



成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

9
The God of High School

電撃文庫



成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

イラスト:ヤスダスズヒト

Illustration : Suzuhito Yasuda



ファミ通!
9

P8 *PROLOGUE* Classmate

P17 *CHAPTER 1* The Information Broker

P40 *CHAPTER 2* Iza-Nii

P75 *CHAPTER 3* The Flea

P111 *CHAPTER 4* The Vice President of the Club

P169 *CHAPTER 5* Orihara Izaya

P207 *EPILOGUE & NEXT PROLOGUE* Me

TSUKUMOYA SHINICHI'S ACCOUNT

Is Orihara Izaya lonely or not?

I have been asked that question.

This is just my personal opinion. I think he feels lonely, but at the same time satisfied.

His love has been, is, and always will be unilateral. It is not that he has never been loved; however, he always denies such love access to him. As long as he loves others, he feels connected to them and satisfied.

When he wants to use you, he does allow you to get close to him. But there will still be a thick wall between you and his heart.

Sounds pretentious, doesn't it? But those were his very own smug words in my chatroom that day. Talk to him if you want to complain. Though I don't think he even blushed when he said those words. Well.

This unblushing attitude, I think, is exactly what keeps him in the advantageous position, whatever the situation. Even so, he still keeps saying things like "Because I love all the humans in this world, all the humans in this world should love me back." Well, whether it's a lie or not, it does sound like something he would say.

But if you were to ask me, "Does Orihara Izaya love himself, then?" - I would have no answer for you but silence.

That's something only Izaya himself knows. Whatever he chooses to tell you, there is nothing you can do about it.

Because even if people try to persuade him to change himself, he would probably never let their words sink into his heart.

That is my opinion.

Sorry. To be frank with you, I feel embarrassed.



「この世界は、
誰かの手で
作られたものだ。
だから、
誰かの手で
壊すこともできる。
それが、
この世界の
真実だ。」



舞流「ねえねえクル姉! どうどう?
私がアシゼントした水着!
うわッ、超似合ってるじゃん! 大好き!」

チキッと、恥ぢかしい
九瑠璃「少……照……」

Mairu
Ne ne,
Kuru-nee!
How do
you like
bikini I got
you?
Uwah, you
look great
in it! I love
you!

Kururi
Slight (I'm a
little)...
shame
(embarrassed)
...

DURARARA!! ×9

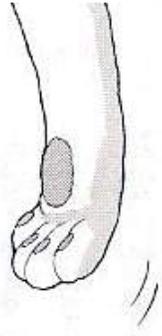
Written by
Narita Ryohgo

Illustrations by
Yasuda Suzuhito

Published by
Dengeki Bunko under *ASCII Media Works*

Translated by
anni_fiesta (http://anni_fiesta.livejournal.com)

Beta-read by
laenavesse (<http://laenavesse.livejournal.com>)



プ
□
□
ー
グ

同

怒

生



PROLOGUE

CLASSMATE

I apologize for taking up your time, Nakura-san.

“Um, let me see. You said your name was Kujiragi-san? Can I ask why I’m getting a call from an insurance company?”

Sorry if this sounds intrusive, but would you happen to know this person called Orihara Izaya?

“Orihara Izaya? Ah, yes. I went to the university with him, and there’s no way you can forget someone with such a weird name anyway. So what is it? Did he finally do something? Like insurance fraud? Don’t tell me he’s been using my name again? I’m telling you this now just in case, but I have nothing to do with anything. I haven’t even seen him recently.”

What did you mean by “finally”?

“Ah, Ms. Insurer, you haven’t met the guy in person, have you? Well, you’ll know what I am talking about when you meet him. You’ll know he’s not normal as soon as you see him. ...Actually, maybe he will pretend to be normal in front of women. He’s got quite a lot of women who kind of worship him or something.”

Did you just say that he was using your name “again”?

“Yeah...how should I put this? I sold him my name.”

Sold him your name...?

“Well, when I met him he told me that he was trying to buy something secretly online, so he wanted to use my name and shipping address. I said no at first, of course. But he offered me a pretty decent amount of money and all that. So I thought, ‘Why not, it’s not like I’m giving him my credit card number or anything.’”

Could you give us more detail?

“Several packages were sent to me. Orihara would always tell me beforehand when to expect them, and they never went to the wrong person since I lived alone. Ah, but I was curious

about their contents. So one day I pretended that I mistook one package for my own and opened it.”

What did you find inside?

“Ordinary books. They did look a little erotic to me, but I think they’re just studies of folklore. He didn’t get angry at me for opening the package, anyway.”

Was he a normal student?

“Normal? I seldom saw him attending classes at Raira University. Well, everyone skipped classes there, so I guess you could call it normal, yeah... Sometimes I saw him talking to this strange guy in a white coat and glasses on the campus. I thought he was in our medical school or something, but he didn’t look like it...ah, right, right. Orihara once made this unfunny joke about him that went like ‘He’s an underground doctor. You can go to him if you ever get shot or something and don’t want the cops to get involved.’”

...

“Oh, I’m sorry. We should be talking about Orihara, right? Well, like I said, he’s kind of not normal, so I did keep my distance from him. I already told you this, but apart from the women who were taken in, I think he had no ‘friend’ friend...except that guy in the white coat. Well, he took that guy to the campus even though that guy was not a student, so they had to be friends, right?”

So he was pretty much isolated.

“Well, I heard that back in high school he got into a lot of trouble with this super dangerous thug called Heiwajima. But when I tried talking to that guy he turned out not so bad after all. I’ll say this again: Orihara’s just not normal.”

And you just lent your name and address to someone you kept your distance from like that...?

“It does sound unnatural when you put it like that...but hey, it’s not like I was the only one.”

You were not the only one?

“Nah. That guy—he borrowed several people’s names at the university. Most of them were women, but there were several men as well. And, you know, I was short on money and all...”

Is there anything else you know about him? Personal history, et cetera?

“I—told—you—I was not the person to ask for that kind of information! If the people at my company ever find out that I lent my name to someone like that, everyone’s going to look at me weirdly!”

Sorry for being intrusive. There are rumors saying that you were close to him when he was going to the university.

“Who told you something like that...? Good God, this is getting on my nerves. I don’t know nothing about Orihara.....”

Is something wrong?

“Nothing...it’s just that now that I think about it, I really don’t know anything about that guy.”

Would you happen to know if there’s anyone who knows him better?

“Well, it’s not like that...I doubt there was anyone at that university who knew about his past and everything. Those women were pretty much simply taken in, and that was all...if there’s anyone who knows his personal history, it would probably be just that white coat guy.”

What is his name?

“I have no idea. Speaking of which, now that I think about it, did I do something terribly stupid...? It scares me. Oh yeah, it does, I feel this chill on my back...did I dig my own grave when I let him use my name...?”

It’s fine. As far as I know your name has not been used for anything.

“That’s a relief...by the way, why are you investigating about him, really? Did that guy do something?”

Unfortunately I can’t tell you the details because it’s a company secret, but his name was on our list of insurance beneficiaries.

“...Ah, I see. So you are suspecting fraud. ...Well, I can totally see him doing something like that, it’s true...he’s good at taking advantage of people’s weaknesses...ah, right, that reminds me. He did say that his hobby was human observation or something.”

Human observation?

“Yeah, sounds totally juvenile, doesn’t it? Imagine a college student telling you that his hobby is ‘human observation’...but it was kind of different from, say, condescending... You know how when people who like cats see a cat, they just go on and on about how cute it is, regardless of whether the cat is angry, sulky, or simply asleep?”

Are you saying that he sees humans as cats? But wouldn't that be condescending in itself?

“Well, it’s not really like that...I’m only saying this because we’re using the humans = cats metaphor and all, but...”

?

“If it’s that guy, even if the cat is run over by a car, dying of a disease, or getting its throat torn open from fighting other cats...”

...he’ll probably still say: ‘So cute.’”

In a Dark Place 1

“How are you feeling now, Mr. Information Broker?”

At first sight this place looked like a bar that had yet to open for the day.

On its shelves, however, there were no alcohol bottles as there should be. The wallpaper was tearing off in places and the place did not look like it was still functioning.

“Or would you prefer me to call you by your full name, Orihara Izaya?”

A young woman’s voice was heard in this dark, dysfunctional bar.

The woman was dressed like a clerk for a designer boutique and probably in her mid-twenties. She was wearing light makeup. Her hair was short and slightly curled.

Her tone sounded somewhat too young for her looks. However, no reply was heard in the dark bar.

Around her there were several figures sitting on the bar’s rusty chairs.

Most of them were women, but there were several tough-looking men as well. Had the lighting in the bar been better, they would have looked like nightclub hostesses and waiters with their bodyguards.

But at the center of the bar sat a figure that indicated the exact opposite.

It was a man in black sitting on a stylish steel frame chair.

For this man, however, the quality of the lighting in the bar did not even matter.

His head and neck were completely concealed under a linen bag that looked like the kind used for transporting coffee beans. It was impossible to tell what his face—and, in fact, even his hairstyle—looked like.

He was definitely breathing, but he did not utter a word in reply to the woman.

The man’s hands were tied together on his back. Since he could not see, it seemed quite impossible for him to make any reckless move.

“Aha, I see. You can’t say anything. I should have known. They beat you up pretty good before they brought you here, didn’t they? Ah, don’t tell me you guys broke every single one of his teeth already?”

The short-haired woman turned in her chair, which looked the same as the man’s, and asked the figures behind her back.

One of the women sitting behind her replied in an apathetic voice.

“No, we didn’t break him. He’s at least good-looking. It would have been such a waste.”

“I see. Well done. That way I can have more fun with him.”

Her voice sounded like a teenage girl’s. But in the dim light it was hard to tell her exact age.

No one told the man under the linen bag a word about who and what they were. The short-haired woman continued to act as if she were the master of the place.

“So, Mr. Information Broker, do you know why you’re looking the way you’re looking right now?” She asked the man under the linen bag again.

There was still no reply, however.

The slightly rough sound of breathing was heard from behind the linen, but it was difficult to tell whether the man was conscious or not.

“I’ll give you a hint. My nickname is...Earthworm. Do you get it now?”

Earthworm. It sounded more like an insult than a nickname. As soon as the man heard it, he slowly began to raise his linen-covered head.

“Aha! He heard me, he heard me! What’s that, he looks like a doll! How funny!”

Earthworm chuckled mockingly. Pressing the tip of her index finger to the forehead of the man under the linen bag, she said in a tone that sounded like an eccentric high school girl talking to her male kouhai.

“I’ll teach you something nice, Orihara Izaya-san.”

“...”

The woman continued as the information broker remained silent.

“I don’t know if it’s because you’re an information broker or anything, but boy, aren’t you a little too conspicuous for your own good?”

“...”

“We heard that someone was curious enough about us to be looking for our information, so we did a bit of our own research. And guess what we found? Boy, aren’t you just interesting? Almost as interesting as playing old maid with 52 old maid cards, you know.”

Earthworm’s simile was hard to understand. The man under the linen bag, however, made no sound other than breathing.

“Aren’t information brokers supposed to be, you know, like nightclub hostesses, cops, lackeys working under really dangerous people, or pimps...? They sell what they know to other people and make some pocket money from it, right?”

“...”

“But not only did you make it your main occupation—you even call yourself an ‘information broker’, and you’re famous as well! Isn’t that just pure blasphemy for an information broker? See, if the bosses of those cops and lackeys knew that they were in fact information brokers, wouldn’t that be the end of them? They’d get arrested, or their fingertips would get cut off. Ah, or they’d simply be fed to the fish in Tokyo Bay, am I right?”

The woman kept on giggling as she said those dangerous words.

She sounded as if she were telling a fairy tale to a child.

“The ‘nice’ thing I’m going to teach you is that...conspicuous people like you are the least suited for a life as an information broker. Do you feel like you just got wiser?”

“...”

“Hey, are you listening? It’s not so much a hint as it is the answer...but those scary old men at Awakusu-kai asked you to look for any information on us you could find, right?”

Earthworm kept her fingertip pressed against the non-responsive man’s forehead and began to trace circles with it. The man was probably exhausted seeing as how he simply let his head be moved around in accordance with the prodding of her finger.

“But then, even though I taught you such ‘nice’ things you probably won’t have a chance to use the knowledge.”

“...”

“Because it’s not like you’re ever going back to that job again, right?”

The woman in her twenties said these ruthless words with the expression of an innocent girl.

Who were those people, and what were they?

What exactly was happening inside this dysfunctional bar?

We'll be going back several days in time to the hour when the information broker named Orihara Izaya received a request from Awakusu-kai.



1章 情報屋

CHAPTER 1

THE INFORMATION BROKER

Early August, somewhere in Tokyo

“Somehow it feels like a long time since I’ve last been in this car.”

In the back seat of an expensive looking car, Orihara Izaya muttered while sitting next to the window on his right and enjoying the view of the city outside.

The young man was wearing a black T-shirt and a likewise black summer coat. Without looking nervous in the slightest, he turned to the other man in the car.

“It’s been so long that the sight of Shiki-san’s face makes me feel nostalgic.”

“Is that so? To me it feels like yesterday.”

The male whose eyes had characteristic long slits at the outer corners replied in an even tone. He looked like he was in his thirties and gave the impression that he was hard to deal with.

It was impossible to tell how Shiki felt about Izaya from his expression as he said in a flat voice:

“I heard that someone tried to scoop your entrails out. Are you alright now?”

“Ah, right...I think that made it into the news or something. Thank God they didn’t show any pictures of me.”

“Who did that to you?”

“I’m looking for that person as well. Anyway, I would readily confess that there are a lot of people who think ill of me when I *only meant to be kind*. ...But still, it’s the first time you requested my presence in a long while. Surely it’s not just to ask me that?”

“I’m satisfying my curiosity, but I’m also doing this for my job. If someone tries to assassinate an information broker under our patronage, it is only natural to suspect that they are trying to harm us, isn’t it?”

Shiki tilted his head further sideways and asked one more question.

“Speaking of which, Orihara-san, would you happen to know anything about someone named ‘Nakura’?”

Though Izaya was obviously younger than he was, Shiki still asked the question in a deferential tone*. There was, however, something sharp and cold in his words that made the air inside the car feel sharper on the skin.

** Shiki uses honorific speech with everyone except his own subordinates. Izaya, when speaking to Shiki, changes his first-person pronoun from the casual “ore” to the more formal “watashi”.*

Izaya, on the other hand, remained his usual self as he replied.

“Nakura-san? Is that a surname or a given name? There was someone whose given name sounded like that in my middle school. I think...we went to the same university, too. But...”

“Well, that Nakura told our Head’s granddaughter to do some weird things...”

“Your Miss? Isn’t she still in elementary school? Good God, even if Ikebukuro is one of the safer areas around this place you should never have let bad guys have a chance to approach her. Or was that Nakura a woman?”

Izaya muttered these words without sounding unsettled in the slightest. Shiki fell silent for a few seconds—

And switched to the “main topic” as if nothing had happened.

“...Anyway. I think this is enough chit-chat for the day. There is something I want you to look into. We can’t risk exposing ourselves by making any moves and hiring ordinary detectives seems not quite enough for so dangerous a situation.”

“I am well aware that you wouldn’t have contacted me if it were anything less. If worst comes to worst, sacrificing me will always be an easy and painless option for Awakusu-kai.”

Ignoring the sarcasm in Izaya’s remarks, Shiki mentioned a particular word.

“...’Amphisbaena.’ Do you know anything about that name?”

Izaya responded almost immediately to the esoteric word that popped out of nowhere.

“Amphisbaena...it’s a legendary lizard believed to make its home in Libya. It’s poisonous and it has two heads, one at the front and one rear. Over the centuries its image has ‘evolved’ in poetry, growing a bat’s wings among other things. Gradually it came to be featured on many coats of arms of aristocratic families in the West.”

“...Is that so? I’ve never heard these before. All I knew was that it was some sort of dragon-like creature in Western mythology.”

“I think very few people are aware of it. It’s one of the lesser-known legendary creatures in Japan. ...Speaking of which, does that word have anything to do with what you’re going to ask me to look into, Shiki-san?”

Izaya steered the conversation forward with his speculation. Shiki nodded readily and continued to speak.

“There is this organization called Amphisbaena...or should I say this nightclub? Anyway, a group with that name is running an underground casino.”

“Oops, I see. I don’t recall that name being among the casinos controlled by the Awakusu family.”

Izaya said this in a tone that sounded as if he knew every business in the city that had ties with Awakusu-kai. Shiki neither admitted nor denied it. In fact, he didn’t even look displeased as he continued in an even voice.

“...You know how difficult it is to open that kind of business directly nowadays, Orihara-san. We can make it look legal on the surface, but we still won’t get the permit if the name Awakusu comes up even fleetingly in their background investigations. Gambling clubs in apartment buildings are different, though...well, enough about that.”

Shiki took a breath and looked into Izaya’s eyes in the rear-view mirror before speaking again.

“If it’s in our territory but not run by us, our policy is to extract as much protection money as we can by threatening to report them to the police as an illegal casino. However, we’re having difficulty locating this particular casino.”

“What do you mean?”

“...’Members-only’ underground casinos have been said to exist for a long time. But most people who talked about them didn’t believe that they actually existed. We didn’t, either, until we saw a decline in the number of customers at the casinos we collected protection money from...and even casinos that had direct ties to us.”

According to Shiki, Awakusu-kai came to believe in the existence of “Amphisbaena” because a customer who frequented their casinos was careless enough to let it slip.

They immediately got hold of the customer and forced him into taking them to the underground casino—but what they found there was only party space for rent. A party hosted by a dating agency was already going on there by the time they tried to look further into the matter.

They tried to extract more information from that customer, but he was about as clueless as they were. He only went to the party place because he received a text message from the mailing list telling him “where to go for the party.” In the text message there was not a single word mentioning gambling.

Usually party space owners would never rent their space to a gambling group—but it seemed that no chips-to-money or money-to-chips conversions ever went on in that space.

“Heh...so they changed the chips into money somewhere else? That sounds like the way you redeem prizes in a game arcade.”

Izaya smiled slightly after listening to Shiki’s explanation.

Shiki returned that smile with a face devoid of expression as he continued.

“They do not change the chips into money in the open. It seems like they take care of that with something that resembles an IC card system. To the owner of the party spaces they rent it will look like they’re just having a board game night with no money involved.”

“That’s true.”

“If we were the police, we could have tracked the text message back to its sender and put an end to this...but things got complicated when we tried to track it back since it seemed to have involved a proxy server in another country. However, it’s not really worth negotiating with an overseas proxy service provider for, either...”

Shiki shrugged slightly, but his words remained relentlessly sharp.

Even though Shiki’s tone kept reminding Izaya that he was not a man to be trifled with, Izaya kept his own pace as he spoke.

“But from what you told me, I feel like the way they run this business is a little too bold...or should I say reckless? This whole chipless electronic casino thing, I mean. If a gambler loses, he can find any excuse to not pay. He can blame it on system error or anything.”

“Exactly. Well, the owners should have expected the same thing and taken the due precautions, I suppose. ...We have other issues with the ‘Amphisbaena’ people as well. The things they do are a real pain to us. They’re not only pushing their luck by walking on this tight rope—they’ve actually already stepped off it and are falling to the ground, but they haven’t realized it yet.”

“So in a nutshell, you want them beaten flat into the ground. Am I right?”

Izaya looked his happiest since the beginning of this conversation when he said this. Shiki, however, simply ignored him.

“Curiously, the customer who originally gave us the information stopped contacting us afterwards. Since they’re already trying to hide themselves from us as if they already knew that we would be looking for them, it’s necessary that we change our strategy a little bit.”

“Therefore you hired me, a free third-party whom you can sacrifice without blinking an eye.”

“It’s not just about our territory—otherwise we wouldn’t have gotten so wound up over this. Things may turn out ugly if people in the territories of other Medei Group branches besides Awakusu-kai catch wind of such rumors. If nothing else, we will need to know if this group has yakuza backing or not. If we can’t do that, branches within Medei Group are simply going to keep suspecting each other.”

Exhaling silently, he said to Izaya:

“—Which means we’re asking you to find out what those people really are.”



Several minutes ago, a road in Tokyo

[W-Wait, let’s talk.]

These words appeared from the hand of the figure in the black rider suit.

To be exact, they appeared on the screen of the PDA the figure was holding.

The rider was on a motorbike with neither a headlight nor a number plate. The body of the motorbike was as pitch black as the rider’s outfit, seemingly absorbing all light that hit its surface. In fact, even its frame and wheels were the same shade of black; the entire motorbike looked as if it had just sprung to life from its own shadow.

However, the group of people standing in the way of this surreal and fantastic motorbike—

—simply couldn’t get any more everyday or real.

“What now? ...Are you finally realizing how serious it is? Ready to call your lawyer?”

The man standing at the front of the group of several police officers on white motorbikes grinned triumphantly at the rider. The rider of the Black Motorbike shuddered and began to type on the PDA again.

[I-I did some research. In Tokyo, horses don't have to have lights on them even though they're treated as light vehicles. Under the article for the obligation of lighting it says 'Cows and horses are exempt from this requirement'!]

“Che...so you knew.”

[What did you mean by 'so you knew'...?! You rogue cop! Tyrant! False accuser! Corrupt to the bone!]

Finally having found a point of attack, the rider kept hurling epithets at Kuzuhara Kinnosuke, the leader of the White Motorbikes group, whose grin only widened as he asked:

“I see. So you're planning on insisting that's a horse till the very end.”

[I'm glad you understand.]

Maybe he's going to buy it. The rider felt reassured at the thought. Kuzuhara, on the other hand, tightened his grip on the handle as he went on to ask:

“So you've been riding that light vehicle, which you call a horse, in the car lane as you would a motorbike?”

[Eh?]

“How much do you know about the rules that say which lanes a light vehicle and a two-wheeled vehicle can use on the road?”

[...Um...I...]

The rider seemed to have realized that this was not going to bode well for him. On the PDA “...”-s dominated the screen as if trying to buy some time.

“Anyway, you see the board over there?”

Kuzuhara was pointing to a board displaying the speed limit—30.

“Not even bikes are allowed to break the speed limit, you know that, right? How fast did you think you were going when you were running away from us just now?”

[...!?!]

“I’ve been demanding that you stop for the past 5 minutes. I have no idea where you got the guts to ignore me for that long...but you’re gonna give me your ID right n–...what, you bastard!”

The Black Motorbike had raced forward noiselessly and made a run for it before Kuzuhara could finish.

At the sight of an eerie motorbike that made no engine noise whatsoever, the traffic police still went about their daily mission without a fear in the world.

—Even though they knew that the thing they were dealing with might be a real monster.



Celty Sturluson was not human.

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

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

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

Perhaps she did know.

But she certainly did not remember.

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

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

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

She already knew who had stolen her head.

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

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

For Celty, life was good as it was.

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

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

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

Such was the being named Celty Sturluson.

♂ ♀

Somewhere in Tokyo, in a luxury car

The Headless Rider, who would be seen as the embodiment of abnormality by any ordinary person, overtook Izaya and Shiki's car.

Izaya's eyes followed the White Motorbikes as they soared past immediately after.

Smiling cheerfully, he muttered, "Our cops are working as hard as ever today. I can now rest assured. Tokyo is still a safe place."

As Izaya said these words no one else would have dreamed of saying to an Awakusu-kai executive, Shiki did not look particularly displeased—though he showed no intention of echoing Izaya's sentiment, either.

"Since that officer on the White Motorbike came, it's gotten harder for us to ask that Courier to do anything."

"Kuzuhara Kinnosuke. The name Kuzuhara rings quite a bell to your people, doesn't it?"

"..."

"The one who works for the anti-yakuza branch is Kuzuhara Yumeji, right? I did hear that he was the one who caused Kine-san's expulsion from Awakusu-kai*..."

**Kine: In the audio commentary of DVD Vol.7 it is revealed that when a big fight broke out between Shizuo and Izaya close to their graduation from Raijin, Kine from Awakusu-kai happened to drive by and stopped them from fighting. This incident became the starting point of Izaya's collaborations with Awakusu-kai.*

Izaya's words were cut off by Shiki's voice.

"Excessive curiosity kills even the snake, Informant."

It was the first time he dropped the deferential honorific speech used in front of a business partner, opting instead for the kind of speech one would use to address someone more than 12 years their junior.

There was, however, no irritation on Shiki's face indicating that Izaya had brought up a distasteful subject—instead, there was a small smile. Nevertheless, the smile did nothing to lessen the sharpness and gravity in his words.



Without showing any sign of fear under the pressure, Izaya maintained his usual composure as he quipped, “Shouldn’t it be the cat, Shiki-san?”

“In the West they say cats have nine lives...but snakes are symbols of rejuvenation and immortality, aren’t they? ...Just like you. You keep shedding your old skin and coming back to life no matter how badly you’re beaten up or stabbed with a knife...”

“...You know more about those things than I thought, Shiki-san. Are you into manga or something?”

Shiki ignored the information broker’s teasing and continued in an even voice.

“We don’t care what you *may or may not know*, Informant. All we care is whether you’re going to keep your mouth shut like a clam or let it slip off your tongue...that is all.”

“I will etch that into my heart.”

“Curiosity may only kill a cat nine times. The punishment for ‘excessive’ curiosity, on the other hand, will be a little longer and a little more difficult to deal with...that’s all I’m trying to say here, Informant.”

“...”

There was a moment of silence.

“So, should we go back to talking about the job?”

Shiki’s face became devoid of expression again. His voice became stiff and mechanical as if none of the words he said in the past minute had ever actually been uttered.

“There’s one thing we do know about this whole Amphisbaena business.”

“What is it?”

“You know about Akabayashi, right? He’s one of us.”

As Izaya asked the question, Shiki mentioned the name of one of his fellow executives at Awakusu-kai who was a famous street fighter.

“Yeah. He’s the one who’s taking care of Jyan Jyan Jyan, isn’t he? They say he’s a hardcore fighter type, but I heard that he’s gotten a lot easier to get along with recently?”

“Who knows? It could be that he’s simply hiding his fangs. You’re an information broker. Surely you know better than to believe that anyone who’s easy to get along with would also be safe to deal with?”

“You have a point. ...So, what about this Akabayashi-san?”

Izaya smiled hollowly. With eyes full of “excessive” curiosity, he awaited Shiki’s reply.

“During the time you went missing after you were stabbed, Orihara-san, he got into trouble with some young folks. Those college students were selling their homemade drugs, little bastards...Akabayashi was smart about it and dealt them a heavy blow, which is good, but we still haven’t found the main culprits.”

“Are you suspecting that those people are from ‘Amphisbaena’?”

Izaya tried to guess the best he could what Shiki was going to say next. But he was wrong.

“No...there’s a possibility that they got into trouble with the Amphisbaena people.”

“Heh?”

“We caught one of the lackeys in the group of drug dealers. Seems like his bosses told him to ‘look for Amphisbaena.’ But we have no idea how much his bosses know about the situation, either.”

“I see. So is it part of my job as well to look into that group of drug dealers?”

It was a natural question, or at least sounded like one in every way.

But Shiki shook his head silently and handed Izaya an envelope.

Izaya took it, checked out the several 10,000-yen bills inside, and placed it inside his summer coat.

Having made sure that Izaya had taken the money, Shiki began to answer his question.

“We will track down the group of drug dealers by other means, so there’s no need for you to look into that matter in particular. However, if they find out that you’re looking for ‘Amphisbaena,’ there’s a possibility that they will be after you. Please take the due precautions.”

Izaya lowered his gaze as he heard these words as if the conversation had already lost all meaning for him—but suddenly, he asked Shiki a question with interest.

“By the way, what did you mean by ‘other means’?”

All he got in reply was Shiki’s sharp, meaningful smile.

“Informant, excessive curiosity...”

“I know, I know. I won’t ask anymore. When I really *want to know*, I’ll just find out without asking.”

“...”

“I don’t want to be made into snake kabayaki* just yet.”

**Kabayaki: a term used to refer to seafood filleted and grilled in sweet soy sauce.*

Several minutes later, the car arrived at a certain place in Ikebukuro.

Izaya put his right hand into his coat pocket as he was about to get out of the car as it parked on the side of the road, his left hand grabbing the door handle.

“Speaking of which, you always dropped me off in the same place you picked me up. But not today, I guess.”

Though he was talking to an Awakusu-kai executive, the young man said this without looking afraid in the slightest. Shiki remained expressionless as he told Izaya the reason.

“That? It’s quite simple. I’m dropping you off here because *it’ll only be a minute.*”

“?”

Trying to guess what Shiki had meant, Izaya opened the door and stepped outside—

A girl was standing there.

“...”

As he saw the girl who looked more than twelve years his junior, Izaya remembered what this place was.

On the signboard he saw the huge words “RAKUEI GYM”. Sounds of sandbags being punched were coming from within the building.

As Izaya remained silent, Shiki talked to him from behind.

“It just happened that I was going to pick up our Head’s little Miss here, too.”

Hearing Shiki’s voice, Izaya’s gaze focused on the girl in front of him.

The girl, who was carrying a bag for her karate uniform, was a girl Izaya had seen before.

Awakusu Akane.

As part of a conspiracy, Izaya had convinced the girl to try to kill Heiwajima Shizuo.

Shiki's sharp eyes focused in turn on Akane's surprised expression and Izaya's back.

Shiki's subordinate from Awakusu-kai held his breath in the driver's seat and tightened his grip on the handle.

However, Awakusu Akane was simply a girl *Izaya* had seen before—no more than that.

“Hi, I don't think we've met! You're Awakusu Akane-chan, right?”

Izaya said it in a natural way as if the name of the granddaughter of Awakusu-kai's Head was but common knowledge.

“Eh? Ah, right...yes!”

Initially taken aback, Akane had been looking at Izaya with a guarded expression—but as she saw Shiki in the car parked behind Izaya's back, she replied looking relieved.

Eyes still focused on Izaya and Akane, Shiki asked, “Miss, have you ever met him before?”

“No, um, my name is Awakusu Akane. Nice to meet you!”

The girl muttered in a nervous voice that didn't sound like she was lying. She was probably just nervous about meeting a person she had never seen before.

Shiki studied Akane's face for a moment before turning to Izaya.

“So, about the job...we're counting on you.”

“Yeah. I'll excuse myself, then. Goodbye.”

Izaya patted Akane lightly on the head as he walked past her.

Akane tilted her head curiously at face of the man *whom she had met for the first time*, but soon forgot about it as she climbed into the car.

Shiki-san sure is sharp.

Izaya muttered to himself in his heart as he watched the car leave.

It was the right call to not have messed with Akane-chan's mind in person.

As he remembered how he had tricked Akane into trying to kill Shizuo, Izaya grinned to himself with satisfaction.

As he remembered the poor man who had appeared before Akane under the name "Izaya" as he was told by Izaya—

There was suddenly some warmth in Izaya's smile.

He was smiling like a cat-lover imagining kittens frolicking with each other.

CHATROOM

.
. .
. . .

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

Pure Water 100%-san has joined the chat.

Pure Water 100%

Just like I thought, there's no one online during the day

Pure Water 100%

Is everyone busy?

Pure Water 100%

It's kind of lonely here...

Pure Water 100%

Speaking of which, I think the original members here are Kanra-san, Setton-san, Tanaka Taro-san, Bakyura-san, Saika-san, Kyo-san and Mai-san?

Pure Water 100%

I wonder what kind of friends they really are.

Pure Water 100%

Do they know each other in real life? Or do they only know each other online? I would be interested to know.

Pure Water 100%

Kyo-san invited me here. I'm friends in real life with Kyo-san and Mai-san. But those two wouldn't tell me who's who in this chatroom. But then, maybe no one in this chatroom knows who's who in real life after all.

Bakyura-san has joined the chat.

Bakyura

I heard you summon me, so I came here

Pure Water 100%

Uwah!? Impressive, have you been lurking all along?

Bakyura

As long as there are girls,

Bakyura

A gangster boy will check any place out!

Pure Water 100%

But how can you be sure that I'm a girl? I could be online gender-swapping, you know.

Bakyura

But by the same token,

Bakyura

Shoro-san and Gaki-san could in fact be girls

Pure Water 100%

I see. No one knows who they're talking to.

Pure Water 100%

But if Shoro-san is actually a girl, the online-offline gap would be kind of huge lol

Bakyura

Gap is moe

Pure Water 100%

Ah, Bakyura-san, are you the kind of people who use words like "moe"?

Bakyura

I'd use any word as long as it gets me into a talk with females

Pure Water 100%

But have you really been lurking in this chatroom?

Bakyura

Nah,

Bakyura

I set the program so that I get notified when someone comes online

Pure Water 100%

Unbelievable! Are you that addicted to this chatroom?

Pure Water 100%

Ah, don't tell me there's someone you like in this chatroom? Ah, but that can't be. Bakyura-san's girlfriend is Saki-san!

Bakyura

I have no idea what you're talking about

Pure Water 100%

Come on! It's so obvious from the way you two talk in the chatroom! Do you really think we can't tell?

Bakyura

I have the right to remain silent

Pure Water 100%

That's true. I won't ask anymore, then.

Pure Water 100%

So do you have friends in real life who are original members of this chatroom?

Bakyura
Nah, nah,

Bakyura
Just give up,

Bakyura
It won't do you any good to seek people out in real life.

Pure Water 100%
You're so serious, Bakyura-san. Aren't you curious too? About the people you talk to on the Internet, I mean.

Bakyura
Who can tell? Maybe I'd regret knowing if I actually knew

Bakyura
If I get along with people here,

Bakyura
It's not really necessary to stalk them in real life

Bakyura
Bye –

Bakyura-san has left the chat.

Pure Water 100%
He left.

Pure Water 100%
But you really do get curious about people at times.

Pure Water 100%
Speaking of which, Tanaka Taro-san hasn't logged on in a while.

Pure Water 100%
Tanaka Taro-san, if you see this message, please come back☆

Pure Water 100%
There are new members here you should say hello to!

Pure Water 100%

I'm logging off now, bye!

Pure Water 100%-san has left the chat.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

.

.

.

In a Dark Place 2

“Speaking of which...you did look into it for a little bit, didn’t you?” Earthworm asked in a bright voice in the dim bar.

“About us ‘Amphisbaena’.”

After disclosing their true identity a little too readily, she began to examine again the man under the linen bag sitting in front of her with interest.

“So? What did you find out? You did your research, didn’t you?”

“...”

“If you did, didn’t you find us dangerous at all?”

“...”

As per usual, the sound of breathing came from under the linen bag. No actual voice was heard, however.

“We’re not yakuza, so we’re not going to kidnap you like this or anything...was that what you were thinking?”

“...”

“That won’t do, that won’t do. That just wooooon’t dooo. Don’t you just fail as an information broker? Don’t you know that young people nowadays get mad easily? Lack of calcium, that’s what it is. Even if they commit a crime they won’t be sentenced to death according to the Youth Law, so anywhere under 14 is the best age to go experience da thrill of da kill! Well, granted, I’m over 20 already, but my heart is still like that of an elementary school boy ready to stomp on ants any time of the day! Ah, but don’t you worry. I’m a girl after all. Girls just aren’t cute if they act like elementary school boys, are they?”

“...”

The linen bag remained silent despite Earthworm’s ceaseless teasing.

“Hey, are you listening to me, Orihara Izaya-kun?”

With her fingers pecking at the linen bag, Earthworm asked in an unctuous voice, “Do you want me to take this bag off you?”

“...”

The man’s head raised slightly, his face turning in the direction of Earthworm’s voice.

“Ah, he heard me, he heard me! Here, here, why don’t you nod for me?”

As she said so, the man under the linen bag nodded emphatically, almost frantically.

“Aha! I see you’re awake! Finally! But no. I’m not taking it off for you.”

Earthworm narrowed her eyes cheerfully and tweaked the man’s nose under the linen bag.

“Isn’t it scarier than you thought, having a linen bag over your head?”

“...”

“It’s so dark; you can still hear and smell everything, but you can’t eat and all you get to feel is how vivid and warm your own breath is. If you ate garlic, your breath would have smelled, too. But you look like the type of guy who cares a lot about how his mouth smells, Orihara Izaya-kun, so I guess that’s not a problem for you. I saw your photos. You always picked cool clothes.”

The woman continued to unsettle the man with information she got from God knows where.

“Linen bags are scary, really. I tried one of them on myself once, and I couldn’t take it anymore after like 5 seconds because I thought ‘Oh my God, my make-up is going to be all messed up!’”

After she finished telling the story, Earthworm flicked her finger at the man’s forehead.

“I’m really sorry that we girls are all so cute and hot. It’s hard to not want to know everything about us, isn’t it?”

Switching back to the main topic without any preamble, Earthworm continued on in a theatrical manner.

“But here’s the problem. Our ‘owner’ really hates being stalked like that. I personally think it’s fine to let you see as much of us as you want, but I can’t say no to my owner’s orders. It’s just hard when you’re working for someone, you know?”

“...”

“Silence again? But then you haven’t really said a single word so far. That makes me want to hear you all the more badly, you know, even if it’s only your scream.”

Earthworm grabbed the scissors on the table beside her and made noises with it next to the linen bag.

The man under the linen bag twisted his upper body as if to back away from the sound, but Earthworm kept her scissors close to his face as she continued to make noises with them.

“But perhaps it is better not to talk, isn’t it? I let slip and told you that we had an ‘owner’, so you know now, Mr. Information Broker, that there’s someone above me in this organization.”

“...”

“Guess you don’t fail as an information broker after all. Silence is golden indeed.”

Earthworm chuckled mockingly and sat back into her chair. In a chilling, sharp voice, she spat, “But it’s useless. Simply useless. Even if you remain silent now, Mr. Information Broker, it doesn’t change the fact that we already know what we need to know about you.”

Earthworm’s eyes turned merciless as the corner of her mouth curled pleasantly.

“Your daddy and mommy are working in business overseas, aren’t they?”

“...”

“Too bad we can’t go overseas to pick them up...but no problem, you still have two cute little sisters. I think they’re called Kururi-chan and Mairu-chan, right?”

The man under the linen bag raised his face slightly.

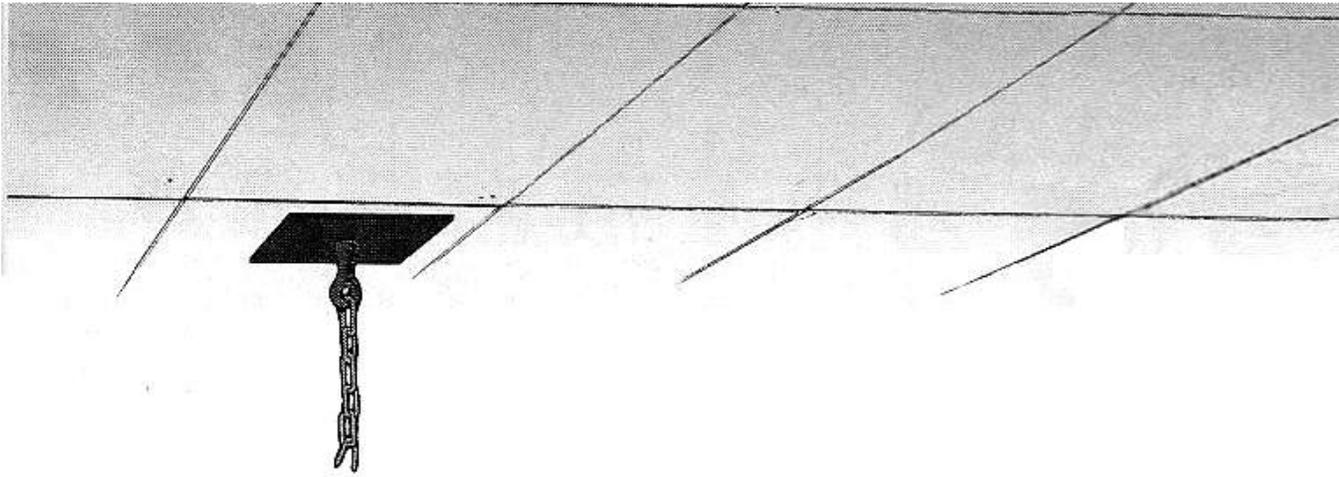
Like a desperate prisoner, he shook his head as if in denial.

Earthworm leaned forward and observed the man eagerly as if the loveliness in his movements was too much for her to bear—

—and continued in a voice dripping with malice.

“*My friends are going to pick them up now.* I’m sure you’re looking forward to seeing them, being the loving older brother that you are. Am I right, Izaya onii-chan?”

Again—we’ll be going back several days in time.



2 章

イ
ザ
兄



CHAPTER 2

IZA-NII

Somewhere on Kawagoe Highway, Shinra's apartment

[Really, it's been such a rough day...]

As soon as Celty typed these words onto her computer screen, the warm voice of Kishitani Shinra—her roommate—resounded throughout the room.

“Are you alright, Celty!? Your grief is my grief! It's what they call ‘If the wife says move, the mountain will move’! Everyone in my family should listen to the lady of the house! Technically we're not married yet, but when my wife-to-be sighs in sadness, my heart feels broken in a thousand pieces, too! But Celty, you...cough.....”

Halfway through delivering his usual spiel in a weaker-than-usual voice, Shinra somehow had to stop. As soon as she heard this, Celty rushed in the direction of his voice.

“Ah, I'm sorry, Celty. I'm fine. Guess a bit of phlegm got into my trachea...”

[I see...thank God. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that when what you're going through is so much worse.....]

Celty was looking at Shinra's bedridden figure under the blanket.

Shinra had been attacked by a violent man who broke several of his bones and left considerable damage on his organs. He laid in bed for a week at Nebula's medical research center. After he had stabilized, they decided that he would go home to recuperate.

Shinra would have had to stay in the hospital for weeks had not his underground medical practice blessed him with at least some necessary equipment in his own apartment. Recuperating at home became the natural choice since it would have been hard to explain his situation to the doctors anyway.

He was now able to talk like usual, but Celty had to help him with everything else. His stepmother Emilia would sometimes come to lend a hand as well.

In the beginning Celty had to lift Shinra up with her shadow and take him to the bathroom since she didn't know how to use a urine bottle. The rice porridge she tried to make ended up looking like fried pancakes. Things like these made her feel stressed out—but as Shinra got better, Celty's life was gradually going back to normal again.

However, her heart was not as calm.

[I'm going to work your share for you, Shinra!]
—after she said these words Celty seized every opportunity she could find to work as a courier when she didn't have to be taking care of Shinra. But that was only her excuse for going out.

Her real purpose is to find out as much as she could about the man who attacked Shinra. Her fury towards the one who hurt her love became her motivation.

Shinra had probably guessed her thoughts. He seemed to be trying to persuade her against it by letting her see that he was indeed getting better.

“But you need to be more careful than ever nowadays, Celty. The traffic cops are harder on you than usual.”

[I'm really sorry.]

“Here's nothing to apologize to me about, Celty! If anything, it is I who needs to apologize to you for not being able to move my body or hold you tightly in my arms!”

In fact, in the beginning Shinra had tried so many times to lift himself from the bed and embrace Celty that his body made grinding noises and gave him excruciating pain. He only stopped after Celty had said [If you keep doing this to yourself, I'm-I'm going to leave this home!]

A small table had been installed over Shinra's bed so that he could use a laptop while lying face up. As he saw what Celty had typed, he continued to smile happily.

“Still, it's so great that you got home safe and sound, Celty. To me, it's the best medicine of all.”

[Shinra...]

“It's been such a joy to listen to you tell me about what's been happening outside that my pain has almost disappeared in the past two or three days. You told me that there had been a fake Shizuo-kun*, that you met a girl who could do Pyrokinesis, and everything else from the most ordinary to the most extraordinary. You brought the world to my bedside, Celty. I'm an underground doctor, so it wouldn't be very convincing for me to say ‘Illness arises from the sickness of the spirit’...but Celty, you really are the best cure for me.”

* “Fake Shizuo”: the details of this incident can be found in *Dufufufu!!*, the *Durarara!!* Dengeki April Fool story for 2010. (A translation is planned and will be available at this site.)

Celty was both overwhelmingly grateful and overwhelmingly sad to hear Shinra's words.

If it weren't for the new analgesic still under development by Nebula, Shinra's injuries would have prohibited him from smiling and talking to her like this. Though his pain was greatly alleviated, his recovery still required time.

When is he going to be completely recovered? In one month? Three months? Half a year? —Are there going to be any aftereffects? Since she did not know anything about medicine, Celty had no idea.

What have I been doing, really...?

Had she known what was going to happen, she could have chosen to become Shinra's aide instead of a courier. Wouldn't she have been able to help Shinra more that way?

These thoughts filled her chest.

Every time Shinra tried to cheer her up with nice words, a new sense of guilt would assault her.

But it was not Shinra's intention to make her feel responsible in any way.

Perhaps having sensed her guilt, he steered the conversation in a slightly different direction to convince her that she should not feel responsible.

“Maybe it was some sort of divine retribution.”

[Divine retribution? ...What are you talking about? I-I know underground doctors are illegal, but that kind of punishment only happens when you're arrested and sentenced to jail—and it's not like you've hurt people or anything, Shinra...well, you've done bad things, like doing that plastic surgery on Mika-chan...but...but...anyway, if you're going to hand yourself over to the police, Shinra, I'm going to hand myself in to that White Motorbike too! We'll be together even if it's in jail!]

“...They house men and women separately at the jail, Celty.”

[What!?!]

Celty looked flustered, but Shinra only smiled softly as he continued.

“When I said divine retribution, I was thinking about what I did to Izaya.”

[Izaya?]

“I was rather rude to him on the phone when he called me after he got stabbed and sent to the hospital, remember? My friend had been stabbed, yet I wasn’t even worried about him. That’s probably why the heavens decided to punish me.”

[No...Izaya deserved it! He walks around wearing other people’s hate for him as if it were his own clothes!]

Shinra smiled at Celty’s somewhat strange rhetoric as he turned to look at the ceiling.

“Well, that’s true indeed. It’s quite unlikely that Izaya expects himself to be able to die a peaceful death on his tatami anyway.”

[Of course.]

“But still, he’s one of my only friends in this world...”

[...I think it’s more problematic to be friends with him in the first place...]

As she typed, she remembered that even though she was a monster without a head, the person lying in bed in front of her had told her that he loved her. Her chest rose and fell as if sighing heavily.

[Speaking of which, you’ve known Izaya since middle school, right?]

“Yeah.”

[I don’t know much about how he was like back in middle school...has he always been like that?]

“Ah, I can’t really say for sure. Back in middle school Izaya was the type of person who kept himself mostly to himself. I doubt that he has anyone to reveal his true feelings to even now, though.”

Shinra’s expression turned serious as he remembered the past of his friend whom he had known for ten years.

“I was probably the one who talked to him the most...”

—If there’s anyone who knows Izaya’s past better than I do, it would probably have to be his family.”

Close to Rakuei Gym, Ikebukuro

“Iiizaaa-niii! Die!”

A bright voice was shouting these dangerous words.

As soon as he heard this voice calling from behind his back, Izaya felt a sharp high kick coming for the nape of his neck.

“...!”

He dodged the attack by the breadth of a hair. Wiping the usual grin off his face, he sighed and said, “Telling a member of your own family to ‘Die’...how sad. Since when did you fall victim to the modern disease of apathy, Mairu?”

“Talking like you aren’t that very disease yourself! And you shouldn’t have moved!”

Izaya saw a pouting girl with pigtails wearing a black karate uniform. Seconds later, the other girl appeared as well in her casual clothes.

“...Brother (Nii-san), fine (are you alright)...?”

“Yeah, though my own sister did just try to break my cervical spine.”

At Izaya’s words, Orihara Mairu—the girl wearing glasses and a karate uniform—swelled her cheeks in annoyance.

“What was I supposed to do? Shizuo-san told us that he would introduce Yuuhei-san to us if you threw yourself in front of a dump truck laughing, Iza-nii! I thought I had a shot at making it look like exactly that!”

“I admit I’m deeply shocked. I don’t think anyone has ever killed their own brother to meet an idol in human history.”

“Who said you had to be killed? Shizuo-san won’t get killed even if he’s run over by a truck!”

“Thank you, but I’d rather not be compared to that talking Iron Golem*. No, actually, Iron Golem would be too much of a compliment. Anyway, get back on the sidewalk, or a car will hit you before a truck does.”

** Iron Golem: a monster that has appeared in various games including Wizardry, the Final Fantasy series and Dungeons & Dragons. Though they share common traits (giants made of steel, formidable monsters, etc.) in all these renditions, Izaya is probably referring to the ones in Wizardry.*

As soon as the name “Shizuo” was mentioned, Izaya’s eyes narrowed visibly and his distaste grew. He began to lead his sisters back onto the sidewalk.

How thoughtless of me.

I should have expected to see Mairu the moment I knew this was Rakuei Gym.

Izaya laughed hollowly at himself in his heart. His two sisters stared at him.

“It’s not our fault! We just came out to say bye to Akane-chan, and out of nowhere you stepped out of an Awakusu-kai car, Iza-nii! We got all excited because we thought they were finally going to bury you alive in a mountain somewhere!”

Mairu’s protests continued as Orihara Kururi—the girl in the casual clothes—averted her gaze and muttered:

“...Also (And you)...passed (didn’t even notice)...sister (us)...”

“It’s not like you two don’t ever do stuff behind my back. How much did Namie-san pay you*? It’s never a good thing when kids have too much money on their hands.”

** In Vol.7, Namie pays the twins a large amount to spy on Mika and Seiji.*

“As if you’re the one to tell us off, Iza-nii! We know you ran baseball gambling rings for the money in middle school! Da!”

Mairu stuck out her tongue as she shot back like an elementary school kid. Hiding herself behind Mairu, Kururi stuck out her tongue timidly as well. As he saw his two sisters behaving like little animals, Izaya sighed again.



“Seriously, I wonder whose influence made you two so twisted. Well, granted, you’re interesting objects to observe if I don’t think of you as my family...”

Izaya kept muttering, but—

He sensed that something was wrong in the next second.

Mairu and Kururi turned their eyes toward someone behind him, their mouths opening as if about to say “Ah! .”

“...!”

His experience made him spin on his heels.

Not only did he spin on his heels—he moved his center of gravity at the same time to prepare himself for speedy retreat.

It proved to be the right call.

Before his eyes could see anything, a powerful flow of air blew the hairs on Izaya’s skin backwards.

It was a roundhouse kick meant to be delivered to the opponent’s face.

Before his calculations could catch up, his instinct had informed him of the true nature of this attack.

What was more, the kick was several times as deadly as the one Mairu had attempted minutes ago.

Like a clockwork doll he arched his back in front of the one who kept delivering kicks at him—and felt his opponent’s shoe graze the tip of his nose. A good portion of his face felt numb immediately, but he had to keep moving.

Izaya chose to escape by flipping himself to the ground. He let himself fall onto his side and began to roll on the asphalt like a gymnast.

The next second, side kicks fell like rain on the asphalt following Izaya as he rolled away. What was happening on the sidewalk looked like a Jackie Chan movie.

Several seconds later, Izaya rose to his feet after having reached a safe distance, his small knife in his hand.

His eyes still looked guarded, but his mouth curled into a grin as he muttered, “Thank goodness. From the look on my sisters’ faces I thought it was Shizu-chan.”

“I see. Is that all you want to say for your last words?”

The one who stood at a distance from Izaya was an unshaven man in a black karate uniform.

Mairu was quick to reveal the man’s identity.

“Master! What brought you here?”

“Oh, step back, you two. I’m going to kick the shit out of your big brother. You don’t want to see your family beaten to a pulp.”

As he flexed his neck audibly, the man in the black karate uniform—Sharaku Eijirou, Mairu’s master of fighting skills—took one step toward Izaya with a bored look on his face.

“If it’s Iza-nii, we don’t really care...”

“...Affirm (That’s right)...”

“I was a fool to expect anything resembling family love from you two.”

Izaya’s face twitched slightly. His sisters continued.

“For you, Iza-nii, aren’t Dad, Mom, Kuru-nee and I on the same level as any stranger? We’re all just ‘things to observe.’ You said you treat every human being equally, yet you’re asking to be treated differently just because we’re your family? How strange!”

“...Sad (What a pathetic man)...”

“That’s not something you say in a situation like this...oh goodness!”

Izaya had to dodge Eijirou’s sharp kick before finishing the sentence.

It was the kind of kick an amateur would never have been able to dodge even if he stayed extremely focused. Izaya, however, managed to dodge it by the breadth of a hair. He began to try to talk to his opponent directly.

“I don’t think it’s honorable behavior for a professional martial artist like yourself to attack an amateur on an open road, Eijirou-san.”

“You call yourself an amateur when you carry a knife on you at all times and managed to dodge my kick just now?”

Eijirou kept delivering kicks with barely concealed killing intent, but his face did not give that impression at all. In fact, his tired eyes and bored expression suggested that this was a man

who found almost everything in this world bothersome. He talked as if he could hardly be bothered to.

“Speaking of which, you’ve sure got some guts for walking past my doorstep like that after what you did to my dear sister.”

“This is a public road. Everyone can walk on it. And I don’t recall ever having made Mikage-chan secondhand*, if that’s what you’re talking about.”

** Here Izaya uses the term 傷物 (literally “damaged goods”, a slang term for a woman who has lost her virginity, esp. if it’s against her own wish) that basically says he did not take advantage of Mikage sexually.*

“I wasn’t talking about whether you raped Mikage or not. You talked her into dropping out of school, bastard. Or did you already forget?”

Sharaku Eijirou was not Heiwajima Shizuo. Nevertheless, he was without doubt one of those people who were dangerous to mess around with.

Also it will be the worst situation ever if Shizu-chan finds me here when things are getting out of hand.

Izaya planned his escape from the scene as he continued to talk to his opponent to distract him.

“If you want me to feel the same way you felt, shouldn’t you be taking it out on my sisters instead of coming for me? Just talk them into doing whatever you like. You can have your way with them. That way I’ll probably be so shocked that I might burst out.”

Izaya chuckled as he said these outrageous words.

“How heartless, Iza-nii! You’re selling your own sisters out! And what was that ‘burst out’—you mean you’ll burst out laughing!?”

“...Tracherous (You’re the worst)...”

“Like you’re the ones to talk when you told me to ‘Die!’ just so that you could meet some idol. Seriously.”

Izaya smiled bitterly at his sisters’ protests. Eijirou, on the other hand, remained unsmiling as his tired eyes focused on Izaya and narrowed further.

“Even if she’s a sister of a scoundrel like you, there’s no way I’m doing that to my important pupil.”

“Master...”

“Were she like 5 years older with a much more mature body I would have given it a thought.”

“As expected of Master! It took only 3 seconds for my opinion of you to go from best to worst!”

Eijirou ignored Mairu’s cheers (?) and kept up his pace. Just as he was about to deliver an attack unique to the Rakuei School—

A roundhouse kick from a certain third party got him in the back of the head.

“What the—!?”

It seemed like the person had gone easy on him. Eijirou landed on the ground face down, but his consciousness was intact. As soon as he saw the person who had attacked him, he protested vigorously in slightly shocked voice.

“M-Mikage! What are you doing!? Don’t tell me you’re still not over that guy!?”

The boyish woman standing in front of him was sporting a crop.

With fury being brought to a slow boil in her otherwise calm and clear expression, the woman who had just been called Mikage said to her older brother Eijirou, “Talking about whether I was raped or not in such a loud voice on an open road... Brother, are you the type of person who needs to die once before they can finally learn to be respectful and have some delicacy?”

“Wait a second! Wait! They say the only good people are the dead ones, but is it true that he didn’t take advantage of you!? I demand that you at least verify that before I get taken in by hearsay!”

“Shut up, stupid Brother. On top of that you got yourself into a fight on an open road. Do you want the name of our gym forever tainted?”

“Didn’t you just taint the very same name when you surprise attacked me on an open road and sent me flying with a kick!?”

Eijirou protested while getting back onto his feet. Mikage, however, denied it flatly.

“A martial artist should be ready to fight at any given time of the day. Surprise attacks are nothing to complain about.”

“You think you can justify anything by saying ‘You should be ready at any given time of the day’!? What are you going to say next, that it’s OK to fire a sniper rifle to kill your opponent since ‘This is not just a match, it’s real, haven’t you heard? So of course firearms are allowed’!? Next thing we know the elementary school kid who sets fire to Master Traugott’s* home while

he's sleeping will be calling himself the next martial art champion! At any given time of the day my ass! And aren't we already off-topic!?"

** Traugott: Traugott Geissendörfer, a highly regarded martial artist in Naritaverse. He comes from the German island that is the setting of the Vamp! series. He teaches martial art throughout the world via a chain of gyms to which the Rakuei Gym belongs. In Vol.7 it is mentioned that Heiwajima Shizuo is a huge fan of Geissendörfer.*

"That person can survive any fires and dodge any bullets, I think. But your sophistry doesn't explain why you were lame enough to have let me catch you off-guard. Neither does it explain why you felt it necessary to insult me with those words."

She stared at her own brother with a darkening aura that suggested she could lose her temper at any moment.

"Wait, Mikage! I just need you to clear up one thing for me!"

"...What is it?"

Seeing that her brother's face had turned serious, Mikage stopped in her tracks to listen to what he had to say.

"Is it true that you have zero experience with men?"

"..."

"Haven't you at least kissed someone?"

"..."

"..."

Mikage fell silent. Mairu and Kururi waited anxiously for her to answer.

But the next word to come out of Mikage's mouth had nothing to do with the questions.

"Die!"

"Did you just tell your own brother to die...uwah!?"

Eijirou managed to block Mikage's punch before it reached his Adam's apple, but Mikage's limbs were already delivering all sorts of attacks to the painful spots of his body.

"W-Wait, what is this, it's kind of like the non-stop version of the serial attacks, oh, wait, what is this!? Your new trick!? The something-Dance or something-Inferno? Is that it!? —! —! —! —!"

Mikage simply didn't stop attacking, and Eijirou kept talking while protecting himself from the attacks.

It took a while for Kururi and Mairu, entranced by the almost theatrical performance as the sister fought her brother, to realize that they should be looking for their own brother—

When they looked around, however, Izaya was already nowhere to be found. Only curious passersby were seen watching from a distance.



Somewhere on Kawagoe Highway, Shinra's apartment

“...So that's how Izaya's two younger sisters are like. They're probably too much even for Izaya, I think.”

[What should I say...those twins sound fictional.]

As if only half convinced by Shinra's story of Izaya's sisters, Celty typed these words.

“Kururi-chan and Mairu-chan became what they're like now when I was attending Raijin High School. They were still first or second graders at the elementary school back then.”

[Really?]

“I think Izaya is actually aware that his influence made his sisters turn out the way they did.”

Shinra talked about the past in a nostalgic tone. Next to his head, Celty was kneeling, her knees and thighs visible through the 100% fitting rider suit made of shadow which accentuated her sensual silhouette. Feeling restless at the sight of her legs, Shinra continued.

“You know what Izaya said to his twin sisters when they were still in elementary school? ‘Kururi and Mairu, you're exactly the same in every way. What is the point of living when in everything you do you're just the same?’ That's right. He said something to that effect, slowly and clearly, in words that even a five-year-old could understand.”

[Honestly, if all the twins in this country voted to hang him, I wouldn't blame them...]

“Nah nah, I don't think it's because he's prejudiced against twins or anything. He probably just wanted to see his sisters feel discouraged or maybe even fight with each other. He did not mean ill—he just ‘wanted to see.’”

[So he intended to follow up on them? But that simply sounds even nastier to me...]

The words she typed onto her networked PDA appeared instantly on the laptop screen Shinra was looking at while lying face up.

It was their way to save Celty the trouble of having to show Shinra her PDA every time they talked. The conversation proceeded at a nice pace.

“But Izaya got one thing wrong in his calculations—namely, the fact that his sisters were far more abnormal than he thought.”

[Abnormal?]

“They threw a dice to split ‘traits’ between them with the intention to become a human being with only strengths and no weaknesses. They believed that they could make up for each other’s weaknesses as a human being with their respective strengths. In fact, they’ve been doing that for almost ten years now. You have to give them some credit for that.”

[I guess it’s kind of admirable...but admirable doesn’t feel like the right word.]

Celty put her hands together, thinking.

Shinra turned his eyes toward the ceiling for a moment and told her his speculation.

“I’m thinking...maybe at first they just did it because they wanted Izaya to like them.”

[Eh?]

“It’s more of a shock when your family members are disappointed in you than when they’re angry at you. That’s what my father kept saying to me. It’s still hard on him no matter how many times he’s been through it before when he lets one of us down—me or my mother, his divorced wife.”

As she remembered Shinra’s father—the weirdo under the white gas mask—Celty typed on her PDA with mixed feelings.

[...Well, not that I wouldn’t expect him to let you down, being the man he is...]

“Anyway, when elementary school girls are told by their much older brother that their lives had no meaning, they will of course do anything to make their brother like them, right?”

After nodding slightly to show his agreement at Celty’s words, Shinra smiled bitterly.

“But I guess at some point the end and the means switched positions. They spend so much time on trying to make themselves the perfect human being that their hearts are no longer on Izaya. Perhaps the best proof is that both fell for Hanejima Yuuhei, nicknamed the ‘Perfect

Superman.' I'm glad that's how it turned out, though, because it would be such a waste if those two were still puppets in Izaya's palm."

[Yeah. I don't know much about those twins, but if you think so, Shinra, you're probably right. Speaking of which, I don't think anyone should ever be in Izaya's palm.]

"Who knows? Maybe we're already in it."

[Then I'll drive my scythe into his nails as hard as I can.]

That must be painful. Shinra smiled as he saw Celty type and said, "Celty, you're too extreme."

Celty's reply, however, caught Shinra by surprise.

[Even if I can only save you, Shinra, I'll make sure to get you out of his hands. There's no need to worry.]

Shinra's mouth hung open for a second as he digested the meaning of the sentence—

After he had finally understood what it meant, he tried and failed to speak for a few times before breaking down completely.

"Celty—! Don't say things like that! Don't tell me to live on alone—cough—"

Shinra!?

Shinra had yelped in pain before he could bolt up in his bed. Celty had no time to type; she hastened to hold him in her arms.

"That hurts...ah...a world without you, ah... 'Hakuga breaks his koto'*...that's about the only phrase to describe it...cough...despair..."

** Hakuga breaks his koto: Hakuga (Bo Ya), a Chinese master of koto/qin (a seven-stringed instrument) in the Spring & Autumn Period. According to Liezi, "Bo Ya was good at playing the qin. Zhong Ziqi was good at listening to the qin. When Bo Ya's will was towards high mountains in his playing, Zhong Ziqi would say, 'How towering like Mount Tai!' When Bo Ya's will was towards flowing water in his playing, Zhong Ziqi would say, 'How vast are the rivers and oceans!' Whatever Bo Ya thought of Ziqi would never fail to understand. Bo Ya said, 'Amazing! Your heart and mine are the same!' When Ziqi died, Bo Ya broke the strings [of his qin] and vowed never to play [the qin] again."*

[Just stay still! I'm sorry! I get what you are trying to say now! I was kidding! We'll escape from his hand together! I said together! So don't worry!]

Celty typed hastily onto her PDA and shoved it in Shinra's face as she wrapped Shinra up tenderly with her shadow.

“My bad, Celty! I’ve calmed down, really, I have...”

Shinra’s antics would have looked amusing, but Celty did not comment since she could hardly forget that just a moment ago he was still yelping in pain.

[Anyway, I’ll make sure to take care of things at home. I’ve told Awakusu-kai about your injuries, so I don’t think they’re going to send emergency patients to you for now.]

“Celty, you don’t have to force yourself to work for them either if you don’t want to.”

[I’ll be fine. If the job is going to keep me away from home for too long, I’ll just turn it down.]

As they continued to talk, Celty’s PDA beeped. It was a new messenger alert.

The messenger was installed quite recently and her only contacts were the ones she was in touch with in real life.

An overwhelmingly distasteful premonition seized Celty.

Speak of the devil and he doth appear. The idiom flashed through her mind. *Honestly, the way I think is becoming more and more like Shinra’s*, she thought as she looked at the screen, and bingo—both her premonition and the idiom proved to be appropriate.

Looking at the name “Orihara Izaya” on the screen, Celty typed dispassionately her reply to the messenger alert.

Celty@MonHun•LongSwordMain* 【What is it? 】
Orihara Izaya 【...Are you gaming or something?】

** MonHun: short for Monster Hunter, a popular online game series by Capcom.*

Realizing that her screenname was still the one she set half a month ago while chatting with fellow online gamers, Celty hastened to change it.

Celty@ 【It’s not like that! Shinra is the Combo Gunner and I just kind of use the Long Sword to clean things up.】
Orihara Izaya 【I have no idea what you’re talking about, honestly.】

As she saw these words she realized that she hadn't really been thinking when she replied. Trying to look calm, she waited for about as long as it took humans to take a deep breath before starting to type again.

Celty@Working 【Sorry about that. What's up?】
Orihara Izaya 【You're kind of getting good at making use of your screenname. Anyway, I have a job for you.】
Celty@Working 【No.】
Orihara Izaya 【Oh, don't be so cold.】
Celty@Day Off 【I have no time for your fishy jobs. Sorry.】
Orihara Izaya 【Goodness.】
Orihara Izaya 【Are you too busy taking care of Shinra's injuries?】

Celty froze for a moment after she saw this reply.

...

How did Izaya know that Shinra was injured?

Well, he is an information broker...or did Shinra tell him?

As she paused to think, Izaya sent more replies.

Orihara Izaya 【Judging by how slow you are in replying,】
Orihara Izaya 【I guess you're wondering 'How did he know about Shinra's injuries?']
Celty@Day Off 【I am. Don't tell me you had a hand in that?】
Celty@Day Off 【If t】
Celty@Day Off 【If that's the case, I'm going to sew your mouth and eyes shut with my shadow and put you in front of Shizuo.】
Orihara Izaya 【Don't get all waspish. Calm down and at least type more steadily. By the way, it was not me. I'm not stupid enough to try to injure or kill my friend. I have few enough of them as it is.】
Orihara Izaya 【But I'm an information broker after all. By now I more or less know why you two were attacked. I'm ready to trade any time you're ready.】
Celty@Day Off 【Really?】

Orihara Izaya 【Though of course I'm going to ask you to do the job in return.】

Celty@Day Off 【Are you really trying to pay me with the information of the people who injured your friend!?!】

Orihara Izaya 【I'm going through a dangerous time personally myself. I can't risk being too nice at the moment.】

Orihara Izaya 【So, what are you going to do? Are you at least willing to listen to me talk about it?】

Celty@Day Off 【Where and when?】

“What happened, Celty?”

Shinra asked nervously as he saw Celty freeze, PDA in her hand.

“It's Izaya, isn't it? Did he just ask you to do some risky job again?”

[No—I mean, it is from Izaya, but the job sounds OK. I'll be going out for a moment.]

“Celty...?”

Shinra said in a questioning voice as Celty prepared herself for going out.

“Hey, did Izaya say something to you?”

[No...it's just about the job.]

“Can I see your PDA?”

[Aren't you looking at it right now?]

Celty shrugged as if Shinra had just said something nonsensical.

Shinra, on the other hand, said in a serious tone, “No, I was asking you to show me your chat transcript. Can you do that?”

[I have my privacy, too. What, are you afraid that I'm cheating on you with Izaya?]

“...Celty, if nothing else, I can at least tell when you're lying, you know.”

Shinra's voice was even and calm—but the determination and the sadness in his words could hardly be missed.

[...I...alright.]

Celty could have just left the home through the secret exit, but Shinra's voice pulled her back and made it impossible for her to leave.

Having made up her mind, she conjured up the chat transcript on the screen and showed it to Shinra.

“...Just like I thought. That's exactly what I thought it was about.”

[I'm sorry. I thought you'd stop me if you knew...]

“I would...but even if I tried, you'd just say 'Sorry' and leave, wouldn't you, Celty?”

[...I'm sorry.]

As she realized that Shinra saw right through her, Celty shrank in her frame.

Shinra, however, smiled as he looked at Celty with warm eyes.

“Well, I've gotten more than used to being involved in his conspiracies, really. For me it's been that way since middle school.”

[Eh?]

“I want to know the reason I was attacked as much as you do, Celty...but I don't want you to stress yourself out because of me. That's why I tried to stop you. But since it doesn't work, I'm going to change my idea.”

Shinra's expression changed as well as he raised his bandaged body slowly from his bed. While trying to fight back the pain, he stroked the nape of Celty's neck.

“We're going to find out about the man who broke into our home, and we're going to do this together. I can't leave my bed, but at least my brain still works.”

[But if it was really Izaya's doing...]

“Didn't we talk about this already? When we escape from Izaya's hand it will be us two together, Celty.”

[Shinra...]

Lovey-dovey air filled the space between the two—although Shinra had always surrounded himself with it wherever he went. To settle things once and for all, Shinra named one condition.

“Promise me this, Celty. If you find out anything about the culprit, don’t keep it to yourself. Come back home and talk to me first even if Izaya brings someone with him and tells you ‘Here, this is the culprit.’”

[...What if I break the promise? Are you going to hate me for it?]

Celty was not planning to break her promise, but she simply had to know.

Shinra shook his head slowly and replied in a refreshing voice.

“There’s no way I can ever hate you, Celty.”

[Then what are you going to do?]

“If you break the promise...”

[If I break the promise...?]

After pausing for a moment, Shinra announced his penalty for Celty.

“Cry...I think.”

[Huh?]

“I’m going to cry...and scream...”

[You meant you!?!]

This sounded so wrong that Celty had to point it out before she even realized it. Shinra, however, continued with a serious face.

“Yeah, I’m going to cry and scream if you ever betray me, Celty! I don’t care that I’m a 25-year-old male! I’m going to cry so hard that even Sagamihara-san living downstairs is going to get worried and come check on me! Do you want to see me like that?”

[No, I mean, you’re right, I don’t think I’ll want to...]

Celty leaned forward not knowing exactly what to say to Shinra. His next words, however, sent a chill down her spine.

“Also I’m going to whine in front of your MonHun buddies in the brigade and ruin it for all of them. How’s that sound?”

[I get it! I’ll definitely keep the promise, so don’t you worry!]

Celty replied instantly. After hastily getting herself ready, she left the home.

As she thought back on how terrifying the last “penalty” Shinra named was, she couldn’t help but feel a little happy about how well he knew what she liked and disliked.

CHATROOM

Kyo

We’ve been waiting for a while, but it seems like Kanra-san still can’t be bothered to come.

Mai

Not coming.

Kyo

Seriously, that person gives us such a headache. Showing up whenever we don’t even want to talk and making a mess of the whole place, and then disappearing off the face of the earth when we actually want to talk about something. The good thing about the Internet is that it connects you with people physically far away. But it seems like Kanra-san is not only far away from us physically. Our hearts may have gone separate ways as well. How lamentable.

Mai

Sad.

Kyo

Since that’s the case, there’s nothing I can do except for writing down all my accumulated complaints about this world and find some comfort that way. Ahh, at the convenience store they sell cashew nuts and almonds, but they seldom sell walnuts on their own...why, when in mixed nuts they do have cashew, almonds and walnuts? Why?

Mai

I don’t really care.

Mai

Uwah!

Mai

Kyo-san, you pervert!

Kyo

Alas, I got called a pervert when all I touched was your calf? You're such a nasty girl. I wonder what you'll call me if I touch anything else? That's something I have to experiment to find out.

Mai

Stop—Stop—

Shoro-san has joined the chat.

Shoro

Oi, stop, you little perverts.

Shoro

Don't bring your sexual harassment ritual online.

Mai

Good evening.

Kyo

Alas, just when I thought that someone's finally online, it turned out to be the one we weren't hoping to see.

Shoro

I apologize to you with all my heart that I failed your precious expectations.

Shoro

Pthu! Pthu!

Kyo

You're spitting in a chatroom. Should I say that you have no manners or that you're such a pro at conveying your emotions in the chatroom...? Either way, it is an indisputable fact that personally I am feeling displeased now.

Mai

Spitting is dirty.

[Private mode] *Shoro*

By the way, Mairu, Kururi

[Private mode] *Kyo*

Alas, has something happened, Sharaku Eijirou-san?

[Private mode] *Mai*
Master, what's up?

[Private mode] *Shoro*
You really do switch personalities in the chatroom...

[Private mode] *Shoro*
Anyway, did your big brother just go missing afterwards?

[Private mode] *Mai*
Yes.

[Private mode] *Kyo*
Go missing? This was the first time we saw him in a long while.

[Private mode] *Shoro*
I see. Well, I thought that bastard disappeared into Shinjuku...

[Private mode] *Shoro*
How come he was in Ikebukuro today?

[Private mode] *Kyo*
Who knows? Even if he is our family, it's not like we keep a watch on him or anything.

[Private mode] *Mai*
Looks like he was up to something with Awakusu-kai.

[Private mode] *Shoro*
I see...

[Private mode] *Shoro*
If you find out what he's up to in Ikebukuro, let me know

[Private mode] *Kyo*
We can do that. As his sisters we feel guilty as well.

[Private mode] *Kyo*
When we think about how we just let our wild brother into this city like that...

[Private mode] *Kyo*
Speaking of which, about Mikage-san and our brother...

[Private mode] *Shoro*
I'm not going to talk about it. It's not the kind of stuff you talk about in a place like this.

[Private mode] *Shoro*

Also I shouldn't be the one to tell you about it anyway...if you want to know, ask Mikage herself at practice tomorrow.

[Private mode] *Shoro*

By the way, Kururi-chan, you should get some exercise once in a while, too.

[Private mode] *Shoro*

You have a better body than Mairu, so I'll have something nice to look at

[Private mode] *Kyo*

Alas, online sexual harassment to a high school girl?

[Private mode] *Mai*

I'm so disappointed in you.

[Private mode] *Mai*

I'm so disappointed in my Master.

[Private mode] *Shoro*

Hey, am I not allowed to be open even on the Internet?

Kyo

What is this? Shoro-san sexually harassed me in private mode. My brains are on the verge of exploding inside my skull because of this impossible insult. Ah, Shoro-dono's cursed words...they became talons and ripped my clothes open as I was enjoying my sleep in peace in the virtual society called the Internet!

Mai

How barbaric!

Mai

We're going to protest.

Mai

In front of his sister.

Shoro

STOOOP! I get it! It was my bad! I'm sorry! I was just kidding and you got all tough on me! Am I not allowed to sexually harass anyone unless they know it's a joke? I hate this world.

Shoro

You two are such a great pair. Honestly.

Mai

We're not a pair.

Kyo

We're one person. You're insulting the real pairs in this world by saying we're a pair. Though none of them are here to hear you, you should still apologize to them.

Shoro

What is that supposed to mean!? Well, since no one's here I guess I can apologize to your heart's content.

Saika-san has joined the chat.

Saika

Good evening.

Shoro

What!? Saika-san's here!?

Saika

Eh

Saika

I'm sorry did I interrupt something

Kyo

No, no. It's nothing you should get wound up about. You'll see when you've checked the chat log that it was just Shoro-san embarrassing himself.

Kyo

Speaking of which, Saika-san, I have something to ask you.

Saika

What is it

Kyo

Setton-san's been missing from this chatroom for about 10 days. Would you happen to know anything about it?

Saika

No

Saika

I don't really know anything about it

Saika

Maybe just busy, I think

Kyo

I see. Well, we're just thinking that most of the older members have been missing from this chatroom recently.

Saika

That reminds me Is Tanaka Taro-san OK

Mai

We haven't seen him.

Kyo

That's true, we haven't seen him at all recently. Guess I forgot about him because he uses such an ordinary name! But still, it looks as if the chatroom has been passed on to a new generation of participants. So much for bringing in new people so that we can have more fun*.

* In Vol.8, the chat members agreed that the chat needed more participants. "Shoro", "Gaki", "Saki" and "Pure Water 100%" joined because of this move to bring in new members.

Kyo

Now it looks like we were just trying to leave the chatroom to the new members whether they wanted it or not.

Mai

Let's have fun together.

Mai

Though I just want to sleep.

Kyo

Alas, look at the time! I guess it can't be helped.

Kyo

Let us reconvene tomorrow. Sleep deprivation and drugs are the enemies of your skin.

Kyo

By the way, I hear that there are people trying to spread drugs around in the city...

Saika

You mean the drug stores?

Shoro

That's not the kind of drug she meant lol

Kyo

...Anyway, we'll explain that to you later. If any of you know Setton-san or Tanaka Taro-san in real life, please try to convince them to come to the chat more!

Kyo

Chatrooms are more fun when we have more people!

.

.

.

In a Dark Place 3

“Hey, this Sharaku Mikage. What is her relationship to you exactly, Mr. Information Broker?”

“...”

The man under the linen bag and the young woman who introduced herself as “Earthworm” sat facing each other like before.

The woman was holding a cell phone in her hand. She looked as if she was looking up some information on the phone.

The man under the linen bag, on the other hand, appeared somewhat different now.

The linen bag was thoroughly soaked with water, and his breath seemed to be inflating and deflating the linen bag rhythmically.

“I’m asking you what her relationship to you is. It’s so cold of you to ignore me like that.”

Earthworm laughed and reached for the plastic bottle of mineral water on the table.

“Or are you just too thirsty to talk?”

Giggling hysterically, she took the bottle and without hesitation poured its contents onto the head under the linen bag.

Water flowed out of the plastic container and hit the linen bag in a small waterfall.

The stream seemed to glide off the already soaked linen bag, but in the dimly lit room it hardly even glimmered before dripping onto the floor with a faint sound.

The woman stood up, brought her face close to the linen bag and began to lick the water dripping off of it.

She reached the tip of her tongue out to the man’s face underneath and felt the soft flesh under the soaked linen bag.

“That’s dirty, Earthworm-san,” one of the women behind her laughed.

But Earthworm only chuckled in return as she stroked her own tongue with her finger and replied, "I don't care any more about whether it's dirty or not. Hey, I just spilled our precious, precious water, so would you go buy some?"

"How many bottles?"

Her subordinate asked a strange question. Earthworm brought her lips close to the man's face under the linen bag and whispered in a loud voice into his ears:

"Yeah, let me think...get me *3 dozen bottles*, 2 liters each, I guess?"

That was 72 liters in total.

The man under the linen bag should have understood by now what I'm planning to do with that much water, thought Earthworm as she asked the man just in case.

"Question. What am I going to do with the water I asked them to buy?"

"..."

"Bing! Your time's up."

Earthworm made an "X" mark with her index fingers and declared the answer to be false instantly.

She brought her crossed fingers close to the man's face, gently pinched his nose, and wiggled it back and forth.

"Listen! The correct answer should be 'I'm going to pour it all on your head.'"

Earthworm revealed her intention nonchalantly in a bright voice.

"As your punishment for getting it wrong, we're going to make your sisters drink water once they get here."

"..."

"Ah, don't worry. It's not the kind of bitter juice you've seen them feed people on television. We're not that bad, so we're not going to make them drink something that sounds so dangerous."

Earthworm waved her hand hurriedly. Breaking into a twisted smile, she continued.

“All we’re going to do is to *make them drink about 10 liters* of this delicious mineral water.”

“...”

The man under the linen bag, who had so far responded to none of her taunts, raised his face slowly.

“Ah, not that we’re going to drown them or anything. That would be too boring. ...Did you know, Mr. Information Broker, that there’s such a thing as a lethal dose of water?”

“...”

“But I don’t really know how much water a person has to drink for it to kill him. I’m not a science person, unfortunately. Ahaha. What about 10 liters? What do you think?”

Earthworm waited excitedly for the water and the sisters to arrive as she continued on.

“Whoops, ...how come you’re still not looking worried?”

“...”

“How heartless. I’m hurt. I’m seriously trying to make you worried, but you just don’t seem to get it.”

Earthworm turned her chair around and sat astride it as she would a horse. She rocked back and forth.

“Ah, I see. Hey, are you thinking that there’s no way we can kidnap your sisters so easily...?”

“... ..”

The woman’s grin widened as, for a second, the man’s head seemed to move suddenly.

“I heard that the younger one of the twins is the ace in the Women’s Division at Rakuei Gym. The older one carries toys like stun guns and pepper spray on her. ...I guess there is a chance that we wouldn’t be able to kidnap them so easily with only a few ordinary young men.”

“...”

“That’s why we did a little strategic planning on our part. We’re planning to hold Kururi-chan hostage once she’s on her own. What do you think? Your two sisters are so close that it’s kind of disgusting to watch, aren’t they, Mr. Information Broker?”

Earthworm lifted the empty bottle between her thumb and ring finger and tapped the forehead under the linen bag rhythmically with it.

She continued, “Are you thinking ‘How come she knows all that?’”

“...”

“Do you really think that you’re the only all-knowing information broker in this world?”

She probably knew by now that silence was the only response she would get from the man.

“There are others like you out there, you see...? But of course you don’t know. When you were busy making yourself as conspicuous as possible, that information broker just does his job splendidly without letting people know his name or his face. I said this before, but Orihara Izaya-san, you’re just an amateur in this business, aren’t you? Or at best semi-professional? Goodness, how funny!”

“...”

The man under the linen bag shook his head slightly as if to say there was nothing funny about it.

Earthworm, on the other hand, ignored the man’s reaction as she pressed the bottle against the man’s forehead.

“...That Mr. Information Broker...ah, um. It’s kind of confusing so I’m going to call him Information Broker B, OK? You’ll be Information Broker A. Let’s see...we bought a lot of information about you, Mr. A, from that Mr. B! We got to know so much about you that it’s funny to think about it!”

She rose from the chair again.

After making her way around the man’s chair to stand behind his back, she put her hands on his shoulders.

As if about to press her chest against the man’s back, she began to talk to the nape of his neck, which was now the dividing line between the linen bag—tied in such a way as to not asphyxiate him—and his skin.

“Hey, you’re an information broker too, aren’t you? If so, you should know stuff, right?”

“...”

The man under the linen bag turned his body as her breath fell on his neck.

Earthworm enjoyed his reaction so much that she kept breathing onto the nape of the man's neck.

"You do your money transactions in all the shadiest and dirtiest of places for a living, yet you never expected yourself to end up like this? ...Of course you did, didn't you?"

"..."

"Well, not that anything's going to change just because you've been mentally ready for this."

Having mocked the man enough, Earthworm breathed one question into the man's ear:

"...Do you know anything about the 'Heaven Slave' people?"

"...!"

As she felt the man stiffen, Earthworm's narrowed eyes widened again like a snake's.

"Ah, that reaction! You know something, don't you...?"

"..."

"Too late, silence is not going to help you now, no no! ...Ah, but you don't have to talk about it just yet. I want to hear you tell me all about it slowly when we're having fun with your sisters after they get here, Orihara Izaya-san."

Earthworm examined the linen bag like a child checking out the wrappings of his birthday present.

"For now...yeah, I want to tell more of your story, Orihara Izaya-san."

Smiling slightly, she muttered as if the thought had only just come to her mind.

"So, where were we? ...Yeah, we were talking about what relationship you had with Sharaku Mikage-san."

"..."

"She's a coach at the gym your sister goes to...but that's not all, is it? Information Broker B told us a lot more, didn't he?"

She asked her companions sitting scattered throughout this place. In the dimly lit room, they only looked at each other and smiled.

As if considering that their silent approval, Earthworm nodded in satisfaction as she said, “Mikage-chan was one of your followers when she was in high school, wasn’t she?”

“...”

“It’s amazing how you had so many followers. Are you still in contact with any of them? Or have you cut your ties beautifully with all of them already?”

Earthworm’s talk was about to slip into the realm of gossip. As if a question mark had suddenly formed in her head, however, she asked about something else.

“Eh...? If you were indeed so popular, you should have been famous ages ago. Speaking of which—I’m going to repeat myself again because this never gets old—why did you want to become an information broker if you were so famous? Isn’t that dangerous? I’m actually surprised that you’re still alive.”

“...”

Though she continued to shower him with provocative insults, the man under the linen bag remained silent.

“Were you thinking that no one would dare to touch you because you had yakuza backing? Too bad for you, then. It’s true that we don’t want a fight with all those old men from Awakusu-kai, but we’re still hardcore enough to not bat an eyelash about kidnapping a lowly lackey like you.”

“...”

“To tell you that we’re not nervous would be lying...but it’s going to be fine as long as ‘Owner’ is on our side. If anything happens he’s going to talk to the yakuza people for us...you should be afraid of ‘Owner’, you see? He’s much more dangerous than I am. But I doubt you can even fathom that, Orihara Izaya-san.”

After she muttered these words as if to herself while looking up at the ceiling, Earthworm returned to her chair.

“Oh yeah, this is something Information Broker B didn’t tell us...or did he just assume that everyone already knew? You were famous since the time you were in high school, weren’t you, Orihara Izaya-san?”

“...”

“I heard that you were in some pretty big fights...I don’t know the details since I’ve never lived in Ikebukuro, but...”

She flipped her cell phone open and double-checked the information before saying:

“Um...Heiwajima Shizuo-san? You got into fights with someone named that, didn't you?”

And with that, we'll be going back in time again.



第三章 一三器

CHAPTER 3

THE FLEA

An evening in Early August, in a park somewhere in Ikebukuro

“Y-You scoundrel! Are you working for that shitty bastard!?”

The voice was bursting with fury, and an illegally parked motorbike was seen being lifted high up in the air.

Not that a crane truck or a forklift was being used or anything.

As he saw the man in front of him lift up the mass of steel easily exceeding 100kg using nothing but his very own flesh and bones, one of the young men went weak in the knees and fell. The silhouette of the man of monstrous strength was illuminated from the back by the street lamp outside the park. To these young men, he probably looked like Death himself.

“W-Wait, we’re, not, not, no—”

Their teeth chattered as they shook their heads desperately. Heiwajima Shizuo—the man who had just lifted the motorbike—opened his mouth, veins throbbing on his temple.

“Not what? From now on you’ll be nothing but bloody pulps....you hear me?”

“Calm down, Shizuo. If you throw that at them they’re going to die for real. Also, even if that motorbike is illegally parked, it still looks pretty expensive...just let them go.”

A voice sounded with a sigh from behind the back of the incarnation of death and violence.

The one who spoke was a man in dreadlocks. Behind him a Caucasian woman with a nice body was watching them with an even expression on her face.

“How stupid would it be to kill them just because they mentioned that guy’s name? Think about it, OK?”

The man's voice did not sound intimidating at all. Shizuo simply obeyed, however, lowering the motorbike to the ground.

"...Kay."

But it seemed that his fury toward the kneeling young men did not disappear as readily. His eyes still sparkled with so much rage that anyone would feel as if a falcon's talons had seized their heart at the mere sight of them.

Tanaka Tom—the bespectacled man in dreadlocks—spoke in an uneventful voice as he put himself between Shizuo and the young men.

"Sorry. He must have scared you."

"Eh, ah, yes?"

The young men continued to shudder from head to foot on their spots as if unable to make sense of what was going on.

They looked like ordinary college students except that all of them carried three cell phones: one in the breast pocket and the other two on both sides. That fact led one to suspect that they might be involved in some kind of underground business.

Tom frowned at these young men and said, "But still, you went a little too far, man. I don't know what you were up to exactly, but you did do your research on him before you talked to him, didn't you? Then why on earth did you go like 'Of course you know Orihara Izaya, right? You guys were like best buddies, weren't you?' That's not even the way you talk to someone you don't know. I can't really blame him for thinking that you came to pick a fight with him, you know."

"W-We're sorry! We're sorry! We're really sorry! We apologize!"

Shizuo, who was standing behind Tom, finally seemed to have calmed down as he heard the young men's hurried apologies. Breathing evenly, he stared down at them.

"...So? What were you going to say about that flea and me?"

"S-S-Sowwy!"

The young man was being stared at so hard that he couldn't even say the word "sorry" straight. He had to avert his own eyes in order to regain his composure and continue to speak.

"I-I have nothing against you! A-Actually, if we have anything against anyone, it'll be against that Izaya bastard...we're looking for him!"

"Argh...?"

“W-We-It’s about our leader, that Izaya bastard tricked his girlfriend into stuff...and that’s why we’re doing everything we can to look for that bastard!”

“So? What were you going to ask me?”

It was several minutes later.

After somebody suggested that they at least move somewhere else first, they walked to a quieter spot further inside the park, and Shizuo asked them the question again.

“Eh, yeah. That’s why we wanted more information on that Orihara Izaya bastard...but that guy’s hard to figure out. We don’t even know where he is, really...”

“I want to know that myself. I’m going to beat him to death myself once I find out where he is...”

Vorona, the Caucasian woman, asked in an even tone as she heard Shizuo’s words, “There exists a case about which I have been concerned since previously. Is the living being called Orihara Izaya a sworn enemy or something resembling the sort for Shizuo-sempai?”

“No, Orihara Izaya is kind of like a flea. He’ll get close to you before you know it, and he’ll have sucked your blood when you realize that he’s here. He’s just a noxious insect like that, so make sure to never ever let him get close to you.”

“I hereby declare my satisfaction. Agreement and understanding, achieved simultaneously.”

Nodding as she spoke in strange Japanese, Vorona etched the name “Orihara Izaya” into her head.

Back when she was a “freelancer” she had accepted a job from Izaya via her partner Slon to “injure Sonohara Anri”—but since she was not interested in her clients in general, she probably didn’t bother to ask for Izaya’s name or see his face. Even if she had, she would have forgotten about him.

Without realizing that she had somehow gotten close to interacting with Izaya before, Vorona now associated the name Izaya firmly with the nickname “the flea.”

The young men who heard this conversation, meanwhile, hastened to agree in unison.

“Y-Yes! That’s exactly right! That Izaya is just a shitty bastard like that! Actually, our boss also said that he was going to kill him for real for stealing his girlfriend!”

As he said these words, Tom said in a placating tone, “Hey, I understand how hard it is for him to have his girlfriend stolen, but could you not involve us in things that sound too extreme like killing and all that? Shizuo gets mad enough as it is at the mere mention of that guy’s name.”

“...It’s OK, Tom-san. When I do kill that guy, I’m going to make sure that no one gets in trouble because of it. Not you, not Vorona, not Manager or anyone else...”

Shizuo spoke with a grave expression on his face.

Tom cut in hurriedly, “No! That’s not the problem here...you see?! Besides, you can’t do it without anyone getting into trouble, it’s just not possible. Also—I’m going to keep telling you this until you really understand it—that kind of scum is just not worth ruining your own life for.”

“...Well let’s just wish that the flea goes to rot somewhere else and never appears in my sight again, then...!”

There Vorona cut in again.

“Carrying out murder, I have the confidence to accomplish leaving zero evidence. To eliminate the noxious insect called Izaya, there exist multiple ways.”

Shizuo frowned involuntarily as he heard his kouhai say these dangerous words.

“Oi, oi, you don’t say that kind of stuff even if it’s just kidding.”

As if forgetting that he himself had already sworn that he’d “kill” Izaya several times today, Shizuo stroked Vorona’s head as he muttered:

“Knowing that’s how you feel is more than enough for me. Thank you.”

“...”

Vorona fell silent and looked up at Shizuo in the eye before averting her gaze.

...Shizuo and Vorona, they have a good thing going there...right?

Well, they look like they’ve got something of that sort going...or do they?

Or is it just me?

The conversation that led to this was so dangerous that it was quite hard for Tom to make sense of what was happening right now.

Needless to say, the young men had even less of a clue as to what was going on. Breaking the silence, they lowered their heads in Shizuo’s direction and continued.

“Ah, right, well, we didn’t really expect you to know where he is...but since you’ve been in fights with Orihara Izaya, well, do you know if he has any, you know, habits, quirks, that kind of stuff...like his weak points or something?”

“Weak points? The fuck are those? You just beat him into the ground like the midget he is the minute you find him. ...Well, that bastard is good at nothing but running away, though. He’s fast, that he is, just like a flea. Only Shishizaki-sempai from our high school could catch up with him and grab his collar...yeah, ever since high school that bastard’s been...arrgh dammit! That flea’s been jumping around like that since forever, really...!”



As if remembering something from his past, Shizuo muttered more and more to himself, fury reigniting in his eyes.

“I-Is that so...”

Sensing the upcoming storm, the young men were about to wrap up the conversation and leave the place as soon as they could, but—

A carefree voice rang in sharp contrast with Shizuo’s in the night park.

“Voorona-saaan! Good even-ya!”

The greeting turned abruptly into a strange battle cry as the thin figure flung itself onto Vorona’s back.

“...”

Without a word, Vorona blocked the attacker’s foot and in the same fluid movement pushed her down to the ground. The attacker, however, managed to wriggle herself out of Vorona’s grip as soon as her body touched the ground. A somersault later she was standing back on her feet again.

“Che—Operation Hugging Vorona-san From Behind was a major fail!”

Mairu—the girl in glasses—laughed as she spoke in a disappointed voice. Kururi walked out from behind her back and lowered her head in front of Shizuo and the others.

“...Night (Good evening)...”

“Before the exchanging of nightly pleasantries, I consider the necessity of questioning. Why is it, that you attempted to leap at and thereby wrestle with me? The possibility was high that I could counterattack seriously without thinking. Dangerous.”

“Body contact! It’s all about body contact, Vorona-san! You’re such an erotic beauty and we have so much to explore in each other as girls! And you’re such a good fighter, too, Vorona-san! I wanted to see who was stronger between you and me! Of course I wouldn’t mind defeating you with bedroom skills or you defeating me for that matter since you’ve got such smooth skin! I want to touch it! Let me!”

“It is unclear to me what you’re saying. I request the exhibition of your meaning.”

Vorona tilted her head and pressed on, but Mairu had raised her hand at Shizuo before she could answer.

“Ah, Shizuo-san! Hello! I’m so sorry, we got Iza-nii today but we didn’t manage to kill him!”

In that second—

The young men’s eyes came to life again.

“Iza-nii?”

Trying to digest the meaning of the word they had only just heard, they muttered it to themselves a few times over—but the furious voice that reached their ears next effectively dispelled their thoughts.

“Oi...you, why do you have three cell phones on you...?”

“Heh?”

As one of the young men turned around he saw Shizuo’s eyes burning with a glare that penetrated even the sunglasses. He was giving off the vibe that he was ready to crush the young man at any moment.

“When I see people walking around with three or four cell phones on them, I immediately think of that flea...you bastard, are you in some kind of fishy business behind people’s backs...? No, forget about that, even if you don’t say anything it’s all going to be the same when I’ve killed you once and for all, right...?”

“W-Wait...”

“If you don’t want that, make yourself disappear in three seconds...did you hear me...?”

The next thing they knew—before Shizuo could even begin counting the seconds, the young men had all run for their lives out of the park like rabbits.

The twins and Vorona stood there not knowing what was going on.

Only Tom looked like he understood. Patting Shizuo on the shoulder, he said in a soft voice, “That was smart, that was. Well, the ‘three cell phones are enough to make me mad’ part was kind of too much even for you, they’re probably going to think you’re unreasonable...but anyway, that at least makes sure that they’ll never try to approach you again.”

“...It’s not like that. I really was mad because they did remind me of that flea.”

After replying to Tom’s words, Shizuo turned back to face Mairu and Kururi and said bluntly, “Oi, you two, it’d be better if you watched out more for yourselves when you’re walking around in town these days. Also don’t go around telling people that you’re that flea’s family.”

“Eh? Why, why?”

“...Puzzle (Did something happen)...?”

Shizuo gritted his teeth angrily as the twins tilted their heads.

“That flea bastard, it seems like he’s *up to something* again.”

With that, he hesitated for a moment as if unsure of whether he should say it, but clicked his tongue and continued anyway, “I don’t really want to say it aloud in front of you, but if anything happens to you, I think he’s the kind of bastard who will be more than willing to abandon you two...sorry if you think I’m wrong. Anyway, I’m worried about you two, so take good care of yourselves, OK?”

That didn’t even sound like me, thought Shizuo as he almost regretted saying it. The next second, however, Kururi and Mairu were hanging onto his arms from both sides.

“Oi, what are you doing?”

Shizuo tilted his head. Mairu chuckled. Kururi smiled silently.

“Shizuo-san, you’re actually a very nice guy, aren’t you?”

“...Respect (That’s awesome)...”

“I knew it! I knew it! Didn’t I tell you that Yuuhei-san is nice because his brother set a good example?”

“Stop it, you fools! Don’t compare someone like me to Kasuka, you’ll just be insulting him!”

Even though two high school girls were hanging onto his arms, Shizuo still managed to get angry at something completely missing the point.

“I request your immediate detachment from Shizuo-sempai. Constrain on arms, constitutes hazard on work. Why you undertook such measures is impossible for me to comprehend.” Vorona asked Kururi in an even voice as she was about to pull the twins off Shizuo.

Tom scratched his cheek at the sight of this somewhat amusing scene and muttered:

“Goodness. What a lively crowd.

...Hopefully nothing troublesome’s going to come out of that.”



Same time, on the rooftop of a building in Ikebukuro

“Hi. It’s been a long time, Courier.”

Under a sky where the stars were mostly wiped out by the neon light from the city stood Celty, whose completely black outfit absorbed even the neon light. Opposite her Izaya raised a hand leisurely in greeting.

“How’s Shinra been doing? With Nebula’s newest equipments I figure he’s at least going to recover faster than at Raira General Hospital? ...But then, having him recuperate at home afterwards may eventually cancel out whatever good that did depending on the quality of care he receives, I guess.”

[...How did you know about all that?]

“I have my own information network, that’s how. You’re absolutely free to speculate that I sent a spy into Nebula or something like that. I don’t think it’s going to be worth the trouble, though. Even if you do find the spy you won’t be able to do anything about it.”

Nothing had changed.

Izaya behaved in the same way he had always behaved when asking Celty to do work for him.

But that was exactly what was making Celty so mad.

Shinra had called a man like this his “friend.”

Yet this man had acted like nothing had changed when Shinra had been so severely injured, and he had known everything about it.

[If you are behind the attack on Shinra, I think it will definitely be worth the trouble to find this spy.]

So she poured her irritation, mixed with sarcasm and suspicion, into the words she typed and pushed them in Izaya’s face. But not even that had an effect on the way Izaya behaved.

“Oops, you scare me. Didn’t I tell you already? I’m not behind the one who attacked Shinra. I don’t see any point in doing something like that.”

[Aren’t you the kind of person who’d just do anything if you think it’s fun?]

“My, that stung. Do I look like I’m that much of a hedonist to you? I’m not omnipotent enough or free enough to be able to do whatever I please just for the fun of it. I won’t expect a monster like you to understand, but the lives of us humans are bound by a variety of fetters. Unadulterated freedom is a privilege of the ones who are determined to go on until they fall dead on the street. But I don’t want to die yet. That’s how simple it is.”

Celty, getting even more irritated as she listened to Izaya ramble on, typed forthright sentences on her PDA.

[...Shinra was severely injured. Do you just not feel anything at all?]

“Earlier when I was stabbed Shinra simply hung up on me with a ‘Bye!’ you know. All I’m doing now is just being appropriately cold to him in return.”

[You...he was worried about you after that call! And what did you do? You had the police call us and everything...! If you didn’t want to be treated that way, you should have known to not treat others that way yourself! Speaking of which, since it’s you, you probably deserved that stabbing in the first place!]

“Oh? Are you saying that Shinra didn’t deserve his?”

Celty shot back fearlessly at Izaya’s calm riposte.

[I’ll find out. That’s exactly what I came here and requested information about the culprit for, didn’t I already tell you that? If you lie to me, I’m going to tie you up and put you in front of Shizuo for real.]

“True, I lie to both myself and other people. But I never lie when I’m doing business, otherwise I would have gone bankrupt already. You can think of lying as one of my hobbies.”

[You have a habit of making your hobbies your business, though.]

“Oops, you said it. Well. Let’s talk business first, shall we?”

Izaya, who had been leaning back onto the rooftop fence, began to walk in Celty’s direction.

As if to stop him, however, Celty kept her watch on the surroundings as she asked Izaya:

[Wait a moment.]

“What is it?”

[...*Those people around us—who are they?*]

What Celty was looking at turned out to be men who were watching them from the shadow of the water tank or leaning against the walls.

As she saw their jackets with skeleton patterns on them, Celty thought of a certain name.

[Oi, aren't those people from 'Dragon Zombie'?]

Izaya clapped his hands as he heard her and answered cheerfully, "Bingo! I'm surprised that you remember them. They haven't been on the roads at all recently."

Dragon Zombie was a bousouzoku group that had been active in all the 23 municipalities of Tokyo. It was said that they had a rivalry with "Jyan Jyan Jyan," a group rumored to be connected to Awakusu-kai. Lately, however, they had disappeared from the city almost completely.

Since Jyan Jyan Jyan had disappeared at about the same time, Celty had concluded on her own that it must be because they were scared of that horrible White Motorbike. Little did she expect to see them here on the rooftop of a building where motorbikes almost never went.

[Why are they here?]

Don't tell me he really was behind the attack on Shinra?

Did he gather those people here to finish me off?

Celty stayed vigilant as suspicions swarmed in her mind. She made the shadows creep around her body.

Should the worst come to worst she would just cover the entire rooftop with her shadow. This plan took shape in Celty's mind as Izaya waved his hand with an expression free of malevolence.

"Ah, it's okay, it's okay. There's no need to be so alarmed. They're kind of both my means of transportation and my bodyguards, that's all."

[Bodyguards...?]

"Didn't I tell you I was stabbed? I haven't found the one who did it yet. Look, don't people tend to hate me *when I only meant well*? That's why I paid them to be my guards. ...The crackdown on bousouzoku gangs is kind of severe recently, you see."

[I agree, but...]

Celty shuddered as she remembered the intense chase half a day ago with Kuzuhara Kinnosuke on her tail. She continued to type on her PDA.

[But I'm pretty sure you don't usually mean well.]

"I was just kidding. With my job and my personality I more than deserve all the hate I get. That's something even I would readily understand."

[If you understand, can't you at least try to change your personality for a bit?]

"If I ever feel like it, sure."

Izaya didn't look interested as he said it. Celty looked like she had given up trying to persuade him further.

[Anyway, fine, I won't ask any more questions about those people around us. So what is it that you wanted me to transport?]

"Well, first things first, I guess. This job is going to take several days."

[Oi, wait. I need to take care of Shinra! I can't afford to be away from home for several days in a row!]

Celty protested. Izaya, however, shook his head as if to say it was not a problem.

"It's going to be fine. You won't have to be there the entire time. I said several days, but actually you'll only have to work for a little while on one of those days."

[A little while?]

"Yeah, in short, I want you to be my assistant. There's a case for which I must look into a lot of things. That's why I want someone who is not bound by things like identity and family registration and therefore can do a lot of things I can't."

[Can't you just ask the Dragon Zombie people over there?]

Izaya's expression did not change when Celty asked the natural question.

"I would be in trouble if they don't concentrate their efforts on being my bodyguards. My life is important to me."

[Even if you say so, asking a courier to collect information for you is just not right. It's outside my area...]

Though hesitating, Celty had realized that she had no choice but to accept this job.

In exchange, she would obtain information on the one who attacked Shinra.

Even if she were to tie Izaya up and threaten him, he wouldn't have given her that information.

Celty understood that if there was anything Izaya was ridiculously not lacking in, it would be that kind of mental durability. She continued to negotiate in her own way, though half of her had already given up.

[I'm going to do everything I can, but you can't deny me the payment even if I fail your expectations.]

"I know. Well, as long as you don't betray me or slack off too much, I will give you the information you want. Also, I don't think the job is going to be that different from your duties as a courier. In fact I wanted to ask you to do this as a courier."

[What is it exactly?]

Celty asked in irritation as Izaya beat around the bushes once more.

Izaya smiled in a child's schadenfreude as he put his hand on Celty's shoulder and landed in a sitting position on the top of the rooftop fence.

Usually one would have been worried that he might fall off the building, but Celty didn't try to talk Izaya out of it. Instead she simply waited in silence for Izaya to continue.

Izaya looked down at Celty from the slightly higher place and clapped his hands loudly together.

"That is to say, what I want you to transport this time, Courier...

...is *information*."

♂ ♀

An hour later, a clubhouse somewhere in Tokyo

The interior of this place looked so typical of a clubhouse that it reminded one of certain Hollywood movie settings.

Sultry music flowed in the dimly lit hall as sabers of light cut through the darkness in a drunk fashion. On the third floor, secluded from the noise and light, was a certain room—

Several college students who looked like they did not belong in this place were gathered inside.

The walls were painted a shade of blue reminiscent of the city's night view.

The table was made of white marble with soft, black leather sofas placed around it, underscoring the fact that this place was, for some reason, special.

“Good place, isn't it?”

The one who said it was a man with a dart in his hand.

A heavily used dartboard hung on the wall. An air of anachronism arose from the fact that the games in this room were not digital.

“The second floor was a gathering place for people who *did the same things as us* until the end of last year. I don't remember if it was the end of last year or the beginning of this year, but somehow they caught the attention of Awakusu-kai and the cops and they were crushed.”

“Oi oi, isn't that bad luck?”

“Why not think of it the opposite way? That those folks took all the back luck with them when they left this place, for example. *My father* owns this club, so we can have a lot more flexibility here. I told him we needed the study space, so he's letting us use this room as long as it's not reserved.”

The young man who spoke looked like a model student who would never even enter a nightclub. He threw his dart at the target.

Dang. A crisp sound was heard in the room and the assembly fell silent.

The young man did not move an inch in front of the dart, which had pierced straight into the bullseye. Though he looked like a model student, he was by no means thin or frail; in fact, judging by the kind of muscles he had, he had probably been doing some sports. With a body and a face that gave off the vibe of someone born to a distinguished family, the young man stood like a portrait in the elegantly furnished room.

His own words finally put an end to this silence.

“...But still, are you saying that the guy called Heiwajima Shizuo actually bought it? He bought *the huge fat lie that my girlfriend was stolen or something?*”

The young man who stood at the entrance—it was the same man who had been talking to Shizuo earlier in the park—smiled obsequiously as he scratched his head and said. “Yeah, I can't believe how easily he bought it. That guy is a monster like the rumors said, but we were so lucky that his head works the way it works! We also found out more about that bastard Orihara Izaya!

Well, to be frank, it's true that he's an information broker and all, but I don't think he's tricky enough to be worth your attention, Shijima-san."

"Ah, you found a girl who looked like his sister...right?"

"Yes, we did! We heard that kid in glasses say 'Iza-nii,' loud and clear! The girl next to that kid looked a lot like her, so she might be his sister as well!"

"Heh, I see. His sisters. True, they're very promising bargaining material."

The man who had just been called Shijima took a new dart and aimed it at the target.

"So? Where does this kid live?"

"Eh?"

As he heard the natural question, the young man who appeared to be the subordinate froze.

The reason was simple enough: he did not have an answer to that.

"Isn't it why those kids are not here yet? Isn't it because you are planning to bring them here later somehow? If so, then you must have found out where they lived, haven't you?"

"Ah, no...well, that Shizuo bastard was getting mad at us so we kind of just ran..."

"Is that so? Too bad. We'll look into that tomorrow, then."

Shijima laughed brightly. The subordinate forced himself to laugh as well.

The next second, however, Shijima tilted his head and asked the young man:

"...Hm? What is that on your eyes?"

"Eh?"

"There's something that looks like a blemish on your eyelid...close them for me for a moment."

"Ah, sure, sorry about it."

As he closed his eyes as he was told, however—

Less than a second later, he felt something hit his nose.

“!?! Argh...what!?”

The young man opened his eyes not knowing what was going on.

As he did so, he saw in the center of his vision two stick-like objects between his left eye and his right. No, there was just one. He must have seen two because it was so close to his eyes that they couldn't focus properly.

At first it felt as if he had been bitten by a tiny lizard or stung by a bee. He hastened to drive the shadow away with his hand.

When he tried to chase it off from the side with his hand, however, pain exploded from inside his face as if someone was trying to bore a hole in the flesh of his nose.

“Eh!”

The object that had been in his nose a moment ago, however, looked like it fell and rolled off after the impact.

The man covered his bleeding nose with his hand and looked at the object on the ground.

“Eh...”

Is that...the sharp end of a dart...?

As soon as he realized this, a black shadow had walked toward him from the side.

“Shi-Shiji-...ma-...san? !? Arrrrgh! ~~~~~!”

He did not know when Shijima had moved from the center of the room to suddenly appear before his eyes and thrust a dart into his shoulder.

The pain from his nose and his shoulder enhanced each other in his brain and almost drove him crazy.

Before he could understand what had happened, his body was already taken over by the pain.

“W-What! I, what did I! What!”

Pressing his hand to his shoulder, the subordinate turned around hastily to shout the incoherent question as he leaned into a corner of the room. Among the other men in the room some were swallowing as they watched, some chuckled, others reacted still differently.

“Ah, did you mean to ask ‘What did I ever do to deserve this’?”

Shijima completed the man's sentence for him and answered the question himself.

"It's because you did nothing, of course."

Shijima said simply and went on to pick up the dart rolling on the floor next to him.

Without the slightest hesitation, he threw it at the man shaking in the corner of the room.

"Wha—!?"

The man yelped in fear—and then, immediately, in pain.

Shijima marched forward and swung his leg up to grind the tip of the dart deeper into the man's thigh.

"Gahhhh!? Arrrrrrrrrgh!"

The voice heard in the room was no longer capable of a human language.

Just like they blocked out the music from the hall, however, the soundproofed walls made sure that the man's cries couldn't be heard outside this room.

The pain stimulated his spinal cord. Tears began to flow from his eyes already filled with fear and confusion.

Shijima smiled his refreshing smile at the pathetic-looking man—and began to talk with his foot still on the dart in the man's thigh.

"You think you were lucky that Heiwajima Shizuo's got the head he's got...? Well, I guess your brain tissue is made of even more golden luck, then...? We can't afford to lose even a second here. We can't afford to. We. Can't. Afford. To. You, hear?"

As he uttered each one of these last six words he pushed the dart once with his foot.

Groans escaped the man's throat as if it were some sort of broken instrument in accordance with the movements of his foot.

"I want you to thank me. Had I not told you to close your eyes you could have lost either your left eye or your right if my hand wasn't steady."

After he said these words Shijima withdrew his foot and turned his back toward the man who continued to groan.

As if no longer interested in that particular subordinate, the man who looked like he was a son of some distinguished family began to address the entire assembly in the room.

“If you think this is just a university club or something, I will be very concerned... No, actually, I’m fine with that. I’m fine with that, really, but...*in the end the one who will have to deal with Kumoi-san’s temper is me.*”

Kumoi.

The air in the room froze upon the very mention of this name.

The assembly had not felt so pressured even when the dart had pierced into the nose of the young man who was just punished in front of them. As soon as the name Kumoi reached their eardrums, however, even those who had been grinning at the sight of blood fell silent.

The cries and groans of the lone man could hardly make an impression on either their eardrums or their brains at this point.

That was just how focused their minds were on the name Kumoi.

“H-Hey, Shijima. Has Kumoi-san contacted you recently?”

“Of course he has.”

Shijima smiled brightly at his companions seated on the leather sofas.

“...How could Kumoi-san *not have noticed*...when those fools not only failed to finish off that Akabayashi from Awakusu-kai, but also got into a fight with some completely irrelevant yakuza organization, not forgetting to get themselves into the news in the process?”

Shijima’s lighthearted expression stayed in its place as a drop of cold sweat crept down his face.

He muttered, “...We’ve been such a disgrace to ‘Heaven Slave,’ we have.”

As he said these words, Shijima unbuttoned the right sleeve of his shirt and rolled it all the way up his arm.

“...”

Silence reigned in the room again.

Some people averted their gazes as others stared in disbelief.

On his right arm they saw strange scars, long and red.

Starting from close to his wrist several long, parallel red lines meandered all the way up to the top of his shoulder.

It almost looked like some sort of musical score.

One of them thought so before he hastened to correct it—

It didn't 'almost' look like one—

That was 'exactly' what those scars were: *a musical score with five parallel lines.*

In-between the five lines distorted by the creases on his arm, red dots could be seen here and there. Some of them were even carefully crafted into a “♪” shape.

“T-Those scars...how come...how did...”

“Hm? Ah, Kumoi-san just did it on me.”

“With a...knife or something?”

The man probably feared that he would be swallowed up by the abnormality in front of him if he didn't try to ask this question.

He had chosen to say “knife” because it seemed like it could get him an answer he would be content with.

Yeah, those are knife scars.

If so, then they're nothing out of ordinary. Delinquents sometimes do that to themselves when they go funny in the head.

It's kind of like burning people with cigarettes to test their guts.

Yeah.

It's no big deal.

I bet you can find things worse than that in any TV series or manga you pick up.

It's nothing compared to getting your fingers cut off, for instance.

These thoughts surfaced and disappeared in turn in his mind.

But the scars before his eyes spoke of “pain” more eloquently than anything he could conjure up in his imagination.

Even if they were indeed better than losing a finger or an arm, the scars did not look like mere scratches on the skin. To leave that kind of scars, the wound could easily have been deep enough to reach his muscles.

The men could not help but be made to imagine.

Imagine that this was one of the lighter forms of punishment they could get.

As if to knock these men out of their escapist attitude, Shijima shook his head slightly.

“Had he used a knife they would have healed faster, perhaps.”

Shijima glided toward the dartboard in a room of people who had frozen simultaneously as they heard him.

Pulling three darts off the target, he rolled them in his hand and answered:

“With the tip of this dart, you see, he etched all those lines one by one in my arm.”

“...”

A chill crept down the men’s spines as they felt themselves sweat.

Destroying muscle cells to compose this musical score with a tool not even meant for cutting. Just picturing it in their minds made the men feel like their lower bellies were being pressed against by something hard and chilly.

“Ah, but it was still loads better than when he drilled a hole in my front tooth without anesthesia. Though he did order me to do something impossible like ‘Sing along to the notes with your screams.’ Really, Kumoi-san always has the best jokes.”

Shijima laughed innocently. No one laughed with him.

It seemed that the man named Kumoi was the leader of this group and that most of his punishments were meted out to Shijima, who appeared to be second in command.

“‘We’re like Dollars’s shadow.’ That’s what Kumoi-san said to me.”

Shijima alone was speaking with warmth in his voice as the temperature in the room seemed to have fallen below the freezing point. He turned to face the dartboard again.

“It’s OK that we’re No.2. We can hide ourselves behind Dollars’s enormous body and remain just a shadow... The only problem is that we need to step up our efforts a little if we want to secure that place.”

Dang. A crisp sound was heard as the dart pierced into the bullseye again.

“...’Heaven Slave’ is going to take over the entire system of ‘Amphisbaena’ and make it its own.”

Dang. His eyes narrowed fanatically as he threw another dart into the bullseye.

“Because that’s what Kumoi-san wants.”

Dang. His last dart shook the target—

Shijima spoke words of what sounded like despair in a voice that resounded within the room.

Only the speaker himself was smiling very, very cheerfully.

“For us, there is no turning back now.”

CHATROOM

.

.

.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

Saika-san has joined the chat.

Saika
Good evening

Saika
Nice to see you

Indoor Scholar-san has joined the chat.

Indoor Scholar
Nice to meet you, my name is Indoor Scholar!

Indoor Scholar
Um, actually this is my first time coming to this chatroom

Indoor Scholar
I've come to visit per Setton-san's introduction! Nice to meet you all!

Saika
Nice to meet you

Saika
My name is Saika

Saika
It's great to know you

Saika
Do you know Setton-san?

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
It's me, Anri-chan.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
I just remembered that Celty tried to get me to join.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
Things happened. Now I'm kind of trapped in a staring game between me and the laptop

Indoor Scholar

Well, yes, kind of! Nice to meet you!

[Private mode] *Saika*

Is it Kishitani-sensei?

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Bingo! But then it's not like Celty had anyone else she could invite.

[Private mode] *Saika*

Are your injuries alright now

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Oh I see, did you hear about it from Celty?

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Anyway, lately it's become easier for me to type on the laptop like this.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Though I can only do it while lying on my back on the bed and with the aid of this special table.

[Private mode] *Saika*

Please take good care of yourself

[Private mode] *Saika*

I wish you good health

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Thank you, I will. Anyway, you don't have to worry about it too much.

[Private mode] *Saika*

I see Thank you

[Private mode] *Saika*

By the way I noticed that you were using the private mode from the very start

[Private mode] *Saika*

That is so cool

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Well, I'm pretty used to computers so more or less I know my way around one.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

I was thinking I should say hello to the other people too for what it was worth, but it looks like they aren't here.

[Private mode] *Saika*

I'm sorry

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Anri-chan, you don't...sorry, I should have said Saika-san. There's nothing you should apologize for lol

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Speaking of which, are you typing on a cell phone? Must be a lot of trouble.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Yeah, it must be hard for you seeing as how you're typing only in hiragana.*

* Anri types only in hiragana in the chatroom. All other members know how to convert hiragana into kanji or katakana when necessary.

[Private mode] *Saika*

I'm sorry

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

I told you, you didn't have to apologize lol

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

If I'm making you apologize all the time Celty will get mad at me later!

[Private mode] *Saika*

How is Celty-san doing

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Ah, she's doing very well. She's still not home today though.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Oh that reminds me, if you want to learn how to convert hiragana into kanji on your cell phone or computer

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Can't you get Mikado-kun or someone else to teach you how?

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Mikado-kun looks like he knows such stuff well.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*

Actually, can't you just talk to him about it in this chatroom? I'm sure no one's going to complain.

[Private mode] *Saika*
I'm sorry

[Private mode] *Saika*
I have thought about it too

[Private mode] *Saika*
But I don't want Ryuugamine-kun to know that I'm using the name Saika

[Private mode] *Saika*
I am not mentally ready

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
I see. Well, I understand how you feel.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
Mikado-kun seems aware that Saika has something to do with the Slasher incident.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
It's true. If he knows that you're using the name of that Demon Blade as your handle, Anri-chan, you may be in trouble.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
But then you can take your time, I think.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
You and Mikado-kun are not like me. You're both reticent types.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
But if you have anything you want to talk about, like living your life as that Demon Blade, or living your life in general...

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
or if you want to tell Mikado-kun the truth or something...

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
feel free to talk to Celty and me at any time.

[Private mode] *Saika*
Thank you very much

[Private mode] *Saika*
I'm happy to hear this

[Private mode] *Saika*

I can only talk to Celty-san and you about Saika

[Private mode] *Saika*
It's really encouraging

[Private mode] *Saika*
But are you sure it won't be too much trouble for you

[Private mode] *Saika*
I don't want to get you and Celty-san into trouble because of me Kishitani-sensei

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
It's nothing to worry about, really

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
Celty considers you a very important friend, you know.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
And Celty's friends are my friends also.

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
Well, you'll have to pick a time good for both Celty and me, but definitely come talk to

us

[Private mode] *Saika*
I'm happy to hear this

[Private mode] *Saika*
I'm really happy

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
I feel kind of embarrassed when you thank me so straightforwardly lol

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
I'll be saying goodbye for today

[Private mode] *Indoor Scholar*
Going out of the private mode for a moment!

Indoor Scholar
Bye for now! I'll be coming to say hello again when there are more people!

Indoor Scholar
Saika-san, thanks for being the first to talk to me!

Saika
Thank you

Saika
I appreciated it

Indoor Scholar
Me too! Goodbye, then...

Indoor Scholar-san has left the chat.

Saika
Thank you

Saika
I think I'll be leaving for the day too

Saika
Thank you so much

Saika
I hope we can all gather to talk someday

Saika
I'll try hard

Saika
Goodbye then excuse me

Saika-san has left the chat.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

.

.

.

In a Dark Place 4

“Now, without further ado, let Orihara Izaya-kun’s *non-self-introduction* begin! Clap clap clap—”

As she made clapping sounds with her mouth, her companions next to her actually clapped their hands to the rhythm.

Some warmth seeped its way into the dimly lit room owing to the light coming from tiny candles.

On the table someone had placed a Mont Blanc cake with more than twenty such candles crowded onto it.

It almost looked like one single huge candle emanating waves of light into the room with its vigorously pulsating flame.

“Orihara Izaya-kun’s birthday is May the 4th! That is so cool! You must have been one of the first few on the student number order!* Such a little grown-up! Wow!”

* In Japan, the number assigned to each student on the roll is sometimes decided by the order of their birthdays starting from April 1st. Other numbering systems (alphabetical, hiragana system, etc.) also exist.

“...”

“Orihara Izaya-kun, you’re 25 now, right? But it seems like you’ve been telling people around you that you were 21. Why? Why? Is it because you are so scared that rounding it up would make you 30?”

The provocative words were met with silent head-shaking from under the non-responsive linen bag.

“You’re truly something! You’ve been silent for 2 hours. Can I be honest with you? We could have beaten you up or kicked you or stabbed you or drilled a hole in you or pulled your hair to make you scream, but that would have been too boring. The real fun can’t begin until Orihara Izaya-kun’s precious little sisters get here! Yeah, yeah!”

Nodding as if satisfied with her conclusion, Earthworm lifted the tray with the cake on it—and brought it close to the linen bag over the man’s head.

“You can still tell that the brightness is coming from the flame even with that linen bag over your head, right?”

“...”

The man under the linen bag breathed harder as he tried to bend backwards.

Sitting on the cake, which was the size for one person, the bundle of candles was brought close to his face.

“I’m so sorry for being a bad girl and making your linen bag all wet. Look, I’ll make it up by drying it for you now!”

Even though the bag was still wet, the heat could still be felt.

But it was hard to gauge how the man was feeling from his reaction.

Under the linen bag there could be anything: fear, despair, or boundless anger towards her.

Behind the calm façade Earthworm was in fact excited just thinking about the endless possibilities.

If she wanted to she could have taken the linen bag off any time she wanted.

But it was not the time. Not yet.

She did all she could to suppress her raging desires while savoring the pure bliss.

Earthworm’s hobby was to insult and let her imagination do its work.

For her, every moment she was seized by the desire to see her opponent’s face as they sink into despair was a moment in which she felt truly alive.

I want to give him some slight burns. Maybe on the hands.

No, I can’t. I have to wait until his sisters get here...

Her heart began to indulge in dangerous imagination stemming from twisted desires. She held them back and maintained a soft smile on her face.

She wanted to push the flame even closer and set fire to the linen bag.

She wanted to see the handsome face she had seen on the photo twist in pain while being burned into a hideous mass.

He would become exhausted and no longer able to move, and she would run her tongue over his burns.

She imagined the taste of blood on her tongue and Orihara Izaya's screams.

That imagination alone was enough to make Earthworm revel in the fact that she was alive.

Up until now she had done the same to many, many people, regardless of age and gender, who were enemies of Amphisbaena—of her and the “Owner”.

By the time those people were unconscious or rolling on the floor screaming, she would sometimes take the linen bags off. She found that it tended to break her trance.

Judging from the photos, Orihara Izaya's looks were Earthworm's type.

That was why she decided to cherish it—

—Until the peak of his despair had come and passed, taking with it his most precious expression, until she had bathed God knows how many times in ecstasy, and until she had finally gotten fed up with the imagination of the human being named Orihara Izaya.

With such thoughts concealed in her heart, she returned the cake to the table.

“Anyway, this cake is actually not for you, Orihara Izaya-san, but for my birthday this month. It's such a pity that I can't offer it to you.”

Instead she turned her eyes toward her cell phone and began to read out the entries below “Orihara Izaya's personal information.”

“Height: 175cm. Weight: 58kg. Heh, looks like you've got a pretty good figure. I might like you more if you could add a few inches to your height, though.”

“...”

Earthworm chuckled as she saw the man under the linen bag tilted his head sideways powerlessly, looking puzzled.

“Are you wondering how I know even how much you weigh? I know. Didn't I tell you? My information broker is the best.”

“...”

“Imagining” the man’s even more puzzled face, Earthworm continued to tell him even more about himself.

“Well, it’s probably changed now since that number was for more than half a year ago. Orihara Izaya-san, you signed up for life insurance last year, didn’t you? You entered your height and weight at that time, didn’t you? ...My information broker had a way to know even those. Isn’t he good?”

“.....”

The breathing seemed to suggest that the man had something to say, but he ended up remaining silent.

Earthworm savored the pain coming from deep inside her and kept reading aloud the information from her cell phone as she watched the man’s shoulders move up and down gently.

“There are seven people in your family including you, Mr. Information Broker. Your paternal grandfather’s name is Torakichi, the grandmother’s name is Natsu. Your maternal grandpa and grandma have both passed away. Did you go to their funerals?”

“...”

The breathing sound was accompanied by a movement of the head that could have been either a nod or a shake.

He was probably not even thinking anymore.

However, it was clear that he could at least still hear her.

As soon as she confirmed that fact she opened her mouth again.

“Your father is called Shirou, and your mother is called Kyouko...that leaves your two sisters, who should be here at any moment.”

“...”

“Raijin Elementary School, Raijin Middle School, Raijin High School and finally Raira University. That’s an escalator*! Cool! Though it looks like Raira is not all that hard to get into. Rai-Rai-Rai-Rai. It’s a string of Rai’s for you! Sounds like the name of a ramen place.”

** Escalator: the “escalator” is a Japanese slang term for private schooling systems that allow students to advance from one level to the next without taking entrance exams en route.*

As she finished telling jokes that sounded like only she herself could understand them, she stood up waiting for those around her to react.

Pulling her chair to a spot right next to the man under the linen bag, she simply sat down on the man's right side.

Her left index finger was on the man's thigh now, tracing circles.

The man was probably ticklish; the breathing coming from the linen bag became arrhythmic.

"Hey...I heard that you were a model student back at Raira Elementary?"

"..."

"Mr. Information Broker, you fought a lot in high school with that Heiwajima I mentioned earlier, right? But the real shocking part was back when you were in middle school, wasn't it?"

"..."

The man under the linen bag was completely nonresponsive this time.

"What happened? Are you not feeling alright?"

She reached for the cake on the table again.

With the cake in her hand, she tried placing it on the man's head under the linen bag.

It took some time to tame the stiffness of the linen bag and balance the weight, but she succeeded eventually.

"..."

"Don't let it fall, you understand? Try to hold back your sneezes. If you let it fall, it's going to burn your clothes! Ah, but we still have water, so I'll pour it on you and there will be nothing to worry about!"

As soon as she saw that the man had now gone as stiff as a rock, Earthworm began to picture what was underneath it again.

As he smelled the sweet scent of the cake, what kind of shame—or fear—or anger would be distorting his handsome features under the linen bag?

She was trembling all over in excitement. She calmed herself in a hypnotic way by staring into the flame.

She continued as if nothing had happened.

“So should we pick up from where we left off?”

“...”

“You were the vice president of your elementary school’s student council, weren’t you? You were the star at sports meetings, too. Independent research awards, poetry awards, slogan awards...you were always getting them. It also says that you were in essay contests. I would love to read an essay you wrote, Orihara Izaya-san. ...I’d love to read it out aloud to you right here and now.”

Giggling, she continued.

“And then, the unbelievable part. In high school you were a problem child, the polar opposite of the model student you had been...in fact, you still looked like a model student, but the things you did behind people’s backs! I heard that Raijin High School got in a lot of trouble in the three years of your attendance, Orihara Izaya-san.”

“...”

“But people almost never suspected you. There were teachers who kind of figured out, but you were never suspended or expelled.”

Nodding as if impressed, she stood up again and walked around the man under the linen bag, reprimanding him in a saccharine voice.

“How did you become such a bad kid, Orihara Izaya-san?”

“...”

“That was something even our Information Broker B didn’t know. But then, he would have been more like an esper than an information broker if he did, which sounds kind of sick. I wondered how our ‘Owner’ became so bad a person as to create ‘Amphisbaena,’ so I asked him a short while ago...but I didn’t find out.”

Nodding with an affirmative sound from her mouth, she extended her arms toward the ceiling.

Lit by the flame, the ceiling looked like a shimmering red ocean.

“But we more or less do know around what time you became a bad kid, you know.”

As if swimming her way through the sea of light, Earthworm took slow steps forwards as she muttered the name of a man.

“Kishitani Shinra.”

The waves of light from the flame seemed to pulsate more strongly than before.

She did not turn to face the man. Instead, she continued to speak to the ceiling.

“He was your classmate in middle school, wasn’t he?”

“...”

“I have no idea yet how it happened, but...”

“Orihara Izaya-san, back in middle school you stabbed that Kishitani-kun with a knife and got taken into protective custody, didn’t you?”

With that, we will be going back in time again.

4 章 副 部 長



CHAPTER 4

THE VICE PRESIDENT

Night, somewhere on Kawagoe Highway, Shinra's apartment

[Speaking of which...this scar is still there.]

Celty muttered as she wiped Shinra's body with a wet towel as she changed his bandages for him.

After taking off Shinra's pajama shirt, Celty stared intently at his body.

Until yesterday she had been too distracted by the new wounds to notice, but on Shinra's side there was indeed a scar that looked as if he had been stabbed with something.

“Ahh! Celty staring at my old scar makes me kind of embarrassed, but at the same time I'm feeling such a surge of happiness as well! What should I do, what should I do? What on earth should I do!? Hey, Celty, what on earth should I do!?”

[Just stay still.]

Pushing a PDA screen with these words on it in Shinra's face, Celty continued to change his bandages and wipe away his sweat in silence.

She ended up taking Izaya's offer and returning home after being told to wait until further notice.

After she told him about it Shinra had said, “He's definitely up to something.” and sighed. “Anyway, be careful.” He added words to that effect over and over again.

Celty knew that the offer was obviously a suspicious one, but she couldn't turn it down. With lingering doubts on her mind, she decided to concentrate on taking care of Shinra first, but—

It turned out that she ended up getting curious about Shinra's scar.

After Celty had finished changing the bandages and putting clean pajamas on Shinra, she asked about the scar again.

[It's been a long time, hasn't it? About ten years?]

“Yeah, I guess so. It feels like yesterday, though. At this rate I'm probably going to outlive the average life expectancy and die an old man in another instant.”

[What are you talking about? You haven't even lived past the mid-point yet... But my, how these scars remain...]

Celty was a dullahan with a body that resembled a human's. But dullahan bodies were different, after all.

She was slightly harder to kill, for one. Knives and scalpels could cut her open, but no scars would remain thanks to her extraordinary regenerating abilities.

For Celty, that was the reason the old scar on Shinra's body felt like a wall that stood between them. It *frustrated* her somehow.

“Well, that one's probably going to be a scar for life.”

Shinra looked like he was reading Celty's thoughts. He patted his side as if to say scars were no big deal.

“Urgh...”

Though he ended up groaning under renewed pain from his recent injuries the moment he did so.

[Are you alright?]

“Ah, I'm alright. As long as Celty is by my side I feel like the injuries are healing themselves.”

[Yeah, if only that also worked for your old scars.]

Knowing that Shinra was worried about her, Celty typed these words jokingly in return.

As she remembered what got her curious a moment ago, she tried asking Shinra again.

[How did you manage to get yourself injured like that, anyway? I remember you said it had something to do with getting caught up in a fight between your classmates...]

“Ah, someone kind of ran a knife into me.”

[A knife!?!]

Celty looked shaken as she typed in response to the simple answer Shinra gave.

[A knife? How can you talk about it as if it were no big deal?! When you said you got caught up in a fight I was so sure it was going to be like being pushed down the stairs or something...!]

“Back then there was still this wall between you and me, Celty.”

Celty and Shinra had only been lovers for a year and several months.

They had been living under the same roof for more than 20 years, though.

Celty had been curious back when she heard that the son of her roommate both belonged to this species called “humans” that resembled herself, but not quite. However, she did not feel the need to inquire further and even thought that it was not something she should dig deeper into.

“But I loved you all the same, Celty, including your wall!”

[Well, I should blame you for making me embarrassed, but in fact you made me happy so...anyway, we’re off-topic. You said it was a knife, it sounded far beyond middle-school-fight level—what happened!?!]

“Ahh...yeah. Now that I think of it, I haven’t told you everything that happened back then yet, Celty.”

[Now that you mention it...I think you’re right.]

In retrospect it was somewhat strange indeed.

Shinra would always come to me to talk about all sorts of things when he was growing up.

He did the same even when he was recovering from that injury. Curiously, however, he never told me the reason he got injured.

Feeling like she was venturing into uncharted territory of the human being named Shinra, Celty wondered if she should just pop the obvious question—

“But for me there are too many complicated feelings associated with this scar...I’m sorry, Celty.”

Shinra lowered his eyes apologetically in his supine position.

Seeing the way her roommate acted, Celty decided to drop the inquiry.

He's right.

It's true that I'm curious, but there's no way I'm putting more burden on Shinra's body and mind.

And everyone has one or two things they never want to talk to others about...

Ignoring the conversation going on in Celty's mind, Shinra kept his eyes lowered as he said suddenly, "Let me see, where should I start...yeah, it was back when I first became a middle schooler..."

[What? So you were planning to tell me after all!?!]

♂ ♀

12 years ago, Raijin Middle School, Class 1-3

"Hey, want to join the biology club? Actually, want to co-found one?"

"Sorry, not interested," the other boy answered curtly as the bespectacled boy asked him.

It was the first verbal exchange between Kishitani Shinra and Orihara Izaya.

They were still in the classroom after the school's opening ceremony and the first homeroom in which the students did their self-introductions.

After homeroom was dismissed, students who graduated from the same elementary school flocked together to talk about their hopes and anxieties about the new life in middle school. In such an atmosphere, Shinra and Izaya were the only ones that somehow did not fit in.

There were several graduates from Raijin Elementary School in the class, but no one looked inclined to come to Orihara Izaya to strike up a conversation.

It didn't make Izaya feel left out, however. He just thought it was natural.

Sure, he was a top student.

But that was all to it: he was not a model student in any way.

He seemed nice, and he and was popular with girls—but he remained decidedly detached in all dealings in his school life.

His classmates in elementary school were to later describe him as “Kind of like an alien. But he was a nice fellow.” with a chuckle. Indeed, it was the way most people viewed him, and they too would agree that he was “a nice fellow.” So it was probably not terribly wrong to say that he was more or less your average good student.

He was not particularly hated. Nor was he particularly loved, either.

When everyone else chatted in the classroom or went out for a game of kickball during lunch breaks, Izaya would always remain in the library room. For that reason he even came off as aloof and kind of a lone wolf to some.

When the classes had to be reshuffled for field trips, he would almost always end up being the only one left without a class—but as soon as people realized it, every class would go “Eh, Izaya, you alone!? Then come to our class!” “No, come to ours!” and it would invariably have to be settled with several rounds of rock-paper-scissors. It was strange, but that was the kind of child Orihara Izaya had always been back in elementary school.

Izaya himself enjoyed being somewhat detached from everything around him.

He knew that he was seen as a top student.

But he never made fun of others, nor did he see them as inferior.

He liked this placed called “school” where lives were spent in groups.

Some of his classmates would chat and laugh in a friendly way, some would fight, some would talk in secret about being bullied, and still others would weep when they were the targets of such bullying—he liked to observe all of the above.

The more he had to do with them, however, the less there was to see.

When he had to choose in the cinema between sitting at the back to enjoy the view of the entire screen and even the other moviegoers, and sitting in the front row to immerse himself in movie scenes too oppressively close to his nose for his own comfort, Izaya the elementary school kid would choose the former without hesitation.

Being left out like this, therefore, was actually right up Izaya’s alley. Cheerfully, he watched the groups form themselves inside the classroom, wondering how they were going to evolve, until—

The smiling, innocent looking boy in glasses interrupted the fun he was having.

It was the boy who had just introduced himself as Kishitani Shinra during the self-introductions.

He recalled that the boy had said, “Mother divorced Father because she didn’t love him anymore, so it’s just we three living under the same roof now.” Though his family sounded like it should be a heavy subject for him, the boy’s voice was lighthearted.

Parents divorced, but he said there are still three. Guess he has a brother or something.

With such thoughts on his mind Izaya was ready to turn his attention back to observing the whole class—

“It’s OK if you’re not interested. Just found it with me anyway. The biology club, I mean.”

“.....”

The boy continued to talk like he was not discouraged in the slightest. Izaya felt slightly annoyed.

But upon realizing how rare it was for him to be feeling this way about another person, his interest in this Kishitani Shinra boy grew despite himself.

“You’re Kishitani-kun, right?”

“Just call me Shinra. ...Uh, sorry, your name is?”

“...Orihara Izaya.”

“Ah, that’s right! Orihara-kun! I’ll call you Orihara-kun, but you can just call me Shinra, it’s alright!”

Shinra had already begun to push the conversation in strange directions. Izaya, on the other hand, was still surprised as he asked, “Why did you ask me to found the biology club with you when you didn’t even know my name?”

“Because that’s what the teacher just said. At this school you can found any club as long as you have at least two people.”

“No, that’s not what I...I mean, why me?”

He probably asked me simply because he saw me looking left out in the classroom.

But there was no way he would just say that out aloud.

Curious about what kind of answer he was going to get, Izaya, already knowing the answer, popped the question anyway—

But the answer Izaya did get exceeded his wildest imaginations.

“You like observing living things, don’t you? So you’ll fit right in.”

“Huh?”

He didn’t recall saying such a thing in his self-introduction earlier.

For a second he thought the boy had mistaken him for someone else. But as far as he knew no other student had said anything like “I like living things” in their self-introductions, either.

Izaya frowned. Shinra, on the other hand, pressed further.

“Hm? Didn’t you say it yourself during self-introduction?”

“Say what?”

“Come on, you said: *‘I like watching people of all occupations.’*”

“...”

He liked observing people.

Although he had realized that it had become an obsession, he thought it would be less than tactful to say “My hobby is human observation” in a self-introduction. But he had no real hobbies other than that, either. That was why he decided to say it in that particular way—but he never thought anyone would try to persuade him to join the biology club because of it.

“How does that have anything to do with a biology club?”

“People are living things, too.”

“...”

Izaya felt renewed interest in this boy who just had asserted, with almost brutal simplicity, that humans were “living things too.” True, “Humans are but one of the species on Earth” was not exactly an unheard-of sentence in this time of eco-movements. He was pretty sure that there were other classmates who also loved this slogan.

But to say it and mean “That’s why humans are a biology club’s subjects too!” obviously suggested that something about the speaker was not right.

After hesitating for a while, Izaya shook his head at the boy.

“I’m sorry, but I still don’t think I’d be interested in a biology club.”

“I see. Guess that can’t be helped.”

The other boy announced retreat so fast that Izaya couldn’t help but feel a little let down.

“I’m going to ask you again tomorrow. Looks like there’s no deadline for submitting applications for founding clubs.”

“Wait a second. Don’t you think you’re just going to get the same reply tomorrow?”

He even bothered stopping Shinra to ask the question, so it was clearly not just a knee-jerk reaction to the absurd statement.

Apart from curiosity, he was driven by a feeling that something was “not right.”

Izaya asked the question in order to find out what was making him feel this way. At that time, however, he failed to realize exactly what the feeling was.

“What about the day after tomorrow?”

“Same thing.”

“Pretty please? You can be the President.”

“Why are you already trying to put me in troublesome positions?” Izaya shot back in a calm tone.

It was something a person wouldn’t usually say to someone they’d only met for the first time, but for Izaya, such dialogues themselves were rare in the first place.

“Couldn’t you just have asked someone else? Like your friends from elementary school or something.”

Shinra’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Do I look like I have friends?”

“...My bad. You don’t look like you have friends at all.”

“Unfortunately you’re wrong! I actually have one!”

“Hm. Can I punch you now?”

Ignoring Izaya’s words as the latter narrowed his eyes, Shinra continued calmly, “But that friend is going to a different school, so either way I ended up with no friends at this school.”

“I don’t think you’re going to succeed in making any, either. My condolences. But you kind of deserve it, no?”

Izaya was slightly taken aback by his own words as they escaped his mouth.

Little did he expect that his stance in elementary school to keep others “neither too close nor too distant” would have collapsed this easily.

Are students from other elementary schools all like this? His heart sank at the thought, but he tried to convince himself that this Kishitani boy in front of him was probably just an exception.

“Well, if you’re looking for people interested in biology, I’m sure you’ll find someone in this class.”

“Yeah. But there’s also this other reason I approached you in particular. Were I to get someone who actually likes biology to join, they’d work too hard, which would also bother me. If possible I’d like to limit the club activity to a bare minimum, like keeping Sea Monkeys or something.”

”? What’s that? I thought you liked biology.”

Club activities were by no means mandatory at this school. If he didn’t want to be in any clubs he could have just gone home after school like others. Why exactly did he insist on being in one?

The natural questions appeared in his head, but they were answered by Shinra before he could ask them.

“Well, to be frank with you, I didn’t want to be in any clubs at all... But my loved one said to me, ‘Shinra, I’ve always felt that you have too few friends ever since you were in elementary school. Maybe you should try joining a club?’...My feelings are still not required, so I kind of, well, don’t want her to hate me...”

“...What actually surprises me is that there’s another human being who’d worry about you in that way. More than the fact that your feelings aren’t required, anyway.”

“You are being a bit too honest with me for a first meeting. Also there’s a little correction to be made with the ‘another *human being* who’d worry about you’ part, but that can wait until later. Anyway, I felt like I could count on you to not be too enthusiastic about the biology club activities even if you join. Please join! Together we can try to find the Tsuchinoko*.”

**Tsuchinoko: a legendary snake with a central girth wider than its head or tail.*

“How’s that even a biology club activity?”

Just like that, Izaya turned down the offer on the first day of school—

However, intrigued by the feeling that something was not right about the human being named Kishitani Shinra, he began to concentrate his ‘observation’ efforts on him from the next day on.

Naturally, he ended up talking to students who were in the same elementary school as Shinra to find out more about Shinra as a person.

“Ah, I’ve heard of that school...hey, were you in the same school as Kishitani-kun?”

“Yeah, I was. Ah, Orihara-kun, are you in the same class as Kishitani?”

“Well, yes.”

“That one’s weird, isn’t he? I don’t get what he’s thinking at all.”

So far he had heard nothing he hadn’t expected people to say about Shinra, but Izaya continued anyway.

“I don’t really want to say this since it would sound disparaging...but he doesn’t look like he had a lot of friends.”

“I’d say he had none...ah, actually, there was Shizu-chan.”

“Shizu-chan?”

It sounded like a girl’s name*. Maybe that was the person who worried about Shinra he had just heard about a couple of days earlier, thought Izaya.

** The suffix “-chan” is used more often with girls’ names than with boys’ for endearment. As children grow up the gender gap in honorific suffixes also becomes more pronounced: an older person can refer to a teenage girl as ‘-chan’, but with a teenage boy the standard suffix is ‘-kun’ (when they are referred to as ‘-chan’ it’s almost always by those closest to them, like mothers or girlfriends.). Apart from the ‘-chan’ suffix, the diminutive ‘Shizu’ is also a popular one among Japanese girls (usually short for Shizuka or Shizune).*

But as soon as the boy said his next words Izaya was able to rule out that possibility.

“There was this scary guy called Shizuo... He could beat anybody in a fight, and he got mad so easily that everyone kept their distances from him. Only Kishitani would approach him like it was nothing and say things like ‘For once, just let me cut you open!’ I don’t get that guy at all.”

“I see. Weird indeed.”

“But then that scary guy would at least talk to Shinra normally...but he was really scary. He used to throw a teacher’s desk at people!”

Throw a teacher's desk?

Ah, he must have meant "turn upside down." He probably just said that to make it sound more impressive.

"I see. Thank you. That guy sounds dangerous. I hope they're going to arrest him soon enough."

Izaya thanked the boy cursorily and left the hallway.

Never in his dreams did he expect that he would later be fighting that very "scary guy" time and time again.

After that he went on with life as he did in elementary school, his gaze focused on the human being called Kishitani Shinra—

But realization dawned upon him one day.

Nothing triggered it in particular.

It came like a sudden flash of light just like how you'd realize that an item was missing.

He realized that Kishitani Shinra was the opposite of him.

Shinra did not bother looking at the vast majority of human beings.

To put it more bluntly, it was almost as if Kishitani Shinra *had no interest in human beings themselves.*

Just like how he loved to watch all sorts of humans—

Shinra was not interested in humans at all.

What is it, then?

What is he watching in his life?

It was the first time he found something "different" in a human being in all these times he had observed them.

As soon as Izaya realized this, a new question was etched into his brain—

More than a month after the school's opening, he said to Kishitani Shinra:

“About the biology club, I think I can do it if you're OK with me being the Vice President.”

He wanted to know why Kishitani Shinra was not interested in human beings.



With such twisted passions concealed in the heart—

Raijin Middle School finally saw the birth of its first biology club ever.



12 years later, Ikebukuro, next to the pool at Raira Academy

“—So as I was telling you, it looks like Iza-nii...our brother is up to something again.”

“...Shock (I'm so tired of it)...”

Raira Academy's pool was open to students during summer vacation.

Two girls muttered as they sat by the poolside making ripples in the shining water with their feet.

The one they were talking to—a boy leaning against a wall behind the girls—looked from their backs to other places and back again as he sighed and asked, “...Why are you telling me this?”

Kuronuma Aoba, the boy who was talking in a more frank tone than the one he usually used with Mikado and the others, continued with a confused look.

“Why did you tell me to come here anyway?”

He looked like he wasn't planning on swimming. Instead of changing into swimwear he still wore a summer coat over a black Kartah shirt that opened at the front and chose to stand where he wouldn't be splashed.

Orihara Mairu, however, threw a handful of water at his feet.

She had a sports swimsuit on her appropriately worked out body. Next to her Kururi was wearing a bikini with spider web print.

Neither of them was wearing the school's designated swimwear, but since it was not during the semester, there were no rules saying that they couldn't.

Raira Academy had an eight-story building that kind of looked like a university's. Strangely enough, the pool was located on the sixth floor. The glass ceiling allowed swimming lessons to continue uninterrupted even on rainy days, and the windows on the walls looked over Ikebukuro.

During the summer the pool was open to all students who had a student ID when the Swimming Club was not using it for practice.

It looked like the Swimming Club was not using the pool today. Students were spread out in both the lanes reserved for tournaments and the regular space for free swimming, taking advantage of the pool in different ways.

Kururi and Mairu were of course sitting and splashing water about in the free swimming area. Beside them boys either whistled as they saw the two in swimwear or stole quick glances and immediately turned their eyes away.

Aoba belonged more to the latter category, but compared to the other boys at the pool, he enjoyed the advantage of being told to come by the girls themselves.

But he still did not know what their intention was. All he could do was wait for their response with feigned composure, his classmates' figures in swimwear making the wait all the more miserable.

Mairu, meanwhile, was smiling as she splashed even more water at Aoba.

"Come on, Kuronuma-kun, aren't you curious what our weirdo of a brother is up to?"

"..."

Aoba smiled slightly at the girl's words.

"What I'll say to you is this: I don't know what you're talking about."

For Kuronuma Aoba, the girls' brother—Orihara Izaya—was one of his enemies whom he despised.

He had confronted Izaya indirectly on several occasions in the past. The enmity had been brought into the open ever since a certain incident took place.

He had told neither Kururi nor Mairu about this, but it seemed that they already knew something.

Aoba was surprised, but not really scared of that fact.

It had only been four months since he first spoke to these twins. But he had made a point to find out what they were.

Compared to your average family, there was next to no communication between the Orihara twins and their brother. However, it seemed that they had their own information network and were surprisingly knowledgeable about the "underside of the city" that Aoba was dabbling in.

“There’s no need to hide things from us. It’s totally fine. We’ll never tell Iza-nii.”

“You can tell him if you want. I’d expect him to know what I’m up to, too.”

After that, looking around to make sure that no one was within earshot except the twin girls, he muttered, “Though I think in any normal family you’d have been warned to ‘stay away from Kuronuma Aoba’ if your family knew what kind of person I am, Kururi-chan, Mairu-chan.”

“When you put it like that it really sounds like you’re obsessed with yourself, you know.”

“You (Aoba-kun)...expect (you’re so interesting)...”

Aoba sighed again at the twin’s relaxed responses and smiled hollowly.

“Sorry, I let me carry myself away.”

“Well, we wanted to see a little bit of your real colors, but we are not going to hate you for it or anything. Not after you helped us out such a tremendous lot, Aoba-kun.”

“You guys are giving me too much credit.”

“Earlier there was this girl who was drawing up a plan to bully us on Raira Academy’s secret posting board, but all of a sudden she disappeared from the Internet, didn’t she?”

Mairu and Kururi glanced upwards at Aoba, who darted his eyes away and tried to change the topic.

“I see I’m no match for you. ...So what exactly is your perverted big brother involved in this time?”

“Yeah, this person called Tom-san told us about it...I don’t know if it was a Color Gang or bousouzoku, but he got the girlfriend of one of those groups’ leaders involved. Iza-nii has always walked around with lots of girls. Is he a playboy?”

“Lewd (He’s a libertine)...”

Aoba paused to think after he had heard more from the girls.

It has to do with women.

Would that Orihara Izaya really invite enmity so openly?

...But then I don’t really have a good idea what people would or would not do for women.

Still, he’s certainly not the type to be too infatuated with a woman to properly strategize.

As he was busy being bothered by these thoughts, the attractive twin girls continued their frolicking in the water.

“Kuru-nee, did your breasts get even bigger? At this rate you’ll soon be like Sonohara-sempai, President Kine of the Art Club, or the Vice President Yumikawa-sempai!”

“No (Stop that).”

“You keep saying that, yet you still wear a bikini to the pool, Kuru-nee. You’re so sulky and erotic at the same time! I love you!”



“...Public (There are other people around).”

The jolly banter continued between the girls as the groping went on in the water. Aoba kept his poker face intact, but darted his eyes away with a slight blush.

“...I’m so at a loss as to where to look at.”

His attitude was still kind of childlike just as his face was. Aoba brushed away the pink haze that threatened to take over in his chest and went back to analyzing the doubts he had about Orihara Izaya.

So.

I know that he’s back in Ikebukuro.

If I told Heiwajima Shizuo where his apartment is, maybe I’d at least succeed in harassing him, but...

He’d probably just flee and change his address.

I’d rather stay in the know about his whereabouts than make him disappear again for no good reason.

It’s probably safe to assume that he, too, is aware that I know where he lives.

Aoba believed that having faith in his opponent’s competence was the best kind of vigilance.

Should I try looking into this matter?

It would be better to keep Mikado-sempai out of it at this point...

Someone showered water as forcefully as they could on his body as he thought.

“That was cold—! “

Even his Kartah shirt under the summer coat was soaked. The momentary coldness of the water soon began to turn lukewarm.

As he turned to look wondering what had happened, he saw Mairu slashing the water with horizontally outstretched arms like an elementary school kid. That was how she was able to attack Aoba with a wall of water.

“You’re like an elementary school kid!”

No whistles were blown. She must have done it when the lifeguard wasn’t looking.

“Ahahah! Sorry about that! You were making such a scary face by the poolside, I couldn’t resist!”

“Don’t give me that ‘Sorry.’ Now my clothes are all wet. What am I supposed to do about that? Honestly.”

Did I really let so much of that show on my face? Aoba thought as he complained about his wet clothes and took a step towards Mairu—

But something soft was already touching him from behind.

“Game (We were just kidding)...”

“Heh?”

It was a quiet, seductive girl’s voice that had just whispered into his ear.

As soon as he realized that it was Kururi’s voice, he also realized that he was being hugged by the girl.

Eh!? What?

Kururi-chan? When did she!?

Wait, this soft feeling on my back...don’t tell me that is...!? Am I in some sort of adult game?

Wait, is she pressing herself against me? Eh, calm down...

Excitement and shock complicated his expression as Aoba turned around while falling into the pool—

He saw Kururi standing there with a deflated beach ball in her hands.

Ah.

A beach ball!?

So it was not Kururi-chan’s chest after all.

I don’t know whether to feel disappointed or grateful for that but calm down arghhh—

Aoba ended up landing in the pool next to Mairu without finishing his thoughts.

As he hastened to get back on his feet in the water, the bespectacled girl giggled and Kururi’s voice was asking “Health (Are you alright)...?”

“Oi, you over there, stop fooling around!”

The lifeguard must have seen them this time. The voice of warning rang throughout the pool.

“We’re sorry—!”

“...Regret (Sorry about that)...”

“Ah, sorry...but there’s nothing I should be sorry for, really...”

After the trio had apologized in three different ways, Aoba took off his completely soaked shirt and left it by the poolside. Through half-closed eyes he kept watching Kururi and Mairu.

“Honestly, I didn’t expect Kururi-chan to be the type to do something like that.”

“When we pull pranks on people, we’re the same person!”

“Same (Yeah)...”

“Kururi-chan, don’t tell me you got all excited because it’s summer and we’re at the pool?”

Instead of answering Aoba’s question, Kururi got into the water herself and, together with her sister, trapped Aoba in his swimwear in the middle.

“Wait, I’m out of here, I’m out of here.”

No longer able to stand being sandwiched between two girls, Aoba tried to clamber up the stairs to the poolside. His arms, however, were seized from both sides and he was pulled back into the water.

“You’re actually enjoying it, aren’t you? Kuronuma-kun, you always put on such a sulky face just to look cool!”

“...Like (That’s cute).”

Aoba’s male classmates passing by the poolside began to talk in a jealous tone as they saw the weakling of a boy being bullied by two girls.

“Oi oi, Aoba, what’s up with that? Are you really going out with those two?”

“Looks like he’s just being toyed around to me.”

“There’s no way Kuronuma would have the guts to go out with women.”

To hide their jealousy and bitterness the boys managed to remain calm by making fun of Aoba. They were of course without girlfriends.

But Aoba had no retort since what they said was the truth.

Our villain who created the gang called “Blue Square,” who ingratiated himself with Mikado and who was currently plotting something using Dollars’s power had almost zero experience in dealing with the opposite sex even if it was just as friends. Right now he was completely at a loss as to what to do about the twins in front of him.

To his classmates who knew nothing about the real Aoba, however, it just reinforced the image that he was the lucky guy hitting it off with pretty twin girls despite being as useless as he was.

His classmates continued to chitchat as Aoba remained unable to say anything in return.

“But then I’m seriously jealous of that little bastard.”

“Should we go pick up girls later?”

“Speaking of which, I heard that last year there was this Raira sempai going around the city trying to pick up girls until he dropped.”

“Ah, I saw him a lot when I was in middle school. But I also heard that he dropped out of school.”

“For real?”

“Yeah, he eloped with this girl or something.”

“I heard he found a job to save money for getting married.”

“Either way that makes me jealous as hell. He has a girl!”

“...You’re making me sad.”

They were no longer paying attention to Aoba as they walked with lowered heads to the locker room.

Having watched them leave, Aoba plunged his face into the water and sighed heavily underwater as he waited for both his head and his heart to cool.

Had he not done this in time the girls next to him would have made even the evil residing in him melt away.



Somewhere in Tokyo

“...So as I was telling you, that really bothered me. Both of them were so cute. I was this close to just burying myself in Kururi-chan’s chest and letting everything else go screw itself.”

“...I’m going to kill you!”

As he heard Aoba’s voice on the other end of phone, the tall boy ground his teeth loudly and yelled.

But Aoba’s voice remained as calm as ever on the phone.

“I’ve heard you say that line too many times already, Yoshikiri. But the guy those two really have the hots for is Hanejima Yuuhei. They’re not just fans, mind you—they really are after him. I can’t blame them for thinking that they actually have a chance, though, since they know his brother and everything.”

“Aoba, you bastard...did you have to mention the name of that idol who’s like the representative of all popular guys in the world? You did that just to annoy me, right? Right?”

“You may want to reserve your rage towards popular guys for when we’ve finally crushed Orihara Izaya.”

“That Orihara Izaya, is he really that popular?”

“Ever since high school he’s had this following of girls who kind of worship him or something. What is more, Kururi-chan and Mairu-chan call him ‘onii-chan’ or ‘Iza-nii.’ What else do you want?”

“...Great, I see. Since you were giggling when those twins splashed water on you at the pool, I’m going to kill you, too.”

“Looks like I’m getting killed either way.”

Aoba’s chuckle on the other end of the phone infuriated the boy named Yoshikiri further.

“So are you trying to get me mad on purpose because you have a death wish? Is that why you called me? It is, isn’t it?”

“It’s not like that. After I had supper with Kururi-chan and Mairu-chan I looked a bit into that thing Izaya is involved in right now.”

“Supper!? With two girls!?”

“That was not my point at all. Just listen. There’s this strange group called ‘Heaven Slave’ dealing in drugs in Tokyo. They got into trouble with Awakusu-kai.”

“...Never heard of that. So where did you eat?”

“Russian Sushi. ...Heaven Slave isn’t really active in Ikebukuro, so I didn’t expect you to have heard of it. Ikebukuro is a relatively safe area in itself, and the one in charge of the places such groups would usually go happens to be Awakusu-kai’s Akabayashi, who’s kind of famous for hating drugs.”

“I see. So basically you’re on a drug-free high from treating two girls to a meal, right? Lucky bastard.”

“No, I was the one treated to a meal. Those two have a lot of money on their hands for some reason.”

“‘I was the one treated to a meal’! Hehhhhhh! If you split the bill it would have been another story, but you let two girls treat you to sushi? You gigolo bastard!! ‘I was the one treated to a meal’! And you had the guts to say that to my face! Hehhhhhhhhhhhhhh! I’m going to kill you! Die!”

“I know, I know. So this ‘Heaven Slave’ is both the name of their drug and their branch that sells the drug. That is but my own speculation, though. Anyway, it seems that those people are looking for information on Orihara Izaya for some reason.”

“...How did you know such stuff?”

“An old acquaintance of mine works at the nightclub they’re now using as their headquarters... I was asking around about Izaya, and he just happened to know. He said those guys were staying in a certain room in the club and coming out to the hall to sniff around for information on Orihara Izaya.”

“Wait a second. If even Aoba knows where to find them, the yakuza at Awakusu must have been aware of them since long ago. Why have they not crushed them yet? Are they backed by some other yakuza group?”

“I don’t know if there are other yakuza groups involved, but Awakusu-kai probably just thinks now is not the best time. There’s this guy called Shijima among the members...he’s a college student, but it looks like he comes from a rich and powerful family of pretty high status. There seemed to be no way to get information on the group’s leader even if I tried. Awakusu-kai

could just have got hold of one of his underlings and made him tell everything. They're probably waiting for the best time to act to make the job cleaner."

"I see. So are we going to do anything about them?"

"Just keep an eye on them. I don't know if and how Orihara Izaya is involved, but it's better to consolidate our own territory first for now. Of course, we can't risk letting their moves go unnoticed either, so make absolutely sure that we have our eyes on them at all times."

"I see. Die."

"I see you don't even know what you're saying anymore when you say 'Die,' Yoshikiri... But that's fine. Anyway, it's true that certain groups are acting weird recently. I heard that *the remnants of the Yellow Turbans are acting kind of weird, too.*"

"Is that your brother's doing?"

"No...I wasn't talking about the Blue Square people who infiltrated them before...I was talking about the same group of people who first confronted us."

"Huh. Those guys. That was back in our first or second year in middle school, right?"

"Back then you were already fighting high school students, Yoshikiri. You hardly ever lost."

"It made no sense at all. They were older than me, yet they were weaker. Is seniority just an urban legend now?"

"That's not how you use the word 'seniority.' Speaking of which, I'm surprised you even know that word, Yoshikiri. Whom did you hear it from? Your grandma?"

"...I'm going to kill you!"

"Your death threats carry less and less weight now, Yoshikiri. I've gotten so used to them they don't scare me at all... Seriously, is that all you've got in your vocabulary, Yoshikiri? Do you know any Japanese besides 'I'm going to kill you' and 'seniority'?"

"...~~~~~!"

The cell phone was squeezed so hard that it began to make cracking sounds as Yoshikiri yelled something that didn't sound like words.

As soon as he did so, a boy called his name from afar.

"Oooi, Yoshikiri—pass me the phone."

“...”

“I’m finished. *All that’s left is him.*”

As he heard him Yoshikiri ground his teeth and tossed the cell phone to the boy who just spoke—

And immediately stopped the metal bat being swung at his side with his other hand.

“Hello? It’s me, it’s me. Send some money my way.”

Aoba answered in an even tone to the teasing male voice, “Ah, Gin. Where’s Yoshikiri off to?”

“To finish the last one of them off.”

The boy called Gin was looking at Yoshikiri as the latter kicked a delinquent in the front teeth with the heel of his shoe.

“That guy’s really something. *How on earth does he manage to fight while speaking on the phone?*”

As Gin looked again he saw that several more men had already fallen at Yoshikiri’s feet, either unconscious or groaning in pain. It looked like all the while he had been on the phone with Aoba he had been fighting multiple men using just one hand, both feet, and a forehead.

“Seriously, I was having a hard time dealing with just three. Anyway, neither Yoshikiri nor I made it to the fight with the stalker earlier*. That stalker kicked several of our Blue Square men’s asses. The shame, man, the burning shame.”

** Stalker: Here referring to Adabashi Kisuke in Vol.8.*

“Don’t say it like that. That stalker was far stronger than we expected. I’m actually more interested in the Yellow Turbans guy who beat two of our people.”

“Well, that is quite embarrassing too since we lost two to one. Shame on our members is shame on us, isn’t it? I’m so embarrassed I gave it my fullest today. Yoshikiri feels the same way. I thought it would be piece o’ cake today since we called all our best men to come, but the Nitari* brothers said there was this anime they wanted to watch so they passed, Neko’s with his girlfriend, Houjou’s sleeping, so we ended up having to beat these guys flat on our own anyway, you know that?”

** Nitari, Neko: Nitari (“fox shark”) and Neko (“cat”) are most likely nicknames.*

Several men were sprawled out on the ground at Gin's feet. His head was injured. Blood trailed down his face from his temple.

From the phone dirtied by Gin's blood, Aoba's voice continued regardless.

"Well, Yoshikiri's good at fighting, not at thinking. All he said to me on the phone was pretty much just 'I'm going to kill you.'"

"What? Was it something you said, Aoba?"

"I told him that I went to the pool with Kururi-chan and Mairu-chan."

"Die, you. Just die. Why aren't you here, anyway?"

Aoba laughed as Gin gave a straightforward reply.

"I will die. I'm human after all. I'd like to live until 80 if possible, though."

"We'll see if you'll still be alive after 80 *seconds*. Shut your mouth."

"Why is it that everyone in Blue Square has such a nasty tongue?"

"Be grateful that at least we are there to hang out with you. If not for us a bastard like you would have ended up nothing more than a lonely petty criminal for life."

As he heard the vicious remark Aoba answered as if to get Gin mad on purpose.

"I put on a good show at school, so I actually have quite a lot of friends."

"Is that so? I get it now. Die. Or, in English, S-H-I-N-E*!"

* "Die" is pronounced "shine" in Japanese.

"That's still Japanese. SHINE is English for 'emitting light.'"

"I was telling you to trigger a nuclear fusion inside you, emit as much light as you want, and die. Just explode already, you fool."

As Gin kept behaving like an elementary school kid Aoba switched back to the topic in all seriousness—probably because he knew it would be futile to stop him.

"...So, how is it going? *Is Mikado-sempai alright?*"

"Yeah, he's alive. But honestly, that one's not carved out for fighting at all. He fell unconscious halfway so I took him back to the van to let him sleep. He's almost as bad as you and Yatsufusa. I don't even know why he insists on coming to our 'cleansings' of Dollars

himself. Since he's basically the god on the portable shrine he should just stay behind and smile upon us."

"No, actually...I don't think I could have won against him in a fight, either."

Aoba laughed pleasantly and muttered as if to himself:

"Because I have no idea how Mikado-sempai is going to turn out, really."

♂ ♀

After hanging up the phone, Aoba looked at the scar on his left palm and muttered, "I can't wait to see how this is going to turn out, Mikado-sempai."

At the same time he was reminded of what Gin had just said.

"...What if there was no one willing to hang out with me? I don't even want to think about it."

In his mind's eye he saw the brother of the twins he rather liked—the man toward whom he could feel nothing but animosity.

"Because the last thing I want is to turn out like that shitty bastard."

Narrowing his eyes as he closed his cell phone, Aoba paused to think.

Speaking of ones to hang out with, what exactly is the relationship like between that underground doctor and Izaya?

The man in the white coat had held a scalpel to Aoba's neck when he went to talk to the Headless Rider. He had felt dangerous to him back then.

"You are exactly like Izaya."

Aoba was reminded of that man's face when he said those words. He continued to mull things over.

...

Just friends? ...No way.

He had looked into this since he was curious.

What he found, however—

Was the record of Orihara Izaya having stabbed Kishitani Shinra—the underground doctor—in the side, resulting in major injuries, back when the two were in middle school.

Anyone would have thought that he must have hated him or seen him as an enemy...

But rumor also has it that they went to the same high school as well...

What exactly is their relationship like?



12 years ago, summer vacation, Biology Room at Raijin Middle School

“Well, well, I’m expecting a lot from you, Vice President!”

As Shinra patted him on the shoulder with a smile, Izaya smiled back hollowly and replied, “So basically, you’re planning on doing nothing yourself...right?”

“Of course I’m going to do something! I’ll at least be here to cheer you on.”

Shinra sat down in the swivel chair in the Biology Room and kept spinning around as if treating it like a toy.

They ended up founding the Biology Club together and were now using this Biology Room for their club activities.

Shinra was the President and Izaya the Vice President.

Their main activity was raising plants. Since the majority of those were carnivorous plants, however, they did little to meet people’s aesthetic expectations. Others saw the plants as either a curiosity or something gross. Hardly anyone volunteered to join them.

The work to take care of the plants, which was not demanding to begin with, became almost negligible once it was divided among the several weirdos who joined the club as soon as it was founded. It turned out exactly the way Shinra and Izaya had intended it. To ensure that they even chose species that were particularly easy to take care of.

The Biology Club was therefore the second earliest to go home, next only to those who had no club activities. Their planters and flower beds were out there for everyone to see, so it hardly occurred to anyone that the Biology Club was barely doing anything.

Around the time summer vacation began, however, their advisor told them that there would be exhibition space reserved for the Biology Club at the annual cultural festival, “So you’d want to come up with something to show your schoolmates; the sooner the better.” They would have had to come to the school to take care of the plants anyway, but Izaya volunteered to do pretty much everyone else’s work. (In their reports to the school they still made it look like the work was divided among the not-so-enthusiastic members, of course.)

Today was the first day of summer vacation. They had planned a meeting including the President himself, but the few members they had had looked like they couldn’t be bothered to come from the very first day of vacation. “I’ll just leave it to you guys.”—After saying that to either Shinra or Izaya at the school’s closing ceremony, they were, indeed, nowhere to be seen today.

“None of the other members are coming, which means everything is ours to decide. And I’ve decided that everything is the Vice President’s to decide, so you are actually the only one making decisions here. Excellent!”

“True. In that case I will observe the decomposition of your body if you drop dead here and present my findings at the Cultural Festival.”

The line sounded like it belonged to a psycho killer, but putting aside the fact that such a feat was impossible to achieve on one’s own in Japan, it actually did exist as a more or less normal kind of study as far as Izaya knew. There are even research facilities in the world that place corpses under different environments to observe the changes they undergo.

Yeah, I think that one is called...

Izaya was about to search his memory when Shinra, as if to save him the time and trouble, nodded and said, “Right, people do that kind of experiment in that research institute at a university in Tennessee. They call it the ‘Corpse Farm,’ don’t they? They put donated bodies under all sorts of environments and collect data on how they decompose or become consumed by insects. The police in turn use their data for forensic purposes like determining the time of death in murder cases.”

Izaya couldn’t help but feel slightly surprised as Shinra raved on.

“...You know a lot of stuff.”

“My father works as a researcher at Nebula, that’s why. He would always tell me things like these at dinner.”

“At dinner...? No wonder your mother no longer loved him and left him.”

“I’m actually more impressed that you still remember such details from my self-introduction.”

Shinra kept chuckling even as his family was being talked about in a sarcastic tone.

With that smile still on his face, he asked Izaya a strange question.

“But what if...it does not decompose?”

“What?”

“I’m not talking about adipocere formation or anything. If the corpse actually never decomposes, could it become capable of communicating with humans?”

Was that supposed to be some sort of big confession?

For a moment Izaya thought that Shinra was going to tell him about his necrophilia or some other kind of strange predilection. That would be something Izaya would be interested in listening to.

So he remained silent and waited for Shinra to continue.

Shinra, on the other hand, did not look as if he was about to make an important confession. Instead he continued in an even tone, “...Suppose there is this gorgeous, gorgeous corpse of a woman whose heart has stopped beating.”

So it is necrophilia after all...?

At last he was going to find out what kind of kinks this boy, whose oddity had bugged him from day one, had—thought Izaya hopefully as he kept listening—

But the boy’s next words went in a somehow different direction from what he had expected.

“That corpse never decomposes. It simply strikes you as extremely beautiful. But since you can’t communicate with a corpse, she would never respond to your love even if you do fall in love with her, would she? She’s just a corpse after all.”

“Well, of course not. But if you have a rich enough imagination you can always ventriloquize her.”

“What if this corpse can move, then?”

“...Huh? Are you talking about zombies?”

That was the only answer Izaya could come up with at the abrupt question. Shinra, however, shook his head with a serious expression.

“To call it a zombie would still be inappropriate since it still implies some decomposition...anyway, suppose that this corpse begins to move with no sign of decomposition at all...in other words, suppose that it becomes a zombie that never decomposes instead of a normal corpse that does decompose...would it be possible to communicate with her...or, in other words, to love her?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What if that zombie is docile and never eats human brains or flesh? What if that zombie is intelligent like a dog that understands what humans say? What if that zombie can smile tenderly at you? What if that zombie can talk and joke normally with humans despite its lack of a functional heart? What do you think?”

The President of the Biology Club tapped a flowerpot containing a carnivorous plant as he prattled on.

What he had said in his even tone did not sound like a joke at all, but was nevertheless too surreal to take seriously.

“...A beautiful zombie that never decomposes and even cracks jokes...wouldn't that just be a special kind of human being capable of moving around without a beating heart...I suppose?”

“What if that zombie no longer possesses the upper part of its body? What if it's a zombie that wiggles its waist around its sexy navel and writes on paper with its slender legs to communicate with humans?”

“It would be hard to call something like that human, but...”

Izaya did not know what Shinra was talking about at all. He was therefore at a loss as to how to react.

He had hardly ever felt this unsettled by anything other people had said or done. But what the boy in front of him had just said was simply confusing.

There was something fundamental about this boy named Kishitani Shinra that differentiated him from all the other humans he had met up until now.

That was the conclusion Izaya had reached in these recent months.

“Would it be abnormal to fall in love with a zombie that has only the lower part of its body?”

“I think it's fine as long as you think about it as an extreme form of leg fetish.”

“I see! Never thought of that.”

Shinra sighed in admiration. Izaya, on the other hand, failed to see why Shinra was so impressed with his sarcastic remark.

“If falling in love with humans is normal and falling in love with anything else is not, where should one draw the line? Ah, loving your cats, dogs, or other pets like family is something different, I think.”

“...?”

“If the line should be drawn between falling in love with something living and something dead, would you say it is abnormal to fall in love with something neither living nor dead and at the same time not human and almost human...? That’s what I was trying to say. Where is the point at which normality ends and abnormality begins? The answer depends on each individual person, I suppose.”

A fly that had been in the room for a while chose this moment to approach the row of carnivorous plants. As soon as it landed on the Venus flytrap, the open leaves shut like a clam and trapped the fly in its green jail.

Shinra, who witnessed this scene, looked as if he was staring at something far away in space as he continued.

“The same goes for these carnivorous plants. If they could communicate with humans via telepathy or something of the sort, would there be mutual understanding? Would it be abnormal to fall in love with or want to be friends with them?”

.....

What, exactly, is he talking about?

Izaya struggled to maintain a calm expression as he tried desperately to think—

Finally, he had a theory.

Neither living nor dead...

Ah, is he talking about manga characters...?

I see. So he fell in love with a girl that exists only in anime?

If that is what he was talking about, a zombie without an upper body was kind of too weird an analogy.

“Yeah, I don’t really see a problem here either. Some people give their plants names when they’re fond of them. I don’t know what percentage of them would love plants as intensely

as they would a member of the opposite sex, but I would think that it is alright to fall in love with anything as long as your love does not hurt anyone, isn't it?"

In fact he loved to observe people when they hurt others for love, but he concealed that part of his nature and answered Shinra's question like a normal human being would.

But the boy in front of him again managed to exceed his imagination.

"I want to love even if it means I have to hurt others."

"Oi oi, what is it that you want to love?"

Izaya sighed with a hollow smile as Shinra gave a curt and unequivocal reply.

Kishitani Shinra. Like I thought...

He's kind of abnormal.

He's not looking at humans at all.

He's different from me, from everyone else.

Shinra is not interested in humans.

But that still does not explain it.

He does not despise humans, nor does he look down upon them. There is no hatred for the world in him. None of these is the reason he is not interested in humans.

They just don't appear on his radar at all.

He is so obsessed with something else that the entire human race has faded into the background.

...What is it?

What is it that his gaze is focused upon?

Right now I have no idea what that is.

If it's a character in a manga or movie...I can still understand. There are people like that...

But Shinra doesn't feel like that kind of person to me.

Shinra waved his hand dismissively as he saw Izaya fall into silent reverie.

“Ahh, there’s no need to think too much into what I said about hurting others. I meant it as a figure of speech. Anyway, I’m counting on you for this plant observation thing. I’ll do it once or twice a week as well.”

Now that Shinra had switched the topic, Izaya felt an even stronger impulse to press the question further. He refrained from popping the question directly, however, since he still believed in keeping others “neither too close nor too distant.”

There will always be time.

I’ll just have to find out the truth bit by bit.

With that Izaya was able to break into his halfhearted, everyday smile again as he shrugged and said, “Of course, of course. There’s less to worry about if you come back to check routinely yourself instead of staying at home the entire time.”

“You think so? Well, if I could have my way I would want to stay at home whenever possible. But it would be a headache for me if my family starts to suspect that I’m not taking part properly in club activities.”

“It would indeed. Or you could have taken the plants home to tend to—if only we didn’t have this many.”

Izaya shrugged again as he looked at all the flowerpots by the windows in the Biology Room.

Shinra had begun to pack his belongings as if eager to go home after sensing that he had talked a little too much about that certain “thing” in his life.

“I’m going home for today then. I’ll be back to water the plants on Friday, so just call me if you need anything before that.”

“No problem. I’ll just enjoy my life as the King of the Biology Room here until Friday comes.”

“Watch out for the guillotine. To me you feel like the type who would be easily captured by the populace if you don’t watch out, Izaya.”

“How mean of you.”

His intuition about people is sharp even though he takes no interest in them.

Because I would agree with him on that myself.

As Izaya continued his negative self-analysis, Shinra left the room in quick steps.

He was smiling radiantly like an elementary school kid who was at last about to embark on that field trip he had always looked forward to.

There was probably something he looked forward to very much at home.

What a strange guy.

I'll just keep observing him in the future.

But I have to watch out. Getting too close to him might be dangerous.

Izaya looked up at the ceiling and chuckled to himself as he reaffirmed the abnormality of the human being called Kishitani Shinra in his head.

“The King of the Biology Room...huh.”

He repeated the title he had just given himself and muttered in a low voice, “It’s starting to suit me just fine this way.”

One month later, however—

The King of the Biology Room would have to end his reign in the most unexpected way.

He was to be taken into protective custody for stabbing Kishitani Shinra, the President—something Izaya couldn’t even in his wildest imagination have foreseen.

♂ ♀

12 years later, Rakuei Gym

“That was your brother...?”

In her black karate uniform, Mairu kept kicking the sandbag as she replied to Awakusu Akane’s voice, “Yeah...! Hyah! The one who, stepped out of the...car! Before you got...in! Akane-chan, that was my older...brother! Orihara...Izaya!”

At every pause she aimed a different kind of kick at the sandbag, which gave heavy, dull thuds upon contact with her foot.

“Izaya?”

Akane began to think as soon as she heard this name.

“Hm? Have you heard of that name before? Did those scary guys in Awakusu-kai ever mention him in front of you?”

“No, it’s just that I know someone with the same name.”

Mairu stopped delivering kicks at the sandbag as soon as she heard Akane. Using one hand to keep the swaying sandbag still, she asked, “Really? Izaya is an extremely rare name...are you sure it was not Iza-nii in disguise?”

“No, it was someone much skinnier than your brother, Mairu-onee-chan...and he said that Izaya was not his given name, but his family name.”

“Did he? Well, I’m glad that it was not Iza-nii. If I were you I’d stay away from him, you know.”

Mairu did not press the topic further, presumably because she was not that interested in the first place. In a second she was kicking the sandbag again.

Akane, on the other hand, began to reflect upon the man called “Izaya.”

She remembered the woman named Nakura whom she had come to know online. The man had claimed to be a friend of the woman’s and given Akane advice on running away from home.

He had also told her about Heiwajima Shizuo and immediately afterwards given her that stun gun—now that she thought about it, the man was indeed strange in a lot of ways.

But Akane never mentioned the names Izaya or Nakura to anyone in Awakusu-kai including her father. If they knew that those people had something to do with her running away from home, they would probably do cruel things to those people somewhere out of her sight. She couldn’t let that happen to them.

So Akane never mentioned the names Izaya or Nakura no matter how hard the Awakusu-kai men tried to get her to tell—but now she had at last realized that there was indeed something suspicious about the duo.

I never got another message from Nakura-san after that...

Even so, Akane still prayed that the duo she had met would never fall into Awakusu-kai’s hands.

I wonder how they are doing.



Inside a car somewhere in Tokyo

“So are you suspecting that Orihara, Big Brother Shiki?”

Shiki answered in an even tone from the back seat as he heard the young driver’s question.

“...No, it’s just a feeling. I don’t really have any proof.”

“But he looked nonchalant when he met Miss Akane yesterday...and Miss Akane did act like she had never seen him before.”

“Indeed. But even if he was somehow involved when Miss ran away from home, he would have known better than to show his face in front of her. I was really just dropping him off before picking Miss up yesterday.”

It was a voice exerting considerable pressure on the listener, in which any display of emotion was constrained to a bare minimum.

Shiki remained silent afterwards and looked like he was not planning to actually voice his thoughts.

Having realized his intention, the young driver changed the topic.

“That Orihara, are you really expecting him to find out something about ‘Amphisbaena’?”

“I’m not expecting that much, but I won’t underestimate him. He does have an information network different from ours.”

“Would it be possible to snatch that information network from his hands?”

The driver seemed really curious about Izaya; even after he had switched the topic he soon began to ask about him again. The only reaction he got from Shiki, however, was a shake of the head and these tired words:

“I would have done that long ago if only the information network in his hands were that simple. He is not the type to cave into threats, either. If we kill him, the information network will just disappear. To make proper use of him is the most correct way...actually, I’d say the second most correct way.”

Shiki fell into deep thought as if to negate what he had just said. A moment later, he continued in a voice with a shade of warning to the driver.

“...Maybe it would be better for Awakusu-kai if we finish him off while we still can rather than keep trying to make use of him. But it’s too early to say either way—that’s how hard to deal with he is.”

“I’m sure he’ll be piece o’ cake for you, Big Brother Shiki.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you. I heard that he’s been working for Medei Group as well. Awakusu-kai would need a very good reason to kill him without permission from Medei Group. We’d probably have to convince them that ‘The fire he’s playing with is going to kill you,’ for example.”

It was probably Shiki’s idea of a joke, but the driver shuddered involuntarily, as if an icicle had been driven into his spine. He didn’t ask anymore questions about Izaya.

Shiki, on the other hand, fell silent for a while as he reflected upon what had happened during the Golden Week.

The biggest question is Heiwajima Shizuo.

Why did he go to the place where our members had just been murdered?

During the Golden Week, Awakusu Mikiya—the Young Head of Awakusu-kai—had hired Slon and Vorona, the “freelancers,” to finish off the spies in the organization. Everything went according to the plan until Heiwajima Shizuo showed up at the killing scene and led to the entire drama with Awakusu-kai trying to hunt Shizuo down all over the city.

It wouldn’t surprise me at all if Orihara Izaya knew what kind of “work” Slon was asked to do...even if Slon didn’t tell, Izaya could have had people stalk him or used a tapping device.

And, as soon as Slon’s “work” for Awakusu-kai is finished, he lured Heiwajima Shizuo to the scene...

...Still...it seems quite impossible that he could have done it without knowing the nature of the work Slon was about to do.

It’s probably better to assume that he has ties to Slon outside of work as well.

You can never wholly trust Orihara Izaya.

Shiki kept thinking. The driver, on the other hand, seemed no longer able to withstand the pressure of the silence.

He looked at Shiki’s face in the rear-view mirror and brought up something else.

“How is it going with the other group? Those students who got into trouble with Akabayashi-san, I mean.”

“Ah...we already found out who the student leader is. But that kid’s father and grandfather are both bigwigs in Tokyo...if we do anything to annoy them we’ll get ourselves in trouble with people other than those in Medei Group.”

“What should we do then?”

“To be honest, the best scenario we can hope for is that the folks selling ‘Heaven Slave’ and ‘Amphisbaena’ will both die trying to bite each other’s head off...”

Shiki discontinued after that, his words turned into a low mutter inside himself.

And to make that happen, I’ll have to wait for the information I’ve asked Orihara Izaya to collect...This is indeed an unsavory thought.

♂ ♀

Somewhere in Tokyo, the rooftop of a building

“Yo, Courier. Did you have a good time with Shinra last night?”

Izaya greeted Celty with his usual smile, not knowing how much displeasure he was giving Shiki, his client.

Celty did not try to conceal her exasperation as she typed on her PDA.

[What did you mean by ‘a good time’? Stop picturing others’ private lives in your head.]

“That was mean. *He only said that because he thinks Shinra and I are a sweet couple—* that’s what you should have thought when you heard my words.”

[Enough about that. I heard about it.]

“About what?” Izaya asked nonchalantly.

Celty pushed the PDA quickly toward his face.

[About that scar on Shinra’s side.]

“.....”

[He told me everything.]

“Of course he would only tell you. He never mentioned a word of it to anyone else, not even back in high school.”

He shook his head as if slightly shocked, but when Celty saw the way his smile remained firmly in place, she had a feeling that he had in some way foreseen it. Izaya’s smile further confirmed Celty’s opinion about him.

[I can never trust you.]

“So what are you going to do? Turn down my offer?”

[No, that’s something different. No matter what happened in the past, you’re still one of Shinra’s only friends in this world.]

“Friends, you say...*but do you really think that Shinra sees Shizu-chan or me as his friend?*” Izaya said, chuckling.

Celty asked right away:

[What are you talking about?]

“He’s simply not interested in humans. In this whole wide world, the only thing he actually ‘sees’ is you. Even if Shizu-chan and I treat Shinra as a friend, he’ll never so much as cast us a second glance. When all is said and done you are still the absolute top of his priority list. I think he remained on friendly terms with Shizu-chan and me only because of something you said a long time ago—something along the lines of ‘You should cherish your friends.’”

Celty stopped typing for a moment after hearing Izaya’s words.

It was true that she had often said such things to Shinra in the past.

Shinra had even lent a hand to Yagiri Pharmaceuticals for his love.

He’s the kind of person who would lie to even me to be with me.

As a result, however, Celty fell for Shinra on the very night she found out about his lie.

She had now recalled what kind of person Shinra was from memories of her own relationship with him. Her shoulders sank as if from a sigh as she typed some more words onto the PDA.

[...I can't say that I disagree with you entirely. He's not the type to separate the good from the evil. It's hard to say if he has ever felt the normal kind of friendship for you or Shizuo.]

"It is, isn't it?"

[But the 'normal kind of friendship' is in itself too ambiguous a concept to define, isn't it?]

Celty knew very well what Shinra was like—

But she still couldn't help but feel annoyed when she heard Izaya speak ill of Shinra.

[Aren't your standards skewed too if you only see someone as a friend if he puts you high on his priority list?]

"That is a misunderstanding. I already see every human being in the world, Shinra included, as my friend, lover and family...with the exception of Shizu-chan, of course."

[You are interested in all human beings. Shinra is not interested in any of them...I still think Shinra is more normal than you are.]

Though Celty wanted to start talking about work as soon as possible, she still shot back at Izaya before she could help herself.

Izaya, however looked like he had a different opinion. With outstretched hands he answered, "Shinra more normal than I am? Not that I want to speak ill of him or anything, but now that Shinra's told you about the scar on his side, I'd assume that you too have realized that he's long been anything but normal, right?"

[Maybe.]

"Without doubt, the one who drove him mad was you, wasn't it? Even if it was not your intention, Kishitani Shinra fell in love with a dullahan, something not human, something superior...or at least so Shinra thought. That was why he didn't think humans were worth his attention at all, wasn't it? Because he came to know something like you."

These words sounded like they were meant to unsettle Celty. She remained calm, however, as she typed without avoiding the subject.

[Yes. I know that very well. I don't think I'm nearly as perfect as he thinks I am, but I do think that I was the reason Shinra turned out abnormal.]

"So what are you going to do?"

[What else? I'm going to stay by his side until the very end, of course.]

Celty said straightforwardly.

Izaya averted his eyes somewhat as he threw a sarcastic remark at her, “Is that your idea of atonement? If you keep defending Shinra like that you’ll only make him hate humans more...well, I wouldn’t actually say hate...you’ll only make Shinra care even less about humans than he does now.”

[Maybe. But I...I don’t want to leave him. I realized that again after he was injured. That’s why I can never forgive the one who hurt him. It’s also why I’m willing to accept your suspicious offer.]

“.....”

[I love Shinra, just like he loves me.]

The corners of Izaya’s mouth curled as he saw this line on the PDA. Shrugging, he said to Celty, “That’s kind of embarrassing to hear. Why is it that you can say such things without feeling embarrassed? Is it because you’re more human than humans themselves, or is it because you’re not? ...Whatever. You’re still a monster, and I’m not interested in monsters.”

[Say whatever you want to say.]

“I have nothing else to say.”

Izaya walked to the fence around the rooftop and picked up a bag.

“We’d better start talking about work, then.”

♂ ♀

Several minutes later

The Courier in the black rider suit left the building. She was stroking the seat of her Black Motorbike.

In her left hand there was a black leather bag for laptop computers. It seemed to be what Orihara Izaya had trusted her with.

A man who had been watching her every move from behind the vending machine spoke into his cell phone.

“It’s the Black Motorbike. There’s no mistaking it.”

A composed voice of a man came from the other end of the phone.

“So it has to do with Orihara Izaya after all.”

“Shijima, what exactly did Kumoi-san say?”

“He is curious about what Orihara Izaya is asking her to transport, but I’m pretty sure he’s looking into the whole ‘Amphisbaena’ business. Maybe he already has a clue.”

“Should we just do nothing and see how it goes for the moment?”

“...No. That way Awakusu-kai might crush ‘Amphisbaena’ before we can get our hands on ‘Amphisbaena’s’ system. That would totally defeat the purpose.”

Shijima and his men in “Heaven Slave” became aware of the existence of “Amphisbaena” only after their catastrophic encounter with Akabayashi.

One of their drug clients had been to the underground casinos “Amphisbaena” ran, so they tried sending several of their men to infiltrate the underground casinos.

After several gambling meetings, however, none of them received any further notice of a next meeting.

They’ve noticed us—so Shijima had concluded.

The client who had told them about “Amphisbaena” stopped getting those notices as well. He complained in their faces, but shut up as soon as they threatened to cut his supply of drugs.

As they looked further into the matter they soon knew why.

The secret was in the special chips shaped like large coins and distributed only to members.

When they carefully took the high-tech pieces of machinery apart, they found that not only did they work as proofs of membership and electronic records of wins and losses—

They also contained things that looked like taps and transmitters.

That was probably how they were able to obtain information on any suspicious activity on the clients’ part and immediately stop sending them notices of meetings.

The batteries inside these chips only last for a limited period of time, of course—but new chips were distributed to replace the old ones at every meeting. The members had been told that it was to prevent electronic fraud on the data stored inside. But now that Shijima and his men

thought about it, the real purpose must have been to ensure that the chips wouldn't run out of battery life.

Combining GPS with a tapping device would be the best way to gather secret information on the members and threaten them when necessary.

On the other hand, they would be in trouble if the members became aware of these tapping devices. Shijima assumed that these chips would automatically send out some sort of signal when opened, and as a result the member would no longer be invited to future meetings.

"Kumoi-san really wants that system. I also find it extremely attractive myself. If we are careful in selecting locations we can create a whole new transaction network for 'Heaven Slave.' Moreover, it would never hurt to have a way to get our hands on taps and transmitters in that kind of quantity."

"So we're not going to crush them?" The man asked as he kept his eyes on the Black Motorbike.

Shijima nodded on the other end of the phone and said, "No, we're not...I'd be satisfied with the most fair deal with them we can strike. To make that happen we will need their personal information."

"Are you saying that you're counting on that information broker named Orihara Izaya?"

"Exactly. If he's working for Awakusu-kai on this matter, we'll have to have him dealt with before he finishes the job."

"Dealt with?"

The man couldn't help but ask when he heard the businesslike phrase.

Shijima's answer, however, was even colder and with less mercy.

"We'll be in trouble if Awakusu-kai catches wind of this. Once we get the information from him it'll be best to *make him disappear in silence.*"

"Kill him, you mean."

"You don't say that out loud in the street. What if someone hears you?"

"Wait, even if worst comes to worst...why can't we just work with him...?"

The man couldn't help but feel fear for Shijima for how easily the latter had decided to kill another man. Shijima, on the other hand, answered in a tone that seemed to say 'What is wrong with you?'

“We’re talking about ‘Amphisbaena’ here. They’re Awakusu-kai’s enemies, so we’ll have no problem working with them. But Orihara Izaya is moving on Awakusu-kai’s very own orders. How on earth would it be possible to get him to work with us?”

“But...”

“Why are you such a coward in your thoughts? Granted, we failed, but we did set out to kill Awakusu-kai’s Akabayashi once, remember?”

“But he’s a non-yakuza,” the man insisted.

Shijima replied calmly, “I wouldn’t call someone moving on Awakusu-kai’s orders a non-yakuza.”

“But...”

“Hang on. I got a message from Kumoi-san.”

“...!?”

As soon as he heard the name “Kumoi,” the hesitant man froze entirely as if a hand made of dry ice had just grasped his head.

“I’m going out to meet him.”

“...Are you?”

“Yeah...even if that means more scars for me.”

Shijima sighed and proceeded to say to the man with a chuckle, “I’ll make sure that Orihara Izaya suffers for whatever kind of scars I’m going to get.”

Finally, Shijima let some laughter escape his lips before speaking again.

“See? Now we have yet another reason to kill him.”

♂ ♀

12 years ago, Raijin Middle School, the last day of summer vacation

“I still don’t think this is right.”

“How is this any of your business?”

“You see, I’ve told my family that you’re my friend.”

“So?”

“So if I don’t stop a friend when he does this kind of thing in front of me, well, it’ll put me in a difficult position.”

“Are you a fool, Shinra? You sound like a puppet with no will of your own. Everything you do is for putting up a good show in front of your family.”

“I wouldn’t mind being a puppet if it means I can stay connected to my loved one.”

“You’re not even making sense.”

The one who heard this “peaceful quarrel” was a student from the Art Club who happened to be walking past the Biology Room.

It did not sound like the kind of quarrel that would lead to a fight, so the student simply kept walking as if nothing had happened.

Only five minutes later, however—

“What was that noise!?”

The PE teacher heard the sound of glass breaking when he was busy coaching club activities on the playground. He arrived at the Biology Room as quickly as he could—

What he saw there was a student bleeding from his side, which had been wrapped up in bandages. The student was pale; his shoulders heaved with every breath he took.

“Kishitani!? What happened?”

Kishitani Shinra smiled reassuringly at the teacher with his pale face and muttered in a small voice, “It’s just that I was...stabbed...could you...call an ambulance, please?”

Several hours later—

Orihara Izaya, who had fled the scene of the crime, surrendered himself to the police. He was taken into protective custody.

It was an incident in which the Vice President of the Biology Club had stabbed the President of the Biology Club in the school and fled.

No report of damage was filed by Kishitani Shinra or his father detailing what had happened between Shinra and Izaya. The school was too conscious about its public image to want the incident publicized. As a result, nothing appeared in any mass media, and the incident itself quietly faded into obscurity.

Only two scars were to remain forever: one on Shinra's side, the other on Izaya's record.

CHATROOM

.
. .
.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

Tanaka Taro-san has joined the chat.

Tanaka Taro
Hello.

Tanaka Taro
Long time no see.

Tanaka Taro

I checked out the logs. Looks like there have been a lot of people I haven't met before.

Tanaka Taro

I'm Tanaka Taro.

Tanaka Taro

Sorry I haven't had the time to come here more often.

Tanaka Taro

I think it's going to be quite a while before I can come back here again.

Tanaka Taro

Oh, not that I got myself in trouble or anything. I'm just kind of busy...

Tanaka Taro

When I do have the time to come back here again I will work hard like a new member.

Tanaka Taro

I look forward to chatting with Setton-san and the others about things happening in Ikebukuro.

Tanaka Taro

I'll be saying goodbye for now, then.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

I've now made it so that only you, Kanra-san...well, Orihara-san, can see what I'm saying.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

I don't know if you're looking at what I'm saying, but I wanted to tell you.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

There are things I'm putting myself into right now.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

Things you might already know, Orihara-san.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

But I'm not doing those things because I've been told by anyone.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*

I wanted to make sure that at least there's you who knows that I'm doing those things because I want to, Orihara-san.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
To be honest with you, I'm scared.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
But I know that I have to do them...

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
I also know that I only burden you with all the talk. I'm sorry.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
It's fine if you just skim through what I've said and say nothing...

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
I just wanted someone else to bear witness to the way I'm feeling right now...

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
That alone is enough to keep me going.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
You said to me last year at our first gathering, Orihara-san

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
"If you really want to get away from your everyday life, you'll have to keep evolving."

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
But I never was able to make myself evolve.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
I now crave a return to my everyday life.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
I want to go back to the kind of life I had with Sonohara-san and Masaomi.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
That's why I want to get it back.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
I want Dollars back the way it was on that night.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
I don't want to get away from my everyday life anymore.

[Private mode] *Tanaka Taro*
I just want to go back to those days. That is all.

Bakyura-san has joined the chat.

Bakyura
Hello

Bakyura
Tanaka Taro-san,

Bakyura
I'm sorry to hear that you won't be coming for a while

Bakyura
We'll talk later then

[Private mode] *Bakyura*
Mikado,

[Private mode] *Bakyura*
If it's about what happened recently,

[Private mode] *Bakyura*
I don't mind

[Private mode] *Bakyura*
In fact,

[Private mode] *Bakyura*
For you and Anri,

[Private mode] *Bakyura*
It's probably harder to understand why I disappeared all of a sudden

[Private mode] *Bakyura*
But,

[Private mode] *Bakyura*
There are things I must talk to you about first

Tanaka Taro
Hello, Bakyura-san

Tanaka Taro

Say hello to everyone else for me, then.

Tanaka Taro

Bye.

Tanaka Taro-san has left the chat.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Mikado

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

You stayed for a while after you said you were going to leave,

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Were you leaving private messages for someone else?

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

I won't ask who it was,

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Anyway,

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

I want to speak with you.

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

Next time you're here, check out the logs again,

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

And if you want to talk to me just reply to my message here

[Private mode] *Bakyura*

I'll call you

Bakyura-san has left the chat.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

No one is in the chatroom right now.

In a Dark Place 5

“Orihara Izaya-san, say, are you friends with that Black Motorbike?”

“...”

“That urban legend’s been sniffing around for information on us in these recent days. It was on your orders, right? Didn’t you ask him to look for information on ‘Heaven Slave,’ too? Are you going to send Black Motorbike off to meet them?”

“...”

The conversation between Earthworm and the man under the linen bag was still going on inside the dimly lit bar.

It was hard to tell how long it had been. The cake was now nowhere to be seen. Instead, three dozens of 2L mineral water bottles stood on the counter.

Earthworm kept talking. The man under the linen bag remained dead silent.

It was hardly even a conversation, but it apparently qualified as communication by Earthworm’s standards.

“Like I said, neither ‘Owner’ nor I know about those folks very well...but we’d have to finish them off as soon as possible if they’re going to land us in trouble. So if there’s anything at all that you know about ‘Heaven Slave,’ you’d better spill it out to me.”

“...”

“Either way, I think you’ll want to tell me once your sisters are here. Or do you want me to break your fingers one by one with my hammer? See that table over there? You can still see the blood left by the person whose fingers I broke last time...do you want to see it? Oh, I forgot, you can’t with that bag over your head! Aha! My a-pol-o-gies!”

She pictured the way fear was pressing the insides of his skull, distorting his face and wrenching his heart, all because she was threatening him from outside the linen bag.

Repeating this step was her idea of communication. It was the way she made herself feel connected to other people.

“Here, here. I think we can be even closer if we work on it.”

“...”

Earthworm slipped her arm around the man’s neck. She had a bottle in her hand.

She rocked the bottle to let the man hear the liquid sloshing against the walls.

“Do you want to be rescued?”

“...”

“Do you not wish to die?”

“...”

“Are you worried about your sisters? Or are you more worried about yourself?”

“...”

Earthworm asked several questions, but the man under the linen bag seemed determined to remain silent.

But it was enough for Earthworm.

For silence was the best “food” for her soul.

Even though she had yet to put him through any physical pain, Earthworm couldn’t help but be impressed by the man’s tenacity. He had remained decidedly silent when anyone else would have at least uttered one or two curses at her.

“Hey, don’t tell me you’re feeling kind of relieved? Are you thinking that at least neither you nor your sisters are going to be killed...? You can’t be. Not if you’ve done your research on us, which you have...”

Earthworm giggled and screwed the bottle open.

“I’ve always been in love with ‘Owner,’ so I’ll do anything for him, you know.”

“...”

“Anything...for him...”

It was a dark smile.

Earthworm tipped the bottle over the man's linen bag so that its contents slowly flowed into its fabric.

The liquid was almost completely absorbed by the linen bag; only a few tiny drops bounced off upon contact.

She moved the bottle in a circle above his head, making sure that the liquid soaked the linen bag evenly throughout. All the while she carefully avoided getting any liquid onto her own clothes or the floor.

"I could have made your face and the linen bag a mess with sulfuric acid, you know, but that is way too underhanded for me. So I'm going to make sure that it is all upright and open...like this!"

As she spoke the odor of the liquid diffused throughout the room.

To anyone who had smelled the substance before, it was immediately evident what it was—lamp oil.

The odor was not as strong as the kind that followed whenever a lamp oil stove was distinguished, but it was more than enough for identification purposes.

"Are you alright? Are you sure you're not going to suffocate? Don't pass out even if you inhale too much, OK? Wait, does the odor of lamp oil make you pass out like paint thinner? Whatever."

"..."

"Anyway, once your sisters get here we're going to do all sorts of things to them...and when we're halfway through, I'm going to set fire to this bag for you, OK? If it burns well you'll even be able to see what will have happened to your sisters, right? Oh, but remember to hold your breath when it burns to avoid asphyxiation. Fire takes the oxygen away from you, you know—though I have no idea how long it's going to keep burning."

If she were to set fire to the bag, the man would have been in too much pain from burning to even think about holding his breath. Of course, she knew how ridiculous her warning was; she had said it on purpose.

What kind of face will be revealed when the bag actually starts burning?

One full of the fear of death? Or grief for the fate of his sisters? Endless anger? Despair? Or will I see determined eyes, never giving up hope, staring back at me?

Anything goes—thought Earthworm.

“What would a human being do? Would he care more about himself or his loved one when they’re in such a dire situation together? I’d say humans are creatures that ultimately put themselves first. Do you know anything about that, Mr. Information Broker? After all, you know everything about humans, don’t you?”

Earthworm had raised a ridiculous question. She was not expecting an answer, of course.

Her sole purpose was to unsettle the man with her questions. But the man had almost won her admiration with his absolute lack of reaction.

What should she do next to get him to talk? Pull his fingernails out? Strip him and write on his body with a soldering iron?

No longer able to suppress her own desire, she had begun to contemplate switching to physical torture when—

Footsteps of at least several people were heard from the entrance of the bar.

“Ah. Is it time already...?”

“...!”

“I think your sisters are here☆”

Earthworm stood up from her chair in a relaxed way like a housewife who finally saw the goods she bought online delivered. Instead of getting the door herself, however, she told one of her subordinates, “Go get the door.”

A young woman nodded and walked toward the door.

Earthworm watched the woman go. She said to the man under the linen bag sitting behind her, “Finally, the family reunion! I think I might cry!”

“...”

She kept giggling as she spoke—

Several seconds later, however, her giggling stopped.

As soon as her subordinate opened the door, more than ten young men walked in—

But these were men Earthworm had never seen before in her life.

Who are they!?

Are they working for the information broker?! No way!

Awakusu-kai? No, they're way too young!

How come they know this place? Who are they, dammit!

They can't be cops. They're probably younger than I am...

Who are they? Enemies? Friends? Dangerous?

"Owner" ... Help me, "Owner"!

All sorts of thoughts rushed to Earthworm's head. Eventually she had to ask for help from the one she trusted the most.

There was no one to respond to the pleas of her heart, of course.

Her subordinates were likewise surprised and alarmed when they saw the men who had just walked in.

The young man who stood at the center of the gang, however, stretched out his hands and spoke in a sonorous voice that rang throughout the bar.

"Nice to meet you all, members of 'Amphisbaena.' We are not your friends *yet*, but we are not your enemies, either."

"...Who are you?"

Earthworm was even more alarmed. She asked the question in a completely different voice from the one she used to interrogate the man under the linen bag.

The young man had probably realized that Earthworm was the center of her gang in this room. Without losing a second he bowed courteously and said his name.

"I'm sorry for the intrusion. My name is Shijima.

Otherwise known as the second in command in the group that sells the drug called 'Heaven Slave.'"

And with that—we'll be going back half a day in time.

5章 折原臨也



CHAPTER 5

ORIHARA IZAYA

Somewhere in Tokyo, an open road

“Hey...what’s that in the Courier’s hand?”

One of the young men in “Heaven Slave” who sold the drug asked his companion next to him.

His companion sighed and offered his observation.

“...The same as yesterday. It’s a bag for laptops.”

“So is he carrying a laptop inside?”

“Maybe. Could also be money...or casino chips.”

They had been stalking the Black Motorbike and Orihara Izaya since two days ago.

They did consider just kidnapping Orihara Izaya himself as the latter had already gathered some information, but couldn’t because the “Dragon Zombie” men surrounded him like bodyguards whenever he walked. When they tried to find out where he stayed for the night and attack him in his sleep he always managed to shake them off his tail.

They had likewise been able to follow the Black Motorbike when the latter was at work, but they always lost track of him when they tried to find out where he lived. At any rate they had succeeded in making some guesses about what the Courier was doing.

At different locations the Courier met people of very different professions and social status.

One of them happened to be a client of Heaven Slave’s. After the Courier had left they talked to him and found out that he also frequented the underground casinos run by “Amphisbaena.” He told them that the Courier asked all sorts of questions one could think of about the casinos.

When they threatened to stop his drug supply unless he spoke, they were able to pry from his mouth another fact: the Black Motorbike had bought “Amphisbaena” chips from him at a ridiculously high price.

He was under the impression that it would be alright to just tell the casino managers that he had lost them. But the truth was that he would probably never get another notice again.

What really bothered them, though, was the fact that the Black Motorbike was buying the electronic chips.

There was also the mystery of how the Black Motorbike managed to locate so many chip holders with precision. They had therefore decided to follow the Black Motorbike more closely and relax the watch on Izaya for a while—

As they continued to drive after him, however, the drug sellers noticed that the Black Motorbike took somewhat different actions.

He stopped his motorbike by the side of the road and took a laptop out of his bag.

“...What is he doing?”

The delinquent in the navigator’s seat lifted the binoculars he had brought with him and aimed it at the Black Motorbike.

He saw that the laptop was displaying an image that looked like a map.

The Black Motorbike closed his laptop and, without shutting it down, put it back into the bag. He had probably forced the laptop into sleeping mode.

The drug seller resumed his chase of the Black Motorbike and spoke to Shijima on the phone about it.

“Is there any way to snatch that laptop from his hands?”

This was Shijima’s conclusion.

The man had wanted to say “No,” but as another subordinate whose nose had just been pierced with a dart the other day came to his mind he had to force out instead an “I’ll see” before hanging up.

“He said to snatch it from his hands...but how?”

“It’s too crowded here...it’s not like we can just drive the car at him to stop him or something...”

The drug sellers continued their chase in low spirits.

What they saw next, however, was unexpected.

A short while after, the Black Motorbike suddenly lowered his speed and parked his motorbike at the entrance of a park where there were few people around.

Having double checked something on his laptop he walked straight into the park.

The Courier walked toward a certain man sitting on the bench, produced his cell phone from his breast pocket and showed it to the man.

Is the man another participant of the underground casinos?

The drug sellers realized something as the question mark arose in their heads.

The bag with the laptop they just saw was hanging from one of the motorbike’s handles.

The Black Motorbike had probably left it there because he thought he would be finished with the errand quickly. But it was way too careless of him.

“...!”

The drug sellers thought it was their chance. They slowly approached the motorbike—

And, stretching an arm out of the car window, lifted the bag stealthily off its handle.

We did it!

The Courier didn’t notice!

The drug sellers were about to drive away at full speed before the Black Motorbike noticed anything.

But—

“HHHHHHHEEEEEEEEEEEEEERRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRrrrrrrr!”

What sounded like a huge horse neighing from within the Black Motorbike shook the surroundings as the riderless motorbike raised its front wheel as if prepared to glide on the other.

“!? W-W-What the hell!?”

As they looked more closely they realized that the motorbike’s form had begun to dissolve like mist—and was transforming itself into the shape of a huge headless horse!

“Anti-burglar device? ...No, what the hell is it!?”

“Monster...m-m-monster!? Arghhhhhh!? Arghhhhhh!”

The Courier standing by the bench turned around suddenly as he seemed to hear the horse.

“R-R-Ruuuuuun! Ruuuuuuun!”

As the man in the navigator’s seat stuttered the driver had already accelerated hard.

They had got what they had wanted.

The Courier’s laptop was in their hands.

Now all they had to do was to run away—the driver told himself as he drove the car onto the main road, clenching his teeth.

In the rear view he could still see the Courier coming after them.

“Arghhhhhhhh! Arghhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Run.

Running, racing, flying—

The drug sellers could no longer worry about traffic accidents or even overheating the engine of their car. They simply did anything they could to shake the Black Motorbike off their tail.

They kept driving over the speed limit for quite some time on the main roads.

They made two turns to get rid of the Black Motorbike.

When they made the third turn the driver looked breathlessly into the rear view—and saw no one there.

When they had made the fourth turn and merged again into the traffic, the man in the navigator’s seat looked desperately around for any sign of the Black Motorbike.

But there wasn’t any. All they got was other cars honking at them for cutting in the line all of a sudden.

They were back to their everyday reality.

The streets were free of monsters just like how they knew them.

Still feeling unsure, they checked the laptop inside the bag. The man in the navigator's seat took out his cell phone and called Shijima.

“Thank you. Bring the laptop right away. *It'll put Kumoi-san in a good mood for a while.*”

There was a trace of relief reserved strictly for himself in his even tone.

The drug sellers sighed likewise in relief.

They looked at each other's face as soon as their hearts stopped beating at a frantic speed and was convinced.

We're safe now.

And with that, every timeline will converge at the “Dark Place”.

♂ ♀

Somewhere in Tokyo, a disused bar

“Heaven...Slave!”

It was inside a no longer functional bar that existed quietly somewhere in Tokyo.

Earthworm's eyes popped wide after Shijima—the man who had just walked in—introduced himself.

Why did they come here themselves when she was planning to torture the information broker to get her hands on any information on them?

There were no rumors of them being Orihara Izaya's allies, but there was every possibility that they were already working together with him.

They would be without a doubt in danger if that was indeed the case.

Earthworm thought about using the man under the linen bag sitting behind her as a hostage—

But Shijima's next words made her realize that it was completely unnecessary.

“Ah, is that the information broker sniffing around for you guys on Awakusu-kai's orders...Orihara Izaya?”

Earthworm couldn't help but frown as Shijima spoke after glancing at the man under the linen bag.

“...Don't you guys know each other?”

“No way. I did make a little use of him when I was trying to find this place, though.”

Shijima snapped his finger. A man walked in with a laptop computer and put it on the table for everyone to see.

On the screen there was a map with red dots all over it.

“This software seems to enable us to track all the transmitters slash taps in your chips system. I have no idea what kind of system it uses, though.”

What was displayed on the screen seemed to be an administrator's view of all “Amphisbaena” chips in circulation.

“...! How come this is...?!”

Earthworm was dumbfounded. Shijima shrugged.

“Who knows? As to how it managed to decipher the transmitters' code...I think Mr. Information Broker over there would be able to answer the question far better than I.”

“...Mr. Information Broker?”

“He told the Black Motorbike to sniff around for information using this laptop, after all.”

Shijima—the intruder—cast a glance at the man sitting tied up and still. He smiled, looking cheerful.

Earthworm, on the other hand, looked at the man's head in surprise and said, “I had no idea that he already knew this much about us... Does that mean this headquarters of ours has long since been found out...by Mr. Information Broker?”

“It’s hard to tell. We happened to run into some of your people when we were following Izaya. They were walking out of the building he had just entered with a traveler’s trunk big enough for one grown male. At the same time one of the red dots on this map started moving with them.”

Shijima walked slowly toward the man and searched his pockets one by one.

From the third one he pulled out a chip.

“See? It’s here. He has one on him...that’s how simple it was.”

“...It was my people’s mistake for not having done the research.”

Earthworm glared at her subordinates behind her. They eyed one another nervously, trying to shove the responsibility onto others.

Shijima looked on as the air in the room went tense and asked, “So, are you the head of ‘Amphisbaena’?”

“...I’m not. ‘Owner’ hardly ever appears in front of us in person. I don’t know where he is.”

“That’s smart of him. Sounds kind of like our leader. But that can wait until later. We have to deal with the information broker first.”

Shijima shook his head slightly and suddenly put his hand on the man’s head.

“We were planning to finish him off ourselves. You saved us the time and trouble. Maybe there was no point in sending people to kidnap his sisters after all.”

“...? Are you after Mr. Information Broker’s sisters, too?”

“Huh? Are you?”

Even though Shijima looked somewhat surprised, Earthworm didn’t let her guard down. She kept her eyes on him and replied.

“About an hour ago I told my people to kidnap them separately at the best timing.”

“...That would be a problem. We sent some of our best men as well because we heard that his sisters were dangerous. I’m not too worried that they’ll start fighting your people over them, but if the cops catch wind of this we’ll be in trouble...anyway, I’ll let my people know that hostages are no longer necessary so they can abandon the mission.”

Shijima took out his cell phone.

“We have no intention of making you our enemy. I hope you’ll take my word on this. We’re here strictly for business...and for that purpose I want to prevent any information leak to Awakusu-kai. That is all.”

Shijima explained as he looked up the number of a certain fellow drug seller whom he had sent to kidnap Orihara Kururi and Mairu—

Before he could find the number, however, a cell phone began to ring in the room.

It was not Shijima’s; the ringtone was coming from the bar’s counter.

“...Is that mine?”

Earthworm grabbed her cell phone and saw that the call was coming from “Unknown.”

Who is it?

Don’t tell me that it’s from...’Owner’?

Half anxious and half hopeful, Earthworm pressed the “talk” button.

“...Hello?”

“.....”

No sound was coming from the other end of the phone.

Shijima, curious about the call Earthworm was getting, stopped pressing buttons on his own cell phone and watched her intently.

All of a sudden, however, Shijima’s phone got a call as well, sending slight vibrating sounds throughout the room.

“...?”

Seeing that the call was from “Unknown,” Shijima had an uncanny feeling as he pressed the “talk” button.

The voice that came through—

“Hello? Hello?”

—was no other than the woman’s own as she stood talking into the phone in front of him.

“...What?”

He felt a chill down his spine.

Earthworm looked hastily at Shijima after she heard him say "...What?" on the phone.

Neither of them knew what was going on—

Seconds later, however, they heard a third voice on the phone.

"Hey."

"Who is it?" "...Who is it?"

Earthworm and Shijima heard each other speaking on the phone. That third person began in a clear, composed voice.

"Looks like the three-way calling worked. I was nervous since I had never made one before."

"Who exactly is it...?"

"Ah, I'm sorry I skipped the formalities. Aren't you already familiar with me, though?"

"...It can't be—"

Shijima and Earthworm both had a bad feeling about this.

As if having calculated the timing of this exact moment, the man gave his name from his end of the phone.

"Orihara Izaya...does that name ring a bell to you at all?"

Crack—a sound rolled off Earthworm's and Shijima's eardrums.

It was the sound of their own muscles going tense as they clenched their teeth nervously.

Why now?

How did he know our phone numbers?

These were the first questions to pop into their heads. The turn of events was so unexpected that it took another while before the most important question emerged in their minds.

As if linked by telepathy, both of them turned their eyes slowly—really slowly—toward one single spot in the room.

It was the figure of the man who had remained silent through all of this with the linen bag still over his head.

As if still linked by telepathy, both of them thought of the same important question.

If so—

Who is this man?

♂ ♀

Same time, inside an office in Ikebukuro

“Hmm~? This is weird...”

“What’s wrong, Tanaka?”

Tanaka Tom looked around as he answered his colleague’s question.

“Shizuo, Vorona, and I are on the night shift today...but Shizuo’s still not showing up.”

Next to him Vorona was likewise looking around, but the man in the bartender suit who should have stood out even in a crowd was nowhere to be seen.

“Just don’t tell me he’s gotten himself into trouble again.”

♂ ♀

Dark Place

“You guys are kind of extreme, you know, going around kidnapping people like that. Were you also the reason that several of my detectives went missing?”

The voice kept talking nonstop from the other end of the phone.

But it no longer reached Earthworm’s ears.

Who...?

If that is Orihara Izaya on the phone, who is this man...under the linen bag?

She had seen photos of Orihara Izaya, upon which she had been basing her imagination of his expressions under the linen bag and savoring the bliss. But right now it seemed that her bliss had been a dream from the very start.

Possibilities emerged in her mind and disappeared.

Her every assumption seemed to be proven false and thrown into a whirlwind of chaos. The presence of the “Heaven Slave” people only made things worse. Slowly, total darkness took over her mind.

“.....”

Her head felt empty as she reached for the linen bag and tried to flip the edge with her fingers.

But the bag was tied up so well that she still couldn’t see anything underneath.

“...Take it off, I said—Take it off!”

She muttered—to herself or the man under the linen bag God only knows—as she tried to pull the bag off the man’s head without untying it.

Earthworm pulled and pulled with her fingers clenching the edge of the bag.

As the bag loosened slightly she was offered a glimpse of the man’s *black hair* near his nape.

♂ ♀

Inside an office somewhere in Ikebukuro

“Ah, sorry I’m late.”

Tom sighed and asked as Shizuo opened the door and walked in, “Was something wrong? You were almost never late.”

“Sorry. The Manager asked me to lend him a hand.”

“Ah, I see. Got it.”

“What content exists in the Manager’s assignment?”

Vorona looked puzzled. Tom sighed again heavily and answered.

“It’s kind of like a bodyguard job. Our Manager has his share of enemies...I’ll tell you about that later.”

Tom, feeling relieved that Shizuo was not late because he got himself in trouble, walked to the door with his cell phone in his hand.

Peace is the most important thing in this world after all.

The atmosphere that surrounded him was uneventful. Tom was grateful, so they resumed their highly dangerous work as debt collectors.

“Anyway, let’s start the work like usual.”

“Yes.” “Understood.”

Behind him stood the duo even more dangerous than the work they were about to do.

♂ ♀

Same time, Rakuei Gym

“Hmm? Where’s Eijirou?”

The one who raised the question was a stout man with a body that looked like the trunk of a huge tree.

He was stout but not exactly short; in fact, he was fairly tall and looked like he wore an armor of muscles as firm as rubber tires.

“Yes! If you’re talking about Eijirou-san, I haven’t seen him all afternoon!”

“He’s slacking off again? That bastard...”

As he heard the student’s reply, the man—Sharaku Eiichirou, Eijirou’s older brother—heaved a sigh as heavy as his person.

“Seriously, I hope he’s just slacking off...he’d better not be getting himself into those street fights again.”

♂ ♀

Dark Place

Shijima was as anxious as Earthworm was.

Is this guy not Orihara Izaya?

Shijima listened to the voice on the other end of the phone as he watched Earthworm trying desperately to pull the bag off.

“So it’s Shijima-kun speaking? I was expecting the one called Kumoi, you know. He would have been more fun.”

“...You know about Kumoi-san?”

“No, I wouldn’t say I’m that familiar with him. I didn’t want to bully you too much, but you made it too obvious that you wanted me dead and even planned on doing stuff to my sisters. That makes it difficult for me.”

Shijima clenched his teeth as he heard the voice on the phone.

How much...does this guy know?

Putting that aside for the moment, what should I do? Should I leave this place for now?

Are there Izaya’s spies in this room?

I can’t even trust my subordinates in a situation like this!

Who is that man tied up over there?

Is he working for Izaya or something!?

If the man were to go berserk, wouldn’t this place be dangerous?

If he was a cop or someone in Awakusu-kai, wouldn’t it be bad to let him see our faces?

Shijima was first able to eliminate his fears for the former between the two possibilities.

That was because the man sitting on the chair didn't look like he was trained for combat—in fact, *he looked like he couldn't possibly have anything to do with either absurd physical power or martial arts.*



Same time, an alleyway somewhere in Tokyo

“...Tut, tut. That was a lot of trouble. Ahhh~Ohhh~~a bunch of idiots running around thinking that with numbers they can win anything.”

Sharaku Eijirou drawled to himself as he stood at the center of about ten men, all lying on the ground.

Against such an abnormal backdrop the innocent voice of a girl was heard.

“Master! Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“No. In fact, shouldn't I be asking you that question?” Eijirou replied in resignation.

Mairu—the girl—giggled and said to her Master, “It would have been dangerous had I been on my own. These people are good!”

“Seriously, I was planning on slacking off until I saw you and that bunch of idiots stalking you. You were lucky I happened to be around, girl.”

“You were actually stalking me yourself, weren't you? Because you heard me tell you this morning that some weird people had been following me around recently! Master, you really do surprise me sometimes! Thank you, Master! You're actually a pedophile, aren't you?”

“Hang on, what was with that last sentence? It didn't flow naturally from that ‘Thank you’ at all!”

A man was watching them from afar as the duo continued their conversation.

It was a “Heaven Slave” member who was not part of the gang that attacked Mairu directly.

He had a crossbow in his hand aimed at Eijirou's body.

Dammit, I was planning to shoot the arrow at the girl's foot so we'd be able to kidnap her more easily...

There's no one passing by. I might as well deal with the guy first.

He looked like he didn't give up on carrying out his plan. He decided that the best way was to frame the mysterious attackers for the crime he was about to commit and take the girl away himself.

His crossbow was a modified one that could easily kill if the aim wasn't accurate enough. But having seen how fierce the man was in the fight a moment ago, he released the arrow without hesitation.

However—

“Speaking of which, Mairu, you...oops!”

Eijirou yelped suddenly and twisted his body backwards.

At the same time, a clashing sound was heard in the narrow alleyway.

Almost immediately his right foot was high in the air above his head—the next moment, a stick-like object fell from the air, spinning madly.

Eijirou caught it with his right hand and saw that it was an arrow for a crossbow.

“.....”

Without a word he picked up a stone from next to his foot—

And threw it at a certain bush located in the park outside of the alleyway.

Like a cannonball the stone flew straight into the bush—

“Gah!”

A low yelp later they heard something fell.

Knowing that he had hit the target, Eijirou flexed his neck lazily and said, “My goodness. If he's serious about sneaking up on me he should at least have aimed from somewhere farther or set fire to my house when I was sleeping. Am I right?”

“You threw that stone too hard. You could have killed him, you know,” Mairu said as she turned to look at the bush.

Ejiro replied in an even voice, "...I'll tell you what I think. A certain someone said before that a martial artist should be ready to fight at any given time of the day, so surprise attacks are nothing to complain about... But by the same token, someone who does surprise attack a martial artist on an open road shouldn't complain either if he gets killed because of that, right? After all, this is not a match—it's real."

"I hope the cops are going to buy that."

Ejiro muttered more complaints after he heard Mairu giggle and say. At the same time he walked toward the bush.

On the other hand, Mairu's face turned serious as she took out her cell phone.

She was on her way to pick up her sister, so she was worried that her sister might have been attacked as well.

Kururi answered the phone almost immediately, though, which made Mairu sigh in relief.

When Mairu told her to "Wait for me somewhere with people around, you could be in danger"—

She got a surprising reply.

"Safe (It's OK)...thus (it's already)...over (finished)..."

"Eh? What do you mean by 'It's already finished', Kuru-nee?"

"...Monster (The Headless Rider)...help (protected)...me (me from them)..."



"...Thank (I'm really)...YOU (grateful)..."

Kururi lowered her head again to thank the "being" in front of her after she had hung up the phone.

Celty typed on her PDA in soft movements as she heard Kururi's disappearing voice.

[If you are to thank anyone for this, thank your brother.]

"...Brother (My brother)..."

[Yes. He asked me to protect you from harm when your sister is away at the Gym.]

Around Celty several men lay motionless.

They were all wearing goggles and masks as if they were playing some sort of survival game.

They had probably taken the extra precaution because they had heard about Kururi's chili spray and other gadgets. Curiously, though, a different gang also tried to attack Kururi and Celty. They ran away quickly, of course.

It looked like they were finally safe. Celty felt relieved and thought:

Still, where is Izaya himself off to and what is he doing?

Dark Place

“Alas, it feels so great listening to you getting all nervous on the other end of the phone.”

Shijima clenched his teeth more forcefully as he heard the voice on the phone. He maintained his composure as he spoke.

“What do you want?”

“What do I want? Let's see. Why not start with...asking Earthworm-chan—that's the Amphisbaena girl—to pick up her phone for me nicely? I think she kind of dropped it. I can't continue the conversation otherwise, you know.”

Shijima clicked his tongue impatiently in his heart. He walked toward the woman who was still desperately trying to tear the linen bag open.

“...He said he wanted you to pick up the phone.”

“What is that...I have nothing to say to him...ahh, I can't stand this!”

She was probably fighting against herself. As her left hand kept working on the linen bag, her right hand picked up the phone again.

“Hey, I hear someone breathing. Is that you picking up the phone? Finally?”

“...Wait...who is this guy?”

Earthworm had lost her calm completely. She asked in a highly anxious tone.

The person on the other end of the phone, however, announced still more cheerfully, “And that brings us to—Quiz Time~!”

“Huh?”

“Are you messing around with us?”

“Question One: what does *Lizard-san*, the head of ‘Amphisbaena’, and Kumoi-san, the head of ‘Heaven Slave’, have in common?”

Both Earthworm’s and Shijima’s heartbeats stopped for a second.

It probably felt like having a bucket of cold water poured down their necks.

That was the kind of icy horror the question was to their ears.

“How...how did you know that ‘Owner’’s nickname is Lizard...”

Ignoring Earthworm’s whimper, the talk show host on the other end of the phone laughed.

“Beep~too bad, time’s up. The correct answer is: ‘He has two symmetric moles under the corners of his eyes’! Question Two!”

“How...how did you know what...‘Owner’...looks like!?”

“...”

Earthworm yelped. Shijima, on the other hand, went pale and remained speechless.

Not knowing what was going on in their phone conversation, the people around them—Earthworm’s and Shijima’s subordinates alike—looked confused as they waited.

“So, that man under the linen bag now sitting with you...are there or are there no such moles on his face?”

“Eh...?”

“...!”

“Why not let us throw in a Question Three? So *who exactly is under that bag—Lizard-san or Kumoi-san?*”

The two of them stopped thinking completely for a moment.

Earthworm did not want to understand the sentence she had just heard.

Shijima, meanwhile, was seized by a different kind of fear.

He's kidding, right?

Orihara Izaya...did he really put Kumoi-san...?

If he did, it would be bad. Very bad.

As soon as he recovered from the momentary inability to think, Shijima had a new question on his mind. He decided to act immediately.

“I-Impossible! It can't-can't be 'Owner'! Liarrrr!”

Earthworm fell to the floor with her hands on her head as she remembered everything she had done to the man under the linen bag.

Shijima, on the other hand, placed himself between her and the man under the linen bag. With feigned composure he spoke in an even tone.

“We're getting nowhere unless we do something. I'll cut the ropes.”

He produced a small knife from his breast pocket and slowly moved it close to the nape of the man's neck.

But—

His arm was seized tightly *by the hand of the man under the linen bag.*

“Eh...?”

“What...?”

The man—whose hands should have been tied up and kept behind his back—had freed himself from the ropes.

He stopped Shijima's arm with his left hand and held his own knife, which he produced from God only knows where, in his right hand.

“What were you trying to do...just now?”

Still keeping Shijima at arm's length, he slowly inserted his knife into the narrow opening between the bag and his own neck.

After a slight grinding sound the rope around the bag was cut open, as was the bag itself.

The man closed his knife and slowly pulled the linen bag, now soaked in lamp oil, over his head.

What was revealed from underneath it—was a smile.

What appeared from under the linen bag was a smile neither condescending nor amicable. It was not even a smile of pleasure or a smile that could be called either eerie or refreshing. What was revealed from under the linen bag was a smile that made the observer think that it only served to conceal his emotions.

“Hey.”

Said the smiling face.

No. Earthworm and Shijima were both aware that the object they were facing was not called a “smiling face.” It had another name.

It was this knowledge that was driving their hearts over the precipice of confusion and almost straight into the abyss of complete darkness.

“Nice to meet you. At least I think that’s what I should say.”

“Orihara...” “Izaya...?”

Earthworm and Shijima said his names one after another.

The person sitting in front of them was undoubtedly the “Orihara Izaya” they had seen in the photos.

Who is the one on the phone, then?

And why is he here?

Why is he smiling?

Riddles, riddles, riddles.

So many incomprehensible things were happening one after another. Shijima remained somewhat calm because he arrived relatively late on the scene, but Earthworm looked like she was breaking down as she muttered to herself words like “‘Owner’ ...help me, would you?”

“Alas, I really didn’t expect someone to pour lamp oil on me. Ah, by the way, the odor of lamp oil does not make you faint like that of paint thinner.”



“Eh?”

“Also—right, I still owe you a lot of answers. First off, are humans self-centered creatures or do they put others first? ...I think I’m going to answer that with your average ‘It depends.’ Things are interesting precisely because they differ from case to case. Are humans good or evil at heart? Which one will prevail, reason or desires? Which one will be the last to remain, hope or despair? Humans cannot answer these questions for sure—and that’s why they’re interesting.”

One by one, Orihara Izaya answered with his unique smile the questions Earthworm had showered on him so far when she had kept talking as if to herself.

“Oh, I think the lethal dosage of water is between 10 and 30 liters. It depends on the person’s weight and stuff, so for Kururi or Mairu even less than 10 liters could have been dangerous.”

“.....”

“About Sharaku Mikage-chan and me, well, to me she was one of my past followers. As for what Mikage-chan thinks of me, that’s something I think you should ask her about. I involved her in a certain incident and she had to drop out of high school because of it...ahh. Maybe she has hated me all along.”

“.....”

From the second Izaya pulled the bag off his head, Earthworm’s and Izaya’s roles were completely reversed.

The young man was now talking nonstop and the woman left wordless.

Izaya’s words confirmed that he was indeed the one who had been put under the linen bag.

“...Ah, eh? Mr. Information Broker?”

“Oh, so you’re finally talking? Goodness, your way of torture was such great fun. I was prepared to have all my nails pulled out, but I didn’t expect you to be so serious about not hurting me physically.”

“...Uh, argh...”

“So? I’m sorry I’m not screaming as you would have liked, but is my voice at least what you’ve expected it to sound like? It looks like you like to get off by imagining how my face looks like under the linen bag, but rather than rely on my imagination I prefer to observe what there actually is—the reality, the results...yes, exactly, such as the dumbfounded expression on

your face right now. Oh, when I said I liked it, I did not mean I had any love for you personally. That is the point.”

Earthworm had just realized something—

This man’s voice was very different from the one she had heard on the phone.

“Eh, ah, well...who...who was that on the phone?”

Earthworm’s eyes darted from the cell phone to Izaya and back.

As her conversation partner heard them, however, his voice suddenly turned into a very different and lewd one as he laughed loudly.

“Haha...hahahahahahah! So you know already? Bastards! But whatever! Here comes Question Four! Who...am I?”

At the same time the entrance door was pushed open to reveal a man with a cell phone pressed to his ear.

It was a man with burn marks over his right face. His eyes shone sharply behind his sunglasses.

Several men in rider’s jackets with ribcage prints also appeared from behind him, making the bar look even more crowded despite its relative spaciousness.

The last one to walk in was a woman with short hair and trained muscles. But to Earthworm it was no longer important.

“W-What the heck...? Who are these...people...?”

Shijima’s companions retreated to a corner as if feeling pressured by the newcomers. A strange triangle appeared in the spacious bar.

It was a very lopsided triangle in terms of power, however. “Heaven Slave” and “Amphisbaena” both recoiled in the face of the third gang centered around Izaya.

What should we tell them to do?

Shijima and Earthworm hesitated. Izaya, however, didn’t take much notice of the change of the power balance as he continued.

“Hmm, what else did you ask...oh, right! About my weight and height, you didn’t actually believe that insurance companies give away their information that easily, did you? It would have been another story if it were Tsukumoya, but I wouldn’t expect him to accept your offer even if you asked.”

“...”

“The weight and height you know were *the numbers I told you myself*. I don’t look like I care about my health that much, do I? But I’ll tell you what, I always weigh myself after my everyday showers.”

“...Eh?”

Stop talking.

Earthworm almost wanted to shout, but her muddled brain was no longer capable of ordering her tongue to speak or take deep breaths.

“You, told, me, ...what? Argh?”

She sounded like she was talking in her sleep.

Izaya chuckled and asked her, “That outstanding Information Broker B you hired, the one who has never let anyone know his name or see his face...it was someone who called himself ‘Chrome’ on the Internet, wasn’t it?”

“Why, you, that...”

“There is no ‘Why.’ It was me.”

“... ..? ...Huh?”

Izaya pressed his hand against Earthworm’s face as her body froze.

Slowly, he said in a tone that sounded as if he was training puppies, “Actually, I’ve already heard of you before Awakusu-kai asked me to do this job because you contacted the online information business I was running under another alias.”

“You’re lying...”

“I am so not. Alas, I was so amused when you sent me that request right after I started my work for Awakusu-kai. ‘I want information on Orihara Izaya!’ or something to that effect. I haven’t laughed that hard in ages. The knife wound I got on my side this spring almost split open again.”

Izaya rubbed his side and added another flavor to his smile.

A trickster-like, *vicious* flavor at that.

“And I’ve noticed something when I was doing business with you.”

“Shut...up...”

“Your ‘Owner’ *hasn’t been contacting you at all recently*, has he? Maybe he’s already abandoned you...”

“Shut up!”

Earthworm bellowed. The bar, which had become somewhat noisier for a second, fell silent.

“Kill...him.”

“Oops.”

“Move! I don’t care who, just kill this man and make him disappear!”

Earthworm yelled hysterically at her companions inside the bar.

Thinking that it was their chance, Shijima signaled to his companions to act as well.

With his chin he pointed toward the woman with the short hair, a silent command that told them to hold that woman hostage.

Taking Shijima’s cue perfectly, five men pounced fiercely at the woman—

Pac!

The noise that rang throughout the bar sounded as if a cardboard box was being stomped to pieces.

“...That was not even a surprise attack, guys.”

Sharaku Mikage—the woman with the short hair—muttered with a bored expression on her face.

The first man who tried to grab her by the collar had had his nose broken by a hit of Mikage’s elbow as she turned around to meet him.

“Arghhh!?”

The men after him recoiled visibly in horror as they saw blood gushing out of their fallen companion’s nose.

The next second—the tip of Mikage’s foot hit another man forcefully in the temple.

It was a high kick delivered with her other foot as the axis. Since she was wearing her safety shoes with steel pieces inserted near the toes for protection, the man fell unconscious without a wail.

She did not lower her foot immediately afterwards. Instead she maintained her posture as she bent her knee.

With an amazing sense of balance she stood on her one leg and kicked yet another man’s throat with the tip of her foot.

She did not pierce the flesh, but with a deflating sound air came gushing out of the man’s mouth and nose at the same time. His eyes rolled upwards as he succumbed to gravity and fell to the ground with a heavy thud.

“...”

She put her foot down without a word and waved her hand provocatively as she stared at the other drug sellers in “Heaven Slave.”

The “Dragon Zombie” members standing slightly farther away seemed to know that she wouldn’t need help. They looked on with their own thoughts on their minds.

“What’s with that woman...?” Shijima muttered to himself as he watched Mikage’s fierce way of fighting.

Izaya shrugged and answered, “That’s Mikage-chan, whom I kind of mentioned to you a moment ago. Let’s continue, then...”

Before he could say more, the sound of glass breaking came from behind Izaya’s back.

Turning around, they saw Earthworm with a broken bottle in each of her hands and glaring at Izaya with a hysteric flame in her eyes.

“What was that...you...why did you trick us...!? Why did you pretend that you were kidnapped...why... !?”

“Your voice sounds so natural now. I like it far better than the sweet fake voice you used on me before.”

“Answer my question!”

“Well, let’s just say that my purpose—is about the same as Shijima-kun’s.”

Shijima couldn't help but shudder as his name was mentioned.

Izaya, however, took no notice of him as he sat down leisurely on the counter and spoke in an even tone.

“I could have just told Awakusu-kai about this place and let them deal with you, you know. But it would have been too heartless to leave young people like you at Awakusu-kai's mercy. So instead I came here to persuade you to stop running those underground casinos...yeah, *guess I'm not your enemy.*”

“...?”

“Well, I also wanted to observe humans. I was able to get a surprisingly good view of the outside from under that bag. There are few chances for me to closely observe a torture artist as cute and full of herself as you, you know. I'd gladly give up a nail or a finger for such a rare opportunity—so I allowed myself to be kidnapped. That is all.”

Earthworm's face twitched at Izaya's straightforward reply. Hands still holding the bottles, she yelled to her companion behind her.

“What are you doing!? Hurry up and make this guy...”

Her voice lost its momentum halfway, however.

“Make this...guy...?”

Finally she shut her mouth as she saw what her companions looked like.

“?”

Not knowing what was going on, Shijima turned to look at the “Amphisbaena” members—and froze like Earthworm did.

Izaya dangled his feet from his spot on the counter as he sat facing the two.

“Do you know why I arrived here completely uninjured? Why no one even tried to hit me? And why my ropes were tied into a loose knot that I could easily free myself from?”

“...What, what are you...”

“You probably don't know. But then, you probably wouldn't understand even if I told you.”

Izaya smiled and turned around to look himself—

All the whites in the eyes of the “Amphisbaena” members had now turned scarlet. With red eyes they smiled slightly as they stood there motionless.

“I could have spent a little more time on this and made your subordinates betray you for real. But I was running out of time since there was also this ‘Heaven Slave’ business to worry about, so I had to resort to a method that’s kind of cheating. Though now that I think of it, using the Black Motorbike was cheating as well.”

Realization hit Shijima as he heard the phrase “Black Motorbike.”

It can't be...

When we stole his laptop...was that part of his plan as well...?

To lure us here...no, to lure me here?

The question marks disappeared as he stood in front of the red-eyed army.

Shijima couldn't fathom what kind of supernatural phenomena it was, so he thought that they were under the influence of some sort of drug.

Earthworm seemed to have reached the same conclusion. Holding tightly onto the bottles, she turned around sharply to ask Izaya, “Orihara Izaya...what did you do to my subordinates?”

“Haven't I told you already? It's something *you are not likely to understand.*”

A flat reply.

As if feeling that it was enough of a reason for her to kill him, Earthworm sprang from the ground—

Explosive instantaneous power.

Her speed far exceeded Shijima's and other people's expectations. Even Mikage, who was still fighting near the entrance, stopped her foot for a second and said, “Heh...”

As if eager to prove that she was not just a woman fond of torture, Earthworm didn't slow down as she thrust the weapon in her right hand hard at Izaya's throat.

Since she twisted her wrist at the same time, the broken glass bottle would have almost surely cut Izaya's artery open without mercy.

Izaya, however, dodged her attack by the breadth of a hair and rolled straight off the other side of the counter.

Earthworm followed him without hesitation. As she landed on the other side of the counter, however, there was no Izaya there.

“Where did you go!?”

Izaya, who had somehow snuck to the other side of the counter, shrugged as if in resignation as a reply to the words she yelled at him.

He said nonchalantly, “You’re making this difficult for me. Beating up girls is not my hobby at all.”

“Funny you should say that, Orihara Izaya! Are you still trying to pretend that you’re a feminist...? So you won’t complain even if I beat you to death, right?”

“I don’t think feminist was the word you were looking for. Of course, I don’t want to be killed either.”

Earthworm hopped onto the counter using her outstandingly strong legs and was about to land on Izaya as the latter chuckled—

“That’s why I’m *trusting this task to my friend instead.*”

As soon as Izaya said this, Earthworm felt a strong impact on her knee.

“Uhh...what!?”

Something inside her felt broken.

The moment she realized this, she fell on the counter with no feeling in her body from that knee downwards.

“~~~~~Urgh! Urgh!”

The severe pain from her knee made her entire body convulse. She could barely breathe, let alone make a sound.

The glass bottles slid from her open hands to the floor and broke into pieces with a loud sound.

What just happened? Earthworm tried desperately to think as the pain assaulted her.

The answer, however, came not from her mind but rather her eyes and ears.

“On the quiz...you scored a 0, didn’t you?”

Turning around, she saw a man with his elbow on the counter looking down at where she lay fallen.

It was a voice she knew—the voice of the man who had just called and said that he was Izaya.

“So, you cute little thing, we’re about to have some fun in the punishment game!”

“Uhhh...gah...you bastard...”

Earthworm had given up her feminine way of speech as she glared at the man while fighting the pain.

As if waiting for precisely this kind of moment, the man in sunglasses with burn marks on his right face hit the woman’s fingertips mercilessly with a hard plastic hammer.

“-----Urgh!!”

Where Earthworm’s fingers were hit happened to be where she herself had pounded her enemies’ fingers into bloody messes before.

Her own blood flowed onto the old blood stains.

As she opened her mouth to scream, Izumii Ran—the man in sunglasses—shoved something that looked like a piece of cloth into her mouth.

“Urgh!”

Earthworm immediately realized what the cloth-like thing was.

The rough feeling on her tongue and the odor of lamp oil in her nose—they told her that it was the linen bag that had been covering Izaya’s head.

“Happyyyy Birthdayyyyyyy—”

Izumii sang as he took out his lighter—and without hesitation as always he set the linen bag in Earthworm’s mouth on fire.

Less than a minute later—

Earthworm lay at Izumii’s feet with injuries all over her body.

To extinguish the fire on the linen bag shoved into her mouth, she rolled off the counter and onto the floor—and though the fire was indeed put out, the shards of broken glass littered across the floor left numerous injuries on her body.

What was more, her other knee, which remained uninjured a moment ago, was now likewise broken under Izumii's hammer. The pain made her lose her consciousness.

“Hahah, this...this sure brings back the old days. Am I right?”

Izumii laughed madly as he turned Earthworm's body into a supine position with his foot.

“Now that I can look more closely, she's actually a fine woman.”

As if taking no notice of the crowd around him, Izumii reached for the woman's clothes—

“Stop that, Izumii.”

Izumii's hands stopped abruptly as Mikage thundered from his side.

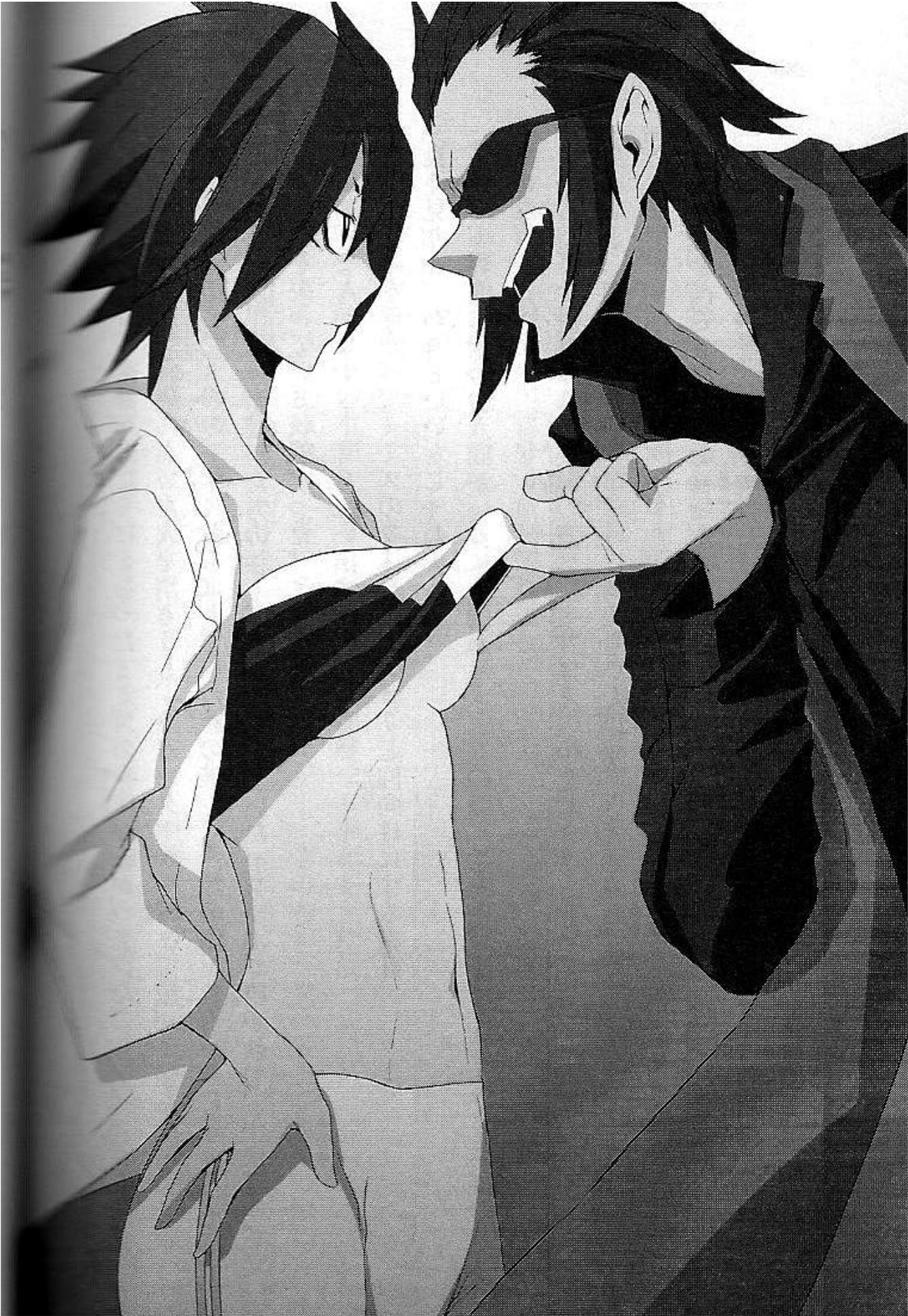
“What? Why are you stopping me? You know how many people that woman has tortured, right?”

“Yes, that's why I wouldn't say a word if you simply smashed her face to pieces with your hammer or burned her to death.”

After uttering such shocking words in her even tone, Mikage continued without the slightest change in her expression.

“But if you're going to assault her as a woman...I will kill you, Izumii.”

Though Izumii clicked his tongue rather conspicuously, he withdrew his hand from Earthworm's clothes.



“I have no obligation to listen to what you say...but let’s just say I’m going to be nice for once. Since you owe me one you are going to play with me, right? Hmm?”

“If you think you can rape me, go ahead and try.”

Izumii clicked his tongue again as he heard Mikage’s murderous tone. Grinning, he left the room.

.....

Shijima, who had seen everything, finally felt relieved as one of the dangerous figures departed the scene.

At the same time, though, it told him something else.

Namely, that every one of the “Heaven Slave” members who tried to attack Mikage had been beaten flat.

W-What is this?

What just happened...in front of my eyes...?

There was only one thing that even he understood clearly, though.

There was no one on his side left in this bar who was still capable of doing anything for him.

Orihara Izaya slowly approached him and whispered into his ear, “Hey, looks like finally we can talk.”

“.....”

“You tried to stab me to death just now when I still had that linen bag over my head...didn’t you?”

“...!”

Shijima shuddered as he heard Izaya and turned back to look around out of reflex.

His companions were either beaten into unconsciousness by Mikage or groaning on the floor. No one was even standing. It looked like none of them could have heard Izaya’s words just now.

“It’s OK, I’m not going to tell any of your people about this. Still, you were pretty gutsy for trying to stab me to death when you knew it could be Kumoi-san under that bag. That was a big decision on your part.”

“.....”

“It looks like the relationship between you and Kumoi-san is exactly like what I’ve guessed.”

Izaya nodded in satisfaction.

Palms sweating, Shijima asked anxiously, “What...what are you planning to do with me?”

Izaya cast Earthworm a glance as he heard the youth’s simple question and answered, “If it sounds at all possible to you, you can just stop doing what was drawing Awakusu-kai’s attention and join Dollars. I’ll introduce you.

With Dollars’s information network...you might even be able to find out what the leader of ‘Amphisbaena’ ...and Kumoi-san are up to, you know.”

♂ ♀

“Well done. You gained yourself the alliance with the bigwig’s grandson.”

Izaya had barely walked out of the bar when a woman standing next to the entrance spoke to him.

“Not really, but I wasn’t in this for the bigwig anyway. He’s just a happy bonus from my work for Awakusu-kai.”

Niekawa Haruna—the woman with long hair—smiled slightly as she heard Izaya’s reply and asked, “So, what should I do next?”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to persuade that Earthworm girl to join us. Could you do it for me?”

Haruna, who for some reason had bandages wrapped around her neck, smiled and smiled and smiled with a dazzling gleam in her eyes.

“Hey, if I do it for you, are you really going to let me see Takashi?”

“That depends on you. I’m just going to give you the information.”

“Is that so...”

A sharp metallic sound broke out between them in the next second.

Izaya had stopped Haruna’s blade with his own knife.

“...How disappointing. I was thinking that I could find out Takashi’s whereabouts immediately...if I possessed you.”

“I love humans, so I don’t want to be possessed by any monsters that aren’t human.”

“Interesting how you can keep saying that when you’re using that kind of monsters’ power for your own purposes.”

Izaya shrugged as he heard Haruna’s straightforward reply and said, “You’re right—it was not really my intention to do something like that. But I’ve used the help of that monster called a dullahan on several occasions, so I have to bend my own rules a little. I’ve been trying hard to not use your power, but this time it would have been problematic if I didn’t use it.”

Izaya paused for a moment before telling Haruna something else.

“Also, as a human I’ve always had a lot of admiration for you. Unlike Sonohara Anri, who took Saika in completely and gave up on being human, you prevailed over Saika with your own power as a human being and made it your servant.”

“My Saika is still very weak compared to that little thief’s.”

Haruna tilted her head sideways and giggled.

“And I didn’t prevail over it with my own power...I did it with the power of my love for Takashi.”

Izaya smiled to himself as he watched her. Waving his hand dismissively he turned around and said, “Don’t worry. Your Saika may be weaker than Sonohara Anri’s, but you are stronger because of it.

You’ve prevailed twice over Saika, after all.”

♂ ♀

Several days later, somewhere in Tokyo, in an expensive-looking car

“...So as I was telling you, it seems that the ‘Amphisbaena’ people are no longer active. The leader, who calls himself ‘Lizard,’ was nowhere to be found even before I started investigating. I think he absconded to somewhere far away. The casinos under Awakusu-kai’s protection should be getting its customers back in no time.”

As Izaya spoke in a carefree tone on the left side of the back seat, Shiki, who was sitting next to him, said in his usual voice, “...So you don’t know the whereabouts of the members other than the leader, either?”

“I did look into it, but they were mostly non-yakuza. I didn’t think they would be able to tell me that much even if I asked. Since they’re no longer active, I don’t think they deserve to be punished that severely, do they?”

“That decision should be ours to make...but it’s not that important. If they become active again, you will have to give us all their names for free.”

“Thank you, then. I never did find out where their leader was, so you don’t have to pay me extra. The down payment would suffice.”

Izaya shrugged as if disappointed. Shiki chose this moment to raise a question.

“...By the way, the gang of student drug sellers...were suddenly nowhere to be seen on the market from the day before yesterday. Do you have any idea why?”

“Who knows? Maybe they and whatever remained of ‘Amphisbaena’ both died trying to bite each other’s head off.”

Izaya smiled cheerfully. Shiki smiled as well—and said in a voice infused with his own emotions, “Informant...you’d better not be so confident that the things in the world will always go in the direction you want them to go.”

These words were said with a smile but nevertheless heavy and sharp enough to reach one’s entrails.

Izaya, however, met these words head-on and made his reply.

“No way. The world is interesting precisely because it doesn’t always go where I want it to go.”

Shiki turned his glance toward Izaya and with crossed hands said, “You can’t be thinking that we know nothing, right?”

“...”

Izaya’s only answer was silence. Shiki didn’t press the question further.

“So, back to business...ah, right. Akabayashi in our group wants a word with you. We hope that you can get in contact with him whenever it’s convenient for you.”

As Shiki switched back to business mode all of a sudden, Izaya replied without the slightest change in expression.

“I see. I’ll get in contact with him right away.”

A slight smile appeared on his face as he said somewhat sarcastically, “After all it’s what I do for a living—letting as many people use me for information as possible.

That for me is the happiness of being an information broker...no, being Orihara Izaya.”

エピローグ&ネクストプロローグ 俺



EPILOGUE & NEXT PROLOGUE

ME

Well, well, Nakura-kun. Great work.

“...”

I heard it all on the wireless. You were such a great actor, and as good at lying as ever.

“That’s because I have been tricked by you too many times before.”

But still, “You’ll know he’s not normal as soon as you see him”? That was some interesting line you came up with on the spot there.

“Is there something wrong with it?”

No, no. There’s nothing wrong with it. But if you really did “know” that I was not normal from the very start, your name would still be yours, and you wouldn’t have to be putting up such tasteless shows for me, either. I just find it rather funny.

“Please stop it, Izaya-san. You know there’s no way that Kujiragi woman is actually working for an insurance company, right!? Have some mercy and at least leave me out of anything that has to do with yakuza, please!”

My, my, you’re getting better at reading people on your own. You’re quite right; she was lying when she said she was talking to you on behalf of some insurance company. But she was not lying when she said her name was Kujiragi. Don’t worry. Her background is kind of different from yakuza.

“R-Really?”

Yes, of course. Speaking of which, I really think you owe me some gratitude. You were this close to being hunted down by Awakusu-kai on both sides.

“...What?”

Do you remember? In senior year of high school...you co-founded an organization called "Amphisbaena" with me. Remember?

"Y-Yes...it was based on the baseball gambling group back in middle school, right? We founded it but concealed our identities."

Exactly. You called yourself "Lizard" back then, right?

"But it was soon disbanded, was it not...?"

Among the members there was this girl nicknamed "Earthworm", do you remember?

"No, not a clue."

Right? Not even I had an idea who she was. Maybe she was one of the subordinates of the subordinates or only joined because she looked up to some other member we had.

"What did that Earthworm girl do?"

She used the name "Amphisbaena" to wreak havoc on Awakusu-kai's territory. Her gambling organization now is much bigger than ours back then.

"...Huh?"

Oh, right, you know what's funny? You, Lizard, disappeared years ago...but she still calls you her "Owner." It looks like she worships you or something.

"Hang on a second please, what do you mean?"

She probably thinks of herself as the Owner's...as your lover and convinced her subordinates to believe the same thing. Like she's the only one who knows how to contact you or something.

"No, I don't get a word of you're saying!"

It's OK now. Don't worry. This case is solved.

"R-Really?"

But what I would call the real masterpiece was...the one who was working against them...that Shijima.

"Eh!? S-Shijima...the same Shijima in that experimental legal drug club...we founded after college?"

Exactly. The wealthy boy Shijima-kun. I never showed my face back then, but Nakura, you appeared before them as the founder of the association under the name Kumoi, didn't you?

“W-What did that guy do?”

He was making illegal drugs instead of legal ones.

“...What?”

And telling his people that it was all on “Kumoi-san's orders.”

“W-Wait! Hang on! Wait! This is not, are you kidding me!?”

That was some interesting reaction. Are you sleepy?

“No! W-Why did he use my false name like that!?”

Shijima-kun knows what tricks to use. He made himself second-in-command and told his people that Kumoi had been “punishing” him. In that way he filled his members with fear for Kumoi.

“...”

Still, he sure is something. He really did drill holes in his own front teeth and injured his own body with darts...I guess if something has the power to make you do that, then maybe you can call it some sort of faith.

“I don't want to hear about any more of it. Please! What should I do...please, save me...!”

I already did, didn't I? *You don't have to worry about Shijima-kun any more.*

“Really...?”

Yes. So there's nothing left to worry about.

Anyway, I will still have to rely on your services.

“...”

If worst comes to worst...just go to Shinra for some more plastic surgery. Hasn't he already taken off both of your moles and changed several other features on your face? I don't think either that Earthworm girl or Shijima-kun will be able to recognize you.

“What...what exactly am I to do!?”

You don't have to do anything.

“.....”

If you ever feel regret, just blame your past self. We'll talk later.

“O-Okay, bye.”

Bye-bye.

“..”

“.....Uwah!”

“Uwahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Dammit, dammit, dammiiiiiiit!”

“Why...why did this have to happen to me...why...?!”

“What the hell is this!? What-what did I ever do!? Well, I-I...did, I did something, yes I did, uh, uh...”

“Why...why...why *on earth* did I do that...!?”

♂ ♀

12 years ago, last day of summer vacation, Biology Room at Raijin Middle School

“So as I was saying, I still don't think baseball gambling is a good thing to do.”

“Are you still not letting that go? You're pissing me off.”

How long had this argument been going on?

Izaya stared somewhat impatiently at the President in front of him.

He had his own purpose when he volunteered to take care of the plants over summer as the Vice President of the Biology Club.

He used this Biology Room, to which he would come routinely, as the meeting spot for a group of baseball gamblers.

Usually students came to the Biology Room claiming that they came to see the carnivorous plants. Most of them were not here to see the carnivorous plants, however, but to meet Izaya, the leader of the group of baseball gamblers.

As long as they kept using the plants as an excuse, they could do whatever they pleased without drawing the teachers' attention—but on the last day of summer vacation Kishitani Shinra, the President of the Biology Club, showed up unexpectedly and saw the gamblers.

Ever since then he had been trying to persuade Izaya to stop with dogged determination.

The President—Kishitani Shinra—did not ask Izaya to stop out of his sense of right and wrong.

That much Izaya understood.

He probably put himself in that righteous position in order to win approval from his “loved one.”

Annoyed by Shinra's attitude, Izaya flatly refused to listen to what he said—

Shinra, on the other hand, was neither angered nor saddened by Izaya's recalcitrance. He simply kept trying to persuade Izaya to stop in his even voice.

“Are you a fool, Shinra? You sound like a puppet with no will of your own. Everything you do is for putting up a good show in front of your family.”

“I wouldn't mind being a puppet if it means I can stay connected to my loved one.”

“You're not even making sense.”

Izaya fumed. A brief silence fell after he had said these words—

The one to break this silence was neither Izaya nor Shinra, but a boy who quietly opened the door and appeared in front of them.

“...Izaya.”

The boy called out in a low voice. Shinra waved his hand at him, smiling.

“Oh, Nakura-kun? Are you here to see the carnivorous plants?”

The boy with moles under the corners of his eyes ignored his classmate's greeting and walked slowly toward Izaya.

“...What is it? Today's round is already over.”

It was obvious from what Izaya had said that Nakura frequented this place to take part in baseball gambling. Shinra's face did not change, however, as he looked from Izaya to Nakura and back.

"H-Help me out here, please. Lend me some money."

Nakura's expression was somewhat hollow. With trembling lips he walked toward Izaya with an expressionless face.

"I'm not running a personal loan business, you know."

"Then give me back the money I put in until yesterday...things are very bad, my dad could find out that I've been stealing money from his wallet any time now..."

"Wasn't it your own fault? I never forced you to come here and gamble, you know."

Izaya sneered. Nakura's lips twitched suddenly—

With hands shaking even harder than his lips, he pulled a knife out of his pocket and held it tight.

"...Are you serious about this, Nakura-kun?"

Izaya's eyes narrowed. Nakura spit out his words one by one from in-between his trembling teeth:

"Get it out! I said get the money out! Give me, give...give me!"

He probably didn't even know what he was saying any more. Stuttering and with the knife in his hand, he walked step by step toward Izaya—

"To be honest with you, I don't think you're worth giving the money back to. I know that you tried several times to follow those who won home. People have complained to me about it, you know."

These facts had only just left Izaya's lips when Nakura charged shakily at him.

"I...I told you to give it back! Give it back...arghhh!"

"...You're such a fool, you are."

Izaya looked nervous for a second. He reached for the chair next to him, prepared to fight back—

Suddenly Shinra burst in and flung himself between the murderous duo.

“Wait-ahhhhhhhh!”

He was probably trying to say “Wait a second.”

But Nakura did not stop even when Shinra flung himself in.

The powerful impact on his side made Shinra issue a strange cry of “Wait-ahhhhhhhh!”—

The other effect it had was to spill blood everywhere in the Biology Room.

As soon as he saw the knife in his hand covered in blood, Nakura’s face lost its color—

“Ah...eh? N-No, it’s not like that, I, I was just, I was just trying to threaten him...to threaten Izaya...”

Nakura probably didn’t want to realize what he had just done. His lips trembled harder than ever as he shook his head desperately.

“It was not me! Not my fault! I, uwah, uwahhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

He tossed the knife aside and ran out of the Biology Room as fast as he could.

Izaya ran to where Shinra lay fallen and turned to look at his side, where the knife looked like it was going for.

The wound was not serious enough to reveal the entrails, but Shinra was bleeding so hard that his clothes were drenched in red.

“Wait here! I’ll call an ambulance...”

Izaya took out a cell phone, which was still a rare gadget back then, from his school bag. But suddenly Shinra grabbed his hand.

“Before you do that...go to the cupboard...and fetch me some duct tape...”

“Huh?”

“...I have to...stop the bleeding first...”

“...OK.”

After seeing Shinra’s assured way of giving orders even with such a gaping wound on his side, Izaya had to obey and fetch him the duct tape.

In an unusual way Shinra skillfully wrapped his wound up in the duct tape as he *smiled* at Izaya.

“Hahah. Looks like I’m, not, carved out to be a hero...after all.”

“Wouldn’t it be better for you to not speak?” Izaya said.

Shinra looked embarrassed as he said, “I was thinking...that my loved one would praise me if I became a hero...uwahh!”

“Oi oi...”

“It’s fine. Wounds like these don’t kill you that easily. My insides look like they are intact. It was a miracle that he didn’t hurt my peritoneum...uhhh...”

As he watched Shinra prattled on with a deadly pale face, what Izaya felt was—

Envy.

He had always thought of himself as being in a position to observe humans and therefore standing on a higher pedestal than those around him.

But unlike him, Kishitani Shinra was living in a different world in the real sense of the word.

He had put himself in the way of harm from a knife without hesitation. He did it out of neither his sense of right and wrong nor his instinct, but simply a desire to earn someone else’s approval. Was it in any way an easy thing to do? It was true that love made one blind, but what Shinra did was simply not normal.

Shinra’s standards were far departed from any other human’s, even including Izaya’s.

Izaya was too anxious back then to properly analyze his feelings. When he revisited his memories later he reasoned that Shinra was in fact “watching humans from a different world.”

Unlike Izaya, Shinra did not harbor fond feelings for humans.

But Izaya still envied him.

He envied his classmate who resided in a different world than him and the rest of humankind.

As he watched Shinra—his fingers stopped on his cell phone just as they were about to dial the number for an ambulance.

“...Hey, Shinra.”

As his classmate groaned in pain, Izaya asked in a small voice:

“That wound, *can you tell them that I...did it?*”

“That hurts, ouch...what?”

“In return for that...I’m going to make sure that Nakura is going to regret it for as long as I am alive.”

♂ ♀

12 years later

[So what did you say to him?]

“Um...I think I said ‘OK, as you wish.’”

Celty typed somewhat surprised as she heard Shinra answer her question from under his blanket.

[You...I knew you did surprising things out of passion, but I didn’t know you started doing them when you were a kid.]

“Heheh. I’ve always tried to be just the good student in front of Celty.”

[Sorry, but you didn’t look like a good student to me back then either.]

“What!? ...Uhhhh...”

Shinra yelped without thinking, and immediately his broken bones felt like they were being ground against.

Celty hastened to calm him down and wiped off the sweat on his neck with a towel.

The reason that Shinra had that scar on his side was that a classmate stabbed him. Izaya took the blame and kept using it to threaten that person into being his plaything.

That was what Shinra had disclosed to Celty a couple of days ago.

Now that she had heard Shinra talk about it, however, Celty was starting to feel that Shinra’s attitude was a problem in itself.

On the other hand she had to admit that it was “a very Shinra thing to do.” With such mixed feelings on her mind she continued.

[But is it really the best way for you? Peaceful co-existence with the one who stabbed you must be hard.]

“It’s not hard at all. I wasn’t interested in him in the first place. In retrospect, though, I think he did something simply unforgivable when he stabbed me. I’m even glad that Izaya has been slaving him around.”

[...It’s so rare that you would think of someone like that.]

“Had he stabbed me to death...well, I don’t really mind dying, but that would have meant that I would no longer be able to see Celty! It would have been the same as taking Celty away from me. How could I ever forgive someone like that?”

Shinra’s assertive tone rendered Celty wordless for a moment. Sighing, she shrugged—and switched the topic back to the money she got for this job.

The only things she had to do were buying strange chips off people, letting the laptop be stolen, and protecting Izaya’s sister. But Izaya seemed satisfied. He told her that her job was done and had Celty meet him outside.

Apart from an envelope that contained more money than she had expected, she also obtained one piece of information from him—

Yadogiri Jinnai.

Izaya had told her that he was the one behind the stalker’s attack on Shinra.

It was kind of hard to believe, but Izaya never lies about things like this.

He is the head of Ruri-chan’s former agency after all, so it makes sense if he indeed has something to do with the stalker.

...

But compared to that, what I’m more concerned about is...

Is...

“What’s wrong, Celty?”

Celty started as she heard Shinra call her name and typed hastily onto her PDA.

[Nothing.]

“Celty, are you keeping something from me?”

Celty gave a clear answer to Shinra’s question.

[Yes, I am. But I don’t want to tell you what it is.]

“...That was cheating, Celty. There’s no way I can keep asking when you’ve said something like that.”

For a moment Shinra looked like he was going to cry. Sighing with resignation, however, he smiled tenderly at Celty instead.

“It’s OK, I’m not going to make you tell me what you don’t want to tell me. Just in case, though, you’re not cheating on me with anybody, right?”

[Definitely not. Rest assured.]

“That’s great...the relief is making me sleepy somehow...ahhh...”

Shinra closed his eyes with a smile and slowly fell asleep.

Celty watched him with an uneasy heart.

Her concern had nothing to do about the information she got from Izaya as a reward.

Rather, it had everything to do with the *definite presence* of “something” she sensed when she heard the information from Izaya.

It was a feeling she would never forget—*the definite presence of her head*.

There’s no mistaking it...

My head...Izaya has it.

The woman from Yagiri Pharmaceuticals had absconded with the head. Considering the kind of information network Izaya had, he might have already met the woman and acquired the head.

She had always been able to sense a faint trace of the head’s presence, but she had never felt it as strongly as she did this time.

She couldn't take it off her mind, so she returned to the same spot several hours later. But by then she was only able to detect the usual faint traces.

As I thought...Izaya must have brought the head with him!

But...why?

I knew it. You simply cannot trust Izaya.

But...if I go to him and ask him to give it back...what will happen?

What will happen to my life and my memories if I get my head back?

Will I forget completely about the life I have had so far with Shinra in Ikebukuro? Will I go back to my dullahan's duties and put the life in this city behind me forever?

Celty felt a rush of fear she had never felt before as she contemplated the possible encounter with her head.

To hold her feelings back she turned her gaze back at Shinra's face.

Shinra.

She ended up still unable to decide on what to do—

But her heart went calm as she watched his face.

When Shinra was attacked, her anger had made her realize that Shinra was now irreplaceable to her—

Right now she realized it again as she felt her heart cured by his presence.

Celty began to think about a question she had thought about before.

Were her feelings for him the same as the love or affection humans often talked about? She did not know.

But she hoped that they were. She hoped that she and Shinra could stay connected with each other via the same feelings—

But she had no gods to pray to. What she could do was just pray in silence to the city of Ikebukuro.

On an open road somewhere in Ikebukuro

“So it turned out that the Courier didn’t say anything. I think she noticed, though.”

“This must be the thousandth time I’ve said it, but you really are the worst human being imaginable...I do hate that Headless Rider, but even I have to feel a little sympathy for her this time. After all, she didn’t seduce Seiji, the head did.”

Izaya turned his neck as he heard Namie’s voice on the other end of the phone and said, “Your standards for loving and hating are as clear cut as ever. I knew from the start that there was no way she would just ask me to give the head back to her, though. I was more hoping to see if it would have any effects on the head...there’s none, though, at least none that I can see.”

“How ironic. You keep telling everyone how much you love humans, yet you’re looking for hope in the world after death.”

“Actually it’s the other way around. I love humans, and that’s why I want to keep watching them forever.”

“You think you’re a god or something?” Namie said in disgust.

Izaya, however, simply shrugged and shot back, “That’s not true. I never wanted to do anything to humans—I just want to observe them. Of course, if I can do a little bit of something to make things more interesting it would be even more ideal.”

“That’s what a trickster god does. Do you think you’re Loki in Norse mythology?”

“First Shiki-san and now you. Is this some sort of mythology boom that I don’t know about?”

The conversation went on for a while. After telling her what was to be done at work next, Izaya hung up the phone.

As he walked on he remembered what Celty had said to him before saying goodbye.

[Still, I saw a new side of you today. I never thought that you would ask me to protect your sister...looks like you do at least have enough of a human side to know that you should worry about your family.]

Did she say it to conceal the uneasiness in her heart after sensing the presence of the head, or did she really mean it? The answer to that question was anyone’s guess.

But in his heart, Izaya disagreed with what Celty had said.

No, it's not like that, Courier.

You got it completely wrong.

I asked you to protect my sister...

Because I couldn't risk having you come to the bar...when Niekawa Haruna was also there. That was all.

As Izaya strolled along the Ikebukuro streets he fell momentarily into deep reverie.

His two sisters were a headache, but to him they were not all that different from other people.

To Orihara Izaya family were friends just like non-family.

But Izaya was suddenly reminded of something that happened back in middle school.

Namely, Nakura stabbing Shinra—what you could call the ultimate cause behind what had happened this time.

Now that I think of it...

It might be the only thing that ever did affect the formation of my personality in a significant way.

Remembering the envy and the sense of defeat he had felt back then, he realized that Kishitani Shinra was probably more of a rival than a friend to him.

Different from Heiwajima Shizuo, whom he hated, Shinra was probably something he should have aspired to be.

But as soon as he recalled the way Shinra looked right now, he smiled and dismissed the idea altogether.

“No way.”

In retrospect Shinra, who lived confidently above this world, did invoke some jealousy in him.

Yet he was attempting to betray even a friend like that. Not a friend by Izaya's standards, but a “friend” as defined by most people in the world.

He'll probably be mad at me if he finds out that I went to meet Celty taking the head with me.

“Haha!”

Izaya couldn't help but laugh slightly as he pictured his only “friend” by the world's standards getting mad at him.

There is nothing to be afraid of.

This is the way I have lived my life all along, he laughed as he thought—

Laughed—

Laughed—

Laughed—

He clenched his right fist and slammed it hard into the telephone pole next to him.

It made a loud sound, but since Izaya was in a secluded alleyway, no one took notice of him.

What did Izaya's face look like?

Why did he slam his fist into the telephone pole?

What was on his mind?

No one in the world would ever know.

Because—

“Ah, here, here! Iza-nii! Iiiiiaaa-niiiiii!”

“...Family (Brother)...”

“Oops, what's up with you two? It's unusual for you to actually greet me before you kick me.”

Izaya was wearing his usual smile again as he turned around to face his sisters.

“I finally saw a new side of you today, Iza-nii! You told that Headless Rider to protect Kuru-nee, right!?”

“...Doubt (Really)?”

“Alas, that is so flattering of you. But the truth is that I simply used you because I needed an excuse to keep the Headless Rider away when I had to be doing something that one must never know about.”

Izaya told his sisters the real reason straightforwardly as they thanked him.

After exchanging a glance, however, they smiled and said:

“That’s fine with us! Thank you, Iza-nii!”

“...Thank (Thank you)...”

“It’s so hard to predict your thoughts, you know.”

“That’s just because you’re not honest with us, Iza-nii.”

The twins flanked Izaya as he began walking, a bitter smile on his face.

Mairu, who was on Izaya’s right, raised her face to look at him and said in a natural tone, “Say, Iza-nii. We know that you probably don’t treat us any differently as you treat other people, but keep in mind that we still think of you as family, OK?”

“All of a sudden you’re saying things that would actually make me happy. What happened?”

Izaya felt that the line didn’t sound like Mairu, who usually told him to “Die!” and high-kicked him when she saw him. He glanced at his sisters’ faces—and saw that they were smiling innocently back at him as they continued.

“So, if you get killed by Shizuo-san, Iza-nii, we’ll make sure to cry a little bit for you before we laugh about it.”

“Small (Just a little)...”

“...I was a fool to expect any family love from you.”

Izaya chuckled and walked faster.

Mairu tilted her head and asked as she saw his right hand, “What happened, Iza-nii? Your right hand looks swollen.”

“...Health (Are you alright)?”

Kururi looked at him with worried eyes. Izaya stroked her head with his left hand and lied with a sigh, “Yeah, I got this when I was running away from Shizu-chan.”

“So you deserved it after all—”

“Keep yourselves away from muscle idiots like that one. Or you could die, you know.”

The siblings continued their conversation as they disappeared into the city night.

The city, which took in everything it was offered, absorbed their talk into its nightly cacophony as it did any chit-chat within any normal family.

♂ ♀

Next day, Russian Sushi

“The city’s been so peaceful recently,” Yumasaki said as he sat by the counter waiting for his sushi.

Togusa, who sat next to him, disagreed with him fervently.

“Peaceful? Haven’t you heard that the guy who tried setting fire to Ruri-chan’s friend’s home was arrested? ...The world is way too dangerous!”

“You said he was arrested, right? Why do you have to worry about it then?”

“Idiot! They haven’t found that Adabashi bastard yet! He’s the main culprit! Damn! ...If only I had his picture or something I would have driven my van all around the place. I wouldn’t stop until I’ve found him and made him nothing but rust marks under my wheels...!”

“Calm down, Togusa.”

Kadota soothed him as he drank his hot tea.

Simon, who had been busy cleaning counter, asked, “Oooh, today, Karisawa is at home? Does she have a cold? When she has a cold, sushi gives her strength, visit her with sushi is good!”

“No, Karisawa-san has to meet with her cosplaying friends. I’m dying of loneliness now because no one’s here to talk about manga with me.”

Yumasaki sighed heavily. Simon continued.

“Oooh—you sigh, happiness run away. Where goes the happiness that ran away? They say it goes into the salmon roe. Order salmon roe is good. Karisawa is not with you, but your hearts are with her. Filled stomachs, filled hearts. Three people eat food for four is good. Let’s eat together for Karisawa’s funeral!”

“It’s not a funeral...”

Just as Kadota was about to point out the mistake in Simon’s speech—

The entrance door was opened and another customer walked in.

“Hey, welcome...oooh! Long time no see! Mr. Manager!”

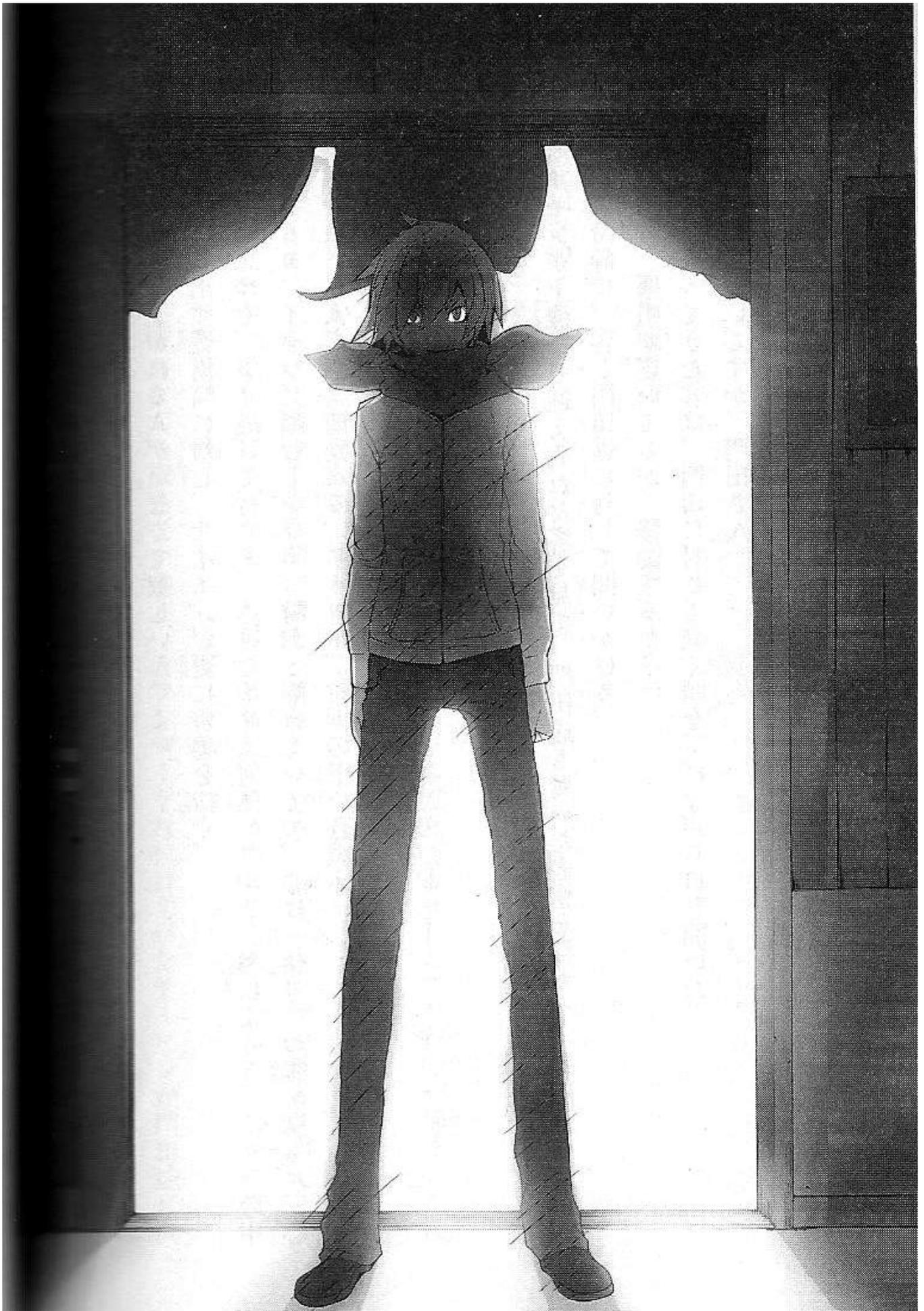
Kadota and the others couldn’t help but look surprised as they saw the customer whom Simon greeted with enthusiasm. Denis, the owner of the place, calmly turned to ask the customer and Kadota’s gang.

“So? The dining room is empty. Would you like to move there?”

The new customer lowered his head in front of Kadota and said:

“Can I ask you for a favor, Kadota-san?”

“Kida...”



“I’m sorry. I saw you walk into this place, so I...I wanted to hear your advice on something.”

“Ah, of course...”

Kadota and the others were surprised about two things.

One was the fact that Kida Masaomi was back in this town.

The other—was the yellow scarf tied around his neck.

♂ ♀

Somewhere in Ikebukuro

The sun was already in the west when Sonohara Anri walked out of Junkudo Bookstore.

She bought a lot of cookbooks for beginners and began to walk home with a bag of books in her hand.

She had felt an aimless kind of excitement in her heart over this summer.

Kida-kun is back in this town.

Maybe it was only for a little while...

But he looked like he was doing well. I’m so glad.

Several days ago during the stalker incident, Kida Masaomi had saved the cat Anri was taking care of to help someone else out.

She didn’t know why Masaomi was there. He had run away before she could talk to him.

But Anri still felt happy.

Mikado would be even happier if he knew.

Mikado had been acting kind of strange recently. If he saw Masaomi again he would definitely be back to his usual self.

That was Anri’s hope, but there had been no progress since the day of the incident.

But Masaomi had said, “I will come back to you, Anri, and Mikado. I promise.” and these words alone were more than enough to keep her going.

Anri felt that there were two things she should do to prepare for the return to their good old days once Masaomi comes back safely.

The first was to learn to cook so that they would be able to taste her food.

The second—was to learn to completely control the Saika inside her.

With these two dramatically contrasting goals in mind, Anri decided to start from buying cookbooks.

Anri had no idea what she should do about her other goal, though. Even as she felt bothered by it, Saika was still murmuring words of love inside her.

Trying to suppress the voice back into the picture frame in her heart, Anri sighed and kept walking—

“Ah! Anri-chan! Yahoo!”

Anri stopped and turned around as she heard someone call her from behind.

She saw two women standing.

One of them was a stranger, but Anri recognized the other one—it was Karisawa Erika.

“Karisawa-san, hello!”

As soon as she saw Karisawa’s face Anri’s heart felt lighter; her expression brightened up as well.

Karisawa had with her own eyes seen Anri as “Saika.” But she didn’t treat Anri any differently afterwards and remained a treasured friend of Anri’s.

“Were you at Junkudo? What did you buy? Manga?”

“No, just some cookbooks...ah, er...”

Anri didn’t know what to do as she turned to look at the girl standing next to Karisawa. Karisawa smiled and introduced them:

“Ah, this is Tsutsugawa Azusa-chan, a friend who cosplays with me. She sometimes takes rides with us in Togusacchi’s van as well.”

“Ah, I see! Um, I’m Sonohara Anri. Nice to meet you...!”

“Don’t even worry about being polite with me! I’m Tsutsugawa Azusa, nice to meet ya!”

The girl had a delicate look about her but talked as straightforwardly as a guy.

Anri was surprised. Lowering her head again she asked Karisawa:

“Why aren’t you hanging out with Yumasaki-san and the others today?”

“Oh, I was meeting with my cosplay team. Ah, since you mentioned it, I’ve actually been meaning to ask you, Anri-chan—”

“?”

Anri tilted her head with a confused look. Karisawa, on the other hand, opened her mouth with a shine in her eyes.

Little did she know that her next words were to slightly but significantly change the fate of the girl named Sonohara Anri.

“Anri-chan...have you thought about giving cosplaying a try? Actually, you have to give it a try!”

“...Eh?”

Anri tilted her head again, not knowing what Karisawa had meant. Karisawa explained further:

“You can start with something other than anime or manga characters! Maid or miko outfits will work just fine!”

♂ ♀

Night, West Ikebukuro Park

The Awakusu-kai executive Akabayashi, who would not have in his wildest imagination foreseen that someone would try to put the little girl he used to take care of in a miko’s outfit, was meeting with another man.

Children who played in the park during the day had all gone home. Akabayashi was sitting on the swing alone as he handed an envelope to the information broker standing in front of him.

“The job’s actually not that difficult, but a guy like Oi-chan* can’t just go spying on someone myself day and night, you see.”

** Akabayashi uses “Oi-chan” as his first-person pronoun. The pronoun is a variation of “ojichan” (“uncle” or “old man”) and is usually regarded as yakuza talk.*

Orihara Izaya wore his usual smile as he took the envelope.

He asked Akabayashi, “I was actually kind of surprised. I thought you suspected me, Akabayashi-san?”

“Ah, I still do suspect you, you know. Oi-chan’s guess is that you do business with Asuki Group as well, lad. Is that a good guess?”

Akabayashi grinned as he sat motionless on the swing.

“Asuki Group is now part of Medei just like you people are, so I don’t really see a problem here. Not that I’m doing business with them, though.”

“You of all people should know that things aren’t as simple as they look, right?”

Izaya’s answer was a smile. He took out a photo from the envelope.

The moment he saw the person on the photo, however—there was a very small change in Izaya’s expression.

It didn’t escape the scrutiny of Akabayashi’s left eye, though.

“Your face changed. ...Do you know this person?”

“He’s a kouhai at the school I went to. Did he do something?”

“Not really. It’s just that the daughter of someone who used to look after Oi-chan has been really close to him recently... Rumor has it that this boy is in some sort of Color Gang. I have no intention to ruin other people’s relationships, but I kind of really want to know if this boy’s been doing anything strange.”

As Akabayashi prattled on, Izaya grew more and more alarmed.

Akabayashi, heh.

An unpleasant man, just as expected.

Don’t tell me he’s using this request to test me at the same time...?

Smiling boldly in his heart, Izaya maintained the usual expression on his face as he spoke.

“I see. If he has indeed involved himself in anything strange, I will do my part to try to talk him out of it.”

“Sorry about the trouble. I was just thinking that an information broker closer to his age like you would be more appropriate than a professional detective. The girl’s parents were the ones who looked after Oi-chan, but they’ve both passed away now. If anything ever happens to her I won’t be able to face her parents in Heaven.”

Akabayashi continued his small talk. Izaya, on the other hand, asked in an almost provocative way:

“Are you sure that her father would also be in Heaven?”

“Ha ha ha. I expected nothing less from you, Mr. Information Broker. Of course you already know.”

Not only did he know that the girl Akabayashi had been talking about was Sonohara Anri—he also knew that she had an abusive father. Izaya had just made both of these facts obvious with one sentence, yet Akabayashi’s expression remained unchanged. In fact, his reply came almost immediately and Izaya had to conclude that his provocative question had been nothing Akabayashi hadn’t expected beforehand.

What an unpleasant man.

And then there is Shiki-san. There are too many men you have to reckon with in Awakusu-kai.

Izaya smiled bitterly in his heart as he bowed courteously to Akabayashi and put the envelope inside his clothes.

“I’m going to give this job my best try, then.

I will try to find out everything there ‘is’ to find out about the boy on this photo—about Ryuugamine Mikado-kun.”

The teenagers’ hearts kept missing each other by inches. The adults’ hearts, on the other hand, had only just begun to stir and move—

A giant whirlwind was forming in the city of Ikebukuro.

As to what awaited them at the center of its vortex, no one had the slightest idea.



発行 株式会社アスキー・メディアワークス

発売 株式会社角川グループパブリッシング



製作



出演

原作

成

田

良

悟

心

今日も
おたのしみ……



イラスト&デザイン
ヤスダスズヒト

装丁
鎌部善彦

編集
鈴木Sue
和田敦

折原臨也

セルティ・ストゥルルソン
岸谷新羅

折原九瑠璃
折原舞流

黒沼青葉

平和島静雄
田中トム
ヴァローナ

写楽影次郎
写楽美影

四木
栗崎苺

遊馬崎ウォーカー
狩沢給理華
門田京平
サイモン・ブレジネフ

電ヶ峰帝人
園原杏里
紀田正臣

矢野波江

『デュララ!!』×9 完
©2011 Ryohgo Narita

CAST

Orihara Izaya

Celty Sturluson
Kishitani Shinra

Orihara Kururi
Orihara Mairu

Kuronuma Aoba

Heiwajima Shizuo
Tanaka Tom
Vorona

Sharaku Eijirou
Sharaku Mikage

Shiki
Awakusu Akane

Yumasaki Walker
Karisawa Erika
Kadota Kyohei
Simon Brezhnev

Ryuugamine Mikado
Sonohara Anri
Kida Masaomi

Yagiri Namie

END OF VOLUME 9
© 2011 NARITA RYOHGO



9784048702744

ISBN978-4-04-870274-4
C0193 ¥570E



1920193005707



ASCII
MEDIA
WORKS

発行● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: **本体 570 円**

※消費税が別に加算されます

