

悪魔の香味料
I

神田光



Chapter 01: A Splash of Red

A man clad in a black form-fitting suit and mask nimbly scaled a wall using a rope attached to a grappling hook. He silently rappelled down the other side after reaching the top. He could clearly see a uniformed man standing a fair distance away thanks to his compact night vision goggles.

In position, as expected, he thought.

The young guard was busy twiddling with his rifle trigger. The intruder was perturbed by the inexperience of his target but quickly attributed it to simple resource allocation. This outlying wall sentry, surrounded by a small forest, was not a high priority.

The intruder had intentionally chosen this entry point because of that. He had surveyed the entire area for many nights until he was confident he could enter without being noticed. He had never attempted something of this difficulty and scale before. Taking out Karasuma Nikaidou, head of the Nikaidou Group of Companies (NGC), would not be easy even with heavy preparation. He had plenty of reasons to be nervous, but he neatly bagged those emotions and threw them in the freezer.

He silenced his breathing and kept his body low to the ground as he slinked towards the guard. He continued his approach until he was within a hair's breadth of the unfortunate victim's back. He soundlessly extended his gloved left hand a few inches past the guard's left cheek and covered the guard's mouth. While stifling any call for help with one hand, he mechanically placed the panicked guard in a sleeper hold using only his right arm. This was only viable because of the extensive gulf in strength between the two. It was a feat somewhat counterintuitive to the intruder's slim but muscular physique.

When he was certain the guard would never wake again, he carried the body over his shoulder and hid it with the rope behind an exquisitely pruned shrub. The climbing tool was of generic make because he planned to leave it behind.

The intruder moved to the main mansion within the large property while skillfully avoiding detection by the patrols. He was grateful that the owner despised animals because watchdogs were far harder to fool than human guards. He finally reached the service door where the servants and delivery men commuted in droves just an hour earlier. They had been transporting food, tables, and decorations from outside the mansion.

The service door was locked but such things meant little to him. He easily forced the door open by destroying the doorknob with his hands.

"Must have been an impressive party. Having not one but two celebrity chefs cater... Just how much money does that cost?" muttered the intruder under his breath after having ensured his solitude in the preparation room.

Before he could open the door that led farther inside, he heard footsteps from the corridor. He judged that it belonged to a man based on the heavy thuds, which gradually grew louder. It was likely a more experienced guard than the one he dispatched earlier. He had tried his best to keep the metallic crunching noise to a minimum when he forced the door open, but his efforts were for naught.

I hope he isn't enhanced like me.

He planted his back flat on the wall to the right of the door. The guard swung the door open with enough strength for it to hit the wall. Holding a pistol with both hands, he peeked into the visible section of the room. Finding nothing, he stepped in.

Terror painted itself on the guard's features when he saw a hand inches away from his face. The intruder expertly muffled the guard and slipped his combat knife horizontally into the side of the guard's neck. Without pausing, he pulled the knife towards himself and severed the carotid arteries and windpipe. He quickly released the guard's face and hopped away as he made the cut to avoid most of the blood spatter. A blood trail would lead to his detection.

He clicked his tongue despite the successful silent kill. He was left with a corpse that spread not only blood but also the smell of iron. Being unable to take the enemy's rear had led to this mishap. He had inadvertently placed a time limit on his mission.

Deciding not to waste time, he abandoned the corpse and silently ran through the corridor leading to the main hall. The corridor was well-lit, so he deactivated his night vision goggles. From this point on, he would have to kill anyone he encountered as quickly and quietly as he could. A small hope that they fit his criteria flickered in his chest.

"Ojousama, you are skipping," said a young woman in a flat tone. She was dressed in a butler outfit sans coat.

"I know, and I'm humming too. Any complaints?" said the little girl. Her black, long-sleeved dress and long and wavy ebony twintails danced with each step she took.

"I know you are excited that we are finally at the climax, but it would be better not to count your chickens before-"

"I'll make them hatch."

"But you cannot. Some eggs just do not hatch."

"I'm not talking about eggs but plans."

"But hatching plans refers to their creation, not about seeing them to fruition."

"You say tomato, I say marinara."

"While I also like marinara, that is beside the point." A trickle of exasperation was audible in the young woman's reply.

The little girl, who looked no older than twelve, turned to the butler and flashed an irresistibly adorable smile, bleeding with charm and innocence. It was a stark contrast to the words that dropped like lead chunks from her pink lips.

"Relax Saya. My father will die tonight."

"I never questioned that, *Kaika-Ojousama*," said the butler, showing a subtle, playful smirk.

"Now you are just being mean." Kaika pouted cutely, her wavy fringe shaking from the movement, but all expression disappeared from her face in the next moment. "Spice is about temperance." Her tone was so frigid it rivaled the Arctic tundra.

A look of regret showed on the butler's minimally expressive countenance, but she quickly collected herself, straightened her slender figure, and then bowed deeply. Her short, glistening, black hair, which normally curtained her right eye, drooped down.

"I apologize for my rudeness. My joke went too far, *Kai-Ojousama*." She continued staring at the carpet. "I merely wanted to remind you that this is still Karasuma Nikaidou we are talking about."

"I'm well aware of who my father is. Being one of the richest and most powerful men in Japan means nothing tonight and likely any day after that."

"He has also been reigning over the darkness of NGC for most of his life."

"I guess that does deserve some credit." She daintily placed a finger on her chin.

"Uhm, how long am I supposed to keep this pose, Ojousama?" Saya's back was still parallel to the floor. Her mistress giggled.

"Until you are satisfied? I didn't ask you to hold it in the first place."

Saya gave a soundless sigh before raising her head. The stoic mask adorned her face again.

I might have been a little too harsh, Kaika thought, but she immediately dismissed the idea. Calling her by her full name did not warrant such a cold reprimand, but she knew that her relationship with Saya was not frail enough to be hurt by it.

Kaika resumed her buoyant skipping as they passed a large, open wooden door. The corridors they traversed were adorned by vases, oil paintings, and other antique displays, but those paled in comparison to the museum of a main hall that the mansion boasted.

The intricate metal and glass work invested in the chandeliers refracted light in a web of subtle colors. The wide main stairwell extended up towards the second floor until it split into two curving staircases leading to opposite ends of the hall. The colorful threading details of the carpets were highlighted by the white marble floor.

Kaika sighed. Her eyes skimmed over all the wealth, which almost triggered a gag reflex from overexposure. Her sight eventually rested on her father, and her urge to vomit worsened.

"Good evening, Father." said Kaika. The disgusted face she had on completely vanished. She smiled sweetly at her father like any loving daughter would.

"Kaika!" said the titan of a man after turning to his daughter. "I didn't see you in the party. Were you feeling unwell?" He smiled with a hint of worry and casually fixed his greyish white locks in an attempt to improve his appearance. He sported a dark grey suit, and his lilac tie was loosened, indicating that the time for entertaining guests had ended.

"Nothing to worry about, Otousama. I just wanted to avoid the crowd. Rather than that, Happy Birthday!"

She gleefully trotted to her father, who was standing on the bottom step of the stairwell. Kaika caught him just as he was about to go upstairs to retire to his bedroom. This seemingly serendipitous reunion was neither happy nor a coincidence.

"Thank you. I'm sorry but I had to invite all those people. I must keep up appearances."

"Please do not apologize, Otousama. Today is your day, so do not worry about me. More importantly, do you have time right now? I wanted to talk to you about something."

"But it's already so late. Are you sure you don't want to rest in your room?"

"I have been in there the whole day. Besides, you know that I will not be sleeping until much later, right?"

"You were probably studying the entire time. Your body can still relieve fatigue even without sleep. Just lying down should help a lot."

"...Otousama, do you not want to talk to Kaika?" She made a childish frown while hiding her trembling fists behind her back.

"You know that isn't true. You're my greatest treasure. I know I've been busy recently and haven't paid much attention to your activities, but rest assured. You're always in my thoughts."

Kaika gave her father a refreshing smile and said, "I understand."

Karasuma was not lying. Kaika knew that her father loved her second only to the existence of his economic empire. Even distinguishing between the two was splitting hairs.

"While it's still far off, I intend to hand everything over to you. Never forget that."

Yes, I know. But we have a timing disagreement. Kaika chuckled inwardly.

"Still, I don't think I can quite agree with you acting like this just to get what you want."

"Like what?"

"A child. You're fifteen. You should act with more grace, as any Nikaidou must." He was not serious about this complaint. Kaika knew that he liked her cute act and she used that.

"I think it fits me far better than acting like a depressed teenager."

"I don't think anyone should be acting like a depressed teenager, not even depressed teenagers."

The father and daughter both broke into laughter. Karasuma believed that he could see through Kaika's acting, and he was right, but only when she chose to let him do so. However, even Kaika was finding it hard to keep herself in character. This was not due to her father's sensitivity but her swelling excitement for the impending reveal.

Saya remained near the entrance while Kaika and her father idly chatted. She made a call on her terminal. A short while later, a guard appeared at each of the four entrances to the main hall. Kaika noticed their presence. The preparations were complete.

Bon appétit!

Saya raised her hand as a signal. The guards at the east and west entrances of the second floor slowly headed down the stairs. Following suit, the two guards on the ground floor approached the father-daughter pair, who continued their cheerful exchange. Despite his focus being robbed by Kaika's cute gesticulations, Karasuma paused and swiveled his head as he peered at the approaching guards.

Saya's estimation was correct. You didn't keep that throne by sitting on your hands.

Seeing her father alert, Kaika lowered her head and started trembling. She embraced herself as she shook and surrendered to the sensation of electricity hurtling through her veins. The back of her eyes burned, and her throat parched. She relived what her father did to her and what he made her do. Her mind swam in a sea of recollections, and her petite frame's shaking gradually increased until it peaked.

Then she squeezed together all those memories and tossed them away like a used gum wrapper. They held no real value to her. She was going to kill her father but not for those inconsequential reasons.

The trembling stopped. Her reverie felt like hours, but only seconds crawled past. Karasuma, seeing his daughter in a strange state, approached her in worry. He stretched his hand out to her but flinched to a stop.

Kaika burst into maniacal laughter.

Her face contorted. Her attractive features fell into the uncanny valley. Her cheeks flushed as she continued to engulf the main hall with her laughter.

"Kaika!?" Karasuma tried to grab hold of her shoulders. He probably thought it was some sort of breakdown.

Kaika deftly avoided his grasp by stepping back and, with disappointment poisoning her every syllable, spat out, "You still don't get it?" She shook her head. "I knew it. You are so-"

Boring.

That was her naked thoughts balled into a single word. That word was her first step crossing the Rubicon, the genesis of her betrayal, and her truth.

However, before she was able to drive the stake into her loving father's heart, he suddenly pushed her aside. She fell to the floor sideways due to the sudden assault. This forced the guard that was supposed to be approaching from the east into her view. Confusion ate into her mind.

Why is one of the mercenaries dead!? Saya reported to me earlier that she had successfully switched out four of the mansion guards!

She filtered through the possibilities as fast as her synapses allowed.

Did that bastard foresee the attack? Has he seen through my act all along? Did I underestimate him? Did all my plans, all that preparation just crumble to dust?

Her paranoia boiled over.

She stared with a blank face at the blood slowly soaking into the carpet and weakly whispered,

"Did I... lose?"

The intruder reached a corner near the end of the east hallway leading to the main hall. He hid himself in a blind spot when he saw a guard standing near the entrance. He easily identified that the guard's right arm and shoulder were cybernetic based on his uneven arm volume and stance.

He knew it was dangerous to take on someone with Artificial Musculature and Skeleton, commonly called ARMS, not because he suspected defeat, but because it would likely result in drawn-out combat. The disturbance could alert the security of the entire estate.

Even an MMA champion will easily fall in a ring against two mediocre fighters.

That did not apply to himself, but he still opted for prudence.

While he was weighing his options, the guard started walking into the main hall. He used this chance to move closer and get a better view of the superfluously large room. He quickly attempted to grasp the situation. The presence of a young girl was unexpected for the intruder because she had not come up during his investigation.

The intruder readied himself. The guards were probably moving towards Karasuma to reinforce his protection. He would be impossible to kill if they got within ten feet of their charge. It had to be now.

He took a runner's stance like a cheetah preparing for a hunt. Using the explosive power in his legs, he rushed into the main hall. This alerted the two west entrance guards, who had the east entrance in view. The reaction of the two guards informed the guard whose back was turned to him of the danger.

The guard did not use a weapon and relied on his ARMS instead. He twisted his torso then swung his right arm towards the intruder. It was a perfectly executed backfist and could not be dodged on reaction.

But it was dodged. The intruder knew the attack was coming and dove down as he closed in. The guard looked shocked after cleaving through space instead of flesh, but that did not last long. The intruder, thrusting his knife upwards through the guard's chin, cleanly lodged the blade between his hemispheres.

This victory did not slow the intruder down. He pulled out the knife, smoothly spun around the standing carcass, and dashed towards Karasuma. Everyone in the room moved except the girl. They were only a short distance away, but the intruder had already achieved his maximum velocity and would reach Karasuma a few seconds before they could stop him. The girl was blocking his path, but he could run her over with little effect on his charge.

I can't risk avoiding the girl. Four unknowns versus one is not a good idea. I don't have a choice..!

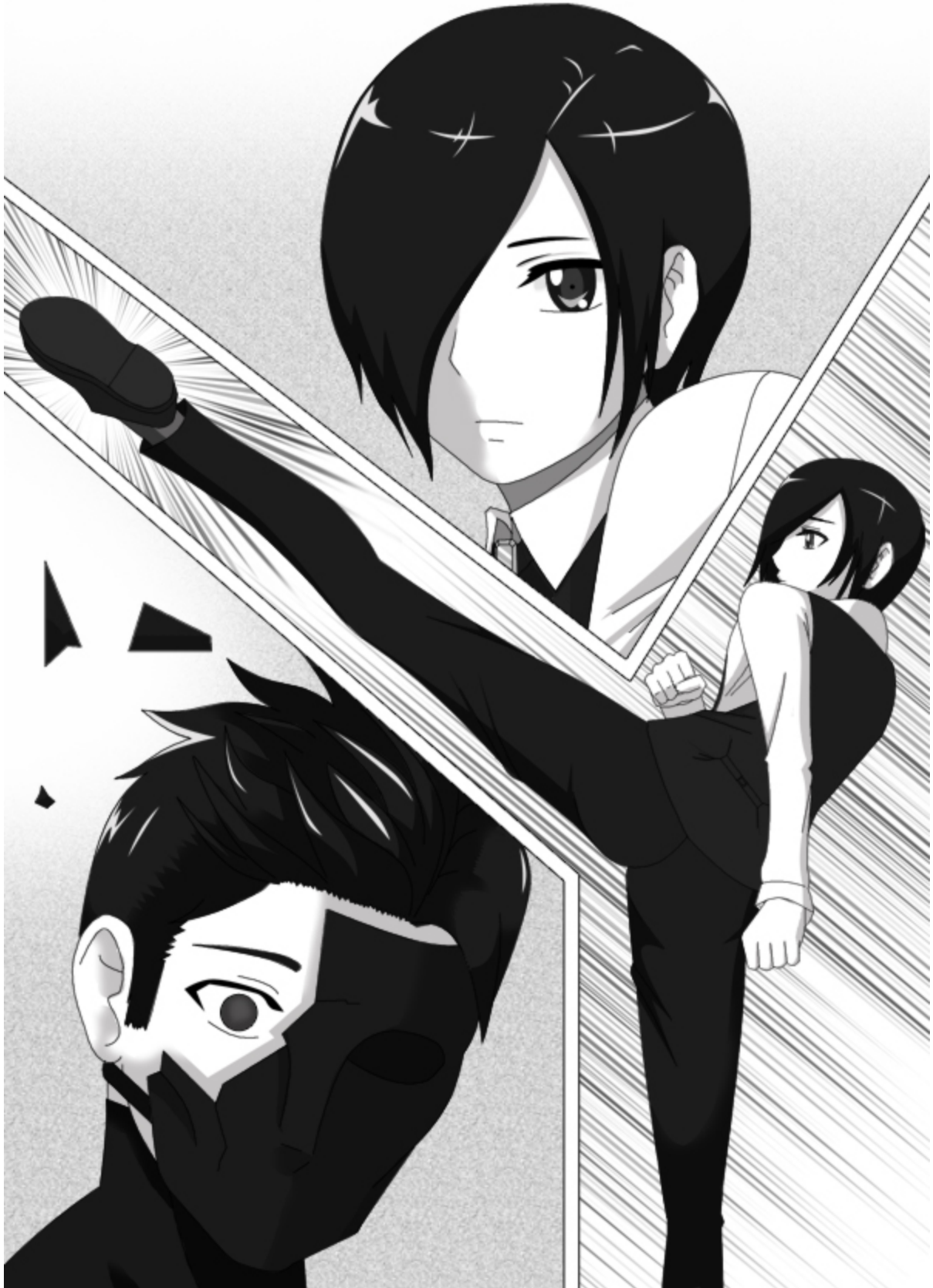
Karasuma, however, did. He could have used the girl as a shield to buy time, but he did not. He pushed her away from the intruder's path. The intruder veered to the left and swung the reverse-gripped knife in his right hand across Karasuma's throat. He dashed past his victim as he made the slice. Karasuma made a gurgling noise as he impotently stared at his daughter and expired.

Red splashed on the young girl. It coated her face, her flowery black dress, her almost pallid skin, her slackened cheeks, and her slightly parted lips.

The intruder had not expected that Karasuma would push the girl away in what seemed like an attempt to save her. He was thankful for the act because he did not want to hurt anyone unnecessarily. Traumatizing a child with a murder scene was already something unforgivable. The intruder apologized silently in his heart.

This must be unfair to you. Seek me for compensation if you wish.

He stopped his dash a few steps away from Karasuma's corpse. Deciding to immediately escape using the same route from which he entered, he turned around and saw the girl veiled in red. At that moment, what gripped his heart was not guilt but dread. It was an unavoidable distraction. Before he could recover, a kick whipped towards the right side of his jaw. He raised his right forearm to receive the blow, but he was an instant too slow. Only his fist reached his jaw area. A clanking sound uncharacteristic of flesh resounded from the contact.



Shards of black scattered in the air. His goggles flew off, fortunately not breaking and cutting his eyes. His fist managed to moderately redirect the rushed roundhouse kick. However, the attack still smashed part of his mask and knocked away his knife. He was taken aback at the young woman's speed despite knowing she had ARMS. She was the farthest away from Karasuma when they all moved.

While the woman was still recovering from her off-balance kick, the intruder endured the impact that lightly joggled his brain and started running.

I can't get my knife..!

He beelined towards the east hallway. The woman ordered the remaining guards to capture or eliminate him. The three pulled out their guns and scrambled after the intruder. She did not follow them.

The intruder darted through the estate. He ignored the alarm siren that echoed throughout the halls. He was no longer concerned about being detected since the deed was done. He was confident that few could rival his speed in a straightforward race. The lack of night vision was only a minor setback since he already had the path mapped in his head. He eventually reached the corpse laden bush and high jumped over the wall. He disappeared into the forest, as if devoured by the undergrowth.

Only after he confirmed that he had eluded his pursuers did he stop to address the image that persistently stalked his mind. It was not the usual elation after a successful kill. It was not the worry that he could be traced by something he left behind. It was the face of the girl bathed in her father's blood. It rekindled the fright that almost cost him his jaw.

"She was smiling."

Chapter 02: Oil and Acid

The *guanciaie* sizzled on the skillet as it lightly browned and rendered steadily. The steam and aroma from the pork fat wafted towards the exhaust vents near the ceiling but not before they had tantalized Ageha's senses. He never got tired of the fragrance despite being enveloped by it daily.

He sprinkled in the minced garlic and gave the pan a quick toss. The boiling spaghetti was just about al dente, so he removed the pan from the flame. He roughly chopped the parsley as he waited for the pan to cool. After that, he cracked several eggs into the pan, using only the yolks from half of them. The young chef then whisked *parmigiano* into the mixture, slightly thickening it.

“This *scaloppine* goes in the bin. Thirty seconds too long in the pan. Rin, apologize to the customer and offer them a glass of wine on the house,” said the head chef.

““Yes, chef!”” said the two in unison.

Matsunaga always loses concentration when we're in the weeds. It's unfair that Rin has to take the flak for his amateurism.

Ageha listened to the usual ruckus in the kitchen as he lifted the pasta basket from the boiling water, gave it a shake, and then slid the contents into the liquid gold mixture. A splash of *bianco* was added for the finish. He adjusted the seasoning and gave it a taste.

Delicious.

Everything rolled to the plate followed by the herb garnish.

"*Spaghetti Alla Carbonara* is ready!" shouted Ageha, his voice reverberating in the kitchen. He brought the plate to the counter and dutifully presented it to the head chef.

The head chef slid the plate to the other end of the chef's counter without tasting it and a waiter gracefully whisked it up and into the front of the house. Ageha could feel Matsunaga's glare despite being at the other end of the kitchen.

“Don't mind him. He's just jealous,” said a fellow line cook.

“Why? He works at a better station. Sapore is better known for its *secondo* than its *primo*.”

“Because you're a decade younger?” The cook's mildly wrinkled face contorted into a wry smile.

“You are not like that though, Yama-san.”

Yama donned a proud smirk.

“I'm like wine, you see. Given enough time-”

“It becomes vinegar.”

Stifling his attempt to laugh, Yama elbowed him in his ribcage. They exchanged wry smiles and Yama returned to his station. As if to fill the void, the head chef promptly approached Ageha.

“You're up,” said the head chef as he cocked his head towards Rin.

“Chef Kirishima?” Ageha quizzically looked at the head chef, then the waitress.

“The guest is asking for the chef who prepared the *carbonara*. Table twelve.” Rin’s bright voice travelled well. It fit her lively aura.

Ageha pondered the reason for the summons. He was confident in his dish.

“Stick your chest out if you think so,” said Kirishima.

Guess it showed on my face.

He shed his apron, wiped his hands on it, rounded the counter, and headed to the tables. He puzzled over what the customer would have to say until he reflexively halted his feet and almost lost balance.

Why is she here!?

Table twelve was at the center of the dining room, and seated there was a girl with a mien that implied that the world revolved around her. Their sights crossed. Ageha made the most polite smile he could. He knew the chance was miniscule, but coincidence was a possibility. Pretending that this was their first encounter, he walked naturally towards the table and introduced himself with a slight bow.

“Hello. My name is Ageha Shikimi. I prepared your pasta for tonight.”

“Looks like it’s my win, Saya.”

Ignoring him, the little girl spoke to the young woman across her while giggling. Her bare shoulders shook slightly in her formal, lilac dress.

“It is not really a bet if only you get to pick a side,” said the woman in a vest, her face sans emotion.

Ageha was lost in the sudden exchange. A crack ran through his mask.

“We wagered whether you would pretend that this is our first meeting or not, and I won decisively,” said the small girl as if reading his expression.

That expression instantly shifted to a much sharper one. Any traces of a smile were ripped away, leaving only the image of a snake staring at a rat. Ageha readied his ARMS for activity as he gradually lowered his center of gravity. Saya slowly backed her seat up in response. Ageha moved his gaze to Saya once he noticed this. He knew a fight here would end his

career, but that would be better than being disposed of one-sidedly. Saya began to stand up while she continued to analyze Ageha's every move.

"Why are you so upset over a loss? I can forfeit the bet if it's that important to you." The little girl's jab doused the smoldering flames. The butler reseated herself.

"And you, is this any way to treat a guest at your *ristorante*?"

"It is, for people who don't even introduce themselves." His speech lost its politeness.

"But you already know who I am?"

He did not, but with her clue that was no longer the case. He blamed himself for letting the girl's youthful appearance dictate his profiling.

"Perhaps you wanted Saya's introduction?" Kaika turned to her butler.

"I apologize for the late introduction. My name is Saya Saionji, and I serve as Kai-Ojousama's aide."

Ageha ignored the formality and interrogated Kaika.

"How did you find me?"

"I was impressed with how quick on the uptake you were. Should I reverse that evaluation?"

My custom knife, he inferred and kept silent.

"I'm glad I can keep your grades up."

"How's Shizan-sensei?"

"You're actually worried over that?"

"He makes good blades."

"Excellent. I'll give you one more point."

"How much weight does that have?"

"Irrelevant, since I arbitrarily decide the passing mark."

Ageha felt exhausted at the seemingly pointless prodding and drooped his shoulders. He reverted to his daytime demeanor and dropped the scowl.

“So, Shizan-sensei?”

“Still hammering away. I don’t really see the value of his method though. Shouldn’t molded alloys be more durable?”

“You really have to feel it to know the difference.”

You’ll find out once I stick one inside you.

Ageha removed his gaze from Kaika’s coal-black eyes and contemplated if Shizan betrayed him but then stopped that train of thought. He realized that it would not technically be a betrayal even if Shizan had divulged information because they had never agreed on confidentiality in the first place. Shizan did not know the knife’s purpose.

“He didn’t tell on you. Saya just handed the knife to him and fooled him into believing it was found dropped somewhere. He accepted it, so we just waited for him to contact you, but he sent the knife to you via courier instead. It should arrive today.”

Kaika snuffed out his doubt as if she had read his mind. She sounded disappointed, as if expecting a more challenging hunt.

“The restraint is appreciated.”

Ageha did not bow despite the words of gratitude. Kaika could have resorted to more violent and efficient means to track him down.

“It wasn’t restraint. It was an issue of elegance. Also, despite what you think, we’re not here as enemies.”

“That’s hard to believe after what happened.”

“You mean what you *did*? Don’t speak about it like it was an act of god. I’m in fact *very* displeased, but vindictiveness should be selective or else it becomes petty.” Her cherubic smile never broke.

Ageha sensed fury in her words, but it was veiled so completely by her overt actions and speech that he doubted himself.

“Anyway, shouldn’t you be returning to the *cucina* now? Sapore can’t be missing a chef during a full house, right?”

As if her words directed fate, a loud crash reached the dining room. Ageha peeked at the direction of the kitchen and saw Matsunaga bowing over and over to the head chef.

“We can talk later. Go here tomorrow morning.”

While Kaika was convincing him to go back to the line, Saya handed him a slip of paper. He reluctantly received and crumpled it into his right trouser pocket. He turned on his heels and briskly marched back to what was now a battleground. His absence of only a few minutes had already damaged the service for that night.

“The *carbonara* was delicious. *Guanciale* with white wine is genius.”

Kaika’s words tickled his pride. He almost paused but resisted. He felt that the last comment was likely the only genuine thing she said, but that feeling might have been his arrogance rearing its head, or worse, him being victim to the girl’s verbal maneuvering.

He saw Rin on his way back to the *cucina*.

“Was it a complaint after all?” said Rin as she agilely put plates on her tray.

“Oh, no. She said it was delicious. And that I’m a genius.” Ageha remembered to smile.

“That’s great! I was worried after seeing your face just now.”

He admired the sincere concern on her fetching face. Her eyes clearly conveyed her honesty.

“I was just feeling guilty that I left my post so long while we’re so busy.”

Ending their short exchange, they quickly turned away from each other. Rin’s high ponytail swung and brushed Ageha’s back as if giving him a push. The *primo* chef swept all thoughts of the ominous pair from his mind and dove into the chaos.

Chapter 03: Emulsion

Ageha arrived at the park a little past nine in the morning. ‘Morikawa Park’ was the only thing written on the slip of paper. Kaika did not specify the time so he decided to go at the start of business hours, like he usually did for work. Kaika, sitting on a bench, was already there. Saya was seated on the stone rim of a water fountain a fairly large distance away. She wore the same uniform as yesterday and was pretending to read a newspaper.

His approach caught Kaika’s attention.

“You look surprised,” she said.

“I am.”

“About me being more punctual than you or about Saya’s reading spot?”

“I’m surprised you came earlier than I did, but that has nothing to do with punctuality since it’s still morning. The latter is downright shocking.”

Kaika was now within arm’s reach. He peeked at Saya. The newspaper visibly jerked.

“It’s a show of good faith.”

“I didn’t think you were this much of a risk taker.”

“It depends. Some risks are worth it, proven by how amicable you still are. Anyway, take a seat. We have a lot to talk about.”

She patted the spot to her right and pulled in the skirt of her plain white one piece to create space. On her head was a straw hat, which was a little too large for her tiny frame. Ageha decided to follow her suggestion but sat down a foot away from the spot she specified.

“Why did you kill my father?” She was not looking at him.

“Because he was threatening the owner into selling Sapore. He planned to demolish it and build a new building on the land.”

“...What?” Kaika slowly turned her head and looked at him in utter disbelief. “Are you stupid!?”

Ageha was silenced by her sudden outburst.

“You killed *Karasuma Nikaido* because of something so irrelevant!?” Her mask fell apart.

“I know you feel wronged-”

“Of course I do! He was *mine!*” shouted Kaika with hatred.

Ageha immediately understood that her hatred was two-pronged. It was directed at him, but the majority of it was pointed to, or rather rooted in, Karasuma. He dusted off his memories of that night and everything clicked into place. The guards approaching Karasuma, the girl’s rouge smile, and her current rampage all led to one conclusion.

Seeing what appears to be a spat between the two, Saya stood up. Kaika, without looking, raised her left hand and signaled Saya to stop. Saya slowly sat back down without removing her gaze from the pair.

The two on the bench kept silent for a short while.

"I'm sorry," said Ageha.

"For what." The question lacked the typical inquiring intonation. Her severe expression was swapped with a stoic one.

"For stealing your enemy and for not being able to offer reparation. I can't give you my life, and I assure you that's the only way you can take it."

She seemed surprised at his reply, but quickly recovered her calm after a few breaths. She gave him a calculating look and said, "I don't want it, and you *are* able."

"Blackmail? It doesn't suit you."

"How rude. Call it a partnership."

"I'm not interested."

"Let me ask you something." She calmly deflected his refusal. "Why did you kill my father?"

"I already told you." He gave a puzzled yet resigned look.

"No, I mean *why* did you do it?"

The unmasked killer wrestled with her question for a moment.

"It was unfair. The people who work there do not deserve to get thrown to the curb."

"Friendship?"

"Fairness."

"Justice?"

"Nothing as noble as that. I just fix things I don't like when I see them."

"Does your fixing always come with a splash of red?"

“I told you it was nothing noble.”

“Perfect. Our interests overlap.” She showed a satisfied smile. She took off her hat, as if alluding to the seriousness of what comes next.

“What do you mean?”

“I want to get rid of certain people who lack that fairness. ...I can’t stand to let them keep doing what they want and hurting others in the process.” She aligned her beautiful, black irises with his. She firmly closed her lips and looked at him with sincerity.

Ageha, however, was not fooled. He detected the slight pause in her normally eloquent speech and the increase in eye contact. Both were hardly noticeable but still signs of lying.

“Lies aren’t helping your case.”

Kaika showed a look of surprise, sighed, then grinned. “I can’t believe you saw through that.”

Ageha received the praise with a grain of salt, but he still accepted it.

“Okay, I’ll level with you.” She shifted her body to face Ageha’s. “My life is in danger. There’s a battle for the inheritance of my father’s assets. The prize is very important not only monetarily, but also politically. This is because of his position as the majority shareholder and CEO of the Nikaidou Group of Companies, better known as NGC. I have two older brothers and a younger sister, but I was designated by my father as his successor due to my ability.”

“I can see why.” The line escaped from his lips before he caught it.

“Thank you.” Savoring the comment, she closed her eyes and beamed.

“It wasn’t praise but fact.” He sighed internally, realizing how much difficulty he was having trying to handle the capable little demon.

“I don’t want the inheritance. I hated my father and wanted him gone, but I don’t need any of his baggage. No one cares about that, though. My brothers want me dead or under their control to make sure that I’m out of the scene. I’m taking great risks coming out to see you.”

“You want me to be your bodyguard? I don’t do things like that.”

“I thought so, which is why I won’t ask that of you. I have Saya anyway.”

Ageha nodded at the last comment, remembering her whip-like roundhouse kick.

“I need you to eliminate certain obstacles so that Saya can be less tense. She has been on edge all the time recently. It’s affecting my mood.”

The butler sneezed.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you get to help *me!*” She puffed her chopping board chest out and smiled proudly.

Ageha began standing up to leave. Kaika hurriedly tugged on his sleeve and said, “I’m kidding, I’m kidding.”

He plopped back down. He denied the notion that her charming appeal made him do so.

“Think of this as a part time job. You can still continue to do what you want in your off hours. In exchange, you get resources.”

“...What kind?”

“Money, transportation, information, information control, and ARMS.”

Those were exactly what he wanted. The last one was especially attractive since it was offered by the de facto owner of NGC, which was known for its cybernetics. However, nothing was as suspicious as a good deal.

“...I only kill a certain kind. I don’t do it for profit.”

“I assure you that you’ll be provided comprehensive information on each target, and you’ll have a choice of whether to do it or not. How’s that?”

Ageha fell silent for a while. He then decided to ask about what bothered him the most. “Why me?”

“You foiled *my* plan, even if inadvertently. Technically, you exceeded it with only your stealth and combat skill. Chalk it up to my arrogance.”

It also took a lot of preparation, you know.

The temptation to accept the deal threatened to overwhelm him, but he resisted. He could not trust the girl’s words. He needed to have more reliable information before making a decision. He considered asking for time.

Before he could open his mouth, he saw Saya break into sprint towards them. He immediately readied himself to intercept her, but he noticed that her focus was not pointed at him but at something behind the bench. He ducked to avoid the flying kick which broke the jaw of the man standing behind them.

She sure likes that spot.

The man's approach was soundless. Saya only caught it because of her position. Ageha surveyed the area and saw two more men running towards Kaika. One wore a grey beanie while the other boasted a pompadour and dark sunglasses. They looked like gang members or thugs. The one wearing the grey beanie came from the left of the bench and was closing in on her.

"Kaika, get down!" shouted Ageha.

"It's Kai!" said the girl after diving under the bench.

Ageha jumped over her while raising his right knee. The thug crossed his arms and blocked the flying knee but was still blown over ten feet backward. Ageha realized that both of the man's arms were cybernetic from the contact. He looked to the left and confirmed that Saya had already engaged the third assailant.

Convinced that Saya could handle a single man, he refocused on the thug with the beanie and ran towards him. Using the force from Ageha's attack, the thug had rolled backward and managed to create a fair amount of distance between them. He had already recovered and taken a boxing stance. Ageha braked a few feet away from his target. The thug slowly closed in by bounce-stepping towards Ageha. Ageha abruptly took a large step forward, surprising the thug with both his randomness and speed. He then feinted a right straight, prompting the thug to raise his left arm to guard. This obscured the thug's left side vision. Ageha took advantage of this and delivered a low kick that shattered the thug's shin bone. Ageha finished his assault by grabbing the thug's head with both hands and slamming it into his left knee.

Still holding the thug, Ageha turned his head to check on the others' situations. Kaika had run towards the fountain to distance herself from the combat. Saya was about to deliver an axe kick to her kneeling opponent, but the man with the broken jaw was already upright and approaching her from behind.

These guys aren't ordinary. Standing up after that taking that much damage...

Warning Saya would make little difference because she was already locked into her kick. Ageha quickly realized he had the perfect solution in hand.

Saya's heel struck her opponent's skull, robbing him of consciousness. Immediately after that, a man wearing a beanie came hurtling towards her direction, flying through the air like a pitched baseball. She could not react due to her incredulity and the speed of the phenomenon, but she was not hit. The human projectile passed just beside her and smashed into the thug about to ambush her.

Both Kaika's and Saya's eyes widened like saucers, but Saya quickly recovered her senses and jogged to her mistress to check on her condition.

After the commotion, Saya told Ageha that she would call the authorities and moved a few feet away while whipping out her terminal. Kaika approached Ageha and silently stared at him in wonder.

Ageha gave in first. "What is it?"

"I thought you weren't a bodyguard?"

"I didn't intend to be. My body just moved by itself because of the danger. I'm just glad they weren't carrying any weapons."

"They were probably kidnappers that my brothers sent to force me to relinquish my succession rights. And ARMS are considered weapons by law, you know."

"Yes, but if they had guns, this wouldn't have ended well."

"Really? That flashy stunt you pulled suggests otherwise."

"I didn't mean to be flashy. I had no choice. It's not like it was my first course of action." He smiled wryly.

"You had a choice, a choice that probably *only you* had, and you took it." Kaika returned his smile without the sarcasm. A shade of pink appeared on her cheeks. "Thank you for protecting Saya... and me."

Ageha did not know how to react to such direct gratitude. He felt a strange mixture of embarrassment and pride. It was not a horrible feeling.

"You should probably get going. I'll tell the police that Saya defeated all of them."

"Thanks for that."

"Please consider my offer carefully. Rest assured that it's mutually beneficial."

Ageha turned around to leave. "I will."

"He's a monster," said Kaika. She made the same smile she had displayed when covered in her father's blood.

"I have to agree." The stoic butler closed her eyes as she recounted the events that occurred a short while ago.

He pitched a man. Both of them thought of the same seemingly absurd thing.

Kaika and Saya sat in the back seat of an armored limousine. The privacy window was up. They had left the scene after Saya's subordinates arrived in several cars to pick up the men she and Ageha had incapacitated.

"How much of his body do you think is ARMS?" Kaika asked her butler.

Saya had extensive cybernetics installed, so she was a good source for an estimate.

"I would say both arms, both legs, and the muscles that support them."

"Isn't that practically everything that's possible with NGC's current technology?"

"Technically, it isn't possible because the person, having so many ARMS installed, would go insane from the pain during the nerve connection and realignment process. Anesthesia is not an option because the person's feedback is necessary to establish a successful connection."

"An iron will... Resolve perhaps?" said Kaika under her breath.

"This was a dangerous and costly plan. We should have just hired actual thugs instead of using some of our best men." Saya rubbed her temples as she contemplated the expenses this show incurred.

"That wouldn't work."

"I know you wanted to test his ability, but losing those three-"

"I didn't want to test his ability, Saya. I already knew he was capable. Well, not *this* capable, but I digress."

"Then what was the purpose of wasting our human assets?"

“This wasn’t a waste. It’s called *promotion*. We get a queen for the price of three pawns.”

“He was more of a knight than a queen, though. I guess your gamble paid off.”

“It wasn’t exactly a gamble. I wouldn’t have signaled with my hat if he could have been bought with money.”

“...I see. You having formidable enemies and me being unable to protect you by myself stimulated his sense of justice.” Saya nodded twice, realizing Kaika’s true intentions.

“His motivation is nothing like that. He’s merely killing for his own pleasure. I do like the fact that he knows it.” Kaika chuckled with an expression of someone tenderly stroking a pet cat. She gazed out the car window. “He’ll say yes. And I’ll make sure to use him like I use anything. Brightly until it burns out.”

Chapter 04: Resting

Saya reached the bottom of the mansion’s main stairwell and was greeted by the front door’s creaking, which echoed in the empty hall. A male attendant pushed the double doors open and revealed Ageha. His formal suit hardly creasing, the attendant made a polite, practiced bow, as if prompting Ageha to enter. The attendant remained outside and closed the doors after Ageha walked in.

“It feels odd using this door to come in here.”

“People normally enter through the front door, Shikimi-sama.”

“I didn’t have a choice back then.”

“Please do so from now on. People will not find it suspicious for Ojousama’s personal chef to visit the mansion regularly.”

“Even if it’s almost ten in the evening?”

“The estate attendants are aware of Ojousama’s odd sleeping habits. Speaking of which, I must apologize.” Saya mimicked the attendant’s bow earlier.

Perplexed at the unforeseen apology, Ageha cocked his head.

“I know that it was Ojousama who called for you at such an hour, but I am afraid she has fallen asleep.”

Ageha's brow twitched.

"Then go wake her up. This part-time chef cover was her idea. I still have a job that I need to wake up early for."

Saya kept her head lowered.

"I understand your displeasure, but I would like to request a favor. Please do not make me disturb her sleep. I am perfectly able to provide you the information in her stead."

"...I don't understand. What's the big deal? She can just go back to bed after."

"She has... sleeping problems. She rarely sleeps more than two hours a day."

"Insomnia? Can't she take pills for that? Anyway, raise your head. You're making me uncomfortable."

Saya straightened her posture. Her movements and form were always efficient and perfect, in combat or otherwise. She was unembellished yet enthralling, like a honed blade.

"Her case is a little... special. Her father wanted her to become his successor, so to maximize her time preparing for that, her sleep periods have been reduced since she was very young through drugs and conditioning."

Ageha's eyes narrowed as he pondered how young exactly.

"Due to the drugs' influence, and probably because she has lived like that for most of her life, all of the treatments we have tried were ineffective. Well, it is possible that she is not actively seeking a remedy anyway."

"Why wouldn't she?"

"I cannot speak for her, but I think she wants the extra time for-" Saya caught herself. She realized that she must not reveal certain details to Ageha, lest he grow suspicious of Kaika's true objective. She searched for an alternative. She noticed a family portrait depicting Karasuma and his two daughters behind Ageha.

"-her sister." She lied.

"Are they close?"

"Not particularly. They hardly spoke with each other. That is probably why she wants to make up for lost time."

Saya only gave out information that Ageha already had. She knew that he had investigated the Nikaidou family and would know its members at the very least.

“I see. Alright. I guess I can let her snore a bit longer.”

“Thank you very much. Also, please keep this request a secret from her.”

Ageha raised an eyebrow.

“She would want me to wake her so she can meet you personally. She fell asleep while waiting due to fatigue. Her schedule has been very busy recently, as you might imagine. Moreover, she would not want anyone to pity her.”

“I don’t pity her at all. I’m just granting your request.”

“Thank you. Well then, let us go to the drawing room so I can brief you on the details of our first endeavor.”

She started walking. Ageha naturally followed several paces behind. When they rounded the second corner in the eastern wing of the mansion, he seemed to notice something.

“Is that Kaika’s sister?”

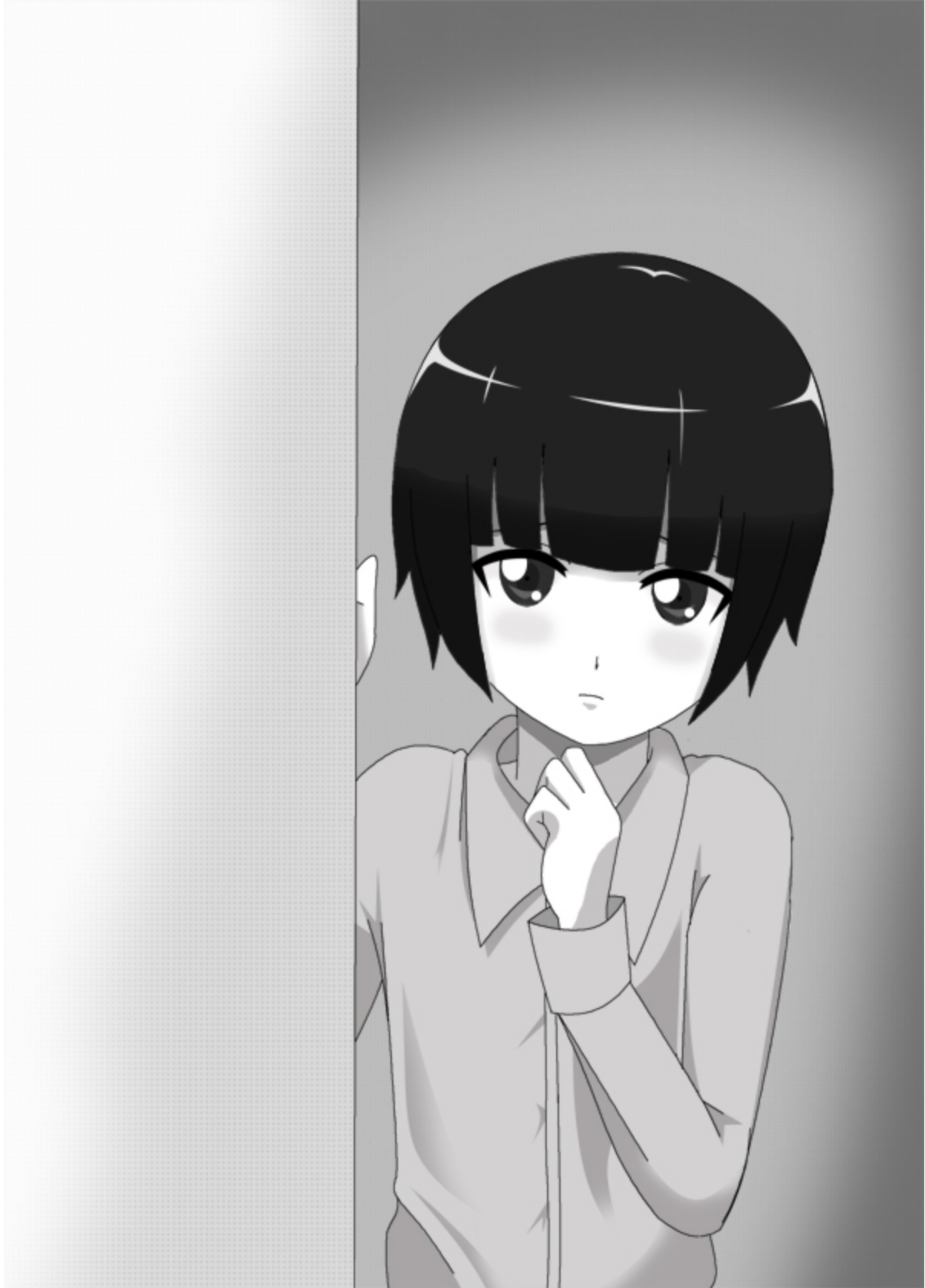
“Yes. It seems she has been following us. You should have pretended not to notice, Shikimi-sama.”

“Why’s that?”

“A gentleman should not ruin a lady’s honest efforts.”

“I don’t see anything honest in stalking.”

The two smiled at each other and then looked behind them.



A little girl in pajamas peeked at them from around the corner. A black bob cut wrapped her tiny head. Her puppy-like eyes were staring at the unfamiliar man in her house. She looked like a fourth or fifth grader and appeared a little younger than Kaika's facade.

"Kureha-Ojousama, please come closer and introduce yourself to Kai-Ojousama's new chef." Saya made an inviting smile as she beckoned for Kureha to come closer.

Kureha hid herself behind the corner. She then popped her head out again. She seemed to be deep in thought.

If only Kai-Ojousama had a little of this innocence, she would be even cuter.

Kureha, her face exuding determination, slowly walked over to Saya and then tucked herself behind her. She peeked from Saya's side and looked up at Ageha. Ageha smiled like he usually did when he met diners at Sapore. It seemed to be effective at assuaging Kureha's fear, and she stepped away from her butler bunker.

"Hello. My name is Kureha Nikaidou. It is a pleasure to meet you," she said. Her bow was very quick, as if she feared losing sight of the man.

"I'm Ageha Shikimi. I'm employed by your sister part-time as a cook." Ageha knelt down to Kureha's eye level. "I'll be coming here to prepare meals from time to time. Is there any food that you don't like, Kureha-chan?"

He is surprisingly good at dealing with children.

"Um, I don't like carrots... and broccoli."

"Understood. I'll make chinese stir fried vegetables then."

Or he is expectedly cruel to them.

Kureha's endearing face withered. Ageha placed a hand on her head and said, "Just kidding. Tell me more about what you like to eat and I'll make them for you when I can, okay?" He made a winning smile as he ruffled her bob cut.

He can be so hard to read. I wonder how Kai-Ojousama does it... Saya felt drained having flip flopped mentally in such a short time.

Saya quietly watched the two as Kureha gradually started smiling while she described her favorite dishes. Ageha laughed softly as he agreed to some of her favorites and promised to cook them for her. Saya also chipped in, telling Kureha how Kaika was enamored by Ageha's *carbonara* and decided to hire him.

Judging that they should move on to their main business, Saya prompted Ageha with her eyes.

“Saionji-san and I have to discuss something so we have to go. You should also go to bed. Staying up late is bad for your growth. It was great meeting you, Kureha-chan.”

Saya wondered if Ageha had already deduced the reason behind Kaika’s childlike figure.

“It was nice meeting you too, Ageha-Oniisama.”

Ageha reflexively jerked at the address.

“It sounds better than Shikimi-Oniisama.” Saya stifled a laugh.

“Stop saying things that make me cringe, Saionji-san.”

“...I can’t call you Ageha-Oniisama, Ageha-Oniisama?” asked Kureha nervously. Her pleading face made it difficult for anyone to refuse.

Ageha sighed in resignation. “It’s okay if it’s only you.”

Kureha beamed with a faint blush on her cheeks. “Thank you!” She turned and trotted away.

The remaining two resumed their trek towards the drawing room.

“That was unexpected,” said Saya.

“What was?”

“That you like children.”

“I don’t particularly like them. Some are better than others.”

“Did someone specific come to mind?”

“Kaika, obviously.”

“I would not consider her a child. I also suggest that you refrain from calling her Kaika.”

“It’s her name, isn’t it?”

“She does not like being called that. Kai is her preferred term of address.”

“That’s odd. If she disliked it so much, why would she use part of it as her nickname?”

“I am afraid I cannot answer that. Please ask her directly if you wish to know.”

Ageha shrugged at the comment but quickly appeared to have lost interest.

Saya knew that Ageha was not asking these questions for no reason. He was trying to find out how much he could trust his employer, or maybe he was even trying to obtain enough information to put Kaika at a disadvantage.

They arrived at their destination after a few more minutes.

“This place is unnecessarily huge.”

“I completely agree.” Saya giggled.

She pushed open the door to the drawing room and held the door with her right hand. Ageha looked uncomfortable as he walked inside.

Saya speculated and asked, “Are you not used to having a female open doors for you?”

“It would be odd for a guy to be used to something like that, don’t you think?”

“I am flattered that you think of me as a woman despite my usual attire and manner.” She approached a terminal while conversing.

“I could tell you were a woman when I first saw you across that large main hall, despite your attire and manner.”

“Is that a compliment, Shikimi-sama?”

“Yes.”

“I am grateful for the praise.” She pressed a button that caused a large paper thin display in front of them to glow to life.

“You don’t look like you are, though.” He laughed and took a seat at the closest sofa.

Saya did not respond. She tried to resolve the boyish charm of Ageha’s carefree laugh with the cold mercury pulsing underneath it. The combination had a complex appeal.

The face of a man in his fifties was displayed on the screen. He had grey hair, a wrinkled forehead, and a large nose.

“This man is Tsutomu Masayoshi. He is the target for this mission.”

“Who? I thought we were aiming for Kaika-, Kai’s brothers?”

“I am glad that you are such a quick study. She would be pleased if you called her that.”

“Please answer the question.”

“It would be impossible even for you to slip through the security of those two. The success rate of that plan is too low for Ojousama to seriously consider it as a valid option. I agree with her.”

“I managed to reach Karasuma.”

“Please do not be offended. She and I highly value your abilities. You were able to kill Nikaidou-sama because he was not on guard. Now that a masked killer murdered their father, Kousuke and Kazuki have reinforced their security teams. They have also become more careful about their movements.”

“I still think we can manage, with proper risk mitigation.”

“Security is not the only reason. The brothers are very close. If you eliminate one of them, there is no telling what the other will do. A desperate counterattack is not unlikely.”

“Then we can just get rid of them together.”

“That will be even harder. It is already hard to predict the movements of one target. Finding out when they will meet is much more difficult. Moreover, security will be doubled when they are together. This is also not an option.”

“Understood.” He nodded with no dissatisfaction.

Pride that easily loses to logic. A formidable quality.

“Tsutomu Masayoshi is a trusted adviser of Nozomu Chiba, the CEO of Excell Corporation.”

“Excell... The battery company?”

“The electrochemical research company, yes. Apparently, Masayoshi and Chiba have been acquainted since high school. Ojousama’s older brother, Kousuke, recently bribed Masayoshi to convince Chiba to go through with a proposed partnership with NGC.”

Information on Excell flitted across the display.

“I see. If Masayoshi is removed, then the deal goes up in smoke.”

“This deal is significantly beneficial to NGC because the contract stipulates that NGC will gain sole rights to any Artificial Musculature and Skeleton related technology that Excell has. Excell has little reason to take the deal, save for the chance that having a powerful ally like NGC will pay off in the future. This is likely the angle that Masayoshi is using to persuade Chiba. Chiba holds great influence over the board, so the partnership will surely happen with his approval.”

“Has Nikaidou-, Kousuke promised this to the NGC directors?”

“No, but he is the one heading the effort.”

“Based on the information, Masayoshi meets my conditions. But will weakening Kousuke’s standing really lead to Kai’s safety?”

“With less influence, he will have less room to maneuver. Also, this is only the first step in Ojousama’s plan. However, even I am not privy to the details of that.”

“I find that hard to believe. Doesn’t she trust you?”

“She does not even trust herself, Shikimi-sama.”

“That’s not true.” A high-pitched melodious voice invaded the room as the door swung open.

Both Ageha and Saya turned towards the sound.

“I trust both of you,” said Kaika, who was wearing only a large white shirt as pajamas. She looked Saya in the eye.

Saya reflexively bowed, removing her hands from the terminal and placing them snugly on her sides.

“I apologize for saying such presumptuous words.”

Saya realized that she should not be speaking of Kaika that way to Ageha. It would endanger Kaika’s control over him.

“No need for that. So, how’s it coming along?”

“We just finished going through the target rationale. Next is the details of the operation.”

“Perfect. Time for a break. Ageha, cook breakfast.” Her wavy, unbound hair, which reached her hips, swayed gently as she placed her arms akimbo.

“...What?” Ageha could not resist looking at the clock on the far wall. Only thirty minutes had passed since he arrived.

“I want something Japanese.”

“It’s 10:30 *p.m.*”

“So? I just woke up.”

“I’m a chef at an *italian ristorante.*”

“You’re also Japanese.”

Ageha did not even try to hide his stupefaction at her absolutely self-centered demand.

“I’m paying you as a chef, too. Make something worth my money.”

She was right. Ageha was being paid properly as a chef even though it was only an excuse for him to commute to the Nikaidou estate without arousing suspicion.

“Kureha is also looking forward to it. I bumped into her on the way here.” The elder sister wore a tender smile.

Ageha paused in thought for a while. His shoulders dropped, and he sighed. “Okay, okay. Japanese breakfast for two?”

“Five. Two portions for Saya.”

“Kai-Ojousama,” warned the butler.

“Four it is.” The chef seemed to understand that he was invited to the meal.

“No *natto.*”

“How picky, just like your sister.”

After the parting shot, Ageha left the drawing room and headed to the mansion's well-equipped kitchen.

Saya closed the door after ensuring that the corridor was deserted.

"Be more careful about what you say to him." There was no anger in the mistress's voice, only a hint of concern.

"I understand. I apologize for earlier."

"Well, getting along with him is also in our interests... Was he so charming that you let your tongue slip?"

"He has potential as a child molester and a ladies' man, but that had nothing to do with my mistake. I was just careless. It shall not happen again."

"That composure is why you aren't fun to tease." The girl pouted childishly.

"Speak for yourself."

"Right, let's go to the kitchen and prank someone more worthwhile. Get Kureha on the way. She should be in my room."

"Understood."

Saya wished that Kaika would at least find solace in peaceful times like these despite fully understanding how improbable that was.

This world can be so unfair.

Chapter 05: Blanched

Masayoshi reviewed the documents in his hands as he mentally practiced the presentation he would soon be delivering. On the papers were headers that read, "Compact Tubular Batteries for Artificial Musculature and Skeleton (ARMS)" and "Future Investment Partnership."

"What time is it?" asked Masayoshi, his foot tapping nervously on the vehicle flooring.

"1:37, sir," said the driver on his right. Masayoshi rode shotgun when he read in the car to avoid nausea. Two more bodyguards were in the backseat of the SUV.

“Aren’t we cutting it close? I can’t be late for this presentation.”

“Understood. I will raise our speed.”

The driver added pressure to the gas pedal as he signalled right to overtake the van in front.

Masayoshi did not remove his eyes from the documents. He knew the importance of this meeting. He needed to convince Chiba about the NGC partnership. Even if they were friends, he still needed a decent proposal to sway the CEO. Nikaidou had already transferred the money. Failure was not an option.

Heading to the Excell Corporation main office, the vehicle turned onto the main street of Akihabara. They were greeted by a sea of people of various ages occupying the space on the road. The SUV ground to a stop in front of the human barricade.

What is this?

People were dressed in a wide array of colorful costumes. Masayoshi commuted regularly to the Akiba office, so he was used to the otaku culture in the area, but the sea of people on the road was immense enough to surprise him.

“Is there an event going on? Why was the road not blocked?”

“There should be no street events today, sir. The route is always checked for such things.”

“Check better then! Katou, go out there and see if you can get them to move. If going forward is impossible, we’ll back up and find a different route.”

Katou, who was one of the men at the back, opened the right rear door. The noise of the crowd rushed into the SUV.

“They said there was a bomb in the building...” said a girl with long, green hair holding a yellow plush toy.

“Whoa, scary stuff. Lucky I was near the exit,” replied a girl with brown wolf ears and a tail.

Numerous similar murmurs reached Masayoshi’s ears as he lamented his own bad luck.

Ageha calmly walked up to the man who got out of the SUV and sank a knife into his chest. The action had no wasted movement, and the man could only react with an “Eh?” before he was pushed aside and fell to the ground.

The guard in the rear saw only the latter part but quickly reacted. “Sir, please get out of the car!”

Ageha, having already ducked his head inside the vehicle, realized that there was a hole in Kaika’s plan. Masayoshi was in the front seat.

You dropped the ball on this one, Kai.

Looking befuddled, Masayoshi followed the guard’s instructions. Ageha was about to go back out of the vehicle and give chase when he saw the guard sitting in front of him take out a handgun from his chest holster.

Not having enough time to dodge, Ageha raised both arms to cover his face and neck as he backed out. Gunshots reverberated in the small space. The bullets ricocheted off of Ageha’s ARMS. One of the deflected bullets lodged itself into the abdomen of the guard who fired it.

“Is it an event?”

“Look, there’s a guy on the ground!”

The voices increased as people surrounded the SUV. They started taking out their terminals and cameras to capture the moment.

The driver escaped from the vehicle and chased after Masayoshi, who had scrambled away. Ageha decided to ignore the injured guard and gave pursuit. He leapt over the SUV to avoid circling it.

“What the!?! He jumped so high!”

“Awesome stunt!”

People cheered. Nonstop camera flashes glittered from the crowd.

I knew this blending in plan was a bad idea...

Ageha clicked his tongue as he remembered Kaika’s smug mug when she told him to wear the costume she prepared. She argued that his usual combat outfit might cause people to take note of him because it didn’t match the event’s theme.

It’s harder to move in these clothes, and my vision is narrower.

He wore a black trenchcoat and pants of the same color. The material was not the skin-tight, flexible one used in his combat suit, so it was damaged by the shots earlier. A white mask with two small eyeholes and a red slit resembling a smile covered his face.

Ageha slowly caught up to the driver by weaving left and right between costumed bystanders. He was significantly delayed by the throng of people blocking his way while trying to take pictures of him. The driver looked back and stopped when he saw Ageha catching up. He pulled out a knife.

Good thing the guy has common sense.

Ageha did not want to unnecessarily involve bystanders, but that would be almost impossible in a gunfight. Thinking that there was enough space for combat, Ageha did not stop his run. He switched to a forward grip and slashed towards the driver's throat. The man leaned back and avoided the strike. Expecting this, Ageha curved the knife trajectory downward. The blade snaked towards the driver's knife hand.

A metallic screech resulted from the contact.

ARMS!

The slash only scratched the surface and was not enough to disarm the driver. The driver threw a left that connected with Ageha's face.

Ageha's vision swayed, but he managed to not get knocked down by twisting his head in the direction of the blow. Using the rotational momentum, he spun around while simultaneously ducking and attacking. He sliced open the driver's left thigh, which caused him to stagger. Using the opportunity, Ageha drilled a fierce uppercut into the driver's chin. The force launched the driver upward before he crashed into the ground. The weights of their blows were far too different.

If both his arms were cybernetic... Ageha shuddered at the possibility.

Thinking that the fight was a show, the people around them clapped their hands and cheered in excitement. Ageha looked for his target beyond the crowd. Masayoshi was still in sight but quite a distance away. Ageha pushed off the road and continued the hunt. In a panic, Masayoshi entered an alley where electronics were sold on tables. He started turning those tables over to hinder his pursuer. It actually worked because the angry merchants manning the tables thought Ageha was Masayoshi's companion and tried to stop him.

Ageha thought about throwing his knife at the corrupt businessman, but there were too many people browsing the stores between them. Ageha knew that if he lost sight of his target, he would have a hard time finding him again before the authorities could intervene.

An old shop owner, whose merchandise was scattered, grabbed the hem of Ageha's trenchcoat and got dragged to the ground by Ageha's momentum. Ageha was forced to stop to prevent the man from being shredded by the rough concrete. He looked to Masayoshi, who was now about to exit the alley.

If I don't get him before he crosses the street..!

But it was too late. Ageha could not use his speed in such a congested location. He could have trampled over the shoppers to reach Masayoshi, but he chose not to because he thought he could catch him regardless. He miscalculated.

Masayoshi, fueled by adrenaline, ran as fast as a professional athlete. He sped across the street while maintaining his manic sprint.

And got run over by a truck.

Chapter 06: Breakage

"Masayoshi is dead."

"What!?" shouted Kousuke, unconsciously rising from his black leather office chair.

"He was run over by a truck on his way to the Excell office," said Kazuki.

"Is that a joke? What is with that timing!?" Kousuke's chiseled, clean-shaven face contorted in anger.

Kazuki, the older, shorter, and much rounder of the two, stood a few paces from Kousuke's desk. He continued his report without taking a seat, as if he were an assistant.

"It was not a coincidence. Most of his guards were found dead in the area. One of them was taken to the hospital but died from blood loss before he could provide any information about what happened. They were killed by a disguised man."

"Are there any witnesses?" Kousuke sat back down, looking drained.

"Dozens on-site. Thousands if you count those who watched the videos."

"What do you mean? Where exactly was he killed?"

“He was attacked on the main street of Akihabara. An event was being held in the exhibition hall near where his SUV was found. A bomb threat was delivered to the building administrators, so they had to evacuate all the attendees into the street. Masayoshi was run over a few blocks away.”

“Send someone to investigate that threat. It’s definitely from the same camp that killed him.”

“I can, but do not expect to find anything.” Kazuki looked hesitant.

“I know. I just want the culprit to know we aren’t fools.”

“Would it not be more prudent to pretend ignorance?”

“No, we need a show of power. We are being underestimated.” Kousuke tightened his clenched fist and tapped it on his spacious desk.

“Understood. Do you have any suspects?”

“There are far too many who fit the bill if we consider motive alone. A lot of people don’t want NGC to partner with Excell.” He placed a finger on his temple, eyebrows furrowed in thought. “It’s probably Saionji.”

“Kaika’s aide?” Kazuki raised an eyebrow. His eyes hardly widened because of the flab on his cheeks.

“Yes. She’s probably trying to weaken our influence on the board so she can worm herself in.”

Kousuke knew that Saya was not just a mere butler. Being Kaika’s current legal guardian, she had limited control over Kaika’s assets and represented the heiress during board meetings and deliberations.

“Why suspect her in particular?”

“The surveillance team watching Kaika’s group and the one monitoring Excell ran into each other.”

“Saionji was meeting with someone from Excell?”

“Several times. The pieces fit.” Kousuke nodded to himself, having decided his theory made sense. “She’s probably going for the partnership deal. Engineering my failure and then getting the deal through another channel should be more than enough for her to gain recognition.”

“Under Kaika’s orders?”

“I don’t think that runt is capable of something like this. Saionji is probably using her. Kaika has majority control of the company and could just strong-arm us out if she really wanted to.”

“She would make enemies of the whole board. No one in their right mind would do something like that.”

“I know. That’s probably why Saya is trying to undermine me. She might be aiming for the same thing we are. All of this is circumstantial, but prepare countermeasures anyway.”

“I will.” Kazuki smiled. “Impressive insight, as always.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” Kousuke was pleased.

“Which is why you know it is sincere. You may want to watch a video of the incident to get the details on exactly what happened.”

Kazuki briskly left the office in order to carry out his brother’s instructions.

Kousuke accepted the suggestion and searched for the video using the terminal on his desk. He easily found several uploaded versions of the event and selected the most popular one. The video maximized and started playing.

A man clad in a charcoal trenchcoat leapt over a silver grey SUV and zipped through a horde of people. He engaged and defeated a man in a suit and then followed another man into an alley. Then everything froze.

Kaika removed her finger from the button that paused the video on the display.

“...Well? What happened?” Kaika’s white, frilled blouse crumpled beneath her crossed arms. Saya stood silently behind her.

“I already gave you my report,” said Ageha.

“That is not what I mean.”

“What *do* you mean?.”

“Why did such a simple operation result in you plastering your face all over the net!?” Her striped blue skirt twirled as she whipped her finger to point at the screen.

“It would have been all over the news anyway. Killing people in broad daylight has that side effect.” He was slouched on one of the leather sofas in the drawing room.

“The whole point of the disguise was to make it easier for you to disappear into the crowd, not be the spotlight of it.”

“I was wearing a mask. My identity is safe.”

“Except that they know you are a man with above average height *that has ARMS*. You practically advertised it with your inhuman stunts.”

“Aren’t those stunts your reason for this partnership?”

“Not when it’s showcased to everyone, including my brothers. The whole point of holding cards is to keep them from view.”

Ageha did not argue back. Logic sided with Kaika.

“A truck driver did a better job than you.”

But she pushed too much.

“It was your lack of information that caused this. He was in the passenger’s seat, and his guard had ARMS. I could have eliminated him easily if you took more time to investigate.”

Saya flinched at Ageha’s accusation.

“He was meeting Chiba today! We had no time to get information on everything. Only his personal guards could know where he sits inside the car.” Kaika skewered Ageha with her glare.

“That’s just you not delivering on your promise. I remember information was part of my compensation.”

“And you were supposed to compensate for minor issues like car seating.”

They threateningly scowled at each other during a short pause in the verbal tussle.

“Besides, how can a geezer like him outrun you? You have cybernetic legs!”

“There were a lot of people that got in the way. Your plan of using the crowd backfired.”

“It was a calculated risk. I wanted to keep your capabilities a secret. It would have succeeded if you had killed Masayoshi in the vehicle then immediately incorporated yourself into the crowd.”

“It was a risk we didn’t need to take. I could have intercepted the vehicle in a less populated area.”

“Why would it even matter? Your physical ability should have allowed you to bypass the obstacles.”

“I took a chance that I would be able to catch Masayoshi without getting others involved. Like you said, a calculated risk.”

“I didn’t think you were so poor at math. You should have just run them-”

“Ojousama,” interjected Saya, “I think we should calm down, cease this bickering, and discuss future-”

“Silence! Don’t speak as if you aren’t involved in this fiasco. You were the one who conducted the investigation on the target.” Kaika’s glare flew to Saya and caused the butler to firmly close her lips.

“But you were the one who decided to continue the operation despite Saionji-san’s warning that we didn’t have enough information on the guard detail,” said Ageha.

“Do you really think strategists laugh in triumph because their plans were proven foolproof? No, the joy comes from winning their gambles. Nothing of worth can be achieved without a corresponding amount of risk.”

“Then you simply lost the gamble this time.”

“Indeed, the one I took when I partnered with you.” Her voice was uncharacteristically low. She turned her head to the side, as if refusing to look at Ageha’s face.

Several tar-like seconds passed.

“I guess that’s it then,” said Ageha. He sighed, stood up, then walked towards the closed doors.

“Shikimi-sama!” Saya called after him.

Ageha did not stop and exited the room. Saya turned to her mistress.

“Kai-Ojousama!” she said in a scolding tone before she followed Ageha outside.

Ageha brusquely walked away from the drawing room.

This was doomed from the start.

“Shikimi-sama! Please wait!”

His sleeve was held back, so he stopped and turned to Saya. Her face showed worry. He was surprised at the amount of emotion on her normally immovable features.

“You heard her. The deal is off.”

“That was just her temper speaking. Please do not let something so insignificant sway your commitment.”

Ageha understood that Saya was trying to appeal to his pride and compel him to take the high road. He conceded despite that knowledge, took a deep breath, and changed gears.

“I admit that I also lost my cool in there. I don’t dislike the current arrangement, but if Kai wants me out, then that’s it. I don’t know what I can do to remedy that.”

“I will talk to her. She merely requires time to calm down. I am sure that she realizes that she overreacted earlier.”

“...Okay. What should I do?”

“Please stay within the mansion. I will speak with Ojousama and find you so that we can resolve this petty conflict and put it behind us.”

“Sorry for being petty.” He put on a wry smile.

“..! I didn’t mean it like that!”

It was the first time he saw the butler flustered.

“You actually dropped formalities.”

Awareness showed on Saya’s face. She attempted to bow.

“I apologize-”

But Ageha placed an index finger on her forehead before she could complete the action.

“I prefer it that way.”

Saya had to turn her eyes up to look at Ageha because of her half bow. Raising her head, she ceased contact with Ageha’s fingertip.

“I cannot do so given my position.”

“That’s too bad.” Ageha shrugged his shoulders.

“Anyway, please wait inside the mansion while I speak with her.” She spoke rapidly as if she wanted to end the conversation.

Is she embarrassed? Ageha could not ascertain because her facial muscles appeared even more paralyzed than usual.

“Got it. I’ll leave it to you.”

Saya turned around and marched towards the drawing room. Her gait was visibly nervous. Her trepidation showed how arduous a task she was about to undertake. Her hand wrapped around the doorknob, but before she twisted it open, she said, “Thanks for defending me earlier,” in an almost inaudible voice.

Ageha was not sure if he was supposed to hear it so he kept quiet.

After Saya disappeared into the drawing room, Ageha decided to go to the kitchen to wait. He considered the kitchen as his office for this cover job. He paced towards the location but did not get far before he noticed that he was being tailed again.

For someone who likes stalking people so much, she’s horrible at it.

Around the corner behind him was Kureha in pajamas. She quickly hid herself after seeing Ageha turn to face her.

“Come on out. I won’t bite.”

Kureha’s body slowly emerged from her hiding spot.

Ageha walked over to meet her halfway. She looked at him with a hint of caution that was not there when they parted last.

“Did you... have a fight with Oneesama?” She fidgeted nervously.

So that's it. Maybe I should reevaluate her stalking stat.

"You were listening?"

"I did not mean to. I just heard Oneesama's voice..."

"It was pretty loud, wasn't it? Did we scare you? Sorry about that." Ageha made a guilty expression.

"No, it was not that scary." Kureha forced a smile.

Scary nonetheless.

"Why did you two fight?" she asked after hesitating several times.

"Well, I kind of screwed up on the job."

"Did Oneesama dislike the taste?"

"...Oh, yes, something like that. I kind of lost my temper too so it ended up like it did."

Kureha fell silent for a while but then looked up to the much taller Ageha and asked, "...Will you stop coming over?"

Ageha felt a little prick in his chest. He was surprised that he did but attributed it to his obsession with fairness. It would be unfair to Kureha if he suddenly disappeared. She quite liked him.

"I can only depend on Saya now, but it's ultimately Kai's decision."

"I am glad. I thought you wanted to leave..." Kureha's face, which was on the brink of tears, formed a cute beam. Her smile was perfect for a child her age. It reminded Ageha of Kaika due to the stark contrast.

"I'll have to if Kai doesn't reconsider."

"I do not think you have to worry about that."

"What do you mean?"

"You call her Kai, right? All of the other servants call her Ojousama. She ordered them not to call her by name, ever."

Ageha was caught off guard by this bit of trivia and could not respond.

“Also, I rarely see Oneesama get truly angry, but when she does, it is only at Saya.”

“You mean she only gets angry at people she cares about? But if that’s the case, doesn’t she get angry at you too?”

Kureha gazed at the floor and gradually worded her thoughts.

“...I... do not think Oneesama likes me very much. I am afraid of people... and I cannot do anything well. But Oneesama is good at everything. She must think I am pitiful... like Father did. I love her though.”

Ageha did not know much about Kaika’s feelings towards Kureha, so he could only parrot what Saya said before.

“Isn’t she spending more time with you recently?”

“Well, I often go to her room, but she is usually not there. She is always busy.”

“I see.”

Did Saionji-san lie? No, Kai is probably just occupied with her brothers.

“Thanks for the encouragement, Kureha-chan. I guess I’ll just wait for the good news then.”

Ageha placed his hand on Kureha’s head and gently moved his fingers through her hair. Kureha closed her eyes like a purring cat being rubbed on the chin.

Ageha opted to forgo his trip to the kitchen and continued his conversation with Kureha. He sat down on the carpet, and she followed suit. They talked about various subjects, from more serious topics like how Kureha’s mother died giving birth to her, to more mischievous ones like what food Kaika hated the most so Ageha could trick her into eating it. The timid Kureha gradually opened up to Ageha and paused a lot less during their talk.

She probably just needs someone to talk to, like I did back then.

The sound of multiple footsteps wedged into their chat.

Ageha and Kureha directed their attention at the pair walking their way. Saya made eye contact with Ageha and nodded. Kaika followed a few steps behind her aide, but she kept her eyesight focused on the hallway wall and would not look at Ageha. The duo came to a stop

when they were close enough for conversation. Ageha and Kureha stood up on cue. The hallway remained silent until Saya chose to break the impasse.

“Kai-Ojousama.”

Kaika, prodded into action, looked directly at Ageha and said, “I overreacted. It wasn’t so bad for a first job. Even though it was a truck that actually did it.” The last part was a mumble that could hardly be heard.

“No, I could have handled the situation better. If I had better info.” Ageha did the same but mostly in jest.

“Okay, now let us drop this so we can discuss future steps,” said Saya, closing the book on the issue.

“About that, I think I should come back some other time. It’s already late.”

“Shikimi-sama...”

“No, it isn’t like that. I just think it would be better to start fresh.” He pointed at Kaika, who still looked miffed, with his eyes. Saya seemed to understand his intentions.

“Understood. I shall walk you to the gate.”

“No-”

“I insist.”

His refusal rejected, Ageha left the mansion together with Saya after he exchanged farewells with the sisters.

The two remaining in the hallway started walking towards Kaika’s room.

“So, did you have a good chat with Ageha?”

“Yes, Oneesama. I came to the drawing room like you said I should and then heard your voices. All of a sudden, Ageha-Oniisama came out. I was surprised, so I hid. But I was curious so...”

“I see. You did well.” Kaika placed her hand on her sister’s ivory cheek and fondly caressed it with her thumb. Likely not knowing what exactly pleased her sister, Kureha happily accepted the compliment.

Upon reaching her room, Kaika, saying that she wanted to rest, apologized to Kureha and asked to be left alone for the night.

“‘I am happy I was able to chat with you so it is fine,’ huh?” Kaika spoke the words her sister told her moments ago as she lay prone on her spacious bed.

She disliked Kureha’s innocence. It reminded her of possibilities that she never had. The lack of freedom in her past compelled her to focus on the future instead.

To Kaika, failure was not something one recovers from. It was an opportunity to capitalize on. Emotion was the same.

I don’t even know where genuine starts and where illusion ends.

She remembered the smoldering anger she felt during the argument with Ageha. She questioned if it was true emotion, or just a method for the act, or if she even had true emotions at all.

Was Kureha insurance or propaganda?

Did she fear losing Ageha because of her wrath and placed Kureha there to stop him? Or did she just use Kureha as a mouthpiece to paint an amiable image of herself for Ageha? She herself did not know.

‘She does not even trust herself, Shikimi-sama.’ Saya was right. She felt sorry for her loyal aide who even tried to prevent her from alienating Ageha when she was about to belittle the safety of innocents. Saya was in the dark. Drama was at its best when the actress forgot it was a performance.

It was all for control. The power she wielded was for that purpose alone. A mistress cannot have equals.

“Can it be called solitude if the self isn’t real?” she asked her pillow.

Another long night of such morbid musings awaited her.

Chapter 07: Best Served Cold

Practiced hands dolloped thick sauce onto a white plate. Ageha dipped a spoon in the amber pool and slid it across the round dish to shape the sauce into an orange fireball. He then checked on the meat. The pale golden coating of a veal cutlet sizzled in the skillet.

“Three minutes on the *Cotoletta!*” shouted Ageha. He made sure he was heard amidst the clattering in the kitchen.

A waiter approached the head chef’s station and placed a plate containing braised rabbit and polenta on the counter.

“Chef Kirishima, there was a complaint about the seasoning of the polenta.”

Kirishima looked down doubtfully at the dish.

“This is Shikimi’s.” muttered the head chef. He grabbed a spoon and scooped out some of the yellow mash. He gave it a taste and made a sour expression. “Shikimi, come here and taste this.”

Ageha turned his head toward the summons. Thinking that he had enough time before the veal passed the perfect temperature, he headed straight for the counter. He did as the head chef instructed and wore a perplexed look after placing the spoon back on the table.

This is way too salty.

Ageha had tasted the polenta before plating it. He had made certain it was seasoned sublimely since flavor balance was a point of pride for him. Still, he bowed in apology.

“I am sorry, Chef. There is too much salt. I will remake it immediately.”

“This was partly my fault for not checking it. I will do so from now on.” Ageha could not see the expression the chef made, but his imagination was enough to prick his heart.

The chef dismissed Ageha and told the waiter that the dish in question was on the house. Ageha hid a grimace as he returned to his station to attend to the now golden brown veal.

“Don’t take it to heart. I’m sure he’s just trying to remind you to not let your guard down,” said Yama, who approached Ageha from behind.

“I understand, and thank you. You did not have to walk all the way here for that.”

“Hey, I gotta act like the senior that I am from time to time, right?” He patted Ageha’s shoulder.

“Says the chef who was listening in on the scolding instead of doing his job.”

“You really should do something about how you treat me.” Yama’s shoulders slumped.

“It is a sign of affection.”

“I don’t want that from a guy.”

“It is all you are going to get from me.”

“Life is so unfair. I get a dude poking fun at me, while you get Rin-chan fawning over you.”

Ageha shook his head. “She does not.” He set the visibly scrumptious cutlet on the plate and decorated it with herb ribbons.

“Keep telling yourself that. That way, my turn might come soon enough.”

“She could be your daughter, you know.”

“That’s what makes it great, right?” Yama winked.

“I do not think society agrees.”

“What’s this? Getting all protective after that denial earlier?” He chuckled.

“No, I am only stating common sense.”

“Whatever you say.” Yama smirked in triumph.

Ageha ignored the one-sided victory declaration and focused on finishing his dish. Yama beelined to his station to make up for his brief procrastination.

Ageha submitted the veal for a final check, which the head chef dutifully performed. Rin, who was also present when Ageha was reprimanded, elegantly received the plate and strode into the dining room.

The rest of the night’s service concluded without further mishaps.

Ageha changed out of his uniform and into a form fitting grey shirt. Faded blue jeans barely covered the top of his brown leather shoes. He walked out of the changing room and bumped into a familiar server.

“Heading home?” asked Rin, with her trademark heart warming smile. Ageha, trading warmth with confidence, responded with his own. A pink camisole under her white jacket accentuated her supple, albeit modest, chest. Her skinny jeans put her shapely legs on display.

“Yeah, today wasn’t the best, so I wanna get home and rest.”

“I’m about to go too. Want to walk together until the station?”

I guess I can’t really blame Yama-san for misunderstanding.

“We both go the same way, so it would be strange if I declined.”

“I’d cry if you did.”

“Sorry, I feel like going home alone.”

“How mean!” She puckered her lips. Ageha normally disliked such artificial mannerisms, but Rin did it so naturally that even he found it pleasant.

Laughing at the pouting Rin, Ageha jogged to the service entrance of Sapore. Rin chased the escaping chef until they made it outside. Realizing their childishness from the looks around them, they ceased the game of tag. They walked down the sidewalk side by side in silence. The early autumn air felt comfortable so Ageha enjoyed the commute despite the distance.

“You’re oddly quiet,” said Rin.

“I was wondering the exact same thing. Usually, I can’t even get a word in.” He chuckled.

Rin aimed her elbow at his side.



“Okay, okay! Just kidding.”

Rin kept silent for a few paces and then brought up a new topic.

“I actually wanted to talk to you about something.”

So that’s why she was so silent.

“What’s up?”

“I saw the polenta incident.”

“Oh? They call it the polenta incident?”

“Yes, the *sala* staff decided on the name. Everyone was laughing when I told them you were knocked down a peg.”

“Really!?”

“No.” She laughed cheerfully. She probably knew that he was only humoring her minor revenge.

“So, what about it?”

She stopped her feet. Noticing this, Ageha also stopped and turned to her. She looked completely serious.

“I know it wasn’t a mistake on your part.”

“I’m glad for the trust, but I’m not too worried about it.”

“No, this isn’t about trust. Not that I don’t trust you, I mean, I trust you, a lot, I really do! But this is...” Her eyes wandered and her hands waved about. Ageha waited for her to compose herself without interrupting.

“When I submitted an order to the *cucina*, I saw Matsunaga-san sprinkling something on the polenta when you were away tending to the meat. I didn’t think much of it at the time. I thought maybe he just adjusted the seasoning for you to match the flavor of Sapore’s *secondo*, but after the dish was returned...” She trailed off, hitting the threshold of what could be said with ease.

“I thought as much.” *What’s unexpected is how much Rin observes me.*

“Eh?”

“Well, he has a thing against me, so I guessed it was his doing.”

“But you apologized immediately.”

“Excuses won’t work on the head chef, even if they are true.”

“...I thought you believed it was your mistake.”

“I don’t make seasoning mistakes.” He grinned proudly.

“...I kind of know how Matsunaga-san feels now.”

Both of them laughed about the grim topic of sabotage.

“Thanks for telling me anyway.”

“You can count on me! So, what are you planning to do? I can talk to the head chef if you want.”

“No, you don’t have to do that. It’ll just cause more problems in the *cucina*.”

“But what if this happens again?”

“I’ll talk to him before that, but not about this. I think the two of us just got off on the wrong foot. I respect his culinary ability. I think I can learn a lot from him.”

Rin looked at him with her left brow raised and a short hum coming from her throat.

“What?” he asked.

“I thought you’d be furious. I know you take a lot of pride in your cooking.”

“I can understand him exactly because of that. I’m a section head at twenty-five while he’s in his forties. He must feel cheated.”

“But that’s not your fault. He shouldn’t lash out at you.”

“Restraint isn’t really something common nowadays. People just do whatever they feel like most of the time.”

Rin refrained from immediately replying. She made a melancholic smile and said, "It's sad isn't it?"

"What is?"

"People just doing what they want, not caring about what's right, or who gets hurt."

I'm like that too.

"There are still considerate people like you, Rin, so I'm optimistic."

"Wha-!" Her skin flushed beet red...

"If only that consideration restrained your nosiness a-

...in anger.

Slices of life like this were something Ageha consumed like pies: on occasion, in small portions, but with great enjoyment. Sweetness in excess induced decay, which was something he could not afford.

Their merry banter continued until they reached the station. Ageha rubbed a sore spot on his side as he entered a different train platform. Rin bid him farewell moments ago.

I don't know if I should feel lucky or unlucky that she elbowed a human part.

Rin handed the order slip to the head chef. Kirishima succinctly relayed it to his workforce in the kitchen. Business was slow at the moment, so Rin didn't have much to do. She gazed at Ageha and Matsunaga chatting while they worked together on a dish.

I can't believe it's only been two weeks since then.

She recalled her conversation with Ageha about the polenta incident. She knew he was going to talk to Matsunaga, but she did not expect them to hit it off so well.

"The salt casing seals in the moisture and allows the sea bass to steam in its own juices," explained Matsunaga. He expertly covered the whole fish with moist salt.

"And seasons it at the same time," said Ageha.

"Exactly."

I didn't expect them to be finishing each other's sentences. She continued to observe the scene that she would have called a hallucination only days before.

Rin had always thought of Ageha as a force to be reckoned with. He was already a *primo* chef at such a young age and had gained the trust of the head chef through skill and discipline. Despite such a high evaluation, his ability to manage kitchen politics had exceeded her expectations.

Ageha placed the salt-encased bass into the oven. The two men continued their discussion about different methods to bake seafood.

I guess this is something that I can't chat with him about. The sala is different from the cucina.

"Rin, stop ogling Ageha and move. You're blocking the *cucina* exit," said a tall, middle aged man with a sophisticated air about him.

"Sorry! I was just spacing out, it's not like I was-"

"Whatever. You can go on break if you want. We have more than enough *camerieri* in the *sala*." The spectacled chief waiter displayed a smile that would leave older ladies smitten.

"Yes, Seta-san."

"That's *capo cameriere* in here."

Seta moved through the space Rin created without waiting for a reply. Rin scolded herself, not just for blocking kitchen traffic, but also for gradually growing attracted to Ageha. She walked towards the break room while keeping Ageha at the corner of her sight.

I only got close to him to stop the other guys from coming on to me, but now...

It was not a secret, especially to herself, that Rin was attractive. She knew how to use her looks as both a tool and a weapon, and she was also aware of the drawbacks. She chose Ageha because he, unlike the other men in *Sapore*, seemed uninterested in her. Kirishima and Seta were also exceptions, but cozying up to someone close to her age was not only more natural but also more palatable for her.

She entered the break room and sat down on one of the chairs placed around the single rectangular wooden table. She slumped herself onto the tabletop and sighed deeply.

This is bad. I'm thinking about him too much.

She knew that she must not fall for Ageha. If she did, that would mean her plan had backfired in the worst way possible. The motive behind her selection would also become the cause of her suffering. Her thoughts slowly derailed into gloom until the door opened, and from it entered the seed of her worries.

“Oh, were you asleep? Sorry if I woke you.”

“Ageha... No, I was just thinking.”

“That’s good. I just went on break,” he said while rotating his shoulders.

“You’re done with the *secondo* menu practice?”

“For today, yeah. Shingo-san wanted to keep going, but I asked for a break. I say break, but I’m actually leaving early today, so we resume tomorrow.”

“You two are on a first name basis now, huh?” She was unable to stop a tiny amount of contempt from revealing itself.

I’m jealous of an old man!?

She used her fairly good acting skills, which she usually employed to play coy or cute, to prevent the raging embarrassment from showing on her face.

“Yeah, we hung out a few times after service, and it just kind of ended up that way. We’re not that close though. He’s much friendlier with the other chefs in the *secondo* section. He’s the type that cares about those under him, I think.”

“Right, I hear they go out for beers a couple times a week.” She inwardly sighed in relief that Ageha did not catch on.

“Cooking can be a stressful job, so that’s understandable.”

“You rarely go out with the others in the *cucina* though. People were talking about it before.”

“That’s just a schedule thing. My nights are usually busy.”

“What do you do?”

Rin noticed that Ageha slipped into thought for a brief moment before answering.

“Keep this a secret, okay?”

“...You can count on me.”

“I work as a personal chef for a rich family.”

“Whoa, that might get you in trouble with Kirishima-san.”

“It’s not affecting my work so it should be okay, but better to keep quiet, right?” His inviting smile lured Rin into becoming an accomplice.

“You really love what you do, huh?”

“I must admit *it* is an obsession.”

Rin felt a certain incongruity in what exactly they had been referring to, but she brushed it off and continued their talk until the end of her break. That was only further proof of how much her feelings for the young man had grown.

Matsunaga opened the lock to his suburban house in Mitaka and lazily entered.

Again, this silence...

He cursed his loneliness. He fondly thought back to a scene just a few hours ago. The young *primo* chef earnestly learned from him. They initially had their differences, but that was now water under the bridge.

“He has talent. It might be interesting watching him grow.” He was repentant over sabotaging Ageha’s dish.

He removed his shoes, turned on the lights, and stepped into the living room. He glanced at the picture of his divorced wife. It was part of his routine even if he no longer thought about her. They had no children.

I might be seeing them as my kids: Hiro, Reiji, and even Ageha.

He took off his coat, threw it on the sofa, and entered the kitchen to make dinner. He flipped the switch to the light beside the door and froze at the bizarre sight that was illuminated.

Everything was covered in clear plastic.

Before he could react, something covered his mouth and he lost consciousness.

Ageha? That name was the first word that floated in his murky mind after he opened his eyes. It was because the young chef, wearing black form-fitting clothes, was standing in front of him. Matsunaga was gagged and his limbs were tied to his favorite chair in the kitchen.

“Good. It seems I can finish early tonight,” said Ageha, his voice devoid of emotion.

What the hell is happening!?

“I will make this short so listen carefully,” said the young man in the same lecturing tone Matsunaga had used on him earlier that same day. “I am going to kill you.”

Matsunaga jerked his body at the declaration. He tried to get out of the ropes, but it was too secure for his attempts to work.

“You are probably wondering why, and why I am telling you all this.”

Matsunaga stopped struggling and trembled in fear.

“First why. Polenta incident.”

Matsunaga instantly understood. Ageha had figured out that he was the culprit, and this was his vengeance.

For something like that!?

“You are probably thinking that this is unfair, but you no longer have that right because you initiated this. The perpetrator cannot be a victim. This is nothing personal. The result would have been the same if you did it to anyone else.”

Matsunaga’s fear switched to anger because he could not comprehend the young man’s words. He tried to scream but only choked on his own saliva. He coughed several times and looked at Ageha with hatred and fury.

“Second why. I wanted you to know the answer to the first. It would not be fair otherwise.”

Fair? What the hell is fair about this!? You fucking sicko!!!

“That’s it. Time to get this over with.”

The sudden deadline dictated by his captor jolted Matsunaga out of his anger. Remembering the last thing he saw before fainting, he swung his head left and right. A plastic tent was erected around the room. Even the floor was covered.

“Do not worry. It will be painless. The plastic is for the possible spillage when I fold your body up to fit in that bag.” He used his thumb to point at a black bag behind him. It looked too small to fit a man, even in fetal position.

Yellow liquid pooled under the metal chair. Matsunaga deduced that the plastic on the floor was also for something like that. Taking pride in his realization, he chuckled. He had already escaped from reality.

He saw the young man move behind him and felt something wrap around his neck. Digging deeper and deeper, the arm slowly pressed on his throat. Darkness followed.

Chapter 08: Ripening

Ageha's clumsy hook landed on the boy's jaw. It was a lucky strike resulting from just randomly flailing his fist. The boy fell to the ground on his bottom. He did not attempt to stand up and only glared at Ageha, who returned the animosity.

“What's wrong with you!?”

“I should ask you that.” said Ageha, unrestrained anger on his youthful features. Slightly surpassing even those a year or two older than him, he was quite tall for a boy of thirteen.

The boy on the ground was about the same size, so it was what one would call a fair fight, if such a thing existed.

“Why do you care what happens to him? This doesn't have anything to do with you!”

The boy moved his glare to another boy, who was also sitting on the ground a few feet away. A girl who looked the same age stood beside him. Both were watching the conclusion of the squabble in the deserted school courtyard.

“You hit him but complain when I do the same to you?”

“He was asking for it!”

“What exactly did he do?”

“I told him to get me cola, but he got diet cola instead!”

“You really are trash.”

“You can't blame me for that! Everyone does it!”

“Get outta here.”

“Why should I listen to you!?”

Ageha replied by kicking the boy’s gut. The blow caused the boy to roll on the ground. Eventually, he obediently got up and left the scene.

“I’m Ageha, and this is Airi. Can you get up?”

Ageha extended his right hand towards the sitting boy. The boy hesitated and then slapped it away.

“I didn’t ask for your help.”

“Hey, that isn’t what you should say to the one who saved you!” said Airi.

“Like I said, I didn’t want that! Now he’s going to go after me even more!”

“This ungrateful-”

“It’s okay, Airi,” said Ageha.

“You’re being too nice again.”

“I’m not.” Ageha fixed his gaze on the boy. “What’s your name?”

“...Jin.”

“Jin, don’t worry. I’ll help you if he comes back. I promise.” Ageha smiled confidently.

The boy looked puzzled.

“Why would you do that?”

“Because I want to. I hate people like him.”

“You can trust Ageha. He saved me when I was bullied, too,” said Airi.

“But Tooru has a lot of friends...” said Jin as he looked down.

Ageha placed a hand on Jin’s shoulder and said, “Then we can run away together.”

Jin's head jerked up as he looked at Ageha with an incredulous expression. He then burst out laughing. Ageha joined in, but Airi looked like she was at a loss.

"Boys..."

Ageha recalled his lonesome days before he met Airi. Back then, he hardly spoke with anyone. The other children avoided him because he was odd. Kids his age belonged to either the bullies or the bullied. He paid no heed to either side and was ostracized for it. It was only after he saved Airi from being disrobed by her classmates that he obtained a companion. By saving Jin, he believed that his bonds would increase.

That was the beginning of their small and fragile group.

The three met everyday after that. They usually hung out at school before going home. Jin often brought in board games or cards for them to play with. He would teach the clumsy Ageha how to build a house of cards or confidently explain the rules to a new game while Airi watched over them happily.

Two weeks passed, and the bonds between them grew stronger. On Jin's suggestion, they decided to go to an arcade after school. The arcade was on the way to Ageha's home, but he had never visited it before.

"This is my first time going to an arcade."

Both Airi and Jin looked at Ageha in shock.

"What? Is there something wrong with that?" asked Ageha, wondering at the duo's reaction.

"What have you been doing with your life!?" shouted the boy.

"So you've never taken photo stickers before?" questioned the girl.

"Well, I usually spend my free time cooking and cleaning at home. My father says that it's good training, and I guess it also helps him out since he's usually too tired to cook anything when he gets home."

"What about your mom?"

"Jin, that's-"

"It's okay, Airi. She died when I was very young so I don't remember her at all. I have Father, so it's not a big deal."

“Ageha’s dad is a well-known chef!” boasted Airi with arms akimbo.

“Why are you the one bragging..?” said Jin as he sighed.

All three of them laughed. This was common when they were together. The trip to the arcade was filled with fun conversation. Ageha, who was used to being alone, felt a strange warmth spreading within him.

“Here we are! What do you think?” asked Jin expectantly.

“It’s bright and noisy.”

Jin cupped his face in his hand and shook his head. “What is wrong with you...”

“No, I’m not saying I don’t like it. I just said what immediately came to mind.”

“...Whatever. In we go!”

The three of them walked inside and headed to the token machine. They each converted a few thousand yen to tokens, which would be enough to last them the entire afternoon. Jin and Airi got into an argument immediately afterwards.

“Let’s do the photo booth first,” said Airi.

“No, let’s play a fighting game! Which one do you wanna play, Ageha?”

Ageha thought for a moment and pointed at the closest fighting game unit.

“Okay, let’s go!” Jin pushed Ageha from behind.

“C’mon guys, don’t ignore me!”

An hour passed while the three busied themselves with different fighting games in the arcade. As expected, Jin almost never lost against the other two. What was unexpected was Ageha’s losing streak.

“Wow, you’re weak,” said Jin.

“Yeah, I’ve never played these games before, but I can’t seem to lose to you,” teased Airi. “This is just like your lousy attempts at making a card house. You really are clumsy at everything besides cooking.”

Ageha, robbed of any excuse, dejectedly slumped his shoulders and kept silent.

“Jin, I didn’t think you were so good at this. I have a better opinion of you now.”

Jin blushed at the rare compliment from the girl. “How low was your opinion of me before?” He looked away while frowning.

“Don’t get angry. I was just joking.”

“I knew you would never praise me seriously.”

“No, I was joking about changing my opinion. I’ve always known you’re a good guy.”

Jin went red to his ears after her correction. Ageha watched the exchange with a smile. Jin was a lot more talkative recently. He had been very quiet the first few days they were together. It was Airi who managed to pry his shell open with her straightforward personality and sincere words.

“Can we go to the photo booth now?” asked Airi. Her arms were crossed and her foot was tapping on the floor.

“Okay!” said Ageha in an uncharacteristically loud voice as he put an arm on Jin’s shoulders to urge him forward. They stuffed themselves into the rather small booth and huddled together as closely as possible to get as much of themselves as they could into the frame.

The picture they took had Ageha on the right, Airi in the middle, and Jin on the left. Ageha wore his usual smile. Airi’s cheeks were red, and her eyes were directed at the boy with the perfect losing record. Jin’s gaze avoided the girl, as if he were trying to hide the blush on his own cheeks.

“I’m the only one looking at the camera.”

““Shut up!”” said the two in unison before all three broke out in laughter.

Such happy times had become normal for Ageha. He wished it would last forever. He was confident that all three of them felt the same way.

It wasn’t long until he realized that wishes never granted anyone anything.

It hurts!

Jin tried to block the kicks with his arms, but there were too many of them. He had been waiting for Ageha and Airi at the usual spot when Tooru and his friends grabbed him. He was now at the same courtyard where Ageha had saved him previously, but hope for such a miracle happening again was wearing thinner by the moment.

“You think I’d let you off just like that!?” asked Tooru. He kicked Jin’s side again.

Jin turtled up and placed his hands on his nape. Ageha taught him to do that in case something like this ever happened. However, a member of the rampaging group looped his arms under Jin’s and pulled him up into a full nelson. Tooru then shot his knee into Jin’s stomach.

“That was for the kick in the gut before!”

Jin retched the contents of his spasming stomach onto the ground.

Ageha, it didn’t do any good...

Tooru grabbed Jin’s hair and pulled his head up. Vomit dribbled down his chin.

“Disgusting.”

A slap flew across his cheek. It was far less painful than the kicks, but somehow his heart ached much more. Another slap. And another. And another. It sounded like a perpetual slow clap. Tooru had never beat him this badly before. It was usually a punch or two at most.

This is all because of Ageha...

Jin’s vision started blurring after his brain was rocked repeatedly by the powerful slaps. Seeing his eyes glazed over, Tooru stopped the assault and told his minion to release the mangled boy. Jin slowly toppled to the ground like a falling tree. Dust and sand stuck to the vomit and blood on his face as he sprawled on the earth. He heard a spitting sound and felt something slimy land on his neck. A series of clicking noises from all around him followed.

“We’re going to spread these pictures all over the school and the net if you squeal on us.”

That doesn’t make sense. It’s like confessing your crime if you did that.

Jin could only laugh in his head at the stupid gag order issued to him. His jaws would not move. The footfalls bustling around him earlier faded into the distance. He lay alone in silence for a long time, at least from his perspective.

“Jin!!! What happened!?”

Jin heard Ageha's voice and Airi's shrill scream. He found it odd that he deemed Airi's voice cute despite the circumstances. His consciousness faded a few seconds later.

When he woke up, he saw the infirmary ceiling and a crying Airi at his bedside. Airi explained that Ageha had carried him there and that the school nurse had treated him. Apparently, Ageha told the nurse that it was Tooru and his friends who attacked Jin, but she simply brushed it off as a quarrel between kids. Ageha then went to the faculty office to file a formal complaint against Tooru and had not yet returned.

Jin told Airi what happened, but she gave no words of comfort. Jin knew she was a victim of bullying as well. She probably understood that nothing she could say would balm the wounds he received. A few minutes of silence passed until Ageha barged into the infirmary, fury audible in his steps.

"...Jin."

"Ageha... where were you?"

"I went to the teachers and told them about this. I told them about the last time as well, but they dismissed it. They said that people should learn to protect themselves. They even blamed *you* for being attacked! What's wrong with those people!?" Ageha faced the floor. His expression was a mix of anger, shame, sadness, and confusion. His fists were red from his forceful clenching.

"I didn't mean that. Where were you?"

Ageha looked at Jin's battered face. A look of realization appeared on his.

"When they kicked me... punched me... slapped me... spit on me!?"

"That wasn't Ageha's fault! I was talking with him about something, so we were late."

Even now she is defending him..!

"You promised! That you would help me! But you were-"

Jin's barrage was halted when he saw Ageha drop down to his knees and slam his forehead to the floor. Ageha remained bowed wordlessly. Airi grabbed Jin's sleeve with a pleading look.

"...I'm sorry. It's not your fault. Please stop that," said Jin lifelessly.

Ageha stood up and stared at Jin's eyes with determination.

“We'll get even. I promise.”

But Jin no longer placed any value in his promises. He had already been betrayed once. No more words were exchanged between the three that day. The boisterous laughter from before was like a dream blown away by the harsh winds of reality.

The three of them still met daily, but it was as if they were only going through the motions. Something genuine disappeared after Jin was attacked.

A few days passed.

“I did some investigating and found out Tooru's weakness,” said Jin.

This topic has not come up recently and immediately caught the attention of the other two.

“He has a sister who also goes to our school. She is two years younger than her brother.”

Ageha looked displeased but did not voice disagreement.

“Her brother bought her a newly released mobile terminal. She was telling all her friends about it. We should steal that terminal to hit him where it hurts the most.”

Airi remained silent and looked at Ageha.

Even now she is leaving the decisions to him.

“I'm sorry, Jin, but we can't do that.”

“Why!?” shouted Jin, surprised at the opposition. He knew that Ageha carried an extreme amount of guilt due to the incident. He believed Ageha would have no choice but to agree with his plan.

“That girl did nothing wrong. She doesn't deserve to be hurt just because of her brother's stupidity.”

“She's probably just as rotten as he is! Please Ageha! You promised you would help me!”

“And I will, but not like this.”

“Then how? Beating him up is impossible! He's always with his group!”

“I'll think of something. Please be patient.” Ageha bowed deeply.

“I’ll ask you, too. We shouldn’t stoop to something as shameful as theft. Please trust Ageha to find another solution.” Airi bowed as well.

These two..!

How can they just ignore what that bastard did to me!?

Even going as far as calling my perfect plan shameful!

And what’s with this couple act!? Acting like you understand each other perfectly..!

Jin finally despaired.

“I understand. I’m sorry for saying something so crazy. I’ll trust you, Ageha.” He was smiling. It was a perfect, stainless smile.

“Thanks. I won’t let you down.”

You already did.

Two weeks later, about as quickly as it was cemented, their small and fragile group crumbled.

It was surprisingly easy. It only took Jin three lies.

“Ageha told me that he likes this girl. She’s from another school. I know that you like him, so I thought that you should know, Airi.”

“Airi told me that she’s going to confess to you, but you know how I feel about her, right? Please Ageha, tell her that you like someone else so she can move on. Maybe then I’ll have a chance..!”

“I can’t believe Ageha! He was laughing about rejecting you with that girl! He said that he knew about your feelings all along. I overheard them yesterday at the arcade. I wouldn’t have brought us to that place if I knew Ageha would get to know that girl there... I’m so sorry...”

The deep trust they had in each other was used to destroy their relationships. Love transfigured into hatred.

Three cards don’t make a house.

“Hey, isn’t that the kid who stole Akari’s terminal?”

“Yeah, everyone’s talking about it. Why would someone steal a terminal, though? Anybody can afford one.”

“He must’ve done it for fun. What a jerk.”

“It’s a shame. He looks pretty cool.”

“You know what they say about appearances.”

“Why isn’t he like, suspended or something?”

“I hear the teachers are still discussing his punishment. Maybe he’ll get kicked out?”

Gossip rained down on Ageha as he took his shoes out of the school shoe locker. Tacks lined his shoes, and the locker was filled to the brim with letters telling him to die. It was the start of the second week since Tooru’s sister’s mobile terminal was found in his school bag. It was Airi who told the teachers about it. It was likely Jin who stole it and planted it there.

Part of him thought that he deserved it for failing to protect Jin.

But a much larger part made his teeth grind.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!

Ageha knew this must be how Jin felt, but he did not care.

How could you!? I don’t deserve this!

Akari was a model student who had garnered the affection of her teachers and peers. After having supposedly wronged her, Ageha had become an object of scorn and loathing. Ageha no longer saw Airi and Jin because they were in a different class. He wanted to blame them, hit them, hurt them, and show them how much pain he was suffering, but he knew that would only make it worse. He was already the enemy.

When Ageha entered the classroom that morning, he saw animal excrement smeared all over the top of his desk. He explained to the teacher that it was like that when he arrived, but the people in class refuted his claims and accused him. Logic dictated that he would be the least likely suspect, but the majority was tyrannical. He was reprimanded by the teacher and ordered to take the table to the courtyard garden and clean it with a hose. He did as instructed and left it there to dry for the entire school day in hopes that airing it out would make the smell disappear.

It was extremely embarrassing taking classes while standing up. Everyone in class took turns looking at him and giggling. There were spare desks, but the teacher thought it was good punishment for his misbehavior. He stayed that way until classes ended.

Ageha was currently on his way to get his desk and return it to the classroom. The insults thrown at him lessened after he left the populated school building. He arrived at the courtyard only to be met by Tooru and three of his friends. He had to return the table, so he decided to ignore the group.

“Hey, did you really think I would just let you go after stealing Akari’s stuff?”

“I didn’t do it.”

Ageha moved towards the table. The other three surrounded him.

“You really think I’ll believe that?”

“No, but it’s true.”

“Stop lying! Even your friends are saying it was you.”

“I have no friends.” Ageha’s faint words were ice cold, but only he could hear them. He picked up the table and proceeded to carry it from the courtyard.

Probably ticked off from being ignored, Tooru grabbed Ageha’s shirt from behind and turned him around. Ageha was forced to drop the table. Tooru held Ageha’s collar and threw a fist towards his face.

Ageha raised his left arm to block the punch. It ached from the impact, but he was able to throw a right of his own. It hit Tooru square in the face and caused a nosebleed. Ageha closed in on Tooru, who was backpedaling from the pain, but he was grabbed from behind by one of the other boys.

He did not know how to escape a full nelson. He had never trained in any martial arts. He was weak. He was only slightly taller and larger, so he had always managed to drive off bullies if they were alone or did not want a fight. That was meaningless right now.

He received a more brutal and shameful beating than Jin ever did.

Dirtied and bruised, he went home much later than usual. His father was already home.

“What happened?” asked his father, who was cooking dinner since Ageha was late.

“Some boys beat me up at school.”

“...How pathetic. Learn to protect yourself. The world isn't kind to weak people, so don't be so pitiful.”

Who was the one who told me to practice cooking any time I can!? I could've learned to fight instead!

He did not reply. He was already too exhausted, both mentally and physically. He hid in his room and cried on the bed. Battered as he was, he could not fall asleep. The world was hideously unfair, and he was powerless to do anything about it.

His father was not wrong. It was common sense for people to be able to protect themselves and what they care about. People were free to pursue their goals because they had the means to do so. Teachers believed that, students were taught that, and parents expected that. It was his fault for being incompetent. He was abnormal for wanting fairness. He lamented this until the sun rose.

And he had to go through all of it again.

It ended as abruptly as it started. One day, he unintentionally walked by the arcade on his way home from school. He usually avoided this route since it reminded him of those blissful memories that now only served to claw at his heart. However, drained by the incessant attacks from all fronts, he forgot this consideration. His legs naturally guided him down that familiar path, where he was confronted with Airi and Jin cheerfully flirting near the roadside.

“Ageha...” said Jin, alarm showing on his face.

His face as blank as a white sheet, Ageha rapidly walked towards Jin. He could no longer understand the myriad of emotions assailing him, so he could not express them. He grabbed Jin's collar and screamed in tears.

“Why!? Why!!? Why!???”

Jin looked terrified. He tried to remove Ageha's grip on his shirt, but it was too strong.

“Stop it, you're hurting Jin! Let him go, you monster!” Airi desperately tried to pry Ageha's talons off her partner.

The numerous holes being drilled into Ageha's heart bored through to the core at last.

Monster?

You're calling me a monster?

After what you've done?

After betraying me?

After I helped you?

After I loved you?

Ageha finally despaired.

His fingers lost all strength and released Jin's shirt. The sudden loss of resistance caused the pair to push Ageha backward and out into the street. The driver of an oncoming truck could not react in time. The truck swerved away from the falling boy but did not avoid him completely.

Ageha's right arm was crushed along with his hope in humanity.

I didn't want this to happen!

Airi cried in Jin's arms. When Jin told her that they would get back at Ageha for betraying them, she did not think it would come to this.

Her heart ached every time she saw Ageha beaten up and sullied. He was spat on, cursed, and made a laughingstock. However, it did not take long for her guilt to turn into fear.

How can he endure all that?, she thought back then.

Ageha's treatment was far worse than Jin's or anyone else's. He was mauled by Tooru every day, but he never gave in. She knew that if it were her, she would have already surrendered to her enemies or killed herself. Probably both.

This fear prevented her from following the clues that would have led her to the truth behind Jin's deception. In Jin, she found an ally in the same predicament. She could not bear to be alone. She even accepted his confession despite not having romantic feelings for him. She took the devil's hand instead of reaching out for the monster's.

Several months had passed since Ageha was run over. He returned to school two weeks earlier. He was not angry and even sought reconciliation with the two of them. They happily accepted.

They had finally returned to those days when they could laugh wholeheartedly.

That was what had she thought.

Before her tear-soiled eyes, Ageha and his new right arm crushed Tooru's fist. Tooru wailed in pain and then fainted.

"That much should be enough. You were only used," said Ageha to the unconscious boy.

Three other boys were scattered on the ground. Each one had a limb pointing in the wrong direction.

"You two arrived too early. You weren't supposed to see this." His voice was gentle.

Airi and Jin were hugging each other in terror. Their legs refused to move, forcing them to remain quivering in the same courtyard where fate had played with them constantly.

Ageha leisurely walked towards them. Jin regained his senses faster than Airi. He tried to free himself from Airi's embrace.

Don't leave me here!!! Airi tried to hold him back.

"Let go, you bitch!" Jin frantically tried to hit her so she would let go.

Ageha ran forward and used his right hand to grab Jin's left forearm. He then applied strength to his grip and crumpled it like a soda can. Jin screamed. He tried to break free, but Ageha held him in place with ease.

"I want to feel this properly," said Ageha.

He used his human left hand to pummel Jin's face and torso. Once Jin's legs gave out, he started kicking the boy who lay defenselessly on the ground. He did not attack with his right arm so the attacks were weak, but it also meant that Jin did not faint and could feel each of them. Ageha continued ravaging his best friend without any emotion on his face. Airi watched on in shock, forgetting to breathe. It was as if Ageha had counted the number of hits he took and cashed them all in at Jin's expense.

Once Jin was reduced to a bloody mess, Ageha turned his attention to Airi. This prodded her into lucidity.

“Ageha, please listen! He tricked me! He told me that you liked this girl and that you toyed with me! You have to believe me!” Rivers gushed down her face as she aimed her index finger at Jin’s twitching body.

“I know.”

The short response birthed a sliver of hope inside her.

He knows I was tricked by Jin!

Ageha protected me earlier!

I’m saved!

“You were right,” said the boy as he reached out to her.

“Eh?”

“I am a monster.”

Airi finally despaired.

Chapter 09 : Merenda

“A surprise party?”

“Yes, Ageha-Oniisama. Oneesama’s birthday is coming up soon, so I want to prepare a celebration for her.”

Ageha and Kureha both stood in the spacious kitchen of the Nikaidou manor. Kureha had started a conversation right after the chef had finished cleaning the countertop. The maids once tried to stop Ageha from doing that kind of work, but he insisted, saying that it was a habit of his to keep his workspace spotless.

“Does it need to be a surprise, though?”

Keeping secrets from that imp isn’t the easiest thing to do.

“We have never celebrated her birthday properly before. Either Otousama or Oneesama has always been too busy to do so.” The concerned sister’s face clouded.

“What about yours?” asked Ageha before Kureha got to her point.

“Mine?”

“Didn’t you say they were too busy to celebrate Kai’s birthday? You weren’t as occupied as her, so I was wondering if you found the time to have parties.”

“...I do not deserve that kind of attention. Spending their valuable time on someone like me is unthinkable. I would not be able to forgive myself.”

“Don’t say that. A sister who would go so far as to plan a surprise party for that bossy brat is already too nice in my books.”

“But Otousama said that being nice was a weakness. He often told me that I am weak and that the weak do not deserve recognition.”

Ageha was not unfamiliar with that sentiment. He gave some thought to his reply before responding.

“I don’t disagree with the last part. Not everyone can be strong, and the weak being preyed upon is natural. That’s why so many seek strength, but... it comes at a price.” He looked at his right palm for a moment, then lowered it. “I don’t know how it is for those born with it, but obtaining strength requires many sacrifices. You can lose ideals, people you care about, or even parts of yourself. I think that being able to pay that price is also a type of strength, so maybe it’s indeed innate.”

Kureha listened closely to Ageha’s words. She always looked eager whenever Ageha spoke with her, even when he started becoming preachy. Ageha did not know if Kureha understood what he said, given her youth, but he wanted to be earnest. To him, sugarcoating and oversimplifying were akin to disrespect.

“However, strength comes in different forms. People can even be blind to their own. For example, you are pretty strong from my perspective, Kureha-chan.”

“Not at all! How can that be?”

“It’s your kindness. Your father said it was weakness, but I disagree.” He slightly shook his head. “I don’t know the details, but you grew up in the same house as Kai. That couldn’t have been easy.”

Kureha subtly winced. Ageha noticed and made a sad smile.

“The first thing people cut away when they suffer is kindness,” he said with conviction, his eyes looking downward as if remembering something. “They dispose of their ability to care about others in order to protect themselves. The fact that you still have it proves that you’re strong. Not many have such fortitude.”

That said, culling compassion is also strength. Such polar sisters.

Kureha wore a complicated expression. She seemed to disagree, but Ageha did not want to pry any further. He concluded his lesson with one more piece of advice.

“Be more confident. You’ve earned it.”

In contrast to her earlier opposition, she locked eyes with him and nodded. It seemed she was more susceptible to straight guidance rather than sophistry. She had a determined look, accentuated by the rosy tinge on her cheeks. Ageha was captivated by her lovable expression but caught himself before staring too long and dragged the conversation back on point.

“Anyway, so you want to throw a surprise party?”

“Oh, yes. I want to do something for her. She has been nice to me recently, so I wish to return the favor.”

Does that mean that she wasn’t nice to you before?

“And you want me to help?”

“...I am sorry! I was being too arrogant! I should know my place!” Her volume fluctuated due to her repeated bowing. She then hurriedly turned around and tried to escape.

Ageha quickly placed his hand on her head, but it was not the usual soft touch. He gripped her head with enough force to stop her but not hurt her.

“Why are you running away!?”

“I am sorry! I am sorry! I have no right to ask Ageha-Oniisama for help!”

Where did all that determination from earlier go!?

Although Ageha did complain wordlessly, he knew confidence was not something easily acquired or faked. She had been making such great progress in their short time together that he decided not to worry about it. He turned her around using his hold on her head and then roughly ruffled her silky locks.

“Kids shouldn’t worry about such things! I’ll help you, so stop trying to escape.”

Kureha, who was unable to break free from his grasp, finally relaxed. Her cheeks looked burned. Ageha could not tell if that was from the embarrassment of not being able to escape or because of his offer of assistance.

“So what do you need?” asked Ageha, getting down to business.

“I want to prepare a feast for her and give her a birthday present.”

“I can handle the feast. As for the present, what did you have in mind?”

“I do not know yet. This is my first time giving someone a present so I wanted to browse a bit before choosing.”

Ageha learned another facet of her past; Nothing in it seemed to be anything pleasant. Some solitude was inevitable because she had lost her mother as a newborn, but her remaining family probably made it worse. Despite also having grown up without a mother, Ageha still had other people in his life during his youth. Ageha internally reaffirmed his assertion about her strength.

“I don’t know anything about the preferences of a teenage girl, much less a weird one like her.”

“I was not expecting you to.”

Ageha felt a twinge of pain from the lack of expectation despite being aware that his ignorance was completely normal. Knowing the tastes of little girls could get him placed in a certain dubious category.

Kureha, oblivious of his inner conflict, continued, “I wanted to ask for your company so I can go out to purchase a gift. It is scary to go by myself, and I... do not think that the people in the mansion would want to accompany me.”

“But you thought that I would?”

Kureha looked like she was about to cry, tears beginning to coalesce on her lashes.

“You’d be right,” he said as he flashed a winning smile.

Playing with her like this could become addicting.

“Thank you so much, Ageha-Oniisama!” Her eyes sparkled as she displayed her perfect white teeth.

“I have a day off tomorrow, so can we go then?”

“I am always available.”

“Got it. I guess we’ll have to tell Kai about this trip. I’ll try to catch her before I leave today.”

“She is in the bath. We can ask her once she comes out. She should be about done by now.”

“I see. Did you meet her before coming here?”

“No. It is common sense for a little sister to know where her Oneesama is at any time.” She beamed innocently.

No, it isn't. How is that even possible? I guess the older sister isn't the only weird one.

“Let’s go wait for her then.”

The pair left the kitchen and headed to the mansion baths. They discussed the plan for the surprise party as they strolled through the long corridors. When they turned into the hallway leading to the bath, they saw their target leisurely walking towards them.

“Oh, together as usual.”

“O-O-O-O-Oneesama!!! Why are you walking around like that!?”

“What do you mean? I’m always like this. Bringing clothes to the bath is a pain.”

“A-A-A-A-Ageha-Oniisama, don’t look!!!”

“Wow, you actually made her drop formality,” said Ageha.

“Ha! Praise me more!”

“You have perfect, white skin.”

“What are you doing praising her like it is normal!? Please turn around!” said Kureha.

Kureha tried to turn the much larger man by rotating him by his waist. This proved to be too difficult for her.

“Onesama, please stop drying your hair and cover your body with that towel!”

“No way.”

“...Why!?”

“Because I don’t want to?”

Kaika pressed the fluffy brown bath towel on her damp hair, which sloped down her right shoulder and shrouded the breast below it. The rest of her was in full view. Her almost transparent complexion, untouched by the sun, was smooth like pouring milk and glistened under the hallway lighting. With her cheeks, neck, and shoulders still flushed from the heat, she appeared feverishly delicate despite her dominating aura. She emitted a different appeal with her hair down, as if she had aged by a year or so. Her ribs were faintly visible on her slender frame, which curved smoothly into her thighs. Littered with water droplets, her sylphlike legs were breathtaking. Kaika was an ethereal nymphet epitomized.

“B-B-But..!”

“Relax. It’s not like it’s the first time he’s seen me like this.”

“!!!”

“Why do you look like you just ate a silkworm?”

“I’m not sure what you are thinking, but nothing strange happened, alright?” said the chef, who was cool as a cucumber even after seeing his mistress in all her glory.

“...Really?”

“Yeah, I just bumped into her once while she was prancing around nude like this.”

“I wasn’t prancing! How rude. Can’t I dress how I want in my own house?”

“I personally don’t mind because you look like a child, but aren’t you actually fifteen?”

“I know what you’re trying to say, but my body looks much younger, so isn’t it fine if I behave correspondingly?”

I don’t think twelve-year-olds parade around naked in front of men, either.

Kaika waved a hand as if to present herself. Ageha took the invitation and gave her another look over. His eyes stopped at a certain spot.

“...Out of curiosity-”

“I shave.”

“I see.”

Kureha tilted her head at the conversation but broke out of her trance once she remembered her mission. She gave up on Ageha and decided to work on her older sister instead.

“Onesama, please let me-”

“Kureha.”

A single frosty word made the young girl cower. Ageha knew little of their relationship and decided not to interfere. It was Kaika’s right to wear whatever she wanted, and he himself cared little.

“That’s right, we had some business with you,” said Ageha in an attempt to change the topic.

“We? Interesting. Do you mind if we walk while talking? It’s a little chilly.”

Then wear some damn clothes.

“It won’t take that long. Actually...”

Ageha told Kaika that Kureha wanted to go shop for clothes and had asked him to escort her. He did not intend to ask for permission, thinking it unnecessary. He only wanted to inform Kaika of their activities out of respect for her position as his employer and Kureha’s sister.

So why did it end up like this?

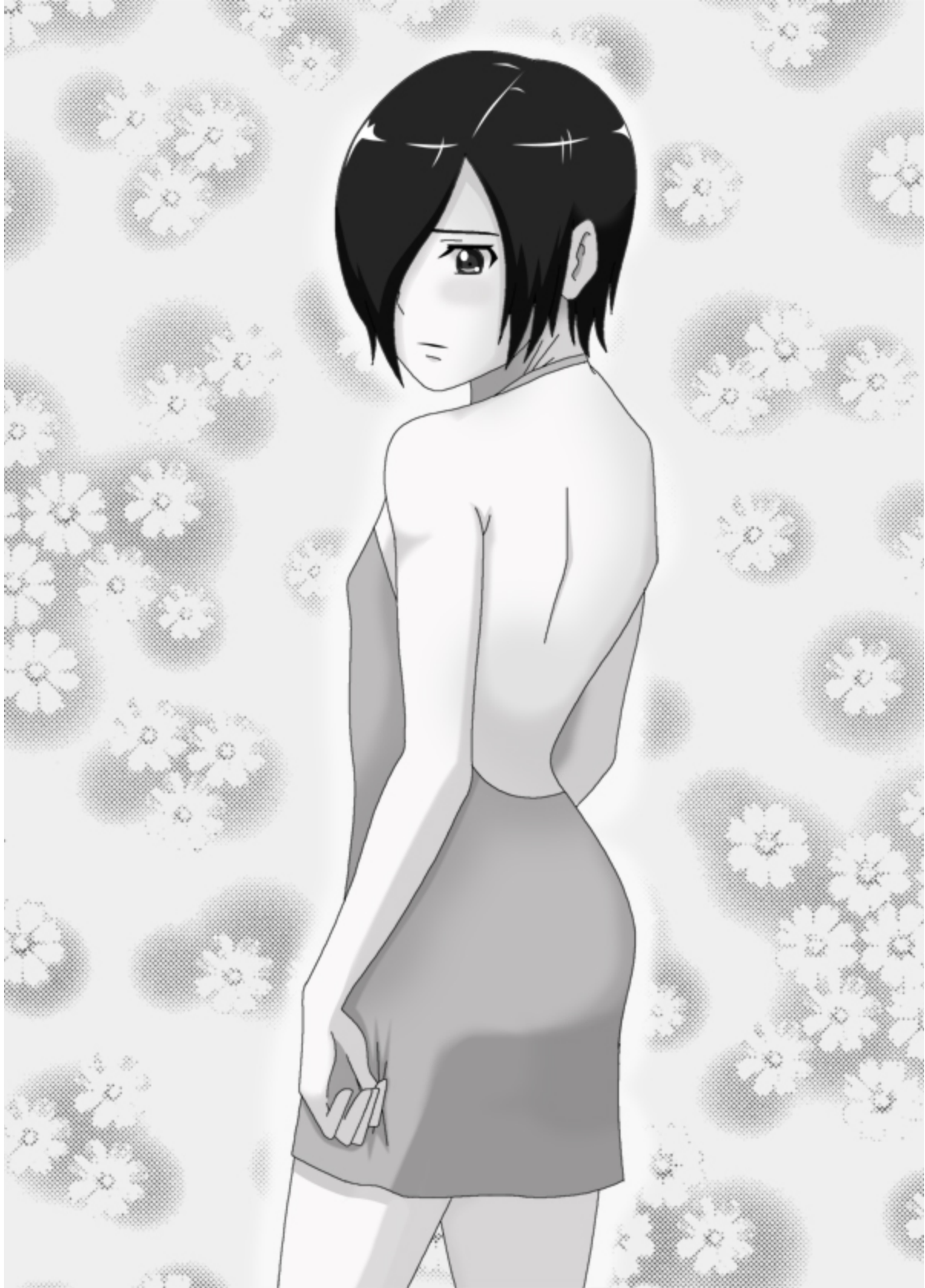
He was walking behind three females in downtown Shinjuku while carrying several bags of clothes. Ageha did not expect Kaika and inevitably her butler to tag along the moment he mentioned the trip with Kureha. She was obviously coming along for entertainment rather than any need for new garments.

“Ojousama, I still think this is not a good idea. We should return to the mansion.”

Kureha jerked after hearing Saya’s request. They had not yet bought Kaika’s present due to their preoccupation with clothes shopping.

“It’ll be fine. We left the mansion in secret and even disguised ourselves,” said Kaika.

“That may be true for you, but the clothes you prepared for me hardly count as a disguise.”



Saya pulled on her yellow one piece dress with a high neckline. Her toned shoulders and back were exposed by the sleeveless and backless frock. Her exquisite curves were showcased by the snugly fitting skirt, which reached midway down her thighs. Due to Saya's formal bearing, the lack of fabric gave an elegant impression rather than a lascivious one. Although her clothes were radically different, her face was the same as usual, unlike Kaika who wore cute red spectacles.

"What are you talking about? It's a fantastic disguise! What do you think, Ageha?"

Ageha moved closer to the rest of his party and looked Saya up and down while walking beside her.

"It's plenty. No one would recognize her."

Saya fell silent with a complicated expression.

"See? The clothes make the girl," said her mistress.

"I think it's the opposite in this case," said the young man without fluster.

"Making moves in front of everyone, how bold."

"It's an honest opinion, proven by how well she handles more masculine outfits."

"I think some credit should go to me for choosing both apparels."

"I find that hard to do considering the raw material you have to work with."

Saya's gait slowed ever so slightly. Ageha questioned if it really happened.

"Why is there such a difference in treatment between me and these two? You dole out compliments to them like free tissues, but you don't recognize my merits at all. There must be something wrong with your head."

"I don't want to hear that from the one who gave me a list of things to praise her for." Ageha pulled out a sheet of paper and hung it in front of his employer. "Look at this, there are over fifty items here. Who would even waste their time coming up with this? It's even handwritten!"

"It's not like it took me any time to write that. I know my gifts like the back of my hand. Good practice for my handwriting, too. Some contacts prefer letters with a personal touch. Look at number thirty-one. It says 'Calligraphy'. By the way, the original was too heavy to carry around so that's the abridged version."

This is abridged!? ...Wait, too heavy!?

“Why is ‘Calligraphy’ even on here? You specifically said to recite these at the start of this outing, so shouldn’t it be limited to things like how you look?”

“I did start writing with that in mind, but my pen just wouldn’t stop. It was like my muse had been unleashed. It practically wrote itself.”

“Don’t talk about this self-praise catalog as if it were some great work of literature.”

“But it is! You just don’t have any taste. Everything there is true, too.”

“How could I even know that? Half of these are things I’ve never seen you do.”

“Then what about the things that you have seen?”

Several line items in the list lauded Kaika’s current wardrobe. Ageha eyed Kaika’s appearance. The beige turtleneck revealed only her pearl white face and hands. Her wavy mane, stuffed into her ashen beret, peeked out from the edges of the hat. Some of the more rebellious strands rested on her red-rimmed glasses. Her plain black pants added a sensible touch to the ensemble. Even when disguised as a bibliophile, her innate loveliness shone through.

Well, they’re accurate.

“Well, they’re accurate,” said Ageha.

It occurred to Ageha that he had never seen Kaika wear anything more than once. This only confirmed his suspicion that she did not need more outfits.

“...Well that was a sudden change in attitude. You just wasted the seventeen comeback lines I had prepared.”

“Like I said, I’m just being honest. You don’t have to force me to read a list. And what’s with that oddly exact number..?”

“Saya, is he always like this?”

“Yes, if memory serves me right.”

Saya and Kureha were sparse with their words throughout the entire excursion. Saya did not speak unless addressed, while Kureha just shyly kept to herself.

"I... I think it is one of his good qualities," said Kureha. Everyone was surprised by her suddenly chiming in, but the conversation continued onward.

"Hmm... I guess that kind of unreserved speech would mesh well with you," said Kaika, switching her view to her sister.

"Thanks, Kureha-chan. You're my only ally when these two Onee-sans bully me."

"I believe you are older than me, Shikimi-sama," said Saya after a cough.

"Not you too. I already have my hands full dealing with Kai's idiosyncrasies. Also, can you stop calling me that? It's too formal."

"I cannot do that. Considering my position as a butler, I must abide by proper honorifics."

"Isn't the butler the highest position for a house employee?"

"You are not employed by the mansion but Kai-Ojousama herself. She also said that you are to be treated as a guest outside of your culinary duties."

"Then at least call be by my first name. I prefer that over my last."

"...I still think that-"

"Do as he wishes. The manner of address should be left to the receiver, not the speaker. They are the ones compelled to listen, after all," said Kaika.

"But..."

"And drop that for me as well for the duration of this trip. We're disguised, so we should play our parts properly. I'm Kaya and she's Kureha, Saya Shikimi's younger sisters. And we're all Ageha-Niisan's cousins." She seemed to be enjoying playing house sans parents.

"...Understood."

"Kureha Shikimi..." mumbled Kureha almost inaudibly.

"I don't remember having such a bossy relative," said Ageha.

"I'm sorry, Ageha-Niisan. Please don't be angry. From now on I will do as Niisan says," said Kaika sweetly while grabbing onto Ageha's shirt hem with two fingers. She skillfully played the timid bookworm.

“Please stop that. You’re too good. It’s disgusting.”

“What do you mean disgusting!?”

“I have to agree.”

“Even you, Saya!?”

“...I hate to say this-” Kureha bowed her head in hesitation.

“Then don’t! What the hell is wrong with you people? My acting was perfect!”

“That’s the problem. If anyone else saw that, they would be completely fooled. But for us who know what you’re really like, it causes nothing but goosebumps.”

The other two nodded at Ageha’s concise explanation. Thinking it required further description, he continued, “A wolf in sheep’s clothing doesn’t even begin to describe it.”

“A lion coaxing a fawn?” asked Saya as she cocked her head in thought.

“...I do not think Ageha-Oniisama is a fawn.”

“Relatively speaking.” Saya peeked at her mistress.

Kureha followed her gaze and said, “Ah...The scales have fallen from my eyes, Saionji-san,” with a nod.

“That’s a little rude to lions, though,” said Ageha.

“Stop teaming up against me!” shouted the stomping fifteen year old.

The teasing trio laughed with differing intensities, proportional to age but due to personality. Kaika looked miffed, but it was evidently an act. Ageha thought she probably enjoyed being on the receiving end on occasion.

The four of them continued their shopping spree. Kaika led them to another boutique and asked Saya to pick out some dresses for Kureha. The stoic woman and the shy young lady formed a rather mute pair and went deeper into the store to browse. Ageha was mentally exhausted from all of the shopping, something he rarely did. He felt lucky his limbs were immune to the same problem. Kaika did not follow the two and instead took a seat beside Ageha on the boyfriend bench typically found in female-oriented stores.

“Matsunaga.”

Ageha’s eyes widened at his employer’s opening line. “...I’m impressed.”

“I make it a point to be learned about those under my care.”

“There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Is that why you didn’t inform me before or even after?”

“That, and I prefer to keep personal and professional matters separate.”

“There’s no merit in doing that, especially when it comes to our partnership.”

“What do you mean?”

“The deal was information and resources, right? That was never restricted to your service to me. You can use it for your *hobbies* as well.”

“That’s very generous of you. It makes me doubt your motivation though. There’s nothing more suspicious than a good deal.”

“Distrustful as ever. The offer isn’t just for your benefit. My assistance should significantly reduce the risk of you getting caught. Your capture would be problematic for me as your employer.”

“Our only relationship, as far as the world knows, is a chef and his client. I doubt there would be any repercussions for you.”

“You misunderstand. I simply don’t want to lose a valuable resource.”

“...I didn’t think you would say that after Akiba.”

“I look forward, never back.” Kaika proudly grinned, her eyes closed.

Ageha accepted Kaika’s reasoning and chose to consider the offer. There was no reason to decide immediately, and he still had misgivings about revealing his morbid personal affairs to anyone, much less his boss.

“I’ll think about it.”

“I guess that’s enough for now.”

A while later, Saya and Kureha returned with an attendant holding several pastel colored dresses. Kureha was already wearing a similar one. It seemed like she intended to wear it for the rest of the trip.

“Did you pick that, Saya?” asked Ageha.

“Yes, Ageha.”

She’s still playing along. How obedient. I guess that applies to me too.

“I’m sure Kureha would look great in anything, but I must say you have good fashion sense.”

Kureha reddened at the customary praise. She gripped the pastel blue skirt of her one piece dress. It had short sleeves and a white ribbon on the chest. The design increased the innocent vibe that she naturally emitted.

“Thanks,” said Saya.

“What’s with this difference in treatment..?” said Kaika, her eyebrows crumpled together.

They purchased the items and left the store. After strolling for a while longer, Ageha noticed a change in Kureha’s behavior. She was probably worried because it was already getting late. She had not yet had a chance to buy a present for her sister.

Ageha walked to her side and whispered, “I’ll try to find a chance to lose those two so we can buy the present, okay?”

Kureha’s darkened expression lit up and she nodded twice in agreement. Ageha was considering his options when he heard a familiar voice calling him.

“Ageha!”

He turned and saw Rin jogging to him while waving her right hand. He raised a hand in response to her greeting.

I didn’t think our family act would actually come in handy.

“What are you doing here? Oh, sorry, I didn’t realize you had company.”

It was an expected question because Rin knew that Ageha was not one to frequent Shinjuku or any other shopping hub. This reminded Ageha how much Rin already knew about him. He made a mental note to avoid handing out further information, lest she stumble into something she could not unsee.

“I was just showing my cousins around the city. They came from Hokkaido and insisted on a tour as soon as they got here.”

“So that’s why you took a day off. Kirishima-san wasn’t pleased, you know. He called me asking where you were. Matsunaga-san still hasn’t called in despite being gone for days, and now we’re suddenly down another chef.”

Ageha heard a faint gasp from Kureha beside him. He did not want her to know that he was skipping work for this errand because she would feel responsible. He had called Sapore this morning to inform them of his absence, but only spoke with Yama. He also did not go into detail about his excuse.

“Hey, you’re out here too.”

“I work the *sala*. It’s the *cucina* that’s in crisis.”

She was right. Sighing in defeat, Ageha retreated by starting introductions.

“Let me introduce you. This is Saya and her sisters, Kaya and Kureha.”

“My name is Saya Shikimi. It is a pleasure to meet your acquaintance.”

“I am Kaya. It is a pleasure.”

“...My name is Kureha... Nice to meet you.”

The three ladies took turns introducing themselves with bows. Rin scanned them and muttered, “Whoa...” before taking the pedestal. “I’m Rin Natsume. It’s nice to meet all of you too!”

“She’s a server at Sapore, the restaurant where I work.”

“You might have to change that to past tense soon,” said Rin.

“Please keep the reason a secret from Kirishima-san. I’ll come up with something more convincing later.”

“You can count on me! I’ll just add this to your tab.”

“I have a tab?”

“You didn’t know? It’s gotten pretty big lately. Maybe I should collect soon.”

“Just so you know, I don’t have much.”

“That’s fine. Treat me to dinner, and we’re square. Still, as expected of Ageha’s family, everyone is so cute...”

“You just haven’t seen them hungry, angry, or worse, both.”

Rin giggled after a moment of imagination. Ageha realized this chance encounter was the perfect opportunity he had been waiting for.

“What are you shopping for?” he asked, executing his scheme.

“Gear and supplies for a hiking trip. My friends invited me to go on one in a few weeks. It’s been a long time since I’ve camped out in the woods, so I need to buy a lot of new stuff.”

“Hiking, huh? Sounds like fun.”

A cute cough from Kaya interrupted the conversation.

“Oh, sorry for keeping you. Are you still going around shopping?” said Rin.

“Actually, we should be heading back soon. It is getting late,” said Saya.

“About that, Saya, I was thinking of accompanying Rin on her errand. Hiking and camping gear are heavy, so I want to help her out. Can you go back without me?”

“Really!? An extra pair of hands would be a great help! I was a little worried if I could buy everything in one trip.”

Saya glanced at Kaika. Upon getting a look of resigned agreement, she said, “Okay. Ageha, should I carry those bags home?”

“No, I’ll bring them over later. This much is nothing even with hiking gear on top.”

“How manly!” Rin tried to poke Ageha with her elbow, but he blocked it with one of the shopping bags.

Ageha found Kureha looking at him in confusion, so he prodded her with his gaze. Kureha’s pink lips formed a circle when she figured out what he was thinking.

“...Saya-Oneesan, can I stay with Ageha-Oniisan? I want to look around a little more,” said Kureha. She was quivering in fear of Kaika’s reaction.

“But Kureha-” Saya was halted by a tug on the skirt from Kaika. Saya nodded with understanding. “I leave Kureha to you, Ageha. Please be safe. We’ll be going now.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be back before you know it.”

The party split up after the short farewells. Ageha and Kureha formed a trio with Rin, and the two groups headed in different directions. The two conspirators exchanged smiles due to the success of their makeshift plan. Both Kaika and Saya had dined at Sapore before. Ageha surmised that Kaika would not risk bringing attention to themselves by not giving permission. Kaika had to retreat for the day due to Rin’s presence.

“There’s something about those two...” said Rin.

She recognized them?

“I wonder why Saya-san looked to Kaya-chan when you asked them to go ahead? It was almost like she was asking about what to do.”

“Saya probably wanted to make sure Kaya-chan was okay with it. That girl can be a bit spoiled.”

“Really? She didn’t look like it at all. She seemed pretty reserved. She looked so cute in those glasses!”

Ageha and Kureha locked eyes once again and then burst into laughter.

“””Surprise!”””

I knew it.

“””Happy Birthday!””” shouted the three people in the dining room right after Kaika’s entrance.

Kaika noticed early on that Kureha was keeping something from her. It was even easier to discern that it involved Ageha and later on Saya, who was likely obliged to participate to avoid hurting Kureha’s feelings.

Kaika looked at her butler. Saya pleaded to Kaika with her eyes, begging her to play along. Kaika was seething at the fact that she had more than enough reason to forgive all of them. None of this was perceivable on her face.

She could have asked properly earlier. It seems a promise with my younger sister holds value to her.

“I was wondering what all of you were doing in secret. To think it was for my birthday. I completely forgot about it.” Kaika obviously faked a wry smile, as if to conceal her embarrassment. It was an act on top of an act.

She did not forget about her birthday. She could not. She had too strong of an emotion associated with it for such a thing to be possible. It was a feeling completely opposite of what would normally be expected for such a day.

“Ageha-Oniisama prepared a feast for you. I hope you like it!”

“Saya helped me come up with the menu. She said that you’re accustomed to fine dining, so I opted to make something more typical of a normal Japanese household. I say Japanese, but half of it is actually western food. Well, it is what it is.”

‘Saya’, huh. It seems playing house had an effect.

The table was filled with roasted chicken, *spaghetti naporitan*, potato salad, *tonkatsu*, hamburger steak, and platters of colorful *uramaki*. Kaika had seen or read of them before but had not tried them. They were dishes that would never appear on the Nikaidou menu. At the head of the table, Kaika’s usual seat, was a clumsily decorated strawberry shortcake.

Kureha was probably responsible for that.

“Kureha and Saya decorated the cake.”

That was unexpected. I’ll have to update my info about Saya’s skill set. It’s funny how quickly Ageha abandoned them to preserve his image.

“Please take a seat,” said Saya as she pulled out Kaika’s chair. Kaika caught a faint “Thank you,” from her butler as she seated herself.

Saya knew how much Kaika loathed her birthday. They never celebrated it because Kaika, trampling on her father’s desire to celebrate his masterpiece annually, had expressly told her that she did not want to.

“O-Onesama.”

“What is it?”

“Before we begin, I want to give you a present. It is not much, so feel free to throw it away if you do not like it, but I... I would be really happy if you keep... if you use it.”

Kureha held out both her hands with her eyes squeezed shut. A small wrapped box rested atop her palms. The birthday girl took the box, opened it, and glared at the contents.

What is this girl thinking..?

Inside were two blood-red, shell-shaped hair ties.

“Did you choose these?” asked Kaika, her voice exposing some frigidness.

“Yes! But Ageha-Oniisama also said that it was a good choice because the color matched your current ribbon, and the shape matched your preferred nickname.”

“...Thank you.”

It was an awkward expression of gratitude and a rare failure in the facade. Even Kaika could not maintain perfection in certain situations, this being an example.

Kaika despised her birthday because it was an indelible reminder of her inability to control her fate. It was something that she never had the ability or chance to decide for herself. Receiving a birthday gift that referenced her name, another sign of destiny toying with her, appalled her.

“Okay then, let’s eat!” It was the chef who dispelled the odd atmosphere.

“Please wait! I also have a gift for Ageha-Oniisama.”

“What?”

“It is for helping me prepare all of this and for choosing the gift with me.”

“That was-”

“Please accept it!” She repeated her earlier action with a smaller box.

“Thanks, Kureha-chan.” He took the box. “Can I open it?”

“O-Of course.”

A silver ring embellished with engraved lines stood in the center of the opened ring case. Ageha took it out and wore it on his left ring finger. Seeing this, Kureha blushed furiously, the red even reaching her nape.

“Not bad. I don’t really wear jewelry, but this will be the exception. Why a ring though?”

“It was Rin-san who suggested it. She said that it would add a bit of flair to- Oh, please forget what I said! Rin-san had nothing to do with it!”

That woman... Being a cameriera, she knew that chefs cannot wear rings in the cucina. She failed to consider Kureha’s personality when she asked her to keep it a secret, though.

“Got it. I didn’t hear anything.” He tousled Kureha’s hair with his right hand.

How considerate. He wears the ring on his left hand because he does that with the other.

“Why does it feel like I’m not even the star of my own birthday party? I’m the main character here...”

“Would that not be Ageha-sama if we factor in the male to female ratio?”

It was a comment that triggered another shootout of bickering, teasing, and loud nonsense. Kaika sighed as she resigned herself to taking part in another farce. She took a bite of the *tonkatsu* and unconsciously smiled. It was scrumptious. Excellent food always put dimples on her face.

If everything were this simple...

Life wouldn’t be worth living.

Chapter 10: Salt and Pepper

“I have always wondered. Why do you not use guns, Ageha-sama?”

“Are you seriously going to keep calling me that even during an operation?”

“How should I address you then?” asked Saya as she turned the steering wheel.

With streetlights illuminating the road ahead, they sped along the highway. They were riding a non-descript gray car with a fake license plate specially prepared for what they intended to do tonight.

“...Since I’m wearing all black, how about ‘Kuro?’ Hmm, but that sounds like a cat name... What about ‘Hei?’ It’s Chinese for black.”

“I do not think that is a good idea for various reasons.”

“Really? Too childish, I guess. Just Ageha then.”

“Would that not reveal your identity if the enemy hears it?”

“Well, it’s just my given name, and they’ll probably think it’s an alias anyway.”

“But still... I have an idea. I shall give you a code name that we can use.”

Ageha raised an eyebrow at the suggestion but did not decline. Saya thought silently for a while. After making another turn on the road she said,

“How about ‘Kokku?’”

“What.”

“I thought about something that represents both of your identities, a chef and a black clad killer. So ‘a cook’ (kokku) and ‘black’ (koku).

Ageha was flabbergasted, and it showed on his face. He pondered if she realized that ‘kokku’ also meant ‘cock’ in English.

“Rejected. And I don’t need puns in my name.”

“...I had confidence in it...” whispered Saya with a disappointed look.

Saya had become more expressive recently. Ageha wondered if she was actually like this by nature when unguarded or if she was only this unreserved with him. He immediately erased the latter possibility from his mind.

Recovering from her previous failure, Saya gave another name candidate.

“How about ‘Chou?’”

“Butterfly?”

My name does mean swallowtail butterfly.

“Also the second word of kitchen knife (houchou).”

Is she an old man inside..?

“Pun aside, I can work with that. It’s short and easy to say.”

“Understood. I shall address you like so during missions.”

“It sounds like your calling me chief (Chou), though.”

“I had not thought of that! A good one, Chou!”

I’m regretting this whole code name business already.

“What should my code name be then?” asked Saya, her head tilted.

“You’re asking *me*?”

“It is only fair.”

Ugh.

Ageha crossed his arms and closed his eyes as he cycled through possible code names for the versatile butler.

“Sebas- okay, okay, I’m sorry. I’ll think about it properly.”

Ageha instantly pulled back his suggestion when he saw Saya’s rare scowl.

I guess her becoming more expressive isn’t all good.

The car sped along the highway as Ageha mentally struggled to come up with a name that would satisfy his partner for the night.

“How about ‘Mikazuki’?”

“Crescent moon?”

“Yeah, but we need to keep it short, so ‘Tsuki’.”

“Why did you pick that?”

“I’ve always thought that your face resembled a crescent moon because of your hairstyle.”

“Choosing a name because of my hairstyle is a little-”

“It isn’t the hairstyle but what it highlights that caught my eye. Well, I can pick another one if you don’t like it.”

“...Tsuki is fine.”

Not making eye contact with her lone passenger, Saya stared straight at the road ahead.

“Back on topic, why do you not use guns, Chou?”

After I tried so hard to avoid the topic..!

“You really like that nickname, don’t you?”

“It is for practice. And please answer the question, if not for my idle curiosity, for future strategic considerations.”

Cornered, Ageha surrendered and gave his explanation.

“I suck at shooting.” He breathed out a long sigh.

“Maybe you just lack practice?”

“I tried, believe me. I’ve always been clumsy, especially with my hands.”

“Your exquisite dishes beg to differ.”

Ageha smiled at the offhand compliment but did not relent.

“I’ve cooked all my life, so I ended up good at it. It isn’t natural talent. The effort is what I take pride in.”

“Is your martial ability like that as well?”

Ageha analyzed if Saya’s question was about his combat training or killing experience. He concluded it was both.

“You can say that.”

I had a very odd teacher though.

“Speaking of idle curiosity, why do you always wear a butler outfit? I think this is only the second time I’ve seen you wear anything different.”

Saya fidgeted a little as Ageha eyed her current attire. She wore skin tight black material all around her body. The torso area had thicker material but still brandished her delicate curves. Her athletic yet feminine shoulders were emphasized by the fabric stitching. Having the captivating contours of a female gymnast, her legs looked lithe despite being made of metal.

“That is Kai-Ojousama’s preference. I personally do not mind what uniform I wear when on duty.”

“She has good taste in food and fashion. The butler uniform fits you perfectly.”

“...Thank you.”

Her deadpan expression did not falter, but the pitch of her voice was minutely higher.

“Your minimal chest girth gives it a really dignified look. Why are you grabbing my hair!? That’s dangerous! You’re driving!”

Saya still bore an expressionless look while facing the road. Unmoving, her left hand was coiled into Ageha’s black hair.

“Excuse me.”

Her left hand slowly returned to the steering wheel. Saya nonchalantly continued to drive as if nothing happened. Ageha decided to forget the bizarre robotic outburst and changed the topic.

“I still don’t understand why an assassin was sent on a thieving mission,” he grumbled, faking annoyance to alleviate the heavy atmosphere.

“To put it bluntly, we need the muscle.”

“That *is* blunt. Are you angry?”

“No, why would I be?” she said flatly as if reading off a script.

“Anyway, why are we stealing a painting from a museum? Kai refused to tell me the true objective of this plan.”

“She did not divulge it to me either, but she must have something in mind. It must be important if she ordered me away from her side.”

Kai did say the painting was absolutely essential, which is why I agreed to this in the first place.

He almost refused to take part in this mission because it was not part of his duties, but his failure in Akihabara made him reconsider. He had not provided any significant service to Kaika outside of his cooking but had still received monetary and cybernetic compensation for their partnership. A little overtime was not an unreasonable demand from his generous employer.

“Aren’t you worried, leaving her alone in that mansion?”

“We left covertly, so the enemies should not be aware that she is unguarded right now. While I say unguarded, we still have the other bodyguards stationed throughout the mansion.”

“I wouldn’t put too much trust in those guys.”

“Coming from you, that is really convincing.” Recovering her mood, she giggled. “But we have no choice. We need at least two people with sufficient capability to fight our way out without damaging the painting.”

“Is there really no way to get it out without being detected?”

“It’s impossible to disable the alarm system from outside the security room. Moreover, the painting in question has special security measures since it is the most valuable piece in the museum. The best we could manage was to prepare a method of entry. As we discussed in the briefing, we are going to sneak in, just grab it, and run.”

“That’s not exactly the most elegant way to do it.”

“And normally impossible because of the Arax units that are stationed in the museum, not to mention the patrolling human guards. That is why you are here.”

“The muscle.” He frowned.

“Yes.” She smiled.

After several minutes of driving down narrow roads sandwiched by foliage, the two arrived at their destination. They parked the car near the museum’s main entrance. It was parked facing the exit to enable a quick escape.

They donned cloth masks, which left the mouth uncovered for easier communication, and exited the vehicle. After quickly traversing the lot, they reached the rear entrance, which had an electronic security lock. Saya opened the lock’s casing and plugged in a data stick, which she produced from her suit.

“Why does a security lock have a data socket? Isn’t that a huge security risk?”

“It is there to ensure that the doors can still be opened even if the digital panel is broken. A safety override, if you will. Only the appropriate security key can open it.

“Which we conveniently have.”

“This is a copy that we managed to get by bribing one of the museum’s greedier security personnel.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised.”

With a beep, the door unlocked. Ageha and Saya silently entered the building.

“Over here,” whispered Saya, her finger pointing towards an air vent on the ceiling.

The museum display floors had numerous safety measures. According to Kaika’s plan, the best route was through the vents. They were supposed to travel in the vents until they were close to the painting. Then they would drop down, procure the item, and escape.

Imitating a ballet lift, Ageha boosted Saya up, her feet resting on his hands. Saya removed the vent cover and tossed it to Ageha before entering. She then dropped a synthetic rope for him. He climbed up, entered the vent, and clicked the cover back in place before crawling onwards.

The vent cover design was included in their investigation. They also had the map of the museum, including the ventilation system, on their portable terminals. They had to exit the vents in certain sections to move from one elevation to another. The stairs had minimal security, so this was done with ease.

They repeated this process until they reached the third floor vents, which led directly to the painting. These vents were narrower than the previous ones.

Did they consider entry through the vents as well?

Ageha could not turn inside the vent, so he had to give up on replacing the cover. After several minutes of crawling inside the shaft, they reached the end of the vent. Saya looked down through the last grate.

“It is down there,” she whispered.

Ageha made an unseen nod. He expected Saya to open the grate like before, but it was taking too long. He tapped her shoe to check on things. He noticed that Saya sent a message to his terminal.

“The grate is welded to the shaft. This is likely another special security measure for this room. I cannot open it,” it read.

Ageha realized what was required of him, so he slowly crawled past Saya’s legs. The vents were narrow enough to prevent turning but wide enough to allow him to crawl past Saya and destroy the grate with his hands.

But it was not wide enough for that to be done smoothly.

Saya placed her back flat on the right side of the vent to maximize space. Ageha inched forward in a similar position on the opposite side, but his hands inevitably brushed against Saya’s thighs due to the lack of space.

“Chou, stop~” said Saya in an amorous voice.

What the hell is she saying..?

Ageha understood that ARMS tactile sensitivity was not much different from human flesh excepting the incredibly high pain thresholds that were designed to match the alloy durability. However, he had hardly touched her.

Isn't she too sensitive?

Ageha opted to quickly end the ordeal by hurrying his crawl. Unfortunately or fortunately, this caused his forearm to graze Saya’s belly.

“Mhmm~”

Saya reflexively bended forward from the tickling sensation caused by Ageha’s touch and unavoidably pressed her modest breast against his face. Though petite, the mounds did exist, and a tender warmth enveloped his cheeks. Ageha has never been in such close proximity to Saya before. The fruity fragrance caused him to pause his slither. Just when he was about to give into the temptation and move his head side to side, his head was pulled back by the hair. He tilted his neck upward and saw a stare that made even absolute zero feel cozy.

Ageha smiled in return and mouthed the words, “Thank you.”

He knew that Saya was very professional. She would not do anything to endanger the mission at this point. At least, he hoped.

Saya sighed and released her arctic glare. She then tucked her arms in front of her chest. This made the space for Ageha to crawl through smaller, but it protected her from further embarrassment.

Ageha reached the grate and carefully tore it off. It was going to be a race against time once they descended. They would need to collect the painting, run through the museum, remove any obstacles, and escape using the car before they were surrounded by security.

Ageha held out three fingers and counted down one by one.

Two.

One.

The torn grate fell from the vent. Ageha dove into the opening head first and then arched his body, flipping to land on his feet. The grate hit the floor just moments before he landed. The room immediately flooded with light and blazing sirens. Without pausing, Ageha rushed towards the painting and smashed the reinforced glass with his hand. He removed it from the mount and tossed it to Saya, who had just landed.

“Be careful!”

“I knew you would catch it, Tsuki!”

Saya formed a wry smile. Ageha was unsure whether she smiled due to his cockiness or his use of her code name, but he dropped that thought and prioritized escape.

They ran following the shortest course to the car. Nothing blocked their way as they cleared the third floor hallway and reached the stairs. Without slowing, they both leapt, skipping all the steps, and landed in a crouch. They continued running along another hallway towards the stairwell to the ground floor.

“Now that I think about it, is it not proper manners for the gentleman to carry the luggage?”

“Only when the gentleman isn’t expected to do the real heavy lifting.”

As if on cue, an Arax met them in the large display hall they just set foot in. Described in minimalist terms, it was a robotic spider about the size of a van. It was painted blue, likely because it was part of a security detail.

Saya signaled to Ageha with her eyes.

Ageha sped up in response to Saya's soundless request. He leaned forward and bolted towards the enemy. The Arax raised both of its front legs, electricity dancing at their tips. The first leg came hurtling down towards Ageha. He kicked off the ground to propel himself to the Arax's left side. After dodging the first blow, he thrust his left hand into the joint of a leg. By digging his fingers in and pulling out the wiring, he caused the leg's movement to cease. He repeated this with his right hand on another leg before the Arax could even turn.

The Arax still kept its balance even with the middle legs limp on its left side, but its stability was quickly broken by Saya, who launched a spinning side kick at the rear left leg. The metal spider toppled over and crashed to the ground.

"I thought you wanted to be careful with the package."

"It is your fault for taking too long."

"Since when is five seconds too long?"

"Since I was able to put down the package and deliver the finishing blow."

After Saya picked up the painting, they sprinted to the next hallway, leaving the damaged Arax behind. Upon reaching the stairwell to the ground floor, they saw two more Arax units waiting for them in the lobby. Guards were also steadily pouring into the lobby.

"You handle the small fry," said Ageha.

Without replying, Saya drew her pistol with her free hand and shot a guard in the face.

From this distance with one hand...

Ageha wanted to curse his own ineptitude, but he had more important things to do. He needed to eliminate the two Arax units while preventing them from targeting Saya, who literally had her hands full, before more reinforcements could arrive.

Ageha jumped down the stairs and landed between the two spiders. Both reacted like the first one, raising their taser legs to strike. Ageha focused his attention on the Arax to his left because it attacked first. Instead of dodging the leg, he parried it by expertly punching it to the side. Using the rotational momentum, he hurled a spinning backhand blow with his other hand. His alloy fist collided with the Arax's sensor and cracked its protective casing.

Ageha backflipped to avoid the second Arax's leg. He crouched low as he landed and dashed back in. Targeting two legs of the second Arax consecutively, he performed a roundhouse followed by a turning long kick combo. His attacks hit and destroyed the robot's limbs.

The Arax counterattacked by swinging one of its right legs underneath its frame and thrusting it directly at his chest. Ageha, still recovering from his kick motion, could not evade and was forced to catch it with his hands as he stomped his right foot into the stone flooring. By rooting himself to the ground, he managed to defend against the attack without being blown back. Digging his fingers into the metal, he twisted the spider leg and tore it off.

The other Arax appeared to be unable to attack because Ageha was too close to a friendly unit. Taking this chance, Ageha spun once and threw the severed leg at the other Arax. The leg pierced the Arax's already damaged sensor and broke it completely.

The closer Arax managed to create some distance during this period to better position itself for an attack. However, the Arax with the broken sensor approached and attacked it. Ageha realized that the Arax must have mistaken its ally for an enemy. He used this chance to check on Saya's condition. A gunfight was ongoing. Saya was taking refuge behind the stairwell. Several guards had already been shot to death.

How dependable. Looks like I can focus on the task at hand.

While the two robots were busy with each other, Ageha focused all his leg power and jumped vertically. He almost reached the ceiling of the lobby, which was two stories high. From that position, he saw Saya close in on the two remaining guards while they reloaded.

She's probably out of bullets.

Sliding and horizontally rotating her body with her right leg extended, she swept the two guards off their feet. She was already rising as she completed her rotation and raised her right leg to gather potential energy for an axe kick.

Ageha did not need to watch further to know the result. He aimed his sight at the blind Arax as he dove towards it. A second before he reached the robot, he curled his body into a ball, spun forward two cycles, and then extended his right leg. The gravity-powered, diving axe kick slammed into the Arax's frame. The impact smashed the armor open, causing fragile parts to spew all over the floor.

Ageha felt the impact rattle his internal organs and brain. Most of the force was absorbed by his cybernetic lower body, but what did get through was still significant. The urge to vomit welled up, but he weathered it. He was used to this kind of beating. Using ARMS like he did had such a cost, and he paid it every time it was for sale.

He leaned back and laid flat to avoid a leg swipe. The remaining Arax had switched from non-lethal attacks to simply clobbering him to death. Rolling on the ground, he escaped from a barrage of leg stabs that poked holes in the floor. He seized the attacking limb, which missed him by a hair's breadth. The Arax reacted by raising its leg, which carried Ageha into

the air. Using the momentum, he pushed off the leg and flung himself on top of the Arax, where the enemy's legs could not reach. As if he had mounted an enemy fighter, he clasped his hands together and hammered down incessantly until the armor cracked open. With the delicate machinery exposed, he stabbed his hand inside like a knife and ripped out whatever his fingers could grasp. The Arax lost power and lowered to the floor.

"Too slow again?" asked Ageha as he stood up from the wreckage.

Saya was looking at him with her mouth agape. She quickly pressed her lips together once she saw Ageha look at her.

"...No, people do not normally survive fighting two Arax units barehanded. I was hurrying to finish on my end so I could aid you, but it appears to have been a needless worry."

"You make it sound like I'm not a person," he said with a wry smile.

"It was a compliment, but I am sure you know that." She smiled in return.

Saya recovered the painting and exited the building with Ageha. Gunshots rang out as they ran towards their escape vehicle. They turned to the source and saw a guard with a rifle trained on them. Ageha realized how unfavorable the situation was. They were on open ground. Saya was out of ammo. Bullets could not be dodged. Ageha knew that running around would not significantly lessen the probability of being hit, so he decided to bet on their best chance of survival.

He placed himself in between the shooter and Saya. Taking a peek-a-boo boxing stance, he covered his face with his fists. Saya instantly understood his intention and did not leave his back. The shooter emptied his rifle into Ageha, who flinched each time a bullet hit him.

Saya dropped the package, slipped by Ageha, and darted to the reloading guard. She leapt and kicked the man's chest with more force than she used against the Arax. The guard was blasted backward and crashed into a wall. Saya looked back at Ageha and pursed her lips. Ageha was on his knees and clutching his left rib area.

At the exact same spot where Rin elbowed me. What luck.

Saya assisted Ageha into the car and drove away from the museum. The only thing left was a clean escape. Saya stopped the car on the shoulder of the highway after making sure that they had not been tailed.

"We have to stop the bleeding."

“Heh, talk about gambles not paying off. Is Kai my jinx or something?”

Saya helped Ageha out of the car and rested his back on the closed rear car door. She used Ageha’s knife and sliced away the fabric on her left leg.

“I will use this as a makeshift bandage.”

“I would be ecstatic if those were real.” He glanced at Saya’s bare leg.

“I will not lend them to you if you keep saying things like that.”

“Do you mean a lap pillow?”

“What else?”

“I’ll pass on a pillow that’s harder than my skull. An arm pillow would be welcome though.”

Saya saw the amount of blood leaking out of Ageha as she bandaged him.

This looks bad. He does not have much blood to spare in the first place.

“I will think about it.”

“Don’t make a face like that.”

“What face? It is the same as usual.”

“Exactly. Can’t you show a little more concern at a time like this?” He laughed weakly.

Joking in this situation... Is he coping with the fear or just fearless?

Something urged Saya to believe the latter. He was probably trying to calm her down. Her fingers had been trembling while treating his wound. The human guards were her responsibility because they did not fit into Ageha’s criteria. This could have been avoided if she had at least one more bullet in her handgun. She was plagued by the consequence of her failures.

They reentered the car after the first aid. Not caring about the possibility of being tagged by traffic police, Saya floored it.

“...Why did you do that?” asked Saya.

“It wasn’t for you, if that’s what you’re asking. You were holding the package. I had no choice.”

“Even so, you did not have to use yourself as a shield... Why do you try to shoulder so much by yourself?”

Ageha faced Saya, the corners of his mouth drooped. “...I don’t believe in depending on others. I tried that once, and it didn’t work out so well. All I can trust are these.” He opened and closed his hand.

Saya remained silent and gave the unusually talkative Ageha a chance to continue.

“I was part of an ARMS experiment when I was a kid.”

Saya knew this story. It was included in his profile, which she had studied a while ago.

“I lost my right arm in an accident. My father wanted me to become a chef, his successor, so badly that he made a deal with NGC to use me for an ARMS experiment. It was a godsend. Let’s just say that my new arm *enabled* me. It’s the reason for the body I have now.”

“...I never had that choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was also involved in an experiment, but it was not voluntary. My family was very poor. I know how unusual that is in this age, but my parents both loved gambling. We had enough for food and the like, but one day I was diagnosed with peripheral artery disease. My legs degraded rapidly and were eventually amputated.” She tightened her grip on the steering wheel. “My parents saw me as nothing but baggage since then. I was not surprised when they decided to sell me off to NGC as an experimental subject.”

Ageha’s face looked more pained than it did right after he was shot. Saya, seeing this reaction, could not help but show a sad smile. She knew that Ageha was not pitying her. He was probably reminded of his own share of betrayals.

“I had leg and hip ARMS installed on me. I was with other teenagers. We were told that adolescent subjects were preferred because they healed and adapted faster. We performed various activities to gather data from the cybernetic parts. We were treated well, better than at my home at least. The lack of freedom was not that noticeable since I never had much of it anyway.”

Reminiscing a fond memory, Saya’s stern expression gave way to a much gentler one. “That ended after Kai-Ojousama toured the facility with her father on one of their educational field trips. She asked her father to hire me as her aide after one look.”

“Love at first sight?”

“For her at least. I did not know how to feel at first. After I moved to the mansion, I underwent an educational regimen similar to Ojousama’s, though less intensive to make room for combat training. That was hell, for a time.”

“Did you try to escape?”

“I intended to, but I was always with Ojousama so I could not find a chance. We were both under strict surveillance.”

“You could have killed her then escaped in the confusion.” Ageha, smirking, was clearly joking.

“I tried to, several times. I almost succeeded each time.”

Ageha turned his head to Saya, his eyes wide open.

“Why did you fail?”

Saya wordlessly opened and closed her mouth like a fish several times. After overcoming her hesitation, she confessed.

“...She was too cute.”

“What.”

“I tried strangling her the first time, but when I saw her adorable face, I lost my resolve. That happened about three times. That level of charm must be some sort of cheat.” The butler’s cheeks were rosy.

Ageha broke into laughter.

How can he laugh like that with a hole on his side? Saya admired Ageha’s physical and mental fortitude. At the same time, it frightened her.

“I’m amazed she didn’t get rid of you after the first attempt.”

“Me too.”

“Judging from results alone, she made the right decision though.”

I wonder if he is aware of what he is doing when he says things like this...

Saya sighed, not knowing how to take Ageha's wanted and veiled compliments.

"Did you ever... ask Kai why she chose you?" asked the wounded warrior. His speech was fragmented and lacking vitality.

"I did."

"...And?"

Why do I have to answer these questions..!?

Saya wanted to preserve her pride, but that same pride prevented her from declining a request from someone who had been injured for her sake, be it his intention or not.

"...She said she wanted a cute... boy butler."

Saya felt Ageha's gaze on her chest. Her left hand unconsciously grabbed him by his hair, but the expected yelp from the action was not heard. She peeked to her left and saw that Ageha's eyes were shut. She could tell he was breathing, so she knew he was only asleep. This did not change the fact that every second counted if he was to be saved. She released her viselike grip on his thick, ruffled locks and gently caressed his hair, as if petting a cat.

"You can look forward to your arm pillow when you wake up."

Chapter 11: Defrost

Ageha stared at the light on the ceiling of his hospital room. He had just finished going through several examinations. He clenched his right hand several times. He could still feel the sensation of warping and snapping bones. It did not evoke any disgust or joy in him but merely satisfied his curiosity, like when he found out what dolphin skin felt like during a visit to an aquarium before.

"I didn't sign up for this!" yelled his father.

"Shikimi-san, please calm down," said Ageha's doctor, who wore the typical white coat.

"How can I be calm!? My son seriously injured six students! With that thing you attached!"

"Let me remind you that you were the one who asked us to help your son."

“Yes, I did. But this doesn’t count as help, does it!”

Ageha listened in on the conversation. He had never heard his father sound so angry. He had seen many unknown sides of his father since he lost his arm. He did not know if his father’s change was due to guilt from having been unable to protect him or anguish from potentially losing the successor to his culinary heritage.

“You have to understand that this is an unprecedented and unpredictable situation for us as well. The prototype cybernetic limbs are designed to induce pain when the user exceeds normal levels of exertion. Using force this far beyond human capability should have produced enough pain for the user to faint. It is not easy to overcome the limiters in the first place. You have to will the limb to move beyond normal operating parameters. It is impossible to misuse by accident.”

“I’ve heard those excuses! Why did this happen then?”

“After conducting several tests, I have concluded that your son has an incredibly high pain threshold and tolerance. This must have allowed him to bypass the limiter.”

“Don’t blame my son for this! You were the ones who built something so dangerous.”

“The strength that the cybernetic arm can exert is inherent in its design. It works much like human musculature, only with lightweight alloy fibers instead of protein. The disparity between the durability of the two materials is irrevocable. We can only prevent abuse by adding limiters, like the one I mentioned earlier.”

“Your limiters are defective. How else can you explain what happened?”

“Like I was saying, Ageha is special. This has never happened with any of the prototype test subjects before. In fact, we would like to keep Ageha under close observation and maybe conduct some more tests-”

“Who in their right mind would leave him to you?”

“We are not asking for your assistance without compensation.”

“Nothing you could possibly offer-”

“Your son will need maintenance for his right arm. Also, he is in puberty and will grow quickly, so it will need to be replaced periodically.”

Ageha’s father could not argue when the facts were cruelly presented.

“Three years,” said the doctor, who was calm throughout the entire dialog, as if he had expected this outcome.

“What?”

“Let us get research data from him for three years. He will live a normal life. We just need him to come by for examinations weekly. We want the data from his peculiar case in order to prevent similar incidents in the future. In exchange, aside from servicing his arm, we will have all the charges filed against him due to the incident dropped.”

Fear surfaced on his father’s face. Ageha understood why because he also just now grasped how frightening a group they were dealing with.

“You can do that..?”

“It is within our power, yes.”

Ageha’s father took a deep breath and feebly sat on the chair. He looked down and rubbed his forehead, his elbows resting on his knees.

“I will do it.”

The reply came from an unexpected source. The two men looked at Ageha.

“What did you say?” asked his father.

“I want to do it.”

“Ageha, you don’t understand. These men are dangerous.”

“I understand. But this is the only way. I... don’t want to lose this.” He gripped his right arm with his left hand.

Ageha’s father could not say anything.

“I will take that as an affirmative answer,” said the doctor curtly.

“Wait, I-”

“Please, Father.”

Ageha’s father had rarely denied his requests since the accident. Even after Ageha attacked his fellow students, his father never blamed him. As the accident was investigated, he found

out what kind of treatment Ageha had been put through. He probably thought that they deserved it.

“...I understand. Kanou-sensei, we will agree to your proposal.” The father locked eyes with the doctor. “But please understand that if I see any untoward actions on your side that could endanger my son, the deal is off. Also, you must keep to the time limit.”

“Of course. We will not have anything over you after three years anyway. Cybernetic limbs, propelled by Ageha’s cooperation, should be on the market by then.”

The doctor stretched his hand out, but Ageha’s father ignored it. To his father, this was probably not an agreement between gentlemen but a coercion. To the boy who had already tasted power, it was the optimal outcome.

“How are you feeling?”

“Nothing unusual, Kanou-sensei,” said Ageha.

“It’s a bit early, but you seem to have hit the end of your growth spurt, so this should be the final replacement.”

“Yeah, I started growing early.”

“You’re plenty tall. You were already a big kid when I first operated on you. I didn’t expect I would be looking up when we talk in just three years.”

Kanou checked the shoulder connection of the ARMS he had installed on Ageha. This was their final meeting, so he wanted to make sure there were no errors.

“It looks like there are no problems.”

Kanou Gen had a good relationship with his experimental subject. It was ideal for research but not intentional. Kanou looked at Ageha’s eyes.

Lifeless, just like me.

They meshed well, not because he tried to be cordial with the boy, but because they both had numbed emotions. Kanou understood his own vitality had been sapped from years of soiling his hands, but the boy was only sixteen. This abnormality interested Kanou.

“Can you remove the pain inducing limiter on my arm?”

The question caught the doctor by surprise.

“Why?”

“Even if I can endure it, pain is still a pain.”

“So you intend to use it beyond normal capacity?”

“Yes.”

“For what?”

“Whatever I find the reason to.”

“You do understand that’s illegal?”

“It’s not like it’s our first time.”

The boy was right. In order to advance artificial nerve research, Kanou performed many borderline and, on occasion, outright illegal experiments. Ageha knew because he was the subject of most of them. These experiments were naturally a secret from his father. His abnormality had been an indispensable asset for Kanou, but that was no longer the case.

“I don’t see why I should. ARMS are already in commercial production. The data I can get from you is redundant.”

“I’m part of the reason why ARMS are out in the market now.”

“Asking for gratitude from me is meaningless. You should know that by now.”

“I know.” The light in Ageha’s eyes changed.

So it was not a request but a threat.

Ageha was privy to information that could trouble Kanou and his superiors, but the boy was deeply involved as well. He would not get away unscathed if such knowledge came to light. He would also be targeted by NGC. Kanou knew that Ageha was too rational to actually do that.

However, that personality trait applied to Kanou as well. All risks should be eliminated. A little tweaking operation was a small price to pay.

I wonder if he read that far?

“Okay. In exchange, you have to make sure you do not get caught due to this modification, and if you do-”

“I don’t know anything.”

Kanou did not trust people. It was something he, having one foot in the underworld, could not afford. However, he trusted probability. The chances of Ageha betraying this promise was miniscule. The boy has never broken his word in the three years he had known him.

“Let’s get started then.”

Soon after Ageha entered culinary school, his grandfather died.

“Go to your grandfather’s house and check if there are any things of value.” His father’s command came from Ageha’s mobile terminal.

“Can’t you go yourself? I’m busy with school.”

“You know I hate that place.”

“But I hardly knew the man, thanks to you.”

“He’s dead now, so I don’t see the problem.”

“Sousuke, we need you in the kitchen!” shouted someone from the background on his father’s end of the line.

“I have to go. The house is close to your university. I’m counting on you, okay?”

The call was cut before Ageha could reply. He sighed as he pocketed his terminal and walked to his next class. He had hardly seen his grandfather when he was alive, much less spoken with him. This was the root of his hesitation for this errand. He felt that he was about to ransack a dead stranger’s home.

He headed to his grandfather’s house after finishing his last class for the day.

“I can’t believe how clean this place is considering he lived alone.”

Ageha scanned the large estate. It was land that had been inherited for several generations of their family. The main building's architecture was traditional Japanese, and a fairly large storehouse stood apart from it. Doing as Sousuke instructed, he entered the large one floor structure and checked the rooms.

In his grandfather's room, he saw military uniforms and medals displayed on the wall. He heard from Sousuke that the man was one of the last war veterans. There had been no major wars for decades, but it appeared that his grandfather was a soldier to the end.

I can't blame father for running away from all this. I wonder what his reaction would be if I brought home those medals.

Sousuke's father wanted him to join the army. However, it was now a pointless occupation with no honor and rampant corruption. Sousuke rebelled, aspired to be a chef, and succeeded. The two never reconciled.

It's ironic how he goes on to force his culinary legacy on me. It's a good thing I actually like cooking.

Ageha found cutouts of old newspaper articles in one of the desk drawers. He scanned some of the headlines, which read, "Sustainable Fusion Achieved" and "Unlimited Energy Changes World Economy." He wondered what his grandfather was thinking when he collected information on the breakthrough that brought prosperity to the world and an end to international conflict.

Was peace his victory, or his enemy?

No one could answer that now. Ageha stopped his train of thought when he realized its futility.

Finding nothing to bring back, Ageha finished his sweep of the main building and moved to the outlying storehouse. He used the key he found in his grandfather's room to open it. In contrast to the rest of the estate, the interior of the storeroom was dusty and had spiderwebs decorating the corners of the ceiling. He switched on the light and observed the objects in the room.

What immediately caught his eye was something that no one would expect to find in a residence storage. A military exoskeleton stood at the far end of the room.

I knew he loved war, but this is pretty big for a souvenir. Is this even legal?

Ageha approached the machine. It was plugged into a charging unit. Out of curiosity, he pressed the activation switch.

“Please input data source.”

Ageha raised an eyebrow in response to the request. He searched the machine for something that fit that description and found a panel with various input slots. Thinking that there was nothing to lose, he checked the shelves and desk in the storeroom. Inside the desk drawer, he found numerous data chips with labels, such as “Knife Combat 2”, “Stealth Movement 3”, and “Grappling -Ground- 1,” on them. With his curiosity piqued, he plugged one of the chips into the appropriate slot on the exoskeleton.

“Activating training program Knife Combat 1. Please equip the exoskeleton.”

Ageha hesitated. He did not know if the machine was safe. All he knew about exoskeletons was what he had learned in history class. They were training machines used during the war to preserve the combat expertise of elite soldiers.

It was not curiosity that pushed Ageha to follow the voice instructions of the metal contraption. Since the time he went berserk in the school courtyard, most of his emotions had been anesthetized, but that did not mean he did not feel anything. He still believed in doing what was right but had been educated by society on how powerless he was. He was forced to swallow his rage whenever the unfairness of the world slapped him in the face.

Isn't this the same as my right arm?

He knew that he did not have enough power with just one cybernetic arm. Punching someone you did not like was only a shortcut to jail.

But what if?

What if he had the fighting skills? What if he had not one, but two cybernetic arms? Legs? The possibilities exploded inside him. Adrenaline coursed through his veins and woke up parts of him that lay dormant for years.

“Equip procedure complete. Please give the command to start when ready.”

“...Start.”

His frozen heart started beating once more.

Chapter 12: Unveiling

On Ageha's blanket-covered lap was a black ball of hair. It reminded him of a small animal curling up for warmth during winter. An IV tube was sticking out of his neck, and his torso was

wrapped in white bandages. He sat up, ignoring the pain on his left side. He looked around and realized that he was in one of the rooms in Kaika's mansion. The location confirmed the identity of the creature on his lap.

Just when he was about to wake Kureha from her slumber, a familiar buzzing sound emanated from the bedside table. He took his terminal and accepted the call.

"Yes?"

"Ageha! Great, I finally got a hold of you," said Rin, her voice filled with relief.

Ageha checked his terminal's display. There were five missed calls. The clock informed him that he had been asleep for almost an entire day.

"Sorry, I was asleep."

"The whole afternoon?"

"Yeah, I have a temperature."

"I see. Your ankle sprain is that bad..."

Sprain?

"An acquaintance of yours called Sapore about your accident. I'm guessing that was your rich employer?"

"Yeah, I had her call for me."

"Your employer... is a woman?"

That was careless. I gave unnecessary information.

"More importantly, how's Sapore holding up?"

"What do you think? Lunch service was a war zone due to two missing chefs. Matsunaga-san's replacement isn't doing very well. Why did you have to get into an accident..?"

"Sorry."

"Ah, no, wait, I wasn't blaming you! It's not your fault! I was just thinking about how these unlucky things keep happening, and I-"

“I get it, relax.” He chuckled upon hearing her fluster. Her tendency to panic always amused him. It was charming, in a way.

He caught a sigh of relief from the receiver.

“So, how are you doing?”

“I’m fine. I may need a couple more days off. I can’t put any weight on my ankle, so I can’t stand in the *cucina*. I’d just be in the way.”

“I know it doesn’t sound convincing after that rant, but take as much time as you need. Kirishima-san said the same thing. ...Though Yama-san was laughing about how you slipped in the kitchen despite being a chef.” A soft giggle followed.

Kai..!

“Oh, sorry, but I have to go. My break’s almost over. Take care of your injury. I’ll call you later after work.”

“Thanks for worrying about me. Please take care of Sapore while I’m gone.”

“You can count on me!”

Ageha placed the terminal back on the table. He noticed that the cuddly ebony plush on his leg was stirring.

I’m amazed she can sleep so well using a metal pipe as a pillow.

“Mhmm...”

Kureha rubbed her eyes as she sat up.

“...Ageha-Oniisama?”

“Good afternoon, Kureha-chan.”

“Ageha-Oniisama!”

“Yeah, it’s me.” He wore a smile that contradicted the current state of his body.

“Are you okay? Oneesama said you were hurt, so I came to visit you, but you were asleep, so-”

“So you used an injured person’s leg as a pillow?”

“I am sorry! I did not mean to nod off.”

Ageha placed his hand on Kureha’s small head and gently stroked it.

“It’s okay. Wasn’t it hard and cold though?” Ageha was sure that Kureha already knew about his limbs from previous contact.

“Not at all. It was comfortable. I would not have slept so soundly otherwise.”

“That sounds like an excuse.”

“Ageha-Oniisama...” The outer ends of her brows and lips tilted downward.

“I’m kidding! Don’t make that face.”

Her frown instantly vanished. Ageha realized that Kureha was faking it. She countered his jab perfectly. Her growth caused a fuzzy emotion to well up inside him. He believed that he was at least partly responsible for it.

“It was not an excuse. I really do feel at ease with you, more so than anyone else.”

The directness she did not have before caught Ageha off guard. His response, though already determined, was delayed.

“...That makes me happy. Thanks, Kureha-chan.”

They exchanged smiles.

“Are you feeling alright? Does your injury hurt?”

“No, I’m fine. It doesn’t hurt at all as long as I stay put.” It was a kind lie.

“I am glad. Oneesama did not tell me what happened, so I was worried how serious it was...”

“It’s nothing to worry about.”

“Oh right! I have to tell her that you woke up. Please wait here for a moment while I fetch her.”

Kureha stood up and trotted to the door. She was wearing brown shorts and a yellow shirt. It was a very sporty look that contrasted with her personality. Ageha wondered if it was part of her effort to be more outgoing.

"I will return immediately," she said as she looked back at him one last time before leaving the room.

Ageha did not have to wait long before the mistress arrived. Saya opened and held the doors to the room. She waited for the sisters to enter before closing the door behind herself. Followed by the other two, Kaika approached the bed. She was in a simple grey one piece, and the butler was in uniform.

"How are you feeling?" asked Kaika.

"Everyone keeps asking me that."

"Would you rather be ignored?"

"Depends on who's asking."

"If you can talk back like that, I guess you're fine." Kaika eyed him like she was observing a strange animal. "Still, you really are impudent, even to your boss."

"That's not true, right, Kureha?"

"Yes, Ageha-Oniisama."

"Wow, I thought only Saya fell victim to your poisonous tongue, but even Kureha—"

"Kai-Ojousama, what are you saying!?"

"Isn't it the truth? She was so frantic when she called me on my terminal and asked for a doctor. You should have seen her when she dragged you back here. What's the story there, Ageha?"

"She did promise me an arm pillow."

"No, I did not. I said I will think about it," said Saya.

"That wasn't the last thing I heard."

"...You were awake!?"

“I wasn’t sure if I dreamt it, but that just now confirmed I was indeed awake.”

Saya was crimson down to her neck. It made Ageha speculate if her organs were getting enough blood right now.

“My, my, this is far worse than I thought. To think that the two of you made this much progress,” said Kaika.

“There is no progress! It is Chou- Ageha-sama’s usual teasing!”

“Oh? What’s this? You even have nicknames?”

“As a matter of fact-”

“Shikimi-sama.” The rumbling change of address halted Ageha’s statement.

“Looks like my lips are sealed.”

“I order you to tell me. Saya, stay there and be quiet.”

The two employees did as their boss decreed. Ageha filled Kaika in on all the details that Saya had omitted from her report. He made sure to censor any information not fit for Kureha’s ears. Due to that limitation, the report became merely a chain of embarrassing events involving Saya. Saya was squatting down while holding her head and mumbling to herself by the time Ageha ended his story.

“How lucky...” whispered Kureha.

“I see. It wasn’t as juicy as I expected, but at least we have a continuation,” said Kaika.

““Continuation?”” asked yesterday’s tag team simultaneously.

“Saya has yet to fulfill her promise, right? An arm pillow is a small price to pay for being saved from turning into a beehive.”

Guilt crept into Saya’s unusually reactive face. Her brows wrinkled in thought for a short while.

“...Okay.”

“What,” said Ageha.

“Now that’s more like it!” said the instigator of this fiasco.

“Saya, you do know what an arm pillow is, right?”

“...Of course.”

“I find that hard to believe, considering your consent.”

“Do not underestimate me.” Saya sat down beside Ageha on the bed. “...Go ahead.”

“I can’t do it with you sitting like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I knew you were misunderstanding something.”

“Is an arm pillow not when one of two people sitting beside each other leans his or her head on the other’s shoulder?”

Kaika’s snickers served as ambient noise for the embarrassing discussion.

“No. In the first place, that’s impossible with our height difference. Listen, an arm pillow is...” Ageha explained the position in detail.

The visible part of her face glowing red, Saya stood up reflexively and tried to leave the room.

“You wouldn’t go out and leave your charge alone, would you?” asked Kaika.

“You were fine with me being gone for one night!”

“Don’t be so childish. An arm pillow isn’t such a big deal, is it?”

Saya ceased her departure and started shaking. Then she flipped.

“Who is the childish one here!? I am not the one always eating dolphin-shaped cookies secretly at night!”

“W-W-What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I know those. Onesama keeps them in the bottom drawer beside the bed.”

“Kureha..!” Kaika glared at her sister.

“Now, now, don’t get angry, at your little sister, for telling the truth,” said Ageha while pausing periodically to stop himself from laughing. His efforts failed in the end.

“Wha- what’s wrong with dolphin cookies? I’ll have you know that dolphins are very intelligent despite their docile and cheerful appearance. I like how similar they are to me.”

You left out how cruel they can be.

“And they are cute,” said Saya.

“Right, they are so cute...” It was Kaika’s turn to go beet red. “No, wait, that isn’t what I meant to say! I don’t care if they’re cute at all!”

Ageha continued laughing despite knowing it could open his wound. Kureha had joined in at some point.

“I don’t want to be laughed at by a mercenary who can’t even use a gun!”

“You told her that!?” shouted Ageha, glaring at Saya. Even he had become a victim in the snitching free-for-all.

“I had no choice! Ojousama needs to know that information for her plans. And you also brought up the arm pillow promise, so you do not have the right to complain!”

Before Ageha could reply, he realized that the content of what they were talking about was supposed to be secret to one of the people in the room.

Ageha slowly turned to Kureha. Seeing this action, the other two did the same. They were at a loss as to how to resolve this unexpected information leakage.

“Do not worry, everyone. I did not hear a thing,” said Kureha politely, an innocent smile on her face.

Like sister, like sister.

The three heaved a sigh.

“Okay, this stops here,” said Kaika, eyes closed. “Saya, can you take Kureha outside? I need to speak with Ageha privately.”

“Understood. Kureha-Ojousama, would you like to accompany me for a game of cards?”

“Okay. Please take care, Ageha-Oniisama. Please do not bully him too much, Oneesama.”

The two left Ageha and Kaika alone in the room.

“Hmph. What did you do to that girl?”

“Which one?”

“I would say both, but I can’t believe Kureha just said that to me.”

“About not bullying a man with a bullet wound?”

“Yes. She used to be unable to hold a conversation with me, much less joke around like that. She’s changed so much in such a short time.”

“I think she was probably always like that. She just didn’t have anyone who would listen to her. I was like that as a kid, so I can understand.”

“You may be right. I never really had the patience to deal with her.”

“You had a lot on your plate.”

“...Did Saya tell you?” There was no anger or irritation in her demeanor.

“Not much. It’s mostly speculation.” Ageha shrugged his shoulders. Deciding to get to the point, he asked, “So, am I going to be bullied for getting shot?”

“Is that what you were expecting?”

“Once burned, twice shy.”

“No burning is going to happen today.”

“That’s good. I was worried about the bridges.”

Kaika looked a little surprised by his reply. She glanced at the door Saya and Kureha had left from. “Their affection isn’t unrequited?”

A photo sticker with three smiling faces surfaced in Ageha’s mind.

“I wonder about that.”

“You can be pretty cruel.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you.” He smiled wryly.

“...You’re right. I want to thank you for protecting both Saya and the painting, but more importantly, I have a confession to make.”

Ageha unconsciously straightened up. It was already unexpected that she would express gratitude sincerely. For her to confess something to anyone was downright astonishing.

“My brothers are not after my life. I staged the attack at the park.”

Ageha’s expression did not change much.

“You don’t look surprised.”

“I would’ve been a few days ago. Carelessly going out shopping clued me in, but sending Saya with me to steal that painting was the clincher.”

“I didn’t think you were this shrewd. Did I adopt a very dangerous pet?”

“The fact that you still call me a pet means I’m not even off the leash yet.”

“You overestimate me. Anyway, I apologize for deceiving you. Trust is not a resource I have in abundance.”

“I would’ve done the same in your position.”

“Does that mean my playing with fire will lead to the unexpected conclusion?”

“You can be so roundabout.”

“Women are such creatures.”

“Says the girl who doesn’t even wear a bra.”

“Isn’t it great? It reduces clothing costs. It also makes it easier to dupe old men.”

Poor Karasuma.

“Such a different reaction from Saya.”

“Right, she did grab your hair too.”

Ageha’s face contorted in disbelief after hearing the last word of Kaika’s sentence.

“What shocks me is she even grabbed yours.”

“I was shocked too. She wasn’t even looking at me when she did it. She looked perfectly calm, as if she was reading the morning paper. I wonder if she did it unconsciously.”

“/ almost died.”

“She didn’t pull too hard in my case. Maybe she did have some consideration for our respective positions.”

“She was driving.”

Both of them guffawed.

“Back on topic,” said Kaika after recovering from the fit, “how does *our* bridge stand?”

Ageha collected his breathing after the bout of literally side-splitting laughter.

“That depends. You haven’t told me the most important thing.”

“Which is?”

“Why are you trying to take down your brothers?”

“Because I want to control NGC.”

“That doesn’t make you any different from them.”

“But I am. Their *dolce* is merely my *antipasto*.”

“...What are you planning beyond NGC?”

Kaika stuck her chest out and looked Ageha in the eyes. Her eyes sparkled. This was the first truly childlike face Ageha had ever seen her make. It was no act. Ageha doubted everything that had ever passed those beautiful pink petals, but there was something inviolable about what she disclosed next.

“To change the world.”

Chapter 13: Marination

“How are things going with Ageha?”

“Everything is proceeding normally, Ojousama,” said Saya.

“Normally? Surely you underestimate. You two look very close.”

“I am only doing as ordered.”

“Really now?” Kaika cast a doubting gaze.

Saya’s dispassionate face did not budge from the provocation. She appeared sincere.

Or so she thinks.

Kaika knew that Saya became more rigid when she was trying to hide something. A perfect poker-face was also an obvious sign of a lie.

“Be careful,” said the mistress.

“I am always careful. Who knows how he will react if this is discovered.”

“I’m not talking about that. I’m referring to the reason you held your breath just now.”

Saya twitched in response to the subtle accusation.

She really is cute.

Kaika had not really noticed any abnormality in Saya’s breathing. She simply threw in bait, and Saya readily took a bite.

I suppose having some form of attachment is inevitable. They have similar pasts, and although she’s fairly skilled at it, she never liked deception. It’s an acquired taste, I guess.

“Should I be worried?”

“Not in the least. I do admit that this task was not unpalatable due to his...” Saya searched for the correct word.

“Charisma.”

“...Yes. But I assure you it has no effect on my judgment.”

You tried lying to me earlier and then say that? Well, she probably knew she would get seen through but tried to coddle her pride anyway. Forgiven.

"If I may," asked the butler as she corrected her posture. They were both seated on a long rectangular dining table. Kaika occupied the head seat, Saya at her diagonal left.

"What is it?"

"Is this really necessary?"

"By 'this' you mean?"

"Establishing an intimate relationship with Ageha-sama."

"I wouldn't ask it of you if it weren't."

"I think he is already invested enough in our group, if not our cause."

"Naive. Invested is not enough. We need him to be *committed*," she said as she raised her index finger and wagged it in rejection.

"He took a bullet to save the painting."

"And you."

"Kai-Ojousama."

"I'm not teasing. The painting was probably the last thing on his mind then. He doesn't even know what it'll be used for. It's simply proof that your efforts have borne fruit."

"Then there is no need to take it further, is there?"

"Is your hesitation from guilt or fear?" Kaika dissected Saya with her vision.

"...Probably both."

"It's good that you're honest."

Saya dipped her head in embarrassment.

She's at least aware of her own feelings, enough to be afraid of losing control of them. That makes her more predictable.

"What you don't understand, Saya, is that commitment has levels. We need his to be absolute. Taking a bullet while protecting himself with his alloy limbs doesn't even come close

to that. Right... He should be able to gladly take one in the heart and still keep crawling until he sputters to a stop.”

Saya’s eyebrows wrinkled at Kaika’s description.

“You say that, but I do not think you would toss away someone you rate so highly.”

“Of course. I’m going to great lengths to groom our knight. I wouldn’t do so if I didn’t like him. I would go so far as to say he’s a favorite,” she said with a brilliant smile.

Which vanished the next instant.

“But there are risks that we must take. He has cooperated so far because he knew the odds were in his favor, but what if it were reversed? What if he’s likely going to die if he complies? Making those questions moot is the purpose of this exercise.”

Saya fell silent and nodded, seemingly comprehending Kaika’s intentions.

“If we want his trust, would it not be counterproductive to admit to any deceit? Why tell him about the park incident?”

The tone in Saya’s questions had changed from doubtful to curious. This stirred up Kaika’s desire to teach.

“There are several reasons.” Kaika crossed her legs, her frilly violet dress fluttering under the table.

Saya, eager to understand what she had failed to discern herself, gazed at Kaika intently.

“The first reason is because he already suspected it. The fact that I ordered you away from my side is enough for anyone to sense the incongruity.”

Saya’s shoulders slightly slumped.

“Don’t take offense. You were merely on the wrong side. Well, it’s actually the *right* side, but I digress. Different standpoints provide different insights.”

Saya regained her perfect posture. Kaika loved how much influence her words had on the butler. Only she could make the stiff pole sway so much.

No, Ageha too.

“The second reason is because truthfulness only works on the innocent. The naive foolishly believe and foolhardily get hurt. A single lie can damage the relationship with such people. However, Ageha’s hardly of that category.”

“Indeed. He is more cunning than I imagined.”

“Rather than cunning, he’s fundamentally distrustful. He doesn’t take anything at face value. For that kind, even the truth can be construed as the opposite, and the connection halts there. It’s best to tell an insignificant lie and purposely be caught to shroud a more relevant deception.”

Realization emerged on Saya’s visage. “If Ageha-sama thinks that he is able to distinguish the truth in your words...”

“His arrogance will blind him from grasping the true lies. It has already worked wonders twice. Once in our meeting in the park and again when I confessed about the same incident.”

But to underestimate him here could lead to problems. He may suspect more than he lets on.

“The last reason is to shrink our distance.”

“Distance?”

“Yes. Although he agreed to help us because I faked being in danger from my brothers’ plot, it was purely out of his own twisted sense of justice. There’s no camaraderie or affection. By revealing to him my real objective and desire for power, I established a commonality. No one craves for power as much as a man who has cast off his humanity for it. Sharing something fundamental, he suddenly finds me much closer to him.”

“I cannot imagine him agreeing to your terminal wish and method.”

“I had to be truthful about my goal. He already knows my amorality. A righteous excuse would have been impossible to swallow. I did keep the method secret by saying the plan hasn’t been drafted.”

“And he accepted that?”

“He said he didn’t care as long as he can do what he wants. Of course, it was under the condition that he’ll only eliminate those who qualify his standard.”

“That sounds like a pointless agreement.”

“No, no. What you fail to see is that Ageha is not my subordinate. I may treat him as such when he cooks, but only then. We are partners, at least in his eyes, so I can’t expect unfailing obedience. He doesn’t need to share my objective, only my resources. I’m already providing a considerable amount of support and financing to him. Most of his current body is my provision. Considering his fixation on fairness, the conclusion is inevitable. Given such a spread, he’ll willingly jump out of the frying pan and into the fire for me. Well, eventually.”

Epecially with you and Kureha as garnish.

“For now he can rest. He did well getting us the painting.” Kaika stretched her arms after finishing her explanation.

“That is not very convincing since he is currently slaving away in the kitchen because you ordered him to prepare dinner.”

“This is what I hate about couples. Always so eager to defend each other.”

“We are not-”

“Kureha is helping him. How can he complain with such a cute assistant?”

“It has only been five days.”

“His wound is closed. The only thing he has to deal with is the pain, which I’m sure you know is paltry for that monster.”

Saya winced.

“You disapprove?” said Kaika.

“...No.”

Saya looked like she was having trouble reconciling her thoughts.

“You misunderstand. That’s probably the highest praise I can give him.”

Since I’m a monster myself.

Saya remained silent, as if she read Kaika’s thought.

“Don’t worry. I won’t ask him to do anything dangerous until he recovers. He’s not necessary for the remainder of the first phase anyhow.”

“Speaking of which, the preparations for my other assignment are complete.”

“Excellent. That was quicker than calculated. It seems your little affair with Ageha has not kept you too occupied.”

Saya shrugged her shoulders in resignation to the chronic teasing. In contrast, Kaika merrily nodded several times.

“I think he will move soon, maybe even today. He has intensified surveillance on my meetings recently.”

“Then it’s also time to move the other piece,” said Kaika after crossing her arms on her meager bosom.

“Delivery of the painting?”

“Yes. Hang it in Kawahara’s bedroom when he and his wife are asleep.”

“...Is that not too strong a move?”

“That’s precisely why I’m making it. He needs to understand that he can’t use our theft of the item as leverage in any way. We’ll have him abide by the agreement to the letter.”

“This is practically threatening him.”

“Not practically. I *am* threatening him.”

“Then why did we go through the trouble of illegally acquiring a bribe?”

“To give him an excuse. An influential member of the national diet can’t bend over easily to threats. Politicians have to preserve their pride and appearance. He can accede to our demand without damaging either if it’s in exchange for the painting he adores.”

“Understood. I will deliver it tonight.”

“No, leave it for tomorrow. I don’t want any tension ruining the meal.”

“You really are partial to Ageha-sama’s cooking.”

“Aren’t you?”

“I never denied it. You make him prepare the oddest dishes, but the results are always delectable somehow.”

“I’m tired of the usual fare. You’ve shared the same meals as me in this prison for years. Don’t you feel the same?”

“I do, but a French *okonomiyaki* might be too avant-garde for me,” said Saya as she closed her eyes and touched her chin.

“I’ve never had *okonomiyaki*.”

“Neither have I, but that is all the more reason to have it the traditional way.”

“Life offers too few meals to waste them on mediocrity.”

“I am certain Ageha-sama’s dish will not turn out mediocre.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Kaika paused in thought for a moment. “You know how scarce leisure has been for me, correct?”

“Of course.”

Kaika knew that if anyone understood the weight of her statement, it would be her loyal aide who underwent the same trials and torture, albeit for a shorter time.

“That hasn’t changed due to my preoccupation with my goal, so I want what little of it I can get to be meaningful in inverse proportion.”

Saya still looked puzzled, so Kaika continued her explanation.

“How did it feel during your first time?”

“Horrible and painful,” said Saya, as emotionless as always.

“Okay, my fault. Bad example. Let’s try something more pleasant. Which meal of Ageha’s left the biggest impression on you?”

Saya closed her eyes for a few moments and then opened them. “I believe it is the *Spaghetti Alla Carbonara*.”

“That’s the case for me as well. That’s because we were treated to not just the taste, but also the surprise from the unexpected and the delight of novelty. First experience has that magic. With that in mind, the most fruitful way to spend leisure time would be a collection of firsts. However, being physically human, we have no choice but to repeat certain activities, such as getting sustenance.” Kaika traced the rim of a half empty wine glass, her dainty finger going

around several times. “If the activity must be repeated, then the content will have to change instead. Never eat the same thing twice.”

“Thousands of digested dolphin cookies turned in their graves just now.”

“...The exception proves the rule,” said Kaika, her bottom lip stuck out and a little blush showing on her white cheeks. “Anyway, if I can eat an item only once, I want it to be special. Wasting my only chance to try something for an ordinary experience is absurd.”

“So we get French *okonomiyaki*?”

“No, we get *Ageha’s* French *okonomiyaki*.” She smirked with her eyes shut.

Saya shrugged her shoulders after witnessing the mistress brag about her favorite pet. “I am fine with ordinary. That is already a luxury for both of us.”

“You really have no greed.”

“Someone has to stay grounded so that you can climb higher.” The butler made a contented smile.

Kaika was intrigued by how two people brought up in the same environment could have such different personalities. She enjoyed lecturing Saya, but she also understood that the young woman had qualities that she did not. Saya held her back when her recklessness manifested and protected her when that failed. Saya was more of a sister to Kaika than Kureha, and Kaika thought of her as such.

You really are an excellent sister.

“Thank you, Saya,” she said sincerely. She was truly grateful for Saya’s existence.

Sisters are useful tools, after all.

Kureha carefully used a mandolin to create thin strips of cabbage. She had her eyebrows wrinkled in concentration.

“You really didn’t have to help, you know,” said Ageha, his voice coming from behind her.

She intentionally chose to have her back towards him. The view of him cooking distracted her from the task at hand.

“I want to. Oneesama is really mean, making you cook despite your injury.”

“It’s my job, and I’m fine. Look.” Ageha hopped to showcase his recuperated self.

Kureha turned to Ageha and expressed a look of concern. She knew that he was forcing himself. He always had a smile on for her, but she was not dense enough to miss the subtle hints in his behavior. They had spent most of this week together, and that resulted in a better understanding of the young man.

“I understand, so please stop pushing yourself.”

Why is he always so nice to me?

Kureha felt jealous of her sister and Saya. Ageha spoke more naturally with them. In comparison, there was something phony in his interactions with her. She could not blame him though, because she too assumed a role.

“I should say that to you. You really don’t have to play the shy little sister anymore, you know?”

If he already knows this much, why does he act so distant?

“I am not playing. I really am a shy little sister.” She smiled ear to ear.

“I don’t think someone who can say something like that qualifies as shy.” Ageha had been talking while preparing a pan-sauce version of burgundy *demi-glace*.

“What about you? ...Are you not forcing yourself to be nice to me?”

The question halted his knife. The thyme ceased its dance on the butcher block.

“...I’m sorry if it came off like that, but that wasn’t my intention. Believe it or not, I’m trying my best to be genuine.” He scratched his head with an apologetic look. “...It seems I forgot how. I didn’t think I was *this* clumsy.”

So I am special but in a good way?

Kureha tried to control her rapidly beating heart. She wanted to believe he was lying because she feared disappointment if she got her hopes up.

“I bet you say that to all your little sisters.”

“I don’t have any little sisters.”

“I knew it. You were just toying with me...”

“I meant blood-related little sisters, and don’t say things people would misunderstand.”

Kureha giggled as Ageha complained. She gave up on keeping her back to him, moved her tools and the cabbage to the counter Ageha was using, and looked at the chef. His eyes were focused on the ingredients in his hands.

“It is not an act,” she said as she adjusted the white fabric wrapping her torso. The apron she had borrowed from Ageha was too large for her. It made it look like she wore nothing else.

Ageha responded by raising his sight to meet hers.

“I really do not have any confidence.” She resumed her work. “The reason I pretend to be clueless is because I do not want anyone to expect anything from me.”

“Why don’t you want that?”

“Who would, after seeing Onee-sama go through all that?”

Kureha admired her sister, but that was not an emotion that drove her to become like Kaika. It served the opposite purpose. She intentionally placed her sister on top of an unreachable pedestal to alleviate her fear of responsibility.

Ageha kept silent, not being privy to the details.

“Eventually, it became a habit. Then it became real. What was it called, a self-fulfilling...”

“Self-fulfilling prophecy. I’m impressed you know such a concept.”

“It does not count because you helped,” she said with a frown, but the displeasure quickly left her features and was replaced by a tender expression. “But talking with you over time gave me back a little bit of confidence. You were always patiently waiting for me to finish. It felt... comfortable. It was something I had not felt for a long time.”

“I kind of feel guilty now for finishing your sentence earlier.”

“But you did that out of good will. Everyone else just left or ignored me before I could speak my mind. I do not blame them though. Even I felt impatience at my own timidness.”

Ageha continued cooking throughout the conversation. He had thinly sliced several shallots and was now caramelizing them in a pan.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, Ageha-Oniisama.”

“Why did you approach me when I first visited the mansion?”

Kureha ceased her slicing and thought for a while before answering.

“Because Oneesama was interested in you. I already knew that you were the chef she had hired before we introduced ourselves because the maids had been gossiping about it. I was curious why she chose you.”

Half of it was jealousy, but she did not voice that part.

“I hope I didn’t disappoint,” he said, a self-deprecating grin on his lips.

“Far from it! I am really thankful because you gave me courage. Not only that, you also gave me things I had lost and things I never had. Even the meal we are preparing now would be impossible without you.”

Kureha was always alone in the mansion. She tried to get close to Kaika, who she admired, but was always deflected. Trying to get some semblance of sibling affection, she often ate, slept, and played alone in Kaika’s room when Kaika was not there. She was desperate for warmth.

“I have always wanted a family. Eating dinner together like this... feels like a dream.”

Ageha showed a pained expression after hearing what she said. He left the saucepan on the stove and walked towards Kureha. He placed his hand on her locks and combed them per usual.

“You did well coming this far.”

Tears started sliding down Kureha’s cheeks. “Huh? Why... Huh... It won’t stop...” she mumbled as she frantically wiped her tears with her palms.

Someone had finally acknowledged her loneliness, her suffering, and most importantly, her effort. It was not her strength but her hard work that she took pride in.

“Stupid, why are you crying? That isn’t an onion.”

“Please... do not call... me stupid...” Her reply was broken up by sobs.

So this is a brother...

Ageha left his hand on her head as he smiled warmly at the crying girl. Ageha's touch made her feel weak but safe. Barring her infancy, she had never truly cried in front of another person. Coming in torrents, her tears increased, as if the dam holding them back all her life had finally collapsed.

Seeing Kureha weep, Ageha knelt down on one knee and gently pulled her towards him. Kureha wrapped her arms around his neck without ceasing her sobbing. Ageha patiently rubbed her back without saying anything. Both of them stayed that way until the smell of smoke pierced the bubble surrounding them.

"I feel stupid after singing your praises earlier."

"I must concur," said the butler, nodding at her mistress.

"I'm sorry."

"Please do not blame Ageha-Oniisama. It was my fault."

Kaika threw Ageha an accusatory stare. "Don't tell me you were distracted because you were doing something to Kureha?"

Kureha's cheeks lit on fire.

"Where there is smoke..." said Saya after seeing Kureha's reaction.

"Wait, wait, wait. There was smoke, but that was because of the burned shallots. And I did something to Kureha, but nothing like what you're thinking, okay?"

"But you do admit to doing something," said Kaika, her left eyebrow raised. "I didn't think you had that preference. No wonder you like Saya's AAs."

"They are A cups!"

"I suddenly feel in danger. You must have been lusting after my body all this time. Now I have no choice but to bring a robe to the bath."

"Please do not ignore me! It is true!"

“Do not mind it, Saya-san. Both Oneesama and I do not even wear brassieres.”

“I know it’s humiliating being told that by an elementary schooler, but calm down,” said Ageha, having hastily caught Saya’s wrist as it extended towards Kureha’s bob cut. “I remade the sauce, so let’s just eat, okay?” He released her hand.

“What an obvious attempt to escape from interrogation.” Kaika closed her eyes. “However, I do feel both generous and hungry so I’ll leave it at that.”

“...I am not lying...” The tiny voice leaked from the depressed butler as she slumped her shoulders, consequently depressing her bust even more.

Ageha suppressed a laugh after seeing her in that state. Despite his joking manner, he did feel sorry for the two who had to wait an extra fifteen minutes before dinner was served. He could not even remember the last time he had made such a mistake in the kitchen. Forgetting the pan was an amateurish error, but instead of feeling ashamed, it only furthered his surprise at how distracted he had been.

He did not want to admit it, but Kureha reminded him of his first love. Their kindness, their straightforward affection, and their admiration towards him all overlapped. Of course, sexual attraction was not present due to the difference in age, but a warm elation that lowered his guard existed.

So this is a younger sister...

Ageha placed two hotplates on the cork mat on the hand-carved dining table. Kureha sat to the right of her sister, and Ageha seated himself beside her.

“So what did you prepare for us?” asked Kaika while observing the plated food.

“As requested, French *okonomiyaki*.”

“You have to be more detailed than that if you want to be a celebrity chef.”

“I never said I wanted to be one. I don’t cook to entertain.”

“I, however, eat for entertainment, so indulge me.”

“I would like to know the details as well,” said Saya.

“It’s a cabbage pancake pan-fried in *lardon*, topped with *ventreche*, and ladled with my second attempt at the burgundy *demi-glace*. It’s drizzled with *aioli* and garnished with sliced chives and fried shallots.”

The hearty fragrance of the of the *ventreche*, which was essentially unsmoked bacon, permeated the dining room. Ageha conjured up a version of pork and scallion *okonomiyaki* using French ingredients.

"It certainly looks like an authentic *okonomiyaki*," said Kaika.

"I aim to please."

"Leave the bragging for after the tasting."

Ageha deftly sliced the first savory pancake into eight pieces. The knife easily slid through the pork slices, despite its crispness. Without muddling the decorative, white, checkered lines of *aioji*, he skillfully lifted a slice from the hotplate and placed it on Kureha's dish. He then served Saya, Kaika, and finally himself.

"Serving me last... Is that some sort of prank?" asked Kaika.

"I was last, and no, I didn't think about that. I just served starting from the closest plate," said the chef as he seated himself.

"Serve me first. Isn't that common sense? I'm your employer, not these two."

"That pettiness is making me less inclined to do so."

"This is about hierarchy."

"But you rank middle in both height and breast size."

Saya virtually glowed at Ageha's statement. Ageha ignored the stoic butler's equivalent of a fist pump. Kaika was about to reply but Kureha spoke first.

"Onesama, the food is getting cold. *Okonomiyaki* is best served hot. That is why they are on hotplates." She pointed at the cast-iron dinnerware.

"Hmph. You always take Ageha's side. I'm your sister, you know."

"Not at all! I just want to eat our meal at its best since Ageha-Oniisama took the trouble to make it."

"That's his job. Well, I do agree with your suggestion, though for a different reason." Kaika ceased her tantrum and picked up her silverware. "Since we're having French, *Bon appétit!*"

That's my line.

They started eating after the mistress's signal. Ageha took a bite of his creation. Immediately crumbling and melting on the tongue, the paper-thin, crisp pork unleashed a surge of flavor. The richness of the meat and *aioli* was cut by the refreshing chives and the acidity of the wine in the sauce. The cabbage tempered the bold flavors. He purposely architected the consecutive, contrasting layers for this effect, and he felt proud of his execution.

Excellent.

He looked at the previously irritated Kaika. She was now joyfully munching on the fusion dish like the child she appeared to be. She always showed her most unguarded side during meals, and in those respites, Ageha even found the diabolical schemer adorable. He could not blame Saya for failing to hurt her for that sole reason.

Saya also looked pleased as she quietly partook of the dish. In contrast, Kureha vocalized her opinion.

"This is so good!"

"Thanks."

"It is worth every second of the wait," said Saya.

"I thought that cooking it in pork fat would be too much because you already used a fatty cut for the protein..." said Kaika. Her long curly lashes suddenly rose, showing her black irises in full. "Got it! You used a sparing amount just to brown the bottom! The use of the fried shallots to mimic *bonito* flakes isn't just for plating. It adds the sweetness *okonomiyaki* sauce is known for to compensate for the lack of it in the *demi-glace*."

The cook was dumbfounded after his technique was dismantled after only a few bites. "You really should just give up on your schemes and become a chef."

"I specialize in consumption, not creation." A smug grin was plastered on her face.

Is that really something to brag about?

"It feels odd eating *okonomiyaki* with a knife and fork," said the Japanese chef.

"It's French *okonomiyaki*, so isn't it fine?"

Ageha felt that Kaika's statement was strangely convincing. He stood up and placed another slice on her quickly emptied plate, as if rewarding her. He served a slice each to the other two, leaving a single slice on the first hotplate.

"Is that all you will eat?" asked Kureha, noticing that Ageha only had one, albeit large, slice.

"Yeah, I don't have much of an appetite."

Saya gave a look of understanding. She could guess the reason for Ageha's weak appetite. He only needed enough energy to fuel his human parts, which were exceedingly scarce compared to normal people. His ARMS were charged directly using a charging device.

"I was thinking of leaving tonight."

Kureha turned to Ageha in shock. "What!?"

"I've recovered enough for everyday activities, and I need to get back to work. Rin keeps telling me how much trouble they're having with the kitchen short-handed."

Both Saya and Kureha twitched at the mention of the pretty waitress's name.

"I don't mind," said Kaika. "I'll just call for you when I want to have your meals."

"Don't treat people like slaves."

"Slaves don't get a salary like yours."

Ugh.

"Can you not stay one more day? You can leave tomorrow evening. That way we can have dinner together again!" said Kureha, who stopped eating after Ageha's announcement.

"Tomorrow's a Saturday, the busiest day for restaurants. They could really use my help."

"And I have a prior engagement for tomorrow night," said Saya. "I am afraid I cannot accompany you for dinner, Kureha-Ojousama."

Kureha lost the brightness that she had just moments ago. Seeing this, Ageha felt a prickling in his chest.

"...I suppose I can stay one more day."

"Really!? Thank you, Ageha Onii-sama! I love you!"

Ageha felt that a bomb was mixed in with her words but chose to disregard it.

“You’re spoiling her too much,” said Kaika, a wry smile on her face.

“What, are you jealous?”

“Check with Saya. I couldn’t care less.”

“Please do not involve me for I do not have anything to say about whatever it is that Kureha-Ojousama said that definitely does not affect me in any way because no matter what I will not be negatively affected since I do not care about who loves anyone in view of the fact that I do not love anyone.”

“Get a hold of yourself,” said Kaika.

Kureha laughed happily at the scene. Ageha did not notice that he, dragged in by the cozy atmosphere, was also laughing along. It reminded him of the past, but the waves of emotion he was currently experiencing swept away anything painful that threatened to arise. What was left was a nostalgic longing for a sweet dream that he once lost. It poured over him, tenderized his calloused heart, and imparted a flavor he had long forgotten.

I'll have to call Rin and Kirishima-san to tell them I'm taking one more day off. I better get ready for an earful.

And so, bathed in familial bickering and chortling, he decided to play hooky for the second time in his life.

Chapter 14: Flash Freeze

“That is Masato Kuribayashi,” said the older Nikaidou. His gaze was directed at an aged man in a suit slouched at a table in the hotel restaurant.

“He looks quite seedy,” said Kousuke. The brothers were walking towards the table, but were still a fair distance away. A group of bodyguards walked with them, some moving ahead to secure the area.

“Based on our reports, he is. All we need to get him on our side is to exceed Saionji’s offer.”

“I hope so. He’s the only one left with enough influence on the Excell board to get us that partnership. The situation is desperate. I wouldn’t have agreed to meet in person otherwise.”

“I apologize, but he strongly insisted. He would not meet if not directly with you. He must be an old fashioned businessman.”

“Hard to say because he’s meeting us at such an open place. Don’t older folks prefer more private meetings?”

“I am afraid this was also one of his conditions for this appointment.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s a minor gripe. You did well.”

“Thank you.”

They ceased their conversation as soon as they reached earshot of the table. The old man stood up and greeted the brothers.

“Hello. I am Masato Kuribayashi. It is a pleasure meeting you,” he said with a lazy bow.

“Hello. I am Kousuke Nikaidou, and this is my brother Kazuki. It is nice to meet you as well.”

The brothers bowed in return. Masato gestured for them to take a seat, so they did. The posse of guards seated themselves at nearby tables.

“We would like to discuss a certain business opportunity with you,” said Kousuke.

“Oh, that can wait,” said Masato as he signaled for a server.

Displeasure almost burst forth from Kousuke’s face, but he managed to rein it in. The old man ordered a bottle of wine and a cheese tray.

“How do you feel about flowers?” asked Masato.

“Excuse me?” The younger Nikaidou could not help but raise an eyebrow.

“Flowers. Lilies, roses, and the like.”

“I have no particular opinion about them. I have sent a bouquet or two as gifts.”

“You see, I really like the idiom ‘stop and smell the roses.’ I think it is particularly meaningful for a businessman like me, the word busy being the first two syllables of the profession. I am sure you understand.”

“Although I do understand how hectic it can be, I am the type that prioritizes efficiency foremost.”

“That is the privilege of the young! When you get to my age, appreciating the beauty of the things you missed in youth is the only pleasure left.”

Kousuke felt insulted at being called young. Being in his thirties, he was indeed quite youthful for his current standing. The speed of his climb up the corporate ladder was fueled partly by his father’s influence, but it was mostly his own ability. People flocked to him because of his handsome face and charisma. He believed that his older brother was one of them. No matter how frequently he heard it, the accusation that he begged his father to gain power was something he never got used to.

“We young folks also have our pastimes. We simply cannot engage in them as often because of how ruthless this world is to its members. It is taking all the time we have to stay afloat,” said Kazuki in his brother’s place.

Kousuke thanked his brother inwardly for preventing him from answering harshly.

“Very well then. Let us talk business.”

“I appreciate the consideration,” said Kousuke.

Kousuke explained the details of the partnership being offered by NGC. During his explanation, the server arrived with the wine and cheese. Masato, hardly looking at Kousuke, immediately busied himself with the food and drink. The wrinkles on his face undulated as he chewed on the assorted slices. The lack of interest irked Kousuke, but he knew that Masato was already informed of the details because he had been seen meeting with Saya on several occasions. This explanation was but a formality before the actual negotiation.

Kousuke finished his explanation at the same time that Masato downed his second glass of wine. The old man laughed and said, “This is really good wine!”

“...I see. About the partnership-”

“It does not seem to benefit my company much. A promise of intangible future benefits does not hold water.”

“As expected of someone of your caliber, we can get things moving along quickly.”

“Whether it goes anywhere is the question.”

“We are here to propose a deal, with you personally.”

“...What sort of deal?”

“We can provide you personal funding much larger than anyone else can offer,” said Kosuke, alluding to Saya’s dealings with Masato. “In exchange, all we ask is that you convince the Excell directors to agree to the partnership.”

There was no surprise on Masato’s face.

As expected, Saionji already spoke about something similar.

Masato heaved a large sigh. “The Nikaidou lady was right.”

“...What?” muttered Kousuke, confusion dyeing his expression.

“You know what I really like about flowers? It is not the color or the shape but the fragrance. I think that is what attracts humans to them. We *are* also animals, just like the ones that pollinate them.”

Kousuke turned to his brother, but his pillar of support, similarly perplexed, shook his head.

“My experience with both people and flowers has taught me how similar they are. Some people exude a certain scent that attracts others. I think you, Kousuke, are one of those people. I, however, am somewhat different.”

“What is the meaning of this!?” Kousuke slammed a hand on the table.

“Have you ever heard of the rafflesia arnoldii? It is a flower that smells of rot. Do you know why?”

“What nonsense are you blabbering? What are your ties with my sister!?”

The seedy old man ignored Kousuke’s protests.

“It is to attract flies. In our case, I am the rafflesia. Guess what you two are?”

Everything suddenly clicked inside Kousuke’s head.

Kaika!!!

He realized that his father’s decision to bequeath his wealth to the first daughter was not out of senility. He had underestimated the young girl and fooled himself into thinking that his enemy was Saya alone.

“What did she tell you?”

“I only spoke with Saionji-san, who was her representative, and we did not talk about business that much.”

“But you met several times. Are you plotting something together?”

“Hardly. We just chatted about mundane things. Like I said, ‘stop and smell the roses.’ And she is quite a rose.”

“A honey trap..?” Kousuke’s dashing face twisted in disgust.

“How immature. It is called class. Trust is necessary in any joint venture, and she invested time to establish that. To answer your question, the Nikaidou lady informed me that you were trying to short-change Excell, and that you would approach me like you did Tsutomu Masayoshi, who is now dead by the way. Did he back out at the last minute?”

“Are you implying I was involved in that?”

“That is why I chose to meet you in a public place. I would not want those gentlemen to get any ideas,” said Masato as he cocked his head towards a table full of bodyguards.

“That was Kaika’s doing!”

“You do understand how implausible that sounds? She warned me about this deal out of her desire to clean up NGC. It is a bit naive but something I can sympathize with. I myself play the role of bait to protect my company. I guess the two of us are fellow heroes!” The hardened businessman cracked up laughing.

What the hell is this!? This whole thing, including killing Masayoshi, is part of her plan!?

“How can you believe the words of a brat like that!?”

“I find it more astonishing how you can actually say those words.”

Kousuke’s face reddened in shame and anger. He was not only read when he negatively reacted to being called young but also cornered into becoming a spectacle of hypocrisy.

“Consider any ties with Excell severed. The supply arrangement that we have currently will also be terminated once the contract expires. We are not in short supply of clients. Now that our business is settled, I will excuse myself.” Masato stood up. “I trust that you can handle the bill considering you had the confidence to outbribe your majority shareholder.” Masato walked out of the restaurant as if nothing happened.

Kousuke was frozen on his chair, but flames seethed within. He collected himself and exited the hotel with his escorts. He could not ruin his public appearance. They had already attracted attention due to the volume of his shouts. Kazuki, likely being considerate of his brother's current mental state, did not speak to him.

He screamed the moment the car doors closed.

"She'll pay for this!"

"Please calm down, Kousuke."

"How can I calm down!? Excell is going to cut ties. This isn't at the level of failing a potential high-profit deal. We are going to lose money. My influence in the board will plummet! The CEO chair was so close..!"

Kazuki fell silent. Everything Kousuke said was true. Sandwiched by two SUVs that housed their protectors, their car left the hotel and sped along the highway.

"If only there was another way to obtain the CEO position..." said Kazuki.

"...There is."

"How?"

"Kaika just has to die."

"...Even if that happened, her possessions will go to Saionji. Saionji is already acting as her guardian and technically has limited control of her assets. She even represents Kaika during board meetings."

"To an unrelated employee? We are blood-related, even if only through father. We can fight that in the courts easily."

"But even if you become CEO by using the majority share vote, everyone on the board, even the interim CEO, will oppose you in light of this failure."

"The alternative being not getting the seat at all? I'll take it. We can iron out the wrinkles when I'm there. I'm not a fifteen year old brat. They would accept it eventually."

"You should not underestimate her. We have tasted defeat once already."

"I'm not, not anymore. She is brilliant. Moving so many steps ahead of us is nothing short of that. That's all the more reason to get rid of her."

"I see. ...I agree that this is the path we should take."

"I didn't think you would consent so easily. You're usually more cautious."

"Only when we can afford it. Now is the time for action."

"We'll use *that*. It's past the experimental stage. It would make for a good practical test."

"I should warn you that it can be traced to us if captured. Very few have that kind of technology."

"Are you suggesting it might fail?"

"No, that is impossible."

"I didn't think so."

Kazuki lowered his head in thought for a few beats and then said, "We should do it tonight."

"Why so soon? Shouldn't we plan this out more thoroughly?"

Kousuke was amused at the role reversal. The smile on his brother's puffy face suggested he felt the same. Kousuke's anger had dissipated in light of his enemy's impending destruction.

"I bribed a maid in Father's mansion to serve as an informant. She can only get menial information around the house, but her recent catch is a boon for our specific purpose."

"What did you find?"

"Saionji is leaving on an errand tonight. The maids were advised to wait for her late arrival. She should be absent until past midnight."

"It *would* be better to do this when Kaika is without her bodyguard. Even father praised that woman's capability. What of the masked killer? Is it possible he's working as a guard?"

"There were no new guards hired recently. The last change was right after Father's death. Kaika probably hired a mercenary. Keeping a murder suspect around the house is too risky."

"Then we move tonight. Let's teach our little sister her first and final lesson as her seniors in this world."

You should have stayed in your shell.

“How’s your wound?” asked Kaika as she welcomed Ageha into the drawing room.

“Like I said yesterday, I’m fine with everyday activities.”

“What about *non-everyday* activities?”

“I see. You really work people to the bone. Who, when and where?”

“No, nothing soon. I just want to fully grasp your condition. It’s better to prepare for the unexpected. One can never predict what’ll happen.”

“I think you’re doing a fine job doing just that.” Ageha sat down on his favorite sofa.

“I try my best. Judging from your reaction earlier, I’m assuming you’re good to go?” Kaika sat on the arm of the sofa beside Ageha, her legs dangling due to the height.

“I wouldn’t say good, but yeah, I can manage. Medical technology is pretty impressive.”

“It should be since I got the best, well, amongst those willing to operate secretly. Do you know how much I paid for your treatment?”

“Please keep it a secret. It might make me want to actually try hard on my next job.”

“Are you sure you should be saying that to the one who pays your wages?”

“My employer is generous so I’m sure she’ll forgive something so insignificant.”

“You realize that now? I’m the best boss anyone can have.”

“The way she gets carried away is cute too.”

“Did you think you could get a reaction from me like you do with Saya and Kureha?” Kaika merely smirked.

“It was worth a try. I wasn’t expecting much.”

“Sorry for not meeting expectations,” she said sarcastically.

“Don’t be. That maturity at your age is something I admire. There are young prodigies everywhere, but you’re of a different ilk. It feels as if I’m speaking to someone my senior. The fact that I find you cute regardless is true though.”

“I also admire how you always state your thoughts so directly. No wonder Saya has so much trouble with you.”

“What’s wrong with saying what’s on my mind, especially praise?”

“Nothing, if you weren’t speaking with the opposite sex. They tend to misunderstand quite easily. You *are* aware of your above average looks, right?”

“I never lacked attention from women, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“So was all of it calculated?”

“Not at all. Just because I know how it might end up doesn’t mean I’m doing it intentionally.”

“Don’t you feel any responsibility?”

Ageha delayed his response as he digested Kaika’s inquiry.

“You might be right. I may have been too irresponsible.” He placed a thumb to his chin. “Maybe I should make things a bit more clear since there’s little chance of me pursuing that kind of relationship.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Like you, I have trust issues.”

“No elaboration?”

“...I’d rather not. You probably know the gist already. I’m sure you’ve already looked into my past. It should be easy for you since NGC was the one who covered it up in the first place.”

“I won’t deny it, but there’s value in hearing it from you. Records only speak of events, not experiences. The latter is what intrigues me.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I’ve lived all my life trapped in this house. Most of my time was devoted to study, practice, and training. Even sleep was reduced to the shortest period possible, so I ended up with this stunted body.” Kaika raised her dangling lower legs alternately. “I did have chances to go

outside, but those were reserved to my father's educational trips. That's the reason why I hate being called by my name. 'A flower within a shell' may have suited my father's intentions for my future but not mine."

His suspicions about her abnormally juvenile physique were confirmed. He knew severe sleep deprivation slowed growth, but the severity of her case practically froze her development.

"Why do you insist on being called Kai then?"

"It's a matter of pride. Completely rejecting my name means escape, so I kept the part that I hated the most and made it mine. A shell can be considered as armor, after all."

He remembered how Kaika's flawless mask cracked when Kureha presented the clam hair ties. "Kai" was her sword that she gripped by the blade, the edge cutting into her flesh. The young man admired her pluck, yet felt melancholy for the plucked flower.

"I've gotten off track. What I meant to say was I didn't have time for personal enjoyment. I have practically no hobbies, so you could say that listening to your story is a form of entertainment for me, and you know how much value I place in that."

Ageha pondered whether he should tell Kaika about it. Thinking about his past was more painful for him than his periodic ARMS nerve realignment. However, the person in front of him had exposed herself willingly, gambling that he would do the same. He wanted to be equitable.

"It's a long story."

A rare, kind smile flashed on Kaika's face. "Then make sure I don't get bored."

Ageha began unraveling the tangled memories of his childhood. He voiced out the names he had sealed within himself for more than a decade.

Jin. Airi.

It was unexpectedly easy. The usual pain that threatened to crush his heart lacked the severity he remembered. Had time finally scabbed the lesions? Or was it something else? He had no answer.

It was not as long a story as he had imagined. It was probably because he did not like to talk in length to begin with. The version he narrated to Kaika was redacted for brevity.

"That's about it." He slowly breathed out after finishing his story, as if releasing something pent up for a long time.

“Naive.”

“I have to say that isn’t the reaction I expected.”

“I would have secretly killed them one by one and avoided the whole NGC issue.”

“...I didn’t want to kill them.”

“Why not? Because they didn’t kill you? What they did was far more grievous.” The red on her cheeks indicated a different emotion than usual. She was furious.

“I didn’t expect you to get angry. I was expecting you to laugh or even joke about it. I thought you were more accustomed to suffering and injustice.”

“That’s precisely why I find purity precious. Don’t misunderstand. My anger isn’t from any sympathy for you. I merely feel like your *friends* smeared mud onto a beautiful painting.”

“I wasn’t anything like that.”

“You were and still are, even after being defiled. I wouldn’t have tracked you down and made you my partner otherwise. My eye for people is one of the most exceptional out of my multitude of talents. Take Saya as proof.”

He never intended to be self-deprecating. Still, he was glad that Kaika came to his defense, even if it was laced with her boasting. He never defended his way of life even to himself. He was prepared to be killed for everything he had done. It would be fair. Someone taking his side despite knowing his monstrosity was refreshing. If it was Kureha who warmed his heart, it was Kaika who washed it clean.

It takes a monster to know a monster.

“I heard you chose Saya because she looked like a cute boy.”

“...That was a condition on top of everything else,” said the blushing girl, looking away from him. He knew she was intentionally acting the terrible liar in consideration of his attempt to lighten the mood by bringing up Saya’s story.

He was about to tease Kaika about her hiring criteria when a blaring noise echoed throughout the mansion.

“A fire?” asked the young man as he rose from the sofa.

“No.”

Ageha recalled that this was the same alarm he heard during his first visit to the mansion.

“An attack?”

“They timed it when Saya’s out. I didn’t think they would move this fast. Looks like I have no choice but to depend on you this time,” said Kaika as she hopped down from her seat.

“I’m not a bodyguard, you know? Maybe I should ask for a raise?”

“I’ll consider it if I make it through this.” Lips tightly shut, brows furrowed, and eyes alert, the gravity of the situation showed clearly on her face.

“...Is it that serious?” Ageha’s expression turned sharp and cold, like an unsheathed blade.

“Kousuke wouldn’t move unless he’s confident. He’s certain he can kill me.”

Frantic knocks came from the door.

“Enter and report,” said Kaika.

A maid opened the door and explained the situation while panting.

“Only one man..?” said Kaika in disbelief.

“Yes, no other reports were received. The sentries are all in position except for the one at the southwest wall. He was likely incapacitated by the intruder.”

“Has the intruder been dealt with?” asked Ageha.

The maid pulled out a radio from her apron and asked for the latest information. She then relayed it to Kaika as she listened to the report.

“All the guards in the building are trying to stop the intruder with no success. Some of them have fallen, while the others are in pursuit. ...The intruder is barehanded.” The maid displayed a baffled face as she relayed the last detail.

“An elite assassin... I didn’t think our methods would overlap. Ageha, please intercept the intruder.”

“I thought you wanted me to protect you?”

“That’s the best way. From the report, it seems that our lone enemy is like you. I believed you were singular, but this proves me wrong.”

Ageha himself was surprised at the existence of someone like him. Kanou had said that his case was unique. Ageha attributed this inconsistency to the advancement of ARMS technology in areas even Kaika was not aware of.

“If that’s the case, it would be better for you to fight him away from me. It would remove the danger to myself and allow you to focus on combat.” Kaika turned to the maid and gave her an order. “You, call several guards here to escort me while Ageha deals with the intruder.”

“The chef will..?”

“Just do it. Where’s the intruder now?”

The maid used the radio to communicate with mansion personnel.

“He is in the main hall. The guards are trying to hold him there, but they will not last long.”

“Ageha.”

“Understood.”

Ageha ran through the open door and into the corridor. On the way to the main hall, he dropped by his temporary room and procured his knives. The last time he sprinted through these hallways, he still had outdated, black market ARMS installed and had to consider stealth. This time, he cracked the flooring with the power of his strides. It took him no time at all to reach his destination.

But even then, it was too late. There were only two guards left, one of which was held by the intruder. The other guard pointed a handgun at the intruder but could not shoot in fear of hitting the captive. Ageha concluded that the enemy had used human shields throughout the battle to avoid being shot. Although bullets could not penetrate ARMS, the force of the impact could still cause damage to human organs.

The intruder’s torso and neck were covered by metal armor. The rest of his body was obviously cybernetic from the lack of skin coating. The alloy elbow and knee caps were visible. A black helmet with a tinted visor covered his head.

That’s practically a robot...

Ageha knew that robot limbs were weaker and less flexible than ARMS. Moreover, artificial intelligence was not advanced enough to be effective in live combat. The fact that Ageha had

destroyed two Arax units by taking advantage of their tactical gaps was proof of this. His thought only meant that there was almost no sign of humanity left in the enemy.

The intruder threw the guard he was holding at the one with the gun. The man could not dodge the body that hurtled towards him. Both men tumbled backward and crashed to the ground.

Ageha took this chance and dashed towards the intruder. The intruder noticed his approach and ran towards him.

What!?

This reaction surprised Ageha because it made no sense tactically unless shock was the only goal. Ageha canceled his attack and tried to dodge the enemy's running hook.

Too fast..!

Ageha raised his left arm and reinforced it with his right fist. The hook collided against his arm and blew him away. He rolled to dissipate the impact and promptly stood on his feet.

He analyzed the opponent's movements. They were amateurish, or more accurately, instinctual. This made it hard to fight the opponent because of unpredictability. That abnormal speed and power were also troublesome.

The intruder was already on him before he could complete his thoughts. He dodged another hook by ducking and performed a sweep that hit its mark. The intruder's left leg was taken off the ground, but he managed to regain footing. Ageha slashed at the intruder's chest. A metallic scratching sound was produced.

It was worth a try.

Ageha checked the durability of the chest armor. His attack did not even leave a mark. The intruder's hands reached for Ageha. Ageha tried to jump back, but his clothes were caught. He always wore skin tight clothing in combat for this reason, but he did not have the luxury of time before this encounter.

Before he could free himself by forcefully ripping his clothes, Ageha was lifted up and tossed into a wall. Spinning in the air and using his arms and legs to temper the impact, Ageha landed on the wall like a spider.

When Ageha was taken off his feet, he thought that he had already lost. It would have been over if the enemy smashed him head first into the floor. He reevaluated the intruder.

He didn't use the guard earlier as a shield. He just picked up the closest thing he could throw at the other enemy.

Ageha realized that the enemy had no regard for tactics. If the enemy moved on pure instinct, then the attacks should be simple. Ageha found a sliver of hope when it came to defense.

But I still can't damage him. He has no weak points.

That was fact, so Ageha decided to take a different approach. Taking the offensive, Ageha pounced on the approaching enemy, his dual knives brandished. He slashed his knives downwards while falling. The intruder raised his arm and blocked the strike. Ageha leapt back to avoid a kick but closed the distance again right after. The intruder used his arms to block the knife swipes coming for his head.

Ageha defended against a swinging kick by raising his knee. The impact threw Ageha to his left. Instead of killing the momentum, he used his legs like a spring to kick off the ground and unleashed another wave of slashes towards the opponent's face. Sparks flew from the intruder's right arm as he fended off the blade.

Should be soon...

After several similar exchanges, Ageha noticed that his right leg was not moving as he wanted. The damage from the kick earlier was taking a toll on his mobility. His previous injury had also reopened and bled into the thick bandages. Weakened, he failed to dodge a straight, which grazed his cheek. There was almost no contact, but the force of the blow cut his face and caused him to see stars. Ageha instinctively took distance. His vision blurred and vomit leaked from his lips.

I won't make it..!

He had taken too much damage. With his mobility and sight decreased, he would not be able to keep up with the enemy's abnormal physical capability. Ageha could overcome pain but not the damage itself. He was affected just like anyone else if something was mechanically impaired.

He remained crouched as his opponent sped towards him. Time slowed as he accepted his imminent demise. Ageha was a realist, and he knew the situation was hopeless. It was his turn to pay his dues.

As he was about to accept his fate, several faces flashed before him: the arrogant and adorable little genius, the stone-faced butler and her embarrassed blush, and the timid girl who suffered the same loneliness. They would all die if he fell here.

Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to his feet. Adrenaline did nothing to his ARMS, but at least it cleared his murky mind and steadied his sight. The odds had not changed. It was almost impossible to defeat the enemy in his current state.

He recalled a certain miniature devil's words.

"Nothing of worth can be achieved without a corresponding amount of risk."

As if she had finally won their suspended argument, Kaika's smug grin intruded into his thoughts.

The image put a similar grin on his face. It was the first time he ever smiled in battle.

Let's do some gambling.

Ageha rolled the dice three times.

He bet on the enemy attacking from the left. He no longer had the speed to dodge on reaction so he simply picked a side at random. He hopped to the left a split second earlier than the robot's assault. His gamble paid off, and he managed to take the intruder's flank after the whiffed grab attempt.

He bet on the enemy performing a backfist. He himself preferred that move when flanked, but there was no reliable way to predict the enemy's reaction. He dropped one of his knives and held the remaining one with both hands. He parried the incoming backfist by slashing the enemy's elbow.

He bet on the possibility that his slashing parry, which used the intruder's strength against him, cut deep enough to sever the artificial nerve connection inside the ARMS. The slash was aimed at the intruder's elbow joint, which was already damaged by his repeated, targeted attacks. The intruder's scream declared another winning roll.

Ageha had never been so lucky in his entire life.

It seems Kaika wasn't my jinx.

Targeting the intruder's head, he launched a roundhouse kick with his left leg. The enemy raised his right arm to block as usual, but the forearm just dangled downward. The arm lost control from the elbow down because of the disconnected nerve. The kick smashed into the helmet and cracked the surface. It was not strong enough to destroy the headgear, but that was irrelevant. The force shook the intruder's brain and caused his knees to buckle.

This strategy was inspired by Ageha's first contact with Saya. He felt a peculiar gratitude and thanked her in his thoughts. He then grabbed the intruder's head and slammed it repeatedly onto the marble floor until the helmet broke open. He inserted his knife into the intruder's eye for good measure.

Ageha dusted himself off. His injury did not bleed enough to go through the bandages, and his concussion was mild enough to endure. He started walking to the drawing room to report back to Kaika, but he felt a certain contradiction.

Why was this robot guy in the main hall?

The intruder's target was Kaika. The first room he would visit should be hers, which was closer to his entry point than the main hall. Ageha remembered what time it was, and a bud of fear sprouted in his heart. He delayed his report to Kaika and decided to check on her room instead.

He jogged down the corridors until he saw a door on the ground. The ornately carved wooden door to Kaika's quarters had been ripped off the hinges and discarded on the hallway floor. He tried to calm his rampaging heart beat. He felt the limited amount of blood in his body gather in his head. His face burned. He tried to deny the possibility, but his body involuntarily peeked into the room.

There she was.



Her cute bob cut was sticky with red. Her soft and warm arms that had embraced him were pointed in odd directions. Her porcelain skin was mottled with black and purple. Tears pooled on the wooden floor by her cheek. The glittering irises that stared at her sister in admiration and at him with adoration had transformed into black swamps.

Ageha stepped forward. He felt the ground crack underneath him. He walked on thin ice, and each step spread the fissures further. He recalled the times she smiled at him, called him brother, and purred as he patted her head. His tightening grip warped the silver ring on his finger. The mutilation of the ring's form paled in comparison to her face that was twisted in terror. When he finally reached her mangled form, the ice floor cracked open, and he fell. He was engulfed in freezing water, which extinguished the warm flame recently rekindled in his heart.

In its place, a deafening blizzard raged.

Chapter 15: Boiling Point

"I did not think he was this cold."

"Ageha, you mean?"

"Yes. I thought that... Kureha-Ojousama's passing would affect him more."

"Is that how you see it?" asked Kaika as she swiveled her chair to face Saya. She was seated at the large table in the middle of the room. The butler stood a few paces to her right.

"How can I not? He simply left the mansion after undergoing repairs and treatment. According to our surveillance, he has returned to work at Sapore as if nothing happened. As it is, I feel sorry for Kureha-Ojousama. She... cared for him."

"What do you propose he do? Kousuke and Kazuki have gone into hiding, and we didn't know where they were until just recently. Running around blindly is meaningless."

"I can understand that much, but his attitude is far too unconcerned. He did not even attend her funeral! I called to inform him, but he only gave me non-committal answers. I had thought that he was grieving in his own way, but like this he is exactly like..."

Kai-Ojousama.

"Go ahead. You can say it."

"I beg your pardon, Ojousama." The servant made a deep bow.

"I can't blame you for thinking so given my composure, but even I would be offended if my thoughts are decided for me by an *outsider*."

"I did not mean to overstep my bounds. I am just... angry. I did not intend to vent it out like this."

"For you to be so openly angry... That's quite a rare sight."

"Who would not be? I informed him that we have finally discovered your brothers' whereabouts and that he should come here for a meeting immediately, but he is over an hour late already! What is he thinking..?" Saya closed her eyes and shook her head.

"...Do you feel betrayed?"

Surprise overcame Saya's static features. It dawned on her that Kaika was correct. She trusted the Ageha she had observed over the past few months, and his disregard for the death of someone he appeared to care for shook Saya's trust in him and in her ability to judge people.

"You don't need to answer."

Saya indulged herself in her mistress's generosity. A knock from the drawing room door ended their conversation.

"Enter," said Kaika.

A maid opened the door and introduced the visitor.

"Shikimi-sama has arrived."

Ageha stepped into the drawing room for the first time in more than a week. He brought the same nonchalant face, effortless clothes, and confident gait. The only difference was a large, black bag strapped to his back.

Saya was battered by a complicated wave of emotions. She was both furious and relieved to see that he looked well. Her disdain towards his indifference to Kureha's tragedy and her desire to see him again fought to devour each other. The former barely won.

How can you look so normal!?

"You are one hour and twelve minutes late," said Saya.

“Sorry. I was at work when you called, and I had to grab a few things. I figured it would be faster to bring them along rather than pick them up later,” he said as he tugged on the bag twice.

Each and every unfeeling word that escaped his mouth pierced Saya’s chest. She had never really been that close to Kureha. They hardly spoke because Saya was tasked to be with Kaika at all times, and it would have been out of line to speak to Kureha wantonly when her mistress was present. The only occasions they conversed without reserve were when the foreign element, Ageha, was there. Saya did not want to admit it, but those interactions were precious to her, and she believed they were precious to Kureha and Ageha as well. Ageha’s normalcy despite the destruction of those golden days was an unbelievable sight to her. She doubted reality.

“You..!”

“Saya.”

“I apologize, Ojousama,” said the butler in a strained voice.

She noticed a pained expression that quickly dissipated on Ageha’s face as she rose from her bow. She convinced herself that it was just her attachment playing tricks on her.

“Did Saya tell you why you’re here?”

“Just that you found your brothers.”

“That’s about it, really. We finally caught their tail. They’re hiding in a safe house on Mount Takao. Aside from being close to us when we’re after them, it’s a convenient location. They can maintain their lifestyle even while in hiding due to its close proximity to civilization. They regularly send out men to get luxury items. That was lucky for us because that’s how we found them. Even knowing their lives are in danger, I have to admit they have guts staying within Tokyo.”

“Not as much as you, staying in the same house that’s been attacked twice.”

“I have Saya with me, and those two aren’t idiotic enough to send pawns after their queen was captured. They didn’t know that my knight had abandoned me, after all.”

“Though I did say I’m not a bodyguard, I would have stayed if you’d asked.”

“Then why did you not attend Kureha-Ojousama’s funeral?” asked Saya.

Ageha did not answer.

“Saya, this is not the time nor place.”

“Excuse me.” She did not bow. Her irritation was peaking.

“We haven’t been able to gather much intel so far. We only know that the place is practically a fortress,” said Kaika.

Saya operated the terminal and displayed a map on the screen. Ageha started fiddling with his personal terminal. His seeming disinterest irked Saya further.

Can’t he take this seriously!?

“What are you doing..?” asked Saya, her voice shaking in fury.

But the response she got was completely unanticipated.

“Recording the location. There.” Ageha pocketed his terminal and turned for the door.

“Where are you going?” asked his employer.

“To kill your brothers.”

Eh?

“Have you gone mad? We know nothing of their defenses. We have to properly formulate a plan!” shouted Kaika.

What?

“It’ll be too late if they relocate.”

“No, it won’t. I’ll make sure we reach them, so don’t go! Think rationally! This isn’t like you!”

Ageha wordlessly paced towards the exit.

The exchange that just took place threw Saya into confusion. What Ageha said and what she thought of him did not reconcile. She realized how foolish she had been.

Kaika said it herself. Ageha was not cunning. He merely distrusted everything and everyone. He was always on guard even when he bantered with Kaika and herself. She recalled the moments when Ageha was with Kureha and searched for wariness in his actions.

How can I be so stupid..!

She found none.

How can you be so clumsy..!

Kureha was special.

And she was gone.

“Saya, stop him!”

Her mistress’s order brought her back to reality. She realized that she needed to prevent Ageha’s rage from consuming him. Going on a suicidal revenge mission would not be something Kureha would want or Kaika could afford. But above all, Saya knew she would never be able to forgive herself if she let him go.

Mustering all her power, Saya rocketed towards Ageha’s back. He reacted instantly and faced her direction. She knew that Ageha anticipated her favorite first strike, a jaw-targeted kick, so she opted to use it as a feint. She still performed the kick but with little force. The rotational momentum she gathered would be used to increase the velocity of her follow up turning side kick. If she could force him to block, he would still be blasted to the wall. It would be her only chance to incapacitate him safely.

She highly rated Ageha’s speed and capability, but surprise was her ally. As expected, Ageha dodged the roundhouse by leaning his head back. She continued to her second attack as planned. Impact.

What just happened!?

Saya was lying face down on the floor at the far end of the room. Her vision sparkled, and her head throbbed. She tried to recall what happened. The memory came together piece by piece.

Ageha dodged her side kick by turning sideways. Without pausing, he grabbed her kicking leg with his left hand and then used the momentum of the kick to pull her in, swing her around, and throw her towards his favorite sofa. The sofa absorbed most of the force, but she still bounced off of it and hit the wall. Her spine and organs would have been obliterated without the cushion. She tried to rise, but her legs would not move. There were a number of reasons for it: concussion, cracked ribs, shock. But she knew the true cause:

Fear.

The best attack she could come up with was manhandled in the most inhuman way. She opened her eyes and stared at the creature that bested her. *A fiend*. She trembled. A shaky high-pitched moan escaped her throat.

That all vanished when the demon turned to her with an expression that made it seem like the world was about to end and said,

“I’m going to see her once I finish everything.”

Saya could do nothing to stop him as he left the room. Guilt and a feeling of powerlessness assailed her. Tears began rappelling down her cheeks. She wept on the floor, fists clenched in regret.

“How long are you going to keep lying down?”

Kaika’s words jolted her from despondency. She dried her face with her sleeve and then supported herself with the wall as she stood up.

“I have no excuse.” She spat the words out in self-hatred.

“What are you apologizing for?”

“I... could not stop him.”

“Seeing what happened, no one would blame you. But that isn’t what you’re actually sorry for, right?”

Saya’s heart was squeezed by a vise. Kaika always knew everything. That could be a blessing or a curse depending on the situation. In this case, it was both.

Kaika looked into Saya’s eyes and said, “About letting him go, I don’t think you need to worry.”

“What do you mean? He is going on a suicide mission. Maybe if... if I follow him...” Her face was marred by sorrow.

“I won’t allow it. Your place is here. This is for your own sake, mine, and his as well.”

Kaika ignored Saya’s look of confusion and helped the unsteady butler by supporting her waist. They moved away from the wall and Kaika made her sit on an unflipped sofa to rest.

“This may not be a suicide mission,” said Kaika.

“Of course it is! He knows nothing about the enemy, and it is only noon! If he goes there directly, he will reach it well before sundown. It would be one thing if he tried to sneak in, but from the looks of it-”

Saya cut herself off before she could describe the horrible image that surfaced in her head.

“I know that much.”

“Then why-”

“Because I also know Ageha.”

Saya knew of Kaika’s abnormal interest in Ageha. Kaika had spent a lot of time analyzing him and planning for ways to influence and manipulate him. She had not held back, going so far as using Saya in her machinations. Her claim had validity, but Saya was dumbfounded at how she could be so confident.

“Ageha is strong. Of course, he is inevitably so because of his ARMS and his ability to endure pain that allows them to be used, but his true strength stems from something more fundamental.”

Saya wracked her brain but could not come up with anything outside of the cliché. She did not speak of them because she understood Kaika’s answer was different.

“It’s his ruthless rationality. He’s analytical and unswayed by emotion. He hates taking chances and always minimizes risk. He has probably avoided persecution so far because of that quality, and his battle prowess was likely honed by that mindset.”

Saya had reported all of Ageha’s combat information to Kaika. It was reasonable that Kaika, combining that knowledge with her own interactions with Ageha, would come to that conclusion. In fact, Saya now felt the same after hearing the hypothesis.

“But that is precisely why I had to stop him. Right now, he has lost his calm and is not thinking logically-”

“Didn’t you feel it, Saya?”

Feel what?

Kaika continued before she could reply.

“Fear.”

Saya immediately understood. She had been consumed by instinctive terror after she was instantly defeated. She felt like she had seen something beyond human.

“You’re misunderstanding something,” said Kaika as if she had read Saya’s thoughts.

“Ageha is strong because his cold, detached reasoning makes him the optimal killing machine. He’s a monster of logic. However, that’s also his greatest weakness.”

Weakness?

Saya could not reconcile that word with that man.

“His rationality tethered him. His logic deluded him. He saw himself as a machine. The problem with machines is they only work according to specifications, well, unless they are defective, but I digress. Ageha hated human irrationality and sought strength to correct that by forgetting that he himself is human.”

The butler glimpsed what her mistress was trying to tell her. She dipped her head in thought.

“I, for the most part, agree with his view on humans. They are filthy, illogical and unfair creatures. However, he and I differ when it comes to our affection for them. He abhors people, with some exceptions.” Kaika shot a meaningful glance at Saya. “But I love humans. Do you know why I cherish them so?”

Saya filtered through her knowledge of Kaika. There was one thing she valued more than anything.

“...Entertainment.”

“One hundred points! Humans go beyond predictions, rationality, logic, and limits! Few things are as entertaining!” A manic smile was spread across her face. “Ageha has now broken free of the chains that bound him. That’s what happened just now and what I believe will recur when he faces my brothers.”

“...A miracle?”

“A gamble.”

A *fiend*. She had long ago accepted Kaika’s cruelty and twisted motivations, but the display before her caused a seed of doubt to sprout.

Could it be that she... the attack that night..?

“All-or-nothing. If Ageha fails, then I’ll likely fall. If he succeeds, then I’ll have my vengeance for Kureha.”

The wrath in Kaika’s gaze dispelled her doubt. She had learned her lesson from misunderstanding Ageha. This was the devil she chose to serve, and she would entrust her body and soul to her until the end. She took a deep breath, assembled her broken mask, and stood up.

“As you will, Kai-Ojousama.”

“How many?”

“Only one, sir.”

“That can’t be.”

“The sentries and cameras around the perimeter are all intact and have not detected any other intruders.”

“This must be a trap. I can’t believe that little wench found me this quickly. Judging from the strategic ability she has shown so far, that lone intruder is a decoy,” said Kousuke, four of his fingers tapping consecutively and continuously on the table.

“I believe that is highly possible,” said his security chief.

“Not *highly possible*. It’s definitely a ruse of some sort. Keep the sentries at their posts and tell the guards to keep the perimeter secure. Sending one person during daytime is obviously a bait operation. Kaika must be trying to get information or gain entry while we’re distracted. Where’s Kazuki?”

“He left this morning. He said that he had your permission to leave the premises and handle some business in your stead.”

What? He never spoke to me about that. Maybe he had something to take care of and didn’t think it was necessary to waste my time.

Excluding himself, Kousuke trusted his brother more than anyone else. He had certainly earned it. Kazuki had assisted him for years despite being his senior in terms of age. Not blinded by Karasuma’s glaring presence, Kazuki was one of the few people who recognized Kousuke’s ability. Kousuke felt insecure not having his brother with him during this crisis but also relieved that he was safe.

“I see. Send several men to neutralize the target. I’ll stay here in my office and monitor the area using the security cameras.”

“Roger, sir.”

The stiff security chief, clearly displaying his military experience, turned about face and rigidly marched out of the room. This assuaged Kousuke’s fears to a certain extent. Despite the costly overhead, he had hired the best people he could afford for exactly this kind of situation. The police were a joke, so people in power naturally relied on hired professional guards.

He pressed on his terminal, and several video feeds appeared on his display. He easily located the intruder, who was walking towards the mansion on the forest path. He was close enough to the building for the cameras at the walls to see him when zoomed in.

The man was garbed in black. It was a pointless camouflage during daylight hours. He wondered why the man chose to wear it despite that. The man’s face was hidden by a mask of the same color, and his torso was encased by alloy armor.

Isn’t that the armor that Unit 01 used?

He gulped at the possibility that this lone intruder was the one who defeated the cyborg that he sent to kill Kaika. Dismissing that as impossible, he clung to the belief that it took most of Kaika’s resources to survive that attack. This perception was reinforced by his youngest half-sister’s death.

The black infiltrator zipped into the trees once the first group of security personnel reached the gate. They started firing their rifles without restraint. Mount Takao had long lost its tourist appeal due to pollution and had become relatively deserted. It eventually recovered its natural beauty after the tourism industry abandoned it, but it still remained unpopulated save for the occasional hikers. Kousuke had this safe house built years ago taking those factors into consideration.

The armed guards chased after the infiltrator but were met by a falling cherry tree. Shocked by the incredulity of it and unable to escape, two of the guards were crushed underneath.

Impossible!? Even with ARMS, felling a tree like that...

Kousuke zoomed in on the tree trunk and figured out what the intruder had done. The intruder had carved out one side of the tree by rapidly pulling off chunks of it using his fingers. That was certainly possible with cybernetic hands, and so was using alloy legs to kick down a tree with a hollowed trunk. Kousuke’s focus on the absurd feat robbed him of his chance to see

the defeat of the remaining guards. Beaten off-camera, they lay convulsing on the forest floor and leaking iron onto the verdant grass.

“Sir, the vanguard unit has been eliminated. I will send two more units to neutralize the target. The target appears to have multiple cybernetic limbs and is armed with a combat knife. He is also carrying a belt bag with unknown contents,” said the voice from the terminal.

“I can see all that. By the look of things, I think he’s the same mercenary that killed Masayoshi. I’m sure he’s a decoy, but make sure to appropriately judge the danger he poses.”

“Sir, the second guard unit just reported that the third was eliminated. They are currently engaging the target in the front lawn.”

What!?

Kousuke directed his eyes to the display and searched for the correct feed. He was stupefied by the scene.

The intruder held a guard with one hand as he darted towards the rest. Considering the load he carried, his speed as he randomly changed directions to avoid enemy fire was astonishing. The few bullets that were directed properly bore holes only in his human shield. Using the hostage as a ram, he smashed into one of the guards. Bullets bounced off his arm and body armor as he sliced open the necks of two more people.

Kousuke was terrified. What that man, if he could still be called that, was doing was beyond common sense. Even blocked, the impact of the bullets should have rattled his brain and organs. The risk of dying from a lucky headshot should have prevented him from diving into a rain of bullets. It was pure lunacy. This controlled insanity was one of the major goals when he and Kazuki decided to use drugs to remove emotions and instill obedience in their cybernetic soldiers. The intruder was doing exactly what they had simulated with drugs.

One of the two units they had produced was lost in the failed blitzkrieg on Kaika’s mansion. He thanked the gods he had never believed in that he brought Unit 02 to the safehouse as an extra precaution.

“Bring Unit 02 to my office!”

“...Understood. Should we also send the sentry patrols after the intruder?”

He almost approved the suggestion but regained some manner of calm after calling his best weapon to his side.

“No. That’s exactly what that witch wants. We can’t risk opening a hole in our defenses.”

She thinks she has me in check, but she failed to foresee that I could castle.

A few minutes later, the security chief entered Kousuke's office with Unit 02. He handed a remote device to his employer.

"This is the last resort. It would not be wise to use such an unstable weapon," said the chief as he released the device. "I will now personally lead the three remaining units within the building to intercept the enemy. One unit each will guard the east and west hallways. My unit will stay in the corridor leading to this office. We will perform a pincer attack once a unit engages the enemy. Only when the gunshots cease, and I do not report victory, should you activate it."

"...Thank you, Sanada."

"It is my job." The security chief bowed to his employer before leaving the room.

Kousuke sat back down on his chair and stared at the unmoving cyborg the security chief had just left with him. With a press of a button, it would be injected with stimulants, thereby activating it from its dormant state. He rubbed the remote device like a rosary while mumbling words of consolation like a prayer.

He did not want to look at the display in fear of what he would see, but anxiety surpassed that so he moved his eyes to the video feeds. The intruder was checking each room as he ventured further into the building. He slowly got closer to Kousuke's location. The office, which was at the center of the large house, was the farthest point from any entrance.

He really doesn't know where I am?

Kousuke questioned his decision about maintaining the perimeter defenses. It was extremely unlikely, but he pondered the possibility that there was no deeper plot in the enemy's attack. In the end, he opted to trust the decision he made when he was still unflustered.

Like a gang member with a metal bat, the intruder ran while dragging a corpse on the ground with his left hand. He turned a corner and entered the west hallway where he met gunfire. He immediately threw the body towards the group of guards. Using the hallway intersection as cover, the four guards split into pairs and dodged left and right.

The intruder followed right behind the pitched corpse. He punched through the edge of the left wall corner and smashed the jaw of the guard behind it. He then slit the throat of the remaining guard and used the limp body as a shield.

The two guards across the hallway opened fire, but the bullets only hit their crimson dyed ally. The intruder kicked the cadaver towards the guards. The bloody corpse obstructed their vision. The intruder dove to the ground and rolled to the first guard. He cut open the guard's knee with a swipe of his reverse-gripped knife and then stabbed the second guard on the right side of the neck after standing up. The intruder pulled back, tearing the throat open. He continued with the pulling motion and stabbed the kneeling first guard's nape behind him. The smell of iron wafted as abstract patterns of red formed on the white walls.

Kousuke tried to stop his hand from trembling but could not. Seeing the monstrosity that came for him, he felt an urge to relieve himself. He barely noticed his pants getting soaked. There was a toilet several paces away from his desk, but he could no longer remove his eyes from the display.

The swift demise of the west hallway unit meant the failure of the pincer operation. Despite the time the intruder took in checking rooms, he still traveled swiftly deeper into the building.

The intruder arrived at the central hallway that led to his office. The two remaining units led by Sanada were already in position. The intruder still carried a corpse as a shield. Some bullets pierced the flesh barrier but simply ricocheted off his limbs and body armor. One of those bullets hit the camera that monitored the last hallway. Kousuke was now blind.

His teeth chattering, he tightly held onto the remote with both hands as he watched the large double doors at the far end of the room. The gunshots waned. Sanada was silent.

I don't want to die.

I don't deserve to die here.

I don't deserve to die!!!

His fear morphed into fury and elation. He was pushed over the edge.

I'll kill you you son of a bitch I'll kill you right here right now die die die!!!!

He pressed the injection switch. The cyborg jerked to life. It scanned the room but found only Kousuke. Kousuke realized his mistake when the visor focused on him. The cyborgs were indeed unstable, as Sanada had said. Moreover, they were not suited for precision work such as protection and defense. They were better treated as bombs than soldiers.

Without any other target, the cyborg marched towards him. It was supposed to obey his every command, but it seemed to suffer from a malfunction. He tried shouting, pleading, begging it to stop, but it kept its stride. It probably considered Kousuke as a minor threat since it did not sprint towards him, but a threat, no matter how small, was still destined for elimination.

Pressing the deactivation switch would sedate the cyborg, but Kousuke would also be defenseless against the intruder. The doors blew open before Kousuke could reach a decision.

The mindless cyborg immediately recognized the higher threat level of the new enemy. Kousuke stared at the intruder. The enemy was heaving, visibly exhausted. There was blood all over him. He fought all the way here, so it would not be surprising if some of the red liquid was his own. Kousuke's faint hope billowed.

The cyborg turned to the intruder and dashed. The intruder was caught by surprise and was forced to block a punch by crossing his arms. He was blown back, but he used the force to shuffle backward and create distance. Witnessing the difference in current fighting strength, Kousuke felt ecstatic. He did not mind the wetness in his pants despite returning to lucidity. He was that joyous.

Die, you scum! I'll make sure your client follows you soon!

The intruder dropped his knife and stuck his hand in the belt bag on his lower back as Unit 02 drew closer. The instinct driven cyborg launched another right punch, this time a hook. The intruder raised his left forearm to block the blow as he dug his right foot into the floor to brace himself.

He blocked the cyborg's hook, but the force was immense. Cracking his mask, his own blocking arm smashed into his face, but he managed to hold his ground. He countered with a right hook of his own, but it was easily blocked by the cyborg's left forearm.

"Go, finish him off!!!"

Gunshots exploded in the room.

Kousuke initially thought it was from security reinforcements, but reality was not so kind. The intruder held a handgun in his right hand and repeatedly shot point blank at the cyborg's helmet. The bullets ricocheted, but the impact shook the cyborg's human brain. The cyborg fell lifelessly to the ground. The intruder effortlessly twisted the unconscious cyborg's neck two full rotations, as if opening a bottle of soda.

...What just happened?

Kousuke's addled brain tried to analyze what just occurred. The handgun came from the intruder's bag. The counter hook that the intruder threw was meant to be blocked. The cyborg's only weak point was its head. It was all planned. Kousuke's euphoria was suddenly extinguished.

...It can't be. ...He was the one who defeated Unit 01?

Kousuke realized that his first suspicion had been right. He would not be in this situation if he had obeyed his instincts more.

The intruder retrieved his knife. Blood dripped from his chin. He removed his damaged mask and wiped the red fluid staining his left eye using his wrist. He approached Kousuke, who had already scampered away and hugged the wall.

“You probably think you know why I am here.”

I don't want to die..!

“But you're wrong.”

...What?

“Kai, Kaika did not order me to kill you, at least not yet.”

Kousuke saw a lifeline.

“How much is she paying you? I'll pay you double! No, triple! Just name your price!”

“This is personal.”

“What do you mean!? I don't even know you!?” shouted Kousuke, his handsome face dripping with tears and mucus.

“But I know you and what you did to your sister.”

Kaika..? No, Kureha..!

“I wasn't the one who planned that attack! It was Kazuki!!!” He easily betrayed his trusted sibling and partner.

“I was just about to ask you about him. Where is he?” The intruder was now standing over the shivering man.

“H-He left the house earlier today. I don't know where he is right now, but I can make sure you meet him! He's the one you really want!”

“Please call me Kazuki like before. I will always be grateful for your support, and I am hoping for your assistance in the future. I have much to learn from from all of you.” His tone was completely sincere as he bowed, his face disappearing from the profile box on the screen.

“I believe I am speaking for most of us here when I say that your achievement is laudable. You managed to follow through despite such a tragedy. To die of illness at such a young age...” said a female member of the board of directors, looking truly distraught.

She must have a thing for Kousuke. That damn gigolo. Well, it was handy so I shouldn't complain.

“Kousuke's passing... was a shock to us all. He was not only a brother to me, but a trusted and reliable partner. I was surprised that he kept his heart problem a secret even to me, but it was also typical of him to not want others to worry. It was unfortunate that his latest project did not materialize despite all his hard work. His contacts trusted him alone. It would have gone well if he... were still here. He deserves this position, not I.” Kazuki's chubby cheeks trembled in grief.

“The bill you helped pass will rake in more profits in the next six months than the Exceed partnership would have yielded in years. I do not know what you did, but convincing that stubborn Kawahara to whip the votes in the lower house was quite a feat. I am sure Kousuke would be glad that it was you who took his place,” said Makita, wrinkles outlining his smile.

“Thank you. I will do my best to live up to your expectations.”

Several more topics relating to Kazuki's promotion were discussed. The faces on the screen bleeped out one by one as farewells were traded at the end of the meeting. Kazuki finally dropped from the call.

That went better than I thought. I prepared for the possibility that Saionji would make a desperate attempt to denounce my election, but I guess Kaika is too smart to do something that would ruin her reputation among the board. Smart, but naive.

Kaika lost the moment Kureha was killed. Threats only had meaning if they came from the winning side. Kawahara happily took a nice chunk of NGC shares for betraying Kaika. It was a bribe Kazuki, unlike his sister who had to keep fifty-one percent, could afford to dole out after inheriting Kousuke's shares.

He was satisfied with his victory, but it did not make him overconfident. He had lived most of his life being the underdog, so confidence was something he industriously built. Those luckily gifted with self-assurance tended to overestimate themselves. He was not one of them.

Kazuki was still in hiding and generally conducted business digitally. The board of directors were not aware of his current situation because most matters could be handled without the need for physical presence. Holing up did not hurt his pride like it did for Kousuke. That intrinsic difference was probably why one was on the throne of the NGC empire, while the other in a coffin.

He scanned through several documents he needed to study for a meeting with a business partner this afternoon.

But I didn't expect her to have enough military power to actually kill Kousuke. Reprogramming Unit 02 to get rid of him was a wasted effort.

He expected both Kaika and Kousuke to fall when they clashed, but his little sister was proving to be more resilient than he predicted.

I'll make sure that you catch up on the shut eye you missed all these years, sister.

Rin rolled on her bed for the thirty-seventh time tonight. Her long, disheveled hair clung to her face and neck. Her panties and belly button were exposed due to her loose nightie catching between her bolster and the bed. She normally disliked such exposure because she got cold easily, but her mind was too occupied for such trivial worries.

It can't be...

She recalled what she saw several days ago. She had been hiking with a group of friends but got separated from them. Too embarrassed to call her companions and admit that she was lost, she wandered around alone in the forests of Mount Takao. A surreal sight welcomed her as she approached a clearing. A masked man dressed in black was leaning on a tree. The setting sun illuminated red stains all over his body.

Rin instinctively hid herself behind a tree. She knew that revealing herself to a strange man covered in blood was not the wisest thing to do. She silenced her breathing as her heartbeat drummed loudly in her ears. She continued to watch because she feared losing sight of the mysterious individual.

The man reached for his mask and slowly removed it. He wiped the blood dribbling down his brow and cheek using the back of his hand. His face was clearly visible despite the shade from the trees darkening his features. She wanted to deny it, but she had studied that face far too well to mistake it. She remained still until the bloody young man, her co-worker, friend, and maybe something more, donned his mask again and left.

Ageha...

“Come on. Stop being so stubborn, Ageha-sama. You came all the way here already.”

“Okay, okay. I’m going.”

The butler, walking in front of the chef as she held his hand in hers, pulled him towards their destination. Their mistress was already there, impatiently watching their stop-and-go approach.

“Kureha-Ojousama, I have finally managed to drag your pigheaded Oniisama here.” The two of them lined up next to the first visitor and faced the tombstone.

“Stop openly insulting people like that.”

“It is not an insult if it is true.”

“No, by definition, it doesn’t matter whether it’s true or not. It’s still an insult.”

“So you admit that it is true then.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“...You two,” said Kaika, brows furrowed.

“I apologize, Ojousama.”

“She started it.”

“I’m fine with you flirting, but please choose the time and place. Holding hands in front of Kureha’s grave... I wouldn’t be surprised if she haunted you both.” She shook her head, her eyes shut.

Saya’s hand flew from Ageha’s as if it were a hot pan.

“We were not doing anything of the sort. I only hauled this mulish dolt over to pay respects.”

“Is it just my imagination or have you been verbally abusing me recently? With increasing brutality.”

“It is just your imagination.”

Ageha had not looked at the tombstone directly since entering the Nikaidou family cemetery. It was obvious from his demeanor that guilt still gripped his heart.

“Are you still worried about seeing Kureha before Kazuki is dealt with? Let me tell you, that promise may seem cool to you men, but it’s nothing but a nuisance to women. Put yourself in the shoes of the one who has to wait while you try to sate your pointless pride,” said Kaika. She sounded harsh, but her intentions were less thorny.

You can’t trip up here. We’ve only just started.

Ageha remained silent but directed his gaze to Kureha’s grave. He walked closer and reached out to the tombstone. He gently brushed the top, as if dusting it off.

“It’s just not the same. Even if it’s about the same height, it’s not fluffy at all,” he muttered, a miserable smile soiling his fine features.

The other two remained silent. Saya held her breath, as though suppressing an emotion.

“...I’m sorry.”

His hand limply returned to his side. Kaika noticed the repaired silver ring on Ageha’s right hand. It was the same hand he used to touch the monument.

I guess it doesn’t matter if there’s no hair to catch on anymore.

Kaika glimpsed the vacuum that had been carved out of Ageha by Kureha’s demise. Wearing the gift on his right hand was likely a constant reminder that Kureha was no more. Whether that would lead him to salvation or carnage, even Kaika did not know. But she knew she could tilt the odds.

At the edge of Kaika’s vision, she saw Saya’s torment as the young woman fixated on Ageha. It was a brief leakage of her naked feelings. It was blinding, beautiful.

And useful.

“Thank you for bringing me here, Saya.”

“..! I... I just thought that... You are welcome.”

It was a short visit. There was no farewell. All he said was a concise apology. Kaika understood that Ageha held no romantic sentiments about death. What he came here to do was to resolve his feelings, his reality, and his desire.

“You two can go ahead. I want some time alone with her,” said Kaika.

Ageha and Saya both looked surprised but nodded and walked away.

Such a rude pair.

Kaika watched them until they were out of earshot. She turned to Kureha’s gravestone. She wordlessly stared at the intricately engraved name. Her expression gradually darkened.

“I know you won’t forgive me, especially for what I’m doing to Ageha. I deserve every bit of hate you can throw at me...” Her voice started shaking.

“I knew your death was a possibility when I invited that attack. I also knew what it could do to Ageha. But I didn’t know... what I wanted to happen..! I just calculated the odds and rolled the dice without placing a bet..!” She gripped the skirt of her black dress as if trying to tear it. Tears rolled down her cheeks. “I can’t even proudly say I killed you..! I’m so sorry!”



Kaika cursed her own weakness. She should have been willing to sacrifice anything and bear any loss to see her goal realized. Yet she could not even kill her estranged sister. To her, it was the utmost insult to the life that had been used and extinguished. Forestalling her own decision, she had simply let luck decide the outcome.

“I’m sorry the sister you looked up to is such a coward! To top it all off, I lost!!! To that pig!!!”

The sacrifice was further blemished by her failure to see through Kazuki’s facade even though he saw through hers. Mutilated to the point of being unrecognizable, her pride was in tatters.

But that was a minor setback.

Despite being peerless amongst those her age, Kaika’s life was a string of defeats. She was shackled, blindfolded, and gagged. She was helpless and could not change most outcomes. Losing was nothing new, and piecing together her shattered pride was second nature. Gamblers always lost more times than they won. What mattered was *when* they won.

Kaika soon ceased her outburst and dried her face. Unbinding her twintails, she pulled off her ribbon and placed it on top of Kureha’s offering altar. She took out the pair of crimson clamshell hair ties, which was the one and only present from her sister, and clumsily bundled her hair with untrained fingers. Her head looked more unkempt than ever, but anyone would agree that her current self was her most regal appearance.

“Your death will be redeemed. The perfect condiment I created and you completed will spice up this bland world,” she promised without falsehood for the first time since she could remember.

Kaika and Ageha believed themselves strong because they held nothing important. They were both wrong.

This rusted world will move forward, even if I have to make it crawl on its hands and knees.

Definition of Terms:

The terms are arranged as they appear in the first volume.

Guanciale - Italian cured pork jowl or cheek.

Parmigiano - Parmigiano-Reggiano is the full term for this hard and grainy cheese.

Scaloppine - An Italian dish that consists of a dredged and pan-fried thinly sliced meat served with a sauce.

Spaghetti Alla Carbonara - An Italian pasta dish with an egg and cheese sauce.

Secondo - The meat or fish entrée course of a formal Italian meal.

Primo - The typically non-meat entrée course of a formal Italian meal. This course is lighter than the secondo.

Ristorante - Italian for restaurant.

Cucina - Italian for kitchen.

Natto - Fermented soybeans.

Cotoletta - Breaded bone-in cutlet of veal.

Polenta - Cornmeal porridge.

Sala - Italian for dining room.

Camerieri - Italian for wait staff.

Capo cameriere - Italian for chief wait staff.

Cameriera - Italian for female wait staff.

Spaghetti naporitan - Japanese pasta dish with a tomato-based sauce, vegetables, meat, and tabasco.

Tonkatsu - Breaded and fried pork chop.

Uramaki - Sushi roll with the seaweed inside instead of outside.

Dolce - The dessert course of a formal Italian meal.

Antipasto - The slightly heavy starter course of a formal Italian meal.

Okonomiyaki - Cabbage pancake with various toppings.

Lardon - A French term for pork fat.

Ventreche - French bacon.

Burgundy - Dry red wine made in the Burgundy, France.

Demi glace - A French brown sauce that is typically used as a base for other sauces.

Aioli - A French sauce made of garlic, egg yolks, lemon, and olive oil.

Bonito Flakes - Flakes of fermented, dried, and smoked fish usually topped on *okonomiyaki*.