

天降

6

成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita

空ヲヲ!!

6

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

イラスト:ヤスダスズヒト

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Mairu: Ah, Kuru-nee, look, look!
There's someone flying!

You're talking nonsense again.

Kururi: Fool...

Mairu: For real! See that?
Shizuo-san! Flying like
pyuun!

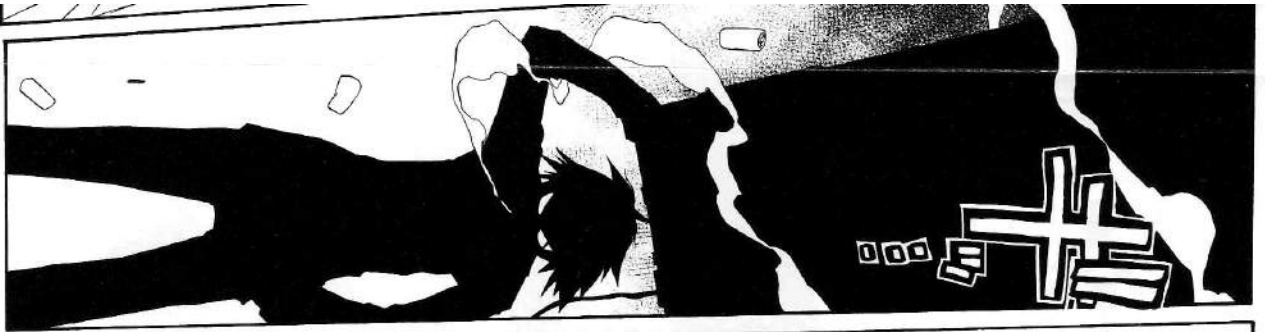
You mean someone is flying.....

Kururi:Admire.....
'cause Shizuo-san threw them into the air?
.....sad.....

Mairu: Nooo, I mean Shizuo-san is
flying! Like *PYUUN!*

That can't be actually happening

Kururi:Doubt.!?



成田良悟
原作



「サマズエルト」
「サマズエルト」



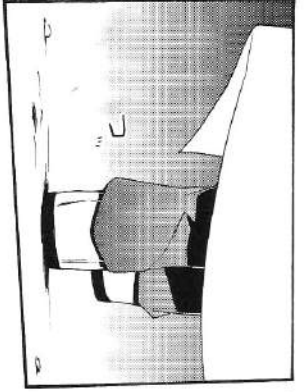
「目次
デユクマツ!! X 6」



「逃走者達は
絡み合う」



P27
四章

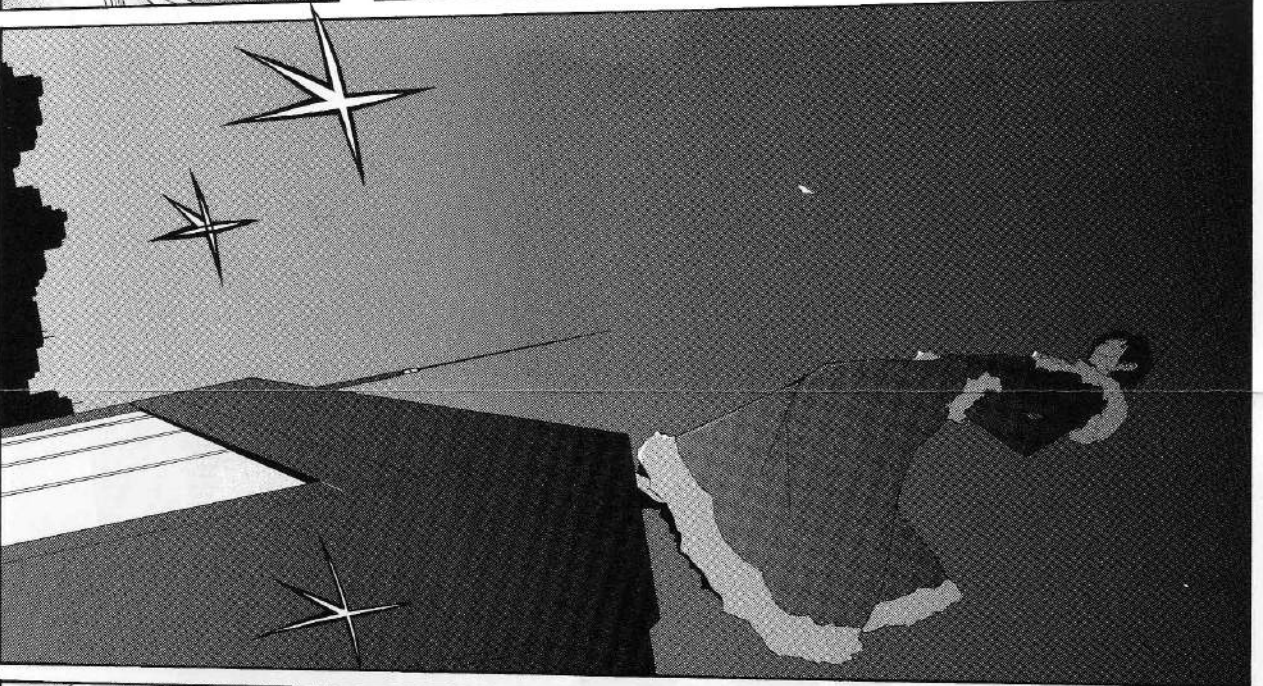


エビローグ & ネットプログラマー

P375



デザイン 鎌部 彦彦



な
9 | 31



収まり爆せる
すべては丸く

P177
五章



千



Vorona's Monologue

The tires of cars, black for a reason. Use carbon particles named carbon black, for making the body stronger.

.....Black Motorbike's body. Invincible as if strengthened from head to foot with carbon black.

.....I thank this. The colors of the city Ikebukuro. The splendor of night. Carbon Black Motorbike, stands out too much in this town.

This town is - just the right ground for hunting the Black Motorbike. I approve.

DURARARA!! ×6

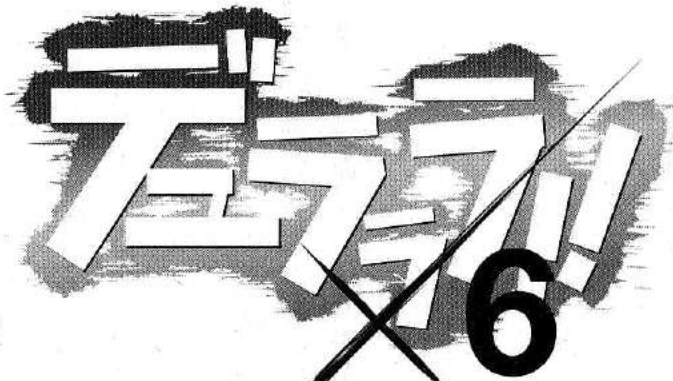
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INTERLUDE, OR PROLOGUE D

KIDA MASAOMI

May 3rd, in a Shinkansen train

“Shinkansen is really something,” the girl murmured as she watched the view from the window through irises the color of the night sea.

The view itself was moving at the speed of wind, occasionally interrupted by reflections of the interior of the train on the glass window.

The boy looked into the girl’s eyes via the reflection in the window and asked with a tender smile, “What about it?”

Usually he would have asked, knowing the answer: “You mean how fast it is?” or “You mean how such a huge steel box can move?” But the boy knew very well that the girl next to him was no longer at such innocent age to be able to marvel at such things.

The girl turned her head slowly to face the boy and answered with a soft smile, “It goes so straight forward.”

The boy could only smile bitterly at the bizarre answer and muttered the girl’s name.

“Saki, you’re as strange as ever.”

“Maybe. But I think I’m not nearly as strange as you, Masaomi.”

The girl called Saki smiled a Japanese doll’s smile and tilted her head.

“What’s so strange about me?”

“Yeah. For example, you hate Izaya-san’s guts, yet you have no problem doing everything Izaya-san tells you to do. It’s just so circuitous, like the underground map within Tokyo. But that’s what I like about you.”

Saki broke into a grin like a little boy who had just caught a beetle. There was uneasiness on the boy’s face as he turned to look at the girl and said, “Saki hasn’t changed a bit. You just say things others wouldn’t be able to say.”

The boy—Kida Masaomi—was in the Shinkansen train to Tokyo with his girlfriend, Mikajima Saki.

He had dropped out of school for certain reasons and begun to live with his girlfriend Saki. His parents never interfered in his life much and did not seem to be against what their son was doing.

But to support themselves the two former high school students had to be prepared to do a lot of things—and the path Masaomi had chosen was to work for the exact man who had pushed him into this desperate situation.

Masaomi knew only too well.

The man had pushed him in the back once, and that had made him lose a lot of things.

But he understood, too, that the one who actually made the step forward was no other than himself.

A medium-sized conflict had broken out between Dollars and the Yellow Turbans, two gangs in this city called Ikebukuro.

Fortunately, it was resolved before it could escalate into an all-out war. But an obvious divide had already appeared between Masaomi and his most important friends.

And the reason lay within himself.

His friends could step over that divide any time as long as they wished.

But Masaomi could not.

He was afraid to see his past self in the darkness of that bottomless crevice.

Masaomi ended up unable to step over the divide. Neither was he able to bring himself to leave it. So he simply found escape in remaining where he was.

He escaped far, far into his own heart, where his own empty shell would not be able to catch him -

Taking the girl sitting by his side—who was already half-collapsed—with him.

Right now he was in a Shinkansen train to Tokyo.

Before that, he had been sent to a Northeastern city on Orihara Izaya's orders—though he had never expected that the trip would take as long as a week.

What was more, the very last days of the week were spent in a remote village in the mountains where even his cell phone got only intermittent signal. He had been forced into a state of isolation from the world of information. Saki, who was not addicted to the Internet or cell phones, had not felt anything; but Masaomi had felt so lonely that he could not even find words for it.

Things were happening on the Internet every second he was kept away from it.

Yet he was left out of the loop; it made him feel unspeakably anxious.

“You're way too enslaved by the Internet, Masaomi. Are you a masochist?”

Saki laughed after she said this.

“What do you mean by ‘masochist’? Everyone knows how convenient the Internet is.”

“But there are people whom you can meet in person but only ever meet on the Internet nowadays.”

“...It's not that I ‘wouldn't’ go meet them. I ‘can't’ go meet them.”

“That's why I say you're a masochist. Go meet them and you'll instantly become happy.”

Saki was right on the spot.

Masaomi laughed and denied it, but kept reflecting on himself.

He had thought that he was by no means addicted to the Internet, but this intense anxiety made him doubt it.

Am I actually feeling homesick because I'm missing out on all that silly banter with those people?

...And now I can only talk to Mikado on the Internet.

He was reminded of his best friend's face on the other side of the divide and had to shake his head to rid himself of the melancholy.

He kept doing that, and after a while he was able to forget about his anxiety.

That was why he did not notice.

That in his anxiety over not being able to connect to the Internet—

—There was actually an element of pure “bad premonition” that had been there since Izaya had sent him on this unplanned trip.

And that premonition proved right—except that he still did not know.

♂ ♀

Morning of May 4th, somewhere in Tokyo

Masaomi and Saki returned to Tokyo on the night of the 3rd. After reporting to Izaya and taking care of everything that needed to be taken care of, the time was already past daybreak.

Masaomi turned on his computer as soon as he got home.

It had probably been in sleeping mode for the past week; the moment he turned it on it simply jumped to the desktop.

“What’s up, Masaomi? Internet before sleep?”

“Yeah. It’s been a week since I’ve been to that chatroom. I want to check what happened.”

It was a certain chatroom Mikado went to. Izaya had been the one to tell him about that chatroom.

It was a useful place. Not only was he able to talk to his friend there—it had also proved to be a very good source of information on things taking place in Ikebukuro.

Masaomi opened the website and was about to check out the log for any change that had taken place in the city over the week, but the archive was completely blank. The page looked exactly the same as it had when he just opened it.

“...Nothing in the past archive? Did someone hack the system?”

Sometimes that happens, thought Masaomi, so he did not think further and typed his greetings into the dialogue box.

“Maybe everyone just disappeared.”

“Don’t scare me.”

The boy chuckled as he replied to Saki’s joke.

Seconds later, Masaomi felt a slight chill run down his spine as he ruminated over Saki’s words—and quickly told himself that it was just him.

He had been kept away from the Internet, so there was no way he could know.

Bakyura—the handle name he used in that certain chatroom—

—Had been used by someone to impersonate him and deceive his best friend.

His best friend, meanwhile, was headed for the center of a giant vortex of disaster—

That’s right—that’s right. Eventually, he still failed to notice.

LOVEY-DOVEY PRATTLES OF AN UNDERGROUND DOCTOR, IV

Excerpt from Kishitani Shinra's diary

April 30th

Celty is as cute as ever today. But that goes without saying.

We're already one month into the spring of the new year, and Celty's cuteness hasn't changed a bit.

I know Celty will be just as cute until the very end of the world, when I will have already died and become ashes. That's what you call the unchanging fact, I suppose.

I've been keeping this diary for about half a year. Now that I've reread it, I realized that this is already my twentieth entry on the same theme.

But that's just how cute Celty is.

Awesome.

That alone will be reason enough for me to write. "It's been a good day."

Speaking of which, when did I fall in love with Celty?

It was sometime during middle or high school that I came to understand that what I felt was love.

If youth is the name of the time when one is in love, then my youth will always be "now"—this very moment.

Right, I wonder how the kids nowadays spend the time of their youth.

I miss my days at Raira Academy*. Alas, those were definitely not the most peaceful days ever. The ones I used to hang out with fought each other all the time.

* Raira Academy: when Shinra attended the school it should have been called Raijin High School; it's unclear whether this is a typo on Narita's part or intentional.

I wasn't good at fighting so I never participated. Not that my participation was in any way necessary, though.

Celty knows some Raira kids.

They've been to our home a few times. I've been talking with them, and for better or worse they were not like the average kind of children nowadays. More suited for the future in some aspects, I'd say.

But then they're not ordinary kids to begin with if they're still willing to be Celty's friends even when they know what she really is.

Of course, I can stay by Celty's side forever because I know best out of everyone just how cute she is.

The world should be more willing to look at her adorable side.

That way it will fall in love with her.

Dullahans are not monsters. They're fairies.

And Celty is an especially cute fairy, too. How awesome is that?

Even though, while I would personally be dying to tell everyone in the world just how attractive Celty is, I know I'd better not tell them everything.

If everyone sees Celty's feminine charm, I'll have to deal with tens of thousands of love rivals.

Speaking of which, I wonder how things are between Mikado-kun and Anri-chan, who have both been to our home.

I thought they were boyfriend and girlfriend, but they were kind of lukewarm towards each other—or at least far from lovey-dovey.

I feel like they're something more than friends, but not yet lovers.

There's too much formality between them for them to have been childhood friends. But it doesn't look like they're just friends either.

I think one is about to confess to the other.

As long as they do what they like, it's fine.

Their lifestyle is way healthier than ours when we were in high school.

But they seem to have their own problems as well. Not that it's a bad thing.

There's no law that says lovers cannot fight.

Self-restraint and patience are necessary, but too much aloofness just isn't normal.

All that trouble with Dollars and Yellow Turbans—but that's probably just what youth is about.

But there are things that one had better not confuse with others.

They say being young is a mistake in itself, but that doesn't mean young people don't have to take on responsibility.

Some salary men like to tell people in bars how "I was a gangster when I was young!" and brag about all the bad things they did. But how very wrong they are.

If they think the bad things they did in their youth are boasting material, then they are not just former thugs. They "still are" mere thugs.

They say a leopard never changes its spots. These people haven't changed or paid back for their sins.

Maybe some of them have been to juvenile correctional institutions and paid back for part of their sins. But if they grow up and start bragging about it, that means they haven't really paid back for anything at all.

Kids do stupid things. I do admit that.

But I also admit that they will have to pay for the things they've done.

And that includes myself. Every single bad thing I've done will come back to me some day.

But when they do, I hope they're at least not going to make Celty sad.

It's the only compensation I can make to Celty for not telling her where her head was.

Or am I being too unilateral in this?

Why am I writing about such unreadable things?

For the next part, I'm going to write about what I write about every day: "Clothes I want Celty to wear".

I won't be able to sleep until I've written it down.

Picturing Celty in the clothes I mentioned in these diaries makes me insomniac in another sense, but that's OK.

Celty the lady gunslinger. She'll be as wild and fatally erotic as Sharon Stone in *The Quick and the Dead*. Celty won't die even if she is shot, so she's more or less an unbeatable gunslinger. But one day she fell in love with me, a wanted criminal. Wait, maybe a better idea is for me to be the gunslinger and Celty the wanted criminal. Celty doesn't have a head anyway, so we can just find her a head, fake a hanging, and set her free. Yeah, that sounds perfect.

Celty the schoolgirl in a swimming suit. Could be very cute if the name tag on her chest says "Seruti" in hiragana. I don't have a thing for young girls or older women, but if it's Celty, I believe I'll fall in love with her no matter what age she looks.

Celty the stripper. Her job is to expose her body, but in front of me she's embarrassed to show her charm. In fact, I pay to watch Celty's show every night. ← (X because that makes me sound like a freak. Celty would probably hate me for it.)

Celty in a sailor's uniform. I've already written about this a couple of times, but let's try a black one for a change. The scene is the library after school. I, the librarian, go back to the library late at night to get something I forgot. And what I see there is Celty, a bookworm girl who is too absorbed in the book to hear the school bell. Her headless body is trembling slightly in the dark…… ← (O I may be on to something good here. I'm going to ask Celty to try this.)

I always end up almost getting a nosebleed when writing this.

They say that even if a doctor knows about every disease in the world, he would still be unable to cure the disease called love. But my illness is even more serious than that.

The only one who can cure me is Celty.

Right behind me Celty is watching "Discovering World's Wonders", which she recorded from last week's TV.

She'll never guess that right now I'm immersed in the bliss of picturing her in different costumes. Celty is simply too perfect when she's innocent and clueless like that.

Geez, Celty is trying to look at this entry.

I was fighting to hide it away from her while scribbling on it—what will she do if she finds out about all the fantasies I’ve written in this diary ahhhh this is the end of me there’s shadow on my foot~~~~~ - ~ -

(The paper was stained by several drops of blood.)

(In-between the red spots, a message was written in a different handwriting.)

Don’t keep this all to yourself. Tell me. And sorry for getting your diary all dirty. Although it was from your nosebleed.

Also that sailor’s uniform fantasy looks nothing like a romantic story. More like a school ghost tale.

Don’t write about things like that, you fool. You’re making me blush when I read it.

But as long as it’s nothing too abnormal, I might consider putting those clothes on for you.

When I’m in the mood, that is.



CHAPTER 4

THE ESCAPEES, THEIR FATES ARE INTERTWINED

Noon of May 4th, somewhere in Ikebukuro

A dull sound was heard in Ikebukuro's suburbs.

It was the sound of a man in tokko-fuku swinging his fist at a gangster's cheek bone.

"Argh..."

The latter fell to the ground groaning and stared at the man in tokko-fuku with eyes full of anger.

"What the fucking hell!? You bastards have any idea who we are? Ahh?"

The delinquent struggled to get back on his feet but was kicked squarely in the face by the man in tokko-fuku.

"Sure we do. You're Dollars, right?"

The man in tokko-fuku stood in front of the delinquents and blocked their way out as he spoke with icy eyes.

"It's beyond me how anyone could be as weak as you are. Looks like they weren't making things up when they said Dollars were either cream or dregs of the crop. Not that we Toramaru are the ones to talk, of course."

"Dammit, what are you after!?"

"What the fuck do you think you're doing!?"

The three gangsters, who were until now too dumbstruck to speak, finally seemed to realize what was happening.

Out of the blue the man in tokko-fuku had asked them, "Are you Dollars?" Finding it funny that anyone would walk around in a tokko-fuku in broad daylight, they had shot back

mockingly, “So what if we are? Trying to apply to be one of us, Captain Tokko-fuku?” As soon as he heard it, the man in tokko-fuku sent the delinquent who replied to him flying into the air.

“Are you screwing with us? Which gang are you from?” The delinquents yelled, but not without a trace of nervousness in their voices.

If the bousouzoku in front of them turned out to be in “Jan Jan Jan” backed by Awakusukai, it would be very unwise on their part to try anything.

But if they were to run away, their own reputation would be beyond repair—not to mention Dollars’.

They began to closely examine their opponent, trying to figure out where he had come from. On the sleeves of his tokko-fuku was embroidered the word “Toramaru”.

“...Ahh?”

One of the gangsters who noticed that detail immediately looked relieved and began to mock him.

“What the hell, you’re just scum from Toramaru.”

“...So what?”

“You got beaten up pretty badly in this place recently, didn’t you?”

“Or didn’t you even hear that they wiped the floor with your friends in their own territory?”

“Is it because Saitama is out of cell phone signal range?”

They began to sneer at their opponent in order to recover from the psychological pressure that had been on them since they got attacked.

True, they could have spared the effort and opted for a fight instead. But in addition to not being veterans at street fighting, they were scared from the sight of their companion falling to the ground after only two blows.

“You don’t honestly believe that you can lick all three of us, do you?” the delinquent yelled threateningly.

The man in tokko-fuku sighed as he replied, “Aren’t you gonna ask why I hit him to begin with?”

“Shut up! As if that’s got anything to do with it!”

“Don’t try to act as if you’re the judge here!”

To the delinquents who looked like they would pounce upon him any moment now, the man in tokko-fuku said in a calm voice, “I’m pretty sure I can deal with all of you, the dregs that you are...”

In the next second, the delinquents felt their spines freeze.

“But I don’t want to tire myself taking down dregs like you. Today is going to be a long day.”

As the man muttered these words, close to a dozen other men in tokko-fuku appeared around the corner of a nearby alleyway.

“...!”

The delinquents turned around hastily, but only to find that several other “Toramaru” members were walking out of the back street behind them.

“W-Why are you...What are you after...?”

The man in tokko-fuku flexed his neck audibly as he said to the almost crying delinquents, “Why are you still asking when you’ve just answered that question perfectly yourselves?”

“...You Dollars bastards have been wiping the floor with Toramaru...haven’t ya?”

♂ ♀

Several minutes later

In a parking lot not too far away from the alleyway, the delinquents with swollen faces were forced to kneel down with legs folded underneath them. They were still pleading in almost inaudible voices.

“No, it’s a mistake, it’s a mistake—we’re not Dollars, really! I-I mean, we’re not Dollars*, we’re sorry. All we did was register on this website. We haven’t even seen the leader’s face!”

**From this sentence onwards they switch to honorific speech.*

The young men had transitioned naturally into honorific speech mode. One of the men in tokko-fuku with a wooden katana in his hand said, “Hmm—well. Actually, we don’t give a damn.”

“...”

“You use the name, you take the risks involved. Though even children would know that you were only using Dollars’ name to make yourselves look formidable in this neighborhood.”

“Sowwy, nevaa again—”

They mumbled with difficulty through their mouths, the insides of which were probably as swollen as the outsides. The Toramaru man took his cell phone out of his breast pocket and threw it onto one of the kneeling delinquent’s knees.

“Call them.”

“Wha— Sowwy?”

“You communicate with each other through text messages, don’t you? Call as many of them here as you can. Anyone you know who has something to do with Dollars is fine.”

“It’s not like you have any other choice anyway.”



20 minutes later

“Oi, there’s nothing to see here! Go home!”

At the entrance of the parking lot, Toramaru men were trying to dispel several elementary school boys peeking inside.

The boys yelled and dispersed. All of them were holding cell phones.

“...Oi. Don’t tell me they’re in Dollars, too?”

“N-No idea. I used the Dollars mailing list, so almost everyone should have gotten it...”

“There were high school girls and salary men peeking inside a moment ago, too.”

“At least some of them should be calling the police now. Let’s go.”

One of the Toramaru men sighed and muttered to himself as he heard his companion, “What the hell...so basically everyone is in Dollars? Is that it?”

As he contemplated the possibility that even the elementary school kids would try to beat them up if they weren't careful, the man's face stiffened. He turned to the delinquents and spat, “Whoever made your gang is a smart, but rotten bastard.”



Somewhere in Tokyo, the Headquarters of Awakusu-kai

It was the Headquarters of Medei Group Awakusu-kai, one of the organizations that had their territories in Ikebukuro.

At first glance it looked like an upscale office building only bigger corporations had the ability to rent. However, there was not a single sign over or next to its entrance. Furthermore, though every entrance was open, they were, without exception, guarded by roll-up doors. Any person smart enough would sense something unsavory about this building and stay as far away from it as they could.

The middle part of this building was home to Awakusu-kai's Headquarters.

The office was furnished with luxury desks and picture frames, as well as black leather sofas—the oh-so-very-typical “yakuza-style” interior often seen on television. Likewise, almost exactly as those TV programs made one believe, pictures of the head of Medei Group and the head of Awakusu-kai could be found next to a shrine and paper lanterns. Aside from those, however, the interior looked no different from that of an ordinary office building.

In a conference room situated in a corner, several men were having a meeting.

Half of them were dressed in ways that made it obvious that they were not “in the legit trades”.

The other half looked like ordinary businessmen at first glance. But the formidable aura that surrounded them in this room made them nevertheless easy to tell apart from people who were not in the underworld.

One of them—a young man with sharp eyes—opened his mouth with a sharp look in his reptilian eyes.

“...So where is Heiwajima Shizuo right now?”

The younger man who had spoken was Kazamoto, one of Awakusu-kai's executives. Opposite him a formidable-looking man blew smoke into the air as he answered, "Oi, Kazamoto, are you trying to give fucking orders here?"

Kazamoto did not even turn his gaze towards him as he heard the other man's provocative tone.

"Don't get too sensitive, Big Brother Aozaki. I wasn't trying to do anything. I was just asking a question."

"I'm not that convinced."

Kazamoto was extremely calm. In contrast, the man he had just called Aozaki fixed him with an unrelenting gaze.

Aozaki was over 190 centimeters tall with broad shoulders and big bones. Muscles and fat were combined in perfect proportions on his body, making the suit tailored to his height look like it could burst at any minute. Having such a man in the room was like having a predatory animal—it made the air even tenser.

At that exact moment, another man's voice cut in.

"Stop that, Aozaki."

The voice silenced the entire conference room.

"Young Head*..."

** Young Head: or "wakagashira", the informal title usually given to the eldest son of the head in a yakuza organization (provided that he is likely to succeed his father).*

As soon as someone muttered this phrase, every gaze in the room snapped towards Awakusu Mikiya, the Young Head of Awakusu-kai.

He was a son of Awakusu Dougen, the head of Awakusu-kai. Everyone thought of him as the first successor in line to the position.

It was becoming less common that an organization like theirs would let the sons succeed their fathers' positions. However, Mikiya placed himself in the position of the Young Head since he was keen on following his father's footsteps.

He was Awakusu Dougen's second son. The eldest son was pursuing a career outside of the underworld. From that it was also obvious that it was Mikiya's own wish to become the future head of Awakusu-kai.

The ones who hated him within Awakusu-kai thought that he was only a candidate because of his father. On top of that, he had no convincing achievements on his record and rival

organizations saw him as the “weakest link” in Awakusu-kai. In short, Mikiya had no shortage of enemies both within and out of Awakusu-kai.

As to whether he could eventually prove himself competent enough a successor like the sons in other organizations, most of the current Awakusu-kai members chose to abstain on the matter.

This man narrowed his eyes and threw a question as he would a pebble into stagnant waters.

“I don’t know about this Heiwajima kid...but is he really the type who could kill three of our men with his own bare hands?”

The air in the room suddenly chilled at his innocent question.

About 30 minutes ago, the bodies of three Awakusu-kai members were discovered.

It was a simple, straightforward fact. But upon hearing about the incident, every member found his mind ominously entangled.

The incident had happened before noon on May 4th, the climax of the Golden Week.

The place was “Mahoutou Co. Ltd.,” one of Awakusu-kai’s daughter organizations Mikiya was in charge of.

The “Co. Ltd.” in the name was, of course, a cover for the real businesses the organization was running.

On the surface, the company was a gallery dealing in paintings, with Shiki as its legal representative. The person actually in charge, however, was Mikiya. Part of its revenue went to Awakusu-kai itself while another part went to Medei Group, their parent organization.

The office was one of three that they had in Ikebukuro that belonged to “Mahoutou Co. Ltd.”.

It was a place where transactions that could not be done in broad daylight were held.

And then the incident happened.

There were four people in that office. Three out of the four, to be exact

The fourth was a younger member. He had left for a couple of hours for another errand, and as he returned to the office—

He saw a man in a bartender suit standing in the midst of his colleagues' dead bodies. By the time he hurried back with hastily picked-up arms, the man was already gone.

That was what the young man told his boss, Shiki.

Since the young man had said, "There's no mistaking it. It was Heiwajima Shizuo," Shiki had ordered his men to track Shizuo down.

It looked like he worked as a debt collector for dating hotlines, but overall he was not a worker in the underworld. Would someone like that really be capable of killing three men in "this trade"?

Mikiya raised that question regarding Heiwajima Shizuo with such doubts on his mind.

The one who answered his question was a man in a gaudy suit. He was almost as tall as Aozaki was, but more on the slim side. He wore a pair of expensive-looking colored sunglasses. A European-style cane that was obviously his was resting against his chair despite the fact that his legs looked fine.

"It's a common mistake to think that he fights 'with his bare hands'. He uses whatever he can find when he feels like it."

Even though his fellow Awakusu-kai members had just been killed, the man's grin was set firmly in its place. But the eyes underneath the designer sunglasses were unrelentingly sharp. Judging by the conspicuous scar on his face and the way people around him reacted to his words, the man was one of the fiercer fighters even among those who gathered in this room.

"You know about him, Akabayashi?"

The man who had just been called "Akabayashi" shifted slightly in his chair, causing it to crackle at the joints. Now facing Mikiya, he began to speak.

"Well. You go abroad a lot so it's no surprise that you haven't been in Ikebukuro long enough to know about him, Mikiya-san. I've seen him fight from a distance... That guy uses weapons. But he never carries any with him. He uses whatever he can find on the spot."

"That's nothing out of ordinary. If you're talking about stones or bulletin boards, anyone who fights a lot would know to use them even if they're only kids..."

"Nah, nah. It's nothing like that. He uses vending machines and guardrails."

"? How's that anything but ordinary? You mean he smashes people's heads onto those things or something, right?"

Mikiya frowned as he felt increasingly lost upon hearing Akabayashi's explanation—

“Nah, nah. He throws them.”

Mikiya’s frown deepened at Akabayashi’s reply.

“...Huh?”

“He would throw vending machines around or pull guardrails off. I think he uprooted an entire street lamp on one occasion as well.”

Akabayashi said this while grinning. Mikiya was about to silence him with a roar of “This is no time for jokes!”, but after realizing that something felt wrong about the atmosphere, he silenced himself instead.

That was because half of the men present in the room simply averted their gazes and remained silent.

If Akabayashi had indeed been joking, Kazamoto or someone else would have been the first to tell him off.

Yet Kazamoto lowered his gaze without a word. Aozaki kept his stony expression and remained dead silent.

Then Mikiya realized something. Even Akabayashi’s own eyes were not smiling behind those colored sunglasses.

That was probably when Mikiya understood that Akabayashi had not been kidding at all.

Though not entirely convinced, Mikiya had at least realized that half of the men in the room felt pressured at the mention of Heiwajima Shizuo’s name.

“...Anyway. We’re just about to close this deal with Asuki Group, so it would be foolish to let them notice that anything’s gone wrong and think they can mess with us when we’re weak. I’m hoping that we move as discreetly as possible on this matter, but...”

“—Before any outsider finds out about this, just lure this Heiwajima guy out somehow.”

♂ ♀

Somewhere in Tokyo, the 3rd Floor of a building

One of Awakusu-kai’s offices had been attacked by someone.

But no longer than 30 minutes after this incident, the greetings now being exchanged in the office were already deceptively routine and ordinary.

“Sorry that we had to bother you again.”

“What are you talking about? We’re more than used to this by now.”

“The Big Head of Awakusu-kai has been taking care of us since we were young.”

“That wasn’t easy.”

“Even little Mikiya’s a big man now.”

“Yeah.”

The ones who were exchanging smiles and greetings with Shiki, an Awakusu-kai executive, were a group of elderly women with hunched backs.

At first glance they looked like ordinary custodians. However, their attire was considerably more sealed-up than ordinary overalls. In addition, they wore helmets that made them look like some sort of anti-germ special force, or professionals in dealing with wasps.

Several of those elderly women were already at their jobs even as they greeted Shiki, cleaning the room with mops and sprays.

“...”

Shiki watched them work from a corner of the room in silence.

“Anyway, it’s very nice that there isn’t a lot of blood. If they find spots with that Luminol thing, just tell them they’re from a nosebleed. Those you can’t hide even if you change the wallpapers.”

“Unfortunately the police don’t trust us enough to buy that kind of stuff. There won’t be anyone coming to examine this place to begin with. Or at least that was what I worked to ensure.”

“Well, guess you’re right.”

“Haha...”

Putting on a forced smile at the elderly women cackling and continuing with their work, Shiki quickly turned to ask the man right next to him questions. It was the young man with bandages over his face—the same one who had yelped at the sight of Celty’s nonexistent face the day before and received Shiki’s punishment.

“So? Where is Heiwajima Shizuo?”

“W-We haven’t...found him yet...”

“Well. I know that kid’s not someone you can hold down that easily. Even if we try, he’ll grab anything he can find to throw at us... So? How many of us has he licked so far?”

“Um, actually...”

Shiki turned his eyes slightly and inquired in an icy voice at his stuttering subordinate.

“What happened?”

“He was simply running away from us... He never laid a finger on any of our men.”



Near the Toshima District Government Office, Ikebukuro

“You’re Heiwajima Shizuo, right?”

Someone spoke to Shizuo on a road somewhat removed from Ikebukuro’s busy commercial streets.

“...”

The “suspect” in the conspicuous bartender suit turned wordlessly around upon being addressed.

He saw several men walking towards him in a formation meant to block the road.

Each one of them was well-built and emanated auras that belonged to the underworld.

As he turned back again, several more were staring at him and blocking his way in the same fashion.

At the same time, a black van came to a stop in its lane. Shizuo was by now completely cornered.

“...What do you want?” Shizuo asked with a sigh.

One of the men replied in a low voice, “Don’t play innocent. You know very well what you did.”

“Whoever did that wasn’t me. But I don’t expect that you’d believe me.”

Rather than saying he did not remember anything or denying the accusation altogether, Shizuo simply stated his own opinion in a flat tone.

The men did not change their expressions as they stepped forward.

“It’s not up to us to decide whether to believe you or not. Just get in the car.”

“I refuse. I’m on my way to beat up that bastard Izaya who framed me. Please don’t get in my way.”

Shizuo’s tone remained calm.

The fact that he even remembered to use honorific speech towards his elders would make one think that he was in a better mood than usual.

But that was not the thought of the men who faced him.

Only Shizuo’s voice was still directed towards them as he made this reply. His eyes were already focused on something other than them.

The burning anger in his pupils was for something that was not even in his sight right now.

The men were, of course, all Awakusu-kai members. Some of them were the same age as Shizuo was.

Anyone who went to high school in Ikebukuro at the same time as Shizuo would have at least heard of the “Fighting Doll”; indeed, many of them had witnessed the terror with their own eyes.

The shock at the sight of people flying in the air remained in their memories longer than they had expected.

Even those among the younger men in Awakusu-kai had seen such sights, too.

Heiwajima Shizuo.

Behind the idyllic sound of his name was the cold sweat trickling down the backs of people who knew him every time they heard this name.

Even among these professional practitioners of violence, several younger ones felt the immense pressure just standing in front of this young man.

And, just as the men swore to themselves to try to overpower Heiwajima Shizuo's "monster strength" with their own violence—

Something completely unexpected happened.

The young man in the bartender suit who looked like he could explode any second turned his back on them without even a backward glance and fled in the direction with no Awakusu-kai men.

It was in the direction of neither the end of the sidewalk nor the car lane.

The building right next to him had no entrance to stores or offices on the wall facing him. All it had was a vending machine standing next to the wall.

Yet Shizuo fled in the direction with no men in sight.

Namely—skywards.

Many of the men believed that Shizuo would lift the vending machine up when he turned towards it.

But Shizuo did not even touch it. Instead, he kicked the ground.

Shizuo could easily kick a motorbike around if he wanted to.

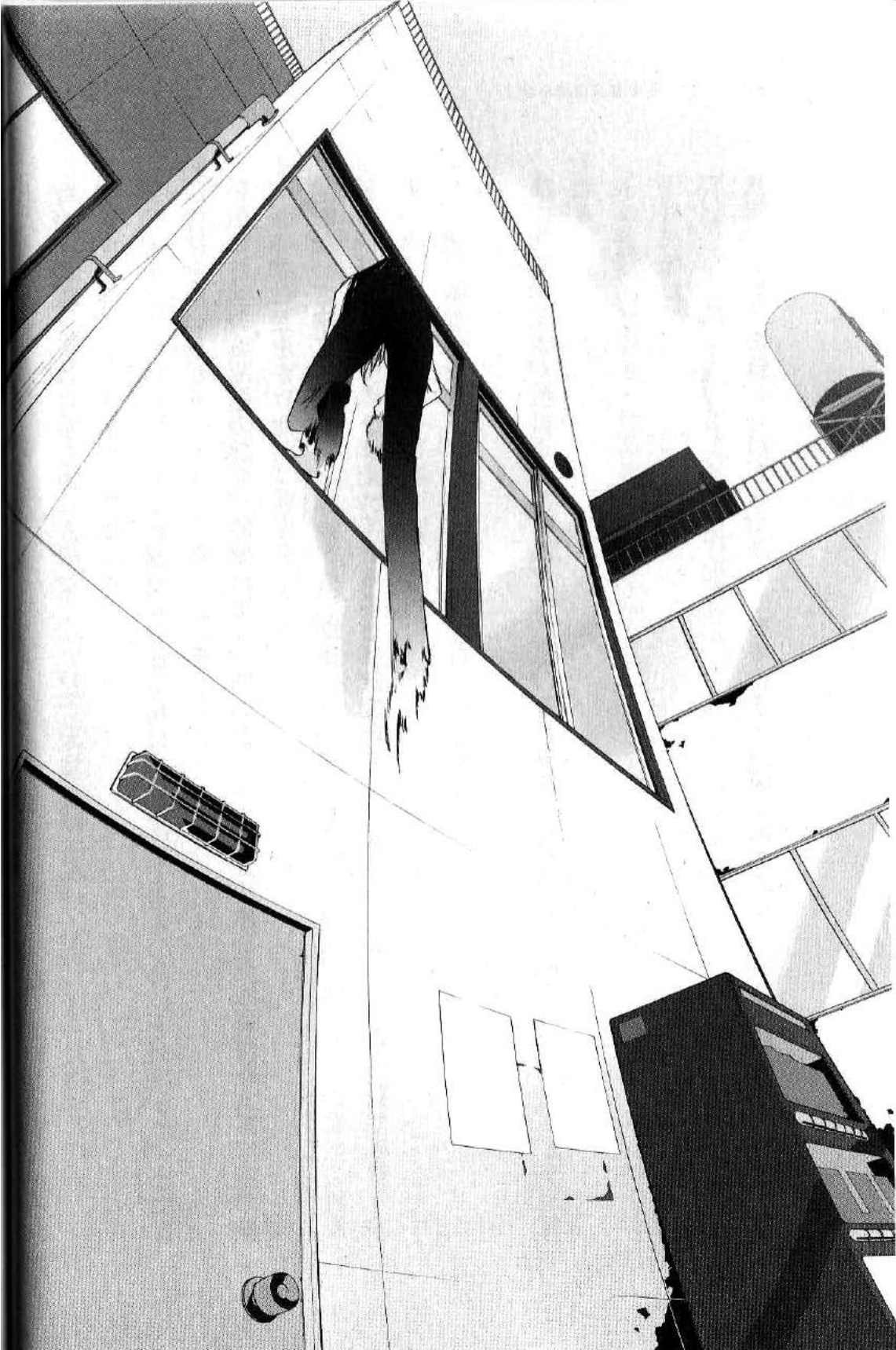
With the help of such strong kicks, his body sprang into the air effortlessly. Taking advantage of that, Shizuo landed on the top of the vending machine and grabbed the window on the second story.

In front of the dumbstruck men, Shizuo continued to use only the power of his arm to lift his own body and put one foot on the window frame.

Just as everyone thought he was going to break in, Shizuo sprang further skywards from the window frame and landed on the steel framework that supported the gigantic advertisement boards on the neighboring building. At a speed no lower than his running speed, he kept climbing up—up—

"S-Stand still you bastard!"

By the time one of the men came to his senses and yelled Shizuo had already disappeared onto the top of the building.



A discipline called “Le Parkour” exists.

It is called a discipline because people have yet to decide whether to classify it as a sport, an art, or simply a way of moving.

In the city or in the wild, they run undeterred, beautifully, and without a single unnecessary move.

It does not sound like a great deal, but it involves much more than just running on soil or asphalt.

People who have acquired these skills would treat various obstacles in the city landscape as their “cours” and fly over them towards their destinations.

If there is a gap between buildings, fly over it. If there is a tall wall, fly over it. Run on the handrail. Use it to hop to higher places.

Sometimes they climb over walls of high-rise buildings. Sometimes they clear the fence effortlessly. Sometimes they use the two walls of neighboring buildings alternately as springboards to conquer dazzling heights.

They are almost the modern ninja. Within the discipline of Le Parkour they are called “Traceurs”. Among them some even incorporated unnecessary acrobatic moves, creating the branch called “Freerunning”. It differs from the original parkour in that its primary goal is freedom, not efficiency.

These skills are widely adopted and featured in recent films and games. More and more people have become aware of them.

But Heiwajima Shizuo’s own brain had yet to receive such information.

Nevertheless, he was running around freely in the city called Ikebukuro.

His moves were far from refined, unlike the ones usually seen in parkour or freerunning.

For instance, even a move as simple as jumping off a high place would almost inevitably result in foot injury in the untrained. Most people who attempt to jump off from several meters high end up breaking a bone or two.

If it was just experience, then he indeed had some.

All thanks to Orihara Izaya, the young man whose life intersected with Shizuo’s in no small way.

Izaya had more or less mastered some parkour skills when he attended high school, with which he was able to escape Shizuo's killer grasp when the latter was after him.

In the process of hunting down Izaya, Shizuo came to master his own brand of the "art of chasing" and gradually became able to catch up with Izaya to deliver the blows Izaya deserved. However—

Reminiscing about these things that happened more than five years ago, Shizuo changed his art of chasing into one of fleeing, and soared effortlessly through the concrete jungle.

Flying over the gap between buildings, he jumped without hesitation even when a height difference of several meters threatened to deter him.

There was no longer a difference between jumping and falling.

The impact on his feet was not absorbed entirely.

The pain would have numbed anyone, if not broken the bones in their feet—yet Heiwajima Shizuo's body simply forced itself to endure it.

Run	Fly over	Swing around	
Hop	Step onto	Cling	Glide into
Grab	Climb	Crawl up	Trip over

And run, run—keep running.

His moves were neither efficient like the original parkour moves nor artistic like the ones in the freerunning discipline. This was no surprise, since Shizuo had never been systematically trained. But with his extraordinary bodily strength, he was able to reproduce only the effect—namely, the "running freely" part.

Ordinary humans, however strong they may be, would never be able to achieve something that can only be achieved through solid training. Part of the reason Heiwajima Shizuo was able to achieve it was the past experience he had had, but more importantly, it was thanks to his abnormal strength.

Yet he—with his superhuman muscles and strength, the rumored "Strongest Man in Ikebukuro"—

Rather than fighting the Awakusu-kai men, he chose to flee without trying to put up any resistance.



Somewhere in Ikebukuro, the 3rd Floor of a building

Heiwajima Shizuo fled.

Shiki, who had just heard the news, contemplated this for a while in silence.

The elderly women had almost finished their custodian work. The room was devoid of traces of a fight—as if the three dead bodies had been mere hallucinations.

Unable to stand the silence any longer, Shiki's subordinate asked, "But if he ran away so quickly, that means Heiwajima Shizuo's not that much of a deal after all, right?"

In the next second, the back of Shiki's fist was rammed into his nasal bone.

"Argh..."

"Are you a complete fool? What part of climbing to the top of a building with bare hands screams that he's 'not that much of a deal'? If you think it's easy, why don't we hang you onto that window frame over there and watch you do it?"

"S-Sorry! B-But if he's so tough why is he still running away? Doesn't that mean that he doesn't want us as his enemies?"

Shiki thought about it for a moment before muttering, as if to himself.

"But if that's what he's thinking, why did he kill our employees in the first place?"

"Er..."

Shiki ignored the subordinate struggling to find his voice and continued to mutter to himself.

"He didn't touch the safe. With that kind of strength he could easily have pried it open or taken it with him."

And with that, Shiki voiced the simplest and most important question of them all.

"...Was it really Shizuo who did it?"

"Blond hair, sunglasses, bartender suit. There's no way one could have mistaken anyone else for him."

“No, but that report only proves that he was here at some point. However...”

Shiki broke off mid-sentence and scrutinized the room again.

If Heiwajima Shizuo was really the culprit, he would have had no reason to leave any living witnesses.

It's possible that he let the eyewitness off because he wanted the eyewitness to tell everyone that he did it. But why on earth was it necessary for him to do so?

“Anyhow, we must have him under our control. Things will get out of hand if Akabayashi and Aozaki try to involve themselves in this.”

Just as he gave such orders to the subordinates around him, another one of his subordinates ran into the room through the door.

“Shiki-san, I have an urgent report.”

“What is it?”

“...I just got it from the people who are looking for Mikiya-san's daughter... It seems that a talent scout on 60-Story Street saw Miss Akane yesterday.”

The name belonged to the girl who was Awakusu Mikiya's daughter and Awakusu Dougen's granddaughter.

Almost the entire Awakusu-kai had been trying to find her after she ran away from home. Shiki had only just realized that he had almost forgotten about her because of the more serious incident he had at hand.

“Isn't Kazamoto in charge of looking for Miss Akane? Why are you reporting to me?”

The fact that he had come all the way to report to Shiki meant that the mission now had something to do with Shiki's.

With an uncanny feeling in his chest, Shiki demanded that the subordinate elaborate.

And he guessed right.

“Y-Yesterday, Heiwajima Shizuo was seen taking a...a girl that looked like Miss...somewhere with him...”



Somewhere in Tokyo, a train station platform

It was the middle of Golden Week. With vacationing families, students who were no longer wearing uniforms, and salary men working the holiday shifts, the platform was swarming with even larger crowds than usual.

Amidst the constantly moving crowd, a young man was leaning against a pillar in a corner, remaining unmoved even as he saw the train stop.

Running around? That's so not like you, Shizu-chan.

With his gaze fixed on the cell phone screen, the young man, Orihara Izaya, smiled slightly.

Finally gaining some resemblance of calmness, are you?

Because if you fought back, there would have been no chance for you to convince them whatsoever.

Actually, by now...the smarter ones among the Awakusu-kai men should be suspecting that maybe Shizu-chan is not the culprit after all.

I guess that means you've grown somewhat as a human being.

Except that in your case, it's not growth—more like degeneration.

Pressing the keys on his cell phone, Izaya smiled again as he pictured his enemy desperately trying to flee.

Cheerfully, merrily, and mockingly from the bottom of his heart.

What's the meaning of growing up as a human being when you're far from a human being to begin with?

There's no way out for you except to use force.

If you simply beat that eyewitness to death, you still could have gotten off without being suspected.

As he voiced these conflicting ideas in his head, the information broker continued with some sort of information transaction on his cell phone.

As his eyes fell on one of those reports, his smile became less mocking and instead broke into a wider grin.

So. Let the game begin.

Until 30 minutes ago Izaya had stayed in one of his hiding spots near the train station.

But as soon as he got a text message that said “Dollars is being attacked”, he moved out of the darkness and into the sunlight.

However, that was not because he wanted to throw himself into the eye of the hurricane.

He was standing on the side of the platform where the trains departed from Ikebukuro.

Ahh. I'll just stay out of the mosquito curtain.

The corners of Izaya's mouth curled slightly upwards as he typed some sort of information onto his cell phone and pressed SEND.

At the same time, the next train was arriving.

The young man replaced his cell phone back into his pocket and slid into the train with light footsteps.

It's about time I let them hear some annoying wing noises from outside of the mosquito curtain.



Somewhere in Tokyo, the rooftop of a building near the abandoned factory

“Oi, Vorona. Do you think this is how hunters feel when they're waiting for their prey's next move?” the huge guy asked.

Vorona did not even nod. Instead, she remained still and answered, “Affirmative, negative, I cannot decide. My animal-hunting experience, nil. If the target is human, then the current situation is the same in manifestation. Comparisons are not applicable.”

“I see. I don't really get it, but I see.”

Nodding, Slon—the man—began looking around through his binoculars.

Through the lenses he saw the backside of the abandoned factory.

Right there, a “being” in a pitch-black rider suit and a full-faced helmet was peeking inside the factory for some reason.

It seemed that the rider was interested in the delinquents gathering inside the factory. For Vorona and Slon, their next move had to wait until the Black Rider made his.

In fact, the delinquents had been in that factory for almost an hour now.

As they waited for their opponent to make a move, Slon popped yet another pointless question that had nothing to do with reality.

“Speaking of hunting, there’s something I’ve been wondering about...”

Slon sounded dead serious; Vorona, however, did not move her gaze for an inch.

“Since the ancient days people have used poisoned arrows in hunting, right? They would treat the arrowheads they used for their blowpipe darts and bows with poison. What’s the deal with that? When they eat the prey that had been poisoned to death, wouldn’t they be poisoned to death too? I’ve been so wound up over that and I can’t do anything about it. The question itself is eating up my brain like a poison. I’m probably going to die of that soon.”

Her partner’s serious question did not elicit any bodily or emotional response from the woman. Like an electronic encyclopedia she recited the answer to the question in a flat voice.

“The poison used in hunting, mostly via circulatory system, affects nervous system and brain. Animal instantly dies, alternatively is paralyzed. Pity, pity. Humans, intake them orally. Saliva, stomach, duodenum, break down poison as it passes. Neutralized. Happy end, happy end. Wisdom bred from experience. Grandmother’s knowledge bag.”

“I see! The human stomach is just as awesome as I thought! Of course, if they poisoned themselves with the poison they used for hunting it would have been ridiculous. ...Speaking of which, what happens if poisonous snakes bite their own tails?”

“Immunity to self-generated poison, exists. Most poisonous snakes don’t have a problem. But, not completely affirmative for all. Snakes with stronger poison, poison triumphs over immunity. Only death awaits. Pity, pity.”

“I see!”

This went on for several minutes while Vorona kept her watch on the Black Rider without moving an inch. Despite the fact the he kept popping stupid questions at Vorona, Slon never relaxed his watch on the surroundings either.

Was he going to stay still like that until every delinquent had left the abandoned factory?

Just as Vorona was starting to have such thoughts, the Black Rider suddenly moved.

“?”

As she watched more closely to see what was happening, she realized that the Black Rider had just gotten a call on his cell phone.

Furthermore, the sound seemed to have made the people inside the factory aware of his presence. The Rider became visibly flustered.

“...A monster, but his actions remind one of humans. Comprehension is impossible.”

“Yeah, comprehension impossible indeed. But look, there’s something weird going on at the entrance.”

As she turned her eyes in the direction indicated by Slon, she saw another dozen men gathered at the entrance of the abandoned factory. They looked like delinquents too; however, there was something strange about them.

They held steel pipes or wooden katanas in their hands, and unlike the boys in the factory, they were dressed in something that looked like overalls.

Are those tokko-fukus worn by specialized groups of delinquents in Japan?

By the time Vorona made this judgment, the young men had already walked into the factory.

Some of them walked towards the back entrance—probably with the intention of blocking their opponents’ way of escape.

“What do we do now?”

“Keep watching. Either way, Black Rider should move somehow. Our gazes cannot be averted when that happens. That is important.”

They maintained their positions.

It was unlikely that they had foreseen the clash between the delinquents, but they were not worried in the slightest.

A fight between groups of Japanese boys could not have less to do with their world.

As if to accentuate that fact, they remained calm throughout the whole scene.

Or at least had remained calm so far.



Several minutes ago, an upscale apartment building on Kawagoe Highway

“It’s so quiet all of a sudden.”

Kishitani Shinra’s apartment had been busy until morning.

The patient was recovering fine, but the unexpected guests had nevertheless made his night truly hectic.

But now Shinra was by himself in the room.

Celty had still yet to return from her job. Tom had gone back to work, and Shizuo was off to destroy Izaya. Anri and the little girl had gone for a walk in the Ikebukuro streets.

“Everyone’s so energetic, going outside first thing in the morning. Kids nowadays are not afraid of ultraviolet radiation at all.”

Shinra was usually dressed in white even in his living quarters, making one marvel at what a complete indoor person he was. As he awaited the return of Celty, his roommate, he ran household errands—like laundering the sheets the patient had slept on.

At that time, the doorbell rang.

“Oops, is it Shizuo? Or Izaya with every bone in his body broken?”

Humming as he muttered to himself, Shinra opened the door—

—And saw several formidable looking men standing there.

Shinra did not look intimidated, however, as he spoke directly to the man at the center.

“Shiki-san, has something happened?”

“I have something I want to ask you.”

Shiki had barely finished the sentence when he walked through the door and without a word continued towards the inner rooms.

“Wait—wait a second, Shiki-san?”

Ignoring Shinra’s voice, Shiki stood in the middle of the living room and looked around. After that, he walked towards the kitchen.

“Looks like you had guests,” Shiki remarked after seeing the various used cups on the counter.

He then reached his hand out towards something that would never be seen on such a counter—namely, a steel cup crushed into a small ball next to the other cups.

Although he had no clue what Shiki was doing, Shinra laughed bitterly and began to explain about the cup.

“Ah, you know what happened just by looking at that, I’m sure. Shizuo’s been here. All I did was joke a little and there he was squeezing people’s cups into something like that with only one hand... I just feel like I’m under the threat of death all the time when he’s around.”

“...”

Shiki pondered Shinra’s words for a couple of seconds.

There were only a limited number of places Heiwajima Shizuo could go due to the fact that he was feared by the majority of people. Though he had also sent subordinates to look in Shizuo’s own apartment, Shiki had come to Shinra’s apartment hoping to find out more about Shizuo since Shinra was one of Shizuo’s acquaintances.

Of course, he had more or less guessed that Shizuo would have already left this place. The reason he marched into Shinra’s apartment without even exchanging proper greetings like he used to was that he had just seen parts of the handrails broken and twisted into impossible shapes—as if a monster had torn them off.

That was probably what Shizuo did in his rage when he set out to kill Orihara Izaya. Although Shiki had yet to know that part of the story, it was nevertheless easy to associate what he saw with Heiwajima Shizuo.

Don’t tell me Awakusu Akane is in this apartment too?

With such questions and hopes, Shiki stepped into the apartment. But he did not sense the presence of any human being other than themselves and Shinra.

“? What happened, Shiki-san? Do you have another urgent patient? I’ve been dealing with Shizuo and other patients all last night, so I’m really exhausted. If you need an operation I’d suggest that you find someone better.”

Judging by the way Shinra talked, he was unaware of the fact that Shizuo was being tracked down.

But Shiki remained quiet on the matter as he opened his mouth and inquired in a serious voice, “...Shizuo’s been in this apartment, right?”

“? Yeah. Did he do something? He couldn’t have destroyed one of stores under Shiki-san’s protection, could he?”

“Well, something like that. The victims really didn’t do anything to deserve it, so even though we can’t say for sure that he was the one, we’d still like to talk to him. That’s why we’re looking for him right now.”

“Ah, if that’s all you want, you could have just called him.”

Shinra, after hearing Shiki’s explanation containing only a part of the truth, produced his cell phone from the pocket of his white coat.

“Hmm, there are a lot of text messages from Dollars. ...Whatever.”

Shinra closed the text message inbox and opened the contact list instead. Smiling at Shiki, he said, “I’ll just call Shizuo to ask him where he is. He gets mad pretty easily, but it’s never without reason, so I do hope you can forgive him for whatever he did. Also, did it happen today?”

“Yeah, it happened today.”

Shinra sighed a bit as he heard Shiki’s reply and pressed the shortcut key combination for Shizuo’s number.

As he pressed the cell phone to his ear, he began to chat with Shiki.

“He’s never been as mad than he is today. Guess it couldn’t have been helped.”

“...Is that so?”

Even though what Shinra had said interested him, Shiki did not let his emotions show. Instead he waited for Shinra to continue.

“I wonder where to start. He came to this apartment yesterday...and guess whom he brought with him?”

“Well, his star of a brother?”

Shiki had a guess.

But he voiced a different one and kept an eye on Shinra’s expressions.

Yet Shinra kept smiling. In a casual tone, he said, “Nah, nah. Actually, he brought a girl about ten years old with him, that guy!”

“...!”

“Huh? Shizuo’s not picking up. ...Ah, right. After that, Shizuo...”

But Shinra had to stop here.

As he turned his gaze away from the cell phone and back to Shiki’s face, he realized that the other man looked sterner than ever. Meanwhile, Shiki’s subordinates surrounded Shinra with stony expressions on their faces.



“Huh? Eh? Did I say something really bad?”

For the first time, it finally occurred to Shinra that the situation was more serious than he had initially thought.

Shiki, on the other hand, pressured Shinra further with his sharp, unrelenting voice.

“That girl.....where is she right now?”

♂ ♀

Ryuugamine Mikado was aware.

Aware of what exactly he had created.

“Dollars” started off as nothing more than a practical joke.

“Let’s make a virtual organization!” Mikado had proposed. A number of his friends online had found the idea interesting and helped him found this completely made-up gang.

“There are no rules for joining or staying in the gang.”

Before they realized it, this bizarre organization had become an actual presence in the city of Ikebukuro.

Ikebukuro.

For Mikado, it was a city he had never even been to.

He had only seen it in magazines, newspapers or TV dramas; it was something that fell on the other side, separated from him by the wall between reality and imagination.

His co-founders were by now nowhere to be found.

They did not even know that his real name was Ryuugamine Mikado. Mikado, of course, did not know their ages and looks either. Anyone who was not an Internet person would find their relationship ridiculous. But that did not change the fact that they had founded Dollars together.

They had cut their online ties with Mikado.

Somehow it became a very real, scary presence.

The gang they had created half-jokingly was moving forwards, sometimes illegally, under the name they had christened it with—and the society began to see it as another one of those Color Gangs.

Fearing the consequences, the founders chose to escape.

They changed their online handles and never brought up the name Dollars again.

That was enough.

That was all they had to do to avoid their responsibility.

It should have been nothing more than fun. It should not have affected anything in reality.

If someone drew a Frankenstein and it began to attack people, would it be the artist's responsibility to stop it?

It was a hard question to answer. But as long as responsibilities can be avoided, most would choose to avoid them.

That was probably what these friends—whose faces Mikado had never seen in his life—had thought when they disappeared from “Dollars” one by one.

But Mikado was different.

He accepted the presence of “Dollars” in his reality.

Telling himself that that was what he had really wanted.

Someone has to be there to regulate it.

It's an obligation of the founder.

The boy had told himself this while concealing the excitement in his chest.

How much did Ryuugamine Mikado understand at that point?

Did he know what he had created?

Did he know what it meant to remain a founder of the gang named Dollars?

Whether he understood completely, or not at all—

His reality was now under merciless attack by everything that had to do with Dollars.

Ryuugamine Mikado was aware.

Aware of what exactly he had made up.

But the boy did not know.

Did not know exactly who he was himself.

Ryuugamine Mikado had yet to find an answer.



Somewhere in Tokyo, an abandoned factory

The time was about one hour before Shiki arrived at Shinra's apartment.

“So, have you decided, Mikado-sempai?”

With a refreshing smile on his childlike face, Kuronuma Aoba asked in a tone that did not match his looks at all.

In front of him was Ryuugamine Mikado, with a face no less childlike than Aoba's despite being a year Aoba's senior.

They were sempai and kouhai at Raira Academy.

Or fellow members in the sea of an organization called Dollars.

At least that was the relationship they had had when they first met each other.

But that was only from Mikado's point of view.

Aoba, on the other hand, had known everything from the very beginning.

He knew that Mikado was the founder of Dollars.

He knew about their clash with the Yellow Turbans and Mikado's relationship to Kida Masaomi.

He even sensed part of Ryuugamine Mikado's concealed nature, of which not even Mikado himself was aware.

On the other hand, Mikado knew nothing about Aoba.

He had thought of him as merely a kouhai who admired Dollars.

The word "merely" had come from nothing other than his own imagination.

For Mikado, the use of the word "merely" was not saying that he knew everything about a person and felt confident defining him this way; rather, it showed that he knew very little about the person.

Yet this kouhai, about whom he knew very little, was suddenly giving him a lot of pressure.

He had told Mikado that he was the founder of Blue Square.

He had also told him that he had led the attack against Toramaru in Saitama.

The string of shocking confessions was already enough to sweep Mikado off his feet, yet—

Just as he was about to regain his composure, Aoba had assaulted him with another "plea".

"Be the leader of Blue Square."

An out-of-the-blue and surreal one.

He wanted to deny everything.

He was so sure that he was dreaming.

I must be having this dream because I'm jealous of Aoba-kun being close to Sonohara-san and want to put him in a position inferior to mine.

What a coward I am.

He thought, and struggled to wake up from the dream.

To escape the reality.

But what Aoba said next made Mikado stiffen like a puppet whose string had just been pulled.

“Mikado-sempai, aren’t you...

...smiling?”

Liar!

That’s impossible!

He wanted to yell.

To yell from the bottom of his stomach.

But before he could make a sound, Mikado had realized something.

That he was for some reason high as a kite when he heard Aoba’s words.

If it were anyone else in his place, they would probably have just yelled in anger without dwelling further on their thoughts.

But Mikado felt the impulse inside himself more vividly than anything had ever exerted upon him from the outside.

The shock from that impulse was so abnormally strong that it threatened to counter the impulse itself.

That was because—he had never been so high since he was born.

Not at Dollars’s first gathering. Not when he talked to Yagiri Seiji’s older sister.

Not when the Slashers attacked Dollars members.

Not even when he saw Masaomi heavily injured in the battle—

He was angry, but never so agitated that he would want to shout.

What's...with me?

Why am I feeling this heat from the bottom of my stomach?

What ended up escaping his throat was not a shout of denial, but rather a strong sense of nausea.

The boy had realized.

That the reason he wanted to shout a moment ago—

—Was exactly because what Aoba had accused him of was the truth.

Eh...huh...

Mikado touched his own face without thinking.

He wanted to know what expression he was wearing on his face.

However, now that he had come to, his face was without doubt no longer smiling.

But what about a moment ago, at the exact second when Aoba accused him of smiling?

I...was I...

What exactly was I thinking?

He couldn't even remember how he felt a mere couple of seconds ago. Only cold sweat was continuing to trickle down his spine.

“Sempai, are you alright?”

Before he realized it, Aoba's face was looming close.

“U-Uwah!?”

His kouhai had become unfathomable all of a sudden. His smile looked as innocent as it did a moment ago, but Mikado found it no longer possible to be convinced by that smile.

“That was mean. How can you yelp like that when you see your cute kouhai's face? ...It's been about 10 minutes. Have you made a decision yet?”

“10...10 minutes?”

Had that much time really passed while he was busy being lost in shock and thought? Mikado took his cell phone out to make sure.

As his eyes fell on the screen he saw a notice that said “23 new messages”. They were probably all related to the attacks on Dollars members.

“So many...”

Mikado felt his heartbeat accelerating at an impossible pace.

He also realized that his ears were ringing.

Shock.

He was in a state of shock now.

That was the only thing he knew.

He did not have the slightest clue where to start to make sense of the situation.

The attacks on Dollars?

Or Aoba’s confession that he was the founder of Blue Square?

Or that they were the ones who attacked the bousouzoku in Saitama?

Or that he knew that Mikado was the founder of Dollars?

Or that he had just asked Mikado to become the leader of Blue Square?

Or, more importantly than everything else, was he really smiling amidst the shock and confusion?

They were separate incidents, yet they were all inter-related.

Right now Mikado did not even have the slightest clue as to where he should start.

“Wait, wait a second.”

He said without thinking, but the words he finally said solved nothing.

Looking at Mikado, Aoba grinned innocently and muttered even crueler words:

“We’ve been waiting all along, all of us.”

“...”

Aoba and Mikado were not the only people in the abandoned factory.

Boys who were all Blue Square members according to Aoba were scattered throughout the factory doing different things. Some played with their cell phones like Mikado while others sat on the steel drums yawning. It made them look like the furthest thing from a disciplined team.

Although no one in the factory had noticed, Celty was outside of the factory window keeping an eye on their movements.

“Well. You don’t have to feel so pressured. Isn’t your inbox fairly spammed by now? Wouldn’t it be better to check the messages out?”

Aoba muttered as he, too, looked down at his own cell phone.

“Though they’re mostly just reports that some members have been attacked. Looks like it’s still nothing that important. I don’t hear any sirens from patrol cars, and it’s not like anyone seeking out the Dollars people would come to this place anyway since it’s supposed to be a gathering spot for Yellow Turbans.”

Mikado trembled as he heard his kouhai’s nonchalant voice.

Aoba was basically saying, “Calm down and think of how to deal with us.”

“Can I go back home and give it some thought?”

“I don’t think we can wait that long.”

Aoba shook his head as two well-built delinquents walked towards the entrance and closed the gate of the abandoned factory.

The crackling noise as the gate was being closed sounded like a song of despair in Mikado’s frozen ears.

“B-But, hey, aren’t we supposed to be meeting with Sonohara-san pretty soon.....?”

“Are you still thinking about that even in your present state, Mikado-sempai? How smitten are you with Anri-sempai, exactly?”

The kouhai smiled bitterly as he mocked him.

Had it been any other time Mikado would have blushed and retorted, “I-It’s not like that!” But right now his face simply remained deadly pale.

Aoba, however, was just about to say something to make his face turn blue.

“Either way, don’t you think it’s better to not meet with Anri-sempai today?”

“Eh...”

“Wouldn’t that be risking involving her in this?”

“...!”

Anri had nothing to do with what was happening between them.

Mikado had more or less sensed that she was keeping a secret of her own.

She was wielding a katana when they went to rescue Masaomi from his former fellow Yellow Turbans. On top of that, she also knew Celty. That was why Mikado assumed that she had a secret of her own.

But regardless of what her secret was, or if she had one, Anri was his precious friend and the girl he liked. He could not risk involving her in this conflict—that was what he decided.

And then, the boy remembered.

In his call, Izaya had said to him, “If you don’t want to be involved, just don’t mention that you’re in Dollars.”

Before he got the call, Masaomi had also warned him of similar things in the chatroom.

He had been warned to avoid associating himself with other Dollars members.

Now that he thought about it, Masaomi had probably foreseen that things would turn out like this.

Mikado, in his confusion, came to something close to a conclusion.

Masaomi had access to information networks other than his own. It could be that he had already known about Aoba and his gang.

If that was the case, wouldn’t he disappoint Masaomi greatly if he replied to Aoba “as a Dollars member”?

Yet at the same time, wouldn’t he just be using his friend as an excuse to extract himself from this confusing situation?

Mikado could not sort everything out in the short amount of time he had. Nevertheless, he decided to answer the question posed by the boy in front of him. But that answer was still

half-intended to convince himself that he was not doing what he was doing “as a Dollars member”.

“If I don’t mention Dollars...then she won’t get involved. Isn’t that simple?”

He was talking like an idiot who was too used to peace. Aoba would probably be disappointed.

So Mikado thought, but he could not bring himself to care.

He would not even mind getting beaten up by these delinquents and going home with heavy injuries if that was what it had to take to get himself out of this situation.

That was just how much pressure Mikado was under at that time.

But the innocently smiling boy was not about to let his revered sempai escape like that.

“You won’t be able to do that.”

“...Eh?”

“Mikado-sempai, you will never be able to just abandon Dollars as it is being attacked and live your life like an ordinary person.”

“...!”

The whispers of the devil sounded completely innocent in his ear.

“The solution is simple. If you want us to make those Toramaru guys a living sacrifice on the shrine, just order us to do so. You won’t even have to worry about getting yourself hurt, Mikado-sempai.”

The suggestion was more meant to provoke than soothe.

Usually Mikado would jump at the mere suggestion (“I’d never do something like that!”) and send text messages to all Dollars members to tell them not to hurt anyone.

But right now, Mikado’s thoughts had come to a screeching halt right before that point.

Partly because he was reminded of the advice from Izaya, whom he trusted.

Furthermore, he was reminded of something Izaya had asked him over the phone: “What you’re actually afraid of is that Dollars will move on without you, right?”

If he was to do anything here as a Dollars member, be it collecting information or coming up with a solution, he would be doing the exact things Izaya had predicted that he would do.

Also, if he was to do anything here as a Dollars member, he would be ignoring Masaomi's advice when the latter had cared about him enough to warn him.

More importantly than those, he was afraid that if he was to admit to being a full Dollars member through involving himself in this conflict, he would risk involving Anri and Masaomi again just like when the clash with Yellow Turbans took place.

But even so, he would rather choose that path out of his own will than have it chosen for him by Aoba and his intimidating friends.

Ryuugamine Mikado was an individual easily wavered by those around him.

But about his own creation, Dollars, he had ideas that even he himself could not understand.

Even as he stood where he was right then, Mikado could feel the tide of nameless emotions ravaging his own insides.

It was a similar feeling to the one he had when he got into the conflict with Yagiri Pharmaceuticals.

But he did not understand what exactly that feeling was.

That was why he failed to catch himself as he sank deeper and deeper into the quagmire of confusion.

“But still...I...”

This is a curious sight to behold. Mikado-sempai is somewhat different today.

The one to notice the changes in the boy was no other than Aoba, the person who put him in a state of confusion in the first place.

Had this been the Mikado he knew, he would have already made some sort of “decision” after Aoba's provocation, be it straight-out refusal or something else.

Yet Mikado seemed to be hesitating for some strange reason. It was keeping him from making any decision at all.

...Did someone prep him for this?

Aoba did not know.

That Mikado had been warned by his most trusted friend, Kida Masaomi, to “not live the life as a Dollars member” just shortly beforehand.

Neither did he know that it was in fact not Masaomi but a complete impostor using Masaomi's handle to deceive Mikado—

...

But Aoba somehow realized.

Was it Orihara Izaya...?

Realized that a certain man had put a little lock in Mikado's heart.

It was not that Aoba had caught any wind of Izaya's moves.

However, Ryuugamine Mikado's reactions were somehow strange. Of course, a person cannot predict how another person would act with 100% accuracy. But what concerned Aoba was that Mikado was not acting "unlike Mikado", but rather "unlike the founder of Dollars".

And there were only a limited number of people who could influence Mikado on matters related to Dollars.

I can't say it for sure...

But if it was indeed him, why would he do it? Was it just a strategic move to harass us?

Or does Orihara Izaya want to use Mikado-sempai to his own end as well?

Thinking about his enemy, Orihara Izaya, Aoba concealed his indignation as he smiled lightheartedly at Mikado and continued.

"It's OK. Please take some time to decide. Speaking of which, why don't we use the time we're meeting Anri-sempai as the deadline?"

"Eh..."

"If you don't decide by then, I will call Anri-sempai and tell her that Mikado-sempai has something urgent to attend to and can't seem to make it today. As for me, I will be there in 10 minutes."

"W-Wait a second!"

Mikado was more bothered by the latter part than he was by Aoba lying about him having other things to attend to.

"You're going to go...?"

“Ah, sure I’m going to go. Isn’t that only reasonable? If it turns out that neither of us can go with her, Anri-sempai will feel uncomfortable too, won’t she?”

With that, he cast a glance at his companions standing by the gate blocking the way out, and narrowed his eyes as he said:

“Mikado-sempai, you can just wait here.”



A “shadow” had been keeping her watch on the things going on inside the abandoned factory.

Taking precautions to avoid being seen by the boys inside, Celty Sturluson continued to think.

Hmm.

What should I do now?

Her goal was of course to not stalk this group of delinquents.

She had been asked by the Awakusu-kai to look for and bodyguard Awakusu Akane.

After she got the job, she and Anri were attacked by a mysterious rider. Celty had attached her shadow thread to the back of her opponent’s motorbike and came all the way here to find people she never expected to find inside. By now, she had completely missed the chance to go inside.

Their motorbike should be parked inside the factory.

These kids don’t look like they would be after the granddaughter of the head of Awakusu-kai...

As Celty continued to watch, she saw Mikado’s face turn pale at some text message on his cell phone. Before that, the boy who looked like his kouhai was smiling unflinchingly.

Anyway, it doesn’t look like Mikado-kun is going to get beaten up any time soon, but still...

It looks like this is going to take a while.

It was the right move to have turned off my own ringtone for incoming text messages.

Celty had had it on until text messages from Dollars became too many for her to handle. Now she usually kept it in the OFF mode.

At the beginning it was in the vibrate mode, but the boys inside the factory had been too distracted by the ringtones of their own cell phones to notice hers since the messages from Dollars were sent to everyone.

Celty remembered that she should turn off the vibrate mode as well and did so quietly.

She had half a mind to leave, but she was still somewhat worried about Mikado.

He was not a stranger to her. In fact, he ranked among her few acquaintances who remained on friendly terms with her even after he came to know her real identity.

She thought about rushing inside to help him, but she feared that it might turn out to be adding to Mikado's troubles. It seemed like he had been presented with a question he must find the answer to on his own. Furthermore, if she caused a commotion here she would risk drawing the attention of the owners of the motorbike—her enemies—and involving all the boys in the factory, including Mikado, in this mess.

Unaware that she was already being watched herself, Celty kept her watch on the boys from outside the factory.

Speaking of which, it looks like Mikado-kun is in some real trouble this time.

That kid, Aoba-kun, doesn't look like a delinquent but he might be a scheming bastard.

...Ah, but then when Shinra first brought Izaya home I had thought he looked like a good student too. ...One can't judge a book by its cover.

Celty was a Dollars member. However, for her Dollars was not an indispensable home. Had she turned Shinra down it might have become something close to that, but right now it was only one of her multiple "homes". She did not even know her fellow Dollars members any better than she did her chatroom companions.

But Mikado was her acquaintance in real life. She could not leave him to his own devices when he was in danger.

But what will you do, Mikado-kun?

Usually mature kids like Mikado would think it was a practical joke when they were asked to become the leader of a gang.

But Celty knew that Mikado was not that simple of a kid.

When she had first met him, he had been in a face-to-face “battle” with a high executive at Yagiri Pharmaceuticals. Although it was only a verbal exchange rather than a physical battle, it was a fierce “battle” nevertheless. From what she saw that day Celty had decided that Mikado was a courageous person.

Yet Mikado was hesitating today.

Was he worried that he might risk involving Anri in this?

If it's Anri-chan, he really doesn't have to worry since it would spell more trouble for the party who dared to involve her than for her.

Celty knew that Anri was the host of “Saika” and was very aware of Anri’s strength.

Mikado did not know about this; however, by now he would have had a clue or two.

But Mikado-kun will eventually choose not to risk involving Anri-chan, I guess.

Even if he knew about “Saika”, he would probably choose to do the same.

However, if Anri-chan offers to help him, it's unlikely that he would turn her down.

Celty was reminded of the time when Mikado had first come to know her real identity. She had realized upon that meeting that Mikado had a greater thirst for “unusual” things than anyone else. If Anri expressed her wish to “go over to the unusual side”, there was no way he would refuse.

Although for Celty, who was on a mission for Awakusu-kai and only half a day ago had been fired at by an anti-material rifle, what was happening with Mikado probably had to fall on the “usual” side of things.

This gang business was pretty out of hand when Shinra went to high school. Is it like that for all high school kids? I just really don't get that.

The fights she remembered happened more than 5 years ago when Shinra was still a student. Celty had witnessed several times high school students fighting each other on a large scale.

Those fights were not like the ones between Dollars and Yellow Turbans; they mostly consisted of high school kids in the same neighborhood fighting over certain territories.

In the eye of the hurricane stood Shizuo, who simply wanted to live a quiet life.

The one who pulled the strings was Izaya, who made sure that he stayed outside of the ring of battle.

Shinra stayed neutral and kept himself unaffected in-between the fighting parties.

Shinra would probably smile and say, "So! Hurry up, apologize to them and let them beat you up. I will treat you guys afterwards for free and we'll call it even, OK?" Shizuo would go "DON'T ADD TO MY FUCKING TROUBLES!" and put an end to this by beating everyone into the ground. Izaya would...

What would Izaya do?

That kid called Aoba, he's kind of like Izaya.

As this thought came to her mind, Celty realized something.

Ah, right.

Izaya wouldn't have done something like this in the first place.

A person his type harbors unusually strong animosity towards people who are like him, so he wouldn't have asked someone like him to become the leader in the first place. ...Unless his intention is to lure the person into a trap, of course.

Celty kept juggling such thoughts on her mind as she kept her silent watch on the things going on inside the factory.

Without realizing that her enemies' eyes were, at the exact same time, focused on her back.

It's been a while.

Afterwards nothing much had happened inside the abandoned factory.

Mikado had lowered his face, asked Aoba something and collected information on his cell phone. But nothing attention drawing had happened.

How many minutes have passed?

Celty checked her cell phone and realized that it had been almost an hour since she arrived at this abandoned factory.

Just as she was seriously considering either rushing inside to rescue Mikado or leaving on her motorbike, inside the factory Aoba suddenly smiled and clapped his hands.

"So, it's about time I called Anri-sempai."

“Wait, wait a second!”

A well-built delinquent grabbed Mikado’s shoulders as he was about to say something.

“I’m worried that sempai might shout unnecessary stuff into the phone if we called her, so I think we’ll be sending her a text message instead. Actually, I should apologize. I already sent one to her 5 minutes ago.”

“Eh...”

“So I kind of have to go right now, I don’t want to be late, you know. Mikado-sempai can wait here and take all the time you need to think it over. ...While reading text messages from Dollars members being beaten into the ground, I guess.”

“W-Wait!”

Celty lifted her waist a little on her motorbike as she heard Mikado yell.

...Looks like I will have to do something about it after all.

That Aoba kid is going to leave soon, so I can probably go in and get him out later.

As she watched Aoba turn his back towards Mikado and make a move to leave, Celty was reminded of the feeling in her stomach a moment ago.

That boy was like Orihara Izaya.

That feeling alone was enough to put her on her guard against this boy.

I don’t really know why, but I feel like it would be better not to have anything to do with this Aoba kid.

When I’ve taken Mikado-kun to Anri-chan, I’ll return to this factory since I still haven’t taken the thread off that motorbike.

At the exact moment when she had just decided on the best time to get out of her hiding spot and charge into the factory—

“That sound” reached her ears at the worst possible time.

“♪♪♪♪♪~~~~~”

It was the famous “Confiscated!” music clip from [“Discover World’s Wonders”](#)*.

** “Confiscated!”: or “Bosshuuto!”, is a well-known line used by Kusano Jin, the host of the TV show “Wonders and Discoveries” aired on TBS. Kusano says this line every time a participant places his or her bet on the wrong answer and subsequently must let one of their “Hitoshi-kun” dolls be “confiscated”. The color of the dolls taken away from the participant varies according to the level of “disappointment” at their getting the answers wrong.*

It was undoubtedly coming from Celty’s own cell phone.

Huh!?

I forgot to turn off the ringtone for incoming calls!

Though Celty had turned off the ringtone for incoming text messages, she had forgotten to turn off the even more important one for incoming calls.

When she had played with her ringtone settings, she had tried setting this music clip as her ringtone for fun. As soon as Shinra heard it, he had jumped and said, “Wait, Celty! I’m about the only one who would call you since you can’t talk, right!? What’s with this!? Does it mean that every call from me will scream ‘Confiscated!’!? Wait a second! If I did anything wrong I will apologize! If you’re taking a Hitoshi-kun doll from me then at least tell me what color it’s gonna be*!”

** Hitoshi-kun: see the translation note for “Confiscated!”.*

Since she had thought Shinra had been really funny when he said this, Celty had set this ringtone as Shinra’s default.

The sound of the ringtone was so out of tune with the atmosphere in the factory that Celty was reminded of how she had come to use it. But there was no time for her to reminisce further.

Just as she hastened to turn off the ringtone on her cell phone, the shocked faces of almost every boy in the factory, including Mikado’s and Aoba’s, were already turned towards her.

“Hello, hello, is it Celty? Shiki-san’s come all the way to visit us. We just got to know something really important that concerns this job you’re doing. Do you have time right now? Hmm? If you can hear me just answer me with our usual secret code. Hello, hello—?”

Celty had no ears right now for the voice that was speaking on the other end of the phone.

“...Black Motorbike?”

“Celty-san!? Why are you here!?”

She heard the voice of Aoba, whose smile had disappeared for the first time, and the voice of Mikado, whose astonishment couldn’t be made any more obvious.

Right after the two voices had finished asking—

“Who the hell are you?”

The voices of the boys who had at last recovered from the shock ricocheted throughout the factory, demanding an answer.

Celty tapped the code for “Now is not the best time” at the microphone part of her cell phone and took out her PDA with the other hand.

And with her countless “shadow fingers”, she typed something onto the PDA and showed it to one of the delinquents who had walked to the window.

[I’m just a passing urban legend. If you don’t pretend you never saw me, I’ll attack you all in your sleep tonight.]

♂ ♀

Shinra’s apartment on Kawagoe Highway

“Are you messing with us!?”

Voices of boys Shinra had never heard before sounded from the other end of the phone.

Shinra sighed and turned around to say, “Um, it looks like Celty is in some sort of trouble.”

The person on whom Shinra’s eyes fell on was Shiki, who was sitting in the chair with a troubled expression, his hands crossed.

“...Please keep trying to get in touch with her. We are understaffed as it is.”

“No problem. Ah, please believe that what I’m telling is the truth. Celty didn’t know that this Akane-chan was in our apartment, and I never heard Celty talk about the job she was asked to do, either.”

“I believe that. If you want to, sensei, you could have erased all traces that would let us know that Shizuo’s been here. Celty-san must have avoided telling you about her job because she didn’t want to risk involving you. This asymmetry of information does bother me to some extent, of course.”

Shiki voiced his own opinion in a straightforward and calm tone. His expression darkened slightly as he mentioned the name of the person of grave importance to him.

“...So, that high school girl who took Miss Akane out for a walk—you said she was going to meet up with her friends... Any idea where she would be going?”

Shinra felt his spine tremble involuntarily as Shiki asked him the question with an unrelentingly sharp look in his eyes. However, he managed to maintain his usual attitude as he reasoned.

“Yeah, I wonder. She doesn’t look like she’s the type who would know a lot of meeting spots in the city. My guess is that it’s going to be either in front of Tokyu Hands on 60-Story Street, or the Lotteria on the other side of the street, or the fountain in front of the entrance of Metropolitan, or West Gate Park if they’re planning on taking the train, or Ikefukurou* in front of East Gate. Something like that.”

** Ikefukurou: the name of the statue of the stone owl in front of Ikebukuro Station’s East Gate. It is a portmanteau word combining “Ikebukuro” and “fukurou” (Japanese for “owl”).*

“...”

Shiki cast a look at his subordinates, several of whom hastened to take their cell phones out of their pockets.

Awakusu-kai men were probably heading for all of the places Shinra had mentioned right that minute.

“But still, I wouldn’t in my wildest imagination have expected that the kid was the precious granddaughter of Awakusu-kai’s Manager.”

“...I don’t think you’d need reminding, but on that matter...”

“Please rest assured. You know how good at keeping secrets I am. The only one who can pry my mouth open is Celty, and she’s no outsider on this matter anyway.”

Shinra poured coffee into his mug with a smile on his face and looked around for sugar packs.

At that exact second, noise of destruction and young boys shouting was heard coming from the cell phone, which had been left in speaker mode on the kitchen counter.

“?”

Of course, the noise had also reached Shiki’s ears. Frowning slightly, he said:

“...Looks like there’s something troublesome going on.”



“Are you messing with us!?”

One of the taller delinquents yelled angrily at Celty, who shrugged slowly.

Had she had a head above her shoulders, she would have sighed.

As she toyed with such thoughts on her mind, Celty sprang effortlessly from the ground and climbed over the factory window, landing on the floor inside.

Putting her cell phone back into her breast pocket, she walked towards Mikado with her PDA in her outstretched hand.

“...”

While his companions remained still and stared at her nervously, Kuronuma Aoba eyed Celty with an alarmed expression on his face.

It was not the first time Aoba had seen her and her black rider suit.

Only a month ago he had been there with Mikado and the others when they had watched her from the van.

He already had a sense that she was something “not human” just from that experience.

She conjured shadow from her body and rode on a motorbike that did not make any engine sound.

If the video clips aired on TV could be trusted, she had nothing above her neck.

Some still insisted it was a magic trick; but even those people should be aware by now.

If that was indeed a magic trick, it would still have been magic.

On top of that, he recalled that he had heard Mikado refer to that rider as “Celty-san” before.

“...Are you spying on us? Or did Mikado-sempai call you out to ambush us?” Aoba muttered.

As he turned his gaze towards Mikado, however, he saw that the latter was staring at Celty with eyes the size of saucers. It looked like he was genuinely surprised to see Celty—the Black Motorbike—here after all.

Celty, on the other hand, typed words onto her PDA silently as she walked without hesitation towards Mikado and Aoba.

[I heard what you have been saying to each other. But I don't feel like I am the one to talk on this matter.]

“...”

“...”

Mikado and Aoba kept their own respective emotions inside and remained silent as they read the words typed onto the PDA.

Ignoring their lack of reaction, Celty continued to type more words.

[So please just pretend that I am not here and continue.]

“...”

“...”

The silence was followed by even more silence. Inside the factory no one seemed like they wanted to say anything.

“...Wha—”

What the hell are you doing here?

Just as one of Aoba's companions was about to break the silence—

The rusted gates rattled as they were forced open, and the silence in the factory was dispelled like mist.

The factory gate, which had only just been closed, was opened wide to reveal a gang of men standing in the sun outside.

They were probably one or two years Mikado's senior. But since both Mikado and Aoba had childlike features, these men looked like they were more than five years older.

They wore the same leather jackets with sleeves embroidered with the logo of “Toramaru”. Though Mikado and the other boys could not see it from their angle, the same logo was featured in the conspicuous design of the backs of their jackets as well.

Many of them were carrying timbers or steel pipes; it was obvious that they were here not for a gathering but for a fight.

“...Toramaru.”

Aoba muttered as the smile wiped off his face completely.

A man with bandages over his face walked out of the group of men in leather jackets. Eyes widening as he saw Aoba and his gang, he turned to inform his companions.

“We found them...it’s these guys. These are the ones who attacked us and burned our motorbikes.”

“Bingo for us.”

Amidst his leather jacket companions, a man wearing a tokko-fuku flexed his neck audibly as he spoke.

“...I guess we’re just going to beat everyone in this place into the ground and report to Captain afterwards.”

“What about the people in the other places? Should we tell them to come here as well?”

“Nah...with our numbers I don’t think we’ll need reinforcement.”

“Yes.”

The men in leather jackets answered in nonchalant voices, already prepared to attack.

The timber swung high and aimed at the face of a delinquent who had been guarding the gates.

The delinquent detected the danger just in time to use his hands to stop the dry weapon in its tracks.

The timber broke with a sharp crack.

It looked like there had been a fissure in the timber, which explained why it cracked so readily upon impact. However, it was still enough to inflict pretty serious damage on the delinquent: he remained in the same position after stopping the timber with his hands, his expression distorted by pain, and his body apparently unable to move.

As if taking cue from that, the delinquents yelled in anger at the leather jacket gang, and was about to pounce upon them when—

“Calm down.”

Aoba’s timely order cooled their hearts down like icy water.

He did not shout.

But his voice was chilly and sonorous.

Everyone in the factory turned towards Aoba’s direction, including the leather jacket gang.

Aoba, after making sure that everyone’s eyes were on him, turned towards Mikado with a serious face—

And said something that would turn Ryuugamine Mikado’s life upside down.

“We will stay here to take care of the situation. Please run, Captain.”

“Eh?”

Having no idea what Aoba had just said, Mikado turned around with a dumbstruck face.

Two seconds later, when what Aoba had just said finally registered, he hastened to raise his eyes to look at the faces of the gang men at the entrance.

Every one of them was looking straight at him.

“Wait, this is a misunderstanding...”

“Listen, all of you!”

Just as he was about to say something, Aoba cut in loudly as if to drown his voice out.

“Don’t let them lay a single filthy finger on Captain! Go!”

“Yees!”

“Go!”

“Die, bastards!”

“Don’t mess with Dollars!”

The delinquents responded to Aoba's order with gusto as they pounced upon the leather jacket gang.

"Interesting...let's settle this once and for all!"

"Yeah!"

"If you're the Captain, don't fucking run away and come fight me one-on-one!"

The Toramaru men shouted as they, too, charged forwards to fight the delinquents.

"W-Wait! Wait!"

Mikado's voice was completely lost in the subsequent chaos.

The only ones who heard him were Celty and Aoba, who was standing right in front of him.

Aoba turned around swiftly and smiled as innocently as ever at Mikado.

"Please leave it to us, My Captain☆"

"W-Wait..."

Angry voices reached Mikado's back as he was just about to say something.

"Die! You fucking Dollars filth!"

"Eh..."

As he turned around he saw a steel pipe coming directly at his face.

!

He was ready to feel it with his face when the steel pipe was stopped by a black hand.

"C-Celty-san!"

"Who the hell are...ahh!?"

Using the "shadow" to toss the man in the leather jacket into the air, Celty showed her PDA to Mikado.

[I know this will be hard for you to do, but you'd better run for now. It will be hard to convince them that it was a misunderstanding.]

“B-But—”

Mikado still looked desperate to say something, but Celty had decided that further conversations would be pointless. She picked Mikado up and jumped out of the window.

Mounting the Black Motorbike parked outside the window, she used her shadow to tie Mikado tightly to her back and started the motorbike.

“Dammit! Stand still!”

Voices of the men in leather jackets were still ringing in their ears from inside the factory. However, Celty kept soaring on her motorbike.

Meanwhile, she continued to show her PDA to Mikado, who was leaning against her back.

[Anyway, we'll first go meet Anri-chan. The two of you can stay at our apartment until things have calmed down.]

“...”

Mikado remained silent as he read the words on her PDA.

This must be a complex situation for him.

Celty knew Mikado well enough to know that being told to “hide” was hard for him. But this was not the time to indulge his wishes or hear his protests.

Because Celty had other opponents she must fight amidst this chaos.

And Celty still had yet to realize that she was being watched by someone.

She did not notice that her motorbike had already been tapped with some sort of tracking device during the time she had been unable to pay attention to it.

Shooter might have tried to warn her of that fact, but right now his overwhelming priority was to get his master out of this place.

And just like that, Celty soared onto the Tokyo streets, almost forgetting about the fact that there were people out there who would attack her a second time when they got the chance.

Little did she know that at her destination yet another commotion awaited.



Rooftop of a building next to the abandoned factory

After she watched the Black Motorbike leave, Vorona looked at the display screen of the end receiver and nodded in satisfaction.

“The tracking device is installed. This way finding out the Black Motorbike’s whereabouts is possible. Happy end, happy end.”

“So should we nap for a while before he gets home?”

“Slon is simpleminded, that is affirmative. He is going home, that is negative. Same as us. Halfway he finds out about the tracking device. If thrown into a long distance freight train, we will be tired to the point our bones begin withering. Pity, pity. In order to avoid that, immediate tracking is the default option.”

Slon shrugged as Vorona spoke in a voice more forceful than usual.

“OK, OK. You’re usually not this enthusiastic about the jobs we do. But now you’re like on fire.”

“Half work, half hobby. Satisfying my own desire. Obtaining monetary reward on top of that. No problem exists. The world today is still permanently beautiful.”

“Haven’t got the slightest clue what you’re saying, but well, if the beautiful Vorona says it’s beautiful, then a beautiful world it is.”

The unprofessional chatter continued as the freelancer duo descended the stairs.

“Still, I never thought it would be so easy to lure him here. That monster’s kind of more thoughtless than I expected.”

“Affirmative. But to say the opponent is simple, that is negative. Insulting and picking a fight with a bear fallen into a trap, such people largely do not exist. A stupid act equal to laughing at butterflies trapped in a spider’s web.”

“...Ah! That reminds me... Speaking of spiders, why do they never get trapped in their own webs? The mystery ensnares me like a spider’s sticky threads, making me so wound up that I probably won’t be able to move another inch.”

Slon did not stop raising his questions even in the present situation.

Vorona did not appear surprised or appalled. Instead, she said in her ever mechanical and flat tone:

“Spiders. Two types of threads used separately. Able to be told apart by touching. Threads in center, adhesive power, nil. Threads emanating from center, adhesive power, likewise nil. Only spirally spun threads are capable of sticking to prey. The end.”

“But when it begins to wrap the prey up in more threads, won’t it end up being stuck to the threads itself?”

“Spiders, secrete from their own bodies special chemicals. Those chemicals, neutralize the adhesive power. In a certain range won’t get stuck. Therefore, touching sticky threads OK if it’s only occasionally. Happy end, happy end.”

Slon looked at Vorona in admiration as she kept descending the stairs at full speed while answering his question. Looking satisfied, he put on a wide smile and nodded.

“I see...! So if Vorona were the spider, I would be the secretion. Both of us are needed in order to catch our prey!”

“The analogy is questionable. I secrete Slon. Too creepy, completely negative. I hope for the erasure of your existence.”

“...I hope you chose to go with the more extreme expressions because you’re still not used to speaking Japanese.”

As this conversation came to an end, so did the stairs. They walked towards the open ground in front of the factory.

The moment they saw the road, several motorbikes soared out of the factory and flew past them.

Inside the factory the fight was still on-going. It seemed that the leather jacket gang had split forces, sending part of the men to go after Celty.

“...Speaking of which, that Black Motorbike took a boy on the back seat with him.”

“Affirmative.”

They were not good at estimating the age of a Japanese person by his or her looks. With Mikado's childlike features, they could easily have mistaken him for an elementary school kid.

Vorona walked towards her newly delivered motorbike and replied in a nonchalant voice, "Acquired him as food. That possibility exists."

"Are you sure that's not too wild of a guess?"

"Affirmative. A monster not recorded in any books. Point in trying to imagine what he would do, nil. Until perceived with these eyes, the truth remains in a vortex of darkness."

Vorona, speaking in weird Japanese, felt the slight bubbling of emotions as she mounted the motorbike. Putting her helmet over her head, she muttered to herself:

"My hope. ...Somehow, please make me happy. You incredible black monster."



Several minutes later, Ikefukurou in front of the East Gate of Ikebukuro Station

There were several meeting spots of choice when young people wanted to have fun together in Ikebukuro.

If they wanted to take the train, they would usually go for the fountain at the entrance of the underground Metropolitan line or the stone owl named "Ikefukurou" in front of East Gate.

These two were used often since they were ideal meeting spots even in rainy weather.

Ikefukurou, just like its name suggested, was a stature of an owl. Like Shibuya's Hachikou* Statue it was a favorite meeting spot because it was hard to miss.

* Hachikou: widely regarded as "Japan's most faithful dog". A bronze statue of Hachikou was erected in Shibuya in 1934 while Hachikou was still alive (the current one is a remake after the war in the year 1948).

Right in front of the stone statue, a girl wearing glasses as round as the owl's eyes was talking to a girl next to her who looked about six years her junior.

"Aoba-kun is going to be here soon, so let's wait here for a moment."

"...Mm."

Akane, the younger girl, nodded quietly and clung more tightly onto the hand of Sonohara Anri, the bespectacled girl.

Akane was already looking much better; it was hard to tell that she had recently been ill.

Anri was relieved at the girl's calm expression, but she was still feeling uneasy inside.

What could Mikado-kun's "urgent errands" be?

She had just gotten a text message from her kouhai, Aoba. She decided to keep waiting, but her heart was no longer at ease.

Yesterday Mikado had said that those errands were for another day. Did it turn out that they were for today after all?

Usually Mikado would have texted Anri directly to tell her about things like that.

That was enough to make Anri wonder just why he had to ask someone else to send her a message.

Hopefully he was not getting into some sort of big trouble?

Anri, who had just been attacked by a foreigner who had thrust a pair of garden scissors at her stomach, worried that Mikado would somehow run into something like that as well.

What if...he gets attacked because of my...

She wanted to believe that he was indeed just distracted by his urgent errands. But she could not rule out the possibility that her assailants yesterday would target Mikado because he was "someone Anri was close to".

And it was not only Mikado. Her friends, Harima Mika and Kida Masaomi—even her classmates like Yagiri Seiji—could also be in danger.

But she had no clue whatsoever as to what her assailants were after and who they were. She had no idea what could happen.

She was so wound up over this that she had sent a text message to Mikado, but he had yet to reply.

She thought about calling him, but was afraid that she would be giving him unnecessary trouble if he was indeed in the middle of some urgent errand.

She decided to wait for Aoba first and ask him what exactly had happened. But she shuddered involuntarily as she was reminded of the shine of the garden scissors.

She was not afraid because she remembered them as they were pointed at her.

She was afraid that they would be pointed at Mikado or her other friends.

The mere imagination of such a scene was enough to send a chill down her spine.

If that happens...I...

Though she stayed calm on the surface, Anri felt a wave of fear and anger washing over her heart.

But it ended up not showing in the slightest; for Anri, it was but another piece of the “world beyond the picture frame”. Her emotions stopped at a certain threshold and raged no more.

It was like being in the audience at a movie. One would feel fear and anger, but no one would seriously shout “Stop kidding!” or run out of the cinema screaming when seeing a movie.

On the other hand, Saika was still whispering her incessant curses inside her body.

“I love you.”

These were the only words Saika said in place of hundreds, thousands, millions of words she could have said. Such was the eerie “demon blade” that existed inside her body.

These simple words would sound cheap in anyone’s ears. But even cheap words could acquire a strange shine after being repeated for an eternity. Whether the shine was a good or bad omen would be another story altogether—for Anri, she simply could not help being jealous of the demon blade who can voice her love in such a candid fashion.

She was concerned that even under such circumstances she simply forced her anger and fear to the other side of the picture frame. But right now she was more concerned about Mikado and Celty being targeted by her mysterious assailants.

Just as she quietly waited for Aoba to arrive without letting a single trace of emotion show on her face—

“Eh? Sonohara-san? What are you doing here?”

“...Ah, Kamichika-san...”

One of the girls in her class was standing in front of her.

She looked like she was with other friends; a group of girls who looked like they were together were chatting somewhere nearby.

She was one of the more mature types like Anri, but they were not particularly close with each other.

They had never really talked to each other before. Both at a loss as to what to say, they remained in a somewhat awkward silence.

“Um...is this your sister?”

“Ah, no, she’s just a girl I know...what is Kamichika-san doing here?”

“Mm, my middle school friends came over yesterday, so I’m showing them around Ikebukuro. We were at West Gate a moment ago but we’re probably heading for Sunshine now.”

“I see.”

After some pointless exchange, silence fell again.

Trying to break the silence, Kamichika Rio, her classmate, told Anri something she had just remembered.

“Oh, right, it would be better to watch out when you walk around these streets today. It looks like there are hooligans fighting everywhere.”

“Fighting?”

“They say Dollars is fighting some bousouzoku gang from outside of Tokyo...”

“...”

Anri’s heart reacted to the word “Dollars”.

“I see. I will watch out.”

She replied in a flat voice, her body on the other side of the picture frame not showing any emotions.

Just as silence was about to fall for a third time between the two, the girls Rio was with walked towards them and tugged at Rio’s sleeve.

“Hey—hey, Rio, we’re hungry. Is she your friend? Wanna go have lunch together?”

“Ah, Non-chan! Sorry, I’m coming! Um, Sonohara-san, do you have anything planned...?”

“Ah, I’m sorry, I’m waiting for someone...”

“I see. Um, in that case, we’ll see each other at school, Sonohara-san...!”

Her classmate left with a peaceful yet somewhat awkward smile on her face.

Anri sighed quietly as she watched her leave.

I really have to make myself more social...

She had become a class representative hoping to change her passive manners somehow. But it turned out that she was still not that different from the time when she was called Mika’s foil and bullied at school.

Her thoughts wandered from that fact back towards the “Dollars” topic that had been brought up shortly before.

She knew that Mikado had something to do with Dollars.

Though it looked like that he had significant ties to Dollars, she had never asked Mikado exactly what they were. Mikado, on the other hand, had never asked her anything either, even after he had seen her wielding a katana.

She knew that it meant he wanted to postpone that talk until after Kida Masaomi’s return.

Anri both looked forward to it and feared it.

The triangle would probably collapse when all the truths would be revealed.

Though it was probably already broken when Masaomi had disappeared from this city, Anri still wanted to believe.

To believe that if these two could accept the abnormality called “Saika” along with the rest of her, she would probably be able to bond with people like she had never been able to bond with people before.

It was a somewhat cowardly expectation on her part, but she could not get it out of her heart.

At the same time she made up her mind.

No matter what dark secrets Mikado and Masaomi had been keeping, she would accept them as they were.

Not as mere “pictures beyond the frame”, but as real beings who would occupy places inside her heart.

That was all she wished for as she waited for Aoba to arrive.

She was going to ask him what urgent errands Mikado had had so she could feel relieved that she had checked that Mikado was alright.

However, the ones who did appear in front of her—

—Were several men in suits whom she had never known in her life.

“Miss Akane.”

There were three of them.

They had a special sort of aura about them that intimidated and repelled. Even as they walked through the variegated crowd close to the train station, people naturally stepped backwards to avoid getting too close to them.

When one of them spoke, it was not to Anri, but to the little girl holding on to her hand.

“!”

Akane looked very surprised at the sight of the men.

It was not fear but rather pure surprise.

“Took us long enough to find you. Please come with us.”

“W-Why...”

Akane stepped backwards, but a hand had already grabbed her shoulder.

As she turned around she saw another man in a suit standing there, looking down at her with a troubled face.

“Goodness, please be a good kid.”

“S-Stop! If you don’t let me go, I’ll yell and say you’re trying to kidnap me!”

“Are you saying you want some cops here to hear your story? We won’t mind, but I think Miss Akane will be the one in trouble that way.”

“Uh...”

Akane could not think of anything to say to the man’s words and had to nod.

“?”

Anri was the only one without a clue as to what was going on. Question marks lingered on her face.

“U-Um...”

“Ahh, Miss, you must be the girl Kishitani-sensei talked about.”

“Eh...”

“We’re sorry that you had to take care of Miss Akane. You can just leave her to us from now on.”

She still had no clue what was happening.

“Kishitani-sensei” had to be that doctor living with Celty. Celty usually called him “Shinra”, but Anri remembered that on the name tag outside the apartment she had seen the name “Kishitani Shinra”.

Did that mean that these men were here because he told them to come?

None of them looked like Akane’s father. If any of them were her father, he would not have needed to come here with multiple men.

It did not look like they were kidnappers, either. They were not hostile towards Akane; in fact, they even addressed her with deference.

Anri had heard that Akane had run away from her home. These people had probably come to take her home. But Anri still had no idea who they were.

“U-Um, sorry, are you Akane-chan’s relatives?”

She tried to ask in a way that would avoid offending the men.

One of the men thought about this for a few seconds and sighed as he answered her question.

“...Well, we’re not her family or anything. But since she’s the granddaughter of the old man*, she’s kind of like family to us.....”

** Old man: yakuza members usually refer to an old head as the “old man”, which in Japanese has the double meaning of “father”. This is why Anri was confused by the explanation.*

The man struggled to find a way to explain, but Anri felt even more confused.

Um, the old man...his father's granddaughter? Does that mean that Akane-chan is either a daughter or a niece to these people? But he said she was not their family, so she's probably not a daughter to any of them, um, so they're like Akane-chan's uncles who aren't living in the same place as she is...?

These men differed greatly in age and looks. As Anri looked at them she was even more at a loss as to what they were.

Just as she was about to ask Akane what exactly was going on, the situation became even more chaotic.

“Sonohara-san!”

“!? M - Mikado-kun! And Celty-san!?”

The ones who were running towards Ikekukurou, rushing down the stairs that extended towards the sidewalk as they came—they were none other than Mikado, who was out of breath, and Celty, who was in her usual characteristic rider suit.

“Um, didn't you have something urgent to attend to? And what happened to Aobakun...?”

“I'll explain later! Before that...”

Mikado was about to say something until he stopped himself involuntarily.

He saw four formidable-looking men right next to her, forming a ring that threatened to close in on her and the girl clinging onto her hand.

!?

Though by judging the way that they were dressed it was obvious these men had nothing to do with Toramaru, Mikado still felt immediately alarmed at the sight.

He feared that Anri was already involved in something ominous because of him.

He looked at Anri's face and without thinking turned to look at Celty as well.

But Celty, too, was frozen on the spot like he was.

A pitch-black rider suit and a full-faced helmet.

The way she was dressed simply screamed “criminal suspect”, and indeed, the eyes of passers-by who were enjoying their holidays were by now turning in her direction.

However, thanks to the fact that one could not see very far on a crowded holiday street, many people simply walked on without taking notice of Celty. It would probably have to take a national idol appearing out of thin air with sound effects or a stray lion charging into the street to make such a crowd panic.

But still, among the people who had taken notice of the rider on the Black Motorbike some had already begun to take photos or videos with their cell phones. Skillfully manipulating her shadow, Celty covered the lenses of their cell phones and made sure that they did not capture a single image of what was going on here.

Usually she would not have bothered, but right now she had to make sure that photos of Mikado or Anri and herself would not be posted all over the Internet.

As she did so she hastened to approach Anri, but—

?

W-What is this? Why are they...?

Celty eyed the men in alarm because they looked like they belonged in the underworld.

As she did so, however, one of the men lowered his head in her direction.

“Thank you for everything.”

Eh!?

Huh? What?

Speaking of which, I might have seen these people somewhere...

“Has Kishitani-sensei or Big Brother Shiki been in touch with you, too, Celty-san?”

“Ah, you came at a great time! We’ll trust her to you if that’s alright, then!”

Ah! Yeah!

These people are...from Awakusu-kai...

What were the Awakusu-kai people trying to do to Anri?

Just as she was worried that they might have found out about Anri’s role in the Slasher incident, she saw the little girl holding Anri’s hand and immediately put such thoughts behind her.

New questions formed in her head instead.

Eh? Ah, eh? Ehhh—?

Awakusu...Akane-chan?

Realizing in shock that the girl in front of her eyes was no other than the Awakusu Akane she had been looking for, she stopped dead in her tracks.

Had she had a head, her eyes would have popped to the size of saucers. Celty was about to ask the Awakusu-kai men just what had happened—

[No, actually, I came looking for this girl in glasses right here...]

Angry voices shouted after her before she could finish typing these words onto her PDA.

“Stand still!”

“Don’t run away like a little rat!”

Celty had to stop typing and turn around as she heard the shouting voices in broad daylight.

Oops.

Don’t tell me they followed me all the way here!?

Five or six young men in leather jackets were standing in front of her.

The passers-by turned to look at them with even more interest than they did when Celty appeared on the scene after they heard the shouts from the group of people who were obviously bousouzoku or something of the sort. Some quickened their pace to leave the area as soon as possible, while some kept watching at a safe distance from behind pillars in order to not get themselves involved.

No one had notified the police or the staff at the train station, presumably because despite their fierce shouts the men had yet to do anything truly violent.

Hang on, isn’t there a police station immediately next to this place!?

Are they that determined to catch the Captain of Dollars—which for them would mean Mikado-kun—no matter what it costs?

Celty thought about holding the five men back with her shadow, but to do so would just convince them further that Mikado was the leader of Dollars.

In her moment of hesitation, Celty heard one Awakusu-kai men speak before she could.

“Shut up, kids. Don’t shout inside the station!”

They probably knew that some bousouzoku gangs had been after Celty last month. Thinking that these young men were just another bousouzoku group seeking to get Celty in trouble, the man had meant to dispel them for her.

But the young men only looked perplexed for a second, after which they recovered immediately and shot back, “Argh? What the hell? It’s got nothing to do with ya!”

Akane shuddered slightly as the young man in the leather jacket yelled.

All four Awakusu-kai men, after seeing how scared Akane was, turned their stares towards the young men.

“You’re adults. Don’t shout in front of kids. We’re busy right now. Get lost.”

In response to the man’s condescending manners, the young men in leather jackets just stared back without any intention to withdraw.

“What? Are you in Dollars too, old man? Really—elementary school kids, office ladies, and now thuggish old men too? Does Dollars not pick its members at all? Ah?”

Mikado felt his chest tighten as he heard the men insult Dollars.

He almost felt like insulting Dollars was like putting a negative sign on everything about him.

On the other hand, the Awakusu-kai men, who had no clue as to what the young men were saying, simply suspected that they had been on some kind of drug as they asked another question.

“You can’t be...the ones who wanted to lay their fingers on Miss Akane?”

They asked that in a voice that only the younger men could hear in order to not make Akane, who was standing right behind them, worry.

Of course, the Toramaru men did not know what they were being asked. It simply sounded like another provocative question to their ears.

And without realizing that Akane was standing right behind the Awakusu-kai men, the young men said something they should never have said.

“Stop messing with us and just hand that kid over already.”

“!!!”

The expressions on the Awakusu-kai men’s face changed drastically at the young men’s words.

For the Toramaru men, the “kid” was meant to refer to Mikado.

But for the Awakusu-kai men, the “kid” in this place was Awakusu Akane.

Someone was trying to kidnap Awakusu Akane. Heiwajima Shizuo, who attacked their fellow members, also had something to do with this incident. For these men who knew about these incidents concerning Akane, it was only natural to misunderstand what the younger men had just said.

“...You’ve got some guts, that you do. What group do you work for, you bastards?”

“Ah? Huh?”

“Or did Yadogiri hire you? ...I wonder how much he paid you for your lives?”

“W-What are you talking about?”

The younger men could not help but step back a little as the Awakusu-kai men grew more intimidating all of a sudden.

One of the men grabbed Akane’s hand and put it in Celty’s. Lowering his head, he said in a voice only she was able to hear, “Celty-san, please take Miss somewhere safe. Big Brother Shiki should still be at Kishitani-sensei’s place.”

...Um, what do I do?

Though Celty had sensed that these men must have misunderstood something about the situation, there was no time for lengthy clarifications.

Not to mention leaving Akane alone in a place where a fight was about to break out was certainly not an option.

As soon as she realized this, Celty took Akane’s hand in a half-resigned fashion and ran.

“Eh—!”

Akane let out a little wail. Celty quickly typed [It’s OK, I’m on your side.] onto her PDA, threw in a couple of emoticons and showed it to Akane.

Akane looked at it as she ran. With confused eyes, she looked up at Anri.

Like Akane, Anri was being dragged around by Celty. Right next to her, Mikado was also being dragged around by Celty.

Something simply felt wrong about this situation. But Akane, seeing that at least Anri was still with her, calmed down a little and kept running. Perhaps she was just happy to be able to get away from the Awakusu-kai men.

Using the shadows that extended from her body, Celty made two extra hands to make sure that everyone was pulled close to her.

The ring of onlookers, upon taking notice of the action, began to clamor.

“Oi, no kidding...”

“Was that two extra hands!?”

“What the hell!?”

“What, so those weren’t special effects!?”

“Is he a magician!?”

“Ooooh!?”

“Oi, it’s true! The Black Motorbike was running past me a moment ago!”

“Awesome!”

Though they kept coming, Celty was already not paying attention to the curious looks from passers-by.

She simply continued to scan her surroundings with her sensors and used her shadow to cover up the lenses of cell phones as discreetly as she could.

“S-Stand still!”

One of the men in leather jackets ran after her.

Of course, he was actually after Mikado and Celty; but to the Awakusu-kai men it inevitably ended up looking like he was after Akane.

“You stand still, bastards!”

“Huh!?”

The young man in the leather jacket was grabbed by the scruff of his neck and pressed to the ground.

Taking everything in via her peripheral vision, Celty led the kids up the stairs to East Gate and out of the Station.

Her Black Motorbike was parked right there on the road in front of the Station.

It was technically not a legal parking spot, but Celty, telling herself that she was in an emergency, mounted the motorbike anyway.

Four people...there's no way we'd fit!

It's been a while...but I guess there's no other way!

Celty thought about this for a second and immediately touched Shooter's back, sending a signal in the form of shadow to her horse.

And with that, the back of the motorbike began to morph back into that of a horse—a Coiste bodhar, the beloved horse of dullahans.

It did not simply change into a horse, however, as it had done on many occasions before. Instead, it morphed back to its even more original shape—namely, that of an Irish Coiste bodhar, a headless horse coupled with a two-wheeled chariot on which the dullahan usually rode in.

Sorry. I know we're going to be heavy, but please bear with us.

Celty let Mikado and Anri sit in the chariot, where she was originally supposed to sit, and made them seatbelts out of shadow to tie them to the chariot's body. Using her shadow to tie Akane to her own back, she quickly mounted Shooter.

Of course, all of these transformations took place in broad daylight on the Ikebukuro streets in the middle of Golden Week. More than a hundred passers-by and many taxi drivers waiting on the side of the road witnessed the entire process.

In front of the collectively dumbstruck crowd that could do nothing but stare, Celty put shadow helmets one by one on the other three people. She had decided that it was much faster compared to having to cover the lens on every cell phone camera in the vicinity.

She then pulled at the black reins and charged.

The neighing of the headless horse was heard even at the Lotteria by East Gate.

I trust you, Shooter.

And the black chariot soared.

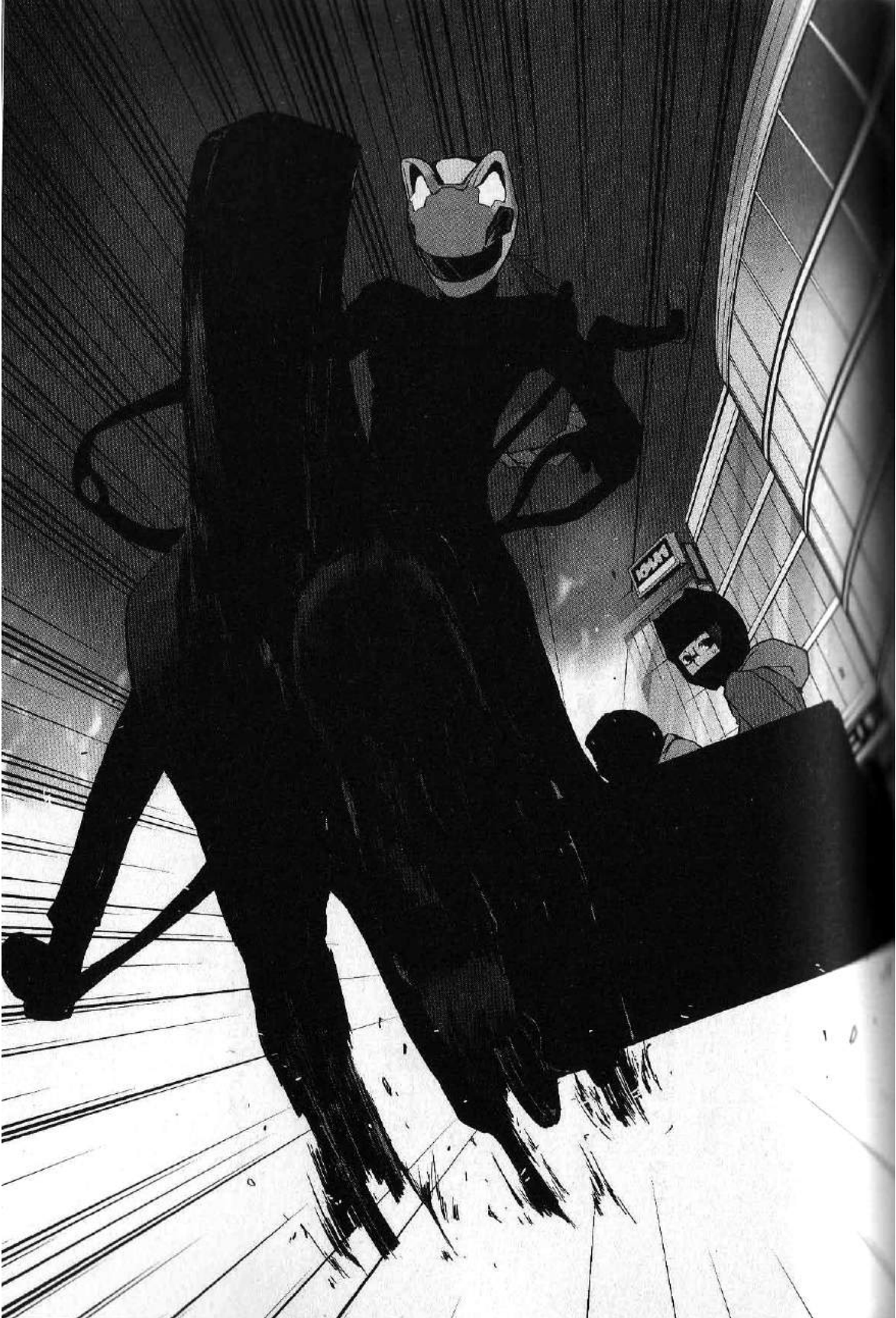
They started slow, but immediately picked up speed until they were going as fast as cars, their old-fashioned wheels grinding on Ikebukuro's asphalt roads.

Good boy. Go!

Celty had faith in her horse. At the same time, she prayed.

It was not to the Gods, but rather to the flow of life in this city, something that bore resemblance to fate.

...If that's not too much to ask...please, please let this be a day off for the scary guy on the White Motorbike...!





Most of the people could only stand still and goggle as the chariot soared away, its horse neighing.

But among them, some managed to stay relatively calm.

Like Vorona and Slon, who had followed Celty all the way there.

They had arrived on their respective motorbikes and seen what had happened.

Using the transceiver installed on the inside of the helmet, Slon spoke to Vorona.

“...That—was a real monster.”

“Affirmative. But the problem does not lie on that spot.”

Vorona recounted the facts in her typical cold and observant tone.

“Her back. The aforementioned boy has been taken on it with her. The problem is the fact that two persons were added.”

“Yeah, that was why she changed the motorbike to a chariot. I’m so curious as to how she did it that I can’t sleep—if I say that to you, what would your answer be?”

“Cannot answer. I recommend investigation by yourself.”

Vorona answered Slon’s question anyway as she slowly started her motorbike.

The light had turned green, but most of the other vehicles were not moving—probably because the sight of the chariot had been too much of a shock. Not knowing what exactly was going on, the vehicles behind them were blowing their horns at them.

Vorona listened to the sound of horns as she continued to talk about what she saw to Slon.

“The two persons added, they are targets of our missions.”

“What?”

“One is the bespectacled girl who acquires cold weapons from her soft flesh. The other girl is the target of our abduction. I confirm. Elements of doubt, nil.”

“...Really? Well, now that you say so...”

Surprised but convinced by what Vorona had said, Slon started his own motorbike to follow her. His huge frame made the motorbike look smaller; however, it was the same model as Vorona's.

Vorona continued to tail the chariot as she organized her thoughts in her head. She said to Slon, "...The bespectacled girl and the abduction girl, clients were different. Completely separate missions. Affirmative?"

"Affirmative."

"Yet, the two targets are gathered together. Adding the Black Motorbike, three gathered together. Incomprehensible."

"...Are the two jobs connected somehow by that Black Motorbike?"

Vorona did not say "yes" or "no" to Slon's question; rather, she voiced her opinion cautiously.

"Coincidence, not coincidence, still unclear. Not the Black Motorbike, but the boy she brought from the abandoned factory connects it all, that possibility is not zero."

"Yeah..."

"In some cases, the possibility that the client set this up as a trap for us, is not zero. I suggest the necessity of caution in action."

Vorona analyzed the situation calmly.

In fact, anyone who did not know her would feel that she was as calm as a machine.

But Slon, who had known her for a long time and gotten used to her Japanese, sounded somewhat surprised as he made a comment.

"You sound really happy, Vorona."

In response to that, the freelancer woman curled the corners of her lips inside the helmet.

"Affirmative. Right now I am...existing in cheerful nervousness."

Noon of May 4th, CHATROOM

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No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

Kyo-san has joined the chat.

Mai-san has joined the chat.

Kyo

I bid you all good day, my illustrious chatroom company on the other end of the computer screen. It's the middle of a long holiday week today. No wonder no one could be bothered to come here. Regardless of that, Mai-san and I would wish to leave records of our excitement here while our hearts are not yet cold. That is why we have come here to the empty cyberspace when no one else is around.

Mai

Good day.

Kyo

Oops, just when I thought I should pick up where we left off yesterday—look what Bakyura-san's written here. On top of that, the archives older than that have all been erased without a trace. Ahh, that's true. Chatroom logs, even if saved, can be deleted at any moment. They're nothing more than data, and therefore subject to change at the owner's whim.

Mai

Strange.

Mai

Bakyura-san said that he hadn't been here all week.

Kyo

That is to say, since not even the records are reliable, chatroom conversations are in fact no different from the ones in real life. That is to say! Conversations in the chatroom are just like the ones we have in real life, in which the words said should remain in our respective hearts and gradually become dyed in our own colors. Though Brother had smiled bitterly at me when I said it to his face. That bitter smile had in turn become a mocking smile in my heart and fanned the fire of hatred—

Mai

Bakyura-san was here yesterday.

Kyo

Oh, that's true. Now that I think about Bakyura-san's words and actions, there are indeed some strange discrepancies. This is a serious situation. If he had not been sleepwalking, then there must have been some imposter who stole his handle. On the other hand, though, it could have been Bakyura-san's doppelgänger...it is said that one dies when one meets his doppelgänger. I wonder if that applies to the online world as well.

Mai

Scary.

Kyo

But then, it could be that Bakyura-san is just desperately trying to pretend that the person who said a word as nonsensical as "Sin-Clone-y-City" yesterday was not him but someone who stole his identity. To prove your words to be true, we must have the testimony of that lover who was traveling with him, which we cannot obtain. But does that person really exist to begin with? Ahh, if she does, I must apologize for my rudeness.

Mai

2D waifu.

Kyo

Argh! Now that I think about it, chatrooms are really an incredible creation. Even if no one is in it, the chatroom still exists in concept. But as long as no one opens the website to log onto it, this space called the chatroom would not exist anywhere. It's just piles of data stored on the server's database. However, it is nothing more than data. It is not a "place" where people have conversations.

Mai

I don't understand.

Kyo

Yet, because of the existence of people like us who use it as a platform of observation, the chatroom becomes an actual presence in this world. There might even be virtual monsters trying to wreak havoc in the chatroom. There might be something they could type that would make us all insane and die in misery once we see it. But as long as no one opens the website, no one can be

Mai
Word limit.

Kyo
Sorry. No one can be sure that something like that is happening. Ahh, it's almost like Schrödinger's Cat. But even Schrödinger wouldn't have expected that in the future places like these would come into existence on a network of computers. Though to be fair, I guess it was not Schrödinger's intention when he invented his cat analogy to illustrate something like that to begin with.

Mai
I don't understand.

Kyo
We too are like Schrödinger's Cats in a closed box for anyone who has never opened this website. When someone finally sees our conversations here, where would we be? Would we still be continuing our conversation, or already logged out, or poisoned to death? That would not be something they could know just from opening this website, though!

Mai
Um,

Mai
Can't you get down to the topic already?

Kyo
Goodness, was that directed at me? Apart from being criticized online, I was also urged by Mai-san who is sitting next to me to hurry up and write down what had happened. Yeah, even from my own point of view, it was not my intention to lessen the impact of the shockingly real story I am about to record with my lengthy, pointless talk.

Kyo
Let us begin. This is the tale of what we saw a moment ago!

Mai
Yay!

Kyo
So, we were strolling around on the Ikebukuro streets in the morning. We were enjoying our shopping tour with the foreign friend we recently made who is so very useful for carrying

things around. There we raised our eyes just because. And what a sight we saw. Behold, wasn't that a man in a bartender suit standing on one of those tall buildings?

Mai
Shizuo-san.

Mai
That hurts.

Mai
I was pinched.

Kyo
Let us put aside for the moment the question of whether that was the famous Heiwajima Shizuo. Anyhow, the man in the bartender suit who was standing high above us was not on the rooftop of that building because he wanted a good look at the sky or wished to kill himself. No, actually, it was in some way suicidal nevertheless—because behold, that man simply jumped to a neighboring building at least two stories shorter than the one he was on!

Mai
So cool

Kyo
He would have been dead had he missed by an inch. Why on earth did he do something like that? We couldn't do anything but stare. He moved like a beast—no—a jumping spider that stuck its feet to the walls without difficulty and moved from window to window on that building! Ahh, those were some terribly erotic moves! I feel so aroused!

Bakyura-san has joined the chat.

Mai
Good day.

Bakyura
Good day.

Bakyura
Um,

Bakyura
There's something I wanna ask you

Bakyura
Is it true that I was here yesterday?

Mai
It's true.

Kyo
Alas, how do you do, Bakyura-san? Are you feeling the fear from the sudden advent of your doppelgänger? Or have you come here with material proof that your lover is not a figment of your imagination but an actual 3D presence? Either way, it is really scandalous of you to have been lurking in this chatroom since you got offline and until we came online. There should be legal limits on how obscene a person can be, really.

Mai
Pervert.

Bakyura
No,

Bakyura
After I logged off,

Bakyura
I put it on "log watch" mode,

Bakyura
And when I returned to the room I saw you two chatting,

Bakyura
So I hastened to logged on.

Mai
Was that so?

Mai
I'm sorry.

Kyo
Hmm. We will take your word for what just happened. Regardless of who typed those words using your handle, be it you or your impostor or your other self or your doppelgänger or Schrödinger's Cat typing its last words before it died of a gas leak, it is a sad fact that we will forever remember the word "Sin-Clone-y-City" that has been typed here under Bakyura-san's name.

Bakyura
I've been wondering, actually,

Bakyura

What exactly is that,

Bakyura

This,

Bakyura

Sin-Clone-y-City thing

Bakyura

Is that the name of a final revelation scene or something? Of a trading card game?

Mai

It's synchronicity.

Bakyura

What, a pun!?

Kyo

But it was "Bakyura-san" who said it, remember?

Bakyura

Argh,

Bakyura

I so have to see that part of the log.

Bakyura

By the way,

Bakyura

Until yesterday,

Bakyura

Has Tanaka Taro-san been in this chatroom as well?

Mai

Yes.

Kyo

Setton-san and Saika-san were here as well. Only Kanra-san is absent.

Bakyura

Kanra-san wasn't here?

Mai

No.

Kyo

Well. That person is always appearing in the least expected places. Might even be watching us as we chat right now. If you know some kind of magic word that would make Kanra-san alone insane and dead, then now is probably the biggest and the last chance to type it. Bakyura-san, aren't you always going "tsun tsun tsun tsun tsun tsun tsun till you die from it" on Kanra-san?

Mai

Scary.

Bakyura

Nah,

Bakyura

That was just kidding.

Bakyura

Thank you, anyway.

Bakyura

See ya.

Mai

Goodbye.

Bakyura-san has left the chat.

Kyo

Alas, he didn't react at all to our story about the man flying on the top of buildings. Did he have something extremely urgent to attend to all of a sudden? Or was he suddenly reminded that he was supposed to be doing something after hearing us talk? There's no way of finding that out now.

Mai

Mm—

Kyo

Then it's about time we logged off as well.

Mai

Goodbye.

Kyo-san has left the chat.

Mai-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 E

AWAKUSU AKANE

The girl was blessed by the world.

By usual standards, she got the best food, clothes, and housing.

She lived in a single-family house in the Ikebukuro suburbs. It was so big that it was a wonder for anyone to see such a house at all within central Tokyo.

Including a loving mother, an understanding father, and a feared but respected grandfather, many people looked out for her well-being and her opinions were never ignored.

But that was not to say that she got whatever she wanted. She was neither spoiled nor pampered, but instead raised to be a healthy, good child.

Ever since she had become aware of her surroundings, she had not spent a single minute of her life not being completely free.

In fact, the girl did not even know what it meant to be “unfree”; as a consequence, she had no idea either just how blessed her life was.

The girl had been happy.

Until that second when she got to know what her father and grandfather actually did for a living and what had been going on in the lives of the people around her.

It all started with a cell phone.

Her father had hesitated, saying, “Isn’t it too early for an elementary school kid?” But out of his concerns for her safety, he eventually gave her a “line” that was all her own.

That line did not only connect her to the people on the other end of the phone.

This invisible line opened a magical door to a new world in front of the girl's eyes by connecting her to the Internet. She did not have a personal computer, so it was the first time she got to know the thing called the cyberspace.

Although the Internet was nothing more than a virtual reality, there was nevertheless something "real" existing behind the wall of virtuality. True, the people she talked to online were wearing masks in imaginary chatrooms, but they were still actual people rather than artificial intelligence that existed exclusively in the cyberspace.

When one browses online content that was not free, one has to pay with actual money. Any fraud or traps taking advantage of that fact were likewise indisputably real.

From the moment she received her own cell phone, the girl was connected to the innumerable "realities" on the Internet.

Even if that was against the wishes of her own.

The girl's life at school was bright, cheerful, and almost free from bullies.

"Almost" because she had seen someone being bullied once.

About half a year ago, a girl in her class was shunned by everyone, and dead bugs were found inside her schoolbag.

She had, by chance, seen the bullies committing an act and told her classmates off in a determined voice.

It's not good to bully other people.

The girl who had been raised in nothing but happiness said words based on her own moral sense.

Nonetheless, it had taken the girl some effort to muster up the courage.

She was little, but she had somehow sensed it intuitively.

—If she tried to stop them, she would probably become their next target.

But even so, the girl still chose to speak up in the bullied one's defense.

She did not regret it.

At least not back at that time.

At that time she had ended up successful in stopping the act of bullying.

But did she become the next target of bullying herself?

The answer was no.

She was in amazing luck. No one tried to bully her in the couple of days that followed, and she and her friends were able to live their lives in peace.

Maybe there were people being bullied in places she could not see. Or so she thought, but there was no sign of that happening, either.

From that time onward she became the center of her class.

Although she was a class representative, she did not feel superior to everyone else just because of that. She strived to stay on good terms with everyone else in her class, and bright smiles were never a rare sight around her.

She was happy.

She had thought that her classmates who were laughing with her must have been happy, too.

She had not suspected a thing. The girl was lamentably simple only when it came to matters like these.

She was no more than a little girl with a schoolbag on her shoulder, yet she had already begun to think just how beautiful life was and how she wanted to help all those unfortunate people.

That sentiment was sometimes unnecessary and condescending, but—

At least the girl had gotten many opportunities to help solve interpersonal problems and plan hiking or beach trips for large groups of people. She became not only the center of her class but one of the centers of her school as well.

She wanted her future job to be one that would make even more people smile.

She did not really know what her grandfather did, but her father seemed to be running a chain of galleries that sold paintings.

On the walls of her house hung several expensive-looking paintings of views in faraway places she did not know. The girl had no clue as to how much these paintings were worth. But she knew that they were very beautiful.

Such pretty paintings would make many people happy when they see them.

Dad has such a nice job.

Right, I'm going to paint my own paintings. I'm going to become a painter!

I'm going to paint many, many paintings, and maybe someday Dad will sell them for me!

Having made up her mind, the girl began to take art lessons.

People around her were very supportive; but for some reason, her grandfather and her father had exchanged a look when she had told them about her dream.

Even so, the girl was blessed with a dream and a goal now on top of everything else she had already been blessed with.

As part of her life enshrouded in endless happiness, she obtained a cell phone.

The girl had almost never used the cell phone except to call her family or the police when her life was threatened. But the cell phone had nevertheless brought one fact to her attention.

It was not because anyone had called her.

Not because she logged onto the internal network of her school.

The incident was a physical one.

An extremely simple incident in which she forgot her cell phone in her friend's home.

The girl had hurried back to her friend's place.

Just as she was about to ring the doorbell, she heard her friend's voice coming from the yard.

She walked towards the yard to try to talk to her friend—until she heard her own name mentioned by her friend's mother.

“You haven't been bothering Awakusu Akane-chan, have you?”

Eh?

The girl stopped in her tracks, feeling confused.

Three other kids had been with them when they played together at her friend's house.

Only she had to return because she remembered that she had forgotten her cell phone.

Then why did her friend's mother mention her name?

Did something strange happen in her home?

But even if that was the case, the conversation still sounded weird.

What was she talking about?

The little girl thought that she must have heard wrong.

But her friend's voice that followed blew her thoughts to pieces.

"I got it, Mom! I always do what Akane-chan tells me to do!"

...Eh?

For the girl, time stopped.

For her world, everything froze.

It sounded as if the mother was angry that her daughter did not do her homework and the daughter shot back saying "I'm just about to do it!"

The girl, confused as she was, did not dwell as far on the matter—

But had anyone been there to hear their voices, they would have thought that way.

—That doing as Awakusu Akane told her was an "obligation" just like doing her homework.

"You're sure that no one else made Awakusu Akane-chan unhappy, right?"

"Of course!"

"Really? You'd better be sure because if anyone did, I won't want those people to target us as well! Goodness, I do so hope she's not going to be in the same middle school as you..."

The child, confused at her mother's words, muttered in a somewhat guilty voice, "...But Akane-chan has never told us to do anything we don't want to do. It's fine, Mom, you worry too much."

Though it sounded like she was defending her friend, the daughter was actually more annoyed by her mother jumping to conclusions about people telling her what to do.

The mother, on the other hand, began to breathe heavily as she shot back, "It's got nothing to do with whether Akane-chan is a good girl or a bad girl! The Awakusu-kai people are terrible! Just try getting into a fight with her or hurting her and you'll know! You have no idea what they're going to do to you!"

...

...?

...? ? ? ...?

The girl did not know what her friend's mother was talking about.

But she did know that her chest felt painful and she could not breathe.

In the end, the girl—Awakusu Akane—turned around and ran home.

She should not be there.

With that clear thought on her mind, she simply kept running.

Her cell phone was still left in her friend's home, but she could no longer bring herself to care.

She just wanted to get away from her friend's home as soon as possible.

She had given up on trying understanding just what the conversation between her friend and her mother had meant.

But fate was not about to leave her in peace.

That very night, her cell phone was brought to her home.

Her friend's parents had driven all the way over to her home.

They could have just let their daughter give it to her the next day in class, but they came all the way themselves to give it back to her.

Her friend's parents bowed low in front of her mother.

Her mother had said, "Here, Akane, come and thank them properly." She had lowered her head and seen their faces for a second—and they had worn forced smiles that did not tell her a thing about what they were thinking in their heads.

When she had told an older friend of hers about this—

"That's because cell phones are filled with information. They wanted to make sure that they gave it back before your family started to think that the information stored in their daughter's cell phone had been seen."

That was what the friend had told her. Of course, for Akane it was not something she could dismiss with a simple, "Huh, I see."

Because it was the incident that had led to everything else afterwards.

With the cell phone that had been returned to her, the girl logged on to "the Internet". She was so nervous at first that she did not know what to do.

She had never accessed the Internet before. For her cell phone, all she knew was its number. But after a couple of days, the receptive child gradually learned how to "walk around" on the Internet.

Of course, her life at school stayed normal.

The friend treated her exactly the same way as she had before.

She actually felt afraid at finding out just how little had changed.

Maybe she did hear them wrong that day, and she began to harbor such hopes again.

But the world the cell phone had connected her to was about to tell her the cruel truth.

When she felt comfortable using the search tool, the girl made up her mind to look something up.

She typed the word "Awakusu" into the box and looked at the results.

"Medei Group Awakusu-kai"

“Fuguruma Youki”, a free online encyclopedia.

It had a detailed entry on everything related to this organization.

As an elementary kid, she did not understand every single thing that was written there. But she came to know one important thing—

—What kind of organization Awakusu-kai was.

Akane found herself shaking all over as this realization hit her.

This is not right.

Someone must have gotten it wrong.

She had seen the name “Awakusu-kai” in various places in her home.

She knew that the paper lanterns in the room with the shrine had the words “Awakusu-kai” on them.

This has to be wrong.

She was sure that it was another organization that just happened to have the same name.

She was almost convinced, but—

The moment she saw her grandfather’s photo, under which the caption read “Head of Awakusu-kai”, the girl felt her world come to a grinding halt.

And that was not all.

On another website she found by using the search tool, she saw the words “...selling paintings as a legal camouflage” and with that, her frozen world began to crumble to pieces.

But even after that, she neither made a scene at home nor screamed.

She simply turned off the network connection with still, glassy eyes, and dialed the number of one of her friends.

It was the girl whom she had defended in front of the bullies.

She had thought that they had become close friends after that incident. So she called her and asked one question.

“Why...does everybody just listen to what I say?” she asked.

The girl must have realized that her voice was somewhat trembling.

The girl, her close friend, hesitated but eventually began to tell her everything word by word.

“...Actually, everyone was saying that they were going to bully you next, Akane-chan. They told me if I joined them in bullying you they would stop bullying me. But...one of them said that Akane-chan’s father was a really scary man, and it would be a bad idea to make him angry...”

Some of the kids had told their parents, and the rumor spread like wildfire among parents in the neighborhood.

“Our kids were planning to bully the granddaughter of the Head of Awakusu-kai!”

Some parents panicked at the thought and told their kids over and over:

“Never, ever upset that girl called Awakusu Akane!”

Because she was the granddaughter of the Head of Awakusu-kai.

What was more, if their kids bullied her at school they would have had no moral excuse even if the other party made a false charge against them.

Before something like that could happen, some parents began to warn their children.

“You should never piss off Akane-chan.”

If they told their kids to stay away from Awakusu Akane, it could have been seen as a form of bullying.

But if their kids got so close to her that they fought over something trivial and hurt her in the process, it would have spelt trouble as well.

So the parents told their kids to always make Awakusu Akane look good.

When TV programs began to discuss the internal networks in schools, some parents became so paranoid that they made their children tell them the address of the internal network and checked to make sure that no one had written a bad word about Awakusu Akane on the website.

What these parents did became gossip material in itself and in turn affected other parents. The kids, too, told each other about the rumors they heard—and in the end, everyone knew better than to say a single “No” to Akane.

Akane herself, on the other hand, had no idea that she had become the queen in the classroom.

She had always thought that she was at an equal level with everyone else. She had never looked down or been condescending on anyone.

But little did she know that everyone around her were just dolls propped from below to match her height.

Did the Head or Young Head of Awakusu-kai threaten non-yakuza people with the name Awakusu-kai on their daughter’s interpersonal matters? In fact, no one could say “yes” to that question.

But the paranoia spread because some of the parents kept overreacting.

Had they not overreacted, would Awakusu Akane already be bullied, and would her father who was an executive of Awakusu-kai or her grandfather who was the head have done something of that sort about it?

No one could be sure that they would “never” do something like that. That was the reason why this twisted web of interpersonal relationships formed around her in the first place.

Though that kind of analysis was beyond her ability from just hearing what her friend had told her, the girl—whose intuition was sharp for her age—was able to get a general idea of the kind of environment she was in.

Akane hung up the phone and kept her head low for a while as she sat in the room.

She had thought that she was a fortunate and happy girl.

Yes, in fact, she was.

But she had thought that everyone else had been as fortunate and happy as she was.

She had thought that there were no bullies in her class, and everyone was free to say what they wanted to say.

But it turned out that it was she who had taken the freedom away from her classmates.

As a result, she was never bullied by anyone.

But that result no longer mattered to Akane.

Time ticked away as she sat there frozen. From the kitchen, she heard her mother calling for her.

It sounded like dinner was ready.

Her father and her grandfather were both busy, so she and her mother were usually the only ones at the table. But Akane had never felt lonely. Her father was always extremely caring when she was able to meet him, and she really liked her father that way.

The girl tried to cheer herself up as she had dinner with her mother.

She smiled her usual smile and talked in the same merry voice.

She had to pretend that everything was alright.

Those were her thoughts as she finished her dinner and returned to her room with the forced smile still on her face as she closed her door. Trying to find a distraction, she began to tidy up her desk.

In the middle of that, one of her sketchbooks on the desk was swept to the ground and laid open.

It was a drawing of her classmates eating lunch together.

Everyone had a happy smile on his or her face.

A truly happy one, from the bottom of the heart.

The minute she saw the drawing, she finally collapsed.

“Ah.....ahhh!”

Akane ripped the drawing off the sketchbook, crushed it into a ball, tore it into pieces, and threw them away.

“I’m going to paint many, many paintings, and maybe someday Dad will sell them for me!”

The girl was reminded of her own dream.

She did not even understand why she was so upset. The little girl cried, screamed and kept destroying her own drawings.

Everything she had seen—

The happy faces of her classmates—they were all lies.

And the one who made them lies was no other than herself.

As if out of her mind, she kept destroying her drawings—destroying her dream.

It all happened in mere seconds. But for the girl it felt like eternity.

In her distorted sense of time, the girl no longer thought of her past life as happy.

But as she got to the middle of the sketchbook, her hands stopped.

It was a drawing of her father and mother's faces.

Looking at the page with her family drawn on it, Akane at last realized something.

Even though she was shocked when she got to know what her father and grandfather did at Awakusu-kai—she simply could not bring herself to hate her family.

“Akane? Akane! What happened!?”

Having heard her daughter crying, her mother rushed into her room.

Akane did not know what to do. She simply dived into her mother's arms and kept crying.

The girl was blessed by the world.

But for her that bliss did not always mean happiness.

The girl went back to her normal life with a heart broken in places.

She knew that she was feeling more and more distant from her family, her father in particular.

Mikiya, her father, seemed to have noticed that his daughter was aware of what he actually did for a living. He kept trying to see how distant they had become, but that was it.

Everyday, she put on a smile at school in order to not show her real feelings to anyone.

She was shocked when she knew that the world around her was built upon layers of lies. But it was even harder now that these lies were destroyed and replaced with reality.

Her classmates acted as Akane wanted them to. Akane acted as she was expected to in front of the lying faces.

The world consisted of nothing but lies. Even she was a lie.

That was the world she had been blessed by.

Several months later—

The girl made up her mind to run away from home when she felt that she could not take it any more.

She did not think it would do any good.

But if she went to a place where no one knew about her or the name Awakusu, her life would probably change. That was what she believed.

She used her cell phone to look up the information she needed to run away from home.

After trying a couple of keywords, she had already found some sites that looked useful.

With shaking hands she posted on the discussion boards—

And a man with the handle “Nakura” immediately came into active contact with her.

He answered Akane’s childish questions patiently and thoughtfully, always putting himself in her shoes when he volunteered to be her counselor. It was perhaps only natural that Akane, who did not know a lot about the Internet and was too devastated at that time to remain vigilant, gradually came to trust him.

After that, they agreed to meet offline. Akane did not lower her guard; she wanted to see with her own eyes what kind of person “Nakura” was before she talked to him—

But the one who awaited her at the agreed meeting spot was a beautiful woman with long hair.

As she edged closer, the woman with long hair smiled a bit and said, “Are you Akane-chan? Nice to meet you, I’m Nakura.”

The intellectual aura around the woman surprised Akane. She stared with round eyes.

She never expected Nakura to be a woman to begin with.

The woman was extremely kind, warming Akane's damaged heart with her words. Probably overjoyed by the fact that Nakura was not a fearsome bad guy, Akane immediately opened up to "Nakura" and met with her several times afterwards.

After several meetings, she introduced a man to her.

"You said you wanted to run away from home?"

The young man who introduced himself as "Izaya" told her that he was "Nakura"'s colleague.

With "Nakura", he often met with the girl and heard her out.

"Nakura" and "Izaya" broke into her heart in an incredible way. In the end, Akane began to tell them what exactly had happened to her.

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Akane regretted it.

These people would definitely be afraid, too, when they heard the name Awakusu-kai.

Akane realized that her legs were shaking uncontrollably.

What should I do?

What should I do? What should I do, what should I do...

These people are going to be afraid of Dad and Grandpa, too.

But instead, she felt a gentle hand on her head.

"Izaya" stroked her hair gently as he smiled softly at her and said, "It's alright. If I tell you that I'm not afraid, I will be lying...but Akane-chan is just Akane-chan."

The girl was little, and her heart was already damaged.

That one sentence was really all one needed to break into her heart through its leaks.

After that, "Izaya" provided the girl with all sorts of information, sometimes giving her links to special websites or teaching her ways to use her cell phone in ways one would not normally use.

And one month after that—

Before she even realized it, the girl found herself running away from her home.

“Before she even realized it” might sound like an exaggeration, but that was exactly how it had felt.

Since the end of April the girl had never been home.

Every day, she would send a text message to her mother saying “I’m staying with a friend. Don’t worry.”

In the first few days, she did.

She stayed at Nakura’s place.

She did not lie. The next day, “Izaya” would take her to a manga cafe, and the day after that they would go to a 24-hour family restaurant to let her make up for some sleep.

Akane did these things because “Izaya” told her to.

But for Akane, it did not feel weird or unreasonable.

She felt like this was what she had originally wanted.

An environment in which no one thought of her as the “Daughter of Awakusu” and everyone saw her as nobody but herself.

Of course, if asked whether she felt lonely from not being able to see her family, she would not have said no.

But maybe, just maybe, her running away from home would make her father and grandfather stop doing things that made people fear them.

She knew that things were never that simple. But her heart clang on to that little “maybe”—and all thoughts of going back home were numbed.

Just as even that thought became not enough to hold her back, “Izaya” told her something.

“...Do you not like your grandpa and your dad?”

Upon hearing the sudden question, Akane was reminded of the time when she was destroying her drawings. Lowering her head, she answered in a quiet voice.

“...I don’t know.”

“Izaya” gave her a kind smile and said, “It’s not up to me to judge you on that. Take your time to figure that out until you know for sure.”

But then his face suddenly darkened. In a serious tone, he said, “I can’t guarantee that your dad and your grandpa will still be alright by the time you figured that out, though.”

“Eh...?”

“Your dad and your grandpa are, well—just like you said you worried about—feared by a lot of people, aren’t they?”

“Y-Yes...”

Akane felt afraid not knowing where the conversation was heading. “Izaya”, however, simply showed her a piece of paper.

On it she saw a blond-haired man dressed in black and white, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses looking predatory like a wolf’s.

“His name is Heiwajima Shizuo. People say he’s the most dangerous assassin in Ikebukuro.”

“A-Assassin?”

The girl inhaled sharply at the ominous word.

“Izaya”, on the other hand, looked as serious as ever as he said the most unnerving words.

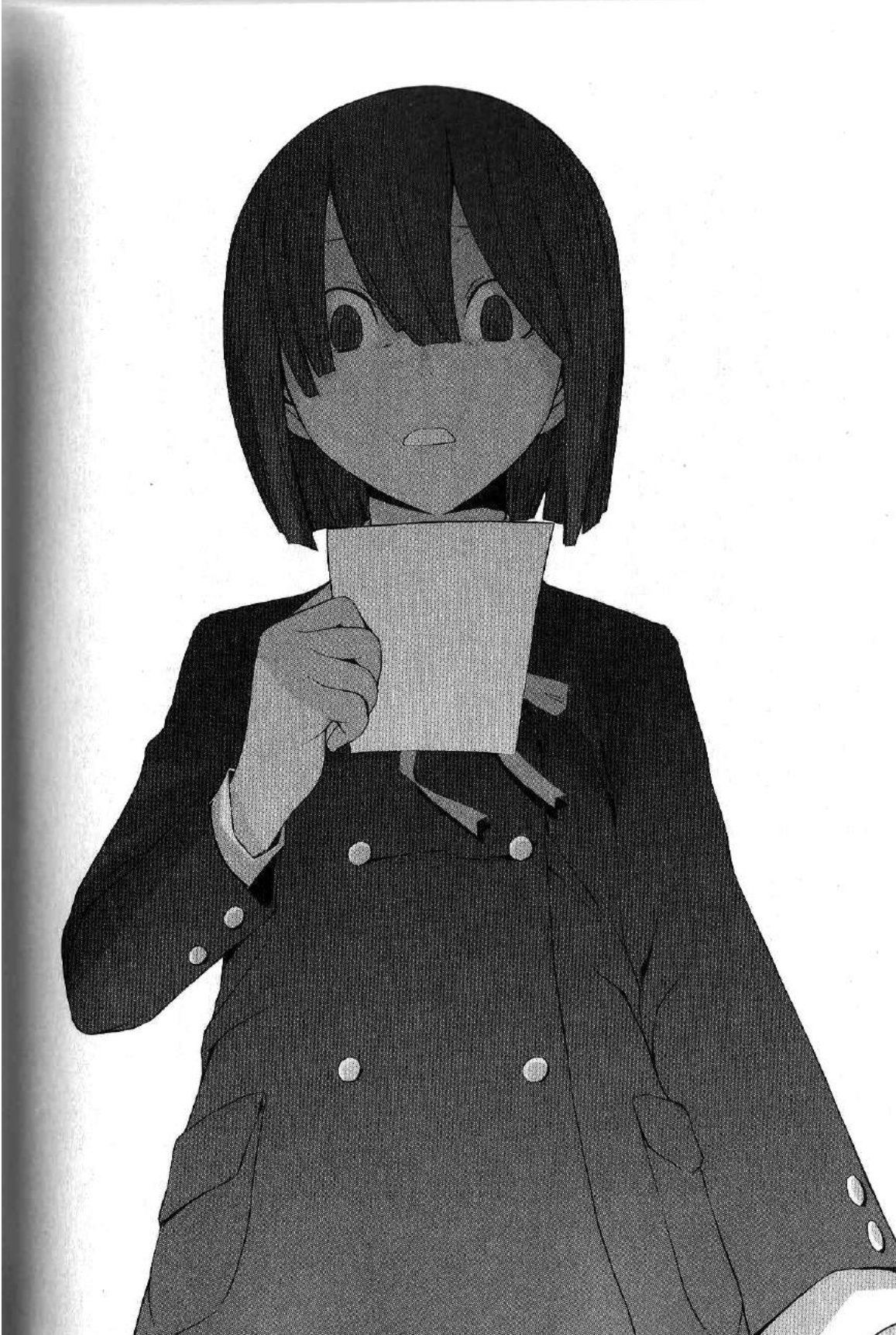
“He might already be after your dad’s and your grandpa’s lives.”

“...If I told you that, what would you do?”

The man’s words were far from a compelling force at this point.

It was simply a question.

But it was still a part of the string that pulled at the girl’s heart.



After that, the girl became trapped in the arena of conflict—

All the while still every bit as blessed by the world as she had always been since her birth.

LOVEY-DOVEY PRATTLES OF AN UNDERGROUND DOCTOR, V

Here. Have some tea while you're waiting, Sir Shiki.

It's going to be alright. Nothing can possibly go wrong if you trust the task with Celty.

Please don't keep making that sour face.

I'm not turning into an optimist; that I am not.

But either way, we can't do anything until we know how things turn out. Waiting somewhat more hopefully with a lighter heart may help to relieve the burden of stress. After all, "Bliss always chooses the laughing families", doesn't it?

Anyway, I was relieved to know that what Sir Shiki had asked Celty to do this time was nothing more than to be the bodyguard of a girl. Had you asked her to kill the ones who are looking to kidnap that girl, however...then I don't think Celty would have agreed to do the job at all.

Celty chose to be a courier because she had no other choice. But even so, she's still an ordinary girl.

...Eh?

...Ah, right. Well, that's true.

You're definitely right.

Dullahans are death's heralds. Depending on the story-teller, they are sometimes also seen as Grim Reapers who bring death themselves.

But it does not mean that they can kill people without blinking—that would be another story entirely. People may see them as something close to Death or zombies, but you're aware that they are actually fae, right?

...What kind of blood is in that tub? ...I'm curious now that you mentioned it.

Could be just tomato juice or something. You'll be surprised how often reality works that way.

Speaking of which, Sir Shiki, how come that you're so familiar with dullahans?

They say many gamblers* nowadays should bear the prefix "Intelli-". Are you one of those Intelligamblers?

** Gamblers (bakuto): forerunners of yakuza emerging in the mid-Edo period. They were mainly involved in illegal gambling. The term remains an alternative term for modern yakuza.*

** Intelli- : "Intelliyakuza" is a term used to refer to members of modern yakuza that draw their income from intelligence (thus the Intelli- prefix) and financial manipulation. Compared to the traditional yakuza they are less dependent on physical violence.*

Eh?

Ah, no. I wouldn't call you people yakuza.

Isn't "yakuza" used in Three-Card Karuta* to refer to 8, 9 and 3—the worst card combination? It would have been way too rude if I called Shiki-san the worst card combination when we're talking face to face like this.

** Karuta: a Japanese card game.*

You say you wouldn't mind, but I would.

But still, Shiki-san, I'm not enough of an idealist to call you and your people "chivalrists".

** Chivalrist (ninkyo-mono): a term yakuza members use to refer to their own occupation.*

I don't really know about other groups, but in Awakusu-kai there are hardly any members who are dauntless, never lay a finger on a non-yakuza, and never do or sell drugs. ...In short, there simply aren't that many real "chivalrists" among you, are there?

Ah, Akabayashi-san may not look like it but he's actually one of those chivalrists?

But still, these are the exact thoughts that make me want to keep Celty from getting too involved with you and your people. I hope you understand.

Myself? I've long since given up on myself.

If I happen to blot my own copybook eternally at some point in the future, it will have nothing to do with Celty.

So after you're finished sinking my body into the depths of Tokyo Bay, please don't also make Celty responsible for anything I may have done.

This is my personal request to you, Shiki-san, since you've been an acquaintance of my family since my father's generation.

Tell Celty that these are my last words: "My soul is floating around you, Celty. Look around for it. We'll be together forever this way, Celty."

...Eh? Why are you sighing?

...

N-No no no, it's nothing like that!

I didn't mean to make it sound as if I were planning to betray your trust so terribly that you'd have to finish me off!

...I apologize. My mistake for being insensitive.

Your people didn't even get the chance to leave their last words, did they?

...Please don't stare at me like that.

I can't stand sitting around doing nothing either when people who would do something like that in Ikebukuro are on the loose.

...I'm asking this out of my own personal curiosity. How did those three die?

?

What's with this digital camera?

Ah, it has photos of the deceased in it?

I must delete them permanently once I've seen them, right?

I see. If you'll excuse me...

...

...May they rest in peace.

I've gone through all of them.

Can I let you know my personal opinion about them?

I speak not so much as an underground doctor as I do as an old friend of Heiwajima Shizuo's.

Whoever did this, it was not him.

...I'm not trying to cover up for him.

As his friend I want to believe that he's innocent...but that's only 30% of the reason.

It's not like Sir Shiki would be convinced by that alone.

But yes, you can say that I have actual reasons for believing it was not him. Several of them, in fact.

Let us assume that Shizuo was filled with rage to the point that he wanted to kill whoever his opponent was.

The kind of insane rage that would make him want to kill three people in Awakusu-kai, mind you.

But don't the bodies of the deceased look a little too tidy for that to you?

Take the body of the deceased who was rammed into the wall for example. Shizuo can easily rip guardrails off with those arms of his. If it was indeed Shizuo who had rammed the man's head into the wall with the intention of killing him—that is to say, without pulling his punches—then the body would probably not be left with a face for you to recognize. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to see a smashed skull instead.

The other bodies are also way too tidy.

It looks like they were indeed killed with bare hands.

But they are too extremely tidy.

It doesn't look like they even put up a fight. They were your subordinates, weren't they? Can that Heiwajima Shizuo really manage to kill three of them before they could put up any resistance?

It doesn't look like he just happened to have gotten into a fight with them and killed them without meaning to, either. Apart from the one deceased stuck in the wall, there is a complete lack of any signs of a struggle anywhere else in the room.

...On top of all that, I have no idea why he went to the building in the first place.

He didn't say anything that even faintly suggested he might go there.

Shiki-san, I don't think Heiwajima Shizuo's ever gotten into trouble with you or your people either, has he?

...But if you were to ask me who it could be if not Shizuo, I would have no answer to provide. It's not like I'm the one to know who's in trouble with Awakusu-kai and who's not.

That's right.

I do not know what kind of trouble Awakusu-kai is in right now. Neither do I plan to know.

Unless it involves Celty, that is.

Celty was home for a split second yesterday. She took her spare helmet with her.

That means something must have happened to her original one.

It looks like Celty got involved in something fairly dangerous this time.

Ah, no, I'm not complaining to you, Shiki-san.

I am actually not too worried that anything bad would happen to Celty.

Celty is strong.

But still I don't want to see her sad face.

Yes, her face.

Even if she has nothing above her neck, Celty still has a face. Or should I say expressions?

I can more or less read her mood from her body language and the ways in which her shadows move around her. But I'm probably the only one.

In short, Celty is too good-natured.

Even if her own body is not hurt, she would feel very sad if anyone she knows gets injured.

She may be already empathizing with Awakusu-san's little princess.

Though she has not even met her, Celty would look unhappy at the mere mention of children dying.

It didn't use to be that way. But Celty's changed a lot in the recent years.

Through her contact with different people she might have become more like a human being.

I personally have never been into that kind of ethics, so I don't think I've really been influenced that much.

Anyway...

Celty may be more kindhearted than even the average human being.

When an average human being helps another for nothing in return, they may hesitate after calculating the costs of the task and the risks it poses to their social status or personal safety.

But Celty has hardly anything like that to put on the "other end of the balance".

She has lost even her own head. The only things left to lose are probably her pride and her life free from guilt. To safeguard her pride and her guilt-free life, she would choose to help people. So these things would actually end up adding to the "help people" end of the balance.

That's what's so awesome about her.

At least I can't say that I have a human heart like hers.

Celty's turning into a more and more splendid woman recently. She's already way too good for me.

That's why I wouldn't let anyone else have her. Neither would I ever want to make her sad. An underground doctor like me would never be good enough for Celty. But still I'm in love with her.

Well, of course life would just be too good if she could include my name in the list of "things left to lose".

...Hm?

...Shiki-san? Sir Shiki?

...Don't tell me you fell asleep.

You just don't have anything to say to that? Ah, I see. That's totally fine.

It would bother me more if you could understand. If you were able to understand what I just said, it would mean that you also understand what an awesome woman Celty is, making you my rival in love.

Anyway, this is just how Celty is like. Please rest assured.

Once she finds Awakusu Akane-chan, she's going to make absolutely sure that nothing happens to her.

She will, even if Awakusu-kai cancels their request right at this minute.



5章

Ryohgo Nante

5

血海無情

CHAPTER 5

EVERYTHING IS SOLVED AND DETONATED

Orihara Izaya was walking down a street in Northern Kantou.

He was on his way to another train station on another line. Around him countless families swarmed the streets; it was Golden Week.

His gaze was fixed on his cell phone.

It looked like he had to keep an eye on something on the screen. However, he was able to walk without bumping into anyone despite how crowded these streets were.

The display on the screen appeared to be a certain chatroom.

“Bakyura”, “Kyo” and “Mai” were leaving the chat one after another.

Watching this with the corner of his mouth curled into a twisted smile, Izaya said quietly to himself, “—About time.”

He pressed the power button on the cell phone and shut down the internet mode.

But suddenly the cell phone started to ring, signaling a call from someone.

The name displayed was “Kida Masaomi”.

BINGO ☆

Flicking his finger quickly at the screen, Izaya extended his finger towards the TALK button.

“Hello.”

“...Hello.”

“Yah, it’s you. What’s up? Dialing me up all of a sudden. I thought we were already done talking this morning. Or are you slowly falling in love with my voice? If that’s indeed the reason, your love would be a tad too heavy on my shoulders. Quite frankly, I don’t have the time to

provide you with comfort either. How about you go to Saki-chan instead? I'm sure she'll drown you with the comfort you need."

"I don't have time to listen to your unimaginative jokes."

"What happened? Why are you sounding so angry?"

Izaya's provocative chattering tone was met with a furious voice coming from the other end of the line.

"What did you say to Mikado...?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You were the one who used my handle to fool everyone in the chatroom, weren't you?"

"Do you have any proof?"

"The only one who would do something like that is you."

"Could be one of Kyo-san and Mai-san's little conspiracies. And you never really know if there's a dark side to Setton-san or not. As for Saika-san, she has her record of spamming the chatroom too."

"Say whatever you want to say. You trying to distract me with these speculations instead of just saying 'No' is definite proof in itself."

"I don't think the jury would buy that, though. But never mind, I'm going to let you pass this time. So yes, it was me who used your handle to trick everyone else. Really, it took a hell lot of effort trying to imitate the way you usually behaved in front of people."

"...What did you say...to Mikado?"

"Why are you so sure that I must have said something to Mikado-kun? I saw you talking to Kyo-san and Mai-san just now. They never mentioned anything about Tanaka Taro-kun talking to 'you', did they?"

"I can't imagine that the human being named Orihara Izaya would impersonate me online for any other purpose. If you were trying to set me up, you would have had many offline courses of action to choose from."

"Well, that is true. So what are you planning to do about it?"

"Answer my question..."

“I wish we had the time for that. Don’t you have any clue what’s going on in Ikebukuro right now?”

“...Huh?”

“Ahh, I see. Since you had that trouble with Dollars you just shut down all channels of information. Well, I guess you’ll just have to deal with it.”

“What are you talking about...? What’s going on in Ikebukuro right now?”

“If you really want to know, *why not just call Mikado-kun and ask him?*”

“...Izaya-san, you...”

“It isn’t hard, is it? You and Mikado-kun are best friends. Just call him and say everything you need to say over the phone. Orihara Izaya is a complete bastard. The one in the chatroom last night was not me; it was him, that impostor. Forget whatever he said to you.....stuff like that. Though I’m guessing it’s already a little bit late for that. But anyway, just let him hear your voice. It would be good enough. Even if it’s only for the sake of the precious friendship that still connects you.”

“...Please cut it out.”

“Mikado-kun seems like he’s still trying to figure out what you would think about him. Really, he cares too much about others at times that it’s sort of an incorrigible disease. But then that’s what makes him worthy of respect. Just like sheep for the sacrifice.”

“I TOLD YOU TO CUT IT OUT—”

Izaya ended the call the moment he heard Masaomi yelling from the other end of the line.

“I don’t like being yelled at. Plus I’m almost at the train station...”

Upon arriving at the station at which he was going to board his connecting train, Izaya took the extra trouble to buy a ticket despite the fact that he had a rechargeable card on him. He headed for the platform.

After looking up at the estimated time of arrival for the next train, Izaya went back to playing with his cell phone, checking his text messages one by one.

“Let’s see. It’s going to be no fun if Dollars isn’t fighting back even a teeny little bit.”

Muttering these words to himself, Izaya took *a second cell phone* out of his breast pocket.

He began to press its keys—

—With fingertips filled to the brim with a malicious intent and a twisted love towards humans.

♂ ♀

One hour ago, in front of a girls' school

Under an overpass that was part of the Metropolitan Expressway, a major road cut across the space between the Ikebukuro Train Station and Sunshine City.

On one side stood a girls' school. In front of the school gate two men confronted each other.

One of them was a severe looking young man wearing a thin knit cap. The other was a young man wearing a straw hat, his face and one arm wrapped in bandages.

The two young men stood facing each other. However, Rokujou Chikage—the injured one—was grinning rather fearlessly while Kadota Kyohei—the one in the knit cap—looked sullen as he stared at his opponent.

“...You bastard.”

A message had just reached Kadota via his cell phone.

On its display screen he saw—

—An emergency notice telling him that Dollars members were being attacked throughout Ikebukuro.

“No...you bastards, what have you come here for?”

“Nothing. Just thought we should pay you back for the fights you hard-sold us.”*

** Hard-sold: the Japanese expression for “picking a fight” translates literally into “selling a fight”—thus Chikage’s wordplay here.*

Chikage laughed as he answered while Kadota fixed him with a sharp glare.

“I don’t need your change. Just take whatever I give you, would ya?”

“You mean you came here to avenge the folks Shizuo and I beat up recently in this city? If that’s the reason, then you’ve got it all wrong. I didn’t do it on Dollars’ behalf. It was a completely personal act; I did it because I wanted to.”

Kadota kept his stare fixed on his opponent, watching out for unusual sounds in his surroundings as well as the way his opponent's gaze moved. The man in front of him could be nothing more than a decoy; he had to be careful in case there were people waiting to ambush him from behind or from the sides.

But so far he had seen only ordinary passers-by.

Some of them turned to look curiously at the two men standing opposite each other and talking in the middle of the sidewalk. As soon as they realized that these two were gangsters of some sort, however, they backed off immediately as if they had been burned.

Chikage rested his back against the wall outside the girls' school, his eyes narrowing to a smile in-between the bandages.

"About that—we were the ones at fault, so we don't hold any grudge against you. I do think that Heiwajima Shizuo kind of overdid it, though, so I went to him to protest personally."

"...Ah. So the injury on your face...that was Shizuo?"

"Beat me out of shape, that one. What exactly is he? The Archdevil or something?"

Laughing a hollow laugh and sighing, Chikage questioned Kadota while playing with the brim of his straw hat.

"Anyway. That matter's already finished. But do you know what you Dollars bastards did back in Saitama?"

"?"

"...Ah, looks like you don't."

As Kadota frowned, Chikage retracted his smile slightly and began to talk in an emotionless voice.

"What a bunch of fortunate folks you are—not even knowing what the rest of your gang is doing!"

"..."

"Had they only targeted the people in my gang, I still would have let them off the hook since we kind of overdid it in Ikebukuro a while back and all...but guess what? One of my people had a younger brother who just happened to be with them, and your people didn't even leave that kid alone. How am I supposed to sit around not doing anything about that?"

Chikage flexed his neck audibly and spoke in an assertive voice as he lifted his back off the wall.

“It doesn’t end here. Our motorbikes got burned. Even our team logo got vandalized. I mean, ‘DARAAZU’ in hiragana? You could have just sprayed the words ‘we want a fight’ outright instead. How long do you think it took us to paint that logo? We did it in that obscure little place because we didn’t want it to get erased, man. Thank you very much for taking the trouble to seek it out.”

“Even if you tell me all this, it’s not like there’s anything I can do about it. Also technically speaking you were the ones who vandalized that place first, you know.”

“...Ah, well. That’s true. Our bad.”

Chikage broke into an involuntary smile as Kadota pointed out the contradiction in his talk.

“I never expected to get lectured on moral matters by a Dollars member. You, Sir, are a pleasure.”

“So? What exactly brings you to me? Aren’t you Toramaru’s head?”

His cell phone rang again, indicating a new message.

Kadota kept his glare on the man right in front of him, never moving a muscle on his face.

“If it’s not for revenge for what I did in Ikebukuro, then why did you come to meet me?”

“Aren’t you like one of Dollars’s bosses or something?”

“What?”

Give me a break. Since when did people start circulating such nonsense?

Kadota stood there unable to think of anything to say. Chikage, on the other hand, did no more beating around the bush as he asked:

“Who is Dollars’s boss, and where is he?”

“...”

Well, that wasn’t a surprise question.

Kadota sighed slightly as he began to realize that the situation he found himself in was far more troublesome than what he had expected—not only because he had an opponent right in front of his eyes, but also because of what it meant for Dollars as a whole.

“If you can talk directly to that guy, get him here fast, would ya?”

“I have no idea.”

“Come on. There’s no need to be so cold, is there?”

“It’s nothing like that...I told you I got no idea who Dollars’ boss is.”

Chikage was the one to freeze this time upon hearing Kadota’s curt reply.

What?

Seriously, there’s no way he could be telling the truth when he said he didn’t know who his boss was.

But then again, when I searched the Internet nothing seemed to come up either...

“Don’t try to mess with me. That just can’t be true.”

“You—are you familiar with locusts?”

“Are you messing with me again?”

“Just listen. Locusts sometimes move in swarms, don’t they? Tens, hundreds of thousands would fly together eating up everything in every rice or wheat field in their path. Well, we’re talking about locusts, so it could be even tens or hundreds of millions. Who knows.”

Kadota turned his shoulders and put one hand on the wall outside of the girls’ school as he spoke. Both of them were on the edge of the sidewalk now, making it easier for other people to walk by. In this way, they almost became part of the natural pedestrian traffic. The passers-by no longer paid attention to what they were saying to each other.

“Say, would the locusts know which one of them is the leader? I don’t even know if there’s a leader like an ant queen or bee queen in each swarm to begin with. There kind of is a leader in Dollars, but I don’t know his name. Neither have I ever received his orders.”

“...”

“Which means Dollars is not like a hive of bees or ants. We’re more like a swarm of locusts or a school of fish in the sea. To put it more simply ...Ah, I may be stretching the concept a little bit, but you can think of us as a country or an ethnicity of people. Which makes what you’re doing right now kind of like an air raid or a terrorist attack...since you don’t bother to discriminate between ordinary citizens and the culprits.”

Kadota finished his introduction to the nature of Dollars with a sarcastic remark and waited for his opponent's reaction, yet—

"I'm not so sure about that."

The corners of Chikage's mouth relaxed somewhat as he objected.

"Aren't most people in Dollars because they wanted to be? If anything, you guys are more like a circle or club of some sort."

"...Maybe."

"When someone in a sports club gets himself into a scandal, others may get involved as well, and eventually the whole team has to be placed on suspension...these things happen a lot, don't they? Whether they should place entire teams on suspension for that is another story. My point is, you guys would be total dickheads if you tell people you're Dollars members and don't expect something like that to happen to you one day."

With reciprocating sarcasm, Chikage provoked his opponent back.

Kadota, however, broke into a smile for the first time upon hearing him. In a soft voice, he muttered, "Yeah, you're right."

"What?"

"Being part of a gang, basking in its power, and then just going 'I have no idea what's happening. That's all. Goodbye.' when something like this is happening to your gang? Nah, I don't think so either. Well, at least I am prepared to deal with whatever comes my way... I can't just laugh and think they deserve it when other members in my gang are being attacked without realizing what on earth they did to merit something like this."

Kadota sighed in some sort of resignation as he continued to mutter as if to himself.

Chikage, realizing that Kadota was starting to give off a different vibe, turned his body to face his opponent and asked in a serious voice, "...What are you talking about?"

Kadota, on the other hand, was wearing a small grin as he said emphatically:

"I'm saying: *challenge accepted.*"

"...Huh!"

Chikage's face brightened at his opponent's words, laughter escaping his throat involuntarily.

“Awesome. You’re just awesome. Old-fashioned but in a good way. You’re more like a banchou* than a teamer*.”

** Banchou: literally “boss”, “banchou” is used to refer to leaders of juvenile delinquent groups in the Showa era. Compared to “teamers”, a banchou is considered to have more backbone and principles, especially in that they’re not afraid to fight alone. In Durarara!!, a teenage Orihara Izaya comments that Kadota Kyohei is the school’s “ura-banchou” (Shadow Boss) and Heiwajima Shizuo the “omote-banchou” (Light Boss).*

** Teamer: a term for “gangster” coined in 1992 to refer to gang members who vandalize and harass in groups. It started out as a derogatory term (since lacking the courage to fight alone is considered cowardice in Japanese culture), but gradually acquired a more neutral character.*

“We’ll be attracting too much attention here. Let’s go somewhere else.”

Chikage kept smiling as he shook his head at Kadota.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“What?”

“It’s gonna be over in one second.”

Before he finished the sentence, Chikage had already sprung off the ground.

It was the same move he had used on Heiwajima Shizuo: he used the guardrail as his springboard to leap forward.

Only this time it was not a drop kick, but rather a kick delivered with the blade of his foot as he tilted his body sideways.

The tip of Chikage’s right foot went straight for Kadota’s temple.

The next second, however, the perfectly-timed kick was met with only thin air when everything seemed to suggest that it was going to hit the target.

Kadota swayed his body to dodge the foot just before it threatened to hit him, stepping back to wait for his opponent to land.

The passers-by stopped dead in their tracks at the sight of the young man performing a jump-kick at people. Hastily, they backed off as far away from the duo as possible.

“How many hours are in your ‘one second’, exactly?” Kadota muttered.

Taking notice of the commotion around them, he made the same proposal to Chikage again.

“Let’s go somewhere else.”

“...OK.”

Chikage, too, had probably realized that Kadota was an experienced fighter from his moves just moments ago.

It seemed like he had given up on acting like a recalcitrant child. Even though Kadota had turned his back to him, Chikage still followed him quietly to find a new place to fight as Kadota had suggested.

But are there any places close by where we can have a fight undisturbed?

There's a police station around here somewhere...also a shrine and a park. But when I was here with My Honeys yesterday all of these places were full of people, at least in the daytime...

Maybe he'll lead me to a rooftop somewhere? Chikage thought as he began to walk.

But after they had walked to Tokyu Hands and were just about to turn onto 60-Story Street, Kadota raised his hand at the taxi stop on the crossing.

Without hesitation, Kadota pulled open the door and climbed in.

Turning to a stunned Chikage, he asked as if confused.

“What's wrong? Just hop in.”

“We're taking a cab?” Chikage murmured, as if he could think of nothing else to say.

Kadota laughed hollowly and replied, “I'm the one with a job, so I'll pay. Don't you even worry.”



Back side of the sports gear warehouse, Second Ground, Raira Academy

Situated not too far away from the Ikebukuro Station but treed and lawned, the Second Ground was a piece of property of Raira Academy.

Though the main campus also had its own sporting grounds, the baseball, soccer, and lacrosse clubs used to have a hard time sharing the limited space available. That was why some of the sports clubs now preferred to come to the Second Ground to practice instead.

The Ground seemed to be in use by the Kabaddi club and the girls' soccer club right at that moment. Even inside the sports gear warehouse outside the grounds there were voices shouting "Kabaddi Kabaddi Kabaddi..." and girls laughing, sounding strange yet lively.

At one corner of the Second Ground, Chikage opened his mouth, sounding impressed.

"...I never thought there would be this kind of place in the center of Ikebukuro."

Around the warehouse, trees had been planted, making it look like a small park. Between the fence and the warehouse there was quite a bit of space, and no one would see what was going on here from the other side of the warehouse.

Kadota stretched his arms in preparation of a fight as Chikage continued to look around.

"They were planning to build a second warehouse here, that's why. But guess after they put the first one to use, they realized that a second one wasn't needed after all."

"How come you know this place so well?"

"I'm an alum."

Kadota laughed in slight self-deprecation and continued to speak.

"This was one of the fighting spots back when I was at school. Folks from other high schools used to lie all around this place after they were beaten up by Shizuo. The trees cast a nice shade over your head, too. Wouldn't be a bad place to take a nap."

"So that's why you want me to put you to some good sleep here. I see."

"Thank you, but no. Raira Academy's grown much more peaceful than before. This place is more of a dating spot now for couples who want a quiet place to make out at night."

"That's great to hear. I'll bring My Honeys over to make out sometime."

The duo laughed aloud as they faced each other.

When the laughter died down, their faces turned serious at the same time.

"Should we start? Is it OK to not use that weapon you have under your clothes? Isn't that a short wooden katana or something?"

Chikage, upon hearing Kadota's question, reached for that "something" hidden under his shirt and replied, "Hm? Ah, so you noticed."

“Yeah, I did when you jump-kicked at me. You’re already injured. It’s only fair that you’re at least allowed to use a weapon against me.”

“That’s what I should be saying to you. Want me to lend you my weapon to equalize the chances, old man?”

“I’m not even 25 yet, kid.”

Simple and straightforward provocations were exchanged, until—

—Without warning, the duo charged straight towards each other.



Fists fell like rain and the dull sound of flesh being beaten against flesh was added to the shouts of “Kabaddi” and girls’ laughter. But little did they know.

That Dollars was, literally, everywhere in Ikebukuro.

As for Kadota, he did not even know that he was indeed considered one of Dollars’s “bosses”.

That was why they did not notice.

A message had already been sent from the cell phone of the manager of the girls’ soccer club—a Dollars member—to every Dollars member within Ikebukuro.

[I just saw Dollars’s Kadota-san walking to the back side of Raira’s Second Ground! The person he was with looked dangerous. I think he might be one of the gangsters who are attacking Dollars members in Ikebukuro right now! If they do start fighting, I don’t think Kadota-san will lose, but I’m still worried! \(><)/]

Attached considerately to the message was a photo of the duo walking shoulder to shoulder.

♂ ♀

Same time, an abandoned factory in Tokyo

“...Honestly, what a royal nuisance they’ve been.”

Aoba sighed heavily in the abandoned factory after Mikado had left with Celty.

The commotion had died down completely. Around the boy his fellow Blue Square members stood there laughing. Around these people men in tokko-fuku and leather jackets lay motionless on the ground.

Toramaru’s men were all lying unconscious. Around them blood-stained steel pipes and broken chunks of logs rolled around in a haphazard fashion.

The delinquents still standing were not miraculously unhurt, either; they also got their fair share of the injuries.

Aoba himself had a scratch on his face in addition to the blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

But he looked calm and composed when he talked to his fellow members around him in a voice that sounded as if nothing of value was lost.

“Good, it’s great to see you all alive and well. Really, you guys are made of such tough materials that it’s kind of a waste.”

He sounded completely different now than when he was talking to Mikado just a few moments ago.

The youths around him replied, laughing, to the boy’s appreciation peppered with sarcasm.

“Heheh. Piece of cake. I told ya they were weak.”

“Neko, that doesn’t sound very convincing when you say it with blood coming out of your head.”

“Nah. It’s just tomato juice. Heheh.”

“But then we’re really lucky that Yatsufusa’s not here.”

“Had he come here he might have been dead.”

“Such a sickly one.”

“And a midget, too.”

“Speaking of which, that Mikado-sempai, isn’t he kind of a midget too?”

“That’s true. Aoba, I’ve never seen him before, but are you sure he’s really the one who made Dollars?”

“You’re not trying to make fools of all of us, are ya, Aoba?”

“If he is, we’ll kill him!” “And take his girlfriends!”

“Huh? Aoba’s got girlfriends?”

“You don’t remember? Those twin sisters.”

“...Kill him! Kill him right now!”

“Calm down.”

“Aoba tries to look tough, but he’s gonna die for real ‘cause most of the blows do get him.”

“That suits us just fine.” “Heheh.”

“...It’s true that Kururi and Mairu kissed me, but they’re not my girlfriends or anything...”

“I remember now! Kill him!”

“They’re already on first-name terms!?” “How close are you with them you bastard!?” “Kill him!” “Die!”

Aoba ignored his fellow members as they began to clamor nonsensically. Instead he looked at the youths around him with a cold face.

“If Mikado-sempai is a midget to you, ain’t I a midget too?”

Aoba muttered in an emotionless voice. A man in a leather jacket groaned and struggled to get back on his feet. Noticing his moves, Aoba edged closer to the man.

“But then, it’s probably because Mikado-sempai has never been in a fight.”

Carrying on with his own talk, Aoba kicked the man mercilessly in the face with his knee as the man moved to get up.

The man fell back into unconsciousness before a cry could escape his throat. Aoba put one foot on the man’s back and continued on in a flat voice.

“Maybe that’s exactly why Sempai was able to make something like Dollars.”

“I don’t get it.” “Forget it, the only one who gets Aoba’s disgusting sense is that Yatsufusa.”

“But isn’t he a perfect match for those crazy twins?” “Kill him!”

“That line gets old, Yoshikiri. Can’t you think of a different combo?” “Die, you!” “Ah, a cockroach!” “Catch it!” “Fry it!” “Is the bet still on?” “Can’t you think of a different combo?” “Cockroach combo?” “...” “...” “...Urgh!!”

Several delinquents ran out of the factory looking like they needed to puke at the imagination.

Aoba continued to think as his fellow members continued their pointless banter.

How did they found out about this place?

Aoba considered this quietly as he looked down icily at the bousouzoku he had under his foot.

Should I interrogate him? ...But they're not the kind to spit out what they know about their fellow members easily.

...

Did Orihara Izaya give them the information...or am I thinking too much into it?

No. When it comes to things concerning him, it's better to think more than necessary.

Aoba's cell phone rang again, indicating a new message as these thoughts took over in his mind.

His fellow members' cell phones also rang at the same time. It looked like another text message had been sent to the Dollars mailing list.

The message was about Kadota, a famous Dollars member, being seen walking to Raira's Second Ground with a strange-looking man.

If the police ever decide to do something about Dollars, this mailing list will be our Achilles heel.

...But did Mikado-sempai make this mailing list? When I looked it up it seemed like one of the members had this idea and just went ahead to make this list. If that's the case, they probably won't find out about Mikado-sempai.

Aoba continued to juggle such thoughts on his mind as he clicked on the photo attached to the message.

Hm? This is...

Aoba "humph"-ed and considered this for a moment as he saw the man next to Kadota on the photo.

Toramaru's leader.

Are they talking to each other about making peace? ...Doesn't look like it.

"Guys, who'd like to go to Second Ground, hide himself behind the bushes and find out what's going on there?"

Upon hearing Aoba's words, a delinquent with his hair dyed light brown replied:

"I'll go."

"Thanks, Gin. We're counting on you."

The boy named Gin walked towards a corner of the factory.

As he approached the motorbike parked there, he mounted it expertly.

“Hang on, don’t tell me you’re stealing it?”

“Come on. I noticed it just a moment before...”

The brown-haired boy named Gin laughed as he began to play around with the motorbike.

Starting the engine in a cheerful spirit, he said:

“It’s still got the key in the keyhole, you see?”

Seeing their fellow member racing the engine of the abandoned motorbike, the youths whistled and cheered at their luck.

“Wait...wait a minute. Get off, Gin.”

No one had tried to stop him from stealing the motorbike. But Aoba alone seemed to think that it was too reckless an act and ordered him to dismount.

“What the hell, Aoba. You’re not the type who goes around telling people stealing is not a good thing to do.”

“Aren’t you the type who would tell us to pick up whatever’s without an owner in such a factory?”

“But then it is illegal to steal.” “Ah? Really?” “Of course.” “Even if you pick up a bike from a landfill the cops will arrest you. You don’t know that?” “For real!?” “Scary! Bikes are scary!”

The conversation carried on without any continuity to speak of. Aoba, meanwhile, was taking his time to examine the motorbike—

And realized that a black thread had been attached to its rear.

?

What is this?

The thread felt different from all kinds of fibers Aoba had known to date.

It was completely black as if it were a shadow that had taken a three-dimensional form. It felt smooth like nylon on his hand, but it reflected none of the light nylon would.

The thread extended from the rear of the motorbike till all the way out of the factory.

This looks like the rider suit the Black Motorbike wears.

“...Oi, Gin. I’ll tell you what. These Toramaru guys should have their motorbikes parked somewhere outside the factory. Go snatch one of those.”

“Huh? Why? What’s wrong with this one?”

His fellow members looked at him puzzled. Aoba thought back on their encounter with the Black Motorbike and announced his next move.

“I’m going to *reel this thread* in. I wonder where it’s going to take me.”



Skydeck on the rooftop of Sunshine Building, Ikebukuro

Sunshine 60 was once the tallest building in Japan.

Though it had since passed the illustrious title to Shinjuku’s Metropolitan Building, it continued to serve as a landmark to the city of Ikebukuro.

Even within Sunshine City, with its great selection of entertainment facilities—including an aquarium and an indoor theme park—the panorama still stood out as a popular tourist attraction.

Above the panorama was a skydeck open to tourists only during weekends and holidays like the Golden Week. In a corner of the skydeck, a man in a bartender suit stood at his leisure as he viewed the city.

“...Wonder if I can seek that flea out using these binoculars...not likely, I guess.”

Shizuo, who was on the run from the Awakusu-kai men, made sure that he had thrown them off track before climbing straight to the Sunshine Building’s skydeck.

He had chosen to come here because, compared to running somewhere with no one else around, it would be harder for the Awakusu-kai men to try anything if he came to a place where everyone could be looking. Furthermore, this place also had an advantage over department stores in that were anyone to come after him, he would be able to see them. But still this was not a place he could stay for long periods of time.

Anyway. Doesn’t look like they’re calling the police or anything.

Shizuo considered things like these in his mind as he cooled his heated body in the wind.

So. Where to go next?

The Awakusu-kai people are probably going to the company and Tom-san now.

Kasuka's apartment? Shinra's place? Neither feels like the right place to go.

...Screw it.

It's all because I fell for Izaya's trick. Now I'm getting my colleagues, family, and friends in danger, too.

As this thought struck him, Shizuo grew mad at himself for having fallen so easily for such a crude trick.

The splendid city view laid itself bare before him. Shizuo looked down upon it and continued to think.

Ah, Celty should be able to ride that motorbike all the way up here without a problem. If worst comes to worst, I can probably just ask that courier to bring me Izaya up here.

The thought flashed in his mind for a second before he realized that he would be getting Celty into all the trouble he was in. He got rid of the thought immediately.

Also, I would be giving the skydeck staff a world of trouble if I beat Izaya up here and threw him off the deck. No, just no.

The man whose very existence defied common sense tiptoed in a weird way within the bounds of common sense in his head as he continued to think about his next step.

Though the entire Awakusu-kai was after him, he could not risk sending any of their men flying into the air because that would only further convince them that he was the killer. If that was to happen, Awakusu-kai would almost surely finish him off at all costs.

Had it just been him versus Awakusu-kai, he would have risked it. But if Awakusu-kai were to take his brother or any of his friends hostage, which they probably would...

It's even possible that they would try to do things to that Akane girl just because she was seen with me.

Shizuo, having no idea that she was actually Awakusu-kai's VIP, began to worry about the girl who had tried to kill him.

But to let himself be captured without being able to prove his innocence was not an option either. The one who held the proof of his innocence was probably none other than Orihara Izaya.

Did he kill those three men? ...Not likely.

There's no way that Izaya would have had strong enough arms to kill those three men bare-handed like that. First of all, why on earth would he want to make such total enemies of the Awakusu-kai folks in the first place?

If he didn't do it himself, then he must have gotten the information beforehand that someone else was going to do it and tricked me into going there on purpose...

FUCK THAT BASTARD AND HIS CONVOLUTED PLANS.

Fighting back his own rage again, Shizuo considered heading straight for Izaya's hideout in Shinjuku.

If that notice had been fake, in that apartment he would at least find clues as to where Izaya might be, if not Izaya himself.

If he could negotiate with Awakusu-kai and offer those to them, the tables would be turned and they would be after Izaya instead.

If I had my way I would rather beat him up and sink him into the depths of Tokyo Bay with my own hands. But well, he deserves that, too.

Other people will probably be in danger if I don't do it right away.

Having made up his mind, Shizuo was about to leave the rooftop when he heard his text message ringtone again.

Speaking of which, it rang several times while I was trying to get Awakusu-kai off my tail.

As Shizuo checked his text messages for the first time in the day, information flooded into his brain.

Dollars is being attacked...?

Hang on, don't tell me Awakusu-kai's attacking Dollars because of what happened with me!?

Shizuo hastened through all of his text messages. It did not seem like that was the case.

A bousouzoku gang from Saitama was randomly attacking whoever claimed themselves to be Dollars members in Ikebukuro.

...A gang fight?

Ever since high school, Shizuo had been through more of those than he cared to remember. He decided that it was probably nothing compared to the current situation he was in. But just as he shifted the focus back on his own dilemma—

The timing of all this is uncanny.

It could all have been a coincidence. But still, too much had happened to him in these past two days. As he considered this, he could not help but notice how strange it was that so many troublesome happenings took place out of the blue in Ikebukuro—and especially around him.

The second to last message had a photo attached to it.

“This...isn’t this Raira’s Second Ground?”

He used to be called out reluctantly to fight people from other high schools, and this was often the place of choice. In this familiar place he saw two people he was also familiar with.

Kadota and...ah, the one who came to me the day before yesterday.

Tom-san said that he was the head of Toramaru or something like that.

The injuries I gave him couldn’t have healed this quickly. He’s a tough one indeed.

As he thought back on the fight he had with the young man, Shizuo considered the situation again with a cool head.

So Toramaru’s the ones attacking Dollars?

But then that Chikage guy didn’t look like he was that difficult to be reasoned with.

Well, if Kadota’s on it, it’s gonna be taken care of somehow.

Shizuo thought optimistically as he went on to click open the most recent text message—

His face fell.

...

...This is disgusting.

Shizuo’s expression changed dramatically.

This was nothing like his rage towards Izaya or towards his own stupidity. It was a completely different kind of rage.

The sender of that text message was “Nakura”.

Written in the text message was, under the title “IMPORTANT INFORMATION!”—

♂ ♀

Underground parking lot, an apartment building on Kawagoe Highway

A giant shadow leaped into the quiet underground parking lot.

Well done! Well done! Thank you.

Celty patted the headless horse on the back appreciatively and parked the chariot in a corner.

Apparently everyone had driven their cars away for Golden Week. There was not a single vehicle in sight in the parking lot.

Celty released Mikado and Anri from the shadow seat-belts and put Awakusu Akane’s feet back on the ground.

The little girl looked blank more than anything. Her frame trembled as she made a step forwards, and her body threatened to give away.

Oops, are you alright?

Celty caught the girl before she fell. But Akane was shaking terribly.

...Well, I can hardly blame her.

A suspicious creature that spewed shadow from its body had suddenly tied her to its back and drove a chariot like crazy on the Ikebukuro streets. Though Akane could hardly have been paying attention, Celty even took the desperate measure to make temporary archways out of her shadow to drive through red traffic lights twice on their way here.

If I put my mind to it, I can do it.

Celty was extremely satisfied with her own performance. She was not sure whether she would succeed, but fortunately none of the cars that had hit their brakes at the sight of her shadow archway ran into any accidents. Celty was relieved.

The hard part was getting them into this underground parking lot.

It was during the daytime and it was Golden Week. The chariot was bound to turn heads even if she did not want it to.

Were she to ignore the looks from the crowd and return straight to her own apartment, the police and the media would almost certainly be after her. She was usually able to avoid being seen, but with the chariot it was close to impossible.

Then Celty had an idea. Before making her way into the apartment, she turned into a narrow alleyway. Once she had made sure that no one could see them, she made the body of a black van out of her shadow and hid the chariot inside.

Were anyone to look closely, they would of course have been found out. But from afar, the shadow simply looked like a strange, big van. That was how Celty was able to drive them into the underground parking lot before anyone noticed.

[It's OK, Akane-chan. I'm on your side, so don't worry.]

Having no idea how many kanji a kid like Akane could read, Celty chose to type everything in hiragana on her PDA before she showed it to Akane.

At first Akane was shaking from head to foot in fear, but after she saw what was on the PDA, she finally relaxed somewhat and said to Celty, "Onii-san, are you a good person...?"

[It's not "onii-san", it's "onee-san".]

Akane, looking surprised, began to nod her head in apology.

"I'm sorry! Onee-san!"

[It's OK. I don't mind.]

Akane seemed to feel relieved at Celty's reply as she raised her face slowly—

At the sight of the headless horse, however, she let out a small gasp and hid herself behind Anri.

Ah, my bad.

Celty looked back at her partner and realized that the sight of a headless horse was still too much for a child.

And—

Hm?

The headless horse began to rustle at Akane's terrified sound. It moved to the back side of the chariot and sank to the ground as if trying to conceal its headlessness from sight.

Ah, Shooter, are you feeling dejected?

Shooter, probably smarter than the average horse, looked as if he knew that Akane was afraid of his looks. He could hardly be blamed for feeling dejected when someone he had worked so hard to bring here was so afraid of him.

In fact, the way his headless neck hung from its base right now was the perfect illustration of "crestfallen".

Celty hastened to stroke the horse's back as she typed words onto the PDA with her other hand. After she was done typing, she walked over to Akane again and showed the PDA to the scared girl.

[There's nothing to be afraid of, Akane-chan. See? Like that Anpanman who fights Baikinman*, Mr. Horse is just changing his face to a new one. So there's no need to be afraid.]

* Anpanman, Baikinman: The hero and the antagonist respectively of the popular children's anime series Anpanman written by Takashi Yanase.

Celty returned to Shooter's side. Using her shadow, she made a piece of armor shaped like a horse's head that even had a unicorn's horn on it. Shooter's headlessness was concealed perfectly.

She brought Shooter, who now looked like a cyborg horse, slowly back to Akane.

Though it was only a piece of armor, the girl still looked relieved now that the horse finally had a head. No longer looking as afraid as she had before, she began to observe the horse from behind Anri's body.

[See? Nothing to be afraid of.]

As Celty tried to persuade her further, Akane looked at Anri's face.

"It's OK. Mr. Horse is really nice."

Anri, who had been on the headless horse several times before, smiled reassuringly at Akane and Shooter.

Shooter swished his tail as if he understood Anri.

Akane finally looked convinced at Anri's words. She turned her gaze towards Shooter's body and even tried to touch his legs.

The headless horse, feeling that the girl was no longer afraid of him, shook his body in delight and bent his knees to make it easier for Akane to stroke him.

Really, Shooter, you have such changeable moods.

Celty felt both relieved and surprised that the horse's feeling of dejection went away so completely.

On the other hand—

Mikado, who had been looking at them, felt that there was something strange about the girl who was now stroking the horse's back.

Even if the horse's headlessness was now concealed, she was convinced far too readily.

Mikado could not help feeling that the girl was a little unusual. Was she born with above average ability to accept unusual happenings like that, much like he was?

His guess was not right, but it was not that far off.

There was no way he could have known that part of Awakusu Akane's mentality had already collapsed. Another question, however, popped into the boy's head.

Speaking of which, who is this girl?

Looks like she knows Sonohara-san and Celty-san, but...

Mikado felt somewhat unsettled at the thought that only he appeared to be left "out of the mosquito curtain".

As he caught himself feeling unsettled, he was reminded of what Izaya had said to him early this morning.

"...You're not afraid that Dollars will go rampant. Am I right?"

"You're afraid that you will fall into the position of a mere bystander while Dollars keeps changing, aren't you?"

He had denied it right away.

Though his spinal reflex had made him shout “No”, it was by no means a well-considered denial. He simply let it escape his lips first.

As a result, he could not decide whether it had been a truthful denial or not.

As he was reminded of that conversation, Mikado had to remind himself that it had nothing to do with what was happening before his eyes. He decided to ask the other two about the girl.

“Um, I’m sorry, but this is...?”

Right at that moment, however, the cell phone in his breast pocket began to vibrate.

!

The ringtone pulled him forcefully back to reality.

The shock from his chariot ride finally died away. He remembered the crisis situation he and Dollars were in.

What...

What should I do?

The confusion he had felt in the abandoned factory took hold of him once again.

If he continued to keep everything to himself, he would just be trapping himself in the agony he had been in back inside that factory.

In that second, Mikado turned his gaze towards Celty.

He had thought that there was no one for him to talk to. But right now in front of his eyes stood someone who knew that he was the founder of Dollars.

Just as he was about to say something to Celty—

“Um, this is Akane-chan. Looks like she knows Heiwajima-san, but...”

In reply to the sentence he had muttered but not finished, Anri began to introduce the girl next to her to Mikado.

“Eh? Ah, ah.”

At her words Mikado came to his senses.

If he tried to talk to Celty about this right here and right now, Anri would know everything. In fact, he could be getting her into danger just by staying in this place with her.

What am I doing?

Why did it take so long for me to realize something as simple as that?

It looked like his judgment was more muddled than he had expected.

Upon realizing this, Mikado decided that the first priority would be to let his mind rest for a while.

I founded Dollars. This is true. That's why I have to shoulder the responsibility...

In fact, there had long been something resembling such resolution inside the boy's mind. But the knowledge of what was going on in Ikebukuro right now was still too much for him to bear alone. Keeping it to himself was not the solution, either.

He knew it.

Mikado knew it very well.

But the question remained: "So who should I talk to?"

Celty was doubtlessly the best person since she knew that he was the founder of Dollars. But from the encounter with the formidable-looking men and the girl, he realized that Celty must be dealing with quite a bit of troublesome happenings herself.

There was Orihara Izaya, who also knew that he was the founder of Dollars. However, Izaya had talked to him over the phone just this morning. Would he be bothering Izaya too much if he called again?

But this is hardly the time to be thinking about trivial things like that.

...

Mikado remembered someone else who might be aware of his true identity.

Masaomi...

He had no idea how much Masaomi had come to know about him after all the trouble Dollars got into with the Yellow Turbans.

But it was probably better to be prepared to think that Masaomi had already found out about him being the founder of Dollars.

Now that he thought about it, the way Masaomi had warned him in the chatroom yesterday sounded as if he had known that things would happen to Mikado the way they did.

Thank you, Masaomi.

Had you not warned me yesterday...I might have already been scared into submission by Aoba-kun and his friends.

Having no idea that the warning had not come from Masaomi at all, Mikado thanked him in his heart.

But Aoba-kun is not...usual.

If he's to have his way...

Then he'll probably take over Dollars.

No, I can't let that happen.

I can't let Dollars belong to a specific someone.

Murmuring such thoughts in his heart, Mikado continued to talk with Anri as he made up his mind deep down in his heart.

I'm going to talk to Izaya-san.

I know I can't rely on him for everything, but I feel like I'll be surer of where I should go after I talk to him.

The boy had no idea.

The path he was on right now was exactly the one his friend Masaomi had walked before.

As a result, Masaomi met his downfall—but Mikado did not know that either. In fact, Izaya's existence even reassured him to a degree.

Just as Mikado was preoccupied with those troublesome thoughts, Celty kept typing on her PDA to explain how she had come to know the girl.

[Um, she's...how should I put it...someone asked me to be her bodyguard for a while. I'll tell you more when we get back to Shinra's place.]

At that moment, Mikado's cell phone was heard vibrating in his pocket.

It had rung several times before, but Mikado had been, of course, unable to check the messages during their chariot ride.

Aoba-kun and his friends might already be trying to do something after he had escaped with Celty. Right now he did not even know what had happened in that abandoned factory after he had left.

Expecting to get some new information, Mikado opened his inbox and clicked on the most recent incoming message.

The sender was “Nakura”.

Ah, that person would sometimes post something on Dollars’ message board.

That was all Mikado knew about this person.

But the title naturally drew his attention. It said: “IMPORTANT INFORMATION!”

The sender could just be putting these words for fun, of course. But “Nakura” was in fact one of the first members to register themselves on Dollars’ website.

Attached to the message he also found a photo.

“...?”

Mikado’s face froze for a second after he read the message.

His mind was far from calm. What “Nakura” had written in the message was, at this moment, beyond his comprehension.

Or rather, he understood what it said, but refused to accept it.

“...It can’t be true.”

As soon as Mikado had digested the message, a desperate sound escaped his throat in his denial.

“...Mikado-kun?”

[What happened?]

Anri asked in a concerned voice. Celty, too, typed these words on her PDA. But Mikado was neither looking at nor listening to them.

He concentrated his entire being on the display screen, assuming that he must have read it wrong.

But no matter how many times he reread it, the message looked the same, and the photo was, of course, not vanishing.

“No...just, NO...!”

After he had muttered these words for a second time, Mikado raised his head suddenly and nodded apologetically to Celty and Anri.

“I’m sorry, Celty-san! I...I’ve got somewhere I need to go. I’m going to excuse myself. Sorry to you too, Sonohara-san! I don’t think I can go with you today. It would be better if you went home right now. Also, no matter what Aoba-kun says, don’t meet with him!”

“Eh...? M-Mikado-kun?”

[What?]

Anri and Celty acted confused at the sudden change in Mikado’s attitude. Akane shuddered.

However, Mikado only nodded his head in apology again in front of the three confused females, and—

As if someone were on his tail, he ran out of the underground parking lot without a backward glance.



Close to an apartment building on Kawagoe Highway

This was a side road to the national highway with its heavy traffic.

In a place where Shinra and Celty’s apartment could be seen, two motorbikes were parked rather inconspicuously.

The riders were standing at the entrance to a rather narrow alleyway, and one of them had a map open in front of him. Any passing driver would think that they just happened to ride their motorbikes into this alleyway and were trying to find a way out.

In fact, the map was but camouflage. The riders—Vorona and Slon—were keeping an eye on the apartment the black van had just disappeared into.

They took the turn into this alleyway when they had followed the motorbike-turned black chariot here.

If they continued to follow the chariot they would almost certainly have been seen. Instead, they chose to stay around the entrance to this alleyway while keeping an eye on it. As they did so, they saw a strange black van emerge from the alleyway. It was hard to tell from afar, but the black van did not shine at all under the sun; it looked as if it absorbed all light.

The black van disappeared into the underground parking lot of one of the apartment buildings. No other vehicles came out of it. Though they were able to narrow the likely places down to only this parking lot—

“Someone’s coming out.”

At Slon’s words, Vorona turned her eyes towards the general direction but remained otherwise unmoved.

“...The boy Black Motorbike took with him earlier. Looks like he’s moving on his own, but...”

“Whatever. So should we assume that this is the Black Motorbike’s hideout or something?”

“Assumption too posthaste. We do not know if he’s only concealing himself in the parking lot momentarily.”

“I see...so what should we do about the kid?”

Vorona did not know what to say to Slon’s question.

The boy was not related to any of the tasks they had been asked to do.

However, it was hard to assume that he was just an average passer-by when he was surrounded by the Black Motorbike, Awakusu Akane, and the bespectacled girl—their three targets. There was a possibility that they could use him as a bait to lure one of their targets out.

In addition, Vorona could not help but sense that there was something out of the ordinary about the boy. She nodded calmly.

“The true identity of the boy is the object of consideration. ...I am going to follow the boy. Slon, I request that you continue to track down the Black Motorbike and the bespectacled girl. Please acknowledge your understanding of this request.”

“Understood. Leave it to me.”

Racing her motorbike forwards and turning onto the national highway, Vorona stayed on the boy's tail.

As she fixed her gaze on the boy, the look in her eyes—

—Was that of a predator's as it ran after its prey that was blindly trying to escape.

♂ ♀

Underground parking lot

“Ah...M-Mikado-kun!?”

As if trying to stop Mikado from running away, Anri called out to him.

However, Mikado did not slow down or turn around. His figure soon disappeared on the slope to the entrance of the underground parking lot.

“I wonder what happened...”

Celty tilted her helmet and tried to think as Anri murmured in a concerned voice.

What could have happened?

I saw him checking a message from Dollars...

Was Yumasaki's lot or anyone else he knew from Dollars attacked by Toramaru?

Celty considered this as she went on to check her own cell phone.

Let's see.

The most recent incoming message...

In the next second, Celty froze.

As she checked the photo attached to the message, Celty understood immediately why Mikado had rushed out of the parking lot.

In fact, Celty was about to rush out of the parking lot herself when she remembered that Akane was still by her side, looking nervously at her. She had to fight back that impulse.

“S-Sorry, Celty-san, but what happened?” Anri asked.

Celty hesitated as to whether to show her the message.

But the seriousness in Anri’s eyes made her shoulders fall in resignation. She handed the cell phone over to Anri.

What Anri saw on the cell phone was—

♂ ♀

Sender: Nakura

Title: IMPORTANT INFORMATION!

Message: *This is about those bousouzoku called Toramaru who are attacking Dollars right now—I saw one of their Captain’s girlfriends having lunch in Ikebukuro just now! I’m too afraid to try kidnapping her, but if you feel like you can, please give it a go! She’s the one on the left!*

♂ ♀

The message was short and simple.

The picture attached to the message showed several girls.

It was taken with a cell phone, but it was taken in a way that made it easy for anyone who was familiar with Ikebukuro to tell where exactly the restaurant was.

It looked like the photo was taken without permission while the girls were eating; none of them were looking at the camera.

The one on the left was an innocent-looking girl who still looked sort of pre-pubescent.

Eh?

This girl...

It was a face she had seen on the “other side of the picture frame”.

Anri remembered that she had seen this face only shortly before.

Before she could recall exactly where, however, the girl on the right side of the photo caught her attention.

...Ah...

Kamichika-san...?

The girl on the photo was none other than Kamichika Rio, the girl she had run into earlier in the day.

Even after she saw the face of her and Mikado's classmate on the photo, Anri remained calm as she tried to think further.

Um...

This, um, person called Nakura in Dollars...

Said that they should kidnap Kamichika-san's friend...

For Anri, these were all things happening on the "other side of the picture frame". To her they felt as if they were happening in a distant world.

However, Mikado had grasped Anri's arm, pulled her out of the picture frame and into "the other side".

Whether or not it was Mikado's intention to get Anri involved was irrelevant.

"...Celty-san."

Suppressing the intensifying surge of "cursings" in her chest, Anri looked at Celty with determined eyes and said:

"I need to go too."

Celty thought about stopping her, but knowing that Anri would probably still go no matter what she said, she typed onto her PDA in resignation.

[The ones who attacked you yesterday may still come back. It's better to not go anywhere with no one else around you. Even Anri-chan wouldn't be able to take a bullet. Also, make sure to go back home before it gets dark.]

"I will...um, t-thank you very much! Akane-chan, this onee-san here is extremely nice, so just stay with her and the doctor and wait for us to come back!"

Saying these words to Akane—

Anri nodded apologetically just like Mikado did a moment ago and rushed out of the parking lot.

Her speed and force was unimaginable to anyone who had only seen the way she looked and usually behaved.

♂ ♀

“Vorona, you hear me?”

“I affirm.”

Slon asked Vorona via the wireless installed on the inside of their helmets.

He was still able to see Vorona’s motorbike, but the boy’s figure was lost to him in the flow of the traffic.

As soon as he was about to turn his gaze back to the entrance to the parking lot, the girl running on the sidewalk on the opposite side of the road in front of his eyes caught his attention.

“It’s our target, the bespectacled girl. She’s running after the boy. God, she’s fast.”

“Running after the boy. Mistakes not present?”

“...Yeah, she definitely looks like she is. No sign of the Black Motorbike coming out, though.”

“I acknowledge that I understood. The boy and the girl, I will follow them both. Falling on both stools.”

Vorona reply came in a calm voice.

Half-jokingly, Slon said, “That’s not even an idiom. Anyway, I know you can probably handle it, Vorona, but we have no idea what that boy’s capable of. The girl can pull a katana out of her belly, and the Black Motorbike is simply a monster. I won’t be surprised if that boy can turn his right arm into a machine gun or something.”

“I affirm. No deficiency present on the opponent’s part.”

Vorona’s voice sounded somewhat elated on the other end of the wireless. Slon understood that she was probably ecstatic.

“...You sound happy, Vorona.”

It was all Slon could think of saying. Vorona, still expressionless, let a trace of her ecstasy slip its way into her voice as she muttered to herself as if even the job was no longer important to her.

“Assuming that the boy is a monstrosity also. To me, the situation would be much welcome.”

♂ ♀

Somewhere in Kantou

The express train departing from Tokyo was jammed with passengers. Izaya made his way through the corridor and slipped into the space between two compartments.

Green Cars* like this one had stairs connecting the first floor to the second near the joints of the compartments. Izaya stood there and checked his text messages.

** Green Car: a more expensive type of passenger train operated by the Japanese National Railways.*

They were from Izaya's very own information network—one that was different from Dollars's mailing list.

As he browsed the reports from some of his informants, Izaya broke into a cheerful grin.

So, Mikado-kun...which path are you going to fall onto?

Whichever you end up falling onto, you'll be quite a sight to observe.

Ah, I can't wait. I can't wait.

That's why I can't stop observing humans.

Just as he continued to smirk cheerfully, the face of a definite someone came to his mind, wiping the smirk off his face.

...It looks like Shizu-chan's still trying hard to escape.

Why doesn't he just fight back already?

You never know when he's going to act so strangely calm. That just annoys me to no end.

As these thoughts occupied his mind, he heard the cell phone ring.

The name on the display screen was “Awakusu-kai, Shiki”.

After considering this for a moment, Izaya simply turned his cell phone off and muttered:

“No talking on the cell phone while on the train, please*...”

** Talking on the cell phone while riding a bus or train is generally frowned upon in the Japanese society.*

♂ ♀

Shinra and Celty’s apartment on Kawagoe Highway

“...He’s not picking up.”

Shiki muttered as if to himself as he closed his cell phone.

“Did you call your people in Awakusu-kai?”

“No, I called your friend. The one who is not Shizuo.”

Said Shiki in a self-possessed manner. Shinra shrugged and replied.

“You’re making it sound as if I have no friends other than those two.”

“Do you have any?”

“No.”

Shinra’s answer was crisp. Shiki ignored him and continued to think.

I called Izaya because I thought he would know something about it...

...

It just continues to bother me.

If it was not Heiwajima Shizuo...then who killed those men in our group?

In fact, Shiki was already questioning the “Heiwajima Shizuo is the culprit” theory.

Partly it was because of what Shinra had said earlier. But more importantly, Shiki could not think of what Shizuo’s motivation could possibly have been.

But still, why was it necessary to kill three yakuza men bare-handed like that?

...”Hollywood” the Killing Monster...?

He remembered the time when their members were threatened by that figure.

“Hollywood” is in fact Hijiribe Ruri.

I’ve never seen it with my own eyes so I don’t really believe it, but according to those people in the group she’s got strength unthinkable for a human being.

And Hijiribe Ruri is dating Hanejima Yuuhei, Heiwajima Shizuo’s brother...

That counts as a connection, but the pieces are still very awkwardly put together.

First of all, why would Hijiribe Ruri try to kill Awakusu-kai men, especially when those people weren’t even tracking her down or anything? If she meant it as a warning for us to not track her down, shouldn’t she have let someone see her at it?

...Suppose that our...no, suppose that Big Brother Mikiya’s men were to get killed. Who would benefit?

Mikiya, the Young Head of Awakusu-kai, did have a lot of enemies in their profession.

If they were to assume that the killings were targeted not at Mikiya’s subordinates but at Awakusu-kai in general, the number of possible culprits would be mind-boggling.

If they were to assume that one of Mikiya’s enemies was behind the killings, however, they would be able to narrow it down to just a few suspects within Awakusu-kai.

Though I hate thinking about it...

There were definitely executives out there who were not happy about the fact that Awakusu-kai was to be handed down to Mikiya, the Head’s own son.

Aozaki’s at the head of that list. ...Akabayashi...he looks like he’s not concerned about who’s going to become the next Head, but...

As different as they were, Aozaki and Akabayashi—both executives of Awakusu-kai—were both such intimidating fighting types that they were dubbed “Awakusu’s Blue Demon and Red

Demon*⁹⁹. It was said that without these two Awakusu-kai's power and influence would suffer terribly.

** Blue Demon and Red Demon: "Ao" in "Aozaki" means "blue", and "Aka" in "Akabayashi" means "red".*

Comparing Mikiya's abilities to his own, Aozaki doubted that Mikiya was the right person to inherit Awakusu-kai from his father. In front of Awakusu Dougen, the current Head, he listened to whatever Mikiya said. However, Aozaki had also flared up at Mikiya more than a couple of times.

While Aozaki's attitude was easily readable, no one seemed to know what Akabayashi was thinking since he looked as if he had not an earthly concern in the world. Everything about the man seemed like they were there to make others not take him seriously, be it his gaudy suit or his weird-looking cane.

No one seemed to know what he was thinking. That was enough reason for Shiki to be on his guard against the man.

His attitude aside, Akabayashi's abilities were definitely to be taken seriously. The fact that he can conceal his real thoughts from people was also part of his strength.

Shiki continued to think about various Awakusu-kai members in his head. No one stood out enough, however, for him to be able to focus on a specific suspect. In fact, the situation remained that anyone could be suspected to be behind the killings; even himself.

... Why now?

Why now, when Medei Group is about to strike a deal of peace with Asuki Group...?

... Maybe that's part of the reason.

Medei Group, Awakusu-kai's parent organization, was about to make peace with its long-time enemy Asuki Group. Talks about merging were on the table*.

** Merging: here Narita is making a reference to ASCII's merging with Media Works (which sounds like "Medei Awakusu" in Japanese) in 2008.*

Both groups were still making changes to the internal structure in preparation for the merger. It was a dangerous time to have one's weaknesses exposed to the other group.

To say it in another way, it was also the best time to try to know the other group's weaknesses. Of course, overly obvious espionage was still out of the question since it would risk losing both groups the precious truce.

... If they catch wind that a non-yakuza called Heiwajima Shizuo was able to kill three of our men... then Awakusu-kai and the entire Medei Group would become laughing stocks.

This was why Shiki chose to erase all traces of the bodies instead of alerting the police.

If the police got involved, these killings might even be reported on TV, and the mess would be unimaginable.

Furthermore, the three men were killed bare-handed instead of with bullets or knives. The mass media would almost surely be making a big deal of that detail.

If that were to happen, there would hardly be any dignity left for them.

Was it the Asuki side's scheme to plunge Medei Group into public disgrace?

Either way, it was better not to rule that possibility out.

An organization as powerful as Asuki Group could easily have hired professionals on bare-handed combat from the outside.

The problem now is still Shizuo.

Many of Aozaki's subordinates seemed to have had bitter encounters with Heiwajima Shizuo when he was a still kid. For these men, it was probably a part of their past they wanted to erase. In fact, Aozaki had proposed that he and his men be put on the task of hunting Shizuo down.

...Supposing that Aozaki was actually behind those killings, making everyone else believe that Shizuo was the killer and then hastening to finish him off would make a lot of sense...

No. It's too soon to be making that kind of guess.

Before thinking any further, Shiki reached for the third cup of coffee in front of him. At that moment, the door of Shinra's apartment flung open with force.

“...”

Shiki turned around in alarm to face the doorway. However, the person who stood there was Celty, with Akane at her side.

“Oh, Celty! You're back! Thank God, you're alright!”

Shinra looked extremely happy when he hugged Celty briefly and stroked Akane's hair.

“It's so good to see you alive and well too, Akane-chan! Are you alright? Did you get hurt anywhere?”

“...No, I'm fine. Thank you, Kishitani-sensei.”

Akane smiled softly at Shinra.

Until this second she had looked afraid; the moment she saw Shinra, however, her expression turned into that of a kid who felt at home from the bottom of her heart.

Celty, who saw the smile on Akane's face, could not help but gasp in surprise in her heart.

Eh!? How come this girl took to Shinra so easily!?

"I see. Good girl. Ah, wait a second, I'll make you some chocolate milk."

Shinra spoke in a non-ironic way, completely different from his usual manners. Celty was slightly shocked.

S-Shinra, don't tell me you have a thing for young girls...!?

Instead of making an "I'm good with kids" impression, Shinra made himself look like a pervert instead from the very beginning due to his usual freaky behavior.

Had it been any other day, Celty would already be going [Uwahh! Shinra, you pedophile! You said you loved me without a head, but you actually loved me because my headlessness made me look as short as a kid, didn't you!?] and running away from home—but right now Celty was not shocked out of her mind yet, and the situation still remained tense.

As Shinra headed for the kitchen to make the chocolate milk, Shiki walked out of the dining room.

"Miss Akane, I'm so relieved to see you looking well."

"!"

Akane's body went tense at the sight of Shiki.

Though the girl stood hostilely and did not look at him, Shiki did not appear angry. Instead, he was simply celebrating the fact that the girl was safe.

"When you ran away from home, I couldn't bring myself to think of what might happen... Anyway, it looks like you're not hurt. That's great. Did anything bad happen to you, Miss Akane?"

His honorific speech sounded somewhat distant, but his words were those of a man who genuinely cared about the person he was talking to.

Heh...

I thought Shiki-san was a cold and ruthless person through and through. I never expected there to be such a side to him.

Celty was somewhat impressed. Akane, meanwhile, muttered in a terrified manner.

“...I’m sorry.”

Shiki shook his head silently at Akane’s disappearing voice.

“Please say that to your parents instead. I’m going to call them right now.”

“...Aren’t you going to get mad at me?”

“First of all, it’s your parents’ responsibility to get mad at you, Miss Akane. My little complaints will have to wait till later. Before that, just let them hear your voice and be happy to know that you’re safe.”

Taking his cell phone out of his pocket, Shiki grinned somewhat mischievously at Akane and muttered these unpleasant words:

“It would be better be prepared to have your cheek slapped, though.”

♂ ♀

Same time, a meeting room in Awakusu-kai’s Headquarters

The meeting room was quiet again after the emergency meeting.

In one of its chairs sat a man in a gaudy suit. His right hand held a cane, and his left was playing with his cell phone.

It looked like he was checking his text messages. As he browsed the information on the screen, the man’s lips curled into a grin.

“...What are you doing, Akabayashi?”

Aozaki’s voice sounded from outside the open door of the meeting room. He just happened to walk past.

“What am I doing? Checking my messages. Just checking.”

“You...do you even know what kind of mess we’re in right now?”

“Of course I do. I also know that I won’t be helping anyone by getting my nose into what they’re doing. That’s why I decided to at least get an idea of what’s happening in this city first.”

“Really? I thought that was a text from your girlfriend.”

Akabayashi’s grin did not waver at Aozaki’s provocative words.

“This is really interesting. Even an old guy like me can register to be on Dollars’ mailing list, and all this information about the young folks will just flood in on its own.”

“...Dollars?”

“Yeah, they’ve been around in Ikebukuro for like one year now. Kind of like a Color Gang, but their color is ‘colorless’ so they don’t stand out much in the crowd.”

Akabayashi continued to grin smugly. Aozaki made a dismissive noise with his nose and spat:

“You’re quite the busybody. ‘Jyan Jyan Jyan’ hasn’t been very useful since that bastard called Kuzuhara or something came to Ikebukuro on a White Motorbike, has it? Is that why you’re using that computer thingy to look for a gang to replace them?”

“...’That computer thingy’...? Aozaki-san, what kind of era do you think you’re living in?”

Returning the other man’s provocation with more provocation, Akabayashi continued in a lighthearted voice.

“But really, cell phones are just so convenient. For example...the guy I sent to help Shiki just texted me about something. Looks like the bousouzoku folks who tried to kidnap Akane-chan had quite the fight with our men.”

“...What?”

Aozaki’s face changed color.

“Even bousouzoku kids are thinking they can lick us now...? Or were they working for Yadogiri?”

“Nah, they ran away as soon as they knew that they were dealing with Awakusu-kai. Our men couldn’t catch up with them; they had motorbikes. Well, as long as Akane-chan is safe...”

Akabayashi continued to play with his cell phone in his hand as he grinned cheerfully.

“Those bousouzoku from Saitama...are having some trouble with Dollars right now.”

He deepened the grin already plastered on his face as he spoke.

“Is it a mere coincidence that Ikebukuro is suddenly so out of control?”

If it’s not...if there are people who really want it out of control...then it’s about time you and I interfered, Sir Aozaki.”

♂ ♀

Somewhere in Tokyo, inside Masaomi’s apartment

“Hey, Masaomi.”

The refreshing May breeze was filling the old apartment through the open window.

Inside the room, a casual voice that sounded like the spring view outside could be heard.

Masaomi, who was looking out of the window, turned around hastily as he heard Mikajima Saki mutter over the book she was reading.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Are you not going?”

“Going where?”

Masaomi smiled as he asked.

A soft smile appeared on Saki’s face like morning light. She muttered the very words that unsettled Masaomi.

“To your friends.”

“...”

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. But your voice was so loud when you were talking to Izayasan on the phone. I couldn’t help but overhear. I’m sorry.”

Saki spoke in a voice that sounded somewhat out of this world. Masaomi opened his mouth and remained immobile for a couple of seconds.

He was going to say something, but for a moment he could not think of anything to say.

So he simply turned his gaze outside of the window again, trying to let his head cool down at the view.

After a couple of seconds, when he finally thought of an answer to Saki's question, he turned around slowly—

And almost bumped into Saki's face.

She was so close. Their noses were almost touching.

Masaomi forgot everything he was about to say at the sight of Saki's smiling face right in front of his nose.

“Ah...”

But he tried to say something anyway—

Suddenly Saki turned her back on him and slowly leaned onto him.

“O-Oi!”

Strands of Saki's hair rose in the wind, teasing his lips. The scent of shampoo surrounded his face, softening his heart.

“Are you still afraid?”

“...Yeah.”

Was all Masaomi could answer in this awkward position, not being able to pull himself out in fear that Saki would fall.

They looked like a happy pair of love birds from any angle, but Masaomi's face was filled with inexplicable sorrow.

“What are you afraid of?”

“...”

“That they'll hate you? Your friends, I mean.”

“Well, it's not only that...but yeah, I guess ultimately it's because of that.”

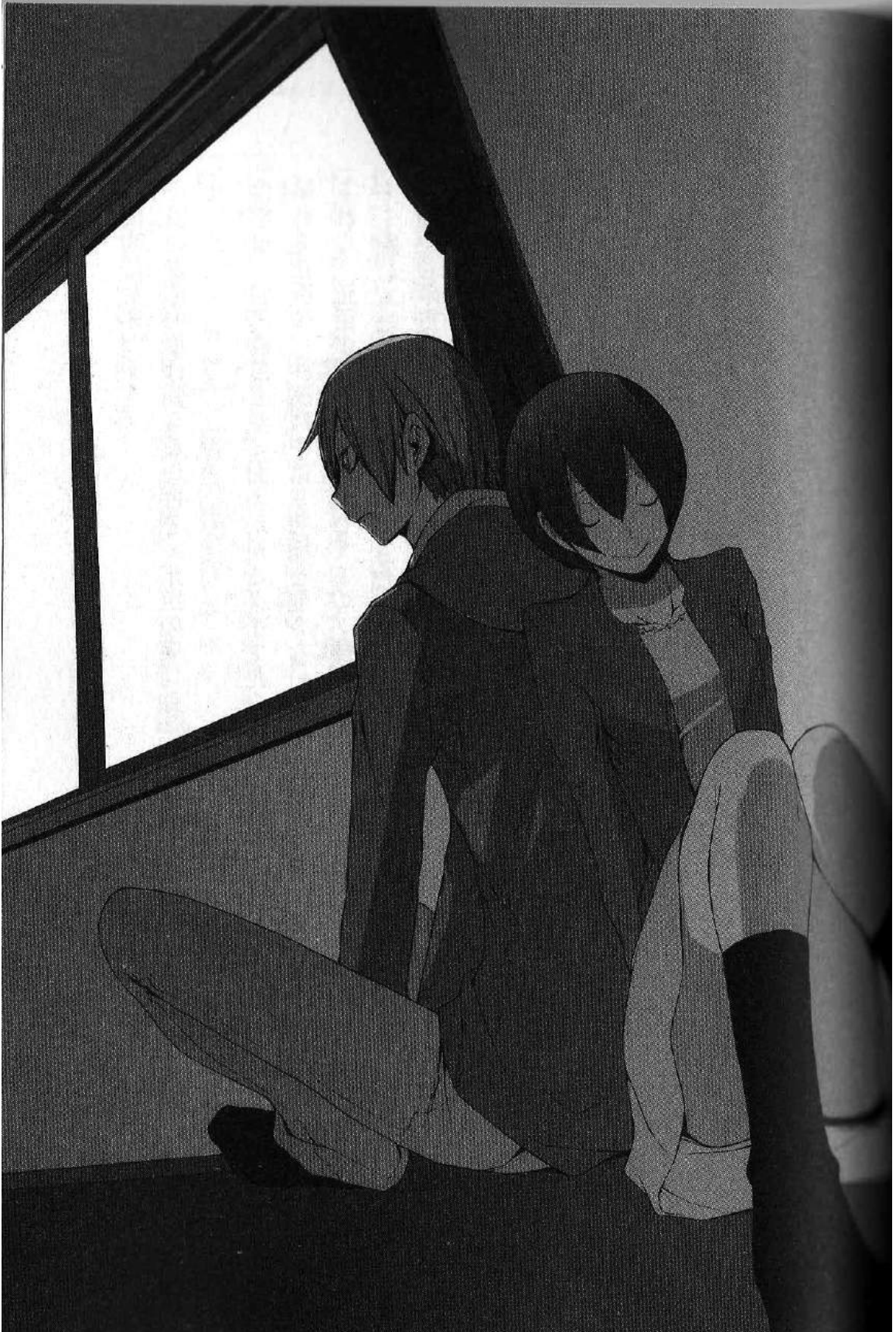
Masaomi raised his face and stared at the ceiling. Saki lowered her gaze and spoke in a quiet voice.

“It’s going to be fine. I don’t think they’re going to hate you, Masaomi.”

“...What are you talking about, Saki? You don’t even know Mikado or Anri.”

Though Masaomi had mentioned “Anri”, the name of another girl, Saki did not seem to mind at all. Instead, she spoke in a child’s best soothing voice.

“I don’t know them, but I think it’s going to be fine.”



“You’re so optimistic.”

“I don’t know your friends, but I know you, Masaomi. That’s why I believe you will have no problem with your friends. You chose them, after all.”

“Saki, I think you’re the type of girl who would be easily taken in.”

Saki kept smiling even at Masaomi’s bewilderment.

“And I don’t want Masaomi to look so lonely.”

“...I’m not lonely. I have you, Saki.”

Masaomi was telling the truth.

But Saki questioned it without a second thought.

“How do you know?”

“Hey!”

“I’m Masaomi’s lover. But Masaomi, I can never become your friend.”

“...”

Masaomi fell silent at Saki’s words.

As if chasing him further into his silence, Saki grasped Masaomi’s hand as he embraced her shoulder.

“But if all Masaomi’s friends say they hate you, Masaomi...if you’re feeling very, very down, Masaomi...remember that I will be here to hold you tight. That’s my responsibility as a lover.”

“Saki...”

“You can always come home to me, Masaomi. Don’t forget that. But I won’t be able to help Masaomi’s friends. That’s something only Masaomi can do, isn’t it?”

Saki turned around swiftly and hugged him with an innocent look on her face.

“...Ah, that’s true. Thank you, Saki.”

Masaomi thought some more as he saw her smile.

Her innocence did not mean that she was a saint. On the contrary, it was a sign that as a human being, part of her was already broken.

Masaomi realized that he was in the same position.

The reason was none other than himself.

He fell from a very high place and broke. That was it.

But before he did, someone had definitely pushed him on the back.

To be exact, someone pushed him up and up the hill as he climbed—and released him just as he was about to trip over and fall.

The same man was now pushing his best friend on the back.

Masaomi lowered his gaze again and made a decision.

I'm going to help Mikado.

Yet I needed so much encouragement from Saki and such determination to make this one simple decision. God, I really am broken, aren't I.

The boy thought as he smiled softly back at Saki.

After getting only the absolutely necessary things ready, he left his apartment without further delay.

The boy kept running away from his everyday life and into the center of conflicts.

To help his best friend Mikado, he now headed for the center of yet another conflict.



Somewhere in Ikebukuro

Just as Masaomi flung himself into the gang war —

—The place was a remote spot away from the street the Station was on.

It was a place with few passers-by even during Golden Week—not an unusual occurrence in any city. Strangely, however, a densely populated spot appeared in this place today.

The few passers-by would shoot them a look, wondering what was going on. As soon as they realized that they were gangsters, however, they walked away as quickly as possible.

Had they been standing in front of the Station, a crowded street, or a tourist attraction, people would probably have already alerted the police. But since they seemed to be just congregating in a place that bothered no one and doing nothing in particular, everyone who walked by this crowd simply chose to stay as far away as possible to preserve their own interests.

If they had known what was actually going on in the center of the crowd, however, some of them would probably have alerted the police at all costs. These delinquents were aware of it as well; they were blocking the entrance to this place from sight for a reason.

In the center of the crowd, an unsettled voice of a girl was heard from further down the narrow alleyway.

“...I’m sorry, but you are...?”

Next to Kamichika Rio, several girls her age stood immobile in fear.

These were the same girls who went out to lunch with her after she had greeted Anri on the Ikebukuro streets.

After leaving the restaurant, they walked off the crowded street to go to the park for some rest when one of the girls checked her cell phone and stopped dead in her tracks.

“...What is this?”

“? What’s up?”

“L-Look, I’ve been getting a lot of text messages from this ‘Dollars’ mailing list...and this newest one...look, isn’t this us?”

The girl turned the display screen of her cell phone to show everyone the photo. On it they saw themselves eating inside the restaurant.

“It says they’re looking for Non... Non, do you know why?”

The girl who was holding the cell phone asked. At the same time, her cell phone rang again indicating a new message.

The girl opened it with shaking hands, and—

“Found the girls. We’re going to have a party with them!”

The message came with a photo attached as well. On it they recognized the street they had only just walked on minutes ago and their own backs.

The girls began to shudder and looked cautiously around.

That was when they saw several men walking towards them.

In the other direction, there were men giving off the same vibe coming towards them as well—

“L-Let’s run.”

One of the girls muttered. Rio and her friends ran immediately into the narrower alleyway nearby. As a result, of course, they were cornered in a spot with even less pedestrians passing by.

After they got the girls cornered, one of the delinquents spoke with a sickening grin on his face.

“Ah, yeah, right. What are we? Hm—look, how should I put it—we’re kind of a bunch of suspicious men.”

The alleyway was blocked from both directions. It did not look like they would be allowed to escape.

“I-If we shout, the cops are going to come right away...” one of the girls muttered.

But the delinquents merely laughed.

“There are fights all over this place today. The cops are busy enough as it is. Speaking of which, speaking of wheeeech, you’re Non-chan, aren’t ya?”

The man’s tone changed suddenly.

Pointing his chin at one of the girls, he spat in a rage, “Your boyfriend is messing up the place so much that the cops are all over them instead! Do you understand?”

“...Rocchi is?”

The girl muttered a strange name.

But Rio and the others knew what it meant. It was the nickname of the boyfriend Non mentioned often.

The delinquents did not know that, but they had probably guessed as well that “Rocchi” could only be referring to the leader of Toramaru.

They grinned maliciously and stepped closer toward the girls.

“Rocchi or Micchi, no one’s gonna come to save you now, Bitchy.”

“Here, here. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid. Come, just come with us for a minute. Come, come.”

The delinquents teased, but their eyes flashed dangerously.

It looked like not only Non, but all the other girls would end up being dragged into their van or something and be taken away as well.

Non looked as if she was furious at herself. She looked at the man opposite her and spoke slowly.

“...I get it. I’ll come with you. But you must let the others go.”

“N-Non...! No! You can’t do that!”

Rio tried to stop her right away. But her words were cut off as another man interrupted rather inconsiderately.

“Nah, nah, nah. That’s not gonna work! If we let the others go, they’ll go to the cops for sure. That way the cops will come, and we’ll be in trouble. Nah—”

At that moment, one of the men suddenly covered a girl’s mouth with his hand.

“Urgh...!”

The man stifled the girl’s voice and put a knife to her throat.

“Here, here. If you shout, I might cut her by accident.”

Rio and the others fell silent at the sight of the shining blade against the girl’s white neck.

A black van had stopped outside the alleyway in the meantime, its door open.

“You sure we can stuff five people in?”

Grasping their arms and covering their mouths, the dozen men dragged the confused girls out of the alleyway. It was an unusual sight.

“We can if we squeeze them in.” “I want to squeeze in too!”

“Are you an ape or something?” “Exciting ride with high school chicks! Thank you!”

“God, you’re sick!”

“But the one who was seen with Kadota, is he really Toramaru’s leader?”

“Yeah, there’s no mistaking it. I’ve seen the guy before.”

More pointless chatter.

Or at least it was no more than chatter for these delinquents.

For the girls, on the other hand, the casualness in their tone was a painful reminder of the reality, sinking them further into despair—

“W-Wait a moment!”

A voice that sounded extremely out of place was heard. It was from a boy who still looked somewhat like a child.

Every gaze was focused on his childlike face. Panting, he looked back at them with shaking shoulders.

“Ryuugamine...kun?”

The face Rio saw was none other than Ryuugamine Mikado, her classmate.

But just like she was not close with Anri, neither was she close with him.

Question marks popped up in Rio’s head. The boy, however, did not have the time to answer them. Summoning as much courage as he could, he shouted toward them.

“W-What are you doing?”

The delinquents exchanged looks and frowned. As if trying to get rid of a fly, they waved their hands at the boy and responded in cold voices.

“Whatever we’re doing, it’s none of your business, kid.”

“Yes, it is!”

“Huh?”

“I-I’m a Dollars member too. I came here because...I saw the message.”

It took almost all the courage Mikado had in him to say it.

But whether because of his confusion or *his fear to see Dollars members arrested*, he did not alert the police.

He came here as nothing more than a Dollars member.

“B-But, taking girls hostage is too...”

Before he could finish his sentence, one of the delinquents was already heading his way with a malicious smirk.

“Ah, yeah, we know about that. Just shut up, kid!”

As he said that, he kicked Mikado in the chest.

It was by no means a powerful kick; he was an untrained delinquent, after all.

Had Mikado been Heiwajima Shizuo, he would probably have hardly even felt it. But he would get mad at the sight of the footprint on his belly and punch the delinquent until he flew higher than a two-story building.

Had he been Orihara Izaya, he would probably have already driven a knife into the palm of the delinquent’s foot.

Had he been Kida Masaomi, he would probably have dodged it and begun to counterattack.

Had he been Celty Sturluson, he would probably have bound the delinquent to the ground with shadow ropes.

He was, however, just Mikado, a high school student with average—no, below average—physical strength.

It was most unfortunate, but Mikado happened to be “nothing out of ordinary” in the situation he was in.

“Argh...”

Mikado fell onto the ground and curled up into a fetal position.

His stomach felt as if a heavy ball of iron had been dropped into it.

Before the pain could register, his brain was taken over by agony. His body screamed “Don’t move!”, but his nerves could not take the agony anymore. They yelled “Roll around!” in shrill voices.

“Argh...arh...”

“If you’re in Dollars, don’t you know this? There’s no rule in Dollars that says you can’t take women hostage.”

The man looked down at the naïve boy on the ground and began to teach him about “Dollars” in an arrogant manner.

Of course, they did not know that Mikado was the founder of Dollars.

But even if they knew and believed it—would their attitude have changed?

Mikado continued to groan in pain as he sought to answer that question. Soon he came to the conclusion: no.

Even if he spoke to them as the founder of Dollars, it would have made no difference whatsoever—because that was just what Dollars was.

“It’s not only that. Dollars has no rules to bind us. Of course, neither does it have a rule that says we should listen to kids like you.”

Mikado’s shoulders were touching his knees. The man kicked his shoulder as he spoke.

Mikado rolled on the asphalt, still thinking.

Ah, that’s right.

This man was right.

Dollars has no rules.

No one can force anyone else to do anything.

I was the one who made it that way.

Mikado thought and clenched his teeth. The delinquents, meanwhile, sounded somewhat shocked as they talked amongst themselves.

“Looks like Dollars does have all sorts of people to offer. Never thought there would be kids like that one. Would someone have called the cops, too?”

“Get your asses to Raira’s Second Ground quick. Staying here is getting boring. Let’s finish off the Toramaru bastards and take these girls to someone’s place to have fun.”

Mikado gritted his teeth harder as he heard their voices.

No.

This is...not it.

These people are...not it.

This...

This is not the Dollars I had in my mind at all!

Mikado simply refused to accept the reality right in front of his eyes.

Trying to suppress the sick feeling in his stomach, Mikado rose to his feet to shout at the men already getting into the van.

“Stop...!”

“...Huh?”

One of the delinquents who looked like the center of the “Dollars” group raised his eyebrow.

“What was that? Didn’t catch that.”

His tone was teasing, but his voice was not without menace.

Mikado, however, did not wince as he shouted from the bottom of his stomach.

“Dollars...Dollars would never sink as *low* as taking girls hostage!”

“...Shut up!”

The delinquent leader was obviously exasperated at being called “low” by someone as inferior to them as Mikado was. Before he could think further about what Mikado had said, he had already swung his fist at Mikado’s face.

“Oi, we’ll be in trouble if he goes to the cops. You three, take care of this kid and make sure he’s broken like a sandbag. “

“W-Wait! We want to be with the girls too!”

“You will! It’s not even gonna take a second to take care of a kid like that.”

The taste of iron filled Mikado’s mouth as he fell to the ground again.

The inside of his mouth was probably bleeding. He might have broken a tooth or two.

But that was not important to Mikado right now.

What pained him more was the fact that the man who hit him did not even bother to look at him.

The mental pain was several times more severe than what he was suffering physically.

It might be paining him even more than the fact that he had not been able to save those girls—

By the time Mikado struggled to get back on his feet, the black van was nowhere to be seen. Only three delinquents remained behind to corner him.

“Oi, get up, kid.”

“Urgh...”

Mikado sought to fight back, but never having been in a fight before, he could hardly make his fist listen to him.

His clumsy fists were not even as steady as an elementary school bully’s. The delinquents laughed and hit him again, making him fall back on the ground.

Mikado could not even remember how he fell.

The only thing he felt was the merciless kick on his side.

His arms and legs were going numb under repeated stomping. He began to wonder if his bones were broken in places. The fibers in his muscles felt as if they were disintegrating.

“Wah....arghhhhh!”

Mikado could not help but wail.

Seeing him in pain, one of the torturers laughed.

“Yo, kid. You remember me?”

“...Huh...ah...?”

Mikado struggled to raise his head and look at the man with eyes watering in pain. His head was stomped mercilessly back onto the ground the next second by a heavy shoe.

“It was more than a year ago...some bastard broke my ex’s cell phone. You were his friend, weren’t you? You looked like a kid. I couldn’t believe you were in high school...so I remembered your face very...well!”

The delinquent let his weight fall on his shoe, grinding Mikado’s face hard on the asphalt.

Mikado felt his nose twisted into such an impossible position that blood began to squirt out of it.

“And the Black Motorbike showed up out of nowhere to ruin everything...are you friends with him too? You can’t possibly be.”

This guy...?

His face did not ring a bell, but Mikado tried hard to remember who he was in the overwhelming pain.

The next words he said finally made Mikado recall who he was. It was an ordinary memory for Mikado, so ordinary that he would not have been surprised if he forgot about it altogether.

“I only got to know this recently after I joined Dollars. His name’s Orihara Izaya, right? The one who broke my ex’s cell phone. Looks like he’s pretty famous.”

Ah.

It was back when Mikado had only been in Ikebukuro for a couple of days. He had tried to save Anri from some bullies, and Izaya had stomped on one of those girl’s cell phone.

A few days after, someone had come to his school gate claiming to be the bully’s boyfriend. Celty had appeared then, however, and sent him unconscious with one kick.

A cracking sound reached Mikado’s ears from inside him.

No parts of his body were being kicked, but Mikado felt sure that he heard the sound of his own spine being ground under a foot.

“Goodness. Just because all your friends are big names you think you can put up a fight against us? Or were you thinking you’d be in the same league as us just by registering at that Dollars website? Ah?”

His back was being stomped on, but Mikado could no longer feel pain.

He was overcome by one single emotion he had never felt before, one that was stronger than any kind of physical pain.

He remembered.

He remembered everything about this man.

“A little bastard like you, in Dollars? You’re just getting in the...way!”

The man suddenly decided to deliver a kick at Mikado’s head—at the same time, he muttered something silently to himself.

It was a thought Mikado would never dream of thinking in his everyday life.

Ah, I remember now...

It was that...

That boring bastard.

It was the first time any definite “change” took place in Ryuugamine Mikado’s heart.

But since it was only taking place in his heart, no one had been able to notice.

Mikado was not able to pursue the thought any further. His head was kicked forcefully, and his consciousness left him.

♂ ♀

Somewhere in Ikebukuro

【GOT THE GIRLS! This way we’ll smash Toramaru’s leader and make Dollars officially No.1 in Ikebukuro!】

A man let his silent anger flare up as he read the mocking message.

The man in a bartender suit grasped the sign post on the side of the road and muttered aloud.

“...Bastard thinks others are fools.”

After several seconds of silence, the man slowly walked on.

Slowly—with the shape of his palm deeply imprinted on the pole of the sign post he had just let go of.

Heiwajima Shizuo marched on towards his destination without hesitation, anger burning in his chest.

♂ ♀

In front of an apartment building on Kawagoe Highway

“Mikiya-san will be here to pick you up soon. Let’s go.”

Shiki urged Akane to leave in front of Celty and the others.

Three of his subordinates stood waiting around him, watching out for Akane while carefully avoiding pressuring her further.

“...Do I have to go back no matter what...?”

“Miss...”

“I...I’ll apologize to Daddy and Mommy...but...but...”

“Miss Akane, I am aware that you probably don’t think highly of what we do for a living. But first of all you should try to talk it through with your parents, right? I am sure your parents have no intention of involving you in our world. Please believe what I just said.”

Celty looked at Shiki as if he was something unusual as she heard their conversation.

Hm...

It’s like I don’t even know him any more.

His voice is the same, and his way of speaking hasn’t exactly changed either. But somehow, he gives off a completely different vibe.

I wish that was the way he usually acted.

With these thoughts on her mind, Celty let herself feel truly happy about the fact that the girl got out of all this safely.

Anyway, the first priority is to get Akane-chan back to her parents before sunset.

Celty was reminded of the duo that attacked her and Anri the night before.

Judging by the time they chose to act, it's probably safe to assume that the incident is related to my job as Akane-chan's bodyguard.

But once we're at Awakusu-kai's headquarters, these weird guys, assuming that they're the same people who are after Akane-chan, would not probably try to kidnap her with all these guards around.

However, were they to drive back to the headquarters at night, there was still the possibility that they would attack their car with that mighty weapon. But in the daylight they would probably avoid doing that. Though it was not rare for yakuza groups to fire guns at each other in broad daylight, for two people whose only goal was to kidnap Awakusu Akane, having to deal with the police was too much of a risk.

Still, I need to remain watchful.

I still don't know why they are after Anri-chan...

I'll follow them as discreetly as possible after they drive off.

While Celty was making up her mind to continue to be the girl's bodyguard, Shiki continued to try to persuade Akane.

"Either way, it would be much better if you stayed at home for a while, Miss Akane."

"...Did something...happen?"

Shiki was lost for words for a moment after Akane's polite question.

Goodness, Miss Akane really is sharp for her age.

"No matter what happens, it is my responsibility to see to it that Miss would not be involved in anything dangerous. Please rest assured."

"...So are Daddy and Grandpa alright?"

"?"

"Did Heiwajima Shizuo onii-chan do something to them?"

Time seemed to have stopped in the room.

Shiki had heard from Shinra that Heiwajima Shizuo had brought Akane here.

But everything before Shizuo brought Akane to this apartment—including how Akane had met him—Shinra had omitted saying “She told me all that when she was having a fever. It’s probably better if you ask Akane-chan to tell you about it yourself after everything has calmed down.” It made sense, and it was what Shiki was planning to do.

Why?

There was no way Miss should have been told anything about Shizuo’s trouble with Awakusu-kai.

Or did Shizuo tell her something?

Though the alarmed expression on Shiki’s face lasted but for a couple of seconds, Akane still noticed.

She asked in an unsettled voice, “...! So Heiwajima Shizuo did something, right!?”

“No, he didn’t. There’s nothing to be worried about, Miss...”

Shiki assured her with a smile. Akane, however, looked as if she hadn’t heard him as she shuddered and muttered to herself.

“I knew it...I should have killed him after all...”

...?

What did Miss...just say?

Akane’s voice was too small for her message to be clear, but Shiki had definitely caught the words “should have killed him”.

The entire situation began to feel strange to Shiki.

He began to realize how different Akane was now from the time before she had run away from home.

She had always been more mature than the average kids her age. On top of that, she was shocked at finding out what her family did for a living.

But the Akane in front of his eyes was still strange.

...

Shiki considered this for a moment. Akane reminded him of some people he had dealt with before.

She's like those women on the verge of collapse because they had no way to pay back their yakuza loans...

The idea, however, flashed for only a second across Shiki's mind. He did not believe that Akane would be in as desperate a situation as those women. But her mental state definitely warranted attention.

"I'm sorry, but what...did you just say, Miss?"

Just as Shiki, thinking it was appropriate to verify his doubts first, asked in a serious tone—

One of his subordinates cut in at an inappropriate time.

"The Young Head's car. It's here."

"I see. We'll be downstairs in a moment."

Shiki pushed his doubts to the back of his mind for the time being as he walked down the stairs to the first floor, taking Akane with him.

"Thank you for taking care of Miss Akane. We will be in contact with you shortly. I still have a lot of questions I need to bother Celty-san with concerning what happened last night."

Shiki bowed deeply as a goodbye while Akane waved at Shinra smiling.

After seeing them off, Celty sat back on the sofa.

[What happened exactly? How is Shizuo involved?]

"Yes? What happened?"

Sipping a new cup of coffee inside the room, Shinra looked at Celty's PDA and asked.

[Shiki-san kind of froze when Akane-chan mentioned Shizuo.]

Celty wanted to hear as much as possible before she left to follow the car.

Seeing Celty's serious expression, Shinra shrugged as he answered.

“Ah...I don't really have an idea either. But it looks like the Awakusu-kai folks are after Shizuo.”

Shinra smiled hollowly at Celty.

Celty, however, realized immediately that only the corners of his lips lifted a little; his eyes remained unsmiling. To her it was enough of a clue to suggest that the situation was serious.

[I see. This is getting more people involved than I thought.]

Even Mikado and Anri could end up being involved. Celty regretted accepting the job at that thought.

But now that she had met this Akane girl, Celty could not abandon her responsibilities to her.

Akane-chan stayed here for a night...

Will the weird duo target this place too just because of that?

It felt unlikely, but Celty decided that she could not risk it while the duo's true identities still remained unknown.

While Celty double-checked the security system in the apartment, Shinra spoke in a lighthearted voice.

“Anyhow, Awakusu-kai was after Shizuo because of a total misunderstanding, so I think it's going to be fine. ...The real question is—why did Izaya set this up in the first place?”

[What? This has something to do with Izaya, too?]

“It would seem so. If Akane-chan was telling the truth, that is...unless, of course, it was actually Izaya's imposter.”

Shinra's hollow smile finally reached his eyes this time. Celty smiled back at him with a movement of her shoulders and typed on her PDA:

[I can't think of anyone on earth who can impersonate him. Apart from himself, that is.]

“Yeah, you're quite right.”

Shinra chuckled.

It's about time I set out.

Thinking that Shiki and the others should be driving away any moment now, Celty had only just stood up from the sofa—

—When a deafening explosion from the outside stopped her dead in her tracks.

!?

What!?! What!?!

Thinking that it might have been a gas explosion or something, Celty turned abruptly to look for Shinra.

At the same time, Shinra flung himself on her and shielded her with his body.

!

What are you doing, Shinra?

“Celty, it’s dangerous! Hit the floor! It’s got to be a terrorist attack! There’s intense light downstairs outside the window!”

[Calm down! I’ll be alright. You take cover under the table, Shinra!]

Was that the right place to go in the event of an explosion?

Shinra doubted that, but he had no time to think.

Celty, on the other hand, was having even less relevant thoughts in this dangerous situation.

Shinra.

Don’t tell me you were trying to protect me...?

Celty felt a surge of warmth in her bloodless chest. As she turned to look outside the window—

—Her unique “vision” was able to capture, through her helmet, Awakusu-kai members covering their eyes or ears as they crouched on the ground, a motorbike leaving the scene of commotion at an alarming speed.

After that, she was able to make out Akane’s tiny figure in the rider’s massive arms—

Celty jumped out of the window and straight off the balcony.

♂ ♀

Several minutes ago, near Kawagoe Highway

“Hey, Aoba, how long is this walk gonna take us?”

“If they try to corner us like this, it’s gonna be a hell of trouble.”

Several of his fellow youths complained as Aoba was about to follow the black thread into a narrow alleyway. Unlike him, they were not interested at all in the thread extending its way out of the abandoned factory.

Aoba smiled slightly at that and replied.

“Don’t say that. Think about this. Isn’t it unusual enough that there would be such a long thread on the street? See, you can’t cut it. It’s elastic like rubber, but it doesn’t get thinner as you pull it. It feels like condensed smoke on your hands.”

“I don’t give a damn how it feels like.”

“...It’s kind of the discovery of the century for me. Anyway, that aside, did Gin ever call?”

“He texted. Said he was watching Kadota fight the head of Toramaru from the corner of Second Ground. They’re still not finished.”

“It’s already a long fight. But then again, Kadota is the well-rounded type. He’s formidable in both short and long fights... Can they manage to take the kidnapped women there before they finish?”

Aoba was halfway through his analysis when a deafening noise reached them from the main street.

“!?”

Pedestrians stopped. Drivers braked. The street was filled with yelps and screeching sounds as if silk was being torn apart.

“What the...!?”

Aoba ran to the crossing on Kawagoe Highway and looked carefully.

He saw a black car parked on the side of the street.

It did not take Aoba long to figure out that the black-painted private car* belonged to some kind of violent organization.

** Black-painted: cars painted black are associated with violence organizations in Japan.*

“...Yakuza?”

Several men were crouched on the ground as Aoba and the boys watched in shock.

Aoba quickly decided that the one who caused this commotion was not among these men—but a motorbike thundered its way into the scene.

Aoba thought that it would head straight for the black car—

But instead, the rider rushed into the scene of commotion only to scoop up a little girl.

The massive man on the motorbike left the scene straight afterwards without even slowing down—

—And rode into a different alleyway than the one Aoba and his friends were in.

“What just happened exactly...?”

As soon as he came to, Aoba realized that the black thread was extending out of the alleyway and following the leaving motorbike.

The boys were about to walk onto the main street to see what was happening when they saw—

—From the apartment beside the black car—

—A weirdly-shaped black figure appear from the fourth or fifth floor.

“The Black Motorbike...!”

Aoba was sure of what he saw, even though it was only for an instant.

The figure in the black rider suit flew off the balcony and landed on the ground.

From its arm, black rope-like things were glued to the balcony it just flew off of.

The Black Rider used them like rubber ropes and landed himself on the ground.

As soon as Aoba had witnessed this unusual sight—

His eyes shone as he muttered, “Found you...”

The gleam in his eyes was, however, very different from the one in Mikado’s when he had first seen Celty—

It was the cold and merciless gleam in a snake’s eyes upon finding its prey.

♂ ♀

One minute ago, in front of Shinra’s apartment on Kawagoe Highway

“...Daddy!”

“Akane!”

At the entrance to the building, the father and the daughter saw each other for the first time in days.

The intimidating man walked towards the girl who was hiding herself behind Shiki.

Akane was ready for her cheeks to be slapped. However, what did end up touching her were her father’s strong, warm arms.

Awakusu Mikiya knelt down and embraced his daughter’s shaking frame.

Even though Shiki and the guards were all looking, Mikiya still let a fatherly expression appear on his face.

“It’s OK if you don’t like me or Grandpa, but don’t worry your mom like this.”

The girl felt confused for a moment, but ended up clutching her father’s sleeve and apologized.

“...Sorry...sorry! I’m so happy you’re safe, Daddy...!”

As he looked at them, Shiki concluded that his ears might have been indeed deceiving him a moment before.

But—

...

She ran away from home, yet she looks so ready to return to Mikiya-san.

This is still kind of strange.

... "I'm so happy you're safe" ...?

Why would Miss be worried about Mikiya-san's safety?

Shiki sensed that something was still not right. At that moment—

—He saw a small object flying towards them from the street.

?

?!

As soon as he realized what it was, Shiki covered his face and heart, ready to run—

But it was already too late. Before his brain could command his feet to move, the “thing” had turned into a flash of light—the next thing he knew, the air was filled with deafening noise and blinding light, and everyone around him could no longer see nor hear.

Explosion.

The world was suddenly swallowed by a darkness named light.

Shiki and Mikiya were the only Awakusu-kai members to realize what was happening.

A flashbang.

It was a special kind of grenade that disoriented people by releasing intense light and sound, made famous because of its frequent usage by the police in hostage rescue and other situations.

Mikiya was completely deafened by the sound, but enough of his vision remained for him to make out what was going on. The flash grenade had been a weaker one. In addition, he had his back turned towards the center of explosion when it happened because he was hugging his daughter.

Realizing that it was an attack, he shielded his daughter with his arms and looked around—

But his deafened ears did not catch the sound of a motorbike approaching.

A man jumped off the motorbike that popped out of nowhere in front of him.

His eyes, already invaded by blinding light, could only make out the figure of a massive man wearing a full-faced helmet.

The considerably taller man grabbed Akane's arm and tried to pull her away from him.

"You bastard!"

Mikiya straightened up immediately—but the man grabbed his collar with one hand and lifted him off the ground with ease.

"...!"

After that, the man threw him towards his black car and away from Akane.

Mikiya felt his back crash onto the side of his car. The impact was so strong that his lungs felt as if they were crushed.

But he struggled to his feet anyway and turned towards the savage man who had appeared abruptly on the scene—

Only to find he was already leaving the scene on his motorbike with Akane in his arm while the Awakusu-kai members remained momentarily blinded.

Only one other man witnessed the scene up close besides Mikiya.

It was Shiki, who had been covering his eyes with his hand. Even so, he still experienced a brief whiteout owing to the amount of light that went through the slits between his fingers.

It was perhaps only appropriate to call it luck that he had taken measures in such a timely manner against an immediate flash of explosion.

The explosion still rang in his ears. The sight in front of him was his boss being thrown onto the car.

As soon as he realized what was happening, he rushed towards the motorbike as well. But it was already speeding up.

That kind of strength...

He was reminded of the mutilated bodies of the murdered subordinates.

But that man was definitely not Shizuo.

Shizuo is way shorter.

The man also had a dramatically different build from Shizuo's.

Of course, it could also have been Shizuo wearing a muscle outfit and shoes with hidden heels—except that Shiki already considered it unlikely that Shizuo was the culprit.

It was, however, not the time for such deliberations.

As soon as the ringing of the explosion faded, the first thing Shiki did—

—Was to push a confused Mikiya into a safer, bullet-proof car.

And then he saw it.

His recovered ears heard it.

Mikiya was yelling something to the rider on the leaving motorbike.

And what he heard was—

♂ ♀

Somewhere in Ikebukuro

“...-kun.”

“...-kun. Mikado-kun!”

A familiar voice sounded in his misty consciousness.

Who is it?

Ah, Sonohara-san.

In its own emptiness, Mikado's consciousness was able to reach that conclusion.

“Mikado-kun, are you alright? Please hold on!”

As his senses slowly began to sharpen, Mikado realized that her voice sounded different.

Ah, this is unusual.

Sonohara-san is sounding so worried.

What happened?

As his senses sharpened further, Mikado realized that he himself felt different, too.

Hm?

My body hurts.

Why?

What did I do?

Ah...right.

I was beaten up.

Then...then...

Sonohara-san...eh, why?

Mikado's mind was finally clear. He opened his eyes, curious about what was going on right now. But his vision remained too blurred for him to make out what was happening.

It looked like he was lying on the ground, and Anri's face was floating somewhere above him.

“Ah...Sonohara-san...”

“Mikado-kun! Thank God...!”

Though he could not make out the expression on her face, Mikado recognized relief in her voice. It made him feel both guilty and grateful. Upon remembering what had just happened to him, his chest felt as if it was going to explode with shame.

Ah, right.

I was beaten up badly.

Speaking of which, I haven't heard Sonohara-san sound this worried since Masaomi fell at the abandoned factory.

I'm so glad.

At least she worries about me as much as she worries about Masaomi.

Mikado's thoughts were so blurred that he was confused as to where to begin.

Speaking of which, where are the men who...

Did they leave?

If they were still around, Anri would be in danger.

Mikado struggled to sit up despite the pain.

At that exact moment, however, a shadow appeared in his blurred vision.

"You...you monster...!"

Eh?

It was one of the three men who had been torturing him.

He raised his arm, looking as if he was about to hit Anri with a silvery object.

Danger!

Mikado was about to push Anri aside when—

Before he could do so, a metallic clang ricocheted throughout the alley.

Anri's upper body was twisted slightly sideways. Something silvery was extending out of her arm.

A steel pipe...?

No, a katana...?

In the next second, the silvery weapon hit the man's temple. His giant figure fell like a puppet with its strings cut.

Mikado was reminded of what happened months ago.

When he had arrived at the abandoned factory to rescue Masaomi from the crowd of Yellow Turbans members, Anri had stood there holding a katana in her hands.

...This is the Sonohara-san I do not know about.

Mikado's vision finally recovered as the silvery weapon was sucked back into Anri's arm.

"Um...are you alright...?"

"Y-Yeah."

Mikado sat up slowly—and saw three men, the one who had just fallen included, lying unconscious on the ground.

"This..."

"..."

Anri lowered her head and remained silent.

It was obvious that "something" had happened just now.

But Mikado had no idea exactly what it was.

None of the men were bleeding, but they had bruises that looked as if they were from being hit by thin steel sticks.

Anri was obviously knew, but she did not speak.

And there was the thing I saw a moment before...

It was probably not a hallucination.

Everything made Mikado curious. But seeing Anri's unsettled expression, he shook his head.

"It's alright. I won't ask any questions."

A soft smile appeared on his swollen face.

"T-Thank you, Mikado-kun..."

Looking relieved at Mikado's recovery, Anri touched his shoulder, smiling timidly.

"Um, are you really alright? Should we call an ambulance...?"

"No, thank you. I can stand up on my own."

Mikado struggled to his feet immediately to reassure Anri.

Yeah, it's already decided, isn't it? Our secrets will have to wait until Masaomi comes back.

It was probably not something they could just explain in one or two sentences, anyway.

A high school girl holding a katana and making it disappear within seconds without a trace.

It was by no means something one could understand with common sense. But it was not Mikado's concern at the moment.

That was because he was overwhelmed by emotions far stronger than his doubt about Anri.

I haven't...

I haven't been able to do anything.

I couldn't do anything about those men...and Sonohara-san had to save me.

My weakness...put Sonohara-san in danger...

Bashing himself in his mind did not mean that he could do anything to remedy the situation. Feebly, he tried to reassure Anri.

"There's no need...I'm fine."

"So...should we at least go to the hospital or Kishitani-sensei's apartment...?" Anri suggested, but Mikado shook his head.

"I have no broken bones, so I'll be alright...also, we have to go...to Kadota-san...to Raira's Second Ground..."

"Eh...?"

Anri looked confused at Mikado's words.

Mikado lowered his eyes as he saw the doubt and concern on her face. Looking at the ground, he muttered.

"I'm sorry...but I have to go right away...to save the girls...they were going to use them as hostages...and judging by what they said, they're probably not going to let the girls go after the fight."

"Mikado-kun...I think it's better to let the police deal with this..."

"No! If we try to alert the police, who knows what those men are going to do to the girls...and Kadota-san will be in trouble too if the police gets involved."

“...”

Anri felt that Mikado was only speaking half of the truth.

Anri was not completely ignorant about Mikado.

She knew that Mikado had some kind of special tie to Dollars.

Mikado was probably worried that involving the police would spell trouble for Dollars.

“...”

After a brief silence, Anri inhaled silently and spoke.

“Then I’ll go, too.”

“Wha...”

“...You don’t want to call the police, right...? Then I’ll go with you. I want to save Kamichika-san and her friends, too.”

Anri paused for a moment, as if hesitating, before adding, “...I want to...be of some help to Mikado-kun.”

She said it with a sort of determination.

Mikado understood her thoughts immediately.

The figure of the girl with a katana filled his mind.

He knew what it meant—even if she was going to risk exposing her secret identity, she was going to help Mikado.

Mikado did not know what her secret was, but he knew that it must be important to Anri.

The boy lowered his head, hesitation written all over his face.

But Mikado knew that no matter what he said, Anri was going to follow him. He decided to accept her determined offer as readily as he had accepted his own selfishness.

“I see...let’s go, then.”

The boy nodded emphatically and left the alleyway with Anri.

Shortly afterwards, a female figure in a rider suit appeared from its hiding spot in the alleyway.

The female figure had probably heard them talking. She muttered “Raira’s Second Ground, huh.” and returned to her motorbike parked nearby.

“Boy and girl, you are simpleminded. The correct solution, contact the police force immediately. Other responses are but driven by nothing but egoism, wishful thinking, or hopes.”

Vorona—the female—had witnessed the scene where Anri took down several stronger men *with the back of her katana*.

“In addition, this way it would be possible for me to finish the bespectacled girl off before the police force interferes.”

As she muttered these words, she heard Slon’s voice over the wireless installed in her helmet.

“Vorona, you hear me?”

“I affirm.”

“I got our target, Awakusu Akane. She’s not hurt, probably just in shock. I’ve taken her into the truck back at the base. No one’s following us.”

“Exceedingly splendid. Please analyze the exact orientation of Raira’s Second Ground and send it to me. Also, please move the truck close to that place.”

Vorona gave out her orders in a calm voice after listening to Slon’s report.

The corners of her lips, however, were curled into a confident smile.

“This is making me positively festive. We’re going to finish the jobs in one go today.”

“Once the jobs are finished, I can concentrate on the conquest of the Black Motorbike for as long as I like. Serendipitous.”

♂ ♀

Back side of Raira Academy’s Second Ground, Ikebukuro

Compared to the area closer to the Station, the open space here was so devoid of traffic that it was hard to believe that one was still in Ikebukuro.

What was once originally a cool and comfortable spot in the shade of trees now smelled of blood.

“Hey...just how sturdy are you, man?”

The one who spoke was Kadota, blood dripping down the corner of his mouth and a sizeable swollen bruise on his right eye.

He said so in a slightly shocked voice while sitting on a paving stone between the asphalt and the grass.

“Had you been a little more well-rounded I would be the one lying on the ground right now.”

Rokujou Chikage lay sprawled on the ground several meters in front of him.

The bandages on his face were drenched anew in blood. He looked like he had difficulty breathing.

Chikage opened his mouth slowly as he heard Kadota speak.

“Nah...you’re just as tough, so I wouldn’t be so sure. Speaking of which, if you were planning on pulling your punches just because I was injured, I would never have challenged you in the first place...you didn’t, did you?”

“Well, I did spare your life, and you can call that pulling punches if you want...but mostly I did it because I didn’t fancy the idea of a life in prison.”

Kadota gave a hollow smile.

Chikage returned that with a dry laugh and raised his left arm to check the time on his watch.

“Ah...don’t tell me I passed out just now?”

“You did for a little while. But then I was about to fall as well.”

“For real? ...Damn, it’s the first time I’ve lost two fights in a row. Feels bad, man.”

Even though his words were bitter, Chikage somehow remained smiling.

“If you are talking about the fight with Shizuo, I don’t think that should count.”

Kadota silently got to his feet and walked to Chikage’s side.

He looked down at Chikage, but not in a contemptuous way.

Looking at Chikage, Kadota suggested, “Hey, I’m not asking you this because I won the fight or anything, but can you tell your Toramaru friends to get out of Ikebukuro now?”

“...”

“I’ll put out some feelers to find the ones who did the thing back in Saitama and make them apologize somehow. Can you just be patient until then?”

“...Are you saying that Dollars members will sell their fellow Dollars members out?”

Chikage gave a “hmpf” at Kadota’s suggestion.

Kadota, however, did not look displeased. Instead, he replied with a mischievous grin.

“Dollars has no rules. Which means, of course, that there’s no rule saying we can’t sell other Dollars members out even if we don’t like them...also, I’m not doing this on Dollars’ behalf. I’m doing this for myself, for Kadota Kyohei. I don’t like those guys, so I’m going to help you find them. That’s it. Got questions?”

“You, man, are a scoundrel.”

Chikage laughed on the ground.

Kadota, too, smirked from the bottom of his heart.

“Of course. Dollars is full of scoundrels. What did you expect?”

The duo laughed hard in unison. A harmonious atmosphere surrounded them. However—

“You can quit your shitty friendship game now, Ka-do-taaaa!!”

A voice cut in, loud and vulgar, breaking the temporary peace.

“?”

“What’s up?”

Kadota and Chikage turned in the direction of the voice—and saw some twenty hoodlums heading their way.

A young man who looked like the leader of the group spat on the ground and yelled.

“Making friends through fights? This isn’t a fucking manga. Or is your brain rotting from hanging out too much with otaku bastards like Yumasaki?”

Kadota, on the other hand, looked back at the gang of intruders with an unchanging expression.

“There are plenty of examples that aren’t in manga. Are you going to laugh at them too?”

With a pitying glance towards his opponent, Kadota continued.

“Ah, right, I forgot. You don’t have friends.”

“Wha...!”

The delinquent’s eyes widened. To mock him further, Chikage got back to his feet and spoke to Kadota.

“Don’t remind him of what a pitiful creature he is. Just look his face. I don’t think he even has a girlfriend. Don’t bully the lonely ones.”

“...What! Yer...!”

The man yelled as the tip of his nose turned scarlet. Kadota, however, did not even bother looking at him.

“Speak Japanese. This is Japan.”

His haughty attitude provoked the delinquents further. But remembering that they had overwhelming superiority in numbers, they regained their composure.

They soon began to mock Kadota and his injuries.

“Look at that, you’re all tattered! You think you can fight us like that?”

“...Why would I want to fight you?”

“Shut your mouth! You’ve been irritating me since long ago, Kadota! Walking around thinking you’re Dollars’ boss or something when you haven’t actually done shit!”

“Huh?”

Kadota had never even thought about it.

But Chikage had said the same thing to him when they first met.

It looked like that the situation had already gotten out of hand before he could even realize it. But still, Kadota did not understand why on earth he gave that impression.

“There are no bosses in Dollars. Everyone is the same. That’s why you’re a pain in the ass when you walk around thinking you’re one!”

“I don’t remember ever walking around thinking I was boss or anything...”

Kadota scratched his head sighing and walked a step towards the men.

They could not help but stop moving and take half a step backwards in alarm.

Kadota was a famous expert at street fighting. Even though the men did not think that he could win against all of them single-handedly, none of them wanted to be the first one to take his blows.

In the tense atmosphere, Kadota asked in a straightforward voice and without hesitation:

“Speaking of which, who the hell are you?”

“.....”

These words from the bottom of Kadota’s heart were enough to send these men into a rage.

They feared him, or at least were grudgingly aware of his existence. This was the best opportunity to claim his position for themselves—before this they had just never had a chance—but their opponent did not even know who they were.

To a group of delinquents who could usually do as they pleased on the streets in the name of Dollars, it was the worst insult they could think of.

“...We’re in luck today. We get to kick both Toramaru’s ass and Kadota’s!”

They said it to conceal their humiliation.

One of them pulled a nightstick out from inside his clothes, veins popping on his temple.

“We’ll be a little more famous once we’ve kicked Toramaru’s ass. But just a little more...since it’s nothing more than a pathetic little gang from Saitama!”

The man laughed and aimed his nightstick at Chikage’s face.

Only that—

—With a sharp metallic clang, the specially made nightstick was stopped before it could hit Chikage’s face.

“Huh...?”

The man saw a stick-like object appear as if out of thin air in Chikage’s hand.

Its handle and sheath were painted a varicolor pattern, mainly in red and black.

It looked like a short sword, only without a guard.

“What the...?”

The delinquent was confused at the sight of the strange stick-like object blocking his attack. Chikage ignored him, however. While his right hand remained on the handle, he put his left hand on the red and black sheath and pulled with force.

A faint metallic sound was heard, and the silvery stick revealed itself.

From a distance, it looked exactly like a short sword or a dagger. The men’s faces changed instantly.

But as they looked more closely, they realized that it was a weapon with a unique design.

It looked like a dagger, but it did not have a blade. Instead, it was blunt and heavy with a steely shine. At the root of the stick a key-shaped branch protruded from the metal surface. To someone who had never seen it before, it would probably look like a fusion of a metal nightstick* and katana.

** Metal nightstick (jitte): a weapon used by Japanese policemen in the Edo era.*

Only Kadota appeared not unfamiliar with this weapon. He regarded Chikage and the “object” with interest.

“Kabutowari, I see. Pretty cool.”

“Yeah, got it in a souvenir store on a trip to Kamakura.”

“Oh, I know that place. The store right in front of the Eyes of Buddha, right?”

“You know that place too? That store is kickass. I got other stuff too, but this one seems to like me. There was no one around to teach me how to use it, so I’ve kind of developed my own system.”

They continued chatting despite the dire situation they were in.

The delinquent with the nightstick was further agitated at being ignored.

He raised his hand high and made a move to split Chikage's forehead open—

Chikage reacted fast in that split second.

Almost as soon as the man began to raise his arm, Chikage twisted his body and thrust the blunt end of the kabutowari towards his nose.

A dull thud later, the man's eyes began to roll uncontrollably.

After a couple of seconds, he fell on his knees, blood squirting from his nose like a fountain.

“...”

Several meters away, the other delinquents gasped at the sight, sweating.

We're at an advantage here.

The fantasy was quickly washed away by the fountain of nosebleed.

“So? You were saying?”

Chikage kicked the kneeling man to the ground, put his foot on the man's head and grinned. His face looked completely different from when he was laughing in unison with Kadota.

“...Hey. You were actually the one who pulled the punches when we fought, weren't you?” Kadota asked, frowning.

Chikage shook his head and answered, “No. When my opponent's not using a weapon, I don't use any either. That's the way I do it. I wasn't pulling my punches with you. But I'm not going to have mercy on them now. That's all there is to it.”

As he said so, Chikage tapped his shoulder rhythmically with his kabutowari and announced with a ruthless smile.

“It's kind of hard to take on all of you at once, I'll admit...but I guarantee you that the first five to try anything *will end up losing an eye or breaking a collarbone.*”

“...!”

The men looked at each other, holding their breath.

They were sure that they would not lose with the number of men they had. But none of them wanted to be one of the “first five”. The assurance that they would win only made each of them more obsessed with not getting themselves hurt.

As if to pressure them further, Kadota stepped forward.

“Since you wanted to kick my ass as well, I guess you won’t complain if I pulled off five more of your ears, will you?”

“...You think you can lick us?”

Finally one of the self-proclaimed Dollars men spoke, but his voice was already weak.

They were different.

By now the men had to admit that the duo in front of them was far above them.

They were two injured men, yet they looked more formidable than twenty.

But it was too late to back off now.

The man who looked like the leader of the group made a bitter face and gave a sign to someone lurking in the back of the warehouse—where Kadota and Chikage could not see.

The plan was to show them those after we beat them up a little bit, but...

Or they might have decided to resort to the “trump card” sooner because a strange boy had just called them “low”—

As soon as the kidnapped girls were pushed out of the back side of the warehouse—

“...Non...?!”

Chikage’s eyes widened in surprise. As soon as he realized what must have happened, he gritted his teeth furiously.

The girl looked into Chikage’s eyes and said apologetically:

“...Sorry, Rocchi. ...We got caught.”

♂ ♀

Road to the back side of Raira’s Second Ground

Mikado and Anri arrived at the track field slightly later than the gang of delinquents.

They moved as discreetly as possible from shade to shade towards the warehouse, making their way to the open ground where Kadota and the others were.

Shouts of “Kabaddi!” were still coming from the track field. No one would have believed that there was actually a fight going on where they were headed.

In fact, the warehouse was such a seldom-visited spot even by members of the sports clubs that it hardly even counted as part of the academy. The sports clubs mostly brought their sports gear from the academic buildings, rendering the warehouse almost completely unnecessary.

As he considered these attributes of the Second Ground, Mikado realized that it was a spot where an ongoing fight would hardly be noticed, let alone be reported to the police.

Text messages from the Dollars mailing list would sometimes report that members were hanging out here both during the day and in the evenings.

Mikado had considered sending a text message saying “We can’t use girls as hostages. Let’s go stop them!”, but he deleted it, worried that other members would call the police and get Dollars in unnecessary trouble.

...No, still no.

Girls who had nothing to do with the gang fight had been kidnapped. It was not the time to debate whether it was “unnecessary trouble” to alert the police. But Mikado’s mind was far from calm enough for him to decide rationally.

Also, since it’s a real crime, I don’t think anyone would want to get themselves involved...

At the time of its first gathering, Dollars was more like a club, and its members mostly showed up because they were interested in the idea.

But he felt that ever since that gathering, Dollars had been changing.

“Dollars is real.” Once this fact was confirmed, people began to use the “power” invested in Dollars’ name.

Mikado did not reprimand them or try to stop them. He knew that he did not have the right to do so.

But that was exactly why things happened the way they happened.

He did not know what Aoba and his gang were after, but he knew that the possibility had always been there that things would turn out like they turned out now.

It's all my fault.

I haven't been able to do anything...

...?

Mikado sensed that something was amiss from his thoughts.

But he had no idea what it was. He simply kept walking.

From the back side of the warehouse, he saw the same gang of delinquents standing opposite two men.

The delinquents looked like they were using the girls as hostages. The man right next to Kadota was probably Toramaru's leader.

"...We have to figure out a way to approach them from the back and help the hostages get out..."

But Mikado had neither a concrete plan nor any preparation; there was not much he could do.

He could try to scare the men by pretending that he was calling the police, or confound them with a fire extinguisher from the warehouse—

Mikado weighed these options in his head.

Without turning around, he said to Anri, who was walking behind him, "I'm going to try something, if I fail, Sonohara-san, please call the police..."

CLANG

A strange metallic noise interrupted him from behind his back.

"Eh...?"

Mikado turned around—

What he saw was a weird sight to behold.

A katana had appeared out of nowhere in Anri's hand *and stopped the knife in the hand of a person who had appeared out of nowhere wearing a full-faced helmet.*

!?

At first Mikado thought it was Celty. But the colors of the rider suits were different.

The person had a curvier body than Celty did. It was probably a woman.

W-Who is this...?

Mikado was confused. The woman in the helmet, however, took no notice of him as she thrust her knife a second—and a third—time at Anri.

Anri blocked those with her katana and made a move to slash her opponent's legs.

The assailant dodged her attacks by a hair's breadth and swung the knife at her again after taking several steps backwards.

“S-Sonohara-san!”

Mikado could not help but yell. He did not understand what was going on.

“...Please run away!”

Anri said briefly to Mikado as she took a giant step forward, wielding her katana.

Her opponent, however, had retreated to a spot further away than necessary in the meantime—

She produced a certain object from the pouch on her waist, pulled its safety pin and threw it at Anri.

Eh?

At some level, it was the kind of “unusual” happening Mikado had been hoping for.

What is that?

Yet at the same time it was so completely different from what he had imagined—the object flew straight towards Anri and Mikado before the latter could even mentally prepare himself.

A grena-...

The object was but meters away from him. Mikado felt more disoriented than ever—

But blinding whiteness took over his vision in the next second, blowing up his confusion along the way.

♂ ♀

“Huh...?”

“What’s happening?”

With Rokujou Chikage’s girlfriend as their hostage the men had reversed the situation to their advantage.

In their peripheral vision, however, there was suddenly blinding light.

They saw the mysterious light flash like an explosion from the shade on the other side of the warehouse.

There was no noise, and the light disappeared right away—but it was still so eerie a flash of light that the men stood glued to their spots.

Kadota and Chikage, who too had taken notice of the light flashing behind their backs, turned around with widened eyes.

Seconds.

The men were distracted by the afterglow for no longer than 10 seconds.

Had they been more experienced street fighters or people who had seen that kind of light before, they would have refocused faster.

But these men were neither.

As a result, mere seconds of inattentiveness made an astounding difference.

A man felt something sprayed onto his arm.

“...Huh?”

He was the one who was holding a knife to Non’s throat. A mysterious liquid had been sprayed onto the arm he was holding the knife with.

The man looked at his own arm not knowing what had just happened—

“Ciao.”

A young man with slanting eyes and looked like he had some Caucasian blood in him appeared in front of them.

“Y-Yumasaki!”

The man yelped. He had realized something.

Namely, that his arm smelled of a certain volatile liquid—and that Yumasaki was holding a can filled with lighter oil in his left hand and a Zippo in his right.

“Uwah?! Wait...wait, you bastard!”

The man tore himself away from Yumasaki, yelping.

Yumasaki seized the chance to grab Non’s hand and take her away from the gang of men.

“Ah...y-you bastard!”

“The hell you’re doing?!”

“When did you get here, stinky otaku?!”

The men yelled and charged at Yumasaki—

But several other men placed themselves in their way.

There were about five of them. They looked very different from this gang of delinquents.

“Ah, it looked like everyone was going away for Golden Week, so we only managed to get these people to come. But they’re the best! With full Musou power gauge! Dance Dance Revolution!”

“...! You...are you all Kadota’s underlings...!?”

The leader of the delinquents yelled. But it was too late: the intruders had begun to attack the men still holding the girls hostage.

“W-Wait...uwah!”

To hold the girls or to release them and attack back?

There was not even time for the men to choose before they were beaten up one by one.

The girls ran hastily towards Yumasaki as soon as they were released. The men ran after them and were, naturally, about to corner Yumasaki.

But in front of them there was an orange flame.

“Eat that! Scientifically speaking, this is called Pyrokinesis. How I’d love to be in Komoe-sensei’s class*!”

** Komoe-sensei: Tsukuyomi Komoe, a teacher at the Academy City in Toaru Majutsu no Index.*

“Huh!?”

The men, feeling the heat, stopped dead in their tracks.

The can of lighter fluid had disappeared from Yumasaki’s hand. In its place, he was holding what looked like a spray bottle.

“Whether you’re a good kid or a bad kid, don’t try to imitate what we do!”

Yumasaki grinned and released his finger from the spray.

It was a simple flame generator made using a spray bottle of flammable liquids and a lighter.

When handled wrongly, however, the spray bottle would leak and cause serious explosions. There were often reports of such accidents and ensuing fires on TV. It was a very dangerous thing to do.

Yumasaki understood this well, but he used the spray and the lighter to threaten the delinquents anyway.

The fire from the spray nozzle had disappeared, but the fire on the lighter was still on. None of the men moved another inch towards Yumasaki.

As soon as he saw familiar faces among the intruders, Kadota shouted in surprise.

“You guys...”

A woman in black—Karisawa—suddenly appeared from behind his back.

“Well—to tell you the truth, Dotachin, we were planning on watching you and seeing if we could steal some moves from you. But these weird guys already stole the best spots for that, so we decided to hide ourselves and see how things turn out.”

“...Speaking of which, how did you know we were here?”

“You’ll know once you’ve checked your Dollars messages. By the way, why was everyone standing with their mouths hanging open just now? Though thanks to that Yumacchi was able to save the girls.”

“Ah, that’s because there was a flash...”

Kadota turned again in the direction of the blinding light to check—

—And heard the roar of a thousand engines coming from the opposite direction.

Kadota turned around and saw riders in leather jackets appear from in-between the trees outside the fence.

They looked like they were trying to see what was going on here. As soon as they realized that there was no way to enter, they parked their motorbikes on the road and climbed over the fence.

These were the men who were attacking Dollars members everywhere else.

They had made a Dollars member call his fellow members, but his face suddenly changed.

One of them found it suspicious and grabbed his cell phone to look at the text message on it—and saw a photo of their leader entering a place that looked like a park. The next message came with a photo of their leader’s girlfriend.

So they summoned every one of their men still standing and headed straight here to find their leader.

Chikage, upon seeing his men, muttered in surprise.

“Why are they here...?”

His eyes were still widened and his mouth hanging open—but Chikage was already at the center of the gang of delinquents.

“Ah...?” “Wah...!” “What are you...?!”

Already distracted by Yumasaki, the men panicked when they saw Chikage approach them so swiftly. They tried to grab his collar, but—

The first one to charge at him fell after he was kicked squarely in the balls.

The second, who raised his chunk of log, lost two front teeth to the tip of Chikage’s kabutowari.

The third pulled his knife and swept the blade at Chikage’s arm.

But his first attempt was blocked by the hook on Chikage's kabutowari. Chikage twisted his wrist, and the man's blade bent.

"What...argh!"

Chikage hit the man hard in the face as he lost his balance. Just like that, he took down three men in a second.

"You bastards...if you've got the guts to go around kidnapping other people's girlfriends, you know you deserve to die, don't you?"

At the same time, Toramaru members who had climbed over the fence began to call out to him.

"Captain! Are you alright?"

"Yeah!"

Chikage replied leisurely.

Toramaru members asked with rage in their eyes, "Can we finish them off, Captain?"

"Ah, no."

Chikage looked around and said in a loud voice as he thrust the kabutowari into the clavicle of the man who dared approach him from behind.

"Nah, it'll be hard to tell who's who at this point. You guys, just fight off whoever's coming for you or me. I'm going to finish them off, so you guys can just put them to some good sleep."

His tone was lighthearted, but the anger concealed in his voice was threatening to come through.

One of the delinquents felt it and realized that things did not bode well for them. He turned his back on Chikage and tried to run, but—

—Before he could do so, an arm had coiled itself around his throat.

"What now? You want to run?"

"K-Kadota..."

"But I want to play."

After sending the man to groan on the ground with a clothesline, Kadota laughed bitterly.

“...There are people like this in Dollars now? Looks like Dollars can only go downhill from here.”

♂ ♀

One minute ago, beside the warehouse

Vorona closed her eyes as the light threatened to blind her.

What she had thrown at Anri was a weakened flashbang. Unlike the type Slon had used in front of Shinra’s apartment, this flashbang was almost noiseless. All it did was give off blinding light.

Vorona’s helmet had a special safety light hood installed in it. But for Anri and Mikado, the flashbang would explode right in front of them. Even if they closed their eyes immediately they would still be temporarily blinded.

They would remain unable to see for longer than mere seconds, but it would not be a very long while either.

Vorona was not about to let the brief window of opportunity go. To complete her mission of “Injure Sonohara Anri enough to make her unable to move for a while”, she thrust her knife at the girl’s abdomen.

But—

The girl with the katana reacted almost immediately and blocked her attack.

A metallic clang was heard. The girl proceeded to slide the blade and swing with force at Vorona’s legs.

Vorona jumped and dodged the blow expertly. Assuming that any contact with the blade was likely to be dangerous, she leaped further backwards than necessary.

She saw my attack?

The girl’s aim was so accurate. Vorona looked at her face and could not help but hold her breath.

Anri’s eyes were bright red like they had been the previous night—maybe even brighter.

Her eyes were glowing.

That was enough to tell Vorona that the girl was something very different from humans.

Vorona looked at Anri and smiled calmly.

There were things she did not have any knowledge of in this world.

Was she human? Or was she something else?

To her, whose only goal in life was to see how strong or ephemeral human beings can be, these were all objects of interest—be it the monster girl with a human form or the Black Motorbike.

Seeing Mikado crouched on the ground, hands covering his eyes, Vorona spoke as she kept up her footwork.

“That boy, seems merely human. Pity, pity.”

“...I won't forgive you if you do anything to him.”

Anri narrowed her eyes as she muttered her response.

Vorona smiled and said, “One question. Could you acknowledge an answer?”

“...?”

Anri stopped momentarily as she heard Vorona.

“Are you human? Monster? Which one?”

“...”

Vorona asked as she approached Anri. As soon as she was back in the attack range, she raised her knife again.

Anri blocked her knife and answered in her own way.

“...I am not human. I am not a monster, either.”

It was hard to tell if Vorona had heard her or not. She stepped aside quickly and pressed a switch on the handle of her knife.

The blade sprung forward from the grip and flew towards Anri's abdomen like a bullet.

Anri, however, repelled it by twirling her body—and continued to answer Vorona’s question.

“I’m...just a parasite.”

Anri’s vision was actually far from recovered.

The flashbang had blinded Anri, and she saw nothing but white—but inside her body, Saika detected everything.

A lovable human’s heartbeat, breathing, footsteps, and even the movements of the muscles.

Even the tiniest sounds made in the wind by the blade the human was wielding—

Saika was able to feel every sound that was coming from this human.

It was all because of her twisted love.

Vorona was not aware of Saika’s existence, but she knew that Anri’s katana was something unusual. She assumed that it would be futile to try to bend it. If she used a gun, she would risk fulfilling the “Do not kill the target” requirement.

The seriousness of gun wounds tended to be greatly exaggerated in Japanese media.

If Anri made her katana disappear again, the entire situation would look just like an ordinary school girl getting shot by violent gangsters.

If the incident was publicized, it would be hard for her to ever find another job in Ikebukuro. In fact, it would become hard for her to even stay in this city.

Yeah, right...

Vorona came up with an idea and decided to try it on Anri.

She leaped, took out another knife from her pouch and walked towards Mikado.

“...!”

Anri hastened to follow her—but Vorona did not do anything to Mikado. Instead, she kept running as if to lure Anri somewhere, casting backward glances every now and then.

Anri’s vision was dim. She ran after her opponent, relying on Saika’s perception of her surroundings.

Judging by the flashbang and the strange bullet knife, it was not a good idea to fight her at anything but a very short range.

That was what Saika's fighting experience told Anri, so she began to run after Vorona.

Part of the reason was also that she did not wish to get Mikado involved—

But that led her into even deeper chaos and commotion.

Because the place Vorona was heading for—

—Happened to be *the very spot* where gangs of delinquents were fighting each other.



Somewhere in Ikebukuro

“Oh, Aoba? Listen. Things have gotten interesting over here.”

“Interesting?”

Face unchanging, Aoba listened calmly to his fellow Blue Square member's report over the phone after sending him to spy on Kadota.

“Let me see—after an awesome fight, they realized the power of friendship, and then a bunch of weird guys came and used hostages, but bang! Light was everywhere and we got a big fire too!”

“...I was a fool for sending Gin on a spying mission.”

Aoba sighed heavily and gave out orders to the fellow member named Gin.

“Listen. Just tell me what's happening in front of you right now.”

“OK—hmm. Someone in a rider suit just came in...and it's not the one in the black rider suit back at the factory, it's someone else coming in with a knife...”

“...?”

What's going on?

I should have gone there myself after all—

Just as Aoba thought this, his fellow member told him something that confused him even more.

“Ah, the one in the rider suit is...fighting a woman with a katana. What’s with this woman? Eh...looks like she’s wearing red sunglasses or something. Her breasts are fucking huge. God, she fights as well as us! Awesome! What’s with those moves?”

“...?”

The report still made no sense, but Aoba still realized that something was wrong. He immediately told Gin to send him a photo or video.

Less than a minute later, Aoba gasped as he looked at the photo attached to the message.

It was a girl with a katana surrounded by other people.

The photo was slightly blurry, but the person was definitely someone Aoba knew.

“...Anri-sempai?”

♂ ♀

Several minutes ago, the road to Raira’s Second Ground

This is such a pain.

Celty hid herself from view on the rooftop of a certain building and looked down.

What she saw there was a truck.

There was no mistaking it. She knew that it was the truck her female assailant had used to park her motorbike in the night before.

On the truck there were firearms she had only seen in movies, games, or news reports and documentaries about wars in distant countries. It had hardly been a day since one of those was fired directly at her by her female assailant.

She should be inside, but...

When Akane left the apartment, Celty did more than just watch her leave.

She wanted to make sure that her bodyguard job was done perfectly. That was why she had attached a thread of shadow on the girl's clothes. To avoid accidentally getting the girl hurt, Celty made the thread feel like liquid or smoke; it was infinitely elastic, so it would not hurt the girl even if it was caught around her neck or finger.

But even Celty did not expect that her physically impossible thread to prove useful within minutes.

Following her shadow, Celty reeled it back into her body and tracked Akane down—

—And ended up discovering the truck.

Celty exercised caution. She rode to the rooftop on Shooter, who had turned back into a motorbike, and made sure that the opponent did not notice they were being followed.

On the way here, she was shocked when she ran into an employee loafing on his job on the rooftop. But since she bowed immediately and took off, it did not cause much of a commotion.

But what exactly should I do?

I've never really had to save hostages before...and I don't even know what's happening in the truck.

Maybe Akane had a knife pressed to her throat or explosives tied to her body that would be triggered if she tried to run away.

Celty hoped that the opponent would not do something like that. But since they had fired a rifle on the street, nothing they did would come as a surprise.

Speaking of which, why here?

This...I remember this place...

Celty looked around. She saw Raira's Second Ground, where the girls' soccer club and Kabaddi club were practicing.

Kabaddi. Looks like fun.

But I can't say "Kabaddi Kabaddi", so there's no way they'll let me join...

With such thoughts on her mind, Celty looked further away.

Further down the track field she saw the roof of the warehouse surrounded by trees. Kadota and the mysterious guy should be right on the back side of it.

Will they be OK?

Seems like that Kyohei guy is a good fighter, so he should be alright. I'm more worried about Mikado and Anri.

Where are they...

Celty looked around the truck, concerned about the safety of her friends—

At that moment, Celty, who had a vision like that of humans, perceived a flash of blinding light in her peripheral vision.

!?

It was obviously not a natural light.

Compared to the lights for illuminating purposes, it was more likely to have come from a small explosion of some sort.

The location was right next to the back side of the warehouse.

People on the track field probably did not see what was going on because the fence was blocking the view. But Celty realized immediately what was going on from her rooftop.

She had thought that the noise of an explosion had merely been delayed by the distance, but after waiting for many more seconds, the sound of an explosion still did not come as she had expected.

Why...?

Celty had a bad feeling. However, knowing that unnecessary action would only make things worse, she instead directed her attention towards the truck parked at the entrance to the track field.

Eh?

As soon as she saw what was going on there, Celty bent forward as far as she could from the rooftop without thinking.

Why? ... Why is he here?

Don't tell me he's here to help Kadota and the others?

She saw someone walk in a dignified manner through the entrance to the track field—

Namely, a man in a bartender suit composed of contrasting white and black shades.



Beside the warehouse

Everything suddenly fell quiet again on this side of the warehouse.

A boy groaned on the ground as fighting noises came from the other side of the warehouse and shouts came from the track field.

“...Uh...”

It was Mikado, who was still temporarily blinded by the flashbang.

But he still heard every word the attacker and Anri had said.

“That boy, seems merely human. Pity, pity.”

The syntax sounded weird, but Mikado understood very well that it was meant as a contemptuous remark towards him.

Just because he was a mere human.

Mikado was feeling shocked, but it was not because the reason had made no sense.

A mere human.

Mikado felt shocked because someone else had just decided for him that he was “a mere human”.

To be more exact, the fact that he felt shocked at being called a mere human was enough to shock him.

What...am I?

I'm just curious about unusual things.

There's no need for me to become anything unusual myself...

In his confusion, Mikado remembered what Anri had said.

“...I won't forgive you if you do anything to him.”

...

I was the one being protected.

I wanted to protect Sonohara-san, but it turned out to be the reverse...

...But haven't I known from the very beginning?

Sonohara-san beat those three men in a second...

...

...No, what am I thinking about?

That's not what I wanted to say.

Eh?

This is weird.

What...what exactly...did I want to think about?

Mikado thought that his brain must have been fuddled again by the light.

He tried to reassure himself that that was the case. However, he was reminded of what Anri had said just a few moments ago.

"I'm...just a parasite."

...What was she talking about?

She had said the same thing when we had first met her.

But she's no longer dependent on Harima-san or anyone else...

Black emotions surged in Mikado's heart yet again.

The last time they did, he was feeling contempt for the man who was kicking him.

But now—it was anger towards himself.

All things considered...I'm more like the parasite.

He had founded Dollars. But that was it. He was not capable of anything, but despite that he somehow felt as if he was special. He had never wanted to see himself as anything special, but he had only just realized it now.

That when he was called a “mere human” and not treated as a worthy opponent by the mysterious assailant, he felt so humiliated that he could hardly stand it.

I...what a despicable human being I am...

Mikado felt ashamed of himself.

But he struggled to his feet anyway, trying to think of what he could do.

The burning whiteness in front of his eyes was receding.

As his vision slowly began to recover—

He saw a man in a bartender suit standing right in front of him, a motorbike on his shoulder.

“...!? S-Shizuo-san?”

“Ah...just like I thought. Um, yeah, that. You’re...Celty’s friend...Ryuugasaki? I saw you at the hotpot party at Shinra’s.”

“Yeah...um, it’s Ryuugamine.”

“Oh, right, right. Sorry.”

Mikado was back in shock after the strongest man in Ikebukuro appeared out of nowhere right in front of his eyes. He had a motorbike on his shoulder, but he made it look as effortless as a dancer walking around with his cassette player.

The “legend” in front of him made him feel even more disoriented—but Shizuo continued in a calm voice as if to help cool his head.

“Ah—right, you’re in Dollars, aren’t you?”

“Eh? Ah, y-yes.”

“I see...it would be kind of rude to not tell anyone. You’re a Raira kouhai, so I’ll just tell you...”

Mikado nodded fiercely. Shizuo looked away somewhat apologetically.

“I’m *quitting Dollars*. Sorry about that.”

Eh?

“...Eh?”

His bewilderment was faithfully conveyed by his voice.

“W-Why is that!?”

“Didn’t you see that text? I don’t want to be breathing the same air as people who go around kidnapping women just for a little fight. That’s why.”

Shizuo began to walk in a relaxed way again after calmly finishing this sentence.

“So from this moment on, I’m no longer in Dollars or anything else.”

Mikado could not stop him. All he could do was wait for his vision to go back to normal.

All the while hoping against hope that this conversation—in fact, this entire day—had only been a dream.

♂ ♀

Back side of the Warehouse, Raira Academy

“Hey, isn’t that Anri-chan?”

A woman in a rider outfit and a girl wielding a katana.

In the vortex of battle no one seemed to have noticed their sudden arrival except for a certain few. Yumasaki, who had just helped the hostages escape through the back entrance, returned to see the figure of a girl he knew and was flummoxed.

It was most fortunate for Anri that she arrived only after Kamichika Rio and her other classmates had left the scene.

“Heh, that’s Anri-chan.”

Karisawa, who had been watching as Kadota and the others resumed fighting, turned her gaze towards Anri.

A girl fighter with blood-red eyes ablaze and a katana in her hands.

Whether out of coincidence or the synchronicity of their souls, Yumasaki and Karisawa muttered “Shakugan no Shana!?” at the same time in two places despite not being within each other’s earshot.

“Is this what they call a predictable twist of fate? Anri-chan turns out to be a Flame Haze...”

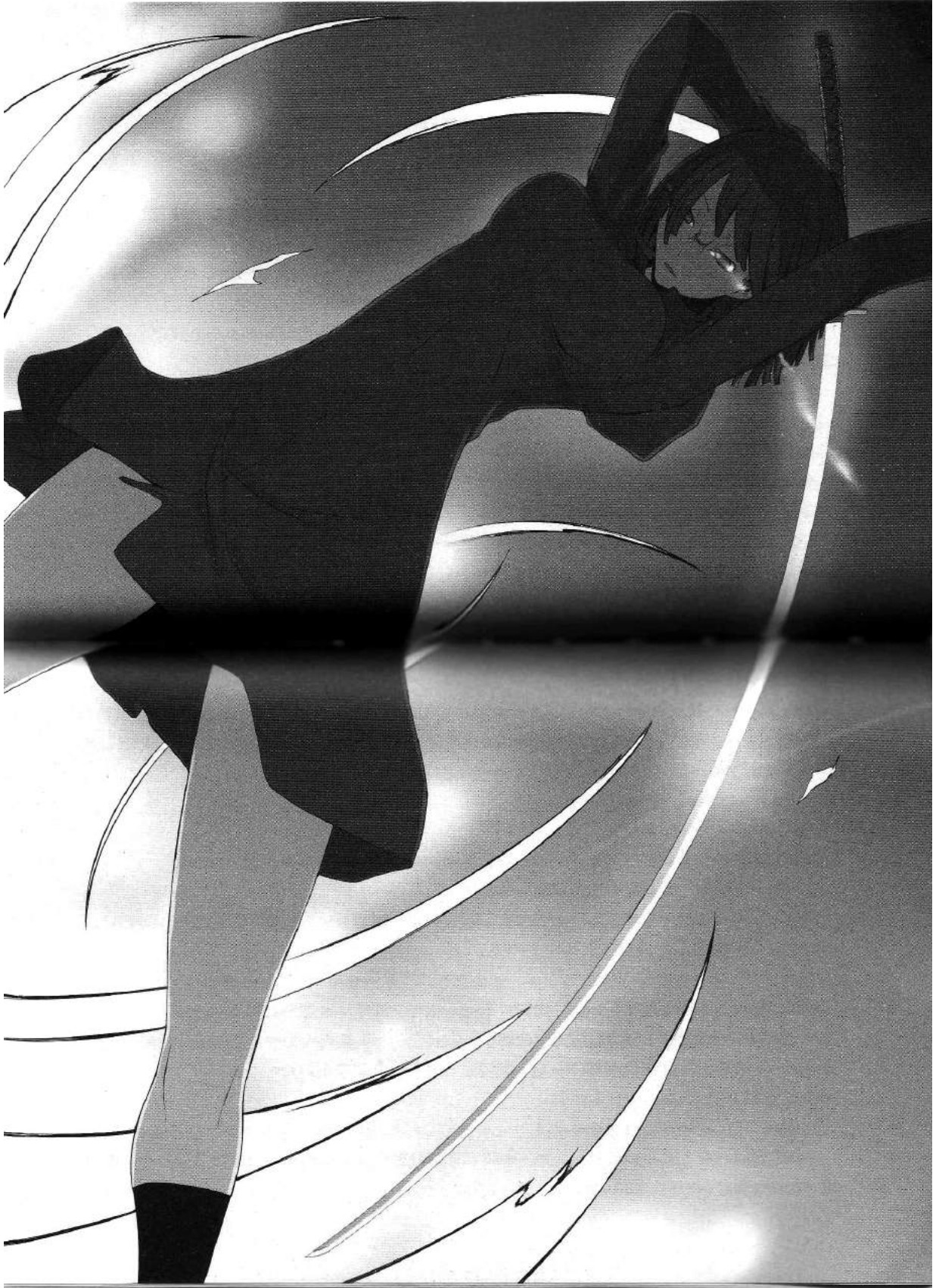
Next to Yumasaki, who was muttering things that were very obviously wrong, a girl’s voice sounded.

“Huh—that’s Rio’s friend. Is she in the kendo club or something?”

“What—why didn’t you run away with the others?”

“Cause Rocchii is still here ~”

Non, (one of) Chikage’s girlfriend(s), stared at Anri as if she saw something extraordinary. As she looked past Anri, however, her eyes bulged in amazement.



“Wow ~ looks like we have a real lion on the scene now.”

Hearing what she said, Yumasaki turned away from the fighting masses to look in the other direction—

“...Uh.”

The one who was walking leisurely towards them with a motorbike on his shoulder was none other than the God of Wrath himself.



Her vision as Sonohara Anri returning to her and her perception of her surroundings back to human, Anri felt a rush of fatigue and numbness permeating her limbs.

Since Saika’s battle instinct had taken control of her and set her eyes on fire, she had arrived against her conscious will at the center of the Dollars conflict.

...

If somebody I know sees me, I’ll be in trouble.

Just as she attempted to shove away such anxiety as mere “happenings on the other side of the picture frame”—

Something kept her from doing that, namely, “—if Mikado, Masaomi or Mika sees me, they’ll probably keep their distance from me.” That message penetrated the picture frame, making her hesitate in her movements for a fraction of a second—

Vorona was able to sweep her legs under Anri and Anri fell imbalanced.

Not about to miss this opportunity for an attack, Vorona thrust her knife forwards—

Only to have it clash with another metal object: a weapon that looked like a hybrid of a metal nightstick and a short sword.

“...KABUTOWARI ...”

Vorona, who had at some point obtained knowledge about this Japanese weapon, glared at the man who had intercepted her attack as she muttered.

“Obstruction, is not appreciated. I, will become bad-tempered.”

Her voice signaled imminent danger, yet Chikage, the one who had intercepted her attack, just laughed and shook his head.

“Not that I don’t enjoy a good cat fight between girls every now and then...but wouldn’t it totally defeat the purpose if you hurt each other’s beautiful faces and bodies with knives like this? I’d suggest you go with mud wrestling.”

Though he could not see Vorona’s face through the helmet she was wearing, Chikage had decided what stance to take the moment he saw it was a female.

He had also stopped Anri’s arm with his other hand. Within that fraction of a second, he had made sure that neither of the two girls would be hurt by each other’s blade.

“...”

What’s with this guy.

Looks like he’s pretty good at this, despite being an amateur...

Vorona slowly looked up at Chikage’s face while trying to decide whether he would be a worthwhile “opponent” for her. But—

“...? ...!?”

She was no longer looking at Chikage. Something she saw right past his shoulder had transfixed her.

Namely, the sight of a man in a bartender suit carrying the motorbike she had been riding on his shoulder and walking towards the center of the battle—a sight that made her seriously begin to doubt her eyes.



In his usual bartender suit and with a motorbike on his shoulder, Shizuo’s figure stood out so much that it made the entire fighting mass—who took virtually no notice of Anri and the others when they had arrived on the scene—freeze in their action.

The Toramaru guys who were not familiar with Shizuo’s name issued a collective “Hah?” while the Dollars members who knew more about Shizuo went into a fit of “Shi—Shizuo’s here!” as fear took hold of them.

The never-ending fight between delinquents stopped in a heartbeat at the mere sight of Shizuo.

“Hey, you’re the...”

“Shizuo?”

Chikage and Kadota both spoke to Shizuo as he glanced around to make sense of the scene.

“...Heard of this plan to hold women hostage... how did that turn out?” Shizuo asked flatly.

The tone in which he said it was so steady that anyone who did not know better would have taken him for an even-tempered youth.

Inside Anri’s body Saika’s incessant “cursings” rose in volume and intensity as she turned her attention to her aggressor whose knife was still held immobile by Chikage’s kabutowari.

Her aggressor—Vorona—did not move.

The man whom the delinquents had just called “Shizuo”.

Why was he carrying Vorona’s motorbike on his shoulder?

Moreover, how did he just carry a 100kg+ motorbike on his shoulder like that as if it were nothing?

Slon and Samia would probably be able to if they tried, but even they would have to use more than one hand. Not to mention Slon and Samia’s builds were way too different from this guy’s to begin with.

But before she actually thought about any of that, her body had begun to shudder with curious delight the moment her eyes first fixed themselves on Shizuo. This fact had caught her attention.

...

What is this.

This was an entirely new feeling for her, one that was perhaps close to the ecstasy Saika felt in Anri whenever she saw Shizuo.

You could call it instinct, or simply the “soul” that had been crystallized and recrystallized to extreme polishedness after years of fighting experience—

Vorona knew it from the moment she set her eyes on Shizuo.

That the *very existence* of this man standing before her eyes right now was about to blow away her common sense.

Every brain cell she possessed was screaming for a fight with the man before her eyes; yet every muscle in her body yelled “Just run!”

It was impossible for ordinary people to recognize this quickly just how dangerous Shizuo was.

They only learned from witnessing with their own eyes the “result” of pissing off Shizuo—in the form of a flying vending machine or flying car, or sometimes their own flying bodies.

But like certain breeds of wild animals who had developed a sharp sense of danger—all the training and experience Vorona had had since a kid made Shizuo’s dangerousness immediately evident to her.

It was a similar feeling to having the gun of a tank pointed at your head. Or on an even more massive scale, the same feeling of absurdity as having a continental missile pointed in your direction.

This completely novel feeling had seized her entire being—blood rushed to Vorona’s cheeks in waves of unstoppable excitement.

“Ah, thanks to Yumasaki and Karisawa the hostages were safe.”

“Oh yeah? That’s good. By the way, whose motorbike is this?”

As Shizuo asked this, the rider wearing a full-faced helmet raised her hand timidly.

“My, motorbike.”

“Hmm...? Ah, that so. Sorry about that. I thought it was those scums’, you know, the ones who took women hostage...thought I’d throw it at their heads. Well since it’s not, I’d better not break it.”

Shizuo talked as if what he was saying was not scary in the slightest as he put the motorbike back onto the ground.

“By the way, who are you? Looks like you wear the same kind of stuff as Celty. You a friend of hers? ...What have you guys been doing, anyway?”

Glancing at Chikage who was holding off both girls’ blades, Shizuo tilted his head.

“I see. So this is what they call a bloody love triangle.”

“Nah, it’s nothing like that.”

Chikage retorted quickly. Shizuo, however, simply went on to ask the next question.

“So...who exactly were the scum that took women hostage?”

He said this in a perfectly calm manner.

But to those who knew Shizuo, there was little doubt as to what was about to come.

Their gazes naturally turned to one certain gang leader and thereby answered Shizuo’s question.

“Hhhhh...oy, you guys...”

The guy’s throat suddenly turned so dry that it felt as it was burning. Half-exasperated—

“...So...so WHAT! HUH?”

He pulled the butterfly knife from his butt pocket and charged at Shizuo.

“DIE!”

It was obvious that he was not skilled with the knife at all. Shizuo only had to hit his frantically waving arm leisurely from the side—

A dull crackling sound.

Yet the knife did not fall to the ground.

The guy, still having no sense what was going on, made for Shizuo’s abdomen before he realized that his knife was already gone—

“HUH...?”

Then he saw it.

His wrist had dislocated and his entire hand was dangling due to gravity.

“Ahhh... AHHHHHHHHHHHHH?”

His brain registering the pain at last, the guy screamed at the sight of his own hand—

“...YOU’RE TOO FUCKING LOUD, YOU SCUM!”

Shizuo grabbed the nape of the guy’s neck, swung him around, and simply *threw* him as far as he could.

“-----”

Even the scream died in his lungs as the guy followed a trajectory parallel to the ground.

The entire weight of his body pierced through the air more forcefully than any human cannon ball action at any circus—eventually making a hole in the fence more than ten meters away.

The guy passed out with his limbs bent in absurd directions.

Shizuo, after seeing this, turned his glance to the rest of the gang still around him.

“Hhhhh...” “T-This is bad—”

Seeing their leader being punched into unconsciousness, every Dollars member except Kadota and his gang were busy running in all directions.

“...Really, they piss me off even when it’s the last time I deal with them...”

His fuming anger still not completely subsided, Shizuo stared at the backs of the running men while briefly gritting his teeth.

About time I make a run for it myself and get back to looking for that flea.

Whatever I didn’t get to do to these scum I’m just gonna do to every one of that bastard’s limbs.

With these thoughts on his mind, Shizuo made a move to leave the scene—

As he turned to look, however, the woman in the full-faced helmet stood in his way only a few meters from him.

“? ...You got something to—”

The exact second he asked—something flew towards his chest.

“Ahhh...?”

Namely, the tip of a shiny silver knife.

Though he was not aware of this, this was the same Spetznaz ballistic knife attack that had been directed at Anri a moment ago.

“...”

The next second—

The knife, *which sunk only 5 millimeters into his chest*, fell to the ground.

Time had stopped dead for everyone who saw this scene.

Everyone who knew Shizuo even marginally was envisioning the woman in the rider suit being thrown into the air.

Before anyone could even think of why on earth the woman had had the guts to try to kill Shizuo—the natural result of her action had preoccupied everyone’s brain and the sheer terror seemed to have stopped the flow of time.

On the other hand, the woman was the only one still able to move in this place where time itself had frozen over.

Quickly turning her back on Shizuo, she ran towards the main entrance of the Raira Second Ground.

“...”

It took him a moment longer, but Shizuo had now realized what she had done to him.

Seeing the cut in his clothes and the blood forming a stain on his shirt—Shizuo slowly began to speak.

“...I’m not interested in beating up women...nor do I want to do that...”

However, her very act of stabbing him with a knife brought to his mind the face of a certain man he usually referred to as “the flea”—gritting his teeth, Shizuo sprung off the ground.

“BUT I GUESS YOU’RE AT LEAST READY TO HAVE THAT EXPENSIVE-LOOKING HELMET CRUSHED TO A PULP IN THESE HANDS, AH?”

♂ ♀

Vorona switched the wireless on in her helmet as angry roars reached her ears from behind. She called out to Slon.

“I’m returning to you 30 seconds from current. Requesting firearm at ready. Presently, presently.”

“What? Wait, what happened? Did the Black Motorbike turn up again?”

“I reject. I’m afraid the one who did turn up was human. No, at least I want to think the creature to be human. It is hard to be believed, but I am currently enraptured. I now exist at the middle point between ecstasy and terror.”

“What are you talking about...? Anyway, it seems like you’re in a bit of trouble. I’ll open the rear of the trailer and get the engine to start any moment you’re ready, so come right now!”

“Understood.”

The moment she nodded, Vorona saw something fly past her at an intimidating speed.

...

My, motorbike.

Just like the man who had been thrown onto the fence, her motorbike had been thrown horizontally past her.

The motorbike hit a tree trunk and broke. As soon as she understood what was going on, Vorona kept on running without turning back.

He probably didn’t aim it directly at me.

What a naïve man.

However...there’s no way I can simply dismiss him as an amateur, either!

The pressure she felt was as if a fighter jet were flying behind her, its rotary machine guns aimed at her back.

Beads of cold sweat dried on her back as soon as they crept their way down.

He’s different from the Black Motorbike. He’s different from the bespectacled girl, too.

There’s no such eerie incongruity in him as there is in those two.

This man is, without question...a human being!

In her fear for this “human being”, the woman detected a trace of happiness—and kept on running.

Because she wanted to confirm the “vulnerability” of the human being named Shizuo using the weapons in the truck and every single skill she had.

But her unprecedented rapture did impair her judgment.

She did not consider a certain possibility.

An extremely important one at that—that there might be other “opponents” waiting for her near where the truck was parked.

♂ ♀

On the rooftop of a building near Raira’s Second Ground

What’s going on?

Celty felt the disturbance in the air around her.

She heard something that sounded like Shizuo bellowing. Before she knew it, the truck’s rear door was starting to open, and she heard something crush as if into a wall and break.

Wh...what’s happening!?

Celty hastened to focus on what was going on right in front of her—but what she saw was a female figure in a rider suit fleeing from the entrance of the Second Ground.

That’s the one who attacked me yesterday!

And the one to appear after her—

Huh?

Shizuo!?

♂ ♀

Running after the woman, Shizuo saw the rear door of a truck parked outside the Ground begin to move.

Just as he thought it was a mere coincidence, the woman in the rider suit leapt onto the truck through the open rear door.

The truck started at the same time and was about to flee.

“You running away?”

Shizuo made his way to the back of the roofed truck and was about to jump onto the truck himself.

However, in the next second, Shizuo was treated to a weird sight.

The woman wearing the helmet was holding a rifle that was only seen in movies.

He saw it in the exact second she held it up and was about to aim it at him.

But what caught his attention was something behind the woman’s back: the figure of a little girl, tied up and gagged, near the front of the bed of the truck.

...Huh?

He happened to have become more familiar with the girl’s face and clothes than he would have cared to be.

It was the girl whom he had met in a whispered “Die!” and a sparkling electric shock.

Akane!?

Why is she here...

In the second he stiffened with shock and doubt, his opponent had aimed the rifle at him.

Damn.

This is gonna give me lead poisoning!

With such completely out of ordinary concerns upon being aimed at by a rifle, Shizuo ran towards the unstaffed parking lot opposite the Second Ground.

Several lead bullets pierced the air where he had been standing only a second ago.

The shots were almost noiseless, presumably thanks to the use of suppressors and subsonic bullets.

“Che...”

What the hell do these guys want!?

Anger and confusion co-reigning in his heart, Shizuo contemplated this in his own way.

Why is Akane...

Why are Akane's kidnappers attacking me?

What do Akane and I have in common...

At this point, he was reminded of what Akane had said this very morning.

"...Izaya onii-chan."

...!

I see...so this is what it's all about.

That flea...he tried to use Akane to kill me...and when that failed, he even had the guts to hire someone else to silence Akane...

His resulting analysis was half wrong, however—

He thinks I'm that stupid...

HE THINKS I'M THAT STUPID THAT FUCKING FLEA BASTARD!

As his enemy's face came to his mind, Heiwajima Shizuo's anger level was officially off the charts.

Looking around for something to use—

He found a rusty car parked in a corner of the tiny parking lot, a sheet of notice paper on its windshield.

【We are compelled to treat this car as an abandoned vehicle since it has remained unclaimed in this parking lot for half a year. If you are the owner of this vehicle and wish to file a complaint, please direct it to the following address—-----】

Upon finding a car with such a notice, Shizuo let an infuriated grin appear on his face as he walked towards it.

“I hope for momentary stopping of the vehicle, Slon. The first bullets were dodged. His instantaneous power is above my imagination.”

“Understood.”

Vorona kept her rifle ready as she watched for anything unusual from the back of the truck.

It was also possible that Shizuo would climb over the fence from the parking lot and come back for her, but whatever he chose to do, the only way to get to her was through this open truck door.

Listening to the slight breathing coming from behind her back, Vorona complained to Slon.

“At least hide her in a bag or under a sheet. Was that impossible?”

He might have seen it.

If I let him escape, he may alert the police and get us in trouble.

...Now I have a reason to kill him.

...This is making me so happy...

As Vorona was having such thoughts on her mind, Slon at last realized that she had been talking about Awakusu Akane. He began to protest in a tired voice.

“You’re asking for too much. I was fleeing from a whole bunch of yakuza in the middle of a metropolis. And I came here because you told me to...”

“Silent. Please fall silent.”

“?”

Vorona realized that a strange sound accompanied Slon’s talking voice.

...

Am I just imagining things?

But the next second—

A huge “something” rolled its way to the middle of the road from the parking lot, making exaggerated metallic noises along the way.

“...Что (What)?”

As soon as she realized what it was, Vorona let out a gasp in Russian.

It was the same sound she made when Anri had pulled a katana out of her body.

Which means that she saw was just as weird—in fact, it was even more surreal.

“Oi...Vorona, the hell is that!?”

“...I hope for the starting of this truck. Immediately!”

“G-Gotcha!”

Slon’s voice sounded anxious.

He had probably seen “it”, too, in the real-view mirror.

In the openings of Western films, you would see tumbleweed rolling.

Like an enormous ball of tumbleweed, *a passenger vehicle* was rolling down the road—

Passers-by and residents who witnessed the scene from afar would tell stories like this:

“A blond bartender was kicking a scrapped car around like a soccer ball.”

But the only ones who believed their stories were those who had lived in Ikebukuro and seen the legendary Heiwajima Shizuo in action.

Vorona was an experienced fighter.

But this was still completely new to her.

Had her father Drakon, Lingerin, a mercenary who had been in many wars, or an adventurer been in her position, they might have been able to figure out a proper response synthesized from their past experience—but Vorona was still too young to pull that off.

She had made up for her young age with the intensity of her experience and reading, but still,

【Q: When a car is rolling towards you, what should you do?】

...She had never read a book with an answer to such a question.

Maybe there was one in a video game strategy guide somewhere. But Vorona had never played one single video game.

In a split second, she felt like she saw a figure running between the rolling car and the parking lot.

She hastened to pull the trigger—

But the car flew towards her before she could do so.

!

Vorona stepped back, and the car fell to the ground just before it was about to hit her.

With a deafening clang the massive object rolled around some more behind their truck.

That was close...

Where is he...?

She thought the bartender was right behind the car, but he was nowhere to be found.

!

Was the car only meant to divert my attention?

Realizing what her opponent's intent had been, Vorona decided that he must be hiding somewhere and looked around for a figure in a bartender suit—

But she did not notice it.

It was a forced feat of parkour.

Shizuo began to run as soon as he kicked the car. He used the fence and the electric poles to climb to the second floor of the apartment building beside the parking lot. *Running on the edges of balconies, he kept up with the truck* as it drove along the way.

As Vorona edged closer to the open rear door—Shizuo jumped into the air.

Shizuo literally flew into the truck from a skewed angle.

From Vorona's point of view, it must have seemed like he teleported himself.

Vorona aimed her rifle at him without a single unnecessary move. But Shizuo's instantaneous strength won by a hair's breadth.

Shizuo immediately grabbed the barrel of the rifle and simply squeezed with force.

The barrel of the rifle was effortlessly bent like a straw. Vorona decided that firing the rifle would be risking accidental discharge and let go of the rifle immediately.

She bent her knees swiftly and tried to get her opponent off the bed of the truck with a kick—

But Shizuo put his hand on the truck's inside wall and let her foot fall on him.

...!

She felt as if she had kicked the truck's wall, or an iron statue that had fused part of itself with the wall.

...There's no way to...fight him.

She hopped off the ground with her numb feet so that she was further away from Shizuo.

At the same time, she pulled her spare firearm from next to her foot and aimed it at Shizuo—

But where...!?

The pistol in her hand was one of fairly small caliber. Its bullets did not penetrate very well.

Usually it would be the easier weapon of choice to wound and kill people. But when it came to the man right in front of her eyes, she doubted that its bullets would even go through his impregnable wall of muscles.

The Spetznaz ballistic knife attack had ended up barely scratching his skin.

...

His eyeballs...can't possibly be as trained as the rest of his muscles.

Vorona immediately raised the pistol, aiming it at his face.

If I could have my way, I would have wanted to fight you for longer.

...Sorry.

The apology could have been to her opponent or the desire inside her doomed to remain unsatisfied. But there was no time for her to deliberate.

Before Shizuo could react, Vorona pulled the trigger—

Pulled the trigger—

Pulled the trigger—

But she could not.

!?

The trigger simply refused to move beyond a certain angle.

As she looked at the pistol in her hand, she saw black shadows coiled around it.

What!?

Black Motorbike...!

She turned around in haste—and there was the rider in black on the motorbike right behind their truck.

A motorbike with a silent engine.

Vorona had not expected such a superior motorized vehicle for discreet operations to exist.

From the wireless inside her helmet a voice sounded.

“Hold on to something close to you!”

Celty felt relieved as she saw that the pistol in her opponent’s hand was indeed unmoving.

Even if it was Shizuo, it was hard to tell what would happen if the pistol had been fired at his face at such close quarters.

Well, usually people would just die...

But still...Shooter, you did a good job holding back your neighs.

I'll just hold the strange woman down with my shadow and...!

Celty raised her right hand at the thought and made new shadows extend from her hand.

But before she could do more—

The truck, which had sped up considerably, suddenly braked hard.

No...!

Celty slid the motorbike sideways as the back of the truck threatened to bump into her.

But she was a moment too late—Shooter bumped into the back of the truck and they fell over.

Celty quickly released more shadows towards the road, transforming them into a spare tire and forcing the motorbike back into its position.

What did they think they were doing?!

Where is Shizuo...!?

She sped up again to follow the truck, trying to see what was happening inside it.

And what she saw was—

Shizuo's fist had *penetrated* the wall dividing the trailer into two parts immediately when the truck braked.

He had used it as a handle to keep his balance—

But the girl he saw right in front of it caught Shizuo's attention.

That's Akane. There's no mistaking it.

In that second—Shizuo saw part of the truck's load threatening to slide and fall as the truck braked hard.

As these things fell on the table, several unsheathed knives sitting on it were knocked off—and about to land right on Akane.

!

Before he knew it, Shizuo had pulled his arm back from the wall and jumped off the floor of the truck.

Part of the floor collapsed due to the overly strong impact.

Shizuo's body was propelled towards Akane with the speed of a bullet, shielding her from the several blades that ended up falling onto his back.

Shizuo felt a slight ounce of pain on his back, but he could not care less. Instead he looked back at the rear of the truck.

As he did so, he saw Celty, who had resumed her chase on her motorbike.

Shizuo held the tied-up Akane in his arms and stood up quickly. Like a wild beast, he jumped from the floor of the trailer—

!

Vorona, thinking that he was going to attack her, readied herself—

As if paying no attention to her, however, Shizuo *jumped off the trailer*.

Had it been several years ago, it would have been hard to imagine Shizuo doing something like this.

No one would have expected that he would be able to place the safety of someone else—a girl he had barely just gotten to know at that—before his own raging anger at its maximum.

However, ever since all the trouble with Saika, Shizuo had come to know how to use his strength. Right now, he decided to jump off the truck because he put Akane's safety first.

Though his act of jumping off a fast-moving truck would only seem like he was exposing the girl to even more danger—

As soon as she saw Shizuo jump, Celty had made a net with her shadow. It kept Shizuo and Akane from falling to the ground.

Shizuo held Akane tightly in his arms as if to protect her. Even if Celty had not made the net in time, Akane would probably have remained unhurt.

But for Celty, the thought was—

...If a dump truck crashed into them...Shizuo would probably be fine, but Akane-chan would definitely have died...

She felt cold sweat trickle down her heart as she thought about how reckless her friend's actions had been.

On the other hand, the truck merged into the traffic on Meiji Road while Celty was lowering Shizuo and Akane to the ground.

Celty gave up the chase for the same reason as yesterday.

... Well, as long as Akane-chan is safe.

Celty thought as she turned to look in Shizuo's direction.

She watched Akane, who had just been untied, grasp onto Shizuo with her shoulders trembling and her eyes looking scared.

Good...everything's alright now.

Celty felt relieved upon seeing them safe and sound.

But then Akane muttered something strange.

“Why...?”

Shizuo tilted his head as he heard Akane's voice and looked back at the little girl.

“Why...I...I *am trying* to kill you, Shizuo onii-chan, why did you save me...?”

“...Did I hear the present continuous tense?”

Huh?

Shizuo laughed bitterly. Akane looked at him with questioning eyes.

“Because...because...”

“Well, whatever. I don't care...are you hurt?”

“No.”

“That's great.”

Akane nodded. Instead of the forced smile he had shown her this morning, Shizuo smiled a very Shizuo-ish, powerfully reassuring smile this time and stroked the girl's head.



“If you did get hurt, then killing me would be last thing you should think of doing.”

Akane felt confused for a moment as she saw Shizuo smile—but finally she smiled back slightly and nodded with a small, “...Yes.”

...

What happened between these two?

Eh, um, eh... Seriously, what?

Speaking of which, Shiki-san and Akane-chan had a conversation that kind of sounded like this before we came here...

Celty did not know the details of what happened between the two. That was why the conversation sounded inexplicably weird to her—

However, satisfied to see the two smiling at each other, she simply sent a text message to Shiki’s cell phone.

♂ ♀

Second Ground, Raira Academy

“So what was the rumpus all about today?” Yumasaki asked.

After hesitating for a moment where to begin, Kadota sighed before answering.

“...Well, we can talk about that over dinner.”

The delinquents had fled, and the gang of Toramaru members had broken up on Chikage’s orders. Only Kadota’s lot remained behind in this place where there had been some forty people fighting until just now. The girls, after running to a safer place, had left as well. They had said that they would alert the police of the kidnapping attempt, so the men lying unconscious beside the fence would probably get taken away soon as well.

“Speaking of which, we’ll be in trouble ourselves if we don’t leave before the cops get here...should we go to Simon’s place?”

“Ah, I think Russian Sushi is closed for this evening.”

“What, for real?”

Kadota’s shoulders sank slightly.

Karisawa suggested, “Should we go to the Taiwanese place next to Russian Sushi then? The one right above the game center.”

“Ah, you mean the one close to the bowling place...? Good idea. Too bad I forgot to ask Chikage to come with us.” Kadota muttered.

Just as the decision seemed agreed upon and the conversation about to be finished, Karisawa said something unnecessary.

“You know, it seems like Dotachin’s been nurturing some kind of friendship with that Chikage person after the fight!”

“The way you talk creeps me out. If you’re trying to say something, just say it.”

“Then I’ll just say it! For me it’s just one of those ‘Thanks for the BL fantasy bait, it was delicious!’ moments!”

“...Looks like there are things I’ll have to kill you for to make you understand.”

Kadota sounded like he was trying hard to fight back his indignation. Yumasaki, on the other hand, began to criticize Karisawa’s opinion in a loud voice.

“Kariwasa-san...! It’s all because of people like Karisawa-san who pair guys up every time they see two guys fight or make friends with each other! You’re the reason so many anime are trolled and called fujoshi-pandering shit just because they’ve got more male characters than female ones! Serious reflection! I demand some serious reflection on your part!”

“Eh—! But if you really want to, even inanimate objects are shippable with each other—! Speaking of which, there has been a shitstorm just recently about which one is the OTP between CD x DVD and DVD x CD...”

“Just shut up already! It’s not like the flow of your conversation even makes sense!”

For Kadota’s lot, life had already returned to normal.

His swollen eye and bleeding mouth were still giving him quite a bit of pain, but Kadota was not looking like he regretted it even in the slightest.

Just as the others gathered to discuss whether the dinner should be on Kadota or if they should split the bill, Yumasaki saw Anri—who was wandering around aimlessly—and called out to her.

“Ah, Anri-chan, you wanna go eat with us?”

Yumasaki had barely finished asking when Karisawa, who had at some point positioned herself behind Anri, put her arms around Anri’s body.

“Kyah—!?”



“That reminds me! I have a lot of stuff to ask Anri-chan today!”

Her hands busy exploring different parts of Anri’s body, Karisawa grinned.

“Where have you been keeping that katana? Are you really a Flame Haze? Or just a beauty in glasses who happens to enjoy cosplaying? Or a stacked-up anthropomorph of the Demon Blade Muramasa?”

“Hey, cut it out you Sexual Harassment Queen.”

Kadota pulled Karisawa away from Anri. Looking at Anri’s troubled face, Karisawa chuckled.

“Well, if you don’t want to tell, you don’t have to! Every girl has a secret or two.”

“That’s so true. Even if Anri-chan is a demon queen planning to take over the world, we’re pretty sure we’ll continue to treat you just like how we’ve treated you all along! In fact, I personally would want to get even more intimate with you if you’re indeed a demon queen in glasses...!”

Yumasaki’s speech was cut off since his mouth was covered by other members’ hands. Kadota ignored him and turned towards Anri.

“What’s up? Are you looking for something?”

“Ah...I’m sorry...!”

Anri lowered her head in haste and looked around before muttering.

“I...can’t find Mikado-kun...”

♂ ♀

On a street beside the Second Ground

“Hey, Rocchi, are you sure your injuries are OK?”

“Ah—I’m totally fine. Since you fondled them they’re actually already healed, Non.”

“Liar. Seriously, Rocchi, I can’t wait to see Kiyopuu and the others get mad at you again tomorrow.”

Non pouted. Chikage laughed before replying.

“You and Kiyopuu and the others will probably forgive me if I kiss you, won’t you?”

“I think it would be better if you died once, Rocchi.”

The flirtatious dialogue continued as they walked on a small road heading to the Station.

Chikage ordered the Toramaru members to return to Saitama. It seemed that some of them were beaten while trying to avenge the previous defeat at the abandoned factory, but the ones who remained unhurt had brought those men back with them. Chikage told Kadota that they would just call it a day for today.

The couple walked on in an atmosphere in which virtually no trace of the animosity that had been filling the air until a moment ago remained—

From behind them they heard a voice that still sounded somewhat like a little boy’s.

“P-Please wait a second!”

“Hm...?”

Chikage and Non turned around to find a boy standing there with his body injured in places, almost out of breath.

“What’s up? Did you need something, kid? You on your way home from a fight or something?”

Chikage could not tell if he was talking to a boy in middle school or high school just by looking at his face. Not knowing what the kid was after, he stopped walking and turned towards the boy.

The boy, on the other hand, looked at Chikage with clearly determined eyes despite his blotched and pale face. Slowly, he opened his mouth.

“...I...I am fully responsible for this.”

“Huh? For what?”

Toramaru’s leader looked surprised. Mikado was about to continue when—

“Ah, Rocchi! He’s the kid I was telling you about! He’s also a Dollars member, yet he tried to save me!”

“...!”

Mikado’s mouth closed involuntarily as Non said these words.

“I see...so you were saying that you were responsible for not being able to protect Non? That’s not your responsibility at all. Actually, I should thank you for that.”

“N-No...that’s not...that’s not what I meant!”

Mikado tightened his abdominals and opened his mouth again with renewed resolve.

“I...*I am the founder...of Dollars.*”

“...Huh?”

“I know what...those Dollars members did to you all...so I’m just here to say that it all started because of me! That’s why...I want to let you know that whatever you wish to do to me, I won’t complain. Just...don’t get Ikebukuro in more trouble, please! Please...!”

At this point, Mikado felt that he could not complain even if he was going to get killed.

Literally ready for anything, Mikado was about to kowtow on the side of the road.

Just as Mikado was starting to bend his elbows, Chikage caught his hand and pulled him up.

“Stop that. A man should never get on his knees that easily. It’s all the more ridiculous to do that in front of a woman—even if she’s my girlfriend.”

“...B-But—”

“Besides that, having a kid kowtow to me on the roadside when I’m with a woman is just going to make me look lame, isn’t it? ...And who would believe that Dollars’s leader is someone who uses ‘boku’ to refer to himself?”

“...”

His words hit home and hurt in Mikado’s heart because they were all true.

Chikage smiled slightly and spoke as Mikado stared silently into the space in front of him.

“I don’t think you’re lying, though.”

“T-Then why...”

“But I can’t simply go ahead and believe what you said, either.”

“Eh...?”

“The one who founded Dollars, in my opinion, would be a filthy bastard who never goes anywhere remotely dangerous...someone who makes the gangs grow just so that he can pit them against each other for the fun of it like it’s a game for him or something.”

Not entirely sure what Chikage had meant, Mikado fell silent again. But being called a “filthy bastard who does it for the fun like it’s a game” shocked him as he wondered if there was indeed a part inside him that was exactly like that.

Chikage placed a hand on Mikado’s shoulder. Slowly and seriously, he began to tell him something.

“There’s no way that Dollars’s head would have eyes as open and honest as yours.”

“...!”

“If—and I mean if—you’re really the one who ‘began’ Dollars...I’ve got only one piece of advice for you. *Let go of Dollars immediately.* People like you are way too naïve for this kind of burden.”

“Wha...”

“You should lead a normal life. It suits you. To live like a normal person is actually more of an accomplishment from our point of view...people like you never take the trouble to come over to our side.”

Chikage might not have realized it, or he might have realized it, but said these words anyway.

That to Mikado, these were the very words that put a negative sign before everything he stood for.

Before leaving, Chikage said one last thing to the silent boy.

“If you’re still not satisfied, just come to Saitama. I can take on you one-on-one any time if you want...ah, actually, make that any time I’m not with a woman. Either way, make sure you put up some resistance because I don’t like beating up guys who don’t even fight back...”

Mikado watched them leave. He ended up never giving a reply to the last words Chikage said.

He could not.

That was because he did not understand what the surges of feelings inside him were.

He knew that it was bitterness, but he was afraid to accept that fact. He remained without a word as he looked up at the sky in silence.

The actual time that elapsed during Mikado's silence was no longer than a minute.

But to Mikado, it felt as if several hours—no, days—months—had been compressed into that minute.

If he admitted it, his life would change.

That was how dense his seconds had to be in order for him to just let this realization sink in.

No...I was not afraid that I would be left behind as Dollars kept changing.

I was afraid to be left behind by this city.

Mikado walked to the side of the street and put his arm on a close-by telephone pole, burying his face in it silently.

But...how wrong I was.

Before confronting Chikage, Mikado had checked the newest message from the Dollars mailing list.

It told him that Awakusu-kai members were showing up wherever there was a fight going on and forcibly putting an end to the fights.

Awakusu-kai had probably been informed of what was going on and decided to dispel the gangs before they caused greater trouble in Awakusu-kai's territories. It felt as if they were just driving away a couple of mosquitoes.

The commotion they got embroiled in today ended up being nothing out of ordinary for the people in Awakusu-kai—an organization far more complex than Dollars. For them, it was probably just everyday stuff.

At least that was what Mikado thought.

That was where his thoughts took him.

That I was being left behind by this city was in itself a delusion.

I've actually never been able to keep up with the unusual happenings in this city in the first place.

The boy simply stood there alone with tears trickling down his face.

Biting his lips and trying to suppress his sobs back into his throat—

As if determined to swallow every bit of his own sorrow—

—The boy simply continued to weep in the city called Ikebukuro.



Only one person saw the boy as he stood there weeping.

Mikado...

Clenching his fist, another male was looking at the boy's back.

It was Kida Masaomi, a boy who looked about the same age as Mikado was.

That he had come here as well was half coincidence and half inevitability.

He had returned to the city named Ikebukuro in order to help Mikado out of the trouble he had gotten into.

After finding out what was going on with Dollars through his acquaintances, he quickly headed to Raira's Second Ground.

On his way there he saw Mikado confronting Chikage.

He kept his eye on Mikado from his hiding spot on the back side of the street—

But after listening to Mikado's determined words and seeing what happened afterwards, it became impossible for him to go meet Mikado in person.

As he saw Mikado silently rest his arm on the telephone pole, Masaomi knew that he must be weeping.

Mikado's back oozed the same kind of sorrow as he did when he was the leader of the Yellow Turbans.

That was why Masaomi could not bring himself to go meet Mikado.

He knew that trying to call out to Mikado would just push Mikado into even deeper sorrow.

Kida Masaomi and Sonohara Anri were probably the last two people Mikado would want to be seen by right now.

Mikado resembled his past self so much that he wanted to go out there right away and try to comfort him, even thinking that he was probably the only one who could do that.

But in the end, he was not able to make that step.

He had no idea what to say now to Mikado, whom he had run away from.

Even if he tried to put on a show for the sole purpose of comforting Mikado, Mikado would probably just end up feeling several times more hurt than he was right now.

...

I'm not the place to return to for Mikado right now.

For him, it should be Sonohara-san or Raira Academy.

Masaomi had come here determined to meet his close friend—

—But he threw even that determination away as he turned his back on Mikado.

What I can do is just...to talk to him...when he gets back on his feet from all this sadness...

Dammit, this is wrong. This has to be wrong.

I just want to...be with him and Anri...like I used to be...

...Screw it, I...why did I...

As he remembered the sadness he felt in his past—

Masaomi found tears trickling down his own face as well before he even realized it.

That was what happened in that place.

Masaomi ended up never being able to reunite with Mikado.

It was true that had he gone out to meet Mikado, he would probably have ended up hurting him. An even deeper gap would probably separate these friends than before.

But considering what was going to happen from now on, Masaomi should probably have called out to Mikado anyway even if that would mean hurting Mikado and losing him his pride.

As for when Masaomi himself was going to realize that—

That would be a story for a bit later.

CHATROOM

Saika-san has joined the chat.

Saika

No one is here today

Saika

It's lonely here

Saika

I'm sorry I said weird things

Saika

I'm really sorry

Saika-san has left the chat.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

.

.

.





EPILOGUE AND NEXT PROLOGUE

Evening of May 4th, the McDonald's at Ikebukuro East Gate

“So? What was that all about and how did everything go?”

Tom dipped his chicken nugget in mustard and put it in his mouth. Shizuo, on the other hand, sucked at the straw of his milk shake and tilted his head.

“Well, I don't really know either, actually...Shinra called me all of a sudden and said 'It's OK now, they're not suspecting you any more.'...and when I walked in the streets after that, nothing happened. So it was alright, I guess.”

“Speaking of which, what did you ever do to Awakusu-kai in the first place, anyway?”

“Nah, I can't tell you that.”

“?”

Tom looked surprised. Shizuo stirred the milk shake with the straw to make it flow better and said, “Shinra spoke with Awakusu-kai for me, but in exchange they want me to keep my mouth zipped about everything I saw...something like that.”

“Hm. Well, I don't want to get any more involved in that myself, either, so I won't ask any more questions.”

“Thank you very much.”

Shizuo lowered his head candidly.

As if the thought had just come to his mind, Tom added, “The Manager said he'd still pay you for today.”

“Eh, really?”

“Yeah. You'll have to make up for today's work tomorrow, though.”

“Ah, of course...”

It was perhaps Tom's own brand of worldly wisdom—they soon switched the topic and began to talk about the work scheduled for tomorrow instead.

The name Awakusu-kai never turned up in their conversation again, and Shizuo's life officially returned to normal.



Somewhere in Ikebukuro, an office belonging to Awakusu-kai

This was one of the offices in Tokyo that belonged to Awakusu-kai.

In the “executive's office”, two men were talking in calm voices.

“...I am very relieved that Miss turned out safe and sound, Young Head.”

“...Yeah.”

Awakusu Mikiya nodded at Shiki's words, his expression difficult to read.

Shiki, in turn, continued to speak in a tone that did not reveal his emotions, either.

“Like you indicated, I told the others to no longer treat Heiwajima Shizuo as a suspect. I hope that is alright.”

“Yeah.”

Right after Akane was kidnapped, Shiki's recovering ears caught Mikiya's voice as he yelled:

“That bastard...he betrayed me!”

As soon as Shiki heard these words loud and clear, he told his subordinates to stop looking for Heiwajima Shizuo.

The man was built and equipped in a way hard to mistake for anyone else.

Even if Mikiya was flashed in the eyes and only slightly beginning to regain his vision, he would be able to tell who that man was—

Provided that he had met the man before.

Looking around to make sure that no one was listening, Shiki asked Mikiya about what was really going on:

“The three killed men—were they spies?”

“...That’s right.”

“It’s hard to believe that the cops would station three spies in one place, though.”

“One of them was from Asuki Group. Another was sent by some foreign organization. ...They just don’t take me seriously, do they?”

Mikiya gave a curt answer. Shiki fell silent and nodded.

He did not ask any more questions. He was able to deduce enough from the information he gathered during the short period of time.

The one who had three of their men killed was none other than Mikiya himself.

He had asked Slon, the Russian “freelancer”, to kill three of his subordinates. His plan was probably to fake evidence that Asuki Group had been behind the killings and use it to their advantage when striking the deal of peace.

But the young subordinates who witnessed Heiwajima Shizuo’s unexpected arrival at the scene turned the entire situation upside-down. They ended up treating a non-yakuza as the suspect.

What was more, they ended up showing their own weaknesses to Asuki Group instead.

To cover up for the embarrassment they began to hunt down Heiwajima Shizuo, claiming that he was the culprit.

However, as Mikiya realized that Shiki—as well as Akabayashi and Kazamoto—had begun to suspect that something was not right, he began to take measures to prepare for the next step.

Shiki did not know how much Mikiya thought about the fact that he owed Shizuo one for saving Akane when ordering his subordinates to stop tracking Shizuo down. But he knew that the man right in front of him was not the “chivalrist” type who was over-conscientious about social obligations.

Was his love for his daughter real then, at least?

To a certain degree that intrigued Shiki, but he cut the thought out since it was none of his business. Instead he continued.

“And, about what is to be done with the Russian...”

“Ah, Akabayashi and Aozaki have set out to take care of it.”

“Two executives in person? And those two, at that?”

“They’re the old-fashioned types who believe everything should be taken care of in person. They wanted to meet ‘their’ agents face-to-face, it seems. I was really surprised when I heard them tell me this, but...”

Awakusu Mikiya closed his mouth for a moment and looked into the distant sky before continuing to speak.

“Well, I guess kids are the parents’ first concern...regardless of the country.”

♂ ♀

Without the slightest clue that this conversation was going on inside the Awakusu-kai office, Shizuo made a brief return to his daily life. After he had finished his milk shake, he frowned as if he had remembered something.

“Speaking of which, if I ever run into that woman in the rider suit again, I’ll have to make sure to grab that expensive-looking helmet and crush it right in front of her eyes...”

Pulling himself slightly away from Shizuo, who was fuming from the memory, Tom sighed heavily.

“...Seeing as how you kicked a car in her direction, I don’t really think she’s going to show up again whenever you’re around.”

♂ ♀

Somewhere in Tokyo, a construction zone

It was the construction zone for a certain building. All work had been suspended due to the lack of funding since the economic stagnation began.

Vorona and Slon, who had made it their temporary quarters, were talking about their plan of action beginning the next day.

“...I am half pleased and half displeased.”

“There was nothing we could do about it. Fortunately, though, neither of the two jobs has expired. We still have a chance at kidnapping Awakusu Akane... If worst comes to worst, we’ll just try shooting the girl in glasses.”

Slon made this dangerous suggestion to Vorona, whose face had gone back to expressionless after sunset.

They sat on the piles of construction materials and continued their conversation next to a little lamp. In front of them there were empty supermarket bento boxes. It seemed that this bloody topic had already been on the table while they ate.

It was probably an everyday topic for them, though.

Vorona tied the trash bag up as she began to mutter her opinion.

“But still...this city is splendid. I hope for our work to be finished soon, so that I will be able to concentrate on hunting the Black Motorbike and the bartender. This state of mind is my current ego.”

Contrary to Tom’s prediction, she was planning to attack Shizuo again after all.

As she thought about the various kinds of “beings” she had encountered within these past two days, hidden waves of pleasure shook her once expressionless mask.

“The job Slon took is finished this morning, no? If so, once we finish the jobs on hand, I propose that we stop working for a while. Please affirm.”

“You’re basically telling me to affirm...can I even say no?”

Slon laughed and replied—

“Hell no, you can’t. At least not from this effin’ second, bastard.”

“!” “!?”

A low and harsh voice reached them from a shadowy part of the construction zone. Vorona and Slon stood up, eyes turning towards the direction.

What they saw was a tall, strong man walking out of the shadow towards them.

“Who are you? I request the immediate self-revelation of your name.”

“...That emblem...Awakusu-kai?”

Slon saw the emblem on the man's suit and knew that it was someone from Awakusu-kai. But judging by the man's looks and the intimidating air he seemed to emanate like a wild beast, this man was probably not a mere underling in the organization.

The man widened his arms as he introduced himself.

"I'm Aozaki. ...Well, you know what I came here for, Mr. and Miss Kidnapper."

"...AOZAKI...the street fighter executive Aozaki?"

"I'm impressed that you know how to say 'street fighter' in Japanese."

Walking toward his opponent, Aozaki laughed slowly and steadily as Slon inquired in alarm.

Calmly, Vorona began to provoke the man who emanated a different kind of dangerous air than Shizuo did that day.

"Are you foolish? An executive of the organization should not show himself so proudly alone in front of people like us."

"...Miss, your Japanese sucks."

The massive man who was an Awakusu-kai executive returned the provocation with a chuckle.

"Nah, I'm not that stupid. Unlike that fool over there."

"You're so mean, Aozaki-san."

Vorona's hair stood on end.

"I'm just here because I heard one of the kidnappers of our little Miss was a knockout from Russia, so I wanted to have a look. And what do I get? I get called a fool all of a sudden."

The flirtatious voice was coming from Vorona's side.

As she quickly turned her gaze to the side, Vorona saw a man in a gaudy suit and colored sunglasses sitting there. He was holding an ornamented cane with exaggerated designs. The man, who looked like he had just walked out of a film village somewhere, simply sat there doing nothing.

"You can call me Akabayashi. I forgot my emblem today, but like that old man who looks like a gorilla over there I'm also an executive of Awakusu-kai's. Well, nice to meet you."

He was sitting right next to where she had been sitting a moment ago, as if he had been there since they had first started eating.

Of course, that was simply impossible—yet that was just how abruptly he had appeared in front of her.

Vorona and Slon did not feel him approaching at all.

Her body tense, Vorona hastened to check on the weapons and equipments she had on her.

The pistol Black Motorbike had held back with “shadows” was no longer good for use. She had put new guns and knives in her waist pouch. Slon was good at killing with his bare hands, and once they got back into the truck they would have even more weapons to choose from.

Vorona decided to look for a route to escape from her opponents—

—But before she could do so, Aozaki was already laughing and shaking his head.

“Unlike that fool who came here on his own, I brought a bunch of men with me.”

In that second—

The air in the construction zone was pierced from all directions, and the sound of flesh exploding ricocheted in Vorona’s ears.

“Arrrrrrrgh!”

As she turned around, she saw blood squirting from Slon’s knees as his massive body swayed and fell to the ground, unable to support his own weight.

“Slon!” Vorona yelled.

The next thing she did was pull a pistol out of her waist pouch and aim it at the man in the gaudy suit next to her.

She was going to use him as a hostage, but—

“I’m so happy.”

Before Vorona even realized it, the man who called himself Akabayashi had grabbed her arm.

!?

“That I get to dance with a girl as beautiful as you, Miss.”

The trigger...why can't I pull it...!?

Numbness spread like an electric shock from the spot where the man grabbed her arm, and the freedom of movement for her hand disappeared.

Akabayashi kept her arm firmly gripped in his hand as he stood up slowly—

Vorona's eyes lost track of what the man did after that.

Before she realized it, Akabayashi and everything else began to revolve around her at a high speed.

Only after her back had touched the ground did Vorona realize that Akabayashi and the rest of the world had not been revolving around her; it was herself who had been turned round and round.

There was no pain.

Akabayashi had slowed down at the last second and with a pull of his arm carefully “lowered” Vorona to the ground.

In-between Slon's groans, Akabayashi confiscated Vorona's guns and knives and threw them somewhere behind him. Still grinning, he began to talk to the two Russians.

“Well, well...tell me honestly, did you think we would be ‘piece o’ cake’? Unlike where you come from, we're just a little organization in Japan, a country spoiled in peace. So we should be nothing to fear for you—did you look down on us like that?”

Akabayashi was gently pressing Vorona to the ground with one arm and one knee only.

Vorona was shocked to discover that even though she did not feel a trace of pain, she still could not move an inch.

“You've killed many people and fought even troops and mercenaries... For you, we Awakusu-kai should be kid's play...was that what you were thinking? Well, well. I'm not going to say no to that dream. You're still young after all, Miss.”

“...”

“But if you continue to push your luck like this in your young little head, you will suffer...just keep that in mind. Also, if two old men like us can take you down so effortlessly, you shouldn't think of taking on Heiwajima Shizuo in a million years. Nah, I don't enjoy ruining a girl's fantasy, either. But if you try to pick a fight with Shizuo, well, you could die, you see?”

After he finished speaking, Akabayashi called out to someone in the shadows behind Aozaki.

“Plus, I’ll have bad dreams if our new trade partner’s daughter loses her life in our territory, you know.”

As soon as they heard Akabayashi, several new faces emerged from the shadows behind the poles.

Faces that were not unfamiliar to Vorona and Slon.

“...Wha...”

“Igor...!”

Slon pressed his own legs and groaned as he yelled the man’s name.

The figure that appeared with bandages over his face was indeed Igor, an experienced fighter from the weapon company they used to work for.

“Long time no see, both of you.”

Igor spoke in Japanese presumably to show respect to Aozaki and Akabayashi.

“Really, you have been rather selfish in what you’ve done. Thanks to you, we suffered a great loss.”

“...?”

Vorona looked confused by the situation. Akabayashi, on the other hand, began to explain in an even voice.

“Well, to tell you the truth, we should really have taken you to a mountain or an underground parking lot somewhere and finished you off. But Igor-san here came to our organization and spoke with us about a lot of things. Your father and Mr. Manager of your weapon business proposed a solution to us. We’re going to enjoy priority treatment when we buy from them, and in exchange for that we will pretend that we never saw what Miss did in this city...”

“Wha...”

“Well, for us it’s a sweet deal since we get to buy all of these nice weapons at a delicious price when all we have to do is to let a girl off the hook. But the big guy over there, alas, they abandoned you. Had they asked us to let you off the hook as well, we would probably have had to ask them to provide free weapons forever in return...”

“...I refuse! If you are going to execute then I ask to share the fate! If I affirm the sympathy I would be negating my existence!”

“Hahaha, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Good night.”

Akabayashi pushed the tip of the painless injection needle into the girl’s neck.

Slon, on the other hand, was kicked in the face by Aozaki and forcibly put into unconsciousness.

“OK, we’re going to do whatever we want with this guy.”

As soon as they had made sure that both of the Russians had fallen silent, Aozaki lifted Slon and disappeared into the darkness outside the construction zone.

Akabayashi, meanwhile, was sighing as the grin disappeared from his face.

“I knew it. I just never can enjoy making a girl sad.”

“...Sorry about that, Akabayashi, man.”

The one who had appeared out of nowhere beside him and muttered those words was Russian Sushi’s Chief Chef.

Next to him stood Igor and Simon, who was wearing casual clothes for once.

“...We’ll talk some sense into her later, so don’t worry about it.”

“Thanks, I’ll trust her with you, then. I’m a good-for-nothing myself, but I’m going to have bad dreams if such a beautiful girl kills herself because of what I said.”

“Oh—Akabayashi, when having bad dreams, you just eat sharks. We’ll prepare shark fin sushi and caviar sushi next time, you eat until you can’t eat any more at seasonal price, lots of happiness and lots of dreams, get him another bowl of shark fin soup—“

“Well, I’ll try to drop by when the girl is sleeping.”

Akabayashi grinned again and left the place slowly while tapping his own shoulder with his cane.

Once they could no longer feel Aozaki’s subordinates around them, Denis, Igor and Simon were the only ones left, a sleeping Vorona next to them.

“Let’s go home, then. Simon, carry Miss on your shoulder.”

Simon put Vorona on his shoulder like Denis said. Igor entered Vorona and Slon's truck to take care of things that needed to be taken care of.

The Chief Chef looked at Vorona's sleeping face and muttered to himself in Russian.

"...I was right, Igor. Miss Vorona is still Miss Vorona. Kids are kids because they're still malleable...they can be anything. They can freely become anything they want.

...That's why kids are scary."

♂ ♀

Same time, an abandoned factory in Tokyo

The abandoned factory turned even eerier as the night drew close.

For some reason its electricity supply still worked. Naked bulbs only barely illuminated the rusty insides of the factory.

"...What's the matter, Mikado-sempai? Do you have something to tell me in a place like this?"

Kuronuma Aoba was speaking to Ryuugamine Mikado, who stood there in his day clothes.

He was twirling a ballpoint pen in his right hand, tapping the steel drum next to him with it every now and then.

Aoba was still surrounded like he was during the day by Blue Square members—and, whether out of coincidence or not, in the same formation they had stood before.

Only this time, it was Mikado who had asked to meet them here.

"Ah, I'm really sorry that I called you guys out when you've already had so much stuff for the day."

"Don't mind that, it was my bad to drag Sempai here at an inappropriate time in the first place."

Aoba smiled harmlessly. Mikado also replied with the same smile he had always been seen wearing at school.

This surprised Aoba.

?

He can't possibly be planning to have that Black Motorbike ambush us, can he...?

Taking the appropriate precautions, Aoba continued to speak with contrived calm.

“So, may I ask what it is that Sempai wants to talk to me about?”

“Yeah...I um, thought about things in my own way...”

Sadness permeated Mikado's expression as he tapped the steel drum with the end of his ballpoint pen.

“You were right. The direction Dollars is heading right now is just...wrong. It's definitely not the Dollars I was hoping for. Though there are still idealists among us like Kadota-san and his gang...the overwhelming majority of the people simply isn't like that.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“But it's not like Dollars had any rules to begin with, and making any rules now would just make Dollars not Dollars anymore. ...In a world without rules...the only thing you can rely on to have your dreams realized is power.”

Mikado nodded quietly as if to himself and tapped the steel drum to make it resonate again.

“...And Shizuo-san just quit Dollars today.”

“Oh...did he really?”

Aoba was genuinely surprised upon hearing about Shizuo.

Mikado nodded again in silence.

“I..., I'm thinking that if you guys are willing to lend me your power, and use me for your own purposes at the same time then...that is a deal I can accept.”

“Really?”

Aoba's harmless smile widened.

Everything's going according to the plan.

He suppressed an evil smirk in his heart.

You're way too naïve, Mikado-sempai.

This is going way more smoothly than I thought it would.

He had not expected everything to happen the way it did today.

All he did was to pit Dollars against the bousouzoku gangs hoping it would shove the reality in Mikado's face. Yet the result turned out simply delicious—

Well, Orihara Izaya probably also did something behind the scenes.

Though he could sense his enemy's presence in this whole affair, Aoba decided to content himself with the fact that he had been able to make Mikado comply with his plan.

Up until this point things should have gone according to both Izaya's plan and mine.

To go from here it's just a matter of which side's going to gain the upper hand.

Aoba contemplated this as he quickly reviewed today's happenings in his mind.

I've located what might be the Black Motorbike's quarters. I'll visit that apartment tomorrow.

And...I'm getting a little interested in Anri-sempai as well.

Izaya's probably already got all the information he needs on it. ...But it's unlikely that the Black Motorbike is one of his pawns. If I can make the best out of it...

Aoba juggled all these thoughts in his mind while his expression remained the same docile kouhai-face he always wore when talking to Mikado.

Mikado spoke slowly to Aoba.

“So would you mind coming over here for a moment? I'd like you to sign an agreement.”

“An agreement?”

“Yes. An agreement is necessary if we're going to make this deal fair, isn't it?”

...

Well, you can't really say it's unexpected of Mikado-sempai.

If he's planning to do something with my signature, I'll take the needed precautions.

No one really signs agreements for deals like this, but it was Mikado that they were trying to deal with and he was simply not used to everything involving the underworld.

Aoba thought to himself as he walked towards Mikado.

“So what would you like me to write?”

“Ah right, about this agreement...”

Mikado pointed towards a sheet of paper that lay on the top of the steel drum.

What could he possibly have written there?

Did he set up any elaborate traps between the lines, him, the founder of Dollars? Or did he simply write down straightforward conditions of sealing the deal?

Just as he reached for the paper while thinking of what might be written on there, Aoba started.

A blank sheet?!

The very next second—searing pain was coming from the back of his outstretched hand that was hovering above the sheet of paper.

“...! ...Argh...”

The pain came from the boneless part between his thumb and index finger, which had just been pierced through.

Still too shocked to realize what had just happened, Aoba looked down at his own hand.

And—

Blood was gushing out from the hole left a second ago by Mikado’s ballpoint pen— which had been jabbed without hesitation into his hand—leaving winding scarlet patterns on the sheet of paper.

Aoba could not help but look up at Mikado—

—And instantly froze at what he saw.

It was not that he had suddenly put on make-up or anything like. Nor did the features on his face change.

Yet for a splitting second Aoba seriously began to think that the person he was looking at could not possibly be Mikado.

That was just how relentlessly cold the boy's eyes were, looking as if he held contempt for everything he saw in this world—

“O-Oi, Aoba!?”

“The hell you're doing!?”

Turning to face his restless fellow Blue Square members, Aoba made a gesture of “you guys wait there” with his uninjured hand.

“...Mikado...sempai... What is this...?”

“No matter what you did...you involved Sonohara-san in this whole thing. ...This is my reaction to that fact. It's also my first order to you.”

“...”

“Stomach the full wrath of my anger.”

Aoba tried desperately to put up with the pain as he spoke to a cold-all-around Mikado.

“...That was an impressive line, sempai.”

“...If you don't want to comply, just stab my hand or throat in return with that ballpoint pen. ...Or report me to the school, or the police.”

“...”

“After what I've just done to you, you have a right to.”

Sadness diluted the iciness in his expression.

Aoba, looking at Mikado, chose to smile instead—

“...No, it's alright. This will serve just fine as...our agreement, written in my blood.”

Aoba raised the bloodstained piece of paper high up in the air as he announced with a fearless smile.

“From now on, Mikado-sempai...will be our leader. ...Sempai, feel free to use us Blue Square as part of your Dollars for whatever you please.”

“...OK.”

Aoba, still struggling to not let the pain show on his face, turned to make sure that Mikado had nodded—

—And felt himself freeze.

The air of coldness that had emanated from the boy right in front of him was gone within a mere three seconds. He was already smiling the same smile he wore everyday to school.

“That’s just awesome...I mean, I’m really glad you just agreed to do that! I’m so, so sorry about your hand. Ah, I actually brought disinfectant and bandages. I’ll apply those for you, so here—just elevate your hand above your heart!”

Mikado prepared the bandages so expertly that one might take him for a class health representative at school.

He was back to being the Mikado Aoba had always known—actually, even more Mikado-ish than the Mikado he had always known.

Yet Aoba was seized by an eerie feeling close to what you would call fear.

The Blue Square members must have shared the feeling to some degree, seeing as how they had given up on their usual banter and instead watched Aoba and Mikado go about their business in silence.

Aoba, feeling his back virtually drenched in cold sweat, whispered in his heart.

Orihara Izaya, have you realized this?

I and you...we’ve probably both underestimated Mikado-sempai.

Even with what you and I already know about him...it could turn out that sempai...

Had far from shown us his true character.

Have you realized this...Orihara Izaya...?



Awakusu-kai's office

“Orihara Izaya...”

Shiki muttered the name to himself as he looked at the number on his cell phone.

He had tried and failed several times on his own to contact Orihara Izaya, the information broker.

Originally, information brokers referred to the touts, hoodlums, and clerks at pachinko stores who collected information in certain places and made some pocket money with it. Professional information brokers who made this business their main source of income were few.

Orihara Izaya was one of them. He collected information from the numerous “sources” he had in this city and used those to dig up even more information in a larger area.

Awakusu-kai had made use of his services from time to time. But for some reason he simply could not be reached today.

Speaking of which, why did Heiwajima Shizuo go to that office in the first place...?

It seems Miss Akane has not told Mikiya-san about the details, either...

If Heiwajima Shizuo was pinned for something he didn't do, the one who would have something to gain from it would be...Orihara Izaya, his long-time enemy.

It wouldn't surprise me if Izaya knows how to get hold of those Russians.

Though they remained unconfirmed as of the present, Shiki had begun to have doubts about Orihara Izaya.

Well, I don't really have to do anything about him right now.

Anyway...he's still a kid. I've met and talked with him a couple of times, but he's without doubt still a kid.

When kids get carried away, you never know how far they're going to push their luck.

Sighing, Shiki walked out of the room. Closing its door, he muttered some more dangerous words.

“If he gets us in trouble...then we’ll just have to finish him off.”

♂ ♀

Somewhere in Japan, a crowded street near the train station

“...Yeah, it’s going to be alright.”

[-----]

“Even if those at Awakusu-kai realize that they should be after me, I won’t be in Ikebukuro anymore anyway.”

[-----]

“...Yes. ...Yes. I understand. Goodbye then, and thanks for your continued patronage.”

[-----]

“Ah, no, no...I’m just convinced that Asuki Group is more fit for ruling over Ikebukuro.”

After hanging up, Izaya kept walking in the nightly street.

A regional metropolis in Northeastern Japan.

From Ikebukuro, he had traveled all the way here, taking only his cell phone and wallet with him.

Blending himself into the swarming crowds looking for night bars and clubs, Izaya began to contemplate the whole matter quietly to himself.

His expression was a dilute mixture of irritation and glee.

Everything was brought to a close in just...one day, huh.

Mikado-kun looks like he would accept Blue Square’s offer, which is a good thing.

“Let’s use each other for our own purposes”, is probably what he would say.

Well, from now on it's just a question of which side is going to have more pawns at its disposal between him and Blue Square.

Izaya, still unaware of the “change” in Ryuugamine Mikado, turned his thoughts elsewhere.

The only person who didn't behave as I expected is still Shizu-chan.

Why...didn't he attack back? Why didn't he beat up the Awakusu-kai people when they cornered him? Why not chase them away?

Didn't he throw a vending machine at a police car when they tried to arrest him back then?

Don't tell me he actually learned from that experience? Impossible!

...Anyhow, he sure does make me mad.

I never thought Shizu-chan was capable of maturing as a person.

At any rate, it's about time to arrange for the next move...

As Izaya's thoughts became focused, his cell phone began to ring.

Shiki from Awakusu-kai again?

That was what Izaya thought as he looked at the phone—but the number displayed on the screen was one that rang no bells.

“...”

Though he had a feeling that it was not the best idea, Izaya answered the phone.

A voice he had never known in his life came from the other end of the receiver.

“Ahh, hello hello! Orihara Izaya-san, I presume?”

It was an apparently well-mannered voice of a middle-aged man.

Though taken aback, Izaya replied anyway.

“...Yes, that's me.”

“Ahh, I'm honored. Actually, I happen to have some humble opinions on you that I would like to pass on!”

“Opinions?”

“Well well, I was really upset. You blew up my plan by involving that monster Heiwajima Shizuo in this whole business with Awakusu-kai. Seriously, if Awakusu Akane had never known Heiwajima Shizuo in her life, I would have been able to carry out my plan much more smoothly. Your ‘pique’ against Heiwajima resulted in some monstrous loss on my part.”

“...Who are you?”

“Ahh, I am so sorry about that! I never meant to make it sound like I was calling just to criticize you! It’s not really anything that you need to know my name for, but, now that you mention it, if you’d allow me to get closer to you in person and pass on my humble opinion...or, if you’d pardon me for being so impudent, allow me to ask you for one more thing...”

“No, just tell me your name already.”

Izaya pressed on as he continued to walk with the crowds.

But the person on the other end of the receiver seemed to have no intention to reveal his name.

“Actually, it’s not so much a humble opinion...as it is a humble piece of advice...you’re a little too good-looking for your own good.”

“Huh? ...Was that supposed to be a compliment?”

“Ah, what I was trying to say was, it is really easy to notice you in a crowd. Your refined sense of fashion helps as well—it just kind of makes you stand out compared to everyone else. And I meant it as a compliment. Pardon me; I’m mostly saying this because I used to scout talents for a living, so my eyes are especially trained for these attributes in a person. Therefore, since it is you we’re talking about, I don’t think trying to conceal yourself by blending into the crowd is a good idea.”

“...”

Something was wrong. Izaya felt a weird alarm sounding through his brain.

“And now, about the thing I’m going to ask you for...”

The man on the other end of the phone paused for a second—

“It doesn’t have to be long, but would you be so kind as to fall asleep for me for a while? In the hospital?”

That sentence was heard at the same time by both his left and right ears.

The next thing Izaya knew, something was being driven into his body.

“Really—you’ve been sniffing around for my information, right? Using that teenage couple? I get easily embarrassed, so would you please stop that?”

The voice was heard next to both his left and right ear for only a nanosecond—now it was coming from only the cell phone like before.

“Honestly, you need to stop that. A kid needs to learn to play only in his little garden...in Ikebukuro. Because if he runs outside, you never know when he might get hurt!”

Izaya stopped in his tracks slowly at this sentence.

“Anyhow, I didn’t twist the knife, so I don’t expect your life to be in danger.”

As Izaya looked down, his gaze met blotches of red.

“If you ever go over the edge again, this should serve as a first warning.”

The moment he realized that it was the blood gushing from his side, Izaya muttered quietly.

“Screw it...I underestimated him.”

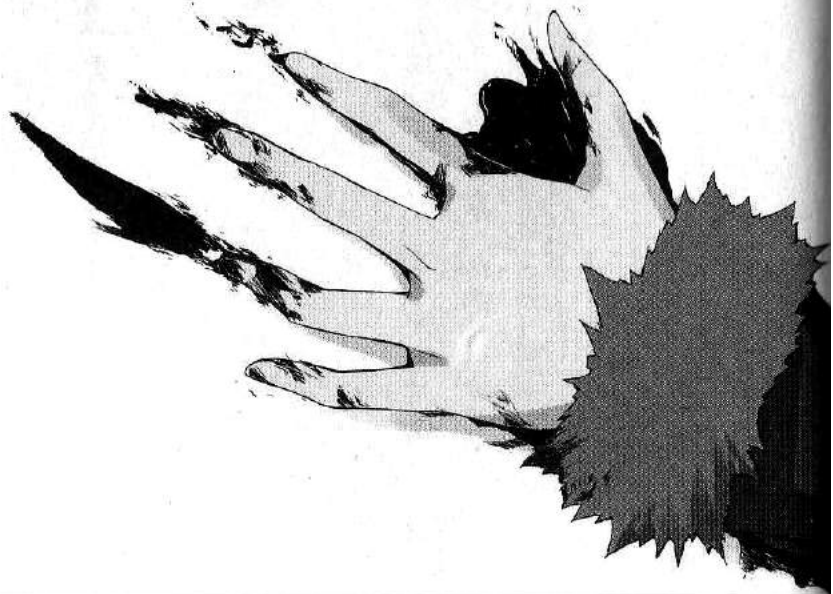
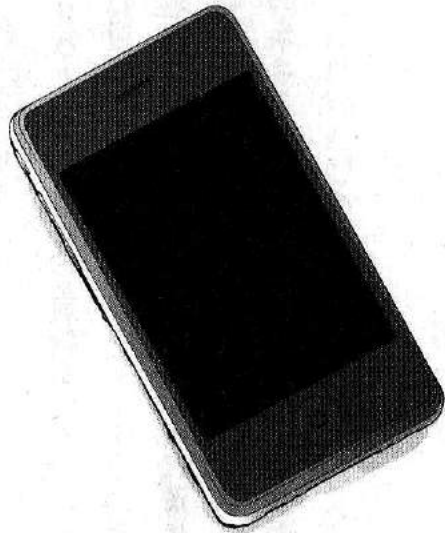
Having said that with a faint smile on his face, Izaya collapsed to the ground.

Passers-by were screaming at the sight of blood that had dripped onto the pavement behind him.

As he lost consciousness, Izaya heard the male voice coming from the cell phone.

“Ah, I forgot. Though I’d expect you to know this already by now...my name is Yadogiri Jinnai. I hope we continue to learn from each other from now on...”

The call ended there. Now all Izaya heard was the many muffled voices of the passers-by.



This is...really bad.

Gotta...contact Namie somehow...

Izaya tried to grab the phone—but felt the wound split back open. Izaya fell unconscious to the ground—on a street far, far away from Ikebukuro—and ended up being sent to a hospital.

Neither could he have known that his name was to going to be on air nationwide the very next day—

♂ ♀

An apartment building on Kawagoe Highway

[Speaking of which, does the name Yadogiri Jinnai have anything to do with Awakusukai?]

“Hm? The missing manager of that entertainment company? ...Well, kind of, but not really...why do you ask?”

[Because Shiki-san told me to contact him if I ever see that man.]

“Shiki-san knows a lot of people. Ah, could it be because of Hijiribe Ruri-chan?”

The underground doctor and the Headless Rider chatted pointlessly as they watched King Television’s midnight film, “Vampire Ninja Carmilla Saizou”.

For the world, this duo was probably the most out of ordinary. Yet they were enjoying such extremely ordinary lives on the living room couch.

Shiki had contacted them earlier saying, “The matter is settled. Thank you for being Miss’s bodyguard.”

Since she had helped to save Akane from the kidnapers, Celty was paid a bigger sum than they had originally agreed upon. She was enjoying the evening with Shinra in a good mood.

Looks like Mikado-kun’s injuries aren’t serious. Anri-chan is alright as well. Good, good.

A lot of things happened, but all’s well that ends well.

From what Shiki-san told me, it seems like they've caught the kidnappers, too. I can now go out in the streets in peace.

...Ah, right.

As the film came to an end, so did their chat. Celty, however, raised a new topic.

[Hey, Shinra.]

“What is it?”

[Um...thank you.]

Shinra looked surprised. Celty began to type somewhat embarrassed.

[When someone threw that flashbang that day...you tried to protect me from the explosion, didn't you?]

“...I don't remember.”

[It's nothing to be embarrassed about.]

Celty did not let on how embarrassed she was feeling as she suggested to Shinra:

[Should we go on a trip somewhere tomorrow?]

“Eh?”

[I turned Shooter into a chariot today...it's been so long since I've done that. I think Shinra and I will have no problem fitting into a carriage. So how would you like the idea of a carriage drive on the side of a lake where no one else's around? Though 'a carriage drive' does sound kind of weird...]

“Celty...!”

Celty pushed Shinra away as he made a move to embrace her with teary eyes. She proceeded to make the trip conditional upon something.

[But you have to wear something other than that white coat when we go on the trip. This is an occasion.]

“Eh! Why...?! I told you my white coat serves as the counterpart to Celty's—...”

Celty covered Shinra's mouth with shadow before he could say more and typed more words onto the PDA.

[In exchange, I will make a concession as well.]

Celty kept typing with slight hesitation.

[Like what you wrote in the diary, Shinra...I will put on whatever clothes you want me to.]

Shinra's euphoria was so overwhelming that night that he almost fell off the balcony—but that would be another story.



Just as Celty, an “alien” being, was planning a romantic getaway from her daily life—
—The human boy bid goodbye to his daily life in a completely different way.

After Aoba's lot had left, Mikado looked up at the night sky and muttered to himself.

“There's...no way back now.”

Mikado felt heat from within his body as he let his thoughts flow in the abandoned factory.

But surprisingly, I do not feel regret.

I will get it back...the Dollars on that night...a year ago.

The real Dollars...

Using my power, I will restore Dollars to what it should be.

That way I'll be able to...face Sonohara-san and Masaomi without feeling ashamed of myself.

But the boy had realized it.

He knew he was only using that as an excuse.

It had nothing to do with Masaomi or Anri. He had stabbed his kouhai's hand for his very own ego hidden deep inside his chest.

Now that he thought about it with a cool head, it made him feel nauseated.

I'm sorry, Masaomi.

Avoid doing anything as a Dollars member...I can't listen to that advice of yours any more.

It was a piece of advice that had limited Mikado's range of actions today.

Not realizing that it had actually come from Izaya, who had been posing as his friend—Mikado kept apologizing to Masaomi in his heart.

Repeatedly, he asked for his missing friend's forgiveness. But there were things Mikado did not know.

He did not know what the name Blue Square stood for.

All he knew was that Masaomi's gang had once been in a war with Blue Square.

Even though he was now this organization's new leader, he still did not have a clue what this gang had done to Masaomi and his lover in the past—

Just like he hoped, Ryuugamine Mikado was falling towards the bottom of Hell.

Like an insect, like a beast.

Not even knowing where he was headed.

Right now, the boy's youth was silently beginning to stir from its stupor.



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

Shiki
Aozaki
Akabayashi
Awakusu Mikiya

Vorona
Slon

Simon Brezhnev

Yagiri Namie

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(Pictured: Chikage's weapon, *kabutowari*.)