To Hell and Back

by thejillyfish

Summary

It starts with post cards. Izaya has disappeared and gone up on some obscure form of vacation. However, when Shizuo tracks him down to enact a spontaneous whim of revenge, they each have a change in plans. They ultimately end up traveling together.

What they encounter on their journey are people and places that teach them that Ikebukuro isn't the only Hell on Earth.

Notes

This all started with a goofy conversation I had with a friend about the postcards Izaya would send Shizuo, and it became this. I had been wanting to do something with Shizuo/Izaya for a long while, but couldn't bring myself to publish anything. Finally, I had to write something down. I just couldn't get these two out of my head!

Now, it's a novel length whirlwind of blood, sweat, and tears. Whose tears? Well, mostly mine.

If I wasn't so meticulous about building the foundations of their relationship, I'd skip right to them being Dumb Boyfriends. As it is, please bear with me.
Tokyo

Chaos had released its hold on Tokyo with an uncharacteristic lack of flair. The city had become reduced to but a mere metropolitan of materialism and crime. Its noise was now nothing more than the ceaseless pandemonium of traffic and construction. Compared to how the city had been, you could say it was peaceful; quiet even.

Most hadn’t realized the change. Tokyo had lain in this state for almost two months now, but it was hard to hear the deafening blanket of silence that had fallen over the city. So, they continued to go about their lives. For some that meant getting their homework in on time, for others it meant paying money back on time or else facing dire consequences. Many enjoyed the luxury of perfectly ordinary, horribly mundane lives. Sato the postman, for instance, simply went about his business delivering mail as one of the many postmen in Ikebukuro.

Sato whistled a pop song as he approached one of the nondescript apartment buildings on his route. He couldn’t remember of the song’s lyrics, only the melody. Honestly, Sato was sure he did not even know the name of the song, and wondered whether it was something to which his daughter had been listening in his presence. All this passed through Sato’s head as he filled one mailbox after another with the apartment number’s respective mail.

Magazines, bills, junk… Very rarely, Sato noticed, did mail include personal letters nowadays. He couldn’t complain; e-mail had made his line of work just a little easier than it had been before. As he thought this, though, Sato pulled out the bundle for the next apartment - number 8 - which he noticed included a postcard. It would be important to note that this wasn’t the first postcard that Sato had delivered to number 8 in the last six weeks. The phenomenon was most peculiar for number 8, who rarely received any mail at all. Sato wasn’t a typically nosey postman, being a respectable city employee for almost fifteen years. He did, however, wonder what sort of a business the resident of number 8 had receiving a postcard from… from where?

Against his better judgment, Sato peeled back a few envelopes and took a peak. Featuring an impossibly tall, white obelisk, the postcard shouted “Greetings! From Washington D.C.” in bold and tacky wordart. Isn’t that the capital of America? Sato wondered. Besides that, Sato could not help but notice that the piece of architecture had been drawn upon with what appeared to be black pen. To Sato’s embarrassment, the added components offered a more phallic representation of the monument than was already notable.

Blushing, Sato opened number 8’s letter box and quickly dropped in the thin stack of mail. Not before Sato had finished, the door to number 8 opened from inside to a tall and disgruntled young man. Sato instinctively took a step back, fearing he had awoken a beast. He always tried to be quiet with squeaky old boxes. The sun was still harsh this early in the morning, stabbing through any gap between buildings in blinding density. Its rays caused the young man to wince as he stepped onto the terrace, whose mop of blond hair fell well in front of his eyes. Based on the young man’s attire of sweats and a dirty t-shirt, he had no doubt just woken up, but he seemed to disregard the postman as he fumbled for his mail.

“Good morning, Heiwajima-san,” Sato offered since at this point it would be impolite to ignore each other.

“Mornin’” came the absent-minded response. An already lit cigarette dangled carelessly from the man’s lips. The young man leaned against his door while he flipped through his mail despite the cold air outside - it was almost February and Sato himself would have preferred to be inside at that moment. Maybe he doesn’t like to smoke in his apartment?
Though Sato wanted limited interaction with Shizuo Heiwajima, his habit for pleasantries got the best of him, “I see you got another postcard this week!”

Heiwajima’s eyes snapped towards Sato, and Sato swore he saw his life flash before his eyes in that moment. Perhaps it was a touchier subject than it seemed.

“Ah… excuse me,” Sato bowed slightly and took a step towards number 9, “it’s none of my business.”

Mihashi, the personable woman that lived in number 9, greeted Sato to receive the mail herself. She was wrapped tightly in a bathrobe and clutching a warm mug of coffee.

“Sato-san!” She exclaimed, “It’s so cold this time of year! How do you survive?”

Sato smiled, “With nothing but a warm coat and an optimistic personality. Here’s your mail, Mihashi-san.”

“Anything good?” Mihashi asked.

“You know it’s not right for us to look through the mail, Mihashi-san.”

Mihashi scoffed, “Well, you could at least keep all these bills from me, couldn’t you?”

Sato chuckled, “If only -”

*CLANG!*

Both Sato and Mihashi looked bewilderedly towards the source of the sound. In front of number 8, Shizuo Heiwajima’s fist was imbedded in his letterbox. Sato gaped. Heiwajima’s shoulders rose and fell with heavy breathing, and his face, though half hidden behind that hair, seemed twisted in an ugly expression of rage.

“Shizuo-kun!” Mihashi scolded. A crack in the wall had appeared upon the wall behind the letter box.

Heiwajima pulled his fist out of the letter box and straightened himself out. In Heiwajima’s left hand, he clutched his stack of mail tight enough to reduce all the paper to wrinkled messes. He glanced in their direction rather bashfully, which perhaps took Sato more aback than did the act of destruction.

“Sorry,” Heiwajima mumbled just loud enough for them to hear, “I’ll fix that later.”

He took one more long drag of his cigarette before retreating back into his apartment, closing the door behind him so strongly that the whole complex shook. Sato didn’t much more time there before continuing his route.

It’s true that the incarnate chaos that usually lead Shizuo Heiwajima to such outbursts was no longer anywhere in Tokyo. Or even in Japan for that matter. For almost two months, the Ikebukuro streets had been free from witnessing the wild chases to which the residents had grown accustomed.

Nobody really missed it, though. Rather, they revelled in the drama’s absence.

So did Shizuo Heiwajima, in fact, who enjoyed his uncontrollable rage no more than the average Ikebukuro citizen. Unfortunately, chaos wasn’t gone completely. Out of sight and out of mind not so much. As long as Izaya Orihara existed somewhere in the world, Hell would surely always return to bite Shizuo on the ass.
The first post card had arrived from San Francisco. It arrived unceremoniously about two months ago on the morning of November 11th, 2013. On the front had been a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge, and on the back had been a message:

Shizu-Chan,

Thinking of you as I marvel at this landmark of man-made ingenuity and collaboration, seeing as how you’ve effectively demolished every bridge connecting you to other human beings, isolating yourself completely. Also, I know the last time you saw me you were enthusiastically beating me to an inch of my life, but you’ll probably never ever see me again. So let’s call it water under the bridge. Did you know this bridge is famous for suicide? I love America.

I’ll try to keep you updated on my exploits. I know how you worry.

XOXO,
Izaya Orihara

Shinra, to whom Shizuo had shown the postcard, found the wordplay quite amusing.

“I didn’t know that Izaya-kun played with words so much!” He had said.

A few months ago, Shizuo had took his strife with Izaya farther than it had ever gone before. If it had not been for the intervention of a dear friend, Shizuo just might have killed Izaya once and for all. However, the case was that Shizuo had not. Izaya Orihara remained alive, but the state of his life was very much a mystery to those left in Tokyo, since he had apparently upped and left the country without a word to anybody. Not to his clients, not to his secretary, not to his family, not to anybody. Now, the only method of having any idea of where Izaya might be is through the passive aggressive post card he would send Shizuo in the mail.

San Francisco had only been the beginning. Shizuo continued to receive postage from places such as Los Angeles, San Diego, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, St. Louis, New Orleans, Orlando, and now the latest location - Washington D.C.. Each one had come with an arcane jab at Shizuo’s self-esteem and an occasional innuendo. The latest had used the United States’ Washington Monument as an example of the epitome of male appendages, one to which - as Izaya had said - Shizuo’s would never compare. When Shizuo had complained to Celty, she expressed sympathy for her longtime friend but also a reluctant admiration for Izaya’s finesse at psychological warfare. Though the effects weren’t as brutal as Izaya is known to be, his actions were certainly taking a revenge on Shizuo.

If Shizuo had ever felt the flicker of hope that Izaya was finally gone from his life after several weeks not hearing from the bastard, the arrival from America had efficiently snuffed it out. The postcards kept Shizuo’s blood boiling and temper at an all time high. The day on which the card arrived from Washington D.C. saw Shizuo in a most disagreeable mood.

He went to work that day as was expected of him. Tom greeted him with caution, sensing the tension radiating from Shizuo.

“Looking a little rough there, Shizuo, and we haven’t even started collecting! You alright?”

“Yeah, fine. It’s nothing,” Shizuo dismissed. He stuffed his hands in his pocket, one of which contained the crumpled form of the postcard from that morning. Grimacing, Shizuo clenched his fist around it and followed Tom to where they’d find their first debtor of the the day.
Part of Shizuo took comfort that the postcard seemed to be evidence that the likelihood of Izaya appearing before him there in Ikebukuro were slim to none. Unless, Shizuo wondered, if Izaya had ways of sending mail from a place where he was not. *What am I thinking, of course he does!* But was he? Shizuo continued to scrutinize the city with the same amount of suspicion as usual.

“You still owe Satoshi-san 500,000¥, Namikawa-san,” Tom was saying to a cowering man. The way the man’s fearful little beady eyes were sizing up Shizuo was extremely irritating. Shizuo shot the man a nasty glare from above his sunglasses, causing the man called Namikawa to shudder.


“Oh? Don’t have it?” Tom tisked, “Well, that’s no good.”

“No wait!” Namikawa pleaded, “I was supposed to get the money from a guy, but he left! He’s not in the city anymore! I can’t find him!”

Shizuo felt his face twitch, as if the predicament resonated with him.

“Well,” Tom said, “that’s not exactly going to go over well with the boss… We might have to take whatever you have on you.” Namikawa wailed.

“What was supposed to give you the money?!” Shizuo demanded. Beside him, Tom started. Technically, Shizuo wasn’t really supposed to do much in these situations unless the guys got rough or physical. He wondered, though, about Namikawa. He wondered about men fleeing the city. Unfortunately, Namikawa just became less and less able to form coherent thoughts. His blabbering just added to Shizuo’s already waning patience.

Snapping, Shizuo pulled out his fists and punched Namikawa right in the jaw. The man hit the ground a few meters away, losing an unflattering amount of teeth along the way.

“Shizuo!” Tom warned, but it didn’t reach Shizuo’s ears. Unwilling to stop, Shizuo ripped up the nearest heavy object - a steel door. Namikawa was already on his feet and scurrying away when Shizuo chucked the door in the man’s direction. By the time Shizuo had his next projectile in hand, Namikawa was long gone.

Blinded by a searing mix of rage, paranoia, and grief, Shizuo hoisted a steel beam above his head and turned around and round, calling out the name of one who could not have been there.

“IIIIIZAAAAYAAAA! COME OUT HERE YOU BASTARD I KNOW YOU’RE WATCHING!! IZAAAAA-”

“Shizuo!”

Shizuo turned toward Tom and his vision began to clear. At most, Tom looked disgruntled and a little confused.

When Tom saw that Shizuo’s grip on the beam had slacken, as did his impression, he said, “‘Izaya?’ What are you going on about? We’re the only one’s here.”

Regaining his composure, Shizuo looked around. Tom was right, they were the only ones there. Though, a few spectators from the busier streets had made their way to peek around the corner, only to haul ass as soon they saw who was causing a ruckus. None resembled the tumor plaguing Shizuo’s imagination. Wherever Izaya was, he wasn’t there. Shizuo cursed as he realized that freaking out like this over a postcard was probably just what the bastard would have intended.
He haphazardly tossed the beam aside. “Careful!” Tom chastised, then he scratched the back of his head. Looking towards the direction in which Namikawa escaped, he mourned. “We didn’t even collect the money.”

“Sorry,” Shizuo apologized.

“It’s fine.” Tom said, shrugging. Next, he spotted something, “Oh, did you drop this?”

Tom reached for what was previously crumpled in Shizuo’s pocket, now lying on the floor.

“Oh, that’s…” Shizuo’s heart skipped a beat.

Already flattening out the postcard, Tom observed the contents on the back. He looked to Shizuo wide-eyed. “I didn’t know you were getting mail from Izaya Orihara!”

Shizuo glowered, “Yeah, well… It’s not exactly…”

Tom turned the card over and gasped. He held it up for Shizuo to see, pointing at the front’s picture. “Shizuo… that’s a penis.”

Snatching it back, Shizuo shoved the card back in his pocket. Tom let out a long, sympathetic whistle.

“Wow,” Tom said, “I just thought he was dead, was all. Most people did.”

“Hmm?” Shizuo raised an eyebrow. Tom frowned.

“Well, you and Vorona got him pretty good, didn’t you? And then poof! He was gone. You sure you didn’t kill him?”

Honestly, the night to which Tom was referring was a blur of fury to Shizuo. He did remember Izaya, wanting so much to end it there, and Vorona stopping him. That’s about it though, Izaya’s condition a mystery to him. All he registered when thinking about it all was a physical reaction of jittering and tension coursing through his veins.

“Yes,” Shizuo bit out, “I’m sure.” He stormed away, despite unknowing of where Tom had to take them next.

Hours later, Shizuo found himself walking through the park in the bitter cold. The sun had already set, and not many people remained outdoors. This time of year, those on the streets were most likely shopping. Thankfully, they avoided idle strolls through the park, so Shizuo could enjoy his smoking habit with a little more peace. He wasn’t bothered, though, when he heard the familiar whinny of an engine closeby.

Celty drove up and parked before him, adorned in her usual black leather catsuit. Shizuo might have been envious of her resistance to the cold were he a little more vulnerable to it himself; he was never one to feel the effects from the outside elements.

“Hey, Celty,” he greeted as she walked over, waving. She didn’t wait too much time before she whipped out her PDA and began typing.

[Hey! I heard about what happened while you were at work earlier.]
He should have known.

“Oh, yeah, that,” Shizuo leaned back on a rail and sighed out a billow of smoke from his cigarette.

Celty continued without much ado, [That hasn’t happened so often lately, so I wondered if you had gotten another postcard from Izaya.]

Instead of answering her directly, Shizuo just pulled the postcard out of his pocket and handed it to her. After all, the high chances that he’d probably see Celty today were the main reason he had brought it along in the first place. It was a shame that the card also seemed to serve as a weight on his nerves.

Shizuo watched Celty read the back. When she turned to observe the front, she held up a hand to cover an invisible mouth in wasted attempts to suppress a tragically inaudible laugh. Unfortunately, she could do little to hide the humorous shake in her shoulders. Shizuo groaned a little, and Celty returned to her PDA.

[I’m sorry,] she typed, [this isn’t funny. Actually, it’s really disturbing. I don’t like the idea of Izaya loose in a city that contains most of the world’s most powerful people any more than I enjoy him here.]

He hadn’t thought about that yet. Shizuo’s eye widened, “You don’t think…?!”

[Then again, maybe it’s nothing. As far as we know, nothing news-breaking had happened in the previous cities he’d been in.]

No, but Shizuo was sure. “He’s definitely planning something, right? I knew it, that bastard!”

Celty waved her hand dismissively, [I wouldn’t dwell on it. After all, we all know how he likes to narrow his harassment down to you. He’s not in Japan, so you should be thankful.]

“But maybe that’s just it. He gave up on Japan after what happened, and now he’s destroying lives somewhere that he thinks he’s safe! If he is planning to, I don’t know, bring down America, shouldn’t someone stop him?”

Seeming to consider this, Celty typed, [Maybe, but that’s not really our place. They have people for that. The CIA, FBI, NBC, CBS... a bunch of other letters.]

Shizuo remained unconvinced, “You say that like Japan’s officials could ever defend themselves against him.”

Celty shrugged, [In any case, don’t you think it would be odd that he would send you postcards to let you know exactly where he was? Wouldn’t that be counterproductive for him?]

“I never understood how his crazy mind works anyways,” Shizuo grumbled.

[Anyways, what could we do? Go to America?] Celty anxiously typed the next bit, [I wouldn’t even be able to get a passport!!]

Her attitude always refreshed Shizuo in these times. He smiled fondly, “No, I guess that would be a bit ridiculous.” He put out his cigarette in a nearby public tray. Though Celty seemed comforted by his agreement, Shizuo still felt a dreadful nagging in his gut.

[Well,] Celty typed, [I better get going.]
“Yeah,” Shizuo said, “Me too.”

Before they parted, Celty put a soothing hand on Shizuo’s shoulder.

[Don’t do anything rash, okay?]

Shizuo smirked, “Who do you think you’re talking to? Of course not!”

Celty visibly relaxed after that. She bid Shizuo farewell as she mounted her bike again, soon taking off and disappearing into the city’s deepest shadows. Shizuo made his way home lazily, mulling over his discussion with Celty and - most regrettably - over Izaya Orihara.

When he returned to his apartment, Shizuo pulled out the collection of American postcards he had gathered over the last few months while he ate his dinner of convenient store bought sushi. Embarrassed that he still had them, Shizuo believed he kept them for the same reasons he had expressed to Celty; he was suspicious. The idea that Izaya Orihara could possibly, currently be bringing down the so-called “free world” was one that had been bothering Shizuo since San Francisco. Now that Izaya was more than likely in the capital hub of the Western world, Shizuo was even more leery of the postcards’ meanings. He arranged the cards in order to examine them. While there was no guarantee how genuine these postcards were, Shizuo desperately searched for a pattern, a clue, anything.

He imagined that if he had been some genius detective, he could have drawn some sort of conclusion from the cards. As it was, Shizuo admitted he was not the kind of intelligent person for that job. All he saw were obnoxious reminders of a neverending feud with the man that would probably be the death of him. Glaring at the postcards, Shizuo did notice one thing to which he had never before paid attention. Each of the postcards had a return address, most from places that seemed to be hotels.

Frowning, Shizuo thought that Izaya was really getting sloppy if he leaving such details for Shizuo. He’s practically leading me right to him. Does he want me to find him? Shizuo quickly shook his head at that idea. Don’t be stupid. He picked up the card from Washington D.C. and looked at the return address.

Washington Marriott Metro Center
775 12th St. NW
Washington, DC 20005
United States of America

Strangely enough, it was even written in Izaya’s own handwriting. It dawned on Shizuo that if he wanted to track down Izaya and beat the crap out of him for this bullshit, he probably could. Or could he? Who knew if Izaya was even in D.C. by the time his postcard reached Tokyo.

Out of curiosity, Shizuo brought out his computer and looked up how much a flight from Tokyo to Washington D.C. would be. As soon as Shizuo saw the price, he almost choked on his sushi. He couldn’t have afforded that trip if he sold his soul.

Unless… Shizuo had one idea, but he quickly pushed the thought away. Besides, what was he going
to do? Fly across the globe just to pound Izaya into the ground? Shizuo did feel a warm sensation swell in his heart at the idea, but he’d never even been outside the country. He’d never even been on a plane before, and surely his funds as a bodyguard were not enough to cover such an endeavor.

However, he did have another source of income. Shizuo found his way wandering into his bedroom and opening up his underwear drawer. Underneath all his boxers, Shizuo kept a safety box. Inside contained the passport he had gotten ages ago as a precaution of living in such an unforgiving environment, his birth certificate, a few other precious valuables, and an envelope stalked with an unused credit card and cash. He realized that he should probably keep these sort of things in a more impenetrable case and in a less conspicuous place than his underwear drawer, but he didn’t exactly have a vault inside his tiny apartment, or a good enough relationship with any bank.

The money had come from his brother Kasuka. As much as Shizuo had tried to refuse the act of charity, Kasuka had insisted that Shizuo kept it in case of emergencies. Kasuka was well aware that his older brother was often the target of people who could easily be described as evil incarnate. Even when Shizuo was worst off, he had no intention of using his brother’s money. Nothing had yet happened in Shizuo’s life that he’d constitute as an emergency worthy of using a favor from Kasuka. But now?

Shizuo pulled out the box, brought it to his bed, and opened it with the key that he kept in his wallet. He stared at the envelope, and the envelope stared right back. Shizuo swore that it was judging him a little bit.

Jumping back as if the money had bitten him on the hand, Shizuo cursed himself. “What am I doing?!?”

However, wasn’t this an emergency? If Izaya Orihara was planning something on a global scale, and the only one who knew where he was and what he was doing was Shizuo… shouldn’t he do something?

I should, Shizuo told himself, but he remained wary.

Challenging himself, Shizuo walked back into the kitchen where he saw the postcards lying out on his table. All of a sudden, Shizuo could imagine Izaya Orihara there, in his kitchen, taunting him and calling him a stupid coward for doing nothing but getting angry.

“Stupid monster, like you could do anything to stop me anyways. An idiot like you? All you ever do is explode and spread your rage everywhere. And that’s what you’ll keep doing, won’t you? Just sit there in ‘bukuro, I’m perfectly safe from you here.”

The imaginary words struck a chord within Shizuo that ricocheted throughout his entire body until it caused every vein to seer with an unquenchable fury.

“LIKE HELL YOU ARE.”

A couple hours later, Shizuo found himself getting out of a cab at Narita with nothing but what he could squeeze into a backpack and carry on his body.

Never having been inside the airport before, Shizuo struggled to find the right desk which only added to his fuming demeanor. Finally, he found the place for international flights. Luckily it was almost 3AM and no one was in line. He approached the girl sitting there and slammed down the unused credit card from Kasuka.
“Get me to Washington D.C. so I can finally put an end to that miserable excuse for a human being.”

Behind the counter, the young woman just raised an eyebrow. After a moment, she scrupulously took the card.

“You know, no matter what you’re going to America for, I’m going to have to see your passport.”

“Oh, right.”

The whole ordeal of going through security and customs was completely foreign to Shizuo. If anything, he found the whole routine tedious. Rather than getting discouraged, Shizuo became increasingly annoyed until he just blamed Izaya for every hassle that came with travelling. He had just enough time to think clearly enough to send Tom a text saying that he would not be at work that morning. But, before he knew it, Shizuo was being herded like a sheep into a 727 and into a seat that could barely fit his whole body. On either side of him were families and businessmen. Somewhere in the plane, a baby wouldn’t stop crying.

It wasn’t until the plane was taking off and in the air that Shizuo realized that perhaps he had made an awful, terrible mistake.
Los Angeles

Chapter Summary

Brief LAX interlude. Shizuo is almost mistaken for a terrorist what else is new.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shizuo should have never trapped himself in a confined place thirty thousand feet above the ground for eleven hours. After that, he’d have to get on another plane in Los Angeles and fly another five hours to DC. Though he tried to sleep the whole way, he found getting comfortable in the airplane’s narrow, short-legged coach seats to be an impossible process. He fidgeted often, and the gentlemen next to him often regarded Shizuo with a peevish leer. Shizuo couldn’t have cared less about what suited-up snob thought of him, but he was suddenly very aware of his strength. He was having terrible visions of accidentally punching a hole in the plane, sending a hundred people plummeting to their death over the Pacific Ocean. His wits weren’t exactly aiding in his quest to sleep through this ordeal.

Since the whole decision to leave Japan had been a whim anyways, he hadn’t exactly prepared any form of entertainment for his journey. The only reading material he had were the postcards he had brought along, and those certainly weren’t going to help his nerves. Luckily, the plane included screens on the back of their seats so that passengers could choose from a number of movies to watch with the headphones they were provided. Most were Hollywood blockbusters, but there were some Japanese ones. All that Shizuo had seen before, though. Ironically, he found one that was based in Washington DC, so Shizuo decided to watch that in a horrid Japanese dub. The film turned out to be about internal American terrorists infiltrating the White House and taking the black president hostage, only to be thwarted by a heroic white dude.

Eventually, Shizuo managed to fall asleep. He dreamed about Izaya in the film’s role of the terrorists, destroying Washington from within. Instead of a small army of bitter white guys, the White House was taken by a small army of Izayas, and Shizuo had to take on the role of heroic Japanese tourist in order to save President Barack Obama. Shizuo woke up several times to the sounds of himself snoring, and everytime he embarrassedly willed himself to fall back asleep.

Several uncomfortable naps and bad inflight movies later, Shizuo arrived at an airport in Los Angeles. Shizuo had come to terms with that he had no idea how to do any of this. He knew he had to transfer to another plane to actually get to DC, which was something he would never have imagined was something planes did. Who knew America was so big? Shizuo found it hard to grasp that it took five hours to fly and still be in the same country.

Since all Shizuo had was a backpack, he didn’t have to go through baggage claim. All he had to do was go through customs. He got into a line with other Japanese people who seemed to be having their IDs checked and passports stamped by CBP officers - a group Shizuo only learned about when filling out papers given to him to fill out during the flight. Celty had been right; America had a lot of letter organizations.

When Shizuo got up to the counter and presented his passport, ticket, visa papers from the plane, and ID, the grumpy worker regarded him suspiciously. The man pointed to his backpack and asked him
something in English. Only then did Shizuo realize how screwed he was; Shizuo’s English skills were absolute shit.

When Shizuo remained silent, the man cleared his throat and asked the same question again, a little more slowly and definitely more sternly. Shizuo was pretty sure he was asking if the backpack was all the luggage he had, so Shizuo mustered up most of his English skills to answer him. “Th…this is all I… have?”

The CBP officer frowned and pointed to Shizuo’s ticket. He spoke in English again, but Shizuo was able to make out “one way” and “no ticket.” It dawned on Shizuo that his position was definitely suspicious. One way ticket to the American capital with just a backpack? Um.

Shizuo shook his head, “Just one day.”

“All the way from Japan for one day?” The CBP officer raised an eyebrow. Shizuo nodded.

“Family… emergency? Emergency.”

“‘Family emergency,’” the guy repeated, observing Shizuo skeptically. This probably wasn’t the best time for Shizuo to be showing the “nasty expression” people told him he always wore, so he forced a smile. Judging by the officer’s reaction, the strained expression might have been even more disturbing than his regular face. His heart was beginning to pound in his ears. *I did not just fly eleven hours to be arrested by border control.*

Finally, the CBP officer just shrugged. Shizuo released the air he’d been holding in as the man generously stamped Shizuo’s passport.

“Well, welcome to the United States, Mr. Heiwajima.” The officer returned all of Shizuo’s documents to him. Relieved, Shizuo thanked the man in Japanese by habit and quickly again in English.

Walking through LAX, Shizuo absorbed being in another country for the first time. First of all, everything was in English. Though he could read only the important things, Shizuo thanked his English classes from high school. The lack of Japanese anywhere was disheartening. The only other language Shizuo saw frequently was another European language he didn’t recognize. There were palm trees everywhere, which Shizuo had never seen before. Another thing Shizuo had never seen before were so many different races of people in one place. Some he’d admit he wouldn’t even know how to categorize. Outside, it appeared to be nighttime in Los Angeles, and Shizuo had no idea what time it was.

And it was hot. Really hot. It was January here too, wasn’t it?

When Shizuo got to the gate for his flight to DC, he still had to wait almost two hours to board. With nothing else to do, Shizuo was faced with nothing more with his doubts about this whole trip. He already felt lost and frustrated. Not to mention, he was exhausted.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Shizuo brought out his cellphone which was on it’s last bits of life. He saw, though, that he had absolutely no signal. Not even a trace. *I can’t use an international cell phone here, can I?* He couldn’t call Kasuka, Celty, Shinra, Tom, anyone. *Shitshitshitshit.*

As soon as he started panicking, he remembered that he still had his emergency money in the backpack. There were stores and food courts all around the terminals, some even had cellphones. Since he had the time to kill, Shizuo decided *Why the hell not?*

However, he didn’t get far before he hit another obstacle. Everything was in dollars, and all he had
was yen and the credit card. Shizuo was wary to use the credit card again, not exactly sure what was left on it. Fortunately, there was also a place to exchange currency.

*Maybe traveling’s not so hard, Shizuo thought, They seem to have everything right here!*

Shizuo gave the currency woman his wad of money, she said something in English that sounded like “Hahahaha, wow, damn. Alright.”

When she returned the cash in dollars, Shizuo completely understood why she had reacted that way.

As absurd as this whole business was, Shizuo had to admit that he found it all a bit thrilling. He had hardly ever left Tokyo, and now he was in America, where it was warm in the winter, and took five hours to get to the other side in a plane. He’d already seen palm trees, strange languages, and a hundred natural blonds.

By the time Shizuo boarded his plane to Washington two hours later, he had bought a new cell phone and eaten from a place with “bread” in the name. He had temporarily forgotten about the dread that awaited him on the other end of this flight.

Somehow he had scored a window seat this time, and he was able use his coat as a pillow and rest his head against the wall of the plane. The pilot soon came on the loudspeaker to greet the passengers. He was definitely American and spoke in perfect English; Shizuo understood little. But, he understood when the pilot announced that they would arrive at Washington at 6am, EST. Shizuo remembered that America’s east coast was ahead in time than their west coast, but behind in Japanese time. He found it all very confusing, but he knew that dawn would be breaking when he landed.

The plane took off and he was on his way. He closed his eyes and pretended that he was chasing the sun.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter's kinda dull??! I promise Izaya in the next chapter, so

BUT which is preferable: shorter chapters and faster updates, or longer chapters and slower updates? I wanted to organize it all by location, but that can get pretty lengthy. I already have a good chunk of DC written, but wasn't sure whether or not I should wait...
He hadn’t even seen Izaya, and yet he was already getting Shizuo into trouble.

*~things are not always what they appear to be~*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Take me here.” Shizuo shoved the Washington DC postcard in the face of the taxi driver, pointing to the return address. He had only landed a half an hour ago and was reeling to finally find Izaya, to finish what he’d come to America to do.

The taxi driver was far less enthusiastic as he started driving into the city.

“So where are you from?” The driver asked in English. Shizuo just gave the driver an intimidating scowl; he didn’t feel like chatting. The man quickly backed off and focussed solely on driving.

They crossed a vast river and soon the capital came into view. The sun was barely above the horizon, but it bathed what it touched in a soft orange light. If Shizuo hadn’t watched that movie on the plane that was based in Washington, Shizuo would have wondered if he was in really America. He hadn’t really gotten to see Los Angeles in the brief time he’d been there - just the inside of the airport. He’d seen movies based in that city, but he wondered if up close it looked more like this place. From what he could see of Washington, there wasn’t a long skyline of towers and skyscrapers. The tallest piece of architecture Shizuo could see was a looming white spier in the distance - the one featured on the front of Izaya’s postcard. Shizuo had expected American cities to all look like what he’d seen of New York City, which seemed as metropolitan as Tokyo. At one point, the cab passed a white circular monument upon the riverbed that, to Shizuo, looked Greek.

As the cab took him into the heart of America’s capital, Shizuo kept his eyes peeled for a familiar black parka somewhere on the streets. He knew he would never be so lucky, but he’d managed to find Izaya in Ikebukuro’s crowds often enough. Most of the time, though, he had always felt like an alarm was going off in his head whenever Izaya was nearby. A nasty tugging had always pulled in his chest towards whichever direction Izaya happened to be. Now, though, he was in a completely foreign country with no lay of the land. All he saw were thousands of marble columns carved into important-looking buildings and domes wide enough in diameter that they could encompass half of Ikebukuro. Most of the people looked just as important and made of money, decked in suits and carrying leather briefcases. No Izaya to be seen.

Finally, the cab came to a stop in front a fancy hotel with “Marriott” displayed above its entrance, just like the name on Izaya’s postcard. Shizuo hastily paid the cabby before slinging his backpack over his shoulder and striding into the hotel.

Right away he felt out of place. The hotel was obviously for people in a financial position far
It even smelled like money, a stagnant clean stench. An air of enforced social hierarchy hit Shizuo as soon as he walked through the perfectly translucent glass doors. All the surfaces were pristinely polished, and the people were just as properly dressed. Well, not everyone. There was a family that was checking in, and their teenage son was still in his pajamas, half-asleep in a leather chair the lobby provided. Shizuo almost sympathized; it wasn’t even 8am, he hadn’t gotten a proper night’s sleep since… he didn’t even know when. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t showered in the same amount of time. He hoped he wasn’t emitting some horrible body odor.

But he remained agitated for other reasons. Even though Shizuo knew that there was a chance Izaya was no longer in this city, the possibility that Izaya could be sitting in a room just several stories above him left Shizuo feeling very unnerved.

Then he realized that out of hundreds of rooms, Shizuo had no idea which could be Izaya’s.

“Tell me which room is Izaya Orihara’s,” Shizuo demanded when he approached a concierge desk. Behind the desk, the female employee looked up, a little bewildered. She was brunette but undoubtedly caucasian.

She recovered from the surprise, smiled and only spoke in English, “Oh! Um, sorry! Could you repeat that?”

Shizuo wasn’t sure how to answer her. The barrier only made him more frustrated, and he ended up just repeating the same demand in louder, slower Japanese. She clearly had no idea what he was saying, and he might have been glowering at her for she looked rather daunted. Next, she disregarded Shizuo and instead called to a male employee who was preoccupied behind him. The male, who at least looked East Asian, switched places with her.

The new concierge smiled. He greeted Shizuo in mediocre Japanese. “Sorry about that! Deborah is more familiar speaking with our European guests. Can I help you instead?”

“Which room is Izaya Orihara staying in?” Shizuo asked once again, gruffly. After he said it, he considered the possibility that Izaya might not necessarily be using his real name. However, the name appeared to ring familiar with the concierge.

“Mr. Orihara?” The concierge repeated. Shizuo raised an eyebrow at ‘mister,’ “Are you here to see him?”

“Yes!” Shizuo bit out.

The concierge smiled professionally, “I’m sorry, we’re not allowed to give out the room numbers of our guests without their consent.”

Shizuo scoffed, “Fine! Then I’ll go find it myself!” He was prepared to barge down every door in the hotel if it meant finding the man he came here to destroy.

Before he could move away, the concierge stopped him. “Uh, sir? If you’re not a guest here, you can’t get into the residence floors.”

“Then tell him to get down here!” Shizuo growled. The concierge was now frowning nervously at Shizuo and kept making wary eye contact with the security guards on either side of the lobby.

“I’m afraid Mr. Orihara has already left the hotel this morning,” The concierge explained.

“Then tell me where he went!” Shizuo’s voice kept getting louder, and he could sense the people in the lobby were beginning to stare.
“We are not authorized to give you that information.”

“‘Authorized’ my ass,” Shizuo was already losing his temper. He slammed his fist down on the counter, causing the brass to dent.

“Sir!” The concierge yelped.

At a boiling point, Shizuo grabbed the man by the collar and yanked him forward, “TELL ME WHERE HE WENT!!”

“Security!!”

Ah crap. Shizuo saw at least three security guards closing in on him from either side. One grabbed his arm, and Shizuo released the concierge in order to free himself from security. He sent the guard flying into the other two, knocking them down into a heap. A woman screamed, and the teenager that had been sleeping was finally awake and looking excited about his family’s vacation for the first time.

Behind Shizuo, the concierge yelled, “Get him!!”

Shizuo dashed out of the Marriott hotel with about five security guards on his heel. The pedestrians outside all gasped and moved out the way for the pandemonium. Of course, Shizuo had no idea where he was going, but getting arrested in a foreign country was not on his to-do list. So he just kept running, and he cursed out Izaya as he did. He hadn’t even been in Washington for half a day, he hadn’t even seen Izaya and yet he was already getting Shizuo into trouble.

Years of chasing Izaya around Ikebukuro has garnered Shizuo quite a bit of speed. He could outrun the security guards, but he ended up miles away from the hotel. Finally confident that he had lost his tail, Shizuo slowed to a stop and caught his breath. Looking around, for a moment Shizuo believed that he ran all the way back to Japan.

Though they were not in bloom, Shizuo could not mistake the barren trees around him for anything other than cherry blossom trees. The trees that were so abundant in Japan swayed unceremoniously around Shizuo and the buildings of marble and brick. If it weren’t for the very foreign architecture, Shizuo might have believed he had suddenly teleported half across the planet. He had no idea so many cherry blossom trees grew anywhere other than Japan, but here they were, planted methodically in America’s capital. He vaguely wondered if that was supposed to mean anything significant between the two counties, but Shizuo had more pressing matters to deal with.

Since he had not found Izaya at the hotel, Shizuo had to find him another way. On the other hand, his visit to the Marriott had confirmed one thing for Shizuo: Izaya was undoubtedly still in Washington DC. He may even return to that same hotel later that day, but Shizuo doubted that the hotel would welcome him so kindly twice. So instead, Shizuo would have to find Izaya as he did many times in Tokyo: by walking the streets. Washington seemed pretty small compared to Tokyo, too, so hard could it be?

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Apparently, an unfamiliar city can become incredibly large if you have no idea where you’re going. Shizuo did not.

He wandered around for hours. He was hungry and Washington was, unlike Los Angeles, very cold. Not as cold as Japan this time of year, but undeniably chilly. *Fuck the cold,* Shizuo thought bitterly as he passed another war memorial. Yeah, there were a lot of war memorials in this city, much to
Shizuo’s surprise. This one for the Korean War. Shizuo hadn’t even known there had been so many wars in America, but on second thought it didn’t surprise him that much.

The fact that there weren’t that many Japanese men on the street sort of aided in Shizuo’s search. There were more Asian people than he expected, but definitely not the majority. He could never mistake Izaya, though, with all the tall white and black men in Washington. Actually, where Shizuo was currently was mostly populated by students on field trips, here to see the memorials. Finding all their noise both irritating and distracting, Shizuo put some distance between them.

Shizuo came upon a massive park that hosted a very long, flat pool. The body of water stretched for what seemed like miles, and at either end were very impressive structures. On one, a large, white, Greek-looking building with columns all around, and on the other was a circular display of marble or granite surrounding a wide water fountain. People were littered everywhere along this park, many taking pictures. Neither of these, however, were the structures that caused Shizuo’s breath to catch.

He saw it reflected upon the water’s glossy surface first - the white obelisk that Izaya had turned into a joke on his postcard. Shizuo followed the mirrored image to his right and saw the monument right before his eyes. Up close, it looked much taller than Shizuo had imagined from its picture, or even from seeing it from a distance.

Shizuo took his chancing upon the monument as a sign that he was headed in the right direction. He was beginning to feel that tugging in his chest, that vigilance he felt whenever Izaya snuck into his path. Following those feelings, Shizuo started walking towards the spier.

*I might have been born with Izaya survival instincts*, Shizuo cursed himself as the sensation grew. He kept attentive eyes peeled on everyone he passed. They all appeared to be enjoying the sights, and Shizuo wished he could have. By the time Shizuo had approached the monument - which he learned from a large plaque nearby was appropriately called the Washington monument - he wondered if this was how tourists felt when they marvelled out the Tokyo Tower.

Turning his attention away from the tower, Shizuo began searching the crowd that gathered at its base. He circled the monument about three times, but the most of whom he saw were students, families, a few couples, and security guards. *There sure is a lot of security here*, Shizuo noted.

Despite the unwavering instinct that Izaya was nearby, Shizuo was about ready to give up. His stomach growled, and Shizuo decided he was better off finding some lunch before he searched anymore. Maybe if he returned to that hotel later, he could stake it out and wait for Izaya to go in or come out. If he couldn’t find Izaya by that night, he’d either have to find someplace to lodge in with the little money he had left he would have to return airport. He’d have to return to Japan, empty-handed and a little lower on himself than before.

His shoulders sagged. He really was an idiot, flying across the world on some wild goose chase.

A hyena’s laugh caught Shizuo’s attention. He followed the direction of the sound and felt even more depressed when he saw that it was just a couple goofing around with each other. Shizuo watched them for a moment, as they looked so delighted in each other’s presence. They were about fifty meters away on the lawn, pushing, swatting and embracing each other. They were definitely two guys, Shizuo noticed, the larger and more burly one leaning in to kiss the smaller, who playfully rejected the advance. Shizuo was about to give them their privacy until he realized that one of them was definitely Izaya.

He gaped. He’d finally found the bastard. Izaya Orihara was a stone throw away from him, beaming like a smitten schoolgirl with a random caucasian guy Shizuo had never seen before. And, all Shizuo could do was stand there and stare like a dumbfounded moron. Whoever that big white guy was, he
was pretty handsy. *Who the hell...?* Had Izaya gotten some kind of American boyfriend over the last months? Izaya didn’t seem to mind at all. Actually, to Shizuo’s disgust, he’d never seen Izaya look so genuinely gleeful. *Not a fucking chance,* Shizuo told himself as his blood began to boil. Shizuo wasn’t sure what set him off: that he had finally found Izaya and could beat him into a pulp or that he had finally found Izaya but looking so damn innocent.

Shizuo crossed the lawn in record-breaking time. The couple never saw him coming. Somehow, though, Shizuo missed Izaya when he swung his fist. He ended up hitting the stranger square in the jaw, sending the man flying. A modest crater was created upon his impact to the ground. People were screaming, but Shizuo’s blood was pounding loudly in his ear. All he could focus on was the task at hand. He turned to Izaya, fully prepared to rip a new limb, but he was stopped mid swing.

Rather than one of shock, anger, or anything along those lines, Izaya’s expression was one of absolute delight. He wasn’t even looking Shizuo. His sight was lain upon the limp man with whom he had just been canoodling. When Izaya finally brought his eyes to meet Shizuo’s, they contained an unfamiliar gleam. Shizuo wondered, in that brief instance, if he was looking at Izaya Orihara after all. But Shizuo’s doubt were almost instantly demolished as Izaya’s face fell into the smirk that Shizuo had come to know all too well.

He raised his fist once more and felt the veins in his temple throb.

“IIIIIIIIIIIZAAAAAAAAAAYAAA-”

Shizuo did not reach within an inch of Izaya before he was tackled to the ground by the Washington monument’s security guards.

“OOF!”

The guards were barking at him in English. Shizuo pulled his face out of the ground and spit out a few blades of grass and dirt. He was completely piled upon, and craned his neck to look around. Meters away he could see where the stranger was still passed out on the lawn. Worried bystanders had congregated around the man. A woman was yelling what Shizuo believed to be “Call an ambulance!!” A few others were pointing at Shizuo, screeching, “Arrest that man!”

Shizuo felt cold metal touch his wrists, and oh shit he was being arrested. He strained to locate Izaya. Nowhere. Izaya was nowhere to be seen.

“IZAYA!” Shizuo mustered up a great deal of his strength to break out of the handcuffs and push all of the guards off of him. The peaceful park had erupted into quite the commotion, making it even more difficult for Shizuo to see where Izaya had run off to.

“Hey you! Back down!” The security guards were now pointing their guns at Shizuo, who opted to ignore them in search from Izaya. “Not another move!” They warned, but Shizuo couldn’t hear them. He took just one step in their direction before one of the guards shot him with something connected to long, bungy wires. They were not bullets that hit Shizuo in the chest, and they made a terrible ticking noise. Shizuo looked down and saw that his whole body was shaking violently. He wasn’t sure what he was feeling before every sense in his body went numb.

*Oh,* Shizuo thought, *I’ve been electrocuted.* His vision fogged. His legs gave out from under him, and he fell face first onto the ground just as he passed out completely.

Chapter End Notes
DC will probably be split into 3 or 4 parts. This trend will most likely continue for most of the places they travel in this fic, though the amount of parts might not always be the same. Actually, once they leave a location, I'll probably go back and combine it all as one [hella long] chapter.
District of Columbia Pt. 2

Chapter Summary

A cell, an officer, a ginger, and a proposal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He awoke to the sound of metal slamming against metal. Whatever he was lain upon was as hard as concrete and as cold as sleet. It was also much too small for Shizuo to lying upon, since his limbs were dangling unappealingly off the sides. Shizuo groaned before he tried to open his eyes. His head was throbbing, there was an itch on his chest, and he could hear a number of unfamiliar voices.

Voices that were speaking in rapid English.

Memories of Shizuo’s series of bad decisions came rushing back to him, the last thing being the escape of Izaya Orihara from his grasp. But he remembered getting on a plane, another plane, where he was… wait, where was he?

When Shizuo tried to open in his eyes he was only met with blinding fluorescent right above him. Shizuo winced, and tried to focus on what was around him. He turned over and the first thing he saw clearly was a man sitting on a steel bench across from him. The man, who was abhorrently gaunt and pale, dressed raggedly, stared bug-eyed at Shizuo without blinking. Shizuo blinked at the man before realizing he was in a cell.

“She…” Shizuo sat up abruptly. He was in a holding cell containing only himself and the other man - a ginger that looked as if he’d abused too many drugs. There were police officers going about their business on the other side of the cell’s barricade, the metal bars separating them and Shizuo. There was one officer at a desk, and he was typing on a computer while going through the contents of a bag - Shizuo’s bag!

“Hey!” Shizuo barked at the officer at the desk. The officer looked up and made eye contact with Shizuo. He smirked.

The officer got up and approached the cell, taking out the keys. He was saying something in English, unlocking the door. Shizuo watched confounded as the officer opened the cell and motioned for Shizuo to come with him. Cuffed while he was out of the cell, Shizuo was lead by the officer to a phone in another room. The officer held up one finger, then pointed to the phone. He turned away from Shizuo but remained nearby. Shizuo assumed that they were giving him one phone call, but he hadn’t the slightest clue who to call.

Would the call go through to anyone in Japan? The only person Shizuo knew in the States was Izaya, who was definitely out of the question. Shizuo wouldn’t have even known how to contact him if he wanted. That hotel? Maybe. The president? No, no...

Even if Shizuo could make a call to Japan, he was a little embarrassed to confront anyone he knew in his current situation. He knew Celty and Shinra would probably be helpless in this situation, and Tom wasn’t exactly any better off for traveling international than Shizuo was. Would Shizuo really
go crying to his little brother at a time like this?

No! Shizuo gritted his teeth.

Just then the officer coughed. Shizuo looked up, and the officer pointed to the phone and then to the clock on the wall. Shizuo rolled his eyes. He dialed for the operator and followed the prompts until he could call Shinra. Though pleased that he was able to get through at all, he just got Shinra’s voicemail.

“Hello thank you for calling! I cannot pick up right now for whatever reason…” Shizuo tuned out the message until he heard a beep.

“Uhhh… It’s Shizuo… So… how do I say this? So, I might have snapped and gone all the way to America to break Izaya’s neck. Yeah… and I haven’t even killed him yet, dumb flea…. Anyways, I’m in the capital, and I kinda got arrested. I don’t know if I’m gonna just be deported or thrown in prison or… killed, I don’t know. So if you could just tell Tom why I’m skipping work. And uh… oh! My old phone doesn’t work here, so I got a new one. I think it has e-mail, too, if I figure out how to work it. I don’t have it right now, since I’m in jail. But I mean, if I break out or something. Uh, the number is… what was it?” Shizuo racked his brain until he remembered the number of the phone he had bought and activated at LAX. After that, the last thing he asked of Shinra was “Don’t tell Kasuka.”

When he hung up, the officer dragged him back to the cell where the creepy ginger was waiting, removed the cuffs, and threw Shizuo back inside.

He might have gotten through to an ally, but there was no way Shinra nor Celty was going to be any help to him now. Shizuo had lucked out too many times in Japan; nobody ever arrested him because they knew who he was. Now, Shizuo wasn’t sure if a lack of reputation was a good thing or a bad thing. Examining the holding cell, Shizuo thought that he could definitely break down the steel bars keeping him in there. There were, however, a lot of officers. With guns. Shizuo decided not to take his chances.

Soon enough, a new officer approached the cell. This time she was young, beautiful, and very apparently Japanese by her appearance and the way she spoke to Shizuo.

“Hello Heiwajima-san! I’m Officer Kiera and I’ll be taking you through the booking procedure.” Her language was good but her accent was painfully American.

She released Shizuo again and lead him into the interior of the police department. The place wasn’t that big, and the building itself seemed old. He assumed the place was just a booking branch, and the real prison resided elsewhere. Officer Kiera sat down at a messy desk and motioned for Shizuo to sit across from her. Tapping on her computer’s keyboard, the screen came to life.

“Now, could you tell me in your own words what happened earlier today at the Washington Monument? In your own words?”

Thinking back, Shizuo remembered first hearing Izaya, then seeing Izaya, and then seeing Izaya with a stranger. Oh!

“First,” Shizuo blushed, “could you tell me what happened to the man I hit? Is he alright?”

Officer Kiera smiled sweetly, “He’s in the hospital currently, but he’ll be fine! He’s not even pressing charges!”

“Really?!” Shizuo’s conscious did a triumphant backflip.
“Really! But you did resist arrest and cause a public disturbance, so we do have to keep you overnight.”

And the backflip landed on its ass. “Oh.”

“Actually, we were all really impressed that you didn’t shit your pants when the security guards tased you! For that, they’re talking about letting you go with a warning!”

Officer Kiera really looked delighted that Shizuo hadn’t shit his pants. “Uhh…”

“But yeah, back to this. Could you tell me what happened earlier? Why did you punch that guy in the face?”

Shizuo didn’t really know how to explain himself other than that he was provoked. He was provoked by Izaya’s mere presence.

*Then why didn’t I hit Izaya first?* A little voice asked.

*Because he looked so damn happy.* Or alternatively, *Because things that make Izaya happy needa die.*

“They were bugging me,” Shizuo mumbled.

“They?” Officer Kiera looked up, “Was there someone else?”

“They were a couple,” Shizuo explained, “the guy I hit and the other Japanese guy there. The one who should have been arrested was that guy.”

Officer Kiera ruffled through some papers and read something. “Hmm… none of the security guards there had reported seeing another Japanese man.” Then she gasped, “Did you hit him because the couple was two guys?!”

Shizuo stammered, “N-no?!”

“Oh!” Officer Kiera beamed, “Well that’s good. Hate crimes are pretty serious. So who’s this other guy you say there was? Why should we have arrested him?”

“He’s dangerous,” Shizuo insisted, “His name is Izaya Orihara and he’s staying at a Marriott. Chances are he’s planning something pretty bad for this place!”

Officer Kiera’s benevolent expressions turned grim. “Like what?”

Good question. “Uh… I don’t know. Something bad?”

She frowned, “Heiwajima-san, please don’t spread conspiracy theories in the capital without any evidence or idea. People will take them seriously.”

“They should take them seriously!” Shizuo exclaimed. A few heads turned in his direction. Whatever, he was used to it.

“Now now,” Officer Kiera chided, “Let’s get back to your statement. Why attack the couple in the park?”

Realizing that this officer wasn’t going to take him seriously, Shizuo chalked up his report saying that Izaya and the other guy were being rude and that he lost his temper. Officer Kiera accepted that, and he was returned to the holding cell after they took his fingerprints.
Hours passed. From the solitary window across the room, Shizuo could see that it had grown dark. He wondered how much time had passed between then and when he saw Izaya. He wondered how much longer he’d have to withstand in that cell with Bug-Eyed Ginger-kun. Once again he weighed the option of breaking out.

A few hours later, he heard Officer Kiera address him in her cutesy tone.

“Heiwajima-san? You have a visitor!”

Shizuo’s mind quickly turned into a *oh fuckin’ hell*.

“Hey there, Shizu-chan!”

Izaya walked in behind Officer Kiera looking like he was walking into the Garden of Eden. Shizuo wanted to rip the grin off his damn face.

Shizuo growled, “You - !”

Before he could get up, Izaya pulled out his phone. “Wait, wait.” Shizuo heard the snap of a camera from the device. “Okay now you can do whatever.”

Shizuo attacked the metal barricade between him and Izaya with full force, causing an impressive dent, until Officer Kiera yelped.

“Oh don’t worry,” Izaya assured her, “Shizu-chan knows well enough not to do something so incredibly moronic. Right, Shizu-chan? Besides! You’re finally in a place you belong: a beast within a cage.”

“I’m gonna tear your head off your skinny little shoulders.”

“He’s always this happy when he sees me,” Izaya told Officer Kiera.

She laughed, “Well, you two seem like you’re getting along just fine. I’m going to go get a cup of coffee… And maybe a security detail… yeah.”

When she was gone, Izaya’s smirk returned to Shizuo. He was squeezing the iron bars so tightly that he could feel the metal condense under his grip.

“So!” Izaya started pacing at a safe distance from Shizuo’s reach, “you found me! I take it you got my postcards. They were cute, weren’t they? I tried to humor you a little bit, but it probably went right over your head. Still, who would have thought that you’d come *all the way* to America just to see *me*? You must have really missed me. Can’t say I blame you. Ikebukuro must be so *abysmally* dull nowadays. It was before I left, so I can’t imagine what it’s like without me.”

“I only came to put an end you once and for all.” Shizuo glared, and hoped that no Japanese-speaking cops were within earshot of them.

Izaya slinked up to the bars as quick as a viper, “So why didn’t you??”

Shizuo wondered why he hesitated earlier when now, with Izaya so close again, he saw so clearly that Izaya looked exactly the same. The malevolence, the manic expressions, the hiss in his voice,
same pale skin turning red from being out in the cold… Same old dirtbag flea.

“You’re obviously planning something here,” Shizuo said, “And I’m gonna figure out what.”

Izaya sighed, “Honestly, you’re always thinking the worst of me. Can’t you just believe I’m an innocent tourist sightseeing in America?”

“No,” Shizuo snapped, “and that would make me 99% sure that that guy you were with earlier was in on it too!”

Raising an eyebrow, Izaya cackled, “That guy?! Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t even know that guy’s name. I just met him today!”

Shizuo blinked. “What?” He could have sworn that they had looked quite intimate.

“After you went to my hotel and caused a shitstorm - bravò by the way I wish I could have seen it - the front desk called me to warn me that some madman had come to see me. I thought ‘who the hell else would do something so stupid besides Shizu-chan!’ Obviously!” Izaya laughed again, “I knew you were looking for me for like, hours before you did. I wanted to have some fun with you so I paid a homeless guy to pretend to be my boyfriend. Who knew you’d punch the lights out of him!! I’m glad you did, though. He kept trying to touch my butt.”

*Of course,* Shizuo felt the heat rising to his head. No one would ever *really* date Izaya. And it was so much like Izaya to put an innocent in the line of fire like that that Shizuo wanted to ring his neck. He made a grab for Izaya but, as always, he was just a fraction too slow. Izaya stepped out of reach again, amused expression unbreaking from his face.

“Coward!” Shizuo spat.

“Yeah?” Izaya shrugged, "Relax, he’s fine! And they told me you’re only in here for a night, so what’s the harm?”

“I was tased.”

“But you didn’t shit yourself and that’s always something to be proud of!” Izaya congratulated quite genuinely.

Officer Kiera walked in with her cup of coffee just as Shizuo released an incomprehensive roar of frustration. She turned around and walked right back out.

“But you know…” Izaya’s eyes panned from the departed officer to Shizuo, “I *could* bail you out right now.”

Shizuo glared, “What?”

“Think of my prank earlier as a sort of test,” Izaya explained, “One that you passed with flying colors. Well not flying colors; you did alright. I can’t imagine you’ve passed many tests in your life. In any case, I have a job proposition for you.”

What the hell is he talking about? Shizuo stared.

“Don’t look at me like such a constipated baboon, I’ll tell you,” Izaya continued. “What would say about becoming my own personal body guard?”

“I would rather drive a nail through every joint in my body,” Shizuo said without hesitation. Whether
Izaya’s offended expression was genuine or not, Shizuo didn’t care.

“Geesh, so fast to decline. Hear me out, won’t you? I could pay you triple -”

“Nope,” Shizuo interrupted, “I refuse.”

“- triple of what Tom pays you, and you would have much less work -”

“Forget it.”

“- not to mention you’d be -”

“I-za-ya-kun.” Izaya finally stopped. Shizuo smirked at him. “Why the hell would I take a job guarding you when I wanna kill you myself?”

Izaya’s face lit up, “Because that’s the perk! At the end of this trip, you get to kill me yourself!”

That took a second for Shizuo to process, and even then it didn’t compute.

“Huh?”

“Hu-uh,” Izaya rudely imitated before breaking off into another spiel, “I’m making this trip around the world, Shizu-chan, one last hoorah. Your job will be to make sure nothing happens to me until I see everything I want to see. After that, you can feel free to end my life as slowly or as painfully as you like.”

Shizuo scoffed, “Yeah right. Why the hell would I believe any of that?”

Izaya pulled something out of his jacket pocket. He unfolded a rather official-looking document, and he held it up for Shizuo to see. “I have the official employment contract for you to sign.”

Shizuo gaped. “You’ve thought this one through. How the hell did you even know you’d even see me again?”

“I didn’t know,” Izaya admitted, “But I knew there was no way you’d follow me across the rest of the Earth if I couldn’t even lure you out this far. And here you are.”

Shizuo cursed himself, “That was to smash your head in.”

“And now you can.”

Shizuo peered at the contract and into the crazy glimmer in Izaya’s eyes.

“Yeah but,” Shizuo frowned, “Now that you’re asking me to kill you, it’s the very last thing I wanna do. You deserve to be miserable. Why would I ever do anything you wanted me to?”

“Because you’re curious, too, aren’t you?” Izaya was slithering closer to the cage again. “Why this? Why now? What could I possibly be up to? You suspected so yourself. I could be planning to bring the world down, and here’s your chance to stop me. You could stop me from bringing the same chaos that I brought to Japan to every country from here to China. I promise, there’s a clause that says if I set the world ablaze too early, you can kill me anytime.”

Shizuo’s eyes narrowed, “This is obviously a trap.”

Izaya cocked his neck and observed Shizuo, “But you’re already trapped.”
Shizuo made another infuriated grab at Izaya only to miss once again. Izaya looked unphased from his safe distance away.

“You know, I quite like it this way - with you behind bars. I can talk to you all I want without any heavy projectiles aimed at my face to worry about. This may be the longest we’ve ever spoken.”

Shizuo fixed Izaya with a nasty grin, “You always did love hearing yourself talk.”

Izaya smiled serenely.

“Aren’t you bored of it all yet, Shizu-chan?” Izaya returned to pacing, “I thought gang wars, gangsters, corrupt politicians, and bugging the hell out of you was all pretty fun, you know? But even that all eventually became routine. None of you were living up to your real worth. I got bored with Ikebukuro, with Japan… Haven’t you? You haven’t left Ikebukuro in years, and now you’re in the capital of America. In a jail cell in the capital of America, mind you, but still further than you’ve ever gone. For what? To keep chasing me around?? I’m flattered, but tell me you haven’t been enjoying yourself. Seeing a whole new world?? I know I am. And even you must have a vague appreciation for culture! I’m gonna see everything this planet has to offer. I’m going to meet every one of its people, I’m gonna see their different ticks, I’m gonna carve myself into every cornerstone across the world. And at the edge of the Earth, if you’re not there to stop me, I’m going to set it on fire.”

Shizuo watched Izaya, both enraged and astonished. The same unfamiliar gleam that he had spotted hours earlier had returned, and he wondered if something really had pushed Izaya over the edge. He scratched his head, thinking that he could really use a cigarette right about now.

“You seem crazier than usual, flea.”

“And,” Izaya continued starry-eyed, “do you know what terrible things congressmen in this country are willing to do just to get ahead?? They’re so fascinating.”

And there it is. “You little shit.”

“So?” Izaya asked, “What do you say to my proposition?”

“I’m gonna stick with ‘no.’” Shizuo answered automatically.

“I figured you’d say that,” Izaya said. He furthered himself from Shizuo. “Well, take tonight to think about it. You look tired, Shizu-chan, and a little scruffy. What better place for you to rest?”

He gestured to the cell.

“I don’t know when they’ll let you out tomorrow, but I’m touring the White House in the morning and then I’m probably gonna check out that Air and Space Museum. Or the National History one. Whichever, I’m sure you’ll find me since you very clearly always do. Try not to get any more trouble before then, Americans are far less forgiving for public vandalism. Oh but if you do decide to go back to Japan -”

Izaya was halfway out the door before he gave Shizuo a wicked grin.

“I wonder if you’ll have enough to pay for the plane home? And I would hate for your little brother to find out what you’ve been spending his generous money on…”

Shizuo felt a blood vessel burst. “IiiizzaaaaaaaAAAAAYAA…”
“Don’t catch anything nasty.” Izaya pointed to Ginger-kun at the back of the cell. And once again he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Happy belated birthday (1/28) to Hiroshi Kamiya and subsequently Shizuo Heiwajima (ﾉ◕ヮ◕)ﾉ*:・゚✧

I wanted to post something that day, but I... well I just didn't whatever.

With college catching up with me, there will definitely be a slower turn out. But I'mma try to keep at least one chapter up a week? If I don't feel free to bug me on here or tumblr. Actually, it's best that you do.

Also I'm like pretty sure you couldn't make an international call from jail but like, Shizuo did.
The police released Shizuo the next morning, after another sleepless and painstaking night. Part of Shizuo’s insomnia was because it was just so damn cold and harsh atmosphere of the jail, but another part was that Shizuo just didn’t trust sleeping in such close a proximity to Ginger-kun. Officer Kiera had returned all of Shizuo’s belongings, giving him a warning to stay out of the trouble with the toothiest and most adorable grin Shizuo had ever seen on a police officer.

Given the time to mull over the situation over the night, Shizuo had come to a decision about what to do about Izaya. Return home or follow Izaya on a psychotic trip around the world? His choice was the same that he had made before he’d left Japan: to kill Izaya.

He didn’t need a contract or to wait until after more border-hopping to do so. Izaya had given him specific locations where Shizuo could find him that day. With that information, Shizuo could go and reject Izaya in the most painful way possible. Nothing was stopping him, except that he still had no idea his way around the city. Luckily, Officer Kiera had given him a map and had explained what the places Izaya had mentioned actually were. Honestly, Shizuo felt a little unfortunate that she wasn’t coming with him; she reminded him of someone.

First, Shizuo took a cab to the White House, since it was still morning. He had some idea of what to expect thanks to his inflight movie, but he had expected that he would have been able to get closer. The place was completely enclosed behind black metal gates, and the House itself looked a mile away. It was also heavily secure, with those Secret Service guys everywhere he could see. If he broke into the grounds of the president’s house, Shizuo bet that he would get a lot more than a warning and a night in a holding cell.

Sure, there were quite a few tourists taking pictures from outside the gates, but Shizuo lapped the place and saw no sign of Izaya. That meant that Izaya was either inside or not there at all. If Izaya was inside the White House, then Shizuo only wondered how long the States would last. It would end up just like that movie on the plane: horribly disarrayed and mostly on fire. At the moment, though, everything appeared calm at The White House.

Shizuo waited around the grounds’ entry and exit for a good while, receiving many suspicious examinations from the guards. The more he gazed upon the House, the more he wanted to venture inside, whether to find Izaya or not. Shizuo hadn’t done much sightseeing anywhere, not since his school field trips out of the region. One of the suited men eventually approached him and accused him of loitering. He asked Shizuo to either leave or buy a tour ticket. After a moment of consideration, Shizuo thought What the hell and paid his way in in cash.

He was thrown into a tour of about fifteen individuals, families and foreign tourists like himself. Their guide, though, only spoke English, and Shizuo just ended up tuning the guy out the whole time in favor of surveying the House’s interior. There was a hell of a lot of art, none of it meaning much
to Shizuo. Some of the portraits he vaguely recognized from high school’s world history classes, but not even the names resonated with Shizuo. While Shizuo was no expert in this sort of stuff, he supposed the place was pretty neat. Mostly, he appreciated that everyone there, tourists and officials, were far too occupied and otherwise concerned with anything other than him. Nobody paid Shizuo any mind at all.

By the time Shizuo’s tour was over, it was a quarter past noon. With Izaya’s absence from the White House, that meant that he was at one of the other two given locations: two museums near he had first spotted Izaya yesterday.

He didn’t even bother catching a cab; he marched defiantly to the museum marked on his map. Determination fueled him as his also chastised himself for wasting time doing something so frivolous as meeting the American president.

Going by his map, Shizuo meant to go to the Natural History one first, since it was the closest to the White House, but somehow Shizuo had managed to turn himself around in the giant park with all the monuments. *There sure are a lot these places*, Shizuo thought bitterly as he turned his map every which way. He looked up at a more modern looking building from its counterparts. As opposed to marble and stone, this place was all glass windows and concrete blocks. Outside and in front of Shizuo was a large, metal needle that stretched towards the sky. Squinting at its sign, Shizuo noticed an emblem that resembled a flaring sun.

*Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum*

“‘National… Air… and Space…’ Ohhhh...” Shizuo had gotten somewhere after all. “That’s one of the places he said, wasn’t it!”

The Air and Space Museum was the most crowded place so far, especially full of schools and schools of students. Upon entry, Shizuo let out a low whistle as he marveled up at some very old planes.

*At least I didn’t fly here in those*, he thought.

More importantly, Shizuo had stepped and side and felt a shiver run through his bones. *Izaya is definitely here*. Looking around, Shizuo wondered how difficult it would be to find him, not only among all the people but around so many… *thingymabobs*. *Yeah, this place is definitely filled with thingymabobs.*

Shizuo searched the museum high and low; he even checked inside some kind of space ship. At some points he found himself being a proper tourist, rather than looking for Izaya. He was checking out an old yellow plane that was hanging from the ceiling when he heard someone call his name. Or some variation of it.

“Shizu-chan! Over here!!”

Following the voice, Shizuo spotted Izaya standing over by a prominently displayed, slick and ruby red airplane. Izaya’s attention only remained on Shizuo until he was sure that the two had made eye contact. Then, he returned to reading something in front of the plain.

Like he just expected Shizuo to come when called. *I’ll kill ‘em.*

Shizuo grabbed loose pole with a sign that said *Please Do Not Touch* attached to it. Whether anyone noticed him drilling towards Izaya with museum property, he would not have been able to see since his vision was strictly full of Izaya. The patrons had so much more to look at than Shizuo.
By the time Shizuo was by Izaya, a fraction Shizuo had expected Izaya - who was usually obnoxiously reactive and quick - to have hauled ass across the museum by now. Instead, Izaya held up a hand in front of him, just as Shizuo was about to swing.

“Wait, listen to this.”

Shizuo blinked at the hand in front of his face, frozen in every other aspect. What... This is new, he thought, not really sure what to do as Izaya rattled on about something.

“... first woman to fly across the Atlantic in this. It’s not like no one had ever flew over the Atlantic, either. But because she was a woman she just had to repeat the same feat of men to gain national fame. It’s so tedious how that works, why not try anything new, or greater?”

“Oi, flea,” Shizuo growled, “I’m about to kill you.”

Izaya lowered his hand and rolled his eyes without even looking at Shizuo, which bristled Shizuo even more. “Yeah okay whatever but first, I mean, look at this thing’s color too.” He moved around the displays cylindrical edge for a different angle at the plane. “Lipstick red. Not very subtle and very assertive of her femininity. Like ‘hey, notice this plane and the woman flying it!’ Is there a female equivalent to that thing they accuse guys of where we apparently overcompensate for our dick size?” There was definite amusement in Izaya’s voice, “Because this is definitely that.”

Still rooted to the spot, Shizuo could only gape. He still had the sign ready to swing, but Izaya kept moving further around the plane. Just do it! he told himself, but Izaya kept talking, and Shizuo kept listening.

“Did you see the first plane in the other room? Or not the first plane, I should say, but the first one that actually worked, hah. It had its own room and was basically just wood and canvas. But it flew! Two guys actually flew that piece of crap even though they were probably going to die. Imbeciles. They didn’t, though. This chick did, trying to go around the world, but not in this plane. This one’s called a Lockhead Vega 5B, and its pilot was -”

“I don’t care about a plane!” Shizuo shouted.

“I don’t expect you to know anything about planes, Shizu-chan, but you flew a plane here, didn’t you? You should care, but I guess a monster wouldn’t care about -”

Shizuo finally chucked the pole and sign at Izaya. He was gritting his teeth as Izaya went tumbling into a display of miniature plane models behind him. The people that were browsing there gasped and cried in surprise. Having been hit by much worth by Shizuo, Izaya quickly regained himself and rose with a smirk directed towards his attacker.

“Alright,” he said, “Since it’s been awhile…”

And Izaya took off, Shizuo hot on his heels.

The crowds of the museum erupted into protests and mayhem. To Shizuo, they were just in the way. Izaya was much more agile and nimble, much to Shizuo’s denial. He easily dipped in and out of the various aircrafts, zipped and dodged around the people and the architecture. Shizuo might have had more trouble, but he had still the practice from maneuvering around Ikebukuro’s chaotic streets. Not only that, but when Izaya starting running from him, Shizuo’s nerves went ablaze. It was all instinct and automatic when he found himself on Izaya’s trail, blood rushing and heart pounding. I’ll kill him I’ll kill him I’ll kill him I’ll kill him I’ll kill him.

Unbeknownst to Shizuo, he felt absolutely exhilarated to be back at the chase after months of
withdrawal. He was just following that tug. If he still had feeling in his face, he would have known that he was grinning like a maniac.

Izaya, still sneering, managed to put a silver and blue miniplane between them. They both circled it several times, Izaya cackling at Shizuo’s frustration, before Shizuo thought of a better tactic.

The plane wasn’t even that big. Grabbing it under its base, Shizuo easily launched it above his head. To his astonishment but also delight, Izaya immediately lost his smug expression.

“Shizu-chan, that’s a Howard Hughes!”

A what?

“Just mad that you’re cornered, flea?”

“Shizu-chan,” Izaya started seriously, though the mirth in his tone and the pull at his lips had not completely disappeared, “I think you might find that not everywhere is as forgiving as Ikebukuro…”

Shizuo knew that Izaya was just trying to talk his way out of having a jet thrown at him - Not that I blame him - but he suddenly realized how quiet the museum had become. A voice stuttered in English somewhere behind him, and Shizuo had a feeling it was addressing him.

“S… sir… Put down the plane… And step away…”

Craning his neck to find the speaker, Shizuo’s enthusiasm immediately dropped.

Behind him, a security guard stood trembling and eyeing the artifact Shizuo had lifted as if was made of styrofoam. The guard’s terrified expression betrayed his assertive stance. And, behind the guard was an embarrassing crowd of international tourists. Some looked on in horror, while others stared in awe. There were cameras pointed at him, some with flashes going off and others with the recording light on. A collection of children were glowing in admiration, but the majority of the crowd stood warily by.

When Shizuo took half a step in that direction, the dozens of people collectively gasped and jumped back.

“Sir!” The guard was saying again, a little more immediately. Even the guard, though, looked like was about to crap in his pants. He had a hand on something on his belt, and Shizuo was pretty damn sure it was one of those tasers. Ugh, not those again.

Surveying everyone’s gawking expression, Shizuo had the sudden urge to throw this plane at them. He hated those judgmental expressions, those fearful eyes, almost as much as he hated Izaya. Emitting a rumble from his chest, he took another half a step in that direction. Just as Shizuo was about to show everybody in that museum how scary he could be, Izaya brushed by him and approached the security guard. The guard’s widened eyes suggested he hadn’t even realized Izaya had been there.

Bowing apologetically, Izaya was talking in fluent English and Shizuo could not understand a word. The guard listened, responded, listened again. Izaya repeated gestured behind him at Shizuo, who still had an antique plane hoisted above his head.

The guard was nodding, but very disapprovingly. In any case, he looked less afraid. That is, he did until Izaya leaned forward and whispered something in his ear. Shizuo raised an eyebrow. What the hell is that about?
Then, the guard turned around and dispersed the crowd. Izaya turned back to Shizuo, looking surprised to see the craft still in his possession.

“Shizu-chan, you should really put that down now.” When Shizuo almost dropped it, he hissed, “But not like a dumbass.”

Before Shizuo could retort (or counter attack), the guard returned to them. He began in English with Izaya again, but whatever he said caused Izaya to bristle and visibly protest, though Shizuo had no idea what was being said. “Izaaaya,” Shizuo called, only to be ignored. As the two went back and forth, Shizuo began to feel like part of the exhibition; lifeless and useless. Just standing there. He heard little voices and then noticed there were still some people watching him, but a few particular little kids were ogling him. Shizuo bared his teeth at them, causing them to gasp and run back to their parents.

“Shizu-chan,” Izaya spoke to him, “I suggest that if you don’t want to spend any more time behind bars, you leave this place immediately.”

That unnerving smile and faux sweetness had returned to Izaya’s demeanor, and this time especially it sent a shiver down Shizuo’s spine. Without another word, Izaya turned his back on Shizuo and strutted towards the exit. Finding that particularly rude, Shizuo went after him. He didn’t even notice the guard, still shaking in fear, gesturing for Shizuo to leave.

Once outside, Shizuo lit up a cigarette. Izaya kept a good pace away from him. Shizuo’s pulse quickened again, as did his own speed as he prepared to start the chase again. But Shizuo just ended up almost crashing into Izaya when the latter suddenly rounded on him, feigned benevolence completely dropped.

“I cannot believe you just got me kicked out of the Smithsonian, Shizu-chan.”

Shizuo, who never really saw Izaya angry, studied the pale face glaring up at him as he reigned in the Izaya’s words. *Smithsonian…?* “That place?” Shizuo jutted a thumb in the museums direction. Izaya’s contemptuous expression that followed basically asked if Shizuo was an idiot all on its own. Glaring right back, Shizuo raked his hand over Izaya’s face, squeezing it. “I wouldn’t start letting your guard down now that we’re outside, *Izaya-kun.*”

Izaya nipped at Shizuo’s hand, but missed chomping on the(584,802),(598,813) completely when Shizuo quickly pulled his hand back. Shizuo almost bit down on his cigarette.

“Me?” Izaya said, falling back on false pleasantries. He began to casually stroll down the park’s paths, and Shizuo matched his stride while dragging from his cigarette. “Why attack me? I’m the one who just got you a ‘get out of jail free’ card, Shizu-chan. Why not thank me?”

Shizuo scoffed, “Like I want to be apart of any nasty threat you fed that guy back there. What’d you say to him, anyways?”

“I made a point to get in touch with the institute’s secretary while I was here. He gave me some pull and in return I gave him -” He caught Shizuo’s disapproving leer, “-something else. There was no way they weren’t going to throw you out after all that, but why’d I have to leave too?!”

Watching Izaya pout in self-pity, Shizuo couldn’t help but ask, “Since when do you care about junk from the past, and crowded tourist traps?”

“Because, Shizu-chan, museums are just collections of the works people did when they were at their most manic, their most expressive. There’s rarely anything boring in them. They’re like giant,
interactive encyclopedias, filled to the brim with hard facts and insanity.”

“Izaya,” Shizuo put out his cigarette under his foot and looked Izaya dead in the eyes. “You’re… kind of a nerd, aren’t you?”

Izaya took that in stride, “Say what you want, but ‘knowledge is power,’ you know, that whole spiel.” He added bitterly, “Except now I can’t go in any because of you. I really wanted to see the Muppets…”

A thought hit Shizuo between the eyes, “But they didn’t arrest me, either.”

Izaya shrugged, “I already have a picture of you behind bars. As much as I like to see you in handcuffs and getting screwed over, you’re still a perspective employee of mine.”

“I’m not signing that damned contract, creep.”

“Still?” Izaya tisked, “Then why are you still here?”

“I already told you, to kill you!!”

They both stopped walking. Heat rose to Shizuo’s face as Izaya looked from Shizuo, down to his own perfectly unmaimed body, back to the three or so blocks behind them which they had walked without any physical conflict, and then back to Shizuo.

“Well you’re not doing a very good job so far.”

Shizuo lit another cigarette and avoided looking at the now hysterical man beside him.

“You’re so tsundere, Shizu-chan,” Izaya clutched his sides, “Maybe I’m better off finding someone else after all.”

“Hey!” Shizuo grabbed Izaya by the collar and hoisted him face to face, “When I say I’m gonna do something, I’m definitely gonna - woah.” Something over Izaya’s head completely stole his attention.

“Seriously? You’re not doing your image any favors right now. Are you this flippant on all your job interviews, or just violent?”

“Shut up!” Shizuo shoved Izaya away from him, albeit not as forcefully as he could have. Wherever they had walked had led them into view of that colossal dome Shizuo had seen his first day. Shizuo hadn’t realized how long its base was; the building itself looked like it stretched a mile wide! All along its walls and its dome with columns upon columns, arches and more arches. Between two staircases at its base was a water fountain, and Shizuo could see many people walking around it. They were dwarfed by the architecture, which had that same Greek look that Shizuo had seen throughout the city but was much, much bigger.

From behind him, Shizuo heard Izaya snicker. “For someone wanting to kill me so much, you sure get distracted easily. I knew you were getting your kicks out here.”

“Am not!” Shizuo snapped, only thinking afterwards how much of a five year-old he sounded like. Izaya was laughing at him again. “I don’t even know what that place is.” Which was true. He had seen it briefly explode during his inflight movie, but he still had no idea what it was.

“That?” Izaya came to stand beside him and shrugged, “Forty-five billion tons of white bullshit, I guess.”
“What?”

“It’s the American Capitol building, Shizu-chan. It’s filled with morons and assholes and clients. Don’t you ever watch anything informative on television? Or just brutes punching each other?”

“You piece of trash!” Shizuo ended up focusing on the former part of Izaya’s words. “I knew you were up to something -”

“I only did what I had to to insure my safety in this city, and to be able to keep affording for this excursion. You can’t expect me to take such a long vacation and not work at all, can you? It’s more fun that way, don’t you think?”

“No!” Shizuo snarled.

“But don’t worry,” Izaya added, “I wouldn’t start a war without you or Celty. America’s quite capable of starting their own wars. And honestly? For their obsession with superheroes, the States sure have a lacked a proper freak. That’s why anywhere you go you’re bound to stick out like a sore thumb.”

“You’re the freak, Izaya,” Shizuo snapped bitterly.

Looking down at him, Shizuo might have sworn that he saw Izaya regard him with a sad smile. But a strong gust blew by. Before Shizuo could be sure he saw anything, Izaya’s face was one of appallment as he looked Shizuo up and down, like he was just noticing something.

“Shizu-chan, is that the exact same outfit you were wearing yesterday?!”

Surprised, Shizuo looked down at himself as well. Yes, he had in fact been unfortunately wearing the same outfit since he left Japan. Naturally, it was one of his bartender uniforms as well, plus a coat. I should have packed more clothes, he thought. He’d only brought an extra pair of pants and underwear. It wasn’t like Izaya wasn’t wearing his stupid black parka-thing either, even if regularly wore a different outfit underneath and this time had a knit hat on in the cold.

“I didn’t expect to be out here more than a day!!” Shizuo barked.

“It takes a day just to get here!” Another strong wind, and Izaya’s nose twitched. “Geez, when was the last time you showered?”

“WHERE THE HELL AM I GONNA SHOWER?!” Shizuo shouted, earning a few judgmental looks from some of the yuppies occupying the same sidewalk.

“Honestly Shizu-chan, don’t you ever think anything through?” Izaya hummed. Shizuo almost smashed his face into the pavement before he continued, “Hmm… I suppose you could use the shower in my hotel room. I mean, if the staff let’s you in there again. Could be funny!” Before Shizuo could protest, Izaya had ran out into the middle of the street and was hailing a cab.

Chapter End Notes

i mean no disrespect to amelia earhart; i love her.
Shizuo finally takes a shower, receives a phonecall, and chases a train.

“At least you brought deodorant.”

Somewhere along the way from the Capitol to the Marriott, Izaya had stolen his backpack. *Right after I paid the cabbie*, Shizuo thought, but he hadn’t noticed right away when it was missing from his back. He had been too busy fuming after he was forced to compensate for Izaya’s own cab in the first place.

“Give that back!” Shizuo snatched at it. Izaya was on the other side of the room in a flash.

“Oh no, *security*!” Izaya feigned a distressed cry. “You’ve let a monster into the hotel!! Come on, Shizu-chan, don’t make me regret talking you up back there!”

On the bright side, he hadn’t been banned from the hotel. Or at least, he wasn’t after Izaya talked something over with the manager. Shizuo found it extremely annoying and disheartening whenever Izaya kept going off with strangers in a language that Shizuo didn’t fully understand. It gave the impression that he was being babysitted by the man he hated. In all honestly, Shizuo wasn’t even quite sure what he was doing anymore. Why was Izaya still breathing and why was he still in America?

But even if Shizuo decided to give up and just return to Japan, he really, *really* wanted to shower.

He was now in Izaya’s hotel room, which was only a modest single bedroom. It was nice and clean and had that blanche hotel room smell, but nothing too fancy. Shizuo really only had the times Tom and he visited crooks in hotels to compare with, but the amenities in this room seemed standard: white bedding, T.V., desk, couch, ugly carpet, bathroom, and kitchenette. The windows were nice and big though, and Shizuo could see the sun already setting behind the city’s buildings. He hated that about winter; the day ends too soon after it began.

“So Shizu-chan,” Izaya called his attention away from the skyline, “Exactly how much money did you start with?”

Shizuo found Izaya rummaging deeper into his bag and drawing out the pouch where he was keeping all his money.

“Hey! I told you to give that back!!”

“Look at all this cash,” Izaya counted through it, “You’re going to be mistaken for a drug dealer. Did Kasuka give it to you like this?”

“None of your business!” He was basically chasing Izaya around the room now.

“Hmm… I don’t know if you really have enough cash to get back to Japan. How much is on this credit card?”
Shizuo stopped. If he didn’t actually have enough to get home, he was screwed. “Uh, I don’t know. “Figures.” Izaya dived for his laptop on the hotel’s desk and opened it. The credit card dangled from his lips as he typed and clicked away furiously.

“What are you doing?” Shizuo demanded. Izaya just kept at his typing. After a moment, Izaya stopped and offered the card back to Shizuo, who took it and wiped it on his shirt.

“There’s like, $500 on there. A little less, actually,” Izaya explained.

“How the hell did you figure that out? The hell did you do?!” Shizuo tried to get a better look at whatever was on Izaya’s screen.

Izaya just closed the laptop. “Don’t snoop, Shizu-chan,” he scolded, as if he wasn’t just hacking a credit account or rummaging through another’s bag without their permission.

“Five hundred, that’s…” Shizuo tried to do math in his head, but failed.

“Chump money in another country,” Izaya said. “But there’s a little more in cash. Probably just enough to get someone back to good ol’ Japan… if that is what you decide to do.”

Shizuo grimaced, “Why wouldn’t I go back to Japan?”

Stretching, Izaya feigned concern, “Well you’ve sure spent a lot of your brothers money, Shizu-chan. It’s his credit account, too, isn’t it? How awkward would it be to explain to him that you flushed it all down the drain for naught? Tsk tsk, you should think about your brother’s feelings more.”

“You little -” Shizuo hoisted Izaya up with one hand while the veins in his forehead pulsed rapidly, “I came to teach you a lesson and I would’ve had enough if you hadn’t kept disappearing into all these places where you gotta pay to get in.”

Izaya pushed himself away and draped the back of his hand across his forehead. “Oh no, you’re right. It’s all my fault. Because of me, poor Shizu-chan has experienced world-renowned exhibitions and seen infamous sights! You poor thing, flying across the world in a plane that wouldn’t crash in the pacific! You must have hated everything you saw, hated walking around one of the most famous people in the world’s house. Imagine if you even had actually seen someone of importance!!” He flopped down on the bed dramatically, “Oh god, what a fucking nightmare!”

Shizuo watched the performance with a mix of irritation and reluctant amusement.

“But,” Izaya’s tone shifted, “If you sign my contract, I’ll insure that I refill what you used of your brother’s and include a return ticket to Japan.”

“Tch, you ever gonna take ‘no’ for an answer?”

“I might,” Izaya admitted as he rose off the bed again. He stalked over to Shizuo, “if I’m convinced you really mean it.”

“Well I’m not convinced of anything you say,” Shizuo spat back.

“That’s okay,” Izaya said, and the contract was in his hand again. “You don’t have to trust me, you just have kill me.”

Izaya was uncomfortably close to Shizuo now, staring up at him, both apprehensive and wicked. Once again, Shizuo swore he could see a new and different glint in the auburn eyes. For almost a
minute, they stayed like that. If Shizuo leaned forward just ever so slightly, their chests would surely bump together. Neither would move. Shizuo searched Izaya’s face for some kind of hint, but all he saw was a slightly cracked mask.

Then Izaya made a movement too fast for Shizuo to react. He pushed Shizuo and sent him stumbling back several feet away, straight through the open bathroom door.

“I can’t keep smelling you like that” Izaya scrunched his nose, “Go take your shower.”

From this view, Izaya was almost just a silhouette to Shizuo. He was backed by the luminous windows that filtered in the last remaining sunlight that was left of the day. An eerily red aura encompassed Izaya, and when Shizuo couldn’t bare to look at it anymore, he slammed that bathroom door and turned on the showerhead. As he stripped and stepped under the hot water, he let the last two days wash over him.

Twice he had failed to actually kill Izaya, or even inflict any real injury. He cursed himself for not allowing the taxi from hitting Izaya, but the moment had been just as impulsive as any time he found him running in Izaya’s wake. Though he considered throwing in the towel for this adventure several times on their way to the hotel, he couldn’t shake the feeling that Izaya was hiding something. Well, Izaya was always hiding something, but there was no doubt that he was acting particularly shady in Shizuo’s presence this time around. Shizuo had to admit that Izaya had barely been provoking him apart from his typically nasty nature. But, the more benevolent Izaya acted, the more Shizuo’s suspicion grew.

The two of them were no strangers, and Shizuo knew good and well that Izaya was a chickenshit when it came to death. Now, he was directly asking to be killed and being so foolish as to run into oncoming traffic - not that repeatedly enticing Shizuo’s wrath was a less dangerous activity. Izaya never told the truth, though, so Shizuo’s head was becoming a conflicting jumble of options. Shizuo told himself that he still fully intended to make good on his vow to kill Izaya before they went any further, but after already spending almost half a day with the man and getting nowhere with that, a fearful part of him wondered if the threat had become empty. While Shizuo wasn’t buying too much into Izaya’s “contract,” he was still curious of two things: what was Izaya up to, and what else was out there in the world for him to see?

Having become a shut-in in Japan, Shizuo wouldn’t mind the opportunity to see the world a little bit more. Even if it was with Izaya, who would have never been his top choice for travelling company, Shizuo wouldn’t have to pay a cent. And if there was some off chance that any of what Izaya said rang true, Shizuo would never have to deal with him again afterwards.

He sighed and rubbed some shampoo away from his eye. At times like this, Shizuo really wished he had Celty around to go to for guidance. When he tried to imagine what she would say, he could only guess that she’d reprimand him for going on this crazy trek in the first place. Hell, that’s pretty much what she told him the day before he left. If only Shizuo had listened.

After a few more minutes of soaking in the hot water, he turned off the shower. He’d been there so long that steam was effectively fogging up every surface. When he reached for a towel, he swayed a little; he really needed some damn sleep. He was cautious getting out, half expecting Izaya to have snuck in and wait with his camera at the ready.

As it was, Shizuo peeked out of the bathroom to find the hotel room empty. All was dark but a single dimly lit lamp on the nightstand closest to Shizuo. He could see his backpack sitting on the bed. Checking his surroundings and still expecting Izaya to jump out of the shadows - as he often did - Shizuo went out with just a towel around his waist and grabbed his backpack. He pulled out the only other t-shirt and pair of clean boxers he bought and threw them on. Once his shirt was over his head,
a note on the nightstand caught his eye. Picking it up, he saw that Izaya had left it.

*Got another room. This one only has one bed, and we’re not that close.*

Izaya

Shizuo huffed and crumpled up the piece of paper, letting it fall to the floor. It honestly bugged him that he couldn’t complain about that. Looking at the alarm clock beside the bed told him that it wasn’t even that late. Only toddlers and the elderly were asleep at this hour, but goddamn he was tired. All he did was make sure the room was locked before crawling under the king-sized bed’s comforter, turning off the lamp, and falling fast asleep.

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Ringalingaling! Ringalingaling!

Shizuo groaned as whatever incessant noise going off woke him. His face was buried in the pillow, with a very impressive drool stain spreading under him.

Ringalingaling! RINGALINGALING!

“Shut upppppp” Shizuo moaned into the pillow. Ringalingaling! was his only answer. What could be ringing at him so early in the morning?

Blearily, he began to blink his eyes open and look around. Every inch of morning light streaming in from the window stung his eyes. His eyes fluttered and he rubbed them more awake. The hotel phone on the nightstand was not the culprit.

Ringalingaling!

Shizuo literally crawled out of bed and to the floor. He followed the direction of the sound until he found his pants from yesterday lying discarded in front of the bed. *My pants are ringing,* was his first thought.

He drowsily searched both the pockets and found his newly bought phone.

Ringalingaling!

You, Shizuo glowered at it, eyes red with sleep. He didn’t even check the number before he answered it.

“Die.”

“SHIZUO-KUN! YOU’RE ALIVE!” Shizuo had to hold the phone several inches from his ear when the person on the other end shouted. “Thank goodness we finally reached you!!”

After a moment to process, Shizuo recognized the voice yelling at him.

“Shinra?”

The doctor was now speaking away from his own phone, “Celty! Celty!! I have him, he’s here!! Shizuo-kun, are you still there?”

“Uh, yeah.” Shizuo had almost forgotten that he had called Shinra and Celty the other day. On the other hand, he was glad to find that his phone was working.
“Are you in jail?!” Shinra sounded panicked, “Is it horrible?! Are the experimenting on you Shizuo-kun?! Those heartless Americans!”

“I’m not in jail!” Shizuo barked through the receiver.

“...Oh!” He heard a sigh of relief. “Shizuo-kun, what were you thinking! Celty told me you were thinking about running off to America to hunt Izaya-kun down. Is that really what you did?”

“M...maybe…” He admitted.

“You did!” Shinra exclaimed, “What, Celty? Oh, she’s scolding you. She says - I can’t say that, Celty! Okay, fine, yes. She’s asking if you’re on your way back. You’re coming back, right?”

“Uh…” Shizuo hesitated, even to his own surprise. “About that…”

“Shizuo-kun, you should give up on finding Izaya-kun. Nothing good can come from finding him.”

“Actually, I already found him.”

Shinra gasped. “YOU KILLED IZAYA-KUN?!”

“No!”

A sigh of relief. “Relax, Celty, he said he didn’t kill Izaya-kun.” Shizuo rolled his eyes at the two of them. “Wait... he’s not with you, is he?”

Shizuo finally rose up off the ground and did a three-sixty to check of any signs of Izaya. No Izaya could be seen but something on the desk did catch his attention.

“No... not right now,” Shizuo answered distractedly.

“I don’t know what that means. And by the way... I did tell Tom-kun why you were absent, but really Shizuo-kun, this was foolish even for you. I mean…”

Shizuo tuned out Shinra as he picked up a new note on the desk. Again, Izaya left it for him. A shiver ran down his spine at the knowledge that Izaya had crept into the room while he was sleeping. He said a silent prayer for his spared life as he picked up the message and read it while Shinra ranted in his ear.

Shizu-chan,

You looked so angelic sleeping so I didn’t want to wake you. I’ve grown tired of DC and originally had plans to set off for a new destination tomorrow anyways, so I’ve decided to leave our future together up to fate. I am leaving on a northeastern Acela Express Amtrak train at 9:15AM from Union Station. I’ve left the contract in your hands. If you decide to see the world with me, I’ve left the contract for you to sign. Don’t sleep in too late, kay?

Izaya

Shizuo looked down to see the contract and a pen lying there beneath the note. His eyes returned to read the note over again but found it difficult as he also found that his hands were shaking for some reason.

“...and I just - Shizuo-kun! Are you listening?!” Shinra was still blabbing in his ear. “Celty’s typing something again hold on. She says - oh. Shizu-chan she’s really mad maybe you should stay there
after all.”

Scanning the room for the alarm clock, Shizuo’s stomach lurched when he saw that it was already 8:41AM.

Through the phone, he heard Shinra help painfully. “I’m sorry I’m sorry I didn’t mean it, Celty!!”

“Shinra!” Shizuo was shouting, already moving hastily, “I’ve got to go!”

“How! Wait! When are you coming back?!”

“I’m not!” Shizuo tried to put on his pants while holding the phone up to his ear with his shoulder, almost tripping, “I mean - Not yet, I - fuck I don’t know!”

“Shizuo?!”

“Look, I’ll call you when I get a chance! Tell Tom I’m really sorry! Bye Celty!!”

“WAIT - !”

Shizuo already hung up and pocketed the phone, throwing on his shirt almost simultaneously. He didn’t stop to brush his teeth, to look in a mirror or to even think. He just dressed himself as fast as he could, stuffed everything in his backpack - including the stupid contract - and charged out the door.

Downstairs, Shizuo burst through the front doors of the hotel and out into the street. Frantically searching for a taxi, all he saw was a traffic jam on their way to work at rush hour. Any taxi he saw was lit up as occupied, and every car was moving at a snail’s pace.

Back in the lobby, Shizuo jutted in front an elderly couple at the concierge desk.

“QUICK where the hell is Union Station?!” He demanded.

The concierge - the brunette, Deborah - went wide-eyed. For a second, Shizuo feared he was about to be attacked by security again. Also, Deborah wasn’t supposed to understand a word Shizuo said, but luckily she seemed to catch the key word.

“Union Station?” She to her left, “Go South on 12th St. and then turn left on E St!!”

Shizuo’s brain latched onto “left on E St.” He was running out the door again while Deborah called after him. “Wait! But it’s really far, you shouldn’t - !”

He didn’t have any time to listen, and adrenaline took over him. Outside, he sprinted down what he hoped was the right street and just hoped he wouldn’t be late.

By the time Shizuo found the train station - which in any other circumstance would have been enjoyable to look at - it was already three minutes past nine. He only had about ten minutes to find whichever train Izaya was on, and he had no idea how to find it.

One that was… Amtrak? Northeast? Shizuo found a screen display of all the trains arriving and departing and there were several of these Amtrak trains lined up. Dammit, flea, you could have been more specific!

Finding an area with that name displayed, Shizuo quickly approached a ticket desk with a man there
and with an empty line. Swallowing, Shizuo did his best to test his English.

“Need a… uh… ticket… Acela?” That he was panting heavily didn’t help that much.

The man raised an eyebrow. “We have three trains leaving on the Acela Express today, sir.”

Without any knowledge of what the hell the guy said, Shizuo just yelled the time at him “9:15! That one!”

“Oh!” The man began processing. “That’ll be -”

Shizuo just threw the credit card at him. An achingly long minute later, the man was handing back his credit card along with a ticket.

“Track 7. Better hurry,” The vendor started, “they’re doing last boarding call -” But Shizuo had taken off as soon as he heard the track number. May luck be on his side and that he actually find the right train.

He reached the train with only a minute or two to spare, and absolutely no air left in his lungs. Even then, though, the train was a long silver bullet and Shizuo wondered if he’d be able find Izaya in its many seats. A conductor looked at him disapprovingly when he climbed on board in the midst of catching his breath. Shizuo just flashed the guy his ticket and clambered in through the cabin.

Looking around, his heart dropped a little. There somewhere between twenty and thirty seats in this cabin alone, and there were probably about five other cars like this. How was he going to find Izaya like that?

He took a deep, long breath and started shouting, “IIIIIIIZAAAAAAAAAYAAAA!”

All of the passengers in that cabin turned to gape at him, but he didn’t stop as he marched down the aisle. “IIIIIIIIIIIZZZZZZAAAAAYA-”

“Yeah?”

Almost choked on his own voice, Shizuo froze immediately. He looked down to his immediate right. Squatted in the window seat with his knees to his chest and feet on the seat, Izaya was staring up at Shizuo with a book open against his legs and a finger twirled within his hair. For a moment, him and Shizuo shared surprised eye contact, but a grin spread over Izaya’s features. He broke into a fit of giggles without taking his eyes off Shizuo, who felt his face heat up. Looking away from Izaya, he only saw other passengers regarding him with uneasy stares. He threw himself down in the seat next to Izaya, who was still laughing.

When Izaya didn’t shut up, Shizuo grabbed his head with one hand and squeezed threateningly. But Izaya only started sounding more and more like hyena, rocking in the seat and holding his stomach as he began to lose the air in his lungs needed to laugh audibly. Shizuo grumbled bitterly to himself as Izaya tried to compose himself.

Even when Izaya finally caught his breath again, Shizuo refused to look at him. His face was still hot, and he wasn’t sure if he was embarrassed by the scene itself or Izaya’s reaction. How did I get here? Shizuo asked himself. How? This is bad, I’m trash, why did I do this.

“Shizu-chan.”

He could sense Izaya's eyes steady on him.
“Did you sign it?”

Shizuo finally turned to find Izaya waiting anxiously, most amusement gone from his face. Snorting, Shizuo reached into his backpack and pulled out the contract that was now wrinkled without care. He presented it to Izaya without flattening it. Izaya snatched it and used the train’s window to spread the creases out. There on the bottom line was Shizuo’s signature, setting Izaya’s face alight again.

The train lurched into motion underneath them. Outside the window showed them rolling out of the station, off on their way to God knows where. Shizuo folded his arms caustically against his chest and frowned at this whole mess he’d just gotten himself into. He caught Izaya’s eye, who folded up their now official agreement and tucked it away neatly into his jacket’s inner breast pocket. “So what now?”
Chapter Summary

Shizuo arrives in a new city, where the eyes of God silently mock him, and there’s an infestation of natural blonds.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once again, Shizuo found himself in a confined space for an extensive period of time with nothing at all to do. He couldn’t even smoke on this train, no matter how much his body itched with craving. All he had was the consistent noises of video game characters to keep him awake.

“Pika-pi~!”

Shizuo ground his teeth together. “Do you have to have the sound on while you play that?”

Izaya was curled up in his seat with a Nintendo 3DS open, and he was tapping away at the bottom screen. He had been like that for about an hour.

“The sound effects are one of the best parts of this game, Shizu-chan. They really put in a lot of thought to what each monster would sound like this time around.”

“Don’t call Pokemon ‘monsters.’”

“‘Pokemon’ is literally a contraction of ‘pocket monsters.’”

“Yeah well literally nobody ever calls them that,” Shizuo countered. “It’s like calling your pet a monster. Besides, what would a game like that interest you about it anyways? It’s for kids and stuff. There’s more Pokemon than humans, which is what you ‘love’ so much.”

Izaya paused from his game to look at Shizuo spitefully. “You’re wrong, Shizu-chan. First of all, these games always have very relevant, underlying tales of the follies of humans. For example, this game features an organized crime syndicate bent on destroying everyone who doesn’t conform to their ideals of wealth and grandeur… Which is a pretty straightforward critique of first world capitalism and class systems, one that even children can understand. And it’s interesting in itself that a multibillion dollar video game company would convey such a message using a so-called peaceful battle strategy game that incorporates and highlights its fictional domestic and wild creatures as a platform for such a message, especially when this installment in particular takes place in a Western world microcosm that greatly resembles the country of France. Second of all, geez can’t I play a video game because I think the monsters are cute?”

Jaw-slacked, Shizuo got lost somewhere between ‘capitalism’ and ‘microcosm,’ or maybe even before. He felt his face twitch when Izaya chuckled at him.

“Fine,” Shizuo said bitterly, “but you can still turn down the volume!”

“It’s your own fault for not bringing anything to do, Shizu-chan.” Izaya kept playing with the sound on. “What do you expect to do for the next five hours?”
“Five hours?!” Shizuo cried. “Why didn’t we fly there?!”

Izaya shook his head. “They’re more expensive, more complicated, more crowded, and all you see are clouds. Look,” he gestured out the window, “don’t we have a better view this way?”

They had been driving alongside America’s East Coast since they left DC’s inner city. Only when they entered a big city like Philadelphia did they lose sight of the ocean. It wasn’t like Shizuo had never seen the ocean before, but he had never seen the Atlantic before. He supposed that fact was something worth celebrating, and he noticed that the terrain was very different than the Pacific’s.

“If you’re just going to be playing that, give me the window seat,” Shizuo demanded.

“No,” Izaya said, “what are you gonna do? Stare at the beaches for five hours?”

“Better than staring at you.”

“Don’t lie,” Izaya batted his eyelashes up at Shizuo, “I’m a delight to look at. What made you decide to come, anyways?”

Shizuo spluttered, caught in a whiplash. “What?”

“I know what it feels like when you’re actually trying to kill me, and that wasn’t it.”

His breath hitched. Shizuo also remembered what he felt when he had come closest to taking Izaya’s life, and he could attest that it wasn’t like what he was feeling now. For a brief moment, the Izaya
before him appeared beaten, bloody, and on the last thread of life. But Izaya was just fine, still scrutinizing the man in front of him.

Shizuo spoke into the back of the seat in front of him so that the words bounced back at him, “I’m always trying to kill you.”

“It’s okay if you’re not always trying to kill me.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Fine, but I wouldn’t want you to succeed before I wanted you to, anyways.”

“And if I wanted to right now?”

“There sure are a lot of witnesses… and I think a railroad murder mystery is a bit too nineteenth century. Do you?”

“Yes, I always want to.” Shizuo took a deep breath. “But I won’t.” Because he didn’t want to just right then.

Izaya’s lips tugged upwards. “Good. I’m counting on you to not kill me and to kill me.”

The whole idea made Shizuo’s head hurt. “You’re confusing,” he said, sighing. So confusing that Shizuo wasn’t sure if he should be disappointed in himself for his passiveness towards Izaya right now.

“We did manage to go to high school together,” Izaya pointed out, “Somehow…”

“But I hated your guts back then, too,” Shizuo reminded. As of three months ago, Izaya hadn’t changed at all since high school, neither in personality or in physicality. But now, the more he looked at Izaya for prolonged moments, Shizuo wasn’t sure how much that notion still held up.

“Fair,” Izaya continued, “But I’m still alive, so… So you are capable of being around me a little without going nuts-o. You probably wouldn’t have graduated otherwise. Sometimes we managed to be in the same room! Usually with Shinra… Well, you’ve obviously gotten worse, though, based on what happened and all.”

Shizuo wished he’d stop bringing that up. “Yeah, but are you capable of not being a horrible little shithead this time?”

“Probably not!” Izaya said honestly, “I guess we’ll find out.” He held out his hand to Shizuo. “Shizu-chan, let’s do our best.”

Shizuo drew back and scowled. “No way!” He refused to shake Izaya’s hand.

Overhead, the conductor came on and announced something that caused plenty of passengers to gather their belongings and ready themselves for departure.

“What he say?” Shizuo asked.

Izaya considered Shizuo before answering, “He said we’re in Newark and the next stop is Penn Station in Manhattan.”

“New York?” Shizuo perked up. “Is that us?”

Perhaps there were pros to this contract after all; Shizuo had always thought seeing New York City
would be cool after seeing it destroyed on film so many times.

But Izaya was shaking his head, “Nope.”

“What? Why not?!” Izaya had been the one to say he wanted to see everything in the world. Wasn’t New York City staple in that venture?

“I’ve already been to New York,” Izaya explained.

“But I haven’t!” Shizuo complained.

Izaya rolled his eyes, “Well then go when you’re not under someone else’s employment.”

Okay, now Shizuo wanted to kill Izaya a little more than before.

Trying not to pout so obviously, Shizuo continued, “Then where are we going?”

“To the end of the line!” Izaya sang. Like Shizuo knew what the hell that meant, but it got Shizuo thinking.

“Izaya…” he started, “Where exactly are we going? By the end? What’s the point of all this?”

Instead of answering him, Izaya rose from his seat.

“I think I have something to keep you entertained.” He moved into the aisle and reached over Shizuo into the overhead storage area. Shizuo watched him raise to the tips of his toes in attempts to obtain whatever it was. With Izaya’s torso in his face, it was hard for Shizuo to ignore the cloth of Izaya’s shirt lifting with his stretch, leaving few centimeters of skin exposed. While Shizuo almost just looked in the opposite direction, his attention was instead drawn in by a series of unnatural lines streaking vertically and horizontally across Izaya’s hips and upper pelvis. Before Shizuo could deduce any further, though, Izaya was back on the flats of his feet and dropping a book into Shizuo’s lap.

“There. Make use of that.”

Looking down, Shizuo saw a black and yellow textbook with a triangular-headed cartoon. The title was English for Dummies in Japanese.

He glowered up at Izaya as he pushed his way back into his seat. “What is this?”

Horrified, Izaya pointed to the title. “I knew your English was bad, but who knew you couldn’t read Japanese either! It says -”

“I know what it says; I can read it!” Shizuo growled. He tried to force the book back on Izaya, “I’m not gonna study while I’m doing this; my English is just fine.”

Izaya deadpanned at him. When he opened his mouth, whatever English gibberish came out went right over Shizuo’s head.

Shizuo hit him with the book in defiance.

More gibberish.

“Izaya.”

“You were the one complaining about nothing to do.” Something in English. “World traveling
should be a learning experience anyways, Shizu-chan.” And then something that Shizuo was pretty sure wasn’t English at all.

Sparing the book a second glance, Shizuo recalled all the times he’d almost gotten himself in trouble so far just from not knowing enough English. Izaya was already back in his Pokemon game.

They pulled into Penn Station, and Shizuo watched in mourning as passengers went off into New York City. Quite a few new people boarded the train, though. Shizuo vaguely considered what could it be like to abandon Izaya on that train to explore the popular city himself, but the weight of the book burdened him. Looking to Izaya, Shizuo found his eyes travelling downwards in recollection of the brief glimpse he had of Izaya’s skin.

Sighing bitterly, Shizuo opened the book and became frustrated by the first page.

Shizuo lost track of time while engrossed in the book Izaya had given him. Hours definitely went by, but Shizuo felt like he had barely learned the English days of the week. Ever since school, Shizuo had never been particularly fond of sitting still and absorbing texts or lectures. It wasn’t so much that Shizuo disliked learning as a whole, but the setting of a classroom never suited him. Sitting still built up his blood pressure; he needed to move and experience things hands on. Plus, whenever he couldn’t understand anything, Shizuo would get furious at himself and at whatever subject he was trying to grasp. Instead of asking for help he would typically throw a fit. Right now, Shizuo interpreted the English language as his enemy.

And it wasn’t like he would ask Izaya for any tutoring. That was absolutely out of the question, even if Izaya was fluent. Eventually, Shizuo began tearing pages out of the book and absent-mindedly folding poor examples of origami. Arts and crafts was never really Shizuo’s strong suit either, but he found it passed the time more soothingly and even eased some of the frustration the text had given him. He just had to make sure he was extra, extra careful to not crush or rip anything. A strength exercise, he told himself, if I’m gonna go this slog without snapping a twig.

First he made a basic crane. Next, a sailboat, a flower of some kind, more cranes, little tiny stars… then he started getting a little creative. Without any real idea of what he was doing, he attempted butterflies and foxes and dogs. But really, they came out looking more like crumpled heaps of paper than any animal or object. Shizuo shrugged, kept ripping out pages, and tried again.

When he eventually grew tired of that exercise as well, he brought out his new phone and began tinkering with it, exploring the features. There were all the basic apps that came with smartphones nowadays, though some were Americanized. He only had one number in his history: Shinra’s. I said I was going to call them, he remembered from that morning. But rather than blabbing in a public train, he set up his e-mail app and sent a message to Celty. Not really sure what he was going to say, he just began typing what came to mind.

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To: cestson@yahoo.co.jp
From: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
Subject: still in america
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sorry the phone convo was cut short. you seemed really mad so im double sorry. ya i did find izaya and hes still alive. my bad. im on a train with him right now. dont know where were going. i might have signed something that made me his bodyguard until he decides he wants me to kill him. think
hes up to something so im keeping an eye on him. also hes paying me. ill call shinra again when i get another chance.

Figuring that was good enough, Shizuo hit send. Then he sent another apology to Tom, which was less detailed. He pocketed his phone and sat back, sighing. There. After a minute of wishful thinking that Celty would answer that quickly, his hands idly fell to the origami-making again. He never considered the damage he was going to Izaya’s book, though. Not until he glanced to his right and found Izaya taking a nap.

Ignoring whichever origami he was in the midst of creating, Shizuo’s focus lingered on Izaya. With his back to the wall, Izaya had turned himself perpendicular to the train and compacted himself into the seat such as only someone with his rag of a body could succeed in doing. His feet were almost in Shizuo’s lap, his knees drawn up, and his arms crossed across his chest with his gameboy tucked underneath. The thing wasn’t making any more noises, so Shizuo would have wondered if the batteries had died like that... if he had cared enough. What Shizuo did wonder was how long Izaya might have been like that, with his lips parted just a fraction of the way open, his head lolling haphazardly to and fro with the movement of the train, brows knit together and breath too uneven to be in a peaceful slumber.

The image pissed off Shizuo to a degree that he felt compelled to chuck the book straight onto the top of Izaya’s head.

Even more aggravating was the nonchalant manner in which Izaya awoke, as if its cause was no more natural than rising with the sun. His breathing hitched slightly, and his eyes fluttered themselves back into consciousness. A tentative hand reached up to rub where the book had impacted his cranium while eyes found Shizuo glaring at him.

“Ow,” Izaya croaked accusingly, voice still low and scratchy from drowsiness. “That was really rude, Shizu-chan.” With a yawn, squeaking here and there, Izaya stretched his limbs up and out. His legs straightened out purposely in front of Shizuo, who promptly pushed them back out of his face. He ultimately fell back into the same knotted up position, his eyes falling on Shizuo’s open tray covered in origami.

Izaya observed the mess for a moment. Then, tilting his head, he breathed the faintest of laughs.

“Did you… Did you learn a lot?”

Shizuo crossed his arms while Izaya tittered at him a little more. “I got bored.”

“Clearly,” Izaya grinned. Shizuo watched him survey everything before Izaya held out his hand.

Confused, Shizuo bore down at the open palm. “What?”

“I want one,” Izaya stated, bucking his hand more distinctly towards the origami. The notion took Shizuo aback for some reason. When Izaya didn’t withdraw, though, Shizuo picked one up and dropped it carelessly into Izaya’s grasp.

Bringing it close for further inspection, Izaya gently fingered the paper. His eyes filled with a childlike amusement, though his words still oozed with degradation.

“What is it?” he asked honestly, eyes-narrowed but smile still intact.

“It’s a fox!” Shizuo insisted. Sure, Shizuo wasn’t an expert origami sculptor, but he had some pride in his creations.

“It’s a fox!” Shizuo repeated, not having a clue of what a platypus was. He reached for it. “Give it back if you can’t even tell what it is!”

Izaya kept the origami close to his chest and out of Shizuo’s reach, using his knees as a barricade. “Nooo,” he whined. “You gave it to me, it’s mine now! Besides, past-participles are important… Even if they are on a wonky platypus.” Shizuo groaned, and Izaya burst into giggles. “What else is there? Oh, stars! I want one!”

“No!” Shizuo smacked Izaya’s hand away. “Make your own.”

“Oh come on, Shizu-chan, don’t be stingy!” Izaya nudged him with the toe of his foot. “You destroyed my book to make them, so technically they’re all mine anyways.”

“You gave me the book, so it’s not yours anymore.”

“I don’t believe that argument will hold up in a court of law, and I’m going to sue you for custody unless you give me another one.”

Shizuo thanked the conductor’s interruption over the loudspeaker. Almost all the passengers at once began stirring at the announcement, and Izaya became momentarily distracted from the origami enough to turn his attention to out the window behind him.

“Oh, looks like we’re here!” Izaya said.

“Where’s ‘here?’” Shizuo asked as he began to collect the remaining origami off of the tray and into his backpack.

Izaya pressed his face against the glass. “Boston.”

“Never heard of it.” Shizuo said.

“Figures,” Izaya said very matter-of-factly, “Do you know anything about the world that isn’t five steps in front of your apartment?”

Shizuo pressed Izaya’s face harder into the glass.

“They brought a baseball trophy to Japan not too long ago,” Izaya offered.

“Hmm,” Shizuo released Izaya’s head in thought, “I might remember that.”

Izaya turned to Shizuo begrudgingly with a red cheek and forehead from being abused against glass. Smirking satisfactorily, Shizuo leaned across Izaya and gazed outside. The city didn’t look like much from this angle, but mostly of what he saw looked like the back of a big station.

Kneeing Shizuo out of the way, Izaya raised just like the rest of the passengers. He crossed Shizuo and went into the overhead compartments again. Shizuo watched amusedly as Izaya struggled all the way to his tiptoes to get a grip on whatever luggage was up there. Izaya glared down between his arms at him when he noticed Shizuo’s leer.

“It’s fine, don’t bother getting up or anything.”

“Allright.” Shizuo said spitefully. At this point, Izaya had mounted his feet on the outer arm rest and was heaving at a duffle bag. This made it difficult for Shizuo to remain spiteful, though, as he now
tried fastidiously not to get distracted by that particular angle that Izaya was in and the accompanying thrusting motions. “How the hell did you get it up there, then?”

“I flirted with the conductor,” Izaya explained while he finally to dislodge the bag and drop it to the floor, trying not to be that rough. Shizuo frowned. Of course, he thought, bitter for whatever reason. Then, Izaya went back into the compartment just when Shizuo thought he was done.

“There’s more?!?”

“I haven’t been in Japan for almost two months, and unlike some people, I need more than a backpack’s worth of clothes and stuff.”

Taking offence, Shizuo considered that. “Wait,” he realized, “two months? Then where were you for the other month you were missing?”

Before he got any answers, the conductor came by and aided Izaya in pulling down a large rolling suitcase. Shizuo witnessed Izaya put on a show of being an apparent helpless tourist while the big conductor regarded Shizuo with a disapproving look. Izaya slung the duffle bag over the clutch of the suitcase, and they made their way off the train with Izaya hauling that freight by himself.

“You’re the one with monstrous strength,” Izaya pointed out as they made their way through the train station, “You should be doing the heavy lifting.”

“Not a chance,” Shizuo said, perceiving his surroundings. South Station, as it was called, wasn’t as big as the last station they were in, but Shizuo decided it did have its own grandeur. Especially when they made it outside, and Shizuo could look over his shoulder at yet another building of grand columns and arches.

“This way!” Izaya beckoned.

“What?” Shizuo started, “To where? You know where you’re going already?” Izaya did not currently have a map in his hands, so far as Shizuo could see.

“I downloaded a map of Boston the other day,” Izaya answered.

Shizuo waited. “And?”

“And I memorized it.” As if that was the most obvious thing in the world. Shizuo wanted to punch the smugness out of him, but he also glanced around at all the intersecting streets he could see and wondered if that was actually possible. Instead, he ended up opting to light up a cigarette, just like he’d been craving all morning.

Boston was colder than Washington and though the day itself was sunny and bright, piles and patches of snow remained in the streets and sidewalks as remnants of a past storm. They were looking at the beginnings of a respectable skyline, proper skyscrapers overhead. The streets were busy with commuters, who walked in and out of little glass pyramids that were strewn about with signs displaying the letter T. However, the first and most obscure sight Shizuo noticed were a giant pair of eyes. Across the street and off a ways was a bizarrely shaped building. Upon its nearest wall was a gigantic mural of just a boy, whose squinted eyes were the only part of its face visible under a red headscarf. His scrunched up sitting position took up the entire wall, and it reminded Shizuo of how Izaya had sat on the train.

But the eyes… The eyes narrowed judgmentally down at Shizuo no matter which angle he leaned. And the more Shizuo made eye contact with them, the more his veins begin to heat and swell. Not to mention, they only reminded him of Izaya’s previous know-it-all statement. His fist clenched tightly.
Without thinking, Shizuo meandered off their path and lengthened his stride, aiming himself right at the mural. He didn’t make it far, though, before Izaya shoved his luggage in front of Shizuo’s legs. Shizuo tripped over them and landed face-first in a pile of dirty snow.

Shizuo could have produced steam from how hot-blooded he’d gotten. “Izaaayaaaaa…” He extracted himself from the slush, now soaked and furious. Even his cigarette had been snuffed out.

Izaya shuffled in mocked innocence, “Oh I’m sorry, was that my fault? Shouldn’t you watch where you’re going, Shizu-chan?”

“I’m gonna kill you.” He said simply.

“But weren’t you just about to kill that painting?” Izaya pulled his luggage in front of him to use as a shield. “By all means, don’t let me stop you from being thrown in jail in a second American city!”

He’s right! Shizuo berated himself. Makes me want to beat him even more! But the suitcase was in his way. Since it was on wheels, Izaya had no problem rolling it around to whichever way Shizuo tried to approached. They played a rooted game of cat and mouse like that for a few minutes, earning plenty of measuring looks from passers-by. Even though Izaya didn’t run away, Shizuo surprised himself by finding a thrill in the game anyways. He knew he needed to actually get to Izaya, so he grabbed the luggage with two hands and lifted it above his head. When he did, their weight surprised him enough to stop before throwing them.

“The hell you got in here, flea?”

Izaya looked at him levelly, widely in the eye. “Human heads.”

If Shizuo hadn’t become an expert Izaya lie detector throughout the years, he could have believed him.

“And organs.”

“But really.” Shizuo prompted.

“Oh, you know,” Izaya shrugged, “clothes, shoes… several external hard drives, an external monitor, a laptop, office supplies, shampoo… the usual traveling necessities.”

Shizuo may not travel often, but he was pretty sure there wasn’t anything usual about those.

Izaya looked hopeful. “So, you gonna carry that for me now?” Shizuo ended up dumping the luggage on top of Izaya and lighting up another cigarette while Izaya protested.

The hotel was not too far away from the train station, and it sat on a wharf right upon the harbor water. Rather than tall, it was long and stacked like a pyramid with many balconies. Along with the harbor, it was situated right next to a small park with arched greenways running through. Actually, there were greeneries everywhere, Shizuo noticed, even alongside and in between the highways. This hotel had the same name as the in DC, so Shizuo figured it must be a chain.

“I’m racking up my guest points,” Izaya explained as they walked inside. Though the lobby was larger than DC’s, it was significantly more crowded. Shizuo tensed when they walked in and all he saw was a bunch of suits bustling about. However, a delectable aroma quickly breached his nostrils. His stomach was growling almost immediately. When was the last time I had real food? He
wondered.

Following the scent, he quickly lost track of Izaya in the massive lobby that honestly resembled a sort of labyrinth. Shizuo really didn’t see the appeal of these fancy hotels. They lacked a certain comfort and charm, and instead focussed on providing top of the line amenities. Which, he figured, would attract someone like Izaya. But all these suits! Perhaps those type of people who were crowding the place were drawing in Izaya as well. The thought made his appetite drop a little, but not enough to stop wading through the crowd until he found the source of the smell. He had to admit, though, that whatever he could smell was very inviting.

There was a restaurant on the first floor, one that he would have to be seated at guessing my the hostess waiting at the entrance. The place looked crowded, too, with all the same type of people taking up every other space. Shizuo sighed in defeat, but his stomach sounded and felt like it wanted to detach itself from his body and gallop into the nearest kitchen.

“Shizu-chan!”

He turned around, and Izaya crept through the crowd with a little more grace than one with all that luggage and such limited amount of space should have. If Shizuo didn’t know any better, he’d say Izaya looked disgruntled.

“What’s up with you?” Shizuo asked absently.

“There’s a big political conference - which, normally, is like Christmas, but all the rooms have been taken.”

“So then why did we come here?” There had to be plenty of hotels in the city and all Shizuo wanted presently was food and dry clothes.

“I had already gotten a room for myself days, but there’s none for you,” Izaya sighed. “Shizu-chan, looks like you’ll just have to sleep outside.”

Like hell, Shizuo was thinking. “Why don’t we just go to another hotel?”

“Because,” Izaya pouted a little too dramatically, “That’s a pain…”

“You’re a spoiled brat, and I hate you,” Shizuo said while succumbing to the whim to pinch and pull at Izaya’s petulant expression with his fingers. Such faces on Izaya were still foreign to Shizuo, albeit he’d never spent such a long period of time in the other’s company. He couldn’t deny that he found the phenomenon a little fascinating. Incidentally, Izaya didn’t seem to mind that much. He’d experienced more dangerous displays from Shizuo. He’s made of putty, Shizuo thought when Izaya paid more mind to their surroundings and whatever storm was brewing in that mind of his, than to Shizuo stretching his cheek.

“Oh!” Izaya’s eyes caught onto something. “I can work with that!” He took off his jacket and left it draped over his luggage. “Watch these.” Without another word, he strided away and forced Shizuo to release him, or else risk Shizuo’s strength ripping his face off. Shizuo’s eyes followed Izaya stroll over to a young man sitting in a leather lobby sofa.

The young man - blond, blue-eyed, caucasian, and well-dressed - had a Blue Tooth in his ear and was tapping furiously on a smartphone. He looked up when Izaya approached, who touched the young man’s knee gently to get his attention. Shizuo couldn’t hear what they were saying; they were too far away. Izaya motioned to the empty space on the sofa, though, and blondie nodded. Natural blond, probably, Shizuo noted. A cold sensation ran through him as he watched Izaya’s persona
transform before his very eyes.

No, he couldn’t hear a word escaping Izaya’s lips, but the body language was all wrong. The change was in the subtle cant of hips, the frequent hand on his face or in his hair, the plastered and dimpled smile. Everything was so unnatural that Shizuo felt a little sick, but blondie seemed entranced. Izaya sat beside blondie a little too closely, and they talked like that for an excruciating amount of time, by Shizuo’s standards. At whatever blondie was saying, Izaya was acting positively intrigued. Then blondie was giving his phone to Izaya?? Izaya tapped something into the phone, scanned it like a barcode with his eyes, and handed it back. Rising, Izaya put his hand on blondie’s leather bag for support as he lingered over the young man a little longer than necessary. Something about blondie’s dumb, gullible face almost sent Shizuo off the deep end, but Izaya was already on his way back.

Izaya, facing his back towards blondie, held up two keycards for Shizuo to see.

“I got us a suite!”

Chapter End Notes

The Os Gemeos mural in Dewey Square was actually replaced a couple months ago with a blander, gray, neutral design. But for the sake of F. Scott Fitzgerald let’s just pretend that the yellow man’s eyes of God remain.

Also I don’t think there’s a legitimate e-mail address for either Celty of Shizuo or anyone canon?? Correct me if I’m wrong. I know there’s screennames here and there but most of those are aliases.
“Ooooh… This is nice!” Izaya exclaimed when they walked into the suite. Shizuo found the whole thing fishy; everything Izaya did was fishy, but… Well, it was definitely clean and fancy, Shizuo admitted to himself. The common room had access to a balcony overlooking the park and harbor, but Shizuo still thought everything was a little overkill. Izaya did a beeline for the adjacent door: the bedroom. Shizuo followed.

“So how’d you manage getting this, anyhow?” Shizuo asked. “That guy just let you have his suite?”

Izaya abandoned his luggage and fell into the single bed in the room face first. “Information! It’s not his room, it’s a governor’s. I knew which one, back in DC. We performed a little exchange… can’t say he won’t get in trouble with his boss, though. Whatever, his fault. People are so predictable…”

Typical, Shizuo grunted as he scanned the suite. One bed, one bedroom, the common room, a visible bathroom and kitchenette…

“Izaya…” he started, coolly, “Where’s the other bed?”

“There’s a couch in the other room, use that.” Izaya was toeing off his shoes and bringing out his phone again. Finding that superior, bossy attitude increasingly perturbing, Shizuo marched towards the bed and lifted Izaya by the hem of his pants, carried him into the common room and plopped him onto the couch face-first. Izaya lifted his head and blinked, like he was a little bit baffled of how he got there.

“I don’t see why I should have to be stuck with anything,” Shizuo growled, “I signed on to be your bodyguard - and to keep an eye on you. I can take whatever I want from you, remember?”

Izaya rolled over onto his back and smirked up at Shizuo. “Can you?”

“Yes,” Shizuo insisted.

“Hmm…” Izaya’s smirk became even more wicked. “...Wanna fight for it?”

Only after a surprised second of consideration, Shizuo grinned. “Yeah, I do.”

Two broken lamps, a smashed end table, a destroyed mini-fridge, and totalled television set later, Shizuo had Izaya in a chokehold against a wall while Izaya had a knife against Shizuo’s throat.
“I was wondering when you were gonna bring out one of those,” Shizuo ground out through bared teeth, referring to the blade under his chin.

“I told you I packed office supplies,” Izaya said nonchalantly. Office supplies, Shizuo repeated in his head, sure. He withheld his strength to the best of his ability, trying more to just hold Izaya there than to actually strangle. A foreign feeling for him, but apparently this was one of those times when he didn’t want to kill Izaya, no matter how pissed he was about a bed. He was still completely famished, too. Not long after the two of them caught each other like that, Shizuo’s stomach rumbled again.

Izaya looked down divertedly at the sound. “Me too!” He said, withdrawing his switchblade.

Shizuo reflexively released Izaya. “But -”

“Have the bed,” Izaya waved a hand dismissively, “You’re taller, it makes sense. And you were obviously going easy on me again.”

Though he said so, red prints began to appear around his pale neck. Izaya placed a hand there, stretched and cracked his neck as if it were nothing while Shizuo inspected the damage for himself. It appeared that Shizuo couldn’t restrain himself as much as he wished. Drawn in, he lifted his hand to gently touch the marred skin, but Izaya jerked away. He used a hand to push Shizuo away; an inch was all he mustered. “Bleck!”

Despite the injury, Izaya remained lively and mischievous as he took to teasing Shizuo again. “Eww,” he shook out his hand, “You’re still wet.”

“I have to change!” Shizuo argued.

“Yeah, into more dirty clothes. That’s gross, you’re gross.” Izaya was now stepping around their mess to retrieve his shoes. Shizuo looked down at his damp and dirty attire. “Buy more clothes while you’re here,” Izaya commanded.

Shizuo became affronted. “I can’t do that!”

“Oh I know,” Izaya rolled his eyes as he laced up his boots over his jeans, “God forbid you wear anything that precious Kasuka-kun didn’t buy for you five years ago or whatever.” Izaya hopped to his feet, wrapped a scarf around his neck and retrieved his parka. “Wear the same clothes for weeks for all I care. You’ll just repel everyone within three meters of you…” Izaya’s voice dripped with disdain, “but, driving people away is what you strive for, right?”

“Oi…” Shizuo’s tone warned. He resented Izaya’s ability to blend pleasantries into personal digs so suddenly, fluidly and easily. Like now, once again - instead of apologizing like any sensitive human being, Izaya flitted into a demeanor of whimsy. He took Shizuo by both his wrists and moved toward the door.

“Wait, what - !” Shizuo resisted, jerking his arms back. “What, where are we going?”

“Into the world, Shizu-chan!” There was that eyeful gleam again. “We just arrived in a new, foreign city and we have yet to experience any of it! And there’s food out there.”

“Uhhh…” Shizuo glanced around at the room. The broken everything that he didn’t even realize could result when they went at it minutes ago. “Should we…? Is this…”

Izaya shook his head. “The room’s still under Kyle’s boss!”

“…Kyle?” Shizuo frowned.
“Kyle!”

“...Blondie?” Shizuo remembered sourly.

“Ye-! Wh - you’re blond too, y’know.”

Shizuo half scoffed, half roared. “You can’t do that, THAT’S WRONG!” Izaya was gonna pawn off property damage to the unknowing natural blond. Then again, Shizuo didn’t care about that guy so much.

Izaya bounced, “Yes, but he’s rich!” Shizuo grabbed his collar again.

“Still wrong!”

“Can you pay for it?”

“...No…”

“Are you hungry?”

“...Yes…”

“Then why are we still here?” There was an unmistakable mirth in Izaya’s voice at this point. In memory of Kyle’s slick suit, fancy gadgets, and neatly combed blond hair, Shizuo caved.

He shook Izaya three times out of mere stubbornness before letting go. “FINE, let’s go!” He turned Izaya around and pushed the laughing man out of the room, leaving all the disarray behind them.

They ventured out into Boston, Izaya in the lead. Shizuo lit up a cigarette as soon as they were outside. The first thing Shizuo noticed of this city was that pedestrians ruled the road, crossing the street and jaywalking whenever they saw opportunity. The streets themselves were designed like a web. Somehow Izaya managed to maneuver them knowingly.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Shizuo asked speculatively.

“Nope!” Izaya chirped, “Just following my stomach’s intuition.”

“What! I thought you memorized the map!”

Izaya turned to him. “Yeah, I did. But I’ve never been here before, so how can I know where anything is unless I already know where it is I wanna go?”

He felt his brain short-circuit a little. “I... that didn’t make any sense.”

“Oh, Shizu-chan,” Izaya put his gloved hands on his cheek bashfully, “Did you really think I was smart enough to know everything about a place I had never been to? You think so highly of me after all!”

Shizuo pushed him without either of them breaking stride. “I think you’re a demon spawn.”

“But a smart demon spawn!”

They walked under an arch and into a bizarre plaza. The road, which was only for people, was all old cobblestone and brick. A long, long building resided in the middle, flanked by restaurants and shops all along either side. Columns again. There were also street vendors, some shielded from the weather by plexiglas enclosures. Upon entering the prominent middle building, they discovered a
paradise of international cuisine as far as the eye could see. The place was designed as a food court in a singular, long hallway with a rotund seating hall in the middle. Shizuo temporarily forgot that he wore cold, wet clothes while his stomach rejoiced.

Izaya swooned beside him. “I’m going to eat everything.”

Feeling the same way, Shizuo went off on his own to find something to settle his appetite. He felt like he could eat everything he came across, but there was an abundance to choose from. American, Italian, Middle-Eastern? Spanish…? A hell of a lot of seafood, for sure. Some of it, Shizuo could not put a name too, but in his current state it all looked delicious. To his luck, there was a Japanese counter. He ended up getting pizza and sushi, which wasn’t too far off from his diet at home.

Later, when Shizuo was sat at a table in that middle room, Izaya had an armful of culinary and found him.

“The hell is all that?” Shizuo pointed with his chopsticks.

“I have no fucking clue!” Izaya elated like it was the most wonderful news in the world, placing the cuisine down one by one. He noticed Shizuo’s meal and fixed him with an incredulous look. “You got sushi?”

“And pizza,” Shizuo corrected and took a greedy bite to further his point. The pizza here was really thin, and he didn’t necessarily dislike it.


“You don’t even know what you’re eating,” Shizuo pointed out, gesturing to a pocket of food.

“Um, I know it’s Greek.” Izaya snided. He picked it up and ate it with his hands. A lot of the contents fell out onto the table. Lettuce, dressing, onions, olives, cheese? Among other things. Chewing, Izaya debated on its taste. He swallowed and added, “And that it’s good.”

“What about that?” Shizuo referred to a milky looking substance in a hollowed out bread.

“Chowder? I don’t know, it was everywhere, so I got one. There’s seafood in it.”

“Why’s it in a bread?” Shizuo asked.

Izaya shrugged, “Because… America? Why not.”

“Eat it.” Shizuo dared.

First, Izaya regarded the bowl like he didn’t really know how to go about it. He turned it 360 degrees and weighed it in his hands, and Shizuo wondered how thick the contents were to not be seeping through the bottom yet. Picking it up with both hands, Izaya went to slurp the contents. That didn’t really work out, though, and the white soup spilled all over his face.

“Hmm… I don’t think that’s how you do it,” Shizuo snarked, but Izaya was practically choking when he ran off in order to return with a fistful of napkins a second later. He wiped his face, shaking his head in agreement.

“It wasn’t… bad though…” Izaya said when he finally discarded the napkins.

Doubtful, Shizuo was pretty pleased with his own selection after all. He popped another sushi in his mouth and watched Izaya try another, easier dish. Then, Shizuo noticed that a couple drips of that
white soup remained near Izaya’s lips. Before his conscious could pull in the reins, his mind dropped into a dark place where only the filthiest of images resided. Like, those locked away from puberty and schoolboy fantasies. While caught staring, a sushi dropped out from between his chopsticks.

Izaya looked up from his own food to question him. “What?” After Shizuo failed to respond, he tracked Shizuo’s line of sight to his own face, and instead of grabbing a napkin he just used his own tongue to lap up the remains of the failed chowder experiment. On cue, Shizuo’s conscious finally reacted by rocketing his mind into a strange, uncharted territory that couldn’t handle the pressure and ignited into fever worthy temperatures. Unable to handle the heat, Shizuo dropped his chopsticks and grabbed the edge of the table. Izaya, quick as he was, managed to move away before Shizuo flipped the wooden table over with a thunderous roar, sending the few other tourists in the facility scattering. They made it outside before anyone could register who they were or what had happened. Once a good distance away from the scene he’d caused, Shizuo immediately fumbled for a cigarette to calm his nerves. Izaya was mourning at the food he’d left behind, but Shizuo tried to tune him out. He sucked on putrid smoke while he tried to squash everything back into the recesses of his mind.

“I can’t –” He puffed, but he couldn’t finish his sentence. He gathered himself, which was mostly rage and self-loathing at this point, and tried again. “Why the hell am I following you around anyways?!"

“Because, you’re supposed be my bodyguard, remember!” Izaya’s voice came from somewhere nearby, but Shizuo wasn’t gonna look at him in fear of visiting post-traumatic flashbacks. “What if some Yakuza hitmen come at me in one of these places where I least expect, or aliens or American sports fans!”

“Bullshit!” Shizuo snapped.

“What are you freaking out about now?!” Izaya kept trying to step into his vision, but Shizuo kept avoiding the images. He focussed all his might on remembering every aspect of Izaya that he hated. He had to remember that Izaya was a despicable human being that used human beings as his play things, that Izaya had hurt and threatened people that Shizuo cared about, that Izaya had ruined Shizuo’s own life time and time again. Shizuo should be 99% sure that that was what Izaya was currently doing. And now he had gone hours upon hours of interacting as if none of that baggage existed. No! It was strange. This is too fucked up, Shizuo reeled, and the gears in his brain cracked into a forced placement.

“I’m not gonna do this!” He hadn’t even lasted a day. “I can’t do this! I’m not going to follow you around and guard you from shit that you probably deserve and act like I don’t hate you. I’m not going to just sit and eat with you like we’re buddies or something because we’re not! We never were, and we never will be!”

“Shizu-”

“Face it, Izaya!” The gears in Shizuo’s head twisted and turned. They created a horrible, ugly, deafening sound. “You just dragged me out here so you could pretend that someone would wanna do all this crap with you because really, NOBODY would! NOBODY missed you, Izaya! They all told me to forget about you - EVERY SINGLE ONE - and I should have listened! But I’m only here to end it with you, remember?!”

Shizuo squeezed his eyes shut and tried to clear the red from his vision. He took a deep breath; the gears stopped again. No more holding back, he told himself as he reached out blindly for whatever throwable object he could grab. However, when he opened his eyes again, Izaya was nowhere to be seen.
He had disappeared sometime during Shizuo’s rant, fled into the unfamiliar city. Shizuo shouldn’t have been surprised; it was in Izaya’s nature to run away. Good! A voice said within, You don’t have to deal with him! That didn’t stop the habitual tug in Shizuo’s gut to follow him. He couldn’t this time, though. If only he had seen where Izaya had gone…

Pathetically and without a clue of where to go, Shizuo found himself wandering through Boston and its cobweb streets. He ambled between skyscrapers and giant clock towers, and every now and then there would be a centuries’ old building tucked in between more modern architecture. A church or an old colonial landmark. But Shizuo ignored most of his surroundings, his mind elsewhere.

It’s not like I didn’t mean it, he practically pep talked himself during his walk. He did mean it, every word. Snow began to fall and seep into Shizuo’s tattered attire, chilling him to the bone. As the sun began to drop below the skyline, the sky darkened into twilight hues. Shizuo lost track of how long he explored, and if he remained in the snow any longer dressed as he was he’d probably die of hypothermia, no matter how stubborn or freakish he was. With his phone’s GPS, he typed in the hotel’s name and followed the directions. Eventually, the familiar gaze of two scrutinous eyes came into view between the buildings again.

Shizuo crossed into the square, as his map directed him, before pocketing it; he had an idea of where he was now, thanks to the reappearance of the mural. Many walked through the square in direction of the train station, some loitered around, and a dark man stood upon a bench at the base of the mural and shouted scripture into the crowd.

The setting sun in the west managed to streak through all of the towers of the city and direct its beams directly onto the boy’s wrapped up face. Shadows fell across the mural’s body and swallowed his patterned clothing into obscurity. But the ray highlighted the yellow skin below the red scarf, the top of a bulbous nose and those squinted eyes that Shizuo swore were weighing his mortal soul. The miniscule, beedy pupils regarded Shizuo with certain disapproval and resentment. Like he knew. His eyes could somehow see every stigma and sin that Shizuo had ever dwelled on, including those currently nagging underneath his skin. Shizuo couldn’t cope with it; he didn’t need a two dimensional cartoon passing judgment over him when he was already wracked with his own guilt.

“...Sons I have raised and reared, but they have rebelled against me! An ox knows its owner, and an ass, its master’s anger…”

Shizuo marched over to the base of the mural, where the boys yellow, wormy hands entwined with his yellow, bare feet. Meeting the boy dead in the eyes, he kicked at the very base and made the whole building shutter and twing. “YOU DON’T KNOW ME!!” He wanted to become a wrecking ball that demolished the whole place.

The next words Shizuo heard came closer to his ears. “...Why would you be struck, that you continue to rebel? The whole head sick, the whole heart faint.” Shizuo realized that the voice was not that of the boy’s, but of the man that had been standing nearby addressing the passers-by. Now, he spoke to Shizuo directly.

“From the sole of the foot to the head there is no sound spot in it; just bruise and welt and oozing wound, not drained, or bandaged, or eased with salve…”

Shizuo recognized the words as English, but hadn’t a clue what they meant. Close up, Shizuo could see that the face was marked up by parallel lines that ran straight over the skin and zig-zagged. They didn’t necessarily look tattooed. Rather, the lines looked embedded into the man’s skin, many fusing with small dots - freckles?
“Uh…”

“Your country is waste!” The man continued, “Your cities burnt with fire! Strangers devour your land before your very -”

“Listen!” Shizuo interrupted heatedly, “I don’t have a clue of what you’re saying, so could you just leave me the hell alone!!?”

A faint buzzing began resonating in Shizuo’s ears.

The man beamed at him. The next words out of his mouth were Japanese. “Is there something the matter, brother?"

Shizuo gaped. “Oh, you speak Japanese?”

The grin widened. “I speak the common tongue of all men, brother!”

“Alright, well…” Shizuo tilted his head. “Sure sounds like Japanese to me.” He twisted his ear for the buzzing to stop, but to no avail. Annoying.

“Have you a qualm to pick with our overseer?” The man gestured to the mural, whose eyes remained boring down on them.

“Bastard was egging me on!” Shizuo insisted, grinding his teeth. Buzzing.

“Are you ashamed, brother? Has your past led you in front of his appraisal?”

Was this guy judging him now, too? “I might have done some shit I’m not proud of, but what does he know? He had it coming for years! And it’s not just me! He’s messed with everyone like this!! Just staring out over everyone and acts like he knows everything, like he knows me?! Yeah, it pisses me off!!”

Despite Shizuo’s increasing temper, the man laughed heartily. The buzzing noise suddenly increased in volume. “Peace, brother! Peaceful brother! Sounds like you’ve been acquainted with the him for years, brother! True, he is merciless, but that is why we devote ourselves to him, brother.”

Shizuo was quickly losing track of this conversation; he didn’t want to devote himself to anyone. Anything. And the buzzing was becoming unbearable. He was about to desert the eccentric man, but the latter blocked his path.

“Back to the island, brother?”

“Move!” Shizuo shoved his way by, but the man grabbed him by the arm. The buzzing became a screech.

“Both shall burn together, brother!”

“Get off!!” Shizuo threw the man off of him with excess force, and the man crashed into the mural’s wall. While Shizuo took off before he drew anymore attention to himself, the man crumpled at the base. His scarred face twisted into a wide-eyed, manic grin.

Back at the hotel, Shizuo found the suite empty and exactly like they’d left it earlier. No signs of Izaya, which left Shizuo wondering where he could have been in the foreign city. Sighing exhaustedly, Shizuo collapsed on the bed. He closed his eyes. The buzzing had long subsided. Though city lights illuminated his room to some degree, he’d failed to turn on any lights when he
walked in. He lay there in darkness, the only light catching his eye a blinking green from his pocket. His pocket?

Shizuo pulled out his phone and unlocked the screen. A notification popped up; the blinking screen. Immediately upon reading the message, he sat up and switched on the lamp beside the bed. He’d gotten a response from Celty.

To: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
From: cestson@yahoo.co.jp
Subject: RE: still in america

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Shizuo -

Yes, I was mad when we got your message. I’m still a little mad, but mostly I’m worried. I know your English isn’t very good, so I hope you’re not relying on Izaya for translations. He’s probably teaching you incorrect meanings to be funny.

You signed a contract?! I’m sure you know that can’t be good. I know you hate Izaya, but I don’t think you should kill him even if he wants you to. Not only could it be a trap (which it sounds like you’re considering), but I don’t think you’re that kind of person. I don’t think you’re cut out to be his bodyguard, either. How did he get you to agree to that? /Why/ would he get you to agree to that? You’re right, it’s all very suspicious, and has been since the postcards. I say come back to Japan and forget about it. Until then, Shinra and I will ask around about Izaya and find out if we learn anything about what’s going on.

On the other hand, I’m a bit jealous! I’ve always wanted to see America. What’s it like? Take pictures, and keep me updated!

- Celty

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After reading Celty’s e-mail, Shizuo felt even guiltier than before. He made Celty worry and become angry with him. On the other hand, he wasn’t sure if he should be grateful or offended that Celty didn’t believe he had it in him to kill Izaya. Since he was already in the doghouse of her graces, decided to avoid the conflict when he sent her a quick reply explaining where he was. He also neglected to mention that he had lost track of Izaya, though the dishonesty burdened him further.

However, he did ask her to ask Shinra about the buzzing in his ears earlier as an unrelated request.

The urge Shizuo suddenly could not suppress was to send a message to Kasuka. Without wanting to reveal too much of what he was up to, Shizuo hesitantly mailed his brother.

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To: heiwajimaka@yahoo.co.jp
From: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
Subject: out of town

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just a heads up that i’m not in ikebukuro. just sightseeing, nothing much. wanted to get out of the city for a bit. but my phone fell in a puddle so e-mail me if you need me.

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Just that much took Shizuo almost an hour. He needed another ten minutes to work himself up enough to hit send. Maybe the contents were a little pathetic, but the contents were just vague enough. His little brother could understand him going on a vacation. Right?

Flopping back down on the bed, Shizuo stared up at the ceiling for an undetermined, extraordinary amount of time. Izaya had yet to return to the room. Should I go look for him? Shizuo quickly shook
that notion out of his head. He didn’t want to spend any more time with Izaya than was absolutely necessary. Maybe he got another room! A tiny voice in Shizuo’s head optimized. He’s fine. He can take care of himself. What does he need a bodyguard for anyways? He still hasn’t told me… Shizuo aimed a whiff of air out of his mouth and at a strand of hair tickling his nose. The strand rose and fell exactly where it had been. I could also be calling Shinra, like I said I would, but Shizuo admitted to himself that he just wasn’t in the mood. Besides, he figured that Celty would just relay information between them.

Getting up, he changed out of his clothes, brushed his teeth, and crawled back into the queen-sized bed. One television remained in the bedroom after they’d earlier broken the suite’s other set. Shizuo switched it on and surfed through unfamiliar American programming. At this point in the night, most channels aired studio comedies and dramas. Everything was English and everyone was white and naturally blond and Shizuo felt his blood pressure rise. Finally settling on a reality competition that didn’t require too much thought, Shizuo watched bad dancing and obscure talents until he fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

you also may have noticed that i added a couple of genre tags. yeah... yeah. there's plot happening, wouldn't ya know! i also never anticipated writing in a jizz reference, but the opportunity arose and i decided to go for it.

i may never be able to eat clam chowder again, though.
Boston pt. 3

Chapter Summary

Shizuo comes to a resolution.

Chapter Notes

short chapter, but uh... shit happens, so.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He awoke to the sounds of screaming.

Everything in the room was dark save for the piercing glare of the television. Shizuo strained to open his eyes and gain consciousness. The noise was unmistakably someone screaming. Images flashed across the TV screen, but any sound coming out was drowned out by the banshee in the other room.

“What the f-” Shizuo stumbled around the bedroom. His blurred vision obscured where he was going, and the blinking TV was making him feel more epileptic than it was helping him see. He just followed the cries to his door. When he opened the door to the common room, the shrieks became so loud that they jarred Shizuo into awareness. The only source of light was that of the city and the moon, which was beaming through the balcony’s glass, French doors and illuminating the sound’s source.

Lying upon the couch, thrashing violently and yelling in pure horror, was Izaya.

Shizuo leaned against the door frame and frowned. “Well that’s just annoying.”

For Izaya to desert him in the city and then to wake him in the middle of the night with this routine really tested Shizuo’s nerves. Izaya’s suitcase had been open, and he hadn’t been lying about all the hardware he’d brought. Some of the hard drives whirred with life, but the laptop screen and external monitor were blank. Clearly, Izaya had been at work. Now he was just pissing Shizuo off, who stood there and flicked the light switch on and off. Izaya just grew louder.

“Izayaaaa... Izaaaaayaaaaaaaa shut the fuck upppp.” Nothing changed. “Or I’ll strangle yooooouuu.”

But Izaya continued. A dreadful feeling started to plague Shizuo.

“Izaya...?”

Shizuo slowly approached the couch. Izaya’s screams had become mixed with whimpers and heavy breathing as he tossed and turned under his coat, which he seemed to be using as a blanket. His eyes were squeezed shut and beads of sweat peppered his forehead and neck.

He’s still asleep, Shizuo decided.

He glanced around the room in vain, not actually sure for what he was looking. The sight of Izaya
below unnerved him. Izaya was obviously having one hell of a nightmare. Shizuo almost threw up when a disgusting part of him suggested that he leave Izaya to suffer. He could just go back to bed, but he wouldn’t. Izaya looked so distressed that even Shizuo felt sympathy that only multiplied when he considered his earlier actions that day. Swallowing repugnant thoughts, Shizuo resolved to wake Izaya from his terror.

Without any tact, though, Shizuo grabbed Izaya by the shoulders and shook him. If anything, Izaya’s cries grew louder and increased in frequency. His arms jut out wildly and tried to push Shizuo away from him, eyes still closed.

“Izaya!” Shizuo shouted at him, “Wake the fuck up!!”

“No!” Izaya flailed. “Nonononnonono! No! No! Stop itstopit stop it stoP IT STOP IT! STOP IT GETOFFGETOFF GET OFF!! NO! N-”

“YOU’RE HAVING A FUCKING NIGHTMARE!” Shizuo screamed right in his face. His heart began to quicken.

“NO! HHNG I WON’T - STOP IT!!”

“IZAYA!!”

Eyes flew open and honed in on Shizuo instantly. A hand disappeared and reappeared within a second, stabbing a knife towards Shizuo’s face. Shizuo thanked his years of tussles with Izaya for adapting his reaction time as he was able to dodge the blade’s edge. He grabbed Izaya’s wrist and forced the knife to fall, but Izaya was nothing if not resourceful. Before the blade hit the floor, Izaya had grabbed the nearest table lamp and swung it around forcefully. Its base whacked Shizuo right in the head.

Shizuo maintained his grip on Izaya. His vision began to swim a little, but he hadn’t felt much upon the lamp’s impact. The lamp itself fell to the floor, still connected to its wire. He tried to pull Izaya in, but Izaya hissed and caught him in a sort of flexible body lock that sent Shizuo crashing assfirst into the couch, Izaya on top of him. Another second barely passed when Izaya had a second switchblade in his hand. He tried to press it against Shizuo’s throat, but Shizuo held his arms away. Looking up, Shizuo saw Izaya completely glowering at him but with eyes that still looked laden with dreams. Is he still…?

“IZAYA!! It’s me!!”

On the ground, the lamp rolled and flickered to life.

Izaya blinked, and finally his eyes dawned into consciousness. One look at Shizuo below him and Izaya scrambled off the couch and away.

He first glanced all around the room as if he was taking some time to remember where he was. He panted and hair stuck to his forehead. When he saw Shizuo on the couch again, he gaped.

“Shizu-chan? What are you doing?!”

Shizuo rose to his feet, and as soon as he did, Izaya raised his switchblade and pointed it at Shizuo unsteadily. He’s shaking, Shizuo noticed.

“You were screaming in your sleep,” Shizuo said lowly.

Eyes narrowed. “No I wasn’t.”
“Yes, you were,” Shizuo continued, “I tried to wake you up and you attacked me.”

“Of course I defended myself if you attacked me while I was asleep!” It was so much like Izaya to speak with so much lip while trembling like a spooked rabbit.

“I wasn’t -” Shizuo took not even a half a step forward when Izaya did something so uncharacteristic and unsettling that Shizuo froze.

Izaya had taken a step back. “Don’t - !”

In the last forty-eight hours, Shizuo had witnessed Izaya frustration that was never so common in their years of knowing each other. Now, he was seeing Izaya appear positively petrified of something that Shizuo could not know. He may have stepped back from him, but Izaya wasn’t afraid of Shizuo himself; Izaya had never been afraid of Shizuo and probably never would be. Based on how Izaya was acting now, even while he was awake, skittish and paranoid, this fear went beyond just a bad dream. The idea sent a chill down Shizuo. Whatever could strike such fear into Izaya Orihara could only be equivalent to an apocalyptic force.

“IZAYA,” Shizuo started, “why did you hire me as a bodyguard?”

Izaya’s eyebrow rose. “Does it matter? Just -”

“Yes it matters!” Shizuo found it difficult to root himself to one spot. “If you got yourself into deep shit then I need to know!”

“Why?” Izaya shook his head. “Didn’t you wanna quit earlier?” He smiled bitterly. “Wasn’t I just dragging you around so we could act buddy-buddy?”

Shizuo suddenly felt very heavy. “I didn’t say I was gonna quit, and I meant-”

“Well of course you weren’t,” Izaya unoccupied hand fell on his hip, a pose more becoming and natural for Izaya, “You’re still under contract.”

“Oh shut up,” Shizuo snapped, “You and your damn contract…” Shizuo remembered the deal and everything that it entailed. Protect Izaya; kill Izaya. Nothing continued to make sense. He looked at Izaya for a second, who was watching with an expression of mixed irritation and apprehension. *Something was up,* and Shizuo had vowed from the beginning that he was going to find out what that was. Now, though, he just wasn’t entirely sure that Izaya was the malevolent force behind it.

Or maybe he was, and he feared punishment. “IZAYA, what was that dream about?”

“I don’t remember.”


Izaya’s lips twitched. “Charming. Man oh man, you sure like to butt in everywhere, don’t you, Shizu-chan?” So Izaya wasn’t going to elaborate, but that told Shizuo enough. Izaya had more confirmed than denied that something was going on with that dodgy statement.

Another step. “You’re really in deep shit, huh?”

Izaya’s discomfort rang across his face, probably against his will. His hand still quivered but to a lesser degree now, even with Shizuo drawing nearer. He finally met Shizuo in the eyes and seemed to relax just a little bit. The knife lowered decimeter by decimeter. Then right as he was opening his mouth, his eyes widened at Shizuo.
Shizuo felt the blood before Izaya could say anything. The sensation of liquid trickling down his forehead and over his eyebrow, dropping onto his white t-shirt, forced Shizuo to reach up and smear it. He examined the red that stained his hand with confusion. Izaya started giggling when Shizuo felt around his head for the source.

“What did you do?” Shizuo glared at Izaya.

Izaya waved his hands with a simper. “Don’t look at me, I was asleep!”

Despite Shizuo’s aggravation, a wave of relief washed over him. Seeing Shizuo injured seemed to return Izaya to a better disposition... Which was terribly inconvenient, but Shizuo felt grateful.

Shizuo located the lamp lying on the floor. It must have happened when he hit me with that.

Zipping past Shizuo suddenly, Izaya disappeared into the bathroom where the light flicked on. From inside, Izaya reprimanded him. “Oh Shizu-chan, don’t you know by now not to infect all your wounds with your nasty hands.”

“My hands are not ‘nasty,’” but Shizuo stopped running his fingers through his hair anyway. Shizuo watched the bathroom until Izaya appeared in the doorway with a small, white, plastic box.

Inspecting the room with pursed lips, Izaya said, “There aren’t a lot of lights left in here.” True, they’d done their fair share of damage to the lights in that hotel room. Shizuo stared at the box in Izaya’s arms suspiciously, and Izaya rolled his eyes. He stepped into the suite to curl his fingers around Shizuo’s forearm and lead him into the bathroom.

“What are you doing?” Shizuo asked when he was sat upon the toilet seat.

Izaya opened the box that revealed a basic first aid kit - bandages, tape, gauze, ointments, all that. “I don’t provide health insurance, so…” He ran the sink over a white cloth, warm enough that some steam rose. Shizuo turned to one side, and Izaya got behind him. Next thing Shizuo knew, Izaya was parting Shizuo’s hair with one shaking hand and dabbing up the blood with the cloth in the other.

If Shizuo didn’t know any better, he’d say his sworn enemy was tending to his wounds.

“This is crazy.” Shizuo muttered, he was never too good at holding in how he was feeling.

“Yes, you’ve already said something along that line today,” Izaya said behind him. Shizuo could hear a smirk in his voice. “Though last time it was much more colorful… and loud.”

Shizuo sighed. He fiddled with the hem of his boxers, and tried not to fixate on the fact that - oh shit - he was still in his boxers. “About that…” Am I sorry? It’s Izaya, I shouldn’t be sorry. Still... Shizuo had flashbacks of Izaya asleep and in terror. “Where the hell did you run off to anyways? You’re always fleeing, damn flea.”

Izaya paused for a moment before applying the cloth again. “A flea flea?” Shizuo couldn’t help but notice the growing tremors in Izaya’s fingers.

“A - no, you’re -” Shizuo growled when Izaya mopped the cloth over the front of his face, clearing up the blood that had dripped there.

“A flea flea?”

“You’re a flea - I mean, you’re a flea and you run away. All the time. Always.”

“Ah.”
Izaya threw the cloth in the sink and turned on the faucet. There wasn’t a whole lot of blood, but Shizuo watched Izaya make quite the project of cleaning his hands with a surplus amount of soap. His teeth bit down on his bottom lip while his eyes jittered. Even after all the blood had washed down the sink, Izaya stayed like that.

“Izaya,” Shizuo called him back to the world. Izaya looked up similarly to how he had woken up. Realizing what he was doing, Izaya turned off the water and dried his hands. “Did where you ran off to before have to do with what…” Shizuo nodded toward the common room. “Before, when you were… you know.”

Izaya looked back and forth between where Shizuo was looking and Shizuo himself. “Of course not!” He chuckled and rummaged through the aid kit. “Don’t flatter yourself, Shizu-chan. It’s not like you hurt my feelings and I ran away crying.” Izaya squeezed some antiseptic onto a cotton swab. “You’re not exactly my first choice of company either. I hate you, too, remember? And there are plenty of other non-protozoan humans that could appreciate all the oh-so interesting things I have to say.”

*Glad to hear we still hate each other.* “Then why not hire one of those as your bodyguard?”

“Unfortunately, Shizu-chan, you’re just one of a kind. While normally it’s a thorn in my side, this time around you might actually prove yourself useful. But I could do without the hissy fits just because you thought some weird American soup looked like jizz - hold *still*, you moron.”

Shizuo had almost jumped up and ripped the toilet out of the floor out of sheer mortification. “It wasn’t that! SHIT I mean -” It was too late; Izaya was laughing at him and Shizuo was beat red. *Izaya’s too perceptive for anyone’s own good.*

“Who knew you had such a perverse mind, Shizu-chan.” Shizuo felt the antiseptic touch his skin, cool and sticky.

Though Shizuo wanted to protest further, he didn’t because something about Izaya’s words didn’t ring true. Curiosity won over. “But that’s not what I mean, anyways. I mean *after* that…”

“Nosy. I just sightseed, like before. This time I could actually enjoy a museum since *last time*, if I recall correctly, some bull in a chinashop got us kicked out. But you missed out, because there were these Van de Graff generators - the largest in the world - and some guy got into a cage while they sparked electricity at him, and -”

*Okay, so that part’s true enough,* Shizuo decided as he weighed Izaya’s words. *But he’s definitely holding something in.* He sat in silence while Izaya finished cleaning him up, chatting non-stop as he did. His mouth just kept motoring. Shizuo leaned his elbow on his knee and his chin on his fist. He closed his eyes and listened to Izaya ramble, finding the noise reassuring that the word wasn’t ending so soon. Eventually, he no longer felt coarseness of cotton. Izaya was instead sliding his fingers through Shizuo’s hair. Shizuo felt like he should have been more alarmed, but he wasn’t. He was more intrigued by the nature of Izaya mussing his hair about, swirling and gently pulling until the damp strands slipped between his fingers.

“Your roots are starting to show.”

Shizuo opened his eyes. “What?”

“I can see the brunet starting to grow in. When was the last time you bleached your hair?”

“Uhh…” He honestly couldn’t remember. Surely it hadn’t been that long ago. Pulling a strand down
in front of his eyes, the tip still looked very blond.

As Izaya massaged his scalp, Shizuo began to unwillingly tilt into the touch. He cursed himself, but couldn’t help the pleasurable feeling. Whether Izaya intended or not, he even managed to avoid the injury. “You should get dye from that pharmacy down the street if you wanna maintain that bad boy bottle blond look you got going on, and not that coconut color you had when you were a kid.”

“Wait a minute, you didn’t know me when I had brown hair.”

“You underestimate me again, Shizu-chan. Just because I didn’t know you back then doesn’t mean that I haven’t seen what you looked like. Your hair’s still a mop.”

“You’re a shit.” Once again, Shizuo felt like his life had been hacked into. If he wasn’t too busy pathetically leaning back into Izaya’s touch, Shizuo might have beat the crap out of him.

“I’m surprised you have the attention span to keep this up. Did you ever think if you went natural again and maybe wore a different outfit every day, maybe no one would recognize you and you wouldn’t attract so much trouble?”

“Could I get away from you?” Shizuo said without as much hostility as usual. Izaya’s fingers had slid down behind his his ears and Shizuo had let his eyes slide shut again.

“I’d always find you, even without your lion mane sticking out in a crowd.”

“Lion mane,” Shizuo repeated. Izaya hummed above him, continuing to amuse himself with Shizuo’s hair. How did we get like this around each other again? Shizuo reached up and gently caught Izaya around the wrist. He led Izaya around to his front, though he mourned for the loss of someone’s hands in his hair.

He lightly tugged Izaya’s hands in front of him, and Izaya took up kneeling on the floor as he watched Shizuo with great curiosity. They had dried somewhat from earlier, but remained pale and smooth. Compared to Shizuo’s, they were smaller, thinner. But they were hands, all in all, harmless as they were in their innate nature. Surprisingly capable of soothing actions like Shizuo had just experienced, or of more sinister deeds. Shizuo folded his hands around Izaya’s and contemplated the fit.

All the while, Izaya observed, the only evidence of his mirth were the dimples in his cheeks. Over the last couple of days, Shizuo had witnessed a very passive side to Izaya. One that preferred to absorb everything around him with an easy stride and honest glee. Only when nothing could keep up with him would Izaya release all the bitterness pent up within. He would swallow every conflict in the world, let it devour him from within, and would spit it right back out at the humans he claimed to love so dearly.

Izaya simply let Shizuo examine his hands, which puzzled him. Shizuo could break every bone in Izaya’s arms right then, but Izaya let Shizuo continue. No more than three months ago - even three days ago - Shizuo would have done so without hesitation. And Izaya had experienced that side of Shizuo. Why?

Because there was something out there sending Izaya into night terrors, making him turn to the person he trusted least in the world. Could Shizuo really take the same chance?

Finally, Shizuo maneuvered their right hands together and dropped the other. Izaya raised an eyebrow when Shizuo shook his hand, maybe a little too vehemently.

“We never shook on the train,” Shizuo said, looking Izaya in his eyes, “you know, to seal the deal.
His eyebrow just arched further, but Izaya responded by shaking back Shizuo’s hand. Just once. “Okay…?”

“I’ll do it, I’ll really do it now” Shizuo insisted. “I’ll bodyguard you from whatever shitstorm’s coming. I still want answers, but I’ll do it either way - I know I signed the contract or whatever already, but now I mean it. I’m in this thing for the long haul. With you. It sucks but whatever. That’s how it is.”

Izaya grinned at him, a little suspiciously. “You’re saying some weird shit, Shizu-chan. Maybe I hit you on the head a little too hard.”

“Oh yeah, that.” Shizuo pat the top of his head. No pain, but he never expected any. Shrugging, Izaya rose to his feet. “I’m not Shinra. Want me to wrap up your head like a mummy to make sure?”

“No,” Shizuo followed suit. “It’s fine; I don’t feel it.”

“Hmm,” Izaya shuffled back into the suite, “then maybe Shizu-chan needs to go back to sleep. Oh! The sun’s already rising.” He walked into the bedroom, where Shizuo followed until the door frame. Shizuo watched Izaya tear up a white blanket from the mattress. “Stay in here for all I care but I’m taking a damn blanket-!”

Izaya had tried to leave with it, but Shizuo had reached down and scooped him up around the waist with one arm. He walked back to the bed with Izaya draped over his elbow and plopped him back on the bed. Izaya untangled himself from the blanket and glared up at Shizuo.

“Will you stop that?”

“Stop what?” Shizuo asked earnestly while locating his backpack and, more importantly, his cigarettes. *I only have a few more of these*, he noted.

“Why am I on the bed again?”

Closing the bedroom door, Shizuo slumped to the floor with his back to it. He lit his cigarette, which was now the only source of light in the room besides the windows.

“This way -” Shizuo knocked on the door at his back, “- anybody tries to break in, they go through me. Better? Maybe you won’t wake me up again.”

Shockingly, Izaya didn’t have anything to say at first. Then he laughed, “Well look who’s taking his job all seriously now.”

“Idiot, I just said I would.” Smoke rose from Shizuo’s lips and nostrils.

Izaya burrowed under the covers so deep that his head popped out on the opposite end. “You shouldn’t smoke in these hotel rooms, Shizu-chan, they frown upon it.”

Shizuo took another, emphasized drag.

“Actually,” Izaya continued, settling into his upside-down position, “Americans frown upon smoking in general. They run hundreds of advertisements of campaigns about why smoking is bad for your health - which it is, obviously, so you shouldn’t smoke, Shizu-chan. It’s a wonder that your lungs aren’t laced with tar and your teeth aren’t a nasty yellow yet. Do you think your obscure nervous system has affected your chance of lung cancer? I bet Shinra would -”
“Izaya. Go the fuck to sleep.”

And he did, eventually, after spouting out four more encyclopedia entries worth of information about nicotine and tobacco. His voice eventually trailed off, and Izaya fell asleep, his head resting at the foot of the bed.

Chapter End Notes

in case you haven't realized, i imagine izaya with cheek dimples...? i think i've written them in before this chapter, but they're just a feature that i imagine him having. he's got a pretty round face so they'd probably suit him.

dimples aren't really a thing i've seen in manga or anime illustration. ever. but they do exist, so they might just not translate to the style so well. but that doesn't mean i can't write about them...! if you disagree, you can just ignore these descriptions, but i may get very passionate about it later on.
Boston pt. 4

Chapter Summary

They shop 'til they drop, meet a monster, and play some ball.

Chapter Notes

Uploading this in the final hour...! Actually, I missed my deadline by a few minutes, but today was just so busy that I almost forgot to upload. (bc if you haven't realized yet, I try to upload every Tuesday. Turns out I can at least attempt a semblance of organization.)

Getting back to one of the main reasons I wrote this fic - Shizuo and Izaya in foreign places just doing things. And that's pretty much what they do this chapter. *Things*.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Their first order of business the next morning was to find Shizuo new clothes, or else Izaya would complain about the smell for the rest of the trip. Or, for the rest of his life. If Shizuo was, actually, in this for the ‘long haul,’ then he would need more than just the clothes on his back and a backpack full of origami and crap.

They crawled down the web of Boston streets to an outside shopping mall downtown, a street closed off to traffic and clustered with all sorts of people. Izaya lit up at the mix of such diverse melting pot of his beloved humans - suited professionals walking alongside more seedy-looking individuals. Shizuo realized they weren’t getting anywhere with him watching Izaya watch everyone else, and started dragging Izaya along. Food and souvenir vendors lined the sidewalks and stood at every corner despite the cold weather. Most storefronts smelled of sausage, peppers, and onions, an aroma that proved favorable to Shizuo.

Inside a large, underground department store, Shizuo hesitated committing to anything. The store had all the garments to compose the same outfit as his bartender's uniform, *but it wasn’t the same*. Izaya became more and more impatient as Shizuo remained indecisive and eventually began tossing random clothing at Shizuo. None of which Shizuo thought suited himself.

“Will you stop that?” Shizuo snapped after another shirt landed in his face.

“No wonder you always wear the same thing every day,” Izaya said as he continued rummaged through the racks, “You’re clearly incapable of dressing yourself.”

“I just hate shopping,” Shizuo shrugged, “I don’t give a fuck what I wear.”

“That...” Izaya fixed him with pointed look, which Shizuo returned, “...I believe. But I don’t believe that a guy that spends time and puts in the effort of dying his hair blond has no concern at all of what he looks like.” He dived into a long row of hanging shirts.

Shizuo bit his lip down on this, “Well, usually Celty helps, so it’s not that much work.”
Izaya popped his head out from within the row. “Really? You two are a real couple of girlfriends, ya know.”

Shizuo pushed his head back in. Izaya appeared on the other side.

“I bet she would be none too pleased to know you’re running around with her favorite informant.”

They spoke through the racks of clothes, walking down the opposite aisles in the same direction. Shizuo couldn’t see Izaya very well, but the sound of his voice told him so.

“She knows. She’s not. She told me not to come.”

“Riiight, so that’s what you meant yesterday.”

“…Kinda.” He could just see Izaya sliding his hand along the fabrics of all the clothes he passed.

“Oh Celty, I miss her,” Izaya said wistfully. Shizuo opened his mouth only to swallow any words he was about to say. Despite them not being able to see each other, Izaya somehow caught on. “But I know the feeling’s not mutual.”

They met at the end of the row. “Not one bit,” Shizuo said.

Izaya dimpled, “But she’s probably impressed we haven’t killed each other yet. However have we made it this long without her driving that horse between us?”

_I wish I knew that myself_, Shizuo thought. Determined to change the subject, he picked up a package off the shelves. “Here, I can just wear these.”

“Six white t-shirts?” Izaya raised an eyebrow. “Woah there, you don’t wanna go and make any bold statements.”

“Well I can wear whatever over them, like -” Shizuo pulled the hanger off the rack for a button-up flannel shirt with a plaid design, “- this. Or whatever.”

“Of course,” Izaya said sarcastically, “if you can’t dress like a bartender, why wouldn’t you look like lumberjack? I mean, obviously.”

Shizuo grit his teeth. “You were the one telling me to hurry up and pick anything.”

“Before I knew how pathetic you were,” Izaya gestured to the items in Shizuo’s possession.

“I am capable of dressing myself, Izaya,” Shizuo glared.

“Mmmm…” Izaya grimaced, unconvinced.

Rolling his eyes, Shizuo draped the shirt over the racks and shooed Izaya away. “Go away and I’ll come find you when I’m done.”

Izaya pouted. “But Shizu-chan…!”

Turning Izaya around with his free hand, Shizuo gave him a little shove forward. “Go.”

“No fun!” Izaya stormed off with just one peevish look thrown over his shoulder. As soon as he was out of sight, Shizuo sighed.

His face was warm, and he still wasn’t used to Izaya in these situations. Izaya still acted like a brat,
but Shizuo was probably the most equipped person in the world to handle Izaya’s poor manners and attitude. That morning, he had awoken with the resolve to completely follow through on his contract. His words during the night had been far from empty. Izaya, in turn, awoke as if nothing about their original agreement had changed. Neither mentioned Izaya’s episode during the night, but Shizuo kept it in the front of his mind as they pressed forward.

They fell back into the heated back and forth banter that had set off Shizuo almost a day earlier. No, Shizuo still couldn’t comprehend how they managed these exchanges, but he also admitted that they were not horrible. At least, if he wasn’t so rigidly aware of with whom he wasn’t having them, he’d enjoy them very much.

Maybe he did anyways. In fact, Shizuo might even acknowledge that it all felt very natural. But he wasn’t nearly there yet.

With Izaya off in another department, Shizuo began picking out the plainest attire he could find. His package of v-neck, white tees, a few button-ups, a couple baseball tees, jeans, package of more boxers, some sweaters, cheap sneakers, black gloves, and finally an army green utility jacket. In a dressing room, he changed out of his dirty bartender’s uniform, into a new outfit, and stuffed the damaged goods in his backpack. He then searched for Izaya. To Shizuo’s surprise, he found Izaya in the junior’s department, standing in front of a mirror and holding a pastel pink skater skirt, still on its hanger, in front of his legs.

Shizuo blinked twice at the image of Izaya tilting his head, debating the garment in the mirror. He’s so fucking weird, Shizuo shook his head.

“...Oh! Shizu-chan, you’re done?” Izaya threw the skirt away and scurried over to him with an empty suitcase being behind him. “I found this while you were - is that all?”

His eyes narrowed at what Shizuo carried.

“Yes.”

They started walking to the check-out line. “I suppose that’s better,” Izaya said.

“Why?”

Izaya looked up at him. “I’m paying for them, aren’t I?”

“No!” Shizuo bristled. “I can pay for them. Fuckin’ - you know, I do actually have my own money, you know. I have a job.”

“Wait,” Izaya smirked, “you mean this whole thing isn’t about me being your sugar daddy?”

Shizuo almost threw everything in his arms at the cashier.

Once outside the store, Shizuo couldn’t help but ask. “Izaya… what was with you in the girls’ area… and the...?”

He was having trouble getting the image out of his mind. Maybe Izaya had just been bored waiting for him, but Shizuo sensed more intrigue than that. Whatever the reason, Izaya didn’t seem at all embarrassed or like Shizuo had caught him doing anything unsavory. Actually, he answered like there was nothing peculiar about it at all.

“Oh that. I decided that it would be too long.”
They continued to walk around Boston with all of Shizuo’s new clothes packed in his new suitcase. They walked another block, crossed a busy street into a massive park, and walked the freshly shoveled paths meandering through snow-covered lawns. One step the air smelled of snow and wet grass. Another step and they’d be hit by a stench of weed. Shizuo expected Izaya to continue his joke at any moment, but he did not.

“You’re kidding,” Shizuo prompted.

“Not at all,” Izaya started, “crossdressing makes for excellent disguises in my line of work.”

“Oh… Wait, no. What?” He felt like there were loose, sparking wires in his brain.

“Honestly, Shizu-chan, it’s not that hard to understand. I’m an informant, aren’t I? Sometimes women are more talkative around other women. Sometimes men are more talkative to women.” Izaya caught Shizuo’s eye. “Sometimes it’s just better that clients or targets not know who I am or even which sex I am.”

Shizuo had a lot of issues with those reasons, too many on which to dwell besides one. “What’s the point of guys thinking they’re talking to a chick?”

Izaya broke their eye contact. “Hmm… I really shouldn’t be sharing so many trade secrets with you, Shizu-chan. Right? Besides, they’re useful in ways besides work.”

“Like?”

“In the summer,” Izaya flashed a wicked grin, “the breeze between your legs is quite refreshing.”

“I’ve known you for plenty of hot summers,” Shizuo scoffed, “and never once have I seen you running around in stuff like that.”

“No, you just don’t know that you’ve seen me in ‘stuff like that.’”

Shizuo took a moment to reevaluate his place in the universe.

“Are you trying to picture it?” Izaya asked impishly.

“What, no? No!” Shizuo lied; he tucked the image back into his mind for further consideration at a later time.

“...Good.”

“But speaking of summer…” Shizuo panned over the icy and snowy scenery, “why the hell aren’t we someplace warm?”

“Because.” Izaya’s tone had turned sour.

“When people go on vacations - or whatever the hell this is - don’t they usually go to places with nice weather? Beaches?”

“Do you prefer the warm weather, Shizu-chan?”

“Well, yeah.” He found the neutral and dull colors of winter to have dismal effects on his mood, and he really didn’t care for all the white and wet bullshit on the ground. However, no matter how clear the sky was during the winter, the sun never seemed to shine. The sun sank too early, too, barely lasting until 5PM. Summer days were longer, brighter.
“But isn’t your birthday in a couple days?” Izaya chimed unexpectedly.

There was also the dreadful reminder of his existence every twenty-eighth of January.

“Already?” Shizuo decided it was time for a cigarette. “Well, forget about that. I don’t give a crap.”

“Easy enough,” Izaya said. “It’s not like I ever got a birthday party invitation before.” He stepped upon a narrow strip of red brick that split the road in half and began to follow its path up a hill that the park steeped into. Shizuo was less inclined to walk on the bricks so precisely, but Izaya placed one foot in front of the other, arms spread, as if he was balancing on the bricks.

“You never answered my question,” Shizuo reminded him.

“Which?” He focussed carefully on the placement of his feet.

“Why here? How long here? Why not, I don’t know, the Bahamas? Why walk around in sub freezing temperatures if you don’t have to?”

“It’s not that cold…”

“Really?” Shizuo pointed at Izaya’s bundled up appearance, complete with hat, scarf, gloves, zipped up parka. “Because you look like a Katamari.”

“Well excuse me for not being able to generate heat like a hot-blooded beast like you. Did you know they have a monster here? We should go see it. You two can make friends.”

He’s just avoiding the question further. “Okay, so you’re here for a reason, then!”

Izaya stopped on his trail of bricks. He turned a glare towards Shizuo, who didn’t miss a beat. This looked like the last thing Izaya wanted to talk about. He always hates it when I’m on to him.

“I said I was gonna help, right?” Shizuo said. “Well, I still wanna know why.” He pointed an accusatory cigarette. “And I sure as hell haven’t gotten a lot out of you.”

“And you won’t.” Izaya began tip-toeing again, “I told you - I’m sightseeing.”

“What are you sightseeing?” Shizuo matched his footing and leaned down. “Bricks?”

They had walked up to the base of a large state house, similar in design to the Capitol they’d seen in DC - columns, arches - but smaller and incorporated more red brick. This one’s dome was sparkling sold that glimmered under the sun. At its tippity top was a golden pine cone, a peculiar symbol in Shizuo’s mind.

“I’ll have you know that these bricks signify specific points of interest regarding the -”

“Izaya.”

“If I told you what it was all about, then you’d kill me before I have the chance to do anything about it.”

He said it so fast that Shizuo wasn’t entirely sure that he’d heard all of it. Plus, Izaya had spoken more towards the ground than to Shizuo. A small smile played on his lips while Shizuo watched him turn his eyes up.

“Or, you could try.”
Shizuo just caught the sunlight in his eyes that reflected off of the blade Izaya was peeking out of his pocket. *Don’t say that shit and then try to look tough.*

“Fine,” he scoffed. “Talk about the bricks. Or the monster. I don’t care.” *You don’t care,* he reminded himself when Izaya beamed and blathered about ironically shifting taxation methods of modern economics. Though Shizuo really had no interest whatsoever, he listened to every word coming out of Izaya’s mouth.

They gazed at the ground eleven meters below them. On one side of them was an alleyway populated only by sports bars and a parking lot. Billboards sat on the same level and apartment buildings stacked on the other side of an expressway that lay just a few blocks away, cars zipping by. In the distance, a large sign blinked its lights with the letters CITGO.

On the other side was a small, green, empty baseball stadium.

“This isn’t exactly a monster,” Shizuo said as he took in the view on either side of him. They had taken a subway train away from the city’s downtown and snuck into the stadium on Izaya’s whim. While the stadium was certainly peculiar, Shizuo wondered why instead of complete bleachers there was the giant wall on which he now stood.

“I cannot account for the obscure names Americans give things,” Izaya said beside him. “I must admit, even I am disappointed to find a wall and not a real monster.”

“What did you expect you’d find at a baseball stadium?” Shizuo watched Izaya squat in front the bleachers and pull out a knife.

“I just read about a green monster and hoped it was some other worldly creature that would eat all the balls that landed in its gaping mouth.” Izaya carved into the back of a seat. “Like, if it had really gnarly green hair and corkscrew horns the size of cars… and big squishy dog paws that could stomp on the players if they came too close trying to retrieve a ball. No legs, just feet. And a teeny tiny pom tail in the back. Bloodshot googly eyes. But its *mouth!* A giant black hole with the universe in the middle. I thought it’d have fangs as long and sharp as katanas that could slice through aluminum baseball bats and thick-skinned athletes.”

Shizuo stared. “Yeah, I can’t imagine how it’s a wall and not that. Have you ever even seen a game of baseball?”

“Yes,” Izaya appeared to be carving the kanji for his own name in the seat. “And I found it boring as it was.”

“Not enough lies, blackmail, betrayal?” Shizuo offered.

Izaya finished scratching into the seat and pocketed his knife again. “There’s plenty of all that behind the scenes. Agents are greedy, managers are ruthless, and athletes are imbeciles. Watching sports is boring, though, and unnecessary battle simulations meant to reaffirm masculinity by asserting your physical dominance over lesser males and excluding females from the same field.”

“I don’t… I don’t think that’s what sports are.” Shizuo barely followed the meaning of Izaya’s definition.

“Sure it is.” Izaya hopped up on the rails on the field’s side of the bleachers and treated them like balancing beams. An extremely precarious position. “Athletes train in specific skillsets and are taught
to hone them or else face consequences in either internal rejection or defeat at the hands of an opposing force, similar to how soldiers train in specific areas of combat, given rank, and die by the enemy. I’d much prefer the real thing. Not to mention, most classic sports were mimicked techniques used in a battlefield, like javelin, and wrestling’s always been around. Baseball incorporates specific codes with which to communicate with your allies while you process and analyse your opponent’s strategy on a play by play basis. See, if you detract the threat of dying, it’s a sport. If you hand them a gun, it’s war. You could say that the innocent industry of sports is a perfect way to fashion killing machines out of mindless jocks.”

Without a counter argument, Shizuo could only whine. “Stop shitting on sports, it’s bumming me out.”

“Oh no, I’m bumming out Shizu-chan however will I sleep at night.” Izaya smirked down at him. “I assume Shizu-chan is a big sports fan?”

“Yes,” Shizuo said proudly, “I like baseball and football and wrestling and the rest. They’re fun to do and watch and that’s all there is to it.”

“Oh, really? Let’s imagine Shizu-chan on the field, probably destroying everything in his path, scoring points in the most violent way possible, and then as soon as something doesn’t go his way - EEP!”

Shizuo hotly knocked Izaya off balance. For a suspended second, Izaya leaned in mid air towards the ground below. But Shizuo caught him so that Izaya didn’t actually drop eleven meters to the ground. The terror that flashed across Izaya’s face amused Shizuo enough that he sneered contently. After the initial shock and still frozen, Izaya burst out laughing. Shizuo lifted him down off the rails and watched him regain his balance.

“That was dangerous, Shizu-chan!” Izaya remained chortling, “I could have died!”

“What a tragedy I caught you, then,” Shizuo leered, reaching into his pocket for a cigarette.

Izaya shook his head, dimples deep. “Terrible. Honestly, when are you going to control those violent outbursts.”

“When you stop being such a shit.” Shizuo flicked on his lighter. Three months ago, Shizuo wouldn’t even have had the sense to pull Izaya back.

“Hey, Shizu-chan, you say you like watching sports, but what if you actually played them?”

Sports still? “What about it?” Shizuo looked up to see where this was going. Izaya wore a dangerously manic expression.

“I mean, obviously you can’t play sports with humans because you’ll destroy them. Like, you never played anything in high school and most gym classes ended with you sending another student to the nurse. Or hospital.”

“That was only five times!” Why is he bringing this up? Does he want me to almost kill him again?

“Oh, excuse me, that’s only five more times than any other person. Congratulations.” Izaya continued, “But imagine if you weren’t an idiotic beast - I know, as hard as it is - that could actually do something with all that freakish strength besides beating up low-lifes and -”

“And you.”
“And me - you don’t beat me up, please. But I wonder how far you could hit a baseball, or throw shot put, or even weightlifting is an Olympic sport. What’s the heaviest thing you’ve ever lifted?”

Letting the smoke fill his lungs, Shizuo pondered this. “A tractor trailer?”

“The one that ran you over?” Izaya watched him a bit nostalgically. Bastard.

“I don’t know,” Shizuo shrugged, “everything’s heavy compared to you.”

Izaya blinked. “What?”

“I swear you’re the lightest thing in the world.”

“That’s impossible, Shizu-chan.” he deadpanned, “Are you saying I weigh less than that cigarette in your hand? Because my mass and its mass are - put me down.”

Shizuo had a very unamused Izaya by the back of his scarf in one hand and his cigarette in the other. He knit his eyebrows together in feigned deep thought as he pretended to weigh them. “Nah… I’m gonna say you’re lighter.” I’m not even lying, either, Shizuo thought. Izaya was extraordinarily featherweight. Even without his strength, Shizuo had the feeling that any average human could toss Izaya around effortlessly.

Smug as he was in this situation, Shizuo’s mood dropped when he glimpsed more lines on Izaya’s skin. He’d almost forgotten that he’d briefly seen such marks under Izaya’s shirt while they were on the train. Now Shizuo could see unnaturally straight, raised tissue of pinkish hues running from the nape of Izaya’s neck to below the hood of his jacket.

“What the hell is that?” Shizuo asked, peering at the lines. There were six, all parallel and tipped with spots where it looked like Izaya’s skin had been bleached paler than it naturally was.

Izaya’s hand shot up to rub the back of his neck. Immediately, he flared out and kicked Shizuo in the thigh. “I said to let go!!” He jumped away and fixed his scarf back over his neck, glaring at Shizuo defensively.

I’ll never get anywhere like this, Shizuo realized. He threw his butt on the ground and stomped it out.

“Alright, how about this then. If I can hit a baseball over this wall from home plate, you’ll tell me everything.”

When Izaya’s shoulders slackened, Shizuo thought, He’s taking the bait. “A bet?” Izaya relaxed a little, intrigued. “Hmm… what do I get if you can’t?”

“You get to not tell me everything?” Shizuo thought that much was clear.

Izaya frowned. “That’s no fun. How about…” He tapped his chin with a gloved finger. “... if you lose, you quit smoking.”

“What? No,” Shizuo grimaced. “Your thing is just saying things. That… that’s a whole process and - no. No, pick something else.”

“Ugh, fine.” Izaya thought again. He smirked. “If you lose, you can’t ever throw another heavy object at me.”

Shizuo glowered at him. “How about one year of not throwing shit at you.”

Izaya huffed. “You’ll kill me before then.” Shizuo’s heart skipped a beat. He recomposed.
“Fine, a day.” Shizuo offered. It wasn’t like he intended to lose.

“Six months,” Izaya amended.

“One month.”

“Three months.”

“...Deal.”

They found a storage room down below and borrowed an aluminum bat and a few fresh baseballs. To their benefit, the park was more or less deserted. On the field, they situated themselves with Izaya on the pitcher’s mound and Shizuo over home plate, bat in hand.

“I don’t know about this.” Shizuo pointed his bat accusingly at Izaya, who was getting a feel for the ball between his fingers. “What if you just suck at throwing?”

“I can throw switchblades with pinpoint accuracy,” Izaya said. He wound the ball and twisted himself in hilariously exaggerated pitching forms. “How hard can a baseball be?” When he threw the ball, it flew by the wrong side of Shizuo by a meter away. “Okay, they are apparently very different.”

Shizuo leaned on his bat impatiently. “What do I get if you walk me? A clue?”

“Nothing, you’ll get nothing because I’m going to ace this.” Izaya threw another baseball. “That one wasn’t that bad! You could have hit that. That’s a strike.”

“No umpiring!” Shizuo held the bat up in the proper position, ready to bring his wrath down upon every ball that tried to cross him. “Alright, throw it again.”

“Hey Shizu-chan.”

“What.”

“Does this mean that I pitch and you catch?”

“Wh - shut up and throw the ball.”

Izaya’s next pitch was better than the two previous, and Shizuo hit a good chunk of it despite the growing heat in his cheeks. At incredible speed, the ball bulleted forward. Izaya had dived out of the way with a humorous shriek. The ball crashed into the center right field bleachers with an incredible clatter. A few of the metal chairs dislodged and flew into the air.

“Don’t hit me!” Izaya snapped at him, rising and returning to the mound.

“If I hit you,” Shizuo practiced a couple swings, “it’s as good as a home run and I should win with a bonus.”

“That rule sucks,” Izaya jabbed, “and we will not follow it. Rule denied. Don’t hit me.”

They kept at it several more rounds, Izaya’s aim improving every turn and Shizuo’s distance greatening. Shizuo could feel his face stretched into an unappealing grin the more they played. He was actually enjoying himself, focusing a lot of his pent up fury on the baseballs that he sent flying into the stadium. Though he could hit home runs easily enough, he had yet to hit one over the monster wall. Kill it kill it kill it, he inwardly chanted with narrowed eyes focussed on the last ball flying his way. He had to get answers from Izaya, and this was his chance.
THRANG! The ball thundered into the monster with a ricochet that pervaded through the whole stadium.

“I’m out of balls!” Izaya exclaimed. “I won!”

“Not yet!” Shizuo yelled, “we never specified how many chances I got!”

“But…” Izaya gestured to the area around him, “I’m out of balls. And it’s not like you have any, if ya know what I mean.”

Shizuo swung the bat in Izaya’s direction. “This is just because your pitching sucks.”

Izaya placed the back of his hand coyly against his mouth and batted his eyelashes. “Forgive me, Heiwajima-san, for I’ve never pitched before. It’s my first time…!”

“Stop that.” Ignoring Izaya’s giggling and trying to draw his senses away from that comment, Shizuo lowered the bat and placed a hand on his hip. He bit his lower lip indignantly.

“Don’t get so bent out of shape, Shizu-chan,” Izaya said. Shizuo arched an eyebrow at him. “I probably wouldn’t have told you the truth anyway.”

“You son of a -” Shizuo dropped the bat and sprinted at Izaya. Frickin’ liar!

“Shizu-chan, I won so you can’t throw anything at me!” Izaya dodged him.

“But I can still beat the crap out of you!”

“Nooo!”

Whether because Izaya wasn’t taking the threat very serious or because Shizuo wasn’t in fact very serious, the chase was more of a game. Shizuo had subconsciously realized that he wouldn’t use pain to get anything from Izaya this time around, since pain seemed to already be a factor keeping Izaya distant with the truth. Hence the bet. But he still got a kick out of chasing Izaya around and replicating their former rapport.

They played chicken on the bases for a few lively minutes. Izaya was, of course, more agile than Shizuo. But the field was slippery from the ice and snow that had fallen. Both slipped at just the right angle for Shizuo to hook an arm around Izaya’s knees and knock the legs out from underneath him. To his own surprise, Shizuo slid himself under Izaya to break the fall and lifted a hand over the back of Izaya’s head to keep it from thwacking into the ice. They landed in a heap of limbs between second and third base, panting for air. Izaya rolled off Shizuo. For a reason neither Shizuo nor Izaya could recognize or acknowledge, Shizuo’s formerly destructive compulsions toward the latter had experienced a seismic shift. For a while, they just stared up into the sky. A small flock of pigeons flew overhead.

“There are a lot of them,” Izaya said finally.

Shizuo turned. “What?”

“You wanted a clue. You caught me, like this, I guess.” Izaya matched Shizuo’s gaze when Shizuo leaned over on his side. His nose - red from the cold, Shizuo noticed - twitched once. “That’s your clue. There are a lot of them… and they’re strong.”

There are a lot of them. Strong. Shizuo repeated to himself. That sure doesn’t tell me a lot. But he took it, more than he had. “Okay.” He rolled back onto his back.
“Hey! What do you two think you’re doing?”

They both sat upright. In the dugout farthest from them, a large, mustached man in a jumpsuit was yelling at them with increasing haste towards their location.

“Oh shit,” Izaya snickered as they both stumbled to their feet and took off in the opposite direction. The man continued to shout and chase them until they snuck back out to Yawkey Way.

Chapter End Notes

I just really like the image of Izaya Orihara in a skirt what of it so what don't look at me.

Also, no offense to any athletes! Izaya's just... Izaya.

A Katamari is a giant ball of junk from a video game, appropriately named, Katamari Damacy. I'm going to talk about it more next week, but I'm probably going to start a tumblr tag for this fic. Not only will I use it to upload new chapters, but to make "tour guides" for each location they visit. More to come on that!
Boston pt. 5

Chapter Summary

The introduction of Petrillos and the return of the natural blond.

Chapter Notes

I return to you a week late, for which I apologize. As college work increases towards the end of the semester, I cannot guarantee that I'll consistently meet my Tuesday deadline. But! I'll try my best. Good news is, this is probably the longest chapter yet (penning at roughly 10.7k words).

Now, I have some announcements.

1.) I'm overdue in doing so, but I'm starting a tag for this fic on my tumblr. The tag will be used to post updates, songs and playlists, Tour Guides, and art. The art will most likely come at a later time, when I'm less busy. There'll be conceptual sketches as well as attempts at "photographs" of their journey. So you can track **fic: to hell and back** without following me.

Tag's kinda bare right now, but there'll be quite a few posts on there by the end of the week.

You can also use the anon feature on my tumblr if u want. That's always there too. Like, if you don't have an AO3 account and wanna pop in and say a thing. Or you can go tell me that you hate this fic and that I've ruined Durarara!! for you. That's okay too.

2.) The Tour Guides are meant as extra bit o' fun. I do a lot of research for this fic, more than I should probably put my time into. But the characters visit and interact with very real places and landmarks. This aspect of the story really fulfills a passion for traveling that I have. I don't into too much detail on this aspect in the text, because it's less important to the narrative until it needs to be. Still, I'd like for you all to have an easy time following their journey!

3.) There's a playlist for this fic already. I'd been waiting to make a graphic for it.

4.) Suggested listening for this particular chapter would be Ed Sheeran's "Give Me Love/The Parting Glass". I've personally been partial to [Sam Behymer's cover](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5m5OOG2WzI) lately.

Alright, now have some drink Shizayas.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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To: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
From: ceston@yahoo.co.jp
Boston? Haven’t been there since its Irish mafia was most influential. We had some… differences to settle. They might have had my head at some point. Anyways, pretty sure the guy’s in jail now… What’s Izaya been doing? You didn’t say in your last message. Have you two killed each other yet? Shinra still wants you to call him, or at least e-mail him directly. I told him what you said and he wants to talk to both of you. Apparently he had tried to get in contact with Izaya, but Izaya’s gone off the grid.
(I think he’s more intrigued than anything.)

24-01-14 10:14AM JST

To: ceston@yahoo.co.jp
From: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
Subject: No Subject

theres no way im coming back to japan.

24-01-14 6:36PM EST

To: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
From: ceston@yahoo.co.jp
Subject: Re: No Subject

:(

25-01-14 7:53AM JST

To: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
From: kishitaniphd2@goo.ne.jp
Subject: Please Call!

Shizuo-kun, please call me when you have the chance, like you said you would the other day! :)
- Shinra

25-01-14 12:02PM JST

To: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
From: ceston@yahoo.co.jp
Subject: Re: No Subject

You can’t ignore your e-mail for more than 24 hours after sending a message like that!!

26-01-14 9:27AM JST

To: ceston@yahoo.co.jp
From: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
Subject: Re: Re: No Subject

i think im onto something. idk what. hes freaked about something i know that. im not giving up. but weve actually just been sightseeing around the city for the past couple days. he never shuts up. we
even went out to some town on the ocean that was obsessed with witches. creepy place. he loved it. i guess it wasn't so bad. there was a place that demonstrated how people were stoned for witchcraft way back when everyone was idiot. there's an aquarium next to the hotel which we finally went into yesterday because before all we did was look at the seals outside. seeing the ocean tho is sort of depressing since its fucking cold here. not that its not cold back in japan. oh yeah for some reason izaya doesn't wanna go to warm places and ive noticed these line markings on his skin and he gets really defensive and dodgy when i ask about them. and violent. know anything about them? also sushi here is terrible but clams are in fucking everything.

26-01-14 8:33PM EST
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To: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
From: ceston@yahoo.co.jp
Subject: Re: Re: Re: No Subject
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It actually sounds like you’re having a good time. Could I be wrong? Well, it at least sounds like you’re experiencing a lot. Is the food really that bad?
Shinra doesn’t have an idea of what you could have seen on Izaya. Neither do I. Lines? Could they be scars? It’s not like he was in the best shape the last time you saw him. It would make sense if there was some damage leftover. Not that he doesn’t usually deserve it, but you’ve hit him around quite a lot.
Ikebukuro’s noticing your absence, I should mention. I fear somebody might start causing trouble without you around. Well, I’ll do my best to make sure nothing happens. It’s strange, really. I’d be more concerned if Izaya was still around, but you’re both in the same place! So I guess it balances out.
Don’t go so long without messaging me, next time! You’re not exactly in good company, and I worry.

27-01-14 10:59AM JST
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To: ceston@yahoo.co.jp
From: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
Subject: Re: Re: Re: No Subject
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i just forget to check my phone! and im not having a good time im stuck with izaya. you can beat up any assholes that try to start any shit in ikebukuro. celty do you know of anything that could give izaya nightmares? just wondering. the foods different but not terrible. i can always eat a burger and americas got plenty but in more places than just fast food joints. the ones in restaurants are a lot better. never eat ‘chowder’ though. and no one eats spaghetti like other noodles and italians less expensive because its also fucking everywhere.

26-01-14 11:11PM EST
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To: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
From: ceston@yahoo.co.jp
Subject: Re: Re: Re: No Subject
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Work was busy today, so I’m just reading this now, sorry! But it’s already the 28th here in Japan, so I’ll say happy birthday! I would have liked to see you on your birthday. If you give me an address of whichever hotel you’re saying, I’ll send you a gift! It’ll probably get there late, though.
Sounds like you’re not starving, which is good. And Izaya? I can’t imagine him eating, he’s so thin. Why are you asking about his nightmares? He’s a coward and terrified of a lot of things, but it never
struck me that he’d let those things plague him enough to lose sleep over. Today, an Awakusa-kai member asked me about you and Izaya. Not all at once, since there’s no way anyone could know that you two are currently together. But it was more like they’d noticed Izaya’s disappearance and now yours. He wasn’t angry or anything like that, he just sounded kind of suspicious and curious. But I think that’s something more and more people are bound to notice, so I guess it wasn’t /too/ odd. Just thought I’d tell you. Obviously I haven’t said anything to anyone, just that you’re out of town on business.

Anyways, happy birthday!

28-01-14 1:17AM JST

To: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
From: kishitaniphd2@goo.ne.jp
Subject: Happy birthday!

Happy birthday, Shizuo-kun! I’d love for you to call me!
I can’t help with those marks on Izaya-kun unless you’re more specific. That doesn’t sound like anything I’ve seen before. Better yet, why not try to get a picture of them? It’s not that I don’t trust your description of them, lol!!

28-01-14 6:10AM JST

To: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
From: tanakatom@goo.ne.jp
Subject: No Subject

Happy birthday, shizuo! It’s been a week, when are you coming back? It’s not a big deal, since vorona’s back, but are you?

28-01-14 9:06AM JST

To: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
From: воронаvv@mail.ru
Subject: happy birthday

happy birthday senpai! any chance you’re coming back soon, or that you’d tell me where you are?

28-01-14 9:07AM JST

To: heiwajimash@yahoo.co.jp
From: heiwajimaka@yahoo.co.jp
Subject: Re: out of town

I get a notice every time the account attached to that credit card is accessed. they almost cancelled it when it was used out of japan. i made sure that didn’t happen. it’s okay if you don’t tell me where you’re really going, just be careful.

also, happy birthday.

28-01-14 10:48AM JST
“Fuck,” Shizuo cursed to himself, reading his last e-mail. He’d always had a tendency to neglect his phone messages. Mostly he usually just forgot to check them, but Izaya kept proving himself to be an amazing distraction. It was just now, while Izaya went to use the bathroom of the restaurant they were in, that Shizuo thought to look and reply. The last message from Kasuka had him kicking himself.

“Fuck what?”

Looking up, Shizuo saw that Izaya had returned. He slid next to Shizuo into the booth they had by the window, and tried to read the message displayed on the phone’s screen.

_Petrillo’s_ - the restaurant - was compact and dim, one of many squeezed into a neighborhood across the park from their hotel. Patrons were loud and rambunctious, enjoying the food, wine, and the televised sporting events at the tiny but busy bar. Everything somehow fit into one room of which the entire facility consisted. It wasn’t a place for the claustrophobic, and Shizuo felt like he barely fit in their corner.

The neighborhood itself had a place to eat on every corner, all of which had names that Shizuo could not read nor pronounce. Though sat just across two roads from the tall, extravagant, and bustling downtown of Boston, this neighborhood retained an isolated, foreign appeal. Initially, Izaya had followed his red bricks to its main street until their stomachs rumbled in front of this place. That had been three nights ago. Most importantly, they did not serve ‘clam chowder.’

“Fuck you,” Shizuo pocketed his phone before Izaya had a chance to see.

“Shizu-chan’s so rude, I only asked!” Izaya leaned an elbow on the table and his head in his hand. His eyes narrowed at Shizuo in contemplation. “Hmm… I guess it’s the twenty-eighth in Japan already, right? Have you been getting happy birthday wishes from all your little friends?”

“None of your business,” Shizuo told him and occupied himself with the ice in his glass of water, using the straw to *slush* and *crunch*. Of course he’d figure it out anyways.

“Poor Shizu-chan has to spend his birthday with the person he hates most in the whole wide world! How miserable!” Izaya all but sang, gesturing enthusiastically. “Whatever would he be doing in good ol’ Japan right now? A sushi night out? Bar brawls?? Karaoke?? Nah, Shizu-chan can’t sing a note. Oh, I know! A hot pot with all his friends! Am I right?”

Shizuo bit his straw. “Time to drop it, Izaya.” He thought that the e-mails should have elicited his homesickness, but they had not. And that jarred him. Recalling Celty’s e-mails, could he be enjoying himself?

“Did you hear from that blonde woman?”

_Nah, that can’t be it._ “Don’t bring up Vorona, flea.”

“So you did?” Fondness that leaked with bile, “How is she? Has she shot or stabbed anyone recently?”

_“Don’t,”_ Shizuo started, “try to act all victimized for back then. Not after everything you did.” _I don’t need the reminder._

Izaya wasn’t even looking at him, like he was speaking to an invisible audience. “Honestly, you’d think the least she could do was make sure she killed me. But I really wanted to be killed by Shizu-chan. He was so vicious and deranged that I thought for sure I was a goner and that Shizu-chan would finally succumb to all his barbaric instincts, but now we’ve both gotta wait for him to kill me,
all because-"

CRACK

Glass shattered in Shizuo’s grasp, jolting Izaya into tearing his eyes away from his delusional state.

“Why do you have to do that?” Shizuo growled lowly. His vision had darkened considerably, brows drawn so low that forehead twinged.

“...Do what?” Came the quiet reply.

At that, Shizuo had to look at Izaya. Instead of Shizuo himself, Izaya’s eyes fixated on the shards of glass on the table. They were wide, hazy, distant… like Izaya wasn’t seeing the same thing Shizuo saw when he looked down to see the beads of red ooze out of his palm.

“Oh, oops.” Shizuo finally relaxed his hand and let the glass fall away. Only a few shards remained poking out of his skin. Honestly, he could barely feel anything, but that didn’t stop Izaya’s trance-like state. “Hey!” Shizuo snapped his finger in front Izaya’s face. Eyelashes fluttered. “Since when do you let a little blood squick you out?” Shizuo asked as he pulled out the glass haphazardly.

“I don’t -” Izaya twitched at Shizuo’s careless approach, “Why’d you have to go and break your glass?”

“Why did I - Why do you always gotta run your mouth like a damn bastard?” The blood dripped to his wrist.

Izaya picked up a few napkins with, once again, fidgeting fingers. “You didn’t even let me finish!” he said sullenly. “Before you made a mess as usual...”

Shizuo only had a second to register that last comment. When Izaya went forward with the napkins, he snatched them away before Izaya got too close. “Stop.” Then he muttered, “keep your hands clean...”

But Izaya heard him. “Hmph, like I’d help Shizu-chan.” As much as Izaya accused him, Shizuo wasn’t so dimwitted. He could remember Izaya’s behavior from just a few nights prior, and had the nature to prevent a reoccurrence. No matter how fruitlessly Izaya now tried to hide his own hands under the table, under his legs, in his pockets, Shizuo had seen their trembling.

He could see Izaya’s eyes, heavy and darkly rimmed with nearly sleepless nights. Though Shizuo had not mentioned it, he could still hear Izaya’s nightmares through the walls of their suite. He wouldn’t wake Izaya again, since the first time was such a disaster. A couple times he would stealthily slip into the bedroom and sit against the door, like he had the first night. With Izaya’s audible suffering, Shizuo couldn’t sleep anyway. He’d pray thanks if his silent presence somehow reached Izaya enough that the whimpers and tossing lessened. Mostly Izaya would wake himself up or refuse to sleep at all. Izaya would stay up with the television or - more likely - his laptop. During those times, he’d ignore Shizuo or berate him. Shizuo suspected that Izaya had never realized their deal together would reveal so much vulnerability, and Izaya overcompensated with his words.

Luckily for their hotel suite, Shizuo was less provoked by Izaya in those moments.

Dear Celty, Shizuo mentally wrote as his blood absorbed into the napkins, I did not think it was possible to breathe the same air as Izaya Orihara for more than thirty seconds, but it's been just him and me for about a week now and there are moments when I do not want to kill him.

There were moments when he would worry, like now. There were moments when he found Izaya
amusing. There were moments when Izaya would be surprisingly serene. There were moments when Shizuo could believe their coexisting harmoniously if not for the chaotic shifts between Izaya’s manic and passive dispositions. Or, if only Shizuo could discover the ways to anchor Izaya to the inbetween. These moments never went recognized within Shizuo’s own comprehension, but they existed nonetheless. These moments went unnoticed by both, because neither could ever fathom admitting any other feeling but loathing toward the other.

“Ooooh! Did Shisho break another glass?”

Both brought their gaze upwards. Carmella, one of the owners of Petrillo’s, had come over with their orders to find the Shizuo had made. She set the plates down and instantly began to fuss over them.

Carmella was an antique teapot of a woman, graced with impressive wrinkles all along her face and hands, and streaks of grey that ran through her snarly black hair. Her dark eyes, giant hooked nose, and whiskered chin resembled too much those cartoonish Halloween figures of green-faced witches. But Carmella was an overly affectionate woman, who took all her guests to heart. Despite owning the joint, she would serve food herself and often converse with customers. Poorly, as her English broke with a heavy Italian accent that made it even harder for Shizuo to understand her. When Shizuo and Izaya had first walked in, she had found them delightfully hopeless.

Shizuo had already broken several of the establishment’s glasses and plates - collateral damage implied by Izaya’s company, but Shizuo miraculously had yet to break or flip any tables. The owners were heavensent not to have already thrown him out. Instead, Carmella cleaned up the glass and spilled water.

“Don’t worry Shisho, I get you more water,” ‘Shisho’ was how Carmella pronounced Shizuo’s name. He didn’t have the words to tell her that she was basically calling him a mint plant.

“GENNARO!” Carmella shouted.

Her husband, a pot-bellied man with a permanent stink eye and more hair on his arms and chest than his head, poked his head out from the hollow brick window that allowed the dining room to peek into the kitchen. “Che cosa c’è?”

“Shisho ha bisogno di più acqua!” Carmella waved at him heatedly.

“Eh? Che se la prenda da solo, allora!” Gennaro gestured to the air around him. “Non è colpa mia se rompe tutto! Smettila di viziare i clienti!”

“Pah!” Carmella shooed him.

“He said he’s gonna call the cops on you, Shizu-chan,” Izaya said. He watched the old married couple with the expression of one watching a sitcom from his couch.


Carmella smiled sweetly at her the Japanese young men again, “I’ll bring a Band Aid!” She pointed to Shizuo’s hand and hobbled off. Band Aid for him or not, Shizuo saw that their antics could cheer up Izaya.

“I don’t know what this is,” Shizuo looked down at their plates.

“Tomato… and garlic,” Izaya described, “and tomato and garlic. And wine and olive oil. And tomato and garlic. And cheese.” He pushed around the penne in the dish. “This is just based on past experiences, but I’m pretty confident about all the tomato and garlic in this place.”
“I’ve never eaten so much cheese in my life than I have the last four days.” Shizuo shovelled the food into his face all the same.

Moments later, in the midst of their sloppy eating, Carmella returned with a package of Disney licensed Band Aids.

“My granddaughter’s!” She handed the box to Izaya. “Take as many as you need!”

When she was gone again, Shizuo huffed. He snatched the box for himself. “I’m the one with the cuts!”

“Then learn more English,” Izaya tisked. “You can’t even say ‘Carmella’ or ‘Petrillo’ without two too many Rs.”

“You do that, too!” Just not as much. Shizuo struggled to open the Band Aids and cover his cuts with one hand. At first, Izaya smugly watched his battle, but he ended up stepping in out of impatience anyways.

“Oh, look at all the characters,” Izaya rummaged through the box. “Hmm… How about Sleeping Beauty?”

“Hey no, not a princess.”

“Why not?” It was too late, Izaya was peeling back the paper. “You’re just as prissy as one. You shall now be known as Shizu-hime.”

“Not if I kill you.”

“Hah!”

In the end, Shizuo’s right hand was covered in Disney princess Band Aids. He used it to hide his face in shame.

Once they’d finished eating, Carmella returned to try and idly chat with them. She could only really communicate with Izaya, but that didn’t stop her from trying with Shizuo. While he never really reciprocated her conversation, Carmella spoke to Shizuo like a grandmother. Shizuo would just nod repeatedly or offer a ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ On the upside, Izaya got completely bent out of shape whenever the woman opted to speak at Shizuo despite Izaya’s lingual advantage.

“My neice’s nephew’s brother-in-law works with Japanese people for a computer company,” Carmella rattled, “Now I don’t know anything about computers or Japanese people. I don’t know how you all use those sticks to each with! You two are so good with your forks and knives!”

The only indication Shizuo had of what she was saying was Izaya’s extremely ugly laughter.

“No, really! When’d you move to America?”

“We don’t live here,” Izaya said. He exchanged a look with Shizuo.

“Travelling,” was all Shizuo had to offer.

“Ohhhh!” Carmella clapped her hands, “Just America?”

“Everywhere,” Izaya corrected.

“Everywhere?” Shizuo hoped he mistook the meaning of the word.
“Everywhere,” Izaya repeated.

“Ohhh!” Carmella hopped to her feet, “You must go to Italia! You go and you can stay with mio fratello.”

“Her what?”

“Alberto’s villa is in the hills outside Ramola towards Firenze. Hold on, I’ll get the address. GENNARO!”

“E adesso cosa c’è?”

“Dove è tutta la posta da Alberto?”

“Come faccio a saperlo? Sto cucinando!”

“Pah!” She left before either Shizuo or Izaya could protest.

“What are you doing?” Shizuo asked.

“Getting another free room!” Izaya beamed. Horrible.

Carmella returned with a stack of pictures, maps, and documents. She shoved them at Izaya. “I’ll call him and tell him to let you stay with him. I’ll give him your names, but he’ll butcher them his English is worse than mine! When are you going?”

She hounded them for almost fifteen more minutes until her attention deviated towards Shizuo again. He’d asked for a glass a milk and she had thought he was just so funny, a grown man asking for a glass of milk. Shizuo didn’t mind at all, but something set off Izaya to the point where he sprang from the booth and stormed out of the restaurant. Shizuo threw an apology at the Petrillos and rushed out the after him.

“HEY!”

Izaya was halfway to the park when Shizuo caught up to him, the fast flea. Shizuo slowed his pace to match Izaya’s. “What the hell’s up with you?”

“As usual, Shizu-chan, you’re completely ignorant of how much of a monster you are.”

Shizuo gawked. “What?! I literally wasn’t doing anything!”

Rounding on Shizuo, Izaya allowed his voice to rise. “That’s the point!”

“How the fuck am I supposed to know what that means?!” Shizuo yelled back.

“You’re not!” Izaya regained his stride, but Shizuo used his longer legs to step in front of him.

“How do you just go from this,” Shizuo held up his right hand, “to this?!” and his left fist.

Looking from one to the other, Izaya’s face screwed in confusion. “What?”

Shizuo raked both through his hair, practically roaring in frustration. A few bystanders looked his way before quickly moving along.

“It’s too cold for you to make a scene out here,” Izaya said.
“If you tell me these things, then I can, you know, not do them.” Hands shoved into his pockets. He could sit through entire meals with Izaya, now, and didn’t want to backtrack to the times when he’d eat in silence without a voice rambling nonsense beside him.

Izaya raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “You’d stop doing something that upset me?”

Shizuo caught himself. “No! I mean - I’d make sure I did it all the time.”

Biting his lip, Izaya shook his head. “You’re so fucking dumb…”

They bickered half-heartedly all the way through the park. This is much better, Shizuo mused, than throwing vending machines. The night was brisk and clear, allowing some stars to break through the city’s lights and to their vision. Not many strolled through the park in such cold temperatures, though, no matter how nice it was under the lit arch ways and soothing sound of water slapping against the harbor.

Izaya was still a mystery, but one that Shizuo wanted to solve. And he was beginning to believe that he could. While Izaya picked at Shizuo’s infatuation with older women, Shizuo tried to pinpoint what Izaya was really so ruffled about. Shizuo had never really seen Izaya interact with outsiders. He’d fight with Shizuo, Simon, and Celty, and he’d slither all around his clients and potential victims. Then he’d put on a show for anyone he needed something from. But naturally come down to humanity’s level and be just that? Human? Shizuo could recall only the conversations between the two of them over the last week. Izaya could talk to Shizuo rather naturally, but anyone else?

Maybe he can’t, Shizuo thought while looking down at Izaya, whose mouth had been running. Eyes then narrowed accusingly.

“Shizu-chan, are you listening? When I’m calling you an inept pervert, I want you to hear me.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

They strolled through the front doors of their hotel and through the lobby. The politicians had not left, and continued to litter the hotel’s facilities.

“That’s not very convincing!” Izaya whined. He latched onto Shizuo’s arm and yanked. “What could a brain like yours be thinking about? Liistenn to mee!”

Shizuo shook him off. “Geez, you’re a pain.” Izaya kept pestering him by getting in his way as they headed towards the elevators. Playing along, Shizuo caught Izaya’s waist and was about to carry him all the way to their suite. Unfortunately, he never got the chance.

“Izaya!”

Both froze and looked for the voice. Upon seeing the natural blond from days ago - Kyle - no! Blondie, Shizuo recalled bitterly - Shizuo began frowning from Izaya to the approaching young man. At least Izaya looked less than pleased by the interruption as well. Facing away from blondie, he sighed before turning back round with a fake smile that Shizuo knew and hated all too well.

“Hey!” Izaya greeted a little too enthusiastically.

The natural blond beamed so widely that his impeccable straight, white teeth could have reflected the all the fluorescent light. His hair glistened with product that kept its locks in a perfect coiffure. Without acknowledging Shizuo at all, blondie spoke directly to Izaya, smoothing out an already smooth navy blue suit.
Oh, so he’s rude too. Shizuo, whose hand was still on Izaya’s hip, turned and released him in a way that put Shizuo in front of blondie. “The hell you want?” He shot daggers into blondie’s wide, cerulean eyes.

Again, blondie avoided Shizuo by leaning over to speak with Izaya again. This time with a point to the man in between them. Whatever he said made Izaya’s mask fall into an expression of disgust. Shizuo fisted blondie’s sports jacket and dragged him forward.

“What he say?” he gestured between himself and blondie. “Is he insulting me?”

“No,” Izaya’s lips quirked back into amusement, “but he insulted me a little.”

Shizuo almost threw his fist into blondie’s face before the next words out of blondie’s words stuck him.

“Ah, no, I apologize! I speak Japanese!” Very well, he might have added.

“So? What are you doing spewing in English?” Shizuo glowered.

“Since Izaya spoke such exceptional English the other day, I thought you both could understand. My apologies, I was mistaken. I can assure you I said nothing distasteful. I simply asked Izaya if you were a romantic partner.”

Shizuo released blondie and wiped his hand on his pants as if he’d just touched something slimy.

“I didn’t think so,” blondie continued, “or at least, I hoped not!” he chuckled in a tone so pompous that Shizuo reconsidered punching him, but a fly flew past his ear and momentarily distracted him. Blondie’s whole demeanor oozed with an unnatural grandiosity. “In that case, who are you?” With a hidden touch of hostility. His smile never broke.

“I’m his…” Shizuo started.

“He works for me,” Izaya cut in, matter-of-factly. Shizuo couldn’t necessarily argue. “Shizu-chan, Kyle. Kyle, Shizu-chan,” went the lazy introduction. When blondie held out a hand to Shizuo, the latter ignored him. The hand was retracted with the same smile. Shizuo himself was repeatedly distracted by a fly he kept hearing but could not see.

Blondie smoothed out his suit again. “In that case, Izaya, allow me to continue where we left off before. I was glad to see that you were still in the city just now, but disappointed I hadn’t heard back from you earlier. I fear that may be my fault, the Northeast Republican’s Youth Conference has surely occupied my time. My apologies.” He turned towards Shizuo. “You see, I’m a media assistant to the governor of-”

“I don’t care.”

“So, Izaya,” blondie returned to Izaya without batting an eye, “I would like to make up for my absence by asking if you’d like to accompany me for a drink in this hotel’s bar.”

Shizuo couldn’t believe what was happening in front of him. Is Izaya getting asked out in front of me? He stood there in bewilderment, the fly’s wings buzzing incessantly in his ear. No, he told himself, Izaya doesn’t get asked out. That fake Izaya that plays dumbasses like this guy is being asked out. Heh, sucker.

But Izaya looked to be entertaining the idea. He bit his lip and looked blondie up and down, humming playfully. “A hotel bar, hm?”
Wait, what.

“Or, perhaps you would prefer a more lively atmosphere at one of the establishments in Faneuil Hall?” Blondie flashed his teeth again.

“We’re not going to any bars!” Shizuo barked. From the sounds of it, the flies were multiplying.

“You don’t have to,” Izaya scoffed.

Shizuo stammered. “Yeah, but—” I’m your bodyguard, and blondie was clearly bad news. If only he could kill those flies.

Blondie caught his eye. “Oh, you are of course welcome to join us. I can—”

“I know where I’m welcome!” Shizuo argued. He felt his blood boil to his brain; blondie had an infuriating effect on him. The way he spoke, the way he moved. His teeth, his tan. He conducted himself as one would expect of a well-mannered mannequin. Nobody like that could be genuine, and Shizuo didn’t trust him a bit.

“Shall we?” Izaya stepped around Shizuo where Kyle waited with a plastic smile.

Yeah hell no. “I’m coming!” He pushed himself in the middle like a chaperone on a field trip.

“Shizu-chan, what are you doing?”

“My job.” Shizuo insisted. Izaya squinted sourly, though Shizuo could have sworn he looked a smidge appreciative.

And that’s how the three ended up in a chic club bar in Faneuil Hall, where the interior was smooth and just various designs of polygons. Their lights were blue and neon and far too florescent. The counter was so polished that Shizuo could see his reflection, though he opted to smear his fingerprints across its surface while he tried to ignore the headache being caused by the American pop music blasting through the speakers and vibrating in his chest. Everyone in the facility looked like magazine models, and drank concoctions with fruit in them. Despite its well kept appearance, Shizuo could still hear the many flies that inhabited it. Even during the winter. Meanwhile, blondie managed to pour more and more dirt on his employer with the more liquor Izaya poured into his glass.

“...and then I passed that on to the Senator.” Blondie was saying, “That’s how I got this position. He was very impressed by my attention to detail.”

“I can see why.” Izaya sipped some form of liquor out of a red straw, eyes widened attentively. Shizuo glowered at the two of him over his shoulder, elbows on the counter. “Oh! Looks like you’re dry!”

Blondie looked down at his empty glass. “...You’re right! How are you doing? Do you need a refill?”

Izaya shook his head with his lips still around the straw. “I’m fine. Do you?” Blondie seemed ignorant of the wicked glint in Izaya’s eyes. Shizuo, however, was always very aware.

“No no no, I couldn’t. I—” He held a fist up to his mouth as his cheeks puffed. They could just barely he the stifled burp. Blondie frowned at himself and Izaya. “I’m sorry about that. I…” He stood up suddenly. “I’ll be right back!” And took off in the direction of the restroom.
As soon as he was gone, there was nothing in between the two. Izaya kept his eyes on blondie’s trail for a moment before turning smugly to Shizuo, who avoided eye contact.

“You’re a terrible person, ya know?”

“Why?” Izaya hopped onto blondie’s stool to sit closer to Shizuo. “He was the one to suggest drinks.”

“Yeah, but you’re only here to weasel crap info outta him.”

Izaya chewed on his straw and twitched his nose. “Maybe. He’s not actually very interesting.”

Shizuo whipped his body around sharply. “Then why are we here?”

“You sure are acting bratty for someone who didn’t have to come.”

“Yes, I did…” He muttered. His eyes lingered in the direction of the restroom. “That guy’s suspicious.”

“Suspicious.”

“Yeah,” Shizuo regarded Izaya seriously. “He’s evil.”

Izaya stared for a silent moment before breaking out in a fit of giggles.

“Wh… what the fuck!!” Shizuo gaped at him.

“Oh my God,” Izaya could barely keep hold of his drink.

“I’m not kidding! There’s something wrong with that dude!”

“Of course there’s something wrong with him!” Izaya managed between laughter. “He’s in politics!”

“Not that kind of evil!” Shizuo snapped. “Come on, no one is that tan during the winter! Stop laughing!”

That only made Izaya lose breath faster, all the while slurping up more of his reddish brown liquor. Only when Shizuo snatched his glass away did Izaya focus. “Hey!”

“Really?” Shizuo sniffed the glass out of curiosity and jerked back with a scrunched up face. “The hell you drinking anyways.”

Izaya took it back and fitted his lips around the straw again. “Rum. Amongst other things, I see Shizu-chan has yet to order himself a drink. You’re being here is even more pointless.”

“I don’t drink,” Shizuo relayed, unready for the dubious look that crossed Izaya’s face as soon as he said it. Auburn eyes fluttered across their surroundings as if he’d suddenly forgotten where they were, before they ultimately landed on Shizuo again.

“But you worked in a bar.”

Shizuo saw red. “For all of five seconds thanks to you!”

Izaya waved him off. “Oh you don’t care about that anymore. You really don’t drink? Maybe I did you a favor!”
“If I shoved my foot up your ass, would it be a favor?”

“I don’t know,” Izaya smirked around his straw, “What size shoe do you have?”

_Oh my fucking God._

Izaya started chortling at himself and the absolutely abysmal expression upon Shizuo’s face.

“Ya know…” Shizuo began to wonder, “How many of those have you actually had?” He tried to take the drink out of Izaya’s hands, slowly and gently this time, only to have Izaya follow the glasses movement with his whole person, hands and body. Shizuo released him. “Geez.”

“Don’t look so scandalized, I’m fine.” He straightened himself. “I’ve never let myself get drunk on a job.”

“This isn’t a job,” Shizuo reminded him.

Izaya knowingly grinned. “You’re right!”

_Is he lying?_ Shizuo inspected him. “I can’t tell.” He lightly tapped his fist twice on Izaya’s dimpled cheek. “You can always be so freakishly giddy.”

Izaya jittered at the comment. “Well, you’re not a real bartender anymore so you can’t cut me off anyway. Hah.” He held out his drink for Shizuo, who leaned away in scrutiny. “You really don’t drink?”

“Yes!”

“But you were a bartender.”

“I know! That doesn’t mean I would be the one drinking.”

Biting down on his straw, Izaya considered this. “I suppose someone like you could easily become an alcoholic if you had a taste for booze and worked in an environment that was _all booze_…” Izaya reached a conclusion that involved placing a hand on Shizuo’s shoulder and unstably leaning into it. “Shizu-chan… you’re very welcome.”

“Fuck you.” Shizuo knocked the arm away, but found Izaya’s decreasing balance, in the least, amusing.

Izaya snickered and swayed on his stool. He just as quickly lapsed into silence. Shizuo felt incredibly anxious, watching him.

“Let’s ditch the blond.”

“What?”


“Uhh…” Shizuo glanced towards the restroom. “He’s still not out, is he?”

“Maybe he’s dead,” Izaya said hopefully.

Shizuo stifled any evidence of his glee. “You wanted to come in the first place!”
“I already got what I wanted to know.” With a *slurp*, Izaya finished off his rum drink. “I hate this yuppy place. Let’s find somewhere where Shizu-chan can make me a drink. And Shizu-chan will drink.”

Shizuo blinked. “What?”

Izaya slid off his stool and headed towards the door, leaving Shizuo to distract himself with many thoughts. He might have stayed there in bafflement had not the tug in his gut willed him to follow Izaya wherever he walked.

Or in tonight’s case, stumble.

A few locks later, Izaya lead them into a rowdy hole in a wall. The bar itself was smaller than their hotel room, so dim that you could hardly see the drink in front of you. There was one counter of aged, chipped, and splintered wood that donned many scratched in messages from patrons over the year. For example, Shizuo sat in front of a message reading: *Call for a good time 641-528-1409.* And below: *YANKEES SUCK.* They had one flatscreen TV screen above the bar, with a baseball game on. Behind the counter worked just a single bartender, tall and muscular and solemn and without a uniform, despite the crowds that had Shizuo realizing for the first time that it was a Friday.

A vintage jukebox rattled in a corner, pumping out old American soul and rock to the best of its abilities. Next to it, a crowd of students sat around a table in the corner and were ordering another round of shots. Actually, most of the patrons appeared to be somewhere between twenty and thirty, more colorful than the previous bar. Then there was the exception of a few middle-aged couples on a night out together and two elderly gentlemen hooting and hollering in the back. Of course, as time stretched, people would flitter in and out to either bar hop, go home, or go gallivanting through the streets.

Izaya approached slammed a bill on the counter. “Barkeep! My… associate here would like access to your… whatever it is. Drinks. Booze. Set ‘em up!” The muscular man stood dumbfounded until Izaya sloppily repeated the directions in English.

“I’m not gonna make you a damn drink.” Shizuo stood behind Izaya, trapping him against the bar.

“But come onnnn,” Izaya turned and leaned back against the counter. “Think of this as your opportunity to show off the skills you never got the chance to master! It’s fine, I think you’re gonna suck.”

Shizuo balled his fists. “Maybe you shoulda just maybe not framed me and got me fired in the first place?”

Izaya winked. “Shoulda woulda coulda.”

Just before Shizuo thought he was gonna get into another bout with Izaya, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Two guys and a teeny, tiny young woman had approached them. The tallest guy, who had a beer in his hand, had tapped Shizuo on the shoulder, and the girl sipped on a martini glass. Each looked effectively wasted, unbalanced and damp. If their features weren’t evident enough, their Japanese ethnicity was made known as soon as the guy with the beer opened his mouth.

“Japanese!” Was all he said.

Shizuo glared, uninterested in mingling. But Izaya matched the enthusiasm.

“Yeah!”
“...Japanese!!” The guy turned back to his friends and raised a fist into the air. His male friend mimicked him. They chugged their beer.

“Sorry sorry sorry!” The girl leaned forward. “We’re the only Japanese people in our class and we’ve never seen other Japanese here in Boston. You know just like… out? Hahaha.” She said the whole thing while giggling around her martini glass.

“You you guys students?!” The second guy asked, pushing forward. The girl almost lost her drink.

“No!” Izaya shook his head one too many times. Shizuo winced with every word. Everyone was practically shouting. Izaya pointed to him. “He’s a bartender!”

Tall guy turned back to them. “No way man! In this bar?!”

The girl guffawed. “Not in this bar!! Oh my God!” She leaned further into their space. She cupped her mouth and spoke to Izaya in a shouting whisper. “Oh my God, I’m soooo sorry about them. Are you guys, like, on a date? I can totally ask them to fuck off, you know?”

“We’re not!!” Shizuo nudged her back.

“Okay okay okay.” She smiled at them. “Sorry sorry. All the boys in college here are either idiots or gay.” She drank her martini as she sized up Shizuo. “You’re very tall.”

Shizuo found the TV screen to be a sudden and very effective distraction from Miss Martini.

"So you're like, a student? Oh my God!" Izaya mimicked her tone in complete mockery.

"Yeeaaaaaaaaaaaaah we all go to Toon Town!"

“This is it! This is it!” Tall guy was hopping and pointing up at the monitor, where a pitcher was striking out a batter. With a moment’s longer watching, Shizuo recognized the pitcher.

“Wait… have I seen this game before?”

Tall guy and his friend got closer to him. “Yeah man it’s a repeat! World Series repeat!” The friends turned to each other and started chanting. “UUUUUUEHARA UEHARA UEHARA UEHARA!”

The name dawned on Shizuo. He addressed Izaya. “I do know this place!”

“See! I told you. You’re so slow, Shizu-chan.”

And then he mourned. “We were at that field and I didn’t even realize!” Shizuo had followed and celebrated Koji Uehara’s victory in the American World Series without even realizing he was visiting the place where that happened.

“Too bad, Shizu-chan. Maybe you coulda gotten an autograph.” Izaya teased. “Woulda been a nice birthday present.”

“Shut up.”

“It’s your birthday?!” The second friend pressed forward excitedly.

“Well, tomorrow.” Shizuo said.

“Oh man!” The bros communicated with each other with only facial expressions and wild gestures.
“Alright we’re totally… doing shots at midnight! BIRTHDAY SHOTS!”

The entire bar raised their glass. “BIRTHDAY SHOTS!!!”

“For…. whatsisface!!” Tall guy slumped. “We don’t know your name!”

“Good.” Shizuo was beginning to actually thank Izaya a little bit; drunk people were incredibly too boisterous for his patience.

“Shizu-chan!” Izaya tugged his arm. “Be a bartender! Right now!”

“Yeah yeah yeah!” Miss Martini agreed.

“No!”

“Here!” Izaya pushed a small glass into his hand. “It’s from Doug.”

“Doug?”

“The barkeep. It’ll loosen you up so you’re not such a stick in the mud.”

Shizuo took the glass as a method to draw Izaya closer to him. “Or how about we leave?”

Izaya pulled away. “Are you kidding? This place is so much better than the last one. Look at them all!” He swung his arm around, nearly whacking Shizuo in the chest. “Drunk Americans in a real American dive bar! As shameless as shameless can be! Nothing… Nothing strips a human down to their most basic and idiotic instincts as hard liquor!”

“Is that what’s happening to you right now?” Shizuo used a finger to push Izaya’s glass further away from him.

“I’m fine!” Izaya chirped. The liquor in the glass sloshed with his excessive arm movements. “I have developed a liver of steel! Something Shizu-chan wouldn’t have after a lifetime of soberar… sobriety. Even with your crazy monster superduperpowers.”

An opportunity seized Shizuo. While witnessing Izaya’s deterioration into cuckooland minute by minute and the danger of going there himself in the company of someone like Izaya Orihara were the biggest red flags he could ask for, Shizuo could not resist.

“I’ll make another bet with you,” Shizuo started. “If I can drink more than you, you’ll tell me what’s going on.”

Auburn eyes narrowed. “I do believe Shizu-chan is developing a gambling problem.” Izaya traced the rim of the glass with a finger. “That’s a dangerous bet, Shizu-chan… Are you sure you’re up to the task? You don’t even like alcohol. Maybe you’d do better with chocolate milk in a sippy cup.”

“Psh, it’s gross but I can deal.” He finally stole the glass from Izaya and downed its contents in one gulp. He immediately spit them out. “UGH. What the hell is this?!?”

“Bourbon. Did I just win?”

“No.”

“That was the easiest thing I’ve ever won. I’d like to thank the Academy and God and probably Jesus…”
An arm draped itself around Shizuo’s shoulder. Tall Guy had returned, and smelled richly of Jack Daniels. “Man what was that? Thought ya said ya were a bartender?”

Shizuo jerked away. “I was! Why does everyone think you have to drink to be able to do that?!”

“Let’s start a mini bar!” Miss Martini raised her glass. She had a caucasian friend next to her now. Turning to each other, they both began tittering for no explicable reason. “A mini bar? A side bar?? Hahahaha, which is it?! Mini side bar? You know what I mean?! Hahahahah!”

“No hahahahahaha what??? Aahahaha!” They clung to each other for support, else they’d most certainly fall over.

“No no no I get it!” Tall Guy approached them. “It’s his birthday let’s do it!”

Turns out, English was even more difficult for Shizuo when the people were slurring the words together. His only indication of what was happening was Izaya brushing against his side, spitting something at the group of strangers. Whatever it was seemed hardly to affect the made up minds of Tall Guy and his posse. Next thing Shizuo, they were dragging him away from an Izaya that was suddenly looking very anxious and almost irritated. They sat him down at a table where they’d somehow secured many bottled liquor and their accommodating glasses. Big Man Doug relieved himself from duty while the bar’s majority surrounded Shizuo, spewing the names of drinks at him.

He hadn’t a clue what any of them wanted without Izaya there to translate, and they all blocked Izaya from his sight. Frankly, he resented being dragged away to this position, their look at him and placing orders. Just before he went through with flipping the table into the crowd, Izaya pushed through and fell to his side. Fists clenched at his side, and his thin eyebrows knit together in a pleasing frown. He’s mad, but why, Shizuo had no idea.

“I can still beat you.” A grin stretched out across Shizuo’s face.

“Yeah?” An eyebrow raised just a millimeter, and lips twitched just a fraction. “Prove it!”

Shizuo uncorked the nearest bottle of liquor and poured it into his mouth. And it tasted like lava, burning his esophagus all the way down. Had Shizuo not been a freak of nature that illuded both pain and reason, he might have died right then and there. Fortunately, he could finish that one bottle without stopping, wincing through his disgust. Once empty, Shizuo smashed the bottle on the ground in a fit of triumph. The crowd roared and raised their glasses in appreciation, and Shizuo focussed on the wide-eyed, possibly impressed stare of Izaya.

Grinning rather manically, Shizuo picked up another bottle and pointed it at his companion. “So? What do you want, ya damn flea? I can make anything you can name off of that Izapedia of yours!”

The next hour or so would be a blur.

Witnesses would say that the blond tourist proved himself worthy of his ex title and the uniform Ikebukuro knew quite well. Most customers received their own specialty drinks. Big Man Doug the Barkeep was quoted as saying, well, nothing at all, for he seized the opportunity to retire early to his quarters and enjoy a calming bath. All the while below him, Bostonians and tourists alike continued to drink even after the surrounding establishments rang their last calls and closed for the morning.

At ten to midnight, Tall Guy and Miss Martini - later revealed and sooner forgotten as Jiminy and Satsuki - lead a chorussed countdown that lead up to Shizuo putting down more alcohol than he’d seen in his bartending training days while balancing himself atop two barstools. And the patrons all sang his name in style of the baseball pitcher. “HEEEEEEEIIWAJIMA HEIWAJIMA
Apparently, Shizuo’s superpower had no strength over his liver or suffering brain cells. The celebration was certainly the most bizarre and lively that Shizuo had ever experienced for his own birthday. Of course, more celebrating was of the bar’s current state of anarchy than of Shizuo’s birth itself. Either way, Shizuo ever expected such an enthusiastic welcome into a company of so many people. He was in another world, one where the public embraced exuberant displays almost maliciously. After a while, the language barrier melted away into a new form of gibberish that those with enough alcohol in their bloodstream could understand.

Such conversations led to overdue introductions and obscure exchanges. Jiminy’s other Japanese friend, a name Shizuo would not even bother to remember, was the only one that grew up in Japan. Osaka, specifically, but he had a cousin from Ikebukuro and somehow, despite all the booze and blaring chit chat, managed to piece the scene together. “I’ve heard of you! My cousin once saw you throw a traffic pole into a bunch of dudes!” Just when Shizuo believed his time was up, the trio converged on him like piranhas. Jiminy and Satsuki found this information positively thrilling, as did all those with whom they shared it in English.

The attention wasn’t fun anymore. He was lost at sea, surrounded by bloodthirsty sharks and without even an anchor. They’d devoured his anchor, his steel anchor.

Sometime amongst all the hullabaloo, Shizuo had lost track of Izaya. When the exploits began, they attempted to remain side by side against the tides. But Izaya had to fight harder. Despite Shizuo’s initial aim to cater his bartending skills solely to Izaya and claim victory in their bet, he soon fell victim to alcohol’s effect on his memory. As midnight had drawn neared, the waves of people crashed down over Shizuo while they pushed Izaya further away.

Now, Shizuo fumbled around at his sides. Behind him, behind a few people he shoved out of his way. He was trying to find Izaya there, but to no avail. So much of his brain was flooded that he couldn’t quite understand why that was. Standing was becoming difficult, and he did wish somebody would do something about the lights.

But he wasn’t so far gone that he couldn’t put thoughts together, or know what he should be doing. He looked over the heads of the crowd, searching for the one familiar face. Though he didn’t see the face, he caught glimpse of the tail end of a parka on its way out the door.

“IZAYA!”

If liquor supposed stripped humans to their most basic and honest instincts, Shizuo might be human after all. He cut through the crowd like a knife and stumbled out the same door.

Both the biting cold and his adrenaline sobered him up for the time being. Not that his head didn’t spin when he turned and ran and turned in search of Izaya’s fleeing form. Where… Where… Come on, where…? At last, Shizuo spotted him running the highway behind the marketplace that separated it from the wharf. Shizuo sprinted after him, calling his name all the while. “IZAYA!”

There were almost no other people around, but there were still quite a few cars on their way home after a night downtown. But Izaya didn’t seem to be stopping. Shizuo picked pace to a speed he’d probably never run before. He made it over the first street without consequence, and over the greenway. “IZAYA! IZAYA!” Whether his voice reached him or not, Shizuo watched Izaya from run straight into the oncoming traffic.

Any rapid drumming in his chest or ears was drowned out by a blaring car horn and tires screeching against the pavement.
No person was harmed on Atlantic Avenue that night. The same cannot be said for a shiny red Jaguar XK Coupe that currently had Shizuo’s right hand indented into its bumper. The other hand rested on Izaya’s waist, where it pinned him safely against Shizuo’s chest. They both panted against each other, blinding their eyes against merciless headlights. When Shizuo squinted, he could see two females occupying the passenger seat. A very unsavory young man rolled down his window, stuck his head out, and started cursing at them in English.

Uninterested, Shizuo replaced his right hand with his foot. Both arms around Izaya now, his limbs quivered with furiousity and gratefulness. He kicked the car meters away from them with a “Shuuuuut the FUCK UP!” That was enough to spook the young man, who opted to drive around Shizuo at that point. He tore away in a panic, and Shizuo dragged Izaya to the sidewalk.

“What the ever loving fucking hell were you thinking?!”

“Let go of me!” Izaya squirmed. Shizuo didn’t even notice him gasp for air.

“Huh?! What the hell was that?!”

Izaya released a strangled cry. “Dumb beast you’re HURTING ME!”

Shizuo regretfully freed him and jumped away.

“I just saved your ass!”

Izaya scoffed, glowered, and rubbed his arms gingerly. “You almost killed me yourself!”

“But I-” While Shizuo was now thinking quite coherently and felt all previous alcoholic effects had left his body as soon as he’d made contact with the car, Izaya looked worse for wear. He could barely stand up straight. His skin had a sickly glow about it. Before Shizuo could form a conclusion, he turned on his heel and proceeded his walking.

“Hey!” Shizuo matched his stride. “Where are you going?!” Their hotel was in the opposite direction.

“I wanna see the seals.”

“The seals?”

“Didn’t you hear me? The seals, the seals!”

“I HEARD YOU. But-” Shizuo glanced behind them. This was the second time that night that Izaya had taken off in a huff.

“But but?”

“Stop that. Why’d you take off?”

“I’m doing what I do. I flee. Remember? A fleeing flea.” Izaya side-eyed him and grumbled. “Why are you still following me?”

Shizuo fell a step behind. “You hired me.”

“I hate you.” Izaya spat.

He stopped. “YEAH? What else is new!”
“No,” Izaya whirled around and almost lost his balance. “I hate you! Stop following me! Go back to all your new friends!”

“Really?!” Shizuo could hardly believe this conversation. He could blame the alcohol for all the non sequiturs, but he could also accept that Izaya’s mind worked this way anyways. “You brought us there!”

“I can’t look at humans right now.” Izaya regained his pace. “They’ve betrayed me again.”

“What?!” Surely Izaya fell out of love with his precious humans. The notion sat forebodingly with Shizuo. “How drunk are you?”

“I’m fine!” Izaya reiterated. “I told you to stop following me!”

“No!”

“I hate you!”

“We hate each other!!”

“UGGGGH!”

They came across the aquarium, abandoned like any other respectable facility at almost three in the morning. One tank resided outside for the public to see: a quaint home of five Atlantic harbor seals. Upon Shizuo and Izaya boisterous arrival, the previously sleeping mammals began to stir. Two lifted their heads from where they had rested on a bedrock and watched the two humans curiously.

Now, usually Izaya had the verbal upper hand in these rows. Shizuo was always the one shouting nonsense and wearing his heart on his sleeve, while Izaya remained composed, emotionally distant. Much could be said by Izaya’s current BAC - which would have been calculated as verging on 0.18 had they performed the proper tests. Rather, Shizuo could only stand by and witness Izaya crumble into a most spectacular fit.

“Why… Why do they love Shizu-chan so much…” Izaya lightly tapped the plexiglass with his finger tips. The seals scooted forward. “Why, even here, even now. Humans loooooove Shizu-chan. Humans love monsters. Dracula, Yeti, Frankenstein, Shizu-chan.” He sighed excessively loud and long. “But they don’t love me!”

One excitable pup rolled into the water and swam up to Izaya. Shizuo, who wondered if Izaya realized he was still behind him, watched Izaya’s reflection smile at the pup.

“Nope! Not a single one not a single bit! Look at you, you blubber blob. You not-human. I hate you things. What’s your point? They’re so stupid! Stupid, stupid! Why don’t they get it? It’s not fair! After all I do for them?! Don’t they get it??” Izaya’s volume gradually increased, wounding up the pup into flipping and diving to and from each of the tank’s ends. Izaya ran back and forth, following and practically shouting. “I try, I really try! I try and I try and I try my love never reaches anyone! I’m doing all that I know! He doesn’t want it! I want it more than anything! Pushes and pushes and pushes everyone away while I try and try and try so why is it that the only creatures ever attracted to me are the scum of the universe?! IT’S NOT FAIR! I LOVE THEM! I LOVE THEM, RIGHT? It’s not fair, they hate me, I hate them. I hate them, I hate them!”

“Izaya-”

“I HATE THEM!”
He’d stopped on the far end of the tank. His voice had cracked at last, and he hid his face in his hands as if that’d make him disappear. Unphased, the pup continued to perform various tricks for Izaya while the elder seals tried their best to go back to sleep. Finally, Izaya sank to his knees. And further. He curled up on the pavement and spoke into his palms.

“No, I don’t. I love them. I love humans. They should hate me, so it’s fine. After all, after that.”

Shizuo felt like vomiting. He watched the display with a sick degree of amusement but an overwhelming sense of pity and dread. Never once had Shizuo felt sorry for Izaya before, but now he was watching him tremble on cold concrete and stare wildly at shivering, open hands just centimeters from his own face - all while lamenting his inability to connect emotionally with his own species.

On the other hand, Shizuo was quickly learning that a sufficient amount of liquor reduced all those between twenty and twenty-five years old to something akin to an exhausted toddler. Obviously people hated Izaya because he was a horrible person, but it baffled Shizuo to realize that Izaya might not recognize that in himself.

But he wanted to make it better, as much as that surprise him, he really did. His Izaya Orihara was perfectly confident and tragically vindictive, not a pathetic mess of regret and social anxiety. Shizuo knew loneliness. Shizuo plagued himself with loneliness, and he wasn’t sure if it was a fate he’d wish even on his worst enemy. So he marched over and lifted Izaya to his feet. “Come on, Izaya. Get the fuck up.”

Izaya stumbled backwards, hands over his face all the while. “No, Shizu-chan! I thought I told you not to follow me!”

“I always follow you, so too bad!”

“Nooo no no no,” Izaya shook his head. “Not always.”

“Yes, always!”

Izaya’s shoulders shook. “But why Shizu-chan?! I hate Shizu-chan the most! Why is it always Shizu-chan?!”

Shizuo shrugged. “I dunno, that’s just how it is! Guess you’ll just have to deal with it!”

“It smells like fish.”

“What?”

Izaya lowered his hands to fix Shizuo with an almost impressive scowl. It wouldn’t have been so comical were Izaya’s nose and eyes so red and puffy. “It smells like dead fish!”

Shizuo gaped. “Izaya… Izaya, are you crying?”

He smacked his hands across his face again. “No I’m not!” He squeaked.

“Unbelievable… Hold on, let me take a video for Celty.”

“What! Shizu-chan, you really are a monster!”

“Take your hands away!”

“No!!”
He never did take the video. He just wanted to look at Izaya’s deplorable face again. Izaya kept avoiding him, even with his eyes sealed. The seals had congregated towards them in either resentment or intrigue. The finale they received was Izaya finally revealing his visage just before he hurled the remnants of Petrillo’s dinner into the Boston Harbor.

Thankfully, their hotel was only a few blocks away. Not that Izaya was much for Shizuo to carry, especially after he’d released his stomach’s contents down near the yachts. Shizuo felt like he had his arms underneath a bag of cotton, a bag of cotton that was mostly dangling limbs and was hiccuping into Shizuo’s shoulder.

Ignoring the strange look from the concierge upon entering their hotel, Shizuo rushed by, to the elevator, up to their floor and into their room. He admittedly had little experience with drunkards in need. Other than removing the parka and lying Izaya gently under the covers, Shizuo was at a loss. He glanced around the room, as if there’d be a manual. What to do with Drunk and Delirious Fleas: A Step by Step Guide.

Instead, all he noticed was Izaya’s unzipped suitcase. Not much was in out of order, besides a pant leg and a frilly cloth draping over the edge. However, Shizuo had never seen Izaya leave it open before.

“Did you do that?”

He felt a tap on his wrist.

“M’fine.”

Shizuo looked down into Izaya’s eyes, as hazy and droopy as they were. The latter was blinking up at Shizuo, then around the room curiously. Sitting on edge of the bed, Shizuo grunted a response. “You’re a pain in the ass.”

Izaya’s lips tugged into a weak smirk at that.

“What?”

“Normally, you should make people drink a lot a water…” Izaya was whispering, or at least his voice was hoarse enough to sound so, “…and make sure they eat something.”

“Oh… do you want something to eat?”

Izaya shook his head. He looked even more amused.

“What?”

His answer was Izaya’s stretching across the mattress, sliding deeper under the blanket and turning into his pillow. “Hmmm… Shizu-chan really is hopeless…”

Shizuo scoffed. “Whatever.” Just as Shizuo was about to rise and retire to his couch, a hand closed around his wrist tightly. Izaya was peering across the room at his suitcase, and then up at Shizuo with a complete change in expression. One of embarrassment.

“I…” He gave Shizuo’s wrist a small tug before releasing it.

Anxious, Shizuo rose a questioning eyebrow.

“Just… it’s cold.”
“Okay?” Shizuo began to move again. “I’ll turn up the heat.”

But they both knew that that wasn’t what Izaya was asking. Mostly because Shizuo personally felt his interior burst into flames, and the rosy color in Izaya’s cheeks was no longer the result of drunken stupor.

“Uhhh…” Just before Shizuo could retreat, Izaya yanked him downwards. Shizuo was a little sturdier than Izaya would have liked. “Whatta ya doing?”

“I…” Izaya started chewing on the comforter. “…Don’t you wanna sleep in the bed?”

Shizuo pulled the thing out of his mouth. “Not in a bed with you. And you don’t either.”

“Well…”

“Well?”

Izaya’s blush deepened. Shizuo blinked.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Don’t make me say it.”

“Say what?”

Pulling the comforter over his head, Izaya mumbled something that Shizuo missed. Too muffled by the cocoon.

“What?”

A tug.

It was Shizuo’s turn to bite his lip. Part of him wanted to chew out Izaya for his selfishness, for thinking he could ask Shizuo for more favors, for thinking they could get that close. But another part, a more overwhelming and physical part, fell prey to the eyes that had peaked over their security in desperation. Yes, those eyes were definitely different.

Toeing off his shoes and grumbling, Shizuo climbed under the blankets and to Izaya’s side. “Fine! You’re a lot of fuckin’ work, ya know that.” Izaya’s response was merely a surprised cheep.

They slid next to each other quite comfortably, though perhaps a bit awkward of what to do with the situation. Izaya fit his back against Shizuo’s torso, while Shizuo limply wrapped his arms around Izaya’s. His hands found Izaya’s arms, where he remembered Izaya rubbing in pain after the car accident. Shizuo wiped his thumbs over those spots, frowning at the memory.

“I lied.”

Shizuo stilled and bore into the back of Izaya’s face. “Hm?”

“I lied,” Izaya repeated. “About before… You didn’t really hurt me. I just wanted you to feel like shit.”

Relieved, Shizuo squeezed Izaya a little tighter and a little closer. “You lying sack of piss.”

He felt Izaya snicker more than heard it. With his nose in hair near his neck, Shizuo inhaled. Terrible. Between the two of them was an unbearable stench of booze and vomit and fish, though they were
too tipsy to care.

“I might puke on you.”

Shizuo closed his eyes. “Don’t puke on me. I’ll kill you if you do.”

He felt and heard Izaya swallow. “Kay.”

They settled into silence and into each other. Despite his earlier fit, that night was Izaya’s most peaceful slumber in a while. Shizuo’s closer proximity proved much more effective than his position on the floor or on the couch. And Shizuo himself slept quite tranquilly, all the way into the afternoon. Izaya never puked on him.

Chapter End Notes

Such concludes Shizaya's adventures in the city of Boston and the United States. Next top, Europa!

Also, if anybody knows Italian, feel free to throw me down a flight of stairs and correct me.
Chapter Summary

Shizuo sneezes, Izaya whines.

Chapter Notes

warning: intense body horror ahead. for this chapter, i'd like to emphasis the dark in "dark comedy." this chapter isn't very funny in its second half, but it is pretty gruesome.

so i hope y'all are under the influence of somethin' strong.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“HAAAA-CHOO!”

“Ew. Cover your mouth.”

Shizuo aimed his next sneeze directly in Izaya’s path, earning him the most disbelievingly offended expression he’d ever seen.

If only Shizuo wasn’t miserable in all other regards, he’d find himself very amused. His nose ran, his throat ached, and a fever ailed his entire body. Ever since their arrival in Spain, his conditions had gradually worsened.

It had started in Boston. The itch in throat, the nasal drip. But it had been the flight over the Atlantic that had tipped him over the edge. “It’s because you ran around in the snow with wet clothes the other day!” Izaya had said. Well, Shizuo pointed out that it was Izaya that had tripped him into a snowbank in the first place. Either argument wouldn’t aid in Shizuo’s current condition.

They’d barely stepped foot on European soil. Shizuo hadn’t been conscious in their taxi from the airport, so he missed any sights they might have passed. He kept their blinds closed, too, as sunlight worsened his headache. Despite Shizuo’s struggle to not allow a mere head cold get the best of him, Izaya had insisted he just sleep it off. Izaya had even run down to the hotel’s little supply store to buy medicine.

“A dead bodyguard is a useless bodyguard.” Or so he’d said.

Of course, Izaya wasn’t one to play nurse, however reluctant. Shizuo had been bedridden for a day, and Izaya was already antsy. He also wouldn't go less than a meter's proximity of Shizuo for more than thirty seconds. Just once had he pressed his palm against Shizuo's burning forehead. While Shizuo couldn't guarantee that any heat Izaya had experienced in that moment was that of ill fever, the touch hadn't lasted long enough to judge that. Shizuo would claim that he'd have slapped the hand away if it had lingered on his skin any longer.

He found it both amusing and incredibly frustrating that Izaya was constantly dodging him. On one
hand, he could tease Izaya by stepping into his bubble and sending him scurrying away. Shizuo could chase him around their room in a mockery of their usual dynamic until his head swam and he’d need to lie down. On the other, Izaya’s refusal to go within a foot of him left Shizuo feeling painfully deprived.

The Spanish television and his phone were his only distractions. At the current moment, he was flipping through channels and lying back while Izaya sat on the adjacent bed and blamed Shizuo for all of his problems.

“Why did you get sick? Why are you doing this to me?”

Shizuo grunted. “I’m not doing anything to you. I’d like to not be like this too, ya know.”

“Hmm… did you take more drugs when you woke up?”

“No. What are you, my mother? That shit’s disgusting.”

“Shizu-chan!” Izaya picked the bottle off the night stand between their two beds and chucked it at Shizuo’s head.

“Unnhhh.”

“Don’t be such a damn baby about it. You’re a grown man; you can hold down some acetaminophen.”

“Acetawhat? …Are you poisoning me?”

“I should.”

Regardless, Shizuo swallowed the prescribed amount of liquid forcefully. Once done, he tossed the bottle back at Izaya, who caught it. “Happy?”

After a moment, “…Are you better yet?”

“What? No!”

Izaya huffed and began pacing around the room. His fidgeting was agitating Shizuo.

“Stop that! Just sit down and watch the Spanish news. Look, humans. Your favorite.”

Izaya waved dismissively. “They aren’t talking about anything other than traffic and weather.”

“Wh… can you speak Spanish?”

“Un poquito.” While Shizuo tried to decipher, Izaya marched over to the window. “But we can only experience so much humanity from censored and targeted media!” He threw open the curtains. “Out there’s where all the humans are!”

“GAH!” Shizuo threw an arm over his eyes. Colors clouded his eyelids and his skull screamed at him.

“Look out there! Out there is the world! Wouldn’t you like some fresh air? That could be all you need. The Mediterranean climate is a lot warmer than America’s northeast this time of year, ya know.”

“Can’t you keep those closed?!”

“I don’t know what that means, but fuck you.”

The room darkened again. Shizuo blinked the orbs of light that were clogging his vision away to see Izaya slouching and dragging his feet back across the room. “Quiero salir a la caaaaaalleeeeee.”

“Can you speak Japaneeese?”

“No.”

“I know what ‘no’ means!”

“Wow! Eres un genio, Shizuito!”

“What did you just call me?!”

“Nothing.” Izaya straightened.

Shizuo watched the way the slight glow from the window illuminated just the left side of Izaya’s figure. It was the only form of light he could bare to look at.

“Well, it’s still early. Maybe I’ll just go out myself.”

Perhaps the fever was making Shizuo hear things. “W-what?”

Nodding, Izaya began moving about the room for his coat and boots. “Yeah, yeah, that’s what I’ll do.”

Perhaps the fever had also worsened, for Shizuo felt exponentially more ill. “You… you can’t do that!”

“Why not?” Izaya tugged on a boot over his jeans. “I’m not the sick one. I didn’t wanna come to Madrid just to keep an eye on a sick Shizu-chan.”

“You’re not keeping an eye on me, you’ve been bitching at me the whole time.”

“What are you talking about? I brought you juice!” He never stopped going about preparing for the outside.

Shizuo wasn’t sure if he was suddenly feeling nauseous or if the dread that had pooled in his belly was something unrelated to cold entirely. “Wait, Izaya, you-”

“Oh, you’ll be fine. Geez, I didn’t know you were such a wimp. A hundred armed thugs are nothing but one little virus and you can’t even get on your feet.”

“It’s not that-!”

“I’ll just go for a short walk. Maybe I’ll find the palace or the Prado. Whenever you’re not around is when I can go to the nice places with the No Pets Allowed signs. There’s also the Reina Sofia. Do I feel like looking at Las Meninas or Guernica?”

Shizuo couldn’t ignore his gut yelling at him for Izaya to stay. While Izaya busied himself, Shizuo willed his limbs to move, willed his body to rise.
“I just love looking at the selfies of European aristocrats from across the centuries, though. I’m pretty sure there’s a special Rubens exhibition going on, and I can just taste all the Goya waiting - AHH Shizu-chan get away!”

Practically falling across the room, Shizuo grabbed Izaya’s bicep.

“No way are you leaving me here while you go frolicing across the city! Remember why I’m here in the first place?”

Izaya tried to free himself but Shizuo only tightened his grip. “Stop! Are you trying to give me the Plague?!” His hand was over his mouth and nose, and he leaned as far away from Shizuo as he could in this position.

“If you just keep running off on your own, what’s your bodyguard supposed to do!”

“Well it’s not like you’d be much good if someone came breaking in right now!” Izaya jabbed just the right pressure point on Shizuo’s arm to his grip slacken. But trick or no trick, Shizuo’s knees buckled and he slumped forward. To his surprise, Izaya caught him around the shoulders before he hit the ground. “Ew ew ew ew ew you’re all sweaty.”

Shizuo sneezed a response and proceeded to groan.

“Nasty.” Izaya dragged Shizuo back towards the bed like a garbage bag filled with concrete. “You really are in bad shape, huh?”

Hearing Izaya heave under him made Shizuo feel a little better. “Not everyone puts on misery for show.”

Izaya threw him back on the bed with excessive force.

“OOF!”

With only Shizuo’s torso on the mattress, Izaya retrieved his legs and tossed them up as well. Just before Izaya could make a break for it, Shizuo used the last of his energy to snatch Izaya and flip him on the bed on top of him.

“You’re still not leaving me here.”

Izaya squirmed in Shizuo’s arms. “Nooo get your plague away from me!”

“You’d deserve to get sick, wouldn’t you?!”

“Not fair! That’s not fair and it’s not fair that you’re still this strong even when you’re dying!”

“I’m not dying!”

“Shizu-chaaaaaan! You’re getting all your sweat and monster boogers on meee!”

But Shizuo remained resilient. Eventually, Izaya stilled and accepted his imprisonment. When he did, Shizuo risked his escape by loosening his hold; he could only keep up his superpowers for so long under this fever. Izaya, though, remained on top of him. He only turned to face him pensively.

“You’d think you’d delight in having me out of your sight for awhile.”

They untangled from each other, settling more comfortably on the mattress. Shizuo didn’t blame Izaya for wanting to distance himself from all the germs he was spewing out, but he kept an arm
around Izaya’s waist for safe measures.

He shrugged. “I would but… If you’re out of my sight then I can’t do my job.” That, and he recalled a time not too long ago when Izaya had run off, lost his marbles and almost died in a car crash.

“Right, and you take your job very seriously,” Izaya mused.

“I do!”

“Sucks for me. I think you just have a soft spot for parasites.” Izaya draped an arm over the one Shizuo had around him and fingered the hem of Shizuo’s t-shirt sleeve. “Fine. But do I have to stay in plague territory?”

“Yes.” Shizuo tried to bring him closer to further his point.

“Oh come on!” Izaya pushed back on Shizuo’s chest. “Gross gross gross!”

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Dark paintings hung on white walls. The long hall stretched on for so long that you could not see the end. Marble trim rose from the base of a marble floor, so clean that the hanging images reflected towards the ceiling that didn’t seem to be there. Instead of tile, plaster, or glass, the roof was a swirling nimbus of light. From somewhere came an unsettling hum, that of like a constantly toiling machinery from far, far away.

No one was around except for one, whose footsteps echoed as he paced with growing confusion and anxiety. Shizuo had certainly never been to this place before.

He wandered around aimlessly, finding deserted rooms attached to the hall to be a bleak contrast from the bustling city life to which he was accustomed. To make matters worse, he couldn’t even appreciate the exhibits that this place had to offer.

Stopping to inspect one, Shizuo cringed at the depiction of a giant tearing off head of a man. Its sharp teeth gnawed to separate the flesh still clinging to the man’s neck. Its massive eyes peered out of the canvas. Wary, Shizuo moved on to the next painting which was just as gruesome. Another giant passed by the miniscule dwellings of man through mist. He kept passing such paintings until he came across one behind which the wall was onyx. For a while, he stared at the image of a man, chained against rock and wood. An enormous eagle, wings beating in flight, bore down on the man and tore out a bit of flesh under his right pectoral. Having enough, Shizuo pushed the painting’s edge and it easily gave way, just as the wall behind it. They swung forward like an open door into a new room.

Shizuo stepped into a rotunda, just as luminous as the hall and also displaying paintings on its walls. On the far end of the room, where Shizuo was looking, he could see the painting of a young woman draped in transparent cloth and veil who stood under an arch. Behind her, a male figure skulked in the shadows. Adjacent to the woman was the canvas of a young man, with curly brown hair and white tunic. He stepped forward into a beam of light, arms spread and eyes pointed towards the heaven.

Following the boy’s line of sight, Shizuo saw not a ceiling or cloud of light, but a mirror. He was looking back at himself, and nothing else. The room was empty, all the paintings were missing. But it wasn’t. He was lying down, looking into the face of marble maiden, resting just a few feet from him. Both slept upon a bed so cushiony, despite being stone. The marble gave way as Shizuo shifted to look her. Now a mirror, not the oil woman and boy. Shizuo could see all of the maiden he could not
see from where he stood - the pronounced bosom under her arm and the erect male genitals between her legs.

Beyond that revealed what was behind Shizuo. To his surprise, there was not a wall, a door, more paintings or the like, but the edge of a mountain. Shizuo turned, swung his legs off his bed, rose, and began to walk forward. Above him, the mountain continued to rise farther than Shizuo’s eyes could see. Into the clouds, into the sun.

Somehow Shizuo knew he was still inside the place of the white walls; he still walked upon the marble floor. There was a cliff right in front of him, and trees were going out of the walls, but no, no, he was still in the same place.

He approached the side of the mountain, where a wild birch grew directly out of the rock. At its top perched a mighty eagle with a bloodied dove in its talons. He cautiously watched Shizuo move forward towards the display that had since been the most captivating. This was no painting or sculpture, but lay nude, suspended in midair by the birch’s grip.

Roots stretched forward and held aloft a pale torso, poking through its lungs, ribcage and shoulders. Separate to those was slice of fleshing missing from under the right pectoral. Arms spread like limp wings that dangled to the sides. Wooden limbs entrapped the figure’s legs and hoisted them skywards into a perfect V. At the base of it all, the head hung back lifelessly. The black hair swayed as the roots grew and grew and grew until the familiar visage was but a centimeter from Shizuo’s nose. Small streams of blood trickled from each wound, over the crown of the head, into its hair and dripped into his hand.

His screams echoed throughout the room, and he assaulted the tree’s base. The eagle began screeching like an alarm. The birch responded by withdrawing its prisoner into itself, back towards the cliff. Shizuo tore at its roots and created waterfalls that would hit his face with each broken limb. His own clamors and the hawk’s fought against each other in the otherwise deafening silence. The corpse began embedded into the wood, into the side of the mountain and rose out of Shizuo’s reach.

The water jutting out of the trees wounds was beginning to flood the rotunda. To make matters worse, the paintings were all crying. Their tears leaked through the edge of their frames, dripped down from their oily canvas. Soon they weren’t paintings at all, just windows to the bottom of the ocean. Shizuo tried to climb the cliff, but it was useless. Before he knew it, a whole tsunami crashed over him from the sky and he had drowned.

He awoke gasping for air and drenched in his own sweat.

The hotel room was pitch black. Not even the television was on any more. Just a sliver of light crept in past the closed curtains. Shizuo hadn’t yet dispelled the visions of his slumber, and he still saw the eagle beating its wings over him, aiming its beak at his liver. His lungs were burning. Everything was burning. Despite the sensation of having the ocean crush him, his fever had spread throughout his entire body. Every inch of his skin was aflame. Perspiration soaked through his clothing and into the mattress.

Throwing an arm over his eyes, he moaned in agony. Closing his eyelids graced him with the despicable image of the deceased human he’d failed to rescue. He shuddered and tried to dispel the haunting figure through sheer willpower. No avail. He needed to see that face, alive and well for any semblance of peace.

“Izaya…” he called into the darkness. He tried to recall his life before he’d transported into the white halls of doom. Izaya had been by his side, with his fingers in Shizuo’s hair and lazily complaining. Aching with every movement, Shizuo padded around him and repeated the name quietly. Nothing
was there except sweaty sheets.

Shizuo opened his eyes and blinked. Darkness. “Izaya…?” He croaked, a little louder. Nothing. His breathing grew faster and heavier. It’d take a while for his eyes to adjust, so he turned on the bedside lamp. The lamp was a dim one, but still blinded Shizuo in this state. He grimaced. “Izaya? Izaya?!” His hoarse voice cracked under the strain. The room was empty. He feared for the worst, like his nightmare was no dream at all.

The bathroom was dark, but Shizuo tried anyways. “Izaya!! Izaya are you there?!” He shivered. No answer. Oh no, oh no.

With every blink, Shizuo saw Izaya’s dead body again until one time he opened his eyes and the corpse was right in front of him. Yelling, Shizuo dug his wrists against his temples. He squeezed his eyes shut; he couldn’t be seeing that. Continuing to call Izaya’s name, he quickly lost breath and started to hack.

“I-Iz-Izaya!!” He managed, not sure what he was expecting at that point. Maybe just for Izaya to rush through the door, perfectly unharmed and berating Shizuo for being a huge weenie. But after a minute of no signs of that happening anytime soon, Shizuo became desperate. He tried to search the room for any trace of where Izaya could be. His suitcase was open, the clothes he’d been wearing had been discarded on the floor. Oh no. Shizuo’s vision was so blurred at this point that it was useless. What’s the point? Izaya himself wasn’t there either way.

With some great effort, Shizuo wobbled to his feet. He tripped towards the door and fumbled for the knob. He left his shoes and socks, jacket, even his wallet behind. Only one thing was on his wavering mind.

In the hallway, he depended on the wall for support all the way to the elevator. Ding! He slackened against the back of the elevator as it rode its way down. Thankfully nobody else got on. Against the metallic doors, Shizuo could just make out his reflection. He looked like the walking dead himself. His eyes were dilated, rimmed with red and heavily bagged. Every surface of his skin was ghostly pale and glistened with sweat. Looking into the mirror afflicted him with the memory of his nightmare. He could see the birch growing behind him.

Ding!

He stumbled out of the elevator and across the lobby.

“.Señor?” The well-dressed, elderly concierge had made his way out from behind his desk. “Puedo ayudarle?”

When the concierge tried to place a hand on his shoulder, Shizuo elbowed him away. No, the man resembled too much of a titan in Shizuo’s eyes that moment.

“Por favor, le llamaré una ambulancia!”

Shizuo just shook his head, whatever that meant. He wracked what was left working of his brain. “I…Izaya…”

“Qué?”

“Izaya… Izaya… Ori…” He held his fingers to his lips and then saluted through the air. He’s about that tall.

“El señor Orihara? Se fue al Prado hace unas tres horas. Le pediré un taxi.”
Shizuo grabbed his shoulder and almost collapsed onto him. No, no, no, he’s in trouble, he needs me. “Wh… where?”

The concierge pointed, and Shizuo immediately left in that direction.

“Espara!”

The world was already dark and bitter. Shizuo had no idea what time it was, just that he had to keep going. He couldn’t let his fever win. No matter how close to drowning he was, his instincts remained; he could find Izaya anywhere if he kept going.

Dragging his feet through the street, Shizuo wished he could move faster. He sent the other pedestrians scurrying around him like he was exerting a shield. Nobody stopped to offer help. They passed him by and deformed before his eyes, in bulls and horses, harsh shapes meshed together, and crooked faces.

Only an old woman, sickly thin and ratty-haired and covered in warts, tried to approach him.

“Los ojos orgullosos serán humillados,” she whispered in his ear, “será doblegada la arrogancia humana; sólo el Señor será ensalzado aquel día.”

He shoved her away from him, and she disappeared into the night. Shizuo pressed forward.

Izaya, Izaya, Izaya.

He imagined he was back in Ikebukuro, chasing after Izaya as usual. Like Izaya was just outta sight because he was blocks ahead, laughing his smug ass off and would be back in Shizuo’s life sooner or later. This willed him to go faster but more quickly drained any energy that he had left on reserve.

At this point, he couldn’t even be sure if he was still heading in the direction in which the concierge had pointed him. Groaning, Shizuo slumped against the nearest building. A young woman yelped and avoided him. His vision swam with the lights of Madrid. Too bad he had no idea what it looked like. Slowly, the lights began to dim, and his eyes drew to a close. The murmurs of the passersby fogged his ears, but he could have sworn he could hear a voice calling out to him. He knew that voice. Cursing himself, he slipped into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

آن (็ด) › happy april first!
The world smelled of saffron and boiled shellfish. Sniff. And an underlying chemical presence.

Drip. Drip.


Everything hurt, but the air was so refreshingly cool. A fan was whirring nearby, and Shizuo could feel the wind beating against his arm.

He groaned into the unknown, slowly returning to consciousness. His head sunk into something plush. Haunting nightmares that clung to the back of his eyelids faded with each passing second, but reminded him of his purpose. A rustle to his side alerted him.

“I… Iz…” His mouth was so incredibly dry. Any sound he got out was not more than a strained whisper. “…I-Iza… Izaya…?”

He opened his eyes just a smidge, and he could just make out the knockoff light fixture above his head. It shone dim orange light upon the chipping walls painted a serene green. Only able to take in so much at once, Shizuo’s eyes slid shut again. He swallowed; he could’ve really used a glass of water. A bed creaked under his movements, slight as they were. Far, far off, Shizuo could hear voices in another room. They only reached him as murmurs. Shizuo could have sworn he knew one of them. It was too distant to be sure. Then there was humming right beside him, a jovial rhythm. But the tone was deep, unfamiliar.

Shizuo’s eyes fluttered open and looked for the source. He came to find a middle-aged, goateed and balding man standing over him. Not standing - dancing? There was an undeniable jig to his step, despite his hefty size. Dancing in lab coat over a Hawaiian shirt. The man was fiddling with an IV - which, to Shizuo’s surprise, was attached to himself.

Sensing the stare, the man looked down. He grinned. “Ah! Estás despierto?”

Without even thinking, Shizuo fisted the man’s Hawaiian shirt, yanked him forward, and growled. “Where am I?” The words came out dry and splintered. “Where’s Izaya?!”

Though his threatening position in the grasp of Ikebukuro’s most dangerous, the man didn’t seem all too concerned. He chuckled lightly. “Wooow! Eres muy fuerte! Izaya dijo que lo eras!”
He blinked. “Izaya?” Shizuo’s fingers slackened, low on energy.

The man lowered Shizuo’s arm back to the edge of the bed. Shizuo took a moment to glance at his surroundings. To his left was a heart monitor, beeping steadily to Shizuo’s own pulse. To his right was an IV drip, and the goateed man who was now straightening himself and his attire.

“Pepe!” He called towards door at the far end of the room, the direction from where Shizuo could hear the other voices. “Pepe, traelo aquí!”

A short silence followed before Izaya rushed in through the door and stopped at the foot of the bed. Izaya, perfectly intact and unharmed. Clothed, in garments Shizuo had never seen before, but not hung degradingly on display. Alive and well - except for the anxious expression that graced his features.

Beepbeepbeepbeep! The pace on the heart monitor had quickened a startling degree.

“Izaya-” Shizuo attempted to rise from his cot, but failed stupendously to support himself on his own elbows.

“Aaaaaye, aye aye!” The goateed man gently pressed Shizuo back into the mattress. His voice rang amusedly as he chortled at Shizuo’s expense. “Para el carro, galán! Voy a buscarlo. Eheheheheh!” He circled the bed to where Izaya was standing and led him to Shizuo’s side.

Meanwhile, Shizuo never took his eyes off Izaya for a second. He kept fearing that he’d blink once and learn that this was just a new dream. One far more malevolent, one that would dangle his hope in front of him just to reel it back to its demise when he least expected. Shizuo wanted to hear his heart beat and feel his breathing, just to make sure.

Izaya, on the other hand, seemed to be directing his gaze to anything other than Shizuo’s.

“Entiendes?” The man was grinning teasingly at Izaya. His belly jiggled as he chuckled through his sentences. “Estaba llamando su nombre, una y otra vez!” Whatever he was saying, unknown to Shizuo, was enough for Izaya’s eyes to grow wide and cheeks to pinken.

The man then proceeded to deliver a set of directions in Spanish to Izaya. Shizuo tuned him out, he tuned the whole world out. Look at me, he silently pleaded with the man who avoided looking his way. He watched Izaya’s eyebrows knit together as he absorbed everything the man was explaining. When Izaya spoke, just once, to ask for that last bit again in English, Shizuo welcomed the return of his voice with remarkable relief.

“Es todo tuyo.” The man finished with a smirk, and headed out of the room. Shizuo hadn’t even notice the petite, ginger girl that had followed Izaya inside and now stood in the back of the room. She remained even after the goateed man had left, fidgeting back and forth and watching the scene with an uncertain peculiarity. “Pepe! Ven!” With a squeak, she was gone, leaving Shizuo and Izaya alone together.

The fan continued to whirl.

Drip. Drip.

Beep. Beep.

Izaya remained adamant to avoid eye contact while Shizuo continued to soak up his presence. Some dismal minutes passed by like they were hours. Shizuo used the prolonged period to prop himself up
just a fraction. It was by sheer coincidence that they spoke at the same time.

“You’re a dumb idiot.”

“You’re alive.”

Taken aback, Izaya frowned. “Me?! Why wouldn't I?! I’m not the one that went running into the streets - in the middle of winter - with a critically high temperature!”

“No but I... you...” Shizuo wasn’t sure if he should reveal the horror of his dream to Izaya. Or if he could, for that matter.

Ignoring Shizuo either way, Izaya couldn’t stand still as he ranted. "Why in hell would you wander out of the hotel?! I left you a note! Were you blind? Can you not read? If you wake up sick, just roll over and go back to bed goddammit! Where the hell were you trying to go, back to Japan?!

Not only was Izaya alive, he was also as berating as ever. “I was trying to find you!” Shizuo snapped. He still had a minor headache and Izaya’s missing the point wasn’t helping.

“Why?!”

Shizuo pointed an accusing finger at Izaya. “You said you weren’t going to go outside without me, and you did.”

At that, Izaya halted. Perhaps he felt some hint of guilt. “But I left you a note!” He picked back up again.

“I didn’t see it!” Shizuo punched the mattress and caused the bed’s copper wire frame to quake. Izaya twitched his nose repeatedly and stared at one of the bed posts as the room ricocheted into silence.

“I thought…” Izaya slowly gestured down to himself. “Well, what you said before you fell asleep kinda did make sense. For just once in your life, okay? I couldn’t just sit in that hotel room any longer, though. You snore, and it was all stuffy with your sick germs. I had to get out! But I didn’t wanna be recognized. So that’s why I’m…”

As a matter of fact, Shizuo had so far neglected to truly address Izaya’s current manner of dress, which happened to be that of a female. [Black ribbed tights, black and silver patterned skirt, and a grey sweater.] The lines on the back of his neck were a little more visible than usual.

Shizuo raised an eyebrow. “Disguise?”

Izaya nodded. “It was better before. Like, I had a wig and sunglasses and everything. It was very incognito.”

...He looks good, Shizuo’s mind betrayed him. But he also appeared apprehensive, standing there, lip bit and brows furrowed just so. “You embarrassed?”

“What?” Izaya snapped out of some deep thought. He gave himself a once over and waved Shizuo off. “Oh, this? No, why should I? It’s just a disguise, like you said. And besides, don’t you find it fascinating that humans are the only species to not only clothe themselves, but assign specific articles to specific sexes? Some of it makes sense, like dresses and suits are tailored to best complement the female and male figures, respectively. There was less of a dichotomy in our past, just kimonos everywhere. But even then there were robes for women and different robes for men. It’s all just cloth! Then the Europeans came and shut trousers everywhere. Isn’t it peculiar how humans
associate so much with just a little bit of fabric…”

While Izaya sped up into another long-winded love letter to the human race, Shizuo relaxed and absorbed. He now marveled Izaya’s passion for society’s quirks. Just when he was like this, when he couldn’t stand still and used his entire arms to illustrate everything he was saying. When he wasn’t punishing mankind for such inane behavior, when he just had to get it all out.

But he was a performing a little too far away. Shizuo felt like he’d seen Izaya’s corpse splayed out in front of him just minutes ago. By now, he knew it all had been some excruciating, fever-induced nightmare. He still craved some physical contact for absolute clarity. A miniscule shift in Shizuo’s body language towards him prompted Izaya to approach and sit on the bed’s edge.

Now that Shizuo had him there, he hadn’t a clue of what to do with him. He was slowly realizing that the revelation he’d felt when seeing Izaya again was a clue that he viewed Izaya as a little more than just “tolerable.” But what… His fingers twitched impatiently.

“Jefe says you’re basically fine now.”

Jefe? “That guy that was in here?”

“Yeah, him,” Izaya twiddled with the hem of the skirt, and Shizuo appreciated the view. Wait a minute… “The fever was breaking when you were going all cuckoo.”

Shizuo crossed his arms and tried to look Izaya in the face, which wasn’t so easy. “How long was I out?”

“About twelve hours.”

Twelve hours?! “Shit… And this place?”

Izaya’s lips twitched. “Shinra isn’t the only illegal back alley doctor in the world. They might all be universally inappropriate and nosey, though.”

“I had no clue what he was saying, so…”

“That’s probably for the best.”

“So it was… what? The flu?”

“Just the flu.”

It didn’t feel like the flu. “That’s… stupid. Fucked up by a dumb flu.”

“Well maybe if you hadn’t gotten out of bed like a dumbass it wouldn’t have gotten so bad. Weren’t you thinking about yourself at all?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

Izaya didn’t have a response to that, astonishingly. Shizuo sighed, leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. He remembered the adrenaline. I was only thinking about getting to you.

“That’s quite an impressive bit of scruff you’re sporting there, Shizu-chan.”

“Hmm?” All of a sudden there was a hand rubbing against Shizuo’s chin. He jolted. “Excuse me?”

“Look at you… you look horrible.” Izaya smirked. “Your roots have almost completely taken over.”
He reached forward and ran his fingers through the length of Shizuo’s hair. Shizuo gulped.

**Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep!**

Izaya’s eyes darted to the monitor. “What’s that? Are you dying?”

“No! I’m fine!”

“Do I need to get Jefe?” Leaning closer, Izaya pressed his palm against Shizuo’s forehead, then his cheek. The heart monitor went haywire. “Shizu-chan, you’re burning up! Your fever is supposed to be gone!”

“It is! I mean, maybe not!” Shizuo squeezed his eyes shut so that maybe Izaya couldn’t find any truth in them.

With the little space he had on his springy little cot, Shizuo tried to distance himself as far from Izaya as possible. The more Izaya touched him and the closer he got, the more it triggered Shizuo’s blood to flare and heart to spasm. And Shizuo, quite reluctantly, came to terms with his condition. *I’m in trouble. I’m in big, big trouble.*

After Jefe eventually heard the beeping, he came in to save Shizuo from more embarrassment. He told Izaya to leave while he gave Shizuo something to calm his nerves. Whatever drug Jefe used calmed Shizuo down to the point where he fell asleep again. Maybe that was the point. Shizuo was grateful, though; he needed time and rest to reflect on some new enlightenments.

New emotions, new urges that his body and half of his brain were screaming at him. All of which Shizuo was keen to ignore.

Later, when Shizuo woke up again, Izaya had been given a wooden chair beside the bed on which to sit. He slouched forward, face buried in his arms which were resting on the mattress, and lazily drew patterns into the creases of the sheets with his finger. Hooded eyelids, glazed eyes, shallow breathing, they might as well be sleeping beside each other.

Shizuo lifted his hand to follow Izaya’s finger with his own. Always chasing, never touching. Unstopping, Izaya’s eyes came to life as he tilted his head in watch of the performance. Most of his lips were hidden behind his forearms, but one dimple was visible on his right cheek.

**Beep. Beep. Beepbeep! Beep.**

“You didn’t take off to a museum this time?” Shizuo rasped. He wasn’t as weak he last woke up, but the drugs in his system kept him drowsy.

Izaya ceased his patterning before Shizuo could catch up, sat up and stretched. “You didn’t crawl out into the streets and almost die this time?” He countered.

Shizuo snorted, then he leaned back and closed his eyes for just a moment longer. His stomach yelled at him, and he wondered when was the last he’d eaten. Izaya must have heard.

“You hungry? That ginger girl made a thing while you were sleeping.”

“Who?”

“That girl. Pepe. Jefe’s daughter. She’s really, really boring. She was all I had for company while
you were asleep and Jefe was dealing with you. Despite being Spanish, she doesn’t have a lot to say about Velazquez or the Inquisition or civil war. Or anything, really. She just kinda stares, and cooks.”

“Hmm…” Shizuo embraced the darkness behind his eyelids.

“So? Do you want some?”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t had any yet.”

“Why?”

A rustle of movement. “I wasn’t hungry. Well, do you want some or not? Or are you just gonna fall asleep again?”

“I…” His mouth was so dry again, “I’m just thirsty.”

“…Alright. You should have something to eat too, though. It’s been, like, what? Twenty-four hours since you last had something to eat? Gotta build that Herculean strength back up, right?” Both the bitterness and mirth were evident. The wooden chair creaked and rattled. “I’ll be right back.”

As soon as he heard Izaya go through the door, Shizuo opened his eyes to stare at the ceiling. Though he was in fact starving, he hadn’t even realized. Suddenly, he was having doubts about himself, about the world, about everything he thought was right and wrong. He focussed his energy on steadying the heart monitor, as to not give himself away again. Easier said than done.

He wanted Izaya to return and just smother him to death with a pillow, to take all the air of his lungs and breathe it into his own. He wanted Izaya to do it with a smile on his face.

Instead, Izaya returned with two bowls, a spoon in each, and a glass of water. He favored to sit on the edge of the bed and to prop his feet up on the wooden chair. “It’s rice, yellow rice!”

The petite, ginger girl stuck her head around the door frame to peer in at both of them astonishedly.

“Pepe!” Came Jefe’s voice from within.

She squeaked and disappeared.

Shizuo took the bowl that Izaya offered him and dug into the contents without even observing the contents. This had been a mistake, as he soon came into contact with an unsavory crunch.

“Shizu-chan… there’s shellfish.”

“Oops,” Shizuo spittled out the broken shell, and Izaya chortled at him.

“It’s not bad,” Izaya commented, mouth full of rice. “Maybe a little dry. What do you think?”

Shizuo answered by shoveling another spoonful into his mouth. Honestly, his taste buds were a dull at the moment. The dish was edible.

“I told you you’d want food.” Izaya smirked for just a second, but the less Shizuo contributed to the conversation, the more sour he got. But Shizuo was too busy studying Izaya, testing his own reactions.
“Shizu-chan is awfully quiet. Are you sure you’re feeling well again?”

Shizuo nodded and swallowed an oyster.

“Well, in that case, I’m going to tell you about everything I saw yesterday.”

“Neither Jefe nor Pepe know Japanese and I, frankly, don’t know enough Spanish to tell them everything. I guess I could have just said so in Japanese and they could have just listened anyways, but it’s not the same. At least you know what I’m saying.”

“Or maybe you don’t. It’s not like Shizu-chan’s smart enough to tell a Renoir from a Monet, or anything like that. But besides that, you should have seen the people looking at them all, all these nobodies trying to make sense of some colors a dead guy threw on a canvas. Trying to impress their peers, or trying to fool themselves.”

Miraculously, Izaya paid no attention to the heart monitor. If he noticed, he decided to ignore the spasm in rhythm, maybe in preference for the sound of his own voice. Shizuo himself didn’t exactly notice the spikes in his pulse, for that very reason.

He was too distracted by Izaya, by the movement of his lips, by the sounds escaping them, by the far off look in his eyes. The gleam that Shizuo caught sight of for the first time in a jail cell, a week or two ago. In moments like this, it seemed as if the world reflected back from those eyes. As if Izaya was looking down at Earth from light years away.

The deeper Izaya got into his tale, the closer he leaned in towards Shizuo. And Shizuo exercised all his willpower at once.

Shizuo never thought about his sexuality often. Now he was. It wasn’t that this awakening was the main cause of his strife. If it was just his sexuality, Shizuo could accept that about himself without much qualm. But he never thought about possible relationships at all. For one thing, he’d never developed romantic feelings towards anyone. Another problem was that even if he had, he was confident that no one would ever reciprocate them. People didn’t fall in love with monsters. Least of all a man who claimed to love humanity above all else. Shizuo wouldn’t want them to, not with him; he’d only break their bones and rip their soul.

“So he buried it, he buried everything. He dug a grave in his chest and threw in the remnants of everything worth living for. Last of all was himself; he dived in head first. This way, he and all the threats he presented would be buried under heavy soil, and Izaya would be the one to layer the Earth over him. His pores closed, his skin hardened, his heart froze, and he felt himself turn to stone.
i'm gonna be generous this week and provide you with some clues/translations, granted you haven't already cracked up a spanish dictionary.

"Para el carro, galán!" would be like saying, in english, "Take it easy, loverboy!"

and what jefe tells izaya to make him blush is that shizuo was calling his name repeatedly while asleep.

i'm also fully aware that jefe and pepe are not your average spanish names... but i like them that way.
Chapter Summary

Lions and tapas and bears. And something very unexpected.

Chapter Notes

first, i want to say something i should have said WEEKS ago. to everyone leaving kudos, comments, etc. either here or on tumblr, i just wanna say

THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU!! you're all beautiful and i love all of it! every comment brings a smile to my face! i'm someone who appreciates and craves feedback, negative or positive. so bless all of you, you're probably the reason i haven't dumped this fic in the trash where it belongs.

that being said... remember months ago, at the very beginning of this fic, when i said "this is not your angsty shizaya fic”? remember that?

well i lied. i'm a lying liar who lied.

enjoy!

warning: mild violence ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jefe discharged Shizuo two days later, days spent with Izaya jabbering at his bedside, Jefe prodding him, and Pepe staring and bringing him food and drink. At some point during that time, Izaya had wanted to go back to their hotel to get clothes for them, but Shizuo was against his leaving. He wasn’t too vocal about it, but Izaya could somehow tell and stayed anyways. Of course, Izaya didn’t trust Jefe or Pepe enough to give them access to their room or suitcases, so they ended up borrowing hand-me-downs from Jefe. Apparently he also had a son, out in the world somewhere. They fit Shizuo alright, but were big on Izaya.

Citing that Shizuo was in top health again, Jefe set him free. However, Shizuo only took his word for it. Otherwise he’d believe the pains in his chest as signs of remaining illness. His head had cooled, his sinuses had cleared, but he felt heavy. A part of him just wanted to lie in bed forever. Perhaps Jefe was mistaken, but Shizuo left the man’s house anyways.

Izaya took him on a personalized tour of Madrid, which Shizuo greeted for the first time, really, since they’d arrived. Whichever architectural and cultural differences Shizuo had found between Japan and America, Europe took them and turned them up to eleven.

At its roots, though, a city was a city. Madrid proposed a bustling atmosphere, similar to Tokyo and yet slightly more laid back in its residence and spread out in its space. In the giant crossroads area Izaya led them through now, people traveled, not traffic. Lots of people, two water fountains, a
clock tower, a statute man on a horse, an inappropriately modern metro station, and a bear hugging a tree. That latter was also a statue, but it just struck Shizuo as more odd. He also noticed, overhead, an old billboard advertisement for *Tio Pepe*, whose cartoon depiction resembled nothing of the last Pepe he’d met. Some people were in the square as vendors, others simply walked through on the way to their next destination.

Others, like themselves, were so obviously tourists.

“Here!”

Izaya planted his feet firmly upon a plaque on the ground. They’d stepped into the middle of the square, a place where they were mostly in everybody else’s way.

“What’s here?” Shizuo asked.

“The center of the world!” Izaya said. “Well, the center of Spain. The center of the Spanish world. Look.” He kneeled to indicate the the *Km.0* labeled with a picture of a compass in the middle of Spain. “It’s where all roads in Spain radiate and measure from. ‘All roads lead to Rome,’ except in Spain they all lead here.”

Shizuo rose. “…So?”

“So?! Isn’t it thrilling to stand at the center of something?”

“It’s just a point on a map, Izaya.”

“Shizu-chan just has no imagination.” Izaya took out his phone and pointed it at his feet, which hadn’t budged. “I, on the other hand, imagined it to be a most fitting place to start our sightseeing of Madrid.”

“Is it really that big a deal?”

Izaya snapped a picture of his feet, shook his head, grimaced, and tapped his phone’s screen heatedly. “Yes. Maybe if Shizu-chan stood here, he’d feel something thrilling about it too.”

“I doubt it-!” To Shizuo’s surprise, Izaya grabbed his arm and dragged him onto the plaque as well. “Oi!”

Before Shizuo could protest further, Izaya tipped on his toes and held his phone over their head. Snap! The photo captured Shizuo with a compromising color in his cheeks and a face contorted unflatteringly.

Izaya lowered his hand. “Well? Do you feel something?”

“No,” He lied. “Nothing.” He shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Really?”

“I hate being at the center of attention.”

Izaya’s smile faltered. “It depends on whose attention I’m the center of.”

Backing away, Shizuo observed Izaya at the center of a world. He took a deep breath. “Someone like you would just love to be in the middle of the universe, wouldn’t you?”
“Someone like me could never be the center of the universe. Humanity can never see me like that. That’s my calling, someone always in the background, watching.”

The day was warm, humid, overcast. A dim morning allowed the subtle difference in Izaya to glimmer a little brighter.

“Your eyes look different from here.”

“Just looking at the world a little differently.” Izaya looked down, “You always see differently when you’re standing at the center of something.” And he clicked his heels together three times.

Shizuo wasn’t sure he was exactly following what Izaya was saying anymore. But whichever world Izaya was standing at the center at, Shizuo felt it just crash into his back. He hoisted the world upon his shoulders and marched under it, while Izaya stepped off the map and led him astray.

Their next stop was the historical royal palace, which they went inside. Nothing could have prepared Shizuo for the grandiose remains of the Houses Bourbon and Hapsburg.

“And through here, if you follow me, we’ll come into the throne room. The first thing you’ll notice are probably at the four golden lions. Please watch your head on the extremely low hanging chandeliers, and remember not to touch anything.”

Once inside, Shizuo and Izaya had snuck onto the tail end of an English tour group. They went unnoticed by the director, who spoke dryly of every detail on the palace walls. Shizuo could only pick up her words here and there, but from what he picked up, he could tell that he hadn’t a single care about a bunch of dead kings and queens. Actually, the staunch environment made him want to smash all the meaninglessness to pieces. He withheld, for Izaya looked particularly interested. But perhaps not on the deceased, as his eyes lingered over the obese and absent-minded tourists.

“Do you think they’re even listening?” Izaya asked, indicating the tour group.

“I don’t see how anyone can listen to this crap.”

“It’s not that the tales of wasting economic resources to satisfy inflated monarch’s egos aren’t compelling, but you can see all that without hearing. Places like these write their stories on the walls in the blood of laborers.”

“So why tour it?”

“Because look at them,” He nodded to a father texting in the middle of the guide’s explanation for the coat of arms. “A week from now, or maybe even tomorrow, everyone in this room will have forgotten what the tour guide is saying. None of them actually care. So why pay twenty euros just to walk around and stare at more stuff people spent too much money on? To take pictures, post them online, and make your friends and relatives jealous. For the ability to say ‘I’ve been here,’ to a place history deems as culturally important.”

Shizuo looked around at the faces of the group, some more intrigued by their surroundings than others. Some might as well have been picking their nose, but others marvelled at the lavishness. He sighed. “Not everyone can hear something and store it in an Izapedia forever. That doesn’t mean they don’t want to try and know more things. Even useless things.”

When he wasn’t retorted right away, he looked down to find Izaya blinking up at him. “…Izapedia?”
“Uh, yeah…” *Crap.* Shizuo scratched his head. He’d said it before, but when they were both a little distracted. He wasn’t sure of exactly how he came up with the term. “It’s like… your brain. How sometimes you talk like an encyclopedia. It’s kinda freaky, actually.”

Izaya tucked a strand of hair behind his ear and frowned at himself, like he was filing through an archive of everything he’d ever said.

“You just… you just know a lot. Maybe too much.”

“Like a computer?”

“No, definitely not a computer,” Shizuo scoffed. “Computers aren’t half as annoying as you, and they don’t put up half a fight as you when they piss me off.”

“Well that’s good,” Izaya smirked up at him. “I’d hate to make it easy for you.”

“You’ll just remember everything in here, won’t you?”

“I’ll remember what’s important.”

*If you follow me…*

The tour moved on to different rooms, through bedrooms and libraries and armories and hallways. If Izaya wasn’t there to offer more colorful commentary on the exhibits, Shizuo would be bored out of his mind. Izaya, while certainly fascinated by more than one aspect the palace displayed of human nature, seemed to find a majority of the complex as ridiculous as Shizuo did.

“What does Shizu-chan see?

They’d fallen a few paces behind the group. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I can’t help but be curious what a protozoan brain like your own would consider of a place like this.”

“Hmm…” He growled low in his throat and looked around at all the gratuity. “It makes me want to smash all this shit to pieces.”

Izaya actually laughed. “I almost want you to.”

Shizuo stopped. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. What is it all, anyways? Ghosts. Ghosts of the past in the forms of baubles and trinkets, and they’ve got no place on Earth.”

“You thought differently when I almost threw that plane at you in DC.”

“That’s true… Some things are just more interesting when they’re destroyed. I’d like to see the preservation society fall into disarray.”

“That’s cruel.”

“Never play with bulls when you’re wearing red.”

“What’s your excuse?”

“I can be the blood-stained flag that the bull chases around a once great empire as its horns knock it
“You don’t have to wear any certain color for that. Your shitty personality is enough to attract me.”

“Good to know.”

“Out these windows, you can get a spectacular view of the Campo del Moro.”

“Unfortunately,” Izaya said as they moved towards the tour again, “I believe such devastating displays would only force us to flee the country prematurely. I would implore you to maintain whatever self control you have and not level the royal palace to the ground.”

“Would you like if I focus any urges I get on you?” Shizuo asked, in more than one way.

“Yes, I would.”

Shizuo almost unleashed every destructive urge upon the entire continent, but he’d save every other impulse for only Izaya.

“I consider myself more durable than these fragile things,” Izaya continued, acknowledging the palace.

“I don’t wanna take anything out on anyone. I—

“-hate violence. I know. Just not as much as you hate me.”

Shizuo paused to answer this very precisely. “I hate when you force the violence out of me.”

Izaya rolled his eyes as if he’d heard the same thing a thousand times before. But he hadn’t, not in such a certain way. “Shizu-chan’s just always trying to spoil my fun.”

“Fun that hurts people!”

“I’m having fun now, and you haven’t even hit me. You haven’t hit me in a while. Not properly. Going soft?”

Shizuo huffed at the brutal reminder. How could he explain himself? “You haven’t been as much as a flea recently. That I know of. That doesn’t mean you’re not being sneaky about something!”

“Still assuming the worst of me?”

_Not exactly._

Whatever he now felt towards Izaya, Shizuo couldn’t suddenly trust him. Most of what he knew of Izaya illustrated that he was a dangerous person. And he had about ten years worth of experience to back that up. Which is one reason why his sudden sentimentality was so alarming. Who was he if he could care about someone who’d done such things as Izaya had?

But he also realized that Izaya wasn’t exactly the same as he’d known him before this trip, and that there was still a lot that Izaya was hiding.

“Next, I’ll take you into the royal chapel...”

Shizuo felt a tug and halted. Looking behind him, he saw that Izaya had frozen but had never really touched him.
“No. I’m bored.”

“What?”

“I’m not having fun anymore,” Izaya said with an edge. “Let’s leave.”

Shizuo never argued with his own physical compulsions. Try as he might to ignore all the bodily signs, or the giant, flashing neon signs all around that all had arrows pointing directly at Izaya, he struggled. He was a bull that had seen red too long, and now it was the only color he ever wanted to see. He feared what he’d do if he actually touched it. Would he turn it to blood in his hands?

They left the Spanish palace and set out for a place to find food. Shizuo followed Izaya through the streets until they came across another large square. This square was legitimately a four-sided, though, with street lamps and another equestrian statue in the center. Its sides were all lined with arches, part of what looked almost like one consecutive building. The most striking of the lot was one with about a dozen frescoes painted on its entrance. Not a minute went by of Shizuo and Izaya walking across the square before numerous people tried to hand them coupons and flyers for local clubs. A hunched woman, wrapped in scarves, tried to sell Shizuo a rose.

“No! No thank you.”

She moved on to the next tourist without a word.

“Do you smell that?” Izaya breathed in the air heavily.

“Smells like food.” There appeared to be restaurants all around the square’s edge.

“Yes! Let’s eat!”

“Well pick a place! It’s basically dinner time.”

“Actually, it’s not.”

“Well, maybe it’s a little early, but—”

“I mean that it’s not here. In Spain, and most Spanish-speaking countries, they have a later schedule than ours. They might not eat dinner until after nine o’clock!”

Shizuo groaned exhaustedly, and so did his stomach. What are these people thinking!

“So let’s try tapas.”

“Tap ass?!?”

“Tapas,” Izaya repeated, “I read about them. They’re like these little appetizer things. I assume they’re like dim sum. Except, you know, Spanish.”

“If they’re something I can eat, let’s get ‘em.” Shizuo looked around, and the restaurants all looked open enough. “Can’t we just grab ‘em in one of these?”

“No!” Izaya whined at him. “Too central and look, they’re too fancy.”

“Who cares.”

Izaya nudged him in gut playfully. “Shizu-chan sure is impatient when he’s peckish.”
Pushing Izaya forward by the shoulders, Shizuo growled, “Feed me.”

“Scary!” Izaya tittered. “Let’s go this way!”

They wandered into an alley, and then another, and then another, until finally Izaya settled on a colorful, cluttered place a little ways off from that big square.

Inside, they sat themselves at a small wooden table. Everything was wooden. Shizuo felt like he was in a treehouse, it was so wooden. Barrels of liquor stood visible for the patrons to see. Bottles lined the walls. The windows were stained glass, like a church, which broke the tree illusion somewhat. Paintings covered both the ceiling and the wall behind the bar, like that of a Renaissance church. Few other tourists were noticeable, like the couple with the children. But there was also the row of elderling man with their trousers up to their chests, drinking heartily like the liquid in their glass was water.

“That’s a lot of booze,” Izaya nodded to the bar.

Shizuo experienced some vicious flashbacks involving seals and jaguars. “Don’t…” A part of him claimed that such an exploit might be worth a repeat of how that past night ended, but the sane part of him promptly shut it down.

Chuckling either way, Izaya said, “I wasn’t going to. I just noticed that showing off your liquor can create a certain kind of aesthetic.”

“Whatever you say. What about the food?”

“I actually have no idea how to conduct myself in a Spanish restaurant,” Izaya admitted. “Let’s explore!”

They explored by ordering a dish for each of them, something with cheese and olives for Izaya and something with sausage for Shizuo. Little did Shizuo anticipate how hungry he’d be, how good the food was, and how little came on a plate. So he ordered ten more. Izaya stopped after two, but was content to lean back and watch Shizuo engorge himself. Occasionally, he’d pick an item off Shizuo’s plate just to try it. Some were better than others, but both enjoyed the rings of fried squid probably the most.

“Would you like a glass of milk to go with that?” Izaya teased on the last course.

“Yeah, I would actually.” Shizuo wiped some sauce from his lips.

“Psh. Well go order it yourself.” A number of Shizuo’s tapas had come with olives, all of which he left untouched. “Do you not like olives?”

Shizuo grimaced. “No.”

Izaya popped one in his mouth, then another. “More for me! Go get your milk, and then we’ll leave.”

“Nah, I don’t really need it.”

“Suit yourself.”

They paid and left, sufficiently stuffed. What I do need is more cigarettes. Shizuo forced Izaya into a quick mart to pick up a pack, none of a brand he actually recognized.

“Maybe you should’ve picked up a patch instead,” Izaya suggested, and Shizuo hissed at him. Then
he looked up. “It’s still grey outside.”

“If it’s going to rain, we should go back to the hotel.”

“Hah… I wonder if they realize we haven’t been there in three nights.”

Shizuo lit up, and they walked along. “It’s none of their business. How much longer are we staying here anyways?”

“Hmm… I don’t know about Madrid, but maybe another city in Spain… Barcelona, Seville? Shizuo-chan could get his flamenco on.”

“Don’t even know what that is.”

“A dance.”

“I don’t dance!”

“You’re so lame…”

“Hmph.”

They lapsed between comfortable silences and idle conversation, walked with no destination. Back home, Shizuo never talked much. He’d been a man of few words, and those that he chose were often yelled or cursed. Thinking back on his life, the most common sounds that passed upon his lips were probably the syllables of Izaya’s name. I-za-ya.

While Izaya naturally dominated most of their conversations, Shizuo surprised himself with how much he contributed. Even when the subject matter was one that went right over his head, he was compelled to answer. Izaya could strum him a long and pull the words out of his mouth. He never knew he could think so much, say so much, value his own words so much. Not until Izaya gave him reasons to speak.

As they wandered into an impressively large park, Shizuo wondered how well he was burying himself. He knew he had to, for his sake and for Izaya’s. At this point, he wasn’t sure which was his top priority.

Walking alongside him past a large pond populated by ducks, Izaya chattered about nothing too important but fascinating all the same. When they passed a little house on a smaller pond, they both admired the city’s dedication to the ducks. Time passed, and the sky darkened. Shizuo grew tired and was about to insist they return to the hotel as they stepped into a garden. The winter took it’s fair toll on the plants; no flowers bloomed in their presence. A fountain lay there as well, but it wasn’t running. In its center was an unsettling statue of a grievous angel being cast down and strangled by a snake.

Izaya stretched from his toes to his fingers. “Alright, I’m ready. I want my own bed again and room service.”

“What if I don’t want to go back yet?” Even though he was.

“Shizu-chan could use his rest after just getting over the flu, right?”

Shizuo scowled. “I feel fine.” He turned to head back to their hotel, but a startling sight stopped him.

“Do you really wanna-”
Izaya stopped, noticing as well. At the entrance of the garden stood a woman with a bouquet, holding out a singular rose towards the two of them.

“Rosa?”

Ignoring her, Shizuo turned back to Izaya and steered him to leave down a different path. “Come on. I don’t want to be caught in the rain.”

“Ah! You’re right! Heaven forbid Shizu-chan get another fever and collapse in the middle of the city.”

“I can handle some rain!”

“Sure, sure.”

“Rosa?”

The woman had followed them, shoulders hunched and rose risen. Shizuo grunted and jerked back from her. She crepted him out and stood just a couple feet away with her head bowed and eyes hooded.

“Rosa?”

Izaya eyed her curiously while Shizuo turned his back to her. “No!” Shizuo snapped.

Quicker than Shizuo expected her to move, she slithered around him and held the flower to Izaya. Up close, it looked withered.

“Rosa?” She urged him to take it, but Izaya just stood there bewildered. “Rosa? Rosa?”

“OI!” Shizuo stepped between them and nudged the woman out of the way. “We said no! Geesh…”

“Rosa?”

“Shizu-chan…” Izaya rose an eyebrow. “Isn’t that the same woman from the Plaza Mayor?”

“What?” Shizuo looked over his shoulder. If he wracked his brain, he could recall a woman wrapped in scarves and rags. The woman before them now had straightened her back and lifted her chin to reveal a face of wrinkles and warts. A certain sound began like someone just turned on a fan. Her eyes were a startling bright blue.

“Were you following us all the way here?”

She stood immobile, and the flowers slipped from her fingers. “Rosa?”

Shizuo scoffed and turned away again. “Whatever. She’s only begging for-”

WHAM!

Rocks and thorns sliced up Shizuo’s back as he landed in a garden bed. Twigs snapped, slapped him, broke underneath him. Dirt sprayed everywhere and scraped his face as he slid another meter of momentum. When he finally halted, he spit leaves and soil out of his mouth. He rose up on an elbow.

“What… the…” Last thing he knew, he’d been talking to Izaya before he’d felt a force on his shoulder and went flying backwards. Izaya!
Shizuo had landed almost ten meters away from the plot where he had stood. What he saw there now brought terror to him.

That woman reached forward, her hand clenched around something invisible above her head. In front of her was the statue, and against it hung Izaya, suspended from the ground. His legs kicked about helplessly as he scratched at something around his throat. Nothing, there was nothing there. But still he struggled for air.

The woman’s clasp tightened. “Rosa?”

Scrambling to his feet, Shizuo could only rely on his instincts in this situation. The first thing he saw was a wooden and steel bench. Darting for it, Shizuo ripped it from the ground. It was bolted into the sidewalk, but that was little to stop Shizuo.

Meanwhile, Izaya had finally twitched his hands away to pull a knife out. He threw it into the woman’s left eye socket. She only stumbled back, but it was enough to get her to lower the hand.

Izaya collapsed to the ground in a heap, rubbing his throat and gasping for air.

Gritting his teeth, Shizuo shouted at her. “HEY!”

She turned his way just in time for the bench to slam into her chest.

Shizuo rushed to Izaya and helped him to his feet, but Izaya brushed him away.

“Izaya collapsed to the ground in a heap, rubbing his throat and gasping for air.

Gritting his teeth, Shizuo shouted at her. “HEY!”

She turned his way just in time for the bench to slam into her chest.

Shizuo rushed to Izaya and helped him to his feet, but Izaya brushed him away.

“Stop! I’m-” His voice was ragged, and his eyes widened past Shizuo. Looking where Izaya was, he saw the woman rising to her feet.

Ssk-ssssksksksk-ksst

Clink. Clink. Clink.

Sparks flew from where scratches ran through her skin. Her joints clanked and jerked unnaturally, and she reached up and pulled the knife out. The eye popped out along with it, followed by a precession of colorful wires and blood veins. Though, she didn’t seem to bleed. She ripped out the whole mess and tossed it to the ground.

Shizuo had seen a lot in his life. Headless woman? Sure. Demonic sword army? Why not. But what he witnessed now was in another realm entirely, and he had to gape at the monstrosity before him.

“What… what the fuck are you?!”

“Rosa?”

That did it. He snapped.

He hated whatever this thing was, for throwing him into the bushes, for its stupid roses, for strangling Izaya. For showing Shizuo just how protective he could be of a man he’d acted similarly towards in the past. For bringing out the worst of Shizuo, for reminding him of how much he could hate himself in these times. But he didn’t care what he was up against, so long as he smashed it pieces.

A hand was on Shizuo’s shoulder, or at least it felt like that. He felt it shove him, but he stood his ground. The remaining eye in the woman’s head widened, and she pulled her arm forward. Shizuo felt the action, but still didn’t comply. Though Shizuo didn’t know how the woman was doing any of this, he grinned nastily as she tilted her head at him.
“Monstruo?” At least she wasn’t asking about a rose.

She was also stronger than Shizuo gave her credit for. The pressure on him increased and he found it more difficult to stand. His feet started to slide, centimeter by centimeter.

There was something in the air in front of him. He could just make it out; a haze in the space between them, stretched from the woman’s palm to Shizuo’s shoulder. The force that grappled with him slid up to his neck, and Shizuo saw the air move.

Then it knocked his legs out from under him. THUD! His back hit the pavement with a smack.

“Shizu-chan!”

Shizuo felt Izaya move beside him before he saw him. For the first time ever, he wanted Izaya to run from him.

But instead of away, Izaya ran to the middle of the fray. He grabbed something in the middle of the air and it seemed to lock the woman in place. The woman greeted him with manic enthusiasm.

“Rosa! Rosa!”

Izaya drew another knife and growled. “You’re really getting annoying, you know!”

“Rosa!”

The woman spun towards him.

“Shut UP!” He sliced at the woman, who dodged. “Just SHUT UP!” They became a blur of reflexes that Shizuo couldn’t match even if he tried.

Kicking, stabbing, twirling, leaping. Shizuo didn’t know anyone faster than Izaya, but this rickety old woman had some agility. Izaya managed to land his blade on her several times, but that didn’t slow her down. Instead of blood, she emitted sparks and frayed metal. Rising to his feet, Shizuo wondered if he would have to do his job at all.

Shizuo still worried, though. That woman - no, that thing - wouldn’t go down. He yanked up a narrow tree.

Just as he did, Izaya fell to a crouch and went for a high kick. His foot successfully connected with the thing’s chin, and it tumbled backwards. For a second, Shizuo inwardly rejoiced and felt a twinge of pride in Izaya’s skills. In that second, however, the thing somehow got a hold of Izaya’s still risen ankle. Not with it’s actual hand, but with that hazy forcefield from before. It twisted around and forcefully slammed Izaya into the pedestal of the statue. He yelped with pain.

Shizuo felt his heart stop, for just a second, and watched Izaya’s body slump to the ground.

There it was, that searing red vision that blinded Shizuo from anything other than mass destruction. Without a warning, without a doubt in his limbs, he swung the trunk of the tree into the woman’s gut. He remembered the sensation of striving for a home run with a baseball bat. Only he kept hitting the ball. He crushed the tree over the woman, over and over and over again. If he cared to listen, he’d hear her shrieking.

“YOU - DAMN - UGLY - HAG - WHATEVER YOU ARE!”

Then she tore the tree from his possession, somehow. With that damned forcefield that Shizuo
couldn’t understand. The tree catapulted in the air and landed in the park’s dead, winter canopy.

I can see it! Shizuo’s eyes caught sight of that forcefield. It was so subtle, but he could see it. When the thing got to its feet, the field came flying towards Shizuo like a wip. Maybe it was from the rage, from the adrenaline, but he managed to dodge it. He even caught it, just like he’d seen Izaya do. His instincts were in full gear, urging him to pound this thing into the pavement.

His beating with the tree had ripped off a great deal of the thing’s skin. Flesh throbbed where it was vulnerable, but coexisted with wires and metal plates. Blue lights flickered under muscle, where there should have been more muscle.

Having been caught by Shizuo, the thing fidgeted. It grinned and yanked back, but now Shizuo really wouldn’t budge. Instead, Shizuo coiled the thread of force around his arm like a snake’s tail. As he did, the action drew the thing closer and closer against its will. When it realized that it was truly trapped, it started to scream.

“MONSTRUO! MONSTRUO! AYUDAME! AYUDAME!”

Finally, Shizuo hooked his arm around the frozen and outstretched hand of the woman. He could feel energy around him surging, trying to free this thing.

“MONSTRUO!” Then its voice changed tinny and monotonous. “Calculating, Calculating.”

Its good eye dilated, widened, grew, and shrunk more like a camera lens than an eyeball. Shizuo ignored both that and its screeching. The more it struggled, the more it egged Shizuo’s ruthlessness on. That is, until he heard a voice behind him.

“SHIZU-CHAN!”

Shizuo’s vision started to clear and he could finally decipher the creature in front of him. A mixture of organs and machinery. What exactly am I hurting right now?

“Izaya,” He breathed. He’s alright, a voice reminded him. “Is this thing human?”

Behind him, Izaya’s voice seemed uncharacteristically small and unsure. Bitter, even. “...It was.” Shizuo wanted to look at his face, but as soon as he let his guard down, the creature acted up.


Just as it started to finally rain, Shizuo felt the surge of energy flare up. He grabbed the creature by the back of it’s head, spun once, twice, three times, and flung it into the air. Wherever it landed was so far, they couldn’t see. It must have landed in another district of the city.

When it was out of his sight, Shizuo’s muscles slowly began to relax. He was panting, unaware of what a frenzy the situation had worked into him. Eventually, it hit him. The shock, the confusion. Turning to Izaya, who was weak on his knees and gripping his left shoulder carefully, Shizuo wanted to go to him. To ensure that whatever had just attacked them hadn’t taken him away. However, Shizuo could also see that Izaya was watching him anxiously. Alive. Relatively okay. What wasn’t okay was whatever just happened.

“Shizu-chan, don’t—”

Shizuo pointed wildly in the direction which he through the woman, the creature, whatever it was.
“NO! NO! WHAT WAS THAT, IZAYA?”

“Calm down!!”

“I’LL CALM DOWN WHEN YOU TELL ME WHAT JUST HAPPENED. DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT WAS?”

“Yes, but we really should—”

“TELL ME WHAT I JUST THREW ACROSS THIS CITY!”

“I will, but Shizu-chan please!” Izaya tugged on Shizuo’s arm, and Shizuo was obliged to let him. There was an immediacy in his voice and impatience on his face. “Chances are it’s still alive, so we have to get out of here!”

Shizuo’s blood was pumping furiously, and his brain was a throbbing mess. Water splashed in his face as he ran through the downpour behind Izaya. A lot went through his mind, but none of it would do him any good without more answers. A series of whos, whats, whens, and whys plagued him. No matter how he felt towards Izaya, he needed to press the issue.

They made it as far as an ovular monument enclosed by walls of arches before Shizuo cracked.

“Wait - WAIT! No!”

“Shizu-?!”

Shizuo grabbed Izaya’s uninjured arm. “Come here!” He marched them under one of the arches, out of the rain. His tattered clothes clung to him and his damp hair chilled his skin. Izaya appeared similarly.

Though Shizuo tried to restrain his strength from Izaya, he must have exerted more than he would have liked to shove Izaya against the wall of the arch. Izaya gasped, winced, and rubbed his shoulder.

“What the fuck?! What was th-”

BANG! Shizuo slammed his fists against the stone, on either side of Izaya’s head. Cracks split through, and the entire monument shook. It was enough to still Izaya, to silence him for a moment.

Shizuo’s voice came out low and dangerously even. “I almost just died… Now, I deserve to know what’s going on, don’t you think?”

When Izaya didn’t answer, Shizuo took a step closer and loomed over him. Not that that would intimidate Izaya. What did seem to scare Izaya, though, was this whole ordeal.

“I just saved your life,” Shizuo tried.

“No you didn’t,” Izaya scoffed. “It would have killed you, but not me.”

“Why?!”

“Because it was just playing with me!” Izaya snapped, like this whole thing should be obvious when it was the most convoluted thing in the world.
Shizuo didn’t like that answer; it made his stomach churn. “Why was it playing with you?”

“It was a pawn in a game that I didn’t choose to play!” Izaya’s voice rose, “And I want out of it!”

“That was a pawn?! Don’t lie to me! Is this one of your games?”

Izaya chuckled humorlessly. “No. I hate this game. I’m not even a player.”

Shizuo’s fists clenched tighter against the stone. “Then what am I?!”

“My ticket out!” Izaya took a deep breath. “These things are going to keep coming after us - after me. I hate to admit it, but I’ve only defeated one once. I can’t handle them. Somebody is taking my precious humans and turning them into monsters. Worse! Machines… computers! All to be used against me!”

“Who?!” Shizuo barked. “Who’s responsible for those things, who’s after you?!”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes it matters!” Shizuo closed any distance left between them, trapping Izaya there. “I’m not going to let them get to you. I won’t let them touch you.” A lifetime of chases and battles flashed across his eyes. Somebody was toying with Izaya, going after Shizuo’s flea. The thought drove him mad, enough for him to temporarily forget his position. “You have to stay alive until I can kill you myself.”

“Do you promise?”

The weight of the words dropped in Shizuo’s stomach.

Rain drops pattered all around. The pond lay to their side, and the ducks floated along merrily as if the heavens weren’t dumping all their sorrows unto them.

Izaya glared defiantly up at Shizuo, whose whole body had gone lax in helplessness.

“I…”

“It’s in your contract anyways, remember? That’s the point.”

Every answer that Shizuo received only begged for more questions. “...Why?”

Sighing, Izaya looked off into the pond. The ducks had their heads tucked in their feathers. A peaceful rest.

“I’ve always feared death. The thought that nothing waits afterwards, the possibility that I’ll just become an empty void and never experience thought or feelings again… After all this, though, maybe that’s not such a bad thing. If Shizu-chan kills me, then I’ll be okay with it.”

He knew he was breathing, but Shizuo couldn’t feel it. He couldn’t feel anything, like stone. It felt instead like he was the one dying. “Why me?”

“Because I was wrong.” Izaya mumbled a curse at himself. “Listen to me, after all this time.” He looked down at his open palms. There wasn’t anything there except dampness. “I may be more of the monster between the two of us. You couldn’t even kill a pawn…”

Whatever Izaya was saying didn’t make any sense to Shizuo. It just made his chest ache and the desire to stop the words escaping Izaya’s mouth.
“If I could go to the same place as Shizu-chan,” Izaya continued, “the maybe death wouldn’t be such a drag. But what are the odds of that?” He smiled sadly and looked into Shizuo’s eyes. “If there is an afterlife, Shizu-chan will go to the good place, with the rest of the big dumb heroes and fragile souls. Unless there’s a steep toll for property damage. Me? Hah… I’m going to the other place.”

Shizuo couldn’t listen to another word. Any life - before, here, or after - would certainly be empty without Izaya.

Some of the fringe that Izaya let grow long by his ears had stuck to the lips that spoke such dreadful things. Shizuo lifted a hand towards it, and Izaya flinched. After a moment, Izaya relaxed. Carefully, as gentle as he’d ever touched anything, Shizuo brushed the strand back. He mimicked Izaya from early, slipping his fingers behind Izaya’s ear and lingering there.

Fingertips grazed under Shizuo’s elbows, then on his sides. It took Shizuo a second to realize that Izaya was touching him back, albeit very, very cautiously.

Shizuo tilted his head down and pressed his forehead against Izaya’s. Izaya rocked forward on his feet, and Shizuo slipped an arm around him to keep him balanced. He minded the injured shoulder. A rumble resonated deep within Shizuo, so low they could have mistaken the sound for distant thunder.

“Did you think you could get away?”

Izaya’s eyes met his, questioning.

“If that’s our fate...” Shizuo continued. Every breath he took like this was one he shared with Izaya. He swallowed. “If we end up on different sides of the universe… Then I’ll just have to go down and drag you out of hell… Because there’s no way I’ll let you go that easily.”

He felt Izaya’s breath hitch and body freeze. His eyes cast down so that Shizuo couldn’t look into them. Shizuo dragged his thumb across Izaya’s cheek, down to his newly bruised neck, to the corner of his mouth where Shizuo felt a quiver.

Izaya fell into Shizuo’s chest, shaking. His arms clung around Shizuo’s shoulders.


A noise was coming from where Izaya’s face was buried into Shizuo’s chest. At first, Shizuo had the gall to think that Izaya might have been crying, but a second of listening set him straight.

Izaya was laughing.

Shizuo couldn’t believe it. “What! Are you-?! I just-!”

“No, no, no!” Izaya tilted his head up to reveal the brightest grin. He was trying to hold it in, but not very successfully. “It’s just…! We both look like shit!” He cackled. “My shoulder is like, dislocated or something, and your back is covered in so much blood!”

Fingers poked through holes in the jacket Shizuo had borrowed from Jefe, where the skin was indeed very tender and exalted a slippery sensation. Izaya drew back a hand to reveal red.

Shizuo hadn’t even noticed. “Oh.”

Izaya just continued to laugh about it, so Shizuo put a hand atop his head and muffled the sound by pressing Izaya to his chest again. He stroked Izaya’s hair while the latter got it all out of his system.
“Qué pasó?!"

Jefe opened his door to find the two looking like drowned, harassed rats. They never did make it back to their hotel that night.

Chapter End Notes

don't ya hate when you're having a pleasant day sightseeing and eating tapas and getting gay with your soul mate but then suddenly these nasty cyborg things chase ya down and fuck ya up?

yeah me too.

disclaimers:

1.) i came up with the idea of these "things" for another shizaya au that i'll probably never write. they kinda made more sense in that setting... but i wanted to try them out here, because

2.) part of me considers this fic a rough draft for another future project. it's nice to test the waters with fanfic, sometimes...

whatever these things may be, i do have purposes and explanations for them being in this fic. we're entering another layer of hell, here, and hopefully the pace will pick up.
Chapter Summary

Answers lead to more questions, and the boys get stranded in the inbetween.

Chapter Notes

Happy May, everybody!

I'm baaaaaack. I even managed to pop out a one shot for Izaya's birthday, if you haven't seen that yet.

I apologize about the two week absence. Be assured that I was truly busy and not just slacking. I finished the semester last week, so updates SHOULD come more breezy (?) Fingers crossed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While Jefe took Izaya into the bedroom to mend his shoulder, Shizuo got stuck with Pepe to clean the scrapes on his back. Despite her quivering hands and inability to communicate, she did a competent job. The antiseptic stung and made his back feel sticky, but she put bandages over it. All while blushing furiously, as Shizuo needed to be shirtless for all this. She avoided eye contact at all costs and sometimes stuttered what he assumed were apologies in Spanish.

But Shizuo didn’t pay her much mind; he had a thousand more pressing thoughts to deal with. Like, for example, Izaya. The thing that had attacked Izaya, why it had attacked Izaya, how he had to protect Izaya.

Had the woman been human? And, if she was, would that mean that Shizuo had almost killed a human?

“Um- umm… you’re… you’re all done!”

The words jarred Shizuo out of his trance. He hadn’t expected Pepe to speak. She stood over him, appearing just as petite as ever. Up close, she was splattered head to toe with freckles. Those on her face got lost under the rosy tint in her cheeks.

“You can speak English?!”

She blanched. “Uh, uh… um...” She stuttered.

“Oh, right,” Shizuo started, “but you wouldn’t understand Japanese, would you.”

She blinked.

“I...” he tried, “am... not good at English.”
To his surprise, Pepe smiled encouragingly. She shrugged slightly. “*That was fine!*”

Shizuo’s lips twitched as he was tempted to return the favor. He decided that, despite her mousey behavior, Pepe was pleasant.

They sat in the small home’s kitchen. The room wasn’t much more than a stove, oven, a sink, an icebox, and a rickety wooden table by the window. Its walls featured some very tacky wallpaper of roosters and rabbits, where there wasn’t chipped marble tiling with grime in between. Something was always cooking on the stove. Even while Pepe was patching up Shizuo, she repeatedly ran back to the stove to stir whatever was brewing. Hefty clouds of steam filled the confined space, enough that Pepe cracked the window open a smidge.

Moisture stuck to Shizuo’s bare skin. Surprisingly, he enjoyed feeling warmth around him. He’d been walking around in winter’s cold for too long. The brisk breeze from the window provided a refreshing counteraction to the heat from the stove. Part of him wished they could stay in a place like this wherever they went, someplace like a home. Not a hotel room. Shizuo never felt so connected to this country as he did when watching one of its residents toss a slab of meat in a pan and smoke it.

He leaned back in his chair and let the charring aroma waft through his nostrils.

Pepe glanced around for a split second before she focussed pointedly on her cooking, avoiding looking back again. “*Um.. um… hay una- ah, lo siento… There is... a shirt there for you. There.*” She risked a nod across the room. “*There.*”

Shizuo rose just as he heard distinguishably distraught voices from the other room. Half in Spanish, half in English, so Shizuo couldn’t decipher anything other than the growing apprehension in Izaya’s tone.

As Jefe strutted through the door back into the kitchen, he was grumbling foreign curses. Pepe exchanged questioning words with her father, who answered heatedly. But Shizuo didn’t wait to try and understand.

He shoved Jefe out of his way, who fruitlessly tried to warn him. Closing the door to the bedroom behind him, Shizuo said, “Hey, what’s—”

Turning, he was faced with Izaya’s bare back for just a split second before a shirt fell over the marked up skin.

Izaya noticed Shizuo and quickly made sure he had covered himself. “Shizu-chan?! Isn’t it rude to burst into rooms like that?! ...Where’s your shirt?”

Shizuo remained staring at the spot he’d seen pale skin lined with pinkish scratches that were so parallel and perfect that it hardly seemed natural. “Wh…? Were those from earlier?”

“What?” Izaya asked, “My shoulder?” He gave the injury a rub. “It’s still sore but Jefe popped it in real nice. Why are you half naked?”

“No... no, no...” Shizuo half ignored him. “Not the shoulder… On your back. Those were there before, weren’t they?”

“I was tossed against concrete and stone, of course I got scratched up a bit.”

“Stop lying.”

Izaya’s eyes narrowed. Shizuo inched a foot forward and Izaya locked on to his movements, taking a
step back.

“Shizu-chan….” He warned.

“Why don’t you want me to see?”

Izaya reached behind him and stroked the back of his neck tentatively, where Shizuo knew there were those scars. “It’s… compromising.” His eyes avoided Shizuo’s.

A brick of realization dropped on Shizuo. Realization that, despite how far they’d come and having just saved each other from an enigmatic monstrosity, there was still a wall between them. One not so easily demolished.

Shizuo crossed his arms and sighed. “You really don’t trust me, do you?”

Izaya looked at him pitifully. “Don’t take it personally. I don’t trust anyone. I didn’t even want the doctor to look. It’s not that I see you as a particularly untrustworthy human being, although your proneness to irrational outbursts does speak against you. Besides, it’s not like you trust me either.”

“No, I don’t,” Shizuo agreed and followed with a deep, rather ugly chuckle that left Izaya offended.

“What?” He asked heatedly.

Cupping his hand over his mouth and dragging his thumb across his lips, Shizuo did his best to wipe the grin from his face. A bitter sense of glee welled up in him. “You just called me a human being.”

Izaya blinked and grimaced. “Oh, please. I’m perfectly aware that you genetically qualify as a human being. In most ways.”

“Do I? Not that you’ve ever admitted it before,” Shizuo said.

“Well, I’m aware,” Izaya prickled, “I’ve become numbingly aware that you can’t take as much as you dish out. A bloody scalp, a fever, a torso covered in bandages that hardly covers anything…”

Izaya looked pointedly above their heads. “Yes, it’s become quite clear. Not that humans can’t be monsters, or vice versa. If you were more... beastly resilient, I wouldn’t be so-” He bit his lip.

“You’re the only body guard I have out here, so it’d be a waste if you became damaged beyond repair. Try and take better care of yourself. Like I said, my business doesn’t include a health insurance policy.”

If Shizuo didn’t know any better, he would have believed Izaya was worried for him. There was certainly a wall between them, as tall as a million complications and as thick as ten years of grief. But it was hardly impenetrable. If Shizuo could use all his strength for anything worthwhile, it would be to knock down that wall and pull Izaya over to a side where he wouldn’t want to throw his life away.

He crossed the room to Izaya, who caught himself up against the bed’s wire frame. Judging from his stance, he was guarding his back.

Shizuo stayed a respectable way away. “How’s your shoulder?”

Izaya swung his arm around, and the pain twitched visibly upon his face. “It functions. I’ve endured worse…”

Shizuo swallowed and nodded.

Watching him, Izaya asked, “You’re not gonna push it?” When Shizuo just shrugged
unconvincingly, Izaya continued. “…A month ago, you would have torn up this room screaming at me until you had answers.”

Shizuo’s lips thinned together. “I really can’t force you, can I? Dammit, you won’t shut up about anything else, but I just can’t get you to spill about the important shit. But I…” Shizuo hunched his shoulders and tried to shrink into himself while simultaneously shuffling closer to Izaya, who watched him with a mixture of amusement and curiosity. “You’re… But, you’re okay, right? Like… do they hurt? Those… whatever it is.”

That was all he needed to know. But the silence from Izaya was hard to read. Shock? Confusion? Horror? Shizuo couldn’t bare Izaya fearing him.

Hesitantly, Shizuo reached forward. He hoped for some unspoken agreement might apply where he could repeat the action of brushing back Izaya’s hair. Izaya didn’t move, so he gave it a try, slicking his fingers under a strand and pushing it behind Izaya’s ear. How bizarre, that such a simple act could affect Shizuo so much. This time, though, he dropped his hand back to his side and cursed himself immediately afterwards.

Izaya spoke like Shizuo had knocked the wind out of him, breathless. “…I really can’t predict you at all.” He inhaled. “How obnoxious.” With that, he stepped to the side.

Shizuo looked on, puzzled but patient. Agitation shown in Izaya’s movement; he fiddled with the hem of his shirt.

“All right,” He said.

Shizuo gestured questioningly, raising an eyebrow.

Izaya responded by lifting his shirt up.

“OI OI OI OI oi oi!!” Shizuo lost his mind. “What are you doing!?!”

As it was, Izaya was struggling with his shoulder. “I’m gonna show you!”

The heat in Shizuo’s face was scorching. He was red, embarrassingly red; he could tell. Lack of words and incoherent protests caught in his throat. But he also didn’t want Izaya dislocating his shoulder again. He scurried over, stopped, and asked, “…Do you want help…?”

At first, Izaya jerked away. Then he stopped. He looked away and nodded, just once.

Shizuo hastily - but carefully - helped the shirt over Izaya’s head. Just as quickly, he jumped back and away as if he’d just touched sacred territory.

“Oh good, now we’re both shirtless,” Izaya snorted as he reached down for his pants.

“What?!” Shizuo turned around and started pacing in all directions that weren’t Izaya’s, looking every other way. The ceiling, for example. What a suddenly very interesting ceiling.

“Stop that! You’re… Don’t make it seem like that, or I’ll change my mind.”

Shizuo grunted a response. Least he could do was cease his frantic pace. He could hear the clothing rustling behind him, sliding against the ground. Until prompted otherwise, he’d continue staring at all else in the room. Yes, what a marvelous wall. He’s sharing this. He hates this, but he’s still sharing this. That reminder kept all of Shizuo’s other senses in check.
The rustling stopped. Shizuo waited.

“...Okay.”

Slowly, Shizuo turned his head around. Now Izaya was the one facing away. His bare back was to Shizuo, and his arms hugged to himself. Bare legs shifted weight in anticipation. Shizuo faced an image like his nightmares mapped out in front of him.

There they were, in more volume than Shizuo could have imagined. They didn’t stand out so much that Shizuo could see great detail from where he stood. They were faint against Izaya’s skin. Cautiously, Shizuo started approaching.

Scars. Or marred skin that looked like scars, but there was something unnatural about them. Straight and parallel, they branched out from each other from the nape of Izaya’s neck, to his shoulders, down to his right hip, around his thigh and stopped within his inner knee. Many were capped by pale, raised bumps no bigger than a pin prick. Some zagged away from the main, others stopped at different lengths. The pattern thinned noticeably as it stretched downwards. The only sight Shizuo had ever seen similar to this was that of a computer chip.

He stood just a few inches from Izaya. He could see the tension built up in Izaya’s muscle. Shizuo frowned. Were they scars, or were they marks of another nature?

Without thinking, he moved to touch. His fingertips just barely brushed the service before he caught himself. Izaya flinched.

“Sorry…” Shizuo said. “I… Sorry, can I…?”

Glancing over his shoulder, Izaya met Shizuo’s eyes and took a step back for a comply. But now Shizuo second-guessed himself. He felt intrusive. Izaya stood in a very vulnerable position, and Shizuo feared making a wrong move.

“Wh…” His eyes narrowed at the pattern. “What are they?”

“They’re me,” Izaya said. Reading the confusion in Shizuo’s face, he continued. “They’re digital data entries with recorded information pertaining to me. At least one hundred and one of them.”

None of that made sense to Shizuo, not enough to keep from jumping to the worst conclusion. “Wait, are you-?!”

“No! I’m not one of those things.” Izaya turned to face him. He even moved closer, tilting his chin up to match Shizuo’s eyes. Shizuo stared into them, the same warm brown he’d always known that if caught in the wrong light, could appear unnaturally menacing. They were warmer than before, but there was certainly nothing menacing about them.

“No, you’re not. I know you’re not.” In fact, Shizuo was beginning to see Izaya as the most human creature he’d ever met.

Izaya relaxed, but his eyes stayed with Shizuo.

“But I still don’t get it.” Shizuo said. “Call me an idiot, whatever. I just want to understand.”

“A few months ago…” Izaya started. He looked down. “After we last saw each other, back in Japan, I was… compromised. Some people with an interest in me helped me out, so to speak. We played some games, right? Well,” he touched the back of his neck, “this is their score.”
Shizuo’s mouth had gone dry. “...Games?”

“Let’s call them ‘Get-To-Know-Me’ games. ‘What-Makes-Izaya-Tick.’ But rather one-sided; I can’t say I got to know them very well but I do believe they learned a lot about me. They knew I liked my privacy, so what better way to do things than write everything about me for the world to see?

Obviously, when I didn’t want to play anymore I got out. Can’t say it didn’t cost anything...” Izaya opened his palms and stared into them.

In all honesty, Shizuo still wasn’t sure that he comprehended completely. What he did grasp, however, left him feeling ill. Violated, on behalf of Izaya. Guilty, in the part he played in the beginning. Regret, that he hadn’t ripped off the head of the thing in the park. Concern, for Izaya. Disgusted, at whatever sick creeps were pulling the strings in this whole ordeal.

Marching across the room, he picked up the monitor equipment and chucked it across the room. The hardware smashed against the wall with stupendous noise. But that wasn’t enough. He spun around and kicked over the bed with furious yell. CRASH. It completely flipped over, even making Izaya jump. Everything on Shizuo’s mind was finding whoever was antagonizing them - Izaya - and ripping them limb from limb. There was still an outlet for his rage.

Then he noticed Izaya watching him nervously, still stripped to his briefs and otherwise exposed. Shizuo froze and shamefully sagged. Reining back, he inhaled and exhaled, inhaled and exhaled. Once he was back to his senses, he walked around the fallen bed and swooped up a blanket. Returning to Izaya, Shizuo draped the blanket over Izaya’s shoulder and wrapped it around his body. Again and again, until Izaya was as secure as an eggroll. Izaya observed the gesture like... like he really didn’t know what to make of it. Once Shizuo felt the blanket was secure, he stepped back.

“I’ll get ‘em back,” Shizuo finally said. “No one deserves... that. Not even you.”

Izaya smiled bitterly. “You don’t mean that.”

“Of course I do!”

“Then you don’t know that!” Izaya snapped.

“I don’t know a lot, but I know that!”

“Stop it, you don’t!”

“Why?!”

“Because...!” Izaya trailed off and shook his head. He surveyed the damage Shizuo had caused to the room.

Shizuo didn’t need a reason. “It does matter what you tell me at this point. I still won’t agree with you.”

“No, of course not, you stubborn beast...” Izaya sighed. His eyes scanned over the room in silence. “How’s Jefe going to pay for all of this?” Izaya nodded to the mess. “You need to stop breaking other people’s shit.”

At that point, Shizuo realized that Izaya’s uneasiness from his bout had been, not from fear that Shizuo might hurt him, but from fear of property damage. Like they were in one of his museums. Shizuo found a new appreciation for Izaya and his strange priorities, but he had no idea how to voice it.
“You look like Mexico.”

Izaya tilted his head and squinted at the statement, like Shizuo might as well have just spoken gibberish.

“Uhh, yeah, those codes or whatever,” Shizuo ran his hand through his hair and scratched the back of his head. “I know you don’t like them, and I don’t like them. Well, no, I don’t like that someone did that to you. I hate it, actually. But they’re you, you said, so I- shit,” The red was in his face now. He cleared his throat. “What I mean is, it’s shaped like Mexico. And you said they’re you, so you look like Mexico. That’s why I said that.”

After a second to take it all in, Izaya burst into laughter. Full hyena cackles.

“It makes sense!” Shizuo grumbled.

“Hahahahaha, Shizu-chan… I never expect anything that comes out of your mouth ahahahahah! You just... haHAHA!” He muffled himself by pulling the blanket up over his head.

Shizuo rumbled impatiently. “Shut up, you shitty flea!” His cheeks were burning.

Barely able to stay still, Izaya ended up keeling over, tumbling around, all this while looking like an eggroll. Shizuo ended up guiding him so that he didn’t crash into anything. The laughter slowly died away, and Shizuo lifted a hem of the blanket from Izaya’s visage.

Izaya willfully peeked out. His face was flushed and he’d lost some breath. A grin was stuck there. Even his eyes threatened to water. Shizuo didn’t believe he’d ever seen Izaya laugh so hard, and he had been the cause. He wasn’t sure if he should be embarrassed or pleased with himself.

“Honestly…” Izaya said, “I’m surprised you even know what Mexico is.”

Shizuo crossed his arms and huffed belligerently. “I know what Mexico looks like! It’s got that hook and squiggly thing at the bottom.”

“’Squiggly thing,’” Izaya smirked, “Do you mean Central America?”

“That’s not all Mexico?”

“No.”

“Huh. Then you look like Mexico and Central America.”

Izaya absorbed that. “I guess it could be worse. I could look like Canada.” When Shizuo raised an eyebrow, he added, “They’re too good there; it’s not fun at all.”

Shizuo felt like he should suddenly jump to this country’s defense, but Izaya was staring blankly at his chest. That’s when Shizuo remembered he wasn’t wearing a shirt.

“Why are you so sweaty?” Izaya asked.

“It’s steam,” Shizuo explained, now *definitely* embarrassed. “From the kitchen.”

“Steam…” Izaya blinked. “Right.” He submerged under the blanket again, just as Jefe came in and saw his whole operation destroyed. How Shizuo wished he had a blanket to hide himself under.
Shizuo had forgotten what it was like to be warm.

Truly warm, when the sun lapped at his skin and light flooded over his body. Not the awkward blood-rushing heat he experienced commonly nowadays that left him feeling anxious and smitten. Though he didn’t dislike that latter sensation; it was just different, and still problematic. This, what he was experiencing right now, was natural, external warmth.

Eyes closed, wind in his hair, sun beans prickling his face, sand on his back… he could already feel the grains sticking to his arms. A thin layer of sweat covered him, but he wouldn’t have it any other way. It felt like Pepe’s kitchen had come with them. His body begged him to strip down so that every pore on his body had the same opportunity to soak up the sun as his arms and face.

Unfortunately, he was in public.

A shadow fall over him, robbing him of the full sensation. He grumbled in protest.

“You’ll get hideous tan lines if you stay like that.”

Cocking one eye open, Shizuo found Izaya leaning over him. The sun hid just over Izaya’s head, radiating his silhouette. Shizuo grunted a response before he closed his eyes again.

Izaya sighed. “You can’t just lie there all day. We didn’t come here to nap.”

Shizuo gave another grunt.

“Shizu-chaaaaan!” Izaya stepped over him, grabbed his arms, and tried to drag him to his feet. Shizuo wouldn’t budge. “We’re at the base of the original Wonder of the World, and you’re lying around on your ass! Don’t you have any respect for these things?”

“No when it’s thirty degrees out and sunny.” Shizuo continued to resist Izaya’s efforts. “You finally take me somewhere warm, and you want me to look at rocks.”

“Rocks!” Izaya sat forcefully on Shizuo’s stomach, making Shizuo lurch. “Shizu-chan has no appreciation for culture. Tens of thousands of humans from thousands of years ago didn’t toil their lives away under this same sun so that you could fall asleep in the sand. I don’t even think you could carry eighty tons of limestone.”

“You never know until you try.” Shizuo opened his eyes and met Izaya’s boring down on him impatiently. “Your babbling is ruining my peace and quiet.” Quite the contrary, actually. While he should have more of a problem with Izaya using his gut as a cushion, he was shamefully enjoying the warmth. He couldn’t deny that he enjoyed the view of Izaya’s legs spread on either side of his torso. As long as Izaya stayed on Shizuo’s stomach and not his lap, Shizuo could handle it. Probably.

“It’s not very quiet. There’s people everywhere and they’re going to stare at you.” Izaya said. This wasn’t exactly true either. Shizuo had chosen to lay in an isolated nook, behind a few of those giant bricks where the sun shined brightest. He could still hear the tourists around them, but they were all on other sides of the stones. The isolation was preferable, since if they had been in the public’s line of vision, the both of them would have received stares. Shizuo recognized the compromising position they were in.

Still, he cupped his hands around Izaya’s knees and brushed his thumb around the exposed caps. On the inside Izaya’s right knee, Shizuo could feel the raised skin of where that cursed pattern ended. He could see where the marks ran up the thigh and disappeared under tan shorts that were, in Shizuo’s opinion, too short.
Izaya reached down and drew Shizuo’s hands away. He held on. “Don’t try and lull me into this lazy demeanor of yours. We still have work to do.”

Shizuo’s eyes followed up Izaya’s left arm to where more of the pattern was visible streaming down from under Izaya’s t-shirt sleeve to his pale elbow. Izaya had come to calling that portion the Baja California Peninsula.

Shizuo allowed himself another moment of this bliss. Then, with great reluctance, he finally rose from the dirt. Izaya climbed off of him and wiped some dust from his shins. He stepped behind Shizuo and did the same to Shizuo’s back.

“Don’t cry to me if you get all those cuts infected after the lovely and generous Pepe did her best to salvage them.”

Shizuo grumbled noncommittally, and Izaya mimicked the noises as he pushed Shizuo out into the open necropolis of Giza.

He could look at pictures of their likeness his whole life, in textbooks, on TV, in movies, everywhere. Because they were everywhere. But nothing amounted to actually standing at the base of the pyramids and the sphinx. Truly, Shizuo had never seen so magnificent rocks. His preference for sun bathing should not be mistaken for boredom or indifference. In fact, Shizuo considered Egypt the most alluring place they’d been to so far.

First of all, Egypt was a sight he’d never seen before. Its appeal was like nothing of Japan, America, or Europe. They were in the middle of the world, the line to cross between East and West. This was a whole new climate, architecture, language, and terrain. Shizuo had never been to the desert before. He’d never understood how the area around the Nile in Cairo could be so lush and green, but a mile inland was all sand.

Where they were now, Giza, was dusty and fifty shades of yellow. The Great Sphinx had overlooked them as they entered the necropolis and guarded a series of tombs and temples. Cemeteries the size of a small villages flanked the pyramids, to which Shizuo and Izaya now proceeded. Hundreds of families and travellers snapped pictures with their phones, or with legitimate cameras if they were serious. Shizuo had even come face to face with a camel.

*What would everybody back in Ikebukuro say if they knew I’d been to Egypt?* he wondered. Who would have suspected to find Shizuo Heiwajima in a place like this, and not just locked in Ikebukuro for his whole life? Certainly not Shizuo. It was funny how suddenly Ikebukuro seemed so small, like a niche carved into Tokyo and isolated from the rest of the world. With the exception, perhaps, of a few Russians.

His thoughts wandered back to the groups in Ikebukuro. What was Ikebukuro like without him? Was everyone the same? Did the world keep turning? He had had scarce contact with Celty since leaving America, because every country needed different cellular specifications. Izaya was still stingy about Shizuo using his laptop.

...*What would they all say if they knew I’d been to Egypt with Izaya? And enjoyed it?* Not even Celty knew that much. Thinking of Celty, he felt a bit guilty. She hadn’t been able to contact him, nor was she aware of certain developments. He decided to try and get on Izaya’s laptop again later.

“You’re spacing out again.”

Izaya’s voice drew Shizuo back to the present situation.
“I need you to pay attention.” Izaya said seriously, eyes fixed on Shizuo’s.

“You have my attention,” Shizuo grumbled.

Besides Egypt’s charm, it was warm. Izaya had finally decided they could travel to warm places. His reason against them before had been his reluctance to display the pattern on his skin. Now that Shizuo knew, though, he saw no reason to cover them up. When he’d told Shizuo that, Shizuo felt a misplaced sense of pride.

Because of that warmth, though, this place felt like a vacation, with a slew of tourists congregated into one place. Much to Shizuo’s amusement, Izaya was fitting right in for once. He’d nabbed Shizuo’s backpack for his own uses and had it slung over both shoulders. Besides his shorts and t-shirt, he was also wearing a short pair of hiking boots. And he had a map of the necropolis open in front of them as they walked. In Shizuo’s eyes, he just looked so touristy.

“Are we going to go into one of these things?” Shizuo asked.

“Into?!” Izaya looked up from his map and looked around at all the crumbling foundations. “I’d rather not. Particularly not with you.”

“What?! Why not?!”

“Take a look around, Shizu-chan. Everything here is old,” Izaya said, “Old as balls. Don’t even sneeze near this shit, or you’ll destroy everything. Ancient Egyptian ruins have withstood thousands of years of earthquakes, floods, wars, you name it. But a Shizu-chan? We shouldn’t push it.”

Shizuo scoffed. “I’m not gonna wreck anything. Not unless you piss me off, or if one of those things…”

He trailed off as Izaya gave him a sideways glance.

“…Show up.” He finished.

Sighing, Izaya folded up his map and opened his backpack in front of him. “Don’t go destroying the remains of one of man’s earliest and most successful civilizations on my account.”

“But they could show up here?” The incident in Spain had opened up a whole new aspect of their travels.

“It’s not impossible,” Izaya shrugged. “I wanted to get out of Europe to throw them off, hopefully, but…”

“But what?”

Izaya pulled out a strange looking device with a large screen, various buttons and knobs, and two antennae on the end.

Shizuo squinted at it. “What’s that?”

“I’m hoping I can find them first.” Izaya said as he shouldered his backpack again. Without a glance to Shizuo, he started climbing up the base of the Great Pyramid.

“Wh… What are you doing?” Shizuo asked.

They’d walked around the necropolis to one of the lesser populated areas. The day was ending, so people were filtering out of the area. The sun setting in the West cast shadow across where they
climbed. Shizuo wasn’t even entirely sure they were supposed to be there. The blocks composing the pyramid were almost as tall as them, so getting up on them wasn’t the easiest task. Izaya switched on his device and it began beeping periodically.

“Just make sure no one comes around to tell us to get down,” Izaya said.

“You were talking about me fucking shit up?!” Shizuo hissed as he followed, “You’re rock climbing on the pyramids!”

“You can climb on the pyramids!” Izaya paced around with his device held outright. “Just not legally, so! Keep watch.”

Shizuo could have argued, but he would have been arguing against climbing the Great Pyramid.

“You still haven’t told me what that thing is,” Shizuo pointed to the device.

Izaya debated whether to tell Shizuo or not. “It’s a thing to track and filter telecommunication waves and frequencies.”

So nothing Shizuo was going to understand. “...Why?”

“Those things, as you call them, receive a master control transmission from somewhere. Typically, the source would be within the same city…”

Shizuo waited. “...But?”

“But so far I haven’t picked anything up, even in Spain or where they’ve showed up before.” Izaya frowned as he turned the dials on his tracker.

“Did you even check in Spain?” Shizuo asked incredulously. “This is the first time I’ve seen that thing.”

“I did…” Izaya glanced back at him, “I looked in Boston after you flipped out at me, and I checked around Madrid while you were sick…”

“You said you went to museums both those times,” Shizuo accused.

“And I did,” Izaya said, “There’s a method to my madness, Shizu-chan. I’m acquainted with the masterminds behind all this, and they’re very sneaky and very good at what they do. Hiding a transmitter where people go every day and don’t realize it would be right up their alley, I think. And they have the resources to do that. They also know me, and where I’d mostly go, and which places would draw me in. Then they could use that information to set up transmission where it would be most effective to which ever pawns they have in the area. All of these areas are busy, easy to hide monstrosities in. Like, in Boston, there’s so much power in those Van de Graaff generators that are used for public show all the time that they could have been a source.”

“They weren’t, though?”

“No,” Izaya said bitterly.

Shizuo wished he had something helpful to say, but this was all out of his league. He understood neither technological terrorism nor the thought processes of such organizations. All he offered was a stumble on one of the looser bricks holding this ancient complex together. Izaya’s hand darted out and held Shizuo back from falling to an early grave, right into the company of a hundred kings. Cautiously, they kept going.
“You know these people?” Shizuo asked, “The ones doing all this?”

“Quite,” Izaya said. “They and I were rivals of sorts back in Japan. I could have done without, honestly. I already had you. Honestly, I was surprised when they still expressed an interest.”

*I already had you.* Shizuo had almost forgot that their relationship used to be so antagonistic. Now they were currently in some purgatory, an inbetween where their reality reflected neither their past lives nor their future. On this middle ground, they were neither the monster or Ikebukuro nor the informant of Shinjuku. They were just themselves, discarded from all former self-imposed and peer expectations. Ikebukuro was nowhere near them, where everything was connected by a common thread.

“...Did I know them?” Shizuo asked suddenly.

Izaya hauled himself over the last ledge and looked down at him. “Probably, in some form or another.”

They came together at the pyramid’s top and crawled to where it was least conspicuous, attempting to blend into the shadows and stone. Izaya tinkered with his device until he sighed exasperatedly.

“Nothing?” Shizuo asked. The look Izaya gave him was enough of an answer. “Well, how would anyone transmit anything from a pyramid anyway?”

“They’re thick, and someone with enough resources and connections could mine a base into them without detection or rousing suspicion. Plus, regular radios and trackers wouldn’t pick them up on a regular basis.”

Skeptically, Shizuo rose an eyebrow at the tiny machine Izaya used. “But that thing can?”

“Yes, plus I know what to look for, unlike a regular federal agent.”

“Hmm… well there’s two other ones. Why not try those? Or the cat thing?”

Izaya shook his head. “This one’s the tallest, I’d be able to pick up any signal in the necropolis from here.”

Shizuo wracked his brain. “Well, what if it’s not here. What if it’s back in the city. There’s a town of towers there.”

“The mosques? Nah, he’s too cynical about religion.”

Something was off. “‘He’?” Shizuo asked.

“...They,” Izaya corrected. Swinging his legs over the ledge, he stored his device away back in his backpack. “Look, I know what you’re trying to do. It’s probably for the best that you don’t hurt your brain trying to sound like you know what you’re talking about.”

Shizuo bristled. “Would it help if I shoved you off this thing?”

Izaya smirked back at him. “Could be fun.”

Settling next to him, Shizuo fell into a solemn gaze over the desert beneath them. They’d climbed very high without him realizing. The wind rustled past them at such great heights.

“Pretty big, aren’t they?” Shizuo said.
Izaya hummed in agreement.

“Remember in DC, you said something about guys and their overcompensation issues?”

Like he was surprised Shizuo could remember that, Izaya’s eyebrows shot up. “Yeah?”

Shizuo patted the blocks gently. “These are that.”

Izaya snickered and kicked his dangling legs playfully. Shizuo stretched and leaned back on his hands for support.

Then, the laughter died away disturbingly, and Izaya’s expression hardened as he stared out into a vast unknown. His eyes became distant, his voice quiet, and his mouth tight.

“Sometimes…” Izaya murmured, “I fear I’m just doing exactly what he expects of me.”

Silence fell over them, besides the whipping of the wind. Shizuo wanted to assure him, but wasn’t even sure of anything himself.

The endless desert lay beneath them. On the other side, they could see the city on the Nile, where it was lively and green. Lights started to twinkle the riverbed as the sun sank lower into the sand. Patches of life separated the desert from complete obscurity. Somehow, people managed to live in the sea of sand, caught between a scorching heat and freezing wind dictated by the rise and fall of the sun. Shizuo could start to feel that chill now. The cool breeze whipped through his hair. He closed his eyes and savored it.

Beside him, Izaya shivered at its mercy. Shizuo scooted closer to him until their thighs graced against each other. Izaya didn’t say anything, just stared out at the massive emptiness and unknown. There was a trace of dreaded disgust on his features, until he looked down at his hands and found the resolve to mask himself. Looking back to the desert, Shizuo felt like he was already stranded in the middle of it.

Chapter End Notes

This fic is weird, right? This fic is weird. Like I'm sorry this fic is so weird. You do not have to read such a weird, weird fic.

I feel like this also coulda been two chapters but ehhh, eHHHHHHH whatever.
Chapter Summary

Shizuo gets a crash course on Ancient Egyptian history.

Chapter Notes

**hint:** the chapter summary is a pun.

Firstly, I changed the titles of these chapters from Cairo to West Bank because while I imagine that they’re staying in Cairo, they’re never actually there? But they are always on the West bank of the Nile. ANYWAYS.

Hello, everyone, I am sorry for another two week's absence! Things have been crazy. Just know that if I fail to update next week, or the week after (or for the rest of the summer), you can assume that it’s because I was either...

a.) on a set

b.) moving out of my apartment

c.) looking for an internship

d.) earning money

e.) writing a bundle of other things.

Despite all of these thing, I try to keep the New Chapter Every Tuesday rule. Can I???? You'd think I'd have more time since classes ended, but nay. That hasn't been the case...

I think this chapters pretty long to make up for the delay!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“...I don’t like it.”

What Shizuo was beginning to understand, and what should have been obvious from the start, was Izaya’s disdain towards all living creatures besides humans.

Izaya and an aloof camel stood speculating each other when Izaya came to that conclusion. The camel took personal offense from Izaya’s words and responded by leaning down and nipping at Izaya’s hair. Izaya yelped and jumped back into Shizuo, who’d been standing back and shamelessly spectating the scene.

Shizuo reached over to give the creature an appreciative pat. “Good boy.”

“Shizu-chan…” Izaya glowered between the two conspiring against him. He ruffled his hair and
stepped behind Shizuo to further the distance between himself and the camel. “It almost tore my head off!”

“Can you blame him?” Shizuo smirked as the camel nuzzled into Shizuo’s palm. Camels were a lot larger than he expected, but so far Shizuo thought they were alright. Its fur was soft and it had this funny expression like it was always laughing or was better than you. Honestly, Izaya should have connected with them stronger in that area.

They were on the edge of Luxor, looking for a way into the Valley of the Kings. Izaya’s original plan had been to take a taxi. Unfortunately, there were none of those left and they’d missed the last donkey tour. Not that Shizuo was confident that Izaya would have gotten on a donkey if he wouldn’t step within five feet of a camel.

The man who owned the camel rental farm waited patiently Who knew camels could make such a business, because Shizuo and Izaya weren’t the only ones there. Quite a few foreigners were paying and hopping on camels to make the same journey West.

The camel tried to make nice with with Izaya. He bent down and tried to headbutt Izaya gently. Izaya, though, wanted nothing to do with it and avoided contact at all costs.

“What is your problem?” Shizuo asked with an undeniable delight in his voice.

“I told you,” Izaya continued to sidestep the camel’s advances. “I don’t like it.”

“It's just tryna be friendly,” Shizuo said. He watched the camel, with whom Shizuo was beginning to feel a spiritual connection, chase Izaya around its enclosure. This is hilarious.

Izaya answered with a series of whines the closer the camel got. Finally, he stepped behind Shizuo and let the bodyguard wrangle the creature away. Which was actually achieved just by Shizuo petting it.

“You’re ridiculous,” Shizuo told Izaya. Izaya didn’t seem to care so long as he was away part from the camel. Shizuo scratched behind the camel’s ears and rubbed its snout. The camel reciprocated by nibbling gently on Shizuo’s fingers and nuzzling its head into his chest. Shizuo never thought of himself as an animal person in particular, but he did think they were easier to get along with than humans.

They were instinctual, just like him.

Izaya crossed his arms with a huff.

Shizuo sighed. “What?”

“Makes sense that two beasts would get along,” Izaya said.

Shizuo patted the camel’s long, outstretched neck in solidarity.

Eyes narrowed, Izaya muttered inaudibly under his breath.

“Are you kidding me?” Shizuo gaped. “Is this seriously hurting your self-esteem?”

“My self-esteem is perfect,” Izaya said, “I have no desire for a beast’s love.”

The finger’s caught amidst the animal’s fur went numb, and Shizuo swallowed the small hope that life could be any different. Whether the camel knew so or not, the pat he received on the head full of
sympathy.

Then there was a hand beside his on the camel’s neck. The hand belonged to Izaya, who wore a look between disgust and determination. However, it didn’t last there long. The camel sensed Izaya immediately and went to nibble on his shorts.

“Hey!” Izaya hopped back and swatted at the camel, who Shizuo swore was chuckling. Shizuo sure was.

“I don’t know, flea,” Shizuo stifled himself, “He stuck his face in your crotch. I’d say that means he likes you very much.”

“Well, he can at least buy me dinner first.”

The renter started to rush them along after that, but Izaya was still reluctant about getting on the camel, whose name they learned was Basil. If they didn’t get a move on, though, they wouldn’t get to the Valley and back before sunset. For once, Shizuo had to take initiative to get this adventure going. He grabbed Izaya by the arms and hoisted him into the air.

“Shizu-chan?!”

Shizuo ignored his protests as he tossed Izaya on top of Basil’s hump. Izaya looked down below like he was stranded up there. He fixed a glare on Shizuo.

“I told you to stop doing that.”

“Doing what?” Shizuo asked innocently, before he turned to the renter. “Alright, where’s mine?”

The renter shook his head and pointed to Basil. He smugly said something in English, and Shizuo knew enough to realize he was saying that it was a one for two deal.

Looking back at Izaya on Basil, Shizuo felt his confidence pitfall. Izaya didn’t even seem aware of the situation, too distracted by his uncomfortable situation. It was about to get a bit more awkward. Should I sit behind, or in front? Either option seemed disastrous. Frankly, though, Shizuo didn’t trust Izaya at the reins. He wouldn’t die by camel, not this young.

“Scoot,” Shizuo snapped at Izaya.

“Bossy, Shizu-chan,” Izaya said, but tried anyways. *I don’t think he wants to be up there alone, anyways.* And then suddenly the prospects of riding together wasn’t so daunting.

Shizuo got on in front of Izaya. Basil’s hump was large enough for them to both sit comfortably. Although, that just mean that they didn’t necessarily have to touch each other. Sitting on a camel hump was still an extremely obscure experience. Camels were, generally, very large creatures. Dozens of other tourists were sharing their camels in pairs, so it was nothing to be embarrassed about. Those people, however, probably didn’t share such a complicated past nor relationship as Shizuo and Izaya.

With about only five minutes instruction from the renter, they were off. Into the desert, where they could potentially die. And Shizuo had the reins in his hands to guide them through.

To Shizuo’s surprise, the journey from Luxor to The Valley was hardly deserted. The renter had been right, they rode by a lot of dig up sights and teeny villages. Izaya made him stop several times to look around, only taking out his tracking device once or twice. The roads were uneven and bumpy, which didn’t seem to bother Basil so much, but was taking its damage on Shizuo’s groin.
Twenty minutes in, his ass ached.

Determined to get wherever they were going just a little bit faster, Shizuo clapped Basil’s sides with his heel. The camel responded with a galloping pace, and Izaya hadn’t been expecting it.

There were arms around Shizuo’s waist.

Reacting instantly, Shizuo yanked on the reins to bring Basil to an abrupt stop. So sudden that Shizuo’s back ended up slamming against Izaya’s face.

“Ow!” Izaya cursed. “Why that?”

“Like I know how to drive this thing!” Shizuo lied. They rode at a steady pace again, but Izaya’s arms remained around Shizuo’s waist. Shizuo was just thankful that Izaya couldn’t see his face.

“Well do it better!” Izaya snapped, “I almost fell off!”

“Maybe you’d like to drive?” Shizuo challenged.

But Izaya didn’t take to it. “Psh, yeah right. I prefer to be chauffeured.”

Shizuo doubted Basil would resist all his training just because Izaya was a flea. Basil was probably covered in fleas as it was. No, this had everything to do with Izaya’s approach to every living creature.

“That was you, though,” Shizuo said very matter-of-factly.

“What was me?” asked Izaya.

“Well I mean…” Shizuo frowned. “Like, you didn’t give this guy a chance before you just decided that you didn’t like each other.”

“He’s not human; he’s just a dumb animal, so why would I like him?”

Basil kicked his hind legs, and Izaya bounced forward into Shizuo. Izaya’s arms tightened.

Grinning, Shizuo leaned forward and gave Basil a rewarding pat. ‘Atta boy. “Guess he’s not so dumb that he can’t tell when you’re talking shit.”

“He can’t understand me,” Izaya said, “that’s just absurd, but I think you’ve got him trained as your wingman or something.”

Shizuo choked on any attempt at a response.

Izaya’s grip tightened around Shizuo’s chest, and he leaned a cheek against Shizuo’s back. Shizuo could feel the smirk through his shirt. “I’m not saying it’s not effective. But you could try and be more subtle.”

Sure his face was warm and red, Shizuo stared straight ahead. “That’s… I’m not…” He gripped the reins tightly and felt Izaya bury his laughter between Shizuo’s shoulder blades.

“On the other hand, I’m giving Shizu-chan too much credit,” Izaya said. “As if you were smart enough to do any of this on purpose.”

“Hey,” Shizuo grumbled and twisted to frown at Izaya, who’d tilted his neck and propped his chin on Shizuo’s shoulder. It was an uncomfortable position for the both of them, but Shizuo was willing
to break his back a little to see the cheeky smile playing on Izaya’s lips. Shizuo hoped Izaya considered even such an innocent exchange to be a meaningless game.

It was another warm, breezy day. Maybe cooler than the last, but the sun kept them comfortable.

“I’m going to start to sweat if you keep clinging to me like that,” Shizuo said.

“Gross,” said Izaya, yet he remained as he was.

“I’m gonna tell everyone in Ikebukuro about how you were scared shitless of a camel,” Shizuo teased dryly. Facing front again, he continued to lead Basil.

“Of the few things in this world that actually frighten me, a camel is certainly not one of them.”

“No, you’re just afraid it won’t like you.”

Izaya huffed into Shizuo’s back.

“You just want everyone to like you, don’t you?” When Izaya didn’t answer, Shizuo glanced around to see just Izaya’s eyes glaring up at him. “You do. Why?”

“Shizu-chan shouldn’t try and analyse people,” Izaya mumbled. “It’s not in his brain capacity to understand.”

“I don’t,” Shizuo admitted. “But you know why nobody does, right?”

Arms uncoiled from around Shizuo’s waist, and the pressure on his back disappeared. Izaya had leaned back and stared at Shizuo both dumbfoundedly and aggressively. Cursing himself, Shizuo immediately pulled the reins for Basil to stop and twisted towards Izaya again.

“That’s not what I meant,” Shizuo said.

“Yes it is,” said Izaya. A jubilant mask fitted to his face. “It’s fine, of course. I know I can’t be everyone’s cup of tea.”

It was a difficult position, especially as Shizuo attempted to close the distance between them on the damn hump. “No, what I meant was that you gave up too easily.”

“It’s a camel, Shizu-chan. I’ll move on.”

“All the horrible things you do don’t help either,” Shizuo scorned, “But I mean besides all that.”

Izaya crossed his arms. He opened his mouth, but Shizuo interrupted him again.

“If you weren’t such an asshole, you’d be fine.”

“Fine?”

Shizuo swallowed.

“What are you doing?” Izaya asked as Shizuo slid off the camel’s back.

Holding his arms up for Izaya, Shizuo said, “Come here.”


“Come here!” Shizuo growled.
Rolling his eyes, Izaya swung his legs around. “I can get down myself,” but that didn’t stop him from bracing his hands on Shizuo’s shoulders as Shizuo gripped his waist firmly. To Izaya’s surprise, Shizuo swung him around so that he cradled Izaya in his arms. “What the-”

Shizuo marched around Basil until his head was in reach of Izaya’s.

Realizing what Shizuo was doing, Izaya started to squirm. “Shizu-chan- what are you- NO-”

Too late. Shizuo gripped Basil’s harness and gently pulled his head down until the camel was planting sloppy kisses on Izaya’s face.

“See?” Shizuo chuckled at Izaya’s whiny protests and uninspired orders to release him. Maybe Shizuo would have obeyed if most pleas weren’t drowned out by increasing giggles the more Basil nuzzled into Izaya’s space. At least Shizuo dropped Izaya’s legs so he could stand and experience the animal’s affections more fully, but he kept his arms tight around Izaya just in case. Izaya curled against him, and Shizuo decided that wild animals were indeed the best wingmen in existence.

After a while, Basil grew tired of accommodating them and left them alone. He trotted a safe distance away, probably telling them to get a move on. But Shizuo stayed there with his arms around Izaya, who was still recovering from the sudden display. Izaya had to catch his breath. His arms lay across Shizuo’s across his chest. He leaned back into Shizuo’s chest, but unfortunately the backpack was between them.

“Don’t crush the water bottles,” Izaya warned.

“I could crush more than that,” said Shizuo, tightening his hold just slightly.

Turning in Shizuo’s arms to face him, Izaya smirked. “Then what a dangerous situation I’m in.”

Once again, Izaya demonstrated a complete lack of fear that Shizuo would cause him harm. His face was rosy in the places it’d been abused by camel lips.

A fucking camel was getting more action than Shizuo. But it made him wonder what would happen if he just went for it. Right there, right then, with no one watching but a seven foot cudmuncher. Izaya was right there, literally in Shizuo’s grasp, and had already let Shizuo touch him in a number of surprising ways without fuss. Even now, he stood confidently in a position almost everyone that knew Shizuo would find dangerous. What would happen if Shizuo suddenly tried something?

He could slit my throat, But that wasn’t even the worst thing that could happen.

Rejection.

Straightforward rejection was by far the worst thing that could happen. And of all the possible outcomes, was the most likely. ‘I have no desire for a beast’s love,’ the words echoed in Shizuo’s mind. Shame on Shizuo for ever suspecting otherwise.

Izaya peered over Shizuo’s shoulder. “Oooh!! Look!” He untangled himself from Shizuo’s embrace and pointed in the distance.

Not much further down the road lay a dusty valley crowded with people. Embedded into a yellow cliff was an impressive temple, three stories high and fronted by many columns. Its stories rose into two plateaus accessible by a long, narrow staircases. The temple stretched deep, deep from the valley to the mountain.

“What’s that?” Shizuo asked.
Izaya grinned. “The Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut. Let’s go!” And he was out of Shizuo’s grasp again.

The temperature rose with the sun throughout the day. Shizuo could feel a pebble in his shoe, but he imagined a thousand more getting under his foot if he dare take it off. Just the one was testing his temper already. Every step triggered a seer of rage. He already came within a hair from destroying a thirteenth century sarcophagus, and he probably would have if Izaya had not intervened and dragged him out of the tomb.

Now they sat in the Valley of the Kings while Izaya made Shizuo fish the forsaken stone from his sneaker.

Not that the crumbling tombs of mummified kings from thousands and thousands of years ago wasn’t all fascinating, but it wasn’t. Not for Shizuo. Maybe if he hadn’t spent the other day in Giza and the previous days in Cairo museums and Nile tours, Shizuo would find the Valley more exciting.

The temple was cool, Shizuo conceded to himself. They’d toured the mortuary temple of the Queen Hatshepsut, of whom Shizuo knew nothing but from what Izaya informed him sounded pretty neat.

However, the Valley was mostly a valley of sand. There were paths winding by dunes and cliff sides, scattered tourists throughout. All of the grandeur was buried underneath. Unfortunately, most of the tombs were closed, because after several thousand years, naturally, falling apart. Shizuo could have done without, but he also didn’t want to have come all that way for nothing. Izaya, though, seemed to be enjoying himself regardless.

A decent crowded by one pit, waiting to get inside.

“Looks like there are still a few still open,” Shizuo observed.

Izaya didn’t even bother looking the same direction. “Let’s not waste money on KV62, it gets enough publicity. I’d rather meet the man behind the Tut.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“And it’s small, and gets far too much traffic, which wouldn’t suit our pursuers,” Izaya continued. “KV5, however…”

With Izaya in the lead, they meandered towards an emptier vein in the Valley towards the entrance. The area was clearly under excavation. Evidence of archeology littered the entrance to a particular pit, closed off with a clear DO NOT ENTER sign. They peeked around a hill, wary of workers and security.

“It’s closed,” Shizuo said.

“Which makes it even more suspicious.”

Shizuo wasn’t so sure. “Most of these places are closed. It’s not suspicious, they’re all just piled with crap.”

“That could also be true,” regardless, Izaya retrieved his device from his backpack and switched it on. “But we have to get in there anyways.”
“In there?” Shizuo glanced around. “It’s completely blocked off and the middle of the day. People will see us!”

“Can’t you distract them?”

“How?!”

Izaya shrugged. “I don’t know, throwing stuff and screaming like you usually do? That’s pretty distracting.”

“That’s usually when I’m chasing you.”

“Hmm, good point.” Izaya bit his lip.

“Why does it have to be me?” Shizuo asked, “Can’t you do it?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, I’ll get inside, and you do the thing you did in Boston,” Shizuo recalled, “with the hips and the hair and the… yeah!”

Izaya stared at him for a good moment. “Not everyone is a repressed homosexual, Shizu-chan.”

“Then do the Egyptian security version of that!”

“I’m sure I can distract anyone I want to,” Izaya said, “But what will you do when you get inside? You don’t know what you’re looking for.”

“I’ll use that thing.” Shizuo pointed to the device. Izaya rose his eyebrows.

“You?”

“Oh, how hard can it be,” Shizuo grabbed the device and realized he didn’t even know where to start. “I’ll figure it out! Besides, you couldn’t get past those blockades. I can move them easily.”

“Getting cocky with that superpower now, aren’t you?”

Shizuo just glared.

“Fine,” Izaya said, “I’ll be in five minutes behind you. Any longer, come back out.” He was about to leave when he turned around again. “Just… don’t go nuts and crash the entire thing in while you’re down there?”

Shizuo cursed at Izaya’s back as the latter approached one of the workers on KV5. Whatever he was saying, Izaya was putting on a flustered show, enough that the other men around came to try and figure out what was going on. Then, Izaya was pointing away from the pit, and went running the opposite way. The men were close on his heel, leaving the site abandoned. There wasn’t anyone around but Shizuo.

Checking his surroundings repeatedly, Shizuo made his way to the entrance, a closed off flight of stairs leading under the sand. A door had been installed, but it was chained off. Not so much that Shizuo couldn’t kick his way in, though. Occasionally he glanced at the device. Nothing changed, so he assumed there was nothing around.

The stairs went even deeper, and the narrow hallways got darker. Sunlight streamed in from elsewhere other than the entrance, allowing Shizuo to see where he was going by more than just the
light of the device’s monitor. He could make out the rotting and eroded walls that still had traces of painted hieroglyphics on them. Men with animals’ heads, and symbols telling stories of centuries ago. It wasn’t long before he was met with obstacles like fallen in walls and rubble. When he roughly moved some debris out of his way, the foundation shook just slightly. Sand trickled in from above. He froze completely.

Izaya had been right; one misuse of his strength and Shizuo could get trapped under all of this. From there, he proceeded with more caution.

The tomb was much larger than Shizuo expected. Passing pillars and holes to adjoining rooms, Shizuo started to think he could get lost in this place. The ceiling was incredibly low in places, and the path painfully narrow. Here and there were tarps, either hanging or on the ground, and tools lying around for archeologists to return to. The sound of silence other than his own footsteps and the movement of rock and sand made Shizuo nervous, especially of this place’s stability. Without any signal from his device, Shizuo mainly remained on a straight path since he entered.

Eventually, he came to a fork. An image of a jackal-headed man carved into the wall stopped him. Shizuo was definitely in the darkest part of the cave. He began to wonder how long it had been since he separated from Izaya when a blip on the monitor caught his attention.

It’s making a sound. Shizuo looked down. There was also a blue dot on the monitor that had not been there before. When Shizuo stepped right, the sound got just a fraction louder and the blue dot moved. When Shizuo stepped left, the sound disappeared along with the dot.

Then there was another sound, but not from the device. A whistle came from down the cavern, and Shizuo’s head snapped in its direction.

“Izaya? Izaya!” He called. Another whistle came in response, then another. “IZAYA, DOWN HERE!” All he got were whistles, so Shizuo marched back in their direction. When the whistling got louder, Shizuo shouted for Izaya again. By the time they were close, Izaya was hissing at him.

“Don’t shout you idiot!” Izaya was on the other side of a fallen pillar. “Which do you want, the tomb to cave in or for everyone to find us?”

“Oh.” Shizuo hadn’t thought about that.

Izaya hopped over the pillar with ease and joined Shizuo on the other side. While Shizuo was about to ask him how he’d distracted the Valley, but Izaya was anxious. “Did you find anything?”

Shizuo wasn’t entirely sure that he had. He led Izaya to the Jackal carving and showed him the blip. Immediately, Izaya snatched the device and took off towards the right.

“Oi!” Shizuo ran after him, as always.

At this point, they were almost rock climbing. Much had been knocked down, and the walls, pillars, and ceiling seemed especially unstable. They had to crawl and climb to get around. None of this stopped Izaya, though. Shizuo could hear the device making a ruckus from ahead. Then, they came to a narrow tunnel, and somewhat different than the rest of the tomb.

No hieroglyphics or Ancient Egyptian lore graced these walls. The tunnel scooped down and twisted, and they seemed to follow it for miles. Separate paths snaked away from them, but Izaya kept following his device.

“Do you hear that?” He asked suddenly, hushed.
Shizuo listened. At first, he heard nothing, but then he made out the faint murmur of voices.

“People?”

“From the Valley…” Izaya scanned where they were. “I think we’re near KV62, and we can hear the crowd.” He kept walking, Shizuo on his heels.

When the path seemed to end, destroyed by rubble, a tarp was just visible on the other side. Several, actually, hanging like curtains and blocking the view of whatever was beyond the barricade.

“It’s a dead end,” Shizuo said. It couldn’t be helped.

“You can move these, though,” Izaya said hopefully. He clutched the device, which was now emitting a piercing beep.

“What about me knocking everything down?”

“I need to get in there!” Izaya argued. Without giving Shizuo a sufficient amount of time to answer, Izaya turned off his device, stuffed it away, and started climbing through the narrow opening.

“Hey wait!”

Only Izaya could have squeezed through that hole, so Shizuo had no choice but to push the rubble out of his way. Despite his carelessness, the tomb remained intact.

Swatting the tarps out of his way, Shizuo found Izaya standing in the middle of what appeared to be more of a medical lab than an archeological dig site. Dirt beneath them ended and became a tile floor. Steel tables, trays, light fixtures, a monitor and contraptions beyond Shizuo’s recognition occupied the space. If Shizuo didn’t know better, he’d say it looked like an operating room. Dissecting tools lay on a tray beside four clay jars. Each jar had a strange lid of the head of a man, a baboon, a jackal, and a hawk. However, the equipment didn’t look like it had been touched in months, a light layer of dust coating them. Even stranger, too, was where regularly an operating table would be lay a massive, eroding, stone sarcophagus.

Izaya stood at the center, regarding the scene with a disturbing sense of familiarity. Shizuo watched Izaya step around in silence, examining each detail, until he suddenly starting kicking fiercely at the lid of the sarcophagus. Though the lid was moving, Shizuo made quick work of it by sliding it off completely.

At first, Shizuo believed they had actually found a mummy. A body did lay in the sarcophagus, arms crossed just like a mummy, but chances that it had ever had life were slim. Instead of decaying flesh, the body was a metallic replica. Its muscles were naked wires, its bones steel rods, and its organs hollow except for four. Where a body’s liver, lungs, intestines, and stomach belonged, a human’s organs resided. They even appeared fresh and working, plugged into this artificial being, useless.

She had a face, too, this body. Beautifully sculpted out of a metal alloy. Aged, gentle. Her forehead was hollowed out to reveal a blinking green motherboard.

“Well that’s creepy,” Shizuo said in their silence. However, Izaya saw no humor in their discovery.

Actually, Shizuo had never seen Izaya so manic.

“Is this what was sending out the signal?” His tone was deadly even.

“You tell me,” Shizuo said.
Instead, Izaya ripped the blinking transmitter from the sculpture’s brain. With one motion he then threw it down on the ground and began stomping on it. He’d never stomped on something so passionately since he decided to make crushing girls’ cell phones his hobby, and even then it was a fit of glee. Now was a case of vengeful fury.

Soon, the motherboard was nothing but a pile of shards to blend in with the dirt floor, yet Izaya kept trampling on it long after it was necessary. How he finally stopped was slow and gradual, like he was tiring himself out. Once satisfied, he turned back to Shizuo with a plastered smile.

“I feel better!”

“The fuck was that, anyways?” Shizuo asked.

Izaya fetched his tracker and checked it. “See? No more transmission.”

“I expected it to be bigger.” Shizuo looked down at the now empty cavity in the alloy skull.

“Power can come in small packages, Shizu-chan.”

The organs ceased their liveliness, but Shizuo still expected the fake body to jump at them. “You sure this thing won’t… try and kill us?”

“Trust me, she’s already dead,” Izaya said. When Shizuo gave him a peculiar look, he added, “Besides, she’d try and kill just you, not me.”

“What would she do with you then?”

“Play with me.”

Shizuo grimaced. A disgusting air lingered in this whole place. It smelled sterile and rotten at the same time. “As long as this means no crazy things are going to start attacking us again.”

“Not in Egypt.”

“Well…” Shizuo glanced around. “You know what this kind of place is doing in an Ancient Egyptian burial ground?”

“I have an idea…” If Shizuo didn’t know better, he’d find Izaya’s expression amused. Izaya examined everything, and stopped by the clear jars, opening them to find nothing inside. “This whole place is a replica.”

“Of?”

“A game board. I suspect this is just one of many tiles.” Izaya knocked the jars over and smashed them too.

“Why here?” Shizuo asked, figuring he’d ask as much as he could when he had the opportunity.

“If I’m not mistaken, this is where Ay’s remains were found… Separated from his own tomb. Cast out and shamed.” Izaya chuckled, a bitter edge to it. “I must admit… my admirers know me well. They know what’ll draw me in. It’s really embarrassing.”

Admirers is a new word for them, Shizuo noted, confused and alarmed.

Antagonizing was not admiring, despite Izaya’s twisted understanding of the concept. These people, whoever or whatever they were, must think similarly to Izaya. If Shizuo knew Izaya as well as they
seemed, he would show his affections much differently than a chase around the globe. Then again, as he looked down at where he stood now, maybe that wasn’t so. Curiosity got the best of him. “If I can ask… What does draw you in?”

Once they’d climbed out of the tomb, Basil was waiting for them. Izaya had relayed his distraction had been to set their camel loose near KV62, which had apparently scattered the crowd so frantically that security had to settle everyone down. During the commotion, Izaya had slipped away. They assumed that not much afterwards, Basil had followed to where Izaya had slid underground. According to Izaya, Basil was smarter than Shizuo.

Now, they rode the camel through over a kilometer over sand and stone.

“Gonna tell me where we’re going?” Shizuo asked.

“I swear we’re going in the right direction,” said Izaya.

“...If we get stranded in the middle of the desert, I’m gonna kill you.”

“I know where we’re going. And you’d die in the desert without me.”

“It’d be worth it.”

“Geesh, Shizu-chan’s so mean in the heat!

In reality, his increased hostility was meant to distract from their position of Izaya against Shizuo’s back with his arms around Shizuo once more.

“Ah, I shouldn’t say that,” Izaya said, “You’re mean pretty much all the time.”

“How much farther is this place?”

“Soon, soon! You’re like an impatient child.”

“Like you’re one to talk!”

“Patience is one of my many virtues.”

“You?” Shizuo snorted, “Virtue? There’s nothing virtuous about you.” Had Shizuo known the seven virtues, he might have said otherwise. Not that Shizuo believed himself to have many of what he’d consider ‘virtues.’

Before Izaya could rebuttal, Basil came to an abrupt halt. They were still in the middle of nowhere, and Shizuo tried to nudge him forward. Basil would not go forward, but he would back up and grunt disapprovingly.

“What’s the matter with you?!” Shizuo kept nudging the camel, but he refused to go down the path any farther.

Izaya hummed behind him. “Maybe he’s realized he doesn’t like Shizu-chan after all.”

Shizuo hopped down from the hump and tried to pull Basil along by the reins instead. Having none of it, Basil growled and clopped backwards. His wild movements were those of fear, and their roughness almost knocked Izaya right off.
“Come on!” Shizuo’s teeth ground together.

While Shizuo could definitely drag this animal forward if he really wanted to, any more effort he put in would most likely hurt it. Basil was adamant on not going any further down the path, so Shizuo opted for holding him steady while Izaya joined him on the ground. When Shizuo let Basil go, he galloped about thirty meters back towards the Valley of the Kings. Once there, Basil slowed and looked back at the two humans, waiting.

“What a peculiar beast,” Izaya said.

Shizuo snarled, “That’s just great! Now we really are stranded out here!”

“We’re not stranded,” Izaya scoffed. “We’re almost there and plenty of people walk this far on foot. We can even walk back if we have to. Let the animal wander around, it makes no difference to us.”

Truth be told, Shizuo was uncomfortable with leaving the camel behind. Not just because he didn’t want to walk through this uneven terrain, but because he found Basil’s actions unsettling. Wherever they were headed caused their camel to freak out and turn back. Even now, he was pacing a safe distance away and watching the humans as if trying to warn them to follow his lead.

But just as Basil was reluctant to go forward, Izaya was reluctant to turn back.

They walked what seemed to be another half a kilometer before finding themselves a smaller, more isolated, and more deserted version of the Valley. Shizuo could see all of five people going about their business.

Shizuo frowned. “What a lively place.”

“But isn’t it better than the over crowded, over hyped KVs?” Izaya asked.

For Shizuo, that fit, but not for Izaya. “Yeah, but you like watching them all. We’re not here for another creepy mummy, are we?”

“No, I just wanted to come pay my respects to some of the more interesting historical figures.” Izaya dimpled, “Follow me.”

They paid way into another tomb. Apparently, Shizuo and Izaya weren’t the only ones in there, as Shizuo could hear the chitter chatter of tourists deeper into the tomb, and occasionally a pair or small group would pass them in or out of their way of the tomb. While it wasn’t as nearly as much foot traffic as KV62, this was the only pit open in the Western part of the Valley to which they’d travelled.

This one was not a fraction as big as KV5 and stuck to one narrowly steeped path into the Earth. Of course, just as any tomb Shizuo had seen so far, the walls were adorned hieroglyphic tales and flat paintings of gods and men. While no Egyptian tomb could completely withstand the test of time, this one’s destruction felt different from the previous. Those had displayed the effects of over a thousand years’ erosion and flooding. This tomb on the other hand, while clearly had its share of nature’s forces, had the marks of disrespect and hatred. Like it had been desecrated.

“There aren’t still dead bodies in here, are there?” Shizuo asked suddenly.

Izaya frowned. “Probably. Why?”

The thought gave Shizuo the creeps. “I can hear bugs.” A faint buzzing and skittering sounded all around him, like they might be in the walls. Shizuo was having flashbacks to that famous mummy
blockbusters with the bugs that crawled under people’s skins. Not exactly what he had signed up for.

“I don’t know about bugs,” Izaya smirked, “but I would be more worried about the curses.”

“Yeah right,” Shizuo snickered.

Stopping in his tracks, Izaya fixed him with a disbelieving look.

Puzzled, Shizuo went on. “You don’t really believe in shit like curses, right?”

It’s possible Izaya had never looked at Shizuo so dumbfounded before. “…You were attacked by an army of people spiritually possessed by a demon sword. Really?”

Scratching his chin, Shizuo recalled that particularly bad day. “Oh yeah. That’s not gonna happen in here, is it?”

Izaya barked a laughter that somehow sounded endeared. “Oh Shizu-chan. Sometimes I envy your simple mind.”

Shizuo wanted to retort, but the bugs were sounding louder.

A group of adults came to pass them, but their guide stopped to brush the side of the wall where a word have been struck off and replaced with another. The group must have consisted of Americans or Europeans, as the guide spoke in English.

"Here you’ll see an example of where Horemheb erased Ay’s name in protest of the Amarna period."

To Shizuo, it just looked like a bunch of symbols. Izaya had stopped to listen intently.

“Despite being the army’s commander and chief under Ay and Tutankhamun’s rule, Horemheb was against their monotheistic practices and moved to return Egypt to a place of polytheism. Horemheb was not actually supposed to succeed Ay, as Ay intended his heir to be Nakhtmin. Follow me into the next chamber and we’ll see further illustrations and homages to Ay eliminated from his own tomb. The sarcophagus in place is not the original, but a replica, because the original was...”

The group disappeared into the dark depths of the next tunnel.

“Isn’t it funny how fickle the world can be about their deities?” Izaya said once they’d gone.

Shizuo shrugged. “If that’s what they were saying. I caught that that Hornhead guy kinda sounded like a dick, though.”

“Shizu-chan, I’m surprised!” Izaya grinned, “It seems your English is improving after all!”

“A lot good English does when it’s all jumbled with all these Egyptian names. I’ve never heard of any of these guys,” he paused, “except Tut. I’ve heard of Tut.”

“Ah yes, the famous boy king. It’s another funny thing…”

They restarted their descent, and Izaya started talking with his hands - a tick Shizuo considered to be one of his favorites.

“Tutankhamun wasn’t necessarily so significant in his own time. He wasn’t a Great, like Ramesses or anything. But there’s something impressive about the idea of a child in power, and especially a child that doesn’t fuck everything to ashes. The thing, though, is that Egypt kept standing because of
men pulling strings behind the pharaoh, men like Ay and Horemheb. That can be said most of all for Ay, except just like you, no one’s ever heard of him.”

“But you have,” Shizuo couldn’t help but marvel. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?” Izaya asked, taken aback.

“Know all the shit nobody else cares to?” Then Shizuo remembered that when Izaya used to make a living off of that, Shizuo would give him hell for it. Not admire it. “Ugh, nevermind. I don’t wanna know.”

Izaya giggled. “Well I didn’t learn that from tricking teenagers in Ikebukuro. I fucking read, that’s how.”

This was an acceptable answer, enough to touch a small smile to Shizuo lips. At least he’s self-aware.

They passed the tour group again in the antechamber, who had stopped to admire a fresco of men hunting a hippopotamus. Without stopping, Shizuo and Izaya continued on into the burial chamber.

“I didn’t know there were hippos in the Nile,” Shizuo said in passing.

“Hmm… Not surprising.”

“What, no Izapedia entry for African hippos?”

“Hah. Shut up.”

The burial chamber was lit by lights under cracks in the floor around its perimeter and under the sarcophagus replica in the center. Railings separated the floor from the decaying walls, though someone could easily reach out and touch the murals. The sarcophagus bore a striking resemblance of that they had found in the abandoned laboratory.

“I thought there’d be more security,” Izaya admitted, “But I guess there’s not much else you could do to a place like this.”

Shizuo reached out and touched the walls just because he could.

“Wow,” Izaya sneered, “enjoy your curse.”

Shizuo wiped his hand on his pants.

“I don’t think it works that way.”

“Pft,” Shizuo shrugged, “I don’t see how life can curse me anymore than it already has.”

“Oh boohoo, poor Shizu-chan.”

“Shhhhuddup.”

Sulking melodramatically, Izaya deepened his voice to sound more like Shizuo. “I’ve got superhuman strength and everyone likes me! Gosh, what a burden! Life’s just awful!”

Shizuo blushed and threw an empty punch Izaya’s way. “That’s not me at all!”

“You’re right, you’re completely right. Give me a cigarette and the sunglasses.”
They’d been lucky to have been the only ones in there to cause such a ruckus. Their fun was spoiled when the tour group filtered in, so they hushed up and stopped chasing each other like children. Only when he and Izaya were the only source of noise did Shizuo notice how quiet these tourists were. None talked to each other even when the guide wasn’t speaking. They just followed silently around until the next bit of information was spilled.

“*Behind me is a depiction of Ay and Tutankhamun,*” the guide started.

“It’s getting crowded,” Shizuo said, and Izaya nodded.

As soon as they moved towards the door, their path was blocked by a pair of tourists in the increasingly crowded tomb.

“We see Ay performing the opening of the mouth ceremony on Tutankhamun, a ritual Ay used—”

“Ya mind?” Shizuo grunted as he tried to shove past them, two middle-aged men dressed as simple hikers.

“-to ensure his position as Tutankhamun’s successor to the throne.”

The men held their ground, even against Shizuo. “Out of the way!” He barked, but they shoved him backwards. They were staring past him at Izaya.

“*Many believe that Ay poisoned Tutankhamun in the first place…*”

The lights of the tomb began to flicker out, one by one.

“*...But there’s no actual concrete evidence to support this claim.*”

A cautious hand held Shizuo’s elbow.

“Shizu-chan…”

With nowhere to go, Shizuo backed Izaya into a corner and guarded him from the small army now closing in. He grit his teeth together, prepared for what was about to come.

In some incomprehensible form of gibberish, the guide continued to mutter until the only source of light left in the tomb were the glowing blue eyes fixed directly on Izaya.

“Shit.”

Multiple hands flew at Shizuo at one. He threw them all off and into the walls, and the foundation shook. They rose as soon as they hit the floor. Shizuo could feel that invisible force trying to drag him forward, but their power was not on the same level as the woman in Spain. Grinning, Shizuo took the beating to them.

He believed he could fend them off with just his fists for a moment, and maybe he could have. There were a lot of enemies raining down on him at that moment, but Shizuo had faced more and gotten out. However, at that time he hadn’t been trying to defend someone. One tried to slip behind Shizuo while his body was twisted and made a grab at Izaya.

Izaya kicked it in the knees and stuck a knife in the back of its neck.

Maybe Shizuo didn’t need to worry so much about Izaya.

It sounded like they were all chanting something or other, like cyborg zombies. Shizuo found the
sound incredibly grating, even more so than their lackluster fighting.

“Is that all you got?!” Shizuo taunted as he kneed one in the gut and elbowed another in the face. “You guys are weak!!”

In retrospect, he shouldn’t have provoked them. At least five used their forcefield on him at once and sent him flying.

*WHAM!*

“UGHFG!”

Shizuo’s stomach slammed into one of the railings after he slammed against a wall across the cavern. Again, the place shook, and sand fell from the ceiling. A rumble could be heard all around.

“Shizu-chan?!”

“I’m-ACK!”

A hand, or a forcefield, had grabbed Shizuo’s skull and began banging it against the wall repeatedly. Shizuo’s vision started to blur. He braced his hands against the wall and refused to meet it with his face once again.

“Fuck - YOU!” Shizuo whipped around and round house kicked any tourists that happened to be there with the momentum. He met the sight of several of them sliding the lid off the sarcophagus…

And dump Izaya inside.

“HEY!” Finding the railing that had done him harm, Shizuo hoisted it from the floor and began swinging it at them. He hit a bunch in the chest. Others dodged, while a few dived for his throat.

The one that had been the guide replaced the lid over the sarcophagus single-handedly. Next, it directed a few to start pushing the giant coffin out of the room, which they did with ease.

“IZAYA!” Shizuo stepped in Izaya’s directions and the tourists’ surrounded him, ready to put him down.

Furious beyond all reason, Shizuo decided to beat the crap out of them.

He succeeded, in a sense. It was one of his finest brawls, and he used all his best moves. The problem was that these things, cyborgs, people, monsters, whatever they were, absolutely refused to be put down. They all had broken limbs, bleeding and head injuries, but were still working mechanically. Shizuo blamed whichever mystical force field they had to fight with.

Roaring in frustration, he bulldozed his way through the burial chamber. Those that had taken Izaya were hastily dragging the sarcophagus across the antechamber. Shizuo managed to whack on on top of the head with his railing before those behind him tried dragging him back into the burial chamber. One of those in the antechamber snatched the railing away and threw it far in the opposite direction.

Thinking on his toes, Shizuo started beating the roof of the entrance way. The stone crumbled on top of the attackers who were trying to get to him, and their way was blocked. Shizuo turned to do battle with the couple in front of him.

All the while, the foundation threatened to fall more and more. Chunks of the ceiling started to rain, as well as pieces from the wall. To make matters worse, the tourists trapped in the burial chamber
were starting to dig their way through the barrier.

Managing to knock out one in the antechamber, Shizuo also ended up knocking over the sarcophagus. The lid fell off. Izaya scrambled out, sharp of breath and practically hissing. He latched onto the remaining tourist and stabbed it all up and down its spine.

“Izaya!” Shizuo dragged him off, allowing the tourist to fall, paralysed. At any moment, they could get buried or face the rest of the hoard. “We have to get out!”

“It’s no good!” Izaya spat, “They can’t be stopped! They weren’t even supposed to work here! We found and destroyed the signal!”

Shizuo hadn’t even thought of that. He looked back at the tourists trying to crawl their way through the rubble he had created. It hit him, and he wished it had not.

“I have an idea,” he said, surveying the room.

“You?” Izaya sounded disbelieving.

Shizuo wanted to argue that now wasn’t the time or place for Izaya to start getting snarky, but instead he pushed Izaya in the direction of the exit.

“You go!”

Izaya stood there. “What about you?”

“I have to stay!”

“Why?!”

“I told you, I have an idea!”

“Well this seems like a stupid one!” Izaya grabbed his arm and started pulling Shizuo with him. “This place is gonna sink, and—”

“Izaya!” Shizuo shoved him off and grabbed him firmly by the shoulders. “Get out now!”

“But without you—”

“You’re selfish!” Shizuo then snapped, because this might be the only way. “Remember?! You’re a selfish coward who only cares about himself, right?! You want those things to follow you?!”

Izaya didn’t answer, he just stared wide-eyed and jaw-slacked at Shizuo’s sudden redirected hostility.

“DO YOU?!”

“NO!”

“See?” Shizuo squeezed Izaya’s shoulders firmly. “You’re selfish and I hate you for it. You’re a goddamn bastard, good-for-nothing flea that’ll save himself without a second thought. We hate each other so none of this matters, but I’m gonna do my damn job. So you do what cowards do right now,” he took a deep breath, “and run.”

Shizuo gave Izaya a final, rough shove towards the exit. Izaya froze and stared at Shizuo with bafflement, before for the first time in their relationship he finally listened to Shizuo.
He ran.

With Izaya gone, Shizuo could rest a little easier about what he was about to do. He always surprised himself when he came out one disaster after another alive. Now, he actually hoped that this time would be one of those times. He hated seeing Izaya run without himself pursuing. Watching Izaya go, Shizuo had to ignore every instinct in his body not to follow.

Instead, he began smashing the cavern walls. He picked up the lid to the sarcophagus and batted at the walls, the ceilings, everything. Only someone like him could finally take down a place that had survived thousands of years. His knack for property damage was finally coming in handy. The more he smashed, the more pieces of the tomb fell apart.

“Just try and come, you pricks!” Shizuo shouted at the tourists that were almost through the barrier.

The foremost one could reach its hand forward, and it used its force field to send Shizuo flying across the antechamber and into the adjoining hallway. Everything shook upon his impact with the ground, and it was just the ticket. As soon as the hoard broke through, the land came caving in around them.

Chapter End Notes

DISCLAIMER: You know how I try to keep the tourism pretty realistic? I cheated in this chapter. From my research, I very much don't think that riding camels to the Valley of the Kings is a thing. It's donkey rides or taxi accessible. And why would there be no more taxis???

No reason besides that I really wanted Shizuo and Izaya to ride a camel.

Now I'm going to moonwalk away from this cliffhanger...
As the world came crashing down around him, Shizuo remembered darkness. An alarming pressure force overwhelmed him, and he knew he had stopped breathing. At least for a time. In that brief moment that air couldn’t reach his lungs and that light could not reach his eyes, Shizuo decided that this would not kill him. He would survive this. His life was not a curse, and one a thousand years old would not be his undoing.

Rubble and ruins were no match for his strength, he decided. With that in mind, Shizuo broke free from the Earth. Just barely, enough for his hand to poke out, enough for air, enough for light.

But even that was scarce when a millennia’s old tomb was crushing his limbs. Consciousness faded in and out of him. He could feel it, but it didn’t hurt him. Even without the burden of pain, his body felt the impact this time. Pressure, so much pressure. Too much even for him. Though he knew he had to stay awake, no matter the weight, everything was a blur.

Black, yellow, black, white, red, green, black, white, blue, black.

He could remember the flashing lights, the sirens, the chopping helicopter blades. People shouted in a dozen different languages. Someone grabbed him in the middle of the chaos. A voice spoke to him, course and frantic. It was the most pleasant of all the sounds. He felt cool air, then rough fur, then smooth skin. That skin was the most pleasant of all. After a while, the pandemonium faded behind him and all there was was the voice and its skin. He held on to that voice, and felt that skin. Then he was gone.

Now, the world felt like a cradle.

A soothing, steady motion rocked Shizuo awake, as did the serene sound of breaking waves.

Waves.

Waves?

Shizuo opened his eyes to a dim cabin barely big enough for himself. Practically a closet. His bed, no more than a feathered mat, sat against the white wall like a shelf. The space between the mattress and the ceiling was narrow, and there was no frame, footboard nor headboard. Just a layer of cabinets and drawers, stacked ropes and crates. From the ceiling hung buoys and rods, anchors and hooks. The only source of light was a small, humming lamp across the cabin and a singular porthole, through which Shizuo could see an a solid blue

A fish swam by.

“Wh…” Shizuo croaked, with a dry voice that felt like it had been mute for quite some time. A glass
of water waited nearby, and Shizuo reached for it and swallowed the contents in almost one gulp.

Above him, he could hear a dozen footsteps and shouting men. Not in any language Shizuo could understand. The air lingered with a cool breeze and the stench of chum.

The left side of his body was warm and felt light, a ghostly sensation that left him feeling lacking for something. Looking down at himself, he discovered that most of himself was intact, but he was surprised to see cast and sling around his right arm. After a test, he learned that the rest of his body parts worked just fine. Shizuo couldn’t feel any pain, but the lack of response in his right arm told him that something there was indeed broken. He could also feel the soft sensation of bandages around his crown.

What Shizuo found most surprising, though, is that none of this indicated that he was dead.

He supposed he should be pleased with that, though Izaya was nowhere in sight. Last Shizuo could remember, Izaya was disappearing from his life once and for all.

Probably. Hopefully, but devastatingly.

Shizuo lay motionless on the mat, brows knit as he replayed the last scene in his memory over and over again. The words echoed to him, words that had cast Izaya away from him. They had been meant to send Izaya away, but their aftertaste was still distasteful.

Now, Izaya was probably miles and miles away. Not that Shizuo could blame him, that had been Shizuo’s intent. More troublesome was realizing that at some point, slowly and then instantly, Shizuo became willing to die for Izaya’s safety. When he had watched Izaya leave, Shizuo hadn’t intended on waking up. Only after the rubble fell did he decide he would escape and find Izaya again.

Except from the looks of things, Shizuo was even more stranded than in the desert.

_Maybe I am dead_, Shizuo pondered as he stared up the ceiling, _Maybe this is the boat that charters you off to the land of the dead. Wasn’t there a river in some cultures? This must be it. It sure smells bad enough._

_Can you have a broken arm when you’re dead, though?_ He sighed deeply, and the voices overhead continued to shout. Questions about other possible reasons he could be on a boat passed through his mind. Pirates? Had Egyptian authorities found him and deported him back to Japan? Could he still be on the Nile?

There was only one way to find out.

A pair of boots wait for him on the floor by his mat. The clothes on his body were not his own, but he fit comfortably in the knitted navy sweater and loosely in a pair of brown cargo pants. He wondered if he’d ever see the clothes he’d bought in Boston ever again, or his backpack full of origami, or his bartender uniforms.

Once he tied both boots up to his ankle, he stood up and immediately stumbled. A particularly large wave sent the boat rocking and Shizuo flailed around the cabin like a fish out of water. Only then did it truly hit him that he’d never been on a boat before. He suffered an embarrassing case of sea legs.

A holler from the deck reminded him that he also wasn’t alone. What if he was some pirate hostage? He couldn’t explore the mysterious vessel empty handed, so he grabbed one of the anchors that were lying around and hoisted it upon his shoulder, ready to swing.

He could hardly gain his footing, but that couldn’t be helped. The rotting walls became his support.
He opened the cabin’s door and walked into a congested, dim hallway. There were a few other doors, all closed. Another hall stretched perpendicular. The only source of light was the sunlight streaming down a flight of rickety stairs, though they were more like a ladder, leading up to what Shizuo presumed to be the deck. The voices were louder in that direction.

Shizuo shuffled down the hall, quietly as he could despite his tripping sealegs. Bracing himself on a step several notches from the floor, he lifted himself up to peer through the trapdoor.

Wind lapped viciously at his hair and made it difficult to hear any distinct word to be said. The sky was mostly overcast with a few exceptions of azure patches. No land could be seen over the edges of the boat, meaning he couldn’t be on the Nile anymore. There was also an unmistakable salty texture to the air. The smell was the most overwhelming, tripling in its intensity compared to below deck.

No one seemed to notice Shizuo’s head poking out. About a dozen guys jovially worked with ropes, levies and pulleys, a hawser and a winch. Whenever one came near, Shizuo ducked under to avoid being seen, so he didn’t get a good look at anyone particular. They didn’t look like pirates, but like fisherman. The deck was crowded with buckets of chum, wet nets and slimy contraptions. No weapons, not even on the men. Just overalls, coats, and sweaters.

But then, fishermen would be an excellent cover for bloodthirsty pirates.

If Shizuo peeked around and risked revealing more of himself, he could see a double decker bridge. A large man with a large hat exited through a door on the upper deck, and before Shizuo could hide, the man made eye contact and grinned.

“AHOOOOY!!!”

Shit.

The other sailors stopped what they were doing and turned their attention to Shizuo’s half-hidden face.

“Why does he have one of our anchors?” One asked.

“Holy crap, he’s holding it with one hand!”

None of them seemed too intimidated, nor threatening.

Shizuo hopped from the latch and pointed the anchor at them, an act meant in itself to be intimidating but appeared more clumsy as Shizuo struggled to stay on his feet. The fishermen watched on warily.

“DOES ANYONE CARE TO TELL ME,” Shizuo shouted over the gusty atmosphere, “WHERE THE HELL I AM AND WHO THE HELL YOU PEOPLE ARE?”

A few of them exchanged looks, possibly debating casting themselves overboard.

“Ahoy there, Heiwajima-san!” Came a voice behind him.

Shizuo whipped the anchor around and almost took off the head of the large man from the bridge. Up close, he was probably only an inch or two taller than Shizuo; the sailor’s hat added more height than was natural atop of his short black hair. He was a thick man, though, with broad shoulders and a square jaw. All this contradicted his surprisingly young face and twinkling kind eyes. Despite Shizuo almost beheading him, the man grinned and chuckled.

“Sorry, sorry!” He held up his hands in surrender, “Looks like you don’t remember anything!”
Shizuo squinted. “You’re… Japanese?”

He beamed. “Captain Sousuke Namikaze, at your service!”

“Alright, captain,” Shizuo growled, “Where the hell am I, how the hell did I get here, and how the fuck do you know my name?”

Captain Sousuke spread his arms in a proud gesture that included the whole ship. “Welcome aboard the Lady Beatrice!!”

Peering around, Shizuo regarded the old tugboat with nothing short of suspicion. Though its size wasn’t too modest, the Lady Beatrice wasn’t exactly the most pristine vessel, with its lousy paint job, rusty metals, and barrels of chum. Shouldering the anchor again, Shizuo faced the captain.

“You guys aren’t pirates, are ya?”

Captain Sousuke barked a laughter. “Of course not! Just your average fishermen!”

There was a shortling murmur from the other shipmates, who earned a nasty scowl from Shizuo. They quickly hushed up and returned to their posts.

“Still doesn’t explain why I’m here or where is here,” Shizuo glared at the captain, squeezing his hold on the anchor. “Do me a favor and dock this dingy. I need to find someone.”

There was a pause as the captain looked at Shizuo with pondering eyes. “You really don’t remember anything?” asked Captain Sousuke.

“If I did,” Shizuo snarled, “I wouldn’t be asking!” He took a step forward and the captain yielded.

“Of course, of course!” He started to head for the latch. “Well, follow me then!”

Hesitant at first, Shizuo followed him below deck. The captain led Shizuo back into the little closet cabin Shizuo had woken up in. He started rummaging through some stacks of papers and baubles.

“Let’s see, where did it go…” Captain Sousuke flitted through some newspapers piled together.

“The hell you looking for?” Shizuo snapped, “Didn’t you hear me? I need to find someone, not hear the news!”

“Just a second…”

“DON’T TELL ME-”

“Found it!”

The captain turned around with a newspaper. Two, actually. The first one he held up to Shizuo was entirely in Arabic, and Shizuo couldn’t read a damned word.

“Do I look like I can read that?” Shizuo snarled.

“I’m not good with Arabic myself,” the captain admitted. “We got this when we were in Alexandria. You created quite the buzz, and you wouldn’t even know it!” He pointed to the picture on the front page under the first headline.

Shizuo snatched the newspaper, almost ripping it, and looked closely at the photo on display. It was an aerial shot of a familiar valley in the desert, though it was crowded with police, firetrucks, and
ambulances. Clouds of dust, results of the massive cave-in, rose from the ground. The area looked like a ground zero.

“The news wouldn’t stop talking about a ‘landslide’ in the Valley of the Kings,” Captain Sousuke explained as Shizuo continued to look at the picture in disbelief. “The most amazing part is that nobody died.”

Shizuo’s eyes widened. “Nobody…?!“ Shizuo shook his head, overwhelmed. “Wait a minute, I thought you said you couldn’t read this. How do you know?!“

“Don’t take my word for it!” the captain handed him a second newspaper, this time a copy if the Japan Times. “I need to be able to read the news, right? It was a big enough story to reach around the world, though it didn’t make the front page everywhere. Take a look!”

Looking down at where the captain had folded the paper for him, Shizuo saw a similar photograph of the valley. It was smaller, and it was only given a quarter of a page.

**CURSE OF THE PHARAOHS… OR MIRACLE?**

Yesterday, at around 15:04 EEST and 21:04 JST, a tomb at the famous Egyptian Valley of the Kings suffered what officials say was a landslide, and the tomb caved in entirely. Several tourists suffered injuries, but so far no one has been reported dead. To everyone’s great relief, it appears that nobody had been inside the most damaged tomb at the time, WV23. Locals are calling it a miracle, since the tomb is very popular amongst tourists. Responders are still digging through the debri, but the entire Valley will be closed off until…

Shizuo stopped reading before the end, too shocked and confused to continue. He knew for a fact that at least half of that article wasn’t true.

“Those bastards!” Shizuo roared, causing Sousuke to jump at the sudden outburst. “They…! They’re lying!! What happened to all those robot things, huh?!“

“Robot things…?” Sousuke raised an eyebrow.

Shizuo didn’t bother addressing that further. This whole situation was plagued with questions and confusion. Checking the date of the newspaper, Shizuo asked the captain when all this had happened.

“Little over a week ago,” Sousuke said. “You’ve been out since we got you on board, and barely conscious when that happened.”

“When you…” Shizuo’s voice faded out. He was so damn confused, and he reached up to rub his aching head. It hurt more the more he tried to think back. Under the bandages, he could feel a distinct bump that stung when he touched it. All of the questions building up inside him didn’t help. The one that nagged at him the most was Where is Izaya? He tried to focus on his current situation, though. Izaya wasn’t there to help him along this time.

*Does that mean I’ve been on this piece of shit for a week?* The little deductive reasoning Shizuo had pointed to the paper in his hands and the man in front of him. *Does this guy know I had something to do with this accident?* How?!

Fisting the captain’s collar, Shizuo yanked the man towards him. “Why are you showing me this?!“ He shouted, “Were you the ones to pull me out of there?! Why?!“
“No, no it wasn’t us!” Sousuke looked genuinely alarmed for the first time in Shizuo’s presence. “Izaya brought you to us! I heard it all from him!”

Shizuo dropped the other man instantly. He suddenly felt dazed. “Izaya?”

Sousuke stepped back. “Y-yeah. I got radioed from Alexandria, and it said that Izaya Orihara was finally calling in his favor. Didn’t expect he’d be lugging you with him, though! Man, you were a sorry sight to see back then. I thought for sure you were dead, and that Izaya was gonna ask me a dump a corpse into the Mediterranean. Not that he looked much better at the time, but—”

“Is…” Shizuo cut him off, “Izaya’s on board? You mean he didn’t run off? He’s not gone?”

Scratching his cheek puzzledly, Sousuke answered, “Yeah… Probably down here somewhere. He hates being on deck because of the smell and something about the fish. He’s kinda been a ghost around here—”

Shizuo didn’t need to hear anymore. His heart was pounding so much he could feel it in every nerve. And it felt wonderful. His chase wasn’t over after all. Honestly, he felt foolish for having not sensed Izaya sooner. Not that he was exactly in top form, having just woken up from a week’s long coma in the middle of the sea.

He stepped into the ship’s narrow passage, took a deep breath, and screamed Izaya’s name. When no answer came after but a second, he yelled even louder. He also started banging on all the doors, hard enough for the boat to rock.

“AH! Please don’t do that!!” came Sousuke’s pleading voice behind him. Shizuo ignored him and continued his ruckus. He started kicking doors in, and Sousuke howled in despair though made no other attempts to stop it. Out of the corners of Shizuo’s eyes, he could see several of the shipmates poking their heads over the hatch. They stared both curiously and nervously, but Izaya had yet to appear anywhere.

The last door Shizuo was going to barge through opened on its own.

“I thought I heard a woken beast.”

On the other side of the threshold, Izaya looked up at Shizuo with the most tired, curmudgeon expression Shizuo had ever seen grace his features.

Shizuo barely noticed, too elated to see Izaya before him. “Flea!” His entire face lit up, contrary to Izaya’s apparent belligerence. He had thought he would never see Izaya again. Yet, Izaya seemed to have not abandoned Shizuo after all. The hope that sparked within Shizuo’s veins took control of his muscles and were about to will Shizuo to do something very, very embarrassing. Like scoop Izaya up in a euphoric embrace, for example.

That is, Shizuo might have, had Izaya not cut him off with a tone sharper than any switchblade he’d ever thrown Shizuo’s way.

“If you don’t mind,” Izaya started just Shizuo took a step forward. His eyes were cold and narrowed, “I’m very busy, and your noisy fits are distracting and obnoxious. Could you keep it down?”

The door slammed in Shizuo’s face.

That hopeful spark fizzled out as quickly as it had ignited, with a pathetically high-pitched whistle. Shizuo stood rooted to the spot, and his grinning face was slowly melting into one of bewilderment and despair. This was by far the most confusing aspect of this boat so far. Behind Shizuo, the captain
and the shipmates had witnessed the whole thing, and merely offered Shizuo a resound and sympathetic “Ooooooooh…”

Water sprayed onto Shizuo’s face, both salty from the waves slapping the side of the boat and the slight spit of rain falling from the blanket of clouds overhead. Shizuo lay back on a bit of cargo, staring up at the vast grayness and welcomed the world’s tears over his pitiful existence.

“Thank you for not destroying the door to my quarters,” came Sousuke’s voice beside him.

Though Shizuo almost had. After he’d gotten over the initial shock from Izaya’s rejection, he had begun knocking at the door like a bull and threatened to knock it down if Izaya didn’t come out and explain himself. Sousuke had pleaded with him to not destroy his precious Lady Beatrice, but it was the extended period of silence from Izaya that had sent Shizuo flopping onto the upper deck like a boned fish.

Shizuo didn’t know which felt worse: when he thought Izaya had up and left him in a tomb to die or in the middle of the ocean with some strangers, or knowing that Izaya was isolating himself just two flights below.

To make matters worse, he was trapped by the biggest cage on Earth, walls of freezing water on every side of him. The ocean mirrored the sky’s dismal color, only with more energy in its dancing under the wind.

Various shipmates passed by to talk to the captain, who stood watching over Shizuo like a guardian angel. They simultaneously would introduce themselves to Shizuo. Three were from Japan: a beanpole named Ryuu, a lumpy walrus named Touma, and a tank named Fujimaki. Another was from Naples, and was handsome and enthusiastic with his Italian. Shizuo hadn’t caught his name. A shrimpy shipmate came by to check over Shizuo’s injuries at one point. Curiously named Rio, the kid was too scrawny for his overalls and young enough to still have spots on his face. Apparently this was the kid that patched up Shizuo in the first place, according to Sousuke.

They all made off-handed comments about Izaya’s dismissal and Shizuo’s predicament, but ceased immediately when met with Shizuo’s glower. If Shizuo got so perturbed as to start to rise, Sousuke would order them to go do something fishing-related, and they’d scurry off.

In Sousuke’s tone, though, an order sounded like nothing more than a friendly suggestion.

“If you’re from Kanagawa,” Shizuo changed the subject by addressing Sousuke, “Why are you in the middle of the Mediter… Mediterranean?”


Shizuo frowned. “Am I going anywhere?”

“True!” The captain smiled something sweet, and Shizuo found it impossible to hate the guy no matter how Shizuo hated his own life at the moment. The man’s face was lined with years of laughter and mirth. “Still, I doubt you’d want to hear it all. Basically, I can thank Izaya for my Lady Beatrice here!”

“Izaya got you a boat?” It sounded unlikely, but also reminded Shizuo of how little he actually knew of Izaya’s life. Izaya knew a ton of people outside his niche in Ikebukuro, so these connections around the world shouldn’t surprise him. It still struck a nerve, though, to witness a part of Izaya’s
life that he’d been missing out on.

“Not exactly,” said Sousuke. “See, I grew up knowing I wanted to see the world! So instead of
going to university when I graduated, I hopped a cargo ship heading towards the South Pacific. So I
did just what I wanted! I travelled the world, getting by on freelance labor and whatever I could carry
on my back. Saw the States, Mexico, South America, Europe…”

“How was Mexico?” Shizuo asked.

“Beautiful! Especially during the spring. There are flowers everywhere in the countryside, and then
mountains always rising in the distance. Did a bit of farming work there. But where I really fell in
love with was the Mediterranean.”

“Fishing?”

“You should see the coast lines,” Sousuke said wistfully. “Just wait until we stop in Venice in a
couple of days, you’ll see. But yeah, so I started working on some fishing boats outta Sicily. Started
to learn Italian. Wasn’t satisfied, though, just being a shipmate on someone else’s boat. Not to
mention, the people I was working for… not the most orthodox.”

When Shizuo frowned, Sousuke winked. “Mobsters, weren’t they? So I went back to Japan, but it
just so happened that what and who I got to know on those boats were of interest to people back
there. Yakuza, who knew! They wanted information, I wanted to be a captain… So…”

“Izaya,” Shizuo figured.

“Exchanges were made. I was able to bring Ryuu, Touma, and Fujimaki. Rio and Anthony joined us
after a while. They gave us an in with some locals. It’s not common to see a crew of Japanese guys
with their own vessel in these waters, you can imagine. Anyways, in the end I owed Izaya a favor.
Well, this is it! Not that I would have left you guys in Egypt as you were, after that mess.”

Shizuo groaned, for no particular reason other than in spite of everything.

“Sorry!” Sousuke chuckled, “that must have bored you. It’s not often I get to tell the story in
Japanese!”

“I still don’t remember what happened,” Shizuo said, rubbing the bump on his nogan.

“Well from what I gathered from Izaya - which, mind you, wasn’t much - I’d say you got off lucky
with just a casted arm and some memory loss!”

“What did he tell you?” Did he tell you I destroyed a national landmark while I was under it?

Sousuke crossed his arms. “Hmm… where to start.”

“Captain!”

The fishing business interrupted them. Shizuo would have to wait to hear what happened in Egypt.
Sousuke was needed on deck, and sun was soon setting. Reds and violets dyed the clouds in the
west, and Shizuo descended below deck before the sky was not but a black mass.

The boat had a little kitchen room, just big enough to fit six people. Shizuo made seven, but Rio and
Sousuke were above tending to the boat. Left the three older Japanese men and the foreigner whose
name he still couldn’t remember, Shizuo finally got something to eat.
Touma slid a plate in front of Shizuo. “It’s not much, but here-”

Within a minute, the plate was empty.

“...Is there any more?” Shizuo asked, with food still in his cheeks.

Bursting with laughter, Touma scooped him seconds.

“Want a beer to go with that?” Ryuu asked, pulling out a bottle for himself.

Shizuo shook his head. He swallowed his mouthful. “Milk?”

“Milk? Really?” Ryuu rose an eyebrow. “Well sure, I think we have some of that. Not a drinker, eh?”

Shizuo accepted a glass bottle of milk from Ryuu and shook his head. “Not really.”

Touma chuckled as he uncapped a beer bottle for himself. “It’d help you forget that that food isn’t really that good.”

Rice, tuna, a type of green. It wasn’t much, but Shizuo legitimately couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten. Rio had said he was awake throughout the week to consume nutrients, but Shizuo didn’t remember anything.

If he ate it every time as quickly as he was now, it was no wonder he didn’t remember. He could barely taste it, at the rate he was shoveling spoonfuls of food down his throat. Somehow he managed to pay half attention to the conversation happening between the four fishermen. From what Shizuo gathered, Touma had a large family that had moved out to Europe with him, and Ryuu was engaged to an Italian woman. The foreigner remained a mystery, no matter how animatedly he spoke. But he looked around Shizuo’s age, and was certainly handsome.

*Thump, thump!*

Shizuo kept chewing and glanced over at the boots now next to him on the table.

Their owner, the muscular fellow named Fujimaki, sighed wistfully, “Man, I can’t wait to get ashore! It’s been over a week I’ve been stuck on this dump surrounded by nothing but dicks.” He crossed his arms behind his head. “First thing’s first, I’m getting me some pussy.”

Put off by the suddenly crude language, Shizuo wanted to ignore the guy. Fujimaki, however, caught the corner of Shizuo’s eye. His smirk became coy and provocative.

“You don’t say a lot, do you?”

Shrugging, Shizuo said, “Just hungry.” He wiped his chin with his wrist and flinched at the coarseness he’d rubbed against. Feeling the rest of his face, Shizuo realized that he was in dire need of a shave.

“I’m jealous, honestly,” Fujimaki said with a nod at Shizuo. He rubbed his own jaw. “Never could grow a beard no matter how hard I tried, and I’ve got quite the competition ‘round here. Don’t think any guy in the world sports chest hair like an Italian. I’ve still been doing well with the European women, though. Turns out no matter where you go, white girls still got a fixation on anything exotic. It’s stupid, but it gets me laid.”

Shizuo swallowed another helping of rice and offered a very passive “You’re a pig.”
At this point, the other three were watching them intently.

Rather than get offended, Fujimaki barked some ugly form of a cackle. “Come on, now! Bet you’d do well in Venice. You’ve got the scruff and the foreign appeal.” Fujimaki’s feet returned to the ground and he leaned into Shizuo’s space. “Come on, Touma, Ryuu, and Anthony got people on the boot, and Rio looks like a teenager. You want me to show you ‘round Venice.”

The more Fujimaki spoke, the more Shizuo disliked him. Shizuo deadpanned, “Like hell.”

“So why not? Doesn’t look like that pretty thing holed up down here is gonna-”

SMASH!

BANG!

The other three fishermen gasped, and Fujimaki shrieked a curse. Blood gushed from the latter’s face. Ceramic shards fell to the table and the floor.

Shizuo hadn’t really known how else to interrupt the man from insinuating something lewd, so Shizuo just decided to hit Fujimaki in the face with his plate and follow up by slamming his head until the table. While Ryuu, Touma, and Anthony stared at Shizuo with an all too familiar expression of distrust and horror, Shizuo picked up his glass and started drinking from it.

They’re not pirates, but I wonder if they’ll still throw me overboard.

Then Touma scoffed. “Well, Fujimaki! You were asking for it!”

A seething hiss came from Fujimaki, and it quickly became a very unnerving, ungenuine snigger. Out of the corner of his eye, Shizuo could see Fujimaki’s lips curl.

“Oh dear, someone’s bleeding.”

The voice was enough to make Shizuo almost choke on his milk.

“Don’t mind me,” Izaya wandered into the kitchen. “I’m just making tea.”

The men who had primarily occupied the room stayed silent. Izaya set a kettle on a burner and turned the stove’s dial.

Click click click.

He had a book under his armpit and opened it as soon as he had a mug and a tea bag ready to go.

“Oh!” Ryuu pipped. “I’ll go get Rio!” He sprinted into the hall and up the latch.

“Touma, hand me a towel,” said Fujimaki. Once Touma complied, Fujimaki started dabbing at his split up face with the cloth. Meanwhile, Shizuo kept his eyes on Izaya patiently.

Izaya was doing that thing when he refused to look at Shizuo without explaining what was bothering him. It was almost just like after Shizuo had fainted in the middle of Spain; Izaya had gotten mad at him then, too.

Convinced Izaya would get over it just like he had then, Shizuo was torn between waiting in a defiant silence of his own or just shouting at Izaya then and there.

“Hey, you pretty thing.”
After a moment to confirm that the man was in fact addressing him like that, Izaya looked up and met Fujimaki’s eyes that were so devilish that Izaya ended up with his own mischievous little smirk.

“That’s a nasty cut you got there,” Izaya said without sympathy. “Wonder how you got it.”

“Aye…” Fujimaki put down the towel and leaned on the table. “Probably deserved it. Let me ask you something.”

The kettle started to crackle and hiss, the water inside starting to heat.

Fujimaki jerked a thumb at Shizuo. “You and this guy doing it?”

Izaya answered without looking at Shizuo and without breaking face. “No, he’s what you would call a virgin.”

Every head in the kitchen snapped towards Shizuo. Except Izaya’s, of course. No, Izaya turn around to shift the kettle’s position on the burner, as if trying to speed up the laws of nature.

Firstly, this was true and yet not entirely true. While Shizuo had definitely never allowed himself to experience full intimacy with another person for fear of their safety, Shizuo had dabbled in several displays of affection from various people with no strings attached. He knew, though, that as far as a couple of sailors and the majority of the human race were concerned, these did not constitute as sexual experience. Secondly, Shizuo wasn’t surprised that Izaya knew without him, but he didn’t like knowing that Izaya knew. He also didn’t like Izaya announcing that information and the affirmation that Shizuo was emotionally attached to one of the biggest jerks the world had to offer. Thirdly, Shizuo never viewed this point about himself as one to feel ashamed of or justify to strangers. However, from the way Fujimaki guffawed at him, the way Touma looked at him with pity, and the way the handsome foreigner stared pointedly at table with wide eyes suggested that maybe he should.

Maybe Shizuo had been kidding himself this whole time. In front of other people, in a world where it wasn’t just the two of them, was Izaya still the same parasite out to bring Shizuo nothing but misery?

His teeth were grinding together, his face was burning up, and he could feel the embarrassment all the way in his ears. Shizuo ended up bending the spoon he had between his fingers. “Izaya… you…”

“HAH! Still?!” Fujimaki was cracking himself up. “Didn’t know it was that bad! No wonder you’re ditching him in Venice!”

Shizuo paled. “What did you say?”

Fujimaki opened his sly mouth, but Izaya spoke first.

“No. Humans are so weird when it comes to sex. You all think if you don’t stick your dick in something by the time you’re eighteen, you’re a loser. Why? Some misplaced form of accomplishment? It’s not like those who wait longer are less capable than those who do it first. And aren’t the ones who jump in it without anything to gain other than a pat on the back from their friends just desperate? Even as just a recreational thing, sex is just another thing that gives humans joy or pain. But I’ve never seen a human outcasted for never having jumped off a bridge before.”

The kettle whistled as the water came to a boil. Izaya turned off the stove and poured the steaming water into his mug. The others gaped, but Shizuo marveled at Izaya’s ability to demonstrate why Shizuo hated him and then didn’t hate him at all in such a short amount of time.
When Izaya turned around, he was grinning, but his face was bright red.

“Nope, I’m leaving him behind for another reason entirely!”

Mug in hand, Izaya walked out and left Shizuo with his eyes wide and jaw hung. Seeing Shizuo’s bafflement, Fujimaki leered at him.

“The captain didn’t tell you what Izaya told ‘im, eh?” He didn’t even give Shizuo the time to confirm or deny, too eager to deliver the blow. “Soon as we dock in Venice, that pretty thing is leaving you in the dust. He wants you to fuck off back to Japan.”

When Shizuo went mute and still for so long, Touma opened their cooler and grabbed another beer bottle. He set it on the table in front of Shizuo. “I know you said you didn’t… but maybe ya wanna start.”

Chapter End Notes

I should point out that I'm pretty sure it takes less than a day to travel from Alexandria to Venice, but these guys live on this boat. They only go ashore when necessary.

As for Fujimaki... I almost just made all the sailors just as likable as a lot of the people they've come across. But then I realized that not everyone they'd meet around the world would be angels. So I created an asshole. Feel free to hate him.
Beatrice and The Storm

Chapter Summary

The boat almost sinks.

Chapter Notes

This is probably the hardest chapter I've written so far. It was like trying to put together puzzle pieces. But! I managed! Because my beta is awesome and helpful.

Also, I realize that this fic is like... kinda weirdly confusing. Especially since I'm really behind on my tour guides. Don't be shy to ask questions, although a lot of it is just intended mystery meant to be answered later on. But just a friendly reminder that you can always shoot me an ask on tumblr, where I will mostly like see and respond to things.

I have some suggested listening for this chapter, and it's an ol song by Yellowcard. It's one of my favorite ever, written about one of my favorite movies ever, and as I listen to it nowadays I realize just how much influence both these things still have on me as a writer.

Further suggested listening would be Sam Smith's entire debut album. Have you guys heard it? It's phenomenal. Go listen to the acoustic version of Latch it puts the remixed mess they have on the radio to SHAME!

Anyways, enjoy this chapter. Or don't.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shizuo wanted to sink to the bottom of the ocean.

But he also wanted to know why.

Beatrice was a haunted vessel. Sousuke hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d said Izaya acted like the ship’s personal apparition. Even within the restraints of the ship’s walls, nobody knew where Izaya was at any point. He made himself scarce around the cabins and even scarcer on deck. The most common place he’d reside, though, was in the captain’s personal quarters, the only room on board with a lock.

That would hardly stop Shizuo.

About to bust down the captain’s door like it was nothing but splinters, Shizuo suddenly stopped. He never considered himself tactful, but decided to try a different approach.

Knock knock knock.

And he waited.
No answer, not that Shizuo expected one right away.

“Izaya.” He spoke the name with demand over desperation.

Still nothing.

That was enough that he almost snapped. The sound of his teeth gnashing together clogged his ear and his good fist clenched at his side.

He inhaled and tried again, this time with more urgency. “Izaya…”

Knock knock knock.

“Izaaaaaayaaaaaaaaaa-kuuuun…”


“Come out-” Bang “-and explain-” Bang “-what-” BANG “-the hell-” BANG “-you’re-” BANG! “-talking-” BANG!! “-about!!!” BANGBANGBANGBANG!!!! “IZAAAAAYAAAAAAAAAA!!”

It wasn’t fair that Izaya shut Shizuo out like this, especially after Shizuo nearly sacrificed himself in Egypt. Izaya had no concept of gratitude or loyalty, as far as Shizuo was concerned. That much was clear to him.

What could he possibly be thinking? Ditching me in Venice? Other than more nagging concerns, Shizuo remembered they had a contract. Damn, I should have read that thing more carefully. Because it must have gone against it to suddenly part ways, not without compensation. The original deal was that Izaya would refill Kasuka’s credit account that Shizuo had dipped into, and make sure he had enough to get back to Japan. That was all relevant enough, but was ultimately very trivial to Shizuo in his current state.

I don’t care about the money, I don’t care about going back.

He began pounding his head against the door.

“Izaya,” he growled

BANG...! BANG...! BANG...!

He lost track of how long he stayed like that, cycling his actions and his words until he crept closer and closer to the edge of his temper.

“You’ve already got a nasty bump on your head, you sure you want another one?”

Shizuo turned around and was met with Sousuke’s usual reassuring smile.

“That can’t be doing you any good, can it?”

Shizuo huffed. “It can’t do me any worse than I am now.”

“Have you tried anything else?”

“Not yet,” Shizuo said. He straightened. “I was about to.”

As Sousuke rose an eyebrow, Shizuo backed away from the door a few paces and prepared to kick it down. Having read what Shizuo was planning, Sousuke hurried over and steered Shizuo away.
“Ah!!! Maybe that’s not the best approach either!”

“No disrespect, captain,” Shizuo said with a frown, “but I don’t really care so much about your door or your boat.”

Sousuke smiled even at that. “I know. You just care about Izaya, right?”

Shizuo’s cheeks burned, and the floor suddenly captivated Shizuo’s attention. “That’s- that’s not why- uhh, I mean-”

Chuckling, Sousuke patted Shizuo on the back, making Shizuo feel ten years younger than he actually was.

“No, what I mean is…” Shizuo shook his head and tried to gather his head. “He’s got to explain himself for how he’s acting. He sticks me on this shitty boat - no offense - and then he won’t talk to me. He doesn’t hide, so what’s he doing? Then when he does open his god forsaken mouth, all he says is that he’s ditching me! Well, actually, that was more from your dick on deck. Izaya said more about my - well, nevermind. But he’s making less sense than usual, right? He can’t be serious!”

He finished off his last few sentences with Sousuke trying to shush him, motioning with his hands for Shizuo to lower his voice. To spite it all, Shizuo just got louder.

“Hey, hey…” Sousuke smiled sympathetically. “I think I get it. That must be extremely confusing for someone to just wake up to…”

Shizuo’s eyes narrowed. “Do you? Do you get it?”

“Heh. Well… maybe not as much as I’d like to,” Sousuke sighed, though his smile didn’t falter. “I’ve never stayed in one place for too long, so I’ve never really ever gotten to…” He faded out and instead of finishing, he glanced sideways at the door behind which Izaya lay. Shizuo followed his gaze, face darkening considerably.

A loud grunt from afar alerted them. In one of the adjoining rooms, Touma rolled over and his snoring calmed. Shizuo only just realized how dark the vessel had gotten, and the soft sound of sleepy breaths carried from the open cabin doors into the hall in which Shizuo and Sousuke stood. The only other sounds were the boat’s body creaking against the ocean surface and the waves rolling it.

“Oops!” Sousuke whispered. “Though, I’m surprised they could sleep through all the banging you were doing.”

Shizuo faced Sousuke, a thought hitting him. “If Izaya’s in there, where do you go?”

“I don’t sleep much,” he stepped toward the hatch. “Let’s not talk here and wake them. If you’re not going to sleep, maybe you can help me on deck.” He disappeared above the surface.

A thread woven in Shizuo’s chest made him feel bound to the door behind him. Just for the time being, he let it unravel. Just enough that he could still feel its tug. Slowly and hesitantly, Shizuo followed. Once his head was above the hatch, he was glad he had.

“Woah.”

Someone had erased the Earth.

“Don’t be alarmed,” Sousuke chimed. “I promise we’re still floating.”
The boat itself was its only source of light, a few lamps on the stern and a light on in the bridge overhead. Otherwise, the world around them was an endless black. Not a moon, not a star could be seen in the sky or reflected upon the sea. Every direction spread an inky blackness, one that was thick and intimidating. What was below them could be as monstrous as anything that could come from above. And all of the unknown seemed to go on forever and ever.

A biting breeze whipped past Shizuo as he stepped onto the deck cautiously. They were moving languidly over the water, like the waves were all that were pulling them along. Shizuo edged over to the rails and looked over, where he could just see the waves lapping at the hull before they disappeared back into the surrounding darkness.

He backed up again, wary that they might fall off the edge of the universe at any moment.

A flurry of sounds drew his attention to Sousuke tinkering with his vessel and untangling the nets.

“A lot of people get spooked when it’s like it,” he said, “but I find it the most exciting.”

“Isn’t it dangerous?” Shizuo asked.

“Hmm… maybe. But the idea of not knowing what’s in front of me has always thrilled me. It’s how I’ve lived my life up until now. I assume it’ll be how I go as well.” Sousuke hunched over a heavy looking that stretch across the entire deck. He looked up at Shizuo. “Mind giving me a hand? If it’s not too much trouble, with one good arm.”

Of course Shizuo rushed to help, though he didn’t know what he was doing. He just followed Sousuke’s direction, feeling embarrassed that he had been preoccupied over the idea of category five kaiju ascending on them to offer to help in the first place.

They worked in silence for awhile, save for the directions Sousuke gave or the questions Shizuo asked. It surprised Shizuo that he wasn’t more tired, or how engrossed in the menial labor he became. Actually, he welcomed the distraction for his mind. He learned various parts of a ship and what the hell each particular contraption that had first confused him was. The only drawback was the restricted use of his right arm, though just his left seemed sufficient for Sousuke’s means. After a while, their chores began to wane and they slowed their pace.

“Not that I know anything about fishing or sailing or any of this,” Shizuo said, “but aren’t these the sort of tasks usually not for the captain?”

Sousuke chuckled sheepishly and rubbed the back of his neck. “Hahaha… you caught me. But sometimes I miss just being a regular, grunt sailor. Doing things with my own two hands is my way. But I am proud that I have my own crew now.”

“You’re a pretty easy-going captain if you’re alright with your crew snoring while you’re up here cleaning the deck by yourself,” Shizuo said.

“Oh, but I’m not alone!” Sousuke beamed. “Anthony’s on the bridge and I’m down here with you!”

Shizuo stared blankly at him, and Sousuke guffawed in return.

“That’s what a captain has to be like, you know?” said Sousuke.

“No,” Shizuo said, “I don’t know.”

“I’ve got to take care of my crew, I’ve got to be honest with them, keep up their spirits, and guide them!”
Shizuo snorted. “No disrespect, but I think one of them could use more guidance than the others.”

“Please don’t call me ‘sir.’” Sighing, Sousuke leaned on the stern. “I know Fuji’s got a mouth on him, and isn’t the most… cordial. But he’s a good fisherman, and he’s not so bad once you get to know him. I’m trying to better him.”

Jaw hardened, Shizuo met Sousuke’s eyes. “That may be so, sir, but if he calls Izaya ‘that pretty thing’ one more time, I’ll snap his neck.”

The sound Sousuke make was halfway between a laugh and a cry. “Well, we can’t have that. I wouldn’t read too much into it. Fuji takes his sexuality as a straight man very seriously. But I guess he really wanted to mess with you…”

“I’m used to punkasses running their mouth to get a rise outta me. It usually works. I even followed one across the planet just because of that. That’s all on me, my fault. But I…” Shizuo breathed in sharply and looked aside. “I guess it’s over now.”

“What’s over?” Sousuke asked.

“Izaya told you, didn’t he? That he wants us to go our separate ways once you dock in Venice?”

“Aye, he did.” And for some reason, Sousuke smiled wider.

Shizuo growled as his face grew hot. “He’s so careless! I know he doesn’t care about me, but what about himself?! After he made me sign a stupid contract, he’s what, just going to ignore it now?!”

_What if he’s attacked by those things and can’t defend himself?!_ was a concern he could not voice aloud.

“Oh, I don’t think that’s true, actually,” said Sousuke.

“What’s not true?” Shizuo blandly asked.

“That Izaya doesn’t care about you.”

“No, he definitely doesn’t,” Shizuo almost laughed.

“Does it really seem that way to you?” Sousuke asked. “Because it didn’t seem that way to me.”

“What?” Shizuo chattered impatiently, “What do you mean? What has Izaya told you? Tell me everything, please.”

“When I found you two,” Sousuke began, “I had never seen Izaya Orihara in such a state. He looked like he’d been to war. And there you were, draped over his back like a corpse. He’d been carrying you God knows how far and looked ready to collapse. He wouldn’t explain anything to me until I got you on board and had someone save you.”

Shizuo had a hard time swallowing that image. _Izaya? Carrying me?_ It didn’t seem physically possible, let alone actually probable. The thought had him blushing all over.

Sousuke continued. “So I took you in, and Rio saved you from internal bleeding, then all you had was that bump on your head and a broken arm. You kept waking up and forgetting where you were, and the only way to stop you from sinking us all was Izaya.

“I won’t pretend to know Izaya very well at all. You know him, and you don’t think he cares about you, but the way Izaya looked and sounded when he told me he would continue his path alone, it
seemed like the very opposite. You were very close to dying, you know. You wouldn’t know this, but he was next to you up until you woke up proper.”

The warmth on Shizuo’s left side when he had woken up recalled Izaya’s presence.

“Then why?” Shizuo pressed, “Why is he hiding, why does he want to run from me?”

“Like I said, I don’t know Izaya that well,” Sousuke conceded, “You’ll have to find that out for yourself. After all, you’re the one who…” He didn’t have the words, and neither did Shizuo have them to offer. But the silence had its own meaning, and Sousuke grinned.

“So you do?”

For a moment, the only sounds were those of the vast and unseen ocean. In the distance was a sudden splash, like a daring creature decided to break the surface. Another splash, and it was gone into the depths again.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Does he know that?”

“He’s supposed to know everything, isn’t he?”

Sousuke hummed disapprovingly. “When staring into black void of the unknown, not everyone wants to dive in just to find what’s underneath. Could swallow them whole.”

He was only just a few years older than Shizuo, but Sousuke had a paternal quality that marveled him. Not that Shizuo had any real idea of what Sousuke was saying this time.

“Oh look!” Sousuke bent over the stern and looked below. “There’s some light after all.”

Curious, Shizuo mimicked him and gazed into the black water, only know it wasn’t so black. There were a dozen glowing orbs passing his eyes. His vision focused, and there were more, hundreds. Hundreds of lights dancing past them in the ocean, darting away from the ship. Their luminescence stemmed from their rotund heads to their swaying tentacles.

“Jellyfish?” Shizuo observed.

“Pelagia,” said Sousuke.

They remained there for some while, admiring the beauty of the fluorescent life below them. It was such a beautiful show, watching the radiance swim west in such a captivating fashion that one might be tempted to stick their hand into the threat of their toxic sting.

In the east, had the two men been facing the ship’s bow, they might have witnessed luminosity of a different design. These lights came from the clouds, in a quick and flashing nature that lit miles of the sky at once, and preceded a low and anxious rumble.

The storm fell upon them in less than a day, mighty and merciless. Waves swelled to great heights and juggled the ship back and forth, spilling onto her deck and into her cabins. Dark clouds flashed heat lightning, the only moments when the waves rising like mountains were truly visible.

Sousuke and Anthony were on the bridge, steering Beatrice in all the right directions. Everyone else
was either helping on the lower bridge or lying low in the cabins. When the storm had begun, Sousuke had read Shizuo’s frown as a sign of despair and had smiled reassuringly. “I know this must look like we’re done for to someone who’s never been to sea before, but I can promise that I’ve sailed through much worse before. It’s just a thunder storm, and Beatrice is tougher than she looks.”

But as it were, Shizuo stood alone on the slightly flooded deck while surges of wind whipped around him and wrangled the sea. What was rain and what was sprayed from the ocean came as an onslaught that drenched him through his thick clothes. Nothing could highlight the world at its most tumultuous like a particularly bold bolt of lightning cracking down on the horizon.

_BANG!_

The thunder was so loud and immediate that Shizuo knew they were in the heart of it, as worse as it could get, and its worse was terrible.

Shizuo never believed the sea would be how he went. No, he’d sooner expect a bullet to the temple or an axe to the spine. He wouldn’t have believed it, either. He would have believed himself stronger than the entire ocean, and had he both arms he might have thought himself capable of contending with the colossal black crests climbing all around him.

However, at the threshold of titans he had never felt so utterly, despicably, helplessly human.

_BANG!_ Another flash and another roll of thunder.

He touched his right arm, still in its sling and now most likely water damaged cast.

Should a wave suddenly come and carry him away, he’d face a battle like no other. The strongest opponent he’d ever meet, more than those possessed by Saika, more than the cyborgs that keep crippling him.

All of this was unexpected, from where he was to how he felt. If he’d stayed in Ikebukuro, he would have never had to deal with any of this. He was at a loss, a complete loss. For one of the few and only times in his life. But, that wasn’t any reason for him to deny it, or to accept the hardships of it lying down. Or to run.

A wave broke against the vessel and splashed itself onto the deck. Shizuo watched it slosh around, create a stream and trickle through the cracks in the hatch.

Shizuo followed it, dropped below and closed the door hastily behind him. Soon as he did, the hatch blocked out the majority of the storm’s sound and rain. All he could hear was a hollow echo of the chaos happening outside, the sizzling hum of the one dim, flickering bulb lighting the bulk of the cabins, and the incessant dripping from the roof and from Shizuo himself. He was soaked from head to toe, more like he’d dived into the ocean then stood in the rain.

Staring at the captain’s quarters door straight ahead of him, he stalled a moment by reaching up and squeezing his nose to drain it. Then he slowly marched across the hall, only to stop just in front of the door.

He could not say if he intended to barge through it or knock, because he never had to decide. The door was already open.

Just a crack, swinging an inch this way and that as the ship hurtled along, but enough for Shizuo to halt everything and wonder. Curious, he pushed on the wood and let it open wider, revealing a dark and very empty room. When lightning spread in through the windows, he could make out a desk, a bed, and clutter, but no signs of a person.
The door creaked back to its nearly closed position.

To the left of him was the little closet of a room he had first awoken in. Its door was also ajar, creaking on its hinges even more haphazardly than the cabin’s door. There was barely a sound from inside, but there was just enough of a presence in that direction that Shizuo knew what he’d found.

Izaya had his face pressed against the porthole, always the victim of morbid curiosity. The lightning lit the sea even from below, and framed Izaya’s body in a very generous silhouette from the other side of the glass. He leaned against the wall on his palms, like he could get any closer to the world like that.

Shizuo stepped into the threshold, and realized he was shaking. The rain and spray had been icy and had seeped into his skin, which was now stiff with salt. His whole body felt taut. He breathed heavily, full of adrenaline but somehow remaining more still than he ever had in his entire life.

So enthralled by the prospect of impending doom outside, Izaya didn’t even notice Shizuo until a furiously loud boom of thunder caused him to jump. He saw Shizuo out of the corner of his eye, and then properly looked the other man up and down.

The sight caused him to grin to himself.

“Wow, is it raining outside, or did you go for a swim?”

Izaya chuckled to himself while Shizuo remained silent, thoughtful. Truly seeing Shizuo’s solemn expression, Izaya’s amusement slowly died away.

Shizuo looked Izaya over and came to settle his eyes on the soft yellow glow framing Izaya’s pale face. It was curious to find Izaya in the place one would most likely find Shizuo on the vessel, after all his spectacular ways of avoiding him. Though the light was scarce in the cabin, Shizuo could just make out the faults in Izaya’s stressed composure. And Shizuo realized what this was all about. All of it.

“You’re terrified.”

The accusation took Izaya aback. “Excuse me?”

“This must be your worst nightmare. Trapped in such a small space for so long with nowhere to run, so you shut yourself off as if that won’t provoke anything out of me. Instead, it’s like you summoned the wrath of the world!”

“I’m not afraid of a little lightning and rain,” Izaya glared. But just as he said so, another clap of thunder ricocheted throughout the vessel and their bones, making Izaya shudder away from the window and look through it wide-eyed. On instinct, Shizuo stepped towards him, but Izaya shied away, like he was stuck between Shizuo and the bottom of the ocean and they were both as equally devastating.

“You’re not?” Shizuo watched him carefully, “So what if this were it? What if after all the threats and hits, this is how we both go?”

Izaya smirked despite himself. “Then I would be immensely disappointed in myself.”

Air filled Shizuo’s lungs slowly, and they burned. “So why? Why get on this boat? If you were going to run again, why wouldn’t you just leave me in that cave to die?”

“Does it matter?” Izaya sighed. “I needed to get to Venice, this was the most convenient way for me.
What I don’t need is you anymore. Got that?”

“Bullshit,” Shizuo said. “I’ve only been protecting you this whole time, and you think you can repay me like this?”

“Oh, but I am repaying you, aren’t I? I’ll live up to my end of the deal. You’ll get back to Japan, just like I said and I’ll continue by myself. At this point, I doubt you could even live up to your end of the bargain… Don’t need you to keep holding me back, do I?”

“Stop lying!” Shizuo shouted, slamming his only good fist against the door frame. He grit his teeth. “If you think that, then you don’t know yourself! There’s more to it than that, you know it, so you’re running! Again!”

“That’s just it. I’m not running, not like you think,” Izaya said way too nonchalantly, “I just don’t have any more use for you.”

“The hell you don’t!” Shizuo spat. He was suddenly very conscience of the broken bones on his right side, almost like he could feel their ache.

“I told you I don’t have health insurance attached to that contract, and you’ve gone and broken yourself too much this time. How can you be a bodyguard with a broken arm and beat up head? But now you can go back to Japan and reunite. It’s perfect for you, don’t you think?”

“None of this is perfect!” Air filled Shizuo’s lungs slowly, and they burned. “I wish I was the monster you accuse me to be. Truly, I do. I wish I was as big as an island and had a dozen limbs to wrap around you, and armor so hard that nothing could get through, and every other bit and piece of the creatures you hate. But I’m not. I’m human, so painfully human, and I’m starting to get that now. Finally starting to feel it. Not in my arm but in my…” He swallowed his heart, because that wasn’t the point.

“…I don’t know who hurt you,” he continued, “or in what way, or how long ago. Part of me doesn’t want to know, doesn’t care, doesn’t matter because I’ll destroy them anyways, but most of me wants to know everything. Every single detail about you, I want to know it and carry it with me so you don’t have to. I can destroy that pain so you never feel it, just like I don’t. I can do that. Because I may be human, but I am strong, strong enough that I can carry the world on my shoulders, both yours and mine.”

When it was all said, Shizuo had to catch his breath. Not for lack of air but for the nerves throbbing under the pressure of honesty throughout his muscles. There was a moment of just the sound of endless ocean.

Finally, Izaya allowed himself to show disbelief. “How can you say that? That’s the biggest lie you’ve ever told, Shizuo, and it’s not even a good one.”

“It’s not a lie,” Shizuo snapped. “I mean every word. You don’t have to accept the offer, but the words are true.”

Izaya laughed, cold and bitter. “You just expect me to accept that? That after all those years of threatening my life, you suddenly want to protect it? You’ve got to be kidding me! You can’t just.. You can’t just change like that!”

“You did.”

Izaya stiffened.
“Would you deny it?” Shizuo asked, genuinely. “Say you’re the same as all those years you tormented people, tormented me, all for your own sick enjoyment? If you went back to Tokyo right now, it would all be different. Wouldn’t it?”

“I never denied I was capable of change,” Izaya said. “I’ve always known I could adapt for whatever the situation called for.”

“This isn’t just adapting,” Shizuo argued. “And it’s not about being so-called good people. Hell knows neither of us are one of those. But you… You’re…” And he wished so pleadingly that for once in his life, he could be articulate.

“I’m what?” Izaya challenged, “Selfish? I’m selfish and terrible, remember? That’s what you said, in that tomb, right before you trapped yourself under there.”

“I needed to protect you!” Shizuo insisted urgently.

“What were you protecting, then? You said you hated me. A thousand times before that, you meant it. And now, it’s the same. We’re the same! I hate you, and you hate me! You hate me!”

Shaking his head like his life depended on it, Shizuo breathed heavily and prepared for a plunge. “No, I don’t hate you. I l-”

“No.”

The word was immediate and sharp, with the most fearsome of scowls attached to it.

Shizuo stopped, the words caught in his throat. Frowning in confusion, he tried again. “Izaya, I-”

“No, you don’t,” Izaya was glaring so intently, biting out his words so cuttlingly that it shocked Shizuo, “so don’t say it.”

Shizuo was at a loss for words, the ones he intended having been stolen from him, rejected. “I don’t know what you’re saying.”

Izaya laughed, but it was humorless and filled with self-pity. “Alright then. Both me and Kasuka have knives to our throat, who do you save?”

Gaping, Shizuo refused to even imagine such a scenario. Surely Izaya was saying nonsense.

But Izaya was impatient. “Well? Quick now, if you mean it, then answer. If you can answer, then you can say it.”

Shizuo’s eyebrows lowered into a grim and glowering expression. “That’s not fair.”

“To which of us?” Izaya asked, exasperated and patronizing. “When I hired you, you weren’t supposed to… get Stockholm Syndrome, or something! You’re so stupid you can’t even do that right!”

Caught off guard, Shizuo continued to frown. “…I don’t know what that is.”

Izaya scoffed. “Of course you don’t.”

“It’s not something that!” Shizuo insisted. “I wish, I really really wish that it was easy and I could do just like you say, go back to Japan and forget this whole thing. But I can’t. Because I…” He caught himself, and finished with, “Because I signed a contract.”
“Don’t be a hero, Shizu-chan. It doesn’t suit you. Don’t you get it?! I’m letting you off the hook! I’m so generous, aren’t I generous?!” Izaya’s voice was as pleading as Shizuo, but pushing in the opposite direction. “But you’re being dumbass about it, just like you always have been!”

“I’m not,” Shizuo said, “I’m being smart about things, for once. I know where I belong, and it’s not in Japan.”

“Well it’s not with me either!” Izaya was halfway between hysterical screaming and deprecating laughter. “I don’t care where you go, then! Maybe you can stay here on this piece of garbage, since you get along with the captain so well! Isn’t that just you? Always finding love and adoration! You could go anywhere, and they’d love you! Go anywhere, just don’t follow me!”

“No, I will always follow you,” said Shizuo, “I promise this time. Even if you never slow down, and slip away from me time and time again. My life has been one road that will, forever and always, lead to you.”

Shizuo was aflush with the heat of his body and blood against the coolness of his damp exterior. Like a fever, his skin felt like it was on fire. So hot that they were hissing away the dewdrops beading into his pores. There was a sudden lack of thunder, and a slackened pace of rain against the walls. The tempest had dwindled. All that was left was the whistle of a harsh wind.

“I want to kiss you.” Amazing, that even out of the storm, Shizuo still felt like he was drowning.

Izaya looked at him like he was dragging him under. Shizuo couldn’t look at him straight, else he’d be tempted to do that just. The silence was unbearably unbelieving.

“Very much. I’ve wanted to, and I want to… very much.”

Across the room, Izaya tensed enough that Shizuo could sense it. Now that he’d said it, heard himself say it, Shizuo thought himself despicable. With the same strength he would use to protect Izaya until the end, he would quench the disgraceful dryness in his mouth.

He swallowed. “But I won’t.”

Then he met Izaya’s eyes, which were filled with surprising awe. Shizuo’s mouth was tightly shut, while Izaya’s was agape at the confession. Then, Izaya’s eyes narrowed, and his mouth closed, and the faintest signs of hope pulled on the corners.

“Good,” Izaya finally said, right before he rushed over to Shizuo and crushed their lips together.

The sea was at peace again. Waves, even more gentle than those in open water, rocked Beatrice gently. It was that sensation, the cylinder of sunlight streaming in through the porthole, and the overhead cawing of seagulls that roused Shizuo. All that, plus the hustle and bustle he felt and heard around him. Particularly, the loud bellow of a man on the deck.

“LAND HO!!”

Shizuo opened his eyes and stirred. He awoke without grogginess and with a newfound tenacity. As soon as he realized he was alone, but still felt the warmth on his left from a person’s recent company, he knew what he had to do.

Izaya had slept through the storm and night with him. After they’d kissed, and they’d only kissed,
there were no more words between them. Just soft breaths, soft brushes, soft butterflies against their skin. They had pulled away from each other, dipped back into each other, tasted each other for the first time. They had latched onto each other and lay upon the mat against the wall. At the time, Shizuo had felt high, to have Izaya in the air in his lungs, in his space, fitted so perfectly against his side. Izaya had lulled him into a tranquil sleep, one filled with hope, and had disappeared without a trace.

And nothing he had ever done to Shizuo hurt more than that.

Wasting no time, Shizuo lept up and shot through the hatch. His clothes were still moist, and his hair matted, and he was generally disgusting. But none of that mattered in the least to him.

The world he saw above was not as vile.

Clearly, they were no longer at open sea. They had arrived at Italy’s northern coast, the tip of the Adriatic. Now, on every side of him were islands. Beautiful, thickly populated islands. Boats and ferries hustled between each of them, filling the harbors with commerce. The seagulls and birds swooped, dove, and perched on the many wooden pickets that stuck out of the water, meant for boats to tether themselves.

*Beatrice* was docked on the biggest and the busiest. The crew paid him no mind as they were all busy carrying crates and barrels of good and fish into the city. Shizuo turned round and around, marveling at this new land of tall steeples and abundant canals. There wasn’t a car in sight, but many small boats, narrow boats, long boats. Almost as soon as you stepped on the dock, there were vendors and shops. People were all over, and not a single one was dull. The sun was shining bright and the sky was a clear and vibrant cyan.

“Shizuo!”

Freed from his trance, Shizuo looked up to the bridge from where Sousuke was climbing down with his signature beaming smile.

He hopped down next to Shizuo, spread his arm towards the city with praise. “Welcome to *Venezia*!”

As beautiful as the scenery was, Shizuo had only one priority. He looked at Sousuke hopefully. “Izaya?”

Sousuke’s smile faltered. “Come with me,” he said, and Shizuo followed him.

According to Sousuke, Izaya had taken one of their life rafts while it had still been dark and while they had still been a few kilometers away from Venice. He hadn’t left anything behind, or taken anything other than the raft. Odds are he made it to shore about an hour before they had, but there was no way of known on which island or where he had stepped onto land.

Before Shizuo left in a hurry, Sousuke provided him with fresh, dry clothes and a meal. These new clothes were almost identical to the outfit Shizuo had drenched, leading Shizuo to believe that Sousuke was a man of little taste. Much like Shizuo. Though, this sweater had elbow patches, which were a little beyond Shizuo.

“You’re a grandpa, you know that?”

Sousuke took it as a compliment, and followed Shizuo as they hastened towards the dock.

“Are you sure about this?” Sousuke asked. “You’re welcome to stick with us, or I would have no
problem finding you a way back to Japan.”

“No way,” said Shizuo. “Besides, I promised that I’d follow him wherever.”

“You don’t even know where to start.”

“I know he’s here somewhere,” Shizuo said. “It’s hard to explain, but he and I have always been freakishly good at finding each other. I know I’ll find him. I have to.”

“You seem confident,” Sousuke said, a bit inspired.

“I’m not,” Shizuo admitted. “I’m just furious. And it’s really familiar, being furious with him. It’s how I got in this mess in the first place. He made me furious, and I went after him. It’s refreshing. That’s why I know that even when it’s as bad as this, I’d still rather be around him. That’s where I belong.”

The crew of Beatrice had returned and emerged from their stations to bid Shizuo a quick farewell. Rio patched him up one last time, and Anthony finally spoke. But it was Italian, and Shizuo didn’t have a clue what he said. Touma and Ryuu wished good fortune for him. Fujimaki, of course, had only come to gloat.

“Going to find that pretty thing?” He smirked, though looking less smug with all the bandages now around his face. “Pfft, you really struck out, didn’t you? This is just getting pathetic, isn’t it?”

Because Shizuo had come to respect the captain so much, he regarded Sousuke first. “Sir?”

“Don’t call me sir,” Sousuke nodded, “but yeah, just don’t kill him.”

Shizuo punched Fujimaki in the gut so hard that he flew off the deck and into the harbor with a satisfying splash! The other crewmembers dashed to the edge to either laugh or to curse at their crewmate.

After that, Shizuo hopped over the boat’s edge and landed on the wooden dock. When he turned back to say a final farewell to Sousuke and the crew, he saw a thick bundle dropping down on him. He caught it, and looked up questioningly.

“It’s not much,” said Sousuke, “but it’s as much as I could spare. There should be something there to help you from here on out.”

Shizuo slung the sack around his left shoulder and smiled at Sousuke gratefully. “Thanks.”

Sousuke returned the smile even brighter. “Good luck to you. I hope you find him, and I hope you get to say everything you need to.”

Rather than say goodbye, Shizuo lifted his palm in a silent, saluted adieu. He turned his back on Beatrice and stepped forward, venturing forth into the unknown. He crossed the dock and willingly lost himself to the island city of Venice.

Chapter End Notes

If you are sad after that, do not despair readers. Hang in there for me. Some pretty damn important stuff is headed this way next chapter. Hang in there!!
Comments and kudos always appreciated on here as well :) Love you guys!
Chapter Summary

Shizuo encounters an army of pigeons (and possibly, a friend).

Chapter Notes

Hello folks, it's been a while.

My reasons for late updates remain the same as the ones described a couple chapters ago. However, I must admit that I have also been spending an ample amount of time marathoning Hunter X Hunter. But don't worry. No abandonment!

I've also been thinking up another Shizaya AU to write. Might decide to finish this fic before I start another, though.

Again, I have to apologize for my languages. Italian... I tried to use as little as possible.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was a city on edge of the west Mediterranean and the east of Spain that somehow felt like being underwater. Its many colors were those of the deep sea, and their usage in the architecture could appear like a great reef. Colorful and beautiful. Where sharp edges should have been, there was a roundness reminiscent of bubbles. Some landmarks incorporated rock into their features. That, and the giant church whose pillars rose over the city like stalagmites made the buildings appear like watery caves.

Then there was the air. Salty and breezy, an atmosphere that carried inland from the long beach that stretched across the entirety of Barcelona’s length. It was even possible for a flurry of snowflakes to fall from the sky even when the sun brightly shone. The coolness, the affinity for blues and greens. The people of Barcelona might as well have been fish, for Shizuo kept thinking he was in the ocean.

Palm trees were very common. Unlike Madrid, Barcelona had more greenery throughout its streets and plazas. One place in particular was so other worldly that Shizuo was compelled to put his phone’s camera to good use. At least he wasn’t the only one; Park Güell was regularly inhabited by tourists. He blended right in with a German father, embarrassing his family to snap shots of the mosaics, elaborate bird nests, and peculiar colonnades.

Under slanted pathways surrounded by twisted, rocky pillars that drilled into the Earth was where Shizuo felt most underwater.

Click click click…

He tried to be subtle about it, like when Izaya was busy admiring the frescos and mosaics of suns upon the ceiling. His efforts were in vain, and Izaya naturally spotted the phone in no time. Izaya’s face actually lit up, like he was pleased with himself. Or maybe he was simply pleased to see that
Shizuo could share his enthusiasm for rich displays of culture. Or maybe he was just glad to see that Shizuo was still enjoying himself, despite it all.

“Look at you,” Izaya teased, “being a proper tourist.”

Shizuo lowered his phone, bashful at the statements truth. He turned away as if he could make his actions less obvious. “Sh... Shut up. Celty asked me to take pictures, so I’m gonna show her when we get back.”

“When you get back, you mean.”

In the brief moment Shizuo took to reflect upon the words, Izaya snatched Shizuo’s phone right out of his hands.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing!??”

But Izaya was already flipping through the camera roll. “Half of these are out of focus!”

“That’s ‘cause I’m always rushin’ to keep up with you!” Shizuo made a grab for his phone, but Izaya was as slippery as ever.

“Geesh, Shizu-chan, may you never attempt a career at photography,” Izaya grimaced, “you’re absolutely horrid. You call that an angle?”

“I’m not trying to make masterpieces, I’m just tryna get the cooler shit so I can show people!”

“Hmm...” Izaya turned the screen. “Is that supposed to be the Sagrada Familia?”

“Are you done?!?” Shizuo continued to chase him around in attempts to regain his phone.

“Of course not,” said Izaya. “You’re missing the best part of your trip.”

Shizuo frowned. “Oh yeah? What’s that?”

As Shizuo asked, Izaya held the camera out in front of his face, flashed a grin, and snapped a picture of himself. Behind him in the photo, there would undoubtedly be a very bristly Shizuo.

“Oi! You’ll waste memory space!”

“‘Waste’?!” Izaya dodged him and took a few more selfies. “You should make these your wallpapers. They’re so much prettier than anything you’ve taken.”

After he was satisfied with how much he’d clogged Shizuo’s camera roll, Izaya let Shizuo grab the phone out of his hands. He faced Shizuo with a cheeky smile playing on his lips, and Shizuo almost took another photo for himself.

“Yeah right,” Shizuo grumbled as he pocketed the phone with a jittery hand. “Those are getting deleted later.”

“How mean, Shizu-chan...”

But they never got deleted. In fact, the collection of photos featuring Izaya had only grown between then and the Valley of the Kings. All had been taken by Izaya himself. Some had even featured Shizuo in them. Every time, Shizuo had feigned annoyance and let Izaya take as many photos as he pleased. Izaya sticking his tongue out, Izaya making an faces that on anyone else would be unflattering.
If Izaya ever noticed the album practically dedicated to his own face on Shizuo’s phone, he had never said anything about it.

Now, Shizuo had never been so thankful for those photos he’d kept. In a foreign city where his only goal was to find this one specific person, some photographic evidence for the residents certainly helped.

“Umm… excuse me? Have you seen this man?”

He must have said those same words a hundred times and a hundred ways before noon that day, to almost anyone he passed by.

No matter how talkative Carmella Petrillo was back in Boston, Shizuo still didn’t have any idea of how to speak Italian. There was some English on signs, fortunately, but certainly no Japanese. To his pleasant surprise, at least, the city’s residents were almost uncharacteristically hospitable.

Very few Venetians brushed off Shizuo, despite his appearance as a scruffy, distressed Japanese man. Most glanced at the picture and shook their heads, but some genuinely tried to help Shizuo before the language barrier became too much for either party to handle.

One woman shook her head regretfully at the photo of Izaya on the screen. She took so much pity on Shizuo that she led him inside her home to have him show the photo to her husband and three sons. At another point, an older man became so concerned by Shizuo’s plight that he offered to take Shizuo to the police station to file a missing person’s report. Of course, Shizuo declined once he understood what the man was trying to do.

If Izaya didn’t want to be found, the last people capable of doing so were the cops. The best way to find someone in the underground informant was by the network Izaya himself so enthusiastically relied upon and manipulated.

People. Shizuo’s best bet was to keep his eyes and ears to the ground. Someone was bound to see Izaya.

And there was certainly plenty of people to pass. Several people had accidentally bumped into Shizuo’s broken arm, causing him to snap at them. Everyone was either on foot, or in a boat. The roads in Venice were narrow spaces between a history of brick and stone. Their excuse might have been that ‘road’ was a generous term for them. No, they were more like alleys, hundreds of alleys woven together tightly. Venice’s true travel network resided in its many canals and bridges.

Trouble was that to someone like Shizuo, that network becomes complicated. Venice was small enough of a city that Shizuo would often circle back to places he found familiar, and he started to wonder if he was crossing the same bridges over and over again. Perhaps it was because around every corner he was jarred to find some historical monument or church that stood apart from the rest of the city plan.

Eventually, Shizuo crossed the Grand Canal, through a roofed bridge walled with archways that overlooked the many gondolas, water taxis, and steeples poking over the cityscape. If he were another disposition, he might have paused to admire the peculiarity of a city treading water. As it was, he barely missed a beat before he was inquiring the residents of Venice’s eastern district the same question he’d been asking all day.

“Sì, l’ho visto..”

Shizuo did a doubletake.
The man he had just approached was the owner of a joint that sold pizza through a window next to one of the smaller waterways. He had thick, hairy arms which he crossed as he peered familiarly at Izaya. Shizuo had to be sure he had heard correctly.

“You have?!”

“Sì.”

“Where?!”

“Hmmm.. E’ passato di qua giusto stamattina ed era proprio messo male. L’ho visto camminare verso la Piazza.”

Of course, none of that made any sense to Shizuo. The pizza maker attempted to explain what the heck St. Mark’s Square was.

“Can you show me?” Shizuo almost pleaded, his heart pounding.

The man pointed down the alley way and began directing Shizuo in pure Italian. Even with the man’s elaborate gestures, Shizuo still had a hard time understand. When that failed, the man drew a small map with some arrows on one of his paper napkins before handing it over. Shizuo bowed his gratitude a dozen times before racing down the direction in which the man had pointed. With a slice of pizza in his hand, that is.

He wasn’t sure what he expected. Izaya standing in the middle of some square, wrapped in a bow and waiting for Shizuo? Such hopes were foolish, and even Shizuo knew that.

What he certainly never expected was an army of kamikaze pigeons.

“RAAAAH!!!”

His bellow sent the flock of hundreds of pigeons swarming towards the rooftops. Their flight gave a fewer number of tourists something to laugh and woop about. It wasn’t long before the birds descended to the ground again, cooing and bobbing their heads plainly.

St. Mark’s was a large square surrounded by a large white colonnade of building that played host to restaurants, tourist shops, and historical sites. Its appearance reminded Shizuo of a larger, cleaner Plaza Mayor. The differences lay in St. Mark’s access to the seaport, the glorious, multi-domed basilica, a tall bell tower, and of course the many, many, many pigeons.

It appeared that the majority of tourists congregated here, probably many of whom spoke less Italian than Shizuo. Shizuo showed them his phone and asked about Izaya anyways, saving himself absolutely no dignity in this mission.

Not a single one that paid him any mind had recognized Izaya.

Shizuo collapsed on a bench and release four second long sigh. He gave a sideways glance to the sun, now sliding towards the western quarter of the horizon.

I’m not going to find him today, am I?

Illuminated by the remaining sunlight’s orange glow was St. Mark’s Basilica. Shizuo stared at it, finding it to have a distinct, eastern flavor that set it apart from the rest of the city’s chapels. Its many domes and spires reminded Shizuo more of the mosques in Egypt than the cathedrals in Spain. But the many crosses, idols, and depictions of Christ assured Shizuo that it was indeed a Christian place.
Most of all, Shizuo wondered if Izaya could have been in there at this very moment. All this time, Izaya had gravitated towards significant places of history to hunt for his enemy. And not only just to search for the transmission origins, but to satisfy his own desires to explore the planet.

When he had landed in Washington, a city much more vast than Venice, Shizuo had less to track down Izaya. Yet somehow Shizuo had found him.

*Actually, maybe that was a time when he wanted to be found by me. This time it’s the opposite.*

Washington seemed so long ago all of a sudden. Shizuo had marched off into the unknown with all intentions of grinding Izaya’s bones to a pulp. Now, he was doing the same thing, with all the intentions of saving Izaya from whatever twisted fate their enemies had planned for him.

If Izaya had already left Venice, though, Shizuo was afraid that he didn’t have the expertise to track him down.

*Maybe I’ll never find him again…*

Shizuo quickly shook his head. *No, I’ll definitely find him.* Just like he’d told Sousuke. *I have to find him.* He had to believe he would. *I won’t stop until I find him.* He got to his feet.

“IAAAAAAAYAAAAA!!!!”

The pigeons took to the sky.

When Shizuo woke up, it was dark outside. All light stemmed from windows and street lamps. He cradled his broken arm as his eyes adjusted to consciousness.

A police officer was standing over where Shizuo lay upon a wooden bench in one of the alleyways, a look of disapproval upon his face. He scorned Shizuo for falling asleep on public property before shooing him away with just a warning.

It must have been well into the night by now, as the streets were practically deserted compared to how they were earlier. He had lasted the majority of the day on his feet. After the officer had woken him up, Shizuo took to wandering again when his stomach started rumbling. *Would anyplace with food be open at this time?*

Turns out, there would be. In the dimmest of alleyways he meandered down, a flickering light welcomed him to a quiet little bar. Shizuo stepped inside and found the place almost empty. Inside had more color and smelled like cream and fresh pastries, not piss and booze like Shizuo half expected. Anyone found in there seemed to simply be enjoying a light night dessert or coffee, several even with reading material, like they had just stopped by on their way home. A man was even working on a laptop.

Shizuo slid into a stool at the counter beside him, and the grey-haired bartender approached him as soon as he did.

“I’ll have a class of milk,” Shizuo ordered.

The bartender rose an eyebrow. “*Latte*?”

“Chocolate.”
With a confused look on his face, the bartender left to make the chocolate milk while Shizuo slumped over on the counter, reflecting upon the day.

His vicious bout of yelling Izaya’s name through the canals lasted as long as it took Shizuo to realize that if Izaya was hiding from him, alerting him of Shizuo’s proximity wasn’t exactly the brightest idea. Still, he had continued his search, starting with museums and landmarks. He figured if his luck from Washington had carried over until now, those would be the places he would find Izaya.

The bartender returned with his chocolate milk and Shizuo tossed a bill on the counter for him. Shizuo finished the glass in one gulp.

There was a mirror on the other side of the bar so that Shizuo was looking right back at himself whenever he looked forward. He could see how haggard he appeared, with bags under his eyes and, just as he’d been told, a layer of stubble on his face. The man beside him, whose face Shizuo could also see in the mirror, though it was focussed on a laptop screen, was almost pristine in his appearance.

Shizuo knew he shouldn’t have been staring, but he could now see up close that the man was quite handsome. He must have been in the midst of his forties, age lines just beginning to prickle his skin. His dark hair was slicked back with a neat, noticeable wave to it, not a strand out of place. His shoes were shiny, and his pants were ironed. His white shirt sleeves were rolled up as he typed away on his computer, and his tie was just slightly undone as it does naturally after a day of work. On his wrist was an expensive looking watch, silver and gold. By his side was a half eaten biscotti and a foamy concoction steaming in a cup.

Most captivating were the man’s eyes, which weren’t exactly identical. Both were blue, but one had little specks of green in it. The other was purely blue and had a glossy shine to it.

Before he knew what he was doing, Shizuo had been leaning forward to get a better look at the man’s attractive visage. His stool squeaked, and the man caught Shizuo’s eyes before Shizuo straightened, blushed, and apologized. The man just smiled shyly without addressing the moment. As the bartender passed, Shizuo grabbed for his attention.

“Ummm, excuse me? How can I access the internet?”

“Che cosa?”

“The internet?” Shizuo took at his phone and poked it. “You know, like, wifi?”

The bartender just frowned. “Ehh... non capisco..”

“Va tutto bene. Lo aiuto io.”

Both Shizuo and the bartender looked at the man with the laptop, who had spoken the words and leaned into their conversation. Whatever he had said was enough for the bartender to shrug Shizuo off. Shizuo turned sheepishly toward the man, who was smiling kindly at Shizuo. He became even more handsome when he did.

Shizuo could not believe himself.

“You’re Japanese?” the man asked him, and it took a moment for Shizuo to realize that the words were in his own language.

“Y-yeah!” Shizuo startled. He looked the man over. “You’re not.” As evident of his accent and
The man chuckled. “No, no. I’m what you would call a European mutt. I used to work in Japan, though! I picked up the language while I was there. It’s not very often I hear it around here. You were asking for the internet?”

“Yeah.” If Shizuo could get online, then maybe he could at least contact Celty and give her an update. *Hell, maybe she’ll even have an idea of what I should do.*

“I can help you with that!” The man offered.

Shizuo unlocked his phone and was met with one of the photos he had used to show people. “Wait! First,” he held up the screen, “have you seen him?”

Leaning forward slightly, the man peered at Izaya for a long, thoughtful moment. For what seemed like ages. Shizuo thought he might have seen a look of familiarity dawn on the man’s face in that time, but he was probably just kidding himself.

“Nope!” The man leaned back. “Can’t say I have.”

“Oh…”

“Are you two travelling together?”

“Um… yeah, sorta,” Shizuo wasn’t sure if he wanted to say we were. “We got separated, and we can’t call each other here so… So that’s why I need internet, you know, to message him.”

“Of course, of course, I’m happy to help!” The man beamed. “Just go into your settings, and…” He then went on to show Shizuo how to connect to the public wifi and gave him the password.

“Thanks!” Shizuo said, admiring the wifi connection symbol in the corner of his phone screen.

“Sure thing,” said the man. “They don’t have internet at the hotel you’re staying at?”

“Oh, I’m not staying at a hotel,” Shizuo divulged all too easily. “I probably don’t have enough to pay for one.”

“I see…”

Shizuo was starting to form a message to Celty when the man spoke up again.

“Let me buy you a pastry.”

Surprised, Shizuo just blinked at him.

“I rarely get to brush up on my very rusty Japanese,” he explained, “and you had to suffer through that rough explanation!”

“It really wasn’t that bad,” Shizuo assured him.

“Now, now, I’m a travelling salesman,” the man said, “so I know a weary traveler when I see one. Come on, it’s just a pastry!”

“Well…” Shizuo’s stomach roared. “Alright.”

After they’d received two cannoli from the bartender, the man held out a hand. “Name’s Josiah, by
Shizuo, who had already anxiously bitten a mouthful of the pastry in his hunger, now felt rude. He swallowed before he got to taste anything and wiped his mouth on his sleeve before he grasped Josiah’s hand. “Shizuo… Heiwajima…”

Josiah laughed as he gave Shizuo’s hand a firm shake. “What brings you to Italy, Shizuo Heiwajima?”

“Uh… work,” Shizuo half lied. He did have a job, at one point. *I still do.*

The skepticism read on Josiah’s face, but he played along. “Isn’t it the worst? They didn’t even give you a hotel! And they made you come like that?” His eyes fell on Shizuo’s casted arm.

“Got in an accident,” said Shizuo.

Josiah hissed. “Looks painful.”

“Sure is.” Now that was an outright lie. Painless, but also useless.

“I could help you with that, you know.”

Shizuo paused as his eyes widened. “How do you mean?”

Closing his laptop and putting it away, Josiah fully faced Shizuo with an enthusiastic smile on his face. “Well I’m just saying, that looks like a pretty… shady casting job. Hah… I won’t ask any questions. Actually, I work for a chain of hospitals, and our medical group specializes in prosthetic technology and orthopedic surgery. Well, it’s boring stuff, probably. But we have a new clinic here in Venice! Tell you what, let me give you a place to stay tonight. In the morning, I’ll take you to get a professional cast on that arm.”

The words startled Shizuo. He never could have expected such an offer, and honestly, it was tempting. Not so much the last bit about his arm, but somewhere warm to sleep sure sounded nice. He wouldn’t have to evade police officers all night. *But…* Shouldn’t Shizuo be wary of strangers doling out such great deals?

“No… Thank you, but I couldn’t impose on you like that,” Shizuo said.

“You wouldn’t be imposing!” Josiah assured. “I’ve just got a hotel suite with a couch in it. I can give you the internet, maybe a phone, maybe you could reach your…”

Shizuo perked up.

“Sorry, I don’t actually know your relationship with the man in the photo.”

“It’s not important,” Shizuo said quickly.

Josiah’s smirk was a little too knowing. “Really? Well, I’d still help you find him.”

Mussing with his own hair, Shizuo got the better of his hopeful excitement. “…Nah… No offense, but…” *You could be a serial killer.* “Well, I just think I’ll have the most luck looking on my own.”

“Alright,” Josiah said after a moment. “In that case, I’m heading back. It’s gotten pretty late, hasn’t it?” He slid off the stool and began to put on his coat. “If you change your mind, I’m staying at the Ruzzini Palace Hotel.”
“Oh, sure…” Shizuo watched him leave a final payment to the bartender and straighten himself.

“Will you show me his picture again?”

“Huh?”

“Will you show me his picture again?” Josiah repeated. “I just want to be sure.”

Hastily, Shizuo opened a picture of Izaya again. It was the first one Izaya had taken, the one in Barcelona. Shizuo’s favorite.

Josiah took his time familiarizing himself with Izaya, before he met Shizuo’s eyes. “He has a nice smile.”

Yes, he does. “’S’alright.”

“I definitely haven’t seen him, though. I’ll keep him in mind.” He started walking towards the door. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Shizuo Heiwajima.” And he walked through the door.

As Shizuo watched him leave, he started to regret turning down the invitation. Not long afterwards, the bartender was signalling to close the establishment, and the customers departed.

Of course he needed a place to stay, of course he needed proper medical care. But those were only small details compared to the tug Shizuo now felt in his belly. He felt that gut feeling, that one that always pulled him in the right direction. There was something about the way Josiah had looked at Izaya that compelled Shizuo to follow him. So before Josiah was too far away, Shizuo ran after him, calling with a loud and undignified “WAIT!”

Chapter End Notes

Everyone, I’d like you to meet Josiah Hummel (✿◠‿◠)
Chapter Summary

Shizuo’s desperation grows, and he finally goes to a doctor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Josiah’s room in the Ruzzini Palace made Shizuo feel like a legitimate vagabond. The cushions were satin and the wood a dark mahogany. Most furniture had elegant carvings and gold trim. The couch Shizuo slept on was bigger and fluffier than his actual bed in his apartment in Japan. Luxury aside, Shizuo was just grateful to be around a proper bathroom again. He could bathe, with mind for his cast, and shave with the razor Josiah lent him. He could brush his teeth! He almost felt like a new man, were it not for his arm.

Really, the cast was starting to smell.

In the morning, there was even a complimentary breakfast that Shizuo, not with his oftenly empty stomach, could pass up. Shizuo tried to make himself scarce and say as little as possible, as both to not impede on Josiah’s obviously busy life and to not reveal too much about himself. He had met a series of untrustworthy individuals in the world lately. However, he had also managed to meet a collection of wonderful human beings. So far, Josiah seemed to belong to the latter group. Shizuo thanked his luck that he could meet someone nearly on Sousuke’s level of generosity so soon after departing on his own.

“Will you look for your friend again today?” Josiah asked on their way out of the hotel.

As they exited, they passed a crew that was unloading some heavy cargo from the nearby bay. They were using wheeled platforms to transport the large crates into a building that Josiah and Shizuo neared as they walked.

“He’s not my friend,” Shizuo corrected him, “and yeah. Can’t work without him.”

“What did you say your job was?”

“I didn’t.”

“Oh,” Josiah could read that as a sign to back off, “Well, where will you look?”

“Everywhere,” said Shizuo, “and anywhere. I guess I’ll keep asking people if they’ve seen him. He’s not invisible, as much he’d like to be. He’s so funny, he acts like he wants everyone’s attention, but he’s shy in this unexpected kinda way. Sometimes it’s unbelievably frustrating, but…!” Shizuo caught Josiah’s eye, who was smiling at the way of Shizuo’s speech wistfully. “I mean, anyways. I’ll probably go to a few more museums or something. He’s really big on that stuff. I think I have enough to get into a few…”

Josiah looked thoughtful. So far they had walked together. Since Shizuo didn’t have a set destination, Shizuo had just paced along Josiah, wherever he was going.
They passed the crew moving into the building with the heavy crates. Just then, one of the larger crates of cargo got away from one of the transporters. It came racing towards Josiah and Shizuo, and the men shouted for them to get out of the way. Anyone else would have, and Josiah definitely would have. A normal person would have gotten crushed.

But for Shizuo, he just had to swat at the crate like a fly before it came to a halt. The workers were rather taken aback, but came to apologize and collect their cargo all the same.

“Sorry,” Shizuo said casually to Josiah, “I should let you get wherever you’re going. I’ll head in the other direction.”

Josiah was gaping at him for just a second before his face relaxed back into its regular composure, as if he didn’t just witness anything spectacular at all.

“No, please,” Josiah stopped him. “I appreciate the company.”

“You’re going to work, aren’t you?” Shizuo asked.

“Well, yes,” said Josiah, “But I don’t have to be at the clinic for another few hours. Why don’t I help you?”

This time, Shizuo really did stop in his tracks. There was only so much hospitality he could accept. “Why would you do that?”

For a second, Josiah looked contemplative. But then he guffawed, and held up his palms in defense. “Caught me. I really just want to play hooky for a bit and go sight seeing.

“I’m not from around here either, remember? Life’s hard when you’re a travelling business man! You go to all these magnificent places and spend most of your time in either a hotel or an office. When you said you might go to a museum, I caved. I admit it, you’re my excuse.”

Shizuo relaxed. “Oh.”

“If you don’t want me around, though,” Josiah continued, “I understand. It’s a bit unconventional to go around a foreign city with some strange guy you’ve just met, isn’t it? Of course, I would help you along the way! Here I was just trying to use the good samaritan routine as a way to get out of work. Haha, I wouldn’t blame you at all.”

Guilt started to weigh on Shizuo’s shoulders, not just because of Josiah. He was so quick to assume the worst in people, he always had been. Suspicious and angry, that’s me. He briefly thought back to his first encounter with Izaya, who he immediately had pegged for a troublemaker before any words were exchanged between the two of them.

Now, many years later, a stranger was finally having Shizuo consider the possibilities of what could have come about if he had simply walked away that day.

Probably nothing different. Izaya’s nothing if not persistent.

If Shizuo had learned something from this whole experience, it’s that there were plenty of people around the world capable of good. He could remember Kiera’s smile, Carmella’s care, Pepe’s sweetness, Jefe’s humor, and Sousuke’s wisdom. It was Shizuo’s own pessimism barring him Josiah’s company. Josiah had laid it all out there, showing much more honesty than Shizuo had. If anyone was being untrustworthy, it was Shizuo. But Josiah wasn’t condemning Shizuo for his secrecy.
And, was Shizuo really in a position to deny help?

As if seeing Shizuo’s brain steaming, Josiah spoke up. “But really, it’s okay. I’ll be on my way. Let me give you my card if you need anything.”

Shizuo blinked out of his thoughtful trance. “Wait, no, I think it’s okay. I mean, I think it’s okay if you want to help, or do whatever. I’m not your boss. If you want to skip work to go sightseeing, I can’t really stop you, can I? After all, it’s basically like I’m doing what I need to, and you just happened to go to the same place… Actually, I don’t really know anything about this city. I never knew where the important places were. I just always sorta… follow him.”

Josiah smiled, “Well, in that case, maybe I can be of some help!”

“Signore, non si può disturbare i turisti. Se continua, vi chiederemo di andarvene.”

Shizuo understood neither the words nor the harm of interrupting a tour group to ask if they had seen Izaya. However, the security guard looked displeased.

Getting between Shizuo and the guard, Josiah pointed to the picture on Shizuo’s phone. “Avete visto quest’uomo?”

Studying the photo, the guard rubbed her chin. She regarded Shizuo and Josiah suspiciously. “Vi siete separati?”

“Non oggi.”

The guard looked Josiah sternly in the eye. “Non posso rilasciare informazioni sugli ospiti. Se fosse venuto con voi oggi, avrei messo fuori un avviso.”


“Well?” Shizuo asked impatiently.

“Looks like he hasn’t come in,” Josiah said.

Shizuo cursed. At that point, he would have preferred to move on. However, Josiah became engrossed in their surroundings, which was all apart of a place called the Palazzo Ducale. Josiah was acting more or less like a kid in a candy store.

“Shizuo, look at that!”

“Shizuo, did you see this?”

“Shizuo, above you!”

“Shizuo, did you know about this?

And it was all a bit too grandiose for Shizuo. Rather, the palace reminded him so much of the royal palace in Madrid, that if someone had shown Shizuo a picture of the two different interiors, he would not have known the difference. This wasn’t because the doge’s palace wasn’t unique from a Spanish royal palace, but because Shizuo found no importance in distinguishing the trivialities of both their designs.
Like other places Shizuo had gone in Europe, the doge’s palace was covered in old paintings. On the ceilings, on the walls, depicting various scenes from biblical to classical. Apparently, people had lived in these kinds of places. Apparently, people still did. Shizuo wondered how anyone could live with so many demonic looking figures staring at them. How could they sleep with paintings of Jesus Christ over their head?

There was a golden staircase, and Shizuo thought, *Come on, isn’t that a little much?*

Josiah, on the other hand, could not get enough.

“The doge of Venice was not actually royalty, or even an elected official. Not elected in our sense, mind you. He was more often who was considered the wisest elder. Though this place is called the doge’s palace, it was more than just a home for him. This is where trials and meetings took place as well.”

“Oh.” *I don’t care.* “Listen, Josiah, I’m gonna go on ahead.”

They stilled in their tracks among the many other tourists passing through the halls.

“You can keep doing your thing,” Shizuo assured, “But I really can’t stick around. I appreciate your help, of course, but….”

Josiah shook his head and chuckled sheepishly. “I got carried away, didn’t I?”

“No!” Shizuo stepped back. “We’ve both got our own agendas. You’re in no obligation to help me, so go ahead and keep doing your thing. It was nice to meet you and all… but… yeah….” Not very good at goodbyes, Shizuo turned his back on Josiah and started walking away awkwardly.

“I’ll walk out with you then,” Josiah said, matching Shizuo’s pace. He was looking at his fancy watch, frowning. “I’ve really wasted a lot of time. Hopefully I’m not fired! Let’s go out through the new prison, it’s just through here…”

They followed the scenes and actually ended up outside on a short, narrow, white stone bridge. The only light was that of the sun, which could peek through the small windows between engraven designs. It was just a short walk between the palace and the connecting building, though it felt a bit let being suspended in limbo.

A canal was no doubt underneath them, Shizuo could hear the water some several meters below. There was an image just visible through the windows that caused Shizuo to stop and peer out.

Beneath them, a gondola slowly rowed by. In the boat was the gondolier who faced opposite two lovers, a man and a woman, that embraced each other. As they passed under the bridge, Shizuo could see the beginnings of a kiss. Then they disappeared.

“What a view!” Josiah said behind him.

Indeed it was. When they faced south, they could see the harbor. Many ships passed by in the open water.

“You know, there’s a legend about this bridge,” Josiah said.

“A legend?” Shizuo questioned.

“Nothing dire,” Josiah explained. “I hear that people believe that if two people kiss in a gondola beneath the bridge at sunset, their love will become eternal.”
Shizuo’s heart sunk. “How lame.”

Josiah chuckled. “It’s just a fun urban legend.”

“It’s stupid. Nothing can guarantee eternal love.”

“Not very superstitious?” When Shizuo shook his head, Josiah sighed. “I am. And wouldn’t it be a thing to behold? Wouldn’t you like to test it?”

“Test it?” Shizuo rose an eyebrow, a little skeptic of what Josiah was insinuating with him.

“I mean, surely people have tried it before. Don’t you wonder what happened to them? Are they still in love? What if some bored friends decided to try it, just as a joke, and accidentally fell in love? How unexpected, but how beautiful. And what about the people who came here with all the hope that they’d be with their boyfriend or girlfriend forever, and then somewhere down the road had their hearts terribly broken? I suppose it’s also a test of faith. Yes, I would very much like to test those forces of the universe.”

It suddenly became much darker in that little bridge, but Shizuo came to look at Josiah in a new light, whose blue eyes appeared to be the only source of luminance. The stretch of words had ignited a bitter sense of familiarity in Shizuo, a soulful aching in his chest.

“You know…” he started, and he found it hard to breathe, “you remind me of him a bit.”

And it did nothing to relieve Shizuo from his longing, for it was only a painful reminder of what he was missing. Josiah was not Izaya, he wasn’t even close.

“Hah, really? I’m flattered, since you seem so fond of him.”

Fondness was but a pitiful understatement for how Shizuo felt.

“He would say weird, nerdy things like that too,” said Shizuo, “You sure you haven’t met him before?”

“Quite sure,” Josiah answered, “though now I believe that I might like to.”

That would imply that Shizuo would find him first.

They exited back onto the alley streets of Venice and joined the crowd of everyday pedestrians. The air was a little anxious, unsure of what was to come next. Then, Josiah turned to Shizuo before they could barely breathe any in. He had a hard, determined smile upon his face.

“Since you allowed me to come with you, allow me to bring you along with me,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Shizuo asked.

“I mean that you were gracious enough to let me tag along even though I was slowing you down. Allow me to make it up to you. If you come with me, I think I can help you further.”

“Is this about my arm again?” Really, I’m fine with just a shitty sling.

“It is, actually,” Josiah said. “Haven’t you gotten sick from the smell yet? It smells like rotten tuna.”

“It probably does,” said Shizuo, but it was something else that was bothering him. “Josiah, can I ask you something?”
Josiah’s eyelids fluttered in anticipation. “Of course.”

“Why are you helping me?” Shizuo was frowning. “It’s one thing to help a stranger off the streets. I believe people are good enough to be capable of acts like that. But everything else? Isn’t it too much?”

Josiah bit his lip, and Shizuo winced. A moment followed full of silence and uncertainty. While Josiah looked a bit backed into the corner, Shizuo was waiting for some sort of catch. That, or to go on the offensive at a moment’s notice.

“You’ve got me all wrong again.” Josiah finally said. “I’m selfish, actually.”

Shizuo’s eyebrows rose, unconvinced.

When Shizuo couldn’t think of anything to say, Josiah continued. “You see… I can tell you’re strong, and I think I might want to use that strength for something.”

Glaring, Shizuo clenched his fists instantly. What a familiar rage, he was starting to feel. He would have broken a few of Josiah’s bones without thinking, had Josiah not spoken up quickly.

“Not for free, of course! I know you’re fixated on finding your friend, so that’s how we would compensate you. We’re a group that has a lot of information and can acquire even more. If you want to find him, our way would be a lot more efficient than yours.”

“And what’s yours?” Shizuo asked through still gritted teeth.

“You have his cell phone number don’t you?”

“You don’t think I’ve tried to call him?”

Josiah smiled reassuringly. “His number will be more than enough for us to find him.”

Shizuo’s frown deepened with a foreboding curiosity. “Josiah, what exactly is it that you do?”

“We have these new prosthetics in our office, and I would like you to test them. They’re a new technology, meant to be extremely strong. There are machines to test them, but… well… I can’t imagine a machine is better compared to a human, can you?”

After that, Shizuo relaxed again. And he was surprised, actually. “Wait… so you don’t want to like… experiment on me?”

“What?!” Josiah gasped. “God, no! That’s terrible! What would make you think that?!”

Well, when you’ve grown up around Kishitanis… Shizuo couldn’t help but be suspicious of those in the medical field that took an interest in him. Now it was Shinra’s fault that Shizuo had almost given this man a reason to use prosthetics himself.

“You just want me to… do what exactly?”

“You will be the one testing. My associate and I will just be monitoring. Actually, it will be more like playing with the prosthetics, on your part.”

“That’s it?” Shizuo scratched his head, a bit skeptical.

“That’s all,” said Josiah, and he met Shizuo’s eyes. Shizuo came to focus on the irritated-looking skin under Josiah’s left eye. “If you do me this favor, I will absolutely find him with you. There isn’t
Josiah displayed an unprecedented confidence that hypnotised Shizuo. Not only were the promises of locating Izaya appealing to him, but Shizuo was suddenly feeling obligated to do Josiah this favor. He personally had no leads to Izaya, and he wondered how effective his desperate, unprofessional methods would continue to be. At this point, he couldn’t think of any good reason not to go along with Josiah.

So he did, and we was glad to find that the building to which he was lead was quite a normal-looking office building.

Well, normal for the Venetian architecture, old and stone.

Shizuo sighed with relief. On the first floor there wasn’t much besides a few doors with names plaqued on their door. Of course, they were in Italian, and Shizuo couldn’t read them. Judging by the smell, at least one of them was a dental office.

They got in an old, brass elevator that had a list of every floor. Josiah hit the third button, and they started to move. When the elevator opened, they were already in the office. Actually, they were in the waiting area, where there was a receptionist behind a desk, several plush chairs, tables with magazines, and an older man in a wheelchair.

“This way,” Josiah led Shizuo through a connecting hallway, with just an exchanged nod to the stout, brunette receptionist. There weren’t too many places to go down that short hall, so they went into a room that, for a moment, really startled Shizuo.

At first, he seriously thought he was surrounded by severed limbs. Biceps, forearms, whole arms, thighs, calves, feet, whole legs, and some that looked like internal organs. However, Shizuo quickly realized that all of these were fake. They were prosthetics, some more high-tech looking that others. While some appeared to be just plastic and not realistic, others had Shizuo fooled longer.

Other than that, it looked very much like a doctor’s office. There was a counter and cabinets, a sink and tools everywhere. There was a medical chair in the corner, as well as exercise equipment, it seemed.

Also, there was a woman, just older than forty, that looked up from tinkering with a feminine left arm when the two men strolled in. She was bespectacled, thin, donned a white doctor’s coat, and had her long blonde hair pulled up high and tight. The thickness of her round framed glasses made her green eyes appear much larger than average.

She smiled at Josiah, and the two began conversing in pure Italian. Shizuo stood by patiently, observing the office’s surroundings. There were large windows that allowed a lot of light in and overlooked the Grand Canal, and Shizuo hadn’t even realized that they had looped around to this area. Upon the walls were the type of posters Shizuo remembered from his trips to doctors when he was little. Very typical How To Stay Healthy, motivational posters, the type of scenery that Shinra lacked in his apartment. Some were specifically about prosthetics and orthopedia.

“Shizuo,” Josiah started, “This is Doctor Dellorco. Obviously, she doesn’t speak a word of Japanese, so let me translate between the two of you.”

Dellorco held out her hand to Shizuo. “Ciao!”

“Uh, chow,” Shizuo returned as he grasped her hand. She jumped, and a large, almost manic grin broke across her face.
“Lui è perfetto!!”

“What she say?” Shizuo asked Josiah, who chuckled.

“She’s pleased to meet you.”

The two Europeans began to explain to Shizuo what they wanted from him. A lot of it went over his head, even with Josiah translating. Dellorco took Shizuo’s height and weight and measured around some of his muscles. She took his pulse and his listened to his breathing. She criticized his casting. Shizuo began to become impatient.

Despite agreeing to this condition first, finding Izaya was still his first priority and more pressing thought. It was also a good distraction from whatever Dellorco and Josiah were having them do. *Hold this, pull this, lift this, bend this, kick this, squeeze this...* He could tell that one thing that they were testing were the prosthetics’ durability, but why against him? Wouldn’t an average human make more sense?

“Shizuo, can you arm wrestle this prosthetic?”

“Excuse me?”

He was sat down at a table on which the other end there was an arm bent and inviting in the pose usually for arm wrestling. It was hooked up to a large battery through cables, but it was just an arm.

“I told you this would be like playing games, right?” said Josiah.

Shizuo grasped the hand of the arm presented to him, and it had a waxy, plastic feel to it.

Dellorco flicked a switch. “Go!”

The arm came to life, and its weight started to push on Shizuo’s hand. However, Shizuo hadn’t expected the sudden start. His reflexes took over and he slammed the arm against the table, breaking it in half at the elbow and shattering most of it to pieces. Dellorco and Josiah gasped, and Shizuo’s eyes widened.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to break it!”

But Dellorco was whooping in excitement.

“It’s fine,” Josiah said, “These are meant to be tested. We expect some to break.”

“Oh... Okay.”

This time, Shizuo was presented with the arm Dellorco had been working on when they had entered.

“Now... Try this one.”

Shizuo grasped the arm, and this one already felt more realistic and sturdy. The skin felt like real skin, and there was a firmness like muscle underneath. There was even blemishes and body hair. The sensation was familiar, but not quite like touching a human.

“Go!”

When he started this time, Shizuo did not use his full might at first. But, he quickly found that he would need to.
This prosthetic was incredibly strong.

*What is this thing made out of?* Shizuo wondered as he began to break out in a light sweat, the muscles in his left arm straining. The two of them, Shizuo and the prosthetic, were going back and forth, little by little. Neither gave way to the other.

Finally, Shizuo slammed the arm against the table in victory. This one didn’t break at all, though. He breathed heavily, a little unnerved by the experience of almost losing to something fake in a contest of strength.

Dellorco looked disappointed. “Suppongo che abbiano bisogno di essere più forti...” She carried her defeated prosthetic out of the room dejectedly.

A hand landed on Shizuo’s shoulder. It belonged to Josiah. “Thank you, Shizuo. That’s all we’ll have you do.

Shizuo straightened. “So you’ll help find my friend now?”

“Of course!” said Josiah. “I’ll get started while the doctor gets you a proper cast!”

Just as he said so, Dellorco came back in and led Shizuo across the hall to a different room. This room was just about the same, with big, bright windows facing the Grand Canal, except the patient’s chair was in the center of the room and there weren’t prosthetics lying around everywhere.

Shizuo sat on the chair, its rubbery skin squeaking underneath him. Dellorco began removing Shizuo’s sling, telling him to lie back and relax. He couldn’t relax, though, not while listening to Josiah talking to someone on the phone outside.

Seeming to be saying farewell to whomever was on the other end, Josiah walked in and hung up his phone.

“I’ve just in contact with a coworker that should be able to help us. She’s from our IT department and very good at… Well, let’s just say whatever she does after hours is up to her. She’s on her way!”

Shizuo sat up suddenly and almost knocked into Dellorco, who shoved him back against the seat. “Josiah, you’re keeping this off the grid, right?”

He laughed. “I think I’d get fired if it wasn’t.”

“Oh. Well I don’t want to get you fired either.”

“Don’t worry about it!” Josiah smiled, and he was just as handsome as Shizuo had first found him. “Just lay back and let Dellorco give you a proper cast while we wait for her to get here.”

And Shizuo tried. Dellorco cut of the decaying cast that Rio had given him, and threw its remains in the trash.

“E’ sudicio!” She exclaimed, plugging her nose in teasing. Shizuo rolled his eyes, Josiah laughed.

Shizuo looked down at his now naked right arm. It was sweaty and clammy and a pit bale. When Shizuo tried to move it, nothing. It was still very much broken. He wondered where and how. It’s not exactly like there was an X-Ray machine on Beatrice.

That was the first thing they did. Dellorco took some X-rays, and then some molds to make a cast with.
An hour passed, and Josiah’s contact still hadn’t arrived. Josiah sat by patiently and watched Dellorco and Shizuo. When Shizuo was in the chair again, Dellorco started talking to Josiah to translate again.

“We’ll give you something to numb your arm, if you’re uncomfortable.”

Shizuo shook his head. “No need. Don’t feel anything.”

But he did feel something all of a sudden. A quick pinch in his right shoulder, and Shizuo looked down. Dellorco had stuck a needle in him, and she was slowly pushing a clear liquid into his body.

And Shizuo’s vision was already starting to blur, his body already swaying by the time she removed the syringe.

“Just so you don’t feel any pain.”

The voice sounded distance, but it was Josiah, who was now even closer. He had come to stand over Shizuo, now slumped back against the chair. Josiah’s serene visage was the last thing Shizuo saw before all was black.

When Shizuo regained consciousness, it was a slow and steady process.

His eyes fluttered against a harsh, fluorescent light from above. Deciding to keep his eyes closed, Shizuo groaned in drowsiness. His head rocked back and forth against the chair’s curved headrest. He wasn’t in any pain, in fact, it was the opposite. Body and mind were coming alive numbingly slow, and Shizuo had yet to feel anything other than tingling sensations below his neck.

“Shizuo, are you awake?”

He knew that voice, just barely.

Josiah.

“Ugh… what happened?”

“Dellorco has always been a little generous in her anesthetics. She knocked you right out.”

Dellorco… Oh yeah… the mad doctor. Shizuo could more accurately recall the image of a lifesize, grinning moth than the actual woman.

“But any fuss was avoided with you like that. Don’t worry! Everything’s fine. Your arm is as good as new. Better, actually. And not just your arm.”

“Well, that’s good…” Shizuo’s mind swam with thoughts, memories, images. He asked softly, “Did you find him yet?”

“Not yet… Soon.” Josiah paused, and Shizuo was almost asleep again in that moment.

Wake me up when Izaya’s here, he meant to say aloud.

“Hey now, Shizuo,” Josiah’s voice called to him. “Don’t fall back asleep. Geez, those anesthetics are scary.”
“Mhm… Oh, right.” Shizuo opened his eyes again. Josiah was standing above him, smiling encouragingly. Blinking a few times, Shizuo got rid of some of the dots floating across his vision.

“Why don’t you tell me about him, your friend,” suggested Josiah, “to help keep you awake?”

“Dunno if he’d like that very much,” said Shizuo.

“It might help in finding him.”

Shizuo closed his eyes again, picturing Izaya. Josiah made a disapproving sound but Shizuo assured him he would not fall back asleep. “I don’t know what to say that would help you. He’s sneaky. Good with computers and technology. He’s probably under an alias.”

“Okay, that’s good. What else?”

The request made Shizuo sigh. He wasn’t the chatty type. somehow, though, the words seemed to roll of Shizuo’s tongue.

“Running is what he’s best at. And cutting into people, but he would much rather run. He’s pretty fast, too, for having such scrawny little legs. But he’s bigger than he looks. Stronger too. Even capable of carrying me. Me! Can you believe it? He’s always been stronger than he looks, and weaker than he appears. Like, he’s all talk. Always putting on an act for everyone else. I didn’t believe there was a genuine part about him until a while ago. Now I know better. I don’t know why he decided to show me, but…”

He breathed. Stupid drugs, Shizuo blamed them for saying such foolish things.

“He’s actually… the only person that I can talk about so much… and the only person that can get me to say as much.”

That’s enough, Shizuo told himself, embarrassed at how pathetic he must have been sounding. He couldn’t ever let Izaya hear such a thing.

Shizuo heard a melancholy sigh that was not his own. Opening his eyes again, he saw Josiah’s eyes closed and a bittersweet expression upon the man’s face. The sight made Shizuo squint suspiciously.

“What else can you recall?”

“He’s a piece of garbage.”

Josiah made a startled sound as Shizuo turned his head around to take in more of his surroundings.

He was in the same room in which he’d fallen asleep. The door was closed, and the blinds were drawn on the windows so that Shizuo was robbed of the view of Venice. There wasn’t any light coming from the other side of the curtains, and the atmosphere was significantly darker.

“Josiah, what time is it?” Shizuo asked, “How long was I out?”

A hand rose to rub his tired head. His hair felt shorter, but was it just his imagination?

“Just a few hours,” Josiah said. “Relax, lie back down. Tell me more about Izaya.”

What was most amazing was how adrenaline could so quickly defeat the after effects of anesthesia. He hadn’t even realized he’d shifted on his left elbow.
The situation was becoming clearer the longer Shizuo had his eyes open, and the more he thought about, the more his blood began to race. His whole body was beginning to respond, the skin on his entire torso could now feel the cool air in the room. That sensation that alerted Shizuo to the fact that he was not, currently, wearing a shirt caused him to look down at himself. When he did, he could then notice the peculiar scar that had appeared around his right shoulder since the last time he’d examined himself.

Its shape appeared eerily like a spider, with legs stretching towards his collar and chest that were attached to a circle that went all around the shoulder, even under his armpit.

Shizuo pulled on the strands of his hair curiously, and they were definitely shorter than before. But this action brought attention to the most shocking abnormality so far.

The hand Shizuo had been using all this time was that of his right arm, which was now moving cleaning and operating according to Shizuo’s will as naturally as ever.

No, not quite as naturally, for Shizuo soon felt the artificial quality under his right arm’s skin.

He held the suspicious hand in front of his wide eyes, and the limb tensely began to shake. Because this simply could not be. Was it his hand shaking, or his vision? In fact, it was all of himself.

“Didn’t I tell you? We’ve made it even better than new!”

Josiah’s voice managed to reach Shizuo, though it sounded so distant despite Josiah standing right beside him. Shizuo could just barely tear his eyes away from own hand in order to look Josiah in his blissful, dishonest face.

Shizuo Heiwajima had sustained a lot of injuries in his lifetime. More than the average person. He had broken both his arms many times before, in several different places. He had broken legs, ribs, vertebrae, elbows, wrists, ankles, shoulder blades, and just about every bone you could name. He had more experience with casts and hospitals than he would like to admit.

Of course, Shizuo wasn’t the average case, either. More often than not it was because he could simply ignore the pain that others could feel before they were entirely healed. He might have been able to heal slightly faster than a normal human being, but he certainly knew that broken limbs didn’t heal overnight. And when they finally did heal, they wouldn’t typically leave a new scar from the base of his wrist to just below his armpit.

Nor around one’s shoulder.

Despite Shizuo’s expression of undoubtedly absolute horror, Josiah continued to smile at him.

Shizuo gaped. “What did you do…?”

“Don’t be so alarmed, Shizuo. We’ve done exactly what we said. We’ve healed your arm and possibly made you even stronger. Shouldn’t you be thankful?”

All Shizuo could do was shake his head and grit his teeth. “You did something. I don’t know what, but you did.”

Sensing Shizuo’s growing animosity towards him, Josiah sat in a chair halfway across the room. A safe distance if Shizuo decided to lash out physically, Shizuo noticed. Josiah crossed his legs and his hands over them. “Honestly, Shizuo, I would love to explain, but Dellorco’s probably more qualified. And she’s not here right now.”
She’s not…” Shizuo sat more upright, and his eyes glanced towards the door. Then to the windows. Something more was wrong, and he couldn’t pinpoint how he knew. He began to look around the room for his belongings, but they were nowhere. Did they take them, or…? Suspicious, Shizuo’s eyes narrowed at Josiah again.

“In the meantime, Shizuo, please relax. I would like to discuss your relationship with Izaya a bit longer.”

“Why would you-” Shizuo began, but that wasn’t right. Josiah’s words weren’t right.

Izaya.

“I never said his name.”

How does he know?

And just like that, a factor in the man switched on that made Shizuo’s skin prickle, his senses go alert. The entire atmosphere in the room changed in such a short moment. It was like Josiah was radiating an aura capable of mass destruction, and Shizuo was caught in the blast.

But Josiah was merely looking at Shizuo curiously.

“Well, I don’t see the point in keeping up pretenses anymore,” he said. “If you haven’t figured out what’s going on yet, you’re even less intelligent than I was led to believe.”

Shizuo through the patient’s chair at him.

The aftermath left sparks flying out of the walls and where the chair had been torn up. Josiah had disappeared under the rubble from the wall he’d crashed into. A wire to the lights must have been damaged, since the lights started to flicker off.

Usually, it wasn’t in Shizuo’s instincts to run away. When it came to Flight or Fight, he always Fought. This time, though, there was a dreadful fear in Shizuo’s stomach, rapidly boiling him and freezing him at the same time. It told him to flee this place, that this was a fight he could not win. If he stayed in this place, he felt that he would certainly die.

Panting, Shizuo shot towards the door. He barged into a hallway that was not the same as the facility he was in before. Nothing about this place was familiar.

The room he had woken up in had been replicated to resemble the one in Venice. Shizuo couldn’t even say he was in the same city.

He was in a place of dim lights and aluminum walls, of cold silver tiles, of long underground hallways. The hall Shizuo entered stretched about twenty meters, and each direction was as ambiguous as the other. With only his gut to follow, Shizuo sprinted towards the triple fork that awaiting him to the left. He rounded a corner, and then another. And when he skidded around a particularly sharp one, Shizuo got hit hard in chest with something as hard as a bulldozer.

The force was enough to knock Shizuo flat on his back. His head smacked against the tiles, and he gasped. For a second, his vision went hazy. When his eyes refocused, Shizuo came into sight with a familiar visage glaring down at him.

A face that infuriated Shizuo as much as the last time he’d seen it.
My bet is that absolutely no one is surprised about Josiah.

Edited 8/26/14: sooooo I'm leaving for my semester in California tomorrow and it's been really crazy preparing for everything I'll need and will have to do. If this fic goes a while without updating, I apologize, but it can't be avoided. I'm hoping once I'm settled out there I'll have time to write this fic again. I'm really adamant about finishing this one!
Shizuo sits in on a lesson of Humanity 101.

If nothing else, Shizuo could usually pride himself on his excellent judge of character.

Izaya, for example. Shizuo knew Izaya was a troublemaker from the moment they laid eyes on each other. Should Shizuo have immediately aimed his fist at Izaya’s face? Not necessarily, but they were bound to brawl sooner rather than later. Don’t mistake Shizuo’s current feelings towards Izaya for a blind eye. Izaya was still a bona fide troublemaker.

Another instance when Shizuo was able to sense someone’s bad intentions was in Boston, from the natural blond that might as well have been an inflated Ken doll. At the time, Shizuo had been unable to pinpoint what was so suspicious about the natural blond. Of course, Izaya had been far less convinced with such small evidence. Izaya was facts and philosophy; Shizuo was emotion and intuition.

I’ll have to rub this one in the flea’s face, Shizuo thought, strewn upon the ground, staring up at Kyle the Natural Blond after all this time.

Kyle grabbed Shizuo by the throat, lifted him, and threw him against the metallic walls so hard that they dented. The hand that had Shizuo tightened, and though the pain was somewhat nulled for Shizuo, he knew that all the air wasn’t getting to his lungs. He rasped and he rasped, taking a good look at the man choking the life out of him.

No longer did Kyle appear as the well-groomed mannequin that Shizuo had met over a month ago. He might still have had the nice clothes and the smooth hair, but his face was feral. Blue eyes glowed with a dark determination, and white teeth flashed aggressively.

Before he passed out, Shizuo remembered that he could fight back.

He jabbed the inside of Kyle’s elbow with the heel of his palm so it would buckle and bend, grabbed it, and twisted. At the same time, Shizuo rounded his right leg into Kyle’s left side. But Kyle was quick to block with his left arm. Anticipating this, Shizuo stepped his left leg around Kyle, and, using the momentum and the grasp he still had on Kyle’s arm, flipped him towards the floor.

Shizuo’s mistake came after Kyle was on his back, when he let his rage get the best of him again. He should have used the opportunity to escape further, however far he got to freedom. Instead, Shizuo's
blood boiled all the way to his knuckles. He aimed a punch at Kyle’s face.

And he felt something resonate in his right arm. Like his veins were working overtime. It felt heavier, and then lighter everywhere but his fist. All the weight had dropped to the surface of his fingers than his slammed between Kyle’s eyes.

The force probably would have killed a human being. Their heads would have smashed to pieces. Kyle’s though, remained perfectly intact. The hard floor actually gave way underneath Kyle’s skull, creating a dent for it to fall back in.

If anything, Shizuo had just messed up Kyle’s hair a bit.

Kyle planted his feet on Shizuo’s abdomen and kicked Shizuo over his head.

For the next few minutes, Kyle completely had the upperhand.

Shizuo had been shot and stabbed before, of course, but rarely was he at a disadvantaged when it came to hand to hand combat. Martial arts and wrestling were the only things he would ever study, and the only learning that ever paid off for him. Now, he was being tossed, kicked, and beaten, and it was all Shizuo could do to defend himself from taking irrecoverable damage. The most he could manage were some weak insults spit from his mouth.

As Shizuo’s head smashed against the wall for the third or fourth time, the world started to spin, but other things were becoming so clear. He could more closely recall the night Kyle had gotten so close to Izaya. One of the suitcases had been slightly awry.

Why? They’ve managed to find us wherever we went. Did they put in a tracker? Would Izaya have noticed?


His face met the floor, and he gasped as the force knocked the air out of his lungs. A foot planted itself on Shizuo’s back, pinning him. Kyle grabbed Shizuo’s new and improved right arm, twisting.

“Kyle, that’s enough.”

Shizuo struggled for air while Kyle kept the lock on him. Rasping, he looked up through blurry eyes at Josiah’s approaching form.

In the time it took for Josiah to cross the hallway, Shizuo wondered how, despite his history of better judgment against people, he could have gotten Josiah so wrong. His intuition had failed him.

“There’s really no need for all this.” Josiah’s voice was as silky as ever.

Despite having a giant mechanical chair chucked at him, Josiah did not have a scratch on his body. The only damage was on his clothes. Josiah stepped just in front of Shizuo, brushing dust and debris from his suit. As Kyle hoisted Shizuo half upwards, Josiah squatted to meet Shizuo at eye level.

The sight of him bled to red in Shizuo’s infuriated vision.

He could not form his hatred into words, so all his tempered emotions came out as a broken, rabid, vengeful growl. His teeth gnashed and gnarled at the man in front of him, who looked as intimidated as a god before a beast.
“Shizuo,” he said, “I wish you wouldn’t act so rashly. I wish you would hear me out.”

Shizuo glowered. He opened his mouth, ready to spill an array of obscenities, but all that escaped from his mouth were vague, distraught, guttural noises. Silently, he cursed himself for his helplessness. The more he struggled, the more he tired and felt like an animal on a leash.

Leaning closer, Josiah asked, “Do you think you can behave if I have Kyle let you go?”

“I’ll tear your limbs off.”

“I can see why you might find that appropriate,” Josiah tisked, “but, how does the saying go? An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. You’d most likely have some trouble tearing my limbs from me, though. Besides, I think you’ll come to quite like your new and improved right arm. It’s stronger, it won’t break when you utilize your strength to its maximum. That’s the flaw in your body, Shizuo. Your human body can’t support the infinite potential! If only we had more time, we could have improved your other arm. Well, they’ll be more chances. Later.”

Shizuo snapped his teeth at Josiah in a way that could only be heard as Fuck you.

Josiah sighed, more exhausted with Shizuo’s wasted efforts than threatened. “Let me put it this way: Go on a walk with me, listen to what I have to say, or you’ll never see anyone you love ever again.”

All of Shizuo stilled, except for his eyes. They had widened with incredible despair.

“It might not have occurred to you how serious the situation for you is right now. I want to make it clear that I have all the power to follow through with that threat. Surely it’s clear to you now that I have been keeping perfect track of you and Izaya since either of you left Japan. Imagine how easy it will be for me to track down a movie star, or a headless woman, or a debt collector. Not very hard at all. I am one of many, and our eyes are everywhere. Killing me would only trigger something very dangerous for the rest of the world.”

An easy smile played on Josiah’s face the whole time, contrary to Shizuo’s growing anguish. “So, ready to hear me out?”

Behind Shizuo, Kyle twisted his untampered shoulder to further prove the point of his helplessness. Every instinct in his Shizuo’s body told him to fight, even if to the bitter end. But what good would that do? asked a wiser voice. If you let that temper take control of you this time, it might just be the worst mistake you’ve ever made.

He could be bluffing! Shizuo argued with himself, which was so stupid.

You really think he’s bluffing? asked the little wisdom he had. Look at the evidence here. If you fuck up, and he’s not, the blood of all those people will be on your hands. And then it added, Remember why you came this far.

He relented, shuddering like it was physically painful to do so. Without a word, he merely sagged against the floor, momentarily untensing the strain in his muscles.

“Wonderful!” Josiah clapped his hands together, and Kyle released his grip on Shizuo.

Shizuo crumpled to the floor and levelled his breathing. He needed a few minutes. His body was actually shaking. From anger, from fear. Obviously these weren’t like the thugs Shizuo had faced in the past. He wouldn’t be able to overwhelm them with his incredible strength. To think, he spent all those years wishing that strength would go away.
Now how he wished he was just a little bit stronger.

Weighed down by the world on his shoulders, Shizuo slowly rose to his feet. His fists became clenched, and his muscles twitched. A lot of willpower went into restraining the urge to throw a punch. He couldn’t look directly at either of the men flanking him. Both Josiah and Kyle were smaller than him in both height and frame, but Shizuo could not help but feel trapped between two Titans.

“Now that we’ve cooled down a bit,” Josiah said, sickeningly casual, “you probably would like something to wear, wouldn’t you, Shizuo?”

Without saying anything, Shizuo looked down at his bare chest and cotton pants as thin as those they give you to wear in a hospital.

“I thought so.” Josiah turned and gestured for the other two to follow. “If you follow me, I’ll be more than happy to make you comfortable here.”

Shizuo glanced behind him. Maybe Kyle wanted to take the lead, but judging by the cold, empty glare that he was giving Shizuo, Kyle wanted to keep his eyes on Shizuo from behind. When Shizuo didn’t move fast enough, Kyle took a menacing step forward.

Swallowing a scoff, Shizuo began following Josiah. You don’t scare me, he wanted to say, but that wasn’t exactly true…

Josiah led them down the brightly lit, metallic halls. The air was cold, and the floor was even colder on Shizuo’s bare feet. For all Shizuo knew, he could have been in a spaceship. It certainly felt like that. Whenever they passed a door, it looked something high-tech that would slide open. They had sleek, plasma touch screens as keypads and multiple scanners on either side. Security, Shizuo noted solemnly, must be extremely tight.

He kept glancing back at Kyle, whose eyes were always trained expertly on Shizuo. Though Shizuo had hated the man from the start, it was hard to imagine that this menace with the cold glare was the same chump Izaya had dumped in a bar.

“You were a lot more talkative in Boston,” Shizuo said, almost to himself.

In response, Kyle cracked each of the fingers on his right hand. One at a time, his stare unwavering. The sound was more like squeak of hinges than the pop of bone joints.

“The Kyle you met in Boston was using a program designed to interact and socialize with humans,” Josiah explained. “His primary functions, though, are defense and combat.”

As if Shizuo hadn’t noticed.

What did surprise Shizuo, though, is when they passed by other people. A man and a woman passed them, both dressed like rogue soldiers. They had the same fierce focus in their eyes as Kyle, and had passed by the three of them without a second glance. Others in labcoats passed from one room to another. Occasionally, one would nod or salute Josiah. They’d eye Shizuo with either grave suspicion or dangerous enthusiasm.

The whole time they walked, Shizuo tried to make a mental map of everything he saw, every corner they turned, every door. It was a difficult task for someone like him on a regular day, but it was even harder with all the panic and stress streaming through Shizuo’s mind already. They passed many rooms, some open, some closed. He snuck a peek into one they passed and saw a row of silver tables with white sheets covering some kind of form. Shizuo slowed for more detail, but all he noticed was
something bright orange and curly sticking out from beneath the sheet before Kyle shoved him to keep moving.

One of the labcoats punched something into a keypad with one of the fierce ones by her side. The door slid open, and this place was an elevator. Shizuo watched them step inside, press a button, and the door slip shut. He heard the whoosh of them being carried above and away.

Noticing Shizuo’s observations, Josiah spoke up. “You might have noticed that we’re not in Venice anymore, Shizuo.”

Shizuo snorted. “You don’t say.”

“There’s just not enough space in the city for us to work, so we had to transport you out here while you were unconscious.”

“Where’s ‘here’, exactly?” Shizuo asked.

“Not near any place civilised, I can assure you. The section of the facility we’re crossing through now is carved deep within a mountainside. Hopefully you can understand, but we’ll have to keep in these parts. The walls are much more durable down here. You’d probably blast right through the rooms upstairs!”

“So… you had to drag me all the way out here, and do… whatever the hell you did to my arm. How long did you keep me unconscious?”

“Well, we had a lot of work cut out for us!” Josiah said, “We had to transport you discreetly out of Venice, drive quite a ways North, perform a very intensive surgery…” He eyed Shizuo from over his shoulder. “It’s been over twenty-four hours, that’s for sure.”

Shizuo froze. He could hear Kyle cracking his knuckles behind him menacingly, but that wasn’t as frightful as how much time he had lost. By now...

Josiah leaned back and smiled at Shizuo assuringly. “Don’t worry, you haven’t lost track of Izaya. I’m sure he’ll be along soon enough.”

A cold dread prickled Shizuo’s skin, freaked by the way Josiah seemed capable of reading his mind. Impatience hit him. He couldn’t wait any longer. He needed to ask the question that’s plaguing him for weeks.

“Why have you been after Izaya?”

Once more, Josiah started walking forward. He only got as far as the next door, though.

Oh, how Shizuo hated being ignored.

He lashed out and grabbed Josiah by the arm with a loud and demanding, “HEY!”

Before Shizuo could say more, an arm folded around his neck. He gasped. Kyle was ready to choke the life out of him. His hand remained clamp around Josiah’s bicep. Unphased, Josiah held up a hand. A signal for Kyle to relax. Shizuo could feel the reluctance in Kyle’s movements when the arm recoiled from his throat.

With his free arm, Josiah placed his hand on one of the scanners. Click. His eye widened at another, and a beam shot out to read his retinal scan. Click. Finally, he punched in a four digit code on the keypad. Click.
“Let’s talk in here, Shizuo,” Josiah said and stepped inside.

Not that Shizuo really had a choice in the matter; Kyle shoved him through the threshold either way.

The room was a naked cube about the size of a prison cell. Shizuo stepped further inside, looking left to right for any suspicious signs. Its walls matched the reflective, metal alloy of the vicinities halls, made up of four panels each. Their surfaces bounced the fluorescent light from the ceiling into Shizuo’s eyes, a glaring from every corner. Every wall was the same except for the monitor taking up the entire surface opposite the entrance. In the room’s center was one, plain, rather uncomfortable-looking chair. Like something he sat in during high school, without the desk.

There was a plain, white shirt slung over it, which Shizuo grabbed and threw on without being told. Overall, though, the room appeared unspectacular and irrelevant.

Shizuo looked behind him to where Josiah and Kyle had flanked either side of the now closed door. “Is this all you have to show me?”

Josiah smiled patiently and nodded to Kyle, who then typed something into the control panel by the door. Behind him, Shizuo heard the fizz of the monitor coming to life. The lights dimmed appropriately as credits flicked across the screen.

“Take a seat,” Josiah said.

Looking back at Josiah skeptically, Shizuo eventually did as he was told, if only because there was nowhere else to go.

The first thing he heard was a booming orchestral score. Shizuo couldn’t locate any speakers, but the music felt all around him. If Josiah wasn’t very clearly his enemy, no matter how much he denied it, Shizuo would have asked him what kind of surround sound he had. Upon the screen, short clips of the world were cut together. Nothing special, just people walking down the street, a baseball game, a hike through nature, a beautiful landscape, amazing architecture - some of which Shizuo could now recognize.

The picture painted on the screen was that of a potentially beautiful world. A gift to humanity.

As the music quieted to a hum, the picture faded into a man sitting at a wooden desk, with all sorts of thick, colorful, shelved books behind him. The man was, much to Shizuo’s dismay, a slightly younger Josiah Hummel.

When the Josiah on film spoke, he spoke in English. Apparently, Josiah and company had anticipated Shizuo’s presence; there were Japanese subtitles.

“Hello,” the other Josiah started. “It’s my profound pleasure to introduce to you The Kazbek Initiative.”

Shizuo crossed his arms. He really did feel like he was back in school, watching some lame documentary about this or that.

“I myself have had many names. For the sake of The Kazbek Initiative, I will be known as Josiah Hummel. I am one of many that share this name, and we have all dedicated our lives and humanity to the sake of The Kazbek Initiative.”

Then the film was showing reels again, but this time, the images became darker. Poverty, famine, disease, segregation. The music drowned from its vibrant vibrato to a more somber symphony.
“The Kazbek Initiative, which you may be wondering,” Josiah spoke over the scenes, “is an ingenious new project designed for the sake of mankind. For many years, I have observed the misdealings, the crime and the irrationality of human beings.”

Shizuo grimaced as he was forced to witness footage of some of the worst atrocities of history.

“What you see is merely a sample of the footage depicting the violence of which humans are capable,” Josiah’s voice continued.

Rioters and protesters were gunned down by police. “We asked ourselves, How can we stop these tragedies from occurring?” Reports of rapists who walked free tickered by. “Every year, we tell ourselves that the world has become a fairer place to live in,” Entire races of people walked to their doom. “But is that really true?” Children were shown starving and homeless. “Time and time again, mankind resorts to its natural violent nature,” Bombs exploded in urban populations. “and millions pay the price for the flaws in our whole species.” Racism, sexism, bigotry, prejudice, terrorism, and all of the bad in the world got a thirty second preview in this incredibly perverted home video.

Shizuo watched his own people rot away under a fading mushroom cloud. He saw his own home erupt into gang warfare, young kids getting beaten to a pulp.

But this is just one side of the world, Shizuo reminded himself. He’d been across four continents, and there were millions going about their lives in enjoyment and freedom. Sweet girls made jasmine rice and kind sailors gave great advice. The faults were not of the species, but of a few.

And, Shizuo was almost positive that Josiah was one of those few.

For the time being, though, he stayed alert to Josiah’s little movie. Really, how pretentious of him was it that he couldn’t just speak to Shizuo face to face…

“The goal of The Kazbek Initiative is to jump start the next evolution of mankind,” said the Josiah on screen. “Godlike bodies and genius brains for every single person. The possibilities are endless for what the New Humanity can accomplish.

In the younger years of our organization, The Kazbek Initiative started small. We’ve so far focussed on helping just a few regain their livelihood. The ending goal is a peaceful world, with plenty to eat and places to live for all.

To speak further on our techniques, I would like you to listen to Doctor Laurel Dellorco.”

Dellorco came on the screen, her eyes just as big behind her glasses and her blonde hair pulled back just as Shizuo remembered from the other day. She rattled enthusiastically in Italian, demonstrating her prosthetic models. Shizuo, however, didn’t have the time to read the subtitles.

“This is bullshit!” Shizuo rose to his feet, whipping around to face Josiah in the flesh so fast that the chair clattered. “What kind of fucked up world are you trying to create?! There’s no one who’d want to live like that!”

“Don’t say so so easily, Shizuo,” said Josiah, whose eyes panned to Kyle.

The Josiah in the film continued to yammer as Shizuo spoke. “You’re telling me all these people volunteered to be turned into what you made them?!”

“Not all of them have the means to volunteer,” Josiah explained. “Kyle here is one of our most enthusiastic about the program. He couldn’t wait to become the first fully formed Kasbek. He’s pure Vulture, from head to toe, because Kyle understood that this is next step for our world. Others, we
Shizuo looked back at the screen to find another Josiah staring at him. “Every year, millions of people are disabled or maimed by other people. In protests and massacres, in war or through acts of terrorism. If it weren’t for The Kazbek Initiative, some of these people might have never walked again, or been able to see, or even have been able to live.”

The footage switched to Dellorco again, and this time, Shizuo forced himself to read what she was saying. “How have we come so far with prosthetic technology? We call it Avvoltoio, or Vulture - this blue chemical of my own creation. It’s quite amazing. It circulates through the prosthetic to the rest of the victim’s body like natural blood. Only, it responds to a transmission sent from a chip we install in the victim’s brain. Of course, Vulture is designed to support the qualities of these higher-functioning bodies. Some models have managed to use Vulture to bend and manipulate the molecules in the air around them. It’s quite spectacular.”

The screen showed a number of Kazbeks, dressed in merely sweats and spandex, like they were in physical training. One man was holding his hands above his head with a concentrated look. Above him was a spray of water that never touched him, stopped by a shimmering forcefield he seemed to be creating himself. A woman was shown juggling three balls in midair with one hand.

Dellorco’s voice continued, “Vulture is so powerful, we’ve even had success at reanimating corpses ..”

And that was enough for Shizuo to hear.

“You’re crazy!” He had turned to yell at the Josiah in person again. “That transmission turns these people into robotic zombies! That’s not humanity at all!”

Josiah rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I had hoped you’d be more receptive of the project than Izaya. Ah, well, I can see you both could use some more convincing.”

Behind Shizuo, the audio fizzed out briefly. Shizuo saw the light of the screen flicker upon the opposite wall, and Josiah’s voice came on again. None of this mattered to Shizuo, who was continuously yelling protests and insinuations at Josiah. No, the video behind Shizuo didn’t matter, not until he heard Izaya’s name.

“Izaya Orihara: Born, male, on the fourth of May, 1990 in Tokyo, Japan.” The voice was Josiah’s off screen. What the monitor did show was the disturbing image of Izaya, in nothing but hospital smock, getting strapped into a chair in the middle of a dark room.

He was being handled by a young, expressionless brunette woman in a lab coat and several surrounding Kazbeks that were overseeing like guards. The woman, Shizuo barely noticed, was familiar, but he was too entirely focussed on the man in the chair.

Izaya’s eyes flicked about the barren room with tired confusion and bleak curiosity. He winced at the light beating down over his head, and was distracted between Josiah’s voice and the woman tightening braces around his wrists and ankles that bound him to the chair. Fidgeting against the restraints, Izaya appeared tired and weak. Heavy bags hung under his eyes and his skin, more sickly pale than its usual hue, was gaunt against his frame.

And worst of all, the monitor on which Shizuo was watching was so big that it felt like Shizuo was looking through a window, like Izaya was just a few feet from him.

From somewhere off camera, Josiah continued to speak. “First born to Kyouko and Shirou Orihara,
prior to twin sisters Mairu and Kururi Orihara. Blood type: O. Height: 175cm. Weight: 58kg. Maintained exemplary marks throughout your academic career, which included Raijin Primary, Raijin Academy, and Raijin Academy High School. Currently employed as a freelance information broker throughout Tokyo out of the office at—”

Izaya suddenly smirked. “Wow, you sure do know a lot about me.”

The woman had finished securing Izaya to the chair and had walked off screen, leaving just Izaya and two Kazbeks standing guard behind him.

There was a pause in the voices, and Shizuo took this opportunity to address the real Josiah in the room. “When was this?!?”

“Long ago,” Josiah said. “Is it not clear?” He walked over to the control panel and paused it. “Let me show you the state in which I found Izaya.”

He typed something into the control panel, and a new video surfaced. Or rather, not a video, but an image of an almost unrecognizable Izaya. His face was smashed in, bruised and swollen. He appeared to be unconscious in the photo, and Shizuo was sure he’d want to destroy such an image of himself. Then across the screen flashed X-rays of broken bones: ribs, wrists, thighs. Scans of medical reports accompanied them.

“We at The Kazbek Initiative are always taking in victims of violence, but I was so shocked of how I found Izaya Orihara. His life was hanging on by a thread. I can’t imagine what sort of monster would do that to a person.” Josiah locked eyes with him. “Can you, Shizuo?”

Shizuo felt like he was about to vomit. His body quaked and sweat in an illness that could only be brought on by the idea of his own existence.

“You did that to him,” Josiah said, “didn’t you, Shizuo?”

Fists clenched at Shizuo’s side, and he tore his eyes from Josiah. “Shut up…”

“Don’t worry,” said Josiah, his tone reassuring. “I’m grateful to you. I was able to rescue him and bring him here. Just think, if it wasn’t for us, Izaya just might have died! Do you see now the kind of good The Kazbek Initiative is for people?”

“Shut up,” Shizuo repeated. “Izaya didn’t become one of those. He’s not like Kyle.”

Josiah brought back the video of Izaya in the chair, and Shizuo was almost thankful to see it, to see Izaya brought back to life.

After you almost killed him, came the inevitable chant in Shizuo’s mind.

“You’re right,” Josiah said. “We didn’t provide Izaya with any prosthetics or Vulture serum. For Izaya…” Shizuo just caught the sight of Josiah’s eyes lighting up, “I had a different intention.”

And then he heard the screams.

“IZAYA!” Shizuo was at the screen in an instant. He pressed his palms upon it like he might be able to break through time and space.

Izaya was back in the chair, but this time half of his face covered by a black helmet contraption. A thick visor blocked Izaya’s eyes, and a short, artificial spine was locked into Izaya’s flesh, from his next to between his shoulder blades. Three, thick black wires pierced the top of the helmet and rose
out of frame towards the ceiling.

A helmet, Shizuo thought, was meant to protect.

Whatever this device was, it was undoubtedly meant to harm. It emitted a vague, high-pitched hiss. Like a drill.

The screams were sharp and piercing, accompanied by ragged breaths and squirming motion. Izaya’s arms and legs writhed and fought against the bondage. Shizuo couldn’t stand it. He pounded on the monitor, which was surprisingly resilient. His force seemed to ricochet back at him, like his attempts to smash the screen were bounced by an invisible forcefield.

“IZAYA!” He called out pointlessly. BANG, BANG! “IZAYA!!” BANG, BANG. SMASH.

He managed to crack the monitor, finally, but the audio was as clear as ever. There was a pause in Izaya’s screams, filled with heavy panting and chattering teeth.

“Izaya…” Shizuo breathed the name hopelessly.

“So what would you say about humanity now?” came Josiah’s dissolute tone.

Shizuo remembered where he was. He turned glaring, rageful eyes towards to the Josiah behind him.

His tone was low, unforgiving. “What did you do to him?”

Izaya’s throat rasped over a haggard laugh. “If you think a few historical documentaries are enough to change my mind, you’ve got a long road ahead. This isn’t anything I don’t already know.”

“Once he was healed,” Josiah said to Shizuo, “I could show him my vision. Unfortunately, I don’t think he appreciated what I had to show him.”

White knuckles dropped from the screen to his sides. “What were you showing him?”

Josiah wouldn’t answer.

The Josiah from the footage said to Izaya, “Oh? Then let’s discuss your own history with humans.”

The drilling and the screaming began anew.

“YOU-“ Shizuo charged Josiah without thinking anything other than I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I swear on my life that I will kill you.

Kyle was ready for him though. Shizuo wasn’t sure when, or how, but Kyle was behind him before he could realize. A needle was thrust into the side of his neck. Shizuo gasped, but momentum carried him towards Josiah. He had been aiming a left hook right at Josiah’s temple, but his arm failed him. His movements slowed, and his body felt heavy. Growling

Izaya’s cries continued behind him.

“Have you ever taken a human life?”

“No! I love humans. I love them, I wouldn’t-”

More screaming.

Numb from head to toe, Shizuo couldn’t even close his eyelids. His face stuck to the cold floor. A bit
of drool started to pool around his cheek.

"Has a human ever tried to take your life?"

"Hahahaha… plenty of times! It makes no difference to me!"

"Have you ever tried to take your own?"

The silence that followed was the most devastating sound of all.

"...No."

There was a certain defiance in the word, betrayed only be the breathy hitch that caught at the end, and it was followed by another series of shrieks and drilling.

If Shizuo could only move. He wanted to cover his ears, his eyes. He wanted to close all of his senses to this horror. Everything inside of him felt dead. He was suddenly turned on his back and face to face with Josiah leaning over him, who had a delighted light in his eyes.

If Shizuo could only move.

“I'm not as interested as converting you to our cause I am with Izaya,” said Josiah. “As the monster of Ikebukuro, I don’t believe you’ve ever felt as attached to humanity in the first place. Right? But as you can hear, Izaya was very stubborn about it.”

The painful screams resonated throughout the entire room, filling every corner. All Shizuo could feel was a burning sensation around his eye sockets as his eyeballs bore involuntarily up at the empty ceiling. His jaw wouldn’t work, nor his lips. He had a curse for Josiah waiting on his mute tongue. *My hands will close around your neck and squeeze until you break.*

Kyle stepped over Shizuo with a downwards glance. He opened the room’s door, letting in a brighter kind of light, and waited.

“My hope for you,” Josiah continued, “is that you’ll help Izaya see our side of things. Please, listen.”

Josiah straightened and walked towards the door. At the same time, his counterpart from the audio was speaking again.

“Be honest with us, Izaya. Be honest with yourself. Let me ask again: Have you ever tried to take your own life?”

Izaya’s breathing was harsh and mixed with wet sniffing.

On his way out, Josiah paused in the doorframe to regard Shizuo one last time. “If you won’t think of the good of humanity,” The light from the hallways casting his features into obscurity. “Think of Izaya, Shizuo.”

The door slid shut with a distinctive LOCK, leaving Shizuo frozen in a darkness that was only filled with the devastating noise of someone precious to him coming to terms with their own personal demons. A hint of a sob and a weakly spoken word, on the other end of time.

"Y... Yes..."
If you're confused, there will be further explanations from Josiah about himself, The Kazbek Initiative, and the Vulture technology. Hang in there!

As for Izaya's age - this fic takes place in present day but I've set Shizuo and Izaya's age as 25/24 (they're born the same year but May hasn't passed yet so Izaya's still 24). Josiah, in comparison, is in his 40s.

If you think I'm being harsh on Izaya for that last confession, remember that in the last volume of the short novels Izaya puts in a lot of effort of provoking Shizuo into killing him, which is an event on which this fic is based. Plus, there's quite a few moments from the various publications of this series that subtly hint that suicide is a thing Izaya has contemplated. I kinda imagined that his fear of the unknown afterlife was the biggest factor stopping him, hence the original proposition he made to Shizuo in this fic (to kill him). Even I thought I was being mean, but it's less of a stretch than I originally imagined.
Shizuo was back in Ikebukuro.

It was almost Spring in Japan, but still chilly. That was fine with Shizuo, who rarely thought much of winter. The day was lovely. So lovely. Shizuo sat in the park, smoking on a bench, staring up at the trees bloom in rapid succession. Faceless strangers walked by him, obscured by the petals falling all around him. He caught glimpse of a high school couple holding hands through the park. Two boys, Raijin uniforms.

How selfish, Shizuo thought, flaunting their relationship like that!

Shizuo rose to follow them.

They disappeared, and Shizuo ran down a narrow alleyway. Concrete walls enclosed him onto a predestined path. He followed without doubt, Fate’s name loud on his tongue. He chased fire with fire. Ahead of him, he could see it. A warm fire for all of mankind.

Though it was not fire, but another human that Shizuo chased. They ran and they ran. Shizuo caught the other, but what to do with him? He’d never thought so far ahead. The fire had gone out, and Shizuo brought his fists down upon the other. Savagely and brutally. He could hear the other’s
painful cries, but he would not stop. The other yelled his name, begged him to stop. Shizuo did not, and the other broke beneath him. Pummelled bloody. Even when Shizuo was sure that the other was dead, the screams continued.

His eyes snapped open.

Shrieks of someone in immense agony echoed all around him. Someone who had not broken, though. There was reservation in his voice, a resistance to vocalise the extent of his torment.

“Subject displays continued resistance against the Insight,” said a woman’s voice. “Proceeding with personal procedure, attempt #23.”

Shizuo blinked the blurriness out of his eyes, but the room remained dark. He looked all around, but didn’t see anyone. The voices came from an audio that filled the entire space.

People were shuffling around, and Shizuo could hear heavy breathing in the background. The screams had stopped, for now.

“Have you ever seen a person die?” Asked the woman.

The questioned garnered an ironic chuckle for a response.

“Have you ever seen a person die first handed?” The woman amended.

A pause, then a deep breath. “Yes,” answered a very familiar voice.

Ah, that’s right... Shizuo remembered. Josiah had drugged and locked him in a room with nothing but the sounds of Izaya going through hell.

“More than one?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“I don’t know… I never counted.”

“Please think back on every single instance and make an estimate.”

A body shuts down after it stays still for so long. Shizuo had slipped out of consciousness some time after Josiah and Kyle had tranquilized him. How long he’d been asleep, he didn’t know. The audio of Izaya and of the woman, whom Shizuo assumed to be the brunette woman he’d seen on video earlier, had continued the whole time. Now, he seemed to be able to move again.

Little good did that do him, though. Once he’d risen, he tried with all his might to kick, punch, and blast through this cell in which Josiah had left him. “JOSIAH! LET ME OUT OF HERE YOU SON OF A --” Whatever he said, he never got any response. The walls would do little more than dent, and the door wouldn’t budge. The control panel ricocheted any force he threw at it, forcing Shizuo to listen.

“I... I don’t know! Less than ten… maybe five.... maybe more, I don’t know!”

“Did you have any involvement in their deaths?”

“I already told you, I’ve never killed a person.”
“We know you haven’t taken a human life with your own hands, but have you ever orchestrated or influenced the death of a human being?”

Eventually, Shizuo tired from his fruitless attempts to escape and from his throaty yells for Josiah to come face him. He curled up in a corner of the room and hugged his knees, hold onto the warmth he had.

As if I’d ever see Ikebukuro again, he thought. At that point, he was barely holding out at the chance he’d see Izaya again.

“... No... I would never kill a person. I love humans.”

“Is that the lie you’re going to go with?”

“I don’t remember!”

“Do you need help remembering?”

Though Josiah had said that Shizuo would see Izaya, Shizuo now knew better than to take anything that guy said as anywhere near the truth.

When Izaya stayed silent at the woman’s questions, she spoke. “You should know by now that silence is never an applicable answer. Begin Insight again.”

Whatever Insight was, it caused Izaya to wail.

Shizuo blocked the noise with his thoughts. What would happen to Shizuo now? What plans did Josiah have for him? Would he rot there in that cell, until he died or until the audio drove him insane? Would Josiah completely turn him into a brainwashed Kazbek like the others? What did they have planned for Izaya? Why had they taken Izaya in the first place? What did they need him for?

The audio fizzed, like a fastforward effect.

“Attempt #24,” The woman’s voice spoke again. “When was your first sexual encounter?”

Shizuo’s nails dug into his own skin.

“Wh... Why does that pervert have you asking questions like that?!”

“We already have the information. Isn’t it curious that you can retain so much information but you ‘can’t remember’ details about your own life? If you’ve blocked them out, we’ll bring the memories to the surface. We want you to answer so we know you’re thinking about your personal history with humanity, so that you see their flaws. This is more direct than Insight. Again. When was your first sexual encounter?”

“...Fifteen.”

“Can you describe it?”

“No.”

“Because you forget? Because you don’t want to?”

“...”

“Was it voluntary?”
"Yes! Yes. I started it. I wanted to, but it still -- !"

The audio cut out, the lights went out, and a resounding surge swept through the entire facility. For just a moment, complete darkness shrouded Shizuo until dim, blue emergency lights flickered to life where the wall met the floor. Everything else, though, the audio and the control panel, the frigid air conditioning, remained dead.

Shizuo welcomed the silence with utmost gratification.

But what the hell just happened? A power outage? Shizuo rose to his feet. He could not hear anything from outside the cell. He could hear a few squeaky feet running a few halls away from him, and distant hurried voices. Then all the noise disappeared.

Hoping for a miracle, he tried the door. No such luck. Shizuo sighed. He was still trapped, but at least he didn’t have to listen to that twisted recording any longer. The interrogation had been escalating in a way that made Shizuo feel ill and temperamental. Especially now, Shizuo knew that underneath a lot of camouflage, Izaya had a lot of misery. He had thought so for years, and now it had been confirmed.

Why does Josiah want me to listen to that anyways? Shizuo pondered. Believing that, despite the powershift, he wasn’t going anywhere soon, he was about to sit down.

Click.

Shizuo froze. His control panel had suddenly beeped to life. Mesmerized, Shizuo watched as the screen ran through several commands without anyone there to touch it.

Click. The door slid open. No one was on the other side. Just a dark, quiet hallway.

His initial thought was naturally, This is a trap. Why wouldn’t it be? Doors to jail cells don’t just open on their own. If this place has cyborgs and ghosts, then I’m fuckin’ screwed. For careful measures, Shizuo waited about a minute before he moved. Surely Josiah or Kyle or even Dellorco would have shown up by now, come to whisk him away to another crazy experiment. When no one came, Shizuo proceeded with caution.

Poking his head around the door frame, Shizuo checked both directions of the hall. Both ways were empty. Practically tip-toeing, Shizuo stepped in the hall. He was now grateful that he’d been paying attention to the environment when Josiah led him here. Hugging the wall, Shizuo crept down the direction from which he had initially came.

This way, he remembered, had an elevator. If he could get inside, he could climb up to the ground level.

What if I run into a Kazbek? Shizuo thought as he got to a corner. He peeked around the wall’s edge in both directions. The coast appeared to be clear, and Shizuo made his way down the next hall. All of his senses were fully alert for the slightest sign of movement. There were visible cameras on the ceiling, but Shizuo hoped they were as powerless as rest of the facilities electronics.

Then, he heard voices up ahead. He reached another corner, and chanced a glance around the edge. Within that split second he had to look, Shizuo noticed two military-dressed Kazbeks, a male and female, walking down the hall towards him, talking. What they were saying, Shizuo didn’t know; it was in a European language. Their tone seemed anxious.

Shizuo froze up against the wall, invisible to the approaching Kazbeks. What do I do? His heart pounded in his ears. Turn back and go back to the cell? Hope they pass without noticing me? Try to
run?

No, I can’t go back. I have to get out of here.

If these Kazbeks were as powerful as Kyle, there was a good chance they could overpower Shizuo. They’d send him back to his cell either way, or kill him without Josiah here to stop them.

He decided to take his chances.

Once the two Kazbeks crossed into Shizuo’s peripheral vision, he karate chopped the closest one, the female, in the back of the next and knocked her to the floor. His new right arm had done the trick; she was out cold. The male was quick to react, whipping to face Shizuo with a gaping expression. Shizuo was faster, though. He dodged the male’s jab, latched to his arm, used the wall as a kick off, clamped the male’s head between his thighs, and flipped him to the ground. Untangling himself and rising, Shizuo looked down at the two unconscious bodies.

His breathing came heavily from the adrenaline, but when he noticed the danger was over quickly, he tried to even it. He half-expected the Kazbeks to rise again, but then didn’t. Shizuo frowned down at the two bodies. “That was easier than I thought.”

He went on his way again, not quite sure what just happened. If he didn’t know any better, he would have thought that he had just fought ordinary humans.

As Shizuo made his way to the elevator, he came to face other Kazbeks. They all went down as easily as the first two. He passed a few doctors working in a lab with the door open. When she slowed at the entrance, the labcoats inside panicked and scurried further into the room. One brave man ran to manually close the door between themselves and Shizuo.

First the door opening by itself, now this? Shizuo couldn’t help but notice how easy it all was, but decided not to question his luck. After all, it used to be normal that people would run away from him in fear. Why should it bother him now?

Before he knew it, he had made it to the elevator. Now what? he asked himself. The keypad wasn’t working thanks to the power outage. A thick metal door stood between Shizuo and the inner shaft. There was a crack where the door would open. Pounding on the crack a few times dented the metal enough that a ridge appeared for Shizuo to grip. Taking a deep breath, he shoved his fingers into the crack and pushed.

For him, it wasn’t that hard to open elevator doors. Their force pushed on him, wanting to close, but he managed to open the doors enough to squeeze between them. While he held the doors like that, Shizuo peered into the void. He realized that there was more to the complex below him. Maybe that’s the direction I want to go? But something in his gut told him to go up.

Where he was going wasn’t his only problem, though. Within the elevator shaft was no cable nor visible lift. His initial plan was to ride the elevator, or climb the cables. Without the cables, he couldn’t exactly perform the latter operation. How the hell does this elevator work without cables? Shizuo wondered, inspecting the shaft’s walls.

Voices could be heard a few halls away, and Shizuo realized he didn’t have a lot of time. They’d soon round the corner and see him escaping.

Think! Shizuo urged himself. There’s gotta be a way to climb up this thing. If only I could call the lift… He had to stop hoping for miracles, but by the looks of it, there were no ledges or anything of the sort for him to grab hold. Footsteps came closer and closer.
Guess I’ll just have to make my own.

Just as the approaching group was about to round the corner, Shizuo jumped into the darkness.

As he had expected, the elevator doors snapped shut behind him. He was invisible to anyone who passed. Hopefully, no one would look too closely at the damage he’d done to the doors and carry on their way.

Inside the shaft, though, Shizuo was having a bit more trouble.

When he had jumped, he aimed his right fist at the opposite wall and slammed it through the concrete. Gravity yanked his body downwards, but his fist’s place in the wall kept him from falling. Shizuo dangled on the wall and looked up. It was amazing that his right arm hadn’t snapped off. Any human’s would have. He hated to admit it, but perhaps there were perks to having Kazbek parts.

Shaking his head, Shizuo dismissed that thought. Now what? He dangled for a few more seconds before he punched a hole with his left hand, higher than the first he’d caused. Planting his against the wall, Shizuo freed his undamaged right hand. Then with his right hand, he punched another groove, higher than the second.

It was a tedious process, but he repeated it until he reached the next landing. Overall, his climb must have taken him around ten minutes. He felt like he was climbing out of the pits of the underworld.

Thankfully, the door to the next landing was on the side on which Shizuo was climbing, opposite to the entrance through which he entered. To his surprise, this elevator door was also not metallic like its sibling. It was an old-fashioned, wooden elevator door. Probably mahogany.

Whatever kind of wood it was, it was a lot easier to bust through. He punched a hole and slid the doors open.

He hoisted himself over the ledge and rolled onto the floor, which was also hardwood. Quickly, he scrambled to his feet and through his back against the nearest wall, which was also behind a very tall ficus plant. The leaves tickled Shizuo’s cheeks, but he didn’t let that distract him from surveying the new environment on to which he’d just stumbled.

The place he was in now was completely, 180 degrees different from the lower levels. He now stood in a very old, very warm, very big European mansion. Its decor wasn’t quite as lavish as the royal palaces he’d explored with Izaya, but it was a home certainly not for the poor. Elaborately carved trimming framed every corner of the ceiling, every door frame. The hall in which Shizuo stood was long and wide, attached to several other rooms and halls. Some with doors, some totally open. Spectacular paintings adorned the walls, as did dark lamps. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, giving just as little light. So it seemed the power outage had affected everywhere, not just the lower levels. The only source of light was through the windows in the adjoining rooms. A soft moonlight gave Shizuo just enough vision to see where he was going.

Unlike downstairs, this upper level was warm. There was a lingering scent of roast beef, much different from the sterile scents Shizuo had encountered down below. If Shizuo didn’t know better, he’d think he was in a nice family home.

There was something spooky about it, though. Maybe the lack of tourists revealed these kinds of places as the haunted manors that they really were. What was lurking in this place, Shizuo had yet to know for sure. He could imagine. Actually, he was suspicious of why no one was around. There was a good chance that Josiah’s recruits were busy dealing with the power outage, which, the more Shizuo thought about it, was a suspicious thing to have happened in the first place.
How did a resourceful, micromanaging person like Josiah lose all his electric power?

_Don’t press your luck, remember?_ Shizuo had to focus on escaping, nothing more.

He moved around, as stealthily as he could, checking corners, and without making a sound. Of course, he was moving around blind. Not just because of the darkness, but because Shizuo had no idea how to escape the building.

There were windows here and there, naturally, but when Shizuo got to one to look outside, his heart immediately sank at what he saw.

Wherever he was, snow was everywhere. On the ground, on the window sill, on parked cars. Judging by what had piled on top of the visible trucks parked outside the compound, the snow was almost half a foot deep. Shizuo saw Kazbeks patrolling outside in thick coats. If he looked up, Shizuo could see mountain ridges surrounding them.

Even if Shizuo were to break through the window, sneak past the Kazbeks outside, and run for it, he wasn’t sure that even he could survive in the middle of an arctic snowland, with just the thin, cotton clothes Josiah had provided for him. He wasn’t even wearing socks.

There had to be another way.

For the time being, he explored. Or so he thought he was exploring. As soon as he had made it to this level of the facility, he had felt a tug in his stomach that wanted to drag him further into the compound. How foolish!

But that, unfortunately, was one of Shizuo’s weaknesses. He was a damn fool. A damn, primitive fool who only had his instincts to go by. At this time, his instincts were drawing him closer and closer to what Shizuo realized was a source of light. Not the moon, not the stars, but a warm flickering light down one of the hallways. As he got closer, he saw that the light shone through a narrow crack in a large doorway.

When he heard a voice come from the same direction, his heart skipped a beat. Did he dare approach? As he debated the right move within his mind, his feet carried him closer and closer. His body moved on its own, drawn by the sixth sense Shizuo had forgotten he possessed.

He reached the door, moved his eye in front of the crack, peeked inside, and stopped breathing.

Within the adjoining room stood a thin figure in a familiar coat. His back was turned to Shizuo, and he appeared to radiate light until he turned his body halfway towards Shizuo. A candle flickered in the man’s hands. His attention was trained on something else within the room, until Shizuo got too anxious and touched the door handle.

His hand had barely brushed it, and the door had only moved a millimeter, but enough for the hinges to make the softest little _creek_... Enough to get the person’s attention, and their head snapped in Shizuo’s direction.

Shizuo froze. In the darkness, Shizuo wasn’t sure if he was visible, but his own eyes locked with bright auburn.

He and Izaya were looking right at each other.

By the light of the candle, Izaya’s features were bathed in an orange glow. His widened in shock at the sound. Then, as Shizuo watched Izaya come to terms with Shizuo’s presence, he saw a flash of anguish cross Izaya’s expression. That was almost enough for Shizuo to charge into the room. Izaya
was quick to regain himself, though, and he slowly rose a finger to press gently against his lips.

“Izaya! Won’t you bring that light a little closer?”

The voice caught both Izaya and Shizuo off guard, especially considering to whom it belonged. Shizuo had been too focussed on Izaya to notice, but Izaya wasn’t alone in the room.

As Izaya stepped away and brought the candle closer to a large hearth, he illuminated the massively ornate fireplace as well as the man that knelt before it. Shizuo could feel his heart in his throat, and it felt like the organ was blocking all his air. He couldn’t make a sound. By the firepit, Josiah struck a long match and threw it into a pile of dry wood. The flame burned quickly, flooding the rest of the room in light and revealing the long dining table in its center.

“Ah, much better!” Josiah rose to his feet, and Shizuo glared.

Compared to how Shizuo was used to seeing him, Josiah appeared more laid back. His sleeves were rolled up, his shirt unbuttoned at the top, and his hair a tad tussled. Josiah Hummel almost looked like a normal guy. Shizuo hated him all the same, if not more for the man’s current proximity to Izaya.

Izaya’s right there! Shizuo’s mind screamed. He’s standing right there! Do something! But he wouldn’t, because Izaya had gestured to him to lie low. He had to ignore everything his body was telling him. For whatever reason, Izaya wanted him to stay hidden.

“Who would have thought you could build such a fire?” Izaya spoke so casually, it caught Shizuo off guard. “You’re such a modern man of science. Such a skill seems… primal, doesn’t it?”

Josiah smiled and wiped soot from his hands onto a white handkerchief that he then hung over the brass chimney tools. “On the contrary. I have a vast appreciation for nature. My father used to take us camping when I was a boy. I admit, I wasn’t the best at it, but as you can see,” he gestured to the crackling blaze, “the memories come in handy.”

Izaya hugged his candle closer to his body, as close as it could get without setting his clothes on fire. “My father was more of a sailor.”

Josiah’s smile widened, as if elated that Izaya would willingly share even such a trivial detail about himself. “Was he? I don’t suppose he taught you how to sail.”

“I know how to do a lot of things without being taught them.”

“That you do. You’ve impressed me again,” Josiah claimed. “I admit, I hadn’t expected you so soon, nor did I anticipate losing my power and my transmission. You’re one excellent saboteur.”

“Glad to entertain you! For my next trick, I’d like to send this whole place up in flames.”

Everyone suddenly became very aware of the tiny fire in Izaya’s palms. The wax dripped from the wick onto the brass pan in which Izaya held it.

Josiah’s grin persevered. He pulled out a chair from the table and offered it to Izaya. “Won’t you sit down?” Izaya accepted and Josiah sat at the head of the table.

They could have been mistaken as old friends, but Shizuo heard a subtle edge in Izaya’s tone that really only Shizuo had ever the sense to hear. Izaya’s words were friendly, but his intentions were undoubtedly hostile.

Shizuo struggled to track their movements with his very limited visibility. He shifted himself as
quietly as possible so that he could see their forms at the table. He could see more of Josiah than Izaya, whose back was towards him again.

“Now,” Josiah leaned forward on the table, “let’s talk about why you’ve really come here.”

Not that Shizuo wanted Josiah to ask, but it was a question that Shizuo had been wondering as well. Why had Izaya come there? Judging by Josiah’s words, it seemed Izaya was behind the power outage. Josiah also mentioned the ‘transmission’ being corrupted, and Shizuo tried to remember why that was so significant.

“You’re the one that led me back here,” said Izaya.

“That I did,” said Josiah, “and I knew you would find your way back after you escaped. How very pleased I am to have you back! Of course, when you did return, I was hoping it would be on more diplomatic circumstances.”

“Aren’t we being diplomatic?” Izaya put his candle on the table. “Sitting by a nice fire, talking at a table. All we need is some tea and cookies. So far, much better than last time.”

Josiah tilted his head. “You should thank me! You’re alive thanks to me, after all.” When Izaya didn’t argue, Josiah continued. “When I found you in Japan, on the brink of death, I brought you here and healed you!”

“That wasn’t much of a favor,” said Izaya. “I had been asking for that beating, but literally and figuratively.”

“You made a monster’s rage the method for your undoing,” said Josiah, and Shizuo’s stomach dropped through the floor.

Monster. That’s me, Shizuo thought.

Josiah continued, “But I know that wasn’t when you wished to die.”

“For someone who never knew me, you claim to know a lot about me.”

“Oh, but I do know you! I know you better than anyone else! After all, almost everything I need to know about you, I’ve had written on your back.”

“Then I’m practically an open book to you, now. It’s a shame you can’t read about what you really want to know from me.”

“I figured if I showed you the Insight, and you hated humanity as much as I do, you would willingly hand me the key to control them. Really, Izaya. This love for humanity that you have is as inane as your half-hearted death wish. You want to live so that you can experience worldly love, but you want to die because of your lack of it. Give me the frequency algorithm, and you’ll have as many humans love you as you please.”

“What you consider love and humanity is as fake as the blue eyes of your brainless followers.”

“That’s not fair! My eyes have been naturally blue since the day I was born.”

Izaya burst out laughing, in genuine amusement at Josiah’s antics. The sound sent a chill down Shizuo’s spine. Then, Josiah joined him with a steady chuckle. Shizuo’s heartbeat increased three times.
Not only was Shizuo disturbed at the conversation between the two men, but Shizuo couldn’t bare the reminder of why they were all in this situation. Shizuo’s lack of control, a bout of anger and revenge that Shizuo released on Izaya, was the reason that Izaya had fallen into the clutches of Josiah and The Kazbeks in the first place.

His suffering was all Shizuo’s fault.

Now, here he was, actually laughing with the man that tortured him both mentally and physically. Was this what Izaya wanted Shizuo to hear? Or did he expect Shizuo to find them a way out while Izaya distracted Josiah?

Shizuo peered in through the crack, hoping Izaya would give him some sort of sign. Neither of them could get out of here alone. At least if he kept listening, he might learn more about Josiah’s plans and what he wanted from them.

The two men steadied their breathing. Josiah spoke first. “I suppose I should have known better than to expect you to settle so low.”

“And certainly you didn’t expect you could convince me with a few World War II and colonial era documentaries,” said Izaya. “I have read up on those kinds of atrocities before, you know.”

“Seeing is a lot different than believing,” said Josiah. “The Insight has two main functions. The first is to give information. When you wear it, the Insight injects data into the brain, a technology never achieved before. What I wasn’t able to show of humanity’s worst times, I was able directly give you that knowledge. Then, it’s up to the imagination to fill in the visuals. Quite remarkable, isn’t it? And judging by those marks on your back, your imagination is quite wild. See, that’s the Insight’s second function. To take information. When you react to those stimulants, Insight gathers all the data your brain releases. Thoughts, emotions, whatever. As you might have noticed, this process leaves behind a scar on the patient.

What Insight provides is a chance to see the reality of human nature in its purest, most uncensored form. Much of the information you absorbed had been lost to mankind for centuries, and would still be if I had not dug it up. It took me quite a year to gather and comprise Insight. Most Kazbeks had experienced just a fraction of what you had before they agreed to the Initiative.”

Shizuo saw Izaya reach behind his neck and tentatively touch the skin that had been marked there. “Sorry your film project wasn’t as effective on me.” His voice contained no sympathy.

“Oh, it’s no matter,” Josiah said, unphased. “I’d be disappointed if you were easily swayed, even if it does make my job easier. It doesn’t so much matter why you come to hate humanity, so long as that you accept the next evolution in the end.” He stood suddenly and walked towards the wall, where a small table hosted several tumbler glasses and a pitcher of a dark brown liquid. As he poured himself a generous glass, his voice carried back to Izaya. “...Unless that’s why you returned.”

Izaya whipped his fingers back and forth over the candle’s small flame without burning himself. “Maybe it is,” he said.

Shizuo gulped.

“I see.” Josiah returned with two glasses of liquor. He slid a tumbler Izaya’s way, but remained standing with his own. “I’m afraid it’s not tea.”

Izaya literally turned his nose up at the glass. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about The Kazbek Initiative since I escaped. You should know. You’ve been tracking me the whole time, haven’t
Josiah took a sip of his drink and shook his head. “Only since Boston, and even then you were hard to follow. You can be quite evasive when you want to be.”

“I had a lot of practice with dodging your colleagues back before you split from them. They didn’t like me as much, but I think I’d rather be stabbed in the chest than have a needle drill into my spine and record all my data onto my back.”

“I was against that stabbing,” Josiah stepped behind Izaya’s chair, “But they saw you as a threat. I see you as an opportunity.”

Izaya mocked a swoon. “Oh, good. I’ve always wanted to be an opportunity.”

A hand snaked into Izaya’s hair, and Josiah began tenderly brushing strands from Izaya’s face.

Even from a distance, Shizuo could see the tension build in Izaya’s shoulders. Izaya might have wanted Shizuo to stay put, but there was only so much Shizuo could stand to witness. He had to start thinking of a way to get them both out of there, but nothing was coming to mind besides his usual rage and charge way of handling things.

Josiah roughly massaged Izaya’s scalp. “You have something in here that I need, and unfortunately, there isn’t a means for me to extract it by force.” Josiah set down his glass and slid his other hand under Izaya’s chin, forcing Izaya to look up at him. “Will you surrender it to me?”

That was the last straw for Shizuo. He readied himself to barge into the room and tear Josiah’s hands from his wrists.

But he was stopped by the familiar CLICK of a hammer being cocked back.

Shizuo dare not move an inch. He dare not even breathe.

The cool tip of a gun brushed against Shizuo’s temple. Slowly, with wavering motion, Shizuo’s eyes looked down the barrel, down the outstretched arm, and into Kyle’s eyes. If Shizuo hadn’t been so preoccupied with the threat of his brains being blown away, he might have noticed the unfamiliar shade of green that he was staring into.

In the room, the conversation continued without interruption, “I wouldn’t so much say I’ve come to ‘surrender’…” Izaya said, “That suggests that I’ve lost, and I don’t lose. No, I’m here to negotiate.”

“What would you like discuss?” asked Josiah.

“You want your algorithm, the right frequency, the key to hacking into the brains of billions of people across the globe with your wacky demon transmission, and I can give it to you.” Izaya teased, “Isn’t it funny that I stole the algorithm from your old colleagues, who never gave it to you because they suspected you were going to kill them all?! They were right, after all.”

“But I didn’t kill them,” said Josiah. “They’re alive as part of my Initiative. My goal is to prevent unnecessary deaths. I’ll use the Vulture transmission to harmonize humans in perfect equality. Unlike you, Izaya, I have never killed a person.”

“After taking a human life, I discovered that playing God is a lot more fulfilling when you have all the power,” said Izaya, and then added, “I want to secure my own free will, naturally.”

Shizuo could not believe his ears. Izaya? Kill a person?! Who? When?! How?! And there was no
way Izaya was really buying into Josiah’s schemes... was there?

“Of course!” Josiah said, “I would never think of altering your brain functionality.”

“Flattering.” Izaya hummed thoughtfully. “It’s quite the ambitious project, and I can see the appeal nowadays. Playing with humans is fun and all, but it gets boring after awhile, don’t you think? But absolute control over them? Now, those are true pawns.”

Though Shizuo wanted to believe that Izaya’s words were another game against Josiah, a nagging doubt crept up on him. Before this whole ordeal, would Shizuo really have doubted hearing these kinds of things from Izaya? Perhaps, Shizuo was just suffering from denial.

*Is that why he didn’t want me to do anything? He didn’t want me to spoil his plans, like always? Does he think he has more control over me now?!* As if reading Shizuo’s thoughts, Kyle’s lips curled at the edges in mockery of his distress.

“You came to this conclusion on your own?” Josiah asked Izaya, “After resisting Insight for so long?”

Izaya scoffed. “Tell a kid to clean his room, and he’ll make it twice as messy. I don’t like to do what I’m told. An effective parent gives their child the space they need in order to make the right decisions on their own. I’m not as easily played as a child, but the time I spent away from this facility on my own accord was just the sway I needed.”

A voice in Shizuo’s head screamed *He’s lying!* at the same time another yelled *This was his goal all along! He played you like a fool!*

“I knew you would come around eventually,” Josiah said, “but tell me… To what do I owe the benefits of your change of heart?”

“The world bored me. Isn’t that the most disappointing thing you’ve ever heard? I went to city after city, and it was all wrong. And I realized a truth I had been denying for a very long time. No matter where I would go, one thing never changed. I’m reluctant to admit it.”

“What is it?” Josiah asked in barely above a compassionate whisper.

“Humanity will never love me, and I definitely hate them for it.”

A weighted silence fell over the entire complex. Kyle wasn’t budging, but he glared at Shizuo as if he were daring Shizuo to make a move. How Shizuo wished he could, but even if he shouted out something to Izaya in the moment, he had no idea what he could say. How could he deflect that kind of grief?

“You clearly must have experienced Hell while you were away, Izaya.” Josiah’s voice came soft and soothing. “It saddens me that you’ll be joining the Initiative with such a negative outlook. With you, I want to channel those emotions into my plan to create a world where those kinds of burdens won’t exist. Everyone will be equal, but there’s one thing I must tell you.”

“And what’s that?” Izaya asked.

Shizuo chanced turning his gaze back through the door.

“The trouble is, Izaya...” Josiah fist a handful of Izaya’s hair, and leaned close to his ear. “I am not susceptible to your mind games.”
Smashing his glass against the table, he yanked Izaya up by the hair and dragged him to his feet at the same time that Kyle kicked Shizuo in the back, through the door, and onto the floor.

“OOF!”

Landing on his face, Shizuo only managed to rise to his hands and knees before he felt the gun poke the back of his head. Kyle was behind him, ready to put him down at any second, and Josiah stood in front of him, lifting Izaya off of his feet just his hair with a shard of glass at his throat. Izaya grit his teeth and clawed at Josiah’s hand.

“Shizuo!” Josiah grinned down at him, “I’m so glad you could join us! Look! Didn’t I tell you I’d present Izaya to you? Here he is!”

Josiah tossed Izaya away from him, and Izaya stumbled between them. Looking down at Shizuo, he didn’t show any sign of concern. Izaya looked back and forth from Shizuo to Josiah in an amused apathy.

Addressing Josiah, he said, “What the hell is this all about?”

“He was looking for you,” Josiah explained. He watched Izaya very, very carefully.

Izaya huffed. “How utterly pathetic! Shizu-chan,” he sneered down at him, “you’ve been following me all the way from Ikebukuro?! Don’t beasts ever know when to quit?”

Unknowing how to react, Shizuo glowered at the floor. He didn’t trust himself to look at Izaya. If Izaya was truly this heartless, Shizuo wasn’t sure his spirit could take it.

“It’s not like you to carry around deadweight, Izaya,” said Josiah.

“Which is why I dumped him in the Mediterranean,” Izaya said. “Believe me, he’s not someone I would want around. He only ever manages to make things worse for me. He’s doing it right now!”

“You-” Shizuo’s neck snapped upwards, and he refrained from saying more. Looking into Izaya’s eyes, he could see the same glint that he had noticed months ago. What could he make of it, now? Biting his lip, Shizuo decided to keep his head down and to see what happens.

“So his being here has nothing to do with you?” Josiah asked.

“No way!” said Izaya. “It’s like I told you, I hate humans, and this protozoan only made me realize it faster. Everywhere we went, people would flock to him like pathetic sheep. It got ignored! It’s disgusting!”

Josiah pensively looked between Izaya and Shizuo for a long while, before finally landing his attention on Kyle. “Very well. Kyle! What did I say about leaving a patient on the floor? Please, at least let Shizuo sit down. We’re not animals!”

Kyle obeyed Josiah without a word, though the force he used to shove Shizuo into a chair at the table conveyed that he’d rather put a bullet in Shizuo’s head. He remained behind Shizuo, ready to do just that.

“Did you hear much of our conversation, Shizuo?” Josiah asked.

He waited patiently, and Shizuo reluctantly answered. “Yes.”

“What did you think?”
“I think it’s a bunch of bullshit.”

“Well which part?”

“All of it. You think you can control the human race with a shitty transmission? Like hell! I may not be a smart guy, but even I know that’s impossible.”

Like he expected Shizuo to say that, Josiah smirked. “It’s not though. I expected you to be quite familiar with the concept. After all, the Vulture transmission is based off of a rather remarkable sword that I do believe you’re quite familiar with.”

Shizuo blanched. “Saika?”

“The one and only. You’d be amazed at what you can accomplish when you mix demon magic with the discipline of science. Of course, while Saika controls its victims with the crave for love, Vulture does the complete opposite. You see, while Izaya claims to love humanity, I long ago came to terms with the fact that I hate the species very much.”

“A bit hard, isn’t it, considering you are a human,” said Shizuo.

“No, I’m a Kazbek. Vulture turns Kazbeks into beings greater than humans. We’ve discussed this, remember?”

“Metal arm, no metal arm, you’re all human once that transmission goes off.”

For just a second, Josiah’s sunny disposition faltered. “So, you figured that much out?”

Shizuo shrugged. “I guess I can be smart when I need to be. I was kinda wondering why all those Kazbeks downstairs went down so easily. Lemme guess, without a Vulture transmission, you guys are as fragile as regular ol’ humans.”

Josiah clapped his hands together. “Very good, Shizuo! Yes, while physical strength has never been anything I truly desired, because as you can see, I’ve had quite the success at duplicating it, I can see that yours is still a force to be reckoned with.”

“Why are you discussing this with Shizu-chan?” Izaya asked. “It has nothing to do with him.”

“Actually, I’ve given Shizuo a very special gift,” said Josiah. “If you remember, Shizuo had a very severe broken arm. We’ve healed him.”

Izaya’s eyes drifted to Shizuo’s right arm. He crossed his arms, frowned, and looked away pointedly. “You turned Shizu-chan into a Kazbek?”

“Not fully,” said Josiah. “You see, I’d been hoping you’d finally join the Initiative, give us the information we need. If that were the case, I couldn’t let your loyalties belong to anyone other than me. But Shizuo, he could remain loyal to you if he wanted, but only as a Kazbek that I could control. That is… if you really are serious about the Initiative now.”

Izaya grimaced. “Of course I’m serious. I have no interest in dealing with Shizu-chan anymore, though. He was fun to play with for a while, but I have no further uses for him.”

Raising an inquisitive eyebrow, Josiah peered down at Shizuo expectantly. “And what about you, Shizuo? You followed Izaya all the way here for some contrived, grand romantic gesture. Now that you’ve found him, you learn that he’s forsaken not only you but the entirety of his precious human race. Are you still that devoted?”
Shizuo took the opportunity to stare at Izaya, unsure what he was looking for. Izaya refused to meet his eye again, and looked into the fire. Apparently, Shizuo took too long to answer.

“Did you know, Shizuo,” Josiah began, “that your Izaya killed a woman with his own hands? Ah, you didn’t? Of course not, why should he tell you such a thing! It was rather gruesome, the way he sliced open her neck. There’s still blood stains on the lab floor! You remember that woman from the video? The one in charge of Izaya’s treatment? Her name was Rosa. Very pretty, even more intelligent. You might have recognized her likeness in a tomb in Egypt. I wanted to send Izaya a reminder of the life that he took. She was my partner, and a devoted believer to The Kazbek Initiative. But unfortunately, her therapy for Izaya backfired. All the pain and suffering Izaya had kept pent up broke the surface in a violent fit of rage. At the first opportunity, he slayed his doctor and ran from us.”

Shizuo gaped at Izaya, whose demeanor was wavering. Suddenly, so much of the past weeks began to make sense. Izaya’s nightmares, his new aversion to blood, his oscillating fits, his fissured attitude towards humanity. The Kazbek Initiative had given Izaya every reason to hate human beings, and he had fought the notion to his very core.

He opened his mouth, which felt very dry. “Izaya, you—”

“I came back, didn’t I?” Izaya snapped, gaze narrowed at Josiah.

“To kill me?” asked Josiah.

“To join you.”

“I wonder…” Josiah rubbed his chin, “I wonder if the only reason I’m still alive right now is because you don’t have it in you to kill another person. Even if it’s me.”

Izaya remained silent for a while, before saying, “Shizu-chan will want nothing to do with me now that he knows, believe me. He’s sickeningly pure of heart. As much as he threatens people, he isn’t capable of murder. He has a tendency to get in the way of my plans, though.”

“What do you think we should do with him, then?” Josiah asked.

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Izaya shrugged.

“Should we kill him, then?”

Shizuo felt the gun against his head as a dreadful reminder.

Biting his lip, Izaya said, “You could, but killing would go against your whole creed, wouldn’t it, Josiah?”

Everything Shizuo had felt up until that point, about Izaya, about everything, set fire to his bloodstream.

Josiah sighed wistfully. “So you do take the Initiative seriously.”

“I told you I did!” Izaya smirked at Josiah. “I mean, if it satisfies you to kill Shizu-chan, by all means, be my guest. I’ve been hoping someone would kill him for me for years.”

Josiah studied Izaya. “You really think he’s of no value?”

“I do.”
“Very well.” Josiah nodded to Kyle.

Kyle pulled the trigger.

There was a moment in which Shizuo believed he truly had died. His ears rang so loudly and painfully that he feared he’d gone deaf. His hands went up to cover them. The shot, and a seemingly far off cry of despair echoed throughout his entire body, which lurched in reflex away from the sound, and the rush of air that passed his cheek. His mind blanked for a split second, and his eyes squeezed shut. The darkness made him think, _Well, that was the end._

But it wasn’t the end.

Shizuo opened his eyes, his ears still ringing, to see the bullet hole in the table in front of him. Smoke rose from the damaged wood. More importantly, he glanced up to see Izaya gasping at the same spot, his hands covering his open mouth in unmasked horror. Once Shizuo regained the use of his ears, he could hear Izaya’s stuttering.

“Sh… Sh… Sh… I thought…!”

“Izaya…?” Shizuo whispered.

“I don’t -” Izaya whirled to face Josiah, “It just surprised me! It’s not - !”

Josiah backhanded Izaya across the face.

“HEY!” Shizuo almost jumped across the room and strangled Josiah, but Kyle hit him in the back of the head with the butt of the gun.

“Don’t try to hide it. I knew this was all a ruse, Izaya,” Josiah growled. “I’m disappointed. You became even weaker, if you can even believe it.” Josiah locked Izaya in his arms, holding his neck like he’d be ready to snap it at any moment. He grinned at Shizuo, daring him to give Josiah a reason to do just that.

“But this works out nicely for me. Don’t worry, I wouldn’t kill Shizuo so easily, not when he has become so _useful_. If I can’t take the information from you, or convince you to give it willingly, or threaten you… perhaps I can threaten _him._”

His eyes flickered down to Shizuo, and Izaya’s eyes widened.

“Just try me!” Shizuo hissed through his teeth.

Taking that as a challenge, Kyle flipped Shizuo’s back onto the table and pinned him there. Transmission or no transmission, the natural blond was still a powerful being.

When he spoke now, Josiah finally sounded like the devil that he was. “The merciless deaths of millions wasn’t enough to convince you, but maybe the endless suffering of one man will be enough for you to talk.” Josiah jerked Izaya’s head towards the table. “Shizuo, I’ll have the opportunity that many in Japan dreamed of having. How far does that pain tolerance go? Let’s see how much the Monster of Ikebukuro can handle until he actually _feels_ something, shall we?!”

Kyle picked up Izaya’s candle and held it above Shizuo’s eye. He began to tip it.

“Wait!” Izaya yelled. Everyone stilled. Desperation filled his eyes. “I’ll…!”

“Don’t you dare!” Shizuo caught hold of Izaya’s full attention and tried to convey as much as he
could with just his voice. “I’ll never forgive you if you tell them.”

Kyle held his face forward, targeting Shizuo’s eye with melted wax, so Shizuo couldn’t see Izaya’s reaction. Izaya didn’t say anything more.

“Make sure you watch, Izaya,” said Josiah. “With someone like Shizuo, we can be at this for a while. One little algorithm from that library of information you call a brain, though, and we’ll let him go.”

Silence.

“Don’t worry,” Shizuo added for Izaya’s sake, “I probably won’t feel a thing.”

I really hope that’s true.

Kyle nodded at Josiah and tilted the candle, and the scorching hot liquid fell.

Chapter End Notes

okay i completely understand that this all might be complicated as fuck, so please don't be shy in asking me any questions about what the hell is going on and i will try my best to explain!! you can ask in the comments here or, where i'm more likely to see and answer them, on my tumblr.

(fic writing gives me such a respect for T.V. EPs because there are times that /we/ figure stuff out about the plot that we wish we could go back and prepare accordingly in earlier episodes/chapters but we CAN’T because the content is already out there!)

but hey izzy's back isn't that great
Shizuo Heiwajima was getting tired of being forced unconscious, and waking up in places he didn’t belong.

He could remember the easy days. Well, the easier days, in which he had a decent apartment, a nice bed, and could sleep until noon on Sundays. In all honestly, Shizuo could not even be sure which day of the week it was anymore. Not that it mattered while bolted to a cold, steel table that he’d been on top of for who knows how long. What happened to falling asleep on the couch while watching late night television?

He couldn’t clearly remember what Josiah and his staff had done to him, or how long it had been. Certainly, he felt like he’d been tinkered with and prodded at for years. It was a surreal thing, having your worst fear actually happen to you. Most likely, the reality of those fears coming to life was what caused Shizuo to howl as much as he did, not the actual pain. The agonizing realization that someone had finally gotten under his skin.

And that was another thing. At some points he could remember the figures over him, doing this and that to him, breaking bones or puncturing flesh, and he wouldn’t react at all. They took notes and tried again. Then, at other times, he could remember a pain so raw and so searing that he would black out. When he came to, he’d feel fine, but the people around him would go at it again.

But that was wrong, wasn’t it? Shizuo didn’t feel pain. Not physical pain, yet his entire body ached.

“Shizuo…”

Maybe it was less of a physical pain.

Fingers ghosted across his forehead, soothing wrinkles just above his brow. They daintily stroked a damp strand of hair off of Shizuo’s eyelid. So suddenly, Shizuo’s lingering memories of pain vanished, like Shizuo had never felt them at all.

“Shizu-chan, can you hear me?”

Shizuo grunted a curt response and opened an eye. He could just barely see a blur of pale skin and dark hair lingering above him. As the face came into focus, Shizuo could notice dark circles under brown eyes, and thin eyebrows pinched together.
Izaya seemed to gulp as he peered down at Shizuo’s condition. “Can you open… your other eye?”

Shizuo did so with surprising ease, and Izaya came into full focus. He saw Izaya sigh with relief before biting his lip to prevent any further expression of emotion. Izaya’s face disappeared from Shizuo’s view, and Shizuo could hear the clink of metal and feel the grace of hands at his feet.

“Can you move?” Izaya asked.

Shizuo wiggled his toes and fingers. “Looks like it.”

“Whatever sedative they gave you has worn off, then,” said Izaya as he released Shizuo’s right ankle and moved on to his left. He must have stolen a key. “I needed to be sure, but… it seems Josiah doesn’t want to do any real, permanent damage to you. He fixed anything he’d broken.”

“Why…?” Shizuo stretched his stiff leg and took in his surroundings a little more. The room was wide and barren except for the tables, monitors, and tools necessary for a makeshift operating room. Above him, Shizuo believed there was a camera. “And how do you know?”

“Because,” Izaya started. His became unsteady as they unlocked Shizuo’s left ankle. “Because I was watching the whole time.”

If that were the case, Izaya probably knew more of what Josiah did than Shizuo did. But that didn’t put him at ease. Not long ago, it had been Shizuo forced to experience the torture done against Izaya. He wondered if Izaya had been affected as much as Shizuo had. Not that Shizuo wanted that for Izaya, but Izaya was more likely to be complacent towards Shizuo’s suffering. Right?

But then he remembered how he ended up in this particular position. *He thought I died.* Izaya had been perfectly composed in Josiah’s company. He’d been holding his own against a chess master of an even sicker mind. Then, he wasn’t, because Kyle had aimed a bullet at Shizuo’s brain. Shizuo could still remember the horror in Izaya’s eyes. That’s what led to Josiah targeting Shizuo. At least, that was one of the reasons. And it had almost worked.

Izaya had almost given up the key to humanity for Shizuo’s sake.

“The power came back, but thankfully they haven’t fixed the transmission yet,” Izaya was saying as he came around to unlock Shizuo’s left wrist. “So now’s probably the only chance we’re going to get. I’ve timed it well enough…” *Click!* Shizuo’s wrist came free, “- but I’ll need you to - if you just wait!”

Shizuo was already rising from his stone cold death bed. He could look at more of Izaya this way, and he was dressed only in one of those raggedy hospital gowns, just like he had been in the videos Shizuo had seen. Actually, Shizuo only now noticed that all he was wearing himself was a pair of black briefs. *Embarrassing.*

“I still need to get the other cuff…” Izaya was saying, and Shizuo had half an ear to listen.

He was a little disoriented, suddenly free to move again, but he ripped the metal restraint up and off of the table to which it was joined like it had been held together with less than glue.

Izaya gave him a bemused look. “Show off…” he muttered, taking Shizuo’s right hand and unlocking it anyways, so Shizuo wouldn’t have a new, heavy, fashionable bracelet.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” Izaya said hurriedly, as the cuff gave way and the keys fell to the floor. “We have to…” He had almost darted towards the door, expecting Shizuo to follow. But he was stopped by the weight of a palm on his cheek.
Not a second after both Shizuo’s hands were entirely free did he capture Izaya’s face in both of them. Though initially agitated, Izaya’s expression softened when he saw the intensity behind Shizuo’s eyes. Shizuo gripped Izaya’s face as gently as he could, but with all the means that Izaya couldn’t slip away from him. Not again.

Yes, Shizuo knew of the danger they were in, and that Josiah could come back at any moment. He was aware of the urgency. But he needed to be sure that the Izaya before him was real. The real Izaya, and not a mirage concocted by his desperate imagination. And if he were real, he needed that Izaya to be the one that had led him all the way to this place, because that was the one he had willingly followed so far. He needed that Izaya to be unharmed, to be completely with him.

“I dreamed of you,” Shizuo explained, though that hardly explained the turmoil within his mind. Still, Izaya somehow understood. He nodded ever so slightly and tilted into Shizuo’s touch, as if to say, Yes this is me, really here in front of you.

Shizuo almost had the gaul to smile in such a situation. Since he had believed he would have never seen Izaya again at all, he revelled in the moment for as long as it was worth. This Izaya was definitely his, though he’d seen better days. His lips were practically blue from the chilled air. Shizuo tenderly brushed his thumb over a bruise over Izaya’s cheekbone. That must have been from when Josiah had smacked him. Just the memory made Shizuo’s blood boil. Otherwise, Izaya looked unscathed. The one injury still looked fresh, so maybe not too much time had passed after all.

Izaya’s eyes fell downwards, and another agitated knot formed over his eyebrows. Just barely, Shizuo heard him mutter something under his breath, but too low for Shizuo to hear.

“What is it?” asked Shizuo, wondering what had crossed Izaya’s mind all of a sudden.

But Izaya shook his head and reached for Shizuo’s hands. “Nothing,” he said. Taking one of Shizuo’s hands in his, Izaya pulled Shizuo to his feet and led him towards the door. “We have to hurry, remember?”

Without question, Shizuo closed his fingers around Izaya’s and followed him, once again, but was momentarily worried for reasons other than the external threats that await them. He had no way to know for sure, but he could have sworn he’d heard Izaya say “You should have never come after me.”

“Where are we going?”

Shizuo kept glancing down at his hand enclosed over Izaya’s, which was not the point of this moment at all, and he really should not have even an ounce of giddiness about such a menial thing. Especially at a time like this. But he was feeling incredibly human lately, and humans were perfectly flawed in these ways.

It was stupid, he knew, but he had come all this way to reunite with Izaya and to help him defeat this adversary. Now here Izaya was, offering his hand to Shizuo and leading him through the underworld. All Shizuo needed to do now was lead them out. The odds were against them, but Shizuo felt more powerful since he awoke with Izaya looking over him. Not because he’d been injected with some maniac’s Super Serum, or because he’d gotten new, shiny parts, but because he felt as if he’d joined with the other half of a very powerful combination.

Izaya was that other half.

They had made their way somewhere along the underground facilities. Izaya was leading them
through a route void of Kazbeks and other security. Was it by purpose or by luck? Shizuo learned long ago that Izaya was capable of figuring these things out

“To the garage,” Izaya answered, hushed. “Once we get there, I need you to -” He turned toward Shizuo, whose eyes were not trained on anything other than their linked hands. Snatching his hand back, Izaya snapped his fingers in Shizuo’s face. “Pay attention!”

“I am paying attention!” Shizuo felt his cheeks heat up. “We’re headed to the garage. Why?”

“How else are we going to get off these mountains? We need a truck!”

“And they’re just gonna let us drive off with one of their trucks…?”

“No, of course not.” Izaya stopped at a corner and peeked behind the wall’s edge. The coast was clear. They crouched right below an alarm switch. “That’s why, while you’re commandeering a truck, and driving it to the front gate, I’ll be in the main mansion and - Why are you shaking your head?”

“Because you’re gonna go back into that place? The root of all evil?” Shizuo all but scoffed. “No way!”

Izaya glowered. “I don’t have a choice! You think this place is gonna go away if we just drive out of here? You think Kazbeks are going to stop hating humanity? You think they’re going to stop hunting me?” His voice was becoming dangerously high, in both pitch and volume. “I have to stop them!”

“Why does it have to be you?!” Shizuo argued.

“Don’t be stupid, Shizu-chan! Who else - ?!”

“I can do it.” The tone of Shizuo’s voice caught Izaya off guard. “Whatever it is to free you from these maniacs, I can do it. Let me do it.”

Shizuo had a few reasons to prevent Izaya from venturing back into the mansion. The first was that if worse came to worst, Shizuo would rather Izaya have a truck to escape, even if Shizuo wasn’t on board. The second was that he was tired

“Forget it, Shizu-chan,” Izaya said. “This isn’t something you can accomplish with brute strength. If something goes wrong, what are you going to do?! Smash everything to pieces?!”

“You know I won’t!” Shizuo barked. He startled Izaya out of a rut that was easy to get in between the two of them.

Izaya shook his head, his tone remorseful. “Yeah, I know. But I have to do something important. Maybe even more important than getting away from this place.”

“I get that!” Shizuo might have sounded angry, but he was mostly desperate. His nostrils flared, and this time, he tried to be articulate.

“Do you remember what I said to you on that boat?” Shizuo said, and Izaya blushed, probably remembering how that conversation had ended. “I said I was going to destroy whoever hurt you. I didn’t know who that was back then, but now I do. I said I wanted to carry your burdens on my shoulders, because I’m strong enough. Those feelings haven’t changed.” Shizuo gently grabbed Izaya’s shoulders, which were tight with stress. He got as close to Izaya as he could without breaking eye contact with the shorter man. “I’ll do whatever it takes, but you have to tell me everything. You have to be honest with me. Right here, right now. We don’t have any time left to be playing games.
We’re both on humanity’s side, alright? I’m on your side. So please?"

The stare Izaya directed at him was a disbelieving one. Maybe he hadn’t expected Shizuo to be so forward, or so cooperative. Maybe he had doubts that Shizuo would still feel the same after he spilled it all out. Maybe he’d never had anyone with whom to share his burdens before. But Shizuo was genuine, and his jaw was set strong and straight in display of it.

Tension left Izaya’s shoulders, and Izaya moved a little closer to Shizuo. His voice dropped. “You have to really mean it.”

“I really mean it.” Shizuo didn’t even hesitate.

For a second, Izaya seemed willing to relent, but still hesitant.

Not wanting to leave him with any doubts, Shizuo added, “Plus there’s also the fact that I don’t know how to drive.”

Izaya’s eyes grew with disbelief before he burst out laughing. A pure, amused laugh that tittered like a kookaburra. He had to cover his mouth before he grew too loud, and attracted unwanted attention. Shizuo wanted to preserve the sound for all that it was worth. Which to Shizuo, was a lot.

“You dumb protozoan, Shizu-chan.” He caught his breath and the laughter turned into a groan.

“Alright, Shizu-chan,” he started, and Shizuo grunted a response, “I’m going to give you a very specific set of instructions, and you have to follow them exactly.”

“Yeah yeah,” Shizuo said, growing impatient. “Just tell me what I need to do.”

The plan that Izaya then relayed was indeed a complicated one, and Shizuo really had doubts if he could pull it off. Izaya shared both their parts from beginning to an end, step by step. Shizuo might have preferred a sudden crash course in automobile operation over the trial that Izaya just assigned to him. Not that either task seemed like a breeze. Shizuo would rather Izaya at least have a getaway vehicle, should Shizuo fail his part.

No. I can’t fail, Shizuo told himself.

Izaya took Shizuo’s hand again, within which he pressed a small thumb drive. “After that,” he said, “all you have to do is open it.”

Nodding, Shizuo inspected the small device. Seemingly harmless, but immensely powerful based on what Izaya just instructed him to do. “How did you get this past them?” He asked.

“I hid it last night, while the security cameras were offline, before you showed up,” said Izaya. At Shizuo’s raised eyebrow, he added, “in a decorative urn. They have way too many of those in the mansion.”

Shizuo nodded in agreement. The mansion had far too many baubles. He waited, then, for Izaya to elaborate further on how he ended up breaking away practically unharmed in the first place.

But Izaya must have read his expression. “I can’t tell you every detail right now, Shizu-chan. We’re a little short on time if you hadn’t noticed. Do you know what you have to do right now, or not?” At Shizuo’s narrowed eyes, he added snippily, “I don’t have time to drill this into that tiny brain of yours!”

Shizuo thought he should be more annoyed, but he was overcome with a familiar euphoria at the
sound of Izaya berating his intelligence. For a moment, it felt as if they were back in Ikebukuro, cussing each other out. If only Izaya’s smartass mouth was the most of his worries again.

“I’ll tell you,” Izaya then said. “I’ll tell you everything afterwards. Can you wait just a little longer?”

Although, Shizuo never got a chance to respond.

Without any warning, Izaya reached up and pulled the fire alarm.

Immediately, red lights flashed throughout the corridor and an ear-piercing siren cried through the air. Even if it was part of the plan, which it was, Shizuo’s heart accelerated. They’d have to be even more alert and cautious from beyond this point. They’d have to move acceleratingly.

“Remember,” Izaya said hastily, “all you have to do is open the file. Once it starts downloading, head for the front gate immediately, or you might not make it. I’ll be the guy in a truck.”

With that, Izaya was about to take off towards the garage.

“Wait!” Shizuo reflexively grabbed Izaya’s arm before he could get too far. Alarmed, Izaya looked back at him. Though Shizuo felt like he had something more to say, he couldn’t quite get the words off his tongue. What else could he say? Be careful? Good luck? Don’t die?

Or, What if this is the last time we see each other?

Thankfully, Izaya spoke instead. “I’ll find you,” he said, “I promise.”

Those were the right words, and Izaya’s eyes were just as confident. Reluctant to let him go, Shizuo slid his hand down to Izaya’s and laced their fingers together for one last moment. He tried to say as much as he could with just a small squeeze of his hand.

With a reassuringly smug smile, Izaya squeezed back.

Then, they both sprinted in opposite directions.

Of course, it wasn’t long before Shizuo ran into a group of Kazbeks, still in the underground hallways. They’d been headed towards the alarm, naturally. Something that he hadn’t been anticipating, though: guns.

Kazbeks, it turned out, when they didn’t have Vulture to juice them up, had a reliable source of weapons to arm themselves. After almost getting shot about five times, Shizuo successfully disarmed the group of four and knocked them out. He could be thankful that neither Josiah nor Kyle had been among them, and they went down as easily they had the last time. Amongst the group was a guy around the same size as Shizuo, albeit a little smaller in both height and build. He’d have to do.

Shizuo dragged the unconscious Kazbeks into an empty room, where he stripped the one guy of his uniform. Hastily, Shizuo dressed himself and stole a pair of boots and their military caps as well. The material was loose to begin with, so thankfully the size difference didn’t make the clothes too snug. He patted his pockets and found an identification card. The guy looked nothing like Shizuo; a brown, Turkish man with a Turkish name that Shizuo couldn’t read. There was a stripe on the back of the card, eligible for swiping into secure areas, just as Izaya had told him.

From thereon, Shizuo continued on up to the mansion’s ground level at no more than a brisk pace. Acting like he was on the run would only alert those he passed that he actually was on the run. The Kazbeks were looking for an escapee, not someone dressed in the same garments as them. With his newly acquired ID, Shizuo could swipe into the elevator and ride it to the mansions’ base level like a
normal person. Much more convenient than climbing the shaft’s walls!

In the mansion, Kazbeks and doctors passed him hurriedly here and there, but Shizuo kept his head down. The cap provided a sufficient shade over his face. He walked with a purpose, pretending he was going somewhere on orders. Which, he supposed he was in some way.

They all shouted at each other in various languages, headed into elevators and down stairs towards the underground facilities. Towards the source of the alarm, as intended. They’d successfully lured most of the guards from the mansion, making it easier for Shizuo to move around. Still, with everyone rushing in that direction, Shizuo really hoped Izaya would be okay.

*Of course he will be,* Shizuo told himself. Izaya was nimble, stealthy, and could probably take out as many of these Kazbeks as Shizuo could so long as they weren’t activated by Vulture.

Then there was Shizuo, who had almost no idea where he was going.

According to Izaya, there was a control room for the entire facility located at the center of the mansion on the top level. In order to get in, he’d need a Kazbek ID and probably to get through some other level of security. Unfortunately, Izaya’s plan to get into control room the previous night had been stifled by Josiah seeing through his scheme. He had planned to investigate once he’d gained Josiah’s trust. *So much for that,* Shizuo thought. Without knowing what else guarded the control room, Shizuo would need to improvise.

There wasn’t an elevator to take him to the highest level of the mansion. Shizuo had to climb the stairs, and there sure were a ton of them. Not to mention, he kept getting lost, bursting into random rooms. The first room Shizuo stumbled upon surprised him, as its floors were cluttered with discarded garments and the desk had scribble-filled notebooks. Other rooms he went in by accident appeared similarly. They appeared… lived in.

*Is this Josiah’s home?* Shizuo wondered. No, all of this is too much for one man. There’s dozens of rooms.

That’s when Shizuo realized that this place was a home. For all the people they were working against.

The thought made Shizuo sour, especially considering what he had to do. His hand slipped into his pocket and felt the thumb drive, and he pressed on.

Finally, he made it to the top floor. He climbed the hardwood stairs with the golden trimmed railing, onto the open landing overlooking the crystal chandelier. *Okay, which way?* Shizuo peered down both ends of the hallway. To his right looked like total darkness, but to his left was the faintest of a blue light around the corner. He decided to head towards the light.

This part of the mansion was more isolated and less chaotic than what Shizuo had just trekked through. There weren’t as many Kazbeks. Even then, Shizuo wasn’t sure what he was looking for. Should he go through every room? Would the control room be hidden, or would it be as obvious a flashing, neon sign?

From behind, Shizuo could hear someone shouting in another language. When the voice sounded closer and angrier, Shizuo realized that he was the one being addressed. Shizuo turned around and came face to face with a large, male Kazbek.

“*Qu’est-ce que tu fais?*” the Kazbek shouted, “*Vous n’êtes pas autorisé ici!*”

“Uhh…” Shizuo wasn’t sure what to say, even if he could lie in French.
When Shizuo remained suspiciously silent, the Kazbek drew a gun and aimed it at Shizuo. Quick to react, Shizuo twisted the gun out of the man’s hand. He spun the Kazbek and put him in a headlock. Soon, the man slipped unconscious.

Just as Shizuo was about to sigh with relief. Three Kazbeks rounded the nearest corner and saw this very inconspicuous act.

“HEY!” They shouted as they drew their weapons.

Shizuo dropped the man. “Son of a -!” He took off down the hall, just narrowly avoiding the bullets that splintered the wall he’d just stood.

“Shit!” He ran and dodged gunfire that shattered light fixtures and destroyed paintings.

* * *

Shizuo couldn’t keep dodging these bullets forever, he knew. If he rounded any of these corners and ran into another set of Kazbeks with pointed guns, he’d be mincemeat. As it was, the corners were the only thing providing him any protection.

He disappeared behind one and waited. The three Kazbeks shouted at each other in three different languages, and Shizuo wondered if they had any clue what the other was saying. They managed to find Shizuo, though.

Luckily, Shizuo was quick. The first Kazbek to stick their gun around the corner received a broken arm. Instinctively, the Kazbek, who was a middle-aged male, fired off a round from his gun. The bullet only hit the wall. Shizuo threw the man into the other two Kazbeks as they approached, another male and a female. They toppled like bowling pins, but all three were quick to recover. Kick-jumping off the wall, Shizuo was able to connect his foot with the middle-aged Kazbek’s chin. That one was down for the count.

But that left Shizuo a little too close to the other two Kazbeks to move out of the way in time.

* * *

The female Kazbek managed to shoot a hole through Shizuo’s right arm.

As fast as he could, Shizuo dived into one of the rooms connected to the halls and locked the door behind him. He crouched behind a king sized bed as a barrage of bullets decorated the wooden door with holes.

Seeming to have bought himself a moment, Shizuo looked down at his new wound. It didn’t hurt, which was normal for Shizuo. The arm also continued to function as if it had never gotten shot at all. For the first time, he got a peek inside the Kazbek arm that Josiah had provided for him. Peculiarly enough, he was bleeding but not at an alarming rate. The bullet had gone right through his bicep. When Shizuo looked into the dark, tiny, hole, he could see a mixture of pink muscle and broken wires. In just the thirty seconds Shizuo spent observing, the wires began to grow and connect themselves. His skin sparkled like plasma and looked like it was healing itself rapidly.

“What the fuck…” Shizuo had never felt more like a monster.

To stop the small amount of bleeding, Shizuo ripped up a shred of sheet from the bed he was hiding behind. He tightly tied the cloth around the wound. While he did so, he noticed how big and luxurious this room was. It was certainly a mansion’s master bedroom. The bed had a canopy, and mahogany posts. There was comfortable seating all around, crystal mirrors, a chandelier, a master
bath attached, and an array of monitors for a person to watch. At the moment, they were blank.

The most interesting detail in the room, though, was the splattered blood on the carpet. Blood that did not belong to Shizuo.

*BANG BANG BANG!*

“Shit,” Shizuo had to flee if he didn’t want to be trapped in this room when the two remaining Kazbeks bust in.

Thankfully, there was another exit from the bedroom. It brought Shizuo back into hallways, though these were a little more barren than the ones he’d before been navigating. No lavish paintings, furniture, or artifacts.

Finally, Shizuo saw what he was looking for. A door that matched the appearance of those in the underground facilities. Steel plating, a touch screen access panel, and a slot to swipe the Kazbek ID. Thinking he could lock his pursuers out if he got inside, Shizuo ran over and swiped his stolen ID.

The access panel blared red. **ACCESS DENIED.**

“What?!” Shizuo furiously repeated the action over and over.

**ACCESS DENIED.**

**ACCESS DENIED.**

**ACCESS DENIED.**

Just before Shizuo was about to slam his fist into the damn thing, the two Kazbeks found him.

Shizuo distracted one by chucking the useless ID at the Kazbek’s face in a childish fit of rage. In the second that it took the Kazbek to think *What the hell was just thrown at me?* Shizuo crossed the room and socked the guy in the face. Knocked unconscious, the Kazbek dropped his gun. Before Shizuo could dive for it, the other Kazbek shot at him. With the bullet just grazing his ribs, Shizuo ran out of the way.

In the past, Shizuo had faced his fair share of gunners. They’d even shot him a few times. If he died this time around, Shizuo could blame Izaya for getting him shot *again.* However, Shizuo didn’t remember ever being fast enough to dodge so many bullets, especially in a confined space. Was this the result of Josiah’s experience?

Was this Vulture?

Shizuo managed to get within reaching distance to the discarded gun just as the Kazbek ran out of bullets. An empty *click* happened when she tried to shoot him away from her fallen Kazbek’s weapon. Instead of wasting time reloading her gun, the Kazbek marched over to Shizuo, and kneed him in the face.

And Shizuo went flying.

When he recovered, he gave the female Kazbek a good overview. She had a hard face and fists raised, but it was that leg Shizuo was worried about. Based on the impact Shizuo just felt, that leg was a prosthetic. A Kazbek prosthetic, pumping with Vulture.

“Well…” Shizuo spit a wad of blood out of his cheek. His fists came up as well. Good old
fashioned hand to hand combat was more up Shizuo’s alley anyways.

She was good. She was skilled. She obviously had training. But only a part of her had the strength that Shizuo had all over. Though she got in a few good jabs, and one more powerful kick to Shizuo’s abdomen, Shizuo quickly gained the upper hand.

When he got the chance, Shizuo elbowed her in the face. One, two, three times. He most likely broke her nose, and red blood gushed out. The sight reminded Shizuo that even crazed cyborgs were somehow human. Unnerved, Shizuo backed off for a moment.

The Kazbek saw that as a sign of weakness. She pounced on him, almost feral. Shizuo threw her off, and she smacked the wall. In a panic, Shizuo snatched the loaded gun off the floor and aimed at her while she started to get up.

She froze. Looking between the barrel of the gun and Shizuo’s eyes, her eyes shone with a sudden fear.

*What am I doing*?! Shizuo thought, horrified. *I’m not really going to shoot this woman!* But the gun remained raised.

Slowly, hesitantly, the Kazbek rose to her feet, anxious that Shizuo might shoot her at any second. When he didn’t, she chanced reaching into her breast pocket. Paranoid, Shizuo’s fingers twitched. The Kazbek noticed, and she paused for just a second before taking out her ID card and flicking it on the ground.

Her eyes darted to the control room’s door, and to her unconscious comrade. “Isha,” she said, pointing to her eye. “Gacanta,” she held up a hand.

Shizuo watched her curiously. *What?*

But with just that, she fled.

As soon as she was out of sight, Shizuo hurtled the gun as far as he could, disgusted. He went over and picked up the Kazbek’s ID. Maybe these level three Kazbeks had more clearance than those he’d stolen from in the underground.

Examining the access panel a second time, Shizuo swiped the new ID.

The light turned yellow, and the screen showed an image of an eyeball. Shizuo finally noticed the retinal scanner. Sighing, Shizuo went and got the unconscious Kazbek and dragged him over to the access panel. He held the guy up and stretched his eyelid open. The scanner sent out a blue beam.

The panel blinked yellow, and the screen showed the outline of a hand. Shizuo grabbed the Kazbek’s arm and slapped his hand on the panel.

Finally, the panel glowed green, and the door slid open with a *swoosh*!

Shizuo carelessly dropped the Kazbek, kicking it out of his way as he stepped into the control panel. The door slid decisively closed behind him.

Inside the control room, everything was silent. No one was inside. Shizuo couldn’t hear the alarm anymore, but the whole room blinked with the red alarm. Otherwise, the room was eerily dark and surprisingly large. Shizuo had to meander around stacked shelves of equipment and files before he came into sight with the main computer.
Which was huge.

It looked like something out of the action movies Shizuo loved to watch. The screen was half the size of a cinema screen, and had smaller monitors flanking it on either side. They were all of a transparent plasma. On the center screen was displayed a spinning symbol, one that encircled the image of a vulture flying over a mountain peak. A ribbon of text danced underneath that read KAZBEK in a distinguished font.

There was no keyboard, but another panel on which the same symbol glimmered. Shizuo approached the computer and swiped a finger across the panel. The computer came to life. A hundred keys came to life on the panel, and the screen switched from the Kazbek logo to display something more formidable.

LOGIN: KI-MAIN
PASSWORD:

All that was in the password entry was a blinking cursor, mocking Shizuo. Shit! Shizuo gnashed his teeth together in frustration. Either Izaya didn’t have an idea of what the password would be, or he neglected to tell Shizuo on accident. Or maybe, Shizuo grasped at optimism, he thought I could figure it out on my own?

Just then, Shizuo felt a rumble under his feet. A far off explosive blast. The whole compound shook, and the nerves went straight to Shizuo’s heart. He almost ditched his task completely, about to run back to the underground in search for Izaya.

Izaya would kill him if he did. No, Shizuo had to focus on the task at hand.

But he was no hacker. He was sure that if Izaya was here, he could crack the password in no time. This was Shizuo, who often forgot his own Yahoo! password. Now, Izaya expected him to hack a secret base’s supercomputer. To make matters more difficult, the keyboard was completely Latin alphabetical. What Shizuo would have given to see some Japanese soon.

Starting with the obvious ones, Shizuo typed in V-U-L-T-U-R-E and H-U-M-M-E-L.

INCORRECT

Shizuo fiddled with the thumb drive in his palm as he wracked his brain. Josiah was probably the one to create the password, so Shizuo tried to focus on what he knew about the man.

So far, Shizuo knew that Josiah Hummel was one of the most despicable people on the planet. From their time together in Venice, he knew that Josiah enjoyed cappuccinos and cannolis. Neither of those granted access. He liked old art and fancy European mansions, but Shizuo wouldn’t even know where to start with those.

“How ’bout your best friend K-Y-L-E?”

INCORRECT

No such luck. Shizuo cursed. What else?

Josiah Hummel, Josiah Hummel… Josiah Hummel hated humans, but liked Izaya Orihara. No, Josiah Hummel was obsessed with Izaya Orihara.

Shizuo vaguely remembered Shinra once explaining Izaya’s strange first name when they were in high school. It had something to do a western prophet, a character of biblical text.

INCORRECT

Shizuo couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief.

But that still left him out of the system. If only Shizuo knew Josiah’s birthday.

Then Shizuo thought about how personal Josiah made everything. He thought about what he’d done to Izaya, what he’d forced Izaya to do, how he continuously haunted Izaya with the worst thing Izaya had ever done.

Shizuo remembered the Kazbek in Madrid, and the word it kept repeating to them, over and over and over again. He recalled the flower offered to them in an extended hand. Sounding the name out in his brain, Shizuo typed it in with a heavy heart.

R-O-S-A

The screen transformed.

WELCOME!

Shizuo muttered. “What an asshole…”

The monitors immediately showed footage from security cameras around the complex, which looked like chaos. In the top left monitor was a frenzy of Kazbeks and scientists trying to both escape a fire in the underground facilities and put it out. Other screens just showed running around, probably on orders of which Shizuo was unaware. One screen showed a large antenna protruding from a mountain side. Another showed the garage, and Shizuo’s heart skipped a beat. He scanned the scene for any glimpse of Izaya, but all he saw were rows of automobiles, Kazbeks, and utility workers in a hectic state. Squinting at the monitor, Shizuo could see the cause of their disarray.

Every vehicles’ tires had been sliced and deflated.

The top right monitor, however, showed the compound’s main gate, which showed nothing too exciting. That meant that Izaya wasn’t in the garage, nor was he already waiting for Shizuo at the main gate like he said he would be.

Where are you, Izaya? Shizuo’s heart raced. It didn’t help his nerves that he also didn’t know where Kyle was.

Not seeing Izaya on the monitors might have been a good sign though. These probably weren’t the only camera monitors in such a large facility, and Izaya would want to move unnoticed. And he could do that if he wanted to. He’d escaped this place before, and he was regularly stealthy.

Shizuo had his own job to do.

He felt around for a USB port. Adjacent to the keyboard were a series of switchboards, cluttered with buttons and notches, on which Shizuo finally found a port to plug in the thumb drive. As soon as he did, the main monitor switched to show a series of prompts.

There was only one file one file on the drive. Its thumbnail was nothing more than a blank page. Shizuo clicked it.

EXECUTE FILE 01000110.PS2XML?
Just before Shizuo could click, a familiar voice stopped him. “Are you sure you want to do that?”

Shizuo whipped around, but he saw no one within the darkness. He did, however, hear footsteps. Slow, calculating footsteps from within the darkness behind the stacked shelves.

“Trying to stop me?” Shizuo challenged.

A shadow cast itself across Josiah’s face, leaving only his mouth visible. “I don’t think I need to. I think you’ll stop without my guidance.”

Instead of answering, Shizuo simply clicked the damn Open button. A download bar appeared and it gradually filled with blue. An estimation of a few minutes until the script fully loaded started to count down. Shizuo turned back to Josiah and shrugged.

Josiah sneered. “You think you’re doing Izaya a favor?”

“I think I’m doing the whole world a favor,” Shizuo countered.

“You’re mistaken, Shizuo.” He began to approach, but Shizuo stood his ground. He wouldn’t let him get close to the computer to shut down Izaya’s script. “I keep telling you that The Kazbek Initiative is the world’s best bet.”

“A world without humanity.”

“Humans are so young,” Josiah mused. “The world has existed far longer without them than it has with them. That’s not to say the species doesn’t have a place on Earth, though. But it’s time for evolution. Even if it needs a little push.”

“Why don’t you just give up? We both know that you need Izaya’s information to do anything with Vulture.”

Josiah came forward, visible now by the light of the red alarm. Shizuo cringed upon the sight of a silver scalpel protruding from Josiah’s eye socket. The organ was completely mutilated, half of it gouged out. Blood dripped down all the way to Josiah’s shirt. Also oozing from the wound was a bluish liquid that was not natural to the human body. The scalpel was stabbed in so deep into Josiah’s brain that any normal human being would be dead.

Despite all this, Josiah walked forward with a wide smile. He wasn’t fazed in the least.

“Uh…” Shizuo gaped at the disturbing image. “You have something in your eye.”

“My only natural eye, too!” Josiah reached up and plucked his unharmed eyeball out of his skull. It detached from a wire with a pop! Shizuo’s stomach churned as the mechanic eyeball whizzed around in Josiah’s palm for a moment before Josiah popped it back in without much ado. “Izaya’s more talented with blade’s than I give him credit for.”

“Izaya did that to you?” Now it became clear why Izaya was able to escape and free Shizuo, how they had been able to move around.

Reaching up and grasping the scalpel, Josiah yanked it out of his head with a sickening squish sound. “Indeed. And to my utmost surprise, he very well tried to kill me! It seems he was capable of harming me all along, he just needed the proper motivation.”
“I think stopping you is motivation enough,” said Shizuo. “It’s too bad he didn’t really kill you.”

Josiah held on to the scalpel. Perhaps he intended to use it on Shizuo, so Shizuo kept a close eye on it. Currently, the weapon remained at Josiah’s side. “If Izaya really wanted to kill me, he had plenty of opportunities to do so. No, I think this has more to do with you.”

“Me?” Shizuo’s eyebrows rose.

“Mmm…” Josiah crept ever closer, “He must have been a bit vindictive over what I was doing to you. A bit silly, isn’t it? He could have stopped it all if he had just told me the algorithm I need. So I used Insight to force him to watch you. I think he was even more vocal than you.”

Shizuo’s hands clenched into fists. He had trouble believing Izaya would kill a person for Shizuo’s sake. Maybe Josiah Hummel didn’t technically count as a human.

“Instead of surrendering,” Josiah continued, “he did this at the first opportunity we were alone!” He slapped his palm against the whole in his face.

“I can’t blame him,” Shizuo said truthfully. He grinned sharply and cracked his knuckles. “I’m a little glad you’re still alive, though. That means that I can be the one to kill you instead! Izaya doesn’t need more blood on his hands in order to stop this mess.”

Josiah rose his one good eyebrow. “You think killing me will put an end to The Kazbek Initiative?”

“Duh it will!”

“Tsk tsk, Shizuo,” Josiah chuckled like Shizuo had just made an elementary assumption. “You don’t get it do you?”

The patronizing tone only fueled Shizuo’s anger. But he didn’t say anything, only glared. He didn’t get it.

“The Kazbek Initiative is more than just me!” Josiah said, “It’s everyone here! Everyone in this place and even more around the world! You think all of this is just mine?!” Josiah spread his arms, as if embracing the entire facility. The more Josiah spoke, the further Shizuo’s heart sank. “This is the work of thousands! Thousands of people who believe the world will be a better place with Vulture in their system!”

“But…” Shizuo’s voice wavered, “But they’re all just here because they’re forced into this program? They’re all under Vulture’s control?”

Josiah’s laugh grew more ugly. “Forced?! My dear Shizuo, the Vulture transmission has been down for over twenty-four hours! If the Kazbeks wanted to leave they could have driven out the front gate! No one’s forcing them to do anything! No, they’re here because they believe in the Initiative, just as I wish you would. Just as I wish Izaya would.”

“Then you’re all nuts!” Shizuo shouted, a bit frazzled with himself. “There are billions of people in this world, and you’re not giving them a say.”

“You treat me like a villain,” Josiah sighed, “but don’t forget that I’ve never killed a person.”

Shizuo clenched his fists so tightly he might break his own bones. He was at a boiling point with Josiah’s superiority complex and his constant attempts at mind games.

“So,” Josiah continued, unaware of the veins bulging in Shizuo’s temple, “why don’t you cancel that
Shizuo Heiwajima wasn’t a smart man, but he was an honest man. Honestly, he could barely understand the whole conflict between Josiah and Izaya. Cyborgs? Vulture? Transmissions? Algorithms? It all went over Shizuo’s head. But even if he couldn’t understand the superfluous levels to Josiah’s convoluted plot, he could still tell when a guy was spewing complete and utter bullshit.

And that made Shizuo extremely, teeth-grindingly angry.

*WHAM!*

A computer monitor collided with Josiah’s gut, and he went flying backwards. He crashed into the shelves. Equipment and files fell on top of him, and the other towers of shelves

The metal of them bent under Josiah’s impact.

“You’re right,” Shizuo bit out, marching over to another shelf fixture and picking it up like a baseball bat. All of the shelves’ contents slid off as Shizuo maneuvered the giant thing. “Neither of us have killed a person. Izaya has, and he didn’t tell me.”

Josiah started to push hardware off of his chest and rise from the broken shelf fixture. The download continued to go on the main monitor, and now its estimation to finish only read less than a minute.

“But I kinda believe that you’re a little less than human,” Shizuo grinned manically, “And I’m willing to finish what Izaya started!”

Shizuo chucked the shelves at Josiah, who dodged easier than humanly possibly.

This was the first time Shizuo got to see Josiah hold his own, without Kyle doing the dirty work, and the sight was frightening. He was upon Shizuo in an instant, with a chop to Shizuo’s neck that probably would have killed him if Shizuo hadn’t just managed to graze a block on him. That didn’t stop Shizuo from taking his own turn flying across the room, crashing into the various electronic hardware here and there.

Josiah followed Shizuo’s trajectory and closed a hand around Shizuo’s throat in a godlike grip.

“Let’s not fight, Shizuo,” he said.

“No, let’s!” Shizuo punched Josiah where Izaya had stabbed him in the eye.

Shrieking in pain, Josiah released Shizuo, who kicked Josiah off of his body. Again, Josiah was quick to recover, and he parried a kick at Shizuo. They exchanged blows, back and forth, but only an amateur would have believed it was an equal fight. Josiah Hummel was not only incredibly fast and with strength on par with Shizuo’s, but he was extremely skilled.

Shizuo had always enjoyed watching various martial arts competitions on television. He even dabbled in a few himself. Josiah seemed to be professionally trained at every single style, though. Taijutsu, karate, taekwondo, Greco-Roman, freestyle, boxing, styles that Shizuo didn’t even recognize. Every move required Shizuo’s absolute attention and discipline, which wasn’t his style of fighting. His brain usually wasn’t a factor, but one misstep probably would result in death.

Sure, Shizuo could get a few hits in, a few jabs, a few kicks, but it felt like Josiah was only getting faster. Of course, Josiah’s mouth ran the whole time. Always a gobshite. If Shizuo tried to listen, he’d be toast. He was too busy trying to block and evade everything Josiah threw at him, stuck on defense. And Shizuo couldn’t stop everything. He got punched in the face and elbowed in the ribs
time and time again. He was probably bleeding somewhere. It wasn’t long before Shizuo had his back to the wall again.

Thankfully, he was saved by a boop!

Both Shizuo and Josiah froze and turned their attention to the computer. A notice popped up on the screen.

DOWNLOAD COMPLETE

The notice disappeared in just a second, and a long, long script flew across the screen in digital jargon that Shizuo didn’t understand.

Josiah, however, did. “No…” He backed away from the Shizuo and stumbled towards the computer. He stopped when the scripts ended and up on the screen popped to life a tiny, pixelated Izaya, carrying what looked to be a torch. The little avatar made a sound akin to a Gremlin’s laugh, before his little torch’s flame grew and engulfed the entire screen.

Soon the computer began to violently spark. The motherboard started smoking, and the room started to quake. No, the entire facility was shaking, and the control room was the epicenter.

“No!!” cried Josiah. He rushed to the computer controls and began desperately tinkering with everything. Every button, every switch it seemed. Nothing he did stopped the place from falling apart. Fire burst from a circuit board and rapidly starting spreading through the room. Josiah turned a horrid, ugly expression towards Shizuo, who stood frozen. “WHAT DID YOU DO?!”

Shizuo remembered the first time he encountered Josiah, in that little cafe in Venice. In his ignorance, he had found Josiah Hummel to be a handsome man. Now, as he looked upon the visage of an enraged and delusional man with a gaping hole in both his body and soul, Shizuo thought he’d never seen someone so disgusting.

But he didn’t pursue Shizuo. He didn’t attack him. He was too preoccupied with finding a way to salvage his life’s work on that frying, crumbling computer.

Shizuo thought it as the best time to run away.

“To the gate! To the gate! To the gate!” Shizuo ran as fast as he could through the deteriorating mansion. The electrical fire had spread quickly, and now the whole place seemed to be in flames. Shizuo feared the worse if the fire hit the chemicals in the underground before Shizuo was long out of this place. That little thumb drive sure packed a powerful punch. He’d have to remember to ask Izaya what was in it. That is, if he got out of this place alive.

Soon Shizuo realized that the mansion was even harder to navigate with walls collapsing and halls blocked by flames. He’d need a miracle if he really wanted to find the proper exit in this place. Front gate? Seemed simple enough in theory, but this was Shizuo. Of course only in the final stretch would he realize that he had absolutely no idea how to get to such a place!

BOOM!

A room about six meters to Shizuo’s right exploded in an inferno, spraying splinters everywhere.

“I’m going to fucking die,” Shizuo grumbled as he barely avoided a shard of wood harpooning toward his thigh. With Josiah’s appearance, Shizuo had forgotten about what Izaya had said about leaving immediately. Now what? Was he doomed?
There’s got to be a quicker way out of this damn place, Shizuo thought as he ran around. His only real direction was down, to get to the ground level. He had made it to the second level, though that was more of a mishap. He fell through a crumbling hole in the floor.

To Shizuo’s surprise, there weren’t any Kazbeks to be seen. They had all evacuated, which only made Shizuo more frustrated. That meant that there was an exit to this damn place. One that Shizuo just couldn’t seem to find. Somehow, with the smoke filling his lungs and killing brain cells, Shizuo came up with a plan. It was a stupid, dangerous plan, but those had so far worked for him in the past. He hadn’t died quite yet.

“This is gonna suck,” he said to himself when he finally burst his way into a room that lay on the edge of the architecture. Through the big windows, Shizuo could see the lit up towers that guarded the front gate of the compound.

It was through one of these windows that Shizuo jumped.

Glass shattered, and Shizuo shielded his face with his arms. His legs bent at the knee and braced for impact. He didn’t have too far to fall, because ground level was larger than the second and had a roof for Shizuo to land on. Of course, it wasn’t a flat roof, so Shizuo went tumbling into the brick walls of the building. He hit the wall with a smack! and he groaned. When he got to his feet, he staggered backwards on the gable and looked above. The sight left him in awe for a moment.

From the outside, Shizuo saw a castle on a mountainside on fire. Large clouds of black smoke rose to the sky and past gargantuan mountain peaks. More smoke joined as more of the mansion caught fire. A freezing windchill whipped through Shizuo’s bones, but he was too dumbfounded by the sight above him to notice. The place looked so huge from the outside.

Then, at the top of the highest tower of the mansion, was a satellite. Or was it an antenna? Shizuo didn’t know, but it was making a very peculiar noise. Like flies buzzing. Probably, it was about to fall apart, just like the rest of this place. The flames were quickly rising in its direction.

Shizuo felt another rumble at his feet, and he thought it best to get off the roof before it caved in beneath him, or the second floor collapsed on top of him. Might as well jump again. Though he wasn’t as talented nor as graceful at the whole parkour thing as Izaya, Shizuo ran the length of the gabled roof of the first floor and swan dived towards the ground.

Which was a hill, and he didn’t have the best landing. He rolled into a snowbank as he landed. “Motherfucker!” Okay, now he felt a little cold, but he didn’t have time to angst about it. He scanned the facility’s lawn, located the direction of the front gate, and hauled ass.

The night was starless, or maybe they were just obscured by the clouds of smoke. Shizuo’s main sources of light were the red and orange glows from the mansion’s fires, as well as the blinding spot lights from the wall’s towers. Were they shining the lights everywhere in search for Shizuo? Because Shizuo sure wasn’t being that stealthy. There were an abundance of hedges and boulders for Shizuo to hide behind, but he was in too much of a hurry to stop and cover himself. Even when bullets began raining down on him, Shizuo just kept running and prayed to any deity listening that no one shot him in the head.

Yeah, Shizuo was really tired of being shot at. So tired that he picked up one of the boulders. Instead of using it as a shield, he chucked the giant thing towards the top of one of the towers. It impacted with a loud POW! and made the tower crumble.

Pleased with that outcome, Shizuo repeated the action at the second tower.
He was almost at the gate when a very bright beam blinded him from somewhere, followed by the rev of an engine fast approaching. Shizuo threw an arm over his eyes to shield them from the glaring headlights of the large, armored truck that stopped just a few centimeters from him. Once his eyes adjusted, Shizuo could make out the familiar face behind the wheel, who looked a bit startled to see Shizuo directly in front of him.

Regaining his composure, Izaya stuck his head out of the truck’s window. “Don’t just stand there! Get in!”

Shizuo ran around to the passengers side and opened the door. He fumbled as he did, a blue light in his vision that suddenly made his head spin. Shaking it off, Shizuo associated it with the headlights that still danced under his eyelids.

“You alright?” Izaya asked as Shizuo climbed in.

“Yeah, fine,” said Shizuo, taking in Izaya. It seemed Izaya had also hijacked a Kazbek uniform, which was probably much warmer than the rag he was in before, especially when, to Shizuo’s surprise, he had his infamous black coat over him as well. Shizuo scoffed. “You managed to get that thing back but none of our other stuff.”

“I got the truck, didn’t I? Now sit your ass down and let’s get out of here.”

The parka wasn’t the only thing Shizuo noticed was new to Izaya since they last time they saw each other. There was new bruising around his neck.

“Who did that?” asked Shizuo gravely.

“Hm?” Izaya was too focused shifting the truck’s gears before he noticed where Shizuo was looking. “Oh. I had a run in with a natural blond.”

Instead of seeing red, Shizuo’s vision went blue again. And along with the color came a searing pain that ran up his right arm all the way to his temples. Pain? That shouldn’t be right, but Shizuo hissed and immediately pressed his palms to his eyelids.

“What?” Izaya asked, his voice tense. “What’s wrong?”

Shizuo couldn’t look at him. He wouldn’t dare. An overwhelming sound had entered his brain. The sound of a million flies. He felt like his blood was draining out of his pores.

“Shizu-chan?!”

A suspicion of what might be happening overcame Shizuo, and that’s why he forced himself out of the truck.

“What are you doing?!” Izaya snapped.

Shizuo still wouldn’t look at him, but he was quickly losing control of his limbs. “You have to leave without me!” His hands were pulling themselves away from his eyes, and Shizuo was fighting his own body with all his might.

“What are you talking about?! Shizu-chan, get back in the truck so we can get out of here!”

Managing to shake his head, Shizuo cursed. His fingers were shaking. “No! You have to leave by yourself!”
“Absolutely not!”

“IZAYA! GO!” Caught in frustration, Shizuo finally snapped his eyes in Izaya’s direction. They both froze. Izaya’s eyes widened in horror at the sight of Shizuo’s, which were most certainly a glowing blue at this point.

Everything within a mile went unnaturally quiet, only to be replaced by a resounding hum that pulsed through the mountain. Anyone could feel its power pervading through the air. Shizuo felt it in his veins, which were now a part of a body that did not belong to Shizuo. Everything Shizuo saw was now under a bluish tint.

Then came the terrifying image hundred of pairs of glowing, blue eyes, popping out of seemingly nowhere. They fixated on the truck, and Shizuo knew that Izaya couldn’t wait any longer.

He gripped the edge of the truck door, hard enough to dent it. “You have to get out of here NOW!” Shizuo managed. When a group of the Kazbeks started to approach, Shizuo ripped off the truck’s door and chucked it at them, sending them flying into another batch.

Every motion was more pain than Shizuo had ever experienced, fighting Vulture’s commands with every fiber of his being.

Somehow, some impossible way, the Vulture transmission had come back on.

Even then, Izaya shook his head. “No way. No way am I leaving without you!”

*I’m the idiot?!* Shizuo wanted to yell, but he couldn’t. He had lost control of his voice, and just barely managed a “G...go...! Now...!”

Izaya shook his head again, but every other part of him was shaking in fear.

From that point, Shizuo only started cursing himself. Pain was not a normal thing for him, but this was the most painful experience of his life. There was something about feeling a mind and body battling with each other that was enough to tear a man in two. That was how Shizuo felt, because no matter how much he tried to control his actions, to regain his body, Vulture remained in command. His body moved without his consent, but it was forceful and robotic. And Shizuo could see the whole thing. He saw himself climbing back into the truck and towards Izaya, who was stupidly still there. He had to watch himself pin Izaya against the door of the driver’s side, and wanted to die when he saw the look in Izaya’s eyes.

For the first time in their lives, Izaya was afraid of him.

He hated seeing Izaya look at him like that. Wide-eyed and quivering. Even when they hated each other, Izaya never feared him. Never once saw Shizuo’s strength as threatening.

Now was different.

Now Shizuo was inches from some despicable act. He could tell by the way his body moved, slow and tense like a predator. His teeth bared themselves as Shizuo came to loom over Izaya, like a beast about to bite its prey’s throat out.

However, Izaya remained where he was, when he could have fled through the driver’s door. Izaya was instead looking straight into Shizuo’s eyes, and while there was fear in his own, there was also an undeniable confidence.

*Why aren’t you running away?!* Shizuo wanted to scream, watching Izaya not even defending
himself against Shizuo. He was leaving himself completely vulnerable.

“Shizu-chan…”

*Slit my throat with a knife and leave!*

Izaya gulped. “You wouldn’t… You…”

*I can’t stop it!* All Shizuo could manage was to slow his body down, but his hand still grasped Izaya’s shoulder against his will.

“You’d never…!”

*I would!*

“You’d never hurt me!”

Shizuo thought he might implode.

Izaya said it like it was the most honest truth in the world, and maybe it was.

No, it was. That was the truth. *I wouldn’t hurt him!* Shizuo screamed at himself. *I wouldn’t!* *I WOULDN’T!* *I WOULDN’T!* His muscles twitched with every thought. *I WOULDN’T!* *I WON’T LAY A HAND ON HIM!* *I WOULDN’T!* He repeated the cry in his mind until it came out of his throat as a guttural cry, and he channeled every ounce of his strength into the act of whamming his head against the dashboard.

“FUCK!” He yelled as he threw himself across the truck and away from Izaya.

Izaya released a breath that sounded like he had been holding in for minutes. “Shizu-chan…?”

Shizuo didn’t answer right away, too busy pressing his hand against the new gash across his forehead. *Did I have to hit my head so hard?* he thought, as blood dripped into his vision, which was still blue. His body, however, wasn’t moving on its own anymore.

But of course that wasn’t the end of his trial.

*SLAM!*

A body landed on the hood of the truck, crouched for assault.

Naturally, that body was Kyle, the goddamn natural blond. He punched through the truck’s windshield and grabbed at Izaya, catching Izaya’s wrist.

This was completely unacceptable.

Abandoning his attempt to stifle his bleeding head, Shizuo dived on Kyle, and they both rolled off the truck. Behind them, Shizuo could hear Izaya yelling something. Shizuo, however, was now way too excited to vent all his rage on this smarmy, no good natural blond. And it wasn’t going to go like the last time they fought.

The last time, Shizuo had been caught off guard. Shizuo had just woken up from having some nutso cyborg procedure. Shizuo was fighting Vulture without Vulture. Now, things were a little more even. So when Kyle quickly got his feet on the ground, Shizuo was just as fast. When Kyle retaliated with kicks and hits, Shizuo blocked and countered. Hitting Kyle in the face was one of the best sensation’s Shizuo had ever felt. And the satisfaction of seeing Kyle’s shocked expression as he
cared a broken nose was even more.

Shizuo had no sure way of knowing that hitting his head would have freed him from Vulture’s mental control, but he was glad the physical benefits remained. Because now he was fighting with not only the strength he’d acquired from years of recklessness, but Vulture’s obscure magnetic field. The air around his right arm felt different. A bit unnatural, but mighty. He felt a bit like the time Celty gave him supernatural super gloves to fight with.

That’s not to say Kyle wasn’t a formidable opponent. If Shizuo didn’t have the pent up frustration from losing two fights in a row, getting temporarily brainwashed, and overall sick and tired of The Kazbek Initiative, Kyle might have stood a chance.

As this time was, he did not.

After various maneuvers, techniques, various shouted obscenities, and exchanged blows, Shizuo rounded a kick into Kyle’s gut that sent him face first into a bush, twenty meters away. The best part was the shocked expression on Kyle’s face, unable to comprehend getting his ass handed to him.

Unfortunately, there were still at least a hundred Kazbeks surrounding them. Shizuo’s breath felt all of the sudden heavy. The adrenaline of his fight against Kyle left him fast. Another factor that was slowly taking Shizuo down a notch was that his head was losing blood.

Oh yeah.

He collapsed in the snow. Then, there was an explosion in the distance. Shizuo felt more than adrenaline leaving him, and his vision returned to natural colors. The buzzing in his ears went away. Glowing blue eyes disappeared from around him. Shizuo’s head lolled in the direction of the mansion, and the antenna he had found so peculiar was now a smoking torch.

Still conscious, he heard footsteps rapidly approaching. Please don’t be someone that will kill me, Shizuo hoped.

“Shizu-chan you dumbass!”

Oh good. Although Shizuo was a bit offended, and also annoyed that Izaya hadn’t abandoned him yet.

Arms that were stronger than they looked wrapped around Shizuo’s shoulders and dragged him back into the truck. Izaya threw him into the passenger seat before getting in the other side. The engine had been running the whole time, and Izaya quickly shifted the truck into drive.

There were still Kazbeks trying to hinder their escape, even without Vulture powering them anymore. Shizuo noticed many with knife wounds. They attempted to hold the truck back, but Izaya mercilessly barrelled over them like bowling pins. Shizuo couldn’t muster any pity for them. As Izaya gained speed, Shizuo held on.

The truck crashed through the main gate, which was only a metal fence. Kazbeks fell away from them as they rolled down the mountain, no longer with Vulture’s speed to propel them. Both of them were completely exposed to the cold, thanks to the damage Kyle did to the windshield. Izaya didn’t seem bothered, though. He gripped the steering wheel so tight that his knuckles turned white. About a mile away from the facility, Shizuo felt the Earth quake, and heard a boom from behind them. In his side view mirror, Shizuo witnessed a distant, titanian explosion engulf the wretched complex that would be Josiah Hummel’s fiery graveyard.
as always, THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO COMMENTS/KUDOS/READS ETC. you all make my day everyday! ✿◠‿◠) (◠‿◠✿)

and remember, if anyone ever has any questions about wth is going on, do NOT feel ashamed to ask on here or on tumblr! i will happily try to explain myself. refer, also, to last chapter for a nice glossary. (◡‿◡✿)
Chapter Summary

A very long argument on a very deserted country road.

Chapter Notes

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!! There are many things to celebrate, my sweet, sweet readers!!

The one year anniversary of this fic was last week, on the 20th. That is, that's when I posted the first chapter. It's CRAZY to think I've been writing this fic for over a year! I am sooooo thankful to everyone who has been following this fic! Not just since the beginning, but even if you popped up and marathoned it last week! I seriously love ALL OF YOU and all the encouragement you have given me! I definitely could NOT have gotten this far with out all you precious chum nuggets.

But that's not all there is to celebrate! SEASON TWO!! The second season of Durarara!! has begun airing since I posted the last chapter, as I'm SURE you're all aware. It's only 3 episodes in, but it's been fantastic having it back! I hope the new season draws lots of new fans, new writers, and new artists :)! And how great is it to see all our favorite characters animated again? Amazing? Amazing.

WAIT THERE'S MORE! Tomorrow is Shizu-chan's birthday! HAPPY BIRTHDAY SHIZU-CHAN! I don't know if I'll have time to write a specific birthday oneshot for him, so I hope he likes what I got him for a present in this chapter...

And, when it's Shizuo's birthday, that also means it's Hiroshi Kamiya's birthday, A.K.A. the man behind Izaya's gorgeous voice. January 28th is a pretty great day, right? Right.

Then, finally, I guess, if you consider a chapter update worth celebrating, there's that as well ;) While the long wait was due to, as usual, a very busy schedule, it was also because I simply wrote a lot of other fic over the holidays. Most of them oneshots. Some of them shizaya! Check 'em out if you want.

But before you start this chapter, I should warn you that there are MENTIONS OF SUICIDE. No one dies, I assure you, but if the subject matter makes you uncomfortable, I apologize for its presence in this chapter. This was a very mentally taxing chapter to write, but I hope you all enjoy it. It's not as dismal as that warning might suggest. I don't think...

Okay, enough of me. Thank you all for reading, and always feel free to leave me a comment! :D

(Oh! One more thing! I have some suggested listening to go along with this chapter. During this long absence of mine, I bought David Guetta's new album, which I love in its entirety. But, there's a song that so strongly depicts Izaya's mindset at this point in the story that it's uncanny. That song is "The Whisperer Feat. Sia". Beautiful song, please
They drove for several silent hours.

When they were done barrelling down the side of a mountain, at an alarming speed that made Shizuo fear they’d die just after escaping, the road eventually levelled out. Enough that Shizuo could breathe, enough for him to realize they were both still alive, if just barely.

His door missing, Shizuo could feel the full blast of how cold it was outside. Thankfully, the Kazbek uniform he had on was thick, and Shizuo had more uncomfortable things to worry about.

Blood trickled from Shizuo’s crown and over his brow, causing Shizuo to survey himself. The wound in his bicep had completely healed. Shizuo had grown used to healing quickly, but not that fast. He’d been shot with a bullet, after all. However, the injury on his head was a different matter. Of course, he couldn’t feel anything other than a painless throbbing against his skull. Without any concern about sanitation, Shizuo removed the strips of bed sheets he’d stolen from around his arm, where they had no real purpose, to around his head. He layered them over each other a few times before tying a tight knot in the back, letting the fringe of his hair hang over the cloth.

They drove all the way into the dawn. The mountain turned into hills, and the hills turned into valleys. Shizuo could see for miles, across fields and farms to see miniscule villages, vineyards, and orchards. He had no idea where they were, or where they were going. He wondered if Izaya knew, or if he was aware of anything else other than the path in front of him.

Then there was Izaya himself. Frozen in a state of determination. White knuckles clasped tightly around the steering wheels, shoulders hunched forward, and eye sockets wide and empty. His eyes seemed set in only one direction: forward.

And that was how Shizuo spent most of that time, staring at Izaya in a mixture of awe and terror. Of what? There remained a violent trace of handprints around Izaya’s neck, and Shizuo could not bring himself to address any of what had just happened to them.

What he had almost done to Izaya.

But as the sun began to rise, all the peril disappeared. No army of cyborgs was on their tail. If anyone was following them, they certainly would have caught up by now, would have made a move.

But no one did.

They had survived. Nothing but freedom stretched in front of them. No more Josiah, no more Kyle, no more Kazbeks or Vulture Transmission…

Right?

Then why, Shizuo wondered, was Izaya so silent? Why did he look like the worst was still ahead?

It wasn’t until far, far, away from their captivity, that Shizuo found his voice.

“Izaya?”
He said the name like a question, unsure if Izaya was with him right then.

Izaya blinked, his eyelashes fluttering against his pale cheeks. He glanced at Shizuo, his eyelids drooping and his pupils dimming, then at the road, then in his mirrors. Like he was taking in where they’ve gone for the first time since he slammed his foot on the gas.

Maybe he hadn’t been there all along.

Their truck decelerated and slowed to a stop, the brakes squeaking under Izaya’s foot. Shizuo looked out the window at where they were. In the middle of nowhere, apparently. There wasn’t a single car or person for miles. A thin mist lay over the Earth, and dew covered the ground. The mountains were just barely a blur on the horizon at this point.

Without a word, Izaya opened his door and stepped out of the truck. Concerned, Shizuo hopped out of his doorless side as well. He marched around the front of the truck, stopping next to the side mirror. Izaya was facing their wake, marching with a crunch under his boots in the direction from which they came. He stopped about ten feet away from Shizuo, who kept his distance, and stayed silent, only staring.

There was nothing that way in particular. The roads had twisted and winded enough that Shizuo had no sense of direction left. He had no sense of anything. What day was it? What month? Where were they? What country? How far from home? All around them was just a singular dirt road surrounded by wide fields, peppered with unassuming homes in the far distance. A murmur of insects lay in the grass. The world wasn’t awake yet, and Shizuo felt like he’d been awake for weeks.

Izaya had left his coat on the driver’s seat of the truck, Shizuo noticed, leaving Izaya in just the Kazbek uniform. The damn coat had certainly seen better days, dirty and torn and burned. Had it really been worth Izaya going back for? Of all things?

Watching the back of Izaya’s head, Shizuo started to worry. Never had Izaya been so silent for so long. Long moments passed before one of them spoke, and it was Izaya.

His voice came softly, mostly carried by the slight breeze.

“It’s over?”

Shizuo didn’t know if he was qualified to answer that, but he had witnessed the side of a mountain blow up. Certainly an army would have descended upon them by now, if it wasn’t.

“Y… yeah… I think so.”

It was the best answer he could give. Then again, maybe Izaya never expected one. However, Shizuo had a feeling there were still doubts in Izaya’s mind. He could see them, in the tension in Izaya’s shoulders.

Then, the muscles in Izaya’s back tightened. The fists at his side clenched, and a heavy strain traveled from the bottom of his spine to the nape of his neck. Shizuo heard a sudden intake of breath. The exhale came when Izaya fell to his knees.

“Izaya - !” He took a step forward, but a violent shake of Izaya’s head stopped him immediately. He tried to speak again, but even that was cut off by a sharp hitch in Izaya’s throat.

Izaya’s whole being shuddered, and the thin body shed half a year’s worth of misery like an expired layer of skin.
Shizuo realized it would be a slow process, and vowed to give Izaya as much time as he needed. There was a lot Shizuo had to reflect upon as well, from the acts of torture, from the grand scheme that almost plagued the entire Earth, from revelations about himself and his companion. He could share some of the emotions, but Shizuo had never been anything more than resilient.

The most prevalent thoughts crossing Shizuo’s mind were those of freedom, finally able to take Izaya home. Finally, back to normalcy.

Well, as normal as Ikebukuro would allow them.

Izaya suddenly got to his feet, wiping dirt and grass from his knees. When he turned around, he looked half asleep. Like he was still in a daze. Shizuo feared he might tip over, but then he smiled at him. It was small and timid, just a subtle curve of his lips, and it made Shizuo grin.

As Izaya started to drag his feet back towards Shizuo, the sky started to get brighter. Little by little. The mist around them glistened. For some reason, Izaya decided to stop more than an arm's length away from Shizuo, but Shizuo could still get a good look at him. Izaya caught Shizuo staring and his lips stretched wider, and Shizuo gave an awkward, bashful, fraction of a laugh. Izaya’s smile twitched, and his nostrils flared as his eyes shifted away for a moment.

Embarrassed? Annoyed?

Shizuo felt like he should say something, ask if Izaya was alright, if he was hurt, but Izaya would probably find that patronizing.

Instead, he finally allowed himself to notice how beautiful Izaya was.

Despite bags under his eyes, despite the marks around his neck, despite the scars on his back, the dirt on his face and the blood underneath his fingernails… Izaya was truly a striking sight for any eyes. Coal-colored hair and soot around his eyes, a nose gone red in the frosty air, and two remarkable dents in the corners of his mouth that gave away too much.

Shizuo’s grin grew wider with every feature. Izaya must have noticed he was staring, but Shizuo didn’t care. He realized, with a skip of his heartbeat, that he might never have to stop.

Taking another deep breath, Izaya’s smile disappeared. His expression became solemn. Determined, even.

“Okay. I’m ready.”

One of Shizuo’s eyebrows quirked, but his grin remained intact. “For…?” To go home, Shizuo mentally provided. What else could Izaya mean?

“For you to kill me, of course.”

The world became unnaturally stagnant.

Shizuo tried to keep grinning, because this was surely a joke. “Wh… what?”

“It’s over, right?” Izaya spoke very plainly. Irritatingly plainly. “Don’t you remember what you signed up for? The contract? Remember? I promised you’d get to kill me, and I remain a man of my word!” Izaya gave a small giggle that was a bit obscene for the situation. “So your time has come! It’s time to fulfill that contract, Shizu-chan!”

Losing the battle with his face, a dreadful, dumbfounded expression twisted itself onto Shizuo’s
features. He had lost all feeling of his skin, though, and he had no idea how anguished he looked.

There was a sharp ringing in Shizuo’s ears. An alarm bell.

“How do you want to do it?” Izaya began to pace in short steps, “Wanna strangle me? Bash my head in? Rip my limbs off? You only get to do this once, so I’d make it count.” His expression became reminiscent, possibly sorrowful. “I’ve heard some colorful threats from you in the day, so I know you won’t lack any creativity this time. Come on, I’m ready!”

Meanwhile, Shizuo wasn’t breathing properly. The oxygen wasn’t quite reaching his lungs. His throat had become too tight.

“I don’t know how busy these roads get during the day, so you better hurry up. You want to have enough time to dispose of my -”

“Izaya.” Shizuo spoke suddenly, and Izaya stilled. “I’m not going to kill you.”

The edge of Izaya’s mouth twitched. “Of course you are. You signed a contract.”

“I’m not going to kill you.”

“Yes, you are!” Izaya’s voice rose, and his eyes narrowed. “You have to. You want to!”

“No, I don’t!” The volume of Shizuo’s words matched Izaya’s.

“Well, you should!” Izaya snapped. “But it doesn’t matter! You signed a legal document and you’re lawfully obligated to fulfil your job!!”

“Izaya!” Shizuo was almost shouting, now. “Fuck the damned contract!! You think I’d kill you just because of a fuckin’ piece of paper?! I haven’t even seen that stupid thing since Washi-”

Reaching into the breast of his uniform, Izaya pulled out an envelope that looked like it’s been through war. Wrinkled, stained, but still whole. Before Izaya could open it, Shizuo snatched it away.

“What the hell?! You’ve had this the whole time?!”

“Of course I did, it’s important! You signed it!”

Shizuo promptly ripped it to shreds.

Wide-eyed and stunned by the act, Izaya recovered by punching Shizuo in the chin.

It didn’t hurt, but it was shocking. Especially when the pressure repeated itself, over and over. Shizuo stumbled backwards, but failed to retaliate as Izaya continuously hit, slapped, pounded, and punched at him, screaming with an animosity that Shizuo didn’t think Izaya was capable.

“IZAYA! IZAYA!” Shizuo shouted over him, but that didn’t ease Izaya’s rampage. Finally, Shizuo managed to grab hold of both Izaya’s wrists. He didn’t like restraining Izaya like this, especially with Izaya hissing and whimpering and fighting against Shizuo’s strong grip. But it was better than being pummelled, and he needed to get ahold of Izaya’s sanity.
“Izaya, I can't kill you!!” Shizuo insisted, “I could never kill you!! And I won’t!!”

Mixed in the fire in Izaya’s eyes was a desperate plea. “BUT WHY NOT!!”

Shizuo’s grip tightened, and his own eyes became slits. “…Don’t make this a game. You know why.”

Izaya froze momentarily. His lips tightened, and his gaze drifted away from Shizuo, but his eyebrows were tightly wound together.

Easing on his grip, Shizuo’s expression softened. “…Izaya, you have to know by now. Don’t you?”

A deep frown appeared on Izaya’s face. Then, he forcefully ripped his arms from Shizuo’s grasp and stepped backwards. Turning his back on Shizuo, Izaya increased the distance with a few strides before the glimmer of something metal appeared on the cusp of his sleeve.

Shizuo had never reacted faster in his entire life. “IZAYA!!” He dove, tackling Izaya to the ground. Izaya landed on his back, stuck coughing for air under Shizuo’s weight as Shizuo squeezed a blade out of his hand.

“Are there more?!” Shizuo asked, though it sounded more like a demand. He had both of Izaya’s wrists pinned against the ground as he straddled the smaller man.

“No!” Izaya lied through gritted teeth.

Sighing, Shizuo gave Izaya a gentle frisk. He murmured an apology about the contact, but he ended up finding two more knives hidden in various pockets. Once he was sure he’d gotten all of them, Shizuo chucked those two along with the first so far into the distance that they landed out of sight.

When he looked back down at Izaya, Shizuo was surprised to see his body gone lax. He had stopped struggling against Shizuo.

Just before Shizuo was about to climb off of him, Izaya made eye contact. Hollow eye contact. He looked like he was trying to smirk, but wasn’t entirely succeeding.

“I hate you more than ever,” he said, as cold as ice. “You’re useless. I would have been so much better off without you this whole time.”

Shizuo gaped. “What are you -”

“Now I know what it feels like to be Kasuka,” continued Izaya, “to have you as a huge burden in my life.” His tone was strained and poisonous.

This isn’t right.

This was all wrong, but Shizuo’s head was hammering. The words still sliced through him.

“If you don’t kill me, then I never want to see you again, because looking at you makes me sick.”

He’s trying to make you angry, to make you kill him, the only rational voice in Shizuo’s brain was trying to say. However, it was barely audible compared to the louder, paranoid cries that believed. Not just because Izaya was saying these things now, but because of lifelong insecurities and doubts.

“You’re pathetic.”

Izaya was striking nerve after nerve.
“You haven’t done anything right your whole life, and you’re a monster.”

Don’t believe him! But Shizuo had to tear himself off of Izaya, stumble away like a weakling, or else he might have actually used his strength.

Izaya sat up half-way, twisted on his hip to glare at Shizuo. “Who would ever want to share their life with a stupid beast like you?”

“STOP IT!” Shizuo finally barked. He wanted to cover his ears like a child, sing or shout so loud that all other noise got lost.

“A monster with no brain that hurts everyone and destroys everything.”

“SHUT. **UP!**” Shizuo fists clenched and he tried not to look at Izaya.

“Makes sense that you didn’t go back to Japan. Nobody misses you. There’s nothing there for you.”

“STOP IT, **IZAYA, JUST STOP IT!**” Shizuo shouted. “I know what you’re doing!”

“COME **ON, SHIZU-CHAN,**” Izaya yelled back, his voice cracked despite the malicious tone he was trying to put into it. “You’re only good at hurting people!! JUST -”

“STOP!”

“I hate you! I will always hate you, so kill me!”

A lie, Shizuo hoped. He tried to breathe regularly, but that was impossible. His blood was boiling to a dangerous temperature. “I’m not gonna kill you, no matter what you say to piss me off!!”

Izaya jumped to his feet, fuming. “Aren’t you **ANGRY?**”

“I’M **FURIOUS!**”

“THEN HIT ME!”

“I **CAN’T!**”

“**HIT ME!**”

Shizuo couldn’t hold it in any more. He finally erupted.

“FAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!”

His fist collided with the hood of the truck, leaving a huge dent. He punched the truck again, and again, and again. All while yelling obscenities and incoherent curses. Kicking tires, pounding the doors, Shizuo directed every ounce of rage in his body on to innocent vehicle, the thing that had saved them. Now, it was the victim of Shizuo’s rage as he imagined punching everything Izaya had just said to anger him.

He had a vague awareness that was Izaya was shouting at him, trying to get his attention. However, Shizuo mostly heard his own roaring and the screeching and twanging of metal bending and breaking under his own brute force. That, and the sound of his heart exploding in his ears.

“SHIZUO!”

“**RAAAAHH!!**” **BANG BANG BANG SLAM!**
“WHY ARE YOU BEATING UP THE TRUCK?!”

“BECAUSE!” BANG!

“BECAUSE?!”

BANG!

“BECAUSE! BECAUSE YOU’RE PISSING ME OFF! BECAUSE I’M FUCKING ANGRY AT YOU RIGHT NOW, BUT I CAN’T HURT YOU ANYMORE BECAUSE NOW I LOVE YOU, LIKE A STUPID IDIOT, SO I’M TAKING SHIT OUT ON THIS DUMB PIECE OF SHIT JUNK INSTEAD!” With a strangled roar, Shizuo managed to flip the truck over on its side, and it landed with a very loud WHAM! and a hiss of the engine.

Shizuo went next, crashing to the ground on his ass with the air filling and leaving his lungs in ragged gasps. Propping his elbows up on his risen knees, he ran his hands through his hair repeatedly. Now that the red was subsiding from his vision, all of Shizuo’s more rational thoughts streamed back to the surface of his brain.

His vision cleared as his pulse slowed, and that allowed him to see the whole situation more lucidly. All the shock and anger disappeared and was replaced with a prolonged clarity.

That, unfortunately, included the specific words in that last outburst.

Slowly, Shizuo’s hands dropped, and he turned his head towards Izaya, who had not said a word for a long time. Instead, Izaya was standing in the same place as before. He was wearing the most vulnerably startled expression Shizuo had ever seen on his face.

His jaw had gone slack, his eyes wide, and his skin pink.

“...You… You said it…”

Unfortunately, Shizuo had been in the middle of a rampage and hadn’t been able to register what the words had felt like in his mouth. He sighed, planting his hands on the ground behind him and leaning back. “I tried to tell you before, on the boat, but you stopped me…”

“I… I thought… You…”

Amazing, Shizuo thought. Izaya Orihara actually at a loss for words. He sighed again.

“Don’t ask me who I’d rather save from a burning building or some shit like that, because I still don’t know what I’d do. I never know what I’m doing anyways! But fuck if I wouldn’t save you from anything in this world. If anything happened to you, I’d…” He wasn’t sure what he’d do, but a world without Izaya was one of which he didn’t want to think. He couldn’t even think of returning to Japan unless Izaya was going with him.

Still, Izaya said nothing. If Shizuo recalled correctly, Izaya had had plenty of girls in high school confessing to him. And after graduation. Long after. Theirs were empty words, though, not like how Shizuo meant it. Sincerely, in a way that made his chest hurt more than any physical pain he’d ever felt. Shizuo, however, had never had an experience with receiving such sentiments. He had no way to gage Izaya’s reaction, which appeared very defensive and displeased.

On his end, though, the words came surprisingly easy to say. Now that Izaya was finally letting him say them.
He looked up at the sky.

“I'm just in love with you, so get over it.”

After another moment, Shizuo heard the sound of boots treading dirt in his direction. He didn’t look, but Shizuo could see in peripherals when Izaya knelt on the ground beside, sitting back on his ankles.

“You're so stupid…”

“I'm stupid?!” Shizuo did look at him for that, “You're the one that just tried to make me kill you!”

Izaya was glaring at him, but there was a sadness in it. A disappointment.

“It's over, don’t you get it?!” Shizuo said, “You're free! You don’t have to worry about them anymore!”

Looking down at the upturned palms in his lap, Izaya shook his head. “If that’s what you think, then you don’t get anything at all!”

Shizuo followed Izaya’s eyes and frowned. “Is it because of what happened… that woman…?”

The nerves in Izaya’s face twitched, and he looked away.

Oh.

“Izaya…” Shizuo turned himself around and plopped himself on his own knees, now face to face with Izaya. “That wasn’t… you didn’t…”

“I killed a human, Shizu-chan.”

To think, Shizuo had just been worried about his confession. Now he felt selfish and obtuse. This was something he could never understand. Shizuo had never killed a person. There had been plenty of times when he almost had. One of those times, the time he came the closest, has been with Izaya.

That time when Izaya tried to push him over, to finally turn Shizuo into a monster. Sort of like their current situation, but much different because back then they actually hated each other.

That time when Shizuo left Izaya for dead without actually killing him.

That time Izaya was found by the people who tortured his body and mind, because Shizuo wouldn’t save him.

Gulping, Shizuo looked hard at Izaya with a shaken feeling. This was all Shizuo’s fault, in a way. Surely Izaya realized this. Surely Izaya resented him for it. How had Izaya bore to be in Shizuo’s presence knowing that?

No, this is no one’s but Josiah’s fault, a newer and wiser part of his brain tried to say. Was that true? It was true that Josiah was the one to abduct Izaya, Josiah was the one to put that helmet on his head, Josiah was the one that put Izaya and the doctor in the same room.

That wasn’t Shizuo’s fault.

“No, you didn’t,” Shizuo tried to assure him. “Josiah killed that woman. What he did to you… you didn’t have a choice. It was probably part of his whole plan for you.”
Izaya shook his head. “I still killed her. I took her life away. I killed a human. The thing I love most. I felt the life leave her body. I was covered in her blood, human blood. My hands… my hands were completely covered! There… There was so much blood. So much…” He looked back down at his empty hands, like the blood was still there. “I can remember thinking… Thinking like that thing wanted me to think. Like I really did hate humans, like I wanted them all to die. Seeing everything that we did to each other, what I did to people. Having every terrible thing in my life shoved down my throat and scratched into my spine. After everything…! I just… I just wouldn’t be able to go back to the life I used to have. I don’t know how to live anymore!”

Shizuo wished he had a time machine. Or a magical Fix-It wand. He wasn’t good at pulling people out of dark places. If Celty were here, she’d probably know what to say. Something comforting and hopeful, despite the darkness coming out of her neck. Unfortunately, Shizuo couldn’t imagine Izaya returning to his previously normal life, either.

In a way, though, this reassured Shizuo. Izaya was no longer the man that left Ikebukuro. That man was an infestation. A funny thought about the same being that he currently loved with immensity, he realized. The one in front of him now, though, the one wracked with guilt over one and many things in his past… Some parts had been broken, but others had been fixed.

“Maybe…” Shizuo started, “maybe that’s a good thing.”

Izaya rose a skeptical eyebrow at him.

“A fresh start,” Shizuo elaborated.

Immediately, Izaya shook his head. “I don’t want one.” Spoken as I don’t deserve one.

“Yes, you do.”

He grimaced and balled his fists. “How can you say that?”

“Because you’re a person,” said Shizuo with certainty, “You deserve life as much as anybody! More, as far as I’m concerned! Yeah, you’re a total asshole, and yeah, you’ve done some terrible things. So have I, though. So have a lot of people. You’re just as fucked up as the rest of us. That’s what makes you human, Izaya. I’ve heard you laugh thirteen different ways, seen real tears fall from your eyes, and watched you puke in the Charles River. And I love that about you, Izaya, you’re so dysfunctionally human.”

Izaya flinched, but a rich red was also returning to his face. “You said it again.”

Sighing, Shizuo reached behind his head and scratched his neck. “Yeah, and I mean it.” He realized he should make some details about that statement a little more clear. “Listen, I… I’m not asking for anything, just so you know. Or expecting you to… But you deserve to - Hey!”

When Izaya suddenly got to his feet and began walking away, Shizuo shouted in offense. Here he was, pouring his heart out, and Izaya was acting more aloof than ever. Not that Shizuo had expected anything more from Izaya. He had fallen in love with the bastard at a fault of his own, and hadn’t really planned for the confession and reaction. He hadn’t planned any of this.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid…” Izaya was muttering. He grimaced at the sideways truck. “Can you… Do you mind?”

“Why?” Shizuo got to his feet with a suspicious glower. Will you run away again, Izaya?

“I promised I would send you back to Japan,” said Izaya with determination, “and that’s what I’m
going to do.”

“What about you?!”

“I can’t go back yet,” Izaya said, and there was an honesty in his voice that made Shizuo’s heart seize.

Such a vague answer would have made Shizuo worry less if Izaya hadn’t been yelling at Shizuo to kill him just ten minutes earlier.

Sensing Shizuo’s anxiety, Izaya offered a melancholy smile. His breath caught on a very acidic chuckle. “I can’t.”

Of course he doesn’t want to go back, Shizuo realized.

After having his mind torn open and exploited more than once, Izaya probably had no idea how to face reality anymore. Everything must look different to him.

‘You always see differently when you’re standing at the center of something...’

Come to think of it, Shizuo wouldn’t know what he’d say to people when he saw them. They’d ask where he’d been all that time. Oh, you know, just sightseeing, fighting cyborgs and saving the world. Even if they believed him, there’s no way any of them could possibly comprehend what he’d been through, or what Izaya’s been through. Or what they’ve been through together.

“Okay…” Shizuo said slowly, and he decided. “Then, I’m not going back either.”

Izaya groaned, like he had expected that answer. “Shizu-chan...”

“What? No way in Hell am I going back without you!”

“You ripped up your contract,” Izaya countered heatedly. “You’re not obligated to protect me anymore.”

“Well...!” Shizuo gasped, “I just told you I loved you! That’s pretty fucking obligated!”

Izaya’s eyes squeezed shut. “I don’t want you to!!”

...To love you? It was a little too late for that, Shizuo thought. He couldn’t deny, though, the sensation of a tractor trailer slamming right into his gut, and that of a javelin piercing straight through his heart.

To be fair, he had just told Izaya that he wasn’t expecting any feelings in return. He had to honor that, no matter how much it ripped his soul to shreds.

For a while, Shizuo had really believed that there was something mutual between them. When Izaya had let him into his a world, step by step, showing him the scars on his back. When Izaya had wrapped his arms around Shizuo during a camel ride, even if he just might have been afraid. When Izaya had kissed him on the ship, even if he had run away the next morning. When Izaya had almost surrendered to Josiah, had Shizuo not stopped him. When Izaya had woken him from darkness, unlocking his chains and linking their hands together.

But what did Shizuo know, really? He was certainly no expert on love. At least Izaya didn’t loathe him anymore, and vice versa... Probably.

The trouble was that Shizuo was still stupidly bound to Izaya at this point.
“Look…” Shizuo began more quietly than was average for him, “I already said it’s alright if you
don’t feel the same way. But… Don’t send me away. Not now, not when you’re like this. I can help.
If you… If you… I couldn’t handle it. You’ve ruined my life twice now. Once on purpose, and
again when you accidentally made me fall in love with you. Don’t ruin it a third time time by going
somewhere I can’t chase you.”

Izaya was staring at him with an almost frightful expression. His agape mouth closed and creased
into a scowl. It seemed that Shizuo couldn’t say anything right.

“Stop talking, Shizu-chan,” said Izaya curtly. “It’s clear you don’t understand a goddamn thing.”

A low growl resonated at the bottom of Shizuo’s throat.

Couldn’t he have fallen in love with someone easier to deal with? Why Izaya? Really? Him? Out of
everybody? A voice in his mind rebuked him. Yeah, really, Shizuo answered, for all the trouble it’s
worth.

“Fine!” Shizuo snapped, “Maybe I don’t understand! But you never do anything to help people
understand!”

Izaya sidestepped him. “Forget it, Shizu-chan!”

“Goddammit, Izaya!” Shizuo seized Izaya’s arms before he got too far away. “Don’t you get it?!
Enough with the tough front! All the secrecy and snide remarks?! After what we just went through?!
There’s no point in any of that anymore! Just fucking talk to me!”

“I can’t!” Izaya shouted.

“Yes, you can!” Despite Shizuo’s bellowing, he really was trying to reason with him, “You don’t
feel the same way, so what?! I already said I would still help - !!”

“No!” Izaya interrupted hoarsely, “It’s the opposite of that!!”

Stunned, Shizuo let go of Izaya’s arm, and Izaya used the opportunity to take another step back. He
was staring at the ground in front of Shizuo’s feet while Shizuo took a long moment to process
whatever that had meant…

“The…” Shizuo swallowed. “Huh?”

“Shizu-chan…” Izaya spoke, without moving his gaze, just loud enough for Shizuo to barely hear
him, “you can’t honestly believe that I don’t feel anything for you…”

“Wh…” Yes, I could totally believe that! Shizuo thought. After all, it wasn’t like Izaya was currently
doing much to express himself. …Is he sure?! It was still quite possible that Shizuo had misheard
him. A faint breeze made him realize he was staring, wide-eyed and mouth ajar.

“I hate it…” Izaya hissed, “but I… really care about Shizu-chan…”

So…? Shizuo sensed a But, nevermind the ‘hate’ part. Otherwise, this would sound like good news.
Amazing news. News to make Shizuo’s heartbeat quicken exponentially, which it did.
Exponentially. “Then why…?”

“It’s me, Shizu-chan,” was the explanation Izaya offered. He huffed when he saw Shizuo’s boggled
expression. “I don’t know if I can… I don’t know how to. It’s not fair to you.”
“Izaya,” Shizuo started, “if you were anything like you were before, you wouldn’t care about what’s fair to me.” The Izaya that Shizuo used to know would revel in Shizuo’s suffering. He certainly wouldn’t be trying to explain himself in this situation. The fact that Izaya was even trying to explain himself, to protect Shizuo from something, spoke volumes.

“I hate feeling this way. It’s disgusting. I thought you died!” His voice cracked on the last word, and he labored not to look at Shizuo too much. “I thought you died, and everything broke!” His hands clenched at the fabric over his chest. “And he knew he could get to me through you! Then he took you away from me, and I thought…! That’s why I tried to give you up! I hated feeling weak! I am not weak!”

“It’s not weakness!” Shizuo argued.

“It’s vulnerability,” Izaya spat. “And it’s disgusting. I can’t… If I let you, it’ll destroy everything I’ve used to protect myself my whole life! Why should I do that?!”

“Because it’s not doing us any good!” Shizuo included himself, because had spent a good portion of his life doing the same exact thing. “I think… I think this is what being human feels like.”

“Well, it’s terrifying and stupid!”

“Izaya, I almost killed you!” He smacked his forehead, where the bandage covered the wound with which he had paid for Izaya’s safety. “That scares the shit out of me! But you knew that I would never hurt you! Don’t you know that anymore?!”

“I do! I want to! I just…” Pulling on his hair, Izaya groaned. “Ugh, this sucks!!”

Biting his lip, Shizuo didn’t have a clever response for that. It all did kind of suck. He should have known none of this would have been easy. Izaya had spent twenty years of his life building up walls upon walls to protect himself from this exact situation. He called himself a coward, and in a lot of ways that was true. Shizuo wouldn’t have questioned that notion in the past, but now… Maybe Izaya didn’t fully realize he had just had a hand in saving the free will of humanity.

Shizuo did, though. He currently thought of Izaya as less of a coward and as more of another unfortunate person frightened by the prospects of letting another soul too close to theirs. Anyone would find that scary, but, as usual, Izaya was the extreme. It scared Shizuo, too. He wanted to hand over his life to Izaya Orihara, and he could think of at least twenty people off the top of his head that would tell him what a terrible idea that was.

Fuck ‘em, thought Shizuo.

Whether he could say with as much confidence as Izaya had that Izaya would never hurt Shizuo as well, Shizuo wasn’t sure. Izaya had hurt him plenty of times in the past. But that was the past. Not the man in front of him that was struggling with being fair. Shizuo thought the risk was completely worth it.

Cautiously, Shizuo took a step towards Izaya. When Izaya didn’t move away, only watch him nervously, he took another. And another.

“It doesn’t have to suck…” Shizuo murmured.

Soon, Shizuo was close enough to lift his hands to either side of Izaya’s face, where he held him gently. Like he had when Izaya freed him. You won’t slip away from me again… His pulse quickened, and he was sure Izaya would be able to hear his heart thumping so loudly.
Part of that was fear. Not just of rejection, but of himself. The blue-tinted image of Izaya frozen beneath him just before Shizuo almost did something unthinkable flashed before his eyes. Izaya’s words echoed in his mind. You would never hurt me!

And that was true. Shizuo would never hurt him anymore. Izaya must have known that when he demanded Shizuo end his life, which told Shizuo that Izaya didn’t really want to go that far.

He wanted to live, he just didn’t know how.

Izaya looked up at him with wavering eyes. “Why can’t we just go back to what we know? To hating each other and destroying things?”

Shizuo’s hands were warm against Izaya’s cool skin. “Would you really want that?”

Against the palms on his cheeks, Izaya softly shook his head from side to side.

And Shizuo was glad to know it. So glad, that he leaned forward and hesitantly brushed his lips against Izaya’s. In response, Izaya’s breath caught for half a moment, and Shizuo almost gave up. However, when Izaya neither pulled away nor told Shizuo to stop, Shizuo carefully fit their mouths together.

To his surprise, Izaya tilted his head, making it easier for Shizuo to reach. Then, Izaya parted his lips, and Shizuo’s already rapid running veins were now sent into overdrive as he deepened the kiss into something incredible.

It was so much different than the kiss they shared on Sousuke’s ship. That had been quick and desperate. A clash of teeth and limb, a frenzy of uncertainty and rage. Something that led to nothing.

This wasn’t desperate.

This was delicate. This was hopeful.

When Shizuo pulled back, he bent down to touch his forehead against Izaya’s, rubbing their noses together while stroking Izaya’s cheekbones with his thumbs. His hands hadn’t moved.

“What’d be unfair…” Shizuo whispered, slightly out of breath, “is if you ditched me again… If you want space, I’ll give it to you. Just… not that much space.”

Izaya actually smirked. “I can see that.”

Grunting a response, Shizuo recaptured Izaya’s mouth, thinking he’d rather kiss it than hear snarky remarks from it.

This was more like a series of short kisses, from different angles and various intensity. They were dabbling in the process of something new.

Shizuo was wary of his strength, tensing up whenever there were nips at each other and slightly more force behind a kiss. Izaya must have sensed that, and he ran his hands along Shizuo’s side. It was as encouraging as he meant it. Tender and gentle, Izaya drew his finger along the bumps in Shizuo’s spine, and Shizuo shivered against his mouth.

“Shizu-chan,” Izaya said with half of breath, “I still can’t go home yet.” It sounded like a question.

“Fuck it all, let’s just be together.”

Izaya snorted and dropped his face to Shizuo’s chest, stifling his amusement. Shizuo breathed with
exhilaration, wrapping his arms around tightly around Izaya’s back.

Who needs Ikebukuro anyways?! Shizuo knew that he would, one day. In the future, he would definitely need to go home, but that place could wait. He had something more important he needed to take care of, first.

They stayed like that for a while, until the sun had climbed the length of the hills and shown with all its strength. The glare hit Shizuo’s eye, but he didn’t care. Soaking it all in, he wasn’t sure what all this meant. Shizuo was pretty sure that Izaya no longer wanted Shizuo to kill him, at least, which was a start at something. Maybe it was even the start of something good.

Finally, Izaya was the one to draw back. Again, he was trying really hard not to look directly at Shizuo, but Shizuo could see the color in his cheeks. Shizuo congratulated himself, but he was also sure that he had the same blush.

“Now what…?” Izaya asked cautiously.

He could have meant it about themselves, or about their current predicament. That being stranded in the middle of nowhere.

Honestly, Shizuo had been hoping Izaya had a plan for that. This whole way, it had been Izaya with the plans, the next destinations. Apparently, that wasn’t the case, here. Maybe he hadn’t planned anything beyond destroying the Kazbek Initiative.

Taking matters into his own hands, Shizuo flipped the truck back on its tires. Izaya gave him a questioning look.

“We have to keep going,” said Shizuo, “wherever that is.”

For some reason, his words made Izaya dimple. He tried to restrain a smile, but he didn’t look to be having much luck. Unable to suppress the emotions showing on his face, Izaya lowered his head and turned away. This was fantastic, Shizuo decided. Maybe every time he said something lame, Izaya would do this, which was pretty adorable. Shizuo vowed to aim for this reaction whenever he could. Quickly, Izaya fixed his face and sneered.

“I don’t like it when Shizu-chan talks like he’s smart,” he said.

“Hey, fuck you!”

They climbed into the pummeled truck, and Izaya berated Shizuo for causing so much damage to their own mode of transportation.

It all felt so blissfully normal again.

“You better hope this thing still operates, Shizu-chan. Or else you’re carrying me on your back to the next town.”

Thankfully, it did. The engine grumbled to life with a hiss and a growl, obviously displeased at the thrashing it received. Shizuo leaned back in his seat, which had now been bent several ways, idly thinking about things. Such as where they’d end up, or the softness of Izaya’s lips on his, when he’d get to taste them again, or what he’d tell Celty about all this, when he would tell her, or that he might need to learn how to drive someday.

“Hey, Shizu-chan…”
“Hmm?” Shizuo glanced over at him and found Izaya sharing a shy smile with him. The image made Shizuo quirk an eyebrow, because it was so unlike Izaya.

“...Thank you.”

All his blood rushed to Shizuo’s face instantly. Why, he asked himself, *am I such a sucker?* Being in love was a strange and alarming thing, Shizuo was beginning to realize.

Slowly, and without warning, Izaya leaned across the gear shift and faintly ghosted his lips across Shizuo’s. That was it, before he sat back in his seat, leaving Shizuo a tad astonished. In no way had it been enticing, but it had been a gesture of faith.

“But seriously, I have no idea where to go,” Izaya said casually. “If we’re not returning to Japan right away, where the fuck are we going?”

It could have been the adrenaline that kiss jumpstarted through him, but Shizuo’s brain was working overtime. Something jumped forward, and it might have been a longshot, but it was all they had.

“Believe it or not… I think I know a place.”

Chapter End Notes

**ALSO!!! HUGE** shout out to Ruri who helped me with the Italian in previous chapters!!!! I would like to virtually shake their hand! Too bad they'll probably grow to resent me as I bother them for more Italian tips in upcoming chapters :B.....
Dear Celty, I have fallen in love with Izaya Orihara.

Most likely, she’d read such a message as a coded cry for help. A sign that Shizuo’s been kidnapped, made delirious, held with a gun to his head, or all of the above. There was no way she’d believe him. If he included the bit about the cyborgs, evil organization, and Izaya saving the world, he’d sound even more suspicious.

As it was, though, Shizuo had no current way of contacting his friend. All he had at the moment were the clothes on his back, a regenerating arm, and a truck full of hens.

Technically, that last one didn’t belong to him.

Their own truck had finally broken down after twenty minutes of their journey. Without any other option, no money nor cellphones, they had traversed alongside the country road, forced to hitchhike. Most people drove right past them, and they walked for what seemed like hours, but was really only about another twenty minutes.

Not much was said between the two of them once they’d settled on their destination. Izaya had lapsed into another silence, choosing to walk about five paces in front of Shizuo, which Shizuo found unnerving. He realized that he had confessed rather suddenly, but the withdrawal discouraged him. Then again, what had he been expecting? Holding hands alongside the Italian highway?

Izaya was still at a distance, but he had also given Shizuo that chaste kiss. The one that had felt like a vow. Maybe it was unclear what they had committed to, but it was something they would discover together. Slowly, and tactfully. If they could both control themselves.

Finally, as they were like that, somebody responded to their signals.

Now, they were in the back of a pickup truck, getting shuttled along by the only man generous
enough - or crazy enough - to pick them up. He was an elderly man, with a salt and pepper beard, full head of hair, and spectacles. Judging from his overalls and the caged chickens in his possession, he was a farmer. With him was a little girl around six years old with loose, blond curls and moles speckled across her pale face. Whenever Shizuo glanced behind him through the truck’s back window, into the passenger seat, she made a cross-eyed fish face at him. Then she would giggle and turn around.

Other than that, the communication between the two men and their saviors was scarce, no common language between them. The hens were much more noisy, clucking excitedly in their cages.

Shizuo and Izaya sat against the helm of the truck, in opposite corners. The countryside rolled by them, fields and villas, as the truck rattled uncomfortably underneath them. It set Shizuo’s teeth on edge. That, and the damned chickens squawking at them. The only serene thing around him was Izaya, caught in his thoughts. Shizuo often noticed Izaya staring off into the distance, a morose way about him.

It was less that he was giving Shizuo a silent treatment, but rather lost in a dark cloud of self reflection. What he was reflecting upon, Shizuo couldn’t be positive. Whatever was on Izaya’s mind emanated from him like a plague. The sight made Shizuo’s heart ache.

This must have been one of the side effects of his affection, to feel the pain of his loved one in his own soul. Without Izaya berating him, offering snide remarks, or talking his ear off, Shizuo didn’t really know what to do with himself. Shizuo wanted desperately to heal Izaya’s mind, but how? How, when he could barely keep himself sane? Was he supposed to say something? He was always a more physical person, but even that he rarely got right. If he was going to be in a relationship now, though - which he wasn’t entirely sure he was yet - he needed to put forth some effort.

“Are you cold?” He asked hesitantly.

“No.” answered Izaya without a glance his way.

The way he hugged his coat around himself suggested otherwise. Shizuo observed him wearily.

“...Your lips are blue.”

Izaya’s eyes wandered toward Shizuo, a smile between wry and amused just barely tugging on his lips. “What are you trying to do?”

“Nothing!” Shizuo snapped. What was he trying to do? “I’m just saying... Y’know, I think this arm generates heat, or something. Anyways, like, I’m not cold. I could… you know… if you needed… uh…”

“Shizu-chan, I already made out with you,” said Izaya, “you don’t need to flirt with me.”

“I’m not flirting!” he huffed, while Izaya dimpled at the show of his temper. “Forget it!”

Then, Izaya surprised him. He crawled across the tailgate and climbed into Shizuo’s lap, resting his head upon Shizuo’s chest, and closed his eyes. “Fine. Warm me up, then.”

Except now Shizuo was frozen, unsure what to do with the smaller man now that he had him. The chickens seemed to be jeering at him, unimpressed. Shizuo glared at them as he settled his arms tightly around Izaya, burying his nose in the mess of black hair. His limbs still felt stiff, wavering in confidence. There was an added pressure that Shizuo didn’t exactly know how to define. Still... it felt nice, to hold him like this, nothing unsaid between them.

As Izaya shifted slightly to get more comfortable, maybe ready to take a nap, Shizuo’s muscles
relaxed against him. His fingers thread into Izaya’s hair, idly caressing him, cherishing him, coaxing him back into the world’s warmth. Miles disappeared behind them while they were like this, and Shizuo found himself closing his own eyes.

Dear Celty, I am in love with Izaya Orihara, but I don’t know if I am all he needs.

Izaya gently placed his palm over Shizuo’s chest, in which his heart drummed at a hurried tempo.

“It’s okay, Shizu-chan,” he said, “you don’t need to say anything.”

“I know, but…” his voice came out a whisper, “I want you… to want to be alive.”

A quiet moment passed, then Izaya lifted his head to look at Shizuo, contemplation visibly on his features. His lips were no longer violet, but they trembled between melancholy and bliss. Just as he opened his mouth to say something, the truck jerked to a violent stop, and Izaya tipped forward into Shizuo, who caught him.

The old man slid open his door and slid out, and peered back into his tailgate at the two men embracing each other. Shizuo was watching Izaya, thinking What was he going to say?

“Posso portarvi solo fin qui,” said the old man, “ma è ancora un po’ più in là.”

Though Shizuo and Izaya were startled and slightly unclear of his words, they got the gist of his message. They climbed out of the truck, and Izaya asked for some last directions. As he did, Shizuo made eye contact with the child in the front seat. She smiled at him, dirt on her nose matching her brown, twinkling eyes.

“I tuoi capelli sembrano come un gelato che si sta sciogliendo!” she said.

“What?” His eyes narrowed at her, which only caused her to giggle.

Children were never as frightened of him as they should have been.

“Grazie,” Izaya waved to the man as he got back into the driver’s seat.

With a rev of the engine, the man and his granddaughter drove off, leaving Shizuo and Izaya on the side of the road again. The young girl rolled down her window to wave her tiny hand at them enthusiastically. She called back to them in her sweet little voice, “Ciao! Ciao!!” And Shizuo didn’t realize, but he waved back.

Around them were several intersecting roads, and just as many homes, spaced generously apart. Compared to the cities they’d been visiting, this felt like the middle of nowhere. The tallest fixtures were steeples built of stone and wood, all other buildings matching their scheme. Much of the landscape were rolling fields, lush shrubbery as fences creating an aerial checkered pattern of green and yellow. The trees congregated in patches, the most it seemed at the top of the hill which they now stood at the base.

“He told me it’s this way,” said Izaya, and he began to hike up the hill.

“Are we almost there?” asked Shizuo impatiently. He didn’t think it would be this difficult.

“What are you, a five-year-old in the back of a minivan?”

Shizuo scowled. “Shut up! I’ll kick your ass…”

Izaya actually laughed. A full, genuine laughter as he looked behind at Shizuo, grinning. “Sorry
Shizu-chan, but your threats are useless now!”

“What!”

The road up the hill was long and winding, stretching past many villas and vineyards, cottages and canopies. And there was life. Children playing in yards, mothers and fathers watching over them, husbands and wives working in their yards and houses, neighbors chatting and greeting each other, teenagers walking together. People walking their dogs, cats perched on walls and hedges, birds chirping. Automobiles slowed to a crawl to avoid hitting pedestrians, including the two foreign men. There was laughter, there were arguments, there were people all around, and there was life.

The atmosphere seemed to improve Izaya’s spirits tremendously.

“You’re gonna kick my ass?” he joked snidely. “Doubt that! Since you’re in love with me and all.”

Shizuo should have known this would all end poorly for him, one way or another. “Just because I said that, doesn’t mean I wouldn’t still kick your ass.”

“Nuh-uh~ What about all that about how you’d never ever hurt me?”

“You said that, actually.”

Izaya fell back into Shizuo’s stride, looking up into his eyes. “So are you saying you would?”

Shizuo nearly tripped. “No! Of course not!”

Smirking, Izaya crossed his arms triumphantly. “You see? You’re completely wrapped around my finger, more than ever before! Who knew all I needed to do was make you fall in love with me?”

Turning away, Shizuo hid a smile that threatened his lips. Though Izaya was being a jerk, Shizuo expected that, and it was so much more refreshing than having Izaya reject him. This was Izaya’s form of acceptance. “I take it back.”

Izaya tugged on his arm. “Shizu-chan, you can’t! You had a whole speech and everything! You looooooooove me!”

“Nope,” Shizuo shoved his head away, “get outta here.”

“But Shizu-chan was sooo cool! What did you say again?” Izaya cleared his throat and lowered it several octaves in his best Shizuo voice, “‘I’m just in love with you, so get over it.’ Wow!” Izaya mockingly swooned, bumping into Shizuo. “How suave you are!”

Shizuo blushed. “Shut up, flea.” He added without any bite, “I hate you.”

“But you love me, too.”

“I love you and I hate you.”

“Good,” Izaya smiled. “Those are a person’s strongest emotions, and both of yours belong to me.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“I’m still deciding,” said Izaya, regaining his lead. The look he gave Shizuo over his shoulder was heavy-lidded and coy, and Shizuo’s blood began to race. They both stopped in their tracks, always on the same page during these moments.
Izaya took a step forward, then Shizuo, then they both took another...

Next thing they knew, Shizuo was chasing Izaya up the hill and through the small, bucolic town, bringing their own brand of chaos to another part of the world. Finally, this was not a chase fueled by rage. Instead, Shizuo was grinning, and Izaya was tittering, and there was no explosion other than one of joyous fulfillment. It was a recreational discharge between two people had come to care for each other, that had made an unorthodox habit of running in each other’s company.

As long as Shizuo didn’t yell so loudly he quaked the Earth, or throw anyone’s property, the locals had no qualms with the display.

They reached the top of the hill like that, where the trees grew tall and the villas reclined under their shade. Many rested in solitude at the end of long driveways, with stone walls, hedges, or mailboxes presenting their entrance.

Izaya slid to an abrupt stop, and Shizuo nearly crashed into him.

“Oh look, we’re here.”

He pointed to an eroded stone way, probably older than most countries, on which was a weathered and modest plaque, the name of the family that owned the property displayed.

Petrillo

They could not see much of the house from where they stood, as its driveway disappeared behind a row of trees. The property appeared large, at least in terms of acres. Whether the home itself would be sizable, they’d yet to find out.

“So what, do we just…?” Shizuo scratched his head. “Walk up to the front door?”

“Well…” Izaya inspected the stones, the vines that covered them, and the bushes. “I don’t see anyway else to get their attention.”

“We really should have called ahead,” said Shizuo.

“With what?” Izaya rose an eyebrow.

“I don’t know, a payphone or something!”

“Paid for with what? What number would we call?”

Grumbling, Shizuo realized Izaya had a point, but he was still uncomfortable traipsing into somebody’s front yard without giving them any warning. Especially when they came to ask for a favor.

“Come on, this was your idea!” Izaya reached behind him and grabbed Shizuo, leading him up the dirt path. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Cyborgs, thought Shizuo, but decided to keep that anxiety to himself.

They marched up the dusty road, soaking up the sun that speckled through the treetops. For the first time in what felt like eons, it didn’t feel like winter. Shizuo actually had some warmth on his skin, natural warmth. He felt even more at ease under this sun than the one in Egypt. There was a hint of spring in the air, the scent of budding tulips and flowering trees. A whirl of insects hummed drowsy melodies in their ears. Songbirds chirped from the trees, a mess through which Shizuo and Izaya
found themselves crossing.

“What kind of trees do you think these are?” Shizuo asked absent-mindedly. The atmosphere almost made him feel chatty.


“Grapes?” Shizuo provided.

“Grapes grow on vines.”

“Oh.”

“There’s the house!” Pointing through the thicket, Izaya marched in the direction where Shizuo could just see a home, modestly made muchly of brick and stone.

Well-trimmed bushes and shrubbery outlined its edges, and the grass of its lawn was fresh and green. Shizuo could not identify the whole of the house from their angle of approach, so it was decently sized. Bigger than the home Shizuo grew up in, anyways, and almost three stories high. He noticed the front door, a thick, dark wood with fanciful carvings that reminded Shizuo of Venice. It even had a brass knocker.

Just from looking at the home, Shizuo could tell that it was a very, very old place. Its foundation was rooted centuries into the Earth.

There wasn’t just one building to the property, though. Looking around and around, Shizuo noticed a few small sheds, a barn, and another, miniscule little shack, all spaced generously apart of the several acres. If he positioned himself correctly, and looked in the right direction, Shizuo could see the rural landscape blanketed beneath them at the base of the hill.

A small car sat in the driveway, which was dirt all the way to the end.

After exchanging a look with Shizuo, Izaya sauntered over to the door and wrapped his “Hello? Anybody home?”

Nothing.

“Hmph…” Next, Izaya tried the knocker, slamming it several times. “Hellooo?”

Still nothing.

At the same time, Shizuo peered into the windows. There were no lights on inside besides the illumination from the sun through the glass. He could see what appeared a rather average living space of carpets and furniture, hallways and adjoining rooms. However, no person fell into his vision. “There’s a car in front…” he remarked. Does that mean they’re home?

Izaya started walking around the house, taking up on Shizuo’s action of looking into windows. “Hellooo! If you’re not home, Shizu-chan will bust down your door!”

“Shh! Don’t say that!”

Izaya snickered.

“Hello? Hello??”

Both their heads turned in the direction of a new voice, an old, raspy voice. It sounded closeby, but
still distant, and not from inside the home. The voice came from somewhere in the dirt paths that separated the rows of trees around the property.

“Hello?” Shizuo answered. They weaved through the trees, whose branches stretched tall and disorderly. There was no one in sight…

“Ehi! Voi! Chi siete?”

Then they both noticed the ladder leaned against one of the trees to their right. They craned their heads and looked up. Surely enough, within the branches of the tree and atop the latter, was a wrinkly old man with a basket and a hefty pair of clippers.

He wore a tweed hat over his gray and ginger hair, thick wool and flannel, and jeans as weathered as he was. His skin was a fine aged leather, creased in all the most charming places, and speckled with the evidence that he hadn’t shaved that morning. However, there was a curmudgeon expression on him, and he fixed them with the worst, most distrustful stink eye Shizuo had ever received.

“Chi siete?” the man repeated, “Che cosa volete?”

“Um…” Izaya stepped forward, squinting up at the old man’s visage that was slightly obscured by the sun. “Sei tu Alberto?”

“Chi me lo sta chiedendo?”

“What’s he saying?” Shizuo asked with a nudge at Izaya.

Izaya brushed him off, though, shushing him “Siamo amici di Carmella.”

“Mia sorella?” He looked suspicious, and his eyes squinted even more. Regardless, he started to descend on his ladder, clippers and basket in hand. His expert balance suggested he did this often, an expert tree climber.

When he landed on the ground, Shizuo realized that he was not particularly tall man, though taller than Izaya, and much of his height declined due to an elderly hunched back. Still, he intimidated Shizuo. And why should Shizuo be so intimidated? He was supposedly the strongest man in Ikebukuro, wasn’t he? Hadn’t he defeated an army of cyborgs?

The old man, who might or might not be the Alberto Petrillo for whom they were looking, took several hobbly steps toward them. As he did, he said several long sentences, gravelly in his rough voice.

Shizuo’s eyes fluttered against the rapid onslaught of words he didn’t understand. Looking desperately at Izaya for translation, he noticed the latter’s eyebrows furrowed in deep concentration, his eyes scanning invisible words as if he were trying to reread them from an invisible page, trying to make sense of them all in his head.

“Umm… So… Quindi sei to Alberto?”

“Chi siete?”

“Siamo Izaya Orihara e Shizuo Heiwajima,” he said, then added once he knew how to, “Abbiamo incontrato Carmella a Boston.”

The look Alberto Petrillo gave them was suspicious, and not entirely convinced. Izaya had a silver tongue, but it only worked if he was fluent in the language. Alberto spoke another few, curt
sentences that made Izaya still. Silence fell over the three of them, and Shizuo looked expectantly and impatiently at Izaya.

“I don’t know what he’s saying,” admitted Izaya.

“What! I thought you were fluent in Italian!”

“I’m pretty good at Italian. I’m fluent in English and Russian. The only reason I know as much Italian as I do is because of the mafia, and that’s a whole other set of vocabulary. His is a totally different dialect, and even Carmella was Americanized!”

Growing impatient at hearing them converse in secret Japanese, Alberto’s volume rose, as did his hands in very unwelcoming gestures, especially with the blades in his hands. As if to threaten them, he opened the large pair of clippers, and Shizuo prepared himself to hank Izaya away.

“Alberto? Che sta succedendo?”

All three men turned in the direction of the voice, the voice of a woman speaking outside her first language, with an accent all wrong.

A woman, no older than thirty, padded towards them, a squirming bundle in her arms. Upon seeing Shizuo and Izaya, she stopped, startled. Shizuo and Izaya were just as surprised to see someone like her, because someone like her was someone like them: Japanese.

Her features were undeniable, fair-skinned and dark-haired. And she was beautiful, long hair plaited over her shoulder, and her eyes sharp with wit. She donned simple clothing, jeans and a sweater. It was the way her Italian pronunciations matched Izaya’s that truly revealed her as Japanese.

“...Hello?” she addressed them in perfect Japanese.

Shizuo gaped, by Izaya took a step towards her. “You live here?”

“Yes?”

“How’s your Italian?”

“Better than yours, by the sound of it.”

The jab made Izaya’s eyes narrow, obviously not keen on being upstaged by this unknown woman. Or by anyone, in that matter. Their eyes silently challenged each other.

Until Shizuo piped up excitedly. “Finally! Somebody besides the flea that I can fluently talk to!”

Looking between them for a second, the woman then broke out into delighted giggles. All three men stared at her.

“S-sorry!” She said between breaths, “it’s just been awhile since I’ve been around Japanese people! It’s kind of refreshing to speak my native language again! Please, if there’s anything I can help you with, let me!”

They explained to her their situation. Rather, they explained it without including certain details, such as the Kazbek Initiative and that they exploded a mad man’s base in the Alps. Mostly they told her that they were two tourists looking for a place to stay as they experienced Italy, and that they came her per request of Carmella Petrillo in Boston, Massachusetts.
Her name was Sawako, it turned out, and she relayed this tale to Alberto in better Italian than Izaya could have mustered. As she spoke and moved, both Shizuo and Izaya became increasingly aware of the moving, squeaking bundle in her arms. The blanket fell away, and a stroke of ebony hair over a round, pink face became visible.

Shizuo blinked in surprise.

A baby.

The infant hiccuped and fidgeted in Sawako’s arms. When Shizuo looked at Izaya, he found the other man staring at the baby with utmost fascination… and distaste. Figures, thought Shizuo. Izaya didn’t seem like one that would be too fond of crying, pooping, unripe humans.

Nor was Shizuo, if he was honest with himself, too keen on the crying and the pooping.

After a couple minutes of exchanges, Sawako seemed to have appeased Alberto. She was smiling by the end, and while Alberto’s stink remained on them until the very end, he ultimately closed his clippers and marched off into his fields.

He was, apparently, a man of very few words, even of Italian words.

“Alberto’s a silent type,” explained Sawako, “but he’s a generous man. If you want to stay here, come with me!”

They followed her back towards the house. During the walk, she enlightened them that she lived on the property, having married Alberto’s grandson, Enzo.

“This is Lucca!” Sawako held up the bundle of so-called joy in her arms.

The boy’s eyes ran over Shizuo and Izaya and everything else in the world with unfathomable curiosity. He blew bubbles of saliva out of his mouth, and he could not have been more than half a year old. His little display had Izaya keeping his distance, wrinkling his nose in disgust, which amused Shizuo.

“He’s… yours?” Shizuo asked dumbly.

Sawako chortled. “I don’t see any other Asian broads popping out babies around here.”

“Oh, right.” Shizuo’s cheeks heated up as Izaya snickered at him, and he shot Izaya a glare.

Once Sawako opened the door to the house to them, Shizuo and Izaya got a proper introduction to the Petrillo living space. Most of the furniture and appliance appeared to be antiques, but well-functioning enough. They only made it to the living room before Sawako took a seat in a large, comfortable-looking chair. Out of place, Shizuo and Izaya sat on the sofa.

There were toys on the carpeted floor, not just for an infant, but for an older child. A playpen for Lucca lay in the corner. There was a large television, a DVD player, and a Wii across from the sofa. Along the walls were artwork and vast bookshelves, which housed not just books, but old films. Tapes and DVDs. The DVDs looked like animated movies, mostly, and many with princesses on the binding.

An unlit hearth of brick and stone dominated one of the walls, topped by a shelf full of framed family photos. Shizuo noticed a young girl, no older than eight nor ten, in one of the less worn photographs. It looked like a school picture, and the girl had long, caramel hair and was missing a few front teeth. The same little girl reappeared in a photograph between a couple that must have been her parents.
The father was squarish man, scruffy and slightly ginger. The mother was curvy, with thick, black curls tied up in a messy ponytail. They held their daughter closely between them.

On the opposite end of the shelf, Shizuo noticed a beautiful young woman in an old, sepia photograph. Lingering on her features, Shizuo swore she looked familiar. He had definitely seen her before, but where?

“So, you met Carmella, huh?” Sawako began with a breathy laugh. She cradled Lucca to her bosom, and the baby fidgeted. “I still haven’t met Carmella, but she’s called before. It sounds like she’s always trying to pawn off stays to Alberto. But I didn’t think anyone actually took up her offers!”

Shizuo then realized that he was looking at a photograph of a young Carmella Petrillo!

“We were in a bit of a bind,” Izaya told Sawako, not at all sharing in Shizuo’s silent revelations. “You see, all our luggage got stolen from a bus we were taking. Obviously, we reported it, but…” He offered her a grin. “I don’t think the authorities here cared too much about a couple of Asian tourists’ suitcases.”

“Wow, that sucks!” Sawako looked them over with pity. “I had a feeling something like that happened. You both look like a wreck! Look at your hair!”

She gestured to Shizuo’s head, and Shizuo blinked. In the vague reflection of the television, Shizuo could just make out the terrible mismatched shades of his hair. His brown roots were invading the blondness he considered so crucial to his identity. The sight made Izaya smirk.

“And like…” Sawako continued, “what are you even wearing?”

Izaya and Shizuo looked at each other, remembering they were still both in Kazbek uniforms.

“We only had enough money for a very obscure thrift shop,” said Izaya.

“And an H&M?” Sawako nodded to the parka tied around Izaya’s waist.

“No…”

“We apologize for barging in,” Shizuo spoke up. “Is it just you and the old man?”

Sawako shook her head. “No way.” She pointed to the photograph of the little girl and her parents that Shizuo was earlier looking at. “Alberto’s son Alfie, and his wife Bianca, and their daughter Isabella live here. They’re all at work and school right now, though.”

“Sounds crowded,” Izaya hummed.

“Is that okay?” Shizuo asked. “I mean, is there really room for us? We could go somewhere else, if you need us to.” Though, he wouldn’t be sure where…

Waving a hand, Sawako smiled at him. “It’s not a problem, really. There’s plenty of space, because the family’s always moving in and out. Alberto’s the patriarch to a big mess. You’ll have your own room, but… that doesn’t technically mean privacy. Wait,” she froze, eyes narrowing at them. “Two beds, or one?”

Shizuo shortly glanced sideways at Izaya, who bit his lip and refused to look at Shizuo. The last time they stayed in a hotel, or anywhere reasonable, they would have their own beds. Sure, the circumstances between them were different now, but Shizuo didn’t even think of the implications. His naïve rationality spoke for itself. Why wouldn’t we want our own beds?
“If you have two, that would be--”

“Would one bed be a problem?” interrupted Izaya, to Shizuo’s surprise.

Unwittingly, Shizuo’s pulse quickened, especially at the unwavering certainty in Izaya’s voice. Whatever he had chewed into his lower lip, he was decisive about it. Shizuo, however, was not so sure. In fact, he suddenly felt rather insecure. All those implications he missed now rang loud in his head. His attention turned to the woman across from them, who was now like a weigher of Fate, Shizuo well aware that, after hearing that, she might send them far, far away.

Maybe that had been what Izaya had been testing by asking all along.

Luckily, Sawako smiled. “Not at all,” her eyes analyzed them silently, and Shizuo sighed with relief. “Actually, it makes things easier. Now, let me see if I can find you guys some clothes.”

She rose to her feet, Lucca murmuring gibberish in her arms, and Shizuo and Izaya did so as well, unsure if they were meant to follow.

“I’ll just be a moment,” said Sawako reassuring. “But, if you could hold Lucca while I’m upstairs…” Since Shizuo was the closest to her, she naturally held the infant to him to take. “He’ll cry if I put him do--”

Shizuo scrambled over the sofa and retreated to the opposite end of the room.

Blinking at him, Sawako’s expression was somewhere shock and confusion. Lucca kicked his tiny legs, still extended into the air. “Uh… okay then…”

Izaya, on the other hand, seemed to understand, and his eyes were uneasy on Shizuo. Maybe pitiful, as well. Maybe even disappointed.

But Shizuo couldn’t help himself. There were very few things that frightened Shizuo Heiwajima, and as he was constantly reminded lately, one of those few fears was unintentionally hurting another human being. Especially now, with an arm he didn’t quite understand. Shizuo could not think of a human more fragile than an infant child, and the prospects of holding one…

_Terrified him._

With Shizuo’s reaction what it was, Sawako then held Lucca out to Izaya, who didn’t run away, but he did look extremely resilient against the idea of holding the baby.

“He doesn’t bite,” she teased, tone and eyes challenging Izaya. For someone who had just met them, Sawako learned quickly. This was enough to provoke Izaya into taking Lucca, nose scrunched but matching Sawako’s gaze defiantly. “Like this,” she advised, placing Izaya’s hands and arms in a proper position. “Wonderful,” she said once her hands were free. “I’ll just be a moment, I promise!”

She disappeared down the hall.

Meanwhile, Izaya seemed content to hold Lucca with his arms outstretched.

“I haven’t held a baby since Mairu and Kururi were in diapers…”

“I never held Kasuka,” said Shizuo. They were too close in age, and Shizuo was too… well, he was what he was. His parents would have never let him, either way. With the mention of their siblings, both of them drifted into a silence, minds wandering. Shizuo, of course, missed Kasuka, and he realized he’d have to get in contact with his brother as soon as he could. Kasuka might have assumed
his brother had died already.

But what about Izaya? Obviously, the Orihara siblings had never been close, with the exception of the twins’ co-dependency on one another.

Funny, Shizuo huffed to himself. They’re in love with my brother. Now I’m in love with theirs.

“Something wrong?” Izaya asked, snapping Shizuo out of his reminiscing.

“It’s nothing,” Shizuo assured him. Seeing Izaya with the baby, though, truly taking in the sight, made Shizuo chuckle.

His nose was scrunched in disdain, and regardless of Sawako’s advice, he attempted to hold Lucca as far away from his body as possible. But he wasn’t bad at it, Shizuo noticed. When Lucca got too fussy, Izaya held him against his chest, the baby’s head rested against his shoulder. Shizuo noticed the slight bobbing motions in Izaya’s knees.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Izaya snapped at him with disdain.

“Like what?” Shizuo hadn’t even realized he was smirking affectionately, and he slapped his cheeks. “I’m not looking at you like anything.”

Glaring at him, Izaya muttered something. He paced around the living room, and Shizuo danced around them, keeping his distance. But he watched on curiously. Lucca hummed contently, the baby’s eyes watching everything from over Izaya’s shoulder.

“Why didn’t she just put it in this playpen?” Izaya wondered aloud, as he stepped in front of the miniature infant prison. Gently, and with what seemed like practiced ease, he placed Lucca in the cushioned pen.

However, as soon as Izaya’s arms receded from him, Lucca began to wail.

Shizuo flapped his arms in a panic. “What did you do?!”

“Nothing!”

“Make it stop!!”

Izaya picked up Lucca again, and the baby immediately stopped its crying.

Shizuo a look, Izaya set Lucca back into the pen.

“WAAAAAAAAAAHH!”

“Oh, that’s just obnoxious,” Izaya scathed, picking Lucca up again. “I hate babies.” It worked, though, and Lucca’s tears ceased once he was in a person’s arms.

Shizuo’s nostrils flared. “How can you hate babies? Aren’t they humans?”

“Barely,” Izaya rolled his eyes. “The kid can call me back when he gains cognitive brain functions. What, you like them?”

Shrugging, Shizuo didn’t think too much about them, other than he didn’t want to touch one, or smell its poop. “I don’t like it when they cry. It’s annoying.”

“A simple answer from a simple guy,” Izaya smirked. “Well, most of what they do is cry, isn’t it?”
“Dunno. Probably.”

“You could hold it, you know.”

Shizuo stilled. He looked at Izaya, who was watching calculatingly and holding out a hand. Taking a step back, Shizuo mumbled, “N… No… that’s okay. You’ve got it.”

Izaya closed his eyes impatiently, sighing. “Shizu-chan…” He took a step forward.

And Shizuo took another step back. “No.”

When Izaya’s eyes opened, they pierced Shizuo with enmity.

Just then, the front door swung open, and the little girl with caramel hair skipped through the threshold, humming a pop song. A backpack was over her shoulders, and she must have come straight from the school bus.

Once she saw the scene in her living room, she froze. Taking in the scene of two strange, dirty, strangely dressed, foreign men with her baby cousin in their possession, her eyes widened and widened and widened.

And she screamed the most high-pitched, shrill scream Shizuo had ever heard.

For the first time in what felt like an age, Shizuo and Izaya had a proper meal.

The girl, Isabella, had not stopped screaming at them until Sawako had rushed back in and explained to the child that the two men were not, in fact, kidnappers. However, that didn’t stop Isabella from squinting at them distrustfully as Sawako cooked them up a quick ragù over linguine. Shizuo and Izaya devoured the food like starved beasts, while the precocious little girl began to interrogate them and their business in her home.

Unfortunately, Shizuo could not communicate with her too well. Neither could Izaya, really, but Isabella had a fair amount of English on her tongue. Between what she knew of English, and what Izaya knew in Italian, they managed.

Though Izaya basically just recounted the same tale they fed Sawako, Shizuo couldn’t help but feel a little left out. On the bright side, per Shizuo’s request, Sawako served his pasta with a glass of milk. And it was some of the creamiest, freshest milk had ever tasted. Absolutely delectable.

Thankfully, Sawako had provided some old, out of date family clothes for the men to wear. Nothing flashy or obscure, for which Shizuo was double grateful. Just jeans, outdated t-shirts, flannel shirts, sweaters and the like. According to Sawako, they were from a mix of relatives, including Alberto, Alfie, and Enzo. She told them to take whatever fit. Shizuo quickly found pants and a plaid shirt that fit him, but Izaya invaded Sawako’s closet after he cursed everyone in the world that was over six feet.

Sawako and Isabella then showed Shizuo and Izaya around the Petrillo property. The scenery was certainly beautiful, and they passed Alberto several times as the old man worked in his orchard. All he gave them was a nod and a less surly appraisal, but Shizuo thought that was already an improvement.

Then, Sawako took them into the barn. There was a small coop of hens, clucking and strutting about,
fleeing whenever a person got near. Other than that, the barn appeared empty other than with
barrels, produce, and hay.

“This is Nana,” said Sawako, gesturing to a large enclosure. At first, Shizuo didn’t know what she
was talking about, but he stepped around her and saw to whom Sawako referred.

He whipped his body towards Sawako. “You have a cow?”

She nodded. “Well, yeah. That ain’t a sheep.”

“No, no, you don’t understand.” Shizuo’s attention swung from the perfectly rotund, creamy colored
creature in the enclosure, back to Sawako. “You have a real cow?”

“...Yes?”

“Is he an idiot?” Isabella asked Izaya in English, earning the girl a snide, agreeable snicker.

“Holy shit, you have a cow!” Shizuo exclaimed. No wonder that milk was so good!

Looking at Izaya, Sawako’s eyebrows knit together. “Am I missing something?”

Shizuo thought Nana was beautiful. She had big, round, dreamy brown eyes and impeccably long
eyelashes. It was clear that the Petrillos kept her in good shape, as her fur was soft and combed.
Izaya ended up leaving Shizuo in the barn for fifteen minutes as he continued his stroll with Sawako,
Lucca, and Isabella. Remaining to admire the benevolent and sweet-natured animal, Shizuo leaned
upon the gate of the enclosure as Nana chewed her hay, completely unbothered by the strange man
observing her.

At one point, she clopped over to Shizuo, allowing him to extend his head and stroke her head. Her
nose was as soft as a cloud, and Shizuo considered forsaking Izaya, because he had found his one
true love. This cow was the greatest cow in all of existence.

The angelic producer of milk.

Eventually, Shizuo rendezvoused with the others, and Sawako showed them to the little shack in
which Shizuo and Izaya would reside. It was indeed tiny quarters, with just one real room that
contained a bed in a rusted iron frame, two cushioned chairs, two antique tables, a couple of wooden
chests, and a mess of yard tools and supplies. Something told Shizuo that this place often doubled as
a shed, but it had windows, and its own bathroom. Well, half of a bathroom. A bathroom about the
size of a closet. A toilet, a bowl sink, and a showerhead barely fit inside.

Despite its somewhat rundown appearance, Shizuo looked at the bed and found it very inviting. If
allowed, he would have collapsed on top of the mattress right then and there. He could have slept for
days, unperturbed and exhausted.

Unfortunately, the rest of the family came home, and dinner was an event with the Petrillos, Shizuo
quickly learned. Not that he minded. At the offer of more food, his stomach rumbled again.

Alfie and Bianca didn’t quite scream at meeting Shizuo and Izaya, but they had the same uneasy
intrusiveness. Of course, Sawako acted as the mediator between everyone again, and Shizuo really
thought she was a gift. Apparently, Carmella’s name held a lot of power in the household, and just
invoking it opened up doors for Shizuo and Izaya.

At one point, Alfie placed a call to Carmella in Boston, and the woman confirmed everything. She
even asked to speak to the two men in question.
“Shisho and Isaiah!!” Carmella cooed over the phone, and Shizuo was forced to listen to the woman babble in broken in English while Izaya skillfully ducked away to instead help Sawako and Bianca with cooking. “Please make yourselves at home!!”

Technically, it’s Alberto’s home, Shizuo wanted to remind her.

After Alfie hung up with his aunt, he shook Shizuo and Izaya’s hands firmly, officially welcoming them.

Then, they all sat in the main house’s dining room for a filling dinner. Everything became rather surreal for Shizuo, and he imagined Izaya felt similarly. Shizuo had dined in the company of a bulk of friends and familiar faces, but this was different. It felt like Shizuo was a bystander looking in on this family’s routine, on their lives. So much like a family, not everything said amongst them was gentle. They would quip and tease each other, but there was a tenderness in their actions and looks towards each other.

Shizuo wondered what Izaya thought of it all. Humans in their natural habitats, pleasantly in love with each other. But to Shizuo’s surprise, Izaya’s expression as he just watched them was one of utmost appreciation.

Bianca was the better between herself and Alfie when it came to English, and she led the conversation pertaining to Shizuo and Izaya. Everyone became intrigued with the two’s travels up into this point. They asked about Japan, America, and Spain, and Egypt. They asked about it all.

“What made you want to travel the world?” Bianca would ask, for example, in English.

“What was your favorite place?” Sawako would ask in Japanese, and translate for the others.

“What are the marks on your arm and neck?” Isabella would ask, only to be ignored by Izaya and scolded by her mother. She thought they were weird tattoos.

Izaya held the reins on their behalf, recounting many truths about where they’d gone, what they’d done, and what they’d seen, gracefully leaving out the details about Josiah Hummel and his army of the damned. As Shizuo listened, he began to feel nostalgic about all the cities they had visited. If he and Izaya were as they are now, would their experiences had been different?

He was also grateful for Izaya’s lead, because the idea of all that attention solely on him, and having to articulate so much, was nauseating.

Sometimes the family did not talk to Shizuo and Izaya, and went about their business as usual, just within themselves. That was fine, too, but Sawako revelled in their presence. She was obviously thrilled to have fellow Japanese people at the table. At some points there would be two different conversations at the table: one in Japanese, the other in Italian. Or three, when Isabella, who was indeed the most fascinated Petrillo, began interrogating Izaya in English.

To say it wasn’t at all awkward would be a lie, but it wasn’t entirely awful, either. The atmosphere was warm and familiar. Shizuo felt a pit in his stomach open, and he knew he was missing Ikebukuro. Truly missing it, his home, his friends and his family. He wanted to visit Celty, he wanted to call Kasuka, he wanted to eat out with Tom, he wanted to wake up in his own bed...

He knew, though, that he had to be stronger than that. When he looked at Izaya, watched him quarrel with a cheeky eight-year-old, Shizuo thought they’d make it back there eventually. Because families could heal, and Izaya needed that.

In Ikebukuro, Izaya didn’t have a family, not that he knew, so he had to take advantage of one that
didn’t know him. Didn’t know *them*. Before Izaya could face the real, permanent people in his life, he needed the warm glow of a family. Already, Shizuo could see some light return to his eyes, color to his face, and serenity in his voice.

Shizuo could think of one sure method to brighten Izaya’s mood: to get him around humans. Busy humans, bustling humans, emotional humans. Humans with motives and agendas.

“Some of my friends call me Izzy,” Isabella was saying. “Do yours?”

Izaya’s nose wrinkled. “Absolutely not.”

“Why not? It works with Isaiah!”

“Because that is not my name. And Izzy isn’t yours, either.”

Isabella lapsed into bratty Italian and Shizuo was sure she was berating Izaya for disagreeing with her. Maybe Shizuo was thankful he couldn’t communicate with the girl. Ironically, in age, she was closer to Akane, but her attitude was much more akin to the twins’.

No, Shizuo reasoned. *Pepe was more like Akane*… Even if Pepe was nearly twice the Japanese girl’s age. The more Shizuo thought about it, about people from Ikebukuro, those cravings for home returned to him, so he pushed them aside. He couldn’t be strong like that.

None of this was bad, he reminded himself. This was a nice place, with nice people. When he looked at Izaya, petulant in debate against a toddler, Shizuo became so much less homesick.

This was about Izaya, after all.

The evening stretched on, into the dark portions of the night. The Petrillos retired to their bedrooms in the main house, and Sawako put Lucca to sleep. Before Shizuo knew it, the hours had grown rather late, and there was no one left in the kitchen besides Shizuo, Izaya, and Sawako. How had Shizuo and Izaya even remained awake so long? Adrenaline? Nerves?

Sawako boiled water on the stove, though, providing Izaya and herself with some sleepyme tea. Shizuo opted for a glass of Nana’s warm milk. The three of them sat in the kitchen, Sawako making small talk with them in hushed voices.

“Don’t get me wrong, my Italian’s really good!” Sawako claimed, “but constantly talking in a second language gets tiresome after awhile. I always feel like I sound dumb.”

“There’s no helping it if its not your native language,” said Izaya, and he raised his teacup to his lips.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Sawako smirked. “You sound pretty dumb when you speak in Italian, too.”

At that, Izaya lowered his teacup to glare at the woman before he had even taken a sip.

“You two are interesting…” she smiled. “I never expected a couple of gay Japanese dudes to fall out of the sky. I wonder if the church here would call that a blessing…”

“Is that a Catholic thing?” Shizuo asked genuinely, and Sawako chuckled at him.

“Not exactly.”

“If you don’t mind me asking…” Izaya started. He had a playful look on his face that made Shizuo raise an eyebrow. “Well, its just… Carmella didn’t say anything about having any Japanese relatives. You’d think she would have. She did, however, speak highly of a nephew of some sort working in
Sawako returned his gaze with a softer smile. “She wouldn’t have. She didn’t know. Nobody in Enzo’s family knew.”

“Why?” asked Shizuo.

“Enzo’s less close to his family than they’d have you believe. He’s not very communicative. He doesn’t even have a Facebook!”

“If he’s not that close with his family,” Izaya said, “then why did the two of you move back to Italy?”

“I wanted to be with my husband,” she answered simply. “His business in Japan was coming to an end, and he was missing Italy. I was just a primary school teacher in Nagano, where Enzo would go for work. That’s where we met. Since I always kinda wanted to see more of the world, I agreed to move with him. As soon as Lucca was born, we moved out here, and we’ve been staying with Alberto ever since!”

“So where is he now?” asked Shizuo. “Enzo, I mean.”

She guffawed. “Japan, if you can believe it.”

Izaya snorted. “How ironic…”

“He’ll be back soon,” she said. “You’ll get to meet him. Well, maybe. If you’re going to stay that long. How long are you staying?”

At that, Shizuo glanced at Izaya, who was staring silently at the steaming coffee in his hands. His eyebrows were slightly pinched together in thought, and Shizuo wondered if they had any real projection of how long they’d be staying.

Instead of answering, Izaya looked up from his coffee and asked, “Do you have a telephone?”

“You memorized their number?”

“Of course!”

Sawako had given them an old, portable landline for their “guest house.” Then, she bid them a goodnight and went to bed, warning them about a rooster in the morning. Now, Shizuo and Izaya sat on their bed, which was springy but not uncomfortable. At least not compared to where Shizuo had been sleeping lately.

“Should we wait? It must be a crazy hour over there…”

“Do you want to talk to them, or not?”

Shizuo huffed, but remained silent. He did want to talk to them. Izaya had the phone in his hand, speakerphone on, and with a final glance to Shizuo, he punched in a number.

It rang.

It rang and rang, and Shizuo held his breath.
Finally, the ringing stopped and was replaced with a moment of unclear silence. The answering voice was groggy and tired, but finally appeared. “H... hello?”

“Shinraaaaaa!!!” sang Izaya, “It’s been too long!! How are you??”

The other end of the line became dead silence, for much longer than a moment. Shizuo had only heard such a small portion of Shinra’s voice, which had been distorted by the telephone and by the morning, that he couldn’t be positive they had the right number. Was that really Shinra he had heard? It had been so long...

But then, a wail blared through the telephone.

“IZAYA?!”

Sniggering, Izaya twirled a strand of his hair around his thin finger. “Is it nice to hear from me? Are you missing me terribly?

“Izaya?! Is that really you?! Holy--” Scrambling noises clashed and smashed could be heard through the phone. “Celty!! Celty wake up!! You’ll never believe who’s on the phone!!”

Shizuo’s heart began to accelerate. He was finally going to be able to speak to Celty! Well, more or less. Speak to her through Shinra, anyways.

“Izaya?” Shinra reappeared. “Where are you? Where have you been?! What’s going on?! Where’s Shizuo?!”

The onslaught of questions made a nerve in Izaya’s face twitch, and a mischievous smirk ultimately formed on his lips. “Oh? Shizu-chan, huh?” Izaya lifted his eyes to meet Shizuo’s, an impish trick twinkling in them. “Shinra, I’ve got some wonderful news! Shizu-chan died in a landslide in Egypt! He’s been dead for over a week!”

“Wh... WHAT?!”

“Stop that,” Shizuo scolded, snatching the phone out of Izaya’s hand. He held it up to his ear, despite it being on speakerphone. “Oi, Shinra? It’s me. Don’t listen to the flea, I’m fine. We both are. Sorry it’s been awhile.”

“Oh thank goodness!” Shinra sighed with relief, and Shizuo could hear a flurry of energy coming from the other end. “I have Celty here now, she’s awake! Hold on, I’ll put you on speakerphone.” There was a click, and Shinra spoke again, slightly more muffled. “Can you hear us?”

“We can only ever hear one of you, y’know,” said Izaya.

“Yeah, we can hear you,” said Shizuo. “You’re on speaker, too.”

A pause. “So this is... Izaya and Shizuo? Together?!”

Shizuo glanced at Izaya, who didn’t say anything. “Yeah, it’s just me and Izaya right now,” he answered.

“So... does this mean you two have been in each other’s company this whole time?!” Shinra gasped. “It’s March! And you haven’t killed each other?!” There was a low, impressed whistle. “Amazing! Are you two finally getting along, perhaps? Is that possible? What’s happened?”

So much of that needed an answer, but Shizuo didn’t know what to say, exactly. Too much of what
had happened swarmed his head, too much to condense. How could he explain everything to Shinra and Celty, other than start with how he currently felt. He opened his mouth, but a hand on his over the phone stopped him.

Looking up, he found Izaya watching him. Izaya covered the mouthpiece of the phone, muting them, his fingers over Shizuo’s.

“Pretend you’re not in love with me,” he said.

Shizuo blinked, his jaw slack. What a peculiar request! “But I am in love with you.”

“It’s just pretend!”

“Hello?” Shinra called through the phone. “Are you both still there? Celty is writing something!”

Izaya moved his hand away from the microphone. “Yeah, we’re here.” His eyes remained steady on Shizuo, perhaps intrigued of what Shizuo would do and say.

“Good! Okay, let’s see… Celty’s asking where you guys are! I am also asking that!”

“Italy,” was all Izaya said.

“Wow! How is it, there?! Is it war-- Oh, hold on. Celty’s asking for an exact address.”

“Why?” Izaya sneered, “Does she want to send us a gift basket?”

“No, I don’t think so. Wh-- Waaaait, Celty! I’ll ask him, just wait a second! So how long have you been in Italy? What’s it like?!”

“Hospitable,” said Izaya.

Shinra whined. “You’re not exactly being forthcoming, Izaya-kun! You’ve been missing for over a month! Everyone started to believe you both had died!”

“Shinra,” Shizuo jumped in. “Can you tell Kasuka and Tom and everyone I’m alive?”

“Well, sure! But they’re going to ask questions! What should I tell them?”

“It’s none of their business,” said Izaya.

“Sorry, Shinra,” said Shizuo. “I’m not sure what to tell you. It’s been kinda crazy… we’re… I guess… lying low for right now.”

“Lying low from what?” asked Shinra. “What ha-- AH!!” There was a commotion and a crash, and Shinra sounded further away. “Celty!! What are you trying to ask him?!”

Shizuo could tell that Celty had stolen the phone, and was desperately trying to communicate to him with silence. To Shizuo’s amusement, and somewhat heartache, he could imagine her cloud of black smoke swirling excitedly, her shaking the phone and pacing aimlessly.

“Alright alright!” came Shinra’s voice again. “Celty's demanding you come back!”

“We will come back!” Shizuo assured, and he gazed at Izaya. “Eventually!”

“When exactly is eventually?” she’s asking,” said Shinra.
“Whenever Izaya… is ready?”

“…Does Izaya have a gun to your head, Shizuo-kun?” Shinra asked hushedly.

“No!” snapped Shizuo. “You think he’d be able to do that to me?!”

“Ehhh! I made him mad.”

“I can hear you, Shinra,” said Izaya, sneering. “What makes you think Shizu-chan is the one under duress here? As if I’m not the one having to suffer in his protozoan company.”

“You little shit.”

“Hmm… it sounds like you two are doing well… OW!” There was a yelp and a ring of feedback. “Ah, Celty didn’t agree with me. She’s saying that neither of you have actually answered anything. What’s been going on?”

Cocking his head, Shizuo looked to Izaya. “Should we tell them?”

“Tell us what?!”

Izaya glared at him. “Shizu-chan… don’t…”

“No Celty’s… oh. Well’s she’s more or less asking Izaya-kun to take his claws out of Shizuo for whatever twisted game he’s playing… Maybe she’s kidding, thou--OWOW! She’s not.”

Shizuo winced. Uh-oh. Noticing Izaya’s eyes widen, his nostrils flare, and his eyebrows furrow, Shizuo held the phone close to his face. “Um, uh, no, guys, that’s not what--”

FOOF!

Izaya whacked him with a pillow. Startled, Shizuo froze to look at Izaya, who was now standing on the bed, pillow in hand, with a manic expression on his face. “What.” was all Shizuo said. He had become immediately irritated.

“Will you help me play a game with them?” asked Izaya quiet enough that the phone wouldn’t pick up his voice.

Shizuo snorted. Izaya’s games were never fun. “No. Sorry, Shinra, I was trying to say--”

FOOF!

Izaya hit him with the pillow again. The veins in Shizuo’s temples throbbed, and he snatched the pillow from Izaya’s grasp and chucked it across the room. “Stop that! I’m trying to--”

Izaya kneed him in the head.

Okay, that’s enough of that. Shizuo wasn’t at all sure why Izaya had suddenly decided to irritate him like this, other than Izaya being an irritating person in general. But was now really the time? Whether it was or it wasn’t, Shizuo grabbed Izaya’s leg, tipped his balance, and Izaya fell back on the mattress with a thump!

“Ahh!”

“Shizuo? What’s going on?”
“Hold on, I have to beat up Izaya.”

“What?!”

Shizuo dived at him, and Izaya scrambled out of the way, thieving the phone. He hopped off the bed and spoke into it. “Shinra! If you don’t hear from us again, assume Shizu-chan killed me -- OOF!”

Shizuo tackled him to the floor, and the phone went flying out of Izaya’s hand. “Hey! Don’t lie to them!”

“Izaya?!” They could just hear Shinra’s gurgled voice from across the room. “Shizuo?! Where are you guys!? Tell us where you are!”

Perking up his head, Shizuo opened his mouth to answer. “We’re--!” But Izaya elbowed him in the face, rolling out from under Shizuo.

“We’ll send you a postcard!” Izaya provided.

“What are you doing?” asked Shizuo with a growl.

“Playing a new game,” whispered Izaya, and he demonstrated to Shizuo how to play.

For the next several minutes, Izaya and Shizuo simulated the sounds and dialogue of a fight very typical of themselves back in Ikebukuro. A lot of jumping on the bed was involved, and Shizuo thought it a miracle that the old thing didn’t break. By the end, Shinra was wailing through the receiver, confident that they had only called so he and Celty would have to listen to them finally kill each other. Before Shizuo had a chance to say anymore to them, Izaya picked up the phone and ended the call with a simple, single push of a button.

“Well, that was fun!” He beamed at Shizuo. “Wasn’t it?” Seeing Shizuo’s scowl, he shrugged. “It’s what they wanted to hear, honestly.”

“Why couldn’t we just tell them?” asked Shizuo. “They’re our friends!”

“Ah, but… Aren’t they more Shizu-chan’s friends than mine?”

Shizuo’s frown deepened. “Don’t be like that. Shinra and you have been friends forever.”

Izaya scoffed. “Yes, we’ve been extremely supportive and caring for each other.”

Ignoring him, because Shizuo knew he was just being snarky to be difficult. “They’d definitely want to see you! Especially now!”

“How naive you are, Shizu-chan! You think anyone wants to help me?”

“I do.”

At that, Izaya paused. Then he said, “It doesn’t matter. I don’t need their help, and I don’t want it.” He began to retrieve garments to sleep in, and he removed the coat that he had kept tied around his waist all day, setting it on the bed.

Shizuo watched him, his brain whirring with anticipation. “What about me?”

“What about you?” Izaya had an edge to his voice.

“How can I help you?”
“Hmph!” Izaya met his eyes, sharpness in them. “Shizu-chan worries so much about me, which is inevitable, I guess, but shouldn’t he be worrying more about himself?”

Eyebrows furrowed over Shizuo’s eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that,” Izaya practically spat the words, “you’re trying so hard to fix me when you’re so afraid of yourself that you refuse to touch a human baby! Haven’t you been a little hypocritical?”

Opening his mouth, closing it, opening it again, and closing it again, Shizuo couldn’t decide how to respond to that. He’s right, Shizuo realized. His strength still scared him, even when it came to Izaya. Especially when it came to Izaya.

“So don’t try and go tell everyone we know that you’re stuck here because you’re helping me,” Izaya continued heatedly, “the chivalrous knight forced to save the mind-broken object of his affections. Because that’s not true. No one’s forcing you to stay here, Shizu-chan. Certainly not me. You need as much time as I do.”

“...You’re such a bastard.”

“And yet, you’re in love with me. I’m glad there’s still some of that animosity,” Izaya snapped. “Hold on to it. Otherwise this would all be utterly boring, wouldn’t it?”

With that, he closed the door to the bathroom behind him, leaving Shizuo fuming in their one, confined room. A space for just the two of them. Frustrated out of his mind, Shizuo kicked the bed frame, bending the iron and causing the bed to sag lopsided.

Why did Izaya always have to hit all of the most sensitive nerves on his body? Shizuo was beginning to get whiplash from their exchanges. Izaya’s attitude could switch from benevolent to hostile so quickly that Shizuo had developed a headache. Although, Shizuo remembered that Izaya would do this even before they went through Hell and confessed to feeling certain attachments towards each other. This was nothing new, Shizuo had just been distracted by all the… unusual circumstances.

He’d just received cruel reminder that this wasn’t a honeymoon. Far from it.

This was rehabilitation for both of them.

But, that didn’t mean Izaya and everything couldn’t piss Shizuo the hell off. Everything was just terribly undefined, and it aggravated Shizuo. What were they? What was the plan? What were they to each other? Shizuo had made himself clear, but Izaya sure as hell hadn’t. Though Shizuo had meant it when he said that he didn’t need Izaya to return his feelings in order for Shizuo to want to help him, he didn’t want to give his everything and receive nothing in return, either.

Nothing was fair, even now!

Out of the corner of his eye, Shizuo noticed the damned coat that had been on Izaya’s back for years. A relic of the flea that was making his teeth grind together.

Spitefully, Shizuo tore the coat off the bed and flung it at the wall. The act wasn’t nearly satisfying, but as it slumped to the ground unceremoniously, Shizuo saw that something had fallen out of its pockets and landed on the floor. Something small and crumpled.

Approaching to pick it up, Shizuo noticed that it wasn’t crumpled at all, though. It was a piece of paper bent in a very meticulous and precise pattern. An origami pattern, on a piece of paper covered with lessons on the English language.
Past participles, Shizuo remembered, feeling another type of heat resonate in his face.

Bending over slowly, Shizuo picked up the origami from the floor, with almost trembling fingers and more gently than anything he’d ever touched besides Izaya himself. He almost didn’t believe his eyes, but then the object was in his grasp, resting in his palm.

Out of Izaya’s jacket had fallen the origami fox that Shizuo had made on the train to Boston. Over a month ago. The fox that Izaya had called a wonky platypus.

Shizuo had never expected to see anything of theirs from that long ago. They didn’t have their phones, or money, or anything. But Izaya had this. This, of all things! And its shape wasn’t horrible, Shizuo observed. It was bent in wrong places, here and there, and a little flattened, but Shizuo could still recognize it.

The wonky platypus made it all the way here, tucked into Izaya’s coat.

Before Shizuo realized, he was laughing. He was cackling, to be precise, and once he heard himself, he knew he sounded completely insane. But he couldn’t stop. His body tremored with the crazed laughter, and the origami fox slipped out of his hands and floated back to the floor.

“Shizu-chan?”

Izaya emerged from the bathroom, probably alarmed by Shizuo’s sudden loud and uncharacteristic outburst. His eyebrows were raised precariously.

“Are you--?!?”

With just a few long strides, Shizuo crossed the room and clashed their mouths together.

Taken aback at first, Izaya’s breath caught against Shizuo’s lips. After the initial shock, though, Izaya loosened his muscles, opened his mouth, and responded heatedly. Shizuo smirked against their kiss. Izaya had no way of knowing what had provoked Shizuo into this display, yet he was fervent in how he used his tongue and his teeth, his hands fisted in the front of Shizuo’s shirt. Shizuo’s hands smoothed from sides of Izaya’s face to the back of his head and neck.

Finding that origami opened up Shizuo’s eyes to another world of possibilities. Why would Izaya have kept it if didn’t mean anything to him? And it was from Shizuo, from so long ago. Just like them, it had come so far, from the very beginning, to the pits of damnation, all the way to here.

Maybe Shizuo would never hear the actual words from Izaya, least of all as open and honest as Shizuo presented them. But maybe Shizuo didn’t necessarily have to hear them, exactly, because there were other ways he could know. Because Izaya maybe did love him just as much.

It would never be easy, but they wouldn’t be themselves if it was all smooth sailing.

When Shizuo finally pulled away, he did so more gently than he had begun, his lips lingering softly on Izaya’s, their noses brushing together, butterfly kisses across each other’s face. Opening his eyes, a question mark finally appeared on Izaya’s expression, gazing at Shizuo.

“Okay,” Shizuo started breathlessly, “I didn’t say I was a shining example of self-esteem.” His hands remained on Izaya’s face, smoothing some of the hair he had mussed up himself. “But at least I want to figure it out. No, I’m not my own biggest fan. But when I’ve been with you these last couple of… however long it’s been. What day is it? Wait, nevermind. What I mean is… I’ve never liked myself better than I have when I was doing stupid shit around the world with you.”
Izaya’s eyes widened, but he didn’t say anything, so Shizuo rambled on.

“I used to hate this stupid strength of mine. Absolutely hate it. But there were times when, for you, I wanted to be stronger. Like now. I’ll start now. Not all at once,” he added quickly, thinking that he would prefer not to go pick up Lucca right away, “We’ll go slow, but you have to commit, too. It’s only fair.”

Dropping his arms to his sides, Shizuo waited for Izaya to react, which took a moment. The other man’s eyes remained fixed on Shizuo, and his breathing became slow and even. “I see…” he breathed, and he dimpled slightly.

Walking past Shizuo, Izaya sat on the bed, lifting up his legs and crossing them under himself.

“Bickering with Shizu-chan is therapeutic, in a way…” he said quietly, “It’s… familiar…”

Shizuo lingered in front of him. “It’s not the best memories, though.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” joked Izaya, “I would get a real kick out of causing Shizu-chan misery, wouldn’t I?”

Shizuo grimaced. “You didn’t, really, and you definitely don’t now.”

“No…” Izaya sighed. “Not really. But I do find Shizu-chan amusing. I always will prod at that temper of yours, you know. Do you still mean those words of yours?”

“Yes,” Shizuo said immediately.

Izaya arched an eyebrow. “So sure?”

“Yes,” repeated Shizuo, then his mouth dried. “Are you… not sure?”

Izaya’s eyes drifted to the side. “I’m not sure of anything, Shizu-chan.”

“Like… what?” When Izaya turned his head away, regarding the wall with hostility, Shizuo sat beside him on the bed, trying to cross his vision. “Hey, stop doing that. Like I said before, that forcefield isn’t helping us. Remember when you promised to tell me everything?” He meant that moment back in the Initiative, and while Shizuo now had a pretty good idea of the conflict that led them here, he still didn’t know everything happening inside Izaya’s head. “What were you going to say on that truck? Before we got off? Why stop there?”

“…Alright,” Izaya huffed, “since Shizu-chan’s so annoyingly persistent.”

Shizuo couldn’t deny that.

Silence preceded Izaya’s words, one filled with Izaya rubbing the back of his neck sorely. “I’m not sure if I know myself at all. All I’ve got is a name, really. Who is Izaya Orihara, anyways? One day I just decided to be a certain kind of person, a person that could be a god. That way, I would always be immune to everything that plagues the human soul.

“It didn’t work. It backfired, and I got burned worse than I ever imagined. The kind of person I built myself up to be was shattered, and I don’t know what’s left. I don’t know what kind of person I am, what kind of person I would have been if I hadn’t lived so many years behind masks, playing a role I created for myself.” His voice faded away, and he looked at Shizuo like he was hoping he’d understand. He added, “I’ve never been human before…”
“Neither have I…” responded Shizuo’s quiet voice.

Which was absurd, in reality, because they were both humans, technically. But reality was always warped for them. At least, they’ve always been able to see each other more clearly than anyone else in the world.

“I’ve seen you,” Shizuo said suddenly.

Izaya looked at him both startled and confused, his face asking *What does that mean?*

“I’ve seen the real you,” continued Shizuo, and he turned himself closer towards Izaya. “I still want to punch you in the face most of the time, but I won’t. Because you also still loves humans. And not in the… evil, parasitic way. It’s a genuine, tragic love for them, and all that they do. Not just the parts that make them dangerous or demented or depressed, but all the good things about humans. When they’re drunk and joyous at a bar, or seeing something new for the first time, or walking through a park with their family. Even watching humans being happy, you love it. Even if you don’t even know them. It’s…” Shizuo was emptying his lungs, “it’s kinda… breathtaking. And do you know what the best part is?”

Shaking his head, Izaya could only gape, dumbfounded.

“Izaya, you’re one of them, the humans that you love. You have to realize that. You have to include yourself in that.”

Again, Izaya sat there speechless. Half of his reaction looked offended, and Shizuo began to second guess everything he had just said.

“Uh…” Shizuo was starting to feel embarrassed. That was a lot of sentences about someone. About a flea -- no, not necessarily. The silence was deafening him. “And you laugh like one of those… what do you call them? The loud as fuck birds with the song about the gum tree?”

Izaya’s frown was so perturbed it was comical. “A kookaburra?”

“Yes. More like a kookaburra than a flea.”

The trill that escaped Izaya’s throat in that moment only proved Shizuo’s point. “I guess I have more than just a name,” he sighed, mockingly wistful. “I also have a Shizu-chan, and that’s gotta count for something.”

Shizuo couldn’t help the redness that undoubtedly spread across his face, especially with Izaya looking at him so genuinely.

“I didn’t know you knew the word ‘parasitic,’” added then Izaya.

“Ya see? This is what I mean. I want to punch you in the face right now.”

“Haha, you’ve gotten very vocal. Almost articulate.”

“…Really?”

“Well, *almost*. All these grand speeches you’ve been giving, do you rehearse them? Write them down beforehand?”

“Shut up!”

“But they’re kind of nice,” Izaya smiled a tired smile, “as long as they’re about me. Only me.”
Shizuo smiled, too, despite himself. “How selfish.”

Yawning, Izaya didn’t seem to have too much of a problem being called that. Crawling around Shizuo, Izaya lay down on the bed, his eyes closed but seemingly still awake. Shizuo followed his lead, grabbing the blankets and pulling them over them, because that seemed to be all they had to say to each other. For now, anyways, and Shizuo kept just enough semblance to switch off the lamp.

As soon as his head hit the pillow, Shizuo realized how tired he was. His eyelids weighed down on him like stones. Hearing movement beside him, Shizuo turned, only to feel Izaya press their bodies together. Izaya’s eyes were still closed, surrounded by dark, tired circles, and he murmured some sleepy words into Shizuo’s chest.

“You really are warm…”

Wrapping his arms around him, Shizuo held him close. “Yeah…”

He tenderly pressed his lips against the bags under Izaya’s eyes, earning a satisfied hum, before he rested his chin atop Izaya’s head, the other man burying his face in the crook of Shizuo’s neck. It suddenly felt very safe, very assuring to be with each other. There were still scars, even those such as the tiredness under their eyes. Wounds that time would wave its hand across and wipe away.

For now, both Shizuo and Izaya, their exhaustion catching up to them, drifted into an easy, dreamless sleep.
Graced by the sun’s rays falling across his face, Shizuo awoke from a peaceful slumber.

His eyes fluttering against the light, Shizuo grunted and stretched against the mattress, its pokey springs no longer bothering him. He hummed contently; it was warm. Limbs splayed across the bed, he reached down and idly rubbed his belly. His shirt rode up his torso. With a deep breath, he soaked in his surroundings.

Beside Shizuo, the bed was empty. His arm fell across the barren space, where the pillow was indented and sheets askewed. Looking at around, his eyes still blurry in the morning light, Shizuo lazily scratched at the short hair right above the waistband of his sweatpants. Clothing lay across the floor here and there, or hung unceremoniously from the brass bed frame. A pair of glasses and bowls sat upon a small wooden table across the room, remnants of a meal.

The lamps of the little shack he was in were off, the only source of light being the sun’s rays streaming through the window, which were magnificently bright. The windows were open, too, allowing a soft breeze to tickle Shizuo’s sensitive skin. A murmur of insects chorused from outside, accompanied by the twittering of songbirds.

Their tune was suddenly interrupted by a high-pitched scream outside.

Shizuo sighed and closed his eyes.

A series of giggles accompanied the shriek, and other voices joined the commotion.

It was Saturday, and Shizuo preferred to sleep in. That didn’t mean, however, that the others slept in
as well. Reaching over to the bedside table, Shizuo activated his phone screen and read 10:07am. He could keep sleeping, he supposed, but the fanfare of life just outside his window had an inviting appeal.

Plus, recently he’d found it a little more difficult to fall back asleep once the bed was empty.

So he got up, stretching again, from the curl of his toes to the crack of his fingers over his head. A lionish yawn escaped his throat, and Shizuo could smell that brushing his teeth definitely needed to take precedence. First things were first, and Shizuo closed the bathroom door behind him.

About a month had passed since he and Izaya had come to live with the Petrillo family. It felt even longer. Since their arrival at the villa, Shizuo had re-dyed his hair’s roots back to blond and no longer looked like melting gelato, as little girls had apparently referred to him. He had also bulked up a bit, after the stress of his experiences around the world had taken their toll on his mass. His body responded eagerly to the carbohydrate-heavy meals that Sawako, Bianca, and Alfie would cook. Luckily, all of the calories went into the strenuous labor Shizuo had been providing around the farm.

As soon as Alberto and Alfie had realized that Shizuo was capable of lifting tractors and uprooting trees, they had immediately put him to work to earn his and Izaya’s residence. There was a lot to do, too, Shizuo had soon learned, as spring was upon them and the Earth was in bloom.

Shizuo didn’t mind the work, though. Not at all, really. It kept him busy and helped to improve his English, having to communicate with the other men when Izaya wasn’t around. Plus, he got to spend a considerable amount of time with Nana, the family’s cow. The sun was also warm and bright in Tuscany, and whenever Shizuo had a moment to spare, he simply lie on the grass and soak it up. That made up for a lot. He had absorbed enough vitamin D in the last month or two that his skin had darkened a shade or two.

Life on the villa was….

Peaceful.

Of course, at that moment, another shrill scream came from outside, followed by an echo of other voices making the same sound.

Shizuo hummed around his toothbrush. Isabella must have friends over already…

Peace had always been a rare commodity in Shizuo’s life. Ever since the day he came out of the womb yelling, he had never been content. His temper prevented that, and all that incited it. Growing up in Ikebukuro, Tokyo’s most bizarre burrough, didn’t help either. Gangs galore and yakuza mayhem, supernatural creatures, serial killers and assassins… Not exactly the most tranquil of atmospheres.

Not to mention, people like Izaya.

How the times have changed…

When Shizuo’s stomach grumbled, he impatiently threw on some clothes and shoes, neglecting to shave, and left the shack.

“Morning, Shizuo,” greeted Alfie as they passed each other on the lawn. He had a hay bale over his shoulder and a pale of chicken feed in another. Alfie had another job during the week, but on the weekends he enjoyed manual labor to keep him busy. He did a lot of yard work and tended the animals, which was good for Shizuo, because that would give the Petrillos less work to dictate to Shizuo.
“Morning,” Shizuo offered in reply.

The two had formed an amiable relationship over the past month. They weren’t too close, thanks to the language barrier, and Shizuo naturally opted to spend most of his time with Izaya. And Sawako, who he could actually communicate with. His rapport with Alfie was more of a silent, physical one, anyways. One built from working in the orchard together, in the barn together, in the yard together, all under Alberto’s watchful gain, as well as sitting on the couch at night and watching television after most everyone else had gone to bed. The methods of communication were curt and haphazard, simply getting the point across. It suited them.

“Ohh, you’re up!”

Sawako looked up when Shizuo entered the main house and walked into the kitchen. She was sitting at the breakfast table with a book in front of her. Beside her, in his high chair, sat Lucca with a toothless baby grin. The corners of his mouth were covered in what looked like dried mush. Likewise, the baby’s bib and high chair table was also a mess with the same substance. Shizuo idly wondered if it was applesauce… or mashed vegetables.

“You want eggs or something?” asked Sawako. “They’re fresh from the coop. Bacon? I’m not so settled down that I won’t get up and cook.”

“Nah,” Shizuo opted for grabbing a bowl out of the cupboard and rummaging for some cereal. “Thanks though.” He located a sugary brand and opened the box.

Sawako hummed in discouragement. “Isabella will throttle you if you keep stealing from her cereal…”

Shizuo huffed as he poured the cinnamony flakes into his bowl. “It doesn’t have her name on it.”

“What are you, a toddler?” Sawako chortled, “Maybe if you had some grown-up cereal, you wouldn’t act so childish.”

“That stuff tastes like pencil shavings.” Shizuo made a face as he opened the refrigerator and retrieved the glass bottle of milk -- Nana’s finest. He popped the cap off and poured it over his cereal, and then, grabbing a glass from the cupboard, filled that with milk, too. Satisfied with his breakfast, he slid into the seat beside Sawako. She looked from the bowl, to the glass, to Shizuo’s face with a subtle smirk.

“You, sir, are a dairy redundancy.”

Shizuo ignored her, shoving a massive spoonful of cereal into his mouth. He swallowed a gulp of milk from his glass around the mush he was chewing. With his spoon, he swirled the milk around the bowl, coating every inch of cereal. There was an art to the process -- never allow the same flakes to stay on the bottom too long, or else they’d just get soggy while the cereal on top remained dry.

Crunch crunch crunch. Shizuo ate and avoided a staring contest with Lucca, who chirped happily as he played with his food. Instead, Shizuo looked around. Nobody else was in the house. Of course not; it was such a nice day, they would all be outside.

He swallowed a mouthful of cereal down his throat. “Where’s the flea?”

“How should I know?” Sawako waved a hand absently, “Probably running somewhere.”

Shizuo lowered the glass of milk from his lips and looked out the window.
Izaya ran a lot lately.

At first, the hobby had unsettled Shizuo, afraid that Izaya would take off in the middle of the night and never return. Shizuo had chased him around the town, around Florence, around the forest, around the whole world. He didn’t throw things at Izaya anymore, and Izaya let him catch up to him nowadays. Izaya would slow his pace whenever he got the sprint out of his system, until he fell into pace with Shizuo, and they would walk alongside each other.

But Izaya kept on running.

They weren’t the kind of runs that were athletic jogs, planned by pace and route. No, Izaya just had the tendency to take off. Sometimes without shoes on his feet. Sometimes when Shizuo wasn’t watching, which had initially alarmed him.

Then Shizuo had realized that Izaya was not running from him. Shizuo wasn’t really sure why exactly Izaya was running. Was it from something, or to something else? They were surrounded by a whole new kind of world, and Izaya craved to see it all. He’d run into town, he’d run to the river, to nowhere in particular. He’d observe, and he’d absorb. But… No matter how far Izaya ran, he’d always return to the villa where Shizuo would be waiting for him. His face would be colorful and exuberant, full of a newfound life. So after a while, Shizuo stopped chasing him.

He let Izaya run free, nowadays.

“Something wrong with your shoulder?”

Shizuo looked up to find Sawako’s concerned eyes focused on where Shizuo had been unconsciously rubbing his right arm. He stopped as soon as he noticed himself, shoving the rest of his cereal into his mouth.

“It’s nothing,” he said as he got up to put his dishes in the sink. “Just a little sore.”

But that was the problem; Shizuo didn’t get sore. Ever.

“Take some ibuprofen. With all the heavy lifting Alberto makes you do, no wonder you cramp up now and then!”

“Yeah… I don’t need anything, though. I’ll be fine.”

Sawako smirked and prodded a giggling Lucca. “Men are so stubborn. That’s gonna be you one day.”

Lucca burped in response.

Would Shizuo be fine, though? He found himself rubbing his tendons again, and he sauntered out of the house without another word. A bad feeling in his stomach, physically unconnected to the pain in his right arm but not unrelated, started churning. At first, he had been wary of this new arm, but it hadn’t bothered him like this. Lately, for the last week or so, Shizuo had begun to feel an unsettling sensation from it.

The arm had almost felt natural, and Shizuo hadn’t always realized the difference. Sometimes he would forget that his right limb was not actually the arm with which he was born.

At the first signs of discomfort, he considered seeing a doctor in town. Maybe every strange pocket of the world had its own back alley doctor. On one hand, though, Shizuo wasn’t sure how he would have explained the situation to anyone – “A crazy man and his cyborg army filled my arm with
circuits and now it hurts. Can you help?” – Not likely, mused Shizuo. And, on the other hand, Shizuo just didn’t want to deal.

There was also the factor that he had yet to voice his concerns to Izaya…

“Well, whatever,” Shizuo murmured and pulled out cigarette.

Of all the people on the Petrillo villa, it was surprisingly Alberto with whom Shizuo had the strongest bond.

Alberto could only speak Italian, and Shizuo could only speak Japanese. They could never understand a word the other was saying. For that reason, they never bothered to try. The two men communicated with nods and grunts, and that was as much as they needed. Serene silence formed a strong bond between them, especially on beautiful days like this, when they would share a pack of cigarettes on a couple of lawn chairs until one or both of them dozed off under the heat of the midday sun.

Shizuo had become fondly acquainted with all the scents and sounds that graced the villa on the weekends. The earthy aroma of cut grass and fruits traded dominance off and on with whatever the villa or the neighbors were cooking. Today, Isabella had a swarm of school friends over, who had been yelping and laughing since morning, and they would often run by the pair of men with even less interest than if the two were part of the trees. Sometimes there were birds chirping, sometimes there were distant tunes, and sometimes the birds were singing their own tune despite the music on the airwaves.

He had lost track of how long he and Alberto had been dozing on and off between smokes. If Shizuo could communicate with the man, he’d compliment Alberto’s taste in cigarettes – these Europeans really knew their shit. Shizuo had closed his eyes and was taking a long, heavy drag when a weight fell on top of his head.

“You and the old man must contribute to an unnatural amount of that brand’s revenue, don’t you think?”

Shizuo cracked an eye open. Izaya had his arms rested upon Shizuo’s head and was leaning over him.

“It’s a good brand. Don’t think it exists in Japan.”

“Oh? Then if we tried to smuggle any into the motherland, they would surely disappear as soon as we crossed the border.”

Undeterred, Shizuo blew a puff of smoke at the smartass above him. This was enough for Izaya to dodge by moving to stand in front of Shizuo, hands behind his back. That didn’t hide, however, the rustling of plastic a bag looped around one of Izaya’s wrists.

“Where’s that from?”

“Town. I bought things.”

“What kind of things?”

“Can’t tell you. It’s a surprise.”
“A surprise? From you? I don’t want it.”

“Don’t be rude, Shizu-chan. I think you’ll change your mind when you know what it is.”

“unlikely.”

His sourness didn’t faze Izaya; it never had. If anything, Izaya looked pleased at Shizuo’s attitude. He might be truly anticipating to surprise Shizuo. At that moment, Shizuo was too lethargic to pry. No surprise Izaya could give him would ever be as bad as a surprise criminal mastermind and his murder armor. Whatever was in the bag would be a gift, comparatively.

Shizuo gave Izaya a once over, meant to be as if he was regarding Izaya suspiciously, but the gaze had its own, more shallow purpose.

Over the past month, Shizuo wasn’t the only one whose physical condition had improved. Izaya was far less peaky, less pale. He appeared healthy again. The villa suited him, packing meat back onto his thin frame, clearing the bags from underneath his eyes, and giving natural color to his skin. Part of Shizuo doubted if even Ikebukuro itself could have induced Izaya with the same glow that Shizuo was currently admiring.

Izaya was standing before him, framed by wildlife and sunshine, well aware of the way Shizuo was staring at him. In fact, Izaya stared right back. His eyes wandered over Shizuo, drinking in the sight. He was particularly entranced when Shizuo replaced the cigarette between his lips.

Shizuo felt a stir in his belly that was consequence of their growing closeness. The past month had made it impossible to deny something that was growing between them:

Pure, unbidden attraction.

Beside them Alberto, who must have fallen asleep ages ago, let out a loud and unbothered snore, jolting the other two men from their stupor.

“Almost as loud as Shizu-chan,” commented Izaya.

Shizuo got to his feet and stretched out his back. “Liar.”

“How would you know?” Izaya snickered, “It’s clear an earthquake couldn’t wake you, at this point.”

“Yeah, but, it’s not that bad.”

“The other night when I squeezed your nose,” Izaya pinched his own nose to illustrate his point, “it was definitely that bad.”

“Yeah, I guess I owe you for that,” said Shizuo, grabbing the comic book that he had lain on the arm of the chair. He swatted at Izaya with it, who dodged easily and grinned.

“Should we wake the old man?” asked Izaya with a nod in Alberto’s direction. “He may drown if we leave him catching flies like that.”

Shizuo squinted at the sky. True enough, the clouds were rolling in. The sun was much closer to the horizon as well, and the air had that mossy smell of an incoming storm. Somehow the day had escaped them, but Shizuo wasn’t one to complain about hours of relaxation.

As for Izaya, the only hint of what he’d been up to was in the mysterious plastic bag.
“He’ll be fine,” Shizuo decided, in regards to Alberto’s snoring form. “He’ll wake up for dinner. It’s like clockwork. He’ll know.”

“Oh? What instincts! No wonder you two get along so well.”

They fell into step together on their way back to their modest quarters, moseying through the winding grove. Izaya kept his hands and the bag they were holding behind him.

“What about you?” Shizuo asked. When Izaya rose an eyebrow, Shizuo continued – “You’ve been fuck-knows all day. Hungry?”

A distant roll of thunder shook the sky, which was growing darker by the second. The sound was followed by the shrill scream of half a dozen little girls.

“If Isabella’s minions are staying for dinner, I’d rather avoid the main house.”

“I wouldn’t call friends ‘minions,’ ya know.” For the same reasons that Shizuo found their current whereabouts idyllic, he imagined Izaya had grown restless.

Shizuo wasn’t too surprised when Izaya had been gone all of one day, only to return that night with a bag full of souvenirs from Rome – which was hours away by bus. That was also when Shizuo realized that he had fully come to trust Izaya. Not just as a travelling companion, or partner in action, but as a…

Well, it was a label neither Shizuo nor Izaya had decided upon, or dared to speak aloud.

**Companion… Partner…?**

They’d spent on unprecedented amount of time in foreign territory. Not just in the obvious way, of crashing on the guest bed of the willing locals, but in what they now were to each other.

Shizuo had never been in love with anyone before. He’d never had a relationship in which he could just touch, hold, or kiss the other person, and that was the right thing to do. For Izaya and him it had so far culminated in the no longer constant urge to kill each other. Instead of the usual antics, there was endless physical comfort. There were soft touches here and there, and there were tranquil nights in an embrace, and there was an ease to each other’s company.

The past month had perhaps been the most surreal stretch of time Shizuo had ever experienced, and that included the outrageous fight for humanity and survival that had come just previously. Their new relationship would surely shock Ikebukuro in ways even an earthquake wouldn’t manage, by the time the two of them made it back to Tokyo.

However, along the same train of thought, Shizuo had to wonder *when* they would return to Ikebukuro. A month had passed, and Izaya seemed ready to return. He had even picked up a few of his old, flea-like antics – Shizuo was well aware that Izaya got a kick out of trolling tourists with misinformation, when he could catch them. As for Shizuo, he just had the ache in his arm to worry about, which was an issue he’d rather bring to Shinra than any legit, professional doctor. There was backstory there that would surely get Shizuo committed in a foreign country.

Shizuo and Izaya had tried several times to get ahold of Shinra and Celty since their last phone conversation, but the couple was, for some reason, hard to contact nowadays. Hopefully, Ikebukuro had not imploded while they weren’t looking.

“Is that one of her comics?” Izaya asked, eyeing the pages in Shizuo’s hand, breaking Shizuo out of his train of thought.
“Oh, uh – yeah,” said Shizuo. He wasn’t the most well-read man in the world, but he now had the time to fill his time. Of course, he couldn’t read the Italian speech bubbles, so he had to garner the plot from the pictures. He could appreciate the artstyle and the spirited ambition of the superheroine.

“I should have known junior literature would suit you.”

There was a small library in town, and Shizuo believed that Izaya had already read through half of it. No doubt that Izaya had already brushed up on the Italian that he had been previously lacking. “Not everyone likes to read textbooks and know-it-all philosophy pricks.”

“Come on, Shizu-chan,” Izaya huffed, “even I've read *Harry Potter*.”

The rain came down suddenly, while the sun still skirted the horizon, beyond the reach of the dark-grey clouds now over them. It turned the droplets into a shimmering curtain that fell upon them all at once. Their pleasant stoll became a sprint as Shizuo cursed, tucking the comic book under his shirt.

Izaya reached the door to their room first, throwing it open and standing aside for Shizuo to barrell inside after him. They closed the door and shut the windows, but the damage was done – both were soaked through their clothes to their skin.

“At least this made it,” Shizuo murmured, removing the comic book from inside his shirt and tossing it on the bedside table. He would feel guilty if he had ruined a little girl’s book. It *was* a little damp…

While Izaya went straight for the bathroom to collect some towels, Shizuo kicked off his socks and his shoes, tore of his soaking shirt and flopped himself down on the bed. He closed his eyes to the sound of the rain hitting the roof – *patter patter patter* – and of Izaya shuffling in the room around him. Then, there was another weight on the bed, Izaya sinking into the mattress beside him. Shizuo felt a towel drape over his face, and he grunted a thank you.

*Patter patter patter…*

Shizuo could have fallen asleep like that. The rain was different in the country than it was in the city. There were no alley dumpsters and sewers for it to dampen and mix with to become a stench. In a strange way, Shizuo missed even those negative elements of his home town.

The sound of just the rain stretched on longer than Shizuo anticipated. Usually, Izaya would be talking his ear off by now, with nonsense that would distract him from his homesickness.

Reaching up, Shizuo dragged the towel away from his face. Izaya was staring down at him thoughtfully. He had changed from his wet t-shirt to a dry, warmer sweater, but his hair was mussed up from when he ran a towel over it, still wet enough to catch the last of the sunlight streaming through their windows. They were surrounded by a surreal kind of sunshower. Or maybe it was just the softness in Izaya’s expression, as he focussed on Shizuo, that made it feel… unique, and otherworldly.

It made Shizuo hesitate to break the silence. He sat up, running the towel through his hair and over his face – partly to hide the blush that Izaya’s sudden silent, attention was causing him.

“Not like you to sit in silence, flea,” said Shizuo, tentatively.

Izaya crossed his legs – bare except for his briefs, Shizuo now noticed – upon the bed, facing Shizuo fully. “That’s true. We’ve known each other for a long time, haven’t we?”

It was more of a statement than a question. Shizuo frowned, giving the towel another run through his hair. “Yeah? I guess? Crazy to think it’s been since high school, but –”
“But time flies when you’re having fun, right?” finished Izaya. “Even if it was only one of us.”

“Oh, when you hate someone, right?” Shizuo offered, without malice… just matter-of-factly.

“Maybe,” said Izaya.

He went back to watching Shizuo, who tossed his towel back into the bathroom through the open door. Shizuo had expected Izaya to take that line of conversation further, to take a few more jabs at Shizuo. Instead, Izaya was looking at Shizuo fondly, openly. It was so unmasked that Shizuo wasn’t entirely sure if he’d ever seen Izaya like that. Shizuo had to stare back.

“When we first met,” Izaya began, “you immediately knew who I was.”

“Not really,” said Shizuo. “You were just some kid that Shinra knew.”

“What I mean is,” continued Izaya, “that you just knew that I was up to no good, as soon as you saw me.”

Shizuo rose an eyebrow. “Yeah? So? I was right.”

Izaya shrugged. “It’s not like you knew anything about me.”

Shizuo shrugged right back at him. “Guess I’m smarter than you give me credit for.”

Izaya snorted, looking down to where his hands fell in his lap, fingers fiddling against each other. “Hardly! I didn’t exactly make it hard to determine. In fact, I even started a rumor that I stabbed Shinra in middle school. You would have known that if you had had any clue of your surroundings.”

Why would you do that? What? Shizuo almost asked, but he withdrew. It was an odd, meandering conversation that they were having, so Shizuo chuckled. “The heck were you out there thinking about today?”

“Hah. A lot. It’s not wrong to think about things, you protozoan.”

“Might do you some good to turn your brain off now and then, though.”

Izaya leaned in to kiss him.

Since they kissed more often, now, Shizuo didn’t immediately question action. He responded out of habit, instinctively, because kissing Izaya was now part of his everyday life.

When Izaya withdrew rather quickly, he smirked. “Cigarettes. Have you ever considered quitting?”

“Hell no. Why, does it bother you?”

Izaya shook his head. “Not at all. I was just curious if it’s phased you – that you have an addiction, technically.”

“Well,” Shizuo began, kicking his feet up onto the mattress and leaning back against the pillows and headboard, “I always imagined I’d die in some crossfire, some street brawl, or by your hands before lung cancer ever caught up to me.”

“You started in high school. Around the time we met. Maybe it’s my long con, my roundabout way of killing you just as you believe.”

Shaking his head, Shizuo smiled at him, “I don’t believe that anymore. If anything, you’re keeping
me alive.”

Shizuo heard a hitch in Izaya’s breath.

Izaya shifted to sit on his knees. “I think I’m addicted to information.”

Before Shizuo could ask what that meant, Izaya continued, “Because at the same time you started smoking, I started sleeping with people so that they would tell me things that I couldn’t know any other way.”

He had said it quickly, fast enough that it took a moment for the words to catch up to Shizuo. Then, eyes wide and gaping, Shizuo reached for Izaya.

“H-hey, look, you don’t have to –”

Izaya dodged him as easily as ever, slipping off the side of the bed and to his feet. “No, I want to.” He began pacing, with Shizuo watching helplessly.

“I think you already know, anyways. I think Josiah told you, in some way, up in that nightmare mansion. Because that’s something he would do. It’s something I would have done. He did manage to coax it out of me, anyways. That I was fifteen. That didn’t matter – I was smarter than most adults.

I was already observing humans, and humans were – are – pathetically swayed by sex. Dirty old men, lonely women, distraught mistresses, power hungry thugs – all sickeningly easy to manipulate with a pretty face and open legs.”

Shizuo jolted forward again, sitting on the edge of the bed, feeling ill. “Izaya–”

“It wasn’t too often. Just when I needed to – for information, of course. Shiki asked me once, when I was nineteen and he was giving me a ride home. He asked why a kid like me, who had brains and looks and money and could basically do whatever the hell I wanted with my life, would pursue such an obscure career. True, I could have been a doctor, or a lawyer, a politician, or even a humanitarian, since I love humans so much.

“But that was the point. Any of those things would have put me in a cage. It would have chained me to a world I was desperately trying to avoid – a life of normalcy. I’d be just another human, working my way through life until I died, not knowing what was waiting for me on the other side. Then, Celty and a world of mythology came into my life, and I learned everything I could to try and control my own fate. I haven’t been as concerned after you told me you’d drag me out of hell. I’m counting on that, Shizu-chan.”

Izaya stopped, both talking and his amble around the room. He looked at Shizuo expectedly, but Shizuo was frozen.

“...Just to clarify,” Izaya said, “I never slept with Shiki.”

Blinking, Shizuo shook his head. Every visceral emotion he had to that downpour of words was at odds with each other. Rage? Envy? Confusion? Sorrow? He hadn’t noticed how tightly he was gripping the sheets of the bed.

“It’s an ugly tale, isn’t it?”

Shizuo looked at him pleadingly. “I just... wasn’t expecting... all of that.”

“I tried to know everything about you after we met,” said Izaya. “If you’re in love with me, you
deserve to know everything about me. Now you know a little more.”

“But…” Shizuo struggled to respond to any of this. He knew sympathy would be the last thing Izaya would want, so all Shizuo could do was his best to understand. “I already know what I need to know about you, I think. All of that – it’s what you did, not who you are… And you know I’d beat the shit out of any of those people when we got back if you wanted me to, right?”

Thankfully, this made Izaya smile. “Yeah, I know. But that’s not why I told you.”

“Then… Why, exactly?”

“It’s a lead-in,” said Izaya, “to my surprise.”

With that, Izaya picked up the mysterious plastic bag that had been left on a chair. He brought it to Shizuo and handed it over. Puzzled, Shizuo held it and just looked up at Izaya.

“Go ahead,” said Izaya, nodding at the bag with a new wickedness in his eyes.

Suspicious of what the contents of the bag could possibly do with anything in this conversation, Shizuo opened the bag and looked inside.

He immediately closed it again, heat flooding to his face.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am very serious about this,” said Izaya.

In case his eyes had been tricking him the first time, Shizuo looked back inside the bag. No, they hadn’t been. It was exactly what he had thought he saw – a bag full of lubricant and condoms.

The sounds of the outside storm had been drowned out by Shizuo’s heartbeat in his ears.

“I… see.”

He couldn’t bring himself to look up at Izaya, so Izaya came over, set the bag aside on the bed, and climbed into Shizuo’s lap. Thin fingers threaded themselves in golden strands of hair. Shizuo became precariously aware that he was shirtless, and Izaya wasn’t wearing any pants.

“Izaya…” Shizuo sighed. Was he trying to stop Izaya? He wasn’t sure.

“Don’t act like you don’t want this. We’ve been sharing the same bed. I’ve woken up with how badly you want this poking me in the thigh.”

Shizuo spluttered, “That–! That’s not – Listen, you – I’m not saying I… It’s just that–” His whole head felt hot with shame, and every time he had masturbated in the shower over the last month suddenly flashed before his eyes. This was somewhat mortifying for him.

Laughing, Izaya grabbed Shizuo’s face and pressed their foreheads together. “It’s nothing to be embarrassed about, Shizu-chan. I’m saying you’re not the only one who’s felt like that.”

To tease the situation, Izaya ground his ass down on Shizuo’s crotch, snickering at Shizuo’s grunt of surprise. There was no hiding his arousal, Shizuo realized. Lifting his head to properly look at Izaya, Shizuo grabbed the other’s hands and brought them down between them.

“After everything you just told me,” said Shizuo, “why would you want to…?”
A breathy moment caught up to them while Izaya considered his answer.

“Because,” Izaya began softly, not as manic as he had been a moment before, “you’re not a subject, or a client, or a source for information, or any of those things. You’re just Shizu-chan, and it’s what we both want.”

The words were absolutely certain. Shizuo couldn’t argue. He did want this. He wanted Izaya in ways he’d never thought of another person. He had spent the last few weeks measuring his opportunities, whether it would be appropriate or not to propose taking things further. Ultimately it was fear that kept Shizuo’s hands to himself, since admittedly… he had no idea what he would be doing.

Though as Izaya had just pointed out, this hadn’t prevented Shizuo from using his imagination.

“I almost said something before now,” said Izaya.

Shizuo raised his eyebrows. “Oh yeah?”

“You could have made a move. I wouldn’t have objected. It’s natural when I’m your… Well, whatever I am in the relationship we’ve established. Humans, typically, when they have someone... They have that physical aspect between each other, too.” Izaya sighed, looking at Shizuo. “At least, that’s what I’ve come to observe… about people.”

That’s when Shizuo realized – it wouldn’t exactly be the first time for him, either.

It’s why Izaya had just given Shizuo that confession. Izaya had already had a whirlwind of sexual experiences throughout his life, compared to Shizuo’s limited practice, but all of those were meaningless. It was for reasons that Izaya had already identified – an obsessive need for information. In Izaya’s world, knowledge was power, the only power he could control. And he did control it, better than anyone. That’s why he would use whatever he had at his disposal, even an attractive face, to get the better of other humans. Their encounters were empty, and Izaya made even moreso in their aftermath.

Shizuo, on the other hand, had no information to offer him. No secrets, no knowledge, no power. All Shizuo had was that he was truly, honestly, tragically in love with him.

At some point during their time together, Izaya must have realized – that that was enough. For the first time, Izaya wanted to step down from his observation deck and indulge in something so primal, so natural to humans… for no other reason than wanting it with the man in front of him.

Shizuo wanted to tell him that that in itself had its own power, but maybe Izaya already knew that.

Instead, Shizuo wrapped his arms around Izaya and leaned forward. He brushed his lips against Izaya’s, not quite landing.

“Can’t say you won’t have to give me some pointers, here and there,” said Shizuo.

Izaya nodded vigorously, so closely that their noses brushed up against each other. “I know. I’m looking forward to it.”

He brought their mouths together, throwing his whole weight into the kiss and knocking Shizuo back down to the bed.

They had had their fair share of heated makeouts so far, but this was so obviously on another level. Both Shizuo and Izaya went for Izaya’s sweater, tearing it off and leaving them bare chest to bare
chest, before they crashed into each other once more. Shizuo tasted Izaya desperately, clinging to him as Shizuo shifted them to their sides. Then, tempted by the tight briefs, he reached down to grope at Izaya’s ass. Izaya broke away for a moment to flick his nose over Shizuo’s, smirking.

Shizuo could also feel Izaya against his stomach, and though neither of them was quite hard yet, they were getting closer by the second.

They tousled like that a few times, breaking for air every few seconds, before ending up lying properly down the length of the bed, Shizuo’s head on the pillows and Izaya on top again. His lips left Shizuo’s mouth and started teasing at his neck. That was fair enough for Shizuo – he didn’t exactly have a gameplan, and his brain was too muddled to think ahead in this situation. All he could listen to was his body’s reaction, and right now his body was telling him to let Izaya keep doing that with his mouth.

Izaya kept moving lower, and lower, exploring nearly every inch of Shizuo’s chest. From the hollow in Shizuo’s neck, to between his pecs, down his abs to his naval. Humming with content, Shizuo lifted his head slightly to watch Izaya descend, one of his hands casually caressing through Izaya’s hair. A hand then found Shizuo’s dick through his jeans and gave it a squeeze.

“Oi,” snapped Shizuo, propping himself up on his elbows.

Snickering, Izaya went for the button of Shizuo’s jeans, then the zipper. Shizuo’s voice caught in throat when Izaya began to pull down the jeans, Shizuo lifting his hips to allow them to be shucked off and discarded to the floor. Now, they were both stripped down to their briefs.

Having now situated himself over Shizuo’s legs, Izaya was giving Shizuo a hungry once over. He bit his lips as his eyes soaked in the sight of Shizuo under him. The attention made Shizuo’s face go hot. Though Shizuo never gave much thought to how attractive he might appear to others, it was clear that Izaya was pleased with what he saw before him. It instilled Shizuo with a newfound confidence, who was admiring Izaya’s stripped down appearance just as much.

In a moment, the state of the world returned to him – the persistent rain outside, the distant thunder, the darkening room as the sun went down. They could still see each other just fine, in the glow of a liquid twilight. Izaya’s ivory skin took on a hue of honey, and Shizuo desperately needed to touch him.

“C’mere,” said Shizuo, just above a whisper.

Izaya’s eyes locked with his, as if the thought to resist was crossing his mind.

But he complied.

Hands on Shizuo’s chest, Izaya crawled back up to be meet Shizuo’s lips in a soft kiss that was broken when Shizuo moved to frame Izaya’s face with his hands. Their eyes met again, completely focussed on each other, before kissing again – once, twice, again, over and over.

Shizuo was beginning to see the pattern of his role in Izaya’s world; he was always the exception.

The tempo changed, suddenly. They had lost a bit of their initial rashness, maybe because now they were sure, they were absolutely certain… This was really happening.

Their legs tangled as they clung to each other and rolled in the rumpled sheets, and Shizuo felt their arousals rub against each other, even through the restraints of their briefs.

Wrapping his arms around Izaya’s thin frame, Shizuo held him close and kissed him. His hands
wandered down Izaya’s back, drawing over the patterns that mapped Izaya himself, his emotions regarding everything the world could throw at him. This action seemed to stir Izaya even more, and he responded by nipping at Shizuo, fondling every inch of Shizuo’s bare skin, groping at Shizuo’s cotton-clad ass and pushing their crotches closer together. The lines on Izaya’s back led all the way down to where Shizuo’s fingers came in contact with the waistband of his tight, black briefs.

Izaya broke away from Shizuo and looked at him. Shizuo, beginning to lose all rationality as his blood went from his brain to his dick, stared back at him, silently relaying what he wanted.

Then, Izaya was nodding and his hand was over Shizuo’s, coaxing Shizuo to pull down. So Shizuo did.

He pushed Izaya down against the mattress, peeling off the briefs from Izaya’s raised legs, until Izaya was completely naked beneath him. He had caught Izaya’s calves before they fell back to the bed, holding them up gently. It was now Shizuo’s turn to rake his eyes down Izaya, and the sight took his breath away.

Izaya was lying there, disheveled and out-of-breath, a heated blush across his face. He was watching Shizuo carefully, most likely gauging Shizuo’s reaction as the latter looked him over, completely exposed.

Shizuo’s gaze settled between Izaya’s legs, where there was a fully erect cock.

At first it was jarring, to have Izaya displayed so candidly before him. Shizuo hesitated to accept such vulnerability from anyone. They had already allowed themselves to know so much about each other, and this was the final step they had yet to take.

However, Shizuo had always been a creature of instinct and sex – as he was quickly realizing – was an act ruled by the primal intuition that Shizuo had always had in spades. All he needed to do was surrender to what the pulsing heat in his body was telling him to do.

He wanted to kiss his way down Izaya’s pale leg, so he did. He wanted to touch Izaya’s arousal, so he cupped a hand under his balls and stroked up to the tip. He wanted to leave a mark inside Izaya’s thigh, so he sucked and nibbled on the sensitive skin until it reddened. He wanted to taste Izaya, so he moved his mouth to Izaya’s dick licked up and down the length. He wanted to make Izaya come undone in bliss, so he encompassed the entire length within his mouth and sucked. He wanted to make this time for Izaya different than all the others, so he kept giving.

Above him, Izaya had begun to gasp in ways that found Shizuo’s erection struggling against his own briefs. Once Shizuo’s name had come out in a strangled moan, Shizuo had risen fast enough to swallow the rest of Izaya’s breath.

Izaya grabbed at him as he kissed him back. He frantically pushed down at Shizuo’s briefs, not to much avail. Shizuo, who couldn’t help but snigger at the others’ plight, broke the kiss to reach down and assist. Izaya caught a hint of the same sense of humor in his tone as he demanded, “Off – take them off.”

In a few seconds, Shizuo’s underwear was shucked off and discarded to the floor. Finally, there was absolutely nothing between them.

Izaya’s legs spread in open invitation for Shizuo to grind against him. Shizuo went slightly hectic as they kissed again, their now-bare dicks rubbing against each other’s. All of this was new and thrilling for Shizuo. He could have kept at this, thrusting against one another until they came. He knew he wanted more though, and he began to peck kisses down from Izaya’s lips to his naval. Fisting the
sheets and throwing his head back, Izaya arched his back and murmured encouragements.

Shizuo found new leverage to reach beneath Izaya and grab his ass. A finger traced down the crack down to the tight entrance, and that’s when Shizuo heard the bag rustling.

Izaya grabbed a tube from his bag of surprises and sat up. In a fluid motion, he was then sitting in Shizuo’s lap, Shizuo now sitting back on his heels.

“Just hold on,” Izaya told Shizuo, kissing him briefly.

Shizuo opened his mouth, not sure with what to respond, but Izaya was already popping the lube open and coating his own fingers.

“Izaya–” Shizuo started, but Izaya was quicker.

With one arm wrapped around Shizuo’s neck, Izaya reached behind himself with his other. The way Izaya rocked his hips and thrusted their cocks together gave Shizuo pause. Holding Izaya steady by his ass, Shizuo watched Izaya close his eyes and hiss in discomfort as he began to move.

While true enough that Shizuo had not had a plan going into this, he was still caught by surprise. Perhaps a part of him had assumed, due to Izaya being the one to initiate this, that their current roles would be… somewhat reversed.

So Shizuo studied Izaya and asked, “That’s… that’s what you want?”

Izaya nodded vehemently, eyes scrunched closed in concentration, gasping as he twisted his hand.

Shizuo wasn’t going to argue, but he also could not help feeling anxious. “Shouldn’t I…?”

Izaya shook his head. “I know what I’m doing.”

Shizuo wasn’t sure if that was a dig at Shizuo’s own inexperience, or just the fact Izaya had gone through this enough times before. Either way, Shizuo felt even more adamant that he should, in fact, be doing something right now. He did not have the control nor patience to sit idly by while Izaya worked himself open.

Letting go of Izaya, Shizuo reached with one hand to retrieve the lube and with the other to pull Izaya’s fingers out of himself.

Jostled by all the motion, Izaya squeaked, “Shizu-chan?”

“I’ve got this,” said Shizuo, hopefully sounding more confident than he really was. “I’m not just gonna sit here, ya know?” He squirted a generous amount of lubricant onto his fingers and rubbed them together, warming the gel as best he could.

“Getting antsy, Shizu-chan?”

“Shut up,” Shizuo grumbled. He found the already-slick entrance to Izaya’s anus and waited, his own nerves at war with themselves. “Just – just say if it hurts, okay?”

Izaya gripped Shizuo’s shoulders and, surprisingly solemn, nodded.

Shizuo worked his finger inside and found it, despite Izaya having already started this process, tighter than Shizuo expected. Then again, having only ever tried this process on himself once before, his expectations were limited and ignorant.
Izaya reacted immediately, though, by inhaling sharply and tightening his hold on Shizuo. His spine curved as Shizuo’s finger moved in deeper, and his head fell back in a gasp as Shizuo added another, exposing his throat for Shizuo’s mouth to latch onto. Simultaneously teasing at the skin of Izaya’s neck, Shizuo scissored his fingers to start spreading the muscle surrounding them.

Soon Izaya’s breathing turned to panting, in the same rhythm as he rocked back onto Shizuo’s hand. Their dicks frotted against each other with each movement, and Shizuo found his own hips moving for more contact against his cock. Izaya reached between them and wrapped a hand around Shizuo, stroking and thumbing at the leaking tip, and Shizuo nearly lost his mind. There was so much to focus on, from the work of his fingers to the friction on his dick to the taste of Izaya’s must on his tongue. Shizuo feared he might lose control before Izaya was even ready.

Shizuo impatiently added a third finger, causing Izaya to gasp in his ear. Before Shizuo could raise concerns, Izaya fisted Shizuo’s shaggy hair and yanked his head up so that they were kissing each other, wet and sloppy. Feeling assured, Shizuo twisted the angle of his fingers and – as hoped, Izaya broke their kiss and started squirming.

Izaya rocked backwards and dug his fingers into Shizuo’s nape. He let little whispers of Shizuo’s name escape him, and Shizuo lost himself in the sight in front of him – Izaya, red-faced and absolutely debauched, riding Shizuo’s fingers for the sheer pleasure of it.

Then Izaya slowed down. He reached behind him to push at Shizuo’s wrist and lifted his hips, freeing Shizuo’s fingers.

Startled by the change of pace, Shizuo blinked. “Flea?”

Shaking his head slightly and gulping, Izaya settled back onto Shizuo’s lap. All he offered was a curt “Not yet,” before retrieving something else from the bag.

Shizuo understood, and watched Izaya pull out a condom. Right, thought Shizuo, not without a sense of disappointment.

“I should’ve known your stamina would be impressive, even for this purpose,” said Izaya, attempting to fill this sudden interlude with his own voice.

Shizuo grunted a thankless response. He noticed Izaya’s hands shaking slightly, and it caused a struggle between Izaya and the condom’s wrapper.

By the time Izaya managed to rip open the package, Shizuo had become overcome with a desire he hadn’t realized he had until this very moment. Right before Izaya could begin to unfurl the latex over his length, Shizuo grabbed Izaya’s wrist and blurted –

“I want to come inside you.”

A frozen silence followed. Izaya, caught off guard, stared at Shizuo with wide eyes. Shizuo gaped helplessly back at him, reddening in embarrassment, appalled at his own boldness.

Just as Shizuo began to open his mouth to take it back, Izaya threw the condom somewhere across the room and said, enthusiastically, “I want that too.”

Izaya punctuated the statement by kissing Shizuo hard. Exhilarated, Shizuo crashed them back onto the mattress. Shizuo then pecked his way down Izaya’s chest and stomach before rising to situate himself. With Izaya’s thighs spread on either side of him, Shizuo held the other’s hips up so that he could align himself with Izaya’s ass. Once Shizuo’s tip rubbed against the entrance, Shizuo felt Izaya brace himself – reaching above his head to grasp the iron bed frame.
With a deep breath, Shizuo pushed in.

The sensation was immediately overwhelming. Tightness encompassed the first fraction of his length, and Shizuo needed more. Groaning, he thrust in further, earning a yelp from Izaya. He was wary of his own impulses and the strength he had within him. He knew himself, and his usual fits of violence when he couldn’t keep a straight head. However, in this instance, Shizuo had no desire to unleash any of that.

Izaya knew all of this as well, and yet he still bucked upwards to encourage the man above him. Gasping, Izaya reached down to grope Shizuo’s ass and push the man further inside himself.

Shizuo doubled over from how good it felt.

Growling, he grabbed Izaya’s wrists and pinned them above his head, and Shizuo thrust in deeper and deeper until there was no more to give.

When Shizuo was fully enveloped, they both needed a moment to breathe. They had come to face to face, Shizuo lying over the length of Izaya’s body. Shizuo supported himself on his elbows, framing Izaya’s head. Izaya’s eyes were closed, and Shizuo could feel Izaya’s body adjusting around his girth. That, mixed with how their breath mingled between their close proximity, had already intoxicated Shizuo in a way he had never known was possible.

Trying not to move too much, Shizuo found a strand of Izaya’s hair that had fallen over the other’s face and brushed it to the side. Izaya’s eyes fluttered open at the contact and found Shizuo’s tender gaze, masking nothing from his expression.

Shizuo continued to smooth back Izaya’s hair, tucking a strand behind the man’s ear. His thumb skimmed gently against Izaya’s cheek. He became lost in the way Izaya was looking back at him, searching for something, as if mesmerized.

He’s so fucking beautiful, Shizuo thought, and almost said. He also could have said I love you in this moment, but found himself swallowing anything he wanted to say. Words were currently unnecessary, for both of them, even Izaya. Instead, they embraced each other even tighter and kissed each other heatedly at the same time that Shizuo began to move his hips – in and out, in and out.

They moaned into each other’s mouths, but didn’t break apart.

Shizuo kept a steady pace at first, rocking mildly back and forth against Izaya’s rear. Wrapping his legs around Shizuo’s waist, Izaya began moving to meet him with each thrust. Their pace quickened rapidly, Shizuo relishing the way it felt. Izaya broke their exchange of kissing with a throaty heave of ecstasy.

Shizuo got hold of the inside of one of Izaya’s knees and bent the leg so that he would have a better angle. Izaya was, as Shizuo could have expected, very bendy. With the new position, Shizuo was now striking Izaya in his most sensitive spot with every thrust, and it made Izaya quake beneath him.

He could have never imagined Izaya to make such sweet, mewling noises as Shizuo pistonedit into him more erratically, but those sounds were only fuel to Shizuo’s movement. Shizuo answered with a particularly particularly hefty jab, pulling out and ramming all the way in again. He stifled a groan against Izaya’s neck – they were both getting dangerously close.

The nonsense Izaya had been spouting became short-of-breath words, “Faster – harder – touch me –!” and the like. Once Shizuo gave in, snaking a hand between them to stroke Izaya’s length in time with their rhythm, it all culminated quickly from there.
Izaya came first, arching his back up against Shizuo and every breath in him leaving at once. The fluid released onto Shizuo’s hand and against his stomach, but Shizuo moreso felt Izaya’s body constrict around him. It was final push to put Shizuo over the edge.

Driving his dick as deep as it would go, Shizuo felt the tense heat unravel him all the way to his core. Everything that had been built up inside him was released into Izaya with a gravelly moan.

Panting heavily, Shizuo rode out the last waves of the orgasm still within Izaya’s ass. Izaya, already limp and breathless, waited and watched him with a surprising amount of warmth. He seemed utterly content.

Arms shaking, that stamina of Shizuo’s that Izaya found so impressive was finally spent. He fell into Izaya’s arms and nuzzled against the other man, euphoric.

Shizuo had never felt so goddamn high. Sex was the best thing in the world, he decided, and almost hated himself for waiting this long to have it. But on the other hand, he knew who he was with and where he was was key to this bliss. He hummed blithely at the idea that this could and would become a regular thing between them.

Slowly, and a bit reluctantly, he pulled himself from Izaya and shifted to lie beside the other man, who was still watching him with uncharacteristic silence. They faced each other, flushed and unkempt. They seemed not to mind the sticky mess between them, too smitten with the afterglow of the situation. Izaya was even more striking after sex, Shizuo thought, in a way that was unusually soft and reserved.

Shizuo grinned around his breathlessness.

“Hey flea,” he said.

Izaya smirked back at him, “Hi beast.”

“That was…” Shizuo started, but only completed the thought with a satisfied sigh. “Fuck,” he said instead.

Izaya snorted. “Very poetic, Shizu-chan.”

“Yeah,” Shizuo agreed. He reached for Izaya and cupped a hand over the man’s nape, drawing their foreheads together. They took a deep breath and shifted closer. Shizuo’s hand ran from the back of Izaya’s neck, over the scars that covered his back, down to his ass…

Then, Shizuo rolled off the bed. At Izaya’s sound of protest, Shizuo bent back down to peck a kiss on his lips, but remained on his feet.

“Just a sec,” Shizuo promised, and he headed towards the bathroom.

Inside, he found a cloth, rinsed it, and rung out the excess water. He was back on the bed in less than a minute, wiping himself off on the way. Izaya gave him a caustic look, but still let Shizuo clean between his legs.

“What a gentleman,” he quipped.

“Hmph.”

The rag was dropped to the floor, and Shizuo climbed back to Izaya’s side, pulling a sheet over them. Shizuo propped himself against the pillows, and Izaya rested his head on Shizuo’s lax shoulder.
while Shizuo reached with his other arm for a pack of cigarettes that he had on the bedside table.

It was a perfect moment, in Shizuo’s mind. He brought the lit cigarette to his mouth, holding it with one hand while the other ran lovingly though Izaya’s hair. His wits were returning to him, but he was still on cloud nine. Outside, the thunder had subsided, but the sun had fully set and the rain continued delicately. The only light in the room came from a small lamp across the room, which Shizuo hadn’t even realized was on until now. He watched Izaya draw across his skin with a finger and thought about everything that had lead them here, to this peaceful, perfect moment.

Then Izaya broke the silence.

“Can I tell you something, honestly?”

Shizuo couldn’t help but chuckle. “I don’t know – can you?”

The joke wasn’t lost on Izaya, but he was determined. “I’ve wanted to do that for a while.”

It wasn’t completely surprising, but it was nice to hear that Shizuo hadn’t been the only one holding back over the past month. They had been on a long journey together, and Shizuo had already known that their feelings were, for better or worse, mutual.

“Since when?” asked Shizuo, thinking he would get an answer like since we got here or since that night on the boat.

Instead what he got was the truth:

“Since high school.”

Shizuo’s hand froze halfway from bringing the cigarette to his lips. At first, he figured he must have heard Izaya incorrectly.

Since high school.

However, that would mean that since they were fifteen, Izaya had been terrorizing Shizuo’s life, scheming and feuding with him, all while…

“But…” Shizuo struggled to speak. His brain, which had just been delirious with joy, was now short-circuiting.

“Don’t think about it too hard, Shizu-chain,” said Izaya, lifting his head. “You wouldn’t want to strain yourself.”

Shizuo took a long, helpless drag from his cigarette before putting it out in the nearby tray. He ran a hand through his hair and fixed Izaya with a calculating look. Izaya held his gaze, as if challenging Shizuo to press the matter further. Initially, it seemed like that would be the most sensical reaction – to pitch a fit upon this revelation and question everything that had occurred between them over the last decade.

But Shizuo found that he didn’t have to.

All at once, everything made more sense than it ever has.

“Okay,” he said.

Izaya let out a breath he may not have realized he’d been holding. “Okay?”
“Yeah,” Shizuo said simply. He prodded Izaya to lie back down upon him and laced their fingers together over his chest. “Okay.”

Izaya sighed against Shizuo’s skin, “...Okay.”

And it really was okay, Shizuo thought. Well, it was plenty fucked up, but that was natural for them, and Shizuo already knew this. As they fell asleep in each other’s embrace, Shizuo knew that he was in love with a terrible idiot. But now, Shizuo also knew without a doubt that Izaya loved him back.

The storm passed through the night, and Shizuo awoke to another sunny day.

He felt the warmth before he opened his eyes, a patch making its from the window, across the room and against Shizuo’s bare skin. He could hear birds outside, and smell the damp Earth creeping into their little room.

This morning, though, the bed beside him was not empty.

Before Shizuo could open his eyes, he was already smiling at feeling the weight against his chest. There was a mop of black hair tickling under his chin, and his arms were wrapped firmly around a thin waist. He could feel Izaya’s the mellow, even breathing – still asleep. They had never gotten up to clothe themselves, so they lay naked against each other, perfectly tranquil. Exuberant, Shizuo tightened his hold and buried his face into Izaya’s hair.

Izaya made a sleepy noise at the sudden jostle, and Shizuo released him again upon the mattress. Shizuo propped himself up on an elbow and faced Izaya, whose eyes remained closed but with a new furrow to his brow.

Watching Izaya fight off his own consciousness, Shizuo played back the events of last night in his head – with vivid visuals. He idly began to brush back Izaya’s hair and run his hand along the length of his body, a stroke of pure affection. It wasn’t often enough that Shizuo got to watch Izaya sleep, and it felt like a privilege to observe such a creature of chaos in such stasis.

Yet, at the same time, Shizuo had half a hope that Izaya would awaken and that they could do it all over again.

Ultimately, Shizuo let Izaya sleep.

He got up and showered, thinking of how sex could become a regular thing for them, now. They were a thing, the two of them. Kind of like normal people, with the caring for each other and all that – now with sex, an aspect Shizuo was immediately a huge fan of. Rinsing shampoo from his his hair, Shizuo remembered Izaya’s overdue confession – “Since high school.”

*That’s like an open-ended invitation to initiate this sort of stuff from now on, right?* Shizuo reasoned with himself. The possibilities made him giddy.

When he emerged from the bathroom, freshly washed from the sweat and stick of last night, Izaya was still snoozing on the bed. He had rolled over and curled into himself, clinging to the sheet. Shizuo’s heart soared at the sight.

After pulling on some sweatpants and a t-shirt, Shizuo was set to rejoin his companion on the bed, to spoon Izaya, maybe fall back asleep, and let this be a lazy Sunday.

But a piercing scream erupted from outside.
Izaya bolted awake at the same time that Shizuo’s head snapped towards the sound.

“What was that?!” Izaya asked, wide-eyed.

They didn’t have the chance to guess before another shriek rung through the air, this time longer and accompanied by stressful hollers and shouts in Italian and Japanese. It wasn’t like yesterday – it wasn’t the joyful cry of children, but one of a child’s complete and utter terror.

Shizuo’s heartbeat had already taken off. His mind flashed with images of possessed blue eyes and armies of determined enemies that had tracked them around the world. Both he and Izaya turned to face each other at the same time, and Shizuo knew that Izaya was having the same thoughts. Are we no longer safe?

“Stay here,” Shizuo said gravely, before running outside to investigate.

Upon entering the full sunlight, Shizuo squinted and held an arm above his eyes as a visor. He quickly searched for the source of the screaming – just as he heard another one.

“ISABELLA!” He yelled, running to where he had just heard the girl.

However, he could have sworn he had also just heard the whinny of a horse, and there were no horses on the farm.

Sprinting, he came upon a wild commotion – Isabella streaked by him, disappearing into the main house, and Bianca slammed the door behind the girl. Both of their faces had been horror stricken. Another whinny garnered Shizuo’s attention, and he turned to witness Alfie and Alberto dodging the hooves of a massive beast.

At first glance, it was indeed a horse. A black horse. But as it reared itself before Shizuo, there was something off about it. The way its shape was hard to see in the sunlight, hard to focus on…

“What the shit – !” Shizuo jumped back from where the animal’s front legs landed with a heavy thud.

The horse inexplicably calmed at Shizuo’s presence, and Shizuo had a chance to notice what should have been very evident from the start – that the horse’s face was nothing but an inky, swirling, intangible mass.

“Wait a minute,” Shizuo gasped, unable to believe it, “you’re–!”

He couldn’t finish the thought before another form crashed into his chest. This body was smaller, human, and wrapped its arms around Shizuo familiarly. They were strong enough to knock Shizuo back several feet, but they remained upright as the new figure clung to Shizuo desperately.

What really clued Shizuo in though, was that where he should have seen the face of this person, there were only shadows.

“Shizu-chan?!”

Izaya had chosen this moment to arrive at the scene, skidding to a halt in front of them, flushed and anxious. He had managed to throw on some clothes, albeit not much. He also didn’t have much of a chance to assess the situation before the tides changed, again.

As soon as they heard Izaya’s voice, the person against Shizuo retracted their embrace, turned, and waved an arm. A giant, black scythe materialized out of thin air and was swung around towards
Izaya so that it’s blade came within an inch of the man’s neck.

Shizuo, watching helplessly, growled and took a step forward, but the newcomer placed a severe but gentle hand against his chest.

When this became the situation, however, Izaya became completely calm. He paid no mind to the weapon by his throat and regarded the assailant with sardonic pleasantry.

“Always a pleasure to see you, Celty.”

Chapter End Notes

Help caffeinate me to finish this fic: [kofi!]
First of all, Shizuo had a lot of questions.

He had gone through a whole catalogue of emotions in the last thirty seconds, and he wasn’t quite sure where he landed – Panic? Confusion? Joy? Excitement? Panic again? On one hand, Celty was here. He hadn’t seen his best friend in months, and here she was!

On the other hand, his best friend was currently threatening to behead his own nemesis.

“C-Celty,” Shizuo started, moving to stand in front of her, “hold on a sec!”

Both Izaya and Celty glared at each other. Well, Izaya was glaring, but Celty’s rigid stance suggested her mood wasn’t exactly positive. Not that Shizuo blamed her for reacting to Izaya with such disdain, but he would still prefer that Izaya remain in one piece.

“Celty, don’t,” tried Shizuo, a bit calmer. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but don’t.”

Without both hands, she couldn’t speak to him by typing. She seemed determined to keep Izaya at bay, but she looked between the two of them, curious and calculating. Behind them, Shooter huffed and trampled on the ground anxiously. The Petrillo family appeared to have cleared the area, but in the next few seconds, the three of them were joined by another.

“CEEEELLTTYYYYYYYYYY~!”

“You’ve gotta be fuckin’ kidding me,” growled Shizuo, turning towards the familiarly irritating voice.

Surely enough, bounding up the hill was Shinra Kishitani.
“Celty…!” Shinra doubled over to catch his breath. He was carrying enough luggage for two people, bent by the weight of it all. “Don’t just run ahead! You dropped your helmet! What if someone – Oh.”

He had finally looked up and adjusted his glasses well enough to survey the scene in front of him – Celty, headless, with her scythe around Izaya, and Shizuo between them with his arms outstretched like some kind of circus tamer.

“You found them!” exclaimed Shinra, elated.

Either he was completely oblivious to the tension around them, or he simply didn’t care.

“Hey Shinra,” Izaya greeted nonchalantly. “Can you call off your girlfriend? You may have a thing for headlessness, but that doesn’t go for the rest of us.”

The scythe dissolved out of existence, and Celty clenched her fists instead. She dove at Izaya with fury, but Shizuo caught her halfway. The ensuing struggle involved Shizuo keeping a scrambling Celty from clawing at Izaya, who ducked behind Shizuo. They were like a cat and a mouse, with determined dog trying to break them apart.

“It’s like we’ve stepped into another universe,” Shinra observed thoughtfully. “Roles have been reversed.”

“Oi,” grunted Shizuo, dragging Celty away from Izaya by the waist. “You gonna help?!”

“Celty, calm down!” Shinra pleaded, “We didn’t come all this way to fight!”

Finally, Celty relaxed against Shizuo. He let go of her, but Izaya remained positioned so that Shizuo stood between them. Now that Celty was more calm, Shizuo remembered what a joy it was to see her. He didn’t understand how this was happening – how Celty and Shinra had found their way all the way from Ikebukuro to this particular Italian villa – or why, but he couldn’t help but grin.

“I can’t believe you two are really here,” said Shizuo.

Shinra returned Celty’s helmet to her. She fitted it over her neck, whipped out her phone, and began typing.

[I’m glad to see you’re okay.] And then: [You are okay, right?!]

“Uh, yeah,” Shizuo frowned. Why wouldn’t I be? “Why were you attacking Izaya?”

“Yeah, seriously,” griped Izaya.

Celty bristled. [For kidnapping you!]

“Kidnapping?!” Shizuo blanched. “Is that what you think happened?!”

“It was a theory for a while,” Shinra interjected. He had dumped all their luggage to the ground and joined their conversation. “Then, after the last phone call we had from you, Celty was convinced.”

Shizuo groaned. “That’s not what happened.”

“I didn’t kidnap Shizu-chan,” Izaya said defiantly. “He’s a grown man and goes where he wants.”

[Then why haven’t you come home yet?!] Celty asked Shizuo, shoving the phone in his face.
“I – well…” Shizuo stammered.

He exchanged a look with Izaya, whose arms had crossed over his chest defensively. Izaya appeared significantly less thrilled to see Celty and Shinra than Shizuo did. Then again, Celty did just attack him. When Izaya met his eyes, he just shrugged. Apparently he was uninterested in explaining the events that had led them here. It seemed Shizuo was on his own, for now.

“It’s been… complicated,” Shizuo settled on.

[I want to know what happened.] demanded Celty. [Why have you been away so long? If you weren’t kidnapped, why are you still together?!!]

“I…” Shizuo scratched the back of his head, stumped. All those questions had long answers.

“Celty, Celty! Slow down!” Shinra interjected before Shizuo could even begin to explain. He waved his hands as he tried to placate her. “We just got here! I’m sure they’ll explain everything. Let’s just take a breath, and –”

“What the hell is going on here?!”

The four from Ikebukuro turned to the new voice, startled.

Sawako had emerged from the house, frantic. She was holding up a frying pan like a weapon, ready to take on whatever was brewing outside. What she found was four arguing adults and a horse. Actually, Shizuo noticed that Shooter had at some point transformed into a motorcycle at some point, perhaps more aware of their surroundings than the adults.

“Where’d the horse go?!” Sawako demanded.

Izaya feigned confusion. “What horse?”

Sawako blinked. “There was definitely a horse.”

“I don’t see a horse,” said Shizuo.

“Fine,” Sawako huffed. “Then who the hell are these two?!” She pointed her frying pan menacingly at Shizuo and Celty.

“These are our friends,” Shizuo said, “from Tokyo.”


“Nice to meet you!” chirped Shinra, waving. “Sorry about the intrusion.”

“But–” Sawako’s grip on the frying pan tightened. Her eyes narrowed at Celty. “Alfie said he saw a headless woman!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Izaya tactfully. “She’s just shy. She’s pretty ugly, too, so she’s always hiding her face. Don’t take it personally if she doesn’t say much. It’s the anxiety.”

A shadow whacked Izaya in the back of the head, but Sawako didn’t seem to notice.

She didn’t seem convinced, either.

“C’mon,” Shizuo forced a chuckle at Sawako. “A headless woman… That’s crazy, isn’t it?”
“Impossible,” Izaya agreed.

Celty crossed her arms in a huff.

Sawako gaped at them. Even Shizuo knew their group was a hard pill to swallow. It was kind of a miracle that a superhuman and a sociopath had remained in the Petrillo’s good graces for this long – a shady doctor and a shadow woman wouldn’t help. He felt they might as well have a neon sign over their head that said: Definitely Not Suspicious!

Eventually, though, she lowered the frying pan.

“You two… are some really strange guys,” Sawako sighed exasperatedly. “I still don’t really get it. Where the hell did these two come from?” She jerked a finger in Celty and Shinra’s direction.

“Ikebukuro,” answered Shinra.

“They surprised us,” said Izaya. “We had no idea they were planning this. What incredible friends they are!”

An eyebrow rose on Sawako’s forehead. “Wasn’t she just attacking you?”

None of them could deny it.

“That’s just their bit,” said Shizuo. “Like a… secret handshake.”

“Mmmmmhm…” Sawako hummed doubtfully.

“We are sorry,” said Shizuo, “about the uproar.”

“We didn’t mean to frighten anyone,” said Shinra. “We were just excited to see our friends.”

Sawako put her free hand on her hip. “Let me calm down the others. I wouldn’t want to kick out your friends, but…” She looked behind her, towards the house.

Isabella, Alfie, and Alberto were peering, half-hidden, through an open window.

Sawako shrugged. “Not sure we have the room to put up anymore wanderers, but maybe I can convince them to have everyone for dinner tonight? It’ll be fine… probably. As long as you’re not leading crazy murderers this way, I guess.”

Shizuo and Izaya exchanged a look.

She was about to turn back towards the house when she fixed Shizuo and Izaya with a wry smirk and pointed her pan at them. “Oh yeah, by the way, you guys can clean your own sheets from now on.”

Both men paled.

[What does she mean?] asked Celty.

As Sawako left, Shinra and Celty studied them. For the first time since the couple had arrived, they gave Shizuo and Izaya a proper appraisal. Shizuo, personally, didn’t take a good look in the mirror this morning. However, Izaya had only managed to thrown last night’s sweater and a pair of ragged shorts before he had sprinted towards the earlier commotion. Neither managed to cover up the marks Shizuo had left with his mouth, on Izaya’s neck and inner thigh.
Shizuo hadn’t noticed, having been too focused on keeping Celty from killing him.

By the way Izaya was looking back at him, Shizuo wondered if he had similar evidence on his visible skin.

They looked back at Shinra and Celty. Shinra’s face twitched and contorted in ways that made the gears turning in his head very apparent. Celty was, naturally, harder to read. She had her hand to the chin of her helmet, thoughtful.

“Well, see,” Shizuo started clumsily, “there’s something you two should probably know…”

“We’re sleeping together,” Izaya finished plainly.

Shizuo winced, blushing fiercely.

It took a few more moments for the statement to register for the others, however. Then, at the same time that Celty’s helmet shot off from a geyser of aghast shadows, Shinra broke out into a grin and whooped, “I knew it!!”

They had no choice but to tell the whole story.

Having sat their friends at one of the Petrillos’ outside picnic tables, Shizuo and Izaya began from the beginning: the post cards. They recounted their journey from America, to Europe, to Egypt, to Europe again, to here. Nowadays, Shizuo and Izaya could play off each other quite naturally, and fill in the gaps that the other left out. There were bits that Shizuo knew well enough, and then there were details that Izaya had excruciatingly memorized.

Both opted not to include any of the cheesy bits, the parts where they had expressed any sort of feelings for each other. It didn’t cross Shizuo’s mind, first of all, because there had been so much else going on. Izaya was not jumping in to describe Shizuo’s grand confessions, either. The subject was skirted around, not entirely absent. A ghost of their emotional journey was present in their tale, because to have gotten to where they had, there was no denying how deeply they felt about each other. Regardless, they stuck to storyline of Josiah Hummel, Vulture, and the Kazbek Initiative.

The whole time, Celty was bent over as if she might be ill. Shinra, on the other hand, was beaming like a kid in a candy shop. His eyes twinkled as he watched his two childhood friends finally getting along. He practically glowed at the parts about Shizuo’s arm and Izaya’s Insight scars. Because if there was one thing Shinra was more of than a romantic, it was a sadistic freak.

Meanwhile, Shooter… was a horse, and didn’t have an opinion on the matter. The creature sat patiently by as a motorcycle, while Shizuo and Izaya wrapped up their tale.

“...So that’s when I remembered the old couple in Boston,” Shizuo was saying, “and thought, ‘What the hell?’ And here we are.”

“An eloquent finish, Shizu-chan.”

Shizuo frowned and rubbed his chin. “It sounds kinda crazy, when you say it all out loud.”

“Kinda’?!” Izaya guffawed. “If Shinra was a real doctor, he’d have us committed.”

Taking no offense to the last comment, Shinra gleamed and rose to his feet. “Incredible! Why didn’t you tell us sooner? We could have helped, don’t you think?”
“Didn’t want it,” said Izaya.

“All that stuff you mentioned,” began Shinra, “that technology, it’s almost supernatural! Vulture and – Insight, was it? Fascinating!” He may have not been currently dressed in his typical lab coat, but he had that manic look of a mad scientist that he got sometimes, approaching Shizuo and Izaya like test subjects. “Nevermind the hickeys, but these lines on your neck… Those are from that Insight machine? They actually contain information?”

Izaya swatted him away, glaring.

So Shinra turned his attention to Shizuo – “And how could you just completely gloss over the bit about your arm, Shizuo-kun!” He latched onto Shizuo’s arm, poking and prodding. “We have some of that science right here, and we could–!”

“Don’t touch me,” Shizuo growled.

Shinra immediately backed off.

“Anyways,” said Izaya, hands on his hips, “that explains how we got here. It doesn’t explain how you two found us.” His eyes narrowed. “Or why you came.”

Celty jumped up. [That explained nothing!]

Shizuo frowned. “What do you mean?”

[I mean that that doesn’t explain what he said before. About you and him!]

Shizuo scratched the back of his neck. “Oh. You mean us sleeping together?”

Smoke puffed out from her helmet. [Yes! He’s joking, right?]

Out of the corner of his eye, Shizuo noticed that Izaya was watching him with an air of apprehension. Shizuo didn’t know why; he thought the matter was rather simple.

“No,” said Shizuo firmly. “That happened.”

Celty leaned back as if she’d been slapped. As soon as she began to jab out a new message, Shizuo put his hand over hers. He already knew what she was going to ask.

“Because I’m in love with him, and I’m pretty sure he loves me, too.”

Both Celty and Shinra froze entirely.

Even Izaya, who knew this already, appeared shocked that Shizuo would profess his love in front of people they knew. Shizuo observed the color rise to the man’s face, his expression somewhere along embarrassed, amazed, or horrified.

Celty went rigid, but was impossible to read further. Shinra gawked. Neither said anything for a whole minute.

“Shizu-chan….” Izaya sighed, rolling his eyes despite the blush on his face. “As usual, you’re lacking in tact.”

“What?” Shizuo frowned. “It’s true!”

“Is it?” asked Shinra, awe-struck. “I thought you two might be messing around, but–”
Celty, evidently, wanted to hear no more of this. She turned on her heel, jumped on Shooter, and took off.

“Oi!” Shizuo hollered at the same time that Shinra whined, “Celty!!!”

Shinra wilted. “She keeps doing that…” He perked up again instantly, though. “Well, in that case, I have my own questions for you two!”

“I’m going after her,” said Shizuo, already jogging.

“And leave me here with him?!” Izaya eyed Shinra skeptically.

The doctor was examining Izaya, particularly the scars on his neck, with eager interest.

“I’ll be back soon,” Shizuo promised. And with that, he took off in the direction of the tracks Shooter had left behind.

Shizuo searched around the outskirts of town for about an hour. He figured Celty wouldn’t be among civilians, and that she would have found as much isolation as possible. Luckily, Shizuo knew the town well enough to know where to look. A few times, he stopped to ask a local – in English – if that had seen a woman on a black motorcycle, and they pointed away from the town’s interior.

He quickly regretted not having thrown on shoes before he ran out of his room this morning, and for not returning for some once he had started searching for Celty.

Finally, Shizuo heard a familiar bray. He was in a woodier parts of town. The area was too thin to be a forest but had more shadows than the majority of farmland surrounding them. Trees lent themselves as decent cover for a dullahan and her supernatural steed.

Shooter trotted up to him, leaned down and nuzzled him as best a headless horse could.

“Hey buddy,” Shizuo greeted him with a pat to his neck.

Shooter answered with a gentle whinny.

Next, Shizuo saw Celty crouched by a stream, staring into the water silently. He gave Shooter a parting pat and joined his friend.

“Hey,” he said.

They say in silence for a while longer. The ground was damp from last night’s storm, but the little creek was all the more beautiful for it. Little bugs glided across the top, and tadpoles and minnows swam past them.

Celty took out her phone and typed, [It’s beautiful here.]

“Yeah,” said Shizuo, looking around. A mild breeze combed through the branches around them. The earth was soft and mossy beneath him, and the shade was soothing on the otherwise hot day.

“S’definitely not Ikebukuro, but I like it.”

She didn’t type anything back, but turned to the stream, as if pondering. Shizuo nudged her with his shoulder teasingly. He gave her an easy smile.

“I missed you, ya know.”
[Clearly not that much] said Celty, not matching his attitude at all, [if you’ve been settling down here.]

“Of course I did!” Shizuo argued, “And I haven’t been settling down here. This is only temporary.”

Shizuo hadn’t realized someone could type so bitterly until he observed Celty like this. [That’s not what it looks like.]

“So...?” Shizuo started, “Izaya really did want me to kill him a month ago. That’s not a state of mind you just bounce back from. He wanted me to go back without him, actually, but I love him too much to leave him.”

[Stop saying that.] Celty typed indignantly, [Of all the things you’ve said so far, that’s the craziest. Cyborgs, or whatever, and criminal masterminds – All that I can believe. But you? In love with Izaya? You two hate each other!]

“We did hate each other,” Shizuo corrected. “Sometimes I still want to throttle him, to tell you the truth. He’s an infuriating person to be in love with, so I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it.”

[Are you brainwashed?] she asked, genuinely concerned. [Like the cyborgs, maybe?]

Shizuo chuckled. He had always known that she would have trouble believing him. “Yeah, that seems more likely, doesn’t it? But no, I’m not. I’m sure of it. I almost was, so I can tell. This is real. I really love him.”

Celty’s fingers went still against her keyboard, and she studied him silently.

Shizuo shifted under her invisible gaze. “What?”

[You’re less miserable than I would have imagined.] said Celty.

When Shizuo merely raised an eyebrow, she continued.

[There have been times when Shinra has suggested that you two] – she hesitated – [get together. I didn’t agree. I could only assume it would be Izaya torturing you, and you would be miserable and angry all the time. You don’t seem that way, though. It’s confusing.]

“Shinra thought that?” Shizuo gaped. “Seriously?”

[Since high school, I think.]

“Since high school,” Shizuo repeated. The world suddenly got a lot smaller. He got to his feet, and Celty followed.

[I remember fending you off from murdering him the day you two first met. You almost killed each other again a few months ago. Now I’m supposed to believe that you’re in love with each other?]

“L-look,” Shizuo began earnestly. “It surprised me at first, too, but–”

[But what? What could possibly erase all the terrible things he’s done?]

Shizuo ground his teeth, frustrated. “Nothing’s been erased, but somethings have changed. You were listening to that whole spiel, weren’t you? He’s been through a lot of shit, and he–”
He stole my head. Celty held the message in Shizuo’s face, defiantly.

Shizuo snarled. “What?”

She jabbed the message in his face four more times – He [Stole] My Head.

“I’m not trying to defend what he’s done in the past,” Shizuo snapped. “And didn’t Shinra keep your head from you for years? While lying to you about it?”

Celty stumbled out another message. That was different!

“Was it? Because it sounds like you’re being hypocritical.”

Shinra had his reasons. He loves me and didn’t want to lose me. I’ve come to understand that.

“So how come you get to be in love with a selfish asshole, but not me?”

Really? Izaya?


A hiss of smoke emitted from Celty’s neck. Shinra isn’t Izaya! He hasn’t tried to kill you!

“No, but him and his psycho dad tried to dissect me a dozen times when I was young. They did dissect you. But no, you’re right. Your boyfriend is a saint, comparatively.”

The shadows of the forest around them grew darker, and Celty seemed to grow bigger with them. They squared off tensely, neither backing down.

This wasn’t how Shizuo had seen reuniting with his best friend. He and Celty had never fought before, and he hated that the subject of their dispute was something that had been making him so happy. When he had woken up that morning, everything had felt perfect. He hadn’t been thinking of the future at all.

He’d been foolish not to.

He’s rubbed off on you. said Celty.

Shizuo huffed. “What?”

I don’t remember you being this derisive. I miss your bluntness.

That stung. “Well, sorry for not wanting to pound out every problem I have anymore.”

Celty recoiled. That’s not what I meant…

“Besides, did you really think I would want to fight you?”

No… I don’t want to fight you, either.

They had come to a deadlock, but Shizuo was less than satisfied.

Still… continued Celty, what do you think is going to happen when you two come home? That everyone’s just going to accept this, or look the other way?
Shizuo crossed his arms petulantly. “I don’t really give a fuck what others think.”

[Shouldn’t you?!] She typed rapidly. [What about Kasuka? You don’t think Kasuka will be disappointed? He knows your history with Izaya, and–]

Celty stopped typing when Shizuo snorted.

“Isn’t Kasuka dating a serial killer?”

[Ruri?!]

“You knew she wasn’t all human, right?”

Celty typed defensively, [So did Shinra.]

“Yeah, well, whatever. I figured it out myself.”

[But a serial killer?!]

“It’s none of my business, and I do feel bad for almost killing her once, apparently. When you travel with Izaya Orihara, you learn a lot of shit.”

[Okay, fine, so maybe Kasuka wouldn’t care. But what about others? Tom? Varona? Varona almost killed him for you. What about Akane? Remember when he made a child believe you were going to kill her father, so that she would kill you instead?]

A vein in Shizuo’s temple throbbed. Those were harder points to combat. He wasn’t sure who he was livid with – Izaya, for being so terrible in the first place? Celty, for rubbing Shizuo’s face in the man’s past mistakes? Or himself for not having seen the whole picture?

“I just figured…!” He stammered, his teeth grinding together, “that… I don’t know! I’d figure it out as I went along, like always!”

[That’s not fair, Shizuo. Other people count on you!]

Shizuo clenched his fists, blood beginning to boil. “I never asked them to! I’m not Ikebukuro’s personal protector.”

[This isn’t like you. You’re not this selfish.]

“‘Selfish’?!” Now Shizuo really did want to punch something. “For what? Wanting a relationship with someone?!”

[That someone is a man who’s done terrible things to people, and you don’t seem to care anymore!]

“It’s not like I forgot any of that! But it won’t be like that when we go back.”

[IF you come back!]

“Of course we’re coming back!” Shizuo began pacing, blood pumping too heavily to keep still.

Maybe he was selfish. He hadn’t thought he could ever be angry at Celty, but he was. He was angry at her for being honest. But Shizuo was as stubborn as Izaya had always accused him of being. He took a deep breath, attempting to calm himself, because he didn’t want to fight his best friend. He
didn’t want to forsake the man he loved either.

“Celty, you don’t know him like I do. If he was the same bastard you knew before, I wouldn’t still be here.”

She read his change of demeanor and hesitated. [I want to believe you, but…]

“There you guys are!!”

Shizuo and Celty turned.

At the sight of Shinra skipping towards her, the shadows of the area retreated back to normalcy.

“We heard Shizuo yelling, and figured you’d be here.”

Shinra was followed by Izaya, who had changed into more reasonable clothing and put on some shoes. His expression was sour, clearly not having enjoyed Shinra’s sole company for past hour. He was also carrying Shizuo’s sneakers. Shizuo’s heart ached with his presence.

As he approached, Izaya noticed Shizuo’s frazzled state. “Alright?”

“Yeah,” Shizuo lied.

Izaya frowned, unconvinced, but he didn’t press it. He handed the shoes to Shizuo.

When Shizuo thanked him, he gave Celty a pointed look. There had even been socks stuffed into one of the sneakers.

Celty crossed her arms and looked elsewhere.

“Can’t believe you left me alone with Shinra,” Izaya complained. “Now he’s trying to experiment on me. You never told me how persistent he could be.”

Shizuo managed a tired smirk. “How awful. No idea what that’s like.”

“I can’t believe I’ve become one of Shinra’s favorite freaks,” Izaya pouted.

If this wasn’t something good, then why did looking at Izaya bring Shizuo such calm? “I’m starting to get the feeling that you always have been.”

Shinra was too busy fawning over Celty to pay attention. “So? How come you ran off, Celty?”

She was reluctant to type an answer. [Just caught off guard, I guess.]

“You were?” Izaya scoffed. “We were the ones ambushed this morning.”

“Now, now you two,” Shinra beamed at each of them, “let’s not argue. Are we really going to waste this beautiful morning at each other’s throats? Celty, we’ve come all this way. Don’t you think it’s about time we treated this like a proper vacation? We haven’t even had a meal today… And we’re in Italy! Where they have one of the most famous worldwide cuisines!”

At the mention of food, Shizuo’s stomach growled. Shinra had a point – they should eat. Maybe he’d even be less cranky about this whole ordeal.

Celty, who didn’t eat, just endured Shinra’s enthusiasm and shrugged in acceptance.
She must have shared Shizuo’s fatigue from their conversation, and at this point was looking for excuses to avoid the subject.

They found themselves at one of the town’s cafes, sitting outside at a quaint bistro table. The waiter was initially startled by Celty’s biker-chick appearance, but most in town were familiar enough with the Petrillos’ two house guests that he welcomed Shizuo and Izaya hospitably.

“Amazing!” Shinra crooned, “It’s practically like you’re locals!”

Celty sat in brooding silence.

Izaya ordered for them, and Shinra bloomed around the latte that was delivered to him. “This is delicious!”

Once they’d settled into their meal, Shinra finally began recounting how he and Celty had come to be there. After the last phone call that the couple had shared with Shizuo and Izaya, Celty had insisted that they find Shizuo, fearing that Izaya had pulled some sort of horrible trick. Of course, wherever Celty went Shinra would follow. However, it wasn’t so simple as buying a plane ticket for a headless dullahan.

“So we had to go through some really shady people,” Shinra shivered at the memories.

“I could’ve gotten you here easily,” Izaya said smugly.

“But you were in Tokyo!” Shinra griped, “not in Tokyo! That’s the point. That’s why it took so long!”

Apparently, they’d even used Shinra’s father’s connections to track down their elusive friends. It was impossible to get a headless woman on a commercial airplane. Without proper ID or a passport, the only way for Celty to travel from country to country was through back channels. As for how they had tracked down Shizuo and Izaya, it all came back to the Petrillos.

“We knew some of the places you had been to in Boston, thanks to your e-mails to Celty,” Shinra was saying, “so we managed to find that old couple with the restaurant. The old lady was so friendly! And their food was amaazaaazing! After that, it was just a matter of getting to her family’s villa, which is… Well, here!”

He capped off his tale with a hearty spoonful of risotto, filling his cheeks like a greedy chipmunk.

“Da foo ‘s reery goo d ‘ere too!” He added while chewing.

After brunch, Shinra insisted on getting a tour of the town. He acted like such a stereotypical tourist that Shizuo and Izaya often found themselves exchanging wry looks. Celty was far less entertained, but she humored the man she loved. There was an old Catholic church Shinra wanted to see, and he needed to try the gelato sold by a young woman by the plaza fountain.

Here and there were decaying statues of figures in old Roman myths or Christian scripture. Shinra snapped photos of anything that caught his interest. The other three followed wherever he went without complaint. Shizuo and Izaya already knew the town well enough, and their days of tourism were long past them.

Celty had yet to type out another word since her dispute with Shizuo, and their clash still weighed on him. They each put on a cheerful façade, but Izaya wasn’t as clueless as Shinra. Izaya frequently
looked between the two, thinking but not commenting on the evident tension.

“Celty!!” Shinra called from beneath a church’s stained glass windows, “Look at all the colors!”

It was Sunday, so mass was in full procession throughout the day. The little town was a not a big tourist destination, so Shinra got his fair share of quizzical or perturbed looks from the Italian residents.

“I must admit,” Izaya mused at one point, “that this is not how I imagined this day going.”

Shinra had dragged Celty to pose for pictures.

“How did you see it?” asked Shizuo.

Izaya leered at him from head to toe, and Shizuo got the point. Shizuo had to admit that he had also anticipated more of that when he woke up this morning.

“Guess that’s off the table…” Shizuo grumbled dejectedly.

“We could always ditch them,” Izaya suggested.

Shizuo considered it.

When there was nothing left in the town for Shinra to capture in a photo, the group made their way back up the hill to the Petrillos’ villa. By the time they returned, the family had relaxed from that morning’s incident. They now received Shinra and Celty with much more curiosity than fear. Alberto paid them little attention and merely went back to his chores.

“You have a lovely home,” Shinra complimented them warmly.

Sawako stood by the whole time to translate for everyone. Bianca and Alfie were still wary of the two strangers, but Isabella followed them, particularly Celty, with fascination. She babbled at Celty in Italian, and Celty became flustered by the attention. When asked what they did for a living, Shinra and Celty kept it simple: A doctor and a courier, respectively.

In his nearby pen, Lucca began to fuss from all the activity in the house. Celty, who hadn’t yet realized there was a baby, was thrilled. She loomed over Lucca and flourished at the cuteness.

“Want to hold him?” asked Sawako.

Celty waved her hands in front of her in a means to say *No no, I couldn’t possibly…!*

“He’s chill,” said Sawako, scooping up the child and plopping him in Celty’s unwitting arms.

Celty clutched the kid and looked around anxiously.

“That’s fine,” Sawako chortled. “This one still won’t hold him.” She gestured to Shizuo, “Some people just hate kids.”

“I don’t hate kids,” Shizuo said defensively.

“Celty!!” Shinra grasped his hands together and swooned, “I never thought that seeing you with a child would be so moving!”

Returning Lucca to Sawako, Celty jabbed Shinra in the ribs and stalked off.
“She okay?” asked Sawako.

Isabella followed Celty faster than anyone, asking if she was a superhero or science-fiction heroine. Celty had no method of answering besides shrugging. Isabella took this as a ‘yes’ and babbled on. Shinra was too busy rubbing his new bruise to respond.

“Tired from travelling,” said Izaya.

The four from Ikebukuro joined the Petrillos for an early supper. Most of the meal was occupied by Shinra’s jabbering, and the Petrillos humored him hospitably. He praised their cooking, their yard, their willingness to look after his two friends. Shizuo and Izaya tolerated his patronizing tone in that last bit. Nothing seemed to improve Celty’s demeanor, however.

Her and Shinra remained on opposite pages for the whole day – Shinra, ecstatic at everything, and Celty, wanting to get away from there.

“There were tons of places I wanted to stop and check out on our way here,” Shinra was explaining to the Petrillos, who barely cared, “but Celty was adamant on finding Shizuo. We had no idea they were shacking up together in such a way!”

The Petrillos turned towards Shizuo and Izaya, and the two of them glared at Shinra.

“I should have seen it coming, though,” Shinra nodded sagely. “I always had a feeling about those two.”

Once again, the shadows around them began to multiply. With the sun beginning to set over the villa, they were already more intense, but Celty’s gloomy presence made it all the worse. Thankfully, the Petrillos didn’t seem to notice, and Shinra continued to gab with them. For someone so in love with Celty, he seemed oblivious to her mood.

Dinner ended and the family cleared the table and returned inside. The other four remained outside, soaking up the last rays of sunlight on a pleasant evening. Shinra kept at the wine the Petrillos had offered with dinner, truly living like a man on a paradise getaway.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever seen you drunk, Shinra,” Izaya observed delightedly.

“Am I?” asked Shinra with a subtle slur and pink-tinged cheeks.

All three across from him nodded.

“Well, why shouldn’t I be? This is a cause for celebration!”

[Is it?] It was the first thing Celty had typed since that morning in the woods.

Shizuo felt his gut seize up in anticipation for whatever sprawling argument was about to ensue. Though he hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

Shinra quirked an eyebrow. “Sure it is. We’ve reunited with our friends after a long journey, and after all their years of fighting, they’re finally getting along!”

He fixed Shizuo and Izaya with a sloppy leer. Shizuo grimaced.

[Izaya is not my friend] Celty countered.

“Fair enough,” Shinra chuckled. “No offense, Izaya-kun.”
“None taken,” said Izaya, bemused. “It’s not like I’ve ever been particularly fond of your very inhuman girlfriend, anyways.”

Celty’s fists clenched on the table’s surface.

“But that’s part of what makes Celty so alluuuuuuring!” Shinra took another swig of wine and hiccupped.

[I thought you didn’t consider Shizuo to be human] Celty challenged, [and that’s why you hated him so much.]

Izaya rested his chin upon his knuckles, his elbow on the table. “Hmm… I guess after seeing Shizu-chan almost die a few times, I came to the conclusion that he was human enough.”

“Thanks,” Shizuo grunted.

“No problem. But then again, he’s not just human. He’s superhuman. In many ways, he’s more human than all the others because he gives into his emotions so willingly. And then the ways he superpasses them don’t bother me anymore.”

Shizuo cursed himself for finding this reason so damn endearing.

[How are we supposed to know that you’re not just manipulating Shizuo for your own sick enjoyment?]

Izaya smirked, “You don’t.”

Celty rose to her feet and shoved her phone in Shizuo’s direction. [See?! He’s taking advantage of how good a person you are!]

It wasn’t Izaya that Shizuo was insulted by, though. “Despite what some people might say, I’m not an idiot, Celty. I know when this flea is manipulating people, myself included. Remember? I knew before anyone else!”

Shaking her head, Celty deleted the previous message rapidly. [I didn’t mean that you were stupid. But I’m not convinced that this isn’t one of his ploys!]

Izaya rose to meet her. “Luckily, I don’t have to convince you of anything. Shizu-chan doesn’t need the blessings of a headless woman.”

They squared off: Celty radiating contempt, Izaya as provocative as ever.

Shizuo got up to stand between them again, his headache returning in full force. “Will you two fucking quit it? Celty, I don’t need you to try and rescue me – from nothing. And you...” he pointed at Izaya, “stop making this even more difficult!”

“Seriously, guys!” Shinra whimpered and followed them to where they were standing. He was still holding his nearly-empty wine glass. “You’re spoiling our vacation!”

[We’re not on vacation!] Celty reminded him fervently. [Why are you so okay with this?]

Shinra tapped his chin thoughtfully, his booze sloshing around in the glass. “Hmm... I always believed they should be a couple. The three of you are closest to me, and I wanted us all to be able to hang out together, just like today.”
“So you were thinking of yourself?”

“Mostly,” Shinra admitted. “I may have hoped that Shizuo and Izaya would be good for each other, but Izaya definitely got to a point where he wouldn’t really have been good for anyone.”

Izaya scoffed.

“Oi,” Shizuo snarled, “I thought you were on our side.”

“I am!” Shinra said, “but I must also side with my beloved. Besides, she has point, she just hasn’t gotten there yet.”

“That being?” Shizuo asked impatiently.

Even Celty looked at Shinra, unsure of where he was going.

“Contrary to Celty,” Shinra began, “I actually believe Izaya reciprocates your feelings. However, Izaya has always been good at seeing the obvious that no one else does and reading the future. No doubt he’s anticipated similar reactions to your relationship for when you two return to Ikebukuro. Shizuo-kun, you have many friends and family members who care about your happiness. These people will likely not be fans of Izaya, because few are.”

As Shizuo listened, he felt Izaya tense increasingly beside him.

Shinra continued matter-of-factly, “Izaya would have already considered the possibilities of the two of you staying together in such a hostile environment. Were you two to return home and proclaim your newfound love – you, Shizuo, would get an earful from those around you. Like Celty, they’d all probably try to convince you to end this relationship.

“Maybe you wouldn’t listen to them, Shizuo, but! Maybe you would! And the Izaya I know would never allow a possibility that could usurp his own interests. If, back in your natural habitat of Ikebukuro, you came to your senses and decided to leave Izaya, it would likely devastate him in ways he’s never experienced.

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“Maybe you wouldn’t listen to them, Shizuo, but! Maybe you would! And the Izaya I know would never allow a possibility that could usurp his own interests. If, back in your natural habitat of Ikebukuro, you came to your senses and decided to leave Izaya, it would likely devastate him in ways he’s never experienced.

“The fact that he’s allowed anyone to get this close to him is astounding, and goes against everything he’s preached to himself for his whole life. I find it hard to believe, though, that he would leave himself completely vulnerable and hasn’t tried to find some safeguard against the chance of you rejecting him. Everything you two have had out here, alone, may be real, but this is a bubble. What happens when you come back to reality? So, I imagine your extended stay here is more to keep you away from that possibility Shizuo, than it is for both your benefits.”

He punctuated his spiel with another hearty gulp of wine.

“Am I right?” He finished drunkenly.

Neither Shizuo, Izaya, nor Celty knew how to respond. They stood across from Shinra, silent and overwhelmed. The only sounds amongst them were that of the wind and a distant helicopter.

Shizuo hadn’t realized his own pulse had quickened. The scenario that Shinra had just presented was one that Shizuo had never considered before. It was impossible, though, wasn’t it? He knew Izaya now, better than anyone, and the Izaya he was in love with wouldn’t keep Shizuo on a leash. It was simply impossible.

At the same time though, a nagging doubt in the back of Shizuo’s mind reminded him, But the Izaya you knew before… would totally pull that sort of shit, wouldn’t he?
Beside him, Izaya was shaking.

“That’s not… That’s not what he’s doing,” said Shizuo, but his voice came out as an uncertain murmur. He turned to Izaya, “…Right?”

When Izaya met his eyes, Shizuo immediately regretted his tone. Shinra’s rant may have made Izaya angry, but it was the doubt in Shizuo’s voice that did the damage.

Izaya said nothing.

Instead, he strode forward and punched Shinra square in the nose.

“OW!” Shinra wailed, stumbling backwards. He fell on his ass, clutching his face. “You broke my nose!!”

Izaya whipped back to Shizuo. “Well?!”

But Shizuo was dumbstruck. Even Celty didn’t react fast enough to save Shinra, nor did she go after Izaya when she regained her wits. She went to Shinra’s side, who was writhing in pain. Shizuo couldn’t take his eyes off Izaya, who appeared far more hurt than the man on the ground.

“For fuck’s sake, Shizu-chan,” Izaya gritted out, “if that’s what you believe, then fine. Just go back to Ikebukuro, like I urged you to in the fucking first place.”

With that, Izaya did what Izaya did best:

He ran.

Shizuo was tired of chasing people today.

First Celty, now Izaya… He supposed chasing Izaya was always going to be a part of his life, but it didn’t make it any easier to find the damn brat, especially now under the cover of nightfall.

“IZAYA!!”

Unlike Celty, Izaya didn’t have a motorcycle to ride off on. Izaya was on foot, and Shizuo had wasted zero time in running after him. It wasn’t too long before Shizuo caught up, grabbing Izaya by the arm and halting him.

Shizuo spun the other man to face him. “Izaya–”

“Let go,” Izaya snapped, wrenching his arm free. He continued stomping ahead, with less speed but just as much determination.

They hadn’t gone far. They were still in the Petrillos’ orchard, surrounded by looming trees.

“Look,” Shizuo started, hot on Izaya’s trail, “I’m sorry I listened to Shinra of all people, but c’mon… You have to admit–”

Izaya stopped, finally, and faced him. “Yes?” He prompted, daring Shizuo to keep talking.

Shizuo took a deep breath. “Admit it. He had a point.”
“Of course he had a point,” said Izaya. “Shinra’s the person who knows me best, besides you. Or so I thought.”

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“Oh, don’t give me that bullshit. I’m in my rights to consider that you might be up to something terrible. That doesn’t mean I believe that you have been!”

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“Okay, so what if I have been?” asked Izaya menacingly.

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Shizuo scowled. “You haven’t.”

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“How can you be so sure? Aren’t I the terrible, awful person that all your precious friends want to save you from?”

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“We both know that you’re not the same you that they knew.”

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“I have thought about it, though.”

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Shizuo blinked. “What do you mean?”

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“I mean…” Izaya bit his lip, not as ominous as he wished he was, “that I have thought about what would happen if we went back to Ikebukuro…” He looked up at Shizuo, who stared at him openly. “That’s part of it, isn’t it? Why I haven’t wanted to leave here.”

“I mean…” Izaya bit his lip, not as ominous as he wished he was, “that I have thought about what would happen if we went back to Ikebukuro…” He looked up at Shizuo, who stared at him openly. “That’s part of it, isn’t it? Why I haven’t wanted to leave here.”

“But you…” Shizuo took a step back, hesitant to hear the rest.

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“Not like how Shinra said!” Izaya explained desperately. “He was right about me looking ahead, about me wondering how you would react to others telling you to dump me. If that happened, you would still have a life around you. I’d have nothing, not even the will to return to my old life.”

“Not like how Shinra said!” Izaya explained desperately. “He was right about me looking ahead, about me wondering how you would react to others telling you to dump me. If that happened, you would still have a life around you. I’d have nothing, not even the will to return to my old life.”

It was brutally honest, but that alone was enough to quell Shizuo’s rage. Perhaps Izaya was more upset at himself for thinking that way than he was at Shizuo.

“It’s wrong,” said Shizuo.

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“I know,” said Izaya. “I’m sick. We both knew this already.”

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“No,” Shizuo shook his head. “I mean – did you ever really think that I’d let anyone change my mind?”

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“You can’t know that you won’t,” Izaya retorted. “Can you promise me that, if we go back, you’re not going to look back on these months and just go, ‘Geez, what a fucking mistake!’ Can you?!”

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“I can,” said Shizuo, easily and earnestly. “I promise.”

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It was Izaya’s turn to shake his head. “I want you all to myself but you could lose everyone else because of me. Did you ever consider that? Have you ever fought with Celty before today?”

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“Because Celty was never the harbinger of chaos that I thought she was. It was me. I can’t help destroying everything around me.”

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A buzzing in Shizuo’s ears nagged at him, but there was more to worry about than the damn bugs. Around them, Shizuo noticed small lights dance amongst the shadows – fireflies, most likely.

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“You can’t destroy me,” Shizuo promised.

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Izaya was determined to brush him off. “I don’t want to, but they’re right. This only works in seclusion, with strangers. Not around people that actually know us.”

“No,” Shizuo repeated desperately, gripping Izaya’s shoulders, “nononono. They’re not right. This is right. I know it is.

Much to Shizuo’s chagrin, the helicopter he’d noticed earlier had gotten closer. Shizuo couldn’t see it, but its chopping blades made it hard for Shizuo to hear Izaya and himself. The wind picked up from the force of its flight, making their hair whip into their faces.

Izaya’s eyes had gone wide, his face pale in the moonlight, his gaze somewhere over Shizuo’s shoulder. “Shizu-chan…”

But Shizuo had a point to make. “I don’t know a lot, but I know about us.” There was so much about Izaya that Shizuo knew he loved, from the sprawling conversations about anything, to the look on Izaya’s face when he was watching people go about everyday life, even to the way Izaya tasted. “There’s no way this is a bad thing, and I won’t let anyone tell me—”

“Shizu-chan!”

“What?!”

“The trees!” Izaya gasped, and pointed behind Shizuo.

Straightening, Shizuo looked around them. Somehow, he’d failed to notice that the shadows of the trees had been moving. Not only that, but there were tiny pairs of lights surrounding them and closing in. It took Shizuo only a second to realize that they weren’t lights at all, but eyes.

Glowing blue eyes.

An explosion shook the ground, a pillar of fire and smoke rising from the direction of the Petrillos’ villa.

Chapter End Notes

p.s. why yes, i did finally add a final chapter count, and i’m pretty sure that's exactly what it's going to be.

thank you for reading!
Shizuo grabbed Izaya’s hand and ran.

The fire spread rapidly, blanketing the orchard in soot and ash. Sparks flew past their faces, grazing their clothes and skin. Shizuo barely felt the sting; all he could feel was his heart racing and Izaya’s hand in his.

Everywhere Shizuo could see, blue lights streaked alongside them. More sets of eyes seemed to appear with every step they took – dropping out of trees and emerging from the darkness.

Twenty…thirty... Shizuo tried to count the Kazbeks closing in on them, No, more. Maybe a hundred.

Several attacked at once, as soon as they were close enough. One jumped and clawed at Shizuo, but he dodged it. A few surrounded them. Shizuo and Izaya had to let go of each other to fend them off. Shizuo’s right arm ached, but remained powerful enough to hit a Kazbek and send it flying through a number of trees. Another grabbed Izaya’s arm. Izaya pulled out a blade and stabbed its hand. The Kazbek shrieked and let go.

One latched onto Izaya’s leg, tripping him to the ground. Shizuo punched it in its head, and it fell unconscious. At every opportunity, Shizuo and Izaya kept sprinting towards the villa.

From what Shizuo could observe from this frenzy, these were weaker Kazbeks than those that Shizuo had fought at Josiah’s mansion. They didn’t put up the same kind of fight that a certain natural blond, for instance, would have. These enemies piled on Shizuo and Izaya like zombies, repeatedly and without fear.

They ran and ran, but it felt like they were getting nowhere. There were too many.

What worried Shizuo the most, though, was that they were less occupied with fighting him than they were with getting a hold of Izaya.

Soon, Shizuo found himself fighting a dozen Kazbeks simultaneously. Beside him, Izaya continued to evade their grasps. But with so many, not even Izaya could dodge them forever. They hoisted him up by his waist and began to carry him away. Izaya grabbed at tree branches and scraped desperately at bark to slow them down.

“Izaya!!” Shizuo shouted, punching his way through a wall of them.

He could barely make out his own voice. The blades of the helicopter were whipping up a storm of wind and mechanical thunder. He could see Izaya screaming more than he could hear it. Shizuo barrelled his way towards him, but the amount of Kazbeks was overwhelming. Just before Shizuo could reach Izaya, one grabbed Shizuo by the hair and yanked him backwards.
“NO! Shizuo growled, breaking the offender’s arm, but another one grabbed him just as quickly.

Just as Shizuo thought he was going down, the weight of the Kazbeks was lifted from him.

Shadows grew from nowhere. Darkness wrapped the Kazbeks in a tangled web, immobilizing them and freeing both Shizuo and Izaya from their clutches. All at once their enemies had become either pinned to the ground or suspended mid-air by inky tethers. Shizuo recognized these kinds of shadows immediately.

_Celty?_ Shizuo didn’t see her anywhere, but this was undoubtedly her doing.

He wondered how vast this field of Kazbeks was.

A few feet from them, Izaya kicked off the last Kazbek and scrambled to his feet. He returned to Shizuo’s side, panting heavily.

Shizuo studied the nearest Kazbek. These weren’t dedicated Kazbeks, Shizuo realized. Their eyes were open, but their gaze was empty. Wire wove in and out of their skin. Metallic plates covered up where flesh had begun to decay. None of them bled. The only fluid that dripped from these Kazbeks’ wounds was luminescent and blue… Vulture serum.

Kazbek had used its technology to reanimate a bunch of corpses – its own expendable army.

Shizuo felt sick.

He also understood the pain in his arm. The sensation reminded him of when Vulture had temporarily taken control of him… back at Josiah’s mansion, back when he had almost attacked Izaya. Shizuo had already broken from the spell once, but it seemed like it still caused his body pain to resist the signal.

Clenching his fish, Shizuo looked down at the arm he’d received from Josiah. Tiny streams of blue light coursed through him, visible beneath his skin.

_What if this is how they found us?_ Shizuo’s teeth ground together.

Izaya put his hand over Shizuo’s fist and their eyes met. Before Izaya could say anything, the helicopter swung their way.

A frantic gust picked up around them, and the chopper descended from the cloud of smoke that hung in the sky. Shizuo finally got a look at it – dark, camou-colored, armed, and militant. The helicopter shone a blinding spotlight at where Shizuo and Izaya were frozen against each other. Shizuo grimaced against the beams in his eyes,

The light shifted, enough for Shizuo to peer through the windshield at the pilot operating the damn thing. Upon seeing the man at the helm, Shizuo’s heart stopped.

Grinning down at them like a child into a toy box was Josiah Hummel, alive and well. His helmet and goggles hid most of the damage Shizuo and Izaya had inflicted upon him, but Shizuo swore he could make out scarred tissue over one side of his face.

Beside Josiah, as loyal a copilot as ever, was Kyle. The natural blond showed neither emotion at this reunion nor signs of the struggle he’d had with Shizuo in the mountains. Behind them, Shizuo could make out several more Kazbeks, but none that he recognized.

The sudden, shrill tone of feedback cut through the storm of noise created by the chopper, followed
by a chipper greeting.

“**You two are looking well!**”

Josiah’s voice came out of the helicopters loudspeaker. It may have sounded slightly static, but there was no denying to whom it belonged.

Shizuo hold on Izaya tightened.

“I see you’ve reunited with the Dullahan…” said Josiah. He grinned wolfishly at the couple through the windshield. “**But don’t worry – I came prepared for that.**”

Izaya, his grip on Shizuo unwavering, turned from the helicopter and bolted.

Kyle flipped a switch on the dashboard.

They ran away just before a barrage of bullets began slicing through the trees.

Not just the trees, Shizuo noticed as they sprinted through a rain of gunfire and splintered wood. Josiah paid no mind to the bodies still trapped in Celty’s web, mowing through the weaker Kazbeks as if there were mannequins. Shizuo felt serum splatter onto him from every direction, the new blood of the already fallen.

“Just keep running!” Izaya yelled back at him. “He won’t kill me, remember?!”

“Sure doesn’t seem that way!” Shizuo hollered back.

They managed to clear the orchard and return the Petrillos’ yard. However – **out of the frying pan and into the fire.** The saying felt very literal as Shizuo and Izaya stumbled into an inferno.

Shizuo’s heart sank at the sight before him: flames consumed the Petrillos’ home.

Behind them, another round of gunfire began, but never reached Shizuo and Izaya. A wall of shadows caught the bullets just in time.

Shizuo heard a familiar bray.

Shooter skidded to a halt in front of them, and Celty hopped off her motorbike. Her shadows speared at the helicopter, forcing a ceasefire as the chopper focussed on dodging. Then, Celty swung her scythe at the shadow-wall now riddled with bullets – and the bullets were shot back at the helicopter. They pinged off the metal of a machine that was clearly built to withstand such an attack.

Shizuo ran to the nearest tree, hoisted its roots from the earth, swung it around thrice, and launched it towards the helicopter.

Josiah reacted in time and the helicopter only just managed to narrowly avoid being pierced.

It pulled back, taking cover in the smoke.

Celty used the opportunity to whip out her phone. [*THE HELL ARE THESE PEOPLE?!]*

“Kazbeks,” Izaya growled.

There was no time to explain. A crackle of fire and a burst of flames had them all turning towards the Petrillos’ home.
“Celty,” Shizuo grabbed her arm frantically, “the family! Are they okay?!”

[They’re with Shinra] she said. [We noticed the helicopter and got them out in time. Shinra was taking them towards town.]

Izaya stepped forward. “What happened?”

[It shot a missile at us!!]

Shizuo couldn’t help but sigh. Not only were they grossly outnumbered, but also pathetically outgunned. Of course the Kazbek Initiative had missiles.

[We need to get out of here!] Celty typed desperately.

Forlornly surveying the damage around them, Izaya shook his head. “They’re just going to keep coming…”

Celty looked at Shizuo, who was just as grim and helpless, then back at Izaya. [Maybe so. But for now–]

“HELP!” someone shrieked.

All three turned towards the voice. Sawako sprinted towards them, skidding into Shizuo and grabbing him. Her eyes were crazed, bugged out. Shizuo was so used to seeing her calm, collected, taking everything in stride. Now, his pulse quickened before he even knew what she was going to say.

“Shizuo!” She shook him frantically. “You have to help! Lucca – he’s…! I was outside, I didn’t know what was happening, and now–!”

Panic boiled within Shizuo. “What are you saying?”

“He’s still in there!” Sawako shrieked, pointing towards the burning house. “Lucca! Nobody grabbed him!”

Shizuo wanted to scream. He wanted to rewind time to that morning and avoid all of this. Why does everything keep getting worse?! The Petrillos’ home might still have been standing on its foundations, but flames consumed more and more. Walls could be heard crumbling. Any sane man would see it as a loss cause.

He took a deep breath and nodded. “Alright. Don’t worry, okay? I’ll get him.”

Sawako began to sob. Her knees shook so hard that she crumpled to the ground.

To Celty, Shizuo said, “Take these two. They’re going to try and take Izaya, but you can’t let that happen. Everything will be even worse if those assholes get what they’re after.”

Izaya grabbed his arm, preventing Shizuo from running into a burning house. “Are you crazy?!”

“Probably,” Shizuo said easily.

“You’re not fireproof, Shizu-chan! Why do you have to be the big damn hero?!”

[He’s right] said Celty, shockingly. [Let me–]
“No!” snapped Shizuo sternly. “No. There are going to be more of those things out there, and more hellfire from that Josiah scumbag. They’re going to keep coming after you, and I–!”

Shizuo gritted his teeth. He took hold of the hand that Izaya had on him and let it fall between them. When life was just a burrough in Tokyo, the world felt smaller. He used to feel invincible, and it pained him to admit otherwise. But when it was for the sake of someone he loved, Shizuo could see the big picture clearly enough. He finally felt more man than monster.

“...I’m just a guy,” said Shizuo, “but I’m going to do what I can. Nobody should be caught in this crossfire.”

Izaya’s eyes widened. Shizuo walked past him and placed a pleading hand on his best friend.

“Celty, you may hate this, but I need you to protect him.” He squeezed her shoulder. “Please.”

Celty looked from Shizuo to Izaya, back to Shizuo. She hesitated for a breath, but typed definitively, [I will.]

“Shizu-chan!” Izaya continued to argue, “Don’t just–!”

A shadow wrapped around his mouth, gagging him. He was then hoisted into the air by several other shadows and bound to the back of Shooter. Similarly, Celty collected Sawako in a cocoon of shadows that formed a side cart to Shooter’s motorcycle. Izaya squirmed fruitless against the bondage, his quarrel only coming out as muffled screeches. He glared viciously at Celty.

[I can give you a bit of a shield] Celty told Shizuo.

She waved her hand, and Shizuo became covered in a black suit similar to hers. It was like the time she had given him special gloves to fight Saika’s army, only this time the inky material covered his whole body – a bit too tightly in certain places. A catsuit was never on his list of desired attire.

[Good luck!]

“Uh, thanks.”

A crackle of flames and the returning sound of the helicopters engine reminded them of the challenges ahead. Shizuo took off towards the house.

He shouted over his shoulder, “See you soon!”

Billowing flames greeted Shizuo as he busted down the crumbling door. The house shook from the force, and Shizuo cursed at himself.

Guess I can’t just barrell through, Shizuo reasoned, or this whole place will collapse on top of me.

Intolerable heat radiated from every direction, and the air in Shizuo’s lungs was thick and toxic. He was definitely a fool for doing this, but he couldn’t leave an infant to this fiery fate. Shizuo just hoped he wasn’t too late…

Looking around, Shizuo tried to remember the layout of the home and where Lucca’s crib was. This task was more difficult with everything broken and on fire. If Shizuo didn’t know that he had entered through the kitchen, the room would be unrecognizable. Everything had been smashed to pieces, and
many portions of the wall and counters had been burned to black.

Shizuo waded through the flames. He didn’t have time to meticulously choose his steps through the rubble, so the layer of protection that Celty had so generously provided was a blessing. The hardest parts were definitely the visibility and air, which was more smoke than oxygen.

Making it through the kitchen, Shizuo stumbled into the dining room. Definitely not where Lucca would be. From there, Shizuo jumped through a doorway that led to the living room, then down the hallway. He dodged falling debris and bursts of flames as he traipsed through the fiery maze. Looking around, his heart broke at the sight of the once cozy home, crumbling to its demise.

He remembered which room was Lucca’s – upstairs, down the hall, last door on the left. The stairs were precarious, but still climbable. As Shizuo got closer, he heard the faint cries of a baby. Shizuo sighed in relief. “Thank goodness…”

He had just reached the top of stairs when someone grabbed his ankle and chucked him to the floor. Shizuo’s gasped upon impact, the air knocked out of him. His back throbbed, but didn’t break. Before he could catch his breath or rise to his feet, a black-clad figure jumped down from the stairwell, landed over Shizuo, reached down and grabbed him by the throat.

His vision blurred. For a second, he thought Celty was his attacker. The figure was female, almost petite. They wore a black bodysuit and a helmet to hide their face. This woman’s helmet was black, though, and left her mouth and jaw exposed.

Definitely not his headless best friend, then. As if the choking wasn’t clue enough.

Shizuo grappled at the woman’s arm. She was strong, but Shizuo was stronger. He grabbed hold of her and tossed her across the room. She crashed into a bookcase, but recovered in seconds. Her movements were mechanical. There was a familiar whirring to her motions, a clink and a clunk when she moved.

A Kazbek.

“C’mon…!” Shizuo growled, rising. “I don’t have time for this!”

She zoomed forward. He scrambled to his feet in time to catch her fist. The strength of their collision created a whirlwind of force, irritating the feeble foundation of the house.

Shizuo was hesitant to engage. Who was he fighting? A hapless corpse? A dedicated Kazbek, loyal to the cause? A helpless victim of the Initiative controlled by Vulture’s serum? He remembered the one female Kazbek in Josiah’s mansion that had helped him escape.

This Kazbek was not going to give Shizuo time to think, though. She flipped Shizuo back to the ground and quickly followed by slamming down the heel of her foot – Shizuo rolled out of the way, allowing her foot to break through and splinter the wooden floor.

Their struggle was only making the house fall apart faster.

He swung his leg around, tripping her. She recovered instantly, kicking at Shizuo’s jaw. He dodged by a hair. He caught her by the ankle and swung her into the wall, creating a crater the size of her body.

Shizuo winced. *That had to hurt.* The Kazbek’s limbs twitched, and her helmet had become so
askew that it toppled off as soon as she moved. When it did, Shizuo froze.

Getting back on her feet, the Kazbek faced Shizuo, revealing a familiar face of freckles and shock of bright red hair.

“Wait…” Shizuo gaped, stricken to his core. “You’re…!”

The ginger girl that he had met in Spain continued her assault.

“Wait!” Shizuo focussed all his energy into dodging. “Pepe, right?! You know me! Remember?!”

His pleas were futile. Her eyes glowed blue, clearly under Vulture’s control. That didn’t make Shizuo any less reluctant to deliver more damage to a girl he knew personally, though. His fists clenched in fury – not at the girl in front of him, but at the man responsible for this whole mess.

“Josiah…!” Shizuo snarled.

Pepe had not been a part of this. She and her father – Jefe, was it? Shizuo recalled – had only helped Izaya and him when the duo had needed it. Over a month ago! Shizuo’s brain raced with questions. *How did Josiah find them? Is Jefe safe? Is the old doc a Kazbek, too, now?! Is there nothing that asshole won’t destroy?! And most pressingly: How the fuck do I bring this chick back down to Earth?!??*

Turning on his heel, Shizuo dashed away from Pepe. She chased him but he had expected that. He ran up the stairs. She couldn’t trip him, this time. Shizuo made it to the top, relieved to still hear Lucca crying.

Pepe was hot on his heels.

Shizuo grumbled, “Fuck.”

Okay, Shizuo wracked his brain for a solution. He certainly couldn’t beat Pepe to a pulp. She was an innocent bystander in all of this, and Shizuo wouldn’t sink to Josiah’s standards. *I was able to break out of Vulture’s control, wasn’t I? So it’s possible…*

Of course, it was hard to really think when a powered-up ginger girl was trying her best to kill him.

“Snap out of it, will ya?!” Shizuo shouted at her as he avoided a roundhouse kick. “You made me soup once, dammit!”

The current Pepe did not remember the soup.

Shizuo ran all the way to the end of the hall, stopping in front of Lucca’s room. He considered just grabbing Lucca and hauling ass, but Pepe was relentless. She hurtled towards him at an unnatural speed.

Shizuo stood his ground. He would have to solve this before he moved forward. If only he was a bit less dense in the head and could figure this out…

“Wait–” *My head?* Shizuo gasped, “That’s it!”

Bracing himself, Shizuo dodged Pepe’s incoming attack and reeled his fist back.

“Sorry about this…!”

He punched her square in the forehead.
To his surprise, she didn’t fly backwards from his strength. They landed in a deadlock. Shizuo felt a prick of electricity between his Kazbek arm and the girl’s noggin. Pepe stood upright, frozen in place. Blood began to trickle down her face. Nervously, Shizuo retracted his fist. Pepe’s eyes fluttered. Her irises flickered from blue to her warm, natural brown.

She took one baffled look at Shizuo and murmured, “¿Qué?”

Then she fainted.

Shizuo groaned exasperatedly.

The house answered him with a moan. Flames began to creep up to the second floor. He wasn’t out of the woods yet – he still needed to carry Pepe and Lucca out of an inferno.

Hoisting Pepe over his shoulder, Shizuo kicked open the door to Lucca’s room. Thankfully, this corner of the house had been relatively unscathed so far. The baby cried from within his crib, oblivious as to why all this horror was happening around him.

Shizuo approached and looked down at the tiny bundle. Lucca looked back.

“Hey kid,” said Shizuo, “guess I better get you out of here.”

Lucca hiccupped at him.

With the house starting to cave in around, Shizuo didn’t have time to consider his fear of holding such a fragile life with his strength. He covered Lucca in a blanket and scooped him into his arms.

The floor cracked, and a giant rumble jerked the house sideways. Shizuo staggered to remain upright, balancing two other lives. Another quake alerted him that his time was up. With every second, the house became less stable. Walls of flames erupted around him, and Shizuo dashed hectically around them. The stairs gave way, and Shizuo sprung to the first floor.

Sweat dripped down his forehead and into his eyes. Shizuo squinted against the blaze and unbearable heat. What’s the fastest way out of here?!

Shizuo only took one step towards the front door when an enormous fireball exploded in front of him. Stumbling backwards, Shizuo sure hoped he would still have eyebrows after this.

Gritting his teeth, Shizuo decided to make his own exit.

He secured Pepe and Lucca against his body and guarded them as he charged forward and rammed through the walls, using his shoulder as a bulldozer. Behind him, the house began to topple. Shizuo roared and smashed through the final wall. His momentum carried him far enough away that they didn’t fall under the collapsing house. Almost as soon as Shizuo tumbled across the yard, the last of the Petrillos’ home fell apart.

“Shizuo!!”

He turned from the catastrophe to Sawako, who sprinted to him, arms outstretched. Her eyes were red and tear-filled.

“Is Lucca—” She tugged on her hair, frenzied. “Is he…?!”

Shizuo presented her with the tiny bundle in his arms. She unwrapped it to find Lucca, slightly sooty-faced but otherwise completely fine. He blew spit bubbles at his mother, as if he hadn’t been
through any more than a bumpy car ride.

Sawako wailed a joyful sob. She held her baby in a close embrace and wept tears of relief.

For a moment, Shizuo shared in her comfort. Then he remembered he had his own loved-ones to find. He shifted to hold Pepe more securely so that she draped over his back. Her arms tangled limply over his shoulders, and he gripped her knees into a makeshift piggyback.

He looked around and noticed the scene had changed considerably from when he was last outside. Firetrucks, police vehicles, and ambulances swarmed the property. Men in uniform attacked the burning house with hoses. There was no violent helicopter or mob of Kazbeks to fight, just citizens come to help their community. An EMT tried to take Lucca from Sawako, but she refused to be separated again from her child and insisted on going along.

Before she left, Shizuo grabbed her arm.

“Where are the others?!” He asked her, “Izaya?!”

She pointed behind him.

Shooter drove up beside Shizuo and winnied anxiously. Luckily, the surrounding crowd was too distracted with putting out the fire to notice a self-driving motorcycle.

Shizuo hopped on Shooter without looking back. “Lead the way!”

Shooter brought Shizuo – and Pepe, still on his back – into the scorched orchard. They didn’t go far; Shizuo could still hear the chaos and crackle of flames behind him. Soon, Shooter stopped in a clearing where Shinra and Celty sat on tree stumps, slumped over in exhaustion.

“Oi!” Shizuo called, hopping off Shooter. “Everyone okay?”

Shinra and Celty jumped up. Both approached him eagerly.

“Shizuo!” Shinra greeted. “You’re still alive!”

[You’re okay!] Celty typed with more genuinity than Shinra had expressed.

Shizuo shrugged under the weight of Pepe. “Yeah, apparently.”

With a snap of her fingers, the suit that Celty had equipped Shizuo with vanished. He was back in his t-shirt and sweatpants.

When he didn’t see Izaya with them at first, Shizuo panicked slightly. Celty must have sensed this, because she pointed away from them. Following her finger, Shizuo could see Izaya’s silhouette several meters away, framed by the glow of the receding fire. His back was turned from them. Shizuo breathed a little more easily, seeing that Izaya was in one piece and still safe.

“Thank you,” Shizuo told Celty earnestly. “I really owe you.”

“What about me?” asked Shinra. “I was the one who led the family to safety, amidst those scary Kazbek things creeping around. You and Izaya sure do attract nasty company…”

Shizuo didn’t presently have it in him to be annoyed with his friend. The fact that all the Petrillos had survived was a huge reprieve. “You’re right. Thanks, Shinra.”

Shinra beamed. “Of course!”
“So what happened?” Shizuo asked, “Where did Josiah and all the Kazbeks go?”

[**Gone,**] said Celty, [*but not without giving us a run for our money!*]

The ground littered with bullet shells was evidence of that.

“You should have seen Celty!” praised Shinra. “Those bad guys of yours didn’t stand a chance! They won’t be coming back while she’s around!”

Celty ignored him. [**I think all sirens spooked them off. The helicopter retreated when the police showed up.**]

*That makes sense*, thought Shizuo. Josiah wouldn’t want actual authority figures snooping around his evil schemes, though Shizuo wondered if police would actually be any help against the Kazbek Initiative.

Nudging him out of his thoughts, Celty pointed to the girl on his back. [**Who is that?**]

“Pepe.”

[?]

“Somebody who had nothing to do with this. Now she does. Anyways, she’s on our side and could use some help. Shinra, can you look at her?”

Shizuo lay Pepe gently on the ground in front of Shinra. Blood stained her forehead, but her breathing was deep and even. Shinra gave the girl one glance.

“Shizuo-kun, did you punch this girl?”

“I had a good reason!”

He wouldn’t stay there for a lecture. He needed to see Izaya. Leaving Pepe in the care of Shinra and Celty, Shizuo stalked over to him.

Izaya was leaning against one of the trees that had survived, arms crossed, observing the struggle between the firemen and the blazing remains of the Petrillos’ home. Shizuo looked sideways at Izaya’s solemn demeanor. Izaya did not look back at him, focussed on the destruction that he would once again leave in his wake.

“This isn’t your fault,” Shizuo told him.

“Isn’t it?” said Izaya. “This wouldn’t have happened if I had never come here.”

“I think you mean *we*.”

That at least got Izaya took look at him. His expression was tired in a way that Shizuo had not seen in a month, and Shizuo’s heart broke a little at the sight of it.

“Fine,” said Izaya. “If *we* had never come here, then somebody’s home wouldn’t be on fucking fire right now.”

“We didn’t know,” reasoned Shizuo. “We thought they were dead.”

“Exactly!” snapped Izaya. “What are we supposed to do now?!” He pushed off the tree and marched in circles. “I’m an information broker, not a Tom Cruise character. World-saving isn’t in my job
description. This is getting ridiculous.”

“It already got ridiculous,” countered Shizuo.

“Shizu-chan,” Izaya warned.

“We’ll have help this time,” Shizuo decided on the spot. “Our friends came after us, and we were able to get away this time because of it, right?”

Izaya gave him a pointed look. “I think you mean your friends.”

Shizuo offered him a smile. “They can be your friends, too.”

This didn’t bring Izaya any comfort. If anything, Izaya looked more forlorn than before. He sighed, ceasing his manic pacing. His eyes were sad as they studied Shizuo.

It went back to their argument before the attack – Izaya didn’t see himself in Shizuo’s life outside of this villa, and now that pocket of paradise had been destroyed. Maybe Izaya would have believed him if everything hadn’t kept falling apart.

“...No. I’m not so sure that they can be.”

Izaya turned away from him.

“Izaya, wait...!”

Shizuo only took two steps forward when Izaya crashed face-first to the ground.

Izaya looked up, startled. Shizuo froze, just as baffled. There was nothing around for Izaya to trip on. All Shizuo could see was a faint, airy blur around Izaya’s left ankle. The blur tightened, ever so slightly. A memory of seeing something similar in Spain flashed across Shizuo’s mind, from when they had encountered the woman with roses.

Their eyes met, and both knew, with growing horror, exactly what was about to happen.

An invisible force began to drag Izaya away at incredible speed.

“No...” Shizuo’s feet were heavy with dread. “No. No no no no no no no!!”

Both Shizuo and the tug on Izaya accelerated. Shizuo had never run so fast. In front of him, always just out of reach, Izaya grasped desperately at anything to grab hold of – grass, dirt, tree roots. He flailed his legs, but the effort was in vain. There was nothing to kick, nothing for him to stab a blade into... just a noncorporeal hand of an advanced Kazbek latched onto his ankle.

“SHIZUO!!”

“IZAYA!” Shizuo dove, but missed Izaya’s hand by centimeters. He tumbled back to his feet in a fluid motion, but was still set back several paces away from Izaya.

Shit shit shit shit shit!!

As they moved, Shizuo heard the swish of chopper blades, the swell of an engine.

He shouted over his shoulder like an alarm. “CELTY!!”

Too late.
The helicopter appeared above the trees, creating a tempest of wind and wreckage. A Kazbek hung from the chopper’s skids, a hand out outstretched and in control of Izaya’s binding. Shizuo’s heartbeat clambered with fear and rage at the sight of the unmistakable Kazbek – Kyle.

Kyle yanked Izaya from the ground and caught him around the waist with one arm. Izaya writhed in his grasp, still attempting to escape. Without skipping a beat, the natural blond climbed back into the helicopter like demonic spider, slamming the vehicle's door behind them.

“IZAYA!”

Even as the helicopter ascended higher and higher, Shizuo kept running. Blood pumping with anguish, he ran like his life depended on it.

From the safety of the air, Josiah mockingly bid him farewell. “See you soon, Shizuo!”

The helicopter rose into the night sky, disappearing through the smoke. Shizuo lost sight of it and fell to his knees, powerless. His eyes stung. It hurt to breathe. All he could do was cry after them, hoarse and guttural.

“IZAYAAAAAAAA!”

Chapter End Notes

i know how much y'all missed kyle :)....................
Celty arrived a moment too late. She raced past Shizuo and aimlessly sent spikes of shadows after the helicopter, but her attempts were in vain. The chopper was long gone, Izaya along with it.

Shinra stopped beside Shizuo, who remained on the ground.

“Shizuo?” His voice wavered. “Is Izaya…?”

Shizuo said nothing. He felt numb. All he could manage was to stare ahead, dazed, at the spot in the sky where the helicopter had disappeared.

When she returned to Shizuo and Shinra, Celty crouched in front of Shizuo and studied him. Even with her directly in his vision, Shizuo didn’t acknowledge her. He stared past her, unblinking, at the same spot.

She held up her phone. [Shizuo?]

“They took Izaya,” Shinra told her. His tone was dire.

They took Izaya.

Shizuo had seen it happen. Only a minute had passed, but Shizuo felt like he had been stuck in the same spot on the ground for an eon. He had watched as Izaya had slipped away from him. Again. But this time, Shizuo felt more useless than ever before.

Come back, a pathetic voice in Shizuo whispered.

Celty got up and addressed Shinra with her phone, so Shizuo only caught half of their conversation.

“I don’t know,” said Shinra. “I’m still not clear on the whole story, myself.”

A pause for Celty to reply.

“We could bring him back with us. Honestly, it’s no good sticking around here. We’re bound to attract undesirable attention…”
Another beat.

“Normally, if I want to find someone, Izaya is the one I ask. Only, this time, it’s Izaya we’re looking for. Guess we could ask ourselves ‘What would Izaya do?’ but that was always impossible to anticipate.”

Shizuo blinked.

*What would Izaya do?*

The shock began to subside from him. He couldn’t stay on his knees forever, he realized. No matter how hard he wanted it, he couldn’t *will* Josiah to return with Izaya. That foolish thinking wouldn’t get him anywhere, and Izaya would be calling him a *protozoan* idiot for even entertaining the notion.

*What would Izaya do?* Shizuo wracked his brain for everything Izaya had told him about Josiah and the Kazbek Initiative. Was there *any* clue left behind for Shizuo to start with? He’d lived with Izaya for months, surely Shizuo had acquired some sort of wisdom…

Instead, the last interaction Shizuo had had with Izaya rose to the surface.

Just before Izaya had been abducted, he had lamented over the damage done to the Petrillos and their home. To anyone else that had known Izaya, that would have been an outrageous notion. Izaya Orihara had felt neither guilt nor sympathy for those under his reign of chaos. But Shizuo was now the person who knew the current Izaya, the *real* Izaya Orihara, best of all. This destruction had not been something Izaya wanted.

Shizuo sluggishly rose to his feet. The weight of Izaya’s absence was heavy on him. He now carried Izaya’s responsibility for this situation, as well as his own, and Shizuo was not going to disappoint Izaya just because he wasn’t here to scold him.

Celty and Shizuo startled at his movement.

“Shizuo?”

Ignoring them, Shizuo walked through the orchard and back to the hub of activity around the Petrillos. Celty raced ahead of him and showed him her phone.

*[What are you doing?]*

“What I can.”

She fell behind him, puzzled.

The Petrillo family huddled together at a safe distance from the ongoing battle against the flames. As Shizuo approached, he noticed their defeated expressions. Alberto and Alfie had singed clothing, and Bianca held her daughter closely. Isabella appeared the most stricken. Her eyes were wide and wavering. She was no older than ten years, but had just witnessed more horror than anyone ever should. The mixture of soot and tears stained her round little face.

Miraculously, none of them had been injured during the attack. Damage had been done, though, to their home, their property, their livelihood… The family that had so generously accepted two strangers into their lives was now without a home, and Shizuo had nothing to offer them.

“Um…”
They all looked at him at once. Shizuo almost lost his nerve under their distraught gazes.

“I need to tell you all something, but I don’t really know how…”

The others stared blankly. Sawako had Lucca bundled safely in her arms. She gave him an reassuring nod. Had she not shown her support, Shizuo was unsure of how he could have continued.

As he spoke, she translated over his voice.

“Before we came here, Izaya and I were in trouble. There were these guys that thought the world was pretty bad. Humans, in particular. They wanted Izaya to help them destroy humans. Izaya destroyed them instead. I helped. I… I guess we didn’t get them so good, because this was them. They came back. They did this to your home. They took Izaya, too. They—”

His fists clenched at his sides. Steady his voice, Shizuo carried on.

“I have to stop them now, or else the whole world might end up looking like this. I’m sorry I can’t stay and help you. I’m sorry this happened. I’m sorry we brought this to you. I’m sorry about all of it. I’m—”

His voice cracked, his breathing hitched, his vision blurred. He couldn’t look at them. Getting to his knees, Shizuo bowed his head to the ground and spoke some of the only Italian that he knew.

“Mi dispiace.”

The ground beneath him was cold despite the nearby fires. His fingers tightened around dirt and grass. Around them, the crackle of the fire began to wane, subdued by the powerful spray of fire engine hoses. The silence of the Petrillos was deafening, though. Shizuo’s eyes screwed shut, and he was certain that they hated him.

He’d faced this before. He recounted the number of times he’d let his rage get the best of him and he’d leave a trail of havoc behind him. Violence would never escape him.

Shizuo knew, on the surface of his mind, that this wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t Izaya’s either. He knew exactly who to blame. But it still hurt. The expression of those that just realized that he was a man of violence, whether around him or from him – Shizuo couldn’t bare to see those expressions on these people.

Even if he would carry on, no matter what… it still hurt.

Above him, he heard movement. He lifted his shoulders slightly and noticed Alberto’s hunched, knobby knees shuffling toward him. The old man stopped just beside Shizuo and said nothing.

Shizuo was unsure of what he expected from this old man and his family, to whom Shizuo and Izaya had brought such misfortune. However, he would not have anticipated the gentle hand that Alberto placed upon his shoulder.

It was a simple, silent gesture – just like the peacefully mum rapport that the two men had shared over the last month.

Shizuo could have laughed, were his throat not restricted with choked back sobs.

Alberto squeezed Shizuo’s shoulder and left him. It had been enough to instill Shizuo with some relief. His breathing returned to him, though he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding it in.
Shizuo opened his eyes. Isabella stood before him, more composed, which slightly embarrassed him. With Shizuo sitting back on his heels, they were about eye level.

Her face was serious, waiting for an answer.

He blinked, considering what she had asked. The words eventually registered in his brain. Would he save Izaya? There was only one answer he could give.

“Y...Yeah…”

Isabella nodded. “Then that’s what you’ll do.”

She said it with such certainty that Shizuo believed her, wholeheartedly. Of course. Sometimes childish sentiment made more sense than anything else.

Shinra was wrong. They couldn’t ask what Izaya would do right now. Shizuo wasn’t Izaya. None of them were. They didn’t know everything that Izaya had in that terrible mind of his. All Shizuo could ask was what he could do.

What would Shizuo do? The answer was simple.

Shizuo Heiwajima would follow Izaya Orihara. Always.

He got to his feet. He wiped his face with his forearm – not that it did more than smudge grime across his nose – and grinned at Isabella.

“You’re right. I’m going to save him. Thank you.”

To the rest of the family, Shizuo bowed once more, with finality.

“I really am sorry. When all this is over, I’ll find a way to repay you all. I promise to make this up to you.”

Alfie looked to Bianca. Bianca looked to Sawako. They may have been at a loss of translation, or just at a loss of how to react to this otherworldly situation. Sawako looked at Shizuo with surprising softness. She was next to come forward. Shizuo straightened in her presence.

“You saved Lucca,” said Sawako.

Shizuo frowned and raised an eyebrow.

“You saved him,” Sawako repeated. Despite everything, she was smiling. “You weren’t afraid to pick him up, and you saved him. Don’t apologize. I’m grateful to you. We all are…”

Upon finally looking at the Petrillos properly, Shizuo realized that they didn’t hate him. There was no animosity in their faces. Just solidarity. The hateful looks that Shizuo was so used to seeing, the glares that were often followed by cries of Monster! were completely absent from this family.

“Just do us a favor,” continued Sawako, holding up a fist, “and stick it to those bad guys, yeah?”

Her positivity was contagious. Shizuo found himself smiling back at her.

“You got it.”
With that encouragement, Shizuo marched back to his friends. Celty and Shinra awaited him. However, Shizuo didn’t stop to address either of them. He strode right past them. Surprised, they followed hot on his heels.

**[Where are you going?]** asked Celty.

“To get Pepe.”

Shinra stumbled to keep up. “Who?”

**[Why?]**

“Josiah won’t kill Izaya; he’s too valuable. Izaya’s gonna hold out for as long as possible.” A vein throbbed in Shizuo’s balled fist. “We gotta be giving it our all, too.”

Celty and Shinra exchanged a look with each other. Shinra shrugged.

Shizuo considered the possibility that neither of them would care to partake in this fight. Celty didn’t seem to consider Izaya someone worth saving, and Shinra was usually apathetic. If they chose to bail – so be it. Shizuo’s mind was made up. He would find Izaya on his own if he had to. He’d trek across the entire world and fight a million Kazbeks. Nothing would stop him.

However, Celty held up her phone.

**[What can we do?]**

Shizuo smirked. If he was going to have help in this, then Josiah didn’t stand a chance.

“Shinra, I need you to wake Pepe.”

“Who?!”

“That girl I brought you, idiot. I don’t really know how she became a Kazbek, but maybe she knows something. Maybe she remembers Josiah’s plans.”

“Then what?”

“Find Izaya.”

“How?!”

Shizuo huffed. “Dunno yet, but who’s better at finding Izaya Orihara than me?”

Celty looked like she was chuckling at Shinra. **[He’s right.]**

Despite having been more accepting of Shizuo and Izaya’s relationship, Shinra was now the skeptic one. He frowned. “And what about if you do find Izaya? They’re not just going to hand him over. These Kazbek people are super powerful!”

Shizuo halted his strut through the orchard. He turned to Shinra with such steedliness that Shinra froze, nervous of what Shizuo might do.

“Then I guess I’ll just do what I’ve always done,” said Shizuo. “Get really fucking angry, and beat the shit out of them.”
They retrieved Pepe from the orchard. Then, they snuck by Shizuo and Izaya’s shack to retrieve some of their things. Despite the fire, the shack remained intact. Shinra needed some of his luggage, and Shizuo needed a change of clothes. He also grabbed Izaya’s parka from where it hung on a chair by the door.

Shooter transformed into a carriage, but disguised himself as a van’s exterior. He transported them all further away from the Petrillos’ property. None of them had time to get mixed up with the local Italian authorities, so they had to keep as low a profile as possible.

Shooter brought them to the outskirts of town, near the stream where Shizuo had earlier found Celty. Stopping, Shooter dissolved the van and transformed back into a headless horse. Pepe lay on the ground, and Shinra checked her vitals.

“You really decked her, Shizuo-kun…”

Shizuo scoffed, “I had to! It was the only way to get her to stop attacking me without throwing her into the fire.”

[How do we know she won’t still be under Vulture’s control?] asked Celty.

Shizuo rubbed his chin. “Well, I don’t exactly… But, I was able to break the control on myself by hitting my head really hard. She seemed back to normal before she passed out…”

Shinra yelped and jumped back from Pepe. “You mean she might still be crazy? What if she attacks me?!”

“I could punch her out again?!”

“Really, Shizuo, have you no honor?” Shinra tisked him. “Punching out women so thoughtlessly…”

Celty jabbed him with her elbow. [If she attacks you, then I’ll wrap her in shadows. That seemed to work for the rest of them.]

Shinra beamed. “Celty! As prepared as always. I should have known you would protect me!”

Shizuo rolled his eyes as Shinra crouched on the ground beside Pepe. Reaching into his travel bag, Shinra rummaged for a few moments and then withdrew a small vial filled with a white substance.

“The fuck is that? Are you carrying around drugs?”

Shinra gasped, offended. “They’re smelling salts!” He grumbled under his breath as he uncapped the vial and waved it under Pepe’s nose.

Curious and impatient, both Shizuo and Celty bent over Shinra and Pepe and watched. Slowly, Pepe began to stir. Noticing his looming companions, Shinra scolded them.

“Give her some air, maybe? I’m sure she doesn’t want to wake up to a helmet and a guy with a scary face.”

“My face isn’t scary!”

“Hnnngh…”

They all looked at Pepe anxiously. Her eyes fluttered open. She groaned once more, squinting at her
surroundings.

Shinra smiled at her, in that reassuring doctor way of his. “Hi there. Are you alright?”

Pepe blinked at him.

Then, her arm flew out and smacked him in the face.

“EEEP!! PERVERTIDO!” she shrieked in alarm.

Shinra fell backwards and cried, “My nose! Not again!!”

Pepe flipped to her feet with surprising dexterity. Her first instinct was to hightail it out of there, and Shizuo couldn’t blame her. One of Celty’s shadows wrapped around her foot, preventing her from getting far. Pepe was able to get out of the binding, though, by spinning her legs around like a breakdancer. She was so coordinated that Shizuo feared that she was still under Vulture’s control.

However, her eyes didn’t glow blue. She noticed Shizuo and Celty and gritted her teeth. Raising her fists, squared up her stance against them. Her expression was frenzied, like a cornered animal. Though shaking, she was clearly ready for a fight. Maybe Pepe was just a little more tough than Shizuo ever would have expected of the mousey girl from Spain.

“Quién eres?! Dónde estoy?!”

“Oi, oi!!” Shizuo held up his hands in a surrendering gesture. “Pepe, relax! Do you remember me?”

She didn’t, not at first. Shizuo took a tentative step forward, and Pepe slightly retreated. Peering at him, Pepe’s face went from panic to ponderous.

“Ese… Ese tipo bueno sin camisa…?”

[Do you understand her?] asked Celty.

“Not really,” admitted Shizuo. “Pretty sure she speaks English, too.”

[Maybe I can translate] Celty suggested. Having originated from Ireland, her English was superior to his. Shizuo nodded.

They each took a step forward. Pepe didn’t try to run away, but she tensed. Her eyes fixed on Shizuo, familiarity starting to resonate.

“Te recuerdo…” she said, “pero quién es este?” Pepe eyed Celty nervously.

Shizuo smiled at her. He got the gist of that. “This is Celty. She’s a friend.”

Pepe relaxed, just slightly.

“Pepe,” Shizuo started as soothingly as possible. “What do you remember?”

At last, Pepe dropped her fighting stance. She shifted her weight to her hip and rubbed her head. “I remember… A bunch of people broke into our home. They dressed like bad guys in a movie… Like…”

She looked down at herself. Her eyes widened.

“Eep! Qué estoy vistiendo?!”
The Kazbek suit was absurdly tight-looking. Pepe crossed her arms over herself in attempts at some modesty. She pointed accusingly at Shinra.

“*El pervertido hizo esto?!*”

Shinra remained on the ground, plugging his nose with a cloth. “I didn’t do anything!”

“Nevermind that!” Shizuo growled. His patience was waning. “What else do you remember about the Kazbeks?! Did you see Josiah?!”

Pepe quivered at the gruff sound of his voice.

Celty put a hand on his shoulder to prevent him from getting in Pepe’s face. [**Don’t.**] She told him, [**She’s already frightened. You’ll freak her out even more.**]

Groaning, Shizuo kicked at the dirt in frustration. Then, Pepe gasped.

Horror struck her face. “*Papa!*”

“*Papa?*”

“*Papa!*” She grabbed his arm with dismay. “*They took him!*”

Shizuo recalled her father, Jefe, a back alley doctor like Shinra. The man had fixed up both Shizuo and Izaya multiple times when they’d been in Madrid. He had also teased Shizuo early on in his crush on Izaya. It had miffed Shizuo at the time, but in retrospect, Shizuo only remembered the man endearingly.

“Why would they take your father?” asked Shizuo.

“The man that was in charge…” Pepe paled at the memory of Josiah Hummel. “I remember he was gravely injured. His eyes… They needed someone to fix him. Then Papa disappeared.”

“So you remember things about them?!” Shizuo felt a tinge of hope.

Pepe shuddered. “*Un poquito… After we got to Japan, I woke up in a warehouse. The rest…”* She shook the memories from her mind. “*Next thing I knew, Señor Shizuo was in front of me in a burning building.*”

“Did you say *Japan*?!” Shinra had recovered from his bloody nose and now rejoined them, gapping at Pepe’s words.

Pepe nodded. “*Sí. Japón.*”

The three from Ikebukuro looked at each other.

The significance was lost on Pepe. *Where are we now?*”

“*Italy,*” Shinra answered.

“*Italia*?!” She pulled on her frizzy red hair. “*Primero Japón, ahora Italia?! Que esta pasando…*”

Celty directed her phone at Shizuo. [**I thought you said their HQ was in the Alps?**]

“It was,” said Shizuo, “but we blew it up. Guess they needed a new one?”
“If they snatched Izaya while he was still in Japan the first time,” Shinra mused, “then they probably always had a base there. After all, the first postcard Izaya sent you was from the west coast of America, not from Europe. He fled East when he first escaped, it seems like.”

Shizuo scowled. “So that massive compound that exploded in the mountains was, what? A decoy?!”

“A secondary base,” Shinra reasoned. “The one you destroyed wasn’t the main hub. They came back, didn’t they?”

Shizuo wanted to scream. Josiah was continuously ahead of him, and now the man had a huge head start. Sensing his frustration, Celty placed squeezed his arm.

[This is good. We have a lead, and it’s familiar territory. Once we’re back in Japan, we’ll have more resources.]

She had a point, and Shizuo calmed. With Celty’s resolve and Shinra’s brain, they could maybe pull this off. As much as he achingly missed Izaya, he was lucky to have his friends there.

[Do you remember where in Japan you were?] Celty asked Pepe.

Pepe shook her head. “It was a city. I remember the sounds. But I’d never been there before. It could have been anywhere, and I wasn’t told.”

Celty placed a gentle hand on Pepe’s shoulder. [That’s fine. You’ve remembered a lot.]

“Listen, Pepe,” Shizuo addressed her with as soft a voice as he could manage, “If you’re sure your father is in Japan, I bet that’s where they took Izaya as well.”

Pepe’s expression hardened. “They’re in Japan. I’m sure of it.”

“Then don’t worry, I’ll find them–”

“I’m going with you.”

Shizuo froze.

“I don’t really know what’s going on, but I will get my father back.”

She said it with such confidence that it took Shizuo by surprise. Her fists clenched at her side, and her eyes were steady. Clearly this wasn’t the same timid girl he’d met in Madrid. Even without Vulture’s influence, Pepe had another side to her.

*Izaya would be eating his words that she was boring,* Shizuo smirked to himself.

[I’m not sure you get it.] Celty told her, [The people who took your father are incredibly powerful, and they have a huge number of–]

Pepe’s voice was shockingly unbothered. “It’s not a problem.”

Celty looked to Shizuo, as if for backup. Shizuo, however, was wondering if Pepe had a secret past in some black ops organization. There was no arguing with a face as determined as hers was.

Shizuo shrugged. “S’fine with me.”

Crossing her arms, Celty was clearly less convinced than Shizuo. However, they couldn’t just leave
Pepe stranded in Italy. Shizuo also figured that she had as much right to save her father as Shizuo did to rescue Izaya.

[We still have to get all the way back to Japan] Celty reminded him.

Shizuo groaned. *Why does Japan have to be on the other side of the planet?* He grimaced. “Fine. I guess commercial airlines are out of the question. How did you and Shinra get all the way here?”

Celtty looked at Shinra expectantly, but her boyfriend was moping.

“Our vacation was just starting…” he whined.

[Shinra, this is an emergency!]

“But…!” Shinra’s shoulders drooped, “We’ve already asked so much of him! This is not going to pan out well down the road for us, Celty!”

[We have no other choice!]

Shizuo watched the couple volley back and forth with a raised eyebrow. He didn’t quite follow their exchange. “Who’s ‘him’? What’s the deal, Shinra?”

[He’s being a baby] said Celty. [Not that I blame him, entirely… We’ll have to call an extremely unsavory character.]

“Worse than Josiah Hummel?” Shizuo snorted. “Whoever it is, just call him!”

“You don’t have to deal with them like I do, Shizuo!” countered Shinra. For a guy that had been nonchalant about the whole doomsday scenario so far, he was jittery at the idea of calling whoever this man was that could help them. “He’s not someone you want to owe.”

“Whatever,” Shizuo scowled. They were wasting enough time. The clock was ticking. “I’ll beat this guy to death too if I have to.”

“I’m not sure I want you to do that, either,” Shinra admitted. He wrung his hands together anxiously.

Grabbing Shinra by the scruff of the neck, Shizuo lifted him from the ground. Shinra yelped and writhed fruitlessly against Shizuo’s strength. Shizuo bared his teeth, going full intimidation mode on his friend. He didn’t have time for Shinra’s cowardice, not while Izaya’s life was on the line.

“The shitty flea I fell in love with just got abducted by a psychopath hellbent on destroying humanity. I don’t care if you have to make a deal with the devil himself to get us back to Japan as fast as possible.” Shizuo dragged Shinra closer so that their faces were an inch apart and growled, “Just. Do it.”

“Alright alright!!” Shizuo held up his hands in surrender.

Shizuo put him down, but not without a very pointed glower.

Straightening his jacket, Shinra sighed. “You’re a hard man to argue with, Shizuo… But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Shinra fetched his own cell phone from his pocket. He petulantly punched in a number and held it to his ear. The others waited. Shizuo didn’t know who they were calling, and Pepe probably had *no* idea what was going on. Celty, though, fidgeted apprehensively with each ring.
Finally, Shizuo heard the unmistakable *click* of the other line answering the call.

Shinra greeted the receiver with an awkward chuckle. “Hey Dad… It’s me again…”

Shingen Kishitani was a man of questionable morals and actions. Shizuo didn’t know many details about the man, but he knew enough not to trust him.

When Shizuo was a boy, after all, Shingen would often attempt to experiment on him. Shizuo’s absurd strength truly enticed the doctor whose career revolved around the paranormal. Celty had been his savior, back then, preventing Shingen from getting his scalpel into a prepubescent boy. That was when Shizuo would be left vulnerable, breaking a dozen bones under his latest boast of strength. However, Shizuo was in no way supernatural and eventually grew able to hold his own against a creepy doctor that had no remarkable abilities of his own.

Nowadays, Shizuo rarely encountered the man. If he had the choice, he’d have liked to keep it that way. But, when the man apparently had his own jet that could ferry them back to Japan without much hassle, Shizuo could avoid Shingen no longer.

Disguised as a van once more, Shooter drove Shizuo, Celty, Shinra, and Pepe to the nearest private airfield. They didn’t have to go through security or through crowds. They drove right up to a nondescript white jet, and Shooter reverted to a horse, leaving the rest of them on their feet with their few belongings in tow.

Shizuo gripped Izaya’s jacket.

On the jet, there were a couple stripes streaked across the cabin with the word *Nebula* swished above them.

“Shinra,” Shizuo started, “how does your dad have something like this?”

“It’s his company’s, technically,” Shinra explained. He sounded unimpressed. “He got a promotion recently, and Nebula has been sending him all over.”

[**I have to admit**] said Celty, [**that we probably wouldn’t have made it to you without his help.**] She paused, considering, and then typed, [**The bright side is that it’s pretty swanky inside.**]

Shizuo huffed. He would have taken a janky hot air balloon if he needed to, as long as he reached Izaya in time.

The door to the jet opened with a hiss, declining forward into a set of stairs. Standing in the jet’s doorway, in his white lab coat and unsettling gas mask, was Shingen Kishitani.

“Your honeymoon was shorter than expected, son!” he called to Shinra.

Celty typed furiously. [**It wasn’t a honeymoon!**]

Shingen descended the stairs and observed them. “You found Shizuo, I see. Not taking Izaya back to Japan with you?”

Shinra started, “Well, actually—”

Shizuo stepped forward. “Can you get us back there or not?”
“Shizuo!” Shingen greeted him enthusiastically, “I think you’ve grown since I last saw you. How’s that super strength of yours? If you want a medical examine, this jet is equipped with everything I’d need to—”

“Don’t make me kill you, old man,” said Shizuo. “I’ll steal your damn plane if I have to.”

Shingen backed off. “As irritable as ever… Oh?” He caught sight of something behind Shizuo. “What’s this?”

It was Pepe, standing behind everyone. She was still in her Kazbek suit and looked unprepared to meet another strange man.

Shingen approached her and leaned into her personal space. His face may have been hidden, but he was definitely leering. “I don’t know this one. It seems you all have acquired another fine speci—GYAH!”

Pepe grabbed Shingen and twisted the man into a painful arm lock. “Otro pervertido!!”

Celty applauded her.

“She’s not wrong,” said Shinra with a wry smile.

Shizuo sneered at him. “She wasn’t wrong before, either.”

Shinra scratched the back of his head sheepishly.

“Help!!” Shingen cried, “Shinra! Celty! Ow ow ow!! Shizuo!!”

“Pepe!” called Shizuo, waving at her. “You can let go of him. He’s suspicious, but he won’t hurt you. Well, at least not with us here.”

Though she seemed reluctant, Pepe released Shingen and backed away.

Shingen rubbed his shoulder tenderly. “Shinra, you left too much out on the phone. I get the feeling of some foul play.”

[We don’t owe you any explanations.] Celty told him heatedly.

“How rude! Is that really how you treat your father-in-law?”

[You’re not!!!]

Shizuo was already walking up the stairs. “C’mon! We have to go!” It angered him enough that he’d have to sit on this plane with Shingen Kishitani for the next thirteen hours. Shizuo would have to stay on his guard.

The others followed him, ushering inside one by one.

“Dad,” Shinra said as they entered, “we’re not in Tokyo, so why are you wearing that ridiculous mask?”

“We’re going to Tokyo, aren’t we?”

Shinra frowned. “Well, yeah, but—”

“You must always be prepared, son!”
Maybe Shizuo didn’t blame Shinra for turning out to be such a freak.

The inside of the jet certainly was ‘swanky,’ but Shizuo also thought it felt sterile. Divided into two sections, the cabin contained a couple of leather chairs and a long, plush couch. There were a few small tables, a mini-fridge, and – Shizuo deadpanned. Is that a bar? Through a doorway, Shizuo could see that there was indeed a fully operational medical station.

Once everyone was on board, the door closed behind them. Shingen called into the cockpit.

“Egor! We’re ready to take off! I suggest you all find a place to buckle in.”

Shizuo sunk into the end of the couch, reclining into its cushion. He folded Izaya’s coat in his lap and dared to close his eyes.

Thirteen hours, Shinra had said, was the time it would take to fly from Italy to Japan. Shizuo hated that there was nothing that he could do for Izaya during that time frame. If Shizuo could bend space and time, he would. As it happened, though, he was at the mercy of this damn jet plane, helmed by men he neither knew well nor trusted.

Still… Shizuo had been awake all night, and he convinced himself that he’d be no good against the Kazbeks if he was dead on his feet. Drifting off was a reasonable prospect.

“Ahem…!”

Shizuo cracked an eye open, already perturbed.

Standing across from him was Shingen. The others had seated themselves and buckled in. Shinra and Celty sat beside each other on the couch, Shooter leaned as motorcycle against one of the walls, and Pepe had strapped herself to one of the chairs. Her hands balled in her lap. She kept a wary eye on the man in the mask.

Shingen, though, was occupied with observing Shizuo.

“That jacket,” he said with a point, “belongs to Izaya Orihara, does it not?”

Shizuo’s fingers tightened in the fabric. His eyes narrowed. “What of it?”

“Interesting, interesting…” murmured Shingen. He thoughtfully stroked the muzzle of his mask like a chin. “So you two fell in love with each other, after all.”

Shizuo immediately directed a glare at Shinra.

“I said nothing!” yelped Shinra, holding his hands up.

Shingen guffawed, fists on his hips in a triumphant pose. “But of course I knew! I had just as much of a feeling about you two as Shinra did when you were young. The least human ‘human’ in the world, and the boy that loves humanity most of all! It was too poetic not to happen.”

About to jump from his seat and strangle the old man, Shizuo was halted by the sound of the intercom. A man’s thick Russian accent came through the jet’s speakers.

“Sir, we are about to depart. Please take your seat.”

“Ah – thank you, Egor!”

Shizuo caught the glint of Celty’s helmet. She shook her head, even when Shizuo bore his teeth.
Shingen ambled over to the chair closest to the cockpit and took a seat. The chair was on a swivel, so Shingen turned to face the others. His fingers steepled in his lap.

“Shinra and Celty set out to find both Shizuo Heiwajima and Izaya Orihara. That they return with just one of you raises questions. It wouldn’t be averse to believe that you’d simply discard Izaya, because you’ve often been at odds. However, the fact that you’re clutching to Izaya’s coat so tightly proposes the opposite – that you, in actuality, care very deeply for the boy, and this abrupt return to Japan indicates that that’s where we’ll find him.”

The others gaped at him. Shizuo’s eye twitched. The plane’s engine revved to life.

“So?” Shingen prompted with cockiness, “Am I correct?”

“You got all that from a coat?!” squawked Shinra.

Shingen chuckled. “Hah! Wasn’t it impressive?”

[You’re just scary, is what you are.] Celty told him.

“Fine,” Shizuo interjected. It wasn’t that he intended to hide his feelings, but he had had no intention of sharing any details of his life with this man. “You’re right. I do love Izaya. Don’t get any nasty ideas about it, though.”

Shingen considered this. “May I ask what happened to him?”

“No.”

“Don’t be like that, Shizuo-kun…” Shingen wilted. “I’m helping in your heroics, aren’t I?”

[I don’t think so] Celty interjected, [You’re not one to get involved out of the goodness of your heart.]

“That’s mean, Celty!”

“She’s right,” Shinra joined in. “I was wondering why you hadn’t gotten very far in the time Celty and I were with Shizuo. Dad…” He reproached his father, “are you involved?”

Shingen fiddled his fingers. “I wouldn’t say I’m ‘involved,’ per se…”

The jet accelerated and ascended from the ground. They climbed through the air, and Shizuo’s temper rose just as quickly. There was no escape for any of them on board.

[You know something?] Celty pressed him, [About Shizuo and Izaya?]

“I had no idea that Shizuo would get involved!” Shingen waved a hand dismissively. Then, he reeled back in his seat, realizing what he’d said.

Both Shinra and Celty pointed at him. “A-ha!”

Shizuo lurched forward. “Are you saying you knew something about what happened to Izaya?”

“I said no such thing!”

Celty wrapped a vine of thorny shadow around Shingen. [Tell us what you know about Izaya!]

“That’s nothing like the hurt I’ll give you if you don’t spill it,” Shizuo growled.

“O-o-o-o-okay okay!!” Shingen raised a hand in surrender. “I’ll talk!”

Celty withdrew her shadows.

Shingen breathed in relief. “Hmm,” he straightened his lab coat. “Young people are so disrespectful.”

“Well, you better start talking,” snapped Shizuo impatiently.

“What do you want from me?” Shingen crossed his arms. “I was only vaguely aware of Izaya-kun’s involvement with a person of interest to myself and Nebula.”

“A person of interest?”

“Indeed,” continued Shingen. “An old co-worker. He left the company some years ago. A bit of nasty business, really. The man had a breakthrough, then went off the rails. His technology did not align with the interest of the board members.”

[A breakthrough in what, exactly?]

“Stop being vague,” demanded Shinra.

Shingen coughed. “I can’t just go around spilling company secrets willynilly! I signed an NDA, you know. Plus, they gave me this jet. I do not want to lose the jet, Shinra.”

“Who cares about a jet?!” yelled Shizuo at the same time that Celty typed the same message.

“We could take more vacations, Celty,” Shinra whispered to her.

She punched him in the gut.

[In my eyes] Celty directed her phone at Shingen, [You’re a suspicious man that works for suspicious people. What could this ex-co-worker have done that was too extreme, even for you guys?]

“Ah…” Shingen leaned back in his chair. “But Celty, by the looks of that ginger girl you have there, you’ve already encountered the man I speak of.”

Everyone looked at Pepe. She shook at the attention and pointed to herself, wide-eyed.

“M-me?!”

“Indeed,” said Shingen. “You’re a Kazbek, are you not?”

[You’re wrong!] Celty interjected. [Shizuo fixed her! She’s just a girl!] Then Celty realized she had confirmed Shingen’s guess and dropped her phone.

“How do you know what those are?!” Shinra asked his father.

Shizuo had already worked it out. He fixed his focus on Shingen. “The man you used to work with…” He knew the answer, yet he asked, “Is his name… Josiah Hummel?”
“Oh!” chirped Shingen, “You know him!”

“Kishitani-san, we have reached 45,000 feet and will continue to cruise at this altitude. You may move about the cabin as you wish.”

“Thank you, Egor!” called Shingen.

Shizuo used the invitation to get up from his seat, stroll across the cabin, and lift Shingen by his lapels.

“Sh-sh-sh-Shizuo!!” Shingen squirmed, “What are you doing!”

“Tell me everything you know about him,” Shizuo demanded. “Everything.”

“But–!” Shingen shook his head, “This is far bigger than you’re prepared for! You’re already threatened by one major organization, do you really want another coming after you because I’ve told you its secrets?”

Shizuo rattled the man. “I don’t care. I’m not interested in this Nebula piece of shit company or its crap agenda. Right now I only care about stopping that Josiah douchebag and getting Izaya back.”

“Ahh...” Shingen relaxed slightly. His voice was charmed. “Young love really does make fools...”

Heat flooded Shizuo’s face, perhaps from both rage and embarrassment. He pulled Shingen across the cabin, unphased by the man’s attempt to escape his grasp.

“Hey, guys, you might want to hold on to something.”

Though confused, the others immediately obeyed.

“Eh-eh?” Shingen looked around, Shizuo’s plan slowly dawning on him. “Wh-what are you doing? Sh-Shizuo!!!”

Shizuo gripped the nearest handle and opened the jet’s exit door.

“AHHHHHHH!!”

The pressure to fly out the door was like a vacuum. For Shizuo, he had plenty of strength to hold onto the plane’s interior, even with one hand. His other arm wrapped Shingen in a headlock and let the man’s legs dangle into the sky.

“SH-SHIZUO!!! LET ME IN!!”

Loose objects like glasses and a couple cushions shot out the door, lost to the atmosphere. Shingen watched them fly past him in horror, realizing that he could be the next to fall 45,000ft. to his doom.

“Sorry?!” Shizuo yelled over the roar of the air. “Did you say you’ll tell me everything??”

“I WILL I WILL! CLOSE THE DOOR, DAMN YOU!!”

Behind him, Shinra, Celty, and Pepe had all tightened their seatbelts, but struggled at the pressure nonetheless.

“SHIZUO CLOSE THE DOOR!!” yelled Shinra.

Dragging Shingen inside, Shizuo did.
The others sighed in relief.

Finally, Shizuo dropped Shingen back into his seat. Shizuo took the seat across from the man, preferring the close proximity if Shizuo had to threaten him again.

“That…” Shingen caught his breath, “was a cruel move, Shizuo Heiwajima.”

Shizuo shrugged. “Whatever works. I wasn’t going to really drop you… probably.”

Shingen huffed. He settled back into his seat and regarded Shizuo momentarily. Shizuo met his gaze with a look of fierce determination.

“Nebula has its hands in many businesses,” began Shingen. “Josiah Hummel worked closely with Nebula to develop a means of immortality. His approach was rooted in technology. For Nebula, it was unorthodox.”

[They prefer stealing my head?] asked Celty, with no lack of animosity.

Shingen pulled at his collar. “N-now now, Celty. This isn’t about you right now. Don’t be selfish.”

Celty emitted an affronted fume of smoke.

“To our surprise, his methods were vastly successful. With the reach of his Kazbek Initiative, he was able to acquire many test subjects under the guise of a humanitarian organization. He excelled at providing prosthetics around the world, from injured soldiers to victims of terrorism. It helped to be associated with a major pharmaceutical company, as well.”

Celty held up her phone to say, [That's sickening.]

“That’s business,” countered Shingen. “Doesn’t it matter that he also saved hundreds with his advancements? He perfected the symbiosis of organic and cybernetic biology, to a point that suggested he could actually achieve immortality with this harmony.

“Unfortunately, this line of business disillusioned young Hummel. Getting to know his patients and seeing the world’s horrors that inflicted such pain upon them, he came to the conclusion that humanity itself was the most ugly disease of all. What began as a crusade to save human beings became one to destroy them.

“Him and his underling were able to conceive a certain serum. To their victims it appeared as the ultimate type O blood transfusion, but for Hummel and his Initiative, the liquid in these people’s veins was as good as puppet strings.”

“Vulture,” Shizuo provided.

Shingen tapped his temple. “You know more than I give you credit for, Shizuo.”

“Yeah,” said Shizuo, “but the crap. How does Izaya factor in?”

“Izaya is an information broker,” Shingen continued. “His entire business is to know things. Unfortunately for him, he came to know something that Hummel desperately needed to see his plans come to fruition.”

“Which is?”

“You see, Hummel had the means to control those with Vulture serum already within them. The
serum is based in cybernetics, and can operate from the signal of a particular waveform. His problem is that that only reaches a small number of Kazbeks, in the grand scheme of things. He realized this, so he sabotaged all other Nebula projects to include Vulture. Food production, pharmaceutics, chemicals… We’re very popular in Japan, you know.” Shingen tutted, “When the executives realized this they were furious!”

“So what they do?” asked Shinra.

“Well naturally Nebula tried to, ah…” Shingen cleared his throat awkwardly, “‘take care of the problem.”

“Assassination?” Shinra was unimpressed.

“It didn’t work, clearly,” said Shingen, just as disappointed. “Hard to kill a man who’s mastered the science of regeneration.”

[How would this change his plans, though?] asked Celty, [He already had Kazbeks, it sounds like.]

“If he wanted to dominate the world,” continued Shingen, “he would need a much stronger transmission. A different waveform. He made a deal with an information broker in Japan to create such a system.”

“Izaya?” wagered Shizuo.

“No actually!” said Shingen excitedly. He was thrilled to have the spotlight amongst them. To him, this was merely storytime. “This broker exists only on the internet and would be far more qualified to provide Hummel with a new Vulture transmission. However, Izaya was able to steal these files and delete the originals.”

[But why would he do that?] asked Celty.

“If I were to guess,” Shingen shrugged, “I would have to say… out of pettiness.”

Shinra chuckled, “That does sound like Izaya.”

I think I’m addicted to information. Izaya’s voice echoed in Shizuo’s mind, and a stab of sadness hit Shizuo in the gut. You reckless idiot, thought Shizuo. He’d scold Izaya face-to-face once they reunited.

Another thing bothered him, though. “Except Izaya didn’t have have his computer or anything on him when he was taken. All that stuff got lost along the way. What if Izaya doesn’t even have this information anymore?”

“He memorized it?” Shingen guessed.

Shinra sighed with an air of bemusement. “Probably. Izaya always played things pretty close to the chest.”

“Then getting Izaya himself to adjust the signal is the only way,” Shizuo concluded for himself.

“It would seem so,” answered Shingen.

“Fine,” said Shizuo, “I get that.” He grit his teeth. Shizuo didn’t like it, but he understood it. There was something else that nagged at him. “But, here’s what I still don’t…”
Shizuo steeled himself and took a breath. It wasn’t something he wanted to ask, but thought he should. He had a feeling he wouldn’t like the answer.

“Josiah has had Izaya as a captive multiple times. If he can control anyone with Vulture serum, why doesn’t he just inject Izaya and make him give him the information?”

Shingen took a moment to regard Shizuo. His fingers twined together in his lap.

“I can only imagine that,” began Shingen, “to a man who has come to despise the atrocities of man, a person who’s come to love mankind unconditionally would have its appeal. Hummel may not believe he’s succeeded in ushering in a new age unless Izaya Orihara can love his creations as the new humanity, and hate those that came before them.”

“Oh.” Shizuo had been right; he didn’t like that answer.

“Perhaps at first it had just been a game to get Izaya to break, to see if he would renounce humanity and give Hummel the waveform willingly. But if it’s escalated this far, Izaya hasn’t been broken, and Hummel has seen the value in that.”

“Izaya won’t break,” Shizuo huffed confidently. “Josiah’s already tried.”

“Has he?” Shingen regarded Shizuo with increased interest.

“Josiah had some kind of helmet thing that he called ‘Insight.’ It basically seemed like it could read Izaya’s mind. It embedded a bunch of scars into his skin. He basically looks like a computer chip on his back, now.”

“Fascinating…” Shingen mumbled to himself, “An embedded system? On a person?”

Shizuo scowled. “Huh?”

“Nothing, nothing!” Shingen waved a nervously dismissive hand. “These types of science aren’t my strong suit. I really was a terrible choice to keep an eye on the situation. Look how far things have escalated! Thank goodness you’re determined to stop it, Shizuo-kun…”

Shizuo’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not doing this for you or your shitty job. Remember that.”

[Can’t you do something useful] Celty ganged up on Shingen, [like coming up with a cure? Instead, you’re just letting Shizuo and Izaya take all the fire! For being so involved, you and your company seem pretty useless!]

Shingen stammered under the pressure. “Don’t you think we’ve tried?! Honestly…” The man sunk into his seat, “Vulture is serious business. As far as we know, there’s no counter to it.”

“But Shizuo forgot something!” Shinra interjected suddenly.

Shizuo raised an eyebrow and Shingen’s curiosity peaked.

“Oh?”

“You were able to break Vulture’s control on you, didn’t you say?” Shinra said, “And you freed Pepe as well.”

“Oh, right,” Shizuo blinked, “I guess I did do that.”

“You were exposed to Vulture, Shizuo?” Shingen stared at him through the mask’s creepy, creepy
Shizuo reached up and pulled down his shirt’s collar to reveal the scars that stretched all around his right shoulder. “My arm. I fucking up really bad in Egypt. When I met Josiah Hummel, I didn’t know who he was. He just offered to heal me and to help find Izaya.”

Shingen leaned forward with intrigue. “He gave you a Kazbek prosthetic?”

“Yeah…” Shizuo looked down at his hand, opening and closing his fist. “It’s weird. It’s still… fleshy, but it heals almost instantly and has all these wires running through it. When a Vulture signal is active, my veins glow blue.”

Celty shifted in her seat. [You didn’t tell me that.]

“Yet you were able to resist Vulture?” asked Shingen. “How?”

“I managed to hit my head really hard. Same with Pepe’s.”

“Fascinating!” Shingen exclaimed, “Not even I had thought of it, but I should have known! The serum runs throughout the body but resonates in the human brain. Damaging the cranium… You must have scrambled the signal!”

Shizuo shrugged, “Sure.” Hell if I know.

“Congratulations, Shizuo,” piped Shinra, “your rashness has finally paid off.”

Shizuo shot him with a scowl.

[Once we land] typed Celty, [Is there anyway to find where they are, exactly?]

Shingen stroked the muzzle of his mask like a villainous beard. “My guess is that Hummel will attempt to implement his plan somewhere with strong broadcasting capabilities.”

“Like the Skytree?” Shinra gasped jovially, “Celty! I’ve always wanted to go on a date there!”

[There’s no time for a date!]

“Josiah won’t be able to do anything unless Izaya helps him,” Shizuo added hotly. “So he wouldn’t need any broadcast system yet! What about finding them somewhere else?”

“If you do truly have Vulture within you, Shizuo,” Shingen pointed to Shizuo’s right arm, “then we may be able to extract it and use the serum to our advantage.”

Shizuo looked down at his arm, then back at Shingen, baffled. “Really?”

“Trace the source of the signal,” said Shingen, as if it were perfectly simple.

“You know how to do that?” asked Shinra.

“Not at all,” admitted Shingen.

The others groaned.

Then Shingen added, “But I may know of an unfortunate woman who could.”

“Who?!” asked Shizuo desperately.
Before Shingen could answer, a young woman poked her head out of the cockpit.

“Hello everyone,” she greeted with a lackadaisical smile and sweet voice, thick with a European accent. “I hope the ride has not been too bumpy.”

“Nonsense!” said Shingen, rising from his seat. He had already forgotten all about his conversation with the others. “You and Egor have been flying stupendously!”

The woman beamed. “I’m glad to hear it! Please let me know if I can get anyone anything. We have snacks and refreshments, even alcohol.”

Shizuo turned to Shinra and Celty and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “The fuck is that?”

Both Shinra and Celty swiped their hands over their necks rapidly in a *Kill the subject!* motion.

“Haven’t you met my wife, Shizuo?” Shingen held an arm around her and radiated pride.

Shizuo examined the blonde woman, who was definitely younger than himself. “Wife?”

“I’m Emilia,” she greeted. “I believe we were once at the same hot pot party at our son’s place…”

“Don’t call me your son!” cried Shinra in absolute despair.

Shizuo didn’t remember her at all, but he gave Shingen a reproachful look. “You really are a dirty old man.”

This did not phase Shingen at all. “Love knows no age, Shizuo-kun.”

“Oh no…” Emilia slipped from Shingen’s embrace and got unnervingly close to Shizuo. He grimaced at the proximity of her very large breasts. “Those bags under your eyes… You’re exhausted…”

“I’m fine,” grunted Shizuo. He pushed her away by her shoulder.

“Please…” she continued sweetly, “The flight to Japan is long. Won’t you rest on one of our operating tables?”

That screamed of malpractice. “Uh, no thanks. I’m good.”

He felt a tap on his shoulder, though, and turned to see Celty.

*[You have been through a lot today.]*

“I’m fine,” Shizuo insisted.

Celty shook her head. *[There’s still a lot of time before we land.]* She dragged him from his seat and pushed him toward the back cabin. *[You’re still a bit sooty. Why don’t you wash up and get some sleep? There’s a shower and everything… I told you it was kinda swanky.]*

“Celty…” Shizuo glared past her at the trio of overly curious doctors. Emilia was attempting to fawn over Shinra like a mother. He also noticed that Pepe had already knocked out in her chair, and he wondered for how much of their discussion she dozed through.

*[I’ll keep an eye on them to make sure he doesn’t start cutting into your arm or something]* Celty assured him.
He couldn’t deny that a shower and a nap had its appeal. That had been his original plan, to sleep his way through this flight and wake up in Japan. Once he was there, he could find Izaya…

“Alright,” he conceded. “Don’t let the others drive you crazy, then.”

She took a breath – or at least, that’s what it looked like – and held up her phone without looking at him.

[You’ll find him.]


It seemed like she wanted to say more, but she didn’t. She pushed Izaya’s coat into his arms and closed the curtain that divided one section of the cabin from the other, leaving Shizuo to his devices.

For an airplane bathroom, the shower pressure was decent. Shizuo let the temperature get blisteringly hot, just how he liked it. His mind was rather blank as he scrubbed the soot and grime from his skin, the ash from his hair. All the knowledge he had on Josiah, Izaya, and the Kazbek Initiative locked itself in the back of his brain. He was unsure what he’d do with it all yet. His plan was still the same:

Find Izaya, and beat the shit out of Josiah Hummel and any Kazbeks that tried to stop him.
Celty woke Shizuo up by jabbing his left shoulder. He startled into consciousness with a grunt, jolting forward. The glare of her phone’s screen made him squint.

[We’ll be landing soon.]

Rubbing his eyes, Shizuo looked up at her. “We’re already there?”

[You slept well] said Celty. [That’s good. You needed it.]

Shizuo responded by groaning and flopping back down on the bed.

She sat beside him at the edge of the bed. Shizuo had Izaya’s coat tucked under his head. They were in the back half of the jet’s cabin, where there was enough equipment to perform open heart surgery. Still, Shizuo couldn’t complain about getting some rest. Over twenty-four hours ago, he’d been in his shack’s janky bed at the Petrillos’, and now…

[How do you feel] Celty typed to him, [about going home?]

Shizuo pursed his lips. “Dunno… I guess I haven’t thought about it like that. It’s not like I can really go back to my life or anything before I find Izaya.” He couldn’t help his bitter chuckle, “This definitely isn’t how I pictured it.”

[How did you picture it, then?]

“Hmmm… Maybe one day, Izaya would have dumped packed bags at our feet and said ‘Time to go, Shizu-chan!’” Shizuo raised his voice an octave and added some flamboyance in a sloppy imitation of Izaya. “Then I guess we would have just come back. You and I might have still argued about the whole thing, but…”

Offering her a lazy smile, he playfully prodded her elbow with his knuckles. “Sorry you couldn’t have your scenic getaway with Shinra.”
She recoiled. He could sense her uneasiness. After a moment, she typed [Please don’t apologize to me.]

Shizuo sat up. “Celty?” He hadn’t meant to breach a sore subject.

[Nevermind.] she said, [It’s fine. There are more important things to worry about.]

“Right…” Shizuo trailed off, unsatisfied with the exchange. At the same time, Celty had a point, and Shizuo didn’t want to press her uncomfortably.

“We are beginning our final descent into Narita Airport,” came the voice of the Russian pilot over the jet’s intercom.

Emilia followed. “Please take your seats and fasten your seatbelts.”

Celty rose from the bed and headed to the front cabin without another message. Shizuo sighed and followed her. He stowed Izaya’s coat away in the small duffle of belongings that he’d brought with him: a few pairs of clothes he’d acquired in Italy, a comic book from Isabella, the origami fox he’d made for Izaya, and Izaya’s own parka. He then took a seat on the couch and buckled in.

Shinra continued to snore in his chair. Pepe was awake now, alertly staring back and forth between the window and the entrance to the cockpit. Shingen was missing, so Shizuo inferred that he was in the cockpit with his mercenary and inappropriately young wife. Meanwhile, Shooter, the most reliable of all of them, hadn’t made a peep throughout the entire trip.

With Celty avoiding conversation with him for the time being, Shizuo turned his attention to the window as well. Outside, the vast lattice of Tokyo expanded below them. The city appeared as a billion speckles of light and color. The sun had just breached the horizon, and the sky became brighter with every second. Streaks of light filtered a hazy glow over the land and cast harsh shadows towards the West. Shizuo would have never believed Japan could look so small, but he had also never seen it look so stunning.

As they descended, the city’s features began to take shape. Shizuo recognized some of the buildings in the Shinjuku skyline. They looked like a child’s miniature model. The Arakawa and other rivers snaked through the luminescence like black veins. Tokyo Tower blinked in the distance, the Skytree even further away.

You’re somewhere out there, Izaya, and I’m going to find you.

Lower and lower they went, until they passed the city and sunk towards Narita Airport. A mechanical whir alerted them that the wheels had dropped. Their surroundings grew to their natural sizes. The ground seemed to come out of nowhere, and they all jolted forward as the jet skid to a stop on the airport runway.

They coasted for a few minutes, giving Shizuo the opportunity to reflect on how long he’d been away from his home. He had left in January of that year; it was now the dawn of April. It would be Spring in Japan, and the parks would smell like cherry blossom.

“Welcome to Japan!” came Emilia’s enthusiastic voice from the intercom. “The date is April 3rd, 5:23am. The temperature today will have a high of 20° Celsius, low of 16, with partly cloudy skies.”

“Does she know we’re not on a commercial airline…?” mumbled Shinra.
On the contrary, Shizuo appreciated the update. The plane soon stopped moving, and the noises of its engine powered down. As soon as it did, Shizuo rose from his seat and collected his bag.

Shingen emerged from the cockpit. “Was that not the most pleasant flight of your life?” He pressed the button to open the front door. “You may tip us if you feel so inclined.”

“We don’t,” said Shizuo, shoving past him and descending the stairs.

Once Shizuo stepped down onto the ground, he took a huge breath. Japan. The air was just as he remembered it – polluted, but still refreshing. The wind was wild around them, and many planes surrounded them, driving around the runways and taking off one by one. They had pulled up to an airplane hanger, but Narita’s terminals were a short walk away.

“I’m really back?” he murmured to himself, disbelievingly.

“I guess a ‘welcome home’ is in order, huh?” said Shinra with a grin. He had stepped off the plane to stand beside him and looked far less nostalgic.

“Almost,” Shizuo responded. “First we find Izaya.”

“But what about breakfast?”

“Shinra…”

“Kidding!! Kidding…”

A cough made the two turn around. Shingen stood atop the jet’s stairs.

“Don’t forget this one!” he called as Pepe scurried past him to hide behind Shizuo.

“Aren’t you coming?” Shinra’s eyes narrowed at him.

Shingen guffawed. “Stay here?! Absolutely not. No offense, son, but if this heroic little outing of yours doesn’t work, then Nebula will take the next drastic measures and I am determined to be as far away from Tokyo as possible when that happens.”

“When what happens, exactly?” asked Shinra.

“Well, if you all succeed, you won’t have to worry about it!” chirped Shingen nonchalantly.

“Thanks for the confidence,” Shizuo grumbled, “good-for-nothing old creep…”

“Don’t be like that, Shizuo,” said Shingen. “I’ve done all I can for you at this point. As for where to find Izaya, I have entrusted that hint to the most competent of you all.”

Shingen stepped aside, and as if on cue, Celty and Shooter shot out of the jet, engine already revving. She went over their heads and circled around to face them. Shooter whinnied at being back in action.

“Celty?!” screeched Shinra, “Where are you going?!"

[I’m going ahead to pick someone up] she said, [Someone that can help us find Izaya.]

“Who?!” asked Shizuo.

She typed determinedly, [I think if I told you both then you’d say it’s crazy, but I have to try.]
“But–” started Shizuo, but she cut him off.

[Please let me do this.] Her phone lingered in front of him. The wind whipped between them, and Shizuo didn’t it have it in him to argue with her again.

“Fine,” he said reluctantly. He trusted her, whole-heartedly, but didn’t think they’d yet come to a complete reconciliation.

“Not fine!” Shinra argued. “You’re going to leave me with Shizuo?! How are we supposed to get around?!”

“Taxi?” provided Pepe, somehow more rational than the rest of them. “No tienes taxis en Japón?”

[Don’t worry,] said Celty, [I called you a ride. They’ll be waiting to pick you up.]

“Are we still being vague about people?” groaned Shizuo. “I can’t deal with any more suspicious characters.”

This made Celty chortle silently. [These people aren’t suspicious. Well, kinda… Nevermind. You’ll see!] For her last message to them, she said [Meet me at Izaya’s old office. I’ll be there as soon as I can!]

Before they could convince her otherwise, she pocketed her phone and revved Shooter to life again. The motorcycle bolted away like a blur of darkness in the sunrise. The barriers of the airport stood no obstacle against a supernatural motorcycle that could scale walls and fences. Celty was gone before security could even notice her.

“What about us?” Shizuo asked. He turned back to Shingen, who still stood in the jet’s threshold. “How are we supposed to get through customs? I lost my passport ages ago.”

“That?” Shingen chuckled. “No matter. Just head through that doorway,” he pointed to the closest terminal, “and say you’re with Nebula. You’ll bypass security.”

“That company gets shadier the more you talk about it.”

“Nothing for you to worry about, Shizuo-kun.”

“Hmph…” Unfortunately, Shingen had a point. Shizuo couldn’t worry about Nebula right now, but it still begged him to question, “When this is over, will you people at least leave us alone?”

Shingen considered this for only a short moment. “You and Izaya Orihara will always be of interest to Nebula Corporation. I have no say in the matter.”

If that was the case, then neither did Shizuo.

Emilia poked her head through the jet’s door and waved. “Farewell, Shinra!” she called to him, “Don’t forget to hug your mother and father goodbye!”

“Alright let’s go,” said Shinra hastily, pushing Shizuo towards the terminal. Pepe followed closely and anxiously.

Just as Shingen had advised, they told the first security guard that they were with Nebula and were granted complete immunity to the typical customs procedure. They bypassed all the checkpoints, and every other security officer acted as if they were invisible.
“Was this what it was like for you and Celty?” Shizuo asked Shinra.

Shinra nodded. “Yup.”

“Shinra… I’m pretty sure your dad works for something really evil.”

“Probably,” sighed Shinra. He gave Shizuo a curious sideways glance. “So, if you take down these Kazbek Initiative people, is Nebula your next target?”

“Target?”

“Of heroic takedowns.”

Shizuo frowned. “I’m not a hero, so no.”

“So this is just about Izaya, then?” There was a sneer hidden in the words.

Shizuo hummed thoughtfully. “Yes… and no.”

They were almost through the airport, and they headed towards the pick-up location. Shinra said nothing, a silent prompt to elaborate.

“I want to save Izaya more than anything,” said Shizuo, “but I know that flea would hate me forever if I let humanity down in the process. It’s not like I want everyone brainwashed, either. I’m finally starting to think rationally as a person, and it would fucking suck to have that taken away now.”

Shinra halted in his tracks, forcing Shizuo and Pepe to fall back and wait for him. The man had the most ridiculous grin on his face.

“What?” Shizuo didn’t have time for this.

“I’m just thrilled at how right I was about you two!” Shinra beamed. “Izaya has had a more positive influence on you than I could have ever anticipated!”

“Oh shut up!” Shizuo marched ahead heatedly, hiding the blush that had sprung to his face.

The morning sun was on full blast when they made it outside. Shizuo regretted his lack of sunglasses. Narita was in a rush of activity. Hundreds of people got in and out of cabs. Others greeted and embraced family members. Businessmen strolled past with their suitcases and waved down the nearest taxi.

“Okay,” Shizuo breathed to keep his patience in check, “so where the heck are these people Celty mentioned?”

For a few minutes, the three walked the length of the pick-up zone, searching for any familiar faces. Meanwhile, taxis came and went. Pepe kept looking at Shizuo questioningly, clearly flummoxed as to why they had not yet taken one.

Their answer came in the form of a familiar voice behind them.

“Well, I’ll be damned! He really is alive!”

Shizuo turned and quickly saw a distinctive van. One of the doors was painted with an anime character. The driver gaped at Shizuo, but Shizuo caught the eye of the man in the passenger’s seat, who was wearing the same beanie as always. His smile was as refreshing as ever.
“Kadota! Yo!” Shizuo rushed over to them, Shinra and Pepe on his heels.

“Shizuo Heiwajima,” grinned Kyohei Kadota, “most of us thought you were dead!”

“Not yet,” said Shizuo, smirking back.

Saburo Togusa yawned from the driver’s seat. “I was one of them.”

“Celty messaged us that you needed a ride,” said Kadota. “Kinda thought she was playing a prank, but here you are!”

“I would have still rather gone with Celty,” Shinra complained.

“I almost didn’t recognize you,” Kadota admitted, “without the bartender get-up.”

“Ah…” Shizuo scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. He had forgotten about that outfit. Jeans and t-shirts had been so comfortable, lately.

“Hop on in!” Togusa jerked a thumb to indicate the back seats.

“SHIZU-CHAN!” cried a feminine voice that was distinctly not Izaya’s.

The door to the van flew open, revealing Erika Karisawa and Walker Yumasaki. The boy’s eyes were as squinty as usual, but Erika’s sparkled with an intensity that Shizuo was unprepared for. Her gaze raked over him with obvious appraisal.

“Uh, hey,” he greeted awkwardly.

“So the strongest man in Ikebukuro lives!” gasped Walker.

Erika rounded on him. “You owe me 5000 ¥!”

“Dammit!” Walker recoiled as if the blow had been physical. Erika pillaged his crumpled form for his wallet, and plucked out all the cash.

“A pleasure doing business with you,” she sang haughtily.

“Pepe, you sit in back with those two,” Shinra nudged her forward.

“Eh?” Pepe dragged her feet. “Quienes son estas personas?”

“Amigos! Go on now!”

“Who’s the ginger chick?” hissed Togusa.

“It’s a long story,” said Shizuo.

Erika and Walker leered at Pepe curiously, and she cowered under their gazes. Both reached out and pulled her into the very back of the van.

“Look at this suit, Karisawa!” exclaimed Walker. The two otakus examined Pepe with no regard to her personal space. “It’s perfectly science-fiction, isn’t it? Like Nia-chan at the end of Gurren Lagann!”

“Mhmm!” Erika agreed. “The cyber patterns and everything! Shizu-CHAN has brought an intriguing woman back to Japan with him. What would Iza-Iza do…”
Shinra perked up. “Oh, you don’t have to worry about that, Karisawa.”

Shizuo roughly shoved Shinra into the van before he could say anything else.

Walker continued his spiel around Pepe. “This morning, a supernatural woman called us to arms so that we would ferry Ikebukuro’s hero to where he needed to be. Now, he shows up with a strange doctor and even stranger woman. She does not speak our language, nor has her role in the story been revealed. The pieces of an adventure are coming together!”

“Not to mention,” Erika wrapped her arms around Pepe, “she’s super cute! Shizu-chan has brought us a heroine from a foreign land, whose attire is erotic and mysterious. Perhaps she is the reason he has been away from Tokyo all this time?”

“Señor Shizuo!” Pepe squealed, “Con qué tipo de personas te asocías!”

“Don’t worry, Pepe,” he assured her. “They’re usually harmless.”

“Generalmente!”

“So,” interjected Kadota, “where we headed?”

Shizuo didn’t remember the exact address. His feet had always carried him there on their own. “Do you know where Izaya’s place used to be?”

Togusa squinted suspiciously. “Izaya Orihara?”

“I do,” said Kadota, but he frowned. “Why there?”

“Yeah,” added Togusa, steadily pulling out of Narita’s traffic, “I kinda assumed you were both dead.”

“Nope,” said Shizuo simply.

“You owe me another 5000 ¥,” Erika snapped at Walker. “I knew they were both alive!”

“You already emptied my wallet!” Walker pleaded with her. They proceeded to wrestle in the back seat. Pepe fretted helplessly between them.

Ignoring the commotion, Kadota pressed Shizuo. “So what’s at Izaya’s office? You’re not headed there to… he grimaced, “finish the job, or something, right?”

Shinra snorted before Shizuo could bullshit an excuse.

“Not at all,” said Shinra. “That phase of Izaya and Shizuo’s relationship is long over.”

Shizuo warned Shinra to shut the hell up with a very furious glower, but Shinra expertly ignored him.

Kadota pursed his lips. “What do you mean?”

“I meeeean~” Shinra continued playfully, “that Shizuo and Izaya have finally put their differences aside to form a bond that will only strengthen them both as individuals. A bond of heart and passion!”

“Shinra…” warned Shizuo lowly, “I swear…”
Too late. Kadota was no idiot. His face contorted as he interpreted Shinra’s words. “Wait… You don’t mean—”

“Indeed,” swooned Shinra. “Shizuo Heiwajima and Izaya Orihara are finally a romantic couple.”

The van fell to complete silence. Togusa nearly swerved into the wrong lane, killing them all. Shizuo’s ears burned in dismay. He was completely frozen in horror. Shinra had always done things to irk him, but now Shizuo seriously considered murdering him. Would Celty hate him? Probably. Would it be worth it? Probably.

Then, the silence was broken by a fangirl’s piercing scream.

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

“You…” Kadota gawked, “You’re joking…”

“I would not joke about this,” reasoned Shinra. “I’ve been waiting for this for years.”

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

“But they hate each other!” cried Togusa.

“No anymore,” smirked Shinra. “They love each other. Shizuo even said so himself.”

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!”

“Not anymore,” scoffed Togusa. “Right, Shizuo?”

Shizuo couldn’t answer; he was still deciding how to kill Shinra.

Togusa’s face fell. “...Right, Shizuo?”

“Oi, Shizuo,” Kadota tried to gain his attention. “You’re in love with Izaya? Really?”

Shizuo gritted his teeth. This was Shinra’s fault, for breaching the topic. His face was embarrassingly red and he knew it. “What if I am?!” he snapped at Kadota blisteringly.

Kadota stammered, “N-nothing! Just…” He whistled, astonished. “That’s a headline, right there.”

“Don’t be coy, Shizuo,” Shinra piped. “You two slept together, after all.”

“You WHAT?!” cried the others in the van all at once.

“YOU—!” Shizuo really did throttle Shinra this time.

“But you did sleep together!” yelped Shinra, trying to shove Shizuo away from him.

“Alright,” Kadota breathed. A blush graced his features. “Let’s all try to calm do– Karisawa are you crying?!”

She was. Erika clung to Shizuo’s shoulder and wept. “Th… thank you… Thank you Shizu-chan…”

“Why are you thanking me?!” Shizuo howled.

“B-because! Th-this is the dream…” She wiped her eyes on Shizuo’s sleeves, “I-I always kn-knew…! I’ve n-never been so v-vindicated…!”
“Get off of me!” snarled Shizuo.

She didn’t.

“Shizuo and Izaya, huh…” A smile crept onto Kadota’s lips, “Who would have thought…”

“She did,” said Shinra with pride

“ME!” shrieked Erika.

“Pensé que era obvio,” added Pepe.

“Enough!” barked Shizuo, red in the face. “My relationship with Izaya is not up for discussion!”

“I don’t know about that,” Togusa teased from the safety of the driver’s seat. “We’ve got a whole hour until we reach Orihara’s office. How else will we pass the time?”

Dear Izaya, Shizuo mentally wrote, You were right. Coming back to Japan was a mistake.

It was unfair, really. Shizuo was supposed to be the most intimidating man in Tokyo. Maybe even in all of Japan. Somehow, though, in a van full of fools, his threats were meaningless. They poked and prodded him with no fear of his wrath. No one had dropped the subject of his and Izaya’s journey, even after they had made it into the heart of Tokyo. Shizuo, the strongest man alive, was helpless before their meddling.

“So this is all a mission to rescue Iza-Iza from an army of evil cyborgs?!” asked Erika, enthralled.

“Yup!” chirped Shinra.

The two had dominated the conversation since the van’s revelation about Shizuo and Izaya. Shizuo could do little but sit there brooding, as Shinra recounted Shizuo’s arduous journey of the past few months. While Walker wanted all the details about the Kazbeks, Erika’s focus kept returning to Shizuo and Izaya’s romance.

“I always imagined Shizu-chan would one day rescue Iza-Iza from peril,” she rambled wistfully. “Iza-Iza’s slender frame draped in Shizu-chan’s big, strong arms… Oooh I can just picture it! Iza-Iza makes a perfect damsel in distress!”

“Karisawa!” Walker scolded her, “Are you forgetting the sheer awesomeness of this situation?! Actual cyborgs will brainwash Japan, and we’ve been chosen as the party of warriors who will stop them!”

“Uh,” Shinra laughed, “I don’t think anyone is expecting you guys to do that.”

Erika countered Walker, “You’re the one who’s not seeing that Shizu-chan has evolved into a *Shounen Jump* protagonist!”

“I see what you mean,” agreed Shinra. “He’s got that furious drive to him, and he’s determined to rescue his love-interest.”

“Right?!”

“Kishitani-san…!” Walker grasped his chest painfully, “not you too…!”

Shizuo, Kadota, and Togusa had all been subdued into silence. With no escape, they fell to the
mercy of the other three’s blather. Shizuo didn’t even understand most of what they were prattling on about. The morning traffic was too damn slow.

“Shizu-chan,” Erika goaded him, “please tell me about the time you and Iza-Iza made love.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Yeah, actually,” Shinra blanched nervously, “this is the part I don’t need to know.”

“But who topped? Was it Shizu-chan?! I bet it was Shizu-chan,” Erika squealed at her own imagination. “I can just imagine it – the legendary tsundere Izaya Orihara, finally willing to submit to the man that he’s been in love with for years…!”

Shizuo gripped the edge of Togusa’s chair desperately. “Are we almost there?!”

Togusa, who looked a bit green, nodded. “Y-yeah, we are, actually.”

They pulled up alongside Izaya’s former building. Shizuo recognized the street. He’d stalk Izaya to this building to pick a fight when Ikebukuro was in turmoil – not that the result was ever very productive.

I used to be pretty obsessed with him, didn’t I? Shizuo sighed to himself as he hopped out of the van, his bag over his shoulder and Shinra in tow. “Thanks for the ride, guys.”

“No problem,” said Kadota. “Sounds like you’ve had a wild past couple months.”

“You could say that…”

“All that Kazback stuff legit?” Togusa asked nervously.

“Kazbek,” Shizuo corrected, “and yeah, unfortunately. You guys should keep your heads down, stay home. Hopefully, there won’t be anything to–”

“Are you kidding?!”

Erika and Walker both jumped out of the van.

“Stay home?!” Walker shook his head, “As if I would miss the opportunity to be a part of this climactic showdown!”

“I’ve never been to Iza-Iza’s place before!” Erika admired the building, gazing up at its many floors. “Ooooh~ Swanky!”

Kadota gaped. “Where are you two going?!”

“With them,” they said in unison.

“Dotachin, please!” Erika pressed her hands together in a plea, “This is a matter of true love! We have to help the handsome knight rescue the beautiful damsel, or the whole world will end!”

“Izaya is not damsel,” Shizuo grimaced, “and I’m not a knight. I’m just a guy.”

“A handsome guy,” she insisted.

“Are you two crazy?!” Togusa exclaimed, flabbergasted, “Weren’t you listening to what Shinra said? Shizuo’s got some crazies on his tail! If anything, we should be getting as far away from him as
“Sa-bu-ro!” Erika stomped her foot on each syllable. Her cheeks puffed out in a defiant scowl.

“It’s just another kidnapped friend to rescue,” reasoned Walker.

“Togusa is right, though,” Shinra chimed in. “It’ll definitely be dangerous.”

“Exciting!” hollered the two friends.

“It would be better if less people got involved,” added Shizuo. The image of the Petrillos’ burning villa had etched itself into his mind. He didn’t want any other bystanders to become victims of Josiah Hummel’s methods.

Meanwhile, Kadota pondered the situation. He stared at Shizuo, then at his eager friends, then at Shizuo again. He rubbed his chin.

“Shizuo…” he began, “You really in love with Izaya?”

Shizuo blushed, but he was always honest. “Yeah, I am.”

Behind him, Erika squealed.

Kadota hummed thoughtfully, mulling that answer. After a moment, he opened his door and emerged from the van.

Erika and Walker cheered in triumph.

Shizuo’s eyebrows rose.


“What?” Kadota turned back to his friend. “I’m curious! Aren’t you?”

Togusa grumbled something that Shizuo couldn’t hear.

“The two couldn’t be in the same neighborhood without all Hell rising,” mused Kadota, “Then they disappear for months, come back, and now all this? Can’t say I’m not intrigued…”

He met Shizuo’s eyes with his usual easy smile and casual demeanor, qualities that Shizuo had always somewhat envied.

“Plus,” Kadota continued, “I kinda like not being a blue-eyed zombie.”

Kadota’s good nature was wickedly contagious to those around him. Shizuo felt that effect now. “Kadota…”

“Well I’m staying down here,” proclaimed Togusa. He put his hands on the wheel just for show.

Shizuo noticed Pepe was still in there as well. “Pepe?”

“Me quedaré con este hombre pobremente vestido y vigilaré,” she said vigilantly. When Shizuo blinked at her, confused, she used two fingers to point to her eyes. “Los ojos azules,” then she pointed out into the world.

“Oh, right.” Shizuo understood that much. She was offering to stay behind with Togusa and to keep
watch for Kazbeks on their trail. Her persona could shift to trained competence so suddenly. For that reason, Shizuo trusted her with the responsibility. He could also leave his belongings with her.

She climbed into the front seat to join Togusa, who greeted her warily, “Uhhh hey…”

Pepe said nothing in return.

The others entered Izaya’s building and squeezed into the elevator. Shizuo wondered if Celty knew that Kadota’s crew would join the fray. He knew they were characters that could hold their own in tough situations but Shizuo still had his reservations about others getting involved.

Erika needled him, as if sensing his apprehension. “Don’t sweat it, Shizu-chan! We want to save Izaya, too.”

“All right?”

“He was our resident pretty boy trouble-maker,” explained Walker. “Every good action series needs one. Plus, it’s been mundane around here without our hero and his rival!”

“It’s been peaceful, I think you mean,” Kadota sighed. “But also, yeah. Izaya mighta been kinda fucked up in the head, but I always thought he was a bit funny. I remember he could be good company, back in school.”

Shizuo recalled Izaya’s fear of returning to Ikebukuro and his belief of finding rejection from everyone they knew. He’d been so sure that no one would accept their relationship, but here was a whole group of people proving him wrong. Erika accepted them with outrageous enthusiasm, and they all were helping Shizuo rescue him.

His heart ached, because he needed Izaya by his side to experience their faithful company.

The elevator dinged! when they reached Izaya’s floor. Its doors opened, and Erika skipped to the door and tried the handle.

“Ah! It’s locked.”

Shizuo kicked it open with ease.

Inside, papers and files had been thrown across the floor. Broken glass littered the ground, along with stuffing ripped from cushions. Board game pieces and a chess board lay scattered around a knocked over table. The whole place had been ransacked.

“Yeeesh…” Kadota nudged a fallen lamp with his foot.

Shinra looked around, appalled. “They really wanted that transmission…”

Shizuo stood at the center of the apartment, surveying the mess. Somebody had definitely combed the place for information, but Shizuo knew that they didn’t find what they were looking for. The only truth was with Izaya himself, wherever he was.

At the desk, the computer had remained intact. There was also some other fancy equipment Shizuo didn’t recognize. Shizuo walked over and tapped the computer’s space bar. The screen flickered to life like it had never been turned off. It asked for a password, but Shizuo could not even begin to wager a guess.
Erika appeared beside him. “Try ‘Shizu-chan.’”

“No.”

“You were right, Karisawa!” called Walker. He was beaming around the apartment, as if he wasn’t standing in the middle of a crime. “Izaya had a stylish place!”

“He’s not dead,” Shizuo grumbled. So stop talking like he is…

“Will you live here after you rescue him, Shizu-chan?” asked Erika, eyes lighting up.

Shizuo went red. “Uhhh? I don’t know… Never thought about it.”

This was a lie. He had often daydreamed about living in Tokyo with Izaya over the past month, but he had envisioned them shacking up at his old place in Ikebukuro. Mostly because he had never seen inside Izaya’s place before, so he had had no point of reference. Now that he was seeing it, Shizuo second-guessed himself. Izaya clearly had higher standards than the rundown apartment to which Shizuo was accustomed.

Why Erika peeped at his noncommittal answer, though, Shizuo did not understand.

“I still can’t believe Karisawa was right all this time,” Kadota said. He was picking up some of Izaya’s fallen books, returning them to the bookcase. “About you and Izaya.”

“I! Told! You!”

“Yeah yeah,” Kadota offered her a passive smile. “I’ll still need to hear the full story, just to wrap my head around it.”

“But,” Shizuo floundered, “Shinra told you guys everything in the van!”

“Not everything,” said Shinra. “Even I still need to know more details. Like, when did you realize, Shizuo? When did Izaya give into it? Who made the first move? You know, that stuff.”

“I need to know these things!” Erika begged. “Shizu-chan, please!”

“Uhhhhhhh…” Where are you, Celty?!! Shizuo inwardly called out to her, You said to meet you here, now where are you?!

“Izaya had to make the first move, right?” Walker speculated.

“He’s had a thing for Shizuo since…” Kadota shrugged, “well, since forever, isn’t it?”

Shizuo fumed. It infuriated Shizuo that not only could they have avoided all the strife between them and possibly this whole current fiasco, but that he could have been kissing Izaya for years.

Kadota chuckled. “It’s not your fault, man. He could have just asked you out in high school instead of, you know, trying to kill you and all that.”

A woman’s voice suddenly interrupted their gossip. “You didn’t say the whole motley crew would be here…”

They all turned to the doorway where Celty stood with a sour-faced brunette. The other woman had a medical bag around her shoulder, but her nose wrinkled at the sight of the apartment and those within it.
“Celty!!” Shinra threw his hands up in elation to see his girlfriend again.

Shizuo didn’t recognize the woman, but Walker and Kadota gasped at her appearance.

Kadota gasped. “You’re…!”

“Big Sister Incest!” declared Walker.

Shizuo deadpanned. “What…”

The woman cringed as if she’d been physically struck. She went entirely red. “Sh-shut up! I don’t remember any of your names either, but that’s just… Why you…!”

Crossing the room, Celty introduced her to Shizuo. [This is Namie Yagiri.]

“Who?”

Namie scoffed. “You really are an idiot.” She entered the room and unslung her bag onto the desk.

“Oi,” growled Shizuo. “Just because we don’t know each other doesn’t make me an idiot. Why are you here, anyways?”

“But I do know who you are, Shizuo Heiwajima,” she said callously, plucking tools from her bag. “I used to work for your precious Izaya, before you two decided to be disgusting together.”

Shizuo whirled around to Celty, his scowl enough to ask her Why the hell have you brought this horrible woman?

[She’s a bit difficult] Celty admitted, [but she can help us find Izaya.]

Shizuo rounded back on Namie. “You know how to find the flea?”

“I have an idea,” she said. She withdrew a large syringe from her bag and flicked it, creating a ping ping! from her nails on the glass. A smirk tugged bitterly at the corner of her mouth. “I still can’t believe what that man’s gotten himself into… And you—” She turned to Shizuo and drawled, “I knew he was obsessed with you, but I never thought you’d be foolish enough to feel the same way.

Shizuo huffed. “Did everybody know that Izaya had a thing for me besides me?”

“Yes,” they all said in unison.

[I didn’t] Celty said sheepishly.

“How much did Celty tell you?” Shizuo asked Namie, still suspicious of her.

“Something about Josiah Hummel and his scheme to take control of humanity,” she answered, “and that Izaya has gotten himself captured by the man. Pathetic…”

“You know Josiah?”

Her tone was bored. “Of him. Josiah Hummel is a big name in the medical world.” She continued to set up her array of equipment, from needles to vials to what looked like a fancy microscope.

“And Izaya?” Shizuo prompted curiously. “You knew him.”

“I honestly don’t care what happens to his well-being,” she spoke honestly, “but if you can get him
back alive, I want to have him in my debt.”

Namie held up her giant syringe and held out a hand to Shizuo, as if expecting something from him. Shizuo stared at her blankly.

“Your arm, loverboy,” she snapped.

“Why do you want Izaya in your debt?” Shizuo asked instead, with narrowed eyes.

“It’s none of your business.”

“I don’t know about this, Shizuo,” Kadota warned. “This woman had a bunch of people kidnapped, once.”

“Enough of this!” Namie grabbed Shizuo’s right arm. She plunged her syringe into it in the same motion, surprisingly quick and right through the fabric of his jacket, without giving him a chance to stop her.

“Oi!” Shizuo grunted.

The syringe filled with a shimmery blue substance. She had hit the vein precisely, showcasing her skill. Namie extracted as much serum as she could, then removed the needle.

Rubbing where she stabbed him, Shizuo glared. “And what are going to do with that?”

“Hummel designed his serum to receive a transmission, didn’t he?” She released the serum into a vial that slotted into her fancy microscope. “Then you can decipher it and trace the source of that transmission.”

The machine flickered to life. She strung a cord between the scope and the laptop. When Namie hit the computer’s space bar, just as Shizuo had done a moment before, she typed in the password without hesitation.

Shizuo scowled at the back of her head. “You know how to do all that?”

Namie sat in the computer chair. “Some of us have useful degrees.” She rolled herself to the microscope and peered into the lenses. Twisting knobs on the side, she adjusted the vision to her liking. Windows popped up on Izaya’s computer monitors, and Namie typed on them one-handed while she fiddled with her equipment.

She obviously knew what she was doing, but Shizuo could not begin to comprehend.

Shinra peeked over Namie’s shoulder curiously. “Is that it?” He pointed to one of the software open on the computer, displaying a swirling blue mess, “Is that Vulture?”

“Yes,” said Namie. “It’s a live feed from the microscope.”

“So you can read the waveform digitally this way… Pretty impressive,” admitted Shinra.

“One of you has a brain?” Namie shot back, taking no flattery from his compliment. Rolling back and forth between monitors and machine, she hummed thoughtfully. “Hummel definitely knew what he was doing. This will take a few minutes…”

The others huddled around Namie restlessly, crowding her whole operation.

“What’s that?” Shizuo pointed to an open window that looked like meaningless squiggly lines.
“Radio waves.”

“What about that?” asked Walker, indicating a second software.

“The translated code.” Her patience deteriorated with each question.

Erika pointed to another. “And that?”

Irritation grew in her voice. “A decryption key Izaya created.”

“And that?”

“A map of Tokyo, you absolute morons.”

The map of Tokyo zoomed in and out, shifted and moved. Blue circles blinked and rippled outwards at several points in the city.

“Hmm… You corrupted this signal, didn’t you?” accused Namie.

“Guess I did something like that,” Shizuo shrugged, “Something that stops it from getting to my brain. I wouldn’t be very useful against the bad guy if I worked for him.”

“You’re not very useful now. I think you’d be more agreeable as a mindless drone.”

Shizuo fought the urge to pick up the computer and drop it on Namie’s head. “You’re even more obnoxious than Izaya was,” which Shizuo had not thought possible. “But if this will save him,” he crossly contemplated, “I guess I should… thank you…”

“Don’t bother,” she said scathingly. “This is a completely selfish action.”

Shizuo looked at Celty, hopefully for more explanation than Namie was willing to give.

[I knew she wouldn’t help us unless there was something in it for her] said Celty.

“And that would be?” Shizuo expected the answer to be money, or something similar. He was dirt-poor, so he hoped Namie wasn’t looking for much.

Celty hesitated. [Her brother…]

Kadota paled.

Shizuo recalled Walker’s initial reaction to the woman when she had first entered. Erika and Walker snickered together in the other corner of the room.

“The despicable girl that looks like your friend’s head has spirited Seiji away to America somewhere,” Namie elaborated heatedly. “Despite all my own efforts, I haven’t been able to track down that sneaky little whore…”

Her ensuing mumble included a string of colorful words that enlightened Shizuo to her temper.

“I hate to rely on Izaya of all people, but even I have to admit that he has a talent for tracking people down.” Her grimace morphed into a smirk. “Shame he isn’t here to find himself, isn’t it? Hmph! Well, this way I can have something over his head.”

“How do you know Izaya will feel obligated to repay you?” Shizuo sneered right back at her. “He’s pretty despicable himself, you know.”
“Oh, of course, I’m aware,” drawled Namie. “Then again, there are ways. You used to work for a
debt collector, didn’t you?”

That wiped the slyness from Shizuo’s face.

“Besides, the head’s body made a deal with me. I do this for you, and she’ll find Seiji for me.
Though, I can’t imagine she could without Izaya. Mika Harima is…” Namie gritted her teeth,
“…elusive…”

Both Shizuo and Shinra stared down Celty. She had no eyes, but she faced pointedly away from
them.

“Celty, that wasn’t a good idea.” Shinra scowled, “Seiji and Mika are likely tracking down your
head. If you look for them, you’ll find it, and last time–”

[I know] She said, [But let’s worry about that later. This is what had to be done right now.]

“Celty…” Shizuo had never known her to feel so very far away. Why was she going so far?

He felt a tingle in his right arm at the same time he noticed Shinra, glowering at him as if it were his
fault.

Beep beep!

Namie examined the monitor. “This is it. It’s done.”

The waves on the screen that Shizuo had previously questioned were now going haywire. On the
map, the blue ripples now inwardly congregated to one point.

“Where is that?” His voice held a sharp edge. Wherever it was, Shizuo would find Izaya there. His
heart began to race.

Shinra gasped, recognizing the place on the map. “I knew it!”

Celty showed her phone to Namie. [If the transmission is active, doesn’t that mean Kazbeks will
be reacting to it?]

Everyone gave each other a wary glance.

Shizuo lifted his sleeve and saw the blue serum illuminate beneath his skin.

A cellphone’s ring pierced their focus. Kadota jumped at the sudden noise, but answered it quickly.
“It’s Togusa,” he said before holding it up to his ear. “Togusa? What’s–Wait, what?!”

Togusa yelled on the other end of the line, but his words were too muffled to hear from where
Shizuo stood. At the same time, Shizuo heard a thumping noise approach from outside.

“Togusa, slow down!” Kadota’s scowl grew by the second. “You saw one of them, and the girl is –
she’s what?!”

Thud thud thud thUDTHUDTHUD...

Pepe crashed through Izaya’s window with a Kazbek in her grasp. Everyone shrieked, dove away,
and shielded themselves from the spray of glass. Pepe landed on top of the Kazbek, slamming its
head on the ground and effectively knocking it unconscious. Shizuo scrambled to his feet, eyes wide
at the display before him.
How did Pepe just get to the nineteenth floor from the outside?

Pepe straightened, not even out of breath. She swiped off the Kazbek’s transparent, tactical visor and put it on herself. It was almost like Insight, but much simpler-looking. When she switched on something on the side, the visor flickered to life, displaying numerals and moving symbols. Pepe surveyed the apartment, unphased by the dumbfounded stares she got from everyone else.

“Who is that?!” hissed Namie, hiding behind the desk.

“That’s Pepe,” is all Shizuo could say.

“Hay dos más,” said Pepe. She frisked the Kazbek below her and withdrew their weapons, including a firearm. “Están subiendo las escaleras.” She stole their belt for herself. “Llegarán a esta ubicación en 25 segundos.” Next, she tinkered with the gun like she had done this a thousand times.

The others remained on the ground or crouched in caution. Pepe raised a shotgun and dashed across the apartment. Sidling towards the doorway, she met Shizuo’s eyes with a level gaze.

“Encontraste su ubicación?”

“Yes,” said Shizuo, pretty sure that she was asking if they’d found the transmission’s source.

“Bueno.” Pepe cocked the gun in her hand, “Entonces no tengo que dejar a ninguno consciente.”

And like that, she rounded the corner and faced two incoming Kazbeks head-on. The others had frozen – not from fear, but from complete bewilderment of their new companion. Shots rang out, and two male voices grunted in pain. By the sounds of the struggle, Pepe had it under control.

Chapter End Notes

it's a shame izzy couldn't actually be in the chapter posted on his birthday, but, meh! he's too busy being erika's damsel in distress.
Time’s up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tokyo Skytree was the tallest broadcasting tower in the world. At 2,080ft., the Skytree was the primary broadcast source for the entire Kanto region and beyond. If the Vulture transmission were to be broadcast from there, millions would fall under the Kazbek Initiative’s control. Shizuo could not begin to imagine the repercussions.

And yet, that’s exactly where Namie traced the signal to.

A glance out of Izaya’s shattered window saw that the city was not yet on fire, but Shizuo’s gut grew more and more uneasy. Kazbeks had already found and engaged them. It was only a matter of time before more followed.

Despite the danger, Erika and Walker threw their fists up in celebration.

“BEST! DAY! EVER!”

Namie disagreed. “I did not sign up to be in the middle of some brawl – EEP!” She shrieked when a Kazbek landed at her feet.

Pepe stood before them, no worse for wear. She fiddled with the side of her newly acquired tactical visor, following its displays vigilantly. With the large gun she had stolen propped against her hip, she looked more like someone out of an action movie than out of a Spanish kitchen.

“Más enfoque desde el oeste. Al menos una docena.”

“Who are you!” exclaimed Erika and Walker with pure joy.

Maybe is was the adrenaline of the situation, or that they both had been exposed to Vulture, but Shizuo was developing a talent for interpreting Pepe’s words. Plus, he didn’t need to be a genius to realize that the Kazbeks wouldn’t just let Shizuo screw up their plans.

“We need to move,” said Shizuo sternly. “They know we’re back in Tokyo and they’re not gonna make it easy for us.”

Clearing her throat, Namie stepped around them and shouldered her medical bag.

“I think you mean for you,” she huffed. “You freaks are on your own from here.”

“But what if they move again?” Shizuo didn’t like the idea of losing the only person who knew how to locate Izaya.

“Tough,” said Namie.
Eyes narrowed, Shizuo stepped forward. “You–”

Celty put her hand out to stop him. [You may want to reconsider that] she told Namie. [You’re involved now. If you’re caught without a way to defend yourself, they’ll most likely turn you into one of those things.]

Namie grimaced. Her face contorted as she weighed her options.

“I really hate you,” she settled on.

“Don’t worry, Big Sister Incest,” Walker assured her with a pat on her arm. “As long as you stick with the main characters, you’ll come out the other end of this arc just fine!”

Namie took no comfort in this.

Outside, Togusa remained in the van. He gripped the steering wheel shakily, eyes darting around at everything on the street that moved. When he saw the others approaching, he gasped at Pepe.

“She…!” He pointed at her with an unsteady hand.

“Is incredible!” Walker finished for him.

“She-sh-she!” Togusa stuttered, “One of those things came out of nowhere! With guns! Sh-she stopped it! She kicked its ass! She chased it up the building, and – holy shit, she saved my life.”

Kadota reached through the window and patted him on the shoulder consolingly.

Despite Togusa’s fretful state, Pepe paid the driver no mind. She walked up to his window and demanded, “Llévanos a la torre con mi padre.”

Shizuo halted. “Pepe, wait.”

“If we have their location,” she switched to English with a harsh tone, “then we should waste no time. The longer we wait, the closer los ojos azules get to their goal, and the less time my father has.”

“I know that,” said Shizuo, “but–”

“Why do you hesitate?” Her eyes flashed challengingly, “Don’t you want to save Señor Izaya?”

Shizuo clenched his fists and ground his teeth. That was a low blow. Of course, Shizuo wanted to save Izaya as fast as possible. Maybe there was a time when Shizuo would have been in the same mindset as her. Maybe part of Shizuo still did want to barge into the Skytree and destroy everything until Izaya was back safe in his arms. But life wasn’t that simple. Shizuo knew that now.

“We can’t just storm into Tokyo Skytree and start fighting Kazbeks,” He stated, standing his ground, “It’s one of the busiest places in the city. I won’t let any more innocent people get caught up in this violence!”

Pepe considered him. Even the others regarded him with surprise.

“Guys,” Kadota interrupted with urgency, “speaking of fighting those Kazbek guys…!”

They all turned and saw a black SUV round the corner, flanked by several motorcyclists wearing the same militant style of uniform that Shizuo saw back in the Kazbek Initiative’s European headquarters.
“Everybody in!” urged Togusa, and didn’t need to say twice before the van was full. He peeled away from the curve before the door was even closed, causing Erika and Namie to tumble.

Behind them, the Kazbeks sped through traffic to reach them.

Celty hopped on Shooter and revved up alongside them. She drove one-handed as she held out her phone. [I'll do my best to hold them off.]

“Celty!” Shinra cried. “Why do I feel like you’re about to do something rash?”

She never got the chance to answer before a shower of bullets sprayed their way. Both Celty and Togusa steered out of the way. Shinra yelled out in worry for Celty, but she could easily defend herself with shadows. The van accumulated a few holes, but no one was hit.

“Are they seriously shooting at us in broad daylight?!” Togusa swerved to avoid hitting a yielded sedan.

Pepe leaned towards Shizuo and loaded the gun in her hand. “They do not share your concern for civilians,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, I get that!” snapped Shizuo.

“There’s no way we can drive all the way to Sumida like this!” Kadota clung to the van.

The roads crumbled into chaos. Pedestrians scurried out of the way, and other cars crashed into each other. Togusa whipped out all his evasive driving techniques to avoid incoming gunfire and the swerving Kazbeks on motorcycles. This clearly wasn’t Togusa’s first highway rodeo, and Shizuo was thankful to have someone like him transporting him throughout the city that day.

On Shooter, Celty was also giving the Kazbeks a run for their money. Those in van watched as she kept the motorcyclists at bay with her shadows. The Kazbeks mostly avoided her, and the black SUV that followed them was sturdy enough to withstand Celty’s barrage.

Shizuo didn’t like being on defense. “We need a place to lie low and figure out a plan.”

Everyone gaped at him, more flabbergasted by his words than by the outside assault.

He scowled. “What?”

“You?” Shinra’s eyebrows shot upwards. “A plan?”

“I can’t help Izaya if I get dead or arrested!” barked Shizuo.

Another pingpingping! of bullets hit the van, and Namie screamed. “As long as we get away from these things!” She yelled.

Celty had bested a hundred biker thugs in the past. Except, these weren’t thugs. Shizuo could tell from their skilled movements that they were a high breed of Kazbeks, likely those that had dedicated themselves to the cause. Their actions were resilient, trained. Even a dullahan was having a hard time fighting them.

“I should help,” Shizuo decided hastily, and reached for the door. “We have to throw them off our trail or else nowhere we end up will be safe.”

“Okay, but how?” asked Shinra.
The Kazbek bikers could get dangerously close to shooting out the van’s windows or tires before Celty stopped them.

“I’ll throw the door at them,” reasoned Shizuo.

“Do not rip my van’s door off again!” Togusa shouted.

Pepe slid open the van door, and the others stuttered out of their argument.

“What are you doing?” cried both Togusa and Shizuo.

Her answer was concentrated silence. Wind whipped through the van as they sped down the highway. She stepped back into the van and gripped the top edge of the doorway. They heard the engine of a motorcycle pull up alongside them. The Kazbek drew its weapon and pointed straight at their driver, Togusa, who howled in alarm.

Pepe swung her legs forward and kicked the gun out of the Kazbek’s grasp. In the same motion, her other knee collided with the assailant’s head. The Kazbek tumbled off the motorcycle, the vehicle crashing into the cars and railways behind them. Erika and Walker cheered her on as she flipped herself up onto the roof.

“Pepe-chan sure is full of surprises,” said Shinra in awe.

“Where did you say you found her again, Shizuo?” asked Kadota, wide-eyed.

“Uh. Spain?”

“That sure is a woman,” breathed Kadota. He managed a smirk at Togusa, whose quivering hands stayed diligently on the wheel. “How ya doin’?”

Togusa had descended into a murmured chant of “I’m gonna die I’m gonna die I’m gonna die.”

Shizuo took inspiration from Pepe and opened his own door. His hair sprayed in his face, but he caught sight of the Kazbek sidling alongside the van. The Kazbek aimed its gun at Shizuo’s head, but Shizuo closed his right hand around the barrel of the gun.

BANG!

The others in the van gasped.

A stream of smoke rose through Shizuo’s closed fingers. Even with a helmet obscuring their features, Shizuo sensed the shock in the Kazbek.

“Send your boss my thanks,” Shizuo sneered. He tossed the gun aside and grabbed the Kazbek by their throat. The bike careened away from the Kazbek’s useless, flailing legs. Seeing the SUV nearing them from behind, Shizuo lifted the Kazbek and chucked them into the van’s windshield. The glass shattered under its weight, and now unable to see clearly, the SUV’s driver spun out of control.

“Shizuo!” Shinra gawked and gestured for Shizuo’s hand.

Shizuo showed him. Surprisingly, Namie grabbed his hand to examine its regeneration. The metallic bones had stopped the bullet from penetrating past his palm. Now, his cybernetic flesh stitched itself back together so efficiently that they flattened bullet was pushed out on its own.

“Incredible…” whispered Namie. “Hummel actually achieved this level of evolutionary cybernetics.
I’ve never seen such efficient biohybrids…”

“What does it feel like, Shizu-chan?!” asked Erika. Both her and Walker had stars in their eyes.

“Kinda like static,” he said with a shrug. He leaned back out of the doorway; there were still Kazbek’s on their tail.

Another motorcycle-riding one sped out from behind the SUV, taking the SUV’s distractedness as a chance to assault. Shizuo peered over the van’s roof at Pepe, who crouched like a tiger waiting to pounce.

“You got that guy?” Shizuo called to her.

Her eyes narrowed and muscles tensed. “Sí.”

Shizuo grinned.

The motorcycle zipped straight at the van. Pepe waited for just the right moment and _leapt_ at them. Within seconds, Pepe had gained control of the motorcycle, and the Kazbek rolled away down the highway. They could now add stunt driving to Pepe’s repertoire of shocking skills.

Spinning around, Pepe shot out the tires of the SUV with one of the many guns she had acquired. The car skidded helplessly across the asphalt.

“Shizu-chan!” Erika squealed in his ear, watching over his shoulder. “I love her!”

“Adding Pepe-chan to our party was a very smart move,” Walker agreed. He pulled out a bottle and a lighter. “As for the SUV…”

Shizuo chuckled and took the molotov cocktail, which Walker had done him the favor of lighting. This wasn’t his usual style of fighting, but he wouldn’t complain.

“Oi, Celty!” Shizuo tossed the bottle.

Celty, who had been wrapping up the Kazbeks that had been knocked off their transportation, turned her head. She caught it with an elongated shadow. Like it was a throwing arm, the shadow tossed it at the SUV. Their crew accelerated away just as the SUV went up in flames. No more Kazbeks would be following them any time soon, and the public would be distracted by the traffic piled up by the SUV.

Pepe, her new set of wheels, pulled up to the van and matched Togusa’s speed.

He glanced nervously sideways at her.

“Good driving!” She called out to him with a triumphant smile.

The real danger was Togusa getting so distracted by the girl driving alongside them that he nearly drove them all off a bridge.

Shizuo could not remember the last time he had good sushi. He could not recall when he last ate, either, and his stomach rumbled as he walked through the entrance of a familiar establishment.

“Shizuo!” Simon greeted casually, “Good to see you again!”

The bright side of lying low at Russia Sushia is that there were rarely other patrons there, courtesy of
Simon’s intimidating presence. A few school kids, collegiates, and loners were littered across the tables. All of them turned their heads at the sound of Shizuo’s name.

“Shizuo Heiwajima?” one kid whispered to another. “Didn’t he die?”

“Nah, that’s not him. The real Shizuo Heiwajima always wears a bartender get-up, remember?”

“Riiiiiight…”

“I’m not sure he ever really existed,” said another that barely looked up from his phone. “I think the Dollars just made him up to scare people.”

Shizuo was more than happy to remain invisible. The less people realized that he was back in Ikebukuro, the better. Kazbeks could be lurking anywhere. One could be one of the Raira kids in the corner, for all Shizuo knew.

“What the hell is this place?” asked Namie with the face of someone who just stepped in shit.

“You’ve never been here?” chimed Erika. She hooked an arm around Namie’s and led her to the gang’s usual booth. “You’re in for a treat!”

Others of the van followed, chatting about how road chases made them hungry.

However, Simon loomed over Pepe. “Shizuo, you made a new friend.” His gaze was stern.

Pepe, who was currently carrying enough artillery for a small army, received more nervous looks than Shizuo – a phenomenon to which Shizuo was unaccustomed. Showing no fear of the Russian giant, Pepe offered an innocent smile. For a second, she looked like the quiet girl Shizuo had met in Spain again.

“Semyon,” she greeted sweetly.

“Josephina,” returned Simon with an inclination of his head. “Я не ожидал увидеть тебя. Тогда есть проблемы?”

Shizuo, Shinra, and Celty gawked.

Shinra pointed frantically between them. “Wait wait wait. Do you two know each other?!”

“Old friends!” exclaimed Simon jovially.

Shizuo rounded on Pepe. “Josephina?!”

“Pepe,” she insisted.

“Good to see new friends meet old friends,” said Simon as he ushered them to their booth. “Eat sushi together! Sushi good!”

“Simon! Simon!” trilled Erika, “Guess what!”

“Hmm?”

“Shizu-chan and Iza-Iza fell in love with each other and now we have to rescue Iza-Iza from an army of evil cyborgs and the villain that wants to steal Iza-Iza’s affections for himself!”

The group shared a collective groan and admonished her for being so forthright. These topics were
sensitive and should not just be shouted in a public space.

Shizuo in particular turned red. “Oi!”

But Simon chuckled heartily, as if this were just another of Erika’s wild fantasies.

“Good that you two have worked it out,” he said consolingly as he pat Shizuo on the back. “You two shouldn’t fight. Fighting is bad. When you two next go on date, you come here, and we will prepare special sushi! Good!”

With that, he returned to the kitchen. At least Shizuo could be thankful for Simon’s nonchalant disposition. However, the mention of a date with Izaya sent his heart aflutter.

_First thing’s first_, he reprimanded himself. _Gotta save Izaya before there are any dates._

“Skytree closes at 10pm,” Kadota provided moments later. “We could sneak in after that. There won’t be any tourists at that point.”

They ate while they planned. Namie sat in silent reluctance. Shizuo was thankful to put something in his stomach. If this was going to be an all out battle, he’d need the energy. Still, he didn’t like the idea of waiting so many hours. Sensing his restlessness, Celty prodded him.

[We don’t know how long it will take for this transmission to get set up] she said, [And you said yourself that Izaya will hold out for as long as possible.]

“Well, yeah, but…” Shizuo mumbled, “something bad could still happen to him.”

“Don’t forget, Celty,” chimed Shinra, “what Shizuo’s priority is.”

Shizuo huffed. “It’s not like I’m gonna sacrifice anyone for the flea. I’m just–”

[Worried?] Celty had a knowing posture about her. [I’ve been there.]

“Are you thinking about that time I was kidnapped?” Shinra swooned against his girlfriend. “You got so distraught about it, it was so romantic!”

Celty pushed him off.

Shizuo tried not to gag on the salmon roll in his mouth. “Anyways…” He swallowed the sushi.

“We could create a diversion!” offered Walker. He held up a napkin on which he’d doodled what appeared to be a plan. The shapes were hard to identify, but the gist undoubtedly involved an explosion. Shizuo squinted at the image suspiciously.

“Could work,” said Kadota, “but we’d have to escape pretty quickly if we don’t want either the cops or the cyborgs to catch us. What do you think, Saburo?” When Togusa didn’t answer, Kadota repeated, “Saburo?”

Togusa seemed not to have listened to any of the conversation. He watched Pepe, mesmerized, as she cleaned and loaded all the guns she’d acquired from various Kazbeks. Erika tittered at her friend’s enthralment.

Sighing, Kadota continued to the rest of the group. “We could cause enough of a ruckus that they have to evacuate the Skytree. Then you and Celty and the ginger chick can sneak in.”
You think you guys can cause a big enough distraction?

Erika and Walker shared a guffaw, as if the answer was obvious.

“Leave it to us!” said Kadota confidently.

Simon returned with another plate of sushi for Erika and Walker. Noticing Pepe’s pile of weapons, he tutted.

“Нам не нравится оружие за столом.”

“Это еще одна война,” said Pepe plainly, “У меня нет выбора.”

Shizuo gasped. “You speak Russian, too?!”

“Да.”

“But not Japanese.”

“Да,” To Simon, she said, “Когда голубые глаза приходят, ударяйте их по голове.”

“If you have any other surprises up your sleeve,” started Shizuo, not sure how many more he could take, “I’d appreciate if you lay them all out on the table.”

She responded by pulling out another gun.

“Nevermind,” Shizuo sighed. “Just try not to kill anybody with all of those. Remember, a lot of Kazbek victims are unwilling.”

“He sido entrenado para inhabilitar tanto como eliminar.”

“Josephina can disable targets as easily as she can eliminate them,” Simon explained.

Shizuo crossed his arms. “Great. Whatever that means.”

“You really gotta tell us your backstory when all this is over,” Shinra said to Pepe before popping a piece of sushi into his mouth.

Simon dropped some nagiri in front of Shizuo. “More sushi? Always good to have a full stomach when you’re feeling down.”

“I’m not ‘down,’” snapped Shizuo. “I’m pissed off!”

And anxious, he noted. This whole not-barging-into-things-like-an-idiot thing was really taking a toll on his nerves. Plus, Denis had the radio on while he cooked, listening to some talk show about celebrity gossip. The static set Shizuo’s teeth on edge. He’d save Izaya, and he’d stop Josiah, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t be impatient in the meantime.

He ignored the sushi. His appetite waned with each minute, his gut making room for anxiety to flourish. Walker quickly took advantage of this and nabbed a few pieces from Shizuo’s plate.

Then a large hand came to rest on his shoulder.

“When you see Izaya again,” Simon said warmly, “tell him we have fatty tuna for him. His favorite, yes?”
A ripple of tension left Shizuo’s body. *Izaya likes fatty tuna…* It was such a trite piece of trivia that Shizuo found it comforting, how real it felt.

“Thanks, Simon. I’ll do that.”

A phone at the table rang, and everybody went silent. They looked to Celty, from where the ringing was coming. Even Celty jumped when she realized that it was her own phone ringing – not many people called her, since she couldn’t talk back to anyone on the other line. Shizuo caught glimpse of the caller ID before Celty answered: Ruri Hijiribe.

Shizuo’s eyes narrowed. *Isn’t that Kasuka’s…?*

Celty accepted the call and help the phone up to her helmet, where her ear would be. They all waited for… Something.

After a short moment, Celty held the phone out to Shizuo. He gave her a quizzical look, but she shook her head and pushed the phone towards him. There was an uneasiness to her mannerisms, but Shizuo took in anyways.

He held it to his ear and said a tentative “Hello?”

“Nii-san.”

Shizuo nearly choked on air. “K-Kasuka?!”

The whole table was struck with curiosity, ears open with nosiness. Shizuo grumbled to them incoherently and removed himself from the table.

“So you really are back…” said Kasuka on the other end.

“Yeah…” The awkwardness was unavoidable.

Shizuo sidled up to the window on the more empty side of the restaurant. He peered out the window. If Kasuka called Celty’s phone, then he somehow knew the two were together, which meant Kasuka also knew Shizuo was back in Tokyo. Word travelled quickly in the burroughs, and now Shizuo squinted suspiciously at any pedestrian outside the restaurant.

“It’s good to hear that you’re okay,” Kasuka continued. His voice was as monotone as usual, but Shizuo could pick up on his brother’s stealthily revealed affection. “Apologies for going through your friend. I didn’t know how else to reach you. It’s been some time since you answered your phone or e-mail.”

It felt surreal, to speak to his brother after all this time. There was a time when Kasuka seemed like the only thing that mattered to him. His world had broadened, but that didn’t change how much he cared for his brother. He wanted to confess to his brother everything that had happened, but now was not the time.

“I promise to fill you in soon?” offered Shizuo sheepishly. “It’s kind of a long story.”

Kasuka waited a beat to respond. “I just wanted to confirm it was really you that people reported seeing.”

Shizuo wondered where Kasuka received such reports. “It’s really me, but I’m trying to lie low.”

“Are you in trouble?” Kasuka didn’t exactly sound worried, but Shizuo could tell.
“Kinda. Maybe. Someone important to me is.”

The shock of Shizuo admitting that he had someone came from Kasuka as silence.

_Both me and Kasuka have knives to our throats, who do you save?_ The words echoed in Shizuo’s mind. He still hoped there’d never come a day where he’d have to decide.

“Like I said,” Shizuo chuckled, “it’s a long story.”

“Call me when you replace your phone, then,” said Kasuka.

Shizuo grinned. “Definitely.”

With that, Kasuka hung up. Silence followed. They’d never been the type of people to indulge in long-winded conversations with each other. The brothers had that much in common.

Taking a moment to stare out the window, Shizuo took note of all the lives in the city. The call reminded me of how many others Shizuo needed to protect by defeating Josiah Hummel. His brother, the Orihara twins, Akane, Tom… Those reunions would all be waiting for him on the other side of this nightmare.

A person coming up to his side got his attention. Looking down, he saw that it was Namie. At first he expected she had come to him to complain about something else. But then he noticed –

Her eyes were blue

He saw it just in time to sidestep the knife that Namie plunged toward him.

This time, Shizuo wasted no time in knocking Namie unconscious. Admittedly, he felt less bad about it than when he had punched Pepe; Namie was a thousand times more obnoxious.

A school girl in the restaurant shrieked at the display.

Across the restaurant, other patrons either gasped or fell silent. It was then that Shizuo realized that Denis’ radio had begun to play dead air. Shizuo couldn’t hear any buzzing, like he usually did when Vulture activated. This transmission was different.

Even his friends suddenly had blue in their eyes. They weren’t attacking him, but Erika, Walker, and Togusa had gone rigid. Curiously, Kadota hadn’t. Neither had Simon, Denis, and a few others in the restaurant. Shizuo wondered why, but not enough to make a fuss of it.

Kadota stuttered, “What happened to them?!”

Celty jumped away from Shinra, who’s eyes had also changed.

“The head!” Shizuo barked at them. “Aim for the head!”

Pepe swiftly struck each affected person at their table in the same spot at their nape, causing them to crumple and groan. Somehow, she’d manage manage to leave them conscious. Shizuo needed to ask her for that move, later.

Togusa groaned as he sat back up. “What the fuck just happened…”

Walker and Erika grasped each other’s hands, stars in their eyes.

“Did we just get our minds controlled?!?” exclaimed Walker.
“How cool~!” crooned Erika.

Shizuo dragged Namie’s limp body back to the table. “She’ll have to stay here. Simon, Denis, do you think you can watch her?”

“You shouldn’t hit your friends, Shizuo,” Simon chastised him.

Shizuo snorted. “She’s not my friend.”

“The hell’s going on?” grouched Denis. He shook his silent radio in hopes that his superficial program would come back to life. The station had probably broadcasted from the Skytree, which meant…

“Nevermind.” If Shizuo had to explain the Kazbek Initiative to a single other person, he’d lose his mind. Plus, time was up. He levelled his gaze at Celty.

“We gotta go. Now.”

Leaving wasn’t easy. Outside of the restaurant, hundreds more had been affected by the new transmission. Now under Kazbek control, a horde of citizens honed in on Shizuo. It was like Saika all over again, except these possessed people were not attacking out of love.

Their only chance was to outrun them all. Shizuo hopped in the van with the others, while both Celty and Pepe on their motorcycles were more than capable of fending off the masses. Shinra ended up staying behind with Namie, to make sure Shizuo hadn’t given her a concussion or worse. At least Shizuo could be sure that Simon and Denis were capable of keeping those in Russia Sushi safe.

But that did little to ease his panic. Shizuo’s blood was ice and his heart pounded with adrenaline. He had been confident that they had time, because Izaya had the key to this madness. Yet, the chaos was unfolding around them. If the transmission was live, what did that mean for Izaya? Would they be able to reverse the effects?

Driving across the city was like driving through a newly sprouted warzone. Sirens could be heard from every direction. Shizuo wondered how many had actually fallen to Vulture’s control, and how much more was still to come.

The information that Shingen had provided to him resonated critically: That Josiah’s success also harbored on how many people had used products from the Nebula Corporation. From what Shizuo could observe while they were on their way, the number was truly great. Nebula clearly had a long reach around the world. Shizuo cursed the whole corporation.

By the time they reached the Skytree in Sumida, the sun had begun to set.

The tower looked like its usual self: tall, looming, seemingly endless in its height. The only offputting aspect of it was that it was lit up blue, which wasn’t inherently suspicious – the Skytree regularly shone one color or another. It was the particular shade of blue that night, the exact hue of a Vulture infection, that concerned Shizuo.

More worrisome was the blockade of Kazbeks that awaited them, recognizable by their familiar attire. An escaping mob paid no attention to them. Perhaps they believed the militant-looking uniforms were actual authority, come to aid the situation, and not to actually make matters worse. Those with blue eyes wandered into line with the other Kazbeks, like zombies joining their ranks. The people who miraculously escaped the control of the transmission knew that something was awry, and reacted in a frenzy.
Nothing about the situation made it easy for Shizuo and his friends to reach the entrance of the Skytree. For now, they pulled into the most remote alley they could find and gathered behind the van.

“Time to cause that distraction, guys,” Kadota said to his three best friends, “and draw away all the small fries from the tower. That’ll clear a path to the Skytree’s elevators. Hopefully we’ll be able to drive away before the cyborgs catch us, but I think we can handle these poor, blue-eyed saps.” He finished with a nod to Shizuo and Celty, “We’ll leave the head honchos to our big damn heroes.”

“Don’t forget Pepe-chan!” Walker clapped the girl on the back. As capable as she’d proven herself to be, her small frame still lurched forward from the force. “You’ll need a wildcard to play at the last second. The hero always does!”

Togusa pouted. “I thought she’d stick with us…”

Erika looked up information on her phone about the tower. “The only way up to the control rooms are the elevators. Or I guess you could pull a Tom Cruise and climb up there! There are control rooms on both the first and second observatories.”

“Knowing Josiah, he set up shop at the very top,” said Shizuo. “He’s a prick like that.”

Walker sniggered.

“Unfortunately, the first elevator only goes up to the Tembo Deck,” continued Erika, “then you have to get out and find the other one that will take you to the Galleria at the top. The rest of the layout isn’t available online, so you’re just gonna have to wing it.”

Shizuo shrugged. “It’s more of a plan than usual.”

She sneered at him wolfishly. “When you rescue Iza-Iza, please save your climactic kiss until you’re in front of me.”

“Karisawa,” Kadota grimaced, “please.”

Shizuo ignored her and held a hand out to Kadota. “I really owe you after all this.”

Kadota grinned, “Yeah, you do.” He accepted Shizuo’s hand and gave it one solid shake. “We’ll get a beer. You can even bring your boyfriend, if he stays out of trouble.”

Boyfriend. Not even Shizuo had called Izaya that. He blushed, but that didn’t stop him from saluting his friends farewell.

“Remember,” he started, “if anyone with blue eyes comes at you--”

“–Aim for the head!” They parroted back to him, presenting four thumbs-up.

About ten minutes later, Shizuo, Celty, and Pepe lay in wait for the van group to carry out their part of the plan. Walker had told them their signal to slip past the blockade would be loud and obvious. Coming from Walker? Shizuo believed it.

“I’ll go up from the outside,” Pepe announced while they waited a half block away from the Skytree’s entrance, out of sight from the surrounding Kazbek’s.

[Outside?] questioned Celty.
Pepe pointed to the tower’s latticework and mimed climbing it.

Shizuo scanned the 350 meters from the ground to the tower’s first observation. “I’ll take my chances with the elevator.”

Pepe shook her head. “They will expect it.”

“Good,” said Shizuo, and he clenched his fist determinedly. “I hope that bastard Kyle is there to personally welcome me.”

Celty placed a steadying hand on his shoulder. Before more could be said, the ground shook with a nearby explosion. Screams erupted all around them. An impressive cloud of smoke rose to the North. All of the Kazbeks visible to Shizuo began to close in on the source of the blast.

*That’s one hell of a signal, Walker.*

“Go!”

He felt like a fish swimming up stream. The mob of people escaping the Skytree ran in every direction. As Shizuo waded through the crowd, he picked up bits people’s panicked exchanges.

“What’s going on?!”

“My husband suddenly went all – all – possessed!”

“Are you one of them?!”

“They’re everywhere!”

Pepe, true to her word, zipped past them all and sprang towards the tower. She expertly scaled her way upwards, with parkour skills extreme enough to rival Izaya’s. Amidst all the chaos, nobody noticed the tiny ginger woman climbing the tallest tower in the world.

By the time they reached the Skytree’s entrance, the masses had thinned. Shizuo and Celty easily made their way through the lobby. All that was left was the tower’s security, who bumbled around bewilderedly from all the turmoil. No one had trained them for such anarchy.

One bottom-heavy guard scuffled up to the two of them. “Hey! What are you doing?! We’re evacua-”

Shizuo wrapped the poor guy in a headlock, dragging him behind the corner of a wall. Celty continued forward and made quick work of wrapping the rest of security up in shadows. Within seconds of Shizuo’s grasp, the first guard slipped from consciousness.

“Sorry!” Shizuo called over his shoulder as he hurried forward. “I swear we’re the good guys!”

Under different circumstances, Shizuo would have stopped to marvel at the glamour of the all. The ceilings glowed blue behind an intricate design. The HD screens of the ticket book continued to play scenic images of the Skytree and the surrounding mall. As it were, Shizuo and Celty proceeded directly to the first elevator, which was thankfully already on the ground floor. Inside were colorful, jovial patterns lining the walls.

Dark doors closed behind them, and up they went.

Shizuo felt the ground drop away from him. Above the doors, there was a screen that displayed how
far they rose by each meter. From here, the only thing between Shizuo and his final foray, between him and Izaya, was the crawl to the tower’s peak.

Each second provided more time for Shizuo fixate on how scared he actually was. His plan was to have gotten to Izaya before Josiah activated the Vulture transmission, but that was already shot. Shizuo had seen with his own eyes, innocent civilians falling under Vulture’s control. People instantly had lost the ability to think for themselves, while the people around them fell into anarchy at the confusion of the situation.

And then there was the question of Izaya’s current state. If Josiah had needed Izaya to activate this particular Vulture transmission, what had had happened to Izaya? Had Josiah forced it out of Izaya, somehow? Could they cancel it? Would they need Izaya to do so? And, if Josiah had gotten what he wanted out of Izaya, what would have happened to him afterwards?

Shizuo wouldn’t acknowledge the thought, but it still gave him goosebumps.

Despite his incredible abilities, Shizuo was very much mortal. The exceptions to his averageness was his strength and the new arm that kept surprising him in its resourcefulness.

But would that be enough to stop an armageddon?

Celty was just as solemn. Usually the silence between them was mutual and soothing. This felt different. They hadn’t really been alone since they argued in Italy, and their clipped exchange on the plane had been unusual. The elevator filled with the unaddressed tension between them.

They happened to glance at each other at the same time. What followed was an awkward shuffle of movements, looking back and forth and finding idle gestures to do with their hands. Shizuo even opened his mouth to break the ice, but quickly closed it again once he realized he didn’t know what to say.

To Celty’s credit, she did try to comfort him.

[Izaya will be fine] she said. [We don’t know what happened, and Shingen made it seem like this Josiah guy wants to keep Izaya alive.]

A bitter laugh escaped Shizuo. “Ironically, that could be the last fate Izaya wants.”

Celty stiffened. He hadn’t meant to be harsh, but Celty’s skin was thick. She’d been acting funny since they’d left the Petrillo’s, even going so far as striking a shady deal with that Namie woman. Since she had no sentimental ties to Izaya, Shizuo pondered her unusual behavior.

“Celty...” He started, “about the deal you made with whatsername...”

She made no motions to answer him.

“I kinda thought you had given up on your head and all that business. I know you and Shinra have been happy without it. So... why now?”

For a moment, she said nothing. She moved with a sigh and finally typed something for him.

[I’m sorry.]

Shizuo blinked. “You’re sorry? For...?”

She just typed it over and over again, her head bowed in front of him.
Now Shizuo stepped back in concern. “For – for what?!”

Her shoulders drooped. Shizuo rarely saw her so dejected.

Oh. Shizuo scowled. “Celty… That wasn’t your fault–”

“I wanted to protect him for you!” She rapidly formed her messages. I never wanted you to think that I wasn’t trying, because of what I had said about you two!

“Celty, seriously,” Shizuo’s voice was stern. “I don’t blame you. I don’t blame anyone except the asshole we’re about to pummel to hell and back.”

“It’s just that I think I was wrong.” Celty continued, You keep surprising me. The Shizuo I knew before you went through all this was, well – I’ll just say that you had a habit of not thinking things through.

“That’s fair,” Shizuo agreed. A smile pulled on his lips. “But really, Celty… You don’t have to explain.”

She did anyways. If I had been more vigilant in that orchard, he’d be okay. I can see now how much he means to you. That’s why I’m doing everything I can to help save him. I still don’t understand, completely. He’s done terrible things to people I care about, you included. He and I have a sour history, and we may never get along, but… I trust you. So I’ll give him a chance.

Stunned, Shizuo could not think of how to respond. Rising in silence, the elevator sped towards the first observation deck.

“I still am sorry about before” She concluded, I shouldn’t have questioned your feelings.

“No,” Shizuo assured her. He smirked. “I would have been skeptical, too.”

Her posture slumped, regardless.

She really was one of the most thoughtful beings that Shizuo knew. Even without a head, Celty was more human than many others that Shizuo had met. They had always understood each other, as fellow outsiders to the world of average mortals. Now, after everything they’ve been through, together and apart, Shizuo felt like he and Celty had found their places on Earth.

Shizuo finally had the urge to do something that he should have done ages ago. Stepping forward, he pulled Celty against his chest.

He hugged his best friend.

Her arms came around him, much less frantic from when she had thrown herself at him in Tuscany. Though they’d spent the last two days together, they finally felt reunited.

“You’ve gotten softer” said Celty when they broke apart.

“Where it counts,” quipped Shizuo. “I guess being exposed to Izaya for so long has built up my
tolerance to most irritating things.”

[Well, at least he’s good for something.] she joked.

Their time to bond like this was nearly up. The elevator was moments away from landing, and the most difficult opponents would surely be awaiting them.

“Alright, enough sappiness,” Shizuo said. “I could really use your help saving the world and my could-be boyfriend from an evil megalomaniac and his cyborg army. Think you’re up for it?”

Celty summoned her scythe from the shadows and nodded. There was no one Shizuo would rather have by his side in this ridiculous, terrifying, incredible situation.

They both faced the door as it opened, ready for whatever waited on the other side.

Chapter End Notes

two more chapters... *holy shit*. the next one will be a BIG one, too, so i may ask for your patience as i crank it out.

however, i have a treat for you all. i’ve really loved all the positive feedback i’ve had for Pepe :) with two chapters to go, i don’t really plan on getting too much into pepe's backstory. so i drew up a profile for background info!

[ PROFILE ][ FULL IMAGE ][ TUMBLR LINK ]
To Shizuo’s surprise, there was no one on the other side of the other of the elevator doors. The observation deck was empty.

That didn’t stop the unsettling chill creeping down Shizuo’s spine. As he and Celty ambled towards the large glass windows, Shizuo had the unmistakable sensation of being watched.

“Celty.”

[I know.]

Silence permeated the Tembo deck, far removed from the chaos of the city below. It was if Shizuo and Celty has ascended to a higher plane, a world above the rest of Earth. To Shizuo’s dismay, there was a transparent, glass floor through which Shizuo could look down 350 meters. In a different situation, Shizuo would have thought the view was cool – the blue illumination of the tower shone through the windows. Now, he just thought of how much he didn’t want to fall from this height in the imminent fight.

All manner of disarray littered the tourist trap, remnants from when everyone had been evacuated. Though there was an aspect missing: if any of the tourists had been possessed by Vulture… where had they gone?

Shizuo focused on the reasons he was there: to find Izaya and to stop the Vulture transmission. Somewhere in this tower was a control room. It was the best place to start.

“Celty,” started Shizuo, “We need to—”

“Shizuo! Good to see you again.”

The voice rang throughout the entire observation deck, but its source was unseen. Not that it enraged Shizuo any less to hear it.”
“Josiah,” Shizuo greeted through grit teeth. He looked around for the man, but to no avail. Instead, he saw the security cameras scattered throughout the corridors and looked directly into the nearest lens. “Can’t say I feel the same.”

“Apologies that I cannot welcome you properly. I’m quite busy, you see. My new world is–”


Josiah paused before he began chuckling. A vein in Shizuo’s forehead twitched. Celty, meanwhile, stalked around the premises. The two never left each other’s sights. They knew one another well enough that they could communicate without words, and right now they were both trying to determine where the first threat would come from.

“I have to say, Shizuo, you surprise me. I expected you’d pull this tower apart from the ground up. You’re unusually subdued.”

Something visibly clicked for Celty when he said that. She looked at Shizuo and moved away from the window, subtly showing him a message on her phone.

[They’re under us.]

*From the ground up, huh?* Shizuo nodded, though the image unnerved him: At least a hundred Kazbeks, lingering skillfully on the limbs of the Skytree’s latticework… skulking their way upwards. They were fast, Shizuo remembered, and could strike at any moment.

By the windows of the Tembo deck were steel railings – mere paperclips for Shizuo’s strength.

Shizuo found another security camera and gazed levelly into it. “Is that the impression I gave?” His hand closed around the metal, denting it in his grasp. “Well, sorry to disappoint you, but…”

Ripping the railing from the window was a familiar and freeing feeling. It’d been far too long since Shizuo tore up a building.

“I’ve never been this pissed off in my life.”

He yanked the entirety of the steel length from its bolts and poised himself for an attack. Celty’s grip on her scythe tightened.

The glass floors shattered and blew inwards, Kazbeks jumping through the newly made entrances. Others crashed through the windows from above. The Kazbeks engaged instantly.

First, Celty naturally tried to wrap them all up in webs of shadows – that would have made quick work of this assault. However, these Kazbeks were many times stronger than the zombies in the forest. These soldiers easily loosed themselves from the shadows’ hold. They wore suits similar to Pepe’s, with an embedded pattern of systemic lines glowing Vulture blue, as well as the black helmet Pepe had worn when she’d first reappeared.

Shizuo swung his railing and knocked over a couple, but most were agile enough to dodge. A couple even got close enough to strike at Shizuo. Shizuo evaded them and countered, and continued this pattern a few times. These Kazbeks weren’t just tough, though. They were also armed.

He only had a split second to get away when one drew a gun on him.

“Celty! Watch out!”
More Kazbeks drew their weapons and sent both Shizuo and Celty scrambling to not to get shot.

Amidst the action came a final mocking message from Josiah: “Then I’ll let you have your fun with my subordinates.”

Shizuo grit his teeth and kept swinging. Josiah clearly cared little about those who had subscribed to his cause, but Shizuo couldn’t afford to hold back. He used the railing to block bullets until it crumbled.

There was a station that included a giant electronic, interactive map. It probably weighed around a thousand pounds. Shizuo flipped it at a group of Kazbeks and pinned them against the wall.

Celty jumped to his side, having just incapacitated a dozen Kazbeks on her own.

[Don’t forget. We need to find a control room and stop the transmission!]

“I know that!”

A Kazbek came out of nowhere and aimed at Celty before either of them registered its movements. They fired their gun without hesitation.

Shizuo acted without thinking and jumped in front of her, his right arm raised.

The bullets were stopped by the artificial Kazbek flesh, which was too strong for them to penetrate. The metal bones didn’t even dent. More quickly than last time, the bullets fell to ground and the wounds stitched themselves back together. Without batting an eye, Shizuo grabbed the gun from the Kazbek’s arm and threw it across the room.

[Thanks] said Celty.

Shizuo nodded.

[But you know, I don’t think that would have killed me, so there’s need to act so hastey.] Shizuo blushed, embarrassed. He hadn’t considered that.

Regarding his arm, he marvelled at its efficiency. To his chagrin, if he was going to survive this battle, he would probably have to utilize it more.

The two of them raced around the observation deck, taking out Kazbeks as they went. Shizuo tore open every door he could find, but found nothing like a control room. He found the bathrooms, a storage closet, the cafe’s kitchen, but nothing helpful. Celty was just as unsuccessful. On the bright side, the amount of Kazbek’s attacking them had thinned out.

Celty and Shizuo were a tough duo to overwhelm.

[There’s nothing here] Celty reasoned, [We need to get up to the Tembo Galleria.]

Shizuo recalled Erika’s information that the only way up to the upper observation deck was by a second elevator. They ran for it, but their momentum was halted by awkwardly waiting for an elevator. Shizuo hit the button in rapid succession.

“Oh come on!”

[I don’t think that’s going to make it come any faster.]
After what felt like thirty minutes to Shizuo, the elevator dinged upon its arrival. Shizuo pressed against the doors anxiously, which wasn’t the wisest decision. Mostly because when the doors finally opened, a Kazbek immediately tried to stab Shizuo in the face.

Shizuo only just managed to step back in time.

The blade managed to scrape across his cheek and draw a line of blood. There was no time to calculate this brawl; this Kazbek was easily the fastest so far. By the time Shizuo registered what was happening, the Kazbek had thrown Shizuo off balance and stabbed him in the leg.

“GYAH!”

Not even Celty could react before a tether shot out from another elevator and tangled her. Another Kazbek stood there, grappling gun in hand. Immediately upon securing Celty, they pressed a button in the elevator that slammed the doors shut and dropped the elevator – at incredible speed, Celty went crashing down after it.

“CELTY!”

His heart pounding with a rush of adrenaline, Shizuo pulled the blade out of his leg, rose, and rounded on the one Kazbek left behind. They had been the only one to inflict any lasting damage on Shizuo, and that irritation just fueled his already blazing rage.

Apparently knowing that Shizuo would attack brutally, the Kazbek readied itself. And they were correct – Shizuo felt particularly triggered by this individual.

There was something about their movements, though, that Shizuo found familiar. Without realizing it, Shizuo took note of this Kazbek’s form – their movements, their height, their lithe body. A flat chest, twiggy legs, nimble hands. The helmet only covered half their face, revealing the pale, mocking lips of its wearer.

Then the Kazbek turned their back on Shizuo, and Shizuo’s blood went cold.

Like the rest of them, this one had a pattern of lines on their suit. However, Shizuo recognized this particular pattern, because he’d seen it before. It was one that he’d traced with his own fingers. It was one he could never forget.

Because it looked like Mexico.

The Kazbek took off in a sprint.

“W–wait!!” Shizuo bolted after him. He tried to grab the other man.

Shocking Shizuo, the Kazbek flipped into open elevator shaft. In an impressive display of fluid motion, he disappeared up and out of sight.

Shizuo followed.

Years of chasing a certain flea had sharpened Shizuo’s parkour skills. He wasn’t as agile, but he undeniably had a heightened, superhuman sense of mobility. With relative ease, Shizuo scaled up the elevator shaft, which was completely exposed to the outside.

Don’t look down, he told himself.

At 350 meters away from the ground, the wind was rough and the air was cold. It was easy to forget
about the threat of falling, though, when Shizuo could only focus on closing the gap between himself and the Kazbek moving expertly above him. Shizuo yelled the other man’s name, but the sound just got lost on the breeze.

He followed the Kazbek onto the latticework of the Skytree, balancing on the diagonal and vertical beams keeping this massive structure intact. He faltered a few times, caught in the terror and confusion presented by realizing who exactly he was chasing.

Eventually, they reached the base of the Tembo Galleria, and the Kazbek halted. He hung from the edge of the structure and gazed down at Shizuo, several feet below him. Shizuo only got close enough so that he words would finally cut through the wind.

“Izaya!”

The Kazbek said nothing.

“You’re Izaya, aren’t you?!” Shizuo knew Izaya better than anyone else. A helmet covering half his face wasn’t enough to obscure the man from Shizuo. There were ways Izaya breathed, Shizuo realized, that he would be able to recognize.

Still, the other man was silent. If this truly was Izaya before him, it wasn’t in the other man’s nature to keep his mouth shut. He loved to goad Shizuo, no matter what.

So what was happening, then? Shizuo now had even more questions than when he began this rescue message. Why was Izaya in a Kazbek uniform? Why did Izaya attack him? Why was Izaya running from him? Where was he leading him?

One thing was for sure: it was probably Josiah’s fault. What the hell did you do, Josiah...?

Suddenly, Izaya ducked into the interior of the tower. He seemed to know of a way into the Galleria from the outside. Right when Shizuo moved to follow him, he heard a roar of sound behind him. Somehow a helicopter had snuck up on him. By the looks of it, it was the same helicopter that Shizuo had seen in Tuscany: armed and militant.

Shizuo made eye contact with the man at the helm – Kyle, the natural blond, as taciturn as ever.

A growl escaped Shizuo, but he prepared himself. Kyle opened fire. Shizuo quickly crawled behind the latticework to use as a cover. He tore up some of the beams and chucked them at Kyle like spears, but the helicopter swayed and dodged.

There was a moment of ceasefire when the helicopter reared back, and Shizuo thought that that meant his troubles with the damn chopper were over.

He peeked around a pole, and his heart sank. How foolish he was to hope.

“Oh, you’ve gotta be fuckin’ kidding me.”

The helicopter crashed into the tower.

On the bright side, the helicopter was no longer airborne. However, that wasn’t so comforting when Shizuo regained consciousness while upside-down, suspended in mid-air.

“Shit.”
It smelled like smoke and oil. The crackle of sparks sounded nearby.

He vaguely remembered moving fast enough to avoid being rammed by the nose of the chopper, or being chopped to pieces by its blades. The helicopter caused a minor explosion though, and so much damage that Shizuo had gone catapulting through the wreckage. At some point he had momentarily blacked out. He had hit his head, and blood dripped through his hair. Now, he awoke to being trapped by several cords around his legs, although they were the only thing preventing him from plummeting 400 meters to his death.

Overall – not ideal.

The tail of the helicopter stuck out of the building like a shank. Before Shizuo’s very eyes, it broke from the body of the helicopter and fell all the way to the ground. Shizuo couldn’t even keep it in his sights, the distance was so great. The entirety of the Tokyo Skytree groaned from the assault.

Alright, Shizuo thought, grinding his teeth, how am I gonna get out of this one?

“Need some help, galán?”

In that moment it felt like heaven had sent him saviors. Shizuo squinted above him and two blurred figures came into focus: Pepe and, to Shizuo’s surprise, her father.

“Jefe?!” Shizuo gaped, “she found you?!”

“Fácilmente,” said Pepe.

The older man had definitely seen better days, though. Even from a few meters below, Shizuo could see that Jefe’s face was sunken and bruised. Both father and daughter were crouching safely on a ledge of the Galleria created by the helicopter’s impact.

With strength that never ceased to surprise Shizuo, Pepe reeled him in by the cords keeping him alive. Within a minute, he scrambled onto the same ledge as them, grunting.

Pepe looked him over. “Dónde está tu amiga?”

Shizuo assumed she was inquiring about Celty’s absence. “The bad guys are trying to take her out of the fight,” he explained, “but she’ll be back.”

Jefe whistled when he got a close up look at Shizuo. “Looks like you hit your head pretty hard.”

“Yeah, but,” He rubbed his head idly, “it doesn’t hurt…” Then, Shizuo blinked, startled at having understood the man beside him. “You speak Japanese?!”

“Of course.”

“You never did in Spain…”

“I only switch from Spanish when it suits me.”

“Hrmph…”

“And you’ve been stabbed,” Jefe pointed out.

“I don’t feel that either,” Shizuo grumbled. “You’re not looking too great either, ya know.”

It was an understatement. Jefe looked like he’d been dragged through a warzone. Maybe he had.
Honestly, Shizuo wasn’t surprised that Pepe had managed to find him so quickly, but he was still impressed.

Jefe chuckled, as good-natured as ever. “This Hummel guy doesn’t take no for an answer.”

Shizuo sighed. “What did they take you for?”

“Hmm… I’m not sure what happened, but he was in a state of disrepair when I was brought to him…”

Thinking back, Shizuo recalled the image of Josiah with a scalpel sticking out of his eye socket, and the massive explosion in the Alps facility. Yeah, thought Shizuo, anyone else would be dead… So that’s why they needed Jefe? To repair Josiah after we left him? Shizuo felt a pang of guilt akin to seeing the Petrillo family suffer.

“Galán,” said Jefe seriously, addressing Shizuo, “there is something you must know to go forward.”

Shizuo met Jefe’s eyes, ready for anything.

“The man you’re up against is no longer human. When his minions kidnapped me, they forced me to revive him from the brink of death. It was only possible because of all the Vulture serum pumped into his body, and all the pieces of himself that he’d replaced with machinery. He has become a slave of his own devices. Because of that, I don’t believe he can be stopped without being completely destroyed.”

Naturally, there was a part of Shizuo that did want to murder Josiah… The man was a monster, and had caused irreparable damage to many people besides just Shizuo. Yet, there was something unsettling about being told outright that death was the only option.

“I’m telling you this,” Jefe continued, “because you seem a good man. If this is not something that you believe yourself capable of, there are other options…”

He glanced sideways at his daughter, whose steely eyes were unwavering as she loaded one of her guns. It wasn’t the first time Shizuo had been in the company of a trained killer – but he never expected the soft-spoken girl from Spain to be so hardened.

“Cuidado!”

Pepe shoved Shizuo and Jefe aside just in time to avoid incoming gunfire. She retaliated with her own gun over their shoulders. Following her trajectory, Shizuo saw her target, and his blood began to boil.

“Kyle,” he growled, rising.

The natural blond was hurtling towards them, easily maneuvering around the debris and expertly scaling the tower. He was firing an automatic weapon at them. Shizuo covered Jefe, using his arm to catch bullets that he couldn’t dodge. Pepe shot Kyle several times, but it was fruitless.

Like Shizuo’s arm, he could take a lot of damage and instantly recover. The main difference was that Kyle’s whole body was like that. Not to mention that tricky invisible forcefield ability he had, which he now used to fling rubble in Shizuo’s direction.

He focussed so much on Shizuo that he didn’t notice Pepe sprint up behind him, jump, and whirl a kick at his head.
Kyle went flying into a wall. Shizuo gasped. Even Shizuo had had difficulty getting the one-up on this wannabe Terminator. However, Shizuo noticed a new tension in Pepe’s shoulders as she stalked to where Kyle had crashed.

Their opponent was quick to recover, this time flying at Pepe with a vengeance. Shizuo joined her in a two-on-one fray. Just as Shizuo remembered, Kyle was the strongest Kazbek in combat. Together, he and Pepe might only just be able to beat him. She often got a step in front of Shizuo and lunged strike after strike at Kyle.

Face as blank of emotion as usual, Kyle’s eyes darted wildly between his two attackers. His cybertronic brain was calculating as fast as possible how to combat two skilled fighters. Though Pepe lacked Shizuo’s strength, Shizuo could tell that her training and sheer skill vastly outstripped his own.

Part of Shizuo was a little jealous.

“Pepe – wait!”

Pepe hesitated for only a split second, but Kyle used the opening to retreat a few paces and harden his stance against them.

Her brown eyes sparked with murderous intent. “*Esto llevó a mi padre.*”

Shizuo took note to never get on Pepe’s bad side. Maybe leaving things to her would be easier, as Jefe suggested, but Shizuo wasn’t so tactical. If it was possible, Shizuo would defeat Josiah, rescue Izaya, and save the world without any more lives being taken. He was still stupidly stubborn like that.

“Pepe,” Shizuo started, his voice terse, “can you do me a favor and leave this guy to me?”

She stared at him, wide-eyed.

“I know you want revenge, but I’ve got a bit of rivalry with this guy going on…” Shizuo stretched out his arms, loosening up his limbs. He’d been stabbed in the leg and hit in the head, so that wasn’t so great. Plus, his last combat with Kyle hadn’t exactly gone in his favor. He had a debt to repay – Tom would be cross with him if he didn’t.

For some reason, Shizuo had unwavering confidence. Compared to Josiah, who Shizuo would still have to defeat, this guy was nothing.

“Hold on, *galán,*” said Jefe cautiously. “This is the guy that got the best of Josephina when he abducted me, and she’s–”

“You only saw me with a fever, right?” Shizuo smirked, “Actually… I’m pretty tough.”

Jefe frowned, unconvinced, but Pepe studied Shizuo, debating whether it was worth it to leave Kyle to him. The cyborg himself was watching them with surprising patience. Though subtle, one could almost mistake the expression on the man’s face to be a glare in Shizuo’s direction.

“Take care of your dad,” Shizuo said to her. “If you’re going back to the ground, the others could probably use your help as well.”

Pepe surveyed all the damage around them. Lights flickered on the visor she’d stolen from a Kazbek, calculating. A fire had started inside the decrepit helicopter, sure to spread to the rest of the tower.
“I’m estimating that you have less than twenty minutes before the top of this tower collapses. Please defeat these cabrónes before then.”

Shizuo nodded, understanding. “Thanks,” he said, and he meant it for many reasons.

She smiled. “Buena suerte, Señor Shizuo.”

With that, Pepe scooped up her father – as if he weren’t thrice her size – and hopped her way back down the Skytree.

She wasn’t even out of sight before Kyle aimed a punch at Shizuo’s face.

Luckily, Shizuo expected him to play dirty, and dodged.

“Oh good,” Shizuo grinned, “you remembered me.” He countered Kyle instantly. “I’ve been wanting a rematch!”

Shock had been part of it, last time. Shizuo had been so derailed at the introduction of a foe on the same physical wavelength as him that he’d let down his guard. Not this time. He knew the cyborg in front of him better now. He knew he didn’t have to be mindful of his strength. For once, he could go all out.

“You know, there is one thing I like about you, blondie,” huffed Shizuo as the two let their fists fly.

Kyle said nothing, but quirked an eyebrow when he blocked Shizuo’s latest blow.

“Since you’re so damn strong already,” continued Shizuo, “I don’t have to hold back a single ounce of my strength.”

And what an absolutely freeing feeling that was.

Except, the two of them probably should have been mindful of the deteriorating integrity of the Skytree’s structure. Having two super-powered individuals going at each other at full force wasn’t very good for an area that had had a helicopter crashed into it. Even Kyle, a being programmed for efficiency, got caught up in the brawl. Together, they knocked down walls and busted through steel beams.

All Shizuo worried about was defeating Kyle as fast as possible, finding Izaya again, and putting a stop to this whole mess.

The tower shook from their bout. They fought near the most volatile area as well – just above the crashed helicopter. A contributing factor could also be that Shizuo had a tendency to peel off heavy objects from walls and use them as weapons. Kyle, realizing guns were useless against Shizuo’s speed and fast healing, copied this method. Perhaps they could bludgeon each other to death.

Shizuo lost track of how many times Kyle struck him, but it was evident from the neon liquid dripping from Kyle’s wounds that the other man was also suffering from several injuries. Even when Shizuo bashed the Kazbek over the head, Kyle kept going. Apparently, knocking Kyle unconscious wasn’t going to be an option.

Which means…

When Shizuo had first met this cyborg, Kyle, it was hate at first sight. In Boston, Kyle wouldn’t shut up but Shizuo now realized that he’d only been trying to get close to Izaya. Since then, the natural blond hadn’t said a word.
To his own surprise, Shizuo held back for a moment.

“Oi,” Shizuo found himself saying, “can I ask you something?”

Kyle actually faltered.

“Do you actually care about Josiah and the Kazbek Initiative, or are you just as helpless against Vulture as the rest of us?”

It could go either way. Shizuo knew that there were plenty of fucked up people in the world that would buy into Josiah’s bullshit. Or, there had been a regular guy that fell under the influence of a megalomaniac and became a knight in a twisted crusade.

Somewhere in Kyle’s face twitched. His seemingly emotionless expression bordered on manic.

“Can you even answer?” asked Shizuo sullenly.

Kyle just attacked him, which Shizuo took as a strong, resounding No.

Whatever Kyle’s answer would have been, it wouldn’t have changed what Shizuo had to do. Because of Kyle’s advanced regeneration, it was impossible to knock him out. Shizuo would have to find a way to indefinitely restrain him.

The cords and tethers that had tangled Shizuo earlier still dangled nearby. That might do, Shizuo hoped, and leaped away from Kyle to lead him that way.

Perhaps Kyle was too distracted by Shizuo’s attempts to communicate with him that he didn’t notice Shizuo wrapping the tethers around him, one after another. He followed Shizuo, attacking no matter what constraints Shizuo wove around him. Actually, it was eerie how much Kyle didn’t react to this. He pursued Shizuo like a rocket honing in on a target – without awareness of its surroundings, even if something was trying to shoot it down.

“Hah!” Once Shizuo was satisfied with his work, he sent one last kick into Kyle’s chest.

The Kazbek flew backwards into the air. The cords caught him, just as they had Shizuo. Kyle was left suspended in the air, caught in a dozen commercial-strength restraints.

A wasp in a spider web.

“Now stay there!” yelled Shizuo triumphantly. “I’m gonna go beat up your boss now!”

Only, Kyle showed no sign of surrender. He struggled against his confines, and Shizuo gaped. Considering the instability of those cords and the tower, movement only made Kyle’s predicament worst.

Shizuo griped, “What are you doing?!”

Kyle flailed helplessly, trying so hard to stay in this fight.

“You’re beaten! Stay still!!”

Maybe it was how he was programmed, but Kyle exhibited no sense of self-preservation. His blue eyes bore into Shizuo, not even looking at how he could realistically free himself. It really was like a one-track machine – with one program, to succeed at no matter what.
That was how Vulture worked. That’s how Kazbeks worked. They didn’t matter. They sacrificed their own humanity for the sake of their cause.

Behind the gleaming blue of Kyle’s eyes, Shizuo swore he saw an emotion… Fear?

In that moment, Shizuo pitied him.

“Humans…” Kyle heaved, “need to be controlled…”

His voice was ragged and tinny – consequences from its lack of use and the mechanical influences in his body.

Whether Kyle truly believed that or not, Shizuo couldn’t say. It didn’t make what happened next any easier, either way. There was nothing Shizuo could do to save Kyle from himself, not when his body was acting against any natural survival instincts a human might have.

The way his body contorted in horrific abnormality sent Shizuo’s stomach churning. Worse were the pained, terrified shrieks emitting from Kyle’s bleeding mouth, mixed with the broken screeches of the metal in his body. His joints clicked unnaturally. The cords only became more tangled, more taught. The more Kyle struggled, the more of a precarious position he caused. One by one, the tethers broke, and Kyle scrambled helplessly. Vulture leaked from his eye sockets, the boy’s eyes having grown wide as he realized how his vain attempts would end.

When the final cord snapped, Shizuo looked away.

If this was the sort of brainwashed action that all others affected by Vulture would suffer, the world was looking at a grim future – if Shizuo couldn’t stop the transmission, that is.

When Shizuo glanced back, Kyle had fallen. 400 meters – 1312 ft… Not even a Kazbek could survive that.

As soon as Shizuo turned around again, he startled.

Izaya – or at least, the Kazbek that Shizuo was certain was Izaya – crouched at the entrance the of the Tembo Galleria. How long has he been there?

Before Shizuo could call out to him, Izaya disappeared out of his line of sight.

Sighing, Shizuo straightened himself out and climbed up the rubble to where he’d seen Izaya. Once he was on level ground, Shizuo made his way up the galleria’s observation ramp. Though the tower had been damaged, it continued to glow a vibrant blue. The color consumed everything in the tunnel – a wide tube of a walkway that led from the elevator to the above floor. Unlike the previous observation deck, the windows of this tunnel were curved, giving visitors the chance to look downwards. When Shizuo did, all he could see was the smoke rising from the crashed helicopter.

Following the path, Shizuo stalked upwards. Surprisingly, no Kazbeks jumped out to attack him. He wouldn’t complain. Every now and then, the blue lights would flicker eerily, but otherwise his trek up the winding way went undisturbed.

Soon enough, he came to the top of the path and the entrance to the galleria’s inner facilities.

Where did you go, flea? wondered Shizuo as he looked from left to right. There were two ways he could go, each down a hall that curved around the center of the tower, which was a giant cylinder with multiple signs and doors on it. Left went upwards and had arrows pointing that way. Right stayed level and looked less travelled.
Shizuo went right. If the arrows were for tourists, then a control room for personnel would be located away from that.

There was a door labelled **STAFF ONLY** just around the other side of the cylinder. Locked, of course, but easy for Shizuo to bust open. He frowned when he only saw cleaning supplies inside.

A sound behind him startled him.

He whirled around and just barely caught sight of a black blur streaking up the ramp.

“Flea?”

Shizuo ran after it.

He passed another door labelled **STAFF ONLY**, but skidded to a halt in front of one with no sign at all. Double white doors, without any indication where they lead. There was a heavy padlock on them for when the facility was open. Currently, though, the left door was left open just a crack.

Shizuo entered.

Shizuo honestly didn’t have a clear idea of what a **control room** was meant to look like. He just imagined a computer would have something to do with it.

The room he’d entered was illuminated by a thousand glowing blue lights – monitors, motherboards, and pulsing wires. This was the hub of the Skytree’s broadcasts; it looked like an infected nervous system.

Plus, the place was like a labyrinth. Shizuo couldn’t see much between the dozens of rows of computers. If Izaya had come in here, Shizuo didn’t see him.

Tentatively, Shizuo crept through the room. He could vaguely feel the tremors of the tower beneath his feet, but nothing urgent quite yet. The Skytree had been built to withstand massive Japanese earthquakes; it could handle a boo-boo from a helicopter… At least, for a little while.

A flash of black crossed by Shizuo’s peripherals, and he whipped around to track it. However, he kept missing sight of the person in the room with him. He felt like prey in a maze as he continued forward. The best look he got of the figure in black was above him – the possible-Izaya moving through the millions of wires and atop the many computers.

When Shizuo reached the center of the room, he recognized it as the middle by the many – possibly thousands – of wires all running to the same computer. Its monitor seemed ancient by today’s standards. Somehow, this compact little set-up was powering this whole operation.

Leaning forward, Shizuo squinted at the monitor. Most of it was gibberish to him, but a few lines stood out to him.

```plaintext
>> CONNECTED TO HOST
>> TRANSMISSION: ACTIVATED
> 012014 RUNNING...
MAXIMUM FREQUENCY [██████████████████] 67%
```

“Well shit,” said Shizuo.

Knowing next to nothing about computers, Shizuo’s first instinct was to hit the **Esc** key.

Nothing happened.
The percentage on the loading bar increased from 67 to 68%.

“What happens at 100%?!”

On the verge of panicking, Shizuo looked around frantically. Where was Celty when he needed her – she always spent more time on the computer than him.

“Izaya?!” Shizuo called out desperately. “Are you in here?! Shut this shit off!”

Instead, the helmeted figure suspected of being Izaya attacked Shizuo from behind.

“Oh!”

Izaya jumped above Shizuo and escaped through a hatch in the ceiling.

Shizuo, of course, followed him.

He wound up outside again, through what must’ve been a workman’s door to the exterior units. They now stood at the base of the Skytree’s final tier, a massive antenna that topped at over 600 meters. Harsh winds threatened his balance, and Shizuo felt even more aware of the tower’s unstable structure – smoke and sparks rose from below. A loud groan could be heard from the steel supports.

He didn’t have much time to think about it, because Izaya flew a kick at him as soon as his head poked out of the hatch.

“Iz-Izaya! Stop!” Shizuo dodged and found his footing. “Tell me how to stop it!”

Izaya didn’t stop, but Shizuo didn’t fight back.

This is all wrong. Izaya shouldn’t be trying to stop him – he should be trying to help! The fact that Izaya was currently wearing the same kind of suit as Kazbecks Shizuo had fought, and that he was wearing that eerie helmet over his face…

Wait… Now that he could see it up close, Shizuo recognized the helmet. He’d seen it before. On screen, in the videos Josiah had shown him of Izaya’s torture – the Insight.

“Izaya!” Shizuo yelled at him, “You have to take that off!”

Just like it had when it had been used for torture, though, the Insight appeared embedded into Izaya’s spine. Was it controlling him?

Shingen had told Shizuo that Josiah wouldn’t use Vulture on Izaya, that he wouldn’t brainwash him, and Shizuo had believed it. He had believed that Josiah really did need Izaya’s cohesiveness for this plan to work, and that the damn man’s pride would save Izaya in this sense.

But what if they’d been wrong?

“Forget this!” Shizuo sprinted away from Izaya’s attacks. “I can just destroy this, can’t I?”

Tokyo Skytree can’t be a broadcast tower if Shizuo destroys the tower itself.

He began assaulting the antenna, tearing at any piece he could get his hands on. For some reason, Izaya did not try to harm him any further. It wasn’t the must sufficient of ideas, but Shizuo had no other ideas, and time was running out. The bar on the computer monitor below would have gone up even more by now.
Using a steel beam as a hammer, Shizuo began beating every inch of the antenna’s base. He could knock it down, end this whole thing right now –

Until one swing, and his motion stopped abruptly. A hand had grabbed the steel beam from behind him. Not even Shizuo’s strength could outmatch the force keeping him from moving just then.

“Oh Shizuo,” said Josiah Hummel, “I really wish you’d give me a break.”
Josiah Hummel: A name that several months ago held no meaning to Shizuo. Now it had significant weight to it. It even had a fear associated with it. A dread, a rage. No name other than Izaya’s had ever plagued Shizuo with a degree of absolute loathing.

He’d already had his fair share of enemies throughout his life: thugs, a demonic sword, assassins, the mob, more thugs, a woman in yellow, a flea in a parka. Shizuo had bested them all. His strength had gone unmet, his wrath and prowess always being enough.

Figures that Izaya would be the one to introduce Shizuo to the outlier.

The first thing Shizuo noticed when Josiah appeared was the metal arm, grasping the steel beam Shizuo wielded. The next thing Shizuo knew, he was spun around and flung into the tower. Such force caused a massive, Shizuo-shaped fissure in the structure. His back received the brunt of the action, Shizuo’s spine screaming at the damage.

When he next opened his eyes, Josiah’s blurred figure stalked towards him. He broke the steel beam over his knee like a mere twig and tossed it over the edge of the Skytree. With only the few seconds Shizuo had before Josiah closed the gap between them, Shizuo’s eyes flickered over everything new from the last time they’d seen each other up close.

First noticeable were the eyes, glowing fiercely. They no longer had any resemblance to a human’s; they shifted like lenses and were surrounded metallic plates. One of his arms had wires running through it, all the way up to his shoulder and protruding from his white collared shirt. The other was completely cybernetic. Vulture serum illuminated every crack in his broken body.

He grinned as he slammed a fist at Shizuo, who was just fast enough to avoid getting his face smashed to pieces. The tower splintered underneath the fist’s impact.

Josiah crushed a knee into Shizuo’s gut, and Shizuo felt things break. Blood splattered from his mouth as he gasped. One of Josiah’s hands closed over Shizuo’s head and flung him to the ground as if he were a ragdoll.

The realization had horrifying implications, but Josiah was faster than Shizuo.

Stronger than Shizuo.

But I’m not out of this fight yet…! Shizuo ground his teeth together and braced himself. Josiah’s next target was Shizuo’s arm – the right one, the Kazbek arm.

It’s what Shizuo was waiting for. He let Josiah break the arm, which would be able to heal itself, and Shizuo slammed a leg into Josiah’s side, sending him flying. Shizuo still had his own impressive
strength, that could easily fling an adult man several meters.

Recovering to his feet, Shizuo winced from the extent of his injuries. His aversion to pain didn’t mean he couldn’t feel the consequences of a stabbed leg, a couple cracked ribs, a head injury, and a bruised spine. The only part of him that could recover from all these brawls was his right arm that, despite Josiah having broken it, twisted back into place with a sickening crunch.

Across from him, Josiah looked as good as new. He dusted himself off and grinned. “For hating me and my methods so much, you sure seem to be making use of that arm I gave you.”

“That was your mistake,” Shizuo snapped back. “You shouldn’t have upgraded the guy who’s gonna kick your ass.”

Preferring not to wait for Josiah to make his next move, Shizuo attacked first.

“Don’t you see?” Josiah’s expression didn’t falter as he dodged and countered Shizuo. “You’re stronger with Vulture. The whole world could be that strong. Keeping all that strength to yourself… is rather selfish, don’t you think?”

Eyes narrowing, Shizuo landed a solid punch to Josiah’s jaw. The man stumbled back a few steps, but if anything, he merely looked impressed.

“I’d rather tear this arm off and give it back to you,” spat Shizuo.

Josiah smirked and held out an expecting hand.

Chuckling, Josiah took a step back and held up his cybernetic arm – a blade flipped up from his forearm to protrude out of his wrist, like a human Swiss army knife.

Shizuo blinked. “Shit...!”

He sprang away from where Josiah plunged his blade with deadly force.

“I always saved Kazbek’s best advancements for myself,” said Josiah, rearing back to strike at Shizuo again.

Without anything to deflect the blade, Shizuo focussed on dodging. Josiah swung at him with speed and fury. Even with Shizuo avoiding being sliced into bits, Josiah was able to nick Shizuo on his arms and face. Thin red lines revealed themselves on Shizuo’s arm, legs, and even on of his cheeks. Josiah moved with machine-like efficiency. Shizuo didn’t have a chance to catch his breath until a shake of the tower made them stumble.

Shizuo jumped away to a pillar. A fissure formed between him and Josiah, the volatile status of the tower ever increasing.

“Seems Kyle did a number on this tower,” said Josiah casually, “I’ll have to finish before it completely crumbles.”

“He’s dead, ya know,” Shizuo told him spitefully, “your buddy Kyle.”

Josiah shrugged. “A colleague is not a friend, Shizuo. He carried out his programming to the extent of his physical form, and I commend him for that.”

Shizuo really did hate Josiah more than anything. The man was incapable of respecting any form of
life. Even those subjugated to his twisted whims could be discarded like trash, if he deemed them expendable.

It occurred to Shizuo that one person Josiah seemed fraught to sacrifice was, ironically, the exact person Shizuo was there to save.

While Shizuo and Josiah had been exchanging blows, Izaya stood idly by and watched them. His expression was still hidden by that black helmet. He showed no implications of caring that Shizuo was getting his ass kicked. Even when he and Shizuo were enemies, Izaya would have at least found it amusing.

“What did you do to him?” Shizuo hissed at Josiah. The quiet stasis of Izaya’s presence unnerved him.

Looking pleased to have the opportunity to gloat, Josiah beckoned for Izaya to come towards him. Izaya did. He stopped just in front of Josiah, who circled Izaya with a satiated sneer.

“You recognize it, don’t you?” Josiah placed a hand upon Izaya’s helmeted head. “When I got him back, I thought Izaya could use another go-around with Insight. You remember this contraption, don’t you?”

Shizuo did recall the device. It had been forced upon Izaya and showed him numerous images of horror and atrocities in Josiah’s attempts to turn him. It was also responsible for etching scars into Izaya’s back, and surely enough the helmet Izaya now wore was one and the same. The major difference was that Izaya wasn’t strapped to a chair and appeared to be able to see through the thick black visor just fine.

“I don’t understand,” Shizuo breathed.

Josiah removed the helmet to reveal Izaya’s face. Shizuo immediately felt his stomach drop.

Blue eyes.

Izaya’s gaze was empty as he stared straight ahead with luminescent blue eyes.

“The others respond to a more unifying signal,” explained Josiah, pleased with himself, “Izaya requires a more precise manipulation. I figure… with exposure to Vulture, Izaya will surely come to see my point of view, of his own free will. Eventually.”

He tossed aside the helmet and delighted in Shizuo’s distraught expression.

“You…” Shizuo’s teeth grinded together in agony. Berating Josiah wasn’t enough anymore. He tried to murder the man with his glare alone.

“It’s only natural, isn’t it? What does Izaya owe to humans? They never loved him back, despite all the affection he poured onto them.”

“I wouldn’t call it affection, and Izaya knows that.”

“But even now, when Izaya descended to their level to love another,” Josiah gestured to Shizuo, “he’s still rejected. Your friends wouldn’t accept him.”

“That’s not true!” Shizuo growled. “You have no idea!” Shizuo addressed the other man desperately, “Izaya, you would be accepted. There are more people than me fighting for you, there’s—!!”
He was interrupted by a black scythe swinging down upon Josiah, which he jumped out of the way of just in time.

Shizuo gaped. “Celty?!”

Miraculously, she had returned from being dragged down the elevator shaft. Besides her yellow helmet being gone from her neck, she looked no worse for wear. Smoke puffed heatedly from her neck in irritation as she held her scyther threateningly towards Josiah, who sized her up gazingly.

“You okay?” asked Shizuo, joining her at her side.

She held up her phone. [I fell 200 meters! But I’m fine. I just hope I’ll be able to find my helmet after this...]

Looking between Josiah, Izaya, and Shizuo, she held up a new message.

[That’s him?] and [Izaya’s under his control?]

Shizuo nodded to both questions. Celty seemed to sigh in tired acceptance.

Just then, the tower shook much harder than it had before. All of them were lurched from where they stood, and there was a visible drop in altitude. Shizuo hissed at Izaya.

“Izaya, c’mon!” Shizuo beckoned hopefully. Of the two, Shizuo was close to the tower’s exit than Josiah was.

Josiah sneered at him from afar. “Izaya,” he said, “go initiate the signal.”

Izaya sprinted below to where the control room awaited.

“Fuck!” Shizuo ran after him.

As fast as lightning, Josiah tried to stop Shizuo with an attack. A shadow from Celty caught him though and flung him backwards against the tower. Celty kept him at bay while Shizuo continued to pursue Izaya.

In the room below, Izaya navigated a labyrinth of computers on his way to the console in the middle. Shizuo followed him and saw text illuminate the screen.

>> CONNECTED TO HOST
>> TRANSMISSION: ACTIVATED
> 012014 RUNNING...
MAXIMUM FREQUENCY [████████████████████████ 99% ]

“Izaya!” Shizuo pleaded, his voice cracking.

To his surprise, Izaya stopped. Though, maybe he was just waiting for that last 1%.

“If you let this happen,” started Shizuo, “humans won’t be the creatures you love anymore.”

“What does it matter?” Izaya answered, though his voice wasn’t quite natural. It had a static, tinny quality laid over it. His striking blue eyes pierced the darkness. “Humans will never love me back. I’ve accepted that.”

“It matters! That’s not you talking,” reasoned Shizuo. “That’s the blue shit being pumped through
A crash behind him alerted Shizuo to an incoming assault – as he turned to face Josiah, the other man sliced his blade across Shizuo’s chest.

Shizuo grimaced at the spurt of blood that rose in front of him, but he didn’t have time to recover. Josiah would lop his head clean off his shoulders. The tower quaked beneath his feet, causing his movements to be clumsy.

That didn’t seem to bother Josiah, though. He moved even more ruthlessly now. He made up for missing Shizuo’s neck by kicking him roughly in the ribs. Shizuo was sure he felt a crack.

Debris fell from the ceiling, and dust stung their eyes.

“İzaya!” Shizuo yelled, “Get out of here!” He didn’t want either of them in this tower when it inevitably fell, but at least Izaya wasn’t currently engaged with a psychopath.

However, Izaya remained where he was, unbothered. His blue eyes followed them, flickering as he witnessed Shizuo land a blow on Josiah.

“İzaya! Snap out of it!”

Nothing.

“He’s gone, Shizuo,” snapped Josiah. “He’s yours no longer. Let go.”

Shizuo refused. “İzaya!”

Black spikes shot down from above, piercing Josiah through the left shoulder and right arm. The man growled, but broke away as if he’d merely been pricked by a few pins. Shizuo took the opportunity to kick him in the chest, knocking him back several feet.

Celty poked her shadow-spewing neck through the hatch in the ceiling, adding more black spikes to threaten Josiah. At that moment, the Skytree jerked so violently that the floor beneath them tilted at such an angle that Shizuo slid a few inches.

“Celty!” he shouted, “You need to hold the tower together!” At the same time, Josiah fought back against the shadows and tried to slash Shizuo again. While Shizuo was becoming slightly more accustomed to Josiah’s attacks, all the injuries he had sustained started to strain his body’s abilities.

Even if Celty protested via her phone, Shizuo was too far away to be able to read it. In seconds, the shaking of the tower increased exponentially. She reluctantly took Shizuo’s word for it and disappeared outside, or else they’d all be destroyed in a few minutes.

Shizuo roared as he fought against Josiah. The man retained a smirk – he knew he had the upper hand – but his expression was crazed, manic. Everything Josiah had worked for was coming to a head, and Shizuo was standing in his way, refusing to back down.

Blood had seeped into the front of Shizuo’s shirt. His breath was ragged. The only part of his body that wasn’t feeling human limits was his one synthetic arm. Shizuo could barely register Izaya in his peripherals, the other man watching the brawl with vacant eyes.

The computer in the center of all this chaos beeped unceremoniously.

All three looked at the screen at the same time.
Shizuo tried to reach the console first, to destroy it, to hit ‘Cancel,’ anything. Josiah grabbed him, though, and suplexed him to the ground.

“Izaya! Hit the button!” ordered Josiah.

“Izaya!” cried Shizuo, begging the opposite.

Izaya, of course, per Vulture’s control over him, was ready to hit the **Enter** key. His fingers reached for the keyboard

“Izaya!”

Again, Izaya’s eyes flickered just briefly. His hand hesitated.

“Izaya,” Josiah said warningly, “hit that button, and then all of humanity will love you.”

“They *won’t*,” ground out Shizuo.

Josiah retorted by picking Shizuo up by the back of his neck and slamming him against one of the massive switchboards.

If he could reach Izaya, Shizuo could knock him out. But Josiah’s hold on him was unrelenting. No matter how much Shizuo struggled, he couldn’t escape Josiah’s grasp – not anymore. Shizuo bled from his head, his chest, his leg, and various other places. His energy was spent. He cursed himself as he slumped against the metal, unable to move, swallowing blood and bile and the sense that he was absolutely and utterly beaten.

A moment flashed across Shizuo’s eyes: *When they’d been in that truck, in the mountains. Josiah’s fortress was on fire. They were surrounded by Kazbeks. Shizuo saw the reflection of his blue eyes in the truck’s mirror. The frequency in his head rang like a drill to his temple. He loomed over Izaya, who despite it all had faith in Shizuo. He could free himself, so he did.*

Izaya’s hand moved towards the keyboard. Shizuo took a deep breath.

“Let me take you out to sushi!”

Izaya froze.

Slowly, with wide eyes, his head turned towards Shizuo.

“...What?”

That voice resonated deep within Shizuo’s chest.

“What are you doing?” Josiah questioned Izaya heatedly, but Izaya somehow ignored him.

“I saw Simon today,” said Shizuo calmly, words rushing forth, “Do you know what he told me? He said that fatty tuna is your favorite. I didn’t know that. He wanted you to know they had more fatty tuna for you whenever you came back. See? Humans watch you, too. You don’t think they can love you, but they can, and they do. I do. I’m human, and I love you.”

Josiah pulled Shizuo back only to slam him against the tower once more. “Shut up, Shizuo.” The
unfaltering confidence in Josiah had disappeared.

The flickering behind Izaya’s eyes became more frequent. Shizuo sighed, his gaze unwavering.

“You pride yourself on being observant, but there’s a lot you refuse to see, like that there are plenty of people who’d be your friend if you just let them. And there’s me, who’s ready to be so much more than that. I love you and I hate you, remember? That’s never going to change.

“So when all this is over, let’s go out together. On a real date and everything. My treat.”

Josiah chose that moment to stab Shizuo in his left shoulder, and Shizuo’s final sentence warped into a guttural cry of pain. Blood seeped from the wound and soaked any remaining clear patch on Shizuo’s shirt with blood.

“You…” Shizuo heaved, “bastard…!!”

Ignoring him, Josiah aimed another order at Izaya. “Execute the transmission!”

Except that Izaya’s eyes weren’t blue anymore. They’d returned to warm brown.

Shizuo watched as a barrage of emotions journeyed over Josiah’s face in an instant – shock, disbelief, acceptance, rage.

When Izaya did start tapping away at the keyboard, it was clearly not to execute the transmission. Josiah screeched in fury. Dropping Shizuo, he beelined for Izaya.

Shizuo wished he could have done something very macho and heroic in that moment, but he just slumped to the floor. He lost track of Izaya and Josiah’s movements. His head spun. How much blood had he lost at this point? He clutched at his shoulder wound, thinking he probably should be dead, or at least unconscious.

The tremors beneath him increased, knocking over equipment and splitting wires. Sparks flew around him. Shizuo wondered how Celty was fairing with keeping the tower together. Based on the creek and moan of the metal structure around him, he wagered that they’d all already be dead if she wasn’t outside, weaving it back together.

“Shizu-chan?”

Shizuo looked up at Izaya through blurry vision. Brown eyes. The tinniness had gone from his voice as well. Despite feeling on the edge of death, Shizuo couldn’t help smiling, “You okay?”

The corners of Izaya’s lips twitched. “Really? You’re the one bleeding out everywhere.”

“’S typical.”

“Can you stand?”

Looking around them, Shizuo registered that the ceiling was falling and that the room was on fire. “Where’d he go?”

“I’ve taken care of it.”

Shizuo noticed that the console at the center was still intact, screen blinking and waiting for instructions.

“We’ve gotta destroy that thing,” Shizuo hissed as Izaya lifted him, slinging one of his arms over his
shoulders. Somehow Izaya supported Shizuo’s deadweight on his small frame.

“We can leave it,” Izaya said calmly. “We need to get out of here before it falls apart.”

“But—”

“Izaya!”

Josiah reappeared, multiple knives sticking out of him. His teeth gritted his teeth as he glared at them. Blue liquid seeped from where the blades protruded from his flesh. Sizing up the other two, though, he saw they weren’t a threat in their current state.

“You will see my way of things!” Josiah barked as he marched to the computer. His composure had completely dissipated. What little of his sanity had remained was now gone.

“Wait–!” Shizuo moved to intercept him, but Izaya held him tightly. Frowning, Shizuo panicked over whether or not Izaya truly was free from Vulture’s control.

Eyes? Still brown. More convincing, though, was the steely resolve hardening Izaya’s features.

“You both will,” muttered Josiah, plugging his own components into the computer. His fingers moved over the keys rapidly. “I just need to make this signal stronger, stronger, stronger…” He turned a dial on the machine up to its maximum.

The ominous message appeared once more.

```
MAXIMUM FREQUENCY
[██████████████████████████] 100%
Execute? >Yes >Cancel
```

Shizuo tore himself from Izaya’s grasp and made a final attempt to stop this, all of it, only to fall flat on his stomach. His stamina deceived him.

Undeterred, Josiah slammed the **ENTER** key.

Shizuo cursed, bracing for the worst.

A series of tones emitted from the computer, and the lights on the other machines blinked in new, exciting patterns. The newly powered whir of machinery mingled with the sounds of destruction. The air felt thick with static.

But then…

Nothing happened.

Then again, Shizuo wasn’t sure what he had expected. The transmission was invisible. Its effects would only be seen in those infected, which… weren’t Shizuo and Izaya? Shizuo wondered what the world outside looked like.

“There,” Josiah exhaled, satisfied, and pushed himself from the console. He spun to face Shizuo and Izaya.

Shizuo was still on the ground, defeated.

Izaya stood across from Josiah, unnervingly calm. His expression matched the blank demeanor he’d had while under Vulture’s control.
Josiah cackled exuberantly. “Do you see now, Izaya? Do you see?”

Izaya said nothing.

“Nobody’s breaking out of this transmissions control,” Josiah sneered, taking a step forward. “You couldn’t stop me.”

When Izaya finally moved, it was to shrug. “I know. So I didn’t.”

Shizuo looked between them rapidly, and did a double-take towards Josiah.

Every orifice of the man’s body began to leak blue liquid. His eyes, his nose, his ears, his mouth… Steam also emitted from the crevices in his mechanic parts. He slowed in his approach towards Izaya, horror dawning on his face. Looking down at himself, he groaned in despair.

Shizuo gaped. He turned to Izaya. “What… did you do?”

“Recalibrated the signal.” Izaya’s voice was cold as ice. “Focussed it on a smaller target… he turned up the volume on his own.”

Josiah screamed and cursed Izaya’s name as he flailed. Around them, smoke filled the room, sparks flew, and the switchboards popped as they burst into flames. Soon, Josiah was as well – his body appeared to be frying from the inside out. He had frozen like an old desktop computer. Shizuo remembered the dial-up he and Kasuka had used when they were younger, and how their programs would stutter to a halt.

Currently, Josiah reminded him of that.

His eyes went vacant as they flooded with all the Vulture he’d pumped into his system over the years. The same serum that had given ultrahuman abilities was now spreading like a virus.

Finally, Josiah fell to the floor, twitching, eyes glazed. A bit of drool escaped his lips.

He collapsed not too far from where Shizuo lay, who hoisted himself up as best he could. For a second, he could only stare at Josiah’s limp form – not dead, but not quite alive. Solemnly, he turned around.

“He’s the only one that… will end up like that?”

Izaya nodded.

Taking in their hazardous situation, blames and falling debris, it was hard to consider that all of this was over. When Shizuo looked at Izaya, the other was also looking around, although seemingly more as if to avoid Shizuo’s own gaze.

“Izaya,” said Shizuo softly.

Izaya looked toward the ground at Shizuo’s feet.

Shizuo limped forward. Once closer, he extended his hand.

Izaya stared at it.

“If we are gonna go on that date…” Shizuo said, as calm as a man surrounded by fire and bleeding from three separate injuries possibly could, “we’re gonna have to not die right now.”
Izaya snorted, taking a last look of their surrounding. “I guess you’re right.”

They looked at each other and a silent understanding passed between them – If they’d made it through all this, then certainly they could survive any ordinary challenges the world could throw at two people absolutely in love with each other.

Izaya lifted his own hand, ready to take Shizuo’s.

Figures that, with Shizuo’s infamously bad luck, that the tower would fall apart at that moment.

It happened in a blink – so fast, neither of them could react in time. The tower shook, and the floor crumbled. Shizuo was knocked back at the same time Izaya fell.

“Shizuo–!” was all Izaya had the chance to say, hand outstretched, before being thrown from the tower completely.

“No – Izaya!”

Shizuo moved without thinking. He jumped after him, 450 meters above the ground.

The tower fell apart around them.

He fell fast, faster than he’d ever gone. Despite this, time slowed. He felt suspended between two points, a past and a future. He could see Izaya below him, falling just as fast. With whatever maneuverability he could muster, Shizuo angled himself, tried to increase his speed, tried to close the distance. Somehow they managed, with Izaya’s limbs spread to create resistance, and Shizuo reaching out… closer… closer…

Their hands clasped together.

It was clumsy, but they held on until they could face each other as Tokyo – their city, the one they fought across for years, and the one they’d left months ago – sprawled out beneath them. Halfway down, their eyes met.

Isn’t this exactly how it had all started?

Izaya fell first.

Shizuo followed.

Maybe they’d always been doomed.

As the ground got closer and closer, enough for Shizuo to make out the details of the mall below and the sound of sirens on the wind whipping past them, they pulled each other forward. Shizuo tucked Izaya against him and took one last breath.

The rest was darkness.

Chapter End Notes

one. more. chapter..........!!!!!!!!!!!!

we crawling to the end here, folks. thank you for all your patience. i’m very excited to
complete and post the end of this. i'll be posting it with lots of gifts to thank you all for your amazing readership over the years :) 

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!