

デブタツ!!

5

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita



電撃文庫



ゴキウ!! 5

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

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写真アルバム

カメラロール



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臨也「彼は逃亡者だ。友達と会うのが辛くて、コタコタの中心に向かって逃げ込んでいくのさ」



臨也「彼女は異形だよ。俺は人間とは認めたくないな。俺以外の人間から見れば彼女が害虫かどうかは知らないけれど」



臨也「帝人君はいつだって常識人だ。だからこそ、最大のトリックスターになりえるんだよ」

(MIKADO AND Aoba PANEL)

IZAYA
Mikado-kun is the common-sense guy through and through. That's why he makes the best of tricksters.

(ANRI PANEL)

IZAYA
She's a monstrosity. I don't classify her as human. No idea as to whether other human beings view her as vermin or not, though.

(MASAOMI AND SAKI PANEL)

IZAYA
He's the escapist. He's afraid to face his friends, so he chooses to seek shelter in the center of the hurly-burly.

IZAYA

About Shizu-chan
I have nothing to
say. Except that I
wonder when he's
gonna die -
hopefully sooner.
Well, on second
thought, giving
him living hell
wouldn't be half
bad either.



DURARARA!! ×5

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Let us play a game.

What, just place your bet on something simple.

Such as heads or tails in the spin of a coin.

Yeah, something as simple as that.

No more than speculations of an event where the chances of each outcome are theoretically even.

For instance, say, I punch hard the next person who walks past the front of this building.

Will the person get angry and punch me back? Or, rather than get angry, will he or she weep and run away? That's the kind of gambling I'm talking about.

How does it sound? Easy, right?

The chess piece we're using in this game is called the "heart".

Or rather, the sum of human behavior and changes in their feelings.

...

Oops, don't stare at me all dumbstruck like that.

Hm. Let's suppose someone asks you: "Can you buy everyone's heart with enough money?"

The tricky part of this question is the word "everyone".

The answer should be "Sometimes yes, sometimes no." Correct?

Some people wouldn't do anything that would hurt their pride or conscience even if you offered them 10 billion, while some might be ready to commit murder for one yen. That's the way the world is, isn't it? Even the same person makes very different decisions under different circumstances and at different times in his or her life.

That's right. The losers in the game called life are mostly the ones who are too assertive while answering this question. If they're assertive because they have some sort of faith or principle, they can still be excused. But those who jump to conclusions like "Of course you cannot buy human love!" or "Of course you can buy human love!" without thinking are doomed to fail because they've rendered themselves blind to all other possibilities. Staunch belief in one single answer does make your world look brighter all of a sudden, but it also narrows your world to the extreme. The trade-off is self-explanatory.

When you look at it that way, it makes perfect sense to gamble on human hearts, doesn't it?

Of course, you might be at an advantage if you know the person we're gambling on better than I do. But the difference it makes is like that between a horse gambler who does his research beforehand and one that doesn't.

Still, some would probably get mad at me and say "How can you compare human hearts to the heads and tails of a coin!" But they end up being the same. You can't say that you know a person perfectly well unless you know 100% what he or she is thinking.

Suppose our bet is on whether this certain person would commit murder.

For those who gave "I never expected him of all people to..." as an answer in interviews after a murder, their "coin" had been heads all the way before they got to know what had actually happened; meaning that they thought the person was more likely to not commit murder. For now, we're not taking into consideration that "everyone lies on TV." since this is no more than an example.

That's right. In fact, it's impossible to know what a person is thinking until the time actually comes.

No person can fully manipulate another.

As an information broker, I have, in many instances, done things similar to that out of personal interest. But I cannot manipulate 100% a person's heart.

What I can do is to give them a slight push on the back.

Not when they're waiting for the traffic light at the crossing to turn green, no. That's something

completely different.

If a person stands on the perilously thin line between one side of things and another...to get him to step into one of the sides, I push...slightly on his back. That way, he'll be able to make his first step and not waver further.

It's nothing, really. Kind of like charity.

Of course, I don't do this as a business. Neither can I offer any guarantee on his life thereafter.

So, now that I've made the conditions clear...let the game begin.

It should go without saying, but during the game, I will push the chess piece in the direction that works to my advantage.

Maybe you can keep that chess piece too. How does that sound?

Come on, don't give me that face.

You're making me look like an incorrigible villain.

Games are meant to be enjoyed.

Am I right?

LOVEY-DOVEY PRATTLES OF AN UNDERGROUND DOCTOR, I

Am I* a bad guy, you ask?

** Here Shinra uses "boku" to refer to himself.*

Is that even a question?

Although, I do think that the most evil thing I've done to date is to have lied to you, I've also told you that I didn't regret it, haven't I?

What's up? Your neck's blushing.

Just kidding. It's not like Celty's blood even circulates like a normal human's...uwah! That hurts, that hurts! I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Speaking of which, every time I* tell you that I like you you'll say-

** Here he uses "ore".*

'You must have been pretty lonely back when you were a teenager.'

That's mean. I* wasn't lonely at all. As to why, because I had you by my side, of course!

** Here he uses "watashi".*

...

Eh? You want me to 'stop switching back and forth between 'boku', 'watashi' and 'ore', pick just one and stick with it'?

But I don't want to, Celty. A leopard doesn't want its spots changed. Even if you ask me to change the personality I'm born with, I can't. First-person pronouns are meant to be varied with different conversation partners anyway.

The world is filled with all kinds of people. That's why you need to use different pronouns in front of different people...but to me, Celty equals the entire human race, or the entire world. That's right. I have to show every single facet of me in front of you, be it my preferred facade in front of other people or my real self!

...Hm, where were we?

Ah, right, we were talking about whether I was a bad guy or not. What brought that to your mind?

Heh-heh. I know. It's got to be that movie you just saw. Weird movie, that one, isn't it? All the characters are good, but end up having to do bad things because they have no other choice. That's how the story's like, right?

You're way too adorable for coming to ask me if I was a bad guy just because you saw that movie.

I'm so in love with you and your outspoken ways. You should watch a romantic movie next time around and come tell me we should make love to each other like they do in the movie.

...

[If it's something like 'The War of the Roses', I can give it a try.]? Celty, you always say such mean things to me.

Let's go back to the “bad guy” topic.

Hm. If it's for the love between Celty and me, I'm pretty sure I can become as bad as bad can be.

...

[Don't use love as your excuse]? Ah, don't say such things to me. Love has nothing to do with either good or bad to begin with, anyway.

Speaking of which, though, I feel like we hear the phrase “love and justice” a lot but no one seems to ever mention “love and evil”.

Evil guys whose love is deeper than the ocean.

I think there are many such guys out there in the world, don't you?

If the object of affection is narrowed down to Celty, then I am one.

...

[Stop saying embarrassing nonsense]?

That's not possible. In front of Celty embarrassment is for me but a double shot in the cocktail of love.

...

Eh, [I meant me! I'll get embarrassed so just shut up!]? That's no problem! They say requited love is like "Fallen petals on a running brook", so if you feel embarrassed, I'll just hold tight in my arms that embarrassed body of yours, aw!

...

That was mean. How come you're punching me all of a sudden? Now we're like "Fallen petals want to be loved but the brook simply runs on with indifference"!

But your perversity is what makes you all the more lovely, Celty! Ugh, that hurts, that hurts, that hurts! Ah, were you trying to conceal your embarrassment with that pinch in my cheek...aah...that hurts that hurts it's being torn apart! My face's being torn apart, aah...



喧嘩狂徒の 因習

CHAPTER 1

THE FIGHTING DOLL*, HE IS IN SLIGHT TROUBLE

** The Fighting Doll: short for Shizuo's nickname, "Ikebukuro's Automatic Fighting Doll".*

May 3rd, Sunshine 60 Street, Ikebukuro

The street was Sunshine 60, one of the most famous in Ikebukuro.

Usually referred to as the "60-Story Street", it connects the East Gate of the Station to Sunshine City. To those who commute to Ikebukuro by train, it's the most familiar one among Ikebukuro's many crowded streets.

It is the fastest route from the Station to Sunshine Building. Though it is often confused with the street named "Sunshine Street" right next to it, they are actually completely different streets.

The time was Golden Week.

The street was more crowded than usual since it was the beginning of a long holiday.

People passed each other by in the streets heading for all sorts of destinations: families headed for Sunshine City, couples walked towards cinemas, young people were about to shop for clothes and salarymen craved their meals. *Akihabara*-style young men were heading for Toranoana and Manga no Mori. Young girls, on the other hand, had Animate and the Butler Cafe "Swallowtail" in their minds. Pimps looking for easy targets, men who looked like hosts, women selling paintings, and even well-built foreigners could also be found in this holiday crowd.

When one walked on this road from the Ikebukuro Station, there was something quite impossible to miss.

Namely, the huge LCD screen and the numerous posters on the walls of Sunshine Cinema.

Inside the game center on the first floor, game machines like UFO claw cranes lined the walls. Young people were often seen killing their time here while waiting for the movie to begin.

"Rocchi! Go for that one next! That one! The stuffed one!"

"Eh, that's not fair! Non just got one, didn't you, Non?"

A throng of girls stood in front of the entrance to the game center. The afternoon looked nice and peaceful.

"Rocchi! I want a minute on that machine too!"

"Ah, OK, then we'll just leave Kanacchi here when we go buy juice, won't we, Rocchi?"

"Hang on! Are you guys dumping me?"

"What's the big deal, Kanacchi? You got plenty of Yuukichi-sempais on you today. Change them into Hideo-kuns and play your alien. Wow, I just tried picturing it, and it freaking rocks! Though it's kind of TR."

"...Um, Kiyomin, what the hell did she just say?"

"...If you try to put that into Japanese, it'll be like 'Kana, you have plenty of 10,000 notes on you today, so why not just change them into 1,000 ones, go have fun on your UFO claw crane and let us watch you act all stupid? I just tried picturing it, it's so bad that it's amazing. I'm getting goosebumps'...something like that. This is sick. Why can't she just speak Japanese?"

"Oi, Kiyosuke! Your translation weirded me out. You're no fun at all like an alien."

A crowd of about ten people walked out of the game center accompanied by their usual banter. Then, out of nowhere, a voice broke the peace of this routine scene.

"Get out of the wa-a-a-y!"

The brusque voice of a male who was breathing heavily sounded within the crowd on the road that had almost transformed into a pedestrian street.

People turned in the direction of the voice out of reflex. A middle-aged man in a hat was pushing through the crowd forcefully, looking eager to get out.

The street was less crowded than the train station at rush hour. Had the man been a little calmer he would have been able to find his way out with relative ease. However, the man didn't look like he had the luxury; he simply charged forwards in a straight line, scaring people out of his way.

Looking more closely, people saw a woman trying to catch up with the man with a dragging

stride while yelling something.

It was hard to hear what she was yelling about, but from the way she was dressed it was easy to tell that she was probably a clerk from a nearby store. From her expression, one could guess that the man trying to get away from her had probably shoplifted or robbed her store.

The crowd was flummoxed for a couple of seconds, but some people quickly realized what was happening and tried to block the man's way out.

"I told you to get out of my wa-a-a-y!"

The man who looked too fired up to catch his breath yelled unclearly on the top of his lungs while knocking people out of his way. Once people got closer to him, it became obvious that despite his modest height, the man had extremely firm muscles all about his body. His fierce determination to knock everyone out of his way reminded one of a professional football player.

(Ooi, that guy's dangerous!) (How come neither Shizuo nor Simon is here!?)

(Run fast!) (Call the police! The police!) (Uh! He's heading this way!)

(Wait! Take his photo!) (Stupid! It's not the time!) (You're the stupid one! You got the photo, you got the evidence!) (Ah, I see.)

(Uwah! I can't get away!) (Dad, what's that guy doing?) (Don't walk away from me!)

(Что случилось?) [What happened?]

(Нет проблем.) [No problem.]

(Eh!? What's up, what's up, Kuru-nee!? What's going on!?)

(Quiet [Don't shout].)

(I didn't even notice, I was too busy looking at porn! Why's everyone shouting?)

(Shut [Shut up].)

Voices drowned each other out and the street was in a commotion-

However, an even more bizarre human being was just about to make his appearance.

The gang of girls, who had just got out of the game center, retreated in fear of getting involved in whatever was going on. But a man had walked out flippantly from the center of the gang.

At first glance he looked like any average young man.

Dressed in several thin layers of clothes, he looked like a model who had just walked off a casual male fashion magazine.

Rather than Ikebukuroian, his appearance struck one as better suited for Daikanyama* or Omotesandou*. His face stood out in contrast to his rather modest dress style.

** Daikanyama: a district in Shibuya, Tokyo. Omotesandou: a road in Shibuya and Minato, Tokyo near Harajuku Station. Daikanyama and Omotesandou are both upscale shopping areas famous for fashion flagship stores such as Louis Vuitton and Prada.*

Which was not to say that he was extremely pretty or ugly; in fact, at present it was hard to tell on which side he fell.

On his face, shaded under the straw hat, there were layers of bandage wrapped about his forehead, part of which was still drenched in blood. One of his eyes was covered under a medical eye mask used to relieve swelling and a huge Band Aid was plastered across his cheek.

Around the eye mask, his skin looked slightly blue as if he had been recently hit with a bat or fallen down a staircase.

"Ah, Rocchi, it's dangerous! You're already wounded."

One of the girls shouted, but it was already too late. The young man who had just been called "Rocchi" had situated himself on the exact escape route of the man who was charging towards him like a bull.

"GET OUTTA MY WAY, AH!"

The masculine guy yelled and accelerated while sinking his body lower, ready to knock the young man out of his way.

The young man with the injured face did nothing but deliver a direct kick at the man right when he was about to crash into him.

This move was dubbed "kenka kick*" in professional wrestling; basically, it was like stomping on the opponent without mercy, only horizontally. It was the illustrious move that enabled Kyojin wrestlers to send their opponents flying with one single kick.

** For a visual example check out [this picture](#).*

Usually, the sight of the man's shoulders as he was charging forward like a bull would have been enough to make anyone lose their balance and get knocked out of his way.

And that was exactly what everyone in the spectating crowd had expected would happen to the young man standing on one foot.

But their speculations failed completely.

A screeching sound came from the middle of the road.

The origin of that sound was obvious to anyone once they cast a look at the the young man who had moved noticeably backwards from where he had been , and the black line extending from under the one foot he was standing on.

It was impossible to tell what kind of energy flow inside him had enabled him to stop the charging man with the sole of his foot and simply skid backwards a little bit on his other foot instead of getting knocked into mid-air.

The instantaneous impact must have been horrible for the young man judging by the way thin smoke seemed to come out of the black line left on the asphalt, which was actually molten rubber from the sole of his shoe.

The man who had charged at him with the full might of his body didn't advance another inch.

Had he kept his momentum and added to it with a push of his foot, he would probably have been able to send the young man flying with ease. However, the man seemed unable to make the last stride which should have been his most powerful one.

As to why, it was because with that "kenka kick" the young man had stuffed the man's mouth with the heel of his shoe. His foot was now deep in the man's face as well.

"You...knocked three women out of your way just now, didn't you?"

The young man said in a cold voice as if to himself, not seeming to mind that the man could hardly have heard him.

"Gabu..gah..."

His front teeth must have been broken.

The man with a shoe heel in his mouth had hardly any idea what was going on. He simply groaned.

As he listened to the man groan, the younger man narrowed his uninjured eye.

"Three times."

And, with the whole weight of his body concentrated on his foot, he move the tip of his shoe three times.

To put it simply, he ground the man's face rather forcefully.

A slight screeching noise came from the man's nose which was quickly being ground out of its place like a control knob of an electric stove being turned.

"ARGH! ARGH-! ARGH!"

The man finally seemed to realize what was going on under the refreshed attack of pain.

He continued to scream nonsensically and roll on the floor with his hands over his bloody face.

The young man looked at him as if he were a mosquito he had just finished off with a spray of insect repellent.

The girls who had been watching him from afar began to chatter anew without sounding worried in the very least.

"Rocchi looks pretty mad, doesn't he?"

"Of course, the clerk who had been chasing this old guy was a woman."

"So it's for women again? How naughty."

"But Rocchi is a playboy. There's nothing you can do about it."

"That's why he's charming."

"Exactly-!"

The female clerk had appeared in front of "Rocchi" before he could hear what the girls were saying about him.

"T-Thank you so very much....this guy stole from us..."

The woman's voice was shaking. It could have been out of fatigue because she had run all the way here with dragging feet, or out of sheer fear of the man who was lying on the ground with blood all over his face and the young man who had put him into that state.

The young man took off his hat and grabbed the female clerk's hand with tenderness.

"It's nothing. I just did what I should have done as a human being."

The words he said sounded so good-natured that it was surprising.

The smile he gave the woman from in-between the eye mask and the bandages was soft,

making it hard to believe that he was the same young man who had just kicked the man in the face.

The young man with a refreshing air about him noticed something about the female clerk's foot and looked worried.

"Look, my lady, you're injured."

"Ah...not really...I tried to stop the guy but he knocked me away..."

The young man kept smiling but, suddenly, he hopped backwards.

"Eh?"

The female clerk shuddered involuntarily, not realizing what the young man was trying to do.

She did soon enough, though.

The young man had landed on nothing else than the leg of the shoplifter who was lying on the ground. He had stomped on the man's knee with all his weight concentrated on his feet.

The man's scream soon drowned out the bone-chilling noise coming from his knee.

"Dah-baah! Argh! Dah! AHH!"

"Shut up, scum."

The young man said in an icy voice and kicked the man mercilessly in the balls.

"Ugh..."

"I'll spare you your life for now since I don't want to make your wife and daughters cry if you do have them waiting for you to come home. But how dare you hit a woman when you're a man? Hm?"

"...!"

The shoplifter seemed to have exhausted all the air he had in his lungs. He couldn't move a finger, and simply kept twitching on the ground.

Everyone in the street who had witnessed this scene stood frozen. The young man, on the other hand, didn't look bothered in the very least as he smiled and said, "Everything's OK now, don't worry. I've avenged you."

"..."

The young man began to talk non-stop once again in front of the completely dumbstruck woman.

"A beautiful lady like yourself is really not carved out for revenge. No, not at all. That's why it's better to leave to me such lowly labor that does nothing but dirties your hands-"

One of the girls standing behind the young man cut in.

"Rocchi."

"Yo, what's up, Non."

It was the shortest girl out of the throng that had come with him.

The girl who had just been called "Non" was pulling at his sleeve and saying in a nonchalant voice, "Kiyo-nee said you kind of overdid it for it to count as self-defense. You'll be in trouble if you don't run right now."

"Eh? Is that so?"

The young man answered just as nonchalantly as he eyed the unconscious man twitching on the ground. He turned his gaze to the female clerk once again.

The clerk was blinking without saying a word. She looked even more afraid now than she did when she thanked the young man.

"...What should I do, Non? It looks like I traumatized her."

"You'll be in trouble if you don't run. Look, the police's almost here."

"Oops, that's true."

He spotted vaguely several police officers in their uniforms in the crowd waiting for the traffic light to turn green at the crossing in front of the Station.

"Bye, beautiful lady. I'll excuse myself for now. You better find someone to check on your foot, just to make sure there's no aftereffects from- "

"Enough, Rocchi! Just go!"

"Oi! Wait a sec...Non, since when are you acting like a big baby...got it! I'm coming! I'm coming, OK? Hey, lady! If that man wakes up, you tell him! Tell him that if he wants a rematch he can come find me any time on Saitama's prefectural highways....that hurts, that hurts! I'm coming! Here, I can walk on my own, so stop pulling at my ear, would you, Non? Non-chan!"

The young man had been dragged back into the throng of girls and hurried away from the

scene.

Some of the people who remained behind tried to take photos of him with their cell phones, but had to be content with taking photos of the shoplifter (though by now it was hard to tell whether he was the criminal or the victim) instead since the young man had quickly concealed himself in the throng of girls.



After that commotion, when everyone was wondering just who that young man was-

"So they're here..."

A man sitting in a Lotteria nearby who had witnessed the entire event murmured to himself.

"Goodness...now the city's gonna be in some real trouble."

Just as the bespectacled debt collector with dreadlocks looked deeply disturbed-

A man who was somehow in a bartender suit despite being in a hamburger chain restaurant walked towards him and said, "Tom-san, I got us coffee...Is something wrong?"

"Ah, thank you...It's nothing. I just spotted a face I happened to know."

Heiwajima Shizuo, the man in the bartender suit, sat down in front of his boss Tom and replied with a calm expression, either because he didn't hear the noise from the commotion or because he simply didn't care.

"A friend of yours?"

"No, not really..."

Tom sipped at his black coffee and frowned.

"They're not my friends. But they might be looking for you."

"-?"

"Look, didn't you give those Saitama *bousouzoku* the hell of their lifetimes last month?...Or the heaven, since you practically blasted them into the sky."

"...Ah, yeah, the scums who damaged my clothes..."

Tom reminded himself to avoid provoking Shizuo further as he saw Shizuo's face turn dark. He

continued, "The head of 'Toramaru' was there a minute ago...His name is Rokujou Chikage. He may look like he's nothing more than a guy with a gaggle of girls at his heels in the day, but he's not the captain of Toramaru for nothing. Not that he's the type who would set fire to your home or anything, but it's still better to watch out."

Shizuo pondered this over for a moment after he heard what Tom had said.

"Are you talking about the guy in the leather jacket with the white heart-mark print?"

"Hm? You know him? That's actually a *tokko-fuku* of sorts, but they only wear them at night."

"Yeah. He came looking for me last night."

"Huh?"

Tom's hand stopped in mid-air with the coffee cup in it as he heard Shizuo's sudden reply. He frowned and stared at Shizuo.

Shizuo chewed his hamburger and began to tell Tom what had happened last night.

"Well...a guy on a motorbike kind of came looking for me for some reason when I was on my way home yesterday."



Night of the previous day, somewhere in Ikebukuro

"Yo, what up?"

Shizuo turned around as he heard somebody talk to him - and found a young man standing in front of a motorbike with its engine stopped.

"You're Heiwajima Shizuo, right? Well, it's not like there are that many guys who walk around in bartender suits anyway. I heard you're famous in the neighborhood."

"Hm?"

"I also heard that you gave my team the hell of their lifetimes recently."

"Your team?"

The young man, Rokujou Chikage, said in a bright voice to Shizuo, who was looking surprised, "Well, I also heard that they picked on you first, so I gave them quite the lecture myself as well. But anyhow, they did end up having to be hospitalized, all of them. Even though it was our fault to begin with, that was still kind of overdoing it, don't you think? So I came here to file a complaint."

The young man who was about five inches shorter than Shizuo walked straight towards him with a fearless smile on his face until they were so close that they could almost sense each other's breath.

"So, I asked the guys in their hospital beds, and you know what they told me? They said you uprooted an entire street lamp! At first I thought they were just funny in the head, but when I got here today I did find a street lamp with new concrete around its base."

"And?"

"I'm the Captain of the team, you see. Plus, I'm interested in getting to know just how strong you are...ah, by the way, are there women who would cry if you don't come home?"

"Huh?"

Chikage grinned light-heartedly as he saw Shizuo frown, and continued, "Well, I can let you off the hook today if there are. I don't enjoy making women cry."

At that instant, anyone who knew how Shizuo was usually like would have expected his fuse to burn out and his demon fist to land on the young man.

But he didn't look angry; in fact, he looked like he was finally beginning to understand what the young man had meant.

"...Ah, I see. I got it now."

"Got what?"

"So basically you came here to pick a fight with me?"

"Basically, yes."

Chikage shook his head in a sort of resignation as he heard Shizuo ask him the belated question.

Shizuo took off his sunglasses and put them into his pocket while saying in a nostalgic voice, "I see, I see. The last time I've been picked on this straightforwardly, I was still in high school. Speaking of which, I'm already working, but you're still a kid, aren't you? You don't even look like you're twenty yet. Even if you get to beat me up it's nothing to flaunt at school about."

"Fighting has nothing to do with age. Have you gotten better at talking thanks to your bartending job?"

"I wish."

Shizuo chuckled slightly and flexed his neck.

"Anyway, I don't hate people who come to pick on me directly. It's still better if nobody comes to pick on me, of course."

"Sorry about that."

"By the way, there's something I should tell you first."

They were already way too close, but Shizuo still tried to say more. At that instant-

Shizuo, who had taken off his sunglasses, became momentarily blinded by the soles of the other man's feet.

Accompanied by a heavy sound of impact, Chikage's feet were now in Shizuo's face.

Just when Shizuo opened his mouth to speak, Chikage had used the guardrail on the sidewalk as his springboard to deliver this seemingly impossible kick with the weight of his body concentrated on his feet.

I got him!

Though that was the feeling that was washing over his body, Chikage couldn't help but notice that something was different.

What?

How come this guy's not falling to the ground?

Chikage felt as if he had just delivered a kick at an extremely thick stick of bamboo. An eerie chill ensnared his body.

He nevertheless managed to maintain his balance as he landed, kicked the ground forcefully and swung his fist straight at his opponent with all his might.

But something still felt wrong.

...

...What exactly is this?

...Did I just hit the ground?

Although, he did feel the softness of flesh with the front of his fist, he was unable to make his fist advance another inch.

It was like punching the ground with his fist; he couldn't sink his fist any deeper.

Question marks swirled in Chikage's mind along with the chill. Then, Shizuo's unchanging voice reached his ears.

"There's something I should tell you first...what I want in my life is just what my name says, to spend my days in peace."

"...Huh?"

Chikage's eyes couldn't help but widen.

His fist did reach his opponent's face.

But all that did was make Shizuo tilt his face a fraction of an inch; even his expression remained unchanged.

Shizuo, on the other hand, looked as if he didn't even feel the series of attacks and continued to express his wish in a flat voice, "Therefore...how should I put it..."

"Wha-?"

Though the younger man was an expert at fighting himself, the flesh-colored hump still broke through his defense line with ease.

" GO TO SLEEP ! "

And the fist sank, with an amazing lack of further ado, deep into Chikage's face.



"...So you just put him to sleep as usual?" said Tom as he sipped at his coffee.

Shizuo sucked up his vanilla milk shake as he said, "Yeah, that's right. Afterwards, I took him to a doctor I knew."

“It’s rare that you would take someone to the doctor, Shizuo.”

“I’d be in trouble if he died. And I don’t hate that type of guy. Had it been that flea Izaya I would have given him the final blow right then and there.”

“I think a first blow from you kind of works as a last as well, though.”

Tom laughed hollowly. Shizuo, however, gave a surprising reply.

“Four.”

“Huh?”

“It took four punches from me for him to fall.”

“...You kidding?”

Tom’s eyes popped to the size of saucers as the sugar pack he had been twirling between his fingers fell.

“Yeah. When I was about to punch him a fifth time he said ‘Ah, and I have girls willing to tend to me when I’m in the hospital bed. Are you jealous now?’...Something like that. His tooth broke so I wasn’t able to hear very well. After that he just fell to the ground with a thud.”

“...I heard he was pretty tough, but I never thought...”

“There are actually quite a few guys out there who are like that. That foreigner* I got into a fight with a while ago took me quite some time as well.”

** Probably Baccano’s Nile.*

“Well, I guess the world is a big place and has all sorts of people to offer...but still, he’s something for being able to walk on his feet like that when he’s only just been beaten up by you last night. I was wondering how his face got injured, but I guess I see why now...”

“But to be quite frank, I am jealous of him for having women who would take care of him.”

“Yeah...speaking of which, you are lacking a girlfriend. I know we’re at work and all, but aren’t you tired of eating with a guy day after day? You could probably use an oasis of the heart as well, ever thought about that?”

Tom had raised a pretty sharp question. Anyone who knew Shizuo enough to be smart would have avoided asking such questions out of fear, but Tom, who had known him for a relatively long time, knew that it actually fell within the safe zone, if only barely.

He was right. Shizuo did not look displeased; instead, he nodded with an “Mm,” and began to

say things that sounded like a complaint.

“Not that I haven’t heard people say, ‘I love you’ to me...but I don’t even know if they counted as women or not.”

“Hm? Have you been going to gay bars or transsexual clubs?”

“No, that’s not what I meant...I mean, they hardly counted as humans to begin with...more like sharp objects...”

“Sorry, but I really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Tom looked puzzled while Shizuo simply continued with the story of his adolescence.

“Actually, no women have ever been willing to get close to me. I know that’s partly my personality’s fault, but there’s no one close to me save that fucking flea and the weird guy in glasses. The flea was always sweet-talking some woman into following him somewhere, and the glasses guy creeped women out as well since he had that twisted personality.”

“Are you talking about Izaya and...um, the doctor you mentioned?”

“Yeah. The doctor’s an irritating fly that just can’t stop talking nonsense into your ear, and I still get mad at him at times. But he’s kind of a bad acquaintance that stuck. I don’t even wanna mention that fucking flea. He can’t die in a fire soon enough for me. Anyway that’s why I’ve never had a girlfriend.”

"Don't mind that too much. You'll find a cute girlfriend sooner or later. You've got a face like your top idol brother's after all."

Tom tried to cheer Shizuo up with a smile on his face. Shizuo, on the other hand, tilted his head in a "Do I really?" sort of way.

It was a day like any other for them, for Shizuo especially.

The Rokujou Chikage incident was nothing more than a speck of spice in their otherwise uneventful lives.

Or at least should have been.

It was only rarely that people like Chikage would come looking for Shizuo.

That was why Shizuo was unable to realize that his life was changing quietly and in places he

couldn't see.

"So lunch was at Lotteria...how about supper at McDonald's for the sake of balance...Hm?"

Tom stopped mid-sentence and raised his voice in a strange way. Shizuo raised his head with question marks written all over his face and asked, "What's up?"

"Turn around and look."

"Hm?"

Shizuo was sitting with his back to 60-Story Street. The restaurant had transparent glass walls, so Tom was able to see clearly everything that was going on outside.

Right now Tom's gaze was fixed on something on the street behind Shizuo's shoulder.

"What's going on...?"

Shizuo trailed off instantly the moment he turned to look.

Sucked to the glass.

That was probably the best way to describe it.

A little girl stood outside Lotteria's glass wall.

The tiny girl, with her hands and forehead practically sucked to the glass, was staring at Shizuo.

For a moment he thought it was a girl he knew, maybe Kururi or Mairu.

Shizuo couldn't think of any other little girl in Ikebukuro who would press herself to the glass staring at him.

But the little girl had a face he didn't know.

Moreover, she was way younger than Mairu or Kururi to begin with.

The little girl was dressed like an elementary school kid. One would guess that she was barely even ten.

The girl kept staring at Shizuo and then, after casting a glance at a piece of paper she had in her hand, raised her eyes to look into Shizuo's once again.

All of a sudden, her face broke into a bright smile like a blossoming flower.

It was not a smile meant to reassure or conceal embarrassment. Rather, it was an innocent smile seen on kids' faces only when they got their hands on a longed-for toy.

After that, the little girl began to run in a circle with loud footsteps like some sort of wound-up toy, her eyes never leaving Shizuo.

"...Um, is she a relative of yours, Shizuo?"

"...No, I don't think I know her."

"But it doesn't look like she's staring at you because she finds your clothes funny."

"Nope. It's strange indeed. I'll go out and have a look."

Shizuo felt puzzled and got up to make for the door and ask the mysterious little girl what she was after.

"Oi oi, you really think it's a good idea? What if she goes 'Dad!' or 'Sweetheart!?' What will you do?"

"That's impossible. We're not living inside Yumasaki's head."

Shizuo gathered the tray quickly and walked outside.

The little girl stared at him, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Parents often fondly compared their kids to dolls; but in the case of this little girl, there was no other way to better describe her loveliness.



Her shoulder-length raven hair swayed gently in the wind, and her cute long bangs took turns concealing her left or right eye from view.

The weather in May was already fairly warm, but the girl had two layers firmly on. Her clothes looked like something European kids would wear, and the golden buttons on them were quite eye-catching. They looked like they were meticulously tailored to accentuate the girl's tiny frame.

However, the way her eyes were concealed behind her bangs made her smile look somewhat gloomy.

The girl kept her gaze on Shizuo as she began to run towards him without hesitating.

Ran.

Ran.

Ran, and ran.

Ran and ran and ran.

Tak-tak, tak-tak, tak-tak, tak-tak-

Shizuo had a sudden uncanny feeling.

An unspeakable chill went down his spine-

He couldn't help but notice the way this kid was smiling.
It was innocent alright.

But there was also something that reminded one of a kid stomping on ants for fun...

Shizuo's premonition was proven true when the little girl opened her mouth to say her first word.

"Die!"

And then, the little girl -

Without hesitation, pressed the stun gun she had been holding in her hand against Shizuo's

abdomen.

The next second, intense currents sent loud explosive sparks flying into the air-

And Heiwajima Shizuo's laid-back routine was officially put to an end.

Night of the previous day (May 2nd), CHATROOM

Setton-san has just joined the chat.

Setton
Good evening!

Setton
Hmm, looks like nobody's online

Setton
I'll just wait

Setton
Ah, my partner's calling, brb

Tanaka Taro-san has just joined the chat.

Tanaka Taro
Good evening

Tanaka Taro
Looks like only Setton-san's online?

Tanaka Taro
Hmm, no response

Tanaka Taro
Maybe Setton-san's busy. Sorry about that

Tanaka Taro
I'll just wait here.

Kyo-san has just joined the chat.

Mai-san has just joined the chat.

Kyo
We are awfully sorry to disturb you in your silent quest of waiting for others to appear, Taro-san who just said you would be waiting after you acknowledged the other party's presence, and Setton-san, who does not seem to notice that the ones you've been waiting for have arrived because you are away. Is this a prelude to some sort of romance? Though I have no idea what gender you are. Taro-san uses a masculine handle, but I cannot rule out the possibility that you're really a woman. As for Setton-san's handle

Mai
?

Kyo
Sorry. I just hit the word limit. As for Setton-san's handle, it's even less indicative of the gender of the person behind it. Speaking of which, Setton is a weird handle to use to begin with indeed. What's the story behind that name? I googled it, but all I got was some kind of Korean fashion. Is that where you got the idea of that name? Or did you get it from the movie producer Maxwell Setton?

Mai
It's a mystery.

Setton
Back. Good evening

Setton

The weird ones are here.

Setton

Ah, actually no. My handle is just a twist of my real name

Kyo

Now that is surprising. I can't believe the story behind it is so simple! Please pardon me if that "simple" sounds offending to you. I apologize with all my heart, but it is really up to you whether to forgive me or not. But again, this might turn out to be an ideal chance to get to know the real Setton-san! What kind of twist is it? Seto Sanpei...Setouchi Anna...what could the real name be? Wow, Setton-san just got even enigmatic if that's possible.

Mai

Serada Jirou Saburou Tonpei?

Setton

Just what kind of name is Tonpei...?

Mai

-Content filtered for containing inappropriate words or phrases-

Mai

What?

Setton

Hmm, I've never noticed we had that kind of filter.

Setton

.....And what were you trying to suggest as my real name?

Mai

-Content filtered for containing inappropriate words or phrases-

Mai

Ah, I see, so you can't type that word here...

Mai

That hurts!

Setton

?

Mai

I was pinched.

Kyo

I am so sorry. Presently we are sitting at computers right next to each other's and both taking part in this chat. But as I just saw Mai typing something way obscene into the dialogue box I punished her in reality in order to stop her from polluting the chatroom. Please rest assured.

Setton

I see you two really hit it off.

Bakyura-san has just joined the chat.

Bakyura

Cheers

Kyo

Look, it's Mr. Playboy who likes his whistle blown.

Mai

Good evening.

Bakyura

What, why is my whistle still being talked about!?

Setton

Evening!

Saika-san has just joined the chat.

Bakyura

Oh, just one minute after me

Setton

It's synchronicity.

Saika

Good evening.

Bakyura

Did Taro-san go to bed already

Bakyura

It's like 10 p.m.

Bakyura

Just how healthy a lifestyle does he feel like he must stick to

Tanaka Taro

Wow, people got online when I was answering calls and going to the bathroom...

Tanaka Taro

Good evening, everyone.

Bakyura

Ah here you are

Setton

Synchronicity again.

Bakyura

Sin-Clone-y-City sounds like some kind of final revelation scene in a game.

Tanaka Taro

I really can't say I'm interested in replying to that.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Mikado

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

I need to talk to you

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

Eh?

Setton

The Clone-y-City part is just...

Saika

What does that mean?

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
You're Masaomi, right?

[Private mode] *Bakyura*
...I don't think who I am even matters right now

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
But these two months you've been pretending you don't even know me in this chatroom...

Kyo

I really have no idea what kind of thinking pattern made Bakyura-san say what he just said...humans really have inscrutable hearts. Maybe that is because so many shades of insanity are synchronized in our hearts. I only hope that mix of insanity is not a potential threat to this world and our fellow humans.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
Sorry, I said I wasn't interested in replying to you because that seemed like what everyone else would say...

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
Ahhh, I really don't know what to say. I never expected to talk to you with the clear knowledge that you're Masaomi in a place like this...but are you really so annoyed that I said that? I thought Masaomi wouldn't mind being told that...but actually, Sin-Clone-y-City was pretty funny.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*
No, that's not what I need to talk to you about

[Private mode] *Bakyura*
Ahh, hang on a moment

Mai
Scary.

Setton
You were a little too mean, Kyo-san.

Setton
See? Looks like Bakyura-san doesn't want to talk anymore.

Bakyura

Ah, sorry

Bakyura

I was just eating

Bakyura

I'll still be around but I probably won't reply to anything

Setton

Bon appétit!

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Good, now I can concentrate

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

Thanks for getting all serious. By the way, I'm glad you're no longer hitting enter after every punctuation mark...

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Anyway. There's a reason that I'm not talking to Tanaka Taro today, but directly to you, Mikado. In fact, I was waiting for you to come online.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

You could have just called me. I haven't changed my number.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Can't. Hearing your voice would probably have swung my heart the unwanted way.

Kyo

So is everybody going somewhere for the break starting tomorrow? We two are more indoorsy types than we might look so we're probably just going to cultivate our love at home.

Setton

Your love? Are Kyo-san and Mai-san a couple?

Mai

It's a secret.

Saika

I will stay at home.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

I was talking to Kyo-san and others

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Are you going somewhere for Golden Week?

Setton

My partner and I are probably going to play video games together.

Kyo

Wow, Setton-san has a way of cultivating love too.

Mai

Together.

Setton

Ah, nah, if you have to call it love...well, I guess there's really no other way to refer to it. lol

Saika

Love?

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

Ah, I'm not going anywhere! So if you want to meet we can definitely meet!

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

Your parents don't really care what you do, so I'm guessing they don't mind your dropping out of school either. But everyone at school is worried about you. Satou-sensei was asking about you too.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

And Anri really wants to see you again.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

...That's not really what I want to talk about. Sorry.

Kyo

Anyway. If we do go out we'll just be wandering around Ikebukuro. Mai and I will probably go shopping at P Parco and see a movie at Sunshine Street and that'll be it.

Mai

I wanna see a movie.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Mikado, are you going anywhere for the break?

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

Eh? Not really, I have class representative stuff so I'll be at school tomorrow.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

I see.....Mikado. This is my best advice for you.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Don't go roaming around alone at night, at least not during the break.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Even if you have to, try not to hang out with anyone else in Dollars.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

Eh?

Setton

Ahh. But sometimes I would think it would be nice to walk in the woods in my hometown with my partner.

Kyo

Really! Why not visit your hometown then? You don't get breaks every other day.

Setton

No...my hometown's kind of too far away for that.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

It's best if you just try to be a high school student with nothing to do with Dollars for a while.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

What exactly is happening?

Setton

Is Taro-san going somewhere?

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

I don't have the clearest idea either, so I'm probably not the best person to brief you

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

It's just...a hunch, yeah, something close to a hunch

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Something just smells dangerous

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Dollars is in danger. I have this feeling that Dollars is in danger.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

Dollars is?

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

Not really sure why, but I see what you're trying to say. I'll be careful

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

I trust Masaomi's hunches for this kind of thing since they've never been wrong.

Setton

Hmm, no response. Might be away.

Setton

Ah, excuse me. Looks like there's a guest in my place so I'll leave early today.

Kyo

Alas, we're already saying goodbye for this evening. That makes me melancholic, but I'll just savor the delicious sorrow while blaming everything on fate. I'm probably the only one who does enjoy things like that. Goodbye Setton-san, have a nice break.

Mai

Setton-san, Bye-bee.

Bakyura

Rest well!

Saika

Thank you.

Setton

Saika-san, it's not like there's anything you should thank me for. lol

Setton

Anyway. Rest well, everyone.

Setton

Good night -

Setton-san has just left the chat.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Thank you, Mikado.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Take care of yourself.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

Thanks. You too, Masaomi. I really mean it. Thank you for everything.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Don't talk like that, it makes us feel like strangers.

Bakyura

Ah, I actually have something to attend to as well so I'll be logging off for the day.

Bakyura

(>_<) ノ シ

Bakyura-san has just left the chat.

Kyo

Good night. Hope you have sweet dreams of Sinful Clone-y Cities.

Tanaka Taro

Good night.

Tanaka Taro

Ehh? Setton-san left, too?

Tanaka Taro

Argh, I didn't know I was ignoring Setton-san...

Tanaka Taro

I'm really sorry.

Saika

I don't think Setton-san would mind.

Kyo

Aww, you seem to be missing out on each other a lot. At the beginning of this chat Tanaka Taro-san was ignored by Setton-san who happened to be away. Now Taro-san ignored Setton-san back...this online phenomena of missing out on each other is definitely trying to teach us something!

Mai

I think it's love!

Kyo

You need to stop responding with just your spinal reflexes.

Saika

Love...?

Tanaka Taro

Um, I'm sorry?

Tanaka Taro

Speaking of which, Kanra-san hasn't been here today.

Kyo

That one is a smart bastard and always busy. Though I wouldn't mind at all if that one wasted more time in places like this chatroom and didn't wreak as much havoc.

Mai

That one's rotten to the bone.

Saika

Kanra-san doesn't seem like a bad person.

Tanaka Taro

Has Saika-san ever met Kanra-san in reality?

Saika

No, only in this chatroom. I'm sorry.

Tanaka Taro

Well, I won't call that one a bad person, but it's true that Kanra-san is a little strange...

Kyo

Alas, alas. Yet another human being taken in by Kanra-san's sweet words...

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INTERLUDE, OR PROLOGUE A

ROKUJOU CHIKAGE

Night of May 3rd, Itabashi, Tokyo

There was an overpass over National Highway 254, commonly referred to as "Kawagoe Highway".

On that overpass, now stood a young man with a medical mask over his one eye, surrounded by a throng of girls, and watching the flow of vehicle headlights under the overpass.

"Rocchi, are you not in pain any more?"

"I'm in horrible pain. But as long as I'm with you all I'm fine. The breath of cute girls in my ear is the best analgesic."

Chikage rubbed at his Band Aid with one hand as he said this. One of the girls opened her mouth to say in a serious tone, "Rocchi."

"What's up?"

"That was sick."

"Wha-"

Chikage's head dropped forwards in a dramatic fashion as if her words had been a fatal blow. But in fact, he was not disheartened in the slightest as he turned towards the girls and said, "I need to thank you for showing me around Ikebukuro's streets today, though. It gave me quite some ideas."

"Drop that pretense, Rocchi. We know you've hardly even stepped out of Saitama."

"But you scared me to death with all those injuries when we saw you."

"Yeah. Don't fight if you don't know how to fight, Rocchi."

Chikage smiled hollowly at the chattering throng of girls and said, "I'm good at it."

"So did you win?"

"...No, I lost."

"I knew it-"

The girls sighed. Chikage sighed back.

"My opponent was too strong. But hell, if that's not the fight I enjoyed the most in years. And he was a nicer guy than I'd expected, too."

Chikage said with a gloomy expression on his face. The girls began to shoot back.

"No idea what you're talking about."

"Why was he in a fight with you if he was so nice?"

"Guys never grow up..."

"Especially Rocchi..."

"The only grown-up part about him is the lower body..."

"That's sick."

"What kind of guy asks eight girls out on a date at the same time?"

"Huh, I thought he actually asked ten more?"

"Most of them got mad and went home."

"That's just the worst."

"Why are we dating such a playboy?"

"Because that's one of our sick hobbies?"

Chikage narrowed his eyes and tilted his head sideways as the girls continued to make biting remarks about him.

"You look like you really enjoy talking about me. I'm at least a better guy than that aristocrat with 30+ maid slash lovers they talked about on TV a while back, don't you think?"

"Eh? But didn't you say you were jealous of him?"

"...We'll talk about that later. Anyway, take care on your way home today. Don't walk alone until you're in the Station."

The girls smiled in resignation as Chikage made an obvious attempt to change the topic, "OK, OK, Rocchi. You sure worry a lot about us."

"See you later."

The girls said their goodbyes and walked off the overpass.

Chikage watched them leave with a smile on his face and kept staring at the night view of the highway.

He kept silent for a while in the nightly breeze-

Then said abruptly in a voice that blended into the noise of the traffic, "But really, I've never been defeated like that before. Not to mention he even had to take me to the doctor. A weird doctor at that, too."

"We never thought you would lose one-on-one."

A voice sounded from behind the young man's back.

It was no longer the voice of a young girl; instead, it was the brusque voice of a grown man.

Chikage did not turn. He kept his gaze fixed on the traffic and said, "Ah...that guy's not human. To be honest with you, I don't even want a rematch with him."

"Is he so hard to deal with?"

"But then, I shouldn't have picked on him in the first place since we were actually the ones at fault. I went looking for him because I wanted to."

"That's OK. Heiwajima is not whom we're after, anyway."

"Haha, that's right."

Chikage chuckled and said to the men around him.

"Yeah, Heiwajima Shizuo is just a side dish. Our main course is the opponent tonight."

Chikage raised his head and turned his gaze away from the highway to focus on the men

around him.

A lot of those faces he was already familiar with.

Eyes.

Eyes sharp like wolves' were focused on Rokujou Chikage.

But the animosity in them was not directed at Chikage.

Scores of men in leather jackets, or "*tokko-fuku*"-s.

They looked like they were not fully adults yet, but their intimidating demeanor seemed to make even the air around them go denser.

Not all of them were standing on the overpass, of course. Apart from a selected few, most of the men stood on the sidewalk under the overpass.

Rokujou Chikage scrutinized one by one the men who stood in silence.

And slowly opened his mouth to say, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. We have no mercy for those who showed us none...if they choose to play dirty, then we'll just play even dirtier! The fools among us who went to Ikebukuro to wreak havoc without my permission have been sent to hospital...don't let yourselves become fools like them!"

"They got another three of us yesterday. Did a clean job at that, too."

"Che! Fools running around without my permission again? Oi!"

Chikage ground his teeth as he heard his subordinates speak. Then, he laughed.

"We're not a herd of meek lost sheep...there's no need for us to bother declaring outright war on those filth before we tackle them."

Rokujou Chikage, the man with the mark of the Saitama bousouzoku gang "Toramaru" on him, proceeded to focus his gaze on the men around him, all filled to the brim with killing intent. His voice was calm, but the waves of emotion underneath were clearly being channeled:

"They might have considered it revenge, but what they did was more than what I can put up with...they came to Saitama, attacked our members, and even ambushed people who had nothing to do with us...Had they avoided involving anyone who was not one of us, I would have put up with it. But now, the story is different."

A man who looked like the Vice Captain of the team swallowed and said, "I don't know how they think about us...but I think Dollars would be a pretty tough opponent."

"I don't care what they are."

Chikage didn't seem to share the Vice Captain's concern.

These delinquents looked completely different than when they wreaked havoc around Ikebukuro; they were now disciplined and had a leader.

"We're gonna show those so-called 'Dollars' who think they're something just who we are!"

All of the men listened to Chikage in silence.

In their hearts, however, a fire had started and illuminated one single goal-

Revenge.

An unknown gang had ruined the peace of their hometown.

What was more, they had lost face.

Their friends, family and other innocent individuals had been involved.

Rokujou Chikage used his most inciting voice to make these angry young men release the full power of their wrath.

"We'll show those Dollars... Who are the ones they shouldn't have messed with!"

OHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-!

A deafening roar shook the nightly sky over Ikebukuro.

Soon after, the men disappeared into the dark.

Chikage remained on the overpass and watched them leave.

His smile now was evil and cruel, completely different from the one he wore while fighting Shizuo.

"Ah, right. I don't think you guys need reminding, but..."

Chikage added for the last time:

“If anyone has the guts to even touch a female member of Dollars...I will kill him with my own hands.”

LOVEY-DOVEY PRATTLES OF AN UNDERGROUND DOCTOR, II

Hey, Celty. Sorry to have kept you waiting.

I got caught up in things.

It looks like you're chatting. Is it OK for me to interrupt? That's the chatroom Celty likes to go to every day, right? That Saika kid with the glasses is in that chatroom as well, isn't she?

Alas. Out of nowhere Shizuo brought a boy covered in blood to our place.

Looks like they were in a fight.

Still, it's been forever since he bothered to bring anyone he had injured to my place.

Since high school, to be exact. That was back when I knew little more than how to do first aid and apply bandages. You were working, I think?

I didn't talk to you all that much about what was happening in high school. It was mostly just fighting, though.

Because Shizuo and Izaya have been fighting like cats and dogs from the moment they set eyes on each other.

Though it's probably more accurate to say vampire and werewolf.

Speaking of which, have you seen real vampires or werewolves, Celty?

...

Eh? Really?

So there are many kinds of vampires and werewolves out there.

But you haven't seen any vampires after you came to Japan? I figured so.

Still, Celty, you're probably the most extraordinary thing in Japan yourself.

...

But you're scared of Little Gray Men?

What, Celty? Celty?

Don't tell me you're still convinced that the Little Gray Men were the reason the dinosaurs went extinct?

...

No, no, Celty. The photon belt is not an enormous living thing. 'The photon belt might eat us all up'? I've never even heard that sentence before.

...

No, no, no! How on earth would people come from the 4th dimension that easily?

Think about it! You know how hard Yumasaki-kun tries to go to the 2D world? Yet, he hasn't succeeded. Therefore 4D people will never be able to come to our 3D world either. Everything's fine! ...You're scared of tesseracts from the 4th dimension? Have you been reading *Dokyouboshi**? Don't confuse manga with the reality!

** Dokyouboshi: a 2000 manga by Yamada Yoshihiro. The astronauts battle a tesseract (4D hypercube with three-dimensional shadow), which destroys the first spaceship humans have been able to send to Mars.*

I just don't get it. Celty, you're not afraid of ghosts or fairies, but aliens freak you out like nothing else. But then, I think there was this TV special where there were so few people who believed in ghosts but not Venusians that they couldn't even set up debate teams with equal numbers of participants.

...Yes? What did that TV special make you think of?

...

Calm down. Prophecies are nothing to be scared of!

Look, nothing happened in 1999, right? So 2012 is going to be fine too!

Speaking of which, Celty, you did say in June 1999 that you were wondering if your lost head was the root of all evil on earth.

...

Eh? The calendar of the Mayans ends in the year 2012?

Hang on, when do you want the Mayans' calendar to end then?

3000 years later? Or half a billion years?

How much work do you want to make the Mayans do? Do you even know how hard it is for the Mayans to make just one year of their calendar? Ah, I don't know either, of course.

Look, the calendar on my notebook ends in the year 2009, too.

...Celty, don't tell me you're scared of the year 2009.

Ever thought of the possibility that the world would end before 2012 in a nuclear war or a meteor impact?

Had the prophecy been made around 1800, people would just rejoice and go, 'Lucky! The world won't end till 2012, so not in my lifetime!, wouldn't they? Though most people would probably ignore it.

That's what I'm saying. What those so-called 'prophets' are good at doing is in fact just exaggerating rumors to frighten people. Though, I'm not saying there are no real prophets among them.

For instance...consider Izaya.

He's sort of like a prophet, isn't he?

Isn't he always saying mysterious things as if he could read your mind?

He'll appear like a ghost every time something happens, and act as if everything's happening in the exact way he has expected but he is actually as clueless as everyone else beforehand. Everything is obvious with the benefit of hindsight.

Just like those self-proclaimed prophets, all he does is talk about things that have already happened as if he had expected them long in advance. What's unusual about Orihara Izaya is that he can make such talks very convincing.

If you analyze his talks with a cool head, they probably won't be enough to take you in...but he'll always make sure to arrive on the scene at the best time and say the worst possible thing into your ear, so that you can't help but be unnerved.

If Izaya were to debut as a prophet on television, he'd get pretty high ratings.

Of course, when his following has reached a certain size, he would probably get tired of it, toss out a big prophecy such as 'Japan is going to be submerged' and simply disappear into the commotion it would cause.

He was already good at coaxing and cajoling back when we were still in school.

Rather than 'tricking' or 'deceiving', I'd rather say he's good at coaxing. So good that it's almost a waste.

Really, my high school days were ruined thanks to those two. Shizuo was violent and Izaya was shady as hell, so no girls were willing to approach us. Not that I wanted any other girl when I was already living with Celty, of course.

Anyway, the point is, never believe a word Izaya says. Unlike those self-proclaimed prophets, there's not even an ounce of good will in his words. But then, his lies aren't any more palatable even if he says them with good will.

...

Eh? What if I am the real prophet who can foresee the end of the world?

I had intended that entire speech to convey the idea, "Rather than worry about prophecies you should be afraid of that Izaya in your reality". Is that message being completely ignored?

That makes me kind of sad. Though that's one of the many things that make you adorable, Celty.

If I had the ability to foresee the future, and if the end of the world could be prevented if mankind tried, I would go out and earn about ten billion yen in gambling, then invest in stocks and earn such a fortune that the world would be convinced that I really had the ability to see the future, and then I would be able to make them do something to prevent the world from ending. If the world would end in three days I'd simply give up and hold Celty tightly in my arms instead!

...This is strange, Celty. You're supposed to be deeply touched by my words and flying into my arms right now.

But then, if there really are prophets who can foresee the future, it'll be equivalent to having a time machine, won't it? Because what they do is effectively channeling information from the future to the present.

...

Celty, don't tell me you're scared because you're thinking about A.I. disasters - pretty please?

My, my. Celty, you're such a strong girl but you're always in such a panic whenever aliens are mentioned. That's just too cute.

...

Eh? Why are you not pinching me in the cheek or stabbing me with your shadow or something?

Look, I'm not a masochist. But I do worry about you when you don't go a little violent on me like you always do...

...

[I'm calmed down. Thank you.]?

Sounds like you really were scared.

Come here, cry all you want in my arms. After that we'll go to bed so I can comfort you with pillow talk, ah, that hurts, that hurts, I see you're back to normal at last, aah, that hurts! That really hurts...

...

My, that really hurt a lot. But I can't be happier to see that you're back to normal.

Ah, by the way, I'm not a skeptic when it comes to psychic phenomena. I actually believe in them.

Because I have you, Celty, you're a living miracle in front of my eyes.

I said you were "extraordinary". I'd like to correct that.

You're not a fairy, not a demon, much less a ghost.

You're a miracle of love!

I don't care whether you're a fairy, a devil or even an angel.

They say you can 'Smell fruit at the first blossom', but to me, the better proverb for you is 'Smell honey at the first rays of sunshine through the canopy'. You've been attractive to me ever since the first day we met! I didn't know it would become requited, of course!

...

Hm?

Ah, this is just horrible timing!

Sorry, Celty. Looks like the kid Shizuo brought here has just waken up.

I have to explain to him what happened lest there be an uproar.

...

Huh...sorry to have kept you waiting.

He's already walking on his feet, so I let him leave. He should get his skull examined more carefully since it was Shizuo who beat him up, so I introduced him to another underground doctor with the proper instrument.

It's just so inconvenient when you don't have the instruments for examination. Good thing that I got to know that doctor from Father's colleagues last month.

Speaking of which, I understand that I do charge him on the cheap side, but Shizuo totally relies too much on my services.

Is he mistaking my love nest with Celty for some kind of Red Cross tent?

My, my. Isn't it just rude of him to compare normal doctors to underground doctors like me?

Speaking of which, do you recall ever having been in a war, Celty?

...

Even if you do they're extremely vague? That's what I figured.

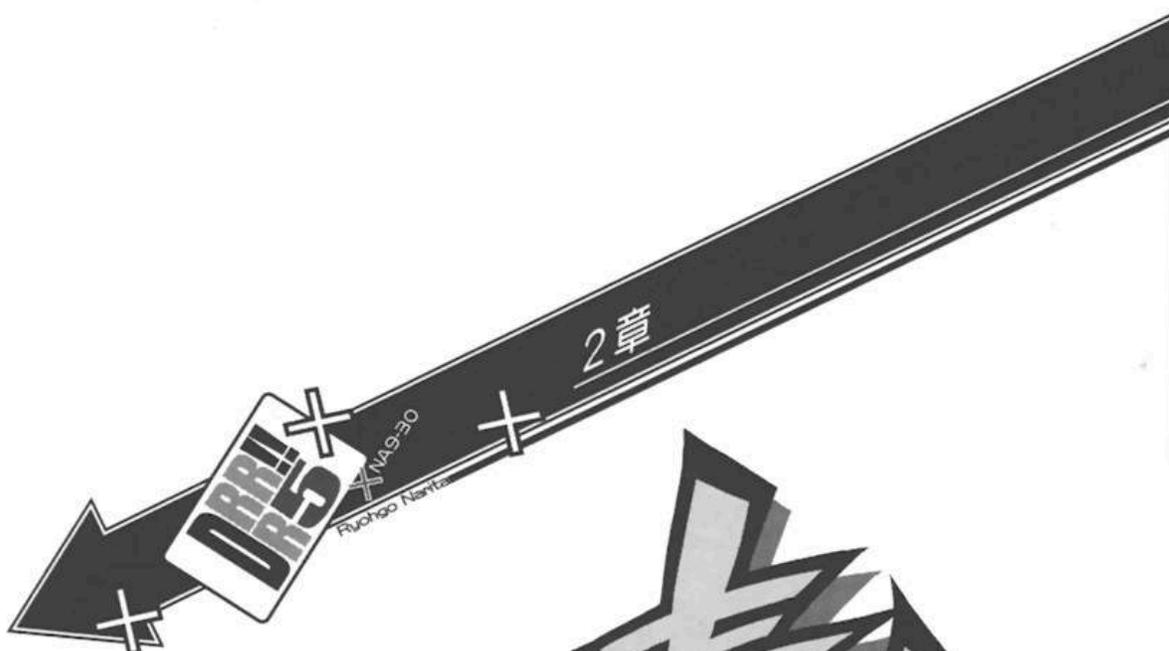
Those memories are probably with the head? ...No, Celty. Don't tell me you're thinking about looking for the head again.

Though it's unlikely that we'll be in a war any time soon if we keep living in this city.

People say that we Japanese are too used to peace. I'm grateful, though, since that's why I can spend such quiet days with Celty.

Still, I have no idea how long the peace will last. That's why we should work on cultivating our
love right now!

Why not just continue where we left off, that hurts, that hurts, that hurts, that hurts, that hurts!
Really! Why are you performing a double armlock on me with your shadow...geh! Geh...!



CHAPTER 2

THE ADULTS, THEY ARE RESTLESS

May 3rd, somewhere in Ikebukuro

At the same time as the mysterious little girl was trying to electrocute Heiwajima Shizuo-

Celty Sturluson was dealing with her own share of non-daily life.

Though for her, it was part of the job.

Idiots who are way too used to peace, huh?

Celty sat on the comfortable sofa and considered the phrase she had heard from her underground doctor roommate the night before.

The phrase was hard to associate with either underground doctors or underground couriers though. The room she was in looked like a clean, beautiful office.

But there was a strange kind of minimalism in the way the room was furnished; even the number of desks was at an absolute minimum.

She was aware that the simplicity served a purpose: to enable the occupants to desert the office or change its outward appearance as quickly as possible.

She also knew that such needs would come up when the cops began to look for things here.

"We're really sorry for making you come all the way here. Ah, do you need a hand towel or anything?"

[No, but thank you.]

Celty typed onto her PDA as she concentrated her sensors on the man sitting opposite her.

The man's name was Shiki. He looked like he was around 30.

He often brings the underground doctor Shinra jobs to do, and Celty works as a courier for him on many occasions.

To the outside world, he was the representative of a gallery. However, he occupied an executive position in a large organization. Simply put, he was one of the executives in the *yakuza* organization Medei Group Awakusu-kai.

In short, the office was the shell of their sham company. It called itself a gallery, but there was not a single painting in the reception room.

"I do think that I should put at least one or two paintings on the wall even if just for the show. But I haven't been able to find paintings that appeal to my aesthetics."

He might have said the same thing before, but Celty couldn't bring herself to care.

Instead, she couldn't help but notice the way the new "employees" stared at her in alarm every time more of them stepped into the office.

[...Um, I feel like everyone's a little tense.]

"Hmm? Ah, I'm sorry about that. A couple of days ago we had someone dressed like you come over uninvited to the financial branch of our corporation and protest a little bit too violently."

Celty was dressed in a black rider suit and a full-face helmet.

She couldn't help but feel slightly annoyed as she understood what he had meant, and began to type anew.

[Would you like me to change into something else and come back later?]

It's kind of an advantage that they don't have to see my displeased face at times like these.

"You don't have to be so displeased."

Is he an esper?

[Can you read people's hearts?]

"You can too if you read carefully into a person's body language. It's kind of a prerequisite for our occupation to be able to read the opponent's heart even when his or her face is concealed. Ah, by the way, if you do wish to change or take off your helmet, just feel free to."

[Is it really OK? If I take off my helmet, I mean.....]

"Yeah. That's what you usually would do when indoors, isn't it?"

[Um...I believe you're aware what kind of creature I am? Is it really OK?]

"I won't mind."

Shiki replied in a collected voice. Celty hesitated for a moment, but took off the helmet from her neck anyway.

The next second, quite a few of the men in the room froze. A younger "employee" who happened to be passing by shuddered and yelped.

"Uwah? M....Monster..."

In the blink of an eye, Shiki sprung up from the sofa and grabbed the young man's collar.

Without even listening to what the other man had to say, he banged his face ruthlessly onto the sharp corner of a cabinet nearby.

"Ugh..."

The young man groaned as blood immediately began to trickle down the corner of his mouth.

Shiki grabbed him up by the collar and banged his own forehead into the man's temple as he said with a face devoid of expression:

"Yelping at the sight of a guest's face? What kind of manners is that?"

"Argh...uwah...."

"What did I just say? I said it was only natural for people to take off their hats and helmets when indoors, didn't I?"

[Um, I-]

Celty could only type onto her PDA in haste, not knowing what was going on. It was a waste of time, however, since Shiki was not looking at her PDA at all.

"I did, right? Then why did you, my subordinate, yelp like that when you saw the guest without the helmet?"

"...I...am really sorry..."

Shiki smiled slightly, and said in a cold voice as he heard his subordinate moan and try to apologize.

"Aren't you apologizing to the wrong person? Why are you apologizing to me?"

Just as Shiki was about to deliver a further blow, "shadows" coiled themselves around his arm.

They were real, actual "shadows".

The shadows with mass appeared out of thin air in the 3D world and held Shiki back as if they were real tentacles.

"..."

Shiki turned silently towards the PDA that appeared before him with new words typed onto it.

[Um, I don't mind.]

The PDA with this line typed in a huge font was held up for him to see by another string of shadows.

Other "employees", who had been paying attention to what was happening in the room, stood dumbstruck with eyes the size of saucers as they saw shadows extending themselves from Celty's hands. But no one dared issue a sound after what Shiki had done to the younger employee.

Shiki sank back slowly into his chair and smiled as if nothing had happened as he said:

"I see. I'm really sorry that you had to see us make such an embarrassing scene."

[I don't mind, really.]

...These people are scary.

In a different way from the White Motorbike.

"I apologize. I thought I said it was OK for you to take off your helmet. But the employees here simply did not seem to understand what I had meant."

Celty felt a chill running down her spine as Shiki kept his head very low in apology.

Speaking of which...I think that was the first time I ever took off my helmet in front of this person.

The man named Shiki had never with his own eyes seen Celty take off her helmet before.

But there was not the slightest sign of change in his expression. Even the pace of his breathing remained unperturbed.

Celty couldn't help but wonder.

...It's a kind of pressure in itself when my abnormality is being completely ignored like this...

For Celty, the normal reactions she expected from humans were the likes of that yelp from the young man, who was now asking for her forgiveness while trying desperately to cover his nose.

Even if you ignored the black shadows extending from her palms-

She had nothing above the neck once the helmet was removed.



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.

She already knew who had stolen her head.

She also knew who had been trying to keep her from finding it.

But still, she ended up having no idea where her head was.

For Celty, life was good as it was.

She had someone who loved her, and people who accepted her for what she was.

If what she was feeling was indeed happiness, then she was ready to carry on with her life the way she was.

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.



And so, to earn her living, the headless fairy started working as a lowly courier, taking orders from both the normal world and the underworld.

The job she was about to take this time definitely fell on the side of the latter.

"I'm really sorry. He worked as a debt collector in our financial branch. Turned out all he was good at was talking. His success rate was so low that they had to demote him to work under me."

[A debt collector...sounds like what Shizuo does for a living.]

Celty had already typed out the sentence when she realized that it was not the best idea and stiffened.

There was no way Shizuo would be willing to accept a job from the yakuza. What if Shiki and his men did try to rope Shizuo into it? Celty was feeling uneasy.

But Shiki's reaction was so far from dramatic that it surprised her.

"Shizuo...ah, you mean him."

Shiki seemed to be familiar with the name Heiwajima Shizuo. He averted his gaze and said:

"He's working as a debt collector for dating hotlines, isn't he? They shouldn't have anything to do whatsoever with companies like ours. Though there was this fool who took money from us and thought he could get away without paying his bills for the dating hotline. He was beaten up pretty badly*."

** The guy is Nasujima Takashi from Vol.2 of Durarara!!*

[I see.]

"...Are you under the impression that we would hire someone like him as a debt collector? Someone whose name is high on the cops' blacklist and doesn't even know how to control

himself?"

[No.]

She was convinced immediately.

Now that she thought about it, she couldn't help but wonder how Shizuo's boss, the guy with the dreadlocks, had been able keep a rein on him, whenever it was needed, and prevented him from causing such a commotion that the cops would take notice...that guy could turn out to be a more formidable character than she had imagined.

"Enough about him. Let's talk about the job."

Shiki said in a composed voice as he produced a photo from his chest pocket.

"This is not a routine transporting job...it's something more special, like the retrieval of those instruments we have entrusted with you before."

[I see.]

Celty was reminded instantly of the task she was entrusted with a year ago.

He had asked her to retrieve the pistols from a bunch of thieves before the police could catch them.

Celty had been reluctant to take the job. But she was aware that the thieves might use the pistols to shoot non-yakuza people. What was more, she had owed Awakusu-kai a big favor since she first came to Japan. She had no choice but to accept it.

I was going to hand the pistols in to the police and pretend that I failed to retrieve them, but this man was quick to come and find me...

Celty knew that Shiki was a keen man and not to be messed with. Therefore she would have to be very careful if she chose to accept this job. Her own problems aside, she couldn't risk involving Shinra or other people in Ikebukuro, her friends Mikado, Anri, Shizuo and Kadota, not to even mention other ordinary citizens, in further trouble. She had to come up with a perfect answer whether she chose to accept or turn down the offer.

Celty proceeded to take the photo from Shiki carefully.

Her vision, which did not rely on the existence of eyeballs, told her that it was the photo of a middle-aged man.

He looked like he was about 45-50; his smile was bright and kind, making him look like an old gentleman.

Complete with a pair of reading glasses on his nose and a formal suit, he would have passed for a manager of a company or a chairman of a private school board.

Who is he?

Don't tell me my job is to kill this man?

[Um, who is this person?]

Celty was about to type, [You're not asking me to kill this man, are you?] but thought the better of it since this man might very well be a former high executive of the group or something. She decided that it was more appropriate to ask first.

"Yadogiri Jinnai, the manager of Yadogiri Shining Corporation...I assume that you've at least heard of him?"

Ah!

That Hijiribe Ruri's - !

[Yes.]

The name of a top idol came to Celty's mind.

Hijiribe Ruri.

She was a young actress who had made a lot of headlines recently because of her affair with the male idol Hanejima Yuuhei. Her acting skills had earned her critical acclaim. Celty and Shinra were both her loyal fans who paid attention to her recent activities.

Shortly after the media found out about their affair, Hijiribe got in trouble.

All artists under Yadogiri Shining Corporation were effectively without an agency after their manager Yadogiri Jinnai disappeared mysteriously.

However, on the same day she lost her agency, Jack Lantern Japan announced that they welcomed her.

Some rumors claimed that her boyfriend Hanejima Yuuhei had talked the manager into making this decision, but such rumors had already faded from the public memory one month from the ensuing publicity storm around the disappearance of Manager Yadogiri.

[So, what exactly happened with this former talent agency manager?]

Drumming the desk with his fingers after he saw Celty ask, Shiki said, "He was sort of our business partner...but we disagreed in places."

[I see.]

"Of course, we're already utilizing every information network we have to look for him. But, to be honest with you, we have to borrow even the cat's hands for this*. You don't have to spend all your time focused on this task, but you do get in contact with different people when you're working as a courier. Let us know if you hear anything..."

** Borrow the cat's hands: a Japanese idiom used to describe a short-staffed situation.*

[I don't know if I'd be of any help, but I'll do what I can.]

Speaking of which, though, did he ask me to come here just to give me this job?

Plus that Yadogiri guy would probably end up fertilizing the soil somewhere deep in the mountains or feeding the fish somewhere deep in the sea if I found him and told Awakusu-kai about it. I'm not sure, though.

Shiki smiled bitterly as he sensed Celty's reluctance and said, "All you need to do is to pay a little bit of attention to what people say. There's no need to overwork yourself for this."

He read my mind again.

Celty was forced to keep up vigilance for the man in front of her as she waited for the man's next words.

Judging by the way he was talking about this task, there were probably more to come.

"And...we have something else to ask of you. It's kind of different from what you usually do as a courier as well..."



The evening of May 3rd, an upscale apartment building on the side of Kawagoe Highway

Ah, Celty is still not back.

This is the upscale living quarters shared by a headless fairy and a human.

At the center of the 150-square-meter luxury apartment with five rooms plus a living room/kitchen/dining room area, Kishitani Shinra was rolling around on the carpet, eagerly awaiting the return of his beloved female.

He was still wearing his white long coat, seemingly oblivious to the hygiene problem. It made him look like a complete freak but, judging from the fact that he had another white coat wrapped in nylon hanging in a corner of the room, he at least tried to keep his working and personal clothing separate.

Of course, it was abnormal enough that he wore his white coat even when not working.

Shinra was an underground doctor. Most of his patients had good reasons to avoid going to the hospital. But since he did not own examination instruments like X-ray machines, he did not have too many patients.

However, he was at least completely independent, which earned him quite a few VIP patrons.

His professional skills and knowledge along with his credentials would have been enough to land him a decent position in a large hospital, but he didn't look like he wanted anything more than to remain a completely useless man and spend his aimless days with Celty.

A job from Shiki-san.

But Celty's not too fond of the idea of working for "them" recently.

She didn't really mind back when she had no real feelings for humans.

But Shiki-san has probably already taken that into consideration.

Shinra did not believe in the goodness of Shiki's heart.

On the contrary, he had known since long ago that Shiki was submerged from head to toe in the underworld.

For the exact reason that he was an experienced player in that field, Shiki would know better than to give an "over underworldly" task to Celty, an unaffiliated neutral being.

Rational management.

Shiki would trust such tasks with people "safer" than Celty. Shinra was spared his anxiety knowing that Shiki was not one to be deterred by other people's sensibilities.

Of course, it would still be better if they could avoid anything to do with the likes of him. But Celty did not have that much of a choice when it comes to work since she was not human.

Ah, but even if we won a third of a billion in lottery, Celty would probably still continue with her job for the sake of fulfillment.

...If we had a kid, would she become a housewife for the kid?

...I should probably check if Celty can actually have a baby with me, though.

...Or we can adopt one...on the paper he or she can be Father and Mother's adopted child.

...Eh, why am I picturing me as the househusband and Celty as the working wife?

...Celty as a housewife...

...Shadow...apron....

Eh? Naked...apron?

Shinra savored his imagination and rolled around on the carpet with more gusto than before.

He looked nothing less than a complete freak, but there was no one to point that out since his roommate was absent.

30 minutes later, the doorbell rang.

"Ah, is she back?"

Shinra sprang from the floor in joy at the thought of Celty coming home.

The doorbell rang a few times more. Shinra walked towards the door and muttered to himself:

"Why is she ringing the doorbell? Has she forgotten the key?"

He didn't even consider the most plausible explanation, that the one ringing the doorbell was not Celty, since he had only her on his mind right now.

He realized this the moment he opened the door; it was already too late, of course.

The one standing outside the door in a bartender suit was Shizuo, whom he had just seen the night before.

Shinra half-closed the door again and muttered to himself with a sigh, "...I should seriously consider moving to the kind of building where you can't enter without a key to an apartment inside. Seriously..."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but I see you kind of want me to beat you up."

Shinra shook his hands with a bitter laugh after he heard Shizuo.

"Don't. I can't rule out the possibility that a punch from you will kill me."

"Can I come in?"

Shinra answered in resignation as his old acquaintance asked while scratching his own face.

"Yeah, please. But what's up this time exactly? The guy you brought here was able to walk so I let him leave."

"Yeah, I know. I sort of saw him on the street just now."

"He's something. Even his cervical spine was still in its place despite having to suffer so many blows from you."

Shinra was about to open the door wide and let Shizuo in when -

"...Eh?"

There were other people than Shizuo standing outside his door.

"Eh? Um, you are...Shizuo's boss..."

"Ah, I don't think I've introduced you. This is Tom-sempai."

"Yeah, I know. But still..."

Shinra's gaze had already left the man with the dreadlocks for someone else-

Namely, the girl holding firmly onto Shizuo's belt, who looked like she was still in elementary school.

"Who's...this little girl?"



Same time, at Raira Academy

A long holiday was a long holiday whether you went to a public or private school.

The private Raira Academy, a famous high school situated close to the Ikebukuro Station, was no exception. It was the first day of Golden Week.

The school was nevertheless swarming with students.

Members of the sports clubs chanted on the playground. Music and art clubs were getting ready for the grand contest at the end of June.

Ryuugamine Mikado was among the many students who went back to school on the first day of the break.

He was not in any extracurricular clubs. But he had to attend a meeting on the coming field trip since he was the class representative.

It was supposed to be held the previous day after school, but they were already behind the schedule and the meeting ended up having to be held on the first day of the break.

The school wasn't about to let them, but eventually succumbed after the students suggested that they use the break to continue with the meeting and consult the absentees individually after the break before reaching a final decision.

"Ahh. Finally, it's over."

He had not expected a simple discussion on the field trip plans for his class to escalate into a fierce debate.

A small voice addressed him from behind as Mikado thought to himself.

"Good work today, Mikado-kun."

"Ah, Sonohara-san. That was tiring, wasn't it?"

The girl standing behind Mikado was the other class representative, Sonohara Anri.

Though Mikado had got to know her on the first day of school before they became class representatives.

Mikado had a crush on Anri. He never talked about it, but everyone in the school seemed to already know. Anri was on pretty good terms with Mikado, and the two were usually regarded as a couple.

Except that neither Mikado nor Anri was aware of it.

From their point of view, they were nothing more than good friends.

Mikado wanted to confess to Anri, but he felt like he had to wait until a certain problem is resolved.

The face of his best friend who had dropped out of school recently came to his mind.

Kida Masaomi.

He was Mikado's childhood pal back in their hometown. Anri joined them later, and their high school days had been happy and fulfilling.

But in fact, all three of them kept their respective secrets.

Ryuugamine Mikado was the founder of the Color Gang "Dollars".

Kida Masaomi was the founder and leader of its enemy, the "Yellow Turbans".

Sonohara Anri hosted in her body a "creature" that was abnormal like Celty Sturluson.

They began to find out about each other's secrets after a certain incident.

And Kida Masaomi ended up disappearing altogether from their lives.

Yet, Mikado and Anri did not believe that it was the final farewell.

They believed that he would come back. That was why they did not dig deeper into each other's secret identity.

They had made up their minds.

Therefore they had been neither closer than before nor further apart; they maintained the delicate balance in their uneventful routine.

Until something happened yesterday that threatened to break the balance.

Masaomi, who was "Bakyura" in the chartroom, talked to Mikado, who was "Tanaka Taro". He was talking not to Tanaka Taro, however, but directly to Ryuugamine Mikado.

But should I really tell Sonohara-san about this?

The talk was sort of intense, and hardly suggested that Masaomi would be returning any time soon.

Dollars was in danger.

Mikado immediately began to look for news that could be relevant to this statement, but found none on the Dollars cell-phone chartroom and the message board.

But then, Masaomi had always been far keener and way better informed than he was as far as such matters were concerned.

He would just worry Anri unnecessarily if he told her about it without a second thought, wouldn't he?

Mikado was wondering what to do as he walked with Anri in the school building when a bright voice in the exact opposite mood Mikado was in reached his eardrums.

"Mikado-sempai-! And Sonohara-sempai-! Good work today!"

They turned around to find a boy standing there.

Kurouma Aoba.

He had only just begun attending Raira last month, which made him Mikado and Anri's kouhai.

He had an even more childlike face than Mikado did, to the extent that he would have passed for a perfect elementary kid in the proper clothing. If he were to dress up as a girl, he would probably not be found out unless he uttered a sound.

He was a Dollars member, and one of the few who knew that Mikado was also a Dollars member. They had not been in touch since the incident that involved Mikado, Anri as well as Aoba last month.



"Yeah, Aoba-kun...what's up? The first-years don't have a field trip, do you?"

Mikado had thought that Aoba had been avoiding him after all the trouble they got in. Aoba's face broke out, however, in as bright a smile as the one he wore a month ago.

His smile changed way too little for a boy who had barely escaped the claws of those raging bousouzoku -

But Ryuugamine Mikado did not notice what was weird about it.

"No, I came back for club activities. I'm in the art club."

"Oh, I see."

Did he come only to strike up a conversation with me?

Mikado thought and proceeded to look for routine topics in his head.

But before he could even speak, Aoba had voiced his intention outright.

"Mikado-sempai, are you free tomorrow?"

"Eh?"

"Um, we planned to have you show me around, but that didn't work out because of what happened last month. That's why I thought we three can probably go out together during the break!"

"Ah, but...tomorrow is..."

Mikado would have said yes instantly had it been any other day but today.

He couldn't help but be reminded of what Masaomi had told him the day before.

Avoid hanging out with anyone in Dollars.

That was what he was told. He wasn't sure about the likes of Karisawa and Yumasaki, but what if it was Kuronuma Aoba?

Mikado was reminded of Masaomi's advice telling him to "be a high school student with nothing to do with Dollars". If he was not to talk about Dollars with Aoba, they would be just like any other sempai and kouhai in high school.

But would it be safer if I stayed at home?

If anything happens to Dollars, I'll dig up information at home and send messages to everyone

so they'll be on their guard.

That sounds good. I'll turn Aoba-kun down, and make it up by inviting him out after Masaomi's problem is solved. I was thinking about introducing Aoba-kun to Masaomi anyway.

Mikado made his decision and shook his head in apology:

"...Um, I'm sorry, but something may come up tomorrow so I can't-"

"Eh, that's too bad."

Aoba looked very disappointed as he heard Mikado's reply -

But his smile was back in place in no time. He turned to Anri, who had remained silent by Mikado's side, and asked, "What about Sonohara-sempai, then?"

"I, um, I don't have anything for tomorrow so..."

Eh?

For a moment Mikado couldn't think of anything to say. The turn of events had caught him unawares.

"But, but I'm not good at showing people around places..."

"Ah, that's totally fine! I'll do some research beforehand myself as well!"

"But I'll just be your burden if you come with me."

...Eh? What?

Had Anri and Mikado really been in a relationship, or rather, had Anri been more aware of what people were actually thinking, she would probably not have replied in that way.

She knew nothing about "normal" love between boys and girls. That was why she didn't have the slightest doubt about Aoba's motives; all she worried about was whether she would be able to fill the role as a tour guide.

"Don't talk like that! Anri-sempai, you're beautiful! I'll be happy just to be able to see you there!"

Anri-sempai?

Since when has he moved from "Sonohara-sempai" to "Anri-sempai"? Has she even agreed?

Cheating! This is cheating, Aoba-kun!

"Please don't make jokes about me."

"I was not joking. So what time tomorrow can you-?"

Mikado could hold himself back no longer.

He was forced to open his mouth.

"Wait a moment! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I must have remembered wrong. I actually have nothing planned for tomorrow!"

"Eh? Really?"

Mikado was confused as Aoba flashed his innocent smile at him again.

...Is it just me or is he looking really happy?

...Was he just kidding about Sonohara-san?

"...But I can only do in the day. The nights are too crowded during Golden Week, and we might get into trouble."

"OK, no problem!"

And so, without the slightest idea what the younger boy was up to, Mikado added one unplanned-for item on his schedule for May 4th.

Or rather, was forced to add.

And just like that he stepped into his own non-daily life.

He did not even know if it was pure fate or if someone was actually behind it.

Though he had probably already stepped into this world the moment he founded Dollars, but he was oblivious of that.

Ryuugamine Mikado's daily life was silently being put to an end.



An upscale apartment building on Kawagoe Highway

Sitting on the living room sofa, Shizuo drank tea from a stainless steel cup and tilted his head as he wondered aloud, "Speaking of which, Shinra, do you always wear that white coat even when at home?"

Shinra, upon hearing that only-to-be-expected inquiry, straightened up proudly for some reason and replied, "Ah, that's because Celty always wears her black rider suit. If I'm dressed in the contrasting color, we'll be like light and shadow, won't we? On the surface, light and shadow are polar opposites, yet, like a pair of love birds they never appear without each other! In manga and movies, they always go the Dark Side this and the Dark Side that, but that's just the Dark Side being royally *tsundere*. You can say that being *tsundere* is another form of being possessive but I won't mind at all if Celty wants to possess me, haha!"

"Shut up."

All Shizuo did was flick his finger at the Shinra's forehead, however, the underground doctor felt like he had been hit by a bamboo katana.

"And you had the guts to say that you were the light? Next to Celty, you're more like a Dark Side guy inside and out."

"If you know what a verbal comeback is, could you avoid using a physical one? Personally, I find that better for the sake of world peace."

Tom, who had never met Shinra before, muttered to himself as he listened to the conversation.

"I see. He does sound like a freak..."

"What-what's with that confirming tone? Shizuo, what were you telling your colleagues about me? ... Well, whatever. If expressing my love for Celty makes me a freak, than a freak I shall be. Freakiness too will transform into love."

Shinra covered his swollen red forehead with his hand and re-paced his breath.

"So, should we hear now what you have to say about the situation?"

His gaze fell on the little girl crouched up in a corner of the room.

"I had to let you bring her in since you said you'd explain once we were inside, but I don't think I can watch any longer with indifference. See how scared she is?"

Shinra exhaled deeply and scrutinized Shizuo with dead serious eyes.

"Why did you kidnap her?"

"We didn't."

Tom was the one to reply almost immediately.

He must have kept track of Shizuo's mood and was therefore trying to stabilize him by quickly answering the question for him. It worked. Protruding veins were already visible on Shizuo's face, but they were going back to normal.

The man named Tom continued to give Shizuo looks meant to forestall his anger as he proceeded to tell Shinra, who was just beginning to realize how close he was to being killed, exactly what had happened.



30 minutes ago, Sunshine 60 Street

"Die!"

Argh?

Shizuo, being relatively tall, was not able to catch what the little girl had said while flying straight towards him.

Tom did, however, as he followed Shizuo out of the restaurant; his expression immediately changed to one of disbelief as he began to question his own hearing.

Unfortunately, there was nothing wrong with Tom's ears. The little girl kept smiling while pressing something she had been holding tightly in her hands to Shizuo's waist.

And then Tom saw it.

White-blue sparks splattered from Shizuo's waist accompanied by a fierce sizzling, crackling noise.

"Ouch, 'hat hurts!"

Shizuo groaned slightly and pushed the girl's hand away from his abdomen.

"Ah!"

A rectangular piece of instrument that looked like a transceiver rolled off the girl's hands.

Shizuo had not the least idea what had just happened; therefore, he did not get mad right away.

He picked up the "thing" the little girl had just dropped onto the ground and looked at it closely.

The black rectangular item looked like some sort of walkie-talkie or emergency light.

"...That hurt a lot...what the hell? What's this?"

Shizuo saw something that looked like a switch and tried pushing it.

A sizzling, crackling noise filled the air as white-blue sparks splattered from the metal part located at the front of the instrument.

"What's this? A stun gun?"

But even then it was still hard for Shizuo to associate stun guns with elementary school girls. He stood there a few minutes longer and pondered this over .

"Oi, Shizuo..."

Until Tom's voice dragged him back to reality from behind.

He looked around and noticed something: passers-by had stopped in their tracks and watched him in silence from afar.

He had a stun gun in his hand.

And a little girl crouching down at his feet.

His brain finally began to register what kind of situation he was in when one of the onlookers started to run towards the police officer standing close to the game arcade.

"God, we're in trouble. It's the same cop who came to arrest the shoplifter."

Tom was able to analyze the situation in a second and grasp Shizuo's shoulder with force.

"Just run for now. We won't have the time to explain."

With that, Tom began running at a godly speed he had come to acquire in his time working with Shizuo.

"...Eh, eh-?"

Having completely missed his chance of "getting mad", Shizuo muttered blankly and instead began to run after Tom without the slightest idea what he was doing.

Things should have ended with the mysterious little girl finding herself under the protection of the police while Tom and Shizuo fled the scene-

But Shizuo, still running, suddenly felt some additional weight on his back.

He kept running, turned around and saw strands of hair flying in the wind in his lower peripheral vision.

Shizuo's absurd power made it take more time for the realization come to him than it would an average human -

The little girl had at some point grabbed onto Shizuo's back and belt. He had effectively been taking her with him on his back all the while when he had been running.

"You can't...run away...die...die...!"

The little girl hung on to Shizuo as if her life depended on it and muttered ferociously.

It was simply impossible for Shizuo to understand what she was saying.

He just couldn't get why such a little girl would want to kill him.

He had been shot on one occasion before; back then he had missed his chance to "get mad" since it didn't occur to him in time that the shot had been "unfriendly fire". Now, the same thing was happening again.

"Tom-sempai, what should we do about this kid?"

Shizuo asked as he kept running. Tom glanced at the girl on Shizuo's back and couldn't help yelping, "Ugh, we're in real trouble now!"

He calmed down immediately, however, and asked Shizuo, "Anyway, are there any friends of yours living nearby? We'll be find out in no time on the streets!"

"What about the office building?"

"We can't afford involving our company in this! Ah right, how about your brother's home?"

"There are always reporters for magazines and the like waiting outside his home."

Another face came to Shizuo's mind as he said this:

"...If it's just an underground doctor, then we probably can afford involving him, right?"



"I see. Anyway.....I have only one thing to say to you."

After he had heard Tom tell the entire story, Shinra stared at Shizuo with a serious face and inquired solemnly:

"Why did you kidnap her?"

Crack.

There was a weird noise. As Shinra blinked and looked at Shizuo again, he found Shizuo's fist tightly closed.

Nonsensical as it would sound, the steel cup he had been holding was nowhere to be found.

Except that it was found a moment later.

As Shizuo showed his palm again, there was a ball sitting on it made of what looked like aluminum foil, which had only seconds ago been a cup.

"Sorry, I'll pay for the repair."

"...That's alright. I was meaning to buy new ones anyway."

"No, I don't want to trash the work of the maker of this cup."

"Hm, it would be nice if you saved this modesty for the guardrails and street lamps you trash on a regular basis. But I need to apologize with all my heart to you. Sorry. Nah, how would you ever bother to kidnap anyone? With your power it would be much faster to go to a bank and tear down the door of its vault if you wanted the money. Kidnapping would be way too slow for you."

Cold sweat seeped out of Shinra's back as he darted his gaze towards the corner of the room where the little girl was shaking harder than ever.

"So you ended up not getting any useful information from this kid?"

"She began to shudder and stuff. Even if she used this toy on me, it would have been too much to start interrogating her."

Shinra took the stun gun from Shizuo's hand and muttered, as if relieved, "Good. Good to hear that you still have a human heart after all. If you began using violence on even such a little kid there would have been no chance left for your soul."

Shinra walked towards the girl and slowly bent his knees to crouch down and meet her gaze.

"Are you alright? You can feel safe now. Must have been hard for you, getting dragged around by such scary, big guys. I assure you, I'm a lover of peace unlike that humanoid weapon over there."

"Calm down, we have a kid here, remember? Remember?"

Shinra heard Tom's voice warning Shizuo coming from behind. He smiled to the little girl.

"..."

The little girl didn't say anything but stare at Shinra's face with unblinking eyes.

She appeared decidedly tough, but her body was shaking harder and harder.

She had no intention to run; yet, despite the fact that she kept telling Shizuo to "Die", she did attack either.

"..."

From her attitude Shinra sensed that something about her was not right. He pressed his palm to her forehead and felt her temperature.

The underground doctor's face immediately changed; with a serious expression, he began to give orders out to the duo.

"There are guest towels in the drawers in the innermost room. Get them for me!"

"Huh?"

"This kid has a terrible fever! Boil some water, now!"

The air in the apartment went tense at Shinra's words.

The little girl also seemed to be sensing something from Shinra's attitude. Her highly wound-up nerves finally relaxed. Her body allowed itself to give away, and her consciousness was gone.



30 minutes later

Shinra made sure that the girl was safe and sound in the bed in the innermost room before finally exhaling in relief.

Nothing had suggested that she was ill; her heat was probably a result of her extreme pressure. But he still had to be careful.

Shinra stood in front of the hidden cabinet in his home and examined the prohibited drugs inside as he looked for a solution. Until, his attention was drawn to the weight in his pocket again and he took the item out.

It was the stun gun Shizuo had thrown into his hands earlier -

As soon as Shinra tried switching it on, white-blue sparks spat from the stun gun and a crackling sound filled the room as currents shot through the air.

The stun gun had apparently been modified. Shinra watched its sparks intently and thought back on what Tom had told him.

“...This has obviously been modified to produce more intense currents.”

“...And all he felt was 'Ouch, 'hat hurts' when she used this on him.....? I feel like it won't be too long before he becomes a real monster.”



Night of May 3rd, a street in Ikebukuro

This is bad.

Celty Sturluson sighed as she considered her future plans.

I got a pretty troublesome job to do this time.

Apparently, the job Shiki had just given Celty was enough to make her entire aura seem darker than usual.

The motorbike without a headlight neighed from its engine as she stopped in front of a red light.

Thank you, Shooter.

Celty stroked her partner's handle and broke into a smile in her heart.

...Speaking of which, this job may keep me away from home for a few days to come.

Should I try to contact Shinra right now?

Or should I go back home and explain everything first.....

She saw the traffic light turn red at the crossing in front of her as these thoughts raced on her mind.

So Celty simply waited for the light to turn green for her on the left side of the two-lane road and was about to let Shooter charge forwards when-

In the exact second before the traffic light turned green, she sensed another motorbike stopping right behind her.

Celty couldn't help but shudder thinking it was the White Motorbike, which was always on her tail, but as she turned around she saw a pretty ordinary motorbike instead of a white one.

The rider was wearing a full-face helmet and dressed in a black rider suit just like Celty.

It looked like he or she was no more than a typical motorbike rider and not someone that warranted extra caution on Celty's part.

But in Celty's sense of vision, there was a strange flicker.

Before she could realize what that flicker was, Celty's spinal reflex had reacted to the green light and started the engine.

"Good evening, Knight Halloween."

In that second, the rider behind her muttered.

In a voice only Celty's sense of hearing would have been able to catch.

It was probably a whisper for the rider's own ears and not really meant to be heard.

Celty had no idea what the sentence had meant. She kept accelerating on her motorbike -

"For kid's play, time is over. Pity, pity."

As the rider kept whispering as if to no one else-

Celty felt a sudden rush of impact on her upper body.

Before she could realize what had happened, her body was already crashing onto the asphalt.

"The job for you this time is to be a bodyguard."

What Shiki had said in the day came back to Celty's mind before the dull pain could register.

"Though we have no idea where to look...but I hope you can help us find this person, and protect her without letting her know it."

It sounded ominous to her from the start that Shiki had to entrust a bodyguard job with her.

But there was no way she could turn it down, either.

"...There's a possibility that someone will try to murder her. But we can't tell you the details regarding that..."

"The person we want you to bodyguard is the one in this photo."

Shiki had produced a photo for her to see.

It was the photo of a girl about ten years old.

Though her expression was somewhat cloudy, she still looked pretty happy on the photo.

"Her name is Awakusu Akane. "

"She's the granddaughter of our 'Manager'."

"She has run away from home apparently because she didn't like the business we actually were running."

I can't really say I like it either.

Celty groaned as she felt the pain from all over her body. Her worst premonition had turned out to be true.

She still had no idea what was going on.

But she knew that she had been attacked. And that was enough.

Because she had confirmed two important facts.

The first was that her helmet had been sent flying into the air upon that impact.

The other was that she was already knee deep in something highly perilous.

And with that, Celty, the most surreal being of them all-

Was embroiled, against her will, in the reality humans had created.

Night of May 3rd, CHATROOM

Tanaka Taro-san has joined the chat.

Tanaka Taro
Good evening.

Tanaka Taro
Looks like no one's online - . Is everyone out having fun?

Tanaka Taro
I thought I got here pretty late today. But no one's online, not even Setton-san.....

Kyo-san has joined the chat.

Mai-san has joined the chat.

Mai
Good evening.

Kyo
I bid you good day, Taro-sama. The fact that you're spending your first day of the Golden Week in the chatroom makes me feel a little sympathy for your solitude. But then, in the cyberspace there is no distinction between holidays and workdays, day and night. No one is going to punish you for this. If you do wish to be punished, however, I would be more than willing to do it with words. Behold, this will be the moment you either prove yourself a true sadist or a true masochist!

Tanaka Taro
Ah, good evening.

Tanaka Taro
I see you haven't changed.

Kyo
This will be the moment!

Tanaka Taro

Why did you have to say it twice!?

Mai
Sorry.

Tanaka Taro
Mai-san, you have nothing to apologize to me for.

Saika-san has joined the chat.

Tanaka Taro
Ah, good evening~

Mai
Good evening.

Kyo
Alas, yet another holiday wanderer without a home for the heart? Shutting yourself in during holidays can be lethal. It's a common superstition that rabbits die from loneliness, but you realize that humans can die from loneliness, right?

Saika
I'm sorry

Tanaka Taro
Why are you apologizing, Saika-san? lol

Kyo
...I don't know how to react when you apologize so sincerely.

Tanaka Taro
Sincerely? But there was nothing to apologize for in the first place.

Saika
I'm sorry

Tanaka Taro
Why are you apologizing again!?

Tanaka Taro
Speaking of which, what about Kyo-san?

Tanaka Taro

Aren't you chatting here as well?

Kyo

Don't you worry about me. Mai and I were enjoying the times of our lives on the Ikebukuro streets the entire day today. We ate every kind of dumplings they had to offer at the Dumplings Stadium in Namja Town and shopped like crazy at World Import Mart and Alpa. Then we witnessed a kickass scene on 60-Story Street where a handsome young man took down a shoplifter. It was an awesome day.

Mai

The dumplings were delicious.

Tanaka Taro

A shoplifter? Was there a commotion?

Tanaka Taro

... You said 60-Story Street, right? Was it a black man who works as a hawker for a sushi restaurant or a man in a bartender suit?

Kyo

Alas.

Mai

Shizuo-san.

Tanaka Taro

Ah, you know Shizuo-san?

Kyo

How rude of me to have written such a short reply. But really, Tanaka Taro-san, I had imagined you to be a meek human being who wouldn't even kill a mosquito from the way you talked in the chatroom. To think that you know Shizuo-san! You must be a terribly social person. Is it even possible that in reality you're a huge guy with tattoos, scars and steely muscles all over your body? Or someone who sells dangerous drugs for a living?

Saika

Is it Heiwajima-san

Tanaka Taro

Sorry, I can't type fast enough to point out all that's wrong with what you said.

Tanaka Taro

Eh, even Saika-san knows him?

Saika

Just a little

Saika

I'm sorry

Tanaka Taro

Why are you apologizing lol

Kyo

Too bad the man I saw today wasn't Shizuo-san. It was a playboy-ish man with an eye mask and bandages over his face. He wasn't the feminine sort of pretty boy - he's a handsome man with just the right amount of muscles.

Mai

And a throng of girls at his heel.

Mai

So jealous.

Tanaka Taro

That certainly would make one jealous. But he must have been something if he could take down the shoplifter like a cop.

Kyo

Speaking of cops, we saw something interesting on the nightly street just now.

Tanaka Taro

What was it?

Kyo

A lot of people were having a gathering near the overpass. It was crowded. There were at least several scores of men. There wasn't enough space on the overpass so some had to gather under it as if it were some sort of pushing game.

Mai

It was so crowded I could cry.

Tanaka Taro

Really?

Kyo

I figured it was a *bousouzoku* gathering or something of that sort.....speaking of which, does everyone here know about Dollars? It's said that it's an evil dark organization insidiously taking over Ikebukuro. Apparently its members are all fearsome characters making it worthy of being called the Flower Bed of Evil.

Mai
Dollars.

Tanaka Taro
Well, I've heard of it.

Saika
I don't really know a lot about it

Kyo
The name Dollars, some say, is short for "dishonored lovers". Others say it stands for "people who are only worth one dollar", "the organization of folks who would kill for one dollar", "gang of *Daidarabotchis*", and many more. In short, it's a mysterious team! I heard it's like a Color Gang, except that it doesn't have a color. It's a gang of lunatics who blend themselves into the city before anyone can take notice!

** Daidarabotchi: a gigantic demon in Japanese mythology.*

Mai
It's awesome.

Tanaka Taro
How is it a gang of lunatics?

Kyo
There's no other way to call it. It doesn't even look like it has a purpose. Had it been a typical Color Gang, people would have assumed it was a gang meant to channel destructive energy on the streets. Even if they were mere goons for money under violence organizations people would have been more sure of their identity and presence. But Dollars is none of these.

Mai
What is it?

Tanaka Taro
You're thinking too much into it.

Kyo
Dollars has no actual structure. They don't even know who the other Dollars are. A student on the street or a housewife you happen to pass by may be one of them. Even your schoolmate talking to you casually on the street could turn out to be a Dollars member...honestly, no one knows how many members it has.

Tanaka Taro
You're right about that.

Tanaka Taro
But it could also be as innocent as an extracurricular club, right? I feel like it's just a group of

people calling themselves members because they wanted some sort of identity. It's like calling yourself a Saitaman or city folk.

Kyo

That's kind of overstretching the concept. You're a Dollars member from the moment you identify yourself as such. Even if it's online only, they do have an Internet-based community to exchange information. Their network is loose, but they are tied to each other with the common identity as Dollars members. Doesn't that sound scary to you at all?

Mai

That's scary.

Tanaka Taro

Why is that scary?

Kyo

It's like -say- having surveillance cameras in the form of human eyes everywhere on the streets. The only difference is that these surveillance cameras are capable of thinking. The ones under such surveillance have no way to know whether they are being "shot" or not. If you happened to have done something indecent on the street, it would be like exposing your weakness to Dollars itself through its members' eyes.

Mai

It's scary.

Tanaka Taro

You're thinking too much into it. I don't think it's like that.

Kyo

...Why is Tanaka Taro-san defending Dollars, a mere Color Gang, as if your life depended on it? I won't dig deeper into that now, but can you really say for sure that Dollars won't try to take advantage of others' weaknesses? It's a Color Gang after all. Those gangs are antisocial to begin with.

Mai

Gangs are horrible.

Tanaka Taro

That's true, but...

Mai

That hurts.

Mai

I was pinched.

Tanaka Taro

But I hear that even though they are a Color Gang, they're just a group of people who gathered because they were intrigued by the idea floating on the Internet, right? They do have offline meetings and stuff, but I don't think they're capable of much havoc.

Kyo

Then I'll ask you again.

Kyo

Can you say for sure that things are the way you think they are?

Kyo

If you were a Dollars member, you'd probably not be so sure that others would not do such things just because you wouldn't. There are so many of them in Dollars, and if what I heard is true, they have hardly even met each other in real life...If all these are true, it's hardly going to surprise anyone if it turns out that some people have already committed crimes in the name of Dollars, right?

Tanaka Taro

That's true.

Saika

Um

Saika

Please do not fight

Tanaka Taro

Ah, no, we're not fighting, Saika-san lol

Kyo

I don't think I'm fighting either. Personally I don't harbor any grudge or animosity towards the individual called Tanaka Taro. On the contrary, I'm pretty fond of you as a chatroom pal. I want to kiss you. CHU!

Mai

Sick.

Mai

That hurts.

Mai

I was pinched again.

Saika

I'm sorry

Tanaka Taro

That's why I asked why you were apologizing, Saika-san lol

Tanaka Taro

Anyway, anyway. I'm not saying that I think such things are impossible. But it's also true that there has been no news about Dollars members taking part in gang violence or other horrible stuff in Ikebukuro. The worst they do is probably the kind of individual fighting you see everywhere on the streets.

Kyo

That's not necessarily the truth. Their vortex of lunacy is going to keep rotating on the Ikebukuro streets. Centrifugal forces are bound to push the lighter ones of inferior quality to the outer layer of the vortex, aren't they?

Mai

Clunk clunk pop~

Kyo

It looks like some Dollars members have been picking fights outside of Tokyo. In fact, it was more like they were just beating people up. They punched their opponent's heads - as if they were hard-selling violence - and kept swinging fists at them regardless of whether they tried to fight back or not until they could no longer move. To think how horrible that must have looked.

Tanaka Taro

Eh?

Mai

I heard too.

Mai

There are people in Saitama

Mai

Who were attacked by Dollars members.

Tanaka Taro

Did you really?

Tanaka Taro

Where did you get this information from?

Kyo

Are you aware of the existence of Pacry*, the social networking system?

** Just like the Dollars website and chatrooms, a real-life version of Pacry has been created by fans at <http://pacry.sns-park.com/>*

Tanaka Taro

I'm actually kind of already a member.

Kyo

How lucky for you! Unlike mixi, it has an open policy allowing you to apply for membership on your own. Even if you don't have friends who will send you an invitation, you can still register there. Oops, I'm sorry. I did not mean to imply that Tanaka Taro-san strikes me as someone who doesn't have many friends. That's a judgment I will have to postpone till I've observed you long enough. Speaking of which, I'm not allowed to register at mixi yet because I'm not old enough.

Tanaka Taro

Sorry, where on Pacry did you find...?

Kyo

Ahh! I'm so sorry! I get carried away every time I begin to talk!

Kyo

You can start from searching for communities on "Saitama *bousouzoku* problem" in Pacry.

Tanaka Taro

I'll do that.

Kyo

There should be a thread titled "About Dollars" in that board. That's where I got my information from. If they turn out to be baseless rumors I would have been giving Taro-san unnecessary trouble.

Kyo

If that's indeed the case, I will without hesitation apologize and ask for your forgiveness. To make up for my sins I will give you my body and heart...my body is but second-rate, so I don't know how satisfactory a compensation you'll find that to be. But I'll be immensely honored and pleased to be able to offer you even a tiny bit of consolation.

Mai

Dirty.

Tanaka Taro

I'll go check that out.

Kyo

Am I being ignored? I sense these thoughts of solitude wrapping themselves around my body. Please be sure to take up the responsibility.

Mai

Dirty.

Kyo

Self-proclaimed Dollars members were picking on the *bousouzoku* in Saitama. If this was part of somebody's master plan, I think it's adequate to say that it shows the downside of not having a gang color. Anyone can shift the blame on Dollars as long as he or she claims to be a member.

Saika

Scary

Tanaka Taro

Sorry, I checked out that thread.

Tanaka Taro

I have some stuff to do tonight, so I'll excuse myself if you don't mind.

Kyo

Ah, then we'll call it a day as well.

Saika

Good night

Tanaka Taro

Thank you so much.

Tanaka Taro

Also I'm really sorry, Kyo-san. I might have said things that offended you.

Kyo

Not at all, not at all. Please don't mind.

Tanaka Taro

Thank you.

Tanaka Taro

I'm leaving then.

Tanaka Taro

That was a good chat -

Tanaka Taro-san has left the chat.

Kyo

So, everyone, since it's only the beginning of the Golden Week, watch out for yourselves and try to have as much fun as you can.....speaking of which, Setton-san, Kanra-san and Bakyura-san are all absent today.

Mai

Goodbye to you.

Kyo-san has left the chat.

Mai-san has left the chat.

Saika

Good night

Saika

Sorry

Saika

Looks like I missed them

Saika-san has left the chat.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

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INTERLUDE, OR PROLOGUE B

VORONA AND SLON (CROW AND ELEPHANT*)

** "Vorona" and "Slon" are Russian for "crow" and "elephant" respectively.*

Somewhere in Russia

The whispers in Russian slowly sank into the soil as they were blown away by the wind.

“...This is so weird...I mean, this is so weird...”

Against the backdrop of an immense expansive field, a man seemed to be wound up over something.

He wasn't tall per se; his skeleton was wide and the muscles covering it were strong making him look one size larger than an average guy of his height.

He was somewhere around 40. Donning a white coat over an already white jacket, he could easily have been mistaken for a polar bear from a distance.

Layers of scarves were wrapped around his head. White puffs of moisture were coming from his open mouth as if he were a steam engine train.

"This is really weird. I don't feel like there's a way out of this..."

Around him there were about ten other guys. One of which, a bespectacled middle-aged man, asked with all seriousness in the world, "What could possibly be bothering you, Comrade Lingerin?"

“Huh? Oh...oh...Listen Drakon. This is really weird.”

"What exactly is it?"

The man who had just been referred to as "Drakon" asked as he looked at the other man's hands.

He saw two narrow-necked jars which the man named Lingerin had somehow squeezed his left

and right hand into respectively.

"Look at this, Drakon."

Lingerin raised the jars high without trying to retract his hands.

His silhouette looked as if it were wearing boxing gloves. Drakon eyed him with a serious face and without even a drop of cold sweat on his back spoke again.

"What happened to you, Comrade Lingerin?"

Lingerin replied to that with a serious face of his own as he shook the jars slightly.

"I can't get my hands out."

Silence reigned for a while among the men; Drakon, however, simply pushed his glasses as he replied.

"That is really a big deal."

"I was trying to get something inside these jars, and somehow can't get my hands out."

Anyone else would have thought they'd been made fun of at this point and laughed hollowly. Yet, Drakon replied again with unabated seriousness.

Though his reply had a tone of resignation to it.

"Well. If worst comes to worst, you'll just have to spend your whole life like that."

"That would be problematic. How am I supposed to eat or shit like this?"

"Nothing is impossible in the great Russia. The immense expanses of Russian soil would take the likes of Comrade Lingerin any time with motherly warmth to feed the growth of a new generation."

"Hmm? Did you just say I'm gonna be buried or something? Did you just skip a lot of chapters about my life? Why, Drakon?"

Lingerin tilted his head. Drakon pushed his glasses again as he spoke.

"Then I'll just be straightforward. Give up the thought of living. Both physically and mentally."

"Even when you say you're straightforward you're basically telling me to die in a long-winded way. Aren't you just getting more fearsome?"

"I was just kidding, Comrade Lingerin."

Drakon deadpanned.

Just as the men around them began to suspect that Drakon's face was made of wax, Drakon stated his wish rather matter-of-factly.

"If you are going to die, please do so after we've survived this crisis situation."

Upon hearing this, Lingerin at last turned to face the men around him.

With the exception of Drakon, these men were all of unknown age to him.

They wore bullet-proof face masks, titanium helmets, and vests with various utility pockets over assault suits. For some reason, a few of them were also wearing gas masks, making them look like some sort of special force from a remote country.

But there was no uniformity whatsoever in the way they were equipped; it seemed like they just picked up whatever they found easiest to use.

Several of them were carrying automatic firearms which made the atmosphere tense in these Russian woods.

As he looked around at these men, Lingerin made noises as he flexed his neck and spoke.

"So who exactly are these nuisances here?"

"Thirty-seven armed illegal immigrants. Looks like they were planning to go to the Western countries via Russia, but decided that we, who happened to have overheard their plan as they were discussing it, needed to be dealt with first."

"We just happened to overhear? What horrible people. Or did we really?"

"If 'you were tapping their car thinking it was our rival's and therefore overheard their plan, then told them that we overheard just so that you could try to talk them into buying our weapons' counts as 'we just happened to overhear', then yes."

"Wow, then we really just happened to overhear."

Though Lingerin laughed bitterly as he said this, his hands, which were still stuck in the jars, made this entire scene a joke.

Drakon continued to show no emotion whatsoever as he moved his lips robotically.

"So, it turned out they attacked the village we were staying in with the intention of robbing us of the weapons. Judging by how quickly and unhesitatingly they made the move, they might have been planning on obtaining weapons in that fashion from the very beginning."

"Really...so, in short, they're a bunch of robbers without borders?"

"That was not what I was trying to say at all. But since Comrade Lingerin's head is dumb, that would suffice."

"Ah. You know you've got an outstanding military staff when he knows where to find points of compromise. I trust you, Drakon."

The flow of the conversation made little sense. Nevertheless, Lingerin Douglanikov, the head of this small weapon business, flexed his neck once more and waited for more enemies to appear on the scene.

"Really, what a pain in the ass. If only we still had those two I'd be able to just sleep through it."

"Are you talking about Samia (Simon) and Denis who quit years ago? Or Comrade Igor who's still taking a break?"

"Nah. Those guys were pretty capable as well. But I'm talking about the special ones who would know to attack even without being ordered to in such situations."

Like a child talking about his favorite hero, the forty-something man was apparently mesmerized by the mere thought.

Had he already drunk an entire bottle of vodka this morning?

"I gave Igor his break just so that he could look for those two."

Looking at the other man's fascinated expression, Drakon showed some emotion on his face for the first time.

"Vorona and...Slon."

Slight disgust. That was the only emotion shown on Drakon's face.

"It's true that they're perfect for such jobs. However, considering that Slon's head is even more... 'that' than Comrade Lingerin's..."

"His head is more what than mine?...More awesome?"

"I take that back. Comrade Lingerin's head wouldn't lose to his in any aspect."

Drakon's face was back to expressionless as he went on to talk about another human being.

"Vorona...has more loveliness, more intellect, and more knowledge at her disposal than anyone else in this place...at the same time, though, she's also an unstoppable and incorrigible fighting addict."

He stopped talking here as he removed his glasses.

Lingerin grinned at Drakon and spoke in a cool voice.

"You know that sounded like you were just showing off your own daughter, don't you, Drakon? If that's what you were doing, at least call her by her real name, not that nickname 'Vorona'."

Even though they had this conversation as if they didn't have a tough battle to fight ahead, Drakon wiped all emotions off his face as he spoke to his employer.

"She's no longer my daughter. How could she be...when she and Slon just took our weapons and escaped to Japan?"



May 3rd, Sunshine 60 Street, Ikebukuro

Just as the shoplifter was charging forward like a bull, knocking people out of his way -

"Что случилось? (What happened?)"

The one who muttered to himself was a Caucasian male somehow even more attention-drawing than the shoplifter.

There were quite a number of black men working as hawkers in Ikebukuro, so the presence of foreigners was not a novelty in itself. But -

In addition to being over 2 meters tall, the man had limbs as thick as logs and protruding muscles that made him look like a professional wrestler. The luggage he carried on his back was the size of sandbags; overall, he resembled some sort of martial artist on a self-improvement

tour.

But more than all of those combined, however, he drew attention because he contrasted so forcefully with the person right next to him.

"Нет проблем. (No problem.)"

The one who answered in Russian was a Caucasian female around 20 who held a large paper bag in her hands.

Her features were somewhat childlike; it was probably more adequate to call her a girl than a woman. But her body was already no different from an adult female's. On her lean arms streamlined muscles were vaguely visible.

Her short hair was a shining platinum blond. At the centers of her sky-blue eyes there was a pair of tiny pupils deep as ice caves.

Her expression was somewhat cold, and the skin on her body slightly mutilated here and there with marks that looked like scars. The color of her casual attire was prevalently black, adding to the dark aura she seemed to emanate.

Yet that aura became the best possible backdrop and brought out her elegant looks in an incredible way.

The breathtaking beauty and the masculine beast.

They turned quite a number of heads with their appearance; however, the same heads quickly turned away and focused instead on the commotion the shoplifter was causing.

The Caucasian girl didn't seem to take notice of the reaction of the crowd. She simply said to the huge guy next to her with a face devoid of expression, "Slon. I negate... Speak Japanese when in Japan. The policy we decided on long ago. When in Rome, do as Romans do. The basics of concealing identity. I too without thinking gave response in Russian. I will watch out. We do the same."

"Sorry, Vorona. My bad."

"You are attention-drawing. We are entering the karaoke, the destination. Please affirm."

The Caucasian female's intonation was perfect, yet her choice of words remained somewhat awkward.

Vorona, since that appeared to be her name, walked towards the destination with Slon at her heel.

She didn't seem interested in either the shoplifter commotion or what happened afterwards.

Having walked away from the swarming crowd, she said in a small voice as if to herself:

"A greenhouse-bred country, too used to peace. Half disappointment. Half jealousy."



Several minutes later, in a karaoke box

"I can't. I can't move. I'm so wound up over this that I can't even make one step forward!"

They had entered the karaoke box as indicated and were waiting for the "client" to appear. The huge guy, Slon, cupped his head with his hands as he squatted down.

Vorona, on the other hand, took out a book from her paper bag and began to turn the pages as she replied matter-of-factly.

"You're sitting. I deny the necessity for you to walk."

"I can't help being all wound up over this.....we just passed some *sukiyaki* and *shabu-shabu* restaurants on the way here. I can't help getting all wound up over beef..."

Slon looked as if his world were about to end. Vorona, however, did not even cast a glance in his direction as she continued to leaf through the pages.

"How...how do cows grow to such immense sizes when all they ever chew on is grass! It's simply weird that they can get so big just by eating grass...if this mystery is not solved, I don't even see any point in living, let alone go to work!"

Tears trickled down the huge guy's face as he shouted what was practically nonsense. Vorona did not look up as she continued to turn the pages; however, her lips began to form words as if they had a life of their own.

"...The stomach of a cow hosts special microorganisms, the microorganisms react with grass and the cow's saliva. Produce amino acids, the cow absorbs them, wherewith the cow grows. No problem."

Slon's question was answered perfectly.

Looking satisfied with Vorona's answer, Slon began to bubble with joy.

"So that's how? You are something indeed, Vorona! That's how! Now I can eat my beef steak in

peace! After all this answer is just perfect!"

But-

"I can now drink cow milk in peace too! Though, it's still slightly weird, the idea of humans drinking...cow milk...eh...speaking of which..."

As if something had just occurred to him, he cupped his head with his hands again and fell onto the table with karaoke menus on it.

"I can't move!...I'm so wound up over it that I can't even bring myself to look at the menu...when I was thinking about cow milk, my thoughts somehow wandered to the fact that men have nipples.....what good does that do exactly to reproduction? I'm not moving an inch until I've solved the mystery of the male nipples! This is my war!"

"...When a fetus, there is a period during which a human being is neither male or female. Gender is decided after the nipples part has been formed. Just vestigial."

"Oh...ooh...perfect, Vorona, you're just perfect!"

While Vorona's expression remained virtually unchanged, Slon asked the next question.

"But...! I now have a new question...if that is not answered, I don't think I can live anymore...! Why, why isn't Vorona looking embarrassed in the slightest? I mean, I'm talking to you about teasing stuff like nipples and reproduction, in this karaoke box where there's only a man and a woman!"

While Slon was speaking the ultimate nonsense, Vorona simply continued to turn the pages.

Turned the pages, then turned some more, and then some more...

"Am I being...ignored?"

Vorona was just finishing the first book when Slon could no longer stand it and yelled.

Then, she took out a second book and parted her lips as if about to say something *en passant*, but the door of the karaoke box was opened the exact second before she could actually say anything. A man entered the box.

"Yeah, good day, good day. I'm really sorry I'm late."

It was a Japanese man with an extremely good-natured face who looked about 40.

"Good day, good day. I'm really sorry. Good day to you."

The man who kept saying "good day" smiled kindly and sat down on the chair.

"Please forgive me for getting straight to business. I really don't have much time...so I'll explain the 'job' to you right now."

The man finished the sentence smiling and produced two photos from his chest pocket before the duo could even answer.

"Actually, I'm hoping that you can kidnap a little kid for me."

The first photo was the photo of a girl with a somewhat cloudy expression.

She looked like she hadn't even finished elementary school. Slon accepted the photo with a frown while Vorona just kept turning the pages of her book despite the fact that the client was explaining the details of the job to them.

The middle-aged man did not seem to mind, however, seeing as he continued his explanation in a nonchalant tone.

"This city has many *yakuza*...or Japanese mafia. Ha-ha. She's the granddaughter of the head of one of those groups...I'm hoping that you can kidnap her and try not to kill her in the process. Ha-ha, I'm really sorry this is not an assassination request but a strange kidnapping job. Good day to you."

"Even though you're technically our employer in this country, I still have to say that we'll decide whether to take the job or not depending on the amount you offer. We can conceal our faces, but even so we demand being paid adequately for risking open war with *yakuza*." Slon said in flawless Japanese.

The man laughed affably and replied, "Ah, actually, the situation's become even more cumbersome than that. The *yakuza* group in question seemed to have hired a bodyguard...I could hardly believe it myself, but, if what I heard is true, that bodyguard is a fearsome character."

Bodyguard.

Vorona's hands stopped turning the pages upon hearing that word.

"Guard, very impregnable? Affirmative or negative, I hope for your quick answer."

The man kept his good-natured smile even after he heard Vorona's words and said with a somewhat troubled face, "How should I put it? It's probably not even a matter of strength...that bodyguard is kind of like a magician."

"-?"

"There are video clips floating around on the Internet, so I downloaded some just in time for our meeting..."

At that, the man took out a portable video player and displayed one image on its screen.

It was a screenshot from a TV news program.

In that image, what appeared to be a group of criminals were fleeing from patrol cars.

And running into someone on a black motorbike wielding a giant scythe.

"This is the so-called Black Motorbike, kind of an urban legend of our time...I have no idea how he did that, though. Anyhow, he's not going to leave you alone if you try to do anything to the girl in the photo."

The man lowered his head as if troubled - but under that facade, he was actually snickering.

"Confirm, one thing."

Blood rushed to Vorona's face as her expression relaxed slightly in what appeared to be joy.

She did nothing to conceal the excitement bubbling in her heart as she asked a simple question.

"If I kill the person on this motorbike, will you not blame me?"

That was a meaningless question.

Slon did not think he fell under the smart category, but he had been working with his female partner long enough to know.

Vorona was a born fighting addict.

There was no way she was going to turn down this job now that the prospect of fighting an unknown opponent was dangling before her eyes like a carrot.

He was also sure of something else.

No matter what Yadogiri Jinnai, their employer for this job, said, Vorona was going to kill the rider on the motorbike for sure.

Having made that assessment, Slon thought quietly to himself:

“Well, I don't really know. I don't care either way.”

And just like that, the Russians, who had yet to show Ikebukuro what they were capable of, stepped into the world of non-daily life out of their own conscious will.

Of course, this volatile state of things was probably the more familiar form of life for them after all.

LOVEY-DOVEY PRATTLES OF AN UNDERGROUND DOCTOR, III

Don't worry, she's sound asleep.

Internal medicine is not my area of expertise, but I think she has some sort of acute adenoiditis.

...

Eh? Teething fever?

Nah, only babies and kindergarten kids get teething fever. You don't seriously believe people get fevers just from thinking too much, do you?

But then Shizuo's brain is as developed as a kindergarten kid so maybe you do still get teething fevers...eh-

...

Shizuo, you realize a flick of your finger in my forehead does as much damage as a knee kick from any other person, don't you? Then try to be more careful, please?

...

What, concussion? How long have I been unconscious?

...

Graceful God, I wouldn't have believed it had I been told that one day I'd have to relocate my own jaw. Not that it's a big deal though considering the number of jaws I've dislocated and relocated through all these years...

...Speaking of which, my grandfather had once choked on a slice of rice cake. Father just dislocated his jaw and snatched the chunk of rice cake from his throat with his hand. He only does that in an absolute emergency, I figure.

I think I've talked enough. Who exactly is that little girl?

I didn't find anything on her that gives any real clue.

...

..."Haven't been doing weird stuff to her have you?"...what's that supposed to mean?

Hello? Before I even get started on where you got the idea that I might be into *lolis*, do you seriously think I would hit any girl other than Celty? Had it been Celty who was shaking from her fever and muttering things on that bed, I'd have done away with the blanket and warmed her with my body instead!

Really, if Celty hadn't existed, I'd probably already be living a hermit's life somewhere in the mountains and killing my time with elegant hobbies.

If anything could even remotely rival Celty's beauty, it would have to be the grand Earth herself; that's what I would have told people. But honestly, I still feel like Celty is more beautiful...What do you guys think?

...Shizuo, that Tom-san has been eyeing me with a pitying look on his face for a while now. Why is that?

Why aren't you saying anything?

Well, whatever.

...

Hm? Celty?

Celty is out working for Shiki-san from Awakusu-kai today.

...

Yep, Shiki-san.

Medei Group, the bigger organization they belong to, is coalescing with Asuki Group. Lots of stuff to be done, it seems...and they said they were entrusting Celty with something important.

...

Ah, that's true. I can't honestly say I'm not worried about her.

Awakusu-kai is in that kind of business, you see?

A lovely girl like Celty just doesn't belong in this kind of shambles with bullets flying around and the smell of blood in the air....of course that was a lie. She's like born to be in it.

The Black Rider blazing her trail among soaring bullets. Isn't that just cool?

But I do still worry about her. I'd rather that she moved together with me all the time, but, unfortunately, I wouldn't have had a better chance of surviving such situations than a clothed pile of limbs.

Ah, Celty is strong so I can rest assured.

Celty is strong. Both mentally and physically.

Speaking of which, Shizuo, people probably don't notice because you're too ridiculously overpowering, but Celty is pretty powerful in her own right, too.

She can bend a steel pipe with her hands if she wants to.

She easily recovers from car crashes as if nothing had happened. Well, not that it doesn't hurt for her, but still.

She can take on at least ten average delinquents with no problem. But thirty might be a little taxing on her mental strength.

She's irrationally afraid of certain occult rumors and the White Motorbike. But that only makes her more adorable as a girl in my opinion.

She's strong and adorable. Isn't that just ideal?

But I wouldn't let you have her, Shizuo. Though she's on really good terms with you. You know that gets me jealous at times, right?

...Eh? Tom-san? What's with that face?

...

Celty? Yeah, that's her name. She's the Black Rider.

...

“So it's a she'...?” Shizuo, you didn't tell him that part?

...

...Eh? You didn't know Celty was a woman either until recently? But Shizuo!

I can't believe it!

But just look at how beautifully she walks! How her gorgeous curves peep out from under those shadows! Anyone would desire her for that kind of charm!

That's right...she doesn't need to have a head for me to love her, so she doesn't need to have a head to be erotically attractive to me, either. Ever since high school, I've never found any ordinary girl even remotely attractive. Celty is the only exception. When I was a kid, Celty was like a reliable older sister to me. Now that I've grown up, Celty is like a cute little kitten - though I guess you can say I'm more like a mouse in her hands.

...Sorry. I got carried away with my lovey-dovey talk. But I don't regret it.

So, back to the little girl we have here.

She saw you for like the first time in her life and told you to "Die!". Shizuo, what exactly have you done to deserve that?

I know you probably don't recall having done anything of that sort, but Shizuo, you're the type of person who gets hated before you can realize the consequences of what you've done.

Let's take, say, a random tree on the sidewalk you uprooted to use as a weapon for example.

If that happened to have been the special tree for a girl who lost her mother on the very day this tree budded...you would have killed the tree she held as dear as her substitute mother. I wouldn't be surprised if she'd hate you enough for it to want you dead...

Well, that was just an analogy.

But still, that's a more plausible explanation in my opinion than saying that the girl is just some sort of indiscriminating killing machine.

...

Eh, Saika?

I don't think so. Her eyes didn't turn red, did they?

Well, point is, whatever the reason the killers might have on their part, people's lives are more easily after than they usually think.

Not that being aware of that fact would have helped you, though.

These things just happen out of the blue.

Sometimes due to misunderstandings they escalate to the level of mutual hostility.

But at any rate, your getting mad isn't going to waver her killing intent against you. You need to figure out how to deal with this situation.

Not to mention it might not have been a misunderstanding on her part after all.

Trivial things you did in the past might have turned someone else's life upside down. That happens, and it happens a lot.

Though there are people who would do such "trivial things" on purpose.

Like Izaya.

...

Oops. Now you're officially looking grumpy.

It's about time you two made it up with each other.

...But then you've never really been on good terms to begin with, have you?

Wow, that just makes me all nostalgic. I miss high school.

We were so green and young back then. Or should I say red?

Since there was always nothing but blood around you and Izaya.

Thanks to you two, I got much better at dealing with broken bones and stitching wounds. Ha-ha.

I can't really say that I dislike Izaya.

He's nothing but true. True to his own desires.

In the same way you're true to your emotions, in fact.

Though in Izaya's case it would have been much better had his desire been just money or women.

But no, it just had to be this inexplicable thing called human observation.

It just gets on your nerves when people observe others and get all haughty about it, doesn't it? It's as if he thinks he's superior to everyone else.

But he's good at sensing other people's moods. He usually won't let you hate him. All he does

is estimate your mood with precision and speak the words that waver you the most at the exact time you cannot bring yourself to hate him for saying them.

...Tom-san, were you going to say something? Please go ahead.

...

“...Eh, I look like I'm the kind of person who likes to observe and feel all superior, too...? That's not flattering. Why do I get hated so much?”

Well. As long as Celty doesn't hate me, I don't really care.

Anyway, I really want to hang out with you guys again like we did back in Raijin.

Back then it was part of my daily routine to find a spot at a safe distance and watch you and Izaya try to kill each other.

Speaking of which, I wonder what kids at Raira are like nowadays.

Hm. I don't know a lot of them, but Ryuugamine Mikado-kun, he was at the hotpot party, is an acquaintance of Celty's. Ah, I know Sonohara Anri-chan somewhat better. Remember? I think you've met her once when you were shot and had to spend a night here. Other than those two there are...Yagiri Seiji-kun and Harima Mika. You know them? They came to the hotpot party when you were also here.

...

Eh? You know Seiji?

...

He stabbed you with ballpoint pens? What?

Whatever...anyway. They all look like pretty mature kids.

Mikado-kun and Anri-chan are just typical high school kids who look like they'll be scared to get into any kind of fight.

I feel like they share some kind of secret with Celty. But then it's a privilege of kids and women to make secret holding attractive. A mysterious beauty. Enigmatic kids. Isn't that just cool? It's like the intro of a movie. A squalid man holding a secret would just make himself an easy criminal suspect.

...Why are you looking at my face at the mention of "criminal suspect"?

Whatever.

...I just wanted to know how kids today are doing with their youthful lives.

My high school days look completely ruined thanks to you and Izaya. But as long as I had Celty at home, I couldn't really complain.

All was fine as long as I had a place to return to.

Though it looks like Mikado-kun knows Izaya. That calls for some concern.

Youth, in essence, is just restlessness.

Like trying to wriggle your way out of some sort of denseness.

Though the Japanese word for "youth" translates literally into "green spring of life"...a lot of things happen during spring, most of them far from clean or fresh.

Caterpillars and many other creatures disturbing to humans also appear during the spring season.

Maybe you'll even become one of those creatures yourself.

I do hope it doesn't turn out that he's becoming one of those. But as I said before, you never know what you did to deserve the hate you get in your life.

Now that I think about it, there could already be something ominous in store for Mikado-kun from the moment he got to know Izaya.

Anyway, now that he got to know you too, Shizuo, at the hotpot party, he's probably half-destined for the hotpot bubbling at the bottom of Hell...eh?...argh!

CHAPTER 3

THEIR YOUTH, IT SPARKLES AND FALLS

Somewhere in Russia

"So, where were we?"

Lingerin banged the jars on his hands repeatedly against each other and inquired nonchalantly.

Despite his light-hearted tone, however, the bloody backdrop against which he said these words was the furthest from light-hearted.

The air was literally heavy with the smell of blood.

Worse than that, however, was the more pungent smell of explosives floating in the air. The denseness of the smoke made even the river of blood on the floor seem pale.

Legions of bodies lay at Lingerin's feet.

These had probably belonged to the group of illegal immigrants they had been talking about. They were all foreign-looking men bleeding terribly from their heads and torsos and slowly turning into smelly, lifeless lumps of flesh on the ground.

The faces of the men still standing didn't even change.

Next to Lingerin Drakon was carefully rubbing dust off his glasses. Around them the men dressed in special force-like attire remained silent and vigilant.

"We were talking about Vorona and Slon, Comrade Lingerin."

"Ha-ha, that's right. These folks came and interrupted us when we were only halfway through that story. How inconsiderate of them. That's why they lost their lives."

Lingerin sighed heavily and muttered.

Raising his hands, which were still stuck in the jars, he said in a grand voice, "That's right. It's very important that one be considerate. On some level, Denis and Samia are what I would call considerate people. Since they escaped to Japan when we were about to enter a life-and-death situation here."

"When you launched a preemptive attack as a warning on the armed force our rival had hired, you mean."

"I was so sure that I was gonna die. Good lord, I was actually the inconsiderate one back then. I'd never thought there would be so many former special forces soldiers among them. None of our shots were lethal since we only meant them to serve as a warning, but theirs, alas, they really wanted us dead."

Drakon, too, pushed up his glasses in a pretentious way and deadpanned in a cold voice to his cackling employer, "Many former special force members lost their jobs during democratization and disarmament. When looking for alternative employment, a considerable number began working under private armed forces and mafia so we would have to watch out...I've already told you that 23 times since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but apparently Comrade Lingerin had ears that did not hear."

"Well, you can't blame me, every member I knew simply became mercenaries...speaking of which, it's not exactly the time to call me on this, don't you think? I didn't expect you to be so inconsiderate, Drakon."

"If you were trying to be considerate you would have first done something about your hands, Comrade Lingerin."

There was no contempt, scorn or displeasure on Drakon's face even at the sight of his employer's hands stuck in honey jars like a bear's paws. He simply stated the fact in a monotonous voice.

Lingerin averted his gaze and laughed as if to conceal his embarrassment.

"I didn't mean for them to..."

The next instant, one of the jars exploded with a huge noise.

A polished black pistol appeared from what remained of the jar on Lingerin's right hand.

The mouth of the pistol was still smoking while the shards rained down on the bodies on the floor.

The next second, something fell to the floor with a clang.

Drakon turned to find an illegal immigrant who had apparently only been pretending to be dead. A stream of blood trickled down the corner of his mouth as his pistol, which he had been aiming at Lingerin, fell from his now-lifeless hand.

"...Very well-played. That's all I'm saying for now."

Lingerin didn't seem to take notice of Drakon, who shrugged as he said this, and instead broke

into a light-hearted smile.

"I see...all I had to do was pull the trigger! It was a pity that I had to break the jar, but the jar was cheaper than the pistol anyway...probably!"

"I would question first the necessity for you to put the pistol into the jar in the first place. Secondly, why didn't you let go of the pistol, retract your hand and take the pistol out afterwards? Thirdly, wouldn't it have been faster to just break the jar on the wall than to blast it open with a bullet?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Speak Russian."

"Did what I said just now sound like English or Japanese to you? I see. If this is a result of a dysfunctional Wernicke's area*, it has to be either yours or mine. Let's go to the hospital together and see who gets sent to the infirmary."

** Wernicke's area: the part of the cerebral cortex involved in the understanding of written and spoken language.*

Lumps of dry ice were coming out of his mouth as he spoke.

Lingerin averted his gaze right away as this illusion almost took shape in front of his eyes. Instead, he steered the topic back.

"Yeah, we were talking about Little Miss Vorona, weren't we? She's twenty now, but mentally she's still a kid. She's damn capable, but compared to Samia and Denis she's not nearly as considerate."

"It's not a problem of whether she's considerate or not. They violated our unwritten laws, which simply were not to be violated. I will literally beat their brains out if I get the chance."

"God, you're scary. This is not something you say about your own daughter. I've decided to not be mad at them, I have. Let's just shut them up in the storage room and leave it at that."

"The storage, huh...well, I suppose starving them to death will make them more miserable than feeding them bullets."

Drakon said with a serious face. Lingerin broke out in sonorous laughter and chimed in as if amused, "Oi oi, why are you assuming that we're executing them? Let it go. We're neither a mafia group or the military. Just live and let live. Plus, it sounds sort of barbarian when you talk about killing people as if it's part of your routine."

Lingerin lectured on unashamedly while leisurely finding himself a place to sit amid the legions of slaughtered bodies.

"First off...I don't think that you, with your skills, can manage to shoot Vorona."

"Affirmative. I regret to say that I can't do the job. But that was why we sent Igor to Japan,

wasn't it? We also told him he could seek Denis and Samia's assistance if necessary...but then, I heard Igor was seriously injured by a local just a couple of days ago."

"Looks like Japan is a tough country after all. I heard our Mr. President* is a master of the Japanese martial art called judo. Could it be that a judo master licked him? Ah, guess I might as well also break the other jar." Lingerin said as he aimed the pistol in his right hand at the jar in his left hand.

** At the time Durarara!!x5 was released, the president of Russia was still Putin.*

Drakon didn't turn to look at him; instead he put his hand on Lingerin's shoulder and said in a flat tone:

"I'll spare you the detailed lecture, but you'll wound your left hand if you do this. It's better to just crack it open with the grip. Japan is indeed tough, though. If Vorona hears that Igor's been licked by a local, she's going to be sure to do something about it."

"That's true. Little Miss Vorona has feelings, unlike you. You're just a robot. She always acts on her instinct and impulses and kills people easily. She kills for things other than food or self-defense which is what makes humans different from beasts."

Lingerin slammed the pistol grip against the jar which broke into pieces upon the contact and fell to the floor.

That revealed his other hand holding a slice of beef jerky marinated in honey. Lingerin put it in his mouth and said, "Well, she's still a weirdo among humans, of course."

"It's probably not the most adequate thing to say in front of Comrade Lingerin, but Vorona is far from grown-up as a human being. She lost her mother when she was still a kid, and all I had given her was books. I've been leaving her to her own devices, and this is the only way it could turn out. She is extremely knowledgeable, but mentally she's still a child." Drakon recounted calmly in a mildly self-reproachful voice.

Lingerin, on the other hand, waved his hand and said light-heartedly, "Isn't that good, though? She's young and blooming. Getting some exercise abroad will do her good. Japan's warmer in the springtime than Russia, isn't it? Just let her enjoy it."

"Though she did take with her too many toys not suited for underage kids."



May 3rd, a certain road in Ikebukuro

Vorona, the woman in the rider suit, rode on as she watched from afar the figure rolling onto the floor.

At the same time there was a sound of friction, and a faintly glittering thread slid swiftly back into her belt.

But no one around her took notice of the faint glitter; every passer-by in the street was too busy looking at the overturned motorbike and the rider, who was thrown from his seat.

The vehicles following the motorbike had no choice but to stop or make a detour to avoid getting themselves into trouble.

Vorona disguised herself as one of "spectators" and steered her motorbike onto a road that lay before her.

She looked into the rear mirror. Seeing that the commotion had officially started, she rode away into the night without casting the street a backward glance.

She knew very well why there was going to be a commotion.

She had seen it with her own eyes -

The moment when the helmet of the rider on the Black Motorbike was sent flying into mid-air and the now-headless body crashing onto the asphalt.

Vorona remained wordless inside her helmet and pondered things over as she kept riding on the night road. It didn't take her long to arrive at the destination.

Parked there on the road with very sparse traffic was a truck.

It was her private truck complete with the logo of a sham company.

Slon was already waiting for her in the driver's seat. As she approached the truck, its hazard lamps flashed briefly.

Vorona walked towards the truck in silence and made her way to its back.

The rear door opened on its own as she approached it and put down a steel slope like a plane's ramp.

Vorona stepped onto it effortlessly and walked straight onto the bed of the truck.

The rear half of the bed resembled a storage room; miscellaneous items were piled one upon another including a stand for the motorbike. The front half, on the other hand, was furnished like a camping car with its set of sofas and closets cushioned with soft white fur.

Vorona stood before the closet and took off her helmet as well as her rider suit. She only wore a thin T-shirt and a pair of leggings underneath, which allowed her well-proportioned figure to show under the fluorescent light.

This place had electricity supply just like a real camping car. Other than the fluorescent light, one could find a number of power sockets at the front.

Slon's voice came through via the transceiver on the table as she took off her T-shirt, leaving only her brassiere.

"Hard day, huh?"

The voice of the male was talking to her from the driver's seat. It inquired leisurely, "Are you changing right now?"

"I affirm."

"Really. It's a pity that I can't watch."

"I don't find it a pity."

Vorona answered in a flat tone. She did not seem to find it embarrassing or annoying, for she simply changed into a new T-shirt without further ado.

Slon was at a loss as to what to say at her lack of reaction, so he chose to jump to a completely irrelevant topic.

"Speaking of which, I saw a car with a number plate that said 1313 driving past when I was waiting for you. And the question suddenly struck me...why is 13 regarded as an unlucky number? I'm so wound up over this that I feel like I could die. Is that a curse of the number 13 as well?"

"Many explanations exist. Famous one is at Last Supper, Judas was No.13 on the table. But origin is not limited to Christianity. Nordic Pantheon, harmony achieved by 12 gods. Loki appearing as the 13th broke the harmony. Ancient times, countries that used the duodecimal system, 13 broke the harmony of 12. The taboo number. Pity."

"I see. So it's still unclear. Also...could you just speak Russian with me? I was trained quite thoroughly before, so my Japanese is more or less OK...but yours is sort of awkward. Or simply weird. People may despise us if that gets in the way of mutual understanding."

"I negate. Communication is possible on matters of work, no problem. Being despised, no problem."

Vorona answered curtly. The man in the driver's seat replied with the same curtness:

"I don't quite get it, but since you say there's no problem, whatever."

Slon didn't dwell further on this subject and instead booted the accelerator to start the truck.

Vorona, who had by now changed into casual clothes, listened to the sound of the engine and muttered to herself on the sofa, "Overly simple. Disappoint. Black Motorbike, was too weak."

"You said something?"

"Slon, no relevance."

"Not my business? Then whatever."

Having made sure that Slon's flirtatious voice had stopped bothering her, she began to ruminate on the matter.

So disappointing.

I had thought that the monster-like human being on the picture would have been able to satisfy me.

His guard was way too loose. Like any other delinquent out there.

He didn't even notice that the specially made steel thread on his neck was connected to a transceiver.

Hunger.

...Hunger.



If "youth" stood for "the spring of life", then the twenty-year-old woman's spring was still not in sight.

The woman named Vorona had never loved a single human being.

She had probably never even loved herself.

She could grasp the concept of love the same way she could other knowledge.

But she had no way to tell whether it was necessary for her life.

Because other than the second-hand knowledge from the books, she had never experienced actual love.

She grew up watching her father's back.

But it was not because she had harbored admiration for him.

Her father, code-named "Drakon", never turned his face to her. He kept giving her books to preoccupy herself with, kept his back turned towards her, kept his attention focused somewhere other than on her.

"It's his way of expressing love. He keeps his back turned to you, Little Miss, because he wanted to protect you from any harm in the world. Drakon is an awkward and stubborn guy, though, so he's never going to let it show on his face."

Lingerin, her father's employer, had once said to the little girl.

It did little more than to perplex her: she didn't understand what love meant, so Lingerin's words went over her head.

But she did not feel lonely, either.

Her father kept a large amount of books at home, and she had full access to his collection.

Any book she wanted her father would also purchase for her without hesitation.

Lingerin also liked to bring her strange books from foreign countries since he found it intriguing that she could read several times faster than an average person.

Surrounded by her pile of books, she took in every necessary and unnecessary bit of knowledge and stored them in her brain.

The little girl was not loved by her father; neither had she loved anyone. But there wasn't discontent in her heart for her life.

She wasn't friends with any of the kids at her school. The kids around her had isolated her since they had all been warned by their parents not to "get too close to her" (they knew her father did something very dangerous for a living.) She had therefore spent her childhood in solitude.

But she did not mind. All she needed to be satisfied with life was books.

She had never felt hunger.

Until a certain moment came to pass.

The first time she felt hungry was when she first killed a human being.

With the knowledge she had acquired from books, she killed a robber who had broken into their house on a certain night.

Half of it was sheer luck; but on any account, she had managed to kill a grown man.

Had managed it although she was a girl who had just turned ten and didn't even know how to pull a trigger.

The man stiffened instantly; it took far less time than what she had expected from reading the descriptions in the books.

An unfamiliar breeze began to blow through her heart at the sight.

It took her many years to put a pin on just what the strange feeling engulfing her heart had been hunger.

Her father returned home as soon as he could after she contacted him; the moment he saw the stiffened body of the robber, he locked his daughter in a silent embrace.

All along he had acted like a robot. Yet the warmth from this expressionless man's tight embrace remained unmistakable in her memory even after all these years.

The little girl had thought, "I don't know what happened, but Father has turned his face to me now."

And acted like he cherished his tie with me.

Why?

Because I took down the bad guy?

Because I killed someone stronger than I was?

Because I am strong?

These were but childish and ridiculous theories.

In her little heart, she had probably sensed vaguely -no, clearly, that "these are all wrong."

But she did not understand what love was.

That was why she never could understand why her father had hugged her.

She had hung on to the false reasons because she could not understand the real reason.

Or simply pretended to hang on to them.

After that, she began to learn things she could not learn from the books from Denis and Samia, her father's subordinates.

Denis and Samia were relatively young members of the group, yet nobody knew what they had previously done for a living. Lingerin, the head of the weapon company, did not care about such things. All her careful research had yielded was a trivial clue that said, "Denis was in the army."

But this simple piece of information was more than enough for her.

After that, she asked the duo to teach her how to use various kinds of weapons as well as how to fight. Denis refused, saying it was "not the sort of thing to be taught to a girl". Samia was only willing to teach her how to work out her body.

Eventually, however, they began to teach her how to use weapons after she had proven herself capable of assisting her father in his job. The amount they had taught her was only meant to make her able to defend herself, yet the girl put these skills to use in a far more aggressive way.

She started out fighting the delinquents on the streets.

Moved on to armed drug dealers.

Moved on to former mafia members who had been in the army.

Began to fight two such opponents at once.

Three.

Four-five -six-.

She kept upping the level of her opponents and reflecting on her own strength every time she survived from those fights.

One day, she caught wind that her father and Lingerin were planning to destroy this rival organization. She immediately set out to its lair and single-handedly killed its every member.

Lingerin, who got the report, arrived at the scene with his subordinates and found the girl leafing through the dead's gossip magazines with gusto in a room filled with the smell of blood and explosives.

She was miraculously unhurt; yet her father, instead of pulling her into his arms, slapped her hard on the face.

At that moment, she at last realized.

That she was not shocked at all about the fact that she was slapped.

Rather, she felt from the bottom of her heart that it was only reasonable.

She had felt this way since a long, long time ago.

Perhaps, from the second she had killed that robber.

At the same time, another realization hit her.

Why do I keep doing this even though I know Father will not praise me?

Not because I want to be loved.

It's very simple.

The happiness.

The delight.

The pleasure.

The bliss.

The ecstasy.

In short, she had been telling herself that she just wanted her father to pay attention to her and using it as an excuse to indulge herself in the joy of killing.

Ironically, she came to realize this when her father slapped her because he was worried about her. But it no longer mattered to her whether her father was willing to turn his face to her or not.

After the harness on her heart had been removed, her abilities as a fighter skyrocketed, but her mentality became increasingly twisted.

Lingerin, who noticed the change in her, had commented that she was "like a crow - smart, but for some reason just loves rotten meat." Laughingly, he gave her the code name "Vorona"* and made her a formal member of his company.

** Vorona: Russian for "crow".*

She kept eliminating their rivals on Lingerin's orders.

Yet her hunger was far from satisfied.

Because her father did not hug her like he did the first time?

No.

She had already realized that this was not the reason.

So was she a blood-thirsty homicide manic?

To be exact, that was not it either.

What she enjoyed was not taking people down.

Nor killing them.

What she enjoyed was attacking the impregnable and blowing it apart.

Tearing down multiple layers of defense and dicing the muscles toughened from years of exercise underneath.

Aiming at the weaker joints of the modern heavy-armed men, firing fuel-air explosives or bullets into their shield and seeing with her mind's eye the tender flesh inside the hard shell being torn apart.

Confirm.

All she wanted to do was confirm.

It was perhaps just another form of her desire for knowledge.

Fragile.

For her, humans were way too fragile.

But were they really?

The first robber she had killed was far more fragile than what she had pictured from reading descriptions in books.

That was the reason of her hunger.

She was slightly traumatized by the fact that she had already killed someone at such a young age.

But there were people in the world who would keep touching the old scars; even tearing them open when they were about to heal and she was one of those.

Was it really a human being that she had killed back then?

Were human beings really that fragile?

Were they really that fragile, herself included?

No matter what kind of training they had gone through, no matter what heavy armor they put on, no matter how much fighting experience they had-

Were those so-called human beings in essence nothing more than lumps of flesh like water balloons supported by skeletons with the same hardness as quartz?

For some reason she did not know, she would feel restless unless she kept trying to confirm it.

She had no idea why.

She kept looking for new opponents with that thought on her mind.

And now, even though it was not entirely her intention, she was working as an individual "freelancer" to earn her living in this metropolis of a country far removed from war.



"Alrighty! Let's start now with the greeting from me, everyone's idol, Takemoo Eiji! We'll be taking you as usual to the "Thundering Russian Paradise" today! Allow me to introduce my partner whom you may already know very well, the babe bilingual in Russian and Japanese!"

"Сегодня также рады удовлетворить всех! (Today is also happy to meet all!) I'm Murada Kiely! What was with the "babe"? That was completely out of the blue! "

"Oi, oi, oi, that's not right! 'Out of the blue' is not a very befitting phrase for a Russian speaker! I think Kiely should do away with that strange choice of words reminiscent of Carlyle's era and go for a uniquely Russian brand of sexiness instead! Such as wearing something that's uniquely Northern! Like a single layer of lingerie under a thick fur coat! "

"Замолчи Трилобиты!"

"Eh? Hang on! What did you just say? Oi, what did you just say in Russian? "

Vorona slowly opened her eyes as a wave of noise reached her ears from the radio.

She had been napping for a while.

It looked like Slon had been listening to the radio for the heck of it while driving.

She looked at the watch. It hadn't been for very long.

The sound of the radio continued; at the same time, a familiar voice howled with laughter through the transceiver.

"Ha-ha-ha! Vorona, you heard? The woman on the radio just said 'Shut up, Trilobite!' When do we ever call someone a Trilobite? Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"I affirm. But I don't think it's worth releasing such a huge amount of laughter over. Also, Slon's language ability is capable of translating into perfect Japanese, I am mildly shocked."

"That's because your father put me through a hellish amount of training. I can't remember how many Japanese newspapers and novels I was forced to read."

"I fled. Parental ties, already severed. Next meeting, one of us will die. Pity, pity."

Vorona remained deadpan as ever as the topic suddenly ventured from everyday chatter into bloodier territory.

"Bodyguard on Black Motorbike, I murdered him just now."

"That's good."

"The whereabouts of the kid, the client will contact us once he knows. Before that, there's a necessity that we go do the next job."

"Ah...speaking of which, we did take another job. But is it really OK? You're pretty reluctant to do that one as well, I think?"

Vorona picked up a book from the shelf as she heard Slon say. Opening it to find the page where her bookmark was, she answered nonchalantly:

"Not any problem at all. We do it tonight."

And she took out the bookmark which was in fact a photo she had stuck in there between the pages.

This is the target.

It's true that I don't want to do it.

I don't want to hurt this completely ordinary-looking girl who doesn't look like she's been trained in anything.

Even I won't be able help feeling guilty. And more importantly, bored.

The client might have had his reasons, or just did this out of irrational hate.....but it's not like I can do anything about it.

Vorona made herself come to terms with the fact and instead focused on memorizing the face on the photo.

It was the face of a girl in round glasses looking docile and reticent.

Sonohara Anri.

The name on her profile rang no bell for Vorona.

Vorona was fairly new to the city called Ikebukuro.

And not exactly that interested in it.

Of course, even among the residents of Ikebukuro, only a very select few knew what that girl was capable of.

As for what it would mean to step into the circle of these select few, Vorona could never have known.

Speaking of which, I was so very let down by that Black Motorbike.

But still, I don't feel like I was going fast enough to sever his head.

He's already dead, though, so there's no point in ruminating.

Magicians or not, humans are fragile.

Yadogiri had only shown her a very small part of the video clips being circulated on the

Internet.

That was why she had no idea how Celty Sturluson, or the "Black Motorbike", was referred to and hyped in the Japanese media.

The Headless Rider.

Not even the most skillful of fighters could slice off Celty's nonexistent head.

But that kind of knowledge wasn't in any of the books she had read.

That was why she did not notice.

Of course, there was no way that she could have taken supernatural phenomena into consideration and watched out.

It would have been like holding on to a talisman while working to avoid being cursed to death by the opponent's ghost.

Unfortunately, Celty Sturluson simply happened to belong to that supernatural category.

In addition, Vorona failed to notice something unusual about her own motorbike.

A black thread that was thinner than a hair had already been attached to the back of her motorbike.

The black thread extended out of the bed of the truck and far, far into the night.

Of course, she failed to notice too that from the other end of the black thread - the origin of the "abnormality" was about to come for her.



Night of May 3rd, a net cafe in Ikebukuro

"OK..."

It was a very refreshing voice.

To put it in a cliché way, it was a voice that would make people think that the blue sky was talking to them. An extremely clear and invigorating voice.

"I see it's finally getting more interesting."

The owner of the voice muttered to himself as he focused on the words displayed on the screen.

The dainty-looking young man with a refreshing face was half lying and half sitting in a net cafe swivel chair, totally relaxed.

At first sight, he looked like a gentle-natured man of slender build; but his features had a relative sharpness in them, making him the perfect exemplification of the word "handsome". He was smiling as if willing to accept anything in the world as part of him; yet at the same time his eyes shone without mercy as if he held contempt for everything except himself. The way he was dressed was idiosyncratic, but it was hard to point at why. Overall, he gave an elusive and mercurial vibe.

Right in front of him there was a net cafe computer with Internet connection, yet Orihara Izaya, the young man, kept playing with his cell phone.

He silently processed the world of information steadily flowing out of the little outlet in his hand as he muttered in a low voice, "Now that gets me all nostalgic. Reminds me of my high school years."

He seemed to be spilling his heart out, but no one, as only to be expected, was there to respond in this isolated space.

The cubicles around his were all rented by the month by homeless youths as their "living quarters". Those temporary owners were all out at work at this hour.

After some negotiation with the manager of the cafe, Izaya was able to rent this cubicle by the year.

It was unclear what kind of negotiation went on between them, but it seemed that Izaya succeeded in convincing the manager that he was an exception.

He summarized the situation in his head from the information currently available and slowly

got up from the chair.

Really, it's getting me all nostalgic.

Though my high school years were a complete mess, many thanks to Shizu-chan.

If only he hadn't existed, I would have been able to carry out my plans so much better.

Now that I think of it, half of my high school life felt like it was spent on trying to wipe him off the face of the earth.

He waved light-heartedly to the clerk as he passed the counter and left the net cafe.

Rather than taking the elevator, he chose to walk down the stairs in sprightly steps, heading for the street under the curtain of night.

He was almost at the exit when he felt the uniquely warm spring air beginning to surround him, the hubbub from the crowded downtown streets reaching his ears. The young man let himself be submerged; as if no longer able to suppress his heartfelt happiness, his lips curled into a grin.

God, I feel so entertained already just thinking about it.

No matter how the situation develops from this point onwards -

I alone will be "out of the mosquito curtain".



One month ago -

Orihara Izaya had been completely excluded from the commotion following a certain incident in Ikebukuro.

It would have been a lie if one were to say that he did not feel the slightest grudge.

Because he did have the feeling that he was left out by everyone else.

Orihara Izaya loved humans.

But that was not to say that he loved any particular individual.

He was a human himself, yet he loved the beings called "humans".

One could interpret it as a grandiose case of narcissism, but he never included himself in the "humans" he loved.

To put it in more exact words, he was deeply in love with "others".

He had wasted an ideal opportunity to observe the humans he loved. He was trapped in passivity when the reward money was placed on Celty's headless body.

It would have sounded harsh if one were to say that he did it to vent his anger.

Yet, it was harsh but true: a desire to vent his anger was part of what prompted his actions.

It was like kicking bicycles out of his way because he felt like no one wanted to play with him...at least, that was the sort of pettiness in his heart when he start to carry out his plan, but the hardest part to deal with about Orihara Izaya was that he knew himself, his pettiness included, like the back of his hand.

Taking into account with full objectiveness every single detail he knew about the situation and about his own impulses, he would deliberately choose the worst possible route for the "others" he loved.

Orihara Izaya was not an "otherworldly" being like Celty nor an ultra-mighty warrior like Heiwajima Shizuo; he was but an ordinary human.

He was not completely rational and calm like a robot or a cold-blooded creature that didn't feel a thing about killing.

He was a human through and through.

Harboring desires ordinary humans too would harbor, crossing lines ordinary humans too

would cross on sudden impulses...

He just happened to possess these two traits at once.

He had not the charisma to lead an evil force; he was but a creature that couldn't seem to have enough of what intrigued him.

Kishitani Shinra had made the following comment about Izaya when they were both in high school, "I'll tell you what you are. You're kind of on the bad side, but you are not completely evil. Yet, there's not a single ounce of goodness in you, either. Hm, how should I put it...if I were to try to sum you up in one sentence, it would be something like 'You make me want to throw up.' And that was a compliment, you know."

Izaya had merely laughed when his almost-only friend said this. But in fact, he too thought it was right on the spot.

He made his targets throw up last night's dinner, along with their various "real selves", and observed them from where their puke could not reach him.

That was how he kept observing the real nature of humans.

Be their puke high virtues or lowly venom worthy of nothing but contempt, Izaya would cherish them and caress them with the same affection.

And today, just like any other day for him,

He began his "game" in order to make humans throw up their real nature.

The players have all shown up.

The board was set.

All he had to do now was to roll the dice.

"All right. Shall I send a little present to all my lovely, lovely Raira kouhais?"

Namely, a crisis just the right size to be a necessity if they want to grow up."

Orihara Izaya fell into deep thought.

Outside of the mosquito curtain. Isn't that just an ideal place to be?

Mosquitoes outside the curtain cannot sting the humans sleeping inside it.

All I will do is make some annoying sounds when I flutter my wings.

Slowly, but persistently, until I drive the humans inside the curtain crazy.

"After all, what is youth supposed to be about if you don't add a little spice to it?"

Izaya continued to play with his cell phone as he walked on.

Heiwajima Shizuo, Simon, and his twin sisters who were born troublemakers.

For him, there were countless natural enemies in Ikebukuro.

Yet he strolled the streets of this city, completely relaxed.

Blending himself into the city, insidiously, insidiously-

The winged insect outside the mosquito curtain was spreading its toxins on the night street.

And -

As a first flutter of his wings, he dialed a certain boy's cell phone number.

Soon a somewhat sheepish voice sounded from the other end.

"...Yo, long time no see, Ryuugamine-kun. Or should I call you Tanaka Taro-kun?"

Izaya greeted him in a half-joking voice before switching to a more serious tone and bringing up a certain topic.

"I just checked out the chatroom log. I've caught wind of that incident in Saitama, too.

...It looks like Dollars is in a very strange situation right now."



Night of May 3rd, Sonohara Anri's apartment

Sonohara Anri's apartment was plain and undecorated.

Everything was arranged in order unlike what you would expect from a high school girl's home.

Disciplined girls tended to clean their rooms regularly, but her room was overly clean.

There was nothing in her apartment apart from the absolute necessary daily items - not even a leisure book.

There was a TV set and a radio, but they looked like they had hardly been turned on. On the desk there was a pile of textbooks she used at school.

It was obviously that the room was lived in, but there was nothing one could infer about the owner based on the items present in the room.

Such was the living space Sonohara Anri had created for herself.

The girl in pajamas stared at her cell phone in silence in the room without a computer.

Displayed on its screen was the interface of an online chatroom she had been going to quite regularly recently.

It was a chatroom Setton had invited her to join some time ago. It was administered by a female (?) screen-named Kanra.

In fact, she had never been told unequivocally by anyone that Kanra was female. But for Anri, who was clueless when it came to the Internet and its interpersonal roles, it was only natural that the concept of "online genderswapping" had never occurred to her.

Celty-san...is not here today.

So nervous...

Anri exhaled deeply as she thought about the Headless Rider who appeared as Setton in the chatroom.

Did anyone else in the chatroom know that Setton = Celty?

The question kept popping up in her head, yet she couldn't keep pursuing it.

It made her happy to just watch others talk in the chatroom.

But she was more nervous than she usually would be since Celty, the only one she was acquainted with in real life, was absent.

Anri had always logged on to the chatroom from net cafes until Celty taught her recently to access it from her cell phone. Right now, she was typing rather awkwardly on the cell phone.

Since she only had a few friends, this chatroom was one of the few places in which she could socialize with other people.

She had had her doubts about this method of communication since it was drastically different from talking to classmates at school. Regardless of that, though, she kept stepping further and further into this world.

Recognizing yet again the fact that she was an easily wavered human being through and through, Anri closed the display with a small sigh and placed the cell phone on the charger.

It was time to go to bed again.

Just as she thought and prepared to switch off the light-

The doorbell chimed from the doorway and rang throughout the entire room.

A strange chill ran down Anri's spine.

It was 11 o'clock in the evening.

There were probably people who wouldn't feel surprised.

But Anri simply couldn't figure out who among her friends would come to her apartment at such a late hour.

Of course, she couldn't ignore the doorbell either; despite the heavy doubts swirling in her heart, she put her face to the door.

Her eyes sought for a standing figure through the peephole but found none.

And then she did something she shouldn't have done.

Feeling that the door chain would keep her safe, she slowly turned the lock.

Just as she was about to try to see what was going on outside the door-

A huge pair of garden scissors was thrust into the gap and cut the chain in half in a matter of seconds.

It was already too late when she heard the loud "clang".

The door was pushed open, and there, the one who stood outside it, was a woman.

Huh?

For a second Anri was at a loss as to what had happened.

The only clear object in her bespectacled vision was the figure of a woman.

The curves more accentuated than concealed by the thin layer of clothing had immediately convinced Anri that the other person was female.

But it was impossible for Anri to make out her face.

In addition to a mask with eye holes she had worn a pair of snow goggles, which concealed her face completely from view.

"Uh..."

Anri was about to let out a scream, but the garden scissors were already pointing at her throat.

"Quiet. Will not kill you. Rest unperturbed."

The voice sounding through the mask was speaking perfectly unaccented Japanese, yet somehow it still felt weird.

"You, several days, will not be able to move. Possibility of several months, exist."

The woman said in a voice devoid of emotion.

"But, no necessity to die."

"Eh..."

"Will avoid the fatal spot. And call you an ambulance."

"E-Excuse me..."

"You, are lucky."

Upon that word, the woman drew her garden scissors back like a bolt of lightning-
And drove them into the softness of Anri's abdomen.



Several seconds ago, in the truck's driver's seat

Really, why did he have to ask us to hurt such a little girl? He could have just paid any delinquent on the street to do it. Why us?

Slon sat in the driver's seat of the truck and looked at the photo of their target in resignation.

But then again, an average delinquent could easily overdo it and kill her. Or hurt her in certain important parts if it's a male...so it might have been the right choice after all to ask Vorona to do it.

Slon lazily juggled such thoughts on his mind as he tried to kill some time on the truck whose engine he had kept running.

That was when his ears caught a strange sound blending into the sound of the truck's engine.

"I think I heard something..."

At first he didn't pay a lot of attention to that sound, which seemed to be coming from afar.

But it bugged him.

Because the sound was one seldom heard in the city called Tokyo.

That was...

And the same sound reached his ears again.

I was right.

A bigger question mark popped up in Slon's head as he became convinced that his ears were not tricking him.

Why do I hear a horse's neigh in such a big city?

What he had heard was an awe-inspiring yet strange neigh of a horse.

Are there horse racing grounds or stalls nearby?

He attempted to explain it away in his head, but the fact that the sound was heard in the center of a metropolis still bugged him to a certain degree.

If he were in New York or the US in general, it could have been the neigh of a police horse. But such things were unheard of in Ikebukuro, Tokyo.

More importantly, it was the most bizarre, the most "emotionally charged" neigh from a horse Slon had ever heard.

What the...?

Was that really a horse?

He noticed something as his doubts were slowly becoming uneasiness.

The source of that sound seemed to be coming closer.

Cold sweat began to trickle down his spine.

Sirens rang throughout his brain.

Had it been any other day he would probably have told himself, "Whatever, I don't care either way" and given up on thinking.

But his instinct sharpened through his life-and-death experiences under Lingerin the weapon dealer kept warning him.

What is the...? What's coming for me?

Slon couldn't help but gasp; nervously, he looked into the rear mirror.

And then he saw it.

A pitch-black motorbike, too black to be missed even under the curtain of night.

And an otherworldly figure riding astride on the motorbike with a giant black scythe in its hands.



Same time, the doorway to Anri's apartment

The neigh of a horse was heard closer and closer to where they were.

Vorona, too, had found it strange, but she was quickly distracted by another sound.

A metallic one.

She should have been able to drive the garden scissors deep enough into the girl's abdomen to make it necessary for her to be hospitalized. Yet, what Vorona's hands felt via the garden scissors was not the girl's soft flesh-

But something as hard as metal. There was a screeching metallic noise as if what she had just tried to cut had been a steel pipe.

"Что (What)?"

An exclamation in Russian slipped from her tongue as her mouth hung open.

She directed her gaze at the source of the sound, and there she saw that the blades of her scissors were stopped, just as they were about to cut into the girl's abdomen, by the blade of something else.

Японский меч (Katana)?

It was an elongated and streamlined blade.

The slightly bending curve was almost reminiscent of the shape of water drops in nature.

What..is this?

The girl had a katana hidden on her, so she used it to stop her first attack.

It was a conclusion from a bizarre premise, but it was the only one she could arrive at.

Yet, Vorona was about to witness something still more bizarre.

"Um...excuse me, but..."

The girl named Anri, her target, had a katana coming straight out of her arm as she asked, sounding perplexed:

"I don't think I know you...are you sure you're not looking for someone else...?"



Sonohara Anri was an ordinary human.

Or at least had been until five years ago.

She came to host an "otherworldly" being in her after her fate brought her into contact with an "otherworldly" being like Celty Sturluson.

Namely, a demon blade Kishitani Shingen, Shinra's father, had once used to cut the Headless Rider's soul and steal her head.

"Demon blade" was the only way one could describe it.

After he had finished using it, Shingen had sold the demon blade named "Saika" to the antique store Anri's father had run. After a series of events, Anri ended up losing her parents, and the demon blade ended up in her body.

The demon blade had not caused her parents' death.

In fact, she and her mother would probably have already died under her father's violence had it not been for the demon blade.

That her mother would have died either way was indeed a thought that rendered her wordless, but Anri had come to accept the fact that only she was saved just like she accepted the existence of the demon blade in her body.

Anri had had such thoughts before:

Had her consciousness been completely in the demon blade's control like the way things were in the slasher tales set in old times, she would probably been able to feel better about her life.

Or, alternatively, had the blade been one that could talk to her freely like the ones in manga, she would actually have felt fortunate.

But Saika was nothing more than a wicked curse that had found a home deep down in her heart.

Saika had only one wish.

To love humans.

To fall in love with the entire human race.

That was it.

But for Saika, "loving" meant becoming one with the person it loved.

In other words, with the entire human race.

It wanted to infect every human being in the world with its curse and fill their bodies and souls with its loving whisper. In that way, it wanted to swarm the earth with its countless "daughters" born in its union with human consciousness.

That was all to Saika's wish.

But it was suppressed to a certain degree by Anri's consciousness.

Anri, who had always seen things around her through a "picture frame", simply regarded Saika's overwhelming "loving whispers" as yet another picture far, far away from her in the frame.

She was never loved by her father, and, the instant she felt loved by her mother, her mother slit her own belly with Saika.

What she felt for Saika, which loved human beings as if it could never get tired of it, was a strong sense of uneasiness and a smidgen of friendship and overwhelming jealousy.

This child...Saika...she can love anyone in the world as if her life depended on it.

How fortunate.

A powerful sense of guilt seized Anri as she caught herself having such thoughts; yet the sense of guilt was not directed at anyone.

On the other hand, Saika did nothing to save Anri from her hell.

It couldn't hurt Anri, who was its host, so it had to exclude Anri from the humans it "loved".

Anri admired Saika; Saika used her but was at the same time suppressed by her.

It was not a form of symbiosis but more like mutual parasitism.

If Saika had bequeathed anything on Anri-

It would be the overwhelming amount of "experience" etched into Saika's consciousness.



In the split second the other female was about to thrust the garden scissors at her-

Anri's body had at some point gotten itself out of her attack range.

All the fighting experiences that made up Saika's consciousness had begun to take over Anri's body.

Utilizing these experiences without realizing it herself, Anri had moved her own vulnerable body in the most efficient way.

"I don't think I know you...are you sure you're not looking for someone else?"

As she said this, Anri had already put her own situation in a "picture frame" of her mind.

What she saw in front of her eyes was now for her nothing more than a painting of faraway objects.

In fact, even if they weren't Anri, the situation would probably have felt surreal to anyone if they had been attacked by a woman in a mask with a pair of garden scissors in her hands.

Anri prayed that the woman had indeed been looking for someone else as she searched her brain for the most peaceful solution. At the same time, she moved the blade so that instead of straight out of her torn pajamas, it was now coming out of her palm.



Like a shark's fin appearing from under the surface of the sea, the tip of the blade glided its way through the white skin on Anri's arm and revealed its breathtaking shape at the other end of her palm. Saika, now a complete katana, was held firmly in her hand.

"Um...in case you're a burglar...I don't have money at my home...so please go back."

Vorona couldn't help but bit her lips at the sight. She scrutinized the girl's body for an instant.

That was when she noticed that her target's eyes were starting to gleam red.

It was as if her eyeballs themselves were red sources of light.

John Carpenter's remake of "Village of the Damned" was released under the title "Gleaming Eyes" in Japan. She was instantly reminded of this piece of information she had read from a book several days ago. But it did nothing to help her understand what was going on.

What?

Question marks flooded Vorona's brain.

What is this girl in front of my eyes?

Despite that, her body had begun to move on its own.

She pirouetted to get her own body into the katana's attack range and readied her elbow for aiming a knock-out blow at the opponent's chin.

Yet-

Hoosh.

She was ensnared in the chilling air that seemed to emanate from her own body.

Ah, I'm going to die.

That thought crossed her mind for a second.

She gave up trying to attack with her elbow and instead hopped as far backwards as she could.

The white blade flashed dangerously close to the tip of her nose.

Judging from the aim and the speed it was probably not meant to be fatal.

It felt more like an attack meant to hurt her than to kill her.

So what happens if I...get cut?

She had already saw the extraordinary way in which the katana was unsheathed.

Taking into the fact that the blade had some sort of surreal quality to it, it was only logical to presume that being touched by the blade was in itself a danger.

What, is this girl?

A human...?

She was different from everything she had read about and experienced before.

Vorona felt all sorts of emotions wash over her heart as she stared at the girl right in front of her eyes.

...Somehow, I feel warm.

I've had this feeling before.

This is...the same thing I felt when...

It was the same feeling she had when she had first killed a person - in the split second before she was about to take his life. Vorona stepped backwards again as she realized this.

Right now, I'm not calm.

Vorona tried to assess her situation with a cool head and thereby force her heart to cool down as well.

She heard the horns of a truck blaring in the night.

Turning sharply, she saw the trucked parked right next to the apartment building flashing its headlights at her in their agreed code.

Emergency.

Vorona froze her own heart instantly and said to the target in front of her:

"You, incredible. Very fascinating."

"..."

"I will appear again. Looking forward to it."

Vorona ran towards the truck, keeping an eye on the girl in case she would attack from the back.

But it seemed that the girl had no intention of doing so. Before her heart could fall back to its place, however, a new alarming sound reached her ears.

The neigh of a horse.

A totally eerie feeling seized Vorona as she heard the neigh coming from somewhere extremely close to the truck.

She was unmoved, however, as she walked past the driver's seat and signaled to Slon to start the truck.

The sound of tires rubbing madly against the asphalt came as the truck, with a momentum proportional to its weight, charged forward like a bull.

Vorona jumped onto the bed of the truck and turned around to check on the "abnormality" coming for them from behind.

And saw that it was more than "abnormal"; it was "otherworldly".

The pitch-black motorbike without a headlight was slowly coming closer.

It was not coming for them at its greatest speed.

Instead, it approached them as if it wanted to make sure of something before it attacked.

Without doubt, it was the rider whose head Vorona had sliced off not long ago.

That she was able to confirm almost instantly.

Because the rider had an even more conspicuous trait than the Black Motorbike he was riding.

The rider, astride on the motorbike, had nothing above his neck.

Before she could feel fear, the woman felt doubt.

It was the second "otherworldly" phenomenon she had witnessed in a row. She began to suspect that she had swallowed something hallucinogenic without realizing it.

She also considered the possibility that she had been dreaming, but it felt way too real.

Anyhow, the situation's dangerous.

Maybe it was a dream. Maybe there was no need to do anything about it.

But the situation had forbidden her from such comforting thoughts.

Vorona stood in a corner at the back of the truck and opened the door manually with her dexterous hands.

That was when she noticed something weird.

She had failed to notice all along that a thread-like object had extended through the slit in the door into the inside of the truck.

The thread was attached to the back of the motorbike she had been riding.

Just as she saw through the open door the motorbike coming for them-

The horse neighed more fiercely than before and the motorbike accelerated hard.

That neigh, from the motorbike...!

It was after she realized this that Vorona was able to notice what was extraordinary about the Black Motorbike.

What she had failed to notice before because she was distracted by the engine sounds from her own motorbike.

No sounds of an engine came from that motorbike; there was only the horse's neigh.

Danger!

Sonohara Anri's apartment was situated on a road with perhaps the least traffic in all Ikebukuro; they had seldom seen other cars or people on their way.

But that was about to end at the traffic light in front of them.

Beyond that, what they were about to enter was Tokyo's downtown traffic network with zillions of vehicles.

Even if they tried to scare other vehicles into making way for them with the truck's sheer size and momentum, the motorbike would probably be able to catch up with them within 100 meters.

Danger! Danger! Danger! Danger! Danger!

Vorona's judgment was bold, and her action almost immediate.

As she rolled into the back of the truck, she took off the cover on "something" that had been sitting next to the entrance.

The Black Motorbike had accelerated further and shortened its distance from the tail of the truck.

But as soon as it saw what had been revealed under the cover, it decelerated instantly.

What had just been revealed was an aggressively-shaped black object with a metallic shine.

An .50 Russian anti-material sniper rifle.

It was the kind of rifle used against tanks and helicopters. Its range varied with the bullet used, but it was said that rifles of this kind could easily tear open the armor of a tank from 1-2 kilometers away.

It was a last-resort killer weapon she had in case they would be hunted down by patrol cars or helicopters. Vorona had never expected herself to have to use it under such circumstances.

Kneeling down on her right knee, Vorona lifted the rifle and placed its stock on her right shoulder.

The rifle weighed more than 10 kilograms, but Vorona was skilled enough with it to be able to position herself and adjust her aim.

In fact, shooting other combatants with a .50 rifle was explicitly forbidden by international treaties. Vorona had acquired that knowledge in a certain book she had read before. Lingerin had also said to her, "Don't shoot people with this. Otherwise they'll explode like red water balloons and you'll never be able to clean up the mess."

But for Vorona, the rider with nothing above his neck did not fall under the category of humans to begin with.

Despite that, she still decided to avoid aiming at the rider's body. Whether she did that out of hesitation or the fact that it was simply easier to aim at the motorbike, it was impossible to tell.

Anyway, just as she would an armored car, Vorona aimed the shot at the motorbike the Black Rider was on and pulled the trigger without hesitating.

Thunder.

Ikebukuro's streets shook as if a cannonball had just exploded. Pedestrians had to cover their ears at the deafening noise without the slightest idea where it was coming from.

Several seconds later, the apartments nearby began to light up as the residents opened their windows to try and see what was going on.

Vorona, on the other hand, couldn't see what was going on behind the truck from inside it.

The dense smoke from the anti-material rifle had completely clouded her sight

It took a few seconds for the forward movement of the truck and the dispersing effect of the wind to enable her to see again.

By then, the Black Motorbike was nowhere to be seen.

Not even its remains.

The rifle was specially constructed so that its recoil was not as powerful as one would expect from a rifle of its size and capacity, but, even with all things taken into consideration, there was no reason for her to fire a second shot. She lowered the rifle and looked around with alarmed eyes.

As soon as she did so, she noticed that the black thread was still attached to the back of the motorbike she had parked at the back of the truck. Without hesitation, she picked up her garden scissors and tried to cut it.

But the black thread was far more resilient than she had expected. She tried and tried, but was unable to cut it.

"Slon. What happened the Black Motorbike?"

"No idea. He kind of disappeared, is all I can say. At least no longer showing up in the rear mirror. Speaking of which, did you use that thing, Vorona?"

"I affirm. It was an emergency."

The truck came to a stop soon enough.

It seemed that they had arrived at the crossing leading straight to a main street.

Vorona closed the back door immediately. The truck turned into a main street as the traffic light turned green.

She fell into deep thought for a couple of seconds and pulled the black thread with no expression on her face. After it became obvious that the entire rear part of the motorbike was entangled in the web woven by the single black thread, she spoke to Slon via the transceiver.

"There should be an abandoned factory close by. Drive us there please."

"What do you wanna do?"

"The motorbike is tailed. I am going to throw it away."

She considered this for another couple of seconds and muttered with a face devoid of expression just like her father's, "Or use it as a trap for our ambush."



In front of Anri's apartment

"Celty-san...!"

Before she knew it, Anri had run out of the apartment as she heard the sudden explosion.

The assault had left her in confusion, but what surprised her even more was the sight of the "otherworldly" creature she knew going straight after the truck the assailant had jumped onto.

Not to mention that the explosive sound reminiscent of a cannonball came only several seconds after.

If anything happened to Celty...the thought alone was enough to make Anri forget about her own situation and rush onto the road

[It's dangerous.]

A PDA screen appeared in front of her with these words displayed on it.

Right after, she was dragged back to her own apartment by a hand that came for her from the side.

Anri turned sharply to find the rider with nothing above her neck standing there.

"Celty-san! ...Eh?"

Celty should have been after the truck. So why was she here?

Celty shrugged to a confused Anri and began to type.

[Well...I don't know either...she made a move to shoot me...so I made this super thick wall with my shadow, but ended up being blasted all the way back here anyway...um...I don't know if 'blasted' is the right way to put it...hm...it was still dangerous...probably. Shooter...could have been blown to pieces.]

Celty used a lot of "... " in her typing. Perhaps, she had not figured out what she wanted to say herself either.

As she focused on her surroundings, Anri saw that the Black Motorbike was parked right behind Celty's back. There was also a misshapen chunk of metal in Celty's hand. It was probably what remained of the bullet that was fired at her.

[I wanted to keep tailing them, but since they weren't afraid to fire their rifle even in the downtown area, I felt like I would get the residents on the street into unnecessary trouble if I upset them further...]

"Rifle...how..."

[Why did they attack you, Anri-chan?]

"Um...I have no idea....."

Anri's expression turned into one filled with uneasiness.

"I don't know if they're going to come back or not."

Celty banged her chest with a "thud" to ensure Anri that she would be safe.

[No problem, just stay with us for the night. Our apartment is pretty secure.]

"B-But..."

Seeing that Anri was still hesitating, Celty waved her hand in front of her face or where it should have been.

Her headlessness made the gesture meant to soothe look extremely weird instead.

[It's alright! You've stayed at ours before, haven't you? We have too big an apartment anyway! And it would be a good idea to think about what to do with those people when we're together!]

Since Celty had said this, Anri saw no reason to refuse. With a hardly audible "Thank...you...", she accepted the headless woman's offer.

Celty, on the other hand, slapped her own shoulder as if she had just remembered something and asked:

[Speaking of which, do you have a mask or a helmet at home?]

"Eh?"

[My helmet was thrown onto the street...I was going to pick it up, but it was already run over by a dump truck...and my spare helmet's at home.]

Celty looked seriously bothered. Anri considered this for a moment.

"Um...why not make yourself a black helmet with your shadow like the one you made for me before...?"

A brief silence fell between the two of them.

It lasted for about 10 seconds until Celty turned around somewhat embarrassedly, made herself a round helmet with her shadow and showed Anri her PDA.

[Didn't think of that...]



With that, the first day of the Golden Week came to an end.

Different creatures were experiencing their respective non-daily lives without realizing that the same thing was happening to others as well.

The night was slowly being replaced by a new morning.

The sun shone down on the earth as it would when the people were leading everyday lives.

And simply watched from afar the weird changes taking place in Ikebukuro.



Morning of May 4th, Mikado's apartment

Turned out I did not get that much sleep after all...

Mikado leaned back into the chair in front of the computer and covered his exhausted face with his hands.

He had been collecting every bit of information he could find right after hearing about the "Dollars Saitama Incident" in the chatroom.

He hadn't been forced to. Neither was it his responsibility to begin with, yet Mikado somehow felt like he "had to."

For Mikado, one of the founders of Dollars, Dollars was already part of himself.

Not that it was necessary for living or anything.

But just like cell phones or the Internet, it was something hard to take out of his life once it had an established existence in it. That was what Dollars was for Mikado.

Although new members were no longer pouring in at the previous rate, the number was still growing. In fact, even Mikado himself had lost count of how many exactly there were.

That was why he had always feared that the members would go wild on their own.

He had once closed down the Dollars website.

When they had first made the website, they had a half-joking rule that said, "All new members of Dollars must confess the worst thing they've done." and made a new member registration page for that purpose.

That page no longer existed. They had deleted it for two reasons.

Firstly, certain members turned the comment function on the "confession" board into a sort of

chatroom; some even began to spam it with download links of prohibited content or game modification codes. The board had lost its original purpose.

Secondly, the "confession", which had started out as a pastime for fun, was turning into a dangerous sport itself.

The first confessions were the likes of "I've grabbed food with my hand" or "I've drawn eyebrows on my dog's face", but soon after they began to warrant more attention as confessions of theft and violence became more frequent.

Some even scoffed at others for not having the guts to do something "more mature" and bragged about the worse things they had done. After seeing a certain post that said, "I stole for the first time in my life so that I can join Dollars", Mikado decided to delete this page altogether.

Dollars was an organization founded for fun.

Not for destroying the social order, lowering the morals or bragging about violations of the law in real life.

That was why he just had to do something to stop Dollars from going rampant if he could.

He had no idea if he would succeed or not, but he would be shifting a founder's responsibility to others if he didn't even try to investigate.

Or at least that was what he had thought.

Until, several hours ago, he got a call from Orihara Izaya.



"Hello, this is Ryuugamine."

"...Yah, long time no see, Ryuugamine-kun. Or should I call you Tanaka Taro-kun?"

"Kanra-san. It's been long since I got a call from you."

"I just checked out the chatroom log. I've caught wind of that incident in Saitama, too...it looks like Dollars is in a very strange situation right now."

"...Yes. I'm looking into that incident myself."

"Good. So what have you found?"

"I think..it was probably done by some new Dollars members."

"Yeah, that's what I figured. What are you gonna do about it?"

"I want to try to stop them, but..."

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"There's no rule in Dollars's book that say, 'Thou shall not pick fights outside of Tokyo', is there? There's no need for you to interfere at this point."

"But..."

"Or have you gotten afraid of those Color Gang games after you saw what happened to the Yellow Turbans? I heard that was what separated you and your best friend?"

"It's not like that. Masaomi's still my friend."

"Let's hope he feels the same way about you."

"...Why do I sense a little sarcasm here?"

"Nah, you bet there's none. I'm just being a little jealous of my young kouhais enjoying the best times of their youth. There were no such friends for me, you see. All I had was this freak of an old acquaintance and that irritating violent thickhead."

"..."

"Anyway. Back to the topic."

"Yes."

"Whether you had wished for it or not as a founder, Dollars is now not only a concrete existence but also more or less a force to be reckoned with. It's only natural that you'll see people toying with the idea of making Dollars an even better-known organization by marking more territory and thereby promoting their own names as well, isn't it?"

"...That I realize."

"It's going to be OK. There's virtually no horizontal structure in Dollars. Even if those who picked on the Saitama folks will have to face retaliation, you'll be fine as long as you don't say

anything. That's just how Dollars is, isn't it? If you want to help, you go ahead and do it, but if you don't, it's OK to just stay lazy*. Freedom. Yeah, that's what you call freedom."

** Here Izaya uses the "dara-dara" (being lazy) expression, which was the origin of the name "Dollars".*

"...Are you calling me just to say this?"

"Ah, nah nah. It's not like that. Speaking of Saitama, that reminds me. I heard several bousouzoku gangs have been after you last month? Quite scary, wasn't it?"

"Ah, yeah. We got out of it safely, though, thanks to Celty-san, Kadota-san and others..."

"I heard that one of those gangs were the same gang that was attacked by Dollars members in Saitama."

"Eh...?"

"The Captain of that gang, I guess it suffices to say that he's after every woman in the world...but he's also a guy who would resort to violence to solve anything. He'd stomp on people's face even after he had kicked them to the ground."

"Is he that dangerous...?"

"Yes. That's why it's a better idea to not take girls with you when you go out in the evenings, you know what I'm talking about? Like that friend of yours, Anri-chan. Try your best to watch out for her safety."

"...I don't think Sonohara-san has anything to do with this."

"I wouldn't be so sure. If they knew that you're a Dollars member and that there's this girl you really like, what do you figure they'd do? There's no guarantee that your opponent will not touch ordinary people who are not 'part of this'. They're here to revenge, you know."

"..."

"You've used Dollars on many occasions yourself, haven't you? Like when you got into trouble with Yagiri Pharmaceuticals. It's not going to make sense to them now even if you tell them to 'Stop doing bad things.'"

"...So what do you want me to do?"

"Shouldn't you ask yourself before you ask me?"

"I only want to 'do something about it'. I've said that already."

"Ha-ha. Looks like I'm not convincing you. In short, if you don't want to involve Anri-chan or yourself in this, just forget about Dollars. Forget everything about it if you can. Or at least forget about it until things have calmed down."

"But..."

"I'll try to explain. Let us assume that you really want to keep Dollars out of any kind of conflict with your own hands...or stop Dollars from going rampant and attacking others...and let us also assume that you've succeeded. If so, this organization will no longer be 'Dollars'. If you're able to control how everyone within the organization moves, it will have become something else...I think that should be pretty self-explanatory."

"That I do understand."

"Dollars, I think, is something 'beyond' Color Gangs. It'll probably sound like an exaggeration if I say it's like a country or nation...but it's made up of people with different goals and intentions. Some of them are good, and some are bad. There's no way you can know how outsiders view this group. You won't know whether they'll see the good Dollars or the bad Dollars...Because that you don't get to choose."

"..."

"Sorry, I've been talking too much. I was annoying, wasn't I?"

"Ah, no. Um...thank you, for telling me all these things."

"..."

"...What is it?"

"Mikado-kun."

"Yes?"

"Aren't you feeling a little excited?"

"...Sorry?"

"Nothing, I was just trying to picture your face on the other end of the phone."

"What nonsense are you talking about...?"

"But isn't this your favorite non-daily life?"

"I never said I liked anything that's not 'daily'."

"Really?"

"Of course..."

"When you closed down the Dollars website you wrote in the explanation that it was because people were spamming with the registration page, and that the 'bad things' they confessed were getting more serious in nature...I won't say anything about the former part, but the latter kind of concerns me. Did you not like it because you thought they were too thoughtless?"

"That should go without saying."

"If that was really what you're thinking, you'd have already given up on Dollars, disbanded it and erased all traces of its existence. That, or leave the organization and go back to living like an ordinary person. All you'd have to do is ignore the text messages. It's not like you'd be punished."

"I'm one of the founders...how can I do something that irresponsible?"

"It's alright. No one in Dollars expects you to take on any responsibility. If you still insist on taking on some responsibility, you're one mature kid...that's what I was going to say, but I don't think you're that type."

"Why are you saying this all of a sudden?"

"Whatever, I guess it's better not to say it. It's always better to not know what others think of you, isn't it?"

"Isn't it too heartless to stop here when you've already said this much? ...Please go ahead and say it, I promise I won't mind."

"Really? Alright. This is nothing more than my own guess, so if it's wrong, you're free to just disregard it. Information brokers enjoy talking nonsense, you see."

"OK."

"...You're not fearing that Dollars will go rampant. Am I right?"

"Eh..."

"You're fearing that you will fall into the position of a mere bystander while Dollars keeps

changing, aren't you?"

"It's not like that!"

"..."

"Ah..."

"That was a fast denial. You know that only makes it sound more suspicious, right? You'll want to be more careful about that next time. That would only mean that you're already having the same thought."

"..."

"You're not good at fighting. You're not even a delinquent to begin with. You've probably never touched cigarettes or alcohol. You don't like people who brag about stealing things, you're just an ordinary good human being. Not that I don't consider it a virtue but you founded Dollars and kept it running till this day exactly because you were tired of it, didn't you? Isn't it your dream to get away from your daily life?"

"..."

"That's why I'm worried about you."

"Eh.....?"

"Haven't I told you before? If you really want to get away from your daily life, you'll have to keep evolving. But you don't necessarily have to do it alone."

"Kanra-sa...Orihara-san..."

"Izaya is fine. Kida-kun calls me Izaya-san, too. That's right, you have many companions even if you don't count the Dollars members. Don't you ever forget that. There's Anri-chan and Kida-kun...well, if there's anything I can do, I'll be glad to help you out, too. That's why I'm saying there's no need for you to try to keep everything to yourself and do everything on your own this time. I just wanted to tell you that."

"...Um, Izaya-san."

"Yes?"

"Thank you...very much."

"I didn't do anything you should be grateful to me for."

Maybe I was just trying to talk you into something. Maybe I had ulterior motives...Just maybe."



Mikado couldn't help but smile in a self-ironic way as these dialogues came back to his mind.

Izaya-san. At first I thought he was just a weird person who did all sorts of things I didn't know-

But he's a nice person after all.

Mikado simply felt encouraged by Izaya's words.

Had his brain not been so overloaded with thoughts on Dollars, he would perhaps have remembered what his best friend had said to him the first day he came to Ikebukuro.

"Never have anything to do with Orihara Izaya."

It was probably the most important piece of advice his friend had to offer.

But right now it simply failed to reach Mikado's ears.

Because Mikado still didn't know exactly what Izaya had done to Masaomi in the entire Yellow Turbans incident.

After that, the boy gathered his spirits and tried to think of a plan.

"...I can't think of anything..."

He did feel grateful to Izaya for what he had said towards the end of the call, but it was also true that he had felt shocked when he heard what Izaya had said before that.

He could no longer understand himself.

Do I...really.....want to keep Dollars from going rampant?

He still didn't know the details about the Saitama incident, such as who did it and what exactly they had done.

But it was certain that some people had committed a violent crime in the name of Dollars.

But how would I be excited about anything like that?

He tried hard to convince himself, but he was not sure he succeeded.

He wanted more than anyone else to get away from his daily life. It was a fact. He had that wish even now.

Even after he had met being furthest from "daily" like Celty Sturluson, the smokeless flame in Mikado's heart still didn't feel completely satisfied.

...I'm a coward.

Just like Izaya-san said, I...never tried to put up a fight with anyone. Neither have I ever been beaten up by a large group of people.

Wasn't that just shameless of me to say that I wanted to keep Dollars from going rampant when I'm like that?

With that question lingering on his mind, Mikado ended up wasting his time and not coming up with anything at all.

Before he realized it, sunlight was pouring in from the window and the short arm of the clock was almost pointing at 9.

"...No time for sleep."

The time he had fixed with Anri and Aoba was 11 a.m..

There was no preparation to be done, but he would without doubt be late if he fell asleep now.

Luckily for him, he got some sleep after school and before the night.

"So there shouldn't be any problem," he thought as he opened the fridge to reach for the nutrition drinks.

The doorbell rang from the doorway.

Who could it be?

Newspaper salesmen?

They had come a few times before, but Mikado had only talked briefly and then basically told them to leave without opening the door. They had left right away without complaint, probably because they weren't expecting to get lucky in the first place when they saw the old, creaky apartment building.

But he was not poor.

In fact, Mikado paid for his own living expenses apart from his tuition.

His parents hadn't wanted him to come to Tokyo, but he had insisted saying that he would find part-time jobs and pay for everything apart from the tuition. His parents would send him some money now and then but that all went into his savings.

He had told them that he was working part-time, but in fact, his income was from conducting all sorts of online business, which took a large slice of Mikado's spare time to manage.

But he was still something for being able to earn his own living in this way when he still had schoolwork. Mikado, however, did not consider it in any way remarkable; he simply saw it as part of his everyday life.

Just like he did the doorbell. Without much thinking, he opened the door.

An entire world of brightness shone in front of his sleepless eyes. Mikado felt his eyeballs twitch.

He couldn't help but raise his palm to shield his forehead from the sunlight as he looked out of the door.

The one he saw standing right there was no other than the boy he had just seen yesterday and was supposed to meet up with in a couple of hours.

"Good morning to you, sempai!"

"A...Aoba-kun?"

It was Kuronuma Aoba, his kouhai who was supposed to tour the Ikebukuro streets with him today.

"Is something up? I thought we were meeting 2 hours from now."

Huh?

Mikado had sensed vaguely that something was not right.

When did I tell Aoba-kun where my apartment was?

"Yeah, it's just that I have something I really need to talk to sempai about before we meet up with Anri-san..."

"You could have just called. Also, how did you know that I live in this apartment...?"

"It's about Dollars."

Aoba cut in as Mikado tried to ask in a diplomatic tone. He kept the refreshing smile plastered on his face as he spoke.

An eerie chill ran down Mikado's spine.

Aoba, seeing that Mikado's expression had stiffened, put his face close to Mikado's and flashed the smile of an angel at him.

"This is not a good place to talk. Shall we move to somewhere better?"

Mikado noticed something else that was weird as he heard this.

A hand had been pressed firmly against the open door.

It was not Aoba's since he had already walked into the apartment. Of course, it was not his own either.

The mysterious fingertips he saw from inside the aged door were forcing the door open as if its life depended on it.

Looking at Mikado's wordless face, Aoba kept smiling as he proceeded to say something still eerier.

"If it's just several minutes for changing your clothes, 'we' won't mind waiting."



20 minutes later, an abandoned factory in Ikebukuro

It was a seldom-visited area, dramatically different from downtown Ikebukuro from which it was somewhat removed.

Several factories stood in a row on the side of the road, among which one looked especially desolate.

It had probably been the shell of a steel factory or something like it.

Rust had crept all over the building's gray walls, giving the impression that it had been abandoned for years. Recycled material were scattered on the factory floor gathering tea-brown rust, but the machines that were supposed to process them had been moved away.

For some elusive reason, an almost brand-new motorbike was parked in the factory as well. Rather than standing out on the background, it seem to bring out the eye-catching color of its rusty surroundings.

Chaotic and empty, it wasn't a pleasing building to behold.

Young, vivacious voices rang throughout the rotten old factory.

"Hmm, what's with that motorbike? There was nothing like that parked here yesterday."

Aoba tilted his head looking perplexed. A tall boy next to him replied, "Someone trying to hide stolen motorbikes here, I figure?"

He was about as tall as Shizuo was.

Tanned skin, protruding muscles, and a tank top revealing the assorted tribal tattoos all over the arms and the neck.

His features were fierce. His mustache made it hard for Mikado to believe that he was still in high school, although Aoba had introduced him to Mikado as his "middle school classmate."

Led by the tall boy, people gathered around Mikado and one by one began to talk to Aoba.

"Speaking of which, I feel like this place's full of cockroaches and centipedes. It's really annoying. If we have to meet somewhere anyway why can't it be a five-star hotel?"

"Are you gonna pay for that, bastard?"

"They're just cockroaches. You eat them and everything's fine."

"Are you gonna eat them, bastard?"

"Heh-heh."

"How much would you pay me if I ate them?"

"300 yen."

"That's cheap."

"I'll do it!"

"No kidding?"

"OK, that's the deal, now get him some cockroaches and fry them!"

"Isn't he gonna eat them raw?"

"Uwohh!"

"Don't throw up!"

"But...I pictured him eating the cockroach and I..."

"Oi, Aoba. These guys are annoying. Can I beat them up?"

"No."

"Heh-heh!"

They were all about the same age as Mikado. These boys of different types surrounded them, making Mikado follow them further into the abandoned factory.

He was also sure that he saw several men looking well over twenty. They were no longer here, but they had driven Mikado and the other boys here in their cars.

Why did I follow them?

It was way obvious by now that the atmosphere in this place is abnormal.

He knew very well that he shouldn't have agreed to come with them. But the atmosphere had left him with no room for refusal or escape.

In the meantime, the abandoned factory began to feel strangely familiar to Mikado.

This abandoned factory...I've seen it at some point before...

Realization hit Mikado only after he had searched his brain for a while.

That's right, this is the same place...that several months ago...

But before the boy could think any deeper on that matter, Aoba had sat down on a nearby pile of steel skeletons and raised his eyes to meet Mikado's:

"You were asking the people last night on the Dollars message board if they knew anything about the Saitama thing, weren't you sempai?"

Aoba alone was wearing the same refreshing smile as he always had. But that creeped Mikado out more than anything else.

He was probably the one person who shouldn't be saying it, but Aoba, too, had a very childlike face.

The boy looked like a middle school student surrounded by a gang of fierce-looking delinquents, yet he smiled as if it was but everyday life for him. That was what creeped Mikado out the most.

"Ah, yeah...I did. I was kind of curious..."

"I happen to know the details, so I was planning to talk to you about it."

"Really?"

Mikado immediately forgot all about this eerie situation he was in; some color even came back to his face.

Usually, when the other person says, "I happen to know the details" under such circumstances, one would at least sense vaguely the other possibility.

But Mikado didn't even for a split second.

For Mikado, it was close to impossible to associate the appearance and aura of Kuronuma Aoba with the other "possibility".

Which was why when Aoba himself declared it a fact the very next instant-

Mikado simply couldn't seem to understand what he was saying.

"It was us."

"...Eh?"

"We did it."

Aoba confessed it with his usual smile on his face.

"I, and all of the gentlemen here...we attacked those people in Saitama in the name of Dollars."

"...I'm sorry?"

Mikado asked with a stiffened smile threatening to peel off his face.

He was hoping that Aoba had been joking.

But Aoba kept stating the facts with an innocent, childlike expression.

"You know this gang called Toramaru? They were among the guys who were after Kadota-san's van and the Black Motorbike last month."

"Ah, eh? Ah, ah, yeah."

"We burned several of their motorbikes and sent around twenty of their men into hospital."

The fierce-looking boy with tattoos added, "You mean you threw Molotov cocktails into the parking lot they used for gatherings, Aoba."

Mikado finally began to take everything in after he had heard them uttered from a "he-looks-like-that-type" boy's lips.

"...Eh...ah..."

But perhaps his brain was still in denial. Mikado simply stared at Aoba, trying to move his lips but failing to issue a single sound.

Aoba, on the other hand, continued to voice even more facts in front of Mikado.

While slowly looking up at Mikado's eyes as if waiting to savor his reaction, he said, "We're Dollars.....but we have another name as well."

"...Another...name?"

"Blue Square. Ever heard of it before?"

Morning of May 4th, CHATROOM

Bakyura-san has joined the chat.

Bakyura
Good morning

Bakyura
YEAH!

Bakyura
Hmm,

Bakyura
I see. Just like I thought, no one's online

Bakyura
But it's the morning, I guess it can't be helped.

Bakyura
Alas~

Bakyura
The last time I came here,

Bakyura
was like already a week ago.

Bakyura
Sorry I've been missing out on our chats lately.

Bakyura
I had some work to do,

Bakyura
Namely, I had to go on a lovey-dovey rendezvous trip to the Northeast with my girlfriend.

Bakyura
How's everyone~

Bakyura
All right, I'm going to sample everyone's Golden Week plans from the chatroom log YEAH~

Bakyura
Eh,

Bakyura
Yesterday's log and everything before it were erased.

Bakyura
Wonder if something went wrong

Bakyura
Whatever,

Bakyura
I'll see you guys later~

Bakyura-san has left the chat.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

INTERLUDE, OR PROLOGUE C

KURONUMA AOBA

3 years ago, a suburb of Ikebukuro, rooftop of a certain apartment building

"...The hell you were gonna talk to me about? I don't have that much time to waste either, if that's what you're thinking."

The young man did not bother to conceal his irritation as he spoke to boy in front of him.

From the rooftop the view in every direction was already drenched in the red glow of the sunset. The young man narrowed his eyes since the boy he was facing had his back turned to the sun.

It was difficult to make out the exact expression on the boy's backlit face, but the corner of his mouth was curled into an unambiguous smile.

The young man, Izumii Ran, did not like his younger brother Izumii Aoba at all.

Aoba had always acted all smart and appeared highly aware of other people's needs, which somehow never failed to stir a weird kind of annoyance in him.

Not that his younger brother had ever actually done anything to him. But although he never felt inferior to Aoba in any way, he had this feeling that Aoba was always the one getting all the affection.

Love from their parents, praise from their teachers, friendship from their peers...he felt like Aoba was raised with more of all these forms of love than he was.

Not that he actually wanted more of those than what he had gotten. But his impression had since been that Aoba was the one who was getting everything, and that annoyed him to no end.

As a sort of revenge he had beaten Aoba up on several occasions and encountered little resistance on Aoba's part.

Until this one day, after he had overdone it just a little bit, a small fire broke out in Ran's room. Apparently, it started while he was out having fun for the night. The moment he got back home, his father broke his nose.

They said it was because he didn't put out his cigarette.

Fortunately, the fire didn't evolve into anything more serious. The problem was, however, that he did not recall smoking at all before he left home that night.

"I'm just so glad big brother is not injured."

His younger brother, then still in elementary school, had smiled the most refreshing smile at him.

The sheer pressure from that smile had kept him from voicing in front of his brother any doubt he might have had.

Instead, he simply distanced himself from his brother, which became easier to do when they began to live physically apart after their parents' divorce.

His younger brother seemed to have changed his surname to their mother's maiden name. Not that Ran cared.

Everything was good as long as he didn't have to see his irritating little brother again.

By now Ran had already earned a reputation as a famous delinquent in the neighborhood. It was best to stay away from the one that was capable of unsettling him.

However, this very younger brother had said, "I need to talk to you" in a serious tone.

Izumii, who came to the rooftop as his brother had asked, did not let his guard down as he hurled insults at his brother.

He was used to fights, after all.

He had no immediate plan to attack. But if his featherweight little brother were to try to pick a fight, Ran should be able to knock him down in no time.

The corners of his mouth relaxed as soon as he double-checked that fact in his mind.

Aoba, meanwhile, moved his smiling lips just as his older brother took on a more laid-back stance.

"Actually, I have a favor to ask of you, big brother."

"What? I got no money to lend to my little brother."

"It's not that kind of favor...look, big brother, you're sort of famous among high school students in this area, right?"

"Ah? The hell you're tryin' to say?"

Aoba slowly began to explain as his brother frowned.

"I, um, gathered some friends and um, sort of made this gang-like thing. It was really a joke when it started out..."

"Gang? What gang? Study group kinda thing?"

"Well, at first that was what it was...but then we had all these weird people joining in.....some are much older than we are, even adults are starting to have stuff to do with us recently."

Ran was getting more irritated by the minute as he listened to his brother's pointless rambling.

But the look in Ran's eyes couldn't help but change at Aoba's next words.

"You know Horada-san and Higa-san from No. 3 Middle School?"

"Ah...?"

He had heard of those names.

Those were pretty famous veteran evildoers who had a reputation among Ran's peers.

He had heard that Horada dropped out of high school. The last thing he expected, however, was to hear Horada's name spoken by his perfect student of a younger brother.

"I haven't really met them in person...but they are in my gang too."

"...Huh?"

Perhaps he should just dismiss that as a joke.

But he couldn't.

Even if it really were nothing more than a joke, it was odd enough that his brother had mentioned Horada and Higa in the first place.

"It's starting to get out of my control...I have no idea what Horada and the other adults will do if they ever get to know that the leader of the gang is someone like me...I'm so scared."

Liar.

Ran decided right away as he heard Aoba say these words.

Aoba was obviously lying.

As distant as they were, they were brothers for a reason. He was at least aware of certain sides of Aoba.

But he couldn't really say anything.

Apparently Aoba wasn't lying about the gang.

Or about Horada and the other adults.

The one thing Aoba lied about was that the gang had begun to "get out of his control".

And what Ran did was to lie as well.

Put on a false show in front of his little brother.

Somewhat longingly, he took a deep breath and voiced the deceptively steady words intended to fool Aoba and himself.

"You pitiful little bastard. So...what is it you want me to do? Hm?"

"I'm so scared right now. I really don't want anything to do with this gang anymore....so I want big brother to become the new leader of this gang."

"..."

He was probably just trying to use him.

Ran was aware of this. But he didn't back out.

If he backed out right now, he would lose the one and only chance to stand above his brother.

This thought preoccupied Ran's brain. He went so far as to decide to let his little brother try to use him if he dared.

"...So this gang of yours, does it have a name?"

Aoba maintained his innocent smile as he answered this question somewhat too cheerfully.

"Yeah, a friend of mine thought it up..."

"It's called Blue Square."



One year later –

When Blue Square got into trouble with the gang named Yellow Turbans, Aoba simply looked on.

He didn't put his most trusted fellow members to the rescue. His brother, out of sheer pride on the older sibling's part, didn't ask for his help either.

Aoba did not say anything when the news of his brother's arrest reached him.

However, when he heard that Blue Square got into further trouble with Awakusu-kai and Heiwajima Shizuo to the point where the gang's very existence hung on the line.

The boy still in middle school muttered only two icy words.

".....How useless."



Several years later, late April, somewhere in Saitama

"Still...is it really OK to write 'DOLLARS', Aoba?"

In front of burning motorbikes stood some boys holding spray cans.

"Of course. Just do it before anyone comes and sees us."

Said Aoba with a ruthless expression he never showed in front of Mikado or others.

It was a quiet parking lot somewhere in the dead of the night.

There weren't any stores still open around the area or pedestrians passing by.

Aoba did not look like he belonged in such a place. Around him several motorbikes were on fire, and their owners lying flat on the asphalt ground.

On the walls, illuminated by the flame, there was a painted logo with a gorgeous woman riding on the back of a tiger and the word "TORAMARU".

Had it been painted in the right place it would have qualified as a work of art with its astounding execution. This did not, however, stop the boys from spraying large expanses of black paint over its perfection.

Aoba squinted at the boys as they went about doing their job and turned to the numerous other boys standing around him.

"The name 'Blue Square' just doesn't sound like it would sell."

"Was that why you just let your big brother take over and land us in this phenomenally pathetic state?"

Aoba laughed in self-irony and continued to speak despite his friends' jabs.

"The one who came up with the name Blue Square was actually Yatsufusa."

"Hm, what's the story behind that name?"

"Heh-heh."

"Yatsufusa said that we were almost like 'sharks stranded in shallow shoals.' Each one of us had a small blue rectangular piece of territory. 'You guys are like sharks fighting desperately just to protect that little slice of territory you have', that's how he said he came up with that name."

Some of the boys around Aoba nodded as if satisfied with the story, some twisted their heads looking nonplussed, and some simply laughed.

"What does that mean...?"

"Go study."

"Aoba...does that mean the guy was making fun of us?"

"Heh-heh."

"That bastard Yacchii."

"He was making fun of us all right."

"Maybe. But I really liked that name."

For a moment, some actual warmth slipped its way into Aoba's ruthless smile; but illuminated by the flame consuming the remains of the motorbikes around him all it did was send shudders

down the spectator's spine.

Not taking notice of the vaguely intimidating smile on Aoba's face, one of the boys looked around and popped up a question.

"Where's the VIP who gave us our name?"

"Yatsufusa? He's home sick. Isn't he always?"

"Yep, that one's pretty frail."

"Hang on, that Mitsukuri just sprayed 'DARAASU' in hiragana!"

"Somebody stop him!"

"Whatever, that works too."

"Hee-hee."

"So Aoba, what exactly is to be done with this Dollars?"

Aoba spoke nonchalantly as the boys around him clamored.

"Big sharks can't swim in shallow shoals. They'll drown."

His figure was in silhouette now, backlit by the raging flame.

But his friends knew it.

Aoba was smiling from the bottom of his heart.

"To make the most of the high time of our lives...we'll need to swim in an ocean like Dollars."

"And? Is that why we're picking on these Saitama folks?"

"...Dollars...is vast enough, but quite shallow. Its vastness does surprise even me at times..."

But for sharks it's just that much easier to swim where the water is *deeper*. That's really all I'm trying to do here."



CONNECTING CHAPTER

Morning of May 4th, an apartment building in Shinjuku

Heiwajima Shizuo stood before one certain door, clenching his fists in fury.

Blood was dripping from his tight fists. One could only guess the magnitude of the force with which he clenched them.

"...Stupid flea...! Going around wasting my time...!"

Veins protruded from his face as the muttering came from the depths of his lungs.

If anyone happened to have been next to him and heard him say it, they'd probably think his lungs were directly fueled by the fires of Hell.

What aggravated him was a sheet of paper pasted to the door.

[WE'VE MOVED! FIND US AT -----]

No human presence could be felt at the place where Izaya had both worked and dwelled.

Seeing as how the notice was still on the door, this place probably had yet to attract new tenants. While Shizuo had every impulse to just kick down the door and destroy everything he could find inside, he fought desperately to swallow the thought since that would only hurt the actual owner of this apartment.

"...He wasted my time twice...I'm gonna kill him over and over...!"

As Shizuo, whose veins were still visible on his face, thought of the face of his mortal enemy, he turned his back to the apartment door and began to walk back.

Less than a minute later –

A woman tore off the sheet of paper at the same time Shizuo stormed out of the apartment

building.

"...How protozoic does that Shizuo's brain have to be for such a crude trick to work so well on him?"

The woman, Yagiri Namie, was looking down from the open corridor.

Her gaze fell on the figure of the man in the bartender suit who was walking in huge strides away from the scene.

"Why does he have to use such roundabout means when he can easily get to that guy?"

Namie watched Shizuo leave without much concern and muttered coldly.

"If knives don't do the trick, he could have just poisoned him."





Why did Heiwajima Shizuo come to Izaya's apartment looking for him?

It all went back to the morning of May 4th.

"Ah, she's awake!"

It was about 6 a.m. in Shinra's apartment.

The one who made that sound wasn't Shinra, Tom or Shizuo but a high school girl wearing glasses.

Shizuo and Tom were there when Celty had brought her in and said, "She's been attacked by some violent guys, let her stay for the night."

Though Shinra had told her she didn't have to do anything, Anri had replied that she couldn't stand doing nothing and took it upon herself to take care of the little girl anyway.

Shinra rose from his computer desk upon hearing Anri's call.

"I'll be there right away."

He washed his hands under running water and made for the bedroom with a sterile medical scope and other equipment in his hands.

"Speaking of which...I forgot to tell Celty about this kid."

Whatever. She looked dead busy anyway so I guess that could wait till later...

The half-asleep underground doctor dimly entertained such thoughts in his head as he went into the bedroom where the girl had been sleeping.

As the door opened before him, however, it turned out what he saw was a little different from what he had expected.

The girl, who should have been sound asleep just a minute ago, had moved from her bed to the corner of the room and was shaking all over.

It didn't look like she was trembling from her fever, though.

The girl's eyes were fixed on Shizuo, who had entered the room before Shinra did.

Shizuo, as he looked at the girl who was obviously afraid of him for some reason, just stood there in a confused but nonetheless intimidating manner.

"...Is it better for me not to say anything?"

"Anything you say would just give her unnecessary shock, so yeah, it's better if you kept quiet."

Shinra said as he offered the little girl his hand.

"Are you alright? You're looking better, but let's take your temperature anyway."

However, the girl continued to stare at Shizuo with mortified eyes as she asked, "Am I...going to be killed, too?"

"...'Too'? What does that 'too' mean?"

Shinra shook his head as Shizuo asked with a frown.

"So I was right, you really did kill someone pretty important to this kid without knowing it..."

"...How about I make you the first kill on my record?"

Veins began to protrude from Shizuo's face again; Tom was trying desperately to pacify him by saying, "Hold that back, we have a kid here."

Shinra tested the girl's temperature with his hand and muttered, "Good, the fever's going down," as his expression became relaxed. Of course, he had much more accurate clinical thermometers on him, but to avoid scaring the girl further Shinra simply touched her forehead with his hand.

If any of Shinra's acquaintances saw him like this, they would have taken him for another person altogether.

If Celty had been there to see him act like this, she would probably have screamed, "Even I haven't seen you smile like an ordinary nice guy like this...wah, Shinra, you *lolicon!*" and stormed out of the apartment. That was how calm and honest his smile looked at this moment.

"...*Onii-chan*, who are you? Heiwajima Shizuo's friend?"

"Nah, he's just a bad acquaintance that I'm stuck with. Don't worry, I won't let him lay his hands on you. But for me to do that you have to tell me something first."

Shizuo felt goose-bumps on his back as he listened to Shinra talking ever-so-softly like a gentle doctor of the town.

But if anybody had a shot at coaxing the girl into telling the truth, it would be Shinra.

So he fought down the urge to throw up and kept listening from a distance to what the girl proceeded to say.

Shinra squatted down until his gaze was at the same height as the girl's, and talked to her as if she were his own child.

"Could you tell me your name?"

"...Akane."

"So, it's Akane-chan. And your family name?"

Akane fell silent as soon as she was asked her surname.

Shinra, deciding that she probably did not want to talk about that particular detail, did not press her and instead asked the next question.

"Are you feeling uncomfortable? Does your throat hurt? Does your belly ache? Feeling alright?"

Akane nodded.

"Really...that's good. So do you want to tell me about yesterday then?"

The girl seemed to be pondering this for a moment, but ended up neither nodding nor shaking her head.

Her fearful eyes turned towards Shizuo. Once Shizuo's gaze met hers from behind those sunglasses, she began to tremble again.

"It's alright, he won't do anything to you. He might be a little violent, but he's really a good guy. If he really wants to hurt you, you would have been beaten up by now, wouldn't you?"

"..."

"Or had he already done something to you? Is that why you wanted to attack him?"

"No..."

The girl shook her head as she muttered.

Shinra tilted his head and asked the central question.

"Then why did you want that *onii-chan* in sunglasses dead?"

There was a moment of silence after this. Shinra kept smiling, and, at last, the girl moved her lips.

"...Because he's an assassin."

"Eh?"

"Someone told me this assassin named Shizuo was going to kill my dad and grandpa...but I couldn't get back to where my dad and grandpa were, so I really didn't know what to do..."

He had a bad feeling about this.

Why didn't you go back home? Before he could ask that question, Shinra found himself shaking all over with that bad feeling.

The man in the bartender suit who stood behind him must have felt the same.

A noise sounding suspiciously like bones being ground against each other was coming from Shizuo's direction, to which Shinra dared not turn.

"I was told that, if I had this, I'd be able to attack him...and I got this."

"Who told you that?"

"The person who taught me a lot of things when I ran away from home."

Shinra's premonition was beginning to take the definite shape of the face of a certain human being.

"So that person told you Shizuo was an assassin and gave you that stun gun?"

The girl nodded. Shinra, feeling his nerves on the edge of cracking, asked the most important question.

"...What's that person's name?"

The girl hesitated for a moment before she answered the decisive question. Then, as if she had decided that Shinra was to be trusted, she said the name timidly.

"..Izaya *onii-chan*."

A chill ran down Shinra's spine.

For a moment, he could feel that right behind his back the new Apocalypse had just been born in the form of a man. Trying to wipe away the cold sweat, he turned in that general direction.

And there-

Shizuo was smiling a very soft smile.

Wha-a-at?

Shinra found himself drowning in even deeper despair at the sight of the never-seen-before smile on Shizuo's face.

Sorry Celty, but it may turn out that I have to die before you. Here. Now.



As such thoughts occupied his mind, a still smiling Shizuo spoke to Akane.

"Ha-ha. That was a misunderstanding, Akane-chan."

"Eh..."

"Izaya-*kun* must have gotten something wrong about me. I'm not an assassin."

"Really?"

"Of course! Izaya-*kun* and I are friends. We just had a little fight."

Shizuo shook his head slowly and turned his back on Shinra and the girl.

"You just wait here, I'll be off to make up with him right away."

Winking harmlessly at Akane, Shizuo whistled lightly as he exited the room.

Shinra, realizing that he was already covered in torrents of cold sweat, kept his muttering to himself in order to not scare Akane further.

Izaya...have you decided that you're fed up with your life...or what?

As he was closing the door behind him, Tom spoke to Shizuo after they were both out of the doorway.

"Very well played. I think you deserve a People's Honor Award for that."

"...Thank you, Tom-san."

Shizuo did not turn to face his superior when he said this.

"If it's OK, I have one favor to ask."

"What is it?"

"If I get arrested for murder today, tell Mr. Manager to just go about things as if I were fired yesterday."

Though he had a thousand things to say, Tom simply watched Shizuo descend the stairs without a word.

Then Tom, after producing his cigarettes from his pocket, turned his gaze to the view from the open corridor of the apartment building.

Inhaling deeply the scent of his favorite cigarettes, Tom said to himself as he watched the smoke rise.

"I'll have to tell the manager Shizuo's taking a day off today..."



Morning of May 4th, a gallery in Ikebukuro

Framed paintings filled the beautifully papered walls in this meticulously arranged space.

A voice that was on some level furthest from art was saying:

"...Consider this. You'll just have to pay as much as you do for your everyday coffee, but you're going to own this famous painting or even your life's happiness. To me, that sounds like the first step to winning at life."

The young man with bandages over his face grinned as he heard the female clerk say with a professional smile on her face. He replied, "Hm, but I don't know what my girlfriend's gonna say if I spend so much money on this."

"If she sees the painting hanging in your room, your girlfriend's going to be head over heels exclaiming how great it looks! A rendezvous with the painting is actually exactly like a rendezvous with your girl! Even if it's just a lithograph, it's very rare that you'd find Karnard Straussburg's* paintings on the market at all!"

** Karnard Straussburg: a fictional painter from Vamp!, another of Narita Ryohgo's series.*

It looked like she had spent the past hour facing the frame now sitting next to the table and trying to sell a painting to the young man, a potential buyer.

But instead of scrutinizing the painting, the young man's gaze had been focused instead on the female clerk's face.

"To me, though, you're more charming than the painting, my lady."

"Oops, I think I would find any man who can buy me this painting extremely attractive."

"Really?"

"Of course! It takes a man with a lot of character to be able to pay real money for his dreams!"

It was true that the painting was by a famous painter, but it was silkscreen-printed. In other words, it was a cheap printed copy.

But she insisted that it was a "lithograph", a rare painting with a serial number.

It was, in fact, worth no more than 30,000 yen, but the female clerk was asking for 1,280,000.

With that kind of money one could have bought a real lithograph by Karnard Straussburg instead of a cheap silkscreen-printed copy. The clerk, however, insisted that the printed copy was the real thing.

Looks like we almost have him.

The adult male who looked like the manager of the place watched the pair from afar and felt like the young man was about to buy the painting.

If he tried to back out, they'd threaten him into buying it anyway saying "You've already wasted us hours so you have to take on the responsibility and sign." In fact, that had always been the way things worked in this tourist trap of a gallery.

But the young man's reactions were so peculiar that they couldn't even follow their manual of hard-selling.

The bandaged young man saw the manager and beckoned him over.

The manager saw the smile on the young man's face and thought he was finally going to pay for the painting. He kept bowing as he walked over to the young man and said, "Anything I can help you with, Sir?"

"Well, I don't have that kind of money on me, but this lady here looks like she'll be very upset if I don't buy this painting. So I came up with this way to make her happy."

"Ah, sure, thank you for your business!"

The manager, thinking that the young man was planning to pay for the painting in installments, smiled instantly. The young man, too, smiled from underneath his eye mask and said, "So, give me."

"Eh?"

The young man showed the manager his palm as if asking for something. The manager froze.

The ballpoint pen had been prepared for him on the table.

What else did he need?

Just as the manager thought that maybe he needed to see a business card, the young man said something even more astounding.

"She said 1,280,000. If you don't have cash, I think a credit card is fine too."

"...Ah?"

The young man continued in a nonchalant voice as the manager seemed unable to comprehend.

"That's how it is. The lady says she'll be upset, but I don't have money on me. We're both men, so there's no way we're allowed to just watch when women are going to be upset, is there? That's why the job is on you to make her happy since you look like you've got the money. You're the owner of this gallery, right? If these are the paintings you bought, you must be pretty rich."

"U - Um..."

"Money is meant to be spent for women. If you are a man, buy it for this lady here. If you give me that 1,280,000 I'll take care of the rest."

"Please stop kidding, Sir."

The manager's face fell instantly - and had to stiffen the very next second.

"Argh, kidding?"

The young man stared up at him in such a sharp and cold way that the general impression of cruelty was almost thrown in his face.

The manager realized instantly upon seeing how fierce the young man's features had turned now that he was no longer talking to the woman.

This is bad. This guy is not normal.

"Since when have I been kidding? Since when have I tried to make you laugh? Argh?"

The young man stood up slowly and put his face close to the tip of the manager's nose.

The female clerk had at last realized there was something wrong with this situation and said to the young man with a pale face, "S - Sorry, Sir?"

The young man broke once more into a kind smile upon hearing her voice and raised his thumbs at her, "No problem, my lady. He's gonna buy it for you. Just like you said, my lady, any man with money would buy it if this painting brings them so much happiness and make them popular with the ladies!"

The man who looked like the manager of the place stared at the woman as if to say, "Why did you bring him in?"

The female clerk looked as if she was about to cry. She wanted to respond with a look that said, "I didn't! He began to talk to me and followed me inside!", but there unfortunately was only so much meaning a mere look could convey.

But the manager was not the only person who saw her almost-crying face.

Of course, the other person who saw it was the young man with the eye mask.

"Oi, old man."

"Y - Yes?"

"You...just stared at her, didn't you?"

The young man was practically fuming; the manager, who was usually the one in charge of scaring potential clients into buying, had to step back a few paces in fear.

"Ah...what...?"

"I don't give a damn if you're her boss or anything. The lady works so hard to do her job even when she's facing a rude dude like me. Yet you gave her that look, what did you think you were doing?"

"W - Wait...this, this is completely within our own company, you have nothing to do with it, Sir..."

"Since I have nothing to do with it, it should be my freedom to beat you up or do anything I like about it, right?"

The young man flexed his neck audibly and stepped forward.

"W -Wait a second, I'm calling the police- "

As he said this, the manager couldn't help but think, "Or am I gonna die before the police could come?"

He had always considered himself a hardened player when it came to dealing with weird

guests. But this young man was weird on a totally different level from any guest he had had to deal with before.

Just as the young man bent down as if about to do something-

His cell phone rang from his chest pocket.

The young man had to stop whatever he was doing, take his cell phone out of his pocket and press it against his ear, "It's me...I see. Where is he now? Ah?...No kidding. That's like right in front of this building. No, tell everyone to come in. There's this bastard here who needs to be taught how to be good to a woman...arch? ...Tch...I see. I'll be there in a minute."

After hanging up the phone the young man with bandages and an eye mask over his face stared once more at the manager and added:

"I'm going to come back and make sure you've bought the painting for her. You watch yourself..."



In front of a gallery building in Ikebukuro

"You were saying you found a Dollars member?"

Rokujou Chikage, the young man who had just walked out of the gallery, asked one of his fellow "Toramaru" members.

The man in the leather jacket mumbled affirmatively and told Chikage what he had heard.

"Looks like it was a pretty famous Dollars member, a guy with some foreign blood called Yumasaki Walker."

"That's a weird name indeed. Where is he now?"

"Um..."

The man in the leather jacket paused hesitatingly and raised his chain slightly to point towards the gallery right in front of them.

"Before you came out, Chikage-san, he was talked into going in by some woman."



Inside the gallery

That was so close...

The manager sighed in relief as he saw the young man walk out of the gallery. At the same time, however, another voice reached his ears.

It did not sound like the usual kind of conversation for this gallery; in fact, it too sounded like an argument.

What now?

A young man's voice rang full of enthusiasm in front of a painting by the famous illustrator Suzie Yasuda.

"But this is just a silkscreen printed copy. Judging by the size the total cost shouldn't exceed 24,000 even if you have it framed, right? I have a lot of respect for this illustrator, and I wouldn't have even minded if I had to pay her a million for a painting! But you'll have to show me the proof that at least 80% of that money is going straight into the hands of the illustrator!"

"Ah, eh, um..."

"Speaking of which, the original of this painting is not even meant for silkscreen printing to begin with! Yet, you're giving a serial number to it, which makes it sound like it had been meant for printing. That actually detracts from the true value of the painting! Did Suzie-sensei really give you permission to do this? This kind of thing? Also, the way you explained her paintings was simply butchering her art! You didn't even manage to bring out 1% of Suzie-sensei's unique charm! Completely broke Suzie-sensei's trance and fantasy! What kind of Level 0 are you? Listen, Suzie-sensei's art originated..."

"M -Manager-!"

The manager rushed over immediately as the clerk gave him a look of plea.

He cupped his head with his hands the moment he saw the young man with slanting eyes who looked like he was of mixed Japanese and western parentage, and yelled:

"Sir, not *you* again! Please leave!"

After they had coaxed the young man into leaving the gallery, the manager began to warn the female clerk in charge of touting in a serious tone, "You're new here so you probably don't know, but never try to talk to that mixed-blood guy again, he's high on our blacklist! I know he looks like he's easy to fool, but watch out!"

"Y-Yes."

The manager of this fishy gallery couldn't help but mutter to himself looking exhausted after the string of troublesome incidents, "Guess it's better to just...close this business down altogether..."

This guy in a bartender suit basically destroyed the gallery back when I've only just opened it...and then those Awakusu-kai people came and asked me to just give them the originals for free..."



Just as the manager was submerged in his woes, Rokujou Chikage began tailing Yumasaki, who had just walked out of the building.

"...Him? He doesn't look like it."

"That's just how Dollars is. You can't judge them by their looks...I heard he was always with this guy named Kadota. He was the one who licked several of our members, when they came to Ikebukuro to ask for trouble last month. That Kadota sounded like a fairly big figure in Dollars."

"Ho..."

Chikage said as he observed the man closely.

That was when a woman in black began to talk to the Yumasaki guy.

Another man with sharp features was in a knit cap and talking to Yumasaki like close friends as well.

"Ah, that's him! That's Kadota in that knit cap."

"...They're with a woman. Don't move now, just keep your watch on them."

"Yes."

The trio, who looked like they were Dollars members, walked along Sunshine Street for a while, until Kadota said something to Yumasaki and the woman when they reached Tokyu Hands and parted ways with them. He kept walking on his own.

Yumasaki and the woman turned in the direction of Sunshine City, after they walked past the crossing, while Kadota kept walking south on the main street under the Metropolitan Expressway.

"I can do it on my own. You go meet the others."

"But -"

"It's gonna be fine. Go."

"Yes."

Chikage stayed on Kadota's tail after he told his fellow members to leave.

But he was distracted soon enough by the sight of a certain building on the side of the road.

At that moment, Chikage had stopped in his tracks and forgotten completely that he was supposed to be following Kadota.

"Why...why is there a girls' school in the center of Ikebukuro...?"

It was the school building of a girls' academy next to Raira. The Captain of Toramaru stood rooted to the spot for a good minute.

It was the Golden Week so he couldn't seem to find any high school girls around or in it.

Still, that got my hopes up...

But hey, it's not the time for this.

Just as he seemed to come to himself and turned his gaze back forwards-

"...Are you looking for us for anything in particular?"

A flat voice sounded from behind his back.

Chikage turned and found no other than the very man in the knit cap, whom he was supposed to be tailing, standing there in front of his eyes.

"Hm, so you noticed that I was following you?"

"Yeah...thought my intuition's gone blunt when I saw you stop in front of the girls' school."

Kadota flexed his neck and looked at Chikage, half-sighing as he asked, "So you are? I don't think we've met before, but I was relieved that you weren't the sort of scum who would attack people when they are with women."

"My name is Rokujou Chikage...I have a feeling that we would hit it off."

The corners of Chikage's lips curled into a grin before he shook his head somewhat forlornly.

"But...you're in Dollars, aren't you?"

"Yeah, that's about right."

"Too bad. I just heard Heiwajima Shizuo is also in Dollars. Is that true?"

Kadota gave a straightforward answer anyway to the confirmative question.

"...In name, yes. But he's not a gang animal to begin with."

"Ah, nope, he's not that type indeed...I see. So I take it that you're not a monolithic kind of organization....But either way we won't care."

Kadota's cell phone rang at this exact moment as if everything had been calculated.

"Go ahead and pick it up. I'll wait for you."

"It's a text message."

Kadota said and looked at the message displayed on his cell phone while keeping an eye on Chikage.

Judging by the ringtone it was a text message from Dollars. Kadota had clicked it open instantly thinking that it could have something to do with the man right in front of him.

Kadota frowned as he read it and gave Chikage a fierce stare.

"What's up?"

"...You bastard."

The message on his cell phone-

It was an emergency notice telling him that Dollars members were being attacked all throughout Ikebukuro.

"No...you bastards, what have you come here for?"

Kadota looked both alarmed and angry as he fixed the man in front of him with a sharp look.

Chikage took in his stare unapologetically, shrugging as he muttered as if to himself, "Nothing. Just thought we should pay you back for the fights you hard-sold us."

"I don't need your change. Just take whatever I give you!"



Same time, inside the abandoned factory

Mikado was about to search his brain for information on Blue Square after he heard Aoba's shocking confession -

But his cell phone, too, rang as a new text message was sent to it.

At almost the exact same time, every cell phone around him began to rang and vibrate as well.

The ringtone from his own cell phone had been the one he had set for Dollars text messages. Something had just been confirmed for Mikado.

Just like they said...

These guys are in Dollars as well...

A group of people gathered in a place. Cell phones ringing at the same time.

The size of the meeting was completely different, but it still added to the disturbance in Mikado's heart as it reminded him of a similar scene one year ago.

Yet, as if trying to send him into even deeper despair -

The shocking contents of the text message informed him of the attacks on Dollars members.

"Looks like it's started."

Aoba checked the same text message on his own cell phone and said with a smile as refreshing

as ever.

"Started...? What is...?"

"The Saitama folks...Toramaru are having their revenge."

Mikado felt everything his vision twist and blur as Aoba told him nonchalantly.

This...is the reality?

This boy in front of his eyes, was he the same boy who smiled that innocent smile at him at school?

But Aoba was smiling just as innocently now.

Yet his words were impossible to associate with the "reality" Mikado had always known.

"Why...why did you attack those people in Saitama...why did you do it..."

"They ruined my Ikebukuro trip with Mikado-sempai and Anri-sempai. I was just venting my anger...or is that not good enough an explanation?"

Mikado was rendered wordless. He could simply swallow.

There was probably no way the other person was going to tell him the truth about that.

Mikado, after making that judgment, kept the fingers of his left hand clasped tight around his cell phone and tried to continue "talking" to Aoba.

"Blue Square...I've heard of it...I think it was some...Color Gang in this area...that got partially absorbed into the Yellow Turbans after they clashed with them...that's what I heard."

Several boys around them whistled in surprise after Mikado had finished. Even Aoba's eyes widened as he looked somewhat shocked.

"You know even more than I thought you did. You're something indeed, sempai!"

"Why are you telling me...someone like me...things like these?"

"Because I trust you, sempai. Or is that not good enough an explanation for you?"

"It's not an explanation to begin with...what do you want me to do?"

Mikado was even more confused now. He couldn't figure out what the other person was after.

"Yeah. I think it would be better to postpone that explanation till after you've known more

about us.....but first of all, I have a favor to ask you, *sempai*."

Aoba looked up at Mikado silently from the steel skeletons he was sitting on, his eyes gleaming as he said in a low voice, "Leader..."

"Huh?"

"I won't ask you to become the leader of Dollars. That would be against the very principles Dollars was founded upon."

Heh-heh-heh. They laughed.

Heh-heh-heh. They snickered.

Mikado had no idea what they found so funny, but every boy around them began to laugh after they had heard Aoba. Their laughter ricocheted throughout the factory with a certain rhythm.

As if savoring a poem to that rhythm on his lips, Aoba continued in a voice that blended in perfectly with the atmosphere in the factory and kept pounding at Mikado's heart.

"...Which is why I'm hoping that you can become the leader of us Blue Square."

"Eh..."

"We'll basically just obey your orders."

That was way too out of the blue.

That was all Mikado was able to feel.

It was as if someone had all of a sudden asked him to become the King of Saudi Arabia. Yumasaki and Karisawa would probably ask him what manga he was in, if they were to hear about it.

That was how out of the blue Aoba's suggestion had sounded to Mikado.

"Why...are you asking me..."

"Yeah, there are a lot of reasons. But, most importantly, it's because sempai occupies a special position in Dollars."

"Special position...?"

Mikado parroted in confusion. Aoba immediately gave a curt answer.

"In short, it's because sempai is the founder of Dollars...Are you surprised? We have a pretty

decent information network too."

Aoba didn't show the slightest sign of fear or contempt in front of the wordless founder. He simply voiced his thoughts in a casual tone, "You can use us in any way you want, sempai... If you decide to end this conflict right away, have us kneel down in front of Toramaru and let them beat us up... then so be it. We'll do as we're told. And after we get out of the hospital, you'll be our leader... If, however, you're to tell us to 'Protect our fellow Dollars members and go crush those Toramaru scums', then we're going to crush them no matter what that takes."

"I -I'll never... I'll never tell you to do either of those things!"

Mikado shook his head violently and said to Aoba in an emotionally-charged tone, "What made you think I would accept it? If you want to avoid conflict, just don't say you're in Dollars and you'll be fine! That's the type of person I am. I'm not the type who can stand above you!"

It was from the bottom of his heart.

At least that was what Mikado had meant for it to come from.

But Aoba, after hearing what Mikado had yelled - got up slowly and put his face close to Mikado's.

And then he whispered, in a tone only Mikado could hear, "...That is a lie."

He sounded happy, very happy -

"Because, sempai..."

"Eh...?"

"Mikado-sempai, aren't you..."

...smiling?"





Same time, the grounds outside the abandoned factory

It was a talk in a confined space between only parties directly involved.

Whatever the choice Mikado was about to make, it was not meant to be known to anyone else.

But they were already overheard real-time by a third party.

Although she did count as a "party involved" in the broader sense of the word.

Hm.

Celty Sturluson thought as she hid herself in the shadow next to the window outside the abandoned factory.

What's with this situation?

Celty's hearing was good enough to catch everything that was being said inside the factory.

At first, it sounded like a typical aggressive conversation between delinquents; but the the center of the conversation was the boy she knew.

Did I just witness an important crossing point in Mikado-kun's life?

She had, in fact, not followed Mikado and the others here.

Celty had returned to Shinra's upscale apartment last night, but only for a few minutes.

She was surprised to find Shizuo and his boss there, but she explained the necessity for Anri to stay at theirs over the night and turned on her heels to leave as soon as possible.

The reason was simple.

She had to find the girl in the photo, the granddaughter of the head of Awakusu-kai.

According to Shiki, the girl seemed to be spending her days at 24-hour manga cafes and family restaurants.

How could a girl stay at a family restaurant so late in the night and not get reported to the police? Celty had wondered about this, but concluded that she must be aware of ways to live in a family restaurant that Celty wasn't.

She had wondered too where the girl took her showers and changed her clothes, but after checking out the interior of an actual manga cafe (her full-face helmet did draw weird looks from other customers), she was surprised to find that they had a shower and other utilities.

She had also heard that the girl would sometimes stay at her schoolmates' or her online friends' for the nights, so it was hard even for Shiki and his intelligence network to track her down.

Shiki had told her that they would contact her once they found the girl, but it only got her more anxious now that she knew those folks with their horrid weapons were out and about in Ikebukuro even though she had never even met the girl in person.

So, she looked all night for her on the Ikebukuro streets.

Not knowing that the girl was in fact in Celty's very own apartment.

She ended up not finding the girl after she hovered around the family restaurants in the neighborhood till the next morning. So, she decided to try to track down the assailants first and followed her black thread to this abandoned factory.

Speaking of which...I didn't know my shadow could extend for so many miles without breaking...

Celty was honestly surprised at the capability of her own shadow when she found that the black thread had not broken off at all. The thin, slithering shadow acted just like real shadow once it fell to the ground; it never wrapped itself around anything nor tripped anyone.

In addition, since it was capable of moving in the form of a liquid or a gas at Celty's will, she could summon it back into her hands within mere seconds even if she had made it go 100 loops around the base of a building.

I feel like that robotic cat from the future. Whatever, I'll think about that later.*

* Robotic cat: Celty's referring to Doraemon, the titular character from Fujiko F. Fujio's vastly popular manga series Doraemon.

She stopped thinking about her shadows with their almost-cheating level of usefulness and focused instead on what was going on in front of her eyes.

Speaking of which, this abandoned factory seems to have a weird way of coming back into my life.

Celty considered this vaguely as she tried to think of what to do next.

She was curious about what Mikado would decide to do; but was it really OK for her to stay here and eavesdrop?

A strong sense of guilt pounded in her heart, but Celty couldn't bring herself to leave. She kept listening.

But she, too, was being watched by someone else.

♂♀

Same time, inside Russian Sushi

"(So, what is it?)"

"(Just thought I should let you know that I found evidence that the duo's been to Ikebukuro)."

It was a conversation in Russian.

The face of the Chief Chef of the sushi restaurant stiffened as he heard the guest, Igor, an old acquaintance of his.

"(...I think you said we didn't know them.)"

"(I did.)"

"(It's true that we don't know that guy called Slon. But that Vorona, isn't she Sir Drakon's Little Miss?)"

"(I wasn't wrong when I said you didn't know them...she's no longer the little girl you know, Denis-san..)"

Simon was already out touting customers. Only Igor and the Chief Chef were in the restaurant, which had just began its day's business.

"(No matter how she changes, the Little Miss is the Little Miss. Colonel Lingerin would have said the same thing.)"

"(Well, sure...if you go by Lingerin-san's personality and standards...)"

Igor said half-sighing as he noticed the Chief Chef's lack of concern.

"(Did you hear anything last night?)"

"(From afar, I heard a shot that sounded like it was from an anti-material rifle.)"

"(Me too. It was probably Vorona and Slon. And it was not something that 'sounded like' it. That was an actual anti-material rifle they took from our company.)"

Igor stroked the bandages on his own face as he voiced one conclusion to the Chief Chef, who was now sharpening his cleaver without a word.

"(If we don't try to stop her soon, it's not going to do good to anybody. Not to Vorona, not to Drakon-san, not to the city Tokyo itself. Of course...not to you, who loves this city from the bottom of your heart, either.)"



Same time, rooftop of a tall building close to the abandoned factory

"Abandoned factory no one uses. This information, is an error. That place, a gathering spot for delinquents."

"Looks like that Black Motorbike's hiding himself from the kids...should we snipe at him?"

Vorona shook her head silently as Slon asked, focusing on Celty through the telescope on his rifle.

"Survived yesterday's sniping. Bona fide monster. Ill-advised sniping will reveal our whereabouts. Fatal."

Vorona and Slon were waiting for their chance on the rooftop situated a distance from the factory.

They chose a spot from which they could see most of the factory's grounds and kept their watch on Celty, who had found this place with her black thread.

If they just wanted to find the other person, they could have traced the black thread back to its origin, but since they were at war with the Black Rider, it would have been very unwise to risk running into him when they were looking for him using the black thread.

So, they had decided to park the motorbike in the middle of the abandoned factory and lure the mysterious rider here-

But right after the rider appeared, a gang of strange boys arrived at the factory as well and the Black Motorbike had to hide himself outside the window so that the boys couldn't see him.

From where Vorona and Slon were, though, the hiding spot was clearly visible.

Vorona inhaled deeply after she had observed him for a while and said in a low voice with a face devoid of expression, "I will follow the monster. The target little kid, may exist right there."

Slon sighed after he had heard Vorona.

"You look like you're enjoying it, Vorona."

"I affirm. This is starting to be enjoyable."

There was an almost unnoticeable change on Vorona's expressionless face, which took after her father's, as she uttered her twisted words of love, "Ikebukuro, I like. Half disappointment, half jealousy. A shred of hope. That, is precisely love..."

I decided on loving Ikebukuro. I affirm."



Same time, an office building in Ikebukuro

"That bastard...I told him not to come to Ikebukuro again...!"

Climbing the stairs of an office building far away from the crowded streets, Shizuo spat.

"Making his nest here as if he heard nothing I had said...!"

Arriving at the third floor, he stared at the office door in front of him.

This had to be Izaya's new office according to the address on that sheet of paper. Though, there wasn't a sign over the door or anything, and there wasn't anything else of the sort installed anywhere in this office building either.

Anyway. I'll just knock on the door pretending to be a client and see how that goes.

And he knocked.

There was no answer.

He saw a doorbell on the side; he rang it, but still no reply.

Maybe Izaya was away? But as he listened more intently, he ears caught the sound of a radio or TV coming from within.

He's pretending to be away, thinking I won't notice, that little scum.

Shizuo let his fury take over and grabbed the doorknob fiercely to break in.

Huh?

The door wasn't locked; it opened readily without the slightest resistance.

What the hell, it was open all along.

Shizuo let go of the doorknob, which had by now taken a new shape from the pressure of his palm, and stormed into the office.

He had entered what looked like a multi-part office complex; the walls of the first room were lined with shelves, on which a staggering amount of files seemed to be on display.

So this is what the office of an information broker is like?

Though he still had a tinge of doubt, Shizuo proceeded to look for his enemy as he walked into the next room.

And what he saw there turned out to be-

...

...

"...Argh?"

He lost track of how many seconds had lapsed since "those" came into his sight.

At first, Shizuo had not the faintest idea what the scene right in front of his eyes meant.

Not that it was in any way hard to make sense of; in fact, anyone except him would have understood instantly what it meant as soon as they lay their eyes upon it.

But for him, the party actually concerned, it was simply beyond comprehension.

What just appeared in front of him appeared to be three piles of human flesh dressed in suits.

One of them lay in front of the TV, which had been left on.

One looked as if it were leaning into the chair.

One sunk into the thin walls that separated the rooms from each other.

The sight of whichever one of them would have been enough to make one realize that they were "finished".

The one in front of the TV set had a half-mashed face.

The one leaning into the chair had his neck twisted 180 degrees.

The one in the wall had his spine and torso bent in naturally implausible directions.

But they had one thing in common.

It seemed like they were killed by bare hands or something that could mimic the effect.

“.....”

It had been a long time since he last saw dead bodies.

Shizuo had yet to kill anyone, but due to the various troubles he had been embroiled in since high school he had on more than one occasion seen dead bodies.

If Shizuo hadn't been through those, he would probably have thrown up at the sight, that was how gruesome the killing scene looked like.

He was not aware of how long he had remained in the middle of this killing scene.

What the hell. Quit messing around with me, will you?

Why are there dead bodies in Izaya's office?

The disbelief had turned into an urge of inquiry inside Shizuo's mind. And questions led to more questions.

Speaking of which...is this really Izaya's office to begin with...?

His thoughts were interrupted by an angry shout coming from behind his back.

"What do you think you're doing here, breaking-in...eh..."

Shizuo turned around to find a young skinhead standing there.

He looked reasonably intimidating himself, but as soon as he set his eyes on Shizuo, whom he probably had some prior knowledge of, fear infiltrated his expression.

The skinhead looked from Shizuo to the dead bodies littering the place.

Eyes popping wide, his jaw dropped like a goldfish gasping for breath.

"Y-y-you -you ba-bas-bastar-...d....you bastard.....!"

Fumbling around for the wall behind him, he ran back into the room closer to the entrance.

Shizuo didn't have the time to say anything.

He merely put his hand to his chin and pondered things over for a second-

And concluded that he had been indeed entrapped by a trick so simple and straightforward that even he had to appreciate the irony.

More than ten seconds later, the skinhead returned with a pistol in his hand, looking around for Shizuo with eyes full of fear.

But Shizuo was no longer anywhere to be found; the only sound in the office was from the wind blowing into the third-story window.

Another couple of seconds later, the skinhead began yelling into the phone in the room, "Shizuo...Heiwajima Shizuo! There's no mistaking it! Contact Sir Shiki right away!

That bastard...killed three of our people in the office...!"

And with that, Heiwajima Shizuo's "daily life", along with his "hope" for a peaceful life-
Were put to an end today, in this very second.



Noon of May 4th, East Gate of Ikebukuro Station, in front of the stone owl

"There's no need to be scared. The people who are coming to meet us are very nice people."

Akane looked up at Anri and nodded as she told her in a soft voice.

Her fever was already completely gone. Nobody knew where Shizuo went, so the source of her mental pressure seemed removed as well.

Shinra had declared her "pretty much OK to go", and Anri had brought her outside for a walk thinking that would cheer her up.

She had worried that the girl would run away, but the girl had said, "...Um, when that man called Shizuo comes back, I will talk to him." so Anri had decided to believe her.

In addition, the mention of the name Orihara Izaya had made Anri very concerned about this whole thing.

Anri had faced Izaya off once. Or rather, Izaya was without doubt an enemy for "Saika".

On top of that, she had been attacked yesterday, and what the girl had said about her father and grandfather's lives being after also concerned Anri.

"Hm, won't it still be kind of dangerous outside?" Shinra had wondered, but Anri had convinced herself that those people wouldn't attack them in broad daylight and Ikebukuro's crowded streets.

Shinra had said after Anri had told him that she was meeting Mikado and Aoba today-

"OK, I'll call Celty afterwards. As long as her time opens up I'll tell her to go meet you. If Shizuo were still here, I would have asked him to be your bodyguard, haha." He said half-jokingly as he agreed to let them leave the apartment.

But now that she thought about it, it was still too reckless a decision to have come here.

If the rascals from yesterday would not be afraid to attack her again even in broad daylight, she would risk getting Akane hurt in this as well.

Anri waited and waited with such worries on her mind.

Waited for Mikado and Aoba, who would at least bring her some assurance of the dailiness of her life, to come to this place.

She still didn't know.

The daily life in Ikebukuro, especially the part she and the people she knew were familiar with, had already collapsed.

What was more, they were now about to step into the collapsed city as well.

Sonohara Anri had still yet to notice.



Somewhere dark in Ikebukuro

Orihara Izaya, too, got the text message informing him of the attacks on Dollars members.

But he got more than that.

The multiple "information sources" he nurtured in the city had also sent him messages with the same content. Some came in reports on completely irrelevant matters.

Izaya paid equal attention to everything as he checked the messages and muttered to himself in the dark, "The little rascals in Blue Square, are they after the same thing as I am, till the middle of our respective plans?"

Izaya looked half expectant and half upset as he thought of the face of a certain boy.

"That's fine. Now that I think about it, Kuronuma Aoba is also one of my lovely Raira kouhais. This challenge...I'll accept it."

He pressed the keys on his cell phone as he kept on talking, to the darkness around him or to himself.

"From now on, it's going to be a real open game, in which foxes outwit one another, and players move in for mutual kill."

After he had sent text messages to multiple recipients, Izaya pressed his hand on the doorknob in the dark.

"Well, since we're both black sheep in the sea called Dollars..."

As soon as the door was opened, the blinding sunlight at noon shone down on his eyelids.

He looked up at the sky grudgingly as if the excessive brightness offended him.

"Why not dine together in peace?"

Orihara Izaya was smiling.

No one could know just how much he knew about Kuronuma Aoba and his gang.

Did he have a way to crush them, or did he secretly wish to be defeated at their hands?

Izaya's smile was pure human. But that only made him look unnatural as a human being.

With his laughter-

Another twisted story was about to commence.



PRESENTED BY

成田良悟

CAST

Celty Sturluson
Kishitani Shinra

Ryuugamine Mikado
Sonohara Anri
Kida Masaomi

Orihara Izaya
Heiwajima Shizuo

Awakusu Akane
Rokujou Chikage

Kuronuma Aoba
Orihara Kururi
Orihara Mairu

Yumasaki Walker
Karisawa Erika
Kadota Kyohei

Yagiri Namie
Shiki
Tanaka Tom

Vorona
Slon
Lingerin Douglanikov
Drakon
Denis
Simon Brezhnev

CAST

セルティ・ストウルルソン
岸谷新羅

竜ヶ峰帝人
園原杏里
紀田正臣

折原臨也
平和島静雄

粟楠茜
六条千景

黒沼青葉
折原九瑠璃
折原舞流

遊馬崎ウォーカー
狩沢絵理華
門田京平

矢霧波江
四木
田中トム

ヴァローナ
スローン
リンギーリン・ドグラニコフ
ドラコン
デニス
サイモン・ブレジネフ

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