



GROUND ZERO: FRAGMENTS

CHAPTER 8: WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS

TRANSLATION: NARU-KUN / K-PROJECT WORLD

That day, that time... the night before. Niki Fushimi was drunk in the entertainment district.

Shimohaneda Kabata is a city located on the southern edge of Tokyo, bordering Kanagawa Prefecture. If you go down one station, you will cross the Tama River and enter Kanagawa Prefecture.

"Excuse me for a moment."

The woman got up from the couch with a lazy attitude. With lipstick on her lips, she put a small cigarette in her mouth and lit it with the match that was on the table.

The man whose wife had been crying just now was standing in the bathroom. The man was Niki's partner, but all he knew was his name, "Sarashina". They approached him at the first bar and the conversation became animated. Niki, who was already drunk at the first bar, entered this shop when Sarashina gave him a ride.

If he was invited, he used to follow them without refusing. He wasn't trying to pry into the kind of place he was going, or whether the person he was talking to was trustworthy. A few years ago, he met Kisa at a party where someone asked him to come along.

After being born as a baby, humans seem to adapt to society by expanding the world towards themselves, parents and families, nurseries and schools in the process of forming their identities. In the process of growing up, Niki did not experience the "expansion of objects of interest". He did not arouse interest, emotion and therefore motivation in anything, including himself.

He could clearly recognize what he perceived with his five senses. To Niki, though, all of that was dry and unimportant.

Except for one thing that piqued his interest.

"Hey, client, is it true that you have a five-year-old boy? The client you brought in was talking about it earlier."

"Hmmm. That's right."

With a slurred response, Niki slid off the couch he was lying on to the floor. A high-end suit jacket and a fancy tie that Sarashina had taken off were hanging on the couch diagonally across from him.

Sitting on the floor he reached for the glass on the low table. Hesitantly, he shook the glass with his finger. The surrounding glasses were also caught and fell, and the marble table was wet with alcohol diluted with ice.

"Are you okay? I'll get you a new drink."

The guy immediately ran over and knelt by the table. He put the glasses on a tray.

"What will you do next?"

"I'll leave it to my brother."

"Then let's do something interesting."

He wore a dress shirt, a black tie, and a black vest with a boy's uniform, but he was a young man with hair dyed bright pink from the roots. In a nonchalant tone, he was holding a bottle of shochu and a bottle of beer in his left and right hands.

"How old were you when you had the child? You're still young, aren't you?"

"I was nineteen."

"That means you're in your twenty something years now."

"You're young."

The guy poured two types of alcohol into a glass with his skillful tricks.

"You're young too, aren't you?"

"I'm baby-faced. I've been in this industry for quite some time."

"Manato looks like this, but he's over thirty."

The woman who said that was in her mid-thirties, she was not young. Her long curly hair was luxuriously pinned up on top of her head.

The cabaret club on the outskirts of the city, where each table was separated by a U-shaped couch, was filled with vulgar talk. A stream of purple smoke rose from the yellowish illumination.

"I'm guessing he was given birth to by a random woman, you dumped her anyway. Client, that's what you seem to want to do."

"Ruriko-san is the one who was discarded in that situation. Yes, it's a way of drinking taught to me by a visitor from abroad."

The glass slid cleanly across the wet table and settled in Niki's hand.

"I have not abandoned her, I am well married and I love my wife. My wife, the president. Besides, my son is the most beautiful in the world."

He drank about half the glass in one go. The champagne of shochu and beer stirred in his brain and made him dizzy. He fell on the table with his head on the side.

"Ah... I hope to see you soon... my cute monkey..."

He dipped his cheeks into the puddle of alcohol on the table and muttered that with his tongue trailing.

"If you have such an important family, don't drink in a place like this and go home. I'm starting to want to go home and see my daughter."

"Ruriko-san is really preaching when it comes to children."

The woman's tone took on a serious preaching tone, while the boy's was flippant.

"It's still useless..."

"No, is there a reason you can't go home?"

"I might get bored if I see his face every day. Even the most interesting thing in the world might get bored me if I paid attention to it every day."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

He tried to tilt the glass with his cheek on the table, but his fingers were shaking. The liquid that didn't fit in his mouth wet his chin and dripped over the edge of the table.

"Client, are you taking medication? You are angry, right?"

"Drugs? He'll make you feel a million times better than that."

A month has passed since he saw Saruhiko's face. The inside of his body was dry. No matter how much alcohol he drank, he couldn't quench his thirst. His consciousness was hazy, his throat ached and his body was sending serious danger signals.

"I'll see the monkey after I have reached the limit of my withdrawal symptoms, so I'm going to climax... Seriously, I'm freaking out..."

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He woke up with a thud.

He felt a strong source of light and heat beyond his eyelids. Something other than the cold marble table touched his cheeks, something rough and hard.

When he opened my eyes, he was outside. He was forcibly grabbed by his collarbone and lifted up by the summer sky piercing high. Immediately after that, he was struck in quick succession by the sensation of floating and falling, as if he was being knocked down to the ground.

"Hmm... where am I...?"

The voice stuck in his throat was hoarse. When he tried to get up, his whole body cracked in pain. In particular, simply putting too much effort into his stomach caused severe pain as if he was holding an iron ball to his stomach.

It was the seat of a wooden bench that he was resting his cheek on. When he rubbed his face at the red stains on the wood, he could feel the coagulated blood sticking to his temples and the corners of his mouth.

He didn't even know where he took off his shoes.

A glass bottle was suddenly delivered from the side.

"I'm thirsty."

A man sitting in a row of benches said that bluntly. With a long beard that covered the lower half of his face, he looked like a bum, but only the jacket he wore over his shoulders was disproportionately good.

Niki reached for the bottle without hesitation. He looked at the label on the square bottle of whiskey and put his mouth on it.

"What is it? It's water."

He took a sip and groaned.

"Because I put water in the bottle I picked up. Let's add a few drops of sake."

On the tips of the homeless man's emaciated ankles, there were familiar sharp-toed leather shoes.

Niki looked down at his feet, which were only wearing socks, but without saying anything in particular, he placed them under the bench and sat back down.

Beyond the clear sky, heading south, for a moment, he saw some kind of light. The sun was shining elsewhere. It wasn't even the moon. Like the flame emitted by the lighter of a hot air balloon.

Without further thought, he purred and drank water.

The high-pitched voices of the children resounded in the sky. Children gather around children's games, such as slides and swings, and their mothers take care of them. Only the area around the bank with Niki and the homeless was avoided.

At night, it was a small park surrounded by trees in the middle of the city, which became a busy entertainment district. Next to the entrance facing the street, there is a public toilet and a phone booth with a green phone.

Last night, in the shade of the trees, he could see the multi-tenant building where the store was located. He appears to have fallen asleep in the park a stone's throw from the store. Tenant signs protrude from every floor of the reinforced concrete exterior wall, but the neon tubes that gave off a garish pink and purple glow last night are now dead in broad daylight. He didn't know if it was last night because his sense of time was gone.

"Ah, you really were here, Client."

A figure stood next to the bench with a calm voice.

He was wearing a hoodie and a black mask, but his pink hair peeked out from under the hood. It was the boy from the night before, Manato.

"I got a call from Ruriko on my pager saying you were sleeping here. I've been wondering since I closed up shop this morning. He was a weird guy, and he hit you a lot. Are you okay?"

Having said that, he looked like he was last night drinking at the store.

"Ruriko-san."

As Manato said that, a mother who was standing by the gym turned around.

Her long, curly hair from the night before was tied up in a simple bun, and her makeup was light, but she was the woman in the store last night.

Ruriko smiled at Manato, who waved his hand and waved back, then quickly turned her eyes back to the jungle gym. A girl who could be her daughter was climbing a jungle gym.

"Yeah, this. It's mostly empty, but just in case. I hope you're happy to come back with just a brand name wallet."

Manato opened the leather wallet and gave it to him.

As he looked at the wallet on his lap, the memory of last night vaguely revived due to its slow effect.

Sarashina didn't come back to the table like that. Looking at his accounting, he was billed 300,000. There were no credit cards or cash in his wallet. Sarashina disappeared after taking out the contents of Niki's wallet, leaving behind his jacket and his tie.

He recalled how a physically strong man dressed in black appeared from the back of the store, was beaten and kicked, and was thrown out of the store.

The homeless man was looking at Niki's wallet. All that was left was a phone card anyway. Niki tossed his wallet on the bench next to him.

"It's a gift for the water."

The wallet itself was worth a reasonable price. The homeless man quickly stuffed his wallet into his jacket pocket and brought their foreheads together like a hug. When he looked back at him, he wondered if it was also something that he threw away along with Niki, it was the jacket that Sarashina had left behind.

He also lost his mobile phone, but it never came back.

"Client, the shoes and accessories look expensive and you seemed to be doing drugs, so they must have been duped. Be careful who you go out with and what stores you go into."

"Don't do drugs."

"Are you kidding me? Did you just do that? You suddenly broke a beer bottle and hit a black suit. If you hadn't acted violently, you wouldn't have been hit so hard."

"Is that so?" His memory of that part had slipped. "Could have been fine."

Niki's childhood was manic. He was restless all the time, making loud noises and destroying everything he could find.

When he entered high school, he became very depressed.

He skipped high school and studied abroad. While studying abroad, he fell back into an extremely manic state, indulged in debauchery at the invitation of his fellow players, and stopped attending university lectures altogether. With no hope of graduating, he was expelled and taken back to Japan.

"Ah, did you want to die? Then, I understand."

"I don't feel like dying at all. I have a wife and a son who love me."

"I don't quite get it. I thought you were the kind of person who wanted to destroy everything, but you say you love your family."

He squinted at the dazzling light that filled the open air and took in the idyllic landscape of the park. A girl slowly climbing up a jungle gym was crouched in a place that was not very high. Ruriko encouraged her daughter who was crying and looking back.

Another boy smoothly overtook the girl and made it to the top with no problem.

"Mom! Look!"

The boy let go of his hands and proudly greeted his mother.

But, the jungle gym suddenly shook vertically.

The boy's body was thrown into the void without resistance. He heard the cry of his mother.

"Eh?"

Immediately after Manato was shocked, the tremor reached Niki and Manato's feet. It was a huge vertical swing, as if a giant grabbed the edge of the ground and rolled it up. The bum fell off the bench next door. Niki's butt also bounced off the bench seat.

"An earthquake?!"

Manato crouched down and gripped the edge of the bench.

The launch itself lasted less than five seconds. In that short period of time, the earth trembled and the iron jungle gym, slides, and swings were distorted into a shadowless figure. All the children were thrown from the playground equipment, and all the mothers around the playground equipment could not stand up and fell.

The children began to cry as if they were on fire.

"Gish..." The warped jungle gym made an eerie noise and tilted further.

"Ruriko! This way!"

Manato raised his voice. Ruriko's daughter clung to the bottom and luckily avoided being kicked out. Ruriko, who had been on her buttocks, stood up as if repelled, grabbed her daughter from both sides of her, and pulled her out of the jungle gym.

Behind Ruriko, who started running with her daughter on her chest, the jungle gym tilted at a fast pace. Immediately after Ruriko caught up with Niki and Manato and covered her daughter, it completely collapsed as rolled a large amount of sand in the park.

Ruriko raised her pale face and looked towards the park that had changed the peaceful landscape of the day.

"The earthquake just now...? I've never seen an earthquake like this before..."

The launch didn't come after the first, but the remnants of the tremor still crackled in the air.

The road outside began to roar with the sirens of ambulances and fire trucks. Trees surrounding the park had also snapped or fallen from their trunks. Buildings emitting black smoke and buildings with collapsed exterior walls could be seen beyond the crooked trees.

There were also cracks in the walls of the multi-tenant building where Manato's store was located. The cabaret club sign on the 7th floor came off the wall, collided with the consumer finance sign on the 6th floor and they both fell. The brand name product recycling store sign on the 5th floor was covered in snow. There was a sign for a ticket shop on the fourth floor.

"Mom, what is that?"

The daughter supported by Ruriko's chest pointed to the sky over her mother's shoulder.

Manato's eyes traced in that direction and reflected a red light.

"Wow. What is it?"

Manato moved his hand to his chin and murmured.

Niki slowly looked up as half of his buttocks had slid off the bench.

A gigantic object suddenly appeared in the void. In the southern sky, it was the direction where he could see the light that he mistook for a balloon burner. A pillar-shaped object engulfed in swirling flames connected the ground and the sky.

The clear blue summer sky reflected the color of the pillar and was eroded by the color of blood.

"What's that...?"

"Was it really an earthquake? It's like the end of the world."

In contrast to Ruriko's trembling voice, Manato's voice was stunned, but there was something lurking in his voice that seemed to anticipate something.

It seemed that the mobile phone was getting difficult to connect. People flocked to phone booths and the lines were growing fast.

"Yeah... it's the end of the world... oh..."

The homeless man sitting in front of a bench knelt while he looked at the southern sky.

"Oh, it is the wrath of God. God has judged. I hope the stupid humans perish!"

He picked up a bottle of whiskey, which was just water, and danced out into the middle of the park. With Sarashina's jacket and Niki's leather shoes. Spinning around like a girl in a fairy tale who can't take off her shoes.

The children cried when they saw the pillar of fire. The mothers were shouting the names of their children.

People were cursing because their phones couldn't connect. Many people were running to the phone booth in a hurry.

A man whose heart was beating at the beginning of something extraordinary. A scared woman. A madman who toasts and dances.

Niki stared at the various reactions of the people in the park with emotionless eyes.

There was also an ugly human pattern unfolding in front of him. A strange sight that rose beyond the sky. The tragedy that was occurring just below that sky.

Nothing aroused Niki's emotion.

There was nothing there to move Niki's emotions.

The ringtone began to play in the pocket of Manato's hoodie.

"Oh, manager... Yes. Yes. I'm safe here. Ruriko-san is close now. Yes. See you."

Manato calmly ended the exchange and hung up the phone as he ignored the damn queue at the phone booth.

"It seems like the PHS tone is more connected. I was lucky I haven't switched to a mobile phone yet."

"Lend it to me."

Niki grabbed Manato's wrist, who was holding a small stick-shaped mobile device. Manato was slightly surprised by the sudden movement.

"Go ahead. Do you want to contact your family?"

He handed it to him.

He entered a phone number by pressing the number pad on a mobile device that fits in one hand with the thumb. Tsu, tsu, tsu, after an inorganic sound wandered looking for the destination for a while, the calling sound began to sound safely.

"Yes. It's Fushimi."

When the call was cut off, a professional female voice answered.

"Kisa-san. Where is the monkey today?"

There was a moment of surprise when Niki suddenly spoke, and then a high-pitched voice returned.

"I don't know. It's Sunday, so he's not home. I'm going to board now, so I'll hang up. Wait a minute. What was that? Aren't you coming back?"

Kisa's voice grew distant, and he could hear the rapid conversation back and forth. Kisa's voice came back on the line with a sense of bewilderment and tension.

"Something happened in eastern Japan. Thanks to you, I'm stuck here."

"Kisa-san, aren't you in Tokyo?"

"I'm going to Los Angeles from Kansai airport via Seoul, but today's work has been cancelled. Where are you now?"

"By the way, what about the monkey? Is he really home?"

"I'll check with Nishida-san. Should I call this phone back? I've been waiting. I'll call you back in five minutes."

The call was cut off. The line at the phone booth continued to grow, but the Manato PHS rang within a quarter of an hour. During that time, Kisa collected as much information as she could about the disasters that had occurred in eastern Japan.

A large explosion occurred somewhere in Kanagawa, and an earthquake was observed over a wide area of eastern Japan. It was reported that the entire Kanagawa area could be devastated.

According to the housekeeper, the earthquake was felt around Tsubakimon's house, but it wasn't severe enough. She saw Saruhiko in the house fifteen minutes before the earthquake occurred, but she noticed that he had run away from the house about five minutes before the earthquake occurred. He must have gone for a walk in silence as usual, and the housekeeper did not rush to find him, thinking that he was a smart boy and that he would come home alone.

"A five-year-old boy doesn't go far in fifteen minutes. At least he wouldn't have been in a place where the damage was so bad. However, Nishida-san is worried about his house, so he will go out today from work."

"I'm going home, I..."

"Are you worried about that child? I made arrangements with the dispatch company to send a representative immediately, and the area around Camellia Gate is safe. The transportation network is now paralyzed. I can't go home soon. It would be foolish that you suffer a secondary disaster. In the event of a disaster, the smartest thing to do is not to run blindly home."

"No way!"

Niki suddenly screamed.

The voice organizing the correct arguments on the phone suddenly stopped.

"I'm going home. I have to see the monkey's face."

Kisa hung up before he could get his voice back.

"Are you going home? In a way, you're a father."

Manato, who received the PHS, shrugged between admiration and boredom.

"It's obvious. Anyone who becomes a father is like that." Ruriko looked at Manato and said to Niki, "Come back whenever you feel like it."

"Well, I don't know if I can continue with the business."

Manato put his hand to his forehead and looked out of the park.

The building in question was in a partially destroyed state. Signs on every floor had collapsed and most of the exterior walls had collapsed, exposing the steel frame.

"It's my rule of thumb, but I've never met a person as a customer "again". Even if you hear the news, he's already dead. Goodbye, take care of yourself and go home. If possible, may you be in good health for forever."

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When he started walking in the direction of Camellia Gate, the railway was at a standstill and he couldn't even hail a taxi. The city was full of people acting the exact opposite of what Kisa called "intelligent behavior".

Eventually, the railways in Tokyo seemed to be restored, but he kept walking and in the end it took six hours to get to his house.

He was dizzy because he had only drunk the water the bum gave him six hours ago. He fell against the heavy door and managed to make a hole and roll inside.

He lifted his head as he knelt down. The dim light from the chandelier that did not reach the ground dimly illuminated the entrance hall of the atrium.

As he traced the stairs in front of him with his gaze, he saw a small figure sitting on the edge of the bottom step in a compact residence.

Nikki got up slowly.

The figure was the first to notice that Niki had returned home. The usual reaction used to be to run away, but this time he didn't run away and he was looking at him with round eyes behind the tortoiseshell glasses because of the smallness of his face.

"Are you lonely, monkey? What are you waiting for? Why are you lonely?"

"...Frankenstein."

Saruhiko opened his mouth vaguely.

"Hmm? What did you say?"

"Could it be that you're dead...? Did you die from an explosion...?"

"Eh?"

Saruhiko's eyes turned to Niki's feet.

Those were the feet that had been walking on the asphalt for six hours without shoes. His socks were torn and his toes were badly scraped and bleeding. The hem of his leather pants was also frayed. He still had blood on his temples because he hadn't washed his face since he was beaten in the store last night, and his clothes were a little dirty.

Frankenstein, he agreed with that. He didn't know where Saruhiko got that knowledge at that age.

"Oh, yeah. There was a big explosion today, right? It shook everything. Were you scared?"

Saruhiko shook his head once.

"No way."

"Did you see the huge pillar of fire? Didn't you get scared?"

"I could see it. It didn't scare me at all."

"I see. I was very close to the explosion. So, as the great monkey detective deduced, I died."

Niki spread her hands over his head and showed himself.

"Really...? Did you really die?"

"Oh, so I'll be going to the afterlife soon. Well, in sixty seconds."

Saruhiko's eyes widened. The light from the finely crafted chandelier shone brightly in his eyes. The color of spongy blood inhabited his pale cheeks.

It was clear that the light of hope had shone in Saruhiko's world.

"I came to see the monkey before I went to the other world. So please show me your face up close one last time."

Nikki turned around. Saruhiko hesitated a bit and covered his lips.

"Ok. No, I'm about to disappear. Look, my hand is transparent. You can see it, right?"

Saruhiko showed interest and lifted his hips off the stairs.

"I'm about to disappear! Hey, let's hurry up!"

He fixed his gaze on Niki's outstretched hand, pulled on his socks, grabbed the railing, and lowered himself closer to him. He stopped at the same height as Niki, who was waiting below, and grabbed Niki's thumb and little finger with both hands.

Immediately, his face changed.

Gyu-gyu, he squeezed him a few times to make sure he was real. "Understanding" spread across Saruhiko's face. His face, which had been glowing with hope for a moment, suddenly stiffened and repainted with despair.

"You're not dead!"

Saruhiko let out a hoarse cry and released Niki's chest. The recoil made his socks slip and he landed on the steps behind him. Niki didn't resist and fell backwards into the hall.

"Gyaahahahahahaha! No way! I'm sorry! I was kidding!"

Loud laughter echoed from the vaulted ceiling.

He came home feeling a bit regretful for not having "prepared" anything for that day, but he suddenly thought about it. Anything to scare, annoy or despair the cutest monkey in the world.

However, today seems to have been the best day to return. It was worth waiting until today to "give up the monkey" until he fell into the final stage of withdrawal symptoms.

At the edge of his field of vision, Saruhiko scrambled up the stairs on his back and escaped to the second floor. He couldn't help but laugh at how unnecessarily funny he was.

"Die, die! I'll die laughing! Ahahahahahahaha!"

On July 11, 1999, Niki Fushimi experienced an unprecedented disaster that affected the entire Kanagawa prefecture, outside the disaster area. But that in itself did not arouse any emotion in Niki, nor did it have any effect on him.

The man lived without mixing with the ups and downs of destiny that secretly moved the Dresden Slate.