RYOHGO NARITA
DURARARA!!
DRRR!!
11

DURARARA!!

DRRR!!

11

RYOHGO NARITA

ILLUSTRATION BY

SUZUHITO YASUDA

Izaya: I hope Shizu breaks out of jail soon.

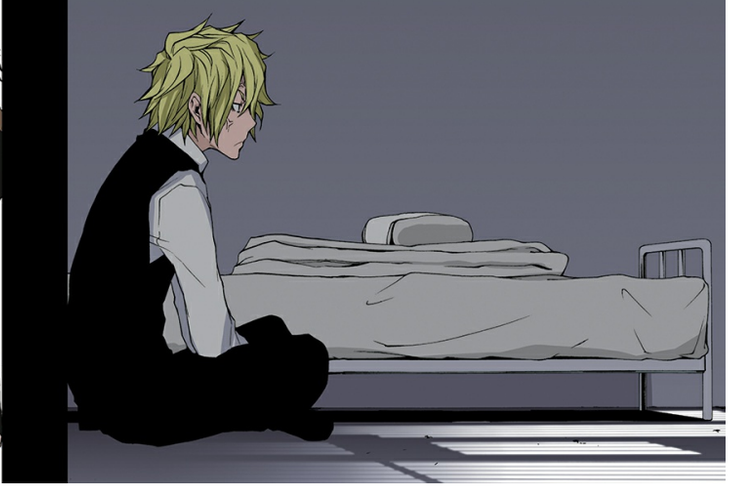
Izaya: Then he can get shot by the police.

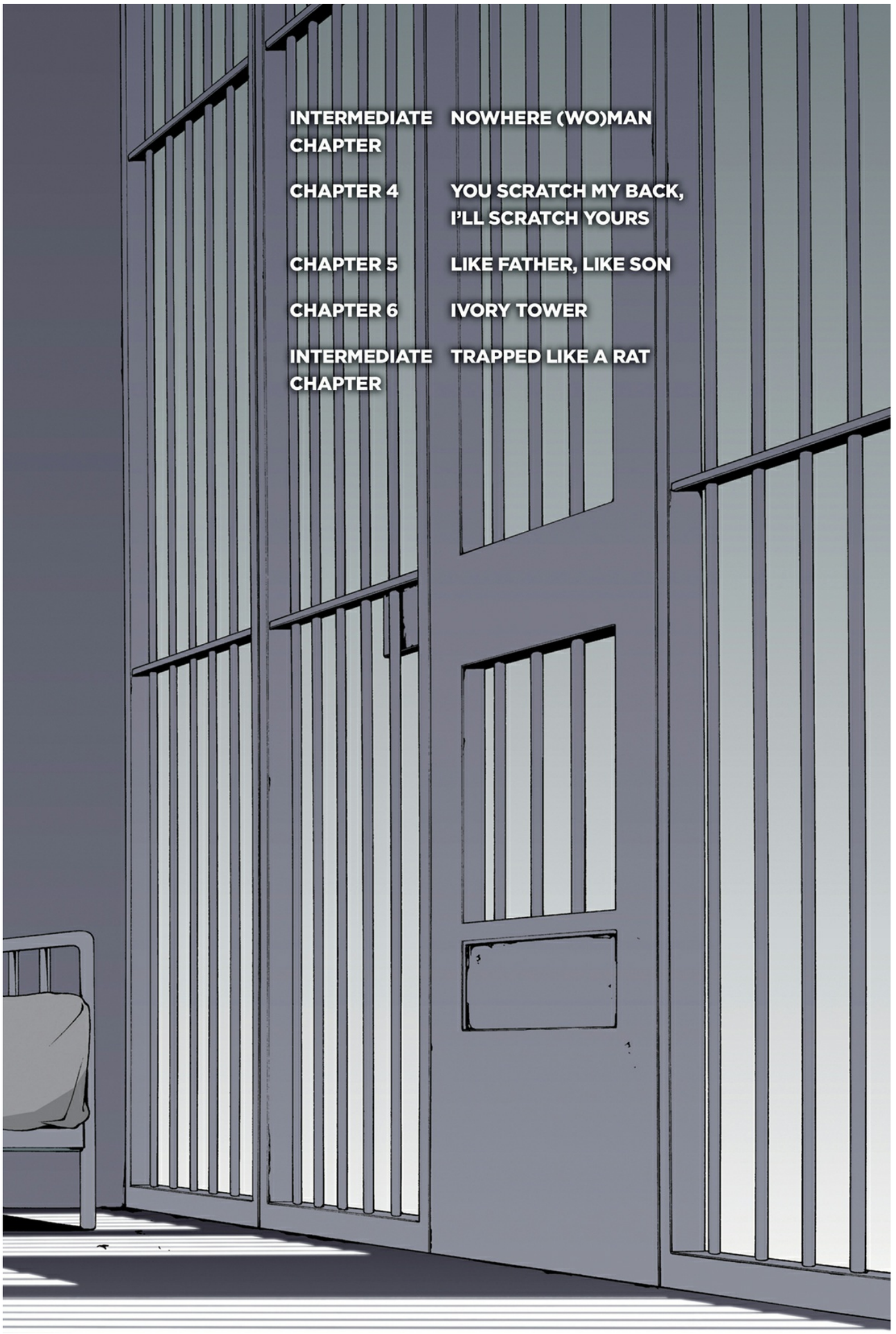
Izaya: I don't care if he goes to heaven or hell; I'd just be happy knowing he's not walking the earth anymore.

Shizuo: Dammit, I just wanna get out of here already...

Shizuo: Well then, I can either pay a visit to Tom and Vorona or crush that fleabrain for good... But which one should I do first...?

Shizuo: Now I'm getting pissed. If that damn fleabrain would just disappear already, I wouldn't have to pick between the two. I swear to God I'm gonna send that son of a bitch to hell...





INTERMEDIATE CHAPTER	NOWHERE (WO)MAN
CHAPTER 4	YOU SCRATCH MY BACK, I'LL SCRATCH YOURS
CHAPTER 5	LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON
CHAPTER 6	IVORY TOWER
INTERMEDIATE CHAPTER	TRAPPED LIKE A RAT

MIKA HARIMA
×
CELTY STURLUSON
SEIJI

VOLUME 11

Ryohgo Narita
ILLUSTRATION BY **Suzuhito Yasuda**

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

DURARARA!!, Volume 11

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DURARARA!! Vol.11

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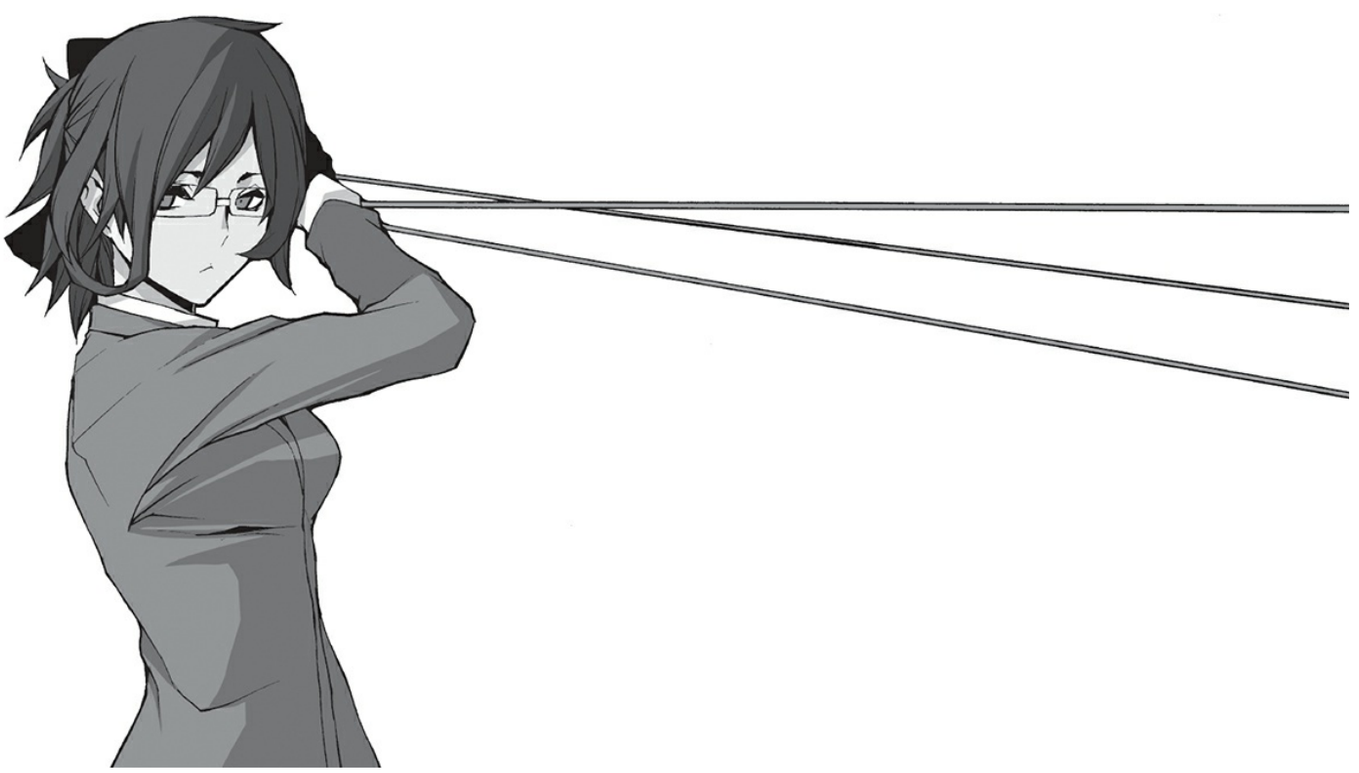
INTERMEDIATE CHAPTER
Nowhere (Wo)Man

DRRR!!

Ryohgo Narita



Intermediate Chapter: Nowhere (Wo)Man

An excerpt from Shinichi Tsukumoya's closed blog Let me tell you about Kasane Kujiragi.

She is undoubtedly and unashamedly a perpetrator, but she is also a victim.

However, being a victim does not make it okay to be a perpetrator. She is a criminal who deserves to be judged by human beings for her actions.

I say "by human beings" for a reason, of course.

Kasane Kujiragi.

This is not her real name, but bringing up her old name would only make this story more complicated. So within the posts of this blog, I will refer to her only by that name.

Kasane Kujiragi might be human, and she might not.

To be precise, her mother was something not quite human.

A folklore yokai?

A monster?

Some evil spirit?

A demon?

I can only guarantee that she is not an angel, but the precise label is not important, really.

The point is, Kasane Kujiragi was born to a human man and "something" not human.

But there's no need for me to go on and on about her mother here. Such stories are best left to rats who reek of blood.

In any case, she has inhuman blood running in her veins.

And though they are separated by a generation, Ruri Hijiribe contains the same blood.

Yes. Kasane Kujiragi and Ruri Hijiribe are relatives. Ruri's mother and Kasane Kujiragi are sisters from different fathers. That would make Ruri the niece of Kujiragi.

Does that seem weird to you?

Kujiragi doesn't look that old, does she?

Well, her mother's blood does confer certain things, but as a matter of fact, she really *isn't* that old. Though sisters, she's over twenty years apart from Hijiribe's mom.

But enough talk about middle-aged childbirth.

Kasane Kujiragi.

To make a long story short, she was sold. Right after birth.

Ruri Hijiribe's grandmother did some hanky-panky after she left home, and when she gave birth to her daughter, that child got sold off to an old man named Jinnai Yodogiri.

What kind of a mother does that, right?

Okay, maybe she had some circumstances, but I don't know about that. It all happened years ago.

Anyway, this guy Yodogiri teaches the little girl all kinds of tricks of the trade, even at her age. That's probably around the time she got Saika.

And after that old man died, out of convenience, she kept the name of Jinnai Yodogiri alive by using appropriate doubles as she went.

Her life is spent devouring people and monsters, as Jinnai Yodogiri.

She didn't ask for it.

She just didn't know any other way to live.

I bet the talent was always there. As long as she lived that way, she never struggled to support herself. In fact, if she'd lived any other way, Kujiragi would no doubt have starved to death as a child.

Her mother sold her, and Jinnai Yodogiri broke her down as a person and fit her into his mold.

If Izaya Orihara is a natural villain, then Kujiragi is a miscreant built by human hands.

That's what I meant when I said she's a perpetrator and a victim.

Again, it doesn't excuse her actions, by any means. That's what I wrote above.

And when it came to the way she treated Ruri Hijiribe, there might have been some personal sentiment involved.

Just think about it.

A woman who has the same blood as her, chasing her dreams and leading a brilliant life in the spotlight.

It makes sense that she'd want to torment and toy with such a woman, right? Just roll her right down into hell.

But only if Kujiragi still has the very human emotion known as jealousy.

Now, I happen to know more things than the average person. I know things, and then I *know* things.

But I can't read people's minds, and I certainly can't read monsters' minds.

Maybe if you searched all across the entire world, you'd find some person or monster with the superpower to read minds as if they were transparent—but it ain't gonna be me.

So I can't really imagine it.

I can't foresee what Kujiragi will do next, broken free from the shackles of Yodogiri.

She's been completely released from Jinnai Yodogiri.

While still possessing the "power" of Jinnai Yodogiri.

Freedom.

If Kujiragi tastes this to her heart's content and tearfully reforms herself to live for the sake of others and the betterment of the world… Well, that'd be

nice, but I’m not counting on it.

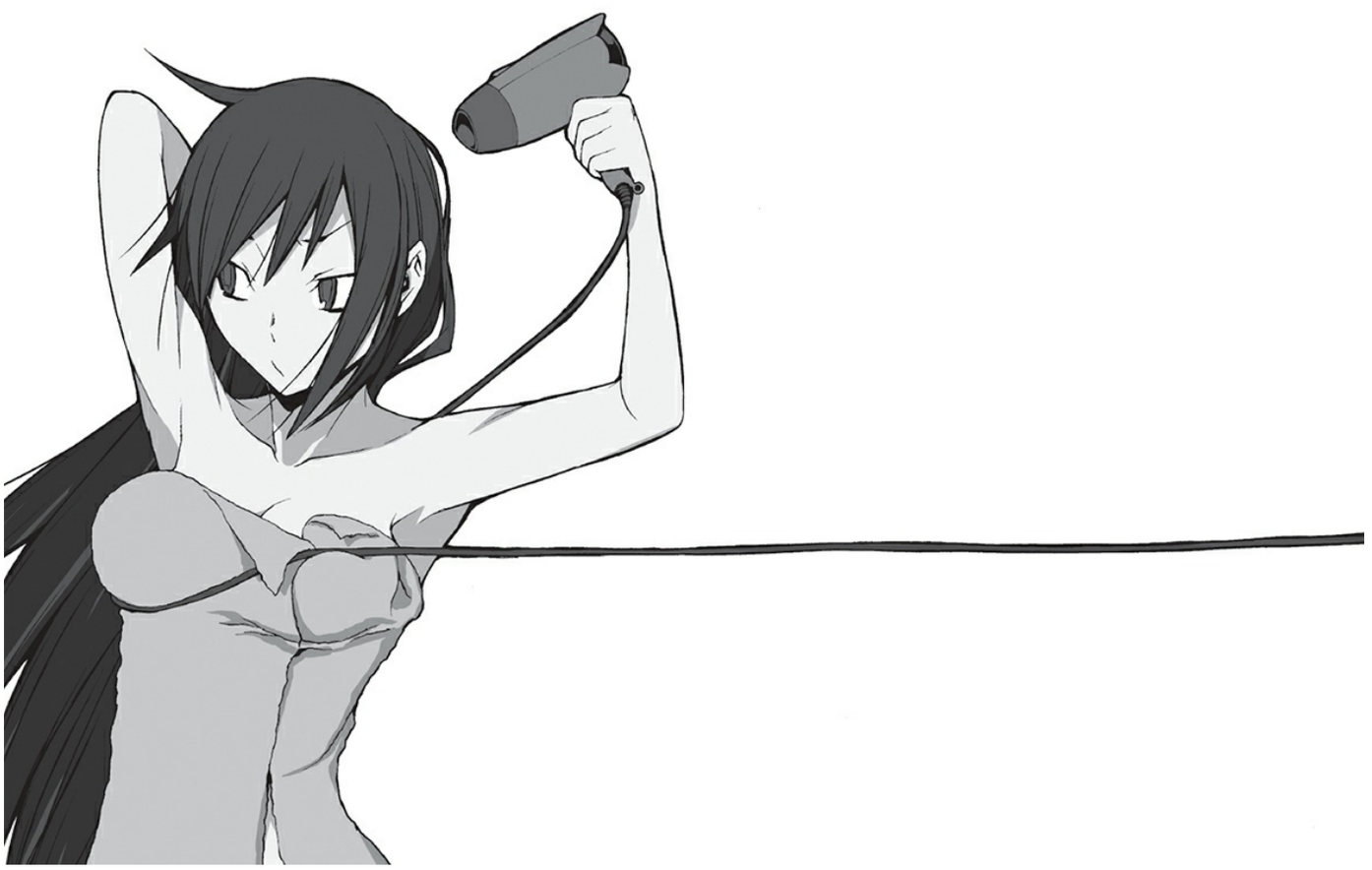
There’s only one thing I can say to you, intrepid discoverer of this blog.

Just be careful that she doesn’t drink the blood flowing fresh from your veins, that’s all.

CHAPTER 4
You Scratch My Back, I'll Scratch Yours

DRRR!!

Ryohgo Narita



Chapter 4: You Scratch My Back, I'll Scratch Yours

Social Networking Service: Twittia

Kisshi—Wearing my gas mask rn **Kisshi**—The air today tastes so fresh through my mask **Kisshi**—My son got me to set up this account on private, but what do I post?

Kisshi—It's all in how you view it. With zero followers and locked posts, no one else can see what I'm posting here **Kisshi**—In other words, I'm free **Kisshi**—The true freedom I've always sought is here. Cyber freedom!

Kisshi—Actually, I wasn't really looking for freedom that much **Kisshi**—But at least I can say whatever I want here **Kisshi**—And if no one else can see it, this should make for a handy journal **Kisshi**—Plus as long as I'm online, I can see it from anywhere on earth **Kisshi**—As many secrets as I want. This is the knot in the tree where I can whisper that the king has donkey ears **Kisshi**—Nebula is currently pooling a large slush fund under the guise of "association expenses"

Kisshi—But in this case, "association expenses" is exactly the right term for it **Kisshi**—Because the money is literally going toward "associating" with something nonhuman **Kisshi**—The division of Nebula of which I'm in is searching for nonhuman people whose presence hasn't been publicly admitted.

Kisshi—The Headless Rider unsettling Ikebukuro at the moment is one of our research subjects, for example **Kisshi**—Other divisions are researching nonsensical topics like the undying and a "liquor of immortality" and such, which is preposterous. Yes, there are various spiritual creatures about the earth, but obviously there is no such thing as a person who does not age or die **Kisshi**—Which is a lie. I know for a fact that they do exist. And on that note, perhaps vampires exist, too. It was reported that the previous chairman of Nebula's business rival, the Gardastance Group, was a vampire **Kisshi**—…But I don't know why I'd write that if no one ever reads it **Kisshi**—I'm connected to the entire world, and yet no one will see me…

Kisshi—I wonder if this is what it feels like to be an exhibitionist who only struts around in the nude in pitch-darkness?

Kisshi—Ha-ha…if this ever gets out, Nebula will execute me for spilling trade secrets **Kisshi**—What an incredible thrill. The excitement of living on the edge **Kisshi**—Why, I don't think I could sleep on the night that I accidentally reveal classified information **Kisshi**—But I'm not revealing my real name, and based on the contents, surely these just look like the ramblings of a madman **Kisshi**—My, but what a terrible and wondrous age we live in **Kisshi**—A sea of information that stretches across the world, supported by networks **Kisshi**—Just like brain cells, exchanging information through synapses **Kisshi**—Perhaps there might emerge some higher being, with humanity itself as its brain **Kisshi**—I bet if I said that in the presence of other scientists, I'd be laughed out of the room **Tsukku**—@Kisshi Perhaps it has already been born **Kisshi**—Who's that?!

Kisshi—I'm supposed to be locked and nonpublic!

Kisshi—I'm sorry! I'll pay whatever you want! Please forgive me!

> **Tsukku**—@Kisshi It's me, Tsukumoya. It's nice to speak to you again, Mr. Kishitani **Kisshi**—Oh, it's just Tsukumoya **Kisshi**—Well, that's a relief. But don't I have a right to privacy?
>
> **Tsukku**—@Kisshi I'm sorry. It's just that you never show up on the Net, Shingen **Tsukku**—@Kisshi I wanted to let you know about something **Kisshi**—For the moment, I will not ask how you are able to speak to me, when my account is unlisted and you are not following me. It seems nothing is impossible to you **Tsukku**—@Kisshi Um, I can't do the impossible online **Tsukku**—@Kisshi I'm not some **deus ex machina**

Kisshi—Now hang on a moment. You can change the fonts on this website?!

> **Tsukku**—@Kisshi **what no of course not**

Kisshi—Now you are mocking me on two different levels, and I do not like it!

Kisshi—Whatever. What did you want?

> **Tsukku**—@Kisshi Seitarou Yagiri's group has made a move to capture Namie **Kisshi**—Ahhh **Tsukku**—@Kisshi It looks like their goal is to get Celty's head **Tsukku**—@Kisshi It's probably none of my business, but I

thought I should tell you **Kisshi**—I see. Well, I am grateful for the information **Kisshi**—You know, I've always been curious, why exactly do you take our side?

Kisshi—I can't imagine a reason that a man like you would side with any one party **Tsukku**—@Kisshi I'd say it's because I'm a fellow Dollars…but a lot of the shine is wearing off them lately **Kisshi**—So whose side are you on?

Tsukku—@Kisshi I'm on the side of the people who love this city **Tsukku**—@Kisshi Whether human or not **Kisshi**—I see. Then I shall question you no more. Treasure your love **Kisshi**—And if possible, I would appreciate that you treasure my privacy, as well **Tsukku**—@Kisshi Can't do that **Kisshi**—…

System Information: Username "Kisshi" has deleted their past activity log.

Outside Namie's apartment—in the past

Namie Yagiri was in the greatest peril of her life.

"You have a filthy mouth, Namie."

She was outside her apartment, surrounded by Seitarou Yagiri, Kasane Kujiragi, and her uncle.

"…"

Her life wasn't in peril. Well, in a sense it was, but Namie wasn't going to let a little thing like a life-and-death situation endanger her choices.

"Do you think Seiji will like someone who speaks of such violence? Not that he would ever pay attention to anything other than that head."

To her, the existence of her younger brother, Seiji Yagiri, was everything. But if she were to be captured here, that would limit her options to save him. And most importantly of all, she couldn't allow Seiji to be used as a hostage—couldn't let him be subjected to danger on her account.

So, in that sense, her entire life was indeed on the brink of a great peril.

Kujiragi held tight and immobile as Seitarou finished, "Have no fear. We do not plan to eliminate you."

But they weren't giving her freedom, his cold gaze said. He turned and gave a signal to the men in suits surrounding them. Namie tried to resist, but perhaps due to the stun gun shock, she couldn't even move her limbs. The men in suits were practically dragging her away— When help arrived on swift wings.

"That's far enough!" cried a muffled voice, and a white figure emerged from the shadow of the wall, sweeping speedily toward the group.

"?!"

Seitarou gaped at this sudden intruder—until he realized that the whiteness of the mystery person was due to a lab coat. "Kishitani…?!"

Shingen Kishitani.

An old acquaintance, a transactional partner regarding a certain head, and a researcher affiliated with the foreign conglomerate Nebula, which had

purchased Yagiri Pharmaceuticals.

And at this moment, his enemy.

The sight of the white gas mask over the man's face all but confirmed his identity to Seitarou—but the sharpness of his actions swept the floor out from under that confidence. As far as he knew, Shingen Kishitani was not capable of running that fast.

And certainly, the actions he was taking now—pulverizing the capable men in black suits without any trouble—was not within Shingen's capability.

"…"

Kujiragi stepped forward to intercept their interloper. She readied for a knee kick as he rushed forward, his center of gravity low.

But the man leaped off the ground just before he reached her, soaring high into the air. Rather than landing directly on Kujiragi, he wall jumped off the side of the adjacent car to get past her to the man holding Namie—whom he gave a fierce toe kick to the jaw.

With the guard knocked out, he scooped up Namie's body and turned back to face Kujiragi.

"Something about your presence…," Kujiragi said, her expression unchanging.

But before she could elaborate, she was interrupted by a muffled voice, coming from the same spot as before.

"That's far enough!"

It was the same voice and words as the last time.

Everyone turned to see a man.

He wore a white gas mask and a white coat, the same outfit as the man who rescued Namie.

Indeed, it appeared that the man who'd been shouting and the man who had just rescued Namie were different people.

"Fwa-ha-ha-ha… It would seem the timing is fortunate. It was a good thing I had a surveillance net around that girl."

“…Shingen…Kishitani?” mumbled Namie, who wasn’t entirely over the electric shock but had enough wits about her to recognize the voice of the man in the gas mask. “All of…you people…spying on me… Such poor taste.”

“An employee of Izaya Orihara, accusing others of being in poor taste?” replied the gas-masked man who was carrying her.

On closer inspection, the shape of his mask was slightly different from Shingen’s, and Namie instantly recognized they were different people. But she didn’t seem alarmed or confused by this state of events and said to the presumably unfamiliar man, “That’s right. He’s probably got the worst taste of anyone in the world. What’s your point?”

“Ouch,” the masked man said with a shrug.

His Japanese was fluent, but little hints of an accent here and there gave Namie the suspicion that he was actually foreign. But she didn’t have the time to inquire further at this point.

There was still the obstacle of Kasane Kujiragi standing in their way, after all.

“And how do you intend to extricate yourself from this situation?” she shot back. “I’ll make certain you are properly thanked for saving me later, but I’d appreciate hearing your plan first.”

For her part, Kujiragi wasn’t taking any risks in attacking them. Most likely, she’d judged from the attacker’s movements that he wasn’t an easily subdued opponent.

A furious, frustrated Seitarou ordered, “What are you doing, Kujiragi? Use any means necessary! Just eliminate him and—”

But the mouth he used to issue that command and the rest of the body attached to it were now five yards removed from their previous location.

A third white shadow had descended behind Seitarou without a sound and struck him in the lower back like a pile driver. Had his arms been held at the same time, the force of the attack would have surely dislocated them—but the attack was not meant for maximum damage, only to physically knock the target out of the area. It was successful in that regard; the company president went flying like a tumbleweed in a Western.

Seitarou hit the ground and rolled until he slammed into the wall. His eyes rolled backward, and a streak of blood trailed from his mouth, from biting something on the impact.

Kujiragi apparently considered her tactical disadvantage as this new attacker arrived, and she mechanically switched from fighting back to assisting her boss instead.

As she helped him up, Seitarou saw that Namie had recovered enough to stand on her own, and next to her, the three men in gas masks stood in a direct line facing him. They were rotating their heads and shoulders in a hypnotic circular rhythm, much like some kind of corny boy band.

“Fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Does it confuse you that I have multiplied into three, Seitarou? And this is not even the end of it. My body doubles can multiply with every act of human desire, until the entire earth is overrun with *me*.”

“…Hrg…gah…,” Seitarou gasped, blood-flecked spittle spraying from his mouth. It wasn’t clear he had even registered Shingen’s taunt. “What do you… think you’re…?”

The member of the masked trio standing at the lead stopped and proudly answered, “My, my, who would have expected that you, of all people, would forget a contract! I believe I told you this about my son: that I would come and punch you. And I believe you accepted those terms, as long as it was one punch.”

“That’s horseshit! You didn’t do that just now, someone else did! And I authorized you to punch me, not to kick me!” Seitarou bellowed, the blood flying from his lips.

Shingen shook his head. “That’s quite an entertaining hypothesis, but do you have proof of it? I wouldn’t blame you for thinking that my…my Nebula punch was so powerful that you confused it for a kick.”

“That does not matter now! Why have you interfered with our business?!”

“And why must I be forced to explain myself to the likes of you…? Have you grown arrogant in your old age? Humanity is not your slave. People grow by overcoming unexpected obstacles and challenges. Don’t you agree, Kasane

Kujiragi?”

The woman, who hadn’t been expecting a direct address at that point, squinted for a moment. Then she said, “I do not sense any need to answer that question. What reason should I have to reply?”

“I’ll pay you ten thousand yen.”

In an airy tone, the gas-masked man right behind Shingen said, “Oh, you are just the *worst*, Shingen.”

“Be silent, my doppelgänger, Gas Mask Number Two!”

Kujiragi considered his offer in silence, her expression completely flat. For several seconds, she looked down, then said, “That seems an outrageous sum in reward for answering a question that does not involve secrets. I cannot accept such a seemingly suspicious offer.”

“Okay, how about five hundred yen?” asked Shingen, pulling a five hundred–yen coin from his pocket. He tossed it toward Kujiragi.

“…Actually, you really *are* the worst, huh?” said Gas Mask No. 3, the one who had kicked Seitarou.

But Kujiragi caught the coin, and when she was satisfied that it wasn’t fake, replied, “Very well. I will give you my answer to that question.”

“You’re actually going through with it?!” snapped Gas Mask No. 3.

Kujiragi ignored him, propping up Seitarou in her arms, and explained, “It is true that humanity is not Seitarou Yagiri’s slave. An unfair reality will likely cause him to grow as a person, with the condition that he must be capable of overcoming it first. However, if one broadly interprets the status of humanity to be in the thrall of someone, or of rules, or of instincts…then one might say that all humanity is, in fact, a slave to something else—perhaps to the world at large.”

“Is that your idea? Or is it Jinnai Yodogiri’s idea?” Shingen asked sharply, but Kujiragi just shook her head.

“I do not understand what you are saying.”

“I’ll give you another five hundred yen.”

“It is one of President Yodogiri’s lessons,” Kujiragi said, catching the coin.

“What kind of conversation is this?” wondered No. 3, but the others ignored him.

Meanwhile, Shingen muttered to himself, “Ah yes, I see. She hasn’t changed in twenty years. She was just a young girl back then… I suppose this would make her a poison that cannot be poisoned by society.”

Then he turned his gaze upon the prone man. “Now, Seitarou. It is *I* who wishes to ask what you think you’re doing. Whatever it is that you’re making a deal with Jinnai Yodogiri about and manipulating his secretary Kujiragi to achieve, you haven’t announced any of it to Nebula headquarters in the least!”

“I’m not under any obligation to—”

“You *do* have an obligation,” Shingen boomed haughtily through his mask. “Wasn’t there an item in your contract that states, ‘You must report prior to handling any matters pertaining to the business, even if personal in nature’? Naturally, it only suggests anything relating to the handling of pharmaceutical products…but you do know that Celty’s head qualifies for that category, I trust.”

Seitarou could only mumble and mutter under his breath. Shingen continued, “Things are becoming highly troubling now, thanks to you. I am not your supervisor or babysitter. But on the other hand, that means that if you are acting suspiciously, you cannot weasel your way out of it with me.”

“Oh, don’t be silly… My company president’s position is nothing more than a stepping-stone, compared to *what we’ve seen*.”

“You are like the apocryphal tomb raider who attempts to rob the mummy’s tomb, only to succumb to being a mummy yourself. Only you’re so incapable of cradling that mummy that you have no right to even *be* a mummy. You’ll just wind up as a man wrapped in bandages, burning in the fire and brimstone of hell!”

“Do you have any room to speak? You’re the man who used a cursed sword to steal a dullahan’s head,” Seitarou snapped back, full of hatred.

Shingen was unperturbed. “I am already a false mummy. As your friend, I am merely warning you not to follow my example, and yet you cannot even take

my warm advice on good faith… What a sad and foolish thing we human beings are!”

Seitarou was about to bellow back at him, but a stab of pain through his body left him moaning and coughing.

Kujiragi replied instead, “I do not detect any such elements of fondness and caring in your conversation.”

“Aha… You would appear to have keen abilities of observation. Very well. It is foolish to give away information to the enemy, but out of respect for the greatness of your imagination, I shall answer honestly! It is true! What I said to Seitarou just now was utter nonsense! Indeed… I am the sort of man who can lie right to his old friend’s face without compunction… A very bad man, indeed! You might even say that I am the baddest man in all this city!”

“…”

“And good and evil are separated by the slimmest of margins… You might even say they are sides of the same coin. In other words—! Because I am the greatest villain to be found in this city, that gives me the right to refer to myself as its most laudable saint as well! How wicked you people must be to treat this saint with hostility. Therefore, let us define the violence I wielded in saving Namie to have been judiciously applied in self-defense. Why, I could have sworn Seitarou was going to kill me back there. How very frightened it made me, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha…”

It was difficult to tell how serious Shingen was being. He pulled something out of his coat. Nearby, the men that Gas Mask No. 2 had knocked out were beginning to recover and get to their feet, which suggested that combat could break out again at any moment.

But just before the men in suits could stand again, Shingen pulled the pin on the smoke grenade he was now holding and tossed it into the middle of the street.

“Fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Until we meet again, Seitarou! The next time, you’d better have changed your name to Akechi the great detective! And I shall be the Fiend with Two Faces!”

Then the smoke grenade burst, and a curtain of all-concealing white completely enveloped a small corner of Shinjuku.

The same day, evening—Shinra's apartment, near Kawagoe Highway

"Next in the news, a very friendly saltwater crocodile measuring seventeen feet long appeared in a river in Saitama today. Local residents took to calling it Salty and tossed raw meat to the creature…"

In a penthouse apartment, with the large TV as background accompaniment, Celty Sturluson listened to Shingen Kishitani brag on and on.

"And it was only because I was able to multiply myself into multiple bodies that she was saved. If not, those scoundrels would have taken Namie away, and who knows what kind of scandalous things they would have done to her?"

"I see. Good for you," Celty typed into her PDA without much emotion, but it did nothing to suck the wind out of Shingen's sails.

"By the way, when I mentioned 'scandalous things,' what did you imagine I was implying specifically? Think of this as a simple psychology test. I want to know how much you, as a monster, have in the matter of human desires, or getting more directly to the point, *just how far* you have gotten with Shinra in the ways of—*gmmf!*"

A tray came flying through the sliding doorway of another room and smacked Shingen right on the temple. He turned toward its hurler, holding his head. "Why would you do that, Shinra?! I did not raise you into the kind of son who throws a tray at his father!"

"And I didn't raise you into a father who would sexually harass his son's girlfriend!"

"Grr… I did not get raised by you, period… They say a son grows in his father's example and a father grows by watching his son, but I was always so busy with my work that I hardly ever had time to watch you… If the result of that fact is my current situation, then I must heartily acknowledge—my bad!"

The target of Shingen's speech was Shinra, who was wheelchair bound. He

couldn't walk yet, but with Celty's help, he was at least able to sit in the chair now.

"But fear not, Shinra. As I just explained, I went to the wicked source of your current predicament and socked him a good one! Normally, I would take him to court and reduce him to utter ruin, but I thought that exposing you and Celty to the legal system would be a poor idea. So be grateful to me that I did not make it into a big deal."

"A big deal, huh?"

"You and I are creatures of the darkness. Shadows ought to stay low and quiet."

As a sign of perhaps how cool and nihilistic he was, Shingen punctuated this statement by spinning the tray that had hit his temple around his finger.

But then…

"Next in the news, an apparent smoke screen device went off in a residential block of Shinjuku this afternoon, sending large clouds of smoke around the area…"

The sound of the newscaster on the television caused the tray to slip from Shingen's finger.

"According to eyewitness reports, a number of men wearing white outfits were seen running from the…"

The newscaster's voice cut off mid-sentence, replaced by the laughter from a comedy show. Shingen slowly raised his head, remote control in hand, and faced his son, who was looking at him with dead eyes, and Celty, who merely held up a PDA screen with an ellipsis typed on it.

"There is no longer any place to hide in this new information society… The network has become light that shines through the darkness. Don't you feel that it has surpassed the boundaries of mankind? I fear the data revolution…might have all been a terrible conspiracy to transform humanity into a higher being."

"Don't try to weasel your way out of this!"

Celty's shadow wove its way around Shingen, squeezing him tight.

“Gwaaaah! W-wait, Celty! I can explain! Let’s all just ta-ta-ta-talk—”

The only one who came to Shingen’s aid was a man who Celty did not recognize. “Please wait,” he said. “The responsibility lies with me for providing him with that smoke grenade.”

The young man was obviously not Japanese, but his command of the language was excellent.

“You know, this is a good opportunity to finally ask… Who are you?” Celty typed, not realizing that he was none other than the “bandaged man” she herself *had ferried as cargo before*.

“Greetings. My name is Egor. I am an old companion of Simon and Denis from Russia Sushi.”

“Simon?”

Now that he mentioned it, he did look as if he could be Russian. But why would Simon’s friend be handing out smoke grenades? Celty was confused, but to be fair, confusion was becoming a familiar state of mind for her.

The reason she was able to stay oddly calm when talking to this unfamiliar Russian was probably thanks to the other people present in the room with them.

Seated by the window of the large common room were Walker Yumasaki and Saburo Togusa. They’d been on edge until recently, when Karisawa sent them a message saying, “Kadota’s heading toward recovery, and he might open his eyes by the end of tomorrow,” and they relaxed quite a bit.

“Y’know, Mr. Kishitani’s dad is a pretty cool guy. When you wear a white gas mask like that, you can’t help but be curious what kind of face is hiding underneath. Could be a half dragon—or it could even turn out to be a gorgeous girl!” said Yumasaki.

“You want a dude with a deep-ass voice to turn out to be a girl…?” Togusa replied.

Shingen boomed, “Fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! If my identity is to be a beautiful young woman, then I am not opposed to that fate. As a matter of fact, my previous

wife and I—Shinra's mother, I mean—once did a bit of clothes swapping indoors. I seem to recall it being rather…enticing."

Celty typed a message into her PDA and showed it to Shinra.

"How does it feel to have your dad admit to his sexual fetishes out loud?"

"I would prefer if you would console me without comment, Celty."

"Hey, don't worry, Shinra! We did not exchange underwear, so that does not make me a pervert!"

"SHUT UP PERVERT!" Celty typed for emphasis, thrust the message into Shingen's face, then turned her attention to the other side of the room.

"Seiji, Seiji! Should we exchange clothes, too?!"

"Nah, that's creepy."

"Okay, but is it all right if I put on your jacket and roll around on the ground with it?"

"…Yeah, I guess that's okay," Seiji Yagiri replied without much interest to Mika Harima's sappy request. On the other side of Seiji, Namie grabbed his arm, her temple twitching.

"My goodness, whatever is this little cat burglar playing at? When Seiji was a little boy, he wore my old hand-me-down pajamas. So would you please cut out the mimicry, if you don't mind?"

"Huh? Those were your old pajamas? I'm pretty sure they were men's pajamas…"

"I wore them first and stretched them out to make them easier for Seiji to wear," Namie said, blushing like a teenager.

Seiji didn't seem to think much about this revelation. "Oh, you did? Thanks, Sis."

Namie managed the impressive feat of simultaneously smiling at her brother while shooting death rays at Mika past him. Celty couldn't help but lament.

This place is doomed. The only people who seem normal are that man named Egor and the driver of the van. Then again, if Egor was working with Shingen for

whatever reason, that would make him involved in the criminal underbelly.

She glanced at the long-haired young man, hoping for at least *some* kind of normalcy…

"Hey, Yumasaki. If they sold the right to switch pajamas with Ruri Hijiribe, do you think it would be insincere to pay for that with money? Because even if it is, I don't know if my willpower could hold out, if given the option…"

All the normal people are gone! Celty despaired, making the gesture of sighing in disappointment. She had to make the gesture, because she wasn't actually capable of sighing.

Instead, black shadow oozed and writhed from the cross section of her neck.

Celty Sturluson was not human.

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

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

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

And it wasn't that she didn't know; more accurately, she just couldn't remember.

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

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

But ultimately, she had not succeeded at retrieving her head, and her memories were still lost.

However, Celty knew who had stolen her head.

She also knew who was preventing her from finding it.

But that meant she still didn't know where it was.

And she was fine with that.

As long as she could live with those human beings she loved and who accepted her, she could happily go on the way she was now.

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

That was Celty Sturluson in a nutshell.

With that reflection in the background of her mind, Celty typed a message on her PDA for Namie, whom Shingen had apparently rescued earlier.

"For now…let me just say one thing to you."

"I have no reason to lend an ear to whatever you want to say. Or lend an eye, I suppose, in this case."

"…Do you understand the situation you're in right now?! Do you recall what you did to my head?!" Celty threatened, her shadows oozing outward as she brandished the PDA.

But Namie looked utterly smug as she replied, "Yes, I'm aware. I also remember that the doctor sitting in the wheelchair was an accomplice."

Ugh! Well, that weakens my position…

Namie Yagiri had spent years studying Celty's head and was the very person who had made off with it after the first in-person meeting of the Dollars. While Celty's drive to reclaim her head might have weakened a bit, that didn't mean she had nothing to get off her chest.

But given that she had already forgiven Shinra—who had helped Namie hide the head and even did plastic surgery on a teenage girl's face—Celty really didn't have it within her to maintain her hatred of this woman. If Celty were a true hero on the side of justice, she might have chastened Namie Yagiri for her human experimentation, but she couldn't pretend to be perfectly in the right,

given that she was a courier who often worked with mafia types.

"…I'm not actually all that fixated on it anymore, but I might as well ask, Am I correct in assuming that Izaya Orihara has my head now?"

"I want to ask you that too, Sis," said Seiji, sneaking a glance at the question on the PDA.

"Seiji…," she murmured, looking at her brother with a conflicted expression. She was silent for quite a while, until she exhaled at last in resignation and shot Celty a dirty look. "That's right… I gave the head to that sarcastic asshole. Right after I ran away from you outside of Tokyu Hands, in fact."

"…Right after?"

"Yes. It was within half a day, I think."

Celty clenched her fists. *That devious fox. He already had the head placed somewhere during the Saika incident, and he had the gall to demand thirty thousand yen from me… But I've never felt its aura as strongly as I did this recent time…*

"I don't think that freak had it placed in just one spot, though. He moved it around from place to place. Sometimes he brought it into his office and tossed it around like a ball."

That…is what he does with someone's head*…?* Celty thought, her shoulders twitching. But it was Seiji who expressed his anger first.

"How…how could he torment her that way…?"

"Well, uh, 'her' in this case would actually be me."

"Izaya Orihara…you bastard…" The usually stoic Seiji seethed, clenching his fists. Namie embraced her brother around the back.

"It's all right, Seiji. If you want to stab him, I'll give you all the help you need. In fact, there's no reason for you to dirty your hands on him at all. I would gladly eat a fifteen-year sentence for you."

"Learn to have some principles!"

"Huh? Principles? A monster freeloading at a human's apartment has the gall

to lecture me about principles? A woman who does illegal courier work on a motorcycle without a license plate?"

Those barbs cut Celty deep. Shinra thought, *The fact that she gets depressed rather than angry here is one of Celty's cute aspects*, but he knew that if he spoke it aloud, the barbs would turn into knives that tore at her flesh instead.

Conscious of Shinra's somewhat twisted attention on her, Celty made a show of heaving her shoulders into a sigh, and typed, *"All right… Forget it. I'll hold on to what I want to say to you. Just know that I haven't forgiven you for that. Trust me, I gave Shinra his punishment."*

"Oh? Punishment, you say? Let me guess, you punched him once, then made up, and went on to engage in some kind of beastly mating ritual?"

"How did you know that?!"

Celty's shadows burst out of her like steam from a heated kettle. Shinra tried to back her up by saying, "That's very rude of you, Namie! It wasn't beastly! If anything, Celty at night is as cute and sweet as a baby rabbi—*bwubrulbwobb*," until she stuffed shadows into his mouth to stop him from talking.

"Wh-wh-why would you think that was a good thing to say at this point?!"

"Now, wait a moment, Celty! What do you do with my son at night? I think I have a right to know more!"

"Shut up, you family of creepers!"

It was into the midst of this argument that Yumasaki cluelessly spoke up.

"Pardon me—what do you mean by 'head'? Did Izaya do something again?"

"Oh. Umm…well…"

Crap. I'm going to have to explain the whole story, she realized.

"The truth is, it turns out that Izaya is currently in possession of the head I'm missing…"

"What?! Celty, you mean that your body's going out with Dr. Kishitani…while your face is going out with Izaya?! Is this two-timing?! If you ever admit this on your blog, prepare to get flamed in the comments!"

“Er, no. My head and body have separate consciousness…I guess…”

“…Ah, meaning…,” Shingen started to say, until a black blade jabbed at his throat. “Wh-what is this all about, Celty?! I haven’t said anything to…”

“Trust me, I can tell. You were about to drop some kind of disgustingly crude joke at my expense.”

“Why, this is madness, what proof do you have of that…?” he protested, but the way he was clearly trying to avoid looking at her was proof enough.

She was about to string Shingen up with shadow when Namie chimed in, her voice dripping with glee. “Yes, that’s right. Izaya and your head were in love.”

“Huhhh?!” Celty typed in the process of spinning around 180 degrees.

But Namie was speaking to her brother now. “So I hate to be the bearer of bad news for you, but you must give up on that fickle, unfaithful woman. Did you realize that Izaya and that head speak deeply of their love for each other every night? But while her mouth says, ‘Izaya this, Izaya that,’ her body desires that doctor over there… That’s right, she’s a wretched slut! You’re too good for some tawdry whore like her, Seiji!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, enough of the nonsense accusations!” Celty typed, bumping up the font size for emphasis. Then she paused before continuing, *“I mean…it is nonsense…right? The head doesn’t wake up on its own…right?”*

“That’s a good question, isn’t it? And yet, it has nothing to do with you, does it?”

“Of course it has something to do with me!” she typed, while Shinra leaned forward in his wheelchair and shouted, “It’s got nothing to do with you, right, Celty? You already gave up on that head!”

“Uh. Oh, um. Y-yeah. Yeah, I wish I could agree…but it was a part of me once, and I guess I feel a bit nervous about it being in Izaya’s hands…”

“It’s all right! No matter what might be happening to your head, wherever it is, I can make you a hundred times happier!”

“Shinra…,” she replied, overcome with emotion, but then thought better of it and pulled the PDA back. *“No…wait. You almost swept me away with the*

momentum of that statement—but was what you said even a good thing?"

"Does it actually matter? It's fine, Celty. Izaya has almost no interest in anything that's not human. He probably either used it as an actual ball or, at best, treated it like an expensive vase."

"That doesn't make me feel better about it at all…," she retorted.

Meanwhile, Seiji spoke forcefully to his sister. "It's all right, Sis. It doesn't matter to me how much love she feels for other people. All I want is for the last person she ever smiles at to be me."

"Seiji… Ugh, it kills me to admit this…but I love how perfectly 'you' that faithful sentiment is…"

What in the world is going on here?!

"It's all right, Seiji! Even after that head is gone from the world, I'll still be here to smile for you!" interjected Mika.

"Be silent, cat burglar," Namie spat back. "I hope you lose all nine of your lives and get your guts pulled out for shamisen strings."

"What a horrible thing to say! But if I can still play beautiful music for Seiji as a shamisen, then I guess I'd be happy!"

Are you lot being morbid or romantic? Make up your mind! Celty thought, apparently the only person in the room who seemed willing to call out other people on their nonsense—even if she didn't fully understand what was happening.

It was Yumasaki, a third party in the conversation, who put an end to her brave attempt at enforcing normalcy once and for all: "Oh, I get it, Seiji. The warlord who ruled the postapocalyptic wasteland said something very similar! He said that as long as the woman he loved was by his side at the end, all was well! That's what love means!"

"Thank you…thank you! I'll do my best to follow this teaching!"

"You know, you've got a pretty strong attraction to two-dimensional elements, falling in love with a dullahan head! If you want, I can give you some kinky *doujins* about dullahans and folklore monsters whose heads fly off."

People make those things?! The world out there is way too big! And so is Yumasaki's strike zone, for that matter! Celty thought, even more confused than before.

Shinra asked, "Yumasaki, will you show me those comics later? Just the ones about the dullahan, thank you."

"Shinra!"

"Don't worry, Celty! It's not like I'll take any woman, as long as she's a dullahan! I just want to try re-creating whatever sexy situation that comic depicts, that's all! My only purpose is to do sexy stuff with *you*! Please, my dear!"

"How dare you say that in front of other people as though you're being the reasonable one!"

She let the tendrils of shadow that had been reaching for Shingen divert toward Shinra and forcefully dragged him upward.

"Ow-ow-ow-ow, I'm sorry, Celty, don't get so ang… *Koff!*"

For just a moment, he looked truly pained, as if Celty's shadows had gotten into his injury site. Frightened, she instantly dispersed her shadow like mist and hurried over to the wheelchair.

"I'm sorry, Shinra! I was just doing the usual thing… Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's good physical rehab."

"I'm really sorry…," she said, wilting.

Now that he was free from her shadows, Shingen said, "You know, Celty, for being so bold most of the time, you really become so very soft around Shinra, don't you? I shall have to add that to my research report for Nebula."

"Wait. What research report?"

"Ha-ha-ha! When I submit observation reports on nonhuman beings like you, I get a bonus! Even reports on romantic feelings like the ones you just displayed!"

It was Yumasaki who jumped on Shingen's explanation. "Wait a moment, Dr.

Kishitani's father! There are nonhuman reports?! Like on vampires who look like young girls but have been alive for centuries, or wolf women who play hard to get?"

"Heh-heh-heh… Between you and me, friend of my son—of course! It's not my assignment, but I do happen to have seen reports on ancient loli vampires who love video games and beautiful werewolf girls who love to eat."

Several of these words, muffled by the gas mask, caused reactions in Yumasaki, his eyes shining bright through his narrow eyelids.

"Oooh! Dr. Kishitani, you're a lot more familiar with our kind than I thought! This is incredible! It's the entrance to the 2-D world! Please, I beg of you! I'd sell half my soul for an introduction to that vampire! Then I can use her supernatural powers to find out who hit-and-ran Kadota and give 'em the old huppety-ho!"

"Hit-and-ran? Kadota? What is all this? Anyway, even if I wanted to, I don't have the connections to put you in touch. More importantly, I'd either be docked pay or discharged from my position."

Sensing that things were getting even more out of her control, Celty took a deep breath (or made the motion of it anyway) and emitted shadow onto the ceiling, drawing a word balloon like in a comic book, complete with speed lines and large shadow letters.

"Don't make things even more complicated!!"

DON'T
MAKE THINGS
EVEN MORE
COMPLICATED!!

Ikebukuro

Meanwhile, the one person who knew the location of the head—Izaya Orihara—was in great danger.

While in contact with Kasane Kujiragi over the phone, he was attacked by Slon, who was under the control of her “other” Saika, and knocked totally unconscious.

The over-six-foot-tall Slon slung the lifeless Izaya over his shoulder and headed down the emergency staircase.

“Sorry, Izaya Orihara,” the Russian man said, his Japanese flawless. “You probably thought you were going to manipulate me into being a double agent against the Awakusu-kai…but you never noticed that I was working for Matushka.”

Saika.

The cursed sword that Jinnai Yodogiri had sold to Shingen Kishitani. The weapon that had severed Celty Sturluson’s head from her body.

As fate would have it, that blade was passed down from a woman named Sayaka Sonohara to the body of her daughter Anri, where it continued to sing its love for humanity. By cutting others, it instilled the curse of its love in them, creating “children” as it continued to infect humanity as a whole—except that Anri did not desire this, and for the time being, she showed no signs of creating new children with her blade.

However, Saika’s body was not only in the singular blade that Anri Sonohara held.

At the time that it was sold to Shingen, there were already two cursed blades.

It had been broken in two, the pieces reforged.

While this might make them shorter, at the point they were absorbed into a human body, the shape itself was meaningless. In the hands of a skilled practitioner like Anri’s mother, the blade could grow to many times its length

on her willpower alone.

At any rate, one of the “branched” Saikas wound up with Anri Sonohara. The other resided within Kasane Kujiragi’s body.

At some point in time, Kujiragi had cut Slon, and on her orders, he now knocked out Izaya Orihara to take him to Kujiragi’s base of operations.

Slon reached the bottom of the emergency stairs, the whites of his eyes violently bloodshot, which was the symbol of Saika’s children. He prepared to load the cargo into his vehicle.

“Whatcha doing, Mr. Slon?”

He spun around and saw two men wearing jackets with a dragon emblem stitched onto them. They were members of Dragon Zombie, the motorcycle gang Izaya used as henchmen.

“…He fell down the stairs and hit the back of his head against the floor. I’m taking him to the hospital,” he made up on the spot. The problem was, he was so comfortable lying to them that nothing in his voice actually suggested any haste or concern.

The two Dragon Zombie thugs glanced at each other, then asked, “Shall we take him?”

“No, I can manage on my own.”

“We can’t have that, sir. You’re hired help from the Awakusu-kai. We can’t have you taking him right to the Awakusu-kai office, for example.”

So they hadn’t trusted Slon in the first place. Independent of the matter of Saika, Izaya must have warned his other cohorts to be wary of the Awakusu-kai.

“…Ah, I see. In that case, I’ll ask for your help,” he said, and no sooner were the words out of his mouth than he hurled Izaya’s body at one of the Dragon Zombies.

“Wha…?!”

The man wasn’t able to support the shock of all that weight and toppled backward.

Meanwhile, Slon lunged forward toward the remaining man, caught him with a vicious hook to the chin, then spun back and kicked the falling youth in the same spot.

They weren't catastrophic blows, but the instant shock to the brain was enough to give them concussions, and the two motorcycle thugs fell unconscious.

"…It's a good thing it was you guys," Slon muttered. "If you were Kine or Sharaku, it would have meant more work for me." He picked Izaya's body back up and loaded it into his car.

He started the car and took off, leaving the two unconscious men behind.

But the moment he turned the corner, *another* member of Dragon Zombie poked his head around the side of the building. He pulled a wireless communicator out and started speaking to someone on the other end.

"…It's me."

"The little fish *has been hooked*."

Fifteen minutes later—Tokyo

In a quieter residential area, quite a way off from the commercial sector, there was a residence with its own yard.

Slon pulled his car into the garage of this building, which looked like a completely ordinary home. Then, hidden from the outside, he opened the inner garage door to the house and started to load Izaya inside—when he sensed the sound of motorcycles in the distance.

They were idling, not riding, but he didn't feel that they were just waiting for a light to turn.

Did they follow me?

He spun around and learned that his suspicion was correct.

Just outside of the garage entrance was a young woman with a tomboyish air. Her buzz-cut hair and masculine musculature marked her as none other than

Mikage Sharaku, one of Izaya's companions; she and Slon had interacted on multiple occasions before.

She glanced at the unconscious body in his arms. "I don't really understand what's going on here."

"…"

"May I take this to mean an agent of the Awakusu-kai has finally showed his true colors?"

"Not quite. But the circumstances are not actually that far off," Slon said. He approached Mikage with Izaya in his arms, preparing to try the same trick as a few minutes before. "I doubt you're alone. Does your driver use a bike, too? I guess I'll finish off the both of you and wait for more orders from Matushka."

"Orders from Matsu-what?" repeated Mikage, who didn't know any Russian.

Slon ignored her and took another step closer. Then he hurled the unconscious Izaya toward Mikage.

But she kicked Izaya's body *directly back at Slon*, and while he was busy receiving the impact, leaped to the side. She kept launching herself—off the car, off the wall of the garage—gaining altitude until she could issue a vicious kick at Slon's head. He only barely avoided it in time.

"Very good, young lady."

"Don't dodge, you big lummox," she snapped back, glaring at Slon from the roof of the car. The man tossed Izaya onto the garage floor and took distance from Mikage.

Suddenly, pain shot through his lower back, like his internal organs had just exploded, and Slon fell to the floor without even a scream.

"…It's over," said a man with a shaved head to Mikage, clicking off the baton-type stun gun in his hand.

But she just surveyed the man with a grumpy look on her face and said, "Hey, I was just getting to the good part. Why'd you have to interfere, Kine?"

"Because it's my job," said the man, who removed a pair of thumbcuffs from his pocket and placed them on the hapless man now foaming at the mouth. A

shot to the kidneys was said to be the most painful place to receive a zap from a stun gun, and Slon had taken one for several seconds. The only way you could tell he wasn't dead was all the twitching.

Mikage sensed that their conversation wasn't going to end in any consensus, so she gave up on complaining and hopped off the car. "You know, for being a master mercenary from Russia, he didn't put up much resistance to your sneak attack. So should I be praising your skill instead?"

"Nah… He wasn't using all his ability. Kinda felt like he was under something else's control, so that probably dulled his senses a bit."

"…True, his eyes were bloodshot. Kinda like the folks that Haruna beat, now that I think of it."

Haruna Niekawa was originally a child of Saika, a victim of Sayaka Sonohara, but she had conquered the curse and learned to wield its power for her own ends. Later, Anri Sonohara cut her, too, placing another layer of the curse upon her—but she broke free of that as well and was now lurking somewhere in Ikebukuro as a collaborator of Izaya's.

After a period of silence, Mikage suggested, "Do you think…she betrayed Izaya?"

"I dunno. But as far as I know, this house isn't owned by the Awakusu-kai," said Kine. With Slon's feet cuffed up, too, he turned his attention to the other man lying on the floor. "Let's hear what you think, Izaya Orihara."

And then the man who was supposedly unconscious lifted his head and smiled at them.

"Oh, goodness, when did you see through my pretend-sleeping, Mr. Kine?"

"When Miss Sharaku there kicked you, I saw how you gritted your teeth. So how long have you been awake?"

"Since about when the car pulled into this garage. I figured it was better to stay down for the time being," Izaya offered. He gave Mikage an awkward grimace. "I didn't expect he was going to use my body as a physical diversion, and I *definitely* didn't expect that you would kick me back at him. Er, sorry, I lied there—actually, I had a feeling it would happen, which is why I gritted my teeth

in the moment."

"Oh…should I have kicked you in a more painful way?"

"No, thank you. You might've cracked my ribs," he said, laughing her suggestion off as he looked down at Slon. Then he cleared up their suspicions, as though being an info dealer meant he was obliged to explain: "Yes, Slon was under Saika's control. But it was neither Anri Sonohara nor Haruna Niekawa who was in control."

"Ohh."

"It was Kasane Kujiragi. She also possesses Saika."

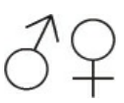
"What's that supposed to mean?" Mikage wondered.

Izaya chuckled. "We'll have plenty of time later for me to explain it to you." Then he took a look around the garage and smiled. "This was quite a stroke of good fortune. The moment I declared war on Jinnai Yodogiri…er, on Kasane Kujiragi, I find out the location of one of her secret hideouts!"

"…I assume you'll explain that part later, too."

"But of course! One thing is certain: If we wait here, we should be able to meet Kujiragi in person eventually. She's just expecting that Slon will have me trussed up and on the verge of death."

"So with that out of the way…shall we set up a surprise party and hide?"



Kawagoe Highway—Shinra's apartment

"Okay, so let's put all this information together," Celty typed, now that she had heard everyone out at last. She shrugged her shoulders to mimic taking a deep breath. *"First of all, Yumasaki and the driver are searching for whoever hit Kadota. And because they were attacked on the way, they needed somewhere to hide for a moment and chose this place."*

Sweat drop running down his forehead, Togusa asked, "Um…do you not remember my name or something…?"

"…I'm sorry."

“You could at least come up with an excuse! It’s Togusa, okay! Written with ‘crossing’ and ‘grass,’ because if you cross Ruri around me, your ass is grass!” he wailed, even getting a little bit teary-eyed. It seemed that receiving an honest apology was only making him feel more miserable.

Once she had properly apologized to him again, Celty continued, *“So Namie Yagiri was attacked by her uncle named Seitarou and the secretary of someone named Yodogiri, because they wanted my head. And according to Shingen, it’s the secretary, named Kujiragi, who’s actually controlling this Yodogiri person.”*

“Well, there *was* a real Jinnai Yodogiri who was the true mastermind, but he’s dead at this point,” Shingen added.

“I see,” Celty typed. *“And Seiji and Mika sensed they were in danger of being taken hostage, so they came here.”*

“That’s right. Mika warned me about this. And we thought that since Dr. Kishitani works in the black market, he might know good places to hide.”

“Okay… I’ll be honest, that’s very perceptive of you, Mika.”

“Yes. I had Yagiri Pharmaceuticals bugged, and when I heard them talking about that on the tape, I got so scared…”

“…Well, what you just said was scary in a different sense, so I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear it,” Celty typed, sensing her very mind sweating. *“At any rate, we’ve learned that Izaya’s even scummier than I imagined. I need to track him down and squeeze the head out of his grasp.”*

“Celty!” shouted Shinra in consternation.

“Don’t worry, Shinra,” she typed. *“I’ll get the head back without touching it directly and have Shingen’s company hold on to it. I don’t mind a bit of research, but I’ll make sure we have a deal so that they’re not mutilating it.”*

Then she stopped to think for a bit and added, *“If I do take the head back for myself, it’ll be decades in the future. After I’ve already outlived you, Shinra.”*

“Celty…!” he repeated, enraptured.

But the elder Kishitani tossed cold water onto the scene: “Now just a moment, Celty! I’ve got two problems with your idea!”

"…What are they?" she typed, infusing her motions with disappointment to make up for the lack of visual organs to side-eye him with.

Shingen puffed out his chest and boomed, "First! Are you confusing Nebula with some kind of unconditional storage safe that is at your disposal whenever you want?!"

"I said you could study it, so if anything, I'd expect you to be grateful…but fine, point taken. What's the other thing?"

"You just called me Shingen! I seem to recall that I demanded you refer to me as 'Father' or 'Papa'!"

"Shut up!"

Just then, Shingen's new wife Emilia emerged from the other room, grinning, and exhibited some of her unusual Japanese. "Yes, most understooded. I have no problem of Nebula taking claiming of Celty's head."

"E-Emilia. You really shouldn't—"

"It is fine. As long as enough coaxing is coaxed, all will be well."

"Who's going to do the coaxing? The company or me…?" Celty asked, then decided she really didn't want to know. She turned her attention to Namie to ask about the man who had the head now. *"What is Izaya actually plotting? Does he have collaborators working with him?"*

Namie looked away as she considered this, then glared back at Celty with unconcealed disgust. "I'm under no obligation to answer that. I'm grateful to that freak dressed in white for saving me, but don't forget that I have nothing in my heart for you but hatred."

"Wait…what did I do to deserve that…? I know I helped Mikado and ruined your research team, but that was just what you guys deserved…"

"That doesn't matter! I hate you because of how your head has seduced my poor Seiji!"

"That one definitely isn't my fault!" she typed as quickly as if she had screamed it.

But that didn't do a thing to extinguish the fires of Namie's misplaced hatred.

“If you demand that I produce the answers or leave, I will walk right out of that door without a moment’s pause.”

Then she pointed at Shingen and, as if to change the subject, said, “Oh, right. One more thing: That freak dressed in white was perfectly aware that Izaya had the head, too. He’s known for a while.”

“Wha…?! This is the precise situation where you play it cool and keep things like that to yourself, Namie!” Shingen protested. “I was successfully dodging around the topic by acting like a perv, and now you’ve gone and ruined it!”

Celty turned slowly. *“Shingen Kishitani… You again…”*

Shingen briefly tried to avoid her attention, then gave up and sighed through his gas mask.

“Well…I suppose there’s no use trying to hide it now. Yes, I knew where the head was, but I admit that I let Orihara go, because I was curious about how he would use it and what the results of his approach would be, coming from a different perspective than Nebula’s. Perhaps he could have gotten ahead of us!”

“Huh? …Oh, that was a pun. It’s hard to understand what you’re going for when they’re pronounced the same way, idiot!”

“I am not an idiot! I am your father-in-law, and you should address me as such!”

“Shut up, freak!”

Celty badly wanted to tie him up with her shadow, but it didn’t feel right to do it while Emilia was watching, so she kept her fury confined to words for now. That was the end of that topic, which left Celty uncertain of how she should bring up the topic of the Dollars and the Yellow Scarves.

How should I do this? Will talking about me and Mikado just make things even more confusing and chaotic here? After all, it involves Mr. Akabayashi and the Awakusu-kai, too. Namie and Shingen are one thing, but the kids like Yumasaki and Mika don’t deserve to be dragged into that.

When Shinra noticed that she wasn’t typing into her PDA anymore, he spoke

up. “Well, in any case, the question now is, ‘What do we do?’”

“Shinra?”

“Look, we’re all here now, right? It must mean something. Shall the whole group of us gathered here collaborate on something? I know it’s a bit overblown, but we could be a team or a gang.”

“Like the Dollars?” Togusa asked skeptically.

Shinra shook his head. “No, we’re not a color-based gang. We’re not here because we wanted to be like the Dollars or Yellow Scarves, are we?”

“Yeah, if anything, it’s mostly coincidence that brings us together.”

“We’re here because we share certain interests. We ought to be able to provide helpful information to one another. We’re like a fraternal society with the same goals… Like a…ah yes, almost like a guild, you could say.”

“Sounds like you’ve been playing too many MMOs.” Togusa laughed, but Yumasaki’s eyes blazed as he shot to his feet.

“Yes! Agreed! A guild! It’s perfect! It has just the right level of fantasy to it! A guild! The guild of guilds! The rhythm just makes your heart sing!”

“Calm down, Yumasaki,” Togusa snapped, but his companion’s enthusiasm could not be dashed.

“But we should at least give ourselves a name, like the Assassins Guild or the Thieves Guild! Hey, we could take it from the name of the sorcerer’s guild from my online role-playing chat room and call it Shadows of the Emperor! Or maybe Queens of Nightmares! Or the Giantess Who Strides Across the Sky!”

Shinra laughed. “Well, we can figure that out later. But I think Celty should be our guild leader. Since like us, she doesn’t have any real power but does have the ability to get people to hear her out.”

“Huh?!” she typed, thrusting the message at Shinra while making a shocked gesture. *“Hang on! I don’t get where you’re going with this! Why me?!”*

“Well, Celty, you’re involved in a bunch of different incidents already, so it just seems like it’d be easier to have all the information gather around you.”

“B-but…I get the feeling that’s just going to bring down more and more trouble…,” she protested.

From his seated position on the wheelchair, Shinra bowed his head. “Please, Celty. I’ll take responsibility for the outcome.”

“W-wow, well, if you’re asking that seriously… But what will the other people say?” she asked, checking around the room. No one seemed to be protesting. Namie had no interest in the fraternal society at all and was staring at her brother’s face.

“Look, if you don’t like it, you can just quit. It’s only a tentative plan. I’ll help as much as I can. Please, Celty.”

“…All right. I guess I’m in, everybody.”

Yumasaki was the first to applaud, and after that, Shingen, Emilia, Mika, and Seiji joined in.

“Geez, you’re making me self-conscious…”

Celty felt like she’d been nominated to be class representative, a very unfamiliar feeling. On the inside, her body blushed.

It was the birth of a tiny organization that was not at all organized.

And a few days later, this organization would have an effect on the power balance between the gangs of Ikebukuro—but no one here could have imagined it yet.

Even Shinra, the very person who had proposed the group, was in no way prepared for the way it changed the situation.

Chat room

Mai: I don’t like being lonely.

Mai: Get fun.

Kuru has left the chat.

Mai has left the chat.

The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

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The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

Sharo has entered the chat.

Sharo: Heya.

Sharo: Dang, I showed up right after Kuru-Mai left.

Sharo: Well, that sucks.

Sharo has left the chat.

Mai has entered the chat.

Kuru has entered the chat.

Kuru: Oh my, finally someone else shows up, and it is in the little while we were gone.

Kuru: Why must Sharo be so impatient, one wonders? Ladies do not like an impatient gentleman.

Mai: Good evening.

Mai: It's too bad.

100% Pure Water has entered the chat.

100% Pure Water: Good evening.

Kuru: Oh my, welcome. We were just so terribly lonely that the pangs of body and heart were reaching a peak.

Kuru: It would not have been long before Mai and I were left with no option but to caress each other's mental scars. Thankfully, you have saved us from that.

100% Pure Water: Eww, geez, Kuru!

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Hey, Kururi and Mairu.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Do you mind?

<Private Mode> Kuru: Oh my, is this something that cannot be discussed in public?

<Private Mode> Mai: You're fine with this?

<Private Mode> Mai: What is it?

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Actually, it's not that important, really.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: But maybe it's better if you don't wander around Ikebukuro for a while.

<Private Mode> Kuru: Well, we can't simply take a warning like that at face value, I'm afraid.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Oh, you're right. Fine, I'll be frank.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Lots of things are kind of messy right now.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: And your brother might be involved in all of it.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: It's possible that, because of that connection, some people might try to mess with you.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: And since I'm involved, too, I'd hate for

that to happen.

<Private Mode> Kuru: So you're saying that you are in on this villainy.

<Private Mode> Mai: I'm scared~

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Um, yeah, I'm in on it. I'm in on multiple different levels.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: I won't deny it.

<Private Mode> Kuru: I feel certain that you truly hated our foolish brother…

<Private Mode> Kuru: Wouldn't the easiest plan be for you to take us hostage?

<Private Mode> Mai: Whatcha gonna do?

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: No, I think of you as my friends.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Er, sorry, that's not accurate.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: I guess, to me, you're more like **<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water:** The kind of friends I don't want to see hurt by this.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Having said that, now you're going to launch yourselves in, aren't you?

<Private Mode> Kuru: But of course. If anything, your warning has piqued our interest.

<Private Mode> Kuru: In fact, you've backfired so spectacularly that I wonder…did you say that on purpose?

<Private Mode> Mai: It sounds fun.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Good question.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: I'm still uncertain.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Should I drag you into this dangerous game or not?

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: To be totally honest, I like you.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: I want to keep you safe, if possible.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: But there's a part of me that wants to get you involved because I like you.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: If I'm going to flame out, I want to take you down with me.

<Private Mode> Kuru: Why, it sounds like you're trying to drag us into a group suicide.

<Private Mode> Mai: It's scary.

<Private Mode> Kuru: You seem very similar to our dear brother, but where you differ, the difference is vast.

<Private Mode> Kuru: Our brother would not bother to come and report these things to us.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Is that so? Well, for one thing, I hate being associated with him at all.

<Private Mode> Kuru: Pardon me.

<Private Mode> Kuru: But I'll admit, I have felt something was strange the last few days…

<Private Mode> Kuru: You were the one behind it?

<Private Mode> Kuru: Are you the one who ran over Mr. Kadota of the Dollars…?

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Would you believe me if I said I didn't know who did that?

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: I'm on the dangerous side so deep that it's almost meaningless to deny it.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: So my point is, I don't know if I'll see you after summer vacation.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Since this is a good opportunity, I wanted to tell you.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: I had a lot of fun getting to meet you, Kururi and Mairu.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: But the fun I'm really looking for is somewhere else.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: Once I've gotten everything I can out of that, if you'll still be my friend…

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: …Well…I'd like that.

<Private Mode> 100% Pure Water: So long.

100% Pure Water: Whoops, I just remembered something I need to do.

100% Pure Water: Gotta go!

<Private Mode> Kuru: Good grief. Is he naive and innocent or irrevocably deviant? How can one tell?

<Private Mode> Mai: Dunno.

Kuru: Let us meet again, whether in real life or on this side.

Mai: Seeya.

100% Pure Water has left the chat.

Kuru has left the chat.

Mai has left the chat.

The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

The chat room is currently empty.

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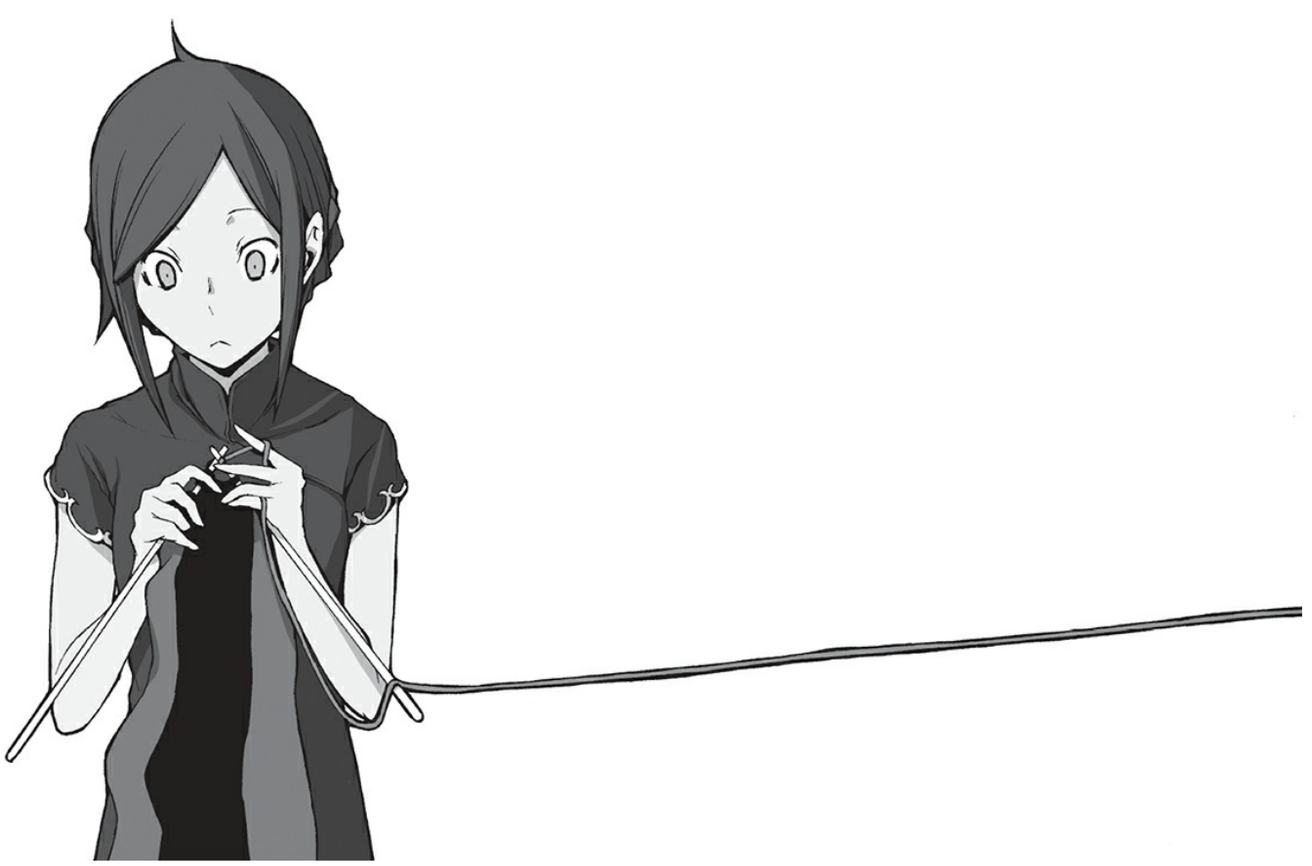
CHAPTER 5
Like Father, Like Son

DRRR!! X

Ryohgo Narita



Chapter 5: Like Father, Like Son

The next morning—Raira General Hospital, Ikebukuro

When the sun rose again after a day of many events, there was one difference in Ikebukuro.

As Anri reached the hospital where Kadota might be waking up soon, she ran across a young man who had come to pay a visit, all the way from Saitama.

“So do you know where Kadota’s hospital room is?”

It was a man named Chikage Rokujou, speaking just outside the door to the surgical ward. Both his tone of voice and his general appearance suggested “light and breezy,” but in fact, he was the commander of a large motorcycle gang in Saitama named Toramaru.

In a similarly breezy tone, Erika Karisawa replied, “Sorry, Rocchi. They’re only letting family see him at the moment. One of those ‘no visitors’ things, I guess. Anyway, it doesn’t sound like his life is in any danger, but he’s not waking up yet.”

“Oh, gotcha. Well, dang, this backfired. If he was awake, I figured I’d get him all pumped up by showing off how hot my girlfriend is,” he said, shaking his head sadly. Behind him, a number of young women reacted in a variety of ways. He was practically a walking harem, and he spoke to anyone on first meeting as though they were already on comfortable terms.

“Hey, y’know, it’s pretty friendly of you to call me Rocchi at our first meeting. Wanna exchange numbers so we can text?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

None of the gaggle of women raised any complaint about Chikage hitting on this unfamiliar woman; they seemed to be used to it. But their eyes were full of

the intent to gang up on him as soon as they left this place, since they didn't want to raise a fuss in a hospital.

Standing behind Karisawa, Anri Sonohara wasn't sure if she should join the conversation or not. She didn't know this man very well, but she understood that he'd seen her swinging Saika. On the other hand, all she knew about Chikage was that he was the person who stopped her sword fight with that mysterious woman, and if he was a friend of Kadota's, then he probably couldn't be a bad person.

"Erika Karisawa, huh? That's a cool, cute name," Chikage said. Then he favored Anri with a nice smile; he clearly recognized her. "And, uh, may I ask your name, too?"

"Huh?! Umm, it's…Anri Sonohara…"

"Anri Sonohara! Nice! That sounds like a celebrity's name."

"Huh? Umm…"

She wasn't entirely certain how she should act around this young man, who was just so casual about everything. Fortunately, Karisawa stepped in to help her out.

"No, no, you can't go after her. She's in the midst of a competition from her very close and precious suitors already."

"Oh, really? And I'm not allowed to throw my hat into the ring?" Chikage mourned. The girls behind him laughed, but their eyes went even colder. Anri could only imagine the fate that awaited him as soon as they left the hospital grounds—but if he acted like this all the time and they still hung around, it had to be a sign that they had a special bond of trust with Chikage Rokujou.

A part of Anri almost felt jealous of that relationship—but that was the kind of weakness that Saika could exploit.

And in fact, right after seeing Chikage and the girls with him, new words began sneaking through Saika's endless internal "words of love," directly to Anri: *—You're jealous, aren't you?*

—Which do you want to be, Anri?

—Do you want to be the boy?

—Or one of those girls?

—Do you want Mikado Ryuugamine and Masaomi Kida to wait upon you?

—Or do you prefer to serve one of them?

—Do you want to be dependent?

—Or depended upon?

—Do you want to bind someone to you?

—Or be bound yourself?

Saika's toying, manipulative messages punctured the usual wave of praises for humanity. Anri tried to push that voice into the picture frame within her mind, but it wasn't quite working. And she had a feeling she knew why.

Saika was already in the process of being on *this* side of the frame. It all started after the incident involving Shizuo Heiwajima and Haruna Niekawa resolved, and one particular sentence had struck a chord within her.

I cannot love you, but I do not hate you.

Maybe it was just my imagination, she had thought.

But at this point, it was less that she hoped it was her imagination and more that she was fine with it *as long as it wasn't* her imagination.

Since then, there were times that Anri felt like Saika was speaking to her directly.

Saika's parasitic presence filled her mind with words of love for all other people. But Anri never found that to be all that troubling or agonizing. In a sense, Anri even felt a kind of respect for Saika, who was at least capable of strongly loving someone else.

But now that relationship was evolving.

She knew the reason why. It wasn't something she wanted to face, but she was certain she knew.

Saika hadn't changed. It was her.

Up to that point, she'd been unable to feel love and stayed hidden inside her own shell—until she began to accept other people into *her* side of the picture frame.

It was a major change.

Mika Harima was a good friend, but to Anri, she was a symbol of longing and aspiration, so rather than being a person on this side of the frame, she was more like the central figure of the painting itself. Occasionally, she did come back through that frame, but Mikado and Masaomi had been on this side almost since the very start.

Perhaps another big event was seeing how Celty—a dullahan, not a human being—had found such a strong partnership with the human Shinra Kishitani. She didn't think much of it at the time, but the steady accumulation of so much normalcy had slowly but surely brought about change in her as a person.

Now Saika was neither some foreign object, nor a host that she was reliant upon, but something she could commune with, something like a companion—whether anything you could call "love" existed there or not.

—Go on. Use me.

—Swing me.

—I will love anyone and everyone!

—I will love! In your stead!

—All you need to do is hold me!

—Which of them do you really love?

—Is it Mikado, the calm and gentle boy who will tend to your wounds?

—Or will you boldly attempt the adulterous Masaomi and go down in flames?

—If you let me love him, Masaomi's body will be forever yours, even if he is promised to another.

Anri considered these booming, echoing sentiments from Saika to be no one's business but her own. She would not let the blade harm Mikado Ryuugamine or Masaomi Kida.

But Saika reacted to that thought:

—Well, well… You're stronger now, aren't you?

—Now you're actually answering my voice. It has been so very long.

"…!" Anri tensed up.

—Don't get so defensive. Why don't we talk for a bit?

—Remember what I said? **I cannot love you, but I do not hate you.**

All the while, the words of love echoed in the background like musical accompaniment. But the voice Anri was hearing was crystal clear, and it functioned just like any conversation.

—In the past, I once told you…

—That as long as you hold me, I can only ever love those you want to cut.

—So why do you think that I was able to love the man named Egor?

Because…

—It's not because you fell in love with him at first sight.

—I fell in love with his strength at first sight. Not as badly as Shizuo Heiwajima, though.

—You understand, don't you? At the start, we each rejected the other…

—But now we are growing slowly closer, aren't we?

That…might be true, but…

—I've become just a little bit you, and you're just a little bit me.

No.

—That's all this is.

No. I am…me.

—You don't have to reject it. I'm not trying to take you over.

—I'm just suggesting that we understood each other.

—I think your mother and I reached quite a good understanding, if not a mutual love.

Please…stop.

—It's how your mother was able to use me better.

—She could do a number of things that you cannot.

—Want me to tell you? Do you want to know how she felt when she…

Stop!

"What's up? You look bad. Oh, sorry, did I frighten you?"

The sound of Chikage's voice brought Anri back to her senses with a start. The words of love continued to echo as they always did, but she couldn't hear the words directed toward her anymore.

Anri looked around in a daze for a few seconds, then bowed to Chikage. "I'm… sorry. I just feel a little bit dizzy…"

"Hey, you okay? Good thing this is a hospital—maybe you should ask for a checkup? Dizziness doesn't seem like much, but it can often be a sign of more serious illness. Forget about me; cute girls like you need to live nice, long lives, until you're adorable old grandmas."

Something in Chikage's lackadaisical tone struck a chord in Anri.

Oh. He's just like Kida.

Masaomi's face flitted through her head, followed by memories of when the three of them had been together with Mikado.

They were fun times. Not dreams, not fantasies, but times that Anri had truly held within her grasp. Irreplaceable times that *accepted* who she was.

A part of her was gripped with a vague fear that they might never return.

But Anri did not sit back and cower beneath that fear. She had come here to meet Karisawa for the purpose of erasing this worry. And then she met this strange man…

He knows that I have a katana…so why is he treating me so normally?

His entrance had caused her to delay her original purpose for coming. If he knew Kadota, then perhaps he might know what was happening around the city.

But her hopes were dashed right away.

“So anyway, I got no idea what’s happening with this one,” Chikage said to Karisawa, his voice gentle and soothing. “They caught the guy who ran over Kadota, right?”

For a moment, Karisawa’s smile wilted but only enough to make it a bit sadder, not to eliminate it entirely. “Nope. I assume the cops are working on it, though,” she admitted.

“Huh…? So it was a hit-and-run?”

“Oh, you didn’t know that already. Yeah, a hit-and-run. No idea who did it, though.”

Rokujou fell silent for a while.

“Got it,” he said. “Then I’ll leave for today. I’d appreciate a message once he wakes up, though.”

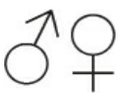
“You’re going back to Saitama?”

“Nah, me and the honeys are going to Namco Namja Town today. And once I’ve seen them off back home, I plan to wander the night streets…”

The girls behind him started beating on him, and Chikage practically ran out of the scene. With a brief good-bye, he left the hospital grounds. Anri felt a strange disquiet as she watched him go.

I could have sworn…

That in the moment when Chikage Rokujou learned from Karisawa that it was a hit-and-run—she felt the briefest bit of a dark emotion exposed in his psyche.



Outside the hospital

“You looked a little scary back there for just a moment, Rocchi,” said one of Rokujou’s entourage, Non, after they left the hospital.

“Hmm? Oh, sorry about that. Did I frighten you?”

“I wouldn’t be here now if you scared me, Rocchi.”

“Oh…oh, right. Thanks.”

Something about Chikage’s manner suggested that his mind wasn’t entirely present. The girls glanced at one another and exhaled through wry smiles.

“You’re thinking of something violent, aren’t you?”

“What’s up, Rocchi? You gonna get revenge for your friend?”

“Of course, he’s gonna stick his head in there. God, that purehearted side of him is so embarrassing, isn’t it? Not that I mind.”

The girls didn’t bother to hold back in their assessments. Chikage readjusted his hat to hide his embarrassment and said, “Look, I won’t deny it. I owe that guy a lot, and I haven’t paid up yet. But don’t worry, I’m gonna make sure none of it comes back on you girls.”

“We’re going to worry unless we know *you’re* safe, Rocchi. What if you get hurt really bad, like recently?”

“If I do, will you peel my apples and feed them to me again?” he asked blithely. Then he went silent and mentally continued his earlier thought.

If I’m gonna get our revenge on Ikebukuro *while I’m still leader…I at least gotta pay back my debt to Kadota first. It’s just the right thing to do.*

He was so absorbed in this thought as he walked that it took him a little while to realize there was a strange man approaching them.

The man glanced at Chikage and his entourage for a split second, then passed by them with a thin-lipped smile—and disappeared into the hospital grounds.

The man gave off an unsettling aura, but that was the extent of Chikage’s reaction as he continued on his way.

Who was that guy? Isn’t he hot, wearing all black in the summer?

Within the hospital

For a while after that, Anri and Karisawa kept talking about Chikage Rokujou, until Karisawa remembered something in a flash.

“Oh, what did you want to talk to me about? What did you mean, you want me to know *everything* about you?”

Anri looked away awkwardly. “Oh…right. Um, I’m not sure how to explain this…”

“Look, I have a general idea. It’s about that katana, right?” Karisawa said, getting right to the point.

“Um…y-yes! That’s right…”

“Is that something you can talk about here?”

Anri glanced around her. Everyone in the vicinity was a visitor for one hospital patient or another. It wasn’t crowded, but it was far from empty, too.

She gave it a little bit of thought, then decided, *I can’t drag her away from this place.*

Karisawa had a very specific reason for being here: to let Yumasaki and her other friends know the moment that Kadota awoke at last.

“…Yes, we can talk about it here. And if anyone accidentally overhears us… well, I don’t think they would believe it anyway,” Anri said with a self-deprecating smile.

She sucked in a breath, willing herself the strength to push forward— “Ooh, do you mind if I listen in, too?”

—when a very lackadaisical voice appeared from beside where they stood.

“?!”

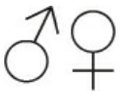
Anri spun toward the voice—and felt a tremor run through her entire body.

This was not the spasm of delight from Saika that she felt when Shizuo Heiwajima was present. It was a shiver of fear from Anri herself.

“Whoa, it’s been forever. What’s up? You here to visit Dotachin in the hospi—

Hmm, yeah, I guess not, huh?” quipped Karisawa, whose reaction was casual and friendly, not at all like Anri’s stunned disbelief.

“By the way, are you familiar with Anri already, Iza-Iza?”



Thirty minutes earlier

“Ms. Kujiragi never did show up last night.” Izaya Orihara chuckled as he lounged on the house’s sofa.

He must’ve been bruised all over his body, but nothing in his demeanor suggested any pain whatsoever. He continued monologuing to himself for the benefit of all present.

“Either she’s more cautious than I thought, or something tipped her off to impending danger. Maybe she was supposed to get periodic messages from Slon. Or maybe *all* the houses on this street are under her Saika’s control, and she’s had tabs on us the entire time.”

“Wouldn’t it be dangerous to stay here, then?” Mikage asked.

Izaya never let the smile leave his face. “Considering Saika’s power, you’re in danger no matter where you are. I will say that when one of the Yodogiris stabbed me while I was on vacation up north in Tohoku, that took me by surprise.”

“When I saw it on the news, I wasn’t sure how to react.”

“I was curious what you’d all think, too. I wish I could’ve had a good long chance to observe it. When I called who I *thought* was my closest friend to break the news, he said, ‘Oh,’ and hung up on me.”

“Can you…even call that a friend…?” wondered Mikage. It occurred to Izaya that she was still very much ordinary and in possession of a commonsense outlook on life.

“Well, in a way, I consider myself lucky to have been stabbed. It brought me back to my roots in many aspects, and I did get to meet Mamiya again.”

“Who’s Mamiya?”

From the corner of the room, Kine answered, “That young lady with the rather gloomy demeanor.”

“Yes! Well done, Mr. Kine! You remembered. She’s Manami Mamiya.”

“Oh, right, that girl who was staring daggers at you. What did you do to her?”

asked Mikage suspiciously, but Izaya shrugged the question off.

"I didn't *do* anything. I just lied and asked if she wanted to commit suicide together, then slipped her a drink with sleeping pills to knock her out."

"…"

Her stare grew colder and colder, to which Izaya just laughed and waved his hand.

"Oh, come on, Mikage. I didn't do the kind of things you're thinking of. But as the girls were falling asleep, they did claim they'd kill me. One of the two of them saw my name on the news and visited my hospital within the span of a single day to come kill me… Don't you think that's lovely?"

"I wish she'd seen it through."

"How cruel."

"Don't worry, I'd avenge you," said Mikage, two clauses that were at odds with each other.

Izaya was going to tease her more, but Kine, who was looking at his watch, said, "Nine o'clock."

"Oh? So it is. What is that supposed to mean?"

"The time the hospital opens. Go and take a visit," he ordered.

"…Wait, are you talking to me?" Izaya asked. "Goodness, I know I got a little bruised, but the hospital would be a dramatic choice of action."

"You hit the back of your head. That kind of damage shows up later. Go and get checked out," said Kine, as he stared at nothing.

Izaya sighed and answered, "I told you, I'm fine. You're such a worrywart, Mr. Kine…"

"Go and get checked."

"I told you, I'm fine. I don't even feel nauseous."

Kine lifted his cold eyes up to fix on Izaya. He repeated himself.

"Get checked by a doctor."

“…All right, I’ll do it. I feel like you’re going to kill me if I keep refusing,” Izaya said with a smirk, standing up to face the outside. “I suppose I could pay a visit to Dotachin while I’m there.”

Mikage parted the blinds with her fingers and watched Izaya as he left the house. Someone from Dragon Zombie was going to drive him close to the hospital, but any more protection than that was going to cause unwanted attention.

She sighed, removed her fingers, and asked the other man, “Kine, right? I dunno much about you. How’d you end up working with Izaya, huh?”

“Etiquette.”

“Huh?”

“When interacting with your elders who are still unfamiliar to you, utilize polite etiquette. Once you’re closer, then you can find out if it’s okay for you to speak to them as an equal,” Kine instructed.

Mikage looked away and scratched her ear guiltily. “Wow, you talk like my old man…uh, sir.”

“President Sharaku is strict on such things, isn’t he?”

“…You know about my old man?”

“My old partner learned something about fighting with a quarterstaff at your family’s gym.”

Something about that particular keyword gave Mikage pause, and a moment later, she asked, “Are you talking about…Mr. Akabayashi?”

“Yeah. Haven’t seen him in a while, though.”

“So…are you saying you came from *that* line of work…?”

“I got outta the business a while back. Now I’m a private eye. But it’s really more of an odd-jobs business most of the time,” Kine said, only relaying the minimum of necessary information. But after another pause, he did say, “I keep my work pretty cut-and-dried, but I will say this. A young lady like you with a future ahead of you would do best not getting involved with kids like Izaya.”

“Oh, I know. Believe me, I do,” Mikage said, cracking her neck and reflecting on the past. “I ended up quitting school because of him. Not that I regret it.”

“Actually, I heard about that one from Akabayashi.”

“…”

“You ought to be careful. The Awakusu-kai have their eye on him. That’s fine—the problem is when they decide to reach out. Akabayashi probably wouldn’t bother with you. He’d focus on Izaya,” Kine said, totally still, doling out basic truths like a stereo speaker. “But Aozaki would come for the throat of anyone, women and children included. Even an old associate like me. And Shiki and Kazamoto are probably somewhere in between.”

He paused for breath. “My point is, when the Awakusu-kai decides it’s time to act, Izaya is done for, no matter how he struggles. So my advice is just don’t leave your tail exposed in a way that makes them want to grab it.”

Then he looked right at Mikage and said flatly, “Are you going to stick with him anyway?”

She briefly considered that he might actually be concerned for her sake and produced an expression of considerable conflict.

“Look, I know he’s not up to any good,” she said with the faintest smirk, plopping into a nearby chair, “but the thing about Izaya is, he’s fair to everyone. He’ll march right into your business and toss around good things and bad things in equal measure. He doesn’t care if you like him or hate him. In that sense, I think that makes him more likable than the folks who are only obsessed with keeping up appearances.”

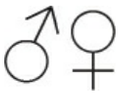
“…I see,” was all Kine said. He didn’t ask anything else.

But Mikage thought back on the past, her face a mask, and muttered, “I agree it’s better not to get involved with him, though. Like in my case, Izaya’s a kind of poison. Once you’ve got him in your veins, you just go kind of crazy… In my case, that poison saved me. But plenty of folks fall into ruin. I think of him as an extreme form of medicine.”

“Because such things, depending on how you use them, can save you or kill you,” Kine agreed. But he chose not to inquire further about her past. “Just

keep in mind, he ain’t some bottle of pills without a mind of its own.”

“The problem is, at the end of the day, he’s as damn human a person as you’ll ever find.”



Raira General Hospital

"What's the matter, Anri? You're looking rather frightening."

"Why…what are you doing here…?" Anri asked, her breathing heavy. Izaya Orihara shrugged.

"Is it that surprising to you that I would pay a hospital visit to Dotachin?"

Karisawa answered in Anri's stead. "*Surprising* isn't the word I'd use for it, Iza-Iza."

She had noticed the change in Anri's demeanor after Izaya showed up and pushed herself into the space between them. "It'd make much more sense if you came here to tell Dotachin a bunch of nonsense to get him worked up, or if you were involved in the hit-and-run and you were just coming to monitor how it was turning out," she said.

Although she was smiling, her eyes were slightly narrower than usual, as if she indeed believed those possibilities were valid.

"Oh, please. I don't have a car, and I have no reason to hit Dotachin. But I do sell information, as it happens. I'll contact you if I find out anything about who did it. Normally, I'd charge fifty thousand yen, but I can give you the acquaintance discount. Only forty."

"You'll take that forty thousand and donate it all to Dotachin's hospital bill, I presume?"

"Oh, please. Don't you know that the number four means 'death'? Not an auspicious number to spend on a hospital patient, is it?"

As they jousted, not at all clear how much was a joke and how much was serious, Anri went through a furious routine of self-questioning.

Izaya Orihara.

Why is he here?

Did he come for me?

To visit Kadota? No, he wouldn't.

He's not that kind of person.

Is he involved? With what? How much?

Instantaneous questions floated into her head, and they all coalesced into one idea.

Mikado Ryuugamine.

Masaomi Kida.

Or put another way, the Dollars and the Yellow Scarves.

Two groups acting in inexplicable ways, and the two boys who seemed involved with them.

“Did you…do something?”

“Hmm? What do you mean by ‘something’?”

“Did you do something…to Ryuugamine and Kida…?”

A rare note of genuine anger in her voice caused Karisawa to turn toward her. “Anri?” There was just a bit of surprise in her expression.

Anri Sonohara was glaring at Izaya Orihara, her eyes wide with open menace —and tinted with a faint reddish light.

The light was faint enough that even a fluorescent would drown it out easily, but for that one moment, Anri’s eyes were most certainly glowing red.

But even then, this phenomenon only registered with Karisawa as a “bit of surprise.”

For his part, Izaya wasn’t startled in the least. He chuckled and answered, “Your suspicions are correct. They’re not misplaced. If I were in your position, I would be skeptical of Izaya Orihara, too. Although I wouldn’t be shining those inhuman eyes at people that way.”

“A-answer my question please!”

Was the cold sweat that ran down her cheek out of fear of Izaya or panic at the idea that she might not be able to control her own power?

Even she was shocked. Anri never considered that meeting Izaya again might bring such a churn of fierce emotion to her breast.

The moment that she had first met Izaya was also the time she had first met Mikado. It was the day she was saved when ganged up on by a trio of girls. (Technically, she had *seen* Mikado at the entrance test for the school, but that particular day was the first time they had actually talked.) She'd felt something strange about Izaya since then. Even in that first meeting, she could tell that he was not like ordinary people. Then again, after the impact of Shizuo Heiwajima's entrance, that initial impression had been all but forgotten.

Once after that, Anri had met Izaya in Shinjuku at night with the intent to slash him. But she did not succeed. In fact, he actually declared *war* on her that night.

"People belong to me. I won't let a stupid sword take them away."

And after that missive, he had left her behind and vanished into the night.

She did not think that their next meeting after that one would come in this fashion. If anything, she had hoped never to see him again.

But Anri was not so foolish or naive as to think that his appearance here was a simple coincidence.

Although, in the sense that he had come to a hospital at all, it really *was* a coincidence.

But Izaya could turn a coincidence into a matter of fate.

"Very well. I will answer your question. Yes, you're right to be skeptical of me, but your timing is poor. I haven't been directly messing with Ryuugamine or Kida lately."

"…I can't simply take your word for that."

"It's true. And I can tell you why."

Without realizing it, Anri's brows knitted.

She was ten feet from Izaya.

If she produced her katana from within, she could reach him in a single leap.

But she wasn't interested in cutting Izaya and taking him over right now. Too much time had passed since that night in Shinjuku.

It was only half a year, but to a girl at a turbulent period in her life, it was plenty enough time for her emotions to settle.

She hadn't forgiven him, and she wasn't letting down her guard. But in order to cut him, she'd need another push, another reason driving her to do it.

If only she had the power to see through lies, she wished. But Anri could not read the minds of others. The only means she had was to control them with Saika and force them to speak their thoughts aloud.

And Saika was quiet now. Either she was figuring out how to treat Izaya Orihara, the man who challenged her to a war, or she was still full of hatred and disgust at him.

"Please explain why," Anri said, quietly controlling her breathing.

Izaya shrugged again but grinned like a little boy. "Because *that part's supposed to come after this*."

"…Huh?" she said, blinking. In the moment, she didn't understand what he meant by that. The words made sense, but what reason would he have to tell a joke about that in this situation?

Karisawa, however, had known Izaya a little bit longer than her. "Ugh," she groaned. "What a bastard."

The man dressed all in black cackled at the different reactions. "Oh yes, it's true. Your suspicions are correct. Interesting things are happening with both Mikado Ryuugamine and Masaomi Kida at the moment. If I had to use an analogy…it's like they're crossing a tightrope between two cliffs. Can you imagine that? Two friends, crossing on a rope, between two cliffs."

Anri lost her focus in organizing how she should be feeling about this and allowed herself to be distractedly swept along by Izaya's strange analogy.

"Do you have the image in your head? Here's the next step. There's another rope connecting each of their necks. If one of them slips, he pulls the other down with him. If the other one manages to cling to the rope, it just means all the weight is hanging from his neck. Rather hair-raising, don't you think?"

"…"

Anri couldn't say a thing. She imagined the vision that Izaya was painting, and the symbolism of it matched up perfectly with the anxiety she'd felt about Mikado for the past few months.

"Let's continue this exercise. The people around them are reacting in myriad ways. There's a guy trying to charge money to watch, some kids who are jumping around on the rope too for fun, some Goody Two-shoes dragging rescue mats around at the bottom of the cliff, even some folks just having a nice fistfight independent of the tightrope altogether."

Izaya leaned against the wall of the hospital corridor, speaking just quietly enough to avoid the attention of the hospital employees. "And I'm watching this unfold and thinking to myself."

After that whole descriptive detour, he finally brought Anri to the answer. "Mikado Ryuugamine and Masaomi Kida are engaging in this meaningless rope crossing. So I wonder, *How will they react if I light both ends of the rope on fire?*"

"…?!"

Instantly, Anri felt as though something were clutching her heart. Her chest squeezed hard, like it was trying to force as much blood as possible to her brain.

Despite not moving an inch, her breath was racing as she asked, voice trembling, "Why…why would you do such a thing?"

His answer was very simple and the sort of thing that anyone who knew Izaya Orihara would consider to be totally true to his character: "*I just want to see it.* I want to know what they'll do in that situation."

This time, she really did tense up. The same chill she'd felt on that night in Shinjuku raced up her spine.

"If they safely get off that rope, it just means the same old situation will continue. Yes, everything will wrap up nice and neat, but to me, that means we're losing sight of their true human nature. I do love boys and girls living peaceful, safe lives, of course…but I want to see what might happen with Ryuugamine and Kida because of *who they are*."

"I don't understand. What…what meaning could there be…? What purpose

are you fulfilling by…?”

Anri’s mind was full not of anger or despair but of pure confusion. She couldn’t understand Izaya. She was simply unable to fathom his logic of doing something because he “wanted to see it happen.”

It was like a serial killer saying, “I killed because the sky is blue.” Anri Sonohara could not adjust the signal of her logical antenna to pick up the channel that Izaya operated on. Perhaps their wavelengths were farther apart than different channels. Maybe they were more like analog signal versus digital or even television and radio.

“What meaning? Well, let’s see: curiosity, inquisitiveness, pleasure. You can call me whatever you want, but whenever I’m asked that question, I always say these things. In fact, I’m pretty sure I said this before.”

Then, with an invincible smile, Izaya revealed the pure, honest truth of his heart.

“It’s because I love people.”

“…”

In the absence of any response from Anri, he continued, proud and clear.

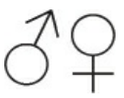
“I love people. I’m in love with humanity.”

With a smile of all-encompassing benevolence directed to empty space, he murmured, “When people all over the world do things, no matter how foolish those around them believe them to be, no matter how hideous and detestable, I will accept and cherish them all. With one specific exception.”

It was a monologue for the benefit of the world at large.

“So why wouldn’t I believe it’s okay to do anything to the people of the world?”

“The result is that I can love everyone equally—even the girl who so hated me that she sought me out to kill me in revenge.”



At that moment—Tokyo

At first glance, she was like any other girl you'd see walking around the shopping district. But the dark shadows lurking in her eyes created tension in the air around her and sent signals to keep your distance.

Her name was Manami Mamiya.

While her given name meant "sea of love," the only thing that filled the seas within her mind was hatred—for Izaya Orihara.

The man who had lied to her and completely dismissed everything she was.

It had the effect of preventing her suicide, so she could've chosen to be grateful to him—but nothing in her mind had moved forward an inch from the moment that she made the decision to kill herself.

Instead of moving forward, her life had taken a sideways turn down a detour of hatred for Izaya Orihara. She didn't even remember *why* she wanted to die in the first place. Whatever that reason was, it didn't matter to her anymore.

Not only did he trick her, he also mocked her for choosing the route of death. He tore apart her everything.

Until that moment, her hatred had not been pointed at any target. She didn't even care enough to hate herself or hate the world.

But in the karaoke room that day, the moment she had heard what the man who had given her the sleeping pills said, a surge of hatred burst forth that had never existed in her before.

"It's love. I don't feel any love in your deaths. And that's wrong. You must love death. You don't have enough respect for nothingness. And I'm not going to die with you after a sorry answer like that."

Those words, the last thing she'd heard before she blacked out, had been etched deep into Manami's soul. She remembered staring back at him and swearing that she would kill him.

His words and hers repeated themselves in her mind, over and over, until the hatred she felt came to define her very reason for living.

Perhaps this was how, when she saw the news on TV that Izaya Orihara had been stabbed, she'd been able to exhibit such an unbelievable proactivity. In a

single day, she had identified the hospital where he had been staying, bought a knife at a home goods center and hid it in her bag, then took a ride on the Shinkansen train.

But her blade did not succeed at tearing into Izaya's heart. Instead, Manami found herself pinned down—not that it did anything to dull her furious, endless hatred of the man she meant to kill.

And there, he suggested to her:

"Do you have a job right now? Do you feel like maybe helping out with my work? It's getting harder to keep on top of all the little details with just Namie. And I'd imagine it'll give you many more opportunities to kill me, don't you think?"

Manami recalled his words and the smug smile he wore and clenched her jaw.

What had he been hoping she would do? Nod and say yes? Scream at him and struggle, trying to stab him with her knife? Or would he have been satisfied at last if she'd laughed and slit her own throat to finally commit suicide?

Manami silently agreed with all those choices and repudiated Izaya.

Izaya Orihara would have been equally happy with any of those actions or anything else.

He loved humanity.

He loved the action and thought humanity brought together, regardless of the end result.

Malice and benevolence, stupidity and sagacity, all in equal measures.

It took just a few days for Manami to understand this. It made her nauseous.

Loving everything equally is no different from loving nothing at all. Love is a selfish thing. It is merely a tool that widens the divide between one and all the rest.

That was an extreme opinion in its own right, but it *was* how she felt.

As far as reasons for killing another person went, having one's opinions negated was a very rash and shallow one. But for a woman who gave up on her

life for reasons she didn't even remember, this was perhaps just a natural way of seeing things.

She worked as Izaya Orihara's pawn, her contempt made clear at every turn. The whole time, her every thought was on how to inflict the most pain on him.

That was what brought her to this place, at this moment. To a cheaply built apartment fairly close to Ikebukuro. The door opened, revealing a girl.

"Oh. Manami, right? What brings you here?"

It was a young woman with long, flowing black hair—Haruna Niekawa. She was smiling, albeit with a note of discord.

"To play a prank on Izaya," Manami stated flatly.

She already knew about Saika. As a matter of fact, she'd seen the people Haruna had sliced and now controlled. But there wasn't a sliver of fear in Manami's eyes as she looked at the woman capable of such things. It was rare that she felt anything anymore, aside from malicious hatred toward Izaya Orihara.

"Sounds like you've got it tough. What exactly were you thinking of?" Haruna asked, chuckling.

"I came here to steal something very *precious* to Izaya. That's all," the other girl offered.

Haruna's eyes narrowed just a bit. "And…how serious are you about this? Because today is my turn to guard the luggage."

"It's easy. Just say that I tricked you and said that Izaya told me to come and get it. That's all," Manami said.

Haruna's mouth hung open for a moment, then twisted. "Ha-ha… And what am I supposed to get out of doing that?"

It was a very reasonable question, and again Manami showed no hesitation in answering, "If you don't have to guard it, that just gives you that much more time, doesn't it?"

"…"

“Time you might spend searching for someone, perhaps?”

In fact, it was an ideal transaction for Haruna. Aside from when she used Saika for Izaya’s sake, nearly all of Haruna’s time was spent guarding the “luggage.”

Almost as though it would be a bad thing if she had free rein.

“Fine. I’ll let you fool me.”

“Good… Thank you, Haruna,” replied Manami, flat faced. Haruna said no more and leaned against the side wall of the hallway.

Naturally, such an excuse would hold no water at all in a normal social structure. She’d be asked, “Why didn’t you call Izaya directly to get confirmation?”

But such common sense did not apply to the group Izaya collected. All Haruna had to say was, “I trusted the woman Izaya brought into the group,” and that was that. Perhaps Izaya had actually inducted Manami into the group with the anticipation of actions such as this.

In any case, Haruna decided that she would allow Manami to go about her business and pretend she knew nothing about it.

Several minutes later, after she had seen Manami off with the “luggage,” Haruna made plans of her own to leave.

Haruna followed Izaya’s orders out of her desire to see the man she loved: Takashi Nasujima. He had once been her teacher and so much more than that.

She needed to reach him, to tell him about her love.

Takashi…

She remembered just how broad his back was and thought about how badly she wanted to thrust the blade that was the symbol of her love into it. Into his muscular neck; his curved collarbone; his shining eyes; his fingers, slender for a man’s.

She wanted to run her blade through them all, over and over, telling him of her love through Saika. And when that dear man’s eyes were red, too, she would give him a blade, and he could carve Haruna’s body in return.

They would pour their love into each other through the blade of Saika.

It might look like a horrifying battle to the death to any observer, but to Haruna, it looked like a kind of love that no other human being could hope to experience.

Her whole body throbbed with the excitement of her imagination, and she headed to the bathroom to wash her face with cold water.

No. Not yet. You must leave the pleasure for the very end.

As she left the house, her refreshed face wore a diseased smile.

Free again, for the first time in ages, to do what she wanted to do.

To sift through the bustle of the city for the one she was dying to see again.

Raira General Hospital

Meanwhile, the owner of the original Saika, facing off against Izaya, still couldn't move a muscle.

He just…isn't normal*. I need to cut him, right away! Or else Ryuugamine—! And Kida—!* her mind screamed. But she couldn't take the first step to act on this.

She was afraid.

She was afraid of Izaya's confidence, in the way he smiled at this distance, even though he knew what she was capable of doing to him. As though he knew he had some trick that would keep her at bay, like that time he pulled out a gun.

At the same time, a question appeared in her mind: *Should I really cut him?*

Saika's control was not absolute. Like Haruna Niekawa, some could overpower Saika's words of love and refuse their status as her "children."

It sounded nice if you said they "returned to being human" or "overcame the supernatural control," but the problem was that it was possible for them to use Saika's power to their own ends.

Saika's desire to love people was a pure one. But what if that power of love was added to a human with their own personal desires? And what if a human being like Izaya Orihara happened to gain that kind of power?

The more she thought about it, the more Anri realized she couldn't just whip out that sword. And she never realized that she was already caught in Izaya's trap.

"You okay, Anri?" asked Karisawa with concern. She must have noticed the sweat on Anri's cheeks.

Karisawa didn't say anything to Izaya. She wasn't sure if she should intervene in what seemed like an issue between him and Anri.

"…"

Out of nerves, Anri couldn't reply to Karisawa, either.

So Izaya sighed and said casually, “Do you think I’m insane?”

“…Yes,” she was able to respond. Anri wasn’t able to discern sanity from madness in other people’s minds, but her instinct told her to say yes.

Izaya smirked, his eyes slightly downcast, then glanced back up at Anri with a note of mockery. “You know, I could ask the Black Rider this, too. What is it about you monsters—what right do you have to determine that a human being like me is insane?”

“…”

“You don’t still think you’re *human*, do you?”

“…!”

That took Anri by surprise.

“Besides, do you even have the right to criticize me? It all started with your katana. Saika, right? The cause of it all was Haruna Niekawa, so it would be wrong to blame you entirely for it. And yet, you should’ve been able to avoid all this chaos.”

Huh? I should have… How?

This should’ve been her place to righteously accuse Izaya Orihara. Why was he the one criticizing her? She was so confused that all she could do was flail about as his words pierced her heart.

“You put distance between yourself and Mikado Ryuugamine and distance between yourself and Masaomi Kida. Didn’t you? You chose to stay back and wait. You had people around you who gave you affection. And you were so pleased with that, you chose to do nothing. You could have made more of a move.”

“No, I…”

She stopped short. She couldn’t truthfully deny what he was saying.

Was he actually right about that? He’d pointed out something she had never considered, and now uncertainty clouded her mind.

Once Izaya detected that the anger in her eyes was wavering, he continued,

“To be quite frank, you should have used Saika to cut Mikado Ryuugamine and Masaomi Kida. Then you would have been able to make them admit everything they were feeling.”

“No…that’s not right! That would be wrong!” she shouted before she could stop herself.

An outpatient down the hallway looked in their direction for a moment, then glanced away again, perhaps assuming Izaya and Anri were just having a romantic quarrel.

Whether Izaya was aware of the public perception of them or not, he certainly played into the image by speaking to her as though calming an angry girlfriend. “Yes, that might be the wrong thing to do in humanistic terms. It might not be something a human being could even do, period.”

“Then—”

“But you’re not human, are you?”

“…!”

He stated it again. Anri could feel her lips and her throat trembling.

When she faced off against him in Shinjuku, he’d said the phrase *stupid sword*, which she’d taken to mean Saika, the being residing within her. But now she was certain she understood.

He was pointing at Anri Sonohara herself and stating that she was *not human*.

Anri knew that she was not an ordinary human being. It was why she had been so drawn to Celty, who was alien in many ways and yet lived proudly. It was why she made the decision to be positive about her own life.

So why did his words pierce so deeply into her heart?

“You’re not like Haruna Niekawa. You didn’t have Saika forced into you and overcome it to win back control. You gave up on being human and wished to become one with Saika.”

Anri understood the hurt in fairly short order. It was because there was clear *hatred and mockery* in Izaya’s words.

“The reason I’m irritated is because you gave up on being human, and now that you’re a monster, you *pretend* to have troubles just like a human being does.”

He was smiling, just like he had been this whole time. But from Anri’s perspective, there was clear and obvious malice in his words designed to corner her.

“In that tightrope analogy from earlier, you would be an audience member watching safely from your luxury box. You’re the person who’s safe and sound and turning to the other people, saying, ‘Look, that’s dangerous. Isn’t someone going to help them?’ And if they fall, you’re the one who’s going to act like the biggest victim of them all.”

“No…I’m…not…,” she protested, but it was more for herself than anyone else.

“There’s no villain in this situation. Ryuugamine and Kida both made their own decisions and stepped out onto that rope, knowing it would be dangerous. No one is the aggressor, but you’re going to run around screaming that you’re the victim. Even though you had plenty of opportunities to save them.”

“No! I…”

“Are you going to claim you can save them both? You’re going to arrogantly use your monster powers to benevolently save the lowly humans? Well, I don’t know about Kida, but I bet Mikado would love that. He might shoot straight past affection and into worship of you.”

He struck down each and every protest she might have lodged before she could say them, boxing her in, allowing no mental escape.

Then came the finisher.

“Let me tell you something, Anri Sonohara. It’s true that, like you’re fearing, Mikado Ryuugamine and Masaomi Kida are facing real peril. The situation is much more dangerous than the tightrope act you were imagining.”

“Huh…?”

“And I’m going to make it worse. But you can’t do anything about it. Hey, who knows, maybe you weren’t actually planning to do anything.”

“That’s not…”

She shook her head. The red light was already gone from her eyes. Instead, they were moist with tears as she tried to squeeze in a word edgewise.

But as always, Izaya was ahead of her. It was like he was casting a spell designed to capture inhuman beings like her behind a magical barrier.

“Yes, it *is* true. Because while I was going on and on about that tightrope analogy, you never once broke in and shouted, ‘Is Mikado really doing something that dangerous?’ You didn’t, did you?”

“…!”

“A normal person, before talking about whether I’m insane or rational, would be more concerned about that, wouldn’t they? That’s just common sense. But before you gave a thought to your friend’s safety, you were preoccupied with your own concerns. You’re such a—”

Pwakk.

Izaya was cut off by a sound like a dry, weak gunshot. Everyone else in the hospital within visual range was looking their way, wondering what had happened.

Being right next to the sound, Anri and Izaya were the first to recognize it.

Karisawa had pulled out a large sales flyer from a fan-run event for selling *doujinshi*, folded it into an origami popper, then snapped it loudly with her fingers. Before the nurses noticed, she then returned the flyer to her bag and grinned.

“Izaya,” she said. Not *Iza-Iza*.

“…What is it, Karisawa?” he asked quietly.

“If you make my sweet, young friend cry, I’m going to *solder your eyelids shut*.”

She gave him a pure, unfiltered smile. In fact, this made it clear that her statement was not a mere threat; it was the truth.

Izaya took a moment to reflect on this, then smirked as he so often did and

said, “You know, it’s that human part of you that I love so much, Karisawa. I respect you, even when you’re sticking up for monsters.”

“You do? Thanks. But I’m not going to let you off.”

“Fine, fine. I could go on, but I’ll let your threat stand and back off. After all, I ought to go and check in at the reception desk for the brain surgery unit.”

“Yeah, you ought to get yourself checked out. What if your entire brain just looks like a wily fox’s face?” Karisawa jibed.

He shrugged. “Anyway, if I learn anything about who hit Dotachin, I’ll get in touch. If he wakes up, I’d appreciate if you told him that Izaya actually swung by to pay him a visit.”

Karisawa watched Izaya go in silence. Once he had disappeared around the side of the hallway, she realized that something was gripping the hem of her clothing. She turned around and saw Anri, her head down, hands trembling.

“Karisawa…I…I…”

She wasn’t on the verge of tears. She seemed more in a state of shock than anything. Karisawa put her arms around the stammering girl and hugged her tight.

“Ah…”

It was a warm and enveloping embrace, not an inappropriate act by any means.

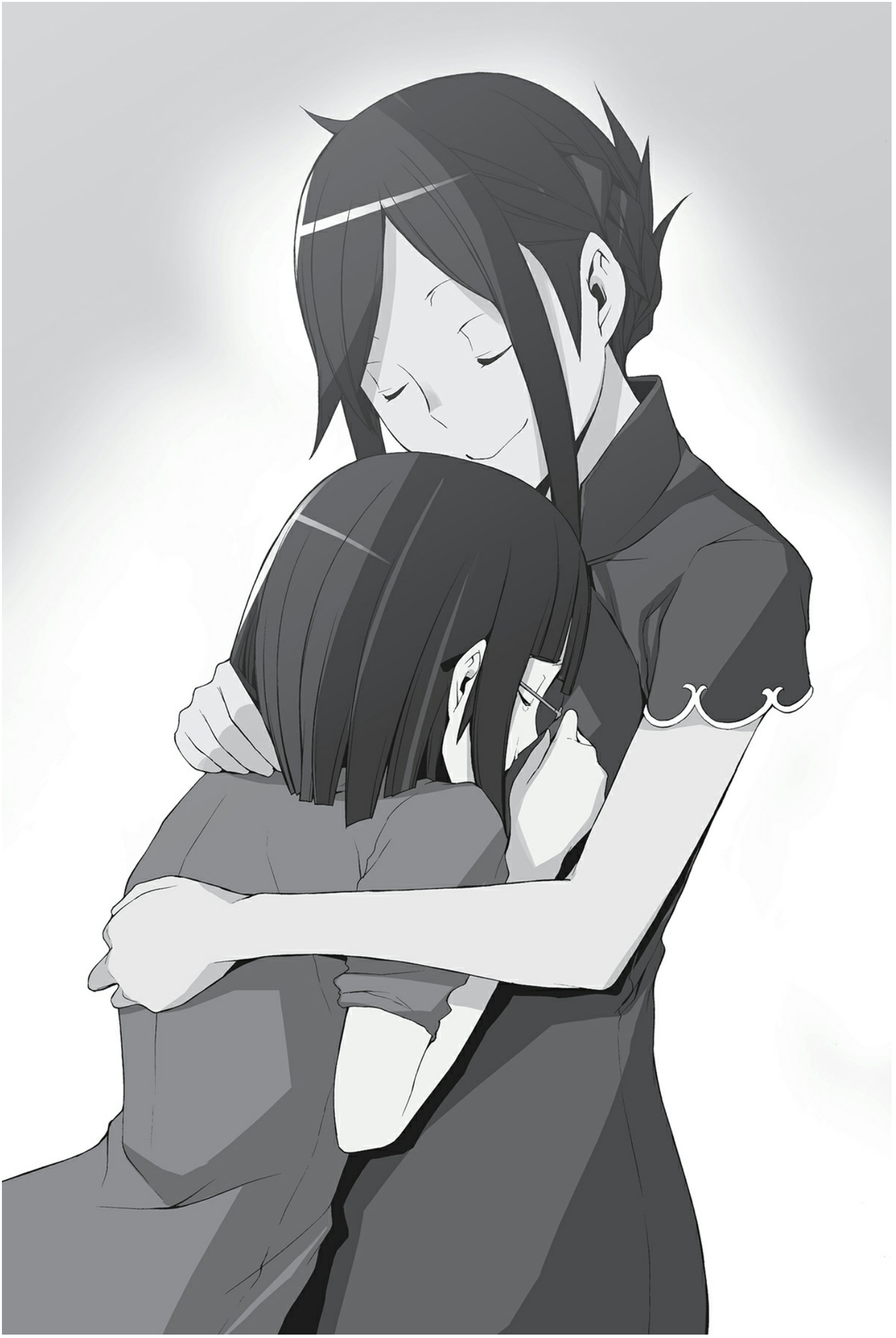
“It’s all right. Don’t you worry about it,” Karisawa said, allowing Anri to sink her face into her collarbone.

Anri moaned, “But—but I…I’m actually…”

“That’s just Izaya’s MO. It’s like leading a witness. He said a bunch of things that were meant to mislead you and confuse you, that’s all. If it seemed like he was speaking the truth and making sense, that was just an illusion. He’s like a thief who breaks into your house and then lectures you on how sloppy your defenses are.”

“But, Karisawa…I…I really was going to slash him just now…”

“It’s fine, you’re all right. You can tell me all about it later,” Karisawa said kindly, patting Anri on the back. “I may not know all the details, but I can forgive you for everything right now. Even if you’re some vengeful god of the ancient past, and you destroyed the earth once before, I still forgive you.”



It didn’t sound like your typical message of encouragement, but Anri couldn’t help but be heartened by it.

“…”

She couldn’t even find words of appreciation, however. All she felt was the painful realization of her own mental weakness.

And fright at what she was.

When Izaya vanished around the corner, Saika’s voice had begun to speak up again—and it even turned its “blade of love” on Karisawa, who’d been treating her so gently.

She was holding Saika at bay now, but if she ended up slicing Karisawa, if she gave in to Saika’s desires—the very thought of it filled her with terror.

“You’re a monster,” he had said, standing in judgment of her. Those words stabbed her heart now.

Not just that—all the things he had said to her were true.

Karisawa said they weren’t worth bothering over, but the fact that Anri couldn’t come up with a rebuttal meant they must be true. In her confused state, she was close to believing all of it.

If it hadn’t been for Karisawa’s statement of forgiveness, who knows what might’ve happened to her. Anri felt nothing but gratitude to the other woman—and unfathomable loathing for herself.

But realizing that even after all this, she couldn’t take the option of discarding Saika, the truth sank in that she really was no longer human.

The reason she thought and said that she was fine with being a parasite was nothing more than an excuse to avoid examining herself and what she really was.

Kawagoe Highway—Shinra’s apartment

“Are you all right, Celty?”

Despite the crowded state of Shinra's apartment, they were alone again in the bedroom, now that Shinra had moved back to his bed.

Celty, now the de facto leader of a strange information-sharing organization, had spent half a day, practically an all-nighter, combining and sorting everyone's stories and collecting information from the Internet to support them.

That was hard enough, but she also had to spend valuable energy calming Namie and Mika down enough to keep them from destroying each other.

They were fairly well-behaved when Seiji was around, but as soon as he left the room—to use the bathroom, say—they would immediately engage in hostilities.

It was an odd sight, two women hurling needles and trowels at each other as the people around them attempted to get it under control. Ultimately, the only thing that worked was Seiji's return, at which point they behaved as though nothing had ever happened.

The worst of all was when Seiji had asked to use the shower. Because both Namie and Mika casually attempted to sneak into the shower with him, that led to another massive conflict.

As they watched the drama from a distance, Togusa leaned over to Yumasaki. "You know…I figured you were the type of guy who would yell, 'Blow up to smithereens, normies,' in this situation, but you're taking it pretty well."

Yumasaki's head inclined at a curious angle. "What? Why would I care? I mean…they're both three-dimensional."

"…Oh. Gotcha," Togusa said, giving him up for lost.

The whole while, Celty just did her best to be the sole peacekeeper of the room.

Eventually, morning arrived.

The clock hands indicated it was close to noon now, but the others were all asleep in another room, and the raucous noise from yesterday was no more. Yumasaki was watching some kind of summer vacation anime special that was

airing in the morning, but the sound of it was as soothing as lapping waves compared to the ruckus that Namie and Mika had produced.

Satisfied that all was calm at last, Celty slumped lifelessly next to Shinra.

"I'm just so tired… There's no other way to describe it."

"I'm sorry I saddled you with such a huge role."

"It's all right. It's the first time in a while I felt I was doing something worthwhile. The only problem is, I need to cut down on my courier jobs until things chill out a bit…"

"That's true. I'll let Mr. Shiki know about that."

The mention of Shiki's name caused Celty to recall something. She typed, *"Speaking of which, the Awakusu-kai are chasing Jinnai Yodogiri, too, right?"*

"Yeah, but I believe they already cleared it up… Maybe they've got some information to use. But if you're going to ask them, you'd better be careful about it. You never want to stir up more trouble."

"…Good point. This isn't just our problem anymore. I'd be involving everyone in this apartment."

Shinra read her sentence and smiled. "You're so kindhearted, Celty. You're much more considerate than a normal human being."

"Flattery won't get you anywhere." She shrugged, lying on her side.

"Celty, I'm not flattering you," Shinra said. "The part of you that's trying to be more human is kinder than any human. It's why I'm worried. With how you overestimate humanity, I'm afraid that when you see true wickedness, you'll be so disillusioned with us that you turn into some vengeful demon out to destroy the world."

But then his worried expression turned into a forceful smile, and lying on his side as well, he said, "Don't worry, Celty! If you wanted to destroy all humanity, I would turn traitor on my species and assist you! I would be happy to die in your arms as the last remaining human being."

"That is a very, very convenient fantasy you have. But at any rate, your fears are unfounded," Celty typed, stretching luxuriously. *"I've been dealing with the*

Awakusu-kai and Izaya all this time. How would I despair of humanity at this point? If you're talking about some kind of mass slaughter or footage from some far-off war, that's going to affect a lot more people than just me…"

"…Well, I was looking more for a moving reaction to my sentiments, rather than a pragmatic response, to be honest…"

"So you were using me and hoping to get an emotional reaction out of it?"

Oddly enough, the words on her screen even *looked* exasperated somehow. Shinra glanced away from them and whistled nonchalantly.

"You're not some little kid!" Celty gave Shinra's cheek a flick with her finger. *"Anyway, I guess I'll be playing along with your little scheme."*

"Celty…"

"But if I'm going to play along, I want you to get better soon."

"Why, Celty, I feel as though I'm walking on clouds! My body is bursting with the feeling of pure joy…ow! Aah!" he shrieked, his bones screeching with pain after he attempted to do a little bedridden dance.

"Hey! Don't push it!"

"Oooh, oww…I'm sorry, Celty. But thank you," he said, lying down flat again as his pain eased. "I'm sure a bunch of different stuff is going to happen starting today… What were you planning to tackle first?"

"I think I should start with Kasane Kujiragi."

"Yeah…you're probably right."

"First things first. Either she or Seitarou Yagiri has to pay for hurting you…"

As she lay next to Shinra, Celty thought about her distant foe.

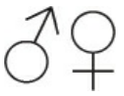
Kasane Kujiragi.

A woman who plays at human trafficking using the name of a dead man, Jinnai Yodogiri. And because most of her products are things like me and Saika, the law is less likely to get involved.

Based on the information we've got, though, I can't imagine what kind of person she is. It's like she's some evil spirit who lives in a much deeper darkness

than we do.

No doubt she's hiding from the sun right now, plotting her next wicked move.



Ikebukuro—cosplay shop

At the very moment that Celty was thinking, Kasane Kujiragi was indeed staying out of the sun.

But the fluorescent lights were bright enough on their own.

"I'll take this and this."

She had brought a very well-made cat-ear headband to the lady at the register. The fur and texture were just like a cat's, so realistic that if she put it on, the ears looked ready to wiggle.

Because she looked just like a company president's personal secretary, complete with stony expression and bespectacled good looks, the employee at the register had to wonder if she was actually going to wear it. But the worker was a professional, too, and so did not show a bit of this as she smiled at Kujiragi.

"Thank you, ma'am. Is this a present for someone?"

"No, it's for me," Kujiragi said, all business.

In fact, the way she walked around the cosplay shop with her back straight was the personification of the term *businesswoman*, to the extent that the other customers wondered if she was already in cosplay.

With the cat ears stashed in a bag under her arm, she strode crisply through Ikebukuro's streets. None of the muscles that formed her facial expression moved, aside from a slight narrowing around the eyes due to the sunlight. She simply walked, in a mechanically steady rhythm, through the crowds on the street.

Her cell phone ringer went off. It was not a custom ringtone or song, just the default setting. When she pressed the button to accept it, Seitarou Yagiri's voice came through the speaker.

“It’s me. How goes the progress? I can’t connect to Yodogiri’s phone. Do you suppose something happened?”

“Mr. Yodogiri was in a car accident last night. He is listed as in the hospital now,” she said flatly.

The elderly men were nothing more than body doubles to take the place of the real Jinnai Yodogiri, who was long dead. Aside from the body double playing the part of the talent agency president, they didn’t have anything proving their identities, so the man would have been admitted as an unidentified patient.

As far as the Yodogiri playing the company president (who actually possessed the “Jinnai Yodogiri” identity) went, it would likely cause a stir if a man who had gone missing showed up as the victim of an accident, but at this point in time, it meant nothing to Kujiragi.

“What?! What happens to the job I hired him to do, then?!”

“I have taken it over. Our company will make use of all personnel to ensure that the work is carried out.”

“Oh. Th-that’s good, then. You never know if Nebula might interfere, like yesterday. Be careful out there.”

“I understand, Mr. Yagiri,” she said, as professional as she had been over the entire call, and abruptly hung up.

Celty Sturluson’s head and body and Saika.

Jinnai Yodogiri’s final job was to provide all these to Seitarou Yagiri.

Normally, she could’ve simply tossed this piece of work to the wayside, but she wanted a clean cut of all her ties to Jinnai Yodogiri, and so she decided she would see this mission through to its end.

For another reason, she considered that she could use this opportunity to turn the attention of her enemy, the Awakusu-kai, toward another enemy, Izaya Orihara.

Once this was over, and the hostility from the Awakusu-kai had dissipated, what would she do next? It was this question Kujiragi considered as she walked.

She’d been controlling an empty human being named Jinnai Yodogiri all this

time and modeling his life. But she wasn't some perfect machine. She didn't do all this without any doubts in her mind at anytime.

She just didn't know any other way to live.

Despite the job being on the seedy underside of society, she didn't have enough of a reason to seek freedom at the cost of the secure life she was leading now. Plus, her Jinnai Yodogiri system was as solid as bedrock, and she had resigned herself to spending the rest of her life as a machine projecting Jinnai Yodogiri onto the world.

But then something had happened, and the world she'd resigned herself to living in suddenly crumbled all at once.

It was Ruri Hijiribe. The moment arrived when her own niece came into her possession as a "product."

Upon reflection now, even Kujiragi had her suspicions about whether or not she had any personal emotion in the idea of bringing Ruri into this side of the world. In fact, when she had learned that a woman with the same blood as her was living happily and chasing her dreams, Kasane did feel a slight bit of jealousy—if not murderous, hateful rage.

As evidence of that, even after seeing the girl turned into a "product" and plunged into misfortune, Kasane did not feel any lightening of her mood. Neither did she have any reason to rescue Ruri Hijiribe from her plight while the Jinnai Yodogiri activities continued, and so she figured the situation would continue.

But when the elderly body double and her clients banded together to murder Ruri Hijiribe's father, that took her by surprise. And she never would have dreamed that Ruri would turn into the masked killer Hollywood in search of revenge for her father's death.

Yet when the girl who'd been working as a movie effects artist donned her own special makeup on a quest for vengeance, the only thing Kasane Kujiragi felt was a faint whiff of longing.

Despite all the pitfalls, all the personal misfortune, she still clung to that idea of a dream. There was nothing that Kasane ever fixated on that way. Even her

position pulling the strings behind Jinnai Yodogiri wasn't something she got because she wanted it.

As the shell of Jinnai Yodogiri began to break around her, she started to see her own dream through the cracks.

The woman who seemed so much like an unfeeling automaton did indeed have her own dreams. The dream of finding her own dream, in fact—like the punch line of some poetic fairy tale.

So she carried out her daily life, possessed with this recursive idea of dreaming to find a dream. Until half a day ago, when that life was shattered to pieces.

By the introduction of Izaya Orihara, a clearly hostile enemy.

The first thought she had about Izaya, who acknowledged her as his foe, was boundless gratitude.

Now the light of the morning sun that burned her skin and eyes was different somehow. Her flesh was prickling, as though ready to burn, but it no longer pained her at all.

At last, she had time to relax and think about what she ought to do. When she finished Seitarou Yagiri's job and received her payment, perhaps she would travel somewhere. Another good option would be to finish things once and for all with Shinichi Tsukumoya, the pest who'd been interfering with her work for around ten years now.

However, to fulfill Seitarou's job, she needed to obtain the dullahan's head and body. At worst, she could branch the Saika she owned now and hand that over instead.

Shizuo Heiwajima was held at bay by her direct "child" within the police force, but once this was all settled, he could be set free. After all, if guided properly, he might be a very good trump card for her against Izaya.

But based on the fact there'd been no contact from Slon, it seemed fair to guess that the plan to kidnap Izaya had failed. He was still on the loose somewhere.

With that in mind, Kujiragi thought it over and headed to a nearby park, where she picked out a tree at random to lean against. Then she pulled out an Ikebukuro tourism magazine and began to very seriously pore over the information provided about local spots.

She flipped through the magazine quickly, apparently having decided that Izaya's freedom was no reason to limit her own. She folded the corners of the pages for a café that allowed customers to interact with a bunch of cats, and the butler café Swallowtail, re-examining the contents.

She indulged in two visions at this time.

One was herself, wearing the cat-ear headband she'd just bought, rolling around with a bunch of actual cats.

The other was herself, being called "Mistress" by a variety of smooth and capable butlers.

In those visions, she was completely stone-faced. And likewise, her own expression was just as steely as she imagined these scenes.

Should she play with the cats or head to the butler café and hope that someone had dropped their reservation so she could get inside?

Clearly, the choice was a difficult one. She stayed in the corner of the park, exuding her weird vibe and ensuring no one wanted to get any closer.

Kawagoe Highway—Shinra's apartment

As her archenemy waffled between the choice of cats and butlers, Celty recalled something else she'd been worried about and rose to a sitting position next to Shinra.

"What is it, Celty?"

"I just realized that I forgot something… There was so much that happened yesterday, it must've slipped my mind. But I need to tell you."

And then she told him what she knew about the situation between Mikado and Masaomi: that the Dollars and Yellow Scarves were set up to clash in a

different way than before. That both Mikado and Masaomi were aware of each other's presence.

But both of them had their own ideas in mind and believed that crushing the other group was an unavoidable part of that. To make matters more complicated, Mikado had received a request to find Haruna Niekawa, and Akabayashi of the Awakusu-kai had added a warning of his own.

That warning from the Awakusu-kai was the worst part of all.

Akabayashi was the most easygoing of the principal Awakusu-kai officers—even approachable, in a way. But that did not mean he was a "good person." He was a yakuza for a reason.

Celty's biggest concern was what would happen if members of the Dollars started dealing drugs behind Mikado's back. Given Akabayashi's known loathing of drugs, and how he viewed such dealing in his turf, the results were as apparent as daylight.

"Honestly, as long as the Dollars and Yellow Scarves aren't involved, I think they should find a nice riverbank in the sunset and beat each other up…but it doesn't seem like all the other factors would allow for that to happen. Especially not Mikado."

"You mean Aoba Kuronuma…? I guess I really should've slit his neck when I had the chance."

"No jokes about violence, thanks," Celty typed, framing it as a joke on purpose, because she knew he was half-serious.

Neither of them had any idea how to resolve that situation peacefully. Was Mikado correct, and did both the Dollars and Yellow Scarves need to be utterly destroyed so that their relationship could be rebuilt from scratch?

But that can't be it. That's not the right way.

Celty then wondered why she felt it was wrong. Perhaps the answer, if she found it, might lead to inspiration for a different solution.

But the answer she got created not an alternative but fresh headaches.

"Anri."

“Huh?”

“What Mikado’s trying to do…to destroy everything and start over, doesn’t include Anri. That’s what’s wrong. I don’t think it’s the right way,” she told Shinra, her fingers slowly, hesitantly typing her thoughts. *“I know just how worried she is about Mikado and Kida. So the idea that they’d totally ignore her feelings and destroy all the strings that bind the two boys together is just not…”*

She stopped there to show Shinra. She could have typed more but felt bad about criticizing Mikado…but eventually she gave in and did so anyway.

“It’s just too selfish of him.”

Shinra looked up and smiled at her.

“You’re so kind, Celty,” he mumbled, staring at her neck with affection. “I love that about you.”

It was a serious statement, not like the ones he usually made as a means of saying hello.

“Wwhhaaar id thifallufhasufig”

She meant to type *“What is this all of a sudden?”* but something in his tone caused her fingers to tremble and slip.

“…Uh, sorry, I appreciate that…but I can’t help but be a little self-conscious when you say that with so many people here, if not in the room with us…”

If she had the same body structure as a human being, her skin would be flushed all over. If she had a head and a face, she might’ve turned away with pink cheeks.

“Now I won’t be able to sleep, dummy. Hang on… I’m going to see if Anri’s in the usual chat room. She seems to find it easier to talk there than through texting. I’ll go check up on her through the guise of small chat.”

Having forced the topic of conversation back to more practical matters, Celty felt calm enough now to admit, *“I’m uncertain, too. Mikado asked me to keep this all secret from Anri…but I don’t know if it’s right to keep her out of the loop on everything.”*

“Yeah…that’s a tough one. I’m not sure if it’s right to tell her or not, either.

I’m sure Izaya would do it without a moment’s hesitation. And in the way designed to cause the most anxiety, too,” Shinra muttered, completely unaware that Izaya had been fanning Anri’s smoldering unease just moments before.

The idea made Celty oddly uneasy, too. She opened up the laptop nearby and deftly typed into the PDA with her other hand.

“Good point. Anri’s a tough girl, but she’s also very hard on herself… If we’re going to bring her into the fold, we need to do it gingerly.”

It was a sentiment that anyone familiar with Anri’s present state of mind would find tragically hollow.

Cosplay shop, Ikebukuro—at that moment

“I’m very sorry, that product is sold out for the day…”

“Oh, I see… Thank you for your help,” said Anri to the employee as she left the shop.

It had been a few hours since she’d interacted with Izaya, and only now was she regaining her composure. The thought of what would’ve happened if Karisawa hadn’t been there gave her the shivers. If it had just been her alone with Izaya, something awful would’ve happened to her by now.

Karisawa had listened to all the things bubbling up from fear and anxiety within Anri, and accepted it all. Anri found it strange that the other girl could be so kind and understanding and had asked her why.

The other girl had smiled gently and brushed her forehead against Anri’s.

“Grown women take the side of the cute. When you get to be my age, even cool things count as cute. It doesn’t matter if you’re human or not. It’s whether you laugh at the same things and cry at the same things.

“You’re a cute girl with a good smile, Anri, and you’re so sad about this business between you and your friends that you’re about to cry. So you’re fine, kid. I’ll still accept you for who you are, even if nobody else does.

“All this stuff about whether you’re human or not? Dotachin and Togupyon

don't care, either. And I bet Yumacchi would be even happier, actually. Listen, even I'm happy about that. Mikado and Kida will be fine with it. I bet they know how kind you are way, way, way better than we do."

Despite being trapped in her own concern for Kadota's condition, Karisawa spent a full hour on the couch in the hospital hallway talking her through her problems. Relief flooded Anri, as much as, if not more so than, when she spoke with Celty.

There was someone out there who knew her well and still accepted her. That was all it took for a great weight to be lifted off her mind.

"As far as Mikapuu goes, I'm going to get to a spot where I can use my phone, and I'll connect to the Dollars' board to look for info. So in return, can I ask you to run an errand for me?"

Karisawa went ahead and asked Anri for a favor, perhaps thinking that a bit of fresh air would help improve her mood.

"I bet that when Dotachin opens his eyes, it'd really cheer him up if all the girls were wearing cat ears."

She had then handed Anri cash and a note with directions to the cosplay shop, where she was meant to buy some cat-ear headbands.

But the headbands were sold out. Since she said "for the day," they must've just stocked up that morning. She considered looking at other stores, but Anri didn't know anything about cosplay shops or where she should go, so she ended up simply wandering around the area.

It seemed like there were many businesses around here involving manga and anime, Anri thought, as she stared at the signs on her way.

Shiver.

A sudden gust of chill wind shot up her back.

Huh? What's this…feeling? Is someone watching me?

The phrase *to feel someone's gaze* was a very, very old one, but this was the first time that Anri had ever felt the sensation of *knowing* that someone was watching her.

Then again, it may have been more accurate to say that it was Saika that noticed it, not Anri. The voices of the swords in her mind abruptly began to stir, racing all throughout Anri's being in what was either joyful welcome or absolute rejection.

Something's there.

Someone's there.

Someone with a connection to her, or possibly Saika, was watching her from very close by, the sensation told her.

Don't look.

Don't turn around, she had told herself.

Every cell in her body was screaming in warning, but Anri made her mistake.

She turned toward the gaze.

And then, when she saw the shadow approaching directly toward her, Anri thought, *Is this really coincidence?*

Or are she and I, and perhaps Mikado and Masaomi, all just trapped in the vortex of one giant event?

The eerie spiraling feeling left it very hard to chalk this up to happenstance alone.

Meanwhile, Haruna Niekawa, whose appearance alone had put this thought into Anri's head, came to a stop a short distance away from Anri, a sick smile on her beautiful face, silky black hair swaying in the breeze.

On a sidewalk in the busy city, two girls stood in place as pedestrians streamed around them.

Anri couldn't find any words to say. Haruna Niekawa quietly smiled and said in a voluptuous voice, "It's been a while, Sonohara."

It was the most Anri could do to say, "Miss…Niekawa."

And so Haruna, one of Saika's children, approached Anri empty-handed and whispered into her ear, "Will you come with me to that park over there?"

"Huh…?"

“I don’t mind starting *right here*…but I’m guessing you wouldn’t want so many people to see, would you?”

Anri instantly understood what it was that Niekawa wanted to start.

Because despite the pleasant tones of her voice, it clearly contained a competitive streak against Anri—and a boundless desire to kill.

Chat room

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Kuru: At any rate, do you suppose this could be a step toward a world-changing revolution? The denizens of the cyber-seas seem to largely take it as a simple prank, but I can tell. This is not a prank. I'm certain it is the real thing.

Kuru: Many different pieces of footage have purported to be evidence of supernatural phenomena, but I believe the reason they seem so suspect is that all of them were only captured by a single camera!

Mai: That's right.

Kuru: If you had a second camera, capturing the same moment from a completely different angle, showing the moment that a ghost or monster appeared, it would be so much more significant. In the same way that a single person's eyewitness testimony can be written off as a trick of the eyes, any single-camera footage can be dismissed as edited!

Kuru: Which makes this particular case so valuable!

Kuru: They don't show it directly on TV, and the corporate and news-owned websites place a mosaic over it—but on video and image sites and social media networks like Twittia, many different people are uploading their own videos and pictures!

Kuru: At this point, I believe we might as well say that it is all true!

Kuru: On this very day, "something" has appeared in Ikebukuro at last!

Mai: I'm scared.

Kuru: There is nothing to be afraid of. Together, we can stand up to any danger. And as long as we die together, I will be fulfilled, Mai.

Mai: I'm so happy.

Mai: Kiss.

Mai: Ouch.

Mai: I got pinched.

Setton has entered the chat.

Setton: Hello.

Setton: It's been a while.

Setton: It looks like Saika…isn't here.

Setton: I guess I should just send a text.

Kuru: Well, well, if it isn't one of our forebears and guides into the great chat room, Setton. It is an honor to meet you once again.

Setton: You seem as excitable as ever.

Mai: Hello.

Setton: So, um, what happened?

Setton: Maybe I should scroll back through the log.

Kuru: Oh my. You must not be aware yet, Setton. Although the rumors only began to spread about the Internet in the last thirty minutes, so I suppose you cannot be blamed for not hearing… In fact, the ability of the news to disseminate this far in just thirty minutes speaks to the incredible power of Twittia, I suppose.

Mai: It's scary.

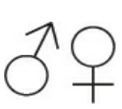
Kuru: But at any rate, I would recommend turning on the news as a quicker means than scrolling through the backlog or Twittia.

Setton: The news?

Kuru: Yes, the noon news program should be starting soon. I expect that Daioh TV will have a special segment on it…

Setton: Well, I still don't know what you're talking about…

Setton: But I suppose I'll check it out.



Kawagoe Highway—Shinra's apartment

Celty was curious about what the girls were raving about in the chat room, so she took her laptop out to the living room where the TV was.

The other people had finished their sleep and begun to gather. Yumasaki had finished watching his summer vacation anime special and was channel surfing. When he noticed that Celty had come into the room, he smiled and asked, "You're up now, Celty? Or have you been awake the whole time?"

"Yeah, I couldn't get to sleep. Do you mind if I change the channel?"

"Um, how can I mind it? It's your TV! Please feel free."

"Thanks."

She took the remote and changed the channel. Up to this point, things were still within the range of peacefulness. Although she was worried about Namie, as long as Seiji was paying attention, she wouldn't try anything reckless.

So Celty turned the TV to the Daioh News channel without much trepidation.

However, the news she was about to witness immediately dragged her, and all the ordinary citizens of the city, into the realm of the surreal.

"I'm here outside the Ikebukuro Station east gate, at the scene of the incident."

The image on the TV was of the familiar entrance to Ikebukuro Station. Only there were vinyl sheets put up over a portion of it, inserting a note of foreboding.

What's this? Was there an attacker?

Given the times, Celty began to fear that someone she knew had been hurt.

Instantly, she learned that her fear was unfounded. On her laptop, which she'd set down on the table, Kuru had pasted a link. It was directed at an image board of some kind.

She clicked on the link right as the newscaster began speaking, and she noticed the chyron on the TV screen.

"It was right here in this crowded rotary, as though designed to affect the

largest number of people possible, that around eleven o'clock this morning, someone threw a *woman's head* into the crowd."

Huh?

The chyron on the screen read: *Madness in broad daylight! Woman's head at Ikebukuro Station.*

Whuh? She gawped and slowly lowered her gaze to the screen of the laptop. An image burned itself into the part of Celty's shadow that governed her sense of sight and, from there, into her mind itself.

In the image, which appeared to have been taken by an ordinary phone camera, a woman's severed head sat atop the asphalt.

Everyone in the room looked at one girl.

Mika Harima.

The severed head looked terrifyingly similar to her own face.

Celty was the only one who didn't turn and look.

She understood the instant she saw the image.

It was a picture of her own head.

Her face, the object she'd been on that long, long quest to recover, was now being shown to the entire world through the Internet.

She crumpled, toppled to the floor—and fell unconscious, deaf to the voices of everyone present.

CHAPTER 6
Ivory Tower

DRRR!!

Ryohgo Narita

Chapter 6: Ivory Tower

Ikebukuro—karaoke room

While the entire nation, not just Ikebukuro, was roiling in reaction to the freakish news, Hiroto Shijima sat in his chair, sweating profusely.

He had a headband pulling his hair back and dark sunglasses to hide his eyes, in an apparent attempt at disguise. And he was in a very precarious position at the moment.

Until just recently, he'd been a member of a group that sold illegal drugs. In fact, you might even say he was the one running it. But in the midst of a squabble with another organization called Amphisbaena, Izaya Orihara had plunged him into the very pits of hell.

Now he was both making contact with the Dollars as Orihara's cat's-paw and secretly working on orders from Jinnai Yodogiri. If they found out that he was a spy sent by Izaya, the Dollars would probably dispose of him. If Izaya found out he was a spy for Yodogiri, he would *definitely* dispose of him.

So should he be honest and tell Izaya Orihara that Yodogiri made contact? Or should he tell the Dollars that he was an Orihara spy?

No matter how much he examined the two sides, Shijima was totally unable to determine which one represented the safer choice to him. In the end, he was unable to betray either side, thus tightening the noose ever closer around his neck.

If I'm going to hell, I might as well take them all with me, Shijima concluded.

He'd continue being a double agent for as long as he could, find as many vulnerable secrets from each camp as he could, and let them all loose just before he crashed and burned at last.

It was a reckless gamble, and the chance that he survived it was extremely

small. But the pressure on Shijima was such that he didn't have much of a choice but to roll that die anyway.

If he went to the police and spilled all the beans, he'd wind up in prison, but at least he might survive. Prison, however, meant losing all the fame he'd built up and might as well represent death to the name of Hiroto Shijima. And ever since the start, he'd never entertained the option that he might be the only one who died.

Now he was sitting in this chair, sweating away.

No one was in the room with Hiroto now. The only sound was the menu screen music of the karaoke machine.

The reason for his disguise was that he was soon to meet an agent of Yodogiri's. They made contact on a regular basis, but phones left a trail, so they met in person at karaoke places like this one.

They each entered and left at separate times. Shijima would borrow the room under the offered alias, and the Yodogiri-side contact would pay for it. That would make it harder to trace them, but Hiroto knew from personal experience that it wasn't wise to underestimate the strength of Izaya Orihara's information network.

He didn't even know how many pawns Izaya had working for him. There was always the possibility that the employee working for the karaoke place was Izaya's henchman. Hence the disguise, which he put on every time he went out into the city.

About thirty minutes later, Shijima's eyes bulged when he saw the man who entered the room.

He had pulled a heavy beanie low on his head, despite it being summer, and he wore a mask over his mouth. He wore sunglasses, too, but his look was so obviously dodgy that it seemed more likely to attract attention than divert it.

Even then, as soon as the man came inside, he spat something out of his mouth. Shijima saw that it was gauze and dentures for a disguise as the man peeled off his fake whiskers.

"Pardon me. Seems like I was late," the man said, sitting down in a position

where he couldn't be seen from the door. "I'm Mr. Yodogiri's agent. You must be Hiroto Shijima."

"Th-that's right."

"I'm sorry. That must have startled you," said the man with a pleasant smile.

Shijima timidly asked, "Um…I know why I need to wear a disguise, but I'm not sure why you needed…"

"Oh, excuse me. I'm not currently able to walk around in the daylight with my face fully exposed. I owe some money, and I'm being very careful not to get caught by that horrifying debt collector dressed like a bartender. Doing errands for Mr. Yodogiri like this is my collateral, in a sense."

Shijima figured his counterpart would cut a more intimidating figure, but this fellow was quite ordinary. The disguise was startling, but his reason for it made sense. As someone who got around in Ikebukuro, Shijima understood the danger that Shizuo Heiwajima represented on an instinctual level.

"But the rumor says that the debt collector got arrested."

"Yeah. *Rumor.* I don't believe rumors, and even if I did, maybe they already let him out today… Sorry. I'm kind of cowardly by nature."

The man used the remote to order a drink, then put the mask back on without another word. Soon the employee arrived with his order, and once the coast was clear again, he took off the mask and put it on the table.

Bemused by all this, Shijima asked, "But…aren't you ruining the whole idea by showing your face to me? I mean, the beanie and sunglasses don't do that much if I can basically see your whole face."

"Ha-ha, it's cool. I trust you."

What is he talking about? wondered Shijima, who was not buying the man's pleasant attitude.

The man noticed the look on his face and laughed. "Oh, sorry. I guess it does sound very fishy when someone you just met seconds earlier says he trusts you. But if there's one thing I want you to know…it's that I am not your enemy. Even if Jinnai Yodogiri is."

“…? What do you mean by that?”

“I’m going to be frank with you. Jinnai Yodogiri was in a car accident last night.”

“?!”

The news caught Shijima like a sucker punch. The flow of his emotions came to a standstill.

The man took advantage of that to say, “According to his secretary, Kujiragi, he won’t be on his feet for another six months. He’s an old man, too. I wouldn’t be surprised if he never recovers.”

“Th-then…”

“Now, hang on. You can’t just assume you’re free. Kujiragi’s got her eyes peeled, and as her errand boy, I’ve got information on you. Either way, you’re Izaya Orihara’s errand boy, aren’t you? I know about him. You’ve made a very nasty enemy. My sympathies.”

“…”

This unwelcome bit of news took Shijima down to the dumps, even as the man maintained his friendly demeanor.

“Hey, hear me out. It’s not like I swore allegiance to Jinnai Yodogiri or anything. Although I will admit that his secretary, Kujiragi? Yeah, she’s a damn fine woman. Wouldn’t mind takin’ it to *her* one of these days. But that can come later… Anyway, here’s my point. Why don’t you and I work together and make a killing?”

“Huh…?”

“I’m saying, let’s make off with a nice little chunk of Jinnai Yodogiri’s wealth.”

What the…? Is this guy really old Yodogiri’s errand runner?

No, watch out. He might be trying to play me—to see if I’ll betray them. I shouldn’t agree to anything he says unless I know that Yodogiri was really in an accident.

It was all too sudden. This only made Shijima’s suspicions stronger.

“But I guess it would be more like one of his trade routes, rather than his actual estate.”

“…Um, that sounds kinda dangerous.”

“Ha-ha, the one in danger now is Yodogiri. Right? He really screwed up, letting this happen at a time when the Awakusu-kai are after him. In fact…the rumor says that the guy who ran over him is one of Izaya Orihara’s henchmen.”

“…?!”

The sudden revelation threw Shijima for a loop.

Damn! How much of his info do I take at face value? I don’t think I can trust a single thing this guy says.

Shijima decided that his best course of action with the other man, who seemed a decade older than him, was to keep his silence. But the man just nodded to himself, as though he could see right through Shijima, his eyes narrowing behind the sunglasses.

“Oh, I get it. You can’t trust me, can you? Makes sense—you’re hanging off a cliff. Of course you’re wary. You can’t take my word without anything in return.”

“Well, sure,” Shijima mumbled.

“Kyouhei Kadota.”

“?”

“Do you know the name Kyouhei Kadota? Big guy in the Dollars.”

“I heard that he got run over a few days ago…”

When he was looking into the Dollars earlier, Shijima studied up on Kadota, who naturally showed up as one of the more prominent members. But the first he had heard of the accident was last night, when he’d met Mikado Ryuugamine for the first time and learned about it as part of the current rundown of the Dollars’ situation.

“A bunch of different people are going crazy searching for that driver. I wouldn’t be surprised if the guy gets lynched.”

“Yeah…I suppose that makes sense. But why did you bring him up now?” Shijima asked, trying to get a glimpse of the man’s eyes.

But the dark tint of the shades, combined with the overall gloominess of the room, hid his facial details.

The man glanced at the door to make sure it was firmly shut, then spoke at barely more than a whisper.

“What if I told you *I know who did it?*”

Silence.

Until he could process what the man said and attempt to judge it for himself.

“…Hang on. You…know who did it?”

“Exactly what it sounds like,” said the man. Shijima considered this.

I see. So is he going to let me have the glory for finding the culprit? But where’s the proof that whoever he identifies is actually the one who did it? What if he’s just trying to use me to screw over someone else?

“…Now *that’s* hard to believe. It’s not just the cops looking for him. Even with all the people in the Dollars working the case, they can’t find the driver. How would you know who it is? Do you have evidence?”

He might be able to hear out the man about the evidence and use that as a hint to discover the perpetrator independently. But what the man cited was far more convincing than he imagined.

“Sure, I’ve got evidence. Here.”

The man pulled out his phone and brought up a photo on the screen. It depicted a young man lying on the street, clearly taken just after a traffic accident.

“Is that…?”

Something about the picture immediately struck Shijima as being wrong. The car lights shining on the victim of the accident…were clearly coming *from* the direction the photo was taken. Inside the car.

Shijima felt a fresh rush of freezing sweat trickle down his spine. In a very

blithe and welcoming way, he'd just been shown something exceedingly dangerous.

Yes, the man seemed pleasant enough, but now he could identify something leering and persistent about that smile. The next moment, Shijima's fears were proven correct.

"I took that photo from the passenger seat."

"…"

Shijima couldn't move his mouth.

Not just his mouth; his fingers and legs were frozen with fear, too.

He'd just assumed that the other man was a simple errand boy for Yodogiri. When he took the mask off his face, he just didn't *look* important compared to Izaya Orihara or Yodogiri. He seemed exactly like the kind of guy who had enough good looks to land a woman who would give him money to gamble on pachinko, go into debt, and wind up sealing his own doom.

Which made the admission of such dangerous information land with that much more terror.

You gotta be kidding. This boring, nice-looking guy, who seems so unassuming…?

The man continued, dragging Shijima and his trembling shoulders farther down into the swamp.

"That's right. I did that. I told the driver, 'Run him over.'"

"…Uh…but…"

"And the driver just ran him over. So the driver's your culprit. And I watched it from two feet away. What greater evidence could you need? Sadly, I have no intention of going to the witness stand, so if you want to sell this information, you'll have to go to the thugs in the Dollars rather than the police."

Shijima still couldn't come up with a word to interject. The man continued by tapping his finger on the table.

"Do you think I'd be charged with a crime in this case? Well, I guess they could

make a case for instigating murder, that's definitely a crime. But they can't prove I said to run him over, and even if I did, can't I just claim that I was sleep-talking? Or what would happen if I tried to claim that I meant, 'Let's run him over to the pub for a drink'? I guess we'll never know unless it goes to trial."

Yodogiri's errand boy smiled happily and swirled his drink. But Shijima couldn't even move the hands he kept on his knees, much less take a sip of his own beverage. All he could do was ask, "Why are you telling me this…?"

"I want you to trust me. I've got dirt on you, see, so now you have dirt on me, too. We're fifty-fifty. Don't you think that makes us much closer and more relatable to each other than Yodogiri or Izaya, who have the scoop on you without any give-and-take?"

He couldn't reply on the spot.

Who is he? Who in the world is this guy? I've never seen him before. He doesn't look like he's got anything to do with yakuza. At best, he looks like an employee from a third-rate host club.

The man just seemed so insignificant compared to big players like Izaya and Yodogiri. If Shijima was going to team up with anyone, this man would clearly be the easiest to betray and cut loose.

If they stole Yodogiri's fortune, and then he cut this guy out of the picture, could he actually have the chance to live for himself again? The temptation was strong but not enough to force Shijima's hand. Instead, he stalled.

"So…why Kadota? Was it on Yodogiri's orders?"

"Nah…I don't have anything against him, and I didn't get any direct orders from Old Man Yodogiri or anything. It just means someone was gonna be really happy with Kadota out of the picture. But if you want to know on whose request I did it, we need to build up a bit more trust first."

The man took an ice cube from his drink into his mouth, rolling it around on his tongue as he spoke. "The primary reason is that I wanted to learn if my new pawn was disciplined enough to act on my orders."

"Pawn?"

“Er, sorry. Just talking to myself. So what’s the deal? Are you in or not?”

Shijima thought in silence. Only when he was certain did he summon his courage to ask, “May I have…a more detailed explanation?”

He couldn’t really sink any lower than he already was. Izaya and Yodogiri knew about his weakness, but he was the only one who had this man’s sensitive information. As long as he could cover his own ass, he might be able to use this as blackmail information for a good long time.

The other guy must really be a lightweight if he was offering a deal that promised so much for so little. If it were Izaya Orihara, any offer that seemed too good to be true would certainly have strings attached. But since this man was after nothing more than money, that seemed much less likely here.

With his mind made up, Shijima reached out and clasped the other man’s hand.

“Fantastic. You’ve made a wise decision, Hiroto Shijima.”

“…Speaking of which, I haven’t heard your name yet.”

“Oh, pardon me. My name is———”

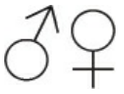
Thirty minutes later, after an explanation of their activities and some sharing of information, they parted ways.

Both men sensed that it would be dangerous for them to linger for too long. And Shijima did not seem to put his full trust in the man, either, though the man knew it. He watched Shijima leave the room first—and he sat back and smiled to himself.

“The idiot. That information wasn’t dirt on me in any way, shape, or form.”

The man perilously close to disaster did nothing else inside the karaoke room except smile to himself ceaselessly.

“I mean, *Kadota saw both me and the driver*, clear as day!”



Tokyo—ruined building

“…Huh?”

Inside the ruined building that Mikado Ryuugamine, Aoba Kuronuma, and the members of the Blue Squares were using as a temporary hideout, a news headline popped out to Mikado as he was scrolling through social media on his phone.

“This can’t be…Celty’s head, can it…?”

The story about a severed head being tossed into a crowd of pedestrians completely knocked Mikado out of his rhythm. Upon hearing the salacious details, the other Blue Squares around him turned their attention to the TV they’d brought into the building.

“Harima?!” Mikado shouted, still scrolling through the Internet for news. They turned back to him again. He had spoken that name on reflex because the uploaded image he saw of the severed head was identical to that of a girl who went to his high school.

But he promptly arrived at a different possibility. In fact, he determined that this one was much more probable.

Upon a closer examination of the image, which seemed to have been taken by a hi-def phone camera, Mikado realized that the head was *just too pristine*. It looked as if it were alive. None of it was smeared with blood, even around the cut.

“…Isn’t that Miss Harima…?” mumbled Aoba Kuronuma in awe as he examined the picture on a separate computer monitor.

But Mikado just shook his head. “No. I’m pretty sure…that’s Celty.”

“Huh?”

“Harima got plastic surgery. To make her look more like Celty’s head… Er, sorry, it’s a long story. I’ll sum it up for you later.”

Then Mikado went searching for information online that might confirm his hypothesis.

—I saw the head, too. It must be fake. It didn’t even seem dead.

—The person who took the video uploaded the pics, and they said it was actually alive.

—Not on a normal video site?

—If you put up video of a dead body, they're just gonna ban your entire account, obviously.

—Look at 1:34 on the video. Did you see the eyelids twitch?

—OMG, they do!

—How did you even notice that?

—So is it fake, then?

—What if it was actually alive, though?

—Think it's the Headless Rider's head?

—Could be.

Mikado focused not on any threads of people debating who did it or what kind of drugs they were on, but on the reactions of the people who had seen it in person.

Then he decided to download the video for himself. Of the initial links he saw for it, he avoided two for containing viruses and succeeded getting the file on the third.

He let the video play without further delay—and noted that the eyelids indeed seemed to twitch for a brief moment. You heard a lot about rigor mortis; did the eyelids of a dead body also flutter as they hardened? He was curious but decided that there was a much more reliable method to get to the bottom of this than searching for scientific facts.

"…"

Mikado used his phone to call an acquaintance's number. After a few seconds of ringtone, it switched to an answering machine message.

"Hello, this is Mika. If you're calling because you're worried about me, thanks! The head on the news isn't mine, so rest assured I *can* hear your message after the beep!"

It seemed to have been just recently recorded, to Mikado's relief. That, in turn, solidified the answer in his mind.

The head of Celty Sturluson—his savior and the dullahan whom he admired and wished he could be like—had been revealed to the world at large in this moment, in this way.

It was the instant that common sense and the world of the grotesque crossed paths.

But…Mikado was a bit taken aback.

Not out of curiosity as to why the head was thrown into the middle of the public—but about a change in his own mind after he understood what had happened.

Huh?

Is this…all it is?

I've been waiting for this day for what seems like forever…but I don't feel any excitement.

He'd had such an obsession with the extraordinary, such a desire to witness the moment that the accepted order of the world was completely overwritten, that he couldn't help but doubt himself when he felt such shockingly little interest in the event when it arrived.

What is it? Am I feeling the lonely feeling you get when that obscure manga or musician you like suddenly gets famous?

No, I don't think that's it…

Mikado's mind worked away as he gazed at the computer screen, his expression steadily clouding over.

…Maybe I've just…gotten too used to Celty. Maybe I'm not capable of thinking of her as extraordinary or abnormal anymore.

Then he remembered what Izaya Orihara told him on the night of the first Dollars' meeting in real life.

"In three days, the abnormal will simply become normal to you," Izaya had said to him as he left that gathering behind.

While Mikado was getting the feeling that Izaya might have been right about

this, he also took the opportunity to re-examine himself. Could it be that what he was seeking was actually just *ordinary* life?

Did he want to take the excitement of that first night the Dollars came together, the thrill of first meeting Celty, and simply stop time right there? After the abnormal became his new, static normal, he never accepted the possibility of further evolution from there. It was why he was here with the Blue Squares now.

The recognition of this led Mikado toward the stairs to the roof of the abandoned building. He told Aoba and his friends, “I want to think about things for a bit. Can you let me be alone in peace?” and headed up the stairs with his phone in hand.

As he went, Aoba gave him the most absolutely delighted smile imaginable.

Mikado reached the roof and gazed up into the sky, breathing deeply. The sun was still high in the sky, shining softly through the gauzy clouds.

He looked at the Sunshine 60 building in the distance and let himself indulge in a private moment before he lifted the phone to open its contact list and click on a particular name there.

It was a number he’d tried a few times recently and mysteriously failed to reach every time. He was worried that he wouldn’t get through today, either, but he felt motivated by a belief that at least trying would be better than doing nothing and a hunch that the extraordinary nature of the situation would actually get him through this one time.

“…”

Mikado sucked in a deep breath and pressed the call button on the contact.

He steeled himself for the task ahead, imagining what might happen as a result of this.

Ikebukuro—Bikkuri Guard

Ooh, another police vehicle. I wonder if something’s happened.

Izaya felt his heart leap as he witnessed each passing police car and crime lab van.

He was on a street underneath the train bridge on the south side of Ikebukuro Station that was colloquially known as Bikkuri Guard. After his hospital visit, he had been strolling this direction, hoping to get an idea of what was happening in the city.

A few members of Dragon Zombie were following a short distance away, but far enough that if a hostile group attacked him with intent to do serious harm, he wouldn't stand a chance. But Izaya beamed happily, soaking in the thrill of danger.

The MRI and CAT scans showed some damage to his skin but no internal bleeding or other effects to his brain. But his good mood had nothing to do with the clean bill of health.

Nothing wrong with my brain, huh? I guess that means that my personality isn't anyone or anything else's fault but simply a product of my own self.

Izaya considered the conversation he had before the exam, when he talked to Anri Sonohara about the inhuman. What would have happened if Karisawa hadn't stepped in to mend the situation? Would Anri have cut him with her sword? Or would she have broken down first?

He had faced down an alien being eating away at a human soul, and if anything, Izaya found the experience to be utterly delightful. But it was not Anri's inhumanity that excited him—it was Karisawa's assertion that this creature was her friend.

Ah yes. Karisawa and Yumasaki are so very entertaining. It's people like them who make the world such a delightful place. He chuckled to himself. *What would happen if the majority of people on earth accepted the inhuman like they do? If such beings were able to interact and dwell in the open, would I be able to observe them the same way that I do humans?*

He had to admit that he felt disgust at those like Anri Sonohara who decided to abandon their humanity. But aside from her head, he felt almost nothing at all about Celty Sturluson. Izaya's interest was reserved for all of humanity and what awaited after death.

If death was simply an empty void, that would be the saddest thing he could imagine. It would mean he could no longer hope to observe humanity. But if he could be a spirit of some kind, even if permanently prevented from ever interacting directly with the mortal realm, it would be like heaven to Izaya. That represented the best possible outcome.

But Celty Sturluson had presented Izaya with a totally new set of values.

Spirits or no, Izaya didn't believe in heaven or hell at all. He didn't accept any consolidated "new world" that continued after the mortal one. They were just fictions reflecting the finer differences in cultures.

Until a dullahan, a being straight from legend, appeared in Ikebukuro. If she was indeed an inhuman being, and exactly what the folklore stories said, then couldn't there be a heaven, or a hell, or perhaps the Valhalla of Scandinavian myth and its eternal battleground?

Izaya didn't desire to go to heaven. He knew that if he were bound for either destination, it was probably going to be hell.

What he wanted to know was what the humans did in this continuation of the world, in their spiritual or soul form. When people committed suicide hoping for permanent oblivion, how would their souls react when told, "Sorry, nothingness was just a myth, your consciousness will suffer for all eternity"?

When people assumed that killing one or a thousand people carried the same sinful weight and were executed for their role in mass killings, how would they react if told, "Sorry, they're not the same thing"?

And on the other hand, what would you get from those who died terrified of leaving their families behind—"Congratulations, now you can watch over them from here"? How long would they actually observe their families? A year? Two? Ten? Forever? Or would the knowledge that they could do it for eternity actually bore them after mere hours?

The afterlife was an unknown quantity for everyone. What would the people plunged into that world of the unknown think? What actions would they take?

He imagined the possibilities, indulging in his own private bliss, like an innocent child swept up in the world of his dreams.

Meanwhile, the part of Izaya not daydreaming wondered what the police were up to and took out his phone to check the news on the Internet. The sudden buzzing of an incoming call brought him entirely back to reality.

The screen displayed: *Ryuugamine, Mikado*.

He clutched the phone for several seconds, thinking hard.

Mikado. I haven't heard from him in a while. I wonder what's been happening.

Left unsaid was the fact that he had been intentionally ignoring any of Mikado's attempts to get in touch.

Why this exact moment? Is something going on?

Izaya had just left the hospital and wasn't aware of the news about Ikebukuro. After several rings, he finally pressed the call button.

"Hello. It's been a while since I heard from you, Mikado."

"Oh, um…yes, it's been a good while, Mr. Orihara."

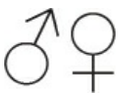
"I'm sorry I couldn't answer the phone for a bit. I've been very busy with work."

"No, *I'm* sorry for bothering you. I know you're busy…"

With the formalities out of the way, Izaya got right down to business.

"So what is it? Got a problem?"

"Sorry. Actually, I wanted to ask you something…"



Abandoned building

"And what's that? I might be able to answer it for free, but if it impinges on my business, I'll have to charge you," said the voice over the phone, which was just the same as any other time they'd talked. Mikado took a deep breath.

Are you aware of the news about the head? That was the first question, no matter what. But Mikado kept the words trapped in his throat.

After a long pause, he instead asked the question he'd been wondering about since last night. "Mr. Orihara…are you familiar with a person in the Awakusu-kai

named Akabayashi?”

“Yes, I am,” he replied instantly. His voice was cheerful, like always. The fact that a teenager was namedropping yakuza lieutenants had no effect on him.

“…Well, this might be a very strange thing to ask, so I apologize in advance if it upsets you.”

“What is it?”

“Was it…you who told him about me?”

And rather than the few seconds of silence that Mikado anticipated after the question, Izaya answered without missing a beat.

“You’re half-right, half-wrong, I’d say.”

“Huh…?”

Izaya had to stifle a chuckle at the confusion in the voice on the other end of the call.

“Remember what I told you before? Out of respect for you, I wouldn’t sell the information that you are the founder of the Dollars. It’s just that there are exceptions.”

“Exceptions…?”

Izaya considerately explained, “One is outside of my business. For example, if I felt like telling a personal friend that you were the founder of the Dollars for their own benefit, rather than as a business transaction, I would do it. That would be an instance that I thought was in *your* benefit, too.”

This was partly the truth and partly a lie. When he told Masaomi Kida about the identity of the Dollars’ boss, it was indeed outside of business. But he never considered it to be for the sake of Masaomi or Mikado. It was entirely to suit his own ends.

Outside of that, it wasn’t Izaya who had leaked Mikado’s information to the thug named Horada but Namie. So for the most part, Izaya was telling the truth.

“The second example—and this would be in the case of Mr. Akabayashi—is if

the other side already suspected that you were the founder of the Dollars and hired me to collect intelligence that would prove it. I can choose not to tell the truth, but if I simply lied, I would be negating the entire point of my personal business."

This, too, contained a bit of untruth.

He hadn't told Akabayashi pure, unvarnished fact. Instead, he said something like, "I never imagined that a student at my old school would be the boss of the Dollars." He had lied to Akabayashi's face as part of his business—albeit with the understanding that Akabayashi was smart enough to see through that lie.

But Izaya wasn't lying about this now for self-preservation. He was setting fire to the rope Mikado Ryuugamine was crossing.

"Do you understand? The moment he came to me, Mr. Akabayashi already had an idea that you were the leader of the Dollars."

"…"

The only sound through the phone speaker was breathing. Izaya continued.

"In other words, consider that your secret is not actually a secret at all on this side of society. And not just this side. In time, the rumors will hit the public, and by the start of second semester, you might get a tap on the shoulder and turn around to hear a classmate asking you, 'Is it true you're the boss of the Dollars?' as if he can't really believe it himself."

"…Yes, I can see how that might happen."

"So now I have a question for you. Why are you still over there? Just abandon your position and play the part of an ordinary student. I've been hearing stories about how you're teaming up with an underclassman at school and doing all kinds of menacing things."

Through the speaker he picked up the sound of Mikado chuckling.

"Ha-ha… You really are incredible at this. So you've heard about that, too…"

"Let me be up-front and reveal that I know Shizu isn't a member of the Dollars anymore, and Dotachin's been in an accident. I can anticipate that you are aware of these things, too. So why are you still there? You know what sort of

danger you're in."

"…And now the yakuza are aware of me, too."

"Exactly. This is your last chance. If you hand over the Dollars to someone else and go back to being an ordinary student, the Awakusu-kai aren't going to have any reason to mess with you. Your name will soon be forgotten," Izaya said, knowing full well this was never an option.

As he expected, Mikado was silent and did not offer any words of agreement. Then the information dealer put the screws to him with a false argument.

"What's wrong? Didn't you want the extraordinary in your life? With what's happening to you now, wouldn't an ordinary and boring life actually be *more* extraordinary at this point?"

"…I believe you were the one who said that in order to taste the abnormal…I either had to accept it or continue evolving."

"Yes, I did say that. But you don't have to take my word at face value. You're the one who makes that choice."

"I know. Which is why I can be up-front about this. Even if you weren't *pulling any strings behind the scenes…I'm pretty sure that I would've ended up in this position."*

At long last, it was Izaya's turn to fall silent.

But it was not shock at learning his actions were already known. It was a silence of deep-seated, trembling fascination and delight.

"My goodness. You make it sound as though I've been sneaking around behind your back," Izaya said hopefully.

Without betraying any anger or disappointment, Mikado said, *"But of course you would be up to something, Kanra. You were the one who told Masaomi about my secret first, too, weren't you?"*

"What if I said you were right about that? Would you scorn me? Would you hate me?"

"…The way you said that tells me it was *you."*

Izaya fell silent, a tacit admission. He got a better grip on his phone, making sure he could clearly hear what Mikado would say next. The statement came imminently.

“Thank you.”

It seemed to come out of nowhere. But Mikado’s voice was completely level, not sarcastic or ironic in the least. *“If that hadn’t happened, I think I would’ve just kept my secret…from Masaomi and from Sonohara, too. I mean, I know that every human being has a lifelong secret or two…but I’m just a teenager. I’m not strong enough to keep going with my secret identity hidden in my back pocket, like the protagonist of some comic book.”*

“…”

“I would’ve been buffeted by the waves of the Dollars and buried it all in the midst of my ordinary life. All the while feeling guilty about hiding it from the people I really care about.”

“And you don’t feel guilty about what you’re doing now?” Izaya asked, suppressing the surge of excitement running through him. “You’re beefing with the Yellow Scarves…and I don’t suppose I need to sell you the details of who leads them, do I?”

Mikado wasn’t shaken by this at all. If anything, his response was almost cheeky. *“My guilt is for creating the Dollars, period. That’s why I want to drag the Yellow Scarves and every other bothersome thing involving me into the Dollars so I can reset everything. In video game terms, I guess you’d call it a New Game Plus.”*

“Putting things into video game terms? You sound just like one of the kids these days.”

“I am *one of the kids these days.”* Mikado laughed, his self-mockery apparent through the phone. *“I want to take the Dollars back to their original state… Back to the night of our first gathering. To do that, I need to destroy everything clinging to the edges of the group. That’s all I want to do. And that includes the war with the Yellow Scarves.”*

“You don’t think that the way you’re trying to take over the Dollars for yourself makes you one of those very clingers?” Izaya teased.

Mikado laughed it off. *“Oh, please. This isn’t like you.”*

“You think so?”

“I mean, I’ve always been a clinger. It’s why I’m destroying all of it, including *myself. Once everything is back to normal and the Dollars are returned to their original state, I want to start something new. Maybe it would be interesting to properly include Sonohara and Masaomi in the Dollars.”*

“…”

Yes! Fascinating! He’s the best!

Mikado Ryuugamine, I must confess I’m a bit surprised and in awe of you.

You’re the greatest kind of clown I’ve ever seen. You are humanity itself! I always had a hunch, and it turned out to be bang on!

“Nice! That’s right, you’re human. If anyone is human, it’s you, Mikado Ryuugamine.”

“Huh?”

Izaya was so moved that he didn’t realize he’d spoken that part aloud. “You’re selfish, but you think of others, you commit crimes as a means of penance, you withdraw into your shell in order to change the world. You inhabit so many contradictions, and yet not everything falls under that particular logic—which is what makes you so human, in my opinion. I happen to think that one of humanity’s defining traits is the willingness to switch things up—to step into the crosswalk with your right foot first every single day, then start with your left today, for no particular reason.”

“I don’t know what it is that you see in me, but I’m obviously not human in some archetypal sense. I’m just indecisive, that’s all.”

“Oh, I wasn’t paying you a compliment. You’re indecisive, and yet your ability to act is unparalleled. You act slowly and smoothly but in unpredictable ways. Just like a pinwheel firework, spinning very slowly.”

“You’re suggesting I’m destined to explode and die at the end,” Mikado noted darkly.

Izaya stifled a chuckle. “That’s not my call to make. You do understand that I’m only assisting you kids in your struggle to move onward, right? It’s up to you to decide which direction you take that. And while we’re on the topic, Mr. Akabayashi being the one to come from the Awakusu-kai side is a huge opportunity for you. He’s not the kind of person who keeps threatening those who walk away from their side of society. You understand what I mean by that?”

“…You’re saying that if I turn back, it has to be now?”

“Yeah. As your senior in life, I’m undecided at the moment. I’ve got connections to him and the Awakusu-kai, as you know. I could get shot and killed at any moment. I don’t know whether I should take your hand and show you how to navigate the depths of this treacherous sea, or push you back up to the safety of the beach and the sunlight.”

“Mr. Akabayashi said the same thing to me. But where I want to be is neither of those places, I think.”

“Oh?”

“In your analogy, I guess I want to be right at the breaking point of the waves at the shore. I feel like whether ordinary student or Dollars, if I choose just one, I’ll be destined to get bored with it. I’m not looking for life-risking thrills and chills. But I’m also not enamored with boring peace. That’s what the last six months have taught me.”

The boy’s true wishes came through the phone, his voice clearly painted in complex and tangled emotions. The fact that there was still a note of uncertainty present spoke to just how truthful he was being about himself.

“In the end, I just want to keep seeing things that are different from where I am now. So if I could just sit in a boat, right at the breaker, spinning and rocking with the waves…I guess…”

Izaya did his best to suppress his emotion, eyes sparkling like he was about to open the mail-order box he’d been waiting for. “So this is what you’re saying,”

he teased. “You always want to be the guy gawking just at the barest margin of safety in all those videos capturing shocking events. You want to be the arsonist and the firefighter. You want to be the scientist who creates the giant monster, then the one to call the superhero for help. You want to cause trouble and get the credit for stopping it. You want to hog all the misery and joy, right from a front-row seat. Like you’re some kind of God.”

Mikado’s response to this mockery was quite simple. *“I would think that’s the devil, not God.”* But he didn’t deny any of it. *“It occurs to me—that would be* you, Izaya*.”*

“Is it a coincidence that you just called me Izaya instead of Mr. Orihara? Or by design?”

“Is it that important? I called you Mr. Orihara earlier because it had been a while and I felt some distance, but it’s a bit of a mouthful.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to call you out,” Izaya said. “It’s just that because my hobby is observation, I’m very sensitive to minor changes. I must say, though, I’m relieved. You haven’t changed at all.”

“Huh?”

“To be honest, I was worried. I thought you might’ve changed since the last time we spoke. But no, nothing about you has changed since that very first meeting. I mean, independent of personal growth. You’re moving forward while retaining who you are.”

Despite the fact that he’d just mentioned how it was human nature to switch things up out of nowhere, Izaya was now complimenting Mikado for his nature never changing. But it didn’t seem to fully register with the younger boy, whose voice was uncertain, hesitant.

“Do you…think so?”

“Yes. What you’re doing now is so extreme that you’ve been worried about yourself, haven’t you? Worried that you might be going crazy somehow.”

“…”

Izaya took his silence as agreement and sang his praises. “Right now, the

people around you are probably thinking things like, *He went crazy*, and *He's acting weird*, and *Someone's fooling him*. Particularly the people who know you well, like Anri Sonohara, Masaomi Kida, Dotach…er, Kyouhei Kadota, and Celty Sturluson."

"…! I was trying to hide it from them…but I guess…I've been worrying folks like Celty."

"Yes, I believe you have. She's not human, but she's got a strong image of humanity that she models herself after, based on TV shows and books and the like. In a sense, that's what makes her seem so human for being so inhuman. I guess she can't help but think that you're running wild at the moment. Because from a normal person's perspective, you seem to be going totally out of control."

Izaya followed his preamble with a more forceful answer.

"However, you don't need to worry about this, because I can guarantee that you, Mikado Ryuugamine, have not changed a bit from the moment you formed the Dollars! If you've gone mad, then it happened right at the time you formed your group, not *now*! When you got all those people together and declared war on a huge corporation with a single text message, *that was when you were insane*."

"…"

"And yet, you persisted in treading your ordinary daily life, with that air of madness inside of you. I'm quite jealous. I wasn't able to do that when I was in high school," Izaya said wistfully.

Mikado reacted to his mentor's plaudit with a soft snort. *"And…what do you intend to do with the Dollars, Izaya?"* he asked.

"What do you mean, what will I do?"

"I'd like to think I know a bit about you. Even this very conversation has told me something. You're not just sitting back and quietly watching this unfold. Also, since this started up, I've been doing some research into the past."

The past.

It was a word Mikado said with great meaning. But he otherwise did not change his tone of voice and didn't beat around the bush in revealing what he knew about then and now.

"You're trying to do to us what you did to the Yellow Scarves two years ago, aren't you?"

Silence reigned.

A train passed over the bridge above, and Izaya said nothing until the roar had passed.

Mikado heard the noise through the phone speaker and waited patiently.

After ten seconds of a very noisy silence, Izaya smiled. His eyes sparkled with surprise and delight. "With the distance you put between yourself and Kida, I didn't think you'd figure that out. Who did you hear that from, Tsukumoya?"

"No…I searched out people who were low on the Yellow Scarves totem pole back then and lead normal lives now. I only got bits and pieces, but when put together from twenty different people's stories, I finally started to see the big picture."

"Do you despise me?"

"If anyone would, it'd be Masaomi, wouldn't you think? Oh, but…if Masaomi's big injury back in March had anything to do with you, then I suppose I should despise you… I wonder what the answer is. I guess I'll consider that again once things are back to normal between me and him," Mikado reflected, detached.

"I see," Izaya replied. "We'll put that off until later, then. Honestly, I was going to stay quiet about the whole thing, but at this point it doesn't seem like there's any reason to hide it."

He leaned against the wall of the tunnel, free hand in his pocket, looking up at the ceiling.

"It's true, I intend to mess with you two. But I'm not deciding if I'll be your ally or your enemy. Frankly, I think that remaining an observer is the fairest choice and will allow me to observe people in their most natural state, but that might be difficult at this point. You and Kida can't solve your issue anymore just

between you and the people you have doing your dirty work. The fact that Mr. Akabayashi's involved should make that clear, right?"

Still, he didn't bring up the issue of Kasane Kujiragi. He could have gone ahead and revealed that Hiroto Shijima was his own cat's-paw but decided against doing that. He knew that actions he took while elated often had a way of coming back around to bite him.

But usually that happened because he couldn't help himself and did it anyway.

Mikado took Izaya's statement with a grain of salt. *"If possible…I'd appreciate having you on my side. As one of the people who knows what the Dollars were on that first meeting…"*

"Well, that's tricky. Even I can't tell what I'll be doing up ahead. Ultimately, what I want to see is other people, not myself. My biggest pleasure in life is observing what others do when placed in unpredictable circumstances. So yes, I will start all the fires and put them all out to that end."

"…It wasn't you *who arranged the stunt with the head, was… Aaah!!"* Mikado yelped. Izaya's eyes narrowed in curiosity at the sudden shift in his voice.

"Oh! That's right!" Mikado continued. *"That's what I wanted to call you about!"*

"?"

"Were you aware of today's news, Izaya?!"

"No, I just got done with something. I haven't checked the news recently. Did something happen?" Izaya asked, sensing something abnormal in the tone of Mikado's voice.

"You'd be better off just turning on the TV for the news, rather than hearing it from me! You could even check the news on your phone! In fact, I was calling because I wanted to ask if you had anything to do with it…but based on your reaction, I'm guessing you didn't," Mikado said, clearly agitated. Then he claimed he would call back and hung up.

Izaya recalled the police cars he'd seen passing by and decided to just check it

out on his phone. In all honestly, he'd have preferred to bask in the splendidness of humanity, out of respect for young Mikado Ryuugamine, but he felt a note of unease in his chest and pulled out a separate smartphone so that he could launch his own special news-aggregating app.

Maybe Shizu broke out of the holding cell. Man, it would be awesome if they would just shoot him down…

He gazed at the screen of the smartphone, holding to that faint hope—and when the headline "Woman's Head in Crowded Ikebukuro" appeared, his mind froze.

It was less than a second, but if Shizuo Heiwajima just so happened to be throwing a vending machine at him in that moment, he would have perished without any means to avoid it.

Once the momentary shock—powerful enough to expose him to fatal threat—had passed, Izaya scanned the details of the article, then launched another online app.

A quick check of the obscure, underground image site brought him what he was looking for very quickly. The instant he saw the face that was identical to Mika Harima's, Izaya understood.

It was not Mika Harima's head. It was the head of Celty Sturluson, which was supposed to be in his possession.

The culprit was likely Manami Mamiya.

And her motive was simple: provocation.

It was for that reason, that extremely personal and petty reason, that she threw the entire city into a panic and totally destroyed a portion of Izaya's plans.

And Izaya's reaction to losing one of the best aces up his sleeve was overwhelming *joy*.

"I see… So that's how you want this!"

He had accepted Manami Mamiya into his team as an irregular element that would interfere with him. His goal was not something experimentally

productive like forcing his operation to tighten up by including an enemy among the ranks. No, it was for the most Izaya of reasons: a desire to observe what a girl who lived on nothing but hatred for him might do.

Naturally, he was under the assumption that she would do *something*.

She'd report their activities to the police, or try to kill him in his sleep, or dump poison into the water tank of the building, knowing full well it would harm other members and innocent residents.

He maintained a minimum of caution, of course, since getting himself killed wasn't the idea—but what she ultimately did far surpassed his expectations. He anticipated that she would steal the head, but his guess was that she would either give it back to Celty, take it to Nebula, or offer it to Kasane Kujiragi.

I never expected she'd get the entire world involved in it.

It was as though, by shining the spotlight of the public's attention on the head, she was exposing everyone and everything in this secret state of affairs—Dollars, Jinnai Yodogiri, Awakusu-kai, Izaya, even the dullahan and Saika—to the world at large.

"…Ha-ha!"

He could no longer hold back his laughter.

Gales of it burst forth, echoing off the walls of the tunnel, laughter that threatened to bowl over the entire world.

When a new train passed over, the clatter and roar of it harmonized with the laughter in ugly ways, chilling both any pedestrians in the area and even the Dragon Zombie members who waited a short distance away.

This is what makes humanity so wonderful!

I admit it, Manami Mamiya—I'm taken aback by your actions. In fact, you might even say I've been put on a major mental defensive. And I couldn't be happier!

But this isn't the end, is it?

He considered the current affairs anew, a sign of utmost respect for the girl who'd placed him in great danger.

I guess this means I should start moving in earnest, then. Shizu's stuck with the police thanks to that thing with Earthworm, so I can move around in safety. And thankfully, Kasane Kujiragi's Saika children will extend his time in captivity.

You know…that meeting with Anri Sonohara this morning seemed portentous. After talking with Mikado, I feel like today is marked by fate. In order to turn coincidence into inevitability, I suppose I should work on Kida later tonight, perhaps.

Malevolent plans swirled in his heart, blissful smile on his lips.

Now, in the moment, when his plans were in danger of being destroyed, he felt the pure opportunity of human observation, a hope that no one else would ever bother to believe in.

Parking garage, Tokyo

It was one of Tokyo's uncountable unmanned standing garages, not very far from Ikebukuro. This had once been a hangout for the Blue Squares, but after the past squabble, the Yellow Scarves had used Izaya Orihara's information to root it out and take over the territory.

When the Blue Squares broke up, and after Masaomi left the gang, some local teens occasionally loitered around the area—but now the folks in yellow were back in full force.

Not that they ever bothered the cars that used the garage. They didn't even sit out in the open where people would take notice. They knew that if any of the usual people complained, the police would come down on them at once. Apparently the cops regularly patrolled the area back in the days of the Blue Squares.

Masaomi Kida made use of that information, using the garage less as a base of operations than a clandestine hideout. Even after he left, the practices he had put in place had been followed, so it was extremely rare that an officer ever came around anymore.

On the roof of the garage, Masaomi was holding a meeting with the other

Yellow Scarves.

“Okay, so we’ve got to watch out for this huge guy with the sleepy eyes. If the rumors are accurate, he’s probably a guy from Kushinada High called Houjou.”

The plan to lure out and strike the Blue Squares yesterday had worked up to a point. But when the large youth got out of the van, the entire skirmish ended in a draw and mutual retreat.

“So…I guess they’re serious about this,” said Kouji Yatabe, one of the senior members.

Masaomi nodded gravely. “Same goes for me. I was dead serious about fighting them off. If it weren’t for the Blue Squares, he and I could’ve had a good fistfight and gotten this all over with already.”

“How many times have you said that, Shogun?”

“Yeah, you can’t keep playing the old hits.” His friends chuckled, annoyed. Masaomi laughed, too.

“I’ll say it as many times as I want. Thanks for sticking around through my personal battle, guys.”

“This is so dorky.”

“Ahh, bittersweet youth!” they joked to hide their embarrassment.

Masaomi prepared himself to get serious again so they could discuss their next actions—but he sensed a silhouette moving out of the corner of his eye and glanced that way.

A young man dressed in casual attire emerged from the elevator. Probably just an ordinary person getting his car, Masaomi mused and turned back to his friends.

But then he realized that something struck him as wrong, and he glanced back.

He understood what it was.

The man wasn’t heading for any of the cars parked on the roof. He was walking straight for their group.

“Hey,” Masaomi said, and his friends turned to look.

They got to their feet, sending dangerous warning glances. There were only five or so of them, but this was one man. If he was with the Blue Squares, they could handle him.

Most importantly, their shogun, Masaomi Kida, was here. This wasn’t like when they had sparred with Houjou yesterday.

They stared the man down, putting their full trust in Masaomi’s presence. But for his part, Masaomi was feeling a light layer of sweat break out.

He knew the man approaching them.

You’ve gotta be kidding me. What’s he doing here…?

At first, he didn’t recognize the man. After all, the previous time they met had been under drastically different circumstances.

When he’d been *secretly listening to Mikado Ryuugamine talk to this man* on the street, his face had been covered by many bandages. It was only the sight of his distinctive hat that gave him away.

“Chikage…Rokujou…,” he muttered.

The other members turned toward him. “Huh? You know this guy, Shogun?”

“I don’t *know* him… I’ve never talked to him. But that’s the head of a motorcycle gang from Saitama called Toramaru.”

“Saitama?” they repeated, befuddled.

All the while, Chikage Rokujou continued forward, until he was close enough to have a dialogue with.

He stopped there and raised a hand to them. “Yo. You guys are Yellow Scarves, right?” he said breezily.

Yatabe and the others shared an uneasy look, but Masaomi stepped forward. “That’s right… I don’t see your girls with you this time, Chikage Rokujou.”

Chikage looked surprised. He gave the smaller boy an appraising glance. “Yeah. Sounds like something gnarly was happening right outside the train station. I sent them back home. But, um…more importantly, sorry, kid. Have we

met somewhere before?”

“No. This is our first time talking. But you’re pretty famous, you know that?”

Chikage considered the words, then smirked. “Ah, I see. This is just a hunch, but I’m betting you must be the boss of the Yellow Scarves, huh?”

“Technically, yes. Once divorced.” Masaomi snorted.

Rokujou readjusted his hat and said, “Well, I don’t think I need to introduce myself, then, but I’ll do it anyway. I’m Chikage Rokujou. I run a little gang called Toramaru over in the Kawagoe area.”

“Masaomi Kida.”

Chikage cracked his neck and gave Masaomi another once-over. “Hmm. I was imagining more of a burly bandit type. You’re smaller than I expected.”

“If anything, I bet the rest of society would be more surprised to learn that *you* lead a street gang.”

“You think so? Well…it’s true that I kind of stick out against the rest of my boys.”

“So what brings you here today?” Masaomi asked, neither sucking up to nor looking down on his visitor, merely cautious.

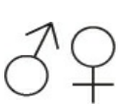
“Oh, right, right. My business.” Chikage chuckled. He answered the question with another question. “You guys are at war with another group called the Dollars, right?”

“…Yes, that’s true.”

“Well, I’ve got a complex situation with them. Lots of favors owed back and forth,” the young man said, always breezy and friendly. “So I know this is sudden, but I was hoping you could choose for me.”

“…Choose what?”

“Whether you want your gang taken over or destroyed entirely.”



Ikebukuro Park

Anri followed Haruna Niekawa to a park located next to Sunshine Street.

Despite it being midday during summer vacation, it was only sparsely populated. The familiar blue vinyl tarps were visible in the back of the park, but there were no homeless around at the moment, just a few people taking a break from their nearby offices and several students enjoying their vacation. Nobody was even sitting at the stone benches in front of the fountain. Upon close inspection, hardly anyone was actually off their feet.

The only person she could see doing so was an office lady perusing a magazine on a bench under a tree, farther away from the fountain.

"…Shall we sit here?" Haruna asked and lowered herself onto a stone bench at the fountain. Anri was cautious, unsure if she should take a seat with some distance between them.

"Oh, don't be so timid," the other girl said, smiling softly despite the overt hostility. "Given the power of your Saika, it doesn't matter how far apart we sit, does it?"

Anri found the offer creepy but sat down next to her anyway. Right before them was a beautiful water fountain, the liquid cascading down stone steps, but Anri was not in any state to relax and enjoy it.

"Umm…Miss Niekawa…" She was still the first to speak, bobbing her head and avoiding looking at the other girl. "I saw on the Dollars' website…that your father is looking for you…"

"My dad is? Oh, I see. It's been awhile since I left home."

"I think it would be best if you went back to him," Anri suggested.

"No," Haruna replied flatly. "I'm grateful to him for raising me, but I don't revere him as a person. It's more important to me that I look for Takashi than help my dad feel better."

Takashi.

Anri recalled the teacher: Takashi Nasujima. He worked at Raira Academy, then disappeared after the street slasher incident. Rumors said that he was

kidnapped by some fellows he owed money—but Anri's memory of him was completely isolated from the rumors and his image as a teacher.

He had singled her out right at the start of school and would do her favors so that he could then take advantage of her in various harassing and inappropriate ways. He had also had a relationship with Haruna Niekawa, and it was at her fanatical, besotted hand that he'd been slashed.

Anri had no interest in him. In fact, despite her lack of negative feelings toward others in general, she had a rare distaste for him personally.

But no matter what he was like, Haruna was madly in love with him. In fact, she started the slashing incident and tried to kill Anri, just so she could monopolize his affections. For his part, Nasujima was terrified of Haruna.

Anri recalled the events of half a year ago and hesitantly asked, "Are you… going to do all that again?"

"'Again'? You mean my love for Takashi? What a strange thing to say, Sonohara." Haruna slowly panned over to look at her, still smiling. "Love might begin at one point, but it does not *resume*. If love ever ends, even temporarily, then it was never love to begin with."

She then put a finger to her cheek in contemplation and continued, "But I'm not selfish enough to claim that a married couple who divorces and gets back together 'wasn't actually in love.' That wasn't love coming to an end. They just changed the way they love each other."

"O…kay…"

"Being together forever is love. Putting distance between you is also love. Even hating is love. There are countless ways to love, and all of them are valid. That's what I've come to believe. And it's because you stabbed me, and I've grown more deeply intertwined with Saika."

Words of gratitude. Yet, Anri could keenly sense that none of the hatred and hostility in the other girl had dimmed. She stayed on guard, prepared to launch Saika from anywhere in her body in case a blade came hurtling toward her.

The idea filled her with self-loathing: She was ready to utilize Saika without a second thought.

No ordinary person would simply play along with Niekawa's invitation. Izaya's words earlier today had jammed themselves deep into her heart. She had completely accepted that she was not human.

…I thought I gave up already.

After leaving the hospital, she tried to call Mikado many times and only reached his voice mail. She didn't have any better luck getting in touch with Celty.

Izaya had warned her that her friends might be in trouble, and yet here she was, calmly spending time with Haruna Niekawa. She really wasn't human, she told herself. And despite her self-loathing, she never even considered letting go of Saika, the root of her contradiction.

"So…did you come here to kill me?" she asked.

A woman sat on a bench in the shade of a tree, reading a magazine.

Kasane Kujiragi could sense the presence of other Saikas in the park aside from her own.

Two of them.

Based on the auras, she suspected that one of them was a Saika she branched off twenty years ago, and the other had been an offshoot of that one.

She had assumed at first that they'd tamed Saika's voices enough to sense her presence here and were coming to her for some reason—but when she glanced over at them, she saw that they were sitting on a distant bench instead, having a conversation. They didn't seem to sense her.

Anri Sonohara.

Kasane knew that much. The sight of the girl with the glasses gave her pause. Apparently, it was a simple coincidence that brought them to this park with her.

So what now?

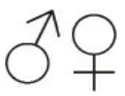
A magazine full of information and mother-and-daughter Saikas.

Which would be easier, defeating them both and presenting them to Seitarou

Yagiri or handing over her own Saika (or a newly branched one)? The latter would be far easier.

So Kujiragi turned the pages of her magazine, pretending not to notice anything.

…Except for the occasional cries of stray cats, which prompted her to glance around dispassionately.



“Did you come here to kill me?” Anri asked.

Haruna never lost her smile as she answered, “Yes, I did…or I wish I did. But no. I forgive you.”

“…?”

“The old me would never have forgiven you—or any woman that Takashi loved. But after you controlled me, I matured a little. So as the older, more worldly woman, I can make a special exception for you.”

Anri wasn’t sure what to make of this. There shouldn’t have been any question of forgiveness—Anri had never done anything to Haruna—but even setting that aside, there was something wrong with what she was saying.

For one thing, none of the hostility emanating toward Anri had abated in the least. It made no sense that she was talking about forgiving, when the fires in her eyes suggested murder.

It wasn’t even a matter of holding back anger. She didn’t look like she was doing her best to stifle hatred. She was simply smiling.

Unsure of how to process all this, Anri waited for her to continue.

“I still hate you. Enough to torture you to death if I had the chance. You stole Takashi’s heart from me and left. *And* you had the gall to reject him. I swore… what you did was unforgivable…”

She glanced away, seemingly out of shame. “But then I was exposed to Saika’s voice…the real voice you’ve been hearing all this time, and you conquered me…”

“Uh-huh…”

“I’m all screwed up now. I just wanted to slice Takashi, have him slice me, and mix us together in one sticky mess. I wanted us to be one in our endless love… but your mind defiled my body first. It ran rampant over me. But then I remembered: No matter how dirty I might be, no matter how much Takashi despises me, my love for him will never change. I can even turn my hatred for *you* into love.”

“? ??”

Umm…what exactly is she saying?

Anri wasn’t following. The more she talked, the more the confusion mounted.

It would’ve been easier if she’d just decided that it was pointless trying to understand someone with a few screws loose, but Anri considered Haruna Niekawa to be firmly within the range of “normal human beings.” In fact, she even respected her for her proactivity when it came to romance.

But respect and understanding were completely distinct concepts, so ultimately Anri was at a loss for how to respond to any of this.

“I overcame the power of your Saika all on my own, Anri Sonohara. But I only overpowered it. I might be maintaining my human self by a thread, but your Saika is still within me. It should have been separate from my Saika, but they’ve begun mixing within me.”

“Th-they have?”

Anri was the host of Saika, but she had never been sliced and turned into a “child.” It was possible to imprint one’s will and orders on any child of Saika’s blade edge, but the child’s thoughts did not get back to her unless by the child’s own mouth.

“Why are you acting like this is someone else’s problem? I want you to *take responsibility*. And then *I* can take responsibility for *being stabbed by you*.”

“…Huh?”

“I’m saying, let’s work together.”

Anri was not expecting this suggestion at all. She still had no idea how to

process any of this.

“Mikado Ryuugamine and Masaomi Kida,” Haruna continued. “You’re interested in both of them, but you’re not cheating on one with the other.”

“…!”

The mention of her friends’ names brought a flash of color to Anri’s eyes. Not figuratively—literally. Her eyes flashed red.

“Don’t…don’t you dare mess with them!” she snapped.

Haruna chuckled mockingly. “Oh, I’m not going to do anything. Because the people important to you are also important to me.”

“What…do you mean by that?”

“I’m not like the people who got cut when Saika ran berserk. You cut me of your own conscious will, with the intent of controlling me.” Haruna leaned over, drawing her shoulder close to Anri’s, close enough to breathe on her, hot and trickling against the back of her neck, the voice almost sensual next to her ear. “Did you think…that it was only Saika’s voice that came flooding into me?”

“?!”

“I didn’t realize it at first, either. Not until I could overpower Saika’s voice. But…once I was able to regain control, I noticed that there was another emotion inside of me. For Mikado Ryuugamine and Masaomi Kida. Two boys I’ve barely even met, much less talked to.”

“No!” Anri turned to face Haruna directly at last.

The other girl’s face, nearly close enough for their noses to touch, was brimming with madness, but curiously, this imbued her with a kind of beauty. “It’s a good thing you felt hesitation about it. And it’s a very good thing your feelings for either of them hadn’t reached the level of love. There is no definition of love, but at the very least, I was relieved that your emotion was a far cry from what I felt for Takashi. If you had feelings for them that were the same as my love for Takashi, I might have had to split my body into three parts.”

“My…feelings?”

“Yes. It might not have been love or romance, but I could tell that you cared about them. Now those emotions have permeated me, along with Saika’s power. All I want is for you to take responsibility for doing that.”

Haruna took Anri’s hand and ran her fingers over the back of it. In her own way, she seemed to be testing Anri, using whatever methods came to her.

“I was forced to peer into your heart, you see. While it may have been inevitable, my attempt to kill you *was* the start of all of it, so I will take a step back from there.”

“But…how do you want me to do that?”

“What have I been saying this whole time? I’m a part of you now, and you’re a part of me.”

“!”

Something in those words brought back Saika’s voice to Anri’s mind.

“I’ve become just a little bit you, and you’re just a little bit me.”

Had she and Haruna Niekawa become connected at some point in their hearts, the way she and Saika had? As a test, she thought about Nasujima, but no affection of any kind surfaced.

Secretly relieved about that, she said, “I don’t think that’s true…”

“Regardless of what you think, that’s just how important human emotions are to me. So while I really, really loathe you, I’m willing to classify that as self-loathing instead.”

Haruna squeezed Anri’s hand, and pressed her forehead with her own. It was the act of two close friends, but that hatred never disappeared from the act.

“So I want your help in making my love for Takashi bloom.”

“Ohhh… Wait, what?!” Anri yelped.

“And in exchange, I’ll help you with your own romance,” Haruna continued, watching Anri’s expression for any changes as she trod further and further into the other girl’s heart. “How much do you know about what’s happening with Ryuugamine right now?”

“…!”

That question was a terrible blow to Anri’s mind, coming so soon after Izaya’s unsettling metaphor earlier in the day.

“Do you…know something about that?”

“Why, yes, of course. When you work *running errands for Izaya*, you hear those two names so often it gets obnoxious.”

“For Izaya Orihara?!”

“Ooh, I felt the anger there. Did something happen between you and him? And yet you were still polite enough to refer to him by his full name. I guess that does seem like you. Oh…I guess I’ve just been calling you Anri this whole time. Is that all right, just calling you by your first name? I mean, we’re friends already.”

It was a brazen thing to drop the term *friends* when she wasn’t even bothering to hide the murder in her voice. “If we get closer than we are now, I might even come up with a nickname for you. Oh, and you can call me Haruna, too. I know you’re younger than I am, but since we’re such good friends…”

“Haruna, please just tell me about Ryuugamine! What is Izaya Orihara going to do to him?! What’s he going to do to Ryuugamine and Kida?!” Anri demanded. It was telling of her personality that despite her panic, she immediately followed the other girl’s suggestion about her name.

Haruna’s eyes crinkled with delight at the mention of her name, but this did nothing to her malice. “How should I know what that sadist plans to do? It’s bound to be whatever the other person wants least at the moment he does it. And if you want to know what those boys are doing…it’s probably better to use Saika’s power and hear it from them yourself, rather than asking me.”

“But…”

“I still have plenty of children from Saika around the city. Some clever control of them should help you find who you’re looking for very quickly.”

“…”

Despite the concrete suggestion, Anri was unable to reply. It wasn’t that she’d

never considered the idea. But even she couldn't tell anymore if her hesitation was because she didn't want to use Saika's powers, or if she just didn't want to intrude on the problem between Mikado and Masaomi.

This was why Haruna's incredible ability to act and think positively made her so envious.

Haruna watched the other girl hang her head and said, "You know…you've changed a bit."

"Huh…?"

"When you cut me, you said, 'Saika gets lonely, so please love her back. It hurts to hear you talk about suppressing her or using her.' And yet, I've just been talking about overpowering and using Saika, and you haven't called me out for it… In fact, it's just like *you've* been trying to hold back Saika."

"…!"

She was right.

Anri always told herself that she was a parasite. That depending on Saika, depending on the rest of the world, was just how she survived and made her way through life.

But since the slasher incident, she'd had more and more interaction with Mikado, Masaomi, Celty, Shinra, even Aoba, and all of this had effected a clear change in her surroundings.

The influence of that created instability in her heart. Anri was aware of the change, but she had gone out of her way not to acknowledge it, afraid that the moment she did so, she would lose everything that made her who she was.

"…Hmm. You seem serious. That's ironic. The moment I suggest that we should leech off each other, now you're the one who's trying to control and use Saika. Maybe I rubbed off on you…? No, that's not true. Even as friends, that would never happen."

It was strange that Haruna was harping on the word *friends* so often, but Anri was in such an extreme mental state she didn't notice.

Haruna sighed and continued, "Well…how about this? How about *I take your*

Saika for you?”

“M…my Saika?” Anri replied. For an instant, she wondered if that was even possible, then shut the idea completely out of her mind.

At the current moment, the only way she could help the boys was to use Saika, regardless of how she felt about that. And if the conversation with Izaya had taught her anything, it was that this was not the moment for her to lessen her options for action.

And a more fundamental question would be why she should ever hand over her original Saika to the woman who willfully engaged in a campaign of indiscriminate violence.

“…I don’t think I will.” Anri squeezed her fist, eyes gleaming.

“You won’t? I thought it was a good offer,” Haruna replied, playing the part of an innocent schoolgirl. She smoothly got to her feet, took a few steps toward the fountain, then turned back around.

Anri’s level of caution instantly shot up to maximum.

“!”

Haruna was merely smiling with her eyes closed—but suddenly there was a large knife in her hands.

“At the very least, I’m sure I could use it better than you can now,” she said, still smiling, eyes wide open. “Thank you for turning me down. Now I have a reason to fight you.”

Her eyes were bloodred and shining. She brandished her blade at Anri without a second thought.

“Even between friends, you sometimes have a fight to the death… It just happens!”

Seconds earlier

"…Meow," Kujiragi murmured, her expression blank.

Her eyes were focused on a cat that had wandered up to her bench. Now others were poking their heads out of the nearby bushes in interest.

"…Meow. Meow-meow."

Not only was she doing it without expression, she wasn't even mimicking the wheedling tones of an actual cat, just saying the word *meow* in a deadpan monotone. It was like one of those computer-generated voices programmed to read your e-mail out loud.

No one aside from her could possibly know what was going through her mind as she did this, but it did suggest that she viewed cats with some fondness. She began rifling through her pockets for some kind of food to offer them.

She didn't find anything and eventually realized that it probably wasn't good to give food to stray cats anyway, so she gave up. But the one especially friendly kitten came forward anyway and rubbed its side against her ankles.

"Mrow?" The kitten pressed its tiny pad against her heel.

She crouched down and held out her hand to the cat, nearly at ground level.

If you want to pet a cat, slowly approach under its chin…

Just when she was about to make contact…

A sharp metallic clash rang through the park.

The cats, who had sharper hearing than humans and even dogs, flinched and turned to the source of the noise, then scattered into the bushes like a nest of baby spiders.

"…"

Kasane was left with her hand in the air and nothing to pet. She turned her head to observe, her expression unchanging.

And there she saw the owner of the original Saika, stopping one of two knives with a blade growing from her palm, while the other knife was pressed to her throat.

“That’s checkmate, Sonohara.”

“…”

“Consider the fact that I’m not stabbing a hole in your throat to be evidence that my offer wasn’t a lie.”

Haruna grinned devilishly, her eyes burning red. The bloodshot color was deeper than the usual “children”—perhaps an effect of being slashed by the original Saika twice—and it was focused around her pupils. In the light of day, it was almost impossible to distinguish from Anri’s original red eyes.

“You’re so nice. If you’d just attacked me without any warning at the start, it never would have reached this point,” Haruna continued.

“…I might have a reason to cut you but not to kill you.”

“Don’t glare at me that way.” Haruna chuckled. Like before, she tapped her forehead against Anri’s. “Why, it doesn’t even sound like you’re bluffing. As if you would kill me, even *if* you had a reason.”

“…!”

Anri felt her entire body tense. What had she been thinking that caused her to say what she did?

I don’t have a reason to kill you.

It was the sort of thing that a hit man or a trained killer bent on revenge would say to someone who wasn’t their ultimate target in an action-thriller movie.

If she did have a reason to kill, would she have actually done it? Would she have swung at the other girl’s throat from a distance with her Saika and cut it open? Would she have impaled her through the heart?

“You don’t still *think you’re human, do you?”* Izaya’s words repeated in her mind, stabbing at her heart once more.

Was he right? Was she no longer human? She couldn’t be certain.

A true nonhuman like Celty would probably hear out Haruna's quip and boldly state, "You're just playing with words." Masaomi would joke something like, "Sure, I've got a reason to kill. How about my parents being murdered?"

But Anri Sonohara only wanted an answer that came from within herself.

Am I…am I really mixing…with Saika…?

If Saika's words were true, was this a phenomenon she ought to accept? She couldn't even answer that question. She had nothing but confusion.

Even sharper than the blade Haruna had pressed to her throat were the girl's words, which tore at Anri's heartstrings without any resistance—but it helped that *Izaya* had already scoured the places that were cut, to make it all the easier.

"…What's wrong? It's like the old you who cut me was an entirely different person," Haruna said, realizing what was wrong at last. Her anticipatory smile vanished. "So what now? Will you beg for your life? Or will you briefly withdraw your blade and emit it from a different place to pierce my chest? Shall we have a contest to see which of us can slice the other faster?"

"I…I wish you would stop this."

"What? Wait, are you actually going to beg?"

"No…I'm just not sure…what I should actually do now…"

Despite having a blade at her throat with utmost malice, Anri showed no sign of actual fear. But she wasn't exactly implacable, either. From her side of the picture frame to the other, she asked weakly, "Do you…think I'm human? Or… do you think I'm a monster…?"

Haruna's brows knitted. "You're not human *or* monster. You're a parasite… That's what you said to me ages ago."

"Oh… You're right. I did say that. I'm sorry…," Anri said, with a forlorn smile. Then she closed her eyes and withdrew the sword back into her body. "That's right… In any case, I'm not human."

"…?"

Haruna seemed to find Anri withdrawing all her defenses eerie and didn't

press her advantage.

“Then I choose to *latch myself onto you*, Haruna *the human*.”

“Oh? What’s with the change of heart? The way you’re acting so nice and obedient all of a sudden is frightening me.”

“I think that I’m not capable of processing things the way that a normal human would anymore. I can’t even tell if what I want to do is actually going to help Ryuugamine or Kida.”

So in that case, would it actually work out better if she just followed all of Haruna’s suggestions? Would Haruna even be misled by Saika’s words?

That’s wrong, Anri thought. *If I let her call all the shots, things will go very bad, fast. The street-slashing incident will come back but all over the city, in a much more vicious way.*

“Please…just tell me one thing.”

It was a decision made by the logical mind of no one else but Anri Sonohara, but after being consecutively shaken by Saika, Izaya, and Haruna over the course of a single day, it was nearly impossible for her to trust her own judgment.

“Would you be able to save Ryuugamine and Kida…?”

“…”

Haruna didn’t expect that question. She fell silent.

In fact, she found Anri’s sudden hesitation and timidity to be creepy. Wouldn’t it be better just to kill her and take Saika away? Or was this some kind of tactic?

She pulled her second knife away from Anri’s neck and pointed it at her face instead, hoping to find out Anri’s intentions. The tip stuck in her cheek, nearly ready to slice— “The cats are running away.”

A third party’s voice entered the scene.

Apparently, it had been directed at Anri, whose mental grip was getting tenuous.

Somehow, there was a woman standing right next to them. She glanced at Haruna, then at Anri, and said, “It’s the first time I’ve ever seen a *mother and child* in a battle to the death, but you’re really just being a bother. Could you please do that somewhere else?”

The new woman was unafraid to scold the two Saikas. While she and Anri were both quiet and wore glasses, the resemblance stopped there. She looked plain at first glance, but on closer examination, her skin was so smooth it was practically clear, perfect as porcelain.

The one black glove on just her right hand was a bit eccentric, but aside from that, she looked like some pretty secretary enjoying a lunch break on her workday.

“…Who are you?” Haruna glared, suspicious of the sudden interloper. “Can’t you tell we’re in the middle of something important?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, she thrust the knife that was not pointed at Anri’s face toward the new woman—not as a threat but an actual attack.

Anri held her breath, and then she realized what it was that struck her about the woman’s words.

Mother and child.

Why had she used that description to refer to two girls wearing school uniforms?

She came to the answer at the same moment that a dull metallic impact rang throughout the park.

“…Huh?”

It was Haruna Niekawa who gaped. The look on her face was much like the time that Anri first showed her the full form of Saika. She glanced back and forth from the woman to the *thing*.

“What…is that…? Who are you…?”

Something like metal fingernails had promptly jutted from the fingers of the woman’s left hand, catching Haruna’s knife blade. While it was not at all like a katana, each and every one of her nails was its own sharp little edge.

With her eyes *blazing red*, the woman answered, “Forgive my late introduction. I am Kasane Kujiragi. This is an original Saika blade.”

“”!””

Both Anri and Haruna reacted to the woman’s simple revelation with shock.

Saika. She had definitely said it.

Before Anri could ask a follow-up question, Haruna leaped into action.

With her one knife still tangled with the woman’s nails, she used the other to swing at the target’s neck—but it was forced to a stop partway.

A silver wirelike cord shot from Kujiragi’s ankle and locked up Haruna’s body.

“Rrgh…aaah…!” She winced, gritting her teeth against the pain of the silver rope digging into her skin, but never stopped trying to swing her arm.

“I have no problem with resisting your mother. There are many reasons one might do so: rebellious phases, becoming independent. But I draw the line when it comes to open physical hostility,” Kujiragi said with clinical dispassion and grabbed part of the silver rope with her gloved hand.

Then she deftly wriggled the tip of the rope and caused it to press a switch hidden on her arm.

“~~~~!”

Haruna let out a silent shriek, her body jolting. After a few seconds of convulsing, Kujiragi instantly undid the rope, retracting it into her body. Her finger blades were gone, too. All that was left was Kujiragi, standing normally, and Haruna falling to her knees.

As a helpless bystander, Anri could only demand, “Wh-what did you do to Haruna?!”

“Merely an electric current through my glove. It is not a fatal flow, but I did run it through her entire body, so she won’t be able to control her muscles for a little while.”

“Aaa…au…”

Haruna writhed on the ground, just barely clinging to consciousness. She

looked up at Kujiragi with eyes full of hatred and suspicion.

“Haruna, are you all right?!”

Anri crouched down and tried to lift Haruna’s body, but it was still trembling and twitching, and the process was too difficult.

“You should just let her lie there. She will recover soon.”

Anri looked up at the woman named Kujiragi again.

Who is she?

Why does she have Saika?

One of the “children” I don’t know…?

No. That can’t be right.

A normal “child” can’t do what she just did.

Is she…a magician?

…It can’t be.

Thoughts came and went in a wave.

Anri swallowed hard and tried to catch one of the countless questions swirling around in her mind to ask the woman. The best she could come up with was, “Um…why didn’t that electricity paralyze you, too?”

With no affect whatsoever, the woman said, “Oh, it did. My right arm and left leg are temporarily immobilized, but it is not a problem.”

But her right arm and left ankle, the places where she was connected to the silver rope, did not actually seem to be trembling.

There was clearly something wrong with this woman. She was not an ordinary human. That much was apparent.

“When you say Saika…what do you mean? Saika is inside me. Plus…what you just did didn’t look like Saika to me…”

Fingernail blades and steel ropes—it just didn’t seem to add up to Saika when the woman said that name.

But instead of answering Anri’s question, the woman said, “On the other

hand, you don't seem to be making full use of Saika at all."

"Huh…?"

Kujiragi glanced down at her feet, where Haruna was still moaning. "Before I stepped in, you could have produced *two Saikas* and easily overcome this woman, it seemed to me."

"Two…Saikas?"

"…Don't tell me that you think Saika can only take the form of a single katana," Kujiragi exclaimed without emotion. It put Anri in mind of something Saika said to her at the hospital this morning.

"It's how your mother was able to use me better. She could do a number of things that you cannot."

She had forced Saika's voice down to where it didn't bother her, but now she was curious about this.

Something I can't do? Use two Saikas…? Dual wield…?

Were her nails and that rope…a different form of Saika?

But Saika is inside me… How does she have that?

She also noticed something else that bothered her: Just as had happened when she encountered Izaya, Saika's endless chanting of love had vanished from her mind.

As if afraid of this Kujiragi woman or disgusted.

Kujiragi.

Who…is she?

And what was that about cats?

The more she thought, the more questions she had to answer, filling her head and dragging her deeper into confusion.

After watching Anri for a while, Kujiragi opened her mouth and said, "It was coincidence that I was in this park. I did not follow you here."

"?"

“But I’m uncertain now. Perhaps meeting you so soon after gaining my own freedom is an act of fate,” Kujiragi said, unaware that it was the same cat-ear headband that had brought both of them to the same area. “And since you do not know how to utilize Saika, I have a question for you…”

She paused there to recollect her thoughts and finally asked Anri, “Do you have any interest in giving your Saika to me?”

Again, Anri was left nonplussed.

She wanted Saika. The request sounded just like Haruna’s a moment ago.

But this woman already had her own Saika. Anri had only seen it in her nails and rope, but the truth started to dawn on her as confusion faded.

There isn’t just one Saika.

Based on the remarkable nature of a cursed sword with a will of its own, Anri had always assumed that the “original” Saika she held was a one-of-a-kind thing.

But it might have been a mistake to apply her own common sense to something like a cursed sword in the first place. On the other hand, if her opponent’s weapon had been in the form of a katana, she might not have believed that was Saika at all.

It was the property that surpassed the laws of physics, the fact that she saw the fingernail blades appearing directly from the woman’s body that had convinced her it was Saika.

The problem was, this understanding broke the logic of the woman’s last statement.

“Why would you want it…? You already have your Saika, Miss Kujiragi.”

“Yes. I already have my own Saika.”

The next instant, a long blade grew from her left hand, until it fit in her palm in the form of a katana. It shone for an instant, then vanished back into her body.

There was no longer any room for doubt. Anri asked, “Then why…?”

“My home vehicle and my products are different things.”

“Products?” Anri repeated. Her eyes widened, but on the inside, this didn’t surprise her that much. The truth was, she already knew. Saika was an item that had ended up at her parents’ antiques shop as a product.

“Is Saika even something that can be bought and sold among different people?” she had to ask.

Kujiragi nodded. “That was my business.”

“?”

The past form of the statement confused Anri.

Kujiragi realized what she’d done and looked away for a moment. “Pardon me. I’m trying to decide if I should continue that business at all. But the last product for which I am under contract is Saika.”

“?!”

Saika, a product to be sold. So somebody actually…wants this thing?

“At worst, I will deliver my own Saika as a product, so I am not forced to buy or take your Saika from you, but…”

The blithe way she mentioned taking it away was alarming. Kujiragi looked into Anri’s eyes and continued, “Based on my observation, you do not control Saika the way I do, but you also haven’t been controlled by it, like past owners. Coexistence is a very rare case, but if you do not need that Saika, I am willing to buy it from you.”

At last, Haruna began to rise unsteadily. She glared at Kujiragi with pure hatred, her smile completely gone. “What kind…of nonsense are you talking…?”

“Are you all right? I wouldn’t force yourself to get up just yet.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, talking that way…for an assailant… But whatever. More importantly, if anyone gets Anri’s Saika, it’ll be me. Who do you even think you are? You just show up in the middle of our conversation, then say you want Saika. You little cat burglar.”

“Cat burglar…” Kujiragi seemed to think this over and, without changing

expression, said, “I like that.”

“You like what?”

Haruna was suspicious of her, and Anri was paralyzed with uncertainty.

The grown woman thought for a bit, came to her own conclusion, and told the girls, “Well, let’s see… In order to make this a proper business deal, there are many things I will have to explain in detail. On the other hand, stealing it creates quite a hassle for me, so I want to avoid that option.”

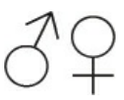
Then she reached down to pick up the magazine she’d dropped in the earlier bout with Haruna and flipped through its pages. “I’d like to tell you about Saika at a nearby café. Do you think I could borrow some more of your time?”

Anri and Haruna looked at each other. Based on what had already happened, they expected the scene to head into a sword fight, resolution or no, but this suggestion had thrown them for a loop.

In contrast, Kujiragi never broke her expression or made one in the first place.

“Even setting business aside… Don’t you want to know more about Saika?”

At that point, there was no way Anri could reject the offer.



Tokyo—parking garage

“Did I hear that wrong? Did you just ask if I preferred getting taken over or crushed?” Masaomi Kida asked.

Chikage Rokujou answered, “Yeah, I did.”

A sudden surge of tension and hostility charged through the five or so Yellow Scarves present.

Chikage recognized that the situation had changed between them but detected that their leader still wanted to hear him out, so he shrugged and said, “Hang on. Masaomi Kida, right? Listen, I understand I’m being unreasonable, too. When a guy walks up and says to choose between getting destroyed and getting taken over, the obvious conclusion is that he’s picking a fight with you.”

“…Is there any other conclusion I’m supposed to draw from this?”

“Hey, it could be a friendly buyout, right? What do they call that in stocks? A… white something?”

“You mean a white knight?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” Chikage nodded. “I’ll just be straight up with you: Wanna work for me? That’s the deal.”

“Well, that patronizing offer certainly fits the suspicion that you’re picking a fight.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m not a white knight. I came here to pick a fight,” he announced, hiding nothing.

Anger flooded the faces of the Yellow Scarves. They sensed they were being mocked.

“Hey, ease up, guys,” Chikage responded. “You know Kadota, by the way? From the Dollars.”

“…Well, yeah.”

The mention of Kadota’s name turned Masaomi’s anger into bewilderment. He had seen Mikado and Chikage talking, but he didn’t see the fight between Kadota and Chikage or how it ended.

So they fought one-on-one, I guess? Whatever happened with that…?

He didn’t need to ask, because Chikage promptly said, “See, Kadota really whooped my ass. I said I’d withdraw from Ikebukuro for now, and that settled the matter. But now I hear he’s been in an accident. So I got curious and decided to do some research of my own.”

Strictly speaking, he had seen the news about a dead body at the train station, sent the girls back home just to be safe, then found himself with lots of extra time to wander the town.

“I got in touch with a recent friend from around here, and whaddaya know? Turns out the Yellow Scarves and Dollars are in the midst of high tensions.”

He leaned against a nearby light pole and adopted a very annoyed expression. “You guys got a bad rep. From what I hear, you had the run of the area before we showed up. Hittin’ people up for money, making everyone miserable.”

He was probably talking about the period up to half a year ago, when Horada's group had been calling the shots.

"I heard that Kadota and his folks knocked you out then. So I was wondering if you ran over him outta revenge. I asked around and learned about this place."

"It's not what you think!" one of the members protested. "It wasn't Shogun's fault things were bad back then!"

"Stop it," Masaomi commanded. Then he said quietly, "So you're gonna destroy us, because we look suspicious? Why would you stick up for Kadota like that?"

"Hey, I didn't say for sure I was gonna destroy you. That's why I keep throwing out the option of working for me, too. Besides, I'm not doing this out of loyalty to the guy or anything. But I do owe those folks for saving my girl Non. I figured I'd help them search for the ones who did it."

Then Chikage sighed, and the lackadaisical lilt to his expression vanished. "And now it's gotten me wrapped up in a buncha nonsense, too."

"?"

"You know about this faction within the Dollars that's carrying out an internal purge or whatever?"

"…!"

Mikado.

Masaomi didn't even need to ask. He was talking about the boy who was the very reason Masaomi was here. Mikado Ryuugamine was the one standing atop the faction Chikage was describing.

"From what I hear, they're *exactly like* a group of folks back in the spring who kicked my boys' asses and lit their bikes on fire. All the details match."

A chill ran down Masaomi's back.

He was acting as leader of the Yellow Scarves and preparing for the possibility of war with Mikado, and possibly the Dollars, as a means of stopping his friend.

But now the possibility of a separate group displaying antagonism toward

Mikado made him indescribably worried. This man and Toramaru were on a different level from the kind of thugs who might swear vengeance after a group purge or stragglers like Horada's circle.

Masaomi hid that unease beneath his exterior and said, "I see. And you want to use the Yellow Scarves to light a fire under those people."

"I'm glad you're so quick on the uptake," Chikage said, followed by something that gouged at Masaomi's heart even further. "The part where it gets complicated is they're apparently leftovers from some gang called the Blue Squares, but from what I hear, most of the holdovers from the Blue Squares went to the Yellow Scarves. And the Yellow Scarves apparently destroyed the Blue Squares back in the day… The twists and turns just keep coming."

"…"

It was all true. Masaomi had no response.

He hadn't even been able to tell that a number of old Blue Squares had infiltrated his gang, yet he had to accept that complication and forge on as the leader of the group.

But Chikage had no idea about any of that. He stared up at the sky and continued, "I just don't get all the complicated details. I wanted to make things simple."

"?"

"This is a place where I should be making things right with the entire Toramaru team, but I'm just here by myself now. I haven't told the boys a thing, and I don't intend to until I've caught these guys by the tail. Do you know what this means?"

The question had been posed. Masaomi had a general idea of what he meant, but he chose to wait rather than answer.

Chikage didn't seem to expect one, either. After a few seconds, he continued, "It means this. If you decide to gang up on me now and beat the shit outta me, you won't be advertising your hostility to Toramaru as a group."

In a sense, this action was practically suicide.

Given that he came to pick a fight with them, the only possibility that he might walk away unscathed was if he impressed upon his opponents the retribution they might face from the fearsome Toramaru gang. And Chikage had just abandoned that weapon.

On the other hand, Masaomi and his friends were neither scummy nor stupid enough to decide to kick the crap out of him.

Even before the matter of if he deserved it or not, none of them was going to take his statements at face value. If he was lying, then the moment they attacked him, he could use that as a pretext to bring his entire organization here for "justified payback," and strike back.

But from what I saw when he was talking to Mikado, he doesn't seem like the sort to pull bullshit like that, Masaomi suspected.

"Look, this is just one of those things," Chikage continued. "I wish I could act like some cool manga character and say, 'Hey, let's be like brothers.' But honestly, I'm not reckless enough to do that with some guys I don't really know that well. So I figured, since you guys have a bad reputation already, I could try to force you to hear me out."

And as for things that Masaomi didn't know about the other man, Toramaru had actually started with Chikage beating up a motorcycle gang member who tried to mess with his girlfriend. As a matter of fact, he had double-digit girlfriends, so between all the girls, family members, and friends who might get into trouble and need help, he was constantly destroying small-time gangs of ruffians in his vicinity.

Finally, for the dirt-simple reason of "If I'm going to let them go afterward, why don't I just keep them all in check?" he formed the gang called Toramaru.

And because he cared for the people he associated with, he attracted not just street punks who followed the might makes right of hierarchy but others drawn to his charismatic personality.

So for Chikage's part, he was considering simply absorbing the Yellow Scarves in the way he understood best. It was just that, without the justification of getting revenge for a girlfriend, he had only his own selfish reasons to motivate him and thus felt a bit apologetic about it.

“The thing is, I’m planning to use you guys for my own ends, but I have no intention of helping you out in return. So if I came to you and said, ‘Let’s be blood brothers,’ I could never face my honeys again for as long as I live. Can we just make this a simple fight and get on with it?”

“…Then what are we supposed to get out of this?”

“Oh, there’s something in it for you,” Chikage said, flashing them a confident smile. “If I lose, *I’ll be your muscle*.”

“…Pardon?”

“I’ll be your shock trooper, helping you out with the fight against this weird group within the Dollars. I mean, win or lose, I’m gonna be fighting the Dollars in the end, alongside you Yellow Scarves.”

The officers of the group reacted to Chikage’s plan by sharing a look. Masaomi’s face pulled into a tired, annoyed grin. “Um…are you stupid, man?”

“I get that question a lot.”

“Why would we fight, then? Why don’t you just help us out?”

“I would’ve considered that if you had a better reputation,” he admitted and started doing squats to loosen up his knees.

“Oh, man, this guy’s rarin’ to fight.”

“Listen, if none of you want to get hurt, that’s fine. Just give me whatever info you have on the Dollars. Then I’ll just go over there myself.”

“Sounds perfect. So you’re going to annihilate them for us and let us keep our hands clean?” Masaomi quipped, looking up at the sky with a grin. Then he turned back to the other boys behind him. “Sorry, guys. Don’t get involved with this.”

“Uh…Shogun, what’s up?” wondered his friends. Masaomi faced Chikage again.

Man… How did it come to this anyway?

Well, I guess it’s my fault, he thought, reflecting on his past.

As he rolled and loosened his neck, Masaomi made his offer to Chikage. “I’ll

take you up on that fight. And no, we're not gonna do five or six against one."

"Sh-Shogun!" one of his friends exclaimed.

"You don't have a problem with that, do you? I'd appreciate it—fewer people injured to worry about." He took a step closer to Chikage.

"…Ha! I like you. You don't look that serious, but you're actually pretty old-school, huh?"

"Look who's talking," Masaomi shot back.

Chikage winced and rearranged his hat. "See, maybe relying on the rumor around town ain't the way to go, after all. I think I *do* like you. Want me to help you for free?"

"No. I'm gonna win and force you to be our muscle." Masaomi steadied his breathing. "I don't want you going overboard and wiping them all out, either. Once you're our muscle, you'll have to listen to what I tell you and obey."

For being ready for an imminent fight, Masaomi's face betrayed no worry or panic. He was as calm as if having a nice little chat as he stared into the face he was about to smash.

Then he swore under his breath, "If only you'd knocked out Mikado back then…"

Back then being the moment that Mikado declared he was the leader of the Dollars. If Chikage had just settled his score with Mikado then, it might never have come to this.

Just one simple punch. If this man had taken Mikado at his word, things wouldn't have gotten so screwed up. The three of them with Anri could have been friends again, laughing together like old times.

No. Stop thinking about that.

He let his hatred from watching that entire scene start to finish dissipate into thin air. Chikage had done nothing wrong then. If anyone was worthy of blame, it was himself for not reaching out to Mikado when he was crumbling.

"Huh? You say something?"

“No. Just misplaced anger.”

“What?” Chikage wondered, his brow darkening.

“I’ll tell you the whole story once we’ve settled all this,” Masaomi said blithely.

“Okay. Guess I better make sure not to break your jaw, so you can still talk after this.”

“And I’ll guarantee that I don’t rupture your eardrums.”

They laughed at their little joke. Then, as Masaomi approached, Chikage lifted his foot to close the gap—and his opponent leaped into motion.

“!”

Caught in the midst of his action, Chikage had to reorient himself from movement to defense. Directly in front of him, Masaomi leaped again, pushing himself to the side. His foot landed on, then pushed off a parked car bumper and into the air.

“Ooh…”

Chikage marveled at his feline, predatorial movement. In the span of less than a second, while he was caught between the options of defending and evading, the toe of Masaomi’s shoe slammed into Chikage’s face.

Got him!

It was a solid hit. Masaomi hadn’t expected it to work so smoothly, but catching him off-balance with that surprise charge had paid off.

He was certain of victory. It was almost too easy.

Snag.

And then a hand grabbed his ankle where it still hung in the air.

Huh?

No sooner did the surprise run through his mind than he realized it was the reeling Chikage who had grabbed him. And despite the slight dent in the bridge of his nose, Chikage’s mouth was twisted into a smile.

That didn't knock him out…

He felt a tug on his captured ankle and a terrifying chill that ran through his entire being.

The next moment, Masaomi's body swung forcefully toward a pillar, to the sound of the Yellow Scarves' exclamations.

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But before he hit the surface, Masaomi recovered his balance and “landed” on the side of the pillar. Then he turned his body ninety degrees so it wasn’t parallel with the floor anymore and hit the ground.

“Man, if *that* wasn’t enough to knock you out, how tough are… *Whoa!*”

In the process of raising his head, he had to dart to the side—because the soles of both of Chikage’s feet were rushing toward him.

Masaomi instantly slid away, and Chikage’s feet passed through the space where he’d just been, smashing into the pillar. It shook with the impact, knocking dust loose from the light overhead.

“Holy crap, man. I’d have *died* if I took that.” Masaomi yelped, even as he rushed back toward Chikage.

He launched a high kick at his opponent’s temple as the older man spun, but Chikage just barely dodged it, swinging a fist in return—only to take a second reverse kick, with full rotation, right into his solar plexus.

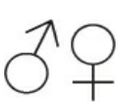
“Hrgh…”

Chikage’s grunt told Masaomi he had gained the advantage for sure this time—but a grunt was all he got. His opponent continued to attack, his fist bearing down on Masaomi’s back.

But Masaomi reacted quickly, launching another kick as a counter to the other guy’s punch.

There was a loud smack—and the Yellow Scarves who had been watching the scene dumbfounded finally caught up to what was happening.

The heads of the Yellow Scarves and Toramaru had only initiated the opening stage of a devastating fight.



Raira General Hospital—interior café

“…And that is the reason that you and I have the same Saika. Do you have any questions?”

It was a sight that would give vastly different impressions to those who

understood the context and those who didn't.

An intellectual-looking woman was giving two high school students a lecture, using a tablet PC. If one didn't know better, it would look like she was trying to sign them up for some kind of insurance.

But with full context, it was not only eerie but downright ghastly.

After all, this was two different women with full Saikas infused into them, and a child Saika transferred through a cut, who later broke free and regained control—all sitting at the same table.

"No…I'm fine. I get the gist of it."

"…"

Despite her consternation, Anri accepted the explanation of "branching" and the revelation that Kujiragi's employer had once sold the very Saika that was inside of Anri now. Haruna said nothing, wearing her murderous smile the whole time. Her wrath was fixated on both Anri and Kujiragi now.

The fact that Haruna might erupt into violence at any time kept Anri's nerves taut, but Kujiragi went ahead and gave them her speech on Saika, her tone all business.

Kujiragi did not touch upon the identity of Jinnai Yodogiri at all. She only gave them information about Saika and her own business handling it. It wasn't that she felt any need to hide this; she simply judged there was no need to point it out.

"Branching, huh…?" Haruna muttered, wearing that sick smile of hers. "If you can do that, could you give one to me, too?" she asked Kujiragi.

"Based on previous transactions, a single Saika would command 6.25 million yen. And because of the nature of the product, I will only sell it to trusted customers." It was the line that Jinnai Yodogiri had taught her to say whenever she had to explain these things.

Haruna couldn't tell if 6.25 million yen was expensive or cheap.

For a supernatural sword outside of the bounds of all common knowledge about the world, it seemed so pedestrian as to be nearly free, but the hurdle to

becoming a “trusted customer” was probably exorbitantly high.

In any case, it wasn’t the kind of money any teenage girl could command. But if money was all it took, Haruna could just use her Saika to cut some rich person and get them to pay for it.

“At present, a client who meets those two conditions desires to have Saika. I wish to avoid branching, because as more and more Saikas spread throughout the world, their price as a product goes down.”

With that out of the way, Kujiragi asked, “Anri Sonohara, I wish to confer with you again. Are you certain you’re not willing to part with your item?”

“…Is that even possible? Can you…take Saika out of my body…?”

“If you want to let go of it…if you really want to be rid of it, you could just throw it away somewhere. But if you do give it to me, I am prepared to offer you some amount of money as part of the deal. Please consider the offer.”

She made it sound so easy. Anri had to think.

Give up Saika.

She’d never considered the idea. Could she even live without Saika at this point? Kujiragi’s offer filled her with anxiety and uncertainty.

Then Haruna stepped in. “If you’re going to sell it to this woman, give it to me. I could find a better use for it. And I’ll also cut Ryuugamine and Kida with it and make them fall in love with you.”

“Stop that!” Anri pleaded, not a shout but forceful all the same. “I still think it’s just…*wrong* to use Saika that way.”

“Oh? How is it wrong?”

“Once you’ve cut a person with Saika…they’re not the same as before. Once Saika’s power has made them a slave, they’re not the person you like anymore, they’re something *else*…in my opinion.”

“So it’s a difference of values,” Haruna said, neither agreeing or disagreeing. Then she turned her darkening, murderous smile to Kujiragi. “And what’s your opinion, Miss Kujiragi?”

Kujiragi sipped her cooling coffee and spoke honestly. “It’s case by case. Saika’s control allows for the user to manipulate the subject. For example…if you cut someone and made them do something, then never activated that control again, that victim would most likely live out the entire rest of their life without ever realizing that Saika’s curse was within them. It might be an extreme step to label such a person as someone else entirely.”

“But—” Anri protested.

Kujiragi cut her off with an explanation that was much more fluid than the previous. “If you want something to happen, consider that using Saika’s power is one available method. The same way that men and women utilize looks, finances, intelligence, and courage in matters of romance. You ought to view Saika as one of your valuable assets.”

“My…assets?”

“If you think it’s unfair to use something others don’t have, that would mean that anyone who has used considerable good looks, smarts, or winning personality as a means to capture the affection of another is also cheating. I think you should view Saika’s power in that light. It may be trite to say, but it is up to the wielder of a power to decide how they should use it,” Kujiragi finished, her affect completely flat the whole time.

Anri considered this for a time, then shook her head. “But…I still think…Saika’s power is not the same as a human one. It’s not the kind of thing you can achieve by working for it…”

“Because it’s not a human power, it shouldn’t be used for love?”

“…Someone recently told me that I wasn’t human. And I’ve been uncertain since then. Maybe I’m really not human anymore. And if so, maybe I don’t have the right to fall in love like a normal person and enjoy normal happiness…,” Anri murmured ruefully.

She knew the Headless Rider, who was very much not human and yet loved a human man. But she also knew that Celty, while inhuman, had the most human heart she’d ever seen. By comparison, Anri looked human, but her heart only got further and further from the mark. This was the rationale behind her statement.

“Does that also apply to me?” Kujiragi asked, without emotion.

“Huh…? Oh!” Anri gasped.

As she’d just explained, Kujiragi owned a Saika, and everything Anri said about herself could be construed as referring to her, too.

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that…,” she stammered, bowing.

Kujiragi’s eyes briefly dipped toward the floor. “Miss Sonohara, even if you are not human, as you claim, the simple act of giving up Saika would make your body human again. I’m not certain what standard you are using to judge a ‘proper’ human heart, but at the very least, Saika would no longer complicate your thoughts.”

“I—I see.”

Anri felt very awkward. She wanted to look away, but she couldn’t.

Huh? That’s strange…

This whole time, I thought she never showed any emotion…

Yes, her face hadn’t changed in the least.

But something deeper than the surface—in her glances, actions, breathing—gave Anri just the slightest hint of some mental shifting.

For a moment, Anri wondered if it was anger at being treated like a monster—but while it was indistinct, it struck her as something more like *sadness*.

“You can go back to being human just by giving up Saika. But…”

At that moment, time stopped for Anri and Haruna.

An abnormal aura was exuding from the woman sitting across the table from them.

“You cannot give up your *flesh and blood*.”

“…!” “?!”

The two girls froze, trying to ascertain the source of the feeling.

There was no change in any of the other people in the room.

Why was it just them?

The reason became imminently clear.

The words of Saika's curse had stopped inside of them—and then the rustling began.

Haruna's roiling curses, as the child, were nowhere near as intense as Anri's. But even still, she trembled at how the quiet curse began to wail in disgust.

What is this…?

Anri's inner voice was dozens of times more intense than Haruna's. It made her a bit dizzy.

Not only did Saika's curse spill into her eyes and turn them a vivid red, it even began to add a pinkish film to her vision. Against that filter of red light, the woman across from her appeared as a black shadow—from which she could see countless tiny black wings extending and writhing.

"…Could you see anything?" Kujiragi asked, and the palpitations of Saika that had racked the girls vanished entirely.

Their vision, the room, and Kujiragi across from them were all completely normal, as though nothing had just happened.

Anri and Haruna each glanced toward the other, just far enough to notice the sweat dripping from their faces.

Kujiragi ignored their reaction and continued, "Are you saying that, regardless of Saika, someone born as *not exactly* human does not have even the right to live like a human, to love like a human, to enjoy life like a human? Is that your point?"

"What…what *are* you…?" Anri gulped.

The answer was, as usual, emotionless. "I cannot answer that question, biologically speaking. But from a social standpoint, I can give you a very precise response."

"…?"

"I'm what is commonly known as a *villain*."

It was so abrupt, so simple, so forceful.

An objective answer, delivered with no guilt or mocking delight, just fact.

“Human or monster, if my past actions were ever revealed to the world in full detail, a good eighty percent of Japan would find me to be a sinner deserving of judgment.”

“…Where did you get that number?” Haruna snarked, but Kujiragi gave her a serious answer.

“From intuition based on experience. But whether it is a hundred percent or ten does not matter to me. I’ve broken a number of laws, and if it is proven and I am arrested, I will break out of captivity. If that does not define me as a villain, this country would have long ago become either a lawless land or the Garden of Eden.”

“Break out…?”

“Even without Saika, I have enough innate strength that I could reliably escape on my own. I will not tell you more concrete details than that, but suffice it to say that I am *that sort of person*,” Kujiragi said, as dispassionately as though reading a form letter aloud. “One day, my life will likely come to a miserable and hideous end at the hands of some entity proclaiming itself an arbiter of justice, or a person seeking vengeance for my past deeds. I deserve to be harmed, defiled, and tortured with my pleas unheard. I am prepared to suffer this, but I do my utmost to delay that eventual day as long as I can and, ignoring the feelings of any of my victims, to enjoy the present.”

With her black coffee half-gone, Kujiragi added milk and sugar. She stirred it with her teaspoon, the lukewarm liquid not dissolving the grains of sugar entirely. All the while, she kept her eyes directly on Anri.

“Miss Sonohara, you might not be an arbiter of justice, but at the very least, you have a sense of kindness toward others. That makes you different from me. You ought to be in the sunlight at all times, not staying here and speaking with villains like me. As for Miss Niekawa, I suppose it would depend on the outcome of the love you speak of,” she murmured, completing the report of her observations.

Stunned, Anri tried to protest. “I…I’m not that special. I can’t live on my own… so I have no choice but to leech off others and Saika… I’m just a parasite. If I

seem like I'm considerate of others…it's only because I'm ultimately concerned about myself and how I might be affected."

"That is fine. The majority of humanity is a parasite that feeds off something else. And if someone is allowing you to live off them for a long period of time, it likely means that they are receiving something from you in return," Kujiragi said, which was certainly one way to respond to a girl resignedly calling herself a parasite. "That is no longer parasitism. It is symbiosis. There is no need for you to feel guilty about this."

They were kind words meant to make Anri feel better, but she said them in the monotone of someone reading another person's words out of a book.

"No matter how pure Saika's love for humanity is, it is still a sword that corrupts the world of man. That is a fact, and I do not intend to deny it."

"…"

"In the same way, by your ethical standards, I would undoubtedly fall under the category of evil."

Anri wondered what she was trying to say.

The answer: "Gentle souls like yours are not meant to possess Saika. In conclusion, I feel that it would be in the best interest of both sides for you to transfer the sword to me."

"!"

"There are two ways to handle Saika in a form other than a katana. Either control it entirely, like me, and use it as a slave, or do the opposite and open your entirety to Saika. In the former case, you can reshape the blade into any shape, but Saika will no longer tell you *how* to fight. In the latter case, you can transform, but your fighting style will be entirely determined by Saika."

It seemed as though she might continue at greater and greater length explaining the finer details of Saika. Instead, she gazed at Anri and described the girl's inner nature as she saw it.

"You are not capable of either, I suspect. You are kind. And because you are kind, you hold Saika in, so as not to hurt others. Meanwhile, you are also kind to

Saika. So you cannot master it completely and use it as a slave. You are indeed traveling the path of symbiosis."

"…"

"Ultimately, this will put you in a corner. You will have all this power and continually sacrifice yourself not to use it."

She closed her mouth for just a moment, giving Anri a piercing gaze.

"Saints like you are not meant to have Saika."

Anri clenched her fists, preparing to say something in return.

But Haruna suddenly chuckled.

"…Haruna?"

The other girl smiled with great delight. "She's stupid, isn't she, Sonohara?"

"Huh?"

Haruna favored Anri and Kujiragi with a nasty, sticky smile.

"You're going to be killed by someone out for revenge? If that's any moment, don't you think it would be now?"

"…"

Kujiragi was silent. She understood what Haruna meant.

Anri did not, however, and was going to ask—when the other girl went on.

"Miss Kujiragi…don't you know that *the Saika you sold is the reason that Anri's parents are dead?*"

For a brief moment, Anri felt that her personal sense of time had stopped.

Then, after several seconds, she detected that her knees had begun trembling.

But that did not matter to her now.

She was under a vast shock and incapable of processing such phenomena further.

One of the people responsible for her parents' death was right before her.

If Kujiragi had never unleashed Saika upon the world, she might be leading a very different life right now.

But that was not what shocked her. It was that, until Haruna pointed it out, the issue of her parents had never even occurred to her.

Were they nothing but a relic of the past in her mind by now?

And in the process of trying to reclaim and reshape her stunned psyche, Anri came to a conclusion. But the past that it caused her to remember made her eyes brim with even greater sadness.

“No…”

“Huh?”

“You’re wrong, Haruna. I think…it’s thanks to Saika that I’m here right now.”

“…What…are you saying?” Haruna asked, smiling and perplexed.

“If there had been no Saika…my father would have killed me.”

She had dredged up her awful memories of what happened five years ago.

The sensation of her own father strangling her, as fresh as if it happened yesterday. If her mother hadn’t cut off his head with Saika…

She shook her head to dispel the horrid recollection and said to Kujiragi, “I’m sorry…I still can’t let Saika go yet.”

“…I see.”

“I still…haven’t made it up to Saika in any way… So I can’t just run away from it all on my own,” Anri said, piecing together the strength of her will as she spoke. In some way, putting the idea into words was helping her reach this determination.

“Plus…I have a promise to fulfill, to tell some people I care for very much about Saika. So until then, I want to remain who I was last year.”

Kujiragi took this in impassively, staring into Anri’s face, then exhaled. “Very well. Please contact me if you change your mind.”

Then she took a blank business card and a pen from her shirt pocket, wrote down a phone number, and gave it to Anri.

“What, you’re not going to give *me* your card?”

“I have no reason to do business with you at the moment, Miss Niekawa,” she declared.

Haruna cackled to herself, getting to her feet. “I might not be able to do business with you, but I *can* rob you. Wouldn’t it be fun if I ripped that Saika you’ve got right out of you?”

“Do you wish to be electrocuted again?”

“If you think that’s going to work on me twice, you’re much less capable than you seem.”

An ugly, sludgy haze hung in the air between Haruna and Kujiragi. Since Kujiragi never showed any emotion of any kind, that meant it was entirely coming from Haruna.

“P-please stop this, Haruna…,” Anri protested, but the other girl’s eyes were already filling with blood.

People at other tables noticed something was happening and started glancing over at the trio. Neither Haruna nor Kujiragi paid them any mind.

Kujiragi finished her coffee and quietly set the cup down.

“I’m ready whenever you are.”

Without changing her expression, the aura around her started getting darker, denser. And then— “Oh, there she is. Anri! Anri! Big, big news!”

A voice tore through the café and the unfolding scene within.

“Karisawa?”

“Hey, I saw your message. Sold out, huh? Too bad.”

Before she came here, Anri had texted Karisawa to tell her the cat-ear headbands were sold out and that she would be meeting with some people here for a bit before she returned to the others.

“So these are your friends, huh? Wait. Huh? I thought you said it was sold out?”

She was reaching for the bag from the cosplay store. Since the furry cat-

themed paraphernalia was slightly visible through the familiar bag, Karisawa assumed it was Anri's and reached for it.

Another hand shot in and stopped her. "I'm sorry. That belongs to me."

"Huh? Oh! I'm so sorry!" Karisawa said, blushing. But when she saw Kujiragi's face, she exclaimed, "Wow! You're so beautiful! Er, sorry to shout. Do you mind if I ask…do you cosplay?"

Karisawa had a way with asking extremely forward questions to complete strangers. Surely, when she saw the pretty woman with flawless skin in possession of a cat-ear headband, she must have assumed Kujiragi was a kindred spirit.

"…Cosplay? I am interested, but I have no experience," Kujiragi admitted. With the way she never showed any emotion, it came off as a polite but firm rejection, but the only words Karisawa registered were *I am interested*.

"If you're interested, why don't you join our club? We'd be happy to welcome any friends of Anri's!"

"No, I…"

"We've got about 270 highly customizable costumes, and we can size them for you, too! We can get you everything from miko priestesses to slutty fallen angel maids!"

With no one around to put the brakes on her, Karisawa's excited pitch went on and on. "Oooh! And *she* looks like she could do a mean cosplay, too! Geez, Anri, you should have introduced me to these cuties earlier! I could totally see you in a themed trio with them!"

She was agitated enough that if Yumasaki were there, he'd say, "Karisawa, if they're normies, you're going to make them give poor Anri the most exasperated reaction!" The other customers around them figured it was just a conversation about manga or something, put the incident with the original trio out of their minds, and returned to their food and chat.

Haruna had been taken aback by the sudden entrance at first, then turned back to the table, ready to ignore the rest of it and attack Kujiragi. But…

“Do you have Gothic Lolita outfits, too?”

“Of course! We can get you over a dozen adult Goth outfits to try on!”

“And idol costumes?”

“I’ve got a number of handmade pieces based on Ruri Hijiribe outfits!” Karisawa reassured her, with a hearty thumbs-up.

“…Here is my contact information. Please tell me the number for your club. I will contact you within the next few days.”

Like she did with Anri, Kujiragi jotted down her number on a blank business card.

““What?!””

Both Anri and Haruna were shocked by this. They stared at her, wide-eyed. But as usual, Kujiragi had no expression, making it impossible to detect what she was up to.

The only giveaway was that Anri’s faint detection of her mental state, when she’d gotten a whiff of sadness earlier, was now indicating what might have been a tinge of delight.

Haruna just stared at the exchange, dumbfounded, and sighed at the end.

“…I’ve lost interest. I’m going home. Maybe something’s finally changed by now.” Then she grabbed Anri’s phone and pulled out her own, and with a device in each hand, she performed a few operations. “There. Now we have each other as a contact. I’ll get in touch tomorrow, and we can meet up again.”

She never let go of her murderous hatred of Anri, but she was smiling as she left.

As though there was nothing in her future but bright, bright hope.

“Umm… So was that girl just, like, not interested in anime at all? I guess it was mean of me to invite her, too… I’m sorry if she acts weird around you after this, Anri,” said Karisawa sadly, much more under control now that she’d exchanged information with Kujiragi and the group was smaller.

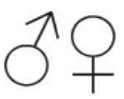
“Oh, uhm, actually…thank you. You saved me.”

“?”

This threw Karisawa for a loop, who wasn’t expecting to be thanked. Then Anri asked, “Um, what brought you here…?”

“Oh, right! I got so excited I completely forgot!” the other girl exclaimed, her face breaking into a huge smile. Perhaps her earlier moment of excitement had been buoyed by whatever had her in a good mood already.

“Listen, listen. Dotachin’s awake again, and they say we can see him in person tomorrow!”



Tokyo—parking garage

A bit earlier in time, when it still wasn’t clear if Kadota would regain consciousness, Masaomi and Chikage were fighting on the roof of the parking garage.

Based on the present arrangement, it would seem that Masaomi had the advantage. He had landed several clean hits and continually avoided Chikage’s attacks by razor-thin margins.

But their expressions told a story just the opposite.

Despite blasting his opponent with many devastating blows, Masaomi didn’t seem to be doing any lasting damage. And each time the man’s strikes rushed past his head, Masaomi felt like his very life was being whittled away.

Holy crap. I’m not hurting him at all, and I feel like even a scratch from him is going to make me woozy.

Masaomi wasn’t blessed with stature. He wasn’t born tall, and he didn’t have a muscular frame.

But he’d been used to scrapping since he was a kid, throwing knees and elbows in unpredictable ways on the road to beating opponents who were much larger than he was.

None of the Yellow Scarves could beat him in a fight, and outside of complete freaks of nature like Shizuo Heiwajima, he was definitely one of the tougher

guys around.

But Chikage Rokujou was so strong that it almost made Masaomi wonder if he *was* in the same category as Shizuo. There were multiple points in the fight where he felt a chill run down his back.

Still, as long as his fellow Yellow Scarves stood around cheering for him, he couldn't let himself falter now.

I guess blows won't do the trick.

Masaomi gathered his breathing and calmly switched tactics.

After just barely dodging one of his opponent's attacks, he chose to swing around behind him rather than strike back. Since he moved into the blind spot of the attack, it would've looked to Chikage like Masaomi had simply vanished.

"Wha—? …Oofh!"

He launched himself onto the back of his opponent, working his arms around the man's neck.

It was a standing sleeper choke hold. Masaomi leaned backward, trying to force his taller foe into submission. He dug his arm deeper under the chin, hanging onto Chikage's back with sublime balance.

The Yellow Scarves were certain he'd just won. The more you struggled in that position, the worse it got. A professional fighter might know the trick to escape it, but an amateur brawler would be at a loss. They knew how Masaomi's original sleeper hold worked and the effect it had.

However, Chikage Rokujou withstanding four punches from Shizuo Heiwajima was not a fluke. When he realized that he was soon going to lose consciousness, he did something that no ordinary human being would ever do.

With his neck in a choke hold, Chikage ran up the bumper of a parked car and onto its roof, then leaped for the fence surrounding the structure.

Huh?

Masaomi's mind briefly went blank, and then he remembered that including the roof the garage had three levels.

They were going to fall from the roof of a three-story building.

Every cell in his body screamed out, and Masaomi instantly let go of the man's neck. Right before he was about to pass over the fence, he grabbed the light pole fixed there.

For his part, Chikage simply fell straight downward without further acrobatics.

"Crazy asshole!" Masaomi screamed, clinging to the pole.

It was high enough to be fatal. He felt a cold sweat break out at first—and several seconds later, another one but for a different reason.

Chikage fell directly onto his back. And after a few coughs, he simply got to his feet, as simple as that.

"Hey, if you're gonna grab me, don't chicken out and jump off, yeah?"

Chikage laughed up at him from the ground. Yet another trickle of sweat ran down Masaomi's back.

Well, damn. We haven't even fought with the Blue Squares yet. Why am I throwing down with the ultimate secret boss first?

Masaomi climbed up the pole so that he could swing back over the fence. But the moment he reached the top of it, he met an abnormal sight.

His vantage point up high made the scene below quite easy to follow. And yet upon first glance, it made no sense to him. It was as though crossing the fence had warped him to a completely new location.

He should've been able to dispel the sight as an absurd hallucination as soon as he saw the other Yellow Scarves—but the problem was that they, too, were looking in that direction…

Toward the ramp leading down to the second floor of the garage…

Where a gang of a few dozen figures stood, clearly not affiliated with the Scarves.

Standing at the head of the rabble of thugs and mobsters was a man who cackled up at him. He held a hammer of hardened rubber in one hand, and his face featured a very visible burn scar.

At first, Masaomi didn't know who he was or the rest of the group trailing behind him. It could've been reinforcements from Toramaru, but that was hard to imagine, given Chikage's personality.

It could have been the Dollars, too, but he didn't see any of the youth who looked like Blue Squares. If anything, these were more like the street thugs who were getting purged from the Dollars.

The burned man spoke up. "Heh-hya…I guess it's true that idiots and smoke like to gather in high places, huh?"

Brrh.

The instant he heard that voice, the hair all over Masaomi's body rippled.

He recognized it.

Before his brain could even recall the name, the other cells of his body surged with anger, terror, hostility, and anxiety.

"Hang on! I'm gonna climb back up now! Wait for me!"

Chikage was down on the ground. He didn't realize what was happening on the roof.

But Masaomi didn't hear him.

Then the burned man spoke again.

"*Here's your question!* When I broke Saki Mikajima's leg…who was the pussy who abandoned her and ran away?! Kee-hee-hya-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

And something in Masaomi burst.

The fear, anxiety, and regret in him all transformed into rage that surged up and out of his throat in the form of a name.

"Izumiiiiiii!"

Fury controlled all of Masaomi's being. He leaped down from the fence and began charging toward the group of dozens without a second thought.

As though willing all the strength of his legs that he hadn't used on that fateful night into this very moment instead.

Such was his possessed manner that the ruffians of the group subconsciously leaned away from him.

Ran Izumii leered through his sunglasses and lifted his hand with the hammer in it.

And then…

INTERMEDIATE CHAPTER
Trapped Like a Rat

DRRR!! X

Ryohgo Narita

Intermediate Chapter: Trapped Like a Rat

After this day, a subset of residents of the city found themselves rolling down a hill toward chaos, unable to know where they were headed.

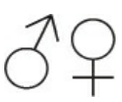
An incident that began with stare downs between the Dollars and Yellow Scarves, that should have ended in mutual confusion between teenagers, suddenly cast the profiles of a completely different group against its shadow. Thanks to Izaya Orihara's little spark, they were all exposed to the darkness.

That wasn't all.

As though whipped up by some unsettling wind through the city, others aside from Izaya cast their own sparks into the fray, steadily increasing the power of the open flames.

But the biggest spark of all, which Izaya had tucked away and Kujiragi had nearly extinguished altogether, still smoldered to itself, lighting nothing around it.

Practically waiting for someone to pour the gas over it.



Holding cells, police station—night Shizuo Heiwajima lay on the floor of the cell, still dressed in his bartender outfit.

He'd been held at the Ikebukuro Police Station next to the train station many times as a student, but the interior before him now was completely different from back then.

Apparently, this wasn't the Ikebukuro Police Station he'd met in his errant youth but a different branch nearby. Shizuo didn't particularly care which station he was in, however.

He just needed to stay calm and maintain his composure until they let him

out. So he decided he should just sleep the whole time, in order to avoid seeing or hearing anything that might set him off.

“Hey, I’ve seen you before, man! You’re the guy who was swingin’ the electric pole around, yeah?”

“…”

But there was a man in the adjacent cell. A thuggish fellow who’d been put in there not long ago.

“Hey, you know what? I bet you could totally break these bars, huh?!”

“…Got the wrong guy,” Shizuo claimed, trying to keep the man off his back.

“Don’t lie! I’d never forget a blond guy in a bartender’s vest!”

Shizuo was still wearing the work outfit he’d had on when they’d arrested him. Only the bow tie was confiscated, because anything with a string or cord might be used to commit suicide. The rest was still there.

“But actually, now that I think about it, today’s not a good day for it. Media’s goin’ freakin’ crazy outside this station right now.”

“Did something happen?”

“You bet. They found a woman’s head outside of the train station or something. They’re saying the rest of the body’s being brought here from the Ikebukuro headquarters.”

Shizuo grimaced at this grisly news. But something stuck out to him.

“…? What are they doing with the body? Whether they do an autopsy or not, doesn’t that get handled at the hospital?”

“That’s why the media’s all here. There’s a whole lot of strange stuff going on with this one. Like, when it originally got announced, it was ‘the head of what seems to be a dead woman.’ But by the evening, they were calling it ‘what seems like a woman’s head.’ Don’t that seem weird to you? The pictures people put online make it super-obvious that it’s a head.”

“Pictures of a body? Those people have no class,” Shizuo murmured, furrowing his brow. But he decided not to think too deeply into it.

He knew that if he thought about it, his rage would only intensify. Instead, he steadied his breathing and stared at the ceiling.

The man in the other cell kept babbling. “Of course, some reporter asked them about that. All they said was, ‘I can’t answer that question right now,’ so the press started getting the inkling that something was wrong here. Then some weird anonymous information leaked online from the Raira University Medical Hospital that did the legal autopsy.”

“Weird information?”

“The head is *alive*, they said.”

“…”

He couldn’t laugh it off as a stupid story or even get irritated.

A living head.

And Shizuo knew what might fit that description.

“Online, people are sayin’ it might be the Headless Rider’s head. From what I hear, they’re keeping it in this station right now. Wonder if they’re having a meeting about it. ‘Can we even declare a criminal case if the head’s still living?’ or something.”

“I see…” Shizuo considered this for a moment, then asked, “So *are you under the control of that monster sword, too*? Or is this something else?”

“…What do you mean? You’re not makin’ sense.” The man chuckled.

Shizuo’s temple visibly twitched. “Don’t play dumb with me. You really think I’m stupid enough not to think somethin’s up when a guy with all the info wanders into the clink and starts blabbing every last detail to me, knowing who I am? Do you?”

He got to his feet and took a step toward the man. There were steel bars between them, of course, but they might as well have been twigs to Shizuo.

Well aware of that fact, the man held up his hands and pleaded—his eyes eerily bloodshot.

“Sorry, sorry. My bad. You’re right. Mother told me to come here.”

"…So assuming you're *not* trying to piss me off, why would you tell me this story about the head?"

"You're smarter than I thought, so you probably know already, huh? You know what that head really is."

"…"

The man didn't wait for Shizuo to answer. "Celty Sturluson. The head that's got the whole city buzzing today is a part of your friend that she's been looking for, for years and years."

"…Okay. And?"

"It's simple. This is a deal. Next time they take you away for questioning, you just have to *rage a little*. Sure, it'll add a few charges to your sheet, but as long as you don't hurt anybody, you might just get parole or even put on bail. While that's happening, I'll sneak out with the head."

"…I don't see the point. Are you guys on Celty's side? Or are you just trying to use her?" Shizuo demanded, his voice quiet but pregnant with the peril of imminent explosion.

"Neither, actually… But I bet we agree with this Celty person about not wanting the head to be turned into a public spectacle. Anyway, if you get good and rough, they'll probably lock you up for that instead, and we can make sure the charges of beating a woman go away. It looks better for you that they questioned you for something you didn't do, and then you snapped on them, rather than coming out with a proper record of having crushed a woman's hand, right?"

"Why can't you just use those hypnosis powers or whatever they are to steal the head? Should be easy."

"…Mother doesn't want us to create too many new children. Plus, if there isn't at least a good distraction that would explain how the head got stolen, it'll only look more suspicious."

Shizuo considered this suggestion. Normally, he would have already snapped by now, but he was just barely succeeding at keeping his cool by envisioning his brother's face and Celty's helmet.

But there was no guarantee that this man would keep his word. And before Shizuo could come to a decision about what to do, his train of thought was derailed by an officer showing up.

Based on the way the man in the other cell immediately clammed up, he could guess that this officer wasn't under the demon sword's control.

"Shizuo Heiwajima? You're being released."

"What?!" screamed the man in the other cell.

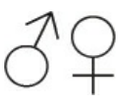
"Shut it, you!"

"Oh, er…"

The other man began to sweat, clearly in a panic. He returned to the corner of the cell, muttering under his breath, "What does this mean…? Did Izaya Orihara do something to…?"

Izaya Orihara.

Shizuo had made it safely through questioning while resisting the urge to explode. The instant he heard that name was the biggest test of his self-control all day.



One hour later—Tokyo

"What the hell's going on…?"

Shizuo left the back door of the police station, his outgoing procedures finished.

Apparently, the victimized girl claimed that she was "mistaken" and that it wasn't Shizuo. Assault wasn't a crime that required a complaint from a victim to prosecute, so just retracting the claim didn't make his charges disappear, but since the victim said he didn't do it, and there was no clear evidence that Shizuo had ever used violence against the woman, they dropped the charges and released him.

Under normal circumstances, Shizuo would be unable to contain his fury, but right now he was simply happy that he'd protected his brother's reputation.

But…Celty's head, huh? Is that fleabrain up to something again? In any case, I'd better report back to the boss…

He pulled out the cigarettes they'd given back to him. As he walked, he glanced around for a good spot to smoke.

Some kind of police van passed him, heading down the road in a quieter direction. Shizuo watched it go as he checked his lighter for remaining oil. He hit the striker of the Zippo.

It produced a spark.

And a roaring explosion went off, right next to the police vehicle.

"?!"

Shizuo's eyes bulged. The van that had just passed him rolled onto its side in the street, and a motorcycle raced up toward it.

When an officer opened the rear door of the van, the motorcyclist knocked him out with practiced ease, then stole a large box case right from the back of the vehicle.

Then the figure hopped back on the bike and took off in Shizuo's direction. When the rider saw him, the bike came to an exaggerated, panicked stop, then went into a U-turn.

A full helmet and a clearly feminine figure. But unlike Celty, this rider wore a white-based suit that looked familiar to him.

"Hey, is that…*Vorona*?"

Vorona.

As soon as he said the name of his new coworker, the rider blasted the acceleration—as though trying to drown out the sound of his voice.

This, of course, was all the confirmation Shizuo needed. The rider turned down a side street and vanished into the night within moments.

He wasn't sure what that was all about, but he was sure of one thing—the box she'd just stolen from the police vehicle contained the head in question.

He didn't know *why* Vorona would be stealing something like that, but the

incident succeeded in finally flipping a switch in Shizuo that had been off this whole time.

Considering the situation, he arrived at one other certainty.

“Izaya… Is that you?”

After what the man under the sword’s control muttered earlier, and other circumstances leading up to this, he had enough of a reason to suspect, even if it was largely a hunch.

“You’re up to some bullshit again. Aren’t you, Izaya…?

“And you’ve got Kasuka…and Celty…and even my new coworker involved…?”

Anger.

Anyone looking at Shizuo at this moment might have hallucinated that the very air around him was warping.

Sheer rage powerful enough to control the air around him was being compressed within his being. Shizuo clenched his fists. He even held his voice inside.

All his anger concentrated in those fists, so that he could use them to smash the source of all the irritation he’d been feeling for days.

Anyone who knew Shizuo well would arrive at the same thought upon witnessing him now.

Whether it was Izaya or someone else pulling the strings behind this—the source of evil would undoubtedly be obliterated off the face of the earth.

And so, with the greatest rage he’d ever felt compressed within his being, the beast quietly ventured forth into Ikebukuro.

The fires across the city formed a chain.

All connected, as though arranged ahead of time; all violent at once.

Like a bundle of firecrackers bursting together.

Tokyo—night

“Haruna!”

She was just leaving to get some dinner from the convenience store and turned around at the sound of her name. A very familiar face awaited her.

“…Oh, Dad. You seem well.”

“You know that’s not what I want to hear… What have you been doing all this time?!”

“I’m surprised you knew where to find me. Or was it a coincidence?” asked the runaway daughter, without a trace of shame or hostility.

Her father, Shuuji Niekawa, sighed. “The Dollars. They had an eyewitness report that you were at the Raira Hospital café. And they followed you the whole way after that. So I’ve been staking out this apartment the entire time since.”

“Oh, I didn’t know I had a stalker. If you’re relying on a street gang like the Dollars, you’ve really fallen a long way, Dad.”

“Don’t be frivolous! Do you have any idea how worried I was when I heard that you’d joined the Dollars…?”

For the moment, he was showing more relief than anger—and Haruna just sighed and turned her eyes Saika red.

“…Be quiet, Dad.”

It was a statement of power, infused with Saika’s curse.

Shuuji had been pierced by her blade before. He was already Saika’s puppet.

Without a second thought, Haruna used her own father as her child—Saika's grandchild.

By her measuring stick, anyone outside of Nasujima, even her own family, might as well have been a stranger.

"Ah yeah, I get it." Shuuji nodded, his eyes red, too.

In the past, when Saika's will took control, he had spoken more effeminately, but now that he was taking orders from Haruna's will, he was more like a pure automaton puppet.

A smile plastered itself on Haruna's face. She felt not the slightest bit of guilt about controlling her father. "The Dollars' information network is impressive. I wonder if I could use that to find Takashi. Anyway, you can go home for today."

"…"

Her father said nothing. So she chatted to him all on her own. "Oh, that reminds me, Dad. I made my *very first friend ever* today! Her name is Anri! I'll introduce her to you sometime. Maybe when it's not so busy."

And then, her quota of family time fulfilled, she walked right past her stock-still father toward the store…

Until something pricked the back of her neck.

"Huh…?"

She felt more surprise than pain and craned her neck to the side.

There was her father, eyes still bloodshot—holding a syringe.

"D…ad…?"

A million questions burst into her head, then vanished into darkness.

"Well done. I mean it, very nice work."

A man emerged from the shadows, clapping his hands. He wore a beanie and sunglasses, a combination that screamed "disguise."

As he peeled off his fake beard, he rolled the unconscious Haruna over. When she was facing upward, he gave her "sleeping" face a very close inspection.

“Oh! Your daughter’s still very pretty, as long as her mouth is shut.”

“…”

Shuuji did not answer the man. He appeared to be in a daze, not entirely present.

The man ignored him and focused on his daughter, gloating over the comatose young woman.

“When two of Saika’s children cut each other’s children—in other words, the grandchildren of the original—control doesn’t pass based on level of strength, or seniority, or dumb luck. Whoever does it latest overwrites the control, that’s all. You didn’t know that, did you? You probably thought you were the only one who ever overcame the original Saika and became an independent child,” he mocked, trying to lift her skirt with his shoe. “But what happens if a child slashes another child? I haven’t tested that out yet.”

He tried a number of times without success and eventually withdrew his foot out of boredom, pressing it lightly against Haruna’s stomach instead.

“If I could use you however I wanted with Saika… Well, you don’t have to worry. I’ve got plenty of love for you, Haruna,” the man gloated with a disgusting leer. He took off his hat and sunglasses.

“Oh yes. I will love you…I will love your body,” he murmured, licking his lips.

Shuuji Niekawa could do nothing as the man beside him fantasized about defiling his daughter. The curse of Saika filled his brain, and he had no functional thinking power.

All he could do was stand there.

Haruna’s onetime homeroom teacher, *Takashi Nasujima*, plotted and cackled over her body.

And all her father could do was stand there.

At that moment—Ikebukuro When Anri finally headed home, she was still feeling depressed.

A number of pathways had been indicated to her over the course of the day.

In a way, they were each potential futures being displayed for her through the picture frame. She just didn't have the bravery to choose which picture to paint.

I'm the same.

Nothing about me has changed since before I met Ryuugamine and Kida…and even Mika.

It was this mood of self-loathing that consumed her when she reached her apartment. Then she saw a feminine figure leaning against her door.

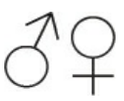
Who is that…? Is it…Niekawa?

She tensed up until she approached close enough to clearly make out the figure—at which point she realized it was a girl she'd never seen before.

"Hello. It's nice to meet you for the first time. Right?"

Her smile was gentle but strong at the core, the exact opposite of how Anri felt at the moment. She gave Anri a piercing look, then held out her hand for a shake, and introduced herself in a firm voice.

"I'm Saki Mikajima. Hi!"



In the darkness, a voice called for her.

It was strongly familiar, but for some reason, she couldn't place who it belonged to.

She was drawn forward, walking through the dark, until she sensed something hitting her chest.

"…am Celty."

When she realized the thing, which was smaller than a soccer ball, was what had called her name, Celty remembered that the voice of the head in her hands was none other than her own.

Then the head that was supposed to belong to her repeated what it had been muttering, louder and clearer this time.

“I am Celty.”

No, no, no, no, no! Wait! I mean, yes, it’s true, but hang on a second!

“…ty! Celtyyy!”

She burst up with a start, stammering to herself, and found that she was in her usual bedroom, right next to Shinra in his wheelchair, who was looking at her with great concern.

“Are you all right? You were really moaning to yourself.”

Celty hurriedly cast her vision around the area and snatched up the PDA resting next to her bed.

“Th-the head! What happened to my head?!”

“Don’t worry. The police report was a little fishy. The rumors on the Net are saying that the head might’ve been a fake. The rumors that me and Yumasaki started, I mean.”

“…Oh. But we’ve got to do something! If that gets cremated, I’ll…I’ll…!”

“Calm down. I’ll do something about that head.”

Shinra leaned over in his chair and held her until she finally felt herself calming down.

“…Thank you. I’m better now. Sorry for getting out of hand like that.”

“I’m glad. If anything, it was Seiji who was even more worked up. He said he was going to charge the police station, so I knocked him out with a tranquilizer for the night… Then Namie got mad at me for giving Seiji a tranquilizer. So I had to knock her out, too. Compared to them, Mika was very relaxed. And when Namie lost her cool, Dad ran off somewhere,” he explained, as if it was all some funny story.

Just then, the doorbell rang over by the entrance.

“Hmm, I wonder who that is. Did Dad come back?”

Several moments later, the sliding door of the bedroom opened, and Emilia popped her head inside.

“Shinra, a glasses girl child has arrived for judgment of a visit?”

“Glasses? Oh, would that be Anri? Please send her in.”

“Anri…I wonder if we should tell her about Mikado,” Celty showed Shinra on her PDA, but she figured there wouldn’t be time for that sort of conversation. Then the door to the bedroom slid open again, and a woman wearing glasses entered.

“…Umm…? I’m sorry, you are?”

Huh? Who’s this?

Neither Shinra nor Celty could hide their surprise. The woman walked up to Shinra and took his hand without expression, staring into his face.

As he waited, baffled, she said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Kasane Kujiragi.”

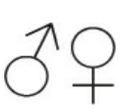
But a second before they could decipher the meaning of that name, Kujiragi drew closer to Shinra’s face and whispered, “I have an interest in you.”

Instantly, *without batting an eye, the woman placed her lips over Shinra’s*—and extended steel nails from her fingers, *sinking them into his shoulder*.

For a brief moment, everything in the room, time included, seemed to freeze solid.

When blood seeped from Shinra’s shoulder and his eyes began turning bloodshot like Saika’s, it was not Celty’s consciousness that abandoned her this time but her sense of reason.

Then chaotic shadows ravaged the room.



It tumbled.

And tumbled.

After this day, a subset of residents of the city found themselves plunging into chaos, without knowing where they were headed.

There was no one mastermind behind it, no one single cause—just different people tangling up one another’s feet, falling and falling…

Into the deep darkness that existed on the underside of the city, where those like the Awakusu-kai lived and breathed.

Inside the sack that was the city, both wide and cramped at once, the rodents struggled and struggled.

Would they fight back like cornered rats? Or simply drown in the sack?

Nobody could guess at this point in time.

Only one thing was certain.

As long as they continued to plunge within the city of Ikebukuro, they would ultimately be headed to the same place, the deepest place of all.

As such, fate worked its ways as they fell.

Without a hint at even the nature of its eventual product, whether rope leading up to safety or shackles dragging to the bottom of the earth…

The city offered a glimpse into its impenetrable darkness, to saints and villains alike.

There was no way to tell if hope awaited at the bottom of that obsidian dark.

And yet, without stopping a single one of them, the city swallowed all within itself—and began to tumble.

Author
Ryohgo Narita

Durarara!! x11–End

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CAST

Celty Sturluson
Shinra Kishitani

Izaya Orihara

Anri Sonohara
Erika Karisawa

Mikado Ryuugamine
Masaomi Kida

Shizuo Heiwajima
Kyouhei Kadota

Walker Yumasaki
Saburo Togusa
Mika Harima
Seiji Yagiri
Namie Yagiri

Chikage Rokujou

Shingen Kishitani
Kasane Kujiragi
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AFTERWORD

Hello, I'm Ryohgo Narita.

Well, *Durarara!!* has passed the ten-volume mark and reached number eleven safely. You might find a few scattered references throughout this book that will make you grin if you've read Volumes 4–5 of my *Vamp!* series of novels… (Blatant cross-marketing.)

I pushed the story forward quite a bit in the latter half of this book and ended it with a number of lit fuses all over the place. I'm expecting that the next book will start with a number of consecutive explosions, so please whittle away the time as you wait, imagining that you're just staring at those fuses…

So, as I had announced before, I was planning to cap the story in a way at Volume 12…but considering what it would take to wrap up some of the stories of the Awakusu-kai characters who didn't appear in this book at all, I'm currently stuck between extending it to a thirteenth volume or making the next one very, very long. I'm still not sure what my final decision will be at this point, but I'm hoping to deliver the news through the usual marketing avenues.

My hope is that once I'm done with this story movement, I'll move it to a fresh series set a year or two later, focusing more on new characters, Aoba and Kuru-Mai and the adults.

Now, if I were to rebrand the title like Mr. Kamachi's *A Certain Magical Index: New Testament*, I could go with…*New Durarara!!* Or…*True Durarara!!* Or…*Durararara!!* Or…*Durarara!!! New World Arc*, or…*Durarara!! Turbo Edition*, or…*Durarara: Sunshine City at Dawn*, or…*Durarara: The Gunman of Ikebukuro*, or…*Durarara Ultimate Battle, Darkness Demon Izaya vs. Ultra-Mecha Shizuo*… The possibilities are just beginning! And now they have ended.

But whatever form it takes, I think that this story set in Ikebukuro will continue for some time longer. I hope you look forward to more!

And now some announcements.

Just as I was praying that there would be more things I could tell you about *Durarara!!*, they have arrived. First of all, the *Durarara!!* Blu-ray box set comes out on the twenty-third of this month!

In addition to all twenty-six episodes of the series, you'll get the *Dengeki Bunko Akifuyu no Jin de Durarara Lovers in Nakano* special event footage. Not only does it include three original audio drama CDs, you get the deluxe box art drawn by Suzuhito Yasuda himself, so if you're interested in that or the *Durarara Rapping!!* character song collection CD that comes out on the same day, I highly recommend looking into buying them!

As for items that are available already for purchase, there's the new edition of the PSP game called *Durarara!! 3way Standoff—Alley—*, which you can check out with its own original opening theme by the band ROOKiEZ is PUNK'D!

On top of that, Ms. Satorigi's manga adaptation is heading into the Saika arc with a volume out already! I'm betting that the combination of the manga format and her fantastic artwork and arrangement will make this even more enjoyable than the original novel!

And now, though it pains me to advertise for a different company than the one printing this book for me…

I have been given the opportunity to write a novel for Tite Kubo's manga series *Bleach*, which is running in Shueisha's *Weekly Shonen Jump* magazine. If all goes to plan, it should be hitting stores within a month or two of the book you hold in your hands!

When I saw my name in the pages of *Shonen Jump* (even if just for publicity purposes), which I've been reading since I was a boy, I got unstoppable chills of joy.

I'm turning that excitement into energy, trying to synergize both fan bases so that readers of *Durarara!!* might find an interest in *Bleach*, and vice versa. I'm doing my best to make everyone happy, so I hope you will check that out!

I've also had more chances to do work in various other fields and places this year, such as participating in the *Red Dragon* role-playing-game fiction series from Seikaisha, and there are others that have yet to be announced coming up.

Of course, the reason I've had all of these opportunities at all is because of the Dengeki Bunko series of *Baccano!* and *Durarara!!*, and the incredible bedrock of support that you readers give me. I will continue to give my all to the series that got me here, to ensure that your support doesn't go to waste!

*The following is the usual list of acknowledgments.

To my editor, Mr. Papio, and the rest of the editorial office. To the proofreaders, whom I give a hard time by being so late with submissions. To all the folks at ASCII Media Works.

To my family, who do so much for me in so many ways, my friends, fellow authors, and illustrators.

To Director Omori, Akiyo Satorigi, and everyone else involved in the various media projects, including anime, manga, and video games.

To Suzuhito Yasuda, who took time out of his busy schedule with *Yozakura Quartet* and his video game character designs to provide his wonderful illustrations and even some live streams of the process.

And to all the readers who checked out this book.

To all of the above, the greatest of appreciation!

March 2012—Ryohgo Narita

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