

ロンドンESP

Kadokawa Comics A



著/モリテツヤ イラスト・原作・監修/瀬川はじめ

– Tokyo ESP Gaiden –
London ESP

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Prologue — In Turkey

The chilling wind that enters from the rear window feels comfortable for Nakadai Takashi. The time is before dawn—the darkest hour of the day. The landscape of a town is engulfed in the seemingly oppressive darkness as it flows beyond his view. It is silent; however, he believes that the silence is calming for his present agitation.

Riding in the van are four men, all muscular including Nakadai. While each individual varies in nationality and race, it is possible for them to blend in with the locals due to their plain attires.

The young man sitting next to him, Nikolai, produces a cigarette and prepares to light it.

"Don't. The smell will stick."

Nikolai clicks his tongue, subsequently crushing his cigarette and throwing it out of the window.

Among them, Nakadai holds the highest position; he is their leader. Therefore, it is his duty to supervise the gang on their 'job'. Failure is not an option, for it will spell their death.

They are mercenaries, willing to face battles and kill for money. The demand of this peculiar business has grown rapidly since the 9/11 terrorist attack on the U.S, and it now holds a portion of the world economy. Sometimes called a civil defense company, this people receives enormous incomes from nations and armies alike.

Currently, however, they are not standing on a battlefield. There are no gunshots; no burnt stench—be it from goods, or humans.

This is Turkey. They are in Üsküdar, a neighbor city of Istanbul (the largest city in the nation). They are on the east side of the Bosphorus, the strait which separates the cities.

In other words, they are in the section closer to Asia. Still, being not too far off from Europe makes the place safe from territory disputes, unlike how it is in Syria. Hence, it is safe to claim that these individuals are a strange sight.

Furthermore, a suitcase stocked with firearms like assault rifles and SMGs can be found in the van. Also, handguns like Glocks and Berettas are holstered on the men's waists.

Why would they be here? The reason originates from the intel that one of the heads of the world-shaking terrorists is hiding in this very city.

The van makes a sudden turn at a curve, shaking the ones inside. Then, Nakadai takes out a portable terminal from his pocket to reconfirm the face of their target. He has looked at the same image so many times that a hole might have started to form on the screen. However, everything must be done to remove any chances of mistaking the target. Be attentive where it's due; that is the basis to survive and succeed.

It is the picture of a teenage girl, which appears to be photographed from a distance. Without noticing the camera, the girl is looking in the same direction as the man in suits standing beside her is. Despite her Asian blood, she has large eyes. Her face is unblemished like a ceramic doll, and her hair darker than the darkness around them.

'Minami Azuma /mɪnɑmɪ ɑzʊmɑ/

She is a Japanese like himself. While there are only a few Japanese mercenaries, even less ever became targets.

It was two months prior; a large-scale terror incident occurred in Tokyo—the capital city of Japan. The accompanying man in the image was the ringleader, while the girl, his daughter.

The man who called himself **The Professor** incited numerous, yet simultaneous uprisings of **those with superpowers** in the heart of the city. Tokyo suddenly turned into an unimaginable field of battle where the National Diet Building floated in the skies, before finally crashing onto Inokashira Park. The casualties from the government and civilians together amounted to thousands of people.

He had personally watched those unbelievable spectacles in the base mess hall. The battlefield, which he recognized from TV, was none other than Japan.

He saw Tokyo burning. Helicopters were shot down one after another and big flames were licking the land.

The word 'motherland' did not even register in his mind. He could never fathom the pain he felt at that time. Everything he had known about his homeland was transformed right before his eyes, giving him the deepest anguish he had ever known to exist.

The sight of National Diet Building, the pivot of the government of Japan, being suspended in midair shocked also the world. News of terrorist subjugations, chaos in Tokyo, as well as reports on the missing conspirators were broadcasted every day after.

The perpetrators then became wanted fugitives all at once throughout the world. A huge reward of thirty five million dollars was prepared for one girl. Yes, that hefty amount is the bounty for this Minami, dead or alive.

Hence, a chase order was immediately issued by the security company. While the Private Military and Security Company (PMSC) undertakes war contracts from countries, they also accept terrorist pursuit missions for the monetary rewards. Regardless of the many names who had volunteered, Nakadai was explicitly nominated for the task. Normally, it would serve as a proof of his worth as a soldier; but his nationality as a Japanese must have played the bigger factor.

He imagines shooting her on the head. The bullet would penetrate through the skull of the young girl with ease, spilling the spinal fluid within. He feels pity for her, but he makes himself clear of her identity as one of the criminals who caused his birth country to fall into chaos.

Furthermore, her head is worth a large sum of money. The amount will be more than sufficient for him to live twice his lifespan. Still, retirement is not his objective; he will continue his job until he loses his life somewhere along the road. He had a family: his separated wife and one daughter. If he remembers correctly, the latter should be two or three years younger than his current target. In fact, his goal is to leave 'something' for said daughter of his.

Before he left Japan, the woman who was once his wife told him.

"Never associate with us ever again. Not me, not my daughter."

Her demand was not unusual in their situation. Choosing to work as a killer with his own will, it would normally be unthinkable for someone who had been raised in Japan. However, he was different; he had been living while surrounded by violence since his childhood. Even in a peaceful country like Japan, such places do exist.

Ergo, he became a mercenary.

He decided to tread on battlefields, carrying firearms, earning his dough. He became a *specialist* in committing violence.

Once again, he looks at the screen.

Will he pull the trigger? He will. Nay, he must. This will not be his first experience killing women or children. Nakadai Takashi is not a selfless hero, nor is he a zealous idealist. Instead of bearing patriotism or righteousness, he is a mere mercenary who fights for money. After all, this sort of *wetwork* has a greater pay rate compared to the wage for manual labor. Even after the deduction for the company and splitting the

remaining amount to the present members, his reward will still add up to a considerable number all the same.

For his own daughter, he will kill someone else's. The thought of his girl detesting such endowment fleets across his mind. It has been more than ten years since he last saw her —not even a photograph. Although, he did hear her voice once.

It was right after the terror incident. He contacted his ex-wife for the first time in those ten years. Immediately after he named himself, the other party turned silent.

"I saw the news," said Nakadai.

"...I see."

"Are you alright?"

"We're living in Kobe now."

"Is that so...?"

Reticence.

"I'm hanging up."

It happened right before he could make his reply.

"Mom, where are we eating today?"

In his mind, he saw his daughter walking towards his (former) wife in her pitter-pattering slippers on the other side of the phone.

"I'll fix some now."

And so, the call was disconnected. That was all that happened. It is all he needs, however, to know that his daughter is living in a peaceful world. Again, his anger towards the terrorists builds up.

"Do you think superpowers really exist?"

The question came from Marx, the man sitting in the passenger seat. Nikolai shrugs his shoulders and replies.

"Who knows? But that huge building surely flew."

"It was truly the works of God."

Hearing that, the young Nikolai gives a snort.

"*Takashi*, there are superheroes walking around in your country. That's like really cool, ain't it!"

One can feel the thorns in Nikolai's demeanor. Perhaps he is still bitter about his cigarette earlier.

"I haven't returned to that place for years."

"Hey now, I thought you'd be more worried about your family."

Nakadai remains silent. He considers it a topic not to be discussed during a mission.

And the van comes to a stop.

"We're here."

Said John, the driver. The four men alight from the vehicle in unison and carry out their preparations. Carrying their each preferred weapon, they are now standing in front of a building—the target's hideout.

With protruding windows on its second floor, the building is a typical Turkish residential house. The gap to the house next door is barely enough for a man to enter, but a teenage girl should be able to run through it with ease.

After ordering John to keep watch outside, Nakadai takes a brief, gaping breath and kicks the door open. A corridor is directly visible upon entry, with rooms to both sides. The house plan includes a stairway at the end of this passage. Having managed to break in smoothly, they begin their search from the nearest room. The first is a bedroom, where Nikolai affirms the situation.

"*Clear!*"

As the target is not in that room, they continue with the one further in.

"*Clear!*"

However, right before they leave the room, they hear a whistle-like sound shrill momentarily. The three hold their guns horizontally as they head towards the source of the racket.

The sound came from the kitchen. Nakadai peers into the area, only to find a teenage girl who is brewing coffee. A fragrant smell wafts through the air.

Judging from her beautiful looks and dark black hair; she is without a doubt their target—Azuma Minami. She dresses prim and proper while holding a coat, looking ready to go out somewhere.

The men look at each other, confused.

"She doesn't notice us?"

"But the door was practically slammed open, she should have noticed..."

"It's not mentioned in the report, but perhaps she has a bad hearing."

Regardless, he determines that this is their chance. Holding the girl at gunpoint, he walks into her vision slowly. Then he said, "Don't move," in Japanese.

The girl—the target—gives him a glance, but she soon loses interest and watches the TV furnishing the kitchen instead. The screen is showing the National Diet Building floating in snowy skies. He hears a newscaster talking in Turkish.

"I said, don't move!"

Nakadai places his finger on the trigger. However, Minami shows little reaction as she sips on her coffee; in which the sound makes him instinctively gulp his saliva. Nikolai and Marx move closer to surround Minami, revealing themselves in the process. Only after Nikolai stands in front of the TV, blocking it from view, that she frowns in response.

"Is she deaf after all?"

"Who cares about that? So, do we kill her?"

His companions are ready to pull their triggers. But suddenly, his daughter's voice springs in his mind.

Mom, where are we eating today?>——He stops his companions.

"Wait! We don't need to kill her, we're taking her alive."

Nikolai seems to make a relieved expression. Nakadai has decided not to give his daughter money from killing a person, even if he or she is a terrorist ringleader.

"I never thought she'd have no guards with her."

Nikolai takes out a cigarette and lights it, with the girl still staring at him.

As regards Nakadai, he has went to the second floor together with Marx to check for any companions. Nikolai reaches for his handcuffs, when on the edge of his vision, he sees——

They search every nook and cranny of the second floor. They have ransacked the closet, combed through the clothes and luggage only to find nobody. He sends a transmission to John, who is keeping watch outside.

"We've located the target."

"[Did you kill her?]"

"No, she's alive and well."

"[So we'll be taking her in.]"

"Yeah."

"[Roger... hm?]"

"What's wrong?"

"[Someone's coming.]"

"Her companion?"

"[I don't know. She's unarmed.]"

"Drive her away."

Roger——John's reply was cut off midway.

"Still, there are so many clothes here. Damn, women always bring lots of luggage with them, don't they?"

Is what Marx said while looking downward at the clothes which are now scattering the room.

"You said it."

Replied Nakadai. There are many clothes decorated with frills like the western medieval dresses. They look heavy and hard to move around in; not to mention the quantity.

He realizes that it is the so-called Gothic Lolita fashion. He recalls Minami's appearance which he saw earlier in the kitchen. Her attires were simple, without any superfluous decorations.

No, these clothes are not hers.

"She has a companion!"

A shattering noise resounds from the first floor. The two immediately return downstairs, only to find a pale-faced Nikolai standing, alone. The coffee that is spilling from the broken cup is still steaming.

"Where is the target?!"

"S-she disappeared."

"Damn it!"

Marx dashes to the corridor hurriedly. There is a girl standing at the entranceway, but not Minami. She has long, wavy, gorgeous blonde hair and is wearing a black dress. She tilts her head slightly as she beams lovely. The frills on her dress are swaying with her joyful bearing. However, Marx has the least intention to return her smile because of the M134 minigun that she is carrying with her.

That armament is usually seen mounted on a helicopter. Marx is fully aware of its firepower—enough to reduce a human body into mincemeat in the blink of an eye. Strangely, that Gatling gun seems to match her dress.

The six jointed barrels slowly start to rotate.

"Good day."

The muzzles spew fire as she makes her greeting. Receiving more than sixty bullets in a second, Marx turns into a stain on the wall. And that wall also crumbles in sequence.

The girl moves the barrels toward the kitchen as is. The wall-destroying bullets are now closing towards Nakadai and Nikolai. They quickly throw themselves down to the floor. The tracer bullets that appear once in every number of shots draw atrocious traces of light. The unlucky articles in the kitchen are flying over their heads as the kitchen itself is being devastated.

"You piece of shit!"

Nakadai shouted as he fires his assault rifle towards the entranceway randomly. The minigun ceases its fire in an abrupt manner.

"Did you get her?"

Asked Nikolai. Without answering, Nakadai heads to the entranceway cautiously, and the former follows suit. What was left in that place is a tumbling M134, and the smoke rising from its barrels.

"Nikolai."

He calls Nikolai, who is gripping his gun, over his shoulder.

"Nikolai!"

"Y-yes?"

Not even the slightest brazenness which he had displayed in the van remains in him.

"Earlier, you said the target disappeared."

Nikolai gulps down the air around him.

"Explain. Did she get away when you got careless?"

"I—!"

He paused his voice that had broken into falsetto.

"I never moved my sight away from her, not even for a second. I swear, she really... disappeared. After releasing some kind of smoke, her body somehow melted away and vanished."

"...ESP (superpower), huh."

"[You're right!]"

All of a sudden, a girl's voice was heard from the telecoms equipment. Nikolai raises a short scream and starts to shoot blindly, as if deranged.

"Calm down! Stop it!"

"Where?! Where the hell is she?!"

"Damn it! That idiot!"

He abandons Nikolai, who continues firing blindly in the middle of the passageway. Knowing that staying near a frenzied soldier brings danger to oneself, he climbs to the second floor and enters a windowed room. He presses his back against the wall and

checks the situation outside.

"[I'm sorry, but I can't have you escape from this place.]"

The gunshots from downstairs stopped at the same time with the incoming transmission.

"Did you kill Nikolai?"

"[If you mean the man who was firing randomly, then yes. I also killed the watchman outside.]"

The echoes of the girl's voice were soothing, but Nikolai's mind is stirred. He can smell blood only from hearing her speak. He feels tense. He feels as cold as iron. He feels despair. Just what kinds of experience did it take for a girl in her teens to be able to produce such a voice, he wonders.

"It was a mistake to see you as normal humans. I was wrong to assume you were mere girls!"

He fires his assault rifle at the floor. The FMJ (Full Metal Jacket) bullets penetrate through it successfully, but there is no feedback of hitting his target. He then replaces the magazine promptly.

"[I feel pity for you all.]"

He smiles wryly from her words. He is given pity by someone he felt pity for. It goes beyond disgraceful that it passes as laughable.

"[You are nothing but weaklings to us. You must have lost your way. You were drawn by sweet nectar, unaware of your purpose.]"

He hears only her voice. Stillness. He once believed that silence had the ability to calm his agitation.

"[But, you are a nuisance. Even more when a weakling like you intends to bring harm to us.]"

But, now is different. This stillness is called——

"You have to die."

The face of a beautiful girl suddenly fills Nakadai's vision. A face, unblemished like a ceramic doll, with dark black hair and large eyes. Then, an unpleasant sensation churns his abdomen. Something has pierced through his body, stopping at the wall behind him.

It is Azuma Minami, the target he had intended to kill. He fixes his eyes on the subject of his teeny bit of pity. Feeling the taste of iron in his mouth, he coughs blood; in which a spray of it sticks to Minami's face.

From her pocket, she takes out something which looks like an ordinary stone to Nakadai. But contrary to his thought, Minami is grasping it tightly as she puts it to his view.

"Can you see the fish?"

He does not understand her question. Meanwhile, the unpleasantness in his stomach changes to pain, and his oozing blood spreads over his clothes.

"Can you see the glowing fish?"

He cannot see anything like she described. The only thing in his vision is Minami's beautiful face. And so, Nakadai shakes his head. Minami pulls out what had pierced his body—a splendid Japanese sword. Nakadai recalls a historical movie that he had watched together with his ex-wife who was still his lover at that time. Recalling how

bored she had looked, he smiles. Although in reality, he only managed to twitch the edge of his mouth.

Nakadai collapses forward, on the puddle of his blood. It is tepid—contrasting with his growing cold body. Then, he looks upward to Minami. Even turning his neck has become difficult for him. His movement is clumsy, as if there are wires constricting his joints.

The girl, who is now looking downward at him, turns slightly pale. She makes a peculiar expression of one experiencing a bloodshed. Still, Nakadai believes that she is showing too much pain in her regard.

The voice of his daughter fleets in his mind. May his daughter never have to tread the same path as this girl's, he hopes.

The wavy blonde-haired girl walks up to Minami. Then the blonde female holds out her hand to Nakadai, as if trying to aid him. So Nakadai extends his hand, trying to reach hers. However, a Beretta abruptly appears within the girl's palm. The weapon inflated like a balloon; it was a truly strange occurrence to him.

"Good day."

A dazzling light.

Thus, Nakadai Takashi heads towards stillness.

This stillness is called——

Minami shakes the blood off her katana, splattering it in the room. She leaves blood prints as she walks, much like making stamps on the floor.

"And?"

"Neither of us is hurt. It appears these people do not know of its existence at all."

The one who answered is the light-haired girl, Kuroi Kozuki.

"We're leaving soon. Pack your necessary luggage."

"I'm all ready. I have finished packing while you were engaged in the sword fight."

And they reach downstairs. Looking at the destroyed portion of the first floor, Minami heaves a sigh.

"Reduce your clothes. Teleporting takes longer if the weight increases."

"It's fine this time. We have acquired a van, the one they used to arrive here."

"That's not what I'm getting at."

At the entranceway, Kozuki stops Minami from leaving. There are locals outside, timidly trying to grasp what had caused all the racket.

"Your face."

"What's wrong with it?"

"You have blood on your face. You must look pretty when you appear before people."

The nonchalant Minami begins to wipe her face with her coat sleeve.

"Ah, geez! Aren't you just smearing it?!"

Kozuki seizes Minami's hand to stop her action. Afterwards, she produces a frilly handkerchief from her own bag to wipe the stain with.

"There, all wiped and pretty."

Minami scowls at Kozuki, irritated. Then they leave the building for the van. The van is crammed with Kozuki's luggage first. After waving towards the gathering locals, Kozuki climbs into the driver seat.

"Shall we visit Europe for the time being?"

"The inspection there is strict."

"You're right, but England will be fine."

Kozuki turns the key, and the vehicle slowly starts up.

"Are you serious? It's an island country. Forget about entering, it'll be difficult to leave."

"Whether I'm serious or not, that country is my home, you know?"

Kozuki retrieves a silver-colored, plastic switch from the dashboard and passes it to Minami.

"What's this?"

"Fireworks for my triumphal return. I wanted to press it myself, but I'll let you have the honor."

"So, I just need to press this?"

"Yes. Press it with all your heart."

Minami presses the switch as she was told. At the same time, their hideout explodes, producing a deafening sound. The crowd scatters to avoid the flame and splinters that are hailing towards them. It is almost dawn, when the brazen deed dispels the tranquil

night in Üsküdar.

"Ohohohohoho! Let us depart! To my home!"

"You're acting like an idiot."

Roaring engine, Kozuki's reverberating humming. Minami settles in her seat and closes her eyes. Tranquil rays of dawn are illuminating the sea as worship of Adhan is heard. Among the cramped luggage, the Ark emits a faint light.

Chapter 1 — Boule of London



'If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?'

Such expression seems to exist in this country. The date is now approaching halfway through March. In Japan, the warm sun would start shining around this period.

Inside a vehicle which heating does not function well, England is cold even in March. The clouds overhead are thin, but the sky looks as pale as a sick person.

We are currently riding in a vehicle. Crossing the Dover Strait and now treading on the land of England; what I obtain from all this is nothing more than exhaustion.

I shift my glance towards the side mirror. It seems that we are not being followed.

There, my gaze meets with my own. I have a slightly pallid complexion. My constant vigilance for pursuers must have taken its toll on my body.

I take a look at the driver beside me, Kuroi Kozuki. The word 'bored' seems to be plastered on her countenance as she drives. Unlike mine, however, her face looks bright.

Kozuki has been together with me for several months. She has pale skin, prominent nose, lightly-colored irises, and above all, her hair is a natural blonde. Although her name is Japanese, anyone can tell from her outward appearance that she is half Caucasian.

I think she is around three years younger than me, so she should be still fifteen years old. But, her age can be sensed only from her childish face. Her abundant breasts and thin waist can be perceived even with her clothes on. Furthermore, her Gothic Lolita attire makes her look similar to a french doll.

If she walks around the town, everyone would be captivated by her appearance. However, like a cute frog has its poison, the darkness of her past and disposition will make anyone regret making her acquaintance.

Noticing my gaze, Kozuki opens her mouth and asks.

"What is it, Minami?"

"...It's nothing."

She is referring to me; my name is Azuma Minami.

"Then, would you mind having a conversation with me?"

"I don't feel like it right now."

Kozuki's eyebrow twitches. She does that whenever she is annoyed.

"I'd believed that you would agree as a compromise for staring at my face..."

I avert my gaze from her and take out a magazine from the dashboard.

"I'm tired right now."

"Huuh?!"

Kozuki snatches the magazine away and throws it out of the driver window. Flapping like a clumsy bird, the magazine goes out of sight in the blink of an eye.

"*You* are the one who feels tired? Haven't you been daydreaming in the passenger's seat all the way here from Dover?! Are you aware of what I've been doing all this time? I've been driving! *I* am the one who has been driving the entire time you're daydreaming beside me!"

She expresses her anger along with various gestures as she drives. Her driving ability is the real deal. However, if I go along with her now, she will only tire me out.

This is something I understood right after we started acting together. Contrary to her refined manner of speech, Kozuki has a short temper. Her posh behavior will take a complete turn, making her actions erratic—as if one of her screws just leaped off.

"But, the reason we're able to take this vehicle through Belgium was all thanks to me."

Without my 'merit', it would have been impossible to cross borders. We might not have reached England, either. Kozuki is aware of this, no doubt.

I have managed to make her swallow her words. However, she betrays my expectation before long as she makes her rebuttal to regain her standing.

"Certainly, that was thanks to you. However, it was only a speck when compared to the entirety."

"The entirety?"

"All contributions, everything during our life as runaways."

The talk has turned troublesome. I let out an involuntary sigh, I'm tired.

"Do you understand now? One instance describes thousands. Know that I will turn furious every time you make light of me."

"I'm not making light of you. Aren't we having a proper conversation right now? What are you dissatisfied with?"

It seems that my remark hits a land mine; the proof being, she suddenly swerves the steer to the left with all her might. This is one of her antics when her screw leaps off.

The vehicle protrudes to the opposite lane, while the skidding tires produce hysterical noises. The car behind us makes a sudden brake in a panic, and the one even behind makes a swerve to avoid it. Mayhem spreads in the blink of an eye, at which Kozuki makes a broad smile.

"Serve you right."

Not heeding the angers released by complete strangers, her smiling face looks innocent, if not lovely. *Temperamental* and *eccentric*, I have been together with this person who has—speaking frankly—a social deficit disorder.

The police may have marked us for this incident. In the face of my repeated concern about potential pursuers, Kozuki talks with a bored tone in her voice.

"Aren't you being a little too nervous? Be more relaxed."

"You're asking the impossible."

"Sheesh, you'll die from stress one of these days."

"You're the source of that stress."

"Oh, you~"

"...We're not here to play around."

During our chat, our means of transport enters a residential area. The houses are lined up in rows with uniform brown roofs.

"We've arrived in London."

We arrived a bit too quickly—it was a bit of a letdown. Anyway, the roads become more complex and the scenery transforms even more. The number of pedestrians is increasing, while the towering buildings surrounding the city are like walls in a maze.

And so, the nature of London is gradually revealed.

"Ah, look. We can see River Thames now."

Over the river, supported by the bridge piers are bridge towers, also known as the Tower Bridge.

And to the opposite of the bridge, I can see a stronghold-like structure. That must be the London Tower.

My interest in history comes from my parents being archaeologists. Being near the fortress that carries various anecdotes excites me a bit.

Crossing the bridge hides London Tower from my sight. What was I being excited for... despite my telling Kozuki we were not here to play around just earlier.

I cough lightly and ask her a question.

"Which part of London are we going to?"

"The East End. It is near Whitechapel."

Whitechapel, the one in the nineteenth century serial killer, 'Jack the Ripper'! I remember now, the East End, the area with the worst public order in London.

"This location is perfect for anyone on the run."

It is as Kozuki said, the more we advance, the worse the atmosphere becomes. There are litters everywhere. And even though it is still noon, I can see many people loitering around in front of stores and buildings.

The vehicle soon reaches a place with a row of tall structures.

"We have reached our destination block~"

"Block?"

"Apartment complex, I mean. Apartment complex in Japan is where the poor reside in, though."

The apartments here are about two times bigger compared to those in Japan. The place is wider, too. But, I feel cooped up; time seems to stop in London. Several ill-bred people are watching us cautiously—they are probably the residents here.

"Are we... hiding here this time?"

"There are a lot of people and various ethnic groups, and the police don't approach the place much. I tell you, there is no better location."

From a glance, even the age group is as wide. And having various ethnic groups means... hiding a tree within a forest, huh. I agree to her declaration.

"Oh, when hiding in this place, there are several rules to follow."

"Rules? You actually know something called 'rules'?"

"May I have a little of your attention here?"

Pouted the displeased Kozuki. When in Rome, do as Romans do. I should give her some respect and listen to what the native has to say here.

"First, you may not use your ESP. I suppose this one goes without saying."

"That rule applies anywhere, doesn't it? Why limit it to this place?"

Kozuki ignores me as she continues her speech.

"Second, do not cause problems. This includes noise, water leaks and the like. Live your days peacefully as a model resident would."

"Like I said, we've been sticking to those rules before we even got here."

"Third, do not poke your head into troubles. No matter the reason, no matter what happens, ignore it."

"You can actually shorten those rules to these three words, 'Don't stick out,' can't you?"

"Minami is a big idiot, after all. I can't help but to worry."

I have thought of a retort, but I will refrain from saying it out. It will be pointless, and it will only tire me out. She drives into an underground parking lot, numbered with '9' as marked on the wall. She then parks somewhere appropriately.

When I alight from the vehicle, I smell a horrible stench. The smell is like the mix of oil and fish. I am trying to find the source, but there does not seem to be anything nearby.

"What's this smell?"

"It smells pretty much the same anywhere around this area. If I must say, it is perhaps the smell of people who are clinging to something or another in order to live."

"What does that mean?"

Kozuki ignores my question and walks to leave the area. And so, I follow her in silence.

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Our hiding place is on the highest floor. Speaking in detail, it is room number 1215 of East End's apartment number 9, which is located on its twelfth floor.

The front door is double-layered with a cage-like crime prevention gate. The door itself is colored with an eye-hurtingly frivolous pink.

"Welcome to my *safehouse*. Ah, please take off your shoes. Cleaning would be tedious, otherwise."

The place is more spacious than I thought. There are two doors abreast in the living room. She says that one leads to the bedroom, and the other is a storage room. The word 'apartment' gave me an impression of it being small and confined, but it appears that it is different in England. From the entrance passageway, there seems to be a closet and a bathroom if I walk to the opposite direction of the living room.

The living room is full with some kind of medieval-style furniture—which lets me understand about Kozuki's tastes. There are things ranging from a leather sofa to a huge liquid crystal TV.

"Albeit small, we also have a balcony."

Boasts Kozuki. Although, I am not interested in it at all, so I ignore her statement.

"Where do I sleep? There is only one bedroom. Should I sleep on that sofa?"

"Would you mind if you don't? This sofa is much more expensive than what you think."

"So, on the floor?"

"Of course not. The bed is king-sized, two people can sleep in it with space to spare."

She opens the bedroom door. The small room barely contains one giant bed. It is equipped with a canopy like those usually seen in a palace.

"We're sleeping in one bed?"

During our life on the run, there were times when we had to huddle together in the cold. However, we have deliberately chosen a place to stay. I cannot understand why we have to sleep in the same room. And actually, I cannot feel at ease when I sleep with someone else.

"Is there any problem?"

"Not really."

Still, this is her home. I can only abide if nothing else.

Is she feeling happy, finally back home after a long time? Kozuki looks festive. I had had a place to call home until two years ago. I would say that I was home when I opened the door, and 'he' would be inside, preparing dinner. That scene has become nothing but an illusion.

"Well, shall we bring in the luggage?"

We enter the room used for storage. Having the same size of the bedroom, it contains many and various items. An ancient sword, ancient-looking tattered books, dimly shining gold bars, there is also a cursing doll from Africa, maybe. It is placed facing towards the ceiling, looking full of resentment. Considering the amount of dust, all the things here must have been neglected after being dumped into this room.

I pick up a cane-like thing that is somehow leaning against the wall. I brush off the dust that is already looking like cotton, revealing what is actually a scepter decorated with emerald and gold. Furthermore, the grip is engraved with a crowned double-headed eagle! I almost dropped it from surprise. This is the coat of arms of Russia, of Ivan the Terrible!

"Hey, this... did you...?"

"Yes, these are all stolen goods. Each of them took some efforts for me to snatch, you know."

Said Kozuki with a puff of her bosom. Now that I think about it, she is from a **Thief's Lineage**. According to the person herself, stories of her family are passed down as legends in London.

"Oh, really? Why do you leave them like this then?"

"Stealing them was fun. But after I contemplated it, these were all things that I didn't actually need. On the other hand, I did not want to discard the fruits of my efforts, so I decided to store them here for safekeeping."

Safekeeping? Did she mean 'neglect'? At the very least, this scepter does not deserve being covered with so much dust. This is a national treasure!

"By the way, the furniture in the living room is all stolen goods, too."

She declared such a dreadful fact without any hesitation. Now that she said it, each and every piece of the furniture seems to give the appearance of having been used for long, until a certain someone stole them. And after I take a closer look at the balcony curtain, I realize that it is actually sewn with very detailed embroidery. It is possible that she stole this from a palace somewhere.

"It is essential to organize these for a bit."

Kozuki forcefully pushes the scattered articles towards the wall. I dare say there are other renowned historical relics in there. Hearing the clattering sounds produced from that violent act is truly horrifying in a way.

"Minami, would you mind helping me out a little?"

I timidly approach a cardboard on the floor. When I pick it up, I can hear the sounds of small items clattering inside. They are combs and ornate hairpins, lying in disarray. Judging from their appearance, they are quite old and made of precious materials like tortoiseshell and coral. Underneath them are coins from the era of the Roman Emperor Hadrian and oval coins of Tensho Oban... I do not want to see any more of this.

That said, I end up 'discovering' more treasures every time I move something. I have carried everything carefully to avoid scratches on the items as much as I can. But, Kozuki just drops things on top of them without any reservation. My efforts were in vain.

"We have cleared up a lot of space. Splendidly done."

Kozuki smiles, looking satisfied. I knew it, this girl is wrong in the head somewhere. She is a person who places a Spartan Shield above the mechanical doll made by the expert craftsman, Tamaya Shobei! An art practitioner would faint from this hellish sight.

"I believe this will be sufficient. Then, I shall bring the things in."

Kozuki holds her hand out towards an empty space. The air starts to inflate like a balloon, and a suitcase appears out of nowhere. I am distressed to imagine if she will place more items above the famous treasures. The new suitcases are appearing neatly in a row as Kozuki continues transferring the rest of the luggage without delay.

This is Kozuki's merit, the ESP of **Item Transfer**. The luggage that is being transferred one piece after another comes from the vehicle we rode. The scope of her power is quite large; she can retrieve anything she has touched once and she can send them to anywhere she has been to. She can send living things away, but she cannot retrieve them because 'living things move around', or so she once said.

And here comes the last one. Not a suitcase like the ones before, rather, a simple wooden crate makes its appearance in the storage room.

I check the wooden crate thoroughly for any damages. It is my mission to guard its content.

The Ark and the Tablets. The origins of the 'glowing fish'; an entity that holds the power to give 'merits', to transform people into 'ESP users'. I see no abnormalities with the crate.

"That should be everything."

I can finally feel relieved.

"I have anticipated this earlier, but this storage room has become so cramped."

"Of course. Unless you organize it more frequently..."

"I know! We don't really use this wooden crate all the time, do we?"

Kozuki is pointing at what contains the Ark.

"What are you saying?"

"Yup, we don't."

In the next instant, Kozuki touches the crate and uses her power to send it away. Unable to understand what just occurred, my head goes blank for a second.

There is Kozuki with her beaming smile. The wooden crate disappeared with the Ark in it. The piles of historical relics are stacked to the wall. The crate disappeared. And Kozuki is definitely smiling.

"What are you doing?!"

I myself am surprised by how loud I shouted.

"Eh?"

"What are you spacing around for?! Bring it back here now!!"

I seize her collar and violently swing her back and forth.

"H-hey, stop it! You're stretching my clothes!"

"Bring it back here or I'll keep doing this until they tear!"

"If that really happens, I'll beat you until your bile comes out!"

"Just get the Ark back here, now!!"

Kozuki's eyebrow twitches and she grabs my collar back.

"Listen here, London is my home. I know what I ought and ought not do."

"I don't care! Just bring the Ark back here!!"

"I sent it to a safe place. It is even safer and more agreeable than here."

"You don't have to! I'm the one who decides what to do, and you just need to obey me!"

"Huuu?! Of course I refuse!"

"Do it even if you don't want to!"

"I'm not doing it because I don't want to!"

I have lost my patience. I cast a glance towards the katana hanging at my flank. But during that instant, I see Kozuki making a grin at the edge of my vision. She is [Transferring] me away.

I see the world around me getting sucked into the air as a new scenery immediately spreads before my eyes.

My vision is filled with red. When I realize that it is actually the frame color of a double-decker bus, its distance to me is already too close that I can see the expression of the bus driver vividly. With haste, I teleport to the rooftop of a nearby building.

There are sounds of an emergency brake and people screaming. An uproar is forming below.

Coincidence or not, Kozuki has sent me to the front of a moving double-decker bus.

No, it must have been intentional. I understand from observing my surroundings; a huge SANYO light signboard, a plaza with the statue of Eros pivoted in the center of the rotary, a crowd of people, and cars in traffic.

I am at Piccadilly Circus, a tourist spot in London. Lots of buses and taxis are traversing back and forth here. So, if someone is [Transferred] right into the middle of the road, even an idiot knows what will happen.

To think that she would **transfer** me to such a crowded place... I feel my heart boiling with anger as I sense Kozuki's malice. Anyway, I need to return and make her spill the whereabouts of the Ark.

It will not take long for me to return with my 'merit'. Like Kozuki, I also bear the power of ESP. My ability is teleportation—allowing me to move across a great distance in the blink of an eye. Those that I touch can be taken along regardless of its structure. Also, I can carry quite a large amount of weight without any particular restrictions.

However, I realize a grave matter before I can continue.

"Which way is to Whitechapel?"

My teleportation is not a convenient power where I can reach any destination just by popping it up in my mind. I need to know things like the general position and direction beforehand. White Chapel, Piccadilly Circus; even if I remember the names of the places, I am pretty much clueless without knowing which part of London they are in, or how the locations relate to each other.

There are no buildings near the apartment that can be used as a landmark from here. I usually *dash* to a conspicuous-looking building whenever I lose my way, but this time there is none.

"Oh well, I better go down and find a map..."

Then I discover another problem—about my current state.

I am not wearing any footwear. It is a matter of course, since I had removed my shoes in Kozuki's house before she transferred me afterwards. Walking barefooted at such a place will definitely make me stand out.

The fact that I can realize such things means that I have calmed down to some extent. For now, I will try to remember the buildings that I have seen while I search for White Chapel.

We passed through Tower Bridge when we crossed the river, and... right, We passed by London Tower. In other words, if I can locate the London Tower, I will make it back somehow.

I remember its shape. It should be easy to spot a structure enclosed by ramparts. Although, when I look around my surroundings, I do not see anything like it.

"Okay..."

I put my consciousness into the sky above and unleash my ESP. If someone is looking at me right now, I must look as if I am turning into mist.

Light fills my vision. And during the next instant, I have *dashed* to London's airspace—one thousand and five hundred meters above ground. It takes one mere second for me to start falling head first.

Below me is the townscape of London with River Thames cleaving the city into north and south. Also, observing from a high-altitude like this makes me aware of how the streets converge in the heart of the city.

"It's near the Thames River, I think."

I run my vision along the areas around the river. I see a bridge soaring like a tower—the Tower Bridge. So, London Tower should be right nearby...

Found it, one building that is surrounded by ramparts. With my consciousness floating above London Tower, I *dash*.

I land at the peak of the tower and look at my surroundings. There, I notice a cluster of apartment-like buildings.

I will return to the room in one go from here and present her with a dropkick as soon as I reach the room. After cracking my fingers, I *dash*.

Dash is the expression I decide for when I use my ESP. Since the word **dash** means going somewhere in a hurry, I think it is perfect to describe the trait of my 'merit'.

Exiting a vortex of light, I return to Kozuki's room after being away for around five minutes. But, there is no one in there. Only one note is left on the table.

*Dear Ms. Short-Tempered Idiot,
I am out shopping.
I may be returning home soon.
Although, there is a chance that I won't.
Please kill some time as you see fit.*

Kozuki

She even attached a simple cat illustration after her signature. In silence, I crumple the paper into a ball and throw it away. Never mind then, I will make her reveal where the Ark is in our next meeting.

In the meantime, I will find a store to buy a map within the apartment complex and search for where Kozuki might be at.

Though, after walking for around thirty minutes, I give up on obtaining the map. I have wandered all the way to the center of the complex, but except for groceries, all other stores were closed.

What should I do now? Visit the city area for the map? But, if the sun sets when I obtain my map, will I be able to catch Kozuki then? This is her home base; without a geographical advantage, it is impossible for me to catch up to her.

Hate to admit, waiting in her room patiently is the wisest conclusion at this point.

It is good that I could return to Kozuki's room with teleportation. But, I should refrain from using my ability too much around the complex. For the sake of *inputting* the layout of this neighborhood, I decide to walk to the other side of the complex and back.

The back side of the apartment complex is desolate. The stench from a garbage dump nearby combined with the already existing fishy smell makes me feel queasy.

A moment later, I see a boy running into the dump. Afterwards, five people—the very definition of delinquents—appear in pursuit and rush into the dump, as well. Soon, I hear the voices of a dispute starting.

I can imagine what is going on. The boy who ran in first looked really scared. And the delinquents seemed to have fun chasing their prey.

They must be bullying him in the dump right now. There are thick sounds of flesh getting beaten, along with the owner's groans.

It would be bad if I get involved. But, when I decide to scam, the five-man group exit the dump while dragging their victim. And more importantly, they are now blocking my path as they resume their bullying.

The one getting bullied looks very young, maybe around ten years old. Compared to him, the delinquents are much bigger in size, about fourteen to fifteen years old. The boy is getting beaten without mercy.

I know the garbage dump is small and cramped... but I never thought that anyone would do such things where people come and go. This is not even a back alley.

Well, what do I do now? I can just ignore and forget about him. Nine out of ten, this is his fate. Maybe I should just go back to where I walked from. On the other hand, why do I have to give up my prior route because of some children?

I am standing still, thinking of my next action. Meanwhile, the boy has become battered from the kicks and punches. His nosebleed is splattered all over the floor.

One of the bullies that is wearing a red cap leaves the place, perhaps to look for something to be used as a weapon. And so, the path has become wide enough for me to go through. They are currently entranced with their bullying, so they should not notice if I walk pass them now.

Still getting hit, the boy cowers like a turtle, waiting for the violence to end. But, that is the wrong choice. Trembling and curling yourself up will not change anything. You will only be wrenched open with even greater strength. What awaits is even more gruesome violence.

"*Bodishi...*"

My feet stop involuntarily. The word seems to come from the boy on the receiving side of the bullying.

"*Bodishi... Bodishi...*"

He mutters the same word over and over again as if in delirium.

Bodishi—it means 'I am sorry' in Efrasian language. This boy, he is from—I see the boy's back overlap with 'him' for an instant.

There was a time when 'he' got beaten up like this, too. He started a brawl with some delinquents that had insulted me during his middle school, and was utterly defeated. After having that transient daydream, my chest suddenly grows hot.

At the same time, someone shoves me, making me fall to my backside. Looking up, I see the boy that went to search for a weapon looking down at me while shouting something.

I brush the dirt off my clothes and get up without hurrying.

The red cap's companions stop what they were doing and surround me. It seems that they are currently throwing some abusive words. I look at the boy, and he looks me back with a frightened expression in his eyes.

"Your name?"

I asked the boy in Efrasian. Surprised and bewildered, he answers me with a soft voice, "Levan..."

I avert my gaze and deliver a punch to the throat of one approaching delinquent.

He holds his throat as he collapses, and I trample on him. That is when I see the faces of the delinquents for the first time. They look like Kozuki when she is annoyed. And about the rules that she made, I have stopped caring.

"We're breaking through."

I swing my leg towards the red cap's jaw with all my might.

3

Good day, my name is Kuroi Kozuki. I am a beautiful young girl born in the thief family lineage which has been existing in the history of England for five hundred years, the **Black Fist**. Yes, I am *the* Kuroi Kozuki.

At the present, I am enjoying a pleasant trip home from my shopping. London is brimming with excellent selections as always. *Seizing one thing after another* has filled me with much satisfaction.

The day has become quite late because of my numerous side trips. The sun has set completely by the time I arrive at the apartment. The temperature has dropped quite a bit, and my exhaled breath forms white haze. This piercing cold weather makes me crave for a stew. Such is my line of thinking as I hasten my pace.

I wonder if Minami is still angry? She is the type who bears a grudge, so I suppose she is super angry even now. Will she grumble to me again when I am home? She is really a handful, I heave a sigh.

When I exit the elevator, I am overcome with a malaise that I cannot seem to put into words. There are times when thieves are able to employ their intuitions. And so, we are able to sense if an undesirable occurrence has arisen.

There is no particular change in the passageway. I do not sense anyone nearby, and I see nothing that can serve as *traps*, either. I observe my surroundings covertly as I head towards my room. In the end, nothing happens.

Is it possible that I am just imagining it? Having a false alarm does not really please me. I open the door to my room and I spot Minami's footwear, along with a pair of tattered sneakers.

"Minami, are you in?"

After I called her from the passageway, Minami reveals herself from the living room while holding a piece of absorbent cotton. The sharp smell of antiseptic solution enters my nose.

"I'm borrowing your first aid kit."

Said Minami with the same expression as always. I can never tell what she is thinking under that visage.

"I don't mind, but did you hurt yourself?"

"No, not me."

"Hold on a second. What do you mean?"

"Well, nothing big."

My thief's intuition is blaring. I push Minami aside. In the living room, I find a young boy whom I do not know sitting on the sofa and wrapped with bandages.

"W-who are you?!"

I fling my bags and ask a question spontaneously.

"Ah, um... I-I, I..."

"He's Levan. It seems that he lives in the same block."

Minami answered the question I threw in the stead of the flustered boy. Levan? Lives in the same block?

"Why is he here, then?!"

"I brought him because he got hurt."

Answering with the same tone as ever, she resumes treating the boy.

"What in the world are you thinking?! Did you not hear what I said the first thing we arrived?!"

"I did, but you said nothing about not bringing anyone into this room."

"Please do not nitpick on the details!"

On the receiving end of my shout, Minami clicks her tongue as if she is fed up with something. No matter what I say to her will fall on deaf ears. I turn to face the Levan boy, instead.

"You!"

"Y-yes?!"

It appears that I can converse with him in English. I do not understand how Minami was able to communicate with him when she cannot speak English at all.

"I am aware of how impolite of me to say this, but I am troubled if you stay here. Would you please leave?"

Levan looks at us alternately. Nodding, he stands up. But Minami forcibly pushes him back to my sofa.

"I haven't finished treating him."

Aah, geez!

"All right. Then make it quick and chase him away when you're done."

"It's almost finished. What are you getting so angry for?"

"You know what? Do you want me to let you know just how thoughtless you are? This morning, you told me to be prudent in my actions or whatnot like you're some important person. Even if I pile my idiotic behavior one hundred times, what you are doing now is yet more idiotic!"

"So you're actually aware that you were being an idiot, I'm surprised."

This woman, I feel like punching her until she spews blood. I have known that she is only capable of providing rude remarks... but that was the worst answer I could ever imagine. Perhaps I should start filling her head with leads.

"See? All done."

"Then please chase him away right now!"

Minami speaks a few words to Levan, and he expresses his gratitude as he rises from his seat. The language they use to converse with; the sound and form are similar to Turkish. But, the boy does not look to be a native from there.

"Excuse me..."

Timidly, he starts speaking with me in English. I notice that he talks in a strange accent. Is he an immigrant, perhaps?

"Could you be not too angry to *Minami*? She rescued me from delinquents."

There goes my thief's intuition, again.

"You were rescued? What do you mean?"

I have put on a smile to keep him from being frightened of my inquiry. However, he steps away and stays quiet instead. What a useless brat.

"Minami?"

"What?"

I gently approach Minami, who is tidying up after her nursing.

"This boy told me that you had rescued him. Care to explain more?"

Her hand stops abruptly. She breathes out lightly and turns to face me.

"That's how the course of events leads up to."

"What course of events would that be?"

"First, that boy was being bullied by delinquents in the complex. Then, when I was passing through where they were at, I got involved."

"And why would you take the trouble trying to pass through them in the first place?"

"Who cares about that. Okay, so I got involved and I asked them to let me through."

"In English?"

"Japanese. I can't speak English."

Said Minami with no shame whatsoever. What is wrong with girl? Is she an alien or something?

"After that, they took action. So... well, I did it."

"Do you mean to say that you responded to their attack?"

"Responded... how do I say it... He pushed me, so I kicked him as a payback."

"Are you an idiot?!"

Just what in heavens... just what is wrong with this lass!! I have told her! I have expressly told her not to poke into troubles no matter what happens! I knew that she was an idiot, but this much is unimaginable!

How old is this little infant? This is not your first time having to house-sit, remember?

"Tell me that the other party is still alive!"

"Maybe. I didn't check it, so I'm not sure."

"If you're that slow and dim-witted, can you please think and behave like one?!"

Minami grows sullen, but she does not rebut me. In the end, she does have a feeling of guilt to a certain extent. However, my distress is not to be quelled this simply. The sense of freedom that I occasionally feel in London city has disappeared; not even its tiniest

atom remains.

Judging from Levan's immigrant-like appearance, some delinquents must have been playing immigrant hunt with him, until they fell victim to Minami.

As a matter of fact, this *block* is under a gang's clout. The group employs kids as extremities to monitor the precinct, and assaulting those kids will result in...

At the same time, I hear the sound of the crime prevention gate being violently beaten. The grating, clanging sounds reverberate within the compartment.

"Here they are..."

I can guess the identity of our violent visitors easily—the gangsters.

"Listen to me, Minami. I will be the one to handle them. Do not speak until I give the signal. Do not fight them, either. Do you understand?"

"Signal? What kind?"

"When I say 'kill them', you can do whatever you want. However, absolutely do not do anything before then. All right?"

After seeing her nod, I head towards the entranceway. The situation has really turned troublesome.

Opening the door, I see a bunch of detestable gangsters standing neatly in a row along the corridor. One of them is tall, about two meters. He is clad with a catchy appearance because of the gold chain on his neck, on top of wearing sagging pants.

"Could you please quieten down a little bit? There should be an intercom at the front."

"Open it."

Having been told so, I open the crime prevention gate. It has become a little crooked because of their violent treatment.

The man that is wearing a pair of sunglasses with gilded rims pushes me aside and enters my residence without removing his muddy shoes. Then, he directs his companions to search the place. It appears that this person is the leader.

The subordinates are looking high and low—my storage room, bedroom, even the shower room—like they were hunting dogs.

"Mayhem! She's here! It's this one, right?"

It seems that the word Mayhem refers to the sunglasses man. 'Turmoil', what an exaggerating name to use for himself.

In the living room, Minami and Levan are now surrounded by the thugs. They are trying to intimidate the two by flaunting the guns that are tucked into their trousers.

"Call Moses here."

Following Mayhem's instruction, one boy is led here; he must be Moses. The face of the boy wearing a red cap is full of bandages. Also, his neck is wrapped with a cast.

"Is it her?"

He nods, and the gangsters draw their guns towards Minami. And so, I interpose myself between Mayhem and her without a moment's delay.

"Breaking into someone else's house and acting however you wish, without even telling the reason is a little disrespectful of you, don't you think?"

"Move. I have some business to settle with that woman. Who the hell are you anyway?"

"I am the owner of the place."

After I said that, Mayhem snorts a laughter through his nose, while the others start to laugh loudly.

"Alright, then. Can you step away, Miss Owner?"

"I cannot do that. You are intending to kill that girl, aren't you?"

"Who knows? She clobbered some of our guys here, so I guess she won't leave unharmed."

Mayhem grins and laughs. Gold teeth peek through the opening of his mouth in a coarse manner.

"The ones whom she hit were underlings at most, were they not? Even if you blame her for that..."

"Yes, they're underlings, but they're still one of us! There's no way we can keep silent after what she did. That laid-back bitch standing behind you has spat all over our Boss's face!"

It is *your* spit that is splattered all over my face, you son of a—Oops, that is unbecoming of me, I must stay calm. If I open hostilities towards these gangsters, I will become unable to live here. I shall not say goodbye to this place on my first day back in London.

"How about... an apology gift to your boss from yours truly? Let us forgive and forget about this matter with that."

"An apology?? There's no way a shitty girl like you can prepare a proper gift."

"Yes, actually. I will wrap a sufficient amount. I do have my share of wealth."

It is a peeve, but this is the most effortless method to solve the matter at hand. It should be fine if I hand over money from selling some loots from the storage room. Aah, geez! Why do I have to waste my money for this! Minami will definitely be given a piece of my mind later.

Mayhem looks around my room and releases another laugh.

"You gotta be kidding me. Why are you living in this *block* then?"

"How about yourself? You and your boss seem to have quite the influence. Yet, why do you live here?"

"Heh, I see. Alright, I'll believe you. I'll overlook the stuff about your bitch of a housemate in your respect as the place owner, but..."

"But?"

"Is that brat your housemate, too?"

Said Mayhem as he points towards Levan. Being pointed at, Levan turns visibly pale. I sympathize with him, but there is nothing I can do in his regard.

"No, that would be incorrect."

"Then you don't mind if we take him with us?"

"No, by all means."

One of the gangsters pulls him by his shirt violently. Not letting out a voice, his face alone turns as white as a sheet. Do not resent us, this is an inevitable outcome. At least, I shall honor you forever as our noble sacrifice.

Case closed——or so I thought in unison with Minami's brainless move. She unsheathes her Japanese sword from its scabbard and swings it onto the gangster's neck.

It takes a mere instant for the venue to transform into a field of battle. The gangsters are now holding both of us at their gunpoint.

"Oi! What's the meaning of this?!"

Shouted Mayhem. Of course he is surprised, even I, am surprised despite having been together with her for these several months.

"Hey! What are you doing?!"

"What did you say to that guy? Why are they taking Levan away?"

"In exchange for a sum of money and Levan, I negotiated that they would overlook both of us!"

"Tell him to take just the money and go home."

"Whatever happens to that brat is of no one's concern, is it?!"

"I'm the one to decide that!"

This goddamn stupid woman! Do I have to beat you until your gray matter spills out for you to understand?! You only need to think a little to know that making an enemy of gangsters is a poor idea!

"Oi, owner! What's going on?! You better not be playing around with us here!"

"Be quiet, you blockhead! I am still thinking about what kind of measure I should take now!"

Ah, now I have done it.

"What was that?! You bastard!!"

Mayhem reveals a ridiculously large, shining *gold-plated Desert Eagle*. How commendable of him, being able to get his hands on such article in England.

"Ohoho, I apologize for my banter, truly. I am going to provide twice the amount. So, would you mind overlooking that boy, as well?"

"The negotiation's been off the moment that woman took out her Samurai Sword. In the first place, I hate your obnoxiously elegant way to speak! That housemate, that brat, and you! You're all dying here!"

The worst. This is really the worst. I have taken the troubles to return home, only to reach such conclusion. I will no longer be able to live here when this ends. The room will be dirty with their blood and flesh and all the furniture will be ruined. Furthermore, the smell of gunpowder will stick to the curtain. After searching high and low, although my train of thought has strayed to the matter about the curtain... Everything! Everything is Minami's fault!

"Minami."

"What?"

"So many things are now in vain thanks to you."

"You're the one at fault for hiding the Ark."

"Let us talk about that later, for now..."

'Kill them'——is what I was about to say when a certain melodic incoming call ringtone resounds. Still pointing their weapons towards us, the gangsters timidly turn towards Mayhem.

Mayhem retrieves his mobile phone. Still holding his gun with his other hand, his expression changes into that of shock. Judging from the scolding tone that can be heard

on occasions, the other party is unmistakably their boss. The way he stops himself from speaking whenever he opens his mouth makes him look almost like a carp.

His face has turned pale by the time the phone call is disconnected. I wonder where his vigor went. His shoulder droops like french fries that have been left for a while. He only says, "We're leaving," before taking his gang out of the room with him.

We, who are left in the room, can only glance at each other as we send them off.

"Did you do that?"

Minami remains quizzical as she asks me, but nothing immediately comes to mind. Did I do so many good deeds during the afternoon that their boss dropped a call at such a great timing in return? No, no, that is not it.

Once again, my thief's sixth sense notifies me of an impending danger. I recall one individual who is capable of achieving this feat.

Another ringtone is heard. The sound originates from what is inside the plastic shopping bag that I tossed earlier. Now that I think about it, I purchased two prepaid mobile phones for our contact purposes. But, the batteries should not have been inserted yet...

I timidly take the phone out of the plastic bag. It is ringing while still inside its airtight packaging. Am I currently inside a horror flick..?

After removing it from the packaging, I press the receive button and places the phone to my ear.

"[That was some trouble you caused.]"

"Eep!"

I stifled my shriek as I heard her voice. *Night Crawler, Queen of the Thieves, Piercer*; she is the great thief that bears numerous titles. The owner of this voice is the present head of the Black Fist, my grandmother.

4

I want coffee. That is what strikes me when I see the translucent reddish-brown drink in front of me.

This is surreal. There is a cell phone on the table, with cups of black tea that seems to be positioned to surround it. The three of us are sitting with the phone set on speaker. But, there is no sound at all. Even so, Kozuki remains sitting up straight with her tense face.

"Ahem."

Kozuki coughs unnaturally. It is rare to see her nervous like this.

"Minami, there is no need to be reserved. Please, have a drink."

Her manner of speech is even more courteous than usual. I drink the tea, enough to dampen my throat.

"All right, where shall we start from?"

Kozuki gives a pleasant smile, though I have no idea who she is directing it to.

"Ah, now that I think about it, I have not introduced you. Grandmother, this quiet girl is Azuma Minami. Minami, the person on the other side of the phone is my grandmother."

"Just what have you been blabbering about?"

Kozuki has been acting weird after she picked up the call from this withheld number. She put the phone on the table so carefully before hurrying to prepare some tea. Levan and I could only be taken aback as we watched her.

She glares at me, telling me to introduce myself with her gaze. This is stupid. I face the phone and talks to it.

"It's Minami."

As expected, there is no answer. From what Kozuki said, the caller is her grandmother—the current head of Black Fist, Kuroi Beatrix.

"You sure the line's actually connected?"

I casually reach towards the phone, but Kozuki slaps my hand.

"Please do not act so foolishly!"

"Talking to a muted phone looks more stupid to me."

Meanwhile, Levan is looking at us with a confused expression.

"Also, you said that the gangsters pulled back because of something related to the one behind this call. In other words, someone is keeping watch of this place. Isn't this hideout unknown to anyone?"

"That is what I thought, too. But... well, it's my family. So I suppose she is not included in 'anyone'."

Stated Kozuki cheerfully. I really feel like kicking her ass right now.

"[It appears that my grandchild has always caused you trouble.]"

For the first time, I hear a voice from the phone. Her Japanese is flawless. Although, I can't tell her age or even her gender from the voice. Is she using a voice changer?

"Of course not, Grandmother. If I have to say, it should be me who has been caused trouble."

I click my tongue from hearing her trying to curry some favor. I pick up the black tea for another sip. In the end, I still dislike its bittersweet taste.

I do not like where this is going. How do I say it, I feel that my pace is being dictated by someone else. Kozuki trusts her grandmother. But to me, that person is nothing more than a stranger.

"Minami, won't you introduce that friend of yours, as well?"

Kozuki looks at Levan, who is sitting to her opposite. He looks anxious because he does not understand Japanese.

"It seems his name is Levan. He lives here, in Block 9."

"Oh yes, so you are called Levan. How do you do? Although, this is troubling~ This hideout is supposed to stay a secret~"

In contrast to her tone, her eyes are burning with rage.

"Like I said, I brought him here because he was injured."

"That is admirable of you, Minami. You broke your promise to me to rescue him. Your kindness truly knows no bounds."

"I'm not the one who started it. It's those kids that picked a fight with me."

"Knowing you, you should have been able to escape right then and there."

"There were too many of them."

"Why didn't you avoid getting involved with them in the first place?"

"I tried."

"You couldn't do it because this child was there. Am I wrong, Ms. Idiot?"

The gong has sounded. The chair where I was sitting on is hurled as I stand up and grab my katana. Kozuki has also prepared herself by leaping backwards and taking out a gun with her ESP.

"[Shouldn't you avoid showing your ESP to others?]"

Hearing that, Kozuki enters a panic. She removes the gun and returns to her seat. I knew it, she is looking at us from somewhere. The balcony curtain is closed tight. There must be a camera somewhere in the room.

"[It is useless to search for cameras. There is no such things from the start.]"

"Then how did you know?"

"[Who knows? The wisdom of an elderly, perhaps?]"

I start to hate the way this person speaks. She is exactly like Kozuki, and it does not change the fact that she is creepy. I really want to cut the call right now, but Kozuki will not let me off if I do that.

Beatrix continues her speech.

"[How was Kozuki in Tokyo? Was she a handful?]"

I glance at Kozuki. She looks calm, but I can see her breaking a cold sweat on her forehead. I can feel a faint aura from her that is trying to prevent me from saying too

much.

"We didn't act together in Tokyo, so I don't really know."

I was saying the truth. In the organization, we were separated into groups according to our powers, special traits, and so on. Kozuki and I were in different groups. And in the first place, I often acted independently. This fugitive life is actually our first time moving in one group.

"[I see...]"

She sounds somewhat disappointed.

"[Kozuki.]"

"Yesss!"

Suddenly getting her name called, Kozuki straightens her posture.

"[You should have contacted me when you're back in London. Or are you avoiding me on purpose?]"

"O-o-of course not, I would never have such intention. I was thinking of contacting you after things have settled down. It's the truth, right Minami?"

Don't ask me. How should I know?

"[Also, Kozuki. Tidy up your storage room properly. Its current state is outrageous.]"

"T-that... um..."

"[If you do not understand its value, do not nick it in the first place. How many times have I told you now?!]"

"Au..."

Beatrix's lecture continues, and Kozuki is hanging her head down meekly for once. Beatrix is right. I cannot believe that a sane person would actually treat historical relics sloppily. Kozuki really needs to reflect on her actions, but...

"I want you to keep your family matters for another time. What I want to hear right now is why you're doing all this."

She stops her lecture, and silence descends again. But, Kozuki hurriedly opens her mouth.

"G-grandmother, this girl is strange in the head... so please excuse her rude—"

"[Be quiet, you.]"

Kozuki closes her mouth, and it becomes silent once more. That is when I realize. Even when there is no one speaking, there should have been some noises during a phone call no matter how hard the other party tries to conceal it. But, there is no sound at all. It is as if she is speaking from within the darkness where not even a light particle can pass through...

"[Hm... Mina-chan, was it?]"

"It's Minami."

"[Whichever is fine. Perhaps you will not believe it, but I am quite well-known. While it is not my intention to boast, my name alone can influence the political world. Even among the elite bunch, it will be easier to find people indebted to me than those who are not. If I desire it, I can even make my words heard by the royalty.]"

"So what?"

"[I didn't expect you to be a thick-head. I am saying that I can report you to MI6 right here and now.]"

My face is boiling with anger. I wield my katana without thinking.

"I'll see you try...!"

"[What are you intending to do with that katana? Slicing the phone won't kill anyone, you know.]"

She is definitely looking at us from somewhere. Kozuki looks pale while still closing her mouth with both of her hands.

"Come out here!"

Instead of an answer, I hear a grating noise. I immediately recognize that it is the sound of a lighter. I have heard it many times when I was with 'Professor'. The image of Beatrix smoking a cigarette while chuckling to herself flickers in my mind.

She is mocking me. The anger within me is running about with nowhere vent it to. It's enough... I'll cut the phone right now! But just as I decide that...

"Hatchoo!"

What a way to break the tension. Levan sniffs to keep his nose from running. I have completely forgotten that he is still here.

"[My, my.]"

Beatrix's voice is mixed with snickers.

"Sorry for interrupting you, Minami."

After saying that to me in Efrasian, he apologizes to Kozuki and Beatrix through the phone in English. The latter replies while still laughing.

"[Haa, I've lost my drive. Well, I did manage to talk to my grandchild. I am hanging up.]"

"Wait!"

"[Don't worry. I am not going to report you.]"

Oh really? Not Kozuki, not this person, I cannot trust this household. As if seeing through my doubts, Beatrix continues.

"[We are... well, an unrivaled family, but we always uphold our rules. Among them, it is set that 'we will never betray one of our own'. Reporting you will lead to my grandchild being arrested as well. So it is all right for you to believe in my words.]"

I look at Kozuki, she gives me a nod.

"[I will be hanging up now. Kozuki, it is still cold, so warm yourself when you sleep. And Mina-chan.]"

"It's Minami."

"[You really are an interesting one.]"

A clattering sound; the call has been disconnected. Right after, Kozuki makes a grand sigh.

"Aah... that was so tiring."

Finally releasing her mouth, she rests her head on the table.

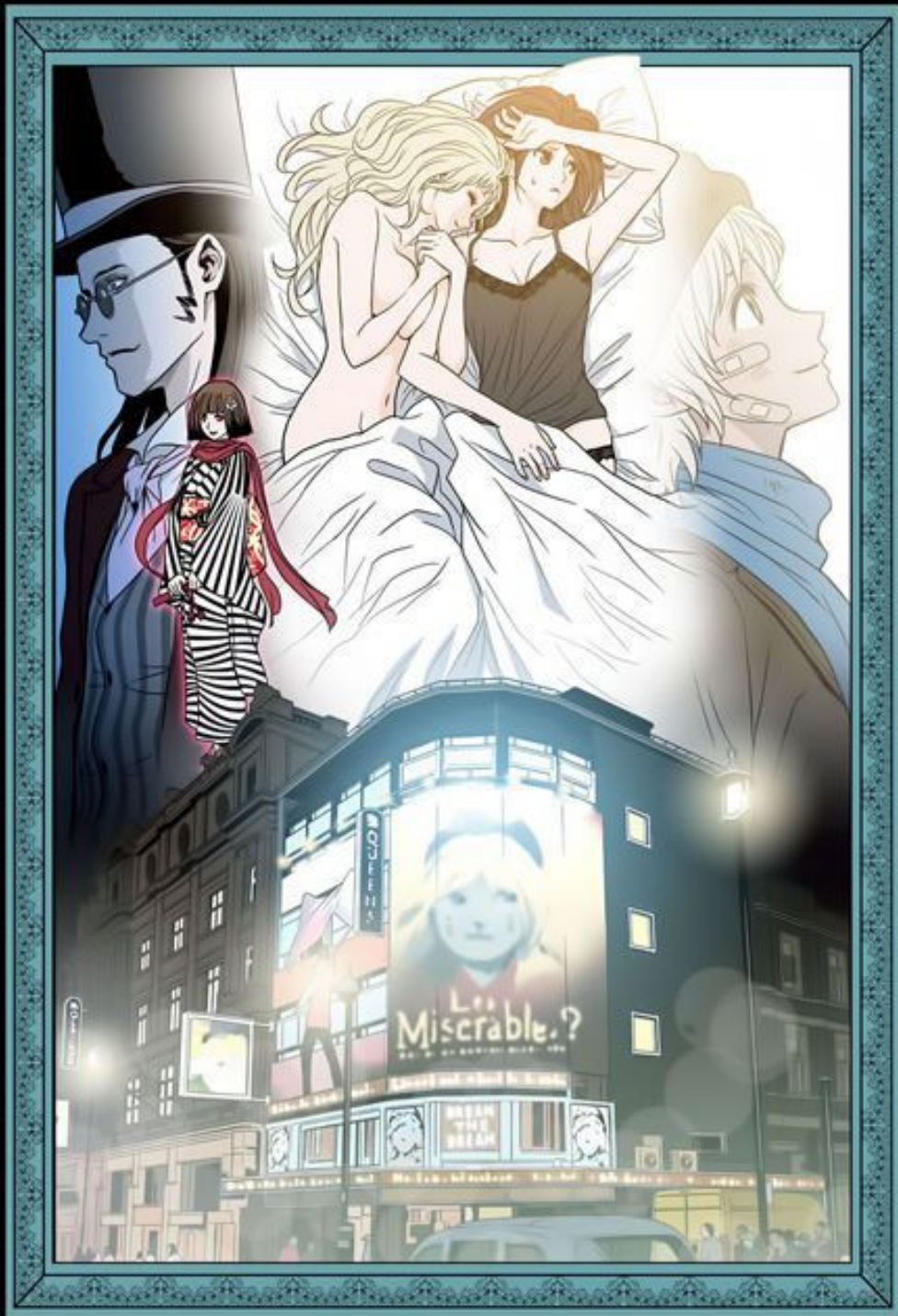
Levan blows his nose. He does not even realize how tense we were.

Putting my katana, I head towards the washbasin. My face and back are full of sweat just from speaking through the phone. By washing my feverish face with cold water, I calm my pounding nerves.

This city is Beatrix's backyard. No, it is something even more than that. As long as I am staying here, it is impossible for me to escape their grasp.

I have a bad feeling, I feel anxious. Somehow, I recall the fragrance of Professor's cigarette.

Chapter 2 — Road of Woe at the Theater



When I wake up, I see Kozuki's lips right in front of my eyes. It surprised me to see how young her face looks without her makeup. The appearance of her sleeping peacefully is, honestly, as beautiful as a picture. During these two weeks in London, I have been seeing her face every single morning. I hate how her looks are getting etched into my mind because of it.

I really dislike sleeping together with someone else. I can never get back to sleep again like this.

I try to get myself up, but my arm has been seized. There is an extremely soft sensation on my upper arm, so I lift the bed sheets a bit. As I thought, she is sleeping without wearing anything. I only know about her sleeping habit recently. After all, we were mostly sleeping outdoors, or in separate rooms before we arrived in London.

"Nfufu, Koala-chan. You're very cute."

Half-smiling, she blabbers some sleep-talk. I know this is your home, but aren't you being too lax?

I shake my arm violently and leave.

Rescuing Levan, forced entry by gangsters, a strange phone call drama; in the end, various things were left unsettled.

Kozuki was totally exhausted from talking with her own grandmother.

"Please do not pick up any more children, all right?"

That was the only thing she said before staggering into the storage room to sort the place. I did offer to help, but she ignored me so I decided to leave her alone. Levan thanked us and went home. Because I had nothing to do, I took a shower and rested for the day.

Surprisingly, it did not take long for me to fall asleep when I lay on the bed. Maybe it was because my body had reached the limit of both physical and mental exhaustion at that time.

Two weeks have passed. The days are so peaceful that I am starting to forget the fact that I am currently living on the run.

The sky through the window looks cloudy, but I am feeling good today. After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I feel hungry.

I dump some cereal into a bowl and pour milk into it. Kozuki is the one who bought them. The cereal is shaped into rings in different colors like red and green. The way they float on the milk really makes it look like swimming rings. Also, the cereal is really sweet to the extent that it numbs my brain, but there is nothing else to eat for breakfast. I feel like a cow munching on its grass in a pasture, and I swallow, and repeat.

Kozuki appears around the time I finish eating. She looks half-asleep, wrapped in a bed sheet. She goes to sit on the sofa.

"Koala..."

With a soft voice, she falls flat on it. The sheet opens up, revealing her thighs and ass.

"If we take a koala away from its tree, the tree will fly away. I never knew that a tree can fly."

"Wake up and wear some clothes already."

"In a few more minutes..."

"People can see you from outside. Besides, the position of the sofa makes you an easy target for snipers. You'll die soon enough."

Highest floor or not, this apartment is built in a row with other buildings of the same height. The inside of this room must be completely visible from the opposite apartment.

"That will not happen. All the windows in my house are made of bulletproof glass."

That's news to me.

"Alright, alright. Wash your face at least, and go get changed."

Kozuki stands up in a wobbly manner and disappears into the bathroom. Meanwhile, I finish washing the bowl and go to change my clothes.

These sluggish and peaceful days are not making me calm at all. I really want to move away from here.

If only I have the Ark with me... I have asked her about its location several times, but she has been dodging the matter intentionally. I have also become unable to press her on it.

I return to the living room and I hear the intercom ringing.

"He's here again..."

I open the door in the entryway and I find Levan, who is waving his hand in greeting.

"Morning, *Minami*."

"I've told you not to come here any—"

Before I could even finish my sentence, Levan pulls my arm and enters the living room with me. He is why I cannot press on Kozuki too much. For some reason, Levan comes to our unit every day.

"I want to repay you," he said, but there is nothing we need from a boy in his teens. He did not give up even after being told to go home so many times. I was finally thinking of pulling out my katana to chase him away, when he stated, "Then, I'll guide you around the town."

Surprisingly, Kozuki accepted his suggestion, which is perhaps to stop me from interrogating her about the Ark. And so, we ended up going out somewhere with Levan every day since.

He is still a child, but there is no way I can talk about the Ark in front of him. Also, the fact that he is an immigrant from Efrasia makes me even more reluctant.

Efrasia—it is where my mother died, and also the place where the Ark was discovered.

"Where's *Kozuki*?"

"Taking a shower."

"Can I sit on the sofa?"

"Do what you want."

I have been giving him curt answers, but he does not seem to mind at all. I really cannot understand what makes him so eager to meet the unsociable woman that is me.

Levan opens up a sketchbook that he has been carrying with him and starts drawing. From his one-sided conversation, it seems that he wants to become an artist in the future. His real name is Levanarl Levanereze, so Levan is actually a nickname.

He is from a city called Ritchel, located in Efrasia. After escaping from the civil war together with his father, they both came to London to ask for his uncle's help.

"Want something to drink?"

I asked. With a smile, Levan shakes his head sideways. But, his stomach growls instead.

"Then, something to eat?"

"Eh? It's alright, I can bear it."

I ignore his answer and prepare some food. Although, cereal is the only thing I can make. After pouring milk to the brim, I hand it over to Levan.

"Eat."

"But..."

I glare at him silently, and he finally holds the spoon. He is hungry after all. He starts stuffing his mouth after taking the first mouthful.

As I imagined, Levan is living scantily as an immigrant. His father was a licensed tax accountant in Efrasia, but that occupation cannot be simply regained after he emigrated from his country. Although he is working on several day labors from the early morning to late at night, it is barely enough for their livelihood. There are even days when they do not eat at all. Their lives are as scanty as they can be. "There are many of them in these *blocks*," said Kozuki once indifferently.

I look at Levan's face from the side. He looks childish, appropriate for someone his age—no trace of one who had witnessed a civil war. Well, maybe he has forgotten about things that occurred more than five years ago. The illusion that I saw in him must have been triggered from hearing the language that I had not heard for a long time. In the end, he is nothing like 'him' at all.

I could always see it in 'him'. Even when he laughed or ate, his eyes and actions were constantly filled with the shadows of his past.

I move my sight towards his sketchbook. Without the allowance to buy a new book, the tattered papers are showing signs of having been drawn and erased repeatedly.

"What have you been drawing all the time?"

I was going to take a closer look, but Levan stops me.

"You can't! It's not done yet."

"I don't mind."

"B-but... you still can't... I'll show you when it's done."

It is easy for me to snatch it and look, but I refrain. It is because I can see how serious Levan is from his eyes.

"That was refreshing~! Ah, Levan, so you were here."

"Morning, *Kozuki*."

Out from her shower, Kozuki greets Levan in Efrasian. She has also finished putting on her makeup.

"So, where should we go today?"

Asked Levan eagerly.

"Hmm... how about going shopping again?"

So we are going out again, despite being international wanted terrorists. We went to Oxford Street yesterday, and Richmond Park one day prior. I have gotten to know more places in London thanks to that. But really, what kind of terrorists actually goes for sightseeing tours I wonder.

I whisper to Kozuki.

"Oi, aren't you getting carried away?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know this is your hometown, but going out every day is just..."

"It's all right, I tell you. If by any chance we are spotted, can't we just hold Levan hostage?"

"Oi!"

"Ah, but an immigrant like him might not make a good hostage after all. Oh well..."

I can see that Kozuki is looking down on me with her attitude.

"You cannot go anywhere without the Ark anyway. Just enjoy your stay in London to the utmost."

I really want to kick that smug face of hers right now.

"*Minami*, do you have anywhere you want to go?"

"Shut up!"

Levan cowers from my voice.

"Ah... sorry, I lost it a bit."

What am I apologizing to him for...

"You're really the wo~rst."

It takes a whole lot of effort to stop myself from shoving a backfist into her mouth. She is totally getting carried away because I cannot do anything when Levan is here.

"Me, too. I'm sorry, *Minami*. You never looked like you're enjoying yourself whenever we went out, either... After all, I have only been forcing you all this time..."

He is getting teary-eyed. This is bad, there will be no stopping Kozuki if he starts crying now. And ultimately, we will end up having a fight to death because of her jeers.

"You're wrong. I do have a place I want to visit."

Levan immediately brightens up, what a simple fellow.

"Where is it? Where is it? I'll guide you there!"

"I'm curious as well. Where do you want to go?"

Alright, what do I do now? Honestly, I have nothing in mind. I have visited the London Tower. It probably will not take long for us to get surrounded by the palace guards if we go to Buckingham Palace in daylight. I wander my sight around the room, until Levan's sketchbook enters my vision.

"I want to go to the a-art... museum... I think..."

And it became my answer.

The National Gallery is located to the north of Trafalgar Square. With a huge ancient Greece-style entrance, it holds everything from da Vinci's to Gogh's, from the thirteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. It seems that its amazing number of exhibits makes it one of the largest art museums in the world.

Levan's eyes have been sparkling with expectation before we even entered the place.

"I am feeling excited as well."

Likewise, I can see the fire in Kozuki's eyes. But, hers are tainted with greed instead.

"Stop it," I said to her, in which she clicks her tongue in return. I keep glaring at her until she finally gives up, saying, "I know, I know," before walking away briskly.

I may be the one who suggested this place, but I am not really interested in paintings. I know several paintings that portray histories of the past, and I recognize some of the artists, but this would be my first time going out of my way to visit an art museum.

I am starting to think that going to the British Museum nearby would have been a better choice.

I am somehow still following Levan. Well, some of the artworks do manage to interest even someone with zero aesthetic sense like me.

On the other hand, Levan is looking at each of the paintings thoroughly. I wonder what he actually sees in them. The charm behind the brush strokes? The splendor of the colors? I do not understand any of them.

After walking around for a while, Levan stops in front of one painting.

Old and young, men and women, all kinds of people are illustrated. A fair-skinned nude woman is drawn in their center, hiding her chest. Behind her is a man wearing armor and helmet, chasing away another man who is wearing a mantle.

The many people around the woman seem to be gathering to worship her, on top of protecting her as well.

"You like this painting?"

"Eh? Ah, yes, it is an artwork titled 'Minerva protects Pax from Mars'."

"Mars and Minerva. So it is based on the Roman mythology?"

I do have some knowledge of that myth. My father... the Professor taught me about it in detail, and I often talked about the stories with 'him'.

"Do you like Roman mythology?"

"That's not it. I only start liking this artwork recently."

"It looks beautiful after all, especially the nude woman in the center."

I only said what came to my mind, but the word 'nude woman' seems to make Levan blush.

"You must be talking about Pax, the goddess of peace. She is pretty, but the one I like is the goddess who is protecting her at her back."

"Goddess?"

So the one wearing armor and helmet is a woman, not a man.

"She is Minerva, the goddess of order and wisdom. And the one she's driving away is Mars, the god of war."

"I see, 'Minerva protects Pax from Mars'. The painting exactly follows its title."

I take a closer look at the painting. Pax is really captivating with her conspicuous, bare fair skin. But, now I can also feel the gallantry from Minerva.

Mars's eyes are opened wide with fear and shock as he gets driven away. Is the red mantle a metaphor for bloodshed?

Then I notice a woman drawn next to Mars. She is painted in a noticeably darker color. And it seems that she is the only one who sides with Mars.

"Who is the goddess that's standing next to Mars?"

"She is the goddess of revenge, Alecto. She's being chased away along with Mars."

A goddess of revenge that is being chased. She sounds a lot like me. The reason I am here is only because I am being pursued.

If I say that Minerva is Urushiba Rinka, then that would make me Alecto. The roles are so fitting that I smile in self-derision.

"*Minami*, it seems that you've started to like this painting, too."

Levan has interpreted my smile as a form of fondness. Do I like it? I guess I do, this painting is perfect for me.

"This painting has another name, 'Peace and War'."

Said Levan with no ill intent.

I am sitting on a bench provided in the exhibition room. Levan was still talking about paintings, but I do not feel like hearing about it anymore.

Interacting with people is tiring as always.

He may be a child that I saved by coincidence. But that does not give me the obligation to get along with him. But then, why can't I just forcibly reject him?

Is it because of the genuine respect that I saw in his eyes? Or is it my sense of responsibility for having rescued him once? Or maybe it is because of his origin as an Efrasian...

I shake off the doubts that are welling inside me. They are not worth brooding in the first place. Increasing my own worries does not do me any good.

Raising my line of sight, I see the wall decorated with a painting of a ship; a battleship, I think. It is painted with setting sun and sea as its background. But, on top of having its sails folded, there is a steamboat at its front. It is raising a puff of black smoke as it tows the battleship.

"This painting gives off a depressing mood, doesn't it?"

I am bewildered from suddenly hearing someone talking to me in Japanese. As a matter of fact, this young woman wearing a black parka simply sits beside me like she is friends with me. She is wearing the hood despite being indoors, to the extent of hiding her eyes from my view. Her white skin, peeking through the gap is white to the extent of being pale. Furthermore, she has a piercing on her lip that is now glittering in view.

"'The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up.' That is the title of this painting."

Without looking at me even once, her eyes are fixed on the artwork.

"A battleship that once boasted its power has become nothing more than a scrap pulled by a small ship... an inevitable end to those left behind the times. It is sad, isn't it?"

Despite her words, I can feel the sneers in her tone.

"If you do not mind me asking, what do you see in this picture?"

And that is when she looks at me for the first time. She has a well-featured face, but her white skin makes her look lifeless. On top of that, she has no eyebrows. In place of what should have been her left eyebrow, she has a piercing instead. Her meek face really does not suit her appearance.

".....A picture of a ship, that's all."

Thinking that I have got myself involved with a strange person, I was going to leave my seat. But, she then opens her mouth again.

"Azuma Minami, right?"

In reflex, I put my hand on the knife hidden in my coat.

"Ah, I am not your enemy."

She is smiling at me, but it feels eerie; maybe because of her looks.

"Who are you?"

"I am sent by Kakunoshin-san. Hmm, please call me Kuroyagi."

Kakunoshin—the guy wearing a helmet decorated with a crest of the old kanji for sorrow. He is Professor's right hand, as well as the one who taught me wushu. I heard that he went into hiding after the fight in the Diet Building. But from what I heard, he did not leave Japan.

"So, you're one of our remnants?"

"No no, I am but a mere underling that awakened my power after 'The Great Liberation.'"

'The Great Liberation', it was the grand operation to awaken as many bearers of superpowers from humankind. It was a success, producing a great swell in the number of awakenings not only in Tokyo, but also the whole Kanto region. Consequently, it caused the following mayhem to drag on.

"How do you prove that Kakunoshin really sent you?"

Kuroyagi reaches her pocket for a small LCD tablet and passes it over to me. I put both earphones in my ears and turn on the power. The screen lits and shows the appearance of Kakunoshin in suits. Although, he is still wearing the same 'sorrow' helmet as always.

"[It's been a while, Minami. This is just a recording so I'll make it short. You can get the details from my messenger over there.]"

"Which is me."

Pointing at herself, she smiles.

"[We scattered during Professor's defeat, but we have started to gather again. We have also been taking in new members, so our scope will soon become big enough to oppose the humans again. However, we currently lack a decisive hand to overwhelm them with. That's why I want you to meet a certain weapons dealer and strike a contract with him.]"

Kakunoshin, is he still intent on establishing the Special ESP District?

"[He is the one who had been supplying Professor with weapons from the underworld. It will probably not be easy. I know it is pathetic of me to bring this to you who are currently on the run. But for the sake of obtaining the Special ESP District, I shall ask for your help with shame. Long live ESP!]"

"And that's it."

I give the tablet back to Kuroyagi.

"Why isn't Kakunoshin here in person?"

"He has become the leader, so he cannot leave Japan at a moment's notice. Ah, we also have a name now. We call ourselves 'ESP Liberation Front' as we carry out our operations."

ESP Liberation Front—that stuffy name is totally something Kakunoshin would think of.

"Who is the guy Kakunoshin wants me to meet?"

"I do not know much myself. It seems that he is a weapons dealer; someone from the *Black Market* so to say. I also heard that we have been in contact with him since Professor's leadership and... we have scheduled an appointment in advance."

Kuroyagi takes something else out from her pocket.

"I am sorry, I has been creased.

What she took out is an envelope sealed with wax. I open it and find two theater tickets and a note with 'Today at 8pm' written on it.

"Have you met this weapon dealer before?"

"It seems that Kakunoshin-san has met him, but not me. I am only told to pass this to you after all."

"Do I just need to go with you then?"

"Of course not. I am just a lackey, you know. I am not a fighter, either. Please go with Kozuki-san."

I look at the tickets. These tickets are for [Les Misérables]; taking place during the French Revolution, it follows the story of a former convict, Jean Valjean, trying to live an honest life.

I put away the envelope and sit down again. Meanwhile, Kuroyagi just keeps smiling as ever.

"You did well finding us."

"It is because Kozuki-san always contacts us whenever you are moving somewhere."

That's news to me. That girl, what has she been doing behind me all this time?

"So Kozuki told you that I would be here?"

"No, she only told us that you were going to London. With that information, I used my ESP to..."

Kuroyagi puts the small tablet on her forehead. The camera shutter then makes a clicking sound, and the screen shows the picture of me sitting on a bench.

"Nensha."

"Yes, ESP is really convenient, isn't it?"

As if she is commenting on her new home appliance.

I finally realized what it is that I sense from this girl after all this exchange. She is 'hollow', so much that I feel if someone swings a hammer to her head from above, her whole body might just shatter into pieces like a porcelain doll.

"You called yourself an 'underling', didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"Despite being sent here as a messenger? That's really reliable of you."

"We are still short of people after all. Since the ESP regulation measure passed through, everyone is now observed through their bracelets. They can't even leave Tokyo anymore. And it has become hard to invite people, too. Like Kakunoshin-san said, it will be hard for us if we don't procure any weapons."

And she squints her eyes.

"Besides, I am a bit curious."

Her pupils are locking on me. No, she is peeking into my soul.

"What kind of person would the daughter of *that* Professor be?"

I feel uneasy, as if something is licking my cheek in the dark. I sense a gaze akin to that of a snake, sadistically wondering about the taste of its prey as it strangles it to death.

Her original mission is nothing but a bonus in fulfilling her true objective, to meet me. She is the type of human who finds joy in exposing herself to danger. I am getting more and more anxious. People like her are often good at stirring up others' emotions.

Without saying anything, Kuroyagi turns away and stands up.

"Oh, Kakunoshin-san didn't mention it in the video, but there seems to be something else that he wants from the weapons dealer. He said that we would not require a better weapon as long as we obtained that one."

"That guy actually has something that amazing?"

"Yes, I heard that the weapons dealer has a copy of Professor's notebook after all."

"What?"

"Aha, of course you are surprised. It had been thought that the notebook was lost along with Professor at the Skytree."

I know about that notebook. Professor would sometimes write in it, but we never let me see its content even once. Why would this weapons dealer own something like that?

"Well then, I will be leaving since I have conveyed everything I was asked to. So good luck, okay?"

At that moment, I thought of calling her out, but I decided not to. Although I might be able to locate of the Ark using her nensha, I cannot trust her. I am reminded by the sting of her gaze earlier that was creeping on my skin.

I watch Kuroyagi leaving with her light gait as I take out the envelope that I put in my pocket earlier. I could have never imagined to encounter an article left by Professor this far away from Tokyo.

Although, that is too short-sighted of me. Professor waged a war with the whole world. He introduced the existence of espers to the world. He brought surging waves towards the world. I was merely running far ahead of the waves, but now those waves have caught up with me.

Kakunoshin is still continuing the fight in Tokyo. Instead of stopping, the waves will continue to spread in the future of this world. When the waves reach their final destination, perhaps when the waves recede, no one knows what will become of the world then.

"Did you make a new friend?"

Kozuki appears from her hiding and comes into my view.

"When did you start listening?"

"I heard pretty much everything. This is going to be interesting, really interesting."

"Not that interesting. Well... Professor's notebook, huh."

Kozuki snatches the tickets from my hand.

"Oh, isn't this 'Le Mis'? I do not really like it, it's dark."

"We aren't going there for the show."

"You don't have to do as they said, do you? Strictly speaking, the organization that was created by Professor and this ESP Liberation Front are two different entities. There is no reason for you to listen to them."

True, Kozuki has a point. Kakunoshin's organization has no direct relation to me. But still...

"Where is the theater?"

"If you're going to watch 'Le Mis', it is at the Queen's Theatre, within the vicinity of Piccadilly Circus."

Piccadilly Circus, where I almost got run over by a bus once because of Kozuki.

"Are you intending to go?"

"Thanks to what you've been doing behind my back. Take responsibility."

"I figured that by letting them know about our location, we would give ourselves some favors in certain situations."

"Not even a sorry, huh."

"Nope, I am not going to apologize. I am not sorry, either. Well, if you want me to take responsibility, I am fine with accompanying you."

For some reason, Kozuki looks proud. There is no one nearby. I really want to drop a knuckle to her face, but maybe not. Everyone has to behave themselves in an art museum.

3

From the art museum, we head back to the apartment and part ways with Levan. He said, "Let's visit it again sometime!" waving his hand as he left.

We return to our room and make our preparations. Kozuki has changed into her best clothes: a black dress with feathers on its back, complete with a black veiled hat. She is like wearing a frivolous kind of a rash widow getup.

"Well then, shall we depart?"

Said Kozuki while twining her hand around my arm.

"What are you doing?"

"Hm? Aren't you going to escort me?"

Shoving her away is just going to be a pain, so we head out as is. We travel towards the theater by car.

"That district often has traffic congestion, so I do not really like to travel there."

"We could've used the train then."

"Are you saying that while knowing how the subway is like? It's crowded, you know."

We drive through the city night. There are lots of people, lots of lights illuminating the cityscape. I am slightly disappointed to see that London does not look any different from other large cities.

I think about the upcoming meeting with the weapons dealer. What kind of person is he? A sly man? Kakunoshin said that he does not pick his methods. I need to remain vigilant.

Underworld—it is the devil's lair, where common laws never apply. The ones lurking in there will always try to take a hold of others' weaknesses.

Perhaps we already belong there. Although, we terrorists are rootless. A weapons dealer, on the other hand, needs a big financial and manpower to function. It is a successful organization that owns soldiers, personnels, and influence on par with all those first-rate companies.

In the underworld, it is always the seller who has the upper hand. And in this case, we are the customer, where they are the seller. Besides, we are the blue-collar who work on site, while most of them are white-collar who never dirty their hands directly. These people are the reason civil wars and terrorists can continue to exist. So any blue-collar who oppose them will just be left out of the loop. No matter the circumstances, we are always the ones who get the short end of the stick.

"Why aren't we using your teleport?"

"That'll just make them wary."

It is Professor and Kakunoshin who have had a contact this person. I wonder what he will think if his business partner arrives by teleportation. They know that we are espers,

but I feel they will not take it in a good way. One way to say it, we have a magic ticket to escape anytime we want.

Fundamentally, they will not sell anything to those who do not put their lives on the line. We need to show our resolve to face the risks to become their customers. It might sound strange, but it is part of the etiquette.

"We have arrived."

I drop off the vehicle and look up, where I see a huge wooden signboard displaying a picture of little Cosette. The Queen's Theatre looks like an old apartment, and it is not all that big. I had expected a grand theater from how Kozuki dresses herself; what a let-down. The buildings nearby are not that different either. The road seems unorganized and is bustling with people.

"Well, let us depart."

Kozuki clings to my arm again. From her outward appearance, she must look like a fine lady. I would feel proud to receive these stares from the foot traffic if I was a man. This only feels like a punishment game. But, if shaking her off will just make her frenzy, I can do nothing but to endure.

I give our tickets to the clerk and we head inside. The lobby is crowded with people waiting for the start of the performance. Is the weapons dealer among them? Everyone seems to be purely looking forward to the play.

I look at the clock, 7:30pm. For now, we head to our seats which are located on the second floor.

The place is bigger than I thought, or it is actually just the ceiling that is high. There is a big chandelier hanging overhead, illuminating the theater.

The stage is, naturally, on the first floor with the second floor, forming a half-circle surrounding the stage. Our seats are on the left-hand corner, so we will be looking down the stage exactly from the side.

"I would have preferred a better seat."

Kozuki stated her complaint, but we are here to conduct business. Where we sit is not important.

Each of our seats has its own small headset. Since there is nothing of the sort on any other seats, they must have been deliberately placed by the weapons dealer. Kozuki elusively checks our seats for bombs and the like.

"Everything seems normal."

It is getting close to curtain raising, and the crowd from the lobby takes their seats one after another. The venue almost has a full house. I wear the headset and take my seat.

It is 8pm. The buzzer rings, signaling the start of the play. The lights are turned off, a music is played, and the stage curtain is raised.

I cannot hear anything from the headset. I look around the audience, but no one is reacting. Have I been deceived? No, it is still too early to judge. I am sure I am being watched from somewhere in this theater. Be patient. I take a deep breath and calmly readjust my sitting position.

The play is now entering its first turning point. Fantine, who was fired from the factory is now singing to find solace within his tragedy. Suddenly, the headset produces some static. I instinctively put my hand on my ear. Kozuki lightly presses on her ear as well, and she gives me a sidelong glance. The headset remains silent, but it is now connected to a line.

"Hello?"

"[You are none other than Azuma Minami-san, correct?]"

It was a male's voice. Judging from his voice alone, I guess he is around thirty. I check through the audience, but it is dark and hard to see anything.

"[And to your side is Kuroi Kozuki-san, correct?]"

"Yes, precisely."

"[I thank you for venturing all this way.]"

His speech is gentlemanly and polite.

"So you're the weapons dealer?"

"[Indeed.]"

"No intention of showing yourself?"

"[I will show myself when the time is appropriate. Such is my way of conduct. On the other hand, I am aware that this will only make you feel anxious. That is why I decided to call you here and let you enjoy a wonderful performance in exchange.]"

Kozuki snorted with laughter at that. I have the urge to do it myself, but it would mean trampling over his courtesy. This guy is fooling around with us. Not showing his face, and telling us to watch a play as a compromise...

"You have no intention to talk business, do you?"

"[Of course I do, I assure you. The people from the Professor's organization were of great help. Although they are now called the ESP Liberation Front, if I am not mistaken.]"

"Who cares about the name. I see you have a clever observation, but I don't like how you're treating us. I want to cancel my purchase if you don't even care to show or name yourself."

"[Since you do not care about names, is there any necessity for you to know mine?]"

His tone is tinged with ridicule. Kozuki looks annoyed from his silly riposte and re-crosses her legs. This guy seems to be looking down on us, thinking that we are just children.

"It appears we'll never reach to an agreement."

"[Is that so?]"

"I'll inform the organization that the negotiation broke down. I will be excusing myself here."

"[Please wait for a moment.]"

I was going to rise from my seat when his voice came through. It is a simple trick, but it appears to be effective. If you cannot push, then try to pull away. Regardless of superiority, no one would just let their customers slip away. He stopped us just as I expected.

"[I admit that I might have slightly crossed the line. However, as a man of position, I cannot divulge my real name. However, I am at least able to tell you that I am called Popper within my group.]"

"Popper?"

"[That name is pretty well-known. When you hear the name Popper in the underworld, it undoubtedly refers to me.]"

"I see. Well then, Mr. Popper. I want to purchase your weapons. Make it the same scale as the previous: firearms, ammunition, everything."

"[Goodness, that is magnificent! However, Tokyo is currently under a strict security. Considering the transport costs, keeping the same price as the previous purchase will... prove to be quite impossible.]"

"The organization will take care of it. They have assessed the sum before sending me here."

"[I see.]"

We continue discussing about the fine details of the weapons. I think everything is going smoothly so far. This is a good time to talk about the real issue.

"There's one more thing that I want to get. Or should I say, that I want you to return."

"[Hoo, what might that be?]"

He sounded slightly surprised, and amused. He knows what I am going to say next.

"I heard you own a copy of Professor's notebook. I want to have it back."

"[A notebook?]"

"I heard it's in your possession."

"[I suppose hiding it will lead me to nowhere. Yes, I do possess the Professor's notebook... but, how would I even return it? This notebook is what I had received from the Professor in person.]"

"You don't need that notebook."

"[Ms. Azuma, do you know what contents the notebook holds?]"

I am at a loss. I do not know, but I cannot say that. I cannot let him grasp my weakness.

"Professor has died. As his daughter, I have the right to inherit it."

"[Inheritance, huh.]"

Popper is laughing. Unlike his gentlemanly attitude, his laugh is high-pitched and vulgar.

"Please take a look at the center seat of the front row on the second floor."

I take a look at the seat he specified. Illuminated with lights reflected from the stage, I see a man sitting. He has a darkish complexion and is wearing a T-shirt.

"Is that you?"

"[Of course not.]"

"What?"

"Minami, here."

Kozuki passes her opera glasses to me, and I use them to look the man closer. He is sitting up straight while watching towards the stage, but he is behaving strangely. He looks stiff of nervousness and fear. His large amount of sweat makes his shirt cling to his skin.

"What's wrong with him?"

When I hear the muffled laughter from the headset, a chill runs through my spine.

"[To tell the truth, I have another customer currently in this theater. That would be him.]"

"What are you getting at?"

"[I am a weapons dealer. I sell weapons to anyone who wishes it. However, there are those who need to purchase from me, yet lack the resources to. I can only sell to customers who pay the suitable amount.]"

Suddenly, the audience bursts into cheers. On the stage is a sly-looking inn's landlord and the fat landlady singing merrily. The spectators are laughing and clapping, while that man keeps staring the stage as if he is going to eat someone. His eyes are bloodshot, and his body trembles every so often.

"[That man lives in a certain country where human rights are but a dream within dreams. He is a member of the revolutionary army that emerged there. The citizens exist only to feed their dictators and the rich, while resisting would only grant them a shooting to death.

As a member of that revolutionary army, naturally, he has no money. That is where I showed him my consideration.]"

I hate how he talks in a roundabout way. And I can think of what he is doing towards that man.

"[His seat is loaded with a bomb. It is a high-yield C4, so it should be quite powerful despite its small size.]"

"What a bad taste..."

"[I gave him one condition, that he would remain sitting until my negotiation with the ESP Liberation Front concludes. However, in the case our talk breaks down, or either of you leaves your seat even for an instant, then the bomb will set off.]"

"What the hell are you thinking...?!"

"[Have a look at his visage. Without knowing how our negotiation is proceeding, he doesn't know when he will die.

Or perhaps, he is holding on the tiny hope that he will survive! His strong desire to save his motherland, that is what binds him as he clings to that seat.

His expression! Wavering between his ideal and his fear of death! The ultimate expression! Doesn't it pound your heart?]"

Ultimate? Isn't this just a torture? Did Professor really talk with this guy? Did we really get our weapons from him?

"Minami, you don't have to ponder about it. As long as he owns the bomb switch, he can blast us away anytime he wishes to. We don't need to go along with this foolish mockery."

"[Now that would be terrible! But... will you be all right with that, Ms. Minami? If you were to leave now, that man will die. Furthermore, the explosion will involve even more people!"]

Kozuki ignores him and is going to get up from her seat.

"Wait!"

She is already half-standing when I push her back down. She lets out her protest to me.

"Hey! You don't need to go along with this! Not with someone like him!"

"I need the notebook. I'm continuing the negotiation."

Kozuki fails to restrain herself as she kicks the handrail.

"Is that how it is? Are you sympathizing with the man sitting over there? Don't tell me that you want to avoid meaningless sacrifices or the like."

"That's not it. The organization needs weapons. Even if this guy is getting on our nerves, we can't start acting on our emotions here."

"Oh, I wonder! Considering that you're the great Minami-sama who had come to the rescue of a frail young boy!"

"Stop it! We can't be fighting among ourselves right now!"

"[All right, would you mind if I have a say on this?]"

Said Popper with a prim voice.

"I'll ask you this first. What is your aim, telling us about that man?"

"[You are espers, and we know about your powers well. You are in a situation where you can disappear from this theater any time you want. We may have the predominance in the transaction, but not in terms of raw strength.

Most likely, both of you will not die when the bomb explodes. But at least, we can direct your behavior closer to our ideal. I am both a *businessman*, and a weapons dealer.

Call it a bad taste, but I always lay the necessary groundwork whenever I partake a negotiation. So to say, that man is the current groundwork. Do I have your understanding?]"

A man who does not pick his methods... It is possible that Popper's methods are actually the norm in the underworld, but it still feels unpleasant. He's calling that man as his groundwork, but he is having fun here. He just enjoys playing with people's lives.

"Got it. Let's continue the negotiation, then."

I push aside my emotion and press on. As long as the negotiation goes smoothly, nothing will happen to that man or anyone else in this theater.

"[All right, I will be frank here. The notebook is not for sale. It's a matter of course, since I cannot even estimate its value. The notebook of the person who shook the world, it is not a mere article that can be bought with money.]"

"So you're saying I'm currently in the same position as that man."

"[I appreciate your keen judgement.]"

This Popper must be laughing at me right now. I feel as if I can see his unfamiliar face smiling within the darkness in this theater.

"[Well then, how about we employ the ancient system of bartering?]"

"What do you want?"

"[Would you like to barter the Ark for it?]"

"What?"

"[I was informed that the Ark is currently in your possession. It would be my pleasure to offer this notebook in exchange for the keeper of the tablets, the Ark.]"

"Of course not!"

"Of course we can't!"

Kozuki shouted almost at the same time. There is no way I can give the Ark to someone else. It is the ultimate weapon that can change the world, which Professor entrusted to me. It is what I have been protecting with my life all the way here. And this guy...!

"[I never said that that would be the only thing I offer. I will be sure to provide the two of you with shelter, hiding you from the world. In addition, I promise a perpetual discount on my weapons for the ESP Liberation Front.]"

"Are you trying to keep us under your control?"

The Ark is the only lifeline for us, for the whole organization. It is a sacred relic that awakens the power of miracles, and it was the pillar of the organization together with Professor. The ESP Liberation Front should have the same foundation. No, because Professor is already gone, they are depending on the Ark more than ever.

If Popper were to obtain the Ark, the organization would have to obey him. They would lose their foothold and become his private army.

"Let us leave now. It is pointless to pursue this negotiation any further. We have already obtained the agreement for the weapons. That is all we need."

"[If you don't give me the Ark, I won't give you the weapons, either.]"

"What did you say?!"

"[Naturally. You are the one who wants to purchase my weapons. Furthermore, you said that you wanted to have the notebook. I assume both are a single transaction. Therefore, I will not give you my weapons if you refuse to give the Ark to me.]"

Anyone can see that his reasoning is flawed, but there is nothing I can say to rebuke him. He is using the fact that he has the upper hand as a seller. There is no longer any chance for us to purchase anything from him when he says no.

"It's good that you are thinking this through. However, please make your decision before the end of the first act, all right? It will turn troublesome when the curtain is lowered."

I look at the stage. The actors and actresses are all singing about what they should be doing as they head towards the night of revolution.

"Our time is limited. The first act will end with this song."

I can hear another chuckle from the headphone. I am gritting my teeth so hard that my molars are making a grating sound.

I should end this negotiation right now. His requirement is just impossible to accept. Besides, this Popper guy is disgusting and unreasonable. I should run. I know that, but...

That man—he must be praying right now, hoping that our negotiation will work out. I see a trickle of tears spilling to his cheek, and I stand. I shout towards him.

"Run!!"

All of the spectators look towards me, and so does the man who is sitting in that seat. The expression on his face at that moment is something I cannot describe in words.

Kozuki grasps my hand. A flash of light appears from under that man's seat, and a blaze spreads to the area. I see everything in slow motion. The flame engulfs him in an instant and blows him away. His body scatters into the air like cherry blossoms as he turns into splinters. The roar of the explosion shakes the building. When the hot wind reaches my cheeks, I dash.

The hot wind is replaced with chilly air. We have teleported to a rooftop of some building in Piccadilly Circus. I can hear screams and shouting from below, followed by the sound of another explosion. The sky towards the Queen's Theatre is dyed with red.

"Just what were you thinking?!"

Kozuki seizes my shirt collars and pushes me towards the edge of the rooftop.

"I had told you again and again! End the negotiation! Don't go along with his farce!"

I do not answer her. I have no idea how to. I myself do not understand why I did not choose to run.

"I have been accustomed to your ignoring my suggestions, but don't involve me in all that!"

".....I never... asked you... to come with me....."

My stomach churns from my own childish answer. Kozuki's eyebrow twitches, and her mouth trembles furiously.

"You... just die."

Her tone has completely changed from that of anger into coldness, like the cold air surrounding us. She lifts me so near to the edge, and my heels are now floating in midair. But she remains tense, she really intends to drop me.

"I won't die from this."

"Of course I know. But, aren't you the one who wants to die?"

"What?"

"At the block, you saved a child. Then at the theater, you sympathized with that man. You are always trying to throw your own life away. You feel like dying, don't you?"

"Don't joke with me. I never felt sympathy towards anyone!"

"Then, why didn't you run?"

"That's...!"

Sirens are wailing. I can see patrol cars and fire engines filling the rotary road below in a great number. Kozuki releases her hand from me.

"I can't kill you here with these policemen all over. Let's move somewhere else."

I look down again. The police is erecting a blockade when a limousine appears from the Queen's Theatre vicinity. There are some police trying to stop the vehicle, but a different police who seems to be the one in charge lets it through.

Passing through the blockade, the limousine heads towards the north from Piccadilly Circus.

"Kozuki."

"What is it?"

"I think I found Popper."

She holds a doubtful gaze at me, but she still stretches out her hand without saying anything. I, too, stay silent as I grasp her hand.

Just before I dash, Kozuki seems to be unable to hold back and says.

"I hope you don't misunderstand me. I shall say this first, it will be your turn after Popper is dead!"

4

Dashing from one rooftop to another, we are chasing after the limousine.

"I wonder where he is going? Up ahead is Jubilee Gardens, though."

"Like, literally a garden?"

"It is more like a public park. You can find a giant Ferris wheel there, the London Eye."

I look over the Thames River to my right as I keep advancing. Like Kozuki said, I can see a huge Ferris wheel glowing with a pale light. There are two thick metals as its fulcrum jutting out from the park, seemingly to protrude towards the river.

The fulcrum extends to a framework of thin wires, that is barely visible under this setting sun. It is now looking like a giant wheel floating in the air.

The passenger capsules are big, designed with glass as their circumferences. The passengers should have an unobstructed view of the whole London from the peak.

'London Eye' truly suits its name in both meaning and shape.

"It appears that they are going to enter the park, all right."

The limousine stops in front of the park. He is clearly inviting us in. Since he has realized our pursuit...

"I'm going to show myself in front of the limousine. If you see them react when they see me, then we're on track."

"Wha— Are you stupid?! How can you instantly decide on such a flawed method?!"

"Back me up from here."

Kozuki grabs my shoulder before I dash through.

"Hey! You aren't the only one who has a score to settle with him. I won't rest until he develops hematuria from my beatings."

"Get ready."

I teleport to the front of the limousine. I have no idea what is happening inside the limousine because it has tinted glass. Although, I am sure that they see me.

The door opens slowly, and a male foreigner appears in front of us. He is wearing a tailcoat with the same black color as the limousine, and sunglasses even though it is already evening. Also, he uses a folded umbrella as his walking stick. I can swear that his getup is strange, even in London.

Is he Popper? He looks at us, and rotates his umbrella once.

"You are unharmed as I expected."

His voice is calm, like how he sounded through the headset. Kozuki takes out a katana with her ESP and throws it. I receive and unsheathe it in one go. The blade reflects the outside light and lets out a glimmer.

"So you're Popper. Give me the notebook."

"Are you referring to this?"

He moves as if flaunting, taking a notebook with leather binding from his breast pocket.

"Don't make any strange movements now."

It is possible for him to tear it in front of me. I thrust my katana towards him to keep him in check.

So this guy is Popper... His clothes are strange, but he appears like the kind of gentleman you can see anywhere.

"I believed that the negotiation has ended, was I wrong?"

"Then we can just start a new one here. Give me the notebook and the weapons if you don't want to die."

This guy smiles as if he is watching a child's play.

"Would you mind taking a little walk?"

He is not even waiting for an answer. Popper turns to his back and starts walking. I can just slash him and snatch the notebook right now, but I will be making an enemy of the whole underworld. I will get both the weapons and the notebook. I have to be patient here if I want to achieve the best results.

Surrounded by the sounds of wind blowing the withered trees and grass, we walk until we reach the center of the public park. Then he suddenly opens his mouth.

"To tell you the truth, I have found **another client**. So you see, I no longer have any business with you."

He talks as if he is sorry, but his contempt and scorn are as clear as day. I am getting impatient because of it.

"What are you saying? Do you think I care about that?"

"Now that will be troublesome. I am trying to talk to you like an adult."

"You're the one who started your childish tantrum during our negotiation!"

"...Brat."

Now he sounds angry. This must be his real nature. He is no more than a shallow scoundrel.

"I'll cut your arm the next time you try a joke. Think before you talk."

He is currently out of my reach, but distance never matters to me. I just need to dash and cut him afterwards.

"You're really scorning us too much. You show up before us without taking even an escort with you. Do you want to taste your... stupidity with your own body?"

"I admit that I am scorning you."

"That self-conceit will be the end of you. I can just kill you here and take my time getting that notebook back from you."

I was half-serious when I said that I would cut his arm. People can get more obedient when they are hurt. What we call negotiations always include that in mind.

"Now, choose. Give me the weapons and the notebook, or die!"

"You don't understand my words, do you? I said, I have no intention to do what you say."

He is putting on airs. What kind of person is he? No one should be able to keep calm when his life is on the line. Like that man in the theater; no matter how much courage it took him to keep sitting, he was still drenched in sweat and restless.

But, this guy is different. Even now, he is still looking down on us. Why...?

It is impossible for a normal person—— but if he is not normal, then...

Popper stretches his hand to us, and the temperature around us suddenly rises. The air sways, distorting the scenery around us. I immediately take Kozuki's hand and dash backward.

A large pillar of flame rises from the ground where we just stood. The fire blazes through the sky.

"Pyrokinesis..."

Also known as the firestarter, it is an ESP to control fire with his own will. Who would have thought! Professor did not only give him his notebook, but also an ESP...!

"The Professor gave me this notebook as a payment for the weapons I sold. And as a guarantee, he let me awaken my ESP."

The temperature rises again. I teleport with Kozuki another time. An explosion. It seems that Popper's pyrokinesis is the explosive-type.

"That Professor... he had given an ESP to another troublesome person."

Muttered Kozuki provokingly. Well, it is true this guy's ESP is powerful. The ground is carved with small craters from his explosions.

I am disappointed with Professor for giving an ESP to this guy. No, this is not the time for that... I have to protect the Ark!

"What do you want to do with the Ark? You said you would shelter us, but you have another intention, don't you?"

Popper spins his umbrella once. His every attitude is getting on my nerves.

"Do you know what commodity is the most sought-after in the black market right now?"

"...Espers, huh."

"Correct. With power, even a human like me can change. This is a great asset for wars. In addition, even the army will face devastation if faced with trained espers, like you."

"Things won't go as you want, bastard."

"Anyhow, I wasn't implying that I would sell you off. You should keep engaging in your own battles. That in itself will serve as a good demonstration."

"Are you mocking our struggle?!"

"No, I'm not. However, it remains a fact that terrorist organizations all over the world as well as the army desire your powers so very much."

"We're not commodities."

He lets out a quiet, shrill laugh.

"I have managed to sell, already."

"What...?!"

"Thanks to you, Tokyo has plunged into chaos. The government has yet to grasp the exact number of espers. It would have been naive of us not to grab that opportunity. A number of espers has been successfully abducted so far.

However, that will soon reach its limit. The key in a trading business is to maintain supply against demand, and the Ark will make it possible."

"You're going to taint even the Ark?!"

"You were the one who let your powers known to the world. You showed that world that you were able to wage a war with but a few people.

Your terrorism brings great success to us. You not only gave rise to a new type of demand, but you were even supplying them for us. You have truly saved us the labor."

How far is he going to ridicule us?! We are not fighting for the sake of your profits!!

An explosive-type pyrokinesis—— sure, it is a powerful ESP, but easy to handle. I can take my time dodging the explosions by teleporting, and also we win in numbers. I only need to approach him with Kozuki's support and it will be easy to beat him.

"Kozuki, cover me."

"Eh? Wait!"

I run towards him in a straight line. The air sways with the rise of temperature. At the same time, I use my teleportation to dash over his head. Hearing the explosion behind me, I brandish my katana.

Got you! —When I am sure of my victory, a sudden gust blows. My right half is hit, I feel as if I am being attacked by a giant. I have no idea what happens as I am blown away.

"Minami!"

I can hear Kozuki's voice from far away. No, my hearing is strange. My ear is buzzing, like there is a howling sound from a speaker. My mind is hazy and my knees are giving way. What's this? What did he do? What happened...?

The wind blows again. The grass topples like a domino in a straight line towards me. I swing my katana in a hurry, but I am blown away by something I cannot see.

I somehow regain my posture in midair, but I nearly fall over when I land. My sense of balance is getting weird. I am somehow still standing by sticking my katana to the ground, but...

Kozuki takes out an assault rifle and aims towards Popper. And to the opposite side, there is a woman in kimono standing in the direction where we walked from. She spreads out her hands, waving the seemingly long, heavy sleeves of her kimono.

"Kozuki!"

I shouted, but she clapped her hands in almost the same time. Her clap echoes through the dry air. Then a sudden gust plows the grass in a straight line, and that invisible something crashes into Kozuki, blowing her aside.

She is an esper, too. I have no idea what her power is, but she is really skilled.

"I suppose her introduction comes late. Her name is Shindou Hibiki. She is an esper, and also my escort."

Popper says in a clear voice, as if he is presenting a new cast in a theater. The woman in kimono called Hibiki steps forward from his flank, and she gives a deep bow to us.

"I am called Hibiki. It is a pleasure to meet you~"

She should be around my age, but she is having the attitude of being lower in stature. But taking it the other way, her action is just strange. Hibiki walks towards me as is.

"I have finally met you, Azuma Minami-sama. I have truly been waiting for this occasion to come."

Why is she getting near? Her ESP, she should be able to shoot that **invisible thing** from a distance. There is no point for her to approach me like this. But, since she is already here, I will take her invitation.

I steady my katana and I dash to her back. Faster than she can turn, I swing it towards her waist. Her body, along with her kimono and its sash should have been bisected.

But when it reaches the cloth the cloth, there is a clanging sound followed by a hard feedback. The blade that came in contact with the kimono shakes. No, it is vibrating.

"Aah~ I am being so close to Minami-sama...!"

Hibiki puts on a sweet smile as she repels my katana so easily with her sleeve. With my stance broken, she stretches her silk-white hand towards me without any hesitation. I instinctively feel an impending danger and take some distance from her in a hurry.

"Aaw~"

She looks really sad when she catches nothing but air. This woman, she was not trying to knock me out, she was... uh..... Anyway, I have never met someone like her before. I can still feel lingering vibration in my katana.

Hibiki walks towards me again, and I rush forward, swinging my katana. Once again, she repels it with her sleeve. The katana vibrates, to the extent that it numbs my arm. I finally know what her power really is.

"Don't you dare forget about me now!"

Kozuki has recovered, shouting angrily. Her shout is accompanied with the rumbling sound of the firing assault rifle. A rain of bullets is now heading towards Hibiki. What is she doing when I am still here! I hurriedly teleport away to evade it.

As if to protect herself from a breezy wind, she lifts her sleeve to cover her face. Like what happened to the katana, the kimono deflects the bullets, ricocheting them to the ground. But not even a soot stains her skin, or her kimono.

"Stop! It doesn't do anything to her!"

Kozuki ignores me and keeps firing in full auto.

"Shut up, you shit hag!"

Snap! I hear a clicking sound. The grass scatters in a straight line, and the gunpowder disperses. Receiving another blow, Kozuki flutters in the air.

Finger snapping, a simple gesture that is also known as finger clicking; that is all she did.

"The ESP of **Oscillation...**"

Like its name, it is the power to make things vibrate. The true nature of her long-range attack is a shockwave that results from amplifying sound.

The trick behind her impenetrable kimono is the same. By applying her ESP, even a kimono gains enough defensive capabilities to flick off bullets. In a way, she is wearing an armor of oscillation. But, to be able to deflect even bullets, only ESP can achieve this.

"Hibiki, don't kill her. The thief girl will be traded for the Ark."

I cannot ignore that statement. Trading Kozuki for the Ark? Did he just say that?

Hibiki points her fingers at me. She is going to snap them! But, she can only attack in a straight line, I can evade it by going sideways.

But in that instant, Hibiki's figure flickers, then a fireball fills my vision. The blinding light and thunderous roar rob me of my five senses.

Shoot! It was already too late when I realized. Hibiki slips through the fire while spreading her arms. She claps right in front of me, launching a super oscillation shockwave. My whole body takes a direct hit, and I collapse to the ground like a selfless doll.

"Now, we can take our time and talk. Right~, Minami-sama?"

She gives an innocent smile as she straddles me. Her white hand forms a clenched fist, and she punches me on my cheek.

"Forgive me, please bear with me. I do not want to do this, either."

And followed with one more hit. My blood splatters, damping the dry grass."

"Please say that you will surrender the Ark. Also, if you agree to become one of us... your life will be spared."

Hibiki's breathing becomes erratic, and she presses more of her body weight on me. Her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes gleam like an animal.

"Damn it..."

I am reaching my hand around to search for my katana, when Popper, who is suddenly beside me steps on me.

"Stop your futile resistance."

Then he kicks in my stomach.

"Aaw~, Popper-san, don't wreck her too much~"

"Hibiki, step aside."

Hibiki looks unhappy when she gets off from me. In her place, I see an umbrella rotates once in front of me.

"You look tired."

"I...ll never... give you the... Ark."

I could barely say that out.

"I told you earlier that I have found a new client. And from what I heard, *it appears that the Ark has somehow entered the possession of said personage.*"

"Im...possible... we are the... ones... who have the Ark..."

Popper shows his disagreement by kicking me. He then takes out a smartphone and shoves it to my face. On the screen is the Ark, letting out a faint light in the darkness.

Why did... how did it happen? I cannot think straight because of my injuries.

He grabs my hair and pulls me up forcibly. I see his grinning face up close.

"Now, what will you do? Do you still want to speak about your naive negotiation?"

I spit on his smug face. Blood, mixed with my saliva sticks to his sunglasses. He takes it off and slams my face to the ground.

"Don't joke around with me, you brat! Who do you think I am?!"

He keeps doing it for several times. My hair is tearing here and there, but I do not care about the pain anymore. How did the Ark fall into someone else's hand...?

Kozuki—— Popper said that he is trading Kozuki for the Ark.

He sinks the tip of his shoe to my stomach.

"You're only a girl, seventeen, maybe eighteen. It's a mistake for you to even speak to me like we're equal."

I confirm my situation in the midst of my hazy consciousness. My fingers are shivering from lack of oxygen, and I cannot stand from the pain. This is hopeless.

"I guess I told you in the theater that you had the predominance in terms of raw strength.

Too bad it was never true from the start! I fooled you. It was to make you feel elated.

And it was hilarious to see you panicking. Over the life of a penniless man, much less!

After all, you're nothing but a mere brat. You're no different from those lots out there."

I feel the sound of Popper's jabbering getting further and further. Crap, my consciousness is...

"You're not worthy of the Ark, for people like me are the only ones who are!"

He keeps saying whatever he wants. My consciousness is hazy and my stomach is being kicked, but my thought is clear.

"I'll let this fool taste death, with my ESP!"

And he lets out a shrill laugh.

Negotiation. A trade for Kozuki. An unknown third party. And a flash appears in my mind.

"A power that I received from the father, will be used to kill the daughter!"

Popper brings out his hand. My vision is getting distorted. No, it is the scenery that is distorting. The temperature around me is rising. The heat haze is refracting light.

I cannot die here. But I cannot move my body. Is this... the end?

Just when I am going to give up. Something hits Poppers foot and it stops there. The next instant, I feel my eyes pierced by a blinding light and my ears rent from a blast. It is a flashbang, a non-lethal hand grenade used to immobilize the victim with sound and light.

Even more grenades are thrown around me like I'm in a ball festival. Beside the flashbangs, there are also smoke grenades, pumping out thick smokes. As if competing, smoke and blast and light fill the area with chaos.

"What the- What's all this?! Hibiki, do something!"

I can hear Popper's bellow. With the flashbang impairing my ear, I cannot tell if he is near or far. What's more, I cannot see well from the light and smoke. I cannot move my body, either. Am I gonna die like this...?

Someone grabs my arm.

"...mi...sh...!"

Who? I can hear something from far away.

"...nami...sh...y!"

The owner of the voice pulls me, calling out to me with all its might.

"Minami, dash away!"

"Kozuki...?"

"Hurry!!"

Mustering the last of my strength, I dash along with Kozuki. A vortex of light covers my vision, and the landscape changes completely into Trafalgar Square.

My consciousness is fading. I can see Kozuki's face calling out to me so desperately.

Popper's new client was her grandmother, Beatrice.

My senses are falling into a bottomless abyss. And that sense of falling too, disappears before long.

Chapter 3 — Brawl the Block



A cold thing is being placed on my forehead. It feels comfortable.

Opening my eyelids weakly, I can see Levan, who is replacing an ice bag on my head.

"Levan..."

"*Minami!* You've come to. Thank goodness..."

I do not understand what he looks so happy about. But, I get it after seeing my own condition. There is a mirror placed parallel to the bed, where I can see my own face covered with bandages and gauze. My hard-to-open eyes are swollen, and the same goes to parts of my skin. I look horrible. An IV is attached to my arm, hanging on one of the canopy pillars.

"How long... did I sleep?"

"About two days, I think. Didn't you fall from the top stairs of The View from the Shard to the bottom? I'm glad you're still okay."

I do not know anything about that, but it seems to be some explanation that Kozuki made for Levan.

I give him a vague nod, and I look up. I am still in Kozuki's hideout...

My head is blank. It still hurts, too. And I am thirsty.

"I want some water."

Levan gives me water from a pitcher. It seems that I have several cuts in my mouth, giving me crackling pains while I am drinking. I can taste iron in the water.

"Oh, so you're awake."

Kozuki enters the bedroom, and she makes a beeline to the IV.

Other than the cut and swell on her lips, I cannot see any other wounds on her. Clearly, she is in a better shape than me.

"Really, I'm so glad. I heard that you hit your head again and again, I'm so worried if..."

"Levan, sorry, can you leave me and Kozuki alone?"

A confused look floats on his expression. I repeat to him, "Go", brushing him off. Levan leaves the room with slumped shoulders.

"Did you develop tinnitus? Or perhaps have you begun seeing illusions?"

"Whatever. What is 'View from the Shard'?"

First things first, I ask her about the thing that intrigues me. Kozuki opens a tourist guidebook that is lying on the side table next to the bed for me to look at. On the page is a photograph of a glass-pyramid-like building.

"The View from the Shard is a skyscraper, approximately 310 meters tall. It has been settled that during your visit to the observation deck, you missed your step on the stairs and fell down until the first floor."

"Where is the observation deck located at?"

"On the 72nd floor."

"And I fell, down to the first floor?"

"Yes."

"What kind of bullshit is that."

Kozuki finishes changing the IV, then she sits on the bed.

"The reality is the same either way. After all, you utterly ignored my warnings. You were even beaten in your own game."

"Stop joking with me!"

I grab Kozuki's arm with all my strength.

"The Ark has been stolen, by your grandmother!"

Kozuki probably knows everything. She looks ashamed, but at the same time she looks as if she has given up on me. I am getting even angrier from seeing that.

"Didn't you say that you kept it in a safe place?! Because of you, I...!"

A dull pain runs through my head. I feel a throbbing pain, maybe because my blood is going to my head.

"See? It's because you are getting too agitated. Here, a painkiller."

I put the pill in my mouth, but the swellings prevent me from swallowing it. I refuse when Kozuki holds out the pitcher for me, but I am still unable to swallow it down.

"Don't ignore me, here."

I reluctantly drink the water. My mouth still hurts, but I have managed to swallow the pill.

"You're right... what Grandmother did was not in my expectation."

"She knows about our location, you know."

"Yes, but we have our family rules. 'We will never betray one of our own', that one."

"I'm not so sure about that, though."

"I'll say this to you!"

Kozuki jumps off the bed, making the spring in the bed sway in response.

"The one who beat all the rules into me is Grandmother. She would never break any of them on her own, without a doubt!"

Why is she sticking up for her grandmother when she has tricked us?

Everyone needs to survive. That is why rules and such never have any meanings. This girl should be the one who knows it better.

"But right now, she is our enemy."

"Be it an enemy or anything, she will definitely uphold the rules. We have our family precepts after all."

I do not even know her face. How can I trust her when I have only heard her voice? She is just a total stranger to me.

And Kozuki. When we had just arrived here, she already transferred the Ark to who knows where. Senseless. Maybe, is she an accomplice of that weapon seller? After all, she did contact the organization without telling me. I can never know everything she has been doing behind me.

I gaze at Kozuki's face intently. What is she thinking, why didn't we leave from this hideout?

"Why are you staring at me?"

"No reason."

Her eyebrows twitch.

"Listen. You better not anger me for your own sake. If you keep saying that you're doubting me, I will insert air into the IV tube and let it fill the blood vessels in your brain."

Kozuki might do it for real. I cannot start a fistfight because of my wounds. I entrust my body to the bed, and I close my eyes.

"I won't say it anymore."

"Wise decision."

Maybe the painkiller is working, I feel my head hurting less.

"Just rest well for the time being."

"How can I? They know we're here."

"If we wander about carelessly, it will become a moment for them to aim at us. Just be obedient now."

She put the replaced IV on a tray and leave the room with it.

This hideout is like a house built on sand. With its foundation shaved by wind and waves, it will eventually crumble. Why does Kozuki choose to stay here? How did Black Fist obtain the Ark? What did Professor grant ESP to Popper for?

Every human is acting to destroy my foothold. I cannot trust anyone. I can never let my guard down.

If Kozuki does not want to, then I will search for another hideout on my own. I pick up the guidebook and take a look at the map. I confirm my current location on it, and I search for a suitable place to hide. But of course, the map in the guidebook does not describe any reclusive places.

I am not thinking straight, maybe because of the painkiller. And so, I fall back to sleep.

2

It is already midnight when I wake up. My swollen face has recovered quite a bit, but I can't see anything in this total darkness. Kozuki is not here. Where did she go?

Nah, I do not even need to guess. She must be slithering around. Actually, I am relieved that she is away.

I am wide awake now. I feel like getting some night wind.

Wrapping myself in a coat, I take my spare katana and head towards the living room. I continue to the door, and I place my hand on the handle. No, there is no point for me to go through the hallway to get out. This is the enemy territory. Kozuki's rules are useless, too. I dash outside of the apartment.

I am now in an open space at the complex. I do not see anyone.

Now, I am alone. I had always been since I was a child. But somewhere along the line, there was someone who appeared in my life.

"Kyoutarou..."

When I murmured his name, I can feel warmth filling my chest. "He" has frizzy hair, long eyelashes like a girl, and is cheeky despite being the same age. He is... the only person whom I ever let my guard down for.

Kyoutarou had always been by my side.

A boy we found in Efrasia. A brother unrelated by blood. And my————

I first thought Professor took him from Efrasia to make him a companion, but I was wrong.

"Don't mention anything to him. About what happened to that country, about ESP. I will tell him myself when the time comes."

That was the first thing Professor said to me me when we ended up living together.

Getting up in the morning, facing each other at the dining table, but we both stayed silent. We went to the same middle school, but we never said anything to each other at school, either.

Sometimes, I would spot him doing nothing on the sports ground. It was a sudden change for him, coming to the peaceful Japan from Efrasia that was filled with hatred. It was impossible for him to fit in there, I thought.

But I never considered doing anything to help him adapt. After all, we had been abandoned by the world.

A housemate, but a stranger. That was my impression of him at that time.

But in time, our relationship began to change.

We started talking, although awkwardly. Every morning, we greeted each other with a 'good morning'. And when we returned home, we would talk about events during the

day, or about the books we read.

Since I cannot cook, my meals are mainly instant foods or takeouts. But Kyoutarou changed that. When I returned, the home would be filled with the aroma of foods being cooked.

"I'm not sure about the taste though."

Said he, embarrassed. His cooking was not that exquisite, but it was still delicious. After eating dinner, we would sit next to each other on the sofa and talk about trifling things.

"You've grown taller."

"Really?"

"Yes. It'd be better if you change your school pants."

"I can still wear it. It'll be a waste."

"They already look bad on you."

That was when I had my first tranquil days after my mother died. Every day became fun.

We talked about various things, but we never mentioned about Efrasia.

I believe that was not escapism nor a rebuff, but kindness.

Both of us bore similar wounds. While admitting the existence of those wounds, we never tried to probe into them. It was comfortable that way.

Kyoutarou became the sole person whom I let my guard down for, and I believe he regarded me similarly. Kyoutarou was a part of me, and I was a part of him, too. We would be able to survive as long as we were together, that was what I thought.

However, Kyoutarou is not here. I am no longer with Kyoutarou either. The one by his side is now Urushiba Rinka.

In order to stop me and Professor, he remained with Urushiba.

Why was he on that side? How did he get involved in the first place?

Kyoutarou, who had seen the scenes of hell in the civil war; I had wanted to keep him away from our battle. That was the reason I left him.

It was about one year after my life with Kyoutarou began, I killed people. I was assaulted, and I tried to protect myself. It was inevitable. That was when I became a murderer.

I did not return home. Instead, I went to Professor and told him about the incident.

"I will make the proper clean-ups. All you did was disposing of worthless *trash*es, so you have nothing to worry about."

If only I could think like that, everything would have been much simpler.

"It's still possible for you to return."

My body shook when I heard his words.

"You are currently at a forked road. You can forget about ESP and about this whole revenge. You can go back and live normally with Kyoutarou like before."

Kyoutarou. Yes... I have Kyoutarou. As long as he is there, he is the only one I need. But..... how can I forget.....

"But if you can't..."

Can I? About those days? My Father's anguish, his sorrow for losing Mother, his anger towards those people who feigned ignorance.

"Then you have no other choice but to follow me in this path of carnage."

Professor put out his tobacco and stood up, but I could not move. My past tangled around me like a chain, and the present with Kyoutarou weighed me down, binding me to my seat.

I could not make an answer. Why did Professor bring Kyoutarou with us? Why did Mother die? Why did Father think of something like revenge? I wondered about those questions.

Kyoutarou... Mom... What should I do?

"The first time I killed people was when I was fifteen."

Kakunoshin who was standing still in one corner of the room suddenly spoke.

"The country where I was born in adopted a strict class system. I was from the lowest birth. I had both my parents, and a younger sister. I also had power, as well as a large build. No one could beat me in a fight. I was even powerful enough to silence the harassment from the upper classes."

His tone was flat, without emotions. I kept silent as I listened to his story.

"As expected, someone from a higher status didn't like that and decided to hammer me down. But, the one who received the brunt of it was my sister. She was still thirteen, yet she was raped for hours and hours. She was barely alive when I found her."

"Cruel..."

"It's a common story where I lived. My sister died in the end. She became crippled, and she took her own life not long after."

I wondered what kind of expression he had under his helmet. Kakunoshin spoke indifferently to the end.

"You were close to getting your heart killed. If you didn't kill them, it was your heart that would have died instead. I am not sure if this serves as a consolation, but I think it is good that you didn't end up like my sister."

A heart that was killed. I suddenly thought about Father before he became 'The Professor'. Father's heart must have been killed when Mother—his most precious—was snatched away from him, and trampled.

Then his wilted heart resurrected itself. With revenge as its dark fuel, his heart blazed forward.

"So the first persons you killed are..."

"Everyone who took part in raping my sister, I killed their families as well. Also, both my parents."

"Why...?"

"This is what they said to me, '*Calm down, it is not a big deal.*' I couldn't forgive that. Those people were obviously the ones at fault, so why did we have to resign ourselves to it? I couldn't forgive my parents for accepting such a situation. And at the same time, I hated them for gearing such a twisted world."

"Is that the reason you joined hands with Professor?"

Kakunoshin nodded in agreement.

"Professor understood my pain. As a killing devil, I was being chased by society. But, he told me that I was needed. He said that what I did was not wrong."

"But, the people you'll kill next time will have nothing to do with all that."

"The moment I found someone who truly understands me, it is worth making the whole world my enemy."

Someone who truly understands me—that would be Kyoutarou. The time we passed together, I can feel strength welling up whenever I think back upon it.

I would do anything in order to protect him. And, he might accept the current me. Maybe he would understand what I did.

"Welcome home. You're out late today."

Like always, Kyoutarou greeted me with a smile on his face. He would always start laughing at a moment's notice.

That was Kyoutarou, his real self that he regained after living in the peaceful Japan. He was cheerful by nature, and kind. He would never choose to kill a person.

He was the sole survivor whom we managed to rescue from that hell. Would I allow him to get involved in another war?

—No, I couldn't do it.

"Minami?"

I buried my face in his chest. His height had surpassed mine who knows when.

I could hear his heartbeat. It was proof that he was alive. Without a doubt, his heart was still pumping. I do not want it to ever stop.

I really wanted to take him with me. I wanted to be with him forever. But, I would end up hurting him. He would think that all the days we spent together were only for the sake of getting him involved.

I did not want that to happen. I did not want to taint our life together. I did not want Kyoutarou to forget about the time he had spent with me, either.

Still clinging to his chest, I desperately tried to keep myself from crying. I had to, but I could not stop my tears. I had known that it was wrong of me to cry, but my feelings towards Kyoutarou were gushing forth.

"I love you, Kyoutarou."

If only I could say that, how relieved would I have been? Would I be saved? But, I could not permit myself. It was exactly because of my love for him that I could not allow myself to say it out. I had to suppress my feelings. I wanted to let Kyoutarou live free, bound by nothing. Yes, free.

I left home that night, without saying anything, without leaving anything; I decided to walk behind Professor, in the path of carnage.

However, my decision was for naught. Kyoutarou's figure appeared on the opposite side. He, too, awakened his power. And of all things, he just had to become a teleporter just like me.

Kyoutarou and I have lost the ability to understand each other for eternity.

I am pondering within this gloomy darkness.

I wonder where things went wrong. Why am I here? Did everything happen purely on my own volition, or was it an unavoidable current that brought me to this place?

Thinking back, I feel everything is just a continuation. Instead of my volition, there is some working power at hand that has been forcing me to go through this ordeal. I chose the wrong path again and again, leading me to my current state.

"I have gone a long way... from Tokyo, and from Kyoutarou."

As always, the apartment complex is filled with a stinky smell. I know I cannot get used to this smell.

The smell of people clinging to something in order to live, huh. There is no way for me to understand that. I do not believe people would have more worth in life by clinging to something.

The ones living here seem to be detached from the world. But despite that, they are all frantically trying to follow its rotation.

What is the point keeping up with a world full of deception? I am sure the world is only letting them dream. They can turn filthy rich. They can stand on the winning side. That is the delusion it gives them. But, that is all it does, as they will never reach that place. They are just running around in circles.

Maybe I can change that. When Kozuki returns the Ark to me, I will scatter the glowing fish around this complex. The qualified will obtain ESP, and evolve into those with merits. They will become the true holders who can stop the world.

I laugh at myself for thinking such a stupid thing.

People with merits? Evolve? No one wants that. Living this miserable life in fear, there is no way someone like me has any merits.

From the start, I was wrong. Me who has no one but myself. I sought power, I spread fear, and I overturned the world. But, did my 'will' exist in all that?

I was only following Professor's words when I thought, when I moved, when I killed. Displaying a face called hatred, brandishing the power of miracles, all while believing that it was right to throw all other emotions aside. I had killed my heart with my very own hands. I lament my current state, but I cannot even cry or shout, just like a doll.

That... is me.

Even so, I have to protect the Ark. That is the only thing left of me. I have no other meaning to live, other than having a doll's duty to fulfil.

The night wind caresses my burning wounds. It is still a bit cold, but it has been comparably warmer than when I first arrived. It will turn April soon. 'If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?'

But Spring will never come for me, not for eternity.

3

I walk around the apartment complex aimlessly. There are other people in twos and threes, but it was quiet.

I am walking in the direction where my feelings tell me to. I know I have no destination in mind, but I do not feel like returning to the room.

Somehow, I reach a public park near the apartment vicinity. The place is brightly lit, but there is not even a person in sight. The playground equipments on the withered lawn are filled with graffiti. One with a lion shape has been sprayed completely black, and it is currently scowling at the sky.

I try climbing up the athletic course. Reaching the top, I can see a slightly different view from when I was on the ground. The sceneries that were spreading above my line of sight before now lowers just a tad bit before me.

Maybe this is how espers view the world; a view slightly above the ground. Just this slight elevation makes them merry and feel as if they are better than others.

Urushiba Rinka said it at the National Diet Building.

'We have someone we hate... We have someone to argue with... We have someone we can fall in love with! We espers are humans, too, aren't we!'

Maybe she is right. She faced me as a human, and she won. It was not out of hatred or anger. She fought with the intent of saving people, believing in justice. She was naive, and her motive was absurd. However, she managed to accomplish it with her 'will'.

"*Minami*, it's really you."

I look down and see Levan. He is standing there, carrying his sketchbook like always.

"What are you doing at such a time? Actually, what are you doing here?"

"I can see this park from my room."

He points at the apartment.

"You're sharp to know that it's me."

"Hehe."

He laughs as if embarrassed, then he starts climbing up, as well.

"Won't your dad be worried?"

"Dad is in a night shift, so he won't be home 'til morning."

Said Levan as he sits next to me.

"And how about you, *Minami*? Is it okay for you to be outside already?"

"I'm alright. I'm just taking a walk to get some wind."

"I see."

At that moment, the wind blows. I squint my eyes, and my hair is fluttering from it. It feels pleasant, as if it is gently soothing my burning wounds.

"*Minami*, you really have a pretty smile."

What is he talking about? I glare at him, and he looks away in panic.

"I didn't smile at all."

"But... I know I saw it during the wind just now. You smiled a little."

There is no way it is true. Even if it is, it must be an involuntary action then. I was not thinking of anything worth laughing. I try touching the edge of my mouth, but I can only feel it pursed in a straight line.

"You have some nerve to make fun of me."

"O-of course not! I... really... thought so..."

He mutters as he blushes to his ears. He is acting weird.

"You're smiling again."

I immediately stiffen my expression, but Levan starts laughing this time.

"Enough. I'm going back."

"Sorry, I'm sorry! Forgive me!"

"No, I won't."

Levan's smile takes a complete turn, he looks like he is going to cry at a moment's notice now. His facial expression changes so easily that he just might rival Kozuki. I think I was much calmer when I was at Levan's age.

With my being silent, Levan's expression keeps turning for the worse. Doesn't it look like I'm bullying him right now?

"Alright, I'll forgive you. Just stop making that kind of face."

"Really?"

"Really. But the next time you say it again, I won't care anymore."

"Okay, got it. I'll be careful."

He nods with a serious face. This kid is weird, seriously.

The wind blows again, stronger this time. Carrying dry leaves and sand to my face, this wind is not a pleasant one. Levan sneezes from the cold.

"Go back to your room. You're gonna catch a cold."

"What about you, *Minami*?"

"I'm staying here for a bit longer."

I do not feel like returning yet.

"Then, I'll stay, too."

Declares Levan as he plants himself firmly again to where he was sitting.

"Hey."

"It's gonna be lonely since Dad won't be home yet. Can't I?"

Lonely, huh. I know that sentiment. Waiting in solitude until a parent returns home is painful. It feels as if I am abandoned in a place with no grounds to stand on.

But looking at Levan again, he is only wearing a coat over his pajamas. He is surely going to catch a cold if he stays here.

"Then, I'll send you to your room. Bear with that."

"Eeh."

He pouts and glares at me, looking displeased. Although reluctantly, he then nods his head.

I intended to accompany him until the front door, but for some reason I am already inside the room.

Levan's room is comparable to Kozuki's, it is miserably messy. There is a worn-out sofa, a small table beside it, and a TV. Empty pizza boxes, consumed beer cans, juice, litters everywhere. I can see a stack of bills at the entranceway. I have heard about his family condition, but experiencing this firsthand still leaves me speechless.

"Ah, sorry. I'll clean them up."

Levan brings a garbage bag and starts putting the cans away. I will help. The place is covered with dusts and oil as a result of half-baked cleaning.

"Do you rarely clean the place?"

"No, but the room gets dirty after I clean it every time. We have no vacuum cleaner, and we don't really have detergents."

"I see... so your parent is that busy?"

"Yeah, he goes to work every day. He is tired, so he always goes to sleep right after he gets home. I'm sad, but it can't be helped. It's for our livelihood after all."

"Why..."

The word slips from my mouth.

"Of course it's for our meals. We can't pay the rent either, if we don't have money."

He answers as if he finds my question strange. I know I need to restrain myself, but I cannot stop my mouth from moving.

"Why do you still think of living under this situation? And it's not just you, everyone living in this apartment, too. Do you believe that you will become rich someday? Are you seeing a dream where you will reach happiness in the future? You may just end up living your whole life bound in this place only to die miserably."

"Haha, you've got it wrong!"

Levan laughs as if he just heard a joke.

"I don't know about the future, but every day is fun for me recently. I get to play together with *Minami* and *Kozuki*, and the delinquents have stopped bullying me. My father always looks tired, but he smiles a lot. I don't know if we'll get rich, but there are times when I feel happy."

Happy? With this livelihood? I cannot understand.

"Maybe it is different from the kind of happiness that you're thinking of, *Minami*."

The child Levan suddenly looks mature in my eyes. It is simple to see that his happiness is being cut by their lack of money. Naturally, it is impossible to deny the feeling of happiness that comes after the riches. Thinking like a greedy person, I am ashamed of myself.

"Yup, this should do it."

Most of the garbage has been collected. The room looks slightly better now.

"Ah, I'll prepare something warm."

Levan stands on tiptoe and rummages through a cupboard in the kitchen. I cannot bear looking at him, so have a look into the cupboard myself. The content is practically empty, save for several packs of instant soup and coffee.

"Can I take this coffee?"

"Sure, I want a cup, too."

"You won't be able to sleep then. It's soup for you."

I boil some water and make the coffee. My nasal sensory is tickled by its bittersweet aroma as I take a sip. It tastes awful, but not from a brewing mistake though. It is most likely because of the poor quality of the coffee itself. Still, it has been a long time. I can feel the bitterness clear my mind.

"Do you like coffee?"

"...Since my father often brewed it for me."

"What kind of person is your dad, *Minami*?"

"He was an archaeologist."

I talk to Levan about 'father' before he became Professor. I talk about what I saw in him as my father. Now that I think of it, this must be the first time I ever talk about my family to others.

"He was a good dad, then."

I vaguely give him a nod. I wonder if he is right, though. A father who rarely returned home, leaving me behind while going from place to place; can I call him a good father? Ironically, it was when he turned into a terrorist that we could spend more time together. On the other hand, it was also the moment when I stopped being able to call him my father.

"Did he teach you *karate* that you used to beat those delinquents, too?"

"No, that was... something that I had to learn out of necessity."

That was not a lie.

"Thank you very much for saving me back then."

How many times does it make now? I have told him over and over that I never intended to save him. He was only looking at the chance outcome.

"That talk is supposed to be over."

"But, it really made me glad."

"Glad?"

"I'm an outsider here, so there was no one that would help me. It was pretty much the same even before we arrived here... so I was really glad that time. You made me think that a hero really exists."

A hero... I am not such a foolish existence.

"Actually, I remember. About the civil war."

My face immediately turns rigid. Without noticing me, Levan continues his story.

"Even now I still don't understand why the civil war happened. People who had been getting along with each other suddenly aimed their weapons to each other. Dad and Mom ran away with all they had... and they kept running."

The Efrasian Civil War. A bog of battlefield that caught soldiers, guerillas, civilians; everything in it. So he has not forgotten about it. Rather, it must have been impossible for him to.

The assailants, victims, bystanders; no matter the position, they are bound to be affected those bloody memories in some way. Those memories will always be haunting them close.

I could not see even a hint of the civil war from Levan's face before. But right now, his face that I see from side is full of bitterness, as if he is trying to pluck a thorn that is etched deep inside him.

So he has only been wearing a mask, the mask of a child with no concerns of the world.

"One day, the general officer died. Then the war turned worse. We managed to escape somehow, but... Mom passed away. I didn't even notice when it happened."

I did not want to hear this. The one who killed that general was Professor; I was there. In order to retrieve the Ark and the tablet, and to avenge Mother, Professor killed him. As a result, the army went wild after losing their pillar of control. And the guerillas also intensified their attacks.

And so, Efrasia was erased from the map. It was swallowed by the large powers who came to intervene in the civil war. The ones responsible of taking his mother and country away from him, we are a part of them.

"Nothing good ever comes even after we reached England. I was bullied... there were lots of time where I felt like dying."

What awaits those who managed to escape is not limited to salvation. Those who are saved are actually the rarer existence. As someone who keeps running away like me, I understand it.

"When *Minami* came to help me that time... you might deny it, but to me... I thought... that you really looked like Minerva."

'Minerva protects Pax from Mars', the painting that we saw at the art museum. The gallant side profile of Minerva that was displayed at Pax's back.

And why was he comparing me to Minerva at such a timing. His imagery was totally out of place. It really wretches me.

I am getting the urge to hurl this cup. I really want to leave this place right away.

"Isn't it hurting you? Still remembering about your past like this?"

"Of course it is. But that's why I'm drawing."

"To forget about the past?"

"Hmm... I think it's a bit different."

"For what then?"

"I can't really put it into words. To face each other... maybe? Maybe not. Sorry, I'm not really sure."

Talking while laughing, Levan now looks his age. But at the same time, I think of him as a person who is far more mature than me. There is no cure for the wounds he bears. The war has cast a large shadow in his heart. But, he is preparing to overcome it, to receive it.

Then he met me. But for some reason, he follows me around and idolizes me. Calling me Minerva...

"You, do you like me?"

He stiffens. He blushes, even his ears are red.

Now I am the one to flounder from getting an unexpected response. Then I realize that I had picked the wrong words to say.

I had wanted to ask in a yearning-kind of way, but it seems that he took the question with the romantic definition instead.

Seeing his reaction, I can guess that he——

This silence is awkward. Levan drinks his soup in one go, and he opens his mouth as if making his resolve.

"About *Minami*'s mysterious power... and *Kozuki*'s, too. There are people with the same powers as you who... um... I saw in the news about the terrorism in Tokyo..."

Levan's voice is trembling. He must have been minding himself to avoid this topic for these two weeks. Maybe it is also because I told him to not say anything about me to anyone. But, there is also a possibility of him thinking that I may leave for good if he ever crosses that line.

"*Minami*, are you one of them, too?"

"What are you gonna do after you know?"

"I don't know... but I want to become *Minami's* strength."

"No need."

I try to cut him off, but Levan is not backing away.

"But I want to. Because I like you, *Minami*."

He must have known; about the atrocities we committed as terrorists, about the blaze in the civil war, about the stern life from living on the run. So why...! Why is he still clinging to me!

"You can do nothing, and you don't have the merit, either."

I can tell that Levan is hurt from my words. He looks pained, and he keeps silent. Somehow my chest feels fuzzy. I thought of drinking the rest of the coffee, but I stop. I do not feel like drinking any more of this tasteless coffee.

"Thanks for the coffee."

I leave the room without looking back. I can feel Levan gazing at me from my back. He must have been looking at me like this all this time.

I have enough self-loathing. I hurt Levan. I ruthlessly rip his heart to shreds, the one that he sustains by drawing in his sketchbook. I have hurt so many people, but currently it feels so painful for some reason. The me from before is overlapping, and it presses on my chest.

Good day to you.

It has been three days since our battle at the London Eye. The explosion at the Queen's Theatre are being broadcast daily on the news. There is a possibility that a third country is involved in the terror attack, is what the greasy-nosed newscaster is reporting.

Speaking of the man who was sitting on the seat, Popper stated that he was from the revolutionary army of a poverty-stricken country. His splendidly boorish capability to shift the responsibility for causing the explosion truly earned my applause.

On the other hand, there was not a report whatsoever of our fighting at the London Eye. With Thames River flows in between, the headquarters of the Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, is located directly to the opposite of the London Eye. Considering their non-existent reaction after that extravagant show, it appears that our opponent has considerable influence with the government.

That battle, regrettably, resulted in our loss. It is irrefutable to call it a horrible, tragic defeat. We even lost the Ark; it never rains but it pours. Soon after the incident, I had an incoming mail from Grandmother, saying 'I have received the Ark' with a picture attached.

I have not the slightest idea about the reason behind Grandmother's actions.

I was raised at Grandmother's side, unlike my sister who grew up like how a stray dog would. Sister was thrown out of the house to live alone off the streets. I had undergone the same experience as well, though half of the time was spent living with Grandmother instead. I do not know why Grandmother provides me with a special treatment. I suppose it stems from her great expectation towards my future.

Still, if I was to be judged by the 'rules' of Black Fist, I was considered an exception among exceptions. That decision might have been an overprotective conduct.

I believe the matter about the gangsters was an extension of said protection. However, if what I believe is wrong...

Immediately after the London Eye, I investigated various things about the man who proclaimed himself as Popper.

First, he is nothing but a part of a weapon smuggling organization called *Long Guo* (Dragon Country). Its leader is Don Hoikoro, and the organization is based in Hong Kong. I have heard rumors of it being a preminent organization in the whole world which deals with every country as its clients. And apart from weapons, it also deals in any products through the *Black Market*, including works of art. Naturally, our family always utilizes the black market whenever we need to sell our loots. And so, there is no doubt that Grandmother possesses a way of contact with them.

Popper himself is not a man of good repute. Well, I suppose it is too much to ask for a reputable person in the underworld.

Real name unknown, but it is speculated that he came from the Republic of Rhodesia, South Africa. The country has now dissolved into Zimbabwe and Zambia.

He enters the underworld in his teens, and he becomes an executive of *Long Guo* in his twenties. He has been continuing his work for over ten years since, which is an interesting fact in this case. If he truly had the capability to obtain his current position at such a young age, it would have been logical for him to reach the upper echelons, perhaps as inner staff or treasurer. This, however, shows the nature of his character.

His alias, Popper, must have been granted to him because of his habit to 'pop' in anger. Befitting his name, he shall cast his fury indiscriminately, and he has no qualms about putting his partner in business to death. As it appears, he possesses a somewhat

troublesome disposition as a *businessman*.

On the other hand, a man of his kind would not be satisfied with his current standings. Perhaps, he is planning to obtain the Ark to promote his status within the organization.

Now, why did Grandmother offer the Ark to such a fellow?

I have lost my means to retrieve the Ark, for 'its whereabouts is currently unknown to me'. In addition, my ability requires me to visit the transfer destination once in advance, and to have touched the object in question.

As a matter of fact, I have attempted several times to transfer the wooden box that is holding the Ark; they all ended up in failure.

It is very likely that Grandmother is aware of all my hideouts. In fact, this hideout of mine is a place with the best escape routes of all. Although, Minami is now having some kind of suspicion towards me. I provide her with a more detailed explanation before she acts without thinking.

I knock on the bedroom door, but there is no answer. Is she still sleeping?

"I'm coming in."

I look at the bed, but it is vacant. So I try closing the door before opening it again, but Minami is not there. I turn over the sheets, look under the bed and above the canopy, yet Minami is nowhere to be found.

"...Where is she going at such times?!"

I cannot believe this! How could she go about without giving me a notice! Why does she have to be such an idiot! And what for am I looking after her!

I have been assisting her thoroughly, yet she repays all of it with enmity? Truly an ill-behaved child!

I need to search for her, but I wonder where she is likely to go. She has not been here for long, so she must not be too far. Is it Trafalgar Square? Or somewhere we went to, perhaps Bond Street?

Then the sound of a door opening comes from the entranceway. It is Minami! Clenching my fist in anger, I walk to the living room to welcome her.

"Where were you?"

"It doesn't matter... does it."

This is the first time I ever heard her voice this glum. She tosses her katana to the sofa and returns to the bedroom. Oh, you are not getting away so simply.

"Hey!"

"What?"

"I believe there is something that you have to say to me."

".....I'm home."

"It's not that, you idiot woman! What are you thinking, going outside at such times!"

"Just to get some wind."

"That's the matter. Have you forgotten that we sought by the police?"

"We're wanted for a long time now. The problem should be the fact that we were walking around like tourists."

"The situation has changed!"

"You told me this place is safe."

Ah... I guess I did... this woman is really irritating!

"Is that all? Then I'm going to sleep. Wake me up if anything happens."

I hear a string going snap inside me. This time I need to stay in an upfront manner.

"What's with your manner of speaking?"

Even a Minami would notice my bad humor.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the way you talk. What kind of noblewoman are you trying to be?"

"I'm talking like I always do."

"'Wake me up if anything happens'? I am not your servant!"

To my increasing voice, Minami clicks her tongue. I pick up a gun with my ESP on reflex. It is the Beretta that I stole in Turkey. I will open up a new wind hole in her body with this one.

"Put that gun away, Kozuki."

"Would you stop ordering me like that?"

"Listen to me, then. We can stop here."

"How far are you intending to look down upon me? When you're but an idiot."

The expression on her eyes has changed. It appears that Minami is getting angry.

"Don't get cocky now, you lowly thief...! Without your ESP, you are nothing but a thief."

"Says the terrorist who can hush a crying child. Ah, should it be an ex-terrorist? Would you remind me of your current hobby? A postman transporting a box? Perhaps a nanny who's tending children around this block?"

"I'm trying to stay alive for Professor's sake!"

"You're a little girl who can't do nothing without your Professor. This isn't your place to speak with self-importance! In London, you're just a bumpkin who can't even tell left from right!"

To my words, she makes a face as if saying 'you've finally shown your colors'.

"I knew it. You're saying that it's easy for you to trick me because you know the land better."

"Haah?! I didn't say that!"

"Stop lying. You, and your grandmother... both of you are working together with that Popper, right? Just keep sneaking around, you brown rats."

I cock the Beretta's hammer at her uncalled-for remarks. I can no longer tolerate her.

"That thing won't kill me."

"It's quite all right. I'll beat you up enough until you can no longer move before I start shooting."

"Try me."

Says Minami as she steps one of her feet forward. Why is this girl so...!

"How stupid..."

This is really stupid. This is not the time for us to be fighting. Minami remains in the same pose, but she has a bewildered expression on her face.

"Shooting a person in her despair will not make me feel any better."

"What did you say?"

"Ever since we arrived here... no. You have become such starting from the time we left Tokyo. You keep saying that you need to protect the Ark, but you always try to throw your life away at every chance you have..... If you despise it that much, you can always run away for once."

"What are you talking about?"

"You hate having to bring *that thing* (the Ark) around with you, aren't I right?"

Her countenance changes. My goodness, did this child only realize about it now?

"Always moping, then getting angry, it is tiring just to stay with you."

"You're wrong... I have to... protect the Ark... but Professor... is gone..."

Always with her petty excuses. This is really vexing me out!

"How long are you going to feel down in the dumps just because Urushiba Rinka stole your man!"

Minami completely loses her expression at those words when I realize.

(This is bad. I've said too much.)

As mist envelops her body, I receive a kick at my back. Then she drops her knee to where I fall, but I roll over to evade. I aim my Beretta at her, but she disappears into a mist again when I shoot.

This time I feel an impact in my flank, followed with a barrage of punches.

"H-hey! Can't you at least rebut my words?"

Minami, however, says nothing while she continues with her beating me. Of course, I am not so kind to endure a one-sided fight. I prepare a counter, and I give her a body blow; in addition, a right straight while she still flinches. She crashes into the wall shelf and my tableware scatters to the floor as a result. Aw... that pottery is from the Victorian Era.

However, I do not have the leisure to be worried about that because Minami is making a lunge at me. The result after everything ends is like opening a cauldron of hell. Sparks and smoke is rising from my liquid crystal TV. My sofa is riddled with bullet holes, and the walls, too, are damaged from having been pierced with a knife or a similar thing.

By the time the two of us stopped moving from weariness, we have turned the whole room upside down, downside up, and turned it over again.

"You still... want to continue?"

Minami still with her heaving shoulders is scowling at me.

"How about you..... say something to me...!"

"[Fire DETectED. PLEase evaCUAte. Fire DETectED. PLEase evaCUAte.]"

What answers me is instead the fire alarm that is reacting to the smoke spewing from the TV. Its beeping is irritatingly resounding through the place.

Just... what am I doing here...? Glaring at each other with this stupid blockhead... this is pathetic.

"Do you hate, staying with me already?"

Minami does not answer. Silence means affirmation.

"All right, then...!"

I head to the changing room to retrieve my coat. Then I walk towards the front door and hold the door handle.

"I'm leaving, you hear me!"

But there is no response from the living room. I wait for a short while, but Minami does not even show up.

"Die!"

I said a single word in resign before finally leaving the room.

They can all die for all I care! They who only see themselves in sorrow without caring how others feel; these people can never be cured unless they die.

Chapter 4 — Rock You



A devastated room; in there I am sitting in a daze. I no longer care about anything and everything.

This is where I will soon die. My journey with Kozuki has already ended. We had bickered for so many times during the past three months since our escape from Tokyo. But, this was the first time we actually beat each other, and perhaps the last.

I think over Kozuki's words.

"You hate having to bring **that thing** around with you, aren't I right?"

It hit me when I heard that sentence; not a shock, not a fear, but a realization. I came to know the reason behind my torment. It felt as if there had been a fog covering my mind. But when she cleared it away, what was revealed was nothing but my dreadful, egoistic self.

It tells me to throw the Ark away, namely, to refuse my duty. However, protecting the Ark is my *raison d'etre*, and refusing that would mean—

I want to meet Kyoutarou. Just staying beside him is enough, but even that small wish would never come true. Because he is not here, and he does not belong to my side.

I grab my katana. I remove it from its sheath, and the blade reflects a cold light to my face. I know I have acknowledged it in a nook of my heart.

—that dying would be so easy.

People die eventually. Professor did, and Mother, and I will, too. But I need to keep running away. And as a result, my death will not be so kind. If that is the case... then

right now—

Crack. There is someone treading on the broken dishes that are littering the floor. I ready my katana as I turn around in reflex, only to see Levan standing there, dumbfounded. He is stunned to see what this room has turned into.

"What are you doing here?"

"This room is— what happened here?"

"It's none of your business."

This guy keeps hindering me in all the important moments. I do not know if he just has a good timing, or bad.

"Why are you here?"

Levan brings out a sketchbook.

"I have finished my picture. So I thought to show it to you, *Minami...*"

"Just leave me alone!"

Right now anything, everything irritates me. Even looking at Levan's sniveling face makes me want to puke. I slap the sketchbook from his hands and I thrust my katana before him.

"I've told you! Your kind has no merits! You're just a human, a brat who is waiting for his death in this garbage dump!"

Tears are welling in his eyes, but he does not turn his face away from me.

"Get out of here!"

Even with my threats, Levan keeps standing still all while looking at me. His gaze is filled with pity. That figure of his overlaps with Urushiba Rinka, and also Kyoutarou.

No. Don't look at me like that. I am strong, I belong to those with merits. There is no reason for you to pity me. I live alone, and I will die the same. Because this... is my only option.

"No need to be scared."

My hand starts trembling, and it makes my katana shake, too. Because of it, the blade is now brushing against Levan's neck. But instead of backing away, he takes one step closer to me.

"I'm not gonna hurt you. I want to become your strength."

"What! Are you going to come with me and kill people?! Are you saying that you will become a terrorist?!"

My shouting is already close to a scream. My sound is rasp, to the extend that I feel ashamed.

"You're wrong. That's not it."

Levan shakes his head.

"Let's live together."

I almost drop my katana from how earnest he is.

"If you don't like this place, we can go somewhere else. Forget about everything. Let's find a quiet place to live. I will always stay with you."

He picks up the sketchbook that fell to the floor and presents it to me.

"Just have a look. I didn't draw anything scary in it."

I mechanically receive his sketchbook and flip over its pages. The paper has turned stiff from having been drawn and erased over and over. Each page contains a different object: a pigeon, a car, scenery from the apartment. But after several pages, the drawing object becomes only one.

'Me'.

I wonder when he drew all this. In one drawing I am sitting. In another I am standing. There is also me lying down. He has reproduced my figure into these pencil drawings so painstakingly. But at the same time, the contours are so delicate, and its appearance looks so gentle.

I turn the pages again. All of his drawings are beautiful, and energetic. None of the pictures are smiling, but I can feel a warm expression from each of them. The me in the drawing is looking somewhere with a sorrowful look. But that alone gives off the emotion of kindness and love.

The person inside this sketchbook is not me. It is someone from Levan's world. The beautiful feeling she gives comes from what he thinks of me. This must be how I look in his eyes.

Now I understand the reason I see Kyoutarou on his face. It was the way Kyoutarou looked at me during the battle. It was not that of hatred, but perhaps that of kindness, seeking to rescue me.

It was not a look of pity, but rather a gaze full of concern and thoughtfulness. It was the look of a Hero who would jump into the depths of hell itself in order to save someone. Has he been looking at me the same way?

I was thinking of killing myself till earlier, but now I feel something has relieved my heart. I feel an emotion that I have not encountered for such a long time. I feel... happy.

I shed off my resignation and despair in a husk.

I can feel it from the painting, I can feel Levan's overflowing amity.

And I reach the final page. It is a picture of me brushing my hair, which is ruffled by the wind. In this picture, the edge of my mouth raises very slightly in a smile.

I am overwhelmed. It is a live portrait of me, of a young girl who only looks her age.

It is as if all of me has been laid bare. Though what I am currently feeling is not that of a shame.

I feel liberated. And at the same time, there is pride welling forth from within my chest. That is because I know that I have become Levan's aspiration.

I close the sketchbook and return it to its owner.

"So, you really like me."

He nods, while being bashful.

"Thank you."

I imagine it. In a small house somewhere, I am sitting on a sofa. Levan is sitting in my opposite, drawing me into a picture. The room is filled with only the sound of his moving pen. Then we have a break, and I drink my coffee. And afterwards, he would resume drawing me again with the lingering aroma of the coffee still in the air.

We might just be able to live our days like that.

I can take his hand right now and dash away. I can discard everything, and live just as a human being.

There is someone right here, one with no ulterior motives. Yet he tells me that I am needed. I have known for a long time that this is something to feel happy about, which is how I can perceive all these feelings from this sketchbook.

"*Minami...*"

He holds out his hand to me. A small hand. It is held out for me to grasp.

"I'm sorry."

But that is why, I cannot take this hand.

"Why...?"

"I'm happy to receive your feelings. That's not a lie, but I can't stay with you. I don't deserve it."

"I don't mind!"

"We, are the reason behind the annihilation of your country."

I tell him about what we had done to his country. He stiffens. His face pales. As though cutting my own lifeline, a bitter taste is filling my mouth.

I am too heavy for his hand.

I am too filthy for his hand.

Instead of me, there are other better things for him to grasp with his hand.

Levan clearly has the talent. One look at these pictures is enough for me to tell. So, there is only one thing left for me to do. Like what I did to Kyoutarou, I have to disappear from him. I did it with my own will back then, and this time will be the same.

At the same time, the place where I need to be has been established.

This is not where I belong. Perhaps I will end up leaving mountains of corpses behind me, but it is something that must be done.

However, this time it will not be for the sake of building a world for humans with merits, nor will it be for Professor, either.

This is necessary for myself, and for my own sake, 'I will finish what Professor had started'. After that, my life will start.

I have no idea what will be when it all ends. I am sure no one in this world will be able to forgive me. But that is fine, because I have seen these pictures.

Because I have received his affection. And that is all I need to continue living.

"But *Minami*, I..."

I gently place my hand on his shoulder as he wrings out his words, as if trying to bear with the harsh reality.

"You'll have to bear with it forever if you choose to stay with me. It's too sad if you have to keep seeing this abhorrent person, isn't it?"

"But, I'm okay..."

He is clearly faking his courage. His earnest nature is pressing me on my heart.

I laugh, which is not my first time forcing it out. Watching the stiff movements of my mouth, Levan is on the verge of tears again.

"Just forget about me."

He is about to say something in reply, when a cell phone suddenly appears in the air. It then falls to the floor with a thud.

I pick it up and take a look at the screen. It is displaying the map of London. I focus on a certain highway where a glowing red dot is visibly moving. On its side, it reads...

'The Ark'.

2

Aah, I have all the reason to be angry. I will use this occasion to visit downtown and play. The Ark, Popper, whatever. Minami can die in some ditch for all I care!

Still in my ill humor, I am walking towards Whitechapel Road as I set Liverpool Street as my destination.

There are pedestrians around, but they look startled when I enter their view as we walk pass each other. What are you looking at, you ignorant bunch. I will crush your head into a sorbet.

I continue walking as I glare at everyone around me. Then my eyes meet with my own reflection in a shop window. I almost scream when I see my terribly awful appearance. My hair is disheveled, my makeup has crumbled, and there is a trace of nosebleed reaching to my cheek. It must be when I wiped it earlier without much thinking. In short, my face is currently in a monstrous state.

This is unacceptable. In a fluster, I produce a mirror and makeup remover. Afterwards, I bring out my comb and put my hair in order. Now I look acceptable, at least.

But without my makeup... *sigh*... how I despise my own baby face. My eyes are the only parts of my face that have grown bigger in size. This is the reason why my face looks childlike. Even though my body has developed, the mismatch removes any charisma I might have possessed. My boorish elder sister does not use makeup. But, the glint look on her eyes, and their sharp, pointed ends are a source of my envy.

I feel like redoing my makeup, but I hesitate to do so in public. I shall endure, until I reach a washroom in the nearby station.

Liverpool Street Station is what you call a terminal station. It is where trains heading towards the suburbs gather. This station is brickwork-tiled. It has two towers in its front, one of which is a clock tower. In appearance, the station looks closer to a church. Including the subway area, this station is the largest in the eastern part of London.

It is perhaps a good idea to ride on a train out of London. Then I will change to another heading eastwards. Yup, east sounds good. Maybe I will head to Scandinavia. I wonder if I have enough money with me. Well, I can always procure the sufficient amount by pickpocketing around here.

There are several policemen standing here and there in surveillance because of the terror bomb incident at the Queen's Theatre. But since I am aware of their circumstances, it should serve no problems for me in that regard. They would not be so attentive to anyone with a fine British appearance like me.

I transfer my bag to hold in hand, preparing myself to bump into someone and pilfer their wallet. Ah, there is a rich-looking gentleman right there. Excuse me, please allow me to steal your—

Suddenly, my thief's intuition reacts.

"I'm being tailed."

Nine out of ten, they are affiliated with Popper. I suppose the fact that I have cut my ties

with Minami would mean nothing to them.

I shall move to a more crowded place. It would be helpful if they lose sight of me this way. But unfortunately, their distance to me does not increase at all, neither does it decrease in any way. Consequently, I decide to descend to the packed subway.

It would be preferable if I can set up an ambush and beat them up. However, the police are numerous even down here. It would be troublesome if they somehow notice me. I would rather not be surrounded by a ridiculous number of them at the same time.

I pass through the ticket gate, and I head towards the platform. These stalkers of mine must be waiting for their chance while hiding somewhere on this platform.

A Tube has arrived, and into this red colored train I go. It is full of people. Although not as bad as in Japan, the underground trains in London are still quite congested.

And so I board the train. I shove between the passengers, moving from one car to another, then I leave to the platform. I look over my shoulder, and I see several men coming out of the train to follow me. Bingo.

Here comes the announcement for departure. The moment the train door starts closing, I squeeze myself through its gap. I succeed in boarding the train again.

Now on the moving train, I see those men still standing on the platform, so I wave to them with a smile. You may try to be reborn eighty thousand times over, but still you will not be able to catch me.

Luckily, there is an empty seat over there. I take my seat, and I stow my bag below. Leaning against the backrest, I ponder on what I should do next. In the meantime, I should pick a suitable station to disembark, and eventually depart from London.

Still unable to decide, the train stops in its next stations, with some of the passengers alighting every time. The train is gradually becoming less crowded, and I am starting to

stand out. After passing three stations, I notice a seemingly homeless drunkard sleeping on one of the seats. In fact, the two of us are the only persons I can see on this car at the moment.

Odd. Around this time, the train should still be congested. Also... this train has not stopped at all since the previous station. We did not pass through any stations either. I wonder if this train is going out-of-service. Did I miss the announcement?

"Both of you are slow to understand."

All of a sudden, the sleeping drunkard rises and looks in my direction. The moment I recognize the aura exuding from that person's eyes, the whole place becomes dark. The place is loomed with darkness, one so black that I cannot see the tip of my own nose.

"Haeh?!"

I lose track of the drunkard's presence, leaving me with only the swaying of the train and the sound of it running on its track. The one who can achieve this feat is...

"Grandmother?"

"[You're coming with me. You no longer have anything to do with that girl, do you?]"

Her voice can be heard through the PA system. Not even thirty minutes have elapsed since I left the block, but she has already figured me out. She is beyond uncanny, to the extent that she terrifies me.

However, I have the least intention to bow down and say 'Yes, I will' to her words. I transfer a gun to my hand with ESP. I aim towards the window and shoot.

"Impossible! How could—?!"

The glass makes a slight dent, but there is no crack at all. The window uses reinforced glass... even more, its quality is extraordinary!

"You're not going anywhere."

Hearing her voice coming from right beside my ear. I flail my arms around and shoot everywhere. Despite that, I cannot even make out her shadow.

"[To think darkness would make you tremble. This is an unthinkable weakness for one with the lineage of Black Fist.]"

Her voice interchanges between one heard from the PA system and the genuine. Fear envelops me down to the tip of my toes. It has been a while since I last felt it. I have hated this feeling of dread that I experienced when I was a child. An overwhelming gap in power. I am made to taste my own powerlessness again...

My feet, my hands are trembling. My heart is beating fast. No more. I do not want to stay here. Get me out of here!

"Really, I can't leave you alone. The same goes to my daughter. Both of you resemble each other."

Grandmother's daughter. In other words, she means my mother. I have no recollections of her. What I know is only the fact that she gave birth to Sister and myself, and that she has been disinherited by the Black Fist.

"[You and she are similar, both with a timid part somewhere inside. You adhere to our rules, but are careless, and have no friends.]"

This is the first time Grandmother ever talks about Mother to me.

"In the end, it resulted in her ruining her own self."

Being compared to Mother makes me feel uneasy in some way. It feels really irritating.

"I am... different!"

I hold back my tears as I shouted. But my voice is sucked into the dark and vanishes. What I heard instead is a sneer, and the grating sound of a lighter.

"[Of course I know. I even left for Tokyo in order to keep you in watch.]"

The darkness laughs once more. What does she mean? Grandmother, she... went to Tokyo?

"What were you doing? All while your elder sister, Kobushi, was risking her life, hunting for treasures? You did nothing, only went with the flow. You were playing around, and deceived by the Professor, were you not?"

"That's...!"

"[What? Say it aloud. I'm sure your excuse is not even worth mentioning. I know why you went to the other side. You thought it impossible for you to succeed the name by yourself.]"

She strikes where it hurts. My hair is standing on ends, I feel cold.

"But Kobushi is not like you. She chose to break our rules, knowingly. She is aware that she is alone, but not you. Perhaps you have intended to protect that child (Minami), but the moment I..... Hmph! You're being too reliant on her."

She is revealing my muddy heart. I never expected that all of my conduct was being watched. Why would she— I am so ashamed...

Oh no... I think I am gonna cry... This is so stupid. I thought that I was caring for Minami, but I was the one who was being looked after... This only proves... that I am

the idiot.

"[Speaking of the reason that I made that deal with Popper, it was to protect you, my naive girl.

With the whole world currently pursuing my granddaughter, it was a cheap to pay considering that they would guarantee your safety. As fickle as he is, the organization behind him is one to be trusted. And thus, I offered the Ark to them.]"

"Your concern... was uncalled for..."

It takes my all just to mutter those words, but my towering pride has already shattered into pieces. I grit my teeth with sheer stubbornness. I rub my eyes to hold my tears from spilling.

All of a sudden, I can feel a presence appearing out of nowhere in this moving vehicle. It walks step by step, closer towards me.

"Now, now. Let's go. You've been playing enough."

"I don't want to."

"Don't be selfish!"

"I don't wanna!"

"Listen to me!"

"No, no, no, no! I don't wannaa...!"

If I back down now, everything will become just as Grandmother said. I will have to admit that she is right. I will turn into a nobody, an empty person. The tears that I have been holding is now flowing freely. I must really look like an idiot now... but please, at least spare me from that.

I feel the presence wince slightly.

"I never thought that you of all people would disobey me."

"*sniff... hic...*"

"It would seem like I'm trying to bully you right now. But, the Ark is already with Popper."

"Uwaaaah..."

This is unfair! So unfair! Why did the situation end up like this? Everything is going exactly as Grandmother planned!

"The stalking, the location of the treasure, I was the one who informed them. You may think that the storage room at the British Museum is a good place to hide it, but it is too obvious."

"*sniffle...* Grandmother, you... *hic...* you stupid...!"

Crying and shouting in a total darkness, I wonder when I last did it. The me who was still young, the me from the past; I spent that period in the coursing darkness.

I have been living in the shadows since I was a child.

Born in a thieves family, I was raised without knowing the love and bonds that should be natural for any ordinary children. When they would learn to speak, I was learning how to steal. When they would make friends, I was told to never trust others.

Truthfully, whenever I saw other children my age playing in a public park, I would often think of joining them. However, even that was out of the question. I did not know how to play. I did not know the way to make people happy.

There was a time when I felt it painful, but that is a matter of the past. Now, I have taken a liking to the way we live. The sense of achievement when I get my hands on my prey, the elation that I feel when I outwit my opponents; they would never be able to perceive these kinds of feelings.

That is why I have no friends, only enemies. I engage in life-or-death battles with my blood-related sister.

It is a natural thing. It is the common practice in the world of darkness.

Solitude is how darkness lives. And since I cannot adhere to that, Grandmother has come to discipline me again.

However, it makes my heart throb to think about it. As if my skirt is stuck in a tree branch, there is something that is stopping me.

Minami—why is her face coming to mind? What is Minami to me exactly?

She is not my enemy, rather she was a colleague from the same organization.

If so, do I think of her as a convenient pawn? No, she has already lost such value.

Because it was a request from the personage whom I had admired, perhaps. The Professor had entrusted Minami to me. On the other hand, I am not such an earnest fellow who would faithfully follow through.

I consider various kinds of relationships. Just what is she to me?

She has had the worst kind of mental condition even prior to our arrival in London. Always moping, self-loathing, always complaining. It would have been better to leave her, but that was not an option for me.

I have no idea how to encourage others, though I do know how to encourage myself. I just need to spend some time in my favorite place. For me, that is London; my birthplace, as well as my greatest playground.

I was sure that bringing her here would improve her moods. I transferred her to a tourist spot, Piccadilly Circus, then I invited her to go shopping in various locations. However, all of them did naught to her.

And in the end—as we can see, this happened.

I am aware that I am acting out of character. As a matter of fact, it is a mystery even to myself why I would do all this.

It would have done me good if I immediately ran away when the Professor died. If I did then, there would be no reason for me to be imprisoned in the darkness like I am now.

Then why? —While my thoughts are going in circles, a voice from the darkness interrupts me.

"Geez, you're pathetic. This is all because you were hanging with a gloomy, wily, dim-witted, and cheeky little girl like her."

"...huh?"

My thought process that was wandering in all directions immediately gathers up.

"I have hated her from the start. She has no courtesies towards the elders. It shows how her parents were like, how she was raised."

As if you are one to say. We are thieves, aren't we? I can still remember how I almost died in a boxing training like it was yesterday.

"She looks so gloomy. She's a terrorist, and she's cheeky, too."

You said gloomy and cheeky twice. Still, what is this? Somehow... I feel sooo...

"...irritated."

"Did you say something?"

My tears have dried. Although my face is still boiling, it is no longer due to shame, but anger.

"What you said is true for the most part. But Grandmother... it somehow irritates me when you say it."

"What's wrong with speaking the truth?"

"The one allowed to badmouth Minami is me alone!"

I will give this old hag a surprise. I have made my resolution. This may seem off the cuff, but a magnificent idea has hit me. I reach towards the bag that is still remaining under my seat. Grandmother, its content is not limited to only my purse, you know!

However, a rope flies from behind me, restraining my right hand.

"[Stop trying now.]"

Her voice is now coming from the speaker again, and her presence disappears. Yup, perfect. I use my free left hand to grab a phone hidden in my pocket. I launch a certain application and transfer the phone altogether to the hideout.

As stealthily as I did it, Grandmother saw me with her keen eyes. Another rope flies from the darkness, shackling my left hand as well. My two hands are held up in the air as if I am celebrating something.

With the shaking train in addition to my wobbly feet, it is now pointless for me to struggle my limbs.

"What did you do?"

There is a presence at my back, to the extent that I can perceive her silhouette. I can tell it is the real deal.

"Grandmother, you're underestimating me. It was rash of you to give the Ark to Popper."

"Hmph. What arrogance, just because you managed to slip a single ant under my nose."

"Just now, I activated the GPS that I had buried inside the Ark. Leaving the detailed mechanism, it is possible to track the location with a mobile phone as long as it stays above ground."

I hear the sound of an ignited lighter. Then a sweet fragrance wafts in the air. It is Gudang Garam, Grandmother's favorite cigarette.

"Would that be your final letter for that little girl? Doesn't matter to me, as long as you are now back with me..."

Her cigarette gives off a spark, which will surely drop from her mouth soon. Because, I have transferred a **certain item** into my left hand.

"Can you see it, Grandmother? Although, it is perhaps hard for your old eyes to see with this darkness."

It is made of a cheap-looking silver plastic. It is something cylindrical, which I am grasping strongly. Then I resolutely press on the red button lying on its top with my thumb.

Grandmother should have understood what is going to happen. She is shouting something, it seems. But with the thunderous roar and flames rising from the explosion, of course it would be inaudible.

Heat, shock wave, and light. Subsequently, I am swallowed by a pitch-black darkness again.

3

I sense Levan's gaze coming from beside me. He is looking at my expression, while I am still staring at the phone screen. I am sure I am no longer the *Minami* that he yearns for.

But that is fine. It only relieves me if he has become terrified of my sight.

I can see him wanting to say something at the edge of my view. Yes... our worlds have parted. For the last time, I see him face to face. I want him to etch it in his mind, that one day, that someday, in a future I am not aware of...

Regardless of when it will happen, I shall make him remember in that future.

And so I close my eyes, and I dash towards the dark night. Parting words are unnecessary. It is merely by accident that our paths have intersected; it is something that occurs only once every long, long years—like a meteor shower. I believe people call it a miracle, but for me——

Above the highway leading to the airport, I keep teleporting to find Popper's wheels as indicated by the GPS. But it turns out to be an easy task to locate that huge limousine tinted in black.

But I have no time to feel relieved. I land on the vehicle roof and unsheathe my katana, and the limousine's skylight opens without a sound. Unexpectedly, Hibiki shows up her

face.

"Ah, if it isn't Minami-sama~"

Jumping to the roof, Hibiki, with her long-sleeve kimono, spreads out her arms and runs towards me. I remind myself that this vehicle is currently going over 80 kph. Falling will not end with just bruises, but her gait is light in contrast.

Thinking to smash her skull, I lift my katana overhead. But at the same time, she reveals a dosu¹ from her sleeve and tries to cut me with her weapon. Her movement is smooth, as if she is dancing.¹ *A very short sword, making it easy to conceal. Often seen in Yakuza films.*

She is already too close for me to evade, so I promptly use my katana to guard against her attack. The moment our blades touch, they produce sparks and a ringing sound, then my katana breaks in two. Reflecting the car light, half of my katana spins in the air and disappears to the road behind.

I am left with a useless sword handle on my hand. My opponent, on the other hand, has not received even a chip on her dosu.

By adding oscillation to an edged tool, she increases its cutting power. This must be what is called a High Frequency Blade like in sci-fis. In reality, this function is already implemented in the ultrasonic scalpels used in medical treatments. With her ESP, it has been made possible to use in a battle.

With an aroused face, she produces another dosu. She is now wielding a pair with both her hands.

"You'll keep struggling as long as you own your limbs. So let me cut them off, all right? Don't worry, it won't hurt~"

But she is aiming her air-cutting dosu to my neck as well. I have been barely evading her attacks, but this limousine is only 7 meters long at most. And if I try making a

counterattack, her kimono that is also a vibrating armor will just flick my arms away. My only chance is to hit her exposed head. But in other words, as long as she protects her head, I can no longer do anything.

"Why do you keep running away from me? ...Are you embarrassed? How childlike of you~"

She sounds like she is shivering. Her eyes are giving off a dangerous, covetous glint. And she licks her lips, glistening them.

"I shall do this, then."

She spreads her arms. She is going to clap! A super shock wave is coming, but I have nowhere to run on this limousine.

If so, I just need to escape into the vehicle. The limousine shakes like crazy from Hibiki's super oscillation, but its steering does not sway at all.

Like I thought, this is not a normal limousine. Rather, it is one that befits even the ruler of a country.

"Desperate, aren't you?"

Sitting to the opposite of the back seat is Popper. The sharp tip of his pointed umbrella is thrust right in front of my throat. Its sharpness is, without a doubt, enough to pierce through my neck.

"You should check yourself in a mirror for a minute. Your appearance is to... unsightly."

I can see the Ark—the wooden box carrying it—on the car floor. Looking closer, it has been fixed to the floor with screws. This prevents me from dashing it away at a moment's chance.

But, I will not give up. There must be a way.

"I don't care about appearance. I've decided that I will survive no matter what the struggle. Although, I suppose someone of your level won't understand such sentiments."

A vein is bulging on his forehead. It seems that I hit a nerve somewhere.

"You're going to die here, you understand? You will shed your tears, looking unsightly, just like that one man in the theater."

I grip a nearby seat, and I focus my consciousness. I have lost my weapon, and I am already cornered. But I still have one thing left—my 'merit', my ESP.

I will dash along with this limousine whole. A limousine that is far from normal, furnished with protective armors and tempered glass that amount to at least three tons in its total weight. I have no other choice but to pull this off.

I desperately try to dash. But, the vehicle keeps swaying and it is not budging at all. Instead, sharp pain runs through my whole body and fresh blood trickles from my nose. I am aware that ESP is swirling in my body, bringing pain along with it. It feels as if there is a power asking to be released, and it burns my nerves.

"I can't stand looking at you. Die."

He is now aiming his pointed umbrella towards my heart. As much as I want to evade it, I can no longer move my body that has stiffened from pain. I must pull this through, no matter what.

There is no way I am going to hand the Ark over to anyone. There is no way I am gonna die here. I am going to ascertain everything with my own eyes. The one behind Mother's death, Kyoutarou's path, Levan's future, and also, the end of everything.

I am screaming. I can feel a surge of power, an amount that I have never felt before, being released from within my body. A swirl of light dances around me. And in it, I dash with my heart and soul.

The light vanishes, and I am back inside the big car. I feel a moment of weightlessness, which means that we are falling down. From the car window, I can see the London Eye floating within the darkness.

Since the capsules of the huge Ferris wheel are lying right in my line of sight, it seems that the limousine has reemerged tens of meters above ground.

We are approaching the ground. I dash out of the limousine before it crashes.

Soon, the falling vehicle pierces the ground, shaking it. Then, it grandly pitches forward as if trying to plow the park, rotating vertically. It then turns upside down, sliding on its roof with an unstoppable momentum for a few meters until it crashes onto a raised path at the end of the lawn before it finally stops.

Startled by the incident, the passersby are making a ruckus. I need to retrieve the Ark, quick.

Now where is Hibiki? I cannot see her anywhere. She should have been transported along if she was still on the roof. Forget it, the Ark comes first.

The wooden box is unscathed, still clinging to the floor of the now inverted limousine. At times like this, I am really grateful that they have done their job fixing the box in place properly.

I reach out my hand towards it, but at that moment, I feel stitches all over my skin. It is a bodily reaction that activates when one enters a battlefield. Hostility, murderous intent, malice, I have somehow developed the senses to perceive those things like this. I abide my intuition to avoid the sign of danger, and I dash towards my rear. There, I see a ball of fire erupts at the place where I just stood.

On the other side of the smokes is Popper. He is trudging his feet, and there is blood flowing from his head. But, he is certainly in good health.

"I won't let you have it. This is already mine..."

He holds his hand towards me. A pillar of fire forms between us, raising fire sparks all around. Did he just miss?

"Shit!"

He furiously wipes off his blood that was entering his eyes. This is my chance. I teleport right to his front and use my palm heel to strike his jaw. A dull sound reverberates from the shock. This fight ends now. I jump forward and send my leg towards his face. After rotating once, his head strikes the floor with the same force.

With his body sprawling on the ground, I straddle on him and punches his face several times.

"I'll be getting the Ark back. And you'll be giving me Professor's notebook, too."

If this was a match, it would have already been my victory. However, what we are doing is not a match. Popper grins, and he starts laughing. With blood in his mouth, he looks as if he has gone insane.

"Kill me, and you won't be getting your weapons."

"You don't have to worry, then. I won't kill you. We'll let you live and become our puppet."

Popper bursts into a maniacal laughter. Blood and saliva together splatters onto his cheeks and throat. I punch once more since he disgusts me.

"Give me his notebook!"

"I'm not hearing orders anymore. With the Ark, I will obtain the world."

"You should really think carefully about your current situation, Weapons Dealer."

You won't attain the world. Because your life is currently at my mercy."

"It is the other way around, Terrorist. The whole underworld will turn their faces away from you.

You will lose your means of procuring weapons, while the whole world will point their muzzles at you, and at Tokyo. And this mayhem that we deliberately keep under wraps will all be blamed onto you."

Then he glares at me. Knowing about my unrest, it feels as if a venomous snake is trying to coil around me.

"It doesn't matter how many miracles you people try to make, because they are only limited to certain extents. You can't win against the world like that. A better method would be to use it to serve the world, instead."

The world—it is indeed a scale too big to make an enemy of. We are an existence that it discarded away, and it is not just recently that we have struggled against it. And to fight the world, we need to own parts of the world itself—money, personnel, information. However, the world has robbed almost all of it from our hands. Ultimately, our companions remaining in Tokyo will turn into scapegoats. And Kyoutarou, too...

"If it's the methods that you're clueless about, I'll teach them for you. Just show me in."

And he smiles triumphantly. I raise my fist overhead, but it remains still without meeting its target. What should I do? Just, what should I choose to do?

Shrouded with hesitation, my reaction has dulled. I am suddenly embraced from behind, and I am forcibly moved away from Popper.

"I~ got you~"

A warm, moist sigh hits my ear. Hibiki, so she survived the crash. And I know how grave of a danger I am currently in. The instant she uses her oscillation power to me, my whole skeleton will crack, and I will die.

"Well done, Hibiki."

Popper picks up his umbrella, and he hits my face with its tip.

"Gah!"

"Aahn, what a luv'ly voice. Ah can't... hold mah'self any longer..."

Hibiki sticks her face to the nape of my neck, and she sniffs at it strongly. I get goosebumps all over from the discomfort. I dash before Popper can let loose another attack, along with Hibiki. My destination is the highest capsule on the London Eye. With Hibiki still behind my back, I slam her right onto the floor. And using the momentum, I hit her nose with the back of my head.

"Ugh," she raises a groan. I take this chance to slip away from her.

"Haa... that hurts~"

She stands with a wobble. She scoops her nosebleed lovingly and makes a delighted face.

Love, although too much and over the top, she keeps such expression on her face as she extends her hand towards me.

"Why me...?"

Her affection towards me is not that far apart from what Levan has. Her eyes are dark, her behavior is clear, but she is making no sense. She rarely talks for herself, but she parades so much lust. Hibiki should be of the same age as me, but I can only see her as a mysterious creature.

"Although I am now in Popper-san's captive, I originally belonged to Professor's group, you know."

She talked and laughed as if it was nothing, but I am rendered speechless. I recall what Popper said.

'I have managed to sell, already,' is what he said. I should have known what it meant. It is not strange to hear if some of our former companions have gotten themselves involved in it.

"Many things happened after I was abducted... but now that I have met Minami-sama, those things don't matter anymore!"

As if imploring, she scratches the empty air with her stretched fingers.

"Let's go together. As long as Minami-sama is together with me, I—"

"No, I can't."

Her smile cramps when she heard my words. Of course I feel hurt from seeing her like this. I sympathize with her, but I must not become Popper's lap dog.

I have decided. I will finish what Professor has started. I will cut anyone who stands against me, even say a former ally. That is my resolution.

"Why? You sure ain't meaning it, right?"

"I am sorry, but that's my decision. I will protect the Ark, and no one else will lay their hands on it."

She retrieves her dosu from her sleeves. She growls, almost like an animal. Then she comes to cut me down.

"Ark, Ark, Ark, Ark! Stop looking at that old box! Notice me, instead! Ah has confessed so much to you 'ere. But what is it that you not understand!!"

Hibiki is broken. Her precious thing must have been chipped, and harmed. And she could not bear it. But it is not her fault, nor is it due to her weakness. Because Professor, and me too, had gone through the same thing.

"No matter 'hen. 'Cos I'm taking you with me, even if I need to turn you into a limbless doll first!"

Hibiki's movement is like that of a beast. The space inside this capsule is even smaller than on the limousine's roof. I am not sure how to handle her, but I have to prepare to face the consequences.

It happens just before her steel-cutting dosu reach me. Suddenly, a shadow appears and gives a splendid straight punch to Hibiki's face. She was blown away into the next capsule nearby.

"O~hohoho! It is the rule of the world for the rescuer to arrive late!"

This irritating laugh, this silhouette is Kuroi Kozuki, without a doubt. She puffs her chest as she laughs, pointing her finger in the direction where Hibiki flew to. Although, Kozuki's appearance is dirty with soot and dust.

"You..."

"I somehow made it. Actually, why did you have to teleport to such a high place? It was troublesome to climb all the way up here."

Acting as if the fight between us never happened, she puffs her cheek as she complains to me.

"Oh well, it is said that idiots and smoke like high places. So I guess you couldn't help it in your case."

"I'm so gonna kill you."

That was my conditioned reflex kicking in. But Kozuki does not seem to mind, and she actually grins and laughs.

"What have you been doing?"

"Well, various things. Getting out of that debris took me way too much time. Since I made it in time, all is well, no?"

Debris...? That explains why she looks so tattered. Maybe in her own way, but it seems that she went through quite the trouble."

"You saved me there."

"Hm? Did you just thank me?"

"Of course not. I was speaking the truth, that 'you saved me'. That's all."

"Not yet though, we aren't out of danger yet."

Kozuki takes off her tattered dress and throws it away. It reveals what she wears underneath it, a skin-tight bodysuit, which is her personal battle dress.

Hibiki rises back on her feet like a revenant. If she had an ESP capable to kill with enmity alone, Kozuki and I would have surely died. That is what her eyes are telling me.

"Aah~ I should have left London instead of going back here."

"Then why are you here?"

"Eh? That's— um..."

Kozuki's eyes are swimming around. She is fidgeting, and she sends some glances at my way. What is wrong with her? She is freaking me out.

"Because... you are my f... f-f-..."

She is stuttering. Three months may not be too long of a period, but this is the first time I see her acting out of character.

"What do you mean by 'fu'?"

"Fu- A funny fellow that might be good at playing the triangle!"

Just what the heck is she blabbing about at such a time. The triangle is... that three-sided musical instrument, right?

"I've never played it before, though."

"R-really? But, I am sure that you will do just great. I like playing the violin, so I will let you play the triangle as my accompaniment sometime."

I have never heard of a violin instrument being accompanied with a triangle, though.

Kozuki is acting as if she just said some words that she is not used to. She is now fanning her flushed face with both her hands. Maybe, this is her way to make peace with me. If so, this is a really great development from her.

"Okay then, I'll make sure to practice."

Kozuki opens her eyes wide. It seems that she is surprised to hear my frank answer. We really do not have the time for this banter, but I feel like smiling.

"How dare ya flirtin' around right in front of me, ya damn bitches!!"

A loud clap resounds to the area. With her oscillation, it turns into a strong gale, shaking the London Eye. Glass shatters, reflecting light in all directions as it falls from the capsule.

"Minami, here."

Inside the furiously shaking capsule, Kozuki uses her ESP. What she is giving me looks massive and heavy, with a glossy black scabbard. It is a Japanese sword.

"It is a sharp sword that I got from the British Museum. Better than nothing, at least, right?"

I am irritated by how pompous she looks, but she is right. I remove the katana from its scabbard. Like how the surface of water reflects the moonlight, it gives off a blue gleam, radiating my face. This is undoubtedly another historical relic. It is absurd for anyone to swing it around, but now is not the right time for me to complain.

The moment I think of dashing into the capsule where Hibiki is on, I realize that the temperature around us is rising. I grab Kozuki's arm and dash into a different capsule. Then, a ball of fire engulfs the one we were just at. And it explodes, which is all caused by Popper's ESP.

A clap resounds again. The gale brings the fireball with it, transforming into a fiery gale that approaches us. Kozuki produces a Spartan Shield to protect us both from the flame.

With no moment to pause, the temperature rises again, and I dash right away. Another explosion. The fire spreads through the framework of the London Eye, turning it into one giant fiery chariot.

"Minami, I shall be covering for you. Take out that kimono girl first."

Kozuki nods to me confidently. She is the reason why I could match these guys. So, I will believe in Kozuki who has come to save me.

I answer her nod with my own, and she transfers a sniper rifle into her hands. She takes her stance and aims it towards Popper below.

Simultaneously with the sound of a gunshot, I dash towards Hibiki. With my figure appearing right in front of her, Hibiki opens her mouth wide. She is laughing.

"Mi~na~mi~ sa~ma~!"

We both have entered our respective striking distances. But on this cramped space, Hibiki with her dosu is at an advantage.

Kozuki's sniping is holding Popper in check, making him unable to aim his ESP properly. I will settle this fight with all of my focus.

But the moment we raise our swords, a thundering sound resounds. At the same time, a severe tremor hits the whole Ferris wheel. Its fulcrum has been hit by an explosion.

And the explosion raises a mushroom cloud, lighting up the night in London.

The whole Ferris wheel is swaying like a baby cradle. Its steel framework is creaking, making noises that are grating on the ears.

Another explosion occurs. The wires that are holding the structure in place, start to snap one after another. Due to their thickness and mass, each of them has a massive elastic potential energy. The wires are lashing the ground with snakelike movements, producing clouds of dusts.

People around the public park are screaming while they flee. But in the midst of it, I can see Popper remaining still and glaring at me. He seems to be fed up because he could not target me directly thanks to Kozuki's cover fire. In the end, he decided to bury us all under this Ferris wheel itself.

More explosions start occurring. Although maybe due to his short temper, domes of fireballs are appearing not only at the Ferris wheel, but throughout the public park as well.

Kozuki fires at him. But due to her swaying foothold, she missed. The bullet hit the ground near Popper's feet.

Another wire snaps from one of the explosions. It turns into another giant snake and whips the ground. Then, the Ferris wheel starts to heel over. Any structures will collapse when they lose all their supports. I wonder if it will fall into the river. Instead, it may actually keel over towards the public park because of all these explosions.

The wind blows, sending fire sparks right before my eyes. The ground below is blanketed with fire. Shrieks resound, and explosions roar. The burnt stench of goods and humans spread through the air.

What unfolds below is the scene of a battlefield. No...

"That's not quite right."

It is different. This is not what battlefields are.

I glare at Popper. All of these flames are his doing. Rather than a battlefield, this is just him venting his anger; a tantrum of a fool who abides by his emotions. This guy, there is no way I will let such a human possess the Ark!

He needs to be taken down first. When I decide to dash towards Popper, I see a dosu approaching me.

"Ya is playin' with me right now, where is ya goin'?"

I dodge her attack barely in time, and I swing my sword. However, it is blocked by her oscillation armor.

"Why are you so obsessed with me?!"

"Because ah love ya, of course! Ah wanted to become ya! Beautiful, strong, ya is truly the sun!

Ah was content with gazin' at ya from afar, but no more. It is human nature to desire what's within our reach!"

She is saying that she loves me. But, unlike how it was with Levan, I do not feel even the slightest warmth from listening to her confession. Because her love is brutish, seeking to dominate me into submission, obedience, and resignation.

Are we the ones who have created her? Or did she turn like this because of Popper's influence? I do not know. But as apologetic as I am, I cannot go with her. Rather, there is only one thing that I can do for her.

That is, to kill her.

"It's all right. I will make sure to take good care of you. Ah will love you in the same way as they did to meee!!"

There is only one way to take Hibiki down. That is, to aim at her exposed head. I also need to consider the fact that I have not much moving space in this small capsule. She is trying to cut me with her dosu, from which I am dodging while parrying some of her attacks with my katana. But it has its limits; for every spark our blades produce, my chance to win is becoming smaller. Now that it has come to this...

"It's all or nothing!"

I store my katana back to my right side with half its blade unsheathed: the 'Kamae of Sun'. Keeping my own weapon out of my line of sight, I will dodge all of her attacks.

With intermittent explosions, inside this swaying capsule, I start a circle dance with death. Without parrying, without countering, I keep evading her incoming attacks.

In time, Hibiki is succumbing to her anger, with her swings are getting wider and wider. And finally, she raises her dosu overhead and swings it vertically with great force.

I match her movements and I raise my katana as well.

Hibiki is using ESP on her kimono, transforming it into an oscillation armor. But, her skin is not under said protection. On the other hand, my target is not her head. She has just one other part of her body that is peeking out of her armor, her fingers.

Blood spurts onto my face. With trailing blood much like weaving a silk, her fingers fly through the air. I swing my katana once again and cut off the fingers of her other hand.

Hibiki looks at her hands, left and right. I hear her making a faint groan while she falls on her backside.

"No way... this... no way..."

I push my katana to her neck.

"Minami-sama..."

Hibiki looks up at me, as if accepting it, she smiles.

One strike. A small amount of blood gushes out. Hibiki closes her eyes, and her neck inclines. A large gash opens and this time, a large amount of blood spurts from it.

Her body topples, and she falls face up.

I will not sympathize with her. I will not apologize, either. It is likely that I will need to kill more people like Hibiki. But, I will remember. I will remember all these people that we have created with our hands.

Another big explosion erupts. The Ferris wheel makes an imposing creak and starts to slant. I dash to Kozuki.

"Kozuki!"

I grasp her arm, and dash onto the ground. With the flame and heat melting the fulcrum, it slants and bents—its shape is getting distorted like a sugar sculpture. The wheel that was protruding towards the river is now entering the public park. The scene is pretty much like a giant trying to bend its own body.

There are no wires left attached the ground. Losing all of its support, the giant wheel pounds the earth as it falls.

Cladding fire, the wheel falls diagonally from the public park. In the end, it crushes the London Aquarium nearby.

"My goodness."

Closing her mouth with her hands, Kozuki shows her astonishment. I, on the other hand, is glaring at Popper. And Popper, he is giving me a glare, too; one full of hatred.

"Kozuki, step back for this time. I'll take on this guy."

A duel while surrounded with fire. No, it is not going to be anything that grand. This will only become a one-sided death penalty.

I hold my katana before my eyes, and I let my awareness fly. I imagine a path within my mind. My destination is... Popper!

Faster than he can wave his hand around, I enter the vortex of light and dash. He swings his umbrella down towards me. And I cut it, I sever his right wrist along with that umbrella from his body.

"Fgyaaaaaa!"

Still gripping the umbrella, his right hand leaves a trail of blood as it lobs in the air. He is screaming as he clutches his bisected wrist. I kick him to the ground.

"I'm taking the notebook... and the Ark."

I pull out the notebook stored in Popper's breast pocket. Checking its content, I confirm that it has Professor's handwriting in it.

"You bitch...! Don't you think you'll get away with this..... The moment you kill me, will be the moment you turn the whole world your enemy!"

He is squirming on the ground like a worm. I look at him with disdain, and he shuts himself up.

I hold my katana against the scruff of his neck. The sword crest reflects a blue light to his face.

"You will become a warning for the world to realize. You will be the living proof... of what happens when you try to mess around with us."

His crooked face is unsightly. He is not laughing anymore, because he is afraid. We are terrorists, the ones who spread terror as we fight against the world.

I will carry out my purpose, in order to see the end of everything with my own eyes.

"Let's negotiate, Weapons Dealer."

"W-what do you want?"

"Weapons, of course. I want weapons for our comrades who are in Tokyo."

I lightly press the blade on his neck, and a stream of blood flows from it.

"We'll pay for it, you know?"

Like a broken toy, he nods his head. It reflexively makes me laugh, and Popper makes a small shriek.

"Then, it's about time we start fishing."

"F-fishing?"

Without making a sound, Kozuki walks to me with a thin wire in her hands.

"I'm talking about your ESP. Seeing that there is no merits for you to use it, we will be fishing it, taking it back."

"W-w-w-w-what are you—"

I make Popper stand and present him before Kozuki. With dexterous hands, she coils the wire around his thin neck.

"But you said you weren't going to kill me!"

Popper screams hysterically to the extent that his voice is cracking. It is annoying me.

"We're not going to kill you. We'll only have you die once. The fish won't come out otherwise."

The ESP-granting glowing fish will leave the moment it senses that its host's heartbeat has stopped.

"Do be assured. I shall bring you back to life immediately after you die."

While saying so, Kozuki points at an AED (Automated External Defibrillator) that is lying nearby. She is well-prepared. Kozuki looks at me, and I nod.

"Well then, let us start!"

"No, wait..."

Popper's screams immediately turns into groans. The noises that he emits quietly resounds through the burning park. Mission complete. Now let us go and retrieve the Ark.

Epilogue

Rays of the eastern sun hit his fingers. Night elapses, and a new day has come.

Levan gently looks up towards the sky. The morning sun that he sees from the top floor is beautiful that day.

There, he has been thinking of a young woman.

Minami—To him, she is the incarnation of beauty.

Like a lead is his bearing, while sorrow exudes from his eyes. This young boy is aware of how his own mentality has far outgrown those around his age.

Even so, it was inevitable that he was drawn to her. The moment they met, he already knew that they were living in two different worlds.

However, his immature awakening of love has made it very easy for him to cross over the wall leading to the her world.

He wanted to stay with her, he wanted to see her, he wanted to hear her voice.

And, he wanted her to attain happiness.

She is beautiful as she is strong. And that becomes the more reason that he wishes for her happiness.

That young boy has prepared to throw everything away for her sake.

There is a chance that the young woman will return to this room. Although he may have realized that it was merely his wishful thinking, still he will not move away from that place.

Suddenly, the front door opens.

"*Minami?*"

However, the person standing there is instead an old woman unfamiliar to Levan. He looks perplexed, while the old woman, on the other hand, narrows her eyes as she looks at him.

"My, what are you doing here?"

Hemming and hawing, Levan finds it difficult to answer her. The old woman understandingly steps into the room.

"Why are you here?"

Instead of her identity, that is what he asked of the old woman. Because, the young boy can tell that the old woman dwells in the same world as Minami. Which in turn means, that he would not be able to meet her anymore.

To Levan's question, the woman heaves a sigh. On her face is signs of weariness that is too obvious to see.

"To clean up the mess. It is always up to me to wipe her buttocks... Honestly, that girl..."

Although she grumbles, the woman looks slightly happy.

And from her words, Levan could deduce the fact that Minami is not coming back any more.

"What do you want to drink?"

The woman asks the young boy who is standing stock still in the middle of the room.

"Something warm..."

Hearing his answer, the old woman starts heating up some water. The sun illuminates the room through the window, and dusts are reflecting its light. And Levan, is getting teary-eyed from looking the scene.

The world keeps on rotating no matter what happens. The sun will rise in the morning, and night will come when it sets. Levan's night—his final night that he spent with Minami—is over, and a new morning has started.

A cup of black tea is presented to him, and Levan finally starts crying after feeling its warmth.

His first love has left him for good. The warmth of her existence, her beauty; he knows that he has lost the one and only—the irreplaceable existence.

He holds his tattered sketchbook tight.

He is thinking of drawing pictures again.

Perhaps a future will come where he finds these days as his encouragement. Perhaps a day will come when he manages to depict Minami's beauty that exists within him into a painting, spreading happiness to everyone who sees it.

However, Minami will not be among them. Although, she does not wish for happiness, either. And now, Levan and Minami are walking down their separate paths that are not going to intersect again.

Even so, he will never cease to wish.

For her happiness.

That was but one genuine wish stemming from the young boy's love.

The old woman smokes a tobacco, and the sweet fragrant permeates the room.



It was a stolen Mini Cooper. Inside the car could barely contain Kozuki's luggages that she brought from her unit.

"They're our assurance for the next time."

I am really irritated by how proud she looks as she says it.

I do not know what happened to Popper afterwards. First, we stopped his heartbeat, then we waited for the glowing fish to leave his body before resuscitating him again with an AED. We escaped after that, taking both the Ark and the notebook with us.

Actually, I do not know if the organization he is affiliated with will keep their promise. Nevertheless, I do not think that they would confront us again after the lost a fight they had waged themselves. Besides, the fire this time should take them much effort to extinguish.

On the other hand, his organization is an existence that should be destroyed. After all, they are gangs who have turned ESP users into objects to sell. Crushing them is exactly the action that I should take if I truly want to liberate the espers.

However, that is not *my role*. I am not a *hero*.

Also, I still need their influence. What I need from them is not just the weapons, but also information, as well as their connections. That is why I will shut my eyes to their modus operandi.

I will take in both good and evil. I am not saying that I will accept sacrifices for the greater good. Instead, I will make sacrifices for my own goals. There are espers who have become victims of abduction, and more will be sacrificed. But, I am not going to

ask for their forgiveness. I do not need it, either.

I will survive, even if it means piling up corpses, and creating rivers of blood. I will still carry out my will.

"Where should we go next?"

A question from the carefree Kozuki.

"I'm sick of going north. Let's go south."

"That sounds good. Let us go southeast towards Asia then."

"This is going to be a long journey."

"Everything will be all right. The two of us managed to overcome this place, too, after all."

The two of us... huh.

Perhaps Kyoutarou does not belong to my side anymore. But in his place, Kozuki is here; a hopeless thief with a social deficit disorder. I feel there is something invisible connecting between Kozuki and me. I guess I am content to have her by my side...

I look outside the car window, and more greenery is visible now.

'If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?'—Such expression exists in this country.

fin

Afterwords

It is nice to meet you. I have the pleasure of writing 'Tokyo ESP Gaiden - London ESP', Mori Tetsuya.

How did you find it? In the original story, what were Minami and Kozuki-chan doing during the gap between the two arcs? I hope that I have managed to answer your expectations.

It was three months after the night of the Great Liberation. There was Minami, who was making her comeback after losing Professor and Azuma. And there was the innocent and slightly psychotic Kozuki who was learning self-control. It would be my greatest happiness if you have enjoyed how these two people, both hopeless in social relationship, were clumsily building their sense of camaraderie.

To Segawa-sensei who has entrusted Minami and Kozuki-chan and given me this task; and has also been waiting patiently as an editor for my manuscript. To the publishing editor who has publicized these writings of the nameless me. And also for Kadokawa Shoten's generosity for providing their approval. And to the fans and readers who have read this to the end; I would like to give everyone my words of gratitude.

Thank you very much!