



- Hokkaido: a conversation between OLs -

"I'm telling you! I really did see it - they're called colour gangs, right? I was there when it started. That colour gang in Ikebukuro - the Dollars."

"You're not making sense again. Chako, you've said it yourself - other than for field trips, you haven't even stepped out of Hokkaido before, not to mention Tokyo. Why would you even be at Ikebukuro?"

"That's true. But these two facts aren't actually related, trust me. I posed as a middle school student in a chatroom, and just as everyone was getting along someone mentioned the colour gang issue, and I don't know who suggested it - to make a fake colour gang for fun - it's true, it really is!"

(Five minutes later)

"And then?"

"At first we were just on the web, saying that we saw the gang, or we were part of it - gathering people like that, or just leaving messages on Tokyo forums for fun - it was just that. But... soon after even places that we weren't connected to started talking about the Dollars! It's true!"

"And then you left the chatroom because you were afraid? It sounds interesting, you should've kept in touch. It's all in Tokyo, anyway."

"Yeah, that's what I thought at first... But it still felt quite terrifying."

"Because you might get caught by the police? Oh - you were scared because if that colour gang really committed some crime, like murder or something, you'd end up responsible, was it that?"

"No, it wasn't. That wasn't what I was thinking at all... What I was afraid of was someone in that chatroom."

"...?"

"There was someone - should I say he was too innocent... Or just determined... Or just disgusting... He was really eager about protecting that colour gang - how do I say this... Like it was - some weird cult someone talked him into. But at first he did seem like a perfectly fine person, really."

"Ah, those kinds turn up now and then, don't they - like those who usually write decent things in their blogs, sometimes they might mention something that has everyone like, 'Whoa, this guy's dangerous'."

"Exactly! Although I don't know how he is in real life, I think surely he's still out there on the web somewhere, really."

"Eh... I remember his username was Yamada Ichiro or Tanaka Taro or something."

- Tail Between Legs -

--Where exactly did I go wrong?

Despite his endless self-questioning, the young man could find no answer.

Merely hours ago - he had been giddy with pride, at being the 'king' of a small group.

In reality, his position had only been that of a fox that had stolen the authority of a non-existent king but a few hours ago, his world had been overturned.

The young man's name was Shijima Hiroto.

He attended a certain university, and was also an executive of a drug cartel.

Yet from this day forth, he would hold two other titles.

The first - as a new member of a colour gang, the 'Dollars'.

And the other - as a mongrel.

He had initially plotted to absorb the underground gambling ring 'Amphisbaena', and had planned to use the informant Orihara Izaya as a means to this end.

However he'd lost more than he had gained as a result, and had fallen to a position no better than that of a cur.

Hiroto mulled over the fact, clenching his fists forcefully.

His nails dug into his palms viciously - he wanted to hurt himself to vent his hatred which he could not inflict on the world. Even as he was aware that his actions were meaningless, he was unable to control his impulses.

Even so, his grip was only strong enough for his nails to barely nip into his skin, and at most there was only some bleeding from his hands.

Hiroto was at a loss, and in his helplessness his mind was consumed by hatred and terror.

- -- Have I lost to Orihara Izaya?
- -- No. I haven't. That can't be possible.
- -- Those red-eyed people... What was that?

As Orihara Izaya toyed with him and had his entire organisation swallowed by the 'Dollars', he had witnessed, clearly, 'something' that was beyond common knowledge.

Without even the time to consider what it was, he, too, had become involved with it. And at the same time, the whole of his destiny had fallen into the clutches of the informant Orihara Izaya.

Lacking even the ability to escape, he returned to his old home on the outskirts of Ikebukuro - the mansion occupying the expensive land fully conveyed his family's wealth. At the sight of the house - unchanged since he had last lived in it - Hiroto felt some measure of comfort.

- -- That's right, I still have Dad.
- --As long as I have Dad and Grandpa, I can get out of this!
- --Although I might get told off for selling drugs, surely they'll help me cover it up.
- --And Grandpa knows someone in the Diet, too; that guy Yokoi, or something.
- -- That's right. Power.
- --I don't know what stunt that was with the red-eyed people, but they weren't operating in broad daylight, so that means they must not have much power themselves.

If it were his usual calm self, he would most likely have found this deduction to be ludicrous, and simply given up on this line of thought. But to the Shijima Hiroto of the present, the idea was as though the singular strand of lifesaving spider-silk in the hell he was in.

- -- That's right I haven't lost yet.
- --It'll be my comeback from now on.
- --Although Dad and the rest have to sacrifice some, that can't be helped, can it?
- --It would be bad news for them, too, if I got caught, after all.

To his present self, even his family now numbered amongst the tools at his disposal - and so, he strode unhesitatingly through the front door.

There were a few pairs of shoes by the doorway, probably belonging to guests, but he continued through the corridor without paying much heed.

Voices came from the living room. It seemed his father and grandfather were both present.

But who were they talking to?

As he thought this, there was a sudden chill down his spine.

--It can't be that Orihara Izaya is here, can it?

The worst case scenario in his mind was that Orihara Izaya intended to take his family and the power that came with it, too.

The image of his family, red-eyed, had Hiroto overcome by a strong sense of uneasiness, the pressure of which seemed sufficient to have his backbone creaking.

But that was not possible - it should not be possible, he convinced himself repeatedly, before he slammed the door open.

Consequently, the scene that greeted his eyes did not contain Izaya - there were only a number of well-dressed guests.

Unconsciously heaving a sigh of relief at Hiroto's appearance, his father exclaimed.

"Isn't this Hiroto; what's this? Coming home so suddenly."

"Uh... It's nothing, I just missed everyone."

Hiroto knew well that his issue could not be discussed in front of the guests, and so he weaved a simple excuse.

"Really? Never mind that now, come here and greet our guests."

Following this, a fawning smile spread on his father's face, as he introduced Hiroto to the guests.

"This is our son, Hiroto; Yodogiri-san."

--Yodogiri?

The name seemed familiar.

Was he a business partner of his father or grandfather?

Thoughts ran through his mind as he looked towards his father, and immediately he felt that something was strange.

If his father and grandfather - powerful people themselves - had such servile smiles on their faces, this guest must be someone important as well. But even so, both of their eyes held emotions distinct from mere submissiveness.

Unease, anxiety, terror.

Were these not, to his own gaze - as he fell completely into the trap of Orihara Izaya and his associates - were these not exactly alike to his eyes at that time?

Where on earth had this guest Yodogiri come from?

Hiroto eyed the guest suspiciously - without waiting for his greeting, the guest bowed and said:

"Ah, I know many things about you, Shijima Hiroto-kun."

There were two guests. One of them was an old man he had never met before, and the other was a young woman in a western suit, who seemed to be an employee.

The one speaking to him was the old man, whereas the woman only watched him in silence, her gaze sharp.

"I am Yodogiri, and this antisocial secretary here is Kujiragi."

"Oh, I see..."

Why did they know his name? As though answering to the question on his mind, the old man smiled amiably, and said -

"Oh, it's nothing - I do personally think I have quite many connections, but honestly I've never once imagined this, that I would have the grandson of Shijima Giichirou-shi working for me."

"...?"

"Aah, sorry. I say you're working for me, but it's not that I'm controlling you. It only happens that what you do has resulted in my benefit."

"I, I don't understand at all what you're... No, I mean, what do you mean, sir..."

The old man interrupted Hiroto's jumbled words, and with a warm voice said, absent-mindedly -

"He's... Orihara Izaya-san, isn't he?"

"...?!"

"In my network I know some people who're involved with him, but to use **methods like today's**, to infiltrate so deeply - you're the first one." --Why did that guy's name crop up? --Eh... Huh? --Eh, uh... Nonono! What is this?! Hiroto's mind drew an instantaneous blank, and as it began to stir even more chaotically, Yodogiri still continued -"You are in a delectable position, Shijima Hiroto-kun." "...?" "Orihara Izaya-san now imagines you fully in his hands. You've even entered the proximity of several 'objects' desirable to me, and are fairly close to them. And now the two of us have met, and connected. Do you not feel this is a beautiful work of fate?" The way he spoke was as though he were a salesman promoting a product - he sustained his own pace, while steadily attempting to pressure the other party. And as the premise of all this - who was this old man who understood his current circumstance so implicitly? Even as Hiroto's body burned under a fear different from before, he still recalled the 'power' he believed in his family that held high status in society. And following such, he turned pleading eyes to his grandfather. And then, his grandfather nodded at him. "Hiroto." "G, grandpa..." "What you've done up till now, I've heard all of it." The perspiration sliding down his wrinkled face was, perhaps, fearful cold sweat. The grandfather, still holding to his smile, subservience and nervousness intermingled, nodded strongly at his grandson. "As for the Awakusu-kai, I will think of something. You don't have to worry about that." "Grandpa!" -- As expected! --So long as Grandpa has this kind of power, even if it's the Awakusu-kai - we can take anything! His grandfather's words injected an infallible shot of strength to bolster his emotions. He firmly trusted that as long as his grandfather was around, the strange guest would not be anyone to fear. Nonetheless, this faith in his grandfather - this indomitable trust - was, by the following words, trampled to dust.

"So don't worry and follow whatever Yodogiri-san says."

"Huh..."

"Listen here, don't you let down Yodogiri-san's expectations!"

The tone of his grandfather was commanding - clearly showing through was his 'terror' towards the guest before them.

And so Shijima understood.

He had not become a mongrel only now.

Rather, it was since very, very long ago - perhaps from the moment he was born, that he had been sentenced to a life of being the dog of others.

The young man, who did not possess the courage to defy his fate, who could not even scream his protest against this conclusion -

He simply, despairingly, gave up everything.

At the sight of this young man, Yodogiri smacked his own forehead and shook his head.

"No no no, there's no need to complicate things. I only wanted to request a few favours from Hiroto. I would like you to help me from now on not by coincidence, but purposefully. Of course, you will be rewarded accordingly."

"...um, uh, I, what must I do..."

Hiroto asked shakily - rather than Yodogiri's origins, he was more concerned about his own future.

"Ah, I apologise. This, well, frankly, I've been interested in it for a long time, now."

The old man who called himself Yodogiri smiled warmly, and spoke the following words lowly:

"The *Dollars*, that lively, robust organisation."



- Every Tom, Dick and Harry -

August. Russia Sushi, a zashiki.

"All right, what did you want to say?"

Kadota spoke, as he crossed his arms, stretching his neck.

In a sushi restaurant clearly imbued with Russian culture, the tatami flooring added to the taste of Japanese style. Including Kadota himself, there were four young people seated at the table, with a luxurious array of sushi laid out before them.

However, the atmosphere that permeated the *zashiki* - a room spread with tatami - was not one of friends celebrating, but rather a nameless shroud of heaviness.

"...why don't we eat first?"

Answering Kadota was the teenager across from him - Kida Masaomi.

Karisawa had gone to attend a cosplay gathering, leaving only Yumasaki and Togusa here. As of now they had not spoken, both gravely observing the conversation between Kadota and Masaomi.

"There might be a lot of things to discuss. If the sushi dried out a kitchen knife might come flying here again."

"...true."

Kadota glanced to the side, where the pillar still held a small - but deep - gouge.

It was proof of the knife the store owner Denis had thrown at them before. At the sight of the scarred pillar, Kadota sighed softly, and thought to himself.

--Since then it's already been a year, huh.

When mark had been made, Kadota had, like now, been having sushi with Masaomi.

Other than Karisawa's absence now, the situation was identical to the one then. But even so, Kadota detected a difference.

--His eyes are different, now.

Masaomi's expression had lost the conflicted, anxious look from before, as though he had become a different person entirely.

However, Kadota was very clear that he had been, from the start, a strong person. The Yellow Scarves he had initiated before had not been an organisation that could be built by any mere fool. In his time in the Blue Square, Kadota had run in with them a number of times, and when he had heard that it was a group composed mostly of high schoolers, he had indeed doubted his own ears.

Nevertheless, regarding him, Kadota was also aware of two other matters.

One of them - was that Kida Masaomi had once had his heart completely and utterly broken.

And the other was that, with the weight of this despair on his shoulders, he had once again stood up, only to experience a setback worse than before.

Apparently he had gone missing after that, but seeing how he had reappeared before them now, it could only be concluded that he had sorted out his emotions.

Moreover, by his eyes alone, one could sense that he was filled with more strength than before - even before he had first experienced despair.

To Kadota, humans were not simple wooden rods. If he were to use a metaphor, the human heart was a coarse rope, bound together from various components. If it were a wooden rod or a stone in question, what was broken would never again return to its original state, but when it came to humans, even if the only part left unbroken was no more than the thinnest, most fragile spider thread - there would always be the possibility of recovery. This was the perception of humanity Kadota had inherited from his father.

With these thoughts in his mind as he finished his meal, Kadota drank his tea, and ascertained that all of them had put down their chopsticks before he continued his questions.

"So - we should get talking now."

"...all right."

"There's no need for long explanations; get to the point first."

At the stern tone, Masaomi straightened up slightly, tightening the hand on his knee, as he spoke.

"I have a favour to ask, from Kadota-san and all of you."

"Could you leave the Dollars, and join us... join the Yellow Scarves?"

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A few days after. In the city. The office of the Awakusu-kai.

On first appearances, the place looked to be an ordinary work office.

Nevertheless, the tension within indicated that it was not simply so.

From the outside, it looked no more than an office building, but on the inside it was the headquarters of the yakuza organisation known as the 'Awakusu-kai', a branch of the Medei alliance, and many of the members strode about within the premises.

The source of the current tension was the two men sitting in the reception room, facing one another.

"What do you mean, Shiki-san?"

Frowning as he spoke this was a man with a gaze sharp like a reptile - the Awakusu-kai executive Kazamoto.

And replying him, a man with eyes holding a different sharpness - an executive of the same rank, Shiki, spoke with an extremely even voice.

"I don't mean anything, Kazamoto-san. All I'm saying is that there's no longer a need to pursue Yodogiri's case."

"It would be good to hear a reason I can accept."

If Kazamoto were to be compared to a snake or an alligator, Shiki would most likely be considered a hawk or a wolf. Although these metaphors were passed quietly in rumours amongst the members, those who happened to be in the office did not voice them. Even if it could be ensured that neither man would catch the words, simply saying them would be enough to give one a foreboding sense that their life would shorten without any particular reason.

In an environment so fraught with nervousness, the two men conversed smoothly.

"Shijima Giichirou. I'm sure you know this name."

"Of course. He's related to the kid who **played doctor** on our turf, isn't he. Wasn't the plan to use that issue as an excuse to swallow the whole Shijima Company?"

"Mm. But there's no longer a need for that."

Although the two were colleagues within the Awakusu-kai, the way they spoke to one another was exceedingly polite; as though they were simultaneously gauging the distance between themselves and the other, and trying to read each other's minds.

Internal transactions and similar operations were Kazamoto's main source of income, while Shiki's methods mostly involved borderline-illegal marketing and betting rings. Although their avenues of racketeering did not coincide, the scope of their authority in the organisation was not precisely defined, so it was unavoidable that they held some wariness against one another.

"There's no need?"

"Yes, due to a certain matter... Regarding Yodogiri Jinnai - Shijima-san contacted us. He mentioned that involving his son's case, there were things to be discussed."

"And then we let go of the Yodogiri issue?"

"Yes; he forked out three hundred million, too."

On hearing of the three hundred million, Kazamoto's brows creased as he asked:

"He can't be thinking of using that to settle things with us?"

"Although Akabayashi-san wasn't injured, a comrade from our side was nearly killed - do you really think the Head would let that go so easily? Naturally, the first condition involved securing a long-term relationship. But for Yodogiri, we did accept the money."

"...and Shijima accepted?"

"Yes, he agreed to our terms completely; suspiciously willing. We'll most likely have a relationship with the Shijima family for a long time from now on."

Shiki tapped against the sofa's armrest with a finger, and continued.

"However... Although they say Yodogiri helped them by contributing the money, their relationship is clearly not of that nature."

Kazamoto narrowed his sharp eyes again; at this, Shiki smiled blandly and said:

"In any case, for Shijima-san's sake we won't be pursuing the case about territory... But since Yodogiri's a potential source of income we'll continue using other reasons to keep an eye on him. That was the Head's decision."

"Which is to say this case has been moved from my jurisdiction to yours - is that it, Shiki-san?"

Upon hearing Kazamoto's frigid tone, Shiki continued smiling faintly nonetheless, and replied -

"I have no intention of claiming all the benefit. Once I find anything we can exploit, the remaining job allocations will be up to the Head and the Young Head. But I must pray that there won't be any trouble from Yodogiri's side, before we get any income."

"Like the Kuzuhara Yumeji case?"

Kazamoto shrugged his shoulders and chuckled; in direct contrast, Shiki's face lost all expression.

"The name Kuzuhara is no joke to us, Kazamoto-san."

"After all, he was the root of Kine-san's dismissal from the organisation."

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Meanwhile, somewhere in Ikebukuro.

Just as that topic was broached in the Awakusu-kai office - a person on Tokyo's 'surface' brought up the name 'Kuzuhara', in a completely different way.

"Please, Miss Kuzuhara, don't you have any information at all?"

"Honestly; if you keep harassing me, I'll send you to the station for obstruction of justice, you know?"

"Wait. Can you not use your jargon to threaten civilians?"

"If you feel threatened, why not we start off with having some tea?"

A residential street some distance from the heart of Ikebukuro. Next to the police car from the traffic department, a middle-aged man was persistently harassing a policewoman in the midst of dealing with illegally parked cars.

"Nonono, I didn't mean to interrupt your work! I was just wondering - to help a civilian in a rut - the promising daughter of the Kuzuhara family, esteemed in the police force, Kuzuhara Shinju-san - surely you would have some information about the group known as the 'Dollars'?"

The man with the cap had his coat under an arm; with a pen in one hand and a notebook in the other, he smiled at the policewoman.

However, the young policewoman sighed exasperatedly as she finished her work, and said to the man -

"It only happens that I have a lot of relatives in the police. There won't be any use flattering me."

"You can't say that; your family also has a few in the brasses, doesn't it? And now, Sota-kun from Raira Academy and Soji-kun still in middle school, the word's that they're working hard to join the police too, isn't it? An elite family. Ah, I'm jealous."

"...why do you even know my cousins who're in school? If you wanted to get a warning for being a stalker, shouldn't you have said it outright, Niekawa-san?"

The policewoman's face turned cold as she spoke. Seeing this, the man called Niekawa hurriedly waved the hand holding the pen.

"Ah, I'm sorry! That wasn't what I meant! Uh, I only happened to hear a little of that when I was interviewing Raira students! I also wanted to hear about the Dollars from students, you see..."

"If you're tracking down such strange information, you should be careful of getting into trouble again."

"Uh, um, that time was really..."

Niekawa Shuji was a magazine reporter for a publisher in Tokyo.

He had once been thrown out in front of the hospital with severe injuries, and due to witness accounts of his wielding a bladed weapon, he was suspected to be involved with the slashing incidents that were rife at the time. Even so, they had no definitive evidence, and he was hospitalised during the 'Slasher Night' where a series of slashing incidents occurred simultaneously, so he was accused of nothing. Since then his wounds had healed completely, and so he was able to live peacefully up till now.

"Though speaking of which, I know you work for that kind of magazine, but interviewing a working policewoman out of a sudden is a bit too nonsensical, isn't it? Even if you wanted to do an issue featuring the Dollars, the information I have wouldn't exceed what you could find on the web."

Perhaps due to the bad impression from his previous attempts to contact the police for an interview, the policewoman did not seem to welcome the man Niekawa Shuji. It could even be conjectured that the entire police force had no positive feelings towards him whatsoever.

Even so, he refused to give up.

Because he had to continue, for a reason.

"No. I'm not going around asking about the Dollars for the magazine! It's a personal problem!"

"As in?"

Shinju was just about to return to her car, but stopped as she heard him. Niekawa's eyes misted over for a moment, before he smiled, self-deprecatingly, and sighed.

"That... Actually, my only daughter ran away from home..."

"Ran away? How old is she?"

"Eighteen this year..."

"Did you report it?"

Upon hearing this perfectly logical question, Niekawa averted his eyes slightly.

"Well... Because she regularly texts me to say she's just moving from one friend's house to another... I just don't know where exactly she is..."

"Even if that's the situation, I think it would be best to request for a search. Also, what do the Dollars have to do with your daughter running away?"

In response to Shinju's persistent questions, Niekawa mumbled in a small voice.

"How do I say this - well, I've never heard my daughter mention anything about her friends... So - well, I feel quite guilty myself, but I went to her room and checked her computer. Eh, I just wanted to see if there were any emails conversations with her friends..."

Niekawa looked down as he explained, as though he were pleading for help from the policewoman, who was very much his junior. Rather than the action of looking into her computer, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it was the fact that he discovered the truth through this that distressed him the most. At least, this was what the policewoman read from his expression.

"Ah, no, let me be honest. Actually, in the past, my daughter once got too strongly attached to a teacher... And it caused some trouble, so I was afraid she was still in contact with him, which was why I checked. And then I found out... Recently she seems to be interacting with a colour gang called the Dollars..."

"Colour gangs aren't that rampant these days, but if you think about it - at the start of the year, didn't they say the Yellow Scarves revived? Although I was in the hospital at the time, so I don't really know much about the situation then..."

Niekawa fixed his eyes at the ground, and steeled his resolve for a tiny goal.

"I only give her trouble, so I'm not sure how accurate I am when it comes to a father's instinct, but I still want to investigate what I can..."

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"There was someone weird asking around about the Dollars?"

Replying Kuronuma Aoba on the other end of the phone call, the teenager nicknamed 'Neko' spoke.

"Yeah, it seems the business card said he was a reporter for the Tokyo Warrior magazine."

The asphalt reflected the sunlight - it was evidently past evening, and yet Ikebukuro's temperature remained above 30 degrees Celsius.

Aoba walked in the shadow of a tall building, alone on Ikebukuro's busy streets.

"...Dollars was most popular a year ago; isn't this reporter a little outdated... But keep an eye out for now. It's not any famous magazine like the *Tokyo Walker*; *Tokyo Warrior* should be nothing to worry about."

Aoba addressed the issue succinctly before hanging up, as he arrived at the junction at the mouth of Sunshine 60 Road.

He drew to a halt next to Lotteria, and stood within the crowd as he waited for the green light. Through the cracks between bodies, he watched the opposite other end of the road, where more pedestrians were waiting.

--How many of the Dollars are there, in that crowd?

Expression unchanging, he snickered inside.

Currently he was the leader of the special group, the 'original Blue Square'; and they in turn obeyed Ryugamine Mikado within the Dollars. But there were few who knew of this.

Aoba concealed himself within the crowd, each and every person within his scrutiny.

Rather than controlling others from the shadows of the city - he manipulated events from within the shadows of the crowd itself. This was the essence of Kuronuma Aoba.

- --I myself don't fully understand the entirety of the Dollars. Or rather, no one should have a full grasp of information, if we include those who don't use the web at all.
 - -- Even Orihara Izaya.
 - --Soon, Ryugamine-sempai will be making his move, too...

Aoba contemplated this as he waited for the traffic -

"...?"

His eyes, previously moving from one person to another, abruptly focused on a single point.

In that crowd, opposite to his concealment, was a man who stood out blatantly - and that eye-catching man was familiar to Aoba.

"Aniki..."

Aoba narrowed his eyes; unthinkingly, the word slipped from his mouth.

The man on the other side of the junction, compared to his brother, had a different hairstyle and was slightly thinner, but he was, indubitably, Aoba's brother - Izumi Ran.

Contradictory to his name, his entire presence radiated the air of a mad dog; as a result, the surrounding people subconsciously averted their eyes from him, and kept their distance.

And that was when Aoba noticed.

That the brother he had not met in the past few years, was looking, directly and unwaveringly, at him, his lips twisting - he was grinning.

The stop lights changed, and the once-stationary crowd moved, immediately, onto the road.

Aoba narrowed his eyes slightly; still blended in the crowd, he let himself become no more than the very air on the street, and started across.

And on the other side, despite the green light - Izumi stood unmoving, splitting the people around him as though a rock in a tide of water.

- --It looks like he has business with me.
- --But I doubt he's so stupid that he'd attack me on the street.

Even if this was the case, Aoba still felt the need to stay on his guard; he held the stun gun in his pocket, and, wiping all expression from his face, walked, step by step, towards his brother.

When the distance between them became suitable for conversation, it was Izumii who made the first move.

He spread his arms, cracked his mouth open and bared his teeth in a grin.

"Yo, Aoba. Long time no see."

"...Aniki."

Izumii reached out slowly, and patted his younger brother's head.

"Your height and your face haven't changed much. You're still like a middle schooler; have you been eating?"

Izumii's words caught Aoba by surprise; they were things any brother would say. Aoba creased his brow, and asked in return:

"But Aniki, you've changed a lot, haven't you? You're thinner, and your hair's black."

"I had to shave everything off when I went to jail, so. I changed my image while I was at it, is all. But I almost got everything lopped off again after coming out."

Before he had been arrested, Izumii had a bleached pompadour that advertised his delinquent status wherever he went, but now his hair, slightly long, had been swept back simply; if one only judged by his hairstyle, it wouldn't be too far a stretch to think he was just a host using brutishness as his style of appeal. However, no one would really think he was a host. The problem lay not in the scars on his face, from fighting and from getting burnt; rather, it was the danger he emanated behind his shades, from the corner of his lips, that intimidated women - or rather, any common person - into avoiding him.

- --But speaking of which... Maybe because he went to the detention centre; the feeling he's giving off is different.
- --He didn't feel so dangerous before.

"Your injury doesn't look as bad as I'd heard it was, too."

"Does it look that way?"

"I heard you were burnt by a molotov when you were fighting the Yellow Scarves? I was worried."

Aoba lied in false sympathy. To him, these words were not meant to challenge his brother, only to steer the conversation in his own favour - but Izumii chuckled meaningfully, as he parted his lips slowly.

"Worried? You? About me getting burnt? Well said, from the one who set fire to my room."

At those words, Aoba maintained his blank face, as he ground his teeth inside.

The brother before him had certainly changed, from before.

In the past, Izumii Ran had vented anger on his brother, inflicting what could be described as extreme violence - immediately after, a fire had broken out while he was out, a cigarette butt of his as the apparent source.

--"It's great you weren't hurt." --

Aoba, still an elementary student at the time, said this to his brother, smiling easily.

Izumii Ran had been **defeated by that smile**, and subsequently had not pursued the matter - afterwards, he had never mentioned this to Aoba's face; Aoba was the same, as he continued to play the obedient little brother. Even if he was aware that his subservient mask had been uncovered, he daringly continued to wear it.

Even so, Ran's unhesitating words shattered this taboo between the brothers.

The fire in his room was Aoba's doing.

His older brother, formerly branded as 'useless' - the air surrounding him now was glaringly different.

"Dad broke my nose after that, you know. You owe me that one, don't you, Aoba?"

As he watched his brother, now unfamiliar, Aoba's expression did not waver; he answered, casually:

"That's too much... Aniki. Surely you're not still thinking I was the one who did that?"

At his brother acting the wolf in sheep's clothing, the villager Ran smiled darkly, baring his teeth.

"It doesn't matter now, anymore. Whether or not you're telling the truth." "..."

"The Blue Square's gotten messy, so just hand it over to me. At this point in time, it doesn't matter how true that was, either."

His breath escaped through his teeth; the sound echoed in Aoba's ears.

Without a word, he reached for the face of Aoba, and pinched Aoba's nose between his fingers.

"In any case, after I kill Kadota, Yumasaki, and the Yellow Scarves' Kida - you'll be up next. If you wanna get off just halfway dead you should start thinking how to suck up to me so I'll spare you."

"...Kadota-san?"

Despite the man's denial, most people believed Kadota was the leader of the Dollars; Kadota thus shared a deep connection with both brothers.

Although they had never met in person, Kadota had been relatively well-known in the Blue Square Aoba had established, and it could be said that his eventual betrayal was what had caused the fall of the Blue Square.

When the reason for the betrayal, the conflict with the Yellow Scarves, had occurred, Aoba had not lifted a finger to help his brother.

It only so happened that members of the Yellow Scarves had provoked Aoba's companions - the ones with the shark-motifed knit caps - and they had retaliated. As a result, the Blue Square had been marked by the Yellow Scarves, but Aoba had remained passive in the conflict, and Ran had not asked any favours.

"How are you planning to do that? Aniki, you no longer have the Blue Square. Horada-san and the rest who escaped previously were arrested for other things - didn't you know?"

Without taking off the mask of the timid younger brother, Aoba spoke challengingly.

"Ah... Horada, that bastard - he's getting along great in prison. The last time I saw him I scared him a little; it was educational, y'know?

Ran sneered, and pinched his brother's nose again - he twisted forcefully as he mentioned a name:

"...Ryugamine Mikado. ...wasn't it? The leader of the Dollars."

"...!"

"That guy's name sure is dramatic. I got a shock, when I did my own research. Childhood friends with that blond punk from the Yellow Scarves, and now he's getting along with you, too, isn't he? Well, I've to greet him sometime."





After saying goodbye to his colleagues, Kadota, in his uniform, left the renovation site they were working at.

As a plasterer, Kadota was participating in the refurnishing of a certain building; after work, he made his way along the asphalt, which, even at night, still held traces of summer heat.

- -- There hasn't been much movement since then, but...
- -- To think Kida would say something so daring.

Under the streetlights, Kadota chased his shadow with his eyes and feet, as he recalled the exchange with Kida Masaomi a few days ago at the restaurant.

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"Could you leave the Dollars, and join us... join the Yellow Scarves, for me?"

" "

Masaomi's serious expression temporarily silenced Kadota.

In this span of time Masaomi's gaze did not shift from him for even a moment; and Kadota, drinking his tea, said this to him -

"Kida."

"Here."

"I'd like to clarify one thing... You can't be thinking... That we're the type who could betray Dollars without a second thought, and simply join another group smiling all the way, can you?"

"Then I'd like to ask, as well - do you think I would ask favours of such people, and like this?"

"...that's true."

Kadota shrugged, and started again from another angle.

"Then about why you came to find us... We'll talk about that later; I want to ask, firstly... What are you planning?"

"I want to bring down the Dollars."

At his nonchalant answer, Togusa, from the sidelines, spat out his tea.

"Heyheyhey, don't make it sound so simple!"

Following Togusa, Yumasaki, just as confused, added -

"Exactly, Kida-kun. This doesn't make sense. In that clash half a year ago - although the issue about the Slasher wasn't resolved, there wasn't any evidence, so that case is more or less closed. That guy Horada was caught, and the Blue Square's ambitions were crushed - aren't things perfectly fine?"

Despite the fact that Masaomi was younger than him, the way Yumasaki addressed him was no different from the way he spoke to Kadota. At his words, Kida held his knee lightly, and replied.

"I want... to save someone."

Upon hearing this statement, Kadota, thoughtfully, spoke of the name that came to mind.

"Is it Ryugamine?"

"..."

Taking his silence as agreement, Kadota continued.

"I don't understand. I do know that he's deeply involved with the Dollars, and I've seen that he gets on well with the Headless Rider. Mm, his position is actually rather strange... But what has this got to do with bringing down the Dollars?"

"Kadota-san - about the Headless Rider, how much do you know?"

"Hm? Ah... A little, I guess."

In actuality, Kadota knew that the Headless Rider was currently living in the apartment of one of his high school friends, and he had even participated in some hotpot party there - but he did not want to bring trouble to the doorstep of his friend or the Headless Rider, and so he waved off what he knew.

"Let's not talk about that now - answer me first. If you're worried about him, you could just tell him straight up to quit the Dollars. Or you could invite other people to join the Yellow Scarves, rather than us." "..."

"But personally - I myself think that someone like him would be better off not getting involved in colour gangs and such. Well, if you were the one to say it, that guy would probably listen to you some, wouldn't he?"

Kadota's words were only common sense. Masaomi gripped his knee even tighter, and said:

"I... can't do it."

"What?"

"I'm sorry; I can't tell you the details."

Masaomi refused outright. Kadota's eyes widened slightly; he took a sip of his tea, and spoke.

"...then what exactly are you doing? You won't say why, but you want to bring down the Dollars. And you want us to join the Yellow Scarves - is that right?"

"Yes."

"Hey, isn't that a little unreasonable?"

"Yes, I know it is. Which is why - I will not force you to join the Yellow Scarves. But at the very least, I hope all of you can pull out of the Dollars."

The teenager before them was not making any joke, and he was completely sober; he was extremely serious as he requested this of them. Concluding this, Kadota said, sternly:

"Did you come today to say all this nonsense?"

"It's true that what I plan to do from now on won't have reason. But today, I came to do what only makes sense."

"What are you saying?"

"I owe all of you infinitely. And precisely because of that - even if we were to clash with the Dollars in future, **if I can**, I hope to avoid any confrontation with you."

--'If I can'... Which means - he's already mentally prepared to fight us, if it comes down to it?

This was what Kadota deduced from Masaomi's gaze and his words; he closed his eyes, and paused.

Pressing on, Masaomi asked -

"Don't you think the Dollars have been strange, recently?"

"..."

"It's not all the members, but haven't there been a lot of rumours recently about them fighting with gangs from Saitama, about 'purging' the more unruly members?"

The doubts Masaomi voiced were exactly what Kadota had considered before.

Nonetheless, as evidence was lacking, they could not believe what Masaomi said too easily at this point in time. For the sake of prudence, Kadota said:

"What we call the Dollars is a group whose selling point is being colourless. That means it can take on any colour. If there are members who do meaningless things, there will also be those who will warn them. Although their methods may vary."

"What if there was a specific reason for this change?"

"..?"

Masaomi said to Kadota, who was frowning -

"...if I said that the guys who wear shark bandanas and balaclavas have infiltrated the Dollars... what if I said that?"

"...!"

Shark-patterned bandanas and balaclavas. This brought a certain group to Kadota's mind.

-- The Blue Square.

It was the colour gang Kadota had previously belonged to, which had blue as its identifying colour.

Within the group the ones with the noticeable shark caps were rare - they were neither anyone Kadota knew nor supporters of Horada, but a group of strange members with no known leader.

"What happened to the Yellow Scarves half a year ago - it might be happening to the Dollars now... What if I were to say that?"

"...are you saying Ryugamine will be involved with this?"

"I'm sorry. I can't say any more. But I can promise you that, the day I can, I'll definitely explain everything."
"..."

Even if he were reduced to choking up blood, he would protect his secret. His gaze held such a conviction.

Kadota fell into thought for a moment; Yumasaki and Togusa tactfully held their tongues.

"...give me a few days to consider. It'd be fine if it were just me, but Yumasaki and the rest will be affected, after all, and we can't just believe whatever you say. Let us check things out on our own, at least."

Kadota personally felt that Masaomi, as of now, was trustworthy. Even so, he also suspected that Masaomi, despite having the intention of speaking the truth, was, in reality being deceived by someone else. Kadota in fact knew of someone who would play such tricks.

"I understand. That's all I wanted to say."

Masaomi bowed slightly, and slowly stood from the tatami.

He had his back towards them at first, but then he turned his head slightly and spoke.

"But if Kadota-san and company were to become our enemy..."

"If that happens, what are you planning to do?"

In this tense atmosphere, the line of Masaomi's lips softened; he smiled, slightly troubled, as he continued:

"Mm... I'll work out some miracle to make sure we won't clash."

The honest smile, so pure it seemed childlike, had Kadota and the rest wide-eyed in astonishment - Masaomi shrugged, and only put out a single statement:

"Frankly speaking, I don't think I could beat Kadota-san in a fight, if we got serious."

Having said this, he walked to the counter to bid farewell to Denis and Simon, before leaving the restaurant.

Having watched him disappear from their sights, Togusa and Yumasaki exchanged glances.

"...what was that?"

"I'm not sure, but that last sentence, it sounded a lot like Kida from a year ago. When he was still with Mikado."

Kadota followed their conversation, and murmured to himself.

"If he really wanted to bring us down, wouldn't it be fine to just ambush us without telling?"

He sighed, exasperated, and smiled quietly.

"What a soft guy."

"By the way, Yumasaki - you've been really quiet today."

"Just observing in my own way, is all. Karisawa's not around, so there's no one I can talk to."

"That can't be helped, can it. We don't even get half of the things you say."

In contrast to Kadota's reticence, the conversation between Togusa and Yumasaki continued -

As though in confirmation of the echoes of the bizarre mood moments before.

"Honestly - Togusa-san, Kadota-san, I wish both of you'd just learn."

"Us?! Wait a minute - are we the ones at fault?!"

However - evaporating this atmosphere, came the low voice from the counter.

"You're fortunate."

"Hm?"

Kadota turned towards the voice, from the owner - Denis - who was rinsing a knife he'd just used to gut a fish; his gaze slid to the edge of the blade, before it returned to Kadota.

"If you'd continued emitting that kind of dangerous atmosphere, that pillar would get another mark."

"Don't... Don't threaten us like that, boss."

Togusa shifted as he spoke, but cold sweat dripped from his face.

This was because he believed that - 'It's not a threat. He's serious.'

After serving another customer their onigiri, Denis continued:

"But he might have noticed, which was why he finished like that and went back. That kid's stronger than expected."

The owner, with Japanese so fluent his Russian heritage was indiscernible, mentioned something:

"For your information, that guy paid for you, too. Maybe he wanted to repay the favour, since you treated him before."

"Wha... When did he?!"

"When he moved his chair over. But it's still short of some, so it'll be on the tab."

Denis smiled - a rare sight - and, to the ones who had been regulars since the day he opened shop, said:

"He probably wanted to repay all of you, in whatever way he could. You're about to become enemies, after all."

"...'

"I'm not sure of what's happening, exactly, and I don't plan to find out... But that kid's set on something big."

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--Set, huh?

Kadota mused at what the owner of Russia Sushi had said a few days before, as he walked.

--But ultimately there hasn't been any movement since then.

After that incident, Kadota had also gathered some information on his own, and discovered that there had recently, indeed, been oddities within the Dollars. Those who had threatened others in the name of the Dollars seemed to have had been attacked.

From the very beginning, the Dollars had been a place crooks and all kinds joined to mess around. Being that anyone could enter, it meant that the lowest of scum could join as well. It could be said that the existence of such members was natural and expected.

In these months there had appeared a flock of people who specialised in hunting these members, and they seemed to have been very active as of late. For simply an internal purge, it wast slightly on the radical side, and the circumstances of their activities - that they were operating as a group - was extremely peculiar.

And the most worrying of all the news he had heard today - was that the members carrying out these 'punishments' wore blue bandanas and balaclavas with shark motifs.

- --Everything up till now follows what Kida said, true.
- --But how is this related to Ryugamine?
- -- Though it's true that the last time I saw him it felt rather unusual.

Kadota recalled the teen who had, eyes shining, told him: "You are the ideal of Dollars." He thought as he walked.

- --Ryugamine's obsession with the Dollars is quite strange.
- --Maybe it's because he's involved with the Headless Rider and Izaya that he gives off this feel... But that's too simple a conclusion.

Even though Kadota had a knack for looking out for others, he would never look too deeply into their secrets; he did not even hold any interest in Ryugamine Mikado's social interactions or his past. Even so, Ryugamine was at the heart of the matter this time around, and so he had developed several theories.

At the same time, Kadota remembered something he had heard of half a year ago.

--"Oh, and Kadota - that scoundrel Horada even said 'what's left is to take our time with that Ryumine guy' - it was quite confusing - but who exactly is Ryumine?"

Those were the words of a companion from the Dollars, with whom he had infiltrated the Yellow Scarves when they were fighting Horada half a year ago. In order to escape detection, the infiltrators' positions had

been generally as far from Horada as possible, but one of those closest to him had overheard a conversation of Horada's.

--"And then, when Kida came, he said something like, 'I'll use you to lure out the leader of the Dollars, Mi... Mi... Mi-something,' you have any idea who this Mi-fellow is?"

At the time, Horada had assembled an enormous group of people at the factory, in the name of 'bringing down the leader of the Dollars'. Kadota and his accomplices were blended into this group, but none of them had heard, specifically, who the leader of the Dollars was.

But he had already his own speculations.

He had, from the start, had a hunch that Ryugamine Mikado held a very important position in the Dollars, and at the time, with what his companions had mentioned, he had, as would be reasonable, guessed that Mikado could have been involved in the founding of the Dollars. After all, he had contact with Orihara Izaya; Kadota was not so foolish as to imagine that he was a high schooler who'd only been dragged in due to his friendship with Masaomi.

Nevertheless, Kadota was fond of the fact that the Dollars had no leader, and so he had not pursued the matter, and had not asked Mikado about it.

It could be said the theory that Kadota himself had come close to forgetting - had, due to Kida Masaomi's words, become a concrete belief.

--Ryugamine's the leader of the Dollars... though I still don't think that's very possible...

No matter how much proof there was, to Kadota, who had conversed face-to-face with Ryugamine Mikado several times before, this was not a conclusion he could accept easily.

This was because he had always felt that Ryugamine Mikado was of the dwindling species of honest folk, who had no affinity whatsover with the world of colour gangs and bousouzoku.

Besides, Dollars was better off without a leader - there was no need to investigate.

This was why, when they had had a clash with Saitama's bousouzoku and he had been asked who the leader of the Dollars was, he had been able to answer, without hesitation, that he did not know; however, if he were to be asked the same in this situation he no longer had the confidence that he would be able to answer as nonchalantly as before.

In order to put a stop to the conflict between the Dollars and the Yellow Scarves, Kadota felt there was a need to meet Ryugamine Mikado; thus he had dialed Ryugamine Mikado's number, which he had gotten before - but the call had not gone through, and there had been no response to Yumasaki or Karisawa's calls either.

--It can't be helped. I'll discuss it with Kishitani and the Headless Rider tomorrow.

Kadota, with the penchant for worrying he had inherited from his parents, had already decided to - one way or another - solve the problems between Kida Masaomi and Ryugamine Mikado.

"Well, I'll just do what I can for now... Since I'm involved as well."

As Kadota murmured, he sensed the headlights of a car closing in from behind, and stepped to the side accordingly.

It was a typical course of action. He had not done anything wrong.

But he was unwitting. Of the 'irony' that loomed ever closer.

In the car, the person in the passenger seat - spoke only a single sentence.

"Hit him." --

A command Kadota himself had issued Togusa, in the past, to aid Anri, who was being attacked by the Slasher.



It probably could not qualify as just desserts, because Kadota was no Slasher; he was merely a pedestrian.

In an evidently narrow road, the sound of the engine, of a car that did not slow at all.

By the time he noticed the oddness of it, it was too late.

An instant faster than he turned
Crash.

Roar.

And then - darkness.

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30 minutes later. In the city, Karisawa's apartment.

"I see - so Anri-chan hasn't been able to meet Mi-kyun either..."

"Yes, he said he was going back to his hometown, so we can't contact each other..."

Currently, there were five females in Karisawa Erika's apartment, sewing clothes and running through thick books with highlighters. They were making cosplaying outfits for a certain summer event, and, from the catalogues, checking what groups were participating.

While the others were still busying themselves, Karisawa had completed her preparations quickly, and was speaking with the girl in the corner, Sonohara Anri.

A few days ago, Karisawa had invited Anri to cosplay, and as someone weak at rejecting others, Anri had been ushered to the house before she could make up her mind.

"Really... Which is to say he'll reply messages, but he won't pick calls? What a strange boyfriend."

"B, boyfriend... Ryugamine-kun is, I mean..."

She had gone through countless costumes at Karisawa's pressing, and was now in a pointed hat with a black dress that revealed her shoulders, like a witch at a Halloween party. She seemed embarrassed that her figure had been completely revealed, and was blushing while slumped on herself; Karisawa's words had her flushing scarlet.

"Ahaha, it was a joke! I know, both you and Mi-pon are late bloomers... Should I say both of you are too polite? Or is it a combination of the new butler and the oblivious maid? In any case, I think you'd make a good couple, y'know? The *moe moe kyun kyun* of a *Swallow* and *Tail*!"

"S, sorry, I don't really understand..."

"If you were butler and maid, then I'd be the mistress of the house - so, would you like to be a maid, next? Or a priestess?"

"T, t, there's more?"

Anri's voice was faltering already, but Karisawa remained lively.

Reaching towards a dresser inappropriately extravagant for the apartment, Karisawa took some clothes still on their hangers, and matched them to Anri.

"I think you could cosplay as Jimuko from OreImo, if your hair were shorter. If my chest were like yours I could wear insoles and pass off as Bajeena - ah, Anri-chan, if you wore a wig you'd fit very well as C³'s Muramasa! On so many levels!"

Terminology that had never once existed in Anri's vocabulary tumbled out one after another -

"Speaking of which, Anri-chan, has your chest grown since half a year ago?"

"I, I don't think so..."

As Karisawa gazed at her intently, Anri reddened further and lowered her head.

"Don't be shy; Mikado's such an innocent guy, you've got to bring out all the big guns when you attack, or it'll stay boring forever! Learn a thing or two from Kida-kun!"

"Ah..."

At the familiar name, Anri ducked her head slightly.

"I heard it from Yumacchi - Kida-kun's back in Ikebukuro, isn't he? And he seems to be doing well, too."

"Oh."

--Kida-kun's really back.

A few days ago, as she was looking after an acquaintance's cat, Anri had run into some trouble.

At that time she had unexpectedly met Masaomi, though he had left after a few words, and before she had said anything herself.

But that was enough.

She had been uneasy at Mikado's strange behaviour, but she felt that Masaomi's return might solve the situation.

--I wonder if he's met Ryugamine-kun yet...

If it were possible, she hoped to be a part of that meeting, and confide certain things.

However, she did not know what she should say, if they were to truly meet.

She had accepted Karisawa's invitation thinking that, as fellow females, they could discuss this matter - but from the start she had been overwhelmed by Karisawa's pace, and it was not a situation where the topic could be broached.

But perhaps Karisawa had noticed Anri's troubles; her jokes were mostly in relation to Mikado and Masaomi.

--Even though Karisawa-san must have seen me like that...

During the Golden Week holiday, when she had been assaulted by an unknown character, Anri had been forced to use the abnormality residing in her body - drawing the steel blade from blood and flesh, borrowing the power of 'Saika'.

Any female high schooler brandishing a katana could not possibly be normal, by any standards.

At the time she had thought that even Karisawa and company would come to fear and hate her. But on the contrary they were completely unafraid, and were happily shortening the distance between themselves and Anri.

--Why do they still treat me so kindly, knowing I'm not a normal person, I wonder.

Those like Karisawa, who had no qualms about persons wielding supernatural power, and would have their eyes shining at the assumption that it represented the materialisation of the 2D realm - they did exist in the world, but to Anri, these people were incomprehensible.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this was that she did not know how she should handle this power.

Anri felt uneasy towards the power of Saika, which constantly sought to escape her control. She had determined that in order to peacefully co-exist with Saika, she had to become strong.

On the other hand, although she considered Karisawa one of the rare elder female confidants amongst her acquaintances, she had not yet settled on whether she should even confess the matter of Saika.

To her mind came another 'older female confidant', a courier of supernatural origins - Anri thought she should discuss this with her first.

--But if I were to bring up something like this, I would probably trouble her...

"...-chan, ...ri-chan."

--But it's not something I can ask Akabayashi-san about, either...

"Anri-chan? Anri-chan? Are you theeere?"

"...? W, what? S, sorry! I zoned out..."

Anri flinched back as she realised Karisawa's face had come inches from her own.

"Ahaha, what a pity... If you'd just zoned out a little longer I could have stripped you and dressed you up as a fallen angel sex-slave!"

"H. huh?"

Despite her trepidation at the words fallen angel and sex, Anri once again asked:

"Um, Yumasaki-san met Kida-kun?"

"Yep, I was surprised, too. Just previously you ran into him on the streets at night, didn't you, Anri-chan? Dotachin and the rest were heading to Russia Sushi, so they met him by coincidence. I haven't heard the details yet, though?"

"Uh, um, if you can, could you ask Kadota-san and the rest, about what happened, that is..."

"I know~ Anri-chan, you get so enthusiastic when it comes to Kida-kun, you ought to show the same love to Mikarun, too!"

Karisawa smiled devilishly as she returned to the cycle of teasing Anri, however -

From her cell phone on the table the sweet voice of a message ringtone: "Ojou-sama, you have a call."

"Yes yes, yes my butler~ Até breve, Obrigado~"

Karisawa said baffling things as she retrieved her phone and checked the LCD screen.

"Ah, speak of the devil. It's from Dotachin... He sure has synchronicity!"

Cheerily, she pressed the button, as she made as to start talking -

"Helloo, Dotachin, what's up? ...eh? Ah, yeah."

Unconsciously, her smile vanished.

"Kyohei-kun's father! Yes, thank you... Did anything happen? Kyohei-kun's phone..."

"..."

They probably felt that something was off.

Not only Anri; the cosplay companions that were previously busy ceased all activity, directing their eyes at Karisawa.

"Yes, yes... Huh?"

In the next instant, all of them in the room understood.

That something **unsavoury** had happened to Kadota Kyohei.

Because they saw.

The instant where from Karisawa's face, which so often bore a smile - the instant that known as 'expression' was wiped from her face.

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'Kadota Kyohei, involved in a car accident, now lies comatose in critical condition.'

With the Dollars at its core, this news triggered an enormous wave.

In the banquet hall of a certain hotel --

"...Kadota-san?"

At his workplace, having just completed his ice sculpture, Yumasaki widened his eyes slightly, as his tools clattered to the ground.

In a certain apartment in the city --

"Seriously?!"

In the midst of sticking a Hijiribe Ruri poster to the ceiling, Togusa slipped from his ladder.

In Saitama prefecture, by a certain riverside --

"Kadota?"

"Y, yeah, so if you've got the time to come after someone like me, why don't you go visit him instead? If you don't go soon he might just croak bugyaaa?!"

As he sent flying the debtor who had brought news of Kadota's incident, the man in the bartender suit creased his brow.

The man with dreadlocks and the young Caucasian woman accompanying him said:

"He's an acquaintance of yours, isn't he. That guy who's always on that van?"

"I hear he is an executive of the incomplete gang organisation, the Dollars."

In response to his colleagues' words, the man in the bartender suit breathed heavily as he bellowed.

"He was a schoolmate... To hit someone I know and run away... Where'd that damned bastard come from haaaaaargh!"

In his anger, the man in the bartender suit kicked the motorbike the debtor meant to escape with, sending it into the air.

The bike skidded across the river like a pond skater, and tumbled onto the opposite bank.

In Ikebukuro, on the roof of a certain apartment --

"Now... What move will you make? Ryugamine Mikado-kun?"

The informant, who had abandoned fundamental human nature in exchange for the pain in his right hand, gazed down onto the streets, a cold smile playing on his lips.

In the city, before a convenience store --

"Hey, you kidding?!"

"That bastard Kadota got knocked over?"

"It's karmaaaaaa!"

The delinquents who had once been **taught a lesson** by Kadota smiled brightly as they bumped fists.

At Russia Sushi --

"A hit-and-run... To do something like that to a regular of ours."

Denis, expressionless at the news about Kadota, merely continued sharpening his knife.

"Oh, we're visiting. Calcium is good for fractures... Eat *sanma* fish with the bones. I'll make a *sanma* ball for him."

Although Simon worried for Kadota, he appeared fairly calm.

Perhaps it was due to past experiences that they were unperturbed by such life-threatening matters, but they were not uncaring; it seemed that they were showing concern for him in their own ways.

"That wouldn't be very edible. And if he's still unconscious there wouldn't be a point to bringing it anyway."

"It's all right. Not as strong as Shizuo, but Manager Kadota is tough. Health is first, telephone second, instead of tea at three let's treat his friends to sushi when they come. I'm more worried about them."

"That guy has lots of connections, you'll go broke if you do that."

The owner, his face blank throughout, finished sharpening his knife, and continued speaking as he eyed the blade.

"Well, after he's discharged we could always treat him with a riceball special."

Somewhere in the city --

In the dark space, the boy with a docile face - Kuronuma Aoba murmured, seriously:

"Mikado-senpai, have you heard?"

"...yeah. About Kadota-san, right."

In the backseat of a van of one of Aoba's friends, another boy, whose face seemed to match the word *ordinary* to a fault - Ryugamine Mikado replied quietly, his expression melancholic.

"I can't believe it. For Kadota-san to get into an accident..."

"What should we do? Should we visit? Though they might not be taking visitors yet, or he could still be in surgery..."

Silence.

The van was swallowed in a long silence, with only the rumbling of movement vibrating the air.

Finally, as they drew to a halt at a traffic junction, Mikado cast his eyes down, and spoke.

"...I really would like to visit, but if I were to go now I might encounter a number of people..."

Various emotions twisted in Mikado's gut, but in spite of this eventually he smiled sadly at his junior, murmuring.

"And that might result in some trouble, so... Ah, but it might be better if you went to see him. You were saved by Kadota-san and the others previously, too, weren't you. It's fine if I'm labelled ungrateful, but there's no need for you to suffer that with me."

"Is that so..."

With the same heaviness Aoba lowered his head, shrugging, as he replied quietly.

"Well, even if you say I was rescued, when it comes down to it, wasn't I the one who provoked Toramaru and gave them reason to chase us?"

Aoba spoke bluntly; Mikado raised his head at length, and said.

"That's not relevant."

"Huh?"

"Regardless of the reason, Kadota-san saved the both of us. That was the outcome; it's fixed. Even if you're saying you stirred up trouble for your own benefit, I don't think we can deny that."

"...I see. Sorry."

At Aoba's simple apology, Mikado smiled gently, and replied.

"No, I might have said it too extremely. Sorry."

Aoba did not understand how that was extreme, but he continued the conversation nonetheless.

"I'll visit him sometime soon, then."

"Mm. Oh, right. Camellias or potted plants are taboo, so take note."

At the eeriness of Mikado, who so calmly gave advice on etiquette in such a setting, the driver of the van shuddered; however Aoba answered nonchalantly.

"It'd be good to see the day you can visit Kadota-san openly soon, senpai. With Sonohara-sempai and Kida-senpai."

"True, but -- "

Mikado mumbled something then, as he gazed out at the scenery beyond the window.

Although the young man's eyes were somewhat lonely, his irises seemed fraught with truthfulness, and his gaze seemed fixed directly to a certain point.

Aoba feared those eyes of Mikado's, but at the same time he felt them trustworthy - from where Mikado could not see, he smiled a smile of intermingled emotions.

An abnormal circumstance that assaulted their everyday life.

And this was merely the beginning.

In the aftermath of this day, the Dollars - most of them against their will - would be embroiled in the extraordinary.

Only a handful of persons wished for - days consumed in an atmosphere sharp enough to cut, that bore the reek of muddy water.

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Chatroom.

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Gaki [Well, that's how loan sharks do business nowadays]

Sharo [Woah, that's impressive]

Pure Water 100% [Gaki-san really knows a lot of inside stories! The thing about backdoor school entry was interesting too, could Gaki-san be a policeman or a prosecutor?!]

Gaki [No, those were just rumours]

Gaki [And law officers don't have the luxury of chatting like this so casually]

Chrome has entered the chatroom.

Chrome [Good evening]

Sharo [Evening]

Gaki [Hello]

Pure Water 100% [Evening~ ☆]

Saki [Long time no see]

Chrome [Oh, the new members are in full force today. None of the old members are here?]

Saki [San-san and Kyo-san were here just now]

Saki [But they had something on so they left]

Gaki [The situation's pretty much the same]

Chrome [I miss Tanaka Taro-san and Setton-san and the rest]

Chrome [Maybe they immigrated to Mixi or something?]

Chrome [Chatrooms are losing popularity, too]

Gaki [I wonder]

Sharo [They could just be busy? And Chrome-san hasn't been here for quite a while, either]

Chrome [I've been working overtime...]

Saki [You've worked hard]

Pure Water 100% [Oh, right. Saki-san is Bakyura-san's friend in real life, I mean girlfriend, aren't you!] Saki [Yes. We're cohabiting] Sharo [So frank!] Sharo [Eh~] Sharo [Ehhh~?] Pure Water 100% [Kya~ ☆] Gaki [How loving] Pure Water 100% [Then, how was Bakyura-san today?] Saki [It looks like work's been busy, he's been out the whole day] Pure Water 100% [The prime of life! Make sure he doesn't die of overwork, take care of him well after he comes home hmm ☆] Sharo [If he overworks in the day and overworks at night, maybe he'll end up driving half-asleep] Pure Water 100% [Indecent! Sharo-san is despicableee! Despicableeee!] Sharo [Ehh?! That counts as indecent?! Pure Water-san] Saki [What do you mean overwork] Saki [Please explain in detail lol] Sharo [I'm sorry it's all my fault. Please forgive me] Chrome [Right, speaking of driving... Have you heard? There was a hit-and-run today, in the city] Pure Water 100% [Scary! Where? Where was it?] Chrome [A little away from Ikebukuro I guess] Chrome [After all, if something like that happened in Ikebukuro, there would be a lot of witnesses and the culprit would get caught quickly] Sharo [Is it in the news yet?] Chrome [No, I don't think it was in the news. It's not like anyone died so] Gaki [Then how did Chrome-san find out?] Pure Water 100% [Could it be that Chrome-san is the runaway culprit?!] Chrome [How could that be] Chrome [I mean, hasn't anyone checked the Dollars message board?] Gaki [Speaking of which, not yet today...] Sharo [Oh, does that mean it's related to the Dollars?] Chrome [Nah. It's not that complicated] Chrome [It's just that the victim was a member of the Dollars]

Chrome [That said, but he's not a normal member, either]

Gaki [Meaning?]

Chrome [The one who got hit, his name is Kadota, he's an influential person in the Dollars]

Sharo [Oh, isn't he quite famous here in Ikebukuro]

Sharo [Seriously?! Kadota's dead?!]

Pure Water 100% [Hey, be serious!]

Sharo [No it's not like I asked because I was looking forward to it?!]

Chrome [Eh, from what's on the Dollars board, it doesn't seem like his life is in danger]

Chrome [But they say he hasn't woken up yet]

Gaki [Hope he'll wake up soon]

Gaki [But by hit-and-run, does that mean the culprit hasn't been caught?]

Sharo [Well, it's only a matter of time]

Sharo [Cause there's been a crazy scary White Motorbike around recently]

Sharo [Has anyone seen? Going cat and mouse with the Headless Rider]

Chrome [Sharo-san haven't you said that before lol]

Sharo [Just means it's that cool]

Sharo [Honestly, hitting and running's kinda stupid]

Pure Water 100% [I guess they panicked and ran away?]

Gaki [If it were like that it'd still be fine]

Chrome [?]

Sharo [I don't think you should say it's fine]

Gaki [Oh no, it came out wrong. Sorry]

Gaki [I was trying to say, was it really just a hit and run]

Chrome [What do you mean?]

Gaki [I've heard of the name Kadota myself. If anyone were to do some research on the Dollars, his name would definitely turn up]

Gaki [He denies it himself, but there are a lot of people who regard him as the leader of the Dollars]

Gaki [This person met with a hit-and-run incident. It would be fine if it were coincidence but]

Sharo [...as in, someone hit him on purpose?]

Gaki [It's a possibility.]

Gaki [For example, weren't there rumours that Hijiribe Ruri's stalker was in the Dollars]

Gaki [What if there was a Hijiribe Ruri fan, just as obsessed as that stalker, who decided the Dollars as a whole was the enemy of Hijiribe Ruri? Or, even simpler, there could be someone who was offended by the Dollars in the past, intending to take revenge. But faced with a group with no leader there's nothing they can do. What if they then chose to target Kadota, the most well-known character?]

Sharo [So although he wasn't involved personally, he was targeted because he represents the Dollars? It'd be awful if it were like that]

Gaki [No, that's not the worst of it]

Sharo [Ehh?]

Pure Water 100% [Scary...]

Chrome [Ah, I understand]

Chrome [If this were only the beginning... is that it?]

Gaki [Exactly]

Gaki [Recently there've been rumours that the yellow gang's revived, too. The Yellow Scarves I think they're called]

Pure Water 100% [Yeah. Does that mean it's going to be a war?!]

Pure Water 100% [Scary! That's really scary!]

Gaki [Well, though that conclusion could be a little hasty]

Gaki [To be honest, the ingredients for unrest have all been gathered]

Gaki [The rumour that Heiwajima Shizuo left the Dollars is also one of them]

Sharo [Yeah, no matter how much anyone hated the Dollars, if Shizuo were around they couldn't fight even if they wanted to]

Gaki [And recently haven't there been rumours about Dollars having a purge]

Chrome [Ah, I heard about that too]

Pure Water 100% [Purge as in?! That sounds really bad!]

Gaki [At any rate, the Dollars have caught the eye of the police. It's a situation where the Dollars cannot misbehave, but other groups are free to ambush them]

Gaki [It's true that the Dollars are colourless, but whether it's the Yellow Scarves or the Blue Square, if they take off their yellow or blue clothes they'll be no different from the Dollars. If they abandoned their pride and honour to bring down the Dollars...]

Chrome [It'd become something like the Slasher case wouldn't it]

Chrome [Back then, the Slasher wasn't caught in the end either]

Gaki [Putting that aside, the fact that the guy called Kadota met with an accident is itself the biggest factor of unrest]

Gaki [In baseball terms, it's like the fourth batter met with a car accident and was hospitalised]

Gaki [Both the designated hitter Heiwajima Shizuo and the fourth batter Kadota are absent. It wouldn't be strange for any group to take advantage of this situation]

Pure Water 100% [Ah~n! No more! No more! This is the worstest of the worst!]

Chrome [?]

Sharo [We broke her]

Gaki [What's wrong?]

Pure Water 100% [Most of us are... At least, Ikebukuro's my hometown! Gaki-san and Chrome-san, threatening things like that is unacceptable! See, Saki-san's been too afraid to say anything!]

Gaki [That was rude. Sorry]

Chrome [About that, Saki-san's icon is gone isn't it]

Sharo [Did she fall asleep?]

Pure Water 100% [Saki-saan. Are you awakeee]

Pure Water 100% [Helloo, helloo]

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- Birds of a Feather - Part 1 of 2

The following day. Kawagoe Highway, Shinra's apartment.

"Kadota-kun's in a coma?!"

With casts and bandages on various parts of his body, Kishitani Shinra was bedridden. As to why he was so severely injured, it was not so much him neglecting his health despite being a doctor, but more so that he had acted incautiously as an underground practitioner. Currently he was in his apartment, awaiting the day he would fully recover.

Regardless of the fact that his wounds were severe enough to warrant about half a year's worth of recuperation, being cared for by his beloved roommate each day brought him great happiness, and so he endured the pain and inconvenience, and steadily regained his smile.

However, the news this beloved roommate brought replaced his happiness with shock.

'Yeah, it seems it was a hit-and-run.'

"Hit-and-run?!"

'Yeah, supposedly he was hit by a car on some alley. They say a resident nearby heard the sound and went to look, and they found him on the ground, so they called the ambulance.'

His roommate restored the information from her inbox on her PDA, and showed it to Shinra.

Shinra browsed through it on the bed, and spoke glumly.

"His life's not in any danger, right?"

He was not particularly close to Kadota, but the man was someone he had known since high school, and had even invited over to the apartment on several occasions. Above all this, in spite of his knowledge of Shinra's roommate's identity, he acknowledged their relationship as lovers, and was, thus, a treasured friend.

For all Shinra put his roommate before everything, while she was safe he had the allowance to feel worry for others as well. As opposed to the incident where another friend had been stabbed, this time around he seemed truly concerned for Kadota's wellbeing.

'Apparently he managed to survive, but he's still unconscious. Hopefully he gets well soon.'

In comparison, although his roommate typed words of concern on her PDA, unlike Shinra she wore no expression on her face.

However, this was only because she had no face with which to wear expression – from the smooth cut of her neck, as though showing her unease, plumes of black 'shadow' fluttered.

Celty Sturluson was no human.

Known as a dullahan, she was a type of fae that originated from Scotland and Ireland – to those soon to breathe their last, she was an existence that called on their homes to inform them of their imminent deaths.

With her own severed head under her arm, riding a two-wheeled carriage drawn by a headless horse – known as the cóiste bodhar – she would visit the homes of those nearing death. If one were to carelessly open their door, they would be drenched with a full basin of blood – similar to the banshee, as a harbinger of misfortune, the dullahan was a subject of European folklore passed down the generations.

Amongst these myths there were some that speculated she was the form of a valkyrie from Nordic lore, fallen to the human realm, but she did not know if this was true.

It was not simply that she did not know.

More accurately – she did not remember.

Having had her head stolen from her in her homeland, she had lost all memory regarding the nature of her own existence. In order to retrieve her head, she had followed its trail to Ikebukuro.

Transforming her headless horse to a motorbike, and her armour to a rider's suit, she had roamed this city for decades.

But all the same she was unable to find her head, and her memory had not returned.

She knew who had stolen her head.

She also knew who had deliberately hindered her search.

But even so, she did not know where her head was.

Until today, Celty had thought that this was all right.

To live with the person who loved her, with the humans that accepted her.

If this could bring her happiness – to live the life she had lived up till now.

With this steely determination hidden in her chest, the headless woman, who expressed what she could not with her non-existent face – with her actions instead.

That was – the existence known as Celty Sturluson.

She had thought she would not change.

She had prayed that this everyday self of hers would never change.

But this very summer, she had encountered a situation that overturned all of this.

Her head.

The reason of her coming to this country – she had determined the whereabouts of her head.

Even so, as the one who possessed her head stood before her, she was helpless to take action, and was forced to make a shameful retreat.

Immediately after the attack on her beloved Shinra, she came to be utterly incensed by this person – with this series of events, even she herself could not appease her flood of emotions. Would a human be assaulted by such emotional flux? Or could it truly be that as a dullahan, she differed from humans?

Even with such humanlike concerns, Celty was uncertain as to the difference between her heart and those of humans. Between humans there were also variations as to how they handled emotions, but Celty, as an entirely separate species, often had such doubts.

Now, as these doubts hit a crescendo, she had heard of Kadota's incident, and her heart sunk into further unrest.

--Why is it these strange things keep happening?

Interestingly, this thought coincided precisely with the topic of the online chat she had not attended, the day before.

--Are they related?

- --It shouldn't be linked to the previous incident with the stalker, but it doesn't feel right.
- --And I don't think Kadota would be related to the Yodogiri Jinnai Izaya mentioned before...
- --It can't be that Kadota only had the bad luck to get into an accident?
- --Or has something happened somewhere I don't know?

Unease called forth suspicion, and suspicion brought further tides of uneasiness.

Celty had hoped that Shinra's company would help offload some of this anxiety, but the guilt of hiding that she knew where her head was only weighed down her heart even more.

"Even if I were fit to go around, it's definitely better to have a normal hospital handle injuries from a car accident. What's left is to pray he gets better soon."

'Huh? Ah, yes.'

Shinra's words woke Celty from her stupor, and she once more directed her focus on the matter of Kadota.

'I want to visit, but I doubt the hospital would let me in...'

"In the first place, if the patient hasn't woken, they usually reject visitors, Celty."

'True.'

"But I must say I'm worried, hm."

To Shinra on the bed, his expression clouded, Celty gently showed her PDA.

'It'll be fine. He's a tough guy.'

However, the following response was beyond all of her expectations.

"No, the one I'm worried about is you."

'Eh?'

"Even if Kadota-kun regained consciousness, he'd still have to be hospitalised for some time, wouldn't he? It'd be best if nothing messy happened around the Dollars in that window. Because, Celty, if Mikado-kun were to be involved in that kind of trouble, you'd surely be worried, wouldn't you?"

- --I'm shocked.
- -- Exactly what I was thinking.

Shinra could often interpret Celty's emotions and thoughts through her nuances, but if he could even read what she had just been thinking he would probably qualify as an esper.

- --It's all right, Shinra isn't an esper. We just happened to have the same thoughts.
- --But I really would worry about that.

Celty composed herself, and asked Shinra a question meant for her own ears as well.

'Who knows? Dollars is a completely horizontal group, so even without Kadota there shouldn't be too drastic a change.'

"Really? Personally I think Shizuo-kun was a military-like restriction, and Kadota-kun restricted them psychologically. Both within and without the group. If there was any abnormal movement, whether external or internal, it would be wiped out by Shizuo. That's the simple part, yes?"

'Well, I guess that's true.'

"On the other hand, if anyone were to make an enemy of Kadota-kun – if it were an attack from the 'outside', a part of the Dollars would gather around him tightly to solve the situation; and if anyone on the inside made any moves and he noticed, it would become extremely difficult for them to survive in the Dollars."

Shinra explained, his tone neutral, while Celty did not reply, keeping her silence.

"He personally denies being the leader of the Dollars, but if we talk about it like a big family, when things get complicated all the members will look for someone 'reliable'. It's rare for anyone to be strong to the extent they can judge the big picture on their own all the time. For example, even Mikado-kun must have times he has to rely on Kadota-kun, don't you think?"

'That might be so, but...'

Being that Anri had told them Mikado was acting strangely, this only caused the uneasiness to well in Celty's heart.

--It would be best if that Kuronuma didn't take advantage of this to start something.

As if he had detected her discomfort, Shinra ignored his pain, and lifted his upper body from the bed.

Before Celty could type 'Are you okay?', Shinra smiled at her softly.

"I'm all right, Celty. No matter what happens to the Dollars, it's fine if you just do what you think is right. Even if it pits the world against you, I'll always be on your side."

'Shinra... Thank you.'

"There's no need to thank me. After all, I simply want to do this for myself."

'But I'm not planning to do anything so extreme, so don't worry.'

Perhaps to conceal her embarrassment, Celty entered words onto her PDA in rapid bursts. Innumerable shadows, extended from her fingertips, lashed quickly, dancing madly on the keypad like pitch-black flames.

'Anyway, if you have the time to worry about me, you ought to worry more over Kadota. Since you only have Izaya and Shizuo as friends he's one of the few people you can talk to easily.'

"No way. I never even visited when my friend Izaya was stabbed – what do you expect of me?"

'Izaya deserved it so that was all right!'

Celty smiled in her heart, as her everyday mood returned to her.

She once again hoped for Shinra's speedy recovery, and the continuance of this feeling.

But – the world would never be so kind.

As Celty was about to get up to cook something simple for Shinra, her cell phone vibrated.

--Who could it be?

She withdrew her phone from her chest, only to see a message from an unknown address.

She sighed at the thought of another online dating message, or some overseas phishing scam.

In the next moment, her heart stopped completely.

'This is Kuronuma Aoba.'

That was all the title of the message said.

This name belonged to the boy who knew of Celty's identity, who knew the address of this apartment, and who was goading Mikado to achieve his own ends; just moments before, she had been worrying about whether he would make any moves.

And then – Celty's unease struck home at the worst possible timing.

'I would like to talk to you. Could you come outside?'

At these concisely written words – Celty's heart was once more shackled by the weight of unrest.

32

Meanwhile. Shiki's personal office.

"So, how can we help you today, Mr Reporter?"

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It was the office of the art gallery run as a front by Shiki, of the Awakusu-kai.

On the guest sofa sat Niekawa Shuji; in contrast to the softness of the cushioning, his body was rigid as a rock.

This was his second meeting with Shiki; the first had been to interview him for a special column for the Tokyo Disaster Report, a magazine specialising in news on delinquents and such, but –

"Now, you didn't make an appointment beforehand, so it seems this isn't for an interview."

"Y, yes. Um, troubling you for such personal matters, um..."

"No, it's fine. You could say we have a certain affinity."

Shiki smiled thinly, his eyes level with Niekawa.

"Naturally, whether we can assist you will depend on what you request... I suppose I can assume that you coming here at all means it's something troublesome."

One could sense the cold light residing deep in Shiki's eyes.

He was very much aware of the type of person Shiki was, but his worry for his daughter was persistent, and he had stepped into this office grasping at straws. He could not stand down now; with this conviction, Niekawa spoke.

"Um... It's shameful, but this is a family matter..."

A few minutes later.

"I see. So your daughter is in the Dollars."

A serious expression crossed Shiki's face as he heard the whole of the situation.

"A, anything would be fine. Any information you have on them..."

Shiki put his hands up as he placated an anxious Niekawa.

"But you've come to the wrong place, don't you think? They call the Dollars a colour gang, but it's mostly a gathering of normal civilians; it's like an internet group high school girls or salarymen or even elementary school kids can join at will. Of course, organisations like ours don't collect any deposits from them, either."

"Yes, I was aware, but... Recently the Dollars seem suspicious."

"Well, there are probably those sorts in the Dollars as well. By nature, the Dollars is not so much a single rock, but a mountain consisting of separate parts with different geologies. The top of the mountain may be lush with greenery, but at the bottom what flows may well not be groundwater, but acid."

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Skipping milder terms such as poison and the like, Shiki directly described it as 'acid'. Niekawa felt this was not a simple threat, and gulped unconsciously.

As a reporter for a magazine, having encountered people from all tiers of society, he could probably imagine what went on in the underworld better than most.

"I, I do understand that as well, Shiki-san. Which is exactly why I'm worried. It was the same when I went around asking previously; those who call themselves the Dollars don't have any decent information at all. None of them know my daughter's face or her name. There's no way to identify those she was in mail contact with, either... But I thought maybe someone who's been in the underworld from the start might know something..."

"I see... Normally I would suggest you approach the police or a detective, but being that you came here you've probably tried that already."

Shiki was also speaking with the awareness of what kind of perception the other man, as a magazine reporter, would have of his own line of work. Due to this, he made no attempt at haphazard cover-ups, and trapped the other man's emotions.

"I cannot assist you personally, but I can introduce you to someone who might have the information."

"Is, is it Orihara-san? He wasn't contactable for some reason... And his office in Shinjuku seems to have moved, too..."

"No, no, it's not an outsider. Let me refer you to someone in our group."

"R, really?! Uh, um, in return..."

Niekawa was fully expecting that he would have to give up every last cent of his meagre assets. Even so, he feared it would not be enough to satisfy whatever price Shiki quoted. He could have an expert in this area from his company mediate, but he felt he could not involve even his colleagues in this personal affair.

However, Shiki's reply involved no monetary payment whatsoever.

"What are you saying. Ours is a mutual relationship, isn't it, Mr Reporter."

"Huh?"

"I won't be taking any money."

Shaking his head with a bitter smile, Shiki had his back bent forward slightly as he placed a hand on his knee; the gaze he set on Niekawa was akin to that of a lion eying its prey from below, in spite of the friendly smile he wore as he spoke again.

"In return, if there's anything on our end, you only need to help out. That is enough."

Based on these words alone, perhaps one might judge Shiki to be a kind person. One might even think he possessed a chivalry rarely seen in modern times. But Niekawa knew. The meaning behind the words of Shiki, of the Awakusu-kai.

The motive was to use him, as a reporter, to further their own business. Likely Shiki had deduced that rather than having a one-off payment and subsequently cutting off ties, it would be more beneficial to sustain a long-term connection with a small publishing company – or rather, a reporter for a magazine available even in convenience stores and bookshops. He had introduced an external informant previously; by referring

Niekawa to a member of the group this time around, he was taking the opportunity to forge such a relationship.

Become our dog.

In a nutshell, this was what Shiki meant. Probably Niekawa would have to write articles beneficial to the Awakusu-kai periodically. Forming a personal connection to the Awakusu-kai in this manner could be, in a way, much more frightening than losing his assets.

Nevertheless, Niekawa thought of his daughter, who had been behaving abnormally for the past year; taking a few deep breaths, he bowed his head as he made his choice.

"I understand. Thank you very much for your concern, Shiki-san."

"There's no need for that. As I said before, this is a mutual relationship, Niekawa-san."

Instead of 'Reporter', he called Niekawa by name for the first time; what Niekawa felt at this was not goodwill, but a chill as though cold branches of ivy had bound him completely.

"I'll try to call my colleague now. He isn't particularly averse to anything, so you should be able to get on well, Niekawa-san."

"Uh, um, what kind of person...?"

He probably felt extremely apprehensive about the Awakusu-kai member he would soon be introduced to. Niekawa asked his question fearfully; Shiki smiled differently from before – a sharp smile, heedless of the business setting – as he murmured a single sentence.

"...they call him the Red Demon, but his fangs and claws've been dulled, so don't worry," he said, but he did not mean the words.

39

In the city, an apartment bar.

"The reporter Niekawa-san from Tokyo Warrior. Roger. I'm at the usual bar, please send him over."

Deep in a bar remodelled from an apartment.

As his call ended, Akabayashi sipped quietly at his umeshu.

After a single mouthful he opened his eyes, murmuring, "How rude of me.

"No, no. I should apologise for interrupting for that call, first. My bad. Oi-chan's getting on in years, too; thought I was drinking on my own as usual."

"Please don't worry. It ended quickly, after all."

With a cold smile like the cracks in obsidian stone, the young man clad in black despite the summer – Orihara Izaya.

To this heatless reply, Akabayashi questioned the informant before him once more.

"So, as in this document, the one called Ryugamine Mikado-kun... is the founder of the Dollars, correct?"

"Yes, I was surprised when I looked it up. To think a kouhai of mine would be a core member of the Dollars!"

At Izaya's exaggerated surprise, Akabayashi swirled his umeshu, and smiled.

"Don't play a fool, Informant-san. You became close to Ryugamine Mikado-kun because you knew that already, didn't you?"

Akabayashi's words seemed omniscient; Izaya shrugged, as he replied.

"I'll leave that to your imagination. You requested information on Ryugamine Mikado and not myself, didn't you, sir?"

"Oh? Does that mean if I pay to know your motives, you'll sell that information?"

"Human hearts aren't for sale, Akabayashi-san."

"That's true. It's my bad."

They smiled at one another, but neither let down their guards by even a crack.

-- As expected, a tough opponent.

--So this is the Red Demon of the Awakusu.

With his facetious manner and the shades that hid his gaze, it was difficult to read Akabayashi. Izaya gauged that he was approximately as unreadable as Shiki, but the two men differed in nature.

Unlike Shiki, whose heart was sealed as though it were made of iron – Akabayashi was comparable to a fluid, impossible to grasp.

Yet he was not merely water; like gasoline, there was the disquieting threat of combustion at any moment.

However, Izaya was unafraid of this threat, and continued his idle work conversation.

"In the first place, you came to me because you knew already, didn't you? That he was an important person in the Dollars."

"Who knows. I heard some interesting rumours from the men just out of prison."

As he spoke, Akabayashi's fingers spun the photograph on the table – the close-up of Ryugamine Mikado.

"But, well, honestly, I thought you'd hide that he was the leader of the Dollars."

"And why would you think that?"

"I was thinking – if those in Oi-chan's field knew, it'd get inconvenient for this young informant, wouldn't it."

"You overrate me. I wouldn't go so far as to hide things from the Awakusu-kai for my own goals."

Izaya shook his head, completely unperturbed.

"I wonder. You have the face of someone who can't live without plotting something or another."

Akabayashi picked up the photograph he was spinning, and slot it into the documents from Izaya.

"If I were my younger self, you'd be the type I'd beat to death without a reason."

"Please don't threaten me."

"No, no, you can relax. Oi-chan isn't young anymore. I'm not that hot-blooded. Anyway..."

Akabayashi paused for a moment, and sipped his umeshu.

"Anyway?"

"Instead of me, it seems you have that young man in the bartender suit ready to beat you to death. I'll leave the fight scenes to the young folks."

Izaya, whose smile had vanished for an instant, smiled bitterly and sighed, as he calmed the disturbance in his heart.

"Please don't say such absurd things. What can a beast like that do?"

"It's not often you hear of a human triumphing a beast."

"Which is why humans have their weapons. Whether it's an individual or a society."

After some consideration of the meaning behind Izaya's words, behind his shades, Akabayashi's eyes sharpened slightly.

"Do you plan to use it, this weapon of society."

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Izaya had no reply to Akabayashi's question.

He merely smiled, fearlessly.

But Akabayashi was not particularly dissatisfied; he slipped the report into a large manila folder.

"Well, all right. For now, I'll still be counting on you for information on Ryugamine Mikado. Your reward will go up accordingly. Ah, is there anything you want? The T-bone steak here is delicious, you know."

"It's a rare chance, but I still have work today, so..."

"I see. The hardworking have it hard, don't they. Take care not to die of overwork."

Akabayashi waved goodbye to Izaya, who was standing from his seat.

The concern in his words hid a warning.

"It's bad for health, for an informant to overwork."

"...thank you for your advice."

"Ah, and one more thing."

"Yes?"

Izaya paused midstep; Akabayashi delivered his words blithelv.

"I think you should know that Dollars smells like it's burning, recently, but you should be careful. The Dollars may be like a city on their own, but that city's starting to go on fire."

"Why this, so suddenly?"

"You may be the one who first started the fire, but there isn't only one source."

He spoke these words laced with meaning; and then he did not look at Izaya, but rather gazed at the surface of his umeshu, as he murmured to himself.

"An arsonist watching the fire he set from a safe place, somehow getting burnt by someone else – it's not a rare sight. Especially in the world of us old men."

32

Night. Namie's apartment.

Yagiri Namie was a fugitive.

Previously she had stolen an important classified object – a Dullahan's head – from the company she worked for, and she had been on the run since then.

However, she had made no attempt to escape beyond Tokyo.

This was because what she feared, above getting caught, was leaving the side of her brother, Yagiri Seiji.

At first, she had been staying at an apartment her employer Orihara Izaya had referred to her; but as she did not trust him at all, she now lived in secrecy in a separate apartment, under another person's name.

As she commuted to and back from Orihara Izaya's office, she was also extremely wary as to whether she was being followed, and until today she had never been careless.

If there was anything she had neglected, it would be that, deducing that the employees of Yagiri Pharmaceuticals would avoid doing anything drastic on public streets, she had not made any major modification to her appearance. She had just about forgotten that she herself had once attempted to abduct Ryugamine Mikado in the middle of the city, but things had been quiet for a more than a year, and so she felt they would not pursue her any longer.

Even so, if only for her own pride, Yagiri Namie continued to act with the same caution as before.

Making fully sure that no one was following her, she reached the front of her apartment.

However, following this, she encountered a situation beyond anything she had prepared for.

At this time, there should have been practically no one on this road, but –

A single black caravan, parked at the end of the road, bothered her.

It was a large, four-wheeled vehicle, unsuitable for the narrow lanes of the city.

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Namie kept herself vigilant; she did not stop walking as she carefully eyed her surroundings.

And in the next moment, she went on full alert.

Because in the moment she glanced behind her – she saw, from the lane she just entered from, an identical black van rounding the corner.

--It's a trap!

It would be good if this were a misunderstanding, but to her hopes like these were no reason not to take action.

She did not run, only feigning calmness as she continued to walk.

Because she felt that if those in the caravans were the enemies pursuing her, they would make their move immediately the moment they were discovered.

To pretend she was unprepared, and put everything into a move at the last minute.

With this plan, despite the tension that saturated every nerve in her body, Namie made sure not to be completely bound by those threads, while she maintained her mask of normalcy, efficiently running through possible plans of escape.

However -

As though to ruin her plan, the figure of a man revealed itself from the shadows of the apartment's gate.

And, the instant she saw the man's face, the threads of nervousness that had just begun to slacken tightened once more, to the point where they seemed ready to snap.

After all, the man that appeared before Namie – was a face she knew well.

"Long time no see, Namie."

The man with greying hair spoke as he watched Namie, with no particular emotion.

"I doubt it's possible, but were you thinking you'd gone undiscovered up till now?"

Contrastingly, Namie replied, cold sweat trickling down her back.

"Director... Yagiri..."

The man sighed and shook his head as he heard Namie.

"Your resignation's been settled. There's no need to speak so formally. It's all right if you call me 'Seitaro oji-san', like in the past."

The man – Yagiri Seitaro – spoke somewhat regretfully, and took a step towards his niece Namie.

"I've been aware of where you live, but it was difficult, considering if I should force my dear niece into a corner."

At the sight of her uncle's exaggerated concern, Namie frowned visibly, as she clicked her tongue.

"You treat my father and the rest like the trash of the company, and now you speak of family? Seitaro ojisan."

"That's true."

Seitaro acknowledged this readily, as he adjusted his tie.

He checked his watch, and then extended his hand to Namie, speaking again.

"Well, we'll talk about the rest later. We're blocking the traffic."

"...isn't it because we'll catch attention?"

As she spoke sarcastically –

"That is exactly true. Please assist us by coming quietly."

The breath of a female voice, cold as ice, brushed Namie's neck.

"...?!"

She spun in a panic – behind her stood a woman in a suit.

- --Who? When did she...?!
- --No, this woman... I've seen her before!

She wore expensive-looking glasses and an impressive suit; the image of a businesswoman.

The cold expression on her well-proportioned face was reminiscent of an android that might appear in a CG movie.

-- This is... the secretary of the Yodogiri that Izaya was investigating...

Namie had seen her photograph on the computer, taken with a long-distance lens.

Recalling the name labelled by the side, she glared at the woman as she muttered her name.

"Kujiragi Kasane..."

"I am much obliged that you know my name."

"Why would you, Yodogiri Jinnai's secretary, be with Seitaro oji-sa...!"

Namie, who had pretended to waver, struck as Kujiragi's guard was down, swiping the back of her hand at her face.

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It was true that she had wavered, but halfway through she had replaced the emotion, and planned to lull Kujiragi into being careless.

- --I don't know why she's with my uncle, but.
- --But I could do better off not knowing that, thank you.

She was going to take advantage of Kujiragi's momentary disorientation to draw the stun gun from her bag, and plunge it at her opponent's solar plexus in a single motion with nothing wasted.

However – Kujiragi was faster by an instant; she spun to dodge, and at the same time gripped the wrist of Namie's right hand that wielded the stun gun.

The coldness of the leather glove froze all feeling in Namie's wrist.

There was the sound of the current from the stun gun, but it was inches away from Kujiragi's suit.

"Kuh...!"

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As opposed to Namie's cutting glare, Kujiragi's face held no expression as she stared at the face of her 'nemesis', in a position slightly below her own.

"To think you can still put on that face in this situation. The same disorder as that Russian mercenary, maybe?"

Namie mocked Kujiragi to distract her, as she tried to shift her centre of gravity to retaliate, but –

--...?

--I can't...?!

Her right wrist, caught in a grip. Namie sensed that her centre of gravity had been shifted to that point.

From the pressure exerted on just one location, pain and tension ran through her entire body.

"There is no need for me to answer your question."

Kujiragi blandly took the sarcasm in stride, and placed her free left hand on the elbow of her right, which held Namie's wrist.



"...?"

Namie creased her brow, clueless to the meaning of this gesture –

With a soft crackle, her entire body became victim to an assault.

"~~~!"

She immediately understood what had been done to her.

From her right wrist that was being gripped had come a single shot of an extremely strong current.

--A stun gun... No, a stun... glove...?!

Extending wires onto a glove, a chimera of a stun gun and a glove, operating via an external fixture.

Orihara Izaya, as well, had once half-jokingly considered buying such an outrageous object that seemed to have escaped the screen of spy movies. On hindsight, the coldness she felt when Kujiragi first gripped her wrist might not have been from leather, but from a metallic surface full of electrodes.

She was able to infer this so calmly because the electric shock lasted no more than a second; her body was quickly released from the pain.

Even so, although her mind had calmed down, her limbs were immovable, as if locked in place.

Ignoring Namie, who was glaring despite having slid to her knees, Kujiragi asked Seitaro neutrally:

"What would you like to do? I can put her to sleep now."

Would Kujiragi electrocute her again, with a current strong enough to knock her out, this time? Or was she planning to use drugs?

With her body still immovable, Namie continued to seek an opportunity to turn the tables.

But Seitaro's next words reset her thoughts completely.

"It should be fine to just tie her up. After all, if she's still unconscious when we bring Seiji here we can't proceed with things."

There was a crack, from something in the back of Namie's brain.

"We've already checked; there's no one in the houses around here. It's useless if you scream, Namie. Well, if the people from the upper floors of the apartment notice, I'll say I'm bringing my runaway niece home, in lieu of her parents. It's not like that's a lie, anyway."

Ignoring Seitaro's taunts, Namie repeated the name he had mentioned a few seconds ago.

"Sei... ii...?"

Namie, with all of her strength, slowly, slowly – with a motion like that of a vengeful ghost in a movie, glared up at her uncle.

"Ah, that's the best method, isn't it? To have you cooperate. Seiji might hurt a little, but if you're not willing..."

In a flash -

By pure force of will, Namie forced her body, numbered by electricity, to move; snarling at her uncle with what was clearly killing intent.

Her eyes said she genuinely intended to rip his throat out with her teeth; for an instant, Seitaro recoiled.

However, her teeth did not reach him.

Without a care as to Namie's sudden movement, Kujiragi had never released her wrist.

As though bound by wires, Namie's body was overcome by tension; yet another shock came from the stun glove, sending her body into a mess.

"...! Ah... Kuah...!"

Although it was immediately switched off this time, Namie's body completely lost its strength.

"Director Yagiri. Please be careful with your words," Kujiragi said, plainly, as multiple shadows appeared behind her.

From the caravan alighted a number of men in western suits, supposedly her companions.

More came down from the van opposite, two of them moving behind Seitaro.

"This kind of person can, for the sake of love, control their own pain."

"Ah...? O, oh. I see. It's just as you say, Kujiragi-kun."

Although he felt extremely discomfort at Kujiragi's use of the word 'love', Seitaro did not have the luxury of a retort.

Because for an instant back then, he had truly feared his niece's wrath.

"You're a bad girl, Namie. To think of attacking your own uncle."

Playing dumb to the fact that he had just mentioned using his own nephew as a hostage, Seitaro had completely regained his composure. Kujiragi had at some point brought out a pair of thumbcuffs; she cuffed both of Namie's thumbs, and instructed the men to bring her onto the vehicle.

But Namie, as though to shove the men away, stood by her own strength.

"Try anything... with Seiji if you dare..."

She neither ran nor submitted to them; she merely mustered the last of her strength for a single declaration.

"All of you... I will scrape your skins off with a plane... melt your flesh with acid... shred your bones with a grater from the toenails up... And when you're still alive... No, even after I've killed you I'll shred everything to dust!"

Namie meant every last one of these drastic words she said to the face of her biological uncle.

Seitaro had known her from a young age, but had he not been overcome by her bloodthirstiness earlier, perhaps he would have thought it was no more than a cheap bluff.

But things were different, now.

Yagiri Namie fully intended to execute what she had just said.

Seitaro believed this, but he had no doubt in his advantage.

With Yagiri Seiji as their shield, she could do nothing.

She probably prioritised her brother's safety above her own life.

Seitaro believed this as well.

"You have bad manners, don't you, Namie."

"If you speak so roughly, Seiji won't like you, you know? Then again, he probably can't see anything beyond the 'head'."

At these challenging words, Namie seethed further, while Kujiragi, standing behind her, only narrowed her eyes slightly, behind her lenses.

And so, from this day forth – the figure of Yagiri Namie vanished from the surface of the city of Ikebukuro.

From the sight of her employer Orihara Izaya, as well.

Even as she kept in mind the one more important than her own life, her beloved, beloved brother.

39

Meanwhile. Raira General Hospital.

As night time arrived, the end of visiting hours came upon the waiting room in the hospital.

What should have been a deserted place was currently occupied by nearly ten people, grave expressions on each face.

By the side were Sonohara Anri, and Karisawa Erika.

Currently Kadota was in his second operation, and, still unconscious, he was transferred back and forth between the Intensive Care Unit and the operating theatre.

After his work Kadota's father had come down to wait in the standby room right in front of the operating theatre; meanwhile those who were not family members were in this general waiting room, worrying over the result of the surgery.

He had survived, but this could change at any time.

Ever since the operation had begun, this anxiety had persisted for more than an hour –

Karisawa sat next to Anri, who had her head bowed in unease, and spoke.

"Anri-chan, there's no need to force yourself. It's tiring to just wait, isn't it?"

Perhaps she was conscious that they were in a hospital; she kept her voice at a volume only Anri could hear.

In reply, Anri, who had always been soft-spoken, answered in a quieter voice than usual.

"No, please let me stay."

"So strange... It's normal for me, since Dotachin takes care of me usually, or for Azurin and Reh-chan, they crush on him, so."

Azurin and Reh-chan were amongst Karisawa's fellow cosplayers, and were about the same age as Anri, or slightly older. They had only met a few times these past few days, but Karisawa had readily informed Anri that they harboured affection for Kadota, right before the two.

The girls looked frail; there was no more sign of how they had at first complained at having their personal feelings revealed so easily, tearily pounding at Karisawa's shoulders. They only sat in the front row of the waiting room, huddled together as they prayed for Kadota's safety.

"It's not just them – there are a lot of girls who like Dotachin. He's dense, so he doesn't realise at all, but he's unexpectedly popular!"

Speaking like the matter didn't concern her, Karisawa smiled as usual at Anri.

"You probably didn't sleep much last night, right, Anri-chan? Even though this isn't something you should be worrying about at all, I'm so sorry..."

"No, it's not like that. I was helped by Kadota-san many times in the past..."

--Not only me, Ryugamine-kun and Kida-kun...

These were Anri's thoughts, but she did not voice them, and as though to cover up, she asked Karisawa:

"It's Karisawa-san who hasn't slept at all, isn't it?"

Anri had gone home once, before returning when she had heard there would be a second operation.

She had come to the waiting room, only to see Karisawa, smiling, dark rings under her eyes.

It was not only Karisawa; the previously mentioned Azurin – Tsutsukawa Azusa, and some others, were visibly sleep-deprived. As for Kadota's father, he had gone to work in the day without any sleep, and had returned to the waiting room without even catching up on his rest.

"Well, myself aside, I believe all the people here honestly worry more about Dotachin than their own health. Which is to say, on some level they're people who can't live on without him."

"Huh...?"

"Dotachin – should I say he's a genius at taking care of others, or maybe he just can't leave people alone when they're in trouble – he's the kind of stereotypical nice guy that doesn't even appear in comics these days. But it so happens that there're so many people this outdated nice guy's helped out, I guess."

At these words, Anri recalled the events of the day.

Upon receiving the news of Kadota's accident, Azusa and the rest had gone into a shocked panic, before calming down and following Karisawa to the hospital – but even when both consultation and visiting times were over, there were still ten to twenty people gathered by the entrance of the hospital. From what she had heard that they were all people who had rushed here worried for Kadota; Anri had to re-evaluate the surprising amount of 'power' possessed by the man known as Kadota Kyohei.

Once the news came out that he had survived, the number of people had gradually dwindled – but she heard that in the day people had still been coming and going; not once had there been a lack of visitors worried for Kadota.

"Though even if they come we can't see him. Really, raking up trouble for the hospital, they're all reckless folks here. It can't be helped, can it?"

Karisawa chuckled with a soft smile that offset her dark circles completely, as she spoke to Anri gently.

At that smile, Anri felt her nervousness abate.

However, at the same time – a doubt arose in the girl's mind.

Those gathered here, and the numerous guests in the day.

It was an impressive display of Kadota's connections, but Anri could not shake off the feeling that something was wrong.

Because, speaking of those who had received Kadota's care, the ones who would first come to mind were not present.

At first she had thought they might be with Kadota's family in standby, but if that were the case it would be odd for Karisawa to be here.

After hesitating for a few minutes as to whether she should ask, she was eventually overcome by the sense of dread in her chest, as she voiced her question.

"Um... Yumasaki-san and, um, the driver, of the van..."

Karisawa looked away, for a few seconds.

Then, instead of a reply, she continued on the same tangent as before.

"...Dotachin, he frowns a lot, but he's really a meddlesome nice guy..."

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"...?"
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"Even if you're the kind of person normal folks would give up on and ignore, once he's made up his mind to be friends, he won't give up on you no matter what, and if you make a mistake he'll get really angry."

Anri swallowed unconsciously as Karisawa's tone darkened.

"Dotachin is a pillar for all of us, but... He's also a brake."

"A brake?"

Karisawa did not turn to look at Anri, and only stared at the ceiling as she wove her words together tonelessly.

"I've been here all this while. It's not exactly because I'm worried about Dotachin. Because I believe Dotachin's twice as hardy as most people."

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"Then, why..."
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"Maybe I'm here... To know the very moment Dotachin wakes up."

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" ?"
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Anri became even more confused; Karisawa spoke again.

"Then I'll call them. Yumacchi and Togusacchi, and the rest, to say, 'Dotachin's awake. It's okay now."

A parched voice.

It held no anger whatsoever, but Anri was overwhelmed by Karisawa's voice. If it were herself from a year ago, perhaps she would be able to dismiss this voice as yet another impersonal object and dissociate it from herself; but her present self had forged countless connections with others, and so she could feel the cold flames hidden in Karisawa's voice.

Karisawa sighed, and glanced at Anri, her smile self-deriding.

"If I don't do that, they won't be able to stop."

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"Stop ...?"
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She must not ask.

In an instant, this warning flashed through her mind, but she could not end the conversation, and could only continue.

And then, Karisawa, in a voice so small only Anri could hear –

Answered directly.

"Because I think, if they get to the culprit before the police... They'll kill him."

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" !"
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"Especially Yumacchi – once he snaps, only Dotachin can stop him."

Anri understood well, that this was not an exaggeration.

Because Karisawa's next words – were accompanied by her usual smile.

"And I, as well, want to do that..."

That smile, contrarily, only proved the truth in that statement; this was what Anri's instincts told her – and so she was unable to reply, and could only accept Karisawa's words.

The sound of rain began outside, dampening the air in the quietness of the hospital.

There was no word of the surgery ending; this, naturally, meant that Kadota was still unconscious.

The turbulent atmosphere that permeated her surroundings awoke a different unease in Anri.

- --I don't want to consider that anything like that would happen...
- -- I get the feeling bad things are happening to Ryugamine-kun and Kida-kun, too...

It was a mere premonition; there was no evidence to it.

But with the unpleasant developments that had unfolded before her eyes in these six months, she could only feel that there was an increasing trend.

Even as she desperately tried to deny this, she had nothing that could dispel her fears, and the sound of the rain, with increasing intensity, continued to dance in her heart.

As if to match the rhythm of the words of love Saika sang, from within her body.

32

In the city. A park.

A central garden in a district near Ikebukuro.

A number of students from the nearby Kushinada High School were gathering in front of a convenience store.

Kushinada High School was notorious in this region for being a school of delinquents, and was once comparable to Ikebukuro's Raijin High School.

However, with Heiwajima Shizuo's graduation and the formation of Raira Academy, Raijin High School had lost its negative image. As a result, Kushinada High School had taken the lead in terms of delinquency.

In this group of people, a number of third-year core members had congregated before the convenience store. The sky began to drizzle. The rainclouds soaking Ikebukuro's streets seemed to have come here for a break as well.

"Damn, it's raining."

"It's not that bad yet."

"This new pudding is awesome!"

They paid little heed to the rain; just as they were idling their time away, there was the sound of the engine of a car entering the parking lot.

They looked up, only to see a van coming their way.

If that was all it would be nothing particularly worth their attention, but this van had a particular characteristic that caught the eye of these delinquents.

"Oi, seriously?"

"Awesome anime print, isn't it?"

The door by the side of the van was illustrated with a beauty from an anime series, forcibly attracting the eyes of the surrounding people.

But only one part of the van held the illustration; every other part of the van was ordinary. Those familiar with itasha might think it was a strange half-baked attempt at it, but even though these young men were ignorant of the term itasha, what they felt was much the same.

"Let's go mess with them."

One of them neared the van, waiting for the driver to alight so they could pick a fight.

They were considering that they might even get some money for their trouble, if things went well –

But the one closest to the van was shocked by the sight of the person that alighted.

They fully expected that the one coming out would be a complete otaku of a man, but the one that appeared was a sharp-eyed young man who looked like he had plenty of fighting experience.

--Oh well.

Without much thought, they stepped forward to provoke the man, but the driver of the van spoke before they could say anything.

"That uniform's Kushiko's, isn't it."

"Aa? What's it to you, ossan?"

"What if it is, eh?"

The driver spoke calmly as the delinquents approached him.

"It's the summer break, but you hang out in your uniforms. Nothing's changed with you guys, huh."

"Bastard, you looking down on us?"

The driver was surrounded in the blink of an eye.

It was a volatile situation.

Seconds passed as they stared at one another; as if to break this stalemate, a large-built young man came out of the convenience store.

"What're you up to, y'all."

"Ah, nothing, he was staring at us..."

The delinquents humbly explained the situation to the young man. By the looks of it this man was the leader; much as the delinquents had wanted to beat up the driver of the van, they put their anger aside to await his judgment.

"Huh...?"

The supposed leader narrowed his eyes as he stared at the man his companions had surrounded –

In the next moment, his eyes widened, as he cried.

"You... You're Togusa-sempai!"

"Eh?!"

At those words, the young men still surrounding the driver – Togusa Saburo – turned towards him, their eyes wide.

"Oh... You're the youngest brother of the Kurakawas, aren't you?"

"You helped Aniki a lot, in the past! Why, have these guys been rude?"

"S, sorry! We didn't know you were an OB!"

The well-built young man glared at the delinquents; they apologised frantically.

But Togusa stopped them short of kneeling with a wave of his hand, and spoke quietly.

"It's fine. I'm only an OB. I didn't come back to lord it over people five years younger than myself."

"T, thank you very much!"

Kushinada probably had a strict hierarchy. The kouhai bowed their heads repeatedly. The leader Kurakawa lowered his head once, and asked, anxiously:

"Uh, what might you be here for, today? You can't be just passing by, right?"

"Ah... Well, I have a little favour to ask..."

"...is it about Kadota-san?"

Togusa chuckled as he shrugged, but his eyes were completely mirthless.

"Um... If you're searching for the culprit, we would be honoured to assist..."

Kurakawa stuttered; Togusa clapped his hands together with an 'Ah'.

"I get it, you know. I'm in the Dollars, now. You don't want any rumours that Kushinada High School's involved with the Dollars, right? I'm an OB of Kushinada, so I can understand."

With what he could not voice so easily addressed, Kurakawa bowed his head once more.

And then, a new question came to mind.

"...? Uh, um, then, why did you come today?"

Togusa smiled kindly as he murmured to his confused kouhai.

"After all, if an OB were to drive someone over and drag them to death... Kunikida High's reputation would get even worse, wouldn't it. Rather than the teachers, I thought I should apologise to you guys still enrolled. Help me pass this on if anything happens."

"...?!"

At Togusa's calm words, the young men led by Kurakawa exchanged glances.

"K, kill... The one who did the hit-and-run with Kadota-san? ...you're kidding, right?"

Leaving the question unanswered, Togusa looked up at the raindrops that were slowly growing larger, as he spoke.

"Well. That bastard stalker didn't get Ruri-chan hurt very badly, so I was thinking it'd be fine to just drive him over and kill him, but you know..."

--Who's Ruri-chan? Togusa-sempai's girlfriend?

The sudden mention of a new name confused them, but with the quiet force Togusa gave off, the young men lacked the courage to ask.

"But to hit a friend of ours and run. In that case, I'll just have to show the culprit what the face of hell looks like, don't you think?"

Togusa smiled as he asked them this; the young men could not reply.

With his kouhai like this, Togusa's smile remained as he spoke.

"So if the culprit's anyone close to you, don't hide it from me. That's all I ask."

As the rain pounded even louder on the roof of the van, Togusa said a last sentence to his kouhai, and, leaving them petrified, returned to the driver's seat.

"I wouldn't want to kill my dear kouhai as well, after all."

The van left and the rain thickened, but the young men remained frozen.

Only as they felt themselves being drenched did they return to their senses.

There was no trail of the van; leaving the young men wondering if what had just transpired was no more than a dream.

And they clung to the hope, that the killing intent that permeated the OB's smile was no more than part of that dream.

32

In the city. A multi-storey carpark.

As the sound of the rain resonated ever-louder on the streets, ten or so young men were gathered in a large room of a karaoke box on the far end of the road.

They had not gathered before entering; rather, they arrived at the pre-booked room at short intervals.

They were clad in various ensembles as they came, but upon entering the room they put on new accessories.

A ring with a yellow tiger's eye embedded.

A yellow wristband.

A pair of yellow-tinted shades.

A yellow leather belt.

And then, the young man sitting innermost in the room - Kida Masaomi, in spite of the summer, donned a yellow scarf.

"So, the only one not here yet is Yatabe..."

Masaomi leant back on the chair, and spoke lightly.

However, all in this room understood this lightness was no more than a facade.

The people in this room right now were each members of the real Yellow Scarves in the flesh; there was no singing involved as they, one by one, reported an assortment of information from throughout the city to Masaomi.

They had even instructed the employees at the karaoke box not to leak that they were using this venue for the Yellow Scarves' meeting.

Congregated here were the earliest members of the Yellow Scarves; the acquaintances Masaomi had made only just after transferring schools to this area.

When war with the Dollars had broken out half a year ago, at the hands of Horada's faction – at the hands of the former Blue Squares, they had been ostracised, and some had even been victim to outright violence.

Even so – the 'founding members', at Masaomi's summon, had all unfailingly gathered by his side.

Some of these members had also been completely uninvolved in the conflict half a year ago.

These were Masaomi's schoolmates at Raira Academy.

They had known that Masaomi had started a new life with Ryugamine Mikado and Sonohara Anri, and some were also aware of the incident involving Mikajima Saki; as such, they had made no effort to bring him back, and had evaded contact, acting as mutual strangers as they continued their school life.

However – things were different this time around.

They had accepted a direct invitation from Kida Masaomi, to the revival of the Yellow Scarves.

Having all along held an immense trust in Masaomi, they had enthusiastically come running back to his side – the number was not comparable to that of half a year ago, but eventually the Yellow Scarves from two years ago had, without a hitch, been revived.

Conversely, from Masaomi's perspective, this was an unexpected result.

He had once forsaken the Yellow Scarves, and when he had returned, to hunt down the Slasher that had hurt Anri, he had not detected the covert movements of Horada's Blue Squares, and had thus endangered his compatriots.

He had assumed simply begging for forgiveness would not be enough.

He had called them mentally prepared to be beaten up to their satisfaction and promptly abandoned.

But they did not expect any apology at all, and were purely happy over his return.

Ironically this only evoked further guilt in Masaomi, and so he had mustered his resolve, and told them on the first day they gathered.

- -- "To return to this city, as part of the Yellow Scarves; this is selfishness, on my part."
- --"A friend of mine, about as important as you guys, is going in a strange direction."
- --"I plan to stop him even if I have to beat him up, but... If I'm on my own, I might not be able to do much."
- -- "That's why... I'm sorry, please lend me your strength, just a little."
- --"Could all of you... be used by my selfishness?"

And so – the founding members of the Yellow Scarves had accepted this selfishness.

- --"Honestly. Hasn't our Shogun always been like this?"
- --"Yep, and you've also given in to our whims, too!"
- -- "Most importantly, it's fun doing things with the Shogun!"
- --"If you apologise, you'll have to take it back, Shogun."
- -- "Speaking of which, can we still call you that?"

Whether it was those who continued to speak to him respectfully, or his schoolmates from Raira Academy, who had unconsciously slipped into casual language – despite their various reactions, the nickname Shogun had remained a constant.

With both happiness and guilt, Masaomi had smiled as he used to, and spoken.

- -- "Now that I think about it, being called Shogun brings a whole new level to embarrassment."
- --"And you say that now!" "There's no such thing!" "No such thing~" "Then I'm gonna call you Shogun for the rest of my life!"

As he saw their smiles, Masaomi had firmly made up his mind.

That from that moment forth, he would be the enemy of Ryugamine Mikado.

That if Mikado was ensnared by the thread known as the Dollars, unable to return to his original state, he would be the one to sever this thread.

To save him, he would become his enemy.

Before his conviction could waver, Masaomi had revealed a truth to all of them.

- --"There's one thing I want all of you to know."
- --"I would like all of you here to keep this a secret amongst us."
- --"The one I want to stop, even if it means beating him up his name is Ryugamine Mikado. Some of you should know him."
- --"He is... the founder of the Dollars."

Now, more than a week had passed.

After announcing Mikado's identity, he could no longer turn back.

Be that as it may, Masaomi did not regret. The only thing he could regret was that back when the leader of Toramaru had told Mikado he was unfit to be a leader, he had left without saying anything.

At that point in time, even if it would have hurt both of them, if he had said something, perhaps Mikado would not have been as broken as he was.

When it came down to it, it could be that he leaving Anri and Mikado's lives was a reason as well. Such thoughts had troubled him before, but considering his emotional state at the time, there had been no other choice.

And precisely due to that, he could not stop now.

He could not run away.

Even if he had to dirty his own hands, he had to extricate Mikado from this mess.

If he could, he would minimise any unnecessary worry on Anri's part.

First he felt he had to get a concrete grasp of the goings-on in the city, and gather as many of the past members as possible; with this in mind, Masaomi and his companions had resumed their activities, and met at the karaoke box daily to turn in information.

Today, as well, when Yatabe had arrived and everyone was present, they would exchange information and determine their future course of action.

"Still. Yatabe's late."

Masaomi's words had the members exchanging glances.

"Could something have happened?"

"I'll try calling him."

The memory of the events half a year ago probably triggered fearful thoughts to flash through their minds. One of the members nervously withdrew his phone from his pocket –

However, an instant quicker, Masaomi's cell vibrated.

"...it's Yatabe."

Masaomi spoke as he saw the screen; all of them were more or less relieved.

"Hey, what's up? You're late..."

It seemed Yatabe's voice was coming through from the other end, and the members relaxed – but in the next moment Masaomi's expression stiffened, and the atmosphere in the room tensed.

"...ah, I see.no, it's fine. Bring him in."

Masaomi uttered strange words as he ended the call.

"Yatabe says he's at the entrance."

Without expression, Masaomi shrugged, as he muttered.

"Though it seems we have a guest."

"Ah, hello. It's been a few days, hasn't it, Kida-kun."

Minutes later, the man who accompanied Yatabe into the room was none other than Yumasaki, his usual self complete with his rucksack.

The only observable peculiarity would be that he was acting independently, which was indeed strange.

Normally he would be with Kadota's group, and if he were browsing through bookstores or anime shops it would almost always be with the companionship of Karisawa.

But Masaomi was also aware of the fact that Kadota was incapable of going around with him at the moment.

"I didn't think you'd come here, Yumasaki-san."

Putting aside Masaomi, who had already met the man several times, the palpable anxiety of the surrounding members was understandable.

Although they were only dealing with one man, they, having been in the Yellow Scarves for years, were fully cognizant of the fact that Yumasaki had once been in the Blue Square. Yet, conversely, they were also aware that he had once rescued Masaomi's lover, Saki; with respect to this, they could only eye the man with mixed feelings.

Heedless of them, Masaomi, the only one who could speak on equal terms with their guest, asked:

"You knew about this place."

Masaomi addressed the crux of the matter; Yumasaki replied easily.

"No, no – sorry, was it Yatabe-kun? I followed him here. He's your right-hand man, so if the Yellow Scarves were reviving I thought he'd definitely be involved."

"...how did you find Yatabe's address?"

"Bought it from Orihara-san."

"...that bastard."

Masaomi's face twitched as he muttered.

-- If that's how it is, we'll have to go somewhere else next time we meet.

It was necessary to keep their activities from leaking to Izaya. At present the Blue Square member Kuronuma Aoba was on Mikado's side, but there was little chance that Izaya would interfere. It could be said that on this front, Masaomi had a clear grasp of Orihara Izaya's personality.

However, with his own personal experience, it could only be natural for him to be vigilant.

Remembering the past irritated Masaomi, but he quickly straightened up his thoughts and brought another question up to Yumasaki.

"So, why did you come here?"

"Don't be like that, Kida-kun. You know already."

His thin eyes narrowed further, and he smiled as he leant on the door.

As Masaomi considered if he should reply, Yumasaki spoke first.

"Was it you guys... who got Kadota-san hurt?"

- Birds of a Feather - Part 2 of 2

Somewhere in the city.

Some way from the city was a building.

Due to certain complications, it had been abandoned midway through a renovation.

There were various burn marks on the concrete walls and floor, and in the wooden scaffolding were what appeared to be bullet holes.

It appeared to be a normal building from the second floor down, but on higher floors the construction had halted while it was still in progress, and the bare steel frame was eerie in the darkness of the night.

A number of teenagers were gathered on the second floor of this building.

Appropriate to this dangerous setting, most of them were dressed as delinquents, but there were two central figures that could only be seen as greatly unsuitable for this backdrop.

The baby-faced boy – Ryugamine Mikado – looked over the surroundings, and spoke to Kuronuma Aoba, who stood beside him.

"It's in quite a bad state. What happened here?"

"At some point in time a rich company was planning to build here, but they suddenly went broke, and things were left like this. There were some yakuza fighting here not long ago, too, so people don't dare come. Other than those free enough to test their courage."

"It does seem a good place to meet. Though I'm bothered that it's a little far from Ikebukuro."

"Far is good, you know. If we were to meet regularly in the middle of the city we'd be found rather quickly."

Mikado willingly accepted Aoba's point, and went to sit at a small pile of building materials at the corner of the room; he opened his laptop and rebooted it from sleep mode.

After about fifteen seconds of tinkering, Mikado nodded in relief.

"Mm, the signal seems fine. This way we can know what's going on in the Dollars."

Rather than convenience in terms of transport, the most important thing, to Mikado, was internet access. It was knowing this that Aoba proposed this location as their meeting place.

Mikado accessed the internet quickly, gathering various kinds of information.

The touchpad on the laptop was left unused; with deft use of the tab key and other shortcuts, he was literally surfing the sea of the internet with no more than the touch of a finger.

As Yoshikiri, Gin, Neko, and the other members of the Blue Square watched Mikado type with all the impressive speed of an electric sewing machine, murmurs of "Whoa..." escaped them; on the other hand, as he saw Mikado's eyes flit from page to page, Aoba noticed something even more striking than the speed of his typing.

-- Can he really read all of this?

No matter how fast he could type, it was inevitable that he had to stop when he was reading the information on the screen. But Mikado spared no more than seconds on each page, with the only exception when he was posting a message.

Aoba looked between the flickering screen and Mikado's face, urgently focused, and felt simultaneously stunned and impressed.

"Today's been turning out quite terrible..."

"You mean for the Dollars?"

"Yeah. It's probably the result of what happened to Kadota-san."

It was true that the state of the Dollars in the city was unstable.

Regardless of how often the man himself denied it, it was unmistakable that Kadota was recognised as a 'leader' of the Dollars.

As a result, he was an eyesore for those who wanted to do as they pleased using the name of the Dollars.

It could be said that the ones Mikado currently suppressed using the 'violence' of Aoba and the Blue Square could be made to stand down by the existence of Kadota alone.

--If only there were five more people like Kadota... The Dollars might not've turned out like this.

At this thought, Mikado hit the keys even faster.

On the Dollars' message boards there were also members openly expressing elation over Kadota's getting hurt, and there were even messages like, "Kadota's dying, food tastes better today!"

Mikado used his authority as an administrator to block access to such users.

Previously he might have left them be, but Mikado now blocked these members without hesitation. Perhaps this was amongst the conspicuous changes he had undergone, but nevertheless, he was unaware of it himself.

Mikado felt agitated that the current state of the Dollars did not match his expectations, but he continued to assemble more information. However –

" ?"

At the sight of a certain post, Mikado's hand froze.

Aoba detected something amiss with the way Mikado stared at that post on the message board, and peered over at the screen –

Indeed, the information there piqued a strong interest in Kuronuma Aoba.

39

In the city, a karaoke box.

"...it wasn't us. Do we look rich enough for cars?"

Were the Yellow Scarves behind the hit-and-run incident with Kadota?

Yumasaki had asked this directly. Masaomi shrugged, and denied the accusation.

"Well, I understand that I'm suspect. I haven't been up to much since meeting Kadota-san, either. Honestly, if I were you I'd be a little suspicious of myself, too..."

"No, no, I'm not suspecting you, Kida-kun."

"Huh?"

"I think I more or less know you. You might not be a good Samaritan, but you're not a low-life bastard, Kida-kun. You don't look like to be same kind of character as Izumii-san, with what he did to Saki-chan."

The use of the word 'character' was very much like him. Yumasaki asked again:

"Just – I know you, but that doesn't mean I know the Yellow Scarves now. Can you be sure, Kida-kun? Unstable elements infiltrating the group, characters rampaging somewhere without the leader's knowledge – whether it's in manga or real life, it's common. The borderless zone between reality and fiction."

"That's..."

"I don't think you can deny that. It's the same feeling as half a year ago, isn't it?"

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Masaomi fell silent.

"And rumours are spreading all over the web, about you guys starting up again."

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"Amongst those, there're also people fanning the flames, saying it's a pre-emptive strike by the Yellow Scarves."

"...is that so."

Masaomi listened on with a hard expression, as Yumasaki continued to relate the situation.

"To be honest, unless the Slasher's caught, the rumours online won't recognise the end of the conflict between the Dollars and the Yellow Scarves."

As though summarising an anime, Yumasaki calmly spoke of the incident half a year ago, to the face of the core figure himself.

"If we think of this conflict as a manga or a novel, if the Yellow Scarves are reviving, the 'readers' are probably going to think: the Slasher and the Dollars've joined hands. Will the Yellow Scarves, beaten at their own game, finally bring down the Dollars, this time? And to do that, they drove over a famous person in the Dollars... Something like that."

"What's your point?"

"I'm just saying, you revived the Yellow Scarves, so you should've known you'd be suspected like this... right? With that I'd like to confirm again. ...can you swear that none of you are involved in the hit-and-run with Kadota-san?"

Perhaps he was unable to watch any further; one of the Yellow Scarves interrupted.

"Hey, you, that's..."

"Stop."

The one who stopped him was Masaomi.

He quietly readjusted his breathing, and looked over the face of every member in the room. He replied, certainly, to Yumasaki.

"I believe in everyone, and I can swear I didn't do it, either. If any of us was the one who knocked over Kadota-san..."

"If so?"

"...at that time, please do as you wish, to your satisfaction."



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After a brief silence, Yumasaki quirked his lips, as he rested a hand on the doorknob.

"I got it. I believe you; I'll go look for the culprit. It was bad of me to suspect you guys, Kida-kun."

"No... Please don't mind. We'll also tell you if we hear anything."

"That would help. Ah, I'm glad you guys weren't behind it."

Before he left, Yumasaki glanced at the pile of song albums at the corner of the table, and spoke with genuine happiness.

"'cause the cover of that anime album's Nogizaka Haruka, isn't it."

"...? Eh, ah... Yeah."

It was probably title of some anime, Masaomi thought, as he responded accordingly.

Yumasaki waved a hand at Masaomi, and said one last thing before he left the karaoke box.

"Glad I didn't have to burn the portrait of the *Nuit Étoile*."

Yumasaki left with those strange words.

Silence pervaded the room for a short while, but one of the members broke this, as he spoke to Masaomi anxiously.

"Before rumours start spreading that we ran over Kadota, wouldn't it be better to chase him down and teach him a... lesson?!"

Masaomi's hand came down hard on his companion's head, and, eyes firm, he chided:

"Idiot, that'd only make us more suspicious."

"O, Oh. Sorry."

"And it's not that easy to teach Yumasaki-san a lesson."

"...? But he looked quite weak."

His companions were in doubt; Masaomi kept his severe expression as he snorted.

"Are your noses blocked?"

"Huh?"

At Masaomi's words, they sniffed at the surrounding air –

"Wha... This is... gasoline?"

"Kerosene, probably. Well, it's definitely something flammable, right?"

As they detected the lingering smell, similar to paint thinner, the faces of the Yellow Scarves paled.

"It just shows his bag and pockets are full of all kinds of things. If we were really the ones who drove over Kadota-san, once he'd confirmed that he would set this whole room..."

"Oh, I forgot something!"

The door opened suddenly, cutting Masaomi off.

"Uwah?!" "Whoa?!"

Yumasaki's reappearance at the door sparked shocked cries from the boys, who had just previously been steeping in tension.

"...? What's with the shock? Could it be there's a beautiful young spirit behind me?"

Yumasaki had completely reverted to his old tone.

But his body – particularly from the rucksack – definitely gave off the smell of something like kerosene, sending cold sweat down their spines.

"Nothing like that. What's up, Yumasaki-san?"

"Ah, right, Kida-kun, have y'all heard the news? You're not involved in that either... right?"

"That?"

Masaomi creased his brow in confusion. Yumasaki hummed as he nodded, and spoke again.

"Well, I just saw it on the Dollars' message board myself... I can't say if it's surprising, or the time's finally come..."

"What is it?"

Masaomi urged him to get to the point; excitement shone in the young man's eyes as he revealed the news.

"Heiwajima Shizuo-san, looks like he's finally been arrested."

32

Outskirts of the city, the 2nd floor of an abandoned building.

"To think Heiwajima Shizuo-san's been arrested... I wonder if it's true."

Like background music, the pounding of the rain echoed in the abandoned building.

When he had first laid eyes on the information on the Dollars' message board, Mikado had doubted the authenticity of the news.

'Heiwajima Shizuo – Arrested!'

Such a headline had appeared in Mikado's mind.

Of course, there was no such report, but to Mikado, this news had a similar impact to a celebrity being nabbed for drug abuse.

Indeed, his record of wrecking public property was unrivalled, and in fact the more bothering issue was why he had not been arrested up till now; but there had been rumours that he had toned down recently, and so this was a fairly unexpected turn of events for Mikado.

"It's only a post on a forum, so it doesn't mean much. We don't know what they mean by saying he got arrested, either. The police could've just took him in for questioning. For all we know someone could have seen him entering the police station and exaggerated."

Aoba calmly asserted this, and Mikado went along agreeably.

"It could be. We've never been short on rumours... But the person who posted this has always been quite credible."

"...it can't be that you memorised the usernames of all the members and what they've posted?"

"It's impossible to remember everyone. Just the ones that stand out, is all."

Mikado smiled as he said this, his face a little uneasy, and he looked no more than an ordinary high schooler worrying over a friend.

If one were to say this boy was the founder of the Dollars, most people would probably laugh it off.

But if they heard what he said next, perhaps their impression of him would be overturned completely.

"But... I'm glad."

"Huh?"

Aoba did not understand what at all there was to be glad about. Mikado smiled at him softly, and said.

"Even if it's true that Heiwajima-san was arrested, it happened after he quit the Dollars."

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Aoba knew nothing of Heiwajima Shizuo's character beyond rumours.

But if the man himself had heard this statement, however kind he was as a person, this would be probably enough provocation to beat Mikado up, wouldn't it? As he felt this, Aoba once more recognised that this was the part of Ryugamine Mikado was 'broken'.

Whether Mikado was broken by the emergence of himself and the Blue Square, or if he was this way from the start. Aoba did not know.

But he understood that the broken part of Mikado was, precisely, the most suitable hiding place for ones such as themselves.

Perhaps this was also why he showed 'only half' – of honestly pure sincerity – to Mikado. This was what Aoba thought.

A person he used, and, at the same time, a person he feared.

Amongst all of the people Aoba had encountered so far in his life, it was certain that Ryugamine Mikado was an abnormal individual.

--Surely that human fanatic would rejoice.

Hiding his inner thoughts, Aoba spoke to Mikado.

"But. What should we do, Mikado-sempai?"

"Do what?"

"Kadota-san's in hospital, and now Heiwajima Shizuo-san's been arrested. If the Dollars were a cut of raw meat, then Kadota-san would be the preservative, and Heiwajima-san would be the fire, right? Kadota-san watched carefully to make sure it didn't rot, and Shizuo-san scared the snarling hyenas outside, so they couldn't do anything. With that time you could just take your time to slice the meat, and prepare it however you liked, Mikado-sempai."

"That was a dynamic example."

Mikado smiled bitterly. Aoba with his finger stroked a burn mark on the concrete wall, as he continued.

"But as things are, the meat will rot before you're done with it, you know?"

"What exactly do you want to say?"

"To put the meat somewhere cold and dark, where the predators can't see it, and it won't rot easily... Essentially, going underground – that's always been my way of doing things. But that's different from the Dollars you hope to see. Isn't that right, Mikado-sempai?"

"Mm... Well, maybe."

After some thought, Mikado agreed to Aoba's metaphor.

Turning his back on him, Aoba spread his arms and raised his voice.

"I believe the Dollars is a place where anyone can overcome their own position, to help one another. Even if there are limitations, to be able to exchange information, without seeing each other's faces... That's what makes it attractive, to me."

" ?"

"Which is why, when I heard of what happened to Kadota-san, when I felt the Dollars would be in trouble... I thought of it, suddenly. To ask a person to work with us, to stand in the stead of Kadota-san and Heiwajima-san. A person who's also a symbol, a 'face'... of the Dollars."

"A symbol of the Dollars?"

Mikado put his hand to his mouth, and carefully considered who Aoba was speaking of.

"That person doesn't appear often on the surface of the city, so they don't have much to lose. Someone with freedom of action."

Aoba paced along the floor of the abandoned building as he spoke, as though giving hints to Mikado.

Aoba's companions, the Blue Squares, grinned knowingly at one another; they were congregated along a wall in the abandoned building, discreetly watching the exchange between Mikado and Aoba.

"Everyone knows them, but almost no one knows the details. Famous as a member of the Dollars, too – there's someone like that, isn't there."

"...it can't be."

A face flashed into Mikado's mind.

Rather, to be precise, it was not a face, but only a body and a helmet.

"If it's that person, I think they'd be happy to help us 'cleanse' the Dollars. To ordinary people they're mysterious and admirable; to enemies of the Dollars, they're an unknown, a terrifying opponent."

"Isn't that right, Headless Rider-san."

Just as Aoba announced this name – on the staircase between the first and second floors, a 'shadow' emerged.

Other than the helmet, wrapped completely in a rider suit made of 'shadow', was –

Mikado's familiar acquaintance, the urban legend in the flesh – for the first time in a long while – appeared before his eyes once more.

39

"Celty-san?! Why're you here?!"

At Mikado's cry of genuine surprise, Celty thought:

--Eh.

--No, uh, really, why this?

Aoba had said to 'please come up when I call you', so she had been waiting on the first floor, but she had never imagined her appearance would become part of such a deceptive performance.

The way things were, it wouldn't even be strange if she and Aoba appeared to be like-minded people, on the same side.

As she was consumed in this uneasiness, to explain the truth to Mikado, she recalled what had happened to bring her here.

A few hours ago –

"I'd like you to help me... No, to be accurate, Mikado-sempai and myself."

Celty had been called to a deserted underground car park, and met face-to-face with Aoba.

She had assumed he would bring people with him, but unexpectedly only Aoba himself had turned up.

- --What a bold guy.
- --Or does he just not want me to see the faces of his friends?

Wary of an ambush, Celty kept her guard up as she entered words on her PDA.

'Help you?'

"Yes. You know about Kadota-san's incident, right?"

'Yeah. I heard just before you called me here.'

"This poses a significant problem for the Dollars. Because it means the Dollars has lost its leader. Even now I hear there are people going wild without a care in the world, already."

With the tone of an entrepreneur worrying for the future, Aoba continued.

"Now, with Heiwajima Shizuo-san having left the Dollars, I think we need a new symbol."

'You want me to be that symbol? I reject.'

"That was fast."

'The Dollars' virtue lies in that it doesn't have a symbol or such things, doesn't it.'

--Exactly. And I can't imagine Mikado-kun would want that.

Celty typed out her opinion succinctly, but Aoba did not waver in the slightest.

"I'm not asking for a long-term arrangement. If those who smear the Dollars' name appear, you'll show up to teach them a lesson. And you'll help the Dollars who're leading ordinary lives. Until the ones harmful to the Dollars fear you and back down – in this timeframe."

'The way I see it, the one most harmful to the Dollars is you.'

"Maybe. But I'm being very straight right now, you know?"

Aoba answered unapologetically.

Celty sighed internally, and changed her question.

'What are your intentions?'

Celty herself had been witness to the instant Aoba had approached Mikado.

But regarding what conclusion Mikado had arrived at, she had seen nothing.

Had he truly joined hands with Mikado, and if so, how had he drawn Mikado in? Towards the boy Kuronuma Aoba, Celty held a strong sense of distrust; factors such as his age were no longer in the equation.

-- This guy's really exactly the same as Izaya.

She would not say it to his face, but this was, indeed, what Celty thought.

After a few seconds of considering Celty's question, Aoba smiled lightly, as he replied.

"A place to swim..."

'What?'

"A place to swim – that's all I want. Ah, of course, that's only metaphorical."

'Put it simply.'

Although she vaguely understood what he meant, Celty felt it would be dangerous to go along with him, and sternly demanded an explanation.

But Aoba simply said, "It's hard to put in words." He hesitated as he spoke again. "I feel something only twisted people in a rebellious phase might feel, that might just disappear in another five years. Before it leaves, I'd like to see how far it can sublimate – would that be the right way to say it, I wonder "

Aoba murmured under his breath to himself; Celty speechlessly showed her PDA.

'What do you mean, it's hard to put in words? You just want to go wild, don't you.'

"If it were just that, I'd just train myself physically and go pick a fight with Heiwajima Shizuo-san. If I only wanted to bully the weak, I could do it by myself without joining the Dollars."

'Then what is it?'

"That's why... Yeah, 'I want to swim.' That's the best way to say what's in me right now."

It seemed they would only go in circles, and so Celty chose to stop this line of questioning.

Instead, she verified something.

'Is it really all right? If I accept, I won't be acting as you tell me to. I could conclude that you're the most harmful, and hunt down the Blue Square first and foremost.'

"I don't mind. Though when the time comes you'll end up hunting down Mikado-sempai as well, I think."

'Nonsense. Mikado's different from you guys.'

"...Headless Rider-san, how well do you know Mikado-sempai?"

--Eh.

--That's true.

'Uh, that, as a normal friend...'

As she bought time with her words, Celty thought.

She only knew of the position Ryugamine Mikado held and hid, and one side of his personality.

Only the secret that he was the founder of the Dollars, and a part of his personality. Of the things that surrounded him, such as the matter of Sonohara Anri's Saika, she knew more than he, but it was hard to say that she knew Ryugamine Mikado himself.

And what Anri had shared, of Mikado acting strangely, was another thorn in Celty's image of Mikado.

'It's true that I don't really know him well, but...'

"It's unfitting to jump to conclusions without knowing how Mikado-sempai is currently, isn't it?"

Hit where it hurt, Celty sank into thought.

Then, with a strong nod, she made a request of Aoba, on the screen of her PDA.

'Let me talk to Mikado first. Everything else will come later.'

And now.

--Ah, right.

--It seemed as though I'd have to go along with him otherwise, so I said that...

"Huh? Er, huh? What?! Aoba-kun and Celty-san, you did see each other once at the factory, but... How long have you known each other?! Ah, no, I mean, you've known each other since you saw one another, but, how do I say this, you're friends? Is that it? Celty-san, what's going on?!"

Looking back and forth between Aoba and Celty, Mikado flustered like a puppy.

--...

--Mikado-kun's the same as always.

Celty had been fully prepared to see Mikado with a Mohawk and a spiked leather jacket, but there was no such thing, only the same timid, baby-faced boy.

Mikado made his way over to Celty unsteadily, and Celty greeted him as usual.

'Long time no see, Mikado.'

"Long time no see. But honestly, why are you here?"

Before Celty could finish typing her reply, Aoba spoke from the side.

"I saw her by coincidence, so I chased after her to apologise for what happened during Golden Week. We exchanged our email addresses then, and we contact each other occasionally."

-- This guy, so shamelessly...

What had happened was that he had invaded her apartment and had a clash with Shinra, but Aoba acted as though nothing of the sort had happened, lying bare-facedly.

- --It's true he said to keep what happened a secret from Mikado, but...
- --Well, I'll just go along with him for now.
- --But you'd better watch out later...

With those thoughts, Celty deleted what she had started typing, and entered a single sentence.

'Well, something like that.'

Mikado was probably assured by Celty's words; he spoke to Aoba, relieved.

"I didn't know about that at all. You should have told me."

"Sorry, I wanted to give you a shock, Mikado-sempai."

"I was really shocked! I didn't think I'd meet Celty-san in a place like this... Ah."

As though having realised something, Mikado spoke to Celty, his voice small.

"Um, I have a request..."

'What is it?'

"Could you please keep it a secret from Sonohara-san that I'm here? Actually, I told her I'd gone back home to Saitama..."

'You did? Why lie?'

A shadow of loneliness came upon Mikado's face, as he answered Celty's query.

"I don't want to make Sonohara-san worry, so, about what I'm doing now, I'd rather not let her know."

"...is that so."

Despite her plain answer, Celty was thinking.

- --True, he's strange, but...
- --What exactly is he doing here with people from the Blue Square?
- --Is it something he can't tell Anri-chan?
- --Speaking of which, I just noticed... Mikado-kun has a lot of injuries, hasn't he?
- 'You're hurt all over, who did it?'
- --It couldn't have been Aoba and his gang?
- -- Was he beaten up and forced to obey them?

--If that's the case I'll just tie up all the people here and bring him back. Then all the problems'll be solved, I suppose.

She felt this situation would be the simplest to solve, and she hoped things were as such.

However, the words that left Mikado's mouth were an answer entirely opposed to this.

"Ah, it was some bad people."

'Huh?'

"I should be the one working the hardest, but I'm so weak at fighting, I'm always the one getting beaten up. It's pathetic, and frustrating..."

Mikado wore a genuinely sorrowful expression; from it, one could feel a disquieting sense of wrongness.

Celty tried to think of what the source of this wrongness was, but could not answer, for a long time.

But what was certain was that they were up to something strange.

- --Aoba mentioned something about the purging of the Dollars, and aiming for a wholesome Dollars, and he said they would hunt those who were deceiving others and such...
- --Mikado can't be fighting those thugs directly, right?

That this impossibility was indeed the truth was something she could never even have dreamt of, and so Celty continued thinking.

- --So Mikado-kun used Aoba and those guys to stop those who were cheating other people and stuff, and somehow they found out about him and took revenge, maybe.
- --Not contacting Anri to minimise the bother...

Things would make sense if it were like that. Celty thought further.

- -- If that's the case, I could just help them make those thugs quieten down...
- --However it is, there's no mistake that what Mikado-kun's doing is dangerous.
- --...oh? Wait, if I convince Mikado-kun here and now, Anri-chan won't have anything to worry about anymore; isn't that two birds with one stone?
- --I was thinking of getting information on 'Yodogiri Jinnai' through the Dollars, but I'll feel better if I solve this first.

It was not that the anger she felt at Shinra's assault had lessened.

Even now, if the perpetrator Adabashi and the man Yodogiri Jinnai were to appear before her, the anger she had suppressed would explode, and she did not know what she would wind up doing – this still held true.

Even so, in spite of this, Celty would not disregard other matters simply due to her anger; it was not in her character to do so.

She was, like Kadota, a nice guy type with a tendency to interfere, but above that, she herself was in debt to Ryugamine Mikado.

The incident that allowed her to feel that existing without her head was all right.

If the Dollars had never existed, perhaps that issue would never have been resolved. And it was fact that the formation of her bond with the city, as a member of the Dollars, was what had offered her heart salvation.

--What should I do to repay that debt now?

--Should I help Mikado-kun, or do all I can to stop him...

Celty was conflicted, and so as to find an answer, she decided to ask Mikado of his intentions, first.

'Before we continue this conversation, there's something I'd like to make very clear... How to put this, uh, using Aoba-kun and his friends, what exactly are you doing, Mikado?'

"Huh?"

'I only heard a little from Aoba-kun. That's why I'd like to hear it from you, directly. What do you want to do with the Dollars?'

"That, of course..."

Mikado, without the slightest hesitation, made as to reply.

Celty tensely awaited his answer, but –

Crack

The dry sound echoed through the abandoned building, cutting off Mikado's words.

The strong sound seemed to erase not only Mikado's words, but even the endless sound of the rain as well.

Unknowing of the source of the sound, Celty and all who were present, including the members of the Blue Square gathered on the second floor, looked around at their surroundings –

All of their gazes landed on a single point.

"I interrupted, so sorry."

The staircase that connected the first and second floors.

From where Celty had been just a minute ago echoed a male voice – plodding up the stairs came a man's figure.

"From here, whether it's a phone or a computer, I can't see the words, see."

At the sight of the man, Mikado's and Aoba's faces both wore expressions that said, 'Who is this?'

The boys in the Blue Square seemed equally perplexed at this sudden trespasser.

But as Celty saw the man, her reaction differed from those around her.

- --Huh.
- --Huh?!

Unable to keep up with the sudden development, cries of confusion rose within her chest.

--Wh-wh, wh, wai - , why is he here?!

Because the man that appeared was a face she was long familiar with.

"But really, never thought I'd come here so many times in the same year. Coincidence is a scary thing."

Wearing an elaborately patterned suit was a tall man who looked to be in his thirties.

He was not young, but not middle-aged either; his appearance fit neither category. Across the man's face was a scar that left a deep impression.

He wore a pair of tinted shades that could be identified on sight to be of high quality, and in his hand was an elegant ornamental cane; he had the air of someone who had just left the filming site of an old movie.

Despite the cane he held, his legs did not appear handicapped in any way. It seemed that the sound from before must have been produced via a solid strike at the concrete ceiling or floor.

--A, aa, a.

"Celty-san?"

"You know him?"

Mikado and Aoba had likely noticed that her odd behaviour.

Out of concern they had called out to her, but currently Celty had lost her ability to reply.

--Akabayashi-san?!

He sometimes requested her to deliver crabs, amongst other duties, and was an old customer of Celty's in her job as a courier.

But, of course, Celty knew.

He did not simply work in the shipping industry.

And she knew he was of an occupation **Mikado would be better off staying away from**.

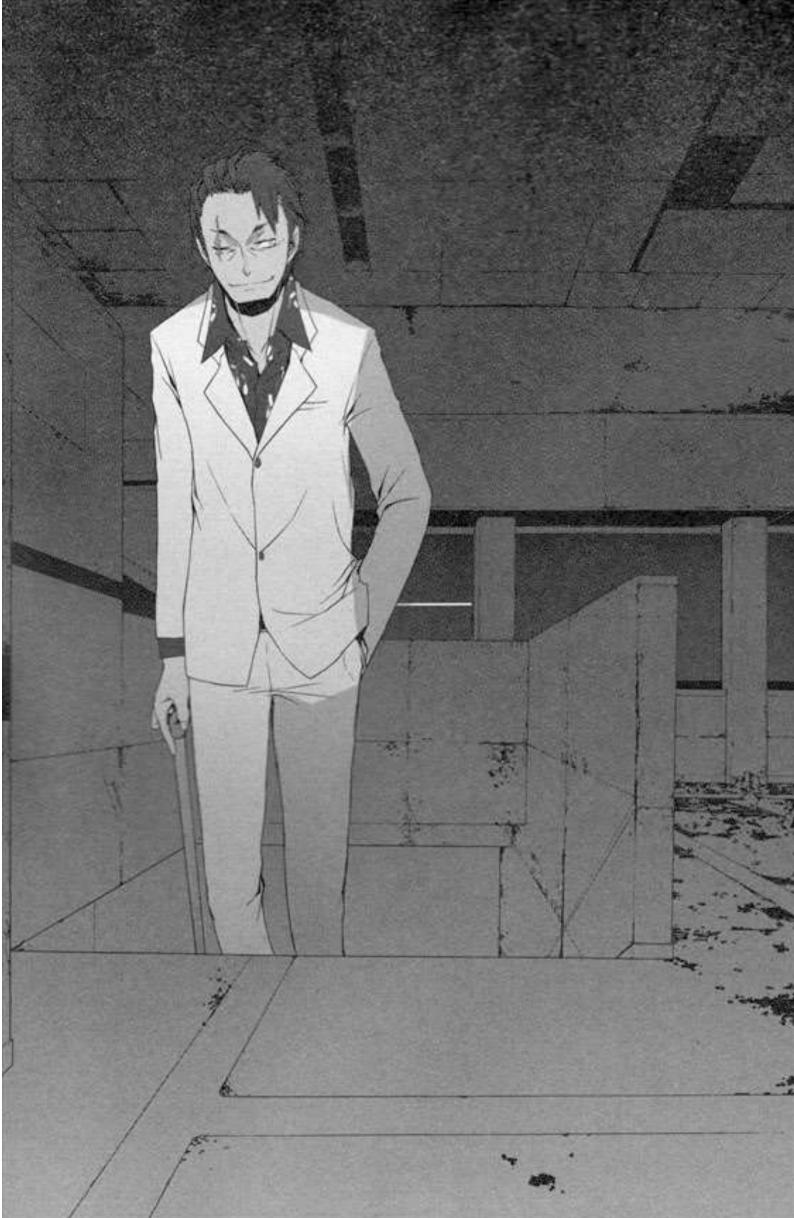
--Why... Why is he here?!

Of course, it was impossible for them to hear the cry in her heart –

Having suddenly appeared before Mikado and company, Akabayashi grinned, as he spoke.

"I don't know what you're discussing here, but won't you let Oi-chan in as well?"

"You will, right? Ryugamine Mikado-kun."



Chatroom.
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No one is in the chatroom.
No one is in the chatroom.
No one is in the chatroom.
Chrome has entered the chatroom
Chrome [Evening]
Chrome [No one's around, huh]
Chrome [Even though it's usually livelier around this time]
Chrome [It's the middle of the summer, maybe everyone's spending time with their family and their partners]
Chrome [I had hotpot recently too]
Chrome [It was fun]
Kanra has entered the chatroom
Kanra [Good~ evening~ ☆]
Kanra [It's everyone's idol Kanra-chan~ ☆]
Kanra [Ooh, there's only Chrome-san today?]
Chrome [Good evening]
Kanra [Somehow it seems really lonely ☆]
Chrome [Yeah]
Kanra [Hotpot's great! It tastes better than usual with everyone crowded around]

Chrome [Yeah]

Kanra [But, but, really, don't you want to eat with your other half, just the two of you, and help them blow on their food or something? You do, don't you! Kya~!]

Chrome [Yeah]

Kanra [Ah~ you sound so unexcited nyan? I'll pinch your cheeks, you know!]

Chrome [Yeah]

Chrome [Then, um, Kanra-san]

Kanra [What is it ☆ Kya ☆]

Chrome [It's about time you jumped down a building isn't it?]

Kanra [Ehh?! What's with that! I don't understanddd! Pun-pun!]

Chrome [You're angry because you understand, aren't you]

Sharo-san has entered the chatroom

Sharo [Hello]

Sharo [Ah, I worked hard today, I'm beat]

Sharo [The two of you don't get along, as always]

Chrome [Good evening]

Kanra [Good evenya! ☆ Sharo-san should become Nyaro-san! How cute!]

Sharo [I can't stand it]

Sharo [I can't stand Kanra]

Chrome [Yeah]

Chrome [I agree with Sharo-san]

Kanra [Ah~! What's with the two of you? Bullying a delicate woman isn't something a real man would do!]

Chrome [Yeah. If you were a delicate woman... to begin with]

Sharo [Ah... Yep, I'm good with women]

Kanra [Hmph! Why don't all of you learn from the Dollars' Kadota-san!]

Sharo [What, is Kanra-san friends with Kadota-san]

Chrome [I didn't know Kadota-san even had any delicate women in his friends]

Sharo [Eh? Chrome-san knows Kadota-san too?]

Chrome [No, like I said yesterday, I just check the Dollars message board a lot. Anyway, from what I see there, he doesn't seem to have much women around him]

Sharo [Sigh. Well, I said this yesterday too, but I feel like I keep seeing him on the streets. There's this woman with him who doesn't seem to be his girlfriend, and she doesn't look quite delicate either]

Kanra [Honestly! Honestly! Abandoning a delicate lady to talk about women, how rude nya!]

Kanra [Well fine! Today I'll tell you unmanly idiots something that'll make you shiver in fear!]

Sharo [Yeah yeah. I'm scared]

Chrome [That's great]

Kanra [A fight might be breaking out between all the bosozoku and colour gangs in Ikebukuro!]

Sharo [Huh]

Sharo [Why suddenly this crazy stuff again]

Kanra [It's true! And recently Kadota-san was run over by a car wasn't he! Nya!]

Sharo [Drop the nya]

Kanra [Did you hear about the Yellow Scarves reviving?]

Kanra [There're rumours that the Yellow Scarves are picking a fight with the Dollars, you know?]

Kanra [Maybe someone from the Yellow Scarves did the hit-and-run with Kadota-san as a declaration of war nya]

Kanra [But did you know there were other rumours?]

Sharo [Hey, I thought it was gonna be small talk, but this is serious isn't it]

Sharo [Kanra-san be more serious with your intro]

Sharo [Also, drop the nya]

Chrome [Other rumours like?]

Kanra [There are two of them, you know?]

Kanra [Number one, the rumour that the Dollars is having an internal purge nya]

Kanra [That is, cannibalisation. Scary nya!]

Chrome [Cannibalisation]

Chrome [Kadota-san's something like a leader in the Dollars, why would he...]

Kanra [Kadota-san's a chivalrous person! Unlike Sharo-san and Chrome-san]

Kanra [That's why if there're people misbehaving under the name of the Dollars Kadota-san will deal with them. On the other hand he's a pain in the nyack for those trying to do as they please \approx

Sharo [Ah, I see]

Sharo [Well, a united group would be one thing, but that's not the case for the Dollars]

Sharo [Though technically I'm part of the Dollars as well]

Kanra [Then, the second rumour is... the dragon's corpse]

Sharo [Dead dragon?]

Sharo [Ah, typo. Dragon's corpse]

Chrome [By dragon's corpse, you mean Dragon Zombie, as in the bosozoku?]

Kanra [Bingo, all correct! I'll nyan nyan as Chrome-san's prize nyan. Nyan ☆] Chrome [I'm fine without] Sharo [Ah, so Dragon Zombie was bosozoku] Kanra [Yup, there're people saying people in Dragon Zombie jackets were hanging around where Kadotasan's accident was] Sharo [They hurt Kadota?] Kanra [Because Dragon Zombie nyat only has bikes, they have cars too] Kanra [It wouldn't be strange for them to attack the Dollars nya] Chrome [I see...] Kanra [But these two rumours aren't unrelated] Sharo [Huh? Why?] Kanra [Actually, they say there're members of Dragon Zombie in the Dollars! And a lot of them, too!] Sharo [Wha?] Sharo [Well, that's, anyone can get into the Dollars, so it's not exactly impossible...] Sharo [Ah, wait] Sharo [That means, the Dragon Zombie folks, they're gonna do that?] Sharo [Take over the Dollars from the inside, and make a giant Dragon Zombie?] Chrome [Yeah, that would make sense] Private Mode Chrome [By the way, Kanra-san] Private Mode Chrome [I have something to talk to you about, just the two of us] Private Mode Kanra [] Private Mode Chrome [Oh? What was that, posting a blank like a novice] Chrome [Well then... Who are you?] Private Mode Private Mode Chrome [You're not Kanra-san, are you?] Kanra-san has left the chatroom Sharo [Eh?!] Chrome [I wonder what happened]

Sharo [Hurhur. Maybe she was upset that I said everything she wanted to say, so she ran away...]

Chrome [Maybe Dragon Zombie vanished her]

Sharo [D, don't say scary things like that...]

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32

Ikebukuro, Izaya's apartment.

"To think someone would steal my other handle."

Orihara Izaya leant back in his chair till it creaked, and began looking into the person who had used the name [Kanra].

At first he had thought it was a prank from his younger sisters, but from the IP address and such it seemed this was not the case.

From the content of the conversation and the purposeful use of the administrator's name Kanra, it could probably be assumed that someone who knew [Kanra=Izaya] was spiting him.

"Tsukumoya... No, probably not... Well, it doesn't matter who."

Izaya smiled as he imagined the person who had masqueraded as him to spread such dubious information.

Then, in the next moment – that smile vanished abruptly, as he murmured.

"...still, 'nyan' was too much... 'Nyan'..."



- A Snake in One's Bosom - Part 1 of 2

Night time. In front of the hospital.

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It seemed Kadota's second surgery had gone over without a hitch, and his vitals had mostly stabilised.

Anri felt somewhat relieved at this news – but as they heard that he had not regained consciousness, she glanced at Karisawa.

"I'm going back for a shower, so you should go back for today, Anri-chan. When Dotachin wakes up, I'll tell him he missed seeing a busty meganekko fallen angel love-slave!"

She smiled as she said this, and stood to comfort Azusa and company.

Anri felt she had no right to bother them, and after a round of goodbyes, left the hospital.

-- I want to talk to someone.

Plunged into uneasiness, she reached for her phone.

Previously, she had been in the waiting room with many people, praying for Kadota's safety; perhaps it was a reverse effect of that that the moment she had stepped out the hospital, a sudden loneliness came upon her.

-- There was never anything like this before...

Before she had met Celty and her other friends, she had locked even that loneliness out of her heart, pushing it outside of her 'picture frame', regarding it impersonally.

But things were different now.

She had moved her loneliness into her side of the picture frame – the recognition of the emotion that assaulted her shook her greatly.

She felt it dangerous that even the voice of 'Saika' swelling within her had begun to seem endearing, and so she decided it would be best to call someone to dispel these feelings.

She did not feel ready to call Mikado, and it seemed Masaomi had changed his phone number, and so was not contactable in the first place.

--Although it feels shameless to rely on others at a time like this...

Even as Anri reprimanded herself, she dialed a certain person's number.

From back when her heart was still completely shut, to now, where it had opened to some extent, this person had remained her friend.

Despite the distance that had come between them since she had entered a relationship, this girl, who still affirmed their friendship – Harima Mika.

But even as the call connected, no one picked up.

"Is she out...?"

She could have gone out on a date, with her lover Yagiri Seiji.

If this were so trying to contact her further would only bother them, and so Anri suppressed her loneliness, and quickly started homewards.

She did not yet know.

And at this point in time, she had no way of knowing.

That on this day –

Yagiri Seiji and Harima Mika had each disappeared from their homes.

39

Night time. Somewhere in Ikebukuro.

The Traffic Police Force officer – or, more simply, the rider of the white motorbike, Kuzuhara Kinnosuke – put out his engine in the middle of an alley.

This alley was the site of a hit-and-run a day ago.

On a telephone pole nearby there was a notice that read 'Seeking Witnesses', and standing beside it was a woman eying the notice.

Having completed his assigned patrol route for the day, Kuzuhara was on the way back to the main office to handle the paperwork for the tickets he had issued today. Kuzuhara was an able officer, but it was hard to say he was completely serious about his job; on the way back he had taken a detour on his white motorbike, and now he even yelled at the woman from his vehicle. Though, of course, he had made sure this was a road he could park on.

"Yo, Shinju-chan. You're off duty today?"

"Ah... Oii-san!"

"I heard a hit-and-run happened here. No one died and it wasn't played up, but the guys at the station have a lot of gossip."

Kinnosuke spoke to his niece, who was out of uniform; he examined the scene that still held traces of the incident, and muttered, irately.

"A hit-and-run on my turf; someone's really looking down on me."

"It's good enough that no one died. But things seem rather riled up... And somehow the atmosphere at the station's been edgy, too, today."

"Ah, they say the one that got hit was a leader of some colour gang."

Kuzuhara had issued countless tickets to Togusa's van before, but he did not realise the man in the passenger seat was the victim this time around.

"Yeah, it's a colour gang known as the Dollars; no one knows much about how it works. The people down at the Juvenile Division've been fretting about whether a fight's going to break out. I haven't been to the station today so I don't know the details, but there've been rumours all over that Heiwajima Shizuo was arrested, so those at Community Safety must be having it tough."

"Heiwajima Shizuo? Ah, I've heard the rumours, and I do see his bartender suit on the street sometimes."

--Speaking of which, that Horada punk's said some things about Heiwajima, too.

There had previously been an incident where a battered car, carrying a street sign, had attempted to run Kuzuhara's white bike off the road.

He remembered that when he had arrested them on the spot (having caught them red-handed, as a policeman), they had cried, "It's not like that! The street sign wasn't our fault, it was Heiwajima Shizuo! We tried to ram you because we thought you were the Black Bike!"

"You might not know, Oji-san, but he's extremely famous in Ikebukuro. They say he's related to the Dollars, and there are rumours that he's friends with the Headless Rider you're after right now, Oji-san."

"...oh? With that monster, huh."

Kuzuhara Kinnosuke was completely unaware that the Black Biker saw him as the monster instead. He questioned his niece again.

"So, that guy's at the station?"

"You're the one on duty today, Oji-san, wouldn't you know better?"

"That's true. I'll be off, then. Thanks."

He said goodbye to his niece, and started back to the main office.

"So that monster's also making friends properly, huh?"

The wind in the streets came over him entirely, and drowned out his grousing as he clicked his tongue.

"Then... Don't drive like there's no tomorrow. Stupid bastard."

32

Night time. Sunshine Street, Ikebukuro.

On the night of the day Heiwajima Shizuo was arrested, Vorona was sullen.

She could not figure out why she felt so irritated, and the fact that she could not discern this called forth further ire, forming a unescapable spiral of frustration.

Usually just walking along the street would attract flirts to her, but perhaps even those flirts and scouts could detect the danger lurking in her eyes today, for no one approached.

"Don't pull a long face. He'll be out soon."

Tanaka Tom, walking slightly behind, was probably unable to leave his subordinate this way; he murmured the above.

However, on the receiving end of this placation, Vorona's face was one of incomprehension; she creased her brow as she asked.

"The process of understanding has been stagnated. Does there exist any relevance between Shizuo-sempai's apprehension and my mood?"

"So you do know 'pulling a long face' means you're angry..."

Vorona's intonation was perfect, but her Japanese was always difficult to understand. The president of Tom's company had speculated that she probably felt using formal words as much as possible was beautiful Japanese, but where was the beauty, if those unused to it could hardly carry on a conversation?

"But, but, there are endless sources of doubt. Why would Shizuo-senpai be..."

Shizuo had been led away by the police sometime in the evening.

They had not come to arrest him with a warrant; it was entirely voluntary for him to follow them for questioning.

'Assault of a civilian.'

That was the charge Shizuo was under suspicion for.

The victim had reported the crime, and so the police had quickly arrived at the building Heiwajima Shizuo worked at – but besides the plainclothes officers five other uniformed officers had come; from this abnormal case it could only be concluded that the name 'Heiwajima Shizuo' was also well-known amongst the police.

The president had said, 'We'll contact a lawyer, just say no.' But Shizuo had said, carelessly, 'I haven't done anything I don't remember doing; it'll be fine.' And so he had followed the police.

"It's because before he came to work here he once got framed by someone and got arrested. It was a suspended sentence back then, too, so he was never actually jailed, but it seems he was detained for a while."

Vorona asked Tom, who was talking as he walked.

"This makes no sense. If it was clear he was framed why would there still be a sentence?"

"He was innocent for the original crime. But when they caught him he exploded; he got violent and threw a vending machine at a police car, apparently he did a lot of stuff. So the charge became damage of public property and obstructing justice. When I heard I was just glad he didn't get charged with attempted murder, too."

"But I feel Shizuo-sempai has a high probability of catching attention for other crimes as well."

Vorona pressed on.

Her image of Japan was of a constitution with one of the strictest police forces in the world.

She herself was involved in illegal activities, such as her violation of the Sword and Firearms Law, and she had expended all of her wit to evade the eye of the police.

Due to this, she felt it unthinkable that Shizuo had never been caught for uprooting guardrails and lampposts.

To her question, Tom sighed and looked up at the night sky as he replied.

"Whenever Shizuo breaks anything, the president pays the compensation fees for him. Thanks to that Shizuo's debt to the president keeps increasing, and he has to work even harder."

"Forcing someone into labour to repay a debt is illegal, isn't it?"

"There're actually a lot of legal details that make it so it can't be subtracted from his pay. But well, this whole line of work isn't one that can survive without hiring lawyers, and there're lots of grey areas, too."

"This is further incomprehensible. Why does Shizuo-sempai..."

"Do you want him to be arrested?"

"No, the possibility of that is nil."

Vorona answered promptly.

Tom shrugged as he smiled, and relayed some of what he had heard from the president.

"If Shizuo gets charged with damaging public property, the situation'll get a little difficult, is all."

"?"

"For example. If there was a judge that had never seen Shizuo's strength before, if they were told that the accused broke off a telephone pole with his bare hands and started swinging it around – who would believe something so ridiculous?"

Vorona understood his point, and nodded; but after some thought she became further confused.

"This is strange. There's plenty of evidence, isn't there? Videos can prove it. And I don't think Shizuo-sempai would deny a crime he really committed."

"That has its own problems. For example, Shizuo really pulled out a guardrail. If that happened, those who don't know 'Shizuo is special' would probably think something like, 'Are our telephone poles made of such weak material that someone could snap them bare-handed?' Or, 'Was the construction so shoddy that it could get pulled out bare-handed?' Something like that."

"["

"When it comes to Godzilla trampling on buildings no one's going to complain about shoddy construction, but that's because society views Godzilla as something fictional. Essentially, Shizuo's superstrength is completely in the fictional domain. If we were to really build telephone poles and guardrails to be so sturdy even Shizuo couldn't break them, what kind of budget do you think we'd need?"

Tom smiled sardonically, and glanced at Vorona.

Her expression spoke of satisfaction, but it was intermixed with an inability to accept this.

"And so the police force lets this pass."

On closer thought, she did not have very detailed knowledge regarding the policing body back in her homeland Russia. She had read of past incidents of corruption in books and newspapers, but no further information had been recorded. And she was not skilled at applying her book knowledge to make deductions in real life situations, in the first place.

Tom looked away from Vorona, immersed in thought, and continued with a light tone.

"Who knows. I generally half-trust the police, and I'm not averse to helping with their investigations. But you know. Whichever country it is, there'll probably be times when the police know a case is 'definitely not a suicide', but go on to handle it as if it were a suicide anyway. If you see it that way, they're not an organisation of absolute justice. Well, we can only pray the police of Japan take their work seriously."

"Then why, today of all days, Shizuo-sempai..."

"Ah, that's simple. They can't arrest him for damaging property, so they've been eying him for a while; they're trying to charge him for assault instead. The ones Shizuo throws around or beats up are generally people with their own crimes, who can't report it to the police even if they want to. To have a victim coming out this time – it's an ugly way to say it, but it's their chance."

Having explained thus far, Tom heaved a deep sigh.

"Personally, I don't believe Shizuo would beat a woman up that bad without a reason. It's either some trivial misunderstanding, or someone trying to frame him again, probably."

However, his expression suddenly clouded over, as he continued.

"What I'm worried about is... During the questioning, or when he's helping with the investigation, all I'm hoping for's that he doesn't start raging."

After that, Tom had asked Vorona if she wanted to visit Russia Sushi, but as she still found it difficult to face Simon and Denis, she declined politely in her own way, and bade farewell to Tom.

On the way back to the apartment Shizuo and Tom's company had prepared for her, she continued to contemplate what would become of Shizuo after today.

If he really got violent in the police station, Shizuo could probably escape easily.

The walls and metal grilles in the detention centre he could most likely break with his bare hands, and the cuffs could probably be torn apart as easily as *amezaiku*.

Although she could not imagine Japan's police officers opening fire on an unarmed man, in the case of Shizuo, he would probably be fine even if he were hit.

- --Shizuo-sempai as a runaway villain. I can have a proper match with him, if I claim self-defense.
- --But I don't think I've grown enough to be able to win against him.
- --And I haven't repaid the favour for that can of coffee.
- --And I still owe him for bringing me to that store with the delicious cake.

--..

As these thoughts ran through her mind, Vorona frowned unconsciously.

--Why, why am I finding reasons to not fight with Shizuo-sempai?

She had remained by Shizuo's side because he was the goal of her life. Unlike the Headless Rider, who was a monster, as a 'human' he was the pinnacle of strength.

If they could wreck one another to her heart's satisfaction, she would most likely be able to resolve the question that had followed her for years.

Whether that known as 'humanity' was weak, or if it was strong.

Having essentially witnessed no more than physical strength in her life, she was completely incapable of understanding the feeling of 'not wanting to fight' that dwelled within herself.

And thus she was unable to identify the gloominess surging within her, frowning as she continued to walk home in the night.

At this point, a looming shadow came to stand before her, obstructing her passage.

"It's been a while, Vorona."

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"……?!"
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At the giant shadow that had suddenly appeared before her, Vorona's nerves sharpened, and her muscles immediately heated up into battle mode.

But at the same time, she realised.

That the man standing before her was an acquaintance.

"Slon?!"

His body exceeded two metres in height; matching that enormous build was a giant aluminium walking stick.

Most of his exposed skin was wrapped in bandages, giving him a mummy-like appearance, but from his overall appearance Vorona recognised the man as her former partner.

Months ago, when they had clashed with the Awakusu-kai, Vorona and Slon had been captured together. But following a deal between the Russian weapons dealers and the Awakusu-kai, Vorona was released, and Slon was transported off to somewhere affiliated to the Awakusu.

"Your survival was possible?! Where have you been, what have you been doing up till now?!"

Despite having heard from Akabayashi that Slon might live, Vorona had had no leads, and being that their relationship did not exceed one of work, she could do no more than pray for his wellbeing – but their sudden meeting shocked her nevertheless, and her eyes widened uncharacteristically as she saw him.

"Well, things happened."

As he said this, Slon reached into his mouth – he brought out a denture with more than ten teeth, then replaced it as he continued to speak.

"It's dealt with, they just tooak aff some af my... teeth."

Some of his speech had been garbled as he was removing his denture, but what had happened was fully imaginable. Not only that, it could be imagined that just the same, in his body, were wounds unattainable by normal means.

The walking stick scraped against the asphalt, as Slon took a step towards Vorona.

"Right now the Awakusu-kai's sent me to be something like an informant's assistant. I don't know what kind of deal there was, that let me live when I should've died."

"I see... I'm relieved to have confirmed your survival."

"I think your relief comes too soon."

"?"

Slon spoke to Vorona, who was confused.

"You should leave this city for a while. It's going to get dangerous for you."

"I do not understand. I feel this city is very much lukewarm. It is incomparable to war zones. I do not sense any dangerous elements at all."

"Yes. But I'm not saying that this city is dangerous. It's just that you're going to be made a cog in a war. More accurately, you and me both are."

"A cog?"

Slon seemed genuinely concerned, and so Vorona forgot her joy at their reunion, puzzling.

"Suits me. I will have them regret bringing me into the vortex of their schemes, for it is harder than they think. Who is the instigator? I will get rid of him first."

"You can't do it. Not as you are now."

"What do you mean? I request an explanation."

Vorona had become somewhat impatient; Slon took on a sarcastic tone, as he threw out:

"You've made yourself at home in the warmth of this city; you probably can't fight as you did before, can you?"

"...! Respecting authority and condemning common men; are you deriding me in a manner equivalent to that!"

"Hey, hey, I don't get what you're saying anymore."

Vorona, sensing she had been insulted, calmly started concocting a plan to knock Slon out –

"Being mean like that's pathetic, Slon-san."

But the voice from the side rapidly cooled Vorona's anger.

"Rather than hot or cold, there're times warm water's better for health, you know? Maybe being in such a lukewarm environment's made her way more terrifying than she was before."

"...did you follow along just to make fun of me?"

Slon frowned as he asked this; the man shrugged as he replied.

"No way. I'm just interested in this ex-partner of yours."

The young man glanced over at Vorona, and to his face, she asked Slon.

"...? Who is this?"

And following this it was not Slon who replied; the man bowed politely as he answered her.

"Well, I did make a request of you before, but we never met, did we? Orihara Izaya. I work a unique job as an information broker in this city; you could say I'm the handyman of the people around here."

"...Orihara, Izaya."

Vorona realised she knew of this name, and turned her eyes on the man named Izaya.

"I remember"

"Oh? To remember the names of all your employers, as expected of a pro..."

As he was speaking, Vorona aimed a high kick at his face.

"W-whoa?!"

Dodging by a hair's breadth, he flew a few steps back, and hid himself behind Slon.

"I'm shocked! Wasn't that kick comparable to Mikage-chan's? Slon-san, her skills haven't worsened at all, have they? And speaking of which, why kick me?"

He seemed incredulous as he asked this; Vorona replied.

"I hear you are Shizuo-sempai's mortal enemy. If I get rid of you here, I may yet repay my debt to Shizuo-sempai. I hold no grudge, but I wish to end you. Please accept your extermination."

"Huh... I'm surprised. It'd be one thing if it were a child with a taste for monsters, but to think Shizu-chan could win over a full-grown girl."

He smiled meaningfully; but Vorona, who had observed many people before, noticed that the smile hid an odd anger.

"Well, it's fine. Human observation is a hobby of mine, so whose pawn you'll become in the end interests me greatly. Besides, I'm a generous person. Even if you're allying yourself with that iron golem, I'll love you as a member of humanity."

The man Orihara Izaya laughed like a child as he spoke.

Vorona recalled that Heiwajima Shizuo often labelled this man an 'insect', and strangely, she agreed.

- --Indeed, a man like an insect.
- --He's smiling, but it's like an imitation of a bug.

Vorona felt something off about the man before her, and instinctively retreated by a step.

She felt, deeply, Shizuo's words, that one could not let this person close.

Likely, this man was a creature similar to a termite.

He was, unmistakeably, the type of man that would devour the foundations of the homes of those that neared him, and bring the house down on the heads of its owners.

When she had worked under her father back in Russia, she had seen countless people carrying the same air as he.

She recalled that one of these had been an executive in the Russian mafia, and further raised her guard against the man Orihara Izaya.

"Somehow it looks like I've garnered some hatred. Let's go, Slon."

"...go? Go where? Today's work should have ended already."

"There's been some strange movement so I've been going around checking, but it seems we've lost contact with Namie. We could've been beaten to the punch."

Izaya chuckled even as he conveyed this serious information to Slon.

Unheeding that he would be heard by Vorona, who was still wary, he instructed Slon lightly.

"Settle it by tomorrow morning. That way everything'll be dealt with before this ex-partner you're worrying about here becomes 'their' pawn."

It was not that he did not mind her hearing this. Rather, he had spoken deliberately so she could hear.

Vorona believed this, and so furrowed her brow deeply.

- --How unpleasant.
- --What's with this man

It was not that she felt any clear malice against the man before her. She was merely overwhelmed by a premonition that he was 'harmful'.

Perhaps this was evidence that Vorona herself had been influenced by Heiwajima Shizuo and Tom, or even the city itself.

But she did not detect her own emotions, and simply glared at Orihara Izaya with unhidden hostility.

Izaya seemed to be heartened by even this hostility; he smiled lightly at Vorona, and went on his way.

Left behind, Vorona hardened her expression, as she glared into the dark streets.

Something was stirring in the city of Ikebukuro, right now.

And it seemed she would be involved in it.

...,

The scene that played in her heart was that of months ago, when she had been effortlessly defeated by Akabayashi. The secret contract between her father and the Awakusu-kai, that had transpired somewhere without her knowing.

The shame of having her life toyed with on their palms resurfaced once more, and her heart seethed quietly.

--I will not let anyone do that again. Anyone.

- -- If there's someone who plans to use me, prepare yourself.
- --You will pay in full.

Ice steadily enclosed her heart, and the expression she had worn when she first came to this city returned.

For Vorona, the person known as Heiwajima Shizuo had become a restraint.

Just as Kadota was the brake for Yumasaki and company, Heiwajima Shizuo was the 'objective' that made her heart boil over.

And now – the man that made her heart tremble hotly was gone.

Was it deliberate, or was it coincidence?

The challenge issued from Orihara Izaya, the one Heiwajima Shizuo called an 'insect'; it had certainly poured a cold poison into Vorona's heart.

32

On the outskirts of the city. Second floor of an abandoned building.

"There's no problem, is there? Ryugamine Mikado-kun."

The man that had suddenly appeared before Mikado and the gang upturned the atmosphere completely.

"Huh...?"

Mikado, who had only been staring in shock up till now – in that instant, his body froze up.

The man had not done anything in particular.

He had said Mikado's name. That was all he had done.

But the man's stance; the way he breathed; the weight hidden in his voice; the incomprehensible fact that he knew of Mikado's name, despite this being their first meeting; the disquiet of his gaze, unreadable behind his shades; this all joined to become a threat, bringing on Mikado an anxiousness he had never felt before now.

More than at the first meeting of the Dollars, when he had confronted Yagiri Seiji's sister –

More than in the moment he had heard that Anri had been assaulted by the Slasher –

More than the time he had been driven by Celty to the abandoned factory, only to witness Masaomi ridden with wounds –

More than when the bosozoku were pursuing, as he escaped on Kadota's van –

More than when his kouhai Aoba had revealed his true identity –

More than when he had been attacked by the stalker of Hijiribe Ruri, an embodiment of frightening violence

Now, in this moment, the fear that came unto Mikado's body far exceeded anything from any of those times before.

He had been called by his name, by a strange man that had appeared all of a sudden.

That fact alone was enough to send off blaring alarms in his body he had never known before.

It felt as if the man's voice had become countless serpents biting their way through his skin, winding around his entire body from within his veins.

```
--I'll die. --This is bad. --What?

--Why? --No. --I don't want to die. --This is bad.

--Who? --Danger. --I'll die. --If I don't run.

--What is he? --This can't do. --I'll be killed. --I don't want to die.

--There're still things I have to do. --No.
```

--I don't want to die yet no no no I can't die here not yet I want to live I want to run faster anywhere but it's impossible I can't escape but I can't die do something do something if I don't do something something –

Why had he this premonition of his own death; why, indeed, did he feel such terror? Unable to comprehend even this, Mikado could only make as to scream, instinctively.

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"-ergh... Ah..."
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However, the extreme tension had drained all moisture from the cavity of his mouth, and in all honesty he was in a state where he would not even be able to speak normally, had he wanted to.

At the sight of Mikado, sweat-drenched, his mouth opening and closing – the man struck the asphalt with his cane.

The dry sound quaked through Mikado's eardrums once more, and the mysterious man chuckled.

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"...? Ah, uh..."
```

Mikado discovered he had been released from the previous tension, and looked once more at the man before him.

The man with the shades picked up his cane, and pat his own shoulder as he spoke.

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"Well, I'm relieved."
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"At least you're the kind of kid that'll get scared from the atmosphere just now."

The man grinned carelessly, as he took a step closer.

"I was wondering what I should do, if you turned out to be the dangerous type that could keep a straight face at that."

At those words the boys from the Blue Square seemed to have finally absorbed the situation, and they begun to stir.

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"Hey, what's up, old man?"
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"We've reserved this spot, y'know?"

A few of them closed in on him at once, and one of them reached out to grab his collar.

'Hey, make them stop.'

About the same time, Celty showed her PDA to Mikado.

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"Eh?"
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Just as Mikado mumbled this -

The boys surrounding the man started flying one by one.

Or rather, more accurately, they had been viciously knocked down by the man.

"?!"

Neither the ones that had been sent flying nor the ones who witnessed this could make head or tails of what had happened.

Only, it appeared that those who had been brutally struck in the back had gone numb and could no longer stand.

"ESP?"

It was perhaps due to the presence of Celty, herself an impossible existence, that such an unlikely possibility came into Mikado's mind.

But on hearing Mikado's words the man chuckled as he denied.

"No way. It's just a trick. If Oi-chan here had ESP, I'd long have... I'd long have... What? What sounds good? Courier-san."

Having unexpectedly been approached, Celty hurriedly typed into her PDA.

'I wouldn't know. And I think it'd depend on what kind of power it was.'

"That's true. Well, I'll think about it on my own."

Mikado could not see the PDA from where he was, but he could sense that they were making some joke.

"Um, Celty-san. Who might this be?"

Mikado queried politely; Celty, hesitating, consulted Akabayashi first.

'Is it all right to say it?'

"I don't mind. That's why I came here, after all."

After ensuring this, Celty directly informed Mikado and Aoba of the truth.

'This man is Akabayashi-san. He's an executive of the Awakusu-kai.'

"The Awakusu-kai, as in... It can't be..."

'In a nutshell, he's... that type.'

At the truth that had just been thrust in his face, a cold shudder ran down Mikado's spine.

The name of the Awakusu-kai was not one that could be uncovered without in-depth investigation of its parent group, the Medei Alliance – but as Mikado roamed the sea of the internet in search of Ikebukuro news, he had encountered it numerous times.

And he was acutely aware of what kind of organisation the Awakusu-kai was.

He had been prepared for this.

At the same time, he had hoped that this moment would never come.

But this man, Akabayashi, that appeared before him came as though a spectral messenger of death, come to tell him this.

That the Dollars had set foot in the underside of the city; and was perhaps already deeply entrenched.

Aoba as well was regarding Akabayashi with a solemn expression, as he signalled with his hand for his companions to make no move.

In the midst of this tense atmosphere, the man that was the source chuckled, and sat on the heap of materials beside Mikado.

"Really, what a coincidence. Oi-chan knew a bit about this place too, see. Or did you fellows find out about this place because of the trouble recently?"

(())

Although Mikado did not understand and was confused, Aoba seemed to have realised what he meant, and averted his eyes slightly.

Akabayashi noticed this difference, but he made no comment, and simply continued to speak.

"Well, well, why don't we put that aside for now. Ryugamine Mikado-kun. Are you curious about why Oichan knows your name?"

"...no. Akabayashi-san, that is..."

"Ah, you can feel free to call Oi-chan here yakuza, yeah? But the word yakuza's never had good connotations. I've colleagues who'd get angry if you called them that to their faces, so look out for that."

"...thank you very much. And, about before... If you're yakuza, it'd be quite easy to find out about me, so..."

The Awakusu-kai aside, Mikado understood well the power held by violence groups. They were able to corner people who owed illegal loans into desperation; from that alone Mikado could sense that they had an investigative ability beyond his imagining.

This time around, Akabayashi had not touched the power of the Awakusu-kai as an organisation, and had instead purchased the information from Orihara Izaya – but Mikado had no way of knowing this.

"I see. It's good you understand. Then, my friends... a bunch of folks called 'Jyan Jyaka Jyan' followed you, which is how I knew to come here... Well. I was surprised when I came. I didn't think you'd be friends with a courier I know."

With a glance at Celty, Akabayashi continued.

"Well. You know what it means when someone like me's coming down here, don't you? You know what it means, right?"

"How has the Dollars... brought any trouble...?"

Swallowing, Mikado mustered his courage and wrung those words from his throat.

- --Scary.
- -- It doesn't seem right to think this, but...
- -- The people from Yagiri Pharmaceuticals don't match up to this at all.

As he stifled the shiver than ran down his spine, Mikado told himself he had to face the reality before him, and clenched his fists.

From that first meeting, when he had first seen the power of the 'Dollars' – he had already known there was a possibility that people who had occupations in the underworld would eventually involve themselves with the Dollars.

But it also stood that Mikado had all along clung to the fleeting hope that that situation could somehow be solved.

On the night of that first meeting, it was true that he had felt that the Dollars was omnipotent.

But in the spring, when Toramaru had attacked, that illusion had cracked; and now it was shattered by the man before his eyes.

He had heard that recently violence groups were progressing towards intelligent methods, and those that could be recognised on sight to be of that sort were diminishing.

Indeed, if one were to ignore the scar on his face and his dressing, the man before him did not give off an impression of being particularly violent. Indeed, while he was certainly not a salaryman, it would be within acceptable boundaries to imagine him as a music producer, or someone of that ilk.

Even so, just now, the very instant the name Ryugamine Mikado left his lips, a distinct 'premonition of death' had emerged in the boy's heart.

- -- I need to, I need to do something...
- --Is he going to collect money? Or will he crush us?
- --Whichever it is, it definitely has to be avoided.

He had also considered requesting Celty to act as an in-between, but he was unclear as to her relationship with the Awakusu-kai, and it would be unreasonable of him to put her in a spot.

At Mikado's hesitation, Akabayashi continued, mildly.

"Well... Should we really call it trouble, I wonder. I'm not sure about the other old men in this line, but Oichan here prefers to avoid acting against civilians, you know."

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"...I see."
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"How should I put it? In the words of those manga or those dramatic magazines, it'd be the surface and the underbelly of the city, yes? Guarding that boundary, that's Oi-chan's job."

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"...I see."
```

There was nothing else Mikado could say, and so Akabayashi continued.

"If anyone's toes came across the line, to put it simply, we'd punt them back to the surface, but if they insist on coming over – we either bring them in as allies, or we crush them, that's how it works."

Here Akabayashi tapped his cane, as he stared into Mikado's eyes through his shades.

"So, which would you prefer? To be crushed? Or to become our ally?"

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For a moment, silence reigned through the building.

After many long seconds, Mikado slowly, strongly, began to speak.

"Will you not give us a third path?"

"So you don't like either, is that it? Well, it's fine. I'll hear about your third path."

He had first pointed out, sharply: 'So you reject our offer?' But Akabayashi had let Mikado continue, nevertheless.

"Us, as the Dollars, we walk on that boundary. We might have some scuffles or gatherings around the city, but we definitely won't give trouble to the Awakusu-kai... Is there such a path?"

"That path of yours sure is narrow. And trouble can come in many forms."

"So, just a little, could we go into more detail? We have no intention of obstructing your side. We're just... looking for a place to belong."

"A place to belong, huh."

The sound of the cane echoed in the room; as though testing Mikado, he asked.

"If you're looking for a place to belong, there're plenty on the surface, aren't there? Mikado-kun, your eyes are full of determination right now, but it isn't all that cool, yeah? If I were to say, those are the same eyes as a gambler who's falling deeper and deeper. Stop gambling. That's all they have to do, but they start saying the thrill's where they belong, and in the end everyone goes splash."

" "

Even Mikado himself could not assert that there was no such thing.

He was conscious of the fact that he was, indeed, walking a dangerous path.

But even so, Mikado had something he wanted to protect.

A long time ago, that which he had witnessed on the night of their first meeting – that which could be called the representation of the ideal Dollars – that illusion.

Even though he could understand, in his head, that it was no more than an illusion, he could not curb the fervour that swirled deep in his heart. And this was why Mikado sought to make that illusion a reality – why he sought to walk on a boundary different from the one Akabayashi had spoken of.

"That's why I'd like some advice on how not to lose this bet."

"Then don't gamble."

Akabayashi replied swiftly.

"And in the first place, you don't come across as someone skilful enough to walk a tightrope. Well, all right. I know a bit more about the Dollars, now. In any case, it doesn't look like we can stop the Dollars even if we were to go so far as to abduct you. If that's how it is I'll just start crushing whoever catches my eye first, as I please."

As Akabayashi stood from the scraps, Mikado continued, doggedly.

"Uh, um!"

"Hm?"

"If, for example... If people from the Awakusu-kai tried to kill one of us for no reason, would it also be 'trouble' if we helped? If you trafficked drugs, would it also be 'trouble' if we stopped the Dollars from buying them?"

For an instant – Akabayashi's face lost all expression.

"...are you saying that we would gang up on civilians for no reason?"

Even as he quailed under Akabayashi's narrowed eyes, Mikado clenched his fists even tighter, as he argued.

"But... you are the yakuza, aren't you?"

'Mikado!'

Celty typed into her PDA, but Mikado, with his eyes fixed on Akabayashi, did not notice.

For a short time, Akabayashi and Mikado locked eyes.

The threatening air Akabayashi exuded was a great deal fiercer than when he had first entered; but even in the face of this Mikado did not avert his gaze.

And then, in the next moment, Akabayashi's face broke into the same grin as before.

"Haha. That's right. Oi-chan said it, too – you can call me yakuza. I guess it's touché. Ah, well, it's because we're yakuza."

Tapping his cane on his own forehead, he chuckled as he continued.

"If you really do see people ganging up on someone, call the police straight away. You can solve that without getting hurt."

"Eh? Ah, y, yeah."

"And you don't have to worry. Our group doesn't deal in drugs, and if there's anyone selling weird drugs...

Oi-chan here'll be the first to crush them."

Despite his smile, that last statement seemed to be holding in fierce anger.

But Mikado did not know the cause, and so he could only be confused.

Akabayashi measured up Aoba, who had not spoken a word throughout, against Mikado. Finally he glanced at Celty, and spoke.

"Well, today's something of a warning. I didn't come here to nag. Just be aware that people like Oi-chan are starting to eye you."

"...I see. Thank you very much for your concern."

"Yep, it's good to be modest. Though if you could step out of the Dollars like that, everyone'd be happy. And if your parents knew you were the leader of the Dollars they'd probably grieve... And, see, there's a girl you're close to, isn't there? What was her name again. Uh, the girl with the glasses..."

"Sonohara-san has nothing to do with this!"

By the time Mikado realised, he had already shouted.

His expression became more agitated than at any point in their conversation before. And in the next moment, it morphed into one of horror.

"I can tell she's definitely an important person, isn't she? At least pretend a little. As expected, the tightrope'll be a little tough, won't it?"

Naturally, Mikado was unaware that Anri and Akabayashi were old acquaintances. Uttering the name 'Sonohara' in such a setting, and even letting a person involved in a violence group know she was dear to him, was his greatest failure yet, today; this was what Mikado felt.

The boy had gone mute; and so Akabayashi continued.

"And did you know? Oi-chan's been a member of the Dollars for a few months, now."

"?!"

"Unless they had at least a grasp of the inner workings, there's no way anyone'd know you'd caused any trouble for us, is there? You're naïve."

Akabayashi laughed richly, as he moved towards the staircase.

"Well, as for Headless Rider-san, I'll save all my questions for next time."

'I understand. But, Mikado isn't the kind of idiot who'd make an enemy of your kind, Akabayashi-san."

"Hopefully that's the case."

'That's what I believe.'

Akabayashi nodded in satisfaction at Celty's reply, and stopped at the head of the stairs.

"Then, now, as a member of the Dollars, I'd like to make a request."

"?"

"A friend of mine has a problem related to the Dollars, see."

As he said this, he turned to the stairway, and called down to the first floor.

"Oi~. Niekawa no danna~. You can come out now~."

--Niekawa?

It was Celty who reacted to this name.

There were only two people she associated with this rare name.

A few seconds, the person stumbling up the steps – was, indeed, a face familiar to her.

"This, this quiet-looking kid? Really?"

The man saw Mikado's face, and seemed surprised at the difference between expectation and reality.

"Yeah, at least, I think he's the closest thing to a leader in the Dollars."

Akabayashi informed him dully, and Celty, beside him, thrust out her PDA.

'Niekawa-san! You're Niekawa-san from the 'Tokyo Warrior', aren't you! W, why are you here?!'

"Uh... Uh, huh?! T, the Headless Rider?!"

'I told you my name before, didn't I! It's Celty Sturluson!'

Celty piped up on something completely irrelevant, and continued to press.

'Why are you here?! You know Akabayashi-san?! Um, if you're interviewing Mikado-kun, please don't publish their faces! There are people who'd be upset!'

"N-n-no, no, I didn't come to interview today..."

Mikado saw the bizarre exchange between Celty and Niekawa, and became further confused, asking.

"You know this person too, Celty-san?"

'No, uh, a long time ago, he interviewed me about Shizuo.'

Celty showed him the explanation on her PDA, and Niekawa, to a boy young enough to be his son, bowed his head.

"If you're the one most familiar with the Dollars, please, my runaway daughter, apparently she's a member... Please, help me find Haruna!"

At the man's burst of words, Celty felt herself grow faint.

--Haruna-chan's her, isn't it. The one with Saika.

-- That girl is... in the Dollars?

With acquaintances turning up one after another came a building pile of consequences of past events.

As she straightened out her situation, she felt herself bound to a desire to escape, to go home quickly to talk to Shinra, or if only to see him.

- --Shinra, help me, Shinra.
- --I... I couldn't have gotten myself caught in something unbelievably troublesome, could I?

Only now did she realise her own position –

The Headless Rider, a member of the Dollars, heaved a deep sigh in her heart.

32

Late at night. Somewhere in the city.

When Yumasaki had first noticed he was being followed, he was already in the proximity of his home, and there were few people around.

Yumasaki's apartment was very far from the heart of the city.

On his working days he would walk to take the train, and on the days he was with Kadota and his friends, Togusa would usually drive the van over to fetch him – it was rare to have a day like this, where he had no work and was going home by himself late at night.

As to who was following him, Yumasaki squinted his already-thin eyes as he thought.

- -- 01 A beautiful vampire girl?
- --02 A mysterious monster? (And then a beautiful girl with red hair and flaming eyes to the rescue)
- -- 3 A girl from another realm come to seek help?

If he were his usual self, he would probably end it there with those three fantasies.

However, with the current circumstances, two other possibilities came to mind.

- --04 The Yellow Scarves from the karaoke box followed?
- --05 The one who ran over Kadota, come after him as well?

As he considered these possibilities, deviant from his usual thoughts, he quietly changed his route home.

He reached a 24-hour car park, and entered without hesitation.

Most people who parked here left their vehicles here through the night to the next morning, and there was virtually no one around at this time; it was completely deserted, without even a supervisor.

No doubt he had chosen a place with surveillance cameras so as to identify the one stalking him – it was also because he felt they wouldn't do anything extreme under a camera.

Although if possibility of turned out to be true, the one making moves would be him; or so he planned.

••••

Yumasaki stood in the centre of the second floor of the car park, and looked around.

At first it seemed no one would come, and just as he thought he had been mistaken –

A few seconds later, he heard the clattering of something being drug along the floor.

The unique sound of friction between metal and asphalt neared from the first floor, and finally, round the corner of the slope, came a man's figure.

"...?"

But at the sight of this man, Yumasaki was confounded.

Firstly, he did not appear to be one of the Yellow Scarves. If it were someone completely unfamiliar he would consider possibility $\circ 5$ – but Yumasaki had a feeling that he had seen this man before.

And at the same time, Yumasaki noticed the source of the clanging.

The man was holding a work-use hammer as long as a staff; like an elementary school child with an umbrella, he slid the stone end along the asphalt as he walked.

A mysterious man dragging a hammer. But this man recognised Yumasaki, and as he raised his voice to speak Yumasaki finally realised his identity.

"Long time no see... It's been a really long time, huh? You rotten otaku bastard... yeah?"

That voice held both joy and hatred intermixed. Yumasaki cried in surprise:

"...! You can't be... Izumii-san?!"

"... 'Izumii-san', you say. 'Izumii-san', is it? 'Izumii-san' 'Izumii-san' 'Izumii-san' ..."

Having been called by his name by Yumasaki, Izumii repeated it under his breath like a mantra, his lips twisting, as he replied.

"The bastard who roasted my face and right arm still greets me with a '-san', I see. I'm so overjoyed I can't take it... Hev."

As opposed to his words, his voice was surging with bloodlust.

Yumasaki stared hard at him for a while, before asking, seriously:

"One thing, first. I want to make sure."

"Huh?"

"Izumii-san, was it you who ran over Kadota-san?"

"...huh, right. That traitor got in a hit-and-run and was hospitalised..."

Izumii smiled, seemingly pleased from the bottom of his heart. Yumasaki's expression remained unchanged as he asked further.

"Izumii-san, you had a huge car, didn't you. Did you run over Kadota-san with it?"

He asked as though he was half-certain of the truth.

Izumii held great resentment against Kadota, who had betrayed the Blue Square and triggered the breakdown of the gang. If Kadota's hit-and-run was a targeted assaulted rather than an accident, it would only be natural that Izumii be the first suspect.

But at Yumasaki's blunt question, the smile on Izumii's face vanished –

"My car, huh...?"

His temple twitched thrice; without warning, he raised the hammer.

"Bastard, didn't you ruin it with your Molotov haaaaaaaargh?!"

The wrath he had been repressing burst out all at once, and he flung the hammer at Yumasaki with full strength.

With the hammer closing in on him like a boomerang, Yumasaki yelped as he hopped to the side.

The hammer missed Yumasaki by a hair's breadth. But Yumasaki lost his balance, and fell to the floor, rolling.

"Ha! Idiot!"

At this golden chance, Izumii crossed the distance between them quickly.

At some point a small rubber mallet had come into his right hand.

Perhaps to stop Yumasaki's movement first, Izumii kicked at Yumasaki's head with the tip of his foot as he was still rolling.

But Yumasaki curled up and dodged it by a hair's breadth, and the toe of Izumii's foot hit his shoulder instead.

"Ugh!"

Much as it had hit only his shoulder, it was a full-force kick from the tip of Izumii's foot. It would have been unstrange if the area of impact had dislocated; that was the extent of the force dealt.

Yumasaki endured the impact that travelled through his entire body, and made as to stand somehow – but before he could, Izumii placed his foot down on Yumasaki's side with all of his weight.

As Izumii watched Yumasaki, unable to get up, he smiled sadistically.

He recalled the scene back then, right before Yumasaki and Kadota had betrayed the gang, and spoke similar words.

"Question time. After I kill you, whose head will I crush next..."

He bent his upper body as he spoke, and, with Yumasaki still underfoot, he raised the hammer.

"The hint's real easy. ...he's the guy in the hospital...right now!"

With no intention to hear an answer Izumii came down on Yumasaki's head with the hammer –

But a moment before he struck, a ball of flame erupted on his upper body.

"Eh... Ugoaaah?!"

Perhaps due to his previous trauma with fire, his shock was exaggerated as he scrambled away from Yumasaki.

He checked if he was still on fire, and kept a safe distance as he yelled.

"Bastard... What d'you have on you this timeaaaargh!"

Yumasaki stood slowly, as he put on his usual smile.

"Well, I feel kinda bad, Izumii-san. I don't wear red, but I'm a fire type."

He clutched in his right hand a specially modified lighter.

Within the range of a bat it could not be used more than a few times – it was essentially a home-made flamethrower, meant for surprise attacks, but this was enough to put distance between them and have Izumii on his guard.

"Yumasakiii..."

"Thinking about it, Izumii-san, if you were the culprit, after hitting Kadota-san you'd probably take his body and drive off with it, rather than just leave it there."

"Of course... Obviously I'd bury him in the mountains!"

At such a frightening statement from Izumii, Yumasaki shook his head and apologised.

"Ah, sorry. I'll apologise for suspecting you, but if you're going to attack the hospital after this, I can't let you beat me now, can I."

Yumasaki opened his thin eyes a little wider, as he fiddled with the modified lighter.

"Interesting... When I'm done killing you I'll burn every last bit of you..."

The light in Izumii's eyes took on a tint of madness exceeding mere killing intent. In the face of this, Yumasaki immediately reached for his rucksack on the ground and retrieved something. He took a step back from Izumii.

"Ah? A Molotov again, bastard? All right, come at me. If you think you can do anything to me with something like that, that is?"



"I'd like it if you could end off with, 'I'll shatter your dreams first', there."

"Huh?"

Yumasaki said something completely off-kilter; Izumii's eyes sharpened further.

In the next moment, Izumii's phone let off a tune.

"?"

Yumasaki was the one surprised.

Upon hearing the ringtone, the look in Izumii's eyes dissipated instantaneously; he took a step away from Yumasaki, and, of all things, picked up the call.

"...yes. Thank you for the hard work. Yes... yes."

Izumii's tone was one completely unimaginable from his self moments before, and question marks rose in Yumasaki's head as he stopped short.

"...I understand. I'll be present shortly."

--I'll be present shortly?!

The politeness was completely unlike Izumii, and Yumasaki was left jaw-dropped.

Izumii glanced sidelong at Yumasaki's expression as he hung up. He spoke irritatedly.

"You're in luck, otaku bastard. ...I'll let you live a few days more. You and Kadota both."

Returning to his former tone of voice, Izumii turned his back on Yumasaki, and spat his last words as he walked off.

"There're countless of the original Blue Square that hate you and Kadota, you know...? Be careful not to get offed by someone else."

Then Izumii clicked his tongue, and truly left the car park.

Yumasaki picked up the long-handled hammer that, after being thrown, had been left abandoned; humming under his breath, he murmured:

"Don't get killed by anyone else, he says... Izumii-san's unexpectedly suited for 2D scripts. Though the atmosphere was a little weak for that kind of line. Maybe I'll have to change my impression of him."

Yumasaki mumbled to himself, and noticed he had regained some of his calmness due to the encounter with Izumii.

"Now I think about it, I did say some really bad things to Kida-kun and the rest of them. I'll apologise properly after I'm done burning the culprit."

It was not that he had forgiven the culprit behind Kadota's hit-and-run, but:

"...it's not very efficient to just walk around, and I might get targeted again like earlier..."

"Somewhere to hide for a while... That's it! Looks like I've to find a hideout!"

- A Snake in One's Bosom - Part 2 of 2

Meanwhile, Anri's home.

Unable to sleep, Anri was alone, fiddling with her cell phone.

The chatroom she usually joined was empty right now.

- -- I have a terribly ominous feeling, about something...
- --What could it be? Such a terrible feeling...

With that strange sense of unsettlement, she decided to try looking up the city's news, and so she typed in the address of the Dollars' message board. It was a community page Celty had told her of, where one could exchange core information that could not be surfaced easily.

Despite her hopes, there was no information regarding Kadota's hit-and-run.

She sighed, and scanned through the entire page in case there was other information.

And then, first under the 'Recent Updates' category, she saw a post that said, 'Urgent matter: Seeking Help to Find Runaway Daughter'.

It seemed that even things such as searching for runaways fell under the scope of the Dollars.

It did not seem relevant to Kadota's incident, but Anri opened the page nonetheless, thinking she might be able to offer some assistance.

"...eh?"

Unconsciously, she let out a sound in the room.

The name displayed on the screen; and the accompanying photograph.

The instant she saw these, she felt both the 'mysterious unsettlement' churning within her and the 'voice of Saika' that sought the love of humans strengthen simultaneously.

This was because the one in the photo –

Was the girl who had once crossed blades with Anri, who had eventually been **subdued once more** by Anri's 'Saika'.

Niekawa Haruna.

A gentle face, and the beautiful long black hair that defined her.

The moment Anri discovered that she had gone missing, the world seemed to spin around her.

She desperately repressed the dizzying turmoil within herself, as she was assaulted by a sense of helpless uneasiness:

Had she been pulled into something vile?

And, because of her, would the ones precious to her be dragged into this tide as well?

The day after. Daytime, the outskirts of the city. The abandoned building.

"What did you want to say, with just the two of us?"

Celty asked this, as she had been brought to the abandoned building from the previous day by a message from Mikado.

Unlike yesterday, Aoba and the others were not with him; the two of them were truly alone.

"I wanted to inform you a little about my situation now, Celty-san... See, when those people came yesterday we got interrupted when we were getting to the point, and everything got all messed up, right?"

'I see.'

Celty had also been thinking that she had to talk to him immediately, and so there had been no reason to reject him.

The abandoned building held a completely different air about it in the daytime, and Celty had even been confused as to whether it was the same building. The battery-powered lanterns the boys had laid out were all gone; the daylight and shadow mixed to create a dim space.

But the face of the boy was no different from the previous night.

Perhaps this face itself was the very same he had worn before. It was a little scraped up, but his baby-face still gave off a slight air of timidity, and had not especially matured in this short period of time.

- --But it feels like something's unusual.
- --Is it internal, or the atmosphere... No, rather, it's more like on our first meeting...
- --It's like when he said he would use the power of the Dollars to trap Yagiri Namie, possibly.

Celty remembered the events of more than a year ago, and struck conversation from her end.

'It's been such a long time, since we've spoken like this, just the two of us.'

"Honestly, when I talk to you, Celty-san, it always feels unreal. Like, it kind of feels like I'm in a dream, or like I'm a protagonist in some movie."

'Is that why you've become unable to tell between reality and fiction?'

"...what are you saying?"

Mikado smiled apprehensively, and Celty typed plainly in reply.

'Anri-chan spoke about you, when we met recently.'

"She did?"

'She said you've been so upbeat it's unnatural, Mikado.'

Celty did not mention that Anri was worried, but instead conveyed what she had said indirectly.

Mikado mumbled in confusion, and after some thought, smiled faintly.

"I see... That might be true."

'Has anything good happened?'

"I don't know if it's a good thing, but... How should I put this? Right now, I'm living very happily."

"? Happy, as in?"

Celty tilted her helmet slightly at Mikado's strange words.

"Maybe it's that I've found a goal, or that I've found something I want to do... Up till now, I've always felt like I was going with the flow. But it didn't feel right..."

'I see.'

By those words alone it would have been acceptable to imagine him as a boy, previously introverted, who had brightened up upon finding his dream – but Celty had come to see various kinds of humans, and to her his words could just as well be those of someone deceived by illegal multi-level marketers.

'And what you want to do is the internal purge of the Dollars?'

"...just how much do you know? Say, Celty-san, you said yesterday that you wanted to hear it straight from me, but in the end you're saying it first."

Still wearing that uncomfortable smile, Mikado stepped towards a window in the abandoned building.

"Ah, but it's nothing so extreme as an internal purge. I want to return the Dollars to how it was before. That's all there is to it."

Through the hole of the window that had neither glass nor even a frame, Mikado reached out his hand, and looked into the distant sky as he awaited Celty's reply.

Celty followed to his side, and, bathed in the daylight, extended her PDA towards Mikado.

'I'd only heard the rumours around the city. Well, Akabayashi-san probably came because the rumours turned out like that.'

"The people in that line... are scary, as expected."

'Let me say this first: that guy's the best listener in the Awakusu-kai, you know? If it were Aozaki-san or anyone else I wouldn't be surprised if they beat all of you up on the spot; in the worst case right about now you'd be being tossed into molten metal in some furnace of a company that should've been bankrupt.'

"I, is that how they dispose of corpses these days... I guess it's true that way the body won't be found."

Perhaps he had been frightened by Celty's words; Mikado twitched his lips.

'Well, if the police investigate, they'll probably be able to tell something strange was left inside the metal.'

"Please stop, that's not something I can joke about right now."

As Mikado spoke this, the expression on his face was no different from usual, and he seemed no more than an ordinary high schooler.

Celty wished she could try to believe that, but already Akabayashi was becoming involved in this, and she could not simply dismiss the matter; and so she attempted to persuade him to distance himself from the Dollars.

'Calm down and think. I'm not scaring you, Mikado, but right now you're in a position where it wouldn't be unexpected for that to come true.'

"...I know."

'Do you really? Do you want to return the Dollars to how it was, to that end? The Dollars has changed recently, true, but even before there've always more or less been people going about racketeering and such. Aren't you just trying to make the Dollars a group that suits your convenience?'

"If the Dollars quieting down would be convenient to me... maybe."

Mikado replied simply.

His reply held no uncertainty at all, and Celty was perplexed.

'Mikado, what's going to happen after you chase out all the troublemakers by force? Even if they leave the Dollars, they'll just continue what they were doing a little more discreetly. Violence won't solve anything.'

"...Shizuo-san helped solve many things with violence, didn't he."

'You'd be killed if you said that to his face.'

"But it's true, isn't it?"

Celty felt a slight chill at Mikado's frank words.

"Celty-san. I don't feel I'm doing something absolutely right. ...in the first place, creating the Dollars probably wasn't socially correct either, was it?"

'Well, being that the police have their eye on me as well, I can't say much.'

Celty shivered at the thought of the white motorbike. But it wouldn't do if she was the one afraid, and so she straightened up and continued talking to Mikado.

'If I were a [human] who'd never done a shady thing in my life and was living respectably, maybe I'd force you to quit the Dollars even if I had to beat you up. But I'm not even human, and I'm more deeply involved with the underworld than you are.'

""

'Even so I wish to live a happy life with Shinra; it's an arrogant thought. That's why I have no right to force you to stop. But as a living creature older than you, I want to warn you.'

Sorrowfully, Celty slumped her shoulders slightly; then she focused on Mikado's face, and typed carefully.

'And what happened to your face? The people you chased out of the Dollars came back for revenge, didn't they. If you continue it's not going to be just a cut on your face, you know?'

"...this wasn't done for revenge."

'Eh?'

At Celty's question, Mikado simply continued his answer.

"Because, if they don't listen when we ask them to leave the Dollars, we'll only ever end up fighting... but I'm completely weak at it, so..."

'Wait a minute. You can't be fighting them directly, right?'

"? Shouldn't that be the case?"

'Shouldn't... I was sure you were ordering that, uh, Aoba and his underlings...'

"Yes, Aoba-kun and the others are following my instructions, but... [The Dollars has no hierarchy.] That's my ideal; if it's something I started, wouldn't it be strange if my precious comrades were the only ones meeting danger?"

Mikado's smile as he replied was as if he were saying, 'Celty-san, you're asking a really strange question.'

At his expression, Celty felt her chill intensify.

--Mikado, what's wrong? What happened?

Back during Golden Week, a series of things had happened to Mikado. Unknowing of this, Celty had finally begun to realise the boy had changed, now that they were speaking alone.

- --Something is wrong. Something about Mikado-kun seems very strange.
- --It's no wonder Anri was worried about this.

Celty hesitated for a moment, before she decided to make a gamble on one thing.

'I wasn't sure if I should say this, but...'

"?"

'Since about this week... did you know there's been a rumour about the Yellow Scarves reassembling?'

The Yellow Scarves were an opponent the Dollars had fought before.

But this group probably held a special meaning for Mikado.

"...I heard the rumour. It seems he invited the founding members, didn't he."

Mikado mumbled, as he leant his upper half out the window of the abandoned building, and let the wind wash over him freely.

Celty felt he was hiding behind the action, but continued nonetheless.

'Half a year ago, it got rather messy, but by now you've probably realised it, right?'

" "

'About the Yellow Scarves and Masaomi.'

Celty asked this frankly; Mikado smiled as he pleaded.

"Celty-san. Please pretend I don't know."

'What?'

"This, and the fact that I'm the founder of the Dollars. And Sonohara-san's secret... Celty-san, you probably know everything, but I have a promise with Sonohara-san. We'll only talk about it when all three of us are together."

"...you say that, but what if the Yellow Scarves attack the Dollars?"

Celty asked this, genuinely curious what Mikado would choose to do.

And the boy's reply was -

"Of course we'll fight, won't we?"

Mikado replied so promptly that Celty thought she must've made a mistake, and she typed:

'What are you saying? Are you serious?'

But Mikado's answer was far from what Celty hoped it to be.

Ryugamine Mikado, with a smile –

With the same youthful smile as usual, said the following words unhesitatingly.

"Actually, I'm having Aoba-kun and the rest attack the Yellow Scarves right now."

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Somewhere in the city. An alley.

"Damnit, didn't think you'd come so soon..."

The boy was panting as he muttered, his back to the fence.

He had a yellow scarf wrapped around his arm, and appeared to be a member of the Yellow Scarves.

"Didn't think you'd recruit in broad daylight."

Cornering him were three other boys. Yesterday night they had been in the same building as Mikado.

They wore the bandanas of the Blue Square and striking caps, and were especially eye-catching in the city in the daytime – but parked at the mouth of the alley was a black van, hiding the situation in the alley from most eyes.

From the van, watching through a pair of binoculars, Aoba murmured happily.

"Now, let's see just how loyal he is to Kida Masaomi."

"Rather than forcing it out, wouldn't it be faster to follow him?"

Aoba replied in casual language, to the older man in the driver's seat:

"It's fine even if he doesn't say anything. This is a declaration of war, so it's fine to just make a warning."

"Speaking of which, you talk to someone four years older than you in casual form, but you're polite with Ryugamine, huh."

The driver with the soft Mohawk spoke discontentedly, and Aoba smiled as he replied.

"It's natural, isn't it? Mikado-sempai's someone worth showing respect to, you know?"

Aoba acted arrogantly towards the roughly twenty-year-old young man, as, in his heart, he recalled Mikado's words.

--"It'd be good to see the day you can visit Kadota-san openly soon, sempai. With Sonohara-sempai and Kida-sempai."

When he had said that, Mikado had replied as follows:

- --"Yeah, but even so... In a way, it's a good thing."
- --"Good?"

Aoba had asked, astonished, and Mikado, with the usual smile he wore in school, had replied.

--"Because, if Kadota-san knows what I want to do, he'll definitely try to stop me... I don't want to fight Kadota-san. And I don't think we'd win anyway."

He had said this breezily, and continued further.

--"And this way, things can be done with without involving Kadota-san. ...in the shattering of the Dollars that'll happen from now on, that is."

"He's planning to break everything breakable in the Dollars, and rebuild it. In the end he might even offer us Blue Squares up as a live sacrifice."

Aoba smiled, and the man in the driver's seat widened his eyes in shock.

"Hey, that's really bad isn't it! Why're you doing what someone like that says?!"

"Calm down. On that theory, my goal is to expose the inside of the Dollars. To drag that pretentious information broker out onto the open stage... It'd be the most ideal if we could give him to the Awakusu-kai as a sacrifice."

"I didn't get anything of what you just said."

The driver was confused. Aoba peeked through the binoculars, and spoke happily:

"I'm saying it looks like Mikado-sempai's expanding the sea we swim in, beyond anything we can imagine."

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The abandoned building.

'What are you saying?! Get a grip! Get a grip!'

"Don't be like that, Celty-san; I'm serious."

Celty gripped Mikado – who was still smiling – by his chest, and pressed on.

'Something's wrong! What, do you think the Yellow Scarves are being controlled by bad people like they were before?! No matter how you think, the one being controlled right now is you, Mikado, isn't it?! Do you think Aoba-kun's someone you can trust that much?!'

Without thinking, Celty had typed out her true feelings about Aoba; Mikado did not move, and spoke as if he already knew this.

"It's not a matter of trust. I'm using Aoba-kun just as he uses me. That's all."

'Mikado!'

"Celty-san, you know about Masaomi and Sonohara-san and me, individually, but you don't know as much about what's between the three of us, right?"

'Don't bluff me with something a middle-schooler would say!'

--No.

-- The one bluffing is me.

Indeed she did not know what kind of a relationship existed, between the three of them.

She did not know the feelings of these children that each held their own secrets.

As she hid her own disadvantage, Celty made as to continue speaking to Mikado –

But Mikado's smile, the exact same as usual, froze Celty's heart. The very same way Masaomi had frozen up upon seeing that expression, when they had reunited.

"The thread between Masaomi and I – it's so tangled neither of us can undo it, I think."

A smile.

As he spoke to Celty, Mikado wore a smile so careless he could've been saying, 'This ice-cream's good!'

"And if that's the case, all I can do is burn all the threads and start over, isn't it."

'Mikado...'

No matter what she said now, it wouldn't get through, would it?

Celty's mind was seized with such thoughts; Mikado bowed his head, apologetically.

"I don't know what it is Aoba-kun wants you to do, but I know I have no right to ask for your help."

"Just... it'd be enough if you could at least stay quiet about what we're doing, and let it pass."

Somewhere in the city. An alley.

"Now, what'll you do? If you come with us quietly, you might not get hurt too bad."

The three boys that had cornered the boy from the Yellow Scarves stepped forward menacingly –

"Honestly, guys, why'd you come out so soon?"

The cornered boy was completely unafraid, as he murmured this.

"Huh?"

Then the member of the Yellow Scarves told the suspicious boys:

"Isn't this exactly what Shogun predicted... And I said we'd be wasting our time; I'm gonna lose face, aren't I."

"What ...?"

Before they could understand what the Yellow Scarf meant -

A number of boys, each wearing yellow accessories, appeared from the shadows of the alleyway.

"Wha..."

Seeing that the Yellow Scarves were blocking their escape, the three boys paled instantly. At the same time, the figures of even more Yellow Scarves emerged, climbing across the fence; as a result, the scene in the alley became an eight-versus-three.

"That's bad."

In the van stopped by the mouth of the alley, Aoba murmured as he looked through the binoculars.

"So, do we run?"

"No, it's better not to move. If we move and they notice us, they might ruin our tyres, y'know?"

Aoba murmured with a serious expression; and in the next moment, a sharp grin plastered itself across his face.

"As expected, from someone with Orihara Izaya's training. So he can do something like this, huh."

Then he shook the boy sleeping on the seat lowered beside him.

"Hojo, wake up, Hojo!"

"...wha? Another five hours..."

Mumbling half-asleep, the boy had the build of a giant.

His body resembled one of a professional wrestler, and the backseat creaked under the weight; the thickness of his muscle was several times that of Aoba's. His long, black hair was tied back, and he gave off the air of a historical figure despite his youth. It would be believable if one were to say he was an armour-clad warrior on the inside; Aoba pat at the cheek of this boy, as he cried.

"You should say five minutes! It's an emergency. There're eight of them! There might still be more, so right now our aim is to escape! OK?"

"...damnit, why me. You should've brought Yoshikiri or Neko."

The boy Hojo opened his eyes blearily, cricking his neck as he got up.

"Wasn't it you who fell asleep in the car? C'mon, to work."

Aoba opened the door as he spoke, dragging the giant's arm.

Despite his sleepiness the boy came out of the van, and stretched, his bones creaking, as he looked up at the sky; and then he turned to see his comrades trapped in the alley.

"Damnit, and insomnia runs in my family, too... Really, Aoba, you're such a slavedriver."

"What're you saying now. Fighting's only second to sleeping, for you."

Aoba smiled bitterly, as he turned his eyes towards the alley – and spoke, cheerfully.

"Well, the Blue Square's full of guys useless at everything but that, so Hojo's probably the most normal."

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Five minutes later, in the karaoke box.

"Ah, so they ran? It's fine, it's fine. It can't be helped if there was an ambush."

Masaomi responded lightly to his comrade reporting over the phone.

"More importantly, did any of ours get hurt? Mm. ...mm, mm. Got it. Tell them to take it easy."

Following those words of concern, Masaomi hung up.

As he did so, Yatabe, who seemed to have been waiting next to him, asked.

"They came after all... Could that Kuronuma guy be acting on his own?"

"No... It could've been on Mikado's instruction."

Yatabe put on an expression of shock at Masaomi's reply.

"Huh?! Ah, but if that's the case, it's because he doesn't know you're our head, right, Shogun?"

"By the look of him, he could've attacked even if he knew that."

"Eh?"

"I know about Mikado and I'm attacking, too; it runs both ways."

Masaomi leant back on the chair and gazed at the ceiling; he remembered Mikado's smile from the day before.

Then his smile vanished, and, in his heart, he muttered his own conviction.

- --Wait for me, Mikado.
- --If you've gone so deep you can't come back on your own.
- --Because whatever I become, even if I become the devil himself, I will chase you just as deep.

Not just Mikado and the Blue Square.

Willing to make an enemy of even the Dollars in its entirety, Masaomi quietly crafted his plans.

And he narrowed his eyes in hate, as one man came to mind.

- --Even if I have to borrow a hand from the worst of the worst, from Orihara Izaya.
- --Though if he's the one behind the mess this time, I'll definitely crush him.

Somewhere in the city, a high-class hotel. An underground car park.

"So we still haven't found Orihara Izaya-kun?"

It was a high-class hotel, a few stops from Ikebukuro.

So murmured the old man as he walked in the underground car park; the young woman – Kujiragi Kasane – bowed her head towards him.

"We're very sorry, sir. After contact with Yagiri Namie yesterday, we completely lost Orihara Izaya's trail."

"Mm... Well, let's leave it be. We'll net him sooner or later. And it should be **about time for Shijima-kun to move**, too. Also, the food here's lip-smackingly good, as usual."

The aged man seemed uninterested in Orihara Izaya, as he changed the topic.

The man – Yodogiri Jinnai – smiled contentedly as he recalled the full-course meal he had had in a high-class restaurant in the hotel.

"Freedom's a wonderful thing. To walk into stores freely, without being hunted by the Awakusu-kai."

"It's as you say, sir."

"Mm. But to achieve true freedom you have to get a taste of what it's like without, first. If you haven't that experience you can't know that freedom's something to appreciate."

"Wise words, sir."

Kujiragi nodded mechanically, and Yodogiri made as to elaborate further on the wonder of freedom –

But the cell phone in the inner pocket of his suit vibrated, cutting him off.

"Oh? How rare; it's my phone and not yours that's ringing, Kujiragi-kun."

Yodogiri mumbled these strange words as he picked the call.

And as he did so, the voice that came over the phone was that of the young man that had been their topic of conversation, just previously.

'Well, long time no see. Yodogiri Jinnai-san.'

"...? You are?"

'Oh, you aren't the Yodogiri-san who stabbed me before? Then let me introduce myself. I do a little business in information dealing, in Ikebukuro; my name is Orihara Izaya. Is that OK?'

"Oh, what's this! We were discussing you just a while ago! But to think you could get hold of this number?"

Yodogiri stood still, and smiled greasily as he questioned Izaya.

'Well, I wouldn't be able to do my job, if I couldn't even get my hands on something like that.'

"So, what business do you have?"

'Ah, that was rude of me. I've a bad habit of long introductions. I'll get to the point, then.'

Then there was an instant of silence, before Izaya spoke, evenly.

'Where is Yagiri Namie, right now?'

"...oh? What's this about?"

'I didn't find anything when I looked into Yagiri Pharmaceuticals, so I thought she might be bothering you instead.'

"Then we have a bit of problem, don't we? Even if that's the case, I've no obligation to tell you anything, have I?"

Yodogiri smiled, as he replied with false politeness.

'Nope. No, you're not. Japan's such a troublesome country; you've no obligation to tell me, huh. Then, well, this is more of a request, but...'

The voice that replied over the phone was joking; and with this same tone, it continued:

'Then, that is, if you've no intention of telling me, could you go to sleep for me, for a while?'

"What?"

'Adults should act like it; please don't fight with children so shamelessly. You'll hurt yourself.'

"What do you..."

His speech interrupted, the old man was struck by a tremendous force –

Unaware even of what had happened, Yodogiri Jinnai lost consciousness.

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By the side, Kujiragi, a witness to this scene, remained silent.

In the middle of his call, a car had come down a slope in the underground car park, and sent Yodogiri Jinnai's body flying as it hit him.

The engine had made no sound; it could probably be inferred that the engine had been cut and the gear switched to neutral, as the car sped down the slope on its own momentum.

The incoming car, its lights off, without even the sound of the engine.

It could not be helped that Yodogiri had been engrossed in his call and had not noticed, but Kujiragi had long seen the car moving towards them.

She might have been able to save him in time if she had risked her own safety to push him away, but Kujiragi had done nothing, merely standing on the sidelines of this tragedy.

" "

In the next moment, the engine of the car started up, and, heedless of Yodogiri's fallen form, drove up the slope and left. From the fleeting glance Kujiragi had caught of the driver, he seemed to be some delinquent – but his eyes were bloodshot, and, **distinctly**, his sclera had been completely awash in red.

In spite of having witnessed that she said nothing, as she took out her cell phone and made a call.

'Yes, hello, what's wrong, Kujiragi-kun.'

The voice across the phone resembled that of the old man fallen before her.

"Director Yodogiri, Number Eight has sustained injury. Requesting you to substitute, as Number Five."

'Injury? What — — — — '

At that point, the voice was cut off abruptly.

In the instant before the call ended there had been the sound of a car's engine – and then Kujiragi had heard an impact not unlike that of the scene she had just witnessed before her.

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Even so she remained expressionless, and called various other numbers – but after this point the calls were unable to connect altogether.

The old man in front of her was unconscious and groaning, but Kujiragi made no effort to call an ambulance, and simply continued to make calls.

Conversely, after a while, Kujiragi's phone received a call.

It was from an unfamiliar number.

She pressed the button to receive the call immediately, and slowly put the phone to her ear.

'Well, Kujiragi-san. Do you know who I am?'

"Orihara Izaya-sama, yes?"

Kujiragi replied the way a secretary would; Izaya snickered as he continued.

'It seemed your superior wouldn't tell me where Namie-san is, but I thought you might if I asked.'

"I deeply apologise, but I cannot make a reply on my personal judgment."

From her answer alone one could hardly imagine there was a severely injured old man at her feet. Izaya, as well, continued in the same tone.

'That shouldn't be the case, should it? After all, your personal judgment should come first. That's why I'm here, anticipating your earnest judgment, you know?"

'Your judgment, as the leader of the "organisation" Yodogiri Jinnai.'

32

Somewhere in Ikebukuro, the roof of a rented building.

'Who gave you this information?'

The topic of conversation had become an issue core to her personal being, but Kujiragi remained expressionless as she continued to speak.

Izaya smiled cheerfully as he replied.

"I didn't get it from anyone. It's just that this is the only conclusion I can make, after looking into it. And the name Kujiragi exists in the register, but it isn't your real name, is it? It's in the register, but chances are you killed the original holder, I guess?"

'I did not take the name by force through murder. It was with the consent of the original holder. Right now she is probably living a new life as she wishes, in Southeast Asia; though whether she's happy or not would be up to her.'

"How honest. Half of what I said was just speculation, too. Well, as it is I don't even know your real name... That's why I thought I should strip down your surroundings first, so I had those pitiful decoy grandpas take their leave."

'There is no need to pity. They were, under their own will, making a choice beneficial to themselves; and they have by their own judgment committed their own crimes. By societal standards, probably this is only what they deserve.'

Izaya shrugged slightly at Kujiragi's mechanical reply.

Currently, he was in hiding with Slon.

He had split his home-grown organisation 'Dragon Zombie' into multiple teams, each with their own activities; putting up a smokescreen for his pursuers as he took a completely different course of action.

Even so Izaya did not grow careless; he surveyed the rooftops of the surrounding buildings as he continued the conversation.

"So cold. It's rare to find such a beautiful woman; it'd be better if you were more emotional, you know? Speaking of which, it seems Yodogiri Jinnai's been a broker in that field for more than 20 years, but... Let me be blunt – how old are you, Kujiragi-san?"

'I thought it was common social knowledge that it's impolite to bring up a woman's age.'

"Don't say that. No matter how, you don't look like you could be much more than twenty. Is it make-up? Plastic surgery? Or is there some other special reason?"

'I don't feel a need to answer your question.'

Kujiragi remained completely unmoved; Izaya, interested, extended the conversation in another direction.

"OKOK. Why don't we change the topic. While we're at it: you were the one who stole my handle name in the chatroom, right? At first I thought you were doing it for someone else, but when I investigated it turned out it was your personal PDA; I was surprised."

'Your ability in data collection is excellent. Did you hack?'

"The means don't really matter, right? I was blended into the Dollars, so to isolate me you spread those rumours about Dragon Zombie, when the web was so riled up over Dotachin's incident. My chatroom has only about ten members; you came just to bother me, and to give a warning, right?"

Actually, Izaya had been surprised that she had pinpointed that Kanra was himself, but it was not as if he had made much effort to conceal the fact in the first place, and he had not minded much that Namie and his sisters were aware of it.

Even so, he felt there was a possibility she had obtained the information from Namie, and so he progressed with the conversation.

"By the way... it'd be fine if you'd just impersonated me in my own chatroom, but what's with the 'nya'? Was it just to bother me?"

This was what intrigued him most about Kujiragi as a person.

To Orihara Izaya, this question concerned him more than the matter of Namie's safety – in reply, Kujiragi spoke, just as emotionlessly as before:

'Wasn't it cute?'

"...right now, I'm deciding what kind of a human you are."

Kujiragi's voice had been even and unashamed; Izaya desperately suppressed his laughter.

Even as his stomach cramped up, he continued asking, his voice shaking slightly:

"What's this? A hobby? So you weren't trying to irritate me – you just wanted to make Kanra a cute girl? Kujiragi-san, you can't be the type that spends your days off posing in front of a mirror by yourself with cat ears and a tail going 'nyan'x', right, nya?"

This was very obviously a challenge.

But after a period of silent consideration –

With the same mechanical voice, Kujiragi replied, plainly:

'That doesn't sound bad. I will try.'

"Give me a break. My abdominal muscles will tear."

This side of Kujiragi was beyond even Izaya's expectations, and for a moment he almost forgot completely about the fact that Namie was missing – but just a step before that he regained his reason, and took a deep breath as he asked once more.

"So, do you want to tell me where Namie is?"

'I feel no need to. How many traffic incidents did you orchestrate for this?'

"I'll cause as many as need be, you know? The ones Niekawa-san cuts for me are all gangsters with something or other against me, so it's no big loss. Even the worries of people who've become traffic criminals while being used are endearing to me, as a lover of humanity."

Izaya murmured these immoral words, and continued brightly without pause for an answer.

"Honestly, without Namie I'd take a very long time to deal with all the data. Besides, with how proud she is, I'm interested in what expression she'd make, in the moment she gets saved by someone she hates so bad."

'I can hardly say your interests are healthy.'

"I never thought I'd hear that from someone who traffics everything from humans to monsters. But it's ironic; the Saika you sold to Kishitani Shingen went around and came back an enemy."

As he informed her of the greatest irony, Izaya opened the laptop placed on the simplistic table on the roof, and started on a separate task. He instructed Niekawa Haruna through a Skype chat to gather the delinquents under Saika's control, and order them to abduct Kujiragi.

"Sorry, but you're a hindrance to observing the future of the Dollars."

'Indeed, to me as well, you and Heiwajima Shizuo are hindrances to importing materials.'

"…?"

At the sudden mention of his rival, Izaya's hands stopped.

'That's why I must thank you, for **setting Heiwajima Shizuo up, and having him brought to the police station**. Thank you.'

"Why... do you think Shizu-chan's a hindrance?"

Izaya felt a strange sense of foreboding, and questioned her seriously.

'If a human like Heiwajima Shizuo walks free, the "children" will lose their focus. Though, it seems Niekawa Haruna's "children" have given up on him.'

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Izaya fell silent; Kujiragi continued alone.

'Saika was in my possession, 20 years ago. This is the full story. Do you know why I relinquished such a blade so easily?'

"Is it a trump card known only to the wielder?"

'Perhaps even the current wielder doesn't know... Besides increasing the number of children and grandchildren by cutting humans, there is another method to the propagation of Saika. I call it, simply, "dissection".'

Dissection.

As he considered the meaning of this, warning bells rang in Izaya's mind.

At the same time, as he considered various possibilities, he turned.

But - it was too late.

'It just means: to break Saika itself, and forge a new blade from the pieces.'

As he heard her voice, Izaya's eyes met the sight of the giant meant to guard his back, launching at him with a speed heedless of the injury to his leg.

Even before he recognised that this was Slon, Izaya noticed something.

Red.

The red, bloodshot eyes that plunged towards him.

0.5 seconds before every muscle in his body made to move, Slon, with his bloodshot eyes, grabbed Izaya's throat –

And just like that, slammed Izaya's back into the concrete roof.



The underground car park. 'Mother... I've caught Izaya. What should I do?' A few seconds after a violent crash – a voice different from Izaya's came over the phone. "Bring him to the twelfth office. We need to question him about the dullahan's head." 'All right.' Having received an answer, Kujiragi cut the call and closed her phone. As Yodogiri's secretary she would never have spoken unnecessarily, but now, she murmured to herself, a sliver of emotion in her voice. "Thank you very much, Orihara Izaya-sama. I thank you for destroying the group known as Yodogiri Jinnai." Ignoring the old man on the ground, she moved towards the exit of the car park, her leather shoes, made for women, clicking against the floor. She paid no attention to even the luxury car she had driven here, and took her time on foot. "I acknowledge that you are, certainly, an [obstacle] in the city of Ikebukuro. The third person, after Awakusu Dogen and Tsukumoya Shinichi." She had been released from the shell of Yodogiri Jinnai, from the repetitive everyday of 'non-freedom' – and sincerely, she thanked the man who had shattered this shell. As she exited the car park, the blinding sunlight pierced at her skin. Even as she felt her skin stinging, Kujiragi narrowed her eyes that were not bloodshot, but purely glowing red – and happily, cheerfully, she smiled, with a joy from the bottom of her heart. "Thank you, freedom." 32 Chatroom. No one is in the chatroom.

No one is in the chatroom.

Kyo-san has entered the chatroom.

San-san has entered the chatroom.

Kyo [It was so crowded the day before, but it's so empty today]

Kyo [Pity, I was planning to describe twenty-something studies into Kanra-san's purring or putting on cat's clothing or whatever those feline add-ons were.]

San [No one's around, huh]

Kyo [One-time loneliness is acceptable, but I feel that each time something strange happens in the city, the people in this chatroom suddenly decrease in number; could this be a lair of demons hosting great numbers of people involved in the underworld?]

San [That's scary]

Kyo [I dislike loneliness, so perhaps I will at least anticipate Kanra-san's return, if no one else's? If my theory is correct, when the city recovers its peace, this chatroom will become lively again. As a denizen of Ikebukuro, as well, I will earnestly hope for that day]

San [Loneliness is hateful]

San [Liven upppp]

Kyo-san has left the chatroom.

San-san has left the chatroom.

No one is in the chatroom.

No one is in the chatroom.

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- A Motley Crew -

Evening. Somewhere long Kawagoe Highway, Shinra's apartment.

- --What should I do...
- --I still couldn't convince Mikado, in the end.
- --But Anri-chan or Kida-kun would be more qualified than me to interfere further.
- --I've lived for hundreds of years, and I can't convince one child; how pathetic.

If she had her head she would have sighed countless times already, she thought; and as a result she remembered about her 'head', and became further depressed.

--And my hands are already full with my own problems...

It had barely been a few days since she had discovered that Izaya was in possession of her head, and she had not sorted out her emotions at all. The series of events she had been involved in had become her excuse, while in fact she had merely been pretending she had forgotten due to busyness.

- --Ahh, I know I can't depend too much on Shinra, but...
- --Right now I just want to meet him as soon as possible.
- --It feels like everything'll get better just if Shinra and I love each other, just the two of us.

It was no more than an illusion, but to Celty's currently frail heart, Shinra was, truly, the greatest comfort.

She thought of how, back in the underground car park, even Shooter had rubbed his neck against her in comfort; Shinra would probably easily recognise that she was feeling dejected.

- -- That's all right. I want Shinra's comforting.
- --No, nonono! Shinra's the one suffering injury!
- --I can't do something so sly as to act spoilt only now...

Celty tapped her helmet with both hands, and pulled herself together as she headed towards the room.

And – just as she made to step onto the staircase, she met someone coming out of the lift.

"Oh my. Celty-san, you are going home?"

'Ah, Emilia-san. Hello.'

It was Shinra's stepmother, Emilia.

Celty had asked her to help care for Shinra when she was away, and so Emilia had been coming by quite frequently as of late.

At first she had felt jealous of Emilia, who was taking care of Shinra, but when they conversed Emilia only ever spoke fondly of Shingen, and so at some point in time that sentiment had been lost, as they built a new relationship as family.

But Emilia's skill at cooking was catastrophically non-existent, and thus it had come about that Celty would try to create something edible from the groceries Emilia brought home.

Right now Emilia had probably just come back from buying food for Shinra.

Grateful, Celty looked to Emilia's hand – and tilted her helmet sideways in confusion.

From the supermarket bags in both her hands, one could imagine she had bought several times the usual amount of groceries.

'Why so much?'

At this Emilia smiled innocently, and puffed out her ample chest, as she replied.

"Today is party day for everyone! I will do my best, please offer your guidance!"

'O, oh...'

--?

She wondered what it could be, and anxiously opened the door to the entranceway.

And when she did – she saw numerous pairs of shoes had been taken off and left there; and from inside the room came the noise of a gathering.

--Huh? What? What is this?

Shelving her various worries for now, Celty rushed into the room anxiously.

And, in the Japanese-style room Shinra rested in, the people gathered turned their heads to her, in unison –

"Oh, Celty-san, long time no see!"

"Yo."

--Y, Yumasaki?! And that, uh, that driver!

"...hello."

"Ah, Celty-san! It's been a while! Though we just met recently, didn't we! I see Seiji every day, so I always think it's been a while since I've seen anyone else!"

-- Yagiri Seiji-kun and Harima Mika-chan?!

"Hey Celty-kun. Getting on well?"

--Shinra's old man! And so shamelessly?!

"Nice to meet you. My name is Igor."

--Who?!

"Celty! Welcome home! Ah, I've been lonely! Somehow it got kind of lonely when it got crowded; I knew you were the best, Celty!"

'Wait, Shinra! What exactly's happening here?! Why's everyone in our house?!'

Celty pushed Shinra back into the futon, as he started to get up despite the pain.

"No, it's like this, see? I was asking Kaa-san to help clean; then Yumasaki-kun came first and said, 'Why don't we make this a secret base! It'll be cool, you know?' and I didn't understand at all so I thought I should hear what he had to say; and then Seiji-kun and Harima-san came, and said they wanted to hide, yeah?"

"...and then?"

"Then, I didn't understand at all, so I was asking them what happened, but Tou-san and Igor-san came, and while I still didn't understand anything at all Emilia-san got all excited about cooking and having a pajama party and such, and then I was asking my father questions when you came home, something like that."

'I don't understand anything!'

Seiji saw Celty hugging her helmet in turmoil, and mumbled.

"Um, if we're bothering you, I, as I thought, I'll find somewhere else."

'Seiji-kun.'

Celty felt light-headed at having one mess after another come at her, and settled her hand on Seiji's shoulder unsteadily.

'You look like you're the best at talking calmly. First, won't you tell me why you and Mika-chan are here?'

"Yeah, that..."

Seiji started, his voice even, and just as Celty thought she could finally settle down and hear what had happened –

The shoji door of the Japanese-style room slammed open, and a woman with a demonic expression roared with undisguised hatred –

"You sow, remove your filthy hands from Seiji!"

--Eh?

In an instant – before even confusion could come, Celty felt her heart blank out for a moment.

Rather than having lost her bearings, it was more as though she was having an out-of-body experience, and was a separate self observing herself and her surroundings.

And then she realised.

The woman that had appeared behind the door – was Yagiri Seiji's older sister, the criminal that had escaped with Celty's 'head' – Yagiri Namie.

- --Eeeeeeh?!
- --W, wai...
- --Why! Why's she! Why here?!
- --Eeeeeeeeeeh?!

'tvfuagiyusodgkbakobo@'

Celty's fingers and her 'shadows' quivered violently on her PDA at the appearance of such an unexpected person, and as a result a series of meaningless symbols danced across the screen.

"Ahh, and I said not to come out till Celty calmed down, too..."

Shinra sighed deeply from where he lay in the futon, as he saw Celty as flustered as when she last saw a movie where aliens flew out a meteorite.

--But things've become really strange, huh.

Shinra looked at the jumbled group that had gathered in the room, and pondered the future.

--Something is happening.

- --I know there's definitely something happening here in Ikebukuro, and at the centre will be the Dollars... and Celty.
- --It's an unpleasant tide of events.

His beloved was being dragged into something.

And despite that he himself could not even walk, and so he felt immense frustration at his own condition.

But Shinra's love for Celty was not so insubstantial that he would complain of his own fate and let it be.

--I will... stop this tide.

Immersed in this strong resolve, Shinra quietly closed his eyes.

- --We might need an **opportunity**, to break into this tide.
- --And not just one.
- --Opportunities that can, together, affect the tide of events surrounding the Dollars.
- --Whether they're good or bad, to change this situation, and that tide...

The backdrop of the exchange between Celty and Namie shook Shinra's eardrums.

As he heard their voices, deep in his own heart, something sharpened.

- --What's left is to take this chance, with everyone here...
- --I'll claw a mark on the palm of the one laughing at this whole situation.
- --...I will.

32

Somewhere in the city.

Whether it was the 'opportunity' Shinra hoped for was yet unknown.

But it was an undeniable fact that somewhere unlinked to Shinra, numerous uncertain factors had begun to writhe.

"So we still don't know who ran over that Kyohei kid?"

The large man in the luxurious sofa asked this of another man, who was standing close to the entrance of the room.

"Yes. I'm not sure about the police, but there've only been some baseless rumours on the street that Dragon Zombie might have been responsible."

The man who replied was – with an outward appearance utterly mismatched with polite language – none other than Izumii Ran.

Instead of his usual slouch, he stood straight as a rod, as he continued to listen to the man on the sofa.

"That bastard Shiki wants Slon to chain down that bastard Izaya, but... I've no trust for someone like that. You get it, right, Izumii. Well, it's not like I've any expectations of you, either."

"Yes."

"I don't know what that informant fellow or your brother are planning, but the Dollars **smell like good money**. No matter how things go, the Awakusu-kai'll swallow everything in the end."

The large man – Aozaki – shifted his muscle-bound body, as he sneered.

"I can't... just give up something so good to that Akabayashi, can I."

39

Half a day ago, late at night. In the police station, an interrogation room.

"I said I don't know her."

The man in the bartender suit said this; in response, a detective, wearing a suit, slapped the table as if in a televised drama.

"Lies! On the afternoon three days ago, you broke both arms of this woman, didn't you!"

"Why would I do that?"

--Ahh, so interrogation rooms don't have desk lamps like in the dramas.

Thinking of such unimportant matters, Shizuo desperately distracted himself.

Somehow he had managed to suppress his irritation and put up a calm façade, but in truth he was just short of boiling inside.

"It's a false report or something. You should investigate the woman who reported this instead."

Shizuo had repeatedly insisted on this.

He remembered the term 'false report' from when his current president mentioned it, after he had been framed by Izaya in the past.

At Shizuo's words, the detective in the suit smiled repulsively as he continued.

"A punk like you claiming a false report? You can act all smart, but that skin of yours will get torn off real quick, v'know? Huh?"

If Shizuo had heard this in a normal context, his anger would have long hit its maximum and he would have begun to rage – but before he had been taken away by the police his president had instructed him, saying, 'We'll arrange for a lawyer tomorrow, so you definitely mustn't do anything till then.' And Tom had also advised, 'You can try wrecking the station all you want, but that artiste brother of yours'll surely get dragged in. So if you're gonna snap, just think of your brother's face.' And so he had narrowly succeeded in swallowing down all of his anger.

But the interrogation the police were carrying out was strangely unnatural.

It would still be understandable if they had blindly decided he was the criminal, but it seemed as though he was being provoked deliberately; he was repeatedly insulted in a way completely irrelevant to the case, and at times he was wordlessly ignored for up to an hour. It felt as though their objective was to force his hand and then arrest him for other offences, such that he would not be able to leave the police station.

In fact, that the detective had threatened to just lock Shizuo in a cell was strange in itself.

Rather than being arrested, he had willingly accepted to aid the investigation; why would he be locked up as a result?

He had heard that for suspected sex offenders, there were cases where they were brought to the train station, only to be detained and handed over to the police, under the claim that the station attendants had caught them in the act. He suspected that this might be a similar situation, but at any rate he continued to endure for the sake of his brother Kasuka.

He looked at the photograph once more, but no matter how many times he saw it the woman was not anyone he recognised.

Despite the thick make-up she had a beautiful face. According to the police, Shizuo had brought her into a bar he had trashed, then broke both her arms and had his way with her, but at the time of the incident Shizuo had already been asleep at home. But as he lived alone, he could produce no alibi.

After going in circles for some more time, the detective switched his tone, and asked.

"Your brother's an artiste, huh?"

"...Kasuka's nothing to do with this, right?"

Shizuo felt the veins around his temple throb, and narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Yeah, he doesn't. By the way, hasn't there been a lot of news about artistes getting arrested for drugs, recently?"

"Huh?"

"If you don't confess, some white powder might turn up in your brother's house, for all we know."

""

There was the sound of something cracking in Shizuo.

But at the same time, he was consumed by a strange unease, and suppressed his anger.

The challenge was excessively direct, but conversely, this caused Shizuo to calm down.

- -- In fact, this is getting laughable.
- --Something must be wrong if they're being so direct.

"...why? Did I do anything to make you hate me?"

Perhaps they had been hurt when Shizuo had gotten arrested a few years ago, when Shizuo had thrown a vending machine at a police car. But although cases of corruption in the police force were not unheard of in the news, would they really be so direct?

"I don't hate you or anything. It's just, we can't let you on the streets of Ikebukuro, for a while."

" ?!"

-- They can't have been bribed by that flea?!

As the face of the man he hated came to mind, Shizuo unconsciously began to glare at the detective –

"...huh?"

At that point, he noticed.

The man's eyes were bloodshot, to the extent that it could be perceived as slightly odd.

And to Shizuo – those eyes were unpleasantly familiar.

His gaze darted to the side, to the other police officer that was transcribing the interrogation – that man, as well, had the same strangely bloodshot eyes.

"You guys are... that, that sword's..."

"Oh? Busted so soon?"

At Shizuo's words, the faces of the detective and the policeman twisted slightly.

"Well, to be accurate, we were born to a different 'parent'."

"?"

"In any case, it doesn't matter what you say. If you don't confess, that officer and I can beat each other up right here, and collaborate to say you did it."

The two interrogators smiled despicably –

But Shizuo smiled along with them.

"I see... Then it's fine."

"Huh?"

"The guys at the Juvenile section have taken care of me since I was a kid... Even after those old guys retired, I've always made sure to respect the police, but..."

From the table Shizuo's hand was on came a creak, as though something had been twisted.

"But if it's you guys inside and not police, then I don't have to hold back... do I!"

And in the next moment – the sound of violent impact came crashing in the interrogation room.

But it was not the sound of Shizuo throwing the table, or beating up the detective.

A man had kicked down the door of the interrogation room, and entered.

"'scuse me."

His appearance was extremely mismatched with the setting.

A man in the uniform of the Traffic Police – or, in a nutshell, a motor officer in white – had barged into the interrogation room.

"H, hey! What are you trying to do! What's a traffic officer doing here in uniform..."

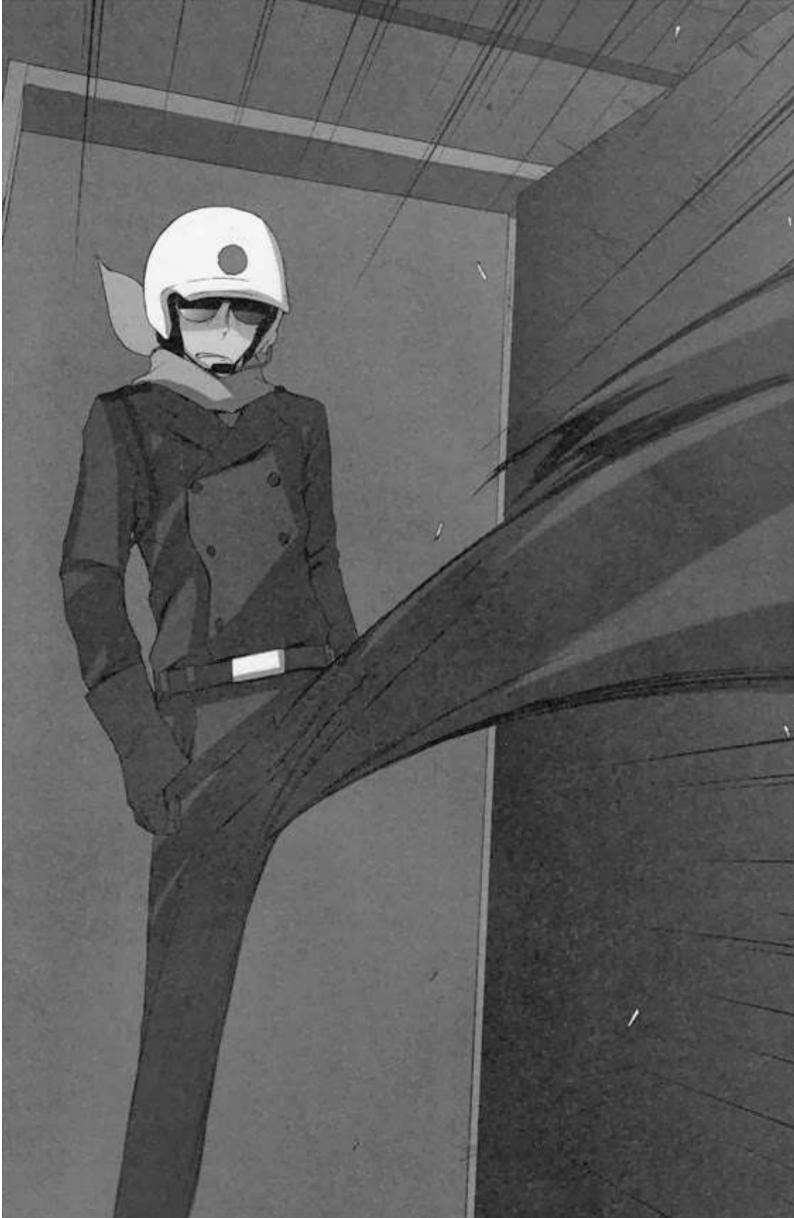
The detective made to stop him, but was shoved aside, as the white biker closed in on Shizuo's confused face.

"Hey, you. You're a friend of that Headless Rider, huh."

"...so?"

Shizuo's eyes widened as he answered, and the motor officer declared strongly:

"If you meet him anytime soon, tell him, 'Even if you're fine, it's dangerous for other vehicles, so turn the lights on'. I'll tell him off directly about the number plate and license when I catch him, so just pass this on for now."



""

"That's all. Bye."

This utterly one-sided conversation robbed Shizuo of even his ability to get angry, leaving him stunned.

The interrogators were exchanging glances as well, and one of the red-eyed men approached the motor officer to ask what he was trying to do.

And in the next moment, a second impact resounded in the interrogation room.

In the moment they brushed, the white biker had grabbed the detective's throat with his right hand, and slammed him into the wall in a movement reminiscent of a professional wrestler's lariat.

```
"Gah... ah..."
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The white biker pinned the detective to the wall with his right hand, and directed a sharp gaze at him through his shades.

"...don't do stupid things."

He threw the detective to the ground, and headed for the exit.

"You're loud enough to be heard from outside. If you really dare do those things... I don't like to pull strings, but an inspector I know might just drop by for a greeting."

"Kuh..."

Perhaps they felt threatened as they had been overheard, or perhaps the mention of an 'inspector' had intimidated them; the detective and the other officer made no further attempt to stop him, and could only grind their teeth as they watched him leave.

And Shizuo, as he saw this scene, chuckled quietly to himself.

"Haha."

"What's so funny."

"What... So there're still good ones out there, huh. How dangerous. I was thinking all the police had become part of **you guys**."

He sighed with heartfelt relief, and murmured, his eyes filled with resolve.

"You guys should thank that white biker."

"What are you...?"

"He saved your lives, you know?"

As he said this, Shizuo himself felt grateful to the white biker from just now as well.

What had occurred in the interrogation room had misled him into perceiving all of the police as his enemy, but it seemed there were still trustworthy police officers around. With that fact alone, Shizuo chose to continue working hard to endure his anger.

"Now... Shall we continue? Interesting. If that's how it is, I'll get rid of every last one of you."

And so Shizuo's battle began.

His opponent was his very own anger.

How long could he endure the impulses that boiled within him? In contrast with his previous fight with Saika, Heiwajima Shizuo prepared himself for a battle crueler than the depths of hell.

"I'll get out of here unscathed... 'cause I'll be going to greet that 'parent' of yours, yeah?"

32

Afternoon. Raira General Hospital.

Half a day after Heiwajima Shizuo and Kuzuhara Kinnosuke met, just as Celty Sturluson and Ryugamine Mikado were conversing alone –

Sonohara Anri visited the hospital housing Kadota, for the third consecutive day.

For the first and second days, she had come purely due to her worry for Kadota and no other reason –

But today, instead, she came seeking Karisawa.

"Ah, he definitely won't know where to meet..."

"Why isn't he here yet? Really, what a downer."

"Keep your voice down in the hospital." "Ahaha."

As Anri arrived at the entrance, a gaggle of girls, each with their own personality, was standing around the entrance.

They were most likely waiting for a friend. Anri felt some envy, at the sight of peers so boisterous.

--I only felt something like this for Harima-san, in the past.

She knew that a change had been set off in her, by various events that had occurred since she had entered high school.

And because of this self-awareness, Anri felt that she must become strong.

With her troubles about co-existing with Saika, recently it had become extremely painful to see other girls chatting happily with their friends.

Perhaps it was because she had once had the very same life, only to have it taken away.

This was what Anri felt.

Harima Mika had grown distant ever since she had become attached to Yagiri Seiji; there was no trace of Masaomi's presence, and Anri felt even Mikado was growing distant.

As if to comfort her, Saika's voice continued to cry within her.

- -- 'Whatever it is, I'll cut it for you!'
- --'I'll love them in your place!'
- -- 'Your precious friends, too!'

Today the voice rang louder than usual.

She knew the reason, herself.

--Niekawa Haruna-san.

The girl she had once slashed was in the Dollars.

What was her mental state, right now?

Why had she entered the Dollars?

Was she still in love with that teacher, now?

What if she had overcome Saika's control once more, and was trying to take over the Dollars?

What if Mikado were cut by Haruna?

--So I'll cut him first! I'll make Mikado-kun mine alone!

""

For once, Anri was shocked by the voice of Saika within her.

Because for a moment, it felt as though that voice was her very own.

--I can't let this go on.

Anri had contemplated since the night before, and unsurprisingly, she could only conclude that if she were to try to solve everything herself, she would only suffer more.

But there were few she could confide her troubles in; Celty seemed to be busy, and Harima Mika had been uncontactable since the night before.

And so Anri made up her mind.

"Wow, Anri-chan, you came today too! Hmm, you're in love with Dotachin after all, aren't you? Mikado will cry, you know!"

Before the entrance of the hospital was the older woman, who, despite her own hardship, persisted firmly with the brightest of voices.

"They say Dotachin's recovering all right from the surgery, so he might be waking up soon."

"I see..."

Anri was planning to reveal everything to her, and ask for advice.

She felt it low of herself, to discuss her own troubles under the pretext of coming to visit Kadota.

But she could not stop her own emotions, and so she apologised as she spoke.

"I'm sorry, Karisawa-san."

"Eh? What? Why?"

"Kadota-san's having a hard time, but... I have a problem I want to tell you no matter what, Karisawa-san..."

"Aww. There's no need to feel bad about that. Come flying to Nee-san's bosom!"

Maybe she was in high spirits because Kadota was about to wake, or perhaps she was simply putting up a front; Karisawa spread her arms towards Anri exaggeratedly.

Anri felt heartened by Karisawa's words, and so spoke resolutely:

"I'd like Karisawa-san... to know everything about me."

But those words only invited misunderstanding.

"....huh?! Wait, is this a yuri confession?! I mean, I swing both ways, but, wait, if it's like that – is this a four-way relationship with Mikado-kun and Kida-kun?! Ah, but it'll be all right if I get together with Anrichan and Mikado-kun with Kida-kun...?"

Karisawa spoke of her own fantasies as a fujoshi, but today neither Yumasaki nor Kadota was there to stop her.

Anri was confused, at first, but as she understood she flushed scarlet as she shook her head.

"N, n, no! I didn't mean that!"

"Tsk. Pity."

Anri was about to ask, teary-eyed, what was such a pity exactly, but -

"Ohh, there you are! Long time no see, you two."

It was a man's voice, in an overly intimate tone; Anri and Karisawa turned together towards the voice.

And there stood a man, surrounded by a shifting crowd of the girls that were at the entrance.

"Well, I heard Kadota-no-danna got hurt so I came to visit; do you know where his room is? I don't remember his name, so the people at the counter might think I'm suspicious..."

"Uh "

The man's face seemed familiar to Anri, but she could not remember exactly who he was.

"Ah, you don't remember me? That's sad... But well, my face was all bruised and swollen and I had so many bandages on I was pretty much a mummy, so, well, I'm happy you forgot – would you like to reenact our fateful meeting?"

The man chattered lightly, only to be wordlessly hit on the head by the girls around him.

"Owowow! Sorry, I'm sorry, I'll stop flirting!"

Then he straightened up, and spoke to Anri and Karisawa once more.

"Erm, see, uh, this miss with the glasses was the one with the katana having a catfight with a lady wearing a helmet, right? And the nee-san there's a buddy of Kadota-no-danna, right?"

As he said that, Anri realised his identity immediately.

He wore several layers of thin clothing, and a straw hat; and he had the air of a man who had walked out of a gravure of a magazine for casual fashion.

"Ah, I remember..."

"Rokujo Chikage, pleasure! Girls just call me 'Rocchi'!"

Rokujo Chikage.

This young man was the leader of the bosozoku 'Toramaru', based in Saitama.

And at the same time, he was the man who had, in the past, unintentionally **shattered Ryugamine Mikado's spirit**.

Would he number amongst the 'opportunities' Shinra wished for?

At this point in time, no one knew.

32

Dusk. The outskirts of the city. On the second floor of the abandoned building.

Unwitting of the fact that the man Rokujo Chikage, with whom he shared great affinity, had come to the city: Mikado worried over Aoba's companions who had come back with injuries, his expression panicky as always.

"Are you really all right? If you're not it'd be better to go to the hospital..."

"It's all right. Something like that won't hurt these thick-skinned guys."

Aoba smiled as he said this, and the casualties in question yelled in return.

"You make yourself sound so important!" "You didn't do a thing, Aoba!"

"What? What do you think would've happened if I hadn't woken Hojo?!"

Hojo, who had worked the hardest, had crashed in the van for a nap; yet Aoba spoke as though the credit was his, and was thus booed by the companions that surrounded him.

"Stop fighting!"

The boy receiving these accusations smiled as he replied to Mikado who was stopping them anxiously.

"It's fine, we're just kidding. We aren't actually fighting."

"Really. ...though it feels like they really do hate you."

Mikado was surprised and puzzled, but he quickly regained his composure, and asked Aoba a question.

"So, someone wants to meet me, you said?"

"Yeah, he's downstairs right now."

Apparently a member of the Dollars had heard of the internal purge being carried out by Aoba's gang, and had, claiming he had a community of his own, offered assistance.

The young man had made the effort to predict where they would strike, and followed them back on the van.

As they had sought Mikado's opinion, they had decided to just hear him out, and so it came about that Mikado would meet him today.

"Hey~ Can you come on up?"

At Aoba's call, a young man slowly ascended the steps.

For some reason he wore long sleeves despite the summer, but on first sight he appeared to be an honest young man.

Mikado shelved his thoughts, as he wondered if this man could put up a fight, and greeted him nervously.

"Um, hello. I'm Ryugamine."

Mikado bowed his head promptly, and, to this boy obviously younger than himself – the young man extended his right hand, his face bright.

"Shijima. Pleasure."

"Ah, y, yeah. Nice to meet you."

Mikado took his hand anxiously, and shook it lightly.

Ryugamine Mikado did not know.

This young man had, mere days ago, acknowledged himself as a failure, and given up everything.

And at the same time, Mikado knew nothing of the following thoughts within him.

- --'I won't become a failure all by myself.'
- -- 'The more people can accompany me, the better.'

Mikado did not know of the young man's inner thoughts, and, of course, he in turn did not know Mikado's –

Yet another twist joined the tide consuming the Dollars.

And so, with the culprit who had run over Kadota still unidentified -

The spinning wheels that surrounded the cities begun to move, in no particular order.

Even the city itself did not know what the tautened strings were weaving –

The wind that blew on Ikebukuro simply sent the wheels spinning, rattling.

Endlessly – and relentlessly.



Afterword

Hello, I'm Narita.

The 12 lines below were printed in June in *Baccano! 1932 Summer*, but I considered that the readers would be different, so please pardon me for repeating the same content.

I do not know what time it will be when this book reaches you. At this point, as I write this afterword, Japan is on the path of recovery. The region I live in is fortunately unharmed, but my friends and family as well as many readers have fallen victim to the disaster, and I do not know what I ought say even to my own relatives. There are those who say they have no wish to hear words of encouragement, but there are also readers in the affected zones who have directly requested the same, and so I continue to reflect on what words I may deliver.

Even so, I believe that by the time you read this afterword, you will at least have recovered a part of your everyday life wherewith you can read a novel. I would be heartened if this book could help you gain something more. I aspire to write novels with stories that entertain, at which readers can eat popcorn and laugh, or clench their fists sweatily in suspense. It may be a difficult time right now, but from now on as well I will continue working hard to write pieces to satisfy through entertainment, for when that everyday life where we can enjoy ourselves with popcorn returns.

Moving on: it's the memorable 10th volume of the *Durarara!!* series.

Previously Celty's head made an appearance, so I was thinking, 'Fuu, it's going to have the most plot progress since Volume 2,' but there were many readers who said they wanted to see Mikado's story sooner, and so despite my loneliness as a supporter of Celty as the main character, from now on I'll push forward the story revolving about Mikado in one shot. *Durarara!!* is being written simultaneously with other works, so although the original plan was to write every book separately, each focusing on a different character, with that pace it'd take at least another ten books (actually, the plan had been to write a book each for Togusa and Vorona and the Awakusu-kai), that was cancelled because it would've gotten tedious, and so I'm currently hoping to finish the Dollars arc at one go.

The Dollars & Saika & Yellow Scarves arc will end at around *Durarara!! x12*, and after that – that will depend on Celty's state by the end of Volume 12. We haven't planned that far, so it's completely uncertain if there'll be a 13th volume, or a new series under a different title, or if it'll just end there. I'm sorry that pushing on the plot without the sufficient strength has resulted in the ending giving off a 'To-Be-Continued' vibe, and I hope all of you can give my other works a try while waiting for Volume 11... (*Baccano!* is scheduled next, but I think afterwards we'll have to keep an eye out for various factors as we proceed.)

It's been nearly half a year since the last part of the anime DVD was released; Yasuda-san's art collection for *Durarara!!* has started selling (launching at the same time as Kodansha's art collection, both are amazing!), and the G-Fantasy magazine has begun on the Saika arc at last. Also, the power-upped version of the PSP game, with new scenarios added, has been launched – I would be glad if everyone can enjoy reading the original work while appreciating the ever-expanding *Durarara!!* world!

* The following are the usual acknowledgments.

Everyone at the Dengeki Bunko Editorial Department, namely Wada-san (Papio-san); everyone I trouble when I submit work late all the time; as well as the various departments at ASCII Media Works.

My family, friends, and the writers and illustrators who have all helped me along.

Director Omori and Satorigi-san who've led the production of the anime, manga, game and various adaptions.

Yasuda Suzuhito-san, who once again did amazing illustrations despite being occupied with the art collection in June, and *Devil Survivor 2* and *Yozakura Quartet*.

And all the readers who've read this book.

--To all of the above people, I express the greatest gratitude – thank you very much!

July 2011 Narita Ryohgo