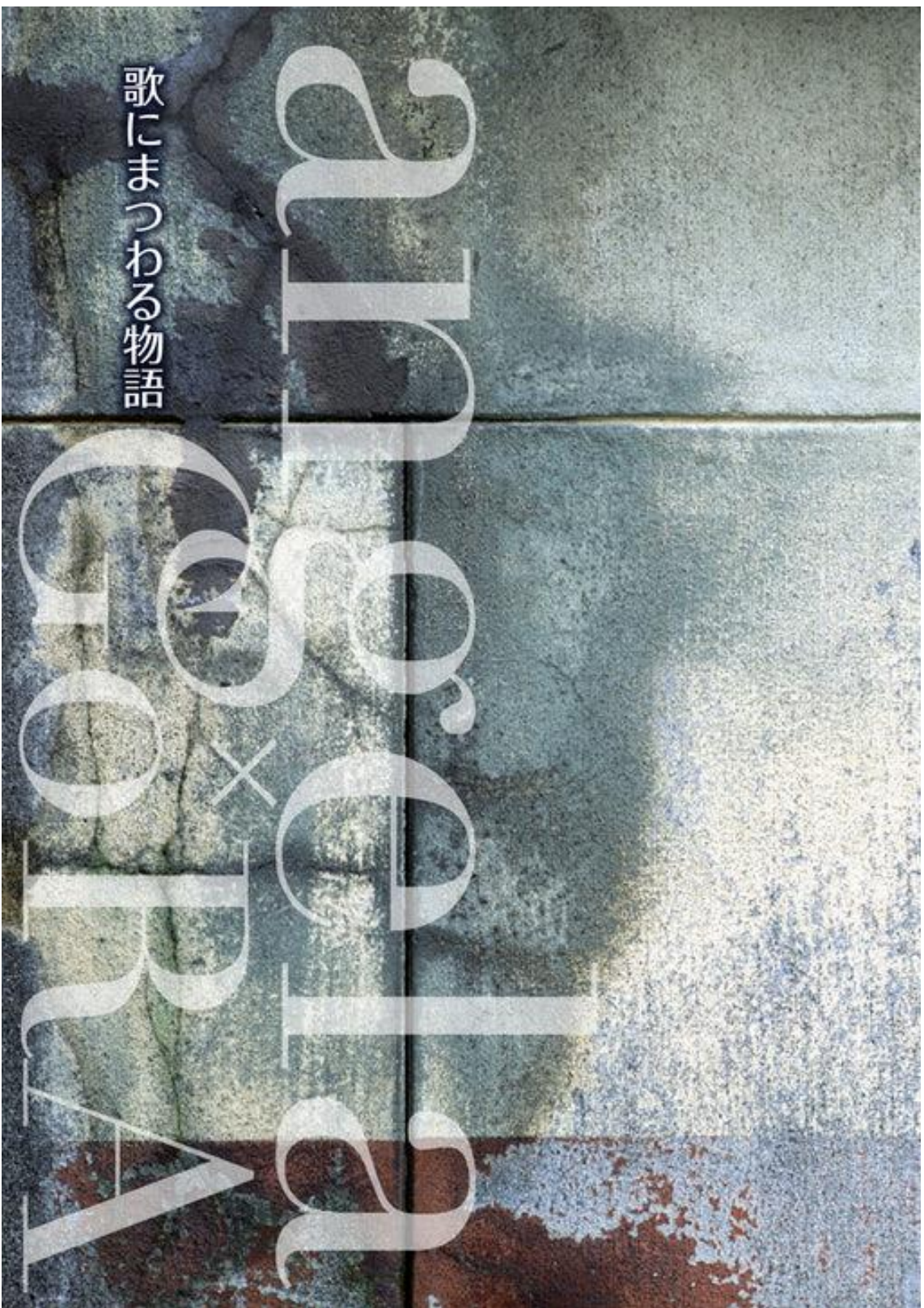


歌にまつわる物語



"ANGELA X GORA"

CHAPTER 5: KIZUNA (MIYAZAWA TATSUKI)

TRANSLATION: NARU-KUN / K-PROJECT WORLD

"Did you bring everything you need? Did you forget anything?"

Kusanagi Izumo checked repeatedly in front of the HOMRA Bar.

The person he was calling was Anna Kushina. She was wearing a red down coat, a red scarf, and a matching hat.

Beside her was a suitcase that seemed disproportionate to her body.

"Don't catch a cold. If you ever feel lonely, contact me."

"Izumo."

Anna interrupted the overprotective father.

"I'm just going on a school trip."

"....."

"It'll be fine. Everyone from school and the teachers will be there."

Kusanagi was silent for a moment, then nodded slowly.

"That's true. It's only for a week, and the place is Australia, so I ended up overthinking it."

He laughed wryly to himself.

Kamamoto Rikio, who was with Kusanagi seeing Anna off, asked,

"Anna, do you want me to carry your luggage to the bus stop?"

Kamamoto's breathing was like a white cloud. Anna smiled and shook her head.

"It's right there, so it'll be fine. Don't worry, Izumo. I'll buy lots of souvenirs for Rikio and everyone else."

"Yes."

Kusanagi's gaze grew kinder.

"Souvenirs are fine, but I'd love to hear fun stories about them. Make lots of memories and tell me about them."

Anna nodded, pulled the suitcase handle, and started walking.

Anna turned and waved three times before turning the corner and disappearing from sight. Japan was experiencing a record-breaking cold snap, but in the southern hemisphere, all their winter clothes would be useless at that moment.

Kamamoto joked with Kusanagi.

"Kusanagi-san, you're already so worried after just a week, right? What will happen if Anna gets married and leaves here in the future?"

Kusanagi paused for a moment as he lit his cigarette.

"Idiot!"

He tapped Kamamoto lightly on the head with his left hand, the one not holding the cigarette.

"You're being hasty."

Purple smoke rose from Kusanagi's mouth into the cloudy winter sky.

He didn't dislike the cold, but he did dislike the dryness of the air conditioning, so he used a small space heater outside of office hours, when friends were gathering or clients came in.

A stove with a slightly retro design was installed inside the counter. He flipped the switch to the left, and a red flame ignited in the center. Soon, warmth began to rise from his feet.

The air inside the bar was so cold it made him shiver, but a slight warmth lingered in the workspace. That was enough.

He inspected the glasses, prepared the drinks, and began taking orders from the suppliers.

The empty store was starting to feel a little lonely, so Kusanagi turned to his PDA to put on some music. He had recently returned to jazz, a genre he enjoyed listening to in his late teens.

He was beginning to feel more intensely the sadness and depth of the music he had struggled to fully appreciate back then. Perhaps it was because he had grown older, or perhaps because he had matured.

Suddenly, Kusanagi noticed an unfamiliar file on a nearby shelf.

(What is this?)

He grabbed it without realizing it.

It looked like an album or something.

The title was handwritten.

At first, he didn't understand what it said, frowning, but then he got it.

Apparently.

"KIZUNA."

That's what it seemed to say.

Kusanagi was deeply confused. He was completely unaware of the origin of that album. He didn't know why it had been put there.

The top half is beige; the bottom is cream. A white space, like a window, runs down the center, with the word "KIZUNA" written in black marker.

(...This is weird, obviously.)

The reason he couldn't read "KIZUNA" on first reading was because "KIZU" and "NA" were clearly written by different people.

The "KIZU" part is written in very choppy handwriting, making it difficult to read, like a celebrity's signature.

The "NA" part, on the other hand, is not neat at all, but it is quite legible.

(I see... so he added the name (NA) to the scar (KIZU) to create the bond "KIZUNA".)

He pointed his finger at his forehead and thought.

(What's this...?)

It's a bit bland.

Who added "NA" to the title, perhaps to convey the message of transforming wounds into bonds?

The question is who collaborated on this title (although it's possible they were both written by the same person).

(The handwriting on the first half is so crooked that I honestly don't know who wrote it. But the meaning of the second half seems familiar.)

He's the one Kusanagi is thinking about right now.

Yata Misaki was competing in the World Skateboarding Championship and wasn't in Japan.

He looked at the clock on the wall.

It was still midnight there.

(I'll call him after work... I'd also like to know how Yata-chan is doing.)

Kusanagi decided to take a look at the album. As expected, it contained photos of the members of the red clan, "Homura".

There are six photos per page, arranged in a fairly loose layout.

(Most appear to have been taken by Totsuka.)

The photos featured Anna, Kamamoto, Yata, and himself.

Anna was sitting by the window of the HOMRA Bar, sipping iced tea with a serious face. Yata and Kamamoto, each wearing glasses and pointy hats, seemed euphoric and embracing. Judging by the decorations behind them, it looked like Christmas.

He was standing by the bar, holding a cocktail shaker, staring wryly at the camera. He kept flipping through the pages.

The collection included photos taken not only inside the HOMRA Bar, but also in various locations and situations. Group photos on trips to the beach. Or casual snapshots at cherry blossom viewing parties.

Some were taken at parties, and others were simply taken together.

Akagi, Bando, and other members of the Red Clan also appeared, some individually and others in groups. They were like layers of accumulated memories, a kaleidoscope of memories.

More than anything.

Kusanagi couldn't help but sigh.

Totsuka Tatara stood by the riverbank, smiling a smile as gentle as a spring breeze. Suoh Mikoto lay listlessly on the sofa.

A part of his heart was still beating strongly.

Seeing the two familiar faces, he tried to smile sincerely, but the pain he still harbored in his heart distorted it slightly.

He turned to another page.

(Eh?)

Suddenly, Kusanagi thought of something and turned back to the first page. He'd already thought of it.

(It seems Totsuka wasn't the only one taking these photos. There are several I don't recognize.)

Though not exactly a professional, Totsuka boasted a certain skill with a camera. However, among the photos in that album, there were several that lacked basic elements, such as poor composition or blurry focus.

(The equipment seems to be all over the place. Does that mean it's a collection of photos taken by several people, all stored together?)

A memory album of the members of "Homura".

However, Kusanagi's hypothesis was disproved with each page he turned.

(That's it...)

A look of confusion crossed his face.

(Why does such a thing exist?)

The members of the "Homura" clan walked down an alley with bloodthirsty expressions. Yata jumped on his skateboard. Kamamoto carried a bat over his shoulder. Akagi and the others cautiously observed their surroundings.

The Red Clan, a rare sight these days, was in the midst of a battle. It was probably all caught on camera, almost secretly.

(This must have been around the time our clan and the Blue Clan were locked in fierce battles. Is it a security camera clip or something?)

Kusanagi speculated. And what struck him most was...

(Uh...)

Instinctively, he covered his mouth with his hand.

A decisive shot captured with astonishing synchronization between two buildings.

Suoh Mikoto and Munakata Reisi were vividly captured as they collided and flew through the air.

The two kings, Red and Blue, calmly leaped from heights roughly equivalent to a dozen stories.

Suoh smiled menacingly, his right fist drawn like a bow, ready to fire at his nemesis. Meanwhile, Munakata brought his sword to his blue eyes and smiled coldly, ready to deflect the strategic high-level attack.

Auras of raging flames and sharp ice, cutting through everything, surged around them.

It was like the moment before the Red and Blue "Kings" of old collided.

Kusanagi growled again, still with his hand covering his mouth.

"What is... this?"

"KIZUNA"

That album of unknown origin was a bit intimidating.

Perhaps because of the cold, there weren't many customers that day.

After closing quickly, Kusanagi immediately contacted Yata Misaki.

He was curious about the "KIZUNA" incident, but even more so about Yata's condition while competing on the grand stage of the World Skateboarding Championship.

His supernatural powers are completely sealed with a special bracelet. He competes solely with his natural physical abilities.

Unsure of his movements before the tournament, he sent him a casual message.

"Yata-chan, how are you?"

He was pretty sure the main tournament was supposed to start the day after tomorrow.

Yata had said this before leaving Japan.

"Since I'm going to the United States, I'll arrive a little early to get used to it. I'll also gorge myself on hot dogs and hamburgers. Huh? Where to stay? Well, an American friend I made at the last tournament invited me to his house."

Furthermore,

"Yes. Of course, if I'm going to do it, I'll give it my all and aim for first place. But, you know, I want to give it my all and be satisfied with myself."

With that, he smiled and, carrying only a backpack, walked through the boarding gate. Kusanagi, who had gone to the airport to see him off, was thinking,

(You've grown up, Yata-chan.)

That's what he thought.

After waiting for a while, Yata's message still hadn't shown up as read.

Just as she was about to give up and head home, Kusanagi's PDA received a message from someone else. It was from Kushina Anna.

"With friends."

There's a photo with that simple caption.

According to the school trip program, it's probably somewhere in Cairns.

Now dressed in light clothing, something unthinkable when they left Japan, Anna posed for selfies with girls her age, also dressed in modern clothes.

Kusanagi's mouth lit up with a smile.

(Anna always does what makes me happiest.)

Anna has made a lot of friends.

That couldn't have been nicer. The heater had long since been turned off, so the bar was cold, but a faint warmth spread through Kusanagi's heart.

"Have fun.", he replied.

He decided not to ask about the album titled "KIZUNA".

He didn't want to bother Anna with something trivial while she was enjoying her unforgettable high school trip.

He would ask her about it when she got home.

Kusanagi turned off all the lights, left the bar, and went home.

However, the next day, part of the mystery surrounding "KIZUNA" was solved by an unexpected person.

"Oh, it was definitely Yata-san who wrote "NA"!"

It was Kamamoto, who had come to deliver a dozen Belgian beers for the bar. He had recently taken over the family liquor store.

According to Kamamoto, a long time ago, when Suoh Mikoto and Totsuka Tatara were still alive, there was a party in "Homura", and Yata, drunk, shouted,

"The scars (KIZU) we received in battle will become bonds (KIZUNA)!"

He shouted, "Mmm!" and added, "NA!"

(That was just what I expected.)

Kusanagi nodded. Kamamoto then revealed another fact.

"This is Anna's photo album. She brought it to the party because she wanted to save all the souvenir photos taken by Totsuka and the others. Oh, it brings back so many nostalgic memories!"

Kamamoto spoke with deep emotion as he flipped through the pages and looked at old photos.

Kusanagi was convinced.

(So it was Anna's after all.)

However, Kamamoto also said,

"Well, I don't know who wrote this "KIZU" either. When Anna brought it to me, it didn't have a title or anything. Then, during the chaotic party, I realized it, and it was written all the way through."

He tilted his head.

And just like Kusanagi yesterday, Kamamoto's eyes widened in surprise when he reached the second half of the album. Especially when he saw the photo of Suoh and Munakata clashing.

"What's this?"

He pointed at her with his mouth half-open and a blank expression. Kusanagi shrugged silently. He still didn't know the source of the photo.

"Wow, how amazing!"

As he looked at the photo, Kamamoto's expression slowly changed from surprise to affection.

He spoke in a slightly husky voice.

"This Mikoto-san... he's really scary. He's the Mikoto-san I know well. But..."

Perhaps it was cold inside the unheated shop, so he sniffed.

"It seems Munakata had a great time..."

He hunched his broad back and stared at the photo for a while. Kusanagi remained silent, determined to leave Kamamoto alone until he was satisfied.

In his mind, the face of someone who almost certainly knew the source of this photo appeared.

Kusanagi's question was direct.

"Seri-chan, there was a strange album in my shop. Do you have any idea what it could be?"

He sent a personal message to Awashima Seri, lieutenant of "Scepter 4".

The reply came instantly.

"Yes. From the way you're saying it, it seems the information wasn't communicated properly. I'll explain it to you when they close."

Kusanagi sighed.

(I thought so.)

A clip of what appears to be a secret recording of "Homura". No matter how you look at it, it was clearly the work of a public institution. It's reasonable to assume it was recorded by the surveillance cameras on "Scepter 4".

(Well, if Seri-chan comes and explains, everything will be resolved.)

Should he refill her bean paste? Holding the PDA, Kusanagi thought idly.

"Oh? What's that?"

His PDA was ringing.

"Yata Misaki"

That was what appeared on the caller ID field. Kusanagi immediately pressed the answer button.

"Hello, Yata-chan?"

"Hello, Kusanagi-san!"

There was a commotion in the background, but Kusanagi managed to hear Yata's voice. Although he hadn't seen him in about two weeks, Kusanagi felt a strange nostalgia, and a smile spread across his face.

"How are you?"

"Oh, yes, I'm great. How are things over there? Is everyone okay?"

"Yes. Everyone's fine. By the way, Anna went to Australia on a school trip."

"Australia!"

Even though he's in the United States, Yata seems surprised.

"Amazing! Kusanagi-san, you were in Germany last month, right? You closed up shop and went there, right?"

"Oh, I just went to the funeral of someone who helped me in Dresden."

"Kusanagi-san went to Germany, I'm in the United States, and Anna's in Australia. Now we're world famous!"

"Yes."

He still didn't quite understand what "World Wide Big" meant, but he answered quickly anyway.

"By the way."

After hesitating for a moment, wondering if it was okay to ask,

"How was the tournament?"

"Yes."

Yata replied enthusiastically.

"The preliminaries are in an hour! If I can make it through this, I'll make it to the finals!"

"Eh?"

Kusanagi asked the obvious question.

"Well, it's an important moment, isn't it? Do you mind talking to someone like me on the phone?"

"Oh, no."

Yata looked a little embarrassed.

"I just wanted to talk to you for a while before the event. Am I nervous, which is unusual for me?"

He laughed. Kusanagi replied,

"I see."

He said gently.

"Well, maybe that's the case."

Going to America alone, conquering the world alone. He must have felt a pressure Kusanagi couldn't understand.

"That reminds me..."

Not wanting to pressure Yata, he brought up the subject of the strange album as a casual, everyday topic.

Yata was immediately hooked.

"Oh, I remember that album! It's the one Anna brought, right? I definitely wrote "NA"! But, uh, I'm sure I didn't write the "KIZU" part."

At that moment...

"What? Really?"

Yata suddenly looked panicked. Kusanagi was also stunned.

"What's wrong, Yata-chan?"

Then Yata said something incredible.

"Oh, no! Looks like they got the time wrong, and my performance will be right after! That's what the staff member said!"

"What did you mean?"

"Sorry! I'm leaving now!"

"Ah."

Before he could offer any words of encouragement, the call was cut off.

"Are you sure, Yata-chan?"

Kusanagi looked at the PDA, half-stunned. But about an hour later,

"I passed the preliminaries! I made it to the finals!"

Kusanagi breathed a sigh of relief when he received a message with a picture of Yata making the victory sign.

Awashima had sent a message saying,

"I'll explain."

Kusanagi naturally assumed she would be there in person, but his expectations were completely dashed.

"Excuse me."

Just before the bar closed, the "Blue King", Munakata Reisi himself, walked through the door with a polite, almost excessively polite greeting.

To their surprise, Fushimi Saruhiko, with a slightly sour expression, followed them.

Kusanagi, who was wiping his glass with a cloth, saw them and let out a voice somewhere between "Huh?" and "Ah.".

Munakata walked quickly to the bar and sat down on a stool.

"Did you just say "Ah"?"

He asked Kusanagi, amused. Kusanagi stammered.

"Well, it was very unexpected."

Munakata smiled gently.

"Ok, Fushimi-kun, let's sit down. Since we're in a bar, we should at least order a drink. It's adult etiquette."

He beckoned to Fushimi. Fushimi, looking reluctant, followed Munakata's example and sat down.

Munakata raised his finger.

"A martini, please. Not Churchill-style, but as dry as possible. And you, Fushimi?"

In response,

"A water."

"Fushimi-kun?"

Munakata smiled, but with some pressure. Fushimi ordered reluctantly.

"...Shandy. Extra ginger ale, please."

"Yes, sir."

Somehow, the situation had been closed, and Kusanagi gave a slight, playful nod to indicate that he had accepted the request.

Fushimi clicked his tongue loud enough for him to hear, which was also a little odd.

Munakata simply offered Kusanagi a rambling conversation until they were served the martini he had ordered.

The cold outside.

The current situation.

The two conversed like a waiter and a regular customer, with an intimacy that was a fine line between emptiness and informality.

All the while, Fushimi felt sullen.

Munakata gracefully raised the martini glass to his face, moistening his lips after the first sip before finally getting down to business.

"In short, we needed records."

"Records?"

Kusanagi asked. Munakata calmly looked into his glass.

"As you know, our world is entering a new stage of chaos. Unprecedented Strains have emerged, forcing us to respond in ways not contemplated in existing manuals. Therefore, we, "Scepter 4", are working with the "Silver King" and "Tokijikuin" to attempt to gather information on all supernatural beings, from as remote a location as possible. This project will take several years."

Kusanagi thought for a few seconds.

"So, basically, you're collecting a massive amount of data on supernatural beings and using it to predict future events?"

"You're quite perceptive."

Munakata stated to Kusanagi in a way that some might find off-putting.

"We're currently collecting massive amounts of data from various angles. As part of this effort, I've negotiated with the current "Red King", Kushina Anna, through Fushimi. I'd like to borrow as many records from the Red Clan as possible."

Fushimi sipped from his Shandygaff with a disinterested look.

Munakata continued speaking.

"Anna Kushina seemed happy to accept, but she also proposed a deal. In exchange, she wanted the video of "Homura" that "Scepter 4" had stored. Of course, I had no objections."

"I see."

Kusanagi nodded. Many things began to fall into place. Munakata apologized.

"I'm sorry. It seems I misunderstood you."

At that moment, Fushimi finally spoke.

"It's not that I was worried about Kusanagi-san's absence or anything. It's just that when I went to HOMRA, only Anna was there."

"Hmm.", Munakata nodded, casting a questioning look at Kusanagi. Kusanagi replied,

"I was in Dresden for about a week. A person who was very kind to me when I went looking for documents recently passed away. I attended the funeral and paid my respects to the local scholars and historians who helped me."

"I see."

Munakata smiled and nodded. Kusanagi asked him a question.

"But that was a bit surprising. Knowing you, I thought you'd already have a good understanding of our data."

"Yes."

Munakata nodded without embarrassment.

"Our official title is the "Fourth Branch of the Family Registration Division". As you say, we have so much personal information about you that even we are embarrassed."

Kusanagi grimaced at his bluntness. Munakata continued, his face a little more serious.

"But something is missing. That is..."

"You mean a private setting? You mean photos of family members taken by the clan itself?"

Kusanagi spoke up. Munakata nodded enthusiastically.

"And Anna Kushina was generous enough to give me a memory album, which I'm sure you treasure dearly. To thank her for her kindness, I personally selected and cut out the best images of him and included them in the album. However, that..."

Munakata narrowed his eyes and looked at Fushimi with a theatrical accusation.

"No, that's why!"

Unusually, Fushimi sounded a little nervous as he defended himself.

"It's not like I was waiting for Kusanagi-san to leave to return it! I happened to find him outside, on the phone or something, so I quietly left it on the shelf and went home."

"And then you caused Kusanagi-san unnecessary confusion, right?"

When Munakata pointed this out, Fushimi looked away and clicked his tongue.

"Sorry."

Kusanagi considered. Then, coming up with an answer, he felt a bit resentful and tried to guess Fushimi's feelings.

"You were feeling a little awkward, weren't you? If I had accepted the album, it might have stirred up memories of my past. Perhaps you took the opportunity and didn't say anything?"

"....."

Fushimi remained silent. He simply brought the glass to his lips slowly.

"Ah, I see."

Munakata clapped his hands cheekily. Kusanagi had a vague idea.

(Munakata-san doesn't seem like a bad person. Perhaps he knew everything and sent Fushimi as an emissary.)

He didn't know if his guess was correct. But that day, Munakata seemed strangely in a good mood. He politely asked Kusanagi to show him the album again, and when Kusanagi opened it on the counter,

"What time was this photo taken?"

And so he began to ask questions. Kusanagi told him everything he remembered. At first, Fushimi pretended not to notice, but soon he became involved, slowly adding corrections to Kusanagi's memories.

This strange moment lasted for about fifteen minutes, until Munakata finished his martini.

"Thank you very much. That martini was delicious. Well, that's about it."

After carefully returning the album to Kusanagi and paying, Munakata prepared to leave.

At that moment, Kusanagi couldn't help but shout.

"Hey! It's a picture of you and Mikoto, crashing."

Munakata didn't let Kusanagi finish.

He seemed to be muttering to himself.

"Suoh Mikoto was a very annoying guy. When people say someone is incompatible with someone, they mean a guy like that. But..."

He turned to Kusanagi and gave him a charming, mysterious smile that seemed a little sad.

"Back then, I thought these conflicts would last forever."

Then he bowed and left. Fushimi gave a slight bow and followed him. Kusanagi stood motionless for a while, motionless behind the counter.

Anna called just as he finished closing.

Being a considerate girl, she had probably considered Kusanagi's usual routine and timed her call accordingly.

With a premonition, Kusanagi gently pressed the answer button.

"Izumo?"

He could hear her voice ringing like a bell.

"How are you, Anna? Are you having a good time?"

To Kusanagi's first question,

"Yes. I'm having a good time. I enjoy spending time with everyone."

Anna replied with a hint of pride. Kusanagi chuckled.

"Great. By the way, can you call at this time of night? There's almost no time difference in Australia, right? I'm sure everyone's asleep by now."

"Yes."

Anna replied with a hint of mischief.

"Actually, the lights went out already, but I couldn't sleep... so I went out to a remote place. I want to talk to you for a while, Izumo."

Kusanagi said sweetly.

"What a coincidence. I wanted to talk to you about something too."

Then he gave a brief summary of the events surrounding "KIZUNA". Anna listened silently, but when Kusanagi finished,

"I'm sorry.", she said, apologetically.

"It's my fault. The news came when Izumo wasn't there, and Saruhiko seemed a little nervous, so I thought it best not to say too much."

"Yes."

Recalling Fushimi's behavior today, Kusanagi laughed a little.

"Now all the mysteries are solved... Oh, I still don't know who wrote "KIZU", but it's not that big a deal."

"Eh?"

Anna's small, surprised voice echoed in his ear from a foreign land, across the ocean.

"Izumo, have you forgotten?"

"Eh? What are you talking about?"

"Izumo wrote "KIZU", right?"

"What...?"

Kusanagi gasped.

"W-what do you mean?"

Before Kusanagi could ask, Anna explained.

"Izumo, you were very drunk that day. After Tatara took a cross-dressing photo of you on a whim, he told you he was going to make an album with those funny photos and asked you to write a title for it."

"Oh, now I remember..."

A flash of light crossed Kusanagi's mind. The memories returned.

"I definitely wrote it, shouting, "These are my scars!".

"Right."

Anna seemed to be nodding vigorously on the other end of the line. Kusanagi held his head with the hand that wasn't holding the PDA.

"Ahhh, uuhh. What's wrong?"

He felt very embarrassed.

Anna seemed to be chuckling.

"But I'm looking forward to it. When I get back, I'll be able to see the photos Reisi picked out. Mikoto, Tatara, and everyone else I know will be there, right?"

"Y-Yes, that's right."

Kusanagi somehow managed to compose himself and answered. He smiled slightly.

"I'm sure I have lots of photos you'll like, Anna."

"Hey, Izumo."

Anna suddenly spoke clearly.

"Ever since I arrived, I've been thinking about Izumo, Misaki, and everyone else more than usual. The further apart we are, the stronger our feelings. I think that's what defines bonds. I'm glad I chose that as the album title. I'm glad Izumo and Misaki wrote it."

He could perceive a smile.

"Well, Izumo. I'll be back soon. It was nice talking to you. Good night."

"Oh, yes."

Kusanagi was stunned by the maturity he'd never felt before in Anna. Without realizing it, the call ended.

Kusanagi took a deep breath, put the PDA in his pocket, and turned his head to "KIZUNA".

(Anna is right. The further away we are, the stronger the bond with the other person feels.)

He covered "NA" with his finger, turning it into "KIZU". Then he removed it and changed it back to "KIZUNA".

He repeated this several times.

"So, what I regret most about being away from you is that we'll never see each other again."

Kusanagi's smile curved.

"You call that a bond?"

Then he traced the title "KIZUNA" with his finger.