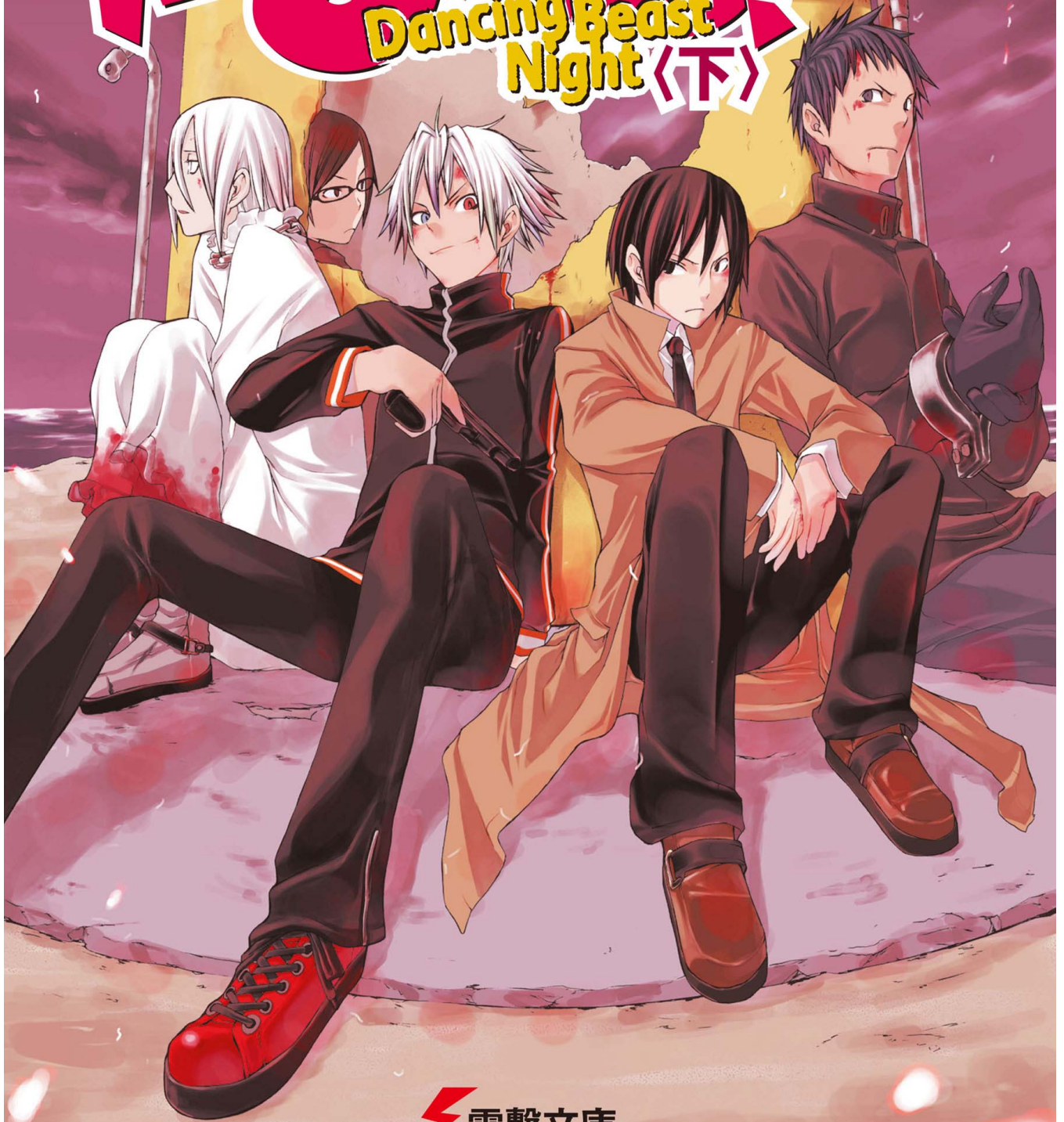


成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita

がらくた

Dancing Beast
Night <下>



電撃文庫



“It looks like things are taking a turn for the annoying here. Explosions going off one after another, execs from every organization dying off one after another, a pair of dogs coming back to the island, a pack of ratlings stirring in the shadows, and the cat being toyed with like no tomorrow.

Add to that the crazy inter-district relationships just before the explosions.
Just what is going on here?

Is it the end times for the island? ...Then again, that doesn't really matter, does it?

Whether the island burns or dissolves or the people die en masse, it's no big deal.

Because that's what this island is.

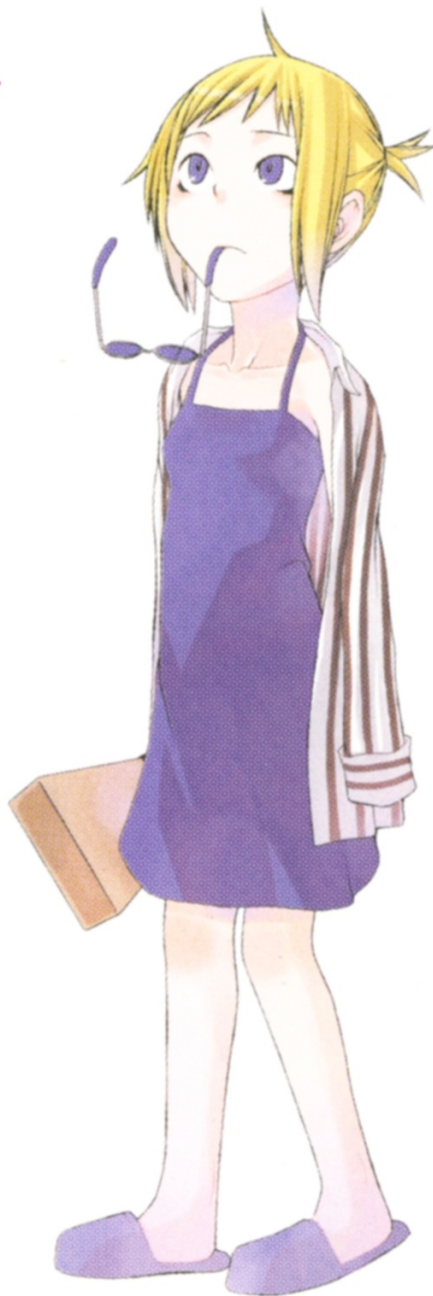
So before we discuss the island's future, let's talk about the ending of this dance—where the ghoul and the girl dance together without even meeting eyes. Shall we, friends?”

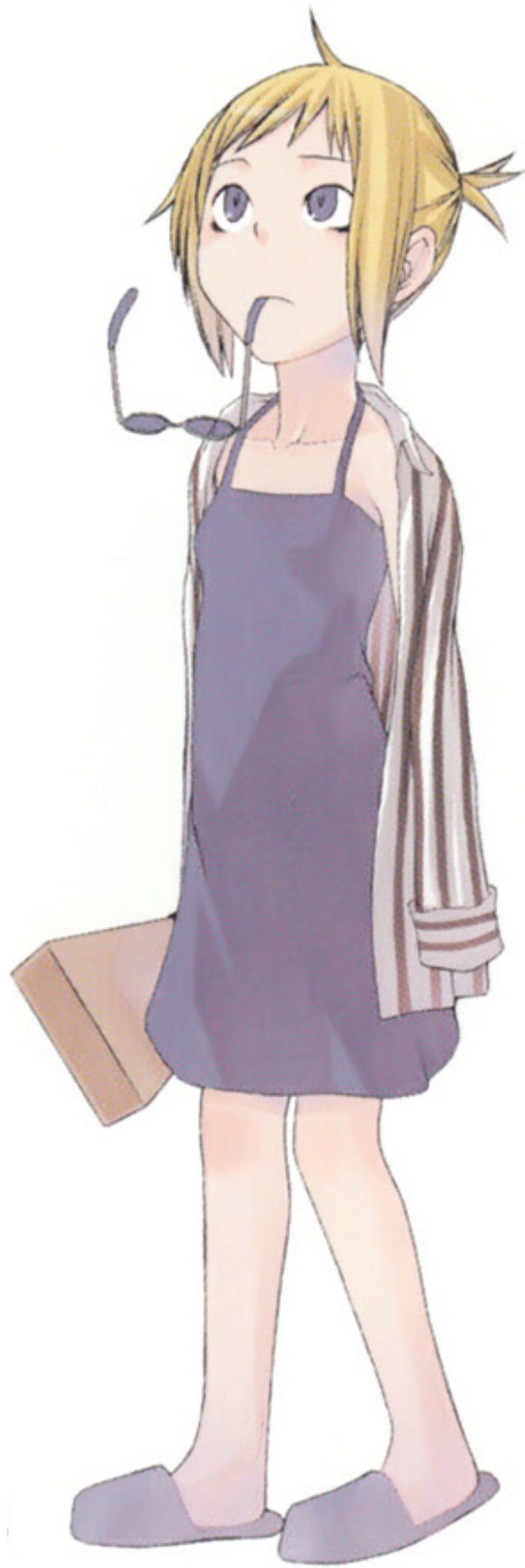
がるくる!

Dancing Beast Night ▶〈下〉

成田良悟
Ryohgo Narita

イラスト:ヤスダスズヒト
Illustration:Suzuhito Yasuda







踊り狂え、豺狼達の夜を——。

Let the beasts dance like mad on this night...



雨霧八雲

島内最悪の殺人鬼と噂される男。口癖は「俺は、まともだ」。



シャーロット

探偵気取りの米英ハーフ。ドジ少女?



シャーロック

シャーロットの弟。皮肉屋。



雪村ナズナ

東の護衛部隊員である刃物使いの少女。現在は面会謝絶。



葛原宗司

西区画の自警団長である、元警察官。島の番犬。



ケリー

島の情報源である海賊放送「ぶるぶる電波」のオーナーである女性。



ギターリン

東区画を仕切る組織のボス。通称、暇人魔神。



イーリー

西区画を仕切る組織の幹部。中国人と英国人のハーフ。



戌井隼人

元山賊にして現在海賊の青年。かつて人工島の最下層の中心だった狂犬。



狗木誠一

自暴自棄な青年。かつてイーリーの右腕だった猟犬。



リーレイ

イーリーの妹。鉄パイプを持った組織の始末屋。可愛い物が好き。



麗凰

イーリーの兄。島を管理する西区画の幹部。冷徹で凶暴な男。



バネ足ジョップリン 島内の「都市伝説」。

金島銀河 葛原に恨みを抱く武器密売人。右腕が高性能の義手らしい。

Dramatis Personae

Yakumo Amagiri: The man rumored to be the island's most atrocious killer. His catchphrase is "I'm normal".

Charlotte: A clumsy half-American half-British girl who's all about detective work.

Sherlock: Charlotte's younger brother. Sardonic.

Nazuna Yukimura: A swordswoman in the Eastern District's Guard Team. In critical condition and unable to receive visitors.

Souji Kuzuhara: A former police officer, and captain of the Western District's volunteer police force. The island's guard dog.

Kelly: An informer and the producer-slash-DJ of Buruburu Airwaves, a pirate radio station.

Gitarin: The boss of the organization that controls the Eastern District. Also known as the Demonic Rogue.

Yili: An executive of the organization that controls the Western District. Half-Chinese and half-British.

Hayato Inui: A former bandit, currently a pirate. The mad dog who was once at the center of the Pits.

Seiichi Kugi: A young man who has given up on everything. A hunting dog who was previously Yili's right-hand man.

Lilei: Yili's younger sister. A member of the organization's executive squad who wields a lead pipe. Likes cute things.

Lihuang: Yili's older brother. An executive and an overseer of the Western District. A vicious man of little pity.

Spring-heeled Joplin: The island's urban legend.

Ginga Kanashima: A weapons dealer with a grudge against Kuzuhara. His right arm is supposedly a highly advanced prosthetic.

Well, friends.

Let us resume our observation.



間奏 4 (後) 『暗躍飢寒』

Interlude 4 (Part 2): The Dark Night's Suffering

The moment their eyes met, something seemed to explode in the distance.

He spied the flames and the smoke out of a corner of his eye.

But that mattered nothing to the man.

'The rainbow.

'Before my eyes here the rainbow dog.'

A senseless series of words flitted through his mind.

How long had it been since he arrived on the island?

The time he spent gazing out at sea seemed like minutes, hours, or years.

But it was over.

Even an eternity was less than a second once it was finished.

The curtains had simply come down and gone back up. There was no intermission to the play.

"<It's been a while,>" said the rainbow-haired man. Then he ended the call. "No point in the phone now, I guess. I'm almost outta batteries anyway. Good to see you looking so lively. Lemme be honest—I thought with a personality like yours, you mighta ended up killing yourself somewhere down the line."

Kugi suddenly became very aware of his own expression.

What kind of face was he wearing now, looking at this man?

He didn't even need to check; Kugi knew he was wearing a faint smile.

Even though he was facing the man responsible for his exile from the island. The rainbow-haired man he should rightly despise.

'So...why am I smiling?'

He was his mirror image.

Which is what made him all the more hateful.

He wanted to kill him. He wanted to shatter his own mirror.

Was Kugi smiling because the time had finally come?

'To...fulfill that desire?'

Was it possible for him?

Was it possible when he was without a gun and completely unarmed?

Or perhaps he had been waiting for this moment.

Perhaps he had been waiting to be reunited with the rainbow-haired man like this.

And—

'And...and what?'

'Why...am I here?'

'Why did I come to this place?'

'This place is...here.'

'...?'

'Where am I?'

The front door.

The small front door and the entrance. A familiar sight.

'Why?! Why am I remembering this now?!'

The day after dueling the rainbow-haired man, Kugi had begun to wander in search of someone.

Shattered, the young man had wandered in search of his friend's family.

Supposedly they had moved away the very year he went to the island—so he went from place to place, running after their trail.

As though that would be enough to redeem him of his sins.

Finally, he arrived at the family's home.

He pressed the recently-installed doorbell and waited. And waited.

To beg forgiveness.

Or to die. To be punished.

The true nightmare was waiting for him inside.

And because he knew that, the young man waited...and waited...for the door to open.

To move on from his past.

Or to accept his past.

'Where am I?'

Though he was facing the rainbow-haired man, Kugi's thoughts were focused on the door in his memories.

The color of fire illuminating the world slowly enveloped his vision—

—and it turned to the color of dusk in his mind, dragging out the memories of the past more clearly than ever.

'That dream...'

The dream he had had several hours earlier replayed itself in his head like a hallucination.

It felt like a fire was crackling somewhere.

The eerily warm light shone the color of that day upon the door in his mind.

When Kugi changed the color of the island's light into the color of dusk, the dream he had rejected—the rest of the story—was forced to the surface from the back of his memories.

All with the rainbow before him as the catalyst.

The door in his mind finally opened, accepting Kugi as he stood lit by the rainbow and the fires—

And something abhorrent emerged.



“Well, if it ain’t Seiichi.”

The bearded man chuckled, surprised.

Emerging from the door was a nostalgic face from his memories.

The father of the childhood friend he killed.

“Ah...ah...”

His knees began trembling at the sight of his face.

What was he supposed to say?

Teeth chattering, Kugi realized the depths of his ignorance and feared the being standing before him.

He had come to seek redemption, but he hadn't thought of what he should specifically do. He was simply prepared to accept whatever the family had in store for him.

He had, in the end, given up on thinking and left his fate in the hands of others.

And as Kugi's trembling grew worse at the realization, the victim's father gave him a calm look.

An undisturbed face. Peaceful eyes.

With a voice far warmer and kinder than before Kugi took his daughter to the island—

"Is...is Kanae well?"

'What?'

For a moment, he was lost.

He had confessed everything to the police when he turned himself in.

The prosecutor's office and his state-appointed lawyer had said the Orisaki family should have been contacted.

But for some reason, Kugi had received no word about the incident afterwards and it had taken him a long time to find this address.

As Kugi stared blankly, Kanae's father smiled.

"...I'm sorry, son. That rambunctious daughter of mine's always been causing you nothing but trouble."

"No, I—"

"Manami! You remember Seiichi? Your sister's friend?"

"...Huh?"

Kugi spotted a girl in the shadow of the hall behind Kanae's father.

'Oh, I remember...she had a little sister.'

He had seen her in passing several times. He froze.

'...She looks like her.'

Her lack of emotion bothered him, but it was painfully clear to Kugi that the girl there was Kanae's sister.

The way she did her hair and the way she dressed—it was all a dead ringer for Kanae.

As Kugi internally reeled, Kanae's father spoke warmly to him.

"Look at you, Seiichi. You're a grown man now. I can rest easy and leave Kanae in your hands. We got word a few days ago about her being dead, but that's another one of her crazy stunts, eh? Just running away from this boring world by pretending she's dead? Hah. I almost feel like I'm dumping her onto you. I'm sorry, son."

He was being kind.

He was being too kind.

"N-no...that's not it, Mr. Orisaki!"

"Hm? What's not it?"

Nauseated by reality—so different from what he had expected—Kugi steeled himself and raised his voice.

"Kanae...Kanae is dead! I killed her...with my own hands."

It felt like his soul had left his body along with the words.

Preparing for his head to be bashed in, Kugi looked up at the man.

But Mr. Orisaki looked no different.

"That so? Well, what does that matter?"

"...What?"

It was only then that sense returned to Kugi's mind. It forced itself back into his thought processes.

The moment he became calm, the senses he had honed on the island brought a series of needless understandings into his mind. Even the things he should not understand were awakened by force, like a punishment.

The girl in the house was glaring at Kugi, then at her father, than at Kugi again. There was almost no life in the face he had assumed was merely emotionless. Only a hint of fear and hatred.

The old him would never have noticed.

It was because he had lived on the island that he understood the color in her eyes.

'I know that look.

'I've seen it back on the island—'



'I've seen it right here on this island—'

"...Whoa, what's with those eyes? You look like you've seen a ghost, man."

For a moment, Kugi returned to reality.

The rainbow before him was staring quizzically, but Kugi's eyes failed to reflect him.

"Anyway, it looks almost like the island's on fire. And come to think of it, I set the place on fire the last time we had ourselves a scuffle, too. Leave it to Mr. Kuzuhara to jump in there like that...hey, you even listening to me? Hello? Hellooooo?"

The rainbow put his cell phone away and continued to speak, but Kugi did not react at all.

He simply reminded himself of the air on the island and returned to his memories.

'I've seen those eyes here on the island countless times. On men, women, and children. To the point of nausea. And I pretended not to see.'

'I know what those eyes are.'



'The eyes of someone who's been abandoned.'

They were not abandoned by people. They were the eyes of pitiful rats who had been abandoned by the society outside, found themselves without acceptance even on the island, and could not even find people to hate for it.

The very same eyes as the boy who led the island's urchins. His name was Nejiro, if Kugi recalled correctly.

With that unnecessary realization, anxiety surged in his heart.

"Um...is Mrs. Orisaki out?"

"Hm? Ah, my wife?"

He had asked the question to quell his fears.

But at that moment, Kugi noticed the girl's eyes darken.

At the same time, he heard the man's voice, unchanged and hazy.

"Well...heh. The second she heard Kanae died on the island, she screamed about it being a lie and went off. Left me and Manami behind. Haven't heard from her since, so I assume she's doing just fine there. Maybe she's found the darn girl already."

It was supposed to be a heavy topic. But there was no weight to Mr. Orisaki's words. Even though the man who destroyed his family was standing right there.

Even though his daughter's killer was right there.

Even though his wife was missing.

Why was he smiling?

Kugi realized that the girl in the hall was staring at him. She had been looking around before that, but she must have reacted to his confession about killing her sister.

From her eyes it looked like she blamed him, or like she desired something. Kugi began sinking into a bottomless pit of fear.

Noticing her gaze, the bearded man turned. The girl flinched.

"...What's wrong now, Manami? Making eyes at Seiichi?"

The slightest hint of a shadow crept into Mr. Orisaki's voice. That also was a subtle change Kugi would not have noticed before his time on the island.

"...I'm sorry, Seiichi, but I'd prefer it if you went home now."

'What in the world is going on here?'

How much time had passed?

Kugi needed a great deal of time, effort, and energy to understand the situation.

What was wrong with Mr. Orisaki?

What had happened to him?

Kugi had seen the man several times in the past, and he seemed no different now.

Almost to the point of being unnatural.

If Kanae's mother had gone to the island and still not returned, she was not likely to be alive. The underground area of the Western District was safe

enough, but if she had stepped into the Pits—or the shadows of the Western District in search of Kanae—

The face of a woman in a *qipao* flashed through his thoughts. Something seemed to run through his nerves.

He stood before the home of those left behind, wondering what he should do.

But as he lingered on the sister who so resembled Kanae, a strange noise reached his ears.

The sound of something falling to the floor, and intermittent impacts.

And a short, subdued, scream.

Kugi came to a realization. He approached the house, crept into the yard, and peered through the window.

The noises continued. There was the sound of breaking glass, followed by dull impacts and the subdued screams from before.

He hadn't noticed from a distance, but now Kugi could hear a voice.

A calm voice.

The voice of Kanae's father—the very same one he had just heard.

But the calm was only in his voice.

"You, too?"

"You, too?" "You hate me, is that it?"

"Enough lies—"

"You were staring."

"Making eyes at that son of a bitch."

"First Kanae."

"Now you."

“—*raised* you, goddammit—”

“Why the hell—”

“—you little whore.”

“Filthy slut.”

“Fucking around like a—

“Like a— like a— like a—”

“—never going to accept—”

“How’s that— —little bitch— —how’s that, Kanae you little shit?”

A series of incoherent words.

But the meaning was clear.

What did Kugi do then?

Did he jump inside to save the girl?

Did he call the police?

Did he decide to pretend he saw nothing?

The answer: none of the above.

After several intervals, Kugi turned away without a second thought.



“I ran...”

Kugi mumbled suddenly, like his mind was elsewhere.

"Back up." The rainbow-haired man furrowed his brow. "What?"

"I...I ran away."

"Hello? What year is this? Aha. Is this flashback time? Funny taste you've got there. Too bad Mr. Kuzuhara ain't around to spice things up like before. ...Hold on. *Did* you say this stuff the last time we did this?"

The shadows slowly returned to Kugi's eyes as he was quietly driven back into his past.



Before he knew it, he was walking in an unfamiliar place.

He had finally tracked down Kanae's family.

Analyzing every bit of what had happened there—what surely must have been happening all along—was meaningless.

That was what his instincts dictated, and by the time his sense of reason came back to reality, he was wandering aimlessly down an unfamiliar street.

As he calmly looked back on his situation, a self-deprecating look rose to his face.

'This might actually be a first for me.'

'Even when I first went to the island, I found a guide almost right away.'

He remembered the girl in the *qipao*, who still had a hint of childhood in her looks.

A second later, he caught himself with a bitter smile.

'...!'

He became afraid.

Of the fact that he was returning to the way he was on the island.

Into the self he had abandoned completely when he pulled the trigger on himself on the bridge.

How could he run away from this destroyed family when he had come to pay for his crimes?

'...No...'

He was afraid and scared and lost—

'...I...I have to do...something...'

'I...I have, to, be, punished.'

Several days later, he went to the house again and snuck inside unnoticed.

It was so simple.

If he wanted punishment, he had to commit a crime.

Not on the island, where people pretended that nothing had happened.

On the mainland that was—that should have been—his reality.

Seiichi Kugi decided to commit a sin.

With such terrible ease.

The longest bridge in the world, spanning Sado Island and Niigata.

The nameless artificial island that stands in the very middle of that bridge—

It was the very first time that he killed someone who was in neither of those places.

It was frighteningly simple.

Compared to the thugs on the island, Kanae's father fell much too easily.

At Seiichi's hands, without even a gun.

Like a man-sized mass of clay the body fell slowly to the cold, hard floor.

Right before the eyes of the youthful girl who resembled Kanae so very much.



Soon, reality returned to Kugi's eyes.

"What're you grinning about? C'mon, I'm grinning too, but at least I've got a reason."

The door was gone, replaced by a smirking man.

The loathsome rainbow-colored dog. Or a rainbow-colored reaper there to grant him punishment and death. Which was the one Kugi wanted? After his trip to the past, his agitation was gone.

Kugi found himself wearing a wry smile, but he was no longer scared.

Nothing felt out of place.

Because he was on the island.

Because his twisted reflection was also clearly smiling.

"Hah hah!"

This time, he laughed out loud without a hint of bitterness.

How many years had it been since he genuinely laughed? The very question made him laugh even more.

"Heh..."

How had he taken the laugh? The rainbow-haired man also began to chuckle.

"Hah...hah hah hah..."

"Heh heh heh...ahahahahaha! What the hell, man? You getting high off the air 'cause you've been gone so long? So what's your game? How're you gonna move and yap and put on a show for the audience this time? And would ya look at that, our lighting crew's that big campfire in the middle of town! How-do-we-respond at this very moment?"

Little by little the rainbow-haired man stepped forward, slowly but surely closing the distance as he pulled out a handgun.

"Let's say we start off with hellos again. That little reunion we skipped over."

The handgun was a common model on the island, available to anyone with enough money. It boasted decent accuracy and safety; not a stand-out as far as weapons on the island went, but in his position it essentially spelled his victory.

After all, Kugi had only just come to the island—he had no guns on hand, let alone proper weapons.

But Kugi's smile did not disappear.

Kugi knew that the man was capable of shooting. For some reason the man seemed to like him, but Kugi knew he was whimsical enough to pull the trigger at any given moment.

Yet he smiled.

He savored the reality of having returned to the island.

"It was...all the same."

"Huh?"

"I...I had it all wrong. I always thought...that the world outside wasn't paradise, but that it at least wasn't hell. The reason I escaped to this rotten island and stayed was because I thought it was the hell I deserved. The hell where I would take revenge on the bastards who put us through this, and remain to suffer forever. But in the end, I couldn't stand even that and tried to change this hell. And then you got in my way."

"Well sorry to bother you, then. What, you want a written apology signed and sealed?" Rainbow-Head shrugged. But Kugi shook his head.

"No. For all that I hate you, I'm actually grateful. If not for you, I never would have found the truth."

"...?"

Something was different from before.

The rainbow-haired man sensed something strangely off about Kugi.

And as if to emphasize that mystery, Kugi stepped forward with a calm smile.

"It was all the same."

With the burning island in the background the two figures drew closer, and Kugi slowly held out his right hand at the rainbow-haired man. As if there was nothing wrong. As if there was nothing to fear.

Perhaps a gun would pop out of his sleeve like before.

Rainbow-Head hoped for it for a moment, but Kugi was unarmed after all.

Kugi quietly grabbed Rainbow-Head by the collar and calmly hauled him forward. His tone grew more and more forceful.

"It was all the same. Outside this island, and on this island... No. In fact, I suffered an even worse hell out there."

"Hey, you feeling all right? I can't believe *I'm* the one saying this, but maybe you're still drunk on yourself?"

Kugi ignored the man and muttered to himself.

"Hell *followed* me. I was my own hell."

A chill ran down the rainbow-haired man's spine.

Alarm bells were going off in his head. Kugi was dangerous, his instincts screamed.

They were very close now; it was clear that something was different about Kugi's eyes. They glinted in a frightening mixture of madness and bloodlust and despair.

"Hey, hey, cut that out, man. We need a bit more buildup before you break out the character death," the rainbow-haired man said, even though he was the one who had pulled out the gun. "Seriously. See that fire over there? Dunno what's up, but any dog could tell you Mr. Kuzuhara's gone over there. He ain't gonna block any shots for you this time."

"Yeah..."

Kugi exhaled, let go of the other man's collar, and lowered his hand.

"Perfect."

At the same time, he turned and reached into his coat. Even as he moved he did not break the rainbow-haired man's gaze.

And noting bloodlust ballooning in Kugi's eye—

"...!"

Rainbow-Head reflexively leapt back.

He was the quicker one, and he had a gun. He clearly had the advantage. But he did not have any intention of killing Kugi. At least, not yet.

And even if a fight broke out, he had the upper hand. He could easily knock out his opponent with a controlled strike.

But a second later, that fantasy was smashed to bits. Kugi began to exude a bloodlust more sinister than the rainbow-haired man could ever have imagined.

He had experienced such situations countless times in his years overseas. So he acted out of reflex.

'So he did have a gun on him?!'

Even as his thoughts scrambled his body was moving in midair.

'Oh, shit!'

A gunshot, then a click of the tongue. He had reflexively relaxed his arm and shifted his aim.

Yet the bullet drove itself into Kugi's body—

And without a shred of mercy, it shot through his ribcage.

Blood spewed from the hole in his back. It looked black by the light of the fire.

And without a sound, without a hint of sentiment, it glinted.

Glint was all it did.

"Agh..."

Kugi fell to his knees, his breathing ragged. But the adrenaline pumping through him would not let him lose consciousness.

He was overwhelmed by a sense of emptiness entwined with his pain. Kugi slowly pulled out his right hand as the rainbow-haired man watched, frozen.

His hand was empty; the pointer finger and the thumb were held out to resemble a gun.



"...Asshole."

Very slightly, Rainbow-Head's expression shifted.

Kugi looked upon such a face for the first time and mumbled again, as though to himself.

"...Finally...got him back..."

His lips twisted into a smirk as he slowly lowered his head.

Kugi did not fall, but he was unconscious.

"Goddamn, that wasn't bad at all."

Though Kugi seemed to be in danger, Rainbow-Head slowly got to his feet with a joke.

He dusted off the dirt from his fall and grinned childishly.

"What, so you're gonna say all that bloodlust was aimed at yourself and not me? You're gonna tell me you used me to kill yourself, you son of a bitch?"

Unlike Kugi, Rainbow-Head was clearly talking to his opponent. He continued to talk to a silent man who would soon die if left alone.

"Hey. Hey...this ain't right. This ain't the ending we're going for. Yeah?"

He stuck his gun into his belt and pulled the coat off the frozen Kugi, then wrapped it around his body to stop the violent bleeding.

"The hell kinda messed up writer puts the end at the beginning? I haven't *seen* whatever script you worked off until now, asshole. ...Wait, does that mean I'm not even supporting cast, let alone main? So I'm just some nameless Killer 1 who puts a bullet into your gut in the last scene?"

He laid Kugi down so the wound was lower than his heart, then took out a cell phone and called someone.

"As if I'll let that happen. I'm not some chump extra who doesn't even get a credit, you got that?"

A second later the call connected, and the man greeted the person on the other end of the line without a hint of anxiety.

“Hey. It’s been a while, DJ babe. I was kinda hoping for Mr. Kuzuhara, but you’ll have to do. Lemme give you a scoop. It’s even bigger than the burning crap in the city.”

With a wry grin he enjoyed the DJ’s thrill and continued.

“But in exchange...you gotta let me use your van as an ambulance.”

Without waiting for the DJ to respond he described his location and sighed, not particularly tense but slightly disappointed.

“If you die, you die. You would’ve died anyway back then if Mr. Kuzuhara hadn’t saved your skin.”

The rainbow-haired man—Hayato Inui—turned his gaze to the flames spewing from the center of the island and shook his head.

“It’s a damn mess. Everyone and everything’s burning up like mad.”

Something was indeed happening on the island.

And though that air was clear on his skin, something in Hayato’s mind felt empty.

“Shit. It’s tepid.”



In his hazy consciousness, Kugi had a very coherent dream.

It was a selection of scenes from his past.

Although to him, it was nothing but a simple nightmare.

The young man sought punishment.

So he committed a new sin.

After all, his punishment would be heavier if he were to be arrested after being hunted by the police rather than if he were to turn himself in.

So he decided to wait blankly until the murder made the news.

—eyewitness testimony pegs the suspect as a man in his fifties. Money and valuables are missing from the home, which suggests a burglary gone awry —

When he first read the article, he did not even realize it was the same incident.

The sole witness to the crime—Kanae's sister—had lied to the police.

The dream instantly flashed to the next scene.

Bypassing everything else, it stopped at a certain night, when he ran into Manami in the city.

"Oh, Mr. Kugi. Thank you for before."

She sounded strangely cheerful for a girl facing her father's killer. Unable to understand the hidden meaning in her words, Kugi asked her a straightforward question.

"Why...why did you lie to them?"

"For myself."

Though she was completely indifferent, there was something resembling a hint of satisfaction in her voice.

"I'd like to ask something of you, Mr. Kugi. Please, don't get arrested. Don't ever turn yourself in."

"What...?"

"Because you'd make me a liar.. But mostly because I'd be so embarrassed if you got arrested and told the truth. It would make me nervous. If the person who abused me was a stranger who ran off afterwards, I would have made him pay even if it cost me my life. But my revenge is already over. You killed him for me."

It took Kugi some time to understand what she meant, and it took him many times more that span to accept her intentions.

Kugi pushed his suspicions and doubts into a corner of his thoughts and gave up on prying deeper into Manami's relationship with her father.

"So...what will you do now?"

"Who knows? Something, I guess. Anyway, I'm grateful to you, Mr. Kugi. I won't hold you responsible for whatever you did to my sister, so please don't poke your nose into my—our—business anymore."

"But—"

"Did you save me because you felt guilty about Kanae? Or to make yourself feel better? It doesn't really matter to me, but I don't want you to start playing guardian angel with me."

Manami's cold stance convinced Kugi of the hopeless truth.

She had already lost her mind. She had already strayed from the path of normalcy.

But the madwoman's every word was correct. They hit the deepest scars of his heart.

She was right.

Kugi had considered—if he were never to be punished for his actions, he would repent by spending the rest of his life protecting Manami.

"You're just going to remind me of Kanae, Mr. Kugi. I...I can't become her replacement, and I don't want to. But I loved my sister so much."

Kugi found himself rooted to the spot.

The childhood friend he had killed with his own hands, and her little sister. Perhaps he truly had been lost in his own fantasy.

'Then what? What...was I going to do with this girl?'

"You're just like Dad, Mr. Kugi. You thought of me as Kanae's replacement. I bet you never knew Dad used to beat her ragged. That's why Kanae was never home, and that's why you spent the most time with her. She was with you more than Dad, Mom, or me! But you never noticed, did you?"

She was merciless and straightforward. Kugi could not turn his ears away.

"Did you know that man was our stepdad?"

He was not forgiven.

"Did you know how happy Kanae always looked when she talked about you at home?"

He was not forgiven.

"Then we heard that our real dad was on the island. So maybe Kanae wanted to find him there. Maybe she wanted to find a dad who wouldn't beat her!"

'Please forgive me.'

"Did you know? The day she left for the island, she asked me to come, too."

'Forgive me—'

"I said no. Because I was more scared of going to the island than of getting beaten by Dad—no, that old pig. So I didn't. Because I loved my sister so much. But you know what she said then? 'Maybe if Seiichi went with me...I don't think he'll agree to live there with me, but if he's the last person who sees me off, I can fight my way through any pain or suffering'."

She clearly spoke the truth.

There was no lie in her words.

There was no sanity left in the calm madwoman for to be able to lie. How could she be so tranquil yet anxious? The air emanating from her told him that her words were truthful.

And they were powerful.

Powerful and sharp, perfectly honed to pierce Seiichi's heart.

The truth could sometimes become violence. It was second nature to those on the island. And that same violence overcame him on the mainland.

"That's right. Kanae never wanted to come back in the first place. Isn't she awful, dragging you into her own escape like that?"

The words he no longer wanted to hear—the truth he never wanted to know—slowly seeped into him.

"So I thought Kanae was the worst. But I still loved her."

He could not respond.

"I loved her so much."

She did not give him even a second to respond.

As Kugi stood in a daze, not even knowing what emotions to feel, Manami put an end to the conversation.

"So go, Mr. Kugi. And never come back. Because as long as you see Kanae in me, I'll have to become her. And I know I'm going to *want* to become her."

Eloquent, but tense.

"Then I'll end up remembering Kanae. The sister I can't forget because I love her. So please go, get out of my sight. I'll even erase all your crimes from my memories. ...Who are you? I don't know who you are, but stop following me. I'm going to call the police."

With that, Kugi knew he was free.

He wanted to say something, but he could think of nothing to say. So he spoke simply to excuse himself from that spot.

"...I'm sorry. I...mistook you for someone else," he said in a trembling voice. The girl replied indifferently.

"Goodbye, someone I don't know."

As Kugi turned to escape, her final words were etched onto his back.

"I'm—I *was*—grateful."

It was the final blow.

If she had chosen to hate him, at least, he might have been released from his past.

No. Even if she did hate him, nothing would be different.

He was forever chained to his sins.

He had lost both his chance at redemption and his right to judgement.

But he did not have the courage to take his own life.

Finally, the dream reached the end of his wanderings.

A murky grey island that stank of rusted iron and the sea.

In the monochrome world, he suddenly spotted a rainbow.

A piece of lead came shooting from the rainbow and carved through his senses.

It tore through his consciousness, his past trauma, and even his future.

In the end, as he fell in his dream, Kugi reached for the city and the ruined buildings in the distance—



'What was I reaching for?

'What was I trying to reach for, when I'd come so far?

'It...it hurts...what...what is this...?'

"It's nice to see you again. Or should I say...welcome?"

The nostalgic voice alerted Kugi to the fact that he was awake.

Around him was a world of drab white.

There were four masses of black there, and at the very center a dress of striking red and pristine white.

It was a familiar sight. He hadn't seen it in his memories of the past, so it must be a reality, Kugi understood. With that conclusion he took a moment to assess his situation.

'I'm alive.'

Should he thank or curse himself for being so hard to kill?

Not knowing whether he had wanted to live or die back then, Kugi closed his eyes.

He wanted to fall asleep forever, no longer bound to waver between life and death. But—

"You can thank the ear-splitting radio station. They stopped your bleeding as much as they could and transported you to me right away. Oh, but don't worry about thanking our doctor—I plan to have you pay off every last cent of that particular debt."

The heavily injured, sleepy-eyed patient stared at the woman in the *qipao*. His gut ached enough for the rest of his body, but Kugi continued to scrutinize the woman's face.

Her face was just as beautiful and icy as it had been the moment they parted ways.

"Thank you, Yili."

"...I see your conversational skills haven't improved."

"Heh. Sorry. ...About that first question. I think...it's neither."

"Hm?"

"In the end, I never set foot outside the island. ...Mentally speaking." Kugi mumbled, as if to himself. Yili spoke indifferently.

"Anyway, you need to recover soon. I need you to become my right hand again."

"...I thought you abandoned me?"

"On the surface, yes. This time, you'll be working completely in the shadows. You'll be in more danger than ever before. But that's the only place our organization can offer you."

"That's a little cruel. Don't I get the right to choose?" Kugi chuckled, his joke turned against himself.

"The fact that you came back—and the fact that you're smiling—answers that question."

Kugi could not argue.

"Elder Brother Lihuang won't take kindly to you, nor will a good portion of the others. But Taifei is in charge of this clinic, and he's part of the neutral faction. So you'll be safe here...unless the room suddenly goes up in smoke."

The hints of emotion Yili showed reminded Kugi of the moment he was shot. He hadn't thought much about it then, but he faintly recalled fire and explosions going off near the center of the island.

"Oh...the explosion. What happened?"

He was returning to a businesslike tone. Rather than trying to satisfy his curiosity, Kugi was seeking answers to help him determine his next course of action.

A complicated look rose to Yili's eyes, but soon even that emotion faded and she explained the situation briefly.

"One, there's a bomber on the loose. We haven't received any warnings yet, but there have been a couple more explosions while you were asleep. There weren't any flames or gas pipes in the area, so they must have been set up by someone. And I don't think it has anything to do with the Eastern District or the Guard Team."

"...By 'one', you mean there's more?"

Yili was silent for a moment, before finally making up her mind to speak.

"...We've also got a monster loose on the island."

"A monster?"

The only 'monster' on the island Kugi could think of was Kuzuhara. But if he extended the possibilities into the realm of rumors, he could think of one more individual.

"...Yakumo Amagiri. The Killer Ghoul's declared war on the island."

"You mean the urban legend?"

Kugi wanted to ask more, but Yili said nothing and stood to leave with her bodyguards.

'Am I still not ready to be involved in that subject?' He wondered with a wry grin, and asked one final question.

"...Was I a burden to you?"

Yili stopped and cast a glance at her bodyguards.

The men did not even blink as they filed out into the hallway.

When it was finally just the two of them in the room, Yili turned.

"...You're still such an idiot."

It sounded like words of mockery, but she wore a warm expression.

That was all she had to say after sending away her guards, but Kugi saw off Yili with an awkward smile.

Left all alone, he looked up at the ceiling and sighed, then glanced out the small window in the corner of the room.

The world outside was filthy. Rusted pipes and plumbing dotted with glimpses of the sky.

But that was enough for him.

Just by looking at the sky he felt death, decay, and a sense of lively energy.

The moment he truly understood he was back on the island, a strange sense of relief washed over him.

Wrapped up in comfort, as though he were finally home, he slowly fell asleep.

And time passed—

四 章



Chapter 4-A: Wolf in the West

The rooftop of an abandoned building somewhere near the center of the island.

Ah, the wind feels great.

The sun shines on me, and as it reflects against the concrete it warms my body.

There isn't a pile of rubble in sight; all around is a clean, drab world. The rooftop is relatively low, but because the building's stairs have all collapsed, only athletic people like me can get here.

I like places where I can be alone.

Because not meeting anyone means that I won't have to kill anyone.

If I want to remain 'me'—if only to constantly prove that the individual called Yakumo Amagiri is normal—alone time is absolutely essential.

In that sense, this is a marvelous place.

For being a slice of this incurably crazy island, it's such a comfortable spot.

"...Yawn..."

I wipe the tears that come with the yawn and lay down on my back on the concrete.

With my gaze on the endlessly clear blue sky, I think about myself.

When I was in junior high school, I always thought about who I was and what my purpose was.

...Actually, I did a bit of that in high school, too. Not when I won the dance competition, though... That's it. Maybe when people lose their purpose or get too bored, they occupy themselves with idle thoughts.

The sky is blue today, too.

So will that make me want to kill again today?

...That's the reasoning I've given myself, but I might be reaching my limit.

In the past, I didn't have the time to spare thinking up reasons for killing people—I was busy trying to survive, and it would have taken forever to rationalize my actions.

So how did it come to this?

I kill people because the sky is blue.

That should have been enough. I'd never questioned that.

...It's all because of what happened two months ago.

After what happened with Miss Nazuna, I changed.

I think...after I came to this island, I became desensitized to killing people. After my first kill, I was obviously lost and lost and lost and scared and scared and scared out of my wits. I felt sick to my stomach. I *did* throw up. It's a terrible memory. I remember I spent three whole hours mulling over it. It's not a long time to other people, but it was painful for me because I think just a little faster than most.

And it was the endlessly clear sky on this island that cured me of that sickness. But now that I think about it, it's this island's fault in the first place that I killed people, so does this mean I'm breaking even? Plus and minus and zero? So since I'm at zero...now what?

Is this island a plus to me, or a minus? Wait. Before that, was my life before the island in the plus zone or the minus zone? Is it even right to put such two-dimensional labels on my entire life? This isn't good. Not good at all. Is this what they mean by 'gaming brains' of the digital age? Hm. It's all right, then. I never played a lot of video games, so according to what a certain scholar says, I don't have a gaming brain.

In other words...I'm normal.

Normal. Yeah. Thinking fast has nothing to do with your moral character.

What a relief. It's such a relief to know that I won't go crazy today.

I look up at the sky and find myself getting emotional. So I slowly think about myself. Nothing as deep as philosophy, though.

Why did I come to the island? Maybe once I solve that question, I'll find an answer.

When did it start?

In elementary school...I was normal. At least, I think I was.

My family wasn't normal, but there was nothing I could do about that. Apparently we were well-off and well-known in the area, and I remember Father was a member of the prefectural assembly. I heard one of my relatives was a member of the National Diet, but I don't think the younger me was interested enough to remember the details.

It was a life of freedom. I'd gone through the motions of crying and laughing and bullying and being bullied, but never to extremes. Lifting girls' skirts or getting clobbered by the big kid on the street was as bad as it got.

I liked music.

I thought I'd wanted to be a musician or a singer when I grew up, but for some reason I wasn't passionate about it. I think I was just starting junior high school when I realized that I preferred moving to the songs other people made instead of composing them myself.

So I began practicing.

Little by little, I trained. But I guess it didn't seem so little to other people. It must have been around then that I realized I thought a little quickly.

The more I focused, the slower time seemed to flow.

I never talked about it with anyone.

I thought it was normal.

I thought everyone could do it.

It was only when I started getting strange tests, where they put funny machines on my head and took measurements, that I realized I was wrong.

It happened to be around when I broke up with my girlfriend, so I remember I was having a hard time in a lot of ways.

No. That's fine. I don't really mind that I was treated like a guinea pig.

But what I couldn't accept was that other people found out about my quick thinking.

I hadn't done anything.

I'd never told anyone. In fact, I hadn't even known until the doctor explained during the test.

...I became afraid.

Yes. I became afraid.

Someone other than me knew the me even I didn't know. It was like realizing that a stranger had been spying on me for a very long time.

Yes. That became the trigger, and I slowly became distorted.

I honestly don't know where the distortions began. Maybe it was in society, or maybe it was in the life I wanted for myself.

It was like I was getting twisted. I went out at night and got into fights, and in the end, I ran away from home without finding a solution.

But with nowhere to go, I found myself turning to the abandoned island—a place I knew only through television, magazines, and the internet. Now that I think about it, it was an idiotic decision.

That's right...If all I'd done was come to the island, I still could have gone back.

Yes. Things quickly went wrong. Days passed, and my outlook on life hadn't changed. So I was just considering going home when I was mugged.

I'd gotten better at fighting, but I never thought he'd pull out a gun.

To be honest, I was scared. I was afraid. I didn't know what to do. Death... That's right. Until that moment, I had never faced death. I'd only just

started high school—remembering how I'd stayed up all night as an elementary schooler crying in fear of what happened after death, I trembled.

That's as far as I remember.

No...that's a lie. I just lied to myself. I actually remember what happened after that.

I ended up moving out of the way of the muzzle and twisted his arm upwards.

I thought, once the gun was pointed at him, he would drop the gun—but before the dull mugger understood what was going on, he pulled the trigger...and blew half his own face off. Ugh...just thinking about it nauseates me.

...From then on, I became afraid to leave the island.

It was the island's fault that I became a killer. If not for this island, things would have been different. ...But...but what if I left the island, and nothing changed?

In fact, was it even acceptable for an abnormal person like me—someone who's committed murder—to go back? At that point, I was scared stiff. I wonder...in places with war or poor security, where death is common, do the people there not worry about these things? Or maybe they do?

...Not good. I almost went on another tangent.

Anyway...I think I've started thinking too much these days.

In the years I spent on this island, a killer's mask settled over my face. Now I just have to wait for the right moment to take it off.

Will the day ever come that I can leave the island? Maybe this is what shut-ins feel when they refuse to leave the house. People have it rough.

That's right. I'm not the only one who has it rough.

There's no point in mumbling to myself about it.

Right now...I just do what I have to do.

That's what I think, but the weather today steals away my motivation.

I want to fall asleep with the tepid wind on my skin. I want to wake up. My feelings are getting jumbled. I wonder which opinion's coming from the angel and which one's coming from the devil.

If only there was something to motivate me, I'd get to my feet in an instant.

And rather quickly, the motivation comes to me.

I hear a clatter.

Before I know it, a girl is standing on the nearly-empty rooftop.

Oh. Her. As quiet as ever.

She wears a somewhat eye-catching Chinese dress and a pair of beautiful white flowers in her hair. She still looks young, but she's beautiful. Although the robotic face she's always making detracts from all that.

We've only met a couple of times, and I don't know her name, but she is one of the few people who could use this rooftop.

She's always holding a lead pipe in her right hand, and I've seen her elsewhere with some of the Rats or talking with the Western District executives. From her looks she must be part of the organization.

It's probably been about three months now since we began to meet here like this. I've come up to the rooftop a few times when she was already sprawled out asleep, but each time I climbed back down because I didn't want to wake her. I know I'm being too sensitive, but it's kind of awkward to sleep in the same place with a girl you're not even dating.

But...even though I still have no idea what she's thinking, if she's affiliated with the Western District's organization, she might be here today to find me.

A girl and a lead pipe. It's a strange combination, but not one to be underestimated. This island is home to a girl who dual-wields chainsaws.

"Hey. It's been a while."

First, I greet her and wait for a reaction.



She's quiet and has a distinctive way of speaking, so we've never really talked. But—

"I sleeeeeeep."

As usual, the blank-eyed girl says exactly what she needs to say and no more. Does her empty gaze speak for the darkness in her heart, or is she just sleepy? I have no way of knowing. And knowing wouldn't change a thing, anyway.

"It is recently. I see rat children. It is in island. I see rats. I hug rats. I pet rats. It is adorable. I hug. ...Sleepy. Sleeeeeeep..."

Her long lead pipe dragging against the ground, she passes me by and lies down where I had been lying just before.

"It is warm. It is cozy. Sleeeeeeep."

The hem of her clothes get messy, but she doesn't seem to care. As mysterious as ever, but people like her are not unusual on the island. Evidence for just how crazy this island is. Hm? Wait. Even in a normal school you'd find at least one or two strange girls like her—wait wait wait. A girl sauntering around with a lead pipe? This goes beyond simple schoolyard cat fights.

At that moment, the girl's eyes open slightly.

"It is white clothes. It is white skin. You take off clothes."

"Huh?"

What does she mean, I should take my clothes off? Talk about an awkward attempt at seduction. What do I do? She's beautiful, but all her gloom drops my romantic interest in her to the negatives. I've never even seen her as a woman.

But it turns out I am jumping to conclusions.

Mechanically, she gives me a word of warning.

"Now, Elder Brother search. Elder Sister search. Father search. Killer Ghoul wear white clothes. Searching. You wear white clothes. If mistake, die. It is careful."

It is a series of incomplete sentences, but her intention is clear. In fact, I can only understand them because I am me.

I see. So she's a Western District executive...and probably related by blood to their leaders. Come to think of it, she has the same eyes as Yili. Then she must be a daughter of Ei *Daren*, the head of the Western District.

It is surprising, but not completely unexpected. I am not taken aback.

"...I see. I'll be careful. But what if I'm the Killer Ghoul?"

Anyone would jump to that conclusion first. A man in white sprawled out lazily on a rooftop like this. Even I would think that was suspicious.

Because she's clearly younger than me, I could talk to her easily. Maybe it was because of my strict upbringing that I'm deferential to my elders by habit. After running away from home, I could act violent with people of any age—but I could never make friendly conversation with older people. That's probably why the Guard Team assumes I'm so quiet.

"You, Killer Ghoul? You, Yakumo Amagiri? It is you?"

She lazily opens her eyes and sighs, shaking her head.

"...No. Killer Ghoul is not you. No bloodlust. If Killer Ghoul, killed me. I nap. I am defenseless."

It looks like she knows I left her alone when she was sleeping on the rooftop. That's a bit of a surprise. I change my mind about her slightly.

"...Or maybe I *am* the Killer Ghoul, but I just happened to not want to kill you."

"If Killer Ghoul, I kill. It is good. Now, sleepy. Sllleeeeeeep."

Why does she only lengthen the word 'sleep', I wonder uselessly, but I quickly right my thoughts and continue the conversation.

"So you can sense bloodlust?"

"I execute. For organization. Kill many. Many. Many. Bad people for organization. Many. Assassin. So I know."

...Is she really allowed to disclose so much information?

And I'm not sure a lead pipe is the best weapon for an assassin.

But I expect nothing less of the island. There are so many strange people here, regardless of affiliation. They're abnormal. And Looking at them convinces me that I am still normal. In that sense, maybe I should love this girl and all the other abnormal people here as my neighbors. ...In theory, anyway.

As I come to an understanding of sorts and turn to leave, the sleepy-eyed girl speaks.

"And...if Killer Ghoul, would take off white clothes. Early."

"Oh...you're right."

When I turn, she is already fast asleep.

She looks like a defenseless girl now. But if she can sense people approach in that state, she must have the instincts of a hardened mercenary.

I turn and head for a corner of the rooftop.

When I look up, the charred black wall of a building leaps into my sights.

It's been two months already since the explosion, but it's as real as if it were yesterday. Two whole months...and the culprit's still at large.

I was flabbergasted at first.

That happened to be around the time I reached many turning points in my life.

One night, explosions shook the island and filled the city with a glow like sunset.

With the explosions and its many casualties as the trigger, the island was stirred into a frenzy.

A whirlwind of emotions coursed through the city as if the island was one large organism. All kinds of rumors spread throughout the people like a rejection of the explosions. Rumors about the culprit. Rumors about diplomacy between the Western District and Eastern District. And even unlikely rumors about foreign terrorists hiding out on the island.

And though it brought a wry smile to my lips, some rumors claimed that I was the culprit.

Come to think of it, I even heard rumors that the rainbow-haired demon had come back to the Pits. I think his name was Inui. I ran into him only once before, but he was interesting. From the way he moved, he was a lot like the Guard Team. But the difference was that he never moved with teamwork in mind. He was a loner.

In any case, one big fire was enough to bring incredible change to the island. I can't say how exactly, but the air is clearly colder than before.

There have been several more bombings since then, but the first was the most influential. After all, you can see the scorch marks from anywhere aboveground.

Averting my gaze from the exhausting sight, I look down at the rubble spreading under my feet.

Yes. I am standing on the rooftop of a relatively low building.

From the edge I can see messy snapshots of daily life, just a few dozen meters below.

I quietly step off the side, indulging in a moment of weightlessness.

I focus. The world slowly rises around me. In other words, I am falling.

Everything is in slow motion, including me. Like a frame-by-frame shot of a droplet falling into a glass of milk. Elegantly. Lethely.

I place my right foot on a jutting piece of steel, and dampen the impact by slowly bending my knee. At the same time, I bend halfway to grab another

piece of steel to steady my momentum—it's sad no one can listen to me explain all this—simply put, I climb onto something mid-fall.

It's a bother to have to climb all this metal in order to reach the rooftop. But if I put a ladder here or something, the rooftop will become another pile of filth and people. The building is inaccessible because of the loads of construction materials piled up inside; I have no intention of opening up my little oasis to the public.

I see. I understand exactly why characters in manga lie on earthen pipes stacked in grassy lots. It just feels good, looking up at the sky when no one's near, lazing around as much as you want. So much that you end up wanting to monopolize it.

But I don't want to go so far as to fight over my oasis. Not even the sleeping girl up there comes very often.

Come to think of it, I wonder how she made it up there. Does she have a trick she uses with her lead pipe? I'm curious, but I'm uncomfortable asking when we aren't even that close. And if she's supposed to be an assassin, she's probably athletic at least...but I can't help but be curious how someone who reveals her identity so easily climbs up a wall like this.

As I lose myself in useless thoughts, my body slowly falls between the steel beams. *Clack clack. Clack clack. Clack clack. Clack clack.* Like a ladder-*daruma* dropping from one rung to the next.

Once I come to a certain height, I jump over to a nearby window. There was never any glass inside to begin with. It fascinates me because it shows just how derelict this building is.

Alone again, I remember what the girl had said.

The real Yakumo Amagiri would have switched out of his clothes.

She's right. In fact, she hit the nail on the head. Even a baby knows that you have to start with your clothes or your hairstyle when you're disguising yourself. But I never thought of that.

I think I'm afraid.

I'm afraid of casting aside my Killer Ghoul mask. Of casting aside 'Yakumo Amagiri' and going back to the real me.

I'm scared that the recoil from all the time I've worn this mask will crush my body and my mind.

Then for now, I just have to live as my mask dictates.

On this island.

On this liberating island, where the Killer Ghoul is allowed to exist.

...Wait a sec.

What was I just thinking?!

Objectively speaking, it's this island's fault to begin with that I'm in this mess.

I can't let myself think well of the island.

No. This isn't good. I really must be getting tired these days. But...I can't run from this particular question.

What is this island to me?

I sound like a bored elementary schooler wondering what life is all about, but this is a question I inevitably have to answer. A human being falls into decline the moment he stops thinking. And he dies. There is a cause for everything—for my being on this island, for people being killed, for people becoming Killer Ghouls, for people becoming perfect saints.

And, naturally, there must be a cause behind the state of this island.

Then...somewhere out there must be a cause that will free me from these chains—this island—and let me return to my original world.

But I can look for that cause some other time.

I simply do what I have to do.

For myself.

For the me I believe in.

Why am I moving, when it might not benefit me in the least?

It must be because the sky is blue.

So in the end, that's my answer.

I think that's good enough.

I'm the only one who reads my thoughts, so it'll work out as long as I can convince myself.

The biggest problem, then, is the fact that I'm not really convinced.

But I move anyway.

That's right. Right now, I have to—

Chapter 4-B: Return of the Great Louse Detective

Aboveground. The detective agency 'Private Eye Lizard'.

"Another executive...dead. It's someone from the East this time. I heard they only came to the island recently to fill in for another dead exec."

The blond girl hung her head at her brother's somber comment.

"I see...so now we are once again down a suspect."

"...*That's* what you're down about?!"

"Hm? Any death is a sad one, whether it's a suspect or a victim."

"...Please stop confusing me."

It was business as usual for the Liverpool siblings, who ran a detective agency on the island.

The strange thought process of Charlotte, the older sister, was a constant source of headaches for her younger brother Sherlock, who still somehow managed to solve all their problems. Though they were named after the most famous detective in the world, their lives couldn't be any further from his.

But one thing had recently changed to bring them a step close to their namesake.

"It's been exactly two months to the day, but we haven't made any progress, Charlotte! Answer me if you understand!"

"I do!"

"If you understand that understanding's not enough at this point, *please* act more like it. ...Listen, Charlotte. We still haven't found the guy in the photo, and there are explosions going off everywhere for no reason we know of. And not only did we get involved with the Guard Team, they're watching us because they suspect we're behind their member falling into a coma or that we're working with the Killer Ghoul. Do you *really* understand all this, Charlotte?!" Sherlock agonized in a huff. He stared into his sister's eyes.

And with a surprisingly grim look and a concerned nod, she placed a hand on his cheek.

"Sherlock Liverpool."

"Wh-what is it?"

"Are you all right? You said the very same thing, word-for-word, a month ago."

"I'm perfectly fine. In fact, If you were a man I'd have beaten you with my bare fists," Sherlock replied, his temple twitching. Charlotte beamed.

"You're such a gentleman, Sherlock Liverpool. I'm sure girls will love you."

"For once, I almost want to be a twisted equal rights activist. Charlotte, maybe this once you could turn into one of those fighting game characters who say, 'Don't go easy on me just because I'm a girl'. Can I hit you?"

"Eep! No violence!" Charlotte cradled her head with a flinch. Still shrinking back, she opened her eyes and looked at her brother, then said quietly with head tilted, "it feels as though you've been getting anxious recently."

"Why not? I felt like the past two months have been shaving time off our lives. It's driving me nuts."

"But *everyone's* lifespans decrease constantly, Sherlock Liverpool. Every day you lose another day."

"You have no idea how jealous I am of how oblivious you are. And how much I hate myself for being beaten in an argument by someone as oblivious as you."

Sherlock surrendered with a sigh and turned to return to his room.

But the door right next to his swung open and a girl emerged.

"Yaaaawn..."

Eighty percent of her innocent voice still tinged with sleep, she stretched in front of the door.

Charlotte stopped mid-greeting, and Sherlock froze.

They had known the girl was there, and they had known it was about time for her to wake. But because they took so much for granted, they were all the more taken by surprise.

The girl was wearing comfortable black pants.

And absolutely nothing above that.

The contrast of black and white and the sleek curves drew Sherlock's gaze for a moment, but he was firmly anchored to reality by the fact of his sister's presence and managed to recover instantly.

"Uhh...ack! Huh?! E-excuse me!"

Sherlock snapped back to reality, averting his eyes and rushing into his room as he pretended to push up his falling glasses.

The door slammed shut, and the literally half-naked girl stared with sleepy eyes—and finally realized that her surroundings were different from those of her usual mornings.

Several seconds later, only after spotting Charlotte's face, she realized that she was neither in her own room nor the Guard Team's office—

Her gaze fell to her own attire—

And several seconds later.

"Whaaaaaaat?!"

She let out a strangely awkward scream for having just exposed herself to a man.

The girl hurried to cover herself. The man in question was already out of sight, but she moved out of reflex.

Charlotte smiled as best she could for the girl, who was around her own age or younger, and tried to defuse the situation.



"D-don't worry, Jun! Why, I once even crawled into my brother's bed by mistake while he was asleep! You wouldn't believe how quickly he froze—"

Sherlock listened to his sister's voice beyond the door and slid to his knees.

Placing his hand on his temple to hold back an incoming headache, he groaned to himself.

"We've got another one..."



"Umm, uh...! I! I'm terribly sorry about earlier!"

The girl named Jun blushed furiously as she bowed to Sherlock, sitting at the table for breakfast.

Her face was partly obscured by her bangs, but her tone of voice and the flush of her skin made it clear how sincerely embarrassed she was.

"...No, I should be the one apologizing."

Sherlock, meanwhile, had reapplied his usual poker face and was stoically pouring milk into his coffee.

"I-I'm really so sorry. It's just a habit of mine at home... Th-this place just has so much better insulation that I...umm..."

Casting Jun sidelong glances as she excused herself, Sherlock calmly asked,

"...Will you tell us now why you came to visit us out of nowhere?"

Though Jun looked like a slow and introverted girl, she was actually the captain of the Eastern District's Guard Team. She was a dangerous figure whose madness truly caught fire when she started her chainsaws and let the rhythm of the 300rpm engines carry her body.

"Um...we wanted to ask last night, but...has Nazuna's condition changed?" Charlotte asked, wearing an unusually solemn look.

"No. She's still in no condition for visitors." Jun replied, her expression even darker. "...She must have been very badly injured. She's covered in bandages, and...it's almost impossible to tell she's alive just by looking at her."

"I see..."

Jun and Charlotte had first met exactly two months earlier.

The day after the siblings were entrusted with the injured Nazuna by an angel descended from heaven (Charlotte's words), they sent off Nazuna after she woke and began seeking the man in the photograph.

But before they knew it, the siblings were surrounded by the Guard Team and taken to the Eastern District.

And this was what they heard there from the equally famous and infamous Jun Sahara, captain of the Guard Team:

Nazuna, whom the siblings had seen off only a few hours earlier, was in a coma.

The Guard Team found that she had been attacked by someone.

Because there were no witnesses, the Eastern District's investigation first reached the two hapless detectives, who were presumably the last people to have been in contact with Nazuna.

Thanks to their eye-catching appearances, it was easy for the Guard Team to track down the siblings.

Afterwards, with testimony from the back-alley doctor who had treated Nazuna at the siblings' bequest, the Guard Team found that the detectives had helped her rather than harmed her. But their suspicions were not completely cleared, and the siblings were discreetly assigned a tail from the Guard Team.

The Liverpool siblings seemed to be under a great deal of scrutiny partly thanks to their potential connection to Yakumo Amagiri, the Killer Ghoul. Charlotte had met him for the very first time at the junkyard when he left

Nazuna to her, so coincidence was the only way for her to explain their connection. In fact, when Charlotte wondered why the Eastern District was questioning her about the man at the junkyard, and Sherlock suggested that the man was perhaps Yakumo Amagiri, Charlotte had laughed at the idea. The Guard Team did not confirm Sherlock's suspicion, presumably to keep them away from unnecessary harm.

They seemed to believe Charlotte's testimony, but their surveillance continued.

Charlotte had been in shock for a time at the news of Nazuna's injuries, but one day, she suddenly cried, "*we must find the culprit responsible!*" and grabbed a fingerprinting kit she obtained years ago to take prints from every surface she could find.

"*Enthusiasm doesn't make a useless endeavor useful,*" Sherlock had sighed, and realized that they had been pulled into great danger.

In fact, the entire island had been drawn into a massive whirlpool of chaos.

Living proof was just outside the office window; the blackened walls of the buildings near the center of the island.

It had been two months since the first of the explosions. Strangely enough, they started the very day Nazuna Yukimura was attacked. Over 30 cases had been reported thus far.

Explosions big and small shook the island about once every two days.

Rumors said that some of the incidents had left casualties. The island began to swirl with anger, fear, and an indescribable sense of distrust.

There was no pattern to the scale and location of the explosions. It could just as likely be the work of a terrorist or someone with a grudge against the island.

The bonds between the islanders was at once solid yet brittle. Every neighbor was a potential suspect, which meant anyone one wasn't particularly close with could be the culprit.

Some, naturally, chose to leave the island. But they were in the minority.

Had those who remained chosen to die on the island? Or had they given up on living outside it, Sherlock wondered, but he could not come to an answer.

He would likely never understand why some would rather choose to die with the island. And he did not understand why his sister refused to escape at a time like this.

The Eastern District's surveillance played a factor, but Charlotte seemed to be wholly disinclined to leave.

With no choice but to continue what they were doing, the siblings had spent the past two months amidst the fear of yet more bombings and the incessant gaze of the people assigned to watch them.

But the previous night, the leader of the Guard Team had come knocking at their door.

She must have been running everywhere the past few days—though her eyes were hidden, the bags under them were testament to her exhaustion.

Charlotte had let Jun inside in that state and sat her on the bed so they could talk, but by the time Sherlock brought some tea, she was already fast asleep on the bed.

"I'm so sorry...the sheets were just so soft..."

Jun shrank, her face beet red. Charlotte smiled obliviously and handed her a bowl of miso soup.

"Not at all. You can't get any work done if you're exhausted! A good night's sleep helps your mind focus and raises efficiency for the day!"

"Then it looks like you need more sleep, Charlotte."

"Oh? Why do you say that, Sherlock Liverpool?" Charlotte wondered naively.

"Because if serving bread, milk, coffee, miso soup, and fermented beans at once is your idea of efficiency, the miso soup's probably been made out of your brain."

"Ohhh...b-but I wasn't sure if Jun would prefer a Western or Japanese-style meal, so I wanted to cover all my bases."

"Then you could have just asked her."

Charlotte's eyes turned to dinner plates, but she quickly took a sip of coffee with feigned calm.

"I expected no less from you, Sherlock Liverpool! Heh heh heh...this was all just a test of your observational skills!"

"By 'test' you mean the kind for failing students where you get full marks just for filling in your name?"

"Precisely! Heh heh heh...I see the detective potential shining in you, like a diamond in the rough!"

"...That wasn't a compliment."

It was an ordinary exchange for the siblings, but Jun seemed to be trying to stifle a laugh. However, she quickly pushed back the giggles and took on a solemn tone.

"So, umm...I came to see you because—"

"Oh, yes! Do you have a case for us? If it's infidelity you want us to investigate, we'll get every last bit of information for you—all they way down to their sleeping habits! Clothes hide nothing from our eyes!"

"N-no, I...umm, I *do* want to know Mr. Inui's sleeping habits, but, uh...wait! I-I'm not here to hire you. I...uh...I know this is very impudent of me, but..."

Jun paused, took a deep breath, and steeled herself before continuing.

"...Could you leave the island temporarily?" She said solemnly.

"Pardon?" Charlotte stared, bewildered. But Sherlock—

"Of course. We'll pack up today and leave as soon as possible."

"W-wait! Sherlock Liverpool!"

"She says we can leave; let's take her up on the offer before she changes her mind."

“B-but...what is going on here, Jun?” Charlotte pleaded.

Jun’s eyes narrowed as she explained the Eastern District’s position. Tersely and directly.

“The locals haven’t noticed yet, but...” Resolve rose to her eyes as she conveyed the truth. “East and West are already on the verge of a meltdown.”

In unison, Charlotte and Sherlock were silenced.

Though the expression was metaphorical, it was a powerful one.

Before the explosions, the two districts had maintained a very precarious balance.

In the beginning, the island had been divided into four districts. But because the executives of the Northern and Southern Districts were all killed the previous year, the two remaining organizations had taken over the newly-emptied territories.

Supposedly, a man named Hayato Inui—who stood at the center of many rumors at the time—was deeply involved in the fall of the two districts, but the Liverpools did not know any of the details.

Yet even they knew that relations between the Western and Eastern Districts were far from amicable.

It was clear as day that at every opportunity, they blew each other’s mistakes into the open, reopened old wounds, and gnawed at each other. Charlotte didn’t seem to mind this, but Sherlock always had his eyes peeled on the minutest details in order to preserve Charlotte and himself.

As far as he could tell, there was more hostility toward the East from the West than the other way around.

The boss of the Eastern District seemed to have things under control, but the Western District was not a unified front by any stretch of the imagination. Supposedly, the organization was divided into multiple factions that were constantly at each other’s throats. And some of those factions, it was said, were highly hostile toward the Eastern District.

But because of the balance of power in the organization, the Western District never clashed fully against the Eastern District.

Yet the balance would soon topple, Jun clearly said.

"I'm sure you understand why. The incident that led us to keep you under surveillance and the serial bombings are connected."

Charlotte did not seem to understand. "But why...urgh. The bomber and, uh... this Mr. Amagiri are a problem for both districts, no? Then where's the teamwork? The team huddle?"

"This isn't a cartoon, Charlotte," Sherlock said. Jun shook her head.

"If we were against something as powerful and terrible as an alien, maybe we could join forces together." Her eyes narrowing sadly, she confessed the state of her own organization, "to be honest, our executives see the two threats as an opportunity to defeat our rival organization. Because of our boss's policies, we do not strike first. But some of our executives are disgruntled. And if the Western District were to launch an attack first, I guarantee our boss will pay them back double, triple, or more."

"No..."

"Some of our executives even suspect that the Western District is pulling the strings behind the explosions and Yakumo Amagiri. And I'm sure the Western District must think the same about us. All this friction is going to snowball overtime, and..." More solemn than ever, Jun took a deep breath. "...Our boss, Mr. Gitarin, says that we're almost at the breaking point. I contacted him via cell phone earlier. One of our executives was killed last night, and now some are wondering if there's a traitor among our ranks."

The sickening reality of the island came to them packaged in a gentle voice. The way she mentioned the executive's death—more sad than morose—seemed to hint at Jun's character.

Charlotte and Sherlock listened quietly, waiting for her to finish.

By the time her cup of coffee had gone cold, Jun sighed and repeated herself.

"So that's why I'm asking you to go. We don't have enough manpower to keep constant tabs on you, and at this point...we have almost no reason to suspect you two. So please leave the island before—"

"I refuse."

"What?"

Jun was flabbergasted. Sherlock stared at his sister with a mix of shock and worry.

Whether or not she felt her brother's gaze, Charlotte confidently misread Jun's intentions.

"In other words, our presence here doesn't necessarily hinder you, correct? If you need more hands, you can just forget us, yes? I see. Then all we can do is force all these complicated incidents happening on the island into one big bundle and solve them in one fell swoop!"

"Umm, I don't—" Jun began anxiously, but Charlotte beamed for no particular reason.

"It's all right! We're veterans at getting dragged into funny situations!"

"Wait, Charlotte!" Sherlock cut in, "I don't think 'funny' even begins to describe this. We're really in over our heads here! Who knows when the next bomb will go off? And...I'm sorry you have to hear this, Jun, but we were practically dragged to the Guard Team headquarters two months ago. And considering how our office is smack-dab between the two districts, the moment the Western District's organization begins to suspect us, we'll be goners!" He argued. But Charlotte's smile didn't budge.

"I'm sorry, Sherlock Liverpool. It's going to be very dangerous from here on out, so you should leave without me. It's time for the assistant to bow out—"

Sherlock ran out of patience.

"Who're you calling an assistant? You couldn't survive a day here without me!"

In that instant, he froze. Normally he could pass for being sarcastic, but at this point he could have very well hurt his sister's feelings. Anxious—afraid—he looked into her face—

"Yes, I know. I don't need to go into observation mode to deduce that much."

“How—”

“Because I am an ace detective!”

“More like an ace defective.” Sherlock shook his head at his sister’s unfounded confidence. “I’m sorry, Jun. At this point, even if I knocked her out and dragged her away, she’ll crawl back to the island. Maybe if I imprisoned her somewhere, but...I couldn’t. I’m sorry.”

Troubled, Jun looked back and forth between the siblings.

“B-but...why would you go so far?”

“We want to help Nazuna, but we also can’t leave you to face this without us, Jun. We’re your friends!”

Sherlock sighed yet again at his sister’s declaration. It was like she knew no embarrassment. Jun gaped for a moment, but quickly replied.

“I, umm...when did we become friends?”

She seemed to be shocked and apprehensive, but not displeased.

Rather than answer, Charlotte hummed as she stood from the table.

“Oh, yes! The snacks I asked the transporter for just came in yesterday. We can have them for dessert!”

“...Please stop ordering things without telling me again, Charlotte! Just how much are you spending on your desserts?!”

Charlotte sped into the room ahead of her as though in escape.

Noting Charlotte closing the door behind her, Sherlock bowed to Jun.

“...I’m very sorry. She says she wants to help you and Nazuna, but she’s clearly just getting carried away with her hardboiled detective game. I’ll make sure she doesn’t get in your way, so please don’t take it personally.”

Sherlock seemed to have given up on leaving the island, but instead of getting upset, Jun smiled.

“Your sister’s a good person.”

“What? Well, yes, if by that you mean naive...” Sherlock said doubtfully. Jun put on an embarrassed grin.

“Well...I’m not trying to make excuses, but normally, I would never fall asleep in a situation like last night’s. But just talking to Charlotte seemed to relax me, and...”

Sherlock said nothing, instead bringing his cup of coffee to his lips in a silent urge to continue.

“I think...she’s a very relaxing person. Someone who makes you feel at ease. It’s funny. Everyone else I’ve met on the island makes me feel anxious about the island or other people—at least a little bit.”

“Oh...I know that feeling.”

“But I don’t feel that way around Charlotte. It’s almost as if she doesn’t live here at all. She’s a very strong person to be able to make people feel so at ease, even on this island.”

“You’re being too kind. Charlotte’s just as oblivious as she looks—she just doesn’t understand how dangerous the island is. I’m always worried she might be stabbed to death by a robber or something. Although I guess she’s more likely to trip over her own feet and die falling headfirst into a heap of junk,” Sherlock said, denying his sister any credit, but Jun shook her head.

“To be honest...though the Guard Team still has its doubts about her, I believe Charlotte. I guess talking to her and seeing her smile makes me feel like I’d be just fine even if she betrayed me. I know this sounds strange, but...”

It was almost like Jun was talking about a friend she’d known for years. Sherlock averted his gaze awkwardly, then sighed again.

“As a pseudo-servant to her, I have to say that that part of Charlotte’s personality can be a very, very heavy burden sometimes.”

Jun answered Sherlock’s grief with a grin.

“I think...you two have an amazing bond. You two are supporting each other.”

"Please," Sherlock mumbled, hearing the door open behind him, "you're embarrassing me."



Thirty minutes later. In front of the hotel.

"Well...thank you for the food. Umm...the snacks were delicious."

Jun bowed with two long cases hanging behind her back.

The siblings stood outside the hotel to see her off, wearing two completely different faces.

"Not at all, Jun. Feel free to visit anytime!"

"...Please take care on your way back. We're dealing with enough suspicion as it already is."

"H-hey! Sherlock Liverpool!" Charlotte scolded him, but Jun smiled.

"Thank you for being so considerate. I'll make sure to use the underground thoroughfares. Once all the commotion dies down, please feel free to visit the theme park."

"I'm not sure the island will ever be free of commotion," Sherlock said. He was clearly still embarrassed about what he had told her earlier. Charlotte blinked curiously, and Jun put on a wry grin, wondering if Sherlock was upset with her.

And with one final bow, she turned to head back to the Eastern District.

Whoosh.

A slender shadow scratched Jun's cheek with a sound sharp enough to cut a moment in time. The force created a breeze that blew Jun's bangs into the air.

“?!”

The moment she sensed danger, something shattered with a dull noise behind her.

Jun turned, worried for the siblings. They were safe—but frozen in confusion.

The source of the sound was at a spot on the wall, a slight distance from the siblings.

Though the wall was thin, it was made of concrete nonetheless. The object that had been driven into it, Jun saw, was—

A long, partially rusted and bent lead pipe.

“...!”

The air around Jun seemed to solidify as she quickly drew her two weapons.

With the two straight but twisted weapons in her hands, she hooked her fingers onto the triggers.

But she did not start the engines; instead, Jun focused her attention on her surroundings.

The height of her focus was trained on the origin of the lead pipe—from the siblings’ perspective, beyond Jun—

A girl was strolling over.

An Asian girl with blank eyes and large flowers on either side of her head.

From the style of her dress, she must be affiliated with the Western District. But where was the one who had lobbed the lead pipe? Could it be the girl?

In spite of her own choice of weapon, Jun could not instantly connect the girl with the lead pipe. In the meantime, the girl continued to close the distance between them.

“Umm...excuse me...”

The silent girl showed no sign of hostility. Jun tried to talk to her, but she walked past without even meeting her gaze. Then she passed by the dumbfounded siblings—

And she pulled the lead pipe out of the wall with ease and lazily turned to the detectives.

“...Ah...”

She finally spoke, but no one could have expected the words that left her mouth.

“...Sleepy.”

“Huh?”

Sherlock shot Jun a look demanding explanation, unable to keep up with the situation. Though Jun glanced at the girl for a moment, she tensed and scanned the area.

Sherlock did the same, also noticing something unusual.

“Wait...”

“There’s...no one around.”

Surprisingly, Charlotte seemed to notice at the same time Sherlock did. But that was understandable considering the oddity of their predicament.

Though the hotel area was never lively by any means, now it was much too quiet.

It was in that silence, as though time itself had stopped, that the girl with flowers in her hair spoke again in her gloomy voice.

“...Yes. Sleepy. Very sleepy. Sleeeeeeep. Sleeeeeeep. Sleeeeeeep.”

“*Another* nap, after I took the trouble of waking you up just earlier, Lilei?”

Suddenly, a man emerged from what had been a dead-quiet part of the hotel area.

He was a tall Asian man with a red tattoo that ran from his right ear to his cheek.

And following after him from the shadows were about a dozen men.

The atmosphere was flipped on its head as the hotel area was instantly filled with human presence. But there was nothing ordinary about the newcomers. They carried themselves like a police force decked out in full riot gear.

Unfazed, the girl called Lilei expressed herself in a series of words.

"Night. I kill. No sleep. Day. Secret place. Sleep. Cell phone. It is loud. It is mean, Elder Brother."

"You can get all the sleep you want once we're done with this job."

The man Lilei called her brother glared, his eyes many times colder and sharper than those of the sardonic Sherlock, as he approached Jun.

"Now, kitten of the East. Do you know who I am? Or must I take the time to introduce myself?"

A droplet of sweat ran down Jun's face as she uttered the man's name.

"You're...Lihuang Ei...a Western District executive..."

"Correct. Now, I'd like you to come with me. You two over there, as well."

The man chuckled, then, and shook his head.

"No...excuse me. I wouldn't *like* for you to come with me."

The other men began to snicker, loosening the tension in the air.

And putting on a grin, the man corrected himself.

"Plant your faces on the ground in gratitude for my sparing your life and come with me, you damned kitten and the two foreign dogs."

A ramen shop in the Eastern District.

“—which is why I’m always looking for some spice in my life, Mr. Take. Just like there’s seven spices in this broth, movies are the spice of my life. You understand that, right?”

“Ain’t possible.”

“C’mon, please? You think so too, right? We’re all brothers in the human race, so you’re me and I’m you. Remember what that badass physicist Freud guy said. How the subconscious is all connected like twins and their telepathy shit?”

Asking me to agree from the next seat was a man with seven-colored hair.

He needed no introduction. The island’s problem child. The Grateful Z. The Mad Dog. The Rainbow Mutt. The One-Man Gun Parade. All were self-proclaimed titles of the off-kilter man named Hayato Inui.

“I think you might have a lot of things mixed up there. And...was Freud a physicist?”

“Dunno. But who gives a shit about Freud? He’s already six feet under. We gotta always look forward—forget the tears in our past. Am I right?”

“Uh, yeah.”

There were a total of two seats in the restaurant.

Of all the people to end up sharing the place with.

I just came to the place because I heard the ramen was good. Talk about unlucky.

“See, Mr. Take? My buddy here agrees!”

“Were you even listening, asshole?”

“C’mon, Mr. Take! This guy’s got a rad scene with all the convincing exposition for you, but it only made it into the director’s cut! BTW, can we switch to Afternoon Roadshow? Talk about a goddamned miracle—they’re actually showing Triple Beretta today! Can’t believe I get to see the newest

one in the series with my own two eyes...I just wanna see it back-to-back with this flick called Zap'em-all Quartet tonight and switch out all that excitement for tomorrow's energy."

"Shaddap. Lemme finish this show."

The owner of the ramen store watched the screen as he cooked the noodles. It was a lazy display, but his ramen did not suffer for it. Maybe that attitude was why he ended up on this island.

The news was on TV. A special about a murder that took place two months ago on the mainland. Apparently a burglar murdered a man in front of his daughter, but the culprit was still loose. It's not any better on the mainland than it is here.

"Don't be an ass to your own customer, Mr. Take— ...Whoops. Phone call."

Inui took out a cell phone. The latest model. How'd he get his hands on one when he doesn't even have Japanese citizenship?

I would have turned a blind eye if he decided to kick manners to the curb and take the call inside, but surprisingly, he walked outside for the call.

Ten minutes passed.

Even after I finished my ramen, he did not return.

In fact, I didn't hear or see anyone at the door anymore.

"Hey, Mister? You think he's pulling an eat-and-run?"

The ramen shop owner did not even turn to look at me as he cleaned up.

"Hm...it's fine. I can give him a beating when he comes back tonight to catch the movie."

There was no laughter in his eyes. I quickly paid and left the store.

...Then, checking that no one was around, I took out my cell phone and accessed a special network. All kinds of images and sounds were displayed on the screen in real time. When I scrolled through several screens, I found a feed from outside a hotel.

The image was distant and blurry, but a blond duo and a woman—probably Jun Sahara—were surrounded by people from the Western District.

...

...

...I see. Of course. I get it.

I understand the situation, Spring-heeled Joplin.

In exchange for this information, I've transmitted the conversation with Inui that I just recorded. That should be all for my job.

...Has Inui noticed something, I wonder? The suspicious movements at the hotel?

...Ah well.

It's a small world, this island.

Whenever there's an incident, it's always the same players that get involved.

Whether it's Inui or Jun Sahara.

Then what about this slow, oblivious, and good-natured detective?

Will she take the stage with gusto?

Well? What do you think, Spring-heeled Joplin?

Spring-heeled Joplin compared this series of incidents to a wild dance show.

Then when did the show begin?

When the first explosion occurred?

When the two dogs were reunited?

When Nazuna Yukimura was wounded?

Or even earlier? Have they been dancing from the moment they entered the island?

Let me take a page out of Spring-heeled Joplin's book and use a poetic metaphor.

As the entire cast dances, someone amidst it all is laughing.

There is someone who dances and makes others dance, all while laughing.

From the outside, the incidents on the island are farcical to watch.

As though everything is inevitable, but as though the links between them are all coincidental.

But it doesn't matter whether things are inevitable or coincidental.

If no coincidence happens, another coincidence will occur and create a new incident.

Yes. On this strange island dotted with incidents big and small, a day where nothing happens is a miracle.

But I don't want to write off anything simply as coincidence. I don't want to think my coming to the island was caused by a series of coincidences.

At the same time, I can't acknowledge the fact that I came to this island because of my own powerlessness.

Which is why I continue to observe the island.

...Hey, Spring-heeled Joplin.

Can you hear me? Do you hear me?

Answer me. Over.

Is observing all we can do?

This is Spring-heeled Joplin. Answer me, Spring-heeled Joplin.

Do we possess power?

Or are we just a group of powerless voyeurs?

Do these thoughts disqualify me from being Spring-heeled Joplin?

If Souji Kuzuhara, Ginga Kanashima, Hayato Inui, Seiichi Kugi,

Ei *Daren*, Yili, Lihuang,

Gitarin, Jun Sahara, the Guard Team,

Charlotte Liverpool,

And even myself—

If we and everyone else are fated to dance on the stage of coincidence, what use is power?

What is power on this island?

Tell me, Spring-heeled Joplin.

So that I can remain Spring-heeled Joplin, if only for a little longer.

All right. All right. This is Spring-heeled Joplin.

Let me answer your question, Spring-heeled Joplin.

Power and strength are not necessarily the same things.

But to be specific...

'Power' is not 'force', at least to a certain fate.

It's just the energy that alters vectors—the direction in which things move.

That! Is the power and freedom given to this island!

Rejoice.

If you wish to change a certain fate, Spring-heeled Joplin will not stop you!

Will we be able to act? Or not?

It is your power that will change that vector.



間奏5 『東源郷』

Interlude 5: Paradise East

Like a hero drifting into paradise, the Rogue of the West dreams while awake.

For the sole purpose of ending his boredom, the rogue dreams his meaningless dreams again today.



The Eastern District. The underground casino.

On an island where everything was run-down, it was an especially unusual place.

Was it filled with more garbage than the rest? No. In fact, it was the very opposite.

Although those from places like Tokyo might not feel that way.

There wasn't a single crack in the wall, where ornaments straight out of paradise shone in immaculate splendor. A soft warmth rose from the red-carpeted floor, like a royal palace. Anyone setting foot on these grounds would be assured of their privileged status.

That alone made the place notable on the island, but the building was equipped with facilities that normal islanders would never have the chance to see.

In the center of the large hall, underneath the chandelier, were genuine roulette tables straight out of Las Vegas, and the corners of the room were packed with all kinds of slot machines. Naturally, there were also tables for baccarat and blackjack, and there was even a gambling corner for dice games like craps. One of the walls was occupied entirely by a bar counter, where hundreds of kinds of alcohol sparkled on the shelves. Though the building was clearly part of the criminal underworld, the wall of colorful bottles bore the mystique of stained-glass windows in a cathedral.

On the endlessly filthy world of the island was a different plane reserved only for the elite.

From afar, it looked like this building was draining all the resources from the world around it. Which was true in a sense, as it drew money from locals and visitors to the island.

From a capitalist's perspective, it was truly heaven on earth.

It was there that ice clinked in a glass of oolong tea, in the hands of a certain man.

"Now...what to do?"

Sitting at the bar with a non-alcoholic drink in his hands was a youngish man with dark skin, who was of ambiguous ethnicity.

Though he looked youthful, it was difficult to discern his age from his appearance. He grinned and turned to a girl in a bartender outfit at the counter.

"What do you think, Misaki? To rise to the Western district's provocation or not...that is the question. I believe the best offense is a good defense, so I have no intention of attacking first. But I think I'll be relying on your opinion today to decide how strongly we'll retaliate if they decide to pick a fight."

"Huh?!"

Unable to even wonder if the man was joking, Misaki dropped the glass in her hands at the sudden burden of responsibility thrust upon her shoulders.

The sound of shattering glass resounded through the casino. Although overshadowed by the noise of chatter and clinking coins, patrons near the bar turned.

"I-I-I'm sorry sir please don't kill me I'm sorry!"

For seemingly no reason the bartender apologized profusely. The other patrons saw the man sitting at the bar and discreetly returned to their games, wise enough to let sleeping dogs lie.

"Please, I didn't do anything! I'm so sorry, sir!"

"No, no. I should be the one apologizing. Sorry I scared you, Misaki. I'll pay Inamine for the glass later."

"N-not at all, sir!"

"Heh. You sound like you stepped right out of a historical movie."

The dark-skinned man snickered, handing a handkerchief to the girl at the counter. As if on cue, the voluptuous women on either side of him giggled.

One of the women was Asian, and the other was white. They clung to the man almost as if flaunting their position.

The bartender girl rushed to clean up the broken glass, not knowing where to look.

The man watched, sitting as if the women on his arms were nonexistent, and continued with feigned ignorance.

"But I *do* feel apologetic to everyone. If only East and West could get along, or if we were many times stronger so we could take over the entire island, people wouldn't have to spend every waking moment worrying about the next explosion."

"N-not at all, sir!"

"...You're fun to watch even when you get flustered, Misaki."

"Huh?!"

The bartender girl—Misaki Yasojima—flinched.

She had served this man several times in the past, but every time he called her name she thought she would die of a heart attack.

Normally, it was the manager Inamine who served the man; but as it was Inamine's day off, Misaki was left to do the job. The man only came once a week, but sometimes he dropped by on nothing but a whim and the casino staff could not match his schedule completely.

Generally in situations like this, Jun was there to help manage the situation. But Misaki's trusty friend was nowhere to be seen that day.

The man looked like a lighthearted rogue on the outside, and he was almost as cheerful on the inside as well. But the fact was that he was the leader who reigned at the head of the organization that controlled the Eastern District.

So in spite of the boss's carefree nature, one wrong joke could paint a target on her back for the other executives to shoot down silently and discreetly.

Misaki tensed before the oblivious bomb and referenced her pool of memorized dialogue for bartending.

"Umm...what kind of work do you usually do, Boss?"

She decided to call the man 'Boss', just as Inamine the manager did.

"What kind of work do I do? You've seen for yourself."

"Uh, well...it's not like I haven't not not seen you work... Umm...thank you for all your hard work!"

It was only after her nonsensical attempt at conversation that Misaki cursed her own foolishness. She sounded like a teenaged girl on her first day at work at a cabaret club.

"Hm. Now what kind of question could you be asking me—Alan Gran Galan J. Gitarin Yamashiro Outerheaven Radiovoice? What information could you be trying to glean from between the lines? I see you're quite the adept tactician, Misaki."

"Wha-?! N-not at all, sir! I don't know anything and I'm really just an unlucky person and I really don't even deserve to talk to you Boss so please excuse me I can't even look in your direction!"

"Heh. Fun as ever."

Gitarin, the man at the top of the Eastern District, chuckled and emptied the contents of his glass in one go before launching into a spiel.

"Let me tell you a funny story."

"Y-yes, sir?"

Misaki stared timidly as Gitarin put his chin on his clasped hands like a movie villain.

"What do you think of boredom?"

"Pardon?" Misaki asked, not knowing what Gitarin was getting at.

Perhaps he never expected an answer from her to begin with; Gitarin continued after a rather brief moment of silence.

"I think boredom is a crime."

"A-a crime?"

"Yes. A crime. Something to be punished. Think about it. Countless lives emerge, live, die, and circulate their energies to move the tiny world perched on the earth's skin. But boredom, you see, makes a waste of that energy. It turns life on earth against itself and stops the flow of energy instead of using it. What else could it be but a crime? Even on a social level, it halts the energy we could use to be productive, to improve civilization, or to save people. And boredom even makes the people who feel it suffer. It's no doubt an enemy to us, whether from a cultural or a biological point of view."

"R-right..."

"The people of this country feared the king of fear or something in the year 1999, but even believing in things like that is just a product of boredom. What are doomsday prophecies to people who're constantly occupied, day after day? And in the end, the king of fear never descended upon us. And what greeted the people who were expecting something? That's right. Mild disappointment and yet more boredom. Maybe that was the true identity of the king of fear. Yes. Maybe boredom does deserve to be called the true king of fear."

It sounded like Gitarin was talking more to himself than Misaki.

The smile on his face cooled by the second, and Misaki began to feel a chill like a viper was staring her down.

But—

The moment he spotted her flinch, Gitarin instantly injected warmth back into his smile.

"Heh. Heh heh. Hahahaha! That's just me rambling about nothings. I just came up with a theory to emphasize how much I dislike boredom. You could come up with any number of rebuttals from a cultural or biological perspective, and if boredom were a crime, *everyone* would be guilty instantly!"

"Huh? Oh, uh...yes! Of course!" Misaki replied, realizing that Gitarin had just been joking.

Perhaps she should have gotten angry, but Misaki did not have that courage. Even if she did, the thought of what might happen if she crossed the line with Gitarin would have stopped her.

And with a childlike smile, that very man continued.

"I was just killing time trying to explain how much I hate boredom. Heh. Don't take it personally." He grinned, and asked another question of the hapless bartender. "Now...that's why I want to ask you, Misaki. Could a leader who judges or forgives his foes on a whim and sometimes goes to the front lines of war in person possibly exist?"

"Huh? Uh...umm...I guess...yes...?"

'He's sitting right in front of me,' Misaki thought, but kept the idea to herself.

"Heh heh heh. I suppose so. But in my opinion, people like that shouldn't be leading criminal organizations like this."

'Is this supposed to be self-deprecation now?'

"After all, a leader like that would have been shanked by a disgruntled executive before he could do anything. Unless he was especially talented and charismatic."

"Y-yes! Of course!"

'Wait, is he praising himself?'

"But I, at least, am not one such leader."

'Then why isn't he getting shanked?'

"...Then why aren't I getting shanked? Is what you thought, right?"

Thousands of insects seemed to crawl down Misaki's spine.

The boss of the organization, the man wearing the innocent smile, had read her mind.

"Hah hah! Looks like I was right on the mark. But don't worry about it."

Gitarin chuckled at the sight of the frozen bartender and continued. Though his gentle expression remained the same, a hint of a shadow fell over his voice.

"...You know, none of the Eastern District executives here on the island are real execs. Including me."

"...Pardon?"

"Think about it. This isn't a construction site—why would anyone need to be physically here on this island to give orders when the internet exists to make life easier? We *are* technically supposed to be working for a parent organization, but in reality, we're just figureheads dispatched here by the people who're really in charge. So in other words, no matter how many executives die in this mess, the organization essentially remains unchanged."

There was nothing laughable about what he said, but Gitarin laughed—honestly, from the bottom of his heart—all the same.

"Whatever whims I follow are just tiny ripples on the surface. It changes nothing about the heart of the organization, and the death of a figurehead doesn't stop the orders from coming in. Although even the real execs back there seem concerned about the bombings."

"N-no way..."

The things Gitarin said should not have been for Misaki to hear.

But by the time she realized that, it was too late. She couldn't retroactively cover her ears.

“And the Guard Team is my little symbol of rebellion against the people who drove me to this island—the people really in charge, who for a moment handed me the monster known as boredom and believe they continue to do so.”

Tapping the counter with his finger, Gitarin sank into his own world.

Misaki gulped, unable to remember how to breathe.

“Placed on this island without even someone to call a self.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Taking on nothing but danger, receiving only hollow fame in return.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Every day is filled to the brim with peril. Day after day.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“But there’s not a hint of thrill in those days. I simply avoid the dangers I’m given, just like a programmed robot.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“There’s no other way to describe this boredom. It’s a crime.”

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tap tap tap.

Tap tap—

“And that is why I despise boredom!”

The moment his finger couldn’t drum any faster on the counter, Gitarin slammed down his hand.

There was a resounding noise, but the patrons pretended not to hear. As they probably did not hear the conversation itself, they didn’t seem to want to get involved.

Gitarin grinned excitedly.

“Yes. It’s the same with ‘them’. One day, I’ll declare independence of the island and war against them. Then I won’t be bored anymore, at least while I’m fighting ‘them’. Yes. This is my own will and a battle for myself, so it couldn’t possibly be boring.”

Misaki felt as though the flash of madness in Gitarin’s smile would rob her of her consciousness. It was just a feeling, but she almost sensed murder in his eyes.

What in the world was he?

She could die.

The moment she felt her life teeter on the edge, she remembered the lovely friend whose eyes were always hidden under her bangs.

‘That’s right.

‘Jun...did you know all this? Just how much do you trust and follow this man?’

By remembering her friend Misaki calmed herself from the shock of knowing Gitarin’s position and true nature.

Taking a deep breath, she turned back to the demon before her.

It took several more seconds before she could muster up a voice, but Misaki used every ounce of power within her to shake off her latest bout of misfortune.

“I...I think that’s wrong.”

Before she knew it, she was talking.

“I-if you sweep away your boredom like that, Boss...then you’re going to be a real boss and not a fake one anymore? And—and then that means you’re taking the Guard Team’s lives into your own hands! You know that, right?”

“...Yes. Exactly. By burdening myself with the lives of people I must protect—and because I have people whom I want to live alongside—I can finally say

goodbye to boredom forever. Of course, I won't force anyone to do anything. And I promise to protect my friends with everything I have. Including Jun, whom I know is your first concern."

Gitarin was still smiling.

But that fact that he had said such a thing with a smile scared Misaki and repulsed her.

"...Please...stop this. Please reconsider!"

Gone was her earlier hesitation, replaced entirely by anger. Though her voice was still low enough that only Gitarin could hear, there was an iron will hidden in her tone.

Gitarin withdrew his smile and shot her an icy glare.

"Why should I?"

"Y-you said you wouldn't force anyone, but Jun would obviously follow you! You *know* what she's like, so how could you say that, Boss? How?"

All the words Misaki had been holding back swelled at once like a wave.

She was speaking from her heart and not her head, but she was more convincing now than ever before.

"Maybe that's not a crime at all. But just like you call boredom a crime...and even if you're not guilty at this point...from my perspective, it's *evil!* The very definition of evil! So...so please don't drag Jun into...it..."

Misaki realized what she was doing halfway through her outburst. Fear crept back into her voice.

"I—um...uhh...I—"

Watching Misaki pale at a comical speed, Gitarin muttered with a hint of surprise and awe.

"You were like this when the Rats took over the casino too. Once you're cornered, your mouth kicks into high gear."

"Wah...I...eek...umm..."

Not even a barrage of gunfire would surprise Misaki now. Imagining herself turned to swiss cheese, she cursed her own misfortune. Perhaps she was reaping what she sowed, but she had almost no regrets about what she had just said.

But she was not the only unlucky one. In a way, it was the same for Gitarin, and even Jun, who followed him. Then Misaki began to feel like the island itself was misfortune incarnate.

'I knew it I knew it I knew it! I was born under an unlucky star and sold off to an unlucky island!'

Wailing silently, she waited for Gitarin to react. He gave a hearty laugh.

"Heh. Hah hah. Ahahahahaha! Great! Great! You never cease to entertain me, Misaki. I'm so glad Jun has a friend like you!"

"Huh?"

"Hahahahaha! Ahahaha! Did you really believe what I said? Please, cut me some slack here. How would I have formed the Guard Team if I were just a figurehead? And just how much money do you think it took me to form the team? You'd better watch out, Misaki. Swindlers are everywhere these days. Now I'm feeling a little guilty. Heh. I'm sorry. I don't know what to say." Gitarin chuckled, tipping the rest of the ice in his cup into his mouth.

He crunched the ice to bits in an instant and held out the cup to Misaki.

He wanted seconds, Misaki realized. She quickly turned and took out the pre-brewed oolong tea from the fridge, and poured it into the cup along with ice.

"O-o-of course, sir! It was a joke! Aha! Please don't scare me like that, Boss."

Misaki played along on the outside, but her heart was still pounding.

Was Gitarin really just joking?

As long as the question remained, she could neither truly breathe a sigh of relief nor allow herself to get angry at the impish man.

Gitarin seemed to have read her mind, as he again denied his earlier claims.

"Not to worry, Misaki. I really have leadership over the Eastern District, and I'm on very good terms with the parent organization overseas. And I don't have a grudge against anyone, either."

"O-of course, Boss..."

Relief slowly flooded over Misaki.

Gitarin drained his cup of tea in one go and narrowed his eyes.

Then he mumbled to no one in particular.

"At least, not now."

"Uh."

'Not now? Then...what about before?'

"Whoops, phone call. I'll be off now, Misaki. Thank you for the tea."

As questions popped up in Misaki's head, Gitarin hurried off.

Before Misaki could say a word, he disappeared like smoke into the crowds of the casino with a beauty on each arm.

The casino was booming with noise, but Misaki felt like the world was muted. And she wondered if the conversation just now had really taken place.

Several more seconds of silence later, she returned to the din of reality and let her elbows drop weakly to the counter as she broke into cold sweat, calling her friend's name.

"Jun...I can't deal with him after all...I don't know where you are right now, but please...come back soon..."



"So Jun's in trouble?" Gitarin asked the man who had been waiting at the casino doors.

"Yeah, and get this, Boss. Of all people, she got caught by Lihuang's gang and Lilei."

Laid-back as always in spite of the gravity of the situation was Carlos the gunman, a Spaniard in blue shades.

"...I see. So they're getting desperate."

"So what do we do, Boss? Mr. Zhang's in a huff about storming their HQ this instant."

"We're not picking a fight. But we're going to get Jun back."

"Easy for you to say." Carlos said with a wry grin. Gitarin replied, sounding just as laid-back.

"With leadership comes great privilege."

"I think you might have a rebellion on your hands with that attitude."

"Maybe if I pushed things. But I don't think it's too tall an order for the Guard Team." With a bitter chuckle, Gitarin slowly let his expression set. "But we'd better take care of whoever's behind this, and quick."

"...Yakumo Amagiri, you mean?"

"No. More like the one who's fanning the flames of fear on this island with the bombings." Cracking his neck, Gitarin named his suspect. "Ginga Kanashima. That plastic surgery freak's the only one whose movements we *can't* track right now."

"...We've got eyes around Kuzuhara, but I don't think Kanashima is going to do anything to him personally."

"Which is only going to make Kuzuhara suffer. And that's obviously his goal. From an outside perspective, revenge stories can be really fun to watch. But," Gitarin said calmly, walking with Carlos to the theme park where the office was, "it's a different story if my islanders, Jun, or the rest of you are hurt. The execs were prepared for death to begin with, but the one that died yesterday only just came to the island. He wasn't mine for long. I never

even had the chance to get bored of this one, let alone see what he could do. And now, Jun is in trouble.”

He carried himself with a hint of arrogance, but Gitarin’s unusually-colored eyes made it impossible for others to read his emotions.

“I’ve never truly despised someone before.”

Carlos found himself tensing at the sight of Gitarin, who had never looked so grim even when the other executives were killed. It felt as though he was seeing something forbidden in the sight of his boss’s back.

“But you know...no one said I’d stay that way for the rest of my life.”

The demon of the East quietly laughed.

And no one would know if the laughter was forced or genuine.



The Rogue of the East dreams.

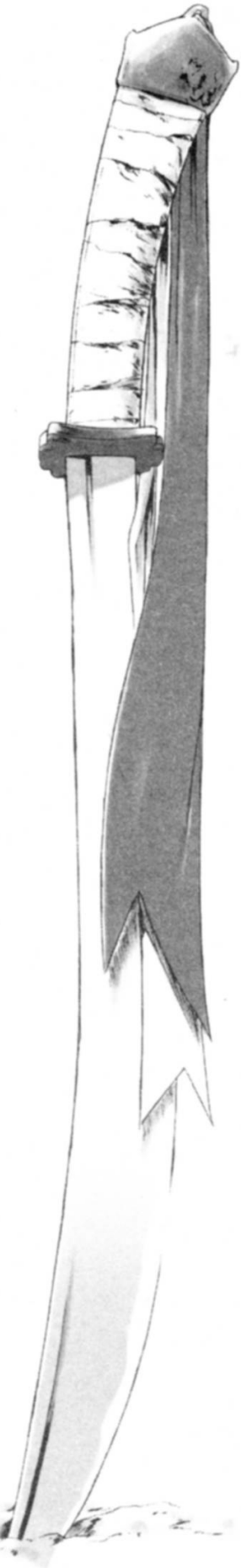
Fun dreams, sad dreams, and meaningless nightmares.

And sometimes, even dreams from other minds.

But the roguish demon accepts all dreams, regardless of nature.

As though claiming that as the duty of a resident of paradise,

The Rogue of the East continues to run endlessly in his dreams today.



五 章

Chapter 5-A: Wolf Alert

The Western District. The Grand Ibis Hotel.

As I walk down the dim corridor, I fall into thought again.

It feels like thinking is all I do these days. At this rate, I'm going to turn into one of those neurotic creeps who wonder about the meaning of each grain of rice as it pertains to my life. In old video games, there's always one character who goes out of his way to sound poetic about the world, but I think being like that must be tiring. Although I can't say I dislike people like that.

Everyone ends up thinking a lot when they have nothing to do.

'School is pointless'.

'Why do humans wage war?'

'Why shouldn't we kill people?' ...Although it would be funny if I ended up wondering this one out loud.

There's no point to thoughts like this, I think seriously... in other words, I don't have much to do.

People think about these things because they're bored out of their minds.

...In that case, I must be all the worse.

By the time my thoughts go from 'it feels like thinking is all I do these days' to 'people think about these things', I have taken a grand total of three steps.

Things always end up like this when I get too carried away by my thoughts.

I remember something my friend said in junior high school.

"Y'know how in baseball manga, there's always a really long scene where the pitcher throws and the batter just thinks on and on before he hits the ball? That could never happen in real life—the ball'd be in the mitt before he got his thinking done."

I remember wondering what the hell this guy was talking about.

Saying your thoughts out loud is one thing—there's a physical limit to how fast your vocal cords and mouth can move—but there's no such limit for thinking in your head.

That was what I always thought, but apparently that wasn't the case.

I think. I am nothing special. Everyone can do it, but they underestimate their brains so much they're placing limits on their own abilities. They think they can't do it because they're letting their brains move at the same speed as their eyes, their voices, and their eardrums. They have to have faith in their own brains, their minds, and their consciousnesses.

...That was what I thought, once, when I had nothing to do.

Did I start thinking fast because I had faith in my brain? Not really. It's been as normal as breathing to me ever since I was little.

But the problem is that thinking fast doesn't make me smart.

I'd rather have been born stupid. Then they wouldn't have made me do all those unpleasant tests, and I never would have become twisted and discreetly ostracized by my family.

My family, seriously...

Wait. Almost got off-track again.

There's still 10 meters to go until my destination.

I'll slowly get my thoughts in order as I go.

I was thinking about...

...The reason people started calling me 'Killer Ghoul'.

I guess my body count has something to do with it.

I think it's a pretty high number, even for someone on the island, but I did my best to avoid killing whenever I could.

I...just had too many enemies.

Right after my first kill, a bunch of people appeared with guns in hand, saying they wanted revenge. Not knowing why they'd step in so loudly when people were watching or why the people in the Pits didn't try to stop them, and scared that this was acceptable behavior on the island, I got rid of them all. I didn't go for kills, but at least a few of them must have died from the injuries I inflicted.

But too many people saw me in action.

I almost died many times after that, too. Sometimes it was unconnected muggings, but naturally a lot of the attacks stemmed from my first kill. I understood with all my body why people said hatred gave birth to more hatred, but understanding doesn't break that cycle.

How many people had I killed by then?

When rumors began going around in the Pits that killing 'the guy in white' would net you fame?

How many people had I killed by then?

When I realized they'd put a bounty on my head in parts of the Pits?

How many people had I killed by then?

When the rumor and the talk of the bounty spread outside the Pits?

To be honest, I was scared.

I was scared to death by the fact that there was a bounty on my head, and that my life was threatened by a meaningless lie. But what scared me even more was the idea of leaving the island knowing that I'd committed murder.

Maybe if I'd put on a disguise and lived incognito then, the rumors might have stopped. But upon endless deliberation, I decided in the end that, rather than hide my identity and live in fear, I would be better off flaunting my existence and killing anyone who attacked me so I could become feared and untouchable.

...After all, by then, I no longer felt guilty about killing people.

But still...I don't *want* to kill people.

I don't kill just anyone. I only kill to keep myself alive.

Right. Right. I'm...still normal.

...But how many people would still be alive if I'd left this island earlier? In the end, hadn't I essentially killed people purely for peace of mind? My brain repeated those vain thoughts again and again, made excuses for them again and again, and argued back again and again, and—

In that repetition of thought, my mind came to one conclusion.

I kill people because the sky is blue.

So I never put on a disguise. To paint over my crimes with these white clothes as my mask.

So I could leave this color behind completely someday, when I left the island.

...That's right. I plan to leave.

But...what's so bad about running away?

I just didn't want to die.

But...even on this island, where killings are nothing to blink at, people forced this moniker onto me. The Killer Ghoul.

It disgusted me. When I realized that the world was rejecting me, I felt something indescribably unpleasant—not anger, not sadness—rising to my throat.

And the final nail in the coffin came when that sicko showed up.

Specifically, he didn't *show* up. But he provoked me endlessly with his voice. The sick bastard called Spring-heeled Joplin had the gall to say this to me—

<The reason you're called the Killer Ghoul has nothing to do with how many people you've killed. It's just because you're eerily cool and abnormally strange. Your strength. Your speed. Your movements as you outread all your opponents. The way you evade even bullets. That already qualifies you as a mystery to other people. By giving you a moniker, they get a brief taste of gaining insight into the mystery. The moniker 'Killer Ghoul' is just a convenient tool by which they try to understand you.>

<If you believe you've been abandoned by society—that you're being rejected by the world—come to me. Live like I do, as a legend. Because once you conclude that you're not human, you never have to agonize over yourself again.>

...Damn it.

No. Don't screw with me!

How the hell am I superhuman?! I...I'm human! I'm so very human! I would have been so much happier if I were a vampire or a monster. Because then, I could just throw up my hands and surrender! I could just surrender because I wasn't human to begin with! But...I'm human. I want to remain human.

I love humans. Because humans can smile and laugh at the most inconsequential of things! I only realized this when I became this way. I realized...two months ago.

I am human and I love my fellow humans. So why do I have to keep this mask on my face? Damn it...I'm going to blow my lid. I'm going to blow my lid at my own weakness, and even at that formless 'something' that's driven me to this mess!

...Huh?

Not good. I walked right past the door.

I shouldn't get too deep into thought. Focus, Yakumo.

Cool down. Cool down. It's all cool.

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.

...All right. All calm.

I make a point of taking deep breaths and slowly reach out to the doorknob. I take into account the possibility of a stungun set up inside and put on a rubber glove before I take hold of the knob.

Instant-acting traps like this scare me. I could do something about a barrage of bullets, but even I can't counter electrical currents.

With the doorknob in my hand, I heighten my focus. My ears pick up nothing unusual, and my nose doesn't smell anything particularly dangerous.

Right...I'll waltz straight in, no breathers.

Focusing, I turn the doorknob in one go—

Click Click

A set of slow metallic noises.

It must be locked.

...Obviously, it must be locked. Obviously, it must be an automated lock. This is a hotel.

Internally smacking myself, I take out a card key. I knocked out the guard earlier and swiped it from him.

...I stole the key but forgot to use it. Hm. What does that say about me?

I must have had so much on my mind that I completely forgot about the key. Damn it. This is why thinking fast doesn't make me smart.

But the fact that I made this noise means that the occupant knows someone's here. Should I just leave this time?

"...Who is it?"

As I turn the card key over in my hands, I hear a female voice from inside. An alluring and elegant voice that was at the same time cold as ice.

My target must be inside after all.

I've come this far; I decide to respond. Being straightforward will make the best impression on her.

"It's Amagiri. Umm...Yakumo Amagiri."

For a while, I hear nothing but silence. Which is natural. Even I'm smart enough to understand...I think. But objectively speaking, is it stupid for an intruder to reveal his own name in the act? Oh no. Now I'm starting to panic. Please...please, say something.

"...Is this a joke?"

Oh. She thinks I'm lying.

Then again, she must trust her guards, and she wouldn't believe that the suspect they're after would suddenly show up before her eyes—I don't think she'd want to believe. If this is real, she'll have to fear for her own safety.

But I'm sorry to say that this is real. That is a fact, so I can only hope she understands... Wait a second. What if I just reply, 'yes, I'm terribly sorry. I'm actually just a passing little grey'?

Wait. Wait a second here. Even I think 'little grey' is pushing it. Speaking of which, Triple Beretta should be starting on TV right about now. Ugh...I should have watched it before I left. I'd better make sure to at least catch Zap'em-all Quartet tonight.

No. No. no. Wait a second. Wait just a second here. This is no time to be thinking about—

"It's open."

Maybe I should just forget this today—wait, what?

There is a low metallic noise and a voice.

I turn the doorknob just in case. It is clearly unlocked now.

I have no idea what she's planning, but she's invited me in. Even if this is a trap, I'm sure I can walk in and things will work out somehow. No, wait...

And after 30 seconds of deep deliberation and introspection, I open the door.



The moment I step inside, I wonder if I wandered into a different dimension.

The air is a complete 180 from that in the hallway. Maybe this is a better way to put it, then. Right now...I *truly* set foot into the Western District.

It is a luxurious room—a hotel suite. I even forget to close the door behind me as I lose myself in the interior.

The furnishings and decorations are Chinese in style, a far cry from the hotel exterior. Each and every piece is tasteful and impeccably ordered. This must be what the word 'bourgeois' is used for. I've never even imagined a Chinese bourgeois before, but if I ever do in the future, this room will always rise to my thoughts. The one flaw, maybe, is that the abundance of primary colors teeters on the verge of being garish.

There are talismans stuck all over the walls and the ceiling. I thought the owner of this room was a sceptic realist. Maybe she's more superstitious than she lets on?

It's great that I get to step into a slice of China, but where is the owner of the room?

I was prepared for gunfire the moment I opened the door, but I sense no sign of that. Is she planning to fill the room with poison gas? I think I could break the window and climb down the wall, then...but that's gotta be bulletproof glass. I hope I can break it with the table...

That is when a slender figure leans over from behind a bamboo partition in the corner.

"I suppose I should say...welcome."

"Oh. Thank you."

There's no mistake; I've seen her at a few events on the island before, so I know her face.

Yili, a Western District executive.

"You're making quite the bold entrance. Did you assume you'd be able to kill me easily even if I was armed?"

"..."

"Please don't underestimate me...is what I'd like to say, but to be honest, you have the skills to get away with that."

"You're *overestimating* me," I reply, "and I've never underestimated you, as far as I can recall. I'll apologize if it came across that way. I'm sorry. Oh, and I am terribly sorry for barging in like this without even making an appointment. Anyway, I am extremely apologetic."

All right. Now that the apologies are over with, it's time to get business done.

But I'm surprised she showed herself so easily. She doesn't seem to be holding a gun, so she might be holding poison pins in her mouth or something. Yili is a proud witch—one of the people who move the island—so she could kill me the moment I let my guard—

"So now it's my turn, is it? All this talk is a little gift before you send me to the afterlife?"

"N-no. About that—"

Agh.

Argh...I messed up.

I screwed up! I am an idiot! Damn it!

I let Yili distract me for too long!

How could I make the same mistake as two months ago? Of all things, the very same mistake?

How could I have been oblivious to the bloodlust swelling behind me?

The massive glass window reflects the interior of the room, cast against the evening lights.

In a corner of that image...I clearly see a hand holding a gun.

Stop. Stop this!

This is no time to be killing people!

So don't shoot.

Listen to me! You, the one behind me!

Depending on what happens, I might have to end up killing you to protect myself!

I...I'm not that strong of a person!

So please don't make me want to kill you!

"Calm down. I'm not here to kill you," I say, pretending I haven't noticed the presence behind me. It would only sound like I was pleading for my life if I did.

And Yili doesn't seem like the type to accept pleading.

Then I have to take care of the person behind me. It's not very easy, keeping people alive—especially disarming them completely. Depending on his skill, not killing him might put my own life at risk.

Then...I hope Yili listens to what I have to say.

"...I'd be very, umm...happy. If you could listen to what I have to say."

I want to say this more to the person behind me than Yili.

She gives me a dubious look before opening her scarlet lips.

"Oh my. Are we obliged to listen?"

...Oh no.

She's noticed.

She's noticed that I've noticed the person behind me.

Then I have no reason to try and pry.

"...But you have the right to listen."

"...You've killed many of our allies and brought chaos to the city. What more could you say? Will you declare victory? Will you provoke us? Or are you finally in the mood to make your demands?"

"I want to tell the truth."

She frowns for a moment.

I can't let this chance pass by. I put everything I wanted to say in order and throw out every truth I knew.

"I didn't kill them."

"...?"

"I didn't kill anyone. Not the Western District executives, not the Eastern District executives. All I did was sneak into your father's room, stand at the old man's bedside, and warn him. That was all. But it looks like people think I'm the one behind all the crazy serial killings on the island. So...I know it's my fault for causing a misunderstanding, but I think I have the obligation to deny what is wrong."

Yili's mouth closes. The guy behind me seems to be hesitating too.

"...And here I was wondering what you'd come here for. Nonsense. How could you deny anything when we have witnesses?"

"All I can do is deny the witness accounts, then. Or maybe someone's disguising themselves as me to kill them."

Yili goes silent again, but she quickly shakes her head and opens her mouth again.

“Unfortunately, we have no—”

The sound of metal on metal. In the reflection on the window I see the man’s finger move.

“—reason to believe—”

Of all the moments to attack! When I see the finger move without a second’s hesitation, I leap forward.

Yili’s expression wavers. She must have thought my assailant had captured the perfect moment, but I reacted the moment I saw his finger move.

But that doesn’t mean I can move faster than a bullet. The odds are stacked against me, and even if I avoid a fatal hit it’ll be nigh-impossible to make it out unscathed.

But I cannot let myself get hurt here.

I move, mindful of the hand reflected in the window.

I step in directly between the hand and Yili.

“...!”

I knew it. He hesitates.

I spin around and flip the nearby table at the man. It’s heavier than I expected, but I manage to get it in the air. One good hit to the head and he’ll be knocked out at the very least. Even if it misses, I can use the moment he dodges it to knock him unconscious myself.

But in my slow-motion world, the man does something unthinkable.

He doesn’t evade, or even try to deflect it—

Instead, he charges forward and falls to the floor moments before impact, sliding under the table and taking aim at me.

Now Yili is no longer in his line of fire.



Did this guy just read my reaction?

This is the first time anyone's done this with me since I faced the rainbow-haired man a few years ago. I let him get away then, but he never came after me afterwards. I'm glad we didn't end up spilling blood.

...Wait. Not good. I shouldn't go off-track when I'm fighting this guy!

He doesn't seem to think as fast as I do; his aim is a mess right now. I launch myself off the floor again to worsen it, even for a moment.

I see flashes of light.

At the same time, I hook my feet on a nearby chair to escape the bullet's trajectory. I leap off the chair and fly through the air, crossing past the man sliding under the table.

He couldn't have expected that. His eyes widen in shock as I pass him by—

...Hm?

I've seen him before.

Leaping over the table I had thrown, I lift it the other way around. It wouldn't be much of a shield against the large-caliber gun he uses, but it would be enough of a distraction.

I kick the table with my heel and launch it at the man. He can't dodge this one—I see my chance.

I manage to fling myself behind a wall. I'm glad this is a suite with multiple rooms—in a cheaper place I would have been cornered in the bathroom.

Once I am able to protect myself from gunfire for a time, I recall the man's face again.

Right. I almost never come to the Western District, but I've seen his face a few times.

He was an executive here who was trying to revolutionize the city. I remember making sure to memorize his face because I thought I could finally cast off my mask if guns were outlawed from this sick island.

I think his name was—

“You’re...Mr. Seiichi Kugi, right?”

I coldly call his name.

All I hear in exchange was silence, but in this situation I suppose he wouldn’t acknowledge it even if I was right. It’s a stupid question now that I think about it, but I’ll be glad if he’s even a little shaken.

I wait several seconds, but he does not respond.

Although that’s only if I haven’t switched gears so much that my internal clock’s gone haywire.

In any case, it’s a good thing we have a chance to talk. I take a slow, deep breath and repeat myself.

“...I’m going to say this again. I didn’t kill them. The only people I kill are people who try to kill me or try to kill those I care about.”

“Let me repeat myself as well. I don’t believe you.”

Yili speaks from beyond the wall. Her voice is as cold as ever, no matter how many times I hear it. I can’t say for certain, but I don’t think I’ll ever like her.

“Then what can I do to make you believe me?”

“Nothing. Although if you dragged the real culprit to our feet, we could at least have a look and see if you’re telling the truth.”

I sense no complacency or conceit in her tone. She is simply stating the facts. It looks like she instantly raised her guard when she saw my movements in person. She must have been a little less guarded earlier because she trusts this Kugi guy.

And he is a skilled one. Although I’m not confident that I’m an accurate judge of people’s fighting skills, I was scared of him for at least a moment.

If this were a manga, meeting someone on par with me or higher might make my heart race. But no. I'm terrified. I think my heart is going to stop. Then again, characters in manga who get pumped up about fighting stronger people get called abnormal, too.

That's right. From a normal person's perspective, that's abnormal.

I am a normal person. I...I'm normal.

Then what about this man?

Is he normal? What about Yili behind him? She's already a part of the criminal underworld, so I suppose her abnormality is a given. But what about Seiichi Kugi?

He tried to make this island a better place. He disappeared so suddenly that I assumed he'd been killed by that Inui character.

Yet he's alive and well. But he won't show his face in public. And I thought he hated guns—why is he trying to shoot me to death now? Political figures really should keep their campaign promises.

Why? If I kill him now, I'll never find out. But his bloodlust refuses to disappear.

Then maybe I should just ask now?

Right. I will. I don't expect much of an answer, but it'll at least buy me time or provoke him.

"Hey, Mr. Kugi. Mr. Seiichi Kugi."

He is as silent as I expected he would be, but I continue anyway.

"You know, to be honest...I really respected you. You tried to make this island a better place where most other people would have given up. So...why are you using a gun now?"

He does not respond.

"Just out of curiosity...do you think you're normal?"

Any normal person would get angry at that question. At least, I would.

"...Shut up."

A low voice.

His voice is normally higher to match his looks, but the heavy tone makes his anxiety clear against my eardrums.

"Let me just assume you're still normal. Look. There's no benefit to us killing one another at this point. If I wanted to kill you, I wouldn't have leapt in here—I would have taken Yili hostage. Am I wrong?"

"..."

"And even though you're armed, you're not coming around here to shoot me because you're on guard. All right. Calm down and listen to me, okay? And ignore your mistress there and just listen to what I have to say."

"..."

Is he finally ready to listen? If only I had a hand mirror I could use it to look around the corner. Oh well. I'll assume he's listening.

"Listen. I want you to accept the premise that I'm not trying to hurt anyone here. After all, if you try to kill me, I won't be able to go easy on you."

"..."

"And if that happens, I'll do everything my power to go after Yili instead of you."

"...! Jackass..."

Good, it worked. That's enough to carry on the conversation.

"I'd be happy if I could take her hostage, but I don't think you or Yili will give me the chance. So all I could do then is kill your employer—the person you're supposed to protect. But if you decide to not kill me, we can end things peacefully. And on that note, if you could give me your number we can resolve this over the phone without any violence. What do you think?"

Damn it. Am I doing this right? I'm not really good at negotiations.

But I think these two are more inclined to listen to reason than the crazies from the East. The one who recites pi endlessly, the one who falls asleep while I'm still talking, the airhead girl who just laughs about not knowing anything... The only people I can actually talk to might be the bondage lady, Carlos, and Jun Sahara.

If Zhang were here, he'd just say, "got it!" and land a drop kick straight through the wall. I don't think even bullets could get through here, but his kicks are practically rocket-powered.

Oh no. I'm getting off-track again.

...Anyway, Yili isn't saying a thing. I didn't think she was the type to get scared...maybe she's coming around from a different direction to get me. But I don't see any way of coming around here from that corner. Then again, there could always be an emergency escape door around here, so I should stay on guard. If she uses something silent, like poison darts, I'm finished.

I tense slightly and wait for an answer.

...But what if it turns out this guy isn't Kugi after all? That would be mortifying. It's funny how I can worry about being embarrassed at a time like this.

There's only one thing I have to be mindful of now. Whether they're willing to listen to me or not.

The moment I turn back to the matter at hand, a sickening thought rises to mind.

That killing them is all I could do.

That that is all I could do after all.

That ultimately, that is my only choice.

Ah, I see. I see. This is the way I am normally.

Something is confusing me. I *have* been abnormal recently. I can't convince myself to kill. ...No, wait. That's how a normal person should feel. Because no normal person convinces himself to kill so easily.

No, that's not right.

I am 'Yakumo Amagiri'.

I should be wearing the mask of the Killer Ghoul. A mask. So why am I hesitating? I mustn't let the mask become one with the real me underneath. The mask of the Killer Ghoul must protect the real me. So I should not hesitate.

After that second of thought—

Rather than cling to the mask, I end up prioritizing the conversation.

"So now what will you do? I think it'll be most energy-efficient and sensible to talk this out peacefully."

"...I understand. I accept your terms."

Huh?

I'm surprised. He actually accepted.

But no matter how polite he sounds, he seems still very cautious.

"Thank you. But I'm not stupid enough to just walk out there now. Could we keep talking like this for a bit?"

"Yes. Let me begin, then. If you have the time and energy to be trying to prove your innocence, I believe you'd be better off leaving the island altogether."

"Hey, that applies for half the people on this island. Including you."

"..."

I am right on the mark, but the man is silent. Did I strike a nerve? Before, he used to be the face of the Western District—but now he's acting more like Yili's personal bodyguard...

...Hm? Something's wrong.

Right. Yili. Where's Yili?

She's talkative and feisty. I know that. So why isn't she saying a word?

I don't even have to check. I hear footsteps coming down the hall. It's a good thing I left the door open. But that was foolish of me. Then again, I'm just a Killer Ghoul. I'm not an assassin or a soldier. I'm not perfect.

While I spoke with Seiichi Kugi like a half-wit, Yili must have contacted security on her cell phone.

I'm such an idiot.

Now...now I have no choice but to kill.

My heart is heavy. I *am* different from before. I've changed. I think...it must have been that day, two months ago.

...But one thing remains the same. My bloodlust.

It's been with me for the past two months, clear as can be.

It's no exaggeration to say that I'm here to fulfill that desire.

I was led here by my overflowing bloodlust, directed at someone I don't even know.

But once I do figure it out, I am going to kill them.

And there's only one person in the whole wide world who could stop me.

...She's...not around anymore. She's gone.

Who are you...?

Who in the world could you be?

My thoughts swell with bloodlust as the footsteps draw near, but the moment I remember her smile, the bloodlust completely ignores both Kugi here and the guards outside.

I'll kill them. That's right. As I move to the rhythm of my raging emotions, I simply repeat this phrase to myself myself myself myself I will kill you. But that person alone should be my target. No one else.

Miss Nazuna...

I swear that I will murder the one who hurt Miss Nazuna.

Miss Nazuna is the only one who can stop me now.

So...so please...get well soon.

The radio broadcast says she was in critical condition. I wanted to visit her as fast as I could, but I don't know where to find her.

What in the world happened?

What in the world happened to her after we parted ways that day?

At that point, I spot men in black Chinese clothing at the door.

Before they notice me, I leap into the air.

And even as I fly, I wonder to myself.

There are enemies before me.

But should I kill them or not?

Chapter 5-B: Slow Case Files

Afternoon. In front of the ruined hotel in the Western District.

“Don’t even think about starting those toy engines of yours, kitten. You may be able to protect yourself, but the two behind you are another matter entirely.” Western District executive Lihuang Ei smirked, a dozen men under his command. The tattoo on his face added a twisted bent to his already terrifying grin.

Meanwhile, Jun held her weapons at the ready and replied defiantly, “what makes you think I can’t protect them?”

“A bold claim, even for the captain of the Guard Team.”

“Yes. But it’s one I’m willing to back up,” Jun said, her eyes flashing as she tightened her hold on her chainsaws.

“I’m well aware that you’re no small fry. But...” Lihuang snickered and turned his gaze to his sister, who stood further behind Jun and next to the caucasian siblings. He gave her a resounding command.

“Lilei. If the cat decides to turn on her chainsaws, crush the face of one of the foreigners.”

The girl nodded silently.

The siblings knew very well that Lihuang was talking about them. But—

“Charlotte? I think we’re in trouble.”

“Worry not, Sherlock Liverpool! Everything will be fine.”

“How?”

Charlotte didn’t seem cowed in the least. Sherlock did not share her optimism.

“There’s no way a girl this adorable could do something so horrifying! Remember—we don’t watch; we observe.”

Lilei's gaze moved slightly. She looked straight into Charlotte's eyes and mumbled, so quietly that only she could hear.

"...Adorable? I am adorable?"

"Hm? Yes," Charlotte said without missing a beat. Lilei averted her gaze with a blush.

Sherlock, who did not hear the exchange, sighed.

"I'm more horrified by the fact that you think you can reason with a gloomy girl holding a rusted lead pipe."

A second's silence later, Lilei spoke loudly enough that Sherlock could hear as well.

"Crush your face. It is decided."

"...Oh. Right..."

Turning her back to Sherlock, who reacted with exhaustion, Lilei moved away and began to draw something on the ground.

Charlotte watched her for a moment before clapping her hands together.

"Sherlock Liverpool...did you just provoke her on purpose? So that you would take on the brunt of her anger?"

"...No. What are you saying, Charlotte?"

"Then perhaps if I insult her, she won't smash in your face!"

"Seriously. What are you going on about?"

Ignoring Sherlock's question, Charlotte turned to Lilei.

"Umm...excuse me. I'd hate to say this, but I actually don't think you're ado-"

"I heard it. It is no meaning."

Lilei cut her off. Charlotte could not continue. She turned to Sherlock in a plea for help, but he stared in silent disbelief.

As Charlotte gaped, Lilei gave her a word of consolation.

"You are good person. Not breaking. Be quiet. Listen."

Meanwhile, tensions ran thick in the air between Lihuang and Jun.

"...It's not becoming of a Western District executive to be taking hostages."

"We simply show honor to those who deserve it."

"But what if I decided to abandon those people and attacked you anyway?"

"Fine by me. Although I suspect it will take a bit of effort."

Lihuang snapped his fingers. The men around him drew their weapons.

Five of the men were holding guns, and the rest Chinese swords. One of them was carrying a Chinese broadsword with a long handle. But he threw it high into the air—

And the spinning blade flew into Lihuang's hand like a falcon returning to its trainer.

"...I was expecting a submachine gun."

"If I wanted to kill you, I would have issued the men assault rifles. Like I said, I have no intention of killing you here."

"...That sword doesn't seem to agree with you."

"Ironic words coming from a woman armed with chainsaws."

It seemed as though there would be no end to their banter.

Most of Jun's awareness was focused on the siblings behind her. She didn't care if she was hurt or captured, but she could not let bystanders be dragged into the mess.

"...Are you certain about fighting the Eastern District?"

"Do not take us for barbarians. We also strive for the security of the island."

“What do you mean by that?”

“Let me make this clear. I suspect you and the Guard Team are behind the rash of deaths among the ranks of my brethren. The suspicion extends to Yakumo Amagiri as well,” Lihuang said plainly. But Jun seemed to have been expecting his answer.

“Why do you think that? The Eastern District has lost executives, too.”

“We’ve seen none of the bodies. Not only can you not prove the murders happened, your leader also seemed to be intent on recruiting Yakumo Amagiri to the Eastern District. So why would the Killer Ghoul murder your executives when they shouldn’t even be his enemies?”

Jun was silent.

“And let me tell you something not even that repugnant radio station knows. We lost an executive last night. One of our brethren. The death took place at almost exactly the same time as one of your people’s supposed deaths. Now...doesn’t that make Yakumo Amagiri a very busy man?”

Like a detective breaking a faulty alibi, Lihuang continued quietly.

“And last night, you came to visit the Western District. What have you been doing until now?”

“?!”

Jun froze. She had not expected that she herself would be under suspicion. It had never occurred to her that the Western District would be keeping such close tabs on her.

“Talk. What have you been doing all night since you entered the hotel?”

“...I...”

“Clearly, you’ll claim you were with the two foreigners. Which is why they are coming with us.”

Jun bit her lip.

Lihuang must know everything—that Jun hadn't taken a single step outside since coming to the hotel at night. That was why the Western District had acted now; because they found the perfect scapegoat.

Jun would not have minded so much if the Liverpool siblings had been left out of it.

The siblings in the distance probably heard Lihuang's voice as well. She apologized inwardly, imagining how terrified they must be. But her guilt was confused by a completely oblivious deduction.

"Aha! I finally understand!" Charlotte cried, clapping her hands.

And with an innocent voice that drained the world around them of hostility—

"From the evidence, I deduce that we are in trouble!"

"Please, Charlotte. You're making this worse," Sherlock groaned, shaking his head with a sigh.

"Is her head full of maggots? Or is she the type to stab her opponents in the eyes with a smile, like Mii from your Guard Team?"

"No, well..."

With a gentle grip on his sword Lihuang cast a glance at Charlotte and put on an icy grin.

"Hmph. No matter. Soon they will come to fear for their lives."

It was just as Lihuang had said.

But it came much sooner than he expected.

Only a few seconds after his words, a corner of the hotel shone brightly—



The violence in the Western District was being observed.

In fact, it was being observed by not one but two different parties.

One was Spring-heeled Joplin. The cameras hidden around the hotel were giving their independent network a live feed of the action.

The other was enjoying the situation.

'So it's about time.'

The men led by Lihuang were surrounding Jun Sahara, a key figure in the Eastern District.

Murder was close at hand, but he smiled an invisible smile. At the same time, a complaint rose to his thoughts.

'He's not here'

This was the best chance he had to torment the man.

'Then I just have to call him.'

'I'll give him a motive. I'll give you a motive you'll never be able to ignore.'

'Suffer and dance in grief. Wolves, pigs, they will all die.'

'And you'll rot in the midst of their corpses.'

'Souji Kuzuhara.'

The man decided to act, and fingered the device in his pocket—

And at that moment, part of the hotel went up in a column of flames with a deafening roar.



“What’s going on here?!”

“?!”

Lihuang and Jun reflexively broke off their standoff at the sudden noise.

At the same time, an intense shockwave passed by them all. It instantly turned to a wave of heat, making the incident known to all—whether they liked it or not.

An explosion.

The windows in the corner of the hotel shattered at once, and the shards ballooned outwards as they flew everywhere.

Flames red and yellow licked the air between the windows, and the wind that came with the heat pushed glass and shrapnel in all directions.

Covering his eyes from the debris, Lihuang howled furiously.

“How?! Why here?!”

The serial bombings had been happening too often over the past two months.

They took place in random locations at random times. No one would be surprised at where or when they struck.

At least, that was what those absent from this place might think.

The timing of the explosion was impeccable. It left a palpable imprint of the culprit’s malice in the area.

Not debris, not flames, but pure malice. It rose far into the air in a pillar of black smoke.

“Wh-what?!”

“Charlotte!”

The moment she spotted the flames, Charlotte was shoved to the ground by Sherlock.

The heatwave passed over their heads and tiny pieces of debris scattered over Sherlock’s back. Lilei batted away the larger debris with her lead pipe.

“...What is this. It explodes. You did not say. Elder Brother?” She said, her tone unchanged, as she glanced at Lihuang.

But when Lilei saw the look on his face, she realized that he had been caught completely unawares.

As she wondered what to do, Lihuang—who had come to his senses earlier—clicked his tongue and gave new orders.

“Damn it...are they planning to get in our way? ...Lilei! Take the foreigners to the Pits! Search them and make sure they are not carrying anything suspicious. We can’t be certain that they’re not the ones behind this explosion.”

“...Yes.”

Noting his sister’s answer, Lihuang directed the other men.

A man holding a gun and a man holding a sword walked over to the siblings.

“Stop! Keep your hands off my sister!” Sherlock roared, shooting the men a murderous glare as they came over to search them. The men tried to push him away, but Lihuang was the one to stop them.

“Hmph. Fine. You take the woman, Lilei.”

He chose to speed up the process rather than cause disruptions.

Lilei nodded, and with the lead pipe still in one hand, patted down Charlotte and searched her pockets. She had no bags on her, so her search should have been over quickly—save for one thing.

Lilei froze when she saw the photograph she found in Charlotte’s pocket.

“Oh. It is him.”

“Pardon?”

Charlotte’s gaze was instantly drawn to the photograph.

It was the picture of their current target. Takehito Isegawa, as he looked five years ago.

“It is him. He is sleeping. Sleeping on roof.”

“Wh-wh-where?! Where can I find—” Charlotte began, thrilled at the new lead. But she was interrupted.

“Go, Lilei.”

“Yes. Elder Brother. I am sorry. We talk later.”

The conversation came to an abrupt end and the Liverpool siblings were forced into a nearby car.

Deciding that there was no point to resisting, Sherlock boarded without a fuss. The car slowly made its way down the fire-lit road.

The moment the car departed, Lihuang and Jun both breathed sighs of relief.

“...?”

Herself aside, Jun wondered why Lihuang seemed to be relieved.

It was almost as though he had prioritized sending them away.

Noting her curiosity, Lihuang held his sword crooked and put on a wry grin.

“Hmph. It would be difficult to talk *him* down if there were civilians around. I would prefer if you made no fuss as well.”

‘*Who?*’

Jun’s confusion lasted but a moment, for the answer soon became clear.

She heard a strange noise.

It was a siren, like a police car, an ambulance, and a fire truck were combined into one. A noise that was nothing but annoying at this point.

Then, a van appeared out of the corner of her eye.

It was the most famous vehicle on the island, painted the same color as the sky. The moving studio of the pirate radio station, Sousei Airwaves.

She heard Lihuang click his tongue.

When he raised a hand, the men with guns immediately put away their weapons. But those with blades did not move.

When Jun realized the implications behind their actions, everything fell into place.

She knew who Lihuang was talking about—the identity of the person in that van.

The radio station made a wide, screeching turn and stopped right in front of Lihuang and the others.

The siren ceased, and at the same time emerged one of the island's most prominent celebrities. A man who was, in a way, much more famous than Lihuang or Jun and had the trust of the islanders to back up his fame.

With a tired look, the man scanned the area.

His eyes were on neither Lihuang nor Jun nor the flames that continued to burn.

But on the one who plunged the island into chaos, standing somewhere beyond the flames.

Or perhaps he was glaring at his old self, who had let the man get away.

All Souji Kuzuhara could do was whisper the name of his nemesis.

“Ginga...Kanashima...!”

I didn't notice a thing when all those things were happening with big bro.

I just listened to Nejiro's friends talking over what looked like cell phones and pieced things together.

"It's Kuzuhara."

"He came."

"He made it."

"What's happening?"

"What's happening?"

"An explosion."

"Another one."

"At the hotel."

"The three-story one in central district 3?"

"Yeah."

"I see."

"I'm the one who put the bomb there."

"Yeah."

"So?"

"Was it amazing?"

"Was it?"

"Not really."

"Right."

"Right."

I still can't get used to the way the Rats talk to each other. It almost sounds like they're one person, and it's very hard to join the conversation.

And how could they be so indifferent about setting up the bombs? Maybe I'm just not used to their voices and they're actually very scared. But I do not know the truth.

Before, I would have passed it off as a joke.

But things are different now.

Because now...I know.

That these kids were the ones who set up most of the bombs that exploded on the island.

I realized this only a few days ago.

After I showed Nejiro the picture two months ago, he began to act strangely. Or maybe the picture didn't have anything to do with it at all.

So...though I was focused on Nejiro all that time, I recently ended up seeing something.

I was wandering around an abandoned building in the Eastern District when I saw some of the kids who often hang out with Nejiro. They were putting something strange by an old vent. When I asked them what it was...

"What do you mean?"

"It's a bomb."

"A bomb."

"Oh."

"She caught us."

"She did."

"What do we do?"

"Do we kill her?"

"Kill her."

"Oh."

"What's wrong?"

"She's Nejiro's friend."

"Really?"

"Really."

"I see."

"Then maybe we shouldn't kill her."

"Yeah."

"Then let's bring her with us."

"Yeah. Let's ask Nejiro what to do."

"Yeah."

"Nejiro always knows what to do."

Right now, I'm with Nejiro.

He won't tell me any details.

"It has nothing to do with you, Yua. You could tell people about it, but then the person who made us do this might set off all the bombs at once. And... there's more bombs out there than the ones we set. Damn it...he doesn't trust us after all. I guess I should have expected that."

He sounded so very sad. But I couldn't forget that sound. So I was too scared to tell anyone. Scared that the moment I confessed, the bombs would explode all at once. That...that these kids would all die.

After that, I've been coming to see Nejiro all the time.

I think the kids have started acting this way because of the adult beside Nejiro, who's telling him things all the time.

I don't know who this person is. Nejiro won't tell me the details. But... something about this person scares me. It's like standing in a room with someone who's killed many people.

Once, when we were alone, Nejiro said this to me.

"...Yua. If you have any relatives on the mainland, I think it'd be best if you left the island."

I shook my head, then.

"I see...so you have loved ones here. Then you should run away with them if you can. I'm sure you have your reasons for staying until now, even after all the explosions. But still..."

I shook my head again.

There are so many people I love on this island.

The people at Iizuka's restaurant, big bro, and Kelly. I love them all so much.

But even if they all left the island...I think I would stay.

I nodded to myself and told Nejiro that I had to keep making maps.

"No matter how much I catch up, the paths keep changing in a matter of days. So...this island is alive. I love my friends, but I can't leave this place."

There was a shadow over his face when he looked away.

"This island isn't alive, Yua. It's been dead from the beginning. But it keeps on squirming. Just like us. You're willing to die for that?"

I nodded immediately.

I told him that, if I stopped making maps, I would feel like I would lose my reason to live—and deny my father's life, too.

Nejiro said, "your dad wouldn't want you to get hurt." But I replied, "I know. This is something I want to do. Whatever my dad says, I won't stop making maps. And he's already gone, you know? So he can't stop me".

"And you know..." I said, "the explosions are making new paths, too, so I need to record them."

Nejiro looked so sad.

"You've lost your mind, too.

"I thought you were still normal. I thought you wouldn't end up like us.

"Why? Why...? Why does this island have to drive someone like you crazy, too? I just don't get it..

"Damn it... This island is full of insects. It's sickening. It's completely lost its mind. Damn it...damn it!"

Nejiro slammed his hand against the wheel of his wheelchair with tears in his eyes, calling me crazy.

Maybe he's right.

I wasn't angry, and I wasn't surprised.

So I think maybe I am a little out of my mind.

I'm sure people would think I was very strange if they could see me now, talking to a cat with a speaker strapped to its back.

Tell me, Spring-heeled Joplin.

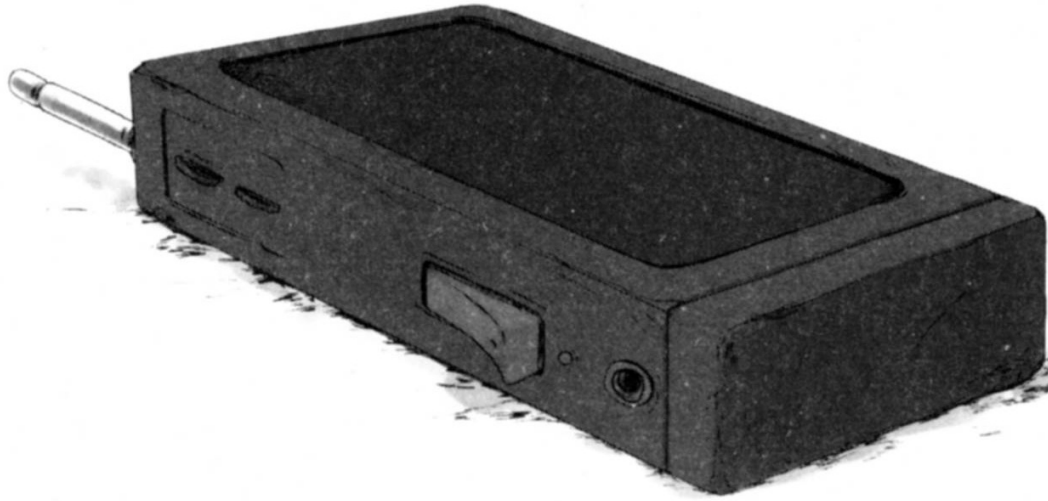
This island is alive. That's what I believe.

But if it is, is it out of its mind?

I just don't know.

So please. Please tell me, Spring-heeled Joplin.

Even if this island—we—are out of our minds...can we find happiness?



This is Spring-heeled Joplin.

Allow me to answer your question, Spring-heeled—oh, ahem. Excuse me. Not yet, I suppose.

Allow me to answer your question, Miss Yua Kirino, the one who walks the line between fairy tales and reality.

This island has indeed lost its mind.

But that is why it is allowed to exist.

After all, it was never supposed to exist to begin with.

I can't tell you if you have gone crazy or not. If you think you are, then the problem becomes what around you you consider to be normal.

If you wish for a standard of normalcy on the island, then you've never been out of your mind to begin with.

It's the same with happiness. It all depends on what you see as the standard.

I apologize for the cliched answer, but not even Spring-heeled Joplin is omnipotent.

Now, think it over once more.

If you choose to become Spring-heeled Joplin, we will welcome you.

...Probably.

間奏6

『ぶるぶる』



Interlude 6: Buruburu

Inside the van in front of the hotel.

There is a *youkai* known as the Buruburu.

It is supposedly an invisible creature that haunts people and makes them tremble. Some say the Buruburu is responsible for sudden chills.

When the nickname 'Buruburu Airwaves' first stuck, Kelly did not know about the Buruburu. When she first heard about it from someone, she had loudly laughed it off.

But now, as the DJ of Buruburu (Sousei) Airwaves, Kelly knew that the Buruburu was haunting her.

"Heh..."

She chuckled, but that was just a strong front.

Her body was trembling for no reason.

Actually, there must have been a reason. But she was simply unable to define it.

Was she afraid of what was happening in front of her eyes?

Was she thrilled at the prospect of a scoop?

Was she too tense?

Or was it an omen of something terrible to come?

The world beyond the windshield was filled with an indescribable air.

Standing at odds were Lihuang of the Western District and Jun Sahara of the Guard Team, surrounded by the Western District's men.

Though Kelly Yatsufusa knew she was trembling, she also knew she was enjoying the situation.

When the bombings first began, she had poured her efforts into getting to the scene faster than anyone to give live coverage of the situation. And the island established a workflow of search-and-rescue efforts based on her information.

Normally, she would have started the emergency broadcast earlier. But she had yet to grab the microphone.

And that was because she had no idea what could possibly happen now.



Recently, she dreamed more often about her childhood.

The one who had brought her into the light from her life as a product in the Pits was a man named Yatsufusa, who ran a pirate radio station.

But the cast in her dreams was different now.

Instead of Yatsufusa, leading her by the hand was a tall man. Silent as a stone, yet lovable all the same.

Each time she woke up to these dreams, Kelly Yatsufusa recalled her past.

'Back then, *I never even dreamed of dreaming.*'

Supposedly, dreams were the brain's way of processing information. Then was the information in her life the kind her brain refused to process? Or maybe she had simply forgotten that she had dreamed.

Kelly remembered the indescribable air that had filled the Pits then.

Dull and endlessly thick and murky. There was no victory or defeat, no distinction between murderer and murdered. The mere fact of one's presence in the Pits sealed one's status as defeated and dead.

It was simply the air of a place crowded with things that should not exist.

Though Kelly laughed about the recent explosions being scoops, unbeknownst to all she was disgusted with them.

She felt like the entire island was turning into what the Pits had been back then.

Once more, that dull and murky air filled her vision.

But unlike before, there was a ray of light in that darkness.

The man who had just stepped off the van had the power to chase away that air.

At least, that was what Kelly believed. And it was true.

Kelly dreamed while awake.

The man before her—Souji Kuzuhara—was the one who allowed her to dream.

Knowing that, she could behave as she did in her dreams.

Free from all restraints, completely liberated—



In front of the ruined hotel.

“What’s going on here, sir?”

The formalities were there, but the respect was not.

Kuzuhara understood all too easily the scene before his eyes.

A Western District executive and his men were surrounding someone from the Eastern District.

Whether or not Jun had done anything, the conclusion was simple.

“Are you trying to start a war with the Eastern District, sir?”

“War? *War*? Look here, Mr. Kuzuhara. Does such a grand term describe our scuffles with the Eastern District? Even ‘conflict’ is too good for this lot.” Lihuang chuckled, shaking his head. “I don’t know what idea you’ve gotten into your head, but we were simply trying to get some answers out of this woman. Scurry on over and do your rescue work now.”

“Then I’ll be asking you for help in this serious accident that’s hit your Western District. If you’re just asking some questions, the ones with the weapons should have nothing to do at this point.”

As Kuzuhara tossed aside even the formalities, Lihuang narrowed his eyes.

“Watch your tongue. There’s only one place for a dog that refuses to obey—the soup.”

“I don’t act on your organization’s behalf. And if you can’t accept that, prepare for some food poisoning.”

Kuzuhara was unintimidated by the many blades drawn before him. His eyes seemed to wander for a split second, however, betraying his worry that people were in need of rescue.

But the fire was on the first floor of the hotel. People almost never approached the area because it was used for storage. The fire had not yet spread to the residential areas above the third floor, and the sprinklers seemed to have kicked in and dampened the flames.

Though he internally thanked the hotel’s fireproof construction, Kuzuhara feared that someone might be trapped in the storage area—but his worries were blown away in a matter of seconds.

He saw several other members of the volunteer police force running over, having heard the explosion.

They stopped for a moment when they spotted the scene in front of the hotel—the face of a normally-reclusive executive and his men—but hesitantly stepped forward when they saw Kuzuhara.

"M-Mr. Kuzuhara, what's going on?"

"Never mind. See if anyone's injured and put out that fire."

"R-right."

Though intimidated by the gazes of Lihuang's men, the volunteer police hurried into the hotel. Because the explosions were ongoing, they had already equipped themselves with makeshift masks and fire extinguishing supplies.

Kuzuhara watched them depart, then took a step toward Lihuang.

"...If you can't give me a reason to cooperate, then I will carry out my duty as captain of the volunteer police force."

"Your duty?"

"I'm going to ask you to do three things. Cease hostilities. Put away your weapons. And calm down."

When Lihuang heard the mechanical listing, his smile disappeared as he shot Kuzuhara a glare.

Kuzuhara was one of the tallest men on the island, but Lihuang was more than a match in height.

Two of the West's leaders stared each other down from the same level, refusing to take a single step back.

Jun hesitated for a while, but perhaps she decided to trust Kuzuhara; with a determined look she put away her chainsaws. Then, she held up her open hands to show she was not going to put up a fight.

Kuzuhara cast her a glance, then went back to glaring at Lihuang.

"...Look. Your opponent's calmed down and put away her weapons. If you insist on making accusations now, you'll only lose face as an executive of the Western District."

"Obeying the orders of a dog would be the greater shame. We simply want to talk to the woman," Lihuang shot back, holding his broadsword crooked. Though he was relaxed, he did not for a moment underestimate Kuzuhara.

"Funny. It looks to me more like you're planning to scapegoat her. Blame her for all the murders of the executives."

"Even if that were true...what could you possibly do about it?" Lihuang said, trying to cement his superiority by expressing it in words.

Kuzuhara, however, denied that stance.

"I don't care about your backing or position. I just don't want anyone to get hurt for no reason on this island."

"What?"

In an instant, Lihuang's icy expression shifted into laughter.

"...Hah hah hah... Ahahahaha!"

"What's so funny?"

"Hah hah hah hah hah! But this is a *riot*! Men, laugh!"

Lihuang raised a hand, and the men around him joined in. Kuzuhara felt like he was the subject of a laugh track.

"?"

"Of course. I see. So you wish for a peaceful world where no one is hurt."

'What, is he going to say it's a stupid idea? I know that already. But he's laughing too hard for that.'

With a smirk, Lihuang answered Kuzuhara's question.

All too easily.

And all too brutally.

"Then let me ask you this, Souji Kuzuhara! Who is responsible for these explosions?"

Casting brief glances at the black smoke, Lihuang loudly slapped the lanyard of his sword against the ground.

"...!"

"Ginga Kanashima. A name you know well, I'm sure."

Instantly, Kuzuhara's vision went hazy. But not from any physical shock. He was so rattled that his nerves seemed to fool his brain into staggering.

Ginga Kanashima.

'An enemy I should never forget. A stray bullet. In the girl's head. I killed her.

'He took aim. I lost him. She was hiding. Revenge. My superior.

'Open fire. Aim for the arm. Justice. Lies. I was just scared.

'The girl's father used the same gun he used...

'The bastard might be the bomber here.

'I knew that. I...I knew that.'

"You can't deny it. This man has never once forgotten his goals—unable to forget, he continues to torment you to this day. I'm almost in awe of his determination. He caused the deaths of many executives this summer, as well. I would forgive you if you claimed ignorance. However..."

Lihuang paused then, taking a breath, and continued.

"...You cannot claim innocence. This is *your* fault."

Kuzuhara's vision shook again.

This time, something had hit him.

Lihuang had reversed his grip on his broadsword and jammed the hilt against Kuzuhara's jaw.

"Grk!"

The impact moved up his jaw, all the way to his brain, as the hilt of the blade hit his unguarded temple. If Lihuang had used the bladed edge, it would have been a fatal series of attacks. But even the blunted blows were enough to throw off Kuzuhara's thoughts.

Lihuang kicked the staggering Kuzuhara in the gut and spat,

"And because of these repulsive bombings, our organization takes the brunt of the islanders' censure. All thanks to the radio station here fanning their flames!"



Though her activities were disparaged, Kelly did not notice. Her eyes were locked solely on the staggering Kuzuhara.

"Souji...what are you doing?!"



"They look down on our organization, the rabble in the East, and even your volunteer police, accusing us of being powerless to capture the bomber. Hmph. Tough words, coming from insects who crawled to the island to live like leeches. How does it feel to be scorned by insects? If I had the freedom, I would turn each and every one of them inside-out and flay them alive before burning them."

Kuzuhara was on his knees on the ground now; Lihuang pressed his sword against the back of his head.

"And yet the people of the island call you a hero. Is that what charisma earns you? You've done a fine job earning so much trust in only a few short years. Snatching what we've worked at for over a decade from right under our noses. It seems you'll wag your tail at anyone you see, dog."

'It's people like you who earn the organization so much resentment,'
Kuzuhara might have shot back, if he were his usual self.

But now, he did absolutely nothing as he was beaten.

Lihuang was right. Kuzuhara had been agonizing over these things for a long time.

Kuzuhara would have preferred that people called him powerless, or blamed him for failing to protect them. He would have been at ease if they hated him.

The incidents on the island were his own fault; but he was the only one who blamed himself for it. Encouragements and words of thanks only pained him more.

He was trying to deceive the pain away, or trying to close his eyes. But when he realized how he truly felt, Kuzuhara felt a surge of self-loathing and allowed himself to be beaten, unable to retort.

And because he understood his own position, Lihuang's words broke him all the more.

That was enough for Lihuang to utterly destroy Kuzuhara.

At this point, Kuzuhara was more physically injured than emotionally; he could soon end up dying without even getting a chance to put up a fight.

"Stop this!"

The one who finally halted Lihuang was a loud female voice.

Jun, who had put away her weapons, raised her voice with a determined look.

"I'll go quietly. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Ah. So you listen to reason."

With a ruthless smirk, Lihuang took the broadsword away from Kuzuhara's neck.

"W-wait..."

Kuzuhara tried to stand, but his knees felt like jelly. Jun went up to him, feigning simple concern, and whispered.

"...Don't worry about me, Mr. Kuzuhara. The two detectives were taken to the Pits, so I'll free them and escape."

"What..."

Was Jun talking about the caucasian siblings who lived at the hotel, Kuzuhara wondered. He had never met them in person, so he did not know why the siblings had been taken.

What distressed him more was the fact that Jun was being taken into the Western District's custody. That was not all. One wrong move could spark all-out war between East and West, from which the residents of the island would not come out unscathed.

The bombings wouldn't be the only thing he was responsible for. The island itself could collapse because of his own mistakes. Kuzuhara felt his vision go hazy again at the realization.

"Hey..."

When he raised his head to speak, Jun was already boarding a car with the men in black.

The car was parked in the shadow of a ruined building. It seemed close enough for Kuzuhara to run to, yet so far that he would never reach it. His legs did not move. His body strained under the pressure of the damage he sustained, and his thoughts were anchored by a similar weight.

Lihuang called over two of his men and stared down at Kuzuhara.

"Finally on the ground as a dog should be. But know that I do not despise you. That is why I resorted to verbal debate to weaken you."

Lihuang was indeed looking down at, but not condescending toward, Kuzuhara.

"I have faith in your abilities. Continue to devote yourself to the work of the volunteer police."

With a faint smile, he finally added,

"For the Western District."

Turning his back to Kuzuhara, Lihuang gave brief orders to his two subordinates. One was holding a Chinese sword, and the other had a holstered handgun.

"I've shaken up his head and insides, but give him a little more just in case. Do *not* let your guard down," he spat coldly. But he never looked back.

In his head, Lihuang plotted out one move after the next, followed by another, followed by another, as though there was nothing in his way to begin with. And he smirked in satisfaction when he carried out his plans.

With the unshakable belief that everything was playing out in the palm of his hand.



The car carrying Lihuang and Jun drove past the van, eventually disappearing from sight.

Watching them depart through the rear-view mirror, Kelly clapped her hands with a gleeful laugh.

"Heehahahaha! There they go! Thanks for ignoring me, assholes! No, really! Makes me feel a hell of a lot better!"

But what she felt on the inside was the very opposite.

'Hey, Hey. This isn't right.'

Her gaze was locked on Kuzuhara, still kneeling, punching the ground angrily.

'That's not like you, Souji.'

She heard the exchange between Kuzuhara and Lihuang.

The parabolic microphone installed on the van conveyed to Kelly everything from Kuzuhara and Lihuang's conversation to the jeers of the Western District men around them.

'No. That's not you. That's not Kuzuhara.'

"Heehah... Heehahahahaha."

Expelling manic laughter alongside carbon dioxide, Kelly burned the image before her into her mind.

The two remaining men left fresh kick marks on Kuzuhara's face.

They were not two peons abusing the defeated. The men were trained killers, attacking to damage their opponent.

Something vibrant and red spilled from Kuzuhara's mouth.

"Heehahaha..."

The image reminded Kelly of something.

A memory of blood.

It was not an image from the Pits, where she was sold. And not from a bloodcurdling murder.

It was from the conversation she had with the man who bought her, just before he passed away.

"Ahh, my not-really-lovely pale assistant girl. Heehahahaha!"

"Mr. Yatsufusa, are you going to die?"

"Probably. C'mon, look a little sad or something. Heehahaha!"

"I don't understand."

"Me neither. Heehahahahahahaha!"

"What do I do first when you die, Mr. Yatsufusa?"

"Whoa, that 'first' made me really sad there. Take that out, and you mighta been able to make that sound pretty heartwarming. Heehahaha! Just let the

island know and start the party of your life. Don't follow the trends. Make 'em. You know, even this stuff is fun once you get into it. Heehahaha."

"Make trends?"

"Yeah. Your broadcasts are gonna move the island! I guarantee it's gonna be a blast. Heehaha! Hahah!"

"I don't understand. What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know. But maybe you should start by moving."

"Moving?"

"People who aren't moving usually start moving when the people right next to them are moving. Then the people next to *them* start moving, and then the people next to them... Except for the stubborn ones who're dead set on staying put. It's like water. You stir it, and it becomes a whirlpool, and you blow on it, and it becomes a wave. Y'know... Hee hah hah... Getting the first person to move, that's harder than hard. But there's a trick around that."

"I just have to start moving myself, right?"

"You're a quick one! Exactly! Moving people's hearts? That idea's prouder than prouder than proud. Once you get into the groove, people around you are gonna start moving. The faster and flashier, the better! And don't think about good or bad when you're moving! If you've got time to brood about that stuff, just run straight ahead! If the world calls you crazy or awful, ignore 'em and run! Even if the world cheers for you, keep running somewhere nobody's ever going to reach you! Doesn't matter if it's a legend or God or the devil. There's no higher high than the moment you escape all that argh now I want to run again heehahahahahaha... hah. Hah. Hah. Hrk!"

"Mr. Yatsufusa."

"Course, I can't even move now! Heehahahahahahahahaha...hah. Hah. Bah. Bleugh."

Laughing, Yatsufusa vomited massive amounts of blood.

And several hours later, the DJ passed away laughing.

When Kelly saw his image overlap with Kuzuhara in the distance, she found herself calming down.

“Heehahaha... Heehahaha... Is he just like him?”

Kelly knew something was wrong. She knew that Kuzuhara was plagued by nightmares, waking as he cried out Kanashima’s name.

But she had always kept herself out of it, saying it was Kuzuhara’s business.

“Can Kuzuhara not run anymore?”

‘Hey, hey. This isn’t right.’

She didn’t want to see him suffer.

‘That’s not like the now-me.’

Sad or happy, she was just glad to have Kuzuhara alive by her side.

‘No. That’s not me. That’s not me!’

Her laughter ceased as she revved the engine.

‘Things are different now.’

There was still a vestige of laughter on her face, but this time, it represented her emotions completely.

With an invincibly mad smile on her face, ready to take on the world—

‘I can change things this time!’

—Kelly hit the gas and barreled toward the enemies before her.



By the time they heard the engine bearing over them, it was too late.

The van had been modified in many ways to avoid the many thugs and delinquents on the island, but now it was moving at far beyond the speed of escape. Now it moved for the mission of plowing aside its enemies.

“Ah—”

The moment the man with the gun tried to kick Kuzuhara—

His friend with the sword flew into the air, hit by the blue van.

Like a cue ball struck with a powerful massé shot, he spun low in the air as he landed, rolling along the ground and hitting a nearby heap of junk.

“...Kelly?”

When Kuzuhara heard the engine and the impact, Kelly and her blue glasses rose to his mind.

He forced his head up to see, and spotted the man who had been about to kick him, pointing a gun at the van and opening fire.

He shot at Kelly’s van with a gun.

That was all Kuzuhara managed to process.

And it was enough to spur him to action.

Cracks spread instantly on the rear windshield, obscuring the interior.

The man with the gun made to fire even more shots, when he heard something stir behind him.

“?!”

Sensing danger, her turned. There stood a demon who had erased his own emotions.

‘Bastard...when’d he get up?’

Souji Kuzuhara loomed behind him. The man felt cold sweat on his back.

Kuzuhara was facing forward. Only his gaze was looking down at the man.

His eyes were heavy, sharp, and at the same time chilling to the bone.

His face framed in shadow, Kuzuhara spoke with a voice just as heavy, sharp, and chilling as his gaze.

“What did you do?”

‘W-was this guy always this big?’

Even he had heard of the fear in Souji Kuzuhara’s name. But Kuzuhara was ultimately just a volunteer police, the man had assumed. He took him too lightly.

“What...did you just do?”

So to escape the fear, he took aim at Kuzuhara.

He had the resolve to kill, the training, and even the experience.

Kuzuhara, standing before him, was so scared of killing that he never took up a gun—

His thoughts stopped there.

Kuzuhara did not use guns.

Fights on the island always escalated to mortal conflicts, where guns and knives were drawn to the surprise of none. Kuzuhara had, as a member of the volunteer police, intervened in such fights for years.

He had defied death countless times.

Without even a gun.

With the handicap of keeping all his opponents alive.

The Western District underling realized his own mistake.

If he had wanted to prioritize his own safety, he should have shot Kuzuhara, not the van.

A shot to the head, to kill him instantly.

The cause of the hapless man's realization was pain.

The gun he was holding had somehow ended up in Kuzuhara's hands, and the right hand that had been holding the gun was a throbbing mess of agony.

He saw something, in the instant before he screamed. His right hand being squeezed like a used rag—his fingers being twisted in macabre directions.

"Aah... GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

The moment the man's scream filled the world, Kuzuhara's massive hand covered his face.

The man was raised over two meters into the air. It felt like his spine would pop as his right hand continued to ache. And yet the man was set on destroying the demon before him, taking out a spare gun with his left hand —

—and was able to do nothing.

When he felt the centrifugal forces on his own body, he saw the sky between the fingers on his face—and that was the last thing the man saw before losing consciousness.

Kuzuhara had spun the man around in midair before slamming him to the ground faster than gravity could. But a second before impact, he let go to let the man fall on his back rather than his head. Perhaps Kuzuhara's instincts had held him back from potentially killing him.



Ba-dum.

'I hear it.'

Ba-dum.

'I hear Souji's heartbeats. I heard them, damn it.'

Ignoring the black lumps stuck in the bulletproof windshield, Kelly let her heart race at the scene beyond the cracks.

Not knowing that the heartbeats she heard were her own, drawn out by the man before her.



Kuzuhara breathed heavily as a familiar voice heaped expletives over him.

<Finally...took you long long long long long enough, fuckin' Kuzu!>

"Kelly!"

Without even catching his breath, Kuzuhara ran over.

"Are you okay?!"

The moment he reached for the driver's seat door, the back door opened automatically.

He hesitated, but leapt in through the back and approached Kelly in the front.

"...Kelly, you dumbass! What were you thinking?!"

Kelly was there, the same as ever.

"Heehahaha! Where's my thank-you, Kuzu?"

"I'll have time for that later! Lemme get the anger out of the way!"

Kuzuhara raised his voice without thinking, swelling with relief. But Kelly laughed off his exasperation and stepped on the gas.

"All right then, Souji. We're off!"

"What?!"

The door he had come in through quickly closed and the world around them began to move.

“What are you doing, Kelly?!”

Kelly ignored the question and kept driving.

“Now I’m a wanted woman, y’know! For knocking over a Western District lackey!”

“Right...I hope you haven’t killed him,” Kuzuhara said, burying his head in his hands. Kelly cackled.

“So—let’s—just—say—you got your ass in here to arrest the crazy hit-and-run bitch! But then she got you with sex appeal like BAM-BAM and knocked you out cold with a double-barrel bleeder! And before you knew it, she was dragging you away! How’s that for a good story? Heehahahaha!”

“Ha. Ha. Ha. Idiot.”

“Heehaha! We’re waltzing straight to the Pits, you got that?”

“...What the hell?!”

“We might catch up if we start now. You’re not gonna just plunk your ass down here and wait, right, Kuzu?”

Kelly was enjoying this. Kuzuhara shot back with unease.

“Hey, you’ve got nothing to do with this! I can cover for you hitting the guy, but anything else and—”

“How the hell’re you gonna pull off that shit? I’ve come this far; might as well go all the way! Heehahahaha!”

“But...”

The same shadow from before came over his eyes.

Kuzuhara was afraid to drag Kelly into his business.

But when Kelly looked at him she laughed nervously and said,

“Heehahaha! C’mon, Kuzu. Why so serious?”

Her tone was the same as ever; but there was something different about the way she spoke.

“Listen up, Kuzu. Even if the explosions are all your fault! Even if this is all just that asshole Kanashima’s rampage! And even if you leaving this place is gonna solve everything!”

She listed off the immovable facts.

But she finished off with one more.

“—Who gives a fuck? Even if people died because this jackass has a vendetta against you! And even if the whole damned island sinks! How much is that worth?!”

“...!”

“Is all that reason enough for you to run? Is that enough reason for you to back down?”

Silence fell over the car.

Unable to take the pause, Kelly’s own laughter broke the ambience of the engine.

“Heehaha...hee hah hah. Heehahahahahahahaha! Heehahahahahahahahaha! Damn, Kuzu! Don’t make me say embarrassing shit like that! Heehahahaha!”

Her laughter never ceasing, she changed the subject before Kuzuhara could react.

“Heehahaha! Reminds you of the good old days, right?! It’s just like running from Kugi last year!”

“...Yeah.”

“You were all fired up about catching the bastard, running off on your own into that crazy mess...”

“Nostalgic.”

'Oh shit. Did I make him mad?' Kelly wondered, inwardly sweating bullets.

But to her surprise, he continued the conversation.

"Come to think of it, you said something to me then. About how you didn't have a true self."

"...Did I? I forgot. Heehahahaha!"

"I know exactly one 'real you' in you."

"Heehahahaha! Where the hell'd that come from?!"

As Kelly howled in mad laughter—like the madwoman she was—Kuzuhara told her his honest feelings.

"You...you're an incredible woman. And that's a true self. A you unique to you."

"Hee..."

Silence again.

Kuzuhara looked away, regretting what he said, but he blurted out something to end the silence.

"Thanks for before."

"Hee hah hah... How're the injuries? You were practically dancing out there just now," Kelly replied as though nothing was wrong.

"...I was running off adrenaline then. I barely felt anything."

"Now?"

"...Don't worry about it."

He was obviously putting up a strong front.

Though Kuzuhara had been mentally shaken, Lihuang had managed to bring him to his knees nonetheless. He must have been quite badly injured.

"Souji."

“What.”

“Win.”

“...Against what?”

Kelly braked, hard.

“Whoa?!”

Kuzuhara staggered, catching himself just before he fell toward the driver’s seat. From the lack of sunlight around them, he could tell they were already on the road to the Pits.

“Hey, what the hell—”

“Shaddap!”

Kelly turned and grabbed Kuzuhara’s face as he came over to the driver’s seat.

And she blocked his lips with hers.



A third moment of silence.

Though it was a short few seconds, the silence made the moment seem slower.

Kelly slowly pulled away and grinned impishly.

"Hee hah hah... Heehahahahaha! Heehahahahaha! How's that, Souji? Excited now? Feeling better? Heehahahahaha!"

There was no sensuality in the kiss and Kuzuhara was left in a daze, but he soon recovered and shook his head with a sigh.

"Look. Just...try to read the situation next time."

"Heehahaha! I had this one in the cards since a thousand moves ago!"

"Hey. We're talking life or death here—"

"Don't die," Kelly cut him off. "You! Are my dream! My waking dream!"

Giving him no time to respond, she hit the gas pedal again. This time, Kuzuhara staggered backwards.

"So...so hurry up and turn out the way I want you to! We're *not* talking life or death, damn it! The Kuzu I know would never add in the death option to begin with! Heehahahahaha!"

"...Sorry." Sitting up, Kuzuhara spoke directly to the back of Kelly's head. "I almost broke last year's promise."

"Hm? What was it again? ...Oh. Something about no matter what bad things happen in the future...something something. Who cares? You know, I just don't want to have a nightmare about you dying! Heehahahahaha!"

Kuzuhara put on a gentle smile.

"I don't know if I can give you any sweet dreams. But I can say one thing. And this might not be the best time or place, but don't tell anyone."

He had no idea what might be waiting for him in the Pits.

War could break out between the districts, or Ginga Kanashima might make his move.

Thick in the stench of death, Kuzuhara raised the corners of his mouth and spoke, answering Kelly.

“Today...I don’t think I’ll lose to anyone.”

Flexing his fingers in his bulletproof gloves, Kuzuhara let his gaze grow sharp.

“From now on...I’ll be true to myself.”



Kelly had no self. She herself knew that better than anyone.

Even the name ‘Kelly Yatsufusa’ was a pseudonym she used for convenience’s sake.

Her words, looks, expressions, and ideology were all imitations of other people, and she subtly cycled through them depending on the time and place. All her actions were lies, yet at the same time they were part of who she was.

Kelly always mimicked the characters of others. Her usual vulgar tone, the flashes of sensuality, and the mechanical face she reserved for interviews.

But that was only until last year.

The man named Souji Kuzuhara.

Their link began when they exchanged phone numbers, and completely changed her life.

The Kelly who loved Souji Kuzuhara was always a real self.

Believing that fact, Kelly continued to drive today.

In the direction her desires led.

She drove and drove.

So that no one could catch up to them.

Dreaming of a certain man always at her side—



六 章

Chapter 6-A: The Wolf is at the Gate

A suite on a certain floor in the Grand Ibis Hotel.

Launching myself into the air, I rush into the wide-open room.

I supposed I could charge forward and try for an instant kill. But I'm afraid to leap out into the hallway. It would be awful if the hallway was swarming with men carrying machine guns. The best thing to do is stay here and hope for a bottleneck.

They rush inside, but just as I expect, only a small number comes. They presumably don't open fire on me as I leap because they confuse me with Yili, who's also in white.

But that confusion is quickly rectified and I am soon surrounded.

Six men armed with guns. No other weapons.

I always thought the Western District was more suited to blades than firearms. I feel betrayed. It's absurd to feel betrayal at a belief that had no real basis to begin with, but I wish they'd try to match the atmosphere, at least.

I'd heard some of them used half-sized daggers or Chinese broadswords, but no such weapons are here. And I suppose there's no one who walks about with a lead pipe like that girl I see on the rooftop.

My complaints are crushed by the men in black, who rush inside with guns at the ready. Alas. This is reality.

Four surround me in a semicircle, and the other two go to a corner of the room—probably to protect Yili and Kugi. Although I don't think Kugi needs a bodyguard.

I sense more people outside. Just how many did she call here?

That's when Yili stops my train of thought.

"...Where is everyone?"

She moves into my line of sight. Her eyes are as icy as ever.

Does she mean she called for even more people? What would she do with so many men? They'll probably end up punching each other before they hit me. It's the Guard Team that's good at teamwork. Although there's no real point to using logical thought with these people.

"I told you to gather as many people as you could," Yili says. One of the men whispers into her ear. Nope. I can't hear him.

But what she says afterwards is enough.

"Elder Brother Lihuang? Are you sure?"

So to confirm my suspicions, I spontaneously decide to ask Yili.

Spontaneous. That's a good way of putting things. It means my question's a natural one. So I'll follow this path of spontaneity and go about things in whatever order comes most naturally to me. Even if it doesn't turn out to be the path of least resistance.

"Oh. So you lost half your team to your brother?"

I only realize how condescending I sound after the fact. I take back what I said. There's a time and place even for spontaneity.

She frowns for a moment, but Yili quickly returns to her icy self.

And she stares at me with her unreadable eyes.

"You're right. 'Lost' isn't the right word. But...if nothing else, I can't afford to listen to you anymore."

"...Could you afford to listen to me to begin with?"

"No."

Blunt. That hurts.

But what's going on here? To be honest, I'm actually a little relieved.

If they came in with guns blazing, it would have simply been a matter of killing or being killed. Unlike in the Eastern District, these people wouldn't put out a capture-on-sight order for me. And unlike in the streets, the hotel's no place for a chase. If only I could knock people out with a blow to the neck, like in those old manga. I think it might be possible with training, but unfortunately I never received any.

I can't afford to worry about other people's lives in an all-out brawl. Then I'd end up looking to the sky again to figure out the reasons I killed people.

Although it's all the same if they charge in to kill me afterwards.

Yili leaves the room with no concern for my anguish. I wonder if she considered that I might take her hostage as she passed by, but I correct my thoughts when I see Kugi pointing his gun at me from a distance. Aha. I see. So this princess has unwavering faith in her prince in shining armor.

"I see. So you have unwavering faith in your prince in shining armor."

"..."

She ignores me. Even though I went to the trouble of changing the knight into a prince.

If these people were the Guard Team, they would have turned red and lunged. But I guess things are different between the districts. No. Actually, the Guard Team is filled to the brim with crazies.

After making sure that Yili passes by me safely, Kugi follows her. Although there are men in black holding me at gunpoint between us, he is obviously being cautious.

Upon an unnecessary re-examination, I realize that this man really is Seiichi Kugi. The shadow over his face is a world apart from what I'd seen in the past, though. Something must have happened. There couldn't have been *nothing*. I don't know what, but the fact that he's on the island means that there was something in his past.

"Hey."

Spontaneously, I ask him,

"Do you think you're normal?"

The men in black tens every time I say something, but they never tell me to shut up. Maybe they know that each response left them open to an attack. Or maybe they don't do anything useless unless Yili gives the order.

"If I could—"

To my surprise, he opens his mouth.

What's he going to say? No. Wait. What am I expecting from him?

And why did I ask him in the first place? I'm busy enough as it is trying to demand normalcy of myself. So now am I extending that to other people?

Oh well. For now, I'll wait and hear him out.

"Seiichi."

But Yili's voice cuts off the response.

They must be desperate at this point. If not, Yili wouldn't have just left me in the hands of her subordinates and departed.

Kugi quickly walks outside, continuing his answer as he passes by me. Not for my sake, but under his breath as if to himself and no one else.

"—I would choose to lose my mind."

I don't answer. I wonder for a moment why I didn't.

But I never find an answer, and decide that I'm not good enough of a person to respond to a man who was talking to himself.

"Restrain him. You have permission to kill if he resists," Yili says from the hallway as though daring me to respond. She gives them permission, she says. I'm a little envious that she has the power to decide whether someone lives or dies.

...Hm? Am I the same, in a sense? I don't ever remember making the decision, but I think it might be similar to when I killed people whom I sensed were going to kill me, or when I killed people because I didn't want to die.

Then I'm an awful person. A significantly awful one. How could I criticize her without even realizing the hypocrisy that I'm guilty of the same thing? But serendipitously enough, I managed to realize that. What a relief. I guess I can still call myself normal.

Oh. A new question rises to mind.

"I want to ask you something."

"Hands in the air," says one of the black suits, tense.

I put my hands in the air and plainly ask the man,

"What does 'serendipitous' mean, anyway? I used the word without thinking, but what's the actual definition?"

The men exchange glances and close in.

They must want to knock me out cold and take me in on the spot. But they're not telling me to put my hands on the back of my head. Maybe because they're not police? Or maybe they're used to killing, but not making arrests.

With both hands in the air, and without showing an ounce of hostility, I ask another question.

"About your feet."

"?"

"What if your feet were broken?"

Their quizzical glances fall on me. Which is natural. But that doesn't mean I should stop talking.

"What if I popped open your Achilles tendons and you couldn't move anymore and lost your will to fight? Would you fear me?"

"Wha...?"

"If that doesn't work, I'll crush one eyeball. One per person. And if you watch me blandly as I juggle the eyes, would you fall to your knees in terror? So you'll never cross me again?"

"What...what the hell are you going on about?"

The light in the room shines in slick patches off the man's face. He is breaking into sweat.

"I was just thinking I should stop killing people. But it occurred to me that I've got too much of a cowardly streak to do that."

"A...cowardly streak?"

"I'm scared. Afraid. I've managed to kill my enemies by sheer luck so far, but never for a second did I think I was strong. I'm the Killer Ghoul, but I'm normal at heart. So being held at gunpoint like this terrifies me. So if I don't want to die, I think I should kill you. I don't have the option of apologizing. Your boss Yili flushed that down the drain. She erased the possibility of solving this dilemma with words. So since I'm here, I thought about how I could disarm you without killing you and make sure at the same time that you don't stab me in the back someday...but I couldn't think of anything specific."

I worried that they might shoot me while I was talking, but that turns out to be an unfounded concern. They're...they're all covered in cold sweat, rooted to the spot, and staring at me. Am I really that terrifying? I was sure they'd cut me off and charge, saying 'hah! What a bunch of crap!'

...Oh.

"If that doesn't work, I'll cut up your tongues. I'll keep them connected to your esophaguses before I cut them to bits to see if the individual slices still move."

I get it.

"So if you're still going to threaten me...I'll just worry about the consequences later."

These guys...they're scared.

They're scared of me...no. Of the mask I'm wearing; the mask of Yakumo Amagiri.

To think my name would bring such fear. I guess that was what I was originally trying to do. That was my goal when I stood at their boss's bedside two months ago. To show that I am no legend, but a living, breathing existence. That I was an existing source of fear.

But the men do not lower their guns.

Is this what people mean when they say they can break the bounds of fear? No. I don't think that's it.

Wait. Wait. This isn't the time for that. The most important thing is that I can't let myself get caught here.

"All right. If you're not going to answer, I'll just try it all one after the next."

They seem quite rattled to hear me say so so nonchalantly.

Don't move, they say, as they slowly pull the trigger.

Slowly. That's right. Slowly.

As I scrutinize the movements of the guns and the men's gazes, I slowly shift to move out of the line of fire.

Slowly. Slowly.

The slow-motion world before me is both mundane and extraordinary.

I was always lonely in this world.

Until I saw that smile that day.



Two months ago, I asked Miss Nazuna, 'do you think I'm abnormal?', and despaired at her reply.

...I must have loved her so much to feel that way.

Even if I was out of sync with the world, I didn't want to be out of sync with her.

"What, you didn't already know?"

Her answer pierced like a spear through something in my head.

I was utterly broken. Something must have happened to me then.

What ran through my mind?

I'm such an idiot.

That's why I tried to stop me.

I just had to acknowledge myself in my own heart.

I could have lost myself in the fantasy that maybe *she* would understand.

I know already. I know that any normal person would have answered that way.

I kept telling myself that I was normal because I knew. Even knowing the fact that I was the only one I could convince that way.

But I started to dream.

That maybe she would be different.

That maybe someone who was completely immersed in this island's air—someone like her, so calm in the face of death—might understand.

And my dream was shattered to bits.

And in only a minute since I truly fell in love with her.

I guess this is what it feels like when a man confesses to someone he's never met before and gets rejected.

So...maybe we're from different worlds after all.

Am I different from this world itself? Is that why I can see this world's time differently?

No...

If we're from different worlds...

If our souls can never truly come together...

If she can't be mine...

Then I'd rather—

Once more, I focus.

The world contorts around me as I take one step after another towards Miss Nazuna, whose back is turned.

I love her so much. So I...I...I...

The moment I think to reach forward, she turns to me.

There is a smile on her face.

It is a beautiful smile. It...really is.

A very pure smile.

"But" She's trying to say something, I think. What now? One more blow while I'm still down?

"you" Please, that's enough. Don't— ...?

"know" `But' what?

"I"

"don't"

The smile that emerges in my world speaks to me.

Boldly, without hesitation.

"But you know, I don't dislike how abnormal you are."

"Ah..."

Time rushes back at normal speed around me.

Doesn't dislike. What does that mean? Is she trying to be nice? Is she cheering me up? Then she could have just lied to begin with and said I was normal. Is this a plot? Is she trying to play hard-to-get? I don't think she's the type. So why?

My thoughts fall to pieces in my confusion, and I can only barely manage to continue speaking. It is such an incomplete and unsightly excuse for a sentence.

"I...why...but...if I'm...not...abnormal...why."

"Hm? Why? I just don't care if someone's interests are normal or not," she replies plainly. I become even more confused. One of the reasons is that I never dared to think I'd hear something like this.

The other reason is that I looked back into my thoughts and felt sick at the horror lurking inside.

What...was I about to do?

What...what was I about to do to Miss Nazuna?

What I was about to do. That was clearly abnormal. It had nothing to do with the mask of Yakumo Amagiri. I had really, truly, lost my mind. Not carrying out the thought doesn't make it okay. The moment the thought occurred to me, I was already insane.

And running a whisk through my already-unsteady heart, Miss Nazuna puts on a self-deprecating smile. Wow. She looks pretty even with a smile like that...

"Then again, I'm not really normal, either. I might actually be more abnormal than you are."

"...What do you mean?"

She shrugs and laughs, "I've already killed so many people with this sword you brought back to me."

It is a shocking confession, in a sense. I can't believe it. But I quickly change my mind. Miss Nazuna would never tell confusing lies.

But to be honest, she doesn't look like the type to kill people.

There is plenty of insanity to go around in the Guard Team, but they don't seem to be a band of killing machines like the Western District's men. And even among the Guard Team's ranks, Miss Nazuna is sensible, courteous, brave, and only kills people because she doesn't want to die... nothing like

me, the man who loses himself in the heat of the moment, almost committing murder.

"...So...it was all in self-defense, right?" I finally say after some thought, but she shakes her head. "Then did you have a grudge against someone?"

Maybe she was after revenge. Maybe she lost her family to guerrillas and decided to wipe them out to avenge her loved ones...yeah. That's not too far-fetched on this island.

But she shakes her head again.

"I've never killed people because of my emotions. If I had to be frank, it's all work."

"Work?"

"I killed people according to orders. I've almost never did it for the Guard Team, but I took other jobs too. You know, our team kind of mellowed out under our leader, but most of us have bloodstained pasts."

...That isn't a big shock. Working for something like the Guard Team on this island generally guarantees that you have skeletons in your closet. Jun, the captain, is all the more unnatural in that midst.

I say nothing. Miss Nazuna continues as though to herself.

"It's strange to kill people in the heat of the moment, but in a way, that's normal. Like you were just now. You ended up saving me anyhow, so thank you."

For a second, I see Miss Nazuna's expression falter. A hint of loneliness; a hint of resignation veils her face.

"So...maybe I'm the crazy one, killing people without needing to get carried away by the heat of the moment."

"No, that's not true!"

Before I know it, I am raising my voice.

"Just now...I...I tried to kill you."

“What?”

Not again.

I did it again. This time, my internal voice didn't even get to stop me.

A horde of monsters called 'regrets' instantly surge from the bottom of my heart and crash over me, but my mouth doesn't stop. If regrets and embarrassment are enough to suppress everything, I wouldn't have felt the urge to kill her earlier.

In the end, pushed by something I don't understand—the heat of the moment, the atmosphere, or something—I squeeze the air out of my lungs and tell her everything. I reveal the twisted emotions I harbored just earlier.

I try to prepare myself to see her draw, prepare for her to spit on me... but before I could finish, I am done telling her everything.

Miss Nazuna listens to what I have to say, standing there. By the time I am done, she looks incredulous.

“Why are you telling me all of this? I think you might have been better off not saying that.”

I think so too. Oh no. It's over.

But this time, I don't jump to thoughts about Miss Nazuna and the universe or anything like that. You reap what you sow. I earned this rejection.

Yet to my surprise, she sighs and looks me in the eye.

“But, well...you may be abnormal, but from my perspective...you're not bad. I never thought someone would confess to me like this.”

What? Confess?

Oh no.

Come to think of it, while I was explaining my impulse to kill her and the universe, I think I also ended up explaining all the emotions related to that without even thinking. Talk about a dry love confession. And it was coupled

with a confession of attempted murder, too. I'm the most disgusting sicko in the world.

No. That's not it. I'm normal. It's just that the mask of Yakumo Amagiri has gone thin right now.

Yes. I'm normal.

People can go mad over jealousy and love.

Anyone can.

But they suppress it all with the mask of logic.

On this island, I wear the mask of Yakumo Amagiri. I look at the world through this mask, separate from logic.

So am I really normal, now that I've expressed everything but logical thought?

I wallow in embarrassment over my twisted confession, when Miss Nazuna begins to walk away. When she turns, she smiles faintly in my direction. There is no veil over her face then. And...yes. She is beautiful.

"I'm glad to see that even you have a human side. I'll be going now, then."

"...I'm sorry. Next time, when I'm calm...I'll confess again."

"We can take our time. I mean, I have my own circumstances so I can't give you an answer yet. If I hadn't smiled earlier, you could have killed me."

"...I don't know what to say."

With a light wave, Miss Nazuna walks towards the Eastern District. Did she truly believe me when I confessed my impulse to kill her? Maybe she's taking it as a half-joke; but even if she believes me completely, I don't think she'd act any differently.

That's right. I...I still don't know much about Miss Nazuna. Because we've been enemies all this time.

I pluck out the words 'you're not bad' and 'I don't dislike you' from our conversation and play them back in my head over and over again.

At the same time, I recall the veil of shadow that had fallen across her face.

"So...maybe I'm the crazy one, killing people without needing to get carried away by the heat of the moment."

At this point, I'm not so much bothered by the fact that she killed people than the question of what is different about us.

People who kill for logical reasons, fully intending to murder.

People who let their emotions take over, winding up taking lives.

Which one is truly insane?

And am I really normal for constantly debating this?

Of course I am.

I want to be acknowledged. Not by myself.

By even just one other person.

Someone. I want someone to acknowledge me.

Before I know it, I am lying on the usual rooftop.

Watching the clouds flowing past, I lose myself in the aftertaste of the recent past and close my eyes to dream.

And I do have a dream.

I see the same scene as earlier, when I walked up to her without a sound and she smiled at me.

But in my dream, Miss Nazuna doesn't look back, and my hand touches her neck.

And I follow my instincts—

I open my eyes.

Before I could see the alternate conclusion, I awake and quickly hold my hands up to my face. They are damp with sweat, and I am sickened to find that I feel the barest hint of her neck on my fingertips.

Someone please answer me.

Am I...am I normal?

What...did I just do?

Was I...normal?

Someone...

Someone, please...

Several days later, I heard over the island's radio broadcast that Miss Nazuna was in critical condition.



Present time. A suite on a certain floor in the Grand Ibis Hotel.

That's it. That's when I became hesitant to kill.

And as if in exchange, someone began to murder the executives of the Western and Eastern Districts.

I came here to prove that I was not the killer, but a part of me is still haunted by something.

Maybe the conversation I had with Miss Nazuna was the dream, and her neck on my fingertips was the reality.

Maybe the mask of Yakumo Amagiri had finally become an independent personality and left my control. Then...maybe I was really behind the serial murders after all.

"Won't you answer me? Am I normal...? Or not...?" I mutter under my breath as I stand amidst the men groaning in pain on the floor. I know they are in no state to respond, and I can't imagine any of their answers would help, anyway.

Including the ones that came in from the hallway, there are ten in total. It ended so much more easily compared to my fights with the Guard Team, since these people were easy to read. But I didn't kill them. I broke their limbs or dislocated their joints—not a single person spared—but they are all still alive.

But a couple of them ended up shooting each other. They are bleeding from their arm and leg respectively, but still have pulses.

I reluctantly stop their bleeding and rummage through the pockets of one of the conscious ones and put his cell phone in his hand.

"Call your friends or something and ask for help. I have to go now."

I don't have a lot of medical know-how, so I just wrap up their wounds with cloth.

I could have just left them, but I actually managed to keep them all alive this time. So it would leave a bad taste in my mouth if they died anyway.

"Miss Nazuna..."

I collect all their guns, fill the bathtub with water, and throw them inside. ... Huh? Wait, can't you fire from a submerged gun, too? I don't know much about guns. But I guess I don't have to worry about them chasing me down to shoot me, since I broke all their knees.

I consider taking one gun for myself, but stop. I've snatched away guns from enemies to use against them before, and I've used them to kill people who

attacked me. But I just don't know about guns. I'm always scared that they might explode and kill me, or that a stray bullet would hit an innocent—like Miss Nazuna. So I never went out of my way to have one—and I probably never will.

“Miss Nazuna...”

I whisper her name once more as I step out of the suite.

If the dream and reality I remember really have been switched, and I really am the one who hurt her..

If she regains consciousness and points her sword at me...it's only right that I'm cut down.

It doesn't matter what the truth is.

I...just want her to get well soon.

But I continue to search for the real culprit, desperately clinging to the hope that the reality I remember is real.

I will personally destroy the one who tried to kill her.

Even if it happens to be me.

Then the mask of Yakumo Amagiri can kill the 'me' under this mask.

Although maybe it's the other way around.

Chapter 6-B: Charlotte Liverpool Without a Clue

The Pits. The engine room.

It was too vast a space to be called a room...and filled with too strange an air.

An engine too big for even a gymnasium hummed and roared as it shook the world.

The island was floating above the water, with no foundation on the sea floor.

Built on theories from 20 years ago, the artificial island was designed to always maintain a regular distance and angle from and with the bridge.

This monstrous engine was a part of that mechanism.

It was symbolically the heart of the island, but its dangerous nature and eerie presence kept even the locals away.

There were catwalks in the massive underground space from where the elegant monster of an engine came into view. The metal walkways hugged the inner walls for the chamber. The machinery would not be out of place at a steel manufacturing plant, but at the bottom of the chamber was not a furnace, but a warm engine.

"Ohh...p-please, stop...this is embarrassing..."

From a part of the engine room came a tickled female voice.

Her blue eyes watering, Charlotte twitched.

At the center of the massive engine room in the Pits was a chain-link platform stretched out directly over the engine. It was, from a three-dimensional perspective, the very center of the room.

Walkways and staircases crisscrossed the space—from scaffolding that should have been taken down after construction to paths that had clearly been only recently installed. Stairs were installed at points along walkways that diverged vertically, so it was not difficult to move across them.

Charlotte was on one of the sturdiest of the surfaces in the room. About the only platform wider and more solid than this would be the one near the top, installed to support work vehicles. From the state of the maintenance, Charlotte was located on a platform that would have been used to view the engine from above after construction.

"Eek?! N-not there!"

But now, Charlotte had turned into the object of attention as she squealed from the viewing point.

"Blue eyes. It is like me. It is like Elder Sister."

Delving across Charlotte's body were the skinny arms of a girl holding a lead pipe.

"Yellow hair. It is like Mom. It is adorable. ...Hug."

Charlotte squirmed at the unfamiliar sensation of arms around her waist. And when Lilei's surprisingly large bust made contact with her, Charlotte was beset by embarrassment.

"Eek! Th-that tickles! It's embarrassing! Uh, if you see your mother in me, I deduce that it makes little sense for you to describe me as adorable!"

Reaching her limits, Charlotte tried desperately to shake off the clingy Lilei.

"Younger brother is not adorable. You are adorable. Difference is adorable. Hug."

It would have been adorable indeed if the girl announcing her hugs out loud were as cute as a doll, but it sounded nothing short of outlandish to hear it from a gloomy girl who wielded a lead pipe.

There wasn't an ounce of sensuality in the scene. Sherlock, having been labeled 'not adorable', shook his head with a heavy sigh.

"...I don't even know what to say anymore."



All around him was an unpolished world of metal. In the center were two struggling girls and two men watching expressionlessly. One man was armed with a handgun, and the other with a Chinese sword. They, along with the girl, seemed to distort the air around them.

After being transported to the center of the Pits by van, the siblings had been brought to the engine room on foot. Because no one had overseen the Pits in the past, the engine room had been neglected for a long time. But after a certain incident one year prior, the Pits had fallen under the control of the Western District.

Half a year after that, after a battle in the engine room involving a member of the Guard Team, the room was sealed completely by the Western District.

And now, the engine room was a perfect stage of sorts for the Western District to use.

"P-p-p-p-please stop it. I-I saw someone hugging the R-Rats in the back alleys but I suppose it was you all along. Now that I think about it, I've seen those flowers in your hair be- oh."

As Charlotte struggled, a photograph fell out of her coat pocket. Lilei spotted it and finally let go, picking up the photo instead.

"...It is him. It is certain."

"Oh, right! Yes! About what you were saying earlier," Charlotte said, finally free and ready to capitalize on the opportunity. "We're searching for this young man! Please tell us where you saw him!"

"It is rooftop. Beside first explosion building. It is lower. The roof is lower. He is there. Always naps."

Though Lilei's words were fragmented, Charlotte was fired up at her first real clue in a long time.

"This is our chance, Sherlock Liverpool! We're finally nearing the truth behind this photograph! Let's hurry to that building!"

"Please observe your surroundings, Charlotte. And check your head to see if your brain is still there, too. I'm begging you."

Charlotte's eyes welled with tears. Lilei clung to her and began patting her head again.

"Eek?! P-please! Hee hee hee! That tickles! Hm?! Please, I'm not a child, and I-I deduce that you're actually younger than I—"

"Does age really matter, Charlotte? You're looking more like a small animal at this point anyway," Sherlock said, defeated, and hung his head.

But everything seemed to freeze when a new set of footsteps entered the engine room.

"...What are you doing, Lilei?"

A grave voice resounded through the room. Lilei let go of Charlotte with a bored mumble.

"Elder Brother. It is late."

"Hmph. Ran into some trouble with a dog," Lihuang said with a wry grin.

Behind him stood a girl surrounded by men in black clothing.

"Oh, Jun!"

"Charlotte! Sherlock!"

Though happy to be reunited with the siblings, Jun could not bring herself to fully smile. They were not out of the woods yet. The long, thin cases she usually had slung over her shoulders had been taken away, now in the hands of one of the men in black.

"I commend you for getting this far—"

"...What are you going to do to us?" Jun asked.

Lihuang cracked his neck and turned, not to Jun, but the Liverpool siblings. A cruel smile rose to his lips.

"Our pitiful kitten will have to become the culprit, and you two foreigners will be the witnesses—as the accomplices who hid the killer from justice. I'll use

that disgusting radio broadcast if necessary to bring shame and dishonor upon you," he said plainly.

Charlotte obliviously met his gaze. But Sherlock seemed to understand what Lihuang meant.

"In exchange?"

"Should you refuse, you will watch your sister die a painful death before you yourself suffer the same fate. ...You'll have to take the brunt of the work, judging from the woman's lack of intelligence."

"..."

"Now... it's time for the culprit to leave the stage."

Lihuang turned his back to the silent Sherlock and faced Jun. Before anyone realized, he was holding a Chinese broadsword, glinting ominously in the light.

"Ugh..."

Jun ground her teeth, but her ears continued to pick up the rhythm of the massive engine.

'It's all or nothing now...'

Her eyes showed no sign of defeat yet; they were busy scrutinizing Lihuang and the men, capturing the sounds of their breaths.

"Not to worry, pitiful kitten. Your fellow ruffians will soon join—"

"Oh! Please, wait a moment."

"?!" "?!"

Lihuang and Jun were both flung out of the tense moment.

Lihuang's parting remarks had been cut off by an utterly oblivious voice. The voice was crisp and clear in spite of the massive engine, lightly ringing every ear in the room.

The voice had come from—

“Charlotte?!”

—the one person furthest removed from the situation. Sherlock raised his voice without even thinking.

But Charlotte ignored his concern and took on the stance of a fictional detective.

“Heh heh heh...I’m afraid there’s a massive hole in your theory!”

“What...?”

‘What does that mean? Is she speaking in metaphors?’

His curiosity roused, Lihuang found himself allowing Charlotte to continue.

But in spite of the re-mounting tension, the self-proclaimed ace detective’s conclusion was—

“Last night, when the Western District executives were murdered, Jun Sahara was asleep in my room! Ergo, she has a watertight alibi for the time and could not possibly be the culprit!”

Everyone went silent.

After a pause, Lilei dragged her pipe against the ground and mumbled,

“It is natural. ...It is adorable.”

Lihuang continued where his sister left off, slapping the lanyard of his sword against the floor.

“Damn you, woman! Enough taking the wind out of the sails! Have you left your head in the clouds? ...Never mind. I am done with you. It’s your brother I need.”

Lihuang needed the right atmosphere if he wanted to kill someone.

The atmosphere—the heat of the moment—was always there on a battlefield. But it was difficult to reproduce anywhere else. Lihuang was

capable of killing even in a thin concentration of that air, but the atmosphere he had so painstakingly built up to kill Jun was returned to naught by the completely unrelated woman, and by his own younger sister.

He could perhaps use that frustration to build up the atmosphere again. But just looking at the caucasian woman forcibly dissipated his rage and turned it into simple anxiety.

'Damn it. I've never seen such an undisturbed face on this island.'

Lihuang was neither unhinged nor professional enough to kill someone outside the heat of the moment. He tried to wipe the peaceful look from the woman's face so he could bring back the atmosphere.

"One more foolish interruption, and I will leave nothing of you on this island. That machine will devour you whole."

Every gaze in the room dropped to the engine below. Lihuang and his men, however, did not let down their guard.

"Do you understand why we are here?" He spat.

The machine at the base of the room looked less like an engine and more like a massive piece of clockwork. It should have originally been sleeker and more efficient in design, but the engine room was originally built to be a tourist destination of sorts and the machinery had to cater to the eye. And because the island was abandoned during development, there were practically no safety measures installed.

No one needed a detective's reasoning skills to know what would happen if they fell.

"We made an addition to this machine. It now connects to the sea below."

What he meant was clear. If someone were to fall from the walkways, he would be crushed by the engine, turned to pulp, and dropped into the sea to become fish food.

Supporting that claim were the reddish-brown rust stains on the massive metal gears.

"This is a convenient garbage dump and execution ground for us. Perfect for making an example and getting rid of evidence."

Charlotte looked back and forth between the humming engine and Lihuang's twisted smirk. She whispered in Sherlock's ear.

"...Sherlock Liverpool, I want you to stay calm and listen to me."

"What is it, Charlotte?"

"If my deduction is correct...we've just been kidnapped. And we might be in danger?"

"Thanks, Charlotte. I feel so much better now knowing you're here. And if I had to add, they're not holding us for ransom. So..." with a defeated sigh, Sherlock continued, "...I'd say our chances of surviving this are close to zero."



People were watching the hopeless scene from far above it all.

They were, quite literally, high up at the top of the engine room. From inside a dark gap in the ceiling, they watched quietly.

As the scene unfolded under the lights, they whispered like rats.

"They're in trouble."

"They are."

"Which side?"

"Dunno."

"That doesn't matter."

"But they're coming."

"They are."

"They're already here."

"Really?"

"They've been here for a while."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Then why aren't they helping?"

"Because."

"I see."

"Maybe they're waiting."

"For the right moment."

"I see."

"When is the best right moment?"

"I get it."

"Cool."

"You think so?"

"Who knows?"

"Let's ask Nejiro."

"Yeah."

"Hey, Nejiro? Are those people cool?"

The boy sitting deeper in the darkness whispered feebly.

"...They're just idiots..."

Rubbing his legs, Nejiro gritted his teeth as though recalling his past.

"It was all a joke to them. ...To them, life itself is a joke."

The shadowed adult beside him smiled in agreement.

The girl who watched Nejiro and the others out of the corner of her eye—Yua Kirino—was nervous.

She had followed him all this way out of concern, and when she saw the scene in the engine room she understood just how dire the situation was.

The detective siblings she had once spoken with were surrounded by men carrying guns and swords.

Nejiro and his friends would not act.

After wondering what she should do, when the people around her refused to move, Yua decided to do something no one else could do.

As she slipped away from the depths of darkness, the Rats' whispers reached their climax.

"Oh, they're moving."

"They are."

"They're coming."

"I told you, they were already here."

"Them."

"Them."

"Them."

"Is now the right moment?"

"I guess it is."

"Yeah."

“See? The guy with the tattoo’s holding up his sword again.”

“It’s called a Chinese broadsword.”

“Who cares?”

“See? He’s about to bring it down.”

“I bet now’s the right moment.”

“That’d be cool.”

“Yeah.”



“Now...I’ll finally have you leave this stage.”

Sensing the atmosphere he wanted, Lihuang quietly raised his sword.

Jun, standing before him, focused on the blade.

She had no intention of dying in that room. But she didn’t even think about evading the attack. She was thinking solely of ways to lunge at her opponent to steal away his broadsword.

She wasn’t accustomed to the weapon, but anything was fine as long as the rhythm of the engine continued to reverberate through the room.

The broadsword seemed to flow in Lihuang’s grip. He could easily bring it down now to kill, but he seemed to enjoy his theatrics, raising it higher than necessary. He likely planned to cut off Jun’s head in a single stroke.

“Any last words, damned kitten? Mewl all you like—nothing can save you now.”

His hand paused dramatically at the apex.

Jun decided then that she would move as soon as Lihuang began to bring down his arm.

The tension of the one-sided violence that day finally reached a climax.

“Jun!”

It was clear to even a civilian’s eyes—and it was so clearly a desperate situation *because* she was looking through a civilian’s eyes—so Charlotte tried to rush over. But Lilei caught her right arm and Sherlock his left to pull her back.

“You can’t, Charlotte!”

“L-let me go—”

Charlotte struggled desperately against them. But her cries were suddenly cut short.

As she was pulled back, she was forced to look up—and spotted something.

It was a large black mass, growing larger and larger under the lights—

Clang. One easily recognizable sound was enough to turn the tables.

Two noises had overlapped into one.

One was the sound of a bullet hitting the end of the stopped broadsword.

The other was the sound of a large man in black landing between Jun and the Western District men.

“What?!”

Lihuang reeled at the sudden impact on his hand. His men raised their guns and swords at the newcomer.

At that very moment, two figures dropped down next to two of the men wielding guns.

One was a man with a mohawk, holding a metal baseball bat. The other was a topless man with long hair.

By the time the Western District men realized who the newcomers were, it was all over.

Those armed with guns hesitated for fear of shooting their own in the fray.

In the meantime, the giant in black—Greatest Zhang—went around the backs of two of the Western District men who were standing side-by-side and grabbed them by their necks.

The two men were hoisted into the air with raw strength before being slammed against the chain-link floor as though failing to pull off a back tumbling maneuver.

Zhang kept his grip around their necks until the moment of impact, not even allowing them to free-fall.

Their arms and legs paralyzed by the blow to their spines, the men each saw one large shoe descending upon his own face.

Once the sound of noses and teeth breaking had finished, Zhang slowly took his feet off the men's faces. He seemed unamused.

"Chumps. That was supposed to be the intro. I'm gonna end up having to juggle heads if I try to pull off a guillotine drop."

Zhang was completely unintimidated by the men around him, in spite of their weapons.

Instead of blades and bullets, the room was filled with chattering voices.

"Hyahahahaha! You can't compare normal-sized folks with yourself, Mr. Zhang! This is a riot!"

"That wasn't even flashy."

"They're just chumps."

"I'm sleepy..."

"9518026877...9856482520...2662409444...8618828672...7054207475...0435367998...4584680211...Hey, what digit am I supposed to be on? Nine hundred thousand and..."

"D-don't ask m-me."

"Now, now, that's enough of the white noise. I swear, it's like we're a walking loony bin. Are you all right, Jun?" Asked a woman wearing a bondage top, clapping her hands. Jun scanned her surroundings.

The Western District men were all unconscious, and she could see familiar faces on the walkway and staircase above, as well as around herself.

"Everyone!" She cried, stepping away from the silent Lihuang and picking up her chainsaw cases off the floor.

Then, she quickly drew them and took a stance against Lihuang.

"Tch. You should be thanking Carlos. He's the ass who managed to snipe that overgrown steak knife. Hate to say it, but he wins this one," Zhang snorted. Jun giggled.

"Thank you, Mr. Zhang! Everyone! But how did you find me?"

"Who knows? Ask the boss and that crazy ear of his."

"You're right. I'll ask him everything once we're out of this."

"Nah. Ask him now."

'Huh?'

Jun was tempted to ask what Zhang was talking about, but remembered that she had other priorities and turned her attention back to Lihuang and the Liverpool siblings.

She feared that Lihuang would take the detectives hostage, but he didn't seem to be trying.

Charlotte was as lost as ever. She stood protectively in front of Sherlock, surprised by the Guard Team's sudden entrance.

Lihuang froze for a second when the Guard Team attacked, but a moment later he began to exude belligerence as though he had been possessed by another being entirely.

"...Answer me this."

Though the tables had turned, he showed no hint of fear.

"How did you get here? I posted guards outside. Did you kill them all?"

Lihuang's resentment was palpable. Zhang replied threateningly.

"Who knows? Our outside guy was gonna take care of it. The place was clean by the time we passed through."

"Hold your tongue, Zhang. You bring shame to the motherland. I'm sure many of our countrymen would be quite pleased to receive your head. And I'm sure the death throes of a wanted man who walked straight to his pursuers will make the perfect side to my next drink."

"...Just try me," Zhang snarled, his smile gone. Lihuang became even more confident.

"You destroyed my atmosphere again. But this is the end."

When she saw Lihuang's smile, Jun felt a chill run down her spine.

She wondered where the smile had come from. Then she understood.

Charlotte and Sherlock were now completely free.

Then the girl with flowers in her hair—

The second she heard the sound of something cutting the air, Jun pulled the throttle.

Scrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrreech.

The usually-pleasant roar of the engine was gone—replaced by the ear-splitting noise of metal on metal. Sparks flew everywhere. The scene was a perfect fit for the setting.

Glancing against the chainsaw was a rusted lead pipe.

And beyond the sparks, Jun spotted two large flower ornaments.

'She's fast!'

The girl struck with unexpected speed in spite of the weight of the pipe. The arc of her swing was almost too accurate for such a blunt weapon, and coupled with its speed the lead pipe almost seemed to become a blade.

Making matters worse was the power behind the attack. Even as they crossed weapons, the girl continued to push the lead pipe against the moving chainsaw. She even took care to shift the lead pipe at times to disperse the damage.

The girl was named Lilei, if Jun remembered. If she was the one who lobbed the lead pipe at the hotel, she was likely on another level altogether from Lihuang and his men. But that did not come across as strange to Jun. After all, she was also a young woman, who wielded chainsaws against her enemies.

Lilei seemed more suited to the Guard Team than the Western District.

“Hah hah...Ahahahaha! Hahahahahahahahaha! Ahahahahahahahahaha! You’re good!”

And at that point, Jun burst into uproarious laughter. Charlotte’s eyes turned to dinner plates at her sudden change.

Meanwhile, the other Guard Team members raised their guard at Jun’s evaluation of Lilei. They all knew how skilled Jun was; the fact that Lilei was keeping up with her at all was incredible.

“Ahahahaha! Hahahahaha! Amazing! I never thought I’d find people like you in the Western District! I thought it was just Mr. Kuzuhara!”

Jun placed her weight into her foot and pushed her opponent, then leapt backwards.

But—

Lilei also charged, as though chasing after her. That also sent her running straight toward Zhang and the others, but she showed no sign of hesitation.

“What—what the hell?!”

Lilei leapt, not once slowing down, and did a vertical tumble as she focused her kinetic energy into her pipe. She moved with all the elegant strength of

a world-class gymnast. But at the very tip of her movements was a weapon far removed from finesse.

Zhang reflexively crossed his arms over his head and blocked the lead pipe.

The pipe landed right over the crossing point, sending shockwaves all the way down Zhang's body.

"...!"

'Damn, that bites. But...'

Clenching his teeth, Zhang roared with all the pride of a pro wrestler and a Guard Team member,

"TRY HARDER, RUNT!"

He uncrossed his arms to counter—

But the girl was already gone.

At that moment, he felt a slight press on his shoulder and glimpsed a tiny figure jumping overhead.

Lilei had used Zhang's shoulder as a step, grabbing a railing on the walkway overhead with her free hand and pulling herself up with zero-gravity ease.

At the end of her flow of movements, Lilei was on a walkway one level above Zhang and Jun. Then she landed in front of a middle-aged Guard Team member who wore sunglasses.

"Mr. Gen!"

"No, before that. Uh...a little girl?"

"Well, well, it's like the Western District has their own version of Jun."

"Oh no. She scared me. Now I've lost track of my digits."

The Guard Team loudly praised Lilei—who was a delicate girl in appearance only—but some of the members cast worried glances at their friend, Gen.

Mr. Gen's eyes seemed to glint as he pulled a handgun.

"Not to worry. I'm a cold man. I don't go easy on anyone, be it a woman or a child."

The others cheered, impressed. Gen then added an afterthought.

"Well? Do I sound like a dashing assassin now?"

"Wow. Fail."

"You owe an apology to every assassin in the world for that one."

"To Nikita!"

"To Lèon!"

"To the Thirteen!"

"Forget that! Mr. Gen never goes easy on his own teammates, either!"

The cheers quickly turned to criticism, but Lilei was even more cautious now.

"Mm. It is cool. It is not bad. You. Black glasses."

Spinning her lead pipe, Lilei slowly closed the distance between herself and Gen.

"No way! She's an idiot too!"

"Maybe she's actually on our side after all?!"

With the Guard Team's voices as a signal, Lilei instantly accelerated. Gen, waiting for that moment, pulled the trigger.

At that moment, the end of the lead pipe touched the muzzle of the handgun.

There was a deafening noise as the bullet left the gun and slid past Lilei's side through the lead pipe.

Then, she did a half-turn with the pipe and drew a silver arc in the air as she brought it down on Gen's hand.

“Gah?!”

The blow rattled the bones in his fingers. Gen dropped the gun. Lilei’s lead pipe mercilessly knocked it away—the gun fell down between the walkways and was finally sucked into the gears below.

The sound of crunching metal seemed to echo at the bottom of the room, but no one was in any state to think about that now.

“...Well, this is a bother. You’re an annoyance, young lady,” Gen mumbled, rubbing his hands together as he backed away.

Then, he opened his coat to reveal countless hand grenades stocked inside. From below, Zhang noticed him reach for one and raised his voice on reflex.

“Gen, you dumbass! Don’t even think about using explosives here! You blow the walkways to bits, and we’re *all* gonna get sucked into that engine!”

“Well, isn’t that perfect?” Gen grinned, tightening his grip around a grenade, but he was quickly restrained by others who came running up to him.

“Gah! What is the meaning of—”

“Never mind, Mr. Gen! Just shut up!”

“All right! Now we just get the girl—”

But before they knew it, Lilei had already jumped down to Zhang’s level and was engaged in furious combat against the man with the metal bat.

Jun listened to Lilei fluttering madly behind her back, and spoke to the man standing alone before her.

“Umm! Could you please consider surrendering now?”

“Impossible.”

Lihuang spun his broadsword around in his hand and pointed it threateningly again. Jun’s engines continued to roar, but their respective voices rose over the din and reached one another’s ears.

“Ahaha! I don’t know if it’s right to force that girl to work so hard!”

Lihuang, undeterred by Jun's new attitude, smirked.

"Lilei is but the incense used to create my atmosphere."

"Wow. You almost make it sound like you're stronger than she is!"

"I am no match for Lilei in anything but raw strength. But with the right air around me, I am the superior. Care for a taste?"

"Not sure I want to end up with heartburn."

Sparks flew.

The moment Jun's sentence ended, they instantly stepped into one another's range. All that was left was to use muscle memory and automatically lash out against the other. Lihuang's speed had multiplied from before—his skill several orders of magnitude higher than what he used to bully Kuzuhara—as he fought to kill.

Jun also battled to knock away his attacks, her chainsaws singing.

Sparks. More sparks.

In the flashes of light, Jun danced to the rhythm of the engines and Lihuang flowed along the air of battle as they slowly accelerated.

Zhang, stuck in between two sets of ferocious battles, nonchalantly reached for the radio in his pocket.

"Hey. Snipe the girl already."

A relaxed voice answered through the earpiece.

<How the hell am I supposed to snipe something that fast?>

"Too fast my ass. You just don't have the balls to shoot a girl, am I right?"

<Well, you're not wrong.>

Carlos admitted defeat so easily that Zhang was stunned into angry silence. And as though having read his mind, Carlos quickly explained himself.

<But more importantly...I think the girl noticed my position when I first shot the broadsword. She's always been moving so something's in my line of fire. Walls, walkways, or one of you guys.>

"Then get your ass outta there and find some other place! Or start with the third-rate wuxia villain act! We need Jun over on this end, pronto!"

<Sorry, bud. Dunno if I can do that, either.>

"Don't mess with me! What the hell are you—"

But Carlos quickly cut Zhang off, whispering a status report.

<Intruders. Keep an eye out—don't wanna get hurt.>

The moment Zhang thought to force a proper answer out of Carlos, the answer resounded through the massive engine room.

"Enough, Lilei."

The sound pierced both the deep hum of the engine and the shrieking of Jun's chainsaws—it was a sensual voice colder than ice.

The chill and beauty led directly to power.

Lilei instantly stopped, and with a dissatisfied look lowered her weapon and put distance between herself and the Guard Team.

All movement in the engine room came to a sudden stop. And for a single moment, even the sound of the island's engine and Jun's chainsaws seemed to go silent.

Jun and Lihuang simultaneously stepped away from one another, turning their attention to the owner of the voice.

Charlotte and Sherlock, who were the only ones left out of the battle, turned. And whether they liked it or not, reality made itself known to them.

On the central level were Jun, Lihuang, Zhang, and Lilei. On the level above was the Guard Team, including Gen.

And a level above them, on a walkway lining the walls of the room, stood a new group.

Standing at the doors leading outside was a woman in a white dress. She still had some hints of girlishness left, but the wicked air around her gave her a sensual aura.

"Yili..."

Lihuang frowned and looked at the people around her.

There stood several of the Western District's executives. A giant of a man with no hair or eyebrows, dwarfing even Zhang. A bearded man with a shaved head. A man with an eyepatch and a large scar on his face. And others. They were some of the more combat-oriented members of Yili's faction.

They dressed in white jackets as though rivaling the Guard Team, and around them were private soldiers dressed in black.

Among them was an odd one out—a man in a brown trenchcoat. The color of his outfit made him a poor fit with the rest, but his eyes were more devoid of emotion than Yili's, as though he were rejecting everything around him. At least, that was Lihuang's impression. But Lihuang knew that the man—Seiichi Kugi, Yili's personal shadow—was the most dangerous of all the newcomers.

"I suppose I can't exactly see you as reinforcements," Lihuang muttered. Had his voice reached Yili through the roar of the engines? As she did not reply, no one would ever know.

Jun stepped even further away from Lihuang and took her fingers off the triggers, looking at Yili with her usual timid attitude.

"...How did you know we were here, Ms. Yili?"

Her voice made it across the gap between cycles of the engine.

"It's not worth mentioning. I simply happened to notice that my brother was being a little selfish, and decided to clean up after him," Yili said, and addressed everyone in the room. "I will have Elder Brother take responsibility later. But what to do about this mess? I don't mind if you

battle to your hearts' content, but...in that case, as a part of the same organization, we'll have to end up siding with Elder Brother."

Blaming her brother alone, she acted as though the Western District was responsible for nothing. It almost sounded as though she wouldn't mind if war broke out then and there.

But Yili did not necessarily want that. She understood to some extent the character of Jun, the captain of the Guard Team, and had used that tone because she was certain it would force them to back out. As if she could simply take care of the details with Gitarin in private later.

"...You act as though you are in charge of the Western District, not Father," Lihuang said, not even trying to hide his contempt. Yili shot him an icy look.

"I'm not obligated to listen to a fool who's trying to start a war without our consent."

"...This is for the Western District. I already have Father's permission."

Yili's expression shifted.

'It can't be.'

Ei *Daren* was the head of the Western District, and the father of Lihuang, Yili, and Lilei.

Yili had thought he hadn't given any orders relating to this case. Or was Lihuang just bluffing? She could not be sure.

After a brief pause, she decided for the moment to clean up the mess before her—

"Well, well, aren't we all in a hurry."

A sudden, relaxed voice brought her thoughts grinding to a stop.

A voice coupled with mechanical white noise resounded from some sort of megaphone further down the engine room.

'Why now?'

Yili clenched her teeth anxiously, careful to not let her worry show.

'Now that you're here, there's no way we can stop this!'

Ideally, Yili would not have personally come to the scene of the conflict. But she had no choice, as long as her brother—a fellow executive—was in command here. She and the other executives had to clean up his mess.

But the owner of the voice had even less reason than Yili to be there.

"B-boss?! How?!"

The first surprised voice in the room came from Jun, who had no idea what was happening there. Zhang and the others must have known; they sighed less in surprise and more in surrender.

All eyes were on the dark-skinned man, who as usual had a woman draped on each arm. But this time, he was surrounded by what seemed to be multiple bodyguards, almost like they were on a group outing to see the massive engine.

The man—Gitarin—looked relieved to see Jun safe. He grinned as he always did and raised an empty hand.

"What kind of man would I be to sit around doing nothing when Li'l Jun's been kidnapped?"

Rather than ruin the voice, the noise on the megaphone only served to distort it.

Jun and the Guard Team were slightly placated, the people from the Western District were plunged into confusion, and the rest began to exude bloodlust.

Emotions of every sort crisscrossed the room, filling the chamber with an indescribable air.

"Yili...is that the Eastern District's leader?" One of the executives whispered in her ear. Yili closed her eyes.

She couldn't deny it now, and knowing Gitarin, even if she tried to deny it he would reveal himself anyway. She decided to nod.

"No way...maybe he's just a body double?"

The other executives stared in disbelief, even at Yili's acknowledgement.

"...Yeah..."

Yili didn't think that was likely, but another possibility occurred to her.

'Why would he throw himself into danger like this?'

Left with no other option, she addressed Gitarin.

"I'd like to thank you for coming all this way, but are you quite sane? The Pits are Western District territory," she said, not even trying to hide her disdain.

Gitarin replied over the megaphone as though having a friendly chat.

"Gotta say I'm jealous of your resonant voice, Yili. I'm just here to find a stray kitten...is what I'd like to say. But I do have another reason for being here."

He paused there, and once he noted that all eyes were on him, Gitarin snickered and said outright to the Western District executives—

"I'm saying...could you please hand over Ginga Kanashima now?"

Silence.

The air cleared in an instant, and the silence turned into a chill that bore down on everyone in the room.

"...What might you be talking about?" Asked Yili. Gitarin's reply was calm.

"Well, we looked into the serial bombings independently. The methods, the materials, and the motives. And we realized that it was all pointing toward a man named Ginga Kanashima. And we also figured out how he installed bombs all over the island...but as we investigated, we found something unusual."

Like a detective giving a summation, Gitarin announced his deductions.

"Of the bombings in the Western District, some took place in facilities you couldn't install bombs in unless security had been lightened on purpose. In other words, there's a traitor in the Western District, I thought. It's a simple strategy. Blow up your own assets to avoid drawing suspicion. Textbook stuff."

"...What are you saying? That's just a theory—"

"Precisely! That is just a theory. Although we of the Eastern District are in conflict with you, that is the very reason I'm so convinced I'm right. We've had our eyes on those facilities for a long time now—we would have targeted them first if war broke out between the districts—but security was always flawless! to the point that I'd say it was impossible for anyone to install anything there! I guarantee you that Ginga Kanashima has connections behind the scenes. If nothing else, he needs someone to supply him with the explosives. And what better supplier could there be than a Western District celebrity, don't you agree?"

"...This is ridiculous. If they just wanted to avoid suspicion, they could have bombed less important facilities. The Eastern District didn't lose any key locations, either."

But Gitarin shook his head with a laugh.

"There's a good reason for that, I think. This traitor of your doesn't want to avoid suspicion from us—they want to avoid *your* suspicion."

"...!"

"So let me put it this way. Someone among you is working with Ginga Kanashima. And he or she is keeping that connection under wraps. It just so happened that both of the warring factions are gathered here today, so I thought I'd come in and ask about it."

Gitarin's explanation came to a smooth conclusion, but he had dropped a bomb before his monologue was done. One wrong move could start a free-for-all shootout in the engine room.

But Yili remained cold as ice as she replied, "either way, we can't put complete faith in your claims."

"Of course. The actions of a model executive."

"...And you're a failure of a boss for coming out to the front lines for such a trivial issue."

"That's who I am. Although it takes a bit of effort to stay this way. And besides, I think it's much safer for me at this point to stay near the Guard Team," Gitarin chuckled.

"The safest thing to do would be to leave this island, imbecile," Lihuang growled.

He was right. Gitarin lowered his megaphone and let his voice resound through the engine room.

"Precisely! We remain on this island because we are imbeciles. And in that, I take pride!"

For those from the Western District, it was a difficult sentiment to sympathize with. But the Guard Team put on wry smiles at that point. As though Gitarin had spoken what was on all their minds.

"...So it's safest by the Guard Team..."

Supposing that Gitarin's confidence stemmed from his reliance on the Guard Team, Yili decided to try them first. Although she couldn't tell what might happen, it was important to get wind of what was going through her opponent's mind.

Physically, she and the Western District executives had the high ground and the advantage. Their private soldiers were scattered across the walkway that encircled the room, surrounding the Guard Team in a semicircular formation. If they were to open fire now, they would also hit Lilei and Lihuang—but Yili would resort to that if it was necessary.

However, even then their forces would only be on even standing. Yili decided to both intimidate and inform her opponents.

"Are you assuming that this is the extent of our forces?"

"Not at all. So I took some measures ahead of time." Gitarin replied, returning the unspoken threat to Yili. "Why not give 'em a call?"

In the midst of the tension stood a man who showed no emotion whatsoever.

Focused on every direction of his surroundings, Seiichi Kugi stood behind Yili and refused to let himself be carried away by the atmosphere.

The conflict before him meant little.

'I...I simply have to protect Yili. No matter who I have to face. And no matter how hopeless the situation.'

He quietly waited for something to change. But change came from an unexpected place.

"Umm...Mr. Kugi?"

One of the private soldiers came over, face pale.

Kugi and Yili both turned. The man handed him a radio, his hands covered in sweat.

"We can't get contact with the watch outside...but...a strange man just asked for you on the radio, Mr. Kugi."

An ominous feeling struck him. His pulse quickened.

Remembering how this had happened before, Kugi slowly brought the radio to his ear.

"...Kugi here."

The once-silent radio reacted, suddenly buzzing.

<Hey, it's been a while! How's your gut?>

Kugi saw a flash of rainbows from the sound of the voice alone.

The rainbow might have seemed beautiful to some, but to Kugi it signified something else. The bright colors of a venomous snake, or a poisonous mushroom.

"How...dare you..."

<Whoa! It's been a while since I heard that one. Does *anybody* say that anymore these days? Maybe over in the West, I guess. Like Lihuang, that tattoo freak down there!>

'Wait...he knows where Lihuang is?'

"Where are you."

<Hah! Look ahead.>

Reflexively, Kugi obeyed. But all he saw was a walkway leading to the other side of the room, and a door.

<Look right, left, and up. Shoulda painted 'whoever looks at this is an idiot' on the ceiling or something.>

"Enough! ...? ...?"

Having glanced left and right for a second each, Kugi took out his anger on the man on the other end of the line. But at the same time, he noticed something.

The second after his eyes went left and right, a man had appeared at the door in the distance, across the room.

Even from afar he recognized him at a glance.

There was no mistaking that nauseating coloring. The coloring that had made a mockery of his life.

But the sight of the seven colors calmed Kugi. He replied into the radio.

"So now you wag your tail for the Eastern District?"

<Hah hah! Don't get the wrong idea.>

Kugi instantly assumed that Hayato Inui, the man across the room, would reply, 'I don't work for anybody'.

But with another laugh, Inui betrayed his expectations.

<I've been working with the Eastern District from the start.>

"...What?"

<From the beginning. For years now.>

"?!"

Kugi froze.

<Even when we had that scuffle last year, I was already cooperating with the Eastern District. Although it was mostly exchanging intel. But anyway, they used that crazy mess we started to gobble up both the North and the South at once! Without getting a finger dirty.>

"..."

<But then I heard the Pits went to the Western District. So I decided I'd do gofer work for the Guard Team thing? And who knew I'd end up running into you here?>

With all his banter out of the way, Inui lowered his voice and continued.

<...So what now?>

"...That's up to you."

Kugi was completely tranquil again, from the tone of his voice.

The incident he caused one year ago had all been just part of the two districts' machinations. He had been used by them. But that realization only made Kugi calm. Although a part of him had thought that he could perhaps do something—change something—once he realized that even Inui, whom he thought was freedom incarnate, was being used by others, that idea dissipated altogether.

'Then...a shadow is all I need to become.'

Slowly narrowing his eyes, Kugi silently moved ahead of Yili. The moment he passed her by, he whispered emotionlessly to her.

"Orders, Yili."

Inui must have noticed Kugi's sudden turn for the enthusiastic. He whistled loud enough that the sound resonated through the room.



The tension escalated every time a new party joined the fray. In the meantime, Charlotte—now relegated to the background—flailed dramatically.

"Ohh...what is going on here, Sherlock Liverpool?"

"Don't ask me," Sherlock replied. But his hand was firmly wrapped around hers. "Still, don't worry. I promise...I'll protect you, Charlotte."

Sherlock scanned the area, but once he realized that there were more guns than ever in the room, he added sheepishly—

"...Never mind. I can't guarantee that."



'Is it time?'

Sensing the mounting tension, Ginga Kanashima thought to himself. If the engine room was a ballroom, he thought, all the dancers were clockwork toys.

'Looks like all the players are here. Except for the leading man.'

The massive metal structure at the bottom of the room looked for all the world like a piece of clockwork. Although the engine wouldn't go backwards if it was sprung, everyone would begin to dance.

'Will they pull off a perfect dance today? Will I?'

He no longer hesitated.

To summon the leading man to the stage, he undertook the second act of destruction that day.

Something so very simple, to pull the key on the clockwork—



When the explosion hit the engine room, every air that permeated the room dissipated.

“What the?!”

At Zhang’s roar, everyone in the room began to search for the source of the sound.

There was so much reverberation that it was difficult to pinpoint by sound alone, but the flow of hot air and the bright flames soon made clear the location of the explosion.

The explosion had hit a part of the massive engine itself. Though it was just a decorative part, a large turbine connected to the system continued to spin in a distorted state.

The shrapnel must have scattered everywhere—but Gitarin and the others near the bottom of the room seemed uninjured.

It just so happened that the explosion happened at a distance from them. But they could have just as easily been caught in the brunt of the blast.

“...Are you all right, Gitarin?”

“...Barely. What about yourselves?” Gitarin asked, when the beauties standing in front of and behind him checked on him.

As Gitarin’s personal human shields did their job, Zhang—whose job it was to guard the boss—grimaced.

“Hey...hold on. This is bad, ain’t it?”

Anyone affiliated with either of the districts knew that the engine was the heart of the island, responsible for raising and lowering it with the tides. Although the destroyed turbine itself had no direct connection to the

mechanism, nothing good could come of blowing it up. Almost everyone tensed instantly, and in Jun's case the blood had drained from her face and her hidden eyes were wide.

"Hey. Jun. If that engine gets busted...what's gonna happen?"

He didn't want to hear the answer, and he knew it was cruel to make Jun tell him. But there was no way around it.

"...I don't know the details, but...I think...if the engine stops and the machine that raises and lowers the island fails..."

The daughter of the man who made the massive engine sensed a part of her own past being carved out by the explosion, despair weighing heavily on her voice.

"The island...is going to sink...?"

"No, no. This place isn't a mud boat. Not to worry, Jun. We won't go down that easily. They must have failsafes for cases like this." Gitarin explained over the megaphone to calm Jun down.

Unusually enough, he looked quite serious. But as he turned off the megaphone, he mumbled to himself.

"...Although things can't turn out well, considering the system was abandoned before it was finished."

"Y-you're right," Jun sighed when she heard Gitarin's explanation. She looked to the source of his voice, and spotted him mumbling to himself. So she thought to turn her attention there—

"Jun!"

One of the Guard Team members yelled, and Jun felt a chill run down her spine.

Reflexively, she pulled the triggers on her chainsaw and raised the spinning blades behind herself.

Sparks flew. Jun staggered under an impact even stronger than that of Lilei's swing as she was pushed forward.

When Jun steadied herself, she saw the blade of a Chinese broadsword.

"I see the wind is fickle today."

"...Mr. Lihuang."

Lihuang had recovered earlier from the blast and had swung at Jun while she was distracted.

"Is this coincidence? Or fate? Either way, it's the perfect entertainment for one who was destined to become a fuse."

"Elder Brother. Elder Sister."

When Lilei saw her brother move, she began to brandish her lead pipe. But she looked back and forth between Lihuang and Yili above, not knowing what to do.

As the uneasy balance of peace crumbled, Yili coolly gave orders to the other executives.

"...We don't care about losing face at this point. If battle breaks out, you have permission to kill."

"Lihuang's already moving; has battle not begun already?" Asked another executive. Yili's eyes remained icy.

"No. If he goes off and gets himself killed, that's just another factor to consider for our next negotiation," Yili said, and turned to leave—

"He's here."

She heard her shadow mumble, and turned again.

At the end of her gaze was a small splotch of seven colors.

Inui was holding a gun and walking down the walkway towards them. Anyone else would have been turned to swiss cheese by then, but Yili knew he was no ordinary man.

“Orders, Yili.”

The man who should have been her shadow spoke, his voice tinged with the hunger of a starving dog. She saw the dark glint in his eye and gave orders with a sigh.

“...The mad dog is yours; do what you’d like. But remember; bullets will ricochet against these walls. If you’re going to kill him, don’t let him get a single shot in, and finish him off in one blow.”

It was a tall order—perhaps impossibly so—but the moment she gave him the order to leave her, Yili saw a hint of a smile on Kugi’s lips.

Her heart faltered at the nostalgic sight, and she sighed even more loudly in an attempt to erase the new emotions squirming in her heart.

Without sparing Kugi a glance, she turned again to depart—

But when a quiet rumble shook her eardrums, she froze.

“Well, just look at the mad dog go. I suppose there’s no use in telling him to stop. And this is why he’s just not Guard Team material. Mr. Gen alone is more than enough— Hmm?”

In the midst of complaining about Inui, who approached Yili without orders, Gitarin realized that another sound was mixed in the the rumbling of the engines in the room.

“What is that?”

Lilei, who was brandishing her lead pipe with her full attention on the situation, also froze and listened.

Above the walkway where Yili was, there was a large path for work vehicles that went from East to West. She turned her gaze to the large entrance on that level and whispered cautiously.

“It is coming.”

At the center of the walkway were two people.

It was a reunion two months in the making. But there was no more light in Kugi's eyes. He cornered himself, suppressing all emotion.

Inui grinned, twirling his gun.

'Son of a bitch...he's changed since last year.'

Inui scrutinized his gait, his eyes, and his bearing, and was convinced; that the moment he put his finger on the trigger, Kugi would open fire without a second's hesitation. Before, Inui clearly had the high ground. But what about now? He sensed barely any difference between himself and Kugi.

It was like he was looking at himself in a mirror.

"Hah."

Gritting his teeth with a grin, Inui went for his specialty—taunting.

"...So one year really is enough to change a guy. Something happen?"

It was trash-talk, no two ways about it. Yet though Inui seemed to have left himself open, Kugi had not even drawn his gun. Kugi knew that if he drew first and Inui dodged, he would be hit by return fire. Kugi also spoke. Rather than answer the question, he expressed a sort of admiration for Inui.

"...I've decided to live on as Yili's shadow. I don't need to use my emotions or memories. This is the world I've finally reached," he said with a sigh, so softly that only Inui could hear.

"You think I'll shoot you first if you draw, right?"

"I won't deny that. I know how strong you are; you can kill me with a single bullet."

"Hey, no worries 'bout that. You're not gonna die."

"Are you trying to go easy on me?"

Kugi frowned, assuming that Inui was intent on humiliating him again. But Inui snickered and gave him an even worse answer.

"I'm not gonna shoot you. I'm aiming straight for Yili. I'd say I've got a 30% chance of making the shot from this distance, but maybe I should test that out."

"...!"

"Heh heh! Looks like you've still got some of that human emotion shit left. So fill me in on the details. You love her as a woman? Or as the person who let you be her shadow? C'mon, we're *buddies*, so you might as well share some gossip."

"Damn you!"

Though Kugi felt unease rising to his throat, he did not let his emotions run wild. Controlling even his anger from the inside, Kugi coldly continued to search for a weak spot in his opponent.

"...You've really changed. Cool. Sure, you must have trained your ass off from the start, but you're different now. Damn, it's like you're on a different level of determination. ...But seriously, cut your worryin' today. I'm not really gonna get trigger-happy. In fact, I might have to ditch this crap piece of metal soon."

"?"

"Too bad. This time, both of us are supporting cast. But I think it's perfectly fine for supporting cast to steal the show. What do you say?"

Kugi realized as he listened to Inui's rambling that something was wrong.

He heard another engine joining the duet below.

"Well, well. The island's hero is here," Inui said with a disappointed grin.

At that moment, the chain-link fence at the doors went flying with a deafening crash as a van emerged into the fray.

The massive engine hummed at the base of the island. Jun's chainsaws sang sharply in her hands.

The third engine grew louder and louder before exploding onto the scene in the frenzy that was the island's engine room.

The engine belonged to a blue van.

The van—the studio of Buruburu Airwaves—was a bright blue, and it looked to those below like a chunk of the ceiling had been carved out to reveal the sky.

The engine room had no speakers, making it one of the few places on the island where the broadcast never reached. But the van’s engine finally expressed itself on virgin ground.

The van came screeching to a halt at the very center of the path, but a moment later, the side door opened—

And a man seemed to emerge from the sky.

He was already tall to begin with, but from below he must have seemed like a descending giant.

“As a member of the volunteer police force...I’m going to ask you to do three things. Three simple things even a child could do.”

The giant descending into the Pits cracked his neck and announced to every ear in the room. He announced his duty, exactly as he wished.

“Cease hostilities. Put away your weapons. And calm down.”



At that moment, the engine room was pandemonium incarnate.

Each and every clash seemed to have all the force of an engine behind it.

A lone figure was languidly watching them all.

“What is Spring-heeled Joplin thinking, that bastard?”

Refusing to hide his unease, he complained to the urban legend.

“Why did you bring me here?”

The figure in white was watching it all from one of the doors.

No one inside had yet noticed his presence.

The presence of the Killer Ghoul, who in his hands held the power to change the very air itself.

Ten minutes earlier.

The basement of the Grand Ibis Hotel. The special section of the monitoring room.

Munch...so today was the day, huh. By coincidence, that's all.

We've been at a stalemate for two months, but Lihuang's rampage finally got things going again.

Everything has to be solved today, in one go.

Why? Munch...because, if we miss this chance...Ginga Kanashima's going to keep this up for months...maybe until the island itself disappears. And if the kitchen explodes, that would be bad for my life...munch.

But in the end, I'm part of the Western District. I want Yili, Lihuang, and everyone else to get along. If we fall apart and the East destroys us...then I'll have nowhere else to go.

But...the information I want to use to prevent that...is information I received as one of you—as Spring-heeled Joplin. Munch...

Now, I have to leak the information Spring-heeled Joplin has obtained, as Taifei Liu of the Western District...munch.

Yes. Spring-heeled Joplin, the urban legend, is now going to interfere with reality. I won't say that my information comes from Spring-heeled Joplin, but the problem is with Spring-heeled Joplin.

Spring-heeled Joplin is a bystander and an observer. A helper and a servant. An urban legend that exists in reality... That was what you always used to say... Oh, this new snack is really good, so I'd like more info on it, please.

Now...back to the point.

This is Spring-heeled Joplin, contacting Spring-heeled Joplin.

Is observing really all we can do? You compared this incident to a dance, but maybe even invisible ghosts like us can take the stage.

I want to know what you think... Munch...

If you don't like it, then I guess I could somehow work with the information limited to Taifei Liu, head of the Western District's intelligence team. ...
Munch.

Hello, hello, this is Spring-heeled Joplin.

Let me answer your question, Spring-heeled Joplin.

We chose to become legends, and accepted the fate that came with it. We should never have existed to begin with. So I can't really agree with interfering too much in reality.

We observe, give hints, and give guidance. That's all right.

But we can't become the driving force. Not even if the island sinks.

So...unfortunately, Spring-heeled Joplin, that suggestion is denied.

"Um." "Hey." "Wait." Please wait." "Hey, hey. Stop."

That is why we are legends—hm?

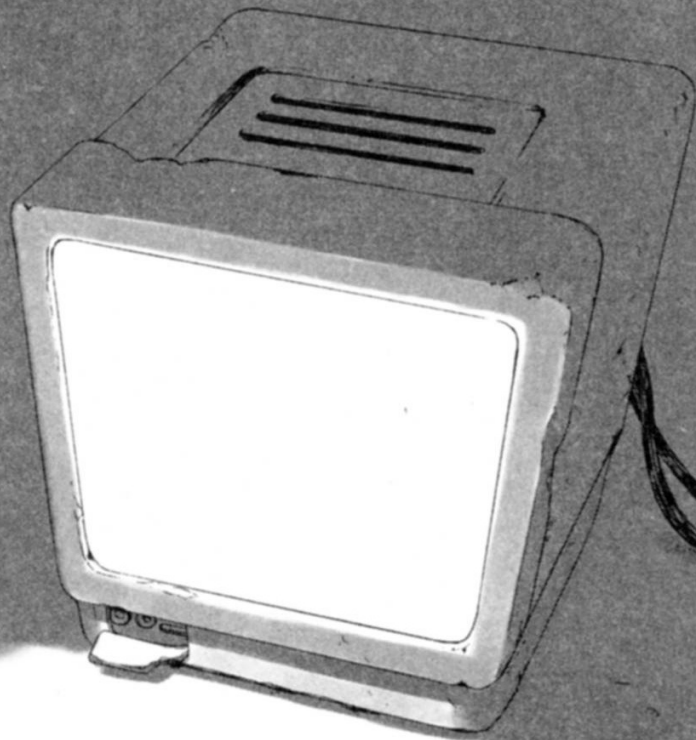
"This is Spring-heeled Joplin." "This is Spring-heeled Joplin, too." "Me too."

Well, well.

"Don't jump to conclusions by yourself." "This is fun." "You're hogging all the good stuff." "We wanna do something." Us too." "We're Spring-heeled Joplin, too." "We also" "have the right to decide" "You may be our proverbial brain and spinal cord, my friend, but I ask that you also pay mind to the reflexive movements of the rest of your body." "I'mma kill you." "Hah!"

Heh heh heh... Heh heh heh! All right. All right, Spring-heeled Joplin.

Then let us put our heads together...let us come to a consensus as Spring-heeled Joplin.



間奏7
『バネ足（電波）ジャック』

Interlude 7: Spring-heeled Hijack

Somewhere in the Kanto region.

Beyond the screens were dreams.

The being outside the screen shared dreams and even the bitterness of reality with countless other people.

There were piles of screens and radios there, each endlessly spewing information. The information was organized from beyond yet more screens and returned to their sources.

In the endless flow of information refinement, the being called Spring-heeled Joplin fell into thought.



<We'll *own* this island. Heehahahaha!>

When Yatsufusa first made that suggestion, I wondered if he was all right in the head. He was never completely sane to begin with, but I had to wonder what he'd suddenly come up with this time.

The artificial island was turning into the Kowloon Walled City. And he suggested that we make the island dance on our strings, controlling it with information alone.

<I'll go around the island and create a flow. And this is your job. You figure out the flow from an outside perspective and control its direction. You're the one at the helm, basically. Heehahaha.>

Yatsufusa continued gleefully, even though his metaphor wasn't even all that brilliant.

He was unpleasant, but I was slowly drawn to him. And before I knew it, I was creating this system.

I abandoned everything I had been tied with until then—society, my family, and my past—and began to observe the island. Sometimes, people on the island, and other times, those with no relation to it at all. All by pulling them into my system, now known as an urban legend.

I chose those who stood out even on the island, or those completely isolated from society—people who weren't likely to spill the secret. If someone revealed our identity, it was immediately reported to the rest of Spring-heeled Joplin. And as each individual member kept their ears out on the others, Spring-heeled Joplin was transformed into a true urban legend.

But the moment it seemed we would have all the island's information in our grasp, Yatsufusa suddenly died.

Had he known when he would die? No...he probably never even went to a doctor. They could probably have treated his illness if he'd only gone to the hospital, but he charged ahead anyway and died alone.

I couldn't back down anymore, but I no longer had a real goal. So as the center of the system, I decided to make Spring-heeled Joplin grow as an urban legend—for the sole purpose of inheriting the will of Yatsufusa.

Sometimes I leaked information outside the island, and sometimes I leaked information inside the island. I lived up to the label of 'urban legend', as the one who had knowledge of every existence in this city.

But I'd never directly interfered in matters of life and death.

After all, too much contact with the real world drains the mystique of an urban legend.



A choice was demanded of the urban legend.

It was an insignificant choice. An irresponsible decision that would not harm Spring-heeled Joplin, regardless of the outcome.

That was precisely why Spring-heeled Joplin chose to leave the decision to the now-developed Spring-heeled Joplin.



Now...what do you suppose we should do, my friends?

[Obviously.] [Umm...kick him out.] [Who?] [That Kanashima bitch, who else?] [Sounds good.] [He pisses me off.] [But is it really all right for us to interfere?] [I don't think they'll trust us, either.] [...I agree with what the other guy said. Legends don't interfere with reality.] [Well.] [Understandable.] [Spring-heeled Joplin is a real-life cheat code, if you think about it.] [stfu] [Grazie.] [Doesn't matter.] [Sometimes only a cheat can get things done.] [*Di molto to the bene.*]

[O proverbial brain and spinal cord—and my fellow body parts. Allow me to speak. If we are forbidden to interfere in reality because we are a fantastical urban legend, it is a simple matter indeed! We must elevate the incidents on the island from the realm of reality to the realm of legend!]

[Prissy ass.] [But he's right.] [More like poseur.] [But that posing] [isn't so bad.] [Yeah.] [I...don't want to admit it, but... I think my legs are shaking.] [We've never been able to help; all we could do was watch. Who knew that'd be how we'd end up interfering in reality?] [I'm scared.] [It certainly is scary.] [Chicken.] [I'm nervous.] [But we have to do it.] [We can do it.] [We're] [Spring-heeled Joplin.] [We're] [an urban legend.] [Even if we are just humans...] [So we're gonna do this, right?] [B-but! We can't do a thing! All we can do is watch people through our screens! Is it...is it really right to interfere with them?] [It's just you.] [Hey, I live on the island, so this is actually relevant to me.] [Back off if you're not gonna do it.] [Ohhhh...ohhh... please! I love this island, too!] [There's your answer.] [I'm not on the island, either, but I want to protect it.] [Ha! If you came here in person, the stink'd have sent you running already.] [Exactly.] [Reality, escapism, whatever. It's up to the people on the island to accept this or not.] [It's not in our hands.]

[Hey, let's not sit on our hands here.]

Excellent. Then, out of personal preference, I will guide Amagiri.

[Amagiri? Why him?]

Would it not make it easier for us to pass on this myth to the future if a fellow 'visible legend' is involved?

[Oh. Makes sense.] [Not sure about passing it on to the future, though.] [W-we! I! I'm the one who understood! So for the m-moment!] [Calm down there, kid.] [Amagiri's not bad.] [I don't dislike him.] [I don't like him. He's such a creep.] [But it looks like he might end up with Nazuna.] [I wonder.] [Should I do it?] [Doesn't matter.] [If we want to see an ending, we can't let the island sink.] [We do not need reasons. We simply send our intentions to the brain, as reflexes do. Reflexes need no reasons. We simply act—or don't—as our instincts dictate.] [Enough with the posing.]

[Please, Spring-heeled Joplin! I...I'll become one of you! So please... please help them! Please lend them the strength to save the island!]

[Oh.] [Who's this?] [Yua.] [Yua?] [Now we've got our reason.] [A reason, no two ways about it.] [Can't turn down a request.] [It's a valid reason.] [Then it's decided.] [We're going.] [Let's go.] [Yeah!] [This is kinda funny, now that I think about it. Heehahaha!] [Are you a Kelly wannabe?] [Say, you think Kelly and Kuzuhara are gonna turn out well?] [Wanna bet?] [Let's.] [Then it looks like] [we can't let the island sink.] [Yeah.] [Right.] [You're right.] [Hey, do we have a Rat infestation now? Stop talking like them.] [...Oh. Sorry. I'm one of the Rats. I'm right next to the engine room now.] [Seriously?] [I see.] [How're things there?] [Nejiro is with—] [...] [...] [...]



Each time Spring-heeled Joplin spoke, text and voices flowed from the computer screens, the CCTV feeds and the countless cell phones and radios sprawled across the desk.

The individual messages, simply a series of words and sounds, gathered together to create one massive intention. It was a little different from an internet discussion—the words were like a swarm of insects coalescing into one massive organism.

They all had one thing in common.

They loved the island.

It was a singular, simplistic, and powerful commonality. So perhaps their course of action was set from the moment they became Spring-heeled Joplin.

It was a span of time only three minutes in length.

In that short period of time, a massive clump of chatter was compressed into something vaguely resembling the will of Spring-heeled Joplin.



Then let us act, my friends. Let us descend upon reality and build up a legend.

Everything that happens on the island from this point on will join the ranks of legends, fables, and myths.

Let us emerge into the legend.

What are we?

[We are Spring-heeled Joplin!]

[We have no form.] [We love reality.]

[Both coincidence] [and fate]

[Are in our hands.] [We are an urban legend!]

Heh heh heh! Heh heh heh heh heh! Yes. I understand, Spring-heeled Joplin!

Though we supposedly shape fate...all we can do, in the end, is guide and inform. And be guided and learn.

Let us do what we can. And after that, let us have faith.

Faith in the people of the island, the living legends who subsume even us.



Thousands of varied faces.

They—Spring-heeled Joplin—danced as they pulled the strings of the island.

They danced jovially and gleefully, as though it was perfectly natural to manipulate themselves on their own strings.

Was the dream their own, or someone else's? Having chosen to escape reality, they could no longer answer that question.

But that didn't matter in the least to them.



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Chapter 7: Girl & Ghoul

Stepping off the van, Kuzuhara looked down on the frenzy in the engine room and began with an angry sigh.

"...It's just one after another..."

He muttered, looking at the nostalgic dogs just below.

"After another...after another..."

He muttered, looking at the Western District members armed with guns below that.

"After another after another...after another after another...after another...after another...!"

And by the time his gaze fell to the Guard Team and two of the Ei siblings further below, his sigh had given way to a determined gaze.

He turned to Yili and quietly, but firmly, spoke.

"Miss Yili. This is Western District jurisdiction, correct?"

"Yes. It is."

"I see. Then this is the Western District, and I am here as the captain of the volunteer police force. I would appreciate it if you would put away your guns."

One of the men in black snorted.

"Ha! Who do you think you—"

Kuzuhara shot a glance at the source of the voice. That was enough.

"—are..."

The lights on the ceiling functioned as a backlight, highlighting Kuzuhara's glare and driving the private soldier to silence. The other executives exchanged glances, but did not interfere and chose to leave things to Yili.

“Mr. Kuzuhara!”

Jun yelled without thinking as she looked up at the ceiling. She was calling to him out of worry for his earlier injuries, but Lihuang saw his chance and closed the distance between them in a flash.

“Ugh!”

Jun swung and quickly parried the broadsword. Sparks flew everywhere, and even from the top of the room, Kuzuhara could see—

Kuzuhara flew.

“What?!”

“No way!”

With no regard for the screams of shock, Kuzuhara first descended to the floor directly below—where Kugi and Inui were—then ran through the path and jumped another five meters down to Jun’s level.

As he fell from one level to the next, he put the tips of his feet on the railings to absorb the impact and change directions. All he had to do now was fall straight down between Lihuang and Jun.

“?!”

“Aaack!”

A split second before Jun and Lihuang’s inevitable clash, the massive figure descended between them. Lihuang swung anyway, and Jun tried to stop before her chainsaw hit Kuzuhara—but she had made a half-turn before the swing, and could not halt the momentum so easily.

Standing between two deadly blades, Kuzuhara was at their mercy—

But with no screams, no screeching of metal, and no blood, Lihuang and Jun were stopped.

The moment the blades drew near, Kuzuhara had grabbed the guard of the broadsword with his right hand, and the blade of the chainsaw with his left.

Though his gloves were customized to be bulletproof, the chainsaw blade slowly ate away at the fabric.

But before Jun could even cut the power, Kuzuhara grasped the blade and forcibly stopped the chain.

“Huh...?”

“Damn you...!”

In contrast to Jun, who went quiet when her engine died, Lihuang angrily tried to haul his broadsword back.

But it was like trying to pull a metal rod out of hardened concrete. The blade did not even budge. And a second later—

“...Impossible...!”

Lihuang realized that he was floating.

The moment his arm tightened completely, Kuzuhara had lifted up the broadsword with one hand. Coupled with leverage, Kuzuhara was lifting more than just Lihuang’s body weight. But for him it was a simple task indeed.

By the time Lihuang realized he simply had to relax his arm, it was too late—he was already tumbling through the air, gaining momentum.

‘Impossible! He’s like a completely different person—’

Until not long ago, the air had been to his advantage. But when that atmosphere was taken away, Lihuang was left clearly exposed, unable to even break his fall properly.

He was sent flying—broadsword and all—and landed hard on his back.

“I’ve paid back my debt, sir,” Kuzuhara said, making a point of being deferent, and turned to Jun. “I want you to sheathe your weapons for now, too. It’s pretty clear who the bad guy is, but it’s not our job to judge who’s right and who’s wrong. Please.”

"Oh... umm...oh! Right!"

Jun had already shut off the other chainsaw as well. She bowed politely, now back to her usual self.

"Sorry," Kuzuhara said softly, and picked up the fallen broadsword. And with unbelievable ease he snapped the blade with his bare hands.

The Guard Team members reacted in different ways when they saw Kuzuhara break the sword as though it were a chopstick. Some whistled, and one quickly hid his metal bat.

Zhang alone seemed unfazed. He smirked.

"I expected no less from you. But how'd you find us? You couldn't have got here this fast if it's the explosion that tipped you off."

"...Some little birds sent me text messages."

"Figures. But for your information...you're an uninvited guest."

"Uninvited, huh. You're right."

They had loudly butted heads when he first came to the island. Kuzuhara replied gravely, though it wasn't clear if he was joking or being serious, "but the volunteer police force prides itself on arriving before the invitation."

Yili sighed loudly when she saw her brother being taken down. Another executive noticed and grinned.

"Is this all right?"

"Yes. And now our hands are tied further. After all, now we can be certain that our actions are being broadcast live to the rest of the island."

She glanced overhead at the blue van. Kelly's radio station was bulletproof. A rocket launcher might do the trick, but grenades probably couldn't stop her broadcasts.

Naturally, she was probably giving live coverage of the situation from inside her fortress. Even if she wasn't, one wrong move and she would probably

start a broadcast. Then it would become even more difficult to oversee the already-frustrated islanders.

And while the organization floundered, Kuzuhara could continue to carry out his mission. That would send his popularity through the roof.

Yili smiled faintly and whispered, almost sounding jealous, "in a way, Kelly and Kuzuhara might be an unbeatable combination."



What is that man?

Incredible. There's no other word for it.

Blocking that Jun girl's chainsaw with one hand...that's not normal.

So that's the infamous Kuzuhara of the Western District. The rumors make him out to be some sort of a monster, but...actually, he is. Frankly, I never want to end up fighting him.

...Wait. Not another tangent.

Anyway, damn that Joplin. The second I step out of the hotel, he sends me another cat...I rushed here because he said something about a clue to finding Miss Nazuna, but...this isn't the best time or place to be clue-searching.

Making up my mind to find those clues about Miss Nazuna, I focus first on a man at the bottom level.

He has a beauty on each arm; he's the boss of the Eastern District. I remember clearly because after I went to the Western District boss's bedside, he was next.

Careful not to get caught up in the mess, I quietly take a back door and head for the entrance next to the engine at the bottom of the room.

I spot some men in black lying on the floor along the way—probably Western District cronies. Someone must have knocked them out before they went inside. I'm grateful. I'll thank them properly if I ever find out who it was.

Once I am at the lowest level of the engine room, I see the Eastern boss's back.

I'll approach him slowly...and then what?

...If I tap him on the shoulder suddenly, I might get turned into swiss cheese. And what about those two women? They look like they're just hanging off his arms, but they're completely guarded about their surroundings.

For now, I should take it slow. Be cautious. ...Huh? Part of the engine's on fire...was it the explosion I heard earlier?

I don't know too much about this, but the engine should be an important part of the island.

When my thoughts reach that point, a chill runs down my spine.

If this island sinks, I'll be forced back to the outside world.

And if that happens...what happens to the mask of Yakumo Amagiri?

The thought scares me. I...I want to tell someone how I feel. I want to confide in someone. And I think it would be nice if Miss Nazuna happened to be that someone. But I can't spontaneously tell her. I know I'm nothing but trouble for her.

...But before all that...I just hope she's all right.

With so many thoughts on my mind, I inch closer to the Eastern boss. Now, how should I begin? Or maybe I should just kidnap him—that might be easier.

At that moment.

An ear-splitting noise shrieks from above.



The noise came from the speakers on Kelly's van.

After a burst of what sounded like feedback came an incongruently lazy voice and the sound of someone chewing on something.

<Munch...ah. Finally got this hijacking thing to work.>

At the same time, a female voice squawked from the wagon—"Whoa, what the?! The hell's wrong with the gear?!"—but few ears were on her.

"Taifei?!"

The voice was a familiar one from the round table. Yili and the Western District executives were floored.

<Hey, everyone. Looks like you're just full of energy, getting into such a big scuffle. You're gonna be starving later.>

The first to react to Taifei's vaguely oblivious tone was Lihuang, who had just gotten to his feet in spite of his aching body.

"Excellent, Taifei! Now negate this radio broadcast completely! Then we can destroy this rabble instantly with the Western District's combined forces!"

'I'll be joining the purge, I suppose. But so long as my countrymen emerge victorious, I am willing to make the sacrifice... And I know Lilei will manage to make it out somehow.'

With a masochistic laugh, Lihuang sensed his atmosphere return.

But Taifei too easily cut that flow.

<Mhm...I get all the input from the mic here, so I heard you, Lihuang. But unfortunately, this isn't the time for that... Munch.>

"...What? What are you talking about?" Lihuang snarled. The voice from the speaker continued.

It disclosed one simply ominous fact.

<Well...you see...mm... The bomber's in there. Munch... What was his name... Ginga Kanashima?>

Yet again, silence enveloped the engine room.

"...What is the meaning of this, Taifei?" Asked Yili.

<Munch...well, I figured out pretty easily that the bombs were remotely detonated. But I didn't know where from, until now. But remember how one went off just next to you, Lihuang? I thought there might be a hint there, so I focused on the engine room...

<And, well, I just found a blip signaling the explosion. And...it was coming from inside the engine room. ...Munch.>



What is that man on the speaker talking about? Bombs? Remotes? Is he talking about the explosion just now? In other words...the bomber is somewhere in here?

...Wait...is that what Spring-heeled Joplin meant? Is the bomber responsible for what happened to Miss Nazuna? No. Wait. I'm jumping off a very slippery slope here. I don't even know what kind of injuries she sustained, anyway.

But one thing's for certain; if the bomber's here, I should watch out for them. I look around, scanning the room for suspicious faces.

Everyone else looks around at one another, too. ...Huh. Wait, a lot of them are stopping...

Slowly, everyone freezes with their eyes pointed in one direction.

Obviously...in *my* direction.

Of course.

Now...how do I resolve this misunderstanding?



The next few dozen seconds that followed were a frenzied free-for-all.

But that did not mean the organizations battled each other.

People from both organizations were mixed up in a furious chase after Yakumo Amagiri. Kuzuhara had frozen the moment he heard the name 'Ginga Kanashima', but when he saw that the man in white everyone was after was unarmed and was not being hostile, he fought through the chaos and returned to the van for the time being.

Kugi—whether afraid of being caught in the fray or not wanting to run into Kuzuhara as he climbed—descended immediately to protect Yili. At the same time, Inui cried, "shit! Yakumo?! I'll pass. Remember, kiddies! Courage and idiocy are two very different things!" and scrambled into a corner. Remarkable was the fact that the two dogs did not break eye contact until the very end.

In the chaos, the first to charge at the ghoul in white was the girl with flowers in her hair and lead pipe in her hand.

"You are Yakumo. Real Yakumo. It is goodbye. Goodbye, nap friend."

"It's true I'm Yakumo, but...I'm not the bomber."

"It is not matter. It is goodbye. I am sorry."

Even as they carried out a conversation while running along railings, the people around them did not flounder. Jun and Zhang had reason to believe he was responsible for Nazuna's injuries, never giving Yakumo a moment of reprieve. However, Jun never turned on her chainsaws, perhaps out of consideration for Kuzuhara.



This...isn't very good. Because of my nap buddy here, most of all. And once Mr. Kugi and the rest join in, it's going to be outright bad. I'm scared. Come to think of it, that rainbow-haired man over there...was he the one I failed to kill back then? Hayato Inui? Although he's hiding somewhere right now, so I don't really care about him.

Anyway, I have to resolve this situation. ...Oh. Whenever I was hunted down at the Eastern District casino, there was a convenient—yes. Misaki. I used to take her hostage to make my getaway. But I don't think she'd come all this way.

But I harbor hope in my heart as I leap down to the level underneath, and look around.

A girl who somehow reminds me of Misaki is running my way, all alone.

I've seen her before—



"Ohh...what do you think is going on here, Sherlock Liverpool? There aren't enough clues here for me to piece together the answer."

"I'd prefer if you focused on helping me find a way out of here."

Members of the two organizations were standing on the walkways leading to the doors, and the upper levels were teeming with the Western District's private soldiers, who were armed with guns. The siblings—being outsiders to being with—were surrounded completely and left squatting behind a chain-link fence.

The crazy cast of characters seemed to be after someone—and the chase showed no signs of slowing.

Just what kind of person would deserve such a massive number of pursuers, Charlotte wondered, cautiously peering out.

She spotted someone moving at inhuman speeds along one of the railings.

A man in white. The one who fell from the explosion at the junkyard—

The angelically handsome man who had then spoken to her.

“Ah! It’s him!”

“What is it, Charlotte? ...Charlotte?!”

There he was—the man who was likely the subject of the photograph. The man who stole Charlotte’s heart at first sight. The man Sherlock once suggested might be Yakumo Amagiri.

And that was why, with no regard for Sherlock’s dissuasion, she ran.

She shook off Sherlock’s arms and sprinted with everything she had, though bullets could start flying at any second.

‘This is my chance...this is my only chance...’



What? Why is this girl running to me? She’s not armed, I think. But she doesn’t seem to be a martial artist.

Ah. I remember. I’ve seen her two months ago...the female half of the detective siblings. The one I entrusted Miss Nazuna to. Come to think of it, the bespectacled boy running after her is a familiar face too.

But I’ve looked into them; they should be civilians.

Then...I don’t want to trouble a girl who took care of Miss Nazuna, but...I’ll get her to help me. At least until I can resolve this misunderstanding.



“...! I knew I should have stayed down there.”

Once he had checked to see Kelly was safe, Kuzuhara looked down at the lower levels to find that the situation was moving at breakneck speed.

A man in white was holding a girl with blond hair and blue eyes hostage, facing down everyone else as he backed away toward the exit on the central walkway.

“CHARLOTTE!”

When his sister was taken hostage, Sherlock cried out helplessly and looked around. He spotted the broken broadsword and picked up the sharp half.

“I have to save her...I have to save Charlotte from the monster...!” He whispered to himself, holding the broken weapon, but the Guard Team, led by Jun and her chainsaws, stood in his way.

“No! We’ll save Charlotte. I won’t tell you not to worry...but please believe in us!”

Tension ran through Jun’s voice. She had never seen Yakumo bring a hostage to harm, but the situation was more dire than ever and no one knew what he might resort to in the confusion.

The Guard Team was not completely certain that Yakumo was the bomber, but first they had to capture him. The Western District members overhead exchanged glances but did not move. Perhaps they suspected that one of the Guard Team was actually Ginga Kanashima in disguise.

Because Ginga Kanashima always changed his appearance through plastic surgery and the expert use of disguises, no one knew what he actually looked like. The one unique characteristic was his prosthetic right arm, but prosthetics these days were impossible to tell apart without a detailed feel of their texture and movements.

In other words, thanks to the plastic surgery, every man in the engine room was a suspect. It could be Zhang, and not even Gitarin was completely exempt from suspicion.

Sensing Jun’s unease, Sherlock refused to stop.

“Charlotte! Damn it...let her go! Let my sister go, Killer Ghoul!”



Killer Ghoul.

It should be a familiar moniker by now. I thought I'd put on this mask of my own free will. But for some reason, it all makes me uneasy today.

Have I lost my mind after all? Oh...I want to see Miss Nazuna. I want to talk to Miss Nazuna. And if I really was the one who nearly killed her...I almost hope I'll be cut down here.

...No. Right now, I have to focus on resolving this misunderstanding. But I never expected the lead pipe girl to stop, too. I thought someone like her might charge in with no regard for the hostage.

"I'm sorry. Don't worry—I'm not going to hurt you," I whisper to the hostage. If I accidentally end up dropping her onto the engine below, I could never live with myself. Then maybe I shouldn't have grabbed a hostage in the first place. But what choice did I have?

But the hostage stares into my face and drops a bomb.

"Are you...Takehito Isegawa?"

No one else could hear her, but...I think my heart is about to stop.

How...? How does she know my real name? I was extra careful to keep my name under wraps on this island. There shouldn't be any proof! Don't tell me...did information about me somehow end up on the island? Information that—that points to the me behind my mask?

"You've got the wrong guy."

Before I know it, the mask of Yakumo Amagiri is denying the truth.

The girl is silent for a moment, but she soon utters the name of my mask.

"You're...really...Yakumo Amagiri, the Killer Ghoul?"

"Yes. I am. But don't worry; I probably don't kill women or children."

"I see...I thought you were an angel. But...it's a funny combination, isn't it? An angel and a ghoul? God might punish me for that one."

She says strange things. And her Japanese is perfect.

But the really strange thing comes after that.

"But I'm so glad. Now...I can say everything."



Breaking the silence was the voice of the hostage.

"Sherlock!"

Her voice firmer and more determined than ever before, she cried out to Sherlock with her hands held behind her back.

"Charlotte?! Charlotte!"

Sherlock heard his sister's call and pushed past Jun and the Guard Team.

"Sherlock! I...I just have one last thing to ask you!"

"Don't say 'last'! Please, Charlotte! I...I'll answer any question you want!" Sherlock cried, tears streaming down his face. Charlotte, also in tears, looked into his devoted eyes.

"Who...who are you?!"

"...Huh?" Jun's jaw dropped.

The crying brother beside her blankly raised his voice.

"What are you talking about, Charlotte?! I'm me!"

But Charlotte wailed, unable to hide her emotions—as though the tension had finally snapped like a thread pulled to its limit.

"I...I...I've been too scared...too scared to ask... Because if I did! Y-you might kill the real him! For...for two months now...yes. For the past two months, since you first switched places!"

The thread had not been pulled just recently. It had been constantly going more and more taut over the past two months.

"Calm down, Charlotte! This is no time for your detective games!"

"M-my brother's alive! I know he is! Because...you know everything about my past...everything only he would know! It means...he's alive to tell you everything! All this time...I was so scared...I didn't know who was on your side...and whenever someone else was around, you stuck close by me and wouldn't leave...! I...I couldn't even consult Jun! But...but now...I think people from every side can finally listen to me...!"

"Charlotte! That's surprisingly logical coming from you, but you have to trust me! I'm me! I'm not an impostor!" Sherlock argued through his tears, but Charlotte continued ruthlessly.

"And today! When the bomb went off...you reacted too quickly! Faster than Jun, Mr. Lihuang, or Lilei! As if...as if you knew it would happen!"

At that point, the people who had wondered if the hostage was losing her mind flinched and turned to Sherlock.

Meanwhile, Sherlock—finally put through his sister's arguments—shook his head with a sigh like any other.

"Charlotte...maybe you should have become a novelist instead?"

Letting the broken blade fall to the floor, he cradled his face in his hands and took off his glasses—

"If you'd just stayed on the mainland writing your little stories..."

He smirked.

"...Then you'd never have gotten into this mess in the first place."



At that moment, Sherlock—Ginga Kanashima—spread his arms wide, and as if on cue, a series of explosions struck the engine room.



What...? What's happening?!

I don't really understand, but I avoid the chain of explosions going off around me. They aren't very powerful. Not even grenade-level. But the bombs must have been installed all along the walls and the wire fences if the shrapnel is flying all the way here. I twist around to keep the hostage safe. We aren't close enough to seriously have to worry, but it would leave a bad taste in my mouth if she happens to get hurt. Besides, she helped Miss Nazuna—I owe her.

The world slowly moves in my focused thoughts. I have no idea what was going on, but I decide to first assess the situation.

The bombs aren't just explosives, it seems. They also include smokescreens. Now the men at the top of the room can't open fire carelessly. There are only two Western District people down here, but one wrong shot, and the guys up there are in for a barrage of bullets from inside the smoke.

Damn it... What is going on here? Damn you, Joplin. Dragging me into this mess.

Next time...I'll drown you with complaints over the radio.



'He...protected me?'

The self-proclaimed Killer Ghoul who took her hostage protected her from the sudden explosions. He had thought over this decision very carefully in his head, but to Charlotte it simply looked like the man she admired was acting on reflex, risking his life to keep her safe.

If not for the situation, her eyes might have turned to hearts and she might have flushed a deep red. But she couldn't afford to do that now.

Exacerbating her urgency was her brother's voice, echoing from the smoke. But that voice slowly distorted, transforming into a stranger's.

"Heh...heh... Gahahahaha! It's been a while, Kitten. Thanks for the topless shot this morning—it was one hell of a pick-me up! Hahahahaha!"

"You're really...Mr. Kanashima?" Jun asked incredulously, her voice echoing throughout the room.

"Believe it. Yessir. How long has it been now, half a year? I thought I'd get you back for the cuts, but after this morning I guess I can let it slide. I'm just after one person. *One* person. Ahahahahahaha!"

His laughter resounded, but it was difficult to pinpoint his location—were everyone's ears thrown off by the blasts? Or was he actually moving around?

At that point, the voice turned to Charlotte.

"So...I have a question for you, wannabe detective."

"Ah!"

"How did you know I wasn't your brother?"

Though terrified, Charlotte responded. She was determined to learn as much as she could about her brother's whereabouts.

"...I've always wanted to be a detective...so I observed people whenever I could. And...I've been around Sherlock the most...so I know all the habits that he doesn't know about. Whenever he drinks coffee, his right eye twitches...but he suddenly stopped doing that two months ago. And...even his irises were different. So...I got scared and decided to compare his fingerprints. And then...I knew."

Standing there was not the oblivious girl from before, or an ace detective. Simply a sister fearing for her brother's safety. Kanashima whistled.

"Gahahahahaha! Even Holmes wouldn't go that far! And for two damn months you never let it show that you realized who I was?! Shit! Your

brother said you were an imbecile, but it looks like *he's* the one who failed harder than you. Ahaha! Hahahahaha!"

"Is...is he alive?"

"Gahahaha! I guess you deserve a reward! The answer is...yes. He's alive! Every time you went on about your crap memories, I excused myself and contacted him from the bathroom!"

"Where is he now?"

At that moment, his face emerged from the smoke—right in front of Charlotte—and stopped.

"*You're* gonna have to do the legwork, detective."

Sneering with her brother's face, Ginga Kanashima disappeared into the smoke again. Charlotte staggered in shock and anger, but catching her before she fell was the Killer Ghoul.



Why...?

Why am I still here?

This is my chance. I should be taking off. So why am I still here? If I'm worried about my hostage, I can take her with me and let her go somewhere safe.

...No, wait. Somewhere...safe? On this island? Why is someone like her on the island to begin with?

Is she...normal?

That's right. Even if she is, could you really say that someone who lives on this island is normal?

No. No. This isn't the time to be philosophizing.

I think I'm breaking apart. To bits. But is it the mask, or the real me?

Someone. Someone please tell me. Someone give me that push. Break my mask or pull it off.

What am I? As the Killer Ghoul, killing people is all I know how to do.

Then what? Who am I supposed to kill now? The bomber? The Western District people? The Guard Team? No. That's not it. I have to take this girl somewhere safe. No, wait. That has nothing to do with my mask. No. No no no no. I...what in the world am I trying to do?

If Yakumo Amagiri, the mask, can't be of any help...

What's left beneath it?

If the real me is normal...if the real me is a normal person...what would he do now?



"Yili. To the exit."

Even as the room filled with smoke, Kugi calmly continued to watch Yili's back.

"He got us. I was hoping we could end things here... Do you think he's going to escape?"

"I'll go in there, Yili. Call for help and seal the exits."

Leaving Yili in the soldiers' care, Kugi ran back into the smoke.

That was when a voice crackled from the radio in his coat pocket.

<Yo! Looks like things just got hot down there! You feelin' the buzz? The high?>

"I'm not a freak like you."

<No, you are. Deep down, you've been itching for shit like this, weren't ya? *This is it! This* is why I just can't keep away from the damned island. Here, I can be an action hero anytime! C'mon, put on those imaginary wires and kick your soul into high gear! Use your past as your own stuntman and let the present shine!>

It sounded more like self-encouragement than anything, but Kugi pressed on cautiously through the smoke and replied in a low voice through the radio. He was essentially giving his position away, but this was one foe Kugi could not ignore.

"You certainly have a talent for aggravating me."

<Thanks, pal. And that's why I think you should think about working with me.>

"Actually, I'd prefer to kill you now while I'm here."

The very idea of teaming up to fight a lone enemy was absurd. The series of explosions had surprised Kugi, but the enemy was unarmed. And even if he had a handgun, there was no reason for Kugi to team up with Rainbow-Head to do his job.

And as though having read his mind in the silence, Inui responded with a surprisingly serious voice.

<...You think he's alone?>

"What?"

<What if he's not using this smokescreen to get away? What if he's using it to catch us unawares?>

Kugi coldly analyzed Inui's words and arrived at one possibility. And when the Eastern District boss's claim that there was a traitor in the Western District's midst rose to mind, the possibility became an omen and spurred Kugi to rapidly survey his surroundings.

The smoke obscured almost everything. The ventilation system seemed to have just kicked in, but it seemed to be malfunctioning or blocked; the smoke showed no signs of clearing.

But Kugi focused his vision through the nearly-opaque smoke.

For a second, he spotted the Western District executives and their private soldiers, and sensed something very wrong about their movements. The omen finally became a conviction.

And when someone quietly held up a gun among the Western District men, the conviction became reality.

On the man's forehead was a special pair of goggles that helped him see through the smoke. As though he were prepared for the smokescreen. His gun was pointed at one of the Western District soldiers, and a gunshot resounded through the room.

But the one who fell to the floor with a scream was the traitor holding the gun.

"?!"

<Looks like it's not a completely blind shot in here.>

Kugi turned again at the voice from the radio. Through the smoke he saw a head of rainbow-colored hair.

<So, change your mind about teaming up yet?>

The first gunshot was the trigger for the next act. More gunshots sounded from around the room, sometimes accompanied by pained gasps.

Because of the visibility, it was impossible to tell who had shot who.

From the upper level, where the smoke rose, they watched.

Kuzuhara heard the gunshots as he descended the steps.

"Those idiots!"



The Rats made monotonous remarks as they watched the chaos from above.

"It's started."

"Yeah."

"He fired."

"Yeah."

"I guess it's time."

"Time for us to work."

"It's time."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. Right, Nejiro?"

In the dark, the boy in the wheelchair spoke.

"Yes. It's time. And as for the rest...remember what we agreed on."

"Yeah."

"Yeah. I don't really get it, though."

"But Nejiro's always right."

"Yeah."

"He is."

With faint smiles on their faces, the children finished their preparations.

It consisted of something very simple.

The adult beside Nejiro clenched their fists as the gunfire continued. Nejiro felt nothing at the sight, and thought only of what would happen once the frenzy of a party was over.



The Western District soldiers in goggles did not waste any time or bullets. Their sights were set on their prey in the lowest level of the engine room. The target: Gitarin, boss of the Eastern District. Although they had never expected him to show up, the men had been ordered to prioritize the highest ranking organization members on the scene. In order, after Gitarin would most likely be Lihuang or Yili. However, a separate team of five was already sent in to deal with the latter.

Through their goggles, they spotted what seemed to be Gitarin's silhouette. The two women hanging off his arms confirmed their suspicions.

Intent on a kill, they tried to close in—but realized something.

That something familiar was fixed over Gitarin's face.

The same goggles they were wearing.

'How...how did he know about the smokescreen...?'

The question rose to their minds in a second. And before it was answered, the man leading the team realized that a massive figure had landed before him.

Because they were relying on their goggles, they failed to notice that the smoke was already clearing, and that they were visible from above.

Souji Kuzuhara, the man of the massive frame, reached out to the astonished man.

And by the time the smoke cleared, Kuzuhara had taken center stage.



After shooting a nearby enemy, Inui was going down to a lower level when he spotted a white figure. His heart nearly stopped at the traumatic memory, but as he scrutinized the man's face Inui furrowed his brow.

"...? That guy in white...that's gotta be Yakumo. But what the hell's wrong with him? He used to scare the piss out of me before..."

Stopping for a scant few seconds, he grinned and looked up, breaking into a run.

"...Ah well. For now, I'll enjoy the mo--"

As Inui searched for his next target, his voice cut off.

Something had grazed his side.

"...Huh?"

A sharp pain overwhelmed him, and he instantly understood what had happened.

'Fuck! Took a hit!'

Before he could cry out in pain, his years of experience spurred his body forward. Thankfully the shot had only grazed his side, and he didn't seem to have lost too much flesh.

'Who the hell was that? Kugi should've taken care of the goons on the other side...'

Remembering the man who was originally his enemy—the man whose skills he trusted because of that fact—Inui turned to find the source of the bullet.

But there was no one pointing a gun at him there.

He simply heard a voice.

"...Did you...really think...?"

A chill ran down Inui's spine.

The low voice belonged to the man he had just recalled.

"Did you really think I'd cooperate with the likes of you?"

Something stung. The man he thought had gone the other way had actually concealed his movements and followed him. Inui put on a self-deprecating grin.

'Has he changed that much? ...Or am I the one who's changed?'

Internally slapping himself, Inui feigned nonchalance as he asked a question.

"...Never got hit in the back before. But...why the hell're you *talking* to me? You coulda just shot me and finished me off."

"I was simply paying you back for two months ago...for calling the van."

"Hah! Look at the shadow now, clinging to fucking *debts!*"

"And now that debt is paid."

'Oh shit. He's gonna shoot.'

Inui's mind and instincts simultaneously drew the same conclusion, forcibly twisting his body around. At the same time, gunfire and a flash of light cut past Inui's wound. At that moment Inui's gun was pointing toward Kugi, but aimed at a point behind him—at the woman in the white *qipao*.

Inui had moved exactly as he had warned, without a moment's hesitation. So Kugi did not hesitate, either, as he reacted. He took a half-step back to block the line of fire with his own body and stepped forward again to shoot.

"Hah... Ahahahahaha!"

Forgetting even his aching side, Inui howled in laughter and pulled the trigger.

As though mirroring Inui's injury, the bullet grazed Kugi's side before hitting the wall of the engine room and shattering.

"Ha! You're hilarious, you know that, dumbass? A fucking *riot!*" Inui cried, and chose to let his instincts take over.

It would simply be a matter of killing or being killed. Deciding that it might be interesting to be killed by his own mirror image, Inui decided to finally abandon his emotions and his rational thought, and pulled the—

The ground shook.

They were only inches away now, but a broken broadsword adorned with a metal lanyard shot up between them through the tight chain-link walkway.

Reflexively, they turned to the origin of the blade, and saw the one who had thrown it.

On the level below, Souji Kuzuhara was taking down foes and taking shots to his bulletproof clothing while facing his enemies, as he finally cast a sharp glare at the two dogs above. That was all.

His gaze immediately returned to the battle at hand, but that one glare spoke louder than any words in the room, and pierced the dogs harder than any bullet could.

Inui felt fear, then. It was right there—fear that dwarfed the inherent terror posed by a gun. Kugi must have felt the same, from his suddenly pale complexion.

“...I know Mr. Kuzuhara ain’t gonna kill me...so why the hell am I scared shitless?” Inui wondered as though to himself.

Kugi responded with silence, but his eyes quickly flew open as he leapt to the side and pulled the trigger.

At that moment, a man taking aim at Yili from the wall-side corridor fell to his knees with a cry.

Without sparing a glance at Inui, Kugi disappeared like a shadow into the clearing smoke.

“Tch...so the princess is more important than wanting to kill me, eh.”

A little disappointed at Kugi’s departure, Inui pulled the trigger.

A man aiming for Gitarin on the opposite walkway from Kugi collapsed.

“Seriously. You’re practically handcuffed to her.”

Inui broke into a run, not looking back at Kugi as he put on a wry grin.

“Damn...now he’ll never come along, even if I suggest going pirating.”



As the smoke cleared, I saw.

I simply saw. That was all.

Souji Kuzuhara. I'd heard the name. And about his way of life. And about his motivation. So I thought I knew who he was from hearsay.

But it was completely different seeing him in person.

Is this...a way of life, too?

I heard he hated guns. But how? How could he put himself in their way? How could he intentionally put his life on the line for something that doesn't have to do with himself?

And above all that...why doesn't this man try to kill anyone?

He throws himself in front of guns without even blinking. And his opponents show him no mercy. So why? Why does he choose to make the fight harder? If he snatches a gun, he could easily use it. With his strength, he could snap their necks and end it instantly. They're really trying to kill him, so he shouldn't have to feel guilty...especially not on this island!

Why does he fight like this? It's completely abnormal.

It's abnormal, but...

But why am I so drawn to this abnormal way of life?

I think. Honestly. Rattled even more than when I faced my first gun on this island, I understand my own feelings.

I...bring terror with the mask of the Killer Ghoul?

So that no one can touch me?

What...is this? This sensation...I killed people because I didn't want to die. That was the beginning. And...

Oh. I see.

I've been killing people to escape.

Not because the sky is blue. And not for self-defense or out of necessity. I did this to escape. To hide behind the mask of Yakumo Amagiri. To hide. To hide. In order to hide inside a mask that never existed to begin with...how many...did I kill...?

Something incongruous has been nagging at my thoughts ever since I spoke with Miss Nazuna. And that something, slowly eating away at my heart, is reaching the zenith of its influence. I am showered with despair, but for some reason I become calm.

I'm at a crossroads, I think.

Am I truly insane, or not? I know that by the time I'm able to shake this twisted incongruity from my heart, I'll be standing with my head held high. I killed people because the sky was blue? That's not holding my head high. To hold your head high means to not need to lie to yourself.

What...is this incongruity? Did I really...do something to Miss Nazuna?

Afraid to face the truth, I turn to the girl next to me.

"Hey...if you want to stay normal on this island...what do you think you should do?"

Even I know I'm just relying on others now. But a sad look rises to the detective's eyes as she answers my question.

"I think...just trying to stay normal on this island is insanity."

At that moment, another bomb explodes in a corner of the engine room.



When he saw that the bomb went off in the direction he was pointing his gun, Kanashima—wearing Sherlock’s face—howled in laughter.

“Ahaha... Ahahahahaha! This is what an all-out brawl is all about! You can’t tell who’s on which side. And even if you’re prepared to kill everyone else, a poke in the back just might kill you before you try!”

Another part of the engine had exploded, and the mechanism was beginning to creak. But it did not stop. Its usual hum swallowed the high-pitched squeals.

“Heh. Whoever made this thing must’ve been a goddamn genius. Then again, if that bomb’d blown it to bits, I would’ve been in trouble too! Gahahahahaha!”

No one listened to the madman, and the madman was not speaking to be heard.

But some people in the fray reacted to the gun in his hand.

“Hee hee hee hee hee! Look, look! He’s got a gun! When’d he take it out? Hee hee hee hee!”

“What the hell?! How does shooting a gun make a bomb go off?!”

“M-maybe it’s not actually a gun. Maybe it’s a miniaturized grenade launcher?”

“I would love to have one of those!”

As the Guard Team tossed out their comments, Lilei—who had searched him before coming to the engine room—furrowed her brow.

“It is impossible. It is not with you. Before.”

Had Kanashima caught her voice in the din? He swiveled around with the agility of a dancer and leaned down at Lilei.

“Ah! Thanks for the body search back there, little lady.”

Snickering, he let his right hand drop to his side. At that moment, it made a stomach-churning turn and rotated, and a part of the arm opened up as though the skin was tearing apart.

“?!”

He smirked when he noticed the reactions around him. Kanashima returned his arm to its original shape.

His fingers and wrist moved fluidly and naturally. It was impossible to tell that they were artificial.

“You gotta realize that there are all kinds of hiding places on a man’s body! Ahahahahaha! And for your information, I just had to use my fingers to detonate the bombs. I pulled out this baby to pull the wool over your eyes just now, but unfortunately it leaves an empty space in my arm.”

“Is that...a detonator?”

“That’s riiiiight. This isn’t a gun—it’s a detonator. What kinda dumbass makes a gun-shaped detonator, anyway? But the bombs that go with this one...”

He pulled the trigger mid-monologue. There was a click, and a strange silence fell over the room.

For a moment, everything was still. But after a few seconds’ delay, there was a blast and the room shook. From the length of the blast it must have been quite large.

“...Nice and big, am I right?”

On the other side of the engine room, Kuzuhara shook as gunshots howled.

He leapt out without a second thought to take down the men aiming for Gitarin, one after another. But his refusal to kill left him one inevitable weakness.

And yet Kuzuhara did not back down. The bullets pummeled his bulletproof clothes and, though not visibly, damaged his ribs and his organs.

But Kuzuhara staggered forward, refusing to run, and pushed guns away with his gloves and stopped bullets from firing as he butted heads with one of the attackers.

He had not heard the exchange between Charlotte and Kanashima, and did not fully understand the situation. Though he knew that Kanashima must have revealed himself, Kuzuhara did not act any differently.

All he did was subdue those who attacked him—not with weapons, but with raw power.

Forcibly and bluntly.

Kanashima Ginga grinned bitterly when he spotted Kuzuhara's heroics in the distance, where the latter completely ignored him. With a shrug, Kanashima turned to the people around himself.

"You folks are in the way...so get off the stage."

With a vulgar smirk, he picked up a gun from a fallen soldier. Zhang and Lilei saw their chance and leapt, but a railing near them exploded and showered them with shrapnel. Lilei rode the force of the blast and landed on a walkway one level lower, and Zhang gasped in pain as some of the shrapnel hit him, forcing him to back down.

"I told you, I can control the bombs over there with my fingers. Did you seriously think I was done?"

Though he was no match for Lilei or Jun in battle, Kanashima had the entire atmosphere under his command.

The Guard Team held out hope for Carlos, but Kanashima had also been observing the shot on Lihuang, along with Lilei's movements, to keep himself in Carlos's blind spot.

<The stairs are in the way. And if I wanna relocate, I gotta pass by where Inui's running wild. Frankly, I'd prefer to wait it out here.>

The Guard Team collectively gritted their teeth when they received word from Carlos. Kanashima's advantage was solidified. But there was one person from the East who didn't bow to the air around them.

"You're backed into a corner either way, I'm afraid."

A voice buzzed through a megaphone amidst the gunfire. Gitarin, who had made it to the door without anyone's notice, addressed Kanashima. "Do you really think you can pull off a victory against so many people? I won't ask you to surrender, but don't you think it would be harsh of me to tell you to die when Jun is listening?"

It was an ultimatum packaged in friendly banter. Kanashima snickered. "... You're right. If this keeps up, you're gonna be right."

"Right?"

"When I blew up the engine...did you think I was just trying to *scare* you?"

With a dramatic pause, Kanashima spread his arms wide and looked up at the ceiling.

"That was just the intro. The beginning of the end."

Those who were listening to Kanashima, cautiously surrounding him, looked up—

"...You've gotta be kidding me."

On the corridor closest to the ceiling, which circled the entire engine room, stood dozens of boys and girls. They looked almost like decorations as they held small-caliber handguns and bowguns that even children like them could use. Like executioners passing judgement on all those in the engine room, they stood emotionlessly on the walkway.

"Hey...are they Rats?!"

"...! Nejiro's friends...? How?!"

The Guard Team gasped at the sight of the rodents above. Kanashima was highly amused.

"Threatening Nejiro was a piece of cake. You already know they installed the bombs on the engine, right? I just scared him a little, saying I'd kill a couple of the kids. And Nejiro was cooperating before he could even say 'rats'. I heard you did something awful to the kid, eh? Messed up his legs good? Ahahahahaha!"

"That was Yili, actually, but more importantly...that makes sense. The Rats don't know anything but the life they have on the island. Nothing would scare them more than the thought of the island sinking. Not even death," Gitarin nodded uncomfortably. But he suddenly set aside that emotion and returned to a businesslike tone, "taking that into account, let me repeat myself."

"...Huh?"

"You're backed into a corner either way, I'm afraid."

And just as Kanashima had earlier, Gitarin looked up at the ceiling.

Kanashima did the same, and realized what was happening.

The guns and bowguns in the children's high-robotic grips were all pointed at him.

"Hey, hey, Nejiro's not smart or stupid enough to try and kill me now."

"Not to worry. They won't open fire. If they did, we wouldn't make it out unscathed, and I'd feel awful for the valiant volunteer police captain over there. I just had them aim their guns at you to make a point."

"...What?"

Kanashima frowned. This time, Gitarin smirked with amusement.

"You took the Rats' home hostage to give orders to Nejiro. We simply did the opposite."

"..."

"We took Nejiro hostage to command the other Rats."

It was hard to tell if they had heard, but the Rats began to whisper to one another.

"We've gotta do it." "Without Nejiro—" "—we won't know what to do."
"Nope." "It's no good." "Nope." "And scary." "Yeah. And easy."

"She's always got a katana pointed at Nejiro."

"So we have to do what she says." "Really?" "Yeah."

"Because we love Nejiro."

There was a creak as Nejiro's wheelchair emerged from the doors.

The Rat King was clearly exhausted, and the adult standing at his side like a butler or a secretary coldly spoke to him.

"If you move, Carlos is probably going to shoot you. Sorry, but you're still our hostage. Stay put."

And in one swift movement, she broke into a run and leapt from one level above, crouching like a spring as she landed before the two outsiders.

In front of Yakumo and Charlotte, who had been rooted to the ground for some time.

The entire Guard Team called her name at the sight of her slender form.

"NAZUNA!"

"Huh...?"

"Miss...Nazuna?"

Charlotte and Yakumo, standing side-by-side, gasped in unison with the very same expression.

How was Nazuna there in good health, when she was supposed to be bedridden? As many people asked the same question in their heads, Nazuna grinned as though showing off her presence.

Then she walked up to Charlotte and quietly whispered a word of apology.

"Are you all right? ...I'm sorry I got you involved in our problems."

"Nazuna! A-a-are you all right? You *are*, aren't you?! Thank goodness...thank goodness!"

“Don’t worry. I’ll waste that creep and rescue your brother now.”

As though consoling a child, Nazuna gave Charlotte a pat on the head and turned to the dazed Yakumo.

“Hey...you’ve got a bad habit of taking girls hostage, huh. You should think about giving that up. You know how badly you scare Misaki all the time?”

Rejecting the act of hostage-taking with the word ‘habit’, Nazuna strode away before turning, just once. And with a faint smile she whispered to Yakumo,

“Sorry. And...thanks for worrying about me.”

Yakumo had no idea what was happening.

But Nazuna’s words were enough for him.



This engine room is like a party full of mad dogs.

Hunting dogs, guard dogs, mad dogs, wild dogs, pet dogs, and military dogs. A party of dogs, by dogs, for dogs. There are some cats and rats mixed in there, but what does that matter?

The only two outsiders here are me and my hostage.

What is an outsider to do here? Especially when he doesn’t even know much about himself?

The hostage girl showed so much courage. I don’t know the details, but even I can tell that she’s played her part.

Let’s suppose that, while I am hesitating in the corner, someone asks me to dance.

Thinking that way is essentially like getting drunk on myself, but to be honest, it’d be painful otherwise.

"...I'm going to cut him down now. I don't have a grudge against him, but this is my job. That's the only reason I'm going to cut him down."

That sounds familiar. It's like she's testing me.

Then, it hits me. Our conversation then wasn't just something I dreamed up. It really happened.

"But...would you still help me?"

I...I...I!

"I will."

The words are out of my mouth before I know it.

"Miss Nazuna, I love...no. Never mind. Not right now. But I think I want to follow my heart. My emotions. And do something to that guy down there. So...umm..."

Because I love you. I want to do this because I love you. Because I want to help you. That emotion alone is the reason I want to fight some guy I don't have any personal grudge against—why can't I say it? I've already told her how I felt, so why can't I do it again?!

Nazuna smiles, her eyes on me, and speaks.

"Then let's do this together."

My expression does not change. But on the inside, I'm...happy.

Oh...right now, I don't care if I'm normal or not.

I...I'm completely satisfied.

I have the hostage stand far back before lightly rushing over toward Miss Nazuna, who's already started for the bomber.

The man holds a gun-shaped detonator in his right hand, and an ordinary gun in his left.

"...The Killer Ghoul? Hah. Hahahaha! What's an outsider like you doing here?"

He should be cornered now, but he's still laughing. As though all this is a part of his plan.

"Yes. I'm the Killer Ghoul and an outsider. And I'm here to stop you...on a whim."

Who is talking now? Yakumo Amagiri? Or Takehito Isegawa?

"So right now, I'm going to announce this as the Killer Ghoul. You're finished."

The moment I leap forward, the railings around me shatter.

The pieces slowly fly towards me. I can't evade them all, but I don't intend to.

Several pieces of metal drive themselves into my arms and legs. Slowly. So slowly. It hurts. It's excruciating. They're not just driving into my body—they're tearing my flesh apart. It would be over in a flash if I unfocus, but I can't let myself do that now.

With my eyes I check the state of the distorted railing and jump. Subtly controlling the position of my legs, I put my feet against the broken and twisted railings and leap forward with all my might. Slowly. Slowly. And with just as much force!

The bomber makes a face like he's surprised. He points his gun at me. At this point, it's all another day's work. I leap almost parallel to the railings, but I kick off the side to slightly change my trajectory and reach forward. My hand narrowly leaves the line of fire and approaches the barrel as though entangling itself. That's a checkpoint. I pull the gun out of his left hand, then try to grab his right hand as I pass by. I wrap his fingers together so he can't pull the trigger, and look back.

I see Miss Nazuna. In her hand is the familiar old katana. It's still sheathed, but Miss Nazuna is in her usual drawing stance and is just about to leap into range.

I look into her face. She's serious. Even if I don't move, she'll strike without a second thought. I am so drawn into her eyes that in this very moment, I don't think I'd mind being cut down. But I decide that I don't want to die with this bomber, and so move away. I grab his right hand and twist around, and see a glint of silver from Miss Nazuna's sheath.

The tip of the katana might be moving faster than a bullet when it passes by my eyes. And for a second, I think I see my smiling face reflected in the blade.

It is for a single moment. Whether it moves slowly or quickly, once it passes it's just another moment.

Please, world. Please slow down just a little more. Please stop completely.

Miss Nazuna looks so beautiful when she's cutting him down.

I want to look at her face forever.

But in the end, that's just the Killer Ghoul's twisted desires talking.





The man's arm is chopped clean off.

Though it's supposed to be a detailed prosthetic, from the amount of gushing blood the sword must have cut through real flesh. I quickly avoid the sudden spray of blood, but Miss Nazuna doesn't even seem to want to try.

I look at her, covered in blood, and realize she is still beautiful.

Maybe it's abnormal to feel like this for a girl covered in blood. But...but...

Then, I am interrupted by the 'me' beneath the mask. The 'me' that's been mercilessly shaking up my past from the moment I heard my name from the hostage girl. Yes. The 'me' beneath the mask has nothing to do with this bloodcurdling world, is normal, and runs from scary things...but...that would be like rejecting Miss Nazuna.

I...won't.

The truth comes to me naturally when I made that declaration.

I see. I understand now. This is the role of the mask I gained when I first came to the island.

Yakumo Amagiri is less of a persona as much as it is a restraint. Something that covers my eyes and ears from the awful truth.

In other words, I was just trying to avert my gaze from reality.

At that moment, a massive figure stands in my way.

Blood is dribbling from his mouth, some of his fingers are splayed in odd directions, but his eyes are on fire. He stands as if protecting the bomber from me, Miss Nazuna, and the others in the room.

That was when I realize that the gunfire had stopped.

What is this man? He's run himself ragged...he's half-gutted by now...so why isn't there any bloodlust in his eyes?

Oh. I see.

This man—Souji Kuzuhara—

There's no match for him in this engine room—no, the island. He is the most abnormal person here—and he is a hero.



"So now what, Mr. Seiichi Kugi? Wanna pick up where we left off?"

"That's up to you."

Things had changed. The two dogs stood frozen, pointing their guns at each other.

They had been running wild on the upper levels of the engine room, but the moment they took care of all the private soldiers in goggles, they were back to taking aim at each other's torsos.

Inui was in his usual sideways stance. Kugi was prioritizing accuracy.

"So it comes down to this...is what I'd normally say, but I won't. You too, right? Heh. We're just a couple of rotten-ass dogs that look one hell of a lot alike."

With a resigned chuckle, Inui slowly lowered his gun.

"Look...if I'm gonna kill you, I gotta be the lead character. And it looks like neither of us are top dog today. But don't ask me who's in the spotlight."

Slowly, they both lowered their guns. But their bloodlust remained. And they tried to justify the temporary ceasefire in their own ways.

"If I shot you here...even Yili would get on Kuzuhara's bad side. That's the only reason I'm sparing you."



The man without a right arm grinned maniacally at the sight of Kuzuhara, even as he spilled blood everywhere. As though being reunited with a friend for the first time in a century, he looked at Kuzuhara with neither hatred nor bloodlust, but hostility.

“Hah... Gahahahaha! Kuzuhara...Kuzuhara! It’s been! One *hell* of a long time! Fuck! I’ve got a lot of crap I wanna say to you. But why! Can’t I say it?!”

Though the embodiment of all his life’s hatred—the subject of his twisted rage, far beyond the point of simple bloodlust—was standing there, Kanashima could not find the words. But there was a strange sense of fulfillment in his face, as though just meeting Kuzuhara was enough.

“Don’t worry. I feel the same way.”

“Gahaha! Ahahahahaha! Yes. Yes! I can tell you have a lot to say! Not just to me—to the girl you shot and killed!”

“...Enough. You’ll die if you keep raving like this.”

But the one-armed man continued madly, even as he bled out.

“You and me. We’re both powerless. How many did you fail to save in the past two months? How many did I fail to kill? Hah! Gahahahaha!”

“Shut up.”

“No. I refuse! I know what you’re thinking. ‘I want to try and keep him alive, even if he’s a piece of shit!’”

Kuzuhara did not answer. Kanashima’s guess was correct. Kuzuhara no longer wanted to see anyone die. Even if that someone was the cause of the chaos. The one who used that as an excuse to endlessly rub salt in people’s wounds.

Even as Kuzuhara clenched his teeth, Ginga Kanashima continued to laugh.

Now without a right arm, he slowly moved his left.

It happened all at once. Not even those watching Kanashima reacted quickly enough.

Kanashima's left arm, to all eyes made of flesh and blood, opened with a clatter to reveal a small black mass.

'His left arm, too?!'

The left arm closed at the same speed it opened at, and a small handgun glinted in its grip.

"It's a cool toy, don't you think?"

Kanashima remained arrogant to the end. But before anyone knew where the gun would be pointed, someone was already running towards him.



The first to move was the self-proclaimed detective.

The talentless ace defective beat the Guard Team, Lilei, Lihuang, Kuzuhara, and even the Killer Ghoul to the chase as she broke into a run. It was not because she had a fighting chance. Not because she wanted to save whoever Kanashima was trying to target. And not because she wanted praise. She simply didn't want to see someone with her brother's face commit murder.

Perhaps she had first rushed out because she didn't want to see someone with her brother's face die. But her goal did a 180 along the way.

From Spring-heeled Joplin's perspective behind the security cameras, a twisted thought came to several Sherlockians who saw Kanashima's gun pointing at Charlotte.

Before the detective was not Reichenbach Falls, but a massive engine. But it was all the same in that once she was sucked in, she would never make it out alive.

[If only she at least knew baritsu...]

'Please let me make it!'

In his slow-motion world, Yakumo reached out desperately to block Charlotte's path—but the speed of his thoughts was now a useless toy that could do little but elongate one hopeless moment.

'Am I powerless after all? Both Yakumo...and Takehito?'

Then, there was a gunshot. And everything was over.

But the bullet had not hit Charlotte.

A crimson stain spread over Ginga Kanashima's chest and back. Directly over his heart.

"?!"

A stunned silence fell over the engine room as heads turned to find the shooter.

"Was that you, Carlos?!" Zhang hissed into the radio.

<No. I was going to shoot, but someone beat me to it.>

In the end, no one spotted the shooter, and several tense seconds passed.

The man with Sherlock's face whispered something to Kuzuhara then, and leaned against the railing. Then he threw himself to the floor of the engine room as though climbing.

How many saw his body crushed by the massive metal clockwork?

Yakumo Amagiri, at the very least, was watching it all in slow motion.

He could have looked away. He could have unfocused and ended it quickly.

But he did not. He could not turn his eyes away from the death he witnessed.

And for the first time in a very long time, he felt sick to his stomach at the sight of death.

Why did it disgust him so much, when the man was a despicable villain?

Charlotte's scream only rattled him further.

The scream lasted a second, but to Yakumo it seemed to be an eternity.

For some time Kuzuhara stood blankly, before picking up Kanashima's gun off the floor in a daze.

The gun had popped out of his hand at the very end. Kuzuhara picked up Kanashima's final weapon—

—he realized that the gun wasn't loaded—

Silently, with an unbearable look, he shook his head.

And so, the incident came to a close.

With several mysteries still left, and the culprit's body gone.

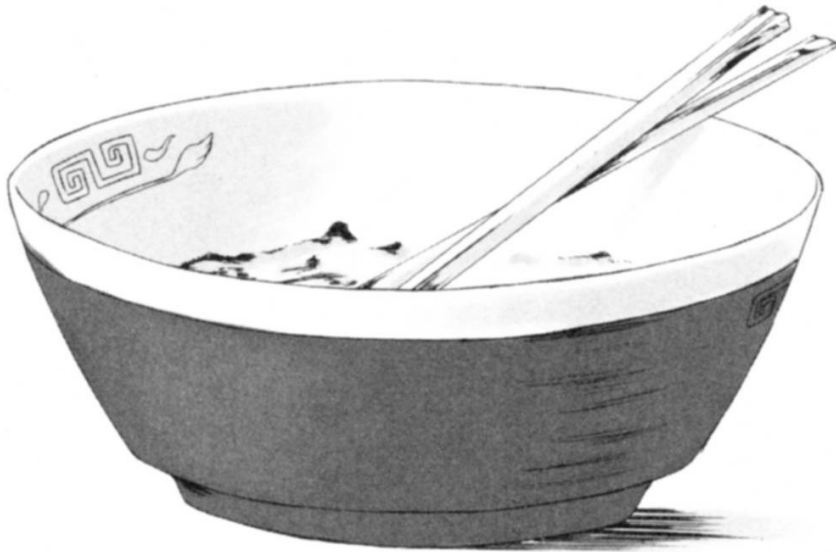
It simply left behind a bitter aftertaste.

Yet everything continued to move.

The engine continued to function in spite of the damage. And higher up on the island, it was business as usual.

Vigorously, but with a hollow ring.

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Epilogue

The theme park office in the Eastern District.

"In other words, I had Nazuna play sick while she was actually off overseeing and commanding the Rats as the representative of the Eastern District. She was never injured to begin with—the pile of bandages you saw at the hospital was actually the mummy from the theme park's haunted house. But we just got word that not all the explosions took place where the Rats set up the bombs, so the cleanup crew's scrambling everywhere—so why do you people have the time to pull a Neck Hanging Tree on your own boss?" Gitarin explained nonchalantly as Zhang tightened his grip on his collar.

"...And you had to hide this from us *why?*"

"Heh heh heh...if you wish to deceive your enemies, first you must deceive your allies."

"You think paraphrasing literature's gonna make us forgive you, asshole?!"

"Whoa, whoa! If this were a manga, this would be the scene where you shake your head and let me off the whoooooooooo!"

Meanwhile, Jun was crying tears of joy from behind her bangs as she held Nazuna's hands.

"Thank goodness...thank goodness!"

"C'mon, Jun. You're embarrassing me. It's all right. ...Let me go out and get some air, okay?"

Nazuna scratched her head sheepishly and walked outside to escape the others.

And as soon as she was out of sight, she sighed and her expression darkened.

She had lied. So had Gitarin, who was still being choked inside.

Watching the Rats hadn't been Nazuna's only mission.

While pretending to be wounded, Nazuna had taken on another job.

She had been ordered to take care of dangerous elements among the Eastern District's own executives—among their own family. Most were affiliated with the parent organization on the mainland and had cooperated with Ginga Kanashima, unlike the Western District executives.

Before going over to Japan, Kanashima had already established a connection with some of the parent organization's executives. He had played the executives for the sole purpose of worsening public security on the island.

Because of what had happened in the past, not a small number of people in the parent organization held a grudge against Gitarin. That had worked in Kanashima's favor, earning him more allies to cooperate with.

And it was on the orders of Gitarin himself, who had noticed this first, that Nazuna killed them.

She had slinked through shadows and pulled all sorts of tricks to eliminate the dangerous elements that targeted other executives. Even though she had no grudges against them. Because it was her job.

Jun didn't know anything about the mastermind behind the case. She might have noticed something, but she was neither insensitive nor clever enough to pry the answer from unwilling parties. So lying to Jun made Nazuna feel like she was choking with guilt.

Perhaps even that was part of Gitarin's calculations. After all, he was a demon capable of flawlessly feigning anger and sadness at the death of the new executive whose murder he had ordered.

Once, surprised at how easily Jun left her fate in the hands of others, Nazuna had asked her how she was capable of such a thing. How could she trust the members of the dangerous Guard Team?

Jun's answer had been simple.

"It's a little rash to say it's because I trust everyone. But...I love everyone on the Guard Team. That's reason enough for me."

Deceiving a girl like Jun made Nazuna's heart feel heavy.

Reminded of the fact that she was in no way normal, Nazuna suddenly remembered a certain scapegoat.

Everyone knew now that Kanashima had pulled the strings, but for a time Nazuna's crimes had been blamed on Yakumo Amagiri.

'He's strange and dangerous to boot...but I think he's much more normal than I am.'

When she remembered how he had nervously confessed his love for her, Nazuna found herself snickering. Then she thought more about him.

Perhaps she could be almost completely true to herself when she spoke to someone like him.

She felt a bit like having a chat with the fainthearted Killer Ghoul.

With that thought, she was reminded once more of her own abnormal nature and smiled at the sky—absently hoping to one day see the Killer Ghoul smile as well.



The Kitten of the East dreams. But she does not speak of them.

To the girl named Jun Sahara, dreams were simply dreams. She saw no meaning in sharing them with others.

She was not the only one. To most of those living in the island's 'present', dreams were simply dreams. No more, no less.

After all, life on the island included joy and sadness and everything in between.

Embracing the reality that included all those things, they lived their lives vivaciously.

For both joy and sadness were part of their very selves—



<—and in a way, part of the dream the island dreams.>

“That’s not what I asked you, Spring-heeled Joplin.”

In the deep darkness, the young man spoke into an unusual communication device.

There wasn’t a soul around. It almost looked as though he were talking to himself.

<Then how can I assist you, Spring-heeled Joplin? You, the island’s foremost backstabber. What does the man who cooperated with the West, the East, and even Ginga Kanashima at times want to know from me?>

Reading the reply, the bespectacled young man—Sherlock Liverpool—asked almost mechanically, “in the end...why did Ginga Kanashima point a gun at Charlotte?”

With his empty hand he fingered a tiny device. It was a remote control detonator reminiscent of a cell phone.

“He must have known that I would kill him. And...why didn’t he kill Charlotte in retaliation? He didn’t die instantly; he had a chance to kill her.”

In order to save his sister, Sherlock had made a certain offer to a certain man.

What was he saving Charlotte from? Sherlock’s answer was simple.

He wanted to free her from the island.

That was the conclusion he had reached after being embroiled in a series of unusual events two months earlier. It hadn’t taken him very long to arrive at the answer. He didn’t care for anyone who wasn’t Charlotte, and he even harbored hatred for the island.

Sherlock had heard of Ginga Kanashima. Having leaked information to both districts in order to eke out a living, Sherlock's abilities were finally deemed worthy for Spring-heeled Joplin to contact him. That was when he first heard of Ginga Kanashima. But one day, Kanashima got into contact with him.

At first, their exchanges consisted of one-sided threats from Kanashima. If Sherlock didn't cooperate, his sister would be killed. It was simple. Kanashima must have needed help from someone who dealt with both the Western and Eastern Districts. But Sherlock kept a cool head and managed to transform the threats into negotiations. If Kanashima would destroy the island, Sherlock would give him his face, on the condition that they entrusted each other with their lives. Kanashima had sustained a deep chest wound over the summer, and was supported by a device that assisted his damaged organs. When Sherlock learned of this, he demanded that they should at least plant bombs in their bodies and take each other's detonators. He was simply bluffing to try and bargain with the man, but Ginga Kanashima accepted the terms.

When the back-alley doctor had finished with Kanashima, Sherlock was prepared to go under the knife next. But—

"Forget it. If you betray me, your sister dies. That's all. Nothing's gonna hurt you more."

Kanashima had seen right through him. Desperately holding back his fear and hatred, Sherlock calmly executed their plans.

Because they knew that the Eastern District had them under surveillance, their dealings and switches all took place inside the hotel where the siblings' office was. As the Guard Team kept an eye out for the siblings entering and exiting the building, Sherlock switched places with Kanashima when he and Charlotte were both confirmed to be inside the hotel, and moved to the Eastern District.

He ran his fingers through the despair of leaving his sister in the hands of a stranger, but endured it. Or perhaps he wanted to finally get rid of his feelings for her.

"But...in the end, I just ended up hurting Charlotte."

Letting his self-hatred surface, Sherlock clenched his fists tightly in the darkness. By the time the tips of his nails were bloody, he exhaled and opened his mouth again.

"It doesn't make any logical sense. What if I'd changed my mind and detonated his bomb out of nowhere? And why did he stop me from implanting the bomb into my body? As far as I could tell, the bombs were real. But I was sure he'd messed with the detonators, at least. So why...? Why would he—"

<It was all part of his plan.>

"What do you mean?"

<He was planning to die from the start. That twisted genius named Ginga Kanashima.>



Inside Kelly's van, Kuzuhara was watching a video.

A memory card labeled 'To Mr. Souji Kuzuhara' had been left at the Iizuka restaurant at some point, but because he had nothing to read it with, he was forced to ask Kelly for help.

He had an idea of what he might find on the card.

'A message from Kanashima.'

The man who was sucked into the engine with a hole through his chest had said one last thing to Kuzuhara.

"Serves you right."

The hole in his chest. Although the shooter's identity remained a mystery, Kuzuhara understood that Kanashima had wanted to die.

He thought he might find a document, but the memory card contained a video. A video of a man sitting on the side of a hotel bed, with bandages around his face like he'd recently had plastic surgery.

<You doin' all right, Kuzuhara? Or not? Is it 'cause I died in front of you? Who gives a shit.>

Kuzuhara gritted his teeth at the sight of the man in the video—Ginga Kanashima. Though he feigned tranquility, all kinds of emotions were rising to the surface.

And as though seeing right through him, the man in the video said,

<Although it would've been great to just drag you into an explosion with me! But if you somehow survived that...it wouldn't hit you as hard if all you had were chunks of meat to recognize me by. And that asshole Gitarin would just say I faked my death. So I needed to make a show of it. To die writhing before your eyes.>

As though euphorically seeing the moment of his own death, Kanashima addressed Kuzuhara beyond the screen.

<But listen up, Kuzuhara! You guard dog! The poor guard dog who gets worked to death and ends up biting his own master! You, the guard dog leashed by my death! Did you realize yet? You must have! Yes, of course! The fact that you're watching this necessarily means that *someone* left this video for you in my stead, after my death! Hahaha! Ahahahahahahahahaha! I may be gone, but I don't plan on taking even my hatred with me.>

There was a person—or *a group of people*—carrying out Kanashima's will. That knowledge alone was enough to turn his insides into a knot.

<Like I said, all I want to do is *torment* you! I could have sunk this island any time I wanted. You know I'm not bluffing. But that wouldn't have done me any good. 'Cause if you died, you'd never have to suffer again! 'Cause even if there *is* an afterlife, I know damn well you're bound for heaven!>

Suddenly, Kanashima stopped laughing, his eyes going blank and lifeless. Like an executioner. Like a sinner. And like a resentful victim.

<I want you to suffer until your last breath. I won't accept a suicide, and I know you couldn't do it, anyway.>

Then, he grinned and burst out laughing, this time even clapping his hands.

<I told you I'd looked into everything about you! Kelly, right? The woman. She's missing a couple of screws, but she's not a bad catch at all.>

Something began to agitate Kuzuhara's insides.

The fact that Kanashima—a piece of human trash—had merely spoken Kelly's name left Kuzuhara desperately forcing his emotions back.

<Whoa, don't get your panties in a twist. I'm not gonna tell you I'll kill her if you die. But! Get this, Kuzuhara! As long as you love her, you will never be able to kill yourself or escape the island—no matter how painful it gets. Am I right? You've only got one option left in life, and that's to live on with the dead girl's eyes burned into your memories! HAH! Heehahahahahahaha!>

The rest of the video was just footage of Kanashima laughing.

But Kuzuhara could neither close the video nor take out the memory card to break it.

He was simply angry.

At the fact that he was played by a man like Kanashima.

At his own foolishness, for having tried to help the piece of human trash.

And at his own self, for feeling almost the same sort of guilt over Kanashima as he did for the little girl he had shot and killed.

With nowhere to take out his anger, Kuzuhara clenched his fists. But a pair of pale, slender arms reached over and wrapped around him, almost as though having read his mind.

"For the record, the asshole's copying *my* laugh! Heehahahaha!"

"Kelly..."

Suddenly, he felt his outrage dissipate. Though the guilt and regrets remained—and he had no intention of erasing them—Kuzuhara could feel the darkest of the emotions being washed away.

"What's wrong? This ain't like you. Again. This is a straight-up challenge! You gonna run with your tail between your legs and get fat and die?!"

"Could you *please* consider how I'm feeling?"

Kuzuhara gave her a textbook reply. Kelly frowned.

"...The hell. I'm surprised you're not floored. I was expecting you to go navel-gazing again so I was gonna give you an intimate pep talk... Heehahahahaha!"

"...People generally learn to consider others' feelings around the time they're in kindergarten. Did you know that?"

"Hey hey, I'm not a mind reader! But remember, Kuzu. I might be a useless piece of crap, but you've still got someone to take shit challenges like this with you! Heehahahahaha!"

Kelly's encouragement was the same as ever. So Kuzuhara gave her the same old bitter smile.

It was all ordinary. Everyday. But for some reason, it made him feel liberated.

'You're a piece of shit, Kanashima. But you were a genius.'

'Still...you got something wrong.'

'I'm bound for hell, too. That was set in stone the moment I shot that girl.'

'When I get there, I'll find you, jackass, and tell you something—'

""Serves you right".'

'But until then...I'm gonna fight the good fight. On this island.'

Quietly, he clenched his fists. With a vow in his heart that, until the time came, he would always remain true to himself.



Sherlock and the communicator's conversation continued as the former walked through the back alleys of the Eastern District.

<For all his talent—talent he *knew* he had—he used it all, along with his life, to torment just one person. ...Maybe that’s what malice really is.>

“Malice, huh. ...Come to think of it, which district allied with Kanashima in the end? The East? Or the West?”

<That’s not for me to say, and not for you to hear. You’re better off not knowing.>

“I see... Right.”

With a tired sigh, Sherlock headed for the ramen store.



The top floor of the Grand Ibis Hotel.

“It was foolishness. No more, no less.” Yili shook her head wearily. “To think that you, Father...no, Ei *Daren*...was allied with Ginga Kanashima all along.”

The room was quite humble for being the quarters of the Western District’s boss. Yili continued to speak to the slight, seated figure.

“I don’t know why you fanned the flames of conflict between the districts, or what made you join forces with Kanashima. Although I suppose I have an inkling. You were plotting to declare independence from the parent organization in China, weren’t you? ...Ironic. A long-lived man like you loses his love for the motherland, while we children born on foreign soil are the ones loyal to her.”

She was no longer speaking as a daughter to her father, nor as a subordinate to her superior. There was contempt in her tone, one reserved solely for her enemies.

“Have you not finished him yet, Yili?”

Calling her name was not the man in the chair. Lihuang emerged from behind Yili—Lihuang, who had earlier reserved no enmity against his half-sister.

“Were you surprised, Ei *Daren*? Did you ever guess? That in spite of our difficult relationship, Elder Brother and I were exchanging information behind your back? It was really just an act to deceive the Eastern District, though I will concede that Elder Brother’s rampage is what sparked this incident.”

“Hey! If you have time to be shaming your brother—”

“Hm? It’s all right, Elder Brother.”

“What...?”

Curious, Lihuang quietly went up to the chair. He found the old man already cold with blood streaming down the back of his neck.

“...Why were you talking to a corpse?”

“I don’t believe in an afterlife, but I’m somewhat inclined to believe in the existence of spirits.”

“I’m surprised. A skeptic like you?”

“That’s why I only speak to my enemies once they’re dead. So I can shower their spirits with one-sided vitriol.”

Her eyes were icy and dark, yet so elegant and clear that it was hard to believe she had just killed her own father.

“I would be a fool to speak to them while they’re still alive and give them the chance to retaliate.”

“Of course. That *is* quite logical,” Lihuang chuckled bitterly.

Yili continued, “things...are going to get busy now. I’ll announce that Ei *Daren* is away, recuperating from illness. We’ll bide our time, find a chance, and slowly release the truth.”

They turned their backs on their father’s corpse, but just as they stepped out of the room, Lihuang spoke.

"Something occurred to me yesterday, when I looked at the woman who drained the venom from the air."

"The detective sister? What about her?"

"...Perhaps blue eyes can be quite beautiful after all."

Lihuang showed no emotion. Yili chuckled bitterly, just as her brother had earlier.

"*Xiexie, Ei Daren.*"



A few minutes before the Ei siblings' conversation.

Kugi, on standby in the dark hallway, stood with his cell phone pressed against his ear.

Normally, he never took personal calls while on duty. But he couldn't hang up on this particular caller.

<Hey, how's the wound? Mine's healing up nicely.>

"...I'm hanging up."

<Whoa, that's cold, man! Same as ever. You even take after your boss's attitude.>

"..."

<You said you were the lady's shadow, right?>

"...Yes."

<And you said a shadow doesn't need any emotions. But something bugged me for a while after that. But I just figured it out, so I thought I'd tell you.>

"..."

<If you're gonna be Yili Ei's shadow...you're gonna need emotions after all.>

"..."

<When she starts chattering, you gotta do the same. If she starts sobbing, you gotta sob too. That's a shadow's job, am I right?>

"..."

<Yili's the type to bottle up everything inside, so you gotta at least understand the whole gamut of her emotions and laugh and cry with her. That's what a shadow does.>

"...Is that all you have to say?"

<You've really changed. Now I look like a dumbass here. Then again, I was pretty surprised when I heard you say out loud that you were gonna be her shadow.>

"What do you mean?"

<Whoa, don't play dumb. 'I'll be your shadow'? That's slang for a marriage proposal back in her country, you ladykiller!>

"...What?!"

The moment Kugi reeled, the one-sided conversation came to a one-sided end.

As he stood in a daze, footsteps approached from behind.

"What's wrong, Seiichi?"

When she called his name, Kugi trembled more than necessary.

It seemed he still had a long way to go before he could fully become her shadow.



Inside a ramen store in the Eastern District.

Hanging up, Inui pounded his fists against the counter like a child celebrating a successful prank.

"I said it! There, I said it! Glad I finally got that outta my system. Now we can call it even—wait. Hey Mr. Take? Can I get some dumplings and fried rice to celebrate?"

"How 'bout you pay off your tab before you act all cool over the phone again?"

"Gah! You're a heartless man, Mr. Take. I was just starting to feel like a good boy back there, and you had to go and ruin the mood."

"Wish I coulda flushed it down the drain after I ruined it. And that whole spiel with shadows and proposals...you pulled that outta your ass."

"Gah! That didn't even take ten seconds! Shit! Then it might not have worked on Kugi, either...looks like I owe him another bullet next time after all..."

As Inui treated a gunshot as the rough equivalent of a prank, Mr. Take brought out a plate of dumplings. And, unusually enough, he began to talk about himself.

"Then again, it's not a bad idea, marrying someone you meet on the island. Not like you can fall any lower once you're here, anyway. At least you wouldn't end up like me."

"Whoa. You were married, Mr. Take?" Inui turned, hungry for gossip. But his enthusiasm was not contagious.

"I left a wife and two kids behind out there. So I don't plan to be anyone's shadow at this point. ...Guess you could say I even lost my own shadow in the dark of the island."

"Hey, what's the matter, Mr. Take? You're starting to sound like a poet!"

"Just trying to match your clowning, kid."

Mr. Take's poker face could beat Yili's, Inui thought, and began to play with a bottle of chili oil.

That was when he heard the door open behind him. Another customer entered.

Inui glanced back and extended the newcomer a friendly greeting.

"Hey, man. We met the other day, didn't we? Talked about a buncha stuff, if I remember. Like Triple Beretta."

"Ah..."

When he spotted Inui, the customer—Sherlock—stared blankly.

"Hey, don't give me that look. C'mon, sit down. This is practically fate, Mr. Take. So let's switch to a movie..."

Inui chirped excitedly. Sherlock turned and left the store.

"Huh? Hey, where're you going?"

"Inui, you son of a bitch! You better not have chased away another customer!"

"Wait, I didn't do anything this time, I swear—"

Listening to the commotion behind him, Sherlock sighed. He never thought he'd run into a related party here. His appetite was long ruined by a wave of nausea.

"...They're not going to have him join Spring-heeled Joplin?"

He was only talking to himself, but a mocking voice escaped the communicator.

<It's much more interesting to watch people like him, instead of having them join us. In other words, all we're allowed to do with them is observe.>



Several hours later, somewhere in the Western District.

Yili was out at a banquet when Kugi's cell phone rang again.

He picked up without even checking the caller ID—and as he expected, the voice on the line belonged to Rainbow-Head.

<Forgot to mention something.>

"...What now."

<...See you.>

Was it yet another challenge? Or was it an addition to the joking offer to live a new life as pirates? Or was it simply a greeting? Kugi had no way of knowing, and no need to know.

Because whatever the meaning, he had but one answer.

"Yeah...see you."

At the end of the call, Kugi reminisced about everything that had happened on the island.

And all alone, the shadow smiled.

He realized that the island under his feet was his own shadow, including the people there, the ground below, and the crimes he had committed.

That fact made him sad, and happy.

He no longer recalled the face of his childhood friend. All he had left was his guilt.

When he looked up, he saw a kite high up in the sky—circling not the mainland, but the artificial island.

When he saw the nostalgic sight,

Kugi no longer wept.



After leaving the ramen store, Sherlock took out the communicator again and asked Spring-heeled Joplin,

“Come to think of it, what happened to the Killer Ghoul?”

<Aha! You didn’t see, did you? It was certainly a show, I can tell you that. And...it seems like he’s gotten closer to your sister.>

Sherlock paled. And as though he could see him, the man on the communicator chuckled.

<Not to worry. It hasn’t gone quite as far as you fear.>

“...What do you mean?”



The Killer Ghoul’s confessions.

I am standing at the island entrance with the hostage named Lottie.

The massive bridge never fails to impress me. Just standing in front of it makes my heart feel open.

‘Takehito Isegawa’.

When the girl here said my name—the name of the ‘me’ under this mask—I honestly thought my heart was going to stop.

But after the incident, she explained everything and I understood. Apparently people from the mainland were searching for me.

I don't know what's happened on the other side, but if they're looking for me...I realized that it was time for a decision.

I would throw away this mask. But my crimes will never fade away. Will I be able to live in the outside world? Or will I end up back here after all? Maybe I'll end up becoming a killer out there and get arrested and executed.

But I don't feel like running away. One sad thing is that I might never see Miss Nazuna again. We exchanged phone numbers, but will she accept the 'me' who's gone back to the mainland? I suppose I can think about that once I've heard out whoever is looking for me.

When we come to the designated place, a group of men are waiting for us.

...? Strange. Why would they bring so many people just to pick me up? And the only familiar face here is the one in the middle—Father's secretary. The rest are a poor match for him; a rabble of lowlifes.

I have a bad feeling about this.

And my suspicions are quickly proven correct.

As the men draw their guns, the secretary goes on and on about the reasons I have to die. It doesn't really matter to me, so it goes in one ear and out the other; but I understand full well that Father found out about me somehow and now considers me a nuisance.

It looks like the one who had to die wasn't the mask, but Takehito Isegawa.

I chuckle bitterly at the absurdity of it all and wonder if I should just let the bullets hit me. If this is my end, it is an end befitting the Killer Ghoul.

But a moment later, that thought is blown away as Lottie stands in front of me and argues with them. "Please wait". "This isn't what you said earlier".

Why is an abnormally naive girl like her on this island, I wonder, as I pick her up and try to escape the lines of fire. Just as it occurs to me that I probably can't evade them all with Lottie in my arms, I spot a cat with a radio strapped to it walking this way.

Damn that urban legend. Why don't you just grab a bucket of popcorn while you're at it?

But it soon occurs to me that maybe he's the one who called those two over.

'Those two' being my nap buddy, who swings her lead pipe at the men from behind, and the island's hero who arrived at the scene with the volunteer police.

I don't know what really went on behind the scenes there, but I escape to a safe place and let the girl down.

"...I'm sorry I got you involved," I apologize.

"...Not at all! ...Er...my heart is racing, but...i-it's all right! After all, I am a detective!"

She's pale and her teeth are chattering, but I bow to her again...and suddenly become serious.

"...I think...Takehito Isegawa was the one who was supposed to disappear. So I decided that he just died in the gunfire back there. So please don't call me that anymore."

I don't know why I said that to her. Maybe I just want someone—anyone—to hear my resolve. Because maybe it would serve as a sort of funeral for Takehito Isegawa.

She replies, quietly.

"So he's...passed away. Then what will you do now?"

"From now on...I'm Yakumo Amagiri. I'll just live on as the Killer Ghoul. Just lounging around the Eastern District, getting into fights with the Guard Team. As usual, I guess."

"You love Nazuna."

She hits the nail on the head. She's supposed to be a detective, but I can't tell if she's clever or dense. ...Or maybe I'm just no good at hiding my feelings.

But even I know something. Even someone as dull as me could understand. Call me conceited, but, well...when I see Lottie's fair cheeks go red when she

looks at me, I can barely meet her gaze. But no. I can't. I have Miss Nazuna
—

"Mr. Yakumo Amagiri! I fell in love with you at first sight! And I still do have feelings for you."

She confesses so easily that I almost do a spit take. I think I should thank God that I wasn't drinking any milk.

I stand there nervously as she continues. She looks happy. Like she's teasing me. And like she's a little disappointed.

"I know you love Nazuna, Mr. Amagiri. And I know that my love-at-first-sight doesn't have a chance yet. So...I think I might direct my love at the person you showed me when you rescued me—not the Killer Ghoul, but Takehito Isegawa."

Does she believe that she'll have a chance someday? I am floored by her naiveté, left to wonder how she could live on the island in the first place.

"If Takehito Isegawa passed away here, I will keep him in my memories forever! So please, live on in his stead!"

For a single moment, my heart wavers.

It feels like what remains of Takehito Isegawa in my heart fell in love with her for a second, but I push him back behind the mask. I will never know how he truly feels until this mask is broken.

With a wry chuckle at my own cowardice, I say goodbye to the ace detective and head for the Eastern District casino.

I want to see Miss Nazuna as quickly as I can. I should probably take Misaki hostage, then.

That's probably Yakumo Amagiri's way of life—

And I know that I am not normal.

And I realized that, *because* I am not normal—

—I love this abnormal island.



"I see...she's safe. Thank goodness."

Having heard a great deal of things that day, Sherlock slowly went silent.

He returned to his hideout and buried himself in the dark rubble, falling into thought.

After the incident, daily life returned to the island and things were moving quite smoothly.

For everyone but himself.

Whatever the case, he could not show himself to her now. Maybe he didn't even have the right to remain on the island, but Sherlock had resolved to stay and protect her. He didn't need any compensation. He didn't mind if no one loved him, if people loathed him, or even if they killed him. He was happy so long as Charlotte was safe.

He explained that to Spring-heeled Joplin. Then he added that he wanted to keep some distance from him. A disappointed voice escaped the communicator.

<So you choose to return from the realm of legend to reality. It's unfortunate, but I suppose there's nothing to be done.>

But that disappointment lasted only a moment. Spring-heeled Joplin continued impishly.

<Then the urban legend shall bid you farewell with one final miracle. I felt a little devious today. Accept it with a bitter smile. But honestly, guiding people through clues alone can be a very difficult job, depending on the subject.>

"...?"

What was Spring-heeled Joplin trying to say, Sherlock wondered, but the communicator finally went silent.

As Sherlock furrowed his brow, a bright light suddenly enveloped him.

Someone had opened the door and let light into the rubble.

'Who is that? Someone from one of the organizations? Are they...here to kill me?'

'That's all right. I'm all right. But...but...'

As his eyes adjusted to the light, his eyes met another set, just as blue as his own. The bearer of the name he was just about to utter in his heart—Charlotte—was there. She stood, panting loudly, without even trying to hide the fact that she had sprinted all the way.

"Char...lotte...?"

What filled his heart then was terror. He had said just earlier that he would never meet her again. If this was what Spring-heeled Joplin considered devious, he was even worse than Ginga Kanashima.

Sherlock could scarcely breathe. But Charlotte smiled her usual smile and spoke as she always did.

"I've finally found you, Sherlock Liverpool! Heh heh heh...now you must acknowledge that I am capable of walking this island on my own!"

Charlotte's radiant smile blew away the tension in the air. Sherlock resisted, trying to retain his venom.

"...How did you find me?"

Joplin's clues had gone clear over her head, he knew. He also had an idea of what Charlotte would say next—"Because I am an ace detective!"—and as he imagined her confident declaration, Sherlock began to wonder how he would escape her—

"...Of course I would know where to find you. We're *family*."

Quietly and gently, she embraced him.

“Thank goodness...I’m so glad you’re unharmed, Sherlock Liverpool...”

He had not been expecting that.

Never in Sherlock’s wildest dreams did he expect that his sister, with her love of putting on airs, would do something like this.

‘I still have no idea if she’s a natural, or if she’s actually calculating all this. But...’

Either way, she was even worse than Kanashima or Joplin.

In the past, when they talked about Little Red Riding Hood, Charlotte had likened herself to the girl and Sherlock to the hunter.

But Sherlock realized that in reality, he was Little Red Riding Hood in the belly of the wolf before him.

‘I’d rather the hunter never come for me at all, if it means he cuts Charlotte open.’

‘I choose to fall into this island and drown with the wolf.’

Captured in the arms of the innocent wolf,

Sherlock sobbed out loud as he did in his childhood.



Half a year later, the Etsusa Bridge.

“Yes, this is Spring-heeled Joplin. Do you copy, Spring-heeled Joplin?”

The new Spring-heeled Joplin smiles innocently.

“I think we have a newcomer to the island, so I’ll go and lend a hand. Don’t worry! Big bro is here with me!”

The way she so easily speaks of the urban legend’s secret is worrisome in a way, but the girl is a dutiful one who would never go so far as to *reveal* the secret.

Nothing has changed on this island.

That is why it continues to change.

...Yatsufusa. Listen. Can you hear me?

Did you truly have this island dancing on your strings?

Is that why you died laughing?

By living on this island and becoming one with it, you’d already taken control of it.

And it became your island, one that you alone envisioned.

Yes. This island belongs to you all. Those on the outside can never take hold of it. All they can do is watch.

I envy you all. But I will continue to watch from here. Even in the future, once I have passed it all on to another, someone else will continue to observe—continue to be Spring-heeled Joplin.

Because that is the fate—and final happiness—given to the urban legend known as Spring-heeled Joplin.



A cat equipped with a radio passed by Yua and ran to the newcomer.

The radio on the cat slowly spoke to the young newcomer, who had come to the island in search of something.

<Amidst the gusts of wind, a column of sea water sweeps across the bridge. And why have you found yourself taking the brunt of that gale? No one—>

As though telling his story, the voice hummed softly, carried away by the wind. Did it reach the newcomer's ears? No one else would know.

<Life does exist on this land over the sea. Clearly and vivaciously, right before your eyes.>

The voice spoke as though to itself, as though the very island was whispering.

<This is neither the mainland nor the island.>

<It is Japan, yet not.>

<It is neither land nor sea.>

<The longest bridge in the world, spanning Sado Island and Niigata.>

<And the nameless artificial island that stands in the very middle of that bridge—>

And again, the island began to move.

Slowly, but surely.

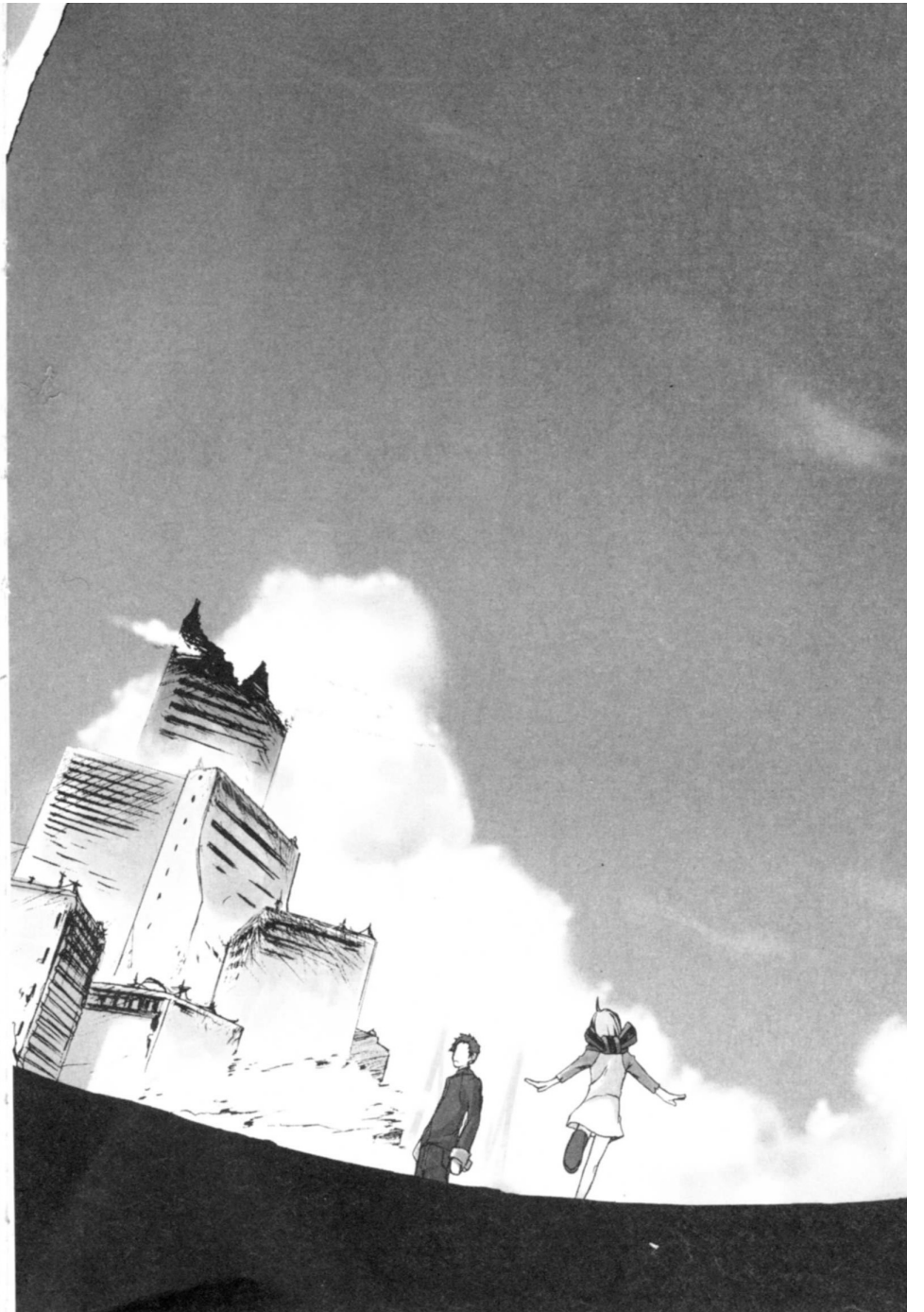
With the hopes of its inhabitants carried in the hum of its massive engine.

The abandoned island continues today to dream.

-Garuguru! End-



がるぐる！ - 完 -



Afterword

Well...it's over.

The fourth and final volume of the Etsusa Bridge series is over. I may or may not write another full volume of the events taking place on the artificial island someday, but the Kuzuhara-Kanashima trilogy is now finished.

It feels strangely complicated. I'm both lonely and relieved. Kind of like there's a hole in my chest.

There's some content I didn't manage to elaborate on, and though the incidents are finished I had to cut out a lot of content relating to the characters themselves. So I'm hoping to write some day-in-the-life stories or character pieces next time I get the chance.

You only ever get one chance to meet a character. I know I shouldn't be complacent, assuming there will be a next time for myself and my characters, but I always end up being dragged along by my characters rather than the other way around.

I really hope I do get another chance.

Specifically, something like five pages or so.

Anyway! I can't apologize enough for the long gap between the previous book and this one.

As for related news, the *Baccano!* drama CD was recently released and is selling quite well, to my relief. I'm holding out hope for Etsusa Bridge and my other series to also branch out to different media.

Just to add, I'm currently planning to focus on *Durarara!!* and *Baccano!* while writing some *Vamp!* and *Hariyama-san* on the side.

I realized that I don't have much else to say in terms of recent news, as writing's all I've been doing recently. It was tough, but looking back I think I really got a lot of stuff done. I tried out new things, and I'm still bursting with this feeling of accomplishment.

I'm very attached to the Etsusa Bridge series personally. Because it was the first work I published outside the *Baccano!* series, I was very anxious at the beginning. A few days after the editor-in-chief said, 'leave it to me', I received multiple illustration boards featuring the artificial island and the characters. Mr. Yasuda's illustrations were a great help creatively going forward, and he had a big influence on my other series as well.

I had help from many other people over the course of working on this series. So it's very sad to have to end it here. So much so that I really hope I can come back for another crazy party.

Specifically, something like three pages or so.

As usual, below are some words of thanks.

I'd like to thank editor-in-chief Mr. Suzuki and Mr. Wada from the editorial department, for whom I always cause nothing but trouble. And a certain dense friend who shall be referred to as 'K', the inspiration for a certain character. The character was supposed to be part of the supporting cast, but ended up a protagonist!

I'm also grateful to the proofreaders and designers, the managing department, the publicity department, the publishing department, and everyone at Media Works, for making this book presentable even as I constantly miss my deadlines.

I'd also like to thank my family, friends, and acquaintances, and everyone from S city.

To all the Dengeki writers and illustrators for all their help and support, especially Mr. Fujiwara for being so fired up about character backstories. And Thank you for referencing *Mew Mew!* in *Resin Cast Milk*.

To Mr. Suzuhito Yasuda, who brings the island and the characters to life in spite of his incredibly busy schedule.

And finally, I'd like to thank all my readers.

Each and every fan of the Etsusa Bridge series.

To everyone who will love the Etsusa Bridge series and its characters, even into the future.

You have my deepest gratitude. Thank you so much!

April 2006, at home
Screaming in joy reading a fan-published comic based on my work that a friend picked up for me

Ryohgo Narita

Illustrator's Afterword

Hi everyone, this is Suzuhito Yasuda. I'm writing an afterword for this volume as well, seeing as it's the last one.

I have a lot of memories with the Etsusa series, which first brought me and Mr. Narita together. Coming into the series I had no idea how long we'd be working together and how good a friend he would become.

The monochrome-esque style of the color pages is an attempt to visualize something like a manga version of the series.

Right now I'm a serialized mangaka and too busy to work on anything else, but I hope that someday I could try a manga adaptation of this series.

And even if I don't, someday after I retire I might try my hand at it little by little and send all the work to Mr. Narita and the editorial department out of the blue.

I'm seriously considering it.

Finally, to Mr. Narita, my editor Mr. W, editor-in-chief Mr. S, Mr. Kamabe the designer, everyone at Mediaworks, to the publishing house (sorry for always holding things up), and all the readers—

Thank you very much.

こんにちは、ヤスタスズヒトです。
最終巻にして、後書きを頂いてしまいました。

この越佐シリーズは、成田さんと初めて組んだ思い出深い作品で
まさかこんな長い、しかも多いつきあいになるとは
この頃は思ってもいませんでした。

ポスター口絵のモノクロっほいやつは、
このシリーズを漫画にするとこんな感じになるんだろうな、と
思いながら描きました。

今は別で連載やってるから動けないのですが、いつか、
自分の手で漫画にできれば。などと。

その機会がなくても、
イラストレーターを引退してからこつこつと描きためて、
いきなり成田さんと編集部に送りつけようかなあとか。

結構本気で思っています。

成田さん、担当Wさん、S編集長、デザイナー鎌部さん、
進行・営業に関わってくださったMWの方々、
毎回遅くて御迷惑かけた印刷・製版の皆様、
そして読者の皆様。

ありがとうございました。

それでは、また。



Chapter Titles (Part 2)

Interlude 4 (Part 2): The Dark Night's Suffering

Original title: 暗躍飢寒 (*an'yaku kikan* lit. 'a dark night's leap, and hunger and cold'.)

Original reference: 暗夜行路 (*an'ya kōro*), a novel by Shiga Naoya serialized between 1921 and 1937. Translated directly as 'A Dark Night's Passing' for English releases.

My reference: Direct translation. I initially misread the character for 'leap' as 'light', which is how I translated it for the blog. The error has been corrected.

Chapter 4-A: Wolf in the West

Original title: 狼・オブ・ザ・ウエスト (*rō obu za uesto* lit. 'wolf of the west'.)

Original reference: ロウ・オブ・ザ・ウエスト (*rō obu za uesto*), which could either be a reference to one of the two films titled 'Law of the West', or the 1985 video game of the same name.

My reference: 'Wolf in the Waste', the name of a quest from Final Fantasy XII. I had to reach a bit for this one.

Chapter 4-B: Return of the Great Louse Detective

Original title: 軽探偵再登場 (*keitantei saitoujou* lit. 'the light (weight)detective returns')

Original reference: 名探偵再登場 (*meitantei saitōjō* lit. 'the great detective returns'), the Japanese title of the 1978 film 'The Cheap Detective', sequel to 'Murder by Death'.

My reference: 'The Great Mouse Detective' (1986 film).

Interlude 5: Paradise East

Original title: 東源郷 (*tōgenkyō* lit. 'east origin hometown')

Original reference: 桃源郷 (*tōgenkyō*), a sort of paradise in East Asian

tradition (not to be confused with Western ideas of 'paradise'). Look up 'The Peach Blossom Spring' online for details.

My reference: 'Paradise Lost', but not for thematic reasons—the pun just worked with the literal definition of the title.

Chapter 5-A: Wolf Alert

Original title: 爬狼警報 (*harō keihō* lit. 'creeping (?) wolf alert'.) The character '爬' is rarely used in the Japanese language, and I had to resort to looking up a Chinese definition, which may or may not be accurate.

Original reference: 波浪警報 (*harō keihō* lit. 'wave warning'), an alert issued when waves are high.

My reference: Direct translation, minus the one character I couldn't find a definition for.

Chapter 5-B: Slow Case Files

Original title: テイゾク (*teizoku*, lit. 'vulgar'.)

Original reference: ケイゾク (*keizoku*, lit. ???), a 1999 TV drama where two detectives work on unsolved cases.

My reference: 'Cold Case Files'.

Interlude 6: Buruburu

Original title: ぶるぶる (*buruburu*)

Original reference: 震々 (*buruburu*), the *youkai* mentioned in the story.

My reference: None.

Chapter 6-A: The Wolf is at the Gate

Original title: マーシャル・狼 (*māsharu rō* lit. 'martial wolf'.)

Original reference: マーシャル・ロー (*māsharu rō* lit. 'martial law')

My reference: 'The wolf is at the door'.

Chapter 6-B: Charlotte Liverpool Without a Clue

Original title: シャーロット・リバプール迷子の冒険 (*shārotto ribapūru maigo no bōken* lit. 'the adventure of Charlotte Liverpool the lost child'.)

Original reference: 名探偵シャーロック・ホームズ / 最後の冒険 (*meitantei shārokku hōmuzu/saigo no bōken* lit. 'the great detective Sherlock Holmes'/the last adventure'), the Japanese title of the 1988 film 'Without a Clue'.

My reference: 'Without a Clue'.

Interlude 7: Spring-heeled Hijack

Original title: バネ足 (電波)ジャック (*baneashi[denpa] jakku* lit. 'spring-heeled (radio wave) jack'.)

Original reference: バネ足ジャック (*baneashi jakku*), Japanese for 'Spring-heeled Jack'.

My reference: None.

Chapter 7: Girl & Ghoul

Original title: Girl & Ghoul (*gāru & gūru*)

Original reference: がるぐる! (*garuguru!* lit. the sound of growling?)

My reference: None.

Volume Title: Garuguru!

Original title: がるぐる! (*garuguru!*)

Explanation: Supposedly an onomatopoeia for the sound of growling.



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