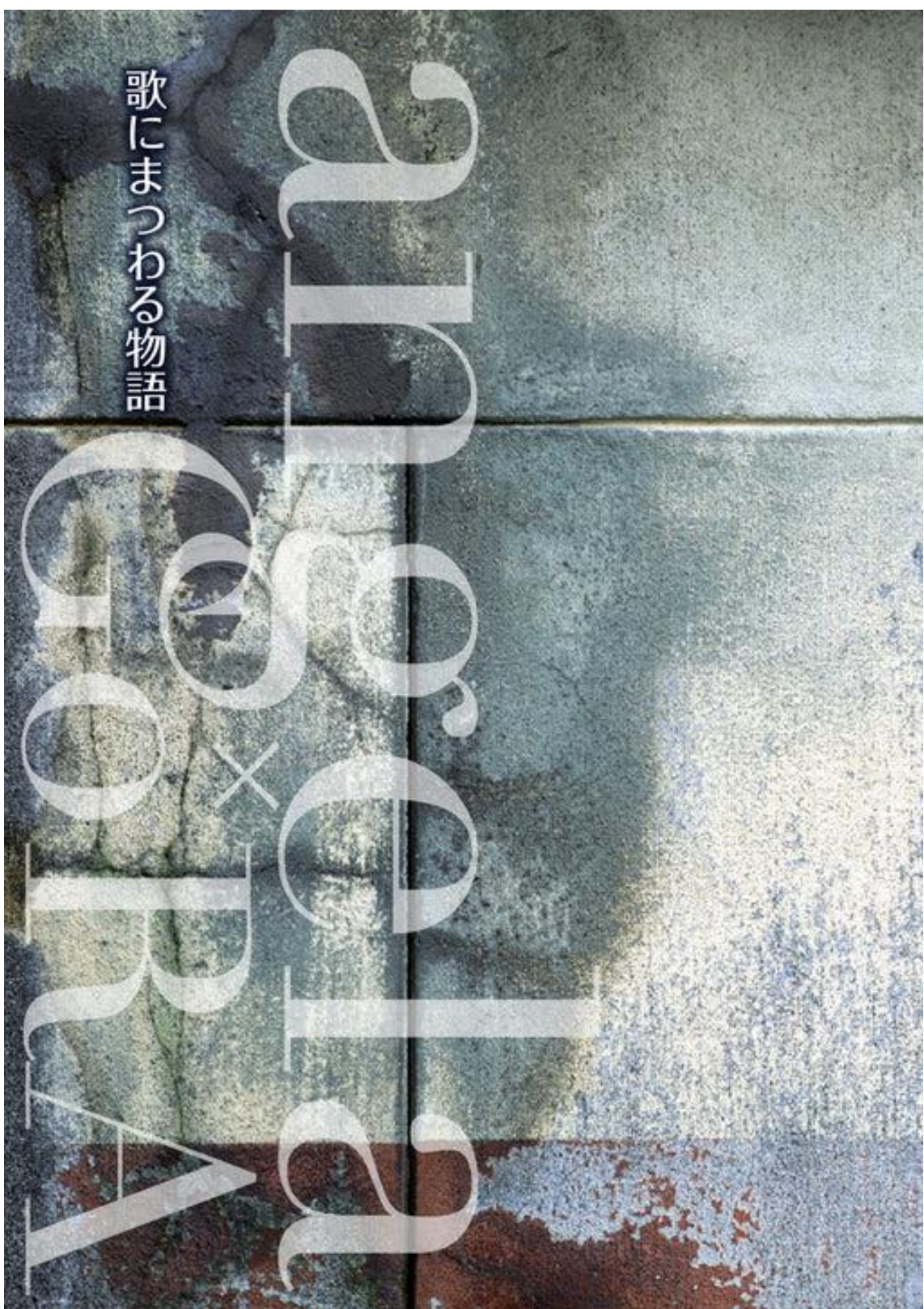


歌にまつわる物語



ANGELA X GORA

TRANSLATION: NARU-KUN
RAWS: RIDIA

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CHAPTER 1: KINGS (RAIRAKU REI)

The boy floated in the sky above wintery Gakuen Island.

Hovering at the same height as the four Swords of Damocles, side by side in the snowy sky, the boy, with his pale golden hair blowing in the wind, looked like a small child under ten years old, but in reality he was ageless. He lacked body and substance, and no one could see him.

The boy was the embodiment of the power originating from the Slate that granted the Kings their power.

"Prayers are swirling.", the boy murmured clearly.

Down below, on Academy Island, several Kings were fighting. With the "Colorless King" at the center of the chaos, the "Red King" and the "Blue King" clashed, and the "Silver King" ran back and forth trying to resolve things.

Furthermore, one could feel that the feelings of the absent Kings were also directed strongly toward this land.

"Everyone yearns for something and strives for it. They pursue it, they hoard it, so strongly that they destroy it with their own hands."

The boy's voice conveys no emotion. He doesn't understand human feelings. He simply accepts everything and continues watching.

He simply continues watching as people wield all kinds of feelings (ambition, cause, impulse, dream, or love) with all their might, and they collide with each other.

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The Third King, the "Red King", leaps forward as if running freely through the desert.

Red flames float through the snow.

Suoh Mikoto brandishes his fist, imbued with red-hot power. The fist, hot enough to melt iron, is deflected by Munakata's saber, which emits a cold blue light.

A smile spreads across Suoh's lips.

He had come this far with anger boiling inside him, and even though there was another enemy, he used his power without restraint and faced Munakata, which brought him indescribable joy.

At the same time as he felt the refreshing sensation of using his full strength, he felt something inside him slowly burning away. The cracks on the sword above his head were widening. The time limit was approaching.

"How disgusting."

Munakata replaced his saber and spat it out with a tone of disgust.

"You know how you are, but what a face you're making."

Munakata's tone, usually both polite and rude, cracked. Suoh wasn't aware of the expression on his face, but he sensed it must be an angry expression.

The corners of Suoh's lips curved upward. A mixture of anger and joy reminded him of the first time he fought Munakata.

"Sorry for the annoyed expression. But anyway, this is the end." Munakata's cheeks twitched slightly at Suoh's words.

"Suoh, you're..."

Without letting anyone finish, Suoh kicked the snowy ground. He approached Munakata, releasing the magmatic heat from his body. He had been forced to control and suppress it, but now, in that moment, he was free to run as he pleased.

Munakata's saber caught and deflected Suoh's scorching heat. The sword closed in on Suoh. He raised his leg and kicked the approaching blade. The mounting pressure spilled out of his body, erupting like a pillar of fire. But amidst it all, Munakata remained calm and unfazed. Suoh struck out with his flaming fists. The way Munakata dealt with it without hesitation makes it all the more amusing.

The footsteps of destruction can be heard.

The footsteps grow louder each time Suoh uses his power without reservation.

It's not that he doesn't feel bad, but Suoh has already made his decision.

He will follow that path to the end.

Settling scores, overcoming frustration, and reaching the end.

With Munakata standing in his way, he gives himself one last powerful run.

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The Fourth King, the "Blue King", calmly swung his sword, despite his frustration and impatience.

The blue power of control enveloped the blade and cut through the flames.

Munakata Reisi could clearly feel the disturbance in Suoh's power as they clashed.

Suoh had used too much power, beyond the critical point. The King's power was on the verge of spiraling out of control, and the crimson sword raised above his head was accelerating its collapse.

Suoh himself had a refreshing smile on his face, furious like a beast released from its cage, but he was breathing heavily. He was burning with his own heat. In fact, black burns spread across Suoh's arms.

In truth, this fight should have ended at that moment. If he forced Suoh to use any more of his strength, his sword would fall. However, if Munakata surrendered, Suoh would go and kill the "Colorless King". In his current state, there was no way he could bear the burden of killing a King.

Munakata's frustration and irritation grew.

Why is this man like this? The anger and frustration he had felt many times since meeting him stirred Munakata's heart.

From the beginning, he had thought he was an incomprehensible man.

A man who failed to fulfill his duties as king and only lived as he pleased.

He recognized that it was based on this man's own beliefs. He recognized it, but he couldn't understand it. He had gone so far without understanding him.

But now, Munakata felt so frustrated at not being able to understand Suoh that his head tingled.

"Why, Suoh? Why would you choose ruin? There must be another way!"

Suoh only smiled in response to Munakata's voice.

Munakata's words didn't reach Suoh. Suoh also understood his reasoning, but he showed no understanding.

Dodging Suoh's fists, brandishing his sword, and continuing the fight as if it were a fierce dance, Munakata continued to think.

A way to save that fool.

Although he knew that technique was no longer available, he tried to keep thinking until that moment came without giving up.

Suoh's fist grazed Munakata's jaw. His head jerked, and he lost his balance. Immediately, he precisely calculated the opening he had created, read the trajectory of Suoh's attack, and swung his sword. Their forces collided, throwing their bodies into the air. Suoh landed softly, while Munakata landed a short distance away, kneeling.

"Don't get distracted.", Suoh said, gently reprimanding Munakata, who was still thinking.

Munakata clicked his tongue loudly, revealing his emotions, something he normally doesn't do.

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The Fifth King, the "Green King", watched the foundations of his dream intently.

The Sixth King, the "Gray King", silently watched the profile of the "Green King".

There are green eyes everywhere.

Nagare projected images captured by the eyes observing the outside world from his stationary position (the scattered security cameras, the cameras on people's PDAs, and the eyes of his clansman) on a holographic screen. They were all real-time images of the events unfolding on Gakuen Island. Nagare's large eyes, watching them, shone brightly, reflecting the light from the screen.

Iwafune Tenkei gulped down a bottle of hard liquor to hide his gray feelings.

"...How's everything going?"

"The battle between the "Red King" and the "Blue King" is evenly matched. It's a fierce battle, but it's at a stalemate. It's a confrontation between the "Red King", whose goal is to defeat the "Colorless King", and the "Blue King", who is trying to prevent the Fall of Red Damocles, so it's only natural... The one who will move the situation will be the "Silver King"."

Iwafune stares at Nagare's pale cheek. Another King, a child he himself had raised and taken in, walking a path he'd never imagined.

"Hey, Nagare. Do you think the Red Sword of Damocles will fall?"

"It will."

Nagare said this mercilessly.

Although he knew it, deep in Iwafune's chest, a dull ache, like an old wound, tormented him.

"The "Red King" is now in a place of no return. The sword will fall. However, unlike Kagutsu, the "Blue King" will prevent a catastrophe."

"That's right..."

"Iwa-san."

Nagare called after him, his voice impassive.

"I won't take your feelings into account, Iwa-san. But I understand that this situation with the Slate is likely difficult for you. You don't have to watch from my side."

"No."

Iwafune shook his head with a bitter smile.

"I can't look away."

It was he who raised Nagare and decided to help him on his path.

Unlike him, who was trapped in an unchanging past, Nagare dreams of changing the world even with irreparable wounds, and moves forward without hesitation toward an uncertain future.

The life of Iwafune Tenkei continued to watch over him.

Iwafune placed his hand on Nagare's slender shoulder.

"I'm watching you, all the time."

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The Second King of Kings, the "Golden King", pondered his friend's voice.

Gakuen Island couldn't be seen from the top floor of the Golden Tower.

Kokujoji Daikaku, however, watched from between the Slate toward the island.

He thought of his old friend's voice he had heard on the phone earlier. Although the voice belonged to a boy he didn't know, having entered another person's body, his manner of speaking and the personality he emanated were undoubtedly those of a man Kokujoji knew.

"He was alive and had descended to earth. I see..."

He muttered softly.

Seeing Weissmann's body, he had a premonition that he was somewhere else. Therefore, he preserved it carefully, but he wasn't sure. Speaking with him and confirming his life and will, Kokujoji felt a chill. It was a chill he hadn't felt in a long time.

Kokujoji narrowed his eyes, deepening the wrinkles around them.

Kokujoji can't get involved in the incidents occurring on Gakuen Island. One reason is that his lifespan is nearing its end, and another is that, due to the nature of the Shrine of the "Golden King", which grants strengthening benefits to all supernatural beings, if he goes to a place where kings with opposing ideologies gather, there's a high probability that the situation will escalate and worsen. Therefore, although he's considered the strongest and greatest "King", he can't act easily in crucial situations.

Even now, he hasn't been able to go see his old friend who has returned.

"This is farewell, Lieutenant."

"Are you going to run away, Weissmann?"

He recalled the conversation he'd had that day when he'd seen him off, desperately flying into the sky.

"I will become the ideal "King". So just watch from there."

He remembered the promise from that day, when Weissmann's airship flew over Japan.

"Thank you. But this time it's also goodbye."

He remembered his parting words today as he landed again.

A man who has been on the run for half a century has decided to risk his life to face the situation before him. His wounds may not have healed, but he has no intention of comforting them. He has no intention of letting anyone know of the injuries he has suffered.

He carries with him the dream he shared with Weissmann and the others. He returned to this country, a defeated nation, with the "Slate", and has lived through it all until today. Those days seem long, but also like the blink of an eye.

"Weissmann, show me the miracle you desire."

Kokujoji silently confided his thoughts to his old friend, who is beyond his reach.

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The Seventh King, the "Colorless King", had become a captive soul.

His mind, which had once been colorless and transparent, was now a mixture of all kinds of colors, murky and black.

"Let me go, stop me! I won't let you...!"

"No, no! Help me!"

"Please, Shiro, help me..."

"Remember this, I'm going to kill you!"

The personalities he had absorbed so far were screaming at him.

He had tried to take over the "Silver King". He had been lured by an appearance of vulnerability, and was trapped within his body in a cage created by the "Silver King's" immutable power. He had underestimated him. He was an insignificant man, so it shouldn't be difficult to exploit his mind.

The soul of the "Colorless King" writhes and screams.

The "Silver King" said he felt sorry for the "Colorless King". He said he had absorbed too many personalities and that his ego was on the verge of collapse.

It wasn't pity, the soul of the "Colorless King" screamed. He will absorb more and more people and contain the world within himself. He will absorb all the Kings and become the single strongest King.

The "Silver King" walked away with the soul of the "Colorless King" sealed within him.

"Where are you going?!"

The cry of the soul of the "Colorless King" found an answer.

"To a place where I can defeat you. With my power, I can only keep you captive."

"Weissmann! Why do you stand in my way?!"

"Because there is something I want to protect."

"What can you protect? You left everything and ran away!"

"That's right. I ran away. I abandoned my broken dreams and fled. But I rediscovered something important. Even though I can't make everyone happy... I've decided to fight this time to protect those I care about."

Because he was inside the "Silver King", he could feel his emotions. His warm, unwavering feelings for his loved ones. It was frustrating.

The "Colorless King" struggled with all his might to escape the silver power vessel. With the colorless power that should be able to interfere with the "King", he desperately struggled to destroy the silver's immutability.

The countless voices of the humans he had absorbed echoed, attacking like great waves. The intense reverberations shook him. The "Colorless King" gritted his teeth.

"Why is Weissmann, who only has a few strangers and weak ties, so warm and unwavering, even though there are so many people inside me?"

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The First King, the "Silver King", was heading toward his immutable end.

Decades had passed since he had seen his own silver sword.

Shiro, Yashiro Isana, Adolf K. Weissmann, gazed at the silver Sword of Damocles. The sword was pointed downward, as if trying to assess Shiro's merits and demerits.

Right now, the soul of the "Colorless King" is within Shiro.

He has finally captured the soul of the "King" who has traveled through countless human bodies, wounding, killing, and wreaking havoc in his ambition to become the strongest "King".

But he, too, is a victim of what Weissmann has started.

The "Colorless King" was unleashed within Shiro's body. If he let his guard down, the power sealing him would break and erode. He needed to resolve this as soon as possible.

Resolve it. In other words, he wanted the "Colorless King" to die with him.

If he had been the person he was a while ago, perhaps he wouldn't have been so moved by this situation. Because it was an existence that only continued to stare at the ground, his emotions frozen.

But then he fell to the ground and found himself in the midst of the lives of the people he had only observed from above. He had left everything behind, but now he has forged new connections.

The bonds we form can make us stronger or weaker. Right now, he is afraid of dying and letting others die.

Shiro smiled slightly as he walked through the snowy Gakuen Island. He remembered the peaceful days that seemed fleeting.

Everyone laughed and shared their meals with him.

Kukuri spoke to him cheerfully and was very considerate.

Neko was always by his side and showed him her pure affection.

Kuro helped him and became his clanmate, his friend.

No one on Gakuen Island remembers Shiro anymore. After exhausting all her powers, Neko has been left in the care of the Red Clan. He told Kuro, pointedly and coldly, that everyone except the "King" is a hindrance.

But he wants to stay connected. ...No.

"Fare you well, Weissmann."

He remembered his old friend's voice telling him that in Weissmann's native language.

They were connected. They were connected even when he wandered through the sky with a lonely gaze.

His dear friend carried with him the dream of the "Slate" that he, Weissmann, and Claudia had seen together, and he continued to search for a longed-for miracle.

Never again could he seem alone, nor a mere spectator.

Shiro kicked the ground. Silver power enveloped his body, blocking gravity and lifting him into the air.

He flew to where the "Red King" and the "Blue King" were fighting fiercely, beneath the red and blue Swords of Damocles, and descended with a single blow.

When the fist, which burst into red flames, and the sword controlled by blue crystals collided, Shiro landed.

He stopped the red fist with a hand containing immutable power, and the blue sword with a Japanese umbrella that also contained immutable power.

The "Red King" and the "Blue King" looked somewhat surprised. Shiro called out to the "Red King".

"This is the one you're looking for, right?"

He slightly reduced the power to seal the "Colorless King's" soul and, using Shiro's body, shouted,

"Hey! What are you thinking? Stop! Stop! Stop!"

Once again, he put all his strength into holding the "Colorless King". His breathing was ragged. He began to sweat. He couldn't hold on much longer.

The four Kings gathered in the same place. Those who didn't share the same path would each pursue their own desires.

"Quickly!", Shiro said.

"Only a "King" can kill another "King"."

Now is the time for the Kings to show off their skills.

CHAPTER 2: DIFFERENT COLORS (TAKAHASHI YASHICHIROU)

A "CLOSED" sign hangs on the door of the HOMRA Bar.

The once mighty headquarters of the Red Clan now seems to have lost its presence in the dim light of dusk, almost merging with the cityscape.

"Phew!"

Someone who had seen the scene so many times it could be said to be the same sighed in boredom. It was Mishakuji Yukari, a member of the green "Jungle" Clan, sitting on a nearby rooftop.

The early winter wind was neither cold nor warm, nor strong enough.

His breath felt half-hearted, neither burning nor icy, and it was uninteresting.

"The boredom that reigns here is a shame for those who aspire to greatness."

He whispered to himself.

Although he felt dissatisfied because it wasn't enough, because it wasn't interesting, he liked knowing that it was imbued with a firm sense of aesthetics.

A voice completely opposite his own, but one that still sounds calm even after being digitally processed, rises from the ground.

"You've chosen this place as a meeting point again. I want you to heed my warning."

It was Hirasaka Douhan, also from the Green Clan, dressed as a ninja.

Her voice was calm, but it was filled with blatant accusation. In fact, what she was saying was reasonable, and meeting so close to the enemy clan's headquarters was extremely dangerous.

Even though that red clan, "Homura", is practically on the verge of collapse.

Mishakuji ignores these circumstances.

"You're being overly cautious. What can they do now?"

He has complete confidence that he can emerge unscathed from any dangerous situation.

The reason such an attitude doesn't seem "arrogant" is his dignity, which makes others feel that his confidence is genuine... but Mishakuji forces himself to ignore it.

"When a powerful and self-confident person drags them down, ordinary people get nowhere."

He said as if trying to push her away.

"That's not what I meant. In any case, showing no signs of activity should have been the top priority for everyone in "Jungle". From now on, I want you to deliver information to the place I specify."

"There's no other option."

To begin with, it wasn't a significant action; she simply called him directly to the monitoring station because it was too complicated to find a place to meet. Mishakuji immediately agreed. They moved on to the main topic.

"So, what are the results of this investigation?"

"First of all, regarding the Red Clan, "Homura", there have been no significant changes in the whereabouts of the core members. Including the fact that there is one person missing."

"Ah, I see."

Mishakuji snorted at the results of the investigation, which were as warm and dull as ever.

Last winter, Suoh Mikoto, the "Red King", who controlled the area with his overwhelming power, died.

Since then, the members of the Red Clan, now servants without a king, have become extremely sluggish in their activities. In particular, the disappearance of the number two, who was the de facto leader of both Bar HOMRA and the clan, led most people to abandon the group. Bar HOMRA, the source of violence and fear that protected Shizume, is now nothing more than a closed shop that blends into the cityscape.

"About that missing person...", Mishakuji said nonchalantly to surprise his interlocutor.

"I found him at Nagare-chan's house."

"Where is he?"

Douhan asked reflexively, and then understood what the other person meant, but it was too much work to point it out, so he let the conversation flow.

Mishakuji took this attitude as a reward for playing a little game and answered with satisfaction.

"He's investigating in Dresden, far, far away, across the sea. It seems it took us so long to find him because the Blue Clan hid his travels."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing for now. It would be bad if it caused a big stir and attracted the attention of the international community, so let's leave it alone as long as it doesn't get in our way."

"In other words, there's no need to consider the intervention of the number two in the execution of the next plan."

Douhan calmly commented on the increased success rate.

"That's right. The Blue Clan will be able to judge the "King's Killing Charge" to a certain extent by their reaction to the execution... The situation is finally reaching a critical point."

The entire Mishakuji corps is eagerly awaiting the battle.

But...

(Even if that's the case...)

Douhan was puzzled. She asked while gathering information.

"You said you decided to ask me to investigate on your own. Why do you still distrust the Red Clan, that you don't believe they can act correctly in the face of the dramatic changes we've caused?"

"That's true. But..."

After Mishakuji's quick reply, she began to gather her thoughts, trying to translate her intuition into dramatic words.

For Mishakuji, this was surprising. It was impossible for that man to miscalculate the magnitude of the battle. Was there still anything left in that crumbling clan to give him pause?

After a few seconds, Mishakuji began to speak in a tone as if reciting a poem.

"It's true that right now there's only one girl left in the tent who can't let go of the days of fun. The girl with the strongest power has no fighting power. The other clan members are scattered, and number two is far away at sea. There's no dangerous "King" drawn to ruin, nor any beast tamer to act as a mediator in this world."

After carefully listing the miserable scenes, he suddenly laughed.

"But they're a fire, as they call themselves. It only seems quiet now because there's no firewood. When they run into something "burning", the buried fire can turn back into a raging blaze. That's probably why I'm on my guard."

That smile that spread across his face wasn't a relaxed expression of nonchalance.

It was the greed of a strong man, yearning for those who would stand up to him.

(I can't keep up.)

Hiding her fear and astonishment behind her mask, Douhan began finishing the remaining work.

"It's another investigation request, but it seems that people trying to deliberately stir up trouble have appeared again. This time, not only are they armed, but they've even hired a Class B agent."

"Ah, I see."

Mishakuji replied with a murderous smile.

Douhan told him the details, determined not to get involved in anything further.

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The few streetlights cast the silhouettes of desolate buildings into the night.

The side streets near Shizume are deserted, and due to their narrowness, no cars can be seen.

A sudden, loud roar breaks the gloomy silence.

It wasn't the entrance. A ten-story gate with one or two lights burning in the windows slammed open.

It wasn't the entrance.

It was a door leading down from the roof.

The sturdy iron plate rolled down the stairs, almost in a U-shape. The noise was too loud to be considered afterglow, waking everyone in the building.

The person who kicked it down slowly lost his graceful figure with his legs raised and entered.

"You're in the way."

Saying that, he smoothly drew his beloved sword, "Ayamachi", from behind his back.

The commotion downstairs intensified, and the stairwell lights, which had been off, instantly came on.

"What? Where's it from?"

"Upstairs!"

"Wake up, a murderer!"

"Gun, quick!"

Only hoarse voices could be heard from downstairs, anxious and panicked.

"That doesn't sound very appealing, but..."

Finally, he encountered the first person on the stair landing.

"Eh?"

The tough-looking man, who looked like a real thief, stepped back in shock, but then remembered what he was holding and pointed it at him. It was a new pistol; he didn't know where he'd gotten it.

"Oh? So things like this keep coming to the Shizume area."

"Who the hell do you think you are?!"

Ignoring the roaring man, Mishakuji muttered something to his absent master.

"I can't believe we can't catch these rebels without Douhan-chan's on-site investigation, not through our distribution routes... I suppose you're still not clear on that, Nagare-chan."

"What are you muttering?"

Mishakuji casually approached him and struck him down.

Before he went downstairs, four or five people crowded the stairs. Seeing their companions lying on the floor like pieces of meat, they all became enraged, or rather, mad.

"You bastard!"

"How dare you do that!"

The guns in their hands spewed flames, gunshots, and bullets.

Mishakuji gracefully dodged the storm of murderous intent and descended the stairs with minimal movement.

With a graceful dance, his steps were light, and he approached like a henchman of death.

Everyone was bound by fear, and it was too late to escape the fatal distance.

The knight passed through the middle of the group.

By the time he realized it, they had all been destroyed.

"Your level of training is declining. I'd say you're like a local gangster who was hunted by the Red Clan, heard rumors of their downfall, and returned for revenge."

Mishakuji gave him a strict assessment.

"You are a supernatural being after all!"

"You're from 'Homura', right?"

From the end of the corridor, a bullet whizzed by, along with a comment that seemed belated and a mistaken assumption.

Of course, Mishakuji didn't respond.

He carefully dodged it and said only what he wanted to say.

"Before I kill them all, hurry up and send the Strain you hired."

As he said that, he noticed a change in the expressions of the yakuza watching closely.

The hidden joy that is characteristic of those who deceive.

The carelessness that arises when they are certain of victory.

(Where is it coming from?)

The mortar floor bulged and exploded beneath Mishakuji's feet, and he immediately searched for any sign. Flames burst from the cracks, instantly reducing the surrounding combustibles to ash, including those who had been slashed.

"Hehehehe...!"

A burly figure crawled toward the center of the raging flames.

"Everything's pulverized. That's all this 'Bomber' can do, hehe."

The self-proclaimed "Bomber" observed his achievements with satisfaction.

Half the stairs had collapsed, and embers projected flickers of light in the darkness here and there.

"You're going too far, Bomber!"

The Yakuza shouted from a distance, avoiding the flames.

"If we hesitate, reinforcements from "Homura" might come, so let's quickly switch to Yasa!"

The "Bomber" laughed again to dispel that fear.

"Ha, if reinforcements come, then annihilate them too. If Yatagarasu and the guy with glasses are among them, even better. I'll pay off a long-standing debt..."

"That information is quite old. I wonder if they were driven out of Shizume a long time ago."

"Eh?!"

The "Bomber" turned around and stared wide-eyed at the initiator of the conversation, as if it were a matter of course.

At the bottom of the collapsed stairs, in a corner unnaturally spared from the collapse, Mishakuji stood calmly.

"That's impossible! How the hell did you escape my bomb?!"

"How?"

A casual word answered a serious question.

"I cut it."

"Don't mess with me!"

The "Bomber" screamed and exerted his supernatural power.

A mass of flames erupted from his outstretched palm.

The flames, unstable in both color and shape, were approaching Mishakuji.

(I see. It's a force field that seals thermal energy... so the unstable control has the side effect of increasing its power.)

After seeing the moment it activated, Mishakuji immediately perceived all its characteristics. He also sneered, in a frank assessment.

(What a neglected hidden talent!)

He smirked and swung "Ayamachi" upward, slashing straight ahead to make it look as conspicuous as possible.

The unstable mass of energy split in two with a single, decisive slash.

Flames split left and right, veering to either side of Mishakuji and exploding behind him.

The handsome swordsman, with a flame on his back, said,

"These fireworks that only look like this won't reach a true clan member."

The proper advice didn't reach the "bomber, who trembled in fear.

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"You're diligent too."

That was the comment of the "Gray King", Iwafune Tenkei, after hearing the whole story.

The report from the Green Clan base, commonly known as the "Secret Base", has provoked three distinct reactions. Adding the bird makes four.

Iwafune, upon opening the can, takes the report as a heroic tale. His lightheartedness toward Mishakuji, whom he simply offers more snacks and a drink, is actually a sign of trust in Mishakuji, who believes he "won't make a mistake".

"How many times have you secretly taken care of the bad guys who were going to attack the weakened Red Clan? You're such a loyal member of the Clan that you could even get a dozen bottles of good sake at that store."

As he said this, he took a few gulps of the cheap sake on sale.

In contrast, Gojo Sukuna was very angry.

"More importantly, even though Nagare has given you permission, you're acting too independently! You're using Hirasaka, and you're the only one being unfair!"

His hand remains hidden until he begins to act seriously, and he's treated like a secret weapon, so to speak, and although powerful, he's still not allowed to move freely. They're both top Jungle players, but the current situation, where only Mishakuji can run around freely, isn't funny.

"I'm trying to stem the suffocation."

He probably didn't know it, but he complained like a child, pouting.

Without trying to appease him, the "Green King", Hisui Nagare, thought calmly.

"So this is the fifth case. I agree with the idea of eliminating uncertainties before executing the plan, but this is a frequency that could lead "Scepter 4" to suspect your true intentions."

Sitting in a wheelchair, he operates the device while still strapped in, and several panels float in the air. A list of the people Mishakuji has secretly eliminated so far scrolls across the map surrounding HOMRA Bar. It's too extensive to be called a "decent" list.

"A separate mission is being prepared to test the strength of the "Blue King". Let's not provoke him unnecessarily for now. Until the plan is put into action, military intervention is prohibited except in emergencies. Is that okay with you, Yukari?"

"As you wish."

If it was an order from his master, Mishakuji had no objection. He bowed exaggeratedly and sat down on his usual bench.

Kotosaka, the parrot, flew above him, yelling.

"Yukari Abarerno, Kinshi Kinshi."

"Hehe, they're scolding you."

Sukuna joined in and provoked him.

Iwafune, swallowing it, asked the question he'd been pondering.

"Anyway, why do you have to go to such lengths? I mean, the "Red Lady" is part of the plan and she needs to be protected, but it's just for fun."

"There's no way Yukari has any other reason than wanting to cause a rude stir."

Sukuna joined in the trend and added a word.

It may have seemed like a rude comment, but it actually hit the nail on the head.

"That's the most important thing."

Mishakuji nodded unabashedly. Then he added,

"But there's an equally important reason."

"Really? What's that about?"

Iwafune was curious about Mishakuji's will to fight and the "reason that's as big as his".

Both Sukuna and Nagare were intrigued and awaited an answer.

Mishakuji's gaze shifted to "Ayamachi" who was leaning next to him.

"If it's a fight where your life is at stake, I want it to be more beautiful."

He replied with words that described it.

After waiting a while for him to continue, Sukuna was displeased to realize that was all he had to say. The boy valued practicality and efficiency, and disliked abstract expressions like that.

"What? You're just making things up to cover it up again!"

Mishakuji couldn't help but chuckle at his comment.

"Actually, it's the other way around... I guess it's still too difficult for Sukuna-chan."

"Do you think Iwa-san and Nagare would understand?"

Sukuna, annoyed, looked at the other two as if demanding a standard answer.

Iwafune, whose motto is secrecy, easily avoided a frank discussion.

"This is a request from the young people, so I ask that you answer it together."

"You asked me, but I can't answer so easily. It's a difficult question."

When Nagare was asked to answer, he thought it over diligently.

Kotosaka perched on his shoulder and leaned toward his thoughtful master.

After a few minutes, Sukuna began to feel he had gotten Nagare into trouble and wondered if he should say, "Enough, you don't have to take it so seriously."

"I guess,"

The "Green King" finally spoke.

"The people Yukari got rid of are standing in the way of our plan."

"That's all? It's obvious..."

Iwafune stopped the impatient Sukuna.

"Well, wait a moment, Sukuna. Let's hear it out first."

Mishakuji silently waited for his "King" to respond.

"....."

"In other words, we, the King and his entourage, should approach the future with greater purity. To do so, we need to eliminate the impurities that hinder us beforehand. When that happens, Yukari describes the overall picture as "beautiful", right?"

Mishakuji smiled deeply at his lord's perfect response and the joy of gaining his understanding. Sitting on the couch, Mishakuji answered truthfully, without unnecessary gestures.

"...Your insight, my lord."

Envious of the two, Sukuna pouted again.

"It's just the way you put it, but it's the same thing you said before. I don't understand."

Iwafune summed it up roughly and comforted the boy.

"It's just a matter of humor, but that's the important thing."

Kotosaka expressed the atmosphere of the place with all his vocabulary.

"Funwari Imai! Sensation!"

Amidst all the commotion, Mishakuji leaned back comfortably on the couch.

Beside him, he explained his intentions in his own way.

"From now on, we will clash and devour each other, each with a different color. If each of our colors isn't clear, the mixture will become murky like mud."

Everyone looked at each other with different expressions, as if they understood or not, and he added with slight amusement.

"The greatest poet in history also wrote it like this."

This time, everyone was on guard.

(Ah, here it comes.)

And he prepared himself.

"All kinds of colors, dancing and vibrant."

It was much better than usual.

Satisfied with what he had said, Mishakuji stretched his long legs and relaxed his body and mind.

"I'm going to sleep. Whether it's blood or fire... I hope it's a red dream..."

The beast, a star actor, fell into a deep sleep, preparing for his next turn.

CHAPTER 3: SURVIVE! (SUZUKI SUZU)

Sukuna let out a shaky breath.

The rain was surprisingly cold and drained his body heat. It wasn't as if he regretted bringing a raincoat. Besides, the rain wasn't a bad thing. It hid his presence and

footsteps. In a situation like this, surrounded by "Scepter 4", it could be said to be a blessing.

The problem lay more on earth than in the heavens.

"...Well, wait, Five."

Sukuna stopped, clicking his tongue, and turned over his shoulder.

Two small figures. They were pleading and supporting each other.

They were in a rainy alley, and they looked like a pile of garbage bags. However, their abilities were only garbage, and Sukuna knew they were the second-rankers, "Takaya" and "Miyuki".

Takaya begged, rubbing Miyuki's back while coughing.

"Miyuki is at her limit. Can we rest for a while?"

"Eh?"

He didn't even try to suppress the irritation in his voice. After using the supernatural ability application "Grassroot", he had finally found a way out of the encirclement, and now he wanted to take a break?

Sukuna and Takaya's gazes met. Takaya knew what Sukuna was thinking.

But he spoke firmly.

"Please. This is the mission, right?"

"....."

Sighing, Sukuna approached them.

"There's a warehouse about ten meters away where we can hide. Let's go."

"Uh, yes. Thanks!"

"Don't shout.", Sukuna muttered, stifling his words as he held Miyuki's body.

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A common misconception among low-ranking players is that "they shouldn't fail a mission".

Well, that's not entirely wrong. In "Jungle", the penalties for failing a mission are very severe. It's not uncommon to have to attempt a mission five or even ten times to make up for it. Failing a mission seems like the worst thing that can happen.

But Sukuna, who has reached G-Rank, knows that's wrong.

The worst that can happen is a game over.

Lost points. Arrested. Unable to recover. And dead.

Game over lurks everywhere. Sukuna has seen plenty of players caught up in it.

The most important thing is to survive.

He should have known.

And yet, the fact that Five ended up in this situation was proof enough that he was nothing more than an L-Rank.

The mission's failure was confirmed from the start.

The contents of a red container in Block L of the Third Seaside Center warehouse were to be stolen. The client was anonymous, but that's not unusual for this kind of criminal mission. It was a fairly easy job.

He thought so until he opened the container.

Was it a covert operation by "Scepter 4", a trap by a rival mafia, or simply a security lapse? At that moment, the alarm sounded.

There were six members on the mission, including Sukuna. As soon as the alarm sounded, three of them began fleeing like a swarm of spiders. Of course, Sukuna did the same. In situations like these, it's a general rule for everyone to flee in different directions to avoid the pursuers concentrating.

But there were two idiots following Sukuna.

They were Takaya and Miyuki.

He knew their names from the brief pre-mission briefing. Miyuki was about the same age as Sukuna, and Takaya was a bit older. They were both timid and seemed unreliable. Sukuna considered them "discharged personnel", and the other three recruits were probably the same.

Takaya and Miyuki followed him.

They jumped from roof to roof of the warehouse, slid through a skylight into the interior, and grabbed onto a beam. They smoothly crossed the steel beams, which weren't designed for human movement. But the two still chased Sukuna. Annoyed, Sukuna said in a low voice,

"Hey! Don't follow me!"

Takaya was out of breath. But he was better than Miyuki. Her labored breathing was harsh and heavy, and she clung to Takaya to support her body, which felt like it would collapse at any moment.

Sukuna narrowed his eyes. She was definitely a "discarded member".

"You're Five, right? There have been rumors about you lately..."

"That's what I mean. It's none of your business."

"Please. Help me. Miyuki, my sister, seems to have had a seizure."

Sukuna remained silent.

He was so stupid that he couldn't say anything else. Not only did he bring a sick person on the mission, but he also asked Sukuna, who only had a personal interest in it, for help. Some spoiled rookies think it's only natural to help them. Sukuna decided and tried to cut the conversation short.

Suddenly, Jumpy jumped out of Sukuna's PDA.

"Mission accomplished! Mission accomplished! 300 Jungle points added!"

"Eh?"

Looking back, Takaya clutched the PDA. A terrifying expression.

The expression of an older brother protecting his younger sister.

"It's an advance. Please. Accept the mission. Could you take Miyuki and me to safety?"

"....."

A request for a new mission had come in. The reward was 1,000 JP. This time it more than made up for failure.

The most important thing was to survive. Not die. And quickly finish off everything that stopped them. Five didn't understand.

+++++

"They're in Block C!"

"Don't let them escape! Surround them!"

The men in blue rushed in, shouting at the top of their lungs. The sound of footsteps raising puddles mingled with the rain.

Inside a warehouse a few meters from the alley. Hiding among cardboard boxes and steel shelves, Sukuna heard footsteps.

"A-are you okay?"

"Don't talk."

While digging his nails into Takaya, Sukuna watched "Grassroot". Three blue dots of light wandered around the surrounding wireframe map.

"Grassroot" reveals the location of devices connected to the network. "Scepter 4's" PDA has tight security, but it's no match for "Jungle's" technology.

Finally, the dot of light went out, and silence returned to the surroundings.

Sukuna let out a small sigh; then, suddenly, he noticed something.

Miyuki covered her mouth and trembled.

"...Enough."

After saying that, Miyuki coughed uncontrollably. Takaya stroked her back.

"I'm sorry."

After a while, Miyuki calmed down a bit and murmured in a weak voice. Her face was pale and her breathing sounded like a whistle.

Sukuna felt irritated. Not with Miyuki, but with Takaya.

"Why did you bring this girl? Leave her at home."

Takaya lowered his head. He had the expression of someone who knows he'll receive criticism.

It was Miyuki who spoke in his place.

"I don't have a home. But I do have a place to sleep."

"....."

Miyuki's hand overlapped Takaya's.

"We promised. When we go on a mission, we'll do it together. Since we were alone together."

Sukuna gritted his teeth.

Sukuna wasn't saddened by the fact that two teenagers were involved in a criminal mission. Children without a home to return to and no one to rely on need strength to survive.

Sukuna understood this better than anyone.

Takaya gently held Miyuki's hand.

"If anything happens, I'll protect her. It's the promise we've made to each other since we began our mission."

Sukuna laughed coldly.

"And this is what you get? If you want to commit suicide with your sister, don't involve anyone else."

"I'm sorry..."

Takaya's low voice took away any desire to insist. He didn't care how stupid those guys were, or if they'd lost something important because of it.

He just needed the points. Everything else was irrelevant.

Still, Sukuna didn't understand why he felt so upset.

Block C, which "Scepter 4" had sealed, was precisely the hole in the fence Sukuna was trying to penetrate.

If Miyuki had had enough stamina, he would have been able to squeeze through easily. Sukuna didn't try to point it out. It wouldn't have been pointless, and he wasn't so useless as to mess with a sick person.

"We'll be on the opposite side, but we'll head for Block X. The blue suits seem to be concentrated on the north side. We'll go the other way."

"I understand."

Takaya looked at the PDA and nodded.

Sukuna squeezed into a gap between the containers. It was so narrow that only a child could fit through, making it the perfect spot for them. Miyuki followed him, and then Takaya.

The rain continued to fall.

Rainwater overflowed from the container, pouring down like a waterfall. There was no way around it. As he walked forward, speechless, Miyuki suddenly spoke.

"Hey, Five."

"What's wrong?"

"Why are you in Jungle, "Five"?"

Sukuna didn't turn around. He didn't want to show his unsightly, distorted face.

"Are you worried?"

"I'm not worried, I'm just asking?"

"You don't need to know."

"I don't need to know, I'm just asking?"

"Hey, Miyuki, stop."

Takaya couldn't help but intervene. But as they moved sideways between the containers, no one could stop Miyuki from saying anything.

Sukuna finally relented.

"It's because I left home. You understand, right?"

Miyuki was silent for a moment and then murmured,

"It's the same thing, right?"

She said with a touch of mirth.

Sukuna didn't reply.

Finally, Sukuna and the others crawled out from between the containers. They were at a dock by the coast. A huge freighter blocked their view like a flat wall. The night sea was black, and the white of the waves was nowhere to be seen.

Sukuna turned and saw Miyuki staring at him. Her large, bright eyes intimidated him.

"Hey, Five...!"

"Miyuki!"

Takaya shouted as if he wanted to stop someone, and grabbed Miyuki with one arm.

"Enough! Five is only helping us because we're on a mission. Don't cause us any more trouble."

Miyuki glared at Takaya. Her gaze was accusatory.

Sukuna searched for the words to say.

But in the end, he couldn't find them. Leaning into the shadow of the container, Sukuna spoke softly:

"It's about a kilometer from Block X. It's unlikely that "Scepter 4" is keeping watch, but make sure they don't detect you."

About three seconds after they started walking, they heard footsteps behind them.

Sukuna pulled out his PDA so the two wouldn't notice.

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Memories of the past began to emerge like maggots from a corpse.

Every time this happens, Sukuna tries to tune out. It doesn't work. As soon as he stops thinking, the bugs begin to gnaw at his brain, producing a crunching sound.

His face. His voice. His movements.

The look he had the last time he saw him.

He took a deep breath and then exhaled.

It wasn't getting any easier. He even felt nauseous. Sukuna pushed them away and continued.

Behind him, he heard Miyuki cough.

Then Takaya's voice came.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Sukuna slowed his pace slightly. He was worried about Miyuki. There were only a few minutes left until this was over. Even if he hesitated, it wouldn't change the outcome.

However, it seemed Takaya wasn't calling Miyuki.

"Five! Are you okay?"

"Eh?"

Sukuna turned around in surprise.

"Something's been wrong with you for a while now. You haven't said anything, and you look pale. Did you hurt yourself or something?"

Sukuna stared at Takaya.

Takaya was the one with a pale face. Probably due to tension, his body was stiff and his lips were trembling.

Sukuna took another breath and then exhaled.

This time it was a little easier. Miyuki stared at Sukuna's face, as if she wanted to say something. Looking away, Sukuna said,

"It's okay. It's nothing. I was just remembering something from the past."

"From the past?"

"It was different back then. I didn't play alone."

Talking to someone makes you feel better. He thinks he heard someone say that on TV. But Sukuna didn't want to feel better.

"I had one friend. Just one. We could talk about anything, do a lot of silly things together, and I felt like I could do anything with him."

Takaya said nothing. Miyuki coughed. Sukuna kept talking.

"He told me about "Jungle". I started as an E-Rank and gradually leveled up. It was fun back then."

The cold rain fell, draining his body heat.

"But in the end, it turned out to be wrong."

"What?"

The faint voice was Miyuki's. Sukuna replied without turning around.

"He wasn't a friend. He was just looking out for me."

"....."

The exit from Block O came into view. There was no one in sight. A steel gate between a wire mesh screen was visible, slightly open.

"So my best friend, the one I always trusted, respected, and thought I could rely on, turned out to be a traitor of the worst kind."

At that moment, Sukuna stopped, turned around, and twisted his lips.

"Isn't that funny, Takaya?"

Takaya didn't respond.

His expression was distorted by an unmistakable fear. His face was pale, and Miyuki looked healthier than him. Miyuki blinked repeatedly, looking back and forth between Sukuna and Takaya.

It seemed she was the only one who didn't know anything.

Sukuna longed for the exit.

"Go ahead. The mission is to get out of here safely, right?"

"....."

Takaya began to walk awkwardly.

"Hey, big brother, why...? What about Five?"

Miyuki was confused. Still, she continued walking, with Takaya leading her by the hand. She glanced at Sukuna several times until they reached the steel gate at the block's exit.

The two arrived and disappeared behind the gate.

After confirming this, Sukuna started walking toward the gate.

It was raining.

The rain wasn't all bad. It obstructs visibility and sound, making it a true blessing.

The three hiding in the shadows outside the gate and the two hiding in the guard post were probably thinking the same thing.

The guard post moved ten meters from the gate.

At the same time, Sukuna started running. A stun grenade hit the ground and exploded, piercing the darkness with an overwhelming light. Three people jumped out of the gate and began firing frantically with machine guns. The muzzles shook, and the muzzle flashes sparkled like fireworks.

Sukuna ran. To avoid the muzzle flashes and bullets, he ran in a semicircle. Angry shouts echoed in the distance. He had no intention of remembering their faces, voices, or names. There was only one thing important, one truth.

To survive.

Sukuna leaped into the guard post in one bound.

The two guards were already in battle mode. One stood on the right, the other on the left, and they attacked with stun sticks in their hands.

"Haha!"

Activating the supernatural app "Thunder Blade". Sukuna smiled wickedly as he brandished his green-bladed scythe.

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The rain stopped.

With the half-destroyed door behind him, Sukuna walked slowly.

Takaya didn't even seem to have any intention of fleeing. Protecting Miyuki behind his back, he backed away, his teeth chattering.

Sukuna muttered as he twirled his scythe.

"There's an N-Rank named "Widow". I met her on a mission a while back."

Miyuki looked at Sukuna in amazement.

"He's a skilled hacker. He's particularly good at hacking into the "Jungle". So I asked him to confirm the identity of the anonymous requester for the container theft mission."

Takaya didn't even blink.

"I'm shocked. He's an E-Rank. The lowest-ranking. And he only has one mission. He used most of that bounty to prepare for this mission."

The green glow illuminated Takaya's fear.

"It's a fake account. Also, "Widow" discovered that the mission participants were using the same IP address as the client. It was you, Takaya."

"Big brother..."

Miyuki murmured in a trembling voice.

"You betrayed Five?"

Sukuna laughed softly.

"No, Miyuki. That's not true. Your big brother didn't betray me. He just planned to frame me from the start."

Miyuki grabbed Takaya's shoulders, with enough force to break his bones, and with enough anger to make her sickly face flush.

"Why...?!"

"Why?"

Takaya smiled slightly. Tears filled his eyes, but his mouth twisted as he looked at his sister.

"You know, Miyuki. We need money."

Miyuki made a strangled noise.

"We don't have a home or anyone to rely on. We have to get everything ourselves: beds, food, medicine. We can't support ourselves if we do things normally. So I had no choice but to take the risk, huh?"

Sukuna placed his scythe at Takaya's neck.

"Whose orders are these?"

Takaya shook his head, tears welling in his eyes.

"I don't know."

Sukuna snorted. Well, it was true. Whoever requested this, there's no way they could have revealed their true identity. It's very likely they were the middleman themselves.

In the end, this guy is just someone who needs to be cut down.

And...

"Stop!"

Miyuki reached out and grabbed the handle of the scythe. Her strength was very weak.

But even so, Sukuna couldn't move it.

"Stop... I'm sorry... Please... Big brother, my big brother is..."

Before he could vent all his emotions, Miyuki coughed violently.

Takaya quickly stroked her back. But Miyuki was still staring at Sukuna, crying uncontrollably.

Sukuna switched off his "Thunder Blade".

He looked back. The half-destroyed gate was silent. But it was only a matter of time before "Scepter 4" rushed in.

Without looking away, Sukuna muttered,

"Mission accomplished. Pay me."

Before he could hear a reply, he ran off.

Using trash cans as footholds, he climbed over the air conditioning and ducts, gently climbing the side of the building. From below, a voice called out to Sukuna. Sukuna didn't even look back.

The most important thing is to survive.

It doesn't matter whether the siblings survive or not.

His face twisted with frustration, Sukuna leaped from building to building and disappeared into the night.

What should he do to survive?

At this point, Sukuna still doesn't know.

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

The flames danced.

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

So...

That was the first time she thought fire was beautiful.

"Burn them."

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

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

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

And yet, fire also attracts the opposite.

What shone was blue.

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

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

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

The man in blue coldly pushed up his glasses.

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

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

For some reason, she was drawn to them.

The fire burned.

+++++

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

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

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

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

"What? "Homura"?"

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

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

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

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

+++++

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

"I'm going to hit you!"

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

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

When she reunited with him, Katsuya had "changed". He was no longer the crazy little brother he'd been two years ago, but had reverted to the image of an even older Katsuya... from when he was an elementary school student, before his parents' divorce. He was the Katsuya she remembered, from when he and his sister still got along. Well, it's a small problem that he still behaves like an elementary school kid at his age.

"You seem much better than before."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then he looked down at the table.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't change the subject."

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

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

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

"Eh? Well, I guess? Maybe?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They're more like a fellow fighter."

"Eh?"

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

"Huh, civil servant?"

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

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

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

That's self-esteem.

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

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

Atsumi sighed, uneasy.

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

"Are you sure you're okay?"

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

"You're being nosy."

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

"How cheeky."

As she answered, Atsumi relaxed her shoulders slightly.

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

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

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

"Yes!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Atsumi shrugged.

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

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

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

Her limbs trembled unintentionally.

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

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

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

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

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

She was going crazy.

But...

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

It had barely begun.

"Ugh! Enough!"

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

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

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

First, she removed the gag.

"Katsuya, don't move!"

She reached behind her brother.

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

Suddenly, Katsuya's hands burst into flames.

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

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

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

He turned around.

"I'm sorry, sister!"

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

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

They didn't spread.

"Eh?"

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

And then, Atsumi's restraints burned away.

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

"Who cares? What can he do alone?"

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

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

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

"....."

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

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

A different voice sounded.

"Burn them!"

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

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

The magic suddenly accelerated.

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

"King?! Why?"

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

Everything was red.

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

It was a hellish sight.

And yet, he looked beautiful.

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

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

"Someone has a gun! Look out!"

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

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

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

"Sorry! I'm late, Katsuya."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, are you related to Anjo?"

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

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

"I'm fine!"

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

The tall man, Kusanagi, spoke gently.

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

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

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

And yet...

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

Then, as if her wish had been granted,

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

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

Kamamoto's expression changed, and Kusanagi frowned.

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

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

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

"Yes!"

Giving orders, Kusanagi took a lighter from his jacket.

Meanwhile,

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

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

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

"No Blood! No Bone! No Ash!"

"Attack!"

"Yes!"

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

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

Atsumi continued to gaze, fascinated, at the battlefield.

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

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

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The fun didn't last long.

But the night dragged on a bit longer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you joking?"

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

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

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

"A little."

"Really?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then...

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

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

"Hey!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Does my brother have guts too?"

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

Suoh lit a cigarette with his lighter as he spoke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you want to do?"

"Eh?"

"He came of his own free will."

Suoh turned to Atsumi on the stool.

Staring at Atsumi,

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

"I..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then...

"No Blood! No Bone! No Ash!"

"No Blood! No Bone! No Ash!"

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

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

She thought it would never end.

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

But...

"No."

She decided.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 5: KIZUNA (MIYAZAWA TATSUKI)

"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, uhhh. 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.