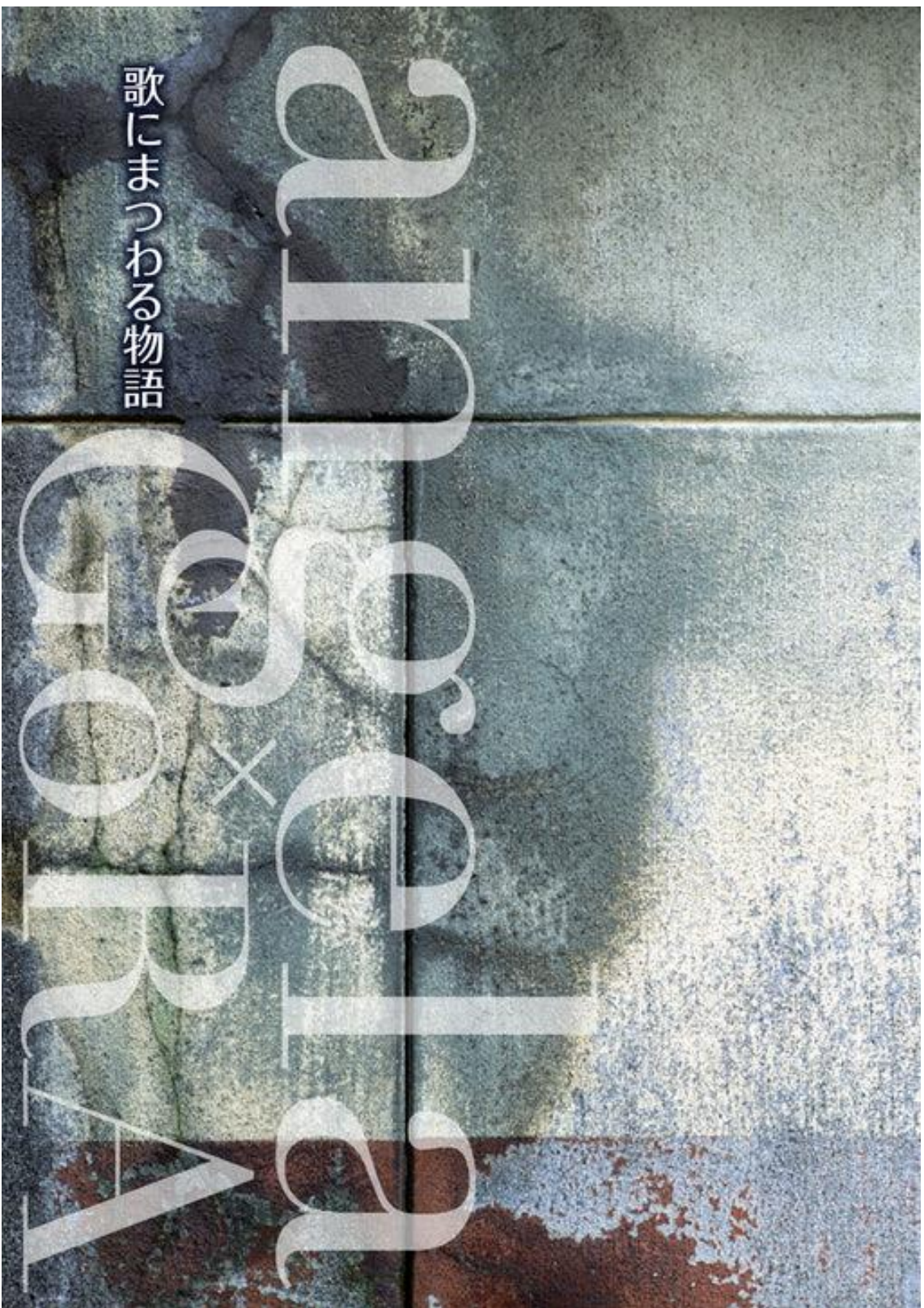


歌にまつわる物語



## **"ANGELA X GORA"**

### **CHAPTER 4: TO BE WITH U! (AZANO KOUHEI)**

#### **TRANSLATION: NARU-KUN / K-PROJECT WORLD**

The flames danced.

She suffered a severe burn as a child. She still has the scar on her right arm, and ever since, fire has terrified her. It's hot and painful. Her body stiffens at the sight, her heart pounds, and she feels a tightness in her chest.

So...

That was the first time she thought fire was beautiful.

"Burn them."

A swarm of fires followed the deep, heavy voice. The flames blazed through the air, scattering sparks.

When the red dissipated the darkness, a man stood, reflected in the flames that spread across the ground. He had human form, but he was far from human.

Fire wasn't the only thing he could control. Rugged men threw themselves into a sea of fire where it was difficult even to breathe. Their faces showed no trace of fear, and their screams even hinted at joy.

And yet, fire also attracts the opposite.

What shone was blue.

Men dressed in vibrant blue threw themselves into the fiery orgy. Their commands and controlled movements contrasted sharply with the unbridled men in red. Their white swords gleamed in the flames. And at the forefront stood a man.

The man of fire smiled and took a drag on a cigarette.

"You're early, Munakata. Are you free?"

The man in blue coldly pushed up his glasses.

"That's nothing to laugh about, Suoh. It's a nuisance after hours."

The two men's passionate exchanges, both passionate and cold, intertwined. She couldn't tear her eyes away from them. Their interaction was so terrifying it took her breath away...

For some reason, she was drawn to them.

The fire burned.

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Her younger brother's life began to go wrong after his parents' divorce.

He entered high school but soon dropped out, gradually losing his chance to return home. Her mother was worried, but as an older sister, she felt somewhat unconcerned. She was much older than her younger brother, and by the time he entered high school, their conversations had become less frequent. Furthermore, her financially strained university life forced her to work part-time, leaving her no time to worry about her family. When she got a job and began living on her own, she felt relieved, as if she could finally breathe.

However, what awaited her upon entering society was a life even busier and more stifling than ever. The work was hard, but rarely rewarding. Although her relationships weren't so bad as to despair, simply surviving was exhausting. Weighed down by daily life, she had no goals or prospects, and simply lived to survive. Still, she felt better than anyone, having avoided being crushed by society. That's what she thought, and it wasn't bravado.

So when her mother came to her for advice, Anjo Atsumi sincerely thought she was a nuisance.

"What? "Homura"?"

"Mom doesn't know for sure, but it seems like a gang of criminals..."

Her mother's explanation wasn't very clear, but it seemed like her younger brother had joined a gang organization. Frankly, she didn't want anything to do with him. She was already so busy with work that she barely had any free time.

Still, she couldn't ignore her mother's crying. She hadn't been in touch with her since she started working, but she sent a message to her younger brother on her PDA.

She expected him not to reply. Or so she thought, but ten minutes later, she received a reply.

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"Hey, sis! It's been a while! You look older, don't you?"

"I'm going to hit you!"

It's been almost two years since they last saw each other in person. Her younger brother, Katsuya, hasn't changed a bit.

He was emotional and playful. He was shallow and always spoke his mind. And yet, he was always the center of the family. And that's why his parents' divorce hurt him more than anyone else. After remembering all that, Atsumi realized and changed her mind.

When she reunited with him, Katsuya had "changed". He was no longer the crazy little brother he'd been two years ago, but had reverted to the image of an even older Katsuya...

from when he was an elementary school student, before his parents' divorce. He was the Katsuya she remembered, from when he and his sister still got along. Well, it's a small problem that he still behaves like an elementary school kid at his age.

"You seem much better than before."

"Really? Well, it makes sense. The last time I saw you was when I dropped out of high school, right? I was at rock bottom back then."

"Don't talk like a teenager. And if that's the case, why are you doing well now?"

"Well, it's because I'm surrounded by like-minded friends."

Straight to the point. Atsumi watched Katsuya closely. His straightforward manner was typical of her younger brother, the honesty of her younger brother of old. At least there was no trace of the gangster or delinquent her mother was worried about.

But whatever her impression, her brother wasn't in elementary school anymore.

"I contacted you out of the blue after two years, so you know why, right? Mom's worried. What's up with you and "Homura"?"

Atsumi pressed him, and Katsuya gave a wry smile, as if to say, "I knew it."

Then he looked down at the table.

He was used to seeing this kind of behavior from people he knew, so he knew. He was staring at the burns poking through Atsumi's wrists. Reflexively, as always, she rolled up her shirtsleeves to hide them.

It was something he was used to, something she'd always done. But perhaps this was the first time Katsuya had paid attention to her.

"You...", she blurted out, but her brother quickly opened his mouth to cover it up.

"We're a team, a team. A group of misfits like me who hang out together."

"But that's not all. For example, I heard you haven't been home lately. Where are you, and what are you doing with those guys?"

"My sister's the one who hasn't come home yet."

"Don't change the subject."

"Um... some of us rent a room. We live together."

"What's that? It's not like some weird part-time job or anything religious, right?"

"I have a part-time job, but I'm a decent guy. Just today I was working at my superior's liquor store. My religion... well, I guess... maybe..."



"Eh? Well, I guess? Maybe?"

"Well, I'm doing my job well."

"You're right, aren't you? In fact, it might be something close to a crime..."

"I didn't do it! At most, I'd get into a fight."

"Even that could be considered a crime, depending on the circumstances."

"It's okay. We have an unspoken rule here, we don't mess with law-abiding citizens."

"What's that? They're the Yakuza."

"They're more like a fellow fighter."

"Eh?"

"Wait, wait. Those guys in blue uniforms aren't civil servants? But they're not legitimate, right?"

"Huh, civil servant?"

What he said didn't make sense. She understood why her mother was so anxious and dependent on him so much.

But despite saying such sinister things, Katsuya, for some reason, didn't give off a bad vibe. On the contrary, he was cheerful and affable, and brimmed with confidence in every detail.

A genuine confidence and affection for what you do and the environment you live in. As a result, you naturally accept yourself.

That's self-esteem.

Katsuya now seemed innocent and carefree, but with a healthy pride.

She reminded her of her younger brother, as calm and adult as he was. He was the complete opposite of her, the withdrawn person who quietly distanced himself from her younger brother when he started misbehaving. In reality, it was her younger brother, not her, whom their mother consulted about her problems.

Atsumi sighed, uneasy.

Of course, there were a lot of things she needed to ask and confirm...

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm saying that. It seems you're the one having the worst time, sis."

"You're being nosy."

"Well, I'll come over when I have time. You should come over sometimes too, sis."

"How cheeky."

As she answered, Atsumi relaxed her shoulders slightly.

The look in her brother's eyes, filled with subtle concern for her, was something she'd never felt before.

"You're having fun right now, aren't you?"

The younger brother answered his sister's question without a moment's hesitation.

"Yes!"

Atsumi had moments when she could give instant answers. In middle school, and for a time after entering high school. She would put aside her worries and spend time chatting with close friends about silly topics, never getting bored. She, too, had those idle, fruitless hours.

But these things don't last. No matter how fun a time or place is, even an eternal era that you believe is unbreakable, will end before you know it. Surprisingly quickly.

And, objectively speaking, Katsuya's time is probably even shorter than hers.

Try as we might, we will eventually be absorbed into society. Even if a group of misfits gets together, they'll eventually disintegrate, fragment, and integrate instead. Otherwise, they'll be crushed. It's not cruel. Happy, leisurely time exists precisely because of a society that allows it. So it's unreasonable to complain about becoming a defender of society as an adult.

But, even if it doesn't last long. Even if it ends.

It's okay to have some periods like that in life. It should be okay, right?

"Well, as long as you're okay."

Atsumi shrugged.

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It turned out she wasn't feeling well at all. And she didn't know what had suddenly happened to her. How quickly? About an hour later.

The brothers met at a family restaurant late one night. They ended up having dinner together, and as they were leaving the restaurant on their way to the police station, they were suddenly kidnapped. "Kidnapped", that is, for the first time in their lives. They were taken hostage without knowing why, and the younger brother was also detained, put in a van, and taken to an old abandoned warehouse. It was so natural, so unimaginable.

But the pain of the severe blow felt very real. Her heart pounded, and she was covered in cold sweat.

Her limbs trembled unintentionally.

"Sorry, sis. I got you into this."

What's that? It seemed like something out of an old soap opera, she thought, but unfortunately, she was gagged, so all she could say was, "Mmm!". Come to think of it, it was also the first time she'd ever been gagged. She was struggling to breathe, tears streaming down her face and her nose dripping. In short, it was the worst.

"Just say it! The other guys have a place to be!"

"Or should I beat you up and use you as bait? I'll take care of the girl you're with, okay?"

A group of men, clearly of disrepute, beat her younger brother, whose hands were tied behind his back. Atsumi's screams of protest were muffled by the gag. There were almost twenty men in the warehouse. They all watched her brother being beaten and laughed hysterically.

She was going crazy.

But...

In reality, this was just the beginning. A very long, magical night that Atsumi would never forget.

It had barely begun.

"Ugh! Enough!"

The moment the man raised his fist, Katsuya suddenly raised his head and rammed him with his shoulder. He knocked him down and charged forward, even leaping at the man holding Atsumi. The man flinched for a moment, but instinctively dodged and backed away from Atsumi.

Katsuya quickly spun around, shielding Atsumi from behind and facing them. However, both arms were still tied. Needless to say, their PDAs had also been taken. For starters, they were surrounded by nearly twenty men, likely accustomed to violence. They weren't even a millimeter away from a desperate situation.

But he could still do something. Their wrists were tied, but unlike Katsuya, Atsumi was only tied in front. This way, she could free Katsuya.

First, she removed the gag.

"Katsuya, don't move!"

She reached behind her brother.

But before Atsumi could release Katsuya's restraints, the first magic of the night occurred.

Suddenly, Katsuya's hands burst into flames.

Before her mind could process it, her body tensed with fear. It was hot. It was bright. It was fire. It was frightening.

But she couldn't tear her eyes away from it.

Katsuya used the flames burning in his hands to burn away the restraints holding his hands behind his back.

He turned around.

"I'm sorry, sister!"

He extended his burning right hand toward Atsumi, who couldn't move.

He grabbed both of Atsumi's wrists, along with their restraints. Her entire body went numb. Flames flickered and burned Atsumi's hands...

They didn't spread.

"Eh?"

It was hot and bright. But it didn't hurt. The strange sensation made her shudder, but her skin didn't burn at all.

And then, Atsumi's restraints burned away.

"Tch! So this guy's going to use it after all!"

"Who cares? What can he do alone?"

All the men drew their knives and clubs and prepared to attack. Some even pointed guns at them. The composure they'd had moments before had vanished, and now every face reflected genuine killing intent.

But even with her life in danger, Atsumi's consciousness was still captivated by the red flames burning in Katsuya's hands.

"Can you run, sister? I'll take you out of the warehouse, so follow me!"

"....."

"I'll stop them. You escape on your own! So... I'm sorry, but we're going to a bar called HOMRA in Shizume..."

Katsuya spoke without turning around, still glaring at the men angrily. From the tone of his voice, she knew he was telling her something important. However, her mind was blank and she couldn't process what he was saying.



A different voice sounded.

"Burn them!"

It was sudden. A deep, heavy, and deep voice was heard.

Even that voice contained great power; it was like a burning ember.

The magic suddenly accelerated.

A tsunami of flames washed over her, flooding everything. A wave of heat hit her, and she instinctively closed her eyes. As she stiffened, anticipating death, she heard the men's screams. Shouts of fury, and maybe even gunshots. But the most intense was the roar of the flames. It sounded like a war cry or a chorus of hymns dedicated to God.

"King?! Why?"

Katsuya shouted. To her brother's surprise and implicit emotion, Atsumi opened her closed eyes.

Everything was red.

A man stood in the sea of fire that filled the warehouse. He had red hair. Reflecting himself in the flames, he stood there calmly. Despite being in the middle of the sea of fire, he seemed somewhat apathetic, his hands in his jeans pockets and even a cigarette in his mouth.

It was a hellish sight.

And yet, he looked beautiful.

"All right! Let's go, guys!"

"I'm telling you, this is over, Yata-chan."

"Someone has a gun! Look out!"

"Whatever, I'll take care of him!"

One by one, the men rushed into the burning warehouse. They were all young. Many could be considered boys. Not a single one flinched at the bright flames.

Then, a man ran up to Katsuya, who was standing there in shock.

"Sorry! I'm late, Katsuya."

"Kamamoto-san! What's going on?!"

"Well, I was about to go out to eat with some others, but I saw a guy driving recklessly and I had a bad feeling. I went out alone and followed him. I tried to get everyone back, but it took longer than expected. I'm so sorry."

"Oh, no! You saved me! Thank you!"

Katsuya thanked him through tears, and the man named Kamamoto gave him a wide smile.

"Who's that girl over there? I don't recognize her, but is she your girlfriend?"

"Oh, she's my sister. I got her involved in this."

Kamamoto's eyes widened at Katsuya's response and turned around as if asking for instructions. Suddenly, another tall man wearing dark sunglasses approached.

"Oh, are you related to Anjo?"

"Kusanagi-san! She's my sister. I... I don't think I should tell my sister this..."

"Okay, okay. Are they hurt? Your sister may be fine, but you're fine..."

"I'm fine!"

"Hmm. I see. Well, I'll leave first and take you to your sister's house. I'll make sure there are no hard feelings."

The tall man, Kusanagi, spoke gently.

With that impression still fresh in his mind, he looked at Atsumi and said,

"Sorry for scaring you. I'll ask Katsuya to explain it to you later, so bear with me."

Although the situation was so terrifying and incomprehensible, as soon as Kusanagi said that, a feeling of relief washed over her, as if wrapped in a blanket. Everything was "okay" now. She truly felt it.

And yet...

For some reason, Atsumi found it hard to leave. For some reason, she wanted to stay a little longer in that fire-dominated place, an object of fear and loathing.

Then, as if her wish had been granted,

"Damn it! It's "Scepter 4"!"

The next moment, someone shouted, and a new group appeared on the burning stage. They were military-looking men in blue uniforms. Well, there was even a woman among them. They all shouted, "Draw your swords!", and drew their sabers.

Kamamoto's expression changed, and Kusanagi frowned.

"Hey, that's too bad. If we act rashly now, they might arrest us. I take it back. Let's fight a bit, calm things down, and then we'll retreat. I'm so sorry, miss! Anjo. You, calm down..."

"Yes! I won't let those in blue suits lay a finger on her!"

"Good answer, Kamamoto. You're helping too."

"Yes!"

Giving orders, Kusanagi took a lighter from his jacket.

Meanwhile,

"You're fast, Munakata. Are you free?"

"That's nothing to laugh about, Suoh. It's a nuisance after hours."

Standing in front of the red-haired man at the center of the flames was another man leading a group of uniformed men. No one cared anymore about the fleeing yakuza. With the two of them at the center, the tension instantly rose between the two groups. Atsumi, too, felt trapped by an overwhelming gravity.

"No Blood! No Bone! No Ash!"

"Attack!"

"Yes!"

The men roared. In response, a female swordsman gave an order, and the uniformed men repeated it. A dazzling red and blue glow filled Atsumi's field of vision. Katsuya was also in that glow.

The fierce battle that followed seemed otherworldly. Yet, oddly enough, it wasn't frightening. It wasn't that there wasn't any fear, but it was overshadowed by other emotions.

Atsumi continued to gaze, fascinated, at the battlefield.

The world to which her brother now belonged. His team and his opponents. Their passionate, serious, yet joyful appearances.

A supernatural feast that seemed endless, the embodiment of fire dancing in the midst of it all.

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The fun didn't last long.

But the night dragged on a bit longer.

The bar they were taken to, HOMRA, seemed to be Kusanagi's. Apparently, it was the base of his team, "Homura". After finishing their battle in the warehouse, the members of "Homura" triumphantly entered the bar.

They threw themselves into the party. The thugs, who moments before had shown their fighting spirit, were now frolicking like children. Although no one was seriously injured, many were, but no one seemed to care. Instead, they focused all their energy on enjoying time with their friends. Take Katsuya, for example. Atsumi stared in amazement at her younger brother, covered in bruises and laughing with Kamamoto.

This is where Katsuya currently lives, and these guys are his younger brother's "good friends". In fact, judging by their behavior at the bar, they seemed like good-natured people, about her brother's age, a little rough.

Also, perhaps upon hearing about the party, more members of "Homura" began to appear at the establishment.

"Geez, Katsuya! Don't bother Mikoto-san with those weaklings."

"No, no, Yata-san. I was the one who called them all."

"They're letting off steam at every opportunity, right?"

"Argh! If we were together, I would have punched them! Right, Shohei?"

"Come to think of it, what happened to the first yakuza? I remember punching him."

"That reminds me. I warned you about the gun, and you still charged right in, right?"

"Since they arrived so early, did "Scepter 4" have any information?"

"Yes. Maybe they'd been keeping an eye on those yakuza for a while."

Some were incredibly excited, others were quietly drinking, and others were calmly reminiscing about the fight from earlier. Still others were smoking alone at the bar. Behind them, Kusanagi, who appeared to be the oldest, was cheerfully serving drinks and food to the group, with a wry smile. Including the fight, they had just witnessed, this was probably their "everyday life".

But that meant that for Atsumi, this was something unusual. To be more specific, a drinking party after a big fight; needless to say, it was a first for her. How many new experiences had she had in the last few hours?

But Atsumi followed his example, not only out of fear of challenging him, but because she wanted to know more about her brother's situation. After all, they had been kidnapped together. And what's more, her brother was breathing fire. It was no longer enough to say "I don't know."

"You see? We share the King's power. In professional yoga, they call us clan members, but honestly, I think we're just "comrades"."

"Yes. Katsuya is my friend. We are both what Katsuya calls "outcasts"."

Apparently, Atsumi was being treated as a "guest" for being both a victim and a relative of Katsuya. She was personally greeted by a man named Totsuka, who claimed to be a member of "Homura", and a girl named Kushina, whose reason for being in such a place was completely unknown.

Still, even when they told her about "royalty" and "clans", she struggled to understand.

Believing it was even harder. If she hadn't seen the fire and felt the heat, she was sure she would have rejected it from the start.

"Eh, but... isn't that person from earlier just an outcast, or even an outcast from humanity?"

"Hahaha. You have a good eye, Onee-san."

"Atsumi is right. Mikoto is the King, so he's probably no longer human."

"Oh, it's rare for Anna to joke."

"Are you joking?"

"Don't tell anyone. Take it as you wish, Atsumi."

She's a young girl, barely older than an elementary school student. Yet there's a strangely mysterious air around her, and before she knew it, she was using honorifics.

"And what about Katsuya? Has he strayed from humanity too?"

"A little."

"Really?"

"My, my. Just because he's awakened to a strange power doesn't mean he's changed inside."

"...He's changed. A lot."

"No. He hasn't "changed", he's just "returned". To the real Katsuya."

Here it is. It's hard to believe it's coming from an elementary school girl. It's so persuasive, as if she sees everything. It's an honorific gesture, and she even wanted to call her Master, though perhaps it was a sign she was getting drunk.

"But... I see. He's out now... Unlike us..."

She muttered to herself, sipping slowly from her glass. Kushina seemed concerned by how quickly she was drinking. She started to say something, but Totsuka silently stopped her.

Unaware of her reaction, Atsumi's vision blurred as she stared at her younger brother across the aisle.



Unsure how she felt about her brother at that moment, she didn't know for sure, but something was bothering her, and Atsumi took another sip of her glass. Totsuka praised Kusanagi's drinking habits and asked for a refill. Her vision gradually blurred, as did her thoughts.

And then...

When she came to, the bar was silent, the lights off, leaving only a dim, indirect light. She must have gotten drunk and fallen asleep. Despairing at her own stupidity, she quickly caught herself and looked around. Then, in the dimness, she heard the faint sound of several people breathing. It seemed that others had also fallen asleep. For example, snoring face down on the couch were Kamamoto himself and a boy named Yata, who, for some reason, wouldn't even look her in the eye. The blanket draped over Atsumi's shoulders was probably a courtesy to "customers".

Since they'd left her alone without waking her, Katsuya was probably asleep somewhere in the bar. "How dare he get drunk and leave his sister alone?", Atsumi thought, venting her frustration.

"Hey!"

Atsumi almost screamed. Instead, she jumped a few inches from her chair and turned her head toward the voice.

It was him. He was sitting at the bar, sipping a lowball glass, looking at her out of the corner of his eye.

Suoh Mikoto, the "King" her younger brother served.

"You've got guts. Just as you'd expect from Katsuya's older sister."

She blushed. She hid under the blanket and desperately searched for words.

"Does my brother have guts too?"

"You saw it, right? Having strength and being able to put your body on the line are two different things."

Suoh lit a cigarette with his lighter as he spoke.

A small light flickered on in the gloom, and purple smoke rose. Ah, he normally uses a lighter; that trivial discovery eased her tension a little.

"What will happen to my brother from now on?"

"I don't know. It depends on him."

"I... shouldn't I see my brother again?"

Suoh looked at Atsumi silently in response to her question. Atsumi somehow grasped the idea and continued.

"Well... I'm a normal person. My brother and I live in different worlds... If I continue to have a bad relationship, it could cause him trouble."

Atsumi was supposed to bring Katsuya back. To the peaceful, narrow world he lived in. Even if he were playing on the fringes of society, he wouldn't have much time.

But it seems his younger brother has found his place on the outskirts. Perhaps his time "here" isn't over. At least, Atsumi can't end it. She shouldn't.

If so, wouldn't it be better for both of them if she stopped acting indifferent and left things as they were?

Suoh took a slow drag on his cigarette and exhaled. He leaned his mouth against the rocks glass, clinking the ice in the whiskey.

"What do you want to do?"

"Eh?"

"He came of his own free will."

Suoh turned to Atsumi on the stool.

Staring at Atsumi,

"You can decide for yourself. Whether he follows you or not is another matter, but no one here will complain if you do what you want."

"I..."

After Atsumi muttered under her breath, a long silence fell. Suoh showed no concern for her silence, turning back to the bar and continuing to drink and smoke in silence.

Finally, Atsumi mustered what little courage she had left and spoke again. With her back to Suoh, she began asking questions one by one. About "Homura". About his strength. About his brother. And about Suoh. Suoh's answers were sparse, and the conversation didn't amount to much. Still, Atsumi didn't care, and probably Suoh didn't either.

In the quiet, unfamiliar bar, Atsumi continued talking with the king. Nothing serious, nothing interesting. Just ordinary small talk. Even afterward, she couldn't quite remember what he'd said. But that seemingly eternal moment remained in her memory.

The half-hearted conversation between Atsumi and Suoh continued until the sky outside the window began to clear slightly.

And so, Atsumi became one of the regular customers at HOMRA Bar.

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Although Atsumi ran after seeing the news, there was nothing she could do. Academy Island was sealed off, and as a civilian, she couldn't even get close. She tried contacting Katsuya countless times, but after her younger brother's PDA replied, "I'm fine.", she received no response.

Under the cold, snowy sky, she spent the night gazing at Academy Island from the sea.

She watched with bated breath as "Scepter 4" charged.

And then...

"No Blood! No Bone! No Ash!"

"No Blood! No Bone! No Ash!"

She heard the resounding cry of "Homura". She didn't need anyone to tell her it was a dirge.

Her mind went blank. The world stopped, along with her heartbeat.

She thought it would never end.

She could truly believe that, in that place, there existed an era that would never end.

But...

"No."

She decided.

Was this the end? Would that fire ever go out? Determined, she would do as she pleased.

Atsumi, now completely pale, felt a surge of passion swirl within her. Like a raging flame, it consumed her body and roared.

Atsumi took a step forward. She clenched her fist tightly.

She inhaled deeply, burning with her entire body, and expelled it into the sky.

"Until we are completely burned, without blood, bone, or life!"

The screams of "Homura" continued. Praise be to her "King", who, with pride, burned every fiber of his being.

Atsumi continued clearing her throat, not even wiping away the tears falling from her eyes. It was as if she were burning away her pain and sadness. It was as if she was wasting her energy for the future.

Suddenly, she unbuttoned her sleeves and rolled up her shirt. She raised her right arm and shouted to the sky.

She was fully aware that a fire still dwelled within her.