

DURARARA!!
DRRR!!

SH4

原 屋 堂

RYOHGO
NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA

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SH $\times 4$
DURARARA!!
DRRR!!



"You've been
making quite a
name for yourself
in just the last few
days, from what I
hear."





VOLUME 4

Ryohgo Narita
ILLUSTRATION BY **Suzuhito Yasuda**



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Durarara!! SH, Vol. 4

Ryohgo Narita

Translation by Stephen Paul Cover art by Suzuhito Yasuda

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PROLOGUE



PROLOGUE

Bargain Sale

Future site of a large shopping mall, Saitama Prefecture

Gunshots echoed back and forth.

Explosions rolled and roiled.

The sky over Saitama was rife with destruction and clamor.

A major shopping mall was nearing completion, and the empty retail spaces simply waited for their tenants to move in. There was the massively tall building open in the center from the ground to the third floor, the length of multiple baseball parks from end to end. Construction was nearly finished. Some stores were already working on their interior installations.

And at this moment, within the unfinished mall, there was a massive sale on violence and bloodlust.

Whoa, whoa, whoa!

As the gunshots clattered and boomed throughout the building, one shadow raced past without a word.

It wove through the gaps between muzzle flashes and gunpowder exhaust, a dark and striking figure within the pure white mall interior.

How did it come to this?

The pitch-black motorcycle's roar of the engine sounded more like a horse whinnying. The bizarre figure on the bike rode on the walls and even the ceiling in ways that should have been impossible, but despite the unreality of the display, it was the Headless Rider who was more confused than anyone else present.

Let's see—there was the burglar at Anri's shop...and the fact that I resumed working as a courier...

The Headless Rider caught any oncoming bullets with her shadow, which contained a mass of its own, stopping the projectiles cold and tossing the flattened metal away.

Is this situation actually connected to Anri's problem in any way? Are Yahiro and his friends wrapped up in this, too?

Her thoughts were occupied with the woman who ran the antiques shop. The young woman had been an acquaintance for the last several years, and the teenagers were even more recent acquaintances.

Nonetheless, the two sides still would not connect in her mind. They were people who had some level of contact with the darker underside of Ikebukuro, but not to the point that you would expect to see them in the middle of a hail of bullets from some action movie scene.

She was living with a black-market doctor, working as a courier for criminal organizations, and not even *human* to boot—and she had still only been in classic shoot-outs like this a handful of times in the last twenty years.

Who's involved and to what extent? Shizuo's not going to show up, is he?

Please tell me Izaya isn't pulling strings behind all of this again.

Those two were the definition of “messy.” Situations like this were common between the two of them. The Headless Rider reached out with her hand and extended a shadow to catch a grenade coming her way. She expanded the shadow briefly, and a muffled boom followed. The shards of the grenade did not escape the shadow's grasp.

Such a violent event was abnormal in peaceful Japan. The Headless Rider did her best to cool her heart to think, since she didn't have a head.

Who was the first to get ensnared?

And how in the world did my job and the burglar at Anri's place intersect?

Desperate to find the hint that would break the stalemate, the urban legend Celty Sturluson did her best to recall every event from the last few days. She realized that she was much calmer than she had imagined; she easily blocked a hail of submachine gunfire to her left side.

I guess bullets and grenades don't startle me anymore. And I know from experience that I can handle being shot from a helicopter and pounded by an anti-matériel rifle.

As the lead rounds scattered to the ground, spilling from her shadow, Celty found herself in a rather self-deprecating mood.

I guess there's no wonder that humans call me a monster.

People had pointed guns at her several times in the past, and she knew from past events that such weapons could not kill her. Of course, she still felt pain, so obviously she would use her shadow to block everything. No innocent bystanders were around to witness it, and after a particular incident a few years back, she'd lost all sense of shame about being seen by the public anyway—so if needed, she had no qualms about using her strength.

The main thing is, this isn't going to resolve on its own. Can I hold them all down with shadow?

But if someone's hiding somewhere around here, they might get away... I should probably look for a possible leader and pin them down...

Pin them... Pin... P-p-p-p-pin... Pin...?

Her mind shuddered and froze in place.

She had noticed another shadow making its way through the smoke from the entrance of the mall. Of course, if that were the only detail, she might find it odd—but not to the point of losing her train of thought entirely.

The problem for Celty was that the figure was the polar opposite of her, riding a white motorcycle instead of a black one.

Wh...wha...? Huh?

Why?!

Why are you here?! This is Saitama!!

She extended her shadow into umbrellas that caught all the bullets coming from either side, an action that was mostly unconscious at this point.

In the span of just a few seconds, Celty's mind had moved on entirely from

the gun-toting attackers all around her.

Her name was Celty Sturluson, and she was a living urban legend making her home in Ikebukuro, an immortal Headless Rider who manipulated her own shadow with mysterious power.

Now that she had conquered her fear of bullets, she had the right to earn the title of “monster.”

But even a monster has objects of fear—sources of terror that do not fade with time and experience.

Many vampires fear garlic and wooden stakes, for example. Werewolves fear silver bullets forged from the melted key of their own family home. Frankenstein’s monster fears loneliness.

And the Headless Rider’s greatest fear was right before her eyes.

“Looks like you’re really makin’ a mess of things...you *monster*.”

The motorcycle police officer, Kinnosuke Kuzuhara, surveyed the furor and billowing flames inside the mall, his eyes sharp and glinting behind his sunglasses.

“So how much of this mess is your doing?”

Facing her natural enemy, Celty Sturluson repeated her earlier question to herself.

How did it come to this?

CHAPTER 1

WELCOME



CHAPTER 1

Welcome

Several days earlier

Not too close and not too far from the center of Ikebukuro was the antiques shop Sonohara-dou.

It was located on the first floor of a home that had been renovated for business. The display window facing the street contained a number of old-fashioned items for sale. There was a well-used flower vase, a hanging art scroll from an unknown artist, a vacuum tube radio—items that bore no common era or type but which most people would recognize and identify as “antiques.”

In contrast to the dusty, ancient atmosphere of the storefront, however, the worker inside was a young woman. She was not quite like your typical modern girl; her mannerisms were more reserved and old-fashioned, which matched the various items around her. If you were in a more supernatural state of mind, you might think that she was an avatar given life by the shop itself.

While she was not even twenty years old, Anri Sonohara was indeed the owner of the antiques shop, and her odd manner made that fact feel appropriate to anyone who visited.

The young owner offered a gentle smile and an incline of the head to the boy who came into the store.

“Welcome. Er...it was Mizuchi, yes?” she asked.

Her younger visitor looked taken aback. “You remember me?”

“Yes. How is the radio working?”

“It’s good. It makes my place feel nice and chill to hang out in.”

This was Yahiro Mizuchi’s second trip to the shop. He’d been hoping to find something like a cheap TV for his apartment, so he’d visited this shop, which

was run by a graduate of Raira Academy, the same school he was attending. He'd left with a nice antique radio.

It seemed to Yahiro that this made for a strange situation: a store for old secondhand items patronized by a young high school student and run by a recent graduate, also young.

From what he'd heard, the store was originally run by Anri's parents before their deaths, and once she had become independent, she had acquired the license to reopen it.

He stared at the alumna of his school, almost reverent in his respect for her ability to run her own business so soon after leaving high school. When she saw how shocked he was that she remembered his name, she giggled and admitted the truth.

"Ryuugamine's told me about you."

"Ryuugamine... You mean the library committee chairman?"

"He was very delighted to have an extremely talented and promising underclassman on the committee."

"So you know him?" Yahiro asked.

Anri stared into empty space, reminiscing on the past. "We were classmates. He's still very important to me," she said meaningfully.

Yahiro wondered if there was something more there, but he wasn't quite sure how to follow the comment. He didn't want to be rude and ask her directly.

Instead, the boy who'd come into the shop with him spoke up. "Huh? Whoa, what's that all about? Are you goin' out with Ryuugamine or something?"

"Kuon, you can't just *ask* that sort of thing," Yahiro grumbled.

"I can't believe you of all people are telling me that..." Yahiro's classmate, Kuon Kotonami, feigned an exaggerated look of shock. His dyed green hair was especially out of place in the old-fashioned store interior.

From behind him came a harsh comment from an inexpressive third customer. "Only Yahiro *could* say something like that. I mean, I cringed at your comment, but I'm assuming that he chose to chastise you out of concern for

your future.”

“...Do you hate me or something, Himeka?”

“Not at all. I feel about the same toward you as I do toward the other random people walking around town.”

“I’ll chalk that up as ‘totally uninterested,’ then,” Kuon said glibly.

The girl clarified, “No, it’s not the same as disinterest. It’s more like a state of zero, where all the good and bad things cancel each other out.”

The frankness of Himeka Tatsugami’s stone-faced comments put a cold sweat onto Kuon’s brow.

“Uh...I’m not sure how to process that comment.”

Yahiro patted him on the shoulder and nodded earnestly. “It’s all right, Kuon. Let’s work on increasing your good points. I’ll do my best to help you.”

“What are you going to ‘do your best’ at?! How does that translate to becoming a better person?!” Kuon snapped at him.

Yahiro had no response for several stunned moments. At last, he opened his mouth to say, “By...taking a class on morals...?”

“Wow... Another normal, thoughtful response that I have no idea how to react to...”

“It’s normal? You think so? Whew, I’m glad to hear that...”

“Stop being relieved! Ugh, man, you throw me off my game so bad!” Kuon shouted, ready to cry from frustration. But when he noticed the gentle, pleased smile of the shop proprietor out of the corner of his eye, he decided to change the topic. “Anyway, enough of that! What’s the answer, ma’am? Are you going out with Ryuugamine or not?”

Anri briefly considered how to answer. “That’s...a secret.”

Afterward, the teens bought a number of items and left. Once they were gone, Anri thought back on them and smiled.

It makes me remember the old days...after I’d just met Mikado and Kida...

There were similarities between the younger kids and her own friends that

gave her a quiet and comfortable sense of normalcy. Running an antiques shop wasn't all fun and games, but she certainly did feel joy at finally having the place in the world that she'd always wanted for herself.

Her fate had charted a strange path in Ikebukuro over the last few years.

After her life's course had been diverted toward the abnormal by a series of major events, primarily around the Headless Rider, she had the sense that those kids from Raira Academy were going to experience a similar fate. All she could do was pray that their travels would be safe.

She did not pray quite as hard for her own safety down the path she took.

From the moment she chose to continue this shop, which brimmed with both good and bad personal history, she knew to expect some level of turbulence—but Anri considered turbulent history to be like arms that would keep her connected to many other people she knew.

You could say, of course, that Anri Sonohara's strange fate was still a work in progress.

As if to prove this point, the door to the shop opened at that moment, bringing a fresh wave of unrest with it.

"Welcome," she said to her new customer, bowing from her usual spot behind the counter.

But the odd visitor—a young man whose face was covered with bandages and who wore his glasses over them—did not respond to her greeting. He looked around the room to confirm there was no one else present. "Are you Anri Sonohara?"

"Yes...? That is my name...," she said, a bit confused that this unfamiliar man already knew who she was.

The man was here on business, and he briefly yet forcefully told her what product he was seeking in her shop.

"...I want you to sell me Saika."

Saika.

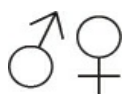
The simple sound of that name turned Anri's smile into a grimace. She was

silent, listening cautiously, as the man continued his business pitch.

“I can offer you...five million yen for the moment.”

And then, just to make clear that he knew exactly what he was asking for, the man added another option.

“Or you could just cut me and make me your child.”



That night, Shinra's apartment, along Kawagoe Highway

“I think I'll go back to work.”

Shinra Kishitani blinked in confusion at the sudden comment from his co-tenant, Celty Sturluson.

“Where is this coming from, Celty? You're already working a job. You know, helping out with that teenager's utility man service.”

At the moment, she was performing something like a part-time job for Kuon Kotonami's agency, which went by the name of Snake Hands.

The jobs weren't frequent by any means, and she had no idea how he found such high-paying requests, but Kuon's jobs were often very lucrative, which provided Celty with a rather comfortable life, especially when you considered that she didn't have to buy any food to eat.

“Not that part-time thing. I want to go back to doing serious full-time courier work.”

“No way, Celty! Working is what losers do!” Shinra wailed, reaching out to grab her. She peeled him off and calmly showed him the rebuttal on her smartphone screen.

“Who are these losers, and what are they losing to?”

These were reasonable questions to ask, and Shinra answered them with all the honesty in his heart.

“Me! Losing to reality! How am I supposed to deal with the loneliness when you're not around the apartment because you're out working?!”

"Hit the CONTINUE button and keep playing," she typed, feeling annoyed.

Shinra reached toward her and cried, "Then I'd better add some more money to my arcade card so I can put more credits in the game! Once I get one good hug from you, I'll be back to full health, full wallet, and infinite lives for—*Bfuhgh!*"

"If you're going to grab at me, at least spare me the nonsensical rambling! Anyway...there's a reason I want to resume courier work."

She sat on the sofa, and Shinra assumed a formal kneeling position on the carpet facing her.

"Very well. I'll hear what you have to say, Celty. I'll find something to complain about, no matter the reason. If it's a problem that money can solve, I'll put up the necessary funds! In a monetary economy, the power of cash to solve problems is unparalleled! Money makes the world go round!"

"I'm amazed at how you can say these things without a hint of shame..."

He leaned forward, eyes sparkling. "At this point, I would be embarrassed to assume that kind of false propriety. Oh, but I can say one thing: It's true that money is essential, but it's not the most important thing! That would be you, Celty! And the second most important is, of course, you again! Number three, number four...oh, just take them all, you thief! Even the fifth most important thing is Celty! The whole world is Celty! The resting place of your soul depends on Celty; feast and famine are Celty! It's a Celty, Celty, Celty, Celty world!"

"...Do you actually understand the sentences that come out of your mouth as you're saying them?"

"Oh, it's like a dream that the top five most important things in the world are all Celty. Being around you is basically like getting all the five major food groups at once! Tasting you is like tasting the rainbow-ow-ow-owww!"

"Sorry, it's getting creepy now." Celty had given him plenty of slack, but she could tell that they were quite off topic and gagged Shinra's mouth with shadow.

"Mrm-guh-gmm-brh?"

“Just shut up and listen.”

Shinra’s arms and legs were bound in a formal kneeling position, like a criminal being judged in some samurai play. Celty took advantage of the situation to type out the things she’d been thinking about for the last several months.

“I don’t actually care what society thinks of me. As long as it doesn’t cause trouble for you, I’m fine with whatever happens. That’s been true, and it will continue to be true.”

“Mguh...”

“But in the six months that I was away, the world changed. I’ve been living here in Ikebukuro for over twenty years, and I can tell you that the values people have and the way the town looks are changing at a whirlwind pace. For example...you remember the situation between the Dollars and Yellow Scarves? It’s only been a few years, but all those color-repping street gangs have completely vanished. It’s like they’re a relic of the past, you know?”

“Mummumah, umm-umm,” Shinra gurgled into the shadow gag blocking his mouth.

“I wouldn’t care if I wanted to live like a hermit in the mountains,” Celty continued, “but I don’t enjoy feeling like I’m coming untethered from the values of the city, losing touch with people...as if I’m not in sync with human beings anymore.”

“Muh-muh-muh.”

“You might just say that’s because I don’t have ideals of my own or I’m just being swept along by the flow. But it’s not like I don’t have any convictions at the core of my being. My hope is to have a reasonably happy life with you, Shinra.”

“Mguh-guh-guh?!” Shinra squealed, his body twitching with spontaneous delight, but because of the gag around his mouth, it made him look like he was excited in a very different way.

Celty benevolently ignored his reaction. *“I want to make you happy, and I want to be happy with you to some extent... Of course, I feel like the quickest*

way to achieving that is getting you to quit performing illegal black market medical services, but it's too late for that at this point, and I've given up on the idea that you might actually get a better job if you quit doing it. Just don't get involved in drugs, and I'll be fine with it."

"Mrrr! Mrrr!" Shinra nodded vigorously.

However, Celty was already fairly certain that wasn't going to be a problem anyway. Akabayashi from the Awakusu-kai was known for his hatred of drugs, so if Shinra did anything involving that, his happiness would be less of a concern than his life itself. He understood that, too, surely.

"And if you got arrested, I would wait until you were out of jail."

"Mrrgl...euehhugh..."

"Basically, it's like physical therapy to get back in the game. I just happened to get a text yesterday from someone I worked for a while back, saying they wanted to meet. It's a nice opportunity to get out, so I'm going to see how the city feels for myself."

When she undid his bondage after she told him everything that had been on her mind, Shinra immediately cried, "Celty!" and tried to leap on her, which she easily evaded, and she left the apartment with time to spare before her meeting.

In the basement parking lot, she sat down on Shooter and thought, *Then again, it's not like my job is exactly on the up-and-up... I'm regularly committing traffic violations, for example...*

She thought of the traffic cop—her enemy—and shivered.

...What would happen to me if I got arrested?

I'd be considered a test subject... Experimental labs... Shady deals with the U.S. government... Area 51...

Area 51...?!

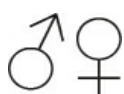
W-wait...what if I run into aliens there?!

Celty continued to shiver, imagining all the horrible kinds of aliens she might find in the secret American facility, from gray aliens to reptilians to psychics to

ethereals to silicon life-forms.

Only squeezing the handles of her black motorcycle could drive away the fear her imagination summoned, sending her out into the night on the Kawagoe Highway.

She had no idea what was awaiting her on the other end of this job.



The next morning, Yahiro's apartment

"And that's why I won't be able to do any Snake Hands work for the next few days. I've already told Kotonami about this, so I assume it's all right."

The sun was climbing high into the sky when Yahiro received that text message from Celty. He leaned his back against his apartment wall as he read it.

"She feels like she's drifting off from the city itself, huh?"

He examined the message very closely; Celty had explained in painstaking detail her reasons for the decision to resume working as a courier.

Yahiro let his thoughts travel to his own past. He couldn't help empathizing with what she was going through. A similar unease had afflicted him from a young age.

Am I different from the others?

I'm out of sync with the rest.

Am I abnormal?

I'm out of sync.

I don't want to be different.

I'm out of sync.

Should I really be with everyone else?

In fact, it was probably the only thing he thought about. Truthfully, he *was* strange compared to everyone else.

It seemed unfair at the time, but since coming to Ikebukuro and meeting all kinds of people who weren't his own family, he was starting to accept that he

was odd and different.

Even still, I think everyone else took it too far...

He'd been beaten at full force with nail-studded bats, hit by a truck from behind—things that went far beyond the realm of a children's squabble.

But with his present perspective, he also understood that his actions were what had dredged up this malice in all those people—not that understanding such a thing made it any easier to swallow emotionally.

If you told him that he could go back to the past and start his life over again, Yahiro couldn't imagine himself doing it any better the second time. What was he supposed to do, just let the very first obnoxious bully completely have his way?

When he told Kuon about this, the boy just shrugged and said, "You just gotta find the sweet spot to get along with them. Most of them are idiots, so you just play along and flatter them enough that they don't hit you, and if they do bully you anyway, just pick a fight, and if the other kid starts crying, you're good. And you're strong enough to do something like that pretty easy, right?"

Yahiro didn't think that would work. He didn't have a sense of what that "sweet spot" was.

How far was he supposed to go to protect himself? At what point did he go too far? Experience had shown that he was catastrophically bad at judging this fine line.

When he considered that this might be what made him stick out from the rest of society, then what Celty said in her text made perfect sense. He actually felt newfound respect for the Headless Rider for trying to conquer that part of herself.

I've got to do something about that... Speaking of which, I need to work hard on Snake Hands first.

Yahiro, however, did not spare a second thought for whether his involvement with Snake Hands, which was already half into the business of Ikebukuro's underworld, was going to help his estranged relationship with society or not.

I've got to pull my own weight and not make things worse for Himeka and Kuon. I need to make sure they don't think I'm super weird. That's a good initial goal to strive for.

Given how totally dense he was about his own peculiar nature, he believed those few human connections he had to people like Kuon, Himeka, and Celty were really the final hope he had to keep from drifting away from regular society.

Just then, one of those rare connections called out to him. "Hey, Yahiro. Thanks for waiting."

Saburo Togusa was the younger brother of his apartment's landlord. He owned a large van and had been nice enough to give Yahiro rides for exams and such on a few occasions.

"Thank you for helping me out early on a Sunday," he said, handing Yahiro the bucket and rag he was carrying. "I'll do all the waxing and finishing. You can just hand me tools while I'm working on the chassis, and you can spray the water for me."

This, too, was something like a simple part-time job.

After Yahiro's trip to Sonohara-dou, Saburo had asked him, "Can you help me with a little car maintenance and a wash? I can pay you enough for a meal or so."

Yahiro was just happy that someone wanted to ask him for help, and so he quickly agreed.

"It's still so weird to me that you know Celty *and* you got into a proper fight with Shizuo."

"...No, it was hardly a real fight. He totally beat me up."

"Don't lie. I saw that video. You were putting up a really good fight. There's hardly a single person in Ikebukuro who's lasted more than three seconds against Shizuo. And when you're talking about putting on a proper fight, there's only Simon...plus a guy named Izaya, but I haven't seen him around lately."

This was merely small talk while they worked, but it truly delighted Yahiro,

despite his placid expression. After Saburo learned what he was like during the serial street attacks the previous week, Yahiro was terrified that Saburo would avoid him or—even worse—kick him out of the apartment. However, Saburo had kept Yahiro’s secret and hadn’t changed how he acted toward him.

After a lifetime of being treated like a monster by everyone around him, Yahiro didn’t have the words to describe the joy he felt.

“Saburo...don’t you think I’m dangerous?”

“Why would I? You’re a good kid, real courteous. Oh...well, yeah—I guess it’s a bit dangerous if you go after those street attacker guys, but I don’t have room to talk about being reckless during my school years. It’s not like I learned from my mistakes, so I don’t have the right to preach.”

“Well...what I mean is, aren’t you scared of me?”

“Huh...? Oh...that’s what you mean?” Saburo asked, suddenly understanding. His answer was on the exasperated side, though. “Listen, you know how many years I’ve lived here? A place with Shizuo and Celty as people I see on the regular?”

“...Good point.”

That was the single most convincing answer Saburo could have given.

“But...the people around here are scared of Shizuo, right?” Yahiro asked.

“Yeah, the majority of folks are. I mean, if you saw a guy who could pull a telephone pole out of the ground and swing it, would *you* think you had nothing to worry about with him? The thing is, if you actually talk to him, you’ll know that as long as you don’t make him mad, he’s a normal guy. I didn’t believe it myself when Kadota told me about him—until I actually talked to him myself. Listen, the people who get it, get it. So you don’t have to go out of your way to feel bad for him or anything, okay?” Togusa exhaled deeply. “Besides, if you want to talk about dangerous, I’d say Karisawa and Yumasaki are a different breed altogether...”

“Really? Them?” Yahiro asked skeptically.

Togusa carefully washed around the vehicle’s windshield wipers. “Yeah, you

just don't know what they're like...but if you hang out with them, you'll see eventually. I didn't want you to get to know them, but now that you've started talking, the cat's outta the bag." Togusa sounded tired, but then he perked up as he remembered something. "Oh yeah, you seemed to be under the assumption that you recently met those guys for the first time, but you already met them a couple months ago in this very van."

"Huh?"

"I gave you a ride to your entrance exam for school, didn't I? Remember how those people were carrying on in the back seat?"

"...Oh!"

I remember now. Some people were hanging out in the back, talking about manga the entire time... That was Karisawa and Yumasaki? I didn't really get a good look at them, so I never realized... Although to be honest, I barely even knew what Saburo looked like at the time...

He was too nervous about his imminent exam to dedicate any brainpower to remembering the faces of the people who happened to be sitting in the back seat, but the guilt was eating him up inside. His nervousness was an excuse, but he still felt awful.

"What should I do?" he asked Togusa, worried. "I had no idea. I carried on with them as if we had only just met. That was so rude of me..."

"Eh, it doesn't seem like they noticed it, either. Besides, they're way worse at recognizing human faces than manga faces..." Togusa said, sighing again before grumbling, "I've known those two a long time, but this damn door, I swear..."

He was staring at the side door of the van, which was plastered with a gigantic sticker of some kind of anime character.

"They always find a way to stick it on when I'm not paying attention, and the next time I notice it, they've switched it to a different one..."

"You don't peel them off?"

"...Well, I owe them some favors...so I feel like this door is the one thing I'll let them get away with...but if I'm gonna be driving a cringy decked-out car around,

I'd prefer to just put Ruri Hijiribe over the entire thing..."

"Why don't you?"

Ruri Hijiribe was an extremely popular singer who also worked as a model and actress. Saburo was apparently a senior member of her fan club, and it seemed like he brought her up about half of the time when chatting with Yahiro.

Yahiro was a big movie buff, so he'd known about Ruri Hijiribe since her early days as a special effects makeup artist. He considered himself a fan, too.

The first time Saburo had mentioned her to him, Yahiro had said, "Oh, she's really special, isn't she?" and Saburo had been inviting him to join the fan club ever since. He just didn't feel he was worthy of being a member, given how passionate Saburo was about her.

In that sense, it was a wonder that he *hadn't* plastered her picture all over the van already.

Togusa shook his head. "Nah, there's issues with likeness rights, and I don't think Ruri would appreciate knowing there's a van out there with her face all over it... Yumasaki suggested we cover the van with a manga character that Ruri voiced, and I'll admit that was a little tempting..."

Togusa made his way around to the back of the van, wiping the windows, and pointed out a spot next to Yahiro, who was washing the rear bumper.

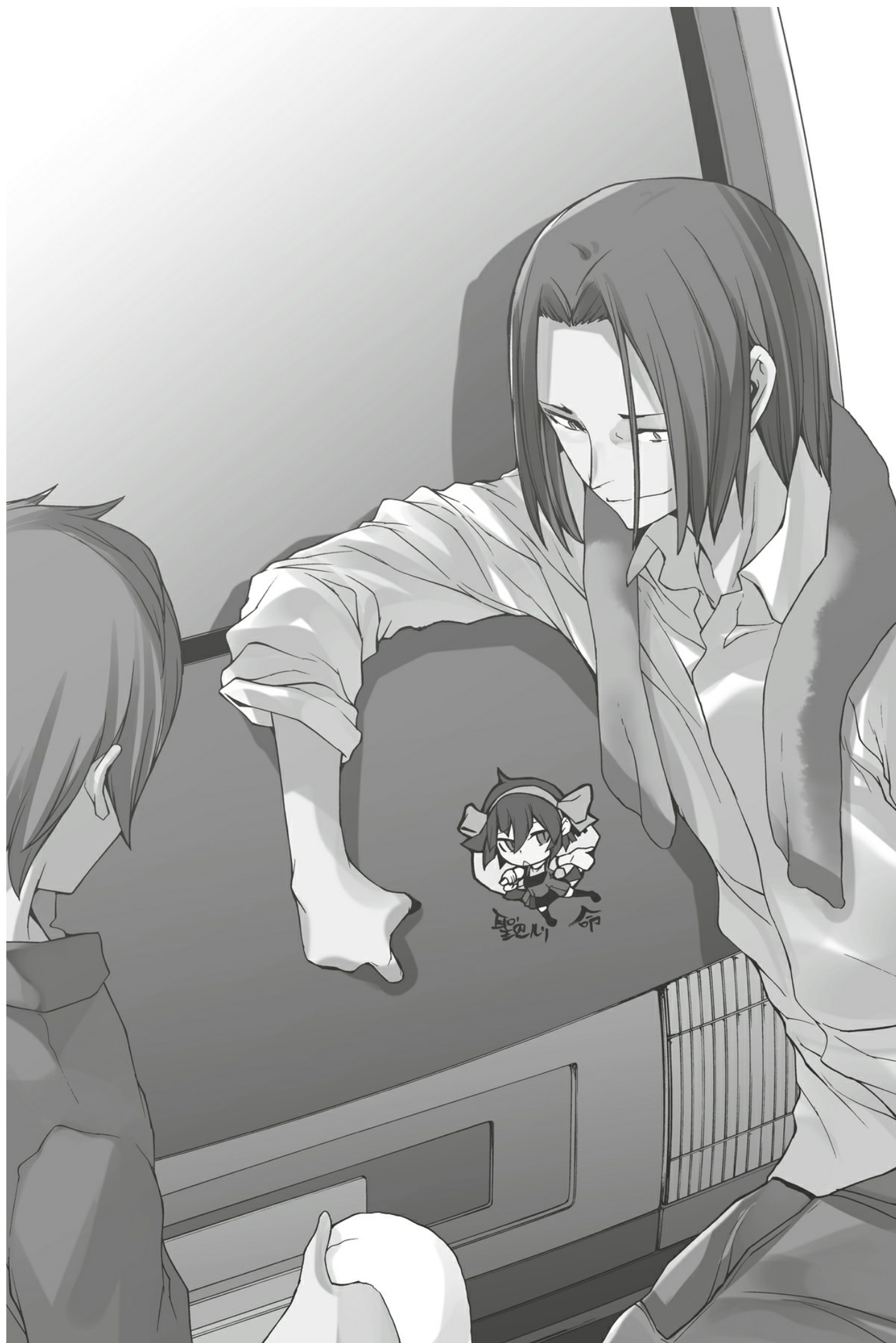
"But see, I love Ruri, and I love my car. So I'm fine with a little display to show that off."

It was a sticker reading RURI HIJIRIBE 4 LIFE, with an official mascot design that was supposed to be a cutesy version of Ruri.

"Finally came up with a sticker design that satisfied me."

"So it's a custom sticker..."

"Yeah. Just knowing that a part of Ruri's soul is here in the car through that sticker makes me naturally get into the act of driving way more. It's the one thing I won't let Yumasaki and Karisawa mess with. If they scribble anything on it, I'm gonna drag them behind the van for a hundred laps around the Shuto Expressway circular route..."



“...” A nasty shiver ran down Yahiro’s back. Blessed with natural cowardice, his finely honed instincts told him that Saburo was most certainly not joking about that.

“Anyway, thanks again. I really appreciate you helping me out on your day off.”

It was several minutes later, and Togusa was getting into the wax, grinning happily from ear to ear.

“It’s fine. I didn’t have anything else to do.”

“Oh yeah? Well, Raira’s a private school, so they’re not tied to the two-day weekend, right? I know I shouldn’t be saying this, given that I asked you for the favor and all, but you oughtta find a more valuable use for your days off, ya know? I’d love to take you to a Ruri concert or something, but I could only get one ticket in the special section for myself... But maybe...maybe if I ask Kaztano, he could hook me up... Then again...”

“Please don’t mind me. I think seeing Ruri Hijiribe on the screen is wonderful enough,” said Yahiro before Togusa went any further murmuring to himself; it wasn’t just lip service, either, but his actual honest opinion.

Togusa swung his waxing arm rhythmically, pleased by the answer. “Exactly—exactly. Even through the screen, her beauty has a holy quality to it! But it’s a whole ’nother thing when you see her in person! She’s beyond an angel, man—she’s like the god who created my entire world. She’s not the gasoline that fuels my heart—she’s the whole damn oil field.”

Now I see why he’s friends with Karisawa and Yumasaki, Yahiro thought, sensing a common thread in the passion of Togusa’s words. He felt jealous that someone could dedicate themselves so enthusiastically to an interest like this.

“...I think what I like about her is that she feels both otherworldly and familiar at the same time.”

Togusa stopped waxing the car and turned to Yahiro, his face shining. “You get it, man—you get it! That’s right! Some guys see Ruri’s mystical aura and say, *Oh, she’s creepy and unapproachable*. I feel sorry for anyone whose only possible reaction to her mystery is to reject her for it!”

“Unapproachable...”

Yahiro had described her as “familiar” because there was something about her that reminded him of himself, but his coward’s instincts had stopped him cold before he could tell Togusa, *I think she’s like me.*

So some people do think she’s distant and unapproachable.

The comment wasn’t directed at him, but realizing that even super-popular idols could turn some people off, Yahiro couldn’t help but wonder dejectedly, *If it’s even like that for Ruri Hijiribe, what hope is there for someone like me?*

He was indulging in a bit of self-pity when the sound of bright and cheerful music distracted him. It was the main theme of the *Vampire Ninja Carmilla Saizou* series, which starred Ruri Hijiribe. When he realized it was coming from his pocket, he apologized to Togusa and took his phone out to see he had a message.

It’s from Kuon. What could it be?

At first, he assumed it was a new job from Snake Hands, but this wasn’t from that address. The notification was from Kuon’s private e-mail.

Yahiro opened the message without giving it much thought—and gasped when he saw what it was.

“...Huh?”

“What’s up?” asked Togusa, busy with his waxing.

Yahiro repeated the information contained in the message, his eyes wavering just a bit.

“There’s a secondhand shop I go to with my friends, called Sonohara-dou... and it just got hit by a burglar...”

“Huh?” Togusa blurted out, the exact same noise Yahiro had made. His brow furrowed. “Sonohara-dou? You mean Anri’s place?”

“Wait...you know Miss Sonohara?” Yahiro asked, his eyes wide.

Togusa exhaled and shook his head. “Man... Ikebukuro really is a lot smaller than you’d think...”

Then he grinned and added something else.

“Or maybe it’s just that you somehow know everybody in it.”



Meanwhile—apartment bar, Tokyo

“How strange, the way these things work out. I didn’t even call for you, courier, but you came right to me instead.”

At the far end of a bar built into a renovated apartment, a man with tinted glasses and facial scars—the Awakusu-kai lieutenant, Akabayashi—smirked at his guest.

Across from him was Celty, who could not eat or drink, of course, so she sat feeling guilty about not ordering anything.

“I’m sorry to take up your time like this. The truth is, I wanted to pay you a visit because I had a feeling that something I’m following at the moment might have a connection to your group...,” she typed into her smartphone and turned the screen to him.

“Well, that doesn’t sound good.” Akabayashi grimaced. Ice cubes clinked in his glass. “Are you sticking your head into trouble when we’re not even payin’ you? It wasn’t a request from the Asuki-gumi, I trust.”

“I am not that reckless. And if I wanted advice on yakuza issues, I’d talk to Mr. Shiki, not you.”

“Oh? Well, there’s not much that I know about that Shiki doesn’t,” Akabayashi said, which was a serious statement, not tongue-in-cheek.

Celty typed up the information she wanted to know. *“I’ve heard that any issues involving motorcycle gangs and other street-level groups like Jan-Jaka-Jan and Dragon Zombie go through you, not Mr. Shiki.”*

“Ah...now I see what you mean.” Akabayashi smirked, exhaling through his nose. He took a sip from his glass. “I thought the kids were awful well-behaved lately, after the Dollars and Yellow Scarves went away. Instead, we’ve had crazed believers in urban legends going wild. Did they mess with you or something?”

“Well, I can’t be certain,” Celty prefaced, hesitating and keeping her senses keen toward the room around them. “I’m looking for someone, you see, and I’ve heard that they’re affiliated with a motorcycle gang or some other group like that.”

“Uh-huh... It’s strange to hear about a courier doing a manhunt, but it shouldn’t be, I suppose; we’ve asked you to do something like that a few times, after all. So this person you’re looking for... Based on what you’re saying, I’m guessing it’s someone young, perhaps still a minor.”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that. Trust is crucial to a courier’s work.” After showing him the message, Celty had a sudden start and hastened to add, *“Of course, I’m not naive enough to expect to keep all my information and have you tell me what I want for free. I’ll prepare as much payment as I can for what you’ll tell me.”*

“Oh no, no—that’s fine. Shiki and Aozaki might try to pry the details outta you, but me...? Here’s an idea. Whenever you’ve got some free time, you can tell me some information I’m looking for in return.”

“You’re looking for information?”

“There are some folks I’m curious about.” Akabayashi tilted his glass back, and when he was done, he wore his usual smile again. “You know about Heaven’s Slave?”

“Uh...I think I might have heard the name somewhere...”

Heaven’s Slave?!

Oh, she’d more than heard of it.

That was the group that came to Celty back when Izaya Orihara was using her. She recalled hearing the name pop up during the recent cult obsession over her, too.

Why would he be mentioning them? But...given Izaya’s involvement, I should probably play dumb for now.

“Every now and then, I do. But I’ve never sought out more than that...”

“They were a group distributing some very naughty drugs in Ikebukuro, back

when the Dollars were around.”

“...That was a very foolish thing to do, then.”

Celty knew very well that Akabayashi abhorred drugs, and the Awakusu-kai didn't deal in them on the boss's orders. She was aware of what would happen to people who decided to start up such a business right under the Awakusu-kai's nose.

“Well, they supposedly fell apart, but the remnants have started messing around again. Is that what you've 'heard the name' in reference to, Miss Worshipful Founder of Headless Riderism?”

“Please don't. That's a shameful part of my personal history. I didn't even have anything to do with it...”

“Sorry, sorry. I'm more curious about this Snake Hands fella that was rumored to be your boyfriend after all that...but as long as he's not gettin' into trouble around town, I don't have anything to say to him.”

“...Thank you.”

I certainly can't go putting in a good word for Yahiro with the Awakusu-kai...

Grateful that Akabayashi was willing to let the topic of the monstrous Snake Hands go, Celty decided she was willing to accept his terms.

“All right, sounds good. I'd rather not have weird and dangerous drugs going around Ikebukuro, either.”

“Well, if you don't like things getting violent around town, maybe you shouldn't be working with violent men like me, eh? With your power, you could easily crush the Awakusu-kai.”

“You're exaggerating. Besides, while I might be fine, I don't want anything to happen to the other people I care about.”

“All the more reason to cut off all ties with yakuza.” He smirked.

Celty couldn't tell whether he was being sincere.

“Well, let's start with what you wanted to discuss... Oops, hold on. Phone call,” he said, squinting at the name on his phone as it went off. He stood up.

“Sorry, courier. It’s from family. Can you give me a minute?”

“I’ll be fine right here,” Celty said. She was suddenly aware that her own cell phone, which she kept close to her chest, was also vibrating.

I wonder what it is. A message?

The name “Snake Hands” on the screen told her it was from Kuon Kotonami. He had two e-mail addresses; she’d registered his work address as “Snake Hands” and his personal address as “Snake Eyes.”

He’d said, *“If Yahiro is the mysterious Snake Hands, then I can be Snake Eyes. Himeka will be Snakeskin, and Celty can be Snake Tail!”* Most would’ve taken it as a joke, but Celty was the only one who had diligently changed his contact name in her phone.

He said that I was Snake Tail because it was a pun on “folktale”...but it kind of sounded to me like he just made it up off the top of his head... Speaking of snakes...I wonder how Meline’s doing these days, the snake woman I met ages ago in the forests of France...

It was with these old memories in her mind that Celty absently checked the e-mail.

The message’s contents, in contrast to its brief nature, were shocking.

“There was a burglar at Sonohara-dou. From what Aoba and the twins say, you know Miss Sonohara, right? Just thought I’d let you know!”

...What? Huh? Someone broke into Anri’s shop?! What does this mean? Is she all right?!

The girl owned Saika, of course, so she could presumably fight off anyone foolish enough to break in, but Celty couldn’t help but worry.

I should write to her... There are probably still police around there, but I can travel over to the vicinity at least.

Before she even replied to Kuon’s message, she sent Anri a quick message to confirm the girl was safe. She had just pressed the `SEND` button when Akabayashi returned.

“Sorry about that, courier. Let’s wrap this up quick. I’ve got something to do.”

“What a coincidence. I was just worrying about something, too...”

They exchanged a minimum of information, and both Akabayashi and Celty agreed to prepare the requested intelligence on their next meeting before they parted ways.

Celty quickly made to leave the bar and found that Akabayashi was doing the same. When he started to call for a car, she found herself asking, *“If we’re going the same way, would you like a ride partway there?”*

“...You sure? It’s just a little bit past Zoshigaya from Ikebukuro Station.”

“Perfect. I have something to see to around there, too.”

“Ha-ha. The truth is, I’ve always wanted the chance to ride on that bike of yours.” He laughed as they left the bar behind.

Celty had not yet put two and two together; Akabayashi’s destination was suspiciously close to her own.

INTERMISSION

Dirty Private Business (1)

The previous night

Celty Sturluson was not human.

She was a type of fairy commonly known as a dullahan, found from Scotland to Ireland. She was 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 Cóište 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.

At present, she had found a job in the faraway land of Ikebukuro, in the country of Japan.

This wasn't a job in the sense of a stable occupation with a guaranteed minimum salary but a self-employed freelance business in which income varied by the day—and in her case, it was a courier job that often involved illegal activities.

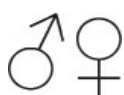
Whenever she passed a legitimate shipping worker, especially one on a motorcycle of their own, Celty found herself thinking, *That must be tough work*. She was even somewhat jealous of those who could do their job proudly and openly in the daylight.

At the same time, she felt guilty. She didn't even follow the rules of the road, and by carrying around illicit cargo, she made sums of money that normal couriers could only dream of. In terms of earning efficiency and work environment (as long as you ignored the danger), it was quite a cushy

arrangement, but when you started discussing what was legal or illegal, it soon got very dicey indeed.

But on the other hand, I don't have much else going for me...and my courier job is ultimately thanks to Shooter's abilities, not mine, Celty thought, as she headed for the home of her client. *I've got a good idea. If I'm going to do this again, I should at least do jobs that are helping people. Like carrying precious mementos or taking a client to the airport to confess their feelings to the one they love before their big flight. You know, the stuff dreams are made of.*

It was with these ideas in her mind that Celty happily drove Shooter toward where she would meet her client.



"I want you to kidnap someone and bring them here."

"No thank you."

Celty promptly turned on her heel and made to leave the reception room.

What a joke! Why would I be an accomplice to kidnapping...?

"Aaah, wait, please! It's not that! It's not that! I know that was a confusing way to put it, but allow me to clear it up! You have fallen directly into my clever descriptive trap and are now laboring under a delusion! Beware, because you might be labeled a jumper to conclusions! By me primarily!"

"Yes, I think I'm leaving."

Celty quickly headed for the exit of the room, dragging behind her the well-dressed middle-aged man clinging to her waist. Like she always did with Shinra, she was going to peel him off her and tie him up with shadow, but another person heard the commotion and came running before she could do anything further.

"What's the matter, Fath...? Huh?!"

The gasp belonged to a young girl dressed in very fine casual clothing that made it clear she was from a rich family.

"Miss Courier?! Is that you?!" exclaimed the elementary school-aged girl. She

possessed several distinctive features—such as her natural prettiness and the regal manner of her dress—but none with quite the visual impact of the huge white snake wrapped around her body.

“Thank you so much for your help back then!” the adorable girl said. The snake was still wrapped around her neck.

“I’m just glad to see that you and Hakujoushi there are doing well.”

It had been two years since the previous time they met, but Celty remembered the girl very clearly.

Her name was Awayuki Natsugawara.

The Natsugawara Group was a toy maker that had been in business since the Edo period, it was said. Awayuki was the descendent of that notable line and had once hired Celty to retrieve her kidnapped pet snake.

Rescuing hostages—even nonstandard ones—was not ordinarily part of a courier’s services, but the girl’s father, Byakuyamaru Natsugawara, had known Shinra’s father, Shingen Kishitani, since childhood, and that was how Celty got involved in the job.

That was a wild time, what with the armed helicopter and all...

There was very little about the incident that was ordinary, starting with this family’s home. It was a truly palatial mansion along the Arakawa River in Saitama, on a baseball stadium-sized estate in the middle of open farmland.

The building looked like the sort of mansion where European nobility lived, with a fountain in the middle of the courtyard and all.

They built a road all the way out into the middle of these fields... Did they clear all this with the laws on land use? she had wondered the first time she saw the building. But *everything* about this place was out of scale, not just the building.

This reception room alone is over half the size of our apartment...

The Kishitani family owned a very nice unit that took up almost an entire floor of an apartment building along Kawagoe Highway—they were undoubtedly bourgeois to begin with, and Celty understood that she was significantly blessed to live in such comfort.

But one look around this mansion was enough to quickly remind her of the old adage: There's always someone richer than you.

While she was distracted by her surroundings, Byakuyamaru had taken a seat again and said, "I do apologize for all that. I am guilty of abbreviating the process a little too much. If anyone was being foolish, it was me. If it does please you, please call me Byakuyamaru the Fool from now on."

"I will not," she stated flatly and added, *"I can see why you're friends with Shingen, though."* She was concerned about the personality of her client but decided that arguing over this would be a waste of time and moved on to small talk in an attempt to smooth over the moment. *"This is quite an extravagant home..."*

"Ha-ha-ha, isn't it? But the Natsugawara family is not from roots as noble as the Kisa clan, and we do not have the power of the Adamura Group, owing to their rise as coal tycoons—but we *do* have lots and lots of money! In the end, it is not breeding or power that gets things done—it's money! The one man I revere above all others is the great American businessman Rude Gardastance, who once drove off a robber by throwing coins at him."

This is not something to talk about in front of your daughter! And that's not what people mean when they talk about the "power of money"!

She imagined her head, which was supposedly in America right now, and the way its cheek would be twitching with chagrin at this story.

"Um, can we talk about the job...?"

"Hmm? Ah yes, let us discuss business." He noticed the way that her helmet was subtly turning toward Awayuki. He took the hint. "Now, now, Awayuki. Father and the courier are going to discuss business now, and we're going to watch a disgusting, bloody R-rated horror movie while we do so. It's time for good little girls to go to bed and shiver themselves to restless sleep at the thought of unknown horrors in the night."

"R-really, Father? Monsters or ghosts?"

"Both, in fact. Also, when parents say that ghosts will haunt naughty children, that is only a lie. The truth is...they haunt good children, too!"

He really is just like Shingen! I should have known that anyone who can be friends with Shingen wouldn't be sane and normal! Celty realized.

Awayuki's face was getting visibly paler, so Celty typed out, *"Don't worry, Awayuki. We're not going to watch any scary movies. We're just going to talk about business."*

"Business...?" Awayuki repeated, then gasped. "Does that mean you're going to search for Big Brother?!"

Big Brother?

The girl's way of speaking had grown much more mature in two years. She was now a fancy young lady, and this was apparent in the way she expressed her gratitude to Celty.

"Thank you so much! Thank you ever so much! First, Hakujoushi, now my brother... Thank you for everything, Miss Courier!" There were tears in the girl's eyes as she clasped Celty's hands and looked up at her with both envy and reverence.

Uh, I...um...

Only her way of speaking had grown up. At the root, she was still the innocent little girl from two years ago—or at least that was how she seemed to Celty. She didn't have the inner strength to say, *Uh, I have no idea what you're talking about*, and crush the poor girl's hopes.

And there was an adult, the very antithesis of innocence, who was all too happy to take advantage of the girl's reaction.

"Yes, don't worry, Awayuki. Rest easy and assured, my dear. The courier here will solve everything within a few days, I'm sure."

"Miss Courier...!"

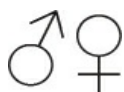
Celty could say nothing in the face of the girl's relieved joy. She could only stand there silently as Awayuki thanked her again and again in the process of leaving for her bedroom.

As soon as she was out of sight, Byakuyamaru Natsugawara promptly said, without a hint of shame, "Ha-ha-ha—well, it seems that you don't have much

choice but to accept now. What do you think?”

Celty chose to forget that Byakuyamaru was one of the wealthiest people in Japan and used a rope of shadow to hang him from the ceiling.

“You don’t get to say that!”



Several minutes later

After hearing the whole story, Celty mentally assembled it all into one broad summary.

Byakuyamaru Natsugawara was the head of the Natsugawara Group.

I still can’t get over how ostentatious his name is...

This man was both one of the wealthiest individuals in Japan and a businessman whose toy company was active all over the world.

He looked so young that it was hard to see how he was the same age as Shingen, and the clothing he wore made him look exactly like an upper-crust rich guy from some movie.

The company was initially famous for its physical toys, but lately they had branched out into the arcade gaming business and social games for mobile phones; at this point, they were known as a multimedia entertainment company, if anything.

Because of the incredible money they were making worldwide, they had a proportionate number of enemies. That was how they’d been singled out by an international criminal group, which led to the incident Celty had to help out with. This time, however, it was more of a private family matter.

Byakuyamaru Natsugawara had three children at the moment.

Originally, it was just his firstborn son and Awayuki, but for certain reasons, he had taken in a foster child. That boy, who was treated as the second son, proved himself to be superior to the first in school and in every other capacity, to the point that people started to wonder if he’d been recruited and brought into the family specifically to be the official heir.

Naturally, the eldest son did not appreciate this.

He must have worried that his inheritance was in danger, because he attempted to stake his claim by antagonizing the second son—and was roundly rebuffed, which only made him more sulky and resentful.

Once he was truly frustrated with the situation, he gradually began to break until he had finally run away from home.

“So we’ve got a runaway son... You want me to find Awayuki’s brother and bring him back home?”

“That would be the essence of it. My wife has worried herself sick over him, and while Awayuki has put on a brave face, I know that she’s dreadfully concerned, too. So if we’re going to have an honest heart-to-heart, I’ll need you to bring him back home to us.”

“Why didn’t you just say that from the start? Why would you say you want me to kidnap him...?”

“Er, well, I...” Byakuyamaru stammered a bit, then continued in hushed tones, “The truth is, my son seems to be affiliated with some delinquent group by his own choice. I do not think he will decide to return just from some half-hearted attempts to talk to him.”

“So you want me to make enemies of this delinquent group and abduct your unwilling son, then drag him back home.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I do appreciate your quick understanding.”

“...Did you talk to the police?” Cely asked, a perfectly reasonable question.

Byakuyamaru averted his eyes. “No, I...haven’t told them anything.”

“Is there a reason for that?”

“...We don’t really need to get into it, ha-ha-ha.”

“Is there a reason for that?”

She didn’t bother to type a new message; she just kept the same one on the screen as she pressed it against his cheek. Her silent, continual pressure must have worked, because he started to talk, assiduously avoiding any glance in her

direction.

“W-well...you see...when he ran away, he took a number of items with him... like a portable safe, some antiques, and...”

“And?”

“One of them secretly contained a micro SD card with some rather valuable data on it...”

“All the more reason for you to have the police looking for him, I’d think,” Celty argued.

Byakuyamaru’s eyes were rolling around in his sockets with admirable speed. He wore a very stiff smile. “I think having the police involved would be bad in various ways... Danger to the group’s existence and all... Might end with me taking a very long and solitary journey behind bars...”

Celty grabbed the man by his collar and shook him back and forth, using her shadow to lift the smartphone and jam it right into Byakuyamaru’s face.

“What have you been getting up to while you have that sweet young daughter back home relying on you?!”

“Ha-ha-ha... A true business manager must be a worldly man who associates with all types. I would gladly give up my life for my daughter—but on the other hand, I also live true to my desires... That’s right, I said it. I have equal measures of personal desire and love for my family!”

“Don’t act like you’re making some heroic stand! Also, that’s not at all what it means to be worldly!”

She pushed Byakuyamaru down against the sofa, then raised and lowered her shoulders in the mannerism of a sigh.

“I think I’m going to have to decline after all...”

“Please wait, Miss Courier. I mean, Miss Celty Sturluson. It would be one thing if I was arrested, but are you going to let my daughter be bullied at school for being the daughter of a criminal?!”

“A bold point for the criminal in question to argue! I mean, I know I’m not some saint, but still!” she typed bitterly, thinking back on all her many traffic

violations. Once she had given herself a little time to relax, she continued typing. *“I don’t know if we’re talking about tax evasion or fraudulent accounting, but I’d advise you to fess up while the wounds aren’t too bad, before the fire you’ve set spreads to poor Awayuki. Although if you’re saying that you had chief members of a rival company assassinated, I’m going to have to tie you up right here and hand you over to the cops...”*

“No, stop! I haven’t hired any assassins, of course! No fraudulent accounting or tax evasion!”

“Huh?”

“My company makes toys, honestly... We sell dreams to children and those who are children at heart! Of course I couldn’t commit any crimes that would betray those innocent dreams!” Byakuyamaru protested, his gaze suddenly fervent. It was so striking that Celty took him at his word.

“Then what’s on the SD card...?”

“...Mostly the dreams of teenage boys. Meaning tens of thousands of images of sexy foreign beauties, free from the shackles of domestic mosaic standards...”

“Just shut up!”

She was ready to tie him up with shadow now, but Byakuyamaru screeched, “Please wait! Just let me say this one last thing! You must think I’m a hopeless fool with a great deal of money.”

“I don’t know about the money, but I definitely think you’re a fool...”

“The truth is, I’m only playing a clown. By choosing to make myself a laughingstock, I bring laughter and ease tensions among my shattered family in the wake of my son’s disappearance... What do you think? Don’t you feel more pity for me in this light? Doesn’t it make you want to accept my request?”

“Not when you state it like that!” Celty snapped.

Byakuyamaru trembled with apparent shock. “I don’t believe this... Shingen told me, ‘Celty’s the airheaded type, so she’s very easy to bamboozle’—aaah!!”

She strung him up at once without a word, then typed out her message to

him in a loud, shouty font.

“Just so you know, I’m not going to be bamboozled by anyone stupid enough to take anything that gas mask says at face value!!”

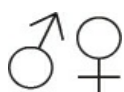
“Wait, wait! All right, let’s do this. If you accept my request, the Natsugawara Group will produce an all-new Headless Rider line of toys. You will receive a profit margin on them, of course, and it cannot help but improve your image in society.”

Celty paused in the act of trussing him up with shadow; perhaps she was intrigued by his proposal. Hesitantly, she asked, *“Like...what kind of toys?”*

Byakuyamaru looked briefly taken aback—obviously thinking, *Really? She’s biting on that lure?*—but then caught a glint in his eye as he expanded on his proposal.

“...We’ll stuff you into a little barrel that you stick knives into, and if the player stabs the wrong spot, your helmet pops out of the top. We can call it Celty the Courier...”

“Are you trying to get sued?!”



Shinra’s apartment, late night

“...All I did was hear his story, and I’m exhausted... Once he started saying stuff like, ‘Eroticism is the shared dream of all humanity, male and female, young and old, so it’s okay,’ I finally tied him up and left him there. I got the minimum of information I need from the servants at the mansion after that.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Celty... They say that birds of a feather flock together, but I didn’t realize he was *that* alike to my father...”

“Thinking back on it, between the talent agency president who put a bounty on me, your dad, and the president of Yagiri Pharmaceuticals, I seem to be surrounded by incorrigible middle-aged men. Isn’t it crazy that the most sensible ones are Mr. Shiki and Akabayashi? They’re from the Awakusu-kai! That’s not normal!”

She took a moment to compose herself and continued, *“Is this just one of*

those things...? Because I'm off from the rest of society, do I just naturally attract weirdos?"

"I suppose that would make me the biggest weirdo of them all."

"Oh...sorry, I didn't mean it like that."

"Why are you apologizing? If loving you is proof that I'm eccentric, then I consider it a badge of honor. Listen—I know I'm always saying this, but no matter how out of sync you are with the rest of the world, I will always stick with you. So you should always do whatever you feel is right in the moment," Shinra said without a hint of shame, his eyes locked on to Celty.

Then, still holding the same look in his eyes, he lunged for her. She twisted her body to evade his attack.

"Sorry, Shinra—I really appreciate what you said, but I'm not in the mood right now. I have to think of how I'm going to track down this spoiled rich boy."

Shinra plunged headfirst into the couch. He rubbed his nose and said, "Oh, so you accepted the job after all?"

"I would have left him behind if it wasn't for Awayuki."

"When all is said and done, you really are a softy when children are involved. I think I should have sought your affection more when I was a little boy."

"Trust me, you're still a little boy," she typed, a glimmer of enjoyment in her heart. But she tightened up after that and made plans for what to do next.

"For now, I'll try getting in touch with Akabayashi. Then I'll narrow down the groups the man's son seems likely to be involved with and go hit the bricks to look for him."

For now, she was still oblivious.

She had no idea that she was getting involved in multiple incidents that were unfolding at the same time.

CHAPTER 2



CHAPTER 2

What Are You Looking for Today?

There was once a legend in Shinjuku of a cursed sword by the name of Saika.

It was in the weapon's nature to love humanity. Not long after World War II, it was said an American soldier found it on the black market, and that was how it made its appearance in modern times.

After a legendary, tremendous battle to the death against a bamboo spear with a mind of its own, the sword disappeared into the darkness again—but among people who were experts in things of an uncanny nature, such as the Headless Rider, it was treated as common fact that the cursed sword did indeed exist.

Saika was a being with a feminine personality that lived parasitically within the human body. Similar to the Headless Rider's shadow, it ignored both modern science and the very laws of physics.

"She" flooded the person who used her with a cursed stream of words of love, giving them orders to love humanity and make children. Under that brainwashing, anyone whose mind was taken over by the sword would attempt to speak of love with human beings.

That might make it sound harmless, but the problem was that to a blade like Saika, expressing love meant *physical contact*. Sinking her blade into human flesh and bathing in its blood was her ultimate expression of love. It was the equivalent of sex in Saika's mind. Once the target was infected, they were forced to revere the owner of the katana as their "mother" and be controlled as a puppet.

Those who were sliced by the sword were "children," and when those children picked up blades of various kinds, such as scissors or kitchen knives, they became the medium that would whisper love to others in turn. Those cut

by the children became “grandchildren” and multiplied onward, creating a chain that would fill the world with accursed love as far as the mother wanted.

However, sometimes there were children and grandchildren with strong enough willpower to escape the mother’s control. Some people could pick up Saika and simply not fall under the effects of her curse, either because of uncommonly strong will, a special mental construction, or because they were not human to begin with.

Anyone who could wield a weapon like Saika without falling prey to its tainting effects would be a severe threat to modern society—but for now, the owner of Saika, living in Ikebukuro, showed no inklings of that kind of ambition or malice.

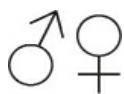
Anri Sonohara was one of those extremely rare examples of a person who could coexist with Saika and retain her own personality.

Saika latched itself on to people and sang the sin of love for the world.

The girl envied the sword’s love and accepted it—and by latching herself on to Saika, she found herself able to maintain a very strange mental balance as she made her way in the world.

Of course, because she lived with Saika, she found herself involved in troubles of various kinds, more often than not.

Was it Saika that drew the current headache closer, or was it something else entirely? Anri could not even begin to guess yet.



Anri realized the problem when, after an early morning breakfast, she went to stock up on items from the shop’s storehouse to fill the empty spots on the shelves.

The storehouse was built around the back of the building, which functioned as both a shop front and a home. The padlock on the entrance was broken, and the shelves and boxes inside had been ransacked, as though a burglar had been looking for something. Every single drawer was pulled out, with its contents spilled all over the floor.

It was a relief that nothing in particular seemed to have been destroyed, but once Anri realized that it was not from an earthquake, she decided to inform the police, though she was apprehensive about doing so. It wasn't because she had done anything she felt guilty about. Despite the fact that Saika slumbered within her body, Anri did not worry that the police would trouble her about that.

Her reason for hesitation was one that most ordinary people would find rather otherworldly. Because her safe and deeds and so on were in the home, there was nothing out here but inventory. At a glance, none of the big objects seemed to be damaged or stolen, so Anri, who was not the most world-wise, thought, *If I report something this minor to the police, I'll probably just be bothering them.* She'd considered what people might say, too, but she decided that if she did nothing and the same burglar hit another home in the neighborhood, she would bear responsibility for her inaction.

So she reported the incident to the police.

The last time a police car had been parked outside the house was the day her parents died.

They asked her questions about the business and so on—but that caused her to realize a big problem.

She herself wasn't really sure what had been stolen.

After her parents' deaths, everything left in the storehouse was of unknown value, sitting dormant because she couldn't simply discard the merchandise. Bit by bit, she appraised items and put them into the shop or occasionally placed a newer item near the entrance, but she hadn't created a registry of everything inside.

Because the burglar had ransacked the place all the way to the back and most of the big items were still present and unharmed, she couldn't really tell exactly how much she'd lost.

"Hmm... Well, how about this. Once you've identified precisely what's been stolen, give us a call. My guess is that your burglar got inside, then wasn't sure what was worth anything and took a few small trinkets with them...or perhaps they just ran off without anything at all. Some thieves are cunning enough to

avoid a petty larceny charge if it's not worth it, so they figure that if they take nothing instead, they'll only be on the hook for breaking and entering if they get caught."

The police sampled some footprints they found that didn't belong to Anri and asked her if anyone else used the storehouse. She was the only one who actually went inside. When opening the shop, she had help from her old high school classmates, Mikado Ryuugamine and Masaomi Kida, and some others like Kadota and Karisawa went in and out, too. But none of their prints, if still there, would be fresh in any way.

They also found fingerprints on the padlock that didn't belong to Anri; they said they would run them through the database and use that in the investigation.

Once that formal inspection was finished, the police promptly left. It wasn't a vicious, violent crime, and the damages were unclear, so it couldn't be a very high priority for them.

Even still, Anri was grateful to the team of nearly ten officers who came to examine the crime scene and politely saw them off in front of the store, bowing.

Behind her, someone said, "Whoa, what happened, Miss Sonohara?"

She turned around to find a boy with bright green hair. It was one of the new students at Raira Academy, who'd become a regular customer in the last few months: Kuon Kotonami.

"A burglar got inside, it seems like...," Anri said, as though distracted by something else.

"What?! Is everything okay?!"

"Well, I'm not actually sure what was stolen... Oh...I'm sorry. It'll be a bit longer before I can open the shop, I think."

"Oh! No, no, don't worry about me! I just saw a post on an Ikebukuro message board that there were cop cars out in front of a local antiques shop, so I thought it might be your place. That's the only reason I'm here!" he admitted without a shred of tact. "I wonder why they broke into your place, though..."

Maybe because they expected you had treasures you'd see on those antique appraisal TV shows, like gold koban coins, Edo era pottery, stuff like that?"

"..."

"I mean, not to suggest that you *don't* have treasures! I'm sorry."

"Oh no..."

Anri's silence was not because anything Kuon said had displeased her. It was because she had a sudden thought.

The police asked her if she had any ideas on who had done it. As a matter of fact, there was one thing that occurred to her from the moment she knew a burglar had broken in.

But she couldn't tell the cops about that—because it involved Saika.

Just the night before, there had been a strange man who desired Saika for himself.

"...I want you to sell me Saika. I can offer you...five million yen for the moment," he'd said.

She played back the conversation from half a day earlier.

"Or you could just cut me and make me your child."

"Saika... What do you mean?" Anri had said, trying to play dumb, but the man with the bandaged face just smirked.

"You don't need to be coy. The fact that I'm here knowing that much should tell you that I'm not just some window-shopper."

"Where did you hear about...?"

"I happen to know one of her children, who escaped the control of the mother. That's all you really need to know."

"...!"

"...Based on the look on your face, I'm guessing you won't sell it for money. I'll just have to give up."

The young man turned and made to leave, prompting Anri to speak up.

“Wait. Couldn’t you just ask your friend to cut you? It would do the same thing...”

“They’re gone now. Half insane to begin with. Also, I saw two of those people who got cut, and they were both driven insane.”

The man put his hand on the door to leave, only turning back to give Anri one final comment.

“...To be honest, I think it’s incredible that you can wield such a fantastical sword and still lead a normal life. I really respect you. That’s not me being facetious.”

She couldn’t help but suspect that the mysterious young man who came and went had something to do with this incident.

But given how easily he gave up and left, she couldn’t say for sure if he was so desperate that he would commit a crime to get what he wanted.

In an attempt to gain Saika for himself, he probably could have threatened me somehow... That way, I might have been forced to cut him with Saika...because he said that he was fine with being turned into a child... And if he really knew about Saika, he should know that he wasn’t going to find the blade by ransacking the storehouse. On the other hand, if he knew that Saika’s been “branched” into several blades...

The more she thought, the deeper her mind sank in the quagmire, so Anri decided to cut Saika out of her guesses at the motivation behind this breaking and entering.

She needed to explain the situation accurately to someone else—and soon. So she decided to ask the man who was acting as the shop’s legal guardian and some friends like Mikado.

She placed the call to the guardian at almost the exact same time that Kuon, who knew about the breakin, sent out a text message to all the members of Snake Hands.

Now that the police and curious onlookers had left, two shadows lurked next to the fence around a park in the vicinity of the store, watching Sonohara-dou.

“...I really didn’t think that we were going to the *exact* same place. I’m a little surprised.”

“...Yes, I agree. Um, Mr. Akabayashi, did you know that I was acquainted with Anri...?”

“Uh, I had an inkling. I heard a couple times about a girl like Anri going in and out of Dr. Kishitani’s place in the last year or two. And there’s Mikado Ryuugamine, too, of course.”

“I’m sorry about that...”

Celty, too, had an inkling about the relationship between Akabayashi and Anri, thanks to the things she learned when she’d been fused with her own head during the Dollars incident.

But Anri didn’t seem to know that Akabayashi was a yakuza, so Celty had never talked about him in her presence.

“Well, I feel bad hiding it, but she still thinks I’m in the crab-wholesaling business. Once her store finds its own footing, I intend to tell her the truth and then keep my distance. If it gets out that she’s backed by a yakuza, she’s going to be exposed to all kinds of groundless suspicions,” Akabayashi said with a grimace.

“Don’t worry—I won’t tell her,” Celty reassured him.

“I appreciate that, courier.”

There was movement outside the shop. A van that Celty recognized had stopped out front, and two familiar faces emerged.

Is that...Yahiro?! And, uh...umm...the driver for Kadota’s group, the Ruri superfan? Ohhh, I get it. He sent that message to Yahiro and everyone else, too.

They got out of the van in a hurry, clearly concerned. The door to Sonohara-dou opened.

But it was Kuon who appeared in the doorway, not Anri. Apparently, his bold lookie-loo mentality continued on strong after the police had left, and he was still hanging out inside the store.

He really does worm his way into whatever place he wants to be, Celty

thought. Knowing Kuon's personality, she imagined that he was planning to turn the news into an online article of some kind.

Perhaps she should stop him before it caused more trouble for Anri, she thought.

With no discernable emotion, Akabayashi said, "I can't help but wonder about that fella with the green hair."

"...?! No, no, it's fine! Anri has Mikado already! And that green-haired boy isn't the completely amoral and wicked sort, regardless of how he looks. I think."

"Well, er, I'm worried about Mikado, too. Though it's been a relief to hear that he's totally withdrawn from the underworld in recent days. But that's not what I mean..."

Akabayashi started fiddling with his phone, pulling up a video.

"That's him, isn't it?"

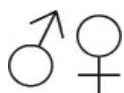
It was a sight that Celty had seen on the Internet many times by now. A blurry and distant video of a boy picking a fight with Shizuo Heiwajima, attempting to save a green-haired boy.

... Celty had no idea what to write.

"Based on your reaction, I would suspect that you know this green-haired boy..."

Uh-oh. Did I just dig my own grave?! Celty inwardly freaked out. Akabayashi placed a hand on her shoulder and smirked. There was a steely glint in his eyes.

"You know, courier, I'd really appreciate the whole story. Could you tell me?"



Meanwhile—outside Kishimojin Temple, Ikebukuro

"Hey, Mr. Shijima, Mr. Shijima! Is this Kishimojin Temple Shinto? Or Buddhist? Which is it?"

A voice that was all too childish and frivolous for the height of the speaker bounced off the stone tiles outside of the temple.

“If it’s for a god, then it’s a Shinto shrine, I guess? But it’s not like the other shrines I know about.”

While the tanned boy was taller, his features were still very youthful. He was speaking to a bandaged man walking in front of him.

The man with the glasses over his bandages kept his cold gaze forward as he answered the boy’s question.

“...Kishimojin is a god who protects Buddhism. This is a temple.”

“But there are all those torii gates, right? Those are for Shinto shrines, and the ones that don’t have them are temples. That’s what my dad said!”

“...Those torii belong to Takeyoshi Inari Shrine, which worships the great Shinto god Inari. This place was originally known as Inari’s forest. The temple to Kishimojin was built later.”

“Oh, really?” said the tanned boy, who started to giggle.

“...What’s so funny?”

“Just that even someone totally evil like you still says the ‘great’ god Inari. Like you have to be respectful!”

“...If you’re not, you’ll be divinely punished,” said the man named Shijima. His cheeks were flushed despite his cold gaze, a sign of his embarrassment about the boy’s observation.

The boy couldn’t see his expression, though. He walked in the rear, smiling innocently, and dropped a comment that absolutely should not be dropped in public.

“If you get divinely punished, it’ll be because you tried to sell a lot of drugs around here, Mr. Shijima.”

Shijima’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, I’ve already been punished for that.” They darkened with self-deprecation. “But considering what I’ve done already, the fact that I’m still walking and breathing means I haven’t been punished enough yet.”

Hiroto Shijima was a young man born into the family that owned the Shijima Group, a hugely powerful business primarily active in real estate. Despite

leading a fairly normal and earnest life, there was a part of him deep inside that looked down on others; he proceeded through school feeling bored of the whole affair.

His life took a turn when a man named Kumoi, drawn by his financial power and connections, invited him to build a mutual aid society dedicated to creating legal drugs.

Kumoi was a strange man. There was no particular presence or personal charisma to him, but his instructions were mysteriously accurate and insightful. He often amazed Shijima and the other principal members of the aid society.

The way that he conjured up viable sales routes for their legal drugs was akin to seeing an elite board game player who seemed to have a special perspective that no one else shared.

Even after Kumoi vanished into the wind, Shijima continued to chase his shadow.

After the group made the transition from legal to illegal drugs, ultimately earning the ire of the Awakusu-kai, Shijima continued to set foot into deeper and deeper darkness, never pulling back.

“I idolized Kumoi, and I envied him. I wanted to stand on his shoulders,” Shijima explained after they left the grounds of Kishimojin Temple, paying no attention to who might be listening. “That’s why I kept using his name to grow the organization, even if it meant I’d have to eliminate him eventually. Akabayashi from the Awakusu-kai and Izaya Orihara ruined everything. I wasn’t taking them lightly, but it turned out that Orihara guy was even more trouble than Kumoi was.”

“Izaya Orihara? Never heard of him.”

“That’s because he hasn’t been seen in Ikebukuro in two years. The last time I spotted him, he had a knife stuck in his guts and was bleeding out...but I don’t really care if he’s alive or dead at this point.”

“That’s surprising to me. You seem like a really obsessive guy. I would have thought you’d hated him with a passion,” cackled the brown-skinned boy.

Shijima frowned a bit. “Oh, I do, but it’s not Izaya Orihara in particular I hate.

It's society itself... Or more accurately, the city of Ikebukuro, I guess."

"Why's that?"

"...Because it didn't pay attention to me."

"?"

The boy tilted his head with confusion, still smiling. Shijima explained, "After Heaven's Slave went down, I got used by everyone: Izaya Orihara, Jinnai Yodogiri, Nasujima... It was like the entire city itself treated me like some kind of utilitarian tool to be worn out. That's why I turned desperate and decided to at least take down the Dollars' boss with me."

"I've heard of the Dollars. I didn't hear that it was such a wild ending, though."

"...Yes, because I was mistaken. The Dollars, Izaya Orihara, Yodogiri, the Headless Rider—all the really big movers in town didn't even see me as a tool to use. I learned that I was just garbage, not fit for anyone's attention at all."

Shijima ground his teeth so hard that it was audible even under all the bandages over his mouth.

When the ugliness happened with the Dollars and the street slashings, he had been very close to the center of events.

But had his malice bounced back on him and delivered karmic retribution?

The answer was no.

He was just left there, adrift in the midst of chaos, unimportant.

He didn't suffer any punishment. The urban legend that once captured him in shadow; the man Nasujima, who showed off his alien Saika power; Izaya Orihara, who was fighting to the death with the monstrous Shizuo Heiwajima just nearby; various monsters and motorcycle gangs filling the streets; color-based street gangs; the Awakusu-kai; the police—none of them did a single thing to him.

Ordinarily, you would consider that fact to be a sign of good fortune—but this just showed Shijima that the pride he'd thought was already shattered had been barely even cracked before.

He was nothing more than “miscellaneous.”

When the surge and flow of fate brought a mixture of reality and fantasy to Ikebukuro, it was like he'd been told that he was utterly dispensable, interchangeable, beneath notice.

The would-be villain was devastated.

Not because he'd been lumped in with all the people he'd always looked down on.

It was understanding that he was no one, less important than anyone else, that robbed all hope from Shijima's mind.

He wasn't even important enough to drag anyone else down with him.

Hiroto Shijima didn't even rise to the level of being *a loser*.

“I just want revenge. I don't have grand ambitions or an ironclad plan for the future. I'll tilt the balance of the city, bit by bit, and hopefully one day the whole thing will topple over. Although it's far more likely that the only thing toppling over is my head off my shoulders,” he said sardonically. Then he asked the tanned boy behind him, “What about you, Jami? Nothing good is going to come of hanging around me and Earthworm.”

The boy he called Jami was unaffected. “That's fine. I knew you were a tiny man from the very start, Mr. Shijima.” His eyes narrowed. “Big people don't rage, for one thing. But I like your little gathering. I don't have to think about anything, and you'll let me fight whenever I want.”

“Yes, I can arrange any number of combat opponents for you. I believe that the accumulation of carnage will eventually destabilize this city.”

“But today's target is a woman, right? I don't exactly get a kick out of punching and attacking women. Let's not do this. I know you're a very petty man, but this is just in bad taste, I think.”

“...Have you gotten the wrong idea somehow?” Shijima asked, arching an eyebrow. For the first time, he turned around to look at Jami. The boy had moved off the street to walk atop the wall bordering the street instead. “What are you doing?”

“Practicing my balance! It’s fun. Want me to do a dance for you?”

“Don’t do anything that will draw attention.”

“Says the guy walking around with his face all bandaged up like a mummy,” Jami grumbled, hopping back down to the ground. “Honestly, I think you’re drawing way more attention than me.”

“I’m allowed to.” Once he was satisfied that Jami was walking on the street normally, Shijima faced forward again and continued, “At any rate, I said I would show you a woman to watch out for. I didn’t say you needed to fight her... But then again, if I want you to understand, the quickest way is to draw her hostility, I suppose...”

“Understand what?” Jami asked.

“The fact that there are things all over Ikebukuro that surpass the bounds of human knowledge.”

Shijima made to turn around a corner, wearing a wicked smile.

“...”

But as soon as he started to turn, he swiveled back a hundred and eighty degrees, placed a hand on Jami’s shoulder, and promptly marched back in the direction they’d come.

“Huh? What? What is it, Mr. Shijima?” Jami goggled.

Shijima murmured under his breath, “Now’s not a good time. That was a bad combination I just saw.”

“?”

Jami crept up to the corner and peered around it, gazing at what lay beyond.

He saw two figures at the next corner, holding a conversation while attempting to hide their presence.

One was a man with tinted glasses holding a cane.

The second figure was none other than the Headless Rider from those videos.

“Wow.” Jami whistled to himself and trotted back to Shijima. “Hey, man! Isn’t that the Headless Rider?! I can tell because I’ve seen the rider before in person!

Is it true it's not human?"

"Yes, the Headless Rider is not human. And it's insane that such a creature can walk around in broad daylight," Shijima stated. He clenched his jaw a bit, then explained, "But the real problem is the guy with the Headless Rider."

"The old man with the cane?"

"...That's Akabayashi from the Awakusu-kai. He's a real pain—he totally messed up my old group, Heaven's Slave."

"Ohhh, so he's a yakuza! Don't worry—I'm not afraid of guns or whatever," said Jami, which was impossible not to hear as insane overconfidence.

But Shijima didn't reprimand him in any way. He just corrected a different part of the statement. "Akabayashi doesn't use a gun. That's not what makes him scary," he said, glancing over his shoulder and picking up his pace. "Let's leave for today. Picking a fight with the guy who hates drugs was how things all started going downhill. If he knows my face, he could beat me to death the moment he recognizes me."

"You know I can hold my own against yakuza."

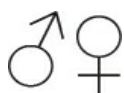
"Yeah, you're strong. You'll be fine. But I'm not. If he attacks me while you're dealing with the Headless Rider, there's not a single advantage I have. Same thing in the reverse situation. The Headless Rider probably doesn't care about me at all but has no reason to let me run away... What's up with you? Are you really raring to fight right now?" Shijima sighed.

Jami flashed him a childlike smile. "Yeah!"

"...Then let's change the order."

He dropped his cold gaze to the ground and grumbled.

"How about instead...I take you to see that guy you wanted to meet, Shizuo Heiwajima?"



Hmm?

Celty turned around, feeling a strange presence, but there was no one else on

the street.

“What’s the matter, courier?”

“Er, nothing. I was just imagining things.”

I wonder what that was. I definitely felt something, she thought.

Despite her curiosity, it wasn’t important enough to leave Akabayashi hanging, so she let the matter go.

“So anyway, here you are again, getting involved in the mischief these high schoolers get up to.”

“Well, it’s not like we’re making some weird gang like with Mikado... Now, I agree that it’s dangerous for high schoolers to be running an odd jobs business, but they’re likely to get into that danger with or without me, so I figure it’ll be easier to stop them if I’m within the group...”

“I know how you feel. I also know that you’re not the kind to hurt those kids to force them to stop. My personal feeling is I don’t want Anri dragged into any trouble. That’s the main thing I’d appreciate.”

“I’ll do everything I can to that end.”

Wait a second—did I just take on a request that will prove to be extremely annoying to fulfill? Then again, if you ask me, it’s Mr. Akabayashi’s presence that is most likely to bring trouble into the mix for her...

“Don’t make that face, ma’am. I know that as an outsider, I’m the biggest trouble of all. I’m just asking—do your best within reason.”

Is he psychic?! What’s going on?! How are all these Awakusu-kai people able to read my expression when I don’t have a face to read?!

“I think of Anri as a friend, too. I wouldn’t want to allow my friends to fall into danger.”

“...I see. Then I suppose I can’t ask you to do anything too dangerous. No carrying bombs or people’s innards.”

“Have you had me transport those things before?!”

“No. Just a joke.” Akabayashi smirked. While she breathed a sigh of relief, he

glanced in the direction of Sonohara-dou and muttered, "We'd keep those jobs in-house anyway."

Celty decided to treat that as a joke, too, and ignore it. She gazed at Sonohara-dou in silence.

"But I suppose I shouldn't be popping my head in while those kids are around. Once they leave the shop, I'll go in."

"Good idea. I'll visit another time. It would be strange for us to go in together."

After parting ways with Akabayashi, Celty returned to Shooter and ambled along slowly, feeling for the presence of others nearby.

Hmm. That strange presence I was feeling earlier is gone, she thought, recalling what she'd sensed. It wasn't another kind of fairy, but it didn't seem entirely human, either... It reminded me of Kujiragi, but it wasn't quite her, either...

Kujiragi was a former romantic rival, a woman who seemed to have a mixture of human blood and something else.

Then Celty recognized something approaching. She focused on it.

Yes, Kujiragi's presence felt more like this...

...Wait, what?

Right where she was focusing, standing on the street, was a woman wearing glasses and a cool demeanor.

It was the very woman who had helped orchestrate chaos in Ikebukuro and attempted to steal Shinra from Celty. It was, in fact, Kasane Kujiragi.

"K-Kujiragi...?"

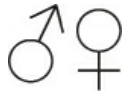
If Celty's head had been around, her mouth would be mindlessly flapping open and closed in silence, so complete was her physical shock. In contrast, Kujiragi bowed, utterly expressionless and still.

"...It's been a long time, Celty."

Her face was just as blank when she straightened up again. That social

formality that made Celty freeze.

“It is good to see you well. How is Shinra Kishitani?”



Inside Sonohara-dou

“So you don’t know what was actually stolen?” Himeka Tatsugami asked.

Anri nodded, clearly troubled. “That’s right... I would know if it was something I’d stocked since reopening the store, because it would be in my records...but I don’t have a list of everything from when my father was running the shop...”

“I bet there was, like, some crazy treasure back there. Like, curios from previous generations that you didn’t even know about or treasure maps...,” Kuon said.

“Kotonami, please read the room.” Himeka dragged him backward by the ear.

“Aaah! Ow, ow—hey, you’re gonna stretch my piercing out!”

“Well, I’m really glad that you weren’t hurt at all,” Yahiro said, a subtle sign of relief on his face.

Anri beamed at him. “Thank you very much. I’m sorry to have worried my regular customers like this...”

She examined the three underclassmen with fresh eyes.

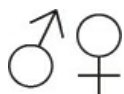
Himeka, Yahiro, and Kuon shared one thing in common—a tendency not to show their emotions—but Anri was coming to understand the subtle differences between the three.

Yahiro was simply not accustomed to displaying emotion. When he felt troubled, he looked like it, and he would smile when he was happy, but everything he did had an awkward feel to it.

In Himeka’s case, she was probably extremely mentally tough. In exchange for not being shaken by anything, she almost never laughed or looked exasperated, for example.

Kuon was actually quite expressive, but it seemed more like a pattern of overacting meant to hide his true emotions.

Kotonami is like Kida, and Tatsugami is like Saki, I suppose, she thought, recalling some close friends. But the thought of expressionless people jogged her memory, too. Miss Kujiragi was like that...but she's not quite like any of them. How is she able to be so devoid of facial expressions? If you listen to her talk, it's sometimes clear when she's enjoying herself, but...



On the street, Ikebukuro

“What do you mean, ‘How is Shinra?’ Do you think I’d tell you?!”

“No, I am not expecting an answer. I am an enemy to you. I simply asked how Shinra Kishitani is because I was curious, and I can state in all honesty that I have no intention of provoking you.”

“No, no, no! First of all, how dare you show up here! I just assumed that you were never going to appear in Ikebukuro again!”

Celty dismounted from Shooter and marched up to Kujiragi as though she were going to grab the woman by the shirt. Instead, she shoved her smartphone in Kujiragi’s face.

The woman was not intimidated, though. She brushed off that anger as easily as a fly. “While I have fewer opportunities to visit Ikebukuro lately, I do find the time to conduct transactions at Sonohara-dou and attend dress-up events for Bespectacled Beaus: The Double Shotgun.”

“Bespectacled...what?” Celty asked, befuddled.

Kujiragi repeated, “Bespectacled Beaus: The Double Shotgun. It is a glorious mass arranged by Lady Eternal de Charmonte for the purpose of summoning down one’s alternate persona, to break free from the shell of ordinary life.”

“What the hell does that mean?! First, you tried to abduct me and sell me off, and now you’re doing drugs?! And...wait a second. Eternal what?”

“Lady Eternal de Charmonte.”

It sounded like the name of a noble in a video game. But it struck Celty in a different way.

"I've heard of that before... But where...? I think it was on a video site..."

After a few moments, the image of a friend dressed all in black popped into Celty's head.

"Isn't that Karisawa's online name?!"

"Yes. It is also Lady Erika Karisawa's cosplay name. Incidentally, my cosplay name is Scool Nyan-Nyan. The 'nyan-nyan' part is written with the kanji for 'girl' and 'cat,' which is very important. Not cat-girl. It's girl-cat," Kujiragi stated quite seriously. She held out a special business card for the cosplay group.

Celty did take the card, although she trembled as she typed on the phone.

"I seriously do not care! Aaargh, there are so many withering comments I could say, my mind can't process them all! For one thing, you are too old to be calling yourself 'school' anything! Although, yes, I know that some people go back to school when they're older!"

"I think you're mistaken. According to Lady Erika Karisawa, who gave me that name, it is not *school* but a portmanteau of *serious* and *cool*."

"I literally could not care less!" Celty typed, the equivalent of yelling. She furiously wrote more and showed the message to Kujiragi. *"Shit! I've been raging about this since last night, and it continues to be true! Why are the only grown adults around me who are relatively normal the ones from the Awakusu-kai?!"*

"By the way, how is Shinra Kishitani?"

"Listen to what I'm telling you!"

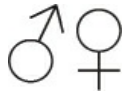
A minute-long battle broke out between Celty, who tried to tie up her opponent with shadow, and Kujiragi, who used inhuman agility and bizarre tools to continually evade capture. Eventually, Celty sensed that people were starting to gather to watch, so she stopped, shoulders heaving.

"...Should we go somewhere else?" she suggested.

"Understood. I did not come here today to fight with you. I am on the run from the Awakusu-kai... I saw Mr. Mizuki Akabayashi earlier, and I cannot simply remain present when I know that he is in the area," Kujiragi replied, putting

away all her numerous odd items.

Celty held out her smartphone screen. *“Well...at least you’re self-aware enough to know you’re being chased.”*



Sonohara-dou

When the high schoolers started to discuss something in a corner of the shop, their chaperone, Togusa, slipped over to Anri. He murmured, “Hey, uh, do they know about the you-know-what? Uh, the sword.”

Anri shook her head. “No, they don’t...I think. And I doubt that Mikado has told them...”

“Ah, all right. It’s just, they know Karisawa and Yumasaki, too, so I’m sorry if those two spill the beans to them. Luckily, those two are probably smart enough to keep your secret.”

“I’m surprised you know Yahiro, too, Mr. Togusa.”

“...Oh. You remember my name.” Togusa had just assumed that he was “the driver” to her. It was a rare feeling of warmth, and it caught him off guard.

“?” Anri tilted her head in confusion.

“Er, it’s nothing. Anyway, I don’t know about the other two, but that Yahiro kid knows Celty, and he’s kind of like a little brother to me. So, y’know, be good to him.”

“It did seem to me that he has met Celty.”

“Oh, you knew already.”

Togusa shrugged, and Anri beamed quietly.

She’d heard a bit about Yahiro from Mikado, including that it was quite likely he knew Celty, too. But now that she found out he knew Togusa and Karisawa on top of that, she couldn’t help but be startled at just how small the world could be.

Whether he knew what she was thinking or not, Togusa continued, “Well, if anything happens, I’m sure Kadota and Karisawa and Yumasaki will come

running. If there's anything we can do for you, just say the word."

"...! Thank you..."

While a part of Anri felt bad for making so many people worry about her, it was also kind of heartwarming to know that there were so many people in the city who were kind and caring enough to think about her.

There was a time that she thought Saika's curse could only bring misfortune, but while it did cause trouble, it had also brought her together with some wonderful people, not least of which was Celty. Anri was grateful for that, and she felt that she owed a great debt to them—and to Saika as well.

All the while, Saika continued to drone her words of love inside Anri's mind.

The high schoolers had finished whatever they were talking about and came back toward her.

"Miss Sonohara, is there anything we can help you with?" Kuon asked.

"Huh?" she exclaimed, eyes wide.

"I mean, you've been giving us all these deals just because we go to your old school. The truth is, we run an odd jobs business; it's kind of like a part-time thing for us. So in return, we want to help you with whatever you need. We can do it for free, just for you. Would you like us to run a night watch outside your store?"

"That's kind of rude, Kuon. It sounds like you're forcing her to accept a favor she'll have to return," Yahiro quickly interjected, although he also picked up right where Kuon left off by continuing, "I'm sorry about him. But the truth is, it scares me to know there are burglars in the area, so if there's any way we can help to catch the culprit..."

"Oh...no, it's fine. I've already left this in the hands of the police, so..."

Anri certainly didn't want to get a bunch of students in trouble like this. Yet the green-haired, pierced boy had a look in his eye like he'd spotted some entertaining prey. He struggled to hide his sneer.

"But don't you think it's scarier if they actually *didn't* take anything? If they were after something else, they might come back again, you know? Aaaaaaaah!

My ear! Stop stretching!”

“Why are you trying to make her nervous...?” Yahiro grumbled. He and Himeka each had one of Kuon’s ears between their fingers.

Togusa sighed and whispered to Anri, “Uh...listen. Yahiro’s kind of like Celty; he’ll rush off on his own. If you try to tell him not to do anything, he might end up starting his own vigilante squad. I think it’d be best to just have him do something easy and insignificant, just so he’s satisfied.”

“But...umm...”

Still, she couldn’t have him going to search for the burglar. Anri considered for a moment and then, against her better judgment, decided to hire Snake Hands for a “job.”

“Well, then...would you be able to help me clean up the ransacked storehouse?”



Alley out front of the store

Akabayashi watched and waited for a while, confused.

“What’s this? Those kids aren’t comin’ back out...”

Then he received a call on his phone. He found that it was from a member of Jan-Jaka-Jan, a motorcycle gang working under his wing.

“Yep, it’s me... Ahhh, uh-huh... Yeah... Yeah.”

He gave a quick, vague instruction and then ended the call. Then he looked up to the sky, lifted the cane to pat his own shoulder, and exhaled.

“I see, I see... So the Heaven’s Slave folks have found some *overseas* partners.”

Although he was smirking at first, Akabayashi’s eyes soon narrowed menacingly.

“Pretty soon, your grandpa and pop won’t be able to cover for ya anymore, Hiroto Shijima.”



Ikebukuro

“That’s Shizuo Heiwajima.”

While Akabayashi was muttering to himself, Hiroto Shijima was in close proximity to an incarnation of violence from which no amount of political power could shield him.

“The blond one in the sunglasses,” he explained, jutting his chin toward one of the two men who had just left the building they were watching.

Jami whistled. “Oooh. He really is a bartender! How come?”

“Don’t know. Maybe he just likes wearing the vest.”

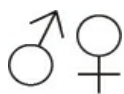
“Well, I’m gonna go pick a fight with him.”

“Ah—hey, you could stand to observe a bit longer...,” Shijima stammered as Jami ran off without listening to a word. He clicked his tongue. “Well, that’s just great. I won’t be able to use him for a while... I just hope he doesn’t die.”

But despite the disappointment, Shijima was just a bit curious.

If that Snake Hands monster put up such a good fight against Shizuo, how well would Jami be able to hold his own?

He resigned himself to not knowing, and he recalled the first time he encountered Jami.



Several months earlier

Basement casino, Tokyo

“...So in the end, you can’t use Saika’s power?”

“Nope. It’s like...how would you say it? I don’t have any memory of being controlled. It’s irritating, but the only method is to search out that Niekawa woman who slashed me, I guess.”

“Don’t worry. The original Saika is in town, I hear. We’ll get to the bottom of it

eventually.”

The hushed conversation was between Shijima and Earthworm, the leader of Amphisbaena, a group that was once his enemy.

She had previously been under Saika’s control—and at someone else’s command—and when she was liberated from that control, she’d lost everything. Shijima found her when she was utterly lost and on her own. He had more or less taken her under his wing. Now they were working together.

Earthworm had used her old smarts to open an unauthorized underground casino at a different location, not in Ikebukuro. It wasn’t quite as large as the previous attempt, and this one didn’t use electronic chips, but they’d found a new clientele through the Internet. They were even making a decent profit.

Shijima sensed the local mobsters would sniff them out soon and commanded Earthworm to shutter the casino for now—but while they were chatting about Saika, there came the sound of something breaking from the casino room.

“Bring me whoever’s in charge here. Look at all this. You know what this means?”

He was a moment too late. Several members of the local yakuza had just barged in. There were five tough-looking brawlers and a man dressed rather smartly leading them, threatening a card dealer.

“Oh my. I figured we’d clear out in another two or three sessions, but their ears are closer to the ground than I thought.” Earthworm sighed, watching the casino through a one-way mirror window.

“Can you manage them?”

“Assuming that’s all of them and they didn’t bring guns. If there are more outside, we might be in trouble.”

“Okay... Well, you’re in charge here, so it’s up to you... Hmm?” Shijima noticed something was wrong in the corner of the casino, while Earthworm sent a subordinate to check what it looked like outside.

A man who’d been winning big at the roulette table in the darkened back corner suddenly began acting strangely. The gamblers at the casino were

watching the commotion from a distance with fright, but this man strode right up to the yakuza heavies—and slammed one of them on the back of the head with a bottle of the wine they served to visitors.

With a dull *thud*, the man dropped to the floor without uttering so much as a peep.

Shijima watched with astonishment. It was clear at a glance that this man wasn't just some guy with a death wish. He had moved craftily through the blind spots of the men examining the casino before striking his target with the wine bottle before anyone knew he was there.

When the other toughs turned around, drawn by the noise, he used the same bottle to knock them out one after the other with blows to the temple, chin, bridge of the nose, and so on.

“What the hell...?!”

The smartly dressed man didn't even have time to recognize the face of his opponent, because the attacker struck him quickly and forcefully between the eyes.

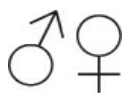
“...Guh...”

The leader toppled to the floor, foaming at the mouth, his upper body twitching.

Under the stunned gazes of the dealers and other gamblers, the man strode forward, undisturbed by anything that had just happened, and spoke to one of the casino workers, Earthworm's subordinate.

“Hey, miss, do you have any orange juice?” he asked, smiling as innocently as a child, despite the fact that he'd just knocked six grown men unconscious. He held out the wine bottle to the woman.

“I'm a minor, so I'm not supposed to drink alcohol!”



“Is he possibly stronger than Shizuo Heiwajima...?”

Six professional artists of violence rendered unconscious in a matter of

seconds. Shijima considered the odds of this question, recalling the feat he'd witnessed upon first meeting Jami. But the answer came to him quickly and easily.

"No. Certainly not." He smirked to himself. Then he looked up to see the result of Jami's attempt to add a new legend to his history: picking a fight with Shizuo Heiwajima.

The next instant, Jami disappeared.

"...?" Shijima could see Shizuo turning in their direction, as though he was staring directly at him. Shijima's wariness was already growing when someone suddenly grabbed his shoulder. "Ah!"

He first expected to see Akabayashi, then more Awakusu-kai members. Carefully but swiftly, he spun around to see...

"Aaaaa, aaaaa!"

It was just Jami, pale-faced and trembling.

"...?"

Shijima didn't understand. *Why is he behind me?*

Did he vanish so quickly because he'd been struck and knocked all the way back here? That was certainly possible if you were foolish enough to challenge Shizuo Heiwajima to a fight.

But the boy's face was unharmed, and his clothes looked clean and undamaged. It was perplexing.

Jami, pale and shivering, still managed to wear a childlike smile as he tugged on Shijima's sleeve. "H-h-h-he's bad. He's bad, bad, bad, Mr. Shijima."

"...Did you already get hit?" Shijima asked, wondering if he'd taken a brief blow that was enough to traumatize him, even if it didn't cause visible damage.

But Jami just shook his head, smiling. "No, no, no, if he hit me, I'd be done for, Mr. Shijima. Oh, man, he's bad. What *is* that thing? It's not a question of if he's a monster or a human. I bet your garden-variety monster would get pulverized by that guy. He's something *else*, Mr. Shijima."

Despite the delighted and innocent smile on his face, it was covered by a sheen of cold sweat.

This is what the people who took a bad batch of those drugs looked like, Shijima thought. At this point, he no longer cared about the question of why Jami was behind him when he'd been right in front of Shizuo moments earlier.

"...What was that about?"

"Dunno... Maybe he's recruiting people for a new martial arts gym or one of those things?"

On the other side, Shizuo Heiwajima and Tom Tanaka were puzzling over what they'd just seen.

Someone had said, "Hey, Shizuo Heiwajima!" and he turned around. But the moment he met eyes with the brown-skinned boy, the kid froze and then instantly bounced away like a spring-wound toy.

His feet touched the side of a building and, deftly utilizing the little protrusions, ran along the side of the wall, seemingly defying gravity, until he bounded off again.

It all happened in an instant, and if you weren't paying close attention, you might have thought he'd simply vanished.

Once the man was over ten yards away, he hid behind another man standing there with bandages around his face, watching carefully.

"...Is he trying to hire you for the circus? You could be the strongman who tears chains apart and stuff," Tom said.

"I'm not really a fan of doing stuff in front of an audience..." Shizuo replied.

"Yeah, I don't get it...but maybe it was an emergency or something. Let's go talk to him."

"Okay."

At Tom's suggestion, Shizuo took a step toward the two men.

"He's coming! He's coming, he's coming, he's coming, Mr. Shijima! I might not die, but *you* will, Mr. Shijima, and if you die, I'll be really bored again, and I

really don't like Miss Earthworm—c'mon, let's run away!" Jami exclaimed like a horror movie fanatic who was delighted about the prospect of being scared.

"Calm down, man. And don't get me involved in—" Shijima started to complain, until his body began to float off the ground.

"Let's go, then! Let's go, Mr. Shijima! Sorry if I drop you!"

"Wha—? Hey—don't!"

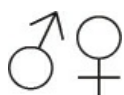


Jami paid no heed to Shijima's protestations. He bolted off and ran through the city with the speed of an athlete, carrying the weight of another full-grown man.

Left behind, Shizuo and Tom could only stare at each other in bafflement.

"...What the hell was that all about...?"

"No idea..."



Alleyway

"Huff—huff...ha...ha...ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wow, Mr. Shijima, that was really scary and fun! Amazing! I've never had a thrill that good from a roller coaster or haunted mansion!"

"Just put me down," grumbled Shijima, who was still slung over Jami's shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Oh, sorry, Mr. Shijima, sorry. You're really light, you know that? I bet that if Shizuo had punched me back there, I would have died in one hit. That was scary!"

"...What happened? Why did you just run away like that?"

"Well, I thought I was going to say something to that Shizuo guy and then just start hitting him. But then our eyes met when he turned around. And that's when I saw it. The thing."

"What thing?"

"You know, it's like the thing that happens when you're almost about to die... What is it again?" Jami said excitedly, his hands gesticulating wildly.

"When your life flashes before your eyes?" Shijima sighed.

"Yes! That!"

"...Um, did you really need me to tell you what it's called?"

"Yes...? It's why I asked... Anyway, my point is, that happened to me the moment our eyes met. I was, like, *Uh-oh, I think I'm gonna die!* All the hairs on

my body stood on end, and the next thing I knew, I was running on the wall!”

So basically, he freaked out when Shizuo looked at him? Why does he act like he enjoyed the experience so much? Shijima wondered.

Jami twirled on the spot, eyes sparkling. “This city is such a fun place, Mr. Shijima! I’m so glad I came here!”

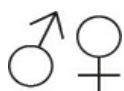
“So you had a lot of fun fighting Snake Hands, but you’ll run away from Shizuo.”

“They’re made of different stuff! Snake Hands had real snakelike danger, which made him worth beating, but that Shizuo guy is more like a bomb waiting to go off. You don’t fight something like that.”

Recalling the mysterious and monstrous Snake Hands that he fought previously, Jami stared at his palms.

“He was weird, but he was really enjoying unleashing his full deadly powers on me,” he said, an odd and violent way to describe their encounter. Jami smiled again.

“So I think he’d be the better one to get into a fight with.”



Storehouse, Sonohara-dou

“...”

Himeka noticed that Yahiro’s eyes were focused on his hands, palms up.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Oh, I cut my finger.”

While helping clean up, he’d caught his finger on a splinter, and it was bleeding a little.

“Are you all right? I have bandages if you want one.”

“No, I’ll be fine. It’ll stop bleeding soon,” he said, clearly unconcerned. He pressed another finger against the wound for a few seconds. It didn’t make the cut disappear, but the bleeding more or less stopped.

“See?”

“...That’s amazing. You heal very fast.”

“It’s because ever since I was young, I’ve gotten hurt many times...”

“That’s not how that works.”

Himeka would have said more, but she noticed the myriad of scars on the back of Yahiro’s hand and did not want to prod him too much on the subject. She’d already heard that the scars on Yahiro’s hands were from punching his opponents, not getting hurt himself, but either way, they certainly weren’t good memories for him, she decided. She was going to move on and keep cleaning up, but at that point, Anri spoke up from the doorway to the storehouse.

“Oh, it’s all right—you can wrap up now.”

The high schoolers followed her lead and walked outside. Because it was more that things had been scattered about rather than destroyed, they had more or less finished putting back all the stuff on the floor in about thirty minutes.

The items hadn’t been stored in neat and organized groups in the first place, so just being able to walk through the shelves to reach the back was a significant enough improvement for Anri.

“Thank you all so much. I think it’s even tidier than it was before,” said the Raira Academy alum, bowing. It didn’t feel like they’d done all that much, which made Yahiro feel uncomfortable with the show of gratitude.

Next to him, Kuon asked, “So what’s up? We cleaned up the place. Anything seem missing?”

“I don’t know... Many of the items were packed away in boxes...so some of these things I haven’t even seen before. I can’t be sure if anything was stolen...”

“Uh-huh. Well, I’m sorry we weren’t able to help you figure that out.”

“No, I’m not blaming you at all. You’ve been a huge help.”

Anri peered into the storehouse, then smiled back at the three of them. “If you’d like, I’ll let you have something from here. It’s not exactly payment for a

job, but I'd like you to each have one item."

"What?! No, that's way too generous of you!" Kuon protested, while his facial expression said, *Whoo-hoo, score!*

Yahiro and Himeka gave him a sidelong look, then shared a conflicted moment.

"No, we didn't do this for gifts...", Yahiro started to say.

But at that point, Togusa appeared at the entrance to the building and said, "Just take what she's offering. You're kids; you shouldn't be acting mature beyond your years."

"Saburo? Where have you been?" Yahiro asked.

"Well, it seemed like you were going to be a while, so I moved the van to a nearby parking lot. But my point is, don't act like you're doing charity. Just accept the reward. This way, Anri won't have to live with the guilt of taking high school students' valuable time, making them work for free. This way, you're both getting something out of it."

"But...I don't know what's really valuable," Yahiro said, torn.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Anri reassured him. "Everything I've added since opening is cheap...and the things that were already back here were too difficult to put a price to anyway. If it's really not meant to go, I'll tell you right away."

"Okay... Well, in that case..."

Yahiro looked to Himeka again, and they nodded in unison.

The three checked every shelf in the storehouse, thinking of what they wanted to take. Yahiro looked for something that wouldn't hurt Anri to give away for free, Himeka looked for something practical, and Kuon looked for something that could be resold for good money or was strange enough to make for a good viral blog post.

Within a few minutes, each one had selected an item that they showed to Anri.

Kuon picked an ancient-looking wooden puzzle box.

Himeka chose a fountain pen that had been in a small paulownia box.

Yahiro chose a fossil of a huge shark tooth; it was impossible to say if it was real or a replica.

“I didn’t know we had all these... I suppose I really should create a registry of them all,” Anri murmured to herself. She happily agreed to let all three of the items go.

“Are you sure about this? It looks expensive to me...,” said Himeka apologetically.

But Anri insisted, “It’s fine. I didn’t have any plans to put them into the shop yet, and I’m sure they’ll all be happier being used or displayed. Please treasure them.”

She gave a saintly smile befitting the way she talked about what inanimate objects would “be happy” about.

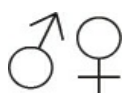
“Miss Sonohara...”

“Thank you! We’ll take good care of them!”

The teens thanked her, delighted.

“...”

Except for one: Kuon, who intended to sell the parquet box as soon as he found out what was inside. His eyes wandered nervously. Yahiro and Himeka knew what he was thinking, but they chose not to say anything about it. They knew that confronting him about his nature wasn’t going to change the way he lived his life.



At a park, Ikebukuro

“So what were you doing there?”

“My contact in the police informed me that there was an incident at Sonohara-dou, which I frequent, so I went to take a look. And then I saw you for the first time in six months. That is all.”

Celty and Kujiragi were sitting on a bench in a park a moderate distance away

so as not to encounter Akabayashi, trying to see eye to eye once more.

“In all honesty, I have no idea what you’re thinking. The police are after you, aren’t they?”

“Yes, I’m wanted for questioning in a serial murder case. It seems that they consider Jinnai Yodogiri to be the main suspect, while I am suspected of being an accomplice in his escape.”

“And...are you?”

“No. But I am fine with it, either way. I arranged it that way. And I have no obligation to explain my reasons.”

Celty considered this for a moment before typing, *“I see... Well, that’s good.”*

“What is?” Kujiragi asked.

“I’m saying it’s good that the person who fell in love with Shinra, and who is fairly friendly with Karisawa and Anri, isn’t despicably evil enough to commit multiple murders.”

“If you say so—I *am* evil. And it might turn out that the actual killer is a more benevolent person than me, just with their own particular circumstances.”

“Ah...good point. And I really can’t lecture anyone else about breaking the law... I spoke based on assumptions without knowing the identity of the culprit yet. I apologize.”

“Why do you say that?” Kujiragi asked, mystified.

“If you’re speaking up for the culprit, then it must be someone you know, isn’t it?” Celty asked directly. *“I shouldn’t have said that they were despicable without knowing their background.”*

“...I’m stunned. You’re even softer than I imagined.”

“That’s not exactly true. I’m actually fairly furious about you abducting Shinra, and that has not lessened,” Celty said, leaning closer to Kujiragi with her screen. As usual, the other woman was completely unfazed.

“...I will not apologize for that, nor do I regret it. But I also will not refuse to suffer punishment or insult for it. Speak your mind. Let me have it.”

"...No, it's too late for that. But I will answer your earlier question."

"My question?"

"Shinra is doing very well. Even better than before. He says that he's happy just being with me, and he's full of smiles every single day," she typed, her answer to Kujiragi's initial question ("How is Shinra?") dripping with sarcasm.

"...I take back my comment. You are just a little bit nasty."

"More than a little. I'm taunting you—don't you get it? You should be more chagrined at your defeat." Celty felt a little unfulfilled, as though Kujiragi had made the faintest suggestion of a smirk. *"Ugh, now I'm just like one of those horrible romance movie women who brags about her boyfriend! Oh, well... Shinra is doing fine. He's probably doing well because you lent him Saika. It's foolish of me to still be mad about it, so I choose not to be. But...if I can say one other thing: You're free to get caught, but don't cause trouble for Karisawa and Anri."*

"That won't be a problem. As I said earlier, I have pawns among the police and the media."

"Pawns...? How is that possible when Shinra's in possession of your Saika?" Celty asked, her helmet tipping.

Kujiragi glanced at a cat near the bench. *"I don't need Saika for that. I have plenty of ways to persuade people to do what I want."*

"Yeah, I really do feel like you're evil... So there are still tons more Saika-like folks out there...?" Celty typed, mostly to herself. Then something occurred to her, and she asked, *"Speaking of which, during the recent street attacks, Shinra was saying something about a wicked, cursed hammer named Bannanjin. You're not using something like that, are you?"*

"I'm surprised that he knew. He's very knowledgeable."

"...What do you mean?"

"I mean that I was previously in possession of that hammer. It currently rests in the storehouse of Sonohara-dou, however," Kujiragi admitted, dropping a bombshell.

Celty practically scream-typed, *“What?! Why is it with Anri?!”*

“It was an apology after what I did to her over Saika. It wasn’t part of our usual paid dealings. I left a few of my items in her storehouse without permission.”

“Without permission?!”

“She would refuse if I tried to give them to her without asking for anything in return, wouldn’t she? I made them look like they’d always been there, so there’s no problem with it,” Kujiragi admitted.

Once again, Celty cradled her helmet, despite the lack of any head inside of it. *“There’s nothing but problems! And just after I told you not to cause trouble for her! He said that it was a hammer that possesses people and accelerates their desires! Why would you leave something so dangerous...?”*

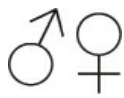
But she lost steam when she noticed that Kujiragi seemed confused by this. The woman’s eyes narrowed. “That is incorrect information. To be precise, Bannanjin is not a cursed hammer with a mind of its own, like Saika. It’s just a normal hammer crafted by a blacksmith from the late Edo period, who modeled it after a work hammer created by the Western artist and blacksmith Karnard Strasburg.”

“Huh?”

“But it matches the original piece by Karnard Strasburg so closely that it possesses the same quality...which is that the perfection of the grip, the stimulation of the grooves, the visual pattern of the hammer itself—all these things have a hypnotic effect on the wielder. Those who noticed this must have started the rumor that it was a cursed hammer that possesses minds. Someone with a dull mind will receive no effect at all.”

She reached down to pet the cat, which had wandered over to her feet.

“But if someone who’s sensitive by nature but also petty and mean finds it, the effect will be amplified. It will be an especially large difference from their ordinary demeanor, which makes the ‘possessed’ explanation a bit more convincing...”



Rental office, Saitama Prefecture

Yukihiko Natsugawara was not blessed with anything you would call a talent.

Talent is not everything in life, and if he searched hard enough, he might have discovered something he had an aptitude for. But at the very least, he hadn't found what that was yet.

Being raised as the son of a very wealthy family, he had the circumstances on his side to produce above-average results in both scholastic and athletic pursuits—if he just took advantage of his ample resources with hard work. That said, he'd found wealth to be a very comfortable and secure thing, falling under the mistaken assumption that he, too, would be fabulously successful without any effort required.

Everything started to go wrong when his parents took in the foster son.

His foster brother, who had all the same resources on his side but with a strong ambition to succeed, soon proved himself to be superior to Yukihiko in every facet.

Yukihiko scorned his new brother and tried to throw his weight around, but the boy even had more talent for fighting. The eldest son was now truly a loser in every regard, and rather than attempting to get back through diligent hard work, he threw in his lot with the option of raising hell instead.

He started visiting hangouts of delinquent youth and assumed he was making a name for himself there—but by the time he realized that they were only approaching him because they knew that being the son of the Natsugawara Group meant he had tons of money, it was already too late for him to extract himself from their grip.

Now that he had run away from home, he immediately found himself in trouble with the delinquent group and was therefore desperately trying to escape them completely on his own.

"Well, well. The rich little Natsugawara boy came crawlin' back on his own," said a voice in a run-down old building.

The voice belonged to a young man still in his early twenties. Even an amateur would be able to tell at a glance that he was not a good person to associate with.

Meanwhile, the person he was talking to was a young man with a cynical look in his eyes but who nonetheless couldn't shake the general air of being a comfortable rich boy. In the classic delinquent relationship, he was going to be the guy getting shaken down for pocket money.

"The truth is, I'm just tired of running around."

"You're wasting our time. So? Where is it? We gotta get in touch with *them* once we see it, so whip it out."

"...I've got it stored somewhere. I'll go back and get it later."

"What? You useless piece of shit! Bring it the *first* time! Or what? Do you still think you can strike some kinda deal with us?" the man demanded.

But the bourgeois boy, Yukihiro Natsugawara, simply grinned and took a step closer. "No, that's not it at all. I just have something to do first."

"Huh? What's that?"

"Well, it's very important, but I don't want anyone else to hear. Can I whisper into your ear?"

"?" The man was suspicious, but he leaned his head closer.

And in response, Yukihiro Natsugawara grabbed a strangely patterned hammer stuck into his belt and smashed it against the man's temple.

"*Gah!*"

The air shot from the young man's lungs, and he fell to the floor, convulsing.

The other men in the room were stunned for a moment, then roared all at once.

"H-hey! What the fuck are you doing?!"

"Are you insane?!"

But Yukihiro roared back, gripping the hammer, in a voice that drowned out theirs:

“You sons of bitches! How much money did he pay you?!” he demanded, jabbing the tip of the hammer toward the man on the ground. “Are you happy, working like slaves for chump change?! You shouldn’t be!”

The men stirred and rustled uneasily.

“I’m Yukihiro Natsugawara! The son of the powerful Natsugawara Group! I’ve got far more money, and nothing he offers will come anywhere close to what I could give you!”

Then he pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket and scattered it through the air. Several million yen filled their surroundings, and Yukihiro carefully watched the reaction of the other men.

The thugs were briefly taken aback, but after a quick look at the convulsing man who had been their leader until moments ago, they started collecting the money.

As of that very moment, their situation had reversed itself.

The young man who’d been nothing but an ignorant source of money had become the one in control, manipulating others with that same money.

It was a transformation as whole as a cocoon revealing a butterfly. The man held up the hammer and shouted again. But this time, it felt less like a message to them and more like he was trying to convince himself of what he was.

“From now on, *I’m* the boss of Heaven’s Slave! If you got a problem with that, money will clear that up!”

INTERMISSION

Dirty Private Business (2)

Saitama Prefecture, night

A lot's happened in one day, but I've still got a job to do, Celty thought.

She never managed to see Anri face-to-face during the day.

After the high schoolers had left, Akabayashi was going to visit the shop next, and Celty figured it would be uncomfortable if she were there, too, and thus decided to try again another day.

For now, she just sent a text message: *"I heard about what happened—please tell me if there's anything I can do to help,"* and after considering the cursed hammer Kujiragi mentioned, she added, *"By the way, I heard from Shinra's dad that the shop once held a strange hammer. Would you still have that?"*

She knew that mentioning Kujiragi had slipped it into the storehouse without permission would only lead to confusion and chaos, so she decided that Shingen would work as a reasonable source.

What am I doing, covering for Kujiragi...? she wondered self-deprecatingly. Celty stopped Shooter at the side of the road and set foot into a bar where young people liked to gather.

"Welco... Huh...?"

The mouth of the employee near the entrance dropped open when he saw Celty.

"Pardon me—I'm just looking for someone. I won't be here long..."

She pulled a wallet made of shadow out of somewhere, then extracted a few thousand-yen bills and put them in the employee's hand.

"If entrance is only allowed to paying customers, use this to buy a few drinks for the folks at the counter."

“Huh? Uh, but...”

She walked past the baffled man and into the back part of the bar. Just as Akabayashi’s recent message claimed, this place was clearly the hangout spot for local delinquents—and this was the neighborhood where the Natsugawara family lived.

The kids in the bar fell silent at once, noticing Celty’s pitch-black appearance, which only made her stand out. After a moment’s pause, there was an uncomfortable murmur of unease and mockery.

A couple of the bolder youths decided to surround her.

“Hey, since when was the circus in town?”

“What’s with the getup? Is this a joke? Do I get to hit you if it’s not very funny?”

“Ororororo? Porororo?”

What the hell does ‘orororo porororo’ mean? What is it about tough guys like these that they love to make up their own words...?

Celty decided to narrow down her reply to the first person to speak.

“First of all, that’s rude to people who work at circuses. And I’m only here in search of someone.”

She started to pull the photo out, but the young man snarled with irritation. “Why should I care about that? And like, for real, when you talk to someone, you should look them in the eyes. Isn’t that just polite manners?” he said, smacking Celty’s helmet.

It fell off her neck and clattered on the ground.

“...”

“...”

“...?”

The silence was far heavier than before. Time stood still within the bar.

Only Celty was unaffected by the moment. She scooped the helmet up off the floor.

Naturally, there had been no head underneath.

Right on cue as she popped the helmet back on her neck, the air began to circulate through the room again—and a wave of restrained emotion burst free.

“H...Headless—Headless Rider...”

“Not cosplay! It’s the real thing!”

“I remember! The TV station said they’ll pay big-time if you can drag her in!”

When did that happen? she wondered but didn’t spend any effort trying to deny it.

“Get herrrr!”

And even though she hadn’t done a thing to any of them, the thugs made to attack her all at once.

Good grief.

She was used to brawls like this after years of being here, and she’d found that there was one way to get people like them to hear her out, and quickly.

You had to strike fear into them and break their spirit.

Ten minutes later, Celty had strung up the punks with her shadow, trapping them in a shadowy spider’s web. She had left the ordinary customers and workers out of the attack, and the only thing she left behind was a message for the man who seemed to be in charge: *“They’re fine—nothing’s broken. The black stuff will undo itself and go away after I’ve left.”*

Ugh... If I keep doing things like this, I’m only going to be seen as less and less like everyone else...

I’m dirty. I run a dirty private business. I honestly have no right to criticize Shinra for his black market medical work...

The whole point of restarting her job was to eliminate any possible disconnect from society, so she knew that this was running counter to her aims. Celty refocused on her goal, determined to fulfill the job requirements.

I got more information than I expected, though.

There were a few broad conclusions she learned.

Yukihiko Natsugawara was no longer visiting this bar anymore.

Just before he stopped showing up, some drug dealers were attempting to make contact with him.

And after he disappeared, there were other people looking for him, not the same as the usual delinquents.

Investigators hired by the Natsugawara family perhaps? she wondered about the last point. She asked more about the second point—and learned that the drug dealers were distributing a dangerous drug by the name of Heaven's Slave.

She knew exactly what kind of effects that drug had, due to the recent incident with the Headless Rider worshippers.

Go figure that this would tie back to what Mr. Akabayashi said.

Hiroto Shijima...

What are you thinking, making enemies of everyone around?



CHAPTER 3

WE DON'T SELL THAT HERE

CHAPTER 3

We Don't Sell That Here

Tokyo, night

While Cely Sturluson was busy fulfilling the duties of her job as a courier, the young man she'd been thinking of was walking down a side street in the outer areas of Ikebukuro, accompanied by a boy whose eyes had begun to sparkle the moment the sun went down.

"So what are you plotting right now, Mr. Shijima?" Jami asked expectantly.

With dead eyes, Shijima answered, "Nothing in particular."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not. For one, I don't put together big, grand plots. What I do is find fires that are starting around the city and either pour gas on them or send a gust of wind to whip them up," Shijima said, a spark gleaming darkly in his eyes.

Jami pondered the answer. "How are pouring gas and gusting wind different?"

"One strengthens the force of an uprising, and the other spreads the reach of an uprising. Or the difference between leveling one specific area to nothing but ash or allowing little flames to spread all over the city."

"What about burning the entire city to ash?"

"I could probably pull that off, but what's the point? That's not the revenge I'm looking for," Shijima said. He wore a rare, thin smile. "But whether I choose to give the fire gasoline or wind, I'm happy as long as the city ultimately turns to ash."

After several more minutes of walking, Shijima pointed out an area of town with a thrust of his chin.

"We're here. There it is."

He was staring at an old, abandoned, worn-out building. It must have been abandoned in the middle of either construction or dismantling; it was impossible to tell at a glance. All that could be said was that it was collapsing in parts, and it possessed all the visual details that made it clear it had not been under any responsible upkeep in a very long time.

“What is this?”

“It’s the place where I screwed up when I was leading Heaven’s Slave. I tried to take out that Akabayashi guy here and fell right into a trap. The soldiers I sent in there ran into guys from a different yakuza gang than the Awakusu-kai, and it turned into a big battle.”

“Ohhh. A bitter history, huh? So you want to see the site of your big failure so you can get in the right mindset to succeed?”

“What? No, I don’t consider mentality to be that important,” Shijima remarked. A faint light was coming out of some of the windows around the middle levels of the building. “I have business with the people who hang out here. And I’m not a good fighter, so if necessary, I need you to keep me from dying, Jami.”

“I can’t guarantee it, okay? I’m not a bodyguard... By the way, what kind of people hang out here? Are they tough? Do they have guns?”

“...No, not guns, I’m sure. There are high school kids in this group.”

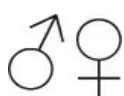
Jami’s shoulders dropped a bit with disappointment. “Aww. Then it probably won’t be very fun to fight them...”

“We didn’t come here to *fight*.”

“Then why? Who are they?” Jami asked again, although his enthusiasm was much weaker than before.

Shijima strode toward the entrance to the abandoned building. He narrowed his eyes with reminiscence.

“...Another group of scumbags just like us called the Blue Squares.”



Inside the abandoned building

“Ahhh, dammit. It won’t budge.”

“What have you been doing, man?”

Kuon was busy fiddling with the puzzle box he’d taken from Anri’s storehouse. The other Blue Squares crowded around him to see.

“Oh hi, fellas. See, I got this parquet box from a friend, but I can’t get it open...”

“Par-kay?” asked a confused man with bleached blond hair, Yoshikiri.

Another young man wearing a cat-ear accessory, Neko, replied, “You don’t know what that is? It’s a box that’s a kind of puzzle, like those interlocking rings, and you can’t open it unless you solve it.”

“Huh. Why are you doing it, if it’s so annoying? What’s the point?”

Another young man who’d been listening, the leader of the group—Aoba Kuronuma—joined the conversation. “Technically, they’re called Hakone parquet boxes, because they’re known for being made in Hakone. Not all parquet wooden objects are puzzles, though. The ones that you’re supposed to solve are known as ‘secret boxes’ or ‘trick boxes’ or ‘puzzle boxes,’ and people love them. I bet lots of people use them to store stuff that you don’t want just anyone seeing but isn’t worth sticking in a safe.”

Kuon exhaled. “Exactly. I can hear something clattering inside, so I’m really curious to find out what it is. Then I’ll put up pictures of the box before and after opening it, plus what I found inside, and use them for a blog article.”

“It’s wood, right? Just smash it, dude,” said Yoshikiri, who was more perplexed than ever.

Kuon just grimaced and shook his head. “I guess if you lost your door key, you’d just break down your own door, huh...?”

“Yeah...why wouldn’t you?”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Realizing that the others were giving him pitying stares, Yoshikiri's temple twitched. He reached for the parquet box. "Ugh, what a pain in the ass! Stop makin' me feel stupid! I'll open the damn thing!"

"Ah! No, please, Yoshikiri! If you break it, it's completely useless!" Kuon protested, clutching the box and running away.

Aoba threw the kid a bone and said, "Knock it off, Yoshikiri. That box is probably worth well over ten thousand yen."

"...What?" Yoshikiri paused and turned to Aoba. Others around them also stirred at the mention of that magic number. "Hey, Aoba! Are you serious? That box is worth ten thousand?!"

"Yep. The price ranges depending on the complexity of the box—how many steps it takes to open, the size, the pattern. But based on the way Kuon's been trying to open it, there's no way there are only ten or twenty steps to it. The pattern's super complex, and it looks like an antique. I'm talking ten thousand at a minimum, maybe even over fifty."

"Fifty thousand?!"

"From what I've seen online, boxes that have over, like, three hundred steps before they open can go for over sixty or seventy thousand yen...and that's a modern item. So if it's old enough that it was from the Edo period, we could be talking a hundred, two hundred thousand."

The Blue Squares, their eyes gleaming in unison, turned toward Kuon. More precisely, toward the trick box in his hands.

"H-hey... I was given this box! You can't have it!"

"It's fine—we're just going to borrow it for a bit. There's a local antique shop that was out of business until just last year, when they reopened. We're just going to ask what the thing's worth," Neko said, his eyes glittering with avarice.

Kuon shouted, "You mean Sonohara-dou?! No way, not gonna happen! It would destroy any trust I've built up, and I can only imagine the looks Yahiro and Himeka will give me! No!"

"What the hell does that mean? Just let me see the box."

The other guys surrounded Kuon, intent on snatching the parquet box out of his hands—when two figures stomped up the staircase to come into view.

“Huh? Who’s that?” Neko wondered.

It was a young man wearing glasses over his bandaged face and a feisty-looking boy with brown skin.

The man in glasses looked around until his eyes landed on Aoba. He inclined his head. “It’s nice to see you again. I’m Shijima.”

“...Yes, it *has* been a while, hasn’t it?” Aoba said, initially bewildered. He found a match for the name and face in his memory and clapped his hands together.

In the old Dollars incident, this was the man who had made contact, hoping to help instigate a purge within the Dollars; he had been rather helpful in that regard. But Aoba recalled that the guy had simply disappeared after that day when darkness covered the sky over Ikebukuro.

“...What have you been doing, then? And who is that?”

“I vanished into the wind because I made too many enemies. He is...a friend.”

“I’m Jami. Nice to meet you!” said the brown-skinned boy, beaming. He held out a hand.

“Um, hi,” Aoba replied, giving it a quick shake. He inclined his shoulders and asked Shijima, “Well? What brings you here? Just to be clear, the Dollars have disbanded, and my friend Ryuugamine I introduced you to earlier has left all this behind him to lead a normal life. If you wanted to see him, I’d advise against it.”

“...Ah yes. I heard the rumor that Mikado was stabbed by a street slasher. Was he all right?”

“He’s totally better now. No need for any hospital visits.”

“That’s too bad. I only wanted to ask him *what* he was stabbed by.”

Aoba and Shijima remained cagey, as though each knew the other was trying to hide something. Eventually, Shijima sighed and decided to offer a challenge that more directly tied into his reason for being there.

“So even though the Dollars disbanded, the Blue Squares didn’t suffer any damage and expanded their territory, too, Aoba Kuronuma? Would you happen to have your brother in the Awakusu-kai backing you up?”

Aoba had not given his full name, and Shijima knew about his brother, too. It was a demonstration that he knew all about the boy already.

Aoba narrowed his eyes and fired back with information of his own. “Wouldn’t that make you the one in danger? I wonder what the Awakusu-kai would do if I told my brother that the leader of Heaven’s Slave is here.”

Shijima shook his head. “That’s not quite right. I was only ever the subleader. Kumoi was the real leader.”

“And does this person actually exist? I haven’t seen the faintest trace of him.”

“Perhaps that’s an issue to discuss with your optometrist.”

“Interesting... In that case, is it Kumoi who’s giving the orders to make deals with those scary people who just showed up from out of the country? I understand they brought a helicopter into the Kanto region and got into a gunfight with it. Are you starting a war?”

Shijima had no response to this at first. After a while, the end of his mouth curled upward.

“If you’re scared, you should buy one of those shelters and hide in it. I’m not interested in guns or helicopters. It’s a smooth and beneficial relationship between groups in Ikebukuro.”

“So you want pawns?”

“Not at all. If I wanted pawns, I could easily hire some random thugs off the street, couldn’t I? No, I just want to forge a particular relationship. You need help, and I offer it. Then you pay me with money or something else.”

“A nice story...but as long as you don’t intend to mess with us, I don’t have any particular desire to be antagonistic. I know the Headless Rider cult isn’t the only thing you’ve set up—you’re dealing tons of drugs all over the city and in Saitama. We’re not going to stop you, but just to be clear, we have no reason to stick up for you if the Awakusu-kai catch wind of it.” Aoba smirked.

Shijima returned the expression and pulled out a notepad. “Phones are too likely for the Awakusu-kai and police to trace back. So if you want to do any business with us, go to this web address and type in the password below. That will bring up a contact form.”

“Thanks. I like cautious people. Although I don’t trust them.” Aoba grinned confidently. Shijima received it coldly.

A cheer from off to the side broke the awkward, ugly moment.

“?” They turned to see the puzzle box that Kuon just brought in, neatly open in Jami’s hands.

“Whoaaa, that was crazy! He just popped it right open!”

“It was so fast I couldn’t even see what he did...”

“Hey, what’s going on?” Aoba asked.

Kuon turned to him, mouth hanging open. “Uh...well...he said, ‘Hey, I can open that!’ and then...he just *did it*, with incredible speed...”

“That was eighty-four moves to solve it. Here you go!” Jami said, tossing the box back to Kuon, who was so startled that he failed to catch it cleanly. Something spilled out of the box.

“Whoa...what’s this?” Kuon scooped the object up: It was a small collection of SD cards in a little plastic case. “Awww, I was looking for gold coins or something. This is way cheaper than that...”

Despite his disappointment, though, he stuck one of the cards into a nearby laptop and nodded to Jami. “Well, thanks for opening it up. I can’t believe you did it so fast, though. I guess there are all kinds of geniuses...”

After a virus check of the data on the card, Kuon proceeded to open it up to look at the files.

“Oh, man, there are a couple thousand files on here... Huh?”

He was looking at neatly arranged rows of image thumbnails. The uniting feature of the images was that they were virtually all the color of bare skin.

“What’s up? What’s on there...?” Aoba asked, peering over his shoulder. Then

he froze and asked, “Whoa...are those uncensored...?”

At the sight of thousands of images of sexy skin in various peachy hues, Yoshikiri and the other Blue Squares were suddenly full of an uncharacteristically serious resolve.

“All right, I’ll keep this safe.”

“No, I will.”

“I’ll do it!”

“What about me?!”

“Wait, wait, wait. Aren’t these basically illegal? We could be charged with a crime for having them.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s fine if they’re for personal use...”

“I dunno.”

“What’s the truth, Aoba?”

With their eyes on him, Aoba returned only a cold glare. “Seems fine to me. Who cares...?”

“H-he’s playing it cool!”

“This is what happens when you’re friends with hot, slutty twins!”

“...I’ll kill you!”

“Why?!”

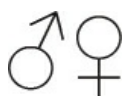
Aoba fled, and the others chased after him. Shijima just shook his head with annoyance and headed for the stairs. “Let’s go, Jami.”

Jami did not seem especially pleased with this. “Awww! We’re leaving? Aren’t we going to that Sonohara-dou place?” he asked.

“Next time we will. Sonohara-dou’s not going anywhere. We’ll have plenty of chances.”

The two left amid the clamor of the gang, trading fairly pointless comments. Most of the Blue Squares didn’t pay them any mind, but one person in particular kept his ears and eyes sharp, catching every last comment.

As he fiddled with the puzzle box, the boy with green hair muttered to himself, “Did I just hear them say...Sonohara-dou...?”



On the street

Shijima and Jami were heading back the way they came.

Jami beamed excitedly and remarked, “Those guys seemed like fun!”

He had his hands behind his head as he walked, reminiscing on what had just happened. Shijima, as usual, was cold and emotionless underneath the facial bandages.

“Hmph. For how famous they are, I didn’t expect the Blue Squares to be such a group of boys just goofing around and bonding.”

“Are you jealous?”

“Why would you ask that...?”

“Well, you don’t seem to have any friends, Mr. Shijima!” Jami observed rather brutally.

Shijima just spat, “This is stupid,” and kept walking.

“So you say. But I bet you wish you could have seen all those dirty pictures, too, huh?”

“.....”

Shijima came to a halt and slowly turned to Jami.

“What is it, Mr. Shijima?”

“I can’t believe...you people can act so normal when you...look at those...scandalous pictures...”

At that moment, Shijima’s face fell under a streetlight. Through the gaps in the white bandages, his skin was flushed, and his eyes were roaming nervously.

Jami gaped at him. “Huh...? Are you serious, Mr. Shijima? I mean, Miss Earthworm is always wearing that half-naked dress around you, putting her arms around you from behind, resting her chin on your shoulder, and stuff!”

“She’s doing it on purpose because she knows I hate it! It takes everything I’ve got to remain rational!” Shijima shouted, a rare display of emotion. He cleared his throat to recover control and continued, “At any rate, such things can be saved until after marriage.”

“Wow, I really didn’t think you were the type to say things like that. That reminds me of a story someone told me years ago, about a gangster who married his girlfriend after fifty years together, and they went on their honeymoon after the seventieth. I’m sure they’re really, really old by now.”

“I feel a bit jealous of a guy who has a girlfriend who’ll wait that long,” Shijima said, then began to walk off, indicating that the topic was finished.

Instead, Jami remarked, “Anyway, Mr. Shijima, you say you’re not plotting anything, but you’re definitely involved in a lot. What’s this foreign group? What are they like? Are they strong?” His voice got faster with anticipation.

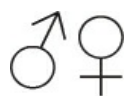
“I have no idea,” Shijima replied.

“Huh?”

“Aoba Kuronuma just said that. I don’t know about this group at all, and even if I’m dealing drugs, I don’t use the name Heaven’s Slave for the group anymore. You know that already. So I can tell you truthfully that I have nothing to do with that.”

He exhaled, looking up at the night sky with dead eyes, and clicked his tongue.

“...I can just tell this is going to be a huge pain in the ass.”



The next morning, outside Sonohara-dou

Now this is just a huge pain... Who would have guessed that Shijima would be involved in the theft?

Celty mimicked a sighing gesture. She was outside the shop, straddling Shooter.

Anri came out of the building and called out, “I’m so sorry to have made you worry like this,” bowing her head. Celty waved back casually.

“Don’t let it worry you. More importantly, you be careful of that Shijima guy. He might come back for Saika.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Celty had come to see Anri early in the morning to hear what she had to say about Shijima.

The previous night, Celty heard that Heaven’s Slave might have a connection to the Natsugawara boy. Considering her discussion with Akabayashi, she decided to look for Shijima—and that was when Kuon messaged her.

It felt like a social media post. *“This guy Shijima, a high-ranking member of the infamous Heaven’s Slave, just came to the Blue Squares. He said he was going to Sonohara-dou and that there would be plenty of chances. LMAO!”*

But to Celty, this might as well have been an arrow striking her in the chest with a message of crucial importance attached to it.

After asking Anri about it, she said that a man had indeed come asking about Saika, and that evening was when the burglary happened.

Is he going after Saika...?

She sent a message to Kuon to check, but according to him, it was “a man with glasses and bandages around his face.” That was probably him.

But what was he doing in the storehouse? Did he think that there was another Saika kept back there, like the one Shinra’s holding...?

She asked Anri about that possibility, but Anri could only say, “Um, we don’t know if he’s responsible for this yet...”

Yes, it might be hasty to decide who was the culprit already, but at this point, it seemed unnatural not to think he had a connection.

Then again, I kind of doubt that Shijima can do anything to Anri... Oh, but wait. What if he doesn’t try to fight her but lights her house on fire...? He might saddle her with some kind of terrible debt that forces her out onto the street...

These were the kinds of things that villains in TV dramas did. Celty found her hackles rising at the thought of them.

Just when Anri's found a tranquil life for herself... I have to protect that...

"Well, putting aside whether the bandaged man is the burglar, I'm chasing after him for a separate matter. If I catch him and find anything out, I'll let you know."

"Thank you for that...um, and please be careful," Anri said, concerned.

Inside her heart, Celty smiled back at the girl. *"Thank you. I'll be very cautious."* Then she remembered something else and asked, *"Oh, by the way, about that wooden hammer in the message last night..."*

"Ah, right... When we organized the storehouse yesterday, I didn't see anything like it... It's possible that it sold during my father's generation. I'm sorry," Anri said, bowing.

Celty waved a hand. *"Oh no, it's fine. It wasn't something I needed."*

She left after that and rushed off, letting Shooter do most of the driving as she considered her plans for what came next.

Hmm...so if the cursed hammer isn't in the storehouse...could the thief have stolen it? If Shijima's the culprit, then maybe he took something else in the same vein when he couldn't find Saika...but according to Kujiragi, it's not actually cursed in the same way... And on the other hand, he might have only heard the rumors that it was cursed, like I did, and believed them...

Ultimately, she concluded that she wouldn't get anywhere without catching Shijima first, so Celty headed off to look for members of Heaven's Slave. If the Natsugawara boy was hanging out with Shijima, he could already be hooked on drugs.

Celty didn't want to see the heartbroken disappointment on Awayuki's face when she saw her brother as a strung-out junkie. Just in case, she sped Shooter up a bit more.

She had no idea that she was being observed from afar.



Building rooftop

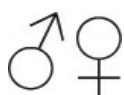
A man was watching Celty ride through the streets below and spoke into his phone in English. "...I've got confirmation. It's the Headless Rider."

"Right, just like the video. The one who attacked our helicopter. Seems like it was true that our target's been to Natsugawara's mansion."

After reporting a few more observations, the foreign man offered his partner over the phone a conjecture.

"Yes, I would say it's a pet of Natsugawara Konzern. I would assume that the incident two years ago was an intentional hostility against us."

"...Absolutely. And even if it's not true, we still owe that ridiculous stage magician for the loss of our helicopter and men."



Raira Academy, rooftop, daytime

"So what's the deal? Is that Shijima guy the thief?" wondered Yahiro, scarfing down his sandwich.

Kuon washed down his home-cooked lunch with cola. "Dunno. I'm not really sure what he's after, but he did say there would be 'plenty of chances.' It's hard to imagine it could be anyone else."

Himeka, who was eating a curry bread from the cafeteria, said, "But if he's the thief, why would he say something like that in front of another person?"

"Well, my Blue Squares are basically thugs to begin with. He probably wasn't worried they'd squeal, ya know? And they were all worked up at the time... Also, I wouldn't have paid as much attention if I hadn't recognized the name Shijima."

That was a name that held a special meaning for them. When the Headless Rider cult incident happened around the start of high school, the man who'd been distributing man power and drugs to the cult was a man named Shijima.

In particular, Himeka had a strong connection because it was her family members who'd been victimized by the scheme. She didn't display any outward emotion; she just asked Kuon, "You couldn't have caught him at the time?"

“Kuronuma was in a noninterference kind of mood, so I would have been alone yelling, ‘Dammit! Revenge for Himeka’s sisters!’ It would be one thing if it was just him, but he had this other weirdo with him...”

“You know my sisters are still alive, right?” Himeka sighed. “Anyway, he might have just been careless, since you look like you’d be a thief yourself.”

“Look, I know I bring this upon myself with how I look, but you could at least take my side after all this time...,” Kuon lamented.

“Maybe you should just dye your hair black and go back to how you used to look,” suggested Yahiro.

“...Why do you say that like you know my old look?”

“Because the Orihara twins showed me pictures of you back in middle school.”

“Unbelievable! I figured it would be Kuronuma—how did those twins get pictures?! How much, dammit?! How much did he sell my past for?!” lamented Kuon.

Himeka and Yahiro ignored him. “I wonder what this Shijima guy wants,” she said.

“...How do *you* feel about him, Himeka?” Kuon said. “He’s the one who gave dangerous drugs to your sisters, right? If you want to catch him and make him pay, I’ll help. The next time he shows up to see Kuronuma, I’ll follow him back to his hideout, then send Yahiro in there to raise hell. That sounds like a plan to me.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize I was part of your plan,” said Yahiro. He must have been fine with the thought of helping Himeka because he didn’t seem especially displeased by this.

Instead, she was the one who shook her head. “To be honest, my sisters partially earned what happened to them... Although some of that is only because the Heaven’s Slave drug effects were weak on them, and they were able to go back to normal life quickly. If that Shijima guy were here, I’d probably slap him across the face. But I don’t really feel like searching for him just so I can do something.”

“One of those ‘vengeance solves nothing’ mindsets? Wow, that’s so cool. You hear that, Yahiro? Doesn’t sound like we’ll have any part of the action after all,” Kuon snarked.

“But I’m scared,” said Yahiro.

“Scared? Of what?”

“It’s scary to me that I can’t tell what this Shijima guy is thinking. What if he’s trying to plunge Tokyo into a sea of flames or end the world? It makes me imagine a bomb’s just going to fall on my head out of the blue one day. That’s really frightening,” said Yahiro quite seriously.

Kuon just chuckled and shook his shoulder. “Seriously, how can you be such a pessimist when you’re such a good fighter? Don’t answer that—I know your story. But seriously, you can afford to chill out a bit. Nobody’s been hitting you with dump trucks here, have they?”

“True, they’re not...but that’s just why I don’t want to repeat the same experiences. If someone around is scary, I want to know more about them. Maybe that way, I’ll know how to stay away from them or avoid making them angry...,” Yahiro said, trailing off. Then a thought occurred to him. “Ah, in fact... maybe it *would* be good to know where his hideout is. So that I don’t accidentally wander into it.”

“Wander into it? We’re not talking about a bear cave, man... You’re not just a chicken, Yahiro, you’re a really *proactive* chicken...”

But while Kuon was as sardonic as usual, Himeka offered Yahiro encouragement in her own flat manner.

“It’ll be fine, Yahiro. I can help you manage that anxiety, as long as it’s within my power.”

“Yeah, good point. Thanks.”

They were both utterly expressionless. It caused Kuon’s face to scrunch up, and he swung his hands with frustration.

“Gaaah! What is with you two? What is your deal?! I can’t even tell if that was supposed to be romantic or not! Like, that was a kinda-sorta touching line, so

you have to *do* something with it! You're making *me* worry over here! You two should be going out by now!" he bellowed.

This came as a surprise to Yahiro. "Huh? We can go out?" he asked her, without a trace of irony.

Himeka considered this for about ten seconds before replying, "I'm sorry. I think that men and women should get to know each other a bit better before making such a momentous decision."

"That's true. Kuon's just impatient."

Kuon put the cap on his half-finished bottle of soda and shook it furiously. "Gaaaaah! Why am I the one who's being oblivious here?!"

"Calm down, Kuon. By the way, did you ever get that box open?"

"Huh? Oh, the box from Sonohara-dou. Yeah, it's open."

"You said you'd write about what was inside on your blog, but you haven't put out an update yet," noted Himeka.

This attention caused Kuon to guiltily avoid looking at either of them. "Well... some stuff happened...and the contents weren't really worth blogging about... Besides, Shijima! Shijima!" he said, clearly desperate to change the topic. "Kuronuma said to leave him alone...but Celty's searching for him for a different reason, and I've kept her up to date, so maybe she'll catch him for us?"



Awakusu-kai office

"And? What's the deal with these guests from overseas?" Akabayashi asked.

His fellow lieutenant, Kazamoto, blinked with gleaming reptilian eyes. "Well, they've never fought with us directly. Seems they're the folks who caused that whole hubbub in Saitama. You know, the one that made the news. Helicopter crash-landing in a port town in Kanagawa, bunch of guns found, prominent gun fighting around that time."

"Ah yes, I remember that. But if it was a squabble in Saitama, what's it got to do with Kanagawa? They're in different directions."

“Well, that’s where this gets funny. You know the Natsugawara Group, right? The rich guy in Saitama. Apparently, they stole some valuable cargo from there and took it to the port to ship it out of the country. It turned into a shoot-out, and even the helicopter went down. Honestly, it was probably infighting...but it didn’t have anything to do with us, so I don’t have details about it. At least, not this early...”

“Mmm...gunfight and a chopper. That’s a pretty big operation, then,” murmured Akabayashi, his eyes narrowing.

Kazamoto smirked, revealing crooked teeth. “Well, the Natsugawara Group might be famous in Japan as a toy maker, but internationally, they’re known for several revolutionary pieces of software tech. I can understand why people seeking to steal their secrets might come to Japan, attempting to find a personal vulnerability that will give them control over the Natsugawara patriarch.”



Rental office, Saitama Prefecture

“It’s an antique shop in Ikebukuro called Sonohara-dou. I’ve slipped all the stuff into the storehouse there,” said Yukihiro Natsugawara.

The members of Heaven’s Slave shared questioning expressions. “When you say ‘slipped into’...you don’t mean that you asked the owner to hold on to the things?” one asked.

“It was a tricky situation,” Yukihiro replied, clicking his tongue as he recalled the events of two nights ago.

Shit. Was I really so terrified of these idiots?

When he ran away from home, Yukihiro took a few items with him.

His reasons for what he chose were simple: Some were for a quick source of cash, some were for long-term funding, and other things were for pure spite at his father. He found it quite logically satisfying.

By first selling the items, he would gain enough money to live off for several months.

And then, using the knowledge he had as part of the family, he would make use of the *thing hidden inside the objects* for long-term financial gain.

As a result, because the profit he gained represented a long-term *loss* for the Natsugawara family, it also successfully punished his father. With all that in mind, he removed some high-value items of a *special nature* from the house as he ran away.

Yukihiko hated his father.

It was an utterly misplaced grudge.

Yukihiko's parents told him on a regular basis that he shouldn't worry about being the heir to the Natsugawara Group and to live as he wished to live. Yukihiko had always compared himself favorably to other children from a very young age. He considered himself special and superior. He didn't understand what his parents meant.

If he was free to live as he wanted, then why would he ever be anything but the heir to the Natsugawara family, where he was guaranteed to be fabulously rich by doing nothing at all? That was the kind of person Yukihiko was. When his young sister Awayuki said she wanted to draw storybooks when she grew up, he just mocked her and said, "That's stupid. Why would you create something from scratch that you can just buy with money?"

In his mind, he wasn't born to make money; he was born to spend money. He existed to put more money into circulation and to oil the gears of commerce: a modern-day nobleman. And that was when his parents brought in the foster son.

At first, he considered the newcomer something like a servant rather than a brother.

When his foster brother achieved school grades far better than his own, he thought it rather impudent but didn't really care much, assuming that the boy was still far below his own standing in the world.

But eventually, he began to notice things.

The stares of others gradually moved past him and gathered on his foster brother instead.

Yukihiko's downfall came quickly.

He began to think, without reason, that even his parents didn't care about him anymore. Surely, "live the way you want" meant "we don't need you anymore." Once his mind was stuck in that swamp, he was unable to free himself.

When he began to act out, and his parents scolded him, he would think, *They're only concerned with what society thinks*, and found himself hanging around with the outlaws of society.

When he spent his money on them, the people he found would praise him without end.

Satisfied with the situation that he'd always considered "the way things should be" since childhood, Yukihiko enjoyed this dream for a while.

But after running away, he found that illusion began to fray at the seams.

The friends who had lifted him up suddenly seemed awfully concerned about his remaining balance. "How much did you manage to take with you?"

And once he noticed that change in attitude, irritating as it was, Yukihiko ventured to Ikebukuro in search of a certain man.

Izaya Orihara.

His plan was to use this information agent, a well-known name among the outlaws, as a means of gaining long-term income.

But Yukihiko had no idea that after an incident two years earlier, the information seller had completely vanished from Ikebukuro.

It was while he was wandering around the city that Heaven's Slave showed up.

"Hey, I remember what you said. That in the stuff you took, there's data that could destroy your dad's company."

"You were talkin' all about it at the bar, weren't you?"

"There are some guys from overseas who are interested in buying at a lucrative price. We'll act as an intermediary for you."

He wasn't nobility; he was just a laborer being extorted by corrupt nobles. He performed the simple but dangerous work of taking money from his family, and it was all going to be stolen from him. By the time he realized what he'd done, it was already too late. He became a lost little lamb, running for his life all over Ikebukuro.

Then he remembered that Sonohara-dou, a place he'd identified when he first came to Ikebukuro as a convenient antiques store that would buy the items he'd taken with him, was nearby. He used the storehouse around the back as a place to hide.

If he handed over everything the other people wanted, he would no longer hold any worth. And the value he'd gained would go straight over his head and into Heaven's Slave.

Understanding his predicament meant that he now needed to temporarily hide what the other men wanted. He needed to improve his status from "target for exploitation" to "trading partner."

If he just put the stuff down, the shop owner would realize very quickly that something had been added. And since he'd broken the simple lock to get inside, if he did a bad job of hiding it, the police might very well impound it as evidence.

Which is why he messed up the storehouse a certain amount—to make it look like a burglary—and slipped the items he'd taken from home among the mess.

Hmm...should I also steal a thing or two while I'm doing this...? Are there any weapons in here? I wouldn't want to run into those guys outside. It's an antiques shop, so maybe there's a katana somewhere.

After a bit of rifling around, he found a small hammer. It was made of wood, aged but sturdy, and decorated with strange patterns.

A wooden hammer...? Well, it's better than nothing. I doubt they're going to be scared by seeing me swing this around, though...

Despite his misgivings, however, the instant he held the hammer, its sheer comfort simply took his breath away.

It had been crafted solely for one man to use it: Yukihiro Natsugawara. Such

was the perfect feel of the handle in his hand. It was as if the hammer had fused to his palm.

After staring at it in wonder, he found himself reconsidering. Why was he sneaking around at all? He was the exalted son of the Natsugawara family. He stood at the pinnacle of the world and had nothing in common with these street-level thugs.

He slowly walked out of the storehouse, holding the little hammer.

He was going to take back the status he was owed.

It was time to punish the ones who had betrayed him and tried to sell him to another, larger organization.

This quest resulted in Yukihiro smashing Heaven's Slave's leader with the hammer and taking over his seat.

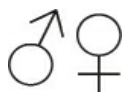
"Listen, the stuff should all be in the storehouse. If you can just bring it to me, I can do the rest," he said, giving his new followers their instructions to attack the storehouse of Sonohara-dou.

His voice brimming with confidence, he noted, "I saw the owner of that place during the day for a bit. She was a good-looking woman..."

Because he was special, he knew that he was therefore allowed to do anything that he wanted.

And it was this that spurred him on to give the order that would lead to his downfall.

"If she spots you and raises a fuss, you can go ahead and kidnap her."



Togusa's apartment, evening

"Whoa...so this is the giant shark tooth you found at Sonohara-dou!" Yumasaki exclaimed.

"Yes. I like shark movies and stuff, so..."

"Yeah, this is cool. Lots of manga and anime like to insert parodies of famous shark movies, so it's good to keep up on them, you know? Man, if I'd known

they had things like *this* there, I would have helped out...”

Yumasaki examined Yahiro’s shark tooth fossil with great excitement, standing in front of Togusa’s van. It was a single piece about the size of his palm, with serrated edges along its spearhead shape. You could use that thing as a weapon.

He and Karisawa had taken a car ride over to Togusa’s place, where they saw Yahiro and struck up this conversation. It was in the course of explaining yesterday’s events that Yahiro brought up the fossil from Sonohara-dou, which proved to be quite the topic of interest.

“Oh, you boys, with your shark and dinosaur teeth.”

“You don’t have any interest, Karisawa?” Yahiro asked.

“Well, I like sharkboys.”

“Sharkboys... Actually, I think *sharkgirls* sounds surprisingly cute and alluring, for some weird reason?” Yumasaki said.

The conversation devolved from there, as usual. Once they had run their course, Yumasaki examined the tooth fossil closely and said, “I have to say, Anri’s quite generous. This is a really high-value item.”

“Huh?”

“At this size, it’s probably a megalodon tooth. They’re tens of thousands of yen at the cheapest. Could be a hundred, two hundred, easily over half a million yen for the very best specimens.”

“What?!” Yahiro gaped.

Saburo was equally shocked. “Are you serious?! Th-they go for that much?! Damn... I shouldn’t have told you to accept her offer... Now I feel like I cost Anri big-time...”

“So I should probably return it...,” stammered Yahiro, his eyes ready to pop out.

Karisawa took a closer look at the fossil. “Well, not this one. It’s not going for a hundred thousand yen or whatever. It’s a composite.”

“A composite?”

“Yeah. Megalodon teeth rarely come in one complete piece, so when that happens, they use other teeth from the other side of the jaw in a similar shape and cut them to fill the missing bit and make a complete tooth.”

“Ohhh.”

“Spoken with the authority of someone who sells her own handicrafts...,” Togusa said.

The guys were duly impressed by her knowledge. Karisawa continued, smiling, “Yes, which is why it’s more like thirty thousand yen for one this size.”

“That’s still a lot of money...”

Yahiro stared at the fossil, unsure of what to do. A sudden thought made him turn to Karisawa.

“But how do you tell the difference between a composite and a normal fossil...?”

“See, if you look closely, notice how the colors are different on the right and left sides of the middle here?”

“Oh, you’re right... Wow. But they’re pretty firmly attached together... Oops!”

Yahiro applied pressure on the seam with his thumbs and promptly cracked the shark fossil in two.

The others went paler much faster than Yahiro did.

“Aaaah! Oh no! Glue! We need glue! Or grains of rice! They say each grain of rice has the seven lucky gods inside of it! We can use their godly power to fuse shark with shark into the demonic Sharktopus-nado!”

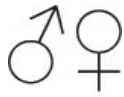
“Hang on—I’ve got a soldering iron and some solder inside the van...”

“Let’s just call Kadota! He’s a plasterer, so he might know what to do!”

While the others panicked, Yahiro’s shock was dulled by a discovery he’d made. “What is this...?”

Right along the seam where the giant shark tooth fossil cracked, there was a little notch—out of which poked a thin micro SD card.





Rental office, Saitama Prefecture

“You’ve been making quite a name for yourself in just the last few days, from what I hear,” Earthworm said.

Eyes half-open, Shijima scowled. “Yeah, I heard. People calling themselves Heaven’s Slave are working with some foreign group.”

“Oh. I thought you were utilizing some friends you were keeping hidden from me. Is that not the case?” She slowly and knowingly sighed, practically with seduction.

Shijima just grimaced. “Heaven’s Slave is a name I gave up. What value can it have without Kumoi or me? It only sticks around as the name of the drug.”

“And that drug is really doing the rounds these days. Junkies are showing up at our casino looking for dealers. It’s starting to become a problem.”

“...What?”

Jami had been listening from the corner of the room, and now he came spinning forward. “Mr. Shijima, I think drugs are bad! I was reading a manga where it said that people who sell drugs are the worst. It’s not too late to turn things around. Say no to selling drugs! It’s majorly uncool!”

“Calling me the ‘worst’ implies a level of importance I don’t rise to. I’m the bottom of the barrel.”

“Oh, man. That wasn’t even a real rebuttal. That makes you look even more uncool, Mr. Shijima!” Jami exclaimed, quite serious despite his childish mannerisms.

Shijima carefully avoided his eyes. “Well...for one thing, I’m not dealing drugs anymore.”

“Huh?”

“Heaven’s Slave is a drug that amplifies your own delusions. It only works when given to the right people. I gave the Headless Rider worshippers some doses, but if I was distributing to anyone, the drug would only follow the same

fate as Heaven's Slave, the organization."

Earthworm seemed surprised by this. "Oh. You said you wanted revenge on Ikebukuro, so I assumed you were going to do something like mix your drugs into the school lunches of all the schools in the area."

"Are you confusing me for some secret criminal organization from a children's show?" Shijima muttered unhappily. He strode to the window and gazed out at the darkening city. "It means nothing for me to do that vengeance myself. Helping the city create its own downfall is good enough. In fact, that's exactly what I want. If my response to the city that totally ignored me is to rage and say, *Pay attention to me*, it would basically be bending my knee and acknowledging their reproach," he said loftily.

Behind him, Jami and Earthworm spoke in hushed tones.

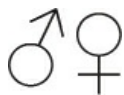
"Sometimes I can't tell if Mr. Shijima is sick in the head or just obsessed with himself."

"I think it's both."

Shijima could hear exactly what they were whispering, but he didn't seem particularly upset by it.

"Yes...that's correct," he said. He paused before resuming.

"...If I wasn't using self-obsession as a cover, I would have gone mad and self-destructed long ago."



4F of Holy Article Hall, mixed commercial building in Ikebukuro, night

This particular building was dedicated to various Taiwanese real estate offices and restaurants. One entire floor was a kind of warehouse, which acted as a hangout spot for Dragon Zombie. Cely was visiting to ask their leader, Libei Ying, for information about Heaven's Slave.

"Ah yes...that name's been popping up again lately. I heard they were wiped out when I was hospitalized in Taiwan. By the way, may I ask how you knew about this spot, Headless Rider?"

About fifteen members of Dragon Zombie were keeping a close eye on her, albeit from a distance. But perhaps because they'd been in Ikebukuro for a long time and understood Celty's power, their attitude was less open hostility and more nervous tension, a desire for things to end peacefully.

"I asked someone I know."

"I'm assuming it's that green-haired boy. If you see him, could you tell him I'd appreciate it if he didn't blab about my hideout to others?"

"You could say that to your own people, but you can't stop others from talking, can you? Besides, after you trespassed into my apartment building, I don't think you have any right to talk," Celty said rightfully.

Libei shrugged and laughed. "Well, I guess you're right about that... It's just creepy how much that kid knows about things. Reminds me of Izaya Orihara."

"Now that's just a cruel thing to say," Celty opined, although she probably didn't realize that Kuon's wish was to be even better than Izaya in that regard. She returned to the topic. *"Kuon doesn't know Shijima's hideout, either. But I figured because you're roaming all over Tokyo on your bikes, you guys might have that information."*

"Well, that depends."

"I'm not asking for free. I can pay a reasonable amount for the information."

"The thing is, they're *really* slippery. We've spotted them selling on a few occasions, caught the dealers, and crushed the higher-ups...but none of that has gotten us any closer to their main hangout. We don't even know where they're cultivating the base of the drug."

Celty couldn't detect any falsehood in the look on Libei's face.

Interesting. So even if they're able to catch the street-level dealers, they can't manage to go up the chain to Shijima. Just like Mr. Akabayashi said, they're trouble. When I observed him before, he was basically just an underling working for Nasujima...

"I see... Well, that's too bad. Let me know if you learn anything good," she typed, turning to leave.

But Libei just smiled and waved his hand. “You take care out there, too, rider. I hear that motorcycle cop Kuzuhara is off his suspension.”

That froze Celty in her tracks.

“...Suspension? I guess I hadn’t seen him around lately.” No wonder she’d had such an easy time driving around. *“What did that monster get up to? Did he skin someone and reupholster his seat with it...?”*

“Uh, I’m not sure how seriously to take that question,” Libei remarked, smirking. “Look, it’s simple. A big politician’s car committed a hit-and-run. He went after the car and tried to arrest the guy.”

“But...that shouldn’t actually be his fault, right? If that earns him a suspension, it makes you wonder if our entire society is rotten to the core...”

“Well, let me finish the story. The politician, no surprise, goes on a rant, like, *‘Who do you think I am?’* And then Kuzuhara dragged the old man out through the window and rode around, dangling him inches above the street. He said, *‘I don’t care who you are—if you crash, you’ll be a stain on the asphalt.’* So he got suspended for going too far.”

Celty felt relieved to hear that the politician was properly arrested for the hit-and-run and was punished.

“I’m glad. Society is still healthy...”

Libei just smirked. “Anyway, for bikers like us, it only means that hell’s coming back around.”

“That’s just a fact of life. It’s your fault for breaking the speed limit.”

“Do I need to fetch you a mirror?”

“I mean...it’s anyone’s fault for doing that...myself included...”

Ugh, now I feel like I’m really losing my grasp on normal society...

But no. This is the time to focus on Shijima.

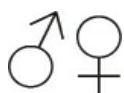
After leaving the building behind, Celty reflected on the information she had collected. It seemed like an agglomeration of dozens of little groups in a hierarchy that was widespread yet shallow, busy with a variety of crimes.

“A group that’s hard to grasp...just like the Dollars.”

In fact, I think Mr. Akabayashi said they’d used the Dollars as a model. Maybe I’ve been underestimating this Shijima fellow...

She straddled Shooter and slapped the sides of her helmet, willing herself to sharpen up.

I have to give this everything I’ve got. As though I’m facing the Dollars themselves.



Saitama Prefecture

Men in dark suits traded English comments in the dimly lit room.

The majority of them were clearly not Japanese, but the few among the group who looked Japanese spoke English exclusively with the others.

Each held a tablet showing videos of the Headless Rider, presumably taken around Ikebukuro.

“I don’t know what it means, but it seems like Natsugawara’s pet magician rider is wandering around Ikebukuro.”

“Apparently, the rider’s been spotted in Ikebukuro for years...but they also pointed out that there’s a connection to a group called the Awakusu-kai. I also heard she worked for a fixer in Shinjuku named Izaya Orihara...but he’s a dangerous sort. He’s even got connections to the SAMPLE cult.”

“There’s a possibility the Awakusu-kai and Izaya Orihara are secretly connected to Natsugawara. He’s a resilient man. Over in America, he’s made contact with mafia families big and small, like the Runoratas and Russos, and he has many dummy connections, too. There’s probably only a tiny handful of people in the Natsugawara Group who know which organizations are actually backing them,” one of the men warned.

The others said, “Which is what makes this information his eldest son stole so fascinating.”

“Is it a trap meant to lure us into the open?”

“No, from what I understand, Yukihiro Natsugawara is just the classic failure of a son, unlike his father. People say the recent foster son is meant to give the family a viable successor. We’re monitoring Yukihiro now that he’s joined Heaven’s Slave; I think the possibility that he’s a genius playing dumb is very low,” said a man. Then he presented his concerned hypothesis about another figure. “This magician rider seems to be searching for Yukihiro...and I suspect... this might be a means to eliminate the man’s oldest son.”

“Interesting. So the pet bodyguard is actually the pet assassin?”

“In any case, the maximum caution must be paid to this character. Get all the personnel and weapons you can at the present moment.”

“Wait, *all* of them...? You want to start a war in this country?” One of his companions gaped.

The central figure in the room shook his head. “Don’t forget—she knocked a helicopter out. Those who dealt with her directly are still in prison...but from what I hear, it was very clear that she’s no ordinary opponent. It would be dangerous to assume that all the videos online are fakes.”

“Oh, come on. Are you the kind of guy who believes that they research aliens at Area 51 or that Nebula Pharmaceuticals is secretly working on vampires and the undead? If anything, this rider’s probably just using some kind of hallucinatory gas or something.”

“If she can freely wield chemical weapons that give groups of people identical hallucinations, she’s more dangerous than your average alien or vampire,” the leader sneered.

“Uh...huh...” The teasing one had no response.

Then the leader played a few more videos on their tablets, including ones with eerie shadow movements that could only be special effects. He brought up another suggestion.

“The Natsugawara Group is a leading company in the realms of nanotech, AI, and biotech overseas. Their scale is smaller than Nebula’s, but the richness and future possibilities of their tech is eye-popping. Perhaps this strange rider has a connection to that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve heard that this shadow might actually be the latest technology from the Natsugawara Group.”

The room buzzed with unease, and the leader cast a wary glance around.

“Don’t assume we’re only dealing with one person. Proceed with extreme violence. Expect to make an enemy out of Natsugawara’s true connection...or perhaps every group in Ikebukuro and Saitama together.”

INTERMISSION

Dirty Private Business (3)

Outside Sonohara-dou, night

“How does it look?”

“Um...I don't know. I don't sense anyone...”

Members of Heaven's Slave were spying on the Sonohara-dou storehouse on Yukihiro Natsugawara's orders. They were grouping up in twos and threes to walk past the building, stealing furtive glances, and so far they were unable to calculate the right time to take action.

“He said we could kidnap the owner. Should we really be doing that?”

“Dunno. Our leader's a rich guy. He could probably cover it up.”

“But will he cover it up if we get caught?”

“Beats me. Grabbing someone off the street is one thing, but a home invasion followed by an abduction? That's bad news, man. We'd get arrested for sure.”

As the pair of men walked by, something struck them as wrong. The streetlight a short distance away had suddenly gone out.

However, further examination showed that the light was *not* actually out.

Something was standing atop the light, its feet exuding some mysterious material, either a black liquid or smoke, and it was covering the light bulb, blocking its light.

“Hwuh?!”

“Wha...wh-wh-wha...?! What is that?!”

As the thugs panicked, the thing bounded off the streetlight, shooting shadow out of its feet like jet boosters before making a soft landing right in front of them.

It was so bizarre, so illogical. Sheer confusion overrode the thugs' sense of fear. Their jaws dropped open, and they glanced at one another.

"You're Shijima's boys."

"Huh? Shijima...? Wh-who's that...?"

"Don't play stupid with me!"

Enough time had now passed in the presence of the thing emitting shadow from its back that their instinct of fear had finally reached their brains. They tried to scream once their lungs managed to work again, but they couldn't vocalize anything. They spun on their heels and fled like startled rabbits.

Don't you dare!

The mysterious shadow, Celty, extended her power toward their legs, intending to truss up the two suspicious punks like she so often did.

Based on the information in Kuon's e-mail, she assumed Shijima was the one behind this and waited around Sonohara-dou, intending to catch anyone who might be trying to sneak in again tonight.

Sure enough, some would-be intruders appeared, and while listening from atop the streetlight, she heard snippets like "kidnap the owner," "rich parents," and "cover it up," which convinced her these were the goons she was waiting for.

I can't let Anri get hurt... While it worries me, I suppose I could ask Shinra to use Kujiragi's Saika and control them...

It seemed to her that Shinra would probably roll around on the floor and protest, *No, no, no! I don't want to use the Saika that sliced Celty to slice some gross, sweaty men!* She decided to go ahead and kidnap the two.

And just when her shadow was mere inches away from her prey—*shunk!* A powerful impact slammed through Celty's body.

...?!

A moment later, she registered pain all through her being.

Her sense of pain was significantly duller than a human's, but even this felt

like intense agony. It might have been worse than the pain of Shingen's and Emilia's vivisection attempts. Alarmed, she tried to identify the cause.

The center of the shock was around her waist. She reached out toward the spot with her shadow and discovered something was lodged into her riding suit made of darkness.

Is this—?!

With a sinking suspicion, she searched for the object, which had sunk into her flesh within the riding suit—and with a sharp pain, her prying shadow tendrils extracted the object.

A bullet?!

It was a dented lead bullet. Celty deployed a shadow shield around herself that offered three hundred and sixty degrees of cover. Then she focused on the direction the bullet had presumably come from, but nothing else was forthcoming.

Just in case, Celty thickened the shadow of her suit before undoing the shield. Ordinarily, it was sturdy enough that it wouldn't allow a bullet through, but it was not unlike a bulletproof vest; it didn't eliminate the shock of impact. She strengthened her shadow with layer upon layer, staying wary.

But no more attacks seemed forthcoming, leaving the misshapen bullet in Celty's palm as the only evidence of the attack.

I didn't hear a gunshot...so was I sniped from long distance, using a sound suppressor? Also, I probably should have known this already, but man, my shadow is tough...

Grateful to the power of her shadow, which had once stopped a shot from an anti-matériel rifle, Celty headed for Shooter, who was parked nearby. Her mount was in the form of a horse, his tail flicking back and forth uneasily.

Hmm? What's wrong, Shooter?

It was like he was trying to flick something away from his rear legs with his tail. Celty examined them and found some kind of small device attached to him.

Is this...a transmitter?! Dammit, was someone watching me when I parked

Shooter? Or are those two goons just a distraction, and this was Shijima's real goal?

She crushed the transmitter and glanced around, but naturally, the pair of hoodlums were long gone. In the process, they'd sent a message to all the others who'd been scattered around, and she couldn't sense any of them near Sonohara-dou anymore.

Celty felt frustrated; she'd seemingly averted danger for tonight, but it wasn't a real solution to the problem at all.

I was sloppy. I didn't expect them to use an actual gun... This means time is of the essence. Anri is essentially stronger than I am, but she's got no defense against a sniper rifle she can't see coming.

Her realization that the situation had worsened significantly and that the two goons had slipped away only added to her frustration.

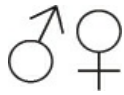
Ugh...I should have tied them up first and asked what they were doing. I'm a disgrace of a professional, she thought, hopping onto Shooter. Then she caught herself and screamed, *Whoa, whoa, whoa! A professional what?! I'm not a police officer or a mercenary or a hit man! Ordinary couriers don't tie up hoodlums to question them!*

She was falling into a deep despair at the thought that even her mental definition of *courier* was starting to go awry. Dejectedly, she sent Shinra a message.

"Hey, Shinra...what is a courier anyway?"

His reply arrived in less than a minute, which was somewhat creepy, but Celty felt grateful for his attention. She could not have imagined, however, how long his answer would be.

"Why, it's a profession that is only for you, Celty: the person who brings love to the client that is me! Any courier under any other definition is a fraud... Yes, only you are my 100% true love, Celty! The love-distributing Santa Claus! In fact, I'll hire you for a job right now! Courier, please bring me the angel known as Celty! And though it's not the season, I would love it if you were dressed as Santa! That would be so, so, so great!"



Meanwhile, at a research building—Nebula office in Chicago

“...Oh?”

Nebula was one of the largest conglomerates in the world.

In this secret research facility, which only existed on paper as materials storage for the company’s pharmaceutical research wing, a Japanese researcher gasped with suspicion.

“What is it, Namie? Do we have a problem?” asked her gas mask–wearing supervisor. Namie Yagiri squinted at her research subject and muttered to herself.

“I feel like I just saw this head make the most bitter grimace ever...but it must have been my imagination.”

CHAPTER 4

EXCUSE ME!
DON'T MAKE ME

CALL THE POLICE, SIR!



CHAPTER 4

Excuse Me! Don't Make Me Call the Police, Sir!

The next day, rental office, Saitama Prefecture

"Mr. Shijimaaa. Kidnapping women is just as low as dealing drugs. Let's not do thiiis..."

It was late afternoon, and the sun was approaching the horizon. Jami had just shown up at the hideout and started complaining.

Shijima exhaled and asked, "What are you talking about?"

"I heard some bad-looking kids talking about it at school. They said Heaven's Slave is trying to abduct people in Ikebukuro. The lady who runs the used item shop. That's the Sonohara person, right?"

"...I told you, I abandoned the organization known as Heaven's Slave... No, wait, stop. What was that? Tell me more."

Earthworm, who'd been listening nearby, smiled lasciviously and interjected, "Oh, I just heard the same rumor from a customer today. I assumed it was you, plotting to get Saika. Or maybe you're only after her body?" She pressed herself fully against Shijima's back.

In a monotone voice, he replied, "You're just enjoying yourself, knowing that that's not the case... Anyway, go ahead and tell me the details."

Minutes later, after he'd heard everything, Shijima readjusted his glasses and remarked, "I see... I would have ignored them if they were merely using the Heaven's Slave name, but if they're going after Anri Sonohara, that makes this a bit more personal."

"Why's that?" Jami asked.

"...Few people know about Saika, the cursed blade. I don't know who is using the group's name, but if there's another group out there looking for Saika, I

want to know the reason.”

“What’s Saika, Mr. Shijima?”

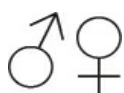
“I’ll tell you later,” he said, trying to get Jami off his back.

Shijima considered what to do next. Apparently, this mystery group wasn’t just going after the owner but plotting to take something from the Sonohara-dou storehouse, for reasons that were unclear.

“In any case, if their plan is getting leaked this easily, it’s going to break down imminently. We could probably let that happen without taking any action, but I’m curious who put them up to it. That might be someone with a connection to Saika.”

He coldly watched Jami, who was doing a handstand on a chair deftly balanced diagonally on two of its legs.

“...Depending on the situation, I might need to have Jami destroy them.”



Outside Sonohara-dou

“Well, Anri, take care of yourself,” Akabayashi said, leaving the building.

After a bit of a walk, he noticed a writhing blackness at the corner of the street ahead.

“You know, if you stay *this* close to Sonohara-dou, I’d prefer not to be seen with you.”

“It’s just as I reported this morning... I’m sorry. I lost our lead...”

“Don’t apologize. That wasn’t supposed to be your job anyway. You were staking out Anri’s place until dawn, weren’t you? If anything, *I’m* the one who should feel sorry.”

“I was only worried about my friend.”

“Your friend, huh...? I don’t have many of those. I’m jealous of Anri.” He smirked self-deprecatingly.

Celty tilted her helmet to the side. “Aren’t Mr. Shiki and Mr. Aozaki your

friends?”

Akabayashi burst into laughter. “Ah-ha...hak...*koff!* Ha-ha-ha... You know, you can be a real airhead at the oddest times.”

“Uh, r-really?”

“...Well, let’s see. I find I get along with the guys at Russia Sushi even when I’m not on the job, so I suppose you might say they’re friends of mine.”

Akabayashi paused, his gaze sharpening. He bowed to her.

“Thank you, courier. I mean it. You might not need it, but let me say it anyway. You have the word of Mizuki Akabayashi that this debt will be repaid one day.”

“Mr. Akabayashi...”

He was so dead serious that she knew it would be insulting to refuse his thanks, so Celty decided it was better to accept the sentiment. Akabayashi’s usual lilting smile returned, and he struck the ground with the tip of his cane.

“You just let me handle the rest. I can’t be using my own people on a garden-variety burglar, obviously. But if Heaven’s Slave is involved, that changes things. It means I can unleash man power on the problem.”

Celty extended her senses outward and became aware that there were men in suits walking about in notable number around them. They might have seemed like ordinary pedestrians at first, but a closer examination of their general air and unceasing observation made it clear that they were on the lookout for trouble.

Are they from Jan-Jaka-Jan or foot soldiers for the Awakusu-kai? Celty wondered, pegging them as protégés of Akabayashi’s. In any case, she was relieved that Anri would not need to expose herself to trouble anymore.

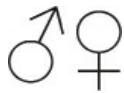
If the enemy just wanted to kill Anri, consequences be damned, snipers would be a major concern. It would be easier for them to just light Anri’s house on fire, so Celty decided the guns weren’t worth worrying about.

Either way, we need to capture the people behind this as soon as possible. And preferably before Anri recognizes what’s going on.

At the same time, however, she was worried about her own job. *While he earned it himself, I can't help but be concerned for Yukihiro Natsugawara's safety, being in the midst of this group.*

After her conversation with Akabayashi, Celty found herself making a new resolution as she zipped along on Shooter.

If I don't want Awayuki to cry over her brother, I need to nab him as soon as I find him, no matter what...



Rental office, Saitama Prefecture

"Oh my." Earthworm chuckled, seeing the collection of intelligence stored on the laptop. "It really is a small world, isn't it?"

"It's a crazy coincidence, huh, Mr. Shijima? Um, also...sorry?" Jami apologized for some strange reason.

"..." Shijima glared at the screen, not taking his eyes off it.

"Who could have guessed that Heaven's Slave had turned out to be such a complicated *mess*? It's like the karma from abandoning them has blown back on you all at once."

"It's divine punishment, Mr. Shijima. Like I said, you shouldn't have been doing that wicked plotting in front of Kishimojin..."

"I did nothing of the sort!" Shijima snapped. He got to his feet. "Well...I suppose it's time to act."

Earthworm noted his calm demeanor and flashed a seductive smile. "Act how, exactly? Are you going to cry to Daddy or Grandpa and say, *Pweeze help meeee*? Actually, I really want to see that. You have to do it, Hiroto."

"Like hell I will," he snapped again, then closed his eyes. "What I have to do hasn't changed. I either pour gas on the fire or send the wind... Well, a breeze is already blowing, so I guess it'll be gas this time."

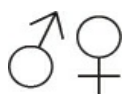
"I hate to douse your fire while you're acting very pretentious and cool, but you make it sound like you're setting up a charcoal grill for your food cart."

“That’s fine. Aren’t professional grillers cool?”

Shijima put on his jacket and went to the door.

“Where are you going?” asked Jami innocently. As usual, Shijima was nothing but cold.

“Off to see the monster that sells gasoline.”



At night, Ikebukuro

The sun had just finished setting, and a reddish glow still remained in the western sky.

Yukihiko Natsugawara was in the midst of the crowds, watching the Headless Rider rush about the city in search of something.

“So that’s the Headless Rider,” he murmured, shaking loose memories from years ago. “The thing that looked for our snake and brought it back...”

Although he had only briefly glanced at her through the window then, he vividly remembered the motorcycle and riding suit that seemed black enough to absorb all light.

“Is that my dad’s henchman? Could be looking for the stuff I took with me...?” Yukihiko murmured—half correctly, as it turned out. He kept his hat on to hide the top of his face as he walked.

He’d heard about how the Headless Rider had prevented the break-in at Sonohara-dou last night. *If that’s Dad’s agent, then how did she know I was involved with that shop? I hope she hasn’t already found the stuff and taken it out,* he worried to himself as he hurried toward Sonohara-dou.

But a mere graze of the handle of the hammer in his pocket caused those concerns to dissipate into thin air.

Yeah, that’s right... If my plan failed, I can just steal it out of the house again. At worst, I could kidnap Awayuki and demand ransom from Dad, he thought.

The lowest of the low.

When Yukihiko arrived at Sonohara-dou, he approached the owner with his

cap pulled low. If the rider had a connection to the owner, they might have photos of his face all around, at which point his presence here could be reported to the Natsugawara family at once. Deciding the chances were greater than zero, Yukihiro resolved to be cautious.

If the owner shows any sign of that, I guess I could use this thing to knock her out, he thought boldly.

“Welcome. Are you looking for anything in particular today?” the owner asked as he approached.

“Yes. Well, I’m looking for something rare... Would you happen to have any shark tooth fossils?”

She might not have organized everything in the storehouse, but if she was aware of it, she would react in some way. And if she realized that he was the culprit, he’d just have to knock her out with the hammer.

His plan was rapidly going from bold to reckless. Yukihiro squeezed the handle of the hammer.

The woman looked apologetic. “Oh...I’m very sorry. We did have one until recently, but it’s already gone.”

He very nearly uttered a twitching *uh...?* but managed to hold it in, pivoting quickly to a nervous “Ah, I s-see... Well, uh... What about a wooden parquet puzzle box sort of thing? My little sister loves those.”

“I’m very sorry. We also had one of those until recently...”

“...Oh. That’s...too bad.”

This doesn’t make sense. Does she know who I am? Is she saying these things on purpose? Since she didn’t say, I don’t know if we have that, and go off to check, but instead claimed, It’s already gone, should I assume that she does know the store had those things?

Dammit, who notices their inventory is growing and then immediately sells the new things? What is this bitch thinking?! fumed Yukihiro, who could not have known that there was never a register of items in the storehouse in the first place. But a possibility occurred to him. *What if...she already checked the*

contents and used the Headless Rider to return them to Dad...? But without any confirmation, it would be reckless to go back to the family to search...

Do I just need to knock her out and question her?

Confirming that no other people were inside the shop, he started to run a mental simulation, trying to figure out how long it would take to attack the woman and drag her into the back of the shop, out of sight.

But then the door opened, and a new person entered.

Yukihiko clicked his tongue in irritation and turned to see who had come in. The sight threatened to pop his eyes out of his skull.

The visitor, dressed in a high school uniform, was holding the very megalodon tooth fossil that Yukihiko had taken right out of his family home.

“Oh, what’s the matter with that?”

“Well...I was examining this, and I found out there was a weird data card stuck inside of it. I was wondering if it was actually something important to your family, Miss Sonohara...”

“...!”

Outside of their view, Yukihiko’s eyes twitched. *Dammit! It’s that kid! And he knows about the card?! What did he do—take that priceless megalodon fossil and immediately smash it to pieces?! he panicked.*

Meanwhile, Anri and Yahiro were having a very matter-of-fact conversation about the item.

“Umm...I don’t think so. My father and mother weren’t good with that kind of tech; we never had a computer... It’s possible that it was sold to us while my father was running the shop over a decade ago, and it was still hanging around,” she said.

“Ah, I see.”

“I don’t know what the data is, but if it was sold to a used items store, I think it’s perfectly fine for you to have it, Yahiro. Please don’t worry about it. If it seems like the contents of the card are important, you can tell me, and I’ll try to find something about it in the ledger from my father’s generation.”

“That’s a good idea,” Yahiro agreed. Yukihiro’s jaw dropped.

No, no, no! It’s a terrible idea! That’s a micro SD card! Why would you assume it’s that old?! You could make a solid guess of when it was sold just by looking at the dates on the files! Ugh, dammit! What now? Did he bring the SD card here with him...? I suppose I could follow him, beat him up, and take the data with me... Of course, I’ll also need the data inside the puzzle box, but I doubt that will be a problem because it only looks like pornography at a glance.

With this resolution in mind, Yukihiro silently slipped out of the store.

...The main thing is, I don’t want people recognizing my face. First things first, I need to find this kid’s hideout.

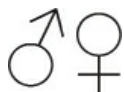
“But this shark fossil seems expensive on its own, so it feels wrong to receive it for something as simple as cleaning up...”

“Oh no. Please don’t worry about that... Oh, that’s right. There was a customer who was just looking for a shark tooth fossil over there... Oh?”

If Yahiro didn’t want it, Anri thought, she could suggest that he negotiate with the other customer who was looking for one—but that person was already gone, leaving behind nothing but a clammy breeze through the open door.

Several minutes later, Yukihiro watched from a distance as Yahiro climbed into a van parked next to the store. He got on the phone and called his Heaven’s Slave companions.

“...Yeah, that’s right. It’s a van with some kind of anime character printed on one side. If you see it around town, follow it and find out where their hideout is.”



Saitama Prefecture

“...We’ve learned the location of one of the data sources. A civilian has purchased it and discovered the card, it seems.”

“What do we do? Should we retrieve it ourselves?”

The suit-wearing men were calm and collected but with an undeniable sense

of menace.

“No, better to have Heaven’s Slave take the blame. We’ll just observe, like yesterday, and if they’re about to be caught, provide sniper backup. If the other side is civilians, no kill shots: just enough to scare them. Make sure the men understand that.”

“Understood. I’ll do so.”

Once the other man had finished passing along those orders to the subordinates, the leader of the group exhaled and murmured, “But the real problem...is that magician rider.”

“Our observation made it clear that the shadow effect is not a trick or illusion of some kind. We shot it when it was trying to catch Heaven’s Slave last night, and there was barely any damage. The rider just scooped up the bullet with its shadow and left.”

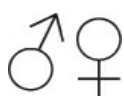
“Then was our prior information correct? Is *that* the Natsugawara Group’s secret tool?”

“What even *is* it...? Some kind of liquid metal controlled at will through electric current, perhaps...?”

“No point in boots-on-the-ground men like us trying to figure it out. We all know how to shoot guns, but can a single one of us list off more than five chemical equations? Is there a single person here who’s a regular reader of *Newton* magazine?” said the seeming leader of the group to the amusement of the men in suits. “We’ll let the boys at the lab figure out what that thing is. But you don’t need to be an expert to know at a glance that whatever it is, it’s so valuable that it could overturn the industry in multiple respects.”

He tapped the picture of the Headless Rider on his tablet, his voice flat and matter-of-fact.

“The pilot can go dead or alive. Just wait for your opportunity and retrieve the Shadow Ghost that takes the form of a bike and its rider.”



Evening, Ikebukuro

Unaware that her shadow had been given a new nickname, Celty was proceeding with the tedious work of investigating her case.

“...So with that in mind, have you heard any rumors about Heaven’s Slave?”

“Heaven’s Slave, huh? I haven’t heard anything *good*, that’s for sure.”

Celty was in a park, collecting information not from Shizuo Heiwajima but his superior at work, Tom Tanaka. They were on a break at the moment. Tom had a deep understanding of the local motorcycle groups, street gangs, and other delinquent sorts—at times, he even knew more than Izaya Orihara about such folks.

Celty had spent all day going from Saitama to Ikebukuro in search of Heaven’s Slave, but as Libei had said, she could find small groupings of their members but was not getting any closer to finding the body that controlled all of them.

She was beginning to feel like she was playing a game of whack-a-mole with a broken score counter. She had spotted Tom hanging out in the park when she realized she needed to be asking other people some questions.

“I just can’t get to the higher-ups. Everyone I threaten or butter up just says the same thing—that they can’t get in touch and they’re all annoyed and waiting for orders...”

“...Uh-huh. It sure does sound like the Dollars,” Tom said.

“Do you have any insight on the main group?” asked Celty, at her wit’s end.

Tom considered the question. “Well...maybe it’s possible...that Heaven’s Slave isn’t one group.”

“Huh?”

“It’s like okonomiyaki shops or what have you. There’s always the ‘original’ recipe, or the ‘true flavor,’ and whatnot... The initial Heaven’s Slave group dissolved, right? Some of those folks who no longer had any affiliation probably retained some know-how of dealing drugs, I assume,” Tom conjectured, sitting on the bench and looking up at Celty. “So if some of those leftovers drifted off to Tokyo or Saitama and recruited partners of their own and decided, *I’m the new Heaven’s Slave boss now*, of course you’re never going to reach the real

organizing body. Because there isn't one."

"...But that doesn't make sense. We know they're working for a leader named Shijima, and while they can't contact him, they all showed signs of having a boss of some kind giving them orders..."

"So like I was saying, inferior copies of Heaven's Slave start popping up like bamboo shoots after the rain, right? And if there's someone who recognizes this is happening, with longer reach and a wider perspective...he might choose to use all those inferior copies to his advantage. Someone who has to have the power to control all those hoodlums—through money, for example."

"I see... In that case, out of all the various Heaven's Slaves, you could choose only to use the ones who suited your purpose."

"Exactly. And it's easy to cut them off, like a lizard's tail. You stay hidden in the shadows and move on to using a different Heaven's Slave."

Interesting. That could be possible...but it seems to me like Shijima's been too visible for that to be true, Celty thought. Or maybe Shijima himself is being manipulated and is only, like, Heaven's Slave number five himself...

Tom could sense that Celty was uncertain about this argument. He scratched his cheek with a finger and suggested, "Well, I don't know the truth. But from what I hear, there are at least three Heaven's Slave groups in Ikebukuro, one each in Narimasu and Wako, and they're all completely independent. To the point that some of them almost started getting into turf wars. I assumed it was an internal conflict in the whole group, but maybe they're each thinking, *We're the real originals.*"

"How do you know so much about this?!"

"Lately, though, that competition has died down. Maybe one of them won the fight and they all united...or like I said earlier, some kind of generous sponsor stepped in and mediated the conflict."

Shizuo had been sitting back and observing the conversation with his arms crossed, but now he finally spoke up. "Celty, what you're really looking for is this Yukihiro Natsugawara and Hiroto Shijima, right? So what do you need to figure out all this complicated stuff for? Forget about the Heaven's whatever

and narrow it down to those guys. Wouldn't that be easier?"

"That's the problem. I was looking for Heaven's Slave so that I could find them, so it might be putting the cart before the horse... Shijima has some distinct features, though. I might recognize him right away if I ran across him."

"What's this Shijima guy like?"

"Well, he's got bandages all over his head and glasses on top of them."

Shizuo and Tom read the message on her phone screen, then looked at each other.

"Is that the guy from the other day?"

"The one who was with the weird circus acrobat guy."

"...?! You know him?!" Celty asked, shocked.

They turned toward her to explain—but both of them froze, looking over her shoulders.

"Ah."

"Huh...?"

"Hmm? What is it?" Celty asked. They pointed behind her.

"...Isn't that him?"

"What?" she began to type in response, but she stopped partway as she checked around her.

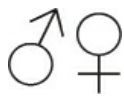
She extended her senses in that direction, toward the entrance to the park, and perceived a young man with bandages around his head standing there.

Huh? Wha—?! Are you kidding me?! she thought, completely flustered, looking between him and the two men she was with. Then she bowed briefly to Tom and typed, *"S-sorry. Let me make this up to you sometime later!"*

As she rushed off toward her task, Tom and Shizuo could only stare at each other yet again.

"Uh, did we...actually do anything for her?"

"I have no idea..."



By the time Celty reached the entrance to the park, the bandaged man had already moved, sliding toward the shadows of a different road.

She caught up to Shijima just as he entered a narrow alley with very little foot traffic and reached for his shoulders. He spun around and came to a stop just as her fingers extended, and he sent a chilling gaze into the darkness in the depths of her helmet.

“I suppose this isn’t really a get-to-know-you situation, Headless Rider. After all, you’re very familiar with me, and I’d like to think I know a few things about you already.”

“...You’re Hiroto Shijima?”

“And if I say yes?”

“I’m dragging you over to Mr. Akabayashi. But first, you’re going to tell me the reason you singled out Anri, and you’re going to tell me where Yukihiro Natsugawara is,” Celty stated, holding back nothing.

Shijima chuckled. “That’s not a negotiation. You’re just issuing demands.”

“...Do you think you’re in any position to negotiate?”

After her failure last night, Celty decided to use her shadows in advance this time and slipped them around Shijima’s hands and feet. Relieved that she could either hold him down or string him up if he tried to run now, she resumed her questioning.

“What do you think you’re doing with Anri? What is your goal?”

“Do I have to answer that? If you had any relationship with Izaya Orihara, you would know that all information has an equal cost.”

“And I told you that you’re not in any position to make deals with me,” she snapped, grabbing him by the collar.

But his gaze remained cold and calm. “Actually, I am.”

“...What?”

“If you take me right over to Akabayashi or kill me yourself, it will mean the

death of someone you care about.”

...!

An eerie chill rushed through Celty’s body. It felt cold enough to rattle her spine.

Her first thought was of the black-market doctor in his white coat. Next, she thought of Anri, Mikado, Shizuo, the van group... Their faces each flashed in her mind.

Wait... How much does he know about me? Can I be sure it’s just a bluff?

She went utterly still, and Shijima grinned triumphantly.

“Don’t worry, monster. I don’t know where your family and friends live. Although I did just learn how close you really are to Anri Sonohara.”

With a surge of sudden relief, Celty lifted Shijima by his shirt with both hands. She extended fingers of shadow to hold the smartphone up and type into it at the same time for Shijima’s benefit.

“So it was a bluff!”

“No, it wasn’t. If anything happens to me, a couple of people around Ikebukuro are going to be shot and killed at random—that’s all.”

...?! Celty froze again.

Shijima’s explanation was delivered with chilling simplicity. “You care about *everyone* in this city, don’t you? In fact, it’s not limited to the city—you care about humanity as a whole, right? Look, when I say random, I mean total strangers to you. There’s no reason to feel guilty about it. I’m the one who’s at fault for doing this.”

She considered that this might be a bluff, too, but the memories of being shot the previous night led Celty to believe that Shijima was probably serious. She lowered him to the ground, arms trembling, and typed through barely suppressed anger.

“Hiroto Shijima...what do you want?!”

“I want nothing from you. I merely wanted to express that I am in a position

to negotiate. I'm not some murderer, and killing innocent children minding their own business is not something that brings me any joy."

"...So I'm supposed to trust you?"

"Well, it's better not to trust wicked people like myself, of course, but I'd like to have a little more trust than Izaya Orihara, let's say. I don't want anything from you, and because of that, I have no reason to be antagonistic to you."

He says all this after having me shot! fumed Celty, who believed that the sniper had been acting on Shijima's order. However, losing her composure would be playing into his hands, so she decided to cool her metaphorical head and continue the "negotiation," as he'd called it.

"Then why are we talking together now?"

"I just so happened to hear that you were out looking for me today. Do you have anything to say to me outside of the matter of Anri Sonohara, Yukihiro Natsugawara, and Akabayashi?" he asked with a shrug.

Celty balled her fists and used shadow to type on the phone. *"Plenty of things. For one, stop dealing your messed-up drugs all over town!"*

"Got it. I'll stop."

"There haven't been that many victims yet, but who knows how many—Ummm, hang on, hang on, wait—wait, what?" typed Celty, getting confused in the middle of her sentence. She erased the message in progress and started over. *"Huh? You'll stop?"*

"Yes. Even my partners told me that people who deal drugs are the worst. And personally speaking, I have no desire to make the Awakusu-kai's Akabayashi any angrier with me. So I haven't been selling anything to ordinary folks for quite a while."

"I can't believe that! The drugs are still going out all over the city..."

"Whoever's doing that is doing so against my orders. That happened with the Dollars, too, didn't it? People revolting against their friends and causing trouble." Shijima sounded rather unconcerned.

"So you're able to tell those folks to stop selling?"

“Yes, I can get them to stop within a few days... Is there anything else you want to say?”

Celty considered this question for a few moments. There was something else very important to her that she could prod him about.

“But...you were the one who was dealing the drugs that amplified and accelerated the delusions of the cult worshipping me, right?”

At the very least, Himeka Tatsugami’s two sisters had been driven mad by Shijima’s drugs. They were already leaning that way at the start, but the drugs essentially caused that clock hand to tick faster and further.

“Yeah. That was an experiment. There was no business there. The results were quite fascinating.”

“...I could punch you,” Celty admitted.

Shijima narrowed his eyelids. “Will one be enough?”

“What?” she replied, her helmet tilting to the side. Shijima pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and called someone.

“...It’s me. The Headless Rider’s going to hit me one time. It’s already part of the deal. No need for retribution against any civilians.” He hung up, not bothering to remove his glasses, and said to Celty, “All right. Hit me with whatever single punch will satisfy you, monster.”

“...You’re sure?” she asked because *she* was not.

Behind the glasses, Shijima’s eyes narrowed as he grinned again.

“I’d prefer it to be nonfatal.”

Shijima’s body flew sixty feet down the narrow alley in an instant.

She had created a fist formed of shadow to perform the deed. It had been a massive three feet across and too fast to see.

It had hit Shijima directly in the face, propelling him down the street as though he were shot out of a cannon. He tumbled until he hit a fence and went still.

...Huh? Was that too much? H-he’s not dead, right?!

Celty was less concerned about Shijima himself and more about the possibility of indiscriminate sniping in the streets out of revenge for his death. She rushed over to where he lay, coughing violently and ejecting spittle flecked with blood.

A piece of his broken glasses was stuck in the skin near his eyes. He made for such a miserable sight, even his attacker felt a little bit queasy about the damage she'd done.

And then, out of nowhere, blood oozing from scrapes all over his body, cradling what appeared to be a broken left arm, Shijima laughed.



“Ha-ha...ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

He laughed uproariously, filling the alleyway with gales of mirthful delight. It was like he'd gone back to being a kid again. The sight of someone so injured and so elated at the same time creeped Celty out. A different kind of chill ran down her spine.

Uh-oh, did he hit his head too hard?! What should I do? I guess I'll take him to Shinra...or should I send him to get a CT scan...?

She panicked on the spot, momentarily forgetting that he was irredeemably wicked.

Meanwhile, Shijima seemed to have completely flipped a switch. His eyes were full of joy, and he giggled, chortled, and guffawed.

“Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha! Finally! Finally, Headless Rider! Finally it feels like someone has paid attention to me! At long last, I lost in a way that mattered to someone!”

“What are you talking about? Are you all right?”

“I'm grateful to you, Headless Rider. Because you seriously, truly punched me...not in some divine punishment sense but out of sheer emotional buildup. I feel like I've finally gotten back on track after being disconnected from this city!” he exclaimed, holding out his hands.

Celty was even more disconcerted by this and began to think in earnest that she needed to take him to a hospital that could give him a brain scan.

But Shijima just took Celty's hand and gave it a vigorous shake. “I'm sure it's only an illusion, though. I'm not going to stop my vengeance against the town now, and I'm certainly not going to turn virtuous out of nowhere. Rest assured and keep a cautious eye on me like usual. Continue to consider me an enemy.”

It was hard to believe he had looked so cold and dispassionate before. Now his eyes were glowing and bubbly, like a child about to open his Christmas presents. To Celty, this just made him far eerier than he had seemed before.

“An enemy...? What do you mean?”

“Because then I can continue to be me. I won't get left behind by the city.

That's all I mean. Oh, sorry...just talking to myself. I don't expect you to understand that—just forget it," he said cryptically. But it sent a shiver down her spine.

Some of the things Shijima was saying about being "left behind by the city" and "disconnected" were phrases that had been rattling around her own head for the last several days.

Just as she was resuming her work as a courier, this man appeared, worried about the same thing she was: being disconnected from society. But the sight of someone who had traveled such a different path from her own sent Celty into disarray, even with a hint of jealousy.

What the hell is this feeling that allows him to be at ease again out of nowhere? All the while, I'm desperately trying to find a way to shrink my feeling of alienation...

But she knew that putting these questions into words and shoving them in his face was the wrong way to react. Instead, she decided to do an about-face and return to her job.

"If you're grateful for that, then give me answers. Where is Yukihiro Natsugawara, and what do you plan to do to Anri Sonohara?"

"Rather greedy of you. If you want to know both answers, why not bring Anri Sonohara here and have her slash me with Saika?"

"...I feel like possessing you with Saika would be dangerous. Just answer the question."

"You're right to be wary. It's not Anri Sonohara I want. It's the power of Saika. Although I'm not all that fixated; if I never get it—oh well," said Shijima, his eyes cold again. His voice was sluggish and aloof.

But Celty was not going to take that for an answer. *"What are you talking about? You broke into the place and even tried to kidnap her."*

"Well, I won't anymore. How's that?"

"If promises were actually binding, there would be no point to having cops."

"Do you want to turn yourself in with me, then? No-Lights Reckless Rider?"

Ugh...

She had no answer for that taunt, and he smirked, very pleased with himself.

“In the end, both you and I are outcasts of society. I’m not saying we should get along. Let’s just struggle and rage on the dark side of town—that’s all.”

Shijima turned on his heel and dragged himself, cracked bones and all, away from the spot. As he went, he gave Celty one of the answers she sought.

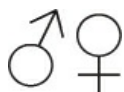
“I’m almost done with Yukihiro Natsugawara. Once that’s finished, I’ll hand him over to you, alive.”

Once Shijima was gone, Celty was left to stare at her own hands.

A tiny tendril of shadow thinner than a strand of hair stretched from her wrist and connected to the street, where it continued to lengthen endlessly.

There we go. I’ve snuck a little piece of shadow onto his shoelace. I don’t know what he plans to do with Yukihiro Natsugawara, but I’m going to find Shijima’s hideout before that happens and rescue the boy.

Or...abduct him? Why did Yukihiro Natsugawara choose to cozy up to such a creepy guy anyway...?



Saitama Prefecture

Foreign gentlemen in black suits covertly filmed the interaction between the Headless Rider and the young man. They shared curious glances.

“Who’s that kid?”

“What were they talking about? First it looked like the rider punched him, and then they were shaking hands.”

“The guy was laughing, it seemed like...and the rider used that shadow power right in the open.”

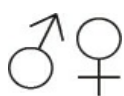
“Yeah... It might have been an empty alley, but still... Unless it’s the nature of their relationship that she can afford to easily show it off?”

“Perhaps the punch was some kind of test. He was talking with someone on

the phone just beforehand.”

Because their assumption was that the Headless Rider’s shadow was the latest technology from the Natsugawara Group, they were only confusing themselves more. They alternated between overthinking and grasping at straws. Despite not realizing that they were on the wrong track, they made plans for their next move.

“Just in case, seize everyone who appears to have close ties to the rider. They might serve as hostages. We should try to pry information out of them.”



Ikebukuro—parking lot outside Russia Sushi

There was a paid parking lot across the street past Russia Sushi. A young hoodlum sat inside a van, watching from a distance. He was reporting in to Yukihiro.

“That’s it, Mr. Natsugawara.”

“Good. Nice work,” Yukihiro said, confirming that the van they pointed out was the same one that the high schoolers had gotten into earlier. He removed several ten-thousand-yen bills from his wallet and tossed them to the ground at the hoodlum’s feet.

“Heh-heh-heh, thanks,” the hoodlum laughed, his cheek twitching. He bent down to pick up the bills.

Yukihiro turned away from the man to look at the van. From the oddly decorated sushi restaurant on the corner across the way came a loud, deep but bright voice.

“Ohhh! You come again!”

Drawn by the voice, he saw the large restaurant employee seeing off a group of several guests.

“You all full, boss? Full stomach, full dreams, then your happiness share to the neighbor, ya? You want to take souvenir? We have special price right now. What is price, you say? Don’t be silly—of course it has rice. It comes locked in special treasure chest with no hinge. That is eggshell. You get egg sushi and crab

sushi, packed like sardines in cardboard box.”

“...Uh...how many tens of thousands of yen does this ‘souvenir’ cost...?”

“Thanks for the meal.”

“That was really good.”

The three teenagers—Kuon, Yahiro and Himeka—left the restaurant with a wave for Simon, the restaurant worker, who was giving them a very hard pitch. Himeka waited until Togusa came out last and said, “Thank you so much, Mr. Togusa.”

Togusa shrugged it off with a casual wave. “Nah, don’t even mention it. Paying a single five-hundred-yen coin for an entire dinner, tax included? No sushi place has prices like these.”

After leaving Sonohara-dou, Togusa had driven Yahiro to where he was meeting Kuon and Himeka. At that point, Togusa had said, “Well, hell, if you guys are getting dinner, I’ll pay. I still haven’t made good on your help with the car the other day anyway.” Because Russia Sushi was right in the area, they had dinner there.

“I had no idea what fish a lot of them were... And what was that Borscht Roll on the menu...?” wondered Kuon, looking a bit queasy.

“Well,” Togusa said, going back to Himeka’s gratitude, “from my perspective, I feel so bad for my poor van when she’s driving around the same people all the time! Kadota’s one thing, but Yumasaki and Karisawa keep leaving their stuff...” He thought of the stacks of manga in the back seat and sighed.

However, his downcast mood lasted only a moment, replaced by a glint in his eye. “Plus, it’s part of my duty as one of the single-digit members of Ruri’s fan club to explain what makes her so great to the younger generation. A piece or two of sushi is a cheap price to pay for that opportunity.”

“Well, I feel like I learned a lot. When I was in elementary school, I always thought that Ruri Hijiribe was just a very mystical person and wanted to know more,” Kuon said.

“Exactly, man, you get it!” Togusa replied, happily taking Kuon’s facetious

statement at face value.

Under his breath, Yahiro asked Himeka, "Was that too much? Sorry to drag you along for all that."

"Oh, I'm fine. I like Ruri Hijiribe, too, you know. I had fun."

"Ah, okay. That's good to hear," Yahiro said, relieved that he wasn't at odds with society on this one.

Topics like Ruri Hijiribe that could be shared with a great many people were good to know about. He felt truly envious of her; how incredible one must be, to be beloved by so many people at once.

The three high schoolers piled into the back seat, and the sliding door automatically rolled shut behind them. As Togusa started to drive away, Kuon chose to bring up a different subject.

"...By the way, you mentioned it briefly earlier, but did I hear that there was an SD card in the shark tooth you got, Yahiro?"

"Yeah. This is it..." He pulled the micro SD card out of his pocket. He'd glued the tooth back together, keeping the card separate.

"Hmm...same brand as mine," Kuon muttered.

"The same?" Yahiro asked.

"Er, yeah... Well, the truth is...there was an SD card in the box I got, too."

"Oh, the one you said you couldn't put on your blog?"

"That's the one. Did you take a look at the data on the card? What was it?"

Yahiro made a face. "Well...the thing is, I don't have a device that can read it... and it doesn't work with my smartphone, it seems..."

"We can use my tablet to read it. You can stick a micro card right in there, no adapter needed."

Kuon pulled the tablet out of his bag and inserted the card. In his head, he was thinking, *It'd probably be bad if Himeka just sees a huge list of porn on it, like with mine...but then again, I'd be curious to see how she reacts to that...*

Instead, however, the only file shown was a single program.

“What is this...? I’ve never seen this program before... Doesn’t *seem* like it’s a virus, but you never know...,” Kuon muttered.

As Kuon tinkered with the file, Yahiro kept his gaze firmly to the rear window of the van.

“What’s wrong?” Himeka asked.

“I think...someone’s following our car,” Yahiro answered.

“Huh?”

Togusa and Kuon both stopped what they were doing to listen in.

“Earlier today, I couldn’t help but notice that there were a bunch of people around Sonohara-dou who seemed extremely tense... And before we got into the car just now, some people were watching us from afar.”

Yahiro hadn’t known that Akabayashi’s men were staking out Sonohara-dou—he merely felt their attention on him, and his cautious instincts told him to be on the lookout for an attack.

“Why does it seem like every time you take a ride in my van, you find someone dangerous...? Like that street attacker recently.” Togusa groaned.

Yahiro apologetically explained, “Well, this time it doesn’t seem like one person... Oh, maybe there’s an extra car...?”

“Wait, you’re talking about cars? Oh...actually, that car *has* been following me for a little bit...” Togusa grunted. Out of caution, he took an unplanned turn down a side route.

Despite being a small alley that would normally not see any traffic, multiple vehicles followed them in.

“Shit...what do they want...? Don’t tell me Izumii didn’t learn his lesson last time and is coming around again,” Togusa growled, assuming this was a personal grudge involving him. He started to plan out how he could let the high schoolers escape. “Hang on—I’m gonna head for a police station with a parking lot, where you guys can... *Wha—?!*”

Another car appeared at the corner just ahead, turning in diagonally to block the van inside the narrow alley.

“Tch!”

He tried to back up in a hurry, but another car was already behind them. They were totally blocked off.

Togusa clenched his jaw, reached for the umbrella on the passenger seat to use as a weapon, and made to get out of the car. “Listen up—I’ll keep them busy. You find a way to esc...”

But the words caught in his throat when he turned back to look at them.

All he saw was Yahiro as Snake Hands, wrapped in black shadow, already in the act of opening the door.

“Hey, Yahiro...,” Saburo said in an attempt to stop him. But then he recalled something he’d said to Anri the other day: *“Yahiro’s kind of like Celty; he’ll rush off on his own.”* It didn’t seem like he was going to get anywhere with the younger boy.

“...Aaah, dammit! Hang on—I’ll go with you! Don’t do anything crazy!”

“Oh, someone’s comi... What the hell?”

Natsugawara clenched his hammer, starting to disembark once he saw the van stop—but he did not expect the man who emerged first.

It was utter shadow, as if it had sucked in the surrounding light. The fluttering darkness made it look like a surface that had been ripped straight out of the world, offering a glimpse through to the nothingness behind it, all in the shape of a person.

One of the thugs, unable to process the situation, rushed at the shadow in a confused state, deciding to just do what came naturally and swing his bat.

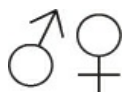
But the next moment, the bat was wrenched from his hands, and the end of it was slammed directly under his nose. The ugly sound this produced filled the alley, and the man passed out, bleeding from the nose and mouth.

“Wh...wh-wha...?”

Natsugawara began to tremble. He had to clench his hammer to summon the courage to keep going. No matter how many times he squeezed it, however, he couldn’t stop the trembling.

The hypnosis effect of the supposedly cursed Bannanjin completely evaporated in the presence of what might be called a true demon—and Yukihiro Natsugawara was instantly returned to being a small, petty excuse for a villain.

That was when the real monster began to use its snake hands on Yukihiro and the other terrified members of his gang.



Near the entrance to the alley, the men in the black car blocking the road watched the chaos unfold.

“This is insane... Is he...using the same kind of Shadow Ghost as the magician rider...?”

“Is he a part of the Natsugawara Group, too?!”

“What do you think? Should we pull out?”

“...We can’t have Yukihiro Natsugawara being captured. Help him escape. Do nothing else.”

The foreign men belonging to the Natsugawara Group’s rival organization were perturbed by recent developments, but they decided to stick to their previously established plan.

Heaven’s Slave members scattered to the wind in the face of overwhelming violence, and the foreign men decided to fire warning shots to stop anyone who would chase after them.

In order to intimidate the monster standing next to the van, they pointed their rifle barrel at the rear window, taking aim through the scope.

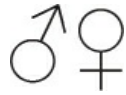
The van that had blocked the rear part of the alley was already gone. Terrified by the strength of the monster that appeared from the van, the driver had left his companions behind and peeled off.

Because the hoodlums had run down the side alley, the shot from the larger street, where the shooter sat, was nice and clean.

“All right...ready to fire,” said the sniper in the back seat in English. He aimed

at a strange sticker on the rear window of the target van and pulled the trigger.

He had no idea that the lead bullet he fired would unleash an even greater monster.



“Whoa!!”

A sharp, shattering sound filled the van; Kuon covered Himeka’s head and hunched over her. “What was that? What happened?!”

The door opened, and Yahiro hurriedly checked out the inside. “A gun! The window’s been shot!”

“What?!”

The rear window had spiderweb cracks all over it, with a small hole gouged in the center of the effect. The bullet had passed through the interior of the van because there was a similar hole near the top of the front windshield, on the passenger side.

“H-hey, we don’t wanna deal with guns, Yahiro! C’mon, let’s get outta here! Call Mr. Togusa back! We can reverse and turn down the side alley... Uh... wha...?” Kuon stammered, his panic giving way as he noticed something was wrong.

Togusa had returned inside the van through the driver’s side door, but he froze in place in his seat as his eyes locked on to the bullet hole in the rear window glass. His soul had left his body.

The teens assumed that it was shock at the damage to his beloved car. Only Yahiro noticed the extra detail.

The location of that shot...

Around the hole, warped and twisted, was some kind of pattern, and Yahiro recognized what it was: a now-warped sticker of a mascot character based on Ruri Hijiribe.

Whether intentional or by accident, the bullet had passed right through the brain of the Ruri Hijiribe illustration.

After several seconds of silence, something took possession over Togusa's soulless body.

He reached for the stick, yanked it into reverse, and slammed on the gas pedal.

Instantly, everyone else inside the van lurched.

"Wh-wh-whoa! What?! What?!"

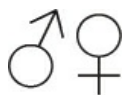
"...!"

Kuon tumbled to the floor of the van, cradling his tablet, while Himeka fell sideways onto the seat, with Yahiro huddling over her. It felt like they were on a roller coaster making a sudden shift in speed.

While Kuon and Himeka were taken by surprise, only Yahiro understood the situation unfolding.

If he were to abbreviate various complex emotional movements and reasonings, the current situation could be summed up in one simple statement.

Saburo Togusa had snapped.



"Good, the shadow user's back inside the car."

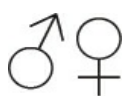
"The driver's pulled back, too. Let's make sure the Heaven's Slave guys are... Huh?"

"What?"

The attackers in suits noticed at this point that something was wrong with the van.

First, it backed up at an abnormal speed; then it started racing forward again, blazing through the alley at a speed over sixty miles per hour.

"That's crazy...," the sniper muttered. The next instant, they were forced to flee the spot even faster than Heaven's Slave had.



Ikebukuro

There was one more.

Saburo Togusa's road rage caused another power to awaken.

This was a very mighty power caused by the complex entanglement of various elements. A guardian of the law, emitting engine exhaust, backed by the power of government authority. A power in the form of a man—but so terrible that the nonhuman Celty Sturluson considered him a monster.

“Station to all officers. We have two vehicles in a chase along the Kawagoe Highway toward Saitama. Reports of occasional gunfire from the lead vehicle. Proceed with all haste,” came the message over the radio. It was a virtually unthinkable situation in modern Japanese traffic.

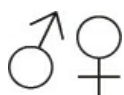
The man listening to the message narrowed his eyes, staring through sunglasses, and replied, “Ten-four. I'm on my way.”

He straddled his police motorcycle and yanked on the handles.

A number of dark shadows burst forth from the black of night. And with his trusty white partner beneath him, the man launched himself out into that blackness.

He was prepared to execute the justice he believed in.

That reason alone was enough to risk his life.



Meanwhile—shopping mall construction site, Saitama Prefecture

Here we are.

Celty Sturluson gazed up at a massive construction site across the street.

It was a major shopping mall that was nearly complete, just waiting for its tenants to enter the premises and open for business.

The advertisements were already out in full force on TV, promising a “Brand-new Mega-giga-tera-peta-level Mall!” which sounded like gibberish. When they promised a new movie theater as well, it was tempting enough that Celty wondered, *Would I be allowed inside with my helmet on? If it's blocking the*

view for the people behind me, I can take it off...

She had followed the shadow string she stuck on Shijima to this shopping mall. The string was clearly heading inside the building, indicating that he was here.

I don't know if Yukihiro Natsugawara is being held in here or not, but I should at least find a clue. If needed, maybe I can nick a cell phone or computer...

No. There's a good chance that Yukihiro's working with Shijima of his own accord. Shijima just happens to think of him as a tool, since he mentioned being done with him or whatever that was, Celty thought, pitying the boy she'd only seen in photographs.

She pulled Shooter over to a corner of the parking lot. Work on the mall was paused at the moment due to delays in the interior contracts with tenants and other paperwork, so there wasn't much reason for anyone to go in or out aside from security. And the security guards simply showed up at a specified time, did a single round, then left. She'd witnessed the security company's car leaving the lot earlier.

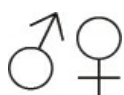
Are they simply evading the security patrol, or did they buy them off...?

She wondered why Shijima would choose such a place for his hideout, and she found the answer when she noticed that the sign outside the building site said, DEVELOPMENT: SHIJIMA CONSTRUCTION.

At the very least, I know someone's got a rifle with a sound suppressor on it. That's got to be the biggest danger to watch out for...

She kept herself shrouded in a mist of shadow, remaining in darkness even as she approached the building.

However, Celty did not yet realize that she had already been under observation since before arriving at this location.



“...A shopping mall?”

With raised eyebrows, the enemies of the Natsugawara Group received the report that the magician rider had gone into a mall under construction.

“It’s not far away.”

“And it’s not all that far from the Natsugawara mansion. Maybe the rider’s making contact with someone.”

A few minutes later, another report added corroborating evidence.

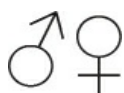
“...! I knew it. My guess was right.”

The leader grinned, certain in the accuracy of his foresight, and rose from his seat.

“I just received word that *someone from the Natsugawara family* went inside through a different entrance. Yes, it was Target D, who evaded our trackers outside of school and home. That settles it.”

He slapped the table and boomed, “All available field agents, head to this spot at once. But don’t draw any attention before anything happens. Once we’ve taken care of that circus performer, we’ll retrieve the Shadow Ghost and withdraw before the police arrive. And just in case, carry out the abductions of the Sonohara-dou owner and others at once.

“If all goes well, we’ll have both a Natsugawara member and their technology... Won’t that be fun?”



Several minutes later, Ikebukuro

“You know that rider in black, don’t you?” asked a voice in flat, unaffected Japanese, causing Tom and Shizuo to stop in their tracks.

They had finished their rounds and were heading back to the office, walking down a quieter street when about ten men, all of them at least six feet tall, suddenly appeared and surrounded the two.

“...Who are you guys?” asked Shizuo, narrowing his eyes with displeasure at the menace in their demeanor.

Tom could sense the possibility of bad outcomes ahead. He tried to answer without provoking either the men or Shizuo. “Well enough to trade a few words if we run into each other, I’d say. Are you with the media? Because we don’t

have any information that hasn't already been on TV. You'd be better off asking someone else."

"We'll be the ones to determine the depth of your relationship. Come with us," said one of the large men dressed in black, pulling out a knife and pressing it to Tom's stomach at an angle that kept it hidden from any other eyes. "And if you try to raise hell, you know what'll happen— *Gublaaah?!?*"

He was *that* close to finishing the sentence before he flew a hundred feet down the road.

"?!"

The blow from the man in the bartender's vest seemed to overturn everything they knew about physics, and it left the rest of the large men frozen on the spot.

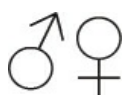
If they were professional mercenaries, they might have succeeded at reacting in a calm and rational manner. Unfortunately for them, they were hardly better than hooligans, hired by the Natsugawara Group's enemies to be disposable foot soldiers.

"I ain't all that smart...but I've figured out one thing," growled Shizuo in a voice from the depths of hell. He stared in a circle around him. "You're Tom's enemies, Celty's enemies, and *mine*, too."

Anyone else walking the streets in the vicinity understood implicitly that Shizuo Heiwajima was around when they saw the man fly down the street. Some quickly scampered away from the scene, and others gathered to watch from a comfortable distance.

Amid the attention, Shizuo clenched his fists and roared at the men, all of whom were rooted to the spot, totally intimidated.

"Which means you gotta be prepared to die *three* times!"



Sonohara-dou

Jan-Jaka-Jan, who'd been keeping their eyes on the area, were busy capturing the members of Heaven's Slave who'd still been after Anri. And inside

Sonohara-dou, a blond woman, who seemed like nothing but a curious foreign visitor, gazed at the various items on the shelves, which seemed to exist in a strange middle ground between antiques and secondhand items.

However, this woman was another disposable foot soldier hired by the Natsugawara Group's enemies. These people assumed they were elites, not interchangeable pawns; they simply didn't realize that ever since the helicopter-downing incident two years ago, their parent company had considered them a lost cause.

The woman's mission was to inject the owner of Sonohara-dou with a tranquilizer, then pull her into the group's car out front the moment she fell unconscious.

I feel sorry for this girl, but I've got to do this for the sake of payme...for the sake of the mission, she thought, trying to convince herself that this was for a more noble purpose than money. She inched closer to the woman behind the counter.

The moment the young woman turned around to take something down from the shelves on the wall behind the counter, the agent silently made her move.

"Umm...what is that syringe for...?"

"It's a tranquilizer...Mother..."

Less than a minute later, the shop was occupied by only Anri and a faithful child who had fallen victim to the self-defense system of the Saika that made its home in Anri's body.

The woman's eyes were completely bloodshot, while Anri's glowed crimson, compelling the attacker to answer truthfully.

As for Anri herself, she didn't understand the situation surrounding her. All she knew was that she'd have to close up the shop early in order to question the woman.

Not that it made a big difference. There were no other customers in the building, and Anri had been planning to close up shop once the woman left anyway.



Inside a car

The black car headed for the mall construction site. In the back seat, the leader of the group was flustered. "...What does that mean?"

"What's the matter?" asked another man.

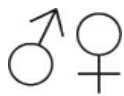
"I've lost contact with the men who went to retrieve the guy in the bartender's vest and the one with the dreads. And Orca, who was supposed to go after Sonohara-dou's owner, hasn't been in contact with her transport team. She's vanished."

"...That's an ominous sign. What should we do?" another said, suspecting a trap.

The leader shook his head. "Either way, if those members have been captured, withdrawing only makes our activities more difficult. If we don't at least manage to recover a piece of that magician rider's Shadow Ghost now, while we've got everyone together, we really *are* going to be left out to dry."

Of course, the leader had no idea that the company considered his team to be nothing but disposable pawns to begin with.

"The rider's left the bike outside. At a bare minimum, we can at least take that with us."



Kawagoe Highway

"Dammit! What's up with that van?! We're at our max speed already!"

"That's not standard speed for a van like that! He's tuned it up!"

All members of the car, from the driver to the sniper, looked pale and nervous as the decorated van roared after them with tremendous speed.

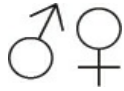
"Can't you shoot the driver?!"

"Not at that speed! I—I mean, I've been timing it out and trying to hit him, but it feels like the driver's actually *dodging* the shots!"

“Don’t be stupid! Only a monster could do something like that!”

The men were in a panic overall, but the one sitting in the passenger seat still had enough sense to call for backup on his phone. That was when he realized that they’d received their next encoded instructions.

“We have orders! The magician rider’s at a shopping mall near the hideout, and all available units are to meet there! We’ll have the numbers to fight back!”



Inside the mall

I don’t see him, but the shadow string continues in this direction...

Celty was on the second floor of the mall, deftly using her shadow to stay hidden, following the string she’d attached to Shijima’s shoe.

The interior of the mall wasn’t engulfed in total darkness; there were emergency lights installed already, and a number of night-lights were around for construction or security purposes, too.

This wasn’t enough to light up the whole structure, though; more than two-thirds of the mall was still in the dark.

If they’re using this place as a hangout, you’d think they would at least have some lights on...

Celty was curious about the utter silence around her, but she kept moving regardless. Eventually, she noticed that the string was leading to a store that was almost entirely furnished.

That must be it. Careful, Celty, careful...

She delicately manipulated her shadow to climb up the wall and then the ceiling like a spider. She used this angle to peer down into the shop—but there was not a single shape moving inside.

“Where are they...?”

The company agents slipped inside through multiple entrances and spread out through the mall, searching for the magician rider and Target D.

Although they were covering a large area with several teams of multiple

members, the mall was so large that they couldn't cover it entirely.

After dispersing from the first through third floors, the teams cut off contact and silently proceeded forward.

Neither Celty nor the company agents, however, were aware that there was one person within the mall tracking everything both sides were doing.

As soon as she realized she was looking at a shoe store, Celty had a bad premonition.

Don't tell me...

She steadily followed the thread to a spot next to a sign inside the shop that was modeled to look like a shoe—and atop the display stand, Shijima's discarded sneaker.

He got me! Is it a trap?! Did he know what I was doing?!

She grabbed the shoe in a panic, then heard a crumpling sound, realizing that there was a scrap of paper inside it.

...?

Celty turned on her smartphone light to read the writing on the paper.

"Sorry about this. The part about indiscriminately shooting civilians was just a lie. I don't have any guns."

What? Celty thought, taken aback. Then she realized that the message continued.

"I realize it's not much of an apology, but to make amends, I'll introduce you to the guys who do have the guns. They're my enemies and probably your enemies, too. Anyway, good luck."

Pardon? She was having difficulty understanding what he meant by this.

"I meant it when I said thanks for punching me...and sorry for using you."

Just as Celty finished reading the message, bright light filled the mall.

All the interior lighting turned on at once, clearing away the darkness that had previously cloaked the shop.

What's going on?!

She hurried outside, and that was when she encountered the very people mentioned in the note.

Celty poked her head over the open railing and met the stares of many men spread out over the first and third floors. Several of them had taken off night vision goggles due to the sudden influx of light—and they were all carrying pistols, assault rifles, submachine guns, and other firearms of the like.

...Umm...this is still Japan, right? Celty wondered, losing her grip on reality for just a brief moment.

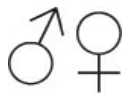
“There she is! It’s her!”

“Capture her!”

The men roared, and the mall was suddenly full of gunshots and the sound of silenced bullets slicing air.

As she retreated back into the shoe store, Celty wailed to herself, *But I was watching out for guns after being sniped last night! I was watching out for this...!*

I just didn't realize I was dealing with such a huge and heavily armed group!



Electrical utility room, mall basement

“All right, time to begin the opening sale. Let’s make it a fireworks show to remember.”

Shijima was the one who had remotely turned on the mall lights. He leisurely strolled toward the exit.

Unfortunately, a gun-toting company agent promptly peered around the corner up ahead.

“ ... ”

Shijima looked worried about the possibility of trouble, but it was short-lived. The man suddenly lurched forward and toppled to the floor. Jami’s face emerged from the corner just behind him.

“Yoo-hoo, Mr. Shijima. That was a close one!” He grinned.

Shijima sighed. “You startled me on purpose.”

“Yeah!”

“Piece of crap...,” he muttered back at Jami.

“You know, it’s honestly kind of shocking to me that you called me a piece of crap.”

“Shut up.”

Around the corner were a number of other armed men, all unconscious. They didn’t seem likely to wake up anytime soon. Certain that this was Jami’s doing, Shijima asked the lackadaisical boy, “Aren’t you scared of the guys with guns?”

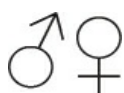
“Depends on who’s using them. These guys weren’t scary.”

“...But you’re scared of Shizuo?”

“That’s because he’s not a person. He’s totally out of my league. At least for now...but if I keep working out, I might be able to stand a chance in the future... or not... What do you think?” Jami cackled. He didn’t wait for an answer. “Well? What are we doing now, Mr. Shijima?”

“Nothing. We’re leaving,” Shijima said, staring coldly at nothing in particular. He continued muttering to himself.

“I’ve finished dousing the place in enough gasoline.”



Exterior, shopping mall

“Hmm...? Did you hear gunshots?”

The group of men working on taking away the black motorcycle in the corner of the parking lot were distracted by the sound of percussive gunfire from inside the mall.

Most of the guns the company agents were equipped with had suppressors, but some of them were naked. Assuming that someone had panicked and fired, it seemed likely this would only speed up the police’s eventual arrival at the

scene.

But these men were not the most sensitive ones to gunfire.

“C’mon—let’s hurry and take this... *Aaaaaahh!!*”

The bike reacted so suddenly that it seemed like it could only have been in reaction to the shots. It dispersed like smoke—but in the next moment, there was a headless horse standing before them.

“What...the...? *Grif!!*”

Before they could even process what they were looking at, the doomed horse thieves were hit with a vicious kick and knocked unconscious.

Shooter, now in horse form, rushed off toward its master.

Like a declaration that it was said master’s sword and shield, all in one.

And at that precise moment, another car raced into the parking lot at ferocious speed. It was the vehicle of the sniper team, on the run from Togusa’s van.

“Okay, we made it! That’s one of our cars!”

“Hurry up and find them! Dammit...crazy van... I’m gonna shoot that thing up, anime decals and all!”

“Yeah! *****!”

“*****!”

Suddenly feeling emboldened, the agents in the car uttered a string of untranslatable English profanity and slang.

They did not rejoin their comrades, however.

A headless horse suddenly appeared in the driver’s line of sight.

“Aaaaaahhh!!”

This impossible vision struck fear into the driver’s heart, and he yanked the wheel to the side at full speed.

“Aaaaaaahhh!!”

The car turned and rolled, tumbling wildly, until it smashed into the parking

lot's light pole.

"Rrg...urgh..."

The sniper crawled, dazed, out of the upside-down car.

A shadow flitted overhead, and then something stomped down on his head.

"Gbgh!"

"Does that hurt...? You son of a bitch..."

It was Saburo Togusa, his voice as cold as a practiced killer's while his features were twisted with rage.

"You killed Ruri, didn't you?"

"Ruri...? Wh-who?" the sniper asked. He couldn't have killed anyone with the trajectory of his shot. Then his body was dragged out the rest of the way and slammed faceup against the ground. His thoughts reeled with pain and confusion. "*Gah!*"

"Who gave you the right to not know who Ruri is?"

The driver straddled the man's chest and began to punch him in the face so hard his fists might have broken.

"What you shot was a part of Ruri's soul... It was entrusted...to me...and you shattered her soul right before my eyes! You ruined her! Die! I will avenge Ruri!" Saburo shouted, which the sniper would not have understood, even if he weren't about to fall unconscious. Saburo was furious enough to keep punching the sniper or perhaps even get back into his car and run it over his face.

But someone else rushed in and put him in a full nelson, shouting, "Calm down, Saburo!"

"Let go, Yahiro! He killed Ruri... He killed Ruriiii!"

"Saburo! If you get arrested over Ruri, it's only going to make her sad! It'd be, like, a scandal...yeah! It'll be a *huge* scandal!"

"..."

The effect of the word *scandal* was immediate and dramatic. Togusa rose to his feet, tears streaming from his eyes.

“...You’re right. Sorry. And it’s not like killing him is going to bring back that piece of Ruri’s soul...”

He literally thinks that sticker has her soul inside of it, Yahiro realized, not daring to speak aloud. Instead, he patted Togusa’s shoulder.

“...What in the world am I looking at?” wondered Himeka, poking her head out of the car to see Yahiro in Snake Hands form, consoling a distraught Saburo.

Meanwhile, Kuon was pale-faced on the floor between seats, desperately trying to hold back the urge to vomit.

“I’m never...riding in Mr. Togusa’s van again...”

“...You’ve really screwed things up, haven’t you?” said a voice over Saburo’s shoulder, just as he was finally calming down for good.

“.....!”

Saburo realized he recognized the voice and slowly turned around.

It was an incredibly menacing traffic officer in sunglasses, riding a white motorcycle.

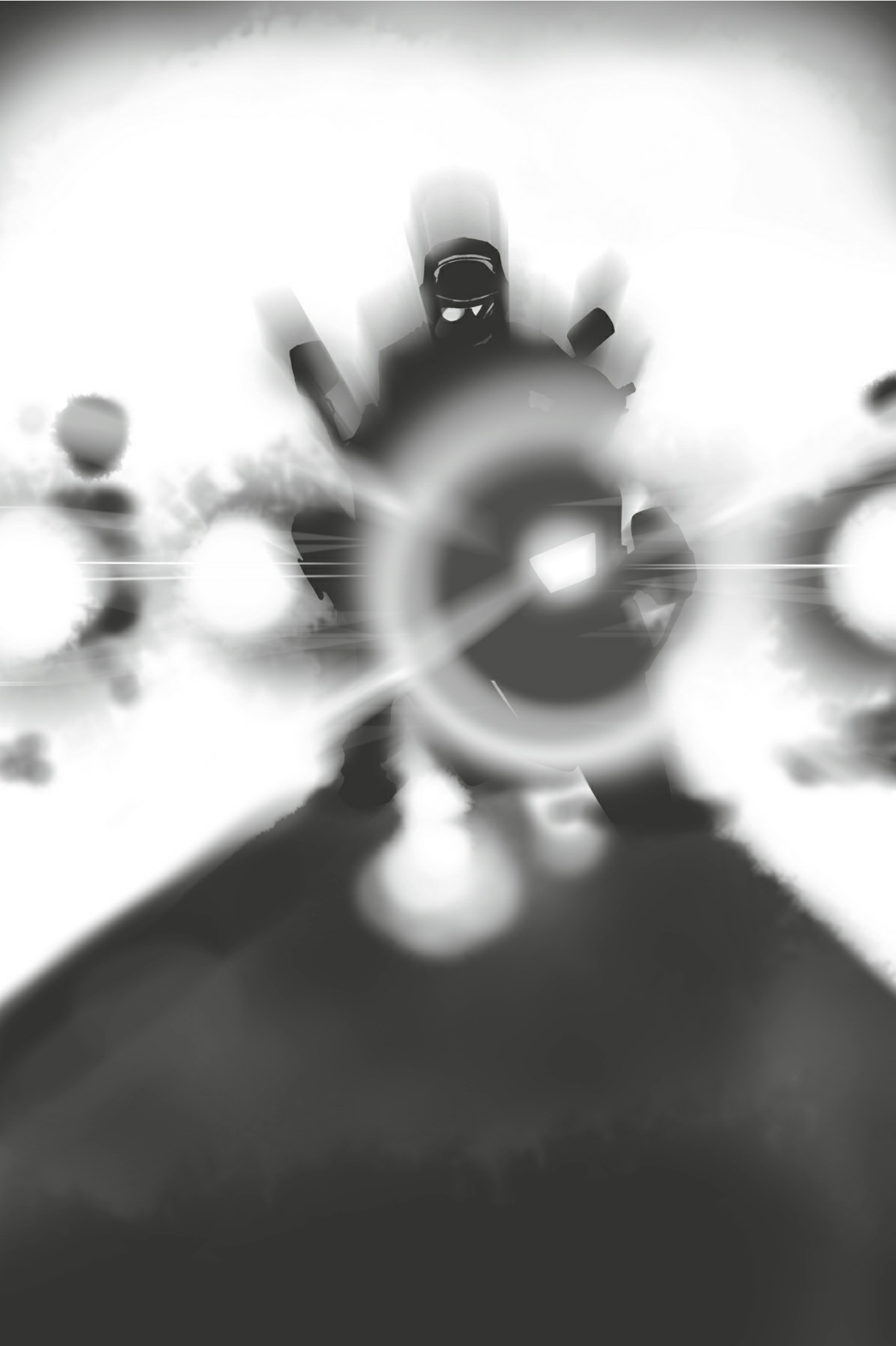
He was accompanied by a number of other officers, who presumably were under his wing. Some of them were even rescuing the men in suits from the overturned car.

“I’ve called in an ambulance and a fire truck already... So, Togusa...I always had a feeling you’d end up doing this, and I’ll be damned if you haven’t... You might get more than just a suspended license for this...”

“K...K-K-K... Officer Kuzuhara...,” Saburo stammered, tears streaming, now joined by huge beads of sweat on his forehead.

Startled by the sudden appearance of the traffic police, Yahiro could only look back and forth between the two without a word.

“...Hmm? Who’s this guy?” asked Kuzuhara, noticing Yahiro at last. He gave the boy a careful examination. “That black stuff looks an awful lot like what that monster produces... Maybe we should have a talk...,” he growled.

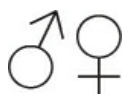


But his train of thought was interrupted by an explosion and gunshots from inside the mall.

“What was that?!”

Kuzuhara barked a few commands to his officers and rushed toward the noisy shopping mall. He was, of course, still riding on his trusty vehicle—but no one was going to warn him that it was dangerous.

With this, various paths would finally cross.



Inside the mall

How did it come to this?

Gunshots echoed back and forth.

Explosions rolled and roiled.

The sky over Saitama was rife with destruction and clamor.

It was the arrival of Shooter, bursting through the door from the outside, that broke the settling stalemate.

The headless horse reached Celty’s side despite being hit by many bullets and whinnied loudly, ignoring its wounds and nuzzling its master with its neck.

Indeed, the bullets had done very little to it. The wounds healed themselves right away, and when Shooter turned back into a bike, dented bullets scattered across the floor.

...I think Shooter might actually be tougher than I am, Celty thought, distracted. A moment later, a grenade flew into the shoe store, and she had no choice but to rush out into the mall, into combat with enemies who would have to be subdued.

Celty ran through the gunfight, her mind a maelstrom of conflicting thoughts.

But no weapon could successfully stop her or Shooter. She watched the lead bullets tinkle to the ground from the shadow that swallowed them, thinking wryly, *Uh-huh. I guess there’s no wonder that humans call me a monster.*

There was a note of resignation in her heart now.

It's not that I fell out of sync with humanity—we were never aligned to begin with. Oh, well. All I need is Shinra. I suppose it was arrogant of me to assume a monster could live among humans and pretend to be one of them.

She was exhausted by how much this world fought her. She considered giving it all up and leaving for unknown destinations with Shinra.

Oh, Shinra, I'm sorry. I might end up indulging in your kindness. If I can't be human...and if, say, I give in to anger and become a killer, slaughtering all these men...even then, there's a part of me that knows you'll still forgive me, Celty thought, preparing herself for the moment she became an enemy to all humanity.

Regardless, she endeavored to overcome the situation as best she could.

The main thing is this isn't going to resolve itself. Can I hold them all down with shadow?

But if someone's hiding somewhere around here, they might get away... Probably better to look for whoever might be a leader and pin them down...

Pin them... Pin... P-p-p-p-pin... Pin...?

And in the next moment, she remembered that it wasn't just herself who demanded that she not fall out of sync with society. It was *Ikebukuro* that demanded none of its residents fall out from its own flow.

The city's anger showed up to greet her in a new form—a form that laughed off any meager, measly sensation of disconnect.

It reached out for her, as if to say, *Just because you feel asynchronous doesn't mean you're off the hook.*

Celty Sturluson's greatest fear had come for her in person, ready to drag her back into the flow of the world.

Wh...wha...? Huh?

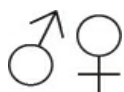
Why?!

Why are you here?! This is Saitama!!

“Looks like you’re really makin’ a mess of things...you *monster*.”

The motorcycle officer Kinnosuke Kuzuhara surveyed the furor and billowing flames inside the mall, his eyes sharp and glinting behind his sunglasses.

“So how much of this mess is your doing?”



“Shit! The police are already here?! It’s too soon!” swore the leader of the team of company agents. “Was it a trap?!”

“It’s just one person! Don’t let them call for help!”

The men, unaware that *multiple* traffic officers had been drawn to the scene by Togusa’s rampage, began to fire in a wild, hasty panic.

While the men were merely pawns of a large conglomerate, Celty worried a single officer would not stand a chance against so many guns all at once. She extended an umbrella of shadow in a frightened panic, trying to protect Kuzuhara.

“Get out of my way,” he barked.

Huh?

Kuzuhara raced out from under the umbrella, weaving behind the mall’s pillars and nimbly avoiding the hail of bullets flying in his direction.

What? What?! What?!? Celty gaped.

A grenade, pin removed, hurtled toward Kuzuhara’s location, but he used the slope of the mall’s fountain to launch himself high into the air.

“Did you think a bike cop would be helpless indoors...?”

He nimbly flicked the motorcycle’s wheel, deflecting the grenade in midair.

N-no way...!

“N...no way...!”

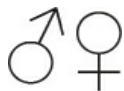
Miraculously, Celty’s thoughts and the grenade thrower’s voice were in perfect sync—and then the projectile exploded in midair, showering the men, who were dressed only in suits and not military gear, with fierce shrapnel.

“There’s just one thing I have to say.”

Kuzuhara used every tool available to him in the hellscape that was the mall interior, even Celty’s paths of shadow, to easily avoid every bullet and knock down every attacker as he roared past them.

“Don’t fuck with traffic cops, you criminals,” he said, a line strikingly similar to something he’d said to Celty once. His destructive sense of justice reigned supreme and terrible.

“You lowlifes won’t ever fuck with traffic cops again.”



Hours later, Shinra’s apartment

“Waaaaaah! Shinra, Shinra, Shinra, Shinraaaa!”

As soon as she was inside the door, Celty was clinging to her partner, shivering.

“Well, well! Did you get chased by Officer Kuzuhara again? How many times has this happened by now?” said Shinra with practiced ease, hugging her back to help calm her down.

“N-no, it was different this time. It was different, but the traffic cops are monsters these days! I mean, he’s the monster...or more than that...a god...?”

“It’s all right, Celty. You’re the only god to me.”

“O-oh...thank you, Shinra...,” she said, taking Shinra’s absurd statement as a comforting compliment. She must have been really terrified. *“It was so horrifying... He was avoiding submachine gun and assault rifle fire with only his bike. That’s inhuman! He even used my shadow to launch himself off the shopping mall rooftop to land on the bad guys’ car as they drove off, then bounced onto another one and wrecked them both! And Kuzuhara himself didn’t take a scratch! Was that all a nightmare?”*

“Compared to such a terrifying man, you’re just an adorable little sweetheart, Celty, hee-hee-hee.”

“Th-thanks... Wait, that’s not what I want to hear!” snapped Celty, regaining a

bit of her usual rapport with Shinra. *“Phew... I think I’ve settled down a little.”*

Her shoulders rose and fell in the manner of exhaling a deep breath. But as her anxiety subsided, doubts arose.

“Anyway, what’s even happening with all this madness...? If it wasn’t Shijima who had me shot, then who were those guys talking about being rich and covering things up...?”

At that very moment, the e-mail notification went off on Celty’s phone.

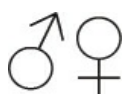
Oh, it’s Mr. Akabayashi.

She’d been wondering what happened with Anri. Celty opened the message to see what it was.

Sender: Akabayashi

Re: The time has come to pay back that favor

And when she saw the body of the message, Celty was so baffled and rattled that she ended up clinging to Shinra again.



An hour earlier, near Sonohara-dou

Yukihiko Natsugawara raced through the city, quieter now that it was after midnight.

He clenched the bizarre hammer in his hand.

His destination was not the storehouse of Sonohara-dou, which he’d broken into previously, but the residential part of the shop itself.

There wasn’t a moment to waste.

He would literally beat the store owner awake with his hammer, presuming she was already asleep, and take her hostage to recover the SD card from that student.

In all honesty, he more or less knew what was contained in that data, but what it could actually do, what it had achieved, and what effect it would have on the rest of the world—these things he could not possibly know or even

imagine.

All he knew was that the data could be sold to another company for money, and he wanted to use that to set up the rest of his life.

It was crucial that he did not lose the data.

Out of rebound from the terror of Snake Hands, his current mood was more attributable to sheer desperation than to any great courage. He raced toward his destination with madness in his step. When he reached Sonohara-dou, imagining the violence that was soon to ensue, a sadistic smile crossed his lips.

Yukihiko swung the hammer through the lock on the door, grinning crudely. Any practical thoughts of the sound summoning the police or leading to his arrest were long forgotten.

He was going to prove that he was special, that he could do anything and get away with it. He lifted his hammer high above his head to swing it at the door—but the weapon never came down.

“That’s far enough.”

Something grabbed his raised arm from behind.

Yukihiko spun around to see a man with tinted glasses and a walking stick. The streetlight gleamed coldly in his eyes.

“...Who the hell are you?!”

“That’s what I was going to ask you.”

“Who do you think you are...? Get lost! You want money—I’ll give you money!” the boy blustered, pulling a fat wallet out of his pocket and hurling it at the man in the tinted glasses.

But the man just shrugged, as if to resign himself, then swept Yukihiko’s legs out from under him, slamming his head against the ground.

“You don’t need your money? Then I’ll be sure to put it all in the donation box at the convenience store later.”

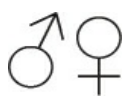
“Ah, gah, agh,” Yukihiko uttered as the tip of the walking stick pressed against his throat. He trembled.

The man in the glasses, Akabayashi, pulled an insurance card out of the wallet and spotted the name Yukihiro Natsugawara on it.

“Hmm...? Natsugawara...?” His mind worked for a bit, delivering him eventually to a realization. “Ah, all those folks we caught earlier, to a man, said, ‘Mr. Natsugawara told us to kidnap the owner’... I thought the name was familiar. So you’re from that huge company... Meaning the one who was using his family’s power to hush things up was *you*, not Shijima.”

Akabayashi thought some more, then relaxed the force behind his cane just a little.

“Is it possible that you’re the one the Headless Rider’s been searching for?”



Message: I have Yukihiro Natsugawara in my possession. When I’m done with him, I’ll hand him over to you alive. Don’t worry.

Celty read and reread the message several times, but it did not fail to confuse her on each reading.

Why is Mr. Akabayashi telling me the same thing Shijima did...? And why does Mr. Akabayashi have Yukihiro...? What is going on here...?

It was a long and agonizing night for Celty, who did not realize that the first part was a simple coincidence. She felt disgusted with herself for succeeding at her courier job because of someone else’s help and without interacting with Yukihiro Natsugawara himself in any way.

“Say, Shinra...do you think I’m not suited to be a courier...?” she grumbled.

Shinra gave her a beaming smile and said, “The one thing you’re best suited to being is my wife, Celty...would be my dream answer. But in fact, you’re best suited to just being Celty. Whether it’s as a courier, or a dullahan, or a hero, or a villain, you should do whatever you want.”

“Shinra...”

“You might fall out of step with society at times, but eventually the city will understand you, too. Just like how I understand you. You just have to have faith that sometimes the city will slow down to match your gait.”

"...You're right. I'd like to believe that," Celty typed, deciding to be true to herself.

But Shinra wasted no time in working himself up in his usual way. "Oh, but speaking of being a wife, I would be happy to take *your* name, too! Shinra Sturluson. That's great! It feels like we're one and the same. I feel closer to you than ever before! Besides, calling you Celty Kishitani would make it sound like Dad took you in as a foster child. So what do you say? We could go and have another wedd-ded-ded-ded-ded—"

She used her shadow to hold Shinra at bay as he tried to leap on her and answered him with a wry *"Good grief. I'm remembering now that you were the one who threw me off my game to get me here in the first place. Originally, we should have been living in completely separate worlds."*

"Celty..."

He looked anguished, as though she was about to say she was leaving again. But she was going to do no such thing.

"Thank you, Shinra. At this point...I'm incredibly grateful that you dragged me off the proper path."

EPILOGUE

SIR,
YOU'RE
NOT
ALLOWED
HERE
ANY *MORE*



EPILOGUE

Sir, You're Not Allowed Here Anymore

Several days later, Sonohara-dou

"Oooh, I didn't realize you were close friends with Celty," Himeka remarked, much to Anri's embarrassed delight.

It had been several days since the big night, and everything seemed to have settled down again.

The trio of teenagers visited Sonohara-dou just at the right time to witness Celty and Anri having a discussion. The group ended up having quite a good time talking about Celty.

"It sounds like Saburo is going to get off without losing his license, because they admitted that he was in a state of panic after being shot at."

"You think so? He might not go to prison, but I imagine his license will be suspended for a while..."

"In a sense, they're not wrong. Togusa literally does go crazy over Ruri Hijiribe."

The chat was helping Celty organize everything into one coherent story in her mind. Of course, they didn't mention Saika in front of the younger kids, but because she and Anri were talking about the sword's part in the recent incident, it had been hard not to accidentally bring it up.

Kuon glanced toward the back of the store, where a woman was currently working.

"Huh? Is that a new employee?"

"Yes, she just started yesterday," explained Anri.

The white woman with blond hair noticed them and bowed. "My name is Orca. I'm an exchange student. It's nice to meet you."

“Wow, your Japanese is really good.”

“Thank you. I was wandering without a place in the world when the owner took me in, and now I work at her store to repay her kindness.”

“You were without a place in the world...as an exchange student...?”

It was an odd story, but they decided that she probably just wasn't explaining it right because her Japanese was still imperfect, so they all ignored the implications of it.

Celty, however, knew the truth. The woman was one of the culprits of the recent incident and had been forced to admit her fault through Saika's power.

And because of that, Anri was able to help Celty understand the full extent of what had happened.

After Shijima's departure, when Heaven's Slave divided and reformed in many splinter groups, they fell under the attention of the same mysterious group that Celty once fought when recovering the Natsugawara family's pet snake.

At first they seemed like an international smuggling ring, but in fact, they were more like hired agents for a rival company looking to steal the Natsugawara Group's research secrets. They were keeping tabs on Heaven's Slave, because the eldest Natsugawara child was involved with the group, and they succeeded in manipulating some of the multiple groups as pawns.

Then, out of the blue, Yukihiro Natsugawara took over one of the many Heaven's Slaves and ordered them to abduct Anri.

So he wasn't actually breaking in to steal anything but to leave behind something he'd taken out of the Natsugawara mansion... And those two items just had to wind up in the hands of Yahiro and Kuon...

Yukihiro also wound up in possession of Bannanjin. All this is Kujiragi's fault. And Shijima ended up not having any connection to this incident...

She felt kind of bad about that, but his corrupting acts had been the start of all of this, *and* he ended up using her for his own ends, so Celty decided it wasn't really necessary to apologize to him after all.

It seemed like a sardonic twist of fate: Celty had coincidentally gotten dragged

into a sequence of events all from coincidence after coincidence. All she could do for now was be relieved that peace had returned to Sonohara-dou.

All those company agents got arrested, aside from the Orca girl here. So that's a relief, too, I guess. All is well...except for those guys who are still in the hospital after receiving a beating from Shizuo.

She wondered if Mikado Ryuugamine was aware of any of this.

Yahiro and Kuon shared a knowing look before turning a laptop around to show it to Celty.

"What is this?"

"Er...well, you see...there were data cards inside the items we got from here...and mine only had porn on it. Thousands of pictures of it."

Yeah, I know. That's the shame of the Natsugawara Group's patriarch, Celty thought, weighing whether or not to tell them the truth.

Yahiro, however, said, "But that's not all of it."

"What?"

"There was a strange program on my SD card that I didn't recognize," Yahiro continued. "Kuon's sister analyzed it and said it was special combination software..."

Combination software—in other words, a program meant to take multiple files split in a particular way and recombine them to form the original data, presumably.

What would something like that be doing there? she wondered.

Kuon explained, "So you see, the thousands of porn photos were...just a false front."

"What?"

"We put the combination program into the photo folder, then extracted the code embedded into the image files...and the file that it recreated is this one."

Celty took a look at the data file—and felt her skin crawl.

"It's really creepy...but I was hoping you might take a look, since you might

know more about this,” Kuon said.

She considered it for a few moments, then banished whatever she was feeling and typed cheerily, *“All right, I’ll take a copy of it! Someone I know might have a better idea what this is, so I’ll ask some questions.”*



Night, Natsugawara mansion

“Can you tell me what this means?” demanded Celty, striding right into the office.

Byakuyamaru Natsugawara gave her a confident smile. “Well, well...I believe I paid your fee already, madam. My butler and maids and bodyguards should have stopped you on the way. What happened to them?”

“...I told them that I came to deliver the porn you were looking for, and everyone let me pass.”

“No way...”

The blood suddenly drained from Byakuyamaru’s face, his confident smile only a memory. Celty thrust the laptop screen and smartphone into his face.

“I’m not lying. I found the twenty thousand porn images you hid inside the parquet puzzle box.”

“Oh, I see. Well, actually, I *do* appreciate that. Give them to me, please.”

“I also found the combination program you hid inside the megalodon tooth fossil.”

“...” Byakuyamaru hid his consternation and let the smile return. “Ahhh...so that means you are aware of our research, then.”

“Yes. And I can see how this would lead to a long vacation in a dark cell. You might not go to prison for simple possession of vulgar images...but human experiments on children that have no medical treatment basis cannot be defined as anything but torture and abuse.”

Contained in the data Yahiro and Kuon found was the record of a child with particular circumstances, who had undergone rounds of genetic manipulation

and special drug treatments in an attempt to intentionally increase human capabilities.

In other words, it was an attempt to tinker with a child's body to turn it into a superhuman.

There were other examples of these tests elsewhere in the world, but the number and manner of experiments laid out in the data was clearly beyond anything allowed by law.

Yahiro and Kuon had no idea that the data had leaked from the Natsugawara family.

But Celty did.

Driven by righteous anger, she had stormed into the Natsugawara mansion to speak her mind. Yet faced with the evidence, Byakuyamaru just grinned, owning his villainous role.

"Heh-heh-heh... And what will you do about it? There is no identification or evidence of any kind that connects that data to us. I could claim that it was all a well-constructed April Fool's joke, and no one could prove otherwise."

"What will I do? I'll do this."

Two loud, crisp smacks filled the office.

"Ouch! That hurts—a lot!"

The massive shadow hands that slapped Byakuyamaru left him with tears in his eyes. His villain's confidence was completely shattered.

"That was so *mean*...! It's not like I was going to use that technology to create a killing machine that would slaughter an entire village as a test of its abilities or anything..."

"Just because you're not planning a massacre doesn't make it right! Turning a child into a toy like this... Where is your respect for human dignity?! You said your company existed to make children's dreams come true!"

"...Yes, I did say that. And it was not untrue."

"Excuse me...?" Celty replied, taken aback by the earnestness in his

expression. With taut nerves, she awaited his explanation.

“...Is it not the dream of boys everywhere to be given special abilities through augmentation surgery?”

“You really are one of Shingen’s friends!” she typed, wringing his neck just lightly enough not to choke him out.

Byakuyamaru tapped her arm and gurgled, “W-wait please. You must understand, the subject in the file isn’t dead. There was no life being toyed with and discarded; please believe me, baby; trust me; love me tender; *killing me softlyyyyy...*”

She let him go with disgust, unable to tell if he was going through the throes of some demented agony or just messing with her. *“So the child is all right? If they’re all right, show me where...”*

“Where? Why...there! Did you just hear the door down below?”

At that moment, there was the sound of feet coming up the stairs.

Oh no...Awayuki?!

Celty spun around as the door to the office flew open, and...



Several hours earlier—rental office, Saitama Prefecture

“Well, I’m certainly glad that all those obnoxious folks are gone, just like that. The odd confusion was cleared up, and I’ve sold out the remnants of Heaven’s Slave to the Awakusu-kai,” crowed Shijima.

Jami sounded apologetic. “I guess I shouldn’t have suspected you of kidnapping girls, huh?”

“I’m not mad. I would do it if I needed to, after all.”

“Wow, you really are the worst!” Jami exclaimed. He was fiddling with a set of puzzle rings. “Ugh, I can’t get them to open.”

“What’s wrong? I thought you were good at those.”

“No, I’m not! I’m only good in classes when I can memorize stuff and calculate

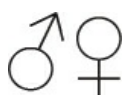
things...,” Jami said, deflated.

Shijima found this curious. “But you solved that puzzle box the Blue Squares had right away.”

“Huh? That’s because I’ve opened it tons of times.”

“?”

“It was the same as one I have *back home*. And I’ve opened that one millions of times, so I remember the steps. But I was really surprised when it even had the same data card on the inside. I wonder if everyone puts those in their parquet boxes...”



At present, office, Natsugawara mansion

“I’m home, Dad! Oh...! The Headless Rider?!”

The sight of a brown-skinned boy, who sounded rather childlike despite his height, confused Celty.

“Uh, er...nice to meet you?”

“Yeah, I’ve seen you around before! Also, I saw you get back my little sister’s snake from the garden! I’m really happy to get the chance to say hello!” the boy raved, his eyes sparkling.

Celty looked to Natsugawara for help. Byakuyamaru simply said, “This is my foster son, Jami.”

“I’m Jami Natsugawara! It’s nice to meet you!”

“Uh, hello...”

She accepted the handshake Jami offered, at which point Byakuyamaru casually admitted, “This is the experiment subject we were just talking about.”

“What?! Right in front of him...?!”

“Huh? You talked to her about that, Dad? Wasn’t it supposed to be a company secret?”

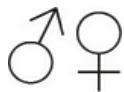
“And he knows about it already?!” Celty was reeling from a series of shocks.

“Of course,” said Byakuyamaru. “I found a child overseas with great aptitude, and his poor, impoverished parents begged me to use him as a subject... So after trying out all our projects in development on him, they were all successful! We created a boy so hale and hearty that it’s almost too much to handle. His grades are good, his athletic ability is Olympic level, and he’s stoked jealousy in his brother Yukihiro...”

He went on to explain how he’d taken the boy in as a foster child and the various things that had happened since bringing him to Japan, but Celty was so mentally exhausted that she barely listened.

Byakuyamaru noticed her haggard demeanor, however, and gloated, “Ohhh? What’s this? Should I call you Miss Jumper? You know, because of all the conclusions you’ve been jumping to—ow, ow, ow, ow!”

“Don’t forget that you are in total violation of the law.”



A few hours earlier—rental office, Saitama Prefecture

“I’m sorry about my big brother making things all complicated and weird, though,” Jami said.

“You’re not kidding. Ahhh, hang on—that puzzle you mentioned... For whatever reason, the guy from the Blue Squares bought that from Sonohara-dou,” Shijima said.

Kuon had actually gotten it for free, but Shijima couldn’t have known that.

“So what’s your brother doing, then?”

“Hmmm. It sounds like he went through something really scary, and he’s been hiding in his room ever since. Sometimes I hear him whimpering things like, ‘I am a miserable, tiny person; I am worth nothing; I am trash; I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ but my sister and mom were really happy that at least he came back home alive.”

“...I think there’s something wrong with your family. But...I did use you as a decoy. I bet they’d completely flip out if they found out about me.”

In order to lure out all the rival company agents, he had sent Jami to the

shopping mall where Celty had been summoned, giving the observers a look at his face. All to make them think the Natsugawaras' second son was making contact with the Headless Rider.

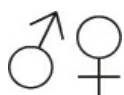
"Well, I think it's crazy that you made people have a gunfight in a place your family is building, Mr. Shijima."

"I'm not crazy. I'm just a piece of shit."

"You're weird... Oh, but I don't think Dad will be angry."

"Why's that?" asked Shijima, curious. Jami gave him a glowing, childlike smile.

"Dad was always planning to destroy those people. This just sped up his plans a bit!"



At present, Natsugawara mansion

"There's one other thing I want to say to you," Celty declared with an accusatory finger once Jami had returned to his bedroom. "You told those company agents that my shadow was some new secret tech of the Natsugawara Group's, didn't you?"

This information came from Orca, who was under Saika's spell, so she must have believed it to be true.

Byakuyamaru assumed another insolent smile and leaned back in his office chair, which creaked under the pressure.

"Well, well. If you've gotten that far, then I must admit that I might have underestimated you."

"So having me search for your son was just a cover. In fact, you wanted to use me to wipe out all those men."

"And thanks to that, I've succeeded at cleaning out all the lingering hostile forces surrounding my family. The fact that you were their foe previously made you an ideal lure to pull them in, courier. Although I will admit that it wasn't my desire to go so far as to have an outlandish gunfight in the shopping mall. Now the Shijima Group also suspects me of orchestrating the event," Byakuyamaru

gloated, despite the note of regret toward the end. “Heh-heh-heh... So tell me, how does it feel to have been used like a tool by a man who would credulously believe anything Shingen says?”

“Well...I do have to wonder why you would admit all that to me. You could have simply insisted that a third party leaked all that false information, and you had nothing to do with it. I wouldn’t have any way to know.”

“Actually, I thought that if I didn’t reveal the cleverness of my plot, you would think me a simple idiot, and that seemed worse to me. In fact, I’d say that it was shockingly easy to take advantage of you—the legendary Headless Rider, indeed.”

She took a silent step closer to him.

“I see. Now, just because I’m curious, what else did Shingen say about me?”

“Ah, let’s see... He said, ‘She’s terrifying if you make her mad,’ and...oh! That’s strange. I fancy that I can see something like a dark and horrible statue of a demon floating behind your back. How odd—ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“Yes. I’m making that out of shadow.” She turned the shadow statue into countless black appendages that crept closer to Byakuyamaru. *“You ought to have credulously believed that warning, too.”*

Faced with the encroaching menace, the man started to scream in earnest, but he was interrupted by the door of the office bursting open. Celty instantly caused the statue to vanish and spun around to see Awayuki in the doorway, breathless.

“Miss Courier! Brother Jami told me that you were here...! I just wanted to offer my sincerest thanks for rescuing Yukihiro!”

“Uh, yeah. It’s fine. Technically, I wasn’t even the one who saved him, but you know,” Celty said, feeling awkward at the profuse bowing exhibition Awayuki was giving.

Byakuyamaru seized on the opportunity his daughter presented. “Oh, Awayuki! Perfect timing. To celebrate Yukihiro’s safe return, why don’t we have an all-night pajama party! Or however long it takes for the courier here to get bored and leave.”

“A pajama party? What will we be doing, Father?”

Celty held up her smartphone at an angle that ensured only Awayuki could see it. *“He’s going to show you all kinds of scary monster and ghost videos that are only suitable for adults, he said.”*

“Eeek...! I-I’m feeling sleepy, so I’ll go to bed now! Good night, Miss Courier! Good night, Father!” the girl stammered, remembering the threat her father made the other day. She bowed once more to Celty and rushed out of the office and down the hall toward her room.

“Nwaaa! What did you tell my daughter?! Did you terrify that little child? Is that what a responsible adult would— Durgh-hurgle-burbur!”

“You don’t get to say that!” Celty snapped, dangling Byakuyamaru from the ceiling and using a shadow spear to poke at him threateningly from below. *“Do you have any last words?”*

“Wait, please! M-money... I’ll pay you plenty of extra money for the trouble!”

“...How much?”

She pulled the spear back. Byakuyamaru lifted the index finger of his right hand, which was not tied up. “Well, let’s see...including the money to buy your silence on Jami’s research data, about this much.”

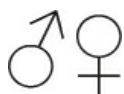
I take that to mean one hundred thousand yen.

In combination with the base pay for the job, it wasn’t a bad number, but considering that they could have bugged her and traced her address, causing potential harm to Shinra, Celty couldn’t help but feel a kernel of irritation bloom inside of her.

“No. This would be more appropriate.”

She held up three fingers instead. Byakuyamaru grumbled but eventually gave up, hanging his head.

“Very well...you drive a very hard bargain, courier.”



The next day—Shinra’s apartment

“And that’s what happened last night.”

Shinra sounded impressed by Celty’s recounting of the tale, and he navigated to the online portal of his bank.

“I see. Well, I don’t know what silence he’s buying, and I won’t ask, but it feels pretty good to know you got one over on one of the richest men in Japan.”

“Well...it was more like I threatened him, so ‘feeling good’ isn’t entirely appropriate...,” Celty said, worrying that both she and Shinra might have darker personalities than she wanted to admit.

I suppose society would consider the both of us to be real villains, she thought sadly.

But she was starting to think that even the path of wickedness would be all right, as long as she and Shinra were going in the same direction. They could drift away from the morals of society, as long as they were drifting together.

Hopefully, however, they would be able to live their lives without making things worse for others, she decided. It made her mind travel to the trio of high schoolers.

If those kids start on their way down this path, I’m going to be the one who pushes them back into the right place. The same way that Mr. Akabayashi did for Mikado.

The topic of the children reminded her of their discussion about the things they’d received while cleaning out the storeroom. Curious, she decided to send a message to Anri: *“Was there some trick embedded inside the fountain pen Himeka chose, too?”*

Anri’s reply was simply *“No, that was something I stocked myself.”*

Oh, all right, Celty thought with relief. *So it wasn’t just some weird coincidence.* Then she noticed there was more to Anri’s reply.

“Ms. Kujiragi sold me that fountain pen, and as a bonus, she hid a map to some buried treasure on an island somewhere inside the pen,” came Anri’s next message.

Wait a second!! What is that?! And why would you just give something like

that away, Anri?!

Maybe every adult around her was crazy in some way or another. Anri had turned into quite a grown-up herself, Celty noted. She turned to Shinra, but he was frozen in front of his computer screen.

“What’s wrong, Shinra?”

“Hey, Celty? There’s a deposit from Mr. Natsugawara’s dummy company...but the number doesn’t make sense.”

“What?”

Don’t tell me he tried to do some punch line like “three fingers meant three hundred yen”!

If that was the case, she’d have to ride back out to Saitama at this very hour to beat the man up. She approached and peered over Shinra’s shoulder at the account screen.

It said the following: *Deposit: ¥30,000,000.*

“What do you mean? It’s right there, all thirty mimimimilmilmilfjljhkjlkljn,” she typed, her fingers spasming partway through the sentence when she processed the number of digits.

“There’s...thirty million yen in here, Celty... What exactly did you do to him?”

After that, the notifications on Celty’s smartphone just kept going off.

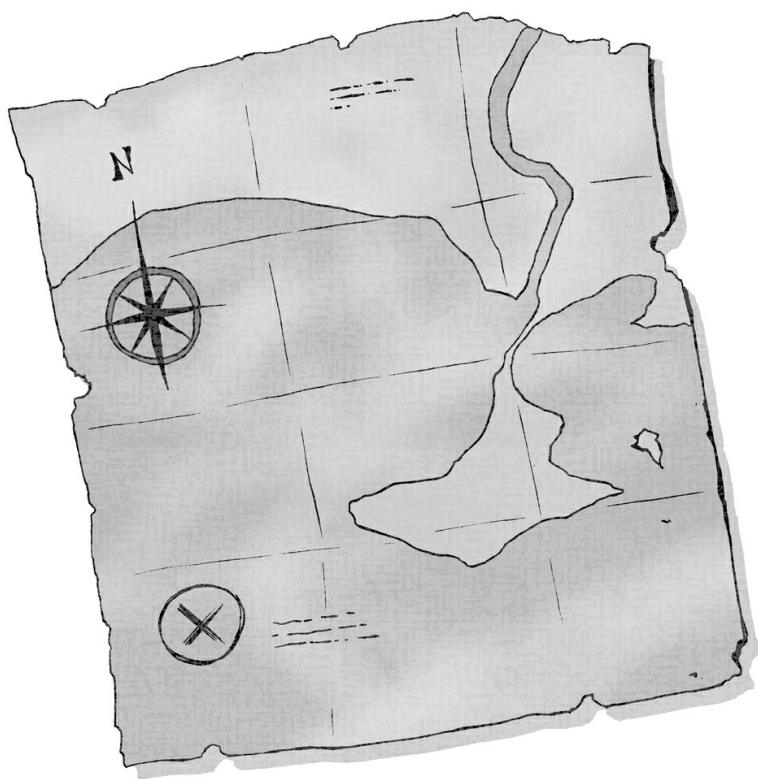
Kuon sent a message that said, *“It’s crazy! This treasure map thing came out of Himeka’s fountain pen! It’s out at sea off the coast of Enoshima. We gotta go check it out!”*

Celty got the sudden feeling that she was simply fated to always remain in the clutches of a slightly abnormal life.

She would use the large new sum of money in her possession to buy a boat and take a summer vacation to the waters near Enoshima with Yahiro, Shizuo, and the others—but that is a story for another time.

Celty didn’t need to head out to sea, of course—she had plenty of slightly off-kilter adventures waiting for her closer to home in Ikebukuro.

A whole collection of stories with Shinra, the man who turned her world upside down, and the greatest partner she could have ever asked for.



AFTERWORD

Hi there, I'm Narita.

As you've just seen, this volume of *SH* is a more whimsical and comedic story, in the vein of Volumes 4 and 7 of the original *Durarara!!* series. Some characters like Anri and Kinnosuke Kuzuhara got to appear for the first time in a while, and their presence made me a bit nervous while writing.

I hadn't thought that the ultimate final boss for Celty, who tormented her so much in *DRRR!!*, would make his return in *SH*—but after seeing the scripts for the anime series, I felt like I needed to write a proper conversation between him and Celty when she was in a rational state, and that's why I included him here. When Celty said (or typed), "*Why are you here?!*" that was exactly what I was yelling in my head as I wrote it.

At any rate, I'm hoping to keep writing more commonplace stories in *SH* that can be contained in a single book, like Volumes 3 and 4. Hope you enjoy the regular life of Ikebukuro!

Now, some of you readers may have noticed that I've written this volume of *Durarara!!* in a slightly different way. As a matter of fact, I've been suffering from an ailment called anaphylactoid purpura and some subsequent kidney inflammation since last fall. It's not that drastic of an illness, but the treatment itself is basically just waiting for it to heal naturally, being careful not to exacerbate it.

Dermatologist: Just make sure you get as much rest as possible until it goes away.

Me: Oh, don't worry! I work sitting down, so it's fine.

Dermatologist: No, you misunderstand me. You need to *rest*.

Me: Huh?!

So this was how I learned that sitting down doesn't actually count as

“resting.” Resting means lying down with your feet up. That means I’ve spent the last few months at home hanging out in bed.

It’s pretty hard to just lie down all the time when your mind and body feel good. As a result, I’ve been writing my novels on an app I found on a particular smartphone company’s OS. In other words, I wrote most of this book on a smartphone app (I’m not mentioning the name because I don’t want to seem like I’m shilling it). Of course, I tidied it up on the computer at the end, so the text itself should be at its usual quality...*should!* (Although I worry that some people might think, *Your writing is actually cleaner than usual when you do it on the phone...*)

Anyway, my condition has improved to the point that it’s okay for me to sit up and work again. It was my first time writing a novel on a smartphone, and I have to admit that the overall lesson I learned in the latter half of last year was *That was...surprisingly easy.*

Still, the process is slower than typing on a computer sitting up, so my schedule had to be rearranged in various ways. All kinds of books had to be delayed, including Volume 4 here.

If any of you out there were looking forward to this book coming out on time, I’m very sorry for the delay.

On the other hand, the process went pretty smoothly once I got used to it, so even though I’ve gotten the go-ahead to continue working sitting up, *I can still write when I get into bed at night. Now I’m able to write day and night*, I think to myself with a smirk.

Speaking of which, while I was on bed rest, I also used my smartphone to write the special short story for the anime’s Blu-ray and DVD set, featuring the very first appearance of Shinra’s little sister...

Yes...the anime.

In the midst of a stretch of eighteen consecutive months, with a deadline for a special pack-in story, the *Durarara x2* anime series is finally in its final cour! The *Ketsu* cour has begun!

I got to attend the recording of the final episode’s vocal track, and it was such

a wonderful performance that I got a little teary to think that *Durarara!!* was finally coming to an end.

I'm so grateful to director Omori and all the people who worked on the anime, and I'm delighted to know that now people can enjoy the entire story of *Durarara!!* in animated form from start to finish.

The world of *Durarara!!* continues in the *SH* series, of course, as well as the *Izaya Orihara* spin-off. Nonetheless, I hope that you'll all enjoy the story reborn in anime form, in its entirety.

Speaking of other media tie-ins, the latest volume of the *Durarara!! Re;Dollars Arc* manga is in stores the same date as this book, plus the first volume of the *Baccano!* manga!

Please go out there and check out *Durarara!!* and *Baccano!* in both novel and manga form!

Lastly, my usual acknowledgments.

To my editor, Papio, and everyone at the publisher, despite my contracting a strange disease at a very important time for the anime and ruining a very busy schedule.

To the manga artist, staff members, and cast members who bring the *Durarara!!* anime, manga, merchandise, and other multimedia tie-ins to life.

To the family, friends, authors, and illustrators who support me.

To Suzuhito Yasuda, who gives color to my words by bringing out new sides to even old characters like Anri.

But most of all, to you for picking up the continuation of *Durarara!! SH*.

Thank you, thank you all! I hope that we meet again soon!

January 2015—Ryohgo Narita (while playing a smartphone game in bed)

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