

# AYA KA

— あ や か —

## SIDE STORIES



いばら  
茨の道

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

**"AYAKA – SIDE STORIES 05": THE WAY OF IBARA**

The girl was angry.

Lying on a white hospital bed, instead of feeling sad about the reality of her parents' death, she was simply angry.

Ibuki Aka clicked his tongue. He spoke quietly so the girl couldn't hear him.

Ibara Ichijou. Second year high school student.

Just the other day, her house was burned by an Aramitama fire and she lost her parents. She escaped with minor injuries, but the large bandage on her cheek hurt.

The other day a fiery Aramitama appeared on the outskirts of Ichinoshima.

The strange shape continued to move, setting fire to private houses one after another, and the fire became a large fire that forced the evacuation of residents throughout the neighborhood.

Considering the magnitude of the fire, there were not many victims.

But there weren't many, which means it wasn't zero.

One of the injured was Ibara Ichijou.

Her injuries are not that serious. The large bandage on her cheek hurt, but she survived with only minor burns and bruises. However, Ibara's parents could not be saved.

(I didn't arrive on time.)

If Ibuki had arrived at the scene five minutes earlier, Ibara's parents could have been saved. It's an honest story.

"What was that?"

Ibara opened her mouth. It was a small but easily recognizable voice.

"An Aramitama."

At Ibuki's response, Ibara clung to the sheets.

"Aramitama... that's..."

"If you were born on the island, you've probably heard about it. The Mitama become stagnant, lose their true nature, and become a harmful monster."

"Why would something like that come to my house?"

"There is no reason. They are no better than beasts. Besides, your house was there. That's all."

He could feel the strength in Ibara's grip on the sheets. Her eyebrows and temples trembled.

"...I'm sorry."

Those were the words that just came out of his mouth.

"Why are you apologizing? You helped me."

"....."

An Aramitama is the same as a plague. It must be exterminated promptly and without hesitation. That's Ibuki's creed. He is convinced that this is the most effective way to reduce the damage caused by an Aramitama and has been implementing it. Still, there will be victims.

In his head he knows that he can't continue empathizing with every victim. Ibuki doesn't usually visit victims, but he came to see Ibara.

He only meant to check that she was okay, but when he was in front of her, he couldn't help but apologize.

Ibuki thinks that's weakness.

"Who are you? I don't even know."

"I didn't even introduce myself."

Ibuki took out a business card from the case in the inside pocket of his jacket and handed it to Ibara.

"This is what I am."

Ibara received it and stared at it.

"Uh, "Ayaka Security"...? Are you from a security company?"

"I'm actually an exterminator... I specialize in Aramitamas."

"Exterminator..."

Ibara looked at Ibuki. Her eyes were wide open.

"Tell me."

"What?"

"How to kill an Aramitama."

Ibuki let out a small sigh.

"What will you do if you know?"

"I already decided. I am going to kill the Aramitamas. I will do it with my own hands."

Ibara was serious. He could tell by the movements of her mouth and her eyes.

"Don't think about such nonsense. It is not something that the human hand can kill."

"But you got rid of him. Does that mean there's a way to kill him?"

Ibuki regretted giving her his business card.

"Do you have anyone who will accept you?"

"...An uncle. Dad's younger brother asked me to go to his house."

"In that case, live a normal life there. Think of your parents as an unfortunate accident. Forget about it, even if it's too much. That will be good for you."

Ibuki turned on his heel and left the hospital room.

"Wait! I can't forget it! There's no way I can forget it!"

Ibara's voice patted him on the back, but he ignored her.

"Boss."

As soon as he left the hospital room, his subordinate Makita called him.

Makita is a veteran member of "Ayaka Security" and is Ibuki's right-hand man.

"I heard it. She seems like a very tenacious girl."

"There is a limit to strong will. It could be dangerous."

"Are you saying that she could take revenge on the Aramitamas by herself? Anyway, that's..."

"That would be great."

In the middle of a conversation with Makita, Ibuki suddenly felt a gaze on him and turned his attention to her.

There was a girl, in a school uniform.

(She is a primary school student...no, she is a high school student.)

Even when the girl met Ibuki's eyes, she didn't try to turn her face away from him.

"Oh, um..."

She was trying to talk to him.

Ibuki looked at Makita and frowned.

Ibuki is tall and it cannot be said that he has a friendly face. Makita is even bigger.

Would a high school girl approach these two literally grown men?

"You were the one who helped Ichijou-san, right?"

Ibuki's eyebrows furrowed deeply.

"What about you?"

"Ah, I'm sorry. I'm Ichijou-san's classmate and my name is Tamase Rin."

"Are you friends with that girl?"

In response to Makita's question, the girl who introduced herself as Rin Tamase said, "Um..." with a strange expression on her face.

Ibuki stared at Rin. Her hair, tied loosely over her left and right shoulders, was black and looked as if it had never been dyed before. Coupled with the old-fashioned glasses, she gives the impression of being serious.

"I wish we could become friends... but..."

Rin looked down, unsure.

"It's true that I was the one who pulled Ibara Ichijou out of the fire, but why do you know that?"

"I was evacuated to an elementary school near this hospital the night of the fire. That's when I saw you, carrying Ichijou-san on your back."

"Was this area also an evacuation area?"

"Umm, Ichijou-san's condition..."

"It's a minor injury. It's not life-threatening."

"...Good."

Rin breathed a sigh of relief, but that wasn't all she wanted to know.

"What do you want to ask me?"

"Eh?"

"If you just want to know about Ibara Ichijou's condition, there's probably someone else you should ask."

"Oh, that's..."

He noticed. Rin moved the intertwined fingers of both hands restlessly, looking at Ibuki.

"Was an Aramitama the cause of the fire...?"

Ibuki looked back at Makita.

"I don't think that was reported."

Ibuki returned the question to Rin.

"You saw it?"

"Yes. While I was evacuating, I saw a monster jumping on the rooftops. His body was on fire, and the houses he stepped on started burning one after another. That was an Aramitama... I think it was a fire Aramitama. "

"...You seem to know a lot about the Mitama."

"When I was a child, my grandmother taught me many things. Then, I got interested and went to the library and did a lot of research on the Mitama and Aramitama. I also learned about "Ayaka Security". "

As Rin said that, her eyes looked at Ibuki's left arm, the red cloth wrapped around his left arm.

Makita also wears the same on his left arm.

It is a bracelet that shows that you are a member of "Ayaka Security".

"....."

"Ayaka Security" is not a company that hides its existence, like giving Ibara a business card. However, it is not widely recognized by islanders. Especially for a high school girl.

"Are you an occult enthusiast?"

At Makita's question, Rin shook her head.

"I would like to study folklore. Ah, but I like to read books related to the occult..."

"I see."

Rin smiled awkwardly and then looked at Ibuki again.

She was waiting for an answer to her question.

"In fact, what you saw was an Aramitama. The Aramitama's fire went crazy and many houses were burned. Even Ibara's house."

"After all, that was an Aramitama!"

Rin put her hand on her cheek and squinted behind her glasses.

"That was a real Aramitama. It was beautiful..."

"....."

"Ah! Sorry! I wonder what I'm saying. That's disrespectful..."

Noticing Ibuki's frown, Rin quickly lowered her head, but Ibuki's frown wasn't because Rin's comment was disrespectful.

When Rin looked at the Aramitama and said, "It's beautiful", Ibuki was drawn to that feeling.

If it's a Mitama, it's understandable. It's like seeing a firefly dancing in the night sky and thinking it's beautiful. However, an Aramitama is different.

"Please believe me! I'm really worried about Ichijou-san..."

"I have no doubt. No matter what you think, it has nothing to do with me."

"Ichijou-san is my benefactor!"

"Benefactress?"

"It's hard to say this, but I don't really fit in with the class, and some people say mean things to me..."

"Oops..."

Makita stepped between Ibuki and Rin.

"I won't force you to say something that's hard to say, young lady."

Ibuki could guess what Rin was trying to say.

Rin is probably being bullied in class. Ibara saved her.

That's what it means to be a benefactor.

"Ah, that..."

"Come on, Makita."

Ibuki turned his back on Rin, who seemed to have more questions to ask, and began walking.

"I don't understand how high school girls feel these days."

Makita, who was walking next to him, said that as soon as he left the hospital.

"One wants to kill the Aramitamas and the other thinks it's beautiful."



"Normally, people are instinctively afraid of Aramitama. Even more so when it is a fire Aramitama."

"In other words, what do those girls feel?"

Ibuki turned his head and looked towards the hospital, the fourth floor where Ibara's room was located. And he carved a deep wrinkle between his eyebrows.

"It means it's not normal."

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"Ibara. From today onwards, this is your home. My wife and I will protect you."

Ibara's uncle left the island after graduating high school and got a job on the mainland, but recently returned after getting married and changing jobs.

To Ibara, he was a relative she didn't know.

He is not a bad person. The sudden death of his brother and his wife must have been a shock to him, but he willingly took in his orphaned niece.

"Ibara-chan. If you have any problems, don't hesitate to tell me. We have become a family."

His uncle's wife is not a bad person either.

There would have been some resistance to welcoming a high school student who was not related by blood into the family. She doesn't know if it's out of conscience or concern for public appearance. Or maybe it's both, Ibara thinks.

In fact, both her uncle and her wife treated her kindly. Far from being bad people, her uncle and his wife were extremely good people.

She was really grateful to the two of them for giving her a place to live after losing her parents and her home.

Still, Ibara felt that this was not the place where she belonged.

Her uncle said he would protect her, but Ibara doesn't want to be protected.

She wants to kill the Aramitamas. An irrational thing called Aramitama.

Otherwise, Ibara will not be able to forgive herself. She couldn't do anything about her parents being burned to death.

(I'm sorry.)

While she apologized to her uncle and her wife, Ibara took action.

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The store was located in a multi-tenant building in downtown Ichinoshima.

A restaurant, GOZ.

"Well, I heard it."

Ibuki was sitting at the counter drinking alcohol and waiting for the food he had ordered when Makita came out of the kitchen and said that while he wiped his hands on his apron.

"It is said that a suspicious high school girl has been seen in the center of the city."

"What's that?"

"She goes around randomly asking passersby if they've seen an Aramitama."

The reason Makita is wearing an apron is because he is the manager of this store. Although he was the manager of the store, he was hired and the owner was Ibuki.

"That girl?"

What appeared in Ibuki's mind was the face of Ibara Ichijou.

"I guess."

Ibuki clicked his tongue lightly.

"What are you going to do?"

Ibuki left his seat without answering that question.

"Cooking is cancelled."

"Hehe. Take care."

Ibuki left GOZ as he was seen off by Makita, who was smiling as if he could see right through him.

He soon encountered Ibara Ichijou.

"Have you seen an Aramitama? It's the ghost of a Mitama. If you have seen an Aramitama, please tell me where you saw it!"

As Makita said, she was constantly calling out to passersby.

It was already after ten at night.

"It's not a good time for high school students to be away from home."

Ibuki approached Ibara and spoke to her with a sigh.

"Ah, "Ayaka Security"...!"

"Go home quickly. You will be guided."

"I don't want any guidance. If I see a police officer, I'll run away."

Ibuki took a deep breath.

"I should have told you to stop doing stupid things."

"I'm not going to stop. It's not a stupid imitation for me. This is necessary."

Ibara looked directly into Ibuki's eyes and said that firmly.

Ibuki realized. He doesn't think he can convince that girl with words, but there's a lot to say.

"If you really encounter an Aramitama, you will die this time."

Ibara spoke without looking away.

"I'm not going to die."

The way she spoke was not just an act of bravery; It seemed like she was confident that she would not die even if she faced an Aramitama.

(This girl...)

Why isn't she afraid of the Aramitama?

"Teach me how to kill an Aramitama."

"It is not a kid's game."

"If you don't tell me, I have nothing to do with you."

Ibara turned on her heel and ran away. The figure was devoured by the crowd and soon disappeared from sight.

"Even if there is nothing to do, we will meet again. If we go after an Aramitama."

Ibuki grumbled and turned his back to the crowd.

The reunion took place in two days.

The largest shopping center in Ichinoshima. An Aramitama appeared in the parking lot.

Ibuki ran there after receiving a request to exterminate the animal, and there he heard the girl's scream.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Ichijou Ibara threw a metal bat and charged at the strange creature.

It's like a distorted kokeshi doll.

A spherical head rests on a cylindrical body. Both the torso and head were uneven, as if they had been roughly carved, and the red marks on the torso looked like scattered flowers or blood spatters. There is no face on the head, but one eye is wide open.

(Wooden Aramitama? It is of low quality.)

In terms of strength, Ibuki alone is enough. The problem is...

"Damn!"

A thorny bat cut the sky. It was a complete movement with all her strength, without the slightest hesitation.

The Aramitama jumped to avoid the bat and lowered its enormous head like a hammer.

"Avoid it...!"

Before Ibuki could scream, Ibara had already jumped away.

The Aramitama's head hit the asphalt ground.

It is no coincidence that Ibara survived. Ibara followed the Aramitama's movements closely.

Ibara attacked the Aramitama again after he turned around.

This time a full movement caught the strange shape. A dull impact sound resounded.

"It's useless. You can't kill them with physical force."

Ibara continued hitting the Aramitama, Ibuki wondered if she could hear his voice or not.

"Die, die, die!"

Every time she hit it, the Aramitama made an unpleasant moan-like sound.

(Is working.)

".....!"

Ibuki noticed something strange about Ibara and widened his eyes.

An aura was surging from the girl's entire body.

It's not something people can see. However, Ibuki, who learned to manipulate that energy and used it to kill the Aramitamas, can see it.

Spirit of life.

A great torrent of life flows at the bottom of the ocean, on the distant island of Ayaka.

The life force is the power that comes from that life line.

Ibara was harming the Aramitama by sucking the life force from his blood and imbuing not only herself but also the metal bat in her hand with life force.

(Maybe she has the talent after all.)

Ibuki was surprised, but agreed.

That day, Ibara was the only one in the family who survived the attack of the fierce Aramitama.

There is no doubt that it was thanks to her parents risking their lives to keep their daughter away from the strange way, but it was almost a miracle that she escaped with only minor injuries in that hellish situation.

In reality, Ibara protected himself with her life force.

And even now.

Ibara probably understands that even subconsciously. She realized that she had the power to confront the Aramitama. That is why she is not afraid of the Aramitama.

The reason why Ibara came to that place before Ibuki was probably because of her nature, she was sensitive to the presence of the Aramitama.

"Break! Crush!"

Ibara continued to swing the metal bat, but the Aramitama did not break or collapse.

It was working, but it wasn't enough to defeat him.

Ibara wasn't using her powers effectively. Most of her vitality had dissipated.

The Aramitama raised his head vigorously and Ibara, who was thrown, hit her butt.

(Until now...)

Ibuki quickly grabbed a gun in each of his hands. And...

"Freeze!"

He pulled the trigger, screaming at Ibara. At that distance, he won't make a mistake like hitting Ibara.

The night air trembled at the sound of gunshots.

You can't kill Aramitama with a bullet, any more than you can kill him with a metal bat.

However, Ibuki's bullet was specially made.

The strange head that was about to fall was hit by a bullet and shattered.



Ibuki fired more shots. The Aramitama, whose torso was crushed, disappeared as if melting into the darkness of the night.

Instead of suffocating it and bringing it back, it destroys and erases it. That's Ibuki's method.

Ibuki holstered his weapon and walked towards Ibara.

Ibara was still shaking, still sitting on her butt.

(Did it really scare you?) Ibuki swallowed those words.

"Damn! I couldn't kill him! Damn, damn!"

Ibara was not shaking from fear, but from anger and frustration.

Ibuki thought. He wonders what will happen to this girl in the future.

She will definitely do the same again. Find an Aramitama and challenge him to a battle. Ibuki was on time this time, but it won't be like that next time.

Ibuki let out a deep sigh.

"Ibara Ichijou."

Ibara's bloodshot eyes reflected on Ibuki.

Ibuki leaned down and looked directly into her dazzling pink eyes.

"I will teach you how to kill the Aramitama."

"If you are brave, they will kill you; if you are not brave, you will live."

Ibara's lips spun words.

Those are words meant to interfere with the cycle of life and force borrowed power to follow one's will.

He could feel the girl's delicate physique filling with life.

"Guh..."

Ibara closed her eyes and clasped her hands in front of her chest, but her expression twisted in pain.

She harbors and retains the power of life. There's no way it won't be painful. It's like a flame is spinning inside your body. It wouldn't be strange if they screamed and writhed. But Ibara persisted.

Ibara opened her eyes, although her eyebrows were trembling and her teeth were clenched.

"Keep moving."

Ibara nodded at Ibuki's instructions, then lowered her hips and raised her fists.

The movement itself was just a formal punch, but the girl's small fist, imbued with vitality, made the air tremble.

"Wow!"

The force of her fists was strong enough to stagger Makita, who was standing next to Ibuki.

"That's amazing. I didn't think I'd be impressed."

"Keep moving."

Ibara nodded, but she moved even more violently. She continually raised her fists and cut the air with kicks.

No matter how much she moves, the power Ibara has inside her does not dissipate. It is well controlled.

"That's a lot of progress in just half a month."

Makita's tone was more than admiration, as if he was surprised.

Two weeks have passed since then. In his free time at work, Ibuki teaches Ibara the art of connecting pulses.

The location is a training room in a building rented as an "Ayaka Security" office. Ibara spends most of the day in that place, not only when Ibuki trains her, but she continues to overwork her body.

In other words, she doesn't even go to school.

"Students are told to go to school, but they don't listen no matter how much we tell them."

Makita, who has a strong sense of ethics despite his appearance, was at a loss.

After continuing to move for about three minutes, Ibara knelt down. Her breathing was very erratic.

(It's more than I imagined.)

Ibuki murmured into his chest.

Ibuki taught Ibara how to improve and strengthen her physical abilities using the power of the life line. He had judged that this technique was more suitable for Ibara and he was right in his assumption.

She was able to maintain her technique for three minutes in just two weeks, so she was no ordinary talent.

(It's not just about talent, though.)

Ibara has will. A determined will to become stronger. That is the most necessary quality to become strong.

If she continues training for three more months, she will be able to protect herself even if she encounters an Aramitama.

"Let's do it again...!"

Ibara tried to get up, but immediately fell back to her knees.

Body strengthening techniques are techniques that directly affect the body itself, so they consume a lot of physical strength.

"That's all for today."

"I can still do it!"

"No. Follow my instructions. That's the condition."

Instead of teaching him how to use her powers, Ibuki made her swallow those conditions.

"...Yes, Boss."

Ibara nodded, although reluctantly.

"Don't call me boss."

"But everyone at 'Ayaka Security' calls you boss."

"You are not an employee of 'Ayaka Security'."

"Part time job?"

"It's not even my part-time job. I had no intention of hiring you."

"I want you to hire me. I will definitely be useful."

"Don't talk like a bossy brat, you're not ready for that."

"If I'm ready, I can do it!"

"The fact that you can easily say that you are ready is proof that you are not. You should go home today."

Ibuki threw the bag that had been placed next to the training equipment to its owner.

Ibara held the bag with a displeased expression on her face. A brief ringtone was heard from the cell phone that was in the pocket of her purse.

Ibara looked at the cell phone she had taken out and tilted her head slightly.

She received a message from someone named "Tamase-san" on her messaging app, but it took her a few seconds to remember who she was.

"Tamase-san...? Ah..."

"Speaking of Tamase, is she your classmate who came to visit?"

Ibuki heard Ibara's murmur and called out to her.

"Yes."

The only classmate who came to visit her while she was in the hospital was Tamase-san... Rin Tamase.

It was surprising that she came to visit her.

Ibara was an isolated figure in the class.

She was aware of that. Compared to girls her age, she doesn't smile enough.

It wasn't that she was dissatisfied with the repetitive routine of her daily school life. There were a lot of things she thought were funny. Still, Ibara couldn't laugh like other girls her age and was often mistaken for being angry.

Ibara lacked charm and kindness, so none of her classmates were willing to talk to her.

She didn't feel alone about it, but she wasn't seriously worried either.

Yes, Ibara originally floated in class.

So even if she isolated herself even more after helping Rin Tamase, it didn't matter.

(Tamase-san...)

Not long after Rin was promoted to the next grade, one of the girls in her class began to harass her.

Although it is not a direct act like violence, they curse so that Rin herself can hear them. The content of the insults is really stupid. Like for example: "she's always reading books and she's disgusting" or "Youkai Woman".

It is true that Rin, like Ibara, did not belong to any group and read books related to the occult alone during her breaks. But why is that?

In the end, the reason doesn't matter to people who bully.

People who are isolated and have no allies are easy targets.

It was an understatement because they targeted the weak-willed Rin instead of the lone wolf, Ibara.

It was also unpleasant to hear the voices of the bullying group. That's why she spoke firmly to the group that was audibly criticizing Rin.

"Don't intimidate her.", Ibara said.

From that day on, the target of bad words became Ibara. The content of the insults was so trivial that she doesn't even remember them.

She doesn't care at all what they say. Perhaps irritated by Ibara's indifference, the attacking group took more direct measures. They had several male students brought from other schools attack Ibara.

"Really, please."

Ibara defeated them easily. It's not like she has experience in martial arts. However, Ichijou Ibara was able to do it.

The girls in the bullying group panicked as they saw well-built boys being expelled one after another.

When Ibara approached them, snapping her fingers, the girls knelt and apologized, and the bullying suddenly stopped.

Rin was very grateful. Ibara simply didn't like the behavior of the people who bullied her and she had no intention of helping Rin. Still, she would have been happy if she had helped a classmate who was suffering.

Meanwhile, Ibara herself became increasingly isolated in her class. The entire class feared her and blatantly avoided her. Rin was the only one who spoke to her, but even she seemed scared and shy. It seemed like she was worrying her, so she felt sorry for her.

A message from Rin.

"I'm worried because you haven't been to school lately. How are you?"

Ibara went there wearing her uniform and pretending to go to school so as not to worry her uncle and his wife.

Aside from her uncle and his wife, she didn't believe anyone in the school community was worried about her.

(I'm sorry.)

Ibara apologized to Rin in her heart.

(I have to answer.)



Ibara typed the response with quick fingers.

"I'm fine. Don't worry too much."

After pressing the send button...

"Uh..."

Noticing the frankness of her writing, Ibara fell into a mild fit of self-hatred. The way she wrote it made it seem like her concern bothered her.

(I'm very bad at this kind of thing.)

She thought she wished she could add at least one emoji.

As she sighed inwardly, she heard the message ringtone again.

(Again, from Tamase-san.)

Ibara was puzzled when she saw the new message.

"Can we see each other...?"

Ibara suddenly looked at Ibuki, who was standing in front of her, as if asking for help.

"What?"

"A girl in my class asked me if I could see her now if it's okay. What should I do...?"

Ibuki frowned, wondering what he would do if he was asked such a thing.

"Think for yourself."

It was a valid opinion.

After some hesitation, Ibara replied:

"It's okay, let's meet. Specify the time and place."

"I decided to meet the girl from my class."

Saying that, Ibara walked out.

"Boss, what do you plan to do with that girl?"

As Ibuki sighed, Makita called him.

"I don't plan to do anything. I'm just teaching her how to protect herself."

"You have no intention of hiring her? I think she would be a great force."

"Do you want me to hire that girl?"

Makita shrugged and shook his head.

"No. She has a home to go to, a suitable guardian and she is likely to make friends. She should live a normal life, right?"

"That's right."

Makita laughed out loud.

"What happen?"

"Well, you've been making a lot of preparations. The things you ordered have already arrived."

"I see."

Ibuki stared at the place where Ibara had been a while ago and bit his teeth with a bitter expression.

He didn't plan to hire Ibara. There was no lie in those words.

However, it is Ibara herself who chooses how to live.

No one can force another person to live their life. Even if it is a family member or if they are like family.

"Makita. I'll make adjustments to that. Help me."

"Do you want to do it right now?"

Ibuki replied as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"...I have a bad feeling about it."

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Rin specified a coffee shop in a block of office buildings.

"Ichijou-san."

Rin recognized Ibara, stood up and waved at her.

Ibara tried to return the greeting, but the act seemed so embarrassing that she simply nodded.

Ibara ordered a drink at the counter and looked around the store as she waited.

As it is an office area, there are no other students in sight. It's also quite far from Ibara's school.

She should have chosen a place where she wouldn't have to meet other classmates. Even Ibara was grateful for that.

"Customer, here is coffee with almond milk."

Ibara took the drink and sat across from Rin.

"Thanks for coming."

"It's no big deal."

"I'm glad you look good."

"Yes."

"Maybe you were busy?"

"Not precisely."

"...Um, maybe you're angry?"

"I'm not angry."

Ibara tilted her head and looked at her face reflected in the window. She had a frown on her face and her lips curled. She can't help people thinking she was angry.

As the saying goes, thorns were not angry. It's not that she's in a bad mood. To be honest, she is a little nervous, but she thinks it's a problem because even a little nervousness can make her look very serious.

"I'm sorry."

"Huh? Why are you apologizing, Ichijou-san?"

"...Because I made you worry."

Ibara responded, unable to apologize for being so cruel. It was true that she was sorry for worrying her.

"So what's the purpose?"

"Ah, um, it's not like I have anything in particular to do..."

"You called me, even though you had nothing to do?"

"D-you didn't like it?"

"....."

She didn't dislike it. Ibara doesn't dislike it, but she doesn't understand the feeling of calling someone's attention even when it's not necessary to do so.

So it's like they're friends?

A friend.

Ibara does not recognize Rin as a friend. However, that doesn't mean she doesn't consider her a friend. First of all, what constitutes a friendship? Is that a mutual agreement?

"I just wanted to meet you, Ichijou-san. I feel lonely at school without Ichijou-san."

"Yes..."

"Ah, um. If you're feeling okay, would you mind coming to school?"

Rin's eyes widened. Her voice also rose slightly.

It was normal for her to speak in a somewhat shy manner, but Ibara felt strange.

"Are you by any chance being harassed by those guys again?"

Rin's shoulders shook. Her expression was tense and even seemed pale.

Clearly, it was a surprising reaction.

"Did you call me for help?"

"N-no! That's not it!"

"Do not lie."

"I'm not lying! I just wanted to be friends with Ichijou-san..."

"Because if we become friends, can we protect each other?"

"Ah...!"

Rin quickly got up and ran out of the store.

"Tamase-san!"

She didn't even look back at Ibara's voice of restraint.

"Tamase-san..."

Ibara stared at the seat where Rin was sitting a moment ago, then lowered her head in dismay as she realized that she had insensibly stepped on Rin's landmine.

(No, no, no!)

Rin screamed in her heart as she ran.

(I wanted to be friends with Ichijou-san! That's all!)

Really? She asked herself.

(Don't you want Ichijou-san to come to school and shut them up?)

Ibara was right. When she stopped attending school, the group began to badmouth Tamase. Loud enough for the entire class to hear, mockingly.

"Hidden Bus.", "Creepy Glasses.", "The Violent Woman's Red Shark."

Although they are really low-level insults, words spoken with malice poison the heart like poison.

She wanted me to help her. She wanted Ibara to shut them up again.

Admire Ibara. She is alone. She is different from her, who is not good at interacting with others and is alone.

She wanted to be friends with Ibara. That is unequivocally true. However, it is also true that she tried to use it to escape harassment.

She knew it.

(What a superficial person I am.)

There was no way she believed she was worthy of being Ibara's friend.

She couldn't go with Ibara anymore. She couldn't involve her. She didn't have the face to see her.

"Ah!"

Rin, who was running without looking at her feet, tripped on a sidewalk step and fell.

Tears flowed from pain and misery.

She wanted to see fire.

In Rin's mind, the vision of the houses burning that night came to life.

It was beautiful. In the darkness of the night, the blazing fire and the Aramitama leaping over the sea of fire seemed irresistibly beautiful.

She wanted to see that beautiful fire again.

Rin's breathing, which seemed like a sigh, was tinged with a strange heat.

Her body was hot.

She seemed to have a high fever, but she didn't feel any pain.

"Fufufufufu..."

Far from being painful, her heart was so excited that she could almost smile.

When Rin returned home, she ran to her room on the second floor. Her parents, who work, were not home at the time.



Without even changing her clothes, she turned on the printer and printed out some photos she had taken with her cell phone.

She replaced her school bag with an empty backpack, took the printed photographs, and left the house again.

She bought it at a local hardware store, put it in her backpack and headed to her destination.

It was a vacant lot behind the school. There was an old apartment building there a while ago, but it has been demolished and now there is nothing left there.

Until the evening, it is sometimes used as a playground for the neighborhood children, but at that time of night, there was no one but Rin.

"Hehehehehe..."

Rin laughed and pulled out of her backpack the various items she had bought at the hardware store and began to work on them.

She lined up the charcoal in a small lighter and lit it. Although Rin had no experience in the outdoors, it was easy to set it on fire.

"Fire, fire."

Her heart skipped a beat as she watched the fire flicker in the darkness.

"Hahahahahahaha..."

There were other things she bought at the store. Four little stuffed animals that were sold at the pet supply corner. One by one, she attached to each one a photo that she had printed at home with thumbtacks.

In the photo are Rin's classmates who were bullying her.

A stuffed animal with a photo attached was thrown into the fire.

"Burn, burn, burn, burn."

Everyone who hurts her should just burn.

As the fire gained strength, Rin's breathing became heavier. Then, fueled by Rin's breath, the fire became even fiercer.

"Burn more! Spread more! Burn everything and make it beautiful!"

As if in response to Rin's voice, the fire grew and exploded.

"Ah!"

Surprised, Rin fell onto his butt, adjusted her glasses, and looked up.

".....?!"

She breathed.

She could see the flames burning violently.

No, it was a strange shape engulfed in flames.

It looks like a large beast standing up, but the shape of its front legs is similar to that of a human, and they look more like arms than legs.

The fire surrounding his head resembles a lion's mane.

One eye, wide open in the middle of his face, glowed bright red.

(An Aramitama...?)

It looks different from the one she saw before at Ibara's house, but there was no doubt about it.

An Aramitama is right in front of her.

Rin's expression brightened.

Her grandmother, who knows the Mitama, taught her that an Aramitama is the stagnation and distortion of the principles of the world. That's what was written in the local materials she read in the library.

There are several reasons why a Mitama becomes stagnant, but it is said that sometimes a Mitama becomes an Aramitama due to strong human emotions.

(Then...)

Rin understood and waited.

That Aramitama was born from Rin's emotions.

It appeared in response to Rin's despair, hatred, and pain.

"Please! Kill them! Kill each and every one who hurt me!"

Rin screamed, coming to her senses.

(No! Don't think about that!)

Her blood turned cold.

(What exactly am I saying? What am I doing in a place like this?)

The Aramitama roared.

That Aramitama has no mouth. The roar that the fire monster emitted from his entire body shook the earth and made Rin shudder.

"Ah... ah..."

The Aramitama's eyes moved slowly and captured Rin.

What those eyes contain is intense and pure killing intent.

Rin knew it. An Aramitama is not something that can be manipulated by human will. And now she felt it, she couldn't stop that monster.

"Help me..."

The Aramitama walked towards her, scattering sparks of fire.

Rin felt weak and couldn't move.

"Help me..."

The warmth in her body that she felt until now was gone. What she felt instead was coldness.

The inescapable fear of death turned into a coldness that controlled Rin.

Rin, unable to get up, could only shake like a blister.

The Aramitama moved his fiery fist.

"Help me, someone..."

There were times when she became desperate and even wanted to die.

However, faced with the absolute sign of death, there was only one thing she could think of.

(I don't want to die yet.)

Rin's throat was tight, but she still screamed desperately.

The name of Rin's hero.

"Help! Ichijou-san!"

At that moment the wind blew.

A gust of wind passed Rin and collided with the Aramitama, shaking his giant body.

The wind blew in front of Rin.

Her true identity was a girl.

The girl simply turned her head and said.

"Are you hurt? Tamase-san."

There was Ichijou Ibara, Rin's hero.

Ibara, who was left alone in the store, lowered her head until her coffee with almond milk cooled completely.

Not only is she insensitive to the feelings of others, but she is also at a loss for words.

Her weaknesses were completely exposed.

(That I have to do?)

The answer that came to Ibara after thinking about it was:

(I will find Tamase. I will meet her and apologize.)

That was it.

It took her a while to come up with such a simple answer.

Ibara sent her a message telling her that she wanted to see her again, but she never marked it as read. She wondered if she hated her so much that she didn't even want to see her face, but she had a bad feeling about it.

She had no basis or certainty. Actually, it was just a hunch, but if she stopped seeing Rin now, it would be irreversible. She couldn't help but feel that way.

Ibara stood up, drank the almond milk coffee that she had barely touched, and left the store.

Ibara doesn't know Rin's house. She couldn't even contact her. The only thing left for her to do was search on foot.

Ibara's instinct led her to school.

(Although I don't think Tamase-san is at school...)

Still, the closer she got to the school, the more bad feeling she had about it.

As she approached the school gate, she heard a strange voice.

It didn't belong to a person. The roar of something more sinister, different from that of a beast.

The moment she heard that voice, Ibara began to run.

She was on time.

Ibara launched a jumping kick with all her might that staggered his strangely large body.

"Are you hurt? Tamase-san."

Ibara asked, turning only her head as she held her body in front of him.

"Ichijou-san..."

Rin is sitting on her butt. At first glance it doesn't look like there are any major injuries, but she doesn't know what the real cause is.

"Please answer."

"No, I'm okay."

"Then stay back."

"Why are you here, Ichijou-san...?"

(I'm the one who wants to ask that.), Ibara responded in her heart.

Why did an Aramitama attack Rin in a place like that?

Ibara looked back in front of her and looked at the Aramitama in front of her.

The body is strong. The area around his face and his left and right hands became engulfed in fire.

Although it looks different from the one that burned down Ibara's house, it is definitely a fire Aramitama.

Ibara trembled.

That day had finally arrived.

All Aramitama are enemies of Ibara, but especially the fire Aramitama.

Ibuki told her to run away if she encountered an Aramitama. The techniques he taught her are not for fighting, but for protection.

(Sorry, Boss.)

However, when facing the fiery Aramitama, fleeing was not an option for Ibara.

"If you are brave, they will kill you; if you are not brave, you will live."

Clenching her fists and lowering her hips, Ibara spoke those powerful words.

The art of strengthening the body.

She used it to run from the school gate to there, but once again she was filled with life force.

"Guh...!"

The power that rages within the body becomes painful and torments Ibara.



Ibara gritted her teeth, suppressed the pain, and kicked the ground.

The Aramitama recovered from his stumble and raised his fiery fist.

Faster than she could move her fist, Ibara flew towards the Aramitama's chest.

"Yaaaaaah!"

With a piercing scream, the flying fist slammed into the Aramitama's torso, causing the giant body to stagger once more.

(What do you think...!)

There was a crack-like wound where he had been hit.

It's different from last time, when she couldn't get a single scratch no matter how hard she hit him.

"Break!"

Ibara's blows slowly but surely undermined the Aramitama.

The Aramitama, on the other hand, was not just being defeated.

He swung his fire fist and attacked Ibara.

Although her body strength had increased, it was still a weak attack if she could hit it correctly, but Ibara could clearly see the Aramitama's movements. It wasn't that hard to avoid.

Hit, dodge and hit again. The repeated rhythm was suddenly broken.

Just as she was about to dodge the burning fist and counterattack, Ibara's vision began to shake.

Her legs lost strength and her knees caved in.

"Ah...!"

Instantly she understood what had happened.

She had reached the limit. An immature rose cannot maintain the technique for long. It also consumes a lot of physical strength.

She knew that would happen if the battle dragged on. That's why she wanted to defeat him quickly, but that didn't happen.

Although the Aramitama had numerous wounds all over his body, his movements had not decreased.

"N-no... guh!"

Her body was heavy. Her breathing became irregular.

Still, Ibara looked at the Aramitama and adopted a fighting stance.

"Ichijou-san..."

Ichijou Ibara is fighting the Aramitama. Certainly she is strong. However, is it possible for her to compete against an Aramitama with bare hands? It must be different than when it comes to male students.

In fact, Ibara seemed to be cornered.

(I have to ask for help!)

Rin thought.

But who? The police?

The two men she met that day at the hospital where Ibara was admitted flashed through Rin's mind.

"Ayaka Security". Officially it is a security company, but in reality it is an Aramitamas exterminator group.

(If it's those people...!)

At this moment, an electronic sound rang near Rin.

"Ichijou-san...?!"

The source of the sound was a bag that had fallen diagonally behind Rin.

Ibara must have thrown it away when she lunged at the Aramitama for the first time.

The purse, or more precisely, the cell phone in her pocket, was emitting the ringtone.

"Listen up! It could be the boss!"

Ibara screamed.

Rin was too weak to get up, but she crawled to her bag and grabbed her cell phone.

The caller's name displayed on the screen is "Boss (Ibuki-san)".

Rin answered the call with trembling fingers.

"Ibara?"

A low, masculine voice.

"I-Ichijou-san! Help Ichijou-san! An Aramitama...!"

Rin let out a raised voice. She wanted to convey the situation accurately, but she was so impatient that she couldn't articulate the words.

"Are you Ibara's classmate?"

"Y-yes."

"Generally, I understand the situation. Tell me the place. I will head there soon."

Somehow, a voice emerged from Ibara to tell Rin the location.

"Who is it...?!"

"I-It's Ibuki-san! He's coming!"

Ibara turned her head halfway and nodded.

The boss will come.

The news gave Ibara strength.

(I will resist somehow!)

It is a fact that she did not want to admit, but right now she does not have the strength to defeat the Aramitama in front of her.

But if she holds on...

Ibara relaxed her limbs and tried to catch her breath.

Avoiding the Aramitama's fist as she descended, she did not leap back nor take a deep step, but rather she made as little movement as possible.

She won't attack from there. She will reduce consumption by focusing on avoidance.

It was not an easy task. Ibara's physical strength had already reached her limit. Her eyes were blurry and it was increasingly difficult to see the Aramitama's movements. It's almost like she's avoiding him based on her intuition.

A moment seems like minutes.

Ibara, however, did not lose focus. She didn't give up.

How long has it been?

After what seemed like an eternity of defensive battles, the time came.

"Ibara!"

Ibuki's voice rang out.

Ibara opened her narrowed eyes. Her blurry vision cleared in an instant.

Ibara was confused, but she nodded and inserted her right hand into her glove.

It covered everything from just below her elbow to the tips of her fingers, and it fit perfectly into Ibara's hand.

It is made of metal, so it is quite heavy. However, her arm moved slightly.

It's not just her right arm that wears the glove. Her left arm, both legs, and her entire body, which had been heavy due to fatigue, mysteriously became lighter.

"This will optimize the effect of the technique. It should also reduce the burden."

While dodging the Aramitama's blows, Ibara realized Ibuki's words.

"Ibara."

Ibuki's deep voice echoed.

"I taught you to flee if you encountered an Aramitama. However, you have decided to fight. In that case, I will show you how to do it to the end."

Ibuki put his hands in the pockets of his jacket, as if he had no intention of providing any further assistance.

"Aren't you going to help Ichijou-san?!"

Ibuki turned to Ibara instead of answering Rin, who let out a surprised cry.

"Hey, "Ayaka Security" doesn't need anyone who can't wipe their own asses."

Ibara responded with a deep nod.

She didn't feel like she was being rejected.

Ibara thanked Ibuki.

As he said, Ibara decided to fight instead of flee. Whether that choice is right or wrong, he knows it is wrong.

However, Ibuki respected Ibara's mistake.

He understood Ibara's desire to defeat the Aramitamas with her own hands, rather than imposing his truth on her.

And now he has prepared a place for Ibara. A place called "Ayaka Security".

Getting there is up to Ibara.

Ibara took a deep breath and caught her breath. She filled her lungs with air and prepared herself for the next battle, not the final one.

The Aramitama roared. The flames surrounding him became even more powerful.

It seems that the other party also intends to resolve the matter.

Ibara moved. At the same time, the Aramitama also moved.

The Aramitama flew in the opposite direction of Ibara, who was advancing and extending her left and right fists. The flames surrounding his fist grew to double his size and shot out a fireball. The number is more than ten.

Ibara was not afraid. She avoided fire bullets that could be avoided and shot down those that could not be avoided with her right arm protected by a glove.

The Aramitama took a step back as if frightened and shook his two fists in the air. He was going to crush Ibara who was aiming for his head.

Ibara was not afraid. She cut the scorching air with her entire body and accelerate even more.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

With a roar, the girl raised her right fist, which surpassed the Aramitama's attack speed and hit the giant's chest.

A dull impact sound resounded.

The Aramitama's movements suddenly stopped.

A deep crack spread around the chest where Ibara hit it.

Like blood gushing from a wound, fire erupted from the crack and the Aramitama exploded.

While a large number of sparks flew, Ibara stood there like a doll whose strings had been cut.

She knelt down.

She had no strength in her legs. Even with the help of the glove, her physical strength and her energy were already beyond her limits.

Still, Ibara gathered the last of her strength and raised her right fist towards the sky.

She fell, delicately.

Aramitama.

Before her parents died, she was helpless and couldn't do anything.

Tears ran down her red, burnt cheeks.

"Mom, Dad. I did it. I'm fine now."

She was ok. She hopes she can live strong even in a world without them. That's the only way she could make a vow to her deceased parents.

That girl is Ibara Ichijou.

"Ichijou-san..."

A high school girl like her defeated an Aramitama, that terrifying monster.

She knew that Ibara wasn't normal. That's why Rin admired Ibara.

But now, upon witnessing Ibara defeat the Aramitama, Rin realized that she was much more distant than she expected.

"Ah, that."

Rin looked at Ibuki who was next to her and called out to him.

"It's my fault. I was burning the photos of my classmates... the people who were bullying me, and the Aramitama..."

"There are cases where Mitama become Aramitamas due to strong human emotions. However, these types of phenomena usually occur in places where a large number of people gather. It is not every day that a person's emotions cause the emergence of an Aramitama."

"So, that Aramitama..."

"Just by chance, unfortunately, it appeared in front of you. Think of it that way."

"Alright?"

Ibuki didn't respond anymore.

With a worried sigh, he walked towards Ibara.

"Ibara."

When Ibara heard him call her name, she wiped her tears and turned around.

"Boss..."

"Did you burn your face again?"

Ibuki touched her left cheek with his fingertips.

She doesn't know it because she can't see it for herself, but it definitely hurts.

Ibara lightly touched her cheek and, although she winced at the pain...

"It's not a unilateral wound, it's a battle wound, so it doesn't hurt."

That's what she answered.

"Don't be too strong. An injury is an injury. However, those who are cornered and cannot be strengthened are of no use. I believe you have passed the test."

Ibuki took out a long red cloth from the inside pocket of his jacket and handed it to Ibara.

It's an "Ayaka Security" bracelet. Ibuki, Makita and the other employees wear that on their wrists.

"You defeated the Aramitama. You should have achieved your goal. Think carefully if you still need this."

Ibara reached out and took the bracelet from him. Then, she immediately wrapped it around her left arm.

"I told you to think about it."

"This is the result of careful consideration."

There was no doubt.

Ibara stared at the bracelet and muttered.

"Ayakai..."

Ibuki shrugged in shock. There was a wry smile on his face.

"Well, okay. Shows how determined you are with your job."

"Yes, Boss."

Ibuki no longer said, "Don't call me boss.".

"Can you stand up?"

"I can stand up."

Ibuki came over to help, but Ibara managed to get up on her own.

Ibuki nodded and pointed at Rin with his eyes and chin.

Ibara walked unsteadily and stood in front of her classmate.

"Tamase-san, I'm sorry. I should have run away with you, but I didn't. That's why I put you in danger."

"Ah, don't apologize! If Ichijou-san hadn't come, that Aramitama would have killed me. Ichijou-san, you have always helped me..."

Ibara shook her head.

"I have to apologize to you again."

"Eh...?"

"The boss made me a member of "Ayaka Security". That's why I won't go to school anymore. I can't protect you."

"Ichijou-san..."

"I was happy when you asked me to be your friend. I'm so sorry I couldn't respond."

Ibara bowed deeply to Rin.

"Look up, Ichijou-san. I'll be fine."

Ibara looked at Rin.

"Compared to the Aramitama, those people are not scary at all."

Rin was laughing. Even an insensitive person could tell that it was not a genuine smile.

"Ibara."

Ibuki's voice came from behind.

Ibuki said to Ibara who turned around.

"Go to school. A student's duty is to study. I'm sure Makita has told you a lot."

"But, Boss..."

"This is an order."

"Yes."

Ibara nodded reluctantly. Once someone gives her an order, she cannot disobey it.

Ibara turned to Rin, extended her hand to the one who was still sitting and said:

"...That's what I mean, so I'd like to see you back at school."

+++++

"Actually, what is going on?"

On the way back home after taking Rin and Ibara home, Makita, who was the driver, asked that question.

"Does Tamase have nothing to do with that Aramitama?"

Ibuki, who was sitting in the back seat, responded as he looked out the window.



"No, just like she said, that Aramitama was probably created by that girl's emotions fired up."

"That is..."

"Rin Tamase is talented."

"Are you sure you didn't have to tell her?"

"It's more dangerous to be aware of your talent if you're not good at it."

Ibuki taught Ibara the art of pulse grafting because Ibara subconsciously understood her true nature and was searching for the Aramitama more than anything else. If he had left it like this, she would have lost her life in a short time.

Regardless of talent, as long as they do not try to actively engage with the Aramitama, there is little danger.

"I don't believe it, but that girl is also the source of the Aramitama that caused the great fire..."

"That's not true. At that moment, the Aramitama was emitting intense fire energy. Its ferocity was also on another level."

"Are you saying that the Aramitama that Ibara defeated is on a different level?"

"Ah. I can't imagine they came from the same person."

Ibuki thinks that perhaps Rin and Ibara's latent qualities were awakened after witnessing that Aramitama.

"In that case, it's fine. Well, Tamase seems to be in a lot of trouble."

On the way, he hears from Rin Tamase about what she was going through at school.

"If Ibara is there, the aggressors will remain silent."

That probably wouldn't solve the root of the problem, but it had nothing to do with Ibuki.

"Boss, you just thought that bullying at school has nothing to do with you."

"I thought so, but what happened?"

"What would you do if Ibara asked you for advice?"

"I can't do anything. I'm neither a teacher nor a father."

"You thought about it for a second, right?"

"....."

"I know it's too late, but can I tell you?"

"What?"

"The boss is nice to Ibara, right?"

"Shut up and drive."

Ibuki clicked her tongue and kicked Makita's seat from behind.

+++++

"Aka."

Ibuki stopped dead when his name was suddenly called from behind.

He didn't want to look back. It was obvious who that voice belonged to, and the accusatory comments tired him out before he even turned around.

"Aka!"

Being called again, Ibuki reluctantly turned around.

Center during the day. Among the casually dressed tourists coming and going, the man in the white kariginu stood out from the crowd.

Kurama Haruaki.

He is the priest of Kaizumi Shrine and, to Ibuki, he is also a brother who studied under the same master.

"Don't call me if you have nothing to do."

"I stopped you because I had something to do."

Not only in his words, but also in the way he looks at Ibuki, there is a hint of reproach.

"I heard that you hired a minor. She is still a high school student."

"What's up with that?"

"I don't think you should force her to fight the Aramitama."

Ibuki snorted.

"That girl... Ibara is a great talent. Her fighting ability is probably better than your younger brother's. I was thinking it might be time to leave her in charge of the workplace."

It has been three months since Ibara became a member of "Ayaka Security".

During that time, Ibara had already experienced more battles with Aramitamas than the fingers of one hand of hers could endure. She has performed above a certain level in all fields and has increased the number of techniques she can use.

The double life of going to school during the day and working after school must have been quite demanding, but not once did she make a sound.

"Don't you think it's shameful to use a girl as a weapon of war?"

"A girl? Don't underestimate her for being a girl. She has determination."

"I'm talking about ethics and decency!"

"The truth you speak of has no value to me."

Ibuki turned his back on Kurama.

"Wait, Aka!"

Ibuki didn't look back.

The two sides separated a long time ago.

Ibuki followed his own path.

Ibuki was walking frustrated when he saw two familiar figures in front of him.

Makita and Ibara. They were talking on the sidewalk while waiting at a traffic light. He heard a voice.

"Do you want me to tell you how to buy stickers?"

"That's right. I can't convey what I think well in writing, so I'll use emojis and stickers, just a little."

"You want to give a softer impression."

"Yes."

"Okay, leave it to me. I'll teach you while you do it. The Makita-style seal technique that will make a thousand friends."

"I want to know."

"Hey."

The faces of the two who were called turned towards Ibuki.

"Hi, Boss."

Makita has large shopping bags hanging in both hands. The contents of the bag are probably ingredients used in the store.

Ibara also carries a paper bag.

"Do they make you help with shopping?"

"Yes."

Ibara nodded disapprovingly.

Ibuki had a small smile at the corner of his mouth.

The path Ibuki has chosen is hard, but not lonely. He has quite a few companions.

The same goes for Ibara.

As the name suggests, Ibuki stands by the girl's side as he walks down a thorny path. He has comrades like Makita and "Ayaka Security".

Ibuki said, placing his hand on Ibara's head.

"That is also an important job for "Ayaka Security". I will help you."