

Boogiepop Wicked

# Embryo Eruption



Written by **Kouhei Kadono**

Illustrated by **Kouji Ogata**

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Also, to make the transition from official translations to fan translations as smooth as possible, all translations on this site will follow the conventions put forth by the Seven Seas translations. These include:

- Translating certain terms in the same way (Ex: Fire Witch, Imaginator)
- Keeping to traditional Japanese name order
- using Japanese honorifics

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BGM – “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” by Tears for Fears

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Written by **Kouhei Kadono**

.....  
Illustrated by **Kouji Ogata**

**“Nothing could be more shameful...!”**

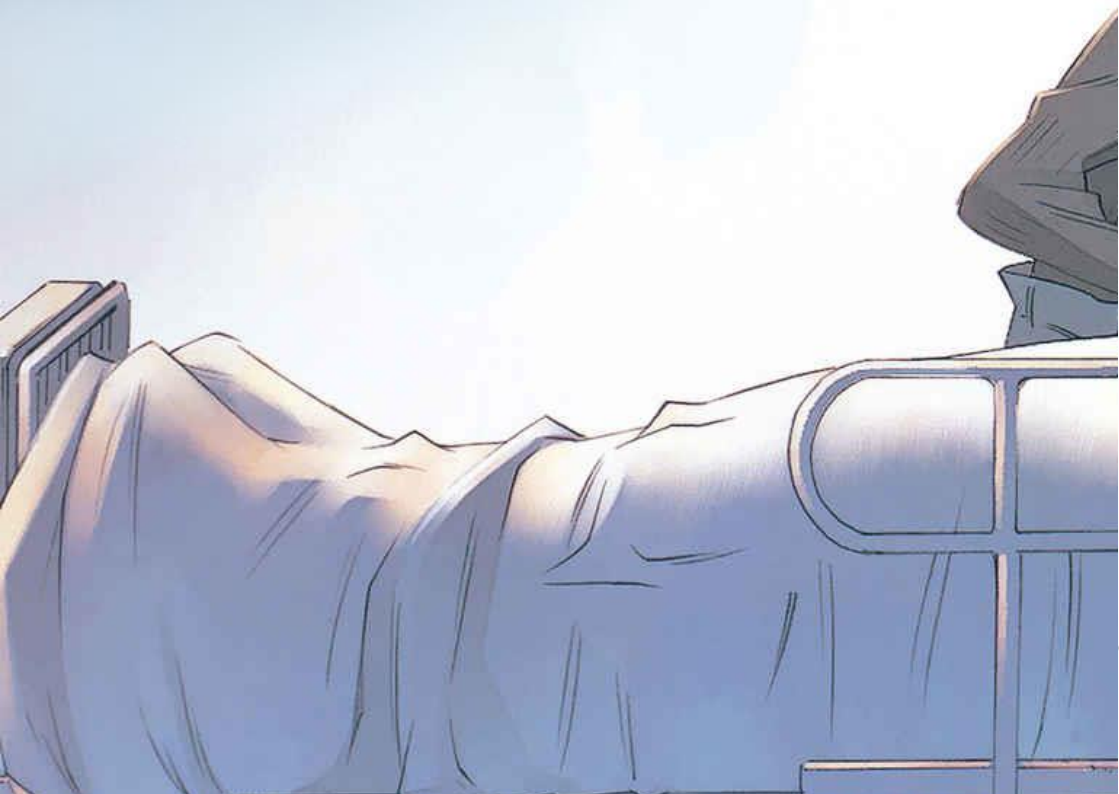


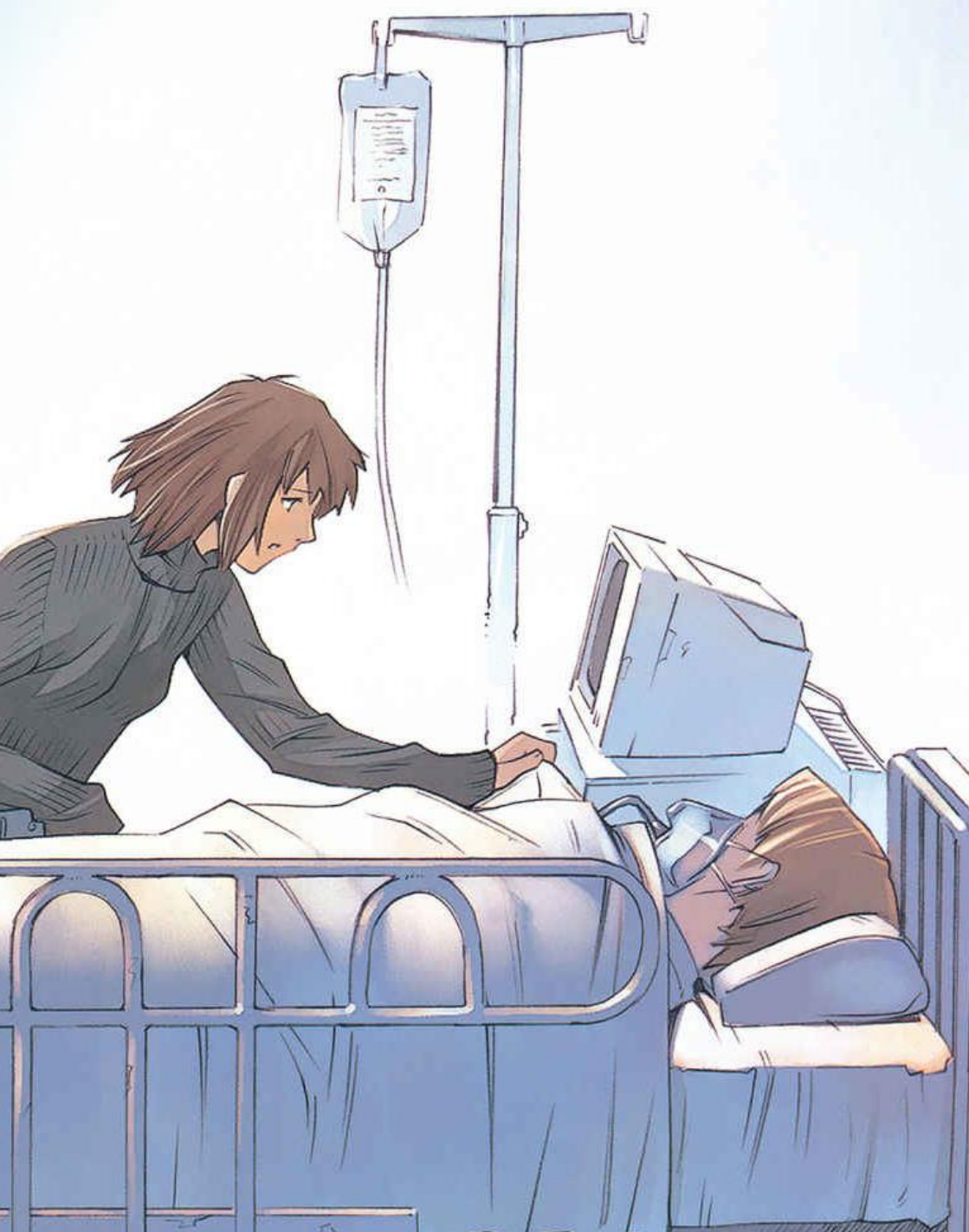


**Where in the world can I find my equal...?**




**"We're not the ones fighting  
for Masaki. She is..."**



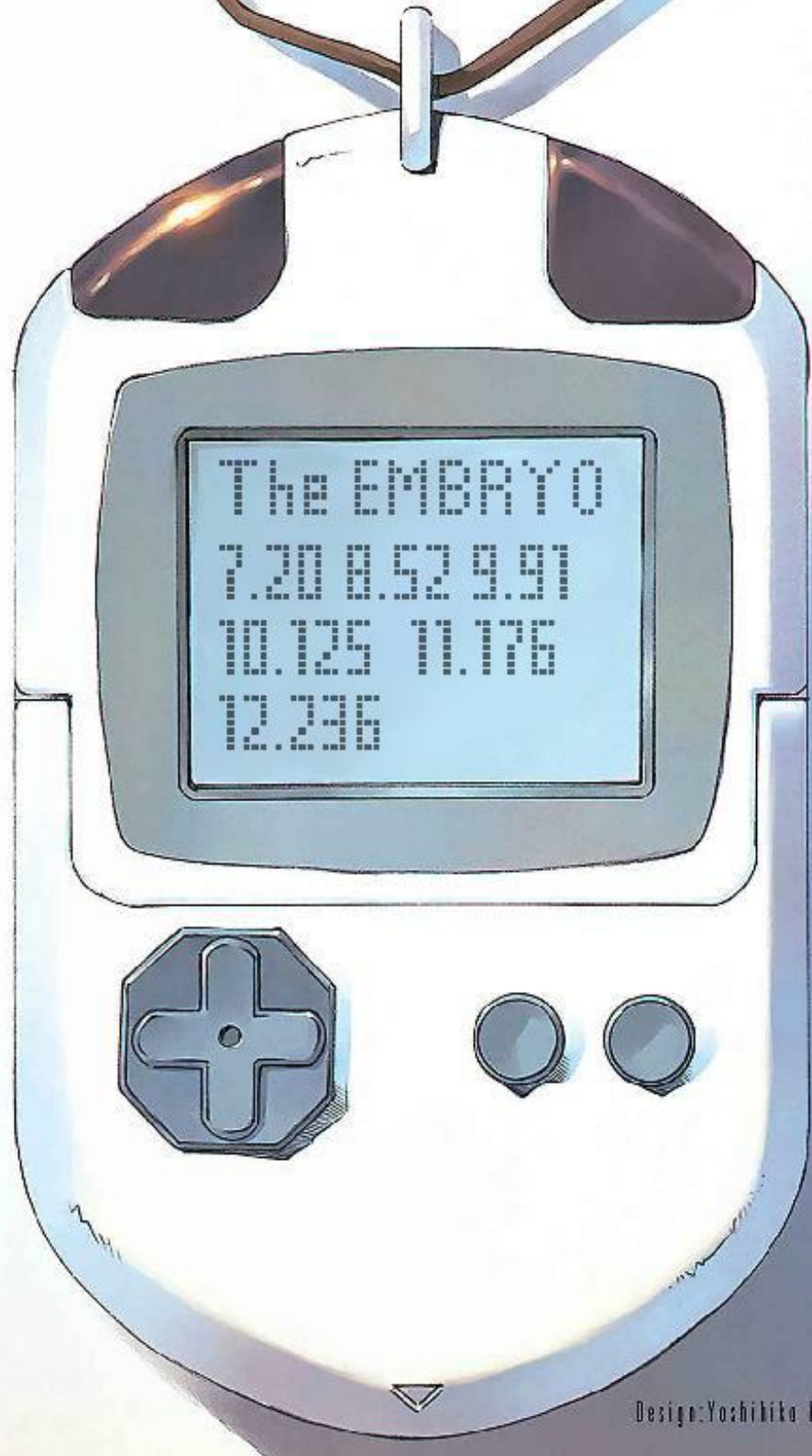








**"Now I wonder, do you  
really expect to make it  
out of this alive...?"**



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“There’s fighting on the left  
And marching on the right  
Don’t look up in the sky  
You’re gonna die of fright  
Here comes the razor’s edge!”

-AC/DC ([Razor’s Edge](#))



...It is said that people dream of things they can achieve.  
Yet no one ever knows in what form it may come to pass.

It was ten years ago that the boy spoke of this to the girl.

“Akiko-chan, why is it that you think you want to die?”

“Because...! Everyone’s so mean to me. Dad, Mom, the teachers... It’s like they all hate me. I should never have been born!”

The girl had likely been up to some mischief or had gotten into an argument, and everyone had severely scolded her for it—her parents included. She was sobbing, eyes red and swollen from the tears.

“I see. But as much as you dislike it, the fact is that you were born. That’s not something that can be undone. Not by anyone.”

“.....”

The boy then chided her gently with a few words, none of which she enjoyed very much. She didn’t like being lectured. It probably showed on her face, so the boy changed his tack.

“All right, then. If you were going to die, how would you do it?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“You can’t just go into this half-heartedly. Dying is hard work.”

“Why?”

“Because, Akiko-chan, to live—to be given the gift of life in this world... That in itself is a miracle. If you say you want to oppose that, then you must show it another miracle. What sort of miracle would you want?”

The girl was taken aback, but the boy continued, unfazed.

“There must be something you want. Tell me. I’m not going to know otherwise. Humans have this terrible habit of living their lives without even knowing what it is they want. Instead, they shut it away inside their heart. If you really want to tell yourself what you want, you have to say it out loud.”

Though he spoke to a child, there was no sugar-coating his words.

“...I don’t know! How should I know something like that...?”

The girl was flustered.

“All right. Then I’m guessing how you really feel is that it’s too soon for you to die. Wait until you’ve found the miracle that you want to make. Then you can think about dying.”

The boy smiled. He was a popular kid in the neighborhood. Friends asked him for help, and he'd give them all sorts of advice. "I'll pave the way for you." "I'll break your eggshell." Whenever someone felt they were at their wits' end about what to do, he'd always get them out of their funk. This was what he was known for.

But he himself always had an air of something fragile. As if he might simply cease to exist, come tomorrow.

"...Hmm."

She'd looked incredulous at first, but now seemed worried.

"Then, what about you?" she asked. "This, uh, 'miracle' stuff... Have you got something like that too, Kyou-nii-chan?"

"Good question." He looked into the distance. "It seems I don't really have much choice in the matter... But there is one thing I'd like to ask of you. One request."

"What?"

"I'd like to meet the shinigami. He's coming to kill me, you know. It's his job. His only purpose is to kill. There are all sorts of people in the world, and they all go on living with turmoil inside of them, but he has nothing like that. He's simply automatic. I'd like to meet someone pure like that... All the worry we have to bottle up inside, all the struggling..."

If someone could tell me definitively that none of that matters... I'd have no regrets dying at their hand."

He spoke coolly.

".....?"

Unable to keep up, the girl simply blinked in confusion. Eight years later, she'd hear a rumor that would be strikingly similar. She'd be in her third year of middle school, taking her high school entrance exam, but she would have lost sight of herself by then, and ultimately wouldn't pick up on the similarities with the boy's story. Nor would she ever recall it.

...A few months later, the boy was lying on the ground looking up at the rolling sky. His body lay still.

And looming over him, the man who had by some means or other fatally wounded him regarded him vacantly.

That's right—the boy was dying. He didn't know what had been done to him, but his whole body was paralyzed; the feeling in his limbs had gone, as if they'd been cut off. He was sure that the attack was fatal.

It was because of his strange ability to make the power that lies dormant in people bloom . Believing this power dangerous, the system had at last carried out their



assassination. It came as no surprise to him. He was well aware of the risk of being killed when he used his power.

But...

Well I'll be...

He was deeply disappointed.

The one who'd been sent to kill him was no shinigami—not even close. Deep down, the man had even had reservations about the assassination mission he'd been assigned to. This had conversely twisted him into acting cool and collected when doing the deed. In short, he was a perfectly ordinary guy.<sup>1</sup>

The man had pressed some device to his head and was doing something as he lay there dying, unable to move. He seemed to be recording and copying his brainwaves. Some special wave pattern that was in his head, perhaps. Retrieving research material, most likely. Exactly like your average salaryman, following the brass's orders to the letter.

Well I'll be damned ...

As he stared intently at the man, eventually their eyes met, and it was clear that he'd been deeply shaken. It can't have been pleasant to meet the eyes of your victim.

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<sup>1</sup> Mo' Murder, as explained in Boogiepop at Dawn.

He'd decided in his final moments to play a mean trick on the man.

Ever so faintly, he moved his mouth. No sound came out, but he was sure the man could read his lips. And this is what he said:

“There is a bug inside of you. You may believe there's no point thinking about it, but it feeds on you as you try to forget, and it's eating you up inside. Your bug will determine your fate someday. And most likely, you will...”

As he spoke, he sensed a feeling, like that of a wry smile.

There was nothing to it. The shinigami had been him.

He was the shinigami who had transcended all of this man's worries, who had quietly announced his end. Which meant that his wish had been granted—albeit in the most ironic way possible.

...It is said that one dreams of the things they can achieve. Yet no one ever knows in what form it may come to pass. The boy understood this.

Oh, boy... Though I'd really like everyone to keep on trying. I really would...

Who was this everyone? Not even he likely knew.

...But reality is never quite so simple as people think. Even when one's dreams are fulfilled, nothing ever ends with such a straightforward resolution.

Nobody knew. Not even the people who were involved.

But his dream to meet the shinigami would, in an awfully strange way, come to be realized ten years hence. By that point, it would no longer be about him, or even the shinigami. It was nothing more than a single piece in the puzzle of fate's design. Its true center lay elsewhere. Indeed, that lay in the duel between the Strongest and Inazuma. The duel amidst flames...

# THE EMBRYO

BOOGIEPOP WICKED

2ND HALF -ERUPTION-  
FROM VERSE SEVEN 'TIL THIRTEEN





“The egg is lost in all of its parts as they  
continue to swell without purpose...”

“.....”

Orihata Aya gazed at the boy lying in bed, immobile. He was hooked up to various drips and blood transfusion tubes, and his chest rose and fell for breath. But from the way the blood was still seeping even now into the bandages wrapping his body, it was looking grim. It seemed almost like hemophilia, but in this case, it wasn't that the blood wasn't clotting. It kept seeping even from the hardened scabs and sutured wounds, with no apparent sign of stopping.

That, and Masaki was still unconscious. He'd had a severe shock and wouldn't wake from his comatose state. Without knowing what that shock was, the doctors had no way to treat it. Their only option was to wait it out. And that was already...

It was for this reason that they weren't against the girl staying by his side. Normally he wouldn't be allowed visitors, but there was little more the hospital could do. She was the patient's girlfriend, it seemed. Letting them stay together until the end was the least they could do for this hopeless patient and the girl.

“.....”

Aya gazed intently at Masaki. He was still breathing. She gazed at him constantly, without end, as if to make sure *that*, if nothing else, kept going.

\* \* \* \* \*

<The prefectural headquarters and competent authorities have, as of yet, still not released an official statement regarding the motives of the officer who perpetrated these indiscriminate killings. It's even unclear as to whether this police officer exhibited any suspicious behavior prior to the incident...>

The announcer's voice carried emotionlessly from the radio-enabled Walkman.<sup>2</sup>

“So it wasn't Tooru-san...”

With an earphone in one ear, Honami Akiko slumped as the tension left her. She should have been happy to hear that the thing she'd thought dubious in the first place had been proven to be exactly as she had thought it, but no—she was

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<sup>2</sup> News reports are typically kept in angle brackets in JPN novels. We'll be doing the same here, just for simplicity's sake. Also, a Walkman is a portable cassette player.



feeling guilty about the little voice in her head that had been telling her “what if?” And so at first, she slumped.

[[Are we sure the cops really got ‘em, though?]] came a voice from her chest.

It hung from her neck like a pendant—a small, round and white portable family game device. This egg-shaped object was speaking to her.

“They didn’t say anything about it on the radio.”

[[Well yeah, ‘course they’re gonna keep schtum about that stuff. How are they gonna introduce him? “This young man single-handedly took out a regiment of berserk police officers?” Their reputation would be in the shitter.]]

“...As soon as they realize he’s not the culprit, they’ve got to let him go. They have to,” she said, trying to convince herself.

The place was dim.

They were in a maze of caves carved into and through the mountains, like the catacombs of Ancient Rome. The flat stone paving the ground and walls suggested that they were clearly man-made. Windows were dotted here and there to let in light, but they were more slits than proper windows, thin slivers of light streaming across the open space. She’d sat

herself down somewhere along a corridor—it was the only spot she could get even the slightest reception from.

As Akiko recalled, she had found the place in middle school, when she was taking a look at prospective high schools. Was it in the summer...? She was walking along casually when she discovered the hidden place right by one of the high schools facing the mountains, Shinyou Prefectural Academy . She'd completely forgotten about it, but now, faced with the need to hide, it had suddenly popped into her head.

Indeed, she had to keep herself hidden from the world.

“.....”

A scarab beetle had flipped over at her feet, weakly moving its legs. Its time had probably come. It looked like it was in its death throes even now.

To her eyes, there was a patch of black clinging to the beetle, dripping onto the floor. This vision, which others could not see, was its life force—its so-called essence—spilling out. Once it had all sunk into the ground, the insect would die.

“.....”

She didn't reach out for it. Before long, it had stopped moving completely. The patch, too, had completely vanished. But if she had reached out, if she had stopped the scarab's

leaking essence, its brief life would surely have been prolonged. Such was the curious power which she now possessed.

[[‘This too shall pass ,’ huh. Time to say a prayer for our dearly departed beetle or what? Heh heh heh,]] cackled the egg at her chest. He seemed in tune with her, as if he was looking at the world through her eyes. This would be why the things she felt were shared with him too.

It may have been a games console, but it was by no means a downloaded minigame. The body of energy sealed within the egg had a will of its own, and spoke directly to her mind. Thus, others couldn’t hear this ‘voice.’ This thing, which went by the name of Embryo, apparently had the effect of unlocking the potential hidden within others.

And it had even drawn out from within her the power to see life. But despite the fact that she’d already saved the life of one person, it still didn’t feel real to her...

*Is bringing back someone about to die really going to save them...? Ahh, what the heck am I thinking?*

...Even so, she couldn’t believe that this was her own gift. She couldn’t seem to accept it internally. Weren’t hidden talents normally something that felt a little more responsive?

Was that not how it went? She felt as if she was masquerading in someone else's clothes.

But however out of place it might have felt for her on the inside, her ability was very clearly real. She needed to come up with a countermeasure for it. When she used her power to revive someone, she herself had to let "life" out of her. Something would have to be consumed, it seemed. Which meant that if she were to overuse it—no, that was naïve—if she were to use it even once more, she might find herself in a situation there was no coming back from.

Though her power was to save living things from death, there were precious few uses for it. Unless...there was a different way of using it, one that didn't involve saving lives?

[[Like I keep saying, just kill me. Then you'll be directly bathed in my energy and you'll have a proper, concrete power on your hands.]]

For some odd reason, Embryo took every opportunity to tell people to smash him .

"Concrete...? OK, let's say I do that. What if stuff gets weird? Like, what if I turned into a ghost or something?"

[[Eh, guess you'd just have to call it fate and give up.]]

“...You don’t care about me at all, do you? You just want to die.”

[[There’s some truth in that,]] he said plainly.

“Why do you want to die so much anyway?”

[[Because I’m a fake.]]

“...A fake? What now?”

[[My energy waves are a kind of copy. No way to know what of, though. Point is, I’m not myself.]]

“...Yeah? So what? You’re still you. What’s the point of thinking about what’s real and what’s not?”

[[You just don’t get it, do you?]]

Embryo snorted—or he would have if he were human. Instead, he gave an approximation of one.

[[If I’m a copy, that means there could be some guy walking around out there who’s exactly the same as me.]]

“...So?”

[[Can you really call this living?]]

“...Humans go on living, even if they look the same or do the same stuff!”

Something had really struck a nerve for Akiko.

[[You can say that because you’re *special*. Try putting yourself in my shoes for a goddamn moment. I can’t do

anything by myself. I have to lie around waiting patiently for someone to hear my voice. The *whole* damn time. Fuck, I've waited years upon years. None of the folks who created me could hear my 'voice,' after all. Just when I thought I'd found someone who could, he...]]

“...He what?”

[[...Sidewinder turned traitor. It's his fault I'm in this pathetic state. Idiot practically died to get me out of there.]]

There was a bitterness in his voice.

“...So what, you're salty about that person?”

Embryo laughed at the question.

[[That'd be a human emotion. I'm not a human—I'm nothing. Just a soulless energy wave.]]

“.....”

Akiko's expression darkened.

Why? The things he was saying seemed so full of pain.

Why did she think that? There was something about it that felt unbearable, like she was seeing an old friend fall to pieces. But who could that have been...?

“If you die...I wonder what that person would think.”

[[Like I give a shit.]]

“He must have said something to you. In fact, I’m positive he did!”

[[What are you getting so worked up about?]]

“He must have! What did he say to you?!” she shouted.

[[They’re gonna hear you out there,]] said Embryo. She zipped her mouth shut. [[Anyways...you can’t afford to be wasting your time fretting over someone like me. You’ve got your brother and crap to be worrying about, don’t you?]]

“...They didn’t say anything about a kid on the radio, so...”

[[They didn’t find a body. And now that the case is closed, he has to be fine? That’s what you’re thinking? Hah. You really believe that?]]

“.....”

Akiko turned glum. In the short time she was out, her home had been ransacked and her brother had vanished. She didn’t know what to do, but she couldn’t just hang around, so she fled. She couldn’t shake the niggling feeling that danger was around the corner.

[[...Eh, your brother’s probably all right, though. If the system got a hold of him, then it’s pretty likely that he’s under their protection. They kinda need him, so they can take me back from you.]]



“...Are you sure you should be saying that? If that’s the case, then I really don’t want to smash you. It means you’re a bargaining chip for my brother, right?”

Embryo made another snort-approximate laugh.

[[Like I told you, those guys can’t hear my voice. They wouldn’t be able to tell the difference. Hand them something the same as this vessel and tell them the screen went dead at some point and they’ll have to take it. Anyhow, it’d be dangerous for you to try anything else. If they catch wind of you ‘awakening,’ you’d better be prepared never to lead a normal life again.]]

“.....”

Little late to say that, she thought.

*Tooru-san...*

She wanted to meet that big man. Takashiro Tooru. The man who said he wanted to be a samurai, and other equally strange things. He should have heard Embryo’s voice too. They were in this together. She wanted to see him. She wanted to tell him about this strange situation she was in.

For a time, she feared he might have been a killer, and had run away from him. Ahh, if she’d just let go of her apprehension, then just maybe, she could have met him...

If life is just an accumulation of irrevocable acts, then Honami Akiko was truly at her peak.

\* \* \* \* \*

<—situation . As for why the police officer was compelled to commit this atrocious, unpremeditated act, we are still completely in the dark. Live at the scene is—>

Honami Hiroshi was transfixed by the reporter speaking on the TV. At his back stood a man.

“...Seems it’s been wrapped up as one lunatic cop’s crime of passion.”

The man was short, and wore a pale purple, body-hugging suit with a standing collar. His age was hard to determine—the face was boyish, but the look in his eyes a little too keen to label him a child. People called him Fortissimo, or Lee Maisaka, but whether they were his actual names was unclear.

“Looks like Takashiro-san and Nee-chan aren’t under suspicion anymore, huh!” Hiroshi’s face lit up.

“As regards the police, I’d say so,” said Fortissimo quietly.

“Woo-hoo! I wonder if we get to go back home now?”

“Not sure... If the cops are backing off, then the ones behind them could show up. It’s probably best if you stay here a while longer.”

“Tch...” Hiroshi clicked his tongue, then cast his eyes over the spacious room he was in.

The carpet was of high quality—your hands and feet were sure to sink in a good 10 centimeters—and a chandelier hung from the very high ceiling. It looked to be studded with actual crystal. Even the table, which he didn’t know the proper term for, had been carved straight out of authentic high-grade wood. The sofa, too, was absurdly large, and far comfier than it needed to be.

That, and there was the TV before him, twice as big as the one in his house, with massive speakers planted on either side. The room was filled with top-of-the-range amenities.

From the window, you could look out over the streets below.

This was the suite room of a high-rise, ultra-luxury hotel.

Of course the police weren’t going to come looking here. Nobody would—because no one would even think to look in such a place. It was the perfect blind spot.

When Fortissimo had said that they would “go to a safe place,” Hiroshi was sure it was going to be more like a secret hideaway—an old worn-down warehouse, maybe—that they’d go to. But no. Even more surprising was the fact that Fortissimo had walked straight into the lobby and took the room without any trouble, acting completely familiar with the staff. Hiroshi wondered exactly how much a single night here would cost.

*Maybe he’s filthy rich...?*

His mysterious appearance certainly suggested that he wasn’t your average guy.

“But what am I gonna do about school? Tomorrow’s Monday.”

“Just say that you’re staying home. Do you have any classes you think you might fail?”

“No, not really...”

“Then the teachers have no reason to believe you’re lying if you tell them a cold knocked you out for a day or two.”

“...Eh, not like I can do much else. Right, Nee-chan?”

Hiroshi turned to the side. There was Honami Akiko—she’d been sitting there the whole time, in silence.

“...Y-yes. Right.”

It was Honami Akiko. There was no mistaking it...and yet, the real Honami Akiko was cradling her knees in a cave at the back of Shinyou Academy. The one who was here was only borrowing her appearance.

Her name was Pearl.

An artificial lifeform created to look like a human. As for what she was capable of, she possessed combat skills far beyond the realms of human ability, as well as the power to transform into others. Hence she was disguised here as Honami Akiko. She'd formerly belonged to the Towa Organization, but had turned traitor and fled. Now she was investing her strength in assembling a counterforce.

Her goal was to recover a special device which the Towa Organization had been researching in secret, called "The Embryo." Although...

*Dammit! None of this would have happened if that Sidewinder hadn't gone batshit crazy and run off with Embryo all of sudden just when it was meant to be getting sold...!*

...The allies who'd accompanied her had either been killed or forced to retreat, and now she was all alone in enemy territory. And with Fortissimo right beside her, who was said to be the strongest even within the Towa Organization, she'd

been forced to keep up her act as Honami Akiko, never knowing when the jig might be up ... It was madness. But she hadn't given up just yet. She'd find a way out of these dire straits and survive. She didn't give a damn about Embryo anymore. In fact she didn't care what happens, so long as she could escape with her own life...!

“Hey, Akiko?” asked Fortissimo suddenly.

“Y-yes?”

“Do you like Takashiro Tooru?”

“Huh?”

Why the hell was he asking her such a hard-to-answer question...?!

“U-um, well... No, it's not like that.”

She was just going to have to wing it.

“Really? But Nee-chan, when you were in front of Takashiro-san, your eyes lit right up!” chimed in Hiroshi.

Blissfully unaware of who Fortissimo was. Oh, to be a fly on the wall, thought Pearl, mentally clicking her tongue.

“I-I did nothing of the sort!”

With all the acting skill she could muster, she attempted to blush and take offense. A cold sweat crawled down her back.

“So you two aren’t going out yet. Is that what you’re saying?”

“I, well... yeah.”

She’d done enough homework to know that much. As far as she could see, the two of them simply shared the same part-time job. It was possible that they could be dating in secret, but these two would never know.

“I see... What sort of man do you think this Takashiro Tooru is?”

“W-what do you mean...?” She couldn’t just blurt out anything. She was just going to have to play the fool for now. “Uhh... He’s a big guy, I guess?”

“Seriously?” As expected, Hiroshi laughed. Better to be the butt of a joke than to come out with some unusually keen observation.

“ He’s a tall guy, for sure... But I’ve had to wonder about him mentally. You don’t think he’s a deadbeat ?”

Pearl was taken aback at this sudden forceful tone. “I-I don’t think so...?”

“You don’t think he’s a blockhead who just stands there vacantly instead of running away in the face of imminent danger?”



There was clearly a hint of anger, or else irritation in his voice.

*What happened between those two? Come to think of it, he and Takashiro Tooru went head-to-head... Is that where...?*

“He’s not that kind of guy at all!” Hiroshi retorted.

“Takashiro-san’s strong. Guns don’t even make him flinch.”

“Isn’t that just because he’s determined that his opponent’s weaker than him? When there’s nothing else for it, he’s not just going to cower like a scared little bunny-rabbit?”

“No, you’ve got it all wrong!”

In the brief time that he’d known Takashiro Tooru, Hiroshi, it seemed, had come to somewhat admire the man. When Pearl’s gang had first tried to attack Hiroshi, Tooru had fought them off, and that had probably made quite an impression on him.

*...In which case, I’d better defer to my “little brother” here.*

Pearl made her decision.

“Th-that’s right. That’s not the kind of person Takashiro-san is. He’s brave, and strong... In fact, he’s just like—“

“A samurai. Right?”

Having her sentence finished off, Pearl’s heart almost capsized. “Th...that’s right.”

So that's what the man had been calling himself. There was no doubt about it.

"A samurai, huh?" Fortissimo snorted. "You know why we think samurai and knights are such noble figures? It's because once the age of warfare ends, there aren't any of their kind around anymore. We've glorified them."

"Huh?"

"In times of war, when they were really fighting, they were little more than thugs. Even in Japan, all this 'bushido' stuff only started in the Edo period, once samurai had actually stopped fighting. It's the same with 'chivalry' in Europe—they only began to utter words like that after war technology had advanced to the point where the idea of a knight riding on a horse was ludicrous. To put it simply, it's just a concept that serves at least to perpetuate their image, long after they've served any purpose."

This proved that there was a surprisingly knowledgeable side to him. Pearl was starting to wonder just how old this boyish man was. It wasn't possible—it couldn't have been—but it gave the impression that he might really have come from such an era. In truth, this man seemed not to care one ounce about the so-called "weight of history."

“I don’t know what’s possessed Takashiro Tooru to call himself a ‘samurai,’ but whatever it is, it’s making him run away from reality.”

There was a logic to his words, but there was something else in the way he spoke... Exasperation.

*Takashiro Tooru and Fortissimo... Just what happened between the two of them?*

Come to think of it, Takashiro Tooru was still alive after being Fortissimo’s mark. For the old Fortissimo, this would have been unthinkable.

*So, the opening I need to exploit here might be in that ballpark...*

Even as Pearl considered all this, she continued to maintain the look of a girl in love, offended at these slights on her crush.

Indeed, this was a battle.

It was possible that Fortissimo had already seen through her ruse and was even simply playing along. But even so—no, for that very reason—her chance was sure to come...!

*That’s right... That’s how I’ve always survived until now, haven’t I?*

A synthetic human in the Towa Organization called the Manticore, who was the same type as Pearl, had turned on

them. It was looking like they would dispose of her as well, but she'd escaped with her life by a hair's breadth. It was no different now.

Even if to live is like walking on thin ice, I'll run across the whole damn thing...!

She may have been up against Fortissimo, the Strongest One, and she may have had no other cards to play other than to bluff her way through, but she had no intention whatsoever of dropping out.

*I will not fail. If I can make it out of this alive, this is my win...!*

But an observer would have realized none of this; they would see only a girl protesting vehemently to Fortissimo, blurting out things like, "But, Takashiro-san's a kind person!"

"Oh boy."

Fortissimo shrugged his shoulders and smiled thinly. There was no way of knowing what hid behind that smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

And so, the man in question was now in a holding cell at the police station.

He was sat upon his bunk, his left eye closed. He no longer had a right eye. It had been cut so severely that treatment had ceased to be an option, so the doctors had had it removed. This really was the appropriate procedure. The cut wouldn't heal up, and if left untreated, blood would have continued to pour out. If they gouged out the whole thing, the rest would heal after. A bandage was wrapped over it, but removing it at this point would make little difference.

“.....”

Because in spite of that, a section of the cut refused to heal. Once in a while, blood would trickle down behind the bandage from the scar that ran from his eyebrow to his cheek, where his eye used to be. And this gouging-out treatment was of course unimaginable in the case of Taniguchi Masaki. He'd sustained injuries in too many places. Removing those parts alone would cause fatal injury. The man knew this full well.

“.....”

He had been sitting there in the darkness for hours, his left eye closed the whole time. He was helpless. But unless he did something about it, he couldn't live on.

“.....”

Occasionally, his big but slender body, 190 centimeters tall and 75 kilos, would tremble. And from his missing right eye, blood would trickle down, flowing like tears.

“.....”

But even so, the man who had at one point been screaming and smashing his head off the cell wall was changed.

Calmly, intently, he sat there in the darkness, as if trying to seek out something from within his mind.

“...How’s it looking for Takashiro Tooru?”

A police officer, his arm in a sling to protect his injured shoulder, had come over to the cell and inquired with the officer on guard duty. This visitor was one of the people who had actually engaged in combat with Tooru, and had testified when Tooru’s fate was to be decided that he had harbored no malice toward the police and that he’d acted in self-defense.

“...He’s quietened down now, but it’s actually kind of creepy. He won’t move a muscle and doesn’t touch the food I bring him. Hasn’t drunk a drop of water for hours or gone to pee,” the guard grumbled.

“...Almost like a martial arts ascetic on a fast of abstinence, eh?” murmured the officer as he looked at Tooru from the shadows. “Let’s hope he’s not trying to follow the way his friend’s going and die a martyr.”

The guard went pale. It was easy to draw such a conclusion, but something about the man evoked an air of antiquated values, like the warriors of old. There was good reason to think that he might.

“The Taniguchi kid ain’t dead yet. There’s still a chance to save him,” chided the officer. “Besides...look at his face. That look like someone who’s determined to do anything to you? He seems more...stuck in a rut.”

“You think he still hasn’t calmed down? But he’s not even moving.”

“...I’ve seen people like him before. At the kendo nationals, I’ll admit, but... They said that in the downtime between matches, the champion would just be thinking the whole time. About how his opponent might strike. How he’d counter.”

“Visualization, right? ...So, what, you’re saying that Takashiro Tooru’s fighting someone in his head now?”

“Can’t say for sure, but that’s the feeling I get,” the officer nodded. “Like he’s not sitting there on his own, but on his guard against an opponent standing before him...”

“T-then, who’s this opponent of his? What sort of person does our pal here expect to be up against?”

The guard sounded distraught. This was because the abnormal concentration that Takashiro Tooru expressed felt somehow...as if he were confronting something quite enormous.

“...Cross-examination won’t get anywhere with him like that. He wouldn’t even be exercising his right to remain silent. He’s done with the likes of us—we’re not opponents worth his time.”

The officer sighed.

“.....”

The whispers of the men had also reached Tooru’s ears. They likely thought that he couldn’t hear them—in fact, they normally would have been talking at a distance out of earshot, but Tooru heard. Perhaps what he was picking up weren’t



voices, but an acute sense that simply conveyed their presence. The difference didn't really matter one way or another.

“.....”

Tooru hadn't really caught the officers' general banter, like how they'd need to let him out as soon as they could if they didn't want to bring all sorts of trouble upon them, and that if they kept him locked up for too long, the mass media would get wind of it. He'd heard these things, but he wasn't listening to them.

There had been only one thing on his mind the whole time.

*Is there really any meaning in doing that?*

This was his only thought: whether or not to challenge the man who called himself the Strongest to a duel once more.

It really seemed as if there was no other option. Even if it resulted in his death, he would have next to no regrets. But there was a matter far more important than his pride and obstinance: Would it save the life of Masaki?

No, it was unlikely that it would. Not a chance. It was in fact far more likely to cause Masaki's sister-in-law, Kirima Nagi, mental anguish that she didn't need.

*Despite that, I'm still trying to find meaning in doing this?*

He had already suffered an ignominious defeat, a blight on his record. Was he only thinking of himself, and in his egotistical arrogance trying to fall further...? Nothing could be more shameful...!

“.....”

Another trickle of blood ran down his cheek.

Unable to move forward or back, Takashiro Tooru’s mind drifted in solitude, aimlessly wandering a wasteland of spiritual darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the secret tunnel, Honami Akiko stood up.

She had to buy food. There was no issue with regard to the lavatory—there was one in the park immediately across—but there was, of course, nothing to eat or drink out in the mountains.

The neighbourhood had a convenience store. She was going to have to go there.

In the same way that she’d got here, she put on her glasses to disguise herself—fake, lensless glasses used for fashion, not something she normally wore.

[[You really think that's gonna fool people? This is the school convenience store we're talking about here. You could bump into someone you know.]]

“It's Sunday. There aren't any students.”

[[They could be here for club activities.]]

“Yeaah, none of the clubs at my school are that dedicated.”

Akiko stepped out, knapsack over her shoulder.

[[This is starting to get a little ridiculous though, no? An ordinary girl like you hiding out here in the mountains?]]

“.....”

[[The biggest reason you're hiding isn't because of your power, is it? It's 'cause of me.”

“.....”

[[Someone like me, who can draw out unknown power from people, who knows what calamity I might spread to the world? So you've gotta hide me. That's what you're thinking, isn't it?]]

“...So what if I am? And don't go telling me I should 'kill you.”

[[...Some folks just don't deserve to live.]]

“...I’m never killing you so long as you keep saying stuff like that,” spat Akiko, who had begun to descend the mountain.

But...why was it?

Though they bickered like this, somehow, she didn’t mind talking to Embryo at all. In fact, she found it a little bit—just a fraction, mind you—entertaining. It just happened to be a bad time for it. If this had all been just a game, she would have been enjoying it so much.

Why was it?

It felt like she was talking to an old friend. The topics were always the same and she knew what was coming, but she wasn’t getting tired of it. On the contrary, it was somehow comforting...

[[...Weird. It feels like I’m actually getting somewhere with you.]] Even Embryo had to admit it. [[Even Sidewinder never spoke to me this much.]]

“Girls gossip a lot. If there’s someone to speak to, they’ll chat. Doesn’t matter who it is, half the time.”

She had, in fact, surprised herself with this remark. With the egg hanging at her chest, she snuck into the convenience store.

“OK, shut up now. If someone hears your voice, there’ll be trouble.”

[[Gotcha. Even though you’re not just gonna bump into any old person who can hear me that easily.]]

“I just told you to shut up, didn’t I...?!” said Akiko, raising her voice slightly.

She looked around hurriedly. There weren’t any customers inside. There was the shop clerk, but they were far away and in mid-yawn. She sighed with relief.

And then...

“...I’m sorry,” came a voice at her back.

She turned with a fright to see a woman standing there. It wasn’t that there were no customers. The woman had been right behind her. It was just that her presence was so subtle, she hadn’t noticed.

“I couldn’t help noticing you were muttering to yourself. Was I too loud?” asked the woman quietly.

It seemed she’d thought the “shut up now” had been addressed to her. Which meant that she hadn’t heard Embryo’s voice. That much was a relief. But Akiko had seen something else—something that was not relieving in the slightest.

*S-she's...*

From her back to her shoulders, there clung a faint black shadow. It was a vision of life spilling out that only she could see. But this woman didn't seem particularly injured, or even ill. And yet, if she was seeing such a thing, then...

*This person... Very soon, she'll die...*

And this was visible to her now.



8

“Then, amidst the chaos, it sees a ray of  
light...”



Half a year ago, Kakizaki Minayo quit her job. She was still living alone in her apartment off allowances from her family and unemployment insurance.

She'd quit the job for personal reasons, not because she was fired. No one knew why she quit—not her superiors, nor her co-workers with whom she ate lunch and spent most of her day.

It was, in fact, for one of the most clichéd reasons that a woman would quit her job: because of a man. She was pregnant.

But before the baby could grow bigger in her belly, she'd miscarried. Since then, she'd spent her days in a daze. Her daily schedule consisted of cleaning her apartment daily for no real reason—it wasn't all that large—and instead of cooking, she'd go out to the convenience store to buy bentos or whatever was on offer, eat what she'd bought, then sleep. This was the monotonous lifestyle she led. She probably should have been looking for a new job or gone back to her parents, but it was too much of a hassle for her to think about such things.

Then, one day, she went out as usual to the convenience store to buy food.

“Oh, they don’t have that toothbrush anymore...” she muttered to herself, looking at the display shelves. She hadn’t met with or spoken to anyone lately, so she had gotten into the habit of speaking to herself. She spoke quietly, of course, so her voice was almost imperceptible to others.

“Oh well... I suppose I’ll go for this one.”

Then, just as she picked up the product...

“I just told you to shut up, didn’t I...?!” came a voice from behind her suddenly.

Surprised, she turned around and saw what looked like a high-school girl standing there.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, and the girl turned to face her.

She looked a little pale. That, and Minayo’s apology had snapped her out of something.

“O-oh, no. Not at all... Sorry, I wasn’t talking to you.”

Now she was apologizing.

“...?” Minayo was baffled. The girl continued.

“U-uhm... Excuse me...!” She began to say something but couldn’t seem to express it. Her lips were trembling.

“Can I help you?” asked Minayo in response.

“U-uh, well... A-are you okay?!” she blurted out.

“...What?”

“D-did something, uhm...t-terrible happen to you?” she asked suddenly.

Minayo’s eyes went wide. “Sorry...?”

“S-something must have happened! The way you’re going right now... No, uh... how do I even explain this? It-it’s dangerous!”

There was a serious look in her eyes. An urgency. Not at all like one of those evangelists who possess a strange self-assurance and confidence, with whom you feel like you’re being talked down to. There was none of that.

It was as if... Almost as if she was acting the way Minayo had herself just a short while ago, she thought.

She decided to go along with her for now and leave the store, as it was difficult to talk inside.

“Err, you are..?” Minayo asked the girl, as they sat on a nearby bench.

“Honami Akiko. Ah—” Just as she’d said it, she winced. Maybe it was a bad idea to give away her name.

“Honami-san? Tell me, what exactly is dangerous for me?”

“Ah, well, that’s... Err...”

“Do you know me? Because I don’t recall you.”

“No, I don’t know you. We’ve never met before, but, the thing is...”

She was all over the place and wouldn’t get to the point. With resignation, Minayo introduced herself and asked her a number of questions.

She learned that Akiko was indeed a high-schooler—at Shinyo Academy, apparently. Minayo wondered if that was why she was here now, but she was hesitant to elaborate on that.

Ultimately, she had absolutely no idea why it was so important for this girl to speak to her.

“...You said something odd earlier. You asked me if I was okay?”

“Y-yeah, I did.”

“Can you tell me...why I wouldn’t be?”

“W-well...because of your li-“

“Li-?”

“Your...life.” Akiko had struggled to come out with it, but at last stated it clearly.

In that moment, Minayo’s face froze.

The day he proposed to her was the day that she herself realized that she was pregnant and had begun fretting whether or not to tell him. She cried.

“Silly,” he said with a smile. But she still couldn’t smile—the tears wouldn’t stop.

Then a week later, completely unexpectedly, he died. It was a traffic accident, the most commonplace and trivial of things. He was crossing an intersection, when suddenly he was hit by a car who’d ignored the traffic lights. The car had also failed to swerve and crashed into a concrete wall—the driver was killed instantly. There had been nowhere for her to direct her anger.

She came to realize then, now that she thought about it, that nobody had known about him and her. They were co-workers at the same company and workplace relationships were forbidden, so she’d kept it secret. They were planning on introducing themselves to their parents but hadn’t gotten as far as contacting them yet.

And then she’d even lost the life growing in her womb. When it had happened, she couldn’t have imagined that that was what it was, but then the doctor shook his head and informed her that it was a miscarriage.

“It was still in the fetal stage, so you wouldn’t have exhibited many symptoms yet. There is...no longer a child in your belly.”

She didn’t know how to react. It was only once she’d quit her job that she realized everything had essentially been “wiped clean.” She couldn’t stay at work. Not because she was afraid that they might find out about her relationship with him; it was just that she couldn’t be there anymore. Going on working at the same place like normal, without him... The thought was unbearable.

But simply quitting her job wasn’t going to help her get by either. If she didn’t keep up, the trash in her room would start to pile up. Though she was living in a daze, tidying up such things was like a daily ritual.

Just mindlessly living. There was likely no reason for it. Maybe that’s just how it had to go.

But...now...

Now this girl she’d never met before was telling her that her life was in danger.

Why?

Why would my life be something that matters?

“Life...”

The moment she heard the word, something in Minayo changed. It was as if everything had gone out of focus, a vacant look on her face.

“Yeah...that’s right. I know it sounds weird, but—” Akiko shook her head and struggled to find the words. She had no idea how she’d explain this, but she had to get the message across somehow.

“What do you mean by that? ‘Life?’” Minayo looked pale—white as a sheet. “You mean I’ve lost my reason for living...? Is that what you’re saying?”

“N-no, how do I put this? I see *death* in you. No, that’s not right...”

Akiko was frantic. Why were everyday words so lacking? Whenever she tried to explain the part that really mattered, it kept coming out wrong. It was so debilitating. How did she ever manage to communicate with others until now if she was this inept?

But while Akiko was stumped for words, Minayo herself spoke up.

“You think there’s a reason, do you?” she said in a hushed voice. “What makes you so sure something like that exists?”

“Huh?” Akiko was taken aback by the sudden fierceness in her voice. She didn’t know that she had inadvertently flipped the switch which had been hidden away—and which Minayo had been keeping hidden—within her heart this whole time.

“Why are any of us alive right now? Who gets to decide a thing like that?!” she exploded.

*Wh-what?*

Amid Akiko’s confusion, Embryo chimed in.

[[It’s her heart.]]

*Huh? What now?*

[[People’s hearts are like a ticking time bomb... Just waiting for their moment to go off, even if they don’t realize it themselves... Same for her. She must’ve been waiting this whole time for the moment she can feel it’s okay for her to die.]]

*W-wait, what? Th-then...*

Even as she continued her conversation, which was inaudible to others, Minayo’s tirade went on.

“I... Why am I alive? He’s dead. My baby’s gone. But I’m still here... What the hell is this?!”



She'd been bottling it up all along, stopping herself from thinking about it. That, and she couldn't endure thinking about it. The human mind automatically saves the content of its thoughts from exhaustion; once she'd subconsciously thought it, she'd instinctively avoided dulling her resolve for when the time came.

The worst barrier to resolve and action is really "habit." Even when you have the most pressing issue before you, if you keep thinking you'll do it some other time, it'll eventually fall by the wayside. She'd known this deep down, which was why she tried not to think about it.

But somewhere along the way, her resolution had petered out. This was why, even living alone, she'd always clean her room till it was spotless, why there was never any spoiled food in the fridge. Because she'd make do with buying things from the store, even down to the smallest thing.

Her preparations to avail herself of this world were already long finished.

She didn't know herself when the time would come. Maybe she'd slump onto a busy road. Or fall onto the train platform. Or climb over the railing of a building's roof.

She'd be acting in a fit of despair, perhaps. But the truth of it was that she'd been waiting for this to happen for so long, and now...

“I-I... I...”

...But then she realized.

“I..I wanted to die along with him...!” she cried, and fell to the ground sobbing, her forehead pressed to her knees.

“.....”

Akiko didn't know what to do. She could more or less guess the circumstances from what she'd been saying—that she'd lost someone very important to her and the shock had subconsciously driven her to wanting to follow them to the grave. Akiko was right on the mark.

[[So? What'cha wanna do?]] butted in Embryo again.

*W-what do you do in this kind of situation?*

How could anyone know that? She was just a teenager . What could she possibly say to a grown-up woman who wanted to kill herself?

“Uh...Minayo-san?”

Even so, she managed to wring out her voice. She had to say something. If she let this be, the woman might really jump

out onto the road and kill herself. After all, death was half-poking out of her already.

“I don’t know what it is exactly that happened to you, and I’m sure I probably wouldn’t understand even if I asked you for the details, but...” She took a long, deep breath. “But I know that the pain you’re feeling is so bad, you feel like you want to die. And it’s not an exaggeration to say that. I know it’s not the sort of thing that goes away after a while. The way you’re going right now, you really will die.”

She desperately squeezed out her voice, on the verge of trembling. “So...let me ask you this. Are you trying to take revenge on the people who died...because they did something terrible to you?”

“.....”

Minayo’s shoulders twitched.

“They left you behind, died before you did, and it’s so cruel of them that you can’t take it. That’s what you’re thinking? That’s why you want to die? Even though these people would never, ever have wanted you to die? Or is that the reason? You feel like you want to die because you want to say to them, ‘serves you right’...? Because that’s the way it looks to me.”

“.....” Minayo didn’t answer.

“If that’s the case, then the fact that you met these people... No, even if they’d never been born and you had never met them, um... Even that desire for them to be born... If you’ve decided that you’re going to kill yourself, then all of that would, uh... It would all be for nothing.”

The words from Akiko’s mouth were like a poorly read speech. Minayo didn’t move.

“Living is... I’m sure it’s, uh...not really all that fun, really. There are lot more painful things than nice things, so it’s true that it would be a lot easier to just die. But...but at least, you feel sorrow for the life that once tried to be born, and that alone should be, um...”

Akiko clammed up once again, but quickly resumed.

“You have a responsibility not to be crushed by the weight of that sadness. Otherwise, it’d mean that that life existed only to cause you hurt. Is that what you want it to be? Is that really the kind of thing you’d wish for?” She finished with a gulp.

“.....”

Minayo was still frozen stiff, face looking down. But eventually, her shoulders began to tremble.

“.....Ohh...” A small sound escaped her lips. “.....Oohhh, ohhh...” It was different to her crying until now—a moan, almost.

“Ohhhhhh.....!” And then she began to stamp on the ground with her feet. Again, and again, wailing like a child having a tantrum, stomping up and down on the spot.

She was bawling her eyes out.

It was a rampage brought on by the most intolerable vexation. Her sadness hadn’t subsided at all, and even if it were to lessen in future, it would never fully disappear. And yet...the reason why she was frustrated was because she was openly expressing her anger—the anger of having to relinquish her feelings. The “death” from her back had already disappeared.

By the time she raised her face, bright red from weeping her eyes out, Honami Akiko was gone.

“Haah, haah, haah...”

After she had run away, Akiko sank to the floor inside the cave.

[[Gotta hand it to you... that was one helluva speech,]]  
piped up Embryo. [[Never thought you had it in ya... To be honest, I thought—]]

“Just shut up!” yelled Akiko. “You’ve got to be kidding me! All of this is just... I can’t take it with these powers anymore!” Now she, too, was in tears. “It’s too much! I can’t deal with seeing people’s death! I’ve had enough!”

She scrunched up her face and shook her head over and over. “Am I...going to have to see things like that all the time? To think up that kind of stuff every single time? There’s no way!”

Sitting there was just an ordinary girl. There was no trace of the attitude she’d had when she weaved those stirring words just a short while ago.

The truth was, not even the words had really belonged to her. They’d been borrowed from some girl who had said those things to her. She didn’t recall where it was, or who—only that it was a girl her age. Maybe it was... No, she couldn’t remember.

Then there was Kyou-nii-chan. If that kid had been alive, he might have said something like that. But he was long dead. She didn’t really have anything she felt she ought to say to a

woman who wanted to kill herself. The only reason she could was because that lady was sure she was loved by the departed. Not many people in the world were as lucky.

It was sheer luck. If she'd encountered someone with a different set of circumstances, what would she have done then?

“I give up. Just make it stop. Help me...” whimpered Akiko, as she planted herself on the ground.

[[You want me to help?]] Embryo asked. [[In that case...]]

“I'm sick and tired of you always telling me to kill you!” she yelled.

But Embryo responded in a calm voice. [[How about Takashiro Tooru? Wouldn't he be able to help you?]]

“Huh?”

[[If you met up with him, think it'd ease your pain a little?]]

“What are you talking about? Y-you mean... you know where Tooru-san is...?”

[[...Can't say for sure, but I've got a feeling I might be able to... 'call' him.]]

\* \* \* \* \*

“You’re free to go,” said the guard.

“.....” But Tooru wouldn’t move. He stayed stock still, eyes closed.

“...I-I’m telling you to leave!”

The guard was one of the people who’d tried to stop this guy from hitting his head against the wall in a rampage and got dragged around by him, so he was a little afraid to make a move.

“J-just hurry it up! There’s already a surety here to pick you up!”

Tooru’s shoulders twitched at the guard’s panicked voice. He had no next of kin, so the people it could be were limited to those involved in the current incident.

He opened his left eye. It was a dark cell, where no light shone.

“Kirima-san?”

“A man by the name of Teratsuki. He’s about your age.”

“Teratsuki...?”

He wasn’t familiar with the name.

“It’s written in the log, Teratsuki Kyouichirou. Come on now, get outta here!”



At last, Tooru lifted himself up and carried his large, slender body out of the cell. As he was being escorted out of the station, he pondered. The name Teratsuki Kyouichirou really didn't ring a bell.

And when he reached the room, Tooru caught the eyes of that man. He briefly held his breath.

“...Yo.”

The man recognized him and raised a hand. He was indeed young, but...

“.....”

As for who it was, Tooru already knew.

\* \* \* \* \*

“So, what'cha wanna eat?”

After leaving the police station, the man who had acted as surety had taken Tooru by foot to a family restaurant. The lack of customers suggested there were better establishments in the area. Tooru noticed as the man was opening the menu that his hands were covered with silk gloves.

“...Let's cut to the chase, Habara Kentarou-san,” said Tooru in a low voice.

The man smirked. He appeared not to have any qualms about acting under a false name.

“So you knew.”

“Kirima-san showed me a photo of Masaki. You were in it too.”

“I see. Well, that makes things simple,” Kentarou said with a nod. “I’m a friend of Nagi’s. Close with Masaki too. I’ve known him at least longer than you. Nagi’s doing all she can to locate the missing Honami siblings, which is why I headed over to you.”

“...How’s Masaki’s condition?”

“Bad,” said Kentarou, without missing a beat. Tooru went silent, unable to find a response. Nor did Kentarou continue.

As the silence grew heavy, the waitress came to take their orders. Kentarou went ahead and ordered two orange juices without asking Tooru. Once the drinks had been brought to them, Kentarou sighed.

“All right... Before we get down to business, I need to see what you can do.”

“...Hm?” Tooru lifted his head and looked at Kentarou.

“What can you do?” asked Kentarou calmly.

“.....”

After a brief silence, Tooru picked up the cold drink and gulped it straight down. He placed the empty glass back down on the table and flicked the rim with his index finger. It spun around and around until eventually, it split clean in two. Each half rolled onto the table.

“.....”

Tooru then took the two halves, put them together, and used the straw that had come with the orange juice to suck up a drop of Kentarou’s water and let it drip onto the cut plane. Finally, he handed the glass back to Kentarou.

“Wow...”

Kentarou spun it around a bit to test it, but the glass, which should have by all accounts been severed in half, was being held together by the water’s surface tension, and held firm. The cut had been so clean that the pieces adhered to each other in the same way that two sheets of plate glass stick to each other with water.

“What’s the logic behind that?”

“I could see the line that told me where to tap it to make it split. That’s where I hit it,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Got it... Interesting power.”

Kentarou knocked the glass on the table a few times, but the pieces held fast. If the staff continued to rinse it, then it was possible that the water acting as an adhesive would never dry up and it would stay like this forever.

“So what you’re saying is, you can find weak points and attack them, yeah? Makes for a pretty decent combat ability.”

“...What do you want me to do?”

“You know the guy you went mano-a-mano with?”

Kentarou instead replied with another question. “The one who got you good...this ‘Fortissimo’ guy? Seems he holds a special position even within the Towa Organization... Far as I can tell, it doesn’t look like they even treat him as much of an ally.”

“...What of it?” asked Tooru, staring into Kentarou’s eyes. Kentarou didn’t return eye contact.

“Towa might not be keeping him in check... That’s what it’s looking like. In which case, say he were to in some way abandon his mission and go on a rampage, it’d be the perfect chance to catch Towa red-handed... They’re sure to let something slip. If we can exploit that, we’ll get to gather a whole motherlode of data.

“...What are you getting at?”

“Nagi...” Unsurprisingly, Kentarou didn’t answer his question directly. “Someday or other, she’s gonna take Towa head on. It’ll happen, no question. So in preparation for that time, I personally need to learn as much as I can about our opponent. Since right now, even Nagi herself barely knows anything about them...” Kentarou sighed. “I still don’t even know if it’s a good idea to tell her. But I know that I want to do as much as I can to prepare for it.”

“...Who are you to Kirima-san?”

“An aspiring sidekick. Nah...to be precise, she saved me once. So yeah, Nagi, she’s my benefactor.”

“.....” Tooru lowered his eyes. “So...you’re telling me to fight. That I should...confront Fortissimo again?”

“Don’t tell Nagi. If she knew, she’d stop you for sure. After all, you’ve got next to no chance.”

“...That, I know.”

“Then it’s perfect. I’ll arrange a location that works in your favor. Already got a way to get his attention, too. All you need to do is focus on your battle.” Kentarou rattled all this off impassively, but what he was essentially asking Tooru was for him to die.

“...Are you telling me to take revenge for Masaki, even if it costs me my life?” asked Tooru, at which Kentarou suddenly grabbed his drink and drained it dry.

“Ahh...” he sighed, placed the glass back down, and continued in a low voice.

“You’ve met Orihata-chan, right? This is for her. She won’t cry.”

“Huh...?”

“Her beloved Masaki’s wavering on the edge of life and death, and the girl won’t shed a single tear. She doesn’t look sad about it... Just sits as his side, watching over him. Day and night, the whole time.”

“.....”

“There’s no way me or Nagi can be in that place... We can’t stand being there a second longer... You know exactly what I mean, don’t you, Tooru-san?” For the first time, Kentarou looked straight at Tooru. Tooru in that moment was keenly aware of the man’s anger, anger at his being the cause of Masaki’s terrible plight.

“It’s not you or me fighting for Masaki. It’s Orihata Aya. She’s the one doing it...!” His voice was forced, quaking.

“There’s nothing else any of us can do. So...I have to do this. A

halfwit like me has to at least use this opportunity to give Nagi's future some hope...!"

Though Kentarou's words were through clenched teeth, they were almost loud enough that others might hear him at any moment.

"....."

Tooru was silent.

Kentarou took out a cash card and threw it on the table.

"It's counterfeit. There's only one store you can use to withdraw from, but there should be about two mil on there. Keep your face hidden from the camera, take out as much as you can from the self-service ATM, then make a quick exit and the money's yours. They won't trace you—the goods come from somewhere with no connection to you."

"....."

Tooru didn't pay much interest in it. It was more of an advance payment than a reward. Taking it would equate to him taking the job. Even so, he wasn't interested in looking at it. Instead, his one eye was staring vacantly into space, as if he was gazing inside himself.

"...Are you gonna do it or not? Which is it?" asked Kentarou, glaring.

“...Why did you come to me?”

“What?”

“If I didn’t plan on accepting your proposition, what would you have done?”

“What, are you gonna bail?”

“...That’s not what I’m asking. Why would you ask me? To take such a risk and trust me?” Tooru asked, his expression serious.

But Kentarou shook his head. “Sorry to burst your bubble, but I don’t trust you one bit. It’s just...”

“...Hm?”

“Masaki and Nagi trusted you. So I don’t have much choice but to trust you too. If you betray that trust, well, not much I can do about that.” He shrugged.

“.....”

Tooru could not comprehend this man, this Habara Kentarou in front of him. He had no idea what he was thinking. But one thing alone was clear: If Tooru were to turn him down, he would undoubtedly move on to some other plan. He was the sort of person who covered all his bases.

And one other thing...



“...And you promise to keep this a secret from Kirimasan?” Tooru reminded him.

“If she found out, she might never talk to me again,” said Kentarou simply.

Tooru nodded and took the credit card. They had an agreement.

“You said you could pick a location for me. What are my options?”

At this, Kentarou pulled out a few pages from his shoulder bag and handed them to Tooru.

“Pick one you like from those.”

Written on them was a list of different buildings, each one a large-scale construction designed for a special purpose. And to the side of each one, some curious notes were written. The details of which, as Tooru read them, gave rise to an evident question.

“How do you know all this stuff? What are these?”

“They’re legacies. Of some man, a nobody,” said Kentarou quietly. “A little something that happened gave me cause to snoop them out. I did some research and whaddaya know, buildings of that sort started popping up all over the place. So I went to check them out, but...” Kentarou sighed.

“Thinking about it, it wasn’t all that hard to guess. Of course the Towa Organization were gonna scope them out too. But they still left them abandoned. Meaning it’s extremely likely that they’re leaving them as bait, waiting for them to be used. That made it kinda hard for me to find a good use for them. I was stumped. But now...” He smirked. “Now we can make use of their traps. They’ll need to have checked the place if we want to use that to trick our opponent.”

“.....”

He couldn’t keep up with half of what Kentarou was saying. It seemed the man had already been fighting with someone many times in the past. This information was a byproduct of that.

But if he was in this deep, then...

“.....”

Tooru looked back at Kentarou’s hands. They were covered in silk gloves. Then...he was making sure not to leave fingerprints. Tooru was convinced that Kentarou hadn’t directly touched this perfectly ordinary copy paper, nor the printed paper scraps with common lettering .

“Burn those, would you?” said Kentarou, as though reading his mind.

“.....”

Tooru’s eye returned to the documents. One thing in particular stood out, and his eyes narrowed.

“This one.” He showed it to Kentarou.

“Hm?” Kentarou saw it and frowned. “Really? Is this a pun on what I just said? ”

“It’s the perfect location,” said Tooru quietly.

“...All right. Well, if you say so. Though, if you’re counting on the remote possibility of getting Fortissimo caught in an ‘accident’ given all the prep, I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

“I know,” said Tooru calmly, shaking his head.

“...Well, whatever. Okay then, we’ve got our place. Incidentally...” Kentarou took out his cellphone. “Do you happen to have some kind of secret code that only you and Fortissimo would recognize?”

“Hmm?”

“You did talk to each other, right? Wasn’t there anything like, I dunno, a keyword? Something other people wouldn’t recognize you by, but Fortissimo would straight away, or something?”

After a brief silence, Tooru soon started laughing. It was a strange laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing... Habara-san, in the end, you don’t really care what happens to me, do you?” Tooru had now slipped completely into a casual way of talking.

“Whether I fight or run away, none of that matters. Really the number one thing you need is this keyword to lure Fortissimo out, isn’t it? With it, he’ll have accepted someone’s challenge, and that fact alone is good enough for you.”

“.....”

“I did think it was strange. Preparing all this money and finding an arena... You never believed I would really want to fight. Any normal person would panic and never want to fight again. But there’s this thing called pride, isn’t there? Anyone can claim that they’ll fight. They’d want money, too. So you could achieve your objective no matter who the opponent is. Heh heh, you’ve really thought this through.”

“...Yeah, so what?” Kentarou appeared a little taken aback at Tooru’s sudden loquaciousness.

“Oh, don’t you worry. You wanted a keyword, yes? There’s one, indeed. Something that came from Fortissimo’s very mouth. ‘Inazuma.’ That’s something that only he’ll understand.”

“Inazuma? As in, the straight-up Japanese meaning?”

“I wonder. But he’ll recognize it, for sure.” Tooru grinned.

“...All right then, I’ll believe you. Inazuma, eh...? Will he get it if I write that in English?”

“I’m sure he will. It sounds even more like a secret code that way,” Tooru said with a grin.

“Right, well, I’ve kept my side of the deal. You better not go check out the site for the battle now. It’ll be pretty damn dangerous.”

There was an insincerity in his voice—Kentarou really didn’t trust him. But Tooru knew. He might not know what would become of Taniguchi Masaki’s older sister, Kirima Nagi, but what he did know was that when that time came, she would need Habara Kentarou’s help. Tooru could do this without a guilty conscience.

Fighting was something he did. Not because anyone ordered him to—it was merely a self-conceited act to fulfil his own personal desire.

As such, he didn’t need any awkward camaraderie here. He had to rid himself of people’s kindness.

“.....”

Kentarou poked around on his cell phone to enter some characters and then passed it to Tooru.

“Push the send button and the message’ll go through. Throw the thing away after that.”

“Yes, sir. I just need to push send?”

“Don’t do it here. Wait till you’re at least a kilometer away. Doubt it’ll be traced, but you can never be too careful.”

“Ha ha! One button press for two million, eh?” Tooru accepted the phone, now wholly amused.

“The date and time are written there in the document.”

“Heh heh. I’ve never challenged someone to a duel before. Never stood them up either. Oops, or should I not have said that part out loud?”

Tooru filed the document away in his pocket and then made to stand up.

“Right, well, I doubt the two of us will ever meet again, so...”

“Yeah, I doubt it. ...Ah, hold on.” Kentarou put a hand in his pocket and produced a key. “Take this with you. It opens the big coin locker at the underground station’s east gate.”

Tooru took it and frowned. “What’s inside?”

“...A little under-the-counter extra for you. Something that goes against the law of swords and firearms possession.

<sup>3</sup>There’s a golf bag inside. Didn’t cost that much, but I’m told it’s the real deal, used to cut folk down. Made by some nameless swordsmith from the Sengoku era, apparently. After Grandpa died and we had to inherit his belongings, the thing showed up in a storehouse out in the countryside, wrapped in oil paper.”

“...Hm?”

“I wasn’t planning on giving it to you, really. Yeah, that’s right... I figured you’d just take the money and run.” Kentarou sighed with resignation, shaking his head. “Didn’t think you’d actually be a samurai. I misjudged you. Sorry,” he said, and bowed his head.

“...What are you saying?” Tooru was confused.

“Come on now... I may be a big-headed oaf, but if there’s one thing I can pride myself on, it’s this. When I met Nagi, I knew that second that she was something special. Somehow or other, I can tell when a person’s serious about something.

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<sup>3</sup> The law is fairly self-explanatory. This is the major Japanese weapon control law. Though, it has a uniquely Japanese flair thanks to it’s explicit mention of swords. This is because of various elements of Japanese history, including the Meiji Restoration ban on swords.

You're trying to stop me from going in any deeper, in spite of everything I dropped on you... Heh, I can get on board with that. I won't go anywhere near or get in your way. But hey, it should be fine for me to at least give you a parting gift, no?"

"....." Kentarou watched him silently.

"...Why?" Tooru asked at last. "Why are you all so kind to me...?" A drop of blood trickled from his missing eye. He clenched his fists. "...I humbly accept your gift."

Thus, as instructed, Tooru stood before the coin locker and retrieved its contents. There was indeed a golf bag stuffed inside. He opened it and there sat an overly thick odachi<sup>4</sup>, designed expressly for battle. Its sheath was blackened with a roughly-applied lacquer treated only to prevent rust, and its basic wooden hilt designed for practice swings. Outwardly,

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<sup>4</sup> An Odachi (大太刀 also referred to as a Nodachi [野太刀]) is basically a Japanese great sword (大太刀 literally means big long sword, with blades starting at around 90cm in length). While most katana in media are of the uchigatana variety (about 60cm long blades), Odachi were more prominent in actual battles. This very closely mirrors the practical uses of the longsword and the greatsword in western culture. Longswords and Uchigatana were more side arms and street self-defense weapons. Greatswords and Odachi were weapons of war.



these things suggested a plain and simple sword—one that had not been very well looked-after.

It was a weighty thing, far heavier than a one year-old baby .

“.....”

He drew the blade a little, hiding it behind the locker door.

The beauty of Japanese blades is often extolled, but this sword was not at all beautiful in that sense. It didn't gleam, but rather reflected a dull, subdued hue.

But Tooru knew at a glance—this sword had no lines to speak of. There was nothing fragile about it. It was an incredibly solid thing, through and through. Truly, it had to have been tempered so as never to break on the battlefield. In a fight, the sharpness of a sword actually takes second place. Sharpness gives rise to a shortfall when the blade dulls. After dozens of clashes, the sword is covered in mud, showered in blood, caked in grease...and becomes utterly unusable as a cutting implement, such as a box cutter. It becomes a tool for bludgeoning. What really cuts down the enemy is not, in fact, the sharpness of the blade, but the frightening speed with which the wielder strikes and draws back; in other words,

“friction” is the principle upon which a sword severs in true battle. It must be unyielding to be of any use.

This work of master swordsmanship had surely been used the very same way.

“.....”

Tooru took out the bag and slung it over his shoulder. He fished out the cell phone he was given as he walked out. A single press of the button and there would be no going back. Habara Kentarou, who now had to have been far away from here, had said something to him as they parted.

“You know, I think I heard somewhere that a samurai has this nuance of ‘one who knows shame.’ So if you think you can’t take this guy, running for it would be the samurai thing to do. You get that, right?”

“...You’re saying I shouldn’t fight him seriously?”

“I’m saying, don’t get yourself killed for nothing. I don’t really like this idiom ‘cause I personally like the animal, but... don’t take on an opponent you can’t beat just to take a jab at him and die like a dog.”

“A dog, is it?”

How does a dog who has lost its master go on living?

Tooru smiled wryly. Those were the words of someone who has a place to return to. He no longer had such a place.

He pushed the button effortlessly. Countless messages showed up on the phone's LCD screen. And casually displayed among them was the word:

“INAZUMA”

Once Tooru confirmed that it had really been sent, he tossed the phone into the rear of a nearby parked truck. The phone, whose weak point he had already struck, landed on a pile of gravel, split into pieces, and was lost in the heap.

\* \* \* \* \*

“.....”

Long after sunset in a deserted park, Kakizaki Minayo was still sitting there on a bench, her body slumped. She'd been wracked with the desperate urge to die, but that very thought was itself proof that the life force inside of her was slowly

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<sup>5</sup> It's worth mentioning that this novel uses some... odd romanization here for Inazuma. This was written in English in the original Japanese; however, it was spelt INNAZZUMA for some reason. We can't think of why this would be the case other than bad English, so we changed it to reduce confusion. Figured I'd mention it just in case though.

gaining strength. The words of that Honami Akiko girl had been spiraling around inside her head.

“...Ohhh...” She’d cried so much that her throat was parched. Even so, she couldn’t even stand up to buy a drink.

Then, before her, a figure emerged.

“Whatever are you doing out here?” they asked. It was a strange voice, one that was impossible to discern as male or female.

“...Shut up. Leave me alone.” Minayo forced out the words.

“Really? ...That can’t be pleasant. This desire to die, or what have you .”

Minayo must have been muttering to herself out loud.

“None of your damn business. People can think what they want, can’t they...?!”

“You’re absolutely correct,” the voice said playfully. “But if that’s so, why are you sitting out here? I can’t imagine anyone coming all the way out to such a place and crying unless, say, someone said something to you and you had an awful shock.”

“...Yeah, so why should any of that matter to you...?!”

“I happen to be looking for someone. Could you describe to me who it was that spoke to you?”

“...Who are you looking for?”

“My being automatic, I can’t say I know very well right now...but that person is carrying something very dangerous.”

“...Then it’s got nothing to do with me. Because the busybody who spoke to me was a girl called Honami Akiko.”

“Honami...Akiko?” The voice sounded surprised. “You’re sure that was her name?”

“I’m sure.”

“...Did she happen to say anything strange to you? Being able to ‘see your death,’ for instance?”

“Huh?” How could this person have known this?

Minayo lifted her head. It was dark, so she couldn’t see very well, but from their clothes, the figure before her was less like a person and more a pipe that extended up from the ground.

“I see. So the one with the egg was Honami Akiko, the survivor of the miko... A strange quirk of fate indeed,” murmured the figure.

Then, they turned on their heel and vanished before the astonished Minayo like the wind.



9

“This is but one brief stage of growth within  
its shell...”

Swallow Bird's<sup>6</sup> human alias was Segawa Kazami. If this seemed unusual, it was because it was a stage name. But although it was the name she had been assigned, in reality she was in the curious position of having had neither the chance nor opportunity to use it in interpersonal relations. She used her career as an actress as a front and had featured in a number of films and TV dramas, even garnering a measure of popularity.

Swallow Bird was one of the Towa Organization's synthetic humans. She had no special objective. Rather, the standard directive of all infiltration-types was to "find and deal with MPLSes" or else "find and eliminate traitors," but besides these things, she had no particular orders.

And so it was that Swallow Bird had been assigned to *that* mission. She met the requirements for it too and had easy access to the location. No one would bat an eyelid at an actress visiting a first-rate hotel. To put it another way, a famous woman like her going all alone into a hotel might raise

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<sup>6</sup> I haven't been able to find anything worth noting about song references with this one. As far as I know, the meaning of her name only comes from the bird. It's worth noting, however, that swallows are a type of songbird, which could justify considering her name a reference to music in some way, similar to how Fortissimo isn't a reference to a specific song.



suspicions, but it was dubious in a way that the Towa Organization had absolutely no qualms with.

*Even so...*

Dressed to the nines, wearing a fur coat and sunglasses, she pondered as she walked through the lavish interior of the hotel lobby.

*We're talking Towa here, so it's pretty much a given that they'd be monitoring my performance on this mission, right...?*

Given who she was dealing with, most certainly.

Fortissimo. She'd been told to test the waters with the man (or woman—she wasn't sure) lauded as the Strongest One. If he really was showing signs of defiance, she was essentially being told to go and get herself killed.

*What to do...*

Towa didn't like people sticking out too much. She knew about someone who'd been taken out just the other day.

Most importantly, though, she had in fact already lost her sense of loyalty to them. If there was something she could do to rectify that, then so be it.

“Segawa-sama?” The concierge in the lobby bowed and came out to receive her.

“The room I reserved. You have it ready?”

“Of course, madam.”

“I came here because I heard this was a first-rate hotel. I do hope that’s the case.”

She had to wonder what was first-rate about the place. As someone who liked simple things, the lavish atmosphere didn’t suit her at all. Her back felt itchy just thinking about it.

“Absolutely, madam. We are confident you’ll be satisfied.”

She signed in, picked up her room key, then shared the elevator ride with the bellboy, who carried her luggage. They passed a shopping mall on the floor below, and when there was a direct path to her room, the bellboy reached out his hand.

“...Here’s the key.”

“Thank you.”

Swallow Bird accepted the spare key for the suite in which Fortissimo and the Honami siblings were lying low.

She wondered if her contact was human or synthetic, but quickly decided that it wouldn’t make a difference to her either way. So long as she hadn’t been given instructions to work in tandem, it was better for her to ignore this one. There was no point wondering if he was monitoring her. The key to survival was never to do more than you were asked.

The more pressing issue was in discerning what kind of person this “Fortissimo” was.

*Has he or she done something to arouse Axis’s suspicion?  
Or is this person so incredible that they’ve become the subject  
of constant monitoring?*

If they really did intend to oppose Towa in earnest, how should she act? If the rumors really were true, then their battle capabilities had to be exceptional. She’d never stand a chance. She had no desire to fight—though she didn’t imagine she’d be allowed to just walk away, either.

*What do I do...?*

When the elevator had stopped at her requested floor, the bellboy scurried out with her luggage. But instead of getting off, she had to go higher.

“.....”

She continued to fret the whole ascent. But this was a dangerous train of thought; she dares not even mutter it aloud.

She wondered if this could in fact be the chance she was waiting for...

*If Fortissimo really is planning on betrayal, it might be  
better for me to join them... That’s right, they are the*

*Strongest One, after all. There'd be no greater ally to rely on. Although...*

She didn't know if Fortissimo was the type who'd want allies. If they said they didn't need any, she'd be a traitor *and* of no use to Fortissimo, with nowhere else to turn. That was the one thing she couldn't let happen.

*How do I play this...?*

Still undecided, Swallow Bird arrived at Fortissimo and the Honami siblings' suite. When the elevator doors slid open, already a portion of the suite floor lay before her. There was a corridor, but no numbered rooms. These rooms all belonged to the same guests.

"....."

She took a step forward. "Mr. Lee? Are you there?" she called out.

No answer.

"Sir...?" She tried knocking on the closest door just to make sure, but it wasn't properly closed and swung open as she struck it. There was nobody inside.

"What...?" She peered around the room, but there was no trace of Fortissimo or the Honami siblings. They were gone.

"...What does this mean?"

She was confused. She wasn't sure how to report this. Was Fortissimo even at this location?

*Was this not a trap that Towa laid out to test me...?*

Unless she thought otherwise, how could anyone escape from a room on the top floor of a high-rise hotel without anyone noticing?

In any case, it wasn't her responsibility if Fortissimo wasn't here. She'd have to report this. There was the contact from before. He should still be in the room she'd booked to spend the night.

*Shit. What does this mean?*

Swallow Bird got on the elevator and started going back down. As soon as she arrived at the reserved room, she lifted her voice.

“Hey, what's going on here?! There's neither hide nor hair of Fortissimo in—“ She broke off mid-sentence. “...Huh?”

Her contact was there, all right, but he was lying flat out in the center of the room, the whites of his eyes visible. He wasn't moving a muscle.

And on the sofa across from him sat a man, who began to speak to her.

“Can’t say I’m especially hiding my hide or my hair, though,” he chuckled.

“.....”

She didn’t know the man—he looked almost boyish—but there was no doubt about it.

“Y-you’re...Fortissimo?”

This was unexpected. She hadn’t thought he’d approach her... But now that she thought about it, if there was no way for them to have escaped the hotel unnoticed, the logical conclusion was that they hadn’t gone downstairs... She’d been blindsided.

“So uh, what should I call you?” he asked, as she stood there rooted to the spot.

“Swallow Bird...sir.”

“Aha. Nice name,” he nodded. “So, Swallow Bird, I take it the Towa Organization issued you an order to find out what I’m up to?”

“...That’s right,” she answered honestly.

She knew that it was futile to resist. With her power, she could see into people’s minds—using her enhanced eyesight, she could read them through close observation of their facial skin. So she knew.

This man wouldn't spare a second thought about killing her. Even when he had the luxury to relax, he didn't let his guard down for a moment. If she made even the slightest misstep, he'd attack her instantly.

Yet despite this, he wasn't displaying a trace of hostility toward her. She knew this for a fact. She didn't know what he was up to, but this meant that Fortissimo hadn't turned against Towa.

"So, what are you planning to do?" he asked, grinning.

"...Did you kill him?" Her eyes turned to the bellboy on the floor.

"What if I did?"

"Ah, I just thought that if you did, it would be a pity. He hadn't revealed his identity to you. Since you approached him without informing him that you were a member, I would think that was rather imprudent," she said coldly. On the inside, she was shaking like a leaf.

"Huh," he snorted, seemingly impressed. "Calm judgment. Your answer works whichever side I'm on. You're a smart one."

"...Thank you."

“Are you curious? About which side I’m on? ...Stupid question, huh. You already know full well. I see, so that’s your power.” Fortissimo nodded to himself. One had to doubt at this point who was reading who.

“There are things my power can’t work out,” she said, and Fortissimo smirked.

“I’ll bet. So? Are you going to make sure of those things?”

“If necessary.”

“That’s what you think, but I do wonder how that’s going to go down.”

“...Meaning?”

“Towa might have sent you here to gauge my reaction, it’s true. After all, those guys never said a word to me.”

“...Hm?”

Swallow Bird was lost. He wasn’t making sense.

“Do you know why you were dispatched here all of a sudden? Why it is you had to suddenly find out what Fortissimo’s up to?”

A grin was still plastered on Fortissimo’s face. Swallow Bird felt a chill run up her spine. What? What was he trying to say?



*Don't tell me... He's trying to whisper something in my ear I mustn't know?*

Something that, if she were to learn of it, would by its own merit warrant her disposal at Towa's hands...

"...There's no need for me to know such a thing." She could barely wring out the words.

"Oh really? Then what if I told you that if you don't want to know, *I'll kill you here, right where you stand?*"

His look was deadly serious. His words were neither lies nor jest.

".....!"

Swallow Bird was struck dumb.

...From the adjacent bedroom, Pearl and Honami Hiroshi peered in to watch the two of them talking. Their voices were subdued, however, and furthermore, they were using the Towa Organization's special language, rendering it impossible to follow even a single detail of their conversation.

*Damn. Did the code change since I was there?*

The words were incomprehensible to Pearl too. She and Hiroshi had been made to move out of the upper suite with Fortissimo.

“But...that’s Segawa Kazami, right?” Hiroshi’s eyes grew wide when he saw the woman who’d come into the room. “Someone so famous, doing stuff in the shadows... I don’t believe it...”

Despite his words, he seemed oddly moved. Lucky for him, Pearl thought, mentally clicking her tongue.

Fortissimo had finally moved away from her, but now she had no escape route. The only entrance was in the room that the others were occupying. There were windows, but this was the twentieth floor. Pearl didn’t have any powers that would let her survive such a fall. She’d thought about jumping into another room’s window or smashing a wall, but if she did and revealed her identity in the process, it was unlikely that she’d be able to escape from Fortissimo and the woman who’d just arrived.

*...Not yet. My chance will come later...*

For now, she just had to be patient.

It looked like Fortissimo was toying with this surveillance woman. Her face was turning pale. Pearl could probably take her one-on-one, but the problem was Fortissimo, who seemed almost without weakness.

The two of them continued to talk.

“...Why do I need to know this?” Swallow Bird asked, despite her circumstance. Something about the man before her told her that if she kept silent, there was no telling what he’d do.

“Well, Miss Swallow Bird, that would be because rather than trying not to know anything, the smart thing to do would be to act like you don’t.” Fortissimo’s smile disappeared. “All the more so for the Towa Organization. If you did learn something here today, you could simply keep schtum, and no one would be any the wiser. If you know nothing, then you can’t act accordingly, can you? Am I wrong?”

“.....”

This wasn’t the kind of thing you’d say to someone who was monitoring you. And yet...

Swallow Bird nodded. “Valid point.”

“Glad you understand.” Fortissimo’s grin returned, and he tossed her the electronic notebook he’d been holding.

Swallow Bird caught it and looked at the screen. Something curious was written on it.

[[Attention, ff. INAZUMA<sup>7</sup> challenges thee to another duel.]]

That was the sense of the text, followed by a string of unintelligible symbols and numbers.

“What is this? It was sent to you?”

One could infer logically that “ff” pointed to Fortissimo by means of musical notation. The symbols and numbers likely referred to a time and place. But what was “Inazuma”?

“Looks like it was sent out all over the place, published in a bunch of different locations. Towa’s Axis is bound to be keeping an eye on it. Thing is, I can’t say for sure whether it really is addressed to Fortissimo or if it’s something unrelated. That’s about the size of it.”

“.....”

Swallow Bird thought, eyes fixed upon the screen.

Would the Towa Organization really have sent her specially to investigate this man when they could have done so by asking him directly? And to use such a roundabout approach, basing their judgment on the trend of the reports without informing her of the circumstances...

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<sup>7</sup> Again, like in the last Verse, this uses the spelling ‘INNAZZUMA.’

*So they really did send me to be first in line for the slaughter when this man betrays us...*

She was sure of it now. Which meant that this man was powerful enough that they had to tread especially carefully around him.

“...Why?” she asked suddenly.

“Hm?”

“Why don’t you consider fighting Towa?” She couldn’t say for certain that the question was pointless. She believed that he at least had the power to confront them.

“.....”

Fortissimo stared at her with upturned eyes. “...How much do you know?”

“Huh?”

“How much do you know about the Towa Organization? Have you, for instance, ever met with Axis directly?” he asked, his expression serious.

“You’re kidding, right? ...Of course not.” A vague grin rose to Swallow Bird’s lips. For a constructed being like herself, that sort of idea was a pipe dream.

“Me neither. You can’t even tell whether they’ve got a kind of committee, or if there’s some boss behind the scenes

personally pulling the strings. Is that something you'd want to know?"

"...I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious."

"Not like you'd ever find out, eh?"

"I suppose not, no."

"In my case, it's a little different. For me, finding that part out... It'd just piss me off." Fortissimo's face turned sour.

"Even the thought of it annoys me. When I think about how Towa's Axis might be something completely trivial and hollow, I feel incredibly put out... It would mean I've got nothing to sink my teeth into."

"Teeth?"

"In all my time, Towa's the biggest thing I've encountered, so I figured I'd stick around with them. Other folk just don't measure up. They set me up with places and opportunities for me to use my power. Except..."

Fortissimo glared once more at Swallow Bird.

"Except, if the most crucial part of it really is something totally pathetic... if it's nothing more than some admin program... then where in this world would I find my equal...? There'd be nothing else on the planet like that. And you can imagine what that would mean, couldn't you, *Miss*?"

“.....”

There was such keenness in his eyes, Swallow Bird couldn't utter a reply. Yet nor could she pull herself away from his gaze.

“Do you want to be my opponent for me? Have you got the strength that it takes? 'Cause if so, I'll gladly turn on Towa and be your enemy.”

He spoke with disinterest, but there was an icy coldness from deep within. Swallow Bird was no longer in a hurry to read his face. She didn't need to—he wasn't hiding a single thing.

“If you want to betray Towa, that's fine. I'm happy fighting them in your stead... But that's only if you have some kind of 'reason' to rival my power. So? How about it?”

“.....”

How about what? What he was saying was preposterous. But how was she supposed to answer him? The dark loneliness in this man's depths was not something anyone could fill. If she gave him an honest answer, her life was most likely forfeit. She had to bluff her way out somehow...

“...That...written challenge.” She began to weave her words out by force. “Do you intend to accept it, Fortissimo? Are you telling me, your overseer, to overlook this?”

“.....”

“Because if you do, I’ll report back that we just missed each other. I can always find you after the appointed date.”

“.....”

Fortissimo didn’t take his eyes off her, but the keenness in his eyes softened just a little, and it seemed that his attention had turned to other things.

“...I don’t know yet. I haven’t decided whether there’s any worth in it.”

“So, it’s making even *you* worry. That’s something at the very least, isn’t it?”

She had no idea of the details, and nor did she want to know, but she had to give it a shot—if only to stop staring down the barrel of the gun.

“...Could be,” Fortissimo said in a whisper, then lightly snorted. “‘If I play it this way, I can get away without having to fight this monster.’ That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it?”

“...I’m beside the point here. I believe that the problem lies in your heart.”



Swallow Bird refused to back down. If she did... if she disappointed this man, she knew that it would signal the end.

“.....”

For a while, Fortissimo was silent.

“Ah... Looks like they’re done talking.”

Even as Hiroshi whispered this, it looked as if they’d finished muttering about whatever it was they were discussing. Segawa Kazami lifted the man on the ground onto her shoulders and made for the exit. Given the way the man’s arms were twitching, it seemed that he had not been killed.

Fortissimo, now without further company, headed towards them. “You can come out now.”

As instructed, Hiroshi and Pearl poked their heads out from the bedroom.

“What were you even talking about?” Hiroshi asked without hesitation.

Fortissimo shrugged his shoulders. “No time for that,” he said abruptly, his meaning unclear.

“Huh?”

“It’s no fun if I’m always the one ‘accepting challenges’ in the ‘proper’ manner. Not exactly fair if I don’t give the other side a little incentive now, is it?” He was talking to himself.

“Uh, what? ...What are you talking about?”

But instead of answering, Fortissimo made a small motion with his index finger in Pearl’s direction. All the strength suddenly left her and she fell to the floor.

.....!

Pearl, still in the form of Honami Akiko, couldn’t move a muscle. To an onlooker, it would have almost looked as if she’d died, but she was fully in control of her mental faculties. He’d done something to her.

“Wha-...” Hiroshi was stunned. “N-Nee-chan?”

“I created a ‘gap’ in a section of her brain stem’s nerves... She can’t move her body, but there’s no risk to her life. If I reconnect the gap, she’ll return to normal,” Fortissimo explained coldly.

“Why are you doing this?!”

“She’s going to be my ‘hostage.’ For Takashiro Tooru, that is,” he stated frankly. “He gets to be the hero who fights to save his damsel-in-distress. I don’t want to be fighting an opponent who’s challenging me just to redeem himself. If I

were to defeat him now like that, it'd feel like I failed to finish him off before. In which case, it's much more refreshing for the both of us if I'm playing the 'bad guy.'”

Hiroshi had no idea what Fortissimo was saying. In any case, he grabbed a hold of his sister and shook her. She had a pulse. She was breathing, too, but showed no signs of stirring. It was as if her entire body had turned fully pliable, like a rubber doll.

“D-damn it! Turn Nee-chan back to normal!”

Fortissimo reached out and seized hold of him. No matter how much Hiroshi punched and kicked, Fortissimo wouldn't budge. Every part of him, even his clothes, was rock solid—Hiroshi may as well have been punching a stone slab. What the hell? Hiroshi was speechless at this impossible phenomenon.

“You're that worried about her, are you?” Fortissimo grinned. “Then you can carry her and come with me. Do you remember the first thing I told you? I said I would save *you*. I won't let you come to any harm. But...you better not regret it in hindsight.”

He gestured with his chin towards the immobile girl, as if to ask “Right?”

.....

Pearl was reflected in his eyes, but she didn't feel any fear. In fact, her thoughts were just the contrary.

*This is it! The chance I've been waiting for!*

Since he still hadn't killed her by this point, it was clear now that he was letting her live because he had some use for her. He may have immobilized her for now, but he'd have to release her at some point. And when that time came, that would be her one and only chance to survive and make her getaway.

*That's right... I won't give up. I refuse...!*

"C-come with you...? Where are you planning to go?" asked Hiroshi, carrying Pearl. His voice was shaking.

"Hm? Let's see..." He peered at his electronic notebook. "It's a code, so... we won't know the exact location until we get there, but if I had to take a rough guess, I'd say... Oh? Well, this is a surprise," he remarked. "It's right in the center of the city. Smack dab in the middle of the high-rise district."

\* \* \* \* \*

The skies were wonderfully clear that day, but the winds were strong; it was almost typhoon weather. Garden trees bent heavily, and few had taken to the streets thanks to the dust clouds whipping up around them. Discarded pamphlets spun and swirled through the air. People on the streets had no choice but to lean forward as they walked, holding down their bags for fear of them blowing away.

Amidst all this, one man walked as if wholly unaffected by the wind. He was slim, but large. His long, unkempt hair was about as messy as could be, but he appeared to pay it no mind.

He wore a T-shirt and jeans, unadorned by any belt or accessory, and a simple coat. He shouldered a golf bag, which looked very out of place, and had sunglasses on. Below one eye, on his right cheek, his raised scar was showing.

“.....”

It was Takashiro Tooru.

“Wind... That could be a slight hitch,” he said to himself quietly, then raised his head and looked up at the building that loomed before him.

It wasn't incredibly tall, but it extended quite some distance lengthwise. An ensemble of gorgeous interior decoration and design, it had been built to be the city's go-to

place for entertainment, lavishly integrating leisure facilities like cinemas and restaurants into a shopping mall complex. Its construction had had the joint backing of numerous different investors, but the corporate body at the time, MCE, was no more. Now it was in a strange position, absent of any tenants, the dominion of property insurance companies.

“Sphere” was its name. And as the name suggested, it had a rounded shape to it.

“.....”

Bag on shoulder, Tooru entered this “dome.” It being a shopping mall, the interior was staggeringly spacious. An overhead roof prevented the wind from getting inside, and people were casually strolling around. For noon in the middle of the week, it was unexpectedly busy. There was even a fountain at the center.

“Really? You’re just going to walk on by?”

Just as Tooru was passing by, he heard a voice right beneath him. He looked down to see a girl sitting on the fountain’s edge, pointing to something. He followed her finger to a fallen paper cup, whose juice had spilled out and was mixing in with the fountain water.

Tooru looked at his golf bag. There was a juice-like stain on one corner.

“Did I spill it? Sorry about that.”

He thought it odd as he hadn't felt anything, but the proof was right there, and so he bowed.

“No, I'm not really bothered about *that*.”

With her tartan skirt and black beret, the girl looked a little like a rich young lady, but she had something of a tomboyish attitude. Probably not uncommon for girls these days, he thought, not being very *au fait* with girls himself. And at the feet of this girl with the black beret, there sat what he assumed was her luggage, a Spalding sports bag.

“Now what would a guy be doing here all on his own? This is a date spot, you know,” she teased, tipping her black hat.

Tooru shrugged. “You wouldn't believe me even if I told you,” he said plainly.

“Hmm?” Black Hat narrowed her eyes. “Planning on risking your life or something?”

Tooru nodded. “How'd you know? That's right, I'm on my way to a duel.”

Again, he openly admitted it, but it was hard to take as anything but a joke.

“Well, that can’t be good. With all these people around?” asked Black Hat, going along with the joke.

Tooru replied with a serious look. “I’ll warn them. You should get out of here as soon as you can, though, miss. I don’t think you’ll need to worry about these folk. There should be just enough time to escape after the warning.”

“You’re making it sound like in just a few minutes, Sphere will turn into a hell-hole and be erased from this world,” replied Black Hat, also with an oddly serious look.

“You’d be correct.”

“Why would you do such a thing?”

“Without consideration for others, you mean?”

“No, my question more lies in the necessity of your doing this.”

There was an odd rationality to her words, in the academic way she addressed him, but Tooru didn’t think it especially unnatural. He’d gotten used to the mood. It was as if Black Hat wasn’t really a girl.

“Well... have you ever considered why it is that people fight?”



“All people live to seek worth in life,” she answered immediately.

Tooru ruminated on this, but then gently shook his head. “If only that was possible,” he replied.

“Meaning, you’ve already found your worth?”

“More like I’ve already lost it, in my case,” Tooru said wryly. “Someone said something to me once. I forget where exactly, but I think it was... ‘People live to battle the possibilities within themselves.’ I don’t fully understand it, but I think I kind of get where they’re coming from. Right now, there’s one possibility that exists inside me, and there’s no way in hell I’m dying before I get to use it. I think that might be the gist of it.”

“You directly connect testing that possibility to living? Now that strikes me as a very practical life.”

“You might be right about that,” Tooru laughed.

It was an odd conversation. Not the kind you would think could have developed from a girl who started speaking to a man on the roadside. But Tooru had gained a sense of stability out of it.



“Things like finding meaning in life are luxuries far beyond my means now. Seeing as how I’ve trampled all over what’s most important to me.”

“The one who got trampled might not necessarily want you to be doing such things.”

“.....”

Tooru bit his lip and pondered, but soon replied. “I’m sure he doesn’t. And I won’t blame him for it either. It’s my problem and mine alone. A selfish, shameless one at that.”

“Is that frustration I’m seeing at the root?”

“No.”

“Anger?”

“I doubt it.”

Black Hat nodded inquisitively and then broached another thought. “Then...what about fear?”

“...Maybe, but I’d rather not choose that as my reason. That comes second place,” he said, shaking his head.

At this, Black Hat shrugged. “...I wonder if you know,” she said, suddenly changing tack.

“Know what?”

“Certain kinds of strength, special talents... These things never work out well from the outset. Most people act much like they did in the past, and grasping at similar things, they fail,” she said, affixing her gaze on Tooru with upturned eyes.

“.....”

Tooru wondered what she was trying to say. His power, Inazuma, was seeing his enemies’ weaknesses. Striking with precision at their weak points, perhaps. Was she saying that it was in its infancy, so it was bound not to work well?

Tooru took off his sunglasses. It exposed his freshly scarred face and eye, but Black Hat continued as if completely unbothered by them.

“There was a woman, among those I knew. She was gifted with a very special talent: to perceive the weaknesses in people’s hearts. But she never learned to master it, and in the end became an ‘eater of fear,’” Black Hat said with a sigh, then looked Tooru directly in the eye. “A great many carry similar things, each failing in their own way. But I don’t believe it was at all wasted on them. Their efforts are carried on by those who succeed them. Even if that person is unaware of those who came before, the fact that they once existed, be it near or far, is sure to leave a mark on them.”

“...Meaning that someone came before me too?”

“What you are doing here is certainly not something that belongs to you alone. You—all of you—may not know it, but you shoulder the will to ‘break through’—a feat many could not achieve.”

“.....”

Tooru stared at Black Hat with his one eye. He no longer believed their meeting pure chance...but this fact did not concern him.

“You believe that if I fail, someone else will pick up the reins?”

“Perhaps.”

“Then... even more reason for me not to give up. Wouldn’t want someone else taking up the mantle to do a thing like this,” he smirked.

Black Hat made a strange expression then. Something asymmetrical, as if she were smiling, or shocked.

“I see. So that’s your pride, is it? Is that backward or forward? I can hardly tell.”

“I can’t move forward or back. What else can I do but hold my ground here?”

“I see...” Black Hat breathed in gently. “If the balance had shifted even slightly, you would have become an enemy of the world.”

Without lending a thought to what those words meant, Tooru’s eyes turned to his watch.

“...Whoops, it’s almost time. Er, so, do you plan on stopping me?”

“No. I have no reason or need to. Do as you will,” she announced, spreading her arms wide.

Tooru smiled wryly, then donned his sunglasses and turned on his heel.

“See you around then, whoever you are. Though...why is it?” In the process of leaving, he turned back, pulling his sunglasses down to peer over them. “It feels weird, you telling me I can do as I please. It’s a bizarre feeling.. Like I’ve just been encouraged by a sworn enemy from a hundred years ago.”

Black Hat simply raised an eyebrow in silence, and then, playing dumb, simply said: “Well, best of luck to you.”

“My thanks,” said Tooru, keeping up the pretense, then hid his eye once again, adjusted his bag and stepped into the building.

Black Hat watched him go, and then, once he had disappeared through the entrance, looked up at the tall ceiling. Its rounded edges made you feel as if you were looking from the inside of an eggshell.

“...So, the hellscape begins. Give it some time and *he'll* surely be on his way too,” murmured Black Hat. She then removed the beret from her head and, Spalding bag in hand, stood up.

Outside, the wind, which had been so fierce, had settled like a distant memory. Perhaps it was divine intervention, a stroke of good luck that would prevent the damage from spreading, but seldom few could have yet known this fact.

\* \* \* \* \*

And thus, the second battle between Fortissimo and Inazuma began.



10



“One could say that only the outside knows  
what awaits the egg at the end, however...”

At first, she didn't have a clue what the news report was talking about.

“—Ah, uhm, it's...it's happened again! It's a repeat of that incident!” The announcer, who should have been reading their script, was stumbling over themselves .

“What in the world...?”

Honami Akiko, who was lying low inside of her cave, was irritated. The poor reception alone made it hard enough to follow, but this was further compounded by the incoherency of the broadcast's details.

Still, listening closely, she understood that some incident was transpiring at a place called Sphere—a fashion mall in front of the station by the prefectural office. The event being connected to a specific building immediately brought to mind a recent episode in February.<sup>8</sup> The circumstances really did seem similar.

In short, the fire doors had all shut automatically, and tear gas—from wherever the hell that was coming from—was spraying out all over the place. But there was a difference: this time it was happening in an ordinary building and the

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<sup>8</sup> Highly likely this refers to the incident in *King of Distortion*, implying that these stories take place within the same year.

emergency exits were still open, so the people inside were reportedly staggering out in fits of coughing. The police had already hurried to the scene ready to rush in, but the entrances were all narrow, and they had precedent to be wary. The external generators had already been cut, so it was only a matter of time before the facilities inside ground to a halt. As such, it seemed the police were on standby, encircling the building.

Like before, it seemed that no one had as of yet claimed responsibility for the crime, their motives remaining unclear.

[[...It's him,]] informed Embryo, resting at her chest. [[It's Takashiro Tooru. Betcha anything he's the one that pulled this little stunt. He wants a showdown with Fortissimo!]]

“H-how would he pull off something on that scale?”

[[With the Towa Organization involved, anything's possible.]]

“.....”

Akiko held her breath.

Embryo had told her about it, but she still hadn't been able to believe it. He'd predicted that because Takashiro Tooru had contacted Fortissimo—who was after Embryo—and lived, it was possible the two of them would engage in battle once

again, and that it would become a major newsworthy incident that involved bystanders.

The late Sidewinder had told Embryo about the kind of person Fortissimo was, and what rank he held within the system . That he had an abnormal obsession for battle. He must have had plenty of reasons to be hung up on Takashiro Tooru, who had escaped his hand. And given that an innocent person had seemingly gotten involved, Tooru was likely looking for a fight as well. Out for revenge, perhaps. Fortissimo didn't know where he was, so if Tooru was to lure him in, he would have to stage something big...

Strictly speaking, this prediction wasn't quite on the mark, for the major incident itself wasn't to lure in Fortissimo, but something that Takashiro Tooru had intended for another purpose. They weren't to know this, however. Nor did this detail have any bearing on their situation, so his prediction was essentially correct.

“Tooru-san...”

[[Guy's still not gone off the deep end either. Looks like bystanders are managing to escape.]]

“This 'Fortissimo'... Do you think he'll show up soon?”

[[Reckon so.]]

“T-then, we have to go there right now...!”

Gripping the portable home gaming device in which Embryo resided, she dashed down and out of the cave.

As for what would be waiting for her when she got there, she still had no idea. It would turn out to be a strange “reunion.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The gas that had filled the area was quickly dispersing. It was never supposed to be very strong or long-lasting. The man who’d set the traps scattered across Sphere had done so as a test. It was no more than a check to determine whether or not their installment would be found out. Compared to the final product, these traps were extremely crude. And there had been one more great, equally crude trap prepared—one rather closer to its intended purpose. But the man had decided to favor more reliable methods, and so in the end abandoned this idea.

As the mist-like gas began to clear, two figures advanced. No... On closer inspection, it was apparent that the larger one was actually two people. A small figure was carrying another on their back.

The three of them had passed safely through the supposedly gas-filled space.

“...How come the gas doesn’t reach us?” asked Honami Hiroshi, who was carrying his sister on his back, to Fortissimo in front of him. His sister was in fact Pearl, but he didn’t know that.

“Because I’m cutting the space between, before the gas reaches us,” Fortissimo stated matter-of-factly.

“...I don’t get it,” grumbled Hiroshi.

Though Fortissimo had shown his true colors and incapacitated his sister, for some reason Hiroshi couldn’t bring himself to feel frustrated at the betrayal. For such a suspicious guy, Hiroshi hadn’t felt much reluctance to tag along with him all this time. In fact, he was a scaredy-cat, so it was a little odd for him, really.

“.....”

Carrying his immobile sister, he followed behind Fortissimo. They’d come from their hotel hideout by car, so he’d had to carry her from the underground car park all the way here, but he didn’t feel especially exhausted or that he was carrying a heavy load. In fact, she wasn’t heavy at all. His sister was oddly light. It was as if she were a little child, even

younger than him. His sister was taller than him, so he'd thought that their weight would be about the same. Bemused, he walked on, wondering if girls were actually a lot lighter than they looked.

"Though...when exactly are you going to bring Nee-chan back to normal?" asked Hiroshi.

"That depends on Takashiro Tooru," Fortissimo chuckled. "What kind of reaction will he have when he sees our 'Honami Akiko?' That's about what I'd like to know."

"...He'll want to save her, obviously."

"Now wouldn't that be fun."

"He will!"

"Well, we'll find out soon enough. ...Hm?"

Fortissimo paused shortly before their intended destination. They were at the entrance to a theater lobby, seven floors up. There were no performances today, it seemed, and a "No Entry" sign had been hung up. The way was barred by thick, heavy doors .

"Th-that's..." Hiroshi's voice slipped out.

"....."

Fortissimo fell silent.

The doors were closed, all right. Perhaps they'd even been locked. But they had been rendered meaningless, for in the wall immediately to their side—four-inches thick with soundproofing material—was a round hole. But it wasn't that someone had smashed through it. The wall had been sliced clean out, as if a hole punch had made its way through paper.

“.....”

Silently, Fortissimo observed the cross-section. It was filled with woolly soundproofing material, but there wasn't the slightest trace of it being pushed in or sticking out. It was as if such a hole had been there from the very start.

“M-making a hole like this... That means...”

Just as Hiroshi began to cough, Fortissimo firmly grabbed the boy's shoulder.

“...Hey, you two get back for now.”

“Huh?”

“I'll call you later... For now, find somewhere to hide,” said Fortissimo quietly.

“B-but why?”

“I've changed my mind. I need to go check on something quick. There should still be time.”

The corners of his mouth had curled slightly...into a smile.



Faced with that chilling expression, Hiroshi was compelled to retreat as he was told. Shouldering his sister, he took cover in the space between a row of vending machines and a bench.

Fortissimo stood before the doors to the theater, alone.

He casually placed his hands in his pockets, and as if on cue the large doors opened all on their own with a *bang!*

He walked forward. Before him stood another set of doors, these ones connecting to the inner portion of the theater. But he simply walked toward them, and mere inches away—*bang!* Again, the doors slammed open inwards.

Rows of seats lined the interior. It was deathly silent. Under normal circumstances, the venue would be saturated with brilliant lights and sounds and filled with the audience's cheers and applause. But now, this empty space was laid bare in the stillness.

And then something happened—something that was the complete opposite of what should happen in a place like this. Ordinarily, it was something you would only have been able to hear coming from the audience. But this time, it echoed from the stage.

Clapping.

It came from just one pair of palms atop the stage, inviting Fortissimo in.

“Welcome, Fortissimo,” he said quietly.

He wore no samurai costume this time. Instead, on his belt was a *tachi*<sup>9</sup>, which he kept sheathed.

Fortissimo walked slowly forward, continued until they were a few meters apart, then stopped and glared.

“Takashiro Tooru... I’ll ask you just to be sure. What are you doing here?”

“.....”

Tooru didn’t answer.

“You seem to have laid traps for some reason. Creating an enclosed space, spreading gas... But do you honestly think that will achieve anything? Or are you just getting desperate?”

“.....”

He was silent for a time, but eventually opened his mouth.

“I too...have something I must ask you.”

“Hm?”

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<sup>9</sup> Tachi normally refers to a weapon similar to what people generally think of as a katana; however, the term can also refer to any weapon made in that style, including the kodachi (small tachi) and Tooru’s oodachi.

“The wounds your power inflicts... Is there a way to close them? What can someone do to heal those injuries?”

Suspicion grew on Fortissimo’s face. “Don’t tell me... That’s what this is about?”

“.....”

“You mean...you went out of your way to set up all this and called me here so that you could save the life of your friend who should be teetering on the brink of death? You’re fully prepared to die?”

“Answer me.”

He didn’t close in—on the contrary, his tone was gentle. Fortissimo’s expression, on the other hand, was clearly growing less and less pleased.

“I admit, it’s a noble goal, but I’m afraid there’s nothing like that ...!”

“...There’s really nothing at all?”

“I’m sick of this! To me, life is like a ball of fluff caught in a web of spatial fissures. His very life was practically cut. It’s not something anyone can stop or staunch, not unless someone can add new life to his body to fill in the wounds...!”`

“So there’s no cure...” He lowered his head slightly and exhaled. A trickle of blood ran from the scar of his ruined right eye. “Then there is but one path left.”

“Path?” Fortissimo’s voice was tinged with anger. The anger of having his expectations dashed. “What other path could you possibly have...except being slaughtered right here, Takashiro Tooru?!”

His rage was answered calmly.

“You’ve been wrong. For a while now.”

“What?”

“That name no longer holds any meaning for me.”

“Name? What name?”

“Now that I know there’s no way of saving him, it means even less.”

“Like I said, what the hell are you talking about?!”

“You were the one who named me. You told me...that all I had left was to be your opponent. That only that name remained.”

At last, Fortissimo grasped the meaning behind his words.

“...I see.” He removed his hands from his pockets. “So you’re prepared. All right. Then how about you show me the measure of this resolve of yours...Inazuma!”

He took a step forward. And then something hitherto unseen happened. The one with a tachi at his hip...moved back.

Fortissimo was roughly five meters apart. He did not attempt to reduce that distance.

Again, Fortissimo took a step forward.

Again, he moved back.

“...Ah!”

Fortissimo suddenly shot him a look.

“Why are you retreating?”

“You must know the answer to that far better than anyone,” he said quietly.

His manner of speaking barely resembled the impulsive-to-a-fault Takashiro Tooru that Fortissimo knew.

“Fortissimo, surely you can’t have thought I’d seen nothing in our first battle.”

He had seen, and he had thought. He’d thought of nothing else but that the entire time in the holding cell. He’d ruminated upon the events of that battle many thousands of times inside his head. He had analyzed, predicted, and imagined, over and over again.

“.....”

“The reason I won’t blindly approach you is because this is your effective range. If I gain more distance, are you sure you’ll be able to launch your attacks accurately?”

Though his words stated the facts, Fortissimo’s expression was unchanged. Emotionless.

“.....”

“And here’s another aspect of your power: Once you deploy it, no one—not even you—can stop it... That’s why your attacks must be precise and subtle, so that you aren’t consumed by their overwhelming destruction yourself. It’s why, at first glance, it looks like you draw up to your opponents in a state of defenselessness. But it’s not because you’ve got guts, or because you have absolute faith in your abilities... It’s because if you don’t, you won’t be able to strike.”

“.....”

Fortissimo remained impassive to the one-eyed man’s words.

“...And what of it?”

To this simple response, however, his opponent shook his head lightly.

“Of course, I won’t have been the first to work out this much,” he responded calmly. “And it’s not about to make your absolute defense fall apart either. If I were to face you a thousand times in an ordinary bout on equal footing, I’d surely lose a thousand times too. However...” He put a hand on his sword. “In the right environment, under exceptional circumstances...you’d win nine-hundred-and-ninety-eight.”

“You’re saying that you can win twice? What, you think that this right here is one of those times?”

“.....”

“You really think you can win? Against me? Fortissimo?”

“No. I won’t win... But you’ll lose,” he declared.

“.....”

In the face of this fearless declaration, Fortissimo did not grin as he had until now. He did not smile. He remained as straight-faced as a Noh mask<sup>10</sup>.

“...You think you know me?” he said, the words wrung out under his breath. “A defeated dog like you, who’s failed over

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<sup>10</sup> Noh (or Nou to be more accurate to JPN romaji) is a type of japanese dance theater were performers wear ridged cypress masks. If you’ve seen any Japanese comedy shows, you may have seen certain characters suddenly wearing a demonic mask to represent them making a scary face. That’s a Noh mask.

and over again? I've never lost, not even once. And yet you claim to know me...?"

He took another step forward.

But this time, his opponent didn't step back. Instead, he shifted to the side. The positions of their stand-off had subtly changed. And the opponent staring him down, the man named Inazuma, softly spoke.

"I don't know you. And I doubt you know me either. So...in this sense, we are even."

"Then we don't need any restraint or mercy, do we?!"

Fortissimo kicked off the floor and charged. An explosion of flying matter thundered all around.

\* \* \* \* \*

".....!"

Honami Akiko's head jerked up. She thought she'd heard something coming from Sphere up ahead—something that sounded like a scream.

[[Mm? What's up?]] Embryo asked.

"...N-no, it's nothing. I probably just imagined it."



She shook her head, and then took in the scene before her once more.

The police were there. It was the squad who'd been dispatched to encircle the building. They'd huddled together at one of its seven entrances to stop anyone coming out or trying to get in.

But they didn't even attempt to stop Honami Akiko, who stood immediately before them. Or rather, they couldn't.

"...B-but isn't this... What's going on?"

Indeed, they had, for reasons unbeknownst to her, all passed out, and were sprawled on their backs. Just to the side, what appeared to be a woman's beret lay on the ground, but they hadn't noticed it.

[[Dunno what the deal is, but I know a chance when I see one,]] said Embryo quietly.

"Y-yeah. Right."

To the side of the entrance, which was barred by shutters, stood a small emergency exit. Cautiously, Akiko pushed the door open.

There was a lingering, faintly malodorous smell of gas inside, but it seemed to have lost all potency and Akiko felt no unpleasant effects from it.

She swallowed, and slowly made her way into the midst of Sphere to look for Takashiro Tooru.

Just then, her eyes landed upon something at her feet. A cockroach.

It lay belly-up and twitching, having seemingly inhaled the gas. Though it was no longer fatal to humans, for insects it must have been like getting a dose of pesticide. Clearly it was on its way out.

*Huh...?*

As always, she saw “death” spilling out from the bug. She could see it, but...it seemed a little more out of focus than normal. No, it was becoming hazier, growing fainter and fainter. When at last she could see it no more, she wasn’t at all confident that it was because the bug had fully perished.

“Is this...?”

[[You think it's...starting to disappear cause your power's weakening?]] Embryo asked. [[B-but then that'd mean you wouldn't be able to talk to me.]]

She could hear the “voice” itself extremely clearly.

“...I don't know. I don't know, but...” said Akiko, speaking her thoughts aloud. “I don't want to make the same mistake as before. I don't know what's happening to me, or how I'll end

up, but... I decided I'd find Tooru-san and that's what I'm going to do. That's all that matters."

She resumed walking.

"....."

Embryo said nothing to her.

"...What's up with you?" It was Akiko's turn to ask.

"Where's your 'Well, well, ain't that brave of you ' or one of your usual jabs?"

She smiled as she spoke. If Embryo had been human, he would have let out something like a sigh.

[[...Nah, it's just... Seems you've turned into a real fine gal .]]

"The hell? You're being creepy now ."

[[No, I mean it. Don't ask me where it came from, but that's the impression that hit me just now. You really have grown since those days. ]]

"What days? We've been together the whole time. That's the kind of thing you say to someone you've been apart from for years."

[[...Guess you got a point there.]]

“Thanks, though. It kinda gives me courage, the fact that you’re praising me. Like I can do anything in the world, no matter how hard it is. Heh eh.”

[[Heh heh heh.]]

The girl and the egg, two oblivious beings, quietly enjoyed a moment of laughter within their enclosed space.

Then they felt another rumble. Something else had been destroyed. They ran in the direction of its presumed source.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blood sprayed through the air.

“...Ngh!”

Takashiro Tooru, the *tachi* at his waist still sheathed, had already borne the brunt of countless flying fragments, and was head to toe in scratches. Despite that, his movements were unblunted, and he continued keeping a fixed distance from Fortissimo as he advanced.

“What’s wrong, Inazuma? Is that sword at your waist just for show?!” challenged Fortissimo.

Most of the seats in the theater had by now been pulverized, and the stage, which was the first to have been hit, was gone without a trace.

“Besides...as you seem to be so intent on keeping away from me, how exactly do you plan on attacking?”

“.....”

Still, Tooru refused to move the hand he had placed on the tachi’s hilt. Nor did his one eye stray from Fortissimo for a single moment. There was not a trace of impatience or fear on his face.

*This guy... Is he waiting for something?*

Fortissimo, too, briefly paused his flurry of attacks.

*If he’s not even drawing his sword, then is he relying on the speed of his draw? An Ia<sup>11</sup> move, so his opponent can’t read the trajectory of his blade? But a sword that length surely couldn’t extend further than my attack range... Even if anything does come within range, I could destroy it long before it reaches me. Sword strike, machine gun fire...*

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<sup>11</sup> A Japanese sword style based on attacking from a sheathed stance. You see this played up a lot in Japanese media. The point of the stance is to be able to defend yourself and attack your opponent while being at the disadvantage of not having your weapon drawn.

*Whatever you throw at me is meaningless... If he knows that, what is it he's aiming for?*

It made no sense, but there was one thing that was clear: whatever he did, it would happen in an instant. And in that moment, the battle would be decided.

“.....”

Seeing that Fortissimo before him had stopped moving, Tooru also fell still. Time alone crawled on at a snail's pace.

“.....”

There was a strange whooshing sound, and suddenly Tooru's right shoulder had been slashed, spurting blood. Fortissimo had severed the space at the very edge of his reach, and the resulting vacuum had torn into Tooru.

But Tooru did not move.

*Vwoosh, vwoosh!* Each consecutive sound added to his wounds. Yet he remained utterly still, unflinching.

Tooru could see them.

For these vacuum attacks, he could perceive the “lines” clearly. He hadn't taken any fatal wounds, or even any significant damage. Just light jabs. He might start to worry about such attacks if they continued to pile up, but that was all. These weren't attempts to decide the battle.

Fortissimo, too, had been forced to realize from Tooru's quiet, penetrating insight that he had figured out his plan of attack.

*Still, you keep this up and at some point you'll stop moving from blood loss. Or are you taking the blows on purpose to lull me into monotonous motions and catch me unawares?*

*All right... I'll play your game,* Fortissimo thought, and resumed his assault, never letting his guard down.

Fortissimo himself only had it half right, but he was not known as the Strongest One for relying on power alone. Inattention was something that he was instinctively—and perhaps almost on a physiological level—incapable of, a fact corroborated by his track record. This was not something he had fostered through training and experience; it was innate. It was possible that his power was a byproduct of this nature. Simply part and parcel of who he was. Though this was not necessarily something he desired.

And so, he subconsciously knew of the strength of this enemy, Inazuma. The hit that he had taken from Taniguchi Masaki, too, had been because his immediate opponent was Inazuma. If he had been facing someone else, he would have

noticed Masaki approaching. That he had been so focused was likely because...

“.....”

But he wasn't ready to admit it yet.

He didn't know why, but he feared that admitting that fact would feel tremendously painful. It wasn't something he was keenly aware of—more a feeling that gnawed at him.

Thoughts pooled. Was it possible that the strength he had was not the only one out there? Was he, in fact, not alone...?

“...Tch.”

He lightly clicked his tongue, even as he attacked.

In Tooru's case, his power was not something he had been born with. So yes, he would let his guard slip, lose himself to his emotions and make mistakes he could never undo. But it was for that reason that he stood here and now. If he'd let his instinct control him, he would have fled long ago. The strength found in nature is only predicated on how long you can survive, nothing more.

But he wasn't like that.

And that was why he didn't run.

Why he continued to fight.

Fighting...by staying still...



“.....”

If he was to follow the “plan” that he had thought up after Habara Kentarou had laid the groundwork, he had only a little longer to wait. Even if he continued to let Fortissimo attack, he’d be able to get through it before the damage got too severe.

However...it was at this point that something utterly unexpected happened to Tooru.

“.....?!”

For the first time, his gaze strayed from Fortissimo.

Past his enemy, towards the theater entrance, there stood a boy.

Honami Hiroshi.

He had secretly approached from the place he was told to hide. And to his eyes, it looked as if Fortissimo was one-sidedly toying with Tooru.

“T-Takashiro-san!” he cried suddenly.

But Fortissimo did not turn toward the voice. Such a thing was trivial to him. The same could not be said for Tooru. A bystander could not remain here—not here, not now.

He leapt. And he ran toward Hiroshi, attack range be damned.

*What?!*

Fortissimo could only interpret this as a sudden retreat. In that instant, he snapped. After all this?! he thought.

“...got to be fucking KIDDING ME!” he roared, launching an indiscriminate attack in Tooru’s direction.

The theater’s floor and ceiling were shredded to pieces, launching shockwaves that burst and scattered through the hall.

“...Wah?!”

Hiroshi, sheltered in Tooru’s arms, was blown away by the force of the blast. The two of them tensed and rolled across the floor. Immediately, Tooru rose to his feet.

“...Can you move?” he asked Hiroshi urgently, straight to the point.

Hiroshi nodded up and down. He had indeed sustained no injuries. Tooru, however... Half of his face was slick with blood. A flying splinter had hit him square in the head.

“T-Takashiro-san—“

“Listen to me. You have to get out of here! This place is about to—”

“B-but he’s kidnapped Nee-chan!” cried Hiroshi, interrupting him.

“What did you say...?”

A look of astonishment painted Tooru’s face. Just then, at his back, came the crunch of debris underfoot.

The two of them turned to see Fortissimo standing there, dangling a motionless girl by the neck.

“...Are you talking about *her*?” he said coldly.

“Bastard... What’s your game? ”

Tooru had been taken completely off guard by this sudden turn of events. He simply couldn’t believe that Fortissimo would stoop so low as to take prisoners.

“N-Nee-chan!” Hiroshi cried.

“You’re a gullible bunch, aren’t you? Did you really think this was Honami Akiko?” he declared at last.

“Huh?”

“What...?”

“Go on, why don’t you show us your true form...*Pearl*!”

Her body began to twitch and spasm. And then—and what a sight it was to behold—her hands, feet and torso all seemed to shrink before their eyes.

Tooru was dumbstruck.

Finally, she reached the size of about a seven or eight-year-old girl, even smaller than Hiroshi.

Indeed, this was the true form of the synthetic human, Pearl. Her base form had been designed to be compact to allow her to transform into any human. It isn't difficult to incorporate a mechanism that pads the skeletal structure to reinforce bones, but to actually shrink those bones was an extraordinarily challenging feat. The Manticore—the archetype upon whom Pearl and all others were based—achieved this transformation in a completely different manner, and it's said that ultimately, none but she was ever able to succeed. Pearl's body, therefore, could be considered something of a poor imitation. Immature.

Her face, too, perfectly resembled that of an innocent child. The only difference was her hairstyle, which matched Honami Akiko's. But even the color of her hair was fading before them, becoming a sparkling, reflective silver. Hair designed to have all kinds of colors applied to it.

“.....”

Hiroshi's mouth was agape. He couldn't understand what he had just witnessed. But in some sense, he accepted it. It would explain why she was so light.

“.....”

Tooru's face was growing darker by the second.

“Stop...!” he growled at last.

Fortissimo did just as he was told and cast Pearl's body aside.

Pearl rolled across the theater lobby carpeting, vomit spilling from her lips.

“Gahuck, gubbgh...!” she convulsed, the edges of her mouth foaming.

Places all across her entire central nervous system had been cut and reattached to the point that she could no longer maintain her disguise, and now she had lost consciousness.

“What's going on?” Tooru asked, his glare directed not at Pearl but Fortissimo.

“Nothing's *‘going on’*. She's a fake. The real Honami Akiko's lying low somewhere with Embryo. This one had been trying to use you by disguising herself as Akiko—up until I found her, at least. I guess when I played dumb, she thought she could bluff her way through it, since she'd stayed like that till now. Maybe I let it slide because she was hoping to strike the moment I let my guard down. Thought she might give me a little challenge for a while...but I've grown tired of that now too,” Fortissimo said languidly.

“You bastard...!”

An anger the likes of which Tooru had never shown smoldered in his eye . Endeavored though he had to keep his head, his opponent's cruel treatment of this person in the form of a young girl was about to stir fierce emotions in him again.

Fortissimo glared straight back at him.

However, the one who was really in control of the situation at that moment was neither of the two.

*...It's time!*

Though her body had been all but rendered immobile, Pearl's awareness alone was sharp and clear.

*At last...after all this time! I'd been waiting for this moment!*

Excretions continued to spill from her mouth in globs. Anyone would have assumed that this was undigested matter being expelled from her guts due to bodily dysfunction. In actuality, this was not the case.

Her power—one shared by the Manticore after which she was modeled—was to synthesize a special and incredibly potent drug inside her body. It was something she had been storing within her the whole time.

And its effect was plain and simple: to corrode, rot and destroy...!

Plenty of this drug had already seeped into the carpet; you couldn't see it from above, but it was spreading rapidly beneath the floor.

*...Go on, expose my pathetic form. Humiliate me all you want. See if I care!*

Pearl watched Tooru and Fortissimo from the corner of her eye. The two of them were staring each other down, their attention unfocused on her. Ever so slightly, she raised an unsteady arm.

She didn't need strength to break the rotted floor; she only had to give it a light tap at a certain interval.

*Victory, you'll find, goes to those who survive...!*

And as Pearl was on the verge of that motion, her eyes met with Honami Hiroshi. He was staring at her.

She cast a wicked grin to her "little brother."

"...Bye now."

Of course, her hoarse, whispered words had reached no one's ears. The next instant, a section of the floor on which Tooru and the others were standing instantly gave way and collapsed.

\* \* \* \* \*

“...W-what was that?!”

The sound, which had reached as far as Honami Akiko’s ears as she walked down the corridor, was many times louder than any so far.

And it wasn’t just the sound. Cracks had immediately begun spreading across the ground at her feet. The floor started to tilt.

“Wa-waaah!”

She clung to a nearby pillar—this turned out to save her life. If she’d still been standing where she was, the ceiling would have come down on top of her.

Beneath the floor that Pearl had destroyed had been the building’s mechanical fulcrum. Its collapse would start a chain reaction, pulling parts of Sphere sideways and causing them to fall apart in turn. Though the structural elements had been built to withstand vertical impact, the horizontal plane had not been adequately accounted for. Whole floors, stratified one atop the other, would soon come crashing down.

“H-hiii...!”



Certain areas were falling apart while others were not, it seemed. Like a haphazard game of dominoes, in which the occasional piece was left standing.

Things came tumbling down from holes in the ceiling. Bits of flooring, steel frames, and—from a clothing store up above, it would seem—even several limbless, dust-covered mannequins, all piling atop each other. If everything above had given way, such a number of objects wouldn't have been falling down. The destruction did indeed seem to be sporadic.

As she listened to the sounds of this ongoing cascade of ruin, Akiko realized something strange.

“...Huh?”

The pose of one of the mannequins that had fallen was...off.

It looked like a small mannequin for displaying children's clothes, but it was lying there on the ground as though it were sleeping. It adhered perfectly to the ground, as if it had been sculpted that way. Unless...

“Aaaiiiee!” she screamed.

It was an actual child. The body had been so caked in dust, it looked ashen, but the color of the hair beneath looked silver. It wasn't moving.

“A-are you okay?!”

She rushed to try to help the child up. Just then, its body jerked with a start.

*Crick, crack.* Its entire body seemed to creak. And just when she thought it had stopped moving, it sprung up, as if an alarm clock at full blast had suddenly woken it from a deep slumber.

“.....!”

The child stared at Akiko, wide-eyed.

“You...”

“W-well, you look lively enough...”

As Akiko spoke, a wide smile grew on the silver-haired girl’s lips—the lips of Pearl’s recovered body.

“Honami Akiko!” she cried. “Of all the places you could have been! So that must mean...”

And then, something that Akiko could not have believed possible happened.

Pearl’s arm grew to several times its length, and with it snatched away the game unit at her chest.

“...Finally!”

Her arm shortening at the same speed that it had extended, Pearl pushed Akiko aside and sprung up.

“At long last, I have it! I have *The Embryo*—that which grants the worthy the ‘power to fight the world!’” she declared exultantly. “Serves you damn right, Sidewinder! Fortissimo! See? In the end, it’s me who gets the last laugh!”

At the peak of her triumph, she threw her head back and cackled.

“...Huh?”

Akiko, unable to grasp the situation, was speechless.

Pearl paid her no attention, simply gazing at Embryo and laughing.

“Do I have the power? Well, if not, it’s just a case of finding someone who does...”

As Pearl spoke, something in her changed. With a look of surprise, she turned to stare at Akiko.

“...What?”

It was the look of a human who had been taken completely off-guard. Dumbfounded.

“...What is this? What the hell *is* this?!” she muttered incoherently.

Now that Akiko noticed, her gaze wasn’t directed at Akiko herself. She was looking at something behind her.

“You... But that’s insane... This is your ‘future?’ But that’s...”

The color was rapidly draining from her face as she spoke these cryptic words. What was she seeing? No, by touching Embryo, she’d *become able to see something*. So, what was it that she perceived?

“You...you’re kidding! Like hell am I getting mixed up in *that!*” she screeched at fever-pitch, flinging Embryo, which she had sought for so long, away. Then she turned to a wall and sprinted towards it. Just when it seemed she’d crash straight into it, a spray of chemicals erupted from her mouth and she punched straight through the weakened wall. Just like that, she was gone.

It had all happened in an instant.

“.....”

Akiko was bewildered. It was impossible for her to comprehend what was going on.

But even so, one thing was clear: The silver-haired girl just now hadn’t been looking at her. She had been looking past her. Speaking to someone beyond. Which meant...

“.....”

Slowly and cautiously, she turned. Lo and behold, He stood there before her, silently. She hadn't even noticed him show up.

“We meet again, Honami Akiko.”

A black hat and a white face. Wrapped top to bottom in a black cloak.

She'd never met a strange character like this.

“You don't remember? No, I don't suppose you would.”

Black Hat snorted lightly through his nose and walked forward, slipped by her and picked up Embryo from the ground.

“So this is the ‘egg,’” he said, and swiftly pocketed it.

Akiko didn't know who he was. She shouldn't have known. If she'd met someone like this, she would most certainly have remembered. And yet...

“O-ohhh...”

And yet some instinctive fear had gripped her body in a vice.

Suddenly, she recalled a rumor one of her school friends—whoever it was—had once told her.

“I heard they appear when someone’s at the peak of their beauty, to kill them so they don’t grow any uglier. They’ve got a black hat and black cloak. And their name is...”

Yeah... That’s right.

She wondered why she hadn’t taken the story seriously. She hadn’t paid it any real mind. But as she recalled, the curious name she’d been told back then was...

“Boogiepop...”

“Hm?”

The figure turned in response. But upon seeing the pallor of her face, this “Boogiepop” character responded.

“You don’t seem to have remembered, Honami-san. Though I imagine that *she* would prefer it this way as well.”

“Wh...what *are* you?”

“Questions such as what I am are inconsequential,” stated Boogiepop plainly. “The problem at hand would be you. I’m referring to that power of yours. The one that still haunts you.”

“Huh...?”

Akiko felt like she’d been jabbed in the chest.

“Incidentally, where have you been these past few days?” he asked.

“Huh? Oh, uh, that’s...”

“It’s not just me who’s been looking for you. Kirima Nagi’s been searching too. She knows this city inside out. How did you know of a place that could elude her?”

“W-well...”

“Surely you’re not going to tell me you’re shrewder than her?”

“I..I’m...”

“You already did those sorts of things in the past. Sometimes you needed a safe, secluded space. Your memories of what you did, however, are gone. So how could you have known? Did someone tell you? You don’t even know yourself, do you?”

With a deft movement, Boogiepop presented something between pinched fingertips.

It was a bug. A scarab beetle. But it was limp and unmoving, and seemed to be either dead or on the precipice of death.

Akiko saw in it a vague form of “death.” It was the same as the other time... No, it was even hazier than before.

“Ah...”

As if having read her expression, Boogiepop nodded.

“As I thought, your power is nearly depleted. Though it comes as no surprise—there was but a fraction left to begin with.”

“A...a fraction left...?” Akiko didn't understand what she was being told. “What are you talking about? I..I used this power to save a dying person's life, and-”

As she said this, Boogiepop snorted, as if taking her for a fool.

“You used that power to do such a deed?”

“...W-what's so funny?!” Akiko said, raising her voice. She felt like she'd been treated terribly unfairly.

“Did you believe that you had the right or reason to do with life as you pleased?” Boogiepop's voice was predictably cold.

“W-well...”

“Indeed, you had no such thing. You are, after all, just a girl. There is no way you could have a power that, used in the right manner, has the potential to rewrite the world . You merely borrowed it.”

The words were harsh. It was like telling a child struggling to understand the concept of addition that they were hopeless and slow.



“.....”

Akiko was lost for words. But Boogiepop spared her no mercy.

“All you’ve done is squandered that which others have spent blood, sweat and tears to attain . People who made every effort to harness it. ‘But it’s too hard,’ you whimper. Did you not curse such power when you first discovered it? Though your anguish was surely trivial compared to the struggles of the one who originally possessed it.”

“.....”

“That power... It is not for saving lives. Quite the opposite. You had it backwards: It is the power to control death . Its original owner, my enemy Minahoshi Suiko, called it ‘Strange Days.’ You would not understand. It had accompanied her for as long as she could remember. You, on the other hand, have had it for a few days at most. So tell me, do you not find this ‘distress’ of yours presumptuous?”

Despite Akiko being unable to follow any of this, she could not hide the growing disquiet stirring within her.

“She was using you, in the past. No, perhaps she was not aware that she used you. I doubt you thought you were being used by her either, back when you were the *miko*, as the two

of you were of one body. Back then, you would have been using each other, neither taking full command, to achieve that ‘unending dream .’”

Boogiepop sighed.

“Well, it's not as if anyone remembers at this point. All those memories, she carried with her to the grave.”

“I...I've met you before...haven't I?” said Akiko, her voice quivering. “My... This power was, uh... It belonged to the person who was your enemy, and... I was one of your enemies too, wasn't I?”

She felt tears well up in her eyes as she spoke. It was a funny thing. She didn't know why she was crying, but for some reason the tears wouldn't stop falling.

She felt that it must have been something very, very important. But now, it was no longer inside of her. That fact alone was something she could be sure of. If she'd forgotten, then she only had to recall. But her subconscious understood that it was no longer *there*.

“Well, consider yourself fortunate,” said Boogiepop bluntly, indifferent to her sobbing. “If a fragment of that power had remained, sooner or later it would have grown inside you, and the weight of its potential would have crushed

you to death. Better for it to have left you now, while it was still immature. You have the 'egg' which dragged out the power to thank for that.”

“.....Ah!”

Akiko snapped to her senses. That's right. There was something more important to her right now than her lost memories.

“Wh-what are you...going to do with Embryo?”

The reason he'd set out to such a place had been to acquire the egg, it seemed.

“I see. It's called Embryo, is it? What shall I do with it, indeed?” he smirked. “Shall I treat it as a dangerous object and destroy it? Or should I use it to forcibly draw out the possibilities in all sorts of people and pluck my would-be enemies before they have the chance to bloom ?”

It was a malicious and unscrupulous attitude. He was clearly enjoying himself. But Akiko hadn't had time to get angry. Her cheeks still wet from the tears, she cried,

“Please, don't kill him!”

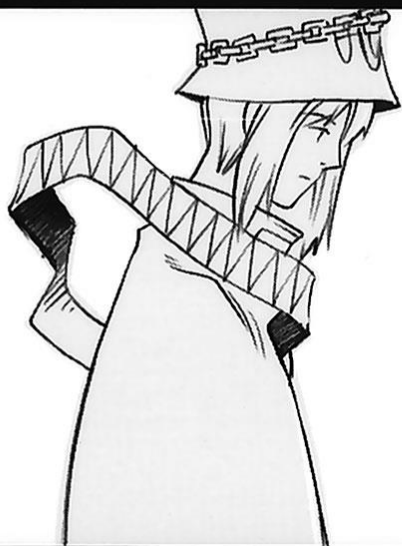
Boogiepop raised an eyebrow.

“Killing things happens to be my job,” he said coldly.

“But...but Embryo's done nothing wrong!”

“Some of those I have killed in the past were not particularly bad. It was simply that they were not compatible with this world. In Embryo's case... I wonder.”

“T-that's...”



Embryo harbored something extremely dangerous. This had already been proven in recent days with Countdown. But even so...

“If that's your argument, is there anything in this world that's completely harmless? Isn't anyone or anything capable of making the world a dangerous place if they take the wrong step?”

She did think she was taking it a bit too far, but it was the truth. Borrowed it may have been, but if someone like her had possessed a power that could gather all life in the world and make it one, surely there was a similar element of risk with anyone.

“You speak from your own experience?” he asked sardonically in return.

Naturally, he had seen right through her. But Akiko did not falter.

“That's right. I am ‘just a girl’ after all...! And yet look at what I became...! Doesn't that mean it could happen to anyone? So that means... That means you can't say Embryo's the one to blame...!”

She was trying frantically to project her voice, but the words came out scratchy and weak. She didn't even consider why it was that she was trying so hard to defend Embryo. Embryo himself had taken every opportunity to tell her to "kill him." So why was she fighting so hard to save him? Even she didn't know.

"Then whose fault do you think it is?"

While Akiko fumbled through her words, Boogiepop remained as impassive as ever.

"W-well..."

"Are you going to say it's nobody's fault?"

"It's...it's *my fault!*" cried Akiko, almost screaming.

\* \* \* \* \*

....san.

....kashiro-san, Takashiro-san...!

The moment Takashiro Tooru became vaguely aware of the voice repeating in his ear, he sprang to his feet, awake.

"Haah!"

There was a mountain of rubble around him. It seemed he'd dropped several floors down as a result of the "cave-in."

Fortissimo and the fake Honami Akiko were gone. They must have fallen in a different spot. Tooru turned to Honami Hiroshi, who'd fallen along with him.

“Takashiro-san! You're okay! I'm so glad...”

Hiroshi, who had survived the fall unscathed thanks to Tooru cradling him, looked on the verge of tears.

“How long?!” Tooru bellowed, ignoring his state.

“Huh?”

“How long have I been out for?!”

“U-uhm, about twenty seconds.”

“Then there might still be time...!” Tooru grabbed Hiroshi's arm and pulled himself up. “Hiroshi, you need to run!”

“Huh? B-but Nee-chan... Oh, wait...”

Confusing as it was, he remembered then that his sister was a fake.

Tooru launched into a run, pulling Hiroshi along with him. Getting dragged along, Hiroshi ran too. In spite of the all the shutters that had come down and the possibility of getting lost, Tooru didn't pause even once. It was as if he were being drawn in a line along the predetermined path he needed to take.



“Wah, wa-waah...!”

They moved at such a pace, Hiroshi nearly tripped several times, but each time the arm gripping him held so firmly in place that it simply swept him back up and he didn't fall. It had never happened to him before, but he imagined that this was what it must be like being dragged along by a horse that had taken hold of its reins.

They reached a long, stationary escalator—essentially now just a staircase—that extended far down into the distance. Here, Tooru finally stopped and let go of Hiroshi's arm.

“You go on your own from here. Down the stairs, there's a big entrance right in front of you. Take the emergency exit to the side of that and you're out. Got it?”

“...Huh?” Hiroshi looked up, still panting and gasping for breath. “A-and you?”

“There's still something I need to do.”

He adjusted the *tachi* at his waist. He was still...seeing this through.

“...You can't be serious?!”

“If you don't run away soon, something very bad will happen in this building. So get going already!”

“B-but...”

“If anything happened to you, I’d never be able to face Akiko-san! Stop dallying!” Tooru roared.

Hiroshi quailed. By the time he opened his eyes, Tooru was already running back to the other side of the building.

“.....”

Hiroshi could only watch him go. Just then, a strange sensation trembled in the innermost depths of his heart.

*Wh-what was that?*

He didn’t really understand it, but the way it felt to him, it was like... Like nothing was going very well yet.

That’s right. Because the most important thing here in this place had been neglected.

But what was it?

What was he thinking about this for, anyway? Didn’t he have to get out of this place before—as Tooru had put it—“something very bad” happened?

“Nghhh...?”

Hiroshi had to decide, and fast.

11



“There’s also no way to see what could be  
outside from inside the shell..”

There was nothing there.

A section of the floor, as if it had been carved out from the rest, was empty. The shops and designer-brand stores for lease around it had been devastated—buried under the falling rubble, or trashed by people fleeing the scene—but this space alone remained completely unchanged. There had never been anything in it to begin with. Looking out across the floor, there were a number of holes caused by the destructive phenomenon that Pearl had set in motion. This space, however, had been spared from all that.

It was in such a space that Boogiepop stood, alone. It seemed to be the only place detached from all the tumult.

“...I do wonder, though. Are you sure you want to die, in the end?” spoke Boogiepop, alone though he was.

[[...Hmm.]]

And alone though he was, there came a reply. It was the voice of Embryo, held in his hand.

“If you still claim to want to die after being told *that*, then perhaps your will is the real thing after all,” teased Boogiepop.

[[.....]]

Embryo had never shown any change in outward appearance when he spoke. Yet this one time, it seemed that his silence spoke volumes.

“It’s my fault!”

Honami Akiko’s scream did nothing to shake Boogiepop.

“You say it’s your fault. Can you do something about it then?” he asked. “Can you extinguish these kindling coals that Embryo seems to conjure, and stop these problems from ever happening?”

“I-I...” Akiko almost tripped over her words, but she held her gaze firm. “I can’t do that. But...but then, if you kill Embryo, can you really say for sure that all the problems will go away?”

Boogiepop hummed thoughtfully.

“True enough, I can’t say that they will,” he admitted.

“Whether Embryo’s around or not, you’re still gonna get problems, right? Like...who’s to say you didn’t come into contact with Embryo in the past? Maybe that’s how you ended up like *that*?”

Depending on how you took it, it could have sounded like an extremely rude question, but Boogiepop answered without a trace of reluctance.

“I’m afraid that’s not the case.”

“Do you even know why you exist?”

“...Being automatic, that is a difficult question for me to answer.”

“Nuh-uh, there’s nothing difficult about it!”

“Oh?”

“You know why people like you and me exist? ...It’s because those things are *miracles*.”

“The miracle of existence itself, is it?”

“That’s right. Each and every thing, just by virtue of being in this world, is a miracle. All that stuff about *raison d’êtres* and finding meaning in life... They’re all strained arguments tacked on later.”

Akiko was speaking fluidly, as if she’d been possessed by something.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, it goes the same for Embryo. Saying that there’s no point in him living, or that letting him live won’t be for the good of the world... Compared to the *miracle of his existence*,

those things all take second place. So long as nothing serious happens.”

Gone was the timid girl from before, her speech now refined enough to sound like a different person. But what could possibly have possessed her?

Minahoshi Suiko was no longer within her. Embryo, too, was no longer at her chest. Her special ability was already disappearing. Right now, she was wholly unburdened by anything that could bewitch her.

“You’re saying nothing ‘serious’ could happen with Embryo?”

“All Embryo does is draw out the talent sleeping within people, so you can’t know for sure it’s his fault. It doesn’t make a difference if he’s there or not. And if that’s the case, I know a reason why Embryo *should* exist.”

“Tell me.”

“Because I think I want him to live. That’s my reason.”

Even that reason should have been shaky for her at best. Nevertheless, she had asserted it firmly.

“I see,” Boogiepop nodded. “Then it is indeed *your fault*. You’ve made your point clear. In other words, if I’m to do with Embryo as I see fit, I’ll have to defeat you first...”



Boogiepop's gaze was intense, but Akiko took it head on. Black Hat shrugged.

"But I have no reason to do such a thing, either. It's too bad. I suppose I'll have to shelve this matter."

"...What do you mean?"

"I think we ought to entrust it to someone else. Though, it would do no good in the hands of the half-hearted, so for now I'll store it in what is currently the safest place in the world."

With what seemed like a smile, or a mischievous look, Boogiepop turned to her and winked. Then around he whirled. Before she could react, it was already too late—the black figure had, in an instant, turned the corner and vanished into the beyond.

...And now, in the empty space, Boogiepop and Embryo stood.

[[I've...always wanted someone to kill me. It was all I'd ever been waiting for.]]

His voice lacked its usual derisive ring.

[[I don't know when it started exactly. Maybe I got it from my past incarnation—the *real one* that this 'Embryo' originated from. Maybe he'd been thinking all this.]]

“In which case, it would indeed not be your own will, but borrowed from another?”

[[...No clue. The real me wouldn't've had a way of knowing whether he wanted to be killed the way I'd thought about it either. It's just...]]

Embryo paused.

“Just what?”

[[There anything like a mirror around? If so, could you take a look in it?]]

There was no mirror, but there was a glass display window. When Boogiepop turned to look in it, Embryo resonated with his vision and sighed.

[[Ah... Knew it. I kinda get the feeling I already know you.]]

“Though I don't believe we've met.”

[[But I still know you. Dunno why, but somehow, I've known all along that a *shinigami* like you would appear before me. If I knew someone like you was gonna show up anyway, maybe that's what got me thinking I should just hurry up and

check out already.]] There was almost a hint of a smile in Embryo's voice. [[In that sense, maybe I owe all the folks who got involved with me an apology...for shoving my own understanding down their throats. Especially Akiko. I'm sorry for what I got her into.]]

“Rather admirable of you,” said Boogiepop, feigning ignorance to the last. “But having had a little chat with said Honami Akiko-san myself, I've decided to spare you. What are you going to do about that?”

[[...What can I do? An egg's just gotta be an egg and sit patiently in its shell. Maybe someday, someone'll take me out of it. Couldn't say if that'd end up killing me until it actually happened... Like how you can't tell if an egg's fertilized or not just by looking.]]

“It is the act of waiting on which an egg prides itself, is it?” said Boogiepop, nodding. Was it a nod of admiration, or of ridicule?

[[...Real talk, though. What are you?]] Embryo asked in earnest. [[How come you can hear my voice? Are you 'half-awakened' too? Or have you got some power that lets you hear all voices, or what?]]

“Who knows. I am, after all, automatic. I’m not certain myself in regards to that.”

It was impossible to discern from his tone of voice whether he was serious or joking.

[[Y’know, if you’re on the edge, killing me might solidify that power,]] Embryo dared.

“I see. So you can give even me ‘incentive.’ And is that something you would ask of me?”

Embryo snickered. It was the same sardonic tone that he’d always used with Akiko. He was back to his old self.

[[I don’t think there’s anyone I’d rather be killed by less than you at the moment. ‘Cause that’d mean I was born just to follow some vague premonition I had. That’s the one thing I sure as hell don’t want.]]

“Well, well. Quite the contrarian, aren’t we?”

Embryo laughed again. Boogiepop didn’t answer, but instead turned to look at the stairs leading to the floor above.

“Now then... He should be here any moment,” he murmured.

[[I dunno. You think the guy’s really gonna take you up on this?]]

“Whether he does or not, it makes no difference to me. It’s your fate on the line, after all.”

[[Oof, savage. But eh, that’s fine.]]

As the two made this incomprehensible exchange, sure enough, there came a sound from that direction. The sound of descending footsteps.

The moment he saw Boogiepop from the corner of his eyes, he tensed, readying himself for combat.

His somewhat stained, but nevertheless elegant clothes of pale purple conformed to his not-so-large body. His boyish face, too, suggested some fatigue. The fall from earlier had placed him at quite a distance.

“The hell are you...? What are you doing here?!” he snarled at Boogiepop.

“Waiting for you, of course. Fortissimo-kun,” said Boogiepop quietly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Akiko looked up with a start.

But it was too late. The crumbling ceiling was already falling straight toward her.

“...Ah.”

It had happened so quickly, her body hadn't had time to react. She just stood there, rooted to the spot. A sudden and unexpected end was nigh.

But then...

“...Look out!” she thought she heard a voice say.

The next moment, something slammed into her, launching her sideways through the air.

As she landed on the floor, the rubble from the ceiling hit the ground immediately beside her with a thunderous crash.

“.....Huh?!”

She gasped. Underneath the rubble was the one who'd come all the way here to look for her: Takashiro Tooru.

“T-Takashiro-san!”

She rushed to help him out as best she could, frantically pulling him from beneath the rubble.

Then, her heart leapt.

His missing eye surprised her too, but it wasn't just that. It was barely visible to her now, but welling up around Tooru's body was the clutch of “*death*.”

Trying her best to stitch up Tooru's “*life*” with the last of her remaining power, she reached out her hands to his left

wrist, where she could see the life was concentrated. But in that moment, Tooru suddenly grabbed them.

With one hand, he had grabbed both of hers by the wrist. It felt as strong as a vice. He hadn't lost consciousness; he'd held on.

"T-Tooru-san..."

"...Honami-san, stop," Tooru said quietly. "I can see it. I don't know exactly what it is you're trying to do, but I do know that you're about to cross the *line of death*."

Akiko fell silent. Maybe it was true. The power was never even hers to begin with, and now even that was almost gone. There was no question that forcing it now would scrape away her own life.

But even so...

"B-but how can I stop when I can see your *life* spilling out of you right before my eyes?!"

Tooru's eyes widened.

"My '*life*'...? Honami-san, you can see that? My '*life*' is spilling out?"

"That's right! So we have to hurry, before it's too—"

"....."

But Tooru's hand wouldn't budge. He was thinking about something. All the while, Akiko's power was rapidly slipping away from her. Her 'sight' was fading.

"Ahh, we have to hurry! Please, Tooru-san!"

Akiko tried to shake off the arm clasping her, but his grip was far too tight.

"No," he insisted. "This is it... Heaven has granted me this final chance."

As he uttered these cryptic words, the vision of '*life*' that Akiko could see continued to dissipate, blurring into a mist. And then finally...it vanished.

At this worst possible moment, Honami Akiko had returned to being an ordinary girl.

"Ah... Ahh..."

She slumped, the strength leaving her body, and Tooru let go.

"The '*line of death*' disappeared. It seems the danger has passed. That's good."

"It's not good!" she wailed. "The way you are now, you... you could die at any moment!"



“So could you. I don’t know what you’re doing here, and I’m not going to pry...but we don’t have much time left to reach the exit.”

Tooru stood up, grabbed Akiko by the arm and started moving at a steady pace. Though bloody from head to toe, he was astonishingly full of energy.

But she really had seen ‘*death*’ lingering around him then. She didn’t know if it was physical or mental, but what she did know was that his life hung in the balance.

“T-Tooru-san, please, listen to me—!”

“Can’t. There’s no time,” Tooru replied bluntly.

Once he’d dragged Akiko over to a wall that read “For Emergency Use Only,” he pulled out the safety valve of the emergency escape chute installed there.

Immediately, a “pipe” extended—if they slid down it, it would take them straight out of the building.

“Okay, you’ll be able to get out from here. There should be police on the outside. Ask them for protection.”

“W-what about you?”

“I...” Tooru’s face darkened. “I would have said there’s something I’ve got to do, but...there’s still one last piece of

unfinished business. Until I've taken care of that, I won't be going anywhere.”

His tone was somber. Somehow apologetic.

“He and I... I suspect that if we miss this chance, there will be no ‘way forward’ for either of us.”

“.....”

It didn't make an ounce of sense to Akiko, but the look in Tooru's eyes told her everything. Yet she still couldn't just let him go.

“B-but...!”

“Oh, that's right, Honami-san...” Tooru interrupted. “I hear you're holding onto something called ‘*Embryo*.’ Do you have it with you? I seem to recall someone telling me that if you kill it, your power will become complete.”

“I..I don't have it anymore...” Boogiepop had taken it away from her. “It's gone...!”

Akiko's head drooped. But Tooru carried on, unfazed.

“I see... Then this half-baked state of mine must be one of my strengths after all,” he murmured, then turned and began to walk away. “You hurry up and get out of there, got it? If you don't have the courage to take it down, wait there a moment. You'll be forced to whether you like it or not.”

“T-Tooru-san!”

Akiko tried to follow him, but then Tooru spoke.

“The kind Takashiro Tooru you used to know is gone,” he said, his back still turned. “After my shameless fall, I was robbed, too, of my right to be a samurai.”

“What...?”

“The one you see here...is just Inazuma.” His voice was chillingly cold. “I won’t say thank you. So don’t you feel sorry for me either. It goes both ways, for us...”

With those parting words, he ignored Akiko, frozen and speechless, put his hand on his *tachi* and headed into the building’s depths.

Thus began the third battle between Inazuma and Fortissimo—the battle that would settle things once and for all.

\* \* \* \* \*

*What the hell is this guy...?*

Fortissimo was puzzled by the sudden appearance of this mysterious, black-hatted figure. It wasn’t clear if they were an

enemy. But to call them an ally... There were far too many unknowns.

The distance between them was approximately twelve meters—a little out of reach for him. Normally he'd approach people quickly and without reserve, but something here gave him pause, and so he stood there on the spot.

"I have to ask. Are you always like this?" asked Boogiepop, his tone derisive.

Fortissimo frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Do you always glare at people you've never met before like that? It's hardly a way to make good friends."

It was spoken without a hint of concern.

"...That's none of your damn business! What the hell are you supposed to be anyway, wearing that ridiculous costume?!" he spat.

"Is it really so strange? I was quite fond of it, myself," sighed Black Hat with feigned disappointment. "Come to think of it, I recall an acquaintance<sup>12</sup> telling me it was strange as well."

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<sup>12</sup> If you're thinking that this is Takeda, you'd be right. The original JPN is explicit about this, but it's written in a weird way unique to Japanese. Basically, the novel writes the characters for Takeda's name, but then writes the pronunciation for the word "acquaintance" above it.

“Who gives a shit about that?!” Fortissimo was about to snap. “Who the hell are you? What are you after?!”

He couldn't believe that they were a member of the Towa Organization. That said, they didn't seem like they'd fit into a rebel faction either. An unknown quantity. There was no other way to say it.

“There would be little meaning in telling you my name. As for my objective, however... You may have some involvement in that.”

“...What? What do you mean?”

“Might you happen to know what *this* is?” said Boogiepop, holding aloft an egg-shaped, portable gaming device.

“...What?!” Fortissimo's face stiffened. “Y-you're telling me...”

“‘*Embryo*’ is what you all seem to be calling it,” stated Black Hat matter-of-factly. “If you promise to keep Honami Akiko out of the picture from now on, let's say I wouldn't be averse to giving it to you.”

“Bastard. So you're involved with the girl...?”

“Was. Despite what happened to her two years ago, she's still been able to survive up until now. There's no reason for her to throw her life away for this pointless incident. Though

if she were still her old self, she might have ended up following in Minahoshi Suiko's footsteps and chosen the path of the Imaginator too. That would have been problematic, for my part."

None of what he said made any sense.

"What the fuck? Are you telling me you know what Embryo is?" Fortissimo asked back, seething, in contrast to Boogiepop's almost placid air.

"Of course. And incidentally, I probably know some things about it you don't. For instance...this."

In addition to Embryo, Black Hat took out something else from under his cloak and showed it to Fortissimo. It was a small, T-shaped pendant made of silver. An Egyptian ankh, was it?

"As I'm sure you're well aware, there is a belief that life is comprised of 'waves.' As our meticulous research of organisms continues, it's becoming increasingly difficult to tell what constitutes a living creature as opposed to mere matter. But what we do know is that there is, in life, a persisting pattern that other things do not have—a kind of ripple<sup>13</sup> of electrical

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<sup>13</sup> If you needed any more evidence of Kadono's love of Jojo's Bizarre Adventure, this is really similar to Hamon from the first 2 parts.

signals, so to speak. This Embryo may not think itself a living being, but given that it comprises both matter and waves, I personally believe it has the right to be called alive.”

“...And?! What’s your point?!”

The impromptu lecture had further incensed Fortissimo. He had no idea what they were getting at. Black Hat paid this no attention and continued.

“However, what makes Embryo an extreme case is that these waves are not so firmly tied to its matter. Which is why, if one uses the phenomenon of resonance, you can do *this...*”

Black Hat then started to tap the ankh in a curious rhythm against Embryo’s game device. The tempo was precise and complex.

Fortissimo’s keen eyes very clearly picked up the phenomenon that occurred then.

“Wha...?!”

This was because although Black Hat hadn’t pressed any buttons, the text reading <EMBRYO> on the device’s LCD screen had vanished completely; in its place was a two-legged character that looked like a bear or a cat.

Then, for but a brief moment, the ankh seemed to shudder.

“...Like so. Do you understand?”

“W-what did you just do? Don’t tell me...”

Had they transferred the core energy wavelengths from one to the other...?

Surely not. Such a thing shouldn’t have been possible, not without one of the Towa Organization’s highly specialized facilities. To do that so effortlessly...

Once Fortissimo came to this conclusion, he trembled.

“So you’re not just a weirdo.” He couldn’t have hidden the mirth in his voice if he’d tried.

“Oh? Now that’s a different expression... I see, so that’s your ‘hobby,’ is it? You want to fight powerful opponents near to you in strength. And you prioritize that above all else, it would seem,” responded Black Hat with a similar relish.

“Though I’m sorry to say, you and I won’t be able to fight here and now.”

“What? What do you mean?”

Fortissimo frowned. He knew they weren’t saying that out of fear. He couldn’t imagine anyone with their personality trying to bluff their way out.

Black Hat shrugged.



“I believe you already know the meaning behind that,” he said, and casually tossed the ankh that now contained Embryo over to Fortissimo.

Fortissimo caught it. Then, out of nowhere, *he* piped up.

[[Hey there, partner. Nice to be workin’ with ya.]]

Fortissimo was taken aback.

The next instant, a mighty tremor rocked the entirety of Sphere, the sound of explosions rumbling all throughout the complex.

“...Wha—?!”

The first thing that hit Fortissimo as he looked up was a flash of bright red.

Flames...

They were erupting all over the building, running across the ground, licking the ceiling and engulfing the walls.

“W-what is this...?”

“It doesn’t look accidental, that’s for sure,” came Black Hat’s voice from beyond the roaring blaze. Though they were

still the same distance apart, the flames now dividing them made it feel as if he had become something incredibly distant.

“D-did you do this?”

“Of course not. I didn’t even know ahead of time that you people would be coming here. It is not so easy to set a trap of this magnitude without prior planning.”

And then it hit him. Could *he* have done this...?

Who else could it have been? It must have been why he’d run away to let Honami Hiroshi escape earlier. He had known these flames would appear. But why would he do this?

“...Ah!”

No... It was obvious. He’d told him.

“In an exceptional environment...”

That’s what the trap was for.

“W-which means...”

It wasn’t over yet. Was that it?

Was *this* what he’d been waiting for...?

“So it would seem. It appears you still have some business to attend to. Let us postpone our battle until after that.”

The voice grew distant.

“W-wait!” Fortissimo cried out hurriedly.

Then something else flew through the flames towards him—something white.

He caught it on reflex. It was the gaming device that had been Embryo's vessel up until now.

*If you wish to fight me, keep that ankh safe. It is the "warranty" that binds me and you. Give that game to the Towa Organization. Don't worry, I assure you there's residual energy left. You'll be able to fool them easily.*

It all sounded so flippant.

"Y-you can't just damn well say that!" Fortissimo cried, snapping at his cavalier attitude. "How the hell can I even be sure you'll fight me?!"

*You may not think it, but one of the few things I pride myself on is that I have never once told a lie, replied Black Hat. I swear it. On this day, one week from now, at the stroke of dawn. I believe you know the abandoned amusement park on the outskirts of the city. I'll be waiting there. Though, there is of course one problem.*

"Problem? What problem?"

*You.*

"Huh? ...What's the matter with me?!"

*I wonder. Can you really escape this place with your life...?*

And that was that. The presence beyond the swirling flames fully vanished out of sight.

\* \* \* \* \*

From the outside, the fire had completely engulfed Sphere. It burned far more dramatically than a typical fire, too. Flames spouted up into the air, rising to almost twice the height of the building itself.

There was something familiar about it. That's right... You could almost mistake it for firewood on a campfire, stacked to burn well. And in fact, this was very much the instigator's intent; it had been secretly designed to flare up in spectacular fashion, while at the same time keeping the flames from spreading outwards with the right amount of space and ventilation.

"Picture it. A great, flaming bonfire in the dead center of a modern-day city. Like a spiritual ritual the people of old used to perform, making an offering to the heavens. Quite a poetic scene, wouldn't you say? Don't you think that, in this boring day and age, kindling a signal fire like this could bring about something truly remarkable?"

This was probably the sort of thing he thought, deep down.

But it was unlikely that he seriously meant it through the act of building it alone. That, and things were panning out a little differently from its intended use. It was still midday outside, rising up at the least noticeable time of day for a person to appreciate the beauty of the flames. Having said that, the smoke at least billowed up quite dramatically, so its purpose as a fire to herald the advent of something was indeed achieved.

The police encircling the building had no choice but to retreat from the sudden conflagration. It was important that they handled this without making the neighboring residents panic, while also guiding them to safety. The fire department was of course contacted immediately, but they would need a few minutes to get there.

It was enough. The series of events surrounding The Embryo would be over before that.

In just a short while, everything would be brought to an end.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Urggh, god-fucking-dammit!”

It felt like nothing was going according to plan. Everything was deviating from what Fortissimo expected. This had never happened before.

“Seriously... How the hell did it come to this...?”

Cursing, he advanced through the brightly burning flames.

Having the power to sever space, even the flames and their heat did not reach him—they merely formed a circle around him, as if trying not to get too close. The lack of oxygen posed a risk, but the building had apparently accounted for that by being well-ventilated when it burned, so breathing was almost no issue. That said, being enveloped by flames still wasn’t the most pleasant of experiences.

*Although...*

Although he *had* completed his actual mission.

He had been tasked with finding Embryo, and he had retrieved it. Now it was at his chest on a pendant chain. He thought he heard strange chuckling sounds from it occasionally, but there was no point in wondering. The gaming device—Embryo’s previous vessel—also hung from the

chain, but Fortissimo was too irritated to think straight about what to do with these two things.

*I can think about that later. My number one priority is to get outside. Besides, if I'm engulfed in all these flames, it should be pointless for him to be plotting much of anything at this point. And yet...*

“And yet, if it was pointless...why go through all this?”

Fortissimo realized that he'd been trying as hard as possible not to think about it. If he thought too hard, he had a gnawing feeling that his understanding might go places he could never bring it back from.

“...This is so damn stupid!” he spat.

[[Heh heh heh. Now, you know that ain't true,]] he felt a voice answer.

“.....”

He found it hard to tell whether this was his inner voice or Embryo talking to him, so he ignored it.

Proceeding farther down the stairs, he reached a place exactly halfway along the route that led from the rooftop to the outside.

“.....”

He looked from the stairway to the floor and made a small gasp. It was a long, tall corridor that extended far into the distance. It seemed to be linked to two emergency stairwells, and likely spanned the length of nearly the entire building.

It was a gallery.

Sandwiched between retail stores on either side, this free-of-charge exhibit area had been designed to fill the gap. It was titled “Impressionists of Modern Japan” or something or other and was wholly unremarkable, the walls lined with dirt-cheap pictures scrounged from a bargain bin. Half of them were aflame, but the area around the fire was left relatively unscathed compared to other places, perhaps because there was little to burn. That said, it didn’t change the fact that the heat was worse than a steam-filled sauna, and there was no telling when something might explode.

There he stood.

*Tachi* still sheathed at his waist, his one eye staring.

“You’re a little later than I expected,” he said quietly.

Somehow, despite this hellish landscape, there was not a drop of sweat on him.

It is said that a high priest who reached Nirvana amid the flames of intrigue once said, “Purge the mind of thoughts and



even fire will feel as the cool breeze.” Could that have been what this man had done...?

His name, as Fortissimo had named him, was Inazuma.

“.....”

Slowly, Fortissimo stepped off the stairs, his face as impassive as a Noh mask.

“I see... Since the shutters blocked off the usual route, anyone trying to descend from above via the emergency exits given the layout would have to pass through here. You could therefore use that fact to set an ambush... But if you’d miscalculated even slightly... Say I’d taken a different route and never encountered you, what then? Weren’t you leaving a little too much to chance?”

“I was not.” Again, his voice was calm. Fortissimo wrinkled his brow.

Then he noticed.

Inazuma was standing between the entrances to the retail stores on either side of him. Being internal partitions, these entrances weren’t equipped with any kind of shutters. This meant that it was possible for him to check each of those spaces from his position. So long as he had the ability to detect

someone's presence, he could run to wherever they might come from.

"...You've been thorough. So? Are you done with all this preparation of yours?" he said with something of a sneer. But Inazuma stayed level-headed.

"I'm done," he simply informed him. "I don't need to keep my distance anymore."

Then, he unsheathed his *tachi* in one deft motion.

The dull gleam of the blade shone dimly in the fire's glare.

*What...? He wasn't going to use iai?*

But then why hadn't he drawn the sword until now? He mentally shook off the thought. This wasn't the time for idle worrying—nor was there any need for it.

His opponent had said he would fight. All he had to do now was break through that.

If Inazuma had confidence in his strategy, Fortissimo was assured of his strength. What was there to be afraid of?

*No. If this is fear, I welcome it.*

Fear meant struggle. And overcoming struggle was the kind of feeling he seldom got to taste.

He'd take it head-on and smash it to smithereens...!

Fortissimo took his first step forward.

Inazuma didn't move.

It really did seem like he was done retreating. Of course, even if he did, he'd quickly run into a dead end. He'd catch him as he was descending the stairs. There was no escape. And though this place had vertical space, it was narrow. Even if he moved to the side, there'd be no way for him to get out of Fortissimo's range.

In just a few meters, he would reach that range.

The air around him seemed to shimmer. A heat haze had formed.

On the other side of that haze stood Inazuma. His opponent must have seen him shimmering the same way.

"...Ah, that's right. There's one thing I've been meaning to ask you, Inazuma."

Fortissimo stopped, though he was so close now that even a light kick off the ground would immediately place him within striking distance.

"You told me before that I'd win 'nine-hundred-and-ninety-eight times.' What about the other two times, then? Assuming *this* is one of them, what would the other one be?"

It was a simple, unadorned question. There was no sense of Fortissimo trying to play his cards right. He simply asked

because he genuinely had no idea. And if he defeated Inazuma here, the answer would forever remain a mystery.

His opponent's reply was equally frank.

"That one already failed."

"...Hm? Come again?"

"Before...when we fought in the rain. The way things were going, I may well have won. But I was a fool and hadn't realized that fact... If Masaki hadn't saved me, I would never have had the chance to come back, here, like this. Which is why..." Inazuma hesitated briefly. "It won't be me who wins here this day. It will be Masaki who defeated you."

Fortissimo's brow creased. He didn't follow.

"You're telling me you could have won back then too...?"

"That's right. This is, in a way, a second chance. So...I will not fail again," he declared quietly.

"....."

Fortissimo fell silent.

In the pouring rain... and amidst the flames...

What was the connection between those two things? They were polar opposites.

Though Fortissimo didn't imagine that this guy would spout nonsense—not under these conditions. It must have just seemed that way to him.

“I see...”

At last, Fortissimo's signature, fearless smirk surfaced.

“Then evidently, we have a fair ‘duel.’ I underestimated you last time... Allow me to take that back now. I have no idea what you're hoping for... But for that reason—for that very reason!—I tell you this: I, too, promise to strike you without a shred of mercy!”

He began to walk forward.

One step. Then another...

At the last moment, Inazuma spoke.

“Fortissimo. There's something I have to ask you too. Have you ever truly thought about what it means to be *strong*?”

“Good question. Maybe I don't have a clue after all,” he answered, fearless as ever.

Inazuma gave a small nod.

“I thought so...” he started, but by that point the fight had already begun.

Fortissimo had already stepped into range. And he had not been bluffing.

In that instant, the space Inazuma occupied instantaneously burst apart. It was a full-out attack, without hesitation or restraint.

But by that point, Inazuma was no longer there.

He had instead stepped forward. Just because Fortissimo had attacked that space, it didn't necessarily mean that anything in between would be subjected to the attack.

*... Well played! However...*

However, it didn't mean that this was a hard-and-fast rule. He was capable of launching attacks in a straight line too.

He assumed a stance planning to do just that, and in that moment, Fortissimo realized. His eyes focused not on Inazuma, but on what was behind him.

Because he had attacked at full force, a hole had opened up in the ground. Normally, a simple hole wouldn't have meant much. But right now, the whole area was brimming with raging flames...

By the time he had realized his mistake, it was too late. Inazuma, propelled forward by the blast of the erupting flames, was approaching with blinding speed.

The tip of his blade drew right before Fortissimo's eyes.







—*N-not yet!*

But his absolute guard had not been broken just yet.

The sword shattered to pieces in an instant.

Fragments danced through the air as if in slow motion.

In the wavering haze caused by the heat, they shimmered.

And then...he understood everything.

Why it had to be burning around them.

Why the conditions were the same as in the pouring rain.

It was all for this. Whether the air was shimmering from the heat or filled with water droplets... Either way would have worked. It didn't matter, so long as the environment let you physically see the changes in the air.

The entire building had to have been set aflame so that wherever their fight led, this condition was guaranteed to be met. As for why he hadn't drawn his sword for so long...that too now became clear.

The sword was in tiny pieces. But this was not a problem, for it had already served its purpose. The true weapon was already in Inazuma's left hand.

It was the scabbard.

The overly thick, heavy, iron and unremarkable scabbard, finished only with rough lacquer to stop it from rusting.

This was why he'd had the sword sheathed the whole time. If he had drawn it, Fortissimo would have noticed why he hadn't discarded something so insignificant.

Now all the conditions were met.

An environment where he could see the air itself.

Speed with which he could take Fortissimo unawares for just a split-second.

And getting Fortissimo to attack, leaving the *line* which shattered the sword in full view.

Fortissimo's power was to proliferate the countless fractures that ran through the air. But now, the shape of those fractures was visible to Inazuma too.

By exploiting that fraction of an opening, his strike—propelled forward by the explosive pressure, as if being sucked in—had buried itself deep in Fortissimo's chest.

Indeed, someone somewhere had once spoken of such an attack.

“When you are focused solely on the *sword*, you cannot call it a *weapon*...”

“Ga-hagh!”

Spewing up blood, Fortissimo's body was blown away by the impact and recoil.

It was just as he had thought. The battle had been decided in an instant.

\* \* \* \* \*

Droplets of blood rose from Takashiro Tooru as well. Fortissimo's space-rending power wasn't his only weapon—the shockwaves that accompanied the destruction came with it. They had landed wounds across his body.

Fortissimo was blown backwards and, without losing momentum, smashed through the stairs weakened by the fire and flew right out of Sphere.

Amid the raging blaze which had quickly caught up with him from behind, Tooru rolled along the floor, somehow evading the main torrent of flames.

In the slightest of spots where the flames had subsided, he rose.

The iron scabbard in his hand was already battered, bent and half-missing. It had been severed where the shockwave and line strayed apart. If he hadn't landed his hit, the thing would have been rendered completely useless. He'd had one chance to win, and one alone.

And he had won.

With his own skill, the one they called the Strongest had tasted defeat.

But then...

“...I knew it.”

He looked down at where Fortissimo had fallen.

“It’s just as you said, Sensei... ‘Becoming stronger is the same as giving up on everything else.’ It really is.”

He looked up at the sky. “There really is...nothing left.”

A trickle of blood fell from his ruined eye.

Then he turned on his heel and returned into the flames.

He, who had nothing, still had one thing left to do.

Just one. And it was a matter of life.

As for Fortissimo, half of what had blasted him away was his own doing. Even after crashing through the building, flying outside, falling and slamming into concrete several dozens of meters below, the shockwave around him had sheltered him the whole time.

And so, lying there buried in the crater turned to rubble, it wasn’t long before he raised his upper body with a groan.

“Uhn, urrgh...”

Not even aware of the situation he was in, he surveyed his surroundings. At last, he had to acknowledge that he had dropped out of the battlefield itself.

“.....”

A piece of the iron scabbard was still lodged in his chest, but it was on his right side, so it hadn't struck him directly in the heart. Just a few broken ribs and a badly injured lung, that was all. He was lucky. A narrow escape, you might say... But he could hardly believe that.

If there was one thing he had to accept, it was that he'd been let off lightly.

It was his total defeat.

“.....”

While he sat there in his daze, something buzzed in his hip pocket.

He jumped, but then quickly realized what it was. Slowly, he inched his left hand out toward it.

He took out a cylindrical stick-shaped device with what looked like a lens attached to the end. It had been vibrating like a phone. The fact that it was still intact in spite of the beating it had taken suggested that it was exceptionally

durable for a device of its kind. But then again, this was the sort of environment that it had been specially designed for.

He brought the device to his mouth and ears and answered the call.

“This is Fortissimo.”

[[Please report your mission status.]] It was the same robotic, female-sounding synthesized whisper as always. He didn’t know whether there was someone on the receiving end or if it really was just a machine.

They’d probably made the sudden call because of that Swallow Bird woman. She had likely “reported” his location to her superiors. They probably felt that the conditions they’d agreed upon had been met by the time Sphere started burning.

“Ah, well...” He looked at his chest.

The pendant and the gaming device were both still hanging from his neck. The gaming device, however, was beyond repair after the impact. But the pendant...?

“Embryo is...”

[[Did you successfully retrieve it?]]

“N-no... But never mind that—something much more urgent came up.”

[[That has nothing to do with you. Your mission is to retrieve Embryo. I repeat: Did you retrieve it?]]

“.....”

Fortissimo looked at the two objects. He had to say something. It was his mission. He had to tell the truth.

“...I’ve retrieved Embryo, but its vessel is broken. Unclear as to whether the energy’s preserved.”

[[What form does it take?]]

“...A family game device.”

He couldn’t believe what he was saying, but he’d already run his mouth.

[[Then your mission is complete. Congratulations. Embryo’s preservation was not one of the achievement criteria. Proceed to the designated location immediately.]]

“Yes, but... As I was saying, this isn’t the time for that! I’ve detected the appearance of a powerful MPLS—I’m sure of it!”

[[And you want to fight them, is that what you want to say?]] came the icy reply. [[As I keep telling you, that is not your mission. We will take the necessary measures on our side.]]

“.....”

Fortissimo didn’t retort. Rather, he couldn’t.



He had to acknowledge that, if asked whether he wanted to fight Inazuma once more, he couldn't give an immediate answer.

“...Understood,” he groaned with resignation.

[[Then stand by on Code F until your next orders.]]

With that, the mechanical voice cut off. Fortissimo lifted himself groggily to his feet.

“.....”

He lifted the pendant at his chest between the fingers of his left hand, sensing that someone somewhere was saying, [[Thanks, pal. Heh heh heh.]]

“...Well, they did say it was warranty,” he murmured, smiling wryly.

Then he looked up at Sphere, blazing away.

He couldn't tell which of the holes he'd fallen from. With the building wreathed completely in flames, it was impossible to distinguish just about anything.

“Except...now the Towa Organization's minions will keep coming after you. How do you plan on getting out of this one? No place on earth is safe for you anymore. Living hell is all that awaits you now...” He shook his head. “But maybe that goes for me too. All right then, Inazuma... As your struggle to

survive goes on, they'll have to give me the order to erase you sooner or later. Until that day comes, you can hang on to the title of Strongest One for a while. Fight, and become ever stronger. Because in that time, I too—”

Then he smiled.

It was a strangely peaceful smile, different to any he'd made before. Yet for some reason, it made his past smiles feel somehow friendlier. Now there was something even more egomaniacal about him.

It was as if to say the desire to challenge another was more suited to him than being the strongest.

Grave as his injury was, with a virtually unchanged gait he spun, turning his back on the blazing Sphere, and strode away.

Very soon, firefighters would rush into the area, and the police who had momentarily retreated would return.

\* \* \* \* \*

Honami Akiko gazed at the burning building from the outside.

“.....”

She had no words for it.

“It sort of feels like a dream, the whole incident.” By her side was her little brother, Hiroshi.

That she was there alive and well was, in a way, thanks to her brother. Afterwards—after she’d parted with Takashiro Tooru—she had sat down on the spot, her mind in a daze. Then the flames sprang up, and just as a blind panic was about to overwhelm her, suddenly her brother showed up, took her in his arms and jumped into the escape chute.

She didn’t know why he was even there to begin with. It seemed he had some complex reasons, but she just couldn’t make sense of any of it.

“That figures, since the real you showed up right after fake Nee-chan left... I had kind of a weird hunch about it. But I don’t get how I’d know that...” Hiroshi said, tilting his head.

“.....”

Akiko simply looked up in silence at the flaming building. It almost looked like half of it had already burned to rubble. It had been raging with such intensity, perhaps it wouldn’t be long before it burned itself out fully.

A number of fire trucks had already turned up at the scene and started spraying water, but she expected it would run out of things to burn even before they put it all out.

Maybe the building itself was designed in such a manner.

Even Takashiro Tooru had left her in that place with a clear objective in mind. Though he had saved her, it hadn't really felt like it. Then there was Boogiepop, and the person she couldn't recall, and even Kyou nii-chan, who'd died ten years ago... It felt like they'd all headed down their own separate paths without a thought for her.

She'd been the only one left alone here like this, the only one who had ultimately remained insignificant.

An unhatched egg, no different than before.

"...It's all so dumb," she mumbled. "Seriously, why am I such an idiot...?"

"Nee-chan?" Hiroshi cast a worried glance at his dazed sister.

Her brother was about the only one who'd consciously thought of saving her, she thought vaguely. But she didn't feel like thanking him right now. She was having a hard enough time dealing with herself.

She'd been concentrating solely on whether this incident had given her anything of value. She didn't want to believe that all of her efforts had been for nothing.

But perhaps sadly, she didn't have a clue what that could be.

Sphere was still up in flames.

The central part that had acted as the axis must have finally burned out, as it flared up suddenly only to collapse in on itself straight after.

It was like part of an eggshell had cracked and something had come out from within, Akiko thought. Though, of course, no phoenix was going to rise out from it—only a pillar of fire and nothing more.

“...I wonder if this is where I'm supposed to admire how pretty it is...”

Still in a daze, Akiko looked on blearily, regarding the lurid spectacle with an air of indifference.

Eventually, as Akiko had thought, the flames burned all that there was left to burn and died down, extinguishing of their own accord almost effortlessly. It was reported that it had burned for thirty minutes at most. The police had, naturally, conducted a thorough investigation, but were unable to find any pertinent clues. Just as with the previous incident,

they were in the end unable to ascertain whether it'd just been an accident caused by a chain of coincidences or a purposeful human act.

Having found no dead bodies or any signs of foul play, the official view was that there were no casualties.

\* \* \* \* \*

...As I lay alone in the darkness, someone came to my side. Someone tall. Very tall. But somehow unthreatening. On the contrary, they looked awfully frail.

I know this person, I thought in passing.

“Hey there...Masaki,” they said to me.

“Tooru. You're all right... Thank goodness,” I answered.

“Guess so. Can't say I was completely unscathed, but considering the trouble I caused for you and everyone else, it's nothing, really,” Tooru muttered. He sounded incredibly exhausted.

“That's not like you. What happened to the bright, peppy Tooru I know?” I teased. “You're not gonna become a fine samurai with that attitude.”

“Yeah... You’re right. In the end, I...” Tooru smiled sadly.  
“I...couldn’t become a samurai.”

“How come?”

“I’ve made too many shameful mistakes. Some of which can never be undone...”

“What are you talking about? If that’s your argument, Master’s always bringing unwanted shame upon himself. He wasted his precious life as a martial artist to train me, for starters. Isn’t that a past to be ashamed of? But I still hold him in the highest regard. The shame you speak of must be important to someone too. I’m sure of it.”

I smiled. Every time I spoke to Tooru, I always seemed to end up preaching to him. The same way Master did to me.

“...Thank you,” Tooru smiled weakly, but his expression quickly darkened. “But personally, I don’t think I can ever forgive myself for almost leaving you to die. I was too self-centered, only thinking about how I could win the battle in front of me.”

“So? Did you win or lose?”

“...It doesn’t feel like either.”

“Then put your shame aside till it’s decided. You’re still on the road. If you’re gonna do this, you’ve gotta do it right.”

Despite my words, Tooru just kept smiling weakly.

“Did I say something wrong?”

Tooru shook his head.

“No... you’re probably right. Either way, it looks like there’s no turning back on this path. Seems I’ll have a lot to see through.”

It was apparently a grave subject.

“Then, does that mean this is goodbye?” I dared to ask.

“...Probably, yeah.”

“In that case, I have a favor to ask... There’s this girl, Orihata Aya. I think you’ll know her,” I said quietly. “Could you give her a message for me? Tell her, ‘Thanks for everything.’ Seeing as it looks like I’ll die here. I don’t think I can tell her myself. That’s the only real regret I have.”

“And you couldn’t tell her this yourself?”

“Well, yeah... It’s embarrassing.”

“What was that about having no shame while we’re still on the road?” teased Tooru.

I smiled wryly. “I guess that makes two of us. But really, I’d like you to do this.”

“Sorry, but no,” Tooru said emphatically.

“Huh?”



“That would be your job. No one else can do that but you, Taniguchi Masaki.”

“But...”

“You won’t die. I won’t let you. It really was a stroke of luck—Honami-san just barely taught me the method in time.”

Tooru placed his left hand over me and drew the other up to its wrist.

“I’m told my ‘*life*’ is concentrated around here, and it’s ready to spill out at any moment... I can’t see it, but if it truly is *there*, then I can predict where the ‘*line*’ is. So...”

Then Tooru moved his right hand with a snap. He did indeed seem to cut something in the air, unseen to the naked eye.

“According to Fortissimo, the only way to seal the wounds is to pour another’s life into them...”

I... I could see it.

A blackish, mist-like thing was spilling out from Tooru’s wrists, falling onto my chest and being absorbed.

My body was steadily growing hotter from within. I became conscious of all the pain throughout being pushed outward, like a chick trying to break free from its shell.

*This is...*

The blotches I could see were invisible to Tooru, it seemed.

“Stop! That’s enough already! If you keep going, you’ll be the one who—” I cried.

Tooru pressed down on his wrist.

“So it seems... Looks like I made it in time.”

“Tooru, do you realize what you’re doing?! You just gave me half of your own life force! That means there’s over twice the risk of you dying from something!”

I knew this intuitively. But Tooru was unfazed.

“No, I was lucky. That there was even some left over for me,” he said, nodding. It seemed he’d already accepted it.

“E-even so...”

“In terms of ability, I’m far better equipped to deal with that risk than your average human... You could say it balances out,” he said calmly. “And that applies to your life, too. I’m just returning what I owe. Though, given the trouble I’ve caused for Kirima-san and the rest, it might still not be enough...”

He spoke so matter-of-factly, I was lost for words.

“Well then, this is goodbye. Enjoy your life with Orihata-san.”

Tooru bowed his head slightly, then drew away from me as I lay there in the darkness.

“W...wait, Tooru! You can’t be serious!” I cried desperately. He couldn’t mean it.

Hearing the anger in my voice, Tooru looked back.

“You can’t honestly believe you’re the one at fault here?!” I roared.

He must have seen how serious I was. Tooru looked straight at me and nodded.

“Then—then before you go, there’s just one thing I need to say to you!”

“...What is it?”

“Swear to me... You *swear* to me that you’ll stay alive, and that we’ll meet again. Swear it to me here! ‘Cause no way in hell am I letting us part like this!” I glared at Tooru as I spoke.

“.....”

For a while, Tooru was silent.

“Heh,” he said finally, with a smile, and nodded. “Sure. I swear it.”

“You better! ‘Cause if you don’t, I’ll never forgive you for the rest of my life!”

“Fine by me. But I’m quoting that right back at you, Masaki. If you push your luck any further and end up making Orihata-san cry, I won’t forgive you either.”

Tooru smirked, and finally vanished this time into the darkness.

“.....Hah!”

I awoke. The first thing to fill my eyes was a clinical, pure white ceiling. I became aware that I was lying on a bed, with several tubes attached to my body.

There were bandages wrapped tightly all over me, presumably to staunch bleeding. But I could already tell that all of my wounds had closed up.

“.....”

Slowly, I turned my head and saw a girl sitting by the side of the bed. She was asleep, however, and must have been ridiculously tired, because she looked practically unconscious.

Assaulted by a constricting feeling in my chest, I sat up. After shutting off all the valves from the IV drip and other medical equipment, I ripped out the tubes attached to my body and massaged the wounds.

“Damn, he really wasn’t making it up... Looks like I owe a proper apology after all,” I muttered, gently draping the blanket I’d been covered with over the girl—Orihata Aya.

Just then, there was the sound of footsteps heading towards the private room I was placed in.

I sensed someone standing outside the door, hesitant to come in and wondering whether or not to knock, until at last the door creaked slowly open.

In came Nagi-nee-san’s good friend, Habara Kentaro. His head was drooping and there were bags under his eyes—he’d been working hard through the night, it seemed.

“Hey, Aya-chan... C’mon now, you need a little rest. I’ll swap with you, so—” As Kentaro-san looked up, our eyes met. “...Ah.”

Just as he was about to raise his voice, I quickly raised a finger to my mouth and shushed him, then pointed to the sleeping Orihata.

“...A-ah... Err...”

Flapping his mouth, there were no words for Kentaro’s expression. It was like he had gone all flabby, like a rubber doll.

Then he began wriggling his fingers animatedly, as if dialing on a push-button telephone.

“...I-I’ll go tell Nagi...!” he said quietly and then flew back out the room.

Chuckling at Kentaro-san’s comical reaction, I looked again at Orihata.

She was breathing softly in her sleep. I gently touched her head and the look on her sleeping face seemed to ease a little.

I decided I would wait for however long I had to until she woke and sat back down on the bed.

Then I noticed the neatly folded kimono in the corner.

“.....”

I didn’t need to confirm it.

It was the kimono my master had. And it was proof that the one who’d worn it really had come.

“...It’s a promise,” I murmured through clenched teeth.

We’ll meet again, my friend...

12



“That unhatched egg trembles in fear as it  
stirs, dreaming of something even now...”



Since his usual cabinet was occupied, Honami Hiroshi was forced to sit on an empty chair and wait.

It was the same old scene. The usual cacophony of electronic sounds and jingling of coin-push games<sup>14</sup> ringing out at his usual arcade.

“.....”

It had been about ten days since his last visit.

A week had passed since those events. He'd been severely scolded when his parents discovered upon returning from their business trip that the inside of his house had been turned upside-down. And during his absence from school, it had been decided unilaterally that he was to be in charge of some annoying tasks, too. A lot had happened, but at least his life had returned to peaceful normality.

He didn't know what the people he'd gotten involved with were up to now. Takashiro Tooru had apparently gone missing. The police hadn't finished their previous inquiries and were trying to locate him, it seemed. He wasn't even sure whether Lee Maisaka and the child who'd turned into his sister

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<sup>14</sup> Original JPN here was “Medal Games,” refers to a type of arcade game where a machine would push coins towards a cliff of sorts. The idea is that the more people who play, the better chance of someone winning a bunch of coins, especially if they start stacking.

had even escaped the fire with their lives. Given that they hadn't found any bodies, he was hopeful that they were alive somewhere. As for Segawa Kazami, he still caught her on TV.

His sister was having more moments of slight absent-mindedness too, but she'd started going back to school again and living her daily life as normal. He heard the delinquent girl who'd saved them before, Kirima Nagi, had asked all sorts of questions, but it didn't seem to amount to much of an issue in the end.

Everything was back to how it was.

When all was said and done, Honami Hiroshi had made it out surprisingly unscathed. It had been Tooru and Lee who'd fought, after all, and his sister had been the one wandering around with Embryo. The building that had caught fire had no bearing on him, his family or his friends.

Then why was it exactly that he'd come here again?

Why was he sitting around waiting in front of the cabinet he'd been sitting at back then?

Back then...at the place he'd received Embryo right at the start of it all.

“Why...?”

“Why did nothing happen? Is that what you’re wondering?” said a voice from above him.

He looked up to see a man standing there. A man with a gray coat. Indeed, everything about him was gray.

“Sidewinder... So that’s your name, huh?”

It was the name that Lee Maisaka had told him. The man nodded.

“So it would seem.”

“You’ve caused a whole lotta trouble, y’know,” Hiroshi said with a sigh.

“Oh? Have I?”

“Yeah, like this arcade. The police showed up and stuff ‘cause you died in this place, and they haven’t been able to open until today ‘cause of that. That’s why it took me so long to come here.”

“Well, to be precise, I didn’t exactly die here. I’d already been killed before that. I made a salaryman believe I was his co-worker and had him carry my body,” Sidewinder chuckled.

A passer-by overlapped him and passed straight through. Sidewinder had no corporeal form.

“That was the power that Embryo drew out of you, wasn’t it...? You used it to bring Embryo to me.” Hiroshi sighed. “It

was all too convenient, really... You just *happened* to have the same game as me and could exchange data? Coincidences like that don't happen. In the end, I just fell for some illusion you'd made."

"Actually, that's not quite right."

Was he a ghost or a hallucination? Either way, Sidewinder, whom only Hiroshi could see, shook his head.

"I was passive to the end. The one single thing I did...was to bring Embryo to you, nothing more," he giggled. "The one who created the illusion wasn't me. That was all you, Honami Hiroshi-kun."

"What do you mean?"

"It was so that you wouldn't come to realize it yourself, of course. You're still just an immature child, and your '*power*' is far too huge."

"....."

"That's right. Surely you didn't think that you were the only one who'd be completely unaffected by Embryo? You were able to talk to me—even take something from me—right at the very beginning, although I was already dead. How could you not be involved? You had awakened sooner than anyone else."

“.....”

Hiroshi didn't answer. Sidewinder continued on regardless.

“Not even Embryo itself realized that it had awakened you, so the awakening must have been instantaneous. You must have immediately activated it at the same time. It began to assemble all the conditions as was its directive—the earliest of which, of course, was camouflaging itself from you. To remove any case that would place too much of a mental burden upon you. A split personality, you might say.”

“...So I subconsciously believed that I got the game from you, and I carried Embryo around...?”

“So it would appear, given that my power was simply to deliver Embryo to whoever reacted, like a homing missile. The rest was your job.”

“I can't believe Embryo wouldn't know itself.”

“It only perceives the outside through the senses of humans it resonates with. The moment I died, it lost the ability to understand anything of the outside world. Until it made contact with Honami Akiko, that is.”

“...Couldn't it have been Nee-chan that you reacted to?”

“No, it's the exact opposite. You were the one who reacted to your sister. You already knew from a past incident that

there was a power bound to her. I don't know how your power budded, exactly. Perhaps you realized it subconsciously, or maybe it was latent within you... Perhaps it's because you were in close proximity to your sister's power. As for why... It's because you were also well aware of just how dangerous hers was."

"....."

"That's why your power was born. It was the reason for your ability to 'subtly sway the circumstances around you in your favor,' shall we say. It's like doing a balancing act to link things together. How about we call it *Tightrope*<sup>15</sup>?"

"...So what, this 'power' I've got made Takashiro Tooru and Lee Maisaka fight and caused a building to burn down? I didn't even know about that place!"

"It doesn't matter that you didn't know. You simply influenced those things, and the rest just happened as it would. Think back carefully."

"....."

Hiroshi didn't even have to think about it.

---

<sup>15</sup> My best guess is that this is a reference to a 1976 Electric Light Orchestra song of the same name.

Every time he'd spoken to someone, whether it was his sister or Lee Maisaka, they would always react decisively. Be it leaving the apartment, or chasing after Tooru's gang...

Had he, on a subconscious level, used his power to ever so slightly influence their minds when he did?

"It's a godlike power, but it doesn't mean that anything is possible with it. After all, your objective was extremely simple."

"....."

"Of course, you already know what that is, don't you?"

"...It's to help Nee-chan?"

His sister had been possessed by a ghost from the past, and Embryo had freed her from its curse. And what's more, she'd been isolated and kept in a safe place until that ghost disappeared...

Had everything around him during this chain of events been set up for that purpose?

"For one like you who has yet to experience first love, saving your sister is an extremely clear motive. And I'd imagine that the power can only be used to help others besides yourself. Since no one in the world has the mental fortitude to fully determine their own fate."

If one truly could have everything in their life the way they willed it, they would in all likelihood lose sight of their reason to live. Lee Maisaka came to Hiroshi's mind. The man who, in spite of all his strength, had somewhat of an irresponsible side.

But there was something more important than that.

"...Then, doesn't this mean my power's pretty much done its thing already?"

It was a power that had been created from being by his sister's side. Now that he'd saved her, it had become meaningless.

"It seems that might be the case for now, yes. Although...you never know. Maybe it'll activate again for someone else. Of course, you'd never realize it yourself..."

"So it really is pointless!" Hiroshi sighed. "Well, I'm happy about it saving Nee-chan, but... it doesn't really matter whether I have this power or not. Actually, that doesn't just go for me. Everyone who got wrapped up in this incident wasn't exactly fighting and stuff *all* because of it. Takashiro-san, and even Lee... They were all just doing what they thought was right, weren't they? So it's irrelevant."

"It probably doesn't mean much to anyone, no."



“You apparently even risked your life to get Embryo to the outside world, but there wasn’t really much point, huh? If you hadn’t given it to me, you might’ve found someone a lot better,” bemoaned Hiroshi.

But Sidewinder remained impassive.

“It’s true that *Tightrope* has only acted independently of people and the world thus far. But you see,” he said, smirking, “that’s exactly what makes it possibility. It’s *because* you don’t know what form it will take and what it connects to, *because* it seems trivial enough to elude even the shinigami, that it is possibility in the truest sense. If it wasn’t irrelevant to this world, it could never attain something new.”

“...What if it leads down a bad path?”

“Good and evil are concepts that can only ever be used in relation to an established past.”

“I don’t get it.”

Seeing Hiroshi’s lament, Sidewinder patted him on the shoulder. Though he had no physical form, it really did feel as if Hiroshi was being patted.

“For *now*, you don’t. You don’t get it right now... You, like everyone else, are still young. All things in this world are

still inside of their shell, struggling on down different paths in order to one day hatch.”

“But you... You’re already dead. Are you okay with that? If you hadn’t gotten involved with Embryo, you might’ve been able to join one of those ‘paths.’”

“...I know. But I had good reason to do what I did.”

“Yeah?”

“Embryo had an original. A man named Mo’ Murder was the one who actually killed him, but I was the one who reported him as a ‘threat.’”

“...Huh?”

Hiroshi was confused about what that had to do with anything. But Sidewinder didn’t try to explain and carried on.

“That’s why I swore I would make it up to Embryo. Not that he had any clue himself,” he said with a self-derisive smile. “I had cut off one great path. Death was the only way for me to join it. I’m no Takashiro Tooru, but it’s one of the things you need to be prepared for to become a samurai, isn’t it? Indeed... Bushido is realized in the presence of death.”

“...Yeah, I really don’t get what you’re talking about.”

Hiroshi already knew. No, he’d known from the beginning.

This Sidewinder wasn't even a ghost.

His emotions were not lingering in that place, or anything like that. It was merely the remnants of Sidewinder's "homing" power that remained within Hiroshi.

It wasn't that he lacked physical form in this world. Rather, he existed only within Hiroshi's awareness.

But unlike what had been within his sister, it was already powerless. The mere act of speaking with him like this was pushing its meagre strength. And Hiroshi wouldn't have even been aware of this, had it not been for the "logic" that they were in the place they'd first met.

"It's already over for me. But for you—for all of you—things have only just begun," Sidewinder's phantom said, then regarded Hiroshi with a slightly stern look. "Did you know? For every thousand people who are born into this world, there are a trillion who couldn't be. You must live for them. Such is the curse placed upon all living things in this world. It is inescapable for you all."

"...I don't like the sound of that." Hiroshi made a sour face and looked away.

When he turned back, Sidewinder was nowhere to be seen.

"....."

Hiroshi sighed.

The lively, yet somehow lonely clamor of the game center rang out around him.

After all that had been said about possibility, in the end they were nothing but embryos, staying put like this within the shell of their everyday lives. It was possible that they were fostering something, but they didn't know themselves what that could be.

“...Yeah, I *really* don't like this.”

It didn't look like any of the seats would be free no matter how long he waited, so he gave up on playing games and stood up from his chair. He had an English test tomorrow. After taking time off, his teacher didn't think too well of him. He had to earn a decent score. He'd have to bone up on the subject once he got home.

Even his reluctant mood might have been caused by the power to save someone. But then again, in being able to do so, it made no difference whatsoever.

\* \* \* \* \*

The wind was blowing.

In that derelict site, so quiet and empty that the very concept of bustle could well have been swept from the world, the wind was blowing.

It was a bitter-cold wind.

The time was just before dawn, the hour in which the crisp air seems to cut right through you.

The buildings at this site were virtually all just scaffolding. Each and every one of them formed curious shapes—it was clear at least that this was not a place intended for human habitation. There was an enormous wheel, rails that ran through the sky...

As these things cast their long shadows onto the world in the growing light, a man stood.

“.....”

He was not so tall, but long-limbed, and wore form-fitting clothes of pale purple well-suited to his stature. His face was boyish. At his chest hung a pendant in the form of an ankh.

He stood there silently, doing nothing. Looking at nothing. Simply standing.

As the wind swept up around him, he remained still.

Time marched on. Shadows began to march visibly across the ground from the rising sun.

“.....”

The man was alone. And yet, without a soul around him, there came a strange voice.

[[Think you might be wastin’ your time here, pal. What’cha think?]] It was a horribly unpleasant voice.

“.....”

The man didn’t respond.

[[No two ways about it by this point, eh?]]

“.....”

The sun had now fully risen, and the peaceful chirping of birds had begun in the sky.

It was the start of a new day. A pleasant, refreshing dawn.

“.....”

But the man’s expression was anything but refreshing. In fact, his cheek was twitching slightly.

The man was sure that at some point, somewhere, a certain someone had told him this:

*“On this day, one week from now, at the stroke of dawn. I believe you know the abandoned amusement park on the outskirts of the city. I’ll be waiting there.”*

...He distinctly remembered the words.

“...God-FUCKING-dammit...!”

He gnashed his teeth in fury.

*“You may not think it, but one of the few things I pride myself on is that I have never once told a lie.”*

“...W-what the fuck kind of pride is that...?!”

Shaking all over, he kicked a large nearby rock with all his strength. The rock instantly shattered into tiny fragments and blew apart.

But it did nothing to quell the man’s anger. Again, he roared.

“...Th-that hat bastard...!” he howled into the heavens.

“That lying piece of shit!!!”

[[Keh heh heh heh!]]

As someone somewhere burst once more into an openly wicked cackle, all that blew across the scene was the healthy, early morning breeze.

“The EMBRYO” 2nd half -Eruption- closed.

A sleeping egg does not know that it is inside a shell  
It learns of sound by the beat of its heart and the  
flow of its blood.

That premonition of what lies outside—a world it  
cannot possibly imagine—makes it stir.

Yet, there is no certainty that it will ever hatch

All it can do is struggle within its shell—now the  
only evidence of the life granted to it

With half-formed thoughts and desires, it can't even  
recognize its own form.

The egg is lost in all of its parts as they continue to  
swell without purpose.

Then, amidst the chaos, it sees a ray of light

This is but one brief stage of growth within its shell

One could say that only the outside knows what awaits  
the egg at the end, however

There's also no way to see what could be outside from  
inside the shell

That unhatched egg trembles in fear as it stirs,  
dreaming of something even now.

Its dream indistinguishable from each and every  
moment of our lives.



# Afterword—

## Till Death, or Life, Us Do Part

We're often told things like "Love is war." Things which imply that "the very act of living is fighting." Honestly, though, life doesn't necessarily have such clear-cut goals for winning or losing. It's an extreme example, but take people being conscripted for war who don't know what tomorrow will bring. Even in their lives, the most important thing for them isn't defeating the enemy—it's stuff like what they can do to stop the chafing after they got sores from their ill-fitting boots.

The natural world is romanticized as the survival of the fittest, a place where life and death hangs in the balance, but in real nature there's a more realistic thing called habitat isolation, which operates on the principle that conflict is best avoided. We profess that humans' true nature becomes apparent in extreme situations, with stories told by people on the brink of death, and these stories are a possible facet of the human self, but the truth is neither singular nor extreme. It's simply one side of it. There's no denying that the bravery of such people in that moment is touching, but after they've

survived, even these people have to face the far more common problems of everyday life, like, “Hmm, now what should I have for dinner tonight?”

Incidentally, I heard that my favorite mangaka, Araki Hirohiko-sensei, likes Westerns. When you think Westerns, you’ve got to picture some showdown scene, right? Two outlaws facing each other. The wind blowing through the wilderness. An arm whips up, there's the sudden bang of a gunshot... and then eventually, one of them falls. Well, something along those lines.

These kinds of things have an immediate thrill to them, but put up against life's difficulties I mentioned earlier, they’re really sort of trivial. Still, it has a certain something that stirs the heart. It doesn't have to be deadly duels, either. You get the same feeling when the sports team you're rooting for is playing well. Why is that? Wasn't battle something we were meant to avoid? Are we just trying to compensate?

No, that’s probably where we're mistaken. You can argue that battles take place in everyday life, but you’re overthinking it if you believe that means you have to kick people down and lord it over others. That’s not it. You’d be losing sight of the pure, unadulterated contest between you and your opponent,

where nothing else exists. I can't help but feel that way. If you really did consider facing off with someone in a duel and you happened to lose, there probably wouldn't be any reason left for the two of you to fight. Take some ethnic conflict, for instance. That sort of thing seems to get so horribly confused; they don't even attempt to see who they're fighting. I believe that they merely smash their own turmoil against their opponent in plain anger. That's because for just about all problems, if you just stopped for a moment to clearly think about why it ever became a problem in the first place, about eighty percent of the time you'll have already resolved the matter. The reason why people can't do that is essentially because their grounds for fighting are poorly defined and they're disregarding what it is that needs to be resolved. Too many of the world's problems are little more than this, I feel.

And that is why we still long for the fight. What's stopping us from making it a part of us? This is the way I find myself thinking. And hey, above all, it's cool. On the moor, the dense pampas grass swaying in the wind, two warriors brandishing their swords, neither making the slightest movement... That stuff. Yeah, that "Holy crap, that's awesome!" feeling you get has to be something good. It's because you dismiss that as a

“childish way of thinking,” and always think about what’s realistic. Maybe that’s what’s making the world such a boring place, huh? Well then, why don’t you challenge that thought process to a battle, dude? It’ll be tough! As I, too, battle my inner voice saying all this, unsurprisingly, my commentary ends here partway through, inconclusively. The end.

(But come on man, at least give us some advice for these “confrontational” problems in daily life.)

(Eh, whatever. Just do what you think best. See ya.)

BGM [“WE’RE IN THIS TOGETHER”](#)  
by NINE INCH NAILS

# Translators' Afterword— Not Even Halfway

Hi again.

So, it looks like we've carried you a little further along the road. Another book down, another story complete.

Is it what you hoped for? You might feel it was more of an action romp than usual, but I dunno... I think we had our fair share of mind games, too. I'm quite a fan of the "battle of wits against an unbeatable enemy" scenario.

Really, though... In reaching the end of a story, what do we seek to gain from it, do you think? There's enjoying well-written narrative and structure, sure. And plenty of thrilling moments you can talk about with friends... All the baggage that comes with book appreciation. But once all that's been said and done, once all the thoughts have run through your mind and you're more focused on the latest new show or release, what's left is simply the impression of what you felt as you read it. Only snapshots and glimmers will remain. A vague, yet immutable history. Moments in a fictional timeline that you've been proud to witness. I think the impression that *Embryo* left me was nothing short of scintillating.

Anyway, maybe all I'm doing by talking about this is tracing the path that Kadono has already walked countless times before. ...But then again, you are too, aren't you? We're all here on this rollercoaster of a journey, with its dips and climbs and bends. In the case of the still (somewhat bafflingly) niche *Boogiepop* series, it may be more of a dirt path through a little-known forest, but we're treading it all the same. And we can see each other's footsteps along the way. And hey, looking closely, there are some pretty weird-shaped footprints along here... Are some of these even human?

Eh, it's okay. I don't mind if you're just a talking egg, grimoire or motorbike. I'm just glad you came along for the ride.

**The Decoder,  
our anonymous translator**

Boy, what a journey this Embryo arc has been, eh? There's just something special about this series, being able to go from an introspective character study like *Boogiepop Missing* to the action-packed excitement of this story. I hope this saga will keep on evolving, and I hope to witness it do so alongside you

all. Since all I do is proofread, it feels less like a job and more like a privilege, getting to read the freshly translated chapters ahead of time—thus, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the absolute legend, our translator, without whom this could not be possible. To commemorate the end of this arc and to tease the beginning of the next, I've drawn a little piece which you can see beyond this section. It's not much, but it wouldn't have felt right to close this chapter off without putting in a little effort, so I hope you enjoy it.

**Written by Genma496 (aka Kheem), editor,  
in May 2023, in the middle of a blackout**

You know, it's fitting that of all the novels to be our 3<sup>rd</sup> project, it would be Embryo. After all, there are only 6 officially translated novels. This means that, so far, we've increased the amount of available Boogiepop content in English by half of what already existed. I'd say that's a call for celebration.

Of course, it would be even cooler if we were halfway through Boogiepop as a whole, but that's just not the case. We're only 9 books into a more than 20 novel series,

especially if you count the side series (which we do). In many ways, this project is still in its early stages, and I hope that we'll be able to see this to the end. Or until we finish all the novels I'm personally excited for.

This one was a bit rough though. Lots of personal things getting in the way, including a year long hiatus smack in the middle of it all! None of this was easy, but it was all so worth it. Haven't regretted any of this for a second.

Anywho, that's it for us this time! Hope that we'll be seeing you in *Boogiepop Paradox: Heartless Red* very soon. Until then, enjoy the art that Kheem made to commemorate the occasion.

Bistai—head editor, website owner,  
and writing obsessive.

BGM "Boy, What a Night"  
By Lee Morgan







