DURARARA!!
8
RYOHGO NARITA

DURARARA!!

- VOLUME 8 -

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[Yen Press]

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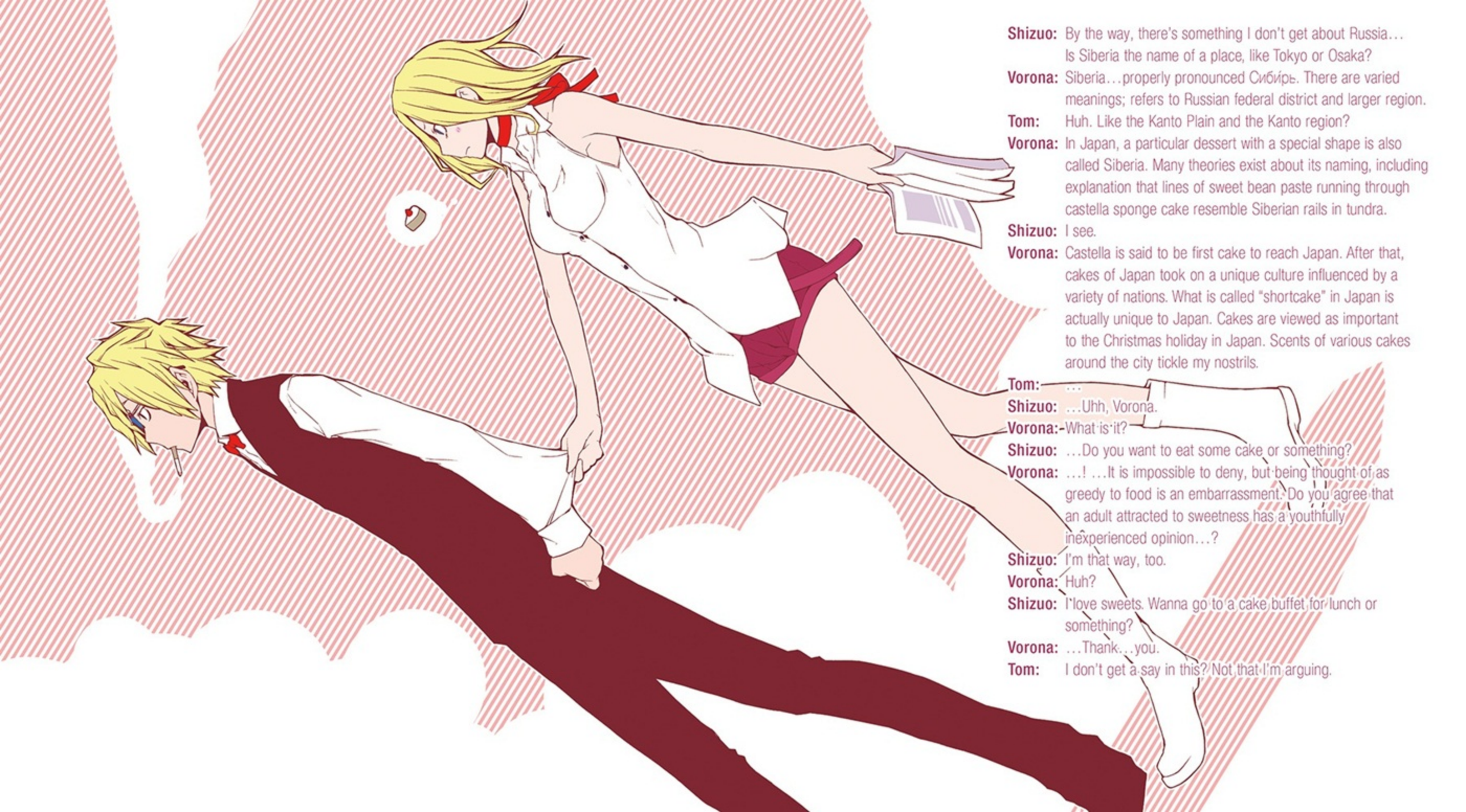

Shizuo: By the way, there's something I don't get about Russia… Is Siberia the name of a place, like Tokyo or Osaka?

Vorona: Siberia…properly pronounced Сибирь. There are varied meanings; refers to Russian federal district and larger region.

Tom: Huh. Like the Kanto Plain and the Kanto region?

Vorona: In Japan, a particular dessert with a special shape is also called Siberia. Many theories exist about its naming, including explanation that lines of sweet bean paste running through castella sponge cake resemble Siberian rails in tundra.

Shizuo: I see.

Vorona: Castella is said to be first cake to reach Japan. After that, cakes of Japan took on a unique culture influenced by a variety of nations. What is called "shortcake" in Japan is actually unique to Japan. Cakes are viewed as important to the Christmas holiday in Japan. Scents of various cakes around the city tickle my nostrils.

Tom: …

Shizuo: …Uhh, Vorona.

Vorona: What is it?

Shizuo: …Do you want to eat some cake or something?

Vorona: …! …It is impossible to deny, but being thought of as greedy to food is an embarrassment. Do you agree that an adult attracted to sweetness has a youthfully inexperienced opinion…?

Shizuo: I'm that way, too.

Vorona: Huh?

Shizuo: I love sweets. Wanna go to a cake buffet for lunch or something?

Vorona: …Thank…you.

Tom: I don't get a say in this? Not that I'm arguing.

VOLUME 8

Ryohgo Narita
ILLUSTRATION BY **Suzuhito Yasuda**

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Ryohgo Narita

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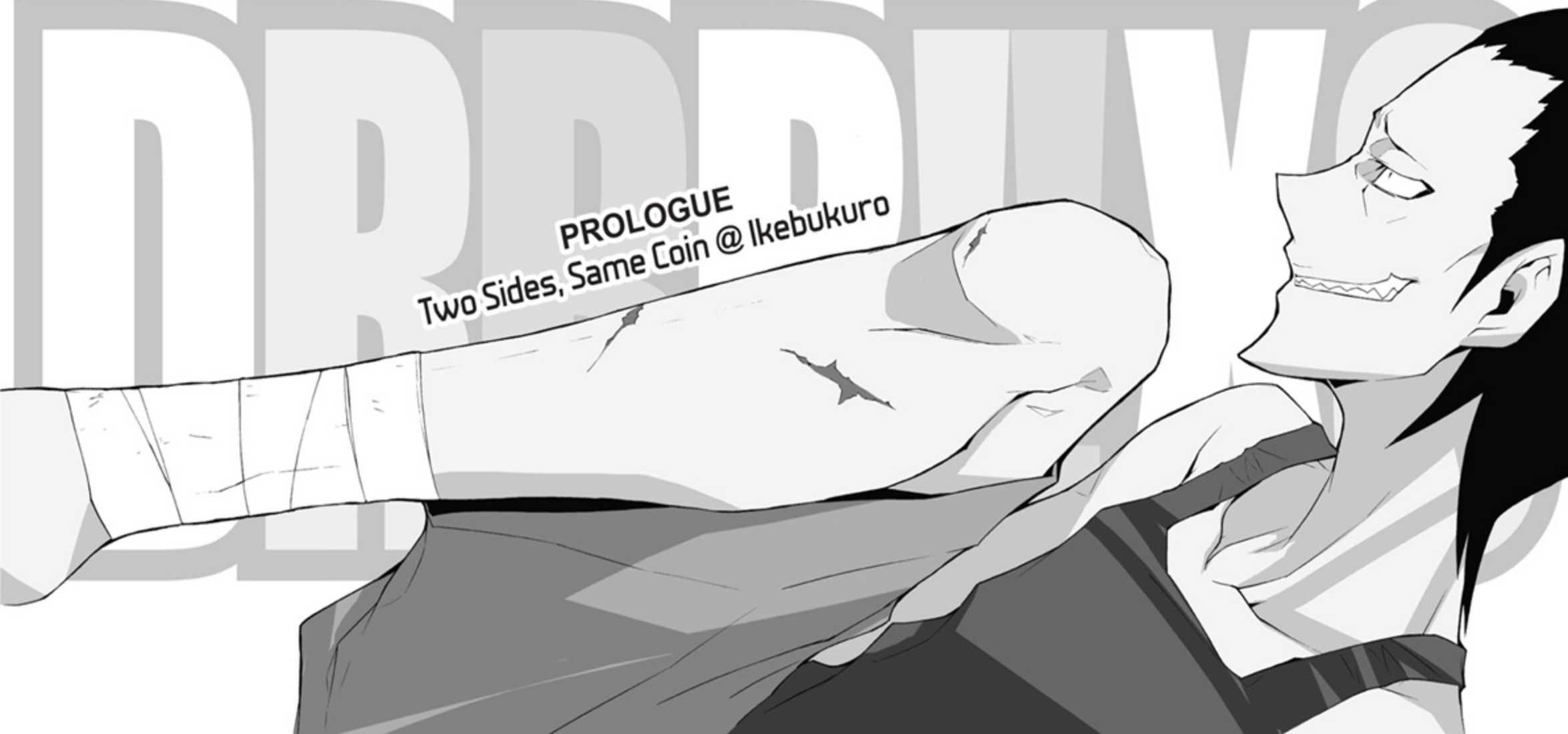
PROLOGUE
Two Sides, Same Coin @ Ikebukuro



PROLOGUE
TWO SIDES, SAME COIN @ IKEBUKURO

PROLOGUE: HEADS

July, Tokyo

"The Dollars have changed."

That's what someone mumbled in the corner of a coffee shop.

Not long ago it was just a low-key club, but recently it's started looking more like the color gangs—a real street gang.

It all kicked off with a turf war incident during the extended holiday in May.

Everything cleared up within just a few days…

But deep, deep scars have remained unhealed in the two months plus since then.

"Yo, mister. We were raised under the new education standards, so we don't know Japanese so good. Let's keep it short, yeah?"

The shroud of night had descended upon Tokyo.

In an alley removed from the center of Ikebukuro, a group of youngsters with ostentatious clothing had surrounded an office-working salaryman.

The fortyish man had no idea what was happening to him, except that he'd gone from being pleasantly tipsy to being in an absolute nightmare.

"Wha… what are you boys doing? Y-you've got the wrong man… Wh-what have I done… to offend you?"

The salaryman quaked in fear at the youths, who were no older than his own son, and

held his briefcase to his chest as a shield. It wasn't very good armor when you were surrounded by four people.

"Like I *said*, let's keep it short. Yeah? You heard of us? The Dollars? Well, we're doin' a little fund-raising. Can I ask for your help? All we need is everything in your wallet," one of the young men mocked, slapping the man lightly on the cheeks.

The salaryman put on an obliging smile as the impact shook the alcohol from his mind. "Ah… h-ha-ha, why, yes. I know of the Dollars—I am one."

"What?"

"Y-you know, online…"

He started to take out his cell phone, but one of the hooligans grabbed his wrist and twisted it, laughing. The phone slipped out of his fingers and clattered onto the ground.

"Ow… aiee! Ah… gah…!" he shrieked.

The young man yanked his arm behind his back and drew close to his ear in order to taunt, "Well, in that case, couldn't you spare a little allowance money for your fellow Dollars? Shouldn't the elders be looking out for the kids?"

The others jeered him on.

"Thanks for all your hard work, fathers of Japan!"

"We just want to repay our parents with loyalty!"

The way that they threw their arms around his shoulders and lightly gibed him for money only made the salaryman more afraid. He would almost have preferred they'd threatened him with clipped, menacing demands for cash. At least that way, he could envision handing over the money and being allowed to leave without further trouble.

He looked backward, gauging whether or not he should make a break for it—when he noticed more youngsters blocking the way. He fully gave in to despair.

However, the ones sticking him up looked similarly upset at the sight of these new visitors.

"…? Who the hell are you?"

"This ain't a show! Get lost!" the muggers shouted at first, but as the eeriness of the new group became more apparent, their apprehension and hostility rose.

While the newcomers were a variety of sizes and shapes, they all wore the same masks. The headwear looked like knit ski masks but with embroidered spikes resembling shark teeth extending around the head in a creepy fashion.

It was bizarre.

They didn't look like they'd gotten together just to threaten people. It wasn't a prank to scare drunks, a creative new art exhibition, or a vigilante group.

The first thing that the muggers thought of was the battle against the Saitama biker gang named Toramaru from a few months back. Could the bikers have come back to attack them, using the masks to hide their faces? The thought gave the thugs chills.

After a few seconds of unsettling silence, one of the masked youngsters said happily, "We're Dollars, too. Mind if we help out?"

"Huh?"

"…!"

The muggers raised eyebrows while the salaryman quaked.

"Why the hell should we split up our take like that? Get outta here!" a mugger said, bold again now that he knew what he was dealing with.

But the masked newcomers first glanced at one another, then shook their hands in a negative fashion.

"Oh no, no, you've got it wrong."

"What?"

"*We're talking to the salaryman over there*."

"Huh? What the hell are you…?" the criminals started to say, confused, when they heard

a dull *crunking* noise.

They spun around and saw another masked youngster with a baseball bat in his hand, standing over one of their companions.

“A-asshole!…?!”

Behind the boy with the bat was another group of masked men. At last, the muggers understood.

They were standing in a lonely alley with no bystanders, completely surrounded.

One of the masked youths spoke up. “We’re gonna need to borrow your phones so that we can log in to the Dollars website and cancel your memberships.”

He cackled and tilted his head to crack the vertebrae in his neck. “Having guys like you in the Dollars is a bit of a problem, you see.

“And our leader wants us to purge you from the ranks.”

“The Dollars have changed.”

That’s what someone mumbled in a back alley.

“The gang no longer has the freedom to lollygag.”

PROLOGUE: TAILS

Metropolitan Expressway, Ikebukuro

"Things are looking extremely troubling, aren't they, sir?" murmured the bizarre man in the white gas mask, sitting in the rear seat of the black luxury vehicle.

"Not troubling, but certainly extreme," replied the man sitting across from him from a decent distance away. He looked to be somewhere in his late fifties or early sixties, with graying hair held in place by pomade.

He glared at Shingen Kishitani and remarked, "And it was you Nebula folks who put us in this extreme situation."

"Alas, it seems you still refuse to see the situation for what it is, President Yagiri."

"Stop it with the obsequious fawning, Kishitani. It makes you sound sarcastic."

Shingen slowly shook his head. A dry chuckle broke from beneath his gas mask. "You may still hold on to the title of president, but from the moment your company came under Nebula's umbrella, Seitarou Yagiri, you have been a Nebula man yourself. You mustn't forget that," he said bluntly.

Yagiri maintained a blank expression. "As people are wont to say to their kind, 'Human beings are the real terror.' It's been a saying ever since I was a boy."

"Actually, everything in the world is a terror. Every kind of food is carcinogenic, and every species can pose an extinctive threat to others. But I didn't invite you on this drive to trade barbs like this."

"Then why did you? I can't imagine Nebula really has such a fixation on the head," Seitarou Yagiri said.

While he freely brought up the matter on his own, Shingen's voice was muffled. "As a matter of fact, this isn't me acting as a Nebula employee. I wanted to talk to you as an old friend. More specifically, to give you a warning."

"Warning?" Seitarou asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Shingen looked down at the fingers he had crossed over his knees and, without looking up, said the name, "Jinnai Yodogiri."

"…!"

Seitarou's expression instantly soured, and he turned to look at the scenery streaming by out the window. Among the forest of high-rise buildings that rose in the distance over the expressway walls, Shingen's faint reflection budged on the inside of the glass.

"Based on that reaction, I take the rumors to be true. You have some connection to the man."

"…"

"I will be frank with you. Yodogiri is dangerous. It's for your own sake not to approach him. You might be thinking that you can use him to your ends, but it's the other way around. What he's doing is trite, but his skill at trampling all over others is exceedingly sharp. Well… calling it 'trite' may not sit well with those he's already victimized," Shingen mumbled.

Seitarou grimaced and shook his head.

"I'm surprised. They say you're the dog off its leash at Nebula, and even *you're* on guard around this Yodogiri fellow?"

"Actually, I'm one of the better-behaved folks there. Remember, these are people who deal with fairy heads and vampires and the like—stuff too embarrassing to ever take public. Plus, if I was really the type to take any means necessary, I wouldn't bother with this company takeover to get Celty's head. I'd just steal it from your house."

"So you say."

"Besides, if anyone's really ruthless, it's you. You haven't forgotten how you seized that head before it could be handed over to Nebula twenty years ago by threatening the life of my son, have you?" Shingen said accusingly.

Without taking his eyes off the window, Seitarou replied, "After fifty, your memory starts to go a little fuzzy. But the vague pieces I can recall all featured you happily giving up the head for cash."

“Hmph! When I asked my boss, ‘Can we sell the head to another company so my son doesn’t get assassinated?’ I didn’t actually expect to get ‘You can’t barter with your child’s life, and we can’t get the police involved anyhow’ as an answer. Not only did they know it wasn’t something that could be made public, it was a division that never paid much attention to loss or gain in the first place.”

“…What a ridiculous company. It makes me sick to my stomach to think that it’s one of the premier corporations in the world and the business I raised myself is now under its control.”

“You mentioned fuzzy memory. Isn’t that convenient? You can just forget the unpleasant stuff,” said Shingen, probably sarcastically, but without being able to see his face, there was no way to be certain. Regardless, Seitarou leaned his head back, pressing his graying hair into the headrest of the seat, and looked downward.

“I will not forget. Last year was the worst of my life. Not only did we get absorbed by Nebula, Namie ran off with the damned head.”

“Knowing you, I’m sure you could track down your niece swiftly. Couldn’t *you* steal it back and make it look like a robbery?”

“…No need to take such extreme measures. We already did every bit of research you possibly could on it. Our conclusion was that it was beyond the realm of modern science. Makes you wonder if you’d have better luck using occult means… but I’m certain that Namie only continued that pointless research as a means to keep the head out of Seiji’s grasp,” he said, exasperated.

Shingen joked, “The fact that you knew all of this and let her do it says a lot about your love for your niece.”

“Well, she was a very talented researcher. Seiichi… her father was useless. I merely made the judgment call that if we were going to continue examining the head, it was best to leave it with Namie.”

“Hrm… But you didn’t think of the head as a target for study in the first place. The reason your nephew became so infatuated with it was because you kept her head at your own house, didn’t you?”

“You certainly like to pry into other people’s private business,” Seitarou said, sounding more resigned than annoyed or affronted.

Shingen cackled. “It’s nothing. And you’re like your nephew, aren’t you? Did you fall in love with that head, too? At your age? You were still a bachelor, and it turned out the object of your affections that led you to threaten me was the severed head of a fairy.”

“Your conjecture is about fifty percent correct.”

The car came across some traffic and gradually slowed. When it had come to a complete stop, Seitarou continued, “Of course, I think the head is beautiful. It has both artistic and feminine beauty. Enough to kindle feelings of longing and desire, as you said—even at my age. But I am no longer young enough to tie such feelings into romance. Seiji can be exasperating, but at times, I envy him.”

He looked up at the ceiling of the car interior, as if cherishing the distant past, and muttered, “If you take my envy as a consequence of love, then I suppose I *am* in love—with the possibility of freeing my soul from the mortal world, just like that fairy.”

“Now there’s a youthful fantasy if I’ve ever heard one. Though I suppose that once you learn of things detached from the accepted view of the world, you can’t help but be possessed by them,” Shingen muttered from behind the gas mask, shaking his head. “But allow me to give you a warning. Do not get involved with Jinnai Yodogiri.”

“And I’ll ask you again. Is he really that dangerous? He’s just a middleman whose only skill is to suck up to the mighty.”

“If his best skill was sucking up to the mighty, he wouldn’t make an enemy of the Awakusu-kai,” Shingen said, referring to a criminal organization in the city. “I know how arrogant you are. You think you’ll use him for all he’s worth, then cut him loose when you need to, like a lizard’s tail… but that’s a perilous idea. He might be the tail, but you never know when it’s actually the body that’s being cut loose.”

“Your metaphors are as abstract as ever, but I shall keep your warning in mind,” said Seitarou, his face so stiff that it was hard to tell if he really intended to heed the advice.

Ten minutes later, after Seitarou had left the car, Shingen called up to the driver.

“By the way, do *you* know anything about Yodogiri?”

The Russian driving the car, a man named Egor, shook his head. “No. I do not know anything more than what you told me and have no interest in it.”

“I see… By the way, you’ve been working for Nebula… er, as my private errand runner for over three months now. Don’t you need to get back to Russia by now?”

“The vice president instructed me to watch Miss Vorona. I do not think it is worth such concern… but there is also a deal with the Awakusu-kai that should keep me in Japan for the time being.”

“What about your visa? If we get pulled over by the cops and they take you, I’m stuck here. I don’t have a license,” Shingen pointed out with grave alarm.

Egor calmly replied as he drove. “Have no fear. It is a long-term technical visa that claims I have been a jeweler since the age of fifteen. Denis and Simon appear to be looking for permanent visas, but I am not so enamored of this country as they are. It’s not bad, of course.”

He paused, then asked his benefactor, “Is this man Yodogiri really as dangerous as you say?”

“He’s a different type from you or Vorona or the Awakusu-kai. If your danger is represented by a knife edge, Yodogiri’s is poison… no, like radiation. If you aren’t aware of it, you’ll sink yourself into its rotting depths without ever recognizing the danger… and once you do know, it’s already too late,” Shingen said, using an analogy Egor would find easy to understand.

“Egor,” he continued, “do you remember the serial killer I hired you to dispatch this spring—Hollywood?”

“I couldn’t forget. I ended up with facial reconstruction because of it. You said that it was Yodogiri this Hollywood killer was going after, yes?”

“Indeed. Hollywood the serial killer—Miss Ruri Hijiribe—should have killed him right off the bat, but for some reason, he evaded her grasp to the very end. That alone should tell you something about him.”

“I see. But what does he wish to achieve by aligning himself with the president of Yagiri Pharmaceuticals?” asked the driver, a suspicious note of interest for one who worked as a detached professional.

Yet Shingen freely offered the answer: “He’s a *broker*. He merely uses show business as a refuge.”

“…From the way you say that, I’m guessing it’s the slave trade?”

“That, too… but he sells more things than just people.

“As a matter of fact, twenty years ago, he was the one who sold me the information on the cursed sword Saika and the dullahan’s hideout.”

The driver’s body shivered the instant he heard the name Saika.

Shingen caught that reaction. “Egor, I’ve been wondering something.”

“What is it?”

“Did you happen to get *cut by Saika*?”

It was such a direct question that Egor could only snort. “I will leave that up to your imagination.”

Through the rearview mirror, Shingen could see that Egor’s eyes were steadily filling red with blood. He shrugged and made a show of not being particularly concerned. “Then I shall say this… under the assumption that you are a ‘child’ of Saika and thus inhuman.”

“What is it?”

“You should stay away from Jinnai Yodogiri.

“You never know what distant land he’ll sell you to.”

PROLOGUE: EDGE

Chat room

Kuru: What I am saying is that Yuuhei Hanejima's infinite range of acting means that he is, in fact, part of the overarching cosmos! In other words, the great Yuuhei is fused with every place in this world… and by closing your eyes, you can feel Yuuhei's presence! With each breath, a bit of Yuuhei enters my body… So why don't we drown in the pleasure of Yuuhei together?!

Mai: We can't.

Mai: I see that woman's face.

Mai: Ruri Hijiribe.

Kuru: Oh, Mai. You seem to be burning with jealousy over the news reports about Lady Ruri and Master Yuuhei, but think of it another way! Now Ruri Hijiribe is, like Yuuhei Hanejima, a single part of our greater world! Do not expend your energy on jealousy—love Ruri Hijiribe as you love Yuuhei, and let them both melt into you!

Mai: What?

Mai: You mean a threeso

Mai: Ouch.

Mai: I got pinched.

Kuru: Because you were going to use a vulgar expression. However, now that I see my thoughts written out, I must admit some degree of eerie, cultlike religiosity to them. But once I can convert that eeriness to pleasure, I will have nothing left to fear in the world!

Mai: I'm afraid of you.

Setton has entered the chat.

Setton: Evenin'.

Setton: You're always pumped up about something, Kuru.

Mai: Good evening.

Kuru: Why, what a lovely encounter, Setton! In fact, the word *pumped* does not even begin to describe it. Our feelings for Yuuhei have transcended to a point beyond the range of mere words! But if words were required to suffice, there is only one needed or fit for the task: Love! Love! Love! My love for Yuuhei is the engine that drives my very life!

Mai: Scary.

Setton: Wow, how much do you like Yuuhei Hanejima?

Bacura has entered the chat.

Bacura: 'Sup.

Mai: Good evening.

Setton: Evenin'.

Bacura: Speaking of Yuuhei Hanejima, his rumored lover, Ruri Hijiribe,

Bacura: Is supposedly suffering the attention of a stalker these days.

Setton: Stalker?

Bacura: Someone's going on and on about an old picture,

Bacura: And using that as a means to mess around with her.

Setton: Oh. I wonder what it is. Hidden camera photo?

Kuru: It is so lovely to encounter you here, Bacura. I have heard tell of this rumor as well. Normally, one would expect this photograph to be spreading near and far on the

Internet, but I have not seen hide nor hair of it.

Mai: Dollars.

Setton: Huh?

Bacura: What about the Dollars?

Kuru: Ah, please do forgive us for Mai's abrupt outburst. Rumor says that the stalker is affiliated with the Dollars gang.

Setton: Oh, I see.

Kuru: The rumor states that there is an extreme fan of Ruri Hijiribe among the Dollars who might have been gathering information from other fans and using it to stalk her… Normally, one would assume fans of idol singers lose interest when their romantic life is exposed, but that does not seem to be the case here. Or perhaps this stalker felt that their emotional investment was betrayed and started stalking out of hatred.

Mai: Scary.

Kuru: Indeed. And yet we would happily continue to love Yuuhei, even after he gets married!

Mai: But it was a shock.

Mai: Wow.

Mai: Ki

Setton: Ki?

Kuru: It is nothing. Mai seems to be in a state of disorientation. Please ignore her.

Setton: I see… I'd be worried about this stalker being violent and angry, though.

Setton: There were lots of people bashing Yuuhei Hanejima when the scandal happened.

Saika has entered the chat.

Setton: Oh, evenin'.

Kuru: What a lovely encounter, Saika.

Saika: hello

Bacura: Speaking of which,

Bacura: TarouTanaka hasn't logged in anytime recently.

Bacura: Does anyone here know him IRL?

Kuru: I suppose that he is fine and not in need of concern. Perhaps he has grown bored of the online world or moved to a different social media platform. Is it not unreasonable to expect a person to be chained to a single chat room forever? As with history, the human heart changes and wanders where it wills.

Saika: i'm worried he's sick or something

Setton: I haven't spotted Kanra in here lately, either.

Setton: It's too bad, because Kanra was always the one who knew about gossip stuff like this.

Kuru: Certainly, that person is entirely unnecessary to worry about. He will find his way back before too long. If you are feeling lonely without as many people in the chat, why not find someone new to invite in?

Bacura: Kanra is,

Bacura: Well,

Bacura: Doing all right, apparently.

Setton: Oh, are you friends with Kanra IRL?

Setton: Has anyone met TarouTanaka off-line, then?

Kuru: He is a sociable enough person online and seems to know what goes on in the

city, so I do not expect that he is a solitary enough person not to have friends.

Mai: He's not a loner.

Setton: A loner, huh?

Bacura: I see…

Kuru: Actually, if you are able to contact Kanra off-line, why don't you try asking Kanra about him? I have the impression that he and TarouTanaka know each other.

Mai: Friends.

Setton: Wait, is that right?

Kuru: However, it would be a shame for the chat room to go quiet. I suppose Mai and I will consider inviting some acquaintances to this place.

Setton: Oh, that would be good. I'll look around for someone to ask… Do you suppose it's a good idea for us to pack the place when the admin, Kanra, isn't around?

Bacura: You shouldn't worry about what he thinks.

Bacura: I'll try asking someone, too.

Saika: i will also invite an acquaintance

Saika: it seems like things should get lively

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Rakuei Gym, Ikebukuro

At a gym in Ikebukuro that taught all manner of fighting styles, a girl still of elementary school age—Akane Awakusu—was receiving passive defense training in the middle of the tatami floor. There were other children and adults around the gym, too, giving the class a very inclusive and varied vibe.

But the space itself was still quiet and tense, broken only by the occasional fierce smack or shout.

Mairu Orihara was stretching herself as she watched Akane train. She turned to the man next to her. "Hey, Master, how's Akane doing? Does she have potential?"

"You've asked that twice already: the day she first came in and then last month," replied the man from his position where the tatami mats and wooden floor met, which gave him a good view of the entire gym. He didn't look at Mairu as he spoke. "My answer hasn't changed. I can't tell if she's got promise or not. Her old man said she could take the same stick training that Mr. Akabayashi does, but I can't tell if that's best. Basically, if she's tougher after her training, then it turned out she had potential. She can be as strong as she wants. As long as she's still weaker than me."

"You really aren't very interested in teaching people things, are you, Master? For a martial artist, you seem pretty soft."

"I'll kick your *dogi* to shreds and give you a strip KO. Does that sound soft?" said the teacher rather shockingly. He was Eijirou Sharaku, one of the instructors at Rakuei Gym.

He was the second son of Eita Sharaku, the gym's owner, and around thirty years old. Along with his hard-core older brother, Eiichirou, and his tomboyish little sister, Mikage, he taught at the family-run gym. In that sense, it was less of a gym than a proper dojo—but Eijirou was too lazy and sloppy for that proud, old-fashioned term to apply here.

Despite being just an instructor, Mairu called him "Master" and took every opportunity she could to tease him.

"If you did such a naughty thing to me and I cried myself to sleep, I bet Boss Eita and Sensei would chew you out."

"Actually, Mikage would crush my nuts first… *Brr!* Just the thought made me shiver."

It was hard to imagine a man with this attitude teaching martial arts, but Mairu didn't mind at all. She popped up to her feet and attempted to ambush him with a sneak high kick.

He caught her kick with one hand and tossed it aside, then snarked, "Well, anyway, it's true that I don't know much about potential. But no matter who you are, whether it's a yakuza grandkid, the prime minister's dad, a good guy, a bad guy—as long as you pay us money, we'll give you a sandbag. Even for slutty little girls like you."

"You know that I could sue you for sexual harassment, right?"

"Shut up. The point is… it depends on her. But that's just me; Dad and my brother think differently."

He would have continued to explain, but a crisp *smack* near the window distracted him. The sound was coming from the training gym upstairs.

Smack, smack, the bursting noises went on a steady rhythm.

"That's a nice sound. Who's that?" Mairu wondered.

Eijirou craned his neck left and right and answered, "Adabashi, I bet."

"Oh, the guy with the crazy eyes?"

"He's not an official student here. Like I said, if you pay the money, we'll let you whack at a sandbag for half an hour, registered or not… But Adabashi's been coming around just about every day. I've met him a few times… and take my advice: He's dangerous. Stay away."

In contrast to his previous lackadaisical attitude, Eijirou's warning was stern.

"What? What? Is he tough? Tougher than you? Than Sensei? Than boss? Than Coach Mikage? Than Mr. Akabayashi? Than Traugott Geissendorfer? Than *Shizuo*?!"

"No, he's way weaker than me."

"Oh… he's even weaker than you…"

"The overwhelming note of disappointment in your voice makes me wonder how

weak you think I really am! Just don't take that statement as me putting myself in the same league as Traugott or Shizuo Heiwajima," Eijirou quipped, his cheek twitching.

Mairu largely ignored his statement, wondering, "Then why should I stay away from him?"

"Well… maybe I'm just generalizing, 'cause this is only my impression," Eijirou said, looking up at the ceiling and the source of the sandbag pounding, "but I don't think he's training for the purpose of being stronger…

"I dunno, I just get a much more dangerous vibe from him…"

Upstairs

A man was unleashing devastatingly sharp kicks to a sandbag.

A very thin man.

But no one would look at his exposed arms and legs and consider him to be spindly or willowy.

His muscles were as solid as bundles of thick wires. His legs could belong to a bird of prey or some carnivorous dinosaur.

Adabashi's body coiled and sprang like a well-oiled machine to kick the sandbag in a rhythmic pattern.

"…"

Once he had finished his fiftieth kick, he smiled to himself.

He returned to the changing room then; an unregistered guest at the gym, he didn't interact with any of the students around him.

On the bench in the corner of the changing room, Adabashi looked around carefully to

make sure no one else was present.

He slowly undid the bandage wrapped around his ankle. From the folds of the white fabric, presumably there to protect his joint from the impact of the kicks, tumbled a piece of paper.

He lifted up the tattered paper, which was unable to withstand the many blows despite the cushion of the bandage, and stared at it with delight clearly etched into his cheeks.

It was a photograph of a person, probably cut out of a magazine.

The popular idol Ruri Hijiribe.

The photo looked like it was from an article or ad announcing the release of a pinup collection. Just as on the cover of that photo book, she was posing seductively with bandages wrapped around her body.

It was both bewitching and somehow youthful, a picture designed to capture her fans and never let go—but between the man's sweat and the tattered state of the paper, there was nothing bewitching about it anymore.

Yet Adabashi stared at the shabby photo with joyous longing, licked his lips—and tore it in half with his teeth, like he was eating a sheet of dried seaweed. He chewed the magazine clipping, then tossed the remaining half of the paper into his mouth and continued.

His saliva seeped into the paper until it grew firmer. Still his chewing went on, and once the paper was wadded up into a large ball, he swallowed it.

"Kah!"

Whatever it was that he was imagining as he chewed the picture of Ruri Hijiribe, his vicious and insane eyes were actually pooling up with misty tears.

"Kah! Kah! Kah!"

The sounds burst from his throat, much like a cough. The wad of paper must have gotten stuck to the side of his gullet. After a few more hacks, he succeeded in swallowing the lump entirely.

This time he hissed: *"Shhhheh."*

He hunched over, not vocalizing but pressing the air through his clenched teeth. *"Shehhh, shehhh."*

The sound filled the changing room. It was like the respiration of some kind of man-eating movie monster. Nobody in the room would have known that this was the peculiar "laugh" that he made when he was excited.

It was so creepy that a student who was about to enter the room suddenly decided he would much rather return to his training.

The paper had absorbed all the moisture in his mouth, so his lips were cracked, with bright-red blood seeping out.

Adabashi licked his lips, a faint tinge of iron in the air, and continued smiling.

He reached into his bag.

There was a thick pile of papers inside of it.

All of them clippings from magazines or printouts from the Internet.

All of the pictures shared one thing: the presence of Ruri Hijiribe.

He took one of the papers out and stuck it to his ankle like a compress, then wrapped the bandage over it.

Once his leg was back to the way it had been before, he returned to the training room and began kicking the sandbag.

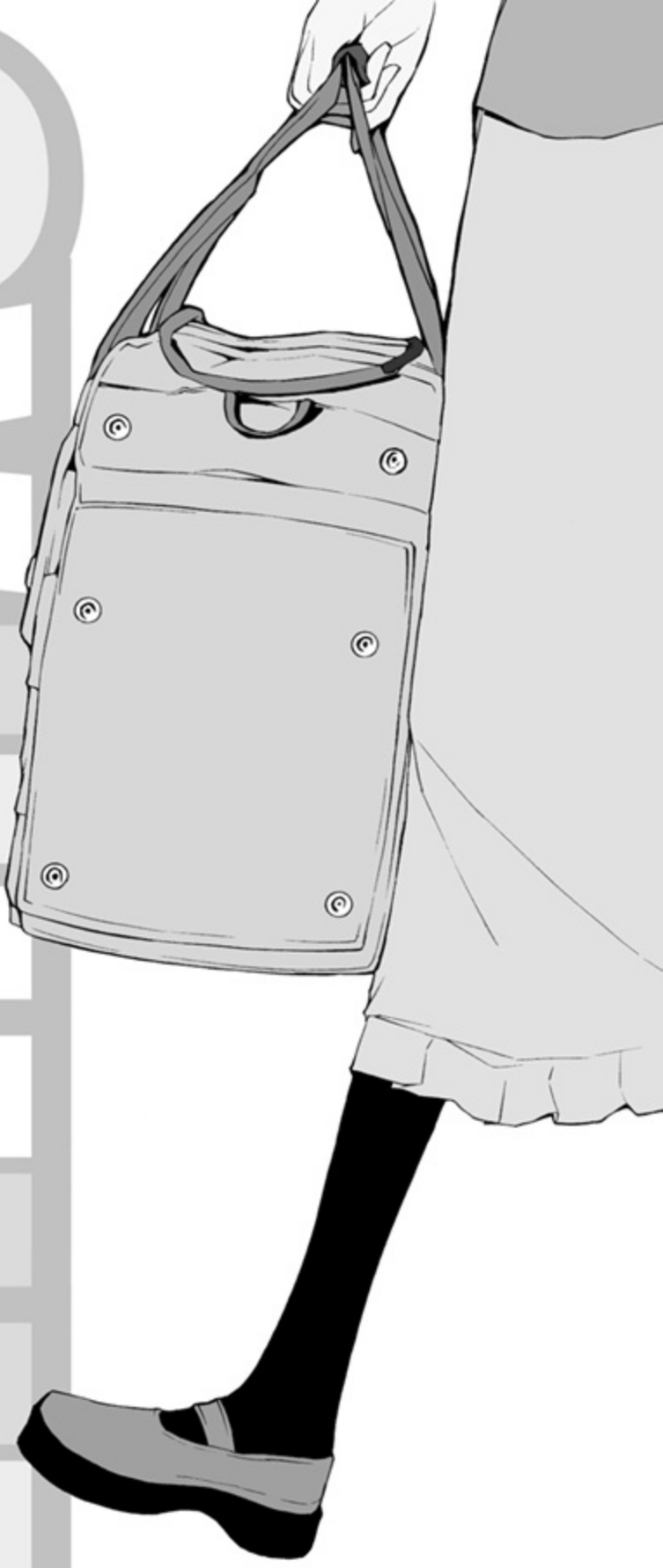
Smack, smack. With each loud impact, Adabashi could feel that the Ruri Hijiribe plastered to the top of his foot was steadily breaking down.

The lurch of thick excitement stayed deep in his gut where he could keep it hidden. As if fulfilling some kind of duty, he continued to destroy the image of Ruri Hijiribe between the sandbag and his foot.

The breath that seeped out of his mouth hung heavy with the heat of twisted desire.

DRRR!!

CHAPTER 1
Vicissitudes @ Dullahan Rider



Ryohgo Narita

CHAPTER 1
VICISSITUDES @ DULLAHAN RIDER

Kanto region, night

A number of cars raced along a seaside road.

The black vehicles had tinted windows, preventing anyone from knowing what was happening inside.

Yet following them was a single motorcycle. This one hung far behind the others, the rider clad in a suit that was even darker than the night. The lone rider trailing the caravan ahead drove at a speed well over the legal limit.

The chase might have been a scene from an action movie were it not for a few details that put it into a different genre.

For one, the motorcycle made no engine noise, only the occasional roar like a horse whinnying. For another, there was no headlight or license plate on the bike, which, like its rider, was completely black, of a shade that seemed to suck in all light.

Lastly, the figure riding the bike was holding an enormous pitch-black scythe that spanned at least six feet.

A reaper's motorcycle that came to life from shadow art, it was ready to drag in the cars up ahead back into the world of darkness.

So if one focused primarily on the bike, it was more like a scene out of a horror movie.

There was no headlight to illuminate the way, but the vehicle found itself easily closing the gap.

No cars came the other way. Perhaps the road was little used.

This dramatic chase continued for a while until, just as the motorcycle was about to catch up to the last car in the row, one of the vehicles began to slow until it came level with the bike, window rolling down.

A red-painted bowgun emerged from the black maw of the window. It fired immediately at the rider's chest.

But just before the arrow could land, *the rider's body produced a black shadow that grabbed it and transformed into a bow of its own, then shot the projectile back*.

It stuck into the arm of the man inside the window, who shrieked.

Suddenly, another car slowed to approach the bike, and from this open window, a flaming bottle came hurtling. Again, the rider's shadowy "suit" grabbed the Molotov, holding it in the air within a black froth that sucked the oxygen free until the flame went out.

The bottle flew back into the car from where it came, landing on the hand of a man in the act of pulling out a black pistol. He fired at that very moment, while his hand holding the gun burst into vivid flames.

That car slammed into a guardrail and came to a stop, screams coming from the interior. The rider continued forward into the center of the group of vehicles.

Suddenly, the lead vehicle changed directions and headed from the road toward the warehouses along the seaside.

The bike kept pace, chasing along after that lead car, when—

From the far end of the warehouse district came a massive explosion—and the appearance of a helicopter.

It was a small three-seater, not some massive military chopper, but it was still not the sort of vehicle that an individual simply *owned*.

The helicopter's spotlight caught the silent rider, marking it clearly as it raced between the warehouse buildings.

Next, one of the men on the aircraft pointed a submachine gun at the motorcycle and

opened fire. Like the helicopter itself, his attack was undisciplined and clearly nonmilitary; the man was spraying fire in a vain attempt to hit the shadow cyclist.

But even those shots from the hail of bullets that *did* land accurately were swallowed up by the rider's scythe, which had transformed into an umbrella. The bullets simply sank into the black mass without deflecting away.

A number of bullets that missed their mark hit the lead car's door and tires, sending the orderly line of vehicles into a swerving frenzy.

The shooter on the helicopter paused then, realizing the effect his gunfire was having, and instead pulled a pin from a hand grenade and tossed it down at the black motorcycle.

When the rider recognized the nature of the small rolling object, it toppled the bike sideways to evade—but the projectile exploded too quickly, and the blast tossed the small vehicle into the water across from the warehouses.

"All right! Yeah, in your face!" crowed the helicopter's gunman, preparing to fire some more into the sea—when he noticed something amiss.

The motorcycle had fallen into the water with a suspiciously small and quiet splash. The surface of the night sea caught the spotlight and threw it back, making it impossible to see down into the water.

He was squinting to get a better look, when the anomaly registered not in his eyes, but his ears.

That horse whinnying that the bike made instead of an engine roar was coming up from the sea.

"Wha…?"

It wasn't his mind playing tricks.

The shooter and pilot both stared, wide-eyed. An even more bizarre sight burned its way into their retinas.

A huge, singular shadow emerged from the water as thick as a tanker truck.

It stretched and stretched through the air, yawning its wide mouth in the direction of the helicopter and cars like a black dragon—until the black motorcycle shot from the opening.

In other words, just before the motorcycle would have fallen into the water, it created a tunnel of shadow that churned through the sea like a mole burrow before it came up to breach the surface again.

The shooter in the helicopter screamed and tried to spray more gunfire, unable to believe what he was seeing, but his magazine promptly ran out, and he had to exchange it for a fresh one.

That was plenty of time for the rider. Its shadow extended to the front car of the escaping line, engulfing the whole body with a black wave.

When darkness covered the windshield, the driver could no longer see and tried to swerve away, but the shadow grabbed at the tires as well, essentially forcing the car into emergency braking.

But that was only the start.

Now rooted to the car, the shadow bulged and grew like a tree, its branches reaching up to the helicopter directly overhead. The darkness clung to the blades and gently slowed their rotation.

The craft rocked, turning slowly, and looked poised to fall and crash—until the shadow tree grabbed the body with countless more branches and held it in place, creating a massive new sculpture that loomed over the warehouse district.

"…"

The rider stopped the bike just in front of the giant tree, then added shadow stairs that climbed the trunk up toward the tangled helicopter. Once at the cabin, the rider pulled the SMG from the unconscious shooter's hands and turned to walk back down.

"W-wait… you monster… Why didn't you let us fall?" groaned the pilot, glaring at his attacker.

The rider pulled a PDA out of its chest and showed the LCD screen to the pilot.

"Well, if I let you crash, you'd have died, right?"

*"…*Uh, what?"

"I don't want to get in trouble with the cops for excessive self-defense. Besides, I'm not an assassin or a serial killer, so I'd feel terrible about it. Also, I saw on TV recently that these small helicopters cost like forty million yen? I mean, I know it doesn't belong to me, but it'd be such a waste to crash it."

For having just exhibited such ghastly, inhuman powers, the rider's statement was both painfully human and even a little… frugal?

The shadow rider looked at the pilot's face and seemed to hit on an idea.

"Well, if you're not unconscious, I guess I can just ask you.

"Where's the 'Hakujoushi' you kidnapped?"

♂♀

Two hours later, mansion, Tokyo area

"Hakujoushi! Yay! You're all right!"

A young girl raced over to the rider and a brilliant white snake—and clung happily to the reptile.

The force of this embrace would be enough to snap the backbone of a thin snake, but this white one was as thick as a beer bottle and big enough to strangle the girl if it felt so inclined.

But the white snake merely licked at the girl's cheek gently, its big eyes shining.

"Thank you, courier! You saved Hakujoushi for me!" raved the girl, the snake still

flicking her cheek with its tongue.

The courier—Celty Sturluson—typed back a *"You're welcome"* message.

"Thank you so very much."

"We don't know how to thank you…"

"It's just my job. I delivered them to the police already, so if you submit a stolen car report, they should wind up in jail."

She took a thick envelope from the girl's parents, waved to her and the snake, then left the mansion.

Celty had received the wealthy couple's request to save their daughter's kidnapped pet, but she hadn't imagined at the time that it would involve a vehicle chase with helicopters and guns.

After Celty questioned them, she learned the thieves were after a different type of property, but they stole the entire moving truck, which just so happened to contain the pet in transit.

The fact that the wealthy couple had sought Celty's assistance rather than the police's suggested to her that perhaps the snake was being kept in violation of some law or regulation, but she did her best not to think about it.

I wonder, if my existence was admitted officially by the world at large, would I be put on the endangered species list? It's usually the person who discovers the species whose name ends up being attached. I guess that would make me Celty Kishitani.

Hee-hee. That makes it sound like I got married and changed my name, she thought blissfully. But then she turned her attention to the snake that she'd just brought here in her cage of shadow.

Hakujoushi is a pretty wild name for a pet, though. I wonder if they named it after "Hakujaden," the Chinese legend of the white snake. Or maybe they took it from the Megami Tensei series…

Hakujoushi was the name of a snake monster from China. A thousand-year-old white snake turned into a beautiful woman in an attempt to seduce the man it loved. By the

end of the story, the monster is revealed and locked away—but among the various evolutions of the legend over the years, some had a happy ending where human and monster fell in love.

Celty revved her bike, thinking dreamily of the classic tale of interspecies marriage.

A story of love between human and monster.

Just like me and Shinra.

⚥

Celty Sturluson was not human.

She was a type of fairy commonly known as a dullahan, found from Scotland to Ireland—a being that visits the homes of those close to death to inform them of their impending mortality.

The dullahan carried its own severed head under its arm, rode on a two-wheeled carriage called a Coiste Bodhar pulled by a headless horse, and approached the homes of the soon to die. Anyone foolish enough to open the door was drenched with a basin full of blood. Thus the dullahan, like the banshee, made its name as a herald of ill fortune throughout European folklore.

One theory claimed that the dullahan bore a strong resemblance to the Norse Valkyrie, but Celty had no way of knowing if this was true.

It wasn't that she *didn't* know. More accurately, she just couldn't remember.

When someone in her homeland stole her head, she also lost her memories. It was the search for the faint trail of her head that had brought her here to Ikebukuro.

Now with a motorcycle instead of a headless horse and a riding suit instead of armor, she had wandered the streets of this neighborhood for decades.

But ultimately, she had not succeeded in retrieving her head, and her memories were still missing.

However, Celty knew who stole her head.

She also knew who was preventing her from finding it.

But ultimately, that didn't mean that she knew its location.

And she was fine with that.

As long as she could live with those human beings she loved and who accepted her, she could enjoy being alive the way she was now.

She was a headless woman who let her actions speak for her missing face and held this strong, secret desire within her heart.

That was Celty Sturluson in a nutshell.

⚥

The "freakish" woman realized that she was daydreaming about her lover and willed herself to concentrate on the road.

She revved the engine, which produced the sound of a horse whinnying, and reflected on the day's job.

Who could have guessed that tracking down an abducted pet would lead to the destruction of an entire criminal enterprise? I'm glad I got them all tied up and presented to the cops, guns included… but more importantly, that was my first time facing a helicopter. It actually wasn't that bad. I felt like I was Angelina Jolie for a moment.

To her foes, she wasn't an action star, but more like Jason, Freddy, or a Xenomorph. That didn't bother Celty in the least, though. She happily pulled her Coiste Bodhar up into a wheelie.

The sight of a horse rearing back and whinnying at the moon spooked the drivers of nearby cars, who all found reasons to move away from her… but Celty failed to notice a shadow approaching the eerie Headless Rider.

"Yo, No-Head."

The deep male voice rose above the growl of the bike engine and rattled around inside

Celty's helmet.

As her entire being turned to ice, she slowly focused in the direction of the voice.

There was the familiar man she always swore she never wanted to see again: the officer on the police motorcycle, Kinnosuke Kuzuhara.

"What was that, a two-hundred-foot wheelie? You realize you can't give the old 'my front tire slipped and came off the ground' excuse for that, right? And that's the least of your problems."

...?!

The instant he stopped talking, fear exploded inside of Celty. Sensing the shift, her Coiste Bodhar leaped forward, picking up speed.

I'm s-s-s-s-s-s-sorry! I'm sorry! she chanted in her mind, terror rattling her being in a way that even the barrel of the submachine gun did not inspire—and kicking off a brand-new chase scene.

Only this time, *she* was the frightened girl on the run from the monster.

One week later, near Kawagoe Highway, top floor of luxury apartment building

"I was scared, so scared... I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Celty typed into her PDA as she slumped onto the shoulder of Shinra Kishitani, her roommate.

The Black Rider didn't need to breathe physiologically, but she made motions like she was heaving against his shoulder and trembled incessantly.

"How? How is that biker cop able to evade all my shadows?! I stretched out just like I did with the helicopter, but the motorcycle just tilted sideways and passed between them. He even chased after me by riding on the midair shadows I sent from my hand!"

Celty raced all through Tokyo, then leaped into the river next to Ochanomizu Station and created a shadow tunnel through the water, like she did against the helicopter.

That, at least, was enough to shake off the biker cop, but by the time she got home to Shinra, she collapsed into his arms.

As had become the routine after every Kuzuhara chase, Shinra rubbed Celty's back before she could have a full-blown panic attack. He said, "It's probably intuition and experience. Someone at his level who can keep calm can probably see all your shadows coming before it happens."

"But being able to predict them doesn't mean being able to ride on them! When he did that, I sent a tendril from another shadow to try to tangle up his tires, and he used his headlight to blind me and simply vanished the next moment!"

"So you can be blinded by brightness, even without eyes?"

"It's not like squeezing your eyelids shut, but it's still difficult to see when there's a bright light shining on you… But enough about theory! What should I do, Shinra? Do you think if I attach a headlight and plate—which Shooter will hate—he'll leave me alone from now on?"

She had to be delirious from fear still. Shinra watched her babble on nonsensically, blushed over how cute he found it, and told her, "Settle down, Celty. Either way, that won't work once they decide to run your plate number or ask for your license. Anyway, hurry up and get yourself together. You've got a guest."

"?"

A guest? For me?

Curiosity helped Celty regain some measure of rationality, and she saw a pair of women's shoes in the entrance.

Then she glanced down the hallway and saw, bowing from the doorway, the figure of Anri Sonohara.

At that moment, Ikebukuro

In a completely normal office building, fairly removed from the center of Ikebukuro…

There were a variety of signs on the outside, from a private investigator to a dating website office to a hookup hotline to a marriage arrangement business to a loan shark office to a real estate agent—all manner of businesses, but as a matter of fact, the second floor up through the top were all interconnected companies.

Depending on the circumstances, the various offices would move from floor to floor, such that the building on the whole operated as one general conglomerate.

Up on the top floor, in an ordinary office, three people returned from their rounds and started packing up to go home.

"Dammit, you just had to rip out that traffic mirror. You're lucky we were able to fix it—but what if some poor kid got into an accident because of that?"

"Sorry, I kinda lost it for a second…"

"Speaking of kids, that just floored me today. How does an elementary school kid rack up five hundred thousand yen of charges to a dating site?" wondered the dreadlocked Tom Tanaka.

The blond man next to him, Shizuo Heiwajima, merely grunted, "Yeah, I know."

Standing behind them was a Russian woman, Vorona, who looked curious. "Negative. Payment was extracted smoothly from the parents. Lack of any physical trouble or combat."

"No," Tom said with a sigh. "I didn't mean it like they literally knocked me to the floor, see…"

It seemed like the usual end-of-work routine of any other day, until a female desk employee on an internal line pressed the hold button and called out, "Mr. Heiwajima, you have a visitor. They've been sent to the reception room."

"Oh? Uh… okay." Surprised, he headed toward the reception area near the front of the office, which was separated by a standing screen.

"A visitor for Shizuo?" Tom wondered. "That's rare."

"Searching possibilities. Perhaps a complaint for the forklift destroyed three days ago."

“Nah, the boss cleared that one up… Oh, maybe we didn’t really fix the traffic mirror after all?”

Tom and Vorona approached the screen, too curious to resist the topic, and peered into the reception area. They found Shizuo wearing a very unnatural smile—and a handsome young man with an utterly flat expression devoid of all emotion.

“Whoa, now there’s a face you don’t see every day. No wonder they let him pass right into the office,” murmured Tom.

“On the contrary, it is a face seen every day. On television and posters,” Vorona replied.

She had a point, in fact. The face was very familiar to anyone who watched a regular amount of TV.

“What’s up, Kasuka? Why are you here?”

“I said I’d wait until you finished with work… It’s not a problem, is it?”

“Oh, it’s totally fine. I was actually just leaving for the day. So what’s up?” asked Shizuo, more cheerful than usual now that he was talking to his younger brother, Kasuka Heiwajima.

Still emotionless, Kasuka looked back at the entrance of the office. “Actually, I wanted to ask you something… First, there’s someone I want to introduce you to. Should we go somewhere else, maybe?”

“Nah, here is fine. Are they waiting outside or something?”

“Yeah… there are reasons.”

Kasuka smoothly made his way to the entrance and opened the door into the hallway. Through it walked a hooded girl, who timidly set foot inside the office.

“Um, it’s… nice to meet you… ,” she said, her voice faint as she bowed. She was a coworker of Kasuka—Yuuhei Hanejima—with rather mysterious eyes.

“…! Whoa, isn’t that Ruri Hijiribe?”

“Affirmative. Matches facial photograph from celebrity yearbook inside my memory,” Vorona told Tom. Quiet murmurs arose from around them.

“No way… Is that really her?”

“I just bought two copies of her photo book…”

“And is that the real Yuuhei Hanejima?! Hey, can I take a picture?!”

“I want an autograph.”

“Can I shake her hand?”

“If he’s Heiwajima’s brother, does that mean he’s a good fighter, too?”

“Isn’t Ruri Hijiribe amazing?! I guess it’s true that she’s just as hot without makeup!”

“Whew!”

Tom turned around and saw a small crowd gathering near the screen—it was the entire remaining staff in the office, all leaning up against the partition. In fact, it was more than just this office; somehow, people from other floors of the building had heard the news and come up to mingle.

“What the hell are you people doing?! Get lost! Go on! Get back to work!” Tom hissed, figuring that Shizuo would snap if he found out. He decided that he ought to clear out and go back to his desk for safety, too.

Vorona was the only one who still kept her back to the screen, assuming a ninja position as she eavesdropped on the reception area. She probably figured that she would listen in and try to learn some weakness of Shizuo’s through his family connections.

But to everyone else watching, the assumption was a much more peaceful and heartwarming one: “Oh, if she’s curious about Shizuo’s family, it must be because she likes him…”

“Oh… I’ve seen you in magazines or whatever. You’re, um… ,” Shizuo started to say.

“Someone important to me,” Yuuhei finished simply.

“…Right, that,” Shizuo mumbled and examined Ruri Hijiribe again. “Is she trembling?”

Yuuhei answered, “Ruri’s seen you fight up close before. Just recently.”

“Wha—?!”

Shizuo flinched awkwardly. He’d never heard such a convincing reason for someone to be afraid before. A few seconds later he returned to Ruri and said, “Uh, well… s-sorry about that.”

“Oh n-no, it’s all right! I’m sorry, actually.”

A few months earlier, after having seen Shizuo from a proximity close enough for him to *smash her with a bench*, Ruri had developed a subconscious fear of him. But she couldn't explain that to him now. Yuuhei had told her that his brother would understand if they just explained the situation properly, but deep down, she really wanted more time to work herself up to that point.

Shizuo could sense something more than simple fear in her reaction and noted it with curiosity but didn't push the matter. He sighed and said to Yuuhei, "Uh, listen… it's nice of you to run things by me and all, but shouldn't you report to Dad and Mom first of all…? In fact, people make a big enough deal about you admitting the relationship. If this is about marriage, won't that kick up a fuss?"

"Actually, that's not what we wanted to talk to you about."

"Huh? What is it, then?"

Yuuhei told him in his flat, mechanical voice:

"Do you know about… the Dollars?"

♂♀

Shinra's apartment

"Um… I'm sorry to barge in on you like this."

Anri Sonohara bowed and apologized repeatedly from a dining room chair, glasses glinting in the light. Celty shook her helmet back and forth and held out her PDA.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure Shinra lured you in here."

"Lured her in! Celty, that's so cruel! You make it sound like I was trying to cheat on you! They say that 'a fallen blossom doesn't return to the branch, and a broken mirror cannot shine,' but I would never knock your flower off the branch, nor would I break any mirror that reflects your beauty!"

His answer was as nonsensical as always, and Celty could do nothing but shrug her shoulders in annoyance.

According to her story, Anri had been wandering around the town, considering if she should ask Celty something, when Shinra had passed by and called out to her.

"Anri, you really shouldn't follow suspicious men like him around."

"Okay, before I offer a rebuttal, I need to say this. For whatever reason, hearing Celty call me suspicious really doesn't feel that bad. I suppose the word *suspicious* contains some hint of mystery and eroticism—*babufh!*"

"Why would you talk about that in front of a teenage girl?" Celty demanded, as Shinra doubled over following the knee to his gut.

The woman turned back to Anri and asked, *"What did you want to discuss?"*

"Well… it's about Mikado…"

"Ah, you want romantic advice? Asking me and Celty might not be the right decision, then. We are in such a torrid state of constant love and perfect equilibrium, you see. I'm afraid we might not be much help when it comes to repairing an upset relationship."

"N-no, Mikado and I aren't like that," Anri protested, her face going red.

Celty quickly covered Shinra's mouth with her shadows.

Well, it's quite obvious from a glance that Mikado's rather smitten with her… but while he might have a shot, their situation seems rather delicate and complex, so it's probably best not to set things off.

She waited for Anri to raise her head again so that she could show her a message on the PDA.

"What is it about Mikado, then?"

"Oh yes… Um… I'm not really sure how best to say this, but… Mikado's been acting strange recently."

"Acting strange? Like he's low energy or going on about odd things…?"

"No, just the opposite… He's gotten very bright and lively and happy," Anri replied. She seemed to be unsure if she should continue, but her willpower eventually won out.

“Just like… when Kida was around.”

⚥

Half a day earlier

“Ah, Sonohara. Congrats on making it to the end of the year!”

Mikado spotted Anri at the class representatives’ meeting just after the end-of-year ceremony.

“Congratulations to you, too,” she said quietly, bowing her head meekly in stark contrast to Mikado’s crisp greeting.

“You got any plans for summer vacation, Sonohara?”

“Uh… w-well, no major plans…”

“Ahh. Well, if you’re ever bored, just hit me up.”

“Uh… okay.”

Normally, such an invitation would be a delight. A year ago, she wouldn’t quite know how to respond, but since getting to know Mikado, Masaomi, and Celty, Anri Sonohara could tell that a part of her was changing.

So she should have been able to smile and accept his offer with an open heart—but a different reason was preventing her from doing that now.

There was simply something wrong with the way Mikado was acting these days.

A number of interrelated incidents had happened during Golden Week, the weeklong string of holidays in May.

A mysterious woman had ambushed her on two consecutive days, for one—but Anri was more worried about the injury Mikado had suffered at the hands of a youth gang.

When she'd leaped to his aid, she was afraid that he'd seen her using her katana.

She'd been spotted with a katana before that as well, when she rescued Masaomi Kida from a mutiny within his own gang, the Yellow Scarves. But this could have been a much more direct and damning witness.

Her sword was the cursed blade Saika, a being that dwelled within her body and continuously chanted words of love. That made her alien and inhuman, just like Celty, and she was worried that this revelation might cause Mikado to reject her. But on the contrary, he hadn't mentioned it once since the holiday ended.

Yet that was not a source of relief. The incident had changed Mikado.

He was *back*, you might say. That desperation to act cheerful in the wake of Masaomi Kida's absence was no longer there.

She didn't notice for the first few days, because she was more preoccupied with concern for his injury and worry that he'd be terrified of her freakish nature… but eventually, she realized that the occasional hints of uncertainty and regret that she'd caught on Mikado's face since Masaomi had left were no longer surfacing.

There was purpose and vitality in Mikado's smile, his words, and his actions—as if he'd just found his reason for living.

That should have been a good thing.

But clearly, it wasn't that Mikado had forgotten about Masaomi or was totally over him.

She almost wondered if he had reunited with the boy somewhere, so she had asked him if something good had happened recently.

But when Mikado replied with a joke of the kind he never usually told ("I guess you could say talking with you is a good thing!"), that only underlined Anri's feeling of unease.

Something happened during that incident… But they do say that people grow over time… Maybe I'm just getting the wrong idea…

Anri was shy and reserved by nature, so she couldn't come out and say, "You're acting strange these days." Instead, she had simply continued her high school life with this

strange feeling eating away at her.

She watched the world objectively through the picture frame.

Perhaps this unique mental position of hers was what allowed Anri to recognize that the particular painting she liked so much had developed a different coloring.

Anri had sensed that something was wrong as summer vacation began, but it wasn't until Mikado's parting statement that day that she recognized her unease was stemming from an actual anomaly.

On the way home from school, at the place where they usually split off for their respective homes, Mikado had sported a more serious look on his face. He turned to her and said, "Hey, Sonohara."

"Huh? Y-yes?"

They'd been chatting idly the whole time, so the look in his eyes took her aback—but that was nothing compared to her surprise at his following words.

"Whatever secrets you have, I don't mind."

"…Huh?"

What?

"Sure, maybe I can't really be a source of support to you…"

What is Mikado… talking about?

Mikado Ryuugamine.

Masaomi Kida.

And Anri Sonohara.

Each of the three had a secret.

Mikado was founder of the Dollars.

Masaomi was founder of the Yellow Scarves and its central figure.

Anri housed an inhuman being inside of her named Saika.

Anri had learned Masaomi's secret, and Masaomi had heard about Mikado's status from the info broker.

Now Mikado seemed on the verge of discovering Anri's secret, enacting a strange three-way relationship.

Anri was close to learning Mikado's status, but she wasn't attempting to get to the bottom of it.

There was a tacit understanding between the two: They would only reveal their respective secrets to each other when Masaomi came back.

But now Mikado was coming close to broaching the subject of Anri's secret. In a roundabout way, he was reaching for the inner parts of her heart.

"…But no matter what you are, I'm sure that I can help create a place just for you."

"…"

She had wanted to say something, to ask something, but she couldn't find the words.

Did he take her silence as discomfort? Mikado's smile had grown even brighter and more confident.

"*I'm* going to make it so Masaomi can come back," he finished. "I'll make a place for everyone… so there's no need for you to worry."

No.

Deep down beneath her hesitation, Anri denied Mikado's words.

She recalled something Mikado had said months ago.

“He’ll come back.”

“Oh…?”

“I’ve known Masaomi since we were young. He’ll absolutely come back.”

“Um,” Anri stammered, clearly troubled.

Mikado had come to his senses and said, “Oh, s-sorry. That was weird of me… Well, get in touch if you need anything!”

He had hurried away to hide his sudden embarrassment. Anri had still been upset, but she never attempted to stop him from leaving.

Something’s… wrong.

That was all Anri knew, all she could tell herself as she had wandered through the shopping district of Ikebukuro.

On multiple occasions, she had thought of asking Celty for advice, but at each instance, she decided that it wasn’t right to get the woman involved in her personal matter and closed her flip phone.

Just as she was deciding to head back home, someone called out to her from behind.

In the end, the thing that had pushed Anri Sonohara to consult with Celty…

“Hey, is that you, Anri? How’s Saika doing these days?”

…was an extremely forward and indelicate statement from a man in a white lab coat.

Now, back to the present.

“Earlier, he believed that Kida would come back on his own, but now Mikado’s talking

about creating a place for Kida to return to… It just feels so strange…"

She wasn't sure how to phrase her feelings. But the only way to get to the bottom of the vague haze of wrongness was to review the day's events in fine detail.

"I see. So rather than believing in his friend, he's believing in his own power."

"You're right, that doesn't sound like Mikado," Celty typed before folding her arms in thought.

Usually making an effort on your own is a positive thing… Why does this strike me as odd? Plus, the part about it starting after Golden Week is troubling… I have a bad feeling about this.

I wonder… Did something happen between him and that Aoba Kuronuma boy?

The one idea that floated into Celty's head brought her back to the final night of Golden Week.

It was right after she and Shinra had gotten home from their little vacation.

May 5, night

"I've come here… to be friends with you two."

A boy named Aoba Kuronuma had stopped Celty and Shinra on the way home late at night.

"How did you find out about this place?" Celty asked.

Aoba smirked. "A lot of it was simple coincidence. But don't worry. I'm not going to tell the police about it."

The mention of the word *police* brought to mind the face of a particular motorcycle cop, causing a shiver to run down Celty's back.

"I'm not sure what's going on here. Do you mind if I ask?" said Shinra to the boy,

stepping forward to protect Celty. "You said you wanted to be friends, but coming over to a person's house before that point is really rather rude of you. Perhaps it was through great personal toil and turmoil that you found this apartment, but you do realize that we might not necessarily value that hard work," he added smoothly.

Aoba shrugged and answered, "Yes, I know it's rude. But I doubt I could have gotten any closer to the legendary Headless Rider any other way."

"I'm not interested in getting closer to anyone who would cause trouble with biker gangs like Toramaru. Besides, didn't you consider the possibility that I'd just silence you for good?"

"Ah, right. You heard my conversation with Mikado, right?" Aoba smiled, leaning against the hallway wall and narrowing his eyes. "You can't really silence me. My friends all know this location, too. If I go missing, the cops and tabloids will descend on this place like an avalanche. Then again, it might go up in flames before that."

"Is that a threat?"

"No, sorry. I'm not intending to push you around. I'm just like Mikado… I want to get closer to you and the people around you, that's all."

He's lying. He's aiming for something after we get to know each other, Celty's instincts told her. She considered how to proceed.

But the first one to act was Shinra, taking another step forward as he adjusted his glasses. He stared closely at the boy's face, gave a faint smile, and said, "You're just like Izaya Orihara."

"…I'm offended that you would compare me to him," spat Aoba, his cocky confidence instantly gone at the mention of that name, a scowl now on his face.

Clearly satisfied with himself, Shinra's cold smile grew. He leaned in closer. "Yes, I said that *assuming that if you knew him, you'd be upset*. And as I suspected, you *do* know about Izaya. Let me guess: Did he put you through some painful experience in the past?"

"…What makes you say that?"

"Because your methods are exactly like his. It was less of a coincidence and more of a

familiar tip-off, you might say. But I didn't say you were a copycat. I think your nature is exactly like his, from the foundation."

"…Well, geez. Not only does the Black Rider know him, but so does the cohabitant." Aoba glared back at Shinra, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with his assessment.

"Hatred of one's own kind, they call it. Both you and Izaya are the type who get annoyed when the world doesn't dance in the palm of your hand. Of course, someone like that isn't going to be happy about a kindred spirit moving in. After all, if the world is dancing on someone else's palm, how will it dance on yours? You're such greedy people. The only thing I want to hold in my palm is Celty's hand."

"?…!"

Aoba tried to bite back his words, unsure what Shinra meant by that. He found the answer along with a small pain down the nape of his neck.

When did he take that out of his bag? There was a sharp scalpel in Shinra's hand now, its end pressed to the back of Aoba's neck. Just a little bit of pressure, and he could easily slide it around into the flesh of his throat and sever his carotid artery.

"Here's a warning."

Shinra's face was no different than usual. He had that simpering, lackadaisical look, all the while holding the means to easily end the boy's life.

"I don't care what you and Izaya get up to plotting. But if you think you're going to destroy the happy life that Celty and I have here, you will make yourself a sworn enemy for life."

Meanwhile, despite that imminent threat, Aoba showed no signs of fear. He even smiled a bit as he looked back at Shinra. However, a shimmer of sweat had risen on his palms and forehead.

"…I see. So you have *that* kind of relationship with the Black Rider."

Black shadows snuck in between the two men and pulled them apart in an attempt to diffuse the danger in the air.

"Knock it off, Shinra. It would be stupid to commit murder over this."

“But, Celty—”

“I don’t want you to turn this into a police matter and leave me all alone. Also, I refuse to let you commit a horrible crime for my sake.”

*“…*Celty!”

As a matter of fact, Shinra was a criminal just for being a black market doctor, but that fact didn’t register in his mind at all. He looked at Celty with the sparkling eyes of a child.

Aoba couldn’t see the messages on her PDA, so he didn’t realize what an obnoxiously private conversation they were having. He could, however, sense that the imminent danger from Shinra was gone.

“I don’t know what you two are talking about, but you don’t have to treat this like some huge thing. I apologize if I’ve upset you in any way… All I want is an e-mail address where I can contact you, and then I’ll back down.

“…Oh, and… please keep this little meeting a secret from Mikado.”

♂♀

In the end, they gave him their contact info, but he hadn’t gotten in touch since then.

Celty had brought up the idea of secretly packing up and moving if he really started to push them around, but the total lack of communication was even spookier.

I wonder if there’s some connection there. I haven’t seen Mikado since Golden Week, either…

Meanwhile, Shinra nodded to himself and started analyzing Anri’s recollection of past events.

“Yes, the phrase ‘I’ll create a place just for you’ does sound like your typical hotshot one-liner, but it seems a bit strange coming from a kid like Mikado. And it wasn’t as if you’d confessed your deepest, darkest fears to him or anything. The way he dropped that out of the blue almost sounds religious in nature.”

He pored over this for a while, then eventually gave Anri his honest opinion, with no malice whatsoever. "Honestly, someone telling you that without any good justification just sounds like he's trying to play out the role of a hero. I guess Mikado's turning into one of those annoying— *Gbogbuf!*"

"What gives you *the right to call anyone 'annoying'?!"* Celty demanded, driving her fist into Shinra's side.

She turned to Anri. *"I get the picture. And in fact, I might have an idea of what it's about."*

"Really?" the girl replied, eyes wide.

Celty carefully considered the message to write on her PDA. *"Just between you and me—how are Mikado's friendships at school?"*

"Huh?"

"Is he getting along closely with anyone in particular these days?"

"W… well… I've often seen him with a younger boy named Kuronuma from the student committee… but it's just like usual with everyone else. He's not getting involved with anyone fishy… I think."

"Gotcha."

The problem is that Kuronuma kid is the fishiest one of all. I suppose he must play nice while at school. Should I tell Anri? If I don't explain things now, that might leave her vulnerable to him abducting her or something… but on the other hand, if it has nothing to do with Mikado changing, that might just make things worse between them…

Shinra, freshly recovered from his gut pain and sensing Celty's hesitation, decided to tell her a lie.

"Well, *I don't know this Kuronuma boy*, but perhaps he has something to do with the problem."

"Um… but… he really doesn't seem that bad…"

"Well, I wouldn't know, because as I said, I've never met him, but there's no harm in being cautious, is there? And shouldn't you know better than anyone that people can't

be judged on appearances?"

"…I suppose so… ," Anri admitted, though she wasn't immediately in agreement. Celty, however, was impressed by Shinra's quick thinking.

Nice one, Shinra! That should make Anri automatically careful around Kuronuma!

She nodded her helmet, playing along with the suggestion. Anri thought it over for a while, but her face still showed concern.

"If Mikado really has changed somehow, what can I even do about it?"

"On the one hand, you could do just about anything, and on the other, maybe there's nothing you need to do."

"That's an irresponsible answer," Celty typed, annoyed. *"Just because it's not your problem doesn't mean you should give her an answer that says nothing."*

Shinra simply grinned. "Look, he's a boy. Within the process of growing up, sometimes you feel like you're special and that your way of thinking is the coolest there can be. Guys get caught up in themselves and think everything they do is cool."

"Is that what they call 'chuunibyou' online? Sophomore Disease?"

"Yeah. It's like measles. As the name says, it's a disease that usually strikes around the second year of middle school, but sometimes there are folks like Izaya who never recover from it. It's not strange at all for a guy to catch it in his second year of high school. Basically, as long as he's not getting wrapped up in some kind of weird cult, he should recover all on his own."

Shinra offered this advice with a laugh—but neither he nor Celty were aware of certain things.

True, Mikado wasn't under the sway of some suspicious new cult.

But to the boy named Mikado Ryuugamine, the Dollars as he idealized them were already an object of faith.

And those Dollars were no longer one unified force.

Ikebukuro

The popular idol Ruri Hijiribe was suffering the advances of a stalker.

After a brief explanation of this fact, which sounded like the sort of thing one saw on the cover of a gossip rag, Yuuhei began to give his brother some background.

"The person stalking Ruri seems to come and go on the Dollars' message board… but I don't know anything about the Dollars. So as I was tracking rumors around, I noticed your name come up, and that made me wonder if you might know more about them than I do."

"Ahh… gotcha. Well, I'm not in the Dollars anymore. I kinda signed up on someone's invitation… but a lot of them were annoying, and I got tired of them, so I told someone I know in the group that I quit. That was the end of it," said Shizuo, looking up at the ceiling as he recalled the events of a few months ago. "But even when I was active, the most I ever did was check their board on my phone and make a few posts. I don't even know what the team is like, really."

Kasuka noticed something mournful and lonely in Shizuo's expression. "Ah… sorry about that. I didn't mean to make you remember anything stupid."

"Nah. You shouldn't worry about it. We're family—don't come bowing and scraping when you need help," Shizuo said with a brief smile. Then he turned to Miss Hijiribe and said, "…Sounds like you've had a tough time, huh? Did you try contacting the police?"

Ruri flinched at being addressed so abruptly but regained her poise and explained, "Well… it started when something was jammed inside my lock, so I could no longer get inside my home."

"? You couldn't get *in*?"

Normally, a stalker, once aware of the target's address, would try to break the lock to

sneak inside and maybe plant listening devices. The idea of keeping her out of her home didn't add up.

"I thought it was just a prank at first… but then it kept happening every day. The police said there was a man hiding his face on the security camera, but they haven't caught him yet. Once they started patrolling the area, the stalker started leaving bloody crosses all over our photo shoot locations, with the crucified being photo collages of various movie monsters with my face attached over them…"

The creepy nature of the stalking was striking, of course, but Shizuo was more preoccupied by a different detail.

"? Wait a second— If this guy knows where you're scheduled to shoot, doesn't that make him someone involved in your business?"

"The police thought the same thing at first. But everyone has an alibi… and when we did more research, we found out that some fans online were making deals and plans over my work schedule. But even though some of those really crazy fans are noted on some industry blacklists… all of them had alibis," she said.

"This group trading idol information is within the larger Dollars, apparently. I tried to register on the website as a test, but it seems like there are a number of little communities, or user groups, within the Dollars, and you can't get in with them unless you have someone to welcome you in," said Yuuhei, his voice without emotion, like a robot reading the information in front of it. But Shizuo knew his brother well enough to read the subtle shifts in his state of mind.

"Look, I get that you're pissed, but you gotta calm down, Kasuka. There are things you can't notice unless you're in a rational state of mind," he advised, which was hilarious, given his own nature.

"Yeah… you're right. Thanks."

Neither Vorona from a distance, nor Ruri sitting right next to Yuuhei, could sense even the barest hint of irritation from Yuuhei. This brotherly conversation perplexed them.

Oblivious to their confusion, Shizuo continued, "Sorry, man. I'm not so good with the heavy-thinking stuff. If only I knew a bit more about the Dollars, I could help more…"

Someone who knows lots about the Dollars. Pretty sure I know someone like that…

somebody who would know this sort of thing…

For an instant, the face of someone who would know way too much about that sort of thing floated into his mind, but he had to banish the image when a vein started throbbing on his temple.

Let's rule out the fleabrain. But I bet Kururi or Mairu might actually fit the bill. No, wait—if I explain the situation, they'll bug me about meeting Kasuka. I'm certain the boss would know, but I can't cause any more trouble than I already have…

After a while, he recalled the face of a Dollars member who was well-known for mastery of the Internet.

Feels like someone I shouldn't owe any more favors to than I already do… but I guess advice is always free.

"All right, I've got a person to ask. I'll head over there right now—you in?"

"Are you sure? Am I imposing on you?"

"I told you, there's none of that between family," Shizuo said with a gentle laugh. Everyone else in the office listening in felt like they'd just witnessed something exceedingly rare but pretended to continue on with their work, in case mentioning it out loud caused the usual Shizuo to return.

Just then, a very pleasing little sound softened the air.

"Mewww."

The unmistakable sound of a cat.

"Are you awake now?" Yuuhei mumbled down toward his feet, then addressed Shizuo. "That reminded me. I had one other thing to talk about."

Without any emotion, he lifted up a little pet carrier resting next to the sofa and focused on the Scottish fold rubbing its face on the inside. It was an adorable cat, like a little ball of fluff, and probably still a kitten.

"Ruri's hiding out at my apartment for the time being, but the thought of it getting attacked by a stalker while we're both gone is horrible… But on the other hand, all the

pet hotels around this area are full, so we can't just leave it somewhere.

"We've been looking for someone who can take care of Dokusonmaru, just for a little while."

Near Kawagoe Highway, Shinra's apartment

"Um, I'm really sorry for just barging in on you like this," said Anri as she prepared to leave. They'd had a nice conversation but ultimately hit a roadblock.

Knowing that Mikado was the boss of the Dollars, Celty could conjecture a number of things on her own, but she knew it wasn't right for her to be the one to reveal that to Anri. She decided to just let the conversation end there. If Mikado truly got himself involved in something imminently dangerous, her silence wouldn't be an option anymore, but she didn't sense that level of danger at the moment.

Still, Mikado's aberrational behavior was a fact, and she figured that it would be a good idea to talk with him the next time she ran into him around town.

Celty checked her watch and said to the girl, *"It's too dangerous to go out this late. You should spend the night."*

"Uh… b-but I couldn't possibly impose on you like that!" Anri stammered. The dullahan clapped her on the shoulder bracingly and typed a reassuring message into the PDA.

"Don't hold back. You've stayed over several times before. But if you really don't like it here, I won't force you to stay."

"N-no, it's not that at all!"

"If you need pajamas, you can use some that I wear from time to time. Hmm… I hope the size fits."

Shinra watched the two abnormal beings discuss their youthful sleepover plans with warm satisfaction in his eyes—but just then, a sudden doorbell ring doused a bit of cold water on the pleasant mood in the apartment.

For being a luxury apartment, it was on the older side, so the doorbell ringer wasn't just at the front door, but in all the rooms as well.

"Who could that be this late?"

It better not be Aoba Kuronuma, Celty worried, while Shinra went to open the front door—revealing a familiar figure bearing an unfamiliar one on its head.

"Mewww."

Upon seeing Shizuo Heiwajima standing there with a tiny cat meowing on his head, Shinra burst into uproarious laughter. He was promptly kicked across the room. Celty thanked her lucky stars she didn't have a mouth to laugh with, but it was still hard to keep her shoulders from trembling.

She didn't realize that she was about to experience an odd reunion of sorts.

One day, chat room

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The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

Kid has entered the chat.

Kid: Nice to meet you.

Kid: I don't think anyone's around to see this, but regardless, nice to meet you.

Kid: Psychic

Kid: Sorry, auto-correct. Saika invited me to join up.

Sharo has entered the chat.

Sharo: Evening.

Kid: Good evening.

Kid: Nice to meet you. Are you from this message board?

Sharo: Heya. No, I just joined up on invitation from someone here.

Sharo: I'm guessing that none of the ordinary members are around at the moment.

Kid: Oh, I see. That's a coincidence.

Sharo: Actually, I was just hanging around waiting for someone to show up before I logged in, lol.

Kid: Got it. (lol)

100% Pure Water has entered the chat.

100% Pure Water: Sorry, I was keeping an eye on things, too. Mind if I join in?

100% Pure Water: I was invited by a friend, but I've never done anything like this before. Hiya!

100% Pure Water: Well, that was a very flippant greeting. What if everyone else is actually older than me?

Kid: We can't see who anyone is, so I don't think anyone will be upset about rudeness.

Sharo: Age doesn't really matter, does it?

Sharo: I read some of the backlog. That Kuru's quite a character, huh?

Sharo: I think we can all address each other as equals.

Kid: I'm not used to this sort of thing, so I'll revert to speaking politely.

100% Pure Water: Everyone should be free to do their own thing! Kya-ha!

Sharo: "Kya-ha" is pretty annoying, though. (lol)

100% Pure Water: Aww! (lol)

Saki has entered the chat.

Saki: Good evening.

Saki: I'm Saki. Bacura invited me to participate here.

Saki: It's nice to meet you all.

Sharo: Oh, good evening.

Kid: What is this, newcomers' day at the chat room? (lol)

100% Pure Water: Hello!

Chrome has entered the chat.

Chrome: Evening. Nice to meet you all.

Chrome: I like all the activity.

Chrome: I'm also a recent invitee.

Saki: Good evening.

Kid: It's a pleasure.

Sharo: Evening. Wow, look how much we've been chatting, and it's all just introductions so far, lol.

Sharo: How is it that none of the original members are even here? lol

Bacura has entered the chat.

Bacura: Good eveniiin'!

Bacura: Whoa,

Bacura: What's going on here?!

Saki: Hi there.

Chrome: Good evening.

Sharo: Aha, is this one of the old-timers?

Kid: *Old-timer* is a bit rude.

100% Pure Water: -Ning! ☆

Bacura: Things are active in here.

Bacura: Sorry,

Bacura: I'm a bit nervous since the only person I know in here is Saki, lol.

100% Pure Water: That's so cute. ☆ I love the innocent types. ☆

Bacura: Sure, thanks, lol.

Kid: Well, we've all been invited to join this chat room, but I don't think any of us are aware of what usually gets discussed here.

Bacura: Oh,

Bacura: It's mostly a place to trade info about the area, primarily Ikebukuro.

Sharo: I see.

100% Pure Water: So are you all from Ikebukuro?

Bacura: Saki and I are currently living in a different location,

Bacura: But we lived in Ikebukuro before that.

Kid: I work in Ikebukuro.

Sharo: Oh, so you're a proper working fellow?

Kid: No, it's more like a part-time job. And let's not pry into ages, shall we? lol

Saki: I agree.

Sharo: Y'know, I looked through the backlog… and I noticed a previous session about people stalking Ruri Hijiribe.

Sharo: And how the stalker might be in the Dollars.

Sharo: I'll just ask: Is anyone in here a member of the Dollars?

Bacura: Right after we all agreed not to pry into private affairs, lol.

Sharo: Oh, come on, Dollars affiliation or not should be fair game.

Chrome: I'm in the Dollars. Registered in name only, though.

Kid: Same for me, I registered but nothing else.

Bacura: Whoa, whoa.

Saki: Then me and Bacura will have to sign up next time.

Bacura: Nope, not gonna happen, lol.

Sharo: I'm curious about them myself. Someone I know takes part in the group.

Sharo: So what's the honest scoop? Do the Dollars get chicks?

Sharo: Because I will Doll up in that place to get some.

Bacura: Doll up, huh?

Chrome: Do you suppose that stalker story is really true?

Chrome: It's scary to think that some of the other people who took our very same registration are criminals.

Chrome: And it doesn't sound like there's any movement within the Dollars to turn in the culprit.

Kid: Well, I'd be fine with handing over a report if there was actual evidence.

Chrome: It's true that there seem to be multiple little communities within the Dollars

currently. I hear that some folks are acting like a real gang, picking fights, mugging people, even running scams.

Kid: It's an unpleasant time we live in.

Chrome: Around May, there was that crazy incident where the yakuza and some college group tried to kill each other.

Chrome: The college students were using the Dollars' name as a front to sell drugs or something. Several of their members were actual Dollars.

Kid: I see.

Kid: You think there are people like that within the group?

Bacura: Let's not start talking about this violent stuff right off the bat.

Bacura: Why can't we just discuss interests first?

Bacura: Like your favorite date spot in Ikebukuro.

Saki: Are we going to Ikebukuro?

Bacura: No comment.

100% Pure Water: My recommendation would be Tokyu Hands!

Bacura: That's a good one. You can spend all day there without getting bored.

Chrome: If you want to avoid boredom, the Seibu Loft Department Store is good, too.

Sharo: Well, they're nice for not being bored, but those aren't real date spots.

Sharo: Rather than a date spot, I'd prefer a location where I can meet girls easily in the first place.

100% Pure Water: Like a hostess club?

Sharo: Not exactly. I like those, but what I'm looking for is a bit different.

Chrome: What about a dating website?

Sharo: Is that a date spot? Were we not talking about date spots?

Kuru has entered the chat.

Mai has entered the chat.

Bacura: Oh!

Chrome: Good evening.

Kid: Nice to meet you.

100% Pure Water: Hey, nice evening!

Chrome: Good evening.

Mai: Good evening.

Mai: Yay.

Mai: There are lots of people.

Kuru: Well, well, it is lovely to encounter so many new and familiar names at once.

Mai: It's lively.

Mai: I'm happy.

Kuru: Then perhaps I shall start by offering a topic of discussion. Just minutes ago, it seems you were all abuzz with the matter of Ruri Hijiribe's stalker and the possible connections to the Dollars… From what I understand, there is somewhat of an internal struggle happening within the Dollars.

Kid: Internal struggle? Didn't know about this.

Chrome: I haven't seen any information to that effect on the boards I watch, either…

Kuru: I am speaking of the real world. It seems that about two months ago, some mugging gentlemen who name-dropped the Dollars were attacked by another group of Dollars. The details are contained in a weekly tabloid that goes on sale tomorrow, and I acquired an early copy.

Kid: Is this true? I find that interesting.

Kid: What's the story?

Bacura: I don't know if I can believe that.

Bacura: For one thing,

Bacura: If it's an internal war,

Bacura: How does that work? It's not like the Dollars function as a typical gang…

Saki: Settle down.

Chrome: I'm getting excited now.

Sharo: Hey, if a bunch of worthless thugs want to wipe each other out, that's fine by me.

100% Pure Water: I'm scared. What if Chrome and Kid get attacked, too?

Mai: Nia

Bacura: Nia?

Kuru: Please excuse that. Mai rolled over laughing next to me. She probably dropped her chopsticks onto the keyboard.

Kuru: At any rate, the Dollars are like the history of Japan itself. In the past, it was a kind of primitive communism, a vague organization that helped one another and shared information. But as the various factions within the Dollars settled into establishment, the various communities within the group began to wield their power. Thus, like the Warring States period of Japan, you have a number of smaller nations coming to life within the whole of the land.

Kuru: Among them, you had a nation that was particularly violent, until it was crushed by a team of elite warriors. Little is known about this elite gang, except that their one feature is the use of ski masks and bandannas with a striking shark-teeth design. They seem to be imported.

Bacura: Uh.

Bacura: Are you serious?

Kuru: What is the matter? Does this ring a bell?

Kid: Oh yeah, I've heard of that, too.

Kid: Those are the caps that an old gang from Ikebukuro used to wear, the Blue Squares. Only a small number of them, though.

Bacura: Must be a coincidence.

Sharo: What's the matter? Does someone you know wear a ski cap like that?

Bacura: No,

Bacura: I was mistaken.

Chrome: More importantly, we have many newcomers here today, so why don't we continue the introductions?

100% Pure Water: Okay, how about we list our favorite movies?

100% Pure Water: Mine's the *Blair Witch Project*!

Kid: I like pretty much anything.

Bacura: My favorite is,

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CHAPTER 2
Reality @ Idealism
Ryohgo Narita

CHAPTER 2
REALITY @ IDEALISM

Apartment building rooftop, Ikebukuro

While Celty was caught between the worries of a girl and Shizuo's cat troubles, a boy who didn't realize what he was putting Anri Sonohara through was busy smiling at a group of other boys.

"I'm really glad that nobody got hurt," Mikado Ryuugamine said, grinning serenely. "But don't go out of your way to put yourself in danger."

He was addressing a group of about half a dozen youths on what looked to be the roof of an apartment building. One of the group was acting as its representative in talking to Mikado, while four others lounged around the rooftop, paying little attention to the goings-on. The only light on the eerie nighttime scene came from the faint rooftop illumination.

Relieved that they hadn't suffered any serious injuries, Mikado exhaled and asked, just to be certain, "And anybody who *didn't* show up today is fine, right?"

The youthful boy facing him, Aoba Kuronuma, grinned. "Mm-hmm. None of my guys are that stupid."

"*Stupid* is a pretty cruel word to use for getting injured," Mikado said with a grimace.

Aoba looked down at the shark-tooth-patterned hood in his hand and said, "I'm impressed that you knew where those guys were working."

"Yeah… I looked into their Dollars community. I needed Mr. Tsukumoya's help, though."

"That's the weird guy who pops in and out of the message board, right?"

"You shouldn't call him weird. He's quite successful, written books and everything."

Shinichi Tsukumoya was a member of the Dollars, as well as a writer of a number of guides to the neighborhood under the title *Ikebukuro Strikes Back*.

Mikado had never met or seen him, so he had no idea what Tsukumoya's real name, age, or even gender were, but after contacting him the other day, Tsukumoya was able to tell him which community corresponded to the folks who were mugging people using the Dollars' name.

He used his administrator status to view the conversation there, identified a few of the users, and had them monitored so that he could take action against them.

All Tsukumoya did was find the original board, and Mikado didn't tell him his plans after that. Perhaps the man could sense the boy's intention, but he hadn't come back to say anything about it.

Mikado was the only one of the original Dollars still around from the group's founding, but he considered Tsukumoya to be a member from a very early stage.

I wonder if he was there at our first meetup last year, he wondered.

Meanwhile, Aoba's smile was gone. "Hmm… Well, if you trust him, then that's all right, I guess…"

As a matter of fact, Aoba was attempting his own research into the man named Tsukumoya, but no one in the Dollars seemed to have actually met him in person. That led Aoba to believe that he was someone who would only claim Dollars membership online, and thus wasn't worthy of overt caution.

The real problem was the name Mikado mentioned next, that of a man who actually involved himself in the Dollars' affairs in reality.

"If I could talk with Izaya Orihara, that would be great… but I can't get in touch with him lately."

"…"

"There are still many folks whose backgrounds I don't know about yet. I bet I could learn a lot from Mr. Tsukumoya, but I don't want to keep bothering someone I don't even know in real life. I'd rather pay money to Izaya, if it comes to that. I wonder what's up with him…"

“Being an info agent is a shady job, right? Maybe he got stabbed by a yakuza and buried already,” Aoba joked, looking aside.

Whatever had happened in the past to cause his attitude, it was clear that the look in Aoba’s eyes was full of hostility toward Orihara, no matter how he tried to hide it. Did Mikado recognize the subtle shift in the other boy’s expression? Either way, he shrugged and said, “You really shouldn’t say something like that, even as a joke. He’s really helped out a lot with some of the Dollars’ problems.”

Mikado Ryuugamine had forgotten something.

“Don’t get involved with Izaya Orihara.”

He’d received that warning from his best friend on the very day he moved to Ikebukuro.

But others he’d heard warnings about, like Shizuo Heiwajima and Simon, turned out to be nicer than first expected. So perhaps he couldn’t be blamed for overlooking his friend’s advice.

And perhaps some of the benefits Izaya had brought to Mikado had sapped the critical functions of his brain, like sweet poisons. Just as they did to Masaomi Kida when he was leader of the Yellow Scarves.

So Mikado didn’t yet realize that Izaya Orihara was a man who posed a danger to him. If he’d been suspicious of Izaya, he might have looked into the man’s past.

Perhaps he would have learned what Izaya once did to Masaomi Kida—or what Izumii, Aoba’s older brother, did to Masaomi.

If he had done these things, he most likely would not have partnered with Aoba Kuronuma and his friends. Ironically, perhaps it was because Mikado felt that Izaya Orihara was a friend—Aoba’s sworn enemy—that he was joining forces with Aoba at all.

I wonder how much Mikado knows about the fight between the Blue Squares and the Yellow Scarves?

That was a constant question within Aoba. Did he know everything already and was

just using them for his own ends with intent to betray them at the very end?

…No, that's too far outside of my expectations.

From the very beginning, Aoba and Mikado's relationship was supposed to be one of using and being used.

Where he went wrong was assuming that ultimately he would be able to gain a leg up on Mikado, but that seemed unlikely to happen at this point.

He hadn't underestimated Mikado Ryuugamine. If anything, Aoba had made contact with him specifically because he highly valued the boy's abilities and connections. But until the incidents of Golden Week happened, Aoba had assumed that due to Mikado's naive, simple nature, he could win control over him in the end.

But then he had realized:

The simplicity within Mikado was shrouded in some kind of thick madness.

"By the way, did you hear the rumors that there's a Ruri Hijiribe stalker… within the Dollars?" Aoba asked bluntly.

Mikado gave him the exact same smile he always did at school. "Yeah, I did."

A smile.

One of unbearable gentleness.

Neither fake nor wicked.

Just a plain old, typical, pleasant smile.

As Mikado Ryuugamine said the usual statement…

"We need to get people like that out of the Dollars as soon as we can."

Luxury apartment, Ikebukuro

It was just after midnight that the ringtone played on Adabashi's cell phone.

A Ruri Hijiribe song echoed off the walls of his apartment.

He listened to several seconds of that voice, that crystalline, heart-throbbing voice.

Wavering, savoring, he pressed the call button.

When Ruri's voice abruptly stopped, he put on a sticky, smeary smile.

"Hello? Hello?"

*"…*Oh, it's you," Adabashi replied, and the man on the other side reacted with relief.

"Ah! Thank goodness. You always pause before you start speaking on the phone, so I can never tell. I'm just curious, is there a reason for that?"

*"…*I am busy savoring."

"Pardon?"

"I savor the abrupt ending of Ruri's voice. By my hand."

"Okay," the other voice said, nonplussed. Adabashi recalled the sensation in his fingertip and ears from moments earlier and let delight twist his entire face. A burning desire leaped deep in his stomach.

"The sound of Ruri's voice, that soul-shaking beautiful voice, clicking off with the flick of my thumb, as if being crushed, her entire existence being flattened. I am savoring that very moment, so it is perfectly natural for my voice to emerge only once that moment is done. Isn't that right?"

The person on the other end of the line replied to this clearly insane comment with a hasty *"Uh, yeah, sure, I understand. But I can't possibly match the depth of your love, so I only understand it halfway… It's amazing, Mr. Adabashi. You say the same things as*

Father."

"Don't compare me to that terrible excuse for a father," Adabashi spat, clearly annoyed. He narrowed his eyes and continued, "Not to a worthless man who would sleep with some total stranger of a woman—neither Mom nor Ruri—and get himself easily killed by Ruri herself."

"Well, actually, as you may already know, Ruri Hijiribe is no ordinary woman. Father's murder was actually quite—"

"That's not what I mean. The murder isn't the problem. If anything, I'm jealous," Adabashi said, recalling the sight of his father's death with slack features. "The problem is why Dad was sleeping with some stranger. I could understand sleeping with Mom. She's getting up there in years, but whatever… But if he's going to sleep with anyone else, it should be Ruri. How can you sleep with another woman when there's Ruri? It makes no sense."

"Aha! Yes, you've got a point there. I quite understand," said the other person.

"So," Adabashi asked, "what do you want?"

"Oh, nothing much. I told you before how I could sell you Ruri Hijiribe information before anyone else, if you did something for me. I was wondering if I could call in that favor now."

*"…*What is it?"

"It seems that Ruri Hijiribe has made contact with the Headless Rider of Ikebukuro. I don't know how they're connected or what she wants… but when you reach out to Hijiribe, I would appreciate a report of everything you might learn about the Headless Rider. Just a report is fine. I'll even slip in a bonus if you can throw an extra challenge at the rider, assuming you can get away afterward."

As the man spoke smoothly, Adabashi raised an eyebrow. "Is that supposed to mean this Headless Rider is stronger than me?"

"Well, if you were… let's say… what was that one fighter's name? If you were tougher than that Traugott fellow who won that whatever-it-is tournament, that would be one thing. But I don't suppose you've seen the Headless Rider in person, have you?"

"…"

As a matter of fact, Adabashi had seen the Headless Rider on several occasions.

But they were all during simple rides through the city, where one's strength or weakness was impossible to determine.

He'd heard the stories about eerie inhumanity, however, and from the way this man was talking about them, the rumors were likely true.

"…So what's with this Headless Rider?"

"Oh, it's just that the rider's activities have grown more overt lately. I'm getting many messages from my clients wondering if it's the real deal or not."

"…"

"I run a business, so if someone shows up and needs my services, I have to leap into action and achieve certain things. So I think it's time that I get a proper assessment. There's also the fact that I had some personal work interrupted… work that was supposed to help guarantee my safety*."*

Adabashi didn't know what he was talking about. He didn't particularly care, either.

Ruri Hijiribe had made contact with the Headless Rider. Whatever that ultimately meant, he still had only one goal:

Whatever impediments might or might not appear, he had to achieve his love for Ruri Hijiribe.

"Well, fine. If you learn something more… something about Ruri, tell me…

"You gotta tell me… Mr. Yodogiri…"

⚥

Parking lot, Ikebukuro

“Must be nice not to have anything to do like you guys, while Kadota’s busy working the night shift,” Togusa said from the driver’s seat of the dormant vehicle, peering through the rearview mirror to the back, where Yumasaki and Karisawa sat.

The boy and girl looked up from their books and raised voices of protest.

“We do, too, have things to do! I’ve got seven more manga on my slate by the end of the day!”

“And I’m watching four late-night anime programs!”

“*Exactly!* You have nothing better to do!” Togusa snapped, hoping to silence them, but the other two only pouted and sniped back:

“Oh yeah? Well, when you’re not out collecting rent, you’re pretty much a jobless freeloader too, Togusacchi.”

“Yeah, what she said.”

“No, I’m not! I’m cleaning empty apartments and sweeping halls and all sorts of stuff, you idiots!”

“But your sister said that she was handling those jobs,” said Karisawa.

Togusa’s rebuttal caught in his throat.

“And I heard your brother takes care of the business and legal stuff.”

“W-well, that’s not… I mean… I’m around in case trouble ever arises… ,” Togusa mumbled unconvincingly.

Just then, he was saved by the sound of his cell phone text notification. A brief Ruri Hijiribe ringtone played, which he faithfully listened to through to the end before he looked at the message.

“I’m too busy catching up on all my messages, you guys. Stop interrupting me.”

“What? You started this by interrupting our reading!”

“And you claimed to be busy, yet you sat there listening to the whole ringtone.”

Togusa reacted to this totally fair criticism by shaking his head in a *you just don't get it* gesture and said, "As if I could pause Ruri in the middle of her song, fool."

Normally, Saburo Togusa's role in the group was to look down on Yumasaki and Karisawa for their overt otaku tendencies—but when it came to his car and Ruri Hijiribe, he displayed an even greater tenacity than they did. If there was anything all three of them would be interested in buying, it would have to be the CD singles of the anime theme songs sung by Ruri.

As it happened, the message Togusa just received involved Ruri Hijiribe as well, so he got into the right frame of mind before perusing the text.

"Wow… Oh man… I wonder if Ruri likes Scottish folds…"

It was a periodical e-mail newsletter from her official fan club. Togusa read through a bit more of the article, then turned to the pair with the kind of blissful expression that he never wore otherwise.

"Whoa… they're gonna reprint her photo album! Man, I gotta get a copy of that, too!"

"…Are you going to buy another copy each time they print more, Togusa?" Yumasaki asked hesitantly.

"? Why wouldn't I? You guys always buy two copies of manga, right?"

"Well, sure, one for posterity."

"You'd have to be a real freak to buy another copy for every printing, though."

"And you get super-pissed whenever your car gets scratched. You're way more high maintenance than we are, Togusacchi."

Togusa ignored his friends in the backseat, closed the e-mail, and started up the phone's browser. Once there, he accessed the special Ruri Hijiribe community within the Dollars' group, "Möbius Bandage."

Right after her relationship with Yuuhei Hanejima went public, the community was in an uproar. They turned on the idol they'd worshipped, calling her a "traitor" and "used goods," and demanded their money back. They loathed and raged against Yuuhei, while others just egged them on for kicks. Togusa was one of the few who never let his

fandom waver, despite the shock. He wasn't one of the levelheaded types who could always remember that an idol was nothing more than a false image, though; he trembled with envy but was able to tell himself, *That perfect human being, Yuuhei Hanejima, is a far better man to make Ruri happy than me. Dammit if they don't belong together!* Thus, he weathered the online storms and worked to stabilize the community.

Through all of that, Togusa had become one of the senior members of the fan club. He scrolled through the article comments in silence, enjoying the trading of opinions—until he happened across one statement that put a scowl on his face.

"That asshole's still around?"

"What's the matter?" Yumasaki asked, surprised by the sudden change of attitude.

"Oh… it's just this insider kinda guy who's been hanging around."

"Insider?"

"Yeah. Today he's posting, asking if anyone's interested in Ruri Hijiribe's secrets. Apparently, he's got some secret photo or something—the guy's always going on about stuff like that. His username's Sacrificial Boy. What a weirdo," Togusa fumed.

"Well, you sound outraged, but I bet you're secretly curious, huh? You wanna know Ruri Hijiribe's naughty secrets?" Karisawa teased.

"Don't you dare talk about her that way. You will show Ruri respect while in my car," Togusa demanded with all seriousness.

The other two just looked annoyed. "Ugh, come on, man. You weren't even that obsessed with her when she was just starting out."

"I was young back then. I failed to fully understand her many charms."

"Oh man, now he's acting even worse. What should we do, Yumacchi?" Karisawa wondered.

Yumasaki mulled it over for a few moments. "I guess there are people like that in the voice actor fan community, too. Like the honorable Kamijou in *Index*. He was just some guy at the start, but now I find it difficult not to show some kind of respect."

“Oh yeah. That makes sense to me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but you’d better not be comparing Ruri to some stupid manga character,” Togusa warned, a vein throbbing at his temple, but he sensed that they were not going to see eye to eye on this and returned to the conversation in the article.

Yumasaki and Karisawa stared at the back of the driver’s seat, then leaned closer together to whisper, “By the way… wasn’t there that rumor about Ruri Hijiribe having a stalker?”

“Another rumor says it’s someone in the Dollars.”

“…That’s right. Even in our web group, everyone’s going crazy trying to ascertain the truth of the matter,” said Togusa, who had overheard every word of their conversation. He exhaled hugely, then stared forward with murder in his eyes. “If I ever find him, I’ll drive this car right into his house and over his bed…”

Yumasaki was stunned but couldn’t tell if it was meant to be a joke or not.

“Well, uh… if you do that, please save it for a time when we’re not in the backseat.”

Apartment building rooftop, Ikebukuro

“Oh, it’s you, Mom. Oh yeah? He’s already back?”

They had to pause their conversation so that Aoba could take a sudden phone call. He seemed to be talking to his mother about some brother of his.

I probably shouldn’t interrupt, Mikado thought. He waved good-bye, then turned to leave the rooftop.

“Oh, hang on, Mom… Mikado, I wanted to say…”

“We can continue this tomorrow. Go back to your phone call.”

“Err… sorry. I’ll text you later,” Aoba said, bowing.

Mikado resumed his bid for the door.

“Heya.” “Nice work today.” “Night.”

“Good night, guys,” Mikado said to the menacing young men…

…still wearing that transparent smile, the kind that one gave to longtime friends.

Mikado descended the building and exited to the street, where he noticed two motorcycles parked out front. The riders seemed to be in an argument, so he started walking well around them to avoid getting involved.

“…you were doing? Huh?”

“That’s none of your busi…”

From what he could hear as he passed, it sounded like your typical argument. Mikado side-eyed the two men along the way.

One was wearing a flashy leather jacket with a spine printed on the back, while the other was dressed in a black suit, which seemed out of place on a motorcycle. He had some kind of metal bracelet on, but it was hard to tell the fine details.

Probably just a quarrel between different biker gangs. Though it was rare for them to be in Ikebukuro to begin with, the sight reminded Mikado of the battle with Toramaru two months ago…

And so he scampered away from the building, his expression just a bit mournful.

⚥

Near Kawagoe Highway, Shinra’s apartment

“Mewww.”

The cry of the kitten brought some much-needed warmth to the room.

The cast assembled in the space was far from peaceful by definition: Ikebukuro’s fighting

puppet, a black market doctor, two huge celebrities whose relationship was subject to media coverage, a girl with a terrible secret, and a headless dullahan.

But a cat has no understanding of the meaning of these things, and thus, it freely brought comfort to the scene. It had jumped down off Shizuo's head, had wandered around the apartment, and was now purring happily atop Anri's thighs.

"…So, where were we?" Shizuo asked.

"We were talking about the Dollars," said his brother.

"Oh, right. I couldn't really think of anyone who knows about the Dollars, but I knew Celty was way deeper in the group than me, so I figured coming here was the best option," he explained.

Shinra shook his head in disbelief. "And *that's* why you brought Kasuka and Ruri Hijiribe over here? How cruel! You could have at least given us a warning first!"

"Huh? Well, I could see the lights were on from a distance. So I realized you guys were probably home and came over…"

"…I'm sorry. I hope we're not intruding," said Ruri, who was shrinking in her seat.

Shinra vigorously shook his head. "Not at all! If anything, it's the opposite! Celty and I are fans of both Yuuhei Hanejima and Ruri Hijiribe, as a matter of fact! I would have preferred to know in advance so we could prepare a roast turkey and a cheesecake and whatever else!"

"Uh… thank you… And you were a huge help to me, er… back then."

"Hmm?" Shizuo wondered, looking back and forth at Shinra and Ruri. "You two know each other?"

Ruri was mumbling, unable to clearly explain, so Shinra stepped in and offered, "She was terribly hurt a while ago. Yuuhei was the one who found her, and he brought her to me for treatment."

"Oh, right, I do remember introducing you to Shinra around early spring… but why Shinra instead of a regular doctor?" Shizuo wondered.

In fact, it was he who had given Ruri Hijiribe her terrible injury, but since he didn't know that, explaining the situation would require revealing that she was the serial killer Hollywood.

Ruri was at such a loss to provide an answer that she was considering getting down on her hands and knees to confess the entire truth—when Yuuhei answered for her.

"There's a monster in show business…"

"Ah, gotcha. One of those things. That makes sense, then," Shizuo said, folding his arms, though it wasn't clear how he interpreted the statement. "So anyway, that's the story. You know anyone who might have the scoop on the Dollars' insider info? Also, take this cat off my hands."

"Hmm, that's a difficult task. Who would know stuff like that? And the cat will depend entirely on Celty's opinion."

While Shizuo and Shinra hashed it out, each of the women in the apartment was plagued by her own particular demons.

Celty Sturluson.

Anri Sonohara.

Ruri Hijiribe.

Each of these women was considered "alien" by the standards of modern society.

Celty was a dullahan and not human to begin with, while Anri housed the cursed blade Saika within her body, and Ruri inherited inhuman blood.

The instant Ruri came through the door, Celty could sense something. She knew Ruri Hijiribe, of course—both she and Shinra liked the popular actress. That should have been their first meeting, but she was immediately possessed with a certain conviction.

I've… met her before?

The first piece of evidence was the way her eyes bulged briefly when she first saw Celty. It wasn't the same kind of surprise that people usually had when they saw the

Headless Rider.

The other evidence was the extremely rare sensation of the inhuman that Celty picked up in Ikebukuro only once in a blue moon.

In fact, this woman felt uniquely both human and alien—a combination that Celty recalled once ferrying as "cargo."

No, uh, wait.

I remember the woman hiding her face with sunglasses and a hat, but… but then she came back as an impostor dullahan to save me from trouble…

Was that actually Ruri Hijiribe, the girlfriend of Shizuo's brother?

…

What in the world?

…

I mean, really, what in the world?!

She sat down on the couch, trying as best she could to act calm while holding down the waves of confusion.

Meanwhile, Ruri was seated next to Yuuhei at the dinner table, grappling with complex feelings of her own about Celty.

What should I do? I didn't realize the Headless Rider was at this doctor's place. I wonder if she knows that I was a "customer" here that one time…

She felt guilty about the idea of hiding information but didn't know how to explain, either. So she focused on Shizuo and Shinra's conversation as a means of distracting herself from the panic.

As for Anri Sonohara, who didn't know anything about the connection between the other two, she had arrived at the conclusion that Ruri didn't seem to be entirely human

through different means.

The instant she saw Shizuo, the voices of the cursed blade within her body swelled. She pushed them through to the other side of the picture frame so that they stopped bothering her, but as soon as Ruri Hijiribe approached, the voices took a sudden turn.

Confusion.

Saika was supposed to love all human beings equally, but the voices of love temporarily hushed and began to whisper among themselves.

"Is she a person? Or a monster? Do we love her? Or not? Is she human?" went the unanswered questions, ringing in Anri's mind.

What does this mean? Is Ruri Hijiribe… not human?

Is Celty aware of this…?

The three women sat back and observed, each harboring her own doubts and questions.

As the third-wheel between the other two, Anri watched Celty and Ruri closely; they seemed a bit stiff and awkward, which lent credence to her suspicion that they knew each other somehow.

She was going to sit back and blend into the scenery—except that Dokusonmaru had other ideas. He stood up in her lap, stretched, and started to climb up her uniform shirt with his little paws.

"Eek!"

He quickly got up to her chest, where his belly pressed against her ample cushioning as his back legs scrabbled in thin air.

The sight of the kitten scrambling on Anri's chest was both cute and somewhat erotic, but given that the men in the apartment were the older Shizuo, the dedicated Shinra, and the stone-faced Yuuhei, there was no particular excitement from them. Dokusonmaru's adorable cries continued unanswered.

But something about the scene caught Shizuo's attention when he heard Anri shriek,

jogging his mind.

Whoa!

*　　*　　*

"Oh, right, that's right. There's that other guy who often hangs out with that girl over there. You know, he showed up to the hot-pot party. Ryuugasaki… no, Ryuugamine?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean Mikado Ryuugamine."

"That's the one," Shizuo said. "When all that fighting was going on during Golden Week, I told that Ryuugamine guy I was quitting the Dollars…"

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

Huh?

Shinra, Celty, and Anri all had the same question.

Was it possible this had something to do with the matter the three of them had just discussed—that of Mikado's strange behavior?

"This is the first I'm hearing that you quit the Dollars… Why?" Celty asked him.

Shizuo shrugged, a bit taken aback by their surprise, and began to explain his decision.

"Well, I was feeling like it was getting to be too much trouble. Or maybe I should say that I didn't wanna be involved with folks who would kidnap girls. But I didn't really know how to actually quit, so I figured I should probably just tell someone. He happened to be in the park at that moment, so I told him I was quitting the Dollars. And that was that."

Celty considered this information.

That must have been a shock to Mikado to learn that he was leaving. It's a shock when anyone quits, but Shizuo was a particularly big name within the Dollars. Did the impact of that make him start acting weird…?

That seemed a little too simplistic and dramatic, so she shelved the idea. If that was going to upset him, he would have acted depressed, if anything. It didn't seem like the

sort of shock that would actually make him *more* cheery.

"If I run across him, I'll make sure to ask. Mikado's still a kid, so I don't really want to drag him into our problems."

"Yeah, true. Don't do anything that makes you uncomfortable," Shizuo told her, then lifted up the teacup on the table to his lips, right as Shinra said the most inconsiderate thing possible, given the circumstances.

"I happen to think asking Izaya would be the quickest route. Why don't we come clean, reconcile, and seek his help?"

There was a spectacular cracking sound, and the pieces of the teacup fell from Shizuo's hand onto the ground. Tea stained his wrist and knees, and a number of veins bulged out on his face.

"…Sorry, Celty. I'll pay you back."

"Huh? Why are you apologizing to Celty and not to *mee-gee-gee-gee- gee*—?"

Shizuo lifted Shinra up by the base of his neck toward the ceiling.

"There's no 'reconciling'…because I've never been friends with that fleabrain in the first place!"

"Settle down, Brother," Yuuhei said.

"…All right. Sorry," the elder brother said, lowering the doctor before he made good on his threat to throw the man out the window.

He's like the Beast, showing mercy at Beauty's request, Celty thought, but she didn't dare mention it. Instead, she typed, *"It's your fault for saying that. Take a hint,"* and showed the message to Shinra.

However, she couldn't deny that when he brought the topic up, the first face she thought of was Izaya's. Then she remembered that not only had she not seen him recently, she hadn't heard a word, either.

Oh, right, he got stabbed and hospitalized. No contact since then.

In fact, Daioh TV had run a single news report about a stabbed hospital patient going missing, but Celty didn't catch that one, so the most she thought about Izaya at the moment was that he hadn't been giving her work for a while. Now that they actually needed his help for something, she realized the strangeness of his recent absence.

He's trouble when he's around and an inconvenience when he isn't… though I guess that might be a bit mean to say.

She began to consider the situation anew but was abruptly distracted by a tiny "*Mewww*" from Dokusonmaru, who was now perched on Anri's shoulder.

It was as if he was trying to dispel the gloomy atmosphere descending upon his keepers with his little voice.

Apartment, Shinjuku

Masaomi Kida paused his examination of the last several days of chat log and turned to his partner, Saki Mikajima.

"Hey, Saki."

"What is it, Masaomi?" she replied, but before he could begin to explain, she followed up with, "Are you going to Ikebukuro?"

"…What are you, psychic? Well… I'm not going right this second. It'll be tomorrow."

"You've been worried about the Dollars since that one chat room session. When you learned about the Blue Squares being in the Dollars."

"Well, if you're just going to say all my thoughts out loud, it kind of defeats the purpose of me pulling myself together enough to make this statement in the first place."

The Blue Squares was a street gang that once repped Ikebukuro and often squabbled with the Yellow Scarves, which Masaomi had created for fun with his fighting buddies in middle school.

He had no good memories associated with the name, but it had to be even worse for

Saki, since *they were the ones who broke her leg*.

But Saki merely smiled and, in a voice like a comforting blanket, said, "I barely remember it. Everything that happened back then is like a really hazy dream."

Masaomi looked at the way she was staring at the floor and suspected that she was lying. The sound of her screaming coming through the phone speaker when they snapped her leg still echoed inside of his skull. But he chose not to press her on it.

"Well, ya can't do much with a dream." He sighed. "Pretty soon you'll be forgetting your memories of me, too."

"That's fine. We're making new memories right now."

"Wow, you move on quick." Masaomi smirked, shaking his head. "The person named Kid in the chat room mentioned guys wearing shark-teeth ski masks. Those guys were in the Blue Squares. I hardly ever saw them… But if they're trying to take over the Dollars like they did the Yellow Scarves… I can't just sit back and let that happen."

"Why do *you* have to go, Masaomi? For your friend?"

"That, too… but the main thing is… I want to settle my own score with those Blue Squares. Sure, maybe I'll just forget all about them as an adult… but at this moment in time, I can't imagine myself getting over it," he said, looking sadly at Saki.

She gave him a smile that spoke of absolute forgiveness. "I'm not going to stop you. I know I can't. I wish I could convince you that it's dangerous, though."

"Hey, no fair saying that out loud. It's supposed to be internal monologue."

"I don't need to play fair. All I'm doing is waiting here."

"For me to return?" he asked. "Don't bother."

But Saki shook her head. "For you to crack jokes and laugh the way you used to."

"…You really don't play fair, Saki." He leaned over and bumped his forehead against hers. "Don't worry. Once I find a place I can actually return to, I'll come and bring you along."

“You claim you need to find one, as if you haven’t already picked it out.”

“…Yeah… I’m going back to ’Bukuro. There are lots of folks I’d like to introduce you to and folks I’d like to meet you,” he said, thinking of his childhood friend and the girl with the glasses.

Saki turned her face away and looked sideways at him. “Your father and mother?”

“Wha…?! C-come on, it’s a bit early for that! I mean, yeah, we’re not students anymore, but w-we’re still young…”

“I’m kidding. You mean your old friend and my rival, don’t you?” She grinned, all-knowing.

Masaomi’s mouth hung open for several seconds, until he smiled in resignation and exhaled a long, long breath.

“You just don’t play fair, Saki.”

Ikebukuro

“Hey, it’s Ryuugamine.”

“Ah…”

On his way home, Mikado was flagged down by Kadota, who was wearing a different outfit from his typical gear.

It was a work uniform with chalky-white spots scattered on it, probably from stucco. There was a sack in his hand that looked like it was carrying work tools.

“Oh, hi, Kadota. Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Yo. Whatcha doing out here at night?”

“Just on my way home from a friend’s. Do you work this late?”

“Yeah, I’m on break from my night shift. Just ate dinner, heading back now.”

Aside from the Blue Squares members, Kadota was the one guy in the Dollars who Mikado encountered more than any other. It felt strange and novel to see him without Yumasaki and the others, but Kadota didn’t act any differently toward Mikado.

“So, you still doing the whole Dollars thing?”

“Huh? Why wouldn’t I be?” Mikado asked as he walked.

Kadota seemed strangely confused by this. “Huh? Oh, okay. Well, it’s just that there are some weird folks doing bad stuff with the Dollars’ name. And they fought with Toramaru back in May.”

“Oh, please, don’t be silly. I wouldn’t quit the Dollars over something like that. Plus, I know about the folks using the Dollars’ name to get away with bad stuff… I just don’t accept them as part of the group,” he said firmly.

“Yeah, but the whole thing about the Dollars is that you can do whatever you want…”

“Yes, you can do whatever you want. That includes criticizing the people doing bad things.”

“…Well, sure, I guess so,” said Kadota, who clearly felt something was off about the other boy but couldn’t tell what it was. He decided to change the subject. “Have you been in touch with Kida lately?”

“…Not in person. Online… now and then,” Mikado answered, looking away.

“Gotcha,” Kadota replied. “Well, I don’t know why he up and left Ikebukuro, but as long as he’s doing well, online or otherwise, that’s good.”

Kadota wasn’t aware that Mikado was the founder of the Dollars. He knew about his friendship with Masaomi Kida and his acquaintance with Celty, but he’d never really asked about the reasons or anything. But Kadota did hear the rumors about Masaomi quitting school and felt a certain kind of loneliness at him no longer rushing around town trying to pick up girls.

“I bet he has his own reasons, though,” he said, not caring to delve too deeply—when Mikado, face forward, delivered a headstrong response.

“It’s all right. As long as people like you guys are around, it’ll all work out!”

“What?”

“You’re like the perfect example for the Dollars,” Mikado said without a hint of shame.

“…Come on, don’t give me that.” Kadota groaned. “People were talking before like I was some kind of influential member of the Dollars. It’s all crap. Besides, anyone can join and do whatever they want, so there’s no example or model to copy in the first place.”

“Still, I feel like the Dollars could be at peace if there were more people like you and Celty around. If only all the people doing bad stuff in our name were gone, and it was an actual beneficial group of people helping one another.”

Yeah, that sounds nice to say, but in reality, it would be kinda creepy and way over-formal, Kadota thought, but he couldn’t just say that right to Mikado’s face. He had to express his doubts in a less direct fashion.

“But that’s just your ideal situation, right? That doesn’t mean your ideal matches everyone else’s.”

“Yes, it’s the ideal,” Mikado admitted. “But being in the Dollars also gives me the right to want to approach that ideal…”

He glanced in the opposite direction from Kadota and fell silent. The other man opened his mouth to say something, but Mikado pushed onward with his usual gentle smile.

“Well, my house is this way. So long.”

“…Yeah. Later.”

They parted ways at an intersection and headed down different streets, one an alumnus of Raira Academy and one a current student.

Kadota was never able to shake his feeling of strangeness about Mikado’s attitude. He continued thinking about what the cause could be—until he landed on the mental image of one man’s face.

Kinda seemed like Ryuugamine knows Izaya… Let’s just hope he’s not like the old Kida

and is going off into a weird direction because that guy's filling him with hot air. But I bet Izaya's too busy to waste time playing around with a kid.

He thought about his old classmate as he headed back to work. Mikado only seemed like he was below Izaya's interest because Kadota didn't realize who he really was.

Y'know, I haven't heard a single rumor about him lately. Hopefully he didn't piss off the Awakusu-kai and get his ass buried in the mountains somewhere… though that would probably be a satisfying end by his standards.

It was a violent thought but an appropriate one for Izaya. Meanwhile, a motorcycle drove past.

"…"

Kadota noticed the jacket the biker was wearing and raised an eyebrow. "That's weird. Haven't seen one of those since that crazy biker cop came to town," he murmured to himself, watching the bike drive off.

"That was a Dragon Zombies jacket."

Outside Russia Sushi, Ikebukuro

"Heyyy, customer, you come tomorrow, day after, and forever after. I send you to eternal sleep," Simon said, ushering out the final customer of the day.

They'd already closed the hanging shutter, so all that was left was to clean up the interior. The only people around were the occasional passing drunk, a stunning contrast to how crowded the restaurant was during the day. But something out there seemed to wriggle and writhe in his peripheral vision, so he quickly focused on it.

It was the sight of someone turning around the corner at that precise moment, the black outfit simply vanishing from view around the bend.

"…?"

Simon continued to stare in that direction, sensing that it had not been yet another

drunk or youngsters out carousing at night.

“What are you doing, Semyon? Get in here and start cleaning,” came a voice from inside the shop, so he shrugged and went back through the door.

Watching from one of the alleys across the street was a man, leering happily to himself.

“Looks like they managed not to get into any trouble with the Awakusu-kai. Wonder how that got resolved,” he said to no one in particular, putting his hands into his thin summer coat. “And to think that Russian girl would end up working for Shizu of all people.”

He slowly left the scene, letting just a hint of frustration tinge his actions.

“This is what makes people so fascinating,” he said, grinning fiercely and springing down the center of the empty street.

Springing, springing.

Like a child headed to the bus for a field trip.

Chat room

Kuru: I think that I might know who Sharo is.

Mai: Really?

Sharo: You serious? Aw, damn.

Kuru: You must be the actress Sharon Stone.

Sharo: You just took that from my username!

Mai: Bzzzt.

Sharo: It would be hilarious if Sharon Stone was just hanging around this site, speaking Japanese, and pretending to be a man.

Kuru: Perhaps you are Charon Walken the stuntman? How wonderful! I've seen all your movies!

Sharo: Who is that?!

Mai: A foreigner.

Sharo: Clearly! That's obvious! But who are they?!

Kuru: Google it.

Sharo: Ugh!

Kuru: You truly are worth teasing, Sharo. As a matter of fact, I really do know your identity, but I prefer to leave it ambiguous to the rest of the group. I would think you'd be grateful for that. Consider my blunt rudeness toward you on our first online meeting to be evidence of my knowledge.

Mai: You did it.

Sharo: Not in the least!

Saki: Charon Walken is a famous stuntman in America. He's the younger brother of the actress Gloria Walken. He doesn't get publicized much since he's just a stuntman… but he's actually rather similar to the actor Yuuhei Hanejima.

Sharo: Thank you for the detailed answer. So he's famous, huh?

Kuru: What's this? You were suddenly much more polite there than with us. Those who change their attitudes depending on the person are destined to end their lives alone and mistrusted. Just kidding. I hope that you take my words seriously, consider the measly nature of your own life and the greatness of ours, and treat us with the respect we deserve.

Mai: Yay!

Sharo: Screw you guys.

Saika: fighting is bad

Kid has entered the chat.

Kid: Good evening.

Kuru: What a lovely encounter, Kid.

Mai: Good evening.

Sharo: 'Sup.

Kid: Saika is correct.

Saika: good evening

Kid: That sounded like the sort of thing that people who know each other off-line would say to each other, but we are all very recent acquaintances. (lol)

Kid: You're going to make us think that you're really fighting. (lol)

Sharo: Whoopsie.

Mai: Sorry.

Kuru: Why, it appears that I became too self-absorbed in teasing Sharo and breached accepted online manners. I am very truly ashamed…

Saika: sorry

Kid: Why are you apologizing, Saika? (lol)

Saika: thank you

Kid: No, please don't worry about it.

Sharo: Speaking of Yuuhei Hanejima, that reminds me.

Sharo: Seems like his girlfriend, Ruri Hijiribe, really does have a stalker.

Kid: She does?

Kid: Was there news about that?

Sharo: No, I just overheard everyone talking today, and they said she's had a stalker for ages.

Sharo: It's even a big rumor online.

Kuru: Ah yes… I am aware of that rumor, too.

Saika: i'm sorry

Saika: i have to get up early so i'm leaving now

Sharo: So long.

Mai: Good night.

Saika: sorry kid

Saika: i hate to leave just when you showed up

Kid: Please don't worry about it. (lol)

Kid: Sleep is the best choice when you're tired. As long as it's not eternal.

Kuru: Oh dear. What a shame, just when the night is beginning. But we shan't hold you back. The greatest bliss in life is the moment of drifting under a warm blanket when one is tired. In that sense, a wounded person on the brink of death who claims to be getting sleepy might just be under the effect of the brain sensing its doom and attempting to ease the suffering through bliss.

Kuru:… Kid seems to have summed up my thoughts more succinctly while I was typing that very long message.

Mai: That's funny.

Mai: Ah.

Mai: Kuru's really bummed out next to

Mai: Ouch.

Mai: I got pinched.

Saika: good night everyone

Saika has left the chat.

Kid: Good night.

Sharo: Oh, speaking of Ruri Hijiribe, do you know anything, Kuru?

Kuru: Pardon me. I was chastising Mai for telling silly lies. What I know is that the media caught wind of her relationship and snapped a roll of photographs of a passionate kiss… and in fact, there are some mysterious men in the middle of the pictures, who are not reporters and not in any way related to Ruri Hijiribe and Yuuhei Hanejima.

Kuru: If you click this link you may view the photos.

Kid: Hmm, let's take a look.

Sharo: Ah yeah, that's the story I heard, too.

Kuru: I suppose the stalker could be harassing Yuuhei Hanejima instead, but those were clearly men in the photo… and I would prefer not to imagine gay stalkers.

Sharo: But what's stalking Ruri Hijiribe gonna get you? She's already smooching Yuuhei Hanejima, right? Kissy-kissy-poo-pooh. You'd think they'd give up at that point.

Kuru: Perhaps the fact that they cannot abandon their obsession is what defines them as stalkers? Ultimately, loving is an act that fulfills oneself. By freely serving the object of one's love, one receives the happy, loving smiles that warm the heart. The actions of a stalker are merely a negative of that service of another.

Kuru: There are numerous kinds of stalker. Some truly believe that they are doing it for the sake of their target. Others just want unthinking control. Some know it is for their own sake but do it in the belief that love is holy. And lastly, there are those who seek the destruction or displeasure of their target in order to fulfill their twisted desires.

Kid: That last one isn't love, it's just plain lust.

Kid: Though it's true that there are plenty of people like that out in the world.

Sharo: Well, if it's someone who wants her all to himself, wouldn't he try to kill Yuuhei Hanejima, too? Scary, huh?

Mai: I don't want that.

Mai: Won't let him kill Yuuhei.

Kuru: Settle down, Mai. Yuuhei is not the sort of gentleman who would perish from the likes of a miserable stalker. He will use his considerable financial, spiritual, influential, and humanistic power to protect himself and his loved one. The stalker is in checkmate. Very soon his despicable corpse will be crucified atop Tokyo Tower for all to see.

Mai: Yay!

Sharo: Damn, that's one hell of an obstruction of business for Tokyo Tower!

Sharo: But some folks are saying the stalker is one of the Dollars, right?

Sharo: Wouldn't the Dollars stick up for that stalker, knowing he's one of their own?

Kid: I can't imagine that. The Dollars are not as cohesive and structured as an actual gang.

Kid: The stalker coincidentally having a relative in the Dollars, maybe. But the Dollars as a whole would never rise up to protect him. They say there are middle schoolers, housewives, and active police officers among the ranks, after all.

Sharo: Man, the Dollars sure are a weird group, aren't they?

Sharo: I hear rumors about a leader, though.

Kid: Oh? I thought there wasn't supposed to be a leader.

Kuru: I also was under the impression that there is no vertical hierarchy in the Dollars…

Mai: Are you a liar?

Sharo: I'm not lying! It's a story this guy named Horada was spreading in prison.

Sharo: Oh, crap.

Sharo: I didn't mean to share anyone's real name. Can I delete that?

Sharo: Oh, whatever. He's in prison, anyway.

Kid: Please tell us more.

Sharo: Okay, so this… Mr. H., shall we call him?

Sharo: I happen to know many ruffians and thugs, which is how I heard this story… but this fellow whose name begins with *H* and ends with *-rada* was boasting in prison that he knew who runs the Dollars. He just won't say any actual names.

Sharo: In fact, he said that if he ever got out, he'd use that info to blackmail the leader.

Of course, you wouldn't expect anyone to believe such a rumor if they knew it came from a guy fresh outta the slammer.

Kuru: You seem to know many menacing types.

Sharo: It's funny, because I myself am utterly impeccable of character.

Kuru: You're a liar.

Sharo: Hey!

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CHAPTER 3
Daydreams & Extremes
@ Past & Present
Ryohgo Narita

CHAPTER 3
DAYDREAMS & EXTREMES @ PAST & PRESENT

Once, she had a dream.

A dream of giving shape to fantasy with her own hands.

Ruri Hijiribe was born in a small town in the mountains of the Kanto region of Japan.

It was a town full of old families hailing from the Meiji era, and her house was bigger than most.

But her father and grandfather's business failed, and the house burned down for unknown reasons. Then her mother went missing. To this day, the only thing standing where her home had once been was charred wooden remains.

She had lost a place to come home to.

But she still had a dream.

Those terrifyingly powerful monsters of the silver screen that overwhelmed humanity.

She'd always been drawn to these freakish abnormalities from a very young age.

But thinking back on it now, perhaps she'd felt the same admiration for her grandmother.

"Say, Ruri. What brought you down this path?" asked her teacher, Tenjin Zakuroya, after she had started her career as a makeup artist. When he had first hired her, Tenjin was lax enough to claim that it was because she was cute—but she proved her skill at the job, and despite the many inappropriate statements he made about her, he had never, ever crossed the line into action.

This question came during the first time she created a monster mask with her own hands. It was a total creation of her imagination, and something about it must have

struck him. Tenjin had stared at the freakish mask before turning to her to ask that question.

“Well,” she began, but she stopped to think about it because she’d never been asked that before. She decided to be open and honest.

She spoke of the heavy atmosphere that pervaded her famous home, the thirst for pure destruction as a result of that oppression, and the admiration for those monsters who symbolized that urge.

She felt blessed by her ability to create monsters on her own. And lastly, she felt hope that the monsters would be able to do what she could not.

Ruri thought that was all there was to it but found that her heart still wanted to spill forth.

“…Plus, my grandmother might be part of it.”

The very first time she told another person what was truly in her heart was also the first time she admitted a feeling she’d never been able to put into words before.

The Hijiribe household crumbled into dust after the business failure of her grandfather and father—but both of them were from outside the family, men who married Hijiribe women and were brought inside.

Her grandfather regretted destroying their fortune, but afterward, he seemed to have a terrible weight off his shoulders and was actually kind to Ruri for once. Before then, he’d been yet another person putting silent pressure on her, but once the family’s fortunes were laid low, he started telling her about her grandmother.

“You look a lot like your grandma.”

From that point, he talked about how much he loved his wife, where they traveled, what they talked about, what they dreamed about, and so on.

Thinking back on this now, Ruri thought there were a number of odd aspects to his stories.

For all the lovey-dovey talk, he never once spoke of how they actually met and fell in

love.

For some reason, the other people in the town seemed afraid of her.

And most importantly, Ruri did not know what her grandmother actually looked like.

There were plenty of photos of *him* around the house. But there wasn't a single bit of physical evidence of her grandmother, and she heard nothing about a divorce or even her death in the past.

And she was never seen around the house in any form.

Her father said, "She probably got tired of Father and left him."

Her mother just smiled and said, "If you're a good girl, maybe you'll meet her someday."

And then, one day, the kids in town told her, "I know your secret! Your grandma's a monster!"

The woman in her grandfather's stories seemed like the furthest thing from the word *monster*. For all that Ruri knew, her grandmother was a human being in the warmest sense—someone who was kind to all, never lost her smile, and gently cared for her thoughtless husband.

But the children chanted that she was a monster and that as her grandchild, Ruri had to be a monster, too.

And this accusation—coming completely out of the blue—delighted her.

She had no idea what kind of monster she was supposed to be.

She had no idea why they said her grandmother was a monster.

But while she made a show of being upset, she was pleased on the inside.

She even felt a sense of security, like being enveloped in a warm blanket.

Those incarnations of destruction she saw on the TV screen, those freakish monsters who wielded the freedom of obliteration—now she was closer to them than before, kindling a special kind of deep-down admiration for her missing grandmother.

The woman her grandfather loved for her endless kindness was reviled and feared by the townsfolk as a monster.

It was a contrast of two very opposing images, neither of which had any physical form.

So Ruri felt a kind of reverence for this grandmother without a photograph.

She was the bridge between Ruri and the incarnations of destruction and freedom, the monsters Ruri could never be—the link between fantasy and reality.

"I see, I see, that makes sense," her teacher said, nodding as he reached out to touch her mask creation. "So that's why it seems so warm and inviting for being a monster. It all adds up. Who knows, maybe one day you'll be able to create your grandmother's face, the one you've never seen."

It was a rather abstract expression to use, she thought. Tenjin Zakuroya continued, "I'm going to be doing some work on a movie with a rather interesting title: *Carmilla Saizou*. The kid playing the lead is an interesting guy, too. Very cold, and yet he burns, the son of a bitch."

Again, it was strangely abstract and hard to grasp what he meant. Then he turned to Ruri and said, "You do the kid's makeup. Make him a warm, inviting vampire."

Ultimately, Ruri's work on *Vampire Ninja Carmilla Saizou* was recognized by the world at large. The World Film Village Federation listed her among the list of "100 Juiciest SF Makeup Artists," and her fame began to grow along with her master's.

This event changed her fate again.

"It's nice to meet you. I am Kujiragi from Yodogiri Shining Corporation."

It was soon afterward that the businesswoman with the sharp suit and expensive glasses showed up.

The woman named Kujiragi took Ruri to a very fancy black limousine, inside of which an elderly gentleman waited.

“It’s a pleasure. My name is Jinnai Yodogiri.”

When the elderly man was done with the introductions and formalities, he presented Ruri with a new path in life.

“One of my talent scouts came to me, breathless, carrying your photo. It was from an article in a film magazine about upcoming special effects makeup artists. I had a glint of intuition.”

Ruri, whose own intuition did not tell her why she was in this limousine, waited for the explanation with curiosity.

Would you believe it? After seeing her photo, Yodogiri and his company wanted her to be a model.

At first, she refused—her intuition couldn’t grasp the point. She wasn’t meant to be a model, of course.

But he found the chink in her mental armor and drove one specific word into it.

“The monsters you create are truly special.

“How would you like to be a monster of an idol and take flight to challenge the whole world?”

⚥

“…!”

She squeaked a silent breath and felt her entire body twitch.

“……?”

Then she realized that she had fallen asleep in her seat and drifted into a dream.

“Are you all right?” asked Yuuhei, who was watching her closely from the seat next to hers.

Suddenly, she noticed Shinra, Shizuo, Celty, and Anri all staring at her with concern.

"…Oh… um… I'm so sorry… Here I am, imposing on you all, and I can't even get through this important conversation without…"

"No one's blaming you," Yuuhei said. "You haven't had a good night's sleep in days."

Shinra grinned. "In fact, it wasn't an important conversation at all. When you started nodding off, I was just launching into a lecture about the lexicological roots of a number of idiomatic phrases. Of course you got sleepy! Oh—speaking of lexicology, perhaps you were engaging in a bit of *hypnopedia*: That would be sleep- learning!"

"Was that supposed to be clever?"

"Oh, please, Celty. Don't hold back—give it a good chuckle like you know you want to."

"You get your sense of humor from your dad, Shinra. And it's just as funny as if it came through a gas mask," Celty announced, annoyed.

Shinra acted devastated by this statement, falling over the table and muttering curses at his father under his breath.

Ruri watched this pleasant picture unfold and recalled the next part of the scene she'd been dreaming.

At Yodogiri's insistence, she started a side job as a model.

Her dream had taken a twist.

It was twisted *for* her.

But her dream was still her dream.

She'd gone into the business of creating monsters when she realized that being one was impossible—but then she began to think that being a "monster" as an idol, a person who exerted incredible influence on her surroundings, might bring her closer to her grandmother anyway.

If she'd known just a bit more about the world, she might have realized that show

business wasn't quite as simple as that.

But although she'd been naive, Ruri did not take show business for granted. It was Yodogiri's clever words that rattled her and shifted her position.

At first, she felt like she was doing a good job.

In the shift from a model to an idol singer, she became popular enough to easily sell out a concert hall for her events.

There were so many people who cheered her on that she nearly forgot her dream for a time.

She felt like she'd gained some kind of powerful force at her disposal, without having to become a monster. While she was closer to her grandmother, who was both feared and beloved, the monsters of her dreams steadily began to fade, replaced by gratitude to Yodogiri for bringing her to this place in life.

But Yodogiri himself did not forget about the monster that slumbered within her.

For Yodogiri himself knew that Ruri Hijiribe truly had *the blood of a monster* in her veins.

"By the way, have you had any contact from your relatives?"

"? No…"

Her father and grandfather had been against her show business career, so they never sent outward displays of support. Yodogiri knew that, too, so why would he ask?

Sensing her suspicion, Ruri Hijiribe's employer smiled gently and explained, "No, I'm aware of your father. I'm speaking of your mother or grandmother."

"Uh… no…"

"Please, don't be upset. I'm just saying, your mother or grandmother could be watching you sing on TV. And if so, they might attempt to reach out to you, that's all. Things like that have happened with our company's talent before, so I thought I'd ask."

"Oh, I see… ," she replied, then considered the matter.

Yes, she'd told Yodogiri that her mother had left. But she'd never once mentioned her grandmother to him.

Maybe Master Zakuroya told him, she decided, not sensing anything deeper to Yodogiri's question at the time.

But that conclusion was very quickly dispelled.

As she envisioned the face of her special effects teacher for the first time in ages, Yodogiri smiled and asked, "Oh, there are some people I want you to meet in a little while—is that all right?"

"Huh?"

"We have a friendly get-together with a number of business folks who frequently sponsor TV dramas, including the president of Adabashi Life Insurance. Kujiragi can fill you in on the finer details."

"Okay… ," Ruri replied, a bit taken aback by the suddenness of it.

But when the boss of her company was bowing to her and saying, "I'm sorry to throw this at you when times are so busy. Feel free to back out if you really can't make it," she felt completely obliged to accept the plans.

Without knowing what would happen at the "friendly get-together."

Without knowing that the day's events would cause her monster blood to awaken…

"Mewww."

An adorable little sound from Ruri's feet roused her from those despicable memories.

She came to her senses and looked into the face of the kitten, which had climbed down from Anri's chest and wandered to Ruri's side.

"Mewww?" it wondered, head tilted as if to ask why she wouldn't play with it. Ruri disengaged her mind from the distant past and gave the creature a friendly smile.

Yuuhei Hanejima's pet cat was named Yuigadokusonmaru, or "Mr. Egocentric." Yet, at odds with the ridiculous name, the kitten was essentially the very personification of cuteness.

Dokusonmaru and Yuuhei had done a lot of heavy lifting in easing the pain of the scars in Ruri's mind. It seemed strange that a girl who dreamed of being a monster would find solace in a kitten, she thought, and then turned to the topic of her current problems, not her past ones.

…I can handle my own problems if it's just me. I can take care of a simple stalker on my own… and if I can't—well, then it's just me who suffers.

In fact, given the strength of the serial killer Hollywood who dwelled within her, she could dispatch a single stalker without breaking a sweat.

But she couldn't take solace in that. She wasn't alone anymore—she had other things to protect.

If trouble ever came to Yuuhei and Dokusonmaru…

She harbored an inhuman power within herself. A monster known as Hollywood who had claimed several victims already.

Even knowing it was hypocritical of her, she set aside the matter of her own monster crimes to pray that no one she cared about would become a victim of this stalker.

If anyone was going to be a victim, let it be her alone.

All the kindhearted monster could do was pray—but to what God, she did not know.

And yet…

The stalker had his own twisted love for Ruri Hijiribe.

For in his love, he knew that she possessed a kind and caring heart.

And thus, he also knew just the right way to break it…

⚥

A few hours later, Kawagoe Highway, Ikebukuro

Adabashi walked through the night.

Slowly but surely along a path next to the national route.

But he was not walking to his destination. He had already arrived there.

On the rooftop of the building across the street from Shinra's apartment, Adabashi continued a long, solitary walk. He paced back and forth endlessly along a stretch of about three hundred feet.

"…"

With each step, he snapped his teeth together.

Click, click, as if counting up some significant activity.

He had been doing this for hours, walking back and forth near the lip of the rooftop, watching the building across the street, the entrance of Shinra and Celty's apartment, all the while, as relentless and mechanical as a windup toy.

At times he pulled out a cell phone and engaged in communications with it, but he never stopped walking or clicking his teeth, no matter what.

Just when the sky to the east was starting to get lighter, a man and woman left Shinra's apartment, followed moments later by a man in a bartender's outfit.

Ruri Hijiribe was hiding under a hood, but Adabashi recognized her at once. He stopped pacing and leered cruelly downward at her from his high vantage point.

But he did not leave his position; he merely continued to monitor the location closely.

Suddenly, a number of men appeared about sixty feet ahead and behind the trio, traveling along with them—bodyguards, clearly.

"…"

They'd probably been hired by the production agency that managed Yuuhei and Ruri. All the bodyguards were hardy and menacing, and even with the large gap between them and the trio, it would clearly be difficult to attack Ruri now.

But Adabashi was not in a hurry.

He knew:

That he could not attack Ruri Hijiribe now, whether she was under guard or not.

He knew:

That standing behind Ruri and Yuuhei was the most famous brawler of Ikebukuro.

He knew:

That if he somehow was able to attack Ruri Hijiribe alone, he would likely be defeated.

Because he also knew:

That Ruri Hijiribe was a monster.

Adabashi followed Ruri's progress from the rooftop with his binoculars.

Once he had confirmed that the trio were empty-handed, he made a *shhhheh* sound through his teeth.

His unique laugh repeated quietly and steadily as he looked at the screen of his phone.

How did he get it? Did he take it himself? It was a photo of the same group heading to this same apartment.

The resolution was crude, but he could make out a pet carrier in Yuuhei's hands and what looked like a little kitten riding on Shizuo Heiwajima's head.

Next, he switched to another photograph.

This one was of an article in an entertainment magazine, which featured a picture of Ruri wearing a gloomy smile and, standing next to her, Yuuhei in his usual expressionless state. Normally, talent agencies preferred to cover up evidence of their stars' romantic flings to preserve their meticulously managed images, but in the case of Yuuhei and Ruri, they decided that it would actually boost their profiles. Apparently, the president of the agency had shopped around the idea for the article to the tabloids.

In the picture, Ruri was clutching an adorable kitten to her chest. The caption under the photo read, "That's Yuuhei Hanejima's lucky cat Yuigadokusonmaru being lovingly caressed in Ruri Hijiribe's arms!"

"Dokuson… maru."

The carrier bag and the cat itself had been there when they came to this apartment building. But after leaving the building, they had neither.

Adabashi turned back to the building across the street and slowly let his gaze slide up it from the street level. When he confirmed that the only window with lights on belonged to the top floor, he hissed with laughter again: "*Shehhh, shehhh.*"

Kisuke Adabashi.

He knew:

That Ruri Hijiribe was the serial killer Hollywood.

He knew:

That Ruri Hijiribe had killed his father.

But he did not hold a shred of hatred toward her.

If anything, he loved her with all his heart.

At least, according to his own definition of love.

He knew:

That he could not love Ruri Hijiribe by destroying her body.

But he *could* destroy her heart.

And he knew what to do in order to achieve that goal.

He stared and stared at the top floor of the building, hissing with laughter all the while.

It was like a musical fanfare celebrating the fulfillment of his love.

When his laughter subsided at last, Adabashi logged in to his special online community within the Dollars—and began to spread his pure, malicious love.

The sky to the east continued to brighten.

The sun would rise soon to shine upon him.

He silently left the rooftop with that in mind.

His only thoughts regarding how he would love Ruri's precious cat and the people who were taking care of it.

A blissful smile spread across his features.

⚥

The next day, morning, Shinra's apartment

"…So why did you call me here?"

It was the day after the gloomy night at Shinra's apartment. The one giving voice to her curiosity was a girl dressed in casual clothing—Mika Harima.

"We just figured that if we wanted to know about stalkers, we should turn to you."

The girl looked at Celty's outstretched PDA screen and acted so stereotypically outraged that she might as well have had cartoon puffs of smoke coming from her ears.

"What a horrible thing to say! I am not a stalker!"

The young man at her side sighed and corrected, "No, you were a stalker."

"Exactly! Like Seiji says, I *was* a stalker!" she pronounced with a proud smile, changing her tune on a dime.

Annoyed, Celty typed, *"Well, I just gave you the situation. I was wondering what sort of defenses we could mount against a stalker… For example, is it easy to break the locks on newer apartments like this one?"*

"Huh? Oh, don't be silly, Celty. The locks on this apartment aren't new at all."

"What?"

"I'm going to go outside, and you lock the door behind me! Wait in here, Seiji! Knowing you're inside will give me extra motivation!" Mika hurried out of the apartment.

"Your friend is very, um, active," Celty typed to Anri, after locking the door.

Anri smiled. "Yes, she's really unbelievable."

"…*Well, yes… in a way…"*

Meanwhile, the doorknob started rattling and turning. From the other side of the door, Mika could be heard saying, "There are a bunch of ways you can get through these older locks. Even a child can learn to use a thumb-turn rotator or a bump key after a day of practice. You should really buy a new lock. You might want to ask your landlord if you can switch to an electronic key… *There!*"

The door clicked, and a second later, it swung open.

—?!

"That was quick!" Shinra exclaimed.

"Y-you did that all while you were talking? How is that possible?!"

"Sorry, trade secret. Besides, Celty, can't you trickle your shadow into the lock, then make it firm to act as a key? That's way more unbelievable than what I can do."

"You might have a point there, but—" Celty protested, while Shinra considered the

issue.

“Hmm… What do you think, Celty? Maybe we should put some serious thought into changing the locks. Or should we just move?”

“Good question… But it was a whole lot of work to come up with a convincing story for the landlord and the people in the floor below, so I’d prefer not to repeat that process,” she typed, showing it to Shinra. Then she cleared the screen and wrote a new message for Mika. *“Are you sure that other people can do that as easily as you just did?”*

“Only if they practice at it. But you can just look that stuff up on the Internet now. It’s a scary time to be alive. You’ve got to take care of yourself!”

Anyone who knew Mika personally would think, “Speak for yourself!” but Anri merely smiled uneasily, while Seiji averted his eyes with a sigh.

“I see…”

Celty recalled when Aoba first visited her two and a half months ago. He had been waiting outside the apartment then, but the thought of him getting inside to wait for them gave her the chills.

Shinra sensed her unease and clapped his hands. “Well, I suppose I can at least ask the landlord about changing the lock. I can say that Shizuo forced it open and broke it.”

“That’s kind of a cruel thing to say.”

“Well, he’s already destroyed our handrail on the stairs and our cups. Anyway, we can pass this anti-stalker advice on to Ruri and Yuuhei, so let’s eat lunch and take our time discussing the matter. There’s not much to eat here, so I’ll grab the delivery menus… Wait, where did they go?”

“I think the new ones are still in the newspaper slot.”

Celty and Shinra headed toward the dining room in the back. Anri was about to follow them when Mika tapped on her shoulder.

“Hey, Anri.”

“?”

“How’s Mikado doing?”

“Wha…?”

Why would she suddenly ask about Mikado? Anri looked back at her, slack-jawed, totally confused.

“What about Mikado?”

“Nothing. Just wondering if you’ve made any progress. Have you kissed yet?”

“K-kissed…? Mikado and I aren’t like that,” Anri protested, turning red.

Mika cackled and leaned in. “Oh, come on, I’m teasing you! But you’ve noticed that he likes you, right?”

It was a direct question, but Anri couldn’t answer. She just hung her head.

“…”

“Well, that’s okay. Just come and ask me anytime you have questions about stuff—anything at all! As long as I’m not doing anything with Seiji, I’ll give you advice!”

“That’s not exactly an unconditional guarantee,” Seiji grumbled.

But Anri couldn’t bring herself to say anything. She merely said, “Thank you,” with a rare, warm smile.

⚥

That day, reception room, Jack-o'-Lantern Japan Talent Agency, Higashi-Nakano

"Okay, okay! I like that you're here ahead of schedule—that's good! No wonder you're our top piggy banks, our money trees, our premier talent! Our other kids should take a page from your book: humble even after success!"

The fluorescent lights bounced softly off the polished white floor of the office building, giving it a clean, crisp look. But the atmosphere clashed with a voice that was neither clean nor crisp.

The man had white skin and slicked-back blond hair, dark sunglasses and facial stubble, a white suit and crocodile-skin bag, expensive rings and a thick cigar in his mouth—the Hollywood image of a fat-cat villain if there ever was one.

This odd fellow was Max Sandshelt, president of Jack-o'-Lantern Japan, and he rarely ever spoke at less than full excitement.

"From what I hear, you've been waiting for twenty minutes. Well, that's fabulous. You make your boss feel like a real big shot! Is this like that story about the time Monkey Hideyoshi warmed up the sandals of Shogun Nobunaga while he was a servant? Wait… what if Mr. Yuuhei and Miss Ruri warmed up sandals with their *own* backsides…? Wouldn't that bring in a fortune if you sold 'em online?!"

"There is a high likelihood that your sales pitch will be shot down, so I recommend scrapping the idea—unless you are hoping for the board to relieve you of your duties, sir. As far as the meeting time is concerned, *you* were twenty minutes *late*. They arrived exactly on time. Please learn from their example," said his secretary, her words so cold they chilled to the bone.

"…"

The man winced, then walked over to Yuuhei and Ruri—who were standing in front of the sofa in the middle of the room—and clasped their shoulders, one hand to each person.

"Hey, time is a minor detail. Compared with the full thirteen-point-six-billion-year history of the universe, twenty minutes doesn't even exist. Time is money? Yes!

Exactly! But life isn't all about money. You know? What's truly important is heart and soul! These money-grubbers, you can see the sickness in their faces. How are you gonna be the singer beamed into everyone's living room looking like that? My point is, don't complain about me being twenty minutes late!"

Then he gasped, realizing something, and turned around to face his secretary. "Hey! I think I may have just said something profound! Write that down!"

"Your excuse for being late?" asked the secretary, her gaze icy, but she did jot down a note.

Yuuhei was as expressionless as ever while his bizarre employer carried on, but Ruri looked around uncomfortably, unsure of how she should be acting.

I'm still not used to how... excitable he is...

Despite that, she didn't dislike him. If anything, a personality this large was just the thing to help her forget the nightmares from her previous agency.

Max snapped his fingers in a sign to his secretary. She placed a document envelope on top of the reception desk, bowed, and left the room.

"?"

As Ruri watched, Max picked up the envelope and said gravely, "Er, Mr. Yuuhei, do you mind turning toward the corner of the room? I'm not sure if you should see what I'm about to pull out from this envelope. But I still want you to listen, so focus your ears back behind you. Okay?"

"Okay," said Yuuhei. The megastar followed the odd instructions without a complaint, turning to face the wall.

"? ? ?"

As the question marks piled up over Ruri's head, Max took a photograph from the envelope and handed it to her facedown.

"We got this in the mail yesterday, along with a very familiar extortion note. Probably from that stalker of yours."

“…!”

“Maybe the best option is not to show stuff like this to our brightest stars, for your own safety… but my stance is always to come clean and find a solution ASAP. I want your help so we can turn this stalker in or bury him in the darkness forever,” Max said. He seemed to feel no hesitation about bringing up the *s*-word topic around Ruri. She nervously took the photo and turned it over.

“…?…!!!”

The instant she recognized its contents, she gasped, the breath caught in her throat, and her skin went an even paler shade of white. Max started to ask her something, then found that her response confirmed his suspicions.

“So it’s real. It didn’t seem the same as those obvious fakes scattered around our shoot locations, so I thought it was best to check, just in case.”

“B-but… how…?”

Her eyes were fixed on her own image in the middle of the photograph. Her body trembled.

Dozens of seconds passed in silence. To Ruri’s senses, the moment felt several times, *ten* times as long.

Max shrugged and muttered, “The longer this silence goes on, the more Mr. Yuuhei looks like some kinda Japanese ghost in the back… It’s freakin’ me out. At any rate, you have any idea who might’ve sent this photo?”

“Um… before that…”

“Hmm?”

“Can I show this to Yuuhei, too?”

Yuuhei came back from the corner of the room when they called him. Ruri looked down at the floor and handed him the picture.

“…”

He looked it over in silence.

In the center of the blurry photo was a woman, obviously Ruri. Despite her eyes being covered, that pale skin and her attractive features were identifiable at a single glance.

The setting of the photo was a room in some kind of building.

A window was visible, but the blinds were closed, so you couldn't see outside.

There were numerous strange details.

Hardly any furniture of any kind in the picture.

A blue canvas sheet on the floor instead of a rug.

Men in suits surrounding her, all of them wearing some kind of mask.

And strangest of all, *blood dripping from Ruri's wrist*, which one of the men was *collecting in a wineglass*.

For the several seconds that Yuuhei held the photo, Ruri flashed back through her memories of that horrible event.

The color of her blood.

The men laughing.

And… *the sight of her father*.

The images flickered through her mind one after the other, snippets of statements ringing in her ears.

"This is her?"

"I've seen her in the magazines."

"I'm getting too excited for my age."

"This isn't a game, Mr. Adabashi."

"Hmm… but is it true?"

"Well, there is indeed something otherworldly about her features."

"We gave her a 'routine health test' that indicated her true nature."

"Actually, I'm excited enough that I don't even care if she's human."

"Mr. Adabashi, please control yourself."

Shall we give it a test?"

"Are you sure, Kujiragi?"

"I don't mind."

Along with the sound of the voices, she also felt the returning sensation of something cold being inserted into the flesh of her arm. Right after the cold came searing pain that shot up and down her spine, causing convulsions from brain to toes.

Why me?

Why this?

Why is it happening?

All of the *whys* bounced around her head. Only the intermittent flashes of agony told her body that this wasn't merely a nightmare.

"…Incredible. The wounds just close right up."

"Especially now. It's the middle of the night."

"Does she even age?"

"We won't know except through the passage of time."

"But it's worth a test."

“Where did President Yodogiri find her?”

“He recently learned about the Hijiribe bloodline.

“The house was burned, and she was gone…

“But he saw her photo in a film magazine by chance.

“The resemblance was so striking, he had to check.”

“And the tests were positive?”

“Very, very lucky, that Yodogiri.”

“You need luck in this line of work.”

“It’s good to hear that her cells are special, even within the family.”

“Do you suppose that means… we have a chance, too?”

“Want to try sucking her blood, just to see?”

“Then you’ll all be accomplices.”

A variety of voices rattled as her memories jumped through time.

The part where they sipped her blood, as shown in the photo, was only the very beginning.

More images, sickening just to think about, popped into her mind before vanishing again.

All the while, echoing in her brain was the soft and horrible voice of Jinnai Yodogiri.

“Hello there, Ruri. You’ve got another meeting with Mr. Adabashi’s group today.

“You don’t want your monstrous identity to be revealed, after all…

“And you certainly don’t want the rest of the world to know what they’ve done to you, do you?

“Don’t be mistaken—I’m not doing these things to you out of hate.

“If anything, they’re for your own good.

“Your entire being can be saved for this mere price.

“You don’t need to understand what I mean now. It will come in time.”

“In time,” she did understand—but there was still no meaning to his actions.

Everything Yodogiri said was nonsense.

But she was already losing her ability to be skeptical of his claim.

Ruri headed to her concerts, expression as fixed in place as a doll’s.

Only when she acted or sang could she actually regain control of herself.

The moment she could use her own voice to sing her songs in front of people who didn’t know about her soiled self, her inhuman nature, or the dark secrets of Yodogiri Shining Corporation.

The moment she could overwrite everything and play a different version of herself.

That moment was the only thing that supported her and kept her mind whole.

The sight of the fans who watched her with tears in their eyes helped keep her on her feet.

The fictional worlds that enveloped the characters she played helped keep her heart intact.

She refused to cross the line.

She denied her own mind’s collapse.

But that would reach a breaking point soon.

“Your father came by.

“After your mother disappeared, and he vanished, too, following the fire.

“He said, ‘Give back my daughter.’

“I think he’s realized who we are.

“So, to put it simply, well, we asked him to leave for now…

“But we’re the only ones who know where to find him. Do you understand?

“If you love your father, you can make things much, much easier for us all by playing our obedient, faithful ‘product.’”

It was simple.

She learned by coincidence that her father was dead.

She’d been trying to find information on his whereabouts by searching the Internet and eventually crossed paths with a man who went by the username Shinichi Tsukumoya, who gave her what she wanted to know for free.

That was the first step to her eventually learning the truth.

Yodogiri and his people had already murdered her father.

The “accomplices” who drank her blood had covered up everything.

All traces of the murder, all tracks of her father, even the tiniest memento of him.

She remembered screaming.

Oddly enough, she was able to calmly process that she was screaming.

Ruri Hijiribe remembered the moment—the exact instant that the monster within her was born.

It wasn't an awakening of the blood. In fact, nothing bodily changed at all.

But there was a monster born in her mind.

It would later be hailed in the newspapers as "Hollywood," then promptly disappear—a murderous monster bent only on revenge.

Her mind returned to the beginning.

The scene in the photograph, the moment when all this began, came to life.

That was the first day in the process of her destruction.

The day she learned that she had inhuman blood in her veins—via a conversation among strangers.

The day those strangers drank the blood flowing from her arm.

It was all absolutely insane. Like some kind of demon-summoning ritual.

But there was no demon, of course. She simply lost blood, lapped up by others to no effect.

The concept of the blood that flowed from her body, trailing into the mouths of unfamiliar men, filled her with an unbearable nausea.

This photograph was taken right in the midst of that nauseating ritual.

She decided to show it to Yuuhei, even as she felt that it would be the end of everything.

Whether he rejected her or accepted her, she would live with the decision.

He had saved her life and her heart once before—he alone was worthy of being her judge.

Whether he insulted her for being defiled or gave her kind words of pity and mercy, Ruri Hijiribe would accept anything that Yuuhei did.

"…"

He stared at the photograph in silence.

Her expression tense, Ruri began to explain, "Earlier… when I tried to tell you about my past… you said that you didn't need to hear it."

"I did."

"But at this point… I think I really should tell you…"

It took all her determination to begin the discussion, but Yuuhei's answer was not quite what she expected.

"Do you really think that telling me is going to improve the outcome?"

"Huh…?"

"I think you're kind of shocked by this. We should wait until you calm down. When you're rattled, it's best not to rush into any hasty decisions."

"…"

"My words mean nothing. Only you can overcome your past."

They were like lines from a movie hero. In fact, he might as well have been quoting from his own past scripts—but Ruri, who'd been feeling desperate and despondent, was as stunned as if he'd dumped freezing water on her.

She stammered and hemmed as he placed the photo back on the table, facedown.

Max then decided that it was the best time to say, "Wow, you two really make a great couple. You know, we sold out of your new photo album, Miss Ruri, so why don't we put out a combined book full of couple photos of you two?"

And then, without missing a beat, he continued directly into the topic at hand. "If you'd just told me this stuff from the start, I could've tried to help! Showbiz is full of secrets, my girl… You should never keep your secrets to yourself. Your secrets belong to the

entire agency! That's right—all for one! What's yours is mine! When I first came to Japan, I didn't know how things worked, so I took on all those vampire tabloid writers myself with a cross and stake, whoopin' ass left and right…"

"…!"

It all sounded like a joke coming from him, but at the end, Ruri twitched and trembled.

Yuuhei put an arm around her shoulder. "It's okay."

As usual, there was no expression on his face, but somehow, those cold doll-like eyes calmed her down.

Meanwhile, Max nodded and grunted as he slid the photo back into the envelope, not losing an ounce of his general state of agitation. "Well, if it's real, there are options we can take. If you have any idea where this photo came from, tell me. This Jinnai Yodogiri… I heard he was bad, but this is extreme…"

"…"

"Your biggest selling point is your squeaky-clean image. What kind of idiot puts that type of talent into this niche type of *adult video*?!"

"…Huh?"

"It's obvious from your expression that you're really disgusted, not acting… I respect any woman who goes willingly into adult films as an actress, but the thought of any man who forces an unwilling subject into a film like this makes me sick! Hang on… that's still a crime here, too, right?"

Ruri murmured, taken aback by his unexpected comment. He leaned forward and patted his agency's prize talent on the shoulders. "It musta been hard… but it's all right now. Yuuhei Hanejima will heal the scars you bear! And as his employer, that basically means that I will be the one who healed you. So whenever times are tough, think of my face to get through it. Then you'll have a happy new year! That's a new you, one step closer to the grave, a journey made in hell! Hey, that gives me an idea: Your photos should be maid and butler themed."

He smacked a fist into his palm and continued, "Good idea. Brilliant! And Yuuhei's sequel to *Silence of the Manservants* is about to be unveiled, so we can use that as a

promotional tie-in. I gotta get the secretary to jot that one down! Hang on, guys. Sorry? Yes! Sorry!"

And he scrambled out of the room.

The stream-of-consciousness rambling left Ruri with her mouth agape. At her side, Yuuhei said, "I think… he might actually understand the truth."

"Huh?"

"That the picture wasn't really from the set of a triple-X film."

Yuuhei looked at the doorway the president left through and said reassuringly, "He might be selfish, dedicated to his greed, and an unabashed outlaw, but at least he's a nice outlaw. I think you can trust him.

"He's just really, tragically awkward, just like me."

⚥

The same day, afternoon, on the street, Ikebukuro

"Mraaaow."

A precious sound trickled from the pet carrier in Anri's hands. Dokusonmaru was rolling on his back inside, tummy catching the light that slipped inside the case.

Mika's face crinkled into a grin as she fawned over the cat. "Aww, you're so cuuute! Widdle-widdle-widdle!"

She wiggled her fingers next to the bag, and the cat squirmed one paw in response.

"A lot of people talk to cats the same way they talk to babies, huh?"

"Maybe they're pretending that it's their own child."

"No way, our babies will be *much*, much cuter!" Mika exclaimed.

For some reason, something about this mushy sentiment made Anri's cheeks color, and she had to look away.

"The problem is that both Shinra and I are available at irregular times, due to the nature of our work. We might not be able to have someone watching the kitten at all times," Celty had typed on her PDA. With everyone else at a loss for a solution, Anri volunteered to take the cat—and here she was now.

She owed Celty for countless kindnesses, so she wanted to make that up to her, no matter what form it took.

Shinra said that he felt satisfied with the cat in Anri's care, while Shizuo's group said that they could rely on someone Celty trusted—and just like that, the cat was with her.

It was all so quick and easy that Anri began to worry if it was really right for her to be responsible for an animal with so little resistance from them. Then Yuuhei said, "Dokusonmaru doesn't take to bad people. It's all right," and that settled the matter.

"Man, you're so lucky, Anri. You got to meet Yuuhei Hanejima and Ruri Hijiribe!" Mika laughed.

Anri shook her head. "They're supposedly such famous celebrities that I got nervous and could barely say anything…"

Of course, the real reason she couldn't speak was the strange reaction that Saika had to Ruri, but she couldn't say that here. She just smiled sadly like she often did and said, "Thanks for hearing me out today."

"Don't even mention it! Seiji said you could come with us, so it's no problem at all."

After that, Anri split off from the couple and headed back home.

Mika asked her if she wanted to get something to eat, perhaps at a restaurant that allowed pets, but Anri didn't want to interrupt her time with Seiji, so she took the cat and headed out into Ikebukuro.

She failed to notice the shadow who incessantly watched her progress.

Celty's group had been naive. They assumed that the stalker would not bother with Anri, since she had no connection to Ruri.

They assumed that a stalker whose activities were outside the bounds of common sense would abide by rationality.

The price for that lack of caution was the lurker trailing Anri now.

Oddly enough, just like the time when the slasher attacked Anri half a year earlier.

However, there was one difference between this person and the slasher.

The shadow watching Anri now continued to follow, neither approaching nor falling back, and when she got to her apartment, it simply vanished without taking action.

As if satisfied with just knowing her address.

The only thing the shadowy figure did, just before disappearing, was open its flip phone and turn on the screen for a brief moment.

♂♀

At that moment, Russia Sushi, Ikebukuro

"Okay, today we have new rolled sushi. Little *norimaki* rolled in big *norimaki*. Whirlpool and rolled omelet and whirlwind put to shame, you try brand-new *matryoshka* roll," said Simon, proudly advertising the restaurant's newest item, while Mika and Seiji sat at the counter, ordering a few cheap individual items for an early dinner.

Simon's new item was an extremely narrow roll of typical *norimaki* sushi rolled inside of a medium-sized *norimaki*, which was itself the center of a large *norimaki*, making one giant *norimaki* in total. The ingredient at the center of the smallest roll was simmered seaweed, making the entire thing no more than layer upon layer of seaweed and rice, just like the traditional Russian nesting dolls.

Seiji lifted the sushi to his mouth and asked Mika, "What's wrong? You seem down."

“Huh?… Oh, geez! How could I be down when I’m at your side?!” She laughed hastily.

“…Is it about Sonohara?” he asked.

“…Yeah,” she admitted reluctantly, unable to deny this.

Mika looked down at her tea for a moment, then back at Seiji. “I couldn’t help but realize that she’d ask Celty for help and advice, but she wouldn’t come to me.”

No one would have told her that, but Mika was aware that Anri had been seeking advice from the dullahan. Mika likely knew this through a wiretap of some sort, but Seiji didn’t touch the topic. He looked down and dipped his head toward her.

“She’s probably being mindful of the both of us, which means that in a way, it’s my fault. Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Seiji! In fact… I was just feeling bad about it because I haven’t gone and hung out with Anri in a while, either…”

As a matter of fact, during their first year at Raira Academy, she had never once given Anri this much thought. That was because Anri had found her own place in the world: with her two new friends, Mikado and Masaomi.

As Anri grew happier and more outgoing, bit by tiny bit, Mika felt reassured in her choice to delve into love with Seiji.

She loved Seiji more than anyone in the world. But he wasn’t the only person in her heart, just the highest on the priority list.

Her feelings for him were different from the love that he once had only for Celty’s head, but she also had room in her heart for her close friend.

And then things changed for Anri.

The slasher incident caused a rift between the Dollars and the Yellow Scarves, and as a result, Masaomi Kida left Ikebukuro.

Mika noticed that this event had thrown a dark shadow over Anri’s mind. Anri did still reach out and talk to Mikado—but the last few months had grown steadily worse for her.

Despite knowing the truth through her own unique sources, Mika wasn't able to reach out to Anri directly to discuss these things. She continued living in her love with Seiji, despite the self-loathing.

On the inside, she felt just a bit lonely. A loneliness that couldn't be filled with Seiji's love or hers for him.

And she wasn't cowardly enough to use Seiji to fill the hole left by worry for her friend.

"Anri's got the ability to look at things very objectively, even when they're centered around her… but it also makes her feel like her own life isn't her concern. It makes it harder to stop things in their tracks… so that she doesn't turn away when she's in danger."

She sipped her tea and, for the first time in ages, said the name of a male classmate who wasn't Seiji.

"If only Ryuugamine or Kida could act as the brakes to keep Anri in line…"

⚥

Evening, Sunshine 60 Street, Ikebukuro

"…"

Masaomi Kida was at a loss.

He stood at the intersection in front of Cinema Sunshine, watching the scenery shift around him.

It had been half a year since he'd left Ikebukuro.

He'd visited once, during the battle between the Dollars and Toramaru, but left just as quickly. It had truly been ages since he had the chance to stand around and just watch the city like this.

It hasn't changed much. It hasn't… right?

Sure, there were changes in the store decorations and advertisements, but Sunshine 60 Street was pretty much exactly as he remembered it.

If anything was different, it was the lack of the yellow scarves that temporarily flourished, bringing things back to the gang-less, peaceful appearance that had been the default state of things a year ago.

Students, office ladies, salarymen on the way home, foreign families—each passed by Masaomi, living in their own localized orbits of culture and atmosphere.

There were slightly more young people in their street clothes out on the street, owing to it being the first day of summer vacation. Girls lined up at the movie theater, indicating the strength of the latest Yuuhei Hanejima star vehicle.

…But I've got it bad, man. All the normal people just look like Dollars to me now.

He was back in town at least, but now he didn't know where to start gathering information.

I guess this is when I should go and pay my respects to Kadota. But… I left off on such bad terms with him, and I never properly thanked him for saving me from that asshole Horada. It'll be awkward to just show up and talk… but I just gotta do it. I need to settle all my old accounts… if I ever want to see Mikado and Anri again.

He slapped his cheeks to get his mind in gear and focused on his surroundings. He just needed to look for Kadota's height or Yumasaki and Karisawa's appearance.

At this time of day, the nerds would be at one of the big bookstores, perhaps Toranoana or Animate, checking out the latest releases.

Masaomi began looking around with that in mind, but after a few minutes, he had already spotted a familiar face. Or more accurately, a familiar outfit. And even more accurately, the man and his outfit were familiar to Masaomi, but the reverse was most likely not true at all.

Well, if I settle things one by one… the very first one might kill me. Sorry if I die, Saki.

He wiped the trickle of cold sweat from his brow and called out to the man in the bartender's outfit walking behind his dreadlocked companion.

“Hey… Shizuo Heiwajima…”

“That cat your brother brought around yesterday sure was cute, though,” Tom murmured out of the blue.

“Affirmative,” Vorona agreed. “Appearance of cat scaling Shizuo’s head is accurately described as lovely.”

“If anything, I’m more of a dog person,” Shizuo griped. Even as the coworkers chatted, he was a bit preoccupied, worrying about the stalker attacking Yuuhei and Ruri.

Shit, if I just knew who it was, I could punch him up to the roof of the Sunshine building…

Unaware of the violent fantasies in his companion’s head, Tom rubbed his stomach and said, “Well, we finished up early today, and work went well, so once we turn in the collection, why don’t we celebrate a little at Russia Sushi?”

Vorona responded to her boss’s suggestion with a shake of the head. “Suggest idea similar to a declination. Taking sustenance at an establishment containing acquaintances should be avoided due to reasons of nervousness and embarrassment.”

“Don’t say that about them. They’re your fellow countrymen, right? But if you really insist, I guess we could eat sukiyaki at Mo-Mo Paradise’s Ikebukuro location. You in the mood for anything in particular, Shizuo?”

“I’m down for whatever.”

“Hmm, what should we do? Head down Meiji Street for some Okinawan food, maybe?”

The trio walked along leisurely through the neighborhood as the sun began to set. Then a shadow crossed their path.

It was a thin boy, his hair bleached blond.

“Hmm? What’s up, buddy? You want something from us?” asked Tom, assuming from the kid’s superficial appearance that he was some past challenger of Shizuo’s coming back for revenge.

But the boy lowered his head, his expression deadly serious, and said, “I’m sorry… to

interrupt your work. I must make an apology… to Shizuo Heiwajima…"

"Oh yeah?" asked Shizuo, who'd been largely ignoring the boy until his name was mentioned. "Who the hell are you?"

"My name is… Masaomi Kida."

"Masaomi Kida?" Shizuo repeated, his brow wrinkling.

Huh? I've heard that name before. But when? I think it was about six months ago…

Vague shreds of memories collected in the back of Shizuo's mind.

Cold rain. Hot lead.

"…Hmm?"

A powerful shock that ran through his side and leg.

"You want someone to blame? How about the guy who gave me the orders and the gun?"

A vulgar, despicable man's voice, covering terror with bravado.

"Masaomi Kida's your man!"

A stumble of the leg. Approaching asphalt.

The sensations and images flickered through Shizuo's mind.

"Oh yeah," said his boss, Tom, not Shizuo. "You're the Yellow Scarves guy…"

Sensing the moment of no return, Masaomi clenched his fists like a man preparing for death. Imagining the imminent possibility that his next words might end with his neck being snapped in half, he opened his mouth and firmly announced his presence.

"I was the leader of the Yellow Scarves, the guys who shot you… Masaomi Kida."

Mikado's apartment

"That's weird…"

Mikado Ryuugamine sighed as he sat at his desk, facing the computer. He was looking at the admin page of the Dollars' message board.

In order to determine the truth of the rumor that Ruri Hijiribe's stalker was within the Dollars, Mikado was utilizing his admin access to view all manner of Ruri-related pages on the Dollars' community site.

But he was looking at the screen in disbelief, like something strange was going on.

High school was a precious time, limited to, usually, just three years of one's life. And summer vacation was even more precious.

He had to laugh that he was spending his first day chained to his computer inside, but he didn't have an ounce of regret. Mikado thought about his hometown with a fresh miso rice cracker hanging from his mouth—a gift from back home.

I took the trip home early last year, but this year I warned them that I wouldn't be back until Obon… If possible, I want to at least put a pin in this matter. I have no idea exactly how far until I've "put a pin" in it… but I at least need to do everything I can…

It was his childhood friend from back home who put Mikado into this state of determination.

Those memories eventually grew to include Anri Sonohara, as the trio spent its first year at Raira Academy together.

He'd gone to karaoke and bowling with other boys and girls from the school, but at lunch and after school, and during all school activities in general, the three of them were a unit.

There were times that he worried Anri wasn't hanging out with other girls, but he enjoyed the time they spent with Masaomi so much that he never remembered to

actually broach the topic with her.

And now, Masaomi was missing from the picture.

Time had stopped inside of Mikado until the day of Masaomi's eventual return.

When that happened, all three would openly discuss their secrets so that time could progress once more.

At least, that's what Mikado believed.

The change in Mikado happened during the holiday in May.

The incident that unfolded had left him shocked in many ways. The violence of the "extraordinary" that he'd sought so fervently had left his world just a little bit bent.

Now, he intentionally avoided the chat room where he was able to talk with Masaomi. He was determined not to let the online connection water down his commitments.

Mikado was forgetting the rush of emotion he'd felt when first chatting with his friend, under the username of Bacura.

Perhaps that was just the extent of the shocks from that Golden Week incident.

But Mikado's beliefs did not change. When he and Masaomi and Anri were together again, they could finally keep moving forward.

That feeling hadn't changed in the slightest; what *had* shifted was the idea that he had to protect this place for the three of them, this home to return to, with his own hands. Or if needed, to build it himself.

That thought alone altered Mikado Ryuugamine's gears—and sent him rolling in a totally different direction.

Mikado sat back from his long session of online tinkering and sighed.

…*So that's what it is.*

Whatever this epiphany was, he continued his work and started downloading a number of files from the Internet.

And then…

"…? Huh?…?!"

When he opened the image files to look at them, the expression froze on his face.

And when he read the text files attached to them, the color from his face began to drain away.

"No way…"

After several seconds of trembling, he quickly pulled out his phone and placed a call to a number on his contacts list.

"……Ah! Hello? It's me…"

"What's wrong, Mikado? You sound short of breath," Aoba greeted him from the other end of the line.

Mikado spoke his orders hastily, in a tone of voice that he rarely ever used:

"Sorry to bug you, but… I need you to get your people together right now."

Somewhere in Tokyo, a man said, "The Dollars haven't changed a bit."

The woman at his side said something in response, but he ignored it and continued talking, juggling two knives all the while.

"From what I hear, Mikado's undergone a bit of a change lately… I can't wait to see how he's grown for myself."

The young man grinned, just as the cell phone in his waist pocket played a ringtone.

"Hello? Anything interesting to mention?" he asked, his voice cheerful for the party on

the other line. But the smile suddenly vanished from his eyes, remaining only on his mouth.

“Ahhh. Shizu and Kida, eh…?

“I wonder—why is Shizu still breathing, anyway?”

⚥

“You’re that kid who was running around hitting on girls last year, aren’t you?”

“…”

“I see… So you’re the one whose name those sick bastards were shouting,” Shizuo said, cracking his neck and taking a step forward.

“Hey, Shizuo,” Tom warned, but when he saw the look on his partner’s face, all he could do was shrug his shoulders.

“I’m not asking for forgiveness. I’m not here to make excuses,” Masaomi said and gritted his teeth.

Yup, I’m about to die.

He sensed a tingling in his fingertips and clenched his fists tighter.

I thought I might squeak through this, but I might really be a goner this time.

Preparing for the punch to crack his neck or perhaps just rip his entire head loose, Masaomi felt his life start flashing before his eyes.

I’m sorry, Saki. You deserve better, Anri, Mikado.

But instead, the only thing Shizuo did was poke Masaomi on the forehead with his index finger and scold, “I’m older than you, y’know. You gotta treat me with a bit more respect.”

“…Huh?” Masaomi mumbled, his head tilted backward.

“I heard the story from Celty. Those punks were just bullshitting around, weren’t they?”

“Celty?”

Masaomi didn’t know the Headless Rider’s name, but he recovered from his confusion quickly enough and protested, “But still, the root of the whole matter lies with me! If I’d taken proper control of my men, you wouldn’t have been shot…”

Shizuo’s right hand loomed within reach of Masaomi. It approached his forehead again, the thumb holding down the middle finger this time.

“I told you to be respectful.”

He playfully flicked the boy’s head.

“Whup!”

Masaomi grunted in the manner of a sound effect and fell to the ground.

It was a total overreaction for your ordinary forehead flick, but given that it came from Shizuo, its power was probably more like a nonlethal rubber bullet used for pacifying crowds.

Shizuo stood over the boy on the ground, arms crossed, and said, “Well, I’ve wiped out those stupid punks, and I don’t have any ill will toward the Yellow Scarves… but I’m guessing that alone wasn’t enough for you. So consider that forehead flick as settling our account.”

Tom crouched down next to the boy. “I wasn’t gonna say anything since you didn’t seem mad about it,” he mumbled, examining the state of Masaomi’s eyes, which were rolling upward from the effects of a concussion, “but can’t you hit him any softer than that?”

“That’s weird… Did I really do it that hard…? I mean, even for me, it’s still just a flick of the finger, you know?”

Shizuo tried flicking himself in the forehead a number of times. The impact made very un-flick-ish sounds like *thwud* and *kaplam*, but Shizuo himself didn’t react much

beyond a slight tilt of the head.

“I announce a question. Forehead flick is a secret technique of what martial art? It does not exist among the knowledge of any book I have read. From the movement of the finger, I theorize it is a type of finger-pointing.”

“So I’m guessing you don’t know about the hand-slapping game, either…”

Meanwhile, Masaomi’s vision was finally starting to clear up.

The dude in dreads leaned over and asked, “Hey, you okay?”

“Uh… s-sorry.”

“Don’t hold it against him. That was his way of going easy on you. I know that you might think getting a good solid punch would be a better way to square up your account with him… but that could easily be fatal, y’know?”

“…Good point.” Masaomi grimaced, but he was still uneasy, like there was something eating at him.

Is that really it? I mean, Shizuo got shot… right…? Is that… all it takes… for me to…?

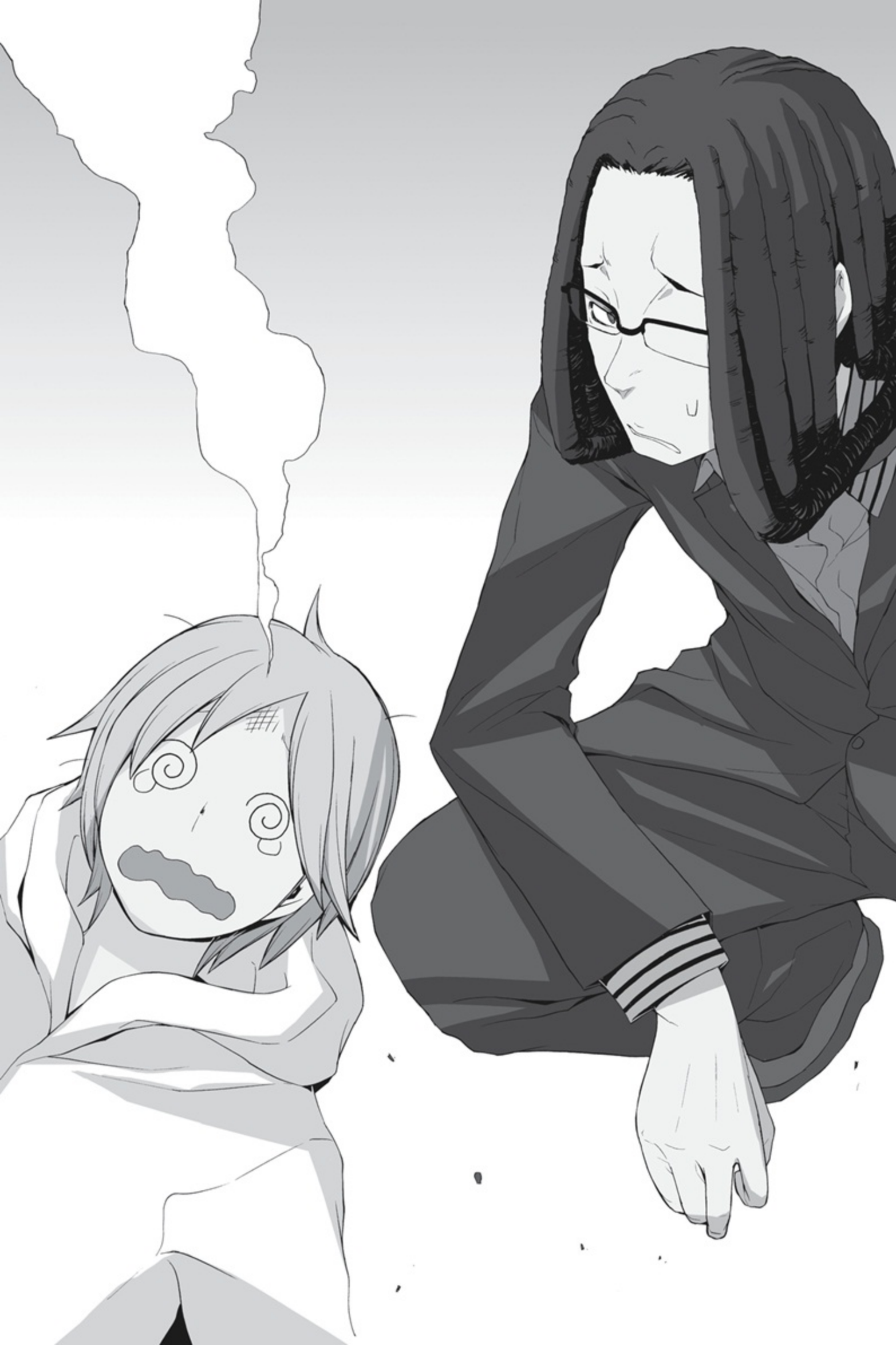
Emotions swirled inside of Masaomi’s head.

Sensing that inner conflict, Tom stretched and said, “Hey, if you’re not hurt that bad, lucky you. By the way, kid—you hungry?”

“Huh?”

“Whenever anything big happens, the best thing is to stuff yourself with food. C’mon, I’m buying.”

Umm… this is the guy… who’s always with Shizuo, right…?



He stared at the older man, who rubbed his neck and explained, “My name’s Tanaka—I’m Shizuo’s boss. Call me Tom. Whatever it is that’s bothering you, it seems like a real pain in the ass, but I’m betting that you’ll be better off getting it all out of your system, right? And I don’t like knowing that my employee’s involved in something that isn’t quite cleared up all the way. It makes me uneasy. So let’s get something good to eat and make sure everything is even between us.”

“But… I came here to apologize. Why should…?”

“Oh, I didn’t say I was gonna buy it for free.”

“Huh?”

Masaomi unsteadily got to his feet, and Tom smirked at him.

“You were the leader of the Yellow Scarves or whatever, right? I’m wondering what’s going on with them now… Mind telling me whatever you might know?”

Anri’s apartment

“There, there.”

Anri scratched Dokusonmaru’s throat with the tip of her finger. The cat rolled back onto the floor, spreading its limbs and displaying its belly. She rubbed his tummy with her palm, and he squealed, “*Nauu*,” and proceeded to writhe with pleasure.

Once she had set up the cat’s litter box and other items from the carrier bag, Anri didn’t have much else to do other than play with the kitten.

She saw much of her childhood cat in Dokusonmaru, and she found herself fondly reminiscing.

The calico cat had been like a friend to young Anri, back when her home was attached to the family business, the curio shop Sonohara-dou.

She had no fun memories from back then, but at least the ones of her mother and that cat had been a sort of solace to her.

Until Anri's father kicked the cat and killed it.

I guess even celebrities like Ruri Hijiribe have their troubles…

Anri hadn't paid much attention to the sense of something abnormal she picked up around the actress. After all, she herself wasn't entirely human, either, to say nothing of Celty.

But there was no feeling of camaraderie from that, and she couldn't even tell if Ruri herself was aware of it. Anri was much more concerned about the girl being stalked than anything regarding her nature.

I wonder… if this stalker is someone like Mika. Or maybe they're more like Niekawa…

That girl Haruna Niekawa had attacked her half a year ago. The memory saddened Anri.

Why do they do those things…? I don't really understand…

She recalled the sensation she'd picked up from Ruri and felt a sudden chill.

Was her concern about Mikado really a normal, ordinary feeling?

Anri wasn't human to begin with; could her instincts and concerns really be trusted?

She knew from the start that she wasn't normal. So she couldn't be sure if her feelings were truly accurate or not.

Just as it had been when she'd hung out with Mika Harima, the time she'd spent with Mikado and Masaomi formed a kind of baseline.

Now, one of those two people was acting strangely—similar to when Masaomi Kida had been acting strangely and got into trouble involving the Yellow Scarves.

Except this was different.

When Masaomi had been acting strange, she'd still had Mikado at her side.

But now she had no one.

Were her worries about Mikado actually accurate?

Would an ordinary person look at the situation and decide that it was actually Mikado who was being reasonable?

She had no one to answer her doubts.

"…"

Thinking about the fond days of their little trio had caused her hand to stop petting the cat. It mewed and tried to rub against her, making her smile.

Saika had no interest in cats and repeated the usual words of love inside her head, like at any other moment.

Hearing the words of love for humanity repeated en masse made her consider something: If she fused entirely with Saika, would that make her able to accept Mikado and Masaomi, no matter how much they changed?

She recalled something Izaya Orihara had once said:

"If you really want a tranquil, peaceful life, you should use that katana to slash everyone you know."

No…

"Once you're the queen, you'll get what you want."

You're wrong… That's wrong!

She felt revulsion in the pit of her stomach and swallowed spit.

Despite the sudden gloomy mood, Dokusonmaru wriggled and stretched. The cat's cute, innocent nature took the sting out of her feelings, and Anri smiled and relaxed a bit.

…*Huh? Wait… am I allowed to keep pets at this apartment?* she wondered, a fresh concern to mull over. But soon she was back to petting the cat's belly.

"There, there…"

Haruna Niekawa and a mysterious masked assailant: Those people were responsible for the two times Anri had been attacked at her apartment.

Now a third shadow she was unaware of watched her home—while she allowed herself to relax in a momentary haze of peacefulness.

And as she played with the cat, her mind continued only to recall her memories of Mikado and Masaomi.

⚥

Sunshine Street, Ikebukuro

"Um… why don't we just go to Russia Sushi, then? I can pay my own way."

At Masaomi Kida's suggestion, Shizuo and Tom were able to convince Vorona to drop her resistance to eating at the sushi place.

"I've got to thank Simon for something, too, so I might as well do it now…"

"What? You know Simon, too?" Shizuo asked.

"Well, the kid was the boss of the Yellow Scarves, so you'd figure he knows people around town," Tom said.

"…"

"…You know, I've been wondering, is there some painful memory you associate with the Yellow Scarves or what? If so, I'm sorry—I won't bring it up again," Tom said to Masaomi, who looked downcast.

Vorona, who had no illusions about being considerate, said, "There is a question. The period of existence of the Yellow Scarves easily exceeds one millennium ago by Gregorian calendar. I cannot believe its leader currently exists in modern society. Or does the boy bear a similarity to folklore beings such as the Headless Rider?"

"…Lady, the way you talk is kind of mysterious and sexy."

The Headless Rider, huh? Speaking of which, I wonder how the Headless Rider knows Mikado. All that asshole Izaya would say was, "Why don't you ask Mikado yourself?"

Masaomi started to grind his teeth at the memory of that hateful face but thought better of saying his name when he remembered that someone next to him would likely explode with rage on a different level if he were to hear it.

Geez, man. I hate to think of things in these terms, but if I can just wrap things up with Shizuo Heiwajima first, it'll make it a lot easier for me to get to the other stuff, mentally speaking.

…

Actually, forget about Shizuo, what should I say if I run into Anri or Mikado?

Masaomi heaved a deep sigh and then heard…

"There is a warning. Walk facing forward and hear closely," Vorona murmured, her voice sharp. Masaomi held his breath.

"?" "…?" "What is it?"

They all turned to her in confusion, and she hissed, "Please face forward."

While her strange version of Japanese had sounded goofy before, Masaomi felt his skin prickle at the suddenly serious tone of her voice.

"We are being trailed. Distance is slowly closing. Hostility is unknown, but caution is required.

"…I suspect the follower is not alone."

Shinra's apartment

"Anyway, I'm going to tour a bit of the area around Yuuhei's apartment, followed by Ruri's, just in case. She might be staying with Yuuhei now, but the stalker could break into her apartment while she's away."

Celty reached for the front door, helmet in place.

"…That's fine, but I'm worried about something."

"What is it?" she asked, tilting the helmet.

"If you're prowling around outside of the apartment… ," Shinra hesitantly admitted, "won't the cops think… *you're* the stalker…?"

Just minutes after that typical conversation ended and Celty had left, the doorbell rang, and Shinra turned to the door with suspicion.

After such a brief interval, he would normally assume it was Celty coming back for something she forgot, but she'd taken the spare key when she left. Ever since the incident with Aoba, Shinra began locking the door even when he was home, and Celty slipped the spare key into the sleeve of her shadow-made riding suit.

Given that they'd just been discussing the stalker, Shinra headed to the door with some trepidation. On the other side of the peephole was a man wearing a delivery company uniform.

Shinra's apartment was deluxe, but the building was fairly old, and it still didn't have a unified entrance or delivery box for the purposes of tenant security.

"Delivery!" said a voice on the other side. Shinra opened the door, relieved.

He left the chain on, just in case. He was going to sign the form and have the man leave the package outside.

"Hang on, I'll get my stamp…"

Shinra reached into the pocket of his white coat when—

At that very moment, an ugly piece of metal squeezed through the gap.

It was the heavy black shape of a large chain cutter.

By the time Shinra noticed it, he was too late.

It snapped through the metal chain, setting the loose ends free.

"…"

The door slowly opened all the way, revealing the grinning delivery worker.

"I'm guessing… you're not a deliveryman," Shinra quipped in a cold sweat.

The man twirled and contorted, throwing himself into a high kick at the side of Shinra's head.

Shinra felt his brain jolt against his skull and veins on his face snap.

Oh, that was… bad…

It's like being slapped… by… Shizuo…

I'm gonna pass……

Wait, why is he gearing up? Is he going for… another… one…?

Am… am I going… to…… die?

His consciousness stretched, pulling everything into slow motion, as the man dressed as a delivery worker drove another kick into Shinra's body.

……*Cel…… ty.*

⚥

Let's see, Yuuhei's apartment should be right around… here.

Celty was taking a route to her destination using narrow roads and back alleys to cut

down on the likelihood of drawing her nemesis's attention.

When she came to a section that featured a number of similar buildings all in a row, she took out her phone to get an accurate location.

She had loaded up the navigation screen and was looking for Yuuhei's address when the screen shifted and a ringtone played.

Celty looked at the displayed number and paused before she hit the answer button.

Huh? It's from Mikado. Why now?

Had he perhaps realized that Anri was worrying about him? Did Mikado learn that she had come to talk to Celty and thus tried to make contact for his own advice?

That was her reason for hesitating initially, but then another thought occurred to her.

Huh…? But why is he calling rather than texting?

If he was calling her, knowing that she couldn't speak back, perhaps it was an emergency. She quickly hit the call button and pressed the phone to her helmet.

"Hello? Is that you, Celty?"

Mikado's voice echoed inside the helmet, making it loud and clear for Celty's mysterious sense of hearing.

"If you can hear me, tap the mic on your phone!"

Celty tapped next to the little mic hole.

Mikado replied with a mixture of relief and haste, *"That's good! I'm going to continue talking under the assumption that you can hear me! Are you at your apartment now?!"*

What could it be? Does he want to come over to talk about something?

Very quickly, she realized that could not be the case. The level of anxiety and distress in his voice suggested something more important than something that simple.

"If you're away from home at the moment, go back immediately!"

“?”

“I’m not worried about your *safety… but Shinra could be in trouble!”*

⚥

Night, Ikebukuro

“…Ah, well. There, you see?”

The young man in the black coat ended the phone call report he’d received and smirked to himself. “Look at that mess. All over some stupid gang squabble that even the yakuza wouldn’t bother with. I feel for Shinra.”

He got to his feet, chair creaking, and looked at the scenery out the window.

It was the top floor of a fancy apartment building close to Ikebukuro Station.

He gazed out at the activity around the station, leering with the excitement of a child facing a grand feast, and he murmured to himself:

“They’re all helpless without me around.”

Chat room

Kid: Seems a bit quiet in here tonight.

Sharo: It feels like only the new people are here.

Chrome: Maybe we've just been talking in here for so long that the old-timers feel awkward about joining in.

Sharo: You're probably overthinking it.

Sharo: Bacura's not showing up today, right?

Saki: That's right. He's busy.

Kid: I see. I can only participate on my phone, so forgive the slow typing.

Sharo: Whoa, seriously?

Sharo: You chat crazy fast for being on a phone. Major respect.

Saki: That's amazing.

Kid: You're giving me too much credit.

Sharo: Does anyone have anything interesting to talk about? I'm so bored every single day. I'm on my feet all day, and my sister bugs me about taking the job seriously. She sure is bossy for being flat.

Saki: Breast size has nothing to do with that.

Kid: That would be sexual harassment.

Chrome: I happen to have an interesting topic.

Sharo: Wait, lol, I don't wanna get sued over this, lmao. Anyway, if my sister saw this, she'd split my head open for sure.

Kid: What kind of topic?

Sharo: Hmm? Oh, you got something to share, Chrome?

Chrome: It's about Ruri Hijiribe's stalker… Apparently, the culprit is within the Dollars after all. I heard this from a friend, though, so I can't vouch for its accuracy.

Chrome: Oh, and this is just between us. Do not repost this info on any Ruri Hijiribe fan club boards, please.

Kid: I understand.

Saki: My lips are sealed.

Sharo: Well, either way, this chat room will show up on Internet searches, right?

<Private Mode> Chrome: How about this, then?

<Private Mode> Kid: Oh.

<Private Mode> Kid: You can do this?

<Private Mode> Sharo: Whoa, what is this?

<Private Mode> Saki: It's private mode. Sometimes I use it with Bacura.

<Private Mode> Chrome: I've selected all members currently participating in the chat to this private mode discussion.

<Private Mode> Chrome: Now it won't show up on searches. In fact, it doesn't even get saved in the log.

<Private Mode> Sharo: Hard-core!

<Private Mode> Saki: This must be serious, right?

<Private Mode> Kid: So what did you learn about the stalker?

<Private Mode> Chrome: Well… Ruri Hijiribe has a stalker, as you know.

<Private Mode> Chrome: It seems this person is on the talent agency blacklist.

<Private Mode> Kid: Oh. But the tabloid said all of those people had alibis…

<Private Mode> Chrome: Exactly. That's the issue.

<Private Mode> Chrome: The people on the blacklist who'd been bothering Ruri Hijiribe.

<Private Mode> Chrome: They're working together!

<Private Mode> Saki: Together?

<Private Mode> Sharo: Hmm? What do you mean?

<Private Mode> Chrome: There isn't just one stalker.

<Private Mode> Chrome: It was different people working together, making it look like the actions of a single guy.

<Private Mode> Kid: Ha-ha, so that's how they had alibis.

<Private Mode> Kid: It wasn't that they all had alibis for one thing; they had different alibis for separate events, ruling them all out as a singular culprit.

<Private Mode> Chrome: Exactly.

<Private Mode> Chrome: But it's interesting, isn't it?

<Private Mode> Chrome: It's on the Dollars' site itself that this rumor is spreading.

<Private Mode> Chrome: It kind of seems like they're having an internal battle. Isn't that fascinating?

<Private Mode> Kid: Could be a kind of purge.

Kanra has entered the chat.

<Private Mode> Chrome: Oh my.

Kanra: Heya! It's everyone's favorite idol sweetheart Kanra, back in glorious action!

Kanra: What, what, what? Everyone abruptly stopped talking a few minutes ago.

Kanra: Could it be that you're all engaging in some hot orgy in private mode?!

Kanra: Eek! That's sexual harassment, you guys!

Kanra: Wait. What, what? These are all people whose names I don't recognize.

<Private Mode> Chrome: Who is this… extremely excitable person…?

<Private Mode> Kid: Oh, I asked the person who invited me here.

<Private Mode> Kid: Apparently, that's the oldest old-timer in the chat.

<Private Mode> Saki: In fact, that's the admin of the group.

<Private Mode> Sharo: I wanna sock 'em.

<Private Mode> Chrome: Really? Wow, that's annoying. Seems like one of those guys who tries to act like a girl online…

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.

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Ryohgo Narita

DRRR!! X3

CHAPTER 4
Running Lost @ Stalkers

CHAPTER 4
RUNNING LOST @ STALKERS

Frivolous.

It should have been a frivolous incident.

Stalking incidents sometimes lead to tragedy, ending in murders or abductions.

They should never be described as “frivolous,” and yet…

Stalking of celebrities is a constant fact, and if the culprit were caught before trying to act on Ruri Hijiribe, it would all be over with.

A part of Celty clung to this idea.

Perhaps she’d been naive in some way.

Perhaps she’d been careless.

She was used to being chased around by yakuza, motorcycles gangs, even the police—and yesterday she’d had to deal with a helicopter and submachine guns.

So there was a part of her that came to underestimate the gravity of a stalking situation.

If only she’d learned about it just after Haruna Niekawa had attacked Anri Sonohara.

If only it’d been after she’d seen a news report on a serious stalking.

If she’d been able to keep in mind the alarming nature of a stalker beforehand…

She considered a number of different things she could have done, but it was too late to overturn any result that had already happened.

And the “result,” in terms of how it affected Celty…

…was bloodied on the floor, panting weakly.

Shin… ra?

When she got back home and opened the front door, she could scarcely believe the sight before her.

He was so proud of his white coat, the item of clothing that he claimed “formed the perfect contrast with your black!”

There were times that his brilliant white coat got splattered with a bit of blood—but in this case, Shinra’s coat was clearly stained in *his own* as he lay in the hallway.

“……”

She tried to scream.

She tried to shout Shinra’s name.

But without a head, Celty couldn’t vibrate the air to produce those sounds. The most she could do was rush to his side and gently lift him up.

He noticed her presence but was only able to move his eyeballs in her direction.

“…a… ah… C… el… ty?”

Blood was flowing from his head and mouth. He obviously shouldn’t be talking.

And yet—Shinra still smiled.

He smiled with total relief upon seeing her face.

Or perhaps it wasn’t for his own satisfaction but an attempt to comfort *her*, recognizing her obvious shock and distress.

“It’s all right… This isn’t life-threatening… I think… but… I’ve broken… a few bones…

I've been hit by Shizuo before, so I figured I could handle some punishment… but he just kept… kicking and… kicking… and…"

"Stop talking! I'll call an ambulance!"

"No, no… not an… ambu… lance… Besides, how will you… call it?"

—!

Of course. She couldn't speak over the phone. And she couldn't force Shinra to make the call. But if she just called and had it on mute, couldn't they trace the location and come for him? And she felt like she'd heard about people unable to speak, sending in faxes for help.

Paper! Where's the paper? Oh, maybe I can turn my shadow into… No, I can't! Oh, Shinra… Don't die, Shinra! Don't leave me all alone here! she thought, turning desperate.

Shinra's eyelids drooped as he mumbled, "Call Dad… or maybe… Emilia…"

He used what strength he had left to open his eyes again, looked at Celty's helmet, and beamed.

"Celty… that beautiful heart of yours is going to waste. You need… to… smile… more…"

And with that, he blacked out.

Stop it! Stop acting like you're about to die!

She enveloped his body in shadow and gently lifted it into the air. Then she leaped over the side of the stairs, spreading out a fine spiderweb that allowed her to float down softly to the ground.

Down in the parking lot, Shooter gave a little whinny, just as alarmed as Celty by Shinra's state. She attached Shinra to Shooter with shadow, then transformed Shooter's body the way she had when transporting the snake the other day.

Taking great care not to jostle Shinra's body, she assembled a fixture like those on soba noodle delivery motorcycles for hauling cargo and headed out as quickly as was safe.

Dammit, why… why?! How stupid am I?! How could I be so careless about a stalker?! I'm… I'm so helpless! I've been spending all my time with a doctor… and I can't do a single bit of emergency aid to treat him! What have I been doing…? What have I been watching him do all along…?!

Without the face of a culprit to focus on, all of Celty's anger was forced at herself as she raced through the night.

But while regret and anger ruled her emotions, she prayed the entire time for Shinra's safety.

Ikebukuro

Kisuke Adabashi watched the black motorcycle as it raced past him and hissed his strange laughter: "*Shehhh, shehhh*."

He leisurely took out his cell phone and sent a message to someone, then indulged in fantasy with a satisfied look on his face, as if to suggest that was the end of his job.

His trek stimulated the soles of his feet, supporting one crystal-clear vision within his mind's eye.

A vision of collapse.

He desired for the "illusion" of Ruri Hijiribe to crumble into nothing within his mind.

Within his sight.

On the surface of his skin.

Under his feet.

Between his nails.

Atop his tongue.

Beyond his eardrums.

Along with the rhythm of his soul's pulse.

Collapse.

Every last element that made up Ruri Hijiribe, crumbling into dust and becoming part of him. The absurd vision and the swell of desire for it from the very base of his being brought him an undeniable bliss.

Kisuke Adabashi loved Ruri Hijiribe.

But perhaps *worshipped* was a better word than *loved*.

Kisuke had lived a comfortable life, thanks to being born the son of a life insurance company executive. But a violent nature had caused others to shun him from a very young age.

When he learned that his father left for suspicious "meetings" every now and then, Kisuke assumed that he was going off to visit a mistress and decided he would blackmail him, despite this person being one of his parents.

But what he saw there was a ritual too grotesque to describe—with the upcoming model Ruri Hijiribe as an unwilling sacrifice.

Grotesque.

That had been his instinctual reaction the first time he saw it, too.

But at the same time, he recognized that thing as a girl with an inhuman air being carved up, body and mind, by normal humans—the familiar hands of his own father.

It was both grotesque and an undeniable source of excitement to him.

Not just simple twisted lust. He was consumed with an almost unbearable desire to make every part of her his.

And especially not his father's.

He wanted to beat and defile that goddess of a girl with his own hands, to scoop out her heart and destroy everything that she was.

Kisuke Adabashi loved another person for the first time in his life at that moment—if you could call it that.

With his eyes veiled by love and admiration, he followed Ruri Hijiribe. And in the moment that his father was murdered by the serial killer Hollywood, Kisuke instantly understood.

It was none other than Ruri Hijiribe who had committed the deed.

It was nothing other than the alien, superhuman power that dwelled within her.

The instant he realized this, his admiration turned to worship.

However, his worship was not of Ruri herself, but the feeling of completeness and liberation that would come when he destroyed her. To Kisuke Adabashi, pure pleasure itself was God.

And to him, Ruri was like the Holy Mother who gave birth to what was sacred.

A man helped guide him to the Dollars' website.

Right after his father's funeral, he attempted to make contact with Ruri Hijiribe through his own means—running into the police on some occasions and earning the caution of a number of talent agencies, who spread his information between them.

But one day, after several months, a man reached out to him.

The very root of evil who had brought Ruri Hijiribe and his father together: Jinnai Yodogiri.

Through his help, Adabashi steadily dipped his toes into that sordid part of society, and with the information Yodogiri provided, he now effectively led the entire *community* of stalkers targeting Ruri Hijiribe.

It was a social place where they could all exchange information, a group within the Dollars' website that almost no one was aware of. Only those scant few members could view the board, and they recruited by posting offers to sell secret photos of Ruri Hijiribe on the normal Dollars' communities and watching the reactions closely to detect the scent of more of their "kind."

Because the public-facing community was self-run by a man using the nickname "Red Carpet," it didn't stick out much. From there, anyone who bit on the original sales pitch could be lured to the first secret website, and from there, to more lurid and obscure places until the group had isolated the right kind of people.

These were people who would commit any crime for Ruri Hijiribe, up to and including killing the girl herself.

Adabashi never expected to recruit around ten such people in total. A number of them were already identified and blacklisted by show business companies; the entire website gave off a distinctly dangerous vibe.

Or perhaps it was just something about Ruri Hijiribe that was able to drive human beings to madness…

There was no answer to this question, so Adabashi simply and faithfully acted on his desires.

The stalkers worked on their alibis and slowly but surely closed in on Ruri.

All of them were aware of Ruri Hijiribe's "alien" abilities, though it wasn't clear if all of them truly believed those powers existed. But only Adabashi knew about her Hollywood secret.

That stimulated his sense of superiority and drove him to a greater degree of madness.

Destroy.

Destroy Ruri Hijiribe.

With my own hands.

In a sense, it would be impossible to physically destroy the serial killer Hollywood.

But Adabashi had an idea.

If the destruction of Ruri's body and mind was what gave birth to Hollywood, then couldn't he just destroy that killer's mind, too?

The photograph Yodogiri had provided to him, he sent on to her current agency.

After a bit of time, he was going to send it to publishers and spread it over the Internet.

He could have been doing that today, for that matter, but he had other business.

Ruri Hijiribe and her lover, Yuuhei Hanejima, were starting to worry about the stalking, and they appeared to be seeking advice from acquaintances and family.

He'd been wary of the Headless Rider's cohabitant at first, but he turned out to be nothing but a wispy, soft man in a coat. After delivering plenty of nonlethal damage, Adabashi whispered, "Ruri Hijiribe is mine," into his ear.

If the man had any consciousness left, that information would soon reach Ruri's ears. Around this point, the other people involved with her would be suffering similar attacks from members of the community.

What a shame. I would have liked to deal with that cat, too.

But Yodogiri had a request about the Headless Rider, so he couldn't defy that command. In order to utterly destroy Ruri Hijiribe, in order to utterly love her, the man's help would be necessary.

Adabashi's mind understood this, but his heart swirled with twisted desire still.

Cat. The cat Ruri Hijiribe held.

I want to grind it into paste.

I want to love it in Ruri's place.

A girl from Raira Academy took Yuuhei Hanejima's cat home with her, where she apparently lived alone. Whatever their connection was, if he "destroyed" the girl and killed the cat, how much damage would that inflict on Ruri Hijiribe?

He was utterly jealous of the companion who got to perform that act, but then he considered that his pent-up desire would be unleashed by destroying Ruri herself. His eerie hissing laughter echoed through the streets of Ikebukuro.

Just then, Ruri's singing voice emerged from his cell phone.

Adabashi allowed the song to play, indulging in it until he eventually picked up the call and savored the abrupt end of her voice, as always. But this time, his pleasure was ruined by a near scream coming through the phone.

"It's not—it's not what you said!"

“?”

He recognized that voice. It wasn’t Yodogiri.

It was the very man Adabashi envied—the other member of the community who was tasked with destroying the cat and the girl.

He was a former salaryman who wore a suit everywhere, and his voice screeched with what could have been taken as either pleading supplication or fury.

“Y-y-you screwed me over! What was that?! Who were those masked people*?!”*

“Masked…?”

“They—th-th-they ambushed me! I was trying to set the girl’s apartment on f-f-fire! And then they rushed me…… Aaaaaaaah, here they cooooome!”

“Hey, what happened?! Hey!” he shouted at the phone, but a scream was his only reply. Before long the call dropped.

“…”

Something was going on.

That much was clear.

Had Ruri Hijiribe hired bodyguards to protect the cat?

Or was it someone else connected to her?

Adabashi considered a number of different options, then banished the thoughts and leered.

The most important fact he had learned from that call was that the girl and cat were still unharmed.

“*Shehhh, shehhh,*” he hissed eerily, heading toward a nearby parking lot.

There he found his car and started driving it directly toward the girl’s apartment.

Despite the danger that his companion had been in, he was utterly delighted.

After all, the loss of that companion just meant that his own love for Ruri Hijiribe would be deeper and richer than before.

Near Russia Sushi, Sunshine Street

"What do you mean, we're being followed? Some street thug?" Tom asked Vorona, keeping his voice low as they continued walking.

"I cannot provide a conclusion. But it is not the professional act of a career soldier or assassin. Extremely amateur work, but caution is advised."

Without turning his head, Masaomi focused on the sounds his ears were picking up, while Shizuo swiveled his eyes back and forth, an eyebrow raised in skepticism.

Despite it being the onset of night, they were in the middle of the shopping district, which was as crowded as ever. Tom reset his glasses irritably and cracked his neck.

"…Either they're victims of Shizuo who are looking for payback or someone angry at me for collecting on their debt… In either case, they aren't going to try anything with so many people around. We can ask the boss at Russia Sushi to let us out the back. Then we can slip around and see who's watching the…"

Vorona cut Tom off mid-speech. "Here it comes."

"Huh?" he squawked.

Vorona spun around. There was a man approaching with something in his hands, but her abrupt movement caught him by surprise, and he froze.

That confusion lasted only a second, but that was all Vorona needed. And even if he hadn't been startled, she still would have had the initiative on him.

"Wha…? *Bwaoah!*"

Her kick snaked around his body and caught him hard on the flank. A small chemical bottle dropped from the heavyset man's hand. The cap was already open, so the liquid spilled onto the ground and the tips of his shoes.

"H-hyaaah!" he shrieked, desperately trying to remove his shoe as he clutched his bruised side. Based on the way the liquid bubbled and hissed at the toe of his shoe, it was probably some kind of acid.

"Whoa, are you tossing acid around in public? You gotta be kidding me." Tom groaned.

Shizuo's forehead vein pulsed. "You son of a bitch… What were you gonna do with that bottle? Huh?"

He took a step forward and reached out with one hand to lift up the heavy man—just as Masaomi noticed another person approaching Shizuo out of the corner of his eye.

This one was a short man carrying a sharp ice pick.

Whoa, whoa, whoa! Are you serious?!

"Watch out!" Masaomi shouted, darting around to cover Shizuo's back. He lifted his leg in a front kick to drop the man before he could swing the pick down—but the next moment rendered that action meaningless.

Another boy rushed in on the attacking man from the side and drove a stun gun directly into his flank.

"…… *nnzz-z-z-buh-buh-buh!*"

The high-powered Taser caught him right near the kidney. The man's muscles crackled and convulsed, and he fell writhing to the ground, still holding the ice pick.

This mysterious new boy grinned in satisfaction, then raced off without a word.

Huh? Who was that?!

Masaomi watched the boy run away, totally baffled, until his attention was drawn to a certain object that made his pulse jump to double the intensity.

It was a bandanna wrapped about the boy's neck, detailed with a shark-teeth pattern.

Masaomi felt every hair on his body stand on end.

It wasn't fear. It was pure shock that jolted his entire being.

Was he… a Blue Square…?

Before he could even process everything he was feeling, Masaomi had turned to Shizuo's trio and shouted, "I'm sorry! I've got to go now! I'll come back and talk to you again sometime!"

He bowed and raced off after the kid with the bandanna.

"Huh? Hey, wait," Tom started to say, as he was wrenching the ice pick out of the short man's hand, but Masaomi ignored him.

He recalled his reasons for returning to the city.

Why are they helping Shizuo?! Altruism? Are they plotting something?! Infighting…? Or is it just a coincidence that he had the same bandanna as them? What if I'm totally mistaken…?

Shit! I can't get tripped up by this… now!

Masaomi dispelled the various questions that plagued him and focused on his pursuit of the boy.

There was no guarantee he would find the answer at the end of this.

But he had to keep running.

Goddamn Blue Squares…

What the hell are they plotting this time…?!

⚥

Anri's apartment

When the text message alert went off, Anri stopped playing with Dokusonmaru for the moment and picked up the phone.

It's from Celty.

Was she wondering how the cat was doing? Anri checked the message, expecting something trivial.

"Shinra hurt stalker here be careful Anri"

"?!"

The message had clearly been written in a hasty panic. Anri's blood turned to ice.

She wrote back, *"Are you all right, Celty?!"* and glanced out the window.

For now, nothing seemed off. She thought she'd heard a noise outside earlier but had paid it no mind.

After watching and waiting for several moments, the message response arrived, still in the same minimal shorthand.

"I'm fine just took Shinra to hospital be careful Anri"

I wonder what happened…? I hope Dr. Kishitani's all right, she thought, then realized the culprit could be after Dokusonmaru and focused on the window again.

Why would this stalker be so intent on destroying their peace of mind?

Why would the stalker hurt the person they loved so much?

It was a different kind of stalking activity than what Mika did, and Anri couldn't understand it. Then she gasped, looking down at herself.

They cannot love without hurting…

She lent an ear to the voices of love chanting in her mind and murmured to herself.

"I guess… it's like Saika."

⚥

Ikebukuro

Masaomi raced through the neighborhood, chasing after the boy who resembled one of the Blue Squares. The boy glanced back at him as he ran, realizing he was being chased.

Masaomi was reminded of the past tragedy of his own making.

Don't stop running.

His overwhelming fear of the Blue Squares had prevented him from saving someone precious to him. He'd kicked off that conflict, and yet he wasn't able to leap into the middle of it.

Don't… stop!

Bit by bit, his legs were starting to protest. He hadn't sprinted in a long time.

Damn, I guess physical education was a more important class than I gave it credit for! he lamented, feeling the cost of quitting high school early, but he kept his pace after the Blue Square jockey.

The youth ahead of him ran out of the shopping district and did not come to a stop until the area was devoid of people.

"…What's up with you?" he asked Masaomi, mouth covered by the bandanna.

Masaomi came to a stop several feet away, hands on his knees, panting and heaving. "Look… I don't know what's going on, but thanks for helping out back there."

"…Doesn't seem like you came sprinting after me all that way just to thank me."

"Nope… and sorry if I've got the wrong idea… but are you from the Blue Squares?"

"!"

The boy *did* react to the mention of the name.

"Guess that's bingo."

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, suddenly cautious and with a hint of hostility.

Masaomi took a deep breath to steady his lungs and then stared the other boy directly in the eyes. "First the Yellow Scarves, now the Dollars?"

"…"

"What are you up to? Who's leading you guys? Did Izumii get outta juvie?" Masaomi demanded, one question after another in rapid-fire.

Underneath his bandanna, the Blue Squares kid sneered. "You got somethin' to do with the Yellow Scarves?" he spat.

"…What if I do?"

"Your age is over. And let me make it clear: I was helping the guy in the *bartender outfit*, on orders. I wasn't saving you."

"I'm relieved to hear that. That means I can hit you without worrying about who owes whom what. So you might want to answer my questions before it turns into a fight," Masaomi menaced, shaking out his wrists. "Because I've got *plenty* of stuff to settle with you guys, going back."

"Well, well, look who's a hotshot. If you think you're that tough—"

The mocking boy's eyes drifted slightly off of Masaomi's face.

Then his sentence was finished by another youth bearing down on Masaomi's back with a baton.

"—then let's see some proof!"

The police baton hurtled down at Masaomi.

⚥

Near Anri's apartment, Tokyo

"Hey, did you find the arsonist?"

"He was a slippery bastard."

A number of young men were wandering around a narrow alley. They wore bandannas and ski masks adorned with shark-tooth patterns and had been on the move searching for someone, but they were now getting tired and slowing to a walk.

They'd strayed quite a ways from the shopping district, and the back alley was surprisingly empty for being in the middle of the crowded metropolis.

"What'd Aoba say?"

"He should be searching around here, too…"

"Hey, there's a car. Get over to the side."

The youths all moved to the edge of the alley, but the car coming down the narrow road turned off its lights and decelerated.

"?"

It came to a stop right in front of them, and the driver killed the engine.

Something was wrong.

It made no sense that the car would stop in the middle of the alley to begin with. They'd all moved out of the way, so why wouldn't it continue past them? Why stop

right in front of a pack of dangerous hoodlums?

As the boys chewed on these questions, a man emerged from the car. He was thin, but beyond that, his age and demeanor were hard to determine from the streetlights.

The only distinct feature was the eerie sound of air hissing, *shehhh, shehhh*. They could sense something unsettling about the man.

“The hell do you want?” one of their rank demanded.

The thin man promptly walked up to the group and shrugged. “Hey, kids, I was looking for some directions.”

“Directions?”

The boys glanced at one another, not expecting that question.

Who would stop to ask directions from a gang of tough-looking guys wearing ski masks?

They looked back at the man, hackles raised—just as a high kick caught the youth closest to the man in the temple.

Victim A blacked out instantly before he even had time to scream.

The rest of the young men were briefly stunned, giving Kisuke Adabashi enough time to hiss once more and repeat, “C’mon, tell me the way.

“The way to love Ruri Hijiribe so tenderly, so delectably.”

Ikebukuro

“…Waste of my damn time.”

Grumbling, Masaomi was bleeding from his head.

He'd avoided a direct blow, but the graze had been enough to break the skin. He wiped his face with a handkerchief and looked down at the two Blue Squares at his feet.

"Well, damn. Both of you passed out? That's ridiculous…"

They weren't weaklings by any means, and Masaomi was an experienced brawler. If he hadn't knocked out the first boy quickly, they probably would have taken him down together.

But he hadn't expected to beat them both unconscious, and that made it much harder to get answers.

If I'm not quick, the cops are going to show up. Damn… guess I gotta use this.

He reached down, pulled one of the boys' phones from his pocket, and started checking the message history. He was surprised at how guilty he felt about it, but there was no other good option now.

He at least needed to find out what the Blue Squares were up to, infiltrating the Dollars like this.

Not that I think this is really coming to Mikado's aid…

The next moment, something in the message list caused Masaomi's entire body to turn to ice.

MIKADO RYUUGAMINE

Right there was the name of his best friend, the one he'd been trying to help out.

And it wasn't in the message history—it was right there in the inbox, very recent.

When Mikado Ryuugamine received word that several of the Blue Squares had been defeated, he looked sad, but his fingers continued the mechanical task of typing out directions.

“Gather a few heads near Anri Sonohara’s house and stay on guard. Do not let Sonohara notice your presence.”

Mikado knew what Adabashi’s goons were doing.

Having noticed the stalkers’ actions on the Dollars’ site, Mikado was able to view their communications using his admin privileges. Through means that were not legal, with back doors very close to virus-based hacking, Mikado seized their information.

Included in the data he pulled this evening were photos of Celty’s apartment and Shizuo’s face, among other things, presented as “info on believed acquaintances of Ruri Hijiribe.” With this came a discussion about several of the members attacking the targets.

Mikado promptly discarded the commonsense opinion that they wouldn’t dare attack out in the open. What he had seen of their communications made it absolutely clear that these people were not of sound mind.

He called Celty immediately to give her a warning—but he did not send a message to Anri, from whom he was hiding his role as creator of the Dollars.

He would protect her with his own ability, the Dollars’ ability, rather than cause her undue worry. That was his reason for not telling her anything.

While he didn’t think Shizuo really needed help, he sent a few men to stop the stalkers. But this was ultimately nothing more than an excuse he told himself.

Mikado Ryuugamine was not prioritizing Anri’s safety but his idea of the Dollars.

No one understood this, least of all Mikado.

No one… except for Aoba Kuronuma.

♂♀

You idiot.

Mikado…

What are you doing…?

What the hell are you doing, Mikado?!

Impulse shot through all of Masaomi's muscles. He ran.

Ran in the direction of Anri's home.

Ran.

Ran.

Ran.

Ran.

He drove all his surging urges, anxiety, anger, and everything else into the ground through the soles of his feet, slicing his way through the air to push *onward*.

The message made it clear that Mikado was the one giving the Blue Squares their orders.

Masaomi knew they'd infiltrated the Dollars, and his trip to Ikebukuro was meant to ensure that their poisonous tentacles didn't reach Mikado—only to find that Mikado Ryuugamine had been their first host body to leech onto.

Mikado…

The leader of the Blue Squares was supposedly some kid named Aoba Kuronuma. But it was Mikado himself who was giving them their orders.

Perhaps this Aoba Kuronuma was leading him on, or Izaya Orihara was pulling all the strings from behind the scenes.

There were a number of possible explanations, but none of them changed the inarguable fact that Mikado was the one giving the orders.

Do you have any idea what you're doing, man…?!

Mikado seemed to think that he was purging the Dollars of all the punks and hooligans, using the Blue Squares as his private muscle.

Shit…

Masaomi knew the cause.

It was that conflict with Toramaru during Golden Week.

Goddammit… If I'd known this would happen, I would have reached out to him then…

But there was no use reflecting on the past now.

You might think you're the king on his throne, giving orders via text from a safe space. You might think this is all a game… but that doesn't change the fact that you're on this *side now!*

Masaomi wanted to do whatever it took to stop Mikado, including storming his house and beating him if necessary. But there was something that prevented him from doing that now.

What, does that mean Anri's in danger?

He'd been alarmed at the appearance of Anri's name in the final message—and when he realized that someone was going after her, he leaped into action before his brain knew what he was doing.

Mikado… what the hell are you fighting against?! Dammit… dammit!

The target of his rage was actually himself.

He ran and ran, blaming himself, unable to forgive his cowardice, determined to be better than that version of himself.

Why… did I have to…?!

Dammit…!

⚥

Anri's apartment

"…Shit… that was close."

The salaryman panted and tried to catch his breath behind Anri's apartment.

Somehow I made it all the way back here, and it doesn't look like they left any guards. They ran off in a hurry somewhere. I wonder what happened.

Shit… I dropped my lighter and one of the oilcans. They've probably picked them up by now. That lighter was expensive, too…

Well, whatever. I have backup plans for starting a fire. I've got to get this job over with so I can lie in bed and imagine Ruri's wailing face.

Bet the news of the burned bodies of the cat and girl will be a huge deal. And once they report on the connections between her and Ruri, she'll be even more broken.

What a humbling thought. I can feel my blood surge!

The man pulled an oilcan from his work briefcase and began to spray its contents around the back of the apartment building.

Once he lit the fuel, he would rush around to the front, so that he could dump more oil on the girl's head as she escaped out the door and light both her and the cat on fire.

The plan is perfect.

He laughed.

If anything, it was a perfect plan for getting arrested, but his imagination was unable to see that possibility.

It had nothing to do with eliminating evidence or pulling off the perfect crime. He didn't even understand that what he was doing was a crime.

This will make Ruri even more beautiful.

When he was done spreading the oil, he pulled matches out of his pocket to light the fire.

That was when a sound that did not fit the scene reached his eardrums.

"Mewww."

"Huh?"

An adorable, delightful sound came from behind him.

When he recognized it as the cry of a tiny kitten, he abruptly swung around—and saw a girl standing there.

"Wha…? Eh… Huh?"

"What are you doing…?" the girl asked. She was holding a pet carrier bag, out of the front of which poked a little cat head that meowed at him.

"…!"

The instant he recognized that this was Dokusonmaru, Yuuhei's pet cat and beloved companion to Ruri, the man took a plastic bottle full of gasoline from his pocket.

"Huh—h-huh-hello… Would you crisp up a bit for Ruri's sake?" he stammered and promptly attempted to splash the contents of the bottle on the girl.

But some kind of silver flash sank into the plastic and twisted the bottle from his hands.

"Wha…?"

He realized that he had somehow missed the fact that the girl had a sharp, shining katana in her hands.

And that her eyes were glowing red like the setting sun.

“Wh-what’s that? A k-k-k-k-katana’s not fair, is it? D-didn’t your mother ever tell you not to point that at others?” he stammered, stricken with fear.

Anri stared at him implacably and moved Saika closer to him. She was unable to fathom why her immolation would be to Ruri’s benefit.

And more importantly, she could tell that no right-minded person would attempt to kill a stranger and a cat on their first meeting.

Saika is truly remarkable if she can love even a person like him, she thought with detachment as she sank the tip of Saika into his ear.

“*Gua*… ah?… Ah! Aaaaahhggh?”

The voices would be eating away at him from the cut on his ear. Anri was used to them from ample experience, but to a first-time listener, it would be as if the entire world was replaced by the voices, such was the avalanche of sensation that overwhelmed Saika’s victims.

He started to lose consciousness from the voices alone, despite his only physical disturbance being a tiny cut on the ear. Anri stared at him dispassionately with just the faintest hint of anger in her eyes.

“…Forget about Ruri Hijiribe… and turn yourself in to the police *for attacking Dr. Kishitani*.”

What Anri didn’t realize was that while this was indeed a stalker, it was not the same person who attacked Shinra.

In fact, she had no way of knowing that the “stalker” was actually a group. And thus, she fatefully relaxed.

She told herself that the stalking incident was over.

And thus created a blind spot in her consciousness.

Behind Anri, air hissed through a narrow space.

For a moment, she wondered if Dokusonmaru had sneezed—but the sound clearly came from the opposite direction of the carrier bag.

“?!”

A chill ran through her entire body. She spun around—and felt a fierce kick slam into her side.

There was a sharp, metallic ring, and Anri’s body floated up into the air.

“…!”

She’d fought off attackers on multiple occasions before, but the impact she felt at this moment was greater than any she’d suffered against Haruna Niekawa or the masked attacker with the pruning shears. In a proper faceoff, she would have easily handled the blow with her blade, but the ambush left her unable to react, and so the kick knocked her sideways off her feet.

She slammed into the wall of the building before she could scream, driving all the air out of her lungs. The carrier bag was tossed into the air and tumbled onto the pavement with Dokusonmaru still inside.

If it weren’t for the instantaneous reaction of Saika guarding her side with the blade, the impact would have easily broken her ribs.

And yet, despite having kicked the edge of the cursed blade, the man’s foot didn’t appear to be cut.

“What a surprise… what a surprise… wasn’t it?”

The attacker examined the slice in the end of his shoe and stared at her. “If I weren’t wearing safety shoes, that would’ve slashed me… What the hell are you? Are you even human?”

“…”

She wasn't in any state to speak at the moment, but looking into the red of her eyes caused Kisuke Adabashi no small amount of glee.

"Is it because Ruri isn't human, either? Do all of you inhuman types gather up together…?"

Adabashi was quite matter-of-fact about the idea; he didn't seem alarmed or frightened by Anri's eyes in the least. He lifted his steel-plated safety shoes, preparing for the finishing blow.

But then—

"Fffhh!"

Dokusonmaru leaped out of the carrier bag, which broke open upon impact. The kitten hissed threateningly at Adabashi, then started racing away in the other direction.

"Whoa… Don't run away now…"

Adabashi went after his top priority, the cat he'd seen cradled in Ruri Hijiribe's arms, and completely lost all interest in Anri, who was still recovering from the physical shock of her blow.

He quickly vanished, and although Anri wanted to shout, her throat wouldn't work, leaving only the half-unconscious man with bloodshot eyes next to her, who asked, "Are you all right, Mother?"

⚥

"Okay, we're going to head back to Sonohara's apartment now, sir."

The boys wearing the Blue Squares' bandannas over their faces bowed to the other boy with the ski mask and goggles and headed off.

So… that's Aoba Kuronuma.

Masaomi identified the leader of the boys by the deference he received and glared at

his target from the shadows. He'd noticed them on his way to Anri's apartment, hopped over a nearby fence, and spied on them from out of sight.

I seem to remember this street as the place where Anri got attacked by the slasher before…

He stuck close to the concrete block wall, using the few hollow blocks as a little porthole to observe what was happening in the street. He could easily be charged with trespassing, hiding where he was now, but the situation was too important to worry about things like that.

Okay. If that Aoba guy gets isolated, I'll grab him and get his story. No… wait. Should I be hiding here, or should I rush ahead to Anri's place? But if I'm not careful along the way, those guys could easily spot me…

After several seconds of consideration, he decided that Anri's safety was more pressing and that he should try to find a way to her apartment without being seen.

But in the next moment, a cat on the street corner meowed.

The little Scottish fold was just a kitten but raced down the asphalt with a kind of feral athleticism rarely seen in animals its age.

"Whoa, what's with that cute little cat?"

"Huh? Isn't that…?"

The Blue Squares noticed the animal approach, then race between and past them—and a few seconds later, Masaomi spotted something that was an absolute 180-degree shift from the sweet little kitten.

—?!

A thin man, wiry with muscle, appeared on the next street, his eyes glittering. He raced toward the boys, who had their backs to him while watching the kitten; leaped high off the ground; and planted a spinning kick right to the neck of one of them.

"Out of the way!" Adabashi hissed as the boy's body flew through the air. The hapless target fell to the ground, taking the boy with the ski mask down with him, and did not

move after that. The ski mask boy stuck beneath him shook him to no avail.

“Wh… what the hell do you want?!” the remaining boys demanded, closing in on Adabashi. One of them pulled out an extendable police baton, and they took places to flank their victim.

“Out of my way. You’ll all just get in the waaay!” Adabashi roared, visibly agitated, and approached them without fear.

The one with the baton pulled it back to swing as a fierce kick caught him in the solar plexus. He didn’t even have time to swing it forward.

Anyone viewing the scene might have thought that the man’s leg actually *stretched*.

The boy bent over double and writhed on the ground, stomach bile spilling forth onto the bandanna over his mouth.

“Wha…?”

Adabashi noticed the other boy’s attention turning to his fallen comrade, and he did not miss the opportunity. He carried his blissful love, that act of human destruction, imagining Ruri Hijiribe’s suffering with each and every blow.

Holy shit. He’s not Shizuo or Kadota, but he’s pretty damn tough, Masaomi thought, holding his breath after seeing the two teens knocked out in mere moments.

Was he the enemy going after Anri? In all honesty, he wasn’t the sort that Masaomi could challenge to a direct fight and win.

Should I call the cops… and have them evacuate her?

It seemed if push came to shove, he’d have to hold back that freak until Anri had time to escape. He was about to leave his hiding place—when another shadow darted into his field of vision.

It was the kid with the ski mask and goggles, the one who’d been knocked over by his fallen comrade. He’d moved the other boys to the side of the road, then raced off after the attacker at top speed.

He attempted a weak rolling sobat kick at the attacker's back, a powerless swipe that was probably just mimicking whatever he'd seen on TV. It thumped lifelessly against the man, who turned around in curious surprise.

What the hell was that?! What a total amateur this Aoba kid is!

Masaomi had no idea that, in fact, *Aoba Kuronuma was completely useless as a fighter*.

If the veteran brawler known as Yoshikiri were present, it might be a different situation, but unfortunately for the Blue Squares, he wasn't here at the moment.

As a result, the most experienced fighter present was either the attacker or Masaomi.

And as for Masaomi…

Adabashi slowly turned and glared at the boy who'd just attempted to hurt him. He stared down, looming a head taller than his prey, and hissed with laughter.

"You know… you're about as tall as Ruri Hijiribe. But without the breasts."

"?"

"Okay. *As of right now, you are Ruri.*"

"…?…?!"

Adabashi's wide palm caught the boy around the throat.

"…!…!"

"Don't bother responding. If I hear a male voice, then I can't pretend you're Ruri and destroy you, can I?" Adabashi taunted, clutching the boy's windpipe.

He let go of Aoba's throat and grabbed the back of his head. As the boy coughed and gasped, Adabashi drove his head directly into the nearby wall.

The goggles cracked, and the boy's nose seemed fit to break.

“Aaaah, if only you really were Ruri!” Adabashi lamented, bliss in his eyes, as he drove the face into the wall, over and over.

He’d been holding back at first, so the damage wasn’t as bad as it looked, but he gradually put more and more strength into it, smashing harder and faster as he grew more excited.

When he saw blood seeping into the ski mask, his exhilaration reached a peak, and he swung the boy back much farther, preparing to crush his face for good—when a man’s voice interrupted him from behind.

“You can’t even give me enough time to call the cops, you… sadistic freak!”

A kick caught Adabashi directly in the crotch.

His legs hadn’t been spread that far apart, but the toe of Masaomi’s shoe passed right between his knees and smashed the attacker’s groin with perfect accuracy.

“?! ?! ?! ?? ?? !! ?! Nnnnnnnng?!?!!!”

He fell on the spot, completely unaware of what had just happened.

Incredible pain burst in his lower stomach, as if something had just grabbed his internal organs and squeezed. He was just barely staying conscious through the agony.

Did that do the trick?

Realizing that the attacker would have killed Aoba Kuronuma if given the chance, Masaomi paused his attempt to contact the police, hopped over the wall, and rushed over to kick the attacker from behind.

The sneak attack should have ended the fight just like that.

“Gaaahh!!”

But the attacker’s mind overrode the pain, and even with his limbs weakened, he managed to strike at Masaomi’s feet with a low kick.

“Whoaaaa!”

Masaomi fell to the ground, spinning, as though a hard river current had swept his feet out from under him.

"Do you… know Ruri, too?" the attacker asked with a smile, which was a strange thing to say for someone who should have been in a violent rage. With a trembling leg, the attacker pressed down on Masaomi's stomach. "If I kill you, will Ruri be terribly, terribly sad?"

"The fuck are you talking about?! Who the hell is Ruri?!" Masaomi hissed, the loudest he could manage with a foot pressed into his gut.

"Oh… oh… Well, that's fine," Adabashi said, shaking his head and hissing. "Ruri is kind enough that knowing total strangers died because of her would cause her great pain."

Okay, is this guy on some kind of drugs?! Actually, holy crap, this is really bad!

The man was putting more and more weight on Masaomi.

Shit, I should've just abandoned the stupid… Blue… Squares… Why did I have to come… to their… aid…?

But he knew the reason why.

If he abandoned these people now, he would never be proud enough to present himself to Mikado, Anri, or even Saki again. He couldn't promise himself that he'd show his face to them again someday, but if anything, it was a kind of personal moral compass within him that forced his hand.

I'm so stupid… First with Shizuo, now this… I must be suicidalalololgh…

Just as he felt the stomach acid starting to convulse and churn, there was a sound of glass breaking against the man's back.

"?"

"?"

Neither Masaomi nor the attacker understood what it was at first—until the man's body was suddenly wreathed in pale-blue flames, lighting the dark alley an eerie color.

“Yaaaaahhh!!”

The flames spread from his back up to his ears, the blue color shifting to yellow and red. He stripped his shirt off and began to run—and within moments, he was gone.

Masaomi didn’t have the strength to chase him, of course. All he could do was heave a sigh of relief that he was all right and look around to see what had happened.

!

It’s him…

He saw the boy in the ski mask lying splayed on the asphalt, barely breathing. There were fine cracks in the goggles, almost entirely blocking his sight. Next to him was a can of lighter oil, and clutched in his hand was a Zippo lighter.

Did he… just go right out and burn that guy without a second thought…?

Even in self-defense, splashing oil on a person and lighting them on fire was not a decision made by a sound mind. He *did* know one person who would do that sort of thing—but even subtracting for the otaku part, the guy clearly wasn’t of sound mind.

At least Kadota’s around to keep Yumasaki in line when needed… but this guy’s out on the loose and trying to use Mikado…

“So you’re Aoba Kuronuma?”

Masaomi glared down at the boy lying in the street. He picked him up by the collar.

“You’re coming with me until we can confirm Anri’s safety. You have my thanks if this was supposed to be protecting her, but if you’re trying to use Mikado for some kind of plot, you’ll have to answer to me,” he threatened, his eyes hard.

The boy in the ski mask slowly turned to face Masaomi. As if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. As if gazing at a mirage in the desert.

“?”

Masaomi watched and waited for a more meaningful response.

He was too ignorant of the situation to understand.

The way that the other Blue Squares had treated him with deference made Masaomi assume that the kid in the goggles was Aoba Kuronuma—but Masaomi didn't know.

The Blue Squares always treated Aoba Kuronuma as an equal, nothing more.

He didn't know.

Masaomi just didn't know.

The boy in the ski mask was not Aoba Kuronuma.

There was only one person whom the Blue Squares treated with the respect of a leader.

And that one boy looked up at Masaomi and opened his mouth.

"…… Masaomi?"

It was the voice that Masaomi Kida had wanted to hear more than any other.

And the voice that he wanted to hear *coming from that particular ski mask* least of all.

Wha…?

Mika… do…?

A voice he never imagined he would hear.

He prayed that he had merely misheard it.

But as Masaomi clutched the boy's collar, dumbfounded, the boy reached up and pulled off his mask and goggles—revealing a bloodied, familiar face.

“Masaomi…? It’s not… a dream, right?”

“Mikado…? It can’t be… can it?”

Masaomi let go of the collar and fell to his knees.

He had to say something.

But the absolutely shocking and unexpected reunion left his mind a blank.

“What… what the… hell was that?” was the only statement he could produce.

Mikado used a handkerchief to wipe his face, occasionally grimacing and hissing, “Ouch!” He’d probably fractured his nose, his cheekbone, or perhaps both.

“H-hey… you okay?! You need a hospital… no, an ambulance… ,” Masaomi mumbled, just before he heard the sound of an approaching vehicle.

A station wagon pulled over on the side of the street. From the backseat emerged a youthful boy with a bandanna tied around his forehead. He rushed over to Mikado’s side.

“Mikado! Are you okay?!” he shouted. He was followed by a much taller boy who went around to check on the other fallen Blue Squares.

“Yeah… I’ll manage. But he really got the others bad…”

“Looking at your face, he got you pretty bad, too… So, who’s this?” the boy asked Mikado uncertainly. He had realized that Masaomi did not seem hostile and thus didn’t treat him like an enemy—for now.

“…Masaomi… Masaomi Kida. My friend.”

The boy’s eyes narrowed when he heard the name. “Oh, so you’re…”

There was a subtle interplay of emotion in his voice. But Masaomi did not miss the instant when his mouth started curving into a grin.

Still, he didn’t particularly care. Masaomi called out to Mikado, who was getting to his feet and leaning on the shoulder of the real Aoba.

“H-hey… Mikado…?”

The others were heading straight for the car, but then Mikado turned back, his expression a little somber. “I’m sorry… Masaomi. Just wait… just wait a bit longer.”

“Huh?”

His face expressed sadness but not in a pathetic sense. It was like the look he would give in elementary school when he borrowed a video game and forgot to bring it back with him.

“Wait… What do you mean?”

They needed to talk. But he had no idea what to say.

Mikado saw Masaomi, panicking and confused, and smiled.

Just like he did in the old days. Like when they were in elementary school.

He smiled the way he did when he asked, “Is that you, Kida?” when they reunited in Ikebukuro.

Smiled. Smiled. Smiled.

That same smile, just like the old Mikado.

It was exactly what froze Masaomi this time and kept him from finding the words he wanted to say.

Is that…

…really you… Mikado?

The boy smiled like always, despite the blood streaming from his face and the likelihood of multiple bone fractures. The note of innocent pluckiness in that smile caused a freezing trickle of sweat to run down Masaomi’s back.

The smile was eerie. It was like watching him smile as he headed out into a roof-ripping hurricane without so much as a raincoat.

Masaomi remained silent until Mikado spoke again, still wearing that same old smile.

“Just a bit longer.”

“Huh?”

“Just a bit longer, and I’ll have made it… *The place for you and Sonohara to come home to.*”

Masaomi felt his own spine creak. That was the signal for a cold shiver of fear to race from his legs up through his body.

Yet he still stepped toward the car, feeling like he had to talk to Mikado.

“H-hey… Mikado…?”

But his old friend didn’t stop again. Without turning, Mikado continued in a murmur, “So… I want you to wait until then. I know I’ll find a way… to *save* you and Sonohara. And until that point… *I don’t think we should meet*.”

That was the clincher. Masaomi couldn't ask anything after that. All he could do was stand still.

"What's up with the stalkers?" Mikado asked Aoba.

"One of them ran off with his eyes all red. The other one—probably the guy who did you in, Mikado—I think he used a car to escape. At the very least, Anri should be safe for now," the newcomer replied.

"Ah… that's good."

Once he was in the car, Mikado stuck his head out of the window and mentioned to Masaomi, as if just remembering it, "Sorry, Masaomi, I need you to do one… no, two things."

"You need my help…? Wh-what is it? Don't hold back, man! Tell me anything!"

Just tell me. You didn't want this to happen, did you? So spit it out… Ask me to help you!

Masaomi could only envision his own selfish desires—but once again, Mikado just gave him that smile.

"I'm going to meet Sonohara in a minute… and I want you to keep this a secret from her. The fact that I was here… and that I was trying to save her."

"Huh…?"

"And the other thing is… I want you to return that cat to her."

Masaomi followed Mikado's gaze down to the ground at his feet.

"Mewww."

An adorable little kitten had sidled up to his legs at some point and was frolicking around his shoes, begging to be played with.

How long did Masaomi stand there, frozen in place?

It was until the moment that Mikado's car pulled away, so objectively, it probably

wasn't even a minute long. But to Masaomi it felt as though several hours had passed, or perhaps that he'd been unconscious for several days, such was the sudden sense of loss that plagued him.

Mikado's car vanished at just about the same moment that Anri came stumbling in from the shadows.

"…Anri," he mumbled. Her eyes got huge when she saw him, and she started trotting toward him on unsteady legs.

"Kida…?! Why… why are you here?!" she shouted, unable to hide her surprise. It'd been half a year since their last encounter.

With dazed wits, Masaomi realized this might be the first time he'd ever heard her raise her voice. He stammered, "Uh… err… Actually, I was just passing through here."

It was a completely unbelievable excuse, but Anri didn't seem to give it a second thought. She smiled as she asked, "Kida… where have you been all this…?"

But before she could finish her question, Dokusonmaru cried, *"Meow."*

"Dokusonmaru! Kida… did you save this cat…?"

That was when she noticed that he was injured in several places. She was still suffering the aftereffects of the attack herself, but the sight of shoe prints on Masaomi's shirt told her he didn't *only* find the cat.

Before she asked about what happened to him, she decided that she should express her gratitude.

"Thank—"

"Sorry, Anri!"

"Huh?" she mumbled, taken aback.

"I swear, I'll explain later! Just, please… please hang on for a bit!" he said, triumphing over his sense of grief with determination.

Upon seeing the bafflement on her face, Masaomi thought to himself, *I suppose I must*

have looked like Anri does now a few minutes ago. Sorry, Anri. I'm so sorry. But… I don't have the right to talk to you yet.

He knew that you didn't need the "right" to talk to a friend, but it was that personal moral compass interfering again. He had to assume that his instinct was correct.

Masaomi stared right at the girl and stated, "I… I will return to you guys. And when I do, I will absolutely give you a proper explanation… Sorry!"

And then he turned his back on her and raced into the night.

"Huh…? Kida? Kid—?!"

She was about to follow him but then stopped her legs of her own accord.

Just a sliver of Saika's blade protruded from her hand.

A particularly strong rush of "voices of love" pulsed out of it.

"Let's cut him." "Let's cut him?" "Let's cut him!"

"Let's love him!" "Let's love him?" "Let's love him."

"You love him and Mikado and everyone else, don't you?"

"So let's get them both—"

"…!"

Anri shook her head vigorously and forced the extended piece of Saika back into her body.

No… that would be… wrong…

She'd used her ability to push the world around her through the picture frame as a defense mechanism around her heart. But Mikado and Masaomi were undeniably making their way from inside the frame over to her side of the scene.

Which made her very nervous.

When she was no longer able to view them objectively, when she truly wished for them to be a part of her own world—would Saika's wicked ability reach out to seize them, too?

It was precisely because Anri lived with the incessant voices—could never ever turn them off—that she was so afraid of this.

If she ever allowed herself to love someone, would she sink to being one of Saika's voices and end up hurting people she truly cared about?

For a girl who considered herself a parasite, losing a host was the most frightening concept imaginable.

As if sensing her fear, Dokusonmaru rubbed up against Anri's legs and cried, *"Mewww, mewww."*

Inside a station wagon, Ikebukuro

"I need to ask you for something, Aoba."

"What is it?" the younger boy asked, shoulders bobbing.

Mikado continued, "I'll probably be out of my home and bouncing around between manga cafés for a little while, so you won't be able to reach me the usual way. We should discuss that again later."

"You're leaving home? But why?"

"…Because Masaomi might decide to barge right into my place. And I think it's best if I don't talk to him at all until the process of 'sorting out' the Dollars is finished…"

Mikado looked out the window, a mild note of loneliness contained in that usual smile of his.

“I don’t want to get Masaomi or Sonohara involved, if I can help it… This is a problem that needs to be solved within the Dollars.

“When I invite Sonohara and Masaomi, the Dollars should be more…”

He trailed off there, looked away, and smiled.

Perhaps he was reminiscing about his past with his two friends or imagining their future together. Perhaps he was doing both.

“…”

Aoba sensed a mild kind of madness lurking in that smile of Mikado’s. He chose not to comment, and he closed his eyes.

Then he envisioned the various possible futures—and he, too, smiled.

But unlike Mikado, his smile was brimming with wickedness.

Ikebukuro

A park near Ikebukuro Station offered a distant view of the Raira Academy campus. There, Masaomi leaned against one of the trees lining the park and considered things.

The night was late now and the foot traffic much lighter. He took out his cell phone and decided to call Saki first. After he told her that he’d be home late, he placed another call.

“…Yo. Is that you, Yatabe?”

“?! Shogun?!” exclaimed the man named Yatabe with a voice full of surprise and delight.

“None of that shogun stuff,” Masaomi said, annoyed. “Listen… I’m here in Ikebukuro now. Think you can meet up for a bit? With all the other guys, if possible…”

“The other guys? Meaning the OG Yellow Scarves?”

“Yeah. I’m sure you’ve got a lot of stuff to get off your chests… I want to talk to you guys about something, and I’m willing to suffer a beating if that’s what it takes. Or maybe I should be honest and say that I want to use you.”

“C’mon, don’t be a stranger. We’re used to our shogun following his whims! Plus, we know the story! I heard that you whooped Horada’s ass before he finally got arrested!”

Masaomi couldn’t prevent the smile from spreading across his face, talking to his old friend like this. Half a year ago, he was certain that he’d never team up with this color gang again.

This was a guy he’d actively avoided talking to, and yet he felt more natural talking to him now than he ever did before.

Hey, Mikado.

If you’ve fallen down into this side… then I’ll make sure to pull you back up.

Until just minutes ago, he’d been prepared to punch him, if that was what it took. But after seeing Mikado in person, Masaomi realized just how naive he’d been.

Mikado wasn’t ordering the Dollars around like it was some meaningless video game, and he wasn’t being manipulated by his junior from school, Aoba. He was in too deep for a good pop to the cheek to wake him up.

Masaomi had been trying to save someone who didn’t ask for help. Even he could tell that he was just as guilty as Mikado for trying to foist off his own obsessive good deeds on someone who didn’t need them.

But even with that in mind, Masaomi did not reverse his intentions.

That’s right, I’m gonna save you all on my own. No matter how much you cry about it.

You’ve known for years just how selfish I am, haven’t you?

♂♀

Masaomi and Mikado, Anri and Masaomi. Though they shared brief reunions, there was no sign that the three would come together soon. The hopes and fears of each created a rift among all of them.

And with that little budding root of discord sprouting in Ikebukuro, the boys and girls had yet to find their place.

~~EPILOGUE~~ & NEXT PROLOGUE
Heads = Tails = Edge; Izaya's Return @ Möbiusloop

EPILOGUE & NEXT PROLOGUE
HEADS = TAILS = EDGE; IZAYA'S RETURN @ MÖBIUSLOOP

Chat room

<Private Mode> Saika: thank you so much

<Private Mode> Kid: It's fine, I mean it.

<Private Mode> Kid: I didn't think that I'd figure out how to use private mode before you did, though.

<Private Mode> Saika: i'm sorry

<Private Mode> Kid: Why are you apologizing? lol

<Private Mode> Kid: By the way, I was curious.

<Private Mode> Saika: what is it

<Private Mode> Kid: What does your username mean, Anri?

<Private Mode> Saika: saika? song of sin

<Private Mode> Kid: Yes, but is it from something?

<Private Mode> Saika: umm it's a name from a fairy tale my mother told me

<Private Mode> Kid: Oh, I see… I hope that didn't bring up any bad memories.

<Private Mode> Saika: no don't let it bother you

<Private Mode> Kid: Whoops, sorry, I've got to go. One of my associates is calling for me.

<Private Mode> Saika: good night then

Kid: I was having a secret chat with Saika.

Kid: Doesn't seem like anyone else is showing up, so I'll leave now.

Kid has left the chat.

Awakusu-kai Head Office, Tokyo

"Are you all right, Akabayashi?" Shiki asked.

"Yes, yes, I'm just finishing up… now," he replied, shutting his phone.

"Making some kind of deal?"

"You could say that. So what is it that you wanted, Mr. Shiki?" he asked breezily, addressing his fellow Awakusu-kai lieutenant.

Akabayashi rapped on the floor of the meeting room with his cane as he sat in his chair, a characteristically lazy leer on his face. On the other hand, Shiki was wearing *his* characteristic glare as he stood.

"Did you learn anything about the Dollars?"

"As much as anyone else might."

Just a few days ago, the topic of the Dollars had arisen in an officers' meeting.

The gang took form over the Internet, they said, but there were times that other groups copying their methods took to selling drugs and making a mess of the Awakusu-kai turf—thus raising the suspicion that the Dollars themselves might be the foundation with these others as offshoots.

“Do you mind if I handle this matter of the Dollars, then?” Akabayashi had offered, thereby assuming control of the situation.

“Have they taken any noteworthy, concrete actions?” Shiki asked.

“It seems to be a bit of a purge, actually,” Akabayashi explained. “From what the kids in Jan-Jaka-Jan were able to tell me, some folks within the group who were engaged in muggings and phone scams are getting driven out of the Dollars. The big story right now seems to concern a stalker of Ruri Hijiribe, though.”

“Ah yes… Kazamoto was furious about that. Something about his own subordinate being front and center in the rumors, treated like a stalker with his pictures floating around…”

“As a matter of fact, I saw that picture myself in a chat room unrelated to the Dollars. Had a good laugh.”

“It’s not funny.” Shiki snorted, exhaling cigarette smoke.

Akabayashi shrugged. “Oops, you’re right. Very sorry… At any rate, I don’t think we need to worry about the Dollars for now,” he claimed, but then he added, “Let’s just hope they don’t take their purge overboard and turn into some kinda hard-line cult.”

“I don’t care what they turn into,” Shiki snapped. “But if there’s a problem… I expect you to solve it, Akabayashi.”

“Shouldn’t you be the one on the lookout, Mr. Shiki?”

“?” Shiki narrowed his eyes.

“That *info broker kid* is under your jurisdiction, isn’t he?”

“…”

Shiki did not comment.

Several hours earlier, a liaison from Jan-Jaka-Jan, rubbing a wristband fashioned like a snake, delivered a personal report to Akabayashi.

“We’ve been keeping an eye on Mikado Ryuugamine, and it sure seems like he’s taking the lead in purging the ranks. I’m also concerned that he’s carrying it out with what looks like the old Blue Squares.”

Akabayashi got information on the Dollars’ leader by having one of his men in prison threaten it out of a man named Horada. After hearing that the boss was only a teenager in school, he assumed it really was just an Internet club, but learning that the guy was teaming up with the former Blue Squares to hunt down members of his own gang made Akabayashi curious.

“Also, while I don’t think it’s directly related… we spotted some Dragon Zombie guys for the first time in a while when we were staking out the Dollars’ boss. They could have been observing the Dollars, too. Plus—although I’m not sure this means anything—someone saw Izaya in Ikebukuro the other day. He’s been up to some fishy stuff. People have talked about him being Dollars for ages, so I wondered if he had something to do with this.”

So the Dollars themselves seemed all right for now—it was the periphery that was looking suspicious. Out of a sense of caution, Akabayashi decided to treat both Mikado Ryuugamine and the Dollars as a whole with careful scrutiny.

Then he got another report, one that was the most concerning of all, though it had nothing to do with business.

“I’m pretty sure that girl with the glasses that you helped out years ago was there, too… It seems like she’s… if not *lovers* with Ryuugamine, at least pretty close. We’ve spotted her leaving school with him, in fact.”

Anri Sonohara was the daughter of his first love, and Akabayashi cared for her like a much younger sister.

The fact that she had a relationship with the leader of the Dollars was troubling, though not directly related to his job. If Akabayashi weren’t the type of person he was, he might be worried sick about it.

“…Seems like things are getting fishy enough in public, too,” he muttered mostly to himself, but Shiki noticed.

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, just a personal matter. Anyway, are things all clear with the info dealer? He was out of commission for a while, and I hear he’s come back out of nowhere.”

“Yes… As I’m sure you know, I do have him… chained, in a way. Aozaki was not happy about it, though,” Shiki said, his eyes sharp as spears.

Akabayashi chuckled, his own eyes hidden behind tinted sunglasses. “Of course he was against it. He’s consistently said that we shouldn’t let that ‘chain’ go free.”

“I was against offing the guy, of course… but I was against letting him loose, too.”

Nebula Medical Research Facility, Nerima Ward

Shinra Kishitani came to on a bed in a research lab where his father, Shingen, and stepmother, Emilia, worked. It was twelve hours after he’d been brought in, and he had been in critical condition at several points.

His initial state of consciousness was heavily dazed, his wits so faint that no one else realized he was awake at first.

What is this?

Despite his steadily clearing mind, he couldn’t move a finger. The only physical sensation he felt was a blanket on top of him. As wakefulness steadily arrived, he recalled the reason he couldn’t move.

Oh, right. That weirdo got me. No wonder, after I got the crap kicked out of me like that.

Hmm? What? Is there something soft resting on my stomach? Heavy, soft… double mounded…

C-could this be… Celty?!

Then his mind snapped to absolute attention, and he forced his eyes to open.

Pain beat in his entire body to the rhythm of his pulse, but he ignored that to look

down toward his navel—where he saw a pure-white gas mask.

“I should have known! This is what I get for getting my hopes up!” he bellowed, the air ripping from his lungs.

The exertion rattled his airway, his chest began to hurt, and he started coughing. The racking of his body caused the gas mask to wriggle a bit.

Huh? The location of the mask seems weird… Is that not Dad after all?

His vision was clearing to the point that he could see that it was not his father wearing the mask—but his father’s second wife, Emilia Kishitani.

The mask had slid off her face and happened to be pointing at Shinra, while Emilia slept soundly atop his chest. She must have dozed off while watching over him and used his torso as a pillow.

Oh, it’s just Emilia. You know, the breasts did seem a bit too ample to be Celty’s. On the other hand… my ribs are broken… and this is kind of heavy…

A normal man might be aroused by the close contact with Emilia’s bountiful bosom, but given that she was his stepmother and *not* Celty, Shinra was merely disappointed. He didn’t even blush.

Instead, he began to nudge her body, hoping to slip her off him.

“Mother, wake up please! Where is Celty?”

“Hee-hee-hee… Shingen, I won with your mah-jongg discard. It is a royal straight flush. Now I am requesting that you remove clothing.”

“Is she… sleep-talking?! *Ah!* Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow…”

His painkillers had worn off. Bones and muscles all over his body were screaming for help.

Just when he had largely given up on waking Emilia, the door flung open, and Celty charged into the room.

“Aaaah! Celty?! It’s not what you think! I woke up, and Emilia was already sleeping

here…"

If it were a rom-com manga, Celty would have flown into a jealous rage and stabbed him. And in fact, Shinra was putting up a desperate defense in that fashion, convinced that she would stab him anyway.

Instead, Celty rushed up and reached over Emilia to fling her arms around his neck.

"Mgwuh?!"

His body screeched in protest at the awkward angle of pressure, but he merely smiled and blushed, his weakened blood pressure suddenly rising.

"I heard your voice coming from in here… I'm glad… I'm so glad!" she typed into her PDA and rubbed his cheek. She was too busy genuinely celebrating Shinra's recovery to care about Emilia.

"I was so, so worried! Oh, if you had died, I… I might have taken your head back home with me instead of mine…"

"…I can't tell if that's supposed to be serious or a joke, Celty. You're scaring me," Shinra snarked, but in truth, he was jubilant. He lifted his arms to hug her close, ignoring the protests of his muscles—and paid the price of five extra days in the hospital for that.

Once they had fully celebrated their respective good health, Shinra brought up a question that had been weighing on his mind.

"So whatever happened with that stalker scare?"

"…*I'm not sure, but I heard that one person turned himself in, Shizuo beat several more to a pulp before they were arrested, and then they ratted out more and more of their group."*

There were a number of startling facts about the case, including the revelation of multiple stalkers—but most concerning to Celty was that Adabashi, the ringleader, had not been found yet.

"It seems like he was the one who did this to you," she typed briefly, but Shinra had the ability to sense her subtle emotional cues.

“Celty,” he said softly.

“What?”

“Don’t ever become a murderer over something trivial.”

You very nearly could have died! That is not trivial! she wanted to protest, but she took Shinra’s request as it was intended.

“Don’t worry. I’m going to search him out and find him, but I won’t kill him.”

She got to her feet and, with some small measure of guilt, typed, *“I just… can’t promise he’ll be unharmed by the time I hand him over to the police.”*

It should have been a frivolous incident.

But the events exposed an unexpected weakness within Celty’s heart.

Celty almost never got truly rattled by anything, even when shot with an anti-matériel rifle or attacked by countless cursed blades—and chased by motorcycle cops? Well, that last one was a different story.

But when she learned that Shinra had been attacked, the news rocked her harder than anyone else could imagine. In fact, from the moment that Shinra had been brought here until he had woken up, Celty had been so distraught that she had barely been able to even produce her shadow scythe.

“Your love for Shinra might, in fact, be slightly different from the love that human beings normally feel for one another,” Shingen had told her. “In a sense, it might be even purer than human love.” Once he had learned that Shinra was all right, he left the lab.

Along with this sudden revelation of weakness, Celty detected another change in her heart.

It’s the first time… I’ve ever wanted… to actually murder a human being. But the part that I truly cannot forgive is my own weakness.

The regret, guilt, and frustration that she hadn’t been able to protect Shinra acted like

a stake in her heart, pinning her negative emotions down. The stake was still there when she left Nebula Medical Research Facility.

I reassured Shinra… but if I come face-to-face with that Adabashi character… will I really be able to cling to my sense of reason? What if I can't bring myself to stop the blade in time and sever his body in half? This is bad. I'm losing confidence in myself…

Doubt and worry plagued her mind as she raced through the night.

She did not realize that for the past several days, someone had been observing her riding around on her motorcycle.

⚥

Backseat, luxury vehicle, Ikebukuro

"What do you think, Mr. Yagiri?" asked a good-natured man entering his silver years, a spry smile on his lips.

Sitting next to him in the back of the fine car was Seitarou Yagiri. "I see. It's better than I imagined. From what they show on TV, I had just taken it for some wrathful monster that acted on impulse alone…"

"Personally, I would have preferred Ruri Hijiribe, but the stalkers were quite a disappointment, and I'm not sure what to do now," the other man said, making a show of sadness, though the true depth of it was hard to ascertain.

Seitarou considered the Celty who passed the car window outside a moment ago and the Celty he'd just watched in the footage on the in-car monitor, and he exhaled a long breath.

"I'll admit I was expecting to get a glimpse of Ruri Hijiribe's extraordinary nature… but I have to say that the state of that Headless Rider has piqued my curiosity more than I figured it would."

"Is that so?"

"I am filled with desire."

“First you possessed her head, and now you want her body? Only a fairy can get away with such adulterous bewitching.” Yodogiri smirked.

“*All* of them,” Seitarou muttered.

“Pardon?”

“The body of the dullahan that fell into the trap of your latest promotion and the girl possessed by the cursed blade. And Ruri Hijiribe. And beyond that, the dullahan’s head that my niece made off with… *I want them all.* That is what I am saying to you.”

Seitarou cracked his neck and looked at the footage of Celty’s body on the monitor, his eyes gleaming like a boy pulling the wings off a dragonfly. “It seems that the body has given up on finding the head… but now I feel like experimenting with sticking them back together again. With them both fully under my command, of course.”

“…So you’re not just after an affair—you want an entire harem.” Yodogiri chuckled.

Seitarou snorted and snapped, “Enough crude jokes. Just tell me if you can assist me or not.”

“I can make the effort. If the dullahan and the blade wielder learn that I was orchestrating the stalking incident, I’m certain they will come looking for me.”

“Using yourself as bait? You are a strange man.” Seitarou sighed, but Yodogiri never lost his thin smile.

“Using yourself as bait is the best way to handle, kill, and sell off the supernatural. If Adabashi gives up my name, she’ll go to the ends of the earth to come after me. She’ll chase me and corner me. That is when you’ll see me at my best,” he proclaimed, then scratched his head in embarrassment. “But I suppose I miscalculated a bit. I haven’t had tabs on Adabashi’s whereabouts since last night.”

“…”

“I’m fairly certain I know who’s responsible… After all, he’s got a grudge against me for stabbing him. It’s not good for young people to be tied down to their past, don’t you think? Ha-ha-ha.”

Seitarou merely stared at his conversation partner, unable to determine where the

boundary was between joke and truth. Then a thought occurred to him, and he asked, "I noticed that you look different from the way you were in the paper. Did you get surgery?"

"Yes. Well… the Awakusu-kai and the police are both after me. Wearing a recognizable face is no recipe for survival, after all. Ha-ha-ha."

Seitarou looked at him with pity, but he wasn't concerned enough to press further. However, unbeknownst to him, the man who once hired Vorona to kidnap Akane Awakusu and the man talking to Seitarou now were, in fact, *completely different in both looks and voice*.

What was more, if Seitarou had happened to be listening to the phone conversation between Yodogiri and Adabashi several days ago, he would have noticed that the voice of the man sitting next to him now was also completely different.

But as he was not aware of these things, Seitarou Yagiri felt little caution toward his riding companion. Instead, he reflected upon a conversation with a friend wearing a gas mask.

It was just a day ago that the friend had called him, right when the man's son had been grievously wounded.

"You've really done it now."

"Why, what a perceptive fellow you must be. Except that I haven't done anything at all."

"If you knew what was going to happen and did nothing about it, you are in essence an accomplice. With what has happened to my son, there's one thing I can do for you as a friend… and that is to punch you as hard as I can."

"Well, what are friends for? Then, the next time we meet, you'll get your punch in. But I have no intention of allowing anything more than that, even to you."

That was the end of the phone call, and the man hadn't contacted him since then.

But Seitarou knew Shingen well and understood that he was not the type of man to

back down and leave things at that. With that in mind, Seitarou chose to prioritize his own greed and made his twisted deal with Yodogiri.

He was more concerned about interference from Shingen than the man sitting next to him. He sat back, wearing a confident smile, and predicted his friend's next move.

"He is a man who will use any means necessary. I wonder what he's got planned…"

⚥

One day earlier, Rakuei Gym

In fact, Shingen moved quickly after calling his friend.

He chose his destination immediately after the call and headed there by foot. When he arrived, gas mask still attached, he proudly and confidently announced his entrance:

"For reasons that are private, I owe my longtime friend one good punch. However, you may be surprised to learn that I've never thrown a punch in my life! I want you to teach me a very good killer knockout punch—preferably one that is easy to learn!"

"Piss off," grunted Eijirou Sharaku, cheek twitching.

But the man in the white gas mask who barged into the gym did not back down. He pulled out his wallet to continue the negotiation.

"I have money! Plenty of money! If you doubt me, it would please me to slap your cheek with a wad of bills!"

"It wouldn't please *me*! And if you need a killer punch, why don't you just use that? See? Problem solved. Piss off."

"Damn… Well, I've been called a man who will use any means necessary…"

"…Whatcha gonna do?" the instructor asked warily.

Shingen leaned in and whispered, "You can wear my mask and turn into me, then wallop Seitarou with a Russian hook! How about that? Perfect, isn't it?! And I'll pay

you to do it, too! One hundred thousand yen in cash!"

"…Actually, that *is* kinda tempting… *gwuah!*"

A fierce chop swung in and caught Eijirou on the side of the head.

"Stop this nonsense conversation and take over. I'm done already, so you're in charge now, Brother."

The attack came from a young tomboyish woman. She sneered at Eijirou and turned to leave the gym.

"Hey, Mikage! You better watch out, because I'm detecting a serious lack of respect for your old broth… Hey, what about dinner?"

"I'll eat out."

The woman's appearance stood out thanks to her short-cropped hair and rippling abs showing through the part in her shirt, and if not for her face and the unmistakable swell of her chest, she could easily be taken for male. One might describe her as "active" or "sporty," but "tomboy" really said it best.

After she left the building, Eijirou lamented, "I dunno what it is with her, but she always packs up early these days. I swear she found a man. Anyway, why am I telling you this?"

"Well… the finer points of your situation aren't my business, but might I say one thing?"

"What?"

Eijirou waited with bated breath for the man in the gas mask to dispense his wisdom.

"I wouldn't mind if that boyish girl there were the one to pass off as me. In fact, the idea of a woman dressed as me punching someone else is actually a turn-on, in a somewhat perverse way… What do you think?"

"Piss off!"

"Now, just a moment. As a matter of fact, my son is currently in the hospital. It occurs to me that if his father comes to visit having turned into a young woman, the sheer

surprise of it might actually speed his recovery. Could you see your way to helping out a concerned citizen and—"

"Piss! Off!"

A short while after that odd-couple comedy routine played out at the fighting gym in Ikebukuro, Adabashi returned in a daze to his home, burns running from his back to his ears.

He parked his car in the lot and headed to the door, wincing in irritation at the pain in his back—but the injury wasn't the only thing annoying him.

It was that his sacred love for Ruri Hijiribe had been interrupted by another. And on top of that, on his car TV, he'd just caught the press conference put on by her agency.

That picture of Ruri, the one he'd been preparing to send to all the media outlets, was already there on the screen before he was able to send it.

"Photos of Ruri Hijiribe's latest movie leak online!" the segment raved. "Leak suspected to have occurred due to a virus on Max Sandshelt's computer after he was browsing pornographic movies on the Internet!"

The shocking photograph was being passed off as a still from the filming of some top-secret horror suspense movie.

What? What the hell is that? How dare they… How dare they all try to block our love…

The combination of irritation and frustration filled him with a sudden impulse to destroy *someone*—anyone would do.

He clenched his teeth audibly and then saw a man waiting, standing before the building staircase. He was young, but he stood with his back to the light so that his face was mostly obscured.

"…"

Adabashi had enough sense to realize that causing an incident in front of his own place of residence was not smart, so he reeled in his raging desire and prepared to pass by

the man.

But then the man addressed him first.

“Yo. Are you burned or something? Because you reek like charred hair.”

“…?”

“What was that from? Lighter oil or a Molotov? It doesn’t feel hot at first, but once your clothes are ablaze, that’s when it gets bad. By the way… who did it to you? It wasn’t that squinty-eyed otaku, was it? Hya… hya-hya-hee-ha-ha-ha-ha!” the man said, clapping his hands in delight.

Adabashi raised an eyebrow, not understanding what he meant, and made a simple decision.

I will destroy him with a kick.

He launched a full-frontal kick, ignoring the pain in his back—and in the next instant, Adabashi’s foot bent at a horrible angle with a tremendous sound.

“?!?!?! *G-g-gaaah?!*”

There was a thick rubber mallet in the man’s left hand, which he had swung right at Adabashi’s foot, timed to the rhythm of the kick.

Adabashi rolled and writhed on the ground, screaming in agony, while the man beamed down at him. It was the same kind of smile Adabashi wore when he smashed photos of Ruri Hijiribe to dust.

Through his seething moans, Adabashi focused enough to look up at the man’s face, dimly lit by the streetlight.

He was maybe twenty years old at most—and covered in deep, dark burn scars that ran from the right half of his face down to the end of his arm.

“I’ll… kill… you…” Adabashi grunted, reaching and straining for the man.

Then something slammed into the back of his head, instantly knocking him into deep darkness.

In the post-screaming silence, a woman's voice said, "What kind of game are you playing? Do you really want to go back to juvie?"

It was a woman with close-cropped hair and boyish features: Mikage Sharaku. She was the one who had kicked Adabashi in the back of the head to knock him out as he was rolling on the ground.

The man with the hammer said, "Shut the hell up… You don't tell me what to do! Ha-ha… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Heee-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The burned man laughed and laughed, though it wasn't at all clear what was funny.

Behind him, a number of men appeared, wearing bone-motif riding jackets. They lifted Adabashi's unconscious body and hauled him into a van parked in a corner of the lot, then drove it away just as quickly.

"Well, whatever. C'mon, let's go," she said to the laughing man, and they left as well.

The only evidence of the scene was a few bloodstains from Adabashi at the entrance of the building.

Chat room

Sharo: And it took thirty minutes to get the guy in the gas mask out of there.

Chrome: What a disaster.

Saki: A white gas mask? That's really something.

Kanra: Was this guy actually real? You aren't pulling our leg, Sharo? lol

Sharo: Absolutely serious.

Mai: I wanted to see it.

Mai: I should have practiced late.

Kuru: It is a true modern urban legend. We should create a rival legend to match the Black Headless Rider. Call him, say, the Gas Mask Freak. I daresay his true identity is made of gas. If he removes the mask, his body dissipates into a gas and vanishes into thin air!

Kanra: Scary!

Chrome: You know, there was that old movie called *The Human Vapor*.

Kanra: Oooh, are you a movie buff, Chrome?!

Chrome: I like movies as much as anyone else does.

Sharo: *The Human Vapor* is a pretty old one…

Kanra: You'll have to give me some suggestions, then!

Chrome: That's a good idea…

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⚥

Luxury apartment building, top floor, Ikebukuro

Namie Yagiri was stunned.

She tensed up and nearly dropped the documents she was carrying.

At her old company job, she was famous for having ice in her veins, but now she was nearly on the verge of tears.

She was facing a laptop computer and a small netbook set up on the desk—and seated

between them, taking turns typing at each one, was a man.

The same chat room was displayed on both computers. He was logged in as Chrome on one computer and Kanra on the other, holding a conversation with himself and even humming. For the very first time, Namie found herself feeling sympathy for the man.

I could always tell he didn't have any friends… but I didn't think he'd turn to chatting with himself online…

She shook her head, pretending she hadn't seen this, and turned away. Then Izaya Orihara leaned back toward her and cackled, "Ah-ha-ha. You're probably thinking that the guy with no friends is up to something weird, huh?"

"It's not weird. It's pathetic."

"Call it whatever you like. Having multiple personas out there on the web just makes it easier to manipulate the collective opinion, see…"

He had each account announce that they were logging off, then shut the computers and stood up. "Plus, it's very rude of you to say I have no friends. I love all the people of the world, and everyone is my friend and lover, okay?"

"Forcing your love on people is just how a stalker thinks."

"Really, now? Coming from you?" he shot back.

She glared at him. "And why did you rent this huge place in Ikebukuro, anyway? You're actually going to get yourself killed by that bartender this time."

The mention of the word *bartender* brought a brief scowl to Izaya's face, but it soon vanished as he explained, "Well… the reason I came back to this neighborhood was to provide some troubled youths a life without relief or solace, I suppose."

"Huh?"

"You see, relief is what stalls development. Take Shinra, for example. No matter what he gets involved in, he has the relief of knowing that Celty and Shizu are out there to help him out of it. And that attitude ended up getting him into the hospital this time. So I intend to be very harsh to my friends now. Out of friendship. If Shinra calls me up

to tell me he's been hospitalized, I'll say, 'Oh,' and hang up on him."

"That's not harsh. That's just being an asshole. And would he ever call you on the phone, anyway?"

Izaya ignored Namie's comment and leaned back on the desk to take in the room around him.

"Of course, I consider *everyone in this room* to be a friend, too."

In fact, there was quite a variety of humanity there with them:

A girl loitering next to a bookshelf and staring daggers at him.

A number of men and women in leather jackets with the backbone pattern of Dragon Zombie on them.

A smiling woman with red eyes and thin black hair down to her waist.

A large man dressed in bandages, who was at least six feet tall.

A thin man passed out on the ground, his leg broken.

A number of men with shaved heads near the entrance of the room, their demeanor marking them as mobsters.

There were other men and women of varying degrees of eccentricity elsewhere in the room, all of them listening to Izaya with different facial expressions.

One man who bore ugly burn scars on his face leered viciously. "Well, I never considered myself a friend of yours… All I can say is that I wanna kill Yumasaki and Kadota, I wanna kill Aoba, I wanna kill Masaomi Kida, and *then* I wanna kill you at the end before I can really be happy."

"Knock it off, Izumii," said Mikage Sharaku, who was next to him.

But Ran Izumii continued, "That's right, Yumasaki… Yumasaki… Ooh, that otaku fuck… I'll kill him so bad… Roast that smirking face of his until he looks just like me… Ha-ha… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The others around Izumii watched him as he went from muttering to full-blown laughter. Izaya stared right at him, still smiling, and said, “For having such a cute name, you approach things in the most extreme manner, Ran. But that just makes you more human to me.”

Then he paused, spread his hands, and addressed the entire room.

“*Welcome to the Dollars.* The Dollars will welcome you all equally.”

Then he turned to the wall-spanning window and gazed down at Ikebukuro, full of wonder.

The girl in the shadow of the bookshelf spat, “Get sniped,” but he ignored that curse and lifted something from the table.

He tossed it up into the air like a basketball, then caught it before pointing it toward the view of the city.

“It’s a familiar sight to you, too, isn’t it?”

And so the man who waltzed back into Ikebukuro held Celty’s head up in the palm of his hand with great delight—and showered the beloved people in the room with one of his most beatific smiles.

“So, as a sign of our close friendship… why don’t we have a little hot-pot party, everyone?”

AFTERWORD

Hello, it's nice to see you folks again for the first time in a while. I'm Ryohgo Narita.

So, that was Volume 8 of *Durarara!!* for you… I technically did wrap up the case here, but it was really more like a long prologue for the story of Mikado, Anri, and Masaomi.

At the end, I felt like I was setting myself up for angry comments like, "You just ballooned the cast and made things all crazy and out of control!" But have no fear, I intend to keep the books ahead focused on just a few characters each. Instead, there won't be any scenes for anyone outside of each book's main cast of five to ten characters (think Mika/Seiji from Volumes 2–6), but you never know—your favorite might end up getting the focus in the next book! Although… I don't think I'll ever say the words "The next *Durarara!!* will feature Horada as the protagonist!" But then again, Horada was used to great effect in the anime, so I have to admit I might be reluctant to leave him out.

…Yes, the anime!

We've received rave reviews from all around, and I am beside myself at the wonderful anime it turned out to be… The TV airing just ended this month, but there are plenty of ways to enjoy it still, including the Bandai Channel, MovieGate, downloads on PS3 and PSP, on demand from Animax, and the usual DVD method, of course. Please check it out!

I cannot overstate my gratitude to Director Omori, the voice actors, and everyone else on the anime staff. Just as I felt with *Baccano!*, the anime has gained so much from those who came to the table.

One of the benefits is reverse importation of character designs. Togusa is an example: He's become much more versatile for me after the anime. At the start of this book, I was planning to have an epic stalker versus Togusa scene, but I didn't feel right about taking a design that was inspired by the anime and making it the centerpiece, so I tucked him away in his usual spot.

At any rate, having a multimedia franchise means coming into contact with so many other creative people who bring new ways of looking at *Durarara!!*, so I feel like the

time has been very valuable to me. Thank you all!

And speaking of other media forms: Some of you might already be aware that a PSP game called *Durarara!! 3-Way Standoff* is coming out! As with the *Baccano!* game on DS, it's being developed by Netchubiyori, and I'm really excited to find out what kind of game it'll be!

On top of that, Square Enix will be putting out a *Durarara!!* comic anthology!

A number of different artists involved with the *G Fantasy* magazine will be drawing their own version of *Durarara!!*, and it should be a really vibrant and varied collection of work!

On top of *that*, there's also *Everything Durarara!!*, a guidebook of sorts that covers all the characters and glossaries of both the anime and novel versions of the series, so check it out!

There are other things as well, but I'm running out of room for ads, so you'll have to keep an eye on the official *Durarara!!* website, the Dengeki website, and *Dengeki Bunko Magazine* for the latest updates!

As for my future plans, I've written about a thousand pages on various projects in the last several months, so my mind and body are starting to lose it a bit. I think I might take a bit of a break before my next book (although there are always smaller things like DVD extras and bonuses that can't be ignored).

Damn… this means my total page count is accelerating, and yet my volume counts are slowing down. People will be saying, "Narita's writing speed has really hit the skids these days!" Even though I'm writing twice as much content as when I started!!

But enough about that trivial nonsense. My plans are for *Vamp! V* in the fall, followed by *Durarara!!*, Volume 9 and *Baccano! 1711*, then *5656 II.* I've been writing here and there for my MW Bunko project, but the pace is slow and there's no planned publication date yet.

If you've gotten here from the *Durarara!!* anime and read all the way up to this latest volume, please, please do check out some of my other series…

By the way, I also wrote a tribute story for the special edition of *A Certain Scientific Railgun 5*, out this month! I felt nervous about depicting someone else's characters,

but if anyone reading this afterword is a fan of the *Railgun* novels and anime and has already finished *A Certain Magical Index*, you should definitely pick that up!

*The following is the usual list of acknowledgments.

To my editor, who has to put up with my constant nonsense at all times, Mr. Papio. To managing editor Suzuki and the rest of the editorial office. To the proofreaders, whom I give a hard time by being so late with submissions. To all the designers involved with the production of the book. To all the people at Media Works involved in marketing, publishing, and sales. I'm so sorry for pushing the schedule especially late this time!

To my family who do so much for me in so many ways, my friends, fellow authors, and illustrators.

To Director Omori and the rest of the anime staff, and Akiyo Satorigi and Editor Kuma for the tremendous manga adaptation.

To Suzuhito Yasuda, who took time out of his busy schedule with the *Yozakura* OVA to provide his wonderful interior illustrations. The cover nearly took my breath away this time!

And to all the readers who checked out this book.

To all the above, the greatest of appreciation!

"Trying to synthesize a dullahan in Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker 2"

Ryohgo Narita

CAST

Mikado Ryuugamine
Anri Sonohara

Masaomi Kida
Saki Mikajima

Celty Sturluson
Shinra Kishitani

Shizuo Heiwajima
Tom Tanaka
Vorona

Yuuhei Hanejima
Ruri Hijiribe
Yuigadokusonmaru
Mika Harima
Seiji Yagiri

Kururi Orihara
Mairu Orihara

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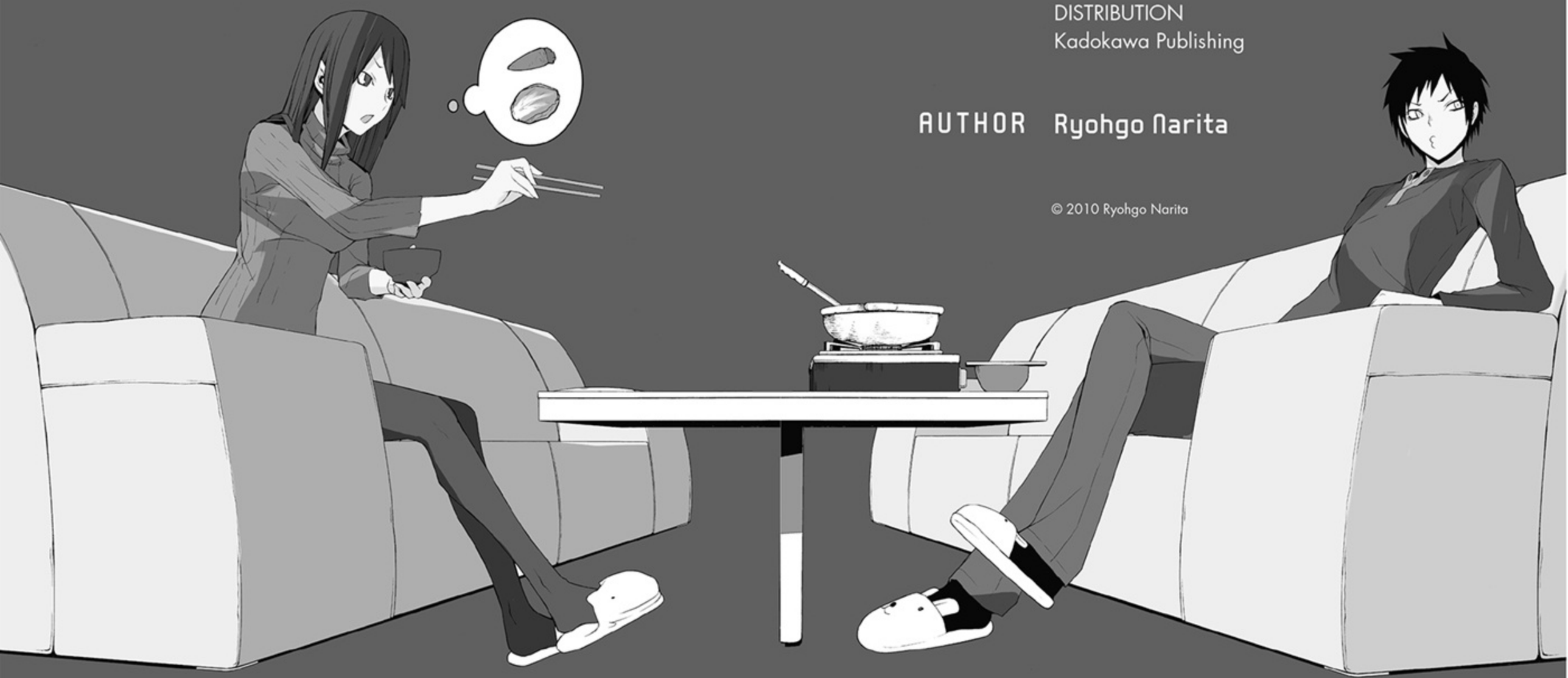

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