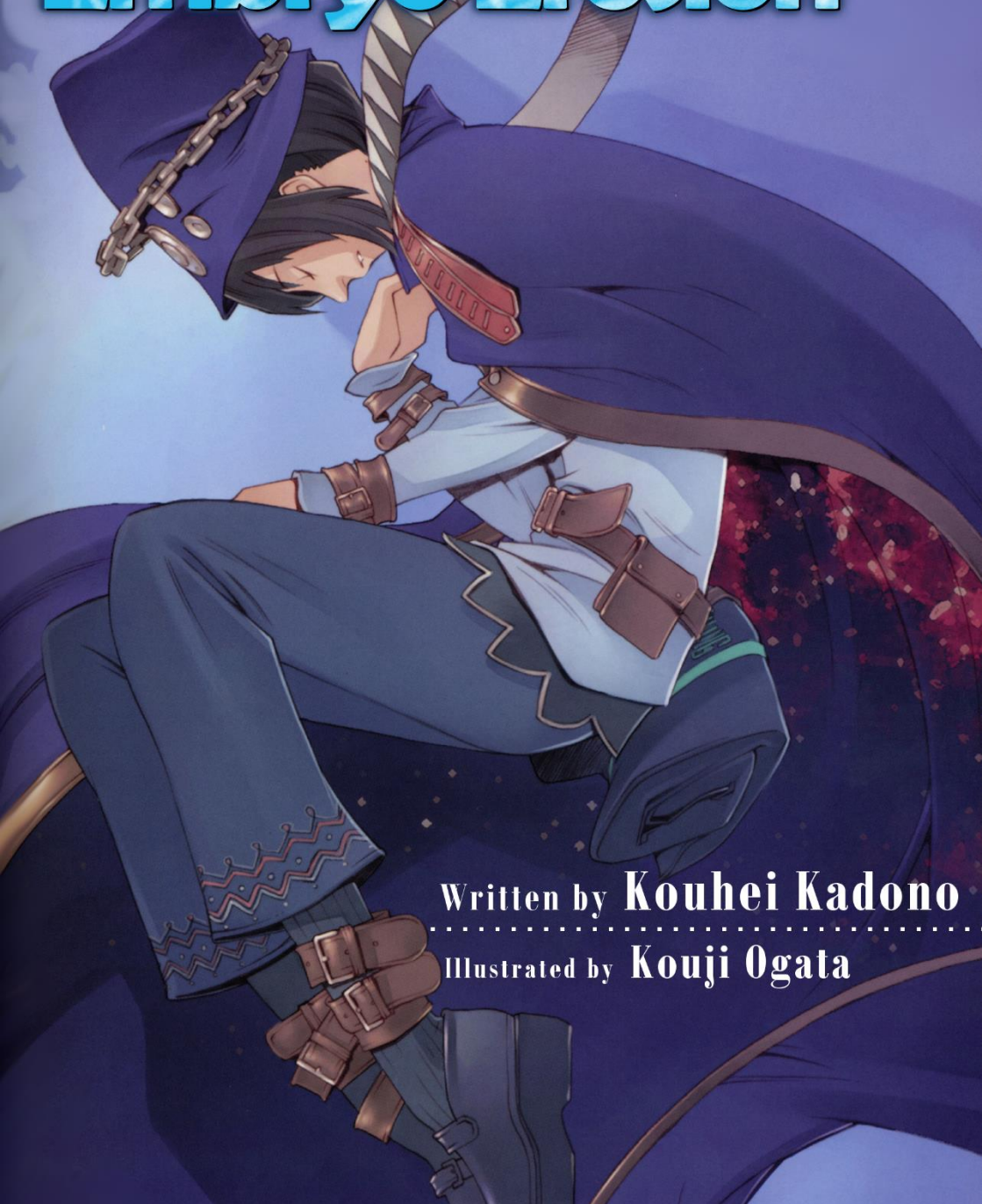


Boogiepop Countdown

Embryo Erosion



Written by **Kouhei Kadono**

.....
Illustrated by **Kouji Ogata**

A Note from the Translators

This translation is a fan-created project that's meant to fill in the hole left by official translation efforts; it's not intended to replace official translations as a cheap alternative. As such, any and all translations that end up receiving an official translation will be removed upon the release of that translation. **No exceptions.**

Also, to make the transition from official translations to fan translations as smooth as possible, all translations on this site will follow the conventions put forth by the Seven Seas translations. These include:

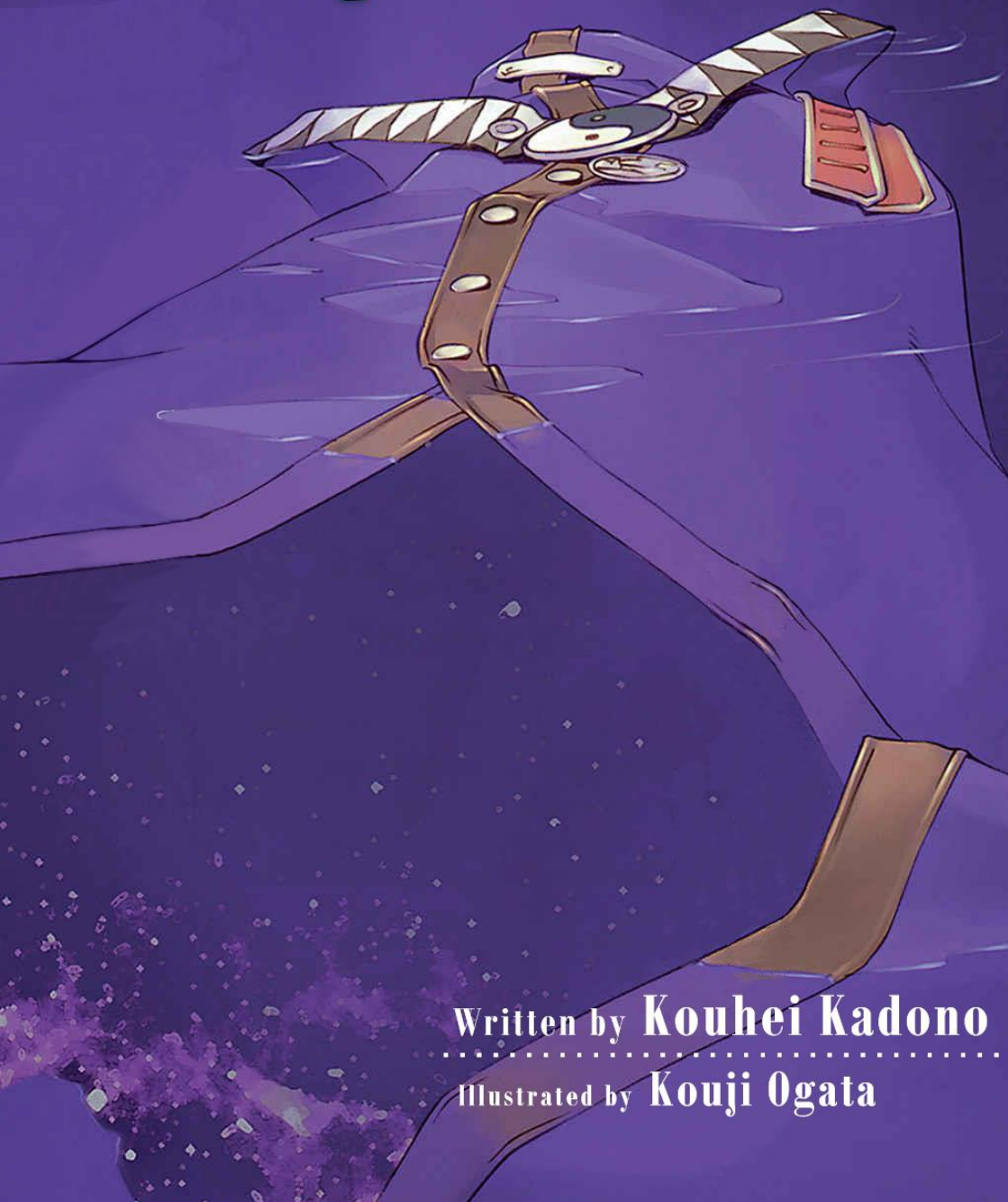
- Translating certain terms in the same way (Ex: Fire Witch, Imaginator)
- Keeping to traditional Japanese name order
- using Japanese honorifics

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BGM – “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” by Tears for Fears

Boogiepop Countdown

Embryo Erosion



Written by **Kouhei Kadono**

Illustrated by **Kouji Ogata**



“Personally, I was just really looking forward to seeing Orihata again after so long. That was supposed to be it. And yet...”

“The moment I touched it, I started hearing that ‘voice’...”

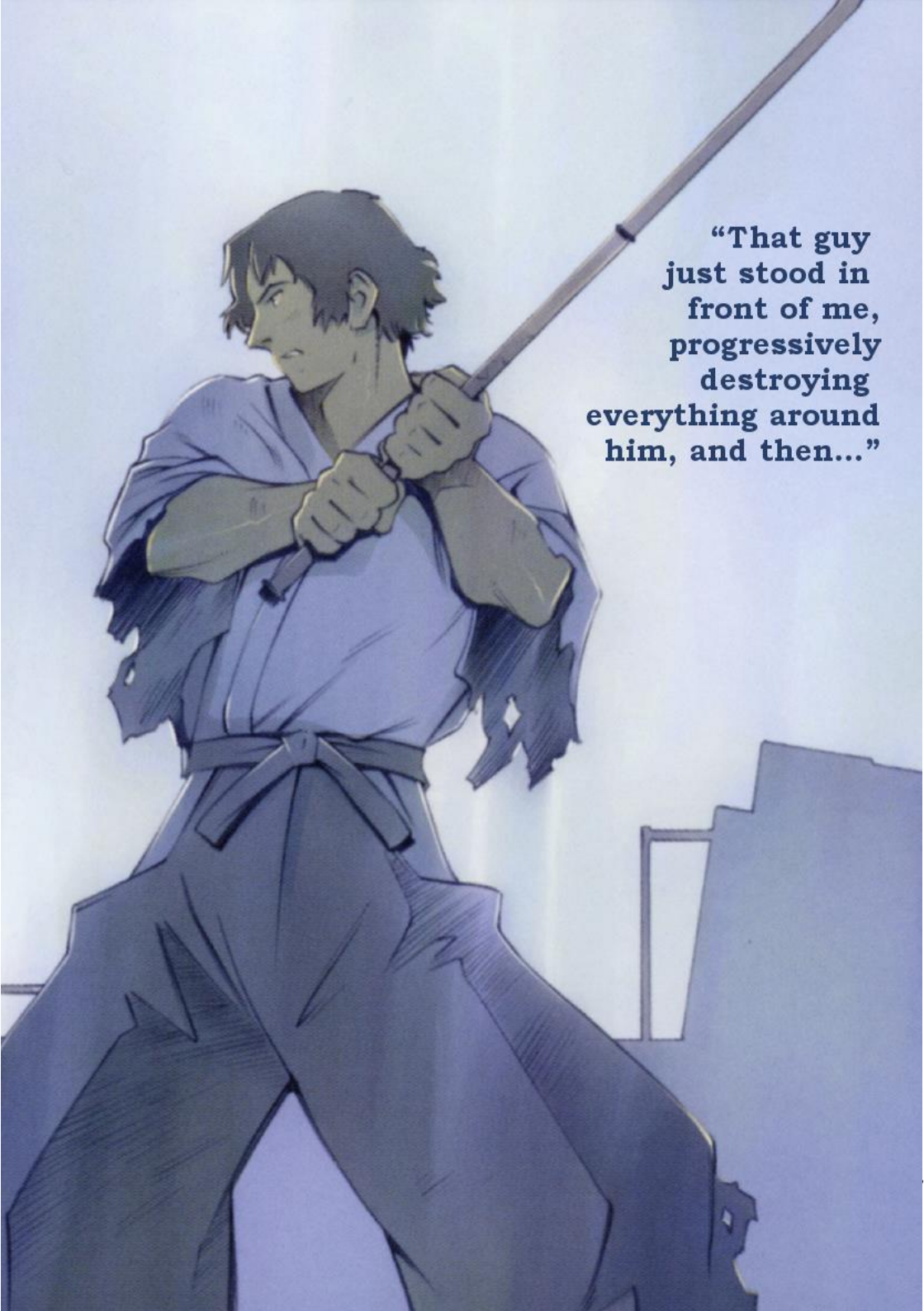


“Nee-chan and the others are really in trouble

– all because I picked up that weird thing...”

**“I was ‘the strongest,’ and I’d
finally found my opponent.
My opponent,
however...”**



A man with dark hair, wearing a blue gi with a white belt, is shown in a three-quarter view. He is holding a long, thin staff horizontally with both hands, positioned across his chest. The gi has some frayed edges, suggesting a fight. The background is a plain, light blue-grey color. In the bottom right corner, there is a dark, jagged shape that looks like a piece of debris or a shadow.

**“That guy
just stood in
front of me,
progressively
destroying
everything around
him, and then...”**

“In time, I would come to learn of this incident involving an ‘egg,’ and a threat to the world...”

**“I’d been having the
worst luck,
and then who would
appear before me but a
shinigami...”**

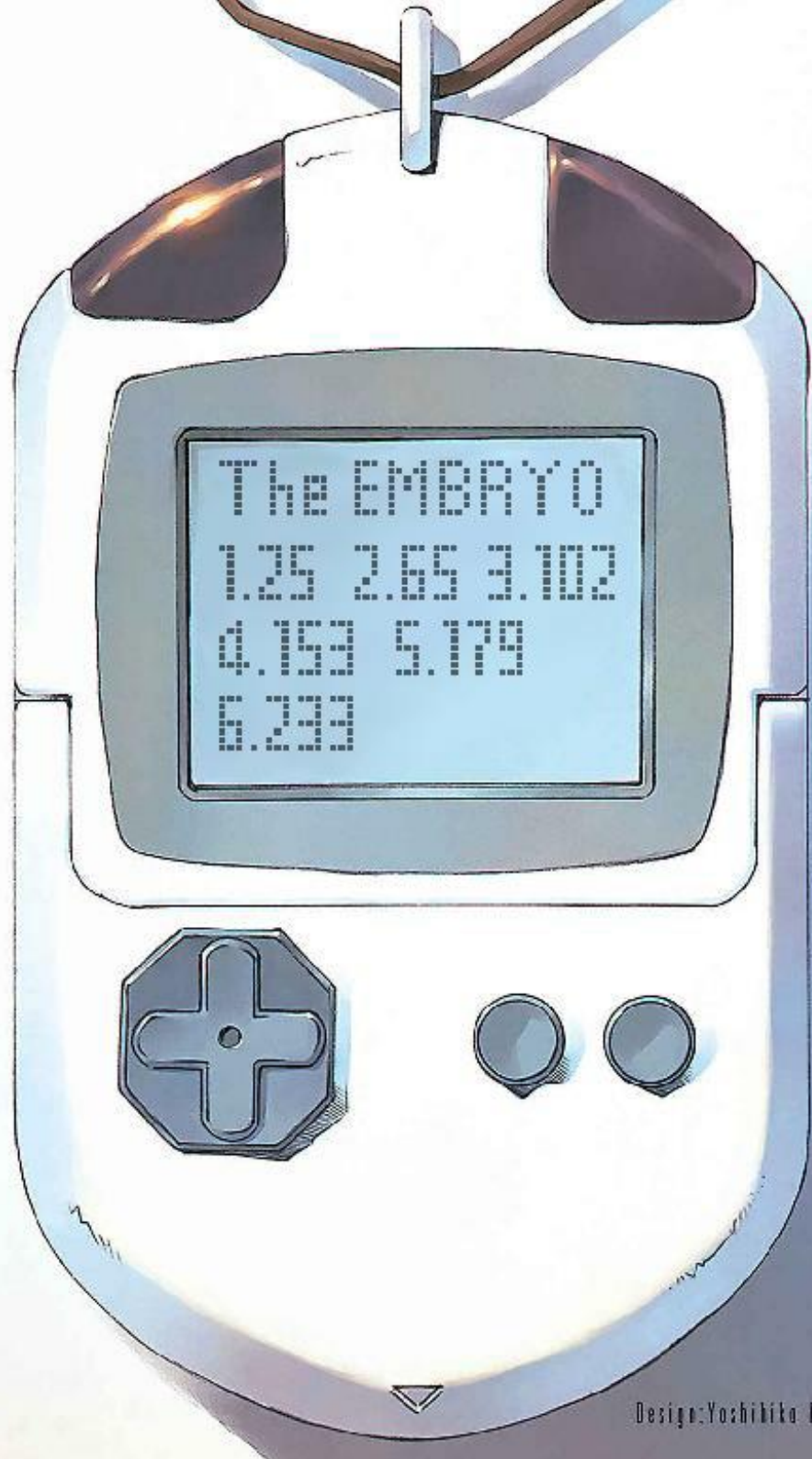




**“Everything
is as it is
because this
little egg
exists: the
‘Embryo’
...”**

**“That’s the
thing about
living, see...”**

**It’s hell, don’t
you think?”**



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“Strength is not about having power. Nor is it about being exceptional. Nor is it being large or possessing brute force. Nor does it mean being rigid or not losing. Ultimately, strength has no bearing on any other thing. It is an independent concept in and of itself, and should you truly attempt to grasp it, you must be prepared to sacrifice all other things.
Victory... glory... All of it.”

-Kirima Seichi
(Isolation and Faith)

It was a strange thing; though the limbs of the corpse were long and thin like poles, the torso was plump and round—unnaturally so.

“.....”

At this sight, a man looked down. He was short, averaging about 160cm. His clothes were a pale purple color and of a meticulous design that fit snugly to his body, like a school uniform or a Chinese silk dress. Such clothes suited him. He was thin and svelte, with relatively long limbs.

The man’s location had, at one point, been developed as a major amusement park on the outskirts of the city, but the plan had met with a hitch partway through. Now it lay abandoned, burdened with debts scattered across various enterprises among different prefectures and municipalities. There was no prospect of resuming development, and now it just lay there without purpose, just waiting for the day it would inevitably be torn down.

And, standing in a row of half-finished, peculiar feats of architecture, there was a tower that rose conspicuously above the rest. There, at its summit, the man simply looked down in silence at the strange corpse.

“.....”

Ordinarily, you may think that he was a little too young to be called a “man.” His face was boyish and looked to be around 14 or 15, but there was something about him. The sharp look in his slightly slanted eyes was extremely cold, which gave an air about him were most would hesitate to call him a “boy,” regardless of his age.

The sky was clear and blue. There was not a soul around him.

“.....”

The white clouds rolled on languidly. Given how serenely the man stood, it was the kind of scenery that might have looked like just another perfectly ordinary day, were it not for the incongruously placed corpse. Perhaps it implied that a death like this was just an everyday occurrence.

“...Hmph. So stupid,” Eventually, the man in pale purple muttered at the corpse before him, his tone as calm as the sky above.

For him, that implication might not have been too far off.

He took out a long, thin object resembling a board or a rod out of his breast pocket and put it to his ear and mouth, akin to a cell phone. But unlike a phone, there was nothing

that might resemble an antenna.¹ Instead, there was a lens-shaped attachment, like a penlight, at one end pointing into the sky. Light extended out from it going somewhere unknown.

“It’s Fortissimo,” said the man in pale purple, speaking into his device, which seemed share the function of a phone as well. “The mission’s accomplished. He’s got zero chance of insubordination. ...Hm? ‘Why?’” Here, the boyish man who called himself Fortissimo first expressed something resembling anger. His face contorted as he spoke out in disgust. “Because the idiot’s dead goddamn it! ...No, it wasn’t me. You’re the ones fuckin’ killing yourselves!”

Fortissimo fixed his glare on the corpse.

“It was suicide! No reason to fight, and no reason for me to even be out here. One hell of a waste of time... What? The motive? The hell should I know?! Probably stress or something!” he roared, forcibly cutting off the connection on his side with a soldierly “Over!”

“Shit. Figured he might have at least put up a little fight. Damn you, getting my hopes up for nothing...!” With a sigh,

¹ Remember, these stories take place at around the turn of the century, so most cellphones still had antennas.

he lightly kicked the corpse with the tip of his foot, and it rolled over.

“...Hm?” When Fortissimo caught sight of his profile, he realized something. The corpse was missing a right ear. The wound was exposed, as if it had been ripped right off.

“.....” Fortissimo then took another look around the place, but nothing vaguely ear-shaped was anywhere to be seen. It seemed that it hadn’t been torn off here.

“...Hrm. So that would mean...”

Suddenly, a vivid color rose to Fortissimo’s eyes.

“Does this mean he’d been fighting someone...? He must have ran away, but seeing that there was no hope for him, he killed himself in despair, or something like that...” His eyes widened, nodding to himself over and over again as he ran through the motions.



“Hey, it wouldn’t happen to be you, would it? You’re not the one who beat him...are you, Eugene²?” His eyes flashed as he spoke that name. “Cause you know I still haven’t beaten you fully yet. If you’re the one I’m taking on, then this is a welcome opportunity!” Fortissimo spread open both arms and looked up at the sky.

“That’s right, our battle still isn’t decided! No matter how much you whine, saying it’s ‘your loss,’ I am *not* letting that fly!” And, facing the heavens, he laughed at the top of his lungs.

Afterwards, as Fortissimo was descending the tower with the cadaver, a man awaited him at the bottom. At first glance, he looked to be a perfectly average office worker.

“Hello there, ‘O’Strongest One³.’ It’s been a while.” The man bowed, his courtesy a veiled insult.

² I’m only noting this ‘cause it’s not mentioned in the official translation of Pandora, but the name Eugene is a reference to Pink Floyd’s “Careful with that Axe, Eugene.”

³ This is a bit tough to translate. In Japanese, ‘strongest’ (最強) is a noun, so it can be used as a sort of nickname. That doesn’t go very well in English, so we have to translate it a bit differently. Normally, we’ll go with ‘Strongest One,’ but sometimes we might modify it depending on the context.

“Oh, it’s you, Squeeze. What are you here for? This shouldn’t be your area of jurisdiction. I’m in the middle of something here.” Displeasure was painted on Fortissimo’s face.

“No, you’ve got another mission,” said the man named Squeeze quietly.

“Come on! I’m literally in the middle of finishing up a job this very moment!” Fortissimo cast a sharp glare at Squeeze, but Squeeze seemed to barely even register it.

“And that’s why I came here. It’s been dealt with,” he said plainly.

“Shit. What, I don’t even get time to take a stroll?” said Fortissimo begrudgingly.

“If you were to go out on a ‘stroll,’ it would be devastating for those around. I’d imagine that as soon as you spot anyone who might look strong, you’d be picking a fight with them.”

“I wouldn’t go all out,” said Fortissimo with a smirk. Squeeze shrugged his shoulders.

“You’d better not. If you were to go all out, your opponent would end up dust.”

At this, Fortissimo’s smile grew even wider.

“Maybe that wouldn’t happen if you were my opponent. How about it? Wanna go a round, Mr. Direct Attack Combat Type?” he said provokingly.

But Squeeze didn’t take the bait and answered with a sigh.

“I think I’ll pass. I’ll have you know I also value my life. Now, back to business.”

Squeeze handed a document written in fountain pen to Fortissimo. It was an old-fashioned way of conveying information, but – unlike electronic data – there was no worry of it being copied, so long as the creator held onto it.

Fortissimo took one glance at it and then snorted.

“An ‘egg’? You’re telling me to look for this thing?”

“That’s correct. But it is no ordinary egg. We don’t know what it’ll give birth to. It’s uncharted territory that’s impossible to predict. We need to establish a countermeasure to the best of our ability while we still can. Which is where the ‘Strongest One’ comes in.”

“Bah. You make it sound like all that. It’s probably just another pointless errand. The jobs they put me on are always the same.”

Fortissimo thrust the document back at Squeeze.

“Besides, that name is no good. ‘Embryo’? Pretty sure there’s a weird meaning behind that.”

Squeeze looked at the document nonchalantly returned to him, and was speechless for a moment.

“.....?!”

There was nothing on it. The letters that should have been stained into the paper in ink had been utterly erased, leaving only a blank sheet. The thing Fortissimo had touched had been transformed from a meaningful document into a worthless scrap of paper.

W-what is this...?

As a combat-type synthetic human, Squeeze was capable of clearly spotting bullets mid-flight; and yet – even with his abilities – he hadn’t noticed Fortissimo do anything..

“.....”

He was now painfully aware of why the Towa Organization acknowledged his “existence” despite the threat level.

“...Yes. The name is derived from the Ancient Greek word meaning ‘that which swells from within,’ which in turn means ‘germ that has attained life...’ And if we were to take its literal meaning, that would become ‘unhatched egg...’ It may be

that's exactly what it is, especially considering that you've been chosen as its opponent," said Squeeze in a hush tone, his voice tinged with the slightest of fear.

Fortissimo then snapped his fingers, and the instant he did so, the scrap of paper turned to dust and floated away in the air.

"Haah. Looks like I'm in for another tiresome task."

For the first time, Squeeze smirked.

"As a matter of fact, I don't imagine it will be. There have been some strange rumors around here recently, you see. Apparently, there's a *shinigami* prowling around this city, or so I'm told."

"*Shinigami*? What are you on about?"

There was a notable change in Fortissimo's expression. He turned to face Squeeze.

"There's a legend to that effect... They say it wears a black hat, and that it comes to kill you at the peak of your beauty, before you can grow any uglier. Or so they say."

"Is there any truth to it?"

"No idea. But, if you do happen to encounter them, perhaps you might actually find a little challenge."

"A *shinigami*, eh...? As if."

Fortissimo's eyes still shone. He then muttered something under his breath. Squeeze couldn't quite catch it and inquired him, but Fortissimo wouldn't answer and simply stood there, grinning to himself.

"Oh yeah. Squeeze, go finish up the rest of my mission for me, will ya?" he said suddenly, as if he'd just remembered something.

"I'm sorry?"

"It's an easy job... All you've gotta do is deliver this 'proof' to the usual place."

Then, with a whirl, he flung something over to Squeeze. Squeeze took it and was again left aghast. Because the thing in his hand was presumably what had just been severed from the corpse moments ago: a fresh human finger. And, by the time he looked up again, Fortissimo was already nowhere to be seen.

"....."

While Squeeze stood there agape, at his back, the tower that the pale purple man had descended from began to crumble away as if it were a sandcastle. Every piece of evidence was being erased all at once, without a trace...

THE EMBRYO

BOOGIEPOP COUNTDOWN

1ST HALF - EROSION-
FROM VERSE ONE TILL SIX



“A sleeping egg does not know that it is inside
a shell..”

...In the corner of a back alley, who voices spoke in whispers.

[C'mon, man, I'm beggin' ya.]⁴

“Shut up... just be quiet already.”

[You ain't got long anyways. Don'cha feel like taking someone down with ya?]

“...This has nothing to do with you.”

[Hey, come on, seriously. Kill me already.]

“To hell with that... How many do you think have sacrificed themselves just for you? You're going to carry out the job you were meant to do—I'll make sure of that.”

[Come on, kill me. What's the problem? It'll be easy.]

“.....”

[I don't wanna keep living any more. I'm just so damn tired of clinging to this stupid fake existence. C'mon now. Think of it as a mercy.]

“.....”

[Please, kill me. Do me that favor, man...]

⁴ This text in square brackets is dialogue. Japanese has two different styles of quotation markers, so it can be easy to denote speech between two people without saying who they are. That's kinda tricky in English though. We'll be using this convention for now but might change it later if we find something better.

...The voices left the alley and headed toward the shopping district across from the station.

* * * * *

The arcade cabinet Honami Hiroshi was aiming for had been blocked off by a crowd, so to pass the time waiting for his turn, he began fiddling around with an egg-shaped handheld game console⁵ in a corner of the arcade.

“Oho, you play that game too, do you?” came a voice from above him.

He looked up to see a gray man. He was somewhere in his thirties or maybe even his forties? Being a middle schooler, Hiroshi had a hard time figuring out the age of middle-aged folk. He considered the man “gray” mostly because of the gray trench coat he had on, which was closed up tightly at the front. However, there was also this kind of sooty, somber feel to the man that gave Hiroshi this “gray” impression.

The man grinned. In his hand was an egg shape similar to what Hiroshi was playing on.

⁵ This refers to a specific type of handheld video game that was popular in Japan for a while. More on what it is later.

“You play too?” He’d rarely ever talked to middle-aged men one-on-one like this before, but if games were their common ground, then there was no need for him to be shy.

“Ah, well, I think mine might be a lower quality one. I can’t seem to get a hold of any good items unless I trade with someone,” complained the man.

Hiroshi couldn’t help but laugh at how dramatically the man bemoaned his plight.

“What’s in you inventory then? Do you have nothing but antidotes or something?”

“Yeah. They’re all pretty much useless. Even if I want to sell them, I don’t get much.”

The two of them started talking excitedly about a topic that would be baffling to people who hadn’t played the game.

“You wanna battle, then? Ah, I’m level 56 though. Are you able to handle that, ossan⁶?”

“42 here. It’ll be tough, but winning isn’t entirely out of the question, right?”

⁶ Ossan is a middle-aged man. Like with oniisan and oneesan, calling someone “middle aged man” in English sounds weird, and there’s no good analogue, so we left it as-is.

The two of them then linked their portable info terminals and started playing, the two consoles beeping all the while.

The man played well, but unfortunately; the child was just better at battling than him. Ultimately, the game ended in Hiroshi's victory.

“All right, guess I'm claiming some data from you.”

“Oh well.”

Hiroshi switched screens and examined the list of data that the man had. Item names listed as basic words ran the length of the menu.

“You really do have nothing but antidotes!” said Hiroshi, laughing at the display showing nothing but <POISON>.

However, among them, he noticed that there was one name he'd never seen before and frowned. “Hm?”

<EMBRYO>

That was what the screen displayed.

“What's this ‘embyoo’ one?”

“Ah, I found that one recently. I don't know what it is,” said the gray man hurriedly. “Would you mind overlooking that one?”

“No way. The PvP⁷ in this game is really cut-throat. You’ve gotta save rare items to your system straight away. Best to keep all your bases covered.”

With a mocking smile, Hiroshi transferred the thing called <EMBRYO> to his own device.

“Hoo boy. This didn’t go well at all...” said the man with a sigh.

“You just need more training, ossan.”

The man laughed at this. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“Well, don’t worry, I’ll research this item carefully and make sure it’s put to good use.”

“I don’t know... It might be a little out of your league. It has a habit of moving around pretty quickly, after all. It’s just in its nature.” It sounded like he was being a sore loser, so Hiroshi snapped back.

“I can handle it better than you!”

⁷ “PvP” is a common acronym in games referring to player verses player encounters. Was originally used to refer to online PC games like MUDs and MMOs, but has since expanded to any sort of battle between players in a game, especially when the game has a non-PvP mode. This phrase wasn’t used in the original novel, but I felt it best communicated what Hiroshi was talking about.

“That so? Well, best of luck with it.” His words were delivered in a strangely serious tone; Hiroshi felt something wasn’t quite right.

“Huh?”

“And, should it end up leaving your hands soon, I wish the very best of luck to those who will come to possess it in future. I really do...” muttered the man to himself.

...Did he really take losing that bad?

Hiroshi was doubtful, but suddenly perked up when he noticed his watch.

“Ahh, it’s this late already?!” Since both of his parents wouldn’t be coming home today, he was meant to be meeting his older sister in town for a meal.

“See ya, ossan!”

“Yeah. Goodbye⁸,” said the man as he casually waved at Hiroshi.

And then he just stood like that in the corridor. A few minutes later, someone trying to get to the toilet lightly

⁸ A small thing here, but it’s worth noting that the word he uses here is ‘sayonara.’ This form of goodbye, unlike Hiroshi’s, implies a long term, or even permanent goodbye, often used for dramatic effect in Japanese fiction.

brushed his shoulder. ““Scuse me.” The next moment, the man’s upper body twisted round.

Then from the middle of his torso came a crack, like a withered tree, and, with his lower half still standing, the upper half faced straight down.

“...Wah?!”

The passer-by leapt away from the man in fright. The man’s grey coat had been hoisted up, revealing what was inside. And inside...there was nothing. The place between his upper and lower body, where his midsection should have been, was empty. His top and bottom were connected – just barely – by his spine, one teetering atop the other like a balancing toy.

The man’s body fell apart.

And the blood, which for some reason hadn’t been gushing out of his wound until now, slowly began to spread out across the floor.

The corpse lying completely still made it clear that he was very much dead. And yet – despite having his entire midsection removed – he’d been moving for quite some time beforehand. When exactly had he died—or rather, been killed? The answer wasn’t one that anybody in the arcade could hope to imagine.

* * * * *

“Still...”

High school girl Honami Akiko was walking through town with Takashiro Tooru—her co-worker from the convenience store she worked at part-time. They were walking home together because their shifts just so happened to end at the same time.

“You’ve got a nice body, don’t you, Takashiro-san?”

“Huh? Ah...well, I guess so, yeah.”

Standing at 190cm, Tooru was tall. He weighed 75 kg, which was slim for his stature, but he didn’t look it thanks to his developed back and shoulder muscles, which gave volume to his upper body.

He was 19 years old but didn’t go to school. From a social standpoint, he’d be a so-called “freeter.”

“Did you used to do basketball or something?” asked Akiko with an eager expression. She’d been interested in this big guy for a while now. With his deep-chiseled features that lent him a mysterious aura, and how incredibly cool and

collected he was for his age, she couldn't take him off her mind.

“Ahh, I get that a lot, but I just seem to be kind of, uh, bad at that sort of stuff.”

“What sort of stuff?”

“Err, I mean like, uh...sports...that kind of thing,” said Tooru, scratching his head furiously. His mid length naturally permed hair might have been a haircut, but it could just as easily have been the result of not cutting his hair for several months.

“But you must have been training for something. Don't even try telling me you're bad at exercise!” Even at the convenience store, she'd seen him carrying heavy heaps at a brisk pace all the time.

“Yeah, well, I could probably do it if I tried, but I guess I don't have much of an interest. Don't know if I could really get myself invested in it.” Tooru wasn't articulating himself very well.

“Do you have some kind of dream you aspire towards, Takashiro-san?”

Her question seemed to put him on the spot.

“Uh, umm... I guess so...? If you could call it a dream...”

“I mean, I just can’t believe you’re satisfied living the freeter life.”

“Hmm... Sure you won’t laugh?”

“At what?”

“Uh, you see, I... How do I put this...” Tooru’s voice fell to a whisper as he scratched his head even more. “...I’m sort of thinking that I, uh, want to become a ‘samurai’ of sorts...”

Naturally, Akiko was taken aback.

“...What?”

“Yeah, it’s weird isn’t it...” Tooru said with a forced smile.

“U-um... That’s, ah... You mean like an actor for a period piece?” said Akiko after some thought.

“No, that’s not what I mean. More like-” Tooru stopped mid-sentence. Akiko looked up at him wondering what was wrong and then tensed up as well. Tooru’s expression had totally changed.

He was staring intently at a single point. It was like a magnet had suddenly taken a hold of his gaze in the same way someone might look at their opponent’s deck of cards in a game of poker when they’re about to reveal their hand.

“.....”

There, parked by the roadside, was a bike, with a girl lightly sitting on it. She was wearing a leather jumpsuit, and the boots she was wearing were oddly hefty. On closer inspection, they weren't ordinary boots but safety boots you'd wear to dangerous places, like construction sites.

Tooru couldn't take his eyes off her. Not in the mushy sense of ogling a beautiful girl. On the contrary, you could almost say it was...

“That woman...”

“Hm?” The girl had also taken notice of Tooru and looked back at him.

I-isn't that...? Akiko knew who she was. That's Kirima Nagi. The infamous delinquent...

For a while, Tooru and Nagi locked eyes. Tooru expression was growing steadily fiercer, but Nagi remained calm.

“The way she carries herself... Could that be...?!”

Tooru swallowed dryly. And then, as he took a step towards Nagi...

“I'm so sorry, Nagi! I didn't mean to keep you waiting!” A girl cradling a large paper bag came running toward Nagi from a street corner, and Nagi casually shifted her gaze from Tooru to her. And then she smiled at her.

“Hey. Did you get the stuff I asked for?”

“Yeah, it wasn’t too bad.” Nagi’s expression when she spoke to the girl was very gentle, as if she were friend or family, and Akiko was a little taken aback at this change.

So even Kirima Nagi can make that kind of expression...

Akiko glanced up and saw that, as she’d expected, Tooru too was staring as if he’d been completely bewitched.

“...Was I just imagining it?” he said in a low whisper and resumed walking.

“W-what was that? Are you a friend of Kirima-san’s, Takashiro-san?” asked Akiko, but he shook his head.

“No, it was just a little misunderstanding,” he said, striding away without expressing the least interest in the fact that Akiko knew Nagi’s name.

Akiko hurriedly chased after him.

Then, as the two of them came upon a slightly lonely alleyway just ahead of the station they were both headed to...

“Ahhh, you brought a guy with you!” a boy’s loud voice called out from behind them.

Akiko jumped and turned around. Behind her was her little brother, Hiroshi.

“H-Hiroshi! Don’t scare me like that!”

“Heh, heh, heh. How about I just give you some money and you can buzz off?” he said, looking at Tooru and grinning.

“I-It’s not what you think!” She glared at her little brother, and then turned to Tooru.

“I’m sorry, Takashiro-san. This is my brother. I promised him we’d eat out somewhere today.”

“It’s fine. He didn’t really surprise me,” said Tooru coolly.

It was the truth. He’d heard the footsteps of someone running into the alley, trailing the two of them. Although he’d been stealthy about it, Tooru could tell that he wasn’t being especially cautious. From that, Tooru had deduced that it must have been a relative or someone on good terms with Akiko.

“So what’s the plan, onii-san? Are you gonna chat up my sister? If you’re into her, I can always back off,” said Hiroshi, laughing.

“H-Hiroshi!” Akiko raised her voice, turning red.

“Oh, no. Sorry, but I think your sister has just as much of a right to choose. I doubt a vagabond like me here would qualify,” Tooru said offhandedly.

“Oh yeah? You think?”

“Yeah. I’m afraid I don’t even attend school properly,” he stated openly.

“Hmm...”

Hiroshi peered at Akiko’s face. She looked a little hurt. Then Hiroshi asked in place of his sister.

“But you don’t seem like a bad type, right?”

“Hiroshi, would you shut up already?! It’s rude to Takashiro-san.”

As Akiko tried to give her brother a stern telling-off, a beeping sound came from his breast pocket.

“Ah, it’s feeding time. Hold on a sec.”

Hiroshi took out a small, white, egg-shaped handheld game console from his pocket. The bonus minigame for the one he was playing at home⁹ was synced with his watch, configured so that it would update over time. The character would speak up when it levelled up or when it was hungry, and demand actions from him, like “feeding.”

⁹ While largely irrelevant to the story, this confirms exactly what Hiroshi’s portable console is. It is most likely supposed to be an imitation of the Dreamcast VMU (virtual memory unit). It was a memory card that you could play small mini games on. The most well-known use of this is in Sonic Adventure’s minigame, Chao Adventure, which released in 1998 (just before this novel released). Basically, imagine that Pokemon was a home-console game, but you could unplug a little pocket game and use your save data to do random stuff on the go.

But Hiroshi looked at the small LCD screen and gasped in surprise. The chibi¹⁰ plushie-like character that had been showing up until now was gone, leaving only the word <EMBRYO> in small letters at the center of the screen.

And, from the small internal speaker, a strange voice leaked out.

...Kill me.

Tooru thought he heard a low, male voice.

“What? What did that thing say just now?”

“Whuh? Is it bugged...?”

Hiroshi tried fiddling with all the buttons, showing no reaction to the bizarre voice.

“That’s a weird game you’re playing there. What’s it called? Did it say ‘kill me’?” asked Tooru.

Hiroshi stared at him.

“Huh? I never said anything like that.”

“No, not you. There was a voice that came from the game, right?”

“What? No, not really?” Hiroshi shook his head.

¹⁰ A common Japanese term for something that has short proportions, making it cute.

“But I could have sworn...” Tooru began, then his face tensed with a sudden realization and immediately yanked Akiko toward him.

“Wha...?” she started, but before she even had the time to blush, he followed through and pushed her over to her brother. And right after that, he turned his back to the two of them, staring sharply ahead of him.

A group of three—two men and one woman—were walking up to them. Tooru glared at them. The three of them wore dark coats, and the woman was wearing a blue body suit beneath that; they were the sort of garments you might see in a cheap gangster flick.

“.....Huh?”

“Who the hell are you?” The trio looked at Tooru standing between them and the siblings, as if trying to shield them, and frowned.

“Hey, Hiroshi,” Tooru asked to Hiroshi behind him, “ever seen these guys before?”

“Huh? Uh, no, but...”

“Well, it looks like they’ve been following you, is all I’m saying.” When Tooru said this, the expression everyone’s faces changed.

“...What?” “What are you talking about?” shouted the siblings, and the trio stepped back slightly, poising for a fight.

“...Well? You going to answer our question?”



“You name yourselves first. You all reek of bloodlust,” said Tooru dauntlessly, and the trio exchanged glances. Then, one of the men spoke up.

“We have no business with the likes of you. It’s that brat you’ve got we’re after,” he said, casting a sharp glance at Hiroshi.

“M-me?” Hiroshi, who was behind Tooru, tensed up.

“That’s right. You should have picked up you-know-what from Sidewinder¹¹. We’ll be taking that from you now.”

“Y, you-know-what? What’s that? I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Hiroshi waved his hands around, not understanding what was going on. There was something awfully shady about the three of them. And, looking at their faces, you had to wonder if they were even Japanese.

“Don’t play dumb. We’ve already confirmed that you were the last one to intercept that traitor. We don’t know what form *it’s* taking right now, but everything’ll be just fine if you just hand it over like a good kid. Otherwise...”

¹¹ Sidewinder is most likely a reference to the Jazz album and song by Lee Morgan

He spoke quietly, but with a distinct severity to his voice; it was evidently a threat.

“H-Hiroshi, what is this? What are these people saying?”

Akiko demanded answers from her brother, but Hiroshi just shook his head furiously. Tooru stepped in to make sure.

“You’re sure you don’t know anything?”

“Y-yeah!”

“...There’s your answer. Sure you haven’t got the wrong person? I mean look at him—he’s just a normal middle schooler. I don’t see how he’d be involved with a dangerous-looking bunch like you.”

“Who are you to keep mouthing off like that, eh? You trying to play the white knight? Keep that up and you’re gonna be in a world of pain.”

Tooru smirked.

“I’m not a knight...”

But the man wasn’t interested in waiting for Tooru to finish his sentence; he lunged at him without provocation with the club-shaped weapon he’d been concealing in his hand.

However, Tooru’s movements were quicker still. He immediately grabbed the man’s hand and lightly caught the tip of his foot; in the next instant, the man’s body whirled around

and was slammed down into the ground. A dumpster full of empty cans was shoved away with the impact, its contents spilling out with a noisy clatter.

“...Guoh!”

Speaking to the man writhing on the ground, Tooru finished his sentence.

“I’m a samurai.”

Even Akiko and Hiroshi, who’d quickly leapt back, watched the stunning display in round-eyed wonder.

“H-he’s strong...” Hiroshi murmured in a daze.

The remaining man and woman assumed a guarded stance and moved a step back.

“...Not bad,” said the woman quietly, but with a tone that seemed almost mocking. “But I see that your moves are self-taught. Guess you aren’t backed by the Organization.”

Tooru sullenly focused his attention on the woman. He’d been concentrating on the two men, but now he realized that the long-haired woman had the sharpest eyes out of the three. Her gaze pierced him from the shadow of her long forelocks.

Then, the woman and remaining man began to use a different language, incomprehensible to Tooru and the others.

“He’s not from the Towa Organization. No need to panic,” said the woman, to which the man nodded with a grunt.

“What’s the plan, Pearl?” he asked.

The fact that he was asking the woman suggested that she was their “commander.”

Around them, people who’d heard the commotion had begun to gather, wondering what the fuss was about.

“It’s a fight!” a voice cried from the crowd.

“We’re drawing attention here. Killing these guys would be easy, but if we did that, our “pursuers” would catch our scent. If we take it now, our pursuers will be able to focus on a single target. There’s a high probability we won’t be able to escape them,” muttered the woman called “Pearl” as she looked at Tooru. Then she switched back to Japanese.

“So... You called yourself a ‘samurai,’ did you?”

“Nn?” Tooru was slightly taken aback by the woman’s expression, for she was smiling at him sweetly, with her attractive looks. Yet, it was a smile that belied the scent of something warped and wicked behind it.

“Alright. I’ll let you hold onto it for now. Perhaps you might even have the ‘potential to break through.’ If that

happens, then you'll be a fellow member of The Diamonds¹² like us."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"You'll know soon enough."

Then "Pearl" and the man, leaving the other one lying on the ground, turned on their heels and walked away from that place. It was as if they'd taken flight without the slightest hesitation, without sparing a single thought for the comrade they'd abandoned.

"H-hey! Wait!" cried Tooru, who, on the other hand, was considerably shaken. But as he tried to call them down and chase after them, the man who'd been on the ground suddenly got up.

"...How dare you!"

The man rushed at Tooru, darting past Hiroshi and Akiko. He moved strangely, having apparently sprained his foot.

"Now you've really done it!"

Tooru spun around. His brow furrowed. Shaky as he was, the man was holding a gun. And its barrel was pointed directly at Tooru.

¹² The group's name, as well as 'Pearl' are both a reference to the Album and song "Diamonds and Pearls" by Prince & New Power Generation.

“...How dare you humiliate me like this!”

His eyes were bloodshot. He seemed to be in a frenzy thanks to his comrades abandoning him.

“Resorting to guns, are we?” said Tooru, preserving an air of calm.

Then he casually lowered his gaze and noticed something.

“Hm? Hey, Hiroshi, looks like you dropped something in the commotion,” he said and stooped down to pick up the egg-shaped portable device lying on the ground. Seeing Tooru’s continued indifference drove the man into an even greater frenzy.

“Don’t try to fuck with-“ The moment he tried to level his gun at him again, Tooru squatted down and then, from a crouching start, pushed off the ground with a thud and launched himself into the man.

“...Uagh!”

Both the man and Tooru tumbled head over heels and fell to the ground. A bullet fired from the gun, glancing off the concrete wall of a building with a bang.

“Kyaaaah!” screamed Akiko. Then, from behind, somebody tightly gripped her shoulder. She turned and was speechless. Because she knew who that somebody was.

“Get back,” they said calmly, and proceeded straight toward where the two were grappling. There was another gunshot, but this person paid no attention to it and grabbed the hand of the man still holding the gun. What had they done? They had, in one deft movement, plucked the man away from the struggling Tooru and sent him flying. The man flew headfirst into a trash can that had only recently been toppled over and, this time, fully lost consciousness.

“.....?!” Tooru was agape, staring at the sudden meddler. They hadn’t seemed to exert themselves at all. But the most surprising fact was that they were the one he’d been staring at before: it was that girl.

“K-Kirima Nagi...” slipped out Akiko’s voice in a whisper.

“Nagi...?”

Tooru—though he didn’t feel especially injured in any way—climbed unsteadily to his feet.

“S-so you’re...Nagi?”

“Onii-san, it’s all well and good playing the hero. But did you ever stop to think about the danger of stray bullets flying around the place?”

After Nagi had finished confirming that the man she'd fought was completely out cold, she turned to look at Tooru, then frowned.

“Hm?”

There was something off about Tooru. Oddly, he'd broken into a smile and was staring at Nagi with bright, sparkling eyes.

“So I wasn't wrong.. H-hey, you. The way you moved just now, that technique. It has to be... Just where did you—“

Then, without warning, he launched himself at Nagi.

“...Wah?!”

Taken by surprise, Nagi acted on reflex. With the foot sweep her master had drilled into her, she took down Tooru cleanly. Tooru fell to the ground and sprawled out; he hadn't tried to defend himself.

“W-what do you think you're doing?!” cried Akiko, lashing out at Nagi.

“H-hold on, I mean, he just came at me...” Even Nagi was uncharacteristically flurried. “Uh, hey... You okay?”

Nagi tried to help him to his feet, when suddenly Tooru's eyes flew open.

“Who did you learn that from? ...Was it from a man named ‘Gen’...?” he asked, then fell back unconscious.

“.....”

Nagi and Akiko, with Tooru passed-out and sandwiched between them, hesitantly exchanged glances.

“I don’t really get what’s going on,” Hiroshi, who’d been silent until now, said timidly to his sister and Nagi, who were both spacing out, “but maybe it’d be a good idea to get out of this place? Kind of seems like the police might show up or something..”

The noisy crowd of onlookers had quickly dispersed once the gunshots were fired. It was highly likely that someone had reported the danger.

“.....”

The three of them cast their eyes on Tooru. The big guy was passed-out peacefully, his face a little like that of a stray child who’d just found his parents.

* * * * *

It had happened back when Tooru was still in middle school.

Even during those years of growth, Tooru was tall. Back then he stood at 175cm, which regularly got him confused with for a university student. The middle school he attended wasn't especially reputable by any stretch, and, though he hadn't made a conscious attempt to behave or dress like one, Tooru soon found himself falling into the role of a kind of old-fashioned "bodyguard" to some school thugs.

Then, one day, he snapped. He learned that a recently enlisted kouhai¹³ of his—who had insisted on calling him aniki¹⁴—had been taking some stimulants sold by the local yakuza and was on the verge of getting addicted to them.

To his relief, the kouhai wasn't addicted enough that it would end up killing him, so he was able to recover and get back on his feet. But Tooru wasn't willing to just let it go like that. He sniffed out the yakuza who'd sold the drug and got a tip about a deal going down at the harbor and—of all things—recklessly crashed it all by himself.

¹³ An underclassman.

¹⁴ A term meaning "older brother." It's often used in gang hierarchies to show a tight bond between comrades. Or at least, that's the idea. Often times school kids use it to be cool with their friends and seem tough. Also worth noting that the term can sometimes be used for females doing the same thing.

Tooru did well. Or rather, his attempt went well. By the time they'd managed to pinned down, he'd already defeated thirteen men, leaving them in such a state that they'd have to be hospitalized for months. But, the odds had always been stacked against him. The attempt ended in his defeat as he was knocked down and a gun was pressed to his head.

“Drop dead, you nutcase braaaat!!!”

Bombarded by cursing, Tooru was prepared to die. He shut his eyes tight and felt the blood pounding in his ears. But no matter how long he waited, the moment didn't come.

“.....Hm?”

Furtively opening his eyes, an unbelievable scene spread out before him. A single... middle-aged man of middling height and build, who didn't seem very strong at all, was leaping around the place as if he were dancing. In his hands was what seemed to be some kind of long pole.

It was like watching magic.

Though he didn't seem to be exerting much strength, the man was blowing away the dozens of yakuza in the room one after another with just his pole, and those he felled did not get back up.

Even when his opponents rushed at him with guns, the bullets just never seemed to hit their mark. That was when Tooru became aware of the fact that guns were powerless so long as they didn't hit their mark. Once they'd all been taken care of, the middle-aged man walked leisurely up to the fallen Tooru.

"You've got skills," said the man, nodding in admiration. "Impressive for someone of your age. But one piece of advice for you: if you want to get your body moving, I'd recommend steering clear of brawls. Think about taking up a ball game, or athletics."

"W-why's that?" Tooru asked back, still in a daze. A wry smile appeared on the man's face.

"You're the type to get a tad too hot-headed. I used to be like that once. If you really must, I'd find something that gives you a clear distinction between 'winning' and 'losing.' If someone like you starts getting into fights...there won't be an end to it no matter how far you go."

Tooru blinked. He didn't really understand what the man was telling him.

"Just...who are you?"

“Ah. Right.” The strange middle-aged man thought for a moment, then looked at the pole in his hands and smirked. “Why don’t we just say...I’m a samurai,” he said drolly.

Then came voices in the distance.

“Gen, what are you doing around here?! You’re the one who said to leave the country—what good is it if you start sticking your neck into trouble?!”

Someone seemed to be calling the man.

“Ah, sorry about that. Just coming,” replied the middle-aged man. He threw away the stick, turned and finally left Tooru’s spot.

“.....” Tooru was dumbfounded.

After a time, once the force of the blows had left his body and the numbness had worn off, he staggered to his feet. But even still, as he stood in the center of the yakuza around him, groaning and unable to move, with broken limbs and ruptured insides, Tooru continued to gaze off into the direction of the mysterious man who’d called himself a “samurai.”

It was a story from years ago, but Tooru still remembered it all clearly, even when both of Tooru’s parents died in a traffic accident soon after that, leaving him all alone in the

world... He'd mourned them, of course, but still, for some reason, he felt that just thinking back to that time was enough for him to find the courage to face things, no matter the situation.

Though he'd been struck with misfortune, the existence of that strange man who'd called himself a "samurai" had put this young man's life back on track. And it had even went on to become his goal in life.

But the biggest problem with this goal... was that there was nothing concrete with which to grasp it, and it was unclear just how one would be able to attain it.

...That is, until he acquired a "clue."

* * * * *

After the scuffle in the city, the man who'd fired his gun was arrested by police. They'd hurried to the scene after someone reported him. By that time, the ones who'd been fighting with him were nowhere to be seen, so the police decided to detain him for now and take him in for questioning. However, the man continued to stay silent, and his identity remained unclear.

The police had no choice but to leave him in a detention room and observe him over time.

Then, late that night...

“.....”

The prisoner lay awake on the narrow bed of his cell; he'd been wide awake all night and his gaze was affixed to the ceiling. From the outside, he looked expressionless. His mouth was closed tightly, and his eyes stared directly ahead, unflinching.

But, to a certain type of person—a tennis player, for instance, who could gauge their opponent's condition when facing them in a match one on one—it was patently clear that the man's rigid expression conveyed only one sentiment: expectation.

Something below was sure to be approaching him, and he was waiting for it... Rather, he didn't have any other choice. And, to this man, there was nothing more terrifying than the act of waiting...

Fear.

The fear that it would inevitably come held the man's entire body in a vise, rendering him unable to move nor speak.

That man was the sole person left in the cell. With no one in the surrounding chambers, it was deathly silent. And, in that motionless world, at last, the prisoner showed a reaction. He spasmed as if tensing up, and the pupils of his eyes that stared up above him narrowed to a point.

Someone was standing there. They made to peer over the bed; they were already right next to the prisoner, without their realizing.

“.....!”

There hadn't been any sound. There were neither footsteps nor the clink of a jail key, but even before that, the prison guard who should have seen someone coming showed absolutely no reaction at the person standing right across from them.

He tried to spring up, but for some reason, couldn't move a muscle, as if his body had somehow turned to lead. He was paralyzed. The intruder had done something to him...but what? He would have known if he'd been touched or attacked in some way...but there was no sensation to suggest anything of the sort.

“You...”

The intruder wasn't all that tall, but his limbs were long, his figure slender and balanced. He had a childlike face, but there was a sharpness to it, lending him an air that made it difficult to call him a "boy." The clothes he wore were close-fitting and pale purple in color.

"You...don't have it, do you?" said the pale purple man quietly. He wasn't speaking Japanese.

".....!"

A cold sweat began to lash off the prisoner's face.

"Well then, who does have it right now...? Care to tell me?" asked the pale purple man coldly.

"U-uuugh...!"

"Who's got the 'Embyro'? That warrior, Sidewinder, was pretty formidable. He got away from me even after I'd dealt him a fatal blow, and he should have entrusted it to someone... So, who was it?" Then, the pale purple man smirked. "Y'see, I'm really curious... If such a great warrior in his final moments staked his life on someone to protect that thing, I'd love to know what sort of person they'd be. And, personally, I'd love to know whether they'd be someone worth fighting."

"Uuu... D-don't tell me, y-you're..." said the prisoner, his voice trembling. "Pearl told us about you... T-the one with a

compulsive desire for battle... Are you the one they call the 'Strongest'...?!"

Then at last, the prisoner screamed out, cried out in terror. No...he tried to cry out. But for some reason, his "voice" was erased the moment it left his throat and didn't get any further. The vibrations in the air that should have been rippling out would not spill into the open, as if there were a vacuum stopping it along the way. They didn't even reach the prison guard who should have been right there, mere meters away from him.

"...!"

"Now...you have two choices," proposed the pale purple man quietly. "We make a deal. I'm sure you must want to know more about the Towa Organization. I'll tell you everything I know about them, so long as you tell me what you know in exchange. That's the first option."

The prisoner was trembling violently, and upon this, the man layered his gentle voice.

"And the other option is where you don't speak, and I torture you. But I don't enjoy doing that. I'm not a fan of toying with the weak, y'see. So, if possible, that's something I want to avoid." He let out a sigh. "So, what's it gonna be?"

The prisoner immediately began blurting out everything he knew just as soon as the pale purple man had finished. He spoke of the boy who'd last contacted Sidewinder, and about his sister and the large man. But he wasn't able to talk about the girl, Kirima Nagi, who'd actually knocked him unconscious. De'd been taken by surprise, so he hadn't even realized he'd been knocked out.

"...I see." The man nodded. "A kid, his sister, and a man presumed to be her lover."

Then he turned back to the prisoner.

"Whew, you helped me out big-time. Then, as promised, let me tell you what I know."

"N-no, you don't have to tell me anything like that!" The prisoner shook his head violently.

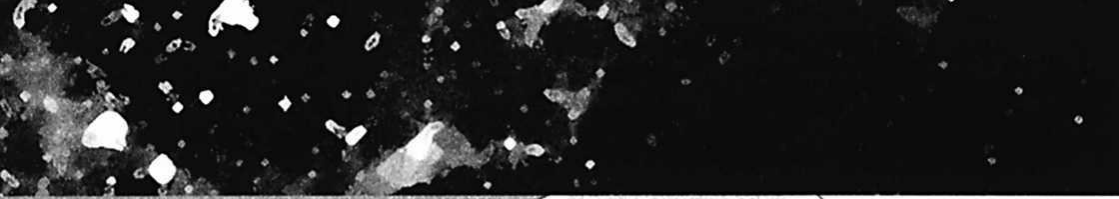
"Now, don't say that... As far as I understand it, the Towa Organization..."

Here the man lightly raised two fingers. Out of nowhere, there was an extremely small, tube-shaped object between them.

"...shows not a shred of mercy towards its enemies."

And then the man tossed the tube away. But there was no longer anyone there to see it.

...A few minutes later, the prison guard, thinking it was a little too quiet, came over to check on the prisoner. He appeared to be sleeping normally, so he turned straight back around. But at this point, the prisoner was already dead, and later examination discovered that, inside his skull, a section of the blood vessel leading to the brain was missing. Its rupture was deemed the cause of death, but no one could have ever deduced that the missing part of the blood vessel was, in fact, lying there on the prison floor.



“It learns of sound by the beat of its heart
and the flow of its blood...”

Ker-crick... Girr-rack... Mk-kreek...

In the darkness of one of the city's many crevices, sounds like these could be heard.

"...But Pearl, are you sure we really need to go *that* far?" A man's voice interrupted the sounds.

"We can't be too careful. Besides, it's possible that our 'samurai' might have already 'broken through'. We'd do well to be vigilant," added a woman's voice.

"Still... You think they'll really fall for it?"

In response to the apprehensive man, the woman replied, brimming with confidence, "I know men like him all too well... When given the option to act or wait, his type will act. His pride in his 'strength' will lead him headfirst into our trap of his own will.

"....."

"Now then... How do I look?" As the bizarre sounds subsided, the woman stepped out from the darkness, and standing there was a young high-school girl.

"Well?" Her voice was now different from the one she'd had up until now, one with a more youthful timbre.

"...Practically identical." The man took one look at her and heaved an audible sigh.

* * * * *

I, Taniguchi Masaki, a 15-year-old high-school student, had been in high spirits since morning.

A small matter involving my school's strict rules had been keeping me holed up in the school dormitory the past few weeks.¹⁵ Most of that time was spent in lesson after lesson of supplementary classes; however, today was the day I was finally allowed to go out somewhere. I'd finished a little errand I'd promised to do for a friend, and now, a little after noon, I was finally free. While walking down the street, I found myself humming away as my legs threatened to break into a skip and a hop. I made a beeline straight home, taking the shortest possible route.

My parents live abroad for their work so they aren't at home. Instead, I live together with Nagi-nee-san; though, she's

¹⁵ The "small matter" was explained in Boogiepop at Dawn. Masaki was absent from school too much during the events of VS Imaginator, so he was confined to his dorm. This puts a more definite timeline on when these events take place compared to At Dawn's present events and the events of VS Imaginator.

not related to me. That said, there's also supposed to be a friend of mine in Nagi-nee-san's care living here as well, a girl named Orihata Aya.

And it's...kind of embarrassing to say, but...I like Orihata, and it seems like she doesn't entirely dislike me, either.

Though I haven't properly confirmed that yet¹⁶.

“Tehehe...”

A grin crept onto my face. And so, I arrived at my abode, a detached house in a cozy corner of the residential district.

However, as I touched the gate, I noticed something odd: the knob was unusually stiff. It felt as if it hadn't been used for some time, like dust had clogged it up.

“.....”

I had a bad feeling.

Cautiously, I continued up to the entrance and stood before it. The door was locked, which wasn't particularly unusual. It was entirely possible that nee-san and the rest weren't in. But I didn't try to enter from there. Instead, I made my way 'round to the back entrance. One may think me a bit

¹⁶ Some may be wondering “what? I thought they were going out.” In Japan, there tends to be a certain order to these things. Masaki never properly confessed and asked to go out with her romantically, so they aren't technically a couple yet.

too wary, but my childhood years abroad had, by all accounts, given me plenty cause to be cautious.

Naturally I had a spare key, so I was able to get in through the back without any difficulty. But in the moment I entered, I was lost for words.

“.....Wha?!”

The back entrance was connected directly to the kitchen. It was the place where I made all my food before I'd been accepted into the dorm, among other things.

But now...I couldn't smell *anything*. The sparkling clean sink indicated that not a drop of water had run from its faucet, and the chopping board that stood to the side of it was bone dry. And...there was nothing there. No cups laid out to dry, no sponge, no scouring brush, no salt, sugar or condiments, no spring onions that should have been bundled up for emergency seasoning... Nothing.

Plus, it was too quiet. There was no power to the fridge, and hence no humming noise from it.

...It was as if there wasn't a trace of anyone living there. A vacant house. And there was one other thing that worried me...

W-what the hell is going on here...?

Mentally telling myself to calm down, I moved farther into the house. Muffling my footsteps, I left the corridor and headed toward the living room. I sensed someone's presence that way. There shouldn't have been anyone in there, and yet there was.

Don't tell me it's someone involved with Orihata...?

I'd thought that all the trouble with her was over...

But whoever it is, I'm not letting them do anything terrible to Orihata ever again...!

Coming to a kind of resolve, I steeled myself and approached the presence. But the moment I stepped into the room, I froze.

All my resolve and preparation were blown away just like that because the guy standing in front of me was so incredibly bizarre and surreal.

"...Are you Taniguchi Masaki?" he spoke out to me. But I didn't know what to say.

"What the..." My voice slipped out.

If I had to describe him in one word, I'd have said he was...

A samurai?

He wore a kimono and hakama. It was the kind of getup everyone had seen plenty of times in period plays and Edo-

themed theme parks and stuff. On top of that, despite being a huge jumbo-size of a man, his clothes were wholly too small and too short for him.

In his hand was a *bokken*¹⁷. And with one swift motion, he pointed it at me.

“I humbly request a lesson.” Much like his anachronistic appearance, his words were old-fashioned too.

“W-who the heck are you? How’d you get in here?” I tried to ask, but in the next moment he was already upon me.

“...Wah!”

I dodged to the side, avoiding him. The *bokken* made a heavy noise as it connected with the floor.

“W-what are you doing?!” I cried, and again he came at me.

I did my best to run, but the living room was hardly spacious. My avenues of escape were limited, and so he closed in on me, using his sword to strike the sofa, table, and everything in his way.

“...Goddamn it, what the hell is happening?!”

¹⁷ Literally a wooden sword. Normally, we’d just call it that, but this tends to resemble something specific at times. Plus, Takashiro is in a full samurai outfit, so it seems fitting.

I finally snapped. Why? Because I was supposed to have come home in a good mood, happy to see Orihata again after a long while. But instead, there was some weird samurai attacking me for no reason!

I turned to face the damn samurai. He in turn abruptly shifted his stance to confront me. The bastard was grinning, which only made me angrier.

I assumed the *seiken*¹⁸ stance and closed the gap between us a step. He did the same.

.....

I glanced down to check my footing. And in that instant, he struck.

Except, having received several of his attacks now, I already knew.

Staying in position, I threw out my fist—not straight out in front, but diagonally downward. It caught my opponent’s sword mid-swing and drove it aside. As I’d thought, he was simply swinging it down from above with all his might, so that giving it a little ‘nudge’ would easily change its course and carry along the body of its wielder in the process.

¹⁸ The closest thing to this I can find is a karate term that means “fore fist.” It seems to refer to the proper way of making a fist to punch someone.

“...Ah!” For an instant I saw the samurai’s face go rigid. He must have realized that with his arms extended, his abdomen was now totally exposed.

He was correct. But it was too late.

“...Fu-HOH!”

With an expulsion of air I drove my fist into the pit of his stomach, and he slumped slowly to the ground.

I picked up his collapsed body and looked around the room, deciding to tie him up for now with the electric cord of the floor lamp.

“...What a mess,” I said with a sigh, and tried once more to try and get a grasp of the situation.

Just who is this guy...?

What was clear was the fact that he was really a complete beginner with the sword. All he’d done was swing it around recklessly without a shred of skill. Despite that, his body itself was sharp and nimble. In that sense alone he was no amateur. But what did this mean?

Hmm...

As I was lost in thought, the phone in the living room began to ring and I almost leapt out of my skin. Even so, I decided to pick up.

“...Hello?” I asked cautiously. Suddenly, on the other end of the receiver...

“Oh, hey Masaki, is that you? I guess that means you won, huh,” came a familiar voice.

“N-Nagi-nee-san!” I cried.

“How many times have I told you, quit it with the ‘*nee-san*’! Sounds so damn childish.”

“W-what’s going on? Why is the house empty? Where’s Orihata?!”

“Oh, she’s staying in my apartment. The house is unoccupied right now.”

“B-but I never heard anything about this!”

“Yeah, ‘cause I never told you.” She stated it so casually my jaw dropped. “But Masaki, you’ve called Aya from school plenty of times, right? She still never mentioned it to you, huh? Anyway, that’s about the size of it.”

“...What are you talking about?”

I felt despondent. Orihata wasn’t the kind of person to chat about things from her side. She must have thought that *nee-san* was always telling me these things. That’s why she wouldn’t have told me. ...At least, that’s what I’d like to believe.

“By the way, what happened to Takashiro-san?”

“Takashiro? ...What, you mean the weird samurai guy?”

“Yeah, that’s him. You haven’t killed him, I hope?” said Nagi, casually throwing out an outrageous question.

“You know this guy, Nagi?” I said, raising my voice.

“Nah, I don’t know much about him. Just...”

“Just?”

“Seems like he really admired Sakakibara-sensei, so I figured I should introduce him to you, with you being his number one student and all.”

Sakakibara-sensei was my master; he’d taught me some stuff like karate and self-defense techniques while I was abroad. He was also a friend of nee-san’s.

“I-Introduce? The guy just launched himself at me for Christ sake!”

“Nah, that’s just ‘cause I told him he should try taking you on,” she said off-handedly.

Gob-smacked, I spoke with trembling words.

“S-so then...are you telling me all this is your fault?!”

She nodded with a succinct “Yeah.”

“I should also add that I was the one who gave Takashiro those ‘clothes.’ They’re Sensei’s old things. He was pretty keen

on them. Though I don't get why Sensei even had those clothes. Wonder if he was an extra in a movie or something," she joked.

I remained silent; I was in no mood to laugh. I knew that sometimes nee-san could be a handful, but this time she'd well and truly...screwed me.

"...A-anyhow, I'm heading over there now, okay?!" I answered forcefully, collecting myself.

"Fine by me, but if it's Aya you're looking for, she's not here today." Her words came as a surprise.

"Huh? But she's supposed to have time off on weekends..."

Orihata was attending a specialist cooking academy for professional training.

"Seems she was handpicked by the principal to assist him with pre-cooking preparation. It's been hard work. She even had to go fetch some kind of ingredients yesterday."

"I never heard about this."

"You wouldn't have, because I didn't say a word to her about you 'coming back.'"

"B-but why?" My voice, practically a pitiful cry at this point, was met with nee-san's calm response.

“Okay, listen to me. This the perfect chance for her to study. I can’t just let her squander it because she’s thinking about you, can I? Aya’s doing the best she can right now. If you care about her too, you better keep yourself focused.”

“I..I get that, but there was no need to shut up about it entirely, was there?”

“That girl still hasn’t gotten out of her habit of getting super conscious about the things people say to her. Can you imagine how crap it’d be if she screwed up at a crucial moment because she was thinking too much about you?”

“.....”

I had no room for argument.

I felt my feelings of happiness at being able to see Orihata wilt. Still...even so...

“...Then why couldn’t you have told me about any of this earlier, Nagi?” I grumbled.

“Eh, because I just felt like teasing you,” she admitted offhandedly.

I wasn’t in any mood to retort.

Just then, there was a groan from behind me.

“Ah...looks like he’s awake.” This “Takashiro-san” or whoever the heck he was that Nagi had gotten involved with had stirred from his unconscious state.

* * * * *

Takashiro Tooru heard a voice from the darkness.

“Hey you. Yeah, you. You hearin’ me?”

...What? Where is this? I can’t see a thing.

“Eh, who cares about that? You can hear my voice, can’t ya, buddy?”

What is this...? Err, what happened to me again? ...Ahh! That’s right. I went toe to toe with the student of that “Samurai” and then...

“Can you quit babblin’ and listen for one second?!”

What are you talking about? I’m unconscious, aren’t I? So this must mean I’m in a dream, right? Pretty irritating for a dream.

“Dream? Heh, look at Mr. Know-It-All here. You don’t even realize you’ve ‘broken through.’”

Broken through? What?

“The name’s Embryo. And you were able to hear my voice... That means you’ve already been ‘infected.’ And that last battle just pulled the trigger. I mean hey, you just happened to come across your long-cherished desire. That beautifully fulfils the conditions in my book.”

...Hm? What do you mean?

“You ever wonder what people live for?”

What are you talking about?

“People live to ‘battle the possibilities within themselves’... At least, I was created as a weapon for that purpose. I exist to ‘draw out the dormant power within a person.’”

...Yeah, I still don’t get what this is about. You’re making about zero sense. If this is a dream, explain it to me in simple terms.

“A certain psychologist once likened the human heart to an egg... He said that it hides within its shell, fostering delusions, hatred—concepts like that—of its own volition. Now, exactly what it’s amassing, no one knows, not even the person themselves. But those things are there, no question about it, waiting patiently for the day they’ll eventually break out from that shell... One person even called it a ‘time bomb.’”

...A shell?

“Yeah. And I react to that shell, like a kind of wavelength? Something like that. You know those tuning forks? The ones that can shatter glass ‘n shit by emitting a certain type of sound? Same sort of thing. By the time folks can hear my voice, their shell’s already fragile. With the right stimulus, you can easily break it...and come out to the surface.”

Wha... Huh...? Can you speak in Japanese, please? None of this is sinking in.

“You really ain’t the sharpest tool in the shed, are ya? All I am is an echo left in your head. That means I’ve already ‘sunk in.’ The only words I’m using are ones that you’d understand. And you’re telling me ya still don’t get it?”

...Hey, shut up. Though I’ll admit I’m not very smart.

“Unbelievable. ‘Course, you being such a fool’s probably the reason you were able to concentrate on one thing so single-mindedly and ‘break through’ so easily. But I gotta warn ya, that alone isn’t enough.”

Not enough? What’s not enough? What’s this ‘breaking through’ even about, anyway?

“You’re gonna have to come to my side one more time... That’s when your ‘talent’ will finally be complete. Yeah, it’s not enough to just break the shell... You gotta have the

strength to come out, else you're just gonna stay inside that shell with a hole in it and kick the bucket. What's the first thing an animal does after it comes out of its shell? That's right, they breathe. I'll give you your first breath. Then—hallelujah!—your 'talent' will come to fruition. That is...on one condition."

...What condition?

"That's right. If you wanna become a true 'samurai'... If you wanna gain that power, then after you find me...you gotta kill me."

Kill...you say?

"It's a promise, you got that? You kill me, and I make you a samurai. That's the condition..."

* * * * *

"Urrgh..."

Takashiro Tooru awoke with a groan. He felt as if he'd been having a strange dream. But as is typical of dreams, his memory of it was hazy. He tried to stretch and then noticed.

"...Huh?"

He'd somehow been rolled up in an electric cord and his arms wouldn't budge an inch.

"Ah, uhm..."

Hearing a voice, he looked up to see Masaki Taniguchi, the boy who'd given him a thrashing, looking at him with a worried expression.

"Ahh, you're Masaki-san, right?!" Tooru's eyes lit up. "I'm so sorry about before. I was just so desperate to have a real bout between us! I'm Takashiro Tooru. Sakakibara Gen-sensei once saved my life!"

His bright, cheerful words only served to furrow Masaki's brow further.

"Erm, about that... I think you might be getting the wrong impression of me here. I'm not especially, uh, Master's number one student or anything," Masaki tried to reason things out, but Tooru wasn't having it.

"Not at all! You displayed tremendous skill! Even as you took me out, you made it explicitly clear why I lost!"

Tooru wasn't in the least bit bitter about his loss, speaking his true feelings with the utmost admiration.

“Hmm...” grumbled Masaki. Eventually, though, he sighed. “Well, I heard what the deal is from my sister just now... Um, I guess I should undo your bindings.”

“Oh, actually, I don’t really mind either way,” said Tooru calmly.

“...I mind. I don’t feel comfortable talking to someone who’s tied up when they’re smiling at me,” scowled Masaki as he loosened the cord that Tooru was bound up in.

“...What did you just do?” Again, Tooru inquired.

“Mm? I just undid your bindings.”

“But they were steel tight! You slipped them off like they were nothing.”

“Oh, well that’s kind of a thing I learned from my mas-”

Masaki shut his mouth mid-sentence as the realization dawned on him; but it was too late, Tooru was gazing at him with even greater admiration.

Uhh...

Though Masaki was bemused, deep down he admired the guy.

Master sure is popular in strange places... Even though when he was with me, all he did was fool around.

Before he realized, he was smirking.

“What is it?” Tooru inquired, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Oh, nothing. Anyway, what was it you wanted to ask me? If it’s something I know, I guess I can tell you about Master.”

Masaki’s mood had improved somewhere along the way.

...Having said that, I didn’t really know all that much about him so all my answers kind of ended up fragmented.

“Yeah, see, even if you ask me where he is, I couldn’t really tell you. He’s essentially a drifter.”

“But he has been in contact with you, hasn’t he, Masaki-san?”

“Occasionally, yeah. ...Listen, Tooru-san.”

“Yes?”

“Um, could you quit being so polite? You’re older than me after all, and it’s totally fine if you just call me Masaki.”

“Mmm... You say that, but you are ranked above me as a student,” Tooru said straight up, without a trace of embarrassment.

“But that’s just it. From what you told me, Master met you before I met him. In that sense, that makes you my senpai.”

“Hmm... Well, if you say so. But in that case, I’d ask that you call *me* Tooru.”

“Sure, fine by me. Now, about what you were saying... In a lot of cases, there wasn’t much I could do. When Master contacts me, he always phones me from his end—that or he’ll send me a postcard or something. Given that I don’t know where he is.”

“So he phones you? What do you talk about?”

“Always kind of trivial stuff, actually. Sometimes he phones just because he wants to hear some Japanese. Oh yeah, come to think, the last time we spoke was around winter last year. Seems he had a daughter¹⁹. He was over the moon about that.”

“A...daughter? Did he get married?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe he has a partner? I didn’t ask him about the details.”

Never mind the details—Master had gone on rambling so much about how auspicious an event it was, I couldn’t get a word in edgeways, and then he was like “Ah, I’m out of

¹⁹ Chances are he was talking about Kit from Boogiepop in the Mirror: Pandora. Timeline matches up with that, given that the Gang of Six found Kit on a snowy day.

money. Later,” and hung up just like that. I figured there was nothing to worry about if he was that happy. I told nee-san about it, but she just feigned mild interest and that was that.

“A daughter, huh...” Tooru was deep in thought with a somewhat complex expression.

“Really though, like I was saying, Master’s not the serious kind of guy you make him out to be. Though I can’t deny that he’s skilled.”

“He is, isn’t he? I knew he would be...”

“At least that aspect is probably the way you’re envisioning it. But I think that might just be his talent. I don’t think he refined it by incorporating and carefully analyzing moves or anything. So I doubt he’s the type of guy who’d be good at teaching people anything. He never taught me any kind of secret arts, for a start.”

“But you’re strong too, aren’t you, Masaki?”

Tooru’s language was starting to show its true colors as he became progressively curter²⁰, but this just made him easier to talk to.

²⁰ Japanese uses many levels of respectful speech depending on who you’re talking to. This ties in to the conversation they had earlier about using “-san.” Basically, Tooru’s forgetting the respectful speech he was using earlier as they talk. In Japan, this is often associated with people becoming closer.

“Hah, hardly. I’m nothing compared to Master.”

This much was true. Master was incredibly strong, and I didn’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell against him. I’d faced him many times in the three years we spent together, morning, noon and night, but I could still clearly count the number of times I’d landed a blow on him.

“Then, what did you learn from him?”

“Hmm...”

I was stumped. Not because I was at a loss for words—on the contrary, it was the opposite. Master had been telling me things almost incessantly, but it was a little difficult for me to tell that to Tooru because he was sure to be disappointed—or should I say, confused.

“No killer techniques?” he asked with eyes a sparkle. As I suspected, he had high expectations.

“No, nothing like that... Though I guess there was something like a secret maxim.”

“Secret maxim?! P-please, would you teach it to me?!”

He drew closer. Reluctantly, I repeated what Master had told me exactly as he’d said it, word for word. Tooru’s eyes widened.

“...What?”

“That’s what he told me. It means... Well, he said it meant something like ‘think for yourself.’”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“.....” Tooru just sat there with mouth agape.

“That’s just how it is with Master—he’s actually an intellectual who’s released a number of books. He always tells me profound stuff like that.”

“Books?” Again, his eyes lit up.

“Well, it was co-authored with Nagi’s, uh, late father. The name Sakakibara Gen doesn’t come up, though.”

“...I never knew there was something like that! Y-you don’t happen to have it, do you?”

“Not to hand, I’m afraid...”

If the house hadn’t been vacant, it would have been in nee-san’s room, though.

“Is it being sold in bookshops?”

“...I wouldn’t even be able to tell you what kind of book to look for.”

Tooru stood up.

“Huh? W-where are you-“

“To Nagi-san’s! Let’s head back right now!”

No sooner had he said that than he dashed off, still decked out like a samurai.

“H-hold on a second!”

Hurriedly, I chased after him, finding myself somehow unable to let him run off as he pleased.

* * * * *

Her parents hadn't come back yet, so Akiko Honami was off in her own world, standing in the kitchen-diner of the apartment that was her home.

On the table before her lay her little brother's portable gaming device. Tooru had left it with her after what had happened. The numbers on its clock feature were keeping the time on the tiny screen.

“.....”

She was staring vacantly at it. The data entered onto it yesterday hadn't been transferred onto the main game console because she hadn't given it back to her brother yet. With everything that happened that day, he'd forgotten all about it, and so the small trinket was still in the same state it had been in.

“.....”

“What’s up, nee-chan?” asked her little brother, Hiroshi, who was watching TV in the living room.

“.....”

But she didn’t answer, still staring at the little egg-shaped device.

“Hey, nee-chan!”

“...Shut up! I can hear you just fine. It’s nothing,” said Akiko huffily.

“...Hey, Nee-chan. Who’d you think that Kirima girl was?”

“How should I know?”

“To be honest, I was a little scared of her. She a friend of yours?”

“I just told you, I don’t know her! She’s not exactly a friend.”

The sister was openly expressing her displeasure. The brother sighed and went back to watching TV. A soccer match was lazily going on. The announcer was commenting on narrowly missed shots and nice saves from the keeper and so on.

“.....”

Against that backdrop, Akiko continued to stare intently at the table's surface.

[Heh, heh, heh. Seems like your little brother can't hear me, huh.]

There was a voice coming from the egg. It had been speaking to her for a while now.

“.....”

Akiko stayed completely silent.

[Now then, I figure you're thinkin' something like this: 'Have I started hearing things? My god, am I going insane?' Well, sorry to tell ya, but you're wrong... This is happening 'cause our two wavelengths have matched up.]

“.....”

[You've only got a 'little more' to go. Just a tiny l'il bit more, just a teensy push and you could make it somehow... I can break that shell for you.]

“.....”

[But on one condition. You've gotta help me out and kill me. I'm so damn tired of 'existing' already.]

“.....”

She'd first started hearing the voice just before she and her brother had been attacked by the mystery trio.

[...Please, kill me.]

Akiko was sure that was what it said. After the incident, she'd spent her time up until now unable to get her thoughts in order. But now...

“.....”

[Hey...]

She grabbed the portable device—which was still talking at her—put the attached chain around her neck and, pushing it inside her blouse, stood up from the table.

She had indeed been listening carefully. It wasn't just her who'd heard the “voice” back then. She was sure Takashiro Tooru had said there was a voice that came from the game... Maybe if she were with him, with Tooru, then they could puzzle out this bizarre situation together!

“...Huh? Are you going somewhere?” asked Hiroshi, to which she curtly replied “Work.”

“Whaat?! Then what about tonight's dinner?”

“I dunno, just go eat whatever you want.”

“Wait, really? Can I go get pizza?”

“Sure, go wild,” she said, hastily ending the conversation, and left the apartment.

“...Well, that was kinda weird.” Hiroshi tilted his head at his sister’s behavior, but just then a voice from the TV shouted “Goooooooooal!” and he quickly turned to focus on that.

And, after he’d engrossed himself in the match for a while, there echoed a metallic clink from the window that opened onto the veranda.

“.....?”

He recalled his mother telling him that cats pooped a lot in the plant pots on the veranda and stood up.

“Hey! Stupid cat-” he began, swinging the window open hard. Before him stood a man wearing an electronics company uniform.

“Wha-” Hiroshi shrunk back immediately.

“Tch,” said the man, clicking under his breath, then the next moment he suddenly thrust out what looked to be a metal bar aimed at Hiroshi. It buried itself square in the pit of his stomach and sent him flying.

“...Guah?!”

Hiroshi rolled across the floor, upturning the living room table and TV. His whole body felt numb, and he couldn’t move.

“.....”

Slowly, the man in worker's clothes entered the room and proceeded to look around, then did the same for the other rooms before eventually returning to the immobile Hiroshi.

"...Where's your sister?"

"...W-who the hell are you...?" he answered, his voice hoarse and unable to project.

"I *said*, where is your sister?"

The man took Hiroshi's hand and lightly twisted one of his fingers. It was such a slight motion, yet it sent excruciating pain through Hiroshi's whole body.

".....!"

He'd never heard of such torment. This...was the work of a professional. Though he wore worker's clothes, they were merely a disguise, and, in truth, he wasn't from anything even remotely like an electronics company.

W-what's going on around here...? First yesterday, now this...

Then mid-thought, it hit him. Was this guy associated with the people from last night?

"Your sister must have left during the few seconds I took to come down here from the roof. But you're still here... That

would suggest that this was a coincidence and that you weren't especially planning to escape. So 'Embryo' must still be here."

Again, the man levelled his metal bar at Hiroshi and pressed it hard into his side. It wasn't a huge amount of force, but Hiroshi experienced a dull, heavy pain, like taking a direct hit to the side from a baseball. The man had to be hitting pressure point on his internal organs.

"Now, you're going to speak... What has 'Embryo' possessed? What form has it assumed? And where would it be?"

"U-urrggh...!"

He didn't have a clue what the man was talking about, and nor could he endure the pain he was being subjected to.

Hiroshi was, at any rate, confused.

"You realize that if you don't answer, you're going to end up dead. If that's how this is going to go, then so be it. Your sister's bound to come back eventually—all I'd need to do is torture her as well."

".....!"

Hiroshi's eyes, clouded with confusion, focused at once. What had he said? He was planning on killing nee-chan too...?

Just as the man began to frown at how the boy had suddenly and fiercely glared back at him, from within the house rang the cheerful “Ping pong!” of the intercom.

“.....A visitor?”

The man assumed a guarded stance. The intercom rung again, this time multiple times.

Pingpongpingpongpingpong!

“Excuse meee! Got a delivery here!” came the sound of a young man’s voice.

But the man of course didn’t respond. Hiroshi wanted to call out, but he couldn’t do it; the man was constricting his windpipe.

“I said you’ve got a delivery here... Hellooo? Nobody at home?” The person on the other side of the door sounded frustrated. The man smirked.

“Yeah, no one here,” he whispered under his breath.

.....!

Just as Hiroshi’s face was contorting with agony...

“Hey goddamn it, don’t lie to me,” said a sharp voice in stark contrast.

And then the door, as if it hadn't been locked up in the slightest, opened completely normally, just as any door might do.

“Wha-...?!”

The man's eyes widened.

“Didn't your mother ever tell you that it's not good to lie?” the person on the other side of the door said quietly.

It was a boy. And yet somehow, there was an air of something that would make you think twice about calling him a boy, something menacing about him that suggested a grown man. He was wearing pale purple clothes that fit tightly to his body, and he had his hands in his pockets. But in that case...how had he been able to open the door that should have been locked until now?

“W-who the hell are...”

Even as the man spoke, this person marched his way into the room. The man pulled out a gun fitted with a silencer and, without any hesitation, aimed it at him and fired. But he simply kept walking, without even bothering to dodge.

...Several bullets that should have been fired at him had somehow vanished before they got to him.

“.....Huh?” went the man, unable to understand what was happening, and when the guy who’d boldly walked in casually swiped his hand to the side, the man’s head separated from his body and flew across the room.

There wasn’t a single drop of blood. But of course...his death was instantaneous.

“.....”

Hiroshi, still lying on the floor, could only flap his lips in a daze at the events that had unfolded. Just what the hell had happened? Just when some kind of unknown assailant had barged in uninvited a moment ago, now a different guy had shown up for no apparent reason and...

Hiroshi turned his eyes to the man’s body lying on the ground. His neck wound was smooth, like clay cut with wire.

He’d simply crumpled with a thud and, of course, lain there motionless. The *ba-tum* sound he’d heard from the opposite direction was likely the sound of the flying head falling to the floor.

“.....”

What the hell is going on around here...?

None of the events had set in as real for him yet. The words “Behead that man and stick his head on a pike” randomly came to mind.

“Hey there,” said the pale-purple man, turning to Hiroshi with a radiant smile. “You’ve had a rough time of it, huh. Err, you’re...Honami Hiroshi, as I recall?”

“.....”

“Ah, my bad. It’s only manners to introduce yourself before you ask someone else’s name, right? I’m Lee Maisaka. But you can call me Lee. Or, if you’d like, you could even call me by my nickname, ‘Fortissimo.’ I guess that one’s harder for you to use, though, huh?”

For someone in his mid-teens, his way of speaking was uncharacteristically mature.

“Lee...?”

“I’d come here to warn you that you were in danger...but it looks like I was just a moment too late. I’m really sorry about that.”

The one who’d called himself Lee Maisaka put a hand on his chest and lightly bowed. Though his features were Asian, his manners and mien were rarely something you’d see in a Japanese person.

“Danger...” he began, and then Hiroshi suddenly realized.
“T-that’s right! If I was attacked, then my sister...”

“Oh? Where’s your sister? Outside?” asked Lee softly.

Behind those seemingly tranquil eyes, for just a moment, there writhed something dark and chilling.



3

“That premonition of what lies outside - a
world it cannot possibly imagine - makes it
stir...”

“.....?”

Suddenly, Tooru spun around.

He was on the riverside road that led from my house, the Taniguchi residence, to Nagi nee-san’s apartment. It was past time for students to be filtered out from school, and there was no one to be seen in the area.

“Masaki—did you hear that?”

“What’s the matter?” I inquired.

Tooru’s eyes darted around him.

“Huh... Could’ve sworn someone called out my name,” he said.

I strained my ears to listen. “I...don’t hear anything.”

There hadn’t been a soul on the road for as far as the eye could see, and that was still the case.

“Maybe it wasn’t a voice...but there was something. Something directed at me...” he muttered, still wary of his surroundings.

He wasn’t making any sense to me, but the way he was behaving felt like how Nagi nee-san and Master were when they got serious. It put me on edge as well.

And then it happened.

In the direction we were headed—KRR-RASH!—a loud noise echoed, as if something had been violently crushed. It was distant, but the fact we'd been able to hear it meant it must have been pretty loud; it was highly likely that there had been an accident.

“.....!”

We briefly exchanged glances and then hurried in the direction of the noise.

Black smoke was rising. The source, a burning scooter that had been overturned and plowed into the guardrail.

“Where's the rider...?”

We approached the scooter. There was a woman lying down on the ground next to it. Tooru ran up to her.

“Hey, are you all right?”

He made to lift her up, but before he could the woman herself embraced Tooru.

“Takashiro-san!”

Tooru was taken aback.

“H-Honami-san?”

“You know her? Hey, lady, you shouldn't be moving right now.”

After checking that there was no risk of another explosion from the scooter, I approached them as well.

“T-Takashiro-san! It was terrible...”

The woman’s name was Honami-san, it seemed. In fact, now that I’d gotten a proper look at her, our ages didn’t seem to be that far apart. Rather than a woman, she was a girl, and that girl now spoke with urgency in her voice. She didn’t seem to have any noticeable injuries, and it didn’t look like she’d hit her head. Her gaze was steady, her upper body wasn’t shaking... Perhaps she’d been lucky. But the girl herself seemed to be in no mood to praise her good fortune.

“I was looking for you, Takashiro-san!” she said, clinging to him tightly, as if wringing out her words.

“H-hold on a second, Honami-san. Y-you’re not injured or anything?” Tooru’s face was bright red—it seemed he wasn’t used to women.

“That’s not important right now! Our house got attacked by some strange people—”

“What?! Those guys from yesterday didn’t come for payback did they?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know anything anymore! I even got split from my brother...”

“A-all right, could you just...let go of me for now? It’s hard to talk like this.”

“Please, Tooru-san, you have to help me!”

“I-I’ll help you, okay, so just...”

While they were busy with each other, I took in our surroundings.

this happening in a relatively affluent residential district was pretty unfortunate. It was early afternoon, the time of day when most people are out somewhere, plus the houses were spaced far apart. No one had shown up despite the noise having been so loud. It seemed that either no one noticed, or there was nobody around.

In short, the area was like a ghost town, despite being smack-dab in the middle of the city.

That was bad...!

“What is it?” asked Tooru. In turn, I asked a question to the girl.

“Uh, Honami-san, right? ...Say, how did you end up crashing?”

“Huh...?”

“You weren’t just in a hurry, were you? The real reason...was that you were actually being chased, wasn’t it? Because if that’s so...then we’ve already been caught!”

My eyes snapped sharply to the intersection beyond. One after another, a convoy of motorbikes were cutting a sharp turn, hurtling toward us.

“...What?!”

Tooru had been caught off guard by the sudden development, but immediately returned to his senses and became aware of Akiko, who was still clinging tightly to him.

He couldn’t move while she was hanging onto him...!

“Tooru! Get back!”

Masaki swiftly stepped forward.

Brandishing steel pipes, the group of bikers rushed down the trio’s position.

Masaki stood to take the brunt of the attack. Of course, he couldn’t afford to take a hit—he would simply dodge whatever was swung his way. But Tooru used that time to do as he’d been told and made his retreat, finally succeeding in tearing Akiko off of him.

“Find somewhere to hide!”

Tooru indicated for Akiko to get to the deathly silent houses, while he returned frenziedly to Masaki's side.

Masaki seemed to be standing his ground. One of the steel pipes had been smacked out of the group's hands and was now lying on the floor. Tooru picked it up.

“Masaki!”

Waving the pipe around, he rushed to the aid of Masaki, who'd been chased into a vacant lot and was now surrounded, bikes circling him. Two of these bikes split off from the ring and headed for Tooru.

“Just try it!”

Tooru gripped the steel pipe in both hands, assuming a rigid stance.

Just then...

BA-DUM.

It wasn't his heart, but a sensation. The very flow throughout his body had seemed to pulsate all at once. It was as if switches all through his body had all been flipped on simultaneously. And...

Huh...?

Tooru was puzzled by the sudden feeling that had welled up within him. Though the bikes that rushed toward him possessed a potentially lethal force that could very well rupture his insides and smash his bones on impact, all Tooru could do was wonder about the thing he was seeing that moment.

What are these...? Lines?

The enemy bearing down on Tooru had somehow become the lesser priority. Because such a thing was already trivial in his eyes. He *knew* what he was able to do.

“Kiiiiyaaaaah!” With a guttural cry, one of the biker guys flailed his pipe about as he launched himself at Tooru. The next instant, he was blown clean off his bike and slammed down into the ground.

The other biker with him could not be surprised by this turn of events. Why? Because he himself had been flung off with a swing from Tooru’s pipe and had met the same fate as his friend.

“...?!”

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

What did Tooru just do?!

He'd swung the pipe—that much was obvious. But to knock both attackers off their bikes with a single swing, and in the same breath...?

“W-what the...”

It appeared that the bikers who'd been going at it with me had also been shaken by this anomaly. They gave up on me and rushed in Tooru's direction.

Tooru, seeming perfectly composed, adopted a focused stance with the steel pipe in hand and awaited the approaching storm.

“.....!”

A chill ran through me. Because I realized from the way he was moving what would happen next. But...that couldn't be. I was sure that when he'd faced me earlier, he was...

A tremendous sound rung out. But it had come from the bikes that had spun out of control, been overturned, scraped the road and crashed straight into the guardrail and wall; what had actually happened at the center of it all was a quiet action.

A single swing of the pipe.

That was all it had taken. Its path seemed to have been sucked in towards the opponents' weak points as if the whole

thing were a staged fight scene, and they were blown away instantly.

One after another, it took them down. His opponents couldn't have avoided it. Even if they'd fled, they couldn't have done so until after the exchange of offense and defense had played out. Since they were the ones attacking, they would have had to change direction themselves. There was no chance of that.

In contrast to the whirring bikes and their riders atop them, Tooru's movements seemed almost sluggish. There was no excess motion, which made him look slow despite it all. But...

But that couldn't be!

When he'd been fighting me, Taniguchi Masaki, I was convinced that he was an amateur in the way of the sword. It wasn't an act or anything of the sort! He really should have been clueless about any kind of fighting style to do with swinging a weapon around!

But then how did that explain the things he was doing, things like a master who'd spent decades in the depths of the mountains?

“.....”

As I stood there agape, he finally finished off the last of them before my eyes.

“H-hiiiiieeee...!”

His back to the mayhem, he tried in desperation to distance himself from the place, but it seemed that his leg was fractured, and he could only crawl, clutching frantically at the ground with his hands.

He was the man Tooru had blown away at the very start. His helmet had come off, exposing the youthful face underneath. It had the distinct features of a child still in his teens.

“N-no goddamn way... H-he’s a monster!” he huffed as he crawled away to safety, but before he could get any further, a shadow loomed before him.

He looked up to see a girl.

“.....”

The girl, who gazed down at him callously, was none other than the one who had been rescued by Takashiro Tooru—Honami Akiko.

“This wasn’t part of the deal!” he lashed out. Even as he looked her in the eye, he refused to be intimidated. “You never

said anything about a crazy guy like that! The plan was just to freak ‘em out a little!”

But the girl seemed virtually unfazed by his desperation.

“The moment you took the cash, you became their opponents. Even if the circumstances are different, the fact remains. Are you just going to run away while you have the enemy in your sights?” she said coolly. Her voice was no different than when she was clinging on to Tooru earlier, which made it all the more disconcerting.

“...A-are you serious?”

“Desertion in the face of the enemy is one of the most unforgivable acts imaginable. Punishment for such a misdeed will be handed down immediately...and swiftly.”

“.....!”

Sensing something was very wrong, he tried to shuffle back. But it was too late. She who had taken the form of a girl thrust out her hand. And from the tips of her fingers, with a frightening speed, her nails extended as though they had sprung out, and with great precision pierced his face,

destroyed his brain and came out through the back of his head.²¹

By the next second, her nails had retracted to normal length. It had happened so quickly, there was barely any blood on them.

“Still...as I suspected, the samurai broke out of his shell. And his battle capabilities far exceeded even *my* expectations... We’ll have to move to the next stage of the plan,” she murmured.

Then she turned on her heel and walked in the direction of Takashiro Tooru and Taniguchi Masaki.

“...Takashiro-san!”

The girl Tooru had called “Honami-san” came back to us. It seemed she’d been hiding.

“Was everything all right?” Tooru asked in a gentle tone. He sounded like his usual self, but...

²¹ Something I’d like to start doing occasionally is pointing out what I think are some clear points that inspire some other Japanese media, just for some fun facts. In this case, does Pearl’s nails remind you of a certain homunculus?

“H-hold on a sec, Tooru. Mind telling me just what the hell’s going on here?!” I demanded, marching up to him. “Were you actually strong? Or was there some kind of reason for that?”

Tooru looked puzzled by the question.

“You know, I don’t really get it myself.. I’m not sure how I’m supposed to explain.”

“But come on...!”

As we argued, a face peered out furtively from an entrance, evidently having noticed the commotion. I glanced their way and, startled, they closed the door. At this rate, the police would surely be on their way.

“...Oh boy. Looks like things are gonna get hairy.”

Confused as I was, I decided I should start off by calling Nagi nee-san to tell her about the incident and took out my cell phone. But try as I might, I couldn’t get through to anyone.

“That’s weird. Is it broken...?”

Maybe it had gotten damaged in the scuffle earlier. But I didn’t recall something like that happening. It looked fine from the outside, and the power light was still on.

“Mine’s not getting through either,” said Honami-san earnestly, phone to one ear.

There shouldn’t have been any problem with the reception given the location and time of day. What was going on? Was something somewhere jamming the signal...?

We exchanged glances, feeling a vague sense of unease.

“Let’s borrow someone’s phone.”

Just as I said this, sirens wailed and two cop cars drove up to us. Four police officers got out and readied their guns.

That’s a pretty sudden response for Japanese cops, I thought.

“Freeze! Throw down your weapons and put your hands in the air!”

The three of us obediently raised our hands into the air. Tooru dropped the steel pipe he was holding.

“Listen, officer...” I tried to explain, but they made no attempt to listen to us. Three of them came up and grabbed hold of us, twisting our arms. I’d expected them to put us in handcuffs, but perhaps that wasn’t the sort of thing they’d do unwarranted.

“A fight, was it? Looks like you made quite a spectacle, kids. Judging by all those folks wiped out, I’m guessing it wasn’t just you guys, eh? Where’d the rest of ‘em go?”

So they asked, but the fact was that Tooru had floored them all by himself, so without any way to answer we could only stay quiet. They apparently took this as a sign of defiance and wrenched our arms even more tightly.

“Well, whatever. We’ll wring it outta you one way or another. Come!”

Shoving me forward roughly, the officer called over to his lone colleague by the patrol cars.

“Hey, get in touch with the station. Call an ambulance too. Let’s detain the guys on the ground.”

It appeared their first priority was taking care of the bikers. *Sure, all right*, I thought. It looked like that would be the end of this mess for now. The police would probably give us a pretty stern talking-to, but at least there was no danger to our lives.

Though, how come it’s always me who gets into situations like this so easily? Just the other day I had to skip school for over a week because of an incident I’d gotten myself involved in²², and just when I thought it’d all been taken care of and I was free to live my life, this happens. If the school got wind of

²² The events of VS Imaginator, obviously

this, I wonder if they'd force me to stay holed up in the dorm till graduation...? Now that's a depressing thought. If I could just see Orihata even once before that happens...

Then, just as I was thinking these carefree thoughts...

—BANG.

To the unsuspecting person, the sound would have felt oddly muffled. But that sound—the sound of gunpowder exploding—was a gunshot.

The cop by the patrol cars had fired without warning, and his gun was still drawn. And, the grip of the officer who'd been pinning my arms suddenly slackened.

“Wha...?”

The officer, face painted with blank surprise and unaware of the red stain spreading from his chest, slumped down onto my body and lay there still.

There wasn't enough time for the remaining two officers to grasp what had just happened. The shooter followed up without a moment's hesitation and pulled the trigger two more times in succession.

“Guh!”

Blood gushed out from both their backs, each having taken a hit through the chest, and they collapsed.

I immediately ducked down. And that was the thing that saved my life. Because the guy who'd taken down the three cops had been aiming for me next. The awful sound of the bullet narrowly scraping my head whistled past.

“—Daah!”

With a battle cry, Tooru seized the moment to hurl his steel pipe at the guy who'd suddenly opened fire. It was a direct hit, and he fell to the ground.

I picked myself up and then ran.

But not towards him. In terms of distance, I knew that I wouldn't have been able to make it; he would already have readied his gun before I could reach him. So instead, I ran for the patrol cars that the cops who'd just been killed had driven here in. The doors were still open.

Because they'd levelled their guns at us and started their proceedings as soon as they'd arrived, the engines were still running. I dove straight in, stepped on the accelerator and turned the steering wheel.

“———!”

The mystery shooter had no choice but to dodge out of the way of the oncoming vehicle. I used this time to spin the wheel again, making for Tooru and Honami-san.

“Get in!” I yelled. Tooru, having already figured out my plan, leapt into the back seat with Honami-san in his arms.

The shooter regained his balance and fired on us again. A terrible cracking sound ran through the bulletproof glass, but it did its job and didn’t break.

“We’re gettin’ outta here!”

I floored the pedal as hard as I could and, finally closing the door amidst a hail of bullets from the back, we left the scene.

“.....”

The officer who’d mercilessly shot his colleagues to death gazed in the direction of the patrol car driving away with hollow eyes.

“.....”

When he realized that he wouldn’t be able to catch up to them, he was instantly compelled to proceed to the next order stenciled into his head by the hypnosis of sorts that he’d been subjected to.

“.....”

He lowered his gaze to the bikers lying on the ground, pointed his gun at their unconscious bodies, and again calmly pulled the trigger. When he'd run out of bullets, he took out some reserve ammo that he shouldn't originally have been supplied with, swiftly reloaded and resumed his work. Twenty seconds later, the only one alive on that scene was him.

“.....“

Then he went straight up to the remaining patrol car and took hold of the intercom. He stated the vehicle number, informed them that this was an emergency and then initiated his broadcast.

“We have a homicide case. The perps have killed three officers, hijacked a patrol car and are currently in flight within the city. The felons are extremely ruthless and possess handguns. One has been identified as Takashiro Tooru, a large man averaging 190cm, wearing a strange samurai outfit...”

And once the broadcast had ended, he pointed the handgun to his own chest...and pulled the trigger.

He slumped backward, fell and ceased moving. A detailed forensic examination would immediately have been able to tell that it was suicide, but right now, while the case was

developing, even if they'd performed a concurrent analysis, they wouldn't have been quick enough.

The report must have given them cause to rush, as the sound of police sirens steadily began to approach that corpse-strewn site.

* * * * *

Seeing the waves of patrol cars racing throughout the city one after another, sirens wailing, Honami Akiko had a sense of foreboding.

She was on the road, making her way to the apartment where Takashiro Tooru lived. She'd once taken a sneak peek at Tooru's résumé at work, so she was relying on her memory of that to try and find the address. You could get there with one train and then switch to bus, so it wasn't especially far away.

Could something have happened...? Surely it's nothing to do with Takashiro-san...?

[You kiddin'? Something's gotta be up!]

As she speculated, the portable device around her neck spoke up. She was wearing it like a pendant and had tucked the normal-looking device between her breasts.

[And I sure as hell bet the big guy's gotten himself wrapped up in this!]

Akiko twitched at this.

“W-what makes you say that?!” Her voice was low, but she responded on impulse with a firm tone.

[The timing's too good. Yesterday he'd already half-broken out of his 'shell.' If something were to have happened in that state, that guy, being unaware of his own 'talent,' wouldn't have known how to rein himself in and could have done something reckless. Might've even killed a buncha people by now, I figure. Heh-heh!]

It was a hurtful way of putting it.

“.....”

Akiko's unease grew, as she knew she couldn't completely deny that possibility. Regardless, she decided she had to ask the question nagging on her mind.

“What is...Takashiro-san's 'talent?'”

[Dunno personally, I'm already cut off from the guy. He's probably hearing a voice from within his heart, but it's just a resonance. Got nothing to do with me. But Miss Honami Akiko, if it's your half-awakened talent we're talking about,

I'll tell you what that's all about once it starts to show. On one condition, that is. You gotta kill me.]

“.....”

Akiko remained silent.

[It's easy. You've just gotta take that vessel I'm in right now and smash it to pieces. I'm nothing but a wave of energy when it comes down to it, after all. Once this reflecting shell that surrounds me is gone, I'll disperse and vanish. Yeah, I'm like a ghost. No point in me even existing in this world.”

“.....”

Of course, nothing he was saying made even a lick of sense to Akiko. But this also told her that this couldn't have been her delusion. And he was saying that she had a “special something”...

I don't have anything like that...

She was a totally ordinary person. Just an average girl. She didn't do any extraordinary things like that delinquent Kirima Nagi.

That's right. I've got nothing like that...

Just as she thought this, something a certain person once said to her surfaced in her mind...

“It means, Akiko-chan, that the act of living, that the existence of ‘life’ in this world... Is, in itself, a kind of miracle.”

...It was about 10 years ago. The words had come from a slightly eccentric high-schooler who lived in her neighborhood. She called him “Kyou nii-chan²³” and thought dearly of him. One day he’d suddenly disappeared, and then his body was discovered. They said he’d slipped and bashed his head as he fell, and that was what killed him. She was deeply upset. He’d died at right around the age she was now. As for his actual name...sadly, she couldn’t remember. His family had moved house after that and vanished without a trace, and besides, she was still just a little kid. She’d barely even known any kanji back then.

But why had she suddenly remembered him now?

Why...?

She realized that just thinking about him still made her heart ache.

²³ One of the deeper cut connections to other books. This is most likely the Boy inspired by Seiichi’s books in *Boogiepop at Dawn*, who was subsequently killed by *Mo’ Murder*.

...No, wait. That's right, there was a rumor that Kyou nii-chan was doing some strange business...

Akiko was on the verge of remembering as she walked down the road to Tooru's apartment. Then her legs froze stiff.

Surrounding the apartment were numerous police officers.

"...W-what is this?"

[Seems a little too well-timed to be a coincidence, eh? Heh-heh-heh.]

Again with the mocking. But there was no time for her to be angry about it.

At a parked squad car, a police officer was communicating with someone over the radio.

"Yeah, we've suppressed the suspect's room but he hasn't fled here. We'll continue surveillance."

That was a snippet of what she'd heard... "Suspect"?

It couldn't be that...Tooru actually *had* killed someone and was being hunted by the police?

Cautiously, she approached the apartment, but there were cops all over the place, so if she was going to slip by them, the only option would be through the narrow gaps between the houses that could barely even be called 'paths.'

[Uhh, that's some risky stuff you're up to. Hey, it's pretty much guaranteed by now that the guy did something. So how about we quit doing stuff that'll get us caught?]

"...Could you just shut up for a second?" she snapped.

Then, right next to where she was standing, there was a dull thud. When she turned to look, she almost screamed.

With the land packed tightly in the closely-knit neighborhood, the gaps between the houses had to be narrow. For that reason, the electricity poles were arranged in such a way that they seemed to conceal the space between the walls. Fencing off just this area were square walls to keep things out.

And, the source of the sound was in just such a spot, which couldn't be seen from the alleyway simply by peeking in.

There, a boy lay. And he was drenched in blood.

* * * * *

Motoki Sanpei was 15 years old.

He'd been having the most terrible spate of bad luck recently. Thinking back, perhaps it had started around February this year, ever since he witnessed that strange thing.

He'd come to the big department store in front of the station, Twin City, but alas, that day was the one day of the month when they were closed.

It was windy that day. One of the curtains on the roof for keeping the wind out of the exhibition hall had come off, and he could see it billowing in the wind from below.

“...Tch.”

Naturally, he was fuming. Of all days, why did it just so happen to have been that day? He couldn't help but feel that he'd been dealt a great injustice and was deeply exasperated by it.

And then...

From the roof that he was looking up at, he glimpsed a leaping shadow. Sanpei was astonished.

I-is that a suicide?!

He thought that it might be. But the next instant, the shadow that had leapt off suddenly changed direction and returned to where it came from, as if it were being hoisted up by invisible threads.²⁴

...Huh? W-what's going on...?

²⁴ Yet another subtle callback. This is Anjou being thrown off the roof and subsequently saved by Boogiepop in VS Imaginator Part 1.

And then, reflected in his wide eyes was yet another curious sight.

A mysterious silhouette wearing a pipe-like black hat and wrapped in a similarly colored cape, seemingly human and yet inhuman, hopped into view where the sheer walls of the building cleanly demarcated the dusk sky.

Their gaze darted in various directions as if searching for something. Then, in the next moment, they had withdrawn. Though standing in a position where one would normally have their heart in their mouth, there was not a fragment of indecision in their movement. You might even say it was like a phantom floating there. No, from the way they appeared, it might have been more fitting to call them a *shinigami*.

W-what the hell was that...?!

Perhaps the figure he'd just seen jump out into the open for a split-second was a soul that that *shinigami* was taking away to heaven? ...The sight had even made him dream up dumb thoughts like that.

If he had been a girl, he would have immediately thought of the subject of the bizarre rumor that's widely known among only female students in these parts. It's said that it kills those when their body and soul are most beautiful to prevent them

from becoming uglier. With a black hat and wrapped in a black cloak, they say its name is Boogiepop...

“A-aiiiee...!”

He became scared and made a run for it, because a creeping sense of dread had inescapably begun to rise within him.

This was the beginning of his misfortune.

He'd been getting into more fights with his parents, with whom he wasn't on the best of terms to start with, snapping at even the most trivial thing. He would hit his mother and get beaten up by his father.

And eventually, on the spur-of-the-moment, he blurted out, “Screw this, I'm getting outta this goddamn house!”

...and he really did fly out of the house.

As he wandered around outside without going to school, the 20,000 yen²⁵ he'd had on him had run out just like that.

Sanpei was at his wits' end. He couldn't go back home after all that, but he didn't have any close friends who'd let him stay over or be willing to lend him money.

God-fucking-damn it!

²⁵ Roughly \$175 USD in 1999

Becoming desperate, he turned his mind to theft. He'd happened to notice that the window to the room of a second-floor apartment had been carelessly left unlocked and half-open, so he clambered over the railing and snuck in through it. He could tell from the silence inside that its owner was absent.

And yet the moment he'd entered the room, a shrill noise came from beyond.

"...Ehh?!"

It was the sound of cop car sirens.

That's ridiculous, he thought. How could the police have shown up with such perfect timing? It was at that instant that he became convinced of his horrifically bad luck, and he was spot on. The cop cars had come to investigate the room of Takashiro Tooru, an accused criminal, and the room that he'd snuck into belonged to an OL who lived right next to him. What was it if not a coincidence? There wasn't a single reason that he should be the one to encounter these quirks of fate, no rational cause other than "bad luck."

If he had stayed put, the police wouldn't have had come to where he was just to check the room adjacent, but Sanpei, who could never have dreamed that that was the case, panicked and leapt out the window.

And as he stepped on the railing, his foot slipped.

He fell two floors and hit his head and back hard. His consciousness was hazy, but hearing the sound of the cop cars mercilessly approaching, he crawled desperately, escaping into the narrow gap-like alleyway between the houses. His whole body was scuffed from having crawled and blood was oozing out, but his head was pounding so hard that he didn't notice. And then at last, he reached the fenced-off space that had been built afterwards to surround the electricity pole and slumped down, out of strength. Inside his skull, which had taken a heavy blow, a brain hemorrhage had started. He didn't have long left.

Damn it... It's all that shinigami's fault things turned out like this... I really have the worst luck.

As Sanpei's consciousness faded, he vaguely thought such things.

* * * * *

“.....!”

Honami Akiko, witnessing the shocking state of Motoki Sanpei, was very nearly on the verge of a scream.

Not because he was covered in blood and lying on the ground. If it had just been that, she would likely have just let out her scream, the police would have come running, the dying boy would have been discovered, and that would have been that.

But it didn't turn out that way.

What Honami Akiko saw, clinging tightly to the body of the boy, was something like mist.

She immediately understood the nature of it. She already knew what it was even though she'd just seen it for the first time.

It was the boy's *life leaving his body*. And once it had finished seeping, spilling, flowing out of him, that would be the moment he died. She knew that.

But why was it that she could see such a thing? ...She didn't know, and that was the reason that she couldn't scream.

“W-what is this?!”

For the first time, she personally asked a question to the “egg” on her chest. However, its answer contained none of its usual frivolity.

“...Jesus H, you just hit the jackpot, Honami Akiko... So you have the power to see ‘life’ and do something about it? To

think that an MPLS like this really exists...” it simply said, its voice hoarse.

“Ugh!”

She didn’t know what to think, but she decided first of all to kneel down by the boy’s side. And she reached out to the mist-like substance. When she touched it, it was less like a gas and more like jello. Because a substance like that mist was seeping out from her own hand, and because the two were repelling each other, she could “touch” it.

“W-what is even going on...?” she cried, while stuffing the “life” back into the boy’s body. It sort of felt like rubbing gravy into chunks of sliced meat for a dish.

Around half of it had already spilled out, but she decided for now to keep doing what she was doing until it stopped leaking out of the boy.

* * * * *

“Um... Taniguchi-san?” asked Honami-san—or whoever she was—gingerly from the back seat. “You do know how to drive, don’t you...?”

“Well, it’s true I don’t have a license. But I spent a lot of time overseas, so I know a little.”

Master had let me drive mostly for kicks. It had been a second-hand Japanese car, so it didn’t handle any differently to the one I was steering now.

“That’s amazing...”

“Masaki is the number-one student of an amazing Sensei. I’m hoping to learn from him,” said Tooru proudly.

“You don’t say...”

The atmosphere was starting to feel pretty relaxed.

“...It’s not really the time to be talking about this stuff. What’s the plan now?” I stressed, a little irritated.

It was all well and good that we’d escaped in a squad car from the policeman who’d seemingly become confused and fired at his colleagues, but now the three of us—Tooru, Honami-san and I—hemmed and hawed about what to do.

“What should we do?”

“Seeking protection from the police—I mean, police who aren’t insane—would probably be the quickest solution.”

As I drove, I reached a hand out to the built-in transceiver, thinking that we might be able to get in touch with someone. It would save us a lot of time if that were the case, and if we

told them we were using the car without permission, they would come flying to meet us whether they believed us or not.

...However, all that could be heard from the transceiver was a whole load of static.

“W-what is this? Is it broken?”

Our mobile phones hadn't been able to connect at all earlier either. Hard to believe this was just a coincidence. Could someone really have been jamming our reception? But from where? We were already getting further from our last location. If someone was using special radio waves to cover such a wide area...it was hard to imagine they were using anything other than military grade equipment.

But then, that means...all this won't end with just a bit of trouble...

I felt as if the machinations of something big were at play behind the scenes.

“.....”

As I remained silent, I could see Honami-san in the rear-view mirror staring at me from the back seat. It gave me a slight shock because the look she'd given me was so...sharp and piercing.

“W-what is it?”

She quickly lowered her head.

“Ah, it’s just...I was thinking about what might have happened to my brother,” she said dejectedly.

That’s right. She said that she’d got separated from her brother. Anyone would be worried. It was no surprise that she’d be glaring. Here, Tooru interrupted.

“Let’s just try and find a police box and tell them what happened. That would be the quickest way. They might end up apprehending us, sure, but at least they should be able to send out a search party for Hiroshi,” he said, stating his thoughts. He was on the mark.

“Yeah, you’re right... Let’s do that.”

I turned the steering wheel. And then...

All of a sudden, a voice could be heard coming from the transceiver’s speaker.

“...Whoever is driving car no. 12, if you can hear this please answer immediately!”

Hurriedly, I grabbed the microphone.

“We hear you, loud and clear!”

“...We got through!”

At the police Special Measures HQ, successfully getting through to the unidentified mass murderers roused everyone’s excitement. It was time to start negotiations.

But as the conversation progressed, they were unable to hide their confusion.

It seemed that the perps had no recollection of killing anyone themselves, and were insisting that an officer was to blame of all things. And they had even acted like they hadn’t done anything wrong.

“What’s the meaning of this...?”

Voices murmured in the HQ. Then a detective spoke up.

“...If this is what they truly believe, we’ll have to regard them as exceptionally delusional,” he said.

With that one statement, every head in the room nodded with an expression of relief.

“Ahh, I get it.”

“But then, that would mean our normal methods of getting them to turn themselves in won’t have any effect!”

“Won’t we be forced to take firm measures? They’re still within the city and they have handguns. We have to prevent harm to the general public at all cost!”

“What shall we do?”

“For now, let’s make use of the fact that they believe themselves to be the victims. Perhaps we could lure them somewhere.”

“It’s worth a try.”

For a person—no, in this case for an organization—there are several patterns in which it’s hard to believe certain things. For example, things such as the existence of a police officer committing a crime, so long as it hasn’t been clearly proven, are not very welcome ideas within the police force. And so, when just one detective proposed another line of thinking, it immediately became recognized as the will of the entire department. It was an easy feat. They’d been made to rule out the police as possible suspects, ironically leading themselves astray, much like they do upon others with their oft-performed “leading questions” and “sting operations”.

“.....”

The detective who’d greatly influenced the situation snuck quietly out of the Special Measures HQ. On hurried feet he

left the scene, passed through a back alley rarely used by the police department and headed outside.

But as he was turning the corner just before the entrance, he stopped dead.

“.....!”

There stood a figure.

It wasn't especially tall. Yet it was slender, and from the facial features it looked to be a boy. But there was something of a sharpness to him, an air that was anything but childlike. Wearing clothes of pale purple, he quietly turned to face the detective and spoke.

“That face... Did that traitor Pearl tinker with your skin to make that disguise for you? So you killed the original and took his face and identity, eh?”

The detective took a step back.

“W-who the hell are you?”

“One of your friends already told me everything last night, of their own free will. It was the Diamonds, wasn't it? They were the ones the deserter Sidewinder tried to sell the Embryo off to. He wanted to gain some short-term getaway money, but then the other party changed their mind at the last moment... The Diamonds are highly capable because they have Pearl, but

your numbers are regrettably small. And since you lack the manpower on your own, it's easy to predict that you'd use the police force."

As he spoke indifferently, the man known both as Lee Maisaka and Fortissimo advanced, matching the pace of other's slow retreat.

"U-urgh... Y-you're with Towa...?"

The detective... No, the one who'd been outed as a fake in the guise of a detective, was now covered in a greasy sweat.

"....."

Fortissimo took another step forward, wearing a soft, gentle smile.

"A-are you an assassin? You...came to kill us?"

Tinged by the man's fear, Fortissimo's smile grew deeper, into a smirk.

"You know...that's a very good question." Then Fortissimo stopped moving.

In that instant, the man responded. He pulled out a handgun and tried aiming it at Fortissimo. But the gun in his hands, which he was sure he'd drawn, was not there.

When he heard a clank, he snapped to his senses and looked toward the sound. It came from Fortissimo's feet,

and...his foot was stepping on the handgun that he had surely just drawn!

When had he taken it...? No. That level of thinking could no longer be used to explain what had happened. If he'd taken it, it should have been in his hands. But then why was it at his feet, and under his foot at that? He shouldn't have been able to do such a thing in the fraction of a second!

... W-what kind of...!

The man realized that he'd encountered a being that surpassed all common sense of the world he'd come to understand.

“O-ohh...”

As he moaned, Fortissimo's eyes widened and he snorted.

“Come now, that just now wasn't even anything special.”

“...Huh?”

“You know reflex actions, right? Let's say you're riding a bike. Once you've learned to ride, then whatever situation you might end up in, your body automatically keeps its balance. That's the same as the trick just now.”

“.....?”

“You must've seen your fair share of battle. And your battle training's been drilled into your body too. When you

take out your gun, you do it subconsciously. Which is why...just now, you'd intended to draw your gun. You're not reaching into your breast pocket, taking hold of the grip and taking aim consciously, it's happening instinctively. And that's exactly why you didn't notice that instant. You didn't notice that your gun was already missing from your breast pocket. And in your brief moment of confusion, I dropped the gun I'd taken and secretly dropped it behind me at an angle you couldn't see, stepping on it at the same time. Haha! See? Simple, right? Your gun didn't just instantaneously teleport from your hands to my feet, it was already missing before that...

“.....”

Before Fortissimo, who seemed to be enjoying the exposition, the man turned pale and was shaking uncontrollably. Simple? A trick? Like hell that was the explanation. If that were the case, when and how exactly did he steal his gun...?!

Here, Fortissimo changed his tone.

“By the way...where are you going?” he asked coldly.

“W-what...?”

“I’m off to exterminate the traitor Pearl and retrieve the Embryo, but...where are *you* headed?”

“.....?”

“What I’m basically trying to say here...is ‘Are you man enough to stand up to me?’” he asked with an icy laugh.

The man came sharply to his senses.

The guy was...already a step ahead of them. He’d presumably even identified the current form of the Embryo, which even they hadn’t figured out yet. That was why he was so sure of himself...!

It’s over... Even if Pearl is on equal footing with the Towa Organization, we don’t stand a chance against this guy... It’s all over for us...

Having come to this conclusion, the man whipped himself around and fled not for the exit in front of him, but into the police station.

Without a moment’s delay, Fortissimo kicked up the handgun and pointed it perfectly at the fleeing man’s back.

However...

He only raised the corners of his mouth into a smirk and did not pull the trigger. His eyes simply followed the figure until he disappeared behind the turn of the corridor.

“Now, the organization will disband. You’re on your own now, Pearl,” he whispered, and then crushed the handgun in his hands like a scrap of paper. When he opened his hands, there was nothing left.

Then he too turned on his heels and left the police station.

“C’mon... What’s he doing?”

Inside a car parked in front of the police station, Honami Hiroshi was fidgeting. Upon hearing that Akiko had gone missing, the man called Lee Maisaka who had rescued Hiroshi made a proposal. “Then how about we go to the police?” he asked and dragged Hiroshi along with him. Hiroshi had been in shock; he’d just seen Lee kill someone right before his eyes. But Lee had spoken calmly.

“Nah, that wasn’t a person. It was a type of robot. Look, you can tell from where its head was severed. No blood, see? And on top of that, watch this.”

As Lee pointed, the corpse...or whatever it was began to crumble away like sand. When Lee opened the window, the fine powder was swept up by the wind and blew outside.

“.....”

Of course, Hiroshi had never heard of anything as fantastical as a mystery robot, but seeing it before his very eyes, he was forced to believe it. There was that...and also because Lee had said he wanted to go to the police himself. At least he didn't seem to belong to some sort of dodgy gang or something.

But now that they'd arrived in the front of police station, it seemed like squad cars were heading out incessantly and it was noisy. They were out for blood. Seeing this, Lee left Hiroshi behind and went into the station alone.

“How long is he gonna take...?”

In reality, he probably hadn't even been waiting ten minutes. But to Hiroshi, it felt like hours, so when Lee finally came back, he let shout a jubilant “Ah!”

“H-how'd it go?!” he asked, but Lee shook his head.

“It's a real mess. Your sister and some guy called Takashiro Tooru are currently on the run from the police for killing a bunch of people, including police officers,” he said in a whisper.

Hiroshi was dumbfounded.

“W-what did you say?!”

“Now calm down. As to whether they really killed them, I have my doubts. Your sister and her friend have been framed.”

“F-framed...?”

“But now we know that we can’t expect the police to work with us. We’ll have to do something about this ourselves...

That is, if you want to join me?”

“Uh, yeah!” Hiroshi nodded repeatedly.

“Good. Then let’s hurry. We can guess their general location based on the info the police have obtained.”

Lee started the car.

“Nnngh...!” Hiroshi opened his eyes wide, biting angrily on his right thumb.

Here, Lee asked a question.

“By the way... You’re sure it was a portable gaming device your sister took out of the house?”

“Y-yeah... But I still can’t believe what that was. That it had such a great secret or whatever to it... And I’d been carrying it around...”

“Don’t worry about it. It wasn’t your fault.”

That’s right—Sidewinder takes the credit for that, whispered Lee out of Hiroshi’s earshot.

The car raced steadily down the road toward the source of the problem.

* * * * *

..In the end, while we made our escape in the patrol car, we were only able to contact the police for just a short time. We couldn't get through to them again after that.

But in that space of time, the police had managed to give us a location where they could take us into custody immediately, so that became our immediate goal.

“Phew. Well that sure is a load off,” said Tooru with a sigh of relief.

“I guess, yeah. We've earned ourselves some breathing room. Now if I can just find some way of contacting nee-san...”

It was clear by now that the situation was abnormal. I stopped the car once and, prepared for danger, tried to get in touch with her from a public phone, but by some freak coincidence, they were all broken. They seemed fine from the outside, but I just couldn't get them to work, so I was left exchanging glances with Honami-san, who'd come along with

me. Once we'd given up on that approach, we decided we'd just follow the police's directions.

"...Still, gotta wonder how Hiroshi's doing," Tooru said quietly, staring at Honami-san.

"Yeah," she nodded.

...I wonder indeed.

Even Pearl, who had borrowed the appearance of Honami Akiko, was nodding inside. Her compatriots should already have suppressed that brat, but nobody had contacted her about it. The jamming device that she was carrying disguised to look like a cellphone allowed them to act independently. It was a powerful thing, capable of scrambling the internal circuitry of public phones, but it was also a double-edged sword, as it had in fact prevented her from communicating with her allies.

Wouldn't be surprising if the Towa Organization had started to catch wind by now... We'll have to exercise the utmost vigilance.

For the present, everything was going well... Even using the police was going as planned. But...she felt that she was missing something.

Of course, the uncertain element in all this is that we don't know a thing about that guy's power...Takashi Tooru.

In her mind she nodded, reminding herself that figuring that out was priority one.

The engine revved, and the squad car Taniguchi Masaki was driving sped on into the center of the city.



“Yet, there is no certainty that it will ever
hatch...”

...Somewhere, voices could be heard speaking.

“What’s the point in saving a brat like that anyway? You’re power, it’s like... like you’re using your own life force to mess with others’, ain’t it? You go too far with it, and it’s gonna put your own life in a hell of a lot of danger...”

“...Shut up. I-I don’t really understand what’s going on myself, so just zip it!”

“Listen lady, seeing as you still don’t really understand what’s going on, I’m willing to spell it out for you, but... you gotta realize by now that you’re special, right? You’re not some average joe; you’re in a whole different league. So, don’t do shit that’s just a waste of your powers!”

“Is this a waste...? No... Kyou nii-chan wouldn’t have let something like this bother him.”

“The hell...? “Kyou nii-chan...?” So that’s it. Goddamn, he’s your hero...?”

...People were bickering next to him—that much, he could tell. But there was just one figure reflected in his still-open eyes: a woman, it seemed. She had some sort of pendant on, dangling from her neck and down to her chest.

It... it looked like an... egg.

He felt as though one of the voices was coming from the egg. Oddly, though, it seemed that the accessory and its wearer were on bad terms with each other.

“Think I just saw the tiniest wavelength from this guy’s heart...but he’s a petty thief, y’know? A shallow punk who flips out at the smallest thing and takes it out on everything else. And worse—he really believes deep down that everything’s just ‘whatever’²⁶”

“Like you can talk. The second thing *you* ever said to me was ‘Kill me!’”

“Okay, look, that’s different. In my case—“

“Everyone’s got their reasons and circumstances, don’t they?”

“...That something this “Kyou nii-chan” of yours said?”

“So what if it was?! I... I...”

Her body swayed heavily to one side as she spoke, seeming on the verge of falling over.

“...What did I tell you? I knew the recoil from your power would hit you. You and that power are gonna go down

²⁶ Decided to translate this more literally because it could hold some double meaning. “なにかもどうにでもあれ” is a phrase that basically means that there’s no point in thinking too hard about anything.

together if you're not careful. Hurry up and kill me, take in the energy that's sealed and make your power whole or sooner or later, or you're gonna burn out!"

"Shut up... It's...already done."

Shakily, the woman stood up and, evidently noticing that the pendant had at some point slipped out, tucked it back into her blouse with a scowl.

And then she walked away, leaving him—Motoki Sanpei—lying there.

He felt a pang of worry. What was even happening to him?

He'd dropped down over the railing because a patrol car had suddenly showed up, taken a severe hit to the head and his back, and then fled into a side alley... So what in the hell was going on now? What had that egg girl done to me?

Why won't my body move at all? I'm not...dead, am I?

Sanpei came to this conclusion because no matter how hard he tried to thrash around, he would not move—until all of a sudden, in the way a faulty light fixture lights up the moment it's been repaired, his limbs sprang to life. The alley being narrow enough as it was, this made some loud thuds against the wall, which echoed through the area.

“.....!”

Of course, it had also reached the ears of the police officers who'd been posted at that site to capture Takashiro Tooru. They hurried straight to the source of the sound. And what did they find but a blood-soaked boy on the ground. He was in the process of attempting to stagger to his feet.

“Hey! What are you doing there?”

Without missing a beat, the officers encircled Sanpei in the narrow alley.

Sanpei's eyes widened, and a meek cry escaped his lips. The officers recognized it well as the reaction of a cornered criminal and became increasingly suspicious that something was up with the boy.

“Don't move! Stay where you are!”

“What were you doing out here?”

They dragged him out of the alley, bombarding him with questions that more resembled an interrogation than a routine questioning.

“T-the hell would I know? I haven't done anything!”

The police held him down as he struggled violently. It became apparent that although he was covered in blood, his injuries weren't severe.

Indeed, brats of his ilk were a dime a dozen. He was hardly public enemy number one. It was hard to look at it any other way, and Sanpei himself thought he had nothing special that could save him. Yet...Sanpei had, by this point, already heard the voice of "Embryo", and had been put in a desperate situation... Yes, at this stage, he himself had no way of knowing, but this commonplace and slightly crooked 15-year-old troublemaker, Motoki Sanpei, had sufficiently fulfilled the "criteria" to "break through".

The police officers dragged Sanpei to the patrol car, with the intention of packing him in and taking him to the station.

"S-stop, please! I had nothing to do with this!"

They'd likely contact his home in any case, and he'd get a good beating from his dad. Sanpei flailed frantically.

"Cool it!"

One of the cops wrenched his arm back.

"Gyaaaah!" he cried. Then, at that moment...

...Ka-chick.

All present heard the sound of something like a switch being flipped, but there was no tangible source around that it could have come from.

“.....?”

They all glanced around, puzzled. But in spite of the commotion, the sound continued regardless.

...Ten, nine, eight, seven, six...

The sound of numbers counting down entered each of their ears.

“W-what’s that sound?”

“Where’s it coming from?”

Flustered, the police began to lose their calm. But the countdown ticked on mercilessly.

Five.

...But what did it mean, exactly?

“What in the hell is going on here?!”

“I’m covering my ears, but I can still hear it...!”

Four.

Unable to reach a reasonable explanation for being able to hear the strange sound, the police officers had entered a state of panic.

“It...it keeps getting louder...!”

“S-stop it! Somebody stop this sound!”

Three.

It was as if the sound was robbing them of their spirit, or their sanity. For, indeed, this countdown was...

“Yeeek!”

“I-it’s all overrr!”

Two.

...like a timer announcing the limit of their equilibrium...

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeee!”

One.

...like the sound of a bell heralding the end of the world...

“_____”

“_____”

Zero.

“.....Huh? What?”

Sanpei alone was unable to hear the sound; he simply stared blankly as the cops entered a state of panic and fled, crawling away on all fours like dogs.

W-what was that about?

He couldn't have known, for he'd had no chance to observe his own power.

The feelings within him that cried "It's all over" and "I don't care what happens anymore"..... When they welled up, they were transferred to others in his proximity, while he himself so to speak "woke up," returning to his senses. Of course, the boy in question appeared totally oblivious of this strange power.

As to what extent this power might reach, not even God knew. If he were ever to convince himself deep down that "now everything really was all over".....how great would the panic he transmitted to others—no, to everything around him—be? Perhaps it would be enough to envelop the entire world.

What would happen then to all worlds other than his?
...No one could yet know.

"...U-uh, guess I should make tracks," said Sanpei, furtively departing the scene.

* * * * *

The police officers who'd left their station and lost the ability to speak out of an excess of panic were apprehended a few minutes later by other officers. But just then, a strange sound rang in the ears of the apprehenders.

One hundred...

“What was that?” they wondered in unison—but the countdown was high and the interval, too, was large, so despite the fact they'd been infected, they remained relatively calm; nor was there any particular communication among them about what they'd each heard.

Once they'd taken care of this “irregular” job, they returned to the mission they were originally ordered to carry out, to head out as backup to the arranged site of arrest that “suspected mass-murderer” Takashiro Tooru was being led to.

* * * * *

“...Hey, Tooru.”

As the police officers were on the way to their designated location, Taniguchi Masaki, keeping his hands on the steering wheel, inquired about something that was on his mind.

“How did you suddenly get so strong?”

“Huh?” Tooru raised his head.

“Sword, staff... Whatever you use, you seem to have become a master of it in just a short time... How come?”

“Hmm...” Tooru folded his arms and considered this. “I’m not sure, but...I think it was a good thing that you decked me , Masaki. I think something just sort of...gave way after that. That’s how it felt.”

“Gave way? On such a scale?” Masaki sighed with incredulity. “Then how do you explain all those stiff moves you were making today? It doesn’t add up. You weren’t the same back then. It was really, seriously like you were a total amateur. Was that all an act?”

“No, I’m not capable of pulling off a stunt like that,” said Tooru, and Masaki agreed.

“I bet... Then, why? Just what happened in the space of a few hours ?”

Masaki’s doubt was natural, but although they’d escaped from the police firing on them, there was a side to him

intrigued about mysteries like these, which he would question with all seriousness. On the surface, his placid and gentle nature was what stood out, but on some fundamental level there was a part of him that wanted to dive into the thick of mystery and adventure... It wasn't clear whether he got that from his father, Shigeki, who was fond of gallivanting across the world, or from his teacher Sasakibara Gen and sister-in-law Kirima Nagi, or whether it was simply something innate, but one thing was certain: in such situations, he was cool and collected, and not in the slightest bit deterred.

However, a personality like that is by no means a fortuitous one. It was, in a sense, like standing at the edge of a precipice. Furthermore, he was the type who put the safety of his lover Orihata Aya, and his friends and acquaintances, before himself—one could say that in terms of his well-being, this was potentially a very dangerous thing.

“Nothing happened, if that’s what you’re asking.” Tooru thought deeply. “How’d I put this...? I feel like I heard a ‘voice’ somewhere. And then for some reason...I started seeing these ‘lines’ over the person I’m fighting.”

“‘Lines?’ What the hell?” chimed in Pearl, who was disguising herself as Honami Akiko, light glimmering in her eyes.

“Over my opponent’s body there are ‘lines’...or that’s how it feels. And it seems that when I trace my sword over those lines, it just sort of automatically takes them off guard and becomes a course for me to strike at their weak point..”

“It ‘seems’? ...That’s a vague way of putting it when you’re the one doing it.”

“Hmm... But that’s just the way it feels to me . Though, I just *know* that that’s what it is. Somehow I’m sure of it.”

A power that lets you see ‘lines?’ ...In the back of her mind, Pearl was struggling sure how to interpret this. In terms of practicality, it honestly didn’t have much point. Martial arts like sword-fighting and bōjutsu were of practically no use in modern warfare when you can get the job done with a gun.

Was this guy a bust?

She was certainly feeling that way. Back in the days of samurai brandishing their swords, maybe, but now it was behind the times. There were battle applications, sure, but that was all. And if this was all it amounted to, there were plenty of substitutes.

“So can you...still see them? Are there ‘lines’ over us as well?”

“No, I can’t tell—not clearly. None of you are especially guarded against me, right? My guess is you’re in a state that doesn’t have weak points or anything yet.”

“Riiight...”

That’s funny, considering the person before you could kill you whenever they feel like it, scoffed Pearl internally. It didn’t seem worth manipulating him just to turn him into an enemy of the Towa Organization. They’d likely take him out on the spot.

Eh, at best he can be a decoy for us to gather a little info...

In which case, it was more important to prioritize retrieving “Embryo” itself than this guy. It hadn’t shown up, had it? She wished she’d headed for the real Honami Akiko and her little brother...but she could never have imagined her own luck, because if she had gone there, she’d have surely encountered and been defeated by the “Strongest One,” Fortissimo.

“This is all over my head, but...basically, you’re happy that you got stronger?”

“Well, I don’t know about that...” Tooru’s face seemed to cloud over. “Can we really say that I’m stronger? ...Masaki, what do you think Sakakibara-san would say?”

But although Masaki was the first to ask, he’d remained silent for some time now, simply listening to the two of them talk.

“.....”

“Masaki?”

“O-oh, no I...” He shook his head slightly, clearly shaken.

Indeed...I knew.

I’d heard about these “lines” that Tooru had just been speaking about before. One day, I happened to ask Master whether he practiced anything like kendou. He responded with a low, pensive grumble.

“The sword?” He gave a sigh. “That thing’s too much for me to handle.”

“Huh? But you must have the reflexes and technique for it, easily. And you can more or less use the staff. I bet you could probably put some dan-level fighters in their place, couldn’t you?”

“Ah, well, if that’s the *kendou*²⁷ you’re talking about, then perhaps. But compared to others, such as my forte, *karate*, I can’t claim to have practiced it at all.”

“Why? Is that because you can’t get serious if you’re using a weapon?”

“No, like I keep telling you, I’ve never considered bare hands as the ‘coolest’, and I don’t think using a tool in battle counts as *relying* on it either. That’s not what I mean. The reason I shy away from swords... It’s because the heights that they can reach are more or less on a whole different level than martial arts.”

“Hm?”

“In the end, no matter the martial art, and especially in the case of things like sumo and boxing, everyone’s working toward the same goal. You can even see this in sport too, right? Like in athletics and soccer. But the sword... It’s different.”

“Uhh... Then, what is it?”

“Hmm. Er, well, keep in mind that I didn’t experience this personally, so take it with a grain salt, but...back when I was

²⁷ Most probably know this, but Kendo is a Japanese martial art centered around traditional swordsmanship. Still practiced to this day.

around your age, that's when I really became an idiot. I started seeking out all sorts of tough guys and I'd barge in unannounced asking them to teach me, half like I was taking on entire dojos. That's when I met *him*. The guy was over seventy, I seem to recall..."

"And this is the guy who reached the 'heights of the sword'?"

"That's about the size of it. His power was something else. Couldn't lay a finger on him. Thing is, I didn't know he was a swordsman, given that we were fighting bare-handed."

"Bare-handed? No *shina*²⁸ or *bokutou*?"

"That's right. And when I was beaten to a pulp and shamefully admitted my defeat, what do you think he said?"

"...Hmm, that you were inexperienced?"

"He said to me, 'Why do you believe that you have lost?'"

"...What's what supposed to mean?"

"I didn't understand him either. So I asked. And he said, 'Surely by virtue of your being alive, there is no winning or losing.' In other words...*that* is the sword. It's not about the

²⁸ Anyone who's seen enough SoL anime has probably seen one. It's a bamboo sword used for sparring, typically in Kendo.

type of weapon or what fancy techniques you use. It is ‘the ability to fell your opponent’, and nothing else.”

“...I’m not so sure about that...”

“For example, take the greatest swordsman ever known, Miyamoto Musashi. He was renowned for his *nitouryuu*²⁹ two-sword style, but do you know what he used in his most famous battle on Ganryuujima?”

“...A long wooden stick, right? So then...”

“If you’re anal about the definition of a *sword*, you wouldn’t call it a *weapon*... That’s likely what it’s about. It’s said that the *yagyuu shinkageryuu* school of swordplay that was famous from the end of the Sengoku era to the beginning of the Edo period ultimately didn’t even have established *kata* or stances. Such things were dependent upon the opponent, it seems. Long story short, they just had to kill them. And that’s also why the name *yagyuu* is known for its expert assassins.”

“That’s kind of amazing.”

“It’s beyond amazing. In the end, the sword puts strength and weakness second-place, and killing is everything. I...wasn’t

²⁹ The official name for this style is Niten Ichiryuu, or “Two heavens as one style.” The style uses a katana in the main hand, and a wakazashi in the other

willing to go that far with it. Though if we're talking 'sports' like *kendou* or fencing, I guess I understand."

"Hmm..."

"So this guy who'd wiped the floor with me, he also said this: 'Wielding the sword is the same as finding the chinks in your opponent's armor'. And as you pursue this goal, you'll eventually be able to clearly see those weak points, lines drawn over your opponent. All you have to do then is trace them.' So it's not really as if you're fighting against them, but more like you're a machine, moving automatically. I take a little too much pleasure in fighting my opponents for me to attain that state... In the end, I'm not fit for the sword."

"Huh..."

...At the time, I thought to myself that it was just another one of Master's tall tales blown out of proportion. No, Master himself said he didn't believe the story he was telling either, so I'm sure that was the case.

But...he found it hard to believe that Tooru had heard such a story. Then what was it exactly that had happened to him...? Could a dormant ability have been awakened within him? But that was... He'd admired Master so much, it would mean...his talent was the polar opposite to the way he'd been going .

How was I supposed to get this across to him?

“.....”

Lost for words, I pretended I was simply focused on driving for the moment.

“Let’s leave it at that for now. We’re almost there .”

I glanced at the rear-view mirror again. It was looking OK—that berserk cop wasn’t following us.

The street itself was silent, devoid of traffic. This was a business district and today was Saturday, so it made sense that most places would be closed. It was vaguely like a ghost town, even.

I’d been driving down nothing but alleys for some time to avoid traffic lights, and now we’d come out at the road that led to the place in question.

“...Huh?”

That was when I finally noticed that something was odd. On the opposite side of the road, between the building blocks, sprawled a vast, wide-open space.

How could there be such a huge open field slap in the middle of the city? No, more importantly, why did the police tell us to come here?

“.....”

I slammed on the brakes before we reached our destination.

“Whoa! What’s wrong?” asked Tooru, reeling from the emergency brake.

“This place... Where do you think we are?” Masaki shot back, urgency in his voice. “Why would there be an empty plot somewhere like this?”

“Ah, I seem to remember there was a stupidly large building here about two months ago. It was ruined by some kind of accident or attack, then got demolished.³⁰ ...Hang on, the police told us to come *here?*”

“Seems so... So what’s this mean? I can’t see any sign of police around.”

With sharp eyes, Masaki surveyed the area before him. It was a strange space.

There’d usually be a fence surrounding it, but here there was none, and the exposed ground stood plainly out from its

³⁰ This is most likely the Moon Temple from v5. Timescale of the novel and the fact that there was an “incident” that would be public knowledge points to it. This also means that this novel probably takes place around April

surroundings, which were hardened with asphalt and concrete, as if that single spot was the scar from a half-healed scab, forcefully torn off. Materials and scrap and who knows what were strewn about haphazardly, disorderly heaps that further lent it a splintered impression.

“What is it?” asked Pearl in Honami Akiko’s voice. Even though police squads were lying in wait all over, ready to rush them down at once, she didn’t let on in the slightest that she was secretly losing patience, wondering what was taking them.

“Something’s fishy... Tooru, Honami-san, stay right there,” said Masaki, unfastening his seatbelt and leaving the car.

“H-hey!” Tooru tried to follow, but Masaki motioned for him to stop and proceeded alone slowly down the empty street. Hands apart from his body, he showed openly that he held no weapon.

“Masaki...”

Tooru sent Masaki a worried, yet at the same time trusting look. A mere few hours had passed since they first met, but Tooru now thought of the young Masaki as an older brother and trusted him more than anyone.

At the same time, right next to him...

“Tch,” Pearl cursed internally as she watched Masaki from behind.

I really didn't account for someone who'd be this calm and make such measured actions... Even though he's just a regular human who hasn't contacted Embryo. He hasn't even “broken through.” At this rate, he's going to diffuse the whole damn situation. The stage I set for measuring Takashiro Tooru's ability will all go to waste.

What to do...?

Just as Pearl was considering abandoning tricks and traps and doing something about this herself, *it* happened. Something she could not have foreseen had been taking place at the same time: the police officers who'd been infected with Motoki Sanpei's “Countdown” were lying in wait, right by their patrol cars...

* * * * *

“Oh, ohhh...!”

The countdown had already reached thirty-seven. They— infection was rapidly spreading through their ranks, so it was hard to pinpoint the exact number—had begun to tremble, unsure how to deal with the anxiety and tension that was

swelling within them and remain on standby awaiting orders. That they did not flee despite this could be ascribed to their responsibility and duty as police officers, but in this situation, it had rather worked against them.

There are only so many actions available to those who resist fleeing though beset by fear... For in addition, they were holding weapons, and were trained on a target at that.

Thirty-six, thirty-five, thirty-four, thirty-three...

“Auuuugh...!”

There was little meaning in asking exactly who started it. But it happened. If someone oblivious about what was taking place were to hear the BANG, it would have sounded to them like a somewhat flat cracker going off in the area. Then the body of Masaki, who was walking forward, shook violently.

A gun shot, a faint light, and an impact—and then droplets of flying red blood from the person shot. It all happened so quickly, in the blink of an eye.

“...W-who just fired?!”

Now that it had begun, those whose counters had hit twenty could no longer do anything to resist.

All at once, they leaned forward. All at once, they opened fire on the parked car on which their guns were trained.

They tore through the fuel tank, and the car instantly went up in flames.

5



“All it can do is struggle within its shell -
now the only evidence of the life granted to
it...”

“So like, I gave it to her straight, told her it didn’t add up cause she was the one who hung up first. I mean, she did, right? ...Hey, Touka, are you even listening?”

“Huh?”

Three high-school girls in a cafeteria were chatting over tea. One of them was looking away, preoccupied with the street outside.

“Whoops, sorry,” said the girl, sticking her tongue out and winking to her friends.

“What’s up? Anything interesting out there?”

Another friend, who was fed up with the rambling, followed Touka’s gaze.

“Nah, nothing like that. I was just kinda thinking about how there’s so many people outside.”

“Riiight,” one friend said sullenly, whose story, she felt, had been rudely interrupted. But the other chimed in.

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s swarming with people. I wonder where they all sprang up from?”

Her friend had been whining about unrequited love for so long, she wasn’t sure how to tell her that it was getting annoying, so she was happy for any change of topic.

“I see all these people, more than you could ever count, and it gets me wondering. About their families, friends, lovers... Kinda dizzying when you think about it, right?”

“Uhh, okay? ”

“No, I kind of get that. Like, even if I’m really hurting from a broken heart or whatever, everyone’s got stuff like that on their plate. In fact, it’s not even a big deal or anything to them, right? But then, people like us, we’re just ‘high-school girls’ to them. They think we’re these ditzy, braindead airheads.”

“I guess they think we just don’t have a care in the world, huh.”

“Sometimes I feel like yelling, ‘Yeah? You wanna change places then?!’ Life’s hard enough for us as it is.”

“Maybe there are just too many people, and they don’t have time to be dealing with others on a personal level?”

“Yeah, but even when everyone’s throwing around this idea of high-school girls, you almost never find anyone who fits into that dumb girl stereotype. Even in class, there’s what, two or three? Why’s it have to be that way?”

“Maybe because people like that are the ones that stand out on TV? What do you think, Touka?”

The two friends turned to Touka, and then their faces froze.

“.....”

Touka Miyashita’s expression had transformed. She was staring intently at the street outside, with eyes as cold as ice.

“That’s...”

A faint voice slipped from her lips. It was a voice that sounded vaguely like a boy’s, and yet something about it was hard to place.

The one who had darted down the street outside just then was a scruffy boy by the name of Motoki Sanpei.

* * * * *

“Haaah, haaah, haaah...”

As he fled, he couldn’t shake the feeling that the whole world had become his enemy. Motoki Sanpei had been wandering the streets, faint with hunger.

What was the deal with those cops?

They’d suddenly started shrieking, then gave up on him and ran off, like they were on drugs or something. Even cops

were into that now? This city was in a real bad state if true. Though he hadn't known very much about it until now...

In his current frame of mind, he was starting to get the feeling that the people passing by were all highly dangerous individuals. They seemed perfectly ordinary, but this salaryman, and that lady going out shopping, and that lovely-dovey couple... What if they all belonged to some dodgy organization, hiding pistols, or knives, or shady drugs in their pockets?

“Urggh...”

Sanpei wandered the streets in a cold sweat, almost—no, truly—believing that the bustling street was filled with suspicious people. Really, what was he supposed to do now? He'd almost been taken in by the police, yet it didn't seem like they had much in the way of dirt on him. Who could blame him if he was feeling extremely on edge?

Besides, I didn't even steal anything...

And as a result, he wasn't any closer to remedying his financial situation.

Shit. What do I do now...?

There wasn't much he could do. He'd lost all confidence in his burglary skills. At this rate he was bound to die in a ditch somewhere nearby.

Goddamn it...!

He had to go back home. Prostrating himself before his father, quick to beat him, and his mother, quick to weep, was the one thing he was sure he couldn't do, but at this point he didn't have much choice.

"Urrgh, fuck it all...! Fuck my life...!" he swore, kicking away a can at his feet.

But he had forgotten one thing: that luck was not at all on his side. That if the dice of fate called chance were to exist, his rolls would always be terrible.

So just when the empty can had hit the wall, it bounced off and struck a passing boy.

"Ow! The hell'd you just do?!"

The boy turned to Sanpei, visibly angry. But Sanpei, too, was irritated.

"Shut up!" he retorted. The brat looked much smaller and punier than him.

But just after that, even the people walking ahead of the boy all turned at the same time toward Sanpei.

“...What’d you say?”

“Uh? There a problem?”

It was clear from their attitude that they were with the brat. Sanpei turned pale.

“You tryna blame us for something , punk?”

They started crowding around Sanpei—eight of them in all.

“Ah, no, that was, uh...”

Sanpei inched backward, then made a break for it. But the alley he’d dashed into was a dead end, and he was immediately cornered.

The gang of eight’s eyes were gleaming with malicious intent as they drew closer to Sanpei. The aura of violence they radiated was not the result of a conscious decision to be cruel , but due to being too young to know the meaning of restraint.

“U-uwah...!”

Sanpei’s mind went blank, unable to process what was happening. He’d only just been surrounded by cops, and now it was these guys? Was all this for real?

“Hey, dipshit. You just told us to shut up back there, didn’t you...?!”

The brat—the one Sanpei had kicked the can at—lifted him by the collar.

“Say it again, I dare you. Say it one more time!” he said, punching Sanpei in the nose as the words left his lips. And as blood spurted from his nose, Sanpei cried out from within.

They’re gonna kill me... It’s all over!

He truly thought it. And in that instant, the switch flipped on.

...Ten, nine, eight...

* * * * *

Honami Akiko, who’d come out as far as the downtown pedestrian precinct looking for Takashiro Tooru, could hardly believe her eyes. First, a group of around eight or so young men had run past her, wailing in fear. Then everyone around her had started staring into space and muttering to themselves. Moments later, they’d suddenly begun screaming their lungs out and started running around.

“P-please help me!”

“I-I feel like I’m losing my mind!”

The things they were yelling didn’t make any sense.

“You wanna explain what’s going on here ?!” she barked at Embryo, whipping him out of her pocket.

[[...Eh, if I had to guess, I’d say a certain someone ‘broke through ’ and we’re seeing the side effects of that now,]]
Embryo replied sullenly.

“Y-you mean... You’re saying this is *your* fault?!”

[[Hey, it’s not like I actually *did* anything... Someone probably ‘heard’ you and me talking, and that awakened the power sleeping within them. And seeing how not much time’s passed, betcha the lucky guy or gal probably doesn’t even know what’s going on, or that they even caused this in the first place. ‘Course, they haven’t killed me and showered themselves with energy, so it tracks that the power itself’s probably incomplete and going haywire.]]

“W-what are we supposed to do then?!”

Screaming echoed through the streets like static noise from a radio.

[[Ain’t much we can do. What’s done is done. Short of hunting down the culprit and beating ‘em to death or something, this ain’t stopping. Though you’d never find them in this total chaos, for starters.]]

“...Ah!”

[[You've already got your own power. Looks like you built up "antibodies" to this sort of phenomenon, so you're not gonna end up in a state of panic, but...I can't say the same for the folks around here. I wonder how long a human body can hold out in an abnormal state of agitation. There's pretty much no recorded cases of someone ever dying from over-excitement. All you can do is speculate.]]

"D-dying...?"

What, everyone in the city? My god. Was this little egg-shaped "Embryo" thing really so dangerous?

Wh-what do I do...?

Amid this great wave of panic, Honami Akiko stood there in a daze, alone in the center of the road.

* * * * *

"...Huh?"

Sanpei, once again dumbfounded, looked on as the group ran off. Seriously, what was up with this city...?

"A-anyway, I better get the hell outta here...!"

Timorously, Sanpei stumbled out of the alleyway into the open...and then was struck speechless.

People were yelling and screaming, in an uproar all around him. It had spread throughout the city now, it seemed. He couldn't even make out what they were saying at first, but straining his ears, it seemed to be...

"It's the end of the world! We're all doomed!"

"What?"

Sanpei's jaw dropped. He didn't understand the reason for their hysteria. It was, of course, because they'd been infected by his "Countdown." The gang of eight who had run away had been spreading fear and panic to everyone they crossed paths with.

"What's going on...? What's gotten into everyone?"

It seemed that the longer he remained around the commotion, the calmer he was. This was to be expected, given that the nature of his power was to transfer his own confusion to those around him. But then it struck him.

Oh yeah... Maybe now...!

He wove between the people running all over the place on the road and snuck into a café. It was deserted inside—everyone had since fled. Only the sound of the cable broadcast rang empty through the shop.

Once he'd checked the ceiling and walls for security cameras, he carefully began to take out fistfuls of cash from the register.

“Heh... Heh heh!”

And then he bolted like a frightened rabbit. And ran. And when he'd finally made it as far as a park with no one else in sight, he burst into laughter. He didn't really know what was going on, but it looked like his luck hadn't completely run out after all. At the eleventh hour, somehow things had finally started going his way. Or rather, everyone had run *away*.

He could think about that later. Right now, he had to try to stay calm and get a grasp of the situation.

“U-uhh... Ah!”

He glanced around to discover—again to his good fortune—that beside the park, in front of a taxi parking lot, was a cup ramen vending machine. They had his favorite, miso. He decided he'd use the money he'd just stolen to buy it. Even the way the change jingled out was somehow getting him emotional.

“Hah! This could be a hell of a lot worse !”

Getting excited for no reason all by himself, he brought the cup ramen filled with hot water to a park bench and waited

three minutes. A faint music from somewhere afar carried on the wind. It was a cheerful tune, but unfortunately too faint to make out.

A lot of things went through Sanpei's head as he waited.

Seriously though, did those guys run off cause they were on drugs? It kinda seemed too weird for that..

“Man, I wonder what happened? It wasn't something I did, was it?”

He was muttering out loud as he thought, a habit he seemed to have picked up in the few days he'd spent away from home.

“Maybe I actually learned how to properly intimidate folk? I've really had it rough. Like, the guy who's been through hell and back's got this new menacing aura or something? Heheh!” He wasn't serious, but the thought entertained him. “Maybe I really am hot shit, and the future's got big things in store for me. Kehehehe!”

As he joked to himself, again came that faint music, like the sound of a flute playing, and he snapped back to reality.

Oh yeah, that should be about three minutes now, huh.

He split the disposable chopsticks he got from the vending machine and peeled open the cup lid. There was a silent

moment of appreciation, and then, just as he was about to start slurping up the noodles, the music stopped.

“No. You no longer have any future to speak of.”

The voice came from behind him. Sanpei was so startled, he nearly spilled his ramen from fright.

“Whuh?!”

He spun around, but there was no one there. All that greeted him was the rustling of the park trees.

“...Hm?”

Was he hearing things? He strained his eyes to see, until again came the voice, from behind.

“It’s similar. Your power, and my existence...”

With a leap, he turned again. This time, the figure remained.

“In that the actor has no control over it. It happens automatically...and before you know it, it has floated to the surface. In those respects, we are perfectly alike. In the sense that both your power and mine emerge as a ‘bubble’ in response to the world...we are the same.”

Ahh. It was *them*. Their expression was oddly asymmetrical, as if they were angry, or perhaps crying. And Sanpei already knew who it was. They wore a black hat that was like a pipe, and a black cloak...

“Y-you’re...”

There was black rouge upon their white face, as if it had risen to the surface. Man or woman, it was impossible to say. But there was no mistaking it—it was the *shinigami* he had seen that time on the street, the start of his run-in with bad luck.

“We are the same. And for that very reason...” Their top half swayed slightly. “I cannot let you escape. Now, while your potential is yet immature, I will put an end to this.”

The *shinigami*—some call them Boogiepop—slowly drew themselves toward Sanpei, as if their shadow was extending across the ground.

“Wah!”

Sanpei reflexively flung the contents of the cup ramen at them, but by that point they were no longer there. Suddenly, they were sailing through the air. His eyes tried to catch up, but the *shinigami* had already used a tree as a perch to jump in

a different direction. He'd lost sight of them. The flurry of jumps echoed in the deserted park.

“Wh-what the hell's with you? What in the fuck is going on...?!”

Sanpei seemed, for the third time, about to spiral into a state of total confusion . But in that exact moment, as if to strike at his weak point, he heard a voice.

{I'll make a prediction: Your life will end in twenty seconds.}

“Wha-!”

That shook him. For some reason, numbers like “twenty” had a profound impact on him.

{Eighteen, seventeen...}

The genderless voice began its countdown.

“A-aiiee...!”

Sanpei tried to run, but as he did, there suddenly came a dry snap from the chopsticks in his hand. Something had sliced through the air and cut them in two. Aghast, he dropped them.

{Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen, twelve...}

The counting continued. With each passing number, more and more anxiety piled upon Sanpei like lead weights. There was no time for it to disperse.

He squealed meekly, desperately and aimlessly looking around, but the *shinigami* was nowhere to be seen. It had disappeared. And yet it most surely had its sights trained on him...

{Nine, eight...}

He heard a *whish* right by his ear. Something hot dripped onto his cheek, then trickled down his chin... It was blood. Part of his left earlobe had been sliced and was hanging off.

“W...waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaughhhh!!!” he screamed in fear. It was a fear he’d never experienced before in his life. An absolute terror that so consumed him he even forgot where he was, as if the bottom of his mind had fallen out.

{Six, five, four...}

His head was spinning. He couldn’t think of anything at all. Didn’t know what to do. Couldn’t form an idea. There was nothing he could accomplish...

{Three...}

With a whip, his right earlobe, too, was slashed—more blood sprayed. But Sanpei didn't care anymore. He couldn't respond.

{Two...}

Somehow, there was only one image that had formed in his head. It was white, smooth, and oval.

An egg.

That's right. It was that egg...

{One...}

He didn't know how, but in that moment, he had reached the truth of the matter. It was the egg's fault. In the heart of his confusion, he had broken through the fear that he'd believed all but absolute and formed a cohesive thought.

And then...

{Zero.}

As the voice whispered in his ear, he felt something touch the back of his neck. And then just like that, Sanpei's consciousness was dragged into the murky darkness, gone.

* * * * *

It was something of a spectacle. There are a fair number of things for which one has words but rarely ever witnesses. But the situation at this moment could be summed up perfectly.

There is an expression: “As if a spirit had left them.” It’s used to refer to someone who snaps out of an activity they were deeply engrossed in, though rarely do you ever find such a radical case of someone coming to their senses in daily life. There’s always a lingering sense of something, a feeling of inertia practically every time.

Yet that very thing was what had happened to these people in that moment.

“...Huh?”

“Uh...”

All of a sudden, the fear and anxiety that had been filling everyone’s minds had vanished without a trace.

“...Why?”

They didn’t really understand why they’d been panicking so much in the first place. But it was clear that the feeling had at least disappeared, like a receding wave. It was as if the city, which had been filled with the people’s ear-splitting mayhem, had transformed. Perfect silence.

“Like a spirit had left them,” many thought, but few would reach the conclusion that this was, in actual fact, the case.

“...Looks like that’s the end of it.”

All was tranquil again. Among the crowd of bewildered faces, Honami Akiko breathed a sigh of relief.

[[Bad news—it looks like whoever started this didn’t manage to break their shell. Seems the power wore off. Or maybe they hit their head somewhere and snuffed it?]]
grouched Embryo. [[Damn shame. With a riot like that, there was a good chance I coulda been smashed and died.]]

“Alright, enough of that for now. We have to find Toorusan...”

[[Oh yeah? So we’ve gone from Takashiro-san to Toorusan now, have we?]]

Embryo snickered. Akiko frowned but didn’t answer.

Though... If what just happened really was the fault of this egg thing...what am I supposed to do with it? she asked herself.

Should she smash it to pieces, the way it wanted...? She didn’t know why, but something inside her advised strongly against it. She had no idea why, but...

“Akiko-chan, there’s not a thing in this world that doesn’t hold value. No matter how awful it may be, it is, just by virtue of its existence, a possibility that might give rise to the future.”

...Again, Kyou-nii-chan’s words echoed in her head. It was strange. Ever since she met Embryo, she couldn’t stop thinking about the boy. He’d died so young...

She shook herself out of it and set out in the direction that a convoy of patrol cars were headed. Now that the people’s confusion had dispersed, she should be able to wave down a proper cab somewhere.

Indeed, she could not have known, but the confusion that “Countdown” had brought about was no more. This also meant that it had left the police, almost “as if a spirit had left them,” who were at this very moment launching their attack on Takashiro Tooru, Taniguchi Masaki and Pearl. And yet it wasn’t enough to bring the situation under control. In fact, it was quite the contrary...

* * * * *

“.....!”

I realized immediately that I'd been shot.

My body spun wildly and I fell to the ground like I'd been hit with a hammer. And yet... The fact that I knew what was happening proved that I hadn't taken all that much damage.

Where is it...? My shoulder? It's just a graze.

I gauged the extent of the attack from the pain in my body. The bullet hadn't been a direct hit. It was just that the impact had had such a weight to it that I'd felt it all the way to my bones.

“Ngh...”

But why would they attack us out of the blue?

Straight after that, there came the roar of a hail of gunshots. Lying flat, I turned toward the sound. And as I did so, I witnessed the patrol car that Tooru and the others were in ignite.

“...What?!”

My eyes widened. Not because I was worried for their safety. On the contrary, what I saw was...

“.....!”

Tooru could see them clearly.

Several lines that ran through the air. He knew them to be “lines of death ,” and that crossing them would spell the end. So *even before* the bullets had started to fly, he had swiftly embraced Pearl beside him—who was disguised as Honami Akiko—opened the door and jumped out.

The car exploded behind them, but Tooru and Pearl were already out of range of the blast, which forced its way through the vehicle’s cracks. They stood safely to its side in spite of the raging inferno , by which point Tooru had let go of Pearl and already moved onto his next action.

Tracing the lines that he could see, he moved into the blind spots of the police who were firing upon him. It was as if he were drawn to them, riding a course that carried him closer.

...The hell?

Taniguchi Masaki wasn't the only one who was surprised to see this. Pearl herself, who was right there by him, watched in disbelief.

What? Did he... What did he just do? Even I hadn't...

It went without saying that even Pearl hadn’t considered the police squad would suddenly start firing indiscriminately. And Tooru should have had no way of knowing that. But now, it was as if he had seen through everything, his motions

effortlessly fluid, dodging each and every attack and explosion that followed, and had even gone on the offensive...

I-is this...what Takashiro Tooru is capable of...?!

Tooru now held an iron bar , which appeared to have been lying at the edge of the construction site; he'd picked it up faster than she could process. He then went for a police officer who had lost sight of him and decided to emerge from the shadows .

“Wah?!”

The police were no longer gripped by fear and were therefore aware of the problematic nature of the actions they'd personally taken, but they made no attempt to flee. Instead, they set out trying to gauge the situation. And that was when the storm hit them.

Tooru's iron bar had already struck four or five police officers, and was already heading for its next target.

“W-what?!”

But the police squad was not your average gang of punks or delinquents. They were trained professionals with knowledge and experience. Even with element of surprise, you could never finish them off all at once.

With a grunt, one officer blocked the bar with his baton. Tooru pivoted and drew away from them, seeking cover behind a lazily discarded pile of materials used for demolition work.

“Ah, shit!”

A handful of officers took aim at Tooru’s limbs and fired, but the hits didn’t land, instead rebounding ineffectually off the materials.

“Wait! Watch where you’re shooting! You’ll hit a friendly!” barked the officer who had just endured Tooru’s attack—the squad leader.

He was highly trained and had even taught *kendo* and *judo* back at the precinct, so he knew. He knew that Takashiro Tooru was no ordinary man. He had to have been at least of *dan* rank, or perhaps higher.

Him, a deviant...? I find that hard to believe.

He knew it was an order from the top, but he had to admit its legitimacy was suspect.

Tooru concealed himself once more, but only to keep to their blind spots rather than to escape. Hearing a clatter behind him, the squad leader turned, readying his baton.

Tooru was brandishing his iron bar, poised for the attack. He steeled himself, trying once more to block with his baton.

But then...something completely unbelievable happened.

The bar drew a sharp angle in the air, as if it had known all along where the position of the blocking baton would be. Swerving around it by a hair's breadth, the attack buried itself in the squad leader's scapula.

"...Guh?!"

He was knocked to the ground, realizing that the bone had been fractured. The other officers panicked and tried to respond, but Tooru had taken a low stance and swept in an arc at their feet... Struck in the ankles, they all toppled over hopelessly.

Even as this occurred, Tooru remained in motion. He snatched the fallen squad leader by the collar and dragged him into the shadows.

"Hey! What's this all about?!" he demanded.

"W-what do you mean?"

"Are you really cops? Or is this all one big setup?"

"...I don't know what you're asking."

"You started shooting your pistols right at us, so why are you practically firing warning shots now?!"

“...Ah!”

He’s figured out all that...?

The squad leader had now completely abandoned the possibility that a man like this had lost his capacity for rational judgment.

“No... That was-“

Just as he tried to respond, something alarmed Tooru—he leapt immediately to the side.

A cop who’d spotted them had fired on them. Tooru had pulled back even before the man had readied his aim. When the bullet scraped the tip of the squad leader’s nose, the man shrunk back, squeezed his eyes shut and whimpered. By the time he’d reopened them, the battle had already moved to another location, the gunshots and clamor quickly receding.

What is this...? What’s happening?

It was evident that Tooru had gone easy on him. Normally, a blow like that could easily have bludgeoned him to death, yet he’d been let off with just a fracture. And now...it even seemed as if Tooru was retreating from the fight in an attempt to stop him from taking any stray bullets.

“...What in the hell is going on here?” he muttered vacantly. It was all he could do.

* * * * *

“Hey, report! What’s going on over there?! What’s the sitch?”

The other squad, who was meant to lure in the murderers and catch them in a pincer, had lost contact with the other side. What they couldn’t have known was that it was Pearl’s jamming device that was the cause of this. What they *had* realized, however, was that the other squad had apparently been forced to handle the situation on their own because the perps hadn’t arrived at the designated point. From the apparent smoke rising from the car, which had blown up, not to mention the gunshots they were hearing, this much was clear.

“We’ve gotta provide backup...”

But it was also true that law enforcement cannot act without direction from above. They hesitated.

“I say we rush in at once!”

“It’ll be too late by the time we get orders!”

“Mm... No other choice.”

But even then, though opinions were unanimous and they'd decided to act, they were unaware that no matter what they did now, it was too late.

None of them had noticed that to their rear, a car had at some point been parked on the road across the street. Inside it, a boy was lying low, hiding as he'd been instructed because it was dangerous outside and he mustn't leave. Even if they had noticed...it wouldn't have made any difference.

They heard the crunch of footsteps on rubble behind them, followed by an oddly serene voice.

“Hey... So what you're saying is, Takashiro Tooru and his friends are over there?”

With a fright, the bloodthirsty police officers spun toward the sound of the voice.

He was grinning.

That was the first thing about him that struck them. He had pale purple clothes and was short of stature... Whichever way you looked at it, it was extremely clear that he couldn't have been involved with the police. And yet, if you had to ask who he was...you'd almost be hard-pressed to find an answer. His odd smile didn't look like that of an adult, but there was

also assuredly something about him that suggested he was no child.

“W-who the hell are you?!”

“I’m in a good mood right now...” he answered, grinning, wholly dodging the question. And then he spread his hands wide. “You’re all so fortunate... It’s a very rare occasion for me not to kill those who stand in my path, so that I can focus on *what comes next*.”

He gave off an air of something surreal, as if his smirk was the only thing there, floating in space. But something about him prevented any of them yelling back and telling him not to play dumb.

“.....”

For the slightest instant, each and every one of the police officers were stunned silent. And then...it was over.

“Now, then...” he said, taking a step forward.

At his feet, the officers’ lay on the ground, rigid, mouths agape. The way they’d fallen, it was as if they were all in fact robots, as if their power had been switched off. The police were no longer even in his sights.

“It's been a while since I've had something to sink my teeth into... I'm looking forward to this...!”

And then his grin broadened further. By now it had crossed from the bizarre into something that could strike fear in the hearts of men.

Thus did the curtain rise on the first battle between Fortissimo and Inazuma.

* * * * *

The sky was rapidly darkening. Even the wind, which should have been relatively gentle, seemed to be growing more violent by the minute somehow. Soon, clouds shrouded the sky and the gentle patter of raindrops suddenly became a torrential downpour.

The building's demolition site, its earth laid bare, was bad enough as it was. Now, it had assumed an awful marsh-like quality—a “quagmire.” It was a fitting way to describe the current predicament.

And through it, Tooru ran, splashing mud as he went. Many of the officers in pursuit also lost their footing and fell,

but even blackened from head to toe and dripping mud from their entire bodies, they continued to chase.

The rain beat down on them unequivocally, the pursuers and the pursued both.

Geh! Gack! Gagh!

The noise of the battle that echoed was hard to describe. It could have been mistaken for the sound of frolicking; if a bystander had been watching from a distance, it may even have seemed like they were playing. But those involved weren't even remotely thinking this way, for Tooru was fighting tooth and nail against the oncoming waves of police officers. Even the police, when it came down to it, were desperate to do something about this situation they'd landed themselves in thanks to their own reckless shooting.

Staggering and stumbling over their own feet, they continued to struggle. However, that too was about to come to an end. The police who had opened fire earlier hadn't had all that much ammo to begin with. They'd been forced to resort to their batons, and by that point the outcome of the battle was clear.

If Tooru had to pride himself on something, it would be his endurance. There was something absolute about his

stamina. On top of having a great reserve of it, he was like an elite soccer player, good at measuring when to take micro-rests here and there. It was a corner-cutting technique he'd picked up from a slew of demanding part-time jobs.

And so, the police officers began to flag, while Tooru drove, steered, isolated and struck them down with little effort. By now, Tooru's doubt had changed to conviction.

These cops are the real deal... They aren't blindly trying to kill me with their attacks, at least. So...what now?

If he went too far, running away would only make things worse. He was also worried about the others, like Masaki and Honami Akiko—who was actually Pearl, but he hadn't realized this—so maybe it was best he surrendered... Although, if they came swinging at him and he was forced to counterattack, there'd be nothing he could do about it.

"...Dammit. What's the answer here?!" he growled from behind some debris.

Maybe he should make a show of it and leap out intentionally to get himself caught? They'd give him a solid beating. It'd hurt... He gritted his teeth at the thought. But they were out of bullets out there. There was no danger of him being shot to death. If he was going to do it, now was the time.

“...Alright!”

He waited until it had gone somewhat quiet, then sprang forth. And then he froze.

Because the one standing there...was not a police officer. All of *them* were lying at his feet. They were frozen stiff; something vacant, hollow in their expressions. You couldn't tell if they were alive or dead.

And he, who stood in the center of it all, rain-soaked and utterly unconcerned about any of this, was grinning.

The man was short. His clothes were a pale purple, and the silken fabric seemed to shine as the rain fell upon it.

“.....?!”

Tooru knew that the man had defeated the police officers, but...he couldn't even guess as to how or what for.

“Hey there, *Inazuma*.” It was a strange thing for him—for Fortissimo—to come out with.

“Huh?”

“That's your name. You know, ‘Thor?’ The God of Thunder, one of the twelve gods of Asaheim temple. That makes you ‘Inazuma.’ What'cha think? It's a good name,

right?³¹ I awoke you. Which makes me, Fortissimo, your godfather³²,” he said with a chuckle.

His words were baffling. Tooru hesitated, but standing before this man, this self-proclaimed “Fortissimo,” there was one thing that was painfully clear to him. One sense alone invariably came pressing down on him, openly and unabated, like being buffeted by gale-force winds.

Bloodlust.

All other sensations coming from him were non-existent. *Drive*. Whoever this man was, he was without a shadow of a doubt at peace with being the *enemy*...!

But even then, Tooru couldn't hide his bewilderment.

What the hell's up with this guy...? It's like...like he's completely covered in weak points!

It wasn't a question of whether the “lines” would appear. He had no doubt about where he should strike, because he could attack anywhere!

³¹ Inazuma literally means “lightning,” so ff here took Thor and made it a JPN name. Everything else here is sorta nonsense from what I can tell. There are no twelve temple gods in Norse myth (they're priests, and Thor isn't one) and it's the Asgaard temple, which is located in Asaheim, aka Asaland.

³² Original JPN was “naming parent.”

But then, why did he seem so unnaturally fearless...?
Instinctively, Tooru took a step back to make some distance.
A gap which Fortissimo, as if giving it no thought at all,
effortlessly closed.

In that instant, Tooru's body twitched. He *understood*.
He...he knows!

This man was fully aware of the fact that he was full of
openings, and that Tooru could see them...!

That was the reason he sneered. Then, that would mean
that the "openings" were...

A trap? ...No! This isn't on that kind of level.

Indeed, it was the very way one might present themselves
to a wary wild animal, as if to say "Look, I'm not afraid,"
inviting them to bite. Since they weren't on a level playing
field, it was a given that the one with the higher ground would
approach.

But what was his superiority grounded in? Not from a
weapon, from the looks of it. You'd be hard pressed to say he
had good physique, so it seemed unlikely that he was strong.
Then, was it his technique?

*But if that were the case, he should have some sort of
stance. How in the...?*

If it were Taniguchi Masaki, he'd surely have been able to tell, having studied so rigorously under Sakakibara Gen. This went beyond the strong and gentle "samurai" that Tooru aspired to after he was once saved—this was the same thing as the "heights of the sword," brandished for the sole purpose of *burying the enemy*.

Ultimately, there were no stances or techniques. It all hinged upon the opponent.

But what *was* clear was that it was creepy. Something formless. Something that, if mishandled, would be extremely bad. This much, he knew. He knew it, and yet...

"Urgh..."

And yet, he couldn't just stand there and do nothing...!

The pressure, the tension... They were in themselves already a part of his opponent's assault, gradually tightening their stranglehold on him. He had to move...!

"Hey, Inazuma," began Fortissimo coolly, as if utterly indifferent to Tooru's state. "Don't you find that the true meaning of being strong...is not having to lift a finger? When you have no equal to challenge you, and you're surrounded by nothing but the weak. When the routine of winning becomes so second nature, it gets invariably dull and tedious."

He snickered.

“And your opponents are so pathetic, it’s ridiculous. A bunch of idiots who don’t even know who they’re up against. You must know what I’m talking about, right, Inazuma? Ever thrashed any punks who don’t know their place, who start messing with you because they think you’re taking up too much space, or don’t like the look you’re giving them or some other dumb reason? You must have, right?”

...He had. And many times. But what of it? What was he getting at?

“What I’m saying is, anyone who doesn’t try to gauge the strength and depths of their opponent is an idiot. In that sense, Inazuma...by not foolishly engaging me, you’ve cleared the first hurdle. Which is why...I’ll give you a proper duel.”

Fortissimo shrugged his shoulders. And then he moved.

His left hand extended with frightening speed, striking out toward Tooru’s chest. On impulse, Tooru swung down with the bar in his hand, aiming for Fortissimo’s fast-approaching trajectory.

The next instant, he was blown away.

“Wha-?!”

Tooru slammed into the materials behind him, the mountain coming down with a noisy crash. The bar in his hand...had broken off. The cut was perfectly clean, smooth like a mirror. But he was afforded little time to gawp at it; Fortissimo was already closing the gap. Tooru launched the materials at him, dodging to the side—the projectile materials were sliced to pieces in mid-air.

“Hahahaha!”

Fortissimo spun around to look at Tooru, and a menacing smile rose to his lips.

“You’re the second person who’s ever dodged two of my attacks... It’s been so long. I’ve waited so, so long to feel this way...!”

Tooru was rushing in even as he spoke, the severed bar thrust out to strike at Fortissimo’s side while Fortissimo was still in mid-turn.

Blood sprayed.

“...Agh!”

Then Tooru was in retreat, rolling away. He’d dropped the bar—now in pieces—and was pressing a hand to his face. From it trickled drops of blood... His right eye had been sliced, rendered useless.

“His eye...? I was aiming for his whole head. So he pulled back a fraction quicker, did he?” murmured Fortissimo calmly, with an air of satisfaction.

“.....”

Tooru took his hand from his eye. He didn't have time to be worrying about pain. His field of vision had been halved, but the “lines” were still visible; they seemed to be more of a feeling to him.

He could see them, but...

...Ngh.

He picked up a new weapon—an iron pipe—and readied himself, trying his hardest to still his hopelessly trembling knees.

He could see the “lines.” He knew that he could strike them. But somehow, the moment he tried to do so, they would disappear. Cut short, as if Fortissimo's power was the act of severing itself.

And the pipe just now... It was indeed sliced at the “cutting” point. It wasn't that he'd touched it... Had he thrown something? But if that were the case he would have seen the “line” of the attack. He could even see the trajectories of bullets, after all...

“Hahaha...!”

Fortissimo’s assault continued unabated. Tooru hurled the pipe at him—it was sliced to pieces and repelled. But not only that—even the raindrops falling around him were atomized, showering down in a fine mist. Even with one eye, Tooru had seen this clearly.

...Huh?!

There really had been nothing. Nothing that he could see where the attack should have been. And yet, the fact remained that targets as small as raindrops had been hit with perfect accuracy. Which meant...

“S-space itself...?!” Tooru murmured. To which Fortissimo smirked.

“Hey, Inazuma, do you know what form the world really takes?” he asked. It was a strange question.

Tooru warily remained silent. Fortissimo continued.

“See, the thing is, Inazuma...this thing we call the world? To the trained eye, it’s covered densely with countless cracks.”

Fortissimo’s eyes narrowed. Were these “cracks” reflected in those eyes?

“I’ve always seen them, ever since I could remember. Then one day, I moved my fingers a little and realized I was able to

make them spread. That's right... It's just as you said, Inazuma. 'Space.' That's the nature of my power."

Fortissimo raised his arms slightly, gesturing as an entertainer might respond to applause.

"I just have to pick one of the countless fissures running through the air and open it up a little. And just like that, I can 'rend' and destroy all things... That's my power: 'Fortissimo.' It refers to how a sound that's too powerful destroys harmony. I was just a kid when they found out I was using it; that's when I joined the Towa Organization. Seems they call folks like us MPLSes, those with powers this world wasn't meant to see. I hear they create synthetic humans with similar powers too...but it doesn't look like any of them have ever caught up to me."

A chill ran down Tooru's spine.

A...a power that lets him manipulate space at will...?

If it were a weapon, he could block it. If it were a projectile, he could dodge it. But *space*...? That was something he already existed within the confines of. So how was he supposed to protect himself from it...?! He had "lines," his opponent, "space"... It was the difference between two-

dimensional and three-. How could he fight someone who existed on an altogether higher plane?

Fortissimo approached yet again, smiling...

* * * * *

...Urk! F-Fortissimo!

Pearl, who had cautiously drawn closer to verify Tooru's power, saw the pale purple man, visible even from a distance in the rain, and shrieked inwardly.

She didn't know the identity of the illustrious "Strongest One," but was well aware of his legendary killing power and his high mission success rate—or rather, the fact that he never, ever failed.

I...I can't believe this! He's here...?! We don't stand a chance of winning now!

She had to get away. She'd hoped to manipulate Tooru into fighting the Towa Organization, but none of her plans mattered to her anymore. Only her own survival came first.

She had escaped Towa to survive, after all. She'd gotten wind of news that they were trying to dispose of everyone with the power to imitate other humans, and with extreme

prejudice. A more powerful type of the same model as her had wiped out a research facility and escaped, and had been deemed potentially dangerous to all, weak and strong alike. Manticore Shock³³ was its name, and it was one of the reasons why the Towa Organization was so on edge lately, indiscriminately hunting down anyone suspicious.

But there was no way in hell Pearl was going to be killed for a reason like that. So she ran.

She snuck into the ranks of an anti-Towa organization and took steps to ensure her safety and fortify herself against the impending danger. And yet...for all her little tricks, she was helpless in the face of Fortissimo, who now stood before her. She had to throw her pride to the wind and run...!

Her shoes, however, slipped in the dirt, now muddy after absorbing a considerable measure of rain. The sound was not overlooked by Fortissimo, who spun in her direction.

Their eyes met.

“.....!”

³³ Obviously the same Manticore from *And Others*. The name “Manticore” is a reference to the ELP song/album *Tarkus*. Though, I can’t figure out what the “shock” part refers to. The Manticore section of *Tarkus* is an instrumental, and “shock” doesn’t appear in the rest of the song either. Peter Gabriel’s “Shock the Monkey” comes to mind, but that’s a stretch.

Pearl stiffened.

“Hm? Isn’t that...?”

Noticing Honami Akiko, whom Pearl was disguised as, Fortissimo’s smile vanished.

“So that’s where you were? But...” He immediately returned his gaze to Tooru. “Right now, this is more fun. She can wait.”

He took another step forward.

“Nngh...!”

Tooru could do little but inch away now. If the openings that had become visible to him were flawed, he could forget all about striking at weak points. He’d realized it was futile. Whatever he tried to do, he wouldn’t be able to land an attack on his opponent...

“What’s wrong, Inazuma...?” goaded Fortissimo, doing his best to rile Tooru up in the face of his visible distress.

“Where’d all that courage go? You were singlehandedly fending off that police squad before. You’re doing a disservice to that samurai gear, you know.”

He snorted.

“Though...now that I look at it, that’s a pretty tacky getup. You look like a complete fool. Was that a hand-me-down? Dunno who gave that to you, but whoever it was, they clearly have poor taste.”

At this, Tooru tensed up, gritting his teeth.

“What’d you say?”

“Oh, that looked like it hit a nerve. What, you have some special memories or something? Hey, facts are facts. Whoever wore those clothes was a guaranteed idiot,” he sneered.

“...Shut up.”

Tooru’s expression was growing ever darker. He could put up with others making fun of his weaknesses. But to mock Sakakibara Gen, to whom his clothes belonged, was to Tooru the same as denouncing the man’s very existence.

“Seriously though, you don’t need to be the lapdog of a fool like that. You should already be leagues stronger than him, anyhow. Best thing for you is to spit on backward folks like that—they’re living in the past.”

Fortissimo shrugged and lightly shook his head with an air of disappointment, as if implying he was beyond hope .

“.....!”

Tooru snapped. He rushed in toward Fortissimo, techniques and powers be damned. Fortissimo dodged his attack effortlessly.

“...Uoooooooooogh!”

With a war cry, Tooru began swinging the pipe around wildly. If his opponent had been on the level of a police officer, he might even have hit them. But alas, each of his swings whiffed the air in vain. And somewhere along the way, he had begun to pant heavily. Too many meaningless movements had finally cost him the well of stamina he so prided himself upon.

Meanwhile, Fortissimo was practically unfazed. He continued to dodge the attacks by a hair's breadth, his smile never fading.

Now then, Inazuma, I wonder what exactly you'll show me when you've been pushed to the brink? Come on, now...





He even had the luxury to contemplate. Tooru, on the other hand, was afforded no such thing. The moment one side gives in to anger, the fight is all but decided. Whoever first loses their composure, loses the battle. Tooru had, at this point, already been defeated. It wasn't about failing to make up for the difference in skill.

Eventually, Tooru stumbled and collapsed in a pathetic heap, face plunging into the mud. And at this moment, it finally hit him. But it was too late.

When he raised his head, what did he see but Fortissimo, hands outstretched and poised for merciless attack, as if to say, "If you've got any more tricks, let's see 'em."

No good, huh?

Tooru resigned himself. It was too much. Somewhere in his heart, he'd quietly accepted that he was no match for Fortissimo.

Although...in reality, things seldom end the moment you come to terms with them. Though he'd been mentally prepared to lose, the power of human conviction is rarely absolute. Even in such abnormal circumstances, that principle was alive and well. And so was the golden rule: that cold, hard reality was especially cruel to the losers and the weak.

It happened as Tooru was closing his eyes to resign himself to his fate: a lone shadow, leaping into the fray. They were no bystander. No, they'd been very much involved. Tooru had forgotten that he was not the only one who'd been battling their way through the mud...

“...Tooru!”

Taniguchi Masaki had leapt in just as Fortissimo was ready to go on the offensive. Then something impossible happened. Fortissimo had been so fixated on Tooru out of curiosity and caution that Masaki's fist had hit him square on the cheek, launching him through the air.

“.....!”

Tooru's eyes bulged. Masaki turned to him and tried to say something...but he didn't make in time. Tooru tried to open his mouth and scream. But that, too, was much too late.

In the next instant, Masaki's body was shredded up, and he crumpled to the ground in a shower of blood.

There was no cry of pain. Nothing. He simply succumbed and fell.

“.....!”

Tooru's lips hung open, trembling. Upon him fell the shadow of Fortissimo, who had now risen to his feet.

“.....”

A thread of blood trickled from his mouth where he'd been punched, but he didn't seem to have taken any kind of damage.

“This man...” Even Fortissimo was staring at the figure, which lay there like a blood-stained rag. “Standing In the path of the attack... Crazy bastard .”

There was something delirious in his voice—something uneasy.

“He dived straight in to save a friend, with no thought for his own safety. Now there's a man of courage and action.”

His voice started to quiver, as if he was regretting his own actions.

“Decisive, too...and he just was an ordinary human. And then...there's *you*.”

Fortissimo glared daggers at Tooru.

“How I overestimated you. You squandered the chance this brave man put his life on the line to give you...! Utterly ridiculous. I guess the biggest fool was me, to even expect anything of you...!”

He spat the words with contempt, and, with open disgust, turned on his heel and quickly left the scene, leaving Tooru all alone.

“.....”

Tooru crawled toward what was left of the man who tried to protect him. They had only just met, but he believed it to be one of the most important encounters of his life.

“...Masaki.”

He reached out his hand, but Masaki was motionless. Blood poured from all over his body, and it would not stop.

“Hey, Masaki...”

He hadn't realized how tightly he was gritting his teeth. He felt so cold, he might well have been naked in the middle of a snowstorm, but even still...he couldn't comprehend what had just happened.

And when at last he'd wrapped his arms around him, he screamed. His cry rang emptily through the street, and then was gone.



6

“With half-formed thoughts and desires, it
can’t even recognize its own form...”

“Haah, haah, haah...!”

With rugged breaths, Pearl fled the silent street with a single-minded determination. The rain had ceased somewhere along the way, and the sky was suffused with the sunset’s crimson glow.

G-give me a break! I can’t go up against someone like Fortissimo!

He’d already found her, but he hadn’t come after her, oddly enough. She didn’t know why, but this was a chance she couldn’t afford to waste. If she was going to make her getaway, it was now or never.

Her plan, however, sadly fell apart.

A car parked just as she turned the corner to exit the street. In the driver’s seat...was Fortissimo, staring intently at her. He’d been one step ahead of her.

Aw, crap...!

All Pearl could do was stand there in a daze. She was prepared to abandon all hope. But then something altogether unexpected happened.

“...Nee-chan!” shouted a boy, leaning out of the car’s passenger seat. It was Honami Hiroshi.

Then it hit her—she was still in the guise of Honami Akiko.

T-then, are you telling me that...

While she stood rooted to the spot, Fortissimo and Hiroshi exited the vehicle and headed over to her.

“Thank god, nee-chan! I’m so glad you’re safe!”

Hiroshi was beaming with joy. His reaction didn’t look faked—he genuinely believed it was her. He probably hadn’t even considered that his sister might have been swapped for someone else.

Though...

Though of course, Fortissimo had to have been aware of this, and for quite some time.

.....

Fortissimo walked slowly toward her. She stared as he approached, fear in her eyes.

“Ah, this is Lee-san! He saved me!” chimed in Hiroshi to explain.

“Saved you...?”

So then, her allies had failed and had either been wiped out or forced to retreat. Either way, it meant that she was isolated and couldn’t expect any rescue on that front.

Even as Hiroshi nodded his head, Fortissimo drew ever closer. He seemed to be in a particularly bad mood. She couldn't really tell if he was suspicious of her.

“Akiko-san...right?” murmured Fortissimo to her, staring like a hawk.

“T-that's right,” replied Pearl timidly, only half acting—she really was afraid. “W-who-”

“Do you have a portable game device on you?”

“Huh?”

“Do you? Or don't you?”

“.....”

Pearl thought hard.

A game device? What the hell? No, wait. Think about why Fortissimo would turn up like this. Right, this “game device” thing's got to be Embryo's current vessel. Which probably means that it's in the real Honami Akiko's possession.

Though of course, Pearl couldn't have had such a thing herself...

“O-oh, that? I...I lost it somewhere,” she said, quickly making up an excuse.

If she couldn't pull off her act here, her life was over.

“You lost it? How?” he asked dispassionately, without any discernible anger.

“A-a lot happened... We were attacked by these bikers, then the police started shooting at us... I think I must have dropped it somewhere when I fell...” she blundered out in response.

She was genuinely shaken, which lent much credence to her act.

“...I see. So you’re saying it might have been smashed then. That there’s a good chance of it.”

“...Probably.”

“What possessed you to even walking around with a game device in the first place?”

“No real reason... Just because. It was a good substitute for a watch, and I could pass the time if I needed to...”

“.....”

Fortissimo’s face remained passive. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

Uuuuugh...!

Pearl was so terrified she could scream, but frantically stifled the urge.

“.....”

Fortissimo was silent for a moment, then suddenly burst into a grin and laughed.

“Well, then that’s perfect. It was a dangerous item. Smashing it was the best thing you could’ve done with it.”

She was taken aback by his sudden change in attitude.

“A-anyway, nee-chan, we need to get out of here! The police are after you, right? That’s bad!”

“Huh? Uh, right...”

“Please, get in the car. I know a safe place. We can head there for now.”

Urged on, Fortissimo had her sit in the passenger seat of the car he was driving. The car accelerated and began to tear down the street.

But... Pearl thought, giving Fortissimo a sidelong glance, does he think I'm Honami Akiko? Or Is he just letting me flounder so I can guide him to Embryo?

Or maybe someone like Honami Akiko was low on his list of priorities and he was focusing on something else...

Regardless, Pearl didn’t have the luxury to poke around right now. If her identity was exposed, she’d be killed on the spot.

I'll need to bide my time and wait for a chance to counterattack or escape...!

With the three of them on board, the car drew steadily away from the site of the chaos and off toward the next stage.

* * * * *

As for the real Honami Akiko...

“...Wh-what is this...?”

Akiko was struck dumb by the sight of all the police lying on the ground before her.

[[I did tell you not to get involved,]] said Embryo at her chest, dripping with sarcasm.

The wail of distant sirens faded in, until suddenly they were practically upon them. She was left with little option but to rush into the shadows, as she didn't have a good explanation for why she'd come to such a place.

There were a lot of people on the ground, but it didn't seem like any of them were at death's door... That's all it looked like to her, since the place where Taniguchi Masaki had fallen was in a blind spot, not to mention it would have been too far away anyway.

So she simply headed off. She was worried about Tooru, but if he really was an uncontrollable ruffian, there'd be little she could do about it even if she went. She couldn't believe it. She didn't want to, but...it was one more reason for her to be afraid of finding him.

What am I supposed to do now...?

She couldn't think.

[[What's the plan now, lady?]] asked Embryo at her chest.

"...I don't know."

[[Your power to control life's gonna cause you all sorts of trouble starting from now, y'know... You better do something about that pronto.]]

She realized she was crying.

What do I do? What am I supposed to do...?

In her heart, she desperately wanted to see Kyou nii-chan again. He was always so calm, and always had an answer for anything you asked him. How nice would it be if he were to suddenly show up now and ask her, "What's the matter? I see something's troubling you."

But the dead cannot come back to life, and even as she thought this, reality continued ever further down an irreversible path.

Help me, Kyou nii-chan... Help me...!

And so she walked unsteadily away from that spot. In thirty minutes, she'd get home and be stunned to find the lock on the door broken, the rooms ransacked and her little brother missing. But right now, she was unaware of all this and simply wandered in a daze, a great secret still dangling from her neck .

* * * * *

“...Masaki is?”

Nagi Kirima clenched the receiver tightly when she heard the news.

“How's his condition...? ...I see. All right. I'll be right there. No, I know the way. ...Yes. Thank you.”

After hanging up the phone in her apartment, Nagi tried to still her trembling body. She shook her head violently, several times.

“...My god. Unconscious and in critical condition...?”

Just then, there was a loud thump. Nagi looked up—the entrance connecting to the living room and hall was open, and

standing there petrified was a girl who'd just this moment returned: Orihata Aya. Her bag had fallen at her feet.

“Masaki...”

Her face was as pale as a sheet.

* * * * *

The police investigation had made some headway.

The results of the autopsy had come in, indicating that the death of the officer who first reported the incident was a suicide. And not only that—the gunpowder residue from the other victims had made it clear that they'd been shot by said officer. His motive and a number of major factors remained unclear, causing quite a stir within the police force, but Takashiro Tooru and his friends were, at the very least, cleared of suspicion.

Taniguchi Masaki, who'd suffered grievous injuries, was admitted to the police hospital and had been receiving treatment, but it was a rocky road. Whatever the wounds had been inflicted by, they just would not seem to close up. The bleeding wouldn't stop and would be life-threatening if left untreated.

Takashiro Tooru had undergone questioning but remained in a daze no matter what they asked him. He was in a stupor, utterly incapable of replying. Even after they'd subjected him to a forceful interrogation, the look in his one remaining eye was vacant and unresponsive.

Yet according to the testimonies of the officers who'd actually engaged him, they had to admit that he was only acting in self-defense, and that even if they were to restrain him to a degree as a material witness, they'd have to acquit him straight away.

“Hey! What the hell happened? What was it that hit your friend to leave him in that state?”

“You don't have any idea about who attacked you?”

“Has anyone ever held a grudge against you?”

The detectives tried as best they could to wrangle something out of him, but Tooru's heavily bandaged head didn't even twitch. He simply stared into space, eyes drifting without focus.

As they seemed to be getting nowhere, Tooru was moved a few hours later to a holding cell. They were hoping that he'd loosen up after he cooled his head a little.

“.....”

Even in the quiet of the cell, Tooru stared into space, mouth half-open.

“.....Ahh.”

A tiny sound escaped his lips.

“.....Ahhh, ngh.”

Fortissimo stood before his eyes. Drenched in rain, the man was looking down on him with disgust.

How I overestimated you.

Fortissimo’s icy voice echoed.

You squandered the chance this brave man put his life on the line to give you...!

The voice thundered in his head, like a long nail being hammered, blow after blow, into his skull.

Utterly ridiculous.

Tooru’s fingers gouged at the flesh of his thighs as he hugged them.

Utterly...

And with his one eye still open, he snapped, and smacked his head against the cell wall. And again. And again. Screaming without rhyme or reason.

Alarmed by the noise, the prison guards on duty flew in.

“H-hey, what’re you doing?!”

Screaming, blood pouring from his head as he smashed it at the wall, Tooru was maddened with helpless rage. Against all the parts of him that weren't strong enough.

It can't end like this.

It absolutely could not end this way. He wouldn't let it.

He had to do something, even if he had to sell his body and soul to the devil ...!

* * * * *

The boy had been taken in after he'd passed out in the park. Normally, he would have been escorted to the nearby police station and formally put on record, but as all the precincts had been caught up in a great commotion, he ended up being dealt with at a police box.³⁴

It wasn't long before he'd woken up. When a young rookie constable told him that he'd get him a roof over his head, he ate with gusto and blurted out the whole story to the man,

³⁴ No, not like the old English police boxes. These are more mini police stations. Think of like a police booth that houses a couple of officers to take care of really minor things and so that the police is more wide-spread. For a more specific example, a Police Box is featured heavily in Boogiepop Phantom Episode 5.

revealing everything from his identity to the fact that he'd run away from home.

"Well then, Sanpei-kun, what's the plan now?" asked the young constable.

"I'll go back home..." he replied glumly, bowl still in hand and a grain of rice stuck to his cheek.

There were band-aids over the injured parts of his ears to hold them fast. Apparently, he'd tripped and fallen in a bush. Flesh had grown where the wound was and the blood had since stopped, but they'd been reinforced just to be on the safe side.

"I'll apologize to my old man and my mom. I was an idiot..."

"That's the spirit," the constable replied with a nod. "Though...surely you can't have fainted from something as silly as spilling your cup ramen. Were you really that famished?" he asked with a laugh.

"....."

Sanpei hung his head. He couldn't tell him the truth—he'd never believe it.

...That a *shinigami* had visited him.

That he didn't know why he was still alive. No, perhaps the *shinigami* had already killed something inside of him. Some great, heavy burden... Like the police were going to believe a story like that. No one in the world would believe him.

“.....”

Seeing him remain silent, the young constable realized that he must have been through something awful and gave Sanpei's hair a good ruffle. Just then, Sanpei's parents entered the police box.

“Sa-Sanpei...”

From his face to his physique, Sanpei's father was the very image of a stubborn old man. The second he'd confirmed that it was his son, he walloped him on the head.

“...You goddamn idiot! I was worried sick about you!”

Normally his son would snap and throw him a punch back in anger, but this time he just took the blow. It took him aback. The son was a sniveling wreck.

“...Uuuuhhh,” he wailed wordlessly.

From his behavior, he seemed to be mouthing the words “I'm sorry,” but they wouldn't come out. Even his mother, who stood behind, was covering her eyes. His father didn't

know what to do with his anger, but even he was affected, his eyes turning bright red. All he could do was bob his mouth open and shut.

Witnessing this scene, the young constable smiled to himself. “How nice,” he thought.

* * * * *

...And from afar, weaving from the police box window through countless gaps, in a line all the way to the apex of the park’s jungle gym, a figure was viewing this same scene.

“.....”

They wore a black cloak and a black hat, with black rouge drawn upon a white face. They call him Boogiepop.

“.....”

Boogiepop was watching Sanpei. He seemed to be keeping a close eye on him, checking once more to be sure that there was no danger of a repeat occurrence of *that*.

“.....”

He gave a slight nod, then looked up at the sky, fully darkened now that the sun had set.

Nothing but clouds, it seemed. Not a single star could be seen in the sky. Only the moonlight filtered through, bright and stark—a brilliance that felt terribly cold.

“Although...there was one thing he said that worries me,” murmured Boogiepop in a genderless voice. “An ‘egg,’ is it?”

A gust of wind blew.

His cloak danced wildly, and he spun around, as if he’d become one with the wind itself and blown away. And in the next instant, there in the moonlight, only the empty stillness stretched on.

“The EMBRYO” 1st half -erosion- stop.

Turn to the next -eruption-

Afterword—

Before Stepping Out Beneath the Sun

In the works of Takahashi Yousuke-sensei³⁵, there's a short story called "When Milk Turns a Screw." Its scant pages are further separated into episodes, making them more like flash fiction. And in one of these episodes, the protagonist, a girl called Milk, asks her father about her pregnant mother. "Is having a child really that hard?" she asks him, and he replies, "In your mother's belly, there's a baby that's tracing the evolution of all living beings on earth up to this moment. It takes time to become a human."

His answer was quite philosophical, but after hearing this, Milk prays to God in heaven that it must be hard for her mother, so she wants her little brother to be born already, even if he's only part matured. Her wish is granted and... Well, that's the gist of the story.

There are a lot of gags that rocket into the surreal in the works of the master *mangaka* of the strange, and this is one of them. Or rather, it's a story representative of his earlier works.

³⁵ A Horror mangaka

Anyway, as for what ends up being born, that's a twist I'm not going to spoil for you. All I'll say is that by the end, I was very impressed, going "Aha, I see..."

In other words, if we assume that the half-developed fetus growing in the womb has awareness, the moment it first wonders what it is, in so far as the basis for its assessment is its current self, I considered: Would he or she keep mistaking itself for an amoeba? Or a fish? Or a lizard? I'm sure plenty of my readers right now are thinking, "Who gives a shit?" But think about it. We've actually already experienced something just like this, after leaving the eggshell that is the womb. No, really.

Supposedly, when you're a kid, there's a time that everyone thinks they're number 1. Looking back at my own childhood, I get the feeling there were a lot of times where I might not have been so honest with myself about a number of things, but I did think that people who think they're amazing are the coolest in the world. As I grew up, I started to catch on that they weren't necessarily all that, and that I and things related to me weren't really all that significant.

Having said that, not all misconceptions disappear once you've grown up. Rather—and this is just my personal

viewpoint—the things I thought about when I was a child were so primitive that they were guaranteed to be off, but in the same way that a life that's only just sprung into being thinks "I'm a cell." In a way, it's still more accurate than the "I'm a fish" thought that's further down the line, isn't it? Then, isn't it actually worse when a misunderstanding has grown to a certain size? Even though they're both still part-way, don't people just tend to think that the place they're in now is the most correct one?

Having said all that, I have no intention whatsoever of claiming that the pure feelings of childhood are the closest we'll come to the truth. Children's notions go too far overboard and are totally hopeless at dealing with reality. Just look at me, the guy who's childish enough to keep digging myself into holes, who can't improve himself despite all the hardships he's going through. So it has to be true! Though...to sum it up, I think all I want to really say is this, to one strangely self-assured individual :

"How can you be sure you've got yourself all figured out now? You got it so wrong when you were a child."

You might still be “midway³⁶,” and you don’t even know what’ll come next! You seem to think that ultimately, that’s just the way the world and your inner self are, but what if that very state is inside the egg and still hasn’t become what it was meant to be? Maybe none of us have even broken our shells and worshipped the sun!

Anyway, yes, things like that.

Not knowing what lies beyond that growth is frankly quite a problem, but is it not our pride as eggs to hold on and be patient? A samurai pretends he has eaten well when he has no food, does he³⁷? You know, this writing is midway³⁸. But I’m ending it here. Bye now.

(...Really though, isn’t this very text an immature piece of work that’s still in its shell?!)

³⁶ This term, 途中 (tochuu) or “midway” appears in this segment a lot but keeping the term the same is difficult in this section. The fetus is “midway,” people are just “midway” as they get older, ect.

³⁷ Basically, means that a person is “putting on a brave face.” Was going to localize the phrase but kept it as-is because of the connection to Tooru.

³⁸ More wordplay with 途中. Once again made it a bit more literal to at least attempt to preserve the multiple meanings. It’s a jab at his own writing for being “immature” but it’s also a play on that this is an unfinished story, much like how an Embryo is an unfinished lifeform.

(Hmm... Well, whatever. And that attitude's probably a misunderstanding right there, huh...)

BGM "[Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun](#)"
by Pink Floyd

