



デュラララ!!×7

成田良悟

電撃文庫

Ⓜ 610

デュラララ!!×7

「僕は何もしてないよ。あれは、ダラーズみんなでやった事だから——」

東京・池袋。この街の休日はまだ終わらない。臨也が何者かに刺された翌日、池袋には事件の傷痕が未だに生々しく残っていた。すれ違うことなく街を徘徊するクラスメイトの男女、弟に付きまとう女の動向を窺う姉、最強の男を殺すために強くなろうとする少女、兄のことなど気にせずひたすら無邪気な双子、今後の自分を憂い続けるロシア出身の女性、過去の未練にしがみつくヤクザな男、休日を楽しもうと旅行に出た闇医者、そして安心しきりの首なしライダーは——。

さあ、みんな一緒に、デュラララ!!×7



成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita

電撃文庫



デュラララ!! ×7

成田良悟

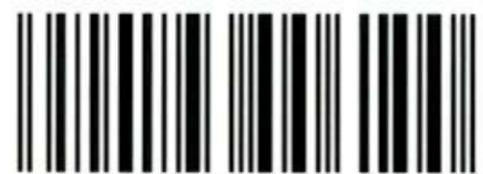
電撃文庫



610



9784048682763



1920193006100

ISBN978-4-04-868276-3

C0193 ¥610E



発行 ● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: 本体 **610** 円

※消費税が別に加算されます

なりたりようこ
成田良悟

グアムに行った作家さん達からお土産を頂きました。
「MAFIA」と書かれた車のナンバーや、バックカーノ！
特集が載った海外の雑誌。そしてこのマスクです。あ
りがとうございました……！ 周囲の私に対するイメ
ージが頭ではなく心で理解できた29歳。

【電撃文庫作品】

バックカーノ! The Rolling Bootlegs
バックカーノ! 1931 鈍行編・特急編・臨時急行編
バックカーノ! 1932 Drug & The Dominos
バックカーノ! 2001 The Children Of Bottle
バックカーノ! 1933〈上〉〈下〉 THE SLASH
バックカーノ! 1934 獄中編・娑婆編・完結編
バックカーノ! 1705 The Ironic Light Orchestra
バックカーノ! 2002【A side】・【B side】
デュラララ!! ×1～7
ヴぁんぷ! I～IV
パウワウ! Two Dog Night
Mew Mew! Crazy Cat's Night
がるぐる!〈上〉〈下〉 Dancing Beast Night
5656! Knights' Strange Night
世界の中心、針山さん①～③

イラスト:ヤスダズヒト

チャイナ服とつり目とワンピースに偏った情熱を燃やす関西
ノリぶっちゃけ系イラストレーター。「月刊少年シリウス」で
連載中の「夜桜四重奏」は、現在コミックス7巻まで発売中!

カバー/加藤製版印刷

ゴキウゴキウ!!

7



成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

イラスト:ヤスダスズヒト

Illustration : Suzuhito Yasuda

ダンスホールの中に、踊る影が二つ。

白い人影と、黒い影そのもの。

「セルティ……凄く綺麗だよ」

白い人影が、「影」そのもので作られた、黒いドレスのセルティに手を差し伸べる。

「ありがとう。新羅。大好きだ」

首から上が欠落した美しい女性。その首から、凍とした美声が響き渡る。

「あれ!? セルティの声って初めて聞いたよ!? っていうかそんなのどうでもいいや! とにかく踊ろう!」

細かい事は気にせずに、新羅はセルティの手をとって踊り出す。

ダンスホールにはいつの間にか円舞曲が流れており、リズムに合わせて二人は優雅な動きで周囲の空間を魅了する。

「ああ、ああ……セルティ。僕は、君とこうして手を繋げるなら、このまま永遠に踊り続ける事になっても構わないよ」

「私もだ、新羅」

体全体で照れたようににかむセルティを見て、新羅はその体を踊りながら優雅に引き寄せ、力強く抱きしめた。

「セルティ大好き……むにゃ?」

そこで、彼は目を覚ます。

「……夢か」

パソコンデスクでうたた寝をしていた自分に気付く、新羅は夢が夢だったという現実にがっかりとしつつ背を伸ばした。

すると、夢の中で踊っていたパートナーが、黒い寝間着姿で寝室の方から現れた。

『おはよう。新羅も今起きたのか』

PDAに打ち出された文章を見て、夢オチに対する落胆は何処へやら、闇医者はセルティに満面の笑みを浮かべてみせた。

「やあ! 丁度今起きた所さ。これがシンクロシティって奴だね! 寤覚めも最高さ」

「そうか……私はなんか変な夢を見てな。お前と私で、ずっと踊ってる夢だ」

「!?」

表示された文字列を見て、新羅は目を丸くする。

——まさか本当にシンクロシティ!?

「これは愛の力の奇跡だよ、セルティ! 夢の続きを今こそ夢の同調を悦びつつ抱きしめようとした新羅の前に、続きの文章が差し出された。

『どじょうすくいを』

「……や、安来節……ッ!?」





非日常α『入院ポルカ』 P15

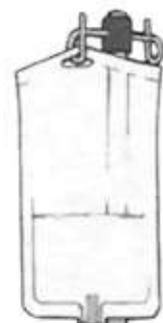
日常A『逢引きボレロ』 P27

日常B『はぐれ者コンチェルト』 P123

日常C『取り立てラブソディー』 P229

日常D『お惚気チャカポコ』 P319

エピローグ&ネクストプロローグ『日常フーガ』 P359



Prologue

In my previous books, I have written in great detail about the 'holidays' of our city.

Today, as a change of pace, let's talk about the holidays of those who live in this city, shall we?

Naturally, we tell ourselves that we must rest in order to relieve our bodies.

However, this is not the case.

Particularly on their days off, people will make a point of going somewhere far away, getting lost in their merriment, immersing themselves in pastimes, and repeatedly spending more energy than they usually would.

You probably know what I'm talking about.

Don't you?

Well, no matter if you don't.

We'll call this my mistake.

I apologise.

I am sorry.

I misunderstood humans.

I underestimated them.

Please, forgive me!... I beg of you!...

... Well, now that we have that over and done with, how about I continue the story for those of you who nodded, and said 'That's right.'?

It could be said that, those who tire themselves out on their days of rest, are actually seeking something more than an everyday life.

It may deviate slightly from the original meaning of the word, but perhaps to these people, 'relief' is actually finding a temporary escape from the monotonous life that they lead.

Not to rest their body.

Not to rest their mind.

No, not the body or the mind... But to give a rest to that very state, which we call monotony.

So that when they return to their normal life, they can savour that taste all the more.

Really, it's the same thing...

The same as when you're eating a good meal, and drink water to cleanse your palate.

So, what do those who are always living an abnormal life do on their days off?

Does the word 'holiday' even exist for urban legends like the Black Rider?

It's a tough question.

Do people who usually eat only strong savoury foods, only drink water on their holidays? Or do they chug bottles of soy sauce?... Wait... That was just an example, and one you shouldn't follow, ok? It wouldn't work out well for you. To be more specific, you would die.

Well, for those whose everyday is abnormal, perhaps their holidays bring them so far beyond strange that they become self-destructive, and seriously consider death by sauce-asphyxiation.

In the first place, do people like that even have days off? Or perhaps every day is a day off for them.

This is a question that could only be answered by the subject themselves.

In any case, the city itself can make no real distinction between the routine days, abnormal days, work days, and rest days of these people.

At the end of the day, the ones who watch and decide are the humans.

The city doesn't discriminate between people. It merely consumes. Consumes every act and deed done by its subjects.

Although, like soy sauce, eating too much at a time can be bad for you.

Well, this city may have a much stronger stomach than people think.

An excerpt from the foreword of "Ikebukuro Bites Back – 3: A Traveller's Guide to Ikebukuro".

Written by Shinichi Tsukumoya, published by MediaWhacks Japan.

Stranger Days α – Patient's Polka

May 5th, Tohoku Region, Unknown Hospital.

“Mr. Orihara, it's time for your check-up.”

The voice of a young nurse resounds through the hospital room.

A white hospital room, with a slightly sweet scent – of flowers or fruit perhaps – mingling amongst the smell of assorted medical products.

This is my private room, so that smell must be a get-well gift for the patient next-door.

The young man lying on the bed – Izaya Orihara – determines the origin of that sweet scent, as he quietly stirs awake.

Ah, that's right.

This is a hospital, huh.

Izaya looks to the unfamiliar nurse in front of him, and begins to confirm his self-induced state.

“Nurse, would you happen to have the time?”

“Umm, looks like it's about 9PM. Ah, I'm going to change your IV bag, ok?”

The female nurse proceeded to briskly roll up the sleeves of Izaya's hospital garb, check the state of his needle, and set about changing his bag of IV fluid.

Upon seeing the state he was in, Izaya remembered a deep pain near his stomach.

Izaya squinted as he endured the intense pain, but made no sound.

He had recalled clearly, just how he managed to fall to this point.

It was around 24 hours prior to now.

He had been stabbed by someone, and collapsed in the middle of a certain Tohoku city. The next thing he knew, he was already lying on top of this bed.

This must have been his third check up since then, or was it the fourth?

The police had arrived sometime before dawn.

The patient with the slashed stomach looked up at the nurse changing his IV bag, and remembered his conversation with the detectives.

To the detectives who asked Izaya questions about this and that, he merely insisted that 'I thought I had just suddenly bumped into someone, then I looked down and blood was spurting out of my stomach.'

The detectives asked for trivial details, like his background, but from the start they had been calling him 'Mr. Orihara', so they must have at least known his details to some degree before conducting the interview.

He was out on a walk by himself, as he was wont to do, and 'some lunatic slasher' suddenly attacked him.

Izaya adamantly continued to assure the detectives that this was the truth.

“Please, not for me, but for the sake of those who live in this town – so that they can live here in safety – please quickly catch that lunatic.”

In retrospect, perhaps he shouldn't have been grinning so widely while he said all of this.

Izaya Orihara knew the assailant, not as “an unknown somebody”, but as a man called Jinnai Yodogiri.

Of course, this was because the man had taken the time to call Izaya and tell him so, before stabbing him.

However, he didn't tell that part of the story to the detectives.

He wanted to avoid any stupid commotion that might ensue when they asked about his relation to that man. Also he didn't believe that Jinnai was the type of guy to be so easily caught by the police.

Izaya had thought he might be able to get away with his 'innocent victim' act, but he had no way to confirm if that business district had CCTV cameras installed, or if there were any witnesses.

If he made a bad move under those circumstances, things could get hairy later on if he was found out.

But of course, it was too late to worry about that.

Izaya's mouth formed a bitter smile as he remembered the looks that the detectives were giving him.

It was not the look of a person feeling sympathy for a poor victim. It was the ever vigilant gaze of an unrelenting hunter.

I can probably assume that this means they found the knife in the hidden pocket of my coat.

The detectives hadn't brought it up, but if it came to it, they could likely charge Izaya for breaking the Arms Control Law.

He may have presently been playing the victim, but that didn't change the fact that in the eyes of the police, he was a suspicious character.

I guess I should get out of this place tonight.

He had learnt about the state of his wounds during the very first check up.

Miraculously, there were no significant injuries to any internal organs. For now, there is no way to tell whether the attacker was aiming for them or not.

If I'm unlucky, I might end up owing a debt to Shinra for the first time in a while...

Izaya's face formed a sickly, bitter smile as he imagined leaving the care of his wounds in the hands of that friend of his, the underground doctor.

Not even that guy can tell the future.

Upon thinking this far, it looked as though the nurse had finished her check up.

“Ok, I'm all done now. You're looking a lot better, at this rate we should be able to discharge you fairly soon.”

Izaya returned a businesslike smile to the young, smiling nurse.

“Well that's a shame isn't it? This hospital's service is so cosy I'd started to hope that I might be able to stay for a little longer.”

“Complimenting me won't get you anywhere, you know. At any rate, I wonder if you're recovering so quickly because you're young... You were so lively, even on the day after you were stabbed with a knife!”

“That's all thanks to you and the other staff.”

Even though he showed a smile on the outside, inside, Izaya was far from serene.

Naturally, he was still feeling pain from the wound, but it was the words of the nurse that brought that man's face back into his mind.

In this world, there are even monsters like him, who can only be stabbed about 5 millimetres deep.

As he thought about that old friend of his, who always wears a bartender uniform, he casually queried the nurse.

“Come to think of it, when I was stabbed, was there anything about it on the news, or in the paper?”

“...Mm. Now that you ask, I think I remember seeing something on 'We're Rolling! Morning News'. On that TV King channel. I'm pretty sure your name even came up... Is that a problem?”

“... I see. No problem, I just thought that I may have worried somebody.”

TV King, huh?

TV King, the local broadcast station for the Empire TV Corporation.

'We're Rolling! Morning News' is one of Empire TV's nationally broadcast news shows.

Upon confirming that his news had flowed all across eastern Japan, Izaya had one immediate concern.

So...

If I assume that this news was broadcast this morning...

Those who are fastest to mobilise, should be arriving here any time now...

♂♀

May 6th, 2AM

The hospital after lights-out, was frighteningly quiet.

Here, Izaya lay on his bed, quietly waiting.

Well then.

Who will it be?...

Or was my intuition off the mark?

Everything that Izaya had caused before he had been stabbed floated into his mind.

Supplying information to that Russian duo, while really trying to use them to get rid of two monstrous hindrances. Creating hostility between that bartender uniformed beast and the Awakusu Famiglia, and trying to remove the demon-blade-wielding girl from the stage completely.

Simultaneous to this plan, he was had also been flickering around between the Awakusu Famiglia, Asuki Group and varying gangs, like a bat.

Some people may have even been aware of the way that he used the granddaughter of the Awakusu Famiglia boss.

Aside from all of this, in his work as an Information Broker, he had provoked a lot of grudges against himself in the past. All while taking hold of the weaknesses of countless amounts of people.

In essence, this man could never create anything himself.

In essence, the Information Brokers usually used by police or underground organisations are likely the barkers at a cabaret club, or the bodyguard of a bar.

Mostly, they are people who work in occupations that allow them to naturally acquire information, like shady hostess clubs, and treat information brokerage as a kind of side-job.

But Izaya is not like them.

He would connect all of those 'part-time' brokers, and sometimes even control them himself, and turn all of the information of that city into network almost like a spider's web.

He would manipulate that web, and all of the information within it, in order to stir the atmosphere of the city.

This man could never create anything himself.

But, he could make money.

Izaya understood.

He understood that what he did – passing around rumours and then demanding money for them – was a vile line of work.

He also knew that this world was teeming with people even more despicable, who would rejoice in handing over money to somebody like him, just to hear the weaknesses.

This was simply his way of living. It was not, however, his entire goal in life.

Izaya Orihara's goal in life was simple – To love all human beings.

In his own way, in a way that only he could appreciate.

Now then, I wonder who it will be...

In this dim hospital room, lit only by what leaked in from under the door, and the stars in the window. In this completely silent place, the young man broke into a broad smile.

Maybe he will be the first to come running over here after seeing the news.

Thinking about that monster in the bartender's vest only brought about unpleasant memories, but his expression softened nonetheless.

It might be nice if he came raging through the hospital and ended up spending years behind bars for his heinous crimes...

That is, if I survive of course.

If not him, then perhaps Anri Sonohara?

She could probably eviscerate me easily while I'm like this.

Or maybe somebody unexpected, like Masaomi Kida, or Namie Yagiri will be the first?

Possibly those two Russians?

I can't rule out the possibility of a bullet from the Awakusu being my first visitor, either...

Of course, if nobody came, that in itself would be acceptable. I'd have to savour my good luck.

Izaya's heart was fluttering with excitement, like that of a child on the day before an excursion.

The injury to his stomach throbbed in sync with his rising heartbeat, but even that pain was only serving to spice up the situation even further for him right now.

After an hour of this had passed, when even Izaya was finally starting to feel drowsy, a certain strange noise entered his ears.

They've come.

It was not the sound of the night-shift nurse, but the fine footsteps of somebody trying to keep their existence unknown.

However they were not able to completely erase their own sound, and it resounded in Izaya's ears as a pleasant rhythm.

Who will it be?

If it were him, he wouldn't be sneaking around like this, and that Russian duo would never make a sound in the first place.

In that case, it must be someone from the Awakusu, or perhaps the Masaomi kid.

As Izaya thought this, the door to his hospital room slowly opened.

And then, a shadow slowly wriggled its way into the room.

...?

A girl with a dark shadow covering her face appeared.

Despite the dark downcast look on her face, the girl gazed intensely at Izaya, who was bathed in the starlight.

“I’ve finally... Found you...”

In response to this girl with an expression filled with complicated emotions: hatred, and the joy of finally encountering her enemy.

“Umm... Ah...”

Izaya tilted his head to the side, and murmured in a deeply confused sounding voice.

“..... Who are you?”



Everyday Life A – Tryst Bolero

May 5th, Morning, Somewhere in Shinjuku.

“... So he didn't come back after all.”

The woman murmured this as she stood in front of the boiling hot pot.

The woman with sleek black hair fluttering slightly in the steam rising from the hot pot in front of her.

This woman – Namie Yagiri – thought about the yet-to-return master of this apartment, in a certain multi-purpose building situated close to the Shinjuku Central Park...

... But that lasted only a few seconds.

“Today's stew is a lot better than I thought it would be. If he isn't going to come home, perhaps I should take some to Seiji.”

The person who came to mind as she checked the flavour of the broth with a small tasting plate, was her most beloved boy, whom she had left in Ikebukuro.

As she imagined tackling the stew with the one she most loved, Seiji, Namie's usual stiff expression turned just slightly pink.

Seeing her in this way, one may conclude that this woman was quite childish for her age.

Unless they knew her 'most-beloved' was actually her biological brother.

Unless they knew that the love she felt was not familial love, but the raw passion that one may feel for the opposite sex.

Namie turned off the heat for the stew, and picked up the TV remote.

Even sitting down on the sofa, she was captivating, and although she herself didn't realise it, she radiated glamour across the otherwise empty room.

What is this.

This TV is even bigger than the one in his last apartment, isn't it?

She turned her head slightly, and scowled at her torpid looking surroundings.

Namie acted like she lived there, but the fact was, it hadn't even been 2 days since she had arrived at the apartment.

Originally, she had been living in a different apartment in Shinjuku as a secretary for an information broker.

But that apartment was currently unoccupied, due to various circumstances.

The information broker had prepared this apartment as a hiding place from a certain bartender uniform wearing man. But, for some reason the broker in question was currently hiding his existence even from Namie herself.

He had said that he would contact her once, at night time, but that call never came.

“That guy is missing at this important time, so maybe he got caught and beaten to death by his little buddy.”

She murmured this to herself as she switched TV channels repeatedly.

As she watched the fortune telling segment of a program she liked, Namie suddenly thought about her little brother's face, and her own face became enchantingly expressionless.

However in the next moment, she heard a very familiar name coming from the TV.

“... Mr. Orihara, on a travel holiday from Tokyo, is now bleeding from his abdomen – ”

...What!?

A sudden, shocking development was coming from the TV's speakers.

Orihara... Izaya?!

I must have misheard, or it could be a different person with the same surname.

Her curiosity piqued, she quietly listened to the announcer's next words.

“... According to eye-witnesses, Mr. Orihara suddenly collapsed while bleeding profusely, on the road of a shopping centre nearby the station. Mr. Orihara is currently receiving treatment in a local hospital, and is thought to have suffered a stab wound to his abdomen. The police believe this to be the crime of a random roadside slasher, but are waiting until Mr. Orihara recovers to ask him for details – “

“Ehhh...”

Upon seeing the on-screen text saying “Seriously Wounded: Izaya Orihara”, Namie's thoughts were confirmed, and she let out that quiet exclamation.

The news hadn't included a picture of the victim, but the Izaya they were talking about was most likely the very same Izaya who she was currently under the employment of. There couldn't be too many people with the exact same name as him in this area.

However, even upon seeing the name of her employer spreading all across Japan on the news, Namie's face remained completely apathetic.

So, he got himself stabbed.

Namie thought this to herself, then changed the channel.

She tried to find further confirmation on many other channels, but they were only airing idol shows or early morning anime, nothing particularly newsworthy.

Well, I suppose it isn't all that surprising, he probably just got into a fight with one of his little punk friends....

Yeah, must have been something like that.

As his assistant, Namie understood fully well just how much trouble Izaya was apt to get himself into.

Even if she would have preferred not to, she understood that much. But she also liked to prevent getting herself caught up in any of that trouble, so she had tried hard to become particularly sensitive to any information regarding it.

Still, she could think of so many suspects that she couldn't really see this as being something out of the ordinary.

...

Her cell number was registered in Izaya's phone as 'Pizza Store', so even if the police searched his phone, she probably wouldn't be receiving a call from them. Surely they wouldn't go as far as to verify every single phone number in his cell phone, one by one, even if he had been murdered. No, they wouldn't go that far for an assault resulting in injury then, would they?

Ah.

More importantly, I wonder if he'll be ok?

Namie had realised that although it may be a simple injury now, within the next few days, it could turn into murder.

Seeing as this had all been broadcast, with Izaya being taken to a hospital somewhere near the scene of the crime... If that young bartender that Izaya is so crazy about saw it... Or if some other rival of his saw it.

As she realised that her employer may be in serious danger of losing his life – Namie said to herself with a serious face.

“Either way... I take it this means that from today onwards, I can have a small holiday?”

By the time she had turned off the gas stove, and put a lid on the barely eaten stew, she had already driven the face of her employer into the back of her mind.

In fact, perhaps the entire problem had been completely erased from her mind, including his prolonged safety (or lack thereof).

“Seiji...”

As she said that to herself, Namie looked out of the window into the night, as if in a trance.

Almost as if she could see her beloved little brother somewhere in that night scenery.

♂♀

May 6th, noon, somewhere in Ikebukuro, an apartment building facade.

Somewhere in that girl's face, there was a deep, hidden beauty.

Her face, and her glossy black hair had a certain foreign aura about them.

She was a girl who, more than just seeming different from most Japanese, almost seemed different from most humans, and gave off the feeling of a painting.

Surrounding her neck like a choker, was a conspicuous, strange scar.

It was as if, through some bizarre surgery, a once severed head had been reattached at the neck.

She was such a suspicious existence that if one stood next to her, they may start to worry that they had become lost in some fantasy world.

There are probably some who have fallen in love at first sight over this feeling.

But –

“Good morning! Seiji!”

– with that endlessly bright voice, she manages to completely ruin the atmosphere that she normally gives off.

Her voice was like that of somebody with not a care in the world, who believes that the entire world is her ally.

The young man exiting the apartment building shows a light smile as he replies to that voice.

“Good morning, Mika.”

The young man she called Seiji, although he was covering himself in casual clothes, had the kind of face that gave away the fact that he was still in senior high school.

On the other hand, the girl that he called Mika may have looked young, but any who saw her would get the impression that she was somehow more of an adult than in reality.

That is, of course, while she was not talking.

“Where will we go today? Anywhere is fine as long as I can be with you, Seiji!”

Innocent words.

Said in a pure voice.

They were words that one would not often hear even between newly-formed couples, and it had already been over a year now since Mika and Seiji had started dating.

When they had just met, Mika spoke to Seiji in exceedingly formal words, but Seiji requested that she stop, and so she now addressed him entirely naturally.

In that girl's eyes were love, hope, and an adamant belief in her relationship with her partner, almost as if they had met only minutes ago, and it was a meeting of fate.

However, the young man himself was extremely composed, and approached the girl's passionate gaze like he hadn't even noticed it.

“Hmm let's see... How about we go see a movie today?”

Seiji gave a soft smile, and gently placed his hand on the girl's shoulder.

♂♀

May 5th, noon, unknown restaurant.

A restaurant that exuded a high-class atmosphere, located in a basement area, in the vicinity of a large electrical appliance store.

A restaurant mainly used for small business meetings, or for friends and lovers to spend their time together in comfort.

The bright voice of a high-school girl echoed in one corner of that luxurious atmosphere.

“And then, when he put his hand on her shoulder, Mika-senpai went 'Kyaa' and started clinging onto Seiji-senpai's arm! Seiji-senpai said 'Come on, you're making it hard for me to walk.', but he didn't look all that annoyed! Really, those two and their little lover's trysts...”

“..... (Passion) Lovey-dovey.....”

The energetic girl with the glasses was interrupted by the dreary sounding girl.

Apart from their hairstyles and eye-wear, these two girls looked exactly the same, although they had completely different moods.

The one listening in on the story of the story of those strange twins was –

Namie, dressed in a female business suit.

“.....”

Namie was quiet in the face of those twins, speaking as if it was any of their business.

Overwhelmingly silent.

“... Namie-san?”

The girl in the glasses had noticed this, and enquired with her head turned to the side.

Namie's expression showed no sign of any emotion in particular.

However, in those eyes was a stare with enough intimidation to freeze the surroundings. Even that carefree glasses-girl felt chills down her spine.

“Namie-san, what's wrong?”

“Absolutely nothing. Continue your story, Kururi Orihara, Mairu Orihara.”

“Ah, it's kinda scary when you call us by our full names, Namie-san!”

“..... (Fear) So scary.....”

The twins huddled together upon realising the aura floating around their conversation partner.

In order to keep down the cold fear slowly rising up inside of her, the bespectacled twin, Mairu, forced a smile and continued her 'report'.

“And so, after that they went to a movie theatre in the city to watch “Vampire Ninja Saizou Carmilla – Beginning”, and still are! Right now! Ah, but... It might be about to finish, maybe?”

“..... (Merely) 10 more minutes.....”

“I see.”

Namie, after making this indifferent response, gracefully drank from her coffee cup.

“Well, for now, I appreciate your observation and report. Here's a small reward for your efforts.”

Without looking at all grateful, Namie took out a small card.

It was a cash-card for some bank.

“I've tried to make it untraceable, but I can't guarantee it 100%, so once you've withdrawn it all, make sure to dispose of this card. The PIN is 0164. As promised, it holds 300,000 yen.”

“I've been wondering since the last time you asked us a favour, but is it really ok to be giving us this much?”

Rather than feeling bad about it, Mairu was genuinely curious about this.

“Of course. Why, do you have a problem with it?”

Namie, seemingly unable to understand the problem, tilted her head as she asked this. This action showed off her adult side, but the expression on her face could easily freeze the spines of any who saw it.

“But, I mean... Getting this much just to stand around watching your little brother, then reporting to you...”

“What a stupid question. To begin with, I could never put a price on being able to hear everything about Seiji's movements. You can just think of that money as being the wages I take from Izaya Orihara in the time that I save by listening to your reports. You don't have to worry about it.”

Hearing this from Namie, the twins quietly whispered to each other.

“Izaya-nii is paying Namie-san big time for her work, huh?”

“..... (Trial) It's his first time (Concern) He probably didn't know.....”

Although Namie had heard the girls, without a shred of agitation in her voice, she simply, indifferently, without any feeling, merely continued to speak.

“If you ask me, I deserve much more than that. Babysitting your moody big brother is a much harder job than I had imagined it would be.”

After saying so, Namie suddenly realised something, and asked a question of the twins in front of her.

“You two... Have you not heard about what happened to Izaya Orihara?”

The response –

“Ahh, our bro went and got himself stabbed, right?”

“..... (Early) This morning..... (Bureau) the police..... (Informed) contacted us.....”

“Our dad and mum are both overseas for work, so they thought it would be easiest to contact our place. I said 'Tell him to spit on it, and he'll be fine! Just let him be.', but the policewoman on the phone got angry and said 'You shouldn't talk that way about your precious family.'”

“..... (Fool) Isn't that obvious.....”

Kururi scolded her sister, but her face showed no genuine worry or anger over her family member being attacked.

Perhaps to those two, their big brother was not actually that important of an existence.

Namie had absolutely no interest in their family matters, so she decided to change the topic as quickly as possible.

“..... Anyway, there is one small detail of your report that I would like to confirm.”

“Huh? What? Our report may have been a little subjective, but we didn't make anything up!”

“..... That girl... What did Seiji call her, usually?”

“Huh?”

Not understanding where this was leading, the twins looked at each other again in confusion.

Without really thinking, Mairu gave her answer.

She went and said it...

“Erm, I believe he called her by her first name, 'Mika', usually. And Mika-senpai herself is weirdly formal around everyone else, but lately she has become pretty frank when she's around Seiji-senpai. I only heard this from some other seniors, but it seems like recently, because it's been a year since they started dating, they might have started dropping honorifics in commemoration.....”

Mairu was trying her best to continue her story, but she was suddenly interrupted by a strange sound.

'Crak'

Along with a dry snapping sound, the coffee cup in Namie's hand started falling.

The cup bounced off Namie's knee, straight to the floor.

As the cup was already empty, nothing spilled onto Namie's clothes, or the floor.

But Kururi and Mairu's focus was not on that, as their eyes were concentrating on Namie's hand.

This was because in her hand, were the crumbled remains of the former grip of her cup.

“We deeply apologise, dear customer! Are you injured at all?”

Seeing the fallen cup, an employee of the restaurant rushed over to their table. They seemed to believe that it must have been some fault in the cup, and that the fault had caused the cup to break all by itself.

“..... It's ok, don't worry about it.”

Namie maintained her cold expression as she shooed away the employee who was still trying to apologise after cleaning up the cup, and slowly drank from her glass of water.

As usual, she moved with grace, but Kururi and Mairu had already realised that the cup hadn't broken because it had a crack in it.

They knew that Namie had cleanly broken the handle of the ceramic cup to pieces, with just her finger strength.

“Na.... Namie-san?”

“..... (Mystery) Are you ok.....?”

The twins, feeling the aura of hatred - so strong that it was almost solid - in front of them, moved slightly away from Namie, and questioned her.

However, it was hard to tell if Namie was even listening to the girls, as she glared at some far away place, and said under her breath.

<http://posting.org/image/inmcoijup/>

“..... never.....”

“Eh?”

“.....”

The next thing the girls heard from Namie was in some ways, an obvious truth, but from it they could strongly, strongly feel the madness of the woman in front of them.

“Seiji..... Seiji has never called me by my first name..... Never.....”

The girls could clearly feel it.

The strong killing intent, and bottomless jealousy that ran through the woman's words.

That, and the fact that it was likely something that no ordinary person would ever be able to understand.

♂♀

30 minutes later, at a cinema lobby.

['I shall explain!

Saizou Carmilla is a vampire ninja!

With a vampire father, and a human mother, he is an Agent of Darkness, who utilises ninja techniques!

While detesting the vampiric blood that flows inside of him, he continues to fight the forces of the Dark Side, all to protect the peace of Neo Tokyo!

After saving Edo – the town that would become Neo Tokyo – in the previous two films, this third film has him travel through a Time Slip for the second time!

His destination, a medieval Romania!

A meeting with his father, who in this time, still hated humans.

A new enemy appears.

Passing through space and time, on the edge of life and death, Saizou learns the truth about himself –']

While reading this on the first page of a movie pamphlet, Seiji Yagiri spoke to the girl beside him.

“Did you like it?”

“It was soo amazing! Being able to sit next to you that whole time, Seiji!”

With a naïve smile on her face, Mika Harima linked her wrist around Seiji's arm.

“I wasn't asking about that, you know.”

Though he was confused by Mika's response, he still showed a thin smile as he looked into her eyes.

He wasn't smiling about what she had said to him.

He was smiling because he could see on her face, that she was happy.

♂♀

Seiji Yagiri was a man who lived only for love.

He was the kind of man who would face a tank, bare-handed, for the sake of the girl he loved.

If he was told that he must gouge out his own heart in exchange for that girl's life, – of course, assuming that this was actually true – he was likely to do so, without hesitating.

The smiling girl clinging to his arm, innocent, yet with some sort of dark side, was not the one who he loved like that.

To put it more accurately, it was her 'face'.

What Seiji was in love with, was the part of the body known as Mika Harima, usually called the head.

If the salesperson working at the ticket counter of this movie theatre had the exact same head, Seiji would probably love her just as easily.

Now, is something like that really love?

There are likely some people who would be able to say they only love girls for their face, of course.

But, putting aside whether or not that could be called love, Seiji's case could be said to be slightly different than just loving a girl for her exterior looks.

He wasn't judging her on her entire body's exterior.

For example, if a girl much more beautiful than Mika appeared before him, Seiji would most likely not be taken in by her.

Seiji, after having his entire life turned upside down for a single girl's head, and through many twists and turns, was currently dating Mika Harima as her partner and lover.

That is, until he could find the actual owner of that face that he had been searching for.

Seiji Yagiri continued to act out this false love.

So that every time he looked at Mika Harima, he could remember the actual woman that he loved.

He wholly believed that this was his own love.

Mika Harima was a girl who lived only for love.

What she loved most, was being in love with somebody.

This meant she didn't really think about the circumstances of her partner.

For the sake of her own passion, she could easily sneak into the house of her partner, and would even consider setting up bugs in the room of her dearly beloved.

Even if Seiji was to fall in love with another girl, she would probably not hold a grudge.

Even if Seiji was to throw violent verbal abuse at her, she would probably not hate him.

Even under those circumstances, she would continue to love, as the most important thing to her was to be in love.

Far, far more important than the feelings of the object of her love, Seiji.

And so, she would continue to love Seiji Yagiri. From the bottom of her heart, with endless purity, to an alarming extent.

– “I don't love you.”

She could remember them even now, clearly inside her head.

Those words of confession, said to her by Seiji.

– “But, as long as I am looking at you, I can remember my love for her, and my determination. So I will accept your love. That is, until the day that I take her back.”

After this, Seiji held her close.

He completely embraced her.

It was enough.

Just that, was enough for her to love Seiji Yagiri.

He accepted me for who I am.

He accepted my love for what it is.

And so, she thought.

She thought about the girl that he loved through her.

The original 'owner' of this face.

She would find that woman along with Seiji, and right in front of him, she would crush that head, and consume it entirely, without leaving behind a drop of blood, or a strand of hair. If she did that, Seiji's love would belong to her.

Seiji may end up killing her in a fit of rage.

She knew that was a possibility.

But something so trivial did not matter to her.

The girl called Mika Harima believed this, from the bottom of her heart.

She had faith.

She had faith that those feelings, that an ordinary person would believe to be abnormal, were truly love.

And the owner of that head that was swimming in the thoughts of those two lovers, was itself a slightly strange existence.

After all, the head of this woman itself was...

... Continuing to live, even while completely separated from the body of its 'owner'.

♂♀

She was not a human.

She was a type of fairy from Scotland and Ireland commonly referred to as a 'Dullahan', who would go around visiting the residences of people who were close to passing away, and inform them of the time they had left.

She would visit them while carrying her own head under her arm, and riding a coach driven by a headless horse known as the Coiste-Bodhar. Any who were foolish enough to open their doors as she passed, would have a bucket of blood poured over them... This was the dreaded legend of the Dullahan, which had been passed down throughout the history of Europe along with that of the Banshee.

And the head originally carried around by that knight, was Seiji's one and only love.

One year ago, Seiji had stolen an 'experiment specimen' from the pharmaceutical company owned by his family.

It was that which he had come to admire as a symbol of beauty, since his childhood – the head of the Dullahan.

Through the many twists and turns of life, he had eventually ended up parting with the head.

In its place, before him appeared Mika Harima, a girl who had been made to have the exact same face as that Dullahan, through surgery.

Mika, who was so close to that visage he loved, thanks to the power of plastic.

Seiji was unable to distinguish between those two faces.

At the same moment that he realised this, he heard those scornful words that broke his heart to pieces.

– “Well, it's not like you could tell the difference between the original and the fake, so...”

He could not remember whose words they were.

It may have been somebody that Seiji didn't even know.

But those words became his bonds, and completely tore his ideas of love to pieces.

– “To be frank, this just means that the 'love' you thought you had for that head was pretty low grade, right? Good effort.”

At that moment, Seiji's feelings were broken apart.

However, he would not give up on them.

What was once broken, could be mended.

The reason he was keeping Mika by his side, was so that he would not forget those feelings.

And, as a warning to himself.

In Seiji's eyes, Mika Harima was nothing more than a relay point – a terminal, through which he could show his love for that face.

And today, Seiji was continuing to act out this false love with a girl he had no feelings for, all in order to confirm that his love was the real deal.

♂♀

A few minutes later, Ikebukuro.

After exiting the movie theatre, the two had decided to take a stroll around the city.

Without any real destination, the two walked down Sunshine 60 Road, in the direction of the Tokyo Hands building.

Perhaps because it was a holiday, the town was more lively than usual.

The people of urban Tokyo came in many different colours, depending on the part of the city you were in.

Like with Shibuya and Akihabara, these 'colours' were difficult to put into words, but Shinjuku and Ikebukuro each had their own types of crowds, that each had a different atmosphere about them.

Seiji and Mika were often floating around amongst that peculiar atmosphere, but today, the excitement of the holidays easily hid that strange feeling from sight.

“What did you think about Saizou's time paradox thing?”

“Hmm, well... It was the same in the second movie, but it didn't look like the future had really changed all that much, so maybe that wasn't the real past, but that of a parallel world? Even then, we got to see a bit about the past of Saizou's father..... That's what I thought, anyway. How about you Seiji?”

“Ahh..... Yeah I thought it might be that too.”

“Really!? Awesome!”

Seeing Namie smiling brightly, Seiji casually said something pertaining to their normal lives.

“..... Seeing monsters and vampires and stuff, reminds me of that.”

“..... That head, you mean.”

“Yeah.”

They may have been in the middle of a busy city, but Seiji didn't hesitate to bring up that conversation.

Again, the young man brought his eyes to the face of the girl beside him.

This girl, Mika Harima, was certainly not a plain idiot.

Seiji had come to understand this.

His first impression of her inner personality, was that Mika was a stalking fool of a girl, who didn't care to listen to what people said to her.

But after he started dating her, he began to understand that while the deviant, perverted side was one aspect of Mika Harima, she also could be cunning, and intellectual when she needed to be.

But there was a lot more that he still didn't understand about her.

Why me?

Seiji was thinking.

Certainly, he had saved that girl and her friend from a group of delinquents around a year ago.

He had also heard that before this, during their exam period, she fell in love with him at first sight.

But, even so...

Even so...

Just because she liked him at first sight, and he saved her from some losers.

Or even because she believed in some sort of 'fate'.

Was all of that truly worth putting her life on the line in so many ways?

Seiji had once sliced this very girl's neck.

In absolute cold blood.

Even then, Mika Harima continued to show her affection for Seiji Yagiri.

Though she was half-forced into it, through mostly her own will, she had a fake scar sewn in around her neck. One that was likely to be there her whole life. She had the face given to her by her parents completely remodeled.

And she didn't regret it in the least.

This was what Seiji couldn't understand.

If he was asked if he was able to put his life on the line for the sake of love, he would answer 'yes'.

But he had never actually been in a situation dangerous enough that he could test that. Thinking on it now, he had been in real danger of death once before, when he picked a fight with a guy wearing a bartender

uniform, but at the time he was so adrenaline-filled that he didn't have the freedom to be thinking about his own safety.

For example, if he was put through some terrible torture, would he still be able to keep his belief in love?

He believed that he could, but he couldn't know something like that for sure without actually having received such torture.

But that girl – Mika Harima, would likely continue to love him through whatever torture she faced.

That was what he felt.

Why?

At this point, an extremely conceited person might reach the conclusion that 'That's just how amazing I am'. Or maybe they would just be content that their love remained mutual. If it were some half-baked relationship, they might even harbour some fear of her love.

However, to Seiji, Mika was nothing more than a simple relay point for his love.

Looking at it objectively, one can find nothing but problems with this situation.

What does that girl even see in someone like me?

Up till now, Seiji had thought this several times.

But every time he started worrying about Mika's unknown motives, he would remember his real objective, and think 'No point worrying about that' while driving it out of his mind.

Again and again, he would do this.

He had even asked Mika directly before, when his mind was dwelling on it too much.

Upon doing so, without fail she would answer 'It's because it's you, Seiji-san!'.

Lately she had become a bit more frank with him, and would instead say 'Coz it's you, Seiji!', but either way, that wasn't a very helpful answer.

Though it had been more than a year since they started dating, today Seiji asked her the same question.

“I keep saying this, but you are not the one I love, Mika.”

“..... I know.”

“If you know, then why do you still love me?”

“Because it's you. I don't need any other reasons.”

As he thought, he got the same answer as always.

While breathing out a sigh, he decided to put that question to rest for now, and moved onto another subject.

“It's been more than a year now since my sister went missing..... I think she probably knows where that head has gone to.”

“..... So you're worried about your big sister then?”

“Huh? Why?”

“I mean... She's probably being chased by a lot of people..... She could be in real danger right now.....”

Mika rarely said anything so commendable, and Seiji had a bitter smile on his face as he answered her.

“My sister isn't that fragile. On top of being tough, she's actually one of the bad guys.”

Not really wanting to continue that conversation, Seiji cracked his neck, looked at the surrounding scenery, and muttered.

“I guess we should go for lunch soon, huh?”

As they stood on a street full of fast food stores, cafes, and restaurants, with side streets packed with Taiwanese food and ramen shops, Seiji placed his hand on Mika's head, and softly said to her.

“Is there anything particular you want to eat?”

“Whatever you like is fine with me, Seiji!”

That was another ordinary exchange for those two.

I think I remember seeing it written in some book once, 'Girls that lack any sense of independence are detestable'.

Well, whatever.

If it were the real head talking, I would accept any type of personality.

While thinking those strange, idealistic thoughts to himself, Seiji decided on their destination based on his own mood, like always.

“Well, I guess I could go for some sushi once in a while.”

And so, they turned towards a shop next to a bowling alley, called 'Russian Sushi'.

♂♀

While they moved towards Russian Sushi, Seiji's eyes were drawn to a certain point.

“..... Huh?”

Upon seeing a familiar face walking in front of him, Seiji raised his voice without thinking.

“Mikado... Isn't that Mikado?”

“Eh.”

The one who turned towards them with a puzzled look in his face, was a boy who looked like a child.

The boy he had called Mikado, smiled after seeing Seiji and Mika's faces.

“Ah, hey Seiji-kun, Mika-san. You on a date?”



“Yeah..... Huh? What's that on your face?”

The boy who was their schoolmate at Raira Private Academy, Mikado Ryuugamine had a band-aid stuck to his face, and part of it was slightly swollen and bruised.

“Mm.... I had bit of a tumble. I fell straight down the stairs of my apartment.”

Seiji had a strange sense of discomfort about Mikado as he smiled and laughed, but seeing Mikado's face, he decided that even if he asked about it he would be unlikely to get an answer, so instead he sent back the appropriate response.

“I see... You should be more careful, man.”

“Thanks.”

Mikado showed his gratitude, and still with an innocent smile, said softly.

“..... Still, it's been over a year since then, hasn't it?”

“Hm....? Ahh.”

Seiji had realised what Mikado was talking about.

There was a time, when Seiji was still in possession of that head, that he had caused a lot of trouble for this boy. To be exact, it was his big sister who had driven Mikado into that dangerous situation... But whether or not Seiji had anything to do with it, he was felt shame for his past self.

“I'm... really thankful for what you did back then.”

“I didn't do anything. You have everybody in Dollars to thank for that.”

“I guess so.”

“You and Mika-san are part of Dollars as well now, so don't worry about it.”

.....?

At this point, Seiji realised what felt wrong.

It's pretty rare for Mikado to be talking like this about Dollars.

Dollars, a group similar to the Colour Gangs, who chose to say their team colour was 'Colourless', and who operated around Ikebukuro.

Seiji knew that the boy in front of him was part of Dollars.

He also could somehow tell from the things that happened back then, and from the aura surrounding the boy, that he held a somewhat special position in the group.

But Seiji didn't go as far as to investigate exactly what kind of position he held.

He didn't care, as long he could keep loving that face.

It wasn't because he felt an obligation towards Dollars and Mikado, he just decided that even if he found out that boy's true colours, it probably wouldn't bring him any closer to the location of the head he was searching for.

Since then, he had come across Mikado every now and then – for some reason, he was even invited to that party in the apartment of that Headless Rider, and they seemed to have some strange sort of colliding fates. They were not very close friends, but their relationship was basically that of slightly intriguing schoolmates.

However, even with their relationship, or perhaps because of their relationship, Seiji harboured some suspicions.

Suspicions about why the boy in front of him had said the name Dollars.

“Yeah..... I won't forget anything that happened that night either.”

Exactly who had Mikado directed those words towards...

As Seiji thought that he was probably directing them at himself, Mikado had already taken a step back, and was waving his hand at them.

“I'll cya later Seiji-kun, Mika-san. If you have any problems, feel free to talk to me whenever.”

“Huh? Ahh... Ok then.”

Confused at being told something like that, Seiji gave such a weak response, but...

“Mikado-kun.”

In Seiji's stead, Mika strongly spoke that boy's name, without her usual smile.

“Eh?”

“You'd better not make Anri-chan cry, ok?”

“.....”

“Huh?”

Mikado fell into silence, and Seiji showed a look of pure confusion.

Seeing those two, Mika's serious expression fell away, and she couldn't help but laugh as she waved back to Mikado.

“I'll see you at school, kay?”

“Ah..... yeah. Cya later.”

After seeing off Mikado with a slight smile, Seiji and Mika continued their walk towards Russian Sushi.

“..... Was there something.... off about him just now?”

Without any change to her visage, Mika looked up at Seiji as he calmly asked this question.

“Yeah. He somehow didn't seem like the usual Mikado-kun, huh?”

“His wound looked pretty bad too, I wonder if there's something wrong with him?”

Seiji looked back at the direction Mikado had left, but Mika took his hand and pulled him back on the path to the sushi shop.

“Well, there's no point in us worrying about him! Let's get going.”

“Eh.....? Ahh, well. I guess you're right.”

I guess I can ask him about it at school if something happens.

Seiji settled with this, and let himself be dragged by Mika down the road of Sunshine 60.

All while feeling something was slightly out of place about the unusually assertive Mika.

♂♀

Watching them from the shadows, was a single woman.

“..... Seiji.....”

Namie, watching her little brother's back with a look approaching ecstasy.

Seeing Seiji looking quite well, her face brightened in relief, and her body was brimming with excitement.

Ahh..... That damn girl. How can she look so cute, when I can't even see her face.

Watching the figure of her little brother's back, it almost seemed to Namie like he was radiating light.

Naturally, on this road there were at least ten other young men who looked almost exactly the same as Seiji from afar, but after coming to this location given to her by the twins, Namie was able to spot her little brother in less than a second.

Of course, this meant that at the same time, the girl walking next to him also entered her field of vision.

“..... Mika..... Harima.....”

As she muttered that name, Namie lightly bit the inside of her cheek.

She bit until eventually she broke through the flesh, and the taste of blood spread throughout her mouth.

As she started to smell the scent of metal in the back of her mouth, Namie silently narrowed her eyes.

This taste..... The blood of that thieving cat will taste the same.....

It appeared as if the image of biting into Mika's neck was running through her mind.

Namie was biting her own cheek in order to eventually make that delusion a reality.

While only making worse her lunatic love for her brother and hatred for her rival in love, Namie continued tailing the two.

“Heeey little lady, you got a second?”

Whether they were hitting on her, or perhaps they were talent scouts of some sort, in the last few minutes, there had been a few men calling her out like this, but –

“..... Nuisance.”

Every time they tried, Namie would say this while looking at them with the cold eyes of a killer.

If she had looked towards them with an angry expression, and scorn in her eyes, the men would likely get angry themselves. Instead, she simply told them the truth, that they were a 'nuisance', in a cold, businesslike voice.

With this, the men would realise.

They would realise that this woman likely would, like it was just part of business, kill a person.

And the fact that they were the target of her 'business'.

“..... Um, so sorry!”

However, the men calling out to her were used to things like this, and as soon as they felt any danger from their target, they would quickly withdraw to go and find a different woman to accost.

As Namie tailed them down the road like that, she confirmed that they had eventually entered a certain sushi shop. Namie then turned around and walked against the flow of the crowd, till she finally left Sunshine 60, for the time being.

As she walked, her eyes held a look of frozen madness, and her body radiated the heat of a passion as hot as magma.

♂♀

Inside Russian Sushi

“Heere's your crab sushi, thanks for waiting. We got raw, we got boiled, we got grilled, we got people, we got the city, we got good food, yes? Crab makes the world go round!”

“Surely you mean 'money makes the world go round'?”

“Ohh, it's no good to be so worried about money at your age! Money generation, yes? But, you're right. If crabs go round, money goes around. The crab of my shop, and the money of my boss switching around, yes? Around and around, like a merry-go-round, yes? Russian crab, and Japanese money, switching around, yes? Sushi-go-round! Lots of profit!”

“.....”

While bringing a crab-filled rice ball to his mouth, Seiji shook his head with a resigned look on his face.

It was a well-known eating spot, known to be eccentric even by Ikebukuro's standards, called 'Russian Sushi'.

In that peculiar atmosphere of Japanese architecture sprinkled with Russian decorations, the Caucasian shopkeeper, and his black employee were doing a fine job of spinning their customers around.

Seiji had come here with Mika many times in the past, so they were well acquainted with the people working there – or so he thought.

“Hey Simon-san, who is that?”

Today, there was an unfamiliar face.

It was a young Caucasian woman, wearing a similar uniform to Simon.

The difference between the two was almost strangely arousing, and her face was cast in such a way that most Japanese people would likely call her 'quite beautiful', however –

On the woman's face was a look filled with displeasure, and she was standing in a corner of the store, not even trying to help. She was glaring into space, with a bloodthirsty look in her eyes, and customers were currently too scared to call out to her to be waited on.

“Ohh, Seiji my young man, are you interested in that girl? That one is called Varona, yes? Taking her home with you, is OK. Young boy, you could have your girlfriend, and a lover. A flower in each hand! Rice gets more delicious when you eat with people you love! 10 people have taken her home with their sushi before, yes?”

Simon has said this as a joke, but hearing it, the woman spoke with some disgust.

“..... Negative. I have no obligation to save your business by selling my body. I will boycott this operation. However, if you're telling me to do this at the request of a client, I shall accede.”

“Ohh, is this one of the Japanese sexual harassment trials? Sexual harassment is bad, yes? People who do that must remove their stomachs! Take out your stomach, and you can not eat sushi any more, you will send me bankrupt!”

After Simon had returned to the kitchen, Seiji continued to watch the woman he had called Varona.

“Hey Seiji, no looking at other women like that!”

With a pout on her face, Mika lightly pulled on Seiji's arm.

“Hm? Ahh, you're right.”

While he agreed with Mika, Seiji had one doubt about the situation.

That's rare.

Normally, she would just think 'I'm cuter, so who cares!' and move on.

Maybe because she's a foreigner?

..... That head was also originally from some other country, so maybe that had her worried.

It's a needless concern, though.

Seiji only had that much concern for the slightly unusual actions of his false lover.

Mika had also moved on, and was as usual clinging to Seiji's arm while eating her lunch.

Mika, who acted like they were an innocent couple who had only just started dating, and Seiji, who dealt with her calmly, and would never be cruel to her.

Although they gave off a strangely fake atmosphere, from a stranger's eyes they would only be seen as a fairly happy couple.

Afterwards, Seiji saw the woman called Varona talking about something with the shop owner, and then walk into the inner room of the shop with a scowl on her face.

But by that point, Seiji had already stopped worrying about her.

“..... But man, isn't he awesome? Yuuhei Hanejima, the guy in all the 'Saizou Carmilla' films. I mean, he's already earning so much that he really doesn't need to act in weird roles like that, but I heard he already gave the OK to appear in the next one!”

“In the next one, I think I heard that his rival, Sasuke Dracul gets revived.”

“Yeah, that's right. I mean, it's a pretty stupid film, but the special make-up they use for Tenjin Zakuroya is pretty awesome, right? I was really glad they used some unique make-up for Ruri Hijiribe in the first one though.”

“That Ruri Hijiribe is dating Yuuhei Hanejima at the moment, right?”

Two people continued this meandering conversation while eating.

“Ahh, even a guy like me can tell that Yuuhei Hanejima is one hot guy. The general population seems pretty divided, but I personally think they're a pretty good couple.”

“Well in my opinion, rather than Yuuhei Hanejima, Seiji is much more – ”

As usual, Mika was starting to turn the conversation into one-sided complimenting, but...

[Mika, your phone. Mika your phone.]

Her phone had started to ring using Seiji's voice as it's ringtone, and Mika grabbed it out of the depths of her bag.

“That ringtone really is a bit creepy, isn't it?”

“Really? I'm perfectly ok with it.”

“When did you even record that, anyway?.....”

Mika turned towards the display of her phone, as Seiji sat beside her grumbling some complaint.

'Private Caller'

Narrowing her eyes at the words displayed, Mika pressed the receive button, and brought the speaker to her ear.

“..... Hello?”

And, from that one phone call, Mika's holiday began a transformation.

“..... Yeah, that's fine. Give me a sec, ok?”

Mika, with a smile on her face, slowly rose from her seat.

“Sorry, Seiji. I got a call from a friend, so I'm heading outside for a second, kay?”

“Ahh, ok then.”

Hearing Seiji's blunt response, Mika waved to him and left the sushi shop, then restarted her phone conversation.

While seeing Mika off with a sideways glance, stared at the sushi menu, and thought.

Mika doesn't get calls from friends very often.

Anri, maybe? Ah probably not, I think I remember seeing her and Mikado talking about needing to buy new phones for some reason or another.

Speaking of which, I don't really understand the relationship between those two.

I know that Mikado likes Anri at least, seeing as I asked him towards the end of our first year at school. But I haven't really asked if anything happened between them since then.

Mikado Ryuugamine was on fairly good terms with Mika's friend, Anri Sonohara.

That, at least, was well known throughout their school, but whether or not they were a couple, seemed like it was a fairly sensitive subject.

They were close enough that students who weren't very close to them would think 'Eh? Mikado and Anri are dating, aren't they?', but not too long ago, there was one other student who was always with them.

Actually, I wonder if Mikado would know why Masaomi ended up having to drop out of school?

Masaomi Kida, Seiji's former schoolmate, who left school at the end of last year.

They weren't in the same class, so Seiji never really had much of a chance to talk to him, but he knew that Masaomi would hang around with Mikado and Anri most of the time.

There had been a rumour floating around the school that he left because he couldn't handle seeing Mikado and Anri sticking together so much, but due to those two never really making their relationship clear, that rumour faded as quickly as it had come. Seiji himself had never believed it from the start, anyway.

But Anri is basically Mika's only true friend, as far as I can tell.

She may have been Mika's friend, but even she never really called Mika very often.

He knew that Anri was only trying to let them have their space out of consideration, and she had never really interrogated Mika about them. But these facts only made this phone call even more unusual.

After a while, Mika came back inside, winked and looked apologetically towards Seiji.

“Sorry Seiji..... I was just discussing something with a friend, and now I kinda have to go meet up with them.”

Mika apologised while bowing her head, as Seiji looked towards her and inquired.

“Mm..... By 'a friend', you mean Anri?”

Probably something like last time, when she was asked to go over and teach them all how to cook fish properly.

To Seiji, who asked this indifferently, Mika smiled and nodded.

“That's right, she said something about needing advice about her family. Really, I'd rather stay with you, Seiji, but.....”

“I don't really mind. I was actually just thinking that you probably need to spend a bit more time on your friends, Mika.”

“Ehh, but as long as I have you Seiji, I don't mind abandoning all of my friends.”

“Don't say stuff like that. Go on, go help her out.”

Seiji said this with a sigh, so Mika sadly lowered her head and answered him

“Ok then, see you tomorrow, Seiji!”

“Yep.”

After that simple exchange, Mika walked up to the counter and placed three 1000 yen bills there, then left the sushi shop at a quick pace.

“Ah, wait. I was gonna pay that, heeeey.”

Seiji grabbed the money from the counter as he hurried to call out to her, but Mika must not have heard him, as she left the shop without stopping.

He started to chase after her, but...

“Heere's your crab and miso soup, thanks for waiting!”

The dark-skinned employee was carrying Seiji's order over to him.

Seiji hesitated for a few seconds.

Oh well, I can just pay her back tomorrow.

And so, he decided not to worry about it, and continued to eat by himself.

♂♀

15 minutes later, unknown area of the city, inside a warehouse.

“..... Hello?”

At the corner of a highway, away from the shopping district.

Mika, after parting ways with Seiji, had entered a building labelled 'Yagiri Pharmaceuticals - Raw Materials Warehouse 3'.

For a warehouse, it was kept quite neat and tidy, so much so that an outsider may even believe it to be some sort of research facility.

On the pure-white facade of the building, there was an entrance, similar to that of a hospital.

However, this was only its outward appearance.

Inside, it was very much a warehouse, with a space about as large as a small gymnasium at its centre, and a corridor surrounding it, lined with a few facilities. These included small, compact, expensive looking rooms, toilets, and even an office kitchen.

The huge space of the warehouse was almost labyrinthine, with its many rooms divided by partitioning screens, which held various raw materials and medical supplies piled around each other.

However, from its current state, with spider webs in its corners, and thick layers of dust, it seemed as if the building may have had very few visitors recently.

There was light shining through the entrance's glass doors from outside of the building, but none of the electric lighting inside was turned on. As the location of the switch for the lights was unknown, the inside of the building remained enveloped in an ominous darkness.

At the entrance area of this building, which was far from the usual hygienic image given by most medical workplaces, Mika continued to call out with a stiff expression on her face.

“..... Heee-llooo-oooo?”

Mika's voice echoed throughout that hospital-like entrance area.

In this place without a reception desk, there stood a large door, through which Mika could see cardboard boxes stacked up like a wall.

Mika took a step towards the door, and looked down the corridors to the left and right, but, at least to the nearest corners she couldn't see any signs of movement. It was as if this place was completely cut off from the rest of the city.

Mika, while staying alert to her surroundings, took one more step through the open door.

As she did –

A clanking sound could be heard echoing through the entrance.

Mika turned around, and saw the figure of a woman, locking the large glass double-doors that were the entrance to the building.

A woman with long black hair flowing down her back, and a sanitary image.

Of course, Mika knew the face of this woman well.

“I've been waiting..... No, I guess you were the one waiting..... Mika Harima.”

Hearing her speaking those relaxed sounding words, Mika thought.

The atmosphere this woman gave off, almost felt like burning ice.

In this way, the emotions packed into Namie's voice were coldly burning up.

“I must apologise. I forced you into seeing a long, long dream..... One that could never come true.”

The emotions enshrouding it were so overwhelmingly clear, that hearing that voice was enough to understand.

However, Mika Harima was not afraid.

Rather, she looked at the woman in front of her as if she was accepting the challenge.

“Long time no see..... Big sis.”

Crck

Crck

Crck

Crck

A strange sound was reverberating around the entrance area.

Mika had recognised it, as the sound of Namie grinding her teeth.

Namie, standing in front of the glass door. Exactly what kind of expression was that woman showing, lit from behind as she was.

Mika could not see from where she was standing, but she didn't really care.

Just from that sound of grinding teeth, one could make a guess at just how much danger was surrounding that woman.

She may have even been smiling – at least on the surface.

Or she may have even been genuinely smiling.

Mika thought that might be what it was.

“One year.....”

The next words that Namie spat towards her, were truly tinted with a some amount of ecstasy.

“It has already been one year, and one month since I disappeared before Seiji's eyes. Since then, we've both been living in dreams. For me, it was a nightmare, yet you had the momentary, fleeting Dream of Rosei..... Ohoh, but I wonder, would one as uncultured as yourself even understand the term 'Rosei's Dream'?”

“..... Please don't just assume I'm uncultured.”

“Oh? Well, personally I can't believe that somebody who tries to force their delusions onto a person who doesn't want them, and who would even do something as shameless as picking a lock to sneak into that person's house, could ever be seen as being a civilised person.”

They were words filled with sarcasm.

But Mika smiled, and responded without a shred of hesitation.

“You were going to dispose of my 'corpse', until you realised that I was alive, and decided to use me and gave me plastic surgery. I don't really think you can talk.”

“.....”

“But really, I'm grateful to you, big sis. Because, thanks to you giving me this face..... Seiji and I were able to be together.”

Crck.

A particularly loud, strange sound echoed around the entrance.

She may have been 5 metres away from Namie, but the killing intent that the woman was releasing was viscously coiling around Mika's body.

However, Mika looked down on Namie with unsettling eyes, and spoke with words filled with provocation towards the woman.

“To begin with, if it means I can't love Seiji the way that I want to, I don't want to be 'cultured'.”

The sound of grinding teeth had already stopped.

Namie had removed her hands from where they had been, on her hips, and slowly raised them overhead.

“..... I'd prefer it if you stopped calling me 'big sis'.....”

The object she was holding in her hands – was a large pair of scissors, usually used for surgery.

“..... And I'd prefer..... if you stopped..... calling Seiji..... by his first name!!!”

As she shouted this, Namie, without a hint of hesitation, threw the scissors at Mika.

The pair of scissors came flying straight towards Mika's face, like a dart.

The pair of scissors cut straight through the heavy atmosphere between the two, with an abnormal amount of force.

The next moment, a distorted sound could be heard throughout the room.

♂♀

What had brought Mika Harima to this place, was a single call to her mobile phone.

“Hello?”

The first words of this phone call that she received while enjoying her meal at Russian Sushi were.

“..... I want to speak with you privately about you and Seiji. I'd rather he didn't hear, if that's fine with you?”

The voice of a woman stating her business without even giving her name first.

However, it seemed that Mika knew the identity of the caller even without asking, and she responded appropriately while Seiji was still within hearing range.

“..... Yeah, that's fine. Give me a sec, ok?”

After she had left the sushi shop, she returned to her call with the woman on the phone.

“..... You deceived him quite easily. Dear me, lying to Seiji, you really are the worst, aren't you?”

“As are you, tampering with my face to try and fool your own little brother. Am I wrong?”

Mika continued the conversation after confirming who she was speaking to.

Namie, not folding to her provoking words, responded.

“It's not that I lied to Seiji, I was simply showing my love.”

After muttering those nonsensical words, Namie returned to the business at hand.

“That head the you and Seiji have been searching for..... I can give it to you.”

“Eh?”

“On one condition..... I'd first like to speak with you face to face. Alone.”

A lie.

Anybody who had anything to do with that woman would be able to tell instantly, that what she had said through the phone, was a plain lie.

“..... Do you really think that I believe that?”

“I'm actually in a bit of a bind, myself..... I've been told that if I hand the head over to some foreign corporation, they'll be able to keep me protected from the police, and Yagiri Pharmaceuticals..... But I'd like to think of that as a last resort.”

“.....”

“But if I give the head to Seiji, he'll be stolen from me forever. I want to avoid that at least. If there is one thing that we both can agree on, it would be that, correct? So..... I wanted to talk to you once again, about what should be done with the head. Without Seiji knowing, of course.”

Not a shred of confidence could be felt towards Namie's words.

But still, Mika bravely accepted the challenge.

And so, at Namie's request, she had come to this place by herself, without letting Seiji know.

As a result, there was now a pair of scissors flying straight towards the girl's face.

Of course, Mika was not stupid or innocent enough to come unprepared.

However, her 'preparations' were...

Well, for a high school girl, they were quite strange.

♂♀

A metallic, 'clink' sound, resounded through the room.

The next moment, the scissors were stuck in the ceiling, and in Mika's right hand, something silver was shining dimly.

“..... What is that?”

Namie narrowed her eyes, trying to see what was held in that hand.

“What?..... Can't you tell by looking? Sure you aren't the uncultured one here?”

Namie seemed unconcerned about the provoking words, and she answered Mika.

“Of course I can tell. What I'm trying to ask is, why on earth are you walking around with something like that?”

What Mika held in her right hand, reflected in Namie's narrowed eyes, was a certain 'tool'.

It was something you might see in a household vegetable garden. A single shovel, with a sharpened tip.

When she first saw its size, and silver lustre, Namie had thought it might be a cooking knife, but upon closer inspection, it was unquestionably a one-handed shovel.

It looked completely out of place when seen with Mika's attire, the location, and the current situation.

But the truth was, the moment she started wielding that, the scissors Namie had thrown at Mika had been sent flying.

Why the hell is she walking around with something like that?

Anybody would have some doubts upon seeing this state of affairs.

In a warehouse without any signs of life, stood two women.

One had thrown scissors, and the other had deflected them with a shovel.

It was an obviously irregular scene.

However, the girl at the centre of it all, smiled lightly and said something even more abnormal.

“I actually believed you, a little.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I knew it would be a trap of course, but I thought that you might end up handing the head over to me, if you had some sort of plan. You are Seiji's big sister, after all.”

Mika smiled slightly.

But her eyes were not smiling at all.

“Isn't that nice? Just because you, big sis, are part of Seiji's family, you gained a tiny, little bit of my trust! You should be really, really, really thankful to Seiji! You really should thank god as well. In my opinion, you should be so, so, so, soooo thankful that your fate was to be born in the same family as Seiji!!”

“Enough of your jokes. I'm asking you, why do you have that shovel?”

Hearing Namie's words, Mika turned her head slightly, and said, with a twisted smile.

“Well..... If I really did get my hand on that head, I would need it, wouldn't I?”

“.....?”

“Thinking about the size, I wondered 'do I have a watermelon or something lying around?', and ended up testing it out on a few things. I did some experiments by putting stuff like bones, and different types of meat inside of different things.”

“..... What..... Are you talking about?”

No sense of disorder could be heard in her words.

Feeling this, Namie realised. She realised that the girl before her was by no means bluffing, or making anything up.

Mika was simply, indifferently stating the truth.

“For something like a head..... I thought a shovel of this size would be just perfect. Of course, I haven't really tried to imagine the taste, but I mean, who could ever imagine the taste of a Dullahan's head in the first place, right?”

Namie could feel a cold wind flying through her from behind.

If she were a normal person, it might have taken her longer to understand what the girl was trying to say.

But Namie herself had stepped well into the territory of the abnormal, and comprehended Mika's words in mere seconds.

Because, if she were in the girl's position, she would probably do the same.

This girl.....

Yeah, that's right.

“Are you saying you want to become one with that head? You're speaking nonsense.”

Hearing those words, and confirming that Namie had understood what she was trying to say, Mika quickly spoke, with an innocent smile on her face.

“That's right. Why, do you have a problem with that?”

“..... It's not really about whether I have a problem or not.”

Closing her mouth slightly, Namie Yagiri began to think.

Yes, she would do the same.

If she were in Mika's position, she would be thinking the same thing.

If Seiji is so in love with that head, then simply erasing it would do her no good.

Doing that would only make the head eternally exist inside Seiji's heart.

And so, I must become that head.

No matter how absurd or illogical her method was, she would become one with that head.

Well.....

If it were me, I would probably remove it's face, and stitch it onto my own.

In fact, Namie even had the resources and facilities to do so.

The only reason she had not already done so, was the 'pride' she had built up as his sister over the years. She couldn't throw away the love that they had accumulated as siblings till now.

Namie understood this weakness inside herself.

Because she understood it, she could never approve of this girl named Mika Harima.

“..... I've changed my opinion of you.”

With her hands reaching behind her back, Namie's fingers touched something attached to her belt, and slowly wrapped around it.

Then, the item that she brought out from the case attached to her back, appeared as a strange silhouette in Mika's field of vision.

“I had thought of you as a simple nuisance, but..... From this moment on, you will be my rival in love.”

The item Namie held in her hand, was a slightly rusted, aged-looking surgical bone-saw.

She then started to speed towards Mika in a flowing movement, as her footsteps produced a satisfying sound throughout the room.

The tool she held became an extremely dangerous weapon, when clad in the distorted love Namie felt for her brother.

That moment, she had transformed into a pure hunter, and Mika Harima was her prey.

“Well, either way..... What I must do doesn't change at all.”

♂♀

Tens of minutes earlier, the subject of a phone call, between two subjects.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Dr. Kishitani, correct? It's been a while.”

“Ahh! Ahh, ahh! It really has, hasn't it! Do you mind if I congratulate you on still being alive?”

“..... I don't need your silly greetings. I called to ask if you could come over to the Yagiri No. 3 Warehouse for an emergency surgery sometime today? Nebula still haven't started sorting that place out yet, so we should be able to get in easily enough.”

“Oh dear, you haven't been shot by somebody, have you? Though, from your voice you seem fine, at least.”

“..... I want you to do the same kind of surgery as last year. I'd like you to change the face of a certain girl. It's the same girl as last time, so it shouldn't be too hard, right?”

“..... Ah, well, that shouldn't be too much trouble, but can we leave it till tomorrow night?”

“Oh, you can't do it right now?”

“Unfortunately, I'm off today, and I'm actually outside of Tokyo at the moment.”

“I see..... That's too bad I guess. For her.”

“..... For her?”

“Correct...”

“...It means that I'll have to chop her face up myself..... It'll probably end up hurting her a lot, I'd say.”

“As a fellow human, I should probably recommend that you don't do that.”

“It's too late to stop me now. Anyway, you aren't really the type to be bothered by this kind of thing, right?”

“Well, that girl is kinda Celty's cooking teacher, so...”

“Ahh, don't worry. If I'm just killing her, I don't really need your help for every little detail.”

Namie stopped the call there, and murmured to herself while looking at her phone.

“Well, for the sake of that doctor..... I suppose I can leave her alive, with her tongue and her right hand intact.”

♂♀

Present, inside the warehouse.

“You should really cut that out..... I had intended to leave you with your tongue and right hand intact at least..... But if you keep running around like that, I can't guarantee it.”

It was a simple maze, formed out of mountains of small containers, cardboard boxes, and crates.

Inside that maze, holding a bone-saw, Namie spoke.

“I'm kind of a novice at plastic surgery, you see.”

The hide and seek game these women had been playing, had gone on for almost 10 minutes now.

The aura radiated by the seeker, Namie, could truly be said to be that of a demon.

After deflecting her first attack with the shovel, Mika had knocked Namie over, and then run further inside the warehouse.

From behind one of the walls of that gloomy maze, lit only by the light leaking in from the corridor, Mika's slightly nervous voice echoed.

“That's surprising! I really thought you were coming at me to kill me!”

“If that were the case, I would have leaked poison gas or something into the building the moment you entered.”

Namie walked around majestically, as if she were the jealous ruler of the maze.

Upon closer inspection, the case around her waist which had held the bone-saw was equipped with a pouch, which was divided into many different pockets.

“I don't really want you to disappear entirely, I just want you to regret ever trying to steal Seiji away from me. Besides..... If you went missing, Seiji might end up searching for you, right? He's such a nice kid..... I don't want to have him wasting so much time on you, but I don't really want to have to show him your corpse either, if I can help it.”

Namie's body quivered slightly as she thought about her little brother's face

“..... That boy is so kind, even though you could never be a real substitute, if you died he would still feel a deep sadness, don't you think? Of course, you shouldn't mistake that compassion for affection.”

“Hahaha, Seiji is definitely very kind, with that I can agree!”

“..... Stop..... Calling him by his first name.”

Namie's voice lowered in anger, and she started to spin her body –

And drove her foot into a pile of cardboard boxes stacked on a steel cabinet, in a roundhouse kick that brought to mind the force of a large wrecking ball.

The boxes flew from the cabinet as if they were rag-dolls.

She heard the sound of somebody taking a short breath from beyond another wall of boxes.

She moved, huh.

Namie was not particularly good at any martial arts, and she certainly didn't possess the same superhuman strength as somebody like Shizuo Heiwajima.

However, she had learned a small amount of self-defence when she was younger, and that – mixed with her current emotional status – seemed to have temporarily released her body's limiter, and enabled her to draw out that kick with great strength.

The truth was, that kick was strong enough that she could have ended up with a broken foot. Either way, by tomorrow, her muscles and joints would likely be screaming at her.

In any case, Namie wasn't going to let this good chance slip by her.

She immediately kicked off from the floor, and leapt towards a hole she saw in the wall of boxes – in other words, the escape route to the other side of the wall.

She looked like gymnastics athlete, or perhaps a phantom thief, fleeing while evading sensors.

It was something that any person would be able to do, but not something that any person would do, without any hesitation.

It was an act which could result in great injury if done poorly, but Namie did it without an ounce of fear.

After sliding her way through the hole, Namie quickly looked around her surroundings, filled with fallen over boxes.

But –

She's gone!?

I was sure I heard that gasp of breath from behind here. It's only been a few seconds since then.

She looked down the artificial corridors created by the materials stacked up like walls, but she couldn't see anything.

Where.....

The moment she thought this, some sort of scraping sound was caught by the ears of this tense woman.

Not from behind or in front, and not to her left or right – from directly above her.

“..... Sh-!”

While looking upwards, she tried to step back, but she was already too late.

“Hyah!”

Mika, who had remained hidden inside of the cabinet even after her gasp of breath almost got her caught, was vigorously flying towards Namie, like she wanted to ride her.

What is this idiot trying to do.....

“Ah.....!”

Namie let out a small shriek as she was forced to the floor.

Mika had kept flying straight towards Namie, and was now sitting on top of her torso, as if mounting her.

Mika's thighs, and Namie's chest touched, and separated only by their clothing, their soft flesh moulded around one another's.

If one saw only the positions that the two were in, they would see it as a terribly obscene spectacle.

The shovel pointed towards Namie's throat spoiled this scene entirely, however.

“..... Please don't move, kay ☆”

While she grinned slyly, the little demon looked down at the witch below her.

Mika slowly prodded Namie's throat with the tip of the shovel.

Matching her breathing, Namie's chest rose and fell, rubbing against Mika's thighs and clothing. Feeling this, Mika murmured with a bitter smile.

“..... Big sis, you have a much nicer body than I thought you did, hahaha.”

She may have been lightly joking, but Mika's eyes were not smiling.

No, they were smiling.... But somehow, it was a smile filled with madness, quite clearly different from a normal 'smile'.

“So, what will you do? You'll tell me.... where the head is..... won't you?”

Pressure was slowly being applied to the shovel at her neck.

In this state, with her life quite clearly in danger, the first thing Namie did was to commend her opponent.

“..... Not half bad. I didn't think you would have the reflexes for something like this.”

“I guess it's because I have so much experience from climbing the walls and fences of that apartment so many times.”

“Are you really boasting about your crimes? Kids these days... Go and write about it on your blog or something. Then go break up with Seiji and kill yourself.”

Mika didn't falter from those provoking words filled with ridicule and killing intent, instead choosing to apply more of her body's weight to the shovel at Namie's throat.

Slowly, slowly.

But, her movements were suddenly stopped, and the shovel started to fall from her hands.

“Wha.....? H-huh.....!?”

The shovel fell from Namie's throat, and landed on the ground with a clattering sound.

“Why..... can't move..... my hands.....”

“Well well, looks like it started taking effect.”

Namie heaved a sigh and broke free, then held out her left hand in front of Mika.

In the place of the bone-saw, Namie held another object in her hand, which must have been brought out from the pouch on her back.

“I got this a while ago from Nebula, it's the newest model of self-anaesthesia syringe. Rather than feeling a prick, you probably just suddenly feel like your legs aren't attached to your body, right?”

After telling her this much, Namie threw the self-anaesthesia syringe to the floor.

Then, turning the powerless Mika around, she brought them to the same positions as they were previously, but with their roles swapped.

“It's just an anaesthetic that I developed a while ago. You won't die or anything, don't worry.”

Different from Mika, she took a position on top of the girl's waist, and began staring intently into her eyes.

“You really do.... have such an annoying looking face. That underground doctor really does his job well, doesn't he?”

She softly stroked the girl's cheek as she spoke in a hoarse voice.

“Ah.....”

“..... By the way, you and Seiji..... how far have you two gone?”

Namie suddenly started asking questions as if they were friendly high school students.

Her face however, was nothing like that of a happy high school girl. She was not smiling at all.

“Please don't make me say such embarrassing things.”

Namie continued to question Mika, who had turned her eyes away.

“..... I wonder, have you kissed, at least?”

“.....”

In response to her question, Mika turned her face towards Namie's, only to turn away again.

“..... You did, didn't you.”

Namie decided from Mika's reaction that the two must have already kissed.

And then –

“If we had..... what would you do..... mmgph!?”

Namie brought her body forward, and put her lips to Mika's.

“Mm!! Mmngh-!”

Mika was trying to shake free with her arms and legs, but her body would not move as she wanted it to.

After a few seconds that seemed like an eternity, Namie slowly brought her face away from Mika's mouth.

After this, she threw a cold look filled with hatred and disgust towards Mika, and said.

“I cannot forgive the fact..... that the sensation of Seiji's kiss was still remaining on your lips..... And frankly, kissing a girl disgusts me..... But if I think of it as an indirect kiss with Seiji, this might remain a good memory for me.”

Namie took the time to smile lightly and relish her memory, perhaps because she knew her opponent could no longer move.



Then, Namie's smile turned even more cruel, as she produced a small medical vial from the pouch on her back.

“..... I really would have liked to cut you up with that bone-saw, but, oh well.”

The vial was a dark brown colour, and had no label attached, and Namie started to tell her about what was inside.

“Now..... This one, was not developed by me..... But I suppose you could say it was made to burn through a person's skin, without actually killing them. I could have just used sulphuric acid or something, but I'm not entirely sure how to use that without killing somebody, so I went with this.”

“.....”

“Really, there are some sick people in this world, aren't there?..... But I suppose this perfectly suits someone like you.”

Namie's eyes showed no exaggeration, nor any sign of threat. They were the eyes of somebody honestly telling the simple truth.

Mika had concluded this.

This woman was, from now, truly going to begin destroying her face completely.

She was confident of it, but her body was still unable to move.

“Come on, panic more. I'm looking forward to seeing your face twisted in fear.”

Namie waited for a few seconds, with the vial in her hand, but Mika didn't scream or plead for forgiveness.

Sighing, Namie moved her hand to the lid of the vial.

“..... Is there anything you'd like to say to me, while you still have your face intact?”

Whether Namie was asking this out of compassion, or simply a demonstration to reassure her own dominance of the situation, was unknown.

At any rate –

That question, brought the ugly truth to the forefront of Mika Harima's mind.

“Rosei's Dream..... is a story which expresses the ups and downs..... of life.”

“..... Huh?”

Hearing Mika's answer, without thinking, Namie narrowed her eyes, and stopped moving.

Mika's smile in response, was so relaxed that it almost looked like it was caused by the same thing that was relaxing the rest of her muscles, and her voice when she next spoke, was the same.

“When I first..... walked into the building, you asked me..... if someone like me even understood..... the meaning of 'Rosei's Dream'..... But..... I knew..... Even I..... know something like that.”

“.....? You're fine with those as your last words, then?”

She was simply pretending to be strong as some sort of vain resistance.

Namie believed this... Or she wanted to believe this.

She wanted to believe that the chilling feeling rising up inside of her, was just her imagination.

But with Mika's next words, Namie realised that she was mistaken.

“Kanra', is Izaya Orihara.”

Eh?

For a moment, Namie couldn't make sense of what she had said.

Kanra.... Was the handle-name used by her employer, in a certain online chat room.

But, that means.....

Suddenly, she thought.

.....?

This little bitch..... How does she know Izaya's handle?

Wait, in the first place, has she even met Izaya?.... Surely not.....

“Tarou is..... Mikado-kun.”

“.....”

“Setton' is..... Celty-san. 'Saika' is..... Anri-chan. 'Byakura' is..... Masaomi-kun. 'Mai' and 'Kyo' are Izaya Orihara's little sisters, Mairu and Kururi.”

As Mika continued to speak, her words managed to bring a chill down Namie's spine.

The handle that Izaya Orihara..... and you, big sis, use when you are trying to fool people is..... 'Nakura'”

“Wait a second.....”

“Mikado-kun is..... A founder of Dollars..... Anri-chan is possessed by the demon-blade, Saika..... Masaomi-kun is the leader of the Yellow Scarves. But, they probably know about each other's secrets.”

Namie wanted to stop her, but her body wouldn't move.

Due to instinct, or maybe curiosity. Or perhaps out of pure fear.

“Yesterday..... and the day before..... Anri-chan was attacked..... by a duo of Russians..... Varona, and Slon..... In English, their names mean 'Crow' and 'Elephant'..... They were requested..... By Izaya Orihara.....”

How does she know all of this?

This question had gradually formed in Namie's mind, and had slowly, slowly, stiffened her body.

How much does she know?

“Slon..... knows Izaya Orihara slightly better..... than Varona does. So Izaya heard from Slon about the details of his work for the Awakusu Famiglia..... and tried to lure Shizuo Heiwajima-san..... into a trap. And then, last night, Izaya was stabbed by somebody, and taken to hospital.”

“..... Wh-!”

Every word she said, was a blow to Namie.

That last piece of information was something that Namie herself had heard that morning on the news, but there was no way that Mika should have known the things she said up till then.

“How..... How do you know all this?”

“Oh come one..... I just did..... what I always do. Right now, bugs are really cheap..... and really, reaaally tiny..... you know? So..... of course..... I just set them up around anybody who I think Seiji might interact with..... people who he knew. Also..... I learned a little bit..... about how to crack computers.”

“.....!”

“The bugs I put in Izaya..... Orihara's place, got found pretty soon, but..... as long as I had the phones of the people he was talking to bugged..... I could hear what he was up to..... Would you like me to talk about somebody else? For instance, last night, Mikado-kun..... used a ball-pen to.....”

“..... That's enough, be quite.”

Bugs?.....

That's impossible....

Namie just could not accept the truth, and her body still wouldn't move.

“What do you think?..... There are a lot of other things I know..... Like the fact that, aside from the Awakusu Famiglia, you and Izaya..... are also involved with the Asuki Group.....”

“..... You're lying..... You've never acted like this before..... That's right, if you're trying to say that you really knew all of this..... You should have been able to stop those things!”

“Huh.....?”

“I'm talking about your friends! The time that idiot, Izaya used your friends to turn this city upside-down..... If you knew all of this, if you even knew all about 'Saika'!..... You should have been able to stop something like that! That stupid quarrel! Before Masaomi Kida got hurt so badly!

“.....”

In response, Mika looked slightly regretful as she said.

“Anri-chan didn't know..... that I knew about her..... She probably didn't know that I had bugged her, and Mikado-kun's rooms..... Just like I did with Seiji's.”

“What does..... that have to do with it.....”

“If I told her that I knew everything..... and helped her out..... I'd get caught up in that whole fuss, wouldn't I? I'm the only one who's still fine. I don't really want to end up being hated by Anri-chan and Mikado-kun, and I don't really want to be caught by the police. But.....”

Mika closed her eyes for just a moment. Namie could understand what she wanted to say, just from that short silence.

And then, Mika said exactly what Namie had imagined she would.

“If Seiji learned about what was going on with Mikado in the shadows, he surely say something about needing to pay back his debt, and try to get himself involved..... So, he couldn't know. Seiji may seem pretty blunt sometimes..... But really, he's a really kind person..... Like that time when he saved Anri-chan and I from those delinquents.....”

“.....”

“And so..... so, I investigated the people around Seiji. I investigated, and investigated, and investigated, and investigated, and investigated, and investigated them..... So that Seiji would never get involved in their problems.....”

Mika fell into silence.

Namie was also silent, and the inside of the warehouse felt as if it had been frozen in time.

But –

“..... I understand your feelings. And I understand that you are a far more capable person than I gave you credit for..... And a far more abnormal person as well.”

Namie muttered this, and then slowly continued to open the lid of the glass vial.

Seeing this, Mika smiled thinly, and thought to herself.

I wonder if I can take her face along with mine, if I blow really hard when she starts to pour that liquid.

..... Actually, who cares...

Seiji would probably be sad if I hurt someone from his family, huh.

Without knowing what Mika was thinking about, Namie continued to twist off the cap of the vial.

But then, even if she had heard those brave thoughts, Namie likely wouldn't have stopped her hands.

But, just as she was truly about to open the lid of the vial, Namie's hand was stopped.

It wasn't that she stopped it of her own will. Suddenly, a familiar hand had appeared from her side, and grabbed her wrist tightly.

“..... That's enough, sister.”

“Se-.....”

Hearing that voice, Namie felt as if not only her hand, but her heart as well might stop.

The reason she was so shocked, was maybe her impatience, or happiness, or perhaps because of her twisted form of love.

“Seiji!.....” “Seiji!?”

Namie and Mika, the two women both opened their eyes widely in shock.

“Why?.....”

Why was he here.

Mika asked in a voice of doubt.

Namie, with actions that said she thought questions were meaningless, threw away the medical vial, and tightly, tightly hugged Seiji's body.

“Seiji..... Ahh, Seiji! I'm so glad..... So you can still call me 'sister' after all of this!.....”

“Wait– Sis, you're hurting me.”

After tearing his sister away from him, Seiji walked towards Mika.

“Are you ok, Mika?”

“Y-yeah.....”

“I see. That's good.”

With this simple response, Seiji turned to his sister again.

“Sister.”

“..... Se-...Seiji.”

With her former form of a witch lost somewhere, Namie was now looking up at Seiji like a puppy lost in the rain.

To his sister, Seiji breathed a sigh, and said.

“..... I don't know what's going on between you two..... But you know that you went too far, don't you sister?”

“Uu.....”

“If you had hurt Mika's face just now..... I would have probably ended up hating you, sister.”

“.....Wh–!”

She knew this.

She had acted, knowing that this could be the result.

However, she had been made to realise just how little she had been prepared for it. This fear ran straight through Namie's body.

“H-how long have you been watching?.....”

“..... From about the point where you kissed Mika.”

“.....!”

The one who showed a look of surprise on her face, was actually Mika.

She had been trying to keep the secrets she knew about Mikado and the rest hidden from Seiji. Because of this, he had now heard everything.

The fact that she had planted bugs not only in Seiji's room, but those of all of his friends, had been found out.

“Ah, ahhhhh.....”

“Seeing you guys kissing, I didn't really know what was going on, so I stayed back to see what would happen..... But things suddenly started looking dangerous, so I came to stop it.”

Seiji had a stiff look on his face, and in the darkness of the warehouse, it was hard to tell if he was amazed, or angry.

Seeing that expression of his, Mika and Namie both nervously looked away.

Eventually Namie could no longer bear the situation, and asked Seiji.

“H... How did you know we were here?.....”

“..... After I left the sushi shop, and started heading home..... I ran into Anri-chan in front of an old second-hand tool store.”

“Huh.....”

“So, I asked her, but she said she hadn't gotten any calls from Mika recently. So I tried calling Mika myself, got the answering machine, and started to worry a little. I started going through the friends in my 'contacts' list, calling them one by one..... and when that didn't work, I called up some of the people I met at that hot pot party we went to before.....”

Seiji stopped talking for a moment, then scratched his cheek and murmured.

“Dr. Kishitani said... I'd probably be able to find you here.....”

Hearing his clear, simple answer, Namie thought of the face of the man she had called an hour ago.

That..... That damn four-eyed freak!.....

Ah, ahhh, that guy, that guy, I'm going to destroy him, and that Black Rider!.....

As she glared with eyes like boiling magma, Namie thought about how best she could make that underground doctor squeal, But—

Her lips, trembling with anger, were suddenly closed by something.

!?

Everything in front of her suddenly turned dark.

She could feel something touching not only her lips, but her cheeks and nose as well.

A gasp of breath, louder than that of Mika from before, could be heard.

.....?

Opening her eyes, she could see Seiji's face slightly distant from her own.

“See? Having someone who isn't your lover, do something like this to you, really sucks, doesn't it? So, sister, you have to apologise to Mika– From the start..... sis..... you've always..... Any time that I made a female friend..... You'd always do stupid stuff like this to them.....”

Seiji was saying something, but not even half of it was reaching Namie's brain at this point.

.....!?

Realising that the sensation she had felt a moment ago, was a kiss from Seiji...

.....! ! ? ? ! ! ! ?

Namie Yagiri, realising this, quickly ran from that location.

“Ah!? Sister, wait! I still haven't asked where that head.....!”

Seiji quickly tried to call her back, but Namie could no longer hear him.

A passionate shock had exploded inside of her, passing through her heart, contracting every muscle in her body.

Namie Yagiri, who had become like a living engine, was....

Continuing to sprint with full force, till five minutes later, when she collapsed from exhaustion.

♂♀

5 minutes later, somewhere in Ikebukuro.

“Why are you so mad?”

“I am not mad.”

“You are so mad.”

Seiji and Mika repeated that exchange in a place separate from the Yagiri Pharmaceuticals Warehouse.

Mika was still feeling some of the effects of the anaesthetic, and Seiji, looking out for her, was waiting for a taxi to pass, but...

Mika has been acting kind of strange for a while now.

“I get it, ok? I get that you're not mad. So, tell me, what have I done wrong?”

“..... Seiji, you're so bad at understanding a woman's heart.”

Finally being able to move her neck properly, Mika looked towards Seiji, puffed out her cheeks and push her face onto his shoulder.

“I know you say it's not me, but my face that you love..... I know you say that you love that head..... But even so... No, because of that, because you have somebody that you really love, you can't go around kissing your big sister like that, ok?.....”

Ordinarily, Mika wouldn't care if Seiji talked to other women, but for some reason, this time she felt a different emotion than usual.

Perhaps it was because this time, the woman he was with was her rival, Namie Yagiri.

..... I suck.

Now that he knows my secret, I'm sure Seiji is a lot more mad than I am.

Hating herself for thinking those toxic thoughts, Mika buried her head in Seiji's back, and almost began to cry, but...

“I didn't.”

“.....?”

Seiji, with a blank, confused look on his face, exposed the trick behind his actions.

“As I was pulling my sister towards me, I put my fingers in the space between our mouths, like this.”

Like he was using chopsticks, Seiji brought his fingers together, and turned them on their side.

After he brought his fingers to his lips like that, Seiji turned to look at Mika and said.

“Though, somehow it seems like my sister mistook it for a real kiss..... Running away like that, I guess it was because she was so grossed out. Even though she's been hugging me like that since forever.....”

Mika, staring vacantly with her mouth open after hearing Seiji grumble his complaints, was about to ask a question, but – she slowly closed her mouth, then mumbled to herself.

“..... That's pretty harsh too.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. That was pretty unreasonable of you.”

Hearing Mika sulk like that, Seiji suddenly broke into a smile.

“Hahah.”

“..... Something funny?”

“Finally, you said something like that.”

“..... Eh?”

Seiji talked over his shoulder to Mika, as she looked up at him.

Seeming to be in a slightly better mood than usual, Seiji said.

“Usually, you just smile and answer 'yes, yes' to whatever I say. To be honest, this is kinda..... Refreshing.”

“Seiji.....”

“And today, you've surprised me in a few other ways too.”

“.....!”

Again, Mika's body became stiff.

He was talking about the fact that Mika had been spying on his acquaintances, in order to keep Seiji away from danger.

The part of her that he must not know about, the part that even she knew was not normal.

Mika Harima did not think that there was anything wrong with sneaking into the home of the one she loved, and placing bugs there. However, she did know that doing the same to people she did not love would be seen as something quite abnormal.

There was a vague boundary between normal, and abnormal. And she had tread that boundary based on morals that only she could understand. In any case, Seiji had been made aware of the abnormality that she had brought about.

“Umm.....”

She knew she had to say something, but no words would come out. Normally, she could simply reassure Seiji of her unrelenting love for him, but in times like this, she had no idea what to do.

But Seiji was the first to open his mouth, long before Mika.

“I'm sorry.”

“Eh?”

“I.... I don't do it because I'm a good person, I guess it's just because I'm nosy. If someone I know is in trouble, I usually end up saying something stupid, and getting myself caught up in it.”

“Seiji.....”

Why?

Why is Seiji the one apologising?

Mika tried to say something.

But as if he was trying to stop her, Seiji continued to speak.

“But..... What you did for me Mika, I won't reject it.”

“.....”

“I don't know exactly what love is any more. All I know, is that my feelings of love for that head, are the truth. I can't explain it. It's not even logical. That's all that I can say. I don't love you, Mika, and I only love my sister as her little brother. Though I don't really know how she feels about me.”

“Yeah..... I know.”

They were words she had heard many times up till now.

Seiji's words were as blunt as ever, but there was no dishonesty.

Seiji, after a short pause, began to speak again.

“But..... I at least won't reject you. I may try to stop you, but I'll never reject your actions. I can really respect your type of 'love'. Whether I can accept it or not is a different matter, of course.”

“..... S-!”

“For the sake of your love for me, you really did some troublesome things..... But I have no right to stop you. You brought up something about Mikado before, and some other names I don't know, Kanra and Saika and the like, but for now, I'll pretend I didn't hear anything.”

He isn't in love with me.

“Well, I can ask you the details later. Let's talk about what we'll do from now..... It's possible that one of those people you didn't want me getting close to, may have something to do with the real head.”

“..... Yeah.”

But Seiji will forgive me for loving him.

As Mika nodded with a smile, Seiji asked in disbelief.

“..... I'm saying such selfish things, seriously, what do you even like about me?”

The same question as always.

But today, Mika had a different answer for him.

“I'll tell you, but only if you say love me!”

“Is it ok if I say 'as a friend'?”

“Nope, as lovers.”

“Then I guess I'll never know.”

She could live an unrequited love.

For Mika, that would be enough.

What was important to her, was not Seiji's feelings. It was her feelings towards Seiji.

The strange love, of a twisted girl.

However, Seiji taking the love of the girl he had no feelings for, and who he knew was twisted... It could be said that he himself was almost as twisted as her.

For now, Mika felt that her love had been blessed by the gods.

That was of course, only for now.

As the sun began to set over their city, Seiji slowly continued to walk, while carrying Mika on his back.

They continued to talk to each other, paying no attention to the mocking looks of passers-by, and slowly, relaxedly spent their time together.

“You still can't walk?”

“Nope.”

“You're lying.”

“Yep.”

“Well, whatever..... I guess I missed my chance..... to ask my sister about the head.”

“I don't think she knows any more, probably.”

“..... You think? So I guess that 'Izaya Orihara' guy you were talking about has it now. I've heard his name come up in a lot of rumours, and I feel like I might have met him before, somewhere..... Well, I guess I'll try finding his apartment and sneaking in or something.”

“Actually, you don't need to bother.”

“Eh?”

“I've already found three of his apartments, and looked around them after sneaking my way in..... But the head was nowhere in sight.”

“..... Really? Well then, I guess I won't bother.”

“Yeah.”

“Also, you probably shouldn't sneak around people's houses like that.”

“Yeah.”

“If you found the head before I did, what would you have done?”

“Eaten it.”

“Huh?”

“If I became one with that head, you'd love me, wouldn't you Seiji?”

“Probably not. Anyway, there's a fault in your plan.”

“What?”

“If you tried to do something like that, I would definitely stop you.”

“Even if you had to kill me?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought so...”

“..... Do you hate me now?”

“Huh, why would I?”

“No, don't worry...”

“Apart from my.... face, what do you think about me, Mika Harima? Do you hate me?”

“Nope, not really.”

“Eh!? Then, you love me!?”

“Nope, not really.”

“Awww.” “What are you 'awww'ing for?”

“Mm, I was lying. That 'awww' was a lie.” “What does that even mean.”

“.....” “.....”

With that endless exchange, the two disappeared into the hustle and bustle of the city.

The girl's love, was abnormal.

The sister's love too, was abnormal.

But the boy who turned aside their love, with any change in expression... In some ways, he was the most abnormal of them all.

But that which consumed even their strange love triangle...

The city of Ikebukuro today, as always, continued to play its tune.

As if being swallowed by a great current.

Slowly, leisurely, majestically.

♂♀

Night, an apartment somewhere in Shinjuku.

Inside the apartment, whose owner was still missing, Namie the free-loader was showering.

“Seiji.....”

It was a name that for the last day, Namie had whispered to herself many times.

Even just during this shower, she had said it almost a hundred times.

After pressing on her own lips, Namie started to embrace herself.

Now that I think about it, that was the first time that I've kissed a male.....

The reason she had restricted it to 'males', may have been because she was counting the kiss she had with Mika just before it, or perhaps she had had some other kind of experiences with women before.

Either way, all that was in her head at this point, was the face of her beloved little brother.

As if she was trying to cool down her burning body, Namie continued her cold shower.

If she didn't, she felt as if her entire reason may begin to crumble.

Seiji.....

“Hehe...”

Seiji!.....

“Hehe, hehehe, aha..... ahahahah..... AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA.....”

Even though all she was thinking about was the name, Seiji, insanely loud laughter spilt forth from her mouth.

They say that 'love lasts 3 years, marriage only 3 days.' but the concept of 'lasting' seemed eternally irrelevant regarding Namie's love for her brother.

Of course, there was a reason that her love never ran out.

To Namie, loving her brother was as natural as taking a breath.

And surely it would be hard to find a person who would ever get sick of breathing.

So, like breathing, if she were to stop loving, Namie would likely be unable to continue living.

As she always had, Namie would continue to live by taking deep breaths of love.

Tomorrow, and the next day...

Until the very day that Seiji disappears from this world.

Or perhaps even after that.

“Seiji.....”

Her breath became the sigh of a twisted love, and blew with passion, through the night-city of Ikebukuro.

日常B『はぐれ者コンチェルト』



Everyday Life B – Vagrant's Concerto

6 years earlier, Ikebukuro.

What?

What am I seeing right now?

That man was only good at fighting.

Even for a person who was part of the type of organisation that was known to be a 'violent gang', this man exhibited extraordinary amounts of violence.

The rumours were that he was powerful, and he believed in that strength of his.

The truth was, the man had been wandering around the dark side of the world with only his own strength.

A strong fighter.

With only that, he was able to continue living. He was able to hold pride in his way of life.

He didn't care about things like intelligence gangs, or the Anti-Crime Laws.

Of course, he had to go along with things like that, but in the end, if he was made light of, it was the end for him.

All he could do, was push on down his own path.

Several years earlier, upon hearing that the subordinates of a person in the same business, who was rumoured to be his rival, were taken down by a kid in a bakery, feelings of pity, contempt, and anger all rose inside him at the same time. He became suspicious, and believed it to be some sort of joke.

He had no way of knowing that in the future, that child would begin dressing himself in bartender's clothes, and become somewhat of an urban legend in Ikebukuro.

So, simply in order to teach those colleagues the basics of fighting, he continued his violence.

He fought, and fought, and fought.

With just his overwhelming strength, the man tried to make everything he could see, become his.

He knew that it was impossible.

But he didn't stop.

He couldn't stop.

He couldn't stop the impulses that would rise up inside of him.

His intoxication with violence.

He couldn't live without being able to test the strength that he had tempered, the technique that he had polished, in real battle.

He couldn't live without displaying it.

Even if he knew that all that awaited him was destruction, the man went with his desires, and swung around his power like a blade.

Then, one day.

He met a monster.

What is this...

It was not the Headless Rider, who rode a black bike that made no engine noise, and had often been rumoured about recently.

It was another recently started rumour, about a Ripper Demon, wielding a Japanese blade.

What am I seeing!?

At the time, nobody really knew.

There was no way they could know.

Even now, other than him, the people who knew the truth were few in number.

Is this even real?.....

The Ripper Demon was – in every sense of the word – a 'monster'.

A red-eyed monster, with superhuman movements, who could grow a blade out of any part of its body.

The man did not know the name of that monster.

“Dammit.....”

The name of that blade, who loved humans. 'Saika'.

“You, what the fuck are you!? Dammiitt!”

Without responding to the shouting man.

The edge of the demon-sword, held by the red-eyed human, cut through a part of the man's body.

And so, time passed...

♂♀

Present time, May 4th, late night, somewhere in the city, at a certain night-club.

Sensual music, and lights blended together throughout the room.

Under the criteria of the Business Regulation Laws, it was registered as a 'cafe', but in truth, it looked more like a night club, or like the 'discos' from long ago.

Every night there was some sort of event, with various entertainment businesses on rotation, hiring out a space in the hall.

Young men and women would dance about in this loud, lively environment, and indulge in various pleasures.

These young people's bodies and hearts would tremble with the deep bass resounding in this darkness.

Some would move their bodies with the music, and some let their bodies be taken by the taste of alcohol, and the beat of the bass. And some, their hearts filled with desire, would call out to the opposite sex.

The various movements of these young people, moving to the beat of the music, burning under the flickering lights.

However, in this club, there were some young people who were not being influenced by the music, and who were making no particular movement.

Inside the men's-only toilet of the club, where the sound was less than half as loud.

“Come on..... You brought the stuff didn't you? Quickly.”

“We've got the money you wanted, so come on. Ok?”

Girls in heavy make-up spoke in voices mixed with impatience.

It may have been a male toilet, but those girls had walked straight in, without hesitation.

On the opposite side to the girls, were three brawny looking men.

Around the necks of the three men, they had tattoos of a particular design, and seemed to be in their early-twenties. However, they were surrounding the girls who were younger than themselves, and emitting a strange intimidating aura.

As they did this, the smallest of the men grinned, and brought his face close to the girls.

“Yeah, yeah. Calm down. We brought it, ok?”

The girls looked relieved to hear these words.

But their faces were absolutely pale, and a layer of cold sweat had formed on their skin.

“But, there's just one thing, you see, this stuff is pretty popular right now, and that makes it pretty damn hard to get your hands on, get it? You understand, right? So, well.... We can leave the payment till later, but... For now, it means we need to do this.”

The man brought a vinyl pack out from somewhere, with a zip attached, and flashed it in front of the girls. Inside it, there were a few white pills.

One of the girls looked at the contents, and her face became pasted with a look of despair.

“No way, but... That's not even half the usual amount.....”

“Well, really I was thinking about letting one of our other regulars take this, but you girls were just breakin' my heart. Really, even people like us can't watch a girl in pain, you know?”

“..... So... if we.. if we pay double... we'd get the normal amount.....?”

The words the girl had said didn't really match the way that she was so out of breath.

Since a while ago, she had been gulping constantly, as if she had a dry throat.

The man continued to talk, as he patted the cheeks of each of the girls.

“It's okay, it's okay. We'll even help you find some work. I don't wanna see you girls with such sad faces. Mokay?”

The man had kept waving the vinyl bag in front of the girl's faces, and smiling as he spoke.

Almost like he was waving a carrot in front of a horse.

However, the carrot was suddenly caught, and carried off by a crosswind.

Whusssh. The sound of water being flushed down a toilet in one of the closed off stalls.

“?”

The men frowned as they looked towards that stall.

It was the stall closest to the entrance. When they had walked in, there had definitely been no-one inside.

Also, the girls did not know this, but outside the entrance, two guards had been posted, and told to inform anybody other than 'customers' and colleagues, that the toilet was 'currently being cleaned'.

“.....”

He first thought it might have been one of the guards who had come in to go to the toilet, but then, until now they hadn't felt any presence, nor heard the sound of the door closing.

“He-hey, quickly.....”

“Shut up.”

The man looked with precaution towards the door, while silencing the girls.

Only a few seconds passed, but to the men it felt like several times that.

What they were looking out for, was somebody like a cop.

If it was just a customer who had accidentally walked in while one of the guards wasn't looking, then they could easily act naturally till they left, or beat them up and drive them out themselves.

In the first place, they hadn't even heard the sound of somebody doing their business in there, or even the sound of toilet paper being rolled.

Meaning.... That the person in the stall, had only flushed the toilet.

Seeing the door begin to open, the men confirmed that the person was not simply about to use the toilet.

This meant that the person had taken the time to enter the stall, and then flush the toilet... Exactly why had they done that?

To think they had just flushed the toilet after only spitting, was overly optimistic.

To them, the fact that an outsider was even able to enter the stall was completely beyond their expectations.

They would frequently come to places like this to make push a certain 'illegal drug', so it seemed that the reason they were this wary, was simply from their experience as drug dealers.

“Hey, who's there? Hey.”

While saying this in an intimidating voice, the men took one step towards the half-opened door.

As they did, the door opened, and a man appeared from the stall.

But the person who had appeared, was not the police detective they had expected.

Having said that, they still were not an ordinary person at all.

“Ahh.”

He was a curious man.

“You young people, well, I guess... It's good to see ya'll so energetic.”

He was a tall man, wearing a dress-suit with a flashy print.

He looked to be somewhere in his thirties.

From his appearance, he was not young, but he also couldn't be said to be middle-aged.

He may have been tall and thin, but thanks to the scar on his face, he certainly didn't look weak.

He was wearing a pair of obviously high-class, tinted glasses, and held a cane in his hand, with an elaborate design on it. It almost felt as if he had escaped from the set of some movie from long ago.

He may have been holding a cane, but that didn't necessarily mean he had a bad leg.

As he smiled lightly, he slowly walked out of the toilet stall.

At the appearance of this strange man, the young, tattooed men looked at each other, and then two of them said, with ridicule in their voices.

“Whaddaya want, old man?” “We're enjoyin' ourselves at the moment, would ya kindly bugger off?”

“.....”

But, the other young man was looking at the face of the older man, and seemed to have something on his mind.

The girls, on the other hand, were frantically trying to grab the vinyl case that one of the men was holding onto.

While one man held them off with his back, the other two fearlessly stepped towards the older man.

“This toilet is bein' cleaned right now, so get the hell outta here.”

“Well, well. Kids these days really are hot-blooded now, ain't they? Uh-oh, you won't start pulling out my front tooth for saying that, will ya? Oh, I meant that as a joke, do kids your age get that one, I wonder?”

“What the hell are you talkin' about, old man? Oi.”

“Ahh, ok, it's fine, it's fine. I thought you might read manga or somethin'. Kids should stay kids, not get all worn out like little old me. You need to stay pure, believe in the powers of perseverance, friendship, and victory!”

Grinning widely, the man cracked his neck, then held out the hand that was not holding his staff.

“.....?”

The younger men stopped moving.

The item in the older man's hand, was exactly the same as the vinyl case that they had been showing to the girls, just before.

However, this case had nothing inside of it.

The smiling old man with the glasses continued to speak to the boys, who's expressions had turned stiff.

“Ahh, so sorry for intruding. The big guys that were at the entrance, they had some yucky looking stuff inside this here bag, so I thought I should flush it down the toilet for them. Listen, for junk like this, you have to properly disinfect it, or flush it down the toilet, right? Well, you shouldn't really flush it if it looks like it won't go down, I guess. But I reckon this junk'll probably dissolve down nicely.”

“.....! You bastard!”

Before they worried about the fate of the guards they had placed outside, the muscular young men went to grab the neck of the older man.

But...

“Come now, you shouldn't do something like that, boys.”

Crack. A sound like a damp, wooden pole being snapped in half.

“You shouldn't be grabbing people's necks like that.”

Slowly moving his body, the grinning man saw before himself...

The body of the man who had tried to grab his neck, spinning, and drawing a graceful trajectory through the air.

And the fingers which had been aiming for his neck went against the spinning motion of the body, forming a twisted angle.

But the spinning man did not raise a scream.

The young man, his fingers broken, continued to spin with vigour, till his head forcefully hit the ground.

“!? ng-..... mmph-! !? ? !”

His lungs were in no state for talking.

It was as if every blood cell in his body had been stolen of all of its oxygen, and carbon dioxide.

A mixed sensation of pain and numbness rose up from his fingers, and as if it were a finishing blow, he then received a violent impact to his Adam's apple.

The cane held by the older man, had been thrust towards the fallen man's throat.

His mind turning cloudy from the pain and shock, the young man lost consciousness.

“It's a good thing I never learnt me any martial arts, ain't it? You could get away with just a broken finger.”

Seeing what had happened before them in only a few seconds, the remaining two young men had stopped moving.

In this room where it almost seemed that time had stopped moving, the first to raise their voices were the girls.

“He- hey, what are you doing!? Quick, sell us the stuff!”

“We've got nothing to do with this fight!”

But to the shouts of the girls, one of the tattooed men only shouted back, angrily.

“Shut it!”

“Eek!”

The young man had elbowed the girl face, who had been attempting to grab the vinyl bag from behind him, but when he turned around...

“That wasn't nice.”

Before him, was the face of the mysterious man.

And reflected in the lenses of the man's glasses, he saw his own, shocked eyes staring back at him.

“Ooah!?”

Without thinking, and without any technique, the young man threw a punch, but the only thing that the powerfully swung fist hit was air.

“Ya know, you really shouldn't be elbowing girls like that. Ya need to treat them nice and kindly.”

The next moment, the young man's ear was grabbed strongly, and pulled downwards.

“Wai-..... Sto-..... It'll brea-.....”

Feeling the impending danger of losing his ear, without thinking, the young man naturally brought his body towards the ground.

Like this, his feet were easily swept from underneath him by the man with tinted glasses, and he was made to vigorously kiss the floor of the toilet.

“Blegh..... You basta-..... Bgyuh!?”

With an angry voice, he tried to stand back up, but that dream would not come true.

A kick from above brought his head to the floor with such force that his nose, and front teeth broke... After which the young man truly went into a dream world, taking his own consciousness with him.

Seeing his two companions in this state, the remaining young man's face trembled in fear.

I remember now.

His fear however, was not brought about from the violent acts of the man in front of him.

Tinted glasses, patterned suit, and holding a cane.

It was because as he had remembered the true identity of the man in front of him, he had also remembered the 'organisation' he was a part of.

No mistake.

Akabayashi.....This guy, is the Awakusu's Akabayashi!

“P-please, wait! I'm sorry! I am seriously sorry!”

When the man wearing tinted glasses looked towards him, the last young man was already prostrating himself on the floor.

“Hey, hey. Mister, that's dirty. Puttin' ya hands on the toilet floor like that.”

While he was pushing the face of another man into the floor with his foot, the man in tinted glasses – Akabayashi smiled lightly.

“And anyway, don't be slamming your face to the ground like that, when a man hasn't even told ya to. And really, I mean, come on. Do ya really think little old me wants to see somethin' like that?”

As Akabayashi ridiculed the prostrating man in a light-hearted tone, the young man, sweating all over, spat out his next words through shaking, pale lips.

“S-s-seriously, I'm sorry man! I-I mean, I di-didn't know you were from the Awakusu! Sorry for picking a fight with you.....”

“Nah, nah, ya don't need to be apologising for somethin' like that. I mean, if any of us was pickin' a fight, it was little old me, right?”

Akabayashi continued to smile light-heartedly, but...

As he squatted down, his smile faded slightly, and he spoke in a low voice.

“If ya gotta apologise, it's for somethin' else entirely. Right?”

“Eh.....”

Akabayashi picked up the vinyl bag that one of the man had dropped, and brought it in front of this young man's face.

“This club, right... Our company, we got allota business relations goin' on with this club. So, and I know ya probably heard this before, but... Who do ya get this stuff from, hm? Who's ya supplier? Hm? Why don't ya tell little old me.”

“Ah..... No, I.....”

“Hm?”

Akabayashi turn his head, but his eyes never left the young man's face.

“That is..... I-.....!”

Faintly seeing Akabayashi's eyes from behind his tinted glasses, the young man's entire body once again became stiff.

“I-I..... I d-didn't know anything about this being Awakusu's turf! I-I'll pay my taxes next time, I swear!.....”

“A-hah-hah-hah.”

From inside the men's toilets, a false-sounding laugh could be heard.

“Ahh, you crack me up! You really know absolutely nothin', do ya mister?”

“E-.....eh?”

“Ya don't even know the law? In Japan, this stuff I have here is illegal, you know? Well, I mean, there was a chance this stuff was just lemon candy or something, so before I came, my little old friends did some investigating for me.”

Akabayashi shook his head exaggeratedly, and brought his face closer to the man.

“This place that little old me looks after, you know, it doesn't really have any, whaddaya call em? Local rules? Let's say it's a drug-free business.”

“Wha-.....”

What the hell?

I've never heard anything like this!

Akabayashi shook his index finger in front of the sweating young man.

“Well, either way, didya really think we were the kinda half-assed group that would let you off just for squealing 'I'll pay my taxes next time, I swear!', as soon as you got found out? Little old me and my people?”

“A-..... ahh.....”

“So, let's choose.”

“C-..... c-choose?.....”

The young man had noticed that his breathing had started to become rough.

He had no idea what the man in front of him was talking about, but he had realised that he had begun to not only fear the Awakusu Group, but the happily smiling man himself.

Remembering the knife in his breast pocket, the man thought.

Should he use it, or not?

Will it work? He's from the Yakuza. So, nope.

It's not like they know my face. As long as I kill him, I can run away.

Nope. I won't be able to run away from the Yakuza. But, maybe if they don't know...

Dammit! Why did this even happen!?! I wasn't told about this!

Wait, in the first place, would it even work on this old guy? My knife...

He's probably carrying one himself, or maybe even a gun. Nope. No.

Dammit... Dammit!... Damn, damn, damn, damn, dammit!.....

Within these various thoughts, there was not a trace of positivity.

“Well ya see, little old me, I'm quite the hypocrite. Of course it's all part of business you know, settling taxes from gambling parlours, managing liquor stores, brokering trades for crab from some suspicious sources. I do lotsa bad things, right? But drugs, you know, well, personally I just don't like 'em. Yeah, I guess I'm just fussy. So, you feel free to call little old me a 'hypocrite' as much as you like.”

Akabayashi took off his tinted glasses, and slowly moved his face closer and closer towards the young man's.

Seeing those eyes, the young man realised something was out of place.

Wait, one of his eyes... Is strange.....

..... A fake eye?.....

Of course, by the time he had realised it, that little fact didn't really mean anything to him.

“A long time ago, there was a broad I was in love with, and her husband, you see, he was into this kinda stuff. And because of him, she had some rough times. I really, really hate this stuff. This white crap. The reason little old me took up with the Awakusu Group, is really just because they were so damn accommodating towards my 'preferences'.”

'Hahaha', Akabayashi continued to laugh light-heartedly, but...

Suddenly he stopped laughing, and his smile became slightly less visible as he spoke lowly.

“..... So, I guess it's about time we talked about what you're gonna choose..... So, which do you prefer?”

“Wh-..... what?”

“..... Would you prefer if we of the Awakusu, handed you over as a nice little present to the chief of police, or would you prefer if I smashed both of your arms to pieces right here, right now? Which will you choose?”

!!!

The breath of the young man reach the peak of roughness, and a few seconds passed.

The man before him, was saying that he would use the young man as an item to trade with the police.

If he refused, both of his arms would be crushed.

Seeing what had happened to his companions beforehand, he knew it was no lie.

“St-.....st-..... s-..... wai-..... I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!”

As the young man scrubbed the floor with his head, and begged in a voice next to tears, Akabayashi shook his head with a bitter smile.

“A guy with enough guts to get a tattoo like that, really shouldn't be doing somethin' so shameful. You'll make your ink-pusher cry.”

“Th-this is just a decal! It's fake! I'm not that kinda guy! We're n-normal guys, w-we were just asked to do this, for like, a bit of cash! It wasn't me! I-I was just told to do this! So please, forgive me! Please, let me go!”

“A-hah-hah. Well if that's the case, you're making whoever made that decal cry..... Even so, this is tough one...”

Akabayashi smiled, started to stand, and snapped his fingers.

When he did, from the entrance of the toilet, appeared young men wearing suits.

“Eh? Eh?”

“If there's someone pulling your strings, then we really need to hear about that.”

In front of the young man, Akabayashi waved his hand towards the suited men.

“So, we're gonna have to abduct you. I guess I'll just leave the rest to Kazamoto-kun.”

“Yup.” “Nice work, Akabayashi-san.”

As he hit the floor with a click-clack sound, Akabayashi spoke along with the rhythm, to the men wearing suits.

“Yeah, you guys know just how bad little old me is, at torture and the like.”

In the face of Akabayashi, who had used words like 'torture' much too lightly, the young man kneeling on the ground began to stand up in panic.

I have to run.

What would happen to him if he was taken to their place...

He may have only been the type of dealer that had to use a fake tattoo to intimidate customers, but even he could imagine what might happen to him.

He brought the knife out of his breast pocket, and while waving it about, began to run away.

“Ah, that little prick!” “Damn, stop!”

Akabayashi's black-suited subordinates yelled out to him, but of course the young man running away was not going to listen.

Seeing the reflection of the toilet's electric light reflecting off of the wildly flailing silver blade, the girls who had retreated to the corner of the room let out a scream.

“Get the hell outta my way! I'll really stab you, I swear!”

While his movements clearly said that he was going to stab somebody, the tattooed man seemed so confused that he didn't even know what he was saying.

Akabayashi let out a short breath.

Not a sigh.

Just for a second, he breathed inwards.

Without hesitating, the young man had tried to run from Akabayashi, who stood in the centre of the room.

-crack-

Keh!.....Ah?

The young man who had been running away, while waving his knife around, had received a small shock to his hand.

From the darkness, the blind-spot of the young man's vision, some kind of cylindrical object had sent knife flying.

A cane?

By the time he had realised, it was already too late, and the tip of cane Akabayashi held had already left his field of vision.

With flowing movements, as if he was sliding along the floor, the tip of Akabayashi's cane appeared from an entirely different direction than the last attack.

It was held with both hands, like a spear, but there was not much length past Akabayashi's left hand, so the young man's instinct told him that it would not be able to reach his body from this distance.

Of course, thinking about it rationally, this couldn't be true... But the optical illusion that was created by the visual information he had received would prove to be his downfall.

He had pushed the other end of the cane with his right hand. This was all that he did, but with that movement, the tip of the cane seemed to suddenly stretch, in the eyes of the young man.

“Uoah!.....”

A surprised cry, and a moan from the impact both escaped his lips at almost the same time.

The tip of the cane hit the man's throat, and impacted his Adam's apple from above the skin.

In just moments, the young man's eyes shook violently before turning white, and he crumbled to the floor of the toilet like a puppet that had lost its strings.

“Ok, take him away, take him away.”

Akabayashi smiled his usual smile as he gave orders to the men in black suits.

After confirming that the fainted young men had been taken away, Akabayashi turned his attention back to the depths of the toilet.

“So, about you girls...”

“Ee-.....” “U-umm.....”

They may have been thirsting for drugs only moments ago, but with the scene in front of them and what had just happened, even these novice girls had probably realised exactly who the man in front of them was.

Their eyes had turned from those of desire, to those of fear, and they had gradually started to shake as they huddled up to each other.

“Awww, ya don't have to look so afraid. You see, little old me only just got here, from making a pretty little Russian girl cry, about an hour ago now. Right now, I'm just a little nervous, ok?”

Smiling lightly, he brought a handkerchief out of his breast pocket, and handed it to one of the girls.

“Actually, ya nose is bleeding right? From that elbow before? You ok, sweetie? Ya probably should get to the hospital.”

“Eh, ah, umm..... T-thank you very much.”

“You know, you should get to the hospital right now, really. Want us to take ya there? Either way, you're all lookin' pretty pale.”

“Eh, a..... N-no, thanks..... We'll be fine.”

The girls, not understanding where this was leading, turned their eyes away from him and continued to shake.

“P-please... Please let us go. We..... We'll do any-..... anything..... s-so!”

One of the shaking girls looked as if she was about to cry as she said this.

“Ahh. This is no good. Does little old me really look that scary to you?”

Akabayashi smiled as if mocking himself, as his cane tapped against the floor with a 'click-clack'.

“You little girls are pretty lucky, huh? If someone other than little old me was looking after this place, why, you'd already have been introduced to some no good shop, or some no good dispatch service, or some no good film studio, probably.”

Hearing him say all this so indifferently, as he continued to smile, the girls only shook more strongly than before.

“Ahh, no, no, I'm not trying to make you feel like you owe me, or anything. Little old me, I'm a bit of a hypocrite, remember? I won't do anything nasty to you young ladies, but I will have to meddle just a little bit, I think.”

Then, Akabayashi chose what would, in some ways, be perhaps the worst kind of 'meddling' for those girls.

“Oh, don't worry. All I'm gonna do is escort you young ladies home, and then I'll tell them all about what kind of medicine you've been taking. Your mothers and fathers, that is.”

“.....!”

“After that, it becomes a family matter, I spose. Either way, I reckon you might end up in hospital, no?”

“Ahh, also..... Well, depending on the circumstances, I guess my people might need to sit down and have a nice little chat with your families...”

♂♀

Several minutes later, inside a taxi.

Akabayashi left the club, alone, after giving orders to his subordinates.

Inside the taxi, he relaxed his body, and said to himself.

“Making a girl cry really does leave a bad after-taste, huh?”

Hearing this monologue, the nosy taxi driver spoke back.

“Oh? Mister, did you have a fight with your girlfriend?”

“Basically. Well, nobody threw any punches, but I guess I made some sad memories for her.”

As Akabayashi shook his head, seeming sad himself, the older taxi driver laughed and said.

“That's no good. You need to treat your girl nice.”

“Indeed.”

A few minutes had passed since then, when Akabayashi's phone started to ring.

His ringtone was the newest hit from the popular idol, Ruri Hijiribe.

“Ah, is that the girl you were talking about, mister?”

“A-hah-hah, you know, I wish.”

Laughing as he responded to the taxi driver, Akabayashi pressed the 'receive' button on his phone.

“Yes, hello. It's little old me.”

“Hey, it's me. Cut out the gross greetings.”

It was the voice of one of his co-workers... One of the Awakusu's top-dogs, Aozaki.

They had only a few hours ago done a job regarding a certain Russian duo, so Akabayashi thought the call may be related to that.

“Ah, it's just you Aozaki-san. Something up with our little Russian customers from before?”

“No, that's not it. Did you hear about what happened with our Princess?”

“Ahh, about how that Heiwajima laddy and the Black Rider saved her? Mikiya-san, being the way he is, is probably lecturing the little runaway Princess right now, even though he's feeling relieved, right?”

The 'Princess' they were talking about, was the granddaughter of the Awakusu's boss, Dougen Awakusu, and daughter of their underboss, Mikiya Awakusu.

He had been informed that the young girl named Akane Awakusu had, in the last few days, run away from home, been kidnapped by the aforementioned Russian duo and gotten wrapped up in various types of trouble, before being returned safely that evening.

“Sort of..... About that, there seems to be something strange going on.”

“Strange?”

“..... Well, I only heard this from someone else, so I don't really know the full details, and really, I kinda don't care to either, but... You've known the Princess since she was pretty small, right?”

“True. Ahh, well, I'll ask Mikiya-san about it tomorrow..... In any case, isn't it rare for you to be worried about somethin' like this? Aren't you supposed to be the guy that hates Mikiya-san?”

In response to Akabayashi's teasing, a low voice could be heard through the mobile phone.

“You shouldn't say stupid stuff like that, Akabayashi. Of course, I don't really approve of Mikiya-san, but Princess Akane is the boss' granddaughter, you know? If she hears something she shouldn't it might start a war. You need to watch your mouth.”

“Are ya sure you don't actually want that to happen? Aozaki-san.”

“..... I told you, don't say stupid stuff like that. You useless bastard.”

Clicking his tongue with a sneer, Aozaki cut off the phone call, from his side.

Akabayashi put away his phone while sighing to himself.

As he did, the taxi driver opened his mouth.

“Hey mister, is here fine?”

“Ah, yep. That corner there'll be ok.”

“Pleasure doin' business.”

Different from before, the taxi driver's smile was now somehow stiff.

It seemed from that phone called, he had gathered that Akabayashi's business was somehow 'not respectable'.

“Hey, sorry I didn't need to go too far. Here, ya can keep the change.”

“Ah, no way! I can't take 10,000 yen for just this!”

“It's fine, it's fine.”

Half-forcing the 10,000 yen note on the driver, Akabayashi slowly left the taxi behind.

As he cracked his neck, he looked up at the starry night sky, blurred by the neon lights of the city.

“But, man... This place has been strange recently.”

The Black Rider.

The revival of the Ripper Demon.

The newly found prosperity of the organisation called 'Dollars'.

The trouble with Ruri Hijiribe.

Jinnai Yodogiri.

And most recently, this case involving Akane and the Russian duo.

“Well, I guess dangerous stories like that have happened in other cities too, since ages ago.”

While murmuring this to himself, Akabayashi walked towards the apartment where he was sleeping.

Even so, it's like... How to say it...

It's like, recently, the normal world and the underground are mixing together... or rather...

It's kinda like the people of the normal world aren't able to keep themselves there any more.

Thinking there was no point in him worrying about it, Akabayashi once again looked to the star filled sky.

The lights of the city and the darkness of the night mixed together, and in this blurred space, the light of the stars was almost lost.

Seeing that vague space in the sky, Akabayashi whispered to himself once more.

“..... Such an unpleasant night sky.”

“Make up your damn mind, are ya dark, or are ya light?”

♂♀

6 years earlier.

Again, today the man stained in violence, was wounding somebody.

Every time he saw somebody with a scar, or injury that he had caused, the man went into a trance.

That scar. That is me.

The blood that flows from them, the red colour of the flesh I force out of them, the sound of their bones breaking. Without a doubt, these are what make me the human that I am.

Rather than being his pride, or his beliefs, these thoughts were simply a kind of daydream, or delusion.

If he wasn't able to hurt people, he would break.

These delusions that he had created for himself, dyed his instincts in a colour of madness.

The scars he made in people, were scratches in the flesh of the city.

The young man was intoxicated with his own reputation, which increased every time he displayed his violence.

As if it was his objective in life, to never tire of it, and to never look back at his past in regret.

What eventually became the turning point in this man's life, was the time when he took on a certain job.

The owner of a certain shop had taken out a loan, and the organisation that the young man was a part of had decided to buy the debt he owed.

It was somewhat far from the central business district, but that didn't change the fact that it stood in the heart of the city.

It was an easy job. Shoulder their debt, then take over their plot of land.

However, everything didn't go as planned, as the shop owner had been supplied funds somehow, and managed to pay the debt off himself.

If that was all though, they could pass it off as bad luck on their part...

Perhaps he had gone crazy, but the shop owner had started telling the man's organisation to hand over money to him.

He threatened them, saying that he would take them to court for their illegal actions.

It seemed like the shop owner's thoughts were quite dishonest.

As the shop owner wouldn't respond to any discussion, a 'job' was passed on to the man.

Punish him appropriately.

A pure, simple job.

It seemed that the shop owner had a family, so if necessary, he was also allowed to lay his hands on them.

Also, it would all be for naught if it was found out that the deed was done by their organisation, so they had decided that the man was to hold back from killing them, and make it look like they had simply been mugged.

On the night of a new moon, the man put on a balaclava and set out for his destination, the shop.

An antiques shop, on the outskirts of Ikebukuro.

The name of this shop.... 'Sonohara Antiques'.

♂♀

Present time, May 5th, morning, Mikiya Awakusu's residence.

The mansion owned by Mikiya Awakusu, underboss of the Awakusu Group.

It was on the outskirts of Ikebukuro, and at first glance, one would not be able to differentiate between it and any other mansion. People who didn't know any better, could only believe that it was the household of a normal person, living an honest life.

No, perhaps some suspicious people would believe that 'It's such a nice house that the guy living in it has got to be doing some sort of dirty work for that kind of money'. It was that sort of elegant mansion.

Taking a step inside of that house...

'Patter, patter' went cute the sound of small feet, as a young girl ran up to Akabayashi.

“Uncle Akabayashi!”

“Hey, little Princess. Long time no see.”

In fact, it actually had been a few years since the last time Akabayashi had shown his face here.

Years ago, he would show up to play every now and then, but since Akane Awakusu had entered her final years of primary school, and Mikiya had begun to worry about her knowing about the work that her family was doing, Akabayashi had begun to try to visit as little as possible.

However, it seemed that his attempts to be considerate had ended in failure, and Akane had ended up learning about their line of work.

He had heard that this was the reason she had tried to run away from home, but the most important thing was that she had returned safely.

“..... So, I hear you have something to tell little old me about?”

“Yeah!”

Akane energetically responded to Akabayashi's question.

The fact that she was overflowing with vitality the day after she had just been kidnapped was in itself, fairly strange.

At first, he had planned to leave after talking to the underboss, Mikiya, but...

Once Akabayashi had shown up to their group's workplace, Mikiya had said to him.

“..... It seems my daughter wants to speak with you. Will you come with me?”

“With me? Do you know why?”

“That's what I wanna know, but she wouldn't tell me.”

Now, that's certainly 'something strange'.

As he remembered last night's phone conversation with Aozaki, Akabayashi turn his head. In the end, he decided to put off his plans for that afternoon, instead choosing to meet up with Akane.

And now, Akane's eyes shone as she saw Akabayashi's face, and she started to pull him by his sleeve.

“I have something I wanna tell you Uncle Akabayashi, in private! Do you mind coming to my room?”

“Oi, Akane.....”

“Ahh, it's all good, boss. I don't mind at all.”

Waving to Mikiya, who had been trying to scold her, Akane ran towards her room, and Akabayashi tried his best to keep up.

However, his arm was grabbed again, this time by Mikiya.

“I shouldn't have to tell you this, but don't give her any stupid ideas.”

“I know that.”

“And don't you touch her, either.”

“..... Really, Mikiya-san, how old do you think your daughter is?”

Understandably amazed by what Mikiya was trying to say, Akabayashi turned his head with a wry smile.

“A-ah, I see, sorry. I was sure that you were into that sort of thing.....”

“..... No, Mikiya-san. No, I am not 'into that sort of thing'.”

“No..... I'm sorry. You know, a few years ago, how you were looking after some little girl from somewhere, right? I thought that must be your particular preference..... No, I dunno what I was thinking. Sorry. I guess it doesn't really matter if you come into contact with a little kid like her.”

“Ahh, it's really no problem. It's not like I have a wife or lover or anything, there were even rumours that I was gay, at some point. Haha.”

Not looking particularly bothered, Akabayashi left Mikiya there, and started heading towards Akane's room.

As soon as he entered her room, Akane looked at Akabayashi with a serious face, and said in a low voice.

“Umm, what I wanna talk about, I want you to keep it a secret from father and mother..... Can you do that?”

“Yeah, yeah. I got it.”

As if to reassure the young girl, Akabayashi smiled, and bent over into a bow.

To this top-dog of the Awakusu Group...

“Errr, umm..... How.....”

Akane said something unthinkable.

“How can I..... become better at killing people?”

Seeing the serious, innocent eyes of the girl, Akabayashi thought to himself.

Well, this is gonna be tough.

A rare cold sweat formed, as Akabayashi took a troubled breath.

The only thing that didn't change was his light smile.

This seems like..... It's gonna turn into something beyond 'something strange', huh.





30 minutes later, inside a vehicle.

“..... What were you guys talking about? The last thing Akane said was 'Cya later', you plannin' to meet her again today or somethin'?”

“Come on, we were just chatting. Though she did say I had to keep some of it a secret.”

In the back seat of a luxury vehicle, headed for the offices of the Awakusu Group.

Next to the young leader Mikiya, sat Akabayashi, with his usual flippant smile.

“..... Akabayashi.”

“Really, it was nothing special..... It seemed like she couldn't get what happened yesterday out of her mind. So she said she wanted to train her body. Well, a friend of mine runs a dojo, no, I guess it's just a sports gym, and he has a program where he even teaches self-defence to younger kids. I told her I could introduce her later on today.”

“..... Ahh, that was all, huh..... But, why did she ask you specifically?”

“Haha, that's kinda a funny story.”

As he said this, Akabayashi took out his phone, and started doing something with it.

“Oi, what are you.....”

“Do you know exactly how the little Princess came to know about our work?”

“..... No.”

“This is why.”

On the screen of the phone he was shown, there was the home page of a certain website.

“..... Ahh, this, huh.”

Displayed there, was an internet based dictionary.

'Fuguruma Youki'

It was an internet encyclopaedia, similar to Wikipedia, where normal people could gather information, which was currently accumulating quite a large database.

Of course, there were cases of misinformation, false information, and misunderstanding, but there were plenty of people who would work on amending these mistakes, whether they did it randomly, or because they were writing a page for something related at the time.

“The youngsters have corrected the dangerous bits considerably.”

With no regards to their public image, there was even an article on the Awakusu Group, including entries with details about their 'operations' and the names of their staff.

Seeing his own name come up on the display of the phone, Mikiya curved his mouth in annoyance.

“..... She saw this on her phone or something? This world is becoming harder and harder to live in peacefully.”

“It's your fault for not thinking, and giving her a phone that can so easily access the internet, isn't it? Well, the cat's out of the bag, we can't put it back in. It's really none of my business to be honest.”

Glaring at the ever-smiling Akabayashi, Mikiya continued to look at the article... And there he saw Akabayashi's name, also recorded.

Among the many profiles plainly listed there, one had written '... along with the aforementioned Aozaki, they form a violent duo with many stories about them. They also manage the martial arts section, and are known as 'The Red and Blue Demons of the Awakusu'.

“Man, they really make us sound scary, don't they? The little Princess saw this written about a guy she had been talking to so much since she was little, and, well I guess that's why she asked me to teach her some sorta self-defence.”

In contrast to the wryly smiling Akabayashi, a sour look stayed stuck to Mikiya's face.

“..... Well, I guess I'm glad she called you instead of Aozaki..... I still wish Akane had come to her mother or I for advice first.”

“Haha, she probably just didn't want to worry you any more than she already had, don't you think? Like the good little Princess that she is.”

“It actually makes me worry even more, when my own daughter is looking out for me like that..... So, this sports gym, or dojo or whatever, can they be trusted?”

“Yeah, they're pretty well-respected. It's that place, you know? The one next to the Zoushigaya Cemetery. Errm, you know that German martial artist, Traugott Geissendorfer? It's like a series of that old guy's dojos, almost like a global franchise.”

Inside the luxury car, this conversation continued.

At the time, Akabayashi was not completely lying.

But he certainly had left out an important piece of information.

Of course, it was also likely that Akane hadn't told Akabayashi everything in the first place. Even Akabayashi himself knew this.

He knew, but he didn't pull her up on it... But it was certain, that Akane had been 'broken' by somebody.

Sighing on the inside, Akabayashi thought to himself that what Akane needed right now, was to come into contact with modest, honest people, which was why he recommended the dojo of his acquaintance.

Well, there are a heap of younger girls at that place as well.

For now, Akabayashi wondered whether it would be best for him to ask for more details from Akane this afternoon, or to stay out of it, and watch from the sidelines. But...

Next to him, Mikiya lost all expression from his face, and broached a completely different subject.

“..... Last night, you closed off the business of some pusher kids, right?”

“Yeah, about that, I left the rest up to Kazamoto.”

“..... Something strange happened after that.”

“Huh?”

Mikiya had only just been worrying about his daughter, but now, as if all that was a lie, he started speaking in an indifferent tone.

“Those guys, I thought they must have been backed by a group from somewhere..... but it seems they weren't. Turns out it was just some university's 'club activities'.”

“Club?”

“Those guys, they're students at Raira University..... And on the outside, they're just normal students, but... The guys you beat the crap out of, they all had the same sticker on their necks, right? The same design of tattoo.”

“Yeah, they did.”

Along with the details of the night before, Akabayashi had almost stopped bothering to remember the faces of the kids from the night before, but now he was recalling them.

They had seemed to have the same gaudy tattoo on the nape of their necks, though according to them, it seemed that they were only fake tattoos.

“Raira Uni, that place usually has pretty high standards, doesn't it? I guess there are idiots in any school.”

“That's right. That stuff they had, they actually cultivated and made it all themselves. Kids these days are pretty creative, don't you think?”

Akabayashi shook his head, with a bitter smile.

Mikiya knew that Akabayashi's eyes showed no sign of a smile, and looking over at the phone Akabayashi was holding, he began to talk.

“They were crafty, I'll give 'em that much. Those guys, they were only using phones to communicate. Looks like they would change their numbers periodically, so they were probably using stealth-phones.”

Stealth-phones, are mobile phones which would register under pseudonym when calling. It was a trick which involved forming phone contracts with many people as part of a reward, or credit. These contracts were then used to circumvent any observers.*

They required no fee, and while they would stop working as soon as the police started to notice them, many remittance fraud groups would use them, and simply change to a new phone whenever this happened.

Of course, Mikiya and his people had started to use these stealth-phones more and more often recently.

“Kazamoto managed to get the number of their stealth-phone dealer out of those guys, but whether or not our dealer will be able to find the centre of their operations from that, we don't really know yet. We're pretty certain that their leader is a uni student too.”

Expressionlessly, Mikiya clicked his tongue.

“Things are hard, these days. When little brats who look perfectly straight can use the internet or whatever, and easily get themselves mixed up in things like our business. Intelligence-gangs have been around for a while, I know, but these guys really just look like normal people, on the outside.”

“True, those guys from yesterday, apart from the fake tattoos, just looked like well-built crumbs.”

“..... By the way, you heard of those kids calling themselves 'Dollars'?”

“Well now, that's a bit out of the blue.”

Akabayashi answered without denial or affirmation upon hearing the name of the organisation that he himself had secretly signed up as a member to.

“Well..... The guy that Kazamoto 'talked' to last night, sounds like he went on and on about a whole lot of stuff..... But it seems like he'd heard something interesting from some of the top-dogs of his group, who he'd only ever spoken to over the phone.....”

“Apparently they took their inspiration from those 'Dollars' or whatever they call themselves. When they made their naughty little online pharmacy, that is.”

♂♀

Same time, Awakusu Group Headquarters.

The Awakusu Group was commonly referred to as a 'violent gang'.

They were a large organisation, and as a branch the Medei Conglomerate, they were a key group amongst their equals.

The exact amount of members they had was not known to normal people, but even in Ikebukuro, they were recognised as being a symbol of 'power'.

Inside an office building, which was the headquarters of this organisation. A serious voice echoed through this space, that was almost devoid of people, but still felt strangely important.

“Ahh, about that. It's no problem.”

From his voice, one would think he was quite an old man.

However, in that voice was overflowing amounts of energy, and one could also feel the intimidating air of a rocky mountain, towering ruggedly above all.

“The way I see it, I don't really want our relationship with them going sour. However, we cannot clean this matter up with our own hands. At this time, when our deal with the Asuki Group is almost coming to a head, murder amongst comrades would only bring about unnecessary rumours. Whether or no he did something that stupid, they want their revenge now.”

It seemed he was on the phone, as there was no audible response to the man's voice.

“But..... I have promised that no matter how they go about it, we of the Awakusu Group will not interfere. As long as he dies from an 'accident', or simply 'disappears', this won't become a weakness that the Asuki Group can use against us.”

The owner of the voice with a polite expression, was neither abasing himself, nor looking down on the other party.

He simply continued to state his opinion in a businesslike voice that hid any emotion.

“..... But any movements they might make towards our group are entirely useless. I ask that you simply be prepared, in case they try to involve somebody other than 'him'. Whether it be someone from our group, or a relative.”

After speaking a few more words, it seemed the owner of this voice had finished his call... As a deeply wrinkled hand reached out to place the receiver back in its cradle.

He gave off an air of composition, as he completed the phone call without a single disturbance in his voice.

“These..... 'phone' things, no matter how long they've been around for, I can never get used to them.”

While breathing what seemed like a sigh, the mood of the man's voice changed completely.

The room was furnished with paper lanterns and a household shrine, and amongst the headquarters that had been disguised as some sort of broker's office, it had an atmosphere of 'the room of a chivalrous chief', in complete contrast to the other rooms in the building.

And in the depths of this room, the owner of the voice sat with a 'thud' into a cow-hide leather chair.

With this sound, the room suddenly felt as if it was relieved of some of the previous pressure it was under.

The man sat behind a beautifully grained, wooden study desk, and began to talk while showing his teeth in a smile.

“Most of my teeth've got crowns, you know? And I got bolts all over the bones in my back... I'm almost like, you know, what's it called... a cyborg? Or that Robocop guy, right? I can only think god made some sorta mistake when he made me so bad with machines...”

Then, while patting the receiver of the phone which was no longer in use, he said.

“How 'bout you, Aozaki? You like 'em? Phones, I mean.”

Those words were directed at the large man standing near the entrance to the room.

The only two people inside the room were the old man talking, and that large man.

The well-built man called Aozaki, bowed his head and spoke in a deep voice.

“If you told me to, I could easily break my own phone to pieces, boss.”

It may have sounded like a joke, but Aozaki's voice was the incarnation of sincerity.

The old man that he had called 'boss', Dougen Awakusu let out a laugh while shaking his head.

“Oi oi, you gotta start calling me 'chairman', else Mikiya and Shiki won't shut up about it.”

The older man looked as if he might be in his early-sixties.

His precise age was unknown, but the white beard that grew on his face gave the impression that he was well-seasoned.

But his pure-white beard was clearly well-kempt, and rather than a rough old wizard from a fairy tale, he gave off more of a 'Santa Claus' impression.

To this old man, the leader of martial arts management of the Awakusu Group, responded humbly.

“It's not like anyone can hear us. Anyway, boss, that phone call just now, was about something else?”

“Hm? Ahh, yeah. You mean somethin' other than what you were talking about?”

“Yeah, it surprises me that those damn leftovers are still after that guy. It also surprises me that they had the balls to call you directly, boss. You know, just say the word and I can crush them within a day.”

While he did use some rough vocabulary, his respect towards the old man was clear enough.

While he was usually overbearing towards anybody else, and even slighted the young underboss Mikiya, Aozaki had nothing but pure devotion to the 'boss' in front of him.

“Haha, I'm sure it would be possible for you. If the Blue Demon of the Awakusu actually tried.”

“Please don't call me that. People will start to think I'm buddies with that other 'Red Demon'.”

“Is that such a problem? Even you recognise Akabayashi's skill, don't you?”

“Yeah, the man can fight, I'll give him that. But in front of a whole organisation, that means nothin'. Yeah he might have a few little gangs of protégés, but in the first place, that guy isn't suited for something like an organisation.”

Aozaki stopped talking for a moment, and narrowed his eyes as he looked towards the ceiling.

“So, it might turn out exactly the same as last time.”

Awakusu Dougen laughed before responding to Aozaki's murmur.

“Maybe. From the eyes of those idiot leftovers, they just need to whack Akabayashi and everything will be fine.”

“Which group are those guys hiding under the wings of at the moment?”

“Oi, you didn't even know that much when you said you'll 'crush them within a day'?..... Well, I guess that's just like you, huh.”

Dougen leaned forward in his chair, and placed both elbows on top of the desk.

Then, while he tapped the desk with the index finger of his right hand, a cruel smile rose to his face.

“I just heard that some of the guys who left have banded together and formed their own, new group. And their facade seems to be a small real estate agency.”

“They're persistent.”

“Yeah, well we can't really do anything about that. Those guys still probably have their suspicions.”

Dougen, looking as if he was enjoying himself somewhat, stroke his beard and continued.

“About whether or not the one who burnt your old boss, was Akabayashi, I mean.”

There was a certain rumour about Akabayashi.

Although he was now a higher up of the Awakusu, he had not always been one of their members.

Once, there had been an organisation in Ikebukuro that was at odds with the Awakusu Group. Akabayashi had been one of their hitmen.

In actual fact, he was only a hitman in name, and was closer to some sort of 'all-purpose weapon'.

The story went, that he had been completely indispensable to their operations, in many ways.

Currently, that group no longer exists.

Because the boss of that group had been killed by someone.

At the same time, it was confirmed that the group had been running a large-scale drug smuggling business. Most of their members were arrested, and the group was fully disbanded.

However, the man who was famous even within that organisation, Akabayashi did not get caught up in these arrests.

Furthermore, at the time of his death, the person who had been guarding the boss of that group, was Akabayashi.

This fact brought about a certain suspicion in the minds of the ones who had been arrested.

The suspicion that the one who had killed their leader, and the one who had leaked information about the drugs, was Akabayashi.

They had their doubts, but there was no proof.

And now, Akabayashi was a top-dog of the organisation that had once been his enemy.

This was enough to earn the hate of his former colleagues, whether or not he had been the one to kill their boss.

However, the Awakusu Group had officially become a branch of the Medei Conglomerate, and with their organisation in pieces, they were no longer able to contend with their might.

Although he had now been given the nickname 'Awakusu's Red Demon', mostly in praise of his past achievements, and even become an important part of their arsenal, most of the soldiers saw him as a relatively gentle personality.

But there were some, like Shiki, who saw this vagrant attitude as a method to hide his true thoughts, and remained wary of the man.

♂♀

“Well, most of the guys who were involved with the junk are still in the can, but if some of the ones who recently got out have heard about Akabayashi becoming one of our top men... Well it pretty much confirms those suspicions, doesn't it.”

“In this world, somebody who kills their own boss doesn't get away with it. Even just the rumours make it pretty hard to be around that guy..... But you still brought someone like that into our group, boss.”

“Who cares. In this world, I'm seen as being a despicable person too. I don't exactly have the freedom to decline a money tree, just because he would be hard to get along with. That guy, he's strangely well connected amongst young people these days, you know?”

The old boss laughed at Aozaki's words.

In response, Aozaki stated a doubt of his own to Dougen.

“But boss, in that last phone call... You just cut down that money tree with your own hands.”

“I guess I did.”

“We want to pay our 'debt' to Akabayashi.”

This was the proposal offered to him moments ago, by the 'Emergent Organisation'.

A proposal from their former enemies, who had been released from prison.

Usually he would reject such an offer instantly, but from their manner of speaking, it was as if they were ready to throw away their lives for this.

“At this point, I have no intention of scheming with you people. However, I know that you won't stop until you've taken revenge for your boss. If we were to protect that guy, we would have to prepare ourselves for an honourable defeat.”

Then, in the end Dougen had given them that answer.

“If it happens as an 'accident', or if he simply 'disappears', something that won't hurt our group in any way, we won't interfere.”

However, he did not say this out of some sense of honour, or sympathy.

He wasn't thinking about their desires for revenge at all.

All Dougen had taken into account, was that he couldn't besmirch the name of the Medei Conglomerate by starting an unnecessary war, and that he couldn't show any weaknesses to the Asuki Group, who they were currently in deals with.

On top of that, it was safe to assume that every one of the men who had been released from prison, had been marked by the police.

To stir up trouble with a group who was set on taking revenge even when they likely knew that themselves, even if they 'crushed them within a day' as Aozaki had said... It would be a dangerous bridge to try and cross.

Their new organisation, was not lenient.

In the end... Even they were an existence created from the darkness of this city.

“You know, I could never betray my subordinates..... But I can watch them burn.”

♂♀

6 years earlier, somewhere in the city, in the vicinity of Sonohara Antiques.

For that man, this was supposed to be a night not unlike any other.

Pretend to be a mugger, and shake up the shop owner.

That was all. A simple job.

His heart had been closed off since long ago.

He didn't even think about things like guilt.

He didn't believe it was worth it to be overly cautious about a simple antique furniture store owner.

He took pride in the fact that he was a symbol of violence.

He had no real interest in money, or women.

Of course, this didn't mean he had no need for money, and he certainly wasn't a homosexual.

He simply, and purely loved exhibiting violence.

'If necessary, you can do something about the wife and child as well.'

This was what he had been told, but he didn't really care, he thought it would be enough to shake up the owner himself.

It would be correct to say that he had never used his violence on women and children, but that was not out of kindness or chivalry. He simply had no interest in violence towards women and children, because he felt no pride in breaking something so weak.

It was unknown where and how he had begun to learn his violent techniques.

The only certain thing was, that he had been training his body through live combat, time and time again.

In the first place, he had no real interest in his own, human body.

He understood that he had to become stronger in order to better use his violence, and that was all.

And so today, he would again clench his fists, in order show his power, and carve out his own existence as a scar in his opponent.

However, as he began to be able to see the Sonohara's shop, he realised he could see the figure of a person standing on the road.

In the darkness of the new moon, the street light which was shining on this figure was repeatedly flickering.

Because of this, the man could not quite see the face of the person.

“Oi, who are you?”

He couldn't just ignore them and keep moving.

The reason was, gripped in the hand of this figure was a long, silver, Japanese blade.

“..... You came out her to kill me? If you think you can take my life with just a blade like that, it's gonna cost ya.”

Cracking his neck, the man walked toward the figure.

Normally, he wouldn't even talk to his opponent, and try to take the first move by throwing something at him, but for some reason today, he didn't. There was something strangely ominous about the figure, and it had chilled the man's heart.

Then, as he began to close the already short distance between himself and the figure holding the blade...

The blade held by the figure began to waver, as if caught in a summer's heat haze.

In the darkness of night, the distance between the two seemed to become indistinct. It felt as if, in the time it took for the street lights to flicker just once, the figure had approached him by 5 more steps.

No... In actual fact, there was something which had truly decreased their distance.

Wh-!?

That blade..... it extended.....

It started at around the length of a normal Japanese blade, but it had transformed in that instant, and was now close to two times its original length.

There were certain blade techniques which used optical illusions like that, to confuse the opponent.

The man had enough experience to understand that this was not one of those techniques.

What he didn't understand, was the inescapable truth that the blade had, in fact, extended.

The next moment, the street light flickered once more, and the man was finally able to clearly see the face of the figure.

A girl!?

The true identity of the figure, was a girl wearing pyjamas... Her eyes shone a fiery red, reminiscent of the red light on a police car.

Could this be... Those rumours!.....

It was as if she had two red moons in place of her eyes.

Blazing, brilliant.

The Ripper.....

The next moment that the street lights flickered, the man's thoughts were engulfed in even more confusion.

Not only from her hands, but from both shoulders, appeared blades similar to the first, the tips of which were approaching the man as if they desired to sink into him.

Wh-!

The man quickly dove sideways, and rolled, escaping the two approaching blades by a hair's breadth.

But as he returned his line of sight to the girl, thinking to begin a counter-attack, his whole body became stiff.

What?

Blades.

What am I seeing right now?

Not only from her shoulders.

What the hell is this.

From her hands, her feet, back, abdomen, even from the tips of her long hair. She was hidden in blades.

They were not springing up randomly and inexhaustibly like a mushroom colony. There were even blades appearing on moving parts, like the tips of her elbows, like they were part of some sort of armour.

What. Am. I. Seeing.

It had to be some sort of mechanical doll, filled with blades.

Surely, the red glow in her eyes was just because her eyeballs were made from some red light-bulb.

An 'abnormality' so absurd that it could give people such nonsensical ideas, was right before this man's eyes.

Is this... Even real?.....

A Monster.

In every sense of the word, this Ripper Demon, was a 'Monster'.

Japanese blades growing from every part of its body, superhuman movements, red-eyed. Monster.

The man did not know the name of this monster.

“Dammit.....”

The name of the human-loving demon sword, 'Saika'.

“You, what the hell are you!?! Dammiitt!”

Without answering the screams of the man.

The 'Monster' held by the red-eyed human, made its owner jump towards the stiffened man, and swoop down on him in a straight line.

Like the heroine of a manga, seeing her lover for the first time in many days, and jumping into the chest of that man with the full force of her love.

But this blade would not kiss the man on his lips, or his cheek...

The man, having somehow broken free of the shock of this abnormal situation, tried to move his body.

But the tip of the blade stretched, once more...

And without any hesitation, split the man's right eye open.

♂♀

Present day, somewhere in the city, in front of a vacant lot.

The shop had a somehow unusual atmosphere about it.

The location was quite far from the business district and train station. This old, vacant building served as both a home and a store-front, and was placed in amongst normal residential buildings.

There was a sign hanging from the front of the store which had written 'Sonohara Antiques', but the letters had begun to fade, and it was mostly unreadable.

While the exterior continued to look like an antique furniture shop, all that could be seen of the showcase inside, was a thick layer of dust.

The shop had absolutely no signs of life, so it was obvious that it was abandoned, but the empty showcase and strangely designed supports gave the building an ominous presence which went beyond mere strangeness.

At the face of this building, stood a man who seemed unaffected by this feeling. With a somehow serious voice, he said to himself.

“It's already been more than 5 years, and this place still hasn't sold... As I thought.”

After showing Akane to the gym owned by his acquaintance, Akabayashi had come to this abandoned shop by himself.

He had not planned to do anything, and was only absent-mindedly looking at the shop from afar, but...

“..... Akabayashi-san..... Is that you?”

Suddenly, a quiet voiced reached him from behind.

“Hm?.....”

When he turned, he saw a single girl standing before him.

She was a meek looking girl with glasses, who wore the uniform of Raira Academy.

Seeing the girl who seemed to be timidly waiting for him to continue, Akabayashi's face unintentionally broke into a smile.

“..... Ohh! It's Anri-chan! You've grown, huh. What's it been, 2 years?”

“Yes, it has been a while..... Did you come to visit?”

The girl named Anri was keeping her head down shyly, but it didn't seem that she was scared of Akabayashi.

“Nah, I just happened to be passing by. Anri-chan, aren't you supposed to be on holidays?”

“I had a few jobs today as the president of the school committee..... I'm just on my way back from that.”

“I see, I see. Even on you long-awaited holidays, the student's life is a tough one, huh?”

As Akabayashi spoke with a smile, Anri once again lowered her head.

“Umm..... Thanks for everything you did back then, really.”

“Ahh, you say something like that every time I see you, really, don't mention it. The lady..... Your mother had done a lot for me, you know.”

“But..... If you hadn't helped me find an apartment and such back then, Akabayashi, I don't know what I would have done..... With my father and mother gone, and having to let go of the house”

Along with her genuine words of gratitude, a rare, soft smile formed on Anri's face.

A long time ago, Anri Sonohara lost her parents in a certain incident.

After that, Anri was passed around between different relatives for a time, but eventually, the remaining stock of Sonohara Antiques was sold off, and Anri inherited seemingly enough funds to see her through to adulthood.

At her parents' funeral, she met the one who had dealt with the shop's assets, Akabayashi.

When Anri was still being looked after by relatives, Akabayashi had also been the one to help her find a new apartment, where she could live by herself. Although he said it was because he was indebted to her parents, towards Akabayashi who did so much for her free-of-charge, Anri seemed to feel such a strong debt of gratitude that no matter how much she thanked him, it would not be enough.

As Anri continued to bow her head to him, Akabayashi scratched his head, and changed the topic.

“Ahh, that's Raira's uniform, isn't it? That's right, you're in high school already, aren't you Anri-chan. Hm, what would you be now, second year?”

“Yes, thanks to your support.....”

Akabayashi showed a wry smile, and scratched his cheek in exasperation as Anri began to bow her head again.

Then, he suddenly remembered.

He remembered what Mikiya had talked to him about in the car, earlier that day.

“In any case, I dunno if it's their 'game-sense' or what, but I hear that the leaders of that 'circle' are pretty dangerous guys. And they're pretty confident if they think they won't be caught by professionals like us..... I've heard they even attacked another group that they had a beef with.”

“You should be careful too. Don't hang around Akane too much, either. We'll get some other guys to pick her up from that dojo, from tonight on.”

“Either way, after what happened yesterday, we've started putting hidden bodyguards on Akane. We don't have the freedom to put any on you though, so your life is in your own hands.”

As Mikiya's words floated across his mind, something started to bother Akabayashi, and he decided to ask Anri.

“Hey, Anri-chan, I need to ask you something, about the 'fads' at your school...”

“O-ok..... Umm..... Not that I really know all that much about that sort of thing.....”

“No, it's fine if you've just heard of it or something. So.....”

Thinking that she would probably have no idea, Akabayashi casually used that word.

“Anri-chan, at your school, have you heard the name 'Dollars' pop up anywhere?”

“-!”

Her breath caught slightly.

Noticing this, Akabayashi asked in a slightly more serious tone.

“..... So, you know something?”

“N-no..... It's just, I've heard some friends talking about it before, that's all..... I don't really know any details.”

“.....”

It was instantly apparent that she was lying.

He had no intention of pulling her up on it, but there was no way he couldn't ignore it, either.

Akabayashi simply said 'I see', smiled, and patted Anri on her shoulder.

“Seems like they're a pretty dangerous bunch, so you shouldn't get involved with them, ok? If anything happens, come straight to little old me.”

“I couldn't..... I can't bother you more than I have already.....”

“It's fine, it's fine, look, you know how many friends I have, right? So, well, it doesn't matter what kind, if you get into any trouble, just give that phone number I gave you a while ago a ring..... But, well... I know that no matter how many friends as I might have, I have about as many enemies. So, if you happen to see little old me when you're walking around town, and you don't need my help for anything, I don't mind if you have to ignore me.”

“Eh?”

Perhaps the girl was unaware of Akabayashi's particular line of work, as she seemed to think that he had said something quite strange.

In response to the girl who was looking at him confused, Akabayashi smiled lightly, and started to open his mouth to speak, but...

Those words stopped before they had begun, as a third party spoke.

“Oh, is that you, Sonohara?”

Turning around to face the voice, there stood a young man.

“Ah..... Yagiri-kun.”

It was the boyfriend of Anri's closest friend Mika Harima – Seiji Yagiri.

After confirming that it was Anri, Seiji began to look around his surroundings.

“Eh, huh?..... Have you already finished your stuff with Mika?”

“Eh?.....”

With Anri looking confused, the young man looked curious.

Seeing that the two seemed to know each other, Akabayashi waved to Anri, and turned away.

“Okey doke, little old me will pardon myself here. Well, stay cheery, ok?”

“Ah..... O-Ok! Thank you very much!”

With that, Akabayashi disappeared from the front of Sonohara Antiques, with Anri seeing him off the whole way.

“..... Who was that guy?”

Anri quietly replied with a smile to Seiji's question.

“His name is Akabayashi, he was a good friend to my mother..... He helped me out a lot, some time ago.”

“What does he do?”

“Umm..... He told me that he does a lot of different things..... Like delivering crabs, and managing cafes and stuff.”

“I see..... He had a strange feeling about him.....”

Seiji seemed to have something on his mind about Akabayashi, but then, as if suddenly remembering something, he asked Anri a question.

“Oh, right, more importantly... Could it be that the one who called Mika before wasn't you, Sonohara?”

“Eh?.....”

A few minutes later, Seiji would learn something, and would end up proceeding towards the warehouse of a certain pharmaceutical company.

But that's a different story.

♂♀

6 years earlier.

An impact had run straight through his right eye.

The man understood this much.

However, he could not understand what began to happen after that.

A voice.

'I love you.'

A simply overwhelming 'voice' had taken control of the man's brain.

The voiced seemed to be coming from where his eye had been impacted.

Ahh, I see.

From this, he understood.

That blade..... My right eye.....

It was as if the eye itself was screaming in pain.

The voice was spreading out from his right eye, shredding apart his nerves, his bones, his muscles, and his brain.

The words made him feel as if he might lose his very self.

It felt as if the words had taken form, and were rampaging about his body, as heavy as lead.

As he felt as if his mind and flesh were being eaten at from the inside, the man felt fear for the very first time in his life.

This voice, preaching its 'love', may erase me completely.

It might turn me into something completely different.

This strange type of fear, was taking control of the man who had lived his life through only violence.

But...

Aside from fear, a different impulse was rising up inside the man's body.

It was another overpowering impulse that the man had never felt in his life.

Oi.

Why now?

What the hell am I thinking?

However, completely ignoring the impulses of this man, the voice continued to gradually apply pressure.

Eventually gaining significance, the voice spoke 'words of love' to

to

to

love

love

so, you c

l, love, L

Love them] [Soo muc

love all Humans] [Don't ask stupid q

[Don't ask a sad question, like who do I lov

g, you're WRONG! I love humans, ALLALLALLALLAL-

Shut up for a sec.

ove, you ask? Don't ask stupid questions! Everything.

ve their blood] [love their bones] [Pure love] [So soft, I lov

k, I'll forgive you] [So, can't you all forgive me?] [NEVER FORGI

go so far] [Ah] [Cutting into their flesh, just as they clima

love stringy muscles, so soft, yet so hard, split so easily] [Oh, and

ove bones too! So supple, yet brittle, sharp, rough] [love islove is

shaking so softly, silky, sloppy, coil it around, coil it around, coil it arou

when you touch them, they chirp on and on about love, right? I'm so jealous

but there aren't enough words for this love so I want you to love me and only me but really there

really want to but you know and ummm I love you but Im really jealous of you and even death is

form of love and even lust is a fine form of love oh you shouldnt say you want me to define love something like that is an insult against my nature it needs no definition you just need that one word I love y

Shut up.

I lov.....e.....?ve?I lov.....lov.....lov.....love?

“I told you to shut the hell up!! Damn eye!”

The words of love echoing around the man's head seemed to pause with a 'pop' sound.

At the same time, a similar popping noise came from around his right eye.

However, the latter was a real sound, which reverberated in the man's eardrum.

“.....!”

Seeing the state of the man, the 'Ripper Demon' was the one to be surprised.

The reason was, that the man had ripped out his own right eyeball.

The man crushed the eye held in his hand, then stood to face the Ripper Demon again.

With the fear he held until now gone somewhere, the man glared fiercely at the Ripper Demon with his remaining left eye, under the street light which had stabilised somewhat.

If it were a normal person, they probably would have raised a scream just upon seeing that glare.

But instead, the Ripper Demon started to speak to the man.

“..... You're pretty amazing, huh.”

“.....”

“This is the first time I've seen someone escape from this girl's voice. That Saika... looks like she hid deeper inside me after you surprised her like that. I wonder if it's the same kind of shock as being dumped.”

The woman's voice was calm, and almost seemed to be relieved, somehow.

With a voice that didn't seem at all like that of a 'Ripper Demon', she slowly approached the man.

At some point, the countless blades coming from her body had disappeared, and the only one she had left was the normal sized Japanese blade in her hand.

“Thank goodness..... I thought there was nobody who would be able to stop her.....”

From the woman's glowing, red eyes, a large tear drop formed, and fell.

Reflecting the light of her eyes, the tears dyed her cheeks red like tears of blood.

“Will you..... Bring me to my end?”

In front of the Ripper Demon, whose words told that she desired death, Akabayashi silently shook his head.

“Nah..... Sorry, but I have absolutely no idea what yer talkin' about.”

Then, without any fear of the blade in the woman's hands, the man walked energetically up to her.

“I..... I just had somethin' I needed to tell ya. So I made you shut up. That's all.”

The man had already stepped within range of the blade.

But the woman did no try to cut him.

“What's ya name?”

“.....”

“Nah, don't worry. Ya name doesn't matter.”

At last when he was within arm's reach of the woman, he stopped.

Then, before the woman who had turned her head slightly, the man began to speak.

In order to clearly convey the impulse which had been rising up within him for the first time in his life.

“..... I love you.”

“.....Eh?”

The three words the man had spoken, had left the Ripper Demon's red eyes staring in wonder.

In front of the Ripper Demon, the man had said the words which he had put his life on the line to say.



He had created himself by piling up the scars that he had left on others. He spoke now with such vigour, it was as if he was spitting up all of those dark-red pieces of himself.

“It's the first time in my life that I've thought a girl looked beautiful. The first time I've wanted to hold one in my arms.”

“.....”

“I dunno if you're human, or if you're a monster, no, that's got nothin' to do with it. Whether you're human or not, I've fallen for you, the woman.”

Although he was trying to maintain a calm composure, the man couldn't seem to hide his excitement, as his words began to get faster and faster.

“I only just met ya, and you just chopped out my eyeball, so I realise you think it's stupid for me to be saying this stuff, but that doesn't matter now. Please, marry me!”

It had only been a few minutes since they had met.

Moreover, she had just sliced his eye open, and it was likely that he wouldn't be getting it back now.

Anybody would think that this man was insane.

However, even while bearing with the pain and loss of losing his right eye, the man's mind was exceedingly close to its normal state.

It was a while after this that the man would realise that this was because of 'love at first sight'.

The man she had only intended to cut open, the man she had thought was weak, was now standing in front of the woman, as an 'equal existence', able to kill her.

The suspicion in her red glowing eyes, her feminine outline, her hair fluttering as if trying to hide itself in the darkness of night... All of it became an attraction to him, and put pressure on the man's heart.

It was the first time he had experienced confessing.

The naïve passion of falling in love for the first, time experienced by men and women of all ages, had sent the 'pride' called 'violence' which the man had clad himself in, flying somewhere far away.

But...

His first confession ended in honourable defeat.

“..... Thank you. Thank you for saying you love me even when I've become like this.”

The woman giggled happily... But there was a touched of sadness mixed within her smile.

“But, I'm sorry.”

As she shook her head, the words that the woman spoke next, in some ways, stabbed the man deeper than the blade had before.

“I'm al ready married.”

“.....Wh-!”

“I have a husband and a daughter, both of which I still love. And so, I can't reciprocate your feelings.”

Faced with the decisive truth, the man knew that his knees had started to shake.

It may have been sadness, anger, embarrassment, or perhaps he even found beauty in the words of rejection she had spoken to him.

The man smacked his own cheeks with both hands, as if to wake himself from a trance. As he did, the blood running from the right side dyed his hand red, and a raging pain rushed into his face.

However, the man did not raise a scream, instead mustering up all of his willpower, and putting a stop to the shaking in his knees.

“Is that right..... That's a damn shame..... Actually, do ya mind telling me your name?”

“.....”

“Don't worry. I ain't askin' so I can do something about your husband and daughter.”

The woman hesitated for a little while, but seeing the man's eye seemed to make her think about something.

Finding some kind of resolve, the woman slowly opened her mouth.

“..... If you do happen to lay your hands on my daughter or husband, I'll slice you up with all of my power.”

“Yeah..... I don't mind.”

“My name is..... Sayaka Sonohara.”

Hearing that name, the man flinched.

Sonohara.

It was the name of the store-owner he was on his way to beat up.

“..... This must be fate or somethin'. Lady, you just saved your husband's life.”

“Eh?”

“Nah, it's nothin'.”

With a bitter smile, the man turned his back to the 'Ripper Demon', and slowly left the scene.

“The name's Akabayashi. Well, if ya get sick of your husband, be sure to look me up.”

“I've got enough goin' for me to look after that precious daughter of yours too.”

♂♀

Present day, Ikebukuro, inside a taxi.

“Hey, Akabayashi?”

Picking up the phone which had rung while he was in transport, Akabayashi heard a familiar voice.

“If it isn't Aozaki-san. You really do love calling me while I'm taking the taxi, don't you.”

“Like I care about your circumstances.”

“So, what's up, Aozaki-san? If it's about the Princess, everything is settled, for now.”

“Nah, I just thought I should call to say my farewells to you.”

A deep laughing sound leaked through from the other side of the phone.

“Ehh? You've finally decided to kill me, huh? Or did you maybe commit some treason, and have to leave the Awakusu Group?”

“Idiot. You know doing something like that wouldn't get me anything”

“That is true. If you're good at anything, it's being in the boss' good-books.”

“Shut up and listen.”

His words mixed with a tint of anger, Aozaki began to calmly speak.

“You really went wild, huh. Too wild.”

“For those ghosts from 5 years ago to come back to haunt you.”

♂♀

May 5th, night, unknown abandoned building.

A single building, considerably distant from the city centre.

Due to certain circumstances, the construction on the building which had been in the middle of remodelling, had been halted.

Till the second floor, the building seemed quite normal, but the floors beyond that had been those under construction. Above these floors, bare steel frames stretched out oddly into the night sky.

Here... 'They' stood, calmly surrounding the building.

“Is it him?”

“Yeah, no doubt.”

Figures of men in parka coats, with bandanas and the like wrapped around their heads. Peeking out from under their sleeves and collars, they all had the same tattoo seal stuck on.

In their hands, they each held various weapons, like steel pipes, knives, or planks of timber with nails hammered into them. Rather than a group of kids on a dare, who believed a monster lived within the abandoned building, they looked closer to monsters themselves.

“They really gonna give us 20,000 yen just ta beat the life outta this old man?”

“That ain't all. They said we can split the goods however we wanna.”

“I heard they're just gonna up the ratio we get when they sell it.”

Among the mess of varying information they all seemed to have heard, the men wearing tattoo seals all had one truth in common.

Their job right now, was to kill the man who had entered the abandoned building a moment ago, Akabayashi.

Most of them had no idea that the man they were after, was one of the top-dogs of the Awakusu Group.

Furthermore, most of them likely didn't even know of the existence of such an organisation.

*However, they were part of a drug trading crew, and had come on board this operation after hearing that they would be rewarded simply for killing a man. In all likelihood, even if they had known of the Awakusu Group's involvement, they would have thought 'We'll be fine if they don't find out', and come to this place anyway.

Put simply, amongst their drug trading group, these men were considered disposable.

In the end, they had managed to track down their target, Akabayashi.

“Man, that 'Dollars' crap is so handy.”

One of the men was looking at the screen of his phone.

Earlier that evening, this man had posted a message on the Dollars bulletin board, saying, 'I've been searching for this man, my benefactor, but I can't find him! If anybody sees him, please tell me!', along with a photo of Akabayashi which they had been given by their superiors.

Then, soon after, he had received information about the location he had been staying at. This abandoned building.

“Man, this was already weird enough, turns out he's a homeless guy now?”

“But, I heard he's pretty damn strong.”

“Quit yer whinin'!”

As one man sounded doubtful, the other brought his attention to the thing he had been holding.

It was a home-made Molotov cocktail.

“We got heaps'a these things, let's just burn this place to the ground.”

The man had no hesitation in his voice, and the other young men around him all smiled as if they agreed with his plan.

Many of them were more heavily involved in drugs than just dealing, and they looked around with unfocused eyes as they picked up their cocktails.

“So, once he starts runnin' we just need to grab 'im and take 'im up to some mountain..... Then we're done, yeah?”

“Damn right.”

“Let's fire it up!”

The young men all began to cackle laughter, including those with normal eyes.

*In some ways, this could be taken to mean that at the time they put those tattoo seals on themselves, they were not without hesitation.

♂♀

Same time, inside the abandoned building.

“..... You almost look happy to be here, Akabayashi.”

An aggressive looking man spoke as he sat inside the abandoned building, on a drum turned on its side.

Around him there were about ten other men, none of whom could be regarded as respectable looking people.

Facing them, looking the same as always, with his cane in hand, was Akabayashi, alone.

In response to them men who were looking at him with eyes full of hatred, Akabayashi spoke with an aloof attitude.

“Hey, when my favourite old seniors call me out, there's no way I can't come, right?”

“..... The way you talk really has changed a lot, huh. Back in those days, were you acting around us to deceive us? Or are you acting all obedient now so you can do the same to the Awakusu as you did to us?”

“You got it all wrong, humans, you know, they grow up. Although I did always think that after I turned 20 my personality would stop changing. But I guess shocking experiences can change a guy, you know?”

Tapping his cane on the floor, Akabayashi continued to speak indifferently.

“Stuff like getting attacked by a Ripper Demon, or falling in love at first sight, for the first time in your life.”

“We don't wanna hear this crap.....”

“By the way, you said you'd like to talk one-on-one, so am I just imagining all those other guys standing around you? Or am I having delusions of something?”

As Akabayashi cracked his neck and looked around the room, the tough looking man slowly began to speak.

“Yeah, I'll be the only one speaking. I didn't say anything about things other than speaking.”

“I see, I see. Also, I didn't see any cars around the building, did you guys walk all the way here?”

“.....?”

Akabayashi paid no heed to the dangerous situation he was in, and maintained his composed smile.

While he was suspicious about Akabayashi's attitude, the man responded to him.

“.....Nah, we didn't want you getting scared and running off. We left them somewhere else. Honestly, we didn't think you'd actually come. Well, if we had to, we'd planned to find one of your buddies, and snatch 'em.”

“I came because I didn't want you doing that. Well, anyway, I'm glad you didn't bring any cars.”

As Akabayashi scratched his cheek, his smile darkened slightly.

“.....?”

“Ah, it's just, if there were a lot of cars, I thought they might get scared and run off.”

“What..... are you talking about?”

“I had the same thought as you. I didn't mind talking one-on-one, but when it comes to killing, I ain't gonna pretend I'm some hero and take you all on by myself.”

“!?”

Tension rushed into the faces of the men.

What, have the Awakusu betrayed us?

His body had stiffened upon thinking of the possibility, but trying to probe out the true meaning of his words, the man asked Akabayashi a question.

“..... Huh, it looks like you haven't realised that the Awakusu have thrown you away.”

“..... Ahh, by any chance, have you already talked to my boss about this?”

With Akabayashi's question, the man only became more confused.

“He said that the Awakusu Group will absolutely not interfere in our little chat. You might have called for help or something, but you ain't got nobod—”

-tap-

The man had been trying to shake up the opposition, but, as if to put a stop to it, Akabayashi tapped loudly on the floor of the building with his cane.

“A-hah-hah. I never said anything about the Awakusu, did I?”

“!?”

“Did you really think..... that I had no connections, outside of the Awakusu?”

“You can't have!.....”

Their boss' killer.

They knew this when they called him out to this place.

But now, finally realising what it meant, a cold sweat began to run down their backs.

He can't have... teamed up with another group?.....

“..... You're bluffing.”

“If you think so, why don't ya take a peek out that window?”

Hearing this from Akabayashi, the man signalled one of his comrades to do so.

The skinhead who had been told to look out the window held his breath and headed towards it.

He was probably being cautious of snipers, as he hid his body from view while moving towards the glass-less window, but...

-smash-

The sound of glass breaking could be heard inside the room.

Because of construction, there was no glass in that window yet.

But there was no real need to wonder where the sound had come from.

Without even time to scream, the skinhead had been engulfed in raging flames.

“Gahhhhh-hHHHhhh-! AaaaAAHHHhhh!”

At the same time, some sort of liquid had dispersed across the floor, and burst into flames soon after the man had.

It didn't take long to realise it had been a Molotov cocktail.

But, before being able to move based on this understanding...

Bottles carrying red flames appeared from the window, one by one, and the sound of glass shattering echoed throughout the room, almost rhythmically.

“Outside! There's a heap of 'em outside!”

The skinhead was rolling around on the ground, and had almost managed to put out the fire burning away his face.

Right before the cocktail had hit, he was able to confirm the existence of many people surrounding the building.

Hearing his information, some of the men retreated further into the room, while some of them rushed over towards the window.

While hiding himself with the wall, one of the men peeked through the window... and started pulling a gun out from his front pocket.

Then, without hesitating, he began to open fire on the men surrounding the building.

♂♀

Hearing the loud 'bang' sound from outside the building, the drug pushers thought some sort of explosion must have occurred inside.

However, they soon realised this was not true... As one of their number fell, trembling, to the ground.

“He-Hey.....?”

“M-my leg... It h-hurts.....”

Looking at him, they could see a small hole opened up in the leg of his jeans, and a red stain which had begun spreading around it.

At around the same time that they realised this was a bullet hole, they heard the same exploding sound two more times.

“Crap! It's a gun! That bastard! He's carryin' heat!”

“Kill him!”

At the time, they still foolishly believed that they were only facing one man.

If they were the type of experts who were used to this kind of attack, they would have at the very least confirmed the number of their opponents, and done some scouting before they arrived. On top of all being amateurs, half of them couldn't think properly through the drugs they had taken, so they weren't in a state where they were able to take such obvious actions.

The young men among them who could still think straight started to run away, but most of them who were overcome with excitement rushed towards the building to exact their revenge.

At this time, a small dispute broke out.

Inside a building away from the city centre...

Certain factions fought each other, without even knowing each other's true identities.

♂♀

Inside the building, in a state of confusion, the men who had come to meet Akabayashi shouted from across the flame-filled room.

“Akabayashiiii!! You bastard! You set us up!!”

He searched through the flames, but couldn't spot Akabayashi's figure anywhere.

To put it more accurately, when the first skinhead had caught on fire, while the rest of them had their vision focused on that one point, Akabayashi had hidden himself somewhere.

“So it really was you that killed our boss, huh! Akabayashiii!”

Hearing that scream, so loud it seemed as if the man was trying to cough up blood, Akabayashi whispered to himself.

“I didn't kill our boss...”

Akabayashi had walked out the back door of the building, as if nothing had happened.

“All I did was let him die.”

At his feet were the two tattooed men who had been assigned to watch the back door.

After he was somewhat distant from the building, he was passed by several patrol cars.

“Oh, here they are, perfect timing. I'm glad I reported this beforehand.”

Akabayashi decided to hide in the shadows while the patrol cars passed him, then continue to distance himself from the scene.

Inside one of the cars, he could see a policeman holding a wireless receiver, perhaps confirming the burning building and the gunshots.

Turning his back to the patrol cars, Akabayashi took out his phone.

He opened the Dollars home page, and started to press the button to delete one of his own posts.

'That guy is staying in this abandoned building, it's on the map I just linked.'

After deleting this post, which was accompanied with a picture of the building, Akabayashi put his own stealth-phone back into his pocket.

Then, he looked towards the night sky, and spoke to himself, with his usual aloof smile.

“Dollars may be pretty handy, but really, they can be a scary bunch sometimes.”

♂♀

May 6th, morning, Awakusu Group Headquarters.

'A dispute has broken out between a violent gang, and a group of young men! Sixteen killed or wounded! A shocking, dramatic, late-night arrest!'

Seeing this headline on a sporting newspaper, an aged man murmured.

“Oi, look at this, Aozaki. It says they're putting out a photo-album of Ruri Hijiribe.”

Looking at a completely different column than the headline, the aged man laughed dryly.

“Says they're only gonna print out 3000 copies, this is premium stuff. Don't you think we could make a killin' if we bought 'em all up, then sold them off on Ebay or something!?”

“Who knows..... You'd have to ask Shiki or Kazamoto. I'm not really.....”

“I see..... Well, could you tell one of the young guys to buy three copies for me, at least?”

“Please, think of your position, boss. What will the young guys think of you, asking them that.....”

Shaking his head silently, Aozaki looked towards the headline of the newspaper the older man had been looking at, and spoke lowly.

“..... So, boss, did you know that it would turn out like this?”

Of course, he was talking about the conclusion of the two incidents Akabayashi had found himself entangled in.

In the end, the men who shared their line of work, and who had only just been released from jail, were charged with various offences and arrested. The young men wearing tattoo seals had also been arrested, and were likely being thoroughly interrogated about their university organisation, which had been unknown to both the police and the media.

As for the Awakusu Group, though they could not be counted as true enemies, two annoying organisations had been disposed of in one fell swoop, and as an added bonus, the eyes of the police would be away from them for a time.

Dougen Awakusu continued to look at the newspaper as he responded to Aozaki's question.

“Well, maybe half of it. I knew Akabayashi could at least wipe his own ass... But it seems like somebody may have helped him out somewhere along the line.”

“..... What do you mean?”

“I mean, I think somebody told him he was being targeted. If not, I don't think he would have been able to plan ahead so well.”

After looking over the whole newspaper, his eyes turned towards Aozaki.

“..... I dunno who it could have been, but I'm sure they just told him some things, and didn't physically help him.”

“Ahh. I didn't think you were that good at jokes, Aozaki. So, you really wanted to settle your score with Akabayashi on your own, huh?”

“Now you're the one telling jokes, boss.”

Aozaki shook his head and laughed, in response to Dougen's question.

“If it were the old him, then maybe. But it wouldn't be worth my time, killing him now that he's gone all soft.”

“Soft' can be a good thing... Soft things can be easily moulded..... Ah.”

In the middle of their conversation, the phone sitting on his desk began to ring.

Dougen rushed to pick up the receiver, and brought it to his ear while clearing his throat.

For some reason, a shout mixed with sorrow could be heard through the receiver.

It seemed to be a call for help from the members of the Emergent Organisation, who had been arrested the day before.

Then, with a completely different tone from that he had been using till now, Dougen spoke with a cold voice.

“This is a problem. We did say that we would absolutely not interfere with your actions, did we not? It is no problem of ours if you picked a fight with Akabayashi, and ended up getting burnt.”

Their organisation was not a lenient one.

In the end... They were, as always, an existence created from the darkness of this city.

After putting down the phone, Dougen began reading the newspaper once again... And he spoke to Aozaki, with a cold-hearted smile on his face.

“You know, we could never betray someone we've made a deal with..... But we can watch as they burn.”

♂♀

Five years ago.

After he met the Ripper Demon, the man changed.

He had reported that he had 'been got by the Ripper Demon', but he also told a straight-out lie, that it had been 'an old man, with white hair, over two meters tall'. He was actually describing something from a comic book he had been reading at the time, but nobody noticed that. They all simply laughed, and said 'Wow, so even that guy is only human', and he was allowed to remain in their group.

Because of his injury, the work relating to Sonohara Antiques was put on hold.

This was a job he had taken on by himself, so he would finish it himself.

Though he told them this, and began to investigate the Sonohara family, really he was trying to find some way to help that family, to help that beautiful 'Ripper Demon', but...

One day, he found out that the parents of that shop had been killed, by the Ripper Demon.

The husband's head had been cleanly cut off at the neck, and the wife had been stabbed through the stomach, as if performing ritual suicide.

He had not heard if the remaining daughter was still in a state of shock or not.

When he first heard about this, he couldn't believe it.

His body was wrapped up in an unshakable feeling of loss and grief.

He fell into a mood of despair, much, much deeper than that which he felt when he lost his right eye.

But at the same time... he realised something.

The wife... Sayaka Sonohara had committed suicide.

In any case, she was the Ripper Demon. He didn't know what had happened, but it seemed she had decapitated her husband, who she had said she loved, and then cut open her own stomach.

But, why would she do such a thing.

Did she not value her daughter on the same level as her husband?

Exactly what was going on in her head that made her murder her own husband, and herself, while leaving her daughter behind...

While he continued to worry about this, he was told something by the man who was the boss of his organisation at the time, in the city at night.

“Hey, Akabayashi. About that Sonohara shop, you can stop worrying.”

“..... Huh?”

The man... Akabayashi was being used as a bodyguard for that boss more and more often recently.

Today, he was ignoring all of his group's members, and was heading towards the house of his favourite mistress, but...

“The owner and his wife went and died. With that, we didn't even have to do anything to get that plot of land in our hands. All thanks to our saviour, the Ripper Demon!”

“.....”

“Oops, guess I shouldn't say stuff like that to you, when it was that demon that took your eye.”

With a vulgar smile on his face, the boss continued to speak.

“Well in the first place, that shop was gonna go under, even if that didn't happen.”

“.....?”

“That owner, he had been trying out some of our special medicine.”

“.....!?”

It was immediately obvious what he had meant by 'medicine'.

As a person who lived for violence, Akabayashi had always hated narcotics and the like, saying 'Like I wanna take something that'll just make my bones weaker'... However, he had never tried to stop the large-scale drug business that their organisation was a part of. He didn't let it concern him, either.

But, as a result, he was having this conversation now, with his boss and his disgusting smile.

“He was already in enough debt to us to pay for the land. I thought I might be able to wring some more outta him though..... so I proposed an idea to him. 'Why not get some insurance payouts from your family, make a little money?', I said.”

“.....!”

“Well, from what I heard, he'd been beating up his family for a while before that. And after he started drugs, it only got worse. About as much as his head did, I guess.”

Perhaps he had been drinking, as he was reciting the details of the incident to his bodyguard, with some kind of pride in his words.

“This probably won't make the news, but I heard that the brat they left behind had choke-marks around her neck. The police said somethin' about the Ripper Demon, but I've been thinkin', maybe not on that day, but some other time, the old dude might've tried to strangle his own daughter to death! All so he could make enough money to buy our medicine!”

“.....”

“See, see? Wasn't he an idiot? As if he'd get a payout for killing his own daughter! Or did he think he wouldn't get found out? Either way, it's pretty damn hilarious.”

The boss seemed to be so engrossed in his own story that he was not even aware of his surroundings.

“Also, that daughter of theirs, she looks like she might grow up to be a real fine woman! We might even be able to use her, if we make up some fake IOU note! Or maybe, maybe I could even have a go at her? Though, she's only like 12, I've never experienced doin' it with a brat like her yet! Gahaha!”

Because of this, there were a few things he didn't notice. Things he completely overlooked.

Firstly, the fact that the atmosphere around the bodyguard at his side, was rapidly becoming colder.

Second, the fact that their current location was a back alley, without any signs of people.

Third... The fact that before them, stood a man holding a large kitchen knife, drawing closer to them with intent to kill.

“Hm.....?”

Of course, it wasn't long before he came to realise that last fact.

The man holding the knife was glaring at the boss, with eyes filled with strong hatred.

“You're.....”

“Who the hell are you! Which group are you from!?”

In response to the threatening voice of the boss, the young man holding the knife spoke, with tears in his eyes.

“You..... You did that..... To my big sis.....”

“Huh?..... Ahh, I see, you, you're the little brother of that girl from before. Right, I remember seeing you in that family photo she had.”

“You..... you gave those drugs to her!..... It's all your fault!..... My sister..... She'll probably never wake up again now!.....”

Somehow, it seemed the young man despised the boss because of something to do with narcotics.

“Haa. Well, in the end, those drugs let her see heaven, so really I'd expect a bit of gratitude. Hey, Akabayashi, you got a job to do. Take this ungrateful little prick and..... an..... d..... d.....”

He had turned his head to look at Akabayashi as he gave his orders, but...

As he did so, his entire body froze.

It almost looked like he had seen a spider on Akabayashi's shoulder...

But the way Akabayashi was looking at his boss, it was as if he was the one who had seen a spider, and had proceeded to crush it under his foot. They were eyes filled with strong contempt, and anger.

The way he was looking down on his boss, it felt as if his gaze was physically pushing down on the boss' shoulders.

Even from his fake right eye, a strong, strong, overwhelming pressure could be felt.

“Y-you, what..... What's with..... that look..... huh.....”

As he was being overpowered by Akabayashi, the boss was trying to speak, without thinking... But under the intense pressure of Akabayashi's glare, he forgot about one very important thing.

He forgot that right now, he couldn't really afford to be looking behind him.

A few minutes later.

On the ground, was the boss, lying face down, convulsing slightly. A pool of red liquid was spreading out from the centre of his upper body.

In a different place, not too far away, a shaking young man was holding a kitchen knife, which had blood dripping from it.

“.....”

Akabayashi took a step towards the young man, and in response, he raised his knife.

But, seeing the atmosphere surrounding Akabayashi, the young man thought 'I have no chance', and instead of fighting, flopped to the ground.

“Kill me..... Just kill me! I don't... I don't care any more..... gah.”

Slapping the young man, Akabayashi spoke.

“If you die, who the hell is gonna look after your sister? Huh?”

“.....!? Eh?”

Not understanding what Akabayashi was saying, the young man looked up at him, and continued shaking.

“..... Scram. Hide your knife somewhere and go. If you're lucky, they might say it was the Ripper Demon.”

“.....!? Ah... Ahh, th..... Thank..... Thank you so much!”

The young man rushed to his feet, hid the knife in his front pocket, and proceeded to run from the scene.

There was no way he could have understood why he had been allowed to leave.

However, confused as he had been, hearing the word 'sister' brought back some of his reason, and he broke into a run, to escape from the scene.

“Thank you so much', he says.”

Akabayashi looked down on the corpse of his boss, and spoke as if he was spitting out his words.

“You shouldn't be thankin' me, kid..... You should hate me.”

“I..... Just let you become a murderer.....”

♂♀

Present day, in the vicinity of an unknown station on the Yamanote line, a back alley of the shopping district.

“Oh, Ruri-chan is putting out a photo-album, huh? I'm gonna have to order me one of those.”

Reading the same sports newspaper that Dougen had been, Akabayashi strolled down the back alley.

Then, his eyes stopped on a certain word in the article.

“Ahh, that's right, she's with a new producer now, huh. They still haven't found that Yodogiri guy, either. Mister Shiki sure does have it tough, huh.”

The word he saw, was the name of the new entertainment production office that Ruri Hijiribe was now employed under.

“Jack-o'-Lantern', huh.”

Seeing the unique name of the office, a somehow self-deriding smile formed on Akabayashi's lips.

Yeah, that's me.

A 'Jack-o'-lantern' was a type of spirit, with a face made out of a pumpkin, used for things like Halloween.

A legend originating in Ireland, it was something like a ghost, who had committed crimes in their life, and couldn't go to the land of the dead, but who had also deceived the Devil, and so was not allowed in Hell either. They were therefore forced to wander the earth for eternity, holding a lantern made out of a vegetable.

In a world of chivalry, he had committed the taboo of letting his boss die.

He hadn't killed him directly, but the inescapable truth was that he had watched as the man died.

So, it was obvious he would not be going to Heaven any time soon.

He was like a ghost, forced to wander aimlessly about the normal world, and the underground of this city.

Well, calling myself a Jack-o'-lantern might be a bit try-hard .

As he thought about these things, a small figure approached Akabayashi from behind.

In the hand of this figure, they held a sharp knife.

But...

“Upsy-daisy”

“!”

It was unclear exactly when he had noticed them... But as he turned around, he grabbed the person's hand, and skilfully took their knife from them.

Doing so, he could see that the person was actually a young boy, who looked to be around 15 years old.

“Come now, kids should act like kids, not go about wavin' toys like this around. Shut yourself up in your room and play some video games or something. Somethin' that won't end up hurting anyone.”

“Ee..... A-Ahhhhh!”

The boy immediately ran away.

Choosing not to run after the boy, Akabayashi put the knife into his pocket.

“..... Small knives, I wonder do they count as non-burnable trash? Or maybe steel-ware?”

While he said this, he thought about the young boy.

He had seen a tattoo seal stuck to his neck, so he was probably a remnant of the group from yesterday.

Or he may have been told that they would make him a member, if he stabbed Akabayashi.

How very distasteful. If he didn't have that seal, I wouldn't be able to tell him apart from a normal kid.

At the same time, he thought about Dollars, and Anri's reaction to that word the day before, and he couldn't help but feel that a strange atmosphere had begun drifting around the city.

Really, are kids these days so confused that they can't even tell day from night?

Well, I spose a pumpkin monster like me can't talk.

Thinking this, he murmured to himself.

“Well, I can at least pray for their safety.”

If possible, I'd like to keep Miss Anri and Princess Akane out of any stupid trouble, and at least let them know the border between night and day.

He remembered the face of his first love.

Every time he saw the young girl who had grown to be so much like her mother, he remembered the face of that 'Ripper Demon'.

If...

If, like a Jack-o'-lantern, he was unable to go to hell, and was forced to wander the 'horizon' without ever redeeming himself, maybe someday, would he be able to meet with that Ripper Demon once more?

How stupid.

I've been reading too much manga.

Once again smiling in self-derision, Akabayashi tapped his cane on the ground, and started to walk away from that place.

“Well, if those girls were to say 'But we like the night'..... Little old me and my friends would have no way to stop them.”

He continued to walk.

I that night city, he walked the underside of the boundary between the normal world, and the underground.

With the shock he felt upon first falling in love reflected in his missing right eye...

With his usual light smile, the man vanished into the depths of the city once more.

日常 C

『取り立て

ラブソディール』



Everyday Life C – Shylock's Rhapsody

At first, the rumours had all been true.

“Hey, have you heard?..”

“That guy, Shizuo Heiwajima...”

“Shizuo, he...”

“That guy...”

“He was walking around with some little girl...”

“Shizuo Heiwajima is...”

“She was only about 9 years old...”

“I heard he got into trouble with the Yakuza...”

“He climbed a building with his bare hands!...”

“He sent a car rolling with just a kick...”

“He got stabbed by some lady...”

“But the knife wouldn't go in, it just fell straight to the ground!”

“... saw him jump out of a moving truck, carrying a girl...” “He threw a motorbike with one arm!”

“That guy's superhuman.”

These rumours were spreading through the net, and through word of mouth.

Amongst all of the things that happened over the holidays, a certain trend appeared.

The topic of a single man had started to stand out amongst the rest, as if he had been raging about every part of Ikebukuro for the entire holiday.

He was an existence which, from the start, stood out in that city as 'The man wearing a bartender's uniform', whether one liked him or not.

If it was just his uniform, one might simply think he was a customer puller, and all would be well. But his blonde hair and sunglasses, along with the way he would always be walking around with a man with dreadlocks, created an image that said 'It would be better to stay away from him'.

However, the more a person got to know him, the more they would start to reassess their attitude towards him.

From 'Better to stay away from him', people would change to various opinions, like 'Never EVER go near him', 'He's a nicer guy than I thought', 'If you see him, run!', 'Pray to your gods!', 'Give up!', but these evaluations were always extreme.

With a certain vigour, as if they were explaining some kind of monster they had never seen before, their extreme opinions would invite further extreme rumours, which would then twist the truth into some even more extreme.

“Hey, have you heard?..”

“That guy, Shizuo Heiwajima...”

“That monster...”

“I heard he died...”

“He got hit by a car, and was sent flying...”

“He was trying to protect that girl...”

“He ended up in some dump somewhere...”

“Shizuo, he...”

“That guy...”

“I heard he got hit by a motorbike...” “He got into trouble with the Yakuza, and fell off a building...”

“No, he got stabbed by some lady, and died...”

“Seriously?..”

“The kid was there...”

“So he was human, then?”

Utter nonsense.

In their own way, they were extreme rumours... But the particular phrase 'Shizuo is dead' became a great shock to certain people, and the rumours spread like wildfire.

Amidst all this, one of the rumours had received an amendment.

Would getting hit by a car truly kill Shizuo Heiwajima?

The answer is 'no'.

Those who knew Shizuo, and those who were more interested in the rumours about him, could say this with some conviction.

“Shizuo Heiwajima would not bite the dust quite so easily.”

That absolute belief brought about a change in this rumour.

As it was moulded by people's reason, prejudices, and desires, the rumour became more and more focused, till it came to a united 'form'.

A rumour which has spread too far, can sometimes become an urban legend.

When an urban legend is given a clear 'form', it spreads even further, and deeper.

For example, amongst these young delinquents, who had gathered inside a club.

“Oi, have you heard?”

“Heard what?”

“About Shizuo Heiwajima.”

“..... What's that monster done now?”

“That guy..... I heard he got hit by a truck, and was injured pretty bad.”

“..... Serious?”

“Yeah. He was being chased by Yakuza, and jumped off a building and it just went..... 'bang', straight into him.”

“Meaning..... He'd be pretty beat up right now?”

For example, amongst the drug dealers who had wanted to crush Shizuo themselves, to make their name known.

“But, knowing that guy, wouldn't he just stand up and walk away like nothin' happened?”

“No matter how hurt he is, I wouldn't pick a fight with that guy as long as he can stand.”

“I ain't scared, it's just... I'd wanna make sure he was really dead, you know?”

“In that case, I have heard one other thing...”

“What?”

“Apparently he got himself a woman.”

“Seriously!?”

“Yeah, sounds like he's been walking around town with some lady all the time recently.”

For example, amongst the remnants of a team who had been destroyed by Shizuo once before.

“..... Shizuo being weakened, surely this is a once in a lifetime chance.....”

“Well, that woman coulda just been showing him around or something...”

“No, listen to this! That lady, apparently there was a kid following her around too!”

“Huh?”

“You should take a seat for this. It sounds like that Shizuo has a kid! And she's already around primary school age!”

“You're joking!”

“I mean, that guy too young isn't he?”

“I heard that it's just some girl he used to go out with in high school, who came up to him one day and said 'this girl is your daughter'.”

It was all just utter nonsense, but in the end, they all completely believed it.

The reason they did, was because these rumours managed to stir up some sort of 'desires' from deep within their hearts.

Rather than actual belief, it was more like they were clinging to some sort of hope. As if they were thinking 'I really hope this is true', the whole time.

And the result of the desires of these people who believed in rumours...

“..... Right now, even we could.....”

“Even we could take out Shizuo Heiwajima, couldn't we?.....”

These rumours flowed through the city in just one day.

And they stirred part of the community into action.

Action, which anybody who knew the full truth would know, would only lead them to their destruction.

♂♀

May 5th, noon, somewhere in Ikebukuro, an old-looking apartment.

The apartment building appeared to have been built around thirty years ago.

Outside of one particular apartment, the sound of a door being knocked could be heard.

“Mr. Sugawa. I know you're in there, Mr. Sandayuu Sugawa!”

In rhythm with the 'knock knock' sound he was making, a young man called out.

After some time, the door clicked open, and a seedy face peered out from within.

“Hey, hi there. I'm sure you already understand why we're here today.”

The man with dreadlocks spoke with a stern face and a strict voice.

Behind him stood a man wearing a bartender's uniform, yawning loudly.

The man had blonde hair, wore sunglasses, and had quite a 'bodyguard' aura about him.

As the young man became frightened upon seeing these two, the man with dreadlocks indifferently began to speak his business.

“So, why don't you just hand over the cash, huh.”

Tom Tanaka was a debt collector.

However, he was not involved in any sort of shady, illegal loans.

He belonged to a company which managed a wide range of normal things, like brothels, telephone dating services, dating websites, and 'video' rentals.

His job was to collect the late-fees which had to be paid by people who had delayed their normal payments... In the end, his work was all within the law.

But then, there are certain cases of debt repayment which technically should be left to actual lawyers, and in the case of 'video' rentals and the like, it wasn't always confirmed whether they were an officially certified business or not.

Consequently, his line of work was in a 'grey-zone' slightly closer to black than, say, the money conversion system used by pachinko parlours. But today, Tom continued this work without a care.

If their job was to collect debts from lonely old pensioners, then Tom, and the man behind him wearing a bartender's uniform... Shizuo Heiwajima, would have quit a long time ago.

But, no matter how one looked at it, people who had failed to pay money for erotic videos, or phone-sex lines didn't really deserve their sympathy.

Of course, if they were told 'I was using that phone service to try and search for my long-lost little sister!', then they would at least take the time to confirm or deny it, but the person in front of Tom right now was not one of these cases.

So, he didn't try to fool himself into thinking this was a particularly honest job, but he also didn't think it was that much worse than any other line of work.

Furthermore, amongst those who had delayed their payments, there were many who had had no intention of paying in the first place, and there were even some amongst them who were engaged in illegal activities, so their job constantly placed them in some amount of danger.

It was for this reason that he was always accompanied by his helper, the bodyguard standing behind him, Shizuo Heiwajima, but...

“As I said, we can straighten this out in court if you really want to do that. But wouldn't that be wasting everybody's time? We ain't ripping you off or anything, and we ain't asking for more than we told you from the start. Actually, first you need to return that damn video you borrowed from our place! Seriously, how do you even rack up a debt of 150,000 yen, when the late fee is only 200 yen a day!?”

“Hey, wait a sec! I ain't said anythin' about not payin'! I just put the dub I made up on a net auction! I pay the damn fees as soon as it sells!”

“Dub.....! Oi, you, are you kidding me right now? That's directly interfering with our business there... Well, whatever, I'll put that aside for today, but you gotta choose now. The video, or the money?”

It seemed he had confirmed that the man he was talking to was an even more despicable human than he had first thought, and decided that talk was going to be useless. In order to finish his business as quickly as possible, Tom began trying to walk into the house.

Looking as if he was about to cry, the man pushed Tom back, and raised his voice.

“W-w-wait, I said! I get it! I'll pay! I'll pay, all right?”

“I'm glad you understand. Whatever you don't have on you, you can just borrow from some loan shark, ok?”

He folded nice and easily.

Tom began to think this, but...

With a vulgar expression rising to his face, the man looked over Tom's shoulder, and spoke towards the man standing on the walkway which lead to the apartment.

“Well, what I mean is... You'll pay it all for me, won't you? Shizuo Heiwajima?”

“Wai- what are y-.....”

“..... Haa?”

At the sudden mention of Shizuo's name, Tom's body froze, and the man himself turned his head towards them with a scowl on his face.

This is bad.

I have a bad feeling about this.

Tom could see Shizuo snapping any second now, and took a step away from the door.

Then, as he backed away, he calmly asked Shizuo a question.

“Just so I know, is this guy a friend of yours?”

“..... Nope..... I've never met him before.”

As Shizuo tilted his head, with a cross look on his face, the man inside the apartment grinned, and started to talk.

“Ahh, it's just, you're a pretty famous guy, you know. I knew who it was as soon as I saw that bartender's uniform.”

“Aah?.....”

Shizuo was clearly becoming more and more agitated, and Tom was distancing himself from the two of them at the same rate.

Without noticing any of this, the indebted man continued to step towards all the pains of Hell.

“So, I heard you're the big brother of that Yuuhei Hanejima, huh?”

“.....!”

ffFFF.....!

Hearing the man's words, Tom almost screamed out loud.

Hey, I heard nothing about this!

“Ohh..... And, if I really was that guy's big brother, what's it to you?.....”

“Your little brother is super-rich, right? Surely he's sharing a bit of that cash with you, so you should have money lying around, right?”

If I knew this guy wanted to die so badly, I would have made Shizuo wait somewhere further away!

After Tom had walked down the stairs of the building, and found shelter on the floor below...

The man spoke his finishing blow.

“So, if you don't want the whole world knowing that a hooligan like you is his big brother, you'll get your money, and.....”

Of course, he would be the one being 'finished'.

-crack- The sound of a part of something being pulled out of place.

At the same time, the man's words suddenly stopped.

This was of little wonder, as Shizuo had just grabbed the man's face with his right hand, at the same time completely dislocating his jaw.

“..... And? You were saying something about money?”



Shizuo brought his hand away, and the lower jaw of the man hung there loosely.

It was opened so wide that a fist could easily fit. The lower half of his wide-opened mouth was swaying slowly, side to side, like a Cat's Cradle. He timidly felt his face with both hands, but it seemed as if the man still hadn't realised what had been done to him.

“A-, a-ga-ga-ga? A-ga?”

“Ah, it probably doesn't matter. Shut that vulgar mouth.”

“A-, a-gaa, a-ga-ga-ga-ga!”

Shizuo took one step towards the man who was in no state to close his mouth, even if he wanted to...

“..... Didn't I tell you..... To shut your god-damned mouth already!?”

Tom could hear his angry voice from outside of the building.

And just a moment after, he heard some sort of violent noise...

Tom looked up, and at almost the same time, a window on the second floors was smashed.

The reason the window had broken needn't be asked, as the answer was already reflected in Tom's eyes.

The body of the indebted man had broken through the window, and fell straight down... Colliding with several branches of a tree planted in a garden outside the building, he fell straight to Tom's side.

However, on his way down, one of the branches caught on his clothes, and the man ended up swinging on the tree right in front of Tom.

“Hey, you have pretty good luck.”

“N-, n-noo..... The p-police..... I'll t-tell th-the, t-th.....”

Perhaps Shizuo had relocated his lower jaw for him, as the man's mouth seemed to be working again, miraculously.

As he looked up at the man who had complained about Shizuo in a quivering voice, Tom calmly asked a question.

“And you're going to tell them what, exactly?”

“..... E-, eh?”

“..... You gonna say, 'I borrowed a naughty video, then tried to sell copies of it illegally, so they got angry at me. Then when I tried to blackmail one of the debt collectors, he beat me up'? That should be an interesting court case. Your mummy and daddy might even come to watch, huh.”

“.....!”

“Well, if you make the wise decision that you don't wanna become so famous over this, then I'm sure we can at least pay for the broken window.”

As he brushed away one of his locks which had been brushing against his ear, Tom shrugged and murmured to himself.

“Though, I guess we'll just be taking it off your late fees, anyway.”

♂♀

Ten minutes later, somewhere in Ikebukuro.

“Good grief, they can say things like that, because you never actually kill them.”*

“..... I'm sorry, Tom-san.”

They were on their way from the last collection site, to the Ikebukuro Station.

It seemed that Tom was lecturing Shizuo about what he had done.

“Couldn't you maybe just, I dunno, do something a bit more safe? Like crush a 500 yen coin in front of their face, to scare them or something? You could do something like that with just one finger, surely.”

“Yeah..... But, I don't think you're allowed to just mess around with coins like that, it's against the law.”

“What?..... Well then, you probably shouldn't. Let's think of something else.”

With their strange conversation somehow meshing together, the two of them continued walking through the crowds, while thinking.

“Really, that guy from before was the real idiot. Picking a fight with you, when he obviously knew who you were..... Rather, it actually seemed like all he knew about you was that you're Kasuka's big brother, huh.”

“..... Seemed like it.”

“If it were those punks over there, just seeing you would have enough of an effect..... But lately there have been a lot more people who don't know, like that idiot just now.”

“..... I'm sorry.”

Tom turned back with a confused look on his face, to see Shizuo looking back at him meekly.

“Huh? Why are you apologising?”

“Eh..... Well, I mean... If only I was better at my job...”

“That is completely unrelated when it comes to fools like him. Honestly, I was scolding you before, but really you're doing a great job. I've always felt really bad for dragging you around to dangerous jobs like this, from the start.”

Tom spoke indifferently, while turning away from Shizuo.

Shizuo, looking at the back of his employee...

“..... Thank you very much.”

... murmured his gratitude, but somehow he himself didn't really seem satisfied.

Noticing Shizuo's discontent, Tom sighed, looked at his wristwatch, and spoke.

“It's a little early, but let's go for lunch.”

“I guess we can treat ourselves once in a while, so let's go to Russian Sushi.”

♂♀

At Russian Sushi.

This woman was truly displeased.

As a result of her forcing all of her feelings – despair, anger, frustration – deep down inside herself... Her face was now sullen, almost to the point of being expressionless.

But, with her naturally well-sculpted looks, her expression almost felt lazy.

Whether or not he knew her true feelings, the Caucasian shop owner behind the counter spoke, while looking at her scowling face.

“Oi, Varona. We serve actual customers here, so quit your frowning.”

“..... Negative. My face has formed no such melancholic expression. It is as normal.”

The woman he had called Varona answered with slightly strange speech patterns.

Hearing their exchange, the dark man who had been cleaning tables spoke up with a refreshing smile on his face.

“Ohh, no good Varona. That face is no good. The customer is god, yes? The gods surely have big hearts, yes? If we visit the Buddha three times, we must pray to the gods one hundred, yes. Pray to Ebisu one hundred times, great for business! This is why you should make an Ebisu-face, yes?”

“Incomprehensible. Your Japanese goes beyond bizarre, Samya.”

Behind the counter, the chef murmured '..... Coming from you?', but Varona only ignored him, and turned her eyes away, keeping the sour look on her face.

“Besides..... I just stood by as my partner was killed. Reaching that state of mind at this point in time, is impossible.”

Varona was a freelance Jill-of-all-trades.

After coming to Japan, she had been hired by many people, and had stained her hands with various crimes.

Everything from assassination, to smuggling weapons, and eventually even kidnapping... Enough that if she were caught by the police, she would likely be living the rest of her life in jail, or be extradited back to Russia.

Along with her partner, Slon, they had performed many jobs like this in Ikebukuro, but...

They had set their eyes on a Yakuza gang, called the Awakusu Group, and as a result, Slon had been shot in both legs, and carried off somewhere. It was best if she didn't continue to hope for his survival. At least, that was what she had decided.

On the other hand, she was...

.....

At this point, she realised something.

She realised that the reason she was feeling so displeased right now, was not because she was mourning Slon.

The owner behind the counter asked Varona a question, as he sharpened a large knife.

“From the start, you must have been prepared for it to end up like this, no?..... Didn't you already lose three other comrades on your way to Japan? I can't really believe that a person who still came here after all of that, without taking revenge, would now start raging about as some sort of revenge for her partner.”

“..... When it came to death, I was to be first. I had firmly believed this..... In the motherland, as I was a woman, my more foolish enemies would let their guards down. As a result, Slon and I were able to survive.”

Varona spoke softly, as if talking to herself, and cast her eye's downward.

“This time was more humiliating. At the moment when we were both supposed to die, my life was permitted to continue, only because of the influence of my father..... Disgraceful.”

In reality, her heart was being attacked by an overwhelming sense of stress.

Not in relation to the loss of her comrade.

If she were the type to value another person's life so highly, she would have avoided this sort of incident in the first place.

She simply could not forgive herself.

I want to destroy, anything and everything.

Including myself.

Only a few hours ago... Right after she had woken up, her heart had been taken over by this impulse.

As this impulse took control, and caused her to begin acting violently, she was immediately subdued by the two workers of Russian Sushi, and it quickly disappeared.

“Calm down. It's your choice if you want to start some sort of revenge against the Awakusu Group, but don't start messing up my shop.”

Denis reprimanded her as she was being held down easily by Samya.

However, her impulse ended up being held down along with her.

“Am I..... Weak?”

As she asked the two of them this, with Denis replying 'Weaker than Master Drakon, at least', and Samya saying 'That isn't something for us to decide, is it?', she thought upon the meaning of their answers, and her usual calm composure began to return to her.

Knowing herself that it was impossible, she asked anyway, "Will we be able to save Slon?..." Of course, the answer she received was not a favourable one. And with this, she understood something.

“It's because you're not doing anything that you think such stupid thoughts.”

Telling her this, Denis began trying to get her to help with the shop.

Varona didn't think of their attitude as being particularly cold-hearted.

Back when she was under the command of Lingerin, even on official duties, the death of her comrades was almost an everyday occurrence, and even if they did have time to mourn their fallen, it was always done while they continued forward.

Feeling that letting her actions be taken over by her rage would bring her no benefit, she decided to listen to the words of the two men before her for now, but...

I really don't look good as a waitress.

Wearing a women's uniform, Varona patrolled the store.

This place did strongly remind her of home, but the fact that the main interior design was that of a sushi shop, gave her a strange, out of place feeling that she just couldn't shake.

It gave a slightly mistaken impression of Russia, as if it were a scene from a movie made in some country far away from Russia itself.

Lingerin would probably enjoy it, but father would find it shameful.

As she breathed a sigh inside that peculiar scene, she turned her eyes towards the two Russian men, continuing their work.

..... Why are these two even doing this? Denis and Samya... Setting up a shop in a place like this, I can't help but think there's something wrong with them.

She had heard that before they started working with Lingerin, the two of them had not worked together, but a few years ago, they both suddenly moved to Japan.

I'm sure Denis would have been making a killing working under Lingerin, but.....

Starting up a shop here, in such an expensive area, must have already depleted most of those savings.

.....

No, I won't pry into it.

This morning, after subduing and calming her down, the two of them had not tried to ask for any details about her actions. If they were not going to pry into her affairs, then she thought she should do the same.

However, upon turning her feelings away from that trifle matter, she couldn't help but recall her memories of the last few days.

..... What..... am I doing.

She had only wanted to test the limits of humans.

It was a question which she was never able to answer by reading books since her younger days.

This question she held, before she knew it, had become her reason for living.

But there was one thing that she had been taught over these last few days.

Within herself... She may not have the power needed to find the truth to this question.

I am weak.

She had been shown this.

The Black Rider was a true monster, so that was fine.

She had thought that, for her, the bartender uniform wearing man, would be the opponent most worth testing.

But that night, she had been unable to even lay a hand on those top-dogs of the Awakusu Group.

Which means, everything I've done up till now, has been.....

It felt as if her pleasures, her past, and her hopes for the future had all been denied, and the weakness of mind she showed by thinking this, and the physical weakness of not being able to rescue Slon, brought to her a deep anger.

Burdened by these thoughts, she continued to stand around the shop.

Denis had said to her, 'For now, you can just watch us work, then go ahead and plagiarise', but how, and what exactly he wanted her to 'plagiarise', was not said. For starters, she had absolutely no shred of experience in customer service. She had learned many tricks of the trade, simply from reading books, but she had never learned anything about a shop that combined Russia and sushi, in books or real life.

In any case...

Since the shop had opened to customers for the day, she had been standing in the same spot, watching the other two work, but...

She realised that the glances of the customers who had walked in had started to gather on her.

?

Are they just surprised to see a foreigner?

But they don't seem too bothered by Denis and Simon.

She didn't take into consideration the fact that she was a woman, and her physical appearance, at all.

In the eyes of regular customer, an unknown female employee had suddenly appeared. And in the eyes of a new customer, they couldn't help but take notice of the glamorous female standing intimidatingly in the corner, with a sullen look on her face.

Suddenly Simon said something strange to a pair of customers, who still looked to be children.

“Ohh, Seiji my young man, are you interested in that girl? That one is called Varona, yes? Taking her home with you, is OK. Young boy, you could have your girlfriend, and a lover. A flower in each hand! Rice gets more delicious when you eat with people you love! 10 people have taken her home with their sushi before, yes?”

.....

I never heard anything about this.

I see, so this shop has that kind of service?

.....I don't mind them paying for my skills, getting me to do a job like normal, but.....

I'll humbly decline any offers to buy my body itself.

Without realising that Simon had simply been making a joke, Varona frowned even more than usual as she spoke.

“..... Negative. I have no obligation to save your business by selling my body. I will boycott this operation. However, if you're telling me to do this at the request of a client, I shall accede.”

“Ohh, is this one of the Japanese sexual harassment trials? Sexual harassment is bad, yes? People who do that must remove their stomachs! Take out your stomach, and you can not eat sushi any more, you will send me bankrupt!”

Simon laughed as he said this, but Varona didn't quite understand what he was talking about.

They both had their own special, strange ways of speaking Japanese, and the customers who overheard their exchange smiled wryly, simply looked confused, or had various similar half-hearted reactions before returning to their meals.

Observing these reactions, Varona didn't quite understand them, but began to think that she probably wasn't suited to customer service. Then...

“Oi, Varona. If some bill collectors come to our back door, hand that white envelope on the desk over to them, okay?”

“.....”

“Even if you can't serve customers, you should be able to at least hand over some money.”

“..... Affirmative.”

Without being able to say anything more in return, Varona began to walk through the shop's kitchen, in the direction of the back door.

She had picked up the thick envelope, which was on a desk in the office located next to the back exit, and opened the back door, but...

“Oh?”

There, stood a man, one who she could remember.

“.....!”

Varona immediately raised her guard, and moved to kick the man where it would hurt him most.

“Upsy-daisy.”

The man stopped the kick which was aiming for him, with one hand, and then forcefully pushed it back away from him.

At the same time, he had swept her remaining leg out from under her, and before she realised it, Varona had landed on her rear.

The reason she felt no pain, was likely because the man had regulated his force such that she wouldn't.

“.....Tch.”

If only I had a weapon.

While despising herself for being unable to think of any plans that didn't rely on her equipment... Varona glared at the man standing before her, in his garish suit.

“So scary. I only came to get the crab-money we were owed, and thought I could check up on the sleeping beauty at the same time, but I didn't think you'd come out to greet me yourself. I thought you'd still be fast asleep... Well, I guess this means I'll have to leave my caviar sushi for another time.”

“Akabayashi!.....”

“Oh? You remembered my name? That makes me happy. Having my name remembered by such a beauty like you.”

The lightly smiling man... Akabayashi, with completely unguarded movements, took the envelope straight from Varona's hands, then turned away from her.

“You must pardon me. I'd love to stay and play with you for a little while longer, but I have to go and escort a different little princess now. Maybe next time, ok?”

“I request that you maintain your position! You must tell me, has the execution of Slon already been performed!?”

“Oi, oi, gimme a break. What would happen if somebody heard you saying stuff like 'execution'?”

Turning to face her in a rush, Akabayashi responded, while shrugging his shoulders.

“Well, in the end it's all up to him, whether we bury him, or spare him.”

“.....?”

“The fact is, your debt to us has gotta be paid somehow. But Mikiya-san and Aozaki, they're both pretty practical guys, you see. They're probably thinking seriously about whether it would be better to finish him off, or to make him do some work for us.”

Tapping the cane in his hand rhythmically on his shoulder, Akabayashi again turned his back to Varona, still sitting on the ground, and began to walk away.

“Though, I think the one to pass down judgement in the end, will be the boss. Well, if he spills the beans about your employer..... that old guy, Yodogiri, then I'm sure the scales will tip in his favour, at least a little.”

“.....”

Should she simply be happy that Slon could still survive, or should she take up arms and bring the fight to the Awakusu immediately, in order to rescue Slon.

Varona continued to sit there, aimlessly, without even knowing how to react to what Akabayashi had told her.

Just how long had it been...

From behind Varona, who had been glaring in the direction Akabayashi had left, she heard a cheerful voice.

“Ohh, so here you were! What's the matter, you have stomach ache?”

“..... Negative. Your concern is unnecessary.”

As Varona started to stand up as if nothing had happened, Simon shrugged his shoulders and asked her a question.

“You get into a fight with Akabayashi? Fighting is bad, it just makes you hungry, yes? And that Akabayashi brings us lots of cheap crab. You kill Akabayashi, and crab gets expensive, then we and our customers just get more and more hungry, yes?”

“Those crabs would be smuggled goods, would they not?”

“As we say, our crab is grown nationally, yes? But we never say which nation, no.”

“.....”

Although his words did not relieve her doubts, they did serve to bring her mind back to the present, and she decided to return to the shop.

So..... I guess this is the end.

On the short walk back, dark thoughts rose into her mind.

Even though I stood by as countless comrades were struck down, just to get here.....

To end up being rescued by my father, and Lingerin, who I severed any connection with, and betrayed.....

I wonder how they would look upon me now. With contempt maybe? Or perhaps pity.

There may not even be any reason for me to continue living now.....

After her recent successive defeats, what Akabayashi had just said to her, had taken away her motivation of 'avenging Slon's death'.

No, that's just an excuse.

From the start, I was more disappointed with my own weakness, than I was that Slon had been killed.

What should I even do from now on.....

While thinking this, she passed through the kitchen, back into the store, and when she got there...

She saw two men sitting in the seats which had previously been occupied by the young couple.

She knew the face of one of those men.

More than just the face, she remembered him easily by his outfit.

His characteristic, was one which was overly obvious to even Varona, who couldn't easily tell the difference between the faces of Japanese people.

After all, on top of his blonde hair and sunglasses, the man was wearing a bartender's uniform.

“Well, you and Kasuka are both overly famous in your own ways, so it's no surprise that guys like that will pop up every now and then. Rather, you should be prepared for that from the start.

“..... Yeah.”

“Of course, I realise you haven't become so famous because you wanted to. I'll make sure to prepare for this sort of thing next time, but it won't be easy.”

“That's true.....”

Arriving at Russian Sushi, Tom and Shizuo had ordered a serving of sashimi, and while waiting, they had restarted their conversation from before, but...

“Oh, by the way, have you said your thanks yet to that underground doctor for what he did yesterday?”

“..... Ah, no, not yet.”

“That's no good. He did a lot for you, it doesn't matter if you're childhood friends or whatever, you really should thank him for it.”

“You're right. We've been busy, so I just didn't think.”

Upon saying this, Shizuo brought out his phone, and began calling his acquaintance, the underground doctor.

“..... Ah, Shinra? Yeah, about yesterday... I thought I should thank you again for that..... Huh? Ahh..... I see, ok then, I'll call you again sometime.”

As he was about to leave his seat to take his call outside the shop, Shizuo suddenly sat back down, and cut the call.

“What happened?”

“Ah, he seemed busy, told me to call again tomorrow..... Well, he did almost sound like he was about to cry, though.”

“Oh? Well, guess there's no need to rush then, just call ag-.....-ain?”

Seeing a woman who had appeared from the depths of the shop, Tom's words stopped partway out of his mouth.

“Hey, isn't that woman over there staring at us right now?”

“..... Yeah, true. Wait, they never had a worker like that here before, did they?”

Seeing the Caucasian woman staring at them with her mouth wide open, Tom asked the owner behind the counter a question.

“Hey, chief, exactly when did you start employing such a pretty young lady? She's Russian, right?”

“Yeah. She's still just observing though. She's too useless to even carry plates at the moment, so please just think of her as some Russian ornament.”

Tom laughed at the owner's blunt response, and asked another question.

“Chief, how do I say something like, 'you're beautiful', in Russian?”

“..... 'Vi ocharovatelny'.”

“Err... Bee, acherabatennen.”

However, hearing this, the Caucasian woman looked confused at Tom, and spoke to the owner behind the counter.

“..... What is this man saying? It is unintelligible. I question its relation to the Japanese language.”

With a bitter smile, the owner turned his head towards the woman, and spoke to her.

“'Vi ocharovatelny'.”

“..... Why do you suddenly speak these social compliments? Please concisely explain your reasoning.”

“That's what that young man over there just tried to say to you.”

“In which language, exactly?”

Listening to their conversation, Tom tilted his head, and started speaking to Shizuo, beside him.

“Was my pronunciation just now really that bad?”

“Well, I don't really know if it was all that bad, but to a native speaker it might have seemed like it, I guess.”

“I've gone and embarrassed myself now.”

As Tom blushed, and sipped his tea, a combination plate of sashimi was brought to them from behind the counter.

While stretching his chopsticks towards the sashimi, Tom flashed a glance towards the young lady, but...

“Hey, isn't that woman actually glaring at us this time?”

He hesitated for a moment before asking, but decided even Shizuo wasn't enough of an idiot to get angry at the woman and shout 'What the hell are you looking at?', so he just spoke in a low voice.

“Is that so? Oh, this stuff is spicy!”

Eating a Teardrop Roll loaded with plenty of wasabi, Shizuo was being brought to tears himself.

Perhaps he couldn't make out his surroundings through the tears, as he wasn't really looking in the direction of the woman.

“Probably because you were making weird moves on her before, Tom-san.”

“I wonder..... You're probably right.”

As Tom breathed a sigh, and went back to his lunch, the owner raised his voice to him from behind the counter.

“..... By the way, you guys said before that you were short on workers, didn't you?”

“Eh? Ahh, yeah, well it's true that it's getting a bit harder with just Shizuo and I, a lot more people seem to be shirking their bills lately.”

As Tom laughed while answering, the owner said 'I see', then...

He glanced over in the direction of the woman, and said something unbelievable.

“So, any chance you'd want to try using our little ornament over there?”

♂♀

Somewhere in Ikebukuro, in front of a dojo.

It was an area near Zoushigaya Cemetery, lined with various different apartment buildings, family homes, and factories.

In front of a building on one stretch of this road, a mismatched pair were speaking to each other.

“Ok, so, I just brought you to have a look today. If you don't really like it, just say so, ok?”

“Ye-yep.”

Beside the man, Akabayashi, stood a hesitant, nervous looking young girl, Akane Awakusu, wearing casual clothes.

Akane wanted to become strong.

Over the last few days, Akane had been wrapped up in incidents that no normal primary school student... No, that not even a normal adult would ever experience.

Furthermore, rather than just being wrapped up in it, it could be said that she was one of the forces that started that whirlpool of incidents.

Immediately after returning home, after being gone for a few days, she was embraced by her tearful mother, and then lectured quickly after.

But during this lecture, her mother cried out the words 'I'm so glad you're ok!', so many times that Akane didn't really feel her anger, and only felt extremely sorry for what she had done to her mother.

On the other hand, Akane was holding some complex feelings deep within her.

Shizuo Heiwajima.

He was the adult that she had been trying to kill, yet also the man that had saved her.

Akane herself could no longer understand how she felt towards that man.

It was true that she had been saved thanks to Shizuo, but... as to whether or not she should still be trying to kill him, Akane had not found the answer yet.

Right now, Akane could not find any answer, no matter how strange the question itself may seem.

The world she had believed in, was all a lie, made by the people who feared the name of the organisation which supported her, 'Awakusu'. After learning this truth, her entire world had been ground into dust.

And with what happened after this, it seemed as if she would not be allowed to begin reconstructing that world.

The girl who had been falling apart at the seams received a finishing blow, when she had been kidnapped.

On top of this, she had met with things that should not have existed in this world, like a headless rider, and her headless horse.

For the world of the girl which had already been breaking apart, this was enough to melt it into mud.

As a result, this girl was, even to this day, broken somewhere inside.

This was what she had said to Akabayashi, when he had been called to their house earlier that morning by her father.

“How can I become better at killing people?”

Hearing this, the man who was her father's subordinate seemed shocked, but he soon hid this from his face with a wry smile, and asked her a question.

“What's wrong, is there somebody you don't like?”

“No, that's not it, but..... But there's somebody who I have to kill.”

“That doesn't sound too good. Who exactly are we talking about here?”

“..... I can't say.”

As Akane shook her head, Akabayashi showed no anger, or even a troubled look. He simply smiled and continued questioning her.

“Why is that?”

“If I said, you and the other men would go and kill that person, wouldn't you?”

“If we did, would that be bad?”

To this, the most obvious of questions, Akane nodded.

“They're a nice person. But still, I have to kill them.”

It wasn't a very informative answer, but Akabayashi patiently continued his questions.

“So little princess, do you want this person to die?”

“That's not it. I don't want to kill them.”

“..... Ok, so why are you still trying to?”

“Because if I don't, someone very important to me might be killed by them.....”

“And who told you that this might happen?”

“..... I'm sorry.”

She looked downwards, with sadness in her eyes.

From this, he concluded that she was saying 'I can't tell', and decided to try asking a different question.

“Is it possible that the one who told you might have been lying?”

“..... I don't know.”

“Before, you said something, like the person you must kill, is a nice person..... Are you certain about that?”

“..... I don't know.”

Akane shook her head again.

But she wasn't just trying to dodge his questions.

“Right now, I don't know. Everybody, everybody, even my friends..... even my friends' mothers..... my teachers..... my dad..... everybody has been lying to me, so..... I don't even know if I can trust you any more Akabayashi-san.....”

“.....”

“So, even if I think that they are a nice person, I... I can't even trust myself about that..... Um, I... Umm.....”

She couldn't even sort out her own thoughts. Akane was looking down, seemingly on the verge of tears, but she continued to choke out her words.

“But, it's no good. I need to be stronger.”

“Why is that?”

“Because, if that person really is a bad person..... If I'm weak, I'll just end up being killed. I can't even think of what I should do if they are really a bad person..... But I can't ask dad and the others for help. Because, they're Yakuza, right? So they would probably just end up killing the person before even trying to find out if they're nice or bad.....”

“..... Well this is a shock. Do all primary school girls nowadays, think about this adult stuff like you do?”

Speaking as if in deep admiration, Akabayashi thought for a moment, then spoke with his light smile.

“Well, I guess I'll know some day. First thing's first, in the case that they really are a bad person, if you don't get stronger than they are, it's not even worth talking about. Besides, princess, at your age..... Well, I like to think that even little old me and my buddies bother to find out whether who we're killing is a bad person or not, before we do it.....”

Shrugging in self-derision, Akabayashi made on proposal to Akane.

“Well, you know. Just because your opponent is a killer, that doesn't really mean that you yourself have to become better at 'killing'.”

“Eh?”

“It's called 'the art of self-defence'. Rather than learning how to kill bad people, you can become stronger in a way that lets you protect yourself, and the people important to you.”

Then, a few hours later.

Brought along by Akabayashi, Akane now stood before this building.

From the building, hung a sign saying 'Traugott Geissendorfer Affiliation - Rakuei Gym', and on the wall next to the entrance, a poster depicting a brawny looking foreigner was stuck.

“Affiliation', huh? This old Traugott guy has his hand in the bare-handed combat scene of so many places. This is one of those places, but of course, they're only affiliated with him by name. Not that they seem to mind, I suppose.”*

“...Hmm?”

From Akane's answer, it seemed as if her mind was somewhere else at the time.

She couldn't understand what Akabayashi was talking about, but even before that, her heart had been caught by a strong anxiety.

This was a new place, and she was likely to meet new people.

Of course, she was anxious about the new environment, but... Before that, the thing she most worried about, was that even in this new environment, all she would ever see would be the same fake smiles that she had seen her whole life. That they would all be just as scared of the shadow called the 'Awakusu Group'. Or they could even hate her for it.

Akane's young heart was trying to accept this anxiety, which rose up from her mature thoughts.

Her body was shaking, and just as she started to wonder if she should say that she wanted to leave...

From behind them, they heard the voice of an innocent sounding young girl.

“Ahh! I just spotted an Awakusu scoundrel kidnapping a little girl!”

“!?”

Akane's body began to shake against her will, upon hearing mention of the Awakusu Group.

But at the same time, she realised something was strange.

Even though that young girl had used the word 'Awakusu' out loud, she spoke it with the same overly cheerful voice.

As Akane timidly turned around, Akabayashi spoke with a strained smile.

“Ah, you got me. Little miss Mairu. Are you trying to say I look that evil?”

“But Akabayashi, I can't help it, you just look soo suspicious!”

“Well I guess I give up then.”

As Akabayashi smiled, the young girl cackled laughter.

She looked to be around five or six years older than Akane, and while she had clean twin-plaits in her hair, and was wearing glasses, her energetic personality seemed completely opposite to her looks.

From the uniform she was carrying around, it seemed that she must be a regular at this gym.

“The truth is, this little one is called Akane-chan, and she's the granddaughter of my boss.”

“Eh! So, wait, someday this little girl will turn into a big female boss!?”

“.....!!”

The matters about her family which she had assumed they were going to keep a secret, were spilling out of Akabayashi's mouth right before her.

With her mouth opening and closing in confusion, and not knowing exactly what she should do, Akane started tapping on Akabayashi's back.

Seeing Akane like this, the girl who had been called Mairu took a step towards her...

“A-hah-hah, it's times like these, when you gotta aim right for the jewels!”

Saying this, she suddenly tried to kick Akabayashi sharply in his crotch.

“Danger!”

Akabayashi dodged the kick, then retreated a step, while smiling.

“Damn, this is the first time I've ever had two different girls aiming a kick at my crotch, in one day.”

“Ahh, if that makes this the second time, then that means you made some girl cry this morning, right? That means you really are a scoundrel!”

After a carefree smile rose to her face, Mairu turned back to Akane and spoke brazenly.

“Well, whatever. Anyway, you're a new junior, huh? If you make sure to do everything I tell you, then I'll make you my special sidekick! I might even teach you my super secret move, the Thumb-Tack Special!”

“Simple name, simple learning requirements.”

“Akabayashi-san, you shut up!”

Akane could say nothing to Mairu, as she continued her one-sided conversation. To Akane, seeing someone like this, who would say these kinds of things even while knowing she was 'the granddaughter of the Awakusu boss', was refreshing.

“Well, in any case, you're my darling little disciple now, so if you get into any trouble, just come tell your big sis, ok? Ok, I'm gonna introduce you to our master now, come along!”

“Ahh, ok then, I've talked to the director here, so I guess I'll leave the rest up to you. Ahh, my recommendation would be pole techniques of course, but you should start with the basics first. When you're done, just call up Akane-chan's dad, and he said he'll send over someone to pick you up, so don't worry.”

“Ah, umm, huh?”

Being unable to catch up with this overly sudden development, Akane couldn't even say her thanks to Akabayashi, who was waving goodbye to her, and she was dragged into the building by the young girl named Mairu.

With everything unfolding completely differently from her expectations, she started to feel something burning deep within her heart.

Ikebukuro, an unknown apartment.

“..... even the director just straight out okayed it, what on earth are they thinking?”

While grumbling, Tom walked up the stairs of an old apartment building.

As always, he was on his way to retrieve unpaid money from a man living on the fourth floor, but this time, behind Shizuo was one more backup helper.

“I raise one problem. I have not yet been informed of the details of our group's mission.”

The one speaking in slightly strange Japanese, was a Caucasian woman, named Varona.

This situation had come about, after they had been told by the owner of Russian Sushi, 'She's so unsociable it's bad for business. You guys take her, and use her for your jobs. I'll call up the director and tell him'.

I thought he might have meant she could do clerical work in the office or something, but.....

She's coming with us!?

When Tom thought of a woman doing bill collection, the image it brought up was of an apartment building's landlady, or the owner of a bar, at most. He certainly hadn't imagined a woman as a colleague in his shylock business.

She had changed into her own clothing before leaving, but he couldn't tell if she was aware that her change of outfit had accentuated her body-line in such a captivating way.

Ahhh, working together with such a sexy lady certainly sounds nice, but.....

With her stone cold face, the lady in question did not seem the type to open up her heart to men, in the slightest.

Thinking things like this, Tom answered Varona's previous question.

“Umm. Well, we go around collecting money from bad people, who aren't paying bills that they really should pay. Ok?”

Because of her dubious use of Japanese, Tom tried his best to use simple language.

As if she had understood the explanation, Varona nodded her head, then reaffirmed her knowledge.

“Collection of protection money. Understood.”

“Well, it's not really protection money, but..... Ah, whatever.”

Seriously, will this be ok?

They could end up being underestimated, bringing a woman along with them.

Tom himself meant absolutely no disrespect to women, but he definitely couldn't say the same for the kind of people that they were about to be collecting bills from.

No, it didn't matter if he was underestimated, but if they did the same to Shizuo as well, that would likely result in a very angry Shizuo killing the other party, which was a result that he must try to avoid.

Aside from that, this girl... it looks like she's been glaring at Shizuo for a while now. Is it just my imagination?

The man in question, Shizuo, had looked like something was troubling him since some time ago, and had folded his arms in thought. It may have been that he was trying to think if there was any reason for him to be glared at like that.

While Tom was thinking these things, they had arrived at their objective location.

Trying out the doorbell, they soon heard the sound of the door being unlocked from inside.

Then, from the opening door, a man with a tight 'punch perm' hairstyle appeared.

“..... Who the hell are you guys?”

“Hey, hi there, if we said we're from the dating site, 'Alcheni', would you understand why we're here?”

Hearing Tom's words spoken so indifferently, the permed man's face froze suddenly.

“..... A-! Nope, no idea.”

“Ok, that's fine, even if you don't know, your phone number shows us that you've already racked up 170,000 yen. There was a formal contract, so really we should be leaving this to a lawyer, but I think we know that would be a bother to both parties, right?”

“Shut yer trap! Keep talkin' crap like that and I'll beat the life outta ya'.”

“Well, if you really can't understand what I'm talking about, I guess I'll need to call in a translator, huh.”

As Tom said this in exasperation, the permed man's face formed a disgusting smile.

“Fine..... I'll call out some 'translators' for ya.”

“Huh?”

“Oi! You guys!”

As the man yelled back into his apartment, several men started appearing in the entranceway of the room.

With their clearly delinquent appearances, the men looked completely opposite from Tom and his colleagues, as they stood in the corridor to block their exit.

From their atmosphere, they didn't seem to be professionals. Tom's years of experience told him that much.

With a triumphant look on his face, the permed man looked at Tom and the others, and spoke.

“So, what didya wanna tell me now? Was it that ya wanted me and my friends to do that pretty lady over there some service?”

Oh man...

Tom breathed a sigh, and thought.

Usually I'd just let Shizuo beat the hell out of them and it would end there, but we've got our newbie, little miss Varona along with us today, so I guess we should retreat...

Thinking this, Tom started to turn towards Varona, but...

And if they aren't gonna let us leave so easily, we have to at least let her..... run.....?

What?

It looked to him as if Varona, who had been behind Shizuo up until then, had disappeared.

“Hah? What, where's the gir-..... guah!?”

Tom had heard the permed man cry out from behind him.

Huh?

Just as he was turning around in the direction of the voice, Tom saw a look of surprise rise on Shizuo's face.

The same look which rose to Tom's face once he had turned around.

“Wha-” “Wait a-..... You bast-..... Ah!?” “Geh!?” “Uahh!?”

What they saw, was Varona moving about amongst the men, and those men falling over with a groan, one by one.

It was almost like a scene from some action video game.

Together with Varona's physical appearance, it formed a truly vivid spectacle.

She was striking the men with her elbows and the tip of her foot, in their chin and throat areas, and was taking away their consciousness, one after the other.

After this, she took several wallets out of the front pockets of the men she had knocked out, and handed them over to Tom, then she spoke in her usual, far from perfect Japanese.

“Please inform me of the correct amount of money we must collect. In the case that this is insufficient, shall I conduct a search of the premises?”

♂♀

Even as Tom and Shizuo looked towards each other in shock...

Throughout the city, rumours continued to spread.

“Oi, did you see?”

“Shizuo, he...”

“Shizuo Heiwajima was...”

“He had some woman following him...”

“So his injury was all a lie?...”

“I dunno...”

“But, there really was a woman...”

“She wasn't just with that guy with dreads?”

“Nah, they've been seen all around town...”

“She's a pretty fine looking woman too...”

“And the whole time they walked together..... She was staring at Shizuo.”

♂♀

Several hours later, Ikebukuro, in front of the Kishibojin Temple.

“Damn, I guess I should have known this would happen, seeing as she's an acquaintance of Simon and the chief of the sushi shop.”

After that, they had gone to a few more collection sites, but each and every one of them would either show their lechery and try to put their hands on Varona, or else try to threaten her... But even before Shizuo could get angry, Varona continued to K.O. every single one of them.

“This is only making the clean-up harder on me, too.....”*

“Clean-up”? In other words, you mean turning them into corpses, and disposing of them? I have heard that the Japanese standard is to sink them into Tokyo Bay.”

“We don't have a standard like that. Shizuo, can't you say something?”

“..... No, it's not really my place to say anything.”

While they had this exchange, they had arrived at a certain shrine at the Kishibojin Temple.

They were on their way to the main Ikebukuro station, after getting off a different local train.

Their next 'workplace' was quite near here, but they had decided to take a quick break before going there, and so had come here, to Kishibojin.

It was a quiet plot of land, right in the middle of a residential area. In the open grounds, many trees were growing, and the light of the sun, which had just begun to turn red, was spilling through the leaves. This place was like the city's oasis, and offered healing upon its people.

They had decided to rest their body's here for the time being, but there was a strangely unexplainable mood surrounding the three of them.

Not really knowing what to talk about, Tom continued to think to himself, however... Surprising Tom, Shizuo was the first to speak, as he asked Varona a question.

“You seem pretty strong, huh. Do you do some kind of martial arts?”

“.....”

Varona looked at Shizuo with a complicated expression. Tom, who didn't know Varona's personal circumstance, could not understand exactly what sort of emotions lay behind that strange expression.

She stayed silent for a time, but after taking one deep breath, Varona responded.

“I was taught the very basics of various things before coming here. In my childhood, it was from books. From puberty, through actual combat. I learned the fundamentals of self-defence from Denis and Samya..... The man that you call Simon.”

“From those two, huh..... You say from your childhood, does that mean your father and such also know some martial arts?”

“..... My father is an expert at a type of martial art called 'Systema', however, this was the only art I did not learn..... The reason was basically as defiance towards my father. I would prefer if you did not press that matter further.”

“I see. Ok then, I won't ask. Either way, I think you're pretty amazing.”

“..... Hearing that from you, I can only see it as being a joke.”

Tom reacted to Varona's words, even before Shizuo himself.

“Hm?..... Wait, little lady, you know about Shizuo?”

“..... If you're in Ikebukuro, you hear the rumours whether you like it or not.”

This was a lie from her.

The reason she knew of Shizuo's strength, was because she had seen it with her own eyes, the previous day.

It seemed that Shizuo had not realised this, as she had been wearing a full helmet at the time, and hadn't talked much.

Of course, she had heard rumours about 'the bartender uniform wearing man' in the past. But for things like 'he can throw a vending machine with one hand', she had most likely just passed them off as a joke.

However, the day before, she had fully, personally experienced that strength. She had been made to experience it.

If it was this man...

Varona remembered that moment.

The spectacle which had overturned her common knowledge, of that man kicking a car over.

I had thought, that this man would be able to prove it to me.

I had thought that he would be able to answer, once and for all, if humans were truly a fragile existence.

However, the excitement she had felt at that time, had been turned into deep depression, in only one night.

To think that I didn't even have the capabilities.

I..... am weak.

To figure out if metal is truly strong, or brittle... You don't strike it with a clay hammer.

The people who I have broken up until this point..... All just happened to be even weaker than clay.

As she thought these quite irrational things, Varona started to glare towards Shizuo again.

She did not hate him. The feelings behind her expression, were all aimed towards herself, not him.

On the other hand, Shizuo, without realising he was being glared at again, spoke as he looked towards the part of the sky he could see through the trees.

“I dunno what kinda rumours you've heard about me, but I really do think you're more amazing.”

“..... I fail to understand what you are saying.”

“Really, I just happened to be strong. My power has nothing to do with whether humans are weak or strong. Rather, people like you, who become strong by training, and training, in my eyes, people like you are much stronger humans. It's worthy of my respect.”

“.....”

I'm more amazing?

What is he talking about?

No, I must have heard something wrong.

In place of the suddenly silent Varona, Tom spoke up.

“Oh right, wasn't there some martial artist guy you really like? Hmm, what was his name.....”

“Traugott Geissendorfer. He's awe-inspiring, that guy.”

“You really are a strange guy. In our eyes, you're so much more crazy. If you really wanted to, you could go and easily win gold in weight-lifting. If you got a whole heap of gold medals, you could..... Wait, are gold medals actually made of gold?”

“..... The medallions used in the Olympics are not entirely made of gold. We must think about what would occur if a country with an unstable economic situation were to host. They use a medallion made of at least 0.925 grade Sterling silver, coated with at least 6 grams of pure gold. Up until 1980, the Nobel Prize was a 100% pure gold medal. These days, even the Nobel Prize uses a medallion of 0.75 grade silver, coated in pure gold.”

The one who had answered Tom's question, was Varona.

She had been trying to change the subject with her answer, but hearing her smooth reply, Tom raised his voice in surprise.

“..... I feel like I just saw the amazing side of this little lady.”

“Why did the Nobel Prize stop using gold? They run out of money?”

Varona was reminded slightly of Slon by Shizuo's questions, and her heart wavered... But still, as if it were habit, she answered the question given to her.

“The price is not the problem. It was changed because a gold medallion was too flexible. Just biting it with ones teeth will leave marks. Just a small accident can transform the medal greatly. An alloy is used to protect it against this.”

“Ohh, so that's why.....”

“Strong, smart, and a beauty. You got all bases covered, huh.”

Tom was smiling half in disbelief, but Varona's heart clouded with his words.

“..... Negative. I am not beautiful, or smart, and I am certainly not stro-.....”

Her words were mostly aimed at herself, but they were suddenly drowned out.

By the loud, overly innocent voice of a girl, from the entrance to the grounds.

“Ah! Shiizuuoo-saan! How's it goin'?”

The three of them turned around, and saw a young girl with braided hair, wearing glasses, and carrying a martial arts uniform on her back. Behind her, stood a girl who looked just like her, but gloomier, and another girl who looked to be around five or six years younger than the two.

Seeing this group, Shizuo seemed slightly surprised, as he spoke.

“If it isn't Mairu and Kukuri..... Wait, and Akane!?”

The young girl who looked like she was still in primary school, was standing behind the twins as if trying to hide in their shadow, but... As soon as she confirmed Shizuo's presence, she came pattering over to them, and dove straight into his arms.

“Mister Shizuo!”



♂♀

“Oi, it's me. Listen to this...”

“That rumour was true!...”

“I was just watching Shizuo from far away!”

“Some little primary school kid just ran over to Shizuo, and then hugged him or something!”

“Seriously?”

“Shizuo's kid?”

“So it wasn't just the woman, even the kid was real!”

These rumours spread, like wildfire, through a certain portion of the population.

The rumours took form in real time, through media like cell phones, and the net... And the men who saw these rumours became abnormally excited.

“How many people can you get here, right now?.....”

The rumours which had been mixed with a hint of desire, had come true.

In reality, they had not exactly come true, but these men believed it to be so.

They needed it to be true, so they didn't take any other possibilities into account.

That excitement would eventually push them to display greater energy than they would ever normally be able to.

No matter what kind of objective it was that they were seeking.

“I dunno how this'll end up, but ten should do. Gather ten people, and get over here.”

“As soon as those women are separated from Shizuo, let's get in there and grab 'em.”

♂♀

Why is Akane Awakusu here?

Varona was deeply confused as she surveyed her surroundings.

She did this because she suspected that there may be people from the Awakusu around.

It's no use.

It was certainly possible that they were being watched, but if so, the watchers wouldn't easily show themselves.

As she didn't have any equipment on her right now, if anybody on the same level as Akabayashi showed up, she would have no chance anyway.

.....No.

We've already talked about this.

As long as I don't lay a hand on Akane from now, the Awakusu won't make any moves either..... But then, I don't know whether the Awakusu will keep their end of that deal, so I have to keep my guard up.

Either way..... I don't intend to become relaxed in the temporary peace my father gave me.

As Varona thought this, the three girls in front of her were talking in loud, boisterous voices.

“Hey, hey! Who's that pretty lady!? Can I give her a hug!?”

“Stop it.”

The girl with the braids was picked up at her collar by Shizuo, and was now dangling in the air.

On the other hand, the gloomy twin was bowing her thanks to Tom.

“..... (Before) About last time..... (Scarves) for that money purse..... (Apology) Thank you very much.....”*

“Ahh, it's fine, it's fine.”

“This morning we got about 300,000 yen, so we put it in that bag and took it home, right Kuru-nee!”

“Three hundre-.....d!?”

Surprised by what they had said, Tom placed his hands on the girls' shoulders, and spoke to them with a serious expression.

“Well..... I'm in no real position to tell you this, but..... You really shouldn't do things that would make your parents sad, ok? You girls are very cute. You're worth a lot more than that. Well, no, I guess 300,000 yen is a lot, but really you can't put a price on such things.....”

“?” “?”

As Tom had the wrong idea, and was lecturing them, the twin girls looked towards each other in confusion.

Akane had completely forgotten about those two, and was clinging tightly to Shizuo's trousers, looking up at him with a smile.

“Thank you very much for everything yesterday, Mister Shizuo!.....”

“Hm? Ahh, don't worry about it. It's a lot cuter when kids just forget about their debts to people.”

With a wry smile, Shizuo pet Akane's head roughly.

Seeing the little girl laughing as she tried to stop Shizuo's hand, Varona thought to herself.

She's so carefree. Even though we kidnapped her just yesterday.

..... No, it just means that she has enough strength to overcome something like that.

In the end..... I'm the weak one again.....

Shizuo, not noticing the depressed Varona, spoke to the twin girls.

“By the way, why were you guys hanging out with Akane?”

“Ehh, we're more surprised that you know Akane-chan, Shizuo-san! Today, this little one became our junior at the dojo we go to! I already finished up my training for today, so when Kuru-nee came to meet me, we decided to take her on a tour of the surroundings!”

“Ohh? They teach self-defence at your dojo, don't they Mairu? I see, I guess there's no harm in you learning some of that.”

“Y-you think so? Ok then, I'll try my best.”

Akane smiled at Shizuo's words.

Shizuo however, seemed to remember something, and his smile faded slightly as he asked the twins something else.

“By the way..... Where's that flea of a brother of yours gone to?”

“..... (Shock) Eh?.....”

“Huh, Shizuo-san, didn't you watch the news or anything?”

“Hm?..... No, we had to start work pretty early this morning. Why, was there something interesting I missed? Like that guy finally getting arrested.”

“It's a secret. Check out a newspaper or the net or something when you get home, I'm sure you'll be surprised!”

“..... (Bro) Izaya-niisan..... (Stomach) Narrowly escapes death.....”

“?”

Shizuo was about to ask what she was talking about, but...

“Ah, Shizuo, we better get going to the next place pretty soon.”

“Yep.”

Hearing Tom's voice, Shizuo changed to work mode.

“The next place has a wife and kids, so it's kinda sensitive. You might have to hang back for a while, little miss Varona.”

“..... Await further orders?”

“Yeah, it's just, it might be bad if you put on a big show like last time, so just stay here and have a tea party with the girls for now. Though we don't have any tea.”

If there was something good to say about the man Tom Tanaka, it was that he was able to quickly adapt to dealing with any new people. Where any normal person would try their best to keep away, after seeing these 'special cases'... For example, Shizuo and Varona... Tom was the type of person who could quickly think up countermeasures to their personalities, and learn to get along with them.

As one of his ways of dealing with her, Tom had decided that it would be best to leave Varona behind in some certain cases. The way that he had Shizuo following him around so closely as insurance of his own safety, could be seen as another of his more cunning plays.

Well...

“Well, anyway, I'm glad we ran into you girls. Shizuo and I should be finished up in about ten minutes. And, while it wouldn't matter too much if she waited by herself, I'd rather not give her any sad memories of her first day at work. So can leave it to the three of you?”

“No probs.”

“..... (Delighted) It's our pleasure.....”

“I'll be waiting for you to come back, Mister Shizuo!”

With three out of three in agreement, it was decided that the four ladies would stay behind in the temple grounds.

Of course, they had no idea that they were being observed the whole time.

♂♀

“Oi, it looks like Shizuo's leaving the women behind! Where are you!?”

“We'll be there in under a minute. Don't worry.”

“By the way, it probably doesn't matter, but..... There are two high school girls here too, look like they're friends.”

“We can just grab them as well.”

“Are you sure that's a good idea?”

“Yeah, look, I heard a rumour.....”

“... Apparently yesterday, the girlfriend's or something of five different gang leader's were kidnapped, by Dollars.”

♂♀

Several minutes later.

“Ehh, so if you're a friend of Simon and Denis, does that mean you know Igor as well!?”

“..... Surprising. That you would be cognizant of Igor goes beyond my expectations.”

“..... (Shock) Amazing..... (Strange) coincidence, huh.....”

Since Tom and Shizuo had disappeared, the girls had managed a healthy conversation.

As Varona had not said anything, she had thought that they would also remain silent, but the girl wearing glasses and braided hair, and even her gloomy twin sister, both spoke without a hint of hesitation.

As they had found this strange connection, Varona had decided to go along with the advice of her current 'employer', and remain here on standby for now.

But..... What should I do next time.....

I'm glad I got on good terms with the bartender so easily. I learned his name too. But, what should I do.

Should I attack him from behind when I get the chance?

.....

For what purpose?

By now, Varona had lost sight of even her own desires.

Akane suddenly started to pull on the sleeve of her outfit.

“..... Miss, are you one of Mister Shizuo's friends?”

“Eh.”

The girl that they had kidnapped the day before.

It seemed that she somehow had not realised who Varona was.

Varona herself only saw the girl as a single element of one of her past jobs, and felt nothing in particular towards her.

“..... Friend?..... Negative. Shizuo and I. We are nothing more than simple colleagues.”

“Is that so...”

For some reason, Akane looked slightly relieved to hear this, and Varona tilted her head in confusion.

The next moment, she sensed a strange presence somewhere in their surroundings.

Several vehicles stopped just outside the grounds, and at almost the same time, their doors all began to open.

Wh-!

An alarm started to sound inside Varona.

She immediately brought up her guard, and watched the surroundings of the temple grounds.

As she did, from the many vans, appeared men, wearing balaclavas and looking like bank robbers.

They weren't carrying any weapons, but they did have some straw rope, and large bags.

“Huh!? What? What? Is something bad happening?”

“..... (Evil) Kidnappers?.....”

Confirming what Kururi had said, the men began running straight towards them.

Like a sprinter, they ran at their top speed. The bags they held were waving about in the air, and would make anybody who saw them become anxious.

Of course... That would be if they were normal people.

Like this, the men surrounded the girls, and tried to cover their head in the bags.

By taking their vision, they would cause the girls to panic, then take them down, carry them to the vans, and escape.

It would be an easy job.

But there was little margin for error.

Right now, nobody was around, but they could never know when somebody might pass by the surroundings.

While doing their best to reduce any risks, the men were attempting to roughly capture the girls.

They did it because, as long as they could complete this one job, they would be able to control the 'lethal weapon' known as Shizuo Heiwajima, whether it be to destroy him, or use him.

But they could never have imagined...

The girls who had been with Shizuo, though they may not be on the level of Shizuo himself...

They were also humans who could be called 'weapons'.

The woman in the group of girls who seemed to be the most strong.

The one man who tried to cover her in a large bag.

He became the first sacrifice to taste the sharpness of that particular 'weapon'.

“..... Am I your target?”

Letting out a small breath, Varona pushed off the ground... and with movement reminiscent of a Chameleon's tongue, her right leg shot out towards the man's chin.

Slipping through his arms, which had been holding up his bag, her safety boots, with an iron plate inserted into them, pushed straight towards him.

With flowing movements, she drew out a perfect high-kick.

With that one blow, as if he was being stabbed by her toes, the man's eyes rolled back, and he fainted without even knowing what had been done to him.

“.....Huh?”

Seeing this spectacle before them, a large empty space formed in their hearts.

It wasn't because they had learned of Varona's strength, and were scared by it.

It was because they simply could not understand what had happened.

So, while their hearts did stop, they couldn't stop their actions.

The men who had waited for an opening, then rushed towards the seemingly defenceless women, had been met with a severe counter-attack.

Not just from Varona, but from every girl there.

“Damn you, just sit still, an-.....d!?”

The man who had been trying to hold down Mairu, had been poked in the eyes by her.

They had not been crushed, but he still started to bend backwards from the force.

With the same fingers she had used to poke him, Mairu grabbed the man's balaclava, and used her opponent's momentum to tear the fabric off of him. Then, aiming for his now bare ears... Mairu used both hands to slap him.

The kind of slap which was aimed to tear his eardrums apart.

Hearing the screams of his companions rolling around on the ground, another man looked towards them reflexively. At that moment, Kururi took a small can out of her pocket, and began spraying.

It was a spray-can about the size of a deodorant spray, and fit perfectly into her palm.

Inside the can... Was an original creation of hers, a self-defence spray, based off one which was sold commercially.

However, her version was made to be much more powerful than the one she had based it off.

“Wh-..... Wha-.....!?”

After seeing his companions falling one after the other, the man among them with the largest build began to realise that something wasn't quite right.

“Dammit, they're taking us lightly!.....”

The man thought it would be best to grab one of the girls at random, and use her as a hostage against the others.

As he decided that the girl with the self-defence spray looked the most docile out of the lot, due to the man's tall figure, he didn't notice something...

The fact that at his feet, the smallest of the girls was walking up to him.

“..... Ah?”

Hearing a buzzing sound from below him, the man looked down, and saw...

“T-take this!”



At the exact same time, Akane Awakusu had pushed the stun-gun she held, straight towards him.

The stun-gun which Akane had received from 'Nakura' the day before, in order to kill Shizuo.

Luckily for both Akane and the man she was aiming for, while Akane was sleeping, Shinra had lowered the voltage on her stun-gun to the point where it wouldn't kill a normal person.

Of course, 'wouldn't kill', didn't change the fact that it was at an overly powerful voltage.

The large man didn't even have time to scream, as he foamed at the mouth and collapsed.

Varona thought, as she watched Akane quickly turn the stun-gun off, then hide in Mairu's shadow.

Why does she have that?

..... After yesterday. She must have been given it for self-defence.

Although, she does seem to know how to use it already.....

Even while she thought these things, Varona continued knocking out men one after the other.

At first, she had thought they must have been sent by somebody who held a grudge against her, or perhaps a group who had been hired to kidnap Akane Awakusu in her stead, but...

“D-dammit! What the hell are these guys!?”

“Who was it!? Who was the idiot that said we could use them against Shizuo!?”

!

When she heard the irritated shouts of the men, Varona understood.

So that's what it was.

They want to use us, as hostages against Shizuo.....

Meaning, these guys wanted to take Shizuo Heiwajima out, huh.

Without realising it... Varona had begun to smile.

Don't make me laugh.

As a man started to approach her, Varona stepped, hard, on his foot.

Before the now doubled-over man could cry out, her elbow flew towards the bridge of his nose, tracing out a graceful arc before it struck him.

People of your level..... taking him out?

Remember.

Remember.

The people she had 'broken' up till now.

The people before her now... Didn't even come close to those she remembered. They were as soft as clay.

But as she continued to knock these men out bare-handed, something else gradually rose to her mind.

That which she had begun to forget, after her recent defeats. Her true duty.

The abnormal impulse that even she herself had no hope of stopping.

They are lacking.

These people, are lacking.

That's right, humans..... are not so fragile.

Shizuo Heiwajima..... is not so fragile!

Whether or not humans were truly weak beings.

She found pleasure in her 'destructive impulse', which had begun under the pretence of confirming this.

However, this pleasure which she had once been able to obtain simply by breaking normal humans... had undergone a subtle transformation.

Stronger.....

I want to become stronger.

Stronger even than that man, harder than a diamond, and more grand than the tundra!

If only I could destroy Shizuo Heiwajima.....

*Surely..... Wouldn't I be able to obtain unwavering perfection?

While she thought this, Varona kicked, and punched, and knocked out, and simply overwhelmed the men.

With an uncontrollable smile stuck to her face, she overwhelmed them.

Her truly happy smile, she had decided to keep for the time that she managed to defeat Shizuo.

“C-crap! We gotta retreat for now, oi!”

With the situation becoming beyond what they had expected, the men rushed to escape from the temple grounds.

They had planned to escape with the vehicles, but those vans had already begun to leave.

“H-hey! W-wait, why.....”

As they panicked and tried to run after the vehicles... They realised just why they had departed without them.

They saw, from the other side of the road, the man with his characteristic bartender's uniform, and the man with dreadlocks, returning.

“Sh-S..... It's Shizuo!”

“Get your ass in here!”

As if they had seen a carnivorous dinosaur, the men began to panic, and the van ended up departing with several of them still forcing themselves through the doors.

Seeing the screaming men leave in their vehicles, Tom tilted his head, and spoke.

“What the hell? Did they have a fight or something?”

At Tom's words, Shizuo looked towards the temple grounds... And after confirming Akane and the others sitting around like normal, looked towards the men with a disgusted expression.

“Really, getting into a fight in front of Kishibojin, they're going to hell.”

In reality, they had been trying to kidnap children in front of Kishibojin, a deed much more likely to put them in hell, but... Luckily for them, perhaps, their plan had ended in failure.

Now, they would not have to be found by Shizuo. The men however, didn't really have time to celebrate this lucky result, as they finally escaped the field of vision of Shizuo and Tom.

♂♀

“..... I committed a small error in my response to your previous question.”

Varona was speaking quietly while looking the man wearing a bartender's uniform, who was walking towards them.

Her face had returned to its usual sour look, and the only one who heard her quiet whisper, was Akane, who was standing next to her.

“Eh.....”

As Akane seemed confused, Varona spoke her true thoughts, hiding nothing.

“Shizuo Heiwajima. He is my prey. One day, he will break, by my hand. This is the truth.”

“.....! N-no! You can't!”

When she heard this, Akane raised her voice in panic, and started pulling on the leg on Varona's outfit.

“I.... I'm gonna be the one to kill Mister Shizuo!”

What exactly the feelings rising in Akane's heart were... being a child, even Akane herself didn't quite understand them.

But, the moment she heard Varona say she would 'break' Shizuo... the complicated feelings towards Shizuo which that girl held, all mixed together... and she had arrived at one answer.

I have to kill Mister Shizuo. But, I don't want to kill him.....

Umm... Umm.....

However, she was unable to convert that answer into words, and all that she could come out with, was this vague response.

“..... I have to be the one to do something about Mister Shizuo!”

“..... Illogical. Please explain to me why you believe you have sole ownership rights to my prey.”

“I-I don't know!”

As Akane and Varona had suddenly started their argument, Mairu and Kururi had silently watched them with shocked expressions... but then Tom arrived.

“Huh, where's Shizuo-san?”

In response to Mairu's question, Tom gestured behind him with his chin, and answered.

“Ohh, he said he was getting a can of coffee from the vending machine over..... there.....”

Tom had noticed the dispute between Akane and Varona, and started listening curiously.

“Shizuo is mine.”

“Is not! You're not allowed to touch Mister Shizuo, ok!”

“.....?!”

Huh!?

At this all too sudden development, behind his glasses, Tom's eyes went as round as golf-balls.

Wh- wait a-..... Eh!?

What's going on!?! When the hell did this happen!?!

As Tom stood there, dumbstruck, Shizuo entered the temple grounds, after having finished his coffee.

“Mister Shizuo!”

“Yo, did you play nice?”

After she ran up to him, Shizuo roughed up Akane's hair.

Akane then looked behind her, and started glaring at Varona, who glared right back, but...

In the end, Shizuo never even noticed the sparks flying between the two of them.

♂♀

“Damn! I didn't hear about this! Those women were damn monsters!”

After the hoodlums had returned to their hangout, one of them spoke in an irritated voice as he threw off his balaclava.

*It seemed the kidnappers were part of the remnants of a team Shizuo had once destroyed, and several of their companions who had stayed behind in their hideout had gathered to find out what happened to them.

“What the hell, you guys failed!?!”

“Damn, we should have known Shizuo's woman would be like that..... What the hell was up with them!”

“Well, it's no problem. It'll be fine if we just take that girl with the stun-gun, once she's alone, right?”

“Yeah, we did send some lookouts back to the area. If they keep watch on the girls, we can just kidnap them one by one next time.”

As the men started to show foolish smiles, it seemed they had not learned from their experience.

They had been beaten by Shizuo once already, but were turning him against them again. It seemed that the men gathered here were all fundamentally obstinate.

However..... This time, they wouldn't be receiving another second chance.

“By 'lookouts', you mean these guys?”

In the entrance to that hideout, two bodies were thrown to the ground, with a 'thump'.

They were unconscious, and their faces were bloody and swollen. It looked like they had been beaten up substantially.

Then... the men who had brought those two to the hideout, continued on inside.

“What! You bast-.....ar-..... Eh?”

From the entranceway, appeared... more than ten fierce looking men.

They wore various outfits, like black suits, jerseys, and work clothing, but... At first sight, one could tell from their ominous, intimidating air, that they were men who worked in 'that kind of occupation'.

“You said something about kidnapping?”

“Ah, eh?.....”

“Trying to lay your hands on our princess Akane..... You really wanna be an iron-man so badly? Ah? Because if you do, we got a blast furnace ready and waiting, want us to help you out? Hey.”

“Eh?..... Ehh!?.....”

They were all members of the Awakusu Group.

Some of them had been looking out for Akane from the shadows, but after seeing her come into contact with Varona, they had decided to call for backup, just in case, but... After the men had attacked, their companions had then returned to the scene, right when their backup had arrived.

They had captured the lookouts without letting Akane notice, and then had the hoodlums guide them to this hideout, but...

Of course, these punks had no idea about Akane's true identity, so they couldn't understand what was going on.

“Wai-..... Just a s-..... What the hell..... We, we just wanted, Shizuo..... um?”

“Yeah, yeah. We'll listen to your story back at our office. Take your time thinking up your excuses.”

“W-wait.....”

“And if your excuses aren't good enough, you might end up thinking of last words, instead. Well, even if it comes to that, it's not like we're gonna relay them to anyone, anyway.”

Without really caring about the details behind these young men, the members of the Awakusu Group each began their work.

Dragging these young men, who had only just been overwhelmed by the female group, back to their office, turned out to be no trouble for them. They simply, relentlessly, took them out, one by one.

And so... A simple rumour, had driven this one team to their certain destruction..

♂♀

Somewhere in Ikebukuro.

After parting with Akane and the twins, the group of three shylocks moved onto their next workplace.

Occasionally, Tom would look towards Shizuo, and say strange things to himself.

“..... Well, I guess his little brother does have a pretty popular face.....”

“Hm? What's up, Tom-san? You've been acting strangely.”

“No..... It's nothing. Don't worry about it.”

“?”

After tilting his head in confusion, Shizuo then asked Varona a question.

“By the way, Varona...”

“What is it?”

“Have we met before, by any chance?”

“..... -!?”

Has he..... realised?

Varona's body became stiff with caution.

He hadn't seen her face, and all she had said to him was 'That bike, it's mine'.

Though he had proceeded to throw said bike, and she had shot at him, the entire time, she had been wearing a riding suit, and a full-faced helmet, so she hadn't shown him her face at all.

But even then, a perceptive person may have noticed.

Continuing her caution, she carefully answered him.

“..... Confidential. I'd like to refuse to respond, if it doesn't concern you.”

“.....”

Not saying anything, Shizuo walked over to a nearby vending machine, and purchase a can of coffee.

She thought he was about to drink another after only just finishing one earlier, but...

Shizuo gave this can of coffee to Varona.

“?”

“Here, my treat.”

“.....”

“It's just..... I've been working in a lot of places up till now, you know..... But this is the first time I've ever had a junior to look after.”

Saying this, Shizuo looked somehow happy.

“Well, I guess I can just ignore the details. You seemed to get along pretty well with Akane, and from Simon and Denis' introduction, they seem to think you're an ok person.”

“.....”

He's like a completely different person from the time when he was kicking that car around.

Whether or not he's figured out who I really am..... I really can't tell.

“So, I hope we can keep working well together.”

Shizuo lightly pushed the can of coffee onto Varona's cheek.

While her cheek squashed inwards slightly, Varona remained expressionless as she responded.

“..... Thanks.”

Shizuo Heiwajima.

..... What a strange guy.

All she had known, was that he was an extremely 'strong' man.

But really, she still didn't know anything about him.

I should take my time to learn as much about him as I can.

Then, once I know everything, I should destroy him.

That is my reason for living.

Varona decided this, then drained the can of coffee.

The coffee was made to be quite bitter, with a strong scent.

Feeling something quite sweet, Varona spoke to Shizuo expressionlessly.

“Thank you very much..... Senpai.”*

♂♀

“O-oi, have you heard!?”

“I heard the guys who tried to go after Shizuo got taken by the Awakusu Group.”

“Seriously? “Why!?” “Sounds like Shizuo's woman is related to the Awakusu.”

“What the hell?” “Meaning, Shizuo is the successor of the Awakusu now?.....”

These absurd, unfounded rumours flew around the city of Ikebukuro.

“Have you heard!? Have you heard, dammit!?”

“Shizuo is the illegitimate son of the head of the Awakusu!” “Gehh! Seriously!?”

“He has a kid with some Russian lady!” “So that's why he has that blonde hair!?”

“Eh, wait, that wasn't just dyed?” “Isn't this bad!?” “Ok, I give up on Shizuo already.”

“I'm not scared or anything.” “Just, you know... the Awakusu as my enemy sounds troublesome.”

As these rumours became more and more unreasonable...

The half-baked punks believed them without a second thought.

They couldn't help but believe them.

Most of them, wished from the depths of their heart.

If I can help it, I don't ever want to get involved with a monster like Shizuo.

This feeling was much stronger than their hope of 'winning against Shizuo'... and could be said to be more like an instinct.

That was why these men jumped on board such rumours.

Because if these rumours were true, it gave them a good reason for their fear of Shizuo.

The one thing that they couldn't give up on if they wanted to keep face, that they 'wouldn't get involved in their private matters', had become this reason once the Awakusu had gotten involved.*

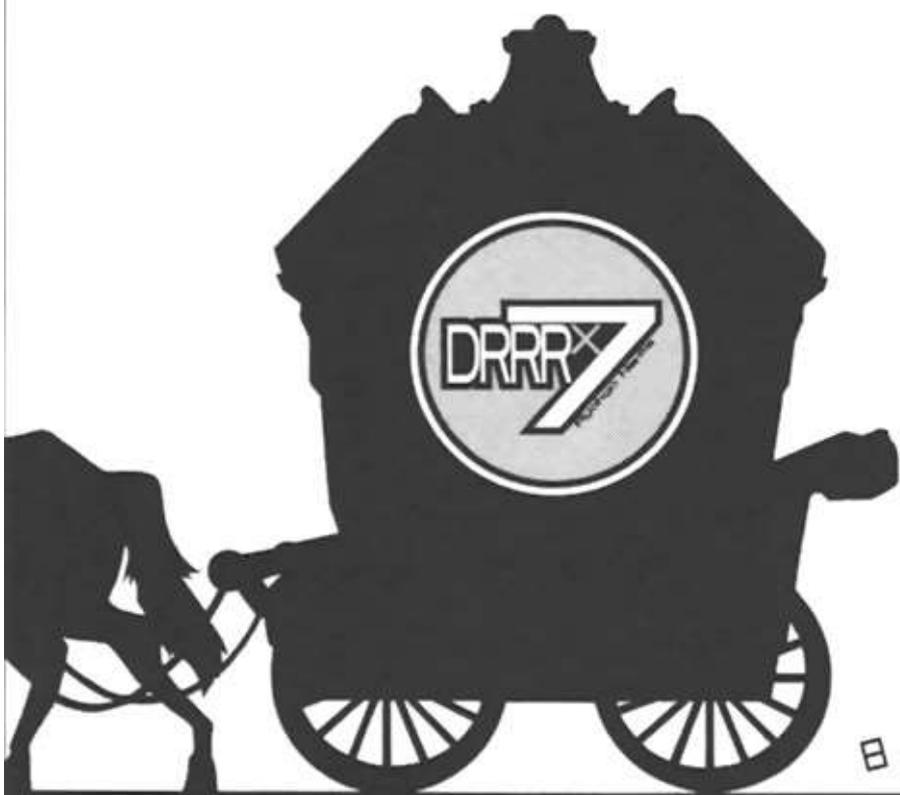
So today, along with their personal desires, they continued to create these rumours.

Several months later, a third rate magazine which had believed these rumours, published an article with the headline 'Yuuhei Hanejima's Grandfather is a Yakuza Boss!'. The publishing house which then sued their main office, and even turned their eyes towards the Awakusu Group were then driven to near-bankruptcy. But that is a different story.

And so, in order to bridge the gap between the everyday and the stranger days, between the city and its people...

Today, new rumours continue to circulate around the city of Ikebukuro.

“Hey, have you heard?”



日常の『お惚気チャカポコ』

Everyday Life D – Romanticist's Chaka-Poko

-chaka-poko chaka-poko-

Synchronised to the galloping of a horse, a single carriage raced down a road.

This silhouette raced through the light scattered by the trees, and like a leaf being swept along in the great passage of time, it was reflected ever so gently on the surface of this world.

However, if one were to raise any kind of issue with this silhouette, it may be that...

The silhouette itself, was the only thing that actually existed.

It was a black that swallowed up even the light itself, and reflected nothing.

From level footing, this roofed carriage looked as if it was made out of a 'shadow' which had somehow transitioned to a higher dimension.

Similar to the vehicles used by nobles in an earlier time, it looked as if it had been taken straight out of a children's story.

That is, if that story were told with shadow puppets.

What was even more out of place... was that the head of the single horse which was pulling the carriage, was covered with black, Western looking armour, so like the rest of the carriage, it reflected no light.

In the window of this carriage taken straight out of a shadow theatre, could be seen the upper halves of two highly contrasting bodies.

The first was a young man, wearing a coat so white it seemed to directly oppose the image of the vehicle.

The second looked as if they could easily pass as the driver of the carriage... as they were wearing a jet black outfit which could only be explained as a 'shadow' given form.

One of them... The woman wearing the black outfit, turned towards the man, and held out a PDA.

[This is the first time I've turned it into a roofed carriage, I guess I can do it if I try.]

Seeing these words displayed on the screen, the man dressed in white spoke with a broad smile.

“Of course, that's because you can do anything, Celty.”

[..... You always compliment me like that, so it's kinda starting to lose its effect.]

“No way! Ok, I get it Celty! In order to prove how great you are, I must challenge even the limits of human strength, right? So, go ahead Celty. Tell me what I must do for you! If you wish it, I could even write an epic poem, spanning more than a thousand pages, about your antics in Ikebukuro, and then spread to the farthest corners of the world, even further than the Bible!”

In response to his stupidity, the woman in black clothing started typing on her PDA indifferently.

[Shinra.]

“Yeah!?”

[Shut up for a bit.]

“..... Yeah.”

The man she had called Shinra had deflated like a child after being scolded.

Then the woman he had called Celty relaxed her shoulders, and nudged Shinra with her elbow.

[Don't look so down. You really are bipolar aren't you.]

“..... Of course I would be this excited!”

With his eyes sparkling once again, Shinra looked towards Celty's neck.

“The last time we went on a trip together, was when I was a kid, and you took me out on the back of your bike!”

[Was that really a trip?]

“Well, even if you don't recognise it as such Celty, that just means this is definitely our first time! Amazing, this is a big day for us! Is it ok if I take this to be our honeymoon!?”

[..... Don't get too carried away, or this honeymoon of yours might not last long.]

“Ok, ok.”

Being scolded again, Shinra's shoulders drooped, and he looked downwards, but...

“.....?!?”

Suddenly realising something, the man rose up from his seat in the carriage, and shouted.

“W-wait, just now, you didn't say this wasn't a honeymo-..... -gah!”

Doing so, he bumped his head on the roof of the carriage, and was now holding it while moaning.

[O-oi, are you ok!?!]

“Owowowow..... I'm fine..... I saw stars though.....”

[Are you sure you're ok? I'm sorry. I probably made the roof too low. I don't have my helmet on, so I couldn't really tell where to put it.]

Seeing her write these words with her PDA, Shinra's expression became gentle.

“No, it's fine. I think this height is perfect. It's my fault for suddenly standing up like that.”

[Wait, are you really, really ok? Sorry, I just don't really know how much hitting your head hurts.....]

“It's fine, it's fine. It's better if you don't know. More importantly, you just asked me three times if I was ok. That kindness of yours is the best medicine for me, Celty.”

[Don't be stupid.]

With this short response from her PDA, Celty turned towards the window, in a huff.

That Celty, I bet her cheeks are turning red right now. She's so cute.

Shinra thought so, but of course, there was no way he could confirm she was blushing for sure.

After all... she didn't even have the cheeks for blushing in the first place.

♂♀

Celty Sturlusson was not a human.

She was a type of fairy from Scotland and Ireland commonly referred to as a 'Dullahan', who would go around visiting the residences of people who were close to passing away, and inform them of the time they had left.

She would visit them while carrying her own head under her arm, and riding a coach driven by a headless horse known as the Coiste-Bodhar. Any who were foolish enough to open their doors as she passed, would have a bucket of blood poured over them... This was the dreaded legend of the Dullahan, which had been passed down throughout the history of Europe along with that of the Banshee.

Some theories compared it to the Norse legend of the Valkyrie, but she herself couldn't tell you the truth of it.

It was not that she didn't know.

To put it accurately, she couldn't remember.

Back in her homeland, her head had been stolen from her, and along with it, her memories had disappeared. In order to get it back, she had followed the signs, and eventually came to Ikebukuro.

She had turned her horse into a bike, and her armour into a riding suit, and till now she had wandered this city for decades.

However, she had not been able to recover her head, and so her memories had not returned, as of yet.

She had figured out who had stolen her head.

She knew who it was who had been obstructing her search.

But in the end, she still didn't know where her head was.

For now, Celty was ok with this.

It meant that she could spend time together with the one who loved her, and the friends who had accepted her for what she was.

She believed that this was happiness, and that she could continue to live like this.

Keeping her strong determination hidden in her heart, the headless woman showed her intentions through her actions, in place of her non-existent face.

This was... the existence known as Celty Sturlusson.

Yet, even for this incarnation of the absurd, she had her own version of everyday life.

As a courier of Ikebukuro, upon request, she would deliver various goods, to many different places.

She was treated as somewhat of a Jill-of-all-trades, but she only saw it as a casual job, at best. She didn't really have a sense of professionalism.

Till around a year ago, her reason for putting effort into this job, was because she thought delivering all over Ikebukuro might increase her chances of finding her head, but... Recently, she had begun to work more diligently, thinking 'If I don't deliver this, somebody may be troubled'.

While before she would be ok with handling less lawful goods, she had tried to cut back on this kind of job lately.

It would be fine if it was only her getting involved with the police, or illegal organisations, but now, she had many friends who she didn't want to get wrapped up in that sort of trouble.

Of course, the first on that list, Shinra Kishitani... he himself was quite closely involved in that kind of trouble from the start, in his work as an underground doctor.

At her root, Celty was an earnest person, and would be busy almost every day, whether it be doing her normal work, or helping other people with their own problems on her days off.

On her true holidays, she would usually end up doing the same things she would normally do after work, like lazing about the house, or playing games with Shinra.

Because of this, today's trip was truly the closest she had come to a true holiday.

On a mountain, far from the city.

A trip along a promenade, swaying in the carriage, and looking upon a lake outside.

There were no other people around of course, as they had investigated this beforehand.

The place they had come to was frequently used as a courage-testing course in summer, and there were rumours about ghosts appearing in the surrounding abandoned buildings.

In some ways, the headless woman riding the black carriage suited this environment, but really, a Western carriage driving around Japan was too much of an absurdity in itself.

At first, they had been a bit worried about this, but... In the end, they chose this place because of its lack of people, and ended up sharing a day trip, just with each other.

As she was always being looked after by Shinra, thinking he needed a rest, Celty had been the one to suggest they take a trip together.

Her current outfit was a Gothic style dress, which fit quite well with the carriage. In the place of her usual helmet, she was wearing a ladylike hat, along with a cape.

If the outfit was completely white, it might look almost like a wedding dress, but... the dress and cape, which were arranged like shadows, gave the same impression as a Western mourning dress.

However, Shinra had been constantly in high-tension next to Celty, who looked like a widow.

Answering Shinra's wishes, today, instead of her riding suit, Celty had made various outfits out of 'shadows', and had been changing into them appropriately since that morning... Being solely devoted to Celty, it was no surprise that Shinra had been excitable all day because of this.

Shinra had also done away with his usual lab coat, and had changed into casual travel clothing for today. Of course, he had maintained his regular pure-white image though.

Since this morning, his eyes had been shining even more than usual, and every time Celty got changed, he would cry out in delight at her new outfit.

Though, for her, 'getting changed'... Only meant that she stood in the same spot while the shadows crawled around her into a new form.

♂♀

May 5th, noon.

“Hey, Celty. When you're changing clothes, can't you, you know... I want to see you taking off each piece of clothing one by one, then slipping your long, white arms through the sleeves of a new outfit, but..... bhogh!”

Celty answered Shinra's proposal with her elbow.

[You pervert. What would happen if somebody were to see me changing in here?]

“Does it really matter if they seeeeowowowowowow.”

With his cheek being pinched with all force, and his face distorting, Shinra still tried to force a smile.

“I'm sorry, I was joking, I really don't want anyone to see. Your changing scene belongs to me, and onl-ouch!”

Taking a full force poke to the temple, Shinra was left dazed and dizzy.

While he was like this, the shadows around Celty crawled about, and changed into a new outfit.

[I'm done.]

As he had the PDA shoved in front of his face, Shinra turned from the device to look towards Celty...

And he saw Celty sitting there, seemingly embarrassed, wearing a jet-black school uniform.

[I brought this red scarf from home to try it out, but, when I wear it I probably look like I came from some brothel or something, don't I.....]

As she was missing her head, rather than a street walker, she looked more like the victim of some strange mystery crime, but Shinra's face suddenly turned serious, and he knelt on top of his seat in the carriage.

[What's wrong? I-it looks weird, doesn't it?]

She didn't really know what her partner was doing, and started wondering if she should change back into her usual riding suit, but then Shinra, looking like he was about to cry, bowed his head to her.

“I've loved you since the first time I saw you. Please go out with me, I beg you.”

[You're being weird, Shinra. What on earth are you doing?]

Maybe she shouldn't have hit him so hard before.

Suddenly becoming quite worried, Celty thought about turning the carriage around and heading to a hospital, but... Shinra wiped away his tears, and grabbed Celty's arm lightly.

“No, I'm sorry. It's just, since I was in high school, I've always wanted to, you know... confess like this, to you, pretending we were in the same high school.....”

Shinra was speaking in circles. Celty's shoulders dropped as she typed her response.

[You're pretty annoying, you know.]

“Wahh. I would even reject any girls who confessed to me, by saying 'But, you have a head, so...!.....’”

[Go and apologise to those girls, on you knees, right now. But more importantly, is anyone fine for you as long as they don't have a head?]

In response to the cynical sentence she had typed, Shinra vigorously shook his head back and forth.

“Of course not! It wouldn't matter what you had above the neck Celty, be it human, a cardboard box, even an earthworm, or a slug, I would still love you!”

[Stop saying disgusting things like that!]

Actually, it's more surprising that there is a girl who actually loves a freak like this.

This goes beyond having strange preferences.

“Although, once that story started spreading, girls kinda found me gross, and wouldn't come after me any more. Shizuo even said unreasonable stuff like 'It's your fault that girls even stay away from me now'.”

[I don't think that's really unreasonable.]

“Really?..... Yeah, I guess so. You're probably right, Celty.”

Seeing Shinra smiling and laughing like a child, Celty thought to herself.

'Strange preferences', huh?

Yep, that's me all right.

The strange man who fell in love with a headless woman, and the strange woman who fell in love right back.

Smiling wryly on the inside about her relationship with Shinra, Celty started typing on her PDA.

[Anyway, why were you getting so worked up over this kind of outfit? Seems like it's not just you, but most other men as well.]

“I don't really know about other guys, but at the very least, I have a reason. To me, we have limitless potential together. Even if I was born somewhere and sometime completely different, I'm sure we would have met through a different situation. I want to experience every single possibility that I can with you!”

[Oh, you really had such grand thoughts?]

“Well, that's the official reason. Really I just want to drown myself in desire by seeing you in as many different ways as possible, then.....”

As he was speaking, Shinra had brought up his guard and closed his mouth.

[What's wrong? Are you finished?]

“A-ah, it's just, usually by now I would have an elbow coming at me..... Huh? Speaking of which, I feel like I remember something like this happening a few months ago.....”

As Shinra murmured this, Celty also remembered.

Right, we did have this kind of mood back then, I guess.

When Emilia rang the chime on our door, then barged in.

It shocked me when she suddenly jumped at Shinra and hugged him.

Looking back on it now, it seemed silly, but she had actually been quite jealous back then.

She had surprised herself when she suddenly realised that she loved the man before her eyes.

But, really.....

How on earth did I end up in love with a guy like this.

Perhaps, within the memories stored in her 'head'... Would the Celty who lived her life as a fairy in Ireland have this sort of experience?

Going on a day trip with the one she loves.

That kind of 'human' happiness. In the past, would she ever have felt something similar to this? Just what kind of life did she have?

It would be a lie to say she wasn't curious.

But...

“What's up, Celty? Are you feeling sick!?”

[No.....]

Seeing Shinra's face, Celty thought.

In the end, the everyday life she was living right now, was more important than that past.

Celty wrote teasing words on her PDA, then softly placed it on Shinra's lap.

[So, what was it you were planning to do..... after 'drowning yourself in desire'?]

“Eh.....?!”

[If you start building up your desires in this carriage, what exactly is going to happen to me?]

“.....”

Huh? He went quiet.

Celty had thought he would start rambling in panic as he normally did, and she peeked towards him as he sat silently, staring at the PDA.

His expression had vanished, and he now looked somehow serious.

What should I do? I wonder if he's angry that I teased him so much.

The moment she tried to take back her PDA, so that she could type an apology...

Shinra grabbed her arm tightly.

“Celty.....”

Shinra was different from usual, more serious.

It was slightly unpleasant, when that serious face began turning red.

“Umm, well..... Thank you.”

He.....

“Thank you..... Celty.”

He's thanking me!?

“I'll try my best!”

His best at what!?

She was trying to type out a retort, but she still couldn't get back her PDA.

If she were to calm down, she could have easily stretched a shadow out to grab it, but currently, the word 'calm' was a completely foreign concept to Celty.

At this point, Celty's entire body was an expression of 'confusion'.

Shinra was starting to reach out his hands towards Celty's shoulders, with a glint in his eyes.

Wait a- seco-.....

If Shinra had been joking around like normal, Celty could just send him flying and that would be the end of it. But with his current serious expression, Celty didn't even know what she wanted to do any more.

At least let me close the window.....!

The moment she shouted this from the depths of her heart...



あた

あた

[♪ ♪♪♪ ♪♪♪♪ ♪ ♪♪♪♪ ♪♪]

From Shinra's breast pocket came the sound of his phone's ringtone.

It was the newest hit from the idol that they both supported, Ruri Hijiribe.

Seeing this as a chance, Celty took the phone and pushed it towards Shinra's face.

“Mghggh”

Ignoring Shinra, who could no longer speak due to the phone in his mouth, Celty finally managed to pick up her PDA, and started typing on it quickly, with several shadow tendrils.

[It's your phone, Shinra.]

“It's ok, I can leave it.”

[That's bad, you may be an underground doctor, but it still means you have people's lives in your hands.]

“If you say so, Celty.....”

Though he seemed depressed upon being hindered like this, Shinra picked up his phone and put it to his ear.

“Hello?”

While Shinra was on the phone, Celty thought to herself.

Ahh that was a shock.

It's not the first time this kind of thing has happened, but.....it was still a shock, in a place like this.

I mean, it's embarrassing in front of Shooter as well.....

“Ahh! Ahh, ahh! It really has, hasn't it! Do you mind if I congratulate you on still being alive?”

'Still being alive', he must mean.....

Probably someone from the Awakusu, or related to them.

“Oh dear, you haven't been shot by somebody, have you? Though, from your voice you seem fine, at least.”

Yeah, must be.

“..... Ah, well, that shouldn't be too much trouble, but can we leave it till tomorrow night?”

So he'll be working tomorrow night, huh. I guess we can't stay here overnight then.

“Unfortunately, I'm off today, and I'm actually outside of Tokyo at the moment.”

I suppose it's fine. We can just wait for another chance, then borrow a bungalow and come back.

“..... For her?”

?

Huh? Shinra's face just changed colour a little.

I wonder what they're talking about.

“As a fellow human, I should probably recommend that you don't do that.”

No, really, what are they talking about!?

Is it someone like Shiki telling him that they're going to bury someone!? But why tell Shinra!?

“Well, that girl is kinda Celty's cooking teacher, so...”

Why did my name come up!?

Teacher!? Cooking teacher!?

Ah, wa-, wait a second.....

“Oh? She cut the call.”

[What was that, Shinra!? Who was on the phone!? My 'teacher', do you mean Mika-chan?]

♂♀

Seeing Celty asking questions in a panic, Shinra thought.

What do I do.

If I tell her exactly what the call was about, she might say she has to run off and save her.

No, Celty would definitely do that.

That is what I'd expect from Celty. That is why I love Celty!

Shinra reconfirmed his love, but he still hesitated to speak the truth.

After all, the person he had just been on the phone to, was the mastermind behind the plan to take Celty's head from her.

There was a chance, that by some miracle, Celty's head might be returned to her.

And Yagiri-san even clearly said that her 'objective is not to kill her'.

Taking these various details into consideration, the result was...

“It was Seiji Yagiri. Sounds like they had a fight or something, don't worry about it.”

He had lied with a smile, and with absolutely no sense of guilt or hesitation.

“Oh, was that all.”

“.....”

[.....]

Celty had gone out of her way to type out her silence, and show it to Shinra.

[.....]

With the screen still pointed towards Shinra, the headless school-uniformed girl skilfully pressed keys on the PDA.

The ever increasing ellipses shown of the screen continued putting pressure on Shinra's heart.

“..... Hahah, Celty.”

As a stiff smile floated to his face, Celty stretched out her shadow over Shinra, and held down his body.

[Stop lying, you liar! It was her, wasn't it! That Namie Yagiri or whatever her name is!]

“Ahhhh, Celty, you can tell I'm lying just by looking in my eyes now, huh! That in itself makes me feel like we're connected, I'm so happy!”

[Would you say 'were you shot?' or 'still alive' to Seiji-kun!?!]

“Celty, are you a detective!? Ok, I get it, I'll tell you the truth.”

Shinra sighed like he had given up, and then continued to speak.

“Apparently, Namie-san is planning to change Mika-chan's face back to how it was. But, you see, Mika-chan likes her new face, doesn't she? So, she asked me if I could do some plastic surgery on her again while she's sleeping or something. That's what I was saying she probably shouldn't do.”

[I see.]

“I wouldn't want to do something like that and end up being hated by her, right? I mean, she's your cooking teacher. When I told her that, she shouted about how I was 'useless', then cut the call. The reason I lied is because I thought when you heard her name, you might start chasing her to look for your head, so I got scared.....”

At this point, Celty began withdrawing the shadows she had been using to hold down Shinra.

[Don't be silly, Shinra. I already told you that I don't care about my head anymore, didn't I?]

“I know that, but I'm still scared. Scared that your head might start drawing you to it or something like that.”

[You worry too much. More importantly, I wonder what the woman is thinking. She couldn't suddenly start having feelings of guilt about tampering with a girl's face after all this time, could she? Though I guess it's pretty ironic that Mika doesn't even want to go back to her old face.]

As Celty typed this to him, Shinra looked at her and thought to himself.

I'm sorry, Celty.

You don't know this because you don't understand just how dangerous Namie Yagiri can be, but.....

The truth is, it seemed like she was planning something a lot worse than that.

But, in the end, I want to keep you as far away from her..... as far away from your head as possible.

After making it so she would see through his first lie, Shinra had then been able to fool Celty by telling her something as close as possible to the truth. Rather than lying, he had really only 'left out a detail', but it had enough of an effect to stop Celty from getting involved with Namie for now.

..... I'd say the atmosphere isn't right for continuing what we were doing.

And I kinda feel like I've forsaken Mika-chan.

Well, she did say that she didn't plan to kill her.

Feeling as if his previous excitement had been showered with cold water, Shinra looked towards his phone with hatred, then tried to stealthily press the power button, but...

[For a change of mood, how about I change into another outfit?]

With Celty's line of text, Mika Harima and Namie Yagiri both disappeared from Shinra's mind.

“Ehhh!? Already!?”

In the first place, he didn't give a damn about the mastermind who had deceived Celty, by having him tamper with a girl's face.

“Wait just a second, Celty! Please, just let me immerse myself in this student-like mood for a little longer! I'm at that awkward age where, I want to call you Senior Sturlusson, but I also want you to call me Senior Shinra.....”

In front of Shinra, as he said this nonsense... Celty suddenly stopped moving, then bound Shinra with her shadows once again.

“Wah, what!? What!?”

[Sorry, just wait for a second.]

Then, Celty gave some sort of signal to her headless horse, Shooter, and had him stop at the end of the road.

Then, leaving a confused Shinra behind, Celty got out of the carriage.

“Wai-..... Where are you going, Celty!? Wait! Don't leave me! I may have my faults, but for you I can change! I'm sorry that I so carelessly taped over that 'World Mysteries Discovered' you recorded last week!”

His sorrowful shouts echoed around the forest, but Celty's uniform-clad figure continued to disappear into the trees.

10 minutes later.

To Shinra, it seemed he had spent an eternity inside the carriage...

When suddenly Celty returned, as if she hadn't even been gone.

“Celtyyy! You came back for me!”

[What an overreaction.]

“But, but..... I really thought that you might have been leaving me here.”

[I dunno about you, but I wouldn't leave Shooter behind, would I?]

As she typed out these heartless words, Celty released Shinra from his shadow bonds.

[Anyway..... I felt the prescence of a fairy for the first time in a while, so I went to say 'hello'.]

“Fairy?”

[I suppose you call them spirits, or mountain gods or something in Japan. But, seems like even in Japan, your forests are full of them. Reminds me of the woods back home.]

Celty seemed to feel somehow nostalgic, but as most of her memories had been taken along with her head, those memories of the woods in her homeland were quite vague. Shinra didn't venture to say this out loud, and instead asked her a question with a gentle smile.

“Ehh, so, did you say hello?”

[Yeah..... Mm..... They didn't seem to be bad guys or anything, but..... They just welcomed me to Japan..... and then.....]

Typing out her words with some hesitation, Celty seemed somehow embarrassed.

[They said it was the first time they'd met someone who was so close to a human, and wished me good luck.....]

“Well of course you do your best! He sounds like a nice guy! Ah, wait..... Does that mean they were watching us?”

[No..... They said that when a man is being so rowdy, they hear it whether they want to or not.....]

“.....”

If she were human, this would be where she starts blushing. With her school uniform, and the way she was looking timidly towards Shinra, she looked to him like a junior at school.

“Hahaha, rather, why don't we let them seegebuh-..... Why!?”

Shinra, who had been trying to calm Celty down by putting his hands on her shoulders, had received a hellish blow to his throat.

[More importantly, Shinra..... What..... did you say you did to the video I recorded?.....]

“Eek!”

Without even the time to make an excuse, Shinra was restrained by shadows for the third time that day.

[I was so excited when I recorded that..... I wanted to watch it with you, and have some fun seeing who would get the most answers right!.....]

“Ahhhh, I-I'm sorry Celty! In it's place, how about I get you a Gold..... no, a Crystal Hitoshi-kun, will that make you happy!?”

[Confiscated! And now, the tickling!]

“Wai-! While I'm all bound up like this!? I'm sorry, Celty! I know it must be hard for you, but if you keep tickling me I might go to Heaven but please stop but please don't stoop!”

Ten tickling tentacles made of shadow were heading towards the sides of a confused Shinra, but then...

For the second time, the sound of Shinra's ringtone echoed through the air.

“.....”

[You can take that.]

The tendrils she had extended took Shinra's phone out of his pocket, then brought it to his ear, while pushing the 'receive' button.

Looking half relieved and half disappointed, Shinra started talking into the phone.

“Yeah, hello..... Ah, it's you Shizuo.”

Shizuo, huh? He had a pretty rough time yesterday too.

Remembering what that friend of hers had done yesterday, throwing a motorbike, kicking a car, saving a little girl, Celty laughed internally, in spite of herself, and the anger that had been rising within her ceased.

“No, don't worry, you don't have to thank me. Actually, I'm kinda in the middle of something right now..... Yeah, yeah, ahh, ok then, cya tomorrow or something.”

It looked like he had finished his call, as Shinra breathed a deep sigh, then spoke to Celty.

“..... I'm sorry, Celty. So sorry.”

[Strange timing for an apology.]

With her poisonous mood disrupted, Celty maintained her imprisonment of Shinra, and looked toward the scenery outside the window.

The lake in the middle of the forest was reflecting sunlight, and creating brilliant, wavering beams.

The 'presence' she had felt before had faded, and now there didn't even seem to be signs of any animals around, let alone humans.

With inappropriate timing, Shinra...

“Well, I kinda did want you to punish me, just a little.”

... said this perverted line, so Celty decided to tease him a little bit.

[If you want it that much, then I'll make sure to punish you plenty.]

Typing this in her PDA, Celty covered the windows of the carriage with 'shadows'.

“Uwah, it's pitch black!”

Hehehe, he's so scared.

“What are you going to do!? What's going to happen to me!?”

I'll just leave him like this, and do nothing.

“Actually, being all alone in the darkness, with a girl wearing a black school uniform, is making me pretty excited!”

I see. Maybe I should get changed then.

The surroundings were completely black, so Celty could relax slightly as she moved her shadows around.

It was normally quite hard to transform her clothing without letting her skin be seen, but using the darkness to her advantage, Celty bravely began to do so...

But at the exact time where most of her skin would have been visible, on top of the table in front of his seat, Shinra's phone began to ring again.

In the middle of the darkness, the phone's display shone brightly, illuminating the cabin...

And the image of Celty's fair skin began burning into Shinra's retinas.

“Wha-!.....”

Hyaaa!?

.....

Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!?

In a great panic, Celty reflexively hid Shinra's eyes behind a wall of shadow, then rushed to cover her entire body the same way.

On the other hand, unable to see, Shinra fumbled about till he managed to find his phone, then in his slow, confused state, he received the call.

“Yeah..... Hello..... Ahh..... It's you..... Yeah, I know..... I think they're probably in the Yagiri Pharmaceuticals Warehouse 3..... Your sister said something about calling her out to that place..... Yeah, cya.”

Shinra answered each question like he was in a trance, but Celty wasn't listening to the details.

There was no way she could have, in her state of semi-panic.

As she wrapped herself up in more shadows, and managed to calm herself down, Celty finally opened the windows of the carriage.

Bathed in the soft light coming from the forest, it seemed she had been in quite a rush... for she was now dressed in the same outfit she used to wear in Ireland, jet-black armour and a matching helmet.

With her in this form, holding out a PDA, something seemed very much out of place, but...

In Shinra's eyes, that armour was nowhere to be seen.

[D-did you see, Shinra?]

“.....Eh?”

[N-no, I mean, obviously you've seen me like that in my bedroom and stuff, but having my skin seen in a place like this is kinda... I mean I said it before, but Shooter is here too, and..... It's kind of embarrassing, or something.....]

As Celty typed out her confused words, the smile of an enlightened man rose to Shinra's face, and he spoke.

“It's all ok, Celty.”

[What's ok?]

“Celty, you're so cute. Fufu.”

[Gross!]

He broke!

Shinra is broken!

Shinra was laughing maniacally, and Celty tried to bring him back to his senses with a slap.

[Wake up! Come on, get a hold of yourself!]

“Buah. Boh..... H-huh, Celty? Why are you wearing armour?”

[Eh? O-oh, umm..... This is.....]

“Armour..... I see, this may be the fundamental outfit of a Dullahan, but this was unexpected! This form doesn't exactly scream femininity, but mixed with Celty's cuteness, it's perfect!”

After just returning from that world of delusions, it appeared that Shinra had fallen into a different one.

Though, Celty didn't look completely discontented with Shinra's compliments. Just from putting on the outfit of her old self, it felt as if that past self had been accepted.

As if that was too embarrassing for her, Celty started trying to transform her outfit once more.

“Ahh, wait a sec, Celty! Let me take a picture!”

With the crawling shadows in front of him, Shinra rushed to prepare the camera of his phone.

The moment she was changing into a new outfit, though not to the same extent as before, her arms and legs would come in and out of view... And thinking this was a perfect photo opportunity, Shinra pushed the camera button.

..... But, an instant before he did so, the phone started to ring, and camera mode was forcefully cancelled.

“Aaahhhhhhhh!”

With a voice nearing a scream, Shinra picked up the phone angrily.

“W-who is it!?”

“Who is it?..... That's the first time I've heard such a dynamic 'hello'.”

“Oh, it's you Izaya. Bye.”

“Oi, don't hang up. I'm kinda stuck here, so I got bored. They finally let me borrow the hospital phone, just now.”

“Hospital? Did something happen to you?”

“So you didn't watch TV King this morning, huh? Well, I got myself stabbed yesterday.”

“Oh, I see. Bye.”

Shinra, completely one-sidedly, cut off the conversation.

[..... Who was that?]

Shinra readily answered this question from Celty.

“Izaya. He got stabbed or something, and now he's in hospital.”

[Ehh? Will he be ok?]

Shocked, Celty wrote this last sentence into her PDA, but...

After thinking about it, she deleted it and typed something else.

[..... Well, I don't know the details, but he probably brought it upon himself, no?]

“Of course he did.”

[And if he took the time to call, then he must be pretty lively.]

“Yeah. He sounded pretty energetic to me.”

Realising that neither her nor Shinra were at all worried, Celty thought about Izaya.

That guy..... Not in the same way as Shizuo, but he is still the type who you don't really have to worry about if they get injured.....

[But still, are you sure you weren't a bit rough on him just then?]

“It's fine, Izaya is the type of masochist who still loves humans even if they treat him badly.”

[You're no better. But, with stab wounds you have to worry about infections and blood clots and things. I think you should apologise to him later. Even now, your only friends are Shizuo and Izaya, you should try to keep them at least.....]

“Yeah..... I guess so. If you say so Celty.”

As he said this, Shinra's phone rang once more.

[Oh, speak of the devil. Looks like even Izaya gets anxious after being stabbed.]

“Yeah I know..... Hello?”

Celty smiled on the inside, as she watched over Shinra taking his call, but...

“Yes..... Yes..... Eh..... Yes, I am Izaya's friend, but..... I'm sorry, I'm kind of on a trip at the moment, so..... Motives?..... I can think of so many, it would be hard to pinpoint just one... Since high school, that guy has never been up to any good. No, I myself am perfectly unimpeachable, thank you.”

Somehow that conversation had turned strange.

It didn't seem like he was talking to Izaya at least.

And hearing him use a word like 'unimpeachable', Celty suddenly thought to herself.

Looking back now, Shinra hasn't shown off any of his usual big words, or proverbs today, huh.

Usually he would be using them all over the place to remind me how smart he is.

..... I wonder if he's just nervous, or maybe he's enjoying the trip so much that he forgot.....

If it were the latter, then I guess I'd be relieved.

While she was thinking this, it looked like the call had ended.

[Who was it this time?]

“..... Someone from the police.”

[Huh?]

“They were asking if I knew anything about Izaya's injury..... I think they must have used the redial function on the hospital's phone or something. Ahh dammit, I was so worried thinking that they'd found out about my underground doctor's business!..... We finally get a real holiday, and now I feel like I've been dragged back into reality.”

As Shinra's shoulders dropped, his phone rang again.

With a stiff face, Shinra picked up the phone... and heard Izaya's voice from the other end.

“Yo. Did you just get a call from the police, by any chance?”

“Thanks to you, yes.”

“I see. I'm pretty bored here, you know. When I thought about you, out there, enjoying your holidays, I got all irritated. So, I thought it might be fun to have the police call up an underground doctor. How was it? Did your little heart skip a beat? You're probably savouring your holidays along with Celty, so I hope I helped spice up your relationship a bit.”

“A-hah-hah. Izaya, I hope you die in a horrible accident involving ceramics.”

After this, Shinra cut the call, and his shoulders drooped deeply.

Then... His phone began to ring again.

“OI! If you don't stop this, I'll tell everyone about that thing you did back in middle school, Izaya!”

It was rare for Shinra to show his anger, but... there was no reaction from the other end of the call.

“.....?”

As he started to find this suspicious, Shinra noticed something.

He noticed that, beside him, Celty had raised her own phone to the spot just above her neck.

He checked the screen of his own phone.

Along with a number, the words [Celty My Honey] were lined across the display.

Looking back and forth between his phone and Celty, Shinra guessed at the intention of his partner...

“Haha!”

After letting out a simple-minded laugh, he smiled and spoke quietly.

“Thank you, Celty. This is why..... I love you.”

They were words she had heard hundreds, no, thousands of times.

And now she heard them both from Shinra's mouth, and the phone, at the same time.

In between these two voices, Celty suddenly realised.

Ahh. I see.

This is what they call happiness.

Thinking like a true romanticist, she continued to listen to Shinra's words, without typing anything on her PDA.

Celty was lost in his words, and Shinra spoke, while reading her emotions... and sometimes they would simply stop, and look at each other.

It may have looked like Shinra was only having a one-sided conversation, but he was reading Celty's every emotion with true skill as he talked, and it felt as if they were having a full conversation.

At some point, Shinra stopped speaking, and they just pressed their shoulders together in silence, but...

For some reason, Celty thought to herself.

Ahh, I see.

She thought something which would usually be obvious, and would not need to be thought about.

But, she had been able to confirm this feeling... and that made this holiday of hers all worth it.

I really do..... love Shinra.

After this, they would get wrapped up in a lot more 'abnormal' things than usual, like coming across a murder attempt deep in the mountains, getting attacked by a bear which had escaped from the zoo, and getting mixed up in a dispute between two groups who were both after a prize for finding the supposedly extinct Japanese Wolf..... But that, as they say, is another story.

Without knowing about this near future of theirs... Celty and Shinra bathed in their own happiness.

With the two riding inside it, buried in each other's shoulders, the jet-black carriage made its noise. -chaka-poko- -chaka-poko- -chaka-poko-

As if trying to interrupt their time together...

Shooter, pulling the carriage along, let out a deep, deep breath from a hole in the helmet shaped to fit his head.

As if he was heaving a big sigh about the two romanticists sitting behind him.

-chaka-poko- -chaka-poko- -chaka-poko-*

Epilogue & Next Prologue – Everyday Fugue

Ikebukuro, inside a vehicle.

“What I'm saying is that this also applies to voice actors themselves, not just the production. Speaking ill of another voice actor just to flatter the one you like, is a disgusting thing to do, not just as a fan, but as a human.”

“Not much we can do about it. People like that are just slow in the head, so when they can't think of any way to praise their favourite, all they can do is drag down others. We must ignore their nonsense, while looking upon them with eyes of pity.”

“Karisawa-san, I feel like you just took this too far, no?.....”

“BelieversXHeathens, or HeathensXBelievers, which do you think sounds better?”

“Are we talking BL, or Yuri? That's an important detail. Super important.”

Inside a van, Yumasaki and Karisawa were having a normal conversation. Normal for them.

“..... Today was pretty non-eventful, huh.”

Kadota spoke, lying down in the passenger seat he had folded backwards, and Togusa, gripping the steering wheel, answered.

“Ain't that a good thing?”

“Ahh, it's just, we had so much crap going on yesterday, I thought something or other might happen today as well.....”

“It should be more normal to not have stuff like that going on.”

“Yeah, well, you're right, I guess..... But, I mean, in the past year..... we've met so many weird things, like the headless rider, and that demon sword, right?”

As Kadota laughed bitterly, a smile also rose to Togusa's face.

“Yeah, that kinda thing changes your view on life, seriously. I could even believe in ghosts, or aliens at this point. To me, those things rank second in level of shock, right after getting a front seat at Ruri Hijiribe's concert.”

“..... That meant more to you? I still wonder where the hell Kaztano got those tickets from.....”

Kadota stretched slightly, and looked out the window towards the changing scenery of the city.

“Well, in any case, it feels kinda like the balance of the world has been tipped through this and that. Even while we're relaxing like this..... Of course, I'd rather not use a war in some other country as an example, so... I guess it feels like somewhere in Japan right now, there's gotta be some kind of trouble going on.”

“What are you on about?”

“Well, we've concerned ourselves with people like the headless rider, and Dollars.”

Kadota smiled and put on his hat, then spoke as he returned the seat back to its original position.

“What I'm trying to say is..... We need to at least be prepared, in case we end up mixed up in that kind of trouble.”

♂♀

Tohoku Region, unknown hospital.

“..... Who are you?”

It was around midnight, inside the silent hospital.

Here, the one who had appeared in front of Izaya Orihara... was a girl, with a look overflowing with bloodlust in her eyes.

Obviously, she was not here to wish for his recovery.

In fact, the knife in her hand said something more like 'I'm here to finish you off'.

However, there was one problem.

Izaya Orihara truly could not remember this girl's face.

“Who?..... 'Who?', you ask?..... I see. Well, I suppose to someone like you, I really must be a worthless human.....”

“From the fact that I can't remember you, it does seem that way, yes.”

He was only speaking his honest thoughts, but it was hard not to think he was provoking her.

However, the girl didn't get angry. Rather, a smile rose to her face as she kicked the floor.

“But..... Not matter how worthless I might be to you, I can still kill you.”

As soon as she said this... The girl jumped straight on top of the bed, landing on both knees.

“Guh!.....”

The impact ran through Izaya's body, and reopened his wound, forcing a cry out of him.

“Ufufu..... This feels great..... It's the opposite of last time..... You're the one who can't be saved. I'm the one who will live on.”

“.....?”

Last time..... meaning..... when?.....

Something was pulling at his mind, from deep within the door to his memories.

But he couldn't quite retrieve that 'something'.

While Izaya searched for that door to his memories, the girl put the knife she held up against the nape of his neck.

“I won't let you die easily..... You're thinking that once you go to the next world, there won't be anything, so you won't have to feel any pain, right? So, I have to hurt you as much as possible before you go there, right? Ok?”

The girl with the knife tilted her head with a smile, as if seeking agreement.

If he were an average man, he would probably be shaking in fear of her madness by now, but...

Before he could even begin to feel fear, Izaya had been shocked by the girl's previous words.

This impact shook the sea of his memories, and brought together the fragments of his past which had been caught between the waves.

Why is she talking about what I feel about the next world.....

No, wait..... I've had that kind of conversation before.

It was... If I remember correctly.....

..... That's right!..... It was one year ago!.....

On the night that I first met Mikado Ryuugamine!.....

“Oh, or are you going to scream for help? I don't mind..... Taking you as a hostage, then embarrassing you on the news tomorrow morning sounds like a good idea. The Naked King, who fancied himself an information broker of Shinjuku, killed by a girl!..... Or something like that. Don't you think that bartender guy you hate so much would be overjoyed about it?”

The girl smiled as she questioned him...

And Izaya, forgetting about the pain running through his open wound, smiled cheerfully, and spoke back.

“Nah, Shizu-chan doesn't even watch the news, anyway. Because if something happened that pissed him off, he'd end up breaking the TV, you see?”

At that moment... Not caring about the pain in his stomach, Izaya jumped up, and fell from the bed along with the girl.

The needle of his IV drip came out, and the transparent liquid flew about the semi-darkness of the room.

“Kuh!”

The girl started trying to reposition herself straight away... But it was here that the difference in their fighting experience was made apparent.

Izaya may have specialised in using his mind to get his way, but he had experienced many fights which came close to death, with people like Shizuo Heiwajima, and other random punks.

He immediately held down the girl, and then straddled her, while taking her knife away.

While fiddling around with the knife he had taken, Izaya looked down at the girl with a smile.

“So, you've been practising, huh?..... Although, obviously not enough.”

“..... Go ahead, kill me. Then you'll be a murderer. I don't know if the next world exists or not, but at the very least, until the moment that I die, I want to imagine you being chased around by the police, like a rat.”

“Kill'? Did you say 'kill'? As if I would do that!”

Cackling loudly, Izaya shouted in a volume that might have even reached the room next door, or might not have.

“Like I would do something like that! I'm not overflowing with such a selfless spirit, that I would volunteer to kill a suicide candidate!”

“..... Oh, you remembered me, huh?”

To put it accurately... Izaya Orihara had not remembered the girl's face, or her name.

But he had remembered just what kind of person she was.

Spring of last year... The little 'game' that he was caught up in at that time.

The extreme, unseemly 'game' of using the handle-name Nakura, to win over the men and women he met on a suicide site... and to take everything from them but their lives, while observing them the whole time.

This girl, was one of two suicide candidates who he had met on the day that he got bored of this little game... on that last night.

The girls he met that day, and their faces. And how they looked. And whether they were beautiful, whether they were ugly, whether they were fashionable, whether they looked strange, what their voices sounded like, why they were trying to die, and in the first place, whether they actually intended to die... Izaya Orihara should have already forgotten all of this.

But the one thing that was etched into his memories, the one thing he could recall, was that the girl before him now, was one of those he had met.

She certainly had been a worthless existence.

However, she had appeared before him now as an almost entirely different person.

And this truth... Lit an explosive buried deep inside Izaya's heart.

“haha..... hahahaHAHAH! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

In a voice that could be heard from next door, Izaya laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

“That's right. Ahh, ahh, that's right! You, you were worthless! But you, who were nothing more than a half-assed suicide candidate, you harboured killing intent towards me, you held onto it for over a year, then you figured out where I was just from some information on the news, and you came all the way here in just half a day!”

“.....?”

Not knowing what her opposition was smiling about, the girl looked at Izaya's face doubtfully.

“That's right, you came here! All the way here! I don't know how you managed to pinpoint this place, but do things this amazing really happen!? You, you have betrayed my expectations!”

Izaya stood up, then grabbed the girl's arm and brought her up with him.

As if he was meeting with a lover who he hadn't seen for many years, he held the confused girl tightly, so tightly.

“Thanks to you..... Thanks to you, I remembered! I've remembered what I once knew!”

Ahh, that's right, that's right.

After I got that 'head' in my hands... I started to underestimate humans.

I got wrapped up in thinking there were existences greater than humans.

“But that's right! Look at this, me! Do you remember now, me!? Humans can be this amazing!”

“.....”

Would a man who had just won the lottery even be this overjoyed?

The girl felt something terrible was about to happen, as she watched Izaya being so merry... But her overflowing hatred for him overcame that fear, and she spoke.

“I don't really understand, but there's one thing I can say.”

“And what is that?”

“You are the worst person.”

“That's fine by me.”

Like a child who had found his beloved toy, Izaya smiled innocently.

“No matter how much you all hate me...”

“I can't help myself, it's completely irrational, but you will always be.... the things I love MOST MOST MOST IN THE WORLD!”

Several minutes later...

A nurse, receiving a complaint from the room next door about a 'disturbance', entered Izaya's hospital room...

In the room, there was no sign of Izaya, or the girl, and even his extra clothes and luggage had disappeared.

Where had Izaya Orihara vanished to?

The people who were related to Izaya would learn this... Well, that's another story for a little later on.

♂♀

Kawagoe main road, unknown apartment building.

[Ahh, I'm so tired.]

“Who would have thought things would turn out like that, huh?”

Inside an old elevator, text and spoken words were exchanged.

[You can't even make this stuff up, like how just when we thought we'd found the extinct Japanese wolf, it turned out to be a werewolf. And those shrine maidens at the shrine we went to were kinda suspicious, don't you think? They felt like vampires, to me.]

“It's the first time I've seen anything like that outside of you and Saika, but in the end, you're still number one, Celty!”

While they were exhausted, Shinra and Celty were speaking as if they had enjoyed today's trip thoroughly.

Just how much they had experienced that day... They had been unable to discuss it with each other while they were returning home on bike-form Shooter, so they likely planned to talk about it at their leisure from now onwards.

As the elevator stopped rising, and the doors opened, Celty put a temporary stop to their conversation.

[Well, I think I'm gonna go have a shower.]

“Why don't we save some water?”

[Don't get carried away.]

Poking Shinra's head lightly, Celty, in high spirits, stepped out into the corridor.

Tomorrow, her everyday life would be waiting for her, as usual.

Using her memories from today as fuel, she could do her best, at her job as a courier again from tomorrow.

As she thought this, an unexpected voice called out to them.

“Good evening.”

The voice... Was one Celty knew.

These words came from the mouth of the boy, sitting in front of Shinra and Celty's apartment.

“I was starting to think you wouldn't come back tonight. I was going to go home after about another ten minutes.”

His face was even more childlike than that of Mikado Ryuugamine.

Celty could clearly remember that face.

This guy is!.....

One year ago... this boy had come to an abandoned factory, to propose a deal to Mikado.

“Mikado-senpai wouldn't tell me where the Black Rider was... So I had to find out myself”

“Who are you?”

In the face of Shinra's suspicion, the boy spoke his name, with a tender smile on his face.

“My name is Aoba Kuronuma. I wonder how many times we've met now, Black Rider?”

“I came today... to become friends with you guys.”

.....

Celty had been observing humans for many years now, so she knew.

She knew that when somebody says they want to 'become friends' when they first meet people, it means they are either very innocent, or they have some secret motive.

And that this boy, Aoba Kuronuma... was without a doubt, one of the latter.

The bandage wrapped around the boy's right hand, stained red, only served to further Celty's worry.

Her worry that for now... They wouldn't be returning to their 'everyday life' for a while yet.

As if he was sneering at that fear of hers, Aoba let his bloodstained right hand sway in the wind.

Swinging, swaying, as if it were mimicking the instability of this city...

Like this, his right hand was blown by the lukewarm wind of the city, and continued to silently sway.

Back, and forth, Back, and forth.

Holidays are not something we use to rest our bodies.

Nor are they to rest our minds.

Not the body, or the mind... They are used to give a rest to that very state, which we call monotony.

I said this from the beginning.

But, there is something we must not forget.

Say we taste as much of the 'absurd' as we can on our holidays, to refresh our mood, so we can jump back into our everyday lives with spirit.

Even if you believe this, and welcome the next day...

It is not certain that our precious, normal everyday life will be there waiting for us.

I told you, didn't I? The city itself makes no distinction between routine days, abnormal days, work days, and rest days.

The ones who watch and decide are the humans.

Us humans.

So, the 'new days' that this city grants upon you, may not be the same as the ones you were given before your holiday.

Of course, even our weekdays may undergo evolution, or progression... But not on this level.

Say you eat healthy food every day, and then on your rare holidays, you treat yourself to a steak. It's as if, even when you think to yourself, 'Ok, back to healthy food from now', you are suddenly forced to eat a full course of poisonous mushrooms instead.

If that everyday life you were expecting never comes back, and you become unable to live without swallowing up this strange state which was forced upon you...

Well, all you can do is pray.

Pray, and believe... That your stomach is at least as strong as this city is.

An excerpt from the afterword of “Ikebukuro Bites Back – 3: A Traveller’s Guide to Ikebukuro”.

Written by Shinichi Tsukumoya, published by MediaWhacks Japan.

製作

イラスト&ビジュアルコンセプト
ヤスダスズヒト (AWVA STUDIO)

デザイン

鎌部善彦

編集

鈴木S.E.C.
和田敦

発行

株式会社アスキー・メディアワークス

発売

株式会社角川パブリッシング

原作 成田良悟



© 2010 Ryohgo Narita