in an airy manner:

".....Before that, can I ask for a favor?"

Shiki's face had turned somewhat pale while Shinra's looked more serious than ever as he said the most important thing on his mind at the moment:

"Could you...help free me from these black ropes?"

"I've been dying to go to the bathroom....."



DR 12
RR 34!
No. 9-26 Ryohgo-Marita

5章 chapter005

池袋散歩解説書『池袋、逆襲II 池袋バイオレンス怪奇譚』

CHAPTER 5

A PEDESTRIAN'S GUIDE TO IKEBUKURO IKEBUKURO ATTACKS BACK II: THE VIOLENCE LEGENDS OF IKEBUKURO

The future -

Excerpt from the Foreword of Ikebukuro Attacks Back II -

Hi.

Before we start there are several things I'd like you to know. I have no intention of revealing my true identity, and trust me, you wouldn't believe me even if I did.

So this is what I will tell you. I'm not going to say exactly what I am - I'll leave that to your own imagination.

Either way, I had virtually nothing to do with the events mentioned in this book.

Except maybe the "Ripper Night", but my involvement in that incident was limited to the cyberspace - I had nothing to do with it in the real world.

That's right...I was just an observer.

All I did was...watch.

I told you I was not planning to reveal my identity, but I can at least tell you my name.

My name is Shinichi. Tsukumoya Shinichi.

Feel free to forget it since it's not all that important anyway.

Excerpt from Chapter 5 of Ikebukuro Attacks Back, "The Shadow Rider Soars Under the Sun" -

Do you know about the bousouzoku incident on that Ikebukuro afternoon early this spring?

Several gangs of bousouzoku had soared down the road while fighting against each other. It was a scene reminiscent of the Spanish Los Sanfermines or tornado attacks.

They were fighting while moving at an extreme speed. For the residents, tourists and people who had come to do their shopping it was probably purely shocking.

It was said that a police officer on a white motorbike took down all the gangs single-handedly.

So what had triggered this incident?

It was the Black Motorbike - the being opposite to the White Motorbike in every way.

There was a commotion online the day before this incident happened.

A shocking video aired on TV (explained in more detail in other chapters) led to a big talent agency offering a reward of ten million yen to anyone who could find out the real identity of Mr. or Ms. Black Rider on the Black Motorbike.

People went after the money like bees after honey for a few days - after all, all they needed to do was to go after a motorbike and reveal the rider's identity, and the sum of the reward rivaled that of a cross-talk contest or the jackpot in a TV quiz show.

It only lasted for a few days because complaints about the commotion came from the police, local residents and even the agency's own actors and actresses, forcing the agency to withdraw its offer.

But that too caused another commotion. The reward made it to headlines the very next day, and its withdrawal left the media in major confusion. A Tsuchinoko*-like mania swept through the society after the Black Motorbike...or, to be exact, the motorbike's transformation into a horse, was captured on film by cameramen from a certain TV channel.

**Tsuchinoko: a legendary snake-like cryptid.*

Is that video real or fake? It remained controversial - but I know the truth.

However, I will not say it here.

I mentioned in the foreword that I would not interfere in the happenings in this city.

I have to be nothing more than an observer in order to write this book.

I will not reveal the real identity of the Black Motorbike in this book no matter what.

I really do know it, though. It's your choice whether to believe me or not.

Similarly, there were other events that led to the "Ikebukuro Bousouzoku Incident".

Although if you only look at the way the incident ended, you'll naturally be led to think that it was only a ruckus caused by bousouzoku from other cities who later returned home.

But there was "something else".

Something that was not covered in newspapers or on TV.

I know what it was, but I will not tell.

If you really wish to know, please go find out on your own.

Everything has a hidden side.

But you'll never find it unless you pay.

If you wish to know, you'll end up getting yourself involved and experiencing it on your own.

I am no exception.

All I did was watch.

Therefore - I have no way of knowing how the parties involved felt about the incident even if I do know what actually happened behind the scenes.

I will say to you what is obvious: the parties involved do know how they themselves felt.

That's the way it is. If you really wish to find out the truth behind the scenes, you need to pay - whether the payment be in the form of money, time, or interpersonal responsibility. Pay for your viewership - and then you'll be able to browse the world like a book.

If you're strong enough, you can also extract the truth from the parties involved using your physical strength.

But I wouldn't recommend it since it would probably spell the end of you.

- Unless you're strong enough to defeat the debt collector in the bartender suit, that is -

In which case I won't stop you.

♂♀

Now - a national highway in Ikebukuro

"Stand still, bastard!"

"Shahzoahhhhh!"

"Dahjahhhhh!"

"drfthjk - !"

The young men, shouting nonsense as they soared, had Celty cornered on her motorbike.

- Ahhhhhh...why...why did things have to turn out like this?

The number of bousouzoku had increased; what was worse, a van that looked like it belonged to a TV station was now on their tail.

- If they want ten million yen that badly -

- Why don't they just work hard and save 50,000 yen each month and keep doing that for 200 months?

Celty shouted things somewhere between sense and nonsense in her heart. She tightened her grip on the handles and cheered her black motorbike on.

- We're flying, Shooter!

The black motorbike seemed to get what she was trying to say immediately. Instead of the sound of an engine came a sharp neigh as the motorbike pranced off the ground as if it were on springs.

"W - W - What....."

One of the bousouzoku screamed.

No wonder he was shocked - the motorbike had jumped at least two meters high into the air without a springboard.

The giant shadow jumped off the ground at a slightly askew angle, flying over the guardrail and at the direction of the sidewalk, even flying over the heads of dumbstruck passers-by -

And "landed" on the vertical wall of a building. It soared on with its side car parallel to the ground.

Celty let hand-shaped shadows extend from her body to grasp the baggage, from which the human hand continued to dangle and threaten to fall off the side car altogether.

The bousouzoku could only stare as their common sense was rendered increasingly useless -

"What are you playing at? Oi!"

"You want us to cut your limbs off?"

"Watch yourself or I'll engorge your ears!"

Their fuse seemed to have burned out at the inflow of supernatural phenomena into their senses. They continued to chase after Celty whether out of embarrassment, anger or sheer excitement.

- Ahhhhh! I really shouldn't have agreed to take this piece of baggage!

Celty was forcefully reminded of what had led her to.

♂♀

The past - thirty minutes ago

"I'm sorry to not have been able to make this job easier for you."

The male who was saying this to her was wearing sunglasses and a gauze mask that covered his nose. Additionally, he pulled his cap so low that his face was almost entirely concealed.

The tall, suspicious-looking male pointed at the large bag sitting next to him and explained the job.

"I want you to keep this for a day."

[Keep this?]

"Yeah, I have my reasons...anyway, if anyone sees it today I'll be in trouble. You can get rid of it any way you want after 24 hours from now. If you want to bring it back to this park, I can take care of it. Ah, also, please don't try to find out what's inside the bag....."

The job sounded outright fishy.

Even if it hadn't, Celty still had to keep in mind that she was already wanted. She'd be in even greater trouble if the contents of the bag turned out to be bombs or transponders. Celty decided to not conceal her anxiety as she began to type.

[.....Sorry, but could you tell me who gave you my name?]

"An information broker named Orihara Izaya."

[.....Ahh, that explains it.]

- Just as I thought.

It was not the first or second time suspicious clients had come to her.

Among the jobs they entrusted her with there were, for example, requests like "Please take this handmade bomb my subordinate made behind my back to a construction zone in the mountains and get rid of it." and she had already found herself several times in action-film-like situations.

These suspicious clients knew her almost invariably from Orihara Izaya.

Celty pondered this over for a moment - and realized that the bag was just about the right size of an average human. She heard her heart's sirens wail.

- I've been asked to transport people who had been drugged with sleeping pills before.....in fact, it was Izaya who had asked me.

Celty shook her head quietly as she was reminded of what happened about a year ago.

- If it were any other day I would still have taken this job, but today...it's just not the best idea to.

- I'll refuse politely.

[I'm really sorry, but I'm only a courier. If you're looking for a place for safekeeping, I suggest that you try the bank.]

"I know. But I really want you to take this job."

[I don't think I can -]

Celty's fingers stopped typing at that.

The male had handed her the white envelope he was holding and said after looking around to make sure no one was listening:

"How about I pay you in full now since you know how this job is going to be like? I can only hope that this is enough, though....."

The envelope he had handed to her contained - if not as many ten-thousand yen bills as the envelope she had lost the day before - then at least about 80% as many.

Celty deleted everything she had typed in silence. It took her only a second to type anew the following words:

[I'll do it!]

♂♀

Now - a national highway passing through Ikebukuro

- Ahhhhh.....I should never have accepted the money...

- I was too thoughtless...too thoughtless! Just because I lost money the day before...

But it was too late for her to regret.

The White Motorbike had without doubt also seen the human arm when it dangled from the bag.

Before that all she had violated was the traffic law, and she would only get punished if they had been able to catch her. But if she was to become a murder or a body-abandoning suspect, she would doubtlessly become wanted by the police. Celty felt like she could cry at that thought.

- It's OK if the police are to go after me...

- But I don't want to part with Shinra because of that!

- How long will I have to hide before it's no longer legal for them to treat me as a body-abandoning suspect?

- Will they be able to treat me as a suspect at all if they don't find the body?

Celty jumped from the side of the building and landed on another.

Her movement looked too smooth to be real, to the extent that the viewer would easily mistake it for some sort of CG effect.

- Screw it. I thought I was ready for whatever situation this job would land me in...

- I know the way I make my living is abnormal as it is.....!

- But I still can't afford getting arrested now.....!

- I should at least try to get away from Ikebukuro before I get anyone I know into trouble.....

Celty continued to soar on her motorbike as she contemplated her plight after her arrest.

Faces she knew rushed to her mind one after another.

- Ahh, a lot has happened this year.....

- I met Mikado and other people...and became a Dollars.....

- I became friends with Anri-chan as well.....

- Most importantly, Shinra.....

-

- Shinra.....

- Ahh, I can't!

Love and sadness rushed to her heart at the same time, but unfortunately she had time for neither.

- Cheer up!

- Do something!

- Figure out a way out of this!

There was no reason to give up before she had at least tried what she could.

Celty made up her mind to focus on getting away from the bousouzoku on her tail. She

turned her sensors forward and made a turn at a crossing.

There was no danger of running into another vehicle as long as she kept her motorbike on the wall. She managed to do so with her shadow and was able to get rid of the bousouzoku coming for her from behind by taking a sharp turn without decelerating.

But she knew it was not going to be long before they caught up with her again.

Just as she turned into another street to eventually go back onto the main street to get rid of them once and for all -

She saw a familiar-looking van driving down the road right beside her.

- That's.....

It was an unforgettable van with anime characters painted on its door.

- That's Kadota, Yumasaki and Karisawa's van!

Celty decelerated immediately as this thought (which would have made Togusa cry had he been able to hear it). Then - something struck her as weird about the van.

- Weird?

- Wait...wait a second...why...how come.....

She noticed small dents all over the van's body and star cracks on the windshield; it looked as if the van had just escaped slightly scathed from a commotion.

Celty quickly got off the wall and closer to the van.

From the van, voices came as the people inside took notice of her.

".....Black Motorbike!"

"Celty-san!?"

".....Celty-san!"

"Ah, Cel-chi!"

"Isn't it Celty-san?"

"What's up? Who is it, Ryuugamine-sempai?"

"Ahhh! It's the Black Motorbike! The Black Motorbike, Kuru-nee!"

"Shock (No way)....."

Celty started as she saw a number of faces she did and didn't know pressed against the window of the van. She adjusted her speed to keep up with the van.

Concealing the baggage in her side car from their view with her shadows, she steered the motorbike expertly with one hand and typed with the other:

[Sorry, the bousouzoku's after me! Try to get away from me as fast as you can!]

"....."

Kadota smiled hollowly at the words she managed to type and replied:

"Actually.....we're probably the ones who should be apologizing to you, Black Motorbike-san."

- Eh?

At that moment, horns blew from behind.

Celty turned sharply to find a gang of bousouzoku on their motorbikes.

"We already have some after us as well."

The aggregation of violence and pent-up energy merged with the gang chasing after Celty
-

The resulting group consisted of over fifty motorbikes and advanced on them with as much killing intent as there was in a typhoon.

[Should we despair now?]

"Not when there's still one single hope."

Celty tilted her helmet, not understanding what Kadota had just said. Kadota smirked and said:

"These guys are all 'guests' in this city. We, on the other hand, are 'Dollars', aren't we?"

"If anyone dares intrude on our territory...we'll just have to make them learn."

♂♀

Two hours ago, somewhere in Ikebukuro

"Oi, bro."

The young men who had two girls cornered turned around in surprise as Kadota called out to them.

"Huh? Who the hell are you?"

"What do you want? Ah?"

Kadota flexed his neck muscles and cackled his joints at their fierce replies and said:

"I just found it funny...that four grown men are picking on two little girls."

"....."

"Show me your sticker with your gang name and I'll change it to 'the Rampaging Lolicons' for you."

"Shut up! Die!"

Kadota provoked them as a way of greeting.

One of the delinquents fell for his tactics and grabbed his collar.

Kadota used the momentum to crush his nose with his forehead as his collar was pulled forwards.

"Gahhh!? ...Urgh!"

The delinquent's face was distorted at the sudden impact. Blood gushed from his now-askew nose a second later.

"That was close. What kind of bastard tries to knock people out with his nose? You were lucky that my skull didn't crack."

Kadota touched his forehead as he said apathetically to the delinquent, who groaned in pain as he pressed his hands to his face.

The other three delinquents stopped smirking and instead stared with angry and alarmed eyes at Kadota, who continued to act as if he were the victim.

"You...ahhhhhhh - ahhhhhhhhh! Gulp! Uh! Uwah!"

"!?"

One of the delinquents yelled suddenly, as everyone else looked in his direction.

They saw a man moaning with his hands cupping his genitals and a girl in a gymnastic suit holding on to her schoolbag.

It wasn't hard to guess what had just happened just by looking at the male. The whites of his eyes were showing as he pressed his lower belly in pain.

As the delinquents stood frozen on their spots -

The bespectacled, docile-looking girl, who didn't look in the least worried that her panties would be showing, stepped onto one of the motorbikes and delivered a kick at the jaw of the male next to it.

Her shoes were safety shoes with iron plates placed inside at the front - which made them totally "unsafe" weapons against the delinquents.

"Gulp....."

After a second, the male stumbled and fell.

That left only one delinquent still standing. As for the one who had blood gushing out of his nose - Karisawa and Yumasaki had tied his wrists together with his turban.

".....You...you...you just wait! Especially you, the capped one!"

The unhurt delinquent glared at the girls and turned to threaten Kadota instead.

It looked like he was planning to pretend that two little girls had never got them the better of and blame everything on Kadota.

Kadota watched the men escape on their motorbikes and turned to say to the girls in a sailor uniform and a gymnastic suit respectively:

"Oi, we'll be in trouble if they call the police or get more of their people to come over. It's about time we got out of here."

"Eh? Ah....."

"I'm Kadota. You're Izaya's sisters, aren't you?"

"Ehhh!? You know Iza-nii!? ...Ah, now that I think of it, we've met you once before!"

Mairu looked genuinely surprised, while Kururi, who had probably been aware from the very beginning that Kadota was an acquaintance of their brother's, lowered her head and said:

"Thank (Thank you)...very (very much)..."

"No...no problem. I know this may sound patronizing, but you attract too much attention for your own good. If you're going somewhere, my friend can drive you - how does that sound?"

"Uwah, really?"

"Yep, but there's no way we would be able to drive you to Hokkaido even if you asked."

Mairu brandished her hands and asked a bitterly laughing Kadota:

"Listen! We were planning to walk around Ikebukuro for an entire day today! Someone we know was supposed to contact us, but we were told to 'Wait for the call to tell you the time and place to meet!'"

"What does that even mean? ...Whatever. These two people are going to show some Raira students around Ikebukuro as well, do you wanna tag along?"

Karisawa and Yumasaki considered this for a few seconds before answering casually:

"Yeah~ we won't mind at all."

"Not at all~ these girls look kind of like 2D characters anyway."

"Shut up."

And this was how these people came to move together as a group that afternoon.

Kadota tried to convince the girls several times that they should head straight home, but he didn't insist further once they told him that they had something they must do in the city.

- Whatever. If worst comes to worst I'll just contact Izaya and tell him to take these two home.

He nodded to the girls once he had made up his mind. He called Togusa and took the girls to a nearby cafe to wait for the van.

A short while later -

Just as they were about to get into Togusa's van, about five times as many delinquents caught up with them on their motorbikes, and the chase - or the fight - began.

♂♀

Now - inside Togusa's van on a national highway passing through Ikebukuro

"So that guy was just pretending to run away - he was actually following us around and thought he could get us when we were about to walk out of the cafe."

"My, my, did these guys grow up reading nothing but manga with delinquent protagonists?"

"I'm sure it's not like that, Karisawa-san! Delinquent protagonists in manga are almost always manly with a strong sense of justice! If they used them as textbooks in schools boys would have known never to bully girls!"

"But isn't that because they are too stupid to understand what the textbooks are trying to teach them?"

".....But - !"

Yumasaki and Karisawa's conversation was as predictable as ever despite their current perilous situation, which involved scores of motorbikes chasing after them.

"W - What are we going to do about this? Are we calling the police.....?"

Kadota shook his head at Mikado's shaky inquiry.

"I think someone else already did that! I saw several white motorbikes just now! The problem is whether we can get away from them in these few minutes before more police can come. If these guys are going to gang up on us with steel pipes...I can still deal with them, but you'll be screwed."

"T - That's true....."

"Don't worry. I'll at least make sure to get you and the other students out of here. If worst comes to worst we'll charge straight into the police station."

A never-heard-before sound came from the driver's seat as Kadota said this. Mikado, on the other hand, relaxed somewhat and nodded -

- Don't!

He hastened to tell himself that he should put others first.

- I should make sure to get Sonohara-san, Aoba-kun and those two girls over there out of this place first.....

- But I can't just run away and leave the Dollars people and Celty-san to deal with this on their own either.....!

He gritted his teeth trying to fight back his fear as he was reminded of the time when they had charged into the Yellow Turbans' meeting place - and of the time he had first met Celty.

- I might...die...but...I have to do something.....

Aoba, who saw Mikado tighten his fists with a stern look on his face, talked to him in a surprised tone:

"Um...Ryuugamine-sempai, are you all right?"

"Eh? Ah...ah...ahhh, yeah, I'm good. Sorry, I'll at least try to get you....."

"No...it's not that...actually, forget about it..."

"?"

Mikado was confused for a moment at Aoba's ambiguous reply -

- before he turned his gaze towards the window again.

Something that looked like a bag could be seen in the side car Celty had apparently installed on her motorbike.

"Celty-san...now that you're wanted....."

For a split second.

In that fraction of a second the boy stared at Celty, and said something that sounded completely out of place.

"Will we ever be able to...see each other with light hearts again?"

♂♀

The Black Motorbike with entire gangs of bousouzoku on its tail soared alongside

Togusa's van.

Everyone in the van was also being chased, even though getting themselves involved in this incident was never the intention for some of them.

Celty, Kadota, Togusa, Karisawa, Yumasaki, Mikado, Anri, Aoba, Kururi and Mairu.

Ten protagonists in a Great Escape.

Celty would have been able to fight the bousouzoku on her own - but if she were to do so, she would face the great risk of being cornered by the White Motorbike and his subordinates.

- Wait, why don't I just do that, since that way...I'll at least be able to make sure everyone in the van gets away safely.....

Celty looked back and scanned the crowd behind her as she thought.

They had increased in number, and two TV helicopters had joined them in mid-air.

- Screw it, I can't risk making everyone look like they're accomplices of someone who's about to abandon a corpse.....

- If I'm not careful enough their faces may even be seen on television.....!

Kadota and his gang will probably be able to deal with it, but Anri, Mikado and other students will be in greater trouble. They may even get expelled if people knew that they have been involved with these riotous bousouzoku riots and myself -

- What should I do...

- What should I do? What should I do!?

She had always been alone.

She had been a courier in this town for years without having to worry about such things. For her all humans had been mere "others" - even Shinra.

Even if she got caught, or killed, or if her identity got exposed - she would still have only her own safety to worry about.

Shinra had stopped being just an "other" since that incident a year ago.

She had come to meet many people. Within a year, her "relationship" with the world that surrounded her had changed completely.

She was no longer alone.

Celty at last realized what kind of burden had come with that fact.

-

She was reminded of a casual conversation between her and Shinra at home as well as other trivial happenings.

♂♀

Several weeks ago, Shinra's apartment

[Ikebukuro witnesses the advent of an exotic fairy, Celty!

A dullahan in the modern disguise of a headless rider, Celty has come to Ikebukuro in search for her stolen head and memories!

But there, she falls in love with the young Shinra, and instead of looking for her head chooses to enjoy the everyday life of the enamored!]

".....That would be my basic setup for the story! Celty-san deviates slightly from tsundere in my opinion! She's a new type of character somewhere between tsundere and 'straightforward but aloof'!"

"Ehhh - Yumacchi really has a narrow mind when it comes to identifying tsundere. I'd say tsundere is just fine!"

"Celty-san is different! But if you have to categorize...she's a strong and capable character, but she's kind of missing the 'aloof' part of 'straightforward but aloof'! She's actually an 'older sister' type of the Edo-era variety! Sort of like 'older sister flings herself at an unreliable young guy'...right! That's what they call an 'older-younger-sister' type!"

"That's just confusing."

In place of a table there was a kotatsu in the room, around which Yumasaki and Karisawa sat warming their feet and exchanging opinions airily.

Listening to the exchange, the other pair of male and female on the neighboring table began to talk among themselves.

[Shinra.]

"Why that face, Celty?"

[Why did those two just burst into our apartment and start a discussion about me?
Plus...where did they get my personal information?]

"Ah, that. I figured they would know at some point anyway so I just told them...I ran into Kadota and these people at the bar...and Yumasaki-kun brought up these awesome rumors about you..."

[.....]

"So I told them you're my girlfriend...well, since they'd know anyway...and how we did this and that kind of stuff when we dated...whoops, guess alcohol is scary when it starts talking for you...ahhhhh that hurts that huuuurts Celty what are you doing. I see you're a tsundere after all ehheheh that hurts that hurts really that huuuur - "

[No problem. Now that I'm being called tsundere anyway I'll just use my shadow to treat you to some real 'tsuntsun' before I'm supposed to go 'deredere'.]

"You say it's 'tsuntsun'...but it's kind of way asphyxial ahhehehehehe.....!"

Looking at the other pair being all predictable, Yumasaki and Karisawa carried on with their just-as-predictable conversation.

"See? I told you she's a tsundere."

"Nope, these two are too honest about their feelings for each other to be tsundere. I'd rather say it's a form of mutual soft SM...Celty-san is topped mentally but Kishitani-san is topped physically...but seeing how they both enjoy it so much, they must both be on the S side!"

"That's just confusing."

♂♀

Celty's chest heaved as if laughing at the trivial piece of memory.

- "My girlfriend", he said...

- That's...heart-warming, really.

- I have been too careless this year.

- Too happy.

She immediately scolded herself for her naïveté.

After she was done being mad at herself -

She began to think.

And think.

- Well, that's why.....

Celty used her shadow as a third hand to type words onto her PDA.

- That's why...right.....

And - threw her PDA to Kadota in the navigator's seat as she maintained the same speed as the van did.

- I can't just abandon everything I have right now.

" - ! Oi, Black Motorbike, are you...serious?"

Kadota asked as he handed the PDA back to her. Celty simply raised her thumb at him in silence.

".....I see...hey, Black Motorbike. I know your name, although not directly from you. So this may sound strange to you..."

The male who had never before talked to Celty stared at her with a solemn expression and raised his thumb in reply as he said flatly:

"I'll thank you afterwards, Celty."

Celty made up her mind in silence as her heart gradually calmed down upon hearing his voice.

- Ahh, that's right...whoever the opponent, whatever happens, and whenever they attack - I will not give up my ties to this world.

- How could I?

- They're everything I have left now that I have lost my head.

Celty let the shadow scythe form from her hand after she had strengthened her resolve -

And headed for a certain destination with the van to give her scythe some room to work to their advantage.

They hadn't put much distance between themselves and the gangs that were chasing them. Fortunately for them, the traffic lights had, so far, had mercy on them and their path was clear. Thanks to all the havoc the bousouzoku had been wreaking around the town, the traffic had thinned considerably.

Celty and Kadota's gang used these conditions to their advantage and made it to their destination in about a minute -

They were now right under the railway overpass that connected the West and East Gate of the Ikebukuro Station.

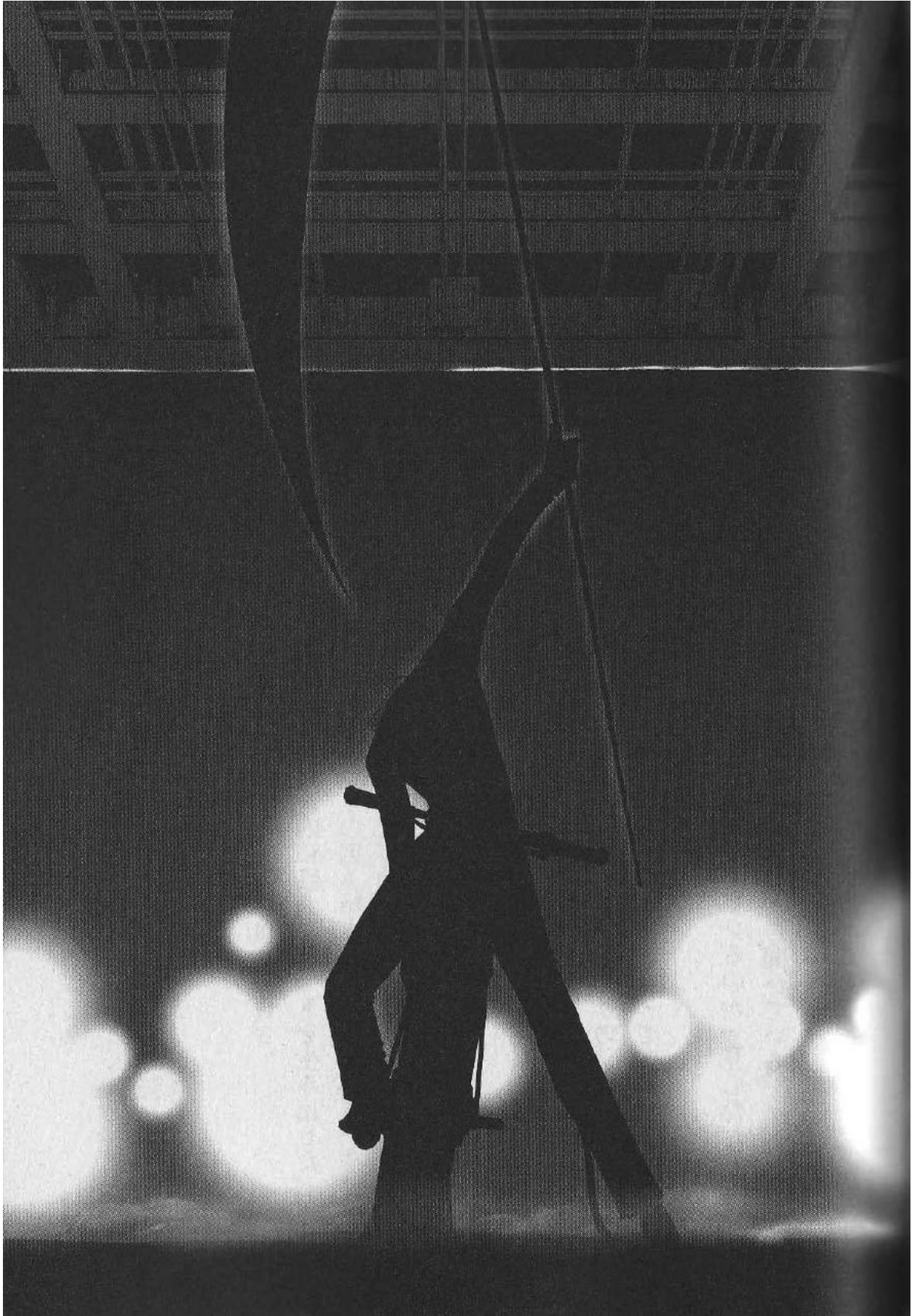
The van kept going -

While Celty turned her Coiste-bodhar around and made him come to a screeching halt.

Scores of motorbikes had caught up with her.

Ironically, she only became aware of this fact at the sight of the White Motorbike.

As her conversation with Shinra that morning came back to her mind -



Celty chose the best timing to raise her giant shadow scythe high.

The next second -

Like a giant spider sitting in its lair -

Countless ropes extended themselves from Celty's scythe and formed a giant web in the tunnel under the overpass.

♂♀

At the same time, the Headquarters of Medei Group Awakusu-kai

Awakusu-kai was a branch under Medei Group, which owned territories throughout Ikebukuro.

The innermost room was furnished with an expensive-looking desk, picture frames and black leather sofas. In every way, the room looked like a typical yakuza's headquarters as portrayed on TV. However, the entrance looked like any other office's.

Kazemoto, one of Awakusu-kai's executives, was listening to his subordinate's report in this office-like room that was furnished to conceal what was really going on in there.

".....So gangs from other cities are doing whatever they like....."

".....Just ignore them as long as they don't do anything to the stores under our protection. Leave the rest to the public servants who should be doing something with our tax money."

He was young, but his eyes were as sharp as a reptile's.

After giving the sarcastic reply, he asked his subordinate another question.

"And? What did you find out...about Yodogiri?"

"Yes. Shiki-san has gone to visit that underground doctor."

Kazemoto tapped his cheek several times with his fingers and continued:

"Actually...I don't care. Headless Riders...monsters, ghosts or aliens, I don't care what conclusion the world eventually comes to. I don't give a damn whether these supernatural things exist or not."

"Y - Yes."

"The problem is, that Miss Top Idol he asked us to 'take care of' - she gave four of our men hell...usually we would have blamed it on their own carelessness and made sure to take care of her anyway, whatever the cost....."

The subordinate asked nervously as the lizard-like male continued in a nonchalant tone.

"So...so this time things are different?"

"Correct...the man who made that request happened to have the guts to not tell us everything about her, which led us into danger - we should really be after him since he was effectively looking down on us."

The subordinate managed to answer as cold sweat trickled down his spine at the male's freezing voice.

"That's...right. But...I heard...that the plan was not to kill that woman....."

Kazemoto averted his gaze for a second. There was a trace of warmth in his voice now that wasn't there before:

"That is kind of hard to explain...it's true that the request was for us to 'bury her in the mountains', but our plan was to send her to some foreign connection we have."

"Y - Yes, but why..."

".....You're asking too many questions."

Kazemoto fixed his subordinate with the most unrelenting gaze he had given him up until now. Turning his chair to face him with his back, he began to tell the embarrassing truth:

"I heard that our head thinks Hijiribe Ruri - our target - reminds him of his daughter he had married off to someone with a more decent occupation...and he's like her number one fan. Apart from that, several of the Medei Group's heads are her fans as well....."

"I...I see....."

The subordinate was still at a loss as to what to say. Kazemoto said in a fainter voice as if eager to shoulder part of the embarrassment for his superiors:

"And, um...Shiki and I are fans as well...look...um...she's not just any pretty girl, is she?"

♂♀

Two days ago, midnight, Hanejima Yuuhei's apartment

"You might get killed - did that thought...never occur to you even for a split second?"

The male pinned to the bed -

And the killing monster sitting astride him.

She could easily have pierced his heart with bare hands - at least according to the news.

The young man did not let out a single wail as his own death looked down at his face.

The killing monster's hand, meanwhile, was visibly shaking.

In only seconds - which felt like minutes to Hijiribe Ruri, or the killing monster "Hollywood" -

Her consciousness threatened to abandon her several times.

She felt like she was no longer herself. Her vision blurred several times.

The silence was insufferable for Ruri, who felt even her lips tremble.

So it came as an immense relief when the male under her began to speak.

".....Can I ask you something?"

".....What?"

"Do you wish to kill me because you're afraid I might tell others?"

".....Maybe."

Ruri averted her eyes in silence as the flat voice of the male - Hanejima Yuuhei - sounded in the room.

- No...it's not like that...

- I'm not doing this because I'm afraid that he's going to tell -

As her body continued to tremble, Ruri realized what she was feeling.

It was fear.

She felt at the same time cold and nauseated, to the point her heart was threatening to freeze over.

- Not to mention I really can't bring myself to do this...

- I probably won't be able to kill this man, whether I had had a plan or let my instinct lead me on.

- It's not only him.

- I probably won't be able to kill anyone except for "those people".

What kind of emotion was being shown on her face?

Yuuhei, who was watching Ruri from underneath her body, told her in a tone flat and

devoid of emotion as ever:

"If that's the case, it's better to give up."

".....?"

Ruri frowned and looked down at Yuuhei's strange suggestion.

The male's eyes were icy enough to conceal any emotion he might have felt.

"The surveillance cameras here should have captured me when I carried you into the building. And you as well, of course."

".....!"

"There's no way you would know where to find the surveillance videotapes, right? So I don't think there's any point in killing me if it's just for the purpose you mentioned."

Ruri couldn't help but shake like an autumn leaf at Yuuhei's calm reply, but she managed to regain her composure and say:

".....What if...my purpose is just to kill you?"

"Then I've got nothing to say...as much as I hate to be killed."

Yuuhei answered without a second thought.

The young man was immensely successful in every aspect of his life, but what he said was a little surprising to Ruri. She asked:

".....That's unexpected...do you not want to be killed?"

"No. I still have many things I haven't been able to do."

"....."

Ruri's eyes widened as she heard his reply.

She stopped to smile broadly as if she had seen a mysterious creature dancing.

She was still trembling slightly and feeling nauseated; but she smiled silently in something that felt like self-irony.

"What's so funny?"

"Haha...nothing...I was just amused that you said you could feel regret when you feel

basically like a robot to me.....what exactly are the things you want to do, you perfect mannequin?"

"Let me see. There are a lot of them, such as finishing the shooting of my newest movie....."

The young man considered this for a while in all seriousness without showing any emotion -

And reached a conclusion.

"But the most important thing I'd wish I had been able to do...would be to do something, anything, to stop the girl right in front of my eyes from crying."

Time stopped between the two of them as the young man said this with a voice and a face completely devoid of emotion.

"....."

"....."

There was no trace of emotion in Yuuhei's eyes.

But that only made it sound even less like he was joking or putting on an act.

Ruri kept her hand high; after a brief silence as she said:

"Are you trying to flirt with me? Or are you sucking up to me to get me to spare you your life?"

"Could be either...I don't know. People say I don't seem to understand how others are feeling. Some say it's impossible to guess what I'm thinking. I feel the same way. But even if I don't really know about myself, I do know something..."

"....."

"A man fails the hardest when he fails to stop a woman's tears."

The young man's face looked so apathetic that he couldn't even be compared to machines; rather, there was something that bordered on Taoist and carefree about his apathy.

Ruri even began to feel like the male before her eyes was nothing more than an apparition. She continued to force words out of her throat:

"That's...your line as Carmilla Saizou, isn't it....."

"Yes, he's one of the people I respect the most."

"Respect...? But he's just a role you played..."

There was a note of resignation in Ruri's tone now as she was reminded of the movie in which she and the male had worked separate jobs.

Yuuhei, however, continued to talk about himself unflustered:

"That's right. I have respect for every role I've ever played, be it a killer or a delinquent or a lady boy in love."

"....."

"I grew up watching the negative example my brother had set - his emotions were too unconstrained. Therefore, I feel like I have missed a lot of important things I needed to grow into a complete person. That was why I chose to become an actor."

"Eh....."

"I wanted to feel the emotions humans feel through playing every role I'm cast in in movies."

Yuuhei said in an unembarrassed and apathetic tone.

Ruri lowered her hand in silence as she stared at the male who, rather than begging for her mercy, chose to say what he said when facing his own death.

- Ahh, he's the opposite...

- He's the opposite of me...

- He's the opposite of me, a human who wants to become a monster.

- He is a monster.

- He is a monster that wants to become a human.

He was not capable of extreme violence. He couldn't make fire erupt from his lungs, nor was he immortal.

But Ruri realized that the male in front of her had a mentality far more "abnormal" than hers.

She also realized that tears had begun to well in her eyes.

She didn't know whether they were tears of sadness or something else.

- That's why...this person...is more "human" than I am.

The male in front of her craved, more than any other human being on earth, the exact thing she was trying to get rid of.

What should she think of this man?

Should she pity him? Or sympathize with him? Or hate him? Or treat him as someone from a different world and ignore him altogether?

She was unable to decide.

Confusion.

The emotions she was determined to live without were overflowing and threatening to wash away her monster mask.

".....Sorry...you saved my life, and I still haven't said 'Thank you'."

She withdrew herself from over Yuuhei's body and murmured as she sat on the bed.

".....Thank you, I mean it...you saved my life."

"No, there's no need to thank me."

"Why...? And...speaking of which...why did you save me...?"

".....Well.....think about it. Let's assume that you're 'Hollywood'..."

And then Ruri noticed.

Yuuhei's face looked a little bit troubled within that split second.

"I was trying to think of who on earth would be able to make you, with your superhuman strength, look the way you looked when I found you...and...could you answer this question for me?"

"?"

"Did it have to do with...someone in sunglasses and a bartender suit?"

Ruri looked up in surprise at her savior's inquiry.

The memory of the real "monster" who had sent her flying into the air with a park bench rushed to her mind.

"Is he...someone you know?"

".....Ahh, I knew it....."

Yuuhei sighed in what sounded like resignation and stood up quietly to say:

"Um, I'll tell you more about him later. Firstly I need to apologize to you for that."

"Apologize?"

Ruri gave Yuuhei a confused look; but it was not the best time to press him further.

The top idol looked something up on the computer screen and said:

"Speaking of which, I did something without asking for your permission first."

".....What is it?"

Ruri didn't know whether she should continue using honorific speech or go with something more straightforward and casual. Either way, she tried to continue the conversation while avoiding making him feel uncomfortable.

"Actually...it seemed to me that there were people on your tail...when you were unconscious. According to Kishita...that doctor, they didn't look like they were the most decent people, either."

"Eh....."

"So I took some precautions without consulting you first."

♂♀

The entrance of Hanejima Yuuhei's apartment building

"Oi, they're here."

"What should we do about the guy?"

"Put him to sleep somehow."

"Shhh...let's go."

Four men in overalls walked out of the shadow from a dark alleyway.

They ran noiselessly in the dark while keeping an eye on their surroundings until they got close enough to the target duo.

Their plan, which they were sure was going to work, was to corner the female and attack from her back -

But they were frozen on their spots by flashlights and sounds of camera shutters being closed -

"!?"

The four men had to narrow their eyes at the uncalled-for assault of light.

What they saw there -

Was more than a dozen cameramen and reporters who had apparently popped out of nowhere.

And the two top idols locked in an embrace right in front of them.

- W - What.....w - when did they.....

- Just now...our faces have been captured on film!

They had been paying attention to their surroundings.

Unfortunately for them, the cameramen who had only tomorrow's headlines in their minds had been doing the same.

Ruri lowered her head as if embarrassed in the rainstorm of flashlights; Yuuhei, on the other hand, asked the reporter closest to him in a voice completely devoid of emotion:

"How did you know?"

As if finally getting their signal - reporters rushed towards the duo like water going through a broken dam.

They were probably aware that Yuuhei was the sole resident in this apartment building, seeing as how they had apparently no intention to stop with the questions and flashlights despite the fact that it was close to midnight.

"We got reports from anonymous sources a while ago."

"Could you tell us about it?" "When did you start dating?"

"How did the two of you meet - " "When will the press release be - "

"How did your agencies react - " "When are you getting married - "

"A man in a white coat just left this apartment building - " "Is he involved in some way?"

"He escaped, dammit." "Go get him!" "Send another team to look for the guy in the white coat ----- "

The four men about to kidnap Ruri felt themselves go green as these voices ravaged their eardrums.

It would be impossible to even begin to confiscate the films when they were outnumbered and trapped in the commotion.

There was no way they would be able to kidnap someone when surrounded by a huge crowd like this.

Yuuhei, ignoring the men as they gritted their teeth at him, continued in his flat voice:

"I'm really sorry, but the time is late. Please allow me to explain it in more detail on a better day. As for now, I hope you could leave us to our own devices as we go out for a ride."

Yuuhei explained a few other things before putting his arm around Ruri's shoulder and walking back into the apartment building with her. A few minutes later, they were seen driving out in a car alone and heading to God knows where.

Several reporters tried to follow them, but almost all of their cars were preoccupied with tracking down the Black Motorbike after King Television struck gold with its report of that incident.

Leaving the reporters and the kidnappers far behind -

The top idol and the killing monster had disappeared in a perfect legitimate manner into the night.

♂♀

Now - under a certain overpass in Ikebukuro

What Celty had made was in fact a giant net she planned to round up the bousouzoku with.

With the elastic net, she was able to make the soaring motorbikes stop.

The timing was the hard part - she had overcome that. Additionally, the net would have been rendered useless had the bousouzoku detected it in advance and chosen to go by another route. But Celty's shadows succeeded in forming the best possible trap and stopped the rampaging bousouzoku despite all these difficulties.

"Guahh!?! What the hell!?"

"Duhrahhhh!"

The motorbikes bumped into the resilient net one after another.

Behind them the traffic was forced to come to a stop as well. The tunnel under the overpass had become the dividing line between the safety and danger zones; on the danger side the road was jammed with unmoving motorbikes.

She could have left things at that and made a run for it, but that wouldn't have solved the problem.

Should she take it a step further and instill a fear bearing her name in their hearts?

Or should she let them catch her and claim that ten-million-yen reward? Celty was undecided.

Either way, she had at least succeeded in making sure that Kadota and his gang got away safely.

She watched the van as it disappeared into the alleyway on the west side of the Ikebukuro Station and told herself to let the Heavens decide what was going to happen to her.

And the town - Ikebukuro, was enjoying its holiday to the fullest.

♂♀

At the same time, inside the van

"OK, now, get off the van and run. Run into the Station or the police station nearby...either way, just say you have no idea what's happening and you were just caught in the middle of everything for no reason - you'll be fine!"

Kadota opened the door at the rear of the van and said to Mikado and the others after they had made it out of the tunnel and checked that there were no motorbikes on their tail. Mikado wanted to stay behind but ended up being pushed off the van by force.

"Speaking of which, Dotachin, what are you gonna do?"

Karisawa asked. Kadota lowered his gaze for a second and let out a slight sigh.

"That Celty...she's Shinra's girlfriend, isn't she?"

"Ah~ yeah. She's so tsundere it hurts."

"She's not, Karisawa-san! I told you over and over that she's the 'older-younger-sister' type!"

Kadota ignored the duo as they began to bicker and said to Togusa in the driver's seat instead:

"Really...I have no idea what Shinra's like since I've hardly spoken to him in high school.....but I'm kind of jealous of that bastard."

Smiling as if something was pleasing him, he continued in a cheerful tone:

"Celty.....is a real woman. Ahh, she is. Don't you think so, Togusa?"

"Eh? The Black Motorbike's a woman?"

".....Yeah, that's right. Can't just let a woman wipe our asses for us, can we?"

Togusa, who seemed to understand what Kadota was trying to say, put his hand on the gear shift and laughed hollowly:

".....So are we going back to rescue the Black Motorbike and then run? Or just to back her up?"

The corners of Togusa's mouth curled upwards as he said this while restarting the engine.

♂♀

Under the overpass

- What now?

A small rebellion had broken out in Celty's shadow net.

Some were trying to break free from the net; since bousouzoku from several different gangs were trapped now in one place, they even began to fight amongst themselves.

"Screw it! Aren't there more of our people out there? Get all of them to come!"

"Can't! They said they were in front of the Station...! Looks like the White Motorbike crushed a lot of them.....!"

"Bastard! What are they playing at? Did Captain answer the phone at all.....?"

"No! He's probably mad that we came here without his permission....."

"Gahhhhh! Then we're at least gonna kill the Black Motorbike and get that money!"

- Ehhhh!? But I really don't think the offer says I'm wanted dead or alive!?

It didn't look like negotiation was still an option. Celty considered just making a run for it and turned her sensors to her back -

And saw the bousouzoku subgroups coming after her.

These were probably the reinforcement each of the gangs had summoned to this spot.

They were the luckier ones who had been able to escape from the White Motorbike and merge with their gangs via another route at her side.

- This is bad...if I conjure a net on the other side as well to stop them...I'll end up rounded up by the police after I've dealt with these bousouzoku.....and that thing in my baggage will be the fatal incriminating evidence.....!

Then -

She saw the van coming back from behind the horde of motorbikes.

- Why did they come back!? Didn't I tell them to run?

The students had probably already taken refuge somewhere safe. But Celty had intended for Kadota and his gang to save themselves as well.

She stopped in her tracks for a second as she saw them coming back -

But as soon as she realized that some of the bousouzoku had gotten off their motorbikes and were trying to get out of the net, she turned around hastily.

Celty conjured once again the giant blunt shadow scythe and was about to take them down with it when -

She noticed something weird.

About her own motorbike.

Namely, that there was now a figure she did not know standing beside it.

She turned her gaze carefully towards the figure - and saw that it was a male with bandages all over his face, making him look like a mummy.

He had stood up in the side car.

- With his feet in the now-empty black bag -

The male, who until a second ago had been a piece of baggage, said in a flat voice:

".....Leave this to me...you guys, run for your lives."

♂♀

The past - half a day ago, inside Russian Sushi

"...My, my, you gave me such a difficult patient to deal with."

They were in the sushi restaurant run by two Russians who had long since made themselves comfortable in Ikebukuro.

A raw smell that wasn't fish had filled the now-closed restaurant.

In the innermost tatami room, a man with a badly damaged face lay on the sheets as Kishitani Shinra - the underground doctor in the white coat - tended to his wounds.

"I'm charging him 200,000 yen for this."

"He'll pay you later."

"He doesn't have that option. He lost me my only opportunity to stay at the side of

Hijiribe Ruri for the night."

"What the hell are you talking about....."

Simon cut in as the Caucasian man who owned the place began to quarrel with Shinra.

"Oh, you two, fighting is not good. Igor's wounds, must make his hurt-hurt fly away. Please, now is the time 100%!"

"All right all right. Anyway, you have to get the money ready.....by the way, is that the patient's name? Igor?"

"Yeah. He was in the same organization as we were back in Russia...but I don't think that even matters now."

Orihara Mairu, who was listening to the conversation from the counter in front of which she stood with her sister, was speaking on her cell phone.

".....Ah! He picked up! Hello hello, Iza-nii? I have a question for you! Ne, does the name Celty Sturluson ring any bell to you?"

Mairu awaited the answer expectantly as she looked at the name on the envelope that held the money.

But -

"..... -Eh? 'It's too early for you'? - What does that even mean? You know something about it, right? Iza-nii, you're horrible! You're so horrible, such a nice smooth bastard - nice - smooth - bastard - ohhh!Ah!?"

Mairu stared at her cell phone as if she couldn't believe what had just happened - and stomped her feet in rage.

".....What (What just happened)?"

"Ah - this is just - unbelievable! Iza-nii just hung up on me! Urgh...since he's making me do this...well....."

Mairu pouted and adjusted her grasp on her cell phone -

- And, after selecting a different number, pressed the "TALK" button with a fearless smile on her face.

♂♀

Now - outside the Ikebukuro Station

"Ahhh, where did Ryuugamine-sempai and Sonohara-sempai go?"

After they had gotten off the van -

Mikado had run off with a "I'll leave Sonohara-san and these girls with you!", and Anri had somehow disappeared as well when Aoba looked around for her.

".....Speaking of which, just like I thought, Ryuugamine-sempai is the...actually, that can wait till later."

Kururi and Mairu stood holding each other's hand behind the flustered Aoba as he looked around wildly.

"Go (What should we do)?"

"Hmm~ why not go check out what's happening first? Though I have no idea why things turned out like this, it's just awesome that we can see 'her' from so close!"

"....."

Kururi was staring at the road under the overpass with a stern look on her face.

Mairu, on the other hand, wore a refreshing smile as she began to say as if to herself -

- with but a slight trace of venom in all that refreshing-ness -

"So - ...will we be able to say a proper 'hi' to Celty-san?"

♂♀

The past - half a day ago, inside Russian Sushi

"Uhhhh....."

The male looked around with eyes not quite ready to perceive after waking up in the tatami room.

"Ah, he's awake."

His dizzy head matched the sight of the male in front of him with one name:

".....Shingen?"

"Eh?"

Shinra looked at the man's face in bewilderment as his father's name got called. - Except that it could hardly be called a face now since it was almost completely concealed under layers of bandage.

".....Oh, I'm sorry. I must have mistaken you for someone else....."

"....."

Shinra bent down and looked at his face carefully as if he was contemplating something -
- before straightening up abruptly and making for the counter while taking out his cell phone.

Like a change of guards, two girls ran into the Japanese-style bedroom from in front of the counter and taken the place Shinra had just left vacant.

"Health (Are you all right).....?"

"Yahoo! Feeling better now, onii-san? Awesome! You're looking great! Plastic surgery nowadays works wonders! And you look manly with these bandages on, too!"

"Oh...I haven't thanked you two yet. Thank you so much."

Igor was still a gentleman even though his gaze seen from between the bandage tapes was extremely sharp.

Simon and the owner of the restaurant looked relieved that their old acquaintance was no longer in a critical condition. They talked to Igor in fluent Russian.

"xxxx" "xx" "xxxxxx" "x!"

After a while, the owner's face turned dark.

"What's the matter?"

Mairu asked. The owner answered in a tone of resignation:

"Well...he's broke."

".....I'm sorry. I wasn't able to finish my job.....I should have made him pay me something in advance. I regret it now....."

"What should we do...we can't just pay 200,000 for you, otherwise we'll be left with no money to pay the caterer tomorrow.....actually...I guess we can just close the restaurant for tomorrow...but....."

"Oh~ a holiday, good. Tomorrow is Sushi-Go-Die anniversary, come eat ramen, come eat mochi."

"Stop fooling around."

Ignoring the owner who was fuming and muttering things to himself, Mairu stepped into the tatami room and squatted down.

"Ne ne..."

The girl pulled at Igor's sleeve. He tilted his head towards her in silence:

".....? Is there something you want?"

Mairu smiled the smile of an angel to the patient with a surprised look on his face and said:

"How about.....we pay that 200,000 for you?"

♂♀

Now - under a certain overpass near Ikebukuro Station

Celty was baffled.

The "baggage" she was supposed to be transporting had awoken and begun to take down swarms of bousouzoku with bare hands.

His movements had far surpassed what the word "smooth" could be used to describe.

He swirled past the throng of men like a puff of human-shaped smoke riding on the wind.

The men were falling to the ground just as they thought they had missed him by inches; it looked as if he were teaching scores of monkeys to dance.

Having given up on making sense of this new situation, Celty turned towards the van instead.

She wanted to check if Kadota and his gang were safe - but before she could do so, she saw something even more unsettling.

A figure was running towards them on the downward slope heading in the direction of the overpass.

- Mikado-kun!?

The boy was running towards them at full speed. Celty was about to gesture wildly to tell him to go back - but she realized that it was not the best time to do so. Besides, it would only have added to Mikado's troubles if she drew the attention of the gangs towards Mikado.

Plus, she had noticed that behind Mikado -

On the further side of the road, there was a bespectacled and well-endowed girl.

- Anri-chan!

True, Anri was formidable.

If she were to release the full power of the demon blade "Saika", she would probably be harder to deal with than Celty herself.

- But this is not the time!

She had concealed the fact that she was "Saika" and lived her life that way. If she was planning to reveal her hidden power on this very street - when so many cameras were focused on them -

Celty tried desperately to think with her muddled brain -

But the Ikebukuro holiday was about to baffle her even further.

Suddenly, an explosive noise shook the overpass - and everyone turned in the direction from which it had come.

On the other side of Celty's black net, the bousouzoku were about to break through without their motorbikes, and behind them was -

- a motorbike that looked as if it were disintegrating from having crashed into a car, and

-

- a figure who had plucked the engine off the motorbike and was playing with it in one hand -

- a figure dressed in a medieval suit of armor with nothing above its neck.

- Eh?

Confusion took over.

Confusion took over.

- One of...us.....?

The first possibility that struck her was that one of her own kind might have come to Ikebukuro.

Back in Ireland she was able to sense several other dullahans from afar.

But why here? Why now?

A new tornado of bewilderment and doubt formed inside her heart - but somehow her head cooled at the center of the accelerating vortex of confusion.

- No...this vibe...doesn't feel like one of "ours".....

- But...there's something else...in this mostly human vibe.....

And then Celty remembered.

She had sensed this vibe before -

Just hours ago, she had sensed it while she was going about her morning's work.

- This vibe belongs to.....!

- The person I transported just this morning -

♂♀

Several hours ago, a certain warehouse in Ikebukuro

Warehouses lined the street far removed from downtown Ikebukuro.

Celty met her client in one of these vacant warehouses.

She had never met this client before; it seemed like the client knew her from Heiwajima Shizuo.

- It's rare that Shizuo would refer someone to her.

Her client was a female who had concealed her face under a cap, a muffler and a pair of sunglasses. Her request was for Celty to take her to a certain apartment.

She didn't tell Celty the reason, but it looked like she was under the threat of a certain violence organization. She might even get intercepted by their people en route.

At first Celty found herself trying to guess what kind of "person" her client was -

She couldn't help but ask as she felt the "vibe" coming from her client.

[Do you have...some sort of power that others don't?]

".....Eh?"

Hijiribe Ruri - the female who hid her face from view - was surprised.

She looked closely at the Black Motorbike in front of her.

She had made up her mind to go back to her own apartment and get ready for her next move.

But she knew she was too famous to be able to just walk back to her apartment without causing a commotion.

- Not to mention...that the Caucasian man might still be somewhere nearby.

She made her appearance in this town as "Hollywood" because of a call he had made to her apartment.

"I know your secret. Let's go see a movie, a Hollywood one with monsters in it."

After that message, he fixed a time and place with her - and then, in the park, she met this man who appeared to be an assassin - and then, she met a real monster.

Although it hardly mattered to her now, Yuuhei had pretty much hinted that the monster was a relative of his.

That was probably why he had saved her life out of a sense of guilt.

Yuuhei had mentioned one name to her in his flat voice as Ruri considered all this.

He had said "Brother used to tell me about this courier he knew. I'll ask Brother to contact that courier for me." and that was how she ended up meeting the Black Motorbike.

She found it curious that this "being", abnormal in every way from head to foot, had seen through at once her abnormality.

- As well as the fact that Ruri's body was probably not human.

♂♀

The past - yesterday midnight, inside Russian Sushi

Conversation between two underground doctors, father and son -

"So what exactly happened? Please explain, father."

".....Coincidences are a nuisance sometimes. I think I'm beginning to understand how Izaya-kun feels."

"? Whatever. How come that Russian knows you, father?"

".....He's...um...kind of a freelancer who does whatever is asked of him. He's a mystery because no one knows who he actually is. Aren't we Nebula something for knowing how to reach someone as mysterious as this guy? Try to marvel for once at how great your father is."

"So basically you know how to get hold of this assassin who sounds kind of scary. And?"

".....I see I spent all these years raising a son with no sense of humor. Well, we'll talk about that later. I asked him to capture a certain female for me."

"A female?"

"Yeah...you'll know what I'm talking about if I say it's 'Hollywood', right?"

"....."

"I thought there was something supernatural like Celty-kun or Saika involved in those serial killings. So I used Nebula to do the research - and found there was this female with a little bit of 'alien' blood like Celty's mixed into her lineage several generations ago. The monster had used its power to strike a fortune after it gave birth to a human child. I guessed that the genetic traits from that monster might have manifested themselves in her - though I have no idea if they're manifest in every generation or just every other one. Wouldn't it be much better for us to protect her from the police who would have just put her to a death sentence? That way we can have loads of fun with her involving lots of dissecting and injecting...OK?"

".....I think you should try to behave for a change, in a lot of ways, father."

"Hmm...you're hardly in a position to say that to me though, Shinra. But whatever.Anyway.....Nebula's observers had said that she was probably not the material for such experiments since she wasn't even able to withstand a human's blow. The higher-ups have given me the orders to just let her be."

"Hey.....that girl...is her name Hijiribe Ruri?"

"How did you know!? Shinra...did you just read my mind? Did some kind of hidden power awaken in you from spending so much time with Celty - beep - beep - beep - "

♂♀

The past - morning of the same day

Celty typed happily on her PDA after she had taken her client safely to the apartment.

[That was a good ride.]

- We had a safe trip. Good.

- It looks like I don't have to worry too much about being wanted after all.

If she had a nose she would be humming now. The client nodded and thanked her as Celty felt almost obscenely relaxed.

"T - T - Thank you so much.....! And...about your pay....."

[No, this time it's for free.]

"Eh.....?"

[I'm kind of happy today. I've hardly ever had the chance to meet someone like you in this city.]

Ruri's curiosity got the better of her when she heard Celty mention this again.

"Sorry...but since you mentioned it...um..."

She finally brought herself to ask the question she had been holding back out of embarrassment.

"Are you...not human...just like the TV says?"

[That's right. Want me to convince you?]

The crisp and affirmative reply from the Headless Rider sounded almost like a joke. As if proud of the fact that she was a monster, she took off her helmet.

Several minutes later -

After Celty had left, Ruri stood in the safety of her home and scrutinized herself in front of the mirror.

She was not looking her healthiest, but she didn't look ill per se, either.

The dull pain in her body had disappeared, reminding her of the fact that her body was not normal.

With her pinky she lifted the 20-kg dumbbells at her side and played with it. She was reminded of the fact that her "strength" was not normal, either.

She was not human.

Neither could she become a monster.

She was something "in-between".

"Ahah....."

Before, she had felt dejected whenever she was reminded of what she was -

But today, it simply made her laugh.

"Ahahahahah! "

She felt like she had never laughed as happily before in her life. She remembered the way Celty, the Headless Rider, had looked - and laughed with tears trickling down her cheeks.

- Ahh, I see...so that's how it is...
- Turns out this world...this world is more understanding than I thought it would be.
- Even fairies...even monsters...can enjoy their lives.
- Even me, even people like Yuuhei-san, even that Headless Rider!
- Why...why didn't I realize this before.....!
- I.....!

Several hours later.

Ruri, whose tears and laughter had at last stopped, turned on the TV for a lack of anything better to do.

The news currently on air read "Ten Million Yen for the Weirdo of Ikebukuro?" and in it was mentioned that many gangs of bousouzoku had flocked to Ikebukuro and that a major fight was about to break out.

"....."

She walked into the "changing room" in the innermost corner of her apartment.

An hour later -

Ruri, who was now in her "costume", found four men waiting outside her door, looking intimidating.

"You're Hijiribe Ruri, aren't you.....Huh? Oi, what are you playing at putting on that costume gohhh!?"

She treated each of them to a punch in the chest, just powerful enough to silence them.

She might have broken a rib or two. But hell if she cared.

The monster named "Hollywood" flew downstairs from her apartment on the fifth floor

in higher spirits than she had ever been in.

- Laughing loud and clear.

Incidentally, her descending figure reminded one of the Headless Rider's as she soared down the wall of a building one year ago.

♂♀

Now - under an overpass in Ikebukuro

Celty, who was shocked at the sight of the sudden appearance of that "being", began to move in its direction -

The Headless Rider slowly raised its thumb at her.

Even so, Celty still looked like she was trying to say something. The Rider said in a faint voice that only Celty could hear:

".....Let me at least pay you back for your free ride."

"....."

Celty froze on the spot. "Hollywood", who was dressed up as a "Headless Rider", charged at the bousouzoku on the asphalt road.

Unlike Igor, she reminded one of a huge iron bullet moving at full speed in a straight line.

She sent a motorbike flying into the air with her kick - whether she had mercy on it one could never guess - and ripped the engine off the motorbike with her hand. The next second, she caught a steel pipe thrown at her face and twisted it.

As she petrified the bousouzoku with bone-chilling fear -

"Hollywood" was singing to herself inside her heart.

It was a song she could never sing as an idol. It was a song dedicated to herself.

- I'm a monster, I'm a human.

- It doesn't matter what I am. It doesn't matter.

- I can't choose my life. I can't choose how to begin it. I can't even choose how to end it.

- So I'll choose how to live it. I'll simply choose how to live it.
- What the Courier did for me this morning -
- Was worth all my wealth and more.
- It doesn't matter if my life ends tomorrow,
- Or continue on for a thousand years,
- As a monster, as a human,
- Whether I try to resist or accept my fate -
- I'm going to enjoy it all.

"Hollywood" held back her urge to yell for all the world to hear. She simply continued her undeterred rampage under the overpass.

The man in the bartender suit.

Hanejima Yuuhei.

Celty Sturluson.

To express her gratitude and respect for these three "monsters" she had met within the past 24 hours -

She simply danced a dance named "Hollywood", on and on.

♂♀

The bousouzoku and Celty weren't the only people who were shocked at the sudden appearance of these weirdoes.

Kadota and his gang, who were getting out of their van, as well as Mikado and Anri, who were running towards the spot, all stopped dead in their tracks and stared at the blatant intruders on the scene.

The two weirdoes were taking down the bousouzoku in very different ways but with the same fierceness.

"Uh, these are probably underlings in gangs like 'Toramaru' who can't make it into the regular team.....speaking of which...um...what the hell's happening?"

Kadota was saying in a low voice in the van. Nobody was able to answer him, though.

Celty was at a loss as to what to do, but she lost no time in using her shadow to tie up the hands and feet of the bousouzoku -

Somehow the bandaged man was already standing next to her again and whispering things into her ear.

"Take, Mother, quickly, please."

- Mother?

For a moment she didn't quite get what he was saying; but she did immediately once she turned her gaze towards his face.

The male's eyes, which could be seen from in-between tapes of bandage, went a fierce shade of red from an inflow of blood.

- Saika!?

Shocked, Celty turned to look in Anri's direction - but Anri was standing at the entrance of the tunnel with a dumbstruck expression on her face as well.

Convinced that it was safe to leave everything else to the two weirdoes who looked like they wouldn't overdo it, Celty decided to leave even though she had no idea what was happening.

Before taking off, she typed quickly on the PDA and showed the screen to the two weirdoes with the help of her shadow.

[I'll give you two pieces of advice -]

But they turned out to be nothing more than irony for the weirdoes -

[If you see a white motorbike, run. Those could turn out to be monsters.]

For Celty, the second piece of advice was the more important.

[The other thing is - though it's not impossible to communicate with him...]

- Except that it came almost a whole day too late.

[Never pick on a man wearing a bartender suit. Never!]

♂♀

Celty signaled to Kadota before leaving the danger zone.

Anri left with her on her motorbike; Kadota and his gang had to drag Mikado into their van and then drove away from under the overpass.

She let the shadow that formed the net go back inside her. Not that the net was all that necessary now since the bousouzoku were all busy trying to get away from the two weirdoes.

Kuronuma Aoba, who watched the scene from afar, tilted his head and muttered:

".....Um...what exactly is going on?"

The twins, not being able to answer his question, could only tilt their heads as well and look at each other.

Though to be fair, none of the people involved in this incident actually had an idea of what was going on.

♂♀

Several minutes later -

The bousouzoku who had been lucky enough to escape from the two weirdoes were moving stealthily along the street in order to avoid being spotted by the White Motorbike.

According to what they had heard on the wireless, many of their friends in the gang had already been arrested by the White Motorbike's team.

"This sucks...we can't just go back like this...Captain would kill us."

A man in a striped tokko-fuku who looked like the leader of this crusade was saying to around fifteen subordinates who had gathered around him.

A motorbike gang their size would have drawn the attention of the police within minutes

if they were to ride on the road - but that was low on their list of concerns right now.

"We have to at least show the local gangs who we are....."

Driven by twisted desires of self-exhibition, they soared on the streets with an almost complete disregard of their injuries.

As they turned onto a street near Sunshine Building, they saw two men who looked like local delinquents. One man parked his motorbike on the sidewalk and approached them in an intimidating manner:

"Oi, I have something to ask you. Which ones are the biggest gangs in this neighborhood?"

One of the delinquents he spoke to seemed to consider the question for a moment before answering:

"Well, there are lots of them...if you're talking about bousouzoku, there's 'Jyan Jyan Jyan' who works for Awakusu-kai, and 'Dragon Zombie' who are more interested in street races...but after that freakishly strong White Motorbike came they all kind of went low-profile."

"Very good. Take us somewhere where we can find them."

"Are you going to pick on them?"

"So what? We're at least not picking on you!"

The man in the tokko-fuku tried to act intimidating, but the delinquent shook his head.

"You guys are 'Toramaru' from Saitama, aren't ya? I don't think your Captain would approve if you did something like that. Your Captain might be a skirt chaser, but from what I heard he should have more principles than that."

"Shut up! This has nothing to do with our Captain!"

"We'll be independent from him once we catch the Black Motorbike, get the money and give it to him!"

".....You guys...don't tell me you're actually planning to give ten million yen away to yakuza? Seriously? If I had that kind of money I'd definitely keep it. There's no point in being a bousouzoku if you're that rich. If you want a racing car, just buy one."

The delinquent with dreadlocks delivered his advice in such a nonchalant voice that it was hard to tell if he was laughing at them or just trying to help them.

".....You bastard! Are you making fun of us the penkoro way?"

Since they had come from a different prefecture, they felt like they were free to pick on local delinquents.

Since they didn't have to worry about future retaliation, they let their fury slowly fuel their blood-thirst.

"What is 'penkoro' supposed to mean?"

"Don't mind them, Tom-san. Let's go. I'm hungry."

"Ah~ you're right. That Manager should have treated us to some dinner...really....."

The bousouzoku felt their fuses burn out at the casual conversation between the delinquents.

"Bastards...DON'T THINK YOU CAN JUST IGNORE US - !"

One of them grabbed the steel pipe on the side of his motorbike and tried to knock out the man with the dreadlocks with it.

"Oops, that was close~"

He dodged it expertly.

The steel pipe didn't lose its momentum - and, in the same way it had torn Celty's luggage bag open in the afternoon -

It tore open the sleeve of the bartender suit the other delinquent was wearing.

"Ahh."

"My clothes....."

The man in the bartender suit murmured in a quiet voice.

The man with the dreadlocks were already running away as fast as he could - and, as if praying that the bousouzoku would fare well on their journey after death, he drew a cross on his chest with his hand and clapped his hands afterwards.

The next second -

"Hyoiii - "

That was about the only way to romanize the sound that could be used to mimic the

situation.

The man had, with just one hand, lifted with ease the motorbike with the rider still on it over his head -

And threw it at the other bousouzoku as if he were passing a baseball at another player.

Nope, the bousouzoku were not aware.

- That in Ikebukuro, there is a human being you "simply do not pick a fight with".

- Not even if you're an assassin, a killing monster, the president, an alien, a vampire or a headless monster - you simply do not pick a fight with him.

And then - the "thunder" cut into the scene.

"MY BROTHER GAVE ME THESE CLOTHES.....YOU SCUM ----- !"

The man in the bartender suit had uprooted the street lamp that had been standing next to him a second before - and swung it like a baseball bat at the bousouzoku.

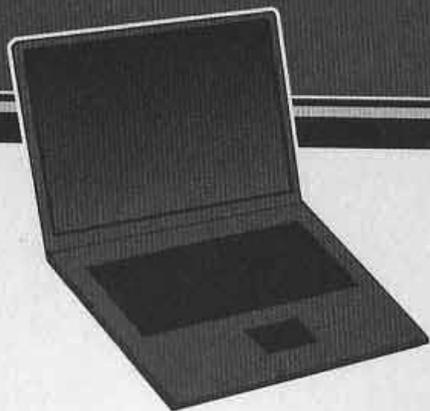
Motorbikes and men were sent flying in the air after what sounded like rolling thunder.

With that all-too-familiar sight Ikebukuro ended its holiday.

No one knew if the city had enjoyed it or not -

But anyhow -

Today, the city called Ikebukuro is as peaceful as ever.



DR 12!
RR 34!
No. 9-20 Ryohgo-Karita

エピローグ

epilogue

EPILOGUE I

PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS

CHATROOM

Orihara Izaya, reborn!

Orihara Izaya

I'm here to ask you about the thing that happened with the motorcycle gangs and Celty recently.

Tsukumoya Shinichi

Ah, here you are. Welcome welcome.

Orihara Izaya

No need to bother with greetings. ...So what happened, exactly, back then?

Tsukumoya Shinichi

Well, well, it did come as a surprise that you weren't actively behind the whole thing.

Orihara Izaya

Stop messing around. I'll pay you the due amount.

Tsukumoya Shinichi

Hah hah! You can bargain on that later. Good thing that I'm actually dying to talk about it as well.

Orihara Izaya

I know Awakusu-kai was behind part of this. I have no idea what they had in mind though.

Tsukumoya Shinichi

Right. That was all for wiping one person out of existence. That was why the bousouzoku gangs were able to go as wild as they wanted. After all, that person happened to be important enough that there would have been a riot if she so much as disappeared for a

while.

Orihara Izaya

Who?

Tsukumoya Shinichi

Hijiribe Ruri. I figure you've at least heard of her?

Orihara Izaya

Of course. So what's the fairy tale now?

Tsukumoya Shinichi

Fairy tale? Have you degenerated so far that you can't tell the true information from the fake anymore? What now, are we getting a half-ass rival character as we enter this new story arc? What should I call you, Orihara Yamcha*?

** Yamcha: a character in Dragon Ball who started out as a formidable opponent but becomes all but useless in battle as the storyline progresses.*

Orihara Izaya

Who requested them to?

Tsukumoya Shinichi

Yodogiri Jinnai, the manager of Yodogiri Shining Promotion.

Orihara Izaya

Why did he feel the need to murder a top idol of his own company?

Tsukumoya Shinichi

Who knows. You're aware I don't dabble in his business any further than that, aren't you?

Orihara Izaya

.....

Tsukumoya Shinichi

Anyway, Yodogiri made one fatal mistake. It was OK to use Awakusu-kai for his purposes, but he ended up making an enemy of all of Awakusu-kai.

Orihara Izaya

Hmm.....

Tsukumoya Shinichi

He didn't make it clear that Hijiribe was the serial killer "Hollywood" when he made the request - so Awakusu-kai was pretty much sending its people to suicide. Which is why Manager Yodogiri is now nowhere to be found and everyone at his entertainment

company is freaking out.

♂♀

Inside the office building of the talent agency "Jack o'Lantern Japan", East Nakano

After the initial ruckus, Ikebukuro remained in chaos for another couple of days as all sorts of people continued their search for the Black Motorbike. In addition, a "Headless Rider" who appeared to be an impostor of the Black Motorbike continued to cause further confusion.

The inflow of visitors and shoppers didn't quite compensate for the troubles the search for the Black Motorbike was causing. The talent agency ended up having to withdraw its ten-million yen reward when pressured by the disgruntled police.

The agency lost a considerable sum of money after having to withdraw its advertisements and put public apologies in their places - but its manager was in high spirits as he said:

"This is wonderful.....Oi! Somebody clap their hands! This is awesome! I! Am feeling awesome! Clap your hands! Louder! Louder, I say! They have my best wishes! They have all of it! I don't care whether they call it a scandal or not - they have all my best wishes!"

Several days after that incident -

The couple that stood in the meeting room as the manager pulled thirty crackers for them was the top idol with a face devoid of emotions, and the top idol with a melancholically beautiful face.

They didn't know what had happened, but Yodogiri - the manager of Hijiribe Ruri's agency - had suddenly disappeared.

The entire agency panicked - and Hijiribe Ruri was the first artist to decide to switch to a different agency, which for her turned out to be "Jack o'Lantern Japan".

A lot of speculations were being circulated around, among which some even said Yodogiri disappeared into the depths of the forest because the scandal that broke out between Hijiribe Ruri and Hanejima Yuuhei came as too much of a shock for him.

But Yodogiri's reputation was far from spotless, and the society was quick to come to terms with this turn of events. It soon began to wish Hijiribe Ruri the best of luck in the new stage of her career.

Max, the manager, showered cheerful praise on himself his own agency and finished by saying "We'll leave the young couple to their own devices." before walking out of the meeting room with the managers.

By the way, it seemed that Kanemoto - Yuuhei's temporary manager - fell ill under stress because Yuuhei's scandal broke out during the time he was supposed to be responsible for him. But that was another story.

The duo was left on their own in the meeting room.

They had been pretending that they were a couple in order to weather this crisis; now they faced each other in silence.

Ruri was the one to break the silence this time. She smiled somewhat softly at Yuuhei, who remained expressionless, and spoke:

"I...have something...I've yet to tell you....."

"What is it?"

".....'Hollywood'...how I came to realize my own power.....how I became a killing monster...and...what Yodogiri.....and his people did to me."

She was smiling, but her voice was shaking - probably because she had to revive the memory of how she went from being a human living in peace with hidden abnormal "lineage" to being a killing monster.

Yuuhei stared at her, his expression unchanging.

"If you don't want to talk about it, don't make yourself."

"But I.....want to tell you."

"I refuse to hear it."

Yuuhei was talking in a tone uncharacteristically stern for him. The killing monster quivered.

As if noticing the confusion on Ruri's face, Yuuhei spoke straight to the point in his ever-so-flat voice:

"After you've told me everything, Ruri-san, you plan to kill yourself, right?"

"....."

It was an affirmative silence.

"Ruri-san, I'm not a hole in a tree trunk for the King to pour his secrets in."

Yuuhei continued in a tone that made it hard to tell whether he was actually angry.

"I'm simply the type of person I appear to be...if I find that I can't understand what others are feeling, I'll at least try harder...that's why I keep observing them."

"....."

"So I more or less do realize what you might be thinking. Which is not to say that I understand why you feel that way, but I do feel like I know what you're thinking. I don't want Ruri-san to die. That's why I don't want you to tell me anything."

".....I was right...you might be the real monster."

This was not meant as an insult; Ruri said the word "monster" with all the respect in the world.

"I...had wanted to destroy everything around me ever since I was little...but...I had been so afraid of losing everything around me...that I never succeeded in becoming a monster that could even destroy itself if it wanted...I'm thinking...maybe the thing I'm most scared of losing...is myself."

"The fear for losing is also a form of love."

Had he said it laughing, it would have sounded like he was trying to be cool or funny. However, he said it with no expression on his face whatsoever - which made it sound strangely intimidating.

A brief silence fell - and it was Yuuhei's turn to break it.

".....I have something I didn't tell you."

"? What is it?"

"When you pinned me to the bed and sat astride me in my room - I was extremely nervous, I think."

".....Eh?"

Had she thrust her hand into his throat, he would have died without even being able to emit a sound - Ruri was sure of that. She looked more closely at Yuuhei's face, curious as to what he would say next -

She found Yuuhei looking back into her eyes. His voice betrayed an ever-so-slight note of confusion:

"My heart beat faster, and my chest felt warmer."

"....."

"....."

"Are you trying to flirt with me?"

"No, I'm speaking the truth."

The "perfect man" looked at her in surprise and tilted his head. Ruri couldn't help but let out a small giggle.

"Yuuhei-san...you're just like a child."

It was not the dark and melancholic sort of smile she had always worn. The girl who had been a killing monster was smiling the innocent smile of a child as she said:

"But.....I can't say I dislike that about you."

CHATROOM

Orihara Izaya

Then what happened with the "Killing Machine"? Why did he turn up suddenly to help Celty?

Tsukumoya Shinichi

.....Holy Moses. You have really fallen on the side of the informationally challenged this time. Did Ikebukuro finally ditch you?

Orihara Izaya

What the heck happened?

Tsukumoya Shinichi

What the heck happened?Your sisters were the cause of that, don't you even have an inkling?

Orihara Izaya

What?



Sunshine 60 Street, Ikebukuro

Several days had passed since the incident -

Kururi and Mairu were doing their evening shopping with Igor following them around and carry their shopping bags.

With the pile of Barco shopping bags in his hands, the male with bandages all over his face looked surprised as he asked the twins:

"Are you buying more clothes? You've bought a lot already."

"Commence (That's just the start.)"

"Don't complain, Igor-san! We paid your medical expenses for you - and you let Celty-san escape!"

These girls had not only used shamelessly the money someone else had dropped - they wanted others to be grateful for it. Although it was legally debatable whether the money Celty had lost was protected by law since she was not human, the fact remained that the twins were using someone else's money as if it were their own.

"I am really sorry about that, Misses."

The male assassin lowered his head in somewhat sarcastic apology. Mairu, however, did not seem to mind as she laughed and said:

"Yeah~ but anyway! I don't think I'll mind! The bousouzoku were after us too! So I'll just pretend that you saved us from them! Thank me! Thank me with something special! Thank me in Canadian style!"

Mairu raised her chest and kept saying things that didn't make sense. Kururi sighed and punched her head hard.

"That hurts!"

"Humble (Don't get too full of yourself.)"

The assassin straightened up and continued to follow the twins around.

Kururi and Mairu's course of action had been for one single purpose: to see the Black Motorbike and find out who he or she was.

They had found what the Black Motorbike had dropped.

Someone had told them that the name "Celty Sturluson" written on the envelope was the name of a certain courier on a black motorbike. They had then come up with a plan.

They would pay Igor's medical expenses for him, and in return, the people at Russian Sushi were to agree to put on this show for them.

The owner contacted Celty and met her in the park with his face hidden from view. Igor hid himself in the bag and promised to call Kururi and Mairu once he had been transported to Celty's home or resting spot. At least that was the plan -

They were not sure whether it was appropriate to make Igor, who still haven't recovered from his injuries, take part in the plan - but Igor himself had said "That's what I'm good at." and agreed to the plan instantly. And then, everything was set in motion.

In fact, if they wanted to meet Celty, they could have just asked Simon to introduce them to her - but Simon had simply thought that they were about to embark on a grand April Fool plan and left them to their own devices. That was why the twins ended up having to take a much more tortuous route to capture Celty.

Incidentally, they also ended up spending the one million yen they found in its entirety on a plan as reckless and meaningless as this one.

All of the money ended up in either Celty or Shinra's hands.

"Speaking of which, Igor-san was the one who caught all those bousouzoku under the overpass, right? You're so cool! I knew you were special! Are you really some really strong guy from the Russian Army? Hey, how about you come over to my dojo next time?"

"Cool (You're so strong.)"

"No.....that was because I had company."

Ikebukuro's top troublemakers now had a most violent man at their service - but that did not seem to be what was on their minds. Right now they only had eyes for each other.

They wanted to become one, which was why they continued their lives as different persons - and continued to love each other.

"So! We'll finish by shopping for groceries for the hotpot tonight, and then we'll go home! Igor-san, why don't you come and eat with us?"

".....Well, I have no current jobs on my hands, so if you allow me to join, I'll be happy to."

"Hotpot (Shabu-shabu pot)....."

The city embraced them in silence despite all the self-contradictory traits they were born with.

- As if it, too, longed for something fresh and new.

♂♀

Orihara Izaya

So.....the "Killing Machine" and the "Killing Monster" both ended up coming to Celty's rescue even though they were involved in incidents completely unrelated to Celty.....

Tsukumoya Shinichi

Ironic, isn't it? Moreover, the one who made them so tame in the first place happened to be the person you hate the most, Shizuo.

Orihara Izaya

.....

Tsukumoya Shinichi

Don't start sulking like that. Ikebukuro needs a holiday. It's a good thing that it's not getting involved with you in Shinjuku again.

Orihara Izaya

Now you're back to spitting out nonsense.

Tsukumoya Shinichi

So I take it you still refuse to recognize that cities, too, have personalities? That coming from someone who claims to love all humans?

Orihara Izaya

I'm not into the occult and stuff.

Tsukumoya Shinichi

It's nothing to do with occult. Cities are formed because innumerable memes...or brain

cells called humans gather inside them. The communication between these brain cells gives the city a soul. Cells are lifeless when they're scattered out and separated from each other. It's only when they communicate among themselves that a city begins to acquire a personality - to enjoy its holiday.

Orihara Izaya

I can follow your rhetoric, but I'm really not all that interested. I'm going to excuse myself for today.

Tsukumoya Shinichi

Sure. Take care and try not to get beaten up by Shizuo again. Or Simon, for that matter.

Orihara Izaya

You better be careful when I find out where you live in real life.

Orihara Izaya, confirmed dead!

Tsukumoya Shinichi

I think you're aware by now that I'm in this chatroom 24 hours a day, 7 days of the week?

Tsukumoya Shinichi's turn!

.....

EPILOGUE II

THE GROUP TALKS

Kawagoe Highway, Ikebukuro

"Attention, everyone! To make good three-five-eight marinade, the quality of the yeast and the ratio of the ingredients are key! As the name suggests, it's just a marinade made with salt, yeast and rice in a 3:5:8 ratio! It's really simple, but it works like magic in a lot of Japanese dishes!"

Wearing a pink apron with "Seiji LOVE" written on it, Harima Mika, the stalker girl with a long scar on her neck, was giving out cheerful instructions to others on how to cook.

Celty had an incredibly mixed feeling as she watched Mika, whose face looked the same as hers, cook like an expert.

Celty seized the chance to learn to cook after the ten million reward had been retracted.

She had at first turned to Anri, but Anri didn't know how to cook either.

Then she asked Karisawa, but Karisawa knew nothing about Japanese cooking.

Celty had wanted someone good at Japanese cooking in order to learn how to make her target dish - three-five-eight marinated sandfish - but she never expected Anri to bring

Mika here.

Of course, Yagiri Seiji had come with her; upon meeting Celty, he had asked brusquely: "Have you given up looking for your head?" After Celty had nodded in reply, he had said: "So I'll have to look for it myself....." and looked as if he was up for some strange kind of challenge.

Celty saw Mika eavesdropping from behind a pillar and felt a little uncomfortable - but Mika's cooking skills were beyond disputable.

She was an expert with the cleaver and was able to produce a series of side dishes almost immediately. The three-five-eight marinade, which Celty had looked forward the most to, was done in no time as well.

Celty had bought some fish thinking that she would invite everybody over since this is a rare occasion -

"Nice! Now all we have to do is to put the fish inside and marinate it overnight!"

- Overnight.....?

She was worried that they would end up starving that evening when Shinra clapped his hands and said:

"We'll do hotpot."

"Since this is a rare occasion, why not have a hotpot party and invite as many people we know as we can?"

♂♀

Meat Meat Greens Meat Greens

Meat Meat Greens Meat Greens

Tofu with sesame seeds wild greens with ponzu sauce

What goes with meat depends on how much fat comes with it

What was going on in the room could be summed up in these four lines.

That was how everyone was practically throwing themselves at the hotpot.

On the top floor of an expensive-looking apartment building on Kawagoe Highway -

The huge dining room felt threateningly small thanks to all the noise and heat coming from the guests flooding the apartment.

Around the nice big table sat about ten people. Two equally-sized clay pots were sitting on their respective gas stoves specially prepared for the occasion.

There was hardly anything in common about the group of people that surrounded the hotpot: there were students in their uniforms, a man in a bartender suit, and even a Caucasian woman.

"Here here, the meat's ready!"

A young woman walked towards them with a huge plate in her hand and a smile on her face. Her apron was apparently made from a dakimakura of some manga character.

Chopsticks began to fly over the table as a most inappropriate fight over food broke out.

On the sofa in the neighboring room, someone was watching everything that was going on in the dining room.

Though she looked comfortable with herself, there was something special about her.

The black figure who was sitting on the sofa with her legs crossed - had nothing above her neck.

A young man in a white coat sat down next to her.

The black figure had no head, but her hand had begun to move and was typing on the PDA she produced from her chest pocket.

[Are you not eating with them?]

"I feel full as long as I can see you smile."

The young man was saying strange things to his faceless partner. The figure shrugged and continued to type.

[You didn't have to do that. But, thanks.]

The man in the white coat looked embarrassed as he read it. He opened his mouth to express his mixed feelings as he listened to the noise of the shabu-shabu hotpot:

"Really, we've been through a lot in these few days."

[That's true.]



"About what happened...should I start from the neglect play I was put through.....?"

[Don't call that neglect play!]

Celty grabbed Shinra's neck as if to strangle him - and the atmosphere suddenly felt normal again.

She looked serious all of a sudden and typed one question onto her PDA.

[So what exactly should I do?]

"What do you mean?"

[I still have no idea what exactly happened. Should I....really keep doing that courier job.....?]

"What made you have second thoughts all of a sudden?"

[I could get Shinra in trouble if I take suspicious jobs again even if I can deal with them -]

Shinra closed the PDA for her before she could finish typing.

"We're family now. Didn't I tell you? A little trouble would be nothing...not to mention that I won't call anything 'trouble' as long as I'm in it with you."

[.....]

"After all, I've overcome the major difficulty in my life - which was to make you love me back!"

Celty couldn't help but smile silently in her heart as the underground doctor said these things unembarrassed as if he thought it sounded cool. She picked up her helmet and pressed its forehead to Shinra's forehead.

They were so content and in love. The people around the dining table were enjoying the small happiness in their lives as well.

They were all members of the enormous family called the city -

And everyone was gradually finding a place to call his or her home in their routine.

It almost felt as if the city, while enjoying its holiday, remembered that it should give something back to its people.

♂♀

[But still, I struck gold that day. A lot of things happened that I couldn't even begin to understand, but I got 800,000 just in down payment...although the baggage ended up moving on its own. Does that count as a job accomplished or...?]

"Well, I wouldn't complain about it if I were you. That night was hectic for me, but I earned 200,000!"

[Ohhh! That's a million in total.....the exact amount I had dropped!]

"Well done Celty! This is the power of our love!"

In fact, they were the exact bank notes Celty had dropped. Shinra and Celty had been working for a whole day for virtually no pay -

But whether they realized that or not was another story.

♂♀

CHATROOM

Tanaka Taro

Speaking of which, I had hotpot with some friends today.

Setton

Me too! What a coincidence.

Kanra

Ehhh!? Hotpot? At this time of the year!?

Kyo

What a coincidence indeed! We too got to enjoy some nice steamy hotpot today!

Mai

It was so good.

[Private mode] *Kanra*

So you guys got in here again.

[Private mode] *Kanra*

You had hotpot spot as well? Where? Have you already got friends to do hotpot with?

[Private mode] *Kyo*

Alas, alas.

[Private mode] *Kyo*

Better not think you can interfere in the glow of all the friendship we girls are basking in, Big Brother.

Mai

It's a secret.

Tanaka Taro

?

[Private mode] *Kanra*

That's why I said Mairu should remember to use the private mode...!

Bakyura

I also went out to have sukiyaki with my girlfriend. You know that sukiyaki place? With an 1500-yen all-you-can-eat option?

Tanaka Taro

Ah, you mean that chain restaurant!

Saika

I had hotpot with Setton-san. It was very good

Kanra

Seriously, you guys need to have a sense of season!

Kanra

Hotpot is good only for winter, you know!

Shinjuku, Izaya's apartment

"Oy, Namie."

"What is it?"

Namie continued to digest trivial tasks without looking up from her own laptop. Izaya, eyes fixed on his desktop display, spoke with a refreshing smile.

"Want me to treat you to some hotpot? The shabu-shabu kind or the crab pot, pick whatever you think is good."

"Would you please refrain from using me to comfort your ego just because everybody else in the chat room has friends to eat hotpot with?"

Izaya looked away slightly and shook his head at Namie's reply.

".....So you saw all that."

"I've been keeping track of that for a while."

"Does that mean...you also told my sisters about Celty?"

"Maybe.Really, recently your online gender-swapping's been getting even more disgusting."

Namie, who kept an eye on the chatroom as she went on with her tasks, glanced at Izaya as she spoke sarcastically and as an ill-natured smile crept over her face.

"Despite that, though.....I'm sort of surprised that you've got a human-like side. Well, guess you are Forever Twenty-One for a reason after all?"

"I see...looks like I will have to take you increasingly seriously. Damn, I should have limited the access to invited users only - like what Tsukumoya's done with his chatroom."

The evil mastermind who had been left out of the loop on all the recent happenings until the very end looked outside as he grumbled.

Shinjuku lay itself bare before his eyes as Izaya began to think to himself.

- Peaceful everyday life is something I decided I could do without since long ago.

- Though it's far from necessary for me, I do understand why it's desirable for most people.

Izaya, jealous of the other participants of the chatroom who seemed to be enjoying the peace of their lives -

Felt like he was jealous of the city Ikebukuro itself as he looked up at the sky through the window.

Swallowing the jealousy of guys like these -

The city enjoyed its holiday all the same.

NEXT PROLOGUE

After he was done being jealous of the city enjoying its holiday -

Izaya closed his eyes silently and smirked:

"Yeah.....it's about time I began to enjoy my holiday as well."

The man who had been completely left out of the incidents that happened this time laughed as if it was his way of revenge.

"After all, there are always as many ways to start a fire as you want there to be."

♂♀

Evening of the day of the incident

Anri let her thoughts wander as she lay under her blanket.

She thought of the bandaged man who had helped Celty escape today.

- He had bandages over his face...but there's no mistaking it...it's him.

It was the Caucasian man whom she had seen talking to the man in the gas mask on her way back from the karaoke.

As memories of that evening rushed back to her, Anri covered her head with the blanket and tried to fight back the incessant curses inside her body.

When she was talking to the guy the gas mask -

The Caucasian man had put his hand on her shoulder - and a disgusting wave of pressure had washed over her. She felt something cold and sharp run through her shoulder, and time stopped for a second inside her heart.

Her entire body felt ensnared, and it was impossible to move.

Jeeg jeeg jeeg jeeg jeeg jeeg -

Every cell in her body was screaming in unison as the twisted sounds became a march and climaxed.

Screaming how dangerous the man right behind her back was.

Screaming that he was far more dangerous than Anri could imagine.

But that was why she had to love immediately.

- At that moment -

What had ensnared her was not the vibe coming from the man.

It was "Saika" gnawing at the insides of her body and making the incessant "Jeeg jeeg" noises.

She was the only person who noticed -

- That as he placed his hand on her shoulder, every cell in her body practically screamed, and "Saika" had materialized into a blade and come out of her shoulder, cutting deep into the palm of the man's hand.

As a result, the Caucasian male had become Saika's "child" against Anri's own conscious will.

Although it was obvious that he did something fishy for a living - although she knew that Saika would not interfere with his life any more than necessary - Anri still felt shocked that she actually cursed someone.

- If.....

- If Saika moves on its own again someday and targets Ryuugamine-kun or Kida-kun this time.....

Fear washed over Anri's body as she realized that she had overlooked the danger of the "curse" inside her.

Not in the sense that she herself might be possessed and manipulated -

Rather, Sonohara Anri feared that she would continue to use Saika to gain control over the ones she loved as she kept listening to the curses inside her body.

That "I love you" sounded like it would never stop -

♂♀

Inside Russian Sushi, the conversation between three Russians in their native tongue

"So, Igor, did something happen? You're Colonel Lingerin's Pocket Knife. Surely he wouldn't have sent you here for nothing.....?"

"Yes, two of our members betrayed the organization."

"Haha! You mean us? Are you finally coming to finish us off after all these years?"

"No.....it has been too long. Colonel Lingerin has no intention to do anything about you two. You probably don't know about the duo that did escape....."

"But it looks like they're hiding somewhere in Tokyo right now. Thought it would be better to let you know. I didn't expect myself to have to undergo plastic surgery for a little side job I took, that I didn't."

♂♀

Awakusu-kai, conversation between the executives

"So...we still haven't found Yodogiri?"

".....Other groups seem to think we already finished him off."

"That old fox.....he's been sucking up to multiple groups besides us...he's grown to look down on us even more."

"Don't underestimate him. Although it's hard to accept the fact that we've been looked down upon by the manager of a talent agency.....but there's so much more to him that we don't understand."

".....Did he pit us against 'Hollywood' because we were no longer any use to him?"

"Bastard thinks we can't get back at him."

"Don't be stingy with money when it comes to information.Whatever it takes, we have to make sure to see that trickster drown forever."

♂♀

Somewhere in Ikebukuro, conversation between several boys

"Ryuugamine-sempai is interesting. Yeah, really interesting. Maybe he'll be even more interesting to have as a friend than Kida-sempai."

"What's your proof?" "Your old insanity's coming back - " "Heheh - "

"I told you we were attacked in a van by some bousouzoku, didn't I?"

"Speaking of which, weren't you the one who invited one of those gangs here, Izumii?"

"Don't call me by my old surname. That would make me think of the face of my brother."

"Must have been a hard time for you, having a brother with a different surname. But anyway, guess it's better to have a different surname from a brother at a reform school, isn't it?"

"My brother.....made a complete mess of Blue Square before I could even blink. Did he even realize how hard it was to form this gang? I knew he was useless, but I didn't know he was that useless....."

"And how about that Ryuugamine-sempai who sounds like he's a little more useful? Tell us."

".....Ah, sorry about that...anyway, things looked desperate for us in every way. I wouldn't have been surprised even if he cried...but Ryuugamine-sempai...was smiling as if he was enjoying it."

"Really?" "Is he a masochist?" "Heheh."

"Really, he's an interesting sempai. He must have a lot of love."

"Love?"

"He has more love for anything abnormal and manga-like than we do, than anyone else does...even if that spells danger. That's the kind of person he is. That was why...Ryuugamine-sempai founded Dollars."

"I don't understand." "What does 'abnormal' mean?" "Go repeat elementary school."

"I'm gonna push you over!" "Heheh - "

"Don't start fighting...anyway, the Yellow Turbans had a good thing going with Dollars, but it ended too soon - they didn't even fight all that much. Wasn't that just boring?"

"So you're planning to start a new fire, Aoba?"

"Yeah, but.....there are people out there who will try to steal the fire and use it for their own purposes. The first one of those we need to deal with is that hyena bastard.....Orihara Izaya."

"Whatever it takes?"

"Right. But I'm gonna say it here - don't touch his sisters. I kind of like them. Remember? I told you they kissed me all of a sudden....."

".....I'm gonna kill you!"

"That hurts that hurts that hurts, stop it, stop it you fool! That's why you're gonna stay unpopular forever - because you get mad so easily at things like this.....that hurts that hurts that hurts that hurts! Wait! Something just cracked! Something just cracked inside me I can hear it that hurts that hurts that hurts that hurts that hurts that - hurts - !"

"Oi, he's dying, Kuronuma's dying, for real." "Well, then we just kill him." "Heheh - "

♂♀

"Fires...you can just start with anything, in any way you can imagine."

Izaya smiled coldly and talked in front of Namie as if to himself.

"All I have to do is to gather the combustibles in one place - and throw a spark in."

The information broker shook his head with a dreamy expression on his face as if he could already see the fire burning.

"And then, I'm going to say to what Tsukumoya calls the 'city' - "

Cheerfully, cheerfully, he said as if only to himself -

In a tone that sounded like he was way absorbed in himself, his intoxication only slightly spiked with hatred, Izaya said:

"Your holiday's over, bastard.' - Just that."

♂♀

Even the city would want to "take a break".

That I have already mentioned.

So what happens when its break ends?

Of course, the city would return to its routine and no longer be able to observe you.

Therefore, if you - for example - are to find yourself in a desperate situation in Ikebukuro -

Don't expect the city to save you. Go get the police.

All considered, the city is not likely to even notice you now that it has returned to its routine.

But keep in mind that you're part of this city too.

As part of this city, you'll just have to do what you're supposed to do, and do it well.

That way the city will, sooner or later, consider taking a break again someday.

I hope that I will be able to see you again.

I hope that your holidays will be blessed by the city -----

Excerpt from the Afterword of Ikebukuro Attacks Back II, A Pedestrian's Guide to Ikebukuro, authored by Tsukumoya Shinichi and published by Media Works.



セルティ・ストゥルルソン
岸谷新羅

電ヶ峰帝人
園原杏里

黒沼青葉
折原九曜
折原舞流

羽島崙平
壺辺ルリ

折原臨也
矢澤波江

遊馬崎ウォーカー
狩沢絵理華
門田京平

平和島幹雄
サイモン・ブレジネフ

紀田正臣
強間美香
矢野誠二

岸谷森厳
エミリア

日本:
岸中トム
風摩魚之助
九十九屋真一

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Ryuugamine Mikado
Sonohara Anri

Kuronuma Aoba
Orihara Kururi
Orihara Mairu

Hanejima Yuuhei
Hijiribe Ruri

Orihara Izaya
Yagiri Namie

Yumasaki Walker
Karisawa Erika
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